

EUROPE & MIDDLE EAST FRIENDS GATHERING 2008

TO FRIENDS EVERYWHERE: From Thursday, the 20th to Monday the 24th of March 2008, 127 participants from twenty-five countries gathered in Vienna. Our gathering was the first ever fully-integrated joint Meeting of the Europe and Middle East Section of Friends World Committee for Consultation and the Europe and Middle East Young Friends, and coincided with the transition from one EMES Executive Secretary to the next. This gathering was truly historic. It occurred on the 70th anniversary of both the founding of EMES and the annexation of Austria, when Friends from England, Germany and Austria were involved in the Kindertransport, rescuing 10,000 children and offering them a safe home.

We were welcomed warmly by our hosts, the Viennese Friends, but more coolly by the Austrian Spring weather (cold winds and driving sleet included!). We were touched by heartfelt messages from Friends who were prevented from attending, including some Middle Eastern Friends. Departing Executive Secretary Bronwyn Harwood spoke most movingly of how the differences between us are so much less important than what unites us.

Our eyes were opened to the great variety of Quaker contexts within EMES – the passion and dynamism of emerging groups spreading Quakerism into new areas as well as the uncertainty of shrinking of some Meetings. We felt ourselves especially privileged to hear from members of Georgia Worship Group, the newest official Meeting in the Section.

When the focus was on peace-building, the speakers helped us to understand the personal realities of working for peace, be it the great disappointment experienced when the chance for real change did not fulfill its promise at the time of the ‘rise’ of the Iron Curtain; a Friend’s personal journey from despairing peace activist to committed peace facilitator; or the complexity of peace building in conflict areas, where there can be no justice for one community without justice for all. A session on the peace activities of the Quaker Council of European Affairs (QCEA) further developed this theme.

On Saturday afternoon, we rejoiced in the timely change in the weather that accompanied two activities – an exploration of Vienna’s beautiful architecture and history, and a walk in the Vienna woods.

Small group sessions and daily workshops added to the richness of the gathering. Several themes stood out, including the challenges faced by small worship groups, the ongoing conflict in Israel/Palestine, the ever-present intermingling of sorrow and joy, and – particularly for the Young Friends – the importance of faith in action within the Quaker experience. The joint gathering gave us the opportunity to explore the position of Young Friends in our Meetings and Worship Groups. Inspirational themes were matched by a series of practical workshops on dealing with small Meetings, outreach, and Quaker business methods, with the help of Woodbrooke-on-the-Road.

Best of all was the spiritual energy generated amongst us, lifting us up, signified by each day’s epilogue, in which words and music infused us with positive feelings and reflected a growing sense of unity. Friends experienced the special thrill of worship in the company of Quakers from so many different parts of Europe and the Middle East, and we were also blessed by the presence of a number of delightful small children.

The gathering very much looks forward to the future of EMES with Marisa Johnson as the new Executive Secretary, hoping further to increase its geographical diversity and spiritual unity.

On behalf of EMES Annual Meeting and EMEYF Spring Gathering

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