

Students' and Teachers' Visit to Israel & Palestine 2012

Visit Report by Neil Boles

5th Year student at The King's Hospital Secondary School, Dublin

Friday 10 February: Dublin – Istanbul - Tel Aviv

From the very moment, we touched Israeli soil the trip was set to be fantastic, having been told by Darran that he usually is stopped by security upon entering the country we were anticipating a 4-5 hour wait. However somehow he managed to get through without a second glance from the guard. After a little celebration from Darran and a successful baggage collection, we quickly saw Darran was a man well able to organise. After hiring the service of two taxi buses for the night we all packed up and set off.

The bus journey and subsequent events have to be one of the most daunting times of my life. Put yourself in this situation. Having been separated from the group from your school, travelling in a random bus through Israel one of the most hostile countries in the world, sharing the experience with teenagers you don't really know trusting in a teacher you have never met, to navigate a Hebrew speaking driver through a country she isn't the slightest bit familiar with to leave you with a family whose name you can't even pronounce all at four am after nearly 12 hours of travelling. Yet a smile at the doorway from your new family's mother followed by a sandwich and a shower puts most of the nerves to rest by the time your head hits the pillow.

Despite having travelled all day and most of the night I felt it was important to do as much as possible in the short time we would spend in the country. Ephrat the 16-year-old Israeli girl who would host me for the next three days was very friendly and excited about showing me around her country

Hence, I was up relatively early to meet the rest of the family over a large breakfast. Ephrat's family were very welcoming, not very religious and encouraged discussions as they shared a desire to learn as much as I did, ranging from life in Ireland its culture to my own understanding and opinions towards the past and present situation in their country.

The day was one of rest whilst also giving me a taste of the country I had just landed into. We visited a small village set on the side of a hill, after walking around the picturesque town and seeing some of the local churches and views towards Jerusalem, we enjoyed an ice cream before heading back to the house. The rest of the day was spent getting to know the family better.

Staying with an Israeli family was truly an experience to remember. Ephrat's family consisted of the father an economist, a mother as close to a caring Irish mother as you will find, an older brother who I never actually met as he is a soldier, my host girl Ephrat, her 11 year-old sister Merav and their aptly named cat Nala (from the Lion King).

It is clear the two major differences between my own culture and their own were language and food. Food is a big part of my life and a big subsection of that food is made up of pigmeat, to me pigmeat is delicious in any form. However, in the stomachs of an Israeli family, you will never find rashers and black pudding, roast pork or even ham sandwiches.

Welcome to the world of kosher living. Despite the absence of swine on any menu throughout the trip I was not left hungry. Kosher chefs have many substitutes for the split hooved animal that will not chew the cud. Ephrat's mother cooked beautiful chicken and beef dishes with an array of salads to complement them. Whilst many were referred to as traditional Israeli dishes, I later

discovered that many Israeli recipes have been adopted from Arabic cuisine, which is equally tasty. Even though many Israelis can speak nearly fluent English, they will speak Hebrew to each other. To an English speaker there is no language (apart from perhaps Chinese) which is harder to decipher than Hebrew, both the spoken and written forms bear no resemblance to English or any other modern language for that matter, comprising of a number of roots the language of David is made by adding these roots to a wide selection of funny looking symbols.

As Ephrat went to great lengths explain the language to me, I found it important to make an attempt at the encrypted street signs. This however ended in raucous laughter from anyone who overheard my struggle. Ephrat's family was very welcoming and most of my time with them was spent talking, through English for obvious reasons. The family and I shared a mutual desire to learn everything about each other. Our discussions ranged from day to day life, family, culture and traditions along with heavier topics like the economic situation in each respective country and the conflict between Israel and Palestine. In some of the other students' families they may have felt the conflict was a taboo subject. However this was not the case and Ephrat's family spent more than one night imparting everything they knew about its beginnings, its resulting problems and even possible solutions. The father of the family was also happy to discuss the Palestinian situation to the best of his knowledge. As I knew very little about the opposite side of the conflict, I took what was said to be completely true. I would later learn that Ephrat's family showed a natural bias towards the Israeli side.

The time spent in the schools would probably be considered the working aspect of the trip. However as the group was enthusiastic about learning this proved to be extremely interesting. I suppose outlining our collective aims would be a good place to start. Everyone was aware that the media gives a somewhat sheltered view of the situation, even a pro-Israeli view on things, so one of the main issues for us was to hear first-hand from those who witness the conflict every day. This would allow us to formulate our own views and opinions through primary sources, this was important to the Israeli and Palestinian student because we could then spread their message to those back home.

We wanted to show the students that there are people outside their own little country who care and wish to understand and hear the truth. Another aspect that some took upon was to carry messages from the Israeli students to the Palestinian students and vice versa. These mainly showed to each side that the "other side" was in fact human. Messages from the Israelis like "We don't need to be afraid of each other as hate breeds hate," or "We are not all like the soldiers" were very refreshing and were well received by the Palestinians.

My own personal aim for the trip was to facilitate connections between both sides of the conflict, in the hope that they grow up to be more understanding and compromising in later life. I feel it is crucial that we reach Israeli teenagers before they turn 18 and join the army, as they will then not have such a black and white view of Palestinians.

We visited two schools in Jerusalem, Hebrew University School and Ha Nissui School. Both were at polar opposites in everything from homework to toilets. The former was your conventional western school of rote learning for exams, much like home, the school was structured in a similar format with class times, homework and breaks Ha Nissui on the other hand was totally different. Students chose topics they would like to study rather than a compulsory system, there was never any homework or exams (up until the final two years). This very liberal school was very proud of how it had broken the shackles of normality and boasted mixed gender toilets and an outdoor museum of student graffiti along its walls.

However despite how these schools physically differed it was quite clear to see that the student thought alike, and shared similar viewpoints. Our discussions in the school carried the same format, an introduction followed by questions from both sides (Irish and Israeli) before summing up what we had covered and concluding with us singing a song. We covered questions on how students felt about conscription, their thoughts about Palestine and Palestinians, opinions about the settlements and separation walls and in some case the possibility of a peaceful future and how

this could be achieved. We obviously received a mixed response to all the topics which was interesting to see how even within a small group of students that there could be such varied ideology. Some disliked the idea of the army and conscription as it interfered with their own lives and studies, others felt it was necessary for protection. Most said they felt pressure to join from family and relatives, as it was their duty to serve the country. Surprisingly, nearly all groups agreed that Palestine did not need an army, this was for a couple of reasons if both countries had an army there would be a full blown war, they do not need to protect themselves and some felt that as Palestine is not recognised it is not worthy to have an army.

Views toward the settlements also varied with some accepting the extreme ways in which settlers can act and others feeling their actions were justified, some agreed with the idea of reclaiming "the promised land" and for most they passed no heed on them as they were usually just extensions of their cities. Some of the students expressed interest in meeting Palestinians and agreed and some even agreed that for a harmonious future to occur it would be crucial for both sides of the conflict to interact peacefully.

Over the three days, we spent in Jerusalem I found out a huge amount of information and observed many different perspectives. It was wonderful to see how passionate the students were about the conflict and how much they valued the work of Schools Across Borders. One thought I have now reflecting back on the Israeli schools is how, whilst the students are aware of the situation in Palestine, they seem somewhat oblivious to the extent of the everyday oppression felt by the people living there. This is not entirely their fault as they have grown up with the media views of life across the separation wall and usually carry on the opinions of their parents who may have experienced the extremities of Palestinian society.

Israel and Palestine is not referred to as the Holy Land for no reason, it is the hub for three of the most popular world religions, Christianity Judaism and Islam. It is incredible how there is so much land available in the world yet there there has been so much emphasis on this small section of land between Europe and North Africa.

Taking a tour through Jerusalem is a very moving experience. Our group met up with Oren, Philippa's sister's boyfriend who happened to be a tour guide. Even though we were mainly a Christian group, we visited some of the important monuments of the world religions. The Western Wall was very powerful and one of the most religious places in Jerusalem. Seeing the devoutness of the Jewish people who make pilgrimage to this place of such significance, and being able to share a message in the wall was compelling.

The Old City of Jerusalem is a charming place; touring through the stone arches and narrow paths of the Armenian and Jewish quarters was exciting as we felt a real sense of the cities character. Some of the sites, which held greater relevance to me, included the Church of the Holy Sepulchre and the Stations of the Cross. The supposed associations Jesus had with these areas and buildings link them to the Christian faith. The Church of the Holy Sepulchre sits upon Calvary and is said to be where Jesus was crucified. The ritual carried out by millions of tourists is to queue to be able to kiss "the Spot" where the cross was laid. Unfortunately, I was disappointed with the visit to Calvary, as the Greek Orthodox Church is highly decorated, in accordance to their beliefs and traditions.

This to me was all a bit excessive and I found it took away the authenticity of the "Holy Site". Sadly, I would come to see that many of the other religious landmarks of the area are preserved in a similar way. As following all Stations of the Cross would have taken a long time, we got a taster of them. The Ninth Station was just around the corner from Calvary so was easily found. The Ninth station of the cross remember the time when Jesus stumbled and fell for the second time on his way to be crucified, some would feel it important to modestly depict this scene. However, it was some bright spark's idea to erect a flashing neon sign bearing a man falling over under the weight of a large cross! I understand that walking the stations is a popular tourist activity yet to me the excessive gold and neon lights were a bit overwhelming. Nonetheless, I feel privileged to have seen some of the sights for myself as it brings the literature from the time alive.

In order to make a fair analysis of the struggle on both sides during the conflict it was important to see examples of the most extreme hatred on both sides. The spot we visited was a memorial to a teenage boy Bnayahu Zuckermann who attended the Ha Nissui School but was killed along with seven others by a Palestinian suicide bomber on a public bus. This was a death close to the hearts of the Ha Nissui students who came to the memorial with us, as some of them knew him quite well.

After a moment of reflection, we engaged in the Jewish tradition of placing stones by the memorial. This action of remembrance was important to express how we care and acknowledge the losses on both sides of the conflict. Another significant part of our stay in Jerusalem was the couple of hours that we spent in Yad Vashem Holocaust museum.

This experience was one we shared with some of the Israeli students who felt knowledge of the holocaust and its atrocities was crucial for our understanding of the Israeli Jewish mentality. The Jewish people seek a land of refuge in Israel, previously some felt it was not necessary to live in the Promised Land, and so they moved out. However due to the ill treatment of the Jewish population throughout Europe and even further afield, they seek retreat in Israel. As some of King's Hospital students had visited the concentration camps at Auschwitz last year, we had already been exposed to such an unpleasant place.

The museum itself was still harrowing as it showed chronologically the build-up of hatred to the final condemning of an entire race. Witnessing the museum with Jewish teenagers who had had relations who were victims of the attempted genocide made the whole ordeal a bit more personal as we could see some of them were really affected by what happened.

Probably the most powerful symbol of divide between Israel and Palestine is literally the large man made division which borders the West Bank, this is known as the separation wall. There are so many feelings and emotions wrapped up in this imposing structure: "It's there for protection"; "It maintains the peace" . Pposing this views are *the* "it is a constant reminder of our struggle"; "It is unsightly and unnecessary", it should be clear who states which argument.

The wall has to be one the most intimidating constructions I've ever seen and is seems to be a case that Israel wanted to control the Palestinian spread whilst reclaim "their own land". Regardless of which side is right a wall is not really the right step towards peace. However, I suppose it has curtailed the eye for eye violence. The best opinion I heard about the separation wall came from a Palestinian girl in a school discussion: "If Israelis want peace they should build bridges not walls."

My Palestinian experience was shared with my host Fahed, his brother and father. Fahed was very generous and made every effort to make me comfortable in his home. Unfortunately Fahed's English wasn't great. This wasn't really a problem though as his extended family was very close, meaning we spent a lot of time with Fahed's cousins who spoke excellent English.

In the evening times I was able to engage with the father who like, as was the case in Jerusalem, and freely discuss the conflict. Fahed's father was very objective when it came to explaining things to me and I could easily extrapolate the prevailing difficulties. He was also very accepting of the views I had picked up in Jerusalem and was clear in his explanations of the Palestinian view on some of my profound questions. For example "Why if there are so many other Arab countries around the world do the Palestinians not move?" In an admirable reply, I was told, "there is no need for this country to be religiously dominated. We are not trying to declare a Muslim state and neither should the Jewish people."

His view was based on the possibility that both sides could live together in mutual respect. However as with any question and answer it can lead to further questions like: Will a future like this be possible and how...?

The Palestinian culinary skill far exceeded my expectations. Every meal regardless of how it looked (believe me some looked unappetising) was delicious and I enjoyed several meals with both Fahed and his cousins, who with delight showed me falafel, sahlab, and hummus in many different forms.

The layout of our day in Palestine was quite similar to Jerusalem. We would visit schools observe the city and spend the evening with our family. The main difference across the border with the schools was the single gender schools. Co-education was widespread in Jerusalem. However the Muslim culture must be respected on all levels of society, including a male-female divide in the schooling system.

The school discussions were aimed at giving the group a Palestinian perspective. Topics like the separation wall, the settlements and the occupation were common and it was again very interesting to hear such a wide range of responses.

One of the big issues I thought that arose in general with the Palestinians was their views of the Israelis. Apart from the soldiers, the only other experience Palestinians have of Israelis are of settlers. I felt it very important to outline that the vast majority of Israelis do not hold the same views as the extremist settlers. This came as welcome news to some of the students who were unsure whether all Israeli people supported the prejudices of settlers. Some of the students expressed a lot of anger towards the Israelis with one girl stating "the only way for peace was to kill all the Israelis." We were able to reveal the underlying message she wanted to bring out: she did not actually want to murder thousands of people but she wanted the Israelis to feel the pain they had imposed upon the Palestinians.

Our education of the conflict with the Palestinian students was not confined to the classroom as some of the hosts accompanied us through Hebron as they have such extensive knowledge of their city. The most moving site I witnessed was in Hebron's Old City: above a busy Palestinian market place are occupied apartments of Israeli settlers. The settlers living here hold very strong views and because of this mistreat the Palestinians in the most humiliating and demeaning way possible. A mesh grid had to be erected above the market to shield the Palestinians from the missiles fired at them from above. A quick view skyward and you can see anything from rubbish and stones to bottles of urine and bleach. It is so impossibly difficult to observe such inhumane behaviour, that I can only imagine the day-to-day lives of the stallholders below.

The whole group was understandably shocked by this appalling behaviour and it really hit us the extent of the harassment and cruelty associated with the conflict. The site of religious significance in Hebron that we saw was the Ibrahimi Mosque contains the tomb of Abraham the prophet. This tomb is important for both Palestinians and Israeli and due to the conflict is not entirely accessible; instead, a segregated viewing area surrounds the tomb. Along with the mosque being religiously relevant it has also more recently become the site of a terrorist attack. In 1994 an Israeli family doctor Dr. Baruch Goldstein opened fire with a machine gun during morning prayer. This shooting resulted in 29 Palestinian deaths. The bullet holes of this massacre can still be picked out along the walls of the mosque. As a mark of respect, the group paused for a moments silence in memory of the people who died that day. Our reflection here was comparable to the moment we took in Jerusalem to remember those who died from the bus explosion.

Another subsection of our stay in the West Bank was the trip to Bethlehem. This journey was spent singing as our stalwart musician Jake had his guitar. Bethlehem, a more liberal city like Jerusalem, contained the Church of the Nativity, a church built over the place of Christ's birth. As was the case in Jerusalem these religious landmarks were covered in gold silver and other shiny metals or were surrounded by statues, candles and burning incense. The spot where it all happened is easily found and the touristy thing to do is queue up and kiss the area marked on the ground. I found it very moving however when in filed a group of Peruvians who followed the traditional routine, but then began singing a hymn to the tune of silent night. In my eyes hymns are one of the best parts of a religion due to their powerful meaning and also the congregating affect they have on people. The simplicity of the hymn dimmed the glimmer of gold in the grotto and created a genuinely

spiritual moment. After walking through some of the streets of Bethlehem, we made our way back to Hebron.

Our penultimate day in Hebron was challenged by torrential rain and flood streets and most of the group headed to Taysir's house for a party whilst our Kings' Hospital group of four made a visit to Samah. King's hospital has supported Samah's third level education for the past two years and will continue to do so until she graduates next year. It would have been impossible for Samah's father to afford university for his daughter and the support we give her has allowed her to follow her dream of studying English literature and pursue a career in teaching. Without the help of our school Samah would have been married young, started a family and her education would never have gone beyond secondary school. Being part of a project like this made me very proud of King's Hospital and how we, a small west Dublin school, could completely change the life of this girl who will go on to help others and positively affect future generations of Palestinian school children.

Saying goodbye to all of the Palestinian hosts the following morning ended up with many of the students, Irish included, crying. The rest of us whilst, sorry to be leaving acknowledged the kindness shown to us and appreciated that we had formed good friendships with each other and happily hugged, promising to keep in touch over Facebook. The Palestinian side of things really has to be experienced first-hand no news story will truly cover all areas feeling very privileged to have witnessed the opposite side of the wall we rounded off the whole trip by sharing our stories from Hebron. This was crucial to bring the purpose of the trip full circle.

After seeing both sides I was surprised just how little the Israelis knew about the Palestinian situation. After detailing the full extent of the oppression in Hebron it was clear to see the Israelis were horrified by the cruelty shown to the Palestinians. A fruitful discussion ended positively in a mutual understanding that regardless of our location we all share the common bond of being teenagers who can communicate and learn from one another. Following this was food, a party, and long goodbyes with more tears before we headed to the airport expecting a relatively relaxed journey home.

Living up to expectations, Israeli security is very thorough. After launching our suitcase full of delicate pottery through a spring loaded x-ray machine, nearly every bag had to be hand searched. Someone ransacking through my suitcase of souvenirs and clothes was the last thing I wanted at 1am. Having clearly recognisable Palestinian items like their flag (!) did not help my case. However after proving I was not in fact a Palestinian sympathiser by showing an Israeli flag and explaining the whole Schools Across Borders project I was allowed to repack my suitcase. This was not the end of the security check, as after the whole group had checked in and passed through that hand luggage security we receive the bad news that Jake was held up. After coming so far, he spilled out the fact he had been staying with a Palestinian family who had given him a cuddly toy. The reaction to this was to hold up our whole group and give individual questioning, delaying the flight by half an hour in order to re check some of the bags! Nonetheless, we managed to get on the plane in the end.

Our journey back to Ireland was carried out in a semi-conscious state, waking between airport transfers and falling asleep before take-off. Open arms from familiar parents and long goodbyes from newfound friends saw our experience through.