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"Hi, my name is Elai and your people murdered most of my family in Poland, so I will try to be as civilized as I can with my questions". This is how I introduced myself to a German lecturer...of a speech she made about the rise of Nazism in Germany. The lecturer's name was Helga and she is one of the founders of "Vacation from War", an organization that promotes dialogue between Israelis and Palestinians by bringing them to a two week retreat in Walberberg, Germany. I would like to tell you a bit of my experiences during these two weeks.

I joined this venture because I wanted to meet Palestinians for the first time, talk to them, hear their story and tell them mine. I wanted them to meet Israelis who are not in uniform and get an honest view of the Israeli perspective into why we built the separation fence. I wanted them to understand that the Israeli people had had enough of terrorists and rockets and did everything they could before resorting to raising fences and checkpoints. More than that, I wanted to get to know people from the other side, hear about the consequences of what we are doing there, and get a different perspective about reality as I know it. I could honestly say I got all that.

I found it very easy to talk to the Palestinians, to hear them, to become friends with them, to realize that maybe we are causing more damage than good with our actions.

But the fact that this all happened in Germany of all places made a big impact on me, more than I thought it would make. My grandparents are all originally from Poland, and like many Polish Jews they came to Israel after somehow surviving the Holocaust. The rest of their families were not so lucky and they were all murdered by the Nazis. This is why, like most Jews from Europe, my family is so small. The holocaust still has a large place in the Israeli culture and in my life. We all grow up hearing the horror stories about what the Germans did to us until the point where we become numb to it. Israeli teenagers today use the word "holocaust" in a very sarcastic manner. They say things like: "Man, that test was such a holocaust", or "It's so hot outside, what a holocaust". They have plenty of dark jokes about it and they find it hard to take the annual holocaust memorial day seriously as time progresses. I have to admit I was also like this.

This all changed for me when I set foot in Germany for the first time to join the "Vacation from War" program. We were taking a tour through the city of Koeln and we saw some golden bricks that replaced the original ones on the sidewalk near a building. Our guide explained that these bricks signify that in this building once lived a Jewish family that was banished to a death camp and that the Germans have these blocks all over the country. He explained that some people refused to put blocks in front of their houses because maybe they didn't want people to come and claim the house back in the name of their parents. I added that maybe they're ashamed of it because it was them who threw the Jewish resident out of the house in the first place. As we continued to walk the streets of Koeln I started noticing these golden blocks everywhere, they were all around me, pointing at houses that were now a

restaurant or an "H & M". Suddenly everything "German" bothered me, the shops, the people and especially the language. Every Israeli knows at least one word in German: "Juden", And at least one sentence: "Arbeit macht frei". Hearing the German language actually spoken by people and not just in movies where it's usually a Nazi soldier being shot was very disturbing to me. I suddenly realized that I'm walking among the people that tried to murder my family simply because they were Jewish. I knew that the people around me had nothing to do with the holocaust and probably weren't even born then but for me, for that moment, they all had something to do with it, they were all responsible. It bothered me, the fact that a nation that brought so much death and misery to the world is still in existence and is allowed to live and prosper. It seemed like a cruel joke to me, it defied justice.

I found myself becoming anti-everything-German, which explains why I kind of lashed out on Helga, who I didn't know, and to me represented the entire German people, when she gave us a lecture about being a German during the rule of Hitler.

I asked her how could it be that a nation which was so evil became so peace loving and "advanced"? Have the German people really changed or do they still think, quietly perhaps, that they are some kind of supreme race and that Hitler wasn't that bad? Helga calmly replied that these voices still exist in Germany but are strongly pushed to obscurity. After the lecture people asked me why I looked like I was about to scream at the poor lady... It was then when I realized how much this is affecting me. I later apologized to Helga about the way I talked to her which wasn't that appropriate. I was surprised to hear her response, she was very interested about my feelings toward the German people and wanted me to explore them and the way they are affecting me during the seminar with the Palestinians. I started to think about the relevance of the Holocaust to why I am in a situation where I need to fly to Germany so I could talk with Palestinian students about the suffering my country is causing them. How did this happen that we of all people need to be lectured about human rights?



When I was little I learned that when the state of Israel was established we vowed "Never again": Never again will the Jewish people be led like lambs to the slaughter, never again we will put our heads down while we are being prosecuted and murdered across Europe and hope that it will pass on its own, never again will we be weak and fragile like our ancestors were. We were raised to become the strong and proud people of Israel, who can triumph over multiple invading armies, who win impossible battles, who never surrender, who you don't want to mess with or you will be sorry. It seems that our whole narrative is based on defeating our past, proving to the world that we are the chosen people, conquering the demons of the holocaust who claim that we are weak and want to wipe us off the face of the earth. We are a very combatant state, because we have to be, because we are forced to be, because we will never go back to being a beaten down minority. It seems that we have become victims of the pursuit never to become victims again, and in that process, we have created other victims. In Germany, I found myself both facing the people who made us into victims and facing the victims that we made because of that.

I would like to get one thing straight; I will never compare the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to what the Germans did to us. Whoever thinks that there is any resemblance between the two is either completely unaware of what is actually happening in the occupied territories, or is unaware of what the Nazis did, or is just lying to himself. But then again, we don't deserve a prize for not being like the Nazis, and there is really no point comparing ourselves to the worst example of humankind that ever existed. When we see how Israel is misrepresented in the world news we can't help but feel cheated, feel once again how the entire world is against us, how we need to be united and strong to exist. We can't seem to let go of the feeling that we are always under clear and present threat from all fronts and we can't let our guards down. We respond to every threat with the harshest result just to be safe and most of the time it's justified, but sometimes it's just too much. The holocaust will always be a part of our daily lives in Israel, but it should be seen more as a symbol of our perseverance and our strong will to conquer any obstacle and less as an excuse for going against the values of human life and rights that we grew up on.

I learned a lot during these two weeks about confronting the past and the present to ensure a better future. I believe that peace will eventually come, but for that to happen both sides need to let go of some past deeds and look towards the future with a cleaner slate of mutual understanding and cooperation. I hope it's just a matter of time until that happens.