

Israeli Youth Delegation to Poland: Hidden Opportunities

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I am not sure how many people in Poland are aware of the Israeli youth delegations that visit this country, but it seems that those who are familiar with this project have a solid opinion on it, and in many cases it is a rather critical one. While Israelis that criticize this program, focus mostly on the costs of those trips or their implications on the Israeli society, Poles tend to focus on the possible effect those trips might have on the image of Poland, hinting that they are not constructive and present Poland in an unjustifiably negative light. I'd like to propose a different approach to the subject. In my opinion, the visits of the Israeli youth delegations to Poland are the biggest opportunity we have, when it comes to improving the relations between Israelis and Poles, and they can serve as an effective mean for building a stronger partnership between our people in the long run.

Some introduction might be required for those who are not familiar with this educational program. The Israeli Youth Delegations to Poland are organized groups of high schools pupils from Israel, who are visiting historical sites in Poland in the framework of their school activities and under the supervision of the Israeli Ministry of Education. The participants, who are 17-18 years old high-school pupils that are interested in the Holocaust and related topics, join the program voluntarily. The school staff verifies that the participants are emotionally and socially fit for this journey, and all the participants go through a thorough process of preparation several months before their trip. The delegations are accompanied by well trained guides and many times a Holocaust survivor joins as well and shares with the group his own personal life story.

It is important to stress that the actual visit of the youth delegation to Poland is just one phase in a process that starts long time before the pupils arrive to Poland and ends some time after their return. Although the main purpose of the journey is to visit the places connected with the extermination of the Jewish people during the Holocaust, the process

of preparation in Israel includes extensive studies regarding additional topics such as pre-war Jewish life in Poland, the Jewish and Polish struggles against the Nazis, the complex relations between Poles and Jews throughout our long common history and further information regarding Polish history and the current excellent relations between Israel and Poland. The trips themselves, although mainly designed to focus on the death camps and the former areas of the ghettos, include as well visits to areas in which Jews lived for centuries, such as Galicia or Kazimierz, visits to Polish historical sites such as Wawel and even stopovers at tourist sites like Zakopane. The result of this process should be a well prepared educational program, which presents the complex historical reality, and encourages the participants to think about topics such as democracy, tolerance towards minorities, anti-Semitism, Zionism and relations between Jews and gentiles.

The seeds of this project were planted in 1988, when the Israeli Minister of Education at that time Yitzchak Navon decided, while visiting Poland, to conduct a pilot program of Israeli youth delegations that would visit the death camps, which had been established by Nazi Germany. The project was a success and gained popularity in Israel. The number of participants in these trips grew from 200 in 1988 to 24,000 in 2008 and 27,000 in 2009. Today more than half of the Jewish schools in Israel participate in those journeys.

As an ongoing and evolving project, the visits of the youth delegations are being carefully examined by a special unit which was established within the Israeli Ministry of Education, and over the years some changes have been made. For example, one of the most important elements that were introduced to the program of the visits was the option of conducting meetings between Israeli and Polish youth. Such meetings are not easily arranged. Many objective obstacles stand in the way: language barrier, security concerns, logistical difficulties and occasionally even lack of interest from certain schools in Poland and Israel. Nevertheless, since 2004 until 2009 around 13,000 young Israelis met Polish pupils in this framework. 160 schools from Israel already include those meetings regularly in the visit program of their youth delegations and 20 new schools join in every year. Those meetings expose the Israeli youth to contemporary Poland, and helps breaking wrong stereotypes that still exist on both sides. This is beneficial not only to the

Israeli youngsters, but also to those young Poles, who in some cases have a certain image of a Jew, without ever meeting one.

There is great desire both in Israel and in Poland to enlarge the number of youth meetings that are taking place in the framework of the youth delegations' visits. While trying to achieve this aim, we should keep in mind that it is not sufficient just to hold such meetings; the meetings should be well prepared in order to have a positive effect. This is a process that requires time and resources. Several institutions are involved in these preparations, and beside the Ministries of Education additional partners such as Yad Vashem from the Israeli side or The Museum of History of Polish Jews, CODN, FODZ and CEO from the Polish side contribute from their experience.

Another criticism we encounter from time to time deals with the security requirements of the Israeli youth delegations. Some Poles misinterpret the presence of the security men surrounding those youth delegation, thinking that the reason for their presence is a general belief that Poland is a dangerous place for Jews or that the delegations should be protected from anti-Semitism. This is really not the case, and in fact, Poland is one of the friendliest countries today towards Israel and Israelis. However, since Israel still suffers from the threat of terror, official Israeli delegations are always taking security measures, and in this regard there is no difference if the delegation visits Poland or any other destination.

Israel and Poland maintain today excellent relations, which have many dimensions and include political, cultural, economic and military aspects. However, there is still room for improvement in the field of people to people relations. Most of the Israelis that arrive with the youth delegations still don't meet Polish peers, and there is a similar situation with Poles that visit the holy land in large numbers every year without getting to know modern Israel. In order to make a positive change in this arena, dialogue is crucial and is mostly necessary when it comes to the young generation, who will eventually shape the future relations of our countries. Therefore the meetings between Israelis and Poles,

which are being conducted in the framework of the youth delegations' trips, are of great importance.

In 2009 an agreement was signed between Israel and Poland regarding a program of youth exchange. Unlike the youth meetings that I described so far, this new program will include the element of reciprocity, and it will not be just the Israeli youth that travel to Poland and conduct meetings there with Polish peers, but also Polish youngsters will arrive to Israel and meet there with Israeli youth. I think that today, both sides understand the importance of increased dialogue between our people, and therefore the existing program of the youth delegations visits, combined with the new agreement concerning youth exchange, can serve as a real platform for dialogue, which will only be intensified in the future.

This is the reason for my optimism and for my belief that the project of the youth delegations poses actually a great opportunity, although some tend to ignore its positive potential. The current format of the Israeli youth delegations provides the Israeli youngsters not only with a view of the painful history of the Holocaust, but also supplies them with information concerning the historical Jewish life in Poland and give them the opportunity to experience a personal encounter with contemporary life in Poland. Up until now about 15,000 youngsters from Israel and Poland got the opportunity to meet each other, and the number of such meetings is increasing annually. Israel doesn't have such an extensive program of youth meetings with any other country.