



DEAR MEMBERS AND FRIENDS OF COEXISTENCES,

No sooner had the girls from Her Voice gone back home than the hikers from Breaking the Ice arrived to walk in our mountains. In this back and forth, the host families didn't have a moment's respite during this summer of 2015; both visits were a source of joy on all sides and infused renewed enthusiasm. "Amazing" they said!

CONCERNING HER VOICE / KOLE'H / SAOUTEK – 16 TO 25 AUGUST 2015

"HER VOICE", IN HEBREW AND ARABIC

An authentic multicultural group indeed: fourteen girls aged 16-17, Jewish, Christian and Muslim, black and white, Israeli, Palestinian, Polish, Ethiopian and Armenian went by train to Ben Gurion airport from Haifa. Destination: Switzerland. Several of them had never left the country, never caught a plane. Accompanied by Olfat Haider and Raz Parker, they were in for "an amazing" week! Also present, Sylvie Berkowitsch-Gassenbauer shares with us an account in three parts of this special moment:

The visit

The first memorable moment was the reception in Geneva, the smiles, the handshakes, the abundant, tasty picnics... And a few hours later, the stupefaction, "amazing!", they said on seeing the chalet and the incredible organisation: the chalet was set up to welcome seventeen people! Dinner was ready and red berries in the fridge for the dessert. There were even waterproof clothes for all the girls. After meeting the members who had come to prepare everything, Jowel said: "What? They've left? They never saw us before and they're leaving us their whole house? Just like that!"

Four days of serious work followed, punctuated by excursions (The Trient Glacier, the Emosson Dam), in a wonderful collaborative atmosphere. Of course, the highlight being the day devoted to the respective narratives, always painful

since it involves confronting the history of the other in order to dialogue "for real". Many tears and much empathy, a group of girls is always very special in this kind of confrontation.

But also cooking together, cleaning the bathroom, lending a jumper, preparing entertainment for the evening, singing to the sound of the ukulele, moments that can only be shared in the "living together".

The programme continued: coming back from the mountain, stopping at the Adventure Park in Aigle (treetop tour with fixed ropes), a greatly appreciated moment of pleasure, followed by the reunion with the families.

In Fiuna's garden, around a buffet and in an easy-going atmosphere, presentations are punctuated by peals of laughter, apprehensions are dissipated and, at the end of the evening, the group splits up into pairs of girls, an Israeli and a Palestinian, to be welcomed in a host family's home. It is important to note that a young high school student from Lausanne that evening was able to talk with the group, as part of her baccalaureate project on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Hugs and kisses and, after three days spent as a group, their Switzerland adventure begins. It will be deeply appreciated, and the week-end with the family will turn out to be most profitable: the girls are thrilled by their new



Ran and Michal / Daphna and Nathaly / Dana and Odes



Miral and Cili / Angela and Maayan / Rachel and Mona / Maya and Jewel

friends, by the wonderful programs offered to them, and by the encounters: it is a clear success. An experience to renew: this year, for the first time, the “family” time was extended from midday Saturday to Monday morning.

Then a day in Geneva, with the excellent choice to visit the International Red Cross Museum, and the treasure hunt concocted by the team of Coexistences in order to discover the town. Another lovely moment.

And how about the beautiful encounter in Lausanne with Magali Hanselmann, head of the Canton of Vaud Equalities Office? We mustn't forget that, apart from their dialogue work, the young girls reflect on the condition of women in their respective societies during their meetings in Israel.

Finally, on the day devoted to the preparation of the final party, I noticed that the Israeli and Palestinian folk dances were not presented by each group but by all the girls who wanted to participate. So they taught each other the hora and the debka to bring their families and all of you, friends of Coexistences, into the dance. Truly uplifting!

**“An enemy is one whose story we haven't heard”,
Jean Knudsen Hoffman**

On Saturday morning 22 August 2015, the host “parents” are there for a moment of reflection and discussion.

Firstly their motivations: curiosity, faith in the young girls, concern for this region, interest in an approach providing hope, the feeling of non-violent resistance, activism to promote global reconciliation, conviction that fear comes from what we don't know, taking of responsibility.

Then the pivotal point: can one participate in this dialogue without being partisan?

Positions diverge:

- the media force us to choose;
- it is not possible to remain neutral;
- during a conflict, differences exist even among ourselves;
- this is not my country, I have no right to take a stand, I must be respectful.

However, over and above these positions, reactions are unanimous:

- when I saw the girls arrive, I felt humble, I saw the complexity and I respect that;
- when the group arrived, I just let go;
- we react according to our values, partisan we may be, but partisan of the dialogue;
- I am moved by suffering, all sufferings, that is the essential.

Whatever the opinions, as the host families teach us every time, to support this dialogue effort the keywords are humility, benevolence, respect and unconditional support to dialogue.

After the meeting, I remembered that magic moment, during the summer of 2006 which is at the origin of the creation of Coexistences. The keyword was **benevolence**. You were eight benevolent families who opened their doors to sixteen brave girls.

Time has passed, the group of friends, which has become the Coexistences association, has experienced compelling as well as difficult moments. And at the same time, at home, the situation in Israel-Palestine has deteriorated, wars have followed one another, and dialogue has deteriorated. But on this Saturday 22 August 2015, the spark was still there.

That is what I wanted to share with you. Thank you for continuing to be, despite the difficulties, this benevolent association which encourages us, on the ground, to nurture come what may, the indispensable coming together.

Why does staying in Switzerland “add value” to dialoging in Israël?

This question was asked to the participants of Her Voice, on the last day of their stay, by Olfat Haider and Raz Parker, the facilitators of the group. Here are some of the answers:

- I feel compelled to reflect more deeply in order to present my story to a third party: the Swiss. The host families were neutral;
- Switzerland has nothing to do with the conflict; here we are in neutral territory. Also, we are disconnected from the media and Israeli society;
- the total disconnection in the chalet, without internet or communication with our families, was a success and crystallised the group;
- this trip has helped me define the situation for myself, to be more informed;
- in my family, we passed from one language to the other effortlessly. Language carries a political significance in Israel, talking about the conflict in Hebrew is not innocent. Here it's different;
- Switzerland is a very good example, bringing things into a right perspective. It is a place of hope, since harmony prevails after the past wars;
- here we experienced collaboration and sharing. We really got to know the other side and my stereotypes have crumbled. I discovered that there is a partner for dialogue.

SYLVIE BERKOWITSCH-GASSENBAUER

“COMING TOGETHER IN SWITZERLAND IS BEING PART OF A FAMILY”

At the final evening which was as warm as it was friendly, on 24 August, different participants to the group Her Voice shared their feelings after a few days spent together, first collectively in the mountains, then by pairs in the host families. Listen to them talk about the meaning of such a trip to here: was it useful?

“Yes, I feel as though I’m part of a family by coming here because we are all together. We ate, worked and created a new communication between Arab and Jewish girls”, says Miral who is a Christian Arab. For Maya who is Jewish, “this trip to Switzerland is really positive because it makes the sharing of opinions easier on both sides. I have gained more awareness of the different points of view. We want to change many things, and not only the perception of the conflict between Jews and Arabs. We also hope we can make heard the voice of those women who seem to be more open to dialogue and peace. We are convinced of the stupidity of war.” Half Arab and half Armenian, Nathalie, talks of the discriminations endured by the Palestinians.

Among these young girls, some are, or consider becoming, activists, others less so. It is the case for Dana who is Jewish and for whom coming to Switzerland is first and foremost “the guarantee to meet in a neutral environment, and that is very different from what I usually experience. This framework has allowed me to open my eyes and ears, I heard more of the Arab perspective. That encourages me to develop other contacts.”

Another noteworthy aspect was underlined by Fiuna Seylan-Ongen, President of Coexistences, during her welcoming speech: “The best way to thank us is by pursuing the dialogue”, she said. “Of course we will continue this work and I hope our children will do likewise”, foresees Nathalie who even dreams of becoming active for peace in Israel, as a delegate with the United Nations!

EDGAR BLOCH

CONCERNING BREAKING THE ICE 27 AUGUST/10 SEPTEMBER 2015

For the sixth consecutive year, Coexistences invited a group of students from the University of Haifa for a trek in our Alps. They arrived in Geneva on 27 August, and returned to Israel on 10 September. As usual, the composition was well balanced: six Jews (three girls, three boys) and five Arabs (three girls, two boys) aged from 23 to 30. Among the Arabs, two boys were Druze, one of the girls Christian and two Muslim. A Muslim participant was unable to come at the last minute, for reasons beyond his control. Similarly to last year, the dynamics of the group was facilitated by Olfat Haider and Asaf Ron. For the record, the latter is the director of Beit Hagefen, the institution where Olfat works in Haifa. Both of them are in charge, in collaboration with the University, for the recruiting and preparation of the group in Israel, a process which started last March, marked in particular by four week-ends of camping together in the Galilee countryside.

This year, the trek itinerary started in Verbier (29 August), ran alongside the Lake of Mauvoisin, crossed the Italian border at the Fenêtre Durand, descended to Ollomont, went through Etroubles, then back over the Swiss border to the Grand-Saint-Bernard, and terminated at La Fouly (5 September). Every night, except one, were spent under tents. Compared to the other years, the weather was clement, fine almost every day, with just one afternoon of heavy rain and the very last day, cold and foggy.

Nadja Schmid, a low-range mountain guide, led us all along the route. Her professionalism was beyond criticism, her empathy and kindness were exemplary, and all the participants adored her. Her explanations on nature were especially appreciated. Under her guidance, lots of herbs

were gathered for herbal tea, and mushrooms to flavour the evening meals. Even more importantly, Nadja perfectly understood that the aim was not the trek itself but the dialogue, so that she always knew how to adapt the hike to the needs for the dynamics of the group.

Compared to other years, the relationships within the group were particularly warm and consensual, everyone showing great empathy towards the others. It was evident that the preparatory work in Israel had been well done. This convivial atmosphere didn't prevent, to the contrary, the painful aspects of the conflict being approached directly and openly. A particularly successful implementation of the general approach to dialogue, as defended by Coexistences: promoting first and foremost the relationships between the participants, and then taking advantage of such interpersonal friendly ties to render the discussion of conflictual issues tolerable.

A new and enriching element in 2015: a professional evaluation of the project, carried out by the Haute Ecole de travail social de Sierre (Hes-SO). Three students and a professor from this institution came to conduct two structured interviews with the group, one just before the departure for the trek, and the other just after the end of it. Each session was filmed, giving the possibility to transcribe and analyse all the comments later on. Each participant also drew a "relational chart", i.e. a diagram of her/his personal relations network, indicating in particular religious affiliation. They will be requested to draw a new chart six months later, in the hope of documenting an evolution.



Nitsan and Janan / Shahaf and Allaa / Dror and Hadeer



Adi, Haitham and Libat / Hadeer and Shaikoo / Asaf and Olfat

Breaking the Ice 2015 experienced some outstanding moments, such as:

- during the preparation in Israel, the participants organised a meeting of their families. All came, giving some of them the opportunity, for the first time, to be in contact with someone from “the other side”.
- as in previous years, the Municipality of Orsières organised an official welcome for the group the morning of their arrival in La Fouly. This moment which took place around good wines from the Valais, in the newly renovated Col Fenêtre hotel, in Ferret, was particularly convivial. We would like to thank Jeanine Mottier-Obrist, member of the Municipality of Orsières, who initiated this.
- the last night of the trek was spent at the Grand-Saint-Bernard Hospice, where the group was warmly received by Father Raphaël, whom we thank here. The participants went to the evening mass, which, for most of them, represented their first contact with Christianity.
- on Monday 7 September, the Municipality of Lausanne, represented by Marc Vuilleumier, gave the group an official welcome in the Town Council hall. The participants listened to a talk by Didier Erard, Head of the Department of Administration and Integration, on a subject of particular interest for them: the Swiss political system, and its links with pacific coexistence between communities in our country. We are very glad that this new link has been established between Coexistences and the Authorities. Our warm thanks to Mr. Vuilleumier and Mr. Erard.
- on Tuesday 8 September, Danielle Kohler invited the group to her workplace: the Point d’Eau Lausanne, a structure offering medical and paramedical care to the poorest of the poor. A good occasion for the participants to see that social problems also exist in Switzerland.
- an innovative formula was introduced for the farewell evening on Wednesday 9 September at the Refuge des 4 Vents in Pully: instead of the usual pot-luck meal, the participants prepared the main dishes: humus, labane, tsatsiki and other Middle-Eastern recipes. Thus, the members of Coexistences appreciated being the “guests”, and the evening took a very pleasant turn. Something to be renewed!

This project would not have come to fruition had it not been for the abundant help we received: from the Civil Protection of the Canton of Vaud who ensured free of charge all the transportations by road, from the Kohler family who lent their chalet in La Fouly and their house in Lausanne to lodge the group, from the Valentin Catholic School and its director, Ahmad Abu-Nijmeh, who stored on their premises our voluminous camping materiel, and who, twice this year, invited the participants for a midday meal in the school canteen, and, finally, the Coexistences working group who carried out the organisation of the stay.

On a final note, these three testimonies heard from three different participants, and which encourage us to pursue our action:

- “it’s the first time I’ve made Arab friends”
- “I have the impression that there’s no difference between us”
- “I realised the importance of relations between people; more people in Israel should experience what we have experienced, that’s to say to get out of our comfort zone in order to go towards the other”.

Further still, on Facebook two or three days after the group returned to Israel: “I hope this is just the beginning of the road for our group, and that what we began over there will continue in Israel”.

Back home, the participants are going to try to extend their experience in two ways: on the one hand by having their families to meet again, and on the other by organising a camping week-end open to anyone in their entourage who is interested, colleagues, friends, family, thus multiplying the occasions for meetings between communities.

FRANÇOIS FEIHL



Nicolas, Jeff and Matthieu from the Civil Protection / Camping under the impressive mass of the Grand Combin / On the trail

TAKE UP YOUR AGENDAS! GENERAL ASSEMBLY 2015

Once again this year, the general assembly will give us the opportunity to come together to review the projects realised in 2015 and envisage those for 2016.

It will take place on Tuesday 17 November 2015 at 19h00 (doors open at 18h30) at the Centre pluriculturel d'Ouchy (CPO) in Lausanne.

During the second part of the evening, we will have the pleasure of welcoming Dr. Francis Piccand, from the Federal Department for Foreign Affairs, member of the political administration in the Middle-East and North Africa Division in Bern.

Francis Piccand, thanks to his training, his professional and on-the-ground experience, has an in-depth knowledge of the Near- and Middle-East, the development of these societies and of past and ongoing conflicts.

Let autumn set in and let us meet in November to pave the way for our season 2015/2016.

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