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Immigration and Emigration: A Student Trip to Israel

What is a kibbutz? Upon our arrival in Israel, everyone in our two courses on Israeli migration knew the answer to this question – or so we thought. Based on socialist and Zionist ideals and dependent mainly on agriculture, kibbutzim are collective communities that play a crucial role in the ideology behind Israel's past and present immigration. Furthermore, kibbutz life is simple, free of superficiality and material luxuries. Yet as we entered Kibbutz Dalia in the Galilee, it occurred to us that we might have misinterpreted something about twenty-first-century kibbutzim. We stayed in cozy, wooden cottages complete with flat screen TVs, Wi-Fi, bathtubs, daily maid service, and a deluxe organic breakfast. There even was a good bar, where we celebrated New Year's Eve along with some of the younger kibbutznikim. This wasn't the only time during our one-week stay in Israel, from 29 December 2012 until 5 January 2013, that we were amazed at how complex, diverse, and at times even paradoxical Israel's present and past appeared.

At Dalia we had the chance to talk to Annette, a German, non-Jewish member who met her kibbutznik husband while journeying around the world. We learned about the crisis of the kibbutzim in the 1980s and their subsequent privatization. Although some elements of traditional kibbutz life, such as educational institutions or collective decision making, still exist, most of the inhabitants now work outside the community and no longer identify with the kibbutz "spirit." In addition, Annette spoke about her initial difficulties in reconciling her new life in Israel with her German identity. For example, she considered not having her children learn any German. Slowly, however, she found a way to deal with her two identities. She translated into German memoirs of kibbutznikim who had survived the Shoah and – much to the joy of many of those older kibbutznikim – even started putting up a Christmas tree.

On our visit to the Museum of Pioneer Agricultural Settlements on the grounds of Kibbutz Yifat, we examined the beginnings of the kibbutzim. Our guide told us what day-to-day life

there had been like, sharing with us old songs as well as jokes about kibbutznik promiscuity. At the early settlement of Zihron Ya'akov, with the grave of Baron Edmond de Rothschild and the Aaronsohn Museum, we traveled even farther back in the history of twentieth-century Palestine.

At the Moshav Kinneret we met Gur Alroy, professor at the University of Haifa. Speaking on the shore of the Sea of Galilee, with the Golan Heights as a backdrop, Alroy focused on a long-neglected chapter of Jewish immigration: the history of the Yemenite Jews. Despite their own lack of farming experience, Zionists of the First and Second Aliyot refused to hire experienced Arab field workers. To provide Jewish labor, Yemenite Jews were brought to Palestine. In terms of wages and living conditions, however, they were not treated as equals. Professor Alroy stressed the important role that research on groups such as the Yemenites can play in deconstructing myths about early Zionism.

Our next stop was Tel Aviv. In the Bauhaus Center we met Gisela Dachs, long-time correspondent for the German weekly *Die Zeit*, who spoke to us about how the integration of French, American, and Russian immigrants into Israeli society is affected by their media consumption. After a "*Bauhaus* tour" (Tel Aviv is home to more *Bauhaus* architecture than any other city in the world), we faced some of the darker aspects of migration. The NGO "Hagar and Miriam – African Israeli Women in Friendship and Motherhood" had arranged for us to speak to a man from the Congo and a young mother from Eritrea. Despite having fled to Israel, these immigrants have not received refugee status. Due to their desperate situation, some immigrants turn to crime, alcoholism, and drugs. By magnifying individual crimes perpetrated by refugees, however, the media facilitates discrimination against African refugees – in politics and in daily life.

In a rather gloomy mood, we made our way to Jerusalem. At the Leo Baeck Institute and the Hebrew University of Jerusalem we had the opportunity to meet some of Israel's most prominent intellectuals. The controversial Moshe Zimmermann spoke about how the memory of the Holocaust serves to create a common Israeli identity. Uzi Rebhun, one of Israel's leading demographers, shared his findings on the current transformation of Israel's population and his prognoses regarding future demographic developments. Historian Yfaat Weiss discussed whether Israel's society should be defined as "multicultural,"

1 Our student group with professor Michael Brenner, Mirjam Zadoff, Noam Zadoff and Gur Alroey (Haifa University).



highlighting several approaches to characterizing the sociopolitical structures in the country.

Intriguing as well as entertaining was an encounter with renowned writer Eli Amir, who spoke to us about the Jews from Iraq. He vividly depicted urban life in Baghdad, the beginnings of Jewish persecution during the 1940s, and the eventual immigration of all Iraqi Jews to Israel. He stressed the Jewish contributions to Iraq's economy, culture, and politics. Like many Iraqi immigrants, Amir himself found the standard of life in newly founded Israel inferior to life in the land of his birth. In his opinion, education was the crucial factor in the success of Iraqi integration into Israeli society. We were intrigued by Amir's charm and his fascinating stories, but also by the way he understood his own identity as that of a Jewish Arab living in Israel.

To explore the unique atmosphere of Jerusalem, we joined an entertaining tour through the "Yekke" neighborhood of Rehavya and the nearby orthodox quarter Nachlaot. We learned about the so-called "Schlafstunde," a daily period of quiet observed by German immigrants, and stumbled upon the colorful book boxes in which orthodox Jews bury religious books. We also spent time in Jerusalem's historic center, discovering the Old City and visiting the Western Wall and the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. We haggled in the Souk, indulged in culinary diversity, and tried to grasp Jerusalem's greatness.

The impressive places we visited, the fascinating people we met, and the great discussions we had on this trip will doubtless remain one of our most rewarding experiences as students of history. Our heartfelt thanks go to Michael Brenner and Miriam Zadoff for their great organization and commitment. Without them we might have never found out what a kibbutz really is.

PHOTO CREDITS
1 Privat.

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