

# Removing Invisible Walls



*A workshop at Holiday Projects West*

by Judith C. Wisch

In Northern Ireland as in Israel there are two communities living side by side, separated by deep-rooted fears and institutionalized structures that have built invisible but very real walls between them.

In Israel, the Jewish majority feels threatened, with good cause, by the Arab lands around them. In Northern Ireland, the Protestant majority feels threatened by the Catholics, who have the support of their coreligionists to the south.

Organizations in both countries are trying to break down the walls. On a dusty hill 30 miles from Jerusalem, there is a School for Peace in the village of Neve Shalom (Oasis of Peace), where I taught for four years. Each year more than 2,000 Jewish and Arab youths come together for workshops and

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seminars designed to reach beyond the fears, stereotypes, and prejudices that each one has grown up with.

Neve Shalom has developed effective techniques for intercultural conflict resolution. These techniques are employed in a four-day intensive workshop. The overall goal is to encourage mutual trust, respect, and understanding between the two groups and thus develop an attitude of tolerance and peaceful coexistence. Neve Shalom's working assumption is that the separation between the two communities—Jews and Arabs live separately and go to different schools—and their inability to meet one another and talk openly and honestly contribute to the continuation of the conflicts.

Neve Shalom's counterpart in Northern Ireland is Holiday Projects West, which runs mixed camps for Catholic and Protestant youth. Having heard about Neve Shalom from a British Broadcasting Corporation program, Holiday Projects West invited two Jews and two Arabs from Neve Shalom's educational staff to come to Northern Ireland to share their skills and knowl-

edge of intercultural conflicts. I was one of the two Jewish teachers.

I was surprised to discover that Catholics and Protestants are much more similar than Jews and Arabs: they speak the same language with the same accent, look the same, dress the same, eat the same foods, dance to the same music. Yet despite these similarities, Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland are as far apart as Jews and Arabs in Israel. They live in different neighborhoods, attend different schools, frequent different discos, read different newspapers, vacation in different spots. Both sides stay away from one another, and when they do meet, they dare not talk about the conflict. They smile and pretend.

In the community, in the schools, and in Holiday Projects West itself there seemed to be an accepted notion that talking about the conflict and the "troubles" would create undesired anxiety in the young people. When a politically tinted issue arose during a mixed summer camp, quite often it was "swept under the rug," as one youth leader put it, with the comment, "It is better not to bring that up in mixed company; it may cause problems and hurt feelings." People began to believe that "across the line" friendships can exist only as long as the differences are ignored.

Enter Neve Shalom teachers with the chutzpah to say that talking about personal views and fears of the conflict is exactly the way to begin to reconcile dif-

*Londonderry*



*Courtesy of Judith C. Wisch*



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At Neve Shalom

city to save lives. Then Hank spoke. He said he had changed his mind. He realized he had been brought up on fear-based principles. Hank let down his invisible brick wall. He cried and cried, receiving affirmation from everyone in the group for his openness and courage to change.

I recalled a similar incident in a small group I was leading at Neve Shalom. During the question-and-answer exercise on the third day of the workshop one Jewish boy posed this question to the Arabs in the group: "Say it is 20 years from now and there exists a Palestinian state next to Israel. And say there is a war between Israel and Palestine, we are both soldiers, and we meet on the battlefield. What would you do?" I remember three responses. The first was "I would kill you"; the second was "I would take you prisoner, hide you, and release you when the war was over"; and the third was "I would put down my gun, hug you, and cry."

Two months of running workshops and training local youth leaders did not bring peace to the Emerald Isle. On the other hand, Northern Ireland was different when we left. A process of reconciliation that works with Jews and Arabs in Israel worked in Northern Ireland. Neve Shalom's methods and techniques began to crack the walls of bitterness and fear that separate Catholic from Protestant.

Ann: "Before, I thought Catholics were all very bitter and that I couldn't get along with them. Now I realize that Catholics are just human beings the same as myself and there are good and bad sections of that community, the same as in my own."

Sean: "I thought I would be meeting some bitter people and not getting on well with them. I found out it was not really bitterness but their own point of view."

Craig: "I've learned to respect other people's views even though I do not agree, and that some people can be bitter but that doesn't mean they are bad."

Some people may say our work is only a drop in the bucket. They may be right, but in a world thirsting for peace, a drop in the bucket can feel like a flood. □

For more information, write *American Friends of Neve Shalom*, 225 W. 34th St., Rm. 918, New York, NY 10122, or call (212) 724-4864.

ferences and bring the two sides closer.

During a workshop participants move through levels of personal sharing, cultural sharing, dealing with stereotypes and identity issues, and sharing the joy and pain of what it is like to be a Catholic or Protestant (Jew or Arab). Only in the latter stages when enough trust and listening skills have been developed in the group do we deal with the most difficult questions.

Hank is a handsome, cooperative, and friendly 15-year-old Protestant; I liked Hank. He made friends quickly with the Catholics in the group. He spent a great deal of his time during the six days of the conflict resolution workshop with Sean, a Catholic boy of similar traits. Neither Hank nor Sean had ever had a friend from "the other side." Hank and Sean had a confrontation.

During the question-and-answer exercise Sean asked Hank: "If the IRA came to you and said 'We will stop the killing if you'll agree to change the name of the city from Londonderry to Derry' would you do it?" Hank answered, "No"; he wouldn't change the name of the city to stop the killing. (L'Derry, Hank and Sean's hometown, is the only city in Northern Ireland with a Catholic majority. The Catholic-controlled city council wants to change the name of the city from the Protestant-identified "Londonderry" to "Derry." Protestants are strongly opposed.) Hank was then asked if he would change the name of the city to save the lives of the people in the group. "I live by my principles," he answered. "No, I wouldn't change the name of the city."

For an hour we talked about principles: the principle of pride, the principle of "no surrender," and the principle of saving a human life. We went around to each person in the group and asked the same question as was asked of Hank. Everyone else, Catholic and Protestant, said they would change the name of the

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Right: Work campers  
in a meeting;  
Below: David Richie  
at work



# Work Camps in Finland

by David S. Richie

*David S. Richie is perhaps best known among Friends for his weekend work camps in Philadelphia. He has also participated and led work camps in Europe and Africa, as well as in other parts of the United States. He was a member of one of the first work camps held in Finland after World War II. In the intervening years David has returned to Finland again and again to be a work camp member, and led the 1957 work camp.*

and work with handicapped persons. In summer 1985 two camps had a Third World orientation. One was devoted to collecting and packing clothing for Namibian refugees in Zambia, and another repaired and boxed used tools that had been collected from all over Finland for shipment to Nicaragua as an expression of the deep Europe-wide humanitarian concern to save the threatened Nicaraguan people and their mixed economy from domination by either superpower.

My final camp was helping to restore the sadly and badly burned Päsila Peace Station near Helsinki. Dozens of volunteers, including myself, had helped prepare this beautiful historic wooden railroad station for moving the year before to become a center for all the peace organizations. This it shall yet become!

In each camp there were fine volunteers from Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Hungary as well as from six or more countries of Western Europe, but none from the United States. English was the basic camp language. Each camp had a veteran Finnish camper as coordinator to organize the work and house-keeping, but each evening after supper in most camps an evaluation and planning session was held with changing leadership and with every camper encouraged to suggest items for the agenda—a very democratic and effective procedure.

To explore the very limited possibility of participating next summer, a U.S. volunteer should write promptly to Service Civil International (SCI-USA, with which KVT is affiliated), P.O. Box 3333, New York, NY 10185.

Ever since the American Friends Service Committee started international work camps in Lapland in 1946 and 1947 and helped to organize KVT (Kansanvaalinen Vapaaehtoinen Työleirijärjestö, the International Voluntary Workcamp Organization), a constantly changing group of experienced Finnish work campers has continued to organize some of the best work camps in the world.

It has been my joy to participate in six of these work camps in July and August 1985, as well as a similar number in 1984. My purpose has been whenever possible to interpret KVT's Quaker "roots" (see "A Remembrance—Esko Saari" *FJ* 2/15) and the practice of daily meditation, and I found a warm response.

Some camps continue to help northern Finnish farmers with their haying, clearing land of stones, cutting and collecting firewood, and the like, as in earlier years, but frequently local young people are participating as campers along with the foreign volunteers. Other camps have been invited to live