

Report about German-Israeli Exchange

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There were 2 main goals for the teacher exchange program. The first was to teach German students and educators about Israeli culture and life, including history and politics, the educational system, and Judaism. The second goal, of equal importance to the first, was to learn about these same aspects of German society so that they can be shared and taught to Israelis. This report describes the efforts and experiences from the standpoint of these two goals, then includes a personal reflection, some notes on accommodations and recommendations for the program.

Before beginning, I'd like just to express that all my expectations were exceeded by this program. My host (Peter Lehnart), the teachers at the school, and the students at the Solitude Gymnasium received me warmly, constantly planning activities and inviting me to various cultural and social events. They were also very receptive to learning about Israel, constantly asking questions and genuinely trying to understand the history and current dynamics of the state.

Goal #1 - Teaching About Israel

History, Politics

The history and political situation in Israel were one of the main focuses of my class presentations. In all, I presented to 12 different classes for a minimum of 90 minutes each. In some cases, I spend up to 270 minutes with a class. The main presentation focused on the meaning of Zionism and the establishment of the State of Israel. It then continued with a discussion of post-1948 wars, with particular emphasis on the 6-day war and the Gaza War in 2008. Approximately 60 minutes was spent with classes on these issues, largely to establish a framework by which students can answer the question, "Is Palestinian Resistance Terrorism or Freedom Fighting?" Using a mixture of cooperative learning techniques and lecture aided by a Power Point presentation, the Israeli narrative of striving for peace against a fight with radical Islamism was communicated. Approximately 20 minutes of discussion in the form of question and answers followed the main presentation. Classes that met for more than 90 minutes often viewed DVDs on Palestinian terrorism that showed the use of media propaganda and breeding a culture of hate by teaching their children to fight as ways to demonstrate aspects of the conflict.

Culture, Society, Religion

This aspect of Israel and Judaism was presented in the context of the historical and political framework, particularly as Israel is influenced by its conflicts with Palestinians and some Arab neighbors. For example, the rational and issues behind required military service was discussed, as was living in a state under the threat of terrorism. The normality of everyday life, from skiing in the Golan, barbeques on the beach, and drinking coffee at a restaurant were shown through pictures. The diversity of religious beliefs, both within Judaism (eg. Orthodox, Conservative, Secular) and without (Muslim, Christian, Bahai) were discussed to show the plurality of Israeli society.

Educational System

Teaching about Israel's educational system had a small yet important role, particularly as this program is set within an educational context and students were naturally curious about the similarities and differences. In-class questions were answered about the Israeli educational system, and I was also interviewed by the school newspaper about the differences and similarities with Germany in this regard.

Goal #2 - Learning About Germany

History, Politics

To learn about the history and politics of Germany, I participated in both in-school and out-of-school activities. Within school, I had many informal conversations with teachers about the both topics, going as far back as early German history and continuing through modern day politics. This included the feudalistic period in Germany, the rise of the nation-state, the Weimar Republic, the rise of the Third-Reich, post-World War II politics and efforts of reconciliation in Germany, Berlin as the front line of the Cold War, and current political opinions. In two different classes, student created presentations that explained some of this history too. Outside of school, many teachers volunteered their time to take me to various sites and museums around the Stuttgart area to teach about the history and politics. These trips included a Celtic museum, Mercedes-Benz museum, the Art museum, the historic town of Eslinger and many sites within, a day trip to Lake Constance and various historic sites within, and much more. Furthermore, I also travelled to Berlin for one long weekend and saw the Holocaust and Jewish museum, as well as famous sites such as the Brandenburg gates, the Reichstag, and remnants of the Berlin wall. I participated in organized tours to learn more about these places.

Culture, Society

Learning about the culture and society of Germany took place on an ongoing, informal basis, as simply meeting with and talking to people constitutes learning about everyday life. On a more formal basis, however, students created role-plays in two classes where they chose aspects of culture and society to demonstrate. These included the culture of automobile appreciation, civic arrangements such as shared cleaning responsibilities in apartment complexes, social life, food, unique holidays and customs, and much more. I also learned about the culture and society by visiting several neighborhoods in Berlin, including those that were very ethnically diverse (including Turkish and Asian populations) and others that were more affluent. Finally, I enjoyed the company of many teachers in restaurants, private homes, at the theatre, and opera house.

Educational System

I learned about the German educational system by both being a part of it and having it explained to me by several teachers and a classroom of students. Several teachers answered questions that I had about its structure, and one class, together with me, generated a list of the similarities and differences between German school and Israeli schools.

Additional Information

Reflection

In reflection, this experience was very meaningful in both academic and personal levels. Academically, I learned a great deal about many aspects of Germany, including history, politics, culture, and everyday life. This undoubtedly added to my appreciation for the country and has given me tools and knowledge by which to teach others. Personally, seeing how past anti-Semitism and the Holocaust are translated into thoughts and ideas today was very poignant. I was quite impressed by the attitude of the new generation of German people towards Jews and Israel and left with an optimism that the two countries have much to share with one another. While the young generations bears no responsibility for the crimes of the past, they put it upon themselves to teach about the past extensively and fight to make sure such atrocities won't be repeated.

Accommodations

The accommodations provided to me were quite unique, in that I was hosted for the entire duration instead of being placed in a hotel. The advantage of being placed in a homestay was being forced to acclimate, instead of having the opportunity to withdraw if I was staying alone. Ultimately, this led to a very intense yet pleasant experience. My host, Mr. Peter Lehnert, was incredibly sensitive to my needs and facilitated a schedule that kept me busy and active. In addition to having a demanding teaching schedule that included teaching classes every working day, we participated in after-school activities on 19 out of the 21 days of the trip. These activities included cultural experiences such as fares, museums, the opera, local restaurants, and social gatherings with other teachers.

Recommendations

First, participants should be encouraged to visit important places, such as Berlin and Jerusalem, during their trips, as these add meaning and understanding, particularly for the second goal of the program (to learn about the other country and bring the information back). My trip to Berlin added irreplaceable depth to this visit, for example. Second, there ought to be a written document that explains this program to upcoming participants. This should include expectations for work and travel, goals of the program, key contacts, and other important information such as insurance and health procedures. Finally, I suggest that we start an online forum for participants of the program to stay in touch, as well as seek ways to use the internet to begin student exchanges between German and Israeli students.