



„Summer Time in Israel – Personal experiences with the Middle East conflict
and living with Jewish families as a German 65 years after the Holocaust“

Israel, July 22nd to August 6th 2009

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1. Introduction

1.1 Description of the project

During my 2009 summer holidays I had the opportunity to travel to Israel within the framework of the international summer camp “Summer Time in Israel 2009”, organized by the “Youth Exchange Association – Rotary Israel District 2490”. I spent this time together with 19 other adolescents from the age of 17 to 19 representing 14 different European countries (Austria, Belarus, Belgium, Croatia, Czech Republic, Denmark, France, Germany, Great Britain, Italy, Netherlands, Romania, Spain and Switzerland). I was sponsored and sent to Israel by the Rotary Club xxxxx. From the 22nd of July until the 06th of August 2009 we travelled and lived with alternating host families in nearly every region of Israel (Tel Aviv, Eilat, the Negev, Jerusalem and Galilee). Through this, I had the opportunity to become acquainted with the multifaceted culture, nature as well as parts of the political situation.

As constituted by Avi Katzman, Youth Exchange Officer of Rotary Israel District 2490, the aim of this summer camp was to shape and form young open-minded European juveniles as ambassadors for Israel in their home country, creating understanding for the Israeli politics, culture and perspectives.

The main aspects I want to concentrate on in this essay are my experiences with Israeli (mostly Jewish) families and the way they welcomed and dealt with me as a German 65 years after the Holocaust. In addition to this I want to describe my impressions of the conflict between the Western, Jewish world and the Islamic nations in the Middle East.

1.2 Personal outlook on the camp

On my trip I wanted to experience the various facets Israel had to offer. It was the first time I had visited the Middle East; therefore I was primarily interested in the cultural and political points of view that dominate our media every day. I was intrigued by talking to people I would live and travel with about the still ongoing conflicts in the Middle East. Although I expected that this journey would be dominated by contact to the Jewish community rather than other cultures, I was curious whether I would have a possibility to get to know a Muslim or Christian family living in Israel.

Another point of interest that inspired me to apply for this project was to learn more about the Holocaust on a personal level, by getting to know survivors of the Third Reich as well as learning about their family history. I was interested in their perspective on Germany nowadays and wanted to represent our modern German cultural and social values and ideals.

But I was not only thrilled by getting to know Israel, its culture, citizens and nature. Contracting friendships to other European adolescents and exchanging perspectives about all the topics I would experience in this area of great historical and current importance with them was another main intention when I applied for this camp.

1.3 Connection of the camp with school

Essentially there was no direct connection between my journey to Israel and my school-education. But what I experienced during my time in Israel has helped me throughout various subjects at school.

First of all the further knowledge I received about the Holocaust due to conversations with Holocaust survivors and my visit at Yad Vashem, Israel's official memorial to the Jewish victims of the Holocaust, helped me to gain a further insight into the extraordinary cruelty of the Nazi regime in the Holocaust. This visit prepared me for the school trip to the concentration camp Sachsenhausen and the Holocaust memorial in Berlin as well as my private visit of the concentration camp Dachau. This knowledge was not only useful for my engagement in history classes but will help me throughout my whole life to apprehend what has happened in my home country under the leadership of Adolf Hitler. Knowing that political extremism led into the greatest genocide the world has ever faced strengthened my democratic basic understanding.

Apart from the impact of German history I experienced in Israel it was fascinating to see the original settings of the bible as well other historical sites. Not only that the places of pilgrimage meant something to me as a Christian but the fact that these biblical sights are, in addition to all the other sites of political importance (e.g. the Golan Heights), the fundamental reason for the conflict in the Middle East conflict was a very interesting

facet of my journey. The knowledge I gained through visiting these sites made this trip interesting for subjects such as social sciences, history and of course religion.

In addition to this I had just finished a geography class before my journey to Israel where the distribution of water in the Middle East (especially in Israel) has been analyzed and took part in a Model United Nations Conference (SPUN, Bonn) as the representative of Saudi Arabia in the simulated Human Rights Council so that my visit to Israel accomplished the knowledge I already had about the conflict in the Middle East. This again has been useful for my social sciences classes.

2. Accomplishment of the project

2.1 Detailed description of the camp

The camp consisted of touring Israel from the South to the North for two weeks together with 19 other adolescents from various European nations and Israeli Rotarians. During the camp I spent several nights in six different host families. I had the possibility to get to know Jewish as well as Christian Arabic families.

22.07.	Frankfurt – Tel Aviv
23.07.	Tel Aviv – Eilat
24.07.	Eilat
25.07.	Eilat- Makhtesh Ramon
26.07.	Makhtesh Ramon – Jerusalem via Dead Sea
27.07.	Jerusalem
28.07.	Jerusalem
29.07.	Jerusalem
30.07.	Jerusalem – Nazareth
31.07.	Nazareth
01.08.	Nazareth (Golan Heights)
02.08.	Nazareth – Nahariya via Lebanese Border
03.08.	Nahariya (Akko)
04.08.	Nahariya - Karmiel via Haifa
05.08.	Karmiel – Tel Aviv
06.08.	Tel Aviv – Frankfurt



The camp began on the 23rd of July in Tel Aviv, where the camp was officially opened having met the rest of the group, after having spent the very first night in a host family in Beit Dagan. From Tel Aviv we drove to Eilat in the very south of Israel, where we spent the following two nights in a youth hostel. The time in Eilat was used mainly for group activities such as a boat cruise on the Red Sea as well as a camel ride so that we could get to know the other members of the group. In Eilat I enjoyed the marvellous underwater sea life of the Red Sea as well as the life and wildlife in the desert. On the 25th of July we left Eilat towards Makhtesh Ramon, where we spent one night in a Kibbutz and saw the

Negev desert, its wildlife and the Makhtesh itself. From there on we left the desert on July 26th towards Jerusalem. On the journey north, we stopped at the Dead Sea. We were able to see the holes of the Wadi Qumran, where original handwritings of various books of the Old Testament have been found. The extraordinary and unique experience of floating on the surface of the water in the Dead Sea represented a fascinating contrast to the Red and Mediterranean Sea I got to know before. In Jerusalem, where we stayed from the 26th until the 30th of July, we were guided along the interesting sights like the Mount of Olives, the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, the Dome of the Rocks, the Al-Aqsa Mosque, the Garden of Gethsemane and the Western Wall. Especially for me as a German it was interesting to see the scenery at the Mount of Olives with the thousands of Jewish tombs as it was the inspiration for the design of the Holocaust Memorial in Berlin. After having visited Yad Vashem, the Knesset and the Israel-Museum on the 29th of July we moved on towards Nazareth the day after, where I stayed until the 2nd of August with two different Christian-Arabic host families. In Nazareth we visited the old city, including the Church of the Annunciation, the bazaar and the Mount of Precipice where Pope Benedict XVI celebrated his Pontifical Mass in May 2009. From Nazareth on we explored the Golan Heights on the 1st of August before I returned to a new host family in Nazareth-Illit. The group left Nazareth on the 2nd of August driving along the Lebanese border and observing the damages of the 2006 Lebanon War until we reached the city of Nahariya on the coast of the Mediterranean Sea. From Nahariya on, where I lived with another Rotarian until the 4th of August, we explored the mainly Arabic city of Akko, with its heritage of the medieval crusaders and Haifa, with its Baha'i World Centre. We spent the penultimate night in Karmiel in Galilee at the traditional Dance Festival, before we returned to Tel Aviv on the 5th of August for the last night and the official ending of the camp before returning home on the 6th.

2.2 Personal experiences during the camp

General experiences

First of all it was a great experience to spend two weeks together with a group of international students I did not know before my journey and to contract friendships with them that last until today. It was amazing to see how easily we developed our own team

spirit and became friends. Although I had the chance to meet only a few people I got to know during my stay in Israel after having returned, I stayed in contact with all of them via facebook or e-mail. It was great to get to know the other participants' perspectives on the topics of the camp as well as talking to them about their home countries. Apart from getting to know the other participants this journey presented a great opportunity to socialize with the members of the various Rotary Clubs I visited during the two weeks. Similar to the German Rotary Clubs the Israeli Rotary Clubs host a multifaceted group of successful and interesting members I got to know on a very personal level by living with their families.

Getting to know different families was especially interesting in Israel because of the great diversity of the Israeli society that was formed by Zionism and the escape from the worldwide persecution of Jews many Jewish families find until today in Israel. In addition to this the Israeli society includes various religious and ethnic groups.

Another main aspect I was fortunate to experience in Israel was the safe situation. Although our news broadcast about terror attacks, military operations or kidnapping in the Middle East nearly every day, I never had the feeling of not being safe during my time in Israel due to multiple armed soldiers and safety guards one could find anywhere in the country. Apart from the cities and sides of religious importance the borders to Syria and the Lebanon appeared especially well guarded to me, although I felt not as "free" as in Western Europe while visiting the Golan Heights and the Lebanese border.



Experiences with the Middle East conflict

In Eilat, which is located on the coast of the Gulf of Aqaba in the frontier zone to Egypt and Jordan, I discovered two completely peaceful and harmonious borders between Israel on the one hand and Egypt and Jordan on the other hand. Eilat appeared to me as a modern, open-minded and young city even though it is one of the strategically most important military bases in Israel.

In contrast to the peaceful border in the south of Israel it was fascinating to see two completely non-peaceful and closed borders in the north of the country I have never seen before, due to the peaceful and allied situation in Western Europe. The border to Syria is dominated by the Israeli occupation of the Golan Heights and the buffer zone created between the two countries by the mission of the United Nations (UNDOF). The way to the top of the heights was surrounded by mine fields that I saw for the first time.



On the very top of the Golan Heights we visited an Israeli military base and a destroyed mosque that symbolically illustrated the predominant role of the Israeli forces and of course the cruelty of the Yom Kippur War in 1973. But what appeared most impressing to me was the symbolical impact of this destroyed mosque located on the top of the Golan Heights provoking the Syrian Muslims every time they see it on their former territory. But not only has the Israeli side employs moral and ethic provocation.

The Muslim community of Nazareth for example installed a huge banner, quoting one of the very enraging suras of the Quran, right next to the



Church of the Annunciation. Although both sides make use of provocation, to me it appears obvious that this cannot represent a method to improve the situation nor to come to peace between the populations and their religions.

On the Lebanese border it was depressing to see the damages of the 2006 Israel-Hezbollah War on the Israeli side that exist until today. But in the meantime the whole border was, similar to the Syrian border obviously dominated by the Israelis again. Huge towers that were strategically constructed in order to scout major assemblies and to intercept the radio communication of the Hezbollah and Lebanese troops dominated the borderline, which – similar to the Syrian Border – has been created and is still observed by the United Nations and their UNIFIL peacekeeping mission.

Living with Jewish host families

Living with Jewish host families I had very different experiences. I met completely open-minded and modern Jewish families that were interested and even fascinated by my

origin but I also had to make the experience of spending two nights in a Rotarian's home in Nahariya who was, as far as I could see, not pleased to have me as a guest from Germany inside his home.

On the one hand I was able to meet various interesting and impartial Israelis I really enjoyed to stay with. I spent the first night in Israel in Bet Dagan near Tel Aviv with xxxxxxxxxxxx an old Jewish Rotarian couple that had its roots in Eastern Europe. They tried not to confront me with my countries' history but appeared very interested in my origin and were happy to talk to me about what my country, city and life is like in our modern German society and of course about my views on Israel. Although they had to flee from their home countries (Ukraine and Romania) during World War II they were easily able to distinguish between the Nazi's atrocities that strongly affected their life and me as a member of a new generation of Germans. As most of the other male Rotarians I got to know on my trip xxxxxxxx belonged to the Israeli Army before he retired. He fought in the Yom Kippur War as a pilot for the air force. Talking to him was very interesting and improved my knowledge about the ongoing conflicts in the Middle East and the Israeli position, especially as the German media mostly focuses on the Palestinian point of view in this conflict.

Another Jewish family I got to know during my time in Israel was the young family of xxxxxxxx I spent one night with in Lod, which is located between Tel Aviv and Jerusalem. They again appeared open-minded and happy to have me around with their children. It was especially interesting for me as I want to study economics to talk to xxxxxxxx who is a "Service Manager" of El Al Israel Airlines about how to manage my future career and my experiences with the airline that brought me from Frankfurt to Tel Aviv. They again well accepted me as if I were their own son. Apart from the positive experiences with Jewish families I experienced family life with two very friendly Christian-Arabic families in Nazareth and Nazareth-Illit.

But on the other hand I experienced living with an old Jewish Rotarian in Nahariya who was not willing to talk to me openly except for the last of three days I spent with him. The last day he told me that he did not like Germans until now, although he personally still holds a German passport, due to the Holocaust that cost the life of his uncle he

never knew. He told me that he was born in Frankfurt and migrated to Israel as a child before the war, together with his parents. This was the only negative experience I had during my stay in Israel. Although I can somehow understand his reservation towards Germany this was the only negative experience I gained by living with Jewish families. Even a former Swiss woman who lost her mum in Auschwitz I met at the Rotary Club Jerusalem was open talking to me and even enjoyed making use of the German language again, so that I regard this single negative experience as an exception from other the impartial and courteous Israelis I met during the two weeks.

3. Reflection and Review

During my stay in Israel I experienced that Israel is a country of sharp contrasts. I noticed the cultural diversity in the Israeli society due to the great amount of religions that find their roots in the already so called “Holy Land”. There is no other land in the world with a comparable religious importance for so many beliefs which of course brings a lot of territorial conflict to Israel. But even in accordance to the conflicts great differences can be found: The southern borders to Jordan and Egypt are absolutely peaceful and open to the public while the northern borders to the Lebanon and Syria are dominated by years of conflicts and military altercations that are until today dependent on the help of the United Nations in order to guarantee a cease-fire between the neighbouring countries. In addition to the great diversity of religions Israel is extraordinarily signed by the Jewish culture and the Zionism that brought people from all over the world to Israel. These heavy conflicts that existed even before the proclamation of Israel as a nation in 1948 brought the creation of a unique form of housing estate (Kibbutz) to Palestine. Due to the Zionism one can find a great ethnic diversity and people with completely different origins in Israel. Apart from the enormous social, political and religious diversities in Israel a great natural diversity can be found as well. Already the three coastlines represent the differing areas inside Israel. In fact could not be more contrasts between the Red Sea, the Dead Sea and the Mediterranean Sea. The Israeli territories include mountains, coasts, desert and of course modern as well as cities of a great historical

impact. All things considered I was easily able to see that Israel represents the border between occident and orient.

Apart from the fact that I visited Israel and its interesting sides this Rotary Camp gave me the opportunity to experience Israel “from the inside” by living with Israeli host-families. But not only getting to know Israel and its citizens was worth travelling to Israel; travelling together with a group of international students around my age gave me the opportunity to contract friendships and to see the way other adolescents dealt with the topics we were confronted with (e.g. war, religion, Holocaust). Finally one can state that the participation in the Rotary Camp “Summer Time in Israel 2009” was a great opportunity gain a little insight into the complexity of the Middle East conflict and to become acquainted with Israel itself as well as it was a great chance to contract friendships with Israelis and adolescents from all over Europe.

4. Conclusion

Until today I am really grateful for having had the opportunity to visit Israel and to meet so many Israelis as well as various European adolescents. Having made the experience of taking part in this Rotary Camp motivated me to participate in another camp in central Spain during my summer holidays 2010. In Israel it was very interesting as well as depressing to experience and to become more acquainted with the atrocities of the Third Reich by visiting Yad Vashem and getting to know Israelis who personally lost a family member during the Holocaust. This experience gave me a better understanding of my German identity and expanded my knowledge about our German history, as well as it improved my approval of the democratic progress that has been made since the end of World War II. Although I gladly did not experience the ongoing conflicts in the Middle East personally it was depressing to experience the great amount of military and safety guards that are necessary to guarantee the livelihood of the Israelis. Having experienced the feeling of being threatened by terrorists as well as the neighbour countries made me think about the great value of our peace in Western Europe. But I did not only gain understanding for my personal or my countries situation. I learned a lot about the Israeli

way of thinking and gained an insight as well as understanding for Israeli politics that are sometimes harshly criticized in Germany. Although I came to Israel with an understanding of their sometimes aggressive politics I got to understand the other side as well. Provoking the Syrian Muslims intentionally by conserving a destroyed mosque on the top of the Golan Heights does not appear understandable to me. Apart from that I was upset about the great legal difference between Jewish and Muslim members of the society. Israel does not allow Muslims and Arabs to enter the army, although a military career is needed for social acceptance and better jobs. Even if I hope that I can fulfil the aim of the camp and represent an ambassador for the Jewish Israeli community in Germany, I have to say that the camp helped to gain understanding for the Muslim or Arabic point of view as well. Having experienced that Israel intentionally uses suppression in order to deal with the Muslim and Christian minorities gave the assurance that there are still many aspects in the Israeli society that have to be improved. From my point of view a sustainable peace is only possible if Israel acknowledges its own mistakes and refrains from provoking their opponents.

Thanks to the Rotary Youth Exchange Association Israel, especially to xxxxx for organizing and accomplishing this camp together with various Rotary Clubs in Israel as well as to the Rotary Jugenddienst Deutschland and the xxxxxx who supported my journey to Israel.