

Haifa, 7 October 2019

### **Summary of my visit to Stuttgart, September 2019**

Within the framework of the teachers' exchange program between the education ministry of Baden-Württemberg and the Leo Baeck Education Center, this year I was asked to visit Stuttgart and represent Leo Baeck for 10 days in the fall, a period that includes the Jewish New Year holiday.

I have been working at the Leo Baeck Education Center for 18 years, and I feel very much connected to the institute, but because I manage the preschool department and am not a teacher, let alone a high school teacher, I thought this might be rather challenging for me.

Very soon after I arrived in Germany, I realized that the essence of the program is not so much my teaching abilities in the classroom but the connection and relationship that I formed with other people, colleagues and students alike.

I was received warmly and made to feel welcome by everybody, and there was an immediate click and lost of chemistry between me and my wonderful friends and colleagues, Chrissi and Caro. They introduced me to the school and to their many friends.

Wolfgang and Renate invited me to family dinners, with traditional German food, in their home. Next to the fireplace, with the beautiful sunset in the background, we had deep conversations about life in general, and about our life in Israel in particular. I was moved to see how much they love Israel, how much they are involved and interested. Wolfgang also drove me around, and he was the best tourguide I could wish for. Because of his tremendous knowledge in every possible field: history, geography, his love for nature and traveling, and mostly his love for people. We visited castles, churches, the Black Forest. We had a great time together, and the fun was mutual.

I had the chance to experience the beer festival, an age-old tradition of the southern farmers, visited an impressive pumpkin exhibition, and I learnt a lot about Christianity, the Protestant and Catholic churches, the differences between the various regions in Germany and their inhabitants, Unification Day. This was a fun and very meaningful learning experience for me.

At the Berufliches Schulzentrum Leonberg I was received warmly and with lots of interest and curiosity. I met the school principal, and met my colleagues in the teachers' room and in the cafeteria, where we had lunches together. The lessons in the classroom were very varied, and I met students aged 15-20. Many of the students have an immigrant background, coming from many different corners around the world. Some of them are new immigrants, and are still learning the German language. I taught three 90 minutes lessons in various classes each day. In the school, students study theoretical/academic subjects, just like our students in Haifa, but there is also a vocational track, where students study to become preschool teachers, administrative secretaries, master plasterers or builders, etc.

At my request I also was given the chance to visit a complex with five kindergartens for the ages 3-6. It was very instructive for me to see the differences and similarities between the preschool education in Germany and Israel.

The subjects that I chose to bring into the classrooms dealt of course with Israel, its beauty and complexities, the city of Haifa, shared existence, the Leo Baeck Education Center, and unique programs that we provide in the preschool department and at our community centers. I spoke about shared existence in our city, where at least five major religions live together, and about projects for new immigrants, programs at the community center that are aimed at community building, through experiential encounters between different religions, programs for people with special needs, encounters between different generations, and so on.

The students were very interested in the progressive and pluralistic type of Judaism that we promote at Leo Baeck, in the Jewish holidays and the ways in which we celebrate them in our

kindergarten, in the Hebrew language (including writing their names in Hebrew). We prepared greeting cards for the New Year. For the classroom lessons I had prepared experiential activities that included presentations, introductory ball games, creative assignments, singing songs in Hebrew, sign language. The activities created a bond between all of us, and the students really enjoyed doing them. I felt this because they were really interested and enthusiastic, and they participated actively. After the lessons many of them stayed behind to ask more questions, some of them wanted to take pictures of the whiteboard (with all the Hebrew writing on it), and wanted to sing more songs. One of the songs that I sang is a song that we often sing in kindergarten and in the synagogue, "Listen, God, to my prayer". After I translated the song into English, they joined me by making the appropriate movements. We also sang songs that have equivalents in German.

On the eve of Rosh HaShanah, the Jewish New Year, after my hosts had become acquainted quite well with the signs and customs of the festival, they invited me to a dinner which, of course, included apples and honey. This was a gesture that moved me to tears.

Today I feel that I made several really good friends in and around Stuttgart and Leonberg, and I am looking forward to the return-visit of my wonderful friends and colleagues Chrissi and Caro here in Israel, at my home, at Leo Baeck and in Haifa.

I would like to thank everybody who made this unforgettable experience and opportunity possible.

Yours truly,

Yafit Markovich