



SYVIE BERKOWITSCH'S REPORT TO YMVP

WHY THE TRIP ABROAD?

THE JERUSALEM INTERNATIONAL YMCA'S EXPERIENCE IN SENDING DELEGATIONS OF YOUTH ABROAD, FOLLOWING MANY MONTHS OF HARD WORK, PREPARATION, DIALOGUE, AND LEARNING ABOUT EACH OTHER, ALREADY SHOWED HOW THE MASKS CAN FALL, HOW A LONGER TIME TOGETHER CAN OFFER THE REAL OPPORTUNITY TO SHARE, LAUGH, AND JUST BE TOGETHER. IT IS OBVIOUS THAT AN INTENSIVE SHARING GIVES THE GROUP THE REAL TOGETHERNESS IT NEEDS TO COMPLETELY LEAVE THE POLITICAL DIFFERENCES AND DISCOVER THE POTENTIAL FRIEND BEHIND THE ETHNIC DIFFERENCE.

THE FIRST LAUSANNE CONNECTION

DURING THE SPRING OF 2006, IN LAUSANNE, 10 FAMILIES RECEIVED A LETTER ASKING IF THEY WOULD LIKE TO BE PART OF THE ADVENTURE AND HOST ONE PALESTINIAN AND ONE ISRAELI GIRL. IN ADDITION, THE JEWISH COMMUNITY OF LAUSANNE WAS INVITED TO PARTICIPATE IN THE JOINT PROJECT WITH THEIR YOUTH FOR PART OF THE PROGRAM.

THE REACTION OF THE FAMILIES WAS IMMEDIATE AND HEARTWARMING: WE WANT YOU TO COME, WE ARE READY TO HELP, HOST, GIVE YOU A CHALET IN THE MOUNTAINS, PREPARE PICNICS, AND MORE THAN THAT, WE CAN HELP ORGANIZE, JUST ASK. THE JEWISH COMMUNITY WELCOMED WARMLY THE PROJECT, OFFERING A SERIOUS SUBSIDY AND THE COMMUNITY CENTER FOR MEETINGS.

BESIDES, PEOPLE BEGAN TO CALL AND INVITE US -- EVELYNE FORM THE LIBERAL JEWISH COMMUNITY IN GENEVA, SAMER, A LEBANESE MUSLIM IN LAUSANNE, WE RECEIVED SUGGESTIONS FOR MEETINGS, AND THE MAYOR OF GENEVA INVITED THE DELEGATION FOR A MEETING AND OFFERED A DAY OF SIGHTSEEING IN GENEVA

BEGINNING TO ORGANIZE THE TRIP

THE PROGRAM WAS CREATED: WE WILL LIVE TOGETHER FOR SOME DAYS IN A CHALET IN THE MOUNTAINS, BY OURSELVES, TO CRYSTALLIZE THE GROUP, TO COOK, CLEAN, PLAY, DISCUSS, AND TO PARTICIPATE TO CHALLENGING ACTIVITIES WHERE ONE NEEDS TO HELP THE OTHER : THE FOREST OF ADVENTURE, CLIMBING FROM TREE TO TREE, AND A VERY CHALLENGING 6 HOURS WALK SEEMS TO FIT OUR PROJECT. THE PARTICIPANTS ARE ASKED TO PREPARE THE MENUS FOR 3 DAYS, A DUTY IS ORGANIZED FOR ALL THE TASKS, AND PROGRAMS FOR THE EVENING ARE DISCUSSED.

THEN, THE GROUP WILL BE HOSTED BY FAMILIES FROM ALL RELIGIONS, IN LAUSANNE, A JEWISH AND AN ARAB GIRL IN EACH FAMILY. THIS WILL PROVIDE THE OPPORTUNITY FOR THE GIRLS FOR A REAL PERSONAL MEETING BETWEEN THE TWO CULTURES, AND BESIDES, THIS WILL OFFER THEM THE OPPORTUNITY TO DISCOVER A THIRD CULTURE, THE HOSTING FAMILIES FROM SWIT-



ZERLAND. THE FAMILIES WILL PROVIDE BREAKFAST AND PICNICS FOR LUNCH AND THE SWISS HOST-TEENAGERS WILL BE WELCOME TO PARTICIPATE ON ANY OF THE TRIPS WITH THE GROUP. DURING THE DAY, VERY VARIED ACTIVITIES WILL BE OFFERED, MUSEUMS, VISITS, A CHOCOLATE AND A CHEESE FACTORY, A CASTLE BUILT DURING THE MIDDLE AGES, A TRIP BY BOAT AND PEDAL BOAT, THE VISIT OF THE UN IN GENEVA, THE CATHEDRAL, THE SALT MINES, MEETINGS WITH GROUPS OF PEOPLE, A SHOPPING DAY. EVERY EVENING, THE GROUP WILL BE HOSTED FOR DINNER AND FOR A DISCUSSION, A PANEL, A WORKSHOP. DURING THE PREPARATION PERIOD, THE PARTICIPANTS PREPARE A SPEECH FOR THE HOST FAMILIES, FOR THE MAYOR IN GENEVA, GAMES FOR A MEETING WITH YOUTH FROM THE JEWISH COMMUNITY OF LAUSANNE, QUESTIONS THEY WANT TO ASK AND TOPICS THEY WANT TO DISCUSS.

THE GROUP MEETS SEVERAL TIMES, BUYING AND MAKING PRESENTS, CHECKING LISTS OF CLOTHES, INSURANCE, RULES OF BEHAVIOR AND PREPARING WHAT IS NECESSARY.

RAISING THE MONEY

THE YMCA BUDGET DID NOT INCLUDE SUCH A TRIP. INSTITUTIONS CAME TO HELP, THE CILV (JEWISH COMMUNITY OF LAUSANNE), THE MUNICIPALITIES OF GENEVA, OF LAUSANNE, THE GIL (LIBERAL JEWISH COMMUNITY IN GENEVA), AND PRIVATE DONORS AND FRIENDS GENEROUSLY PARTICIPATE. THE GIRLS WILL PAY A PART OF THEIR AIRLINE TICKET, SOME OF THEM WILL BE SUBSIDIZED.

THE WAR IN LEBANON

ONE MONTH BEFORE THE TRIP, THE WAR IN LEBANON RAISED QUESTIONS. AFTER THREE WEEKS OF WAR, THE PARTICIPANTS WERE INVITED TO SIT AND SHARE ABOUT THEIR FEELINGS, THEIR UNDERSTANDING, AND THEIR THOUGHTS. IT WAS A DIFFICULT MOMENT BUT MORE THAN EVER, IT WAS A TIME TO CONTINUE THE STRUGGLE, TO TRAVEL HAND BY HAND EVEN WHEN OUR PEOPLE WERE FIGHTING AND CRYING. THE GIRLS WERE UNANIMOUS, WE ARE NOT GOING TO CANCEL. THE TOPIC OF THE DISCUSSION WAS ABOUT OUR LIFE ABROAD: WERE WE GOING TO LOOK AT THE NEWS? EVERY DAY? WILL WE TALK ABOUT IT? ARE WE ABLE TO STAND THAT? BUT IS IT POSSIBLE TO TRAVEL WITHOUT KNOWING?

THEN, THE DIRECTORS OF YMCA MET AND DISCUSSED THE SUBJECT: THEY TOO FELT WE SHOULD GO. THE PARENTS AGREED, THE FAMILIES IN LAUSANNE SENT WARM LETTERS AND ENCOURAGED US TO COME TOO, WE CONTINUED THE PREPARATION.

ONE SURPRISE: THE JEWISH COMMUNITY OF LAUSANNE DECIDED TO POSTPONE THE TRIP: YES THE TRIP IS A GOOD THING, BUT IN THESE TIMES OF WAR, THE YOUTH WILL NOT BE ABLE TO SHARE, BECAUSE THEY ARE OVERWHELMED BY THE WAR, THEREFORE, WE SHALL WAIT.



WE DECIDED TO TRAVEL ANYWAY. IN FACT, IT WAS TOO LATE TO CANCEL, WE WERE 8 DAYS BEFORE DEPARTURE. A LETTER INFORMED SOME FRIENDS OF THE CHANGE, THEIR IMMEDIATE REACTION WAS TO HELP EVEN MORE, TO SEND MONEY, TO ORGANIZE ALTERNATIVES FOR THE CHANGE IN ACTIVITIES, TO RENT A ROOM IN THE FOREST FOR THE LAST EVENING, TO BUY THE FOOD FOR 3 DAYS IN THE MOUNTAINS, TO INVITE THE WHOLE GROUP FOR THE FIRST MEETING WITH FAMILIES, TO PREPARE A HUGE BUFFET FOR THE FAREWELL MEETING, AND MORE. THE SOLIDARITY WAS AMAZING, EVERY DAY BROUGHT ANOTHER MOVING LETTER, THE TRIP SOUNDED MORE THAN WELCOME AND THE PEOPLE MORE THAN EXTRAORDINARY.

THE JEWISH COMMUNITY OF LAUSANNE DECIDED A FEW DAYS LATER TO BE PART OF THE PROJECT, OFFERED A CONSEQUENT SUBSIDY TO THE TRIP, INVITED US AND ORGANIZED AN ENCOUNTER WITH THE YOUTH AND A DINNER.

OUR TRIP IN LAUSANNE

ON AUGUST 20, 2006, SIXTEEN GIRLS AND THREE ADULTS LEFT JERUSALEM.

AT THE AIRPORT, NOTHING FROM THE PREPARATION AND THE TALKS WITH THE SECURITY HELPED AND ALL THE ARAB GIRLS ENDURED A VERY PAINFUL SECURITY CHECK. THEY CRIED, AND WERE SURROUNDED BY THEIR JEWISH FRIENDS, DESPERATE AND HELPLESS, BUT SUPPORTIVE AND ACCOMPANYING. FOR TWO HOURS, WE WENT THROUGH A NIGHTMARE.

FROM THIS POINT, WE BEGAN A NEW MOMENT, A REAL HAPPY 10 DAYS TRIP.

FIRST TIME IN A PLANE FOR 5 GIRLS, FIRST TRIP ABROAD, FIRST TIME AWAY FROM HOME FOR SOME GIRLS, WE FLEW OVER SEES AND MOUNTAINS AND ARRIVED ON THE SHORE OF THE LAKE, ON A PEACEFUL AND SUNNY SUNDAY, AND WE SAT IN A CIRCLE AND TRIED TO CAPTURE OUR FIRST FEELINGS. THE MOST OBVIOUS: PEACE, CALM, SERENITY.

AT NOON, SAMER, A LEBANESE MUSLIM, AND JOELLE, HIS HALF-JEWISH WIFE, AWAITED US. LOTS OF TEARS AT THEIR HOME, SAMER'S BROTHER WAS KILLED BY AN ISRAELI BOMB AND THE FAMILY LEFT LEBANON, MORE THAN 20 YEARS AGO. LOTS OF EMOTIONS, DISCUSSION IN FOUR LANGUAGES, A DELICIOUS LEBANESE BUFFET OFFERED BY SAM'S MOTHER, MOVING FAMILY STORIES, A HEART WARMING MEETING ENDING WITH MUSIC AND DANCE, OUR FIRST AND UNFORGETTABLE MEETING WITH SWITZERLAND. SUDDENLY, EVERYTHING SEEMED POSSIBLE, AND FAR AWAY FROM THE CONFLICT, LEBANESE, ISRAELIS AND PALESTINIANS SHARED, CRIED, HOPED AND HUGGED. (DURING THE LAST EVENING, SAM TOLD US THAT AFTER HIS BROTHER DIED, HE DECIDED THAT WHEN HE WOULD GROW UP, HE WOULD KILL A COUPLE OF ISRAELIS. YEARS LATER, WHEN HE MARRIED A HALF-JEWISH GIRL, HIS PARENTS WERE AFRAID SHE COULD BE FROM THE INTELLIGENCE SERVICE!)

LATER THAT DAY, AT THE HOME OF KATIA AND ELIE, WE WERE WELCOMED BY THE HOST FAMILIES. WE RECITED FOR THEM SOME PHRASES FROM OUR MEETINGS: "I WAS UPSET ABOUT OUR DISCUSSION, I SAW THAT WE THINK DIFFERENTLY, BUT THEN, I THOUGHT THAT WE ARE REAL FRIENDS EVEN IF WE THINK SO DIFFERENTLY, AND THIS SHOWED ME THAT THERE IS HOPE."

THE EMOTION WAS HERE AGAIN, SOME HOST-PARENTS SAID A FEW WORDS, ELIE ELKAIM, A LAWYER, PRESIDENT OF THE LICRA



(AN ASSOCIATION AGAINST RACISM AND ANTI-SEMITISM): "WE WANT TO THANK YOU, BECAUSE YOU GIVE US THE OPPORTUNITY TO BE PART OF YOUR STRUGGLE. USUALLY, WE SIT HERE AND WE FEEL WE CANNOT DO ANYTHING, SO IT IS A PRESENT FOR US TO BE ABLE TO GIVE A HAND TO COEXISTENCE IN ISRAEL AND BE WITH YOU."

FAMILIES MET THE PARTICIPANTS, WARM WELCOMING, AND THE GIRLS SEPARATED FOR THE FIRST NIGHT.

AFTER THIS MEETING, FOR THE FIRST TIME, I UNDERSTOOD THAT OUR GROUP WAS BRINGING SOMETHING VALUABLE TO THE PEOPLE OF SWITZERLAND. I UNDERSTOOD THAT SOME JEWS IN LAUSANNE ARE HAPPY TO BE PART OF A COEXISTENCE PROCESS BETWEEN ISRAELIS AND PALESTINIANS, THAT SOME CHRISTIANS IN LAUSANNE ARE HAPPY TO BE PART IN THE STRUGGLE FOR UNDERSTANDING IN THE HOLY LAND, AND A LEBANESE MUSLIM IS DREAMING FOR THE DAY HE WILL VISIT JERUSALEM. SOMEHOW, A PROJECT AIMED TO BRING TOGETHER, FACE TO FACE, ARABS AND JEWS FROM JERUSALEM WAS DEVELOPING UNEXPECTED BENEFITS.

DURING THE NEXT THREE DAYS, WE HAD A REAL EXPERIENCE OF TOGETHERNESS, AND A HIGHLIGHT OF THE TRIP: THREE DAYS IN THE CHALET OF ANNE-MARIE, IN VERCORIN, 1500 METERS UP IN THE MOUNTAINS, ALONE, WITH THE 180 DEGREES VIEW OVER THE ALPS, THE GLACIER, THE TURQUOISE LAKE, THE CHALLENGING FOREST OF ADVENTURE, THE CABLE CAR, THE BLACKBERRIES, BLUEBERRIES AND WILD STRAWBERRIES, THE COLD WIND, THE 6 HOUR WALK IN FRONT OF THE BREATHTAKING MATTERHORN, THE PICNICS, THE HOT CHOCOLATE IN THE SWISS VILLAGE.

AND OVER ALL THIS BEAUTY, THE LIFE OF 16 GIRLS AND 2 WOMEN IN A HOUSE, SHARING 2 BATHROOMS, SLEEPING EVERYWHERE, COOKING AND WASHING DISHES IN A SMALL KITCHEN, PREPARING LUNCHES, SINGING ON THE BALCONY, SHARING EVENINGS, DANCING, LAUGHING AND CRYING, EATING CHOCOLATE FONDUE, WRITING DIARIES, ARGUING, THE REAL LIFE, WHEN NO MORE ETHNIC DIFFERENCES EXIST, THE TOGETHERNESS AS A WHOLE.

ONE COULD ARGUE THAT THIS IS POSSIBLE IN ANY ENVIRONMENT, AS SOON AS WE TRAVEL AWAY FROM HOMES AS A GROUP AND SHARE SOME DAYS IN A HOUSE TOGETHER. TRUE, CONCERNING THE EXPERIENCE OF TOGETHERNESS. HOWEVER, SWITZERLAND ADDED TO IT THE DIMENSION OF THE UNKNOWN AND CREATED FOR THE GIRLS SHARED MEMORIES THAT ARE OFTEN PART OF A DEEPER RELATIONSHIP.

HOME HOSPITALITY

THE GIRLS WERE EXTREMELY WELCOME. THE FAMILIES DID THEIR BEST TO MAKE THEM FEEL AT HOME.

FOR THE GIRLS HAVING TEENAGERS IN THEIR HOMES, THERE WAS A REAL FRIENDSHIP, SHARING, MEETING. MAUD, LEA, OLIVIA, THOMAS CAME WITH US ONE DAY OR THE OTHER ACCORDING TO THEIR FREE TIME.

IN ADDITION, ALL THE OTHER ENCOUNTERS WITH ADULTS WERE TOO SHORT TO OFFER MORE THAN AN EXCHANGE. IT MEANT THAT THE HOME HOSPITALITY WAS THE ONLY WAY TO ENCOUNTER THE INHABITANTS OF THE COUNTRY WE VISITED AND TO HAVE A CLOSE CONTACT.



THE FUTURE OF THE PROJECT

ON SEPTEMBER 15, 2006, WE HAD A MEETING TO CONCLUDE OUR WORK AND SHARE PHOTOS AND THOUGHTS. WE DECIDED TO HAVE 15 MORE MEETINGS AND CONTINUE OUR WORK. DURING THESE MONTHS OF MEETINGS, WE HAD THE OPPORTUNITY TO DEEPEN OUR UNDERSTANDINGS, TO BECOME CLOSER, TO VISIT EACH OTHER'S HOMES, AND WE CONCLUDED THE PROCESS WITH A PHOTOGRAPHIC EXHIBITION ENTITLED "CONNECTIONS."

AT THE SAME TIME, A NEW GIRLS GROUP OF 16-YEAR-OLDS, WAS BEGINNING THEIR JOURNEY.

AT THE SAME TIME, THE FAMILIES IN LAUSANNE WERE CREATING AN ASSOCIATION THAT WOULD SUPPORT THE SAME PROJECT, EACH SUMMER. DURING THE WINTER OF 2006, A GROUP OF FAMILIES CAME TO VISIT THEIR "DAUGHTERS" IN JERUSALEM, AND DURING THE SPRING OF 2007, "COEXISTENCES" WAS BORN.

SYLVIE BERKOWITSCH