

## **Overcoming divisions - the 9<sup>th</sup> edition of *Closer to Each Other. Preserving the Memory* programme at the XV Łódź Secondary School**

The 9<sup>th</sup> edition of the International project *Closer to Each Other. Preserving the Memory*, under the auspices of the Polish Ministry of National Education and the Centre for Education Development, as well as the Yad Vashem Institute, took place in Łódź on 14 and 15 September 2016, bringing together students and teachers from three schools: the Yarden High School from Ma'ale Efrayim, the Pisgat Zeev High School from Jerusalem and the XV Secondary School from Łódź. As many as 70 students from Israel and 50 Polish students took part in it.

The students participated in integration workshops on the first day, which took place in the beautiful hotel *Grand* in Piotrkowska Street. The guests were welcomed by Barbara Matusiak, the project coordinator, on behalf of the School Director Ewa Kaczorowska and teachers Aneta Jachimowska, Dominika Maciaszek and Małgorzata Pawłowska. The Polish youth taught their Israeli partners how to dance the polonaise, while the Israelis showed their national dances, which was followed by a singsong (among others, *Hava Nagila* and *Shalom Aleichem*). The students also did dictionary work, searching for Hebrew and Polish equivalents of English words. This was interspersed with spontaneous discussions of common interests, family, and school, which made it evident that the young people from both countries did not perceive any boundaries dividing them, and seemed to see more similarities than differences between them.

The programme of the second day, 15 September, had a different character. All students followed the memory trail, visiting the Jewish cemetery in Bracka Street, and exploring the history and culture of Łódź Jews inscribed in the dynamic and often dramatic story of the city. The students also visited the Radegast Train Station, from which the German Nazis sent transport of Jews to death camps and concentration camps. Importantly, the narration of both groups interwove on that day, combining with and complementing each other. We were really together.

We also spent time together at the Manufaktura Centre, enjoying a brief respite before the most emotionally difficult element of the programme, i.e. our visit to the former extermination camp in Kulmhof and the killing site in the Rzuchów Forest. Again, our historical narratives linked there. Jews made up the greatest number of victims in these places, but the victims also included Austrian Sinti, Soviet prisoners of war, children from the Czech village of Lidice, Polish children from the Zamość region, Polish priests and nuns, underground Home Army soldiers, patients of Polish nursing homes and mental asylums.

Our common emotions manifested themselves in the Polish-Israeli ceremony commemorating the victims, which took place in the Rzuchów Forest. The Polish and Israeli students recited the same poems in their own languages: *Still* by Wisława Szymborska, *Marzenie* by Abramek Koplówicz, a fourteen-year-old inhabitant of the Łódź Ghetto, and Psalm 23 (*Adonai is my shepherd*). We sang *Imagine* by John Lennon, *Mury*, or *Walls*, a protest song

by Jacek Kaczmarski, and the national anthems of both countries. The Israeli guests were particularly impressed by the fact that the Łódź students had not only Polish and Łódź flags, but also Israeli flags, and that they could sing *Hatikvah*. They felt our empathy, understanding and acceptance. The ceremony was brought to an end with the laying of flowers and lighting of candles at the monument on the site, bearing the significant inscription *We remember*.

One of the Israeli mothers accompanying her child in the trip to Poland said, “My whole childhood was overshadowed by the Holocaust. My both parents survived the Holocaust, losing all their families. This trauma resulted in constant sorrow and fear of others. Now this all has finally burst in me. I have come to believe that people can overcome divisions, sympathise with each other and support each other regardless of what nations they come from. You have done a great thing!” The Israeli students asked about the words on the monument and about the lyrics of the song *Mury (Walls)*. Those of Israeli teachers who participated in the project for the first time asked why we included Jewish history and culture into Polish education and were touched by the care taken of the remembrance sites. The Polish students were also greatly touched and emotionally involved, acting with dignified solemnity.

We know that we will meet soon, this time on Israeli soil. A Polish delegation is leaving for Israel in November, at the invitation of the schools from Ma’ale Efrayim and Jerusalem. The project has been co-financed by the Polish Ministry of National Education.