

# Students' and Teachers' Visit to Israel & Palestine 2012

## Visit Report by Cleopatra Ogochukwu

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My main aim of going on the trip was to not have a biased based opinion and see reality for myself, and also to tell the Palestinian and Israeli children that I care.

We arrived at Ben Gurion airport early on Saturday the 11 of February. When I arrived at my host family's house, I was immediately greeted with love and affection. I went to bed and woke up at 12 in the morning. I had lovely breakfast and went out. First I went to the Dead Sea which was absolutely amazing! Then I went on a camel: it was so exciting but terrifying after that. I went to David's Valley and then for lunch. It was my first day with the Rotem's but it felt like my 3month with them because I bonded with them immediately. The girl I stayed with was named Merav, and I was surprised how she acted towards me like her own sister. That night I went to bed happy and full with food.

The next day which was Sunday I woke up at 6 am to get ready for school with Merav. I was given lunch by my host mum and was given a lift to school by my host dad. We visited Hebrew University Secondary School. The other students were not there yet so Amit and Merav showed me and some other students around the school.

When the other students arrived we met in a room to discuss our main aims. We then spoke to the Principal who talked about the achievements of the school. Afterwards we had a group discussion: Darran asked questions and then we and the Irish students asked and answered the Israeli students.

We then had a group discussion with the 8<sup>th</sup> grade which is second year in Ireland. I found them very intelligent for their age. They spoke about their visit to Hebron and the fact that they were prevented by the Israeli police from meeting the "Breaking the Silence" organisation. They also visited the Ibrahimi Mosque/ Cave of the Patriarchs.

Most of the Israeli students gave their opinions on the visit whether it was necessary or not, how they found it. They also gave us the Irish student's messages and questions to ask and tell the Palestinian students ... After that we took taxis and visited the Old City of Jerusalem. Thankfully we had a tour guide from Oren who was Pippa's sister's boyfriend. We first saw the Armenian Quarter and the Jewish Quarter; it was really fascinating to see the differences within the same country.

We visited the Western Wall. I was really happy to be there as I had letters from family and myself to put in the wall... We visited the Holy Sepulchre where Jesus was crucified. I found it very religious and spiritual. We then went to the market which is in the Muslim quarter and then we ate kanafe, which i didn't like because it was too sweet!

The others went rock climbing while i went back home to have dinner with my host family.

On Monday the 13<sup>th</sup> I went to the Hebrew University Secondary School to have a further discussion with the 10<sup>th</sup> Grade: we discussed about the army, how they felt about joining the army. We also

discussed the settlements, which was a touchy subject for me, but it was really important for me to have had that discussion.

After the discussion with the students from the Hebrew University Secondary School, we then went to the Ha Nissui School. I found that school really interesting because it was an experimental school.

We spoke with the 10<sup>th</sup> grade and they had not done this project before so they had mixed emotions about the subject.

We saw the school memorial to Bnayahu Zukermann, a 12<sup>th</sup> grade student who was killed by a suicide bomber on a bus in February 2004. I found it very sad and emotional.

We went to the Zion Square and then visited Montefiore village community. We then looked around the Mahane Yehuda market which was filled with so many different aromas because there were fruits, sweets, bread, fish, meat etc in the market, and then we went for some ice cream. It was so yummy and fresh. Afterwards we went to one of the market entrances/exits and sang songs in a circle while Jake played the guitar. It was so fun because we were all relaxed and ourselves and we all bonded through the music.

The other students went to Mea Shearim, where the Ultra Orthodox live. I didn't go because Maya was not covered appropriately to go into the community so I stayed with her and Stacey and ate some falafel. After that we went to where a suicide bomb attack had taken place years ago but is now a shop (previously the Sbarro pizzeria). I tried to picture the fear and terror the people must have felt but it was too sad and gruesome to imagine. Then Darran gave us an hour of shopping which I was very grateful for, Maya took Stacey and I around the shops and we bought lots of presents for our friends and families back in Ireland.

After the shopping it became emotional as we went to the spot where Bnayahu Zuckermann and seven other people were killed. I just kept thinking how sad for him to be in his last year of secondary school, and so young but his life was taken away at a very young age. We had a moment of silence for him and the seven other people and then we placed stones by the memorial, which is a Jewish tradition.

After that emotional time we went to the German colony and had drinks at the Cafe.

When I got back to Merav's home, I was aware of the fact that I would be leaving the next day, not knowing what to expect. I became very emotional and had a little cry because I didn't want to leave my Israeli family as I had bonded very well with all of them. I packed my bag and went to bed and bit unsure because I had not met the Palestinians before as I was sick when they came to Ireland so I did not get a chance to see them.

On Tuesday the 14<sup>th</sup> we brought our luggage to the Hebrew University Secondary School to keep them while we went to the Holocaust museum.

So we went to the Yad Vashem, the Holocaust museum but before we went in we had a discussion about this. Inside the museum was indescribable as it was just too emotional and gruesome; it was a very low and sad time for humanity. The part that really touched me was the room with the pictures of children that surrounded the wall, all the children that had been killed, I found it hard to grasp. After that we had another discussion about our visit into the museum.

We then returned to the Hebrew University to collect our bags and then took the taxis to checkpoint 300: it was one of the main entry points to Bethlehem. It was our first encounter with the Separation Wall. As I walked through I felt like a prisoner and I felt really sad because this is how majority of the Palestinian felt because of the Separation Wall. Also as I walked through the barrier I felt completely

different: the whole place was a complete difference to Israel - the aroma, the people, the way the place looked. I was absolutely amazed, I saw a lot of settlements while I was in the taxi. Our taxi driver was very kind to us: he spoke to us about his daily life and how he felt about the conflict, and then he bought us Palestinian sweets. Everyone was so welcoming it was such a shock. I expected misery and sorrow, but instead strong and brave-hearted people.

When we got to the Media centre of IPYL (which is SAB's partner organisation in Hebron) where we would meet our host families we were greeted by the Palestinian students, immediately the worry and unsureness that I had disappeared. I saw Jomana for the first time and we embraced each other as if we already knew each other, it was really amazing. When I got home I was introduced to her brothers and shown around the house, and then given my bedroom.

On Wednesday the 15<sup>th</sup> we visited the Palestinian ministry of Education Office in Hebron and we tasted Palestinian tea for the first time.

We visited Widaad Nisredeem girl's school to thank the Principal for her support for the project (this was Jomana's school). Then we visited another all-girls school called Khadeeja Abdeen: we thanked the Principal and she shared some of her opinion with us which I felt very sad about. We then went out the back to join the girls in the high jump. This was a lot of fun. We then visited Yakoubia girl's school where we had more tea! And had a brief discussion with the 10<sup>th</sup> Grade students: we asked them questions and they asked us questions.

Afterwards we went to Al Qawasmeh school. We had a very important discussion with the 10<sup>th</sup> grade students: the students felt very proud from where they were from but lived with a constant fear. A particular student was angered by this but this was because of her experiences. We then passed messages from the Israeli students and they gave their opinions and gave us messages to send back. The main issues were the settlements and the occupation. After that the younger students presented us with their traditional dance and songs. It was absolutely amazing and mind-blowing, the way they did the dance with pride.

Then we went into the H2 area our first check point from H2 area, which was almost deserted. We saw Palestinian shops that had been closed down by Israeli soldiers, we saw Jewish flags, on buildings, doors etc. There we visited Qurtuba girls' school. The Principal told us of how young children had been arrested for playing but was seen as threats to Israelis. We had brief discussions with the 10<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> graders, during which they shared their opinions.

Then we had some lunch, which was quite tasty.

As we walked we through the old city of Hebron we saw the fencing above the markets, this was because Jewish settlers would throw rubbish, bleach, eggs etc down onto the products and the fence prevented the rubbish touching the sale goods.

We saw a Jewish Bible centre (yeshiva) where a Palestinian boys school used to be but was demolished to build the centre. This was sad because this used to be Adli's school.

We walked through the alleyways of the Old City of Hebron. There were many shops. I wanted to buy from them all because I wanted to help everyone as much as I could.

We went onto the roof of the Hebron Rehabilitation Committee organisation where we all got a view of the old city and the Ibrahimi Mosque: it was a sight for sore eyes.

We walked onwards passing through turnstiles and soldier checkpoints, the soldiers were particularly nice to me. I feel it was because of my skin colour.

So then we went into the Ibrahimi Mosque, where Sarah, Abraham, Isaac and Leah were buried. I still can't believe that I got the chance to see their tombs. On the Jewish side of the building lie the tombs of Jacob and Joseph.

We had the chance to see bullet marks on wall, from the massacre on the 25<sup>th</sup> of February 1994 when Dr. Baruch Goldstein killed 29 people using a machine gun. We then had a moment of silence. I just thought Wow how cruel could someone be, to walk into a religious place while people have their eyes closed praying to their God, and just shoot them all. Wow so cruel...

Afterwards we walked down a street Avraham Avinu, a place where Palestinians are forbidden to go. This was an exercise to recognise the rights of the Palestinian students to walk down 200 meters of their home city. As we turned a corner two soldiers spotted us and started running with guns in their hand and i felt petrified, but Darran assured the soldiers that we walking down to area that Palestinians were allowed. It was the first time the Palestinians students had ever been in this area, and it was all thanks to foreign presence. We then negotiated with the soldiers to allow the Irish students to visit the Palestinian pottery shop, which was successful!

When we returned home, Jomana's mum had made a lovely dinner with rice and chicken, so after we ate we got into our pj's and watched a movie. It was really cosy and I found it impossible to miss home.

The next morning Thursday the 16<sup>th</sup> we did an evaluation session to improve on our interactions in the group discussions with the Palestinian students. We thought of ice breakers etc.

We then visited the Hussein boy's school. We were all put into mini groups to facilitate exchanges of questions. After we had feedbacks from each groups. Then I exchanged my face book with a lot of the students.

We then visited Mazania girls school, which was our last school of the trip. This was Layali's and Diana's year 10<sup>th</sup> grade group. We had an exchange of questions and point of views. One of the Palestinian students said "that behind the conflict , the Israeli teenagers are teenagers just like us".

We then went to eat pizza, which was so huge but yummy. Then we took a bus to Bethlehem, where Jesus was born. I found it very religious and then we walked around Bethlehem's Old City and we sang in a big circle. Michael played the guitar which we never knew. Singing was a lot of fun.

When I returned home, I ate and i discussed with Jomana: we had a girly talk and then we went out to visit Jomana's grandparents' house

On Friday the 17<sup>th</sup> I went sightseeing with Jomana's family and I visited jomana's auntie's house. As it was heavily raining the plans were cancelled and we all met up in Taysir's house with the Palestinian students, while the KH students went to visit Samah Sharabati at her home.

Saturday the 18<sup>th</sup> we woke up with snow, and Jomana and I were happy that I might not be able to leave, but unfortunately I had to leave. We all met up in the media centre to say our final goodbyes, which was very sad and then we took the taxis to Bethlehem and 21 bus to Jerusalem. Then we have lunch at a pizza restaurant in East Jerusalem and onto the Muslim quarter for our final shopping

And then we get our final view of the old city from the rooftop of the Austrian Hospice. We said our goodbyes to some of the Israeli students at the central bus station in Jerusalem.

Then we all had a final get together at Shauli's house in Shoeva... we then told them about our experiences and messages from the Palestinian students. Some of the Israeli students did not agree with each other and had debates about it. Then we the Irish students had our final reflection about the whole trip. After that it was party time, and then at 12 am we said our goodbyes to the Israeli students. We then took the mini bus to the airport.

The security was very strict in the airport but it was all worth it. If I had the opportunity to go on this trip again, I would go.

I really enjoyed the trip. The trip to Israel and Palestine has changed me in so many different ways: the whole experience was life-changing. Now I have friends from the other side of the world, even in Ireland as well.