

'Minority to Minority: how to live in a predominantly Christian community'
Mitzvah Day, Berlin

Sunday, 15 November 2015

event organizer: Chaim Jellinek, Freedomus e.V.

tour guide: Nils Ederberg, Oranienburger Strasse Synagogue

Part bridge-building, part education, our Mitzvah Day action proved a rare and helpful opportunity to share a bit of the Jewish history in Berlin and exchange our stories and perspectives with newly arrived Muslim refugees. The group included Germans, an Israeli, an American (myself) and refugees from Syria, Afghanistan and Egypt. We began in Mitte with a short but informative tour, covering some sites and the history of the former center of Jewish Berlin. We then had two chances to get to know each other and discuss common interests, first with SalaamSchalom, a local inter-faith group, then with our partner group, Freedomus, which provides support for refugees in Berlin.

The group discussions were lively and engaging for all concerned. While the translations between Arabic, German and English slowed things down, hearing the rhythm and tone of each other's languages helped bring us closer. Besides the stories the refugees told, I was struck by the messages. There was a sense of mixed emotions. On the one hand, they are grateful for the help, and the generally welcoming response they have received in Germany. On the other hand, they felt some disappointment and frustration. One Syrian described surprise that everything takes so long and is so hard once they arrive. They want to be productive and not charity cases. Germany was thought to be heaven, but it turns out to be just another country with bureaucracy and daily struggles. Mostly the reactions seemed the natural process of adjustment, exacerbated by but not exclusive to their situation.

Beyond the history of this place and their challenge of transition, how to live within this society was high on the agenda. They spoke movingly of being treated as guilty until proven innocent, and much debate about the relative openness of Germany ensued. Whatever the reality in other lands, finding a place in this new home was clearly proving difficult for the new arrivals, being, as most are, alone in a strange land, with horror and danger at their back and hard work with an unknown future in front of them. Several noted how good life had been in Syria. They described professional jobs and lovely big homes abandoned with the hope of a safer and more secure life. This contrast between past and present, compounded by loss and concern for family left behind, weighs on them. Adding to the heady mix of gratitude, frustration and disappointment is a resolve among many to return in a few years, when things have calmed down. Whether that is wishful thinking or admirable determination, making a plan, however tentative eases the difficulty of living with uncertainty.

Spending time together, learning of each other's history and talking about common concerns in a small group was hugely valuable. It addressed one of the complaints voiced – that we Westerners know very little about the refugees, yet we have lots of false ideas and impressions. There was consensus that our Mitzvah Day action had gone some way to correcting misperceptions on both sides and increasing our comfort with our new neighbors.

Méli Solomon
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