

## ***Cultural Diplomacy 'From Below'***

by Sarah Imani

### **Bridging the Gap between the Turkish and German Communities in Rendsburg**

When most of us think about cultural diplomacy, the first image that most frequently comes to mind is that of high profile cultural initiatives. This may be because of the mainstream definition of culture or it may be because of the word 'diplomacy', which is typically associated with elite circles and individuals. Yet, if we look beyond the classical notions of these two concepts, it is clear that when successful communication between different cultures happens, a broader approach is taken and therefore every individual within the group, nation or society needs to be included in that process. Some inspiration can be drawn from another, yet closely related science: in Conflict Resolution the answer to that question is called 'peace-building from below'. The concept includes grassroots theories, which focus more on "ordinary" people and agents such as grassroots organisations and activists<sup>1</sup>. One of the main objectives of this research is to contribute, with a policy orientation, to the debate regarding the way in which outsiders, at governmental and non-governmental levels, can help local communities resolve complex political crises. The research thus draws in international non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and governments who are involved as aid and development donors; host and recipient governments; local NGOs and networks; as well as academics and other interested parties. The fundamental idea within this framework is that, in any specific area of conflict or contention, the culture of peace (or of the deeper spiritual and philosophical sources favouring sustainable peace) can be found within the communities themselves and not necessarily in theories brought in from non-local, neutral outsiders. This raises the question of what peace-building theory means for cultural diplomacy. Foremost it should be said that peace-building theory is very much civil-society centred, an aspect it has in common with cultural diplomacy. In light of this common ground, we can ask the specific question: what impact can such an approach achieve when it is placed within the context of cultural diplomacy and what are the outcomes of such a discourse?

To answer these questions, this paper will concentrate on the interaction between two different nations. The study's main interest is the relationship between Turkish and German people living in Germany. Given all the recent critique about the integration of such an important community, an investigation about what role cultural diplomacy can play in improving the relationship and the interchange between these cultures must be considered an urgent task. Yet this paper's focus will be narrowed down further to look at how contributions by women, proven to be crucial to all civil society initiatives, can help to overcome the present division.

***“Buttercreme und Börek oder: Wie Integration auch funktionieren kann”<sup>2</sup> – Turkish and German female cooks as cultural diplomats***

A few weeks ago, I found a wonderful book titled *Buttercreme und Börek oder: Wie Integration auch funktionieren kann*. The story is about an initiative undertaken by Hannelore Salzmänn-Tohsche and Edith Berkau, the equal opportunity commissioner (Gleichstellungsbeauftragte) of the region Rendsburg-Eckernförde. The project strikingly demonstrates that something as simple as cooking and celebrating traditional holidays together can open worlds, which beforehand seemed alien, closed and sometimes appear strange to one another, even though they share the same country as their place of residence. Whilst many Turkish women are generally not integrated into social life outside their Turkish community, at the same time the broad mass of German women have been showing less and less interest in their ‘foreign’ neighbours. This was the frustrating situation, discovered by Mrs. Salzmänn-Tohsche and Mrs. Berkau. Relationships between German and Turkish people are not singular, but their social behaviour towards each other is symptomatic of the relationship between these cultures everywhere in Germany. Yet the two project leaders believed that love of good food and celebrations are universally shared values, and therefore they developed the plan together with Birgit Rienecker (Director of the International Centre in Rendsburg) and Ayşe Ipekçioğlu (Migration social worker) to bring together women from the Turkish community in Rendsburg with German women of the same region by cooking and organising traditional holidays together for one year in order to overcome the strongly entrenched prejudices and stereotypes in both communities. Interestingly, the German women involved came from rather a conservative background, the Landfrauenverband des Kreises Rendsburg-Eckernförde. The whole idea was based on the intention to build

sustainable structures where intercultural dialogue could take place and relationships would be given the time and opportunity to grow. The *leitmotiv* therefore was 'Miteinander reden – nicht übereinander! And again it was a fundamental aim of the project not to work within classical structures of intercultural integration models but to try something new, something less academic or administrative but closer to the social reality of the life of these women and their community background.

In the beginning both groups were shy and did not know where the project would lead. Language barriers between the groups of women were also prominent. However, the following period was characterized by curiosity, openness and sensitivity for other traditions and customs. For instance, questions like 'How do you prepare that dough?' or 'why do you use that kind of spice?' easily offered the opportunity to investigate further into the regional or national traditions which these women would otherwise never have heard of, let alone experienced, such as Ramadan for the Germans and 'schietspakete' (a sort of jule klapp) for the Turks. Unsurprisingly, the women learned that Tupperware seems to be well known (and valued) all over the world, as they discovered when a German organised a 'Tupper party'.

In the end the outcome of this initiative was a colourful cookbook, rich in its variety of themes, from recipes to explanations about different traditions in both cultures and a short presentation of the activities undertaken by the group. The reader will find German and Turkish recipes, gathered throughout the year and seasons, a surprise even for the German reader who has forgotten some of the classics of German cuisine. Even more importantly from the perspective of this article, the reader gets a vivid presentation of how the relationships between these different women has been evolving in the course of the year and real friendships that were established where in the past mistrust and prejudice suppressed interest for the other. This, it seems, is what the warmth of the kitchen is capable of producing.

At the same time one can also get a close insight into the problems that already exist in simple situations, such as preparing a thanksgiving meal with meat. When such different groups meet, differences become clear such as awareness of the Muslim rule of *halal* slaughtering when using chicken stock as a base. The importance of dialogue in overcoming obstacles for future friendship becomes clear. For the Turkish

women it means explaining their refusal of food prepared by the Germans without being rude, and for the Germans to understand the importance of cultural sensitivity for such issues. The simple act of cooking a soup already reveals that the fundamental structures and corresponding problems of intercultural communication can be discerned. Nevertheless, food is only a vehicle for all the communicative abilities that women can offer — as these women demonstrate — when they present and represent their culture to each other and exchange their points of views about controversial topics (such as comments made by the Pope in his 'Regenburger speech', or the meaning of the *Hajj* in a life of a Muslim). In more abstract means of perception, the book tells the story of how the best aspects of both cultures can merge into the most colourful and fruitful celebration two cultures can have: fine food, dance and talk.

The participating women are still in contact and even made a trip to Istanbul together. What general principles can finally be drawn from such an overall successful experience?

### **What could be a good recipe for 'cultural diplomacy from below'?**

It becomes clear that the key for success of such a project lies within the endeavour and devotion of its participants. It is much more their personal and individual input that shapes the project rather than an agenda which is brought in by an outsider and which is to be rigidly fulfilled. This aspect is precisely the advantage which is often talked about when presenting non- high profile initiatives. In these cases, the message does not need to be spread afterwards by media or other supplementary means, but is directly rooted in the community concerned: the people for whom the project was conceived for are its own creators. Hence their trust in its importance and success is intrinsic to the project itself. The spreading of the message is emotional and spontaneous and takes place in the everyday life of the people instead of through an intellectual and artificial circulation. The reason for this is that in local and community interventions, local people's knowledge is applied as a tool of communication. The project presented above is a perfect example of that concept: by instilling a new Turkish-German friendship highly controversial political themes which would previously have been answered on the basis of biased stereotypes are now

discussed in reciprocal respect for the other, and it may simply be because the buttercreme cake or the börek taste so delicious.

The decision to choose a homogeneous group—in this case women—was a wise decision. Despite the fact they come from different cultural backgrounds, a shared perception of the world can be used as the group's common foundation. This means first and foremost that some codes of communications are common, which alleviate the potential culture clashes. Some might call it something like 'the Other within ourselves'. In a homogeneous group, setting aside all other differences of opinion and tradition which might exist, some aspects of life are shared; for women, the role as a mother, sister, daughter or wife, to take an obvious example. This feeling of having something in common is the ideal condition to work with, since all differences can be discussed within this context. It is not the cultural difference, which serves as a reference point but the shared elements within the personality of each individual or woman, which could be something like the 'female experiences' of other cultures.<sup>3</sup>

Furthermore, when examining the Project 'Buttercreme und Börek', the central role food and cooking plays in the project's success becomes very evident. Probably everyone who has travelled to foreign countries and was eager to bring back home something conceptual or tangible from that experience knows how deeply connected food is with all other aspects of culture, even with something as exalted as classical high culture. For instance, whenever I am travelling I always go to a local supermarket in order to get an idea about the people of that country and how they live. It is like getting the taste of the culture through their use of spices, combination of ingredients and the way in which dishes are prepared and presented. Preparing food and keeping special cooking traditions is something common to all cultures, manifesting at least the universal love of good food not to mention the deeper human qualities with which this inclination could be associated.

In our particular case, Turkish and the German food in the first place seems to have little in common. However, looking closer one sees that baking is something treasured in both cultures, as is a fondness for serving a guest too much to eat. Again, a starting point for exchange could be found, not only for recipes but for food related questions which can lead to more profound topics, such as: 'why do the

Germans not have salty cakes while the Turkish do?' Or, 'why do Germans traditionally not include flowers in their cuisine while the Turkish do?' These can be philosophical questions. It is exactly this kind of fun and warm atmosphere which only living traditions and celebrations can create which gives the opportunity to people who participate in such project for a joyful dialogue about differences without any fear of offence or repugnance towards the other culture.

Women's roles as bearers of cultural knowledge and experience should not be underestimated in this context. In most cultures women, whether or not formally employed, are at the centre of family life and the social life of their communities and neighbourhoods. Consequently they occupy a central position in transferring knowledge and opinions, but simultaneously stereotypes and negative prejudices. Working with women, especially those who are in the role of a traditional housewife, helps to open communities towards other social groups. They probably will have a nice conversation at the coffee table about the other within their own family. This can start just by talking about their new friends and later on by explaining to family members the culture of these new friends, and then ideally by introducing their families to one another. Thereby they influence the perception of their family members in a positive way, so that they in their own social surroundings can break stereotypical and biased thinking as well and open a dialogue in their context. Women therefore are predestined cultural diplomats for the other culture in their cultural community and ambassadors of their own culture when they meet people from other backgrounds. This is especially true in light of this project. The participants and their families had previously had very little contact with communities other than their own.

What conclusion can be made? Is the concept of 'cultural diplomacy from below' the key answer to all of our problems? Certainly it is not. Yet this 'third track' (as it is called in Conflict Resolution theory) is often neglected when cultural diplomacy theories and application methods and models are discussed and evaluated. Getting cultural diplomacy out of the ivory tower is a crucial step towards enabling a holistic approach. Thereby high profile cultural diplomacy and grassroots methods can effectively supplement each other for a better understanding of the so-called 'Other' and for offering the chance that this other may soon become another friend.

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<sup>1</sup> Short introduction to the idea 'peace-building from below' can be found in). To put it very generally, this approach is designed to strengthen the relationship between the so-called track II (middle-level leaders and NGOs) and track III (grassroots organisations and activists). Track I, encompassing the elites, is not as relevant for the purpose of this article.

<sup>2</sup> *Buttercreme und Börek oder: Wie Integration auch funktionieren kann* (2008) – Hannelore Salzmänn-Tohsche and Edith Berkau (eds.) It is available in bookstores or can be ordered directly from Frau Salzmänn Tohsche, e-mail can be found on the following website: <http://www.kreis-rendsburg-eckernfoerde.de/194.html> (accessed 31.03.09).

<sup>3</sup> Of course the same effects could be observed in other groups (men, farmers et cetera).

### Sources

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*Buttercreme und Börek oder: Wie Integration auch funktionieren kann*.