

Students' and Teachers' Visit to Israel & Palestine 2011

Visit Report by Denise Chaila

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The Trip

I was part of the delegation to leave the King's Hospital from Dublin for the Schools across Borders trip this year. We left on Friday the 18th of February and we arrived at Ben Gurion airport, Tel Aviv at 2.15, having left Dublin the day before.

Activities While in Israel

Being *Shabbat* when we arrived, the city of Jerusalem itself was sleepy and slow-paced, which was a great way to acclimatise oneself to the new environment without becoming overwhelmed. Initially we spent half of the first day sleeping- exhausted and slightly jet-lagged, but when we did wake that afternoon the rest of the day was entirely devoted to exploring and experiencing Israel. Those who were staying in host families had already been separated from the group by this stage. We ventured into the Old City asking questions in stunned appreciation of the city and getting our first taste of Israel followed by a lovely dinner in the Jerusalem Hotel.

The next day we went to our first school, and it was our first real taste of exactly how the people of Israel- and particularly the young people our age- felt about the conflict, on their own ground and on their own terms. We asked questions regarding our identity in the discussions; we touched on topics like personality, religion, politics and nationalism as regards the person who you are and why it was important to get an overall view of a person rather than just their political inclinations. In every school we conducted this survey type approach in, more the Irish students tended to be more ambiguous about politics while the Israeli students said it was very important to them because it 'affected their lives'.

The following schools -Keshet, Hanissui and the Hebrew University High School- all followed a similar scheme. We unfortunately had more time in some schools than others as that's simply how the mornings worked out, however I count all those discussions as a valuable experience and as all the schools were very different there were many varying opinions and ideas, however they all amalgamated into a few key points. That they wanted first, to be able to get their voices heard to the rest of the world as they felt that the media incorrectly interpreted the character of Israel. That someone took a picture of a radical proclaiming that they hated Palestinians and painted all of Israel with the same brush. We spoke to several people about their thoughts and feelings to get a better understanding for the general opinion of the youth concerning the conflict. It was admitted that many students felt that they 'didn't really understand' what the Palestinians were going through. It was a sentiment echoed by the Palestinian students as well. We met students who said they were neither Pro-Israeli nor Pro-Palestinian because they felt that both sides were wrong, and had done terrible things. They said that they were Pro-Relationships, Pro-Peace, because they felt that every individual person was different and unique and that it was only through acceptance of these differences that peace could eventually be found.

We spent our evenings being shown the city by students who had previously been in the SAB programme and being told the history of the city. We saw holy sites that many people around the world- Christian, Jewish and Muslim alike- long to see. We left our prayers in the Wailing Wall, visited the Church of the Holy Sepulchre and explored its diversity as regards the co-existing religions within and the tensions that exist there. We even managed to visit the Al-Aqsa Mosque and leave a

message for the Palestinian students to say we were thinking of them whilst we were over there. Tamar and Yotam, our wonderful tour guides, were definitely some of the more outspoken students and whilst we were at the Wailing Wall even though they felt awkward they didn't let that encumber our experience. Although they deliberately held back, one of the girls explaining that the Holy places made her feel uncomfortable because she felt too much emphasis had been placed on the gaining of land for the sake of spirituality and it was perhaps part of the reason why people were reluctant to see past their differences.

Although I was staying in the hotel for the majority of our stay on the Monday night I was lucky enough to be invited to stay at Hamutal's house- she was hosting Solenn- and thereby get an entirely different experience of life in a Jewish home. We ate out at a restaurant in the city and just spent time talking with each other just as I would with my friends back home and I felt immeasurably grateful for the fact that as a group the Irish students and Israeli students clicked so well because it enabled us to talk about sensitive and perhaps touchy issues in a more relaxed forum without the presence of adults. Some things we spoke about was the military within Jerusalem.

Though they were generally sixteen, they said they were already planning to enter the army as soon as they left school before they made any plans for college and that they were currently having profiles made during school. It was rattling to hear them talk like that when some of them were younger than I was. I was upset particularly for one boy who said he hoped to be working in intelligence because he would like to be a journalist –as would I!- and work for peace. However if he did it straight after school it would lose its impact if he was a Peace worker, with a gun. It seemed that without a formal structure the students seemed to feel able to talk more freely with us and they shared valuable insights which I will not forget.

Activities While in Palestine

After lunch in the Pizzeria we frequented whilst staying in Jerusalem, we set off for Palestine and had our very first encounter with the separation wall. Tuesday the 22nd of February. It is a tall imposing cement structure that made us feel oppressed as soon as we saw it. I think it is perhaps only then that we truly began to comprehend the enormity of this conflict. For all that we'd talked about it, debated its existence and discussed how it was perceived on both sides we were still at a loss for words when confronted with this solid grey structure that went on for miles. Crossing the wall was easier for us, as we were far more easily recognized as tourists and allowed through the check point- the first we'd seen of this nature- with minimum fuss.

We got on a taxi on the other side and proceeded to drive through to Hebron, passing Bethlehem and staring at the scenery and trying to get used to Hebron. Once we reached the city and met Adli at the International Palestinian Youth League centre, we'd already ascertained that Israel and Palestine- Jerusalem and Hebron- were vastly different. Going from one to the other was similar to entering country entirely. And indeed in some ways it was. The reunion we had with the Palestinian students was warm and although I had not had the pleasure of meeting the Israeli students before this trip I had already spent some time with the Palestinian students- as had most of the group- and we easily slipped back into the camaraderie we'd formed in Belfast. I stayed with Nour Teeti's family with Abiola and we couldn't have asked for a better host family. Her family was very welcoming and on the first night her father took us aside to tell us that whilst we stayed with their family, we were to consider him our father and he would look after us in any way he could.

The night was filled with food- samosas and stews and upside-down and sweet things which we could hardly remember the names of! And once we were well and truly fed we went to bed, knowing quite well that our schedule demanded that we get up at 6:00 a.m. if we had any hope of accomplishing everything we wanted to during the day.

We went to our first school, Widad Nasir Al-Deen and had our first discussion with students from a Palestinian school. The way it worked in Hebron was that the girls and the boys were schooled

separately and the boys in our group achieved instant celebrity status wherever they went. A fact which they didn't feel too cut up about, I'm sure.

The discussions we had in Palestine revolved more around the life they were accustomed to living. Military presence and checkpoints, abusive settlers, the constant frustration and growing helplessness they have for their future but also the fierce pride and loyalty they have for their country.

We found these conversations the most difficult regarding the fact that a certain amount of tact and diplomacy is needed when one attempts to address an issue as sensitive as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. We had all had our experience with the Israeli students, however the girls we spoke to also had their own experiences with Israeli soldiers and settlers and it was difficult to talk about peace when we didn't fully understand the realities of their everyday lives and it was difficult for them to reconcile the fact that not all Israelis were the same, just like no two Palestinians were the same.

However even though this was the first of many intense conversations, it's conclusion was satisfying as we felt we'd managed to convey the Israeli students' desire for understanding and they proved their remarkable open-mindedness. The questions we asked were of the same mould as the ones we'd asked the Israeli students, and after dividing the athletes from the literary fanatics we were able to proceed and touch topics such as forgiveness and peace.

As a group I felt the Irish delegation played off each other's strengths extremely well and towards the end of the trip as we grew closer it became evident that we shared many of the same goals. Our primary one was to listen and truly hear what people were trying to say to us. Within the group there were many people who said they wanted to act as a mediator between the two groups. To exchange messages from one group to another, a job that called upon our burgeoning skills in diplomacy.

H2 and the things we saw when we visited people's houses as well as the stories we heard being told and the people we met was the most difficult of the trip overall. The overall appearance of H2 was that of a ghost town- the few stalls which remained were manned by a few faithful souls willing to live and work under such conditions. It was a veritable roller-coaster of emotion and frequently we had to turn to each other for support as we heard the story of these people's lives. Samah, whose university education my school has been sponsoring for the last few years, and Jamil who told us about life so close to the settlers and the difficulties of living life under constantly military surveillance.

Discussion

I feel that the Schools Across Borders programme has achieved many of its aims with this trip. Overall it has created an awareness and a passion for these people and this conflict within those of us from the Irish delegation. We have made friendships here and experienced things together that have drawn us closer to both Israeli and Palestinian students alike. Contact between students makes it easier to understand and empathise with their situation. It creates a medium with which to view the conflict that is entirely uninfluenced by the media and other second-hand sources. The chance to formulate our own opinions based on pure fact and our own experience unhindered by media bias is invaluable and I feel that as people we have matured and honed many skills. The art of diplomacy, organizational skills, confidence when talking to large groups and above all, the ability to listen and with-hold judgement until you have understood all the facts to an acceptable degree.

As far as accommodation went the hotel in Jerusalem went a long way towards acclimatising ourselves to the city. However because of the fact we all stayed in host families in Palestine, I feel this created an imbalance. It would probably be better to either have *everyone* staying in a hotel or *everyone* staying in host families because it's an entirely different experience to actually live with a Jewish family in Israel rather than staying in a Jewish hotel. There may be biases created on that basis alone because of the limited exposure to family life when staying in a hotel. You tend to get better exposed to one cultural viewpoint as opposed to the other.

Darran was a great asset on the trip and often doubled as tour-guide as well as trip co-ordinator, no easy feat. And the teachers who accompanied us- Pascal, Aisling and Yvonne- were always there,

unfailingly, whenever we needed anything. Without them I feel we wouldn't have appreciated everything we saw as much, and having the teachers there to support us encouraged us greatly- particularly in those rare bouts of homesickness.

The trip itself played a large role in maturing us as people and broadened our vision to see the world and the various issues as real problems that affect real people rather than just sad spectres on the news. We were privileged to be among those who have experienced the heat "where the road meets the rubber". The programme was very educational, and, as suggested by its title, it has succeeded in breaking down many barriers already (many of them mental) where many of the Irish students were concerned. It was an exercise in shedding prejudices and learning to adapt to a change of environment at the drop of a hat. Although a week was not enough, as an introductory programme it most definitely succeeded in raising awareness of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

The work being done with Schools Across Borders is far-reaching and perhaps underestimated, and I hope many students will have the opportunity to take part in this life-changing programme.

What Next?

However with regard to what happens next, the first few weeks after the trip were quite difficult. We had experienced a lot of emotional stress, in politically tense situations and the abrupt end of the trip made it quite hard to re-integrate back into life at home.

The feeling that there was not very much else we could do contributed to how well we were able to deal with the things we'd seen and heard and if there was some definite follow-up in the weeks ahead to either plan another trip or actively work towards something that can help the programme in a practical way

Following the trip, some of the students who went on the trip have formed good friendships. Some students from Oatlands College, visited The King's Hospital to see the production of Anne Frank and some of the students from The Kings Hospital travelled to Oatlands College to see the production of Oliver.

We hope that we will on a one-to-one basis, breakdown prejudices and promote broad-mindedness with regard to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. I am certain that with programmes like SAB, latter generations of Israelis and Palestinians will be more tolerant and accepting of each other's opinions, leading to real dialogue. I hope I will have the opportunity to be part of this programme again.