

**The International Polish-Israeli Youth Meetings Programme *Closer to Each Other. Preserving the Memory***

**XV Secondary School students visit Israel for a fifth time**

A group of students of the XV Jan Kasprowicz Secondary School from Łódź, led by the project coordinator Barbara Matusiak as well as teachers Aneta Jachimowska and Dominika Maciaszek, visited Israel at the invitation of the Yarden High School from Ma'ale Efrayim in the Jordan Valley, with which they have been cooperating for ten years now, and Pisgat Ze'ev High School from Jerusalem. The visit was a leap straight from Polish November drizzle into the burning Israeli sun (35 degrees Celsius!), and from rainy autumn greyness into the beige and pinkish landscapes of the desert and the blue of the water and the sky.

The itinerary of the Łódź students included a trip following the tracks of Jesus and his disciples, and thus the group visited Galilee, stopping at Capernaum, Tabgha, Magdala, Mount Tabor, the Mount of Beatitudes, the Sea of Galilee, the Yardenit Baptismal Site, and Cana of Galilee. The outstanding Polish-speaking guide Bat El Notsani took care that the proper Gospel passage was read in each of these places, at the same time providing the students with the historical background of the monuments, churches and excavations they were visiting.

The visits to the Church of the Annunciation in Nazareth and the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem made a particular impression on the group, evoking prayer, carol singing, and reflection. The biblical figures connected to these places became close, real people. Jesus' teachings, mission, suffering and sacrifice acquired peculiar character thanks to the group's visits to the Mount of Olives and the Last Supper Room, and following his tracks along the Via Dolorosa.

However, pilgrimage was not the main goal of the trip. The participants also learnt the history of Israel. They ascended Masada, the last Jewish bastion defying the Roman occupiers; they paid tribute to David, the great ruler of ancient Israel, visiting his grave; they saw evidence of the achievements of Herod the Great, portrayed in Israeli history not only as a tyrant, but also a great architect; they prayed by the Western Wall and admired the menorah, a symbol of the State of Israel. Also, the group visited Qumran, where the oldest surviving scrolls of the Bible were found, and where the Essene sect lived in seclusion according to the teachings of the Torah, opposing the corruption of the external world (John the Baptist was probably a member of this sect for some time).

The group's encounter with the culture and history of Islam was a particular attraction of the trip. The participants entered the Temple Mount and saw from a close distance the Al-Aqsa Mosque and the Dome of the Rock, beautiful monuments of the Arab architecture of old.

Another very important element of the trip was the participants' visit to Yad Vashem. It began with a meeting with father Romuald Waszkinel/Jakub Weksler, a Holocaust survivor, who disclosed the dramatic history of discovering his double identity and searching for traces of his Jewish family. The meeting brought tears to the eyes of many students. Father Waszkinel received from the group an album of old maps of Łódź. Hopefully, they will prove helpful in his uncovering of the Jewish history of Poland, swept away by the whirlwinds of German Nazism.

Later, the group toured the Yad Vashem Holocaust Museum and the Children Memorial, devoted to the youngest victims of the Shoah, which greatly moved them. The participants were guided by Adina

Shtoyer, a police general and a friend of long standing, who also conducted a workshop about discovering traces of memory in the present times.

The primary goal of the trip was the group's meeting with Israeli students and teachers, during which we promoted Łódź as a city of dialogue, cultivating the memory of the common history of Christian and Jewish Poles. The Polish and Israeli students participated in historical workshops, visited the Jordan Valley and Jerusalem, had fun together and discussed the issues of the past and the present.

The Polish group took part in ceremonies at the Yarden High School, commemorating the death of Yitzhak Rabin, Prime Minister of Israel and a Nobel Peace Prize laureate, during which Barbara Matusiak met with representatives of the regional education authorities and the Israeli school principal, and had the opportunity to thank the Israeli coordinators of the programme, Naomi Doron and Elisheva Paran, for their commitment and cooperation. Ilanit Carmi, the Yarden High School principal, spoke of the prospects of the Polish-Israeli cooperation and of the honour of having Polish youth participating in such an important patriotic Israeli event. Barbara Matusiak, in turn, spoke of the history of the mutual school meetings, outlining their goals, and expressed her hope that the contact contributes to building good relations between both nations. The Łódź students sang *Mury*, or *Walls*, a protest song by Jacek Kaczmarski, which, sung over the years at the mutual Holocaust commemoration ceremonies, has become an unofficial anthem of the programme. They also joined in singing *Hatikvah*, the Israeli national anthem.

All this forged a sense of functioning in an international community, raising the temperature of good feelings and emotions. Reportedly, two lessons had to be called off after the departure of the Polish group from the Jordan Valley because the Israeli students grieved deeply over the separation from their Polish friends. Let us hope the friendships thus created will survive years, and the next classes will go through equally pleasant and beneficial experiences.

**The project was carried out under the auspices of the Polish Ministry of National Education, which co-financed the trip, the Israeli Ministry of Education, the Polish Centre for Education Development, and the Yad Vashem Institute. Materials promoting Łódź were provided by the Łódź City Hall, the Łódź Province Marshall's Office, the Łódź Suburban Rail, the Łódź Airport, and the Łódź Water and Sewage Services Ltd.**