

Conversation with Patricia Kahane

Patricia Kahane, GPC Member and President, Karl Kahane Foundation

Patricia Kahane, GPC Member, graduated from the Geneva Ecole d'Interprètes in 1975. After some years as a publisher in Vienna and Berlin, she co-produced several documentaries about Art Brut. She joined the boards of the family enterprises, Jungbunzlauer Holding in Basel, Switzerland, and Bank Gutmann, Vienna, Austria, in 1987. She is a founding board member of the Bruno Kreisky Forum for International Dialogue in Vienna and currently President of the Karl Kahane Foundation.

Patricia has been dedicating time to philanthropic causes for most of her life. Her issues of interests are bridge-building in Palestine-Israel, Palestinian health issues, helping disabled women in Morocco, and tackling health issues in Europe, Africa, and India. Her geographic areas of interest are the Middle East, Morocco, Sub-Saharan Africa, and India.

► TRANSCRIPT:

I'm based between Austria, Switzerland, and Morocco, and chairing the Kahane Foundation which I think you know about from the GPC directories. I've been invited to be here or to join this group because in Austria and Switzerland we are doing some projects and international conferences with the nucleus on mayors because mayors are representing the people who live in all the communities and they actually are those people who are in the front line of dealing with all the issues concerning living together of whoever happens to be or come into the community. And so we've had two conferences up to now and now we are starting to focus on the refugee situations, but starting to take into account what it means for European societies, democracy, and the larger issues that are being touched by the inflow of migration that is unusual for Europe, not like let's say the white and largely Christians.

Thank you for this really fascinating presentation [to Gaziantep mayor Ms. Fatma Sahin], because it's not often that we get first-hand information from administrative positions in Turkey. There's a lot of media, and Facebook, and social media, and stuff like that but to have really first-hand facts and figures is very valuable and thank you for that. We invited you to the International Mayors Conferences in Vienna and in Athens in January and in July of this year, but unfortunately, I think you couldn't come. Maybe you can come to the next conference, which will be in Vienna at the end of January next year, where we have the overall topic of children having to run from wherever and what happens to them and how one can generate conditions in the places where they come to settle at some point, to generate conditions so as to avoid this specter of a huge lost generation that stays uneducated and then is very easy to persuade to join all kind of radical movements, wherever this takes place.

And so what I think that what you're doing, what you're starting or started to do or doing with apparently a lot of success in Gaziantep, is definitely something that we can propagate as best practice examples for Mayors all over the place, going back to Lebanon, Jordan, where there are big refugee numbers as well. But up to Italy, Austria, Germany... the problems are very similar and probably the solutions are very similar as well. And what I can say for Europe or the European countries that I'm familiar with, that Germany's doing quite well, as you said.

Sweden is doing quite well as well. Other countries are doing not well at all, amongst those are Austria, Italy, where we get enormous numbers of unaccompanied minors. So it was actually a thank you comment and not really a question. Thank you.

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Well, this is a very personal story. In the summer a year ago when there were so many human beings fleeing war I was stuck in Budapest and then they started moving on foot on the highway towards Vienna where this whole thing started that ended with Mrs. Merkel making this policy decision. We were sitting, a few Jewish friends, we were sitting in the living room drinking tea in Vienna and saying, "Wow. This doesn't look good." And then we looked at each other. There were three of us and we said, "What are we going to tell our grandchildren if one day they come to us and they say like we looked at our grandparents, 'Hey, guys, you know, something big was happening there and who did something to maybe not let it happen?'"

And this is how we said, "Okay. Now these people are moving on the highway. They are walking, escaping a bad situation and we are sitting in good comfort in the middle of Europe." And then we started thinking what we could do to tell our grandchildren when they look at history, to do something. And we came to the knowing that of course there are many options to do something and to give immediate help and with the food, and tents, etc. When asked to create a community of people, we thought who can share their experiences and their expertise in order to help in this situation when it's possible.

And when we first thought about where to start we said, "Okay, this involves human beings. People in the local populations everywhere, starting in the Arab countries, here in Turkey and all along the way to Europe, and we decided to trace to Vienna in general to think as a basis to route. Yeah, they'd say Egypt was not so much in focus, then and Jordan and Lebanon, Syria, and Turkey, Greece, Italy, straight up to Sweden. And then we thought about who is representing the people, human beings in the most immediate way. And then we said, "Okay, this is their local government, because they are in a huge city like Istanbul, in Gaziantep, or in a very small town in Austria, it doesn't matter, and they're all comparable situations, where you have things have to be managed, where actually physical people live together, not numbers, not percentages, but people.

And so we invited Mayors from this whole route and some experts and some representatives of NGOs. And as you saw at our second meeting in Athens, we never work without having at least one refugee at each table because we don't want to talk about people, we want to talk with them, and they have to be a part of the discourse because they actually know what they wish, what they need, what they dream of, what they ran from, what they fear. It's not for us to decide or prioritize.

Melissa Durda: One thing that struck me there was the disconnect that you see from those who are working on the ground and those who are making the decisions that affect them, and even though you may read reports and figures, it's very different to hear the stories of what's happening not only to the refugees on the ground, but the groups that are working to support them and the challenges that they face to even do their jobs because the systems are not in place.

Patricia Kahane: So we have a very interesting experience from our second conference in Athens in July. We had a few members of the European Parliament attending, because they had heard of us and when we invited them, they said, "We're coming." And we had this lady from the Netherlands, who works with Turkey in the EU Commission. And then during one of the breaks she said, "This is so great here," because she's never talked to a refugee. And we have a conference design that there are some panel discussions of about 10 or 12 people who discuss a topic and then we have breakout sessions in the form of workshops in different rooms, where people then discuss special issues and every workshop had a host.

And also in each session there was at least one workshop hosted by a refugee, so he was the host of the workshop and the others could give an input. And this is getting people together, it is always something a little different and I think we're going to continue on this road also for the next conference in Vienna.

Melissa Durda: And what would you say are a few examples of movements forward on this issue that have come out from your conference either in Vienna, or in Athens, or the work that you've done between these meetings?

Patricia Kahane: There has been increasing communication between people who attended. One thing is to exchange cards and, and say, "Hi, and nice to meet you, nice to see you," and so some people started communicating also through us. They came to us and said, "Can you put us in contact with A or B or C or D?" And people are asking for more information and we just started like seven months ago, and we're doing a project in Austria, where we are developing a program for peer-to-peer counseling and accompaniment especially for Afghan youth, because in Austria half of those who are granted asylums are Syrians and half Afghanis.

And the Syrians come in families and the Afghanis come mainly young men, very often still in the status as an unaccompanied minor under 18. And the people from Afghanistan have a very low chance of being granted asylum in Austria as well as in Germany. We have some guys sitting around now for years who don't even get anything, because the system kicks in also in Germany, the system kicks in once you're granted asylum. Before that nothing, you just get shelter, food, basic medical care, and... that's it.

Melissa Durda: I know you have another plan for your next conference that will take place in Vienna at the end of January. What are your hopes for moving this forward in the next year?

Patricia Kahane: I have to take a step back - the first conference was like an emergency thing that everybody had the feeling we have to do something so we did that without connecting players and exchanging their contacts. I mean it was really weird because two Mayors from Jordan met for the first time on the plane to come to Vienna. And they have the same problems. Each of them has a couple hundred thousand refugees in their local government. So people connected and this worked fine. And for the meeting in Athens we timed like three, four months after the EU Turkey joint statement to evaluate how it works and doesn't. And Gerald Knaus was there and gave his explanations, in fact this thing doesn't work at all. It's a no brainer.

But, Europe is trying to hold on to it, with all its might and force, because Europe is very happy to roll off the responsibility for these millions of people to Turkey and Greece, but not to let anybody

come up further north or west. And this is a very cynical position of Europe. On the other hand, we talk about large numbers of people migrating, but this is not something new or unusual. People have been migrating for a million years. There are always large numbers of people moving through the earth for different reasons.

And the absorption capacity of the society is huge and very positive as long as it doesn't drop over the tipping point into nationalism.

So you asked about the next conference and what came out of the talks in Athens, and it came on different levels from different people out of different backgrounds, was a question of these many children and unaccompanied minors that are on the move, these numbers coming out of Europol and INTERPOL, that there are some 10,000 missing children in Europe.

Those who have crossed into Europe and who have been registered once somewhere in the world are recorded like children under the radar. And we have now a team investigating this issue and at the next conference we'll be digging with the whole topic of children, minors, and young people, and also who have passed the age of 18, where nobody's responsible for them and their education anymore. And we're going to try motivate and pass the message also through the members of European Parliament to get a higher awareness in the general public, but especially in the institutions in Brussels of what should really be done so that in ten years' time we will not be confronted with a relatively large lost generation of people who will then be in the 20's and 30's without any training and without having been in good contact with local populations. We are actually targeting local populations now in Europe.