

Students' and Teachers' Visit to Israel & Palestine 2012

Visit Report by Philippa Peters

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My aims:

In the ten days in Israel and Palestine I wanted to use the great opportunity to learn as much as possible:

to learn about different cultures and different religions; to get to know new people and interesting characters and of course, I wanted to learn about the conflict - what the different points of view are and how much they experience the conflict in your everyday life in Israel and in Palestine.

I wanted to find out if there was a difference between Jerusalem or in Hebron, and how big is this difference? I wanted to find out if I am with Israelis or with Palestinians.

Furthermore, my aim was to give the Israeli and Palestinian people hope - that students from Ireland (or other countries) were interested in their life, cared about them. I wanted to make them feel that they are not alone. Finally, if I had the feeling that it could be possible, I wanted to try to pass messages on from Israel to Palestine and vice versa. Back in Ireland/Germany I wanted to tell people what I experienced in my ten days full of learning.

Friday 10

The Friday was the day of our travel. The hours on the plane and on the airport gave me the opportunity to get to know the students of the group as I met most of them only one time before.

Saturday 11

My first day in Jerusalem: We arrived at 2.30 in the morning at Ben Gurion Airport. It took a while till we could organise taxis to our host families but I arrived safe at Shir's house in Mevasseret, a town next to Jerusalem. In the morning I woke up at ten and enjoyed the beautiful view of Jerusalem. The host family and Shir were very friendly and made a wonderful breakfast. Later we went to Tel Aviv to a market at the beach. We had a nice time there and I met Shir's sister. Back in Mevasseret I and Shir went for a long walk. It is so nice there. It was Sabbath and very quiet.

When we came back I fell asleep because I was still so tired from the flight and of all the new impressions I got that day. I spent the evening with the family. It was weird to stay in a family you didn't know before and I felt to unsure about having serious discussions with Shir and her family. But I loved Israel from the first day and I felt very welcomed.

Sunday 12

In the morning we went to the Hebrew University School. We had to wait about an hour till the other students who had hosts from the Ha Nissui arrived. But we spent this time to get to know the other hosts. The group then met to talk about our first experiences and impressions and about the aims we all had for the visit.

In the school we had three other meetings. We met the principal and he talked about the school and the projects they have. I think this school does a lot to encourage the students to think about the conflict and policy in general and to discuss different views. For example, some students do the Model United Nations project and a group of 8th grade students went to Hebron and tried to meet with an organisation called "Breaking the Silence."

We met with this group of students. The students found the trip to Hebron very interesting and

thought that they took a great opportunity to go there. They also gave us questions to pass onto the Palestinians. For example, what they think about Israelis. The students were in general open and interested but I think a little bit too young to develop their own views.

We had also a meeting with older students from the 10th grade. We focused on the aims of the project and the identities of the students. We heard what aspects of identity are important for them. After that we looked what is important for us. Everyone that felt for example their nationality is important for their identity had to stand up. Religion, Nationality and family were important for most of the group.

After the visit at the school we went to the Old City. For me, this was especially nice because I got to see Oren. He gave us a tour through the Old City. The Old City is one of the most impressive places I have ever seen. It is really old and you have layers from so many centuries. Culturally, it is impressive because different cultures live so close to each other, and as far as I could see, in peace. This is an example that there can be peace and that Jerusalem can be shared.

From the Old City we could see the separation wall, which makes it so sad. The wall keeps people from going to a city they love, it is the proof that the peace is not there. We went to the Western Wall and a man talked to us: that the next kingdom will come and that anyone who doesn't believe will die. Oren translated him for me. It was quite interesting to know which way I will die soon. The Western Wall was my favourite spot. You could really feel how important it is for the Jews.

We also visited Christian places. The church of the Holy Sepulchre and a station of Jesus' Passion. I didn't like the Church, because all the spirit was taken away with too much glittery golden stuff. And the station as well. The sign looked like a permanent Christmas decoration. This is not what religion means for me. It looked only tourisy.. The last quarter we went through was the Muslim Quarter. There was life! We went through the market and ate kanafe, a Palestinian sweet speciality.

That evening I had my own special event- I went to a Jewish wedding. It was good fun. I saw the traditional ceremony and we danced a lot. It was a real highlight of the week. This day was full of excitement and new experiences. We saw a new country, new people and a different cultures. In the Old City I was impressed by the peace between everyone. The soldiers were not frightening at all.

Monday 13

In the morning the students from the Hebrew University School had a group discussion with a smaller group from the 10th grade. We talked about the conflict. Mostly they felt insecure and uncomfortable about the Palestinian but they were willing to find a peaceful solution. We asked if they thought that settlements should be removed as part of the peace process. The answers for that were different. There was one guy who lived in a settlement and he saw it as his home and just a suburb of Jerusalem. He said he lives in peace with the Palestinians and settlements weren't a problem for him. Others disagreed and said settlements would disturb the peace process while others said it is necessary to distinguish between settlements and settlers and they gave us examples of settlers that had a really good relationship with Arab villagers.

I thought it was really good and interesting to get different views for such a sensitive issue. Especially now I realize how valuable it is not to see settlers as the settlers like the ones in Hebron and not to get only the Palestinian view on them. In the end we collected messages from Israel to Palestine: "No one should equalize the government and Israel. What the government does is not what everyone supports." "It is important to talk before we go to the army, after the army it is too late to get your impression." "There can be a future with order and peace. We believe in that".

In Ha Nissui we continued the discussion with another group of 10th grade students. We asked them first quite general opinions on the conflict. The answers were different. They said they don't know what to feel partly because they don't even understand the conflict fully and to get a solid opinion they should know the other side as well. I was very impressed by this answer because it is

really wise and because this is exactly how the start of a solution looks like.

Another opinion was that the conflict is not as bad as it might look like. This might be true but I think this view grows out of the good situation that the Israelis are in. I only heard this only in Israel and never in Palestine. Israeli students are not as deeply involved in the conflict as the students in Hebron. The conflict is not that present. After that we went over to the army. Nearly everyone saw the need to have the army, because Israel is such a small country surrounded by only enemies, and that without the army they would be lost. The job of the army is to protect, not to fight. A girl said, the army did a lot for me and my country, soon it is my turn to return this to the army. The army is more like a volunteer service and you don't have to go around with a weapon the whole time.

Others said that they don't want to join the army and that no one should be forced to. Others again said, they would like to have no army because that would mean peace but in their situation they need an army. I learned again that most Israelis stand behind their army but that it doesn't mean that they support everything it does. But here as well: there are many people with many different opinions. As we asked them what they would think about a Palestinian army the responses were quite alike. They thought the Palestinians were not capable of having an army. Firstly, because they don't have their own country and there can't be an army without a country. Secondly, because they proved that they would misuse their power- even without an army they shoot and kill people anyway. What I didn't know was that Israel did even give weapons to Palestinians, but I don't think that it is comparable to the Israeli army. I thought that they mainly didn't like the idea of Palestine having the same power resources as they do and that they fear the Palestinian more than they admit they do.

We went on to Palestine as a separate state. Only a few said that all Arabs should get out of the Jewish land. Others said, they wish for them that they get their own country and even that Israeli people understand their need the best, because for many centuries they didn't have their own country either. But they had one condition: Israel shouldn't lose security and land.

As we had done at the Hebrew University Secondary School, the last thing we did was to ask if they had messages for the students in Hebron we could pass on. A very important message was: "We shouldn't fear each other because all hatred grows out of fear." This is my personal favourite message because I learned in these days that fear indeed is a huge problem in the conflict. When a student involved realises this, it is a step definitely in the right direction. From the discussions I learned that most Israelis I met are willing to give the Palestinians their freedom and to live in peace.

On the other hand they are afraid that the Palestinians won't be satisfied. After the discussion we got hosted with nice food and the students showed us around their school. Ha Nissui is a school like I have never seen before. The students get a lot freedom and don't even have to write test until their senior years. In the break they turn on big loudspeaker and everyone gets crazy. The teacher Judy showed us in the end the memorial of Bnayahu Zuckermann, who was a student at Ha Nissui and who was killed by a suicide attack on a bus. He only lived two years longer than us. This showed us the Israeli side of the conflict clearer than anything else we heard before. To see the school of a victim and to know so much about his death brings it to a way more personal level. I think it was really important for us to see this and to stop on our tour through west Jerusalem where the murder took place. Our tour started at the Zion square and we walked to Montefiore village community. It was established for the Jews to come there in 1880s and 1890s, under Turkish rule.

Later on we had a fun programme, we had ice cream, went through the Mahene Yehuda market and we made music. Jake on the guitar and the rest singing (loud and funny, but I heard better musicians in my life). We also visited Mea Shirim, that is where the ultra-orthodox communities live. We saw their houses from the outside, it seemed that time was frozen there. Some people on the street turned their face away from us, because in their eyes we were not clean. As wrong as it is to judge them for their views and their way of life, but for me it is hard not to see them as very

different to everything we are used to. But I think that everyone should respect others no matter how they live and what they believe in - that counts for me, for Christians, Muslims and the Jewish ultra-orthodox.

The rest of the time we spent on shopping and a last gathering in a café in the German Quarter. The evening I spent with Shir and her parents. I planned for this evening to start a discussion, but on the way home I got reminded by the father that I would be too young to argue with him. I wanted to tell him that the Church of England would call themselves Protestants but it seemed like he didn't like children to question him. After this experience I was too afraid to start a discussion with the family and we spent the evening watching a movie and we ordered very good Arabic food for my last evening at their house.

Tuesday 14

The last morning at school was quite said as I knew that I wouldn't see some of the girls I met at the wedding again. Some students, including Shir, joined us to visit Yad Vashem. For me this was one of the hardest experiences in Israel and Palestine. I knew from the beginning that it wouldn't be easy, but it was even worse than I thought it would be. All the time I had to think that my country is the one with the highest responsibility for the Holocaust. I never felt so bad to be German before. I knew that it was not my fault and I knew no one would accuse me, but to see what the Jews must think about Germans made me feel bad. The Holocaust is deep in the Israeli psyche: they say that Israel is the only place where they ever could live their religion and get respect. They say this is their true place and the European history proved that there they got slaughtered. I can understand this view and I really wish for the Jews to find their place where they can live in peace. In Yad Vashem I also realized that life goes on and history falls behind: this was the place where my sister and Oren met- the start of a long relationship between a Jew and a German girl. After the visit I felt down and it was Shir who came to me and asked if I was alright.

We made our way to Palestine. Here everything is different. When we saw the wall it seemed like an imprisoned country and you feel sad that people don't get on the other side of the wall. But my first impression of Palestine was so different. You get over the wall and you arrive at a small market with Arabic food, the sellers praise and shout and it is very alive. The taxi drivers treat you the same way and do their best to be the lucky ones who gets the tourists. Palestine is not European orientated, it is Arabic. On the way to Hebron we saw first signs of Bethlehem and settlements. Sheep and donkeys were on the streets as it would be normal and in the taxi Arabic music was played. From the first moment on I liked the difference. At Hebron the Palestinian students awaited us very for a friendly welcome. Yara and her Mum picked me and Stacey up and on the way they bought falafel for us.

Their house was not what I expected a Palestinian house to be: it was huge! They had their own swimming pool and a big garden and from the balcony we could see the lights of Gaza. That day we met the whole family, except the father (a doctor, who works in Jerusalem) was at that time in Dubai. Yara has two sisters and two brothers. The mother can only speak a little English but the older sister went for a year to California, she is fluent and a very lovely person, like Yara. I felt very welcomed and I love the family.

Wednesday 15

This day started with a real Arabic breakfast and I was the amusement of the family because I didn't know how to eat mine. With the group we first went to the Ministry of Education office, where nothing went according to plan and I tried to compare this to Germany, and had to laugh a little. But obviously, we weren't in Europe anymore. We went to different schools to say thank you and to introduce the program. In the Khadeeja Abdeen Girl's school the girls were allowed to join in the PE class. That was great fun and I wonder how you could possibly call their high jump "high" or "sport". The principal was a lovely woman, a real mother-figure.

In the Al Qawasmeh School we had a discussion with 10th Grade girls. One question was how they see Israelis. A girl answered, that she would like to kill them all. Of course was this quite

shocking for everyone in the room. But after some questions it became clear, that she wanted to make them feel what she has been through, she wants them to be for once the oppressed side. Violence was for her the only possible way for this. This is understandable but sad. Girls at this age should be those who tell their fathers for example not to shoot and to kill the poor deer or not to eat meat. But these are the results of a conflict and this might be a sign of how hard it is to find a solution.

After the programme at the schools we visited the Old City of Hebron. We saw the reality of the conflict. We saw the fences above the market that are needed to protect the shopkeepers and customers from rubbish and stones. We saw dead streets, we saw houses that were closed down for protection against the settlers, rocks on the street to stop the Palestinian cars to get through, soldiers on roofs and at the next corner, doors with the Star of David as a sign that the settlers had wanted to occupy these. We saw the checkpoints.

On the way to one of the school in the H2 we had to go through a checkpoint and the school was surrounded by a fence for protection against the settlers. From the school we could see where once was an old Palestinian school is now a Jewish bible study centre (Yeshiva). I think when you went to the school before, you feel very angry seeing now the settlers using it. I heard this day many stories about cruel soldiers and settlers and from this point I can understand the Palestinians very well. I would like to know the stories of soldiers and settlers, to get the full image. I can understand the Palestinians here when they say they hate settlers and soldiers, but from the discussions in school I realized that many make the mistake to see all Israelis as future cruel soldiers and settlers.

On our tour we went to the Ibrahimi Mosque. The girls had to wear long coats to cover themselves completely up. In the mosque we saw the tombs of Sarah, Abraham, Isaac and Leah. We also saw bullet points in the Mosque from a massacre. On the 25 February Dr Baruch Goldstein went into the mosque with a machine gun and when the Muslims bent their heads in their prayer he shot about 29 people, the others run out in panic and 10 more were killed, because the soldiers thought they were aggressive and saw themselves in danger. I can't believe that a holy place can be made into a place of such disgust. When people kill in holy places there is no respect left at all. It is so sad, that things like this happen. We heard that some settlers honour Goldstein for his "good" action, because he killed terrorists!

This day was also a day of cultural difference. The food and the music, the poverty, the little boys selling bracelets or the market, everything was different. I saw it in movies, but I never experienced it before. I knew that people would be amazed by my blonde hair, but to see actually the taxi driver staring at it, is something else. I knew, that we as a multicultural group from Europe would be special, but to see the little girls in the primary schools staring at us as if we were from another planet is something else. I didn't learn more about the religious and cultural differences, I didn't learn, that girls and boys are strictly separated but I experienced it.

Thursday 16

We started the day with a group meeting to improve our discussion. We prepared our questions in pairs. I worked with Francois and we came up with these questions:

Do you like living in Hebron?

Do you feel the same about all settlers and settlements? Are there any good soldiers? What do you think about Israelis?

What do you feel when you see the separation wall? What would you do if you had full freedom?

The first school we went to was the Hussein Boys' School and had very good and sufficient discussions in small groups. In the end I didn't end up asking all my questions because the discussion went in another direction. The boys said about Hebron that they like life there, they are proud to live there and of course there are some problems, especially in the H2 area and the Old City, but not always. One boy said it is very difficult to see the Israelis happy because they

themselves have no rights.

The settlers are for them all bad people, who steal land and are happy when Palestinians get killed. The grandfather of one of the boys got killed by the settlers, and of course with a personal experience like that, he hates the settlers. After this we continued with the question, under which conditions they would be willing to find a compromise. Here the opinions varied. One boy said, he would only be fully satisfied if they would get everything back and if all Jews would get out of their country, but he also said, for the will of peace and freedom, he would be able to find a compromise. Another boy said Jaffa must be given back, but he wouldn't believe in a solution ever. Another opinion was that it wouldn't matter, because the Israelis would never be happy with a compromise. The reaction to this was that not the Jews are the problem, the problem is when they act illegally!

The second school was the Mazania Girls' School. The girls here in general were afraid of the Israelis and didn't believe in non anti-Palestinian Israelis. They didn't believe in what we told them we saw and heard on the other side. In the beginning the reaction to the messages we gave them from the Israeli students was, that they only say it, to shine in a good light before the European students. They also said, they wouldn't blame the students because they only adapt point of views from their parents, schools etc. Also they said, what happens when they go to the army? Will they still have this view?

Their view on Israelis was either that especially settlers and soldiers are bad or all of them are bad. I hope that we could have planted the idea in their heads, that some Israelis actually wish peace for Palestinians and don't want to go to the army, that the government doesn't have the people's support. The girls liked the idea, that some want to speak to them. They hoped every Israeli would experience their situation, would feel what they have to feel. And one girl said, she would love to know what Israelis really think about Palestine. All in all I think, this discussion was really good for us to see the view on Israel young people have. The 10th grade girls were very open to us and I hope they will let our messages grow in them, especially when the programme continues.

Afterwards, the whole group with all the hosts went to Bethlehem. In Bethlehem we first visited the Church of nativity, the place where Jesus was born. I personally didn't like it there. I thought it was ridiculous to know the exact spot and I thought the place lost its holiness. But I really enjoyed the rest of Bethlehem. After the Church we went a little bit around the Old City and we saw, that life here is not like in Hebron, that not whole Palestine suffers that much and people can live in more freedom. It was very good to see this side. We stopped to make music again; it was the first time that we sang "Wonder Wall" which later became our Israel/Palestine song.

When the rest returned to Hebron, Yara took Stacey and me to the maternity hospital where we looked at their one-day old cousin Karim. Back at home we had dinner and afterwards tea and cake. We spent the evening talking, and Yara told me about a bus accident that happened, because of all the rain that started that day. A bus crashed into a truck and 9 primary school children, teacher and bus driver burned. This was obviously a big tragedy. On an extreme page in the internet someone wrote: "Every dead Arab is a dead terrorist and every dead terrorist is a good terrorist." Of course I don't know who wrote that and why, but it was really shocking to read this. Innocent children died! At the first moment I couldn't believe it, but now I realize, that I shouldn't make the mistake, to say, that a large group of Israelis are happy when Palestinian children die. That would be the same, as if someone said that Germans still deny the Holocaust, because there are extreme neo-Nazi pages on the internet.

Friday 17

This morning we had our first lie-in. We had a wonderful breakfast and later I had a long talk with Yara about the conflict. She told me a lot about Gaza, about her aunt and cousins who are refugees, about her culture and her views on Islam. I listened and learned a lot. We talked till lunchtime. The mum made "upside down". It was delicious and I didn't mind to eat it again in the evening. The weather was just terrible and the plan to go to the Old City again was cancelled because of all the rain.

The KH students went to Samah's house. It was great to see the girl we heard so much about. She is lovely, and the whole family was very kind and welcome.

ing. Samah told us what she learns in university and what perspectives she has with our help. We spent the evening at Taysir's house. The way to him was a small adventure because of the torrential rain. Most cars didn't drive and the streets were flooded. The last evening with the Palestinian group was great but sad, to know it was the last time for us all together. At Yara's house the four of us talked and talked and talked. It was my favourite evening of all of them.

Saturday

This day was the day of the extremes. In the morning, we had snow in Hebron, and later in Jerusalem the sun was shining. We had the final goodbye to the Palestinian students. I had to cry, because I really didn't want to leave my host family and Yara. Especially because I feared that I would never see them again. This was soon shadowed by pleasure of seeing the Israelis again and having a wonderful last evening/night with them at Shauli's house.

Back at Jerusalem we had our last reflections - the end of our time here was to come soon. The last hours we had a nice program with time to go to a market to buy some presents and souvenirs in the Muslim Quarter, I had the last chance to meet Oren again in the Austrian Hospice, which was more Germanic than any café in Germany. With him I had a good discussion and he gave me the view of an Israeli soldier. He said that Israel is in general the side that is more open for peace and that the extremist Palestinians are the real problem. He said they said they declared, that they want to live in peace with their neighbours but as it seems the Palestinian are not ready for a compromise. When they threaten Israel with bombs, what is Israel's choice? I think that this misses out on the degree of oppression. Defending the country and occupying more land and oppressing innocent people are two different things.

After the Hospice we met with the Israeli students. Shir and her Mum awaited me at the bus stop and gave me little presents. The first thing we did at Shauli's house was telling the Israeli students about our experiences in Palestine and we passed on the messages. Afterwards they gave us their final reflections. Then we had a great last evening with a lot of music. At midnight we went back to the airport. The last hours in Israel were the highlight! We got searched and had all our personal interview. I got asked for example what colour my book was. All the questions had the result that of holding back the whole plane by half an hour! But they didn't realize that I had a pair of scissors by accident in my hand luggage...

Sunday 18

After an exhausting flight/night we arrived at Dublin. We loved the Irish security! Of course it was said to leave the group, but on the other hand everyone was happy to be back home and with their family. I was welcomed by the Reverend at his house and later had a long talk with my oldest sister, who could understand me in many ways. It was very good to have so many people there for me.

Final Reflection

The days in Israel and Palestine made me realize many things. For myself I learned not to be too fast with my judging and to appreciate our freedom, peace and prosperity. We experience how important it is to first listen and then to make your own opinion, but to be always careful if you really didn't miss a different view from a different group. Never judge someone before hearing the context! I hate when people do that with Germany's history, but I never realized that maybe I make the same mistake. I learned that Europe in many ways is like paradise. Multicultural people live next to each other and the majority would never even think about hating or disrespecting them because of their religion or nationality. We are allowed to travel from one country to the other without being expected to be blown up on the plane.

On the Sunday we came back I went to Liffey Valley to get something to eat and there I realized how small our problems are. Everyone was in stress or worried about how they look like. In

Germany, the economic situation is even better, and still so few people realize how lucky they are. I would like them all to go to Israel and Palestine and go through there with open eyes. I want them all to have an experience like me, to make them realize for once what they have.

I think I can say, that I did learn more about the conflict than many others will ever know. I probably learned more than my sister who has lived in Israel for 2 years, because I experienced two sides! My picture of the conflict developed from a vague into a much clearer one. It seems that fear, the difference in culture and religion and most of all, the question of who owns the land, are all involved in the conflict. But still the conflict is very complicated: in Palestine, when I hear some reports about Gaza I feel pro Palestinian but then I think about the Israelis and I know and what they tell me and I change my view. I always have to remind myself to think again. It is so easy to take a side and to ignore the other one.

I will never forget all the different people I met. The group from Ireland was amazing, the Israelis were amazing and the Palestinians were amazing. I met new friends and I hope to keep the contact to them over long time. With both my hosts I bonded really well and especially my host family in Hebron welcomed us with a hospitality I hardly ever experienced before. I personally had problems figuring out all the relationships between me and the two opposite sides.

On the Saturday for example I first had a tearful goodbye to the Palestinian students but a few minutes afterwards I was looking forward to spending the last evening with the Israeli students. I wondered if the two groups which I both got to know and love well, will ever be able to talk and to develop sympathy. Soon after the arrival in Israel I met up with Oren and he told me that he will have to go for two weeks in the desert to practice with his tank. He was for a short time soldier in Hebron, he belongs to the group of people that everyone I talked to in Palestine hates and blames more or less for everything. This all was very confusing for me and it was hard for me to separate myself from all these different relationships. Now I realize that we had just one true role and everyone saw us just in this role: we are like the Swiss-the neutral ground. No one judged us because we had Israeli/Palestinian friends. This was like a condition in the week.

But still, not being judged is one part. The other part was that I wanted for the conflict end for both sides. I wanted them to meet each other and to unite all in Jerusalem. But I knew it wouldn't be possible. This all was making me feel hopeless, sad and full of despair. At this moment I hoped, that at least we reached out aim to bring the others hope. If I felt despair, hopefully I brought the others hope, because they are the ones that need it. And I think we did bring hope, we gave up our time to listen to both sides. We were interested in their problems and told about the other side, they know we will never forget them and talk about them at home.