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Sumoud GUIRAB's return to Italy
'Bagpipes for Peace'
by Olga Ambrosanio

Gioia del Colle, Ruvo di Puglia, Mola di Bari, Polignano a Mare, Supino, Scapoli, Carpineto Romano, Perugia, Marsciano e Pescia Romana : these are the places in Italy that 14 young Palestinians from Burj al Shemali refugee camp will never forget. The 14 are the musicians who make up Sumoud GUIRAB, the bagpipe band from the NGO Beit Atfal Assumoud, invited to Italy by the non-profit making association, ULAIA, of which I'm the president. In addition to these towns throughout Italy, the 'Bagpipes for Peace' tour also visited our capital city, Rome, where they played in three very particular locations : Radioimpegno, an online streaming site committed to the environment, the defence of human rights and social issues; the cooperative farming association "G. Garibaldi"; and the historic neighbourhood of the Garbatella.

The tour was conceived under the umbrella of 'Bands without Borders', which is our most ambitious project to date designed to counteract the numerous disadvantages faced by young people in the refugee camps in Lebanon and financed by the Valdensian Evangelical church. A small part of these funds together with donations from ULAIA and from the many other associations who hosted the concerts made "Bagpipes for Peace" possible. These young people brought not only their traditional Palestinian colours, music and dance, but also a message of peace to share with their audiences. One aim of this initiative was to give a group of young people, children of third generation refugees, their first ever holiday. However, we also wanted to mark 2017 for its symbolic significance in the diaspora of the Palestinian people. There are three key anniversaries to commemorate. It is a hundred years since the Balfour declaration, in which the British government announced they were in favour of creating a nation for the Jewish people in Palestine; 70 years since the UN's approval of the partition plan of Palestine in 1947, which was the first step towards the forced exodus of 700,000 Palestinian people who poured into the refugee camps in Syria, Jordan and Lebanon. Finally, it is 50 years since the 6 days war, in 1967, which marked the beginning of the ongoing Israeli occupation of the West Bank, East Jerusalem, the Gaza Strip and the Golan Heights.

For almost all of the members of GUIRAB, aged 16 and over, this invitation to Italy was their very first opportunity to leave Lebanon. For some it was even the first time out of Tyre, the third most important town in Lebanon where Burj al Shemali, the refugee camp they come from, is situated.

'Why can't you travel?' "When are you coming back?" were the question put by many of the young Italians, for whom this was the first encounter with the problems that face the Palestinian people.

Communicating with a bit of effort on both sides in English, the answer to this question was a real eye-opener for everybody.

Without an association that will take responsibility for the invitation, the flight, the stay and their return, it is impossible for Palestinians to obtain a visa to travel. So sadly there is little point in asking a Palestinian.

Our audiences are also now aware of the day to day difficulties faced by the Palestinians within Lebanon itself. It is not the size of the country that limits their movements, since Lebanon is no bigger than the smallest region of Italy and you can, in fact, travel the whole length of the country in little over two hours. The problem is that in order to travel from one city to another in Lebanon you really need a car since public transport between towns is often inexistent or unreliable, as, for example, between Tyre and Sidon, a large city on the way to Beirut. They have also learned that when the schools close, there are no holidays, but if you are lucky you may be able to take part in activities set up by various local and international organisations in the camps.

So many times we heard the question "What is it like, the camp where you live?" The extensive TV coverage of the refugee camps in Syria with the images of tents stretching for miles has obviously influenced the way we imagine camps to be. Now they know what the camps are really like. No tents in sight, but a mass of concrete with buildings piled one on top of another. 23,000 people in one square kilometre, where the only way to find sufficient housing for newly married couples is to build upwards, and that is dependent on their obtaining permission to bring the necessary materials into the camp. Burj al Shemali is a peaceful camp with no history of trouble, but even here there is a check point. Lebanese soldiers stop foreigners entering without a permit, while at the same time ensuring that the Palestinians do not forget they are only guests and that the soldiers on duty have the power to stop and search them or allow them to pass with a mere nod of the head, hardly acknowledging their existence. Houses are in concrete, but some still have sheets of corrugated roofing material containing asbestos, a substance that has long been banned in our countries since discovering its links to the deadly Mesothelioma cancer. The houses are cramped, damp, many with outside toilets and washing facilities, and so close to one another that not even a ray of sunshine can pass.

Overall, there was a recognition that we need to find out more about the situation of these people, whose plight is largely ignored and rarely discussed at home, at school, and in the wider society.

When GUIRAB are holding their bagpipes, however, none of this discomfort or anxiety about their future studies is visible on their faces. Their studies are a real problem for them, though. The Palestinian people, once the most erudite and cultured in the Middle East, have seen the standard of education fall drastically. In the schools run by UNRWA there are 50 children in each class and lessons of an hour last only 45 minutes. That is less than a minute each! This is a situation that creates a natural selection, leaving behind the less able and those born into large families, who cannot afford to enlist the help of private tutors. This situation has been attenuated somewhat with the assistance of the programme 'Family Happiness' run by the NGO ASSUMOUD and supported by ULAIA and its sponsors. Attending university with the costs it incurs is generally only possible with a grant or scholarship.

The joy is infectious and tangible when the audience join GUIRAB in a dance, their hands linked, creating for a moment a world in which we would all like to live, a world which is fast slipping away from our hands and our hearts.

However, for that period from the 13th July to the 5th of August, the people we met seemed to confound this view. We rediscovered a humanity that the media would lead us to believe had vanished completely. It was evident that a large number of people do not consider one's religious beliefs all-important while many expressed their desire that Israel and the Palestinian people would find a solution that respected the rights of each and every individual. Here are just some examples of the warm reception given to GUIRAB. In Ruvo in Puglia, the band was welcomed by the little "musicians" of the summer school of " Bembé Performing Arts" and were presented with the "Peace Light of Bethlehem" by the town councillor for Social Policies offered by the AGESCI scout group 1. This is a lamp whose light is kindled every year from the eternal flame in the nativity grotto in Bethlehem and is passed through many countries with a message of peace. In Scapoli, the musicians of the Pipe Circle accompanied GUIRAB's entrance into Alpini Square, while The University for Foreigners in Perugia opened wide the doors of their great hall to them. Last but not least are the friendships that blossomed in those places where GUIRAB stayed for longer; at Supino where they were guests of Assopace Palestine and at Pescia Romana where they enjoyed the hospitality of the association Mal di Mare. Staying in these places the young people of GUIRAB were able to enjoy not only the starry skies, which are of course visible in all corners of the globe, since there are as yet no human restrictions on the heavens, but also surroundings they had never experienced before: houses with all the home comforts, and even boats they could sail. However, what seems to be the most consequential experience is the contact with people of the same age, which thanks to social media, familiar to youngsters through the world, can be sustained and nourished even at a distance.

In describing this tour to you, I must not forget to mention our encounter with another continent, that of South America. This opportunity arose through the Folklore festival of Lepini, in which GUIRAB paraded with groups from Mexico and Panama. During the refreshment breaks organised by the Flag-wavers' association of Carpineto Romano both musical and culinary cross pollination took place. At the table, tales of life in the refugee camp were shared with the players from over the ocean mixed with the flavour of zaatar, which GUIRAB had brought with them from Lebanon. Finally, though we have to omit some important stops in the tour, I would like to end with our stay in Rome at the Coop for Social farming "G. Garibaldi" that employs young autistic boys and girls in agriculture, artisan crafts and catering . The staff were a little anxious about the possible reactions of GUIRAB to the autistic behaviour of some of the youngsters in the audience, but I was able to reassure them that GUIRAB were used to dealing with diversity. Their reaction proved to be the case: at the end of the concert GUIRAB were happy to let the youngsters have a go on the bagpipes and I can assure you there were some very touching moments.

This and so much more is the Tour of Italy 2017 for young people who value their neighbours, their life and their freedom, expressing this through the music of the bagpipe, an instrument of war played by the infantry at the start of battle, but which, in the hands of GUIRAB, assumes a different significance. For them it is the BAGPIPE of PEACE!

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