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The Youth Encounter: Impressions from a German perspective

History
Project

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Hamburg - Ashdod
Youth Exchange

The project defines itself as a history research and youth encounter at the same time.

In an open application process we chose 11 youngsters from Hamburg, who were between 16 and 19 years old. The German group members were mainly scholars from different schools or trainees. When preparing the project, we focused on creating opportunities - such as group activities and subjects of debate - with the intention of making it easier for the participants to get to know each other.

Shortly before we left Hamburg, we had an intensive workshop, in which we talked about our expectations regarding the first encounter in Israel. The results of the workshop were various and were based on different themes: on how to improve mutual understanding, on how to reduce prejudice and on how to reflect our points of view in a critical manner.

In general the youth was very much interested in improving its knowledge about Israel and its understanding of the Israeli perspective. The youngsters sought to become insiders of a new culture and to build cross-cultural friendships. They wanted to learn about Jewish traditions and cultural habits and to experience these traditions and habits in practice. The group members were also willing to reflect on their own culture and prejudice and were curious to find out about the prejudice, which the Israeli youth might have against them. The participants of the youth encounter decided to be open minded, to enjoy themselves and to create an atmosphere, in which it would be easier for them to make a connection.

Still some of the group members had doubts and were concerned about the encounter. E.g. some participants wondered, if there was anything to avoid, or better: if there was a possibility of making mistakes, which might occur from their different cultural backgrounds? The youngsters explicitly named their fears: misunderstandings based on language difficulties and clothing-tradition regulations in religious quarters or synagogues. However, the biggest fear was about getting involved in discussions or conflicts unintentionally: „How can I be polite, but honest, if I recognize a totally different world view or values which I don't like?“ „Will they ask us about what our grandparents did during World War II?“ Especially the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was considered to be a source of possible misunderstandings - as one can always have a more distant or critical view, while not being involved personally. As a result, the group members agreed to be as tolerant as possible and to question things they wouldn't understand, but without being judgemental and respecting other points of view.

A moving time in Israel: The missile attack

During the encounter in Israel, the German group members were invited to spend the Shabbat evening at the homes of the partner families. Shortly after the group split up and the youngsters went to the Israeli homes, a siren started. Ashdod was attacked by three Grad missiles sent from Gaza. Two of them landed somewhere in the countryside around the cities border, while one missile was parried off by the „Iron Dome“, an Israeli mobile air defense system. Luckily nobody was hurt in this attack. Nonetheless this experience affected all of the German group members very much.

Reunited in the hotel in the evening, the German group members had a long and intense

conversation about their feelings: „I wasn't really afraid of the rockets as my hosts were very routined, calm and caring, but I never expected this really to happen, while we are here“, one German group member said. Another participant described the safety room, which each house has: „We had to go downstairs and as soon as we arrived two floors further down, the sirene stopped. Five minutes later we went back upstairs and celebrated Shabbat as if nothing had happened.“ „It's strange now. After this experience everything has changed. Before this happened, we only saw the attacks on TV and might have thought about, how this feels like for the Israeli population in theory, but from now on we'll think of our friends in Ashdod and worry about them“, the group agreed.

During the days before the attack the group members focused on finding similarities between each other and now the group members started to focus on the differences much more. They experienced how unequal their living circumstances are and were thinking about the different influences. From this day on the German group asked a lot of questions about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, about the three-years of military-service and about the Israeli perspective on family and career and all the other themes young people are busy with.

As a result the German youngsters were quite deflated when they understood, that the conflict is much more complicated as they thought it was in the beginning. They recognized a deep insecurity and fear towards the Arabian neighbour countries, which is strengthened by the regular missile attacks. It was hard to realize, that simply being non-violent or an anti-war-activist doesn't bring a solution in this conflict. In the end they were impressed by the Israeli people and how they were able reacting in such a calm and „normal“ way. „I am fascinated, that each of them has an opinion about politics. It isn't like that in Germany. I guess, not even every third German actually knows about what's discussed in politics right now“, one group member said.

The group experienced a very diverse Israel - young, secular and tolerant on the one hand, and very religious and closed up on the other. We visited common places, like the market area and the beach in Tel Aviv, and very old and traditional ones, like the Western Wall and the Old City of Jerusalem, different Kibbuzims and the Holocaust memorial „Yad Vashem“. We did research on Jewish resistance during World War II, met survivors and the editor of the book „Cherries on the river Elbe“. The whole group felt a need to come again as there is so much more to see, ask for and discuss about - and as the time went by so quickly.

Being hosts in Hamburg: How to be kosher

The encounter in Hamburg brought to light the serious intention of the German group members being as good hosts as the Israeli hosts were and the apprehension about cold and rainy weather, which they feared would make it impossible for the Israeli group to enjoy themselves the same way themselves did in Ashdod.

Even if they had been in touch a lot via Facebook, and sharing pictures, experiences and music, every participant was quite nervous before meeting again at the Hamburg airport. At least the weather was good enough, so that the group was able to enjoy an amazing day at „Planten & Bloemen“ together, where the Israeli group members tried ice-skating for the first time in their lives.

The group process itself didn't develop as harmonic as it did in Israel. Being in their familiar surrounding and secure home, the German group members were very much irritated through specific attitudes of their partner group. They couldn't understand why the Israeli youth should feel insecure in multicultural St. Georg or why they wouldn't try non-kosher food. The Israeli group was confused about the atmosphere, and as a result the members kept to themselves.

These aspects lead to an intense group discussion about cultural differences in values and behavior. The Germans figured out, that - because of being very secular and non-traditional - they were able to eat anything they liked. One group member mentioned, that he actually recognized now, what it means to live kosher and that it is almost impossible to provide real kosher food in Hamburg. Furthermore the groups found out, that there are totally different strategies to solve problems for each culture - as the German society can be characterized as an individualised society and therefore each group members speak for themselves, while the Israeli society is affected by a more collectivist way of thinking. For that reason the partner group from Israel always acted as a collective and every single member was able to speak for the whole group.

When everyone understood, that these differences are not to be judged as "good" or "bad" habits, but as aspects of culture, which everybody has to deal with, the atmosphere changed immediately. The group was proud of having realised and sorted out something very important. These are the kind of cultural misunderstandings the participants had in mind during the preparation-workshop in the beginning of the project.

In the end the Germans had an exciting time and still are very thankful for the honest and deep conversations, that they were able to have with their new Israeli friends.

Outlook

„For me this encounter with Israel was an encounter with Germany as well. Even if I didn't feel personal guilt about what happened during World War II, I was constantly frightened of being reduced on my nationality. This never happened in Israel. The Israelis even told us to be proud of the Germany of today“ (Yasmina).

„I never expected us to be so similar and to connect that quickly“ (Miriam).

„There are huge differences also. Especially regarding cultural values. The Israeli youth is very close and able to unify very quickly, if necessary. That wouldn't be possible with German youth“ (Neele).

(to be continued)

