

## Diary Noam

August 2005

This summer I was part of a delegation in Germany. The main idea of the delegation was a dialogue between Israelis and Palestinians. It was a strong experience for me and it changed my life in various ways. In the following **project** I will share it with you.



Between the 2<sup>nd</sup> and the 14<sup>th</sup> of August, I took part in “Vacation from War”, it was a meeting between Israelis and Palestinians. Each group (Palestinians and Israelis) met separately inside their countries (or their “almost countries”)...before the joint encounter, and on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of August we all flew to Germany and there we met and stayed together until the 14<sup>th</sup> of August.

### 2.8.05

At 11:16 a clock the "northerners" from the group boarded the train in Nahariya that took us to Ben Gurion airport. The Israeli group included 21 members who all boarded the same train at various stations along the way. At the airport we met the Israeli Arab group (who preferred to call themselves “Palestinians 1948”), that included 7 members and few Palestinians who held Jerusalem I.Ds and have a special licence to fly from Ben Gurion airport. At that time we didn't have contact with the Arab group yet, just a few polite words. The rest of the Palestinian group flew from Amman Jordan.

We landed at about 20:00 and were driven to a campus called “Jugendakademie” in a small German town(near Cologne). It was very late and we could barely meet with the Palestinian group in this evening, so we went to sleep.

### 3.8.05

We had an assembly of all the delegation and the leaders made speeches. At the end of the meeting we were divided into 3 groups that were to be our core groups for the rest of our stay at the camp. Two of the groups had to work with translators, and one

group of English speakers. I was in the English speakers' group. The members of the group were: Israelis: Noam, Kalia, Shai, Shir (from tefen), Hadar, Igor & Tania. Palestinians: Lama, Zeid, Jalal, Ali, Tania, Eman, and Samar and Isam who are "Palestinians 1948".

At our first meeting there was a lot of tension in the room, not only because of the cultural differences and the "situation", but also because it was a room full of young people who were meeting for the first time. We started like every normal group with the names and name games, then we divided into 2 mixed groups. We had a mission to build a half of a bridge (the materials we had were paper and carton) so that at the end the two halves of the bridge combined would be one bridge, strong enough to hold a glass of water.

The mission was completed successfully and it was very symbolic. We took a picture of the results and all felt very good about this exercise. The remainder of that first day was games, fun and getting to know each other.

Between the sessions when we met the other Israelis they told us that in their groups they were already talking about the INTIFADA and the conflict.

#### 4.8.05

The second day of the sessions; we opened the morning with a discussion where the main question was: What language will we use in our sessions? The issues were: "Why English?" Because it is an international language foreign to us all, that we could all speak and feel relatively equal. "Why translation?" Because then, every one could talk in his own language and then we could express our feelings in a better way. Then, we found out that there was one girl in our group who didn't speak English... in the end we decided that each one will talk in the language that he felt right at the moment and would get translated if there was a need. It turned out in the end that we spoke in English and the girl who didn't understand English (she did understand Hebrew) got a private translation from her friend.

Later on we had an activity for which we divided into two nations. Each group had to write on a piece of paper as much information as they could about the other culture, for example: holidays, traditions, customs, relationships between man and wife, family etc...

The Arab group knew much more about us because they had Israeli Arabs in their group, though most of the customs that they mentioned related to religious Jews (none of the Israelis there was religious).

We (the Jews) didn't know a lot about them, except a few holidays and old traditions. After the culture session we made a list of questions, we each chose one question that we wanted to ask the other group. At the end of this session we had a uni-national session, we separated to two different rooms and we had a conversation about our feelings in the group. We expected how we wanted to pass through the level of the politeness and the getting to know each other, and get to the "nitty gritty" (*tachles*). After the Uni-National meeting we had another joint session in the core group, before the leaders (Bassem and Adi) started their program, they asked if "anyone wants to bring up something?" I raised my hand and I said: "Let's talk about the INTIFADA". There was silence in the room... but suddenly Samar started to speak in Hebrew: "the thing that happened is that the Israelis didn't think that the young Arab Israelis knew how to (be ready to) fight. And they keep depressing us and depressing us. And when Sharon went to the El Akza Mosque everything blew up and the Arab youth came out in the streets".

I saw that something was burning inside her from the way she spoke. It seemed like she was waiting for someone bringing up the subject of the Intifada. Samar is a “Palestinian 1948”, she lives in Kfar Qara and throughout all of the sessions she had a hard time to connect to the discussions, because she is Israeli by nationality and Palestinian in her spirit. She did not speak English so she couldn’t take a direct part in the conversations. I will talk more about Samar and Isam (also from Kfar Qara) later. For the rest of this day we talked about the conflict, but the direction was the oppression and the occupation. We heard a lot of stories and this was the day that we got our first shock: The only source of Information that we had about the Palestinians or the conflict was from the Israeli media, and our media doesn’t show both sides equally. We heard stories from an original source. True and painful stories, about harassments that they experienced in their daily lives, first person sharing of how they felt about dead bodies that they see in the streets, about shooting inside their house, about humiliation and segregation policies practiced by the Israeli system towards them on personal levels and as an ethnic group.

It is one thing to understand the stories and the pain inside the Palestinians, but what is more difficult is to understand that the one who causes all the suffering is us.

After that we said that we understand the pain and we know that there are things wrong with the Israeli system. We then had another issue to deal with:

“If you say that you understand our pain and that you want peace, how can you go to the army?” and with this question I will close the second day of the sessions.

This army conflict met me in a very difficult place; I put a lot of thought in this question at the sessions and until now.

After dinner I sat with Eman, she lives in Beit Hanina, which is part of East Jerusalem, she is 20 years old and she is probably the gentlest girl I have ever met.

Earlier in the sessions we mentioned our way to Germany, and of course the way of the Israelis was easy: House>Train>Airport>Frankfurt>

The Palestinians’ path was similar but took many hours more at the checkpoints, with physical body checks, harassments and tears- as I sat with Eman and she told me what she had been through in the Ben-Gurion Airport:

*“First of all they marked my passport with a mark that says that I am Palestinian, they checked my passport about 5 times, they took all of my stuff out of my bag including my underwear, all of this was in front of my friends and all of the airport, it was so embarrassing. They took my 2 cameras and put them through a machine that broke my digital camera and harmed my other camera. When they told me that I have to put my cellphone through this machine, I begged them not to do because it broke my cameras. So they told me “if you don’t like it you can stay here”. That’s when I started to cry, and because I didn’t want to put my cellphone through they decided that I am dangerous and they attached a security guard to me who went with me everywhere, he even waited for me when I went to the toilet. Then came the worst part- the physical test. They took me inside a small room and told me to take my clothes off, and while I stood there crying in my underwear a woman took a small machine and started touching all parts of my body. While you and all the rest were in the Duty-Free I was being put through this hell, just because of my nationality”.*

I had nothing to say, I was shocked, and she went to her room with tears in her eyes and left me also with tears in my eyes. If you would know her, you wouldn’t believe that someone could think that she is dangerous.

#### 5.8.05

On Friday the 5<sup>th</sup> we did a trip to Cologne, you can call it a rest or a "Vacation from War"... at the beginning of the day we had an organized activity, we divided to groups of four (2 Palestinians and 2 Israelis), and we had the mission to explore all kinds of informations about Cologne. Afterwards we had free time in the city. The 4<sup>th</sup> day of the delegation passed without any conflicts.

I will write about the next days as one unit, because that is how they appear in my mind:

We had a discussion about "The Wall", they asked us: "Why is the wall there?" and we didn't really know what to answer them. –In my opinion the wall is not necessary. Even if it is meant to protect us, the border line is not secure. In addition to that it is un-logical and un-humane. – In the discussions, Shir expressed an opinion about the wall that was close to mine. The rest of the group said: "We don't know why the wall is there, but there must be a good reason. Our army is not stupid and there must be a reason..." Of course that answer didn't make an impression on the Palestinians. They said that the wall only made their lives miserable and created more "freedom fighters" (terrorists). They also claimed that the wall took more land for Israel and is being used as another instrument of oppression. Zeid told us about the wall in Qalquilia, which encircles the city turning it into a cage. The only way out of the city is through check-points which open only at specific hours. The details and the stories about Qalquilia and the wall there, touched me deep inside, beyond the bad feelings that I had every time that some of the Palestinians told a story. I had a terrible feeling because the way he described Qalquilia reminded me of the Jewish Ghettos (that I carry in my collective Jewish consciousness). At the end of this discussion I went some place where I could be alone for a bit, and I started to cry. I cried because I felt that I am part of this machine that makes my friends' and their nation's lives miserable.

In the evening of this day we gathered together all three groups in one room and we saw 4 short movies. The first and the second movie were part of a documentary project called "Route 181" which is a journey of two directors (one Israeli and one Palestinian), who traveled around the land and interviewed people about the conflict and the "Nakba". (Arabic word literally meaning "the catastrophe" and used to describe 1948 for them) The first movie was an interview with an old man from Farod who took part in the occupation of the Galilee. He was not such an intelligent man, he had difficulties with questions he was asked and I felt ashamed that he was representing our nation. He told how they just "swept" the Arabs away from their houses, and while he talked about that he had a mean smile on his face. The second movie was about an Arab "Falach" (a farmer), who told how the wall was planned to take his lands away from him, and how he tricked the authorities, so the wall will leave his lands in his hands. The third movie called "The Cage", was about the wall. It showed in a realistic way the effect of the occupation and especially the wall on the daily life of the Palestinians. For example: children who need to walk many miles to school every morning because of the wall, they also need to wait near an electrified gate until an armed soldier comes to open the gate and let them in (which does not always happen). Soldiers who humiliate Palestinians at the checkpoint before they let them pass (which does not always happen). And soldiers who demand an-appropriate request from Palestinians.

The last movie was about the Palestinians in East Jerusalem. The movie had difficult pictures and it had serious accusations of the Israeli authorities.

From that moment on we (the Israeli group) felt that the leaders of the delegations were against us and showed only one side.

The feeling that the discussions and the subjects were one-sided came up in most of the Israeli groups. I also had that feeling, but not from the place of "we are also pitiful, and we also suffer"- but from the place of "looking forward for a solution". When there will be a solution, it will have to come from both sides which is why it is so important to convey the both sides of the conflict. In the continuation I understood that the reason for the inequality in our dialogue is the inequality in the reality..

During the discussions there were times that I felt like we were having a competition of 'who suffers more' and while we had this competition the Palestinians always won. Not only because they do suffer more in life, but also because their group was stronger than our group. I see three reasons for their strength: **1.** On average age they were older than us. **2.** They knew more than we knew about the conflict because they live it every day. We can escape the reality of the conflict whenever we choose, they can not. **3.** They acted as one unit which thinks the same and had a lot more in common. In our group every one thought differently, had different political opinions, (left wing and right wing) and all lead very different life styles.

It is important to say that no matter how hard the discussions were, or how much we fought in them, outside the discussions we where the best of friends. We laughed a lot (especially jokes about the conflict and black humor about both nations)... I made some deep relationships with few of the Palestinians, and I even managed to meet Eman after we came back from Germany. Meeting her was not so hard because she lives in East Jerusalem, but it is much more difficult to stay in touch with my friends from Ramallah because it is illegal for us to meet.

After a day trip to Amsterdam where we all had fun, it was "back to business". By that time most of the conflicts where inside the uni-national group discussions. Shir and I were blamed for not representing our nation and for being "pro- Palestinians". Shai was carrying the flag of the one who represents the majority. I explained that I just follow my values and my ideology, and that if Shir and I don't "do our job", the Palestinians will feel that no one understands them and identify with them, which is important. In my opinion- it is useless to try and prove that we suffer more or that the other side is more responsible. In the uni-national meeting I gave a metaphor to try to explain my point: Israel and Palestine are like a big boy who is hitting a little boy. We are stronger; we have established authority, so we are the big boy. The Palestinians have less power and military resources than we have. They also suffer from chaos in their authorities. Therefore I believe that we are the ones who should make the first step.

Adi and Basem gave us a challenge: to use role-reversal for one session. So we started to ask the "Israeli" about the wall. Some of them said that the purpose of the wall is to protect, and that the security of Israel is top priority, and some of them said that the wall is not necessary. All of the Palestinians played mild and calm Israelis, but Lama played an ugly Israeli without values. She said that she does not care if people get killed for her security and that the Israelis should oppress the Palestinians more. It hurt me so much to see the way that she acted as an Israeli. Lama and I had a deep relationship and understanding and I told her after the session that the way she acted my nation (which includes me and the group) hurt me. She answered that she does not

see me or any of our group as part of the Israeli nation, and that we are different. That answer was good and bad. Good because of the private relationship between me and Lama, and bad because of the fact that the Palestinian group does not see us as a representative group of the Israeli society. It means that the positive effect of encounter groups like ours is much smaller than it should be. There is a phenomenon that people come back to their homes and their friends ask them: "So, how are the Israelis?" or "How are the Palestinians?" and they answer: "Those that I met were great but they are different".

We (the Israelis who acted as a Palestinian) asked the other group questions and they answered, and that was the way the discussion worked. The real Israelis had a lot of issues to deal with as a result of the dialogues, but the biggest one was the "army question". And that is the reason that we kept asking questions. We asked each one of the Palestinians (as Israelis) if they will go to the army, because we wanted them to help us find the answer for ourselves. Just for the record- all of the Palestinians said that as an Israeli they would not go to the army.

That evening we heard a lecture by a man named Yosef Ben-Eliezer who came to the camp in order to tell us his story. Yosef had been through the holocaust, and he lost most of his family there. When the war finally came to an end, Yosef came to Israel. He fought in the "Independence War" and during the war he felt that what the Israelis were doing to the Palestinians and the way they treated them was too similar to the way the Germans acted with the Jews. He said that he could not fight nor carry out the commands that he was given. He just refused and left the country to the Netherlands. His story was very touching but we felt that it was too much. We had a feeling that all of this camp is just a brainwash, we felt like the system was trying to make us refuse going to the army.

As a result of the lecture, we began to talk about the holocaust, and with the holocaust came the comparing which is the most sensitive part in the Israeli mind. There were a few voices who denied a big part of the holocaust, in one other group someone claimed that 6 million is a false number and that the Nazis killed less than a million Jews. Those who were in his group told me that at the moment he said that, half of the group started to cry and left the class. Yarden who is friend of mine from that group told me that only the leader stopped him from hitting him. In our group they weren't so radical, but Samar (who I consider a friend of mine) said outside the discussions that 90% of what we tell about the holocaust didn't happen. That "Holocaust denial" issue didn't get resolved but still, it didn't hurt our personal relationships. I still feel a bit hurt because of that but I can guess that their opinions on the subject came from their media which is no better than ours.

After a day break of touring in Bonn we came back to the camp and we started to "smell" the end. We began to feel like we still have a lot to say, because by then we had been through the discussions for over a week and subjects were always coming up and issues were opened but not closed. At this time the "Palestinians 48" came into the picture. Throughout all of the discussions they were a bit quiet because they felt like they do not belong to either of the sides. Of course that they identified more with the Palestinian ideology and values than with the Israeli, but they are civilians of the country of Israel. When Samar and Isam felt like the delegation was about to end and they hadn't brought up their issues yet, they opened another front against Israel, the Palestinians 48 front. They spoke with a lot of anger about the discrimination and about how the Israeli authorities do not consider Arabs the same way they consider Jews. This discrimination is felt in lower budgets, and poorer conditions in education. They were completely right, and they asked us if Israel is a democratic country, we

answered: Yes. They asked why the authority discriminates against people because of their nationality and by this acting against democratic values. They were completely right and I agreed with them, but the combination of the accusations from the Palestinians, the one sided policy of the group leaders, the movies, and the lecture caused us to become very emotionally involved with all that we heard. On top of that we felt we were being blamed for some serious wrong doings, and most of all we were dealing with our doubts about the army issue. The combination of all of these emotional matters made a block in our hearts. We couldn't take it any more, so the Israeli-Arab (Palestinian 48) issue remained open.

It was the night before the last day and we had a "big miss" feeling. Shai expressed a wish to show an Israeli movie about the conflict, the leaders said that it does not fit the program because it is the last day. We felt that they said it only because it was Israeli material. In the end she gave up on showing the movie because she said that it is not such a good movie. This evening was a point that we (the Israelis) understood why the delegation was so one sided.

On the last day we summarized the journey that we had been through together. Every one talked about his own experience. That was a very emotional discussion, during which I looked around me at the Palestinians and I asked myself: Will I ever see them again? When it was my turn to speak, I could say the things that I really wanted to say, I had many thoughts running inside my head, and during the camp I thought about many things that I would want to say at the summary. But when finally it was my turn to speak I didn't manage to reach my points.

Afterwards we had a barbecue with the big group, and after the barbecue we had a concert of a Jewish and Arab band that happened to be in Germany at the same time. The celebration was very fun and we were in a complete euphoria.

We knew that every one is going home to his situation and that we may not see each other again. We knew that there are still so many unresolved problems, but we also knew that we had had one of the strongest experiences ever, that we had been through a journey that changed our lives.

### **Summary**

This project was very difficult for me for a number of reasons. It forced me to express my feelings in writing, which is difficult. It also made me write my feelings in English which is even more difficult. But most of all, it forced me to understand things that I have been through at the camp. Because I had to put things in writing I couldn't escape them any more. I had to stand in front of my issues and conflicts and try to figure out what do I think or feel. Unlike other projects which I did in my life, I couldn't copy or summarize written material here. I really had to think about every single word and while I was doing that I had to process the conflicts that I was writing about in real time.