

We are the people!

**The Anna Lindh Forum 2010
in Barcelona
Impressions of a conference of
civic associations
by Farah Lenser
Translation by David MacBryde**

"We are the people" announced the twenty year old Maha Staitit, the Palestinian veteran of "Combatants for Peace" during the closing session of the Anna Lindh Forum 2010 before a large audience in Barcelona; "The Wall is not between the people, it is between the governments". And she told how Israeli soldiers and Palestinians who had taken part in the armed resistance laid down their weapons in order to look together for a peaceful way to resolve the decades long conflict between the Israelis and Palestinians.

"Combatants for Peace" was founded in 2005; the members crossed the border regularly in order to visit each other and to listen. They learned to face the history of injury, sadness and rage, to help with the reconstruction of destroyed Palestinian homes and practice civil disobedience in demonstrating against new Israeli settlements and harassment at the border crossings. In 2009 this non-governmental organization (NGO) received the "Euro-Med Prize for Dialogue Between the Cultures" which the Anna Lindh Foundation awards to organizations and persons who are actively for a culture of peace and for coexistence in the Euro-Mediterranean region.

The Anna Lindh Foundation represents a network of civic associations: More than 3000 large and small organizations in the 43 countries of the Mediterranean region are members. The name-giver Anna Lindh was a politician who, first as Minister for the Environment and then as Foreign Minister, was a member of the Swedish government. She was very loved, not only by her countrymen, and was viewed as a future head of state.

On the 10th of September 2003 while in a department store she was attacked with a knife by a young man of Serbian extraction, and died the next day of her severe wounds. Her great role model was the Swedish Prime

Minister Olaf Palme, who in 1986 was also a victim of assassination. Anna Lindh was convinced that dialogue between cultures was the right way to enable peaceful relations; but that decisive for dialogue was personal contact: "Dialogue is not sufficient, contact is decisive!" This credo was also followed by André Azoulay, President of the Anna Lindh Foundation, when he initiated the "Anna Lindh Forum 2010" which over 1000 people from Europe and the Mediterranean countries attended from the 4th to the 7th of March in Barcelona. I too had made my way there in order, as a member, to represent the magazine "ab40" with its engagement with the "Hanan Dialogue" between artists and scientists in Morocco, and to get to know the organizations and people gathering in Barcelona engaged for peace in Europe and the Mediterranean area.

After the official greetings and opening remarks on the first afternoon, the market place was opened where the various civic organizations could present their work. Here not only was much informative material displayed, but Andreu Claret, from Spain and the Director of the Anna Lindh Foundation, gave the floor to the coordinators of the national networks so they could briefly present their activities. The diversity of the projects was overwhelming: Impressive was the engagement particu-



Anna Lindh:
"Dialogue is not enough, contact is decisive!"



Moments of contact during the Anna Lindh Forum in Barcelona 2010

Photos: Garba Diallo

larly of the youth working not only on the cultural and interfaith dialogues but also on the preservation of biological diversity. Artists from the conflict zones of Europe presented photo exhibits and short films as their contribution to a peaceful euromediterranean region.

Edgar Blume, along with Stefan Winkler of the Goethe Institute a co-coordinator of the German network, referred to the Arabian Film Week which this year, for the third time, will be organized by the association "euriente e.V." in Leipzig: The films of young Arabian directors are now also being shown by partners in the German network in Weimar, Munich, Hamburg and Mainz.

The next day we had the difficulty of deciding between the many offerings: There were diverse workshops in the "Agora" with titles like "Intercultural Learning and Youth", "Cultural and Artistic Collaborations", "Religion, Spirituality and Values" as well as "Cities, Migrants and Diversity", and on issues which member groups had worked on in preparatory conferences. More than 40 delegates with experience in the area of migration and intercultural dialogue had already met in Munich to survey how people in the large cities learn to treasure their cultural diversity. That conference was carried out in February this year by the Goethe Institute. That is where the German network of the Anna Lindh Foundation, lead by Stefan Winkler, is based. Precisely project suggestions on the theme cluster "Cities, Migrants and Diversity: Valuing Cultural Diversity and Understanding Migrants" are financially supported by the Anna Lindh Foundation because people from different cultures live near each other in big cities, often without necessarily understanding each other or even actually meeting.

Cultural diversity in large cities notably can also lead to conflicts – a problem that was repeatedly raised by some of the media representatives at the daily press conferences of the Anna Lindh Forum. President André Azoulay did not get tired repeating that he was more inclined to be an optimist rather than a pessimist, and that the vision of a Mediterranean Union is of a goal set in the distant future, that cannot be achieved in a short time and also does not produce current news attractive for the media. Yet there are positives that could be reported, even if they are largely ignored by the press. For instance significantly in Cairo and Beirut synagogues have just been restored and their opening celebrated. In Morocco this week a conference on the integration of Moslems and Jews is taking place – an issue that until recently had been taboo in Morocco, as André Azoulay emphasized, himself being a Jew and an advisor to the Moroccan King. Asked about the middle-east conflict, Azoulay emphasized that even if the Anna Lindh Foundation does not have a political agenda, and while he as President of the Foundation could not comment politically, he is completely clear as the person André Azoulay that a Mediterranean Union would remain an illusion without a State of Palestine in which dignity, justice, freedom and rule of law were introduced.

The conflicts in the Near East, but also between the newly formed states of Serbia, Croatia and Bosnia, were discussed in the "Medina", where the various NGOs found ways to come together in common work groups. Here too the focus was always on problem resolution and



André Azoulay, President of the Anna Lindh Forum

exemplary project ideas such as the "Active Citizens for Dialogue" where conflicts – for example in Cyprus – could be overcome with structured dialogues such as a practical computer supported problem investigation process – developed by a co-founder of the "Club of Rome", Alexander Christakis, for large groups engaged in democratic decision-making processes – which Larry Ferguson of the "Future World Center" has successfully utilized in many conflict zones on the earth.

"Dialogue" is for many an overused term – and yet always essentially important in all attempts to defuse beginning or acute conflict situations between different ethnic groups. A special workshop explored how important the role of women is. There Miralem Torsinolic, a peace activist from Croatia, told of the efforts to promote talks between Serbs and Croats in order to work out their common very conflicted history. In those efforts he noticed that it was almost always only women who had participated in these activities. That led him to the conclusion that women are simply more capable of feeling empathy for other people. And his colleague Igor Djordjevic recalled the women of Srebrenica who courageously faced their pain, and the "Women in Black" who first in 1972 in Argentina as "Mothers of the Palaza de Mayo" wore black when asking about their disappeared children. At the beginning of the first Intifada in Israel / Palestine this form of public protest against war and terror was taken up by the "Women in Black" in Jerusalem and in 1991 by women in Belgrade, in former Yugoslavia. Since then women world-wide have been active as "Women in Black" to conduct nonviolent struggles for peace.

The Palestinian Maha Staitit and her Israeli friend Giti El Bar of "Combatants for Peace" confirmed how important it is to open one's feelings because the process of reconciliation can only succeed if every person is prepared to face one's own and the other's emotional truth. In the short film that they brought along a former Israeli soldier acknowledged how difficult it was for him to listen to the personal histories of Palestinians that were also part of his painful memories. But only the mutual acceptance of the mourning, pain and rage can lead to trust and friendship. A young Palestinian who lost her husband in an Israeli ambush and only had thoughts of revenge well



The team of the Anna Lindh Foundation in Alexandria, Egypt, where the Foundation has its office in the famous Alexandria library

up inside her talked about how shocked she was when for the first time she stood next to an Israeli soldier who had come to meet her to make peace. It was then that she comprehended that the path of revenge only leads to more spilling of blood. And an Israeli soldier who had grown up with the knowledge that Zionism had saved his grandfather from the Holocaust comprehended that the fate and decisions of his father and grandfather could not for ever determine his own life.

To work through and comprehend the historical context of ethnic and cultural conflicts is essential for reconciliation between people who participated in violent conflicts. For this reason the “Euro-Clio: History In Action”, which like the “Combatants for Peace” was awarded the Anna Lindh Foundation “Euro-Med Prize for Dialogue between Cultures”, has set the goal of producing a common history book for the region of Ex-Yugoslavia. An enormous challenge: because so far each ethnic group had their own history books and their own truth.

The significant role of the media in reporting and in working through the history of conflicts was frequently explored in various podiums. But mostly, as the young Egyptian journalist Ethar El Katatney pointed out for reflection, the time to do that was lacking: The media want quick and explosive news; thorough research about differentiated truths is not wanted. But the media structure is changing radically with the internet and the young generation of bloggers. Ethar El Katatney is one of them, and modern technology is a commonplace for them. Wanting to meet with her the next day I started to suggest we find some central location and set a time. She said “Just text me!” At first I did not understand, but then grasped that she meant I should send her an SMS. Frankly that would never have dawned on me since I had turned off my cell phone because I did not want to place a call from Spain to Germany and back to Spain. I am rather old fashioned, and possibly also overestimated the costs since there is probably some “flat rate” available. Although I have used the internet, e-mail and cell phones for years and am rather comfortable with them, in this case I feel like a dinosaur. Whilst I am still taking

notes with a pencil or ballpoint pen on paper (dead trees!), I see Ethar El Katatney and her young colleagues working just with laptops on their laps or surfing in the internet with the latest “handies”.

The Anna Lindh Foundation presented on the first day excerpts from the study on intercultural trends in the Euromediterranean area conducted for them by the Gallup opinion research institute. I found it notable that 50% of the people under 30 in the Mediterranean region reportedly “chat”, communicate in the internet, across borders with friends (most of whom they have never met face to face). In Morocco the figure is up at 58%, in Turkey at 55%.

As I was in the press center looking at the blog entries by young Egyptians I grasped more and more how much the world had already changed. The media is no longer a one-way street; bloggers not only describe their own impressions and views about things – independently from the official media – often in excellent articles, but furthermore engage in direct exchange with readers. Direct reporting from people on the spot, for example from Iran during the turbulent times of the recent elections, gets public without censorship. Sure, also terrorists network over the internet, as a journalist from Al Jazeera remarked. But the medium can be used by all, as Ethar El Katatney emphasized, and offers especially young people in Mediterranean lands possibilities for dialogue. That is important since many of them can only travel virtually because they often have no passport to leave their country, and get no visas for entrance into European countries.

Yet also, Lisa Goldmann, a young Israeli journalist and blogger, asked herself why, despite all the information available today – also per internet – Israelis and Palestinians know so little about each other. But probably, she stated, that is a very human problem, that one only takes in information that fits into one’s worldview. It may also show that it is the personal contacts that basically affect how one works through one’s impressions.

Lisa Goldmann as also Ethar El Katatney were awarded the 2009 Journalism Prize of the Anna Lindh Foundation: Lisa Goldmann for her background reporting from the Gaza conflict and Ethar El Katatney for her article on cultural identity in which she described the feelings and sensitivities of “Halfies” – young people who either were born in a Mediterranean country but grew up abroad or attended international elite schools in their own country, or also youth of Mediterranean background who grew up in European or North American cultures and later returned to the land of their parents.

Enlightening for me was a comment made about Ethar El Katatney’s article by a “pure Egyptian”: She reported how proud she had always been when, asked about her heritage during her studies at an American university, she would answer that she was “pure Egyptian” while others described themselves as “afro-american” or “latin-american” or gave other “halfie” descriptions. But one day, she recalled, a professor asked for more detail and she patiently explained that her parents and grandparents were pure Egyptian, born and raised in Egypt. “Ho,” said the professor, smiling “so you would not describe yourself either as an African or as an inhabitant of the Mediterranean sea area, or as an Arab? Probably you do not feel in any way



Placa de Catalunya, Barcelona



Discussion forum with the artists Rima Maroun, Sara Zaravise, Esra Aysun



The plenum



Ethar El Katatney, journalist



Congress Center in Barcelona (CCIB)



„Magic Round Table“ with Dr. Hasan Anbari and Farah Lenser

Photos: Farah Lenser

connected with the Turkish traditions?”

Ethar El Katatney closed her article with a quote from Patrice Brodeur, a French-Canadian professor of the science of religion: “Every day we have species that die out because of environmental problems. That depletes the biological diversity and only threatens life on earth,” he notes. “It’s the same on the human level. We need diversity of identities in the world for creativity and richness to sustain itself. Let’s bring it down to very basic terms. What happens when human beings intermarry in the same family? Exactly. We need diversity.”

What all have I learned at this wonderful conference: The world is changing rapidly and young people today have a cultural experience horizon that does not fit into our usual “either-or” thinking. In the workshop on “Media and Perception” a journalist of my generation, introducing himself as an Arab and an atheist, asked himself and the journalists on the podium if he did women a favor by tolerating the wearing of head-covering which was, basically, a sign of oppression of women. “Well”, remarked Ethar El Katatney, “if you ask that again, simply just think of me!” Oh, I forgot to mention that Ethar El Katatney wore a head-covering scarf.

The Anna Lindh Forum in Barcelona also invited people to participation in an intercultural marketplace where one could find conversation partners, and offered informal space with comfortable seats in the lobby for chatting or discussions of concrete projects – if one had time and did not wish to stay in the prepared sessions and workshops in the Agora or the Medina or take in another exhibit or film. In the foyer there was also a small display of the more important magazines and newspapers of the Mediterranean region, and a large table with an invitation to gather for a creative “Magic Round Table”. That is a communications game, on the invitation of Heiner Benking from the “Positive Nett-Works”, in which talking time is converted into listening time by giving a present of one’s talk time to the person one wants to listen to. This can enable a dynamic, intensive conversation focus on what the participants find most interesting, ideally a dance between talkers and listeners. There an Italian film maker told me the story of an almost abandoned Italian border town where immigrants from North Africa had found a new home and had thereby awakened the whole town to a new life. What an inspiring report! That story had also inspired the German film maker Wim Wenders to make a documentary.

“We are the people!” Out of this conviction people can become active and search for solutions to conflicts. 1000 people from civic associations gathered in Barcelona and gave examples of what all is possible. The Anna Lindh Foundation -- that is not only an acknowledgement by the governments to the “Barcelona Process” and to a “Union for the Mediterranean” which was founded on the 13th of July 2008 by all the EU member countries and for which an office was opened in Barcelona in January 2010, but also that is all the many creative initiatives that people in Europe and the Mediterranean region are successfully implementing. For, as André Azoulay emphasized again in his closing remarks, “Governments can sign peace treaties, but only the people themselves can make peace!”



„Omar Faruk Et Aisikides” and singer Tal Ben Ari inspire the public with a concert in the Barcelona Nautical Museum with songs from the eastern mediterranean area.

It was to honor all these people that Katrina Stigwall, the representative of the Swedish network of the Anna Lindh Foundation, presented at the closing panel the resonances and suggestions of the participants.

Speaking for all, she challenged the Anna Lindh Foundation to ask all the members to raise questions and participate, otherwise only the loudest get heard. Above all it is important to search for hidden histories and listen to people’s stories that do not otherwise get told. The Foundation also needs to raise questions about problems since otherwise it would not be possible to grasp the core of conflicts and understand the contexts.

An important point would also be the definition of the concept of culture because this concept is used in almost all presentations. When the Foundation speaks about culture then this concept should be grasped as broadly as possible and not be restricted to cultural heritage, tradition and the fine arts. Culture is identity and as such includes spirituality, religion, values and all that which makes up the core of our identity. The social dimension also belongs thereto: the political and economic contexts form the ways and means that we view and interpret the world; all that flows into intercultural dialogues. We also need to release the concept of equality from its reduction to gender and nationality, and relate it also to age, class and other factors that determine our being.

For Katarina Stigwall ecological sustainability is at the core since it was mentioned in various ways in most every workshop. Many of the nongovernmental organizations that attended are involved with this theme, and ecological sustainability is of equal importance for us all, regardless of whatever differences might otherwise separate us. Therefore the challenge of ecological sustainability should in the future be a priority for the Anna Lindh Foundation. The applause showed that she spoke from the soul for all participants. And André Azoulay thanked her for her open words and emphasized again the strength that comes from the many initiatives of engaged civic associations because a strong wave consists of many small drops. “We as the Anna Lindh Foundation are only strong through you! Continue to be active in those places where you are at home. Your convictions and strength will make us all strong. We will meet again in 2012!”

More information about the Anna Lindh Foundation:
www.euromedalex.org