

Report for the Gesellschaft für Christlich-Jüdische Zusammenarbeit Stuttgart

on

*The Teachers' Exchange Program between the Education Ministry of
Baden-Württemberg and the Leo Baeck Education Center, Haifa*

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Since I would like this report to be read also by the Israeli partners of the exchange program – in particular the previous CEO of the Leo Baeck Education Center, Dani Fesler, and the new CEO, rabbi Ofek Meir – I decided to write it in English rather than in German.

Yonathan Bar-On's stay in and around Stuttgart, 27.9.17-12.10.17

In the two weeks that I stayed and worked in the Stuttgart area, I visited a large number of classes of various levels and ages at three different schools: The *Berufliches Schulzentrum* in Leonberg, the *Schickhardt-Gymnasium* in Herrenberg, and the *Remstalgymnasium* in Weinstadt. Because of the very different study levels and ages of the students, I had the chance to teach and present a large variety of subjects: daily life in Israel, 'the' conflict, Judaism, Jewish holidays, my personal story (I was born and raised in a Protestant family in Holland, converted to Judaism, emigrated to Israel), Hebrew, and even some English (lexical chunks and fluency). Since I understand and speak German well enough, I was also able to observe a number of lessons, which was particularly enriching for me.

Most of the German students were very interested in the subjects that I presented to and discussed with them. They were often surprised to hear that the lives of their peers in Israel are both very similar to and different from their own. Of course, German teenagers find it difficult to imagine what it must be like to have emergency drills that prepare you for war situations, or to experience an actual war. On the other hand, they can easily identify with perfectly regular school situations, where people have to deal with tests and exams, the interaction between teachers and students and among students themselves. As I had learnt in previous meetings with students abroad, some of the most interesting and moving questions and comments came from children and young adults with an immigrant background. Partly because I am an immigrant myself, and although I am perfectly aware of the problems that immigrants experience and may cause, I always find it touching and inspiring – not only in the Netherlands, Germany and other countries abroad but also in Israel itself – to see that most immigrants (and in particular their children, grandchildren etc.) appear to succeed and integrate very well.

One of the activities that I did towards the end of an encounter with a class was to give some basic explanations about Hebrew and the Hebrew alphabet, and to help students write their own name in Hebrew. They learnt about my Dutch and Hebrew name, and I learnt a lot about them through their names. Many students were surprised to learn that their names originate in Hebrew. In one of Erik's 4th or 5th grade classes, I observed a lesson on religion. Erik did a review of the Jewish holidays, a topic that he had taught before, and they remembered quite a lot. I was able to add a few details here and there, and to blow a *shofar*. The young children were very interested in the Jewish religion and in its relationship with Christianity.

In general, I am always grateful and thrilled to see how interested German youngsters (and adults) are in Israel and Jewish culture and religion, and how eager they are to learn more about those subjects. We could see this very well during the lecture that Danielle Zimmermann (who visited Haifa last year) and I gave at the *Stuttgarter Lehrhaus*. Christiane Stoll and Caroline Hummel of the BSZ Leonberg managed to bring a large group of their students to our lecture. Those students had really good questions, and many of them even showed serious interest in visiting Israel in the near future. Such a visit – plans for which are being worked out as we speak – would be a very enriching experience for them, and a great sign of success for the teachers' exchange program.

Besides the encounter with the students, I had the chance to meet several 'old' friends and make some new ones among the colleagues at the different schools in the Stuttgart area. In the teachers' rooms and over lunch or dinner, we were able to share our experiences and perspectives. Such meetings are always very insightful. Again, it is very self-evident but also remarkable to see how much we have in common, even though we live in very different realities. One of the most visible differences is the teachers' room. In German schools the room is usually locked, and students do not enter it. At our school, the room is open, and students enter and exit it more or less as they please. There is something to be said for each approach, or as the late football player Johan Crujff used to say, "Each disadvantage has its advantage".

In addition to all the work-related activities, there was also some spare time. I was lucky enough to be able to attend some cultural and academic events: a performance, based on the story of Martin Luther, by the Hymnus boys' choir in the Stiftungskirche; an amazing performance of Luther's songs by the Kammerchor Stuttgart; a visit to an art gallery; a lecture by professor Mathias Morgenstern on the "diaspora of German orthodox Judaism" in Israel and elsewhere.

Feedback from German students

To give an impression of the great variety of things that the German students took in from their encounter with me (and of what I learnt from them) I wrote down some of the things that Erik Sauter's students mentioned in their feedback after I visited their classes:

- About the difference between their own class and my classes, after I had told them that Israeli students tend to be very active and lively: "I wouldn't have expected that they're louder than in Germany [...] I always thought we were a wild class"
- "We know less about Judaism than about Islam"
- "This was for me the first time to meet a Jew"
- "I expected him (Yonathan Bar-On) to wear a long-sleeved black jacket; I didn't notice he was a Jew [...] There are different kinds of Jews"
- Students were not aware of the importance of the army in Israel
- Several students enjoyed the combination of my life story and the English teaching
- In German schools, "the teachers' room is a place to stay away from the students"
- By meetings such as this, "You get to know things that the news don't tell you"
- "Mr. Bar-On was the first person that I met who converted"
- Students wrote that one of the things they understood from my story is that it is important to "follow your dreams" and to "take an interest in other people, languages, cultures"
- "I learnt about lexical chunks"
- "I would have wanted more time", there was not enough time for questions

Erik Sauter's stay in Haifa, 20.10.17-5.11.17

See Erik's report on his visit. I would like to add that I enjoyed visiting some of my favorite places in Northern Israel (Acre, Rosh HaNikrah), as well as several Christian sacred sites, some of which I had never visited before.

The students connected well to Erik. As he wrote in his report, Israeli students (and especially those in the advanced and gifted classes that I teach) are often very open and inquisitive. Quite a few of them had visited Germany before, either with their families (usually Berlin, the Black Forest) or with the LB Orchestra or a delegation (Mannheim, Mainz, Berlin). Very few of them had met German teenagers or adults on a more than very superficial basis, though, so this was a good opportunity to gain some actual knowledge about Germany and Germans today. Although they know that Israel and the Middle East often play an important role in the news in Europe and elsewhere, many of my students are surprised when they see that a foreigner takes an interest in Judaism, in Israel etc.

General insights

Many of the insights that I will mention here came up in the press meeting that Erik Sauter, Wolfgang Maresch, Renate Bagel, Christana Stengel and I had with Bürgermeister Dr. Martin Schraier at the Stuttgart City Hall.

The exchange program's aim – as I understand it – is to have Israeli and German teachers and students learn from and about each other. For teachers this is a great opportunity to enhance their professional perspectives by:

- 1) working in a totally different environment;
- 2) sharing knowledge and observations with other teachers;
- 3) building friendships and professional networks with colleagues;
- 4) learning to appreciate their own students and work environment anew: they realize that each school, school system and learning culture has both advantages and disadvantages.

One of the central and most meaningful aspects of this exchange program (in my humble opinion), is that this program offers Israeli students and teachers to learn about Germany and Germans through their German guest, while German teachers and students are able to learn about Israel, Judaism and Israelis through their encounter with the teacher from Israel. In the press meeting I used the phrase "Giving Germany/Israel a human face". By that I mean that we usually read or hear about 'the other' (Germany/Germans for Israelis, Israel/Israelis for Germans) in very general, often stereotypical and impersonal ways. Rarely do we have the chance to meet each other as equals, both in a professional and a more intimate, personal setting. By meeting an actual, living German or Israeli, students and teachers have a chance to learn that yes, the two countries and peoples are very different, but they share even more than what divides them. None of the students or teachers who has met a participant in the program in a classroom, lecture hall or teachers' room (or a cafeteria, restaurant or other place where the teachers meet their colleagues), will see 'the other' in the same way as (s)he saw her/him until that very moment. When you just look at some of the comments made by Erik's students, you can be sure that the next time these youngsters read/hear about Israel in the news, many of them will not shrug and think "Mwah, I can't be bothered", but they will realize that that news is about people like Yonathan and his family, and about teenagers like themselves, Jewish and Arab, Israeli and Palestinian. In addition, most of them will probably have slightly changed perceptions of Jews and of Judaism. Something similar, I am sure, is true for the way my own students view Germany and Germans after their meetings with Erik, or Danielle, or Caro, or Wolfgang.

In general, the subject of religion is always an interesting topic in international, intercultural and interreligious meetings such as this. Since I come from a Protestant family, and passed an orthodox-Jewish conversion, I am very familiar with both Christianity (especially the Protestant version) and Judaism in its very diverse forms. As Erik already made clear in his report, there is a wide gap between the role of and people's personal experiences and relationships with religion in Germany and Israel. Many of those differences can be traced back to the differences between Judaism and Christianity. Erik – who himself is a faithful Christian – was visibly *enttäuscht* (disappointed, this is one of my 'favorite' words in German) when in various discussions that we had I pointed out that I don't consider myself religious, and that I converted first and foremost because I identified with the Jewish people historically and culturally. That does not mean that I don't believe (I definitely do), but for me, believing means first of all doing. That is one of the

aspects of the Leo Baeck Education Center that I enjoy so much: the strong focus on *Tikkun Olam*, repairing the world. In every possible way, by helping people in need (disadvantaged families, refugees, handicapped, etc.), by working to preserve the environment, by developing leadership and critical thinking among our students, by trying to work on a constructive dialogue with 'the other' (for us at LB that means mainly Christian and Muslim Palestinians and Israeli Arabs, but also religious and ultra-orthodox Jews).

For most Israelis that I know, and particularly for my friends and colleagues at the Leo Baeck Education Center (including Ohel Avraham, the reform synagogue at the center, of which my family and I are active members), religion is a very personal thing. Each of us experiences and expresses his or her religious belief – or lack of it – in a highly individual manner. Nevertheless, we (i.e. the Jews among us) are all proud and conscious of our Jewish heritage and identity. Erik seemed to find it rather difficult to accept the fact that, although at Leo Baeck we are very liberal, open-minded and always interested in dialogue with basically anyone, we consider 'messianic-Jewish' groups like *Jews for Jesus* as Christian, not Jewish. He was almost visibly hurt when I told him that we are unable to bring such groups, or any other groups that are aimed at proselytizing rather than at meeting us as equals, to our school. I have had similar reactions from other Christian friends. Coming from a Christian background myself, I am well aware of the sensitivity of this issue in Christian-Jewish encounters and dialogue, but it is an issue of which all participants of such meetings should be aware.

Points to be considered

- When planning the exchange, the organizers must make sure that the program is 'filled to capacity', enabling the visiting teacher to meet as many students and teachers as possible.
- At the same time, it is important to give him/her the opportunity to have some more in-depth encounters with at least some of the students, allowing both sides to get to learn about each other more substantially.
- Before they leave for Haifa/Stuttgart, the teachers should submit basic lesson plans both to their 'home front' and to the other school(s). It is important that they get feedback from their colleagues before they leave for Stuttgart/Haifa, and that those colleagues check if the material that they plan to bring with them is suitable for the level and the age of the classes that they will be visiting.
- It is important to coordinate the ages and levels of the classes that are to be visited. Since the Israeli participants usually do not speak German and the German teachers do not understand Hebrew, communication with colleagues and students is in English. This means that – except for exceptional cases – the program should be limited to (junior) high school classes and their teachers.
- It is important to match the expectations of the participants and of the receiving schools. While there is plenty of time for entertainment and tourism, the main purpose of the program is to have the teachers interact with colleagues and students.

- Including "food for the soul" in the program remains essential: cultural and social events, resting time, time for trips and relaxation.
- Personally, among many other things, I learnt from Erik to include more family pictures into my personal presentation, to make many more pictures during the lessons, and to have my students write a reflection after they met him (rather than discussing their experiences with them in class, which does not leave any visible and lasting documentation).

Conclusions

The exchange program between the Education Ministry of the state of Baden-Württemberg and the Leo Baeck Education Center in Haifa has been around for more than twenty years. Within the framework of the program, a modest but impressive and influential network of friendships and contacts has been built between teachers in and around Haifa and Stuttgart. This has already led to various separate initiatives. What remains the most important part of the program is the encounter between teachers (and students) with entirely different cultural backgrounds, and – through that encounter – the building of mutual bonds of understanding, tolerance and friendship. I'm absolutely convinced that in that respect, and in many other ways, we can conclude that this year's exchange was – again – a great success.

Words of thanks

To finish this report, I would like to thank the people, institutes and organizations that helped us realize this program last year.

On the Israeli side: Rosi Ben Yaacov, Herbert Bertelheim, my colleagues and the management of the Leo Baeck Education Center, in particular Dani Fesler (the former CEO of the LBEC). I'm looking forward to many more years of the LBEC participating in the program under its new CEO, rabbi Ofek Meir.

In Germany: the Gesellschaft für Christlich-Jüdische Zusammenarbeit Stuttgart, and in particular its *Sprecher*, Dr. Martin Schraier; the Stuttgarter Lehrhaus – Stiftung für interreligiösen Dialog; Karl-Hermann and Lisbeth Blickle, the unrelenting sponsors and enthusiastic supporters of this project; Hans Dagdelen; the management of and my colleagues at the Berufliches Schulzentrum Leonberg, the Schickhardt Gymnasium in Herrenberg, the Remstalgymnasium in Weinstadt; and in particular, my friends and colleagues Erik Peter Sauer, Wolfgang Maresch, Renate Bagel, Christana Stengel, Danielle Zimmermann, Caroline Hummel, Christiane Stoll.