

Azrieli Institute of Israel Studies'



Summer in Jerusalem

2017



“THIS PROGRAM PROVIDED A WONDERFUL LEARNING EXPERIENCE FOR OUR STUDENTS.

They were directly immersed in the Israeli cultural and social environments on an intimate inter-personal level, which evidently lead them to a much deeper and more nuanced understanding of some of the complex facets of Israeli life.

The personal testimonies from the people we met on our day trips helped our students obtain much stronger appreciation and understanding of the course material which we cannot provide them in a regular North American classroom setting using our traditional learning methods.

By the end of the program, students were well informed and equipped to question and probe the material that they were learning in class. Sometimes what they had read in the textbook was reinforced at other times it was contradicted by the direct encounters we experienced on our field trips. These experiences truly contributed to the sharpening

of our students’ critical thinking skills, which is in itself a great achievement.

The field trips added much more insight than I had initially expected, and I was very impressed by how much the students had learned by the end of the month in Israel.”



Csaba Nikolenyi
Director, Azrieli Institute of Israel Studies
Professor, Department of Political Science



Typically, conventional forms of education occur in a classroom setting. It is in this setting that people are expected to learn and grasp new concepts. However, it is often the case that certain concepts need to be taught in somewhat abstract terms -- who can travel back to ancient times and witness long lost practices or meet with the important contemporary figures being discussed in class? What if the student could be immersed in the subject they were learning about? What would this look like, and how would it affect the learning process? Several Concordia University students were granted such an opportunity as they participated in the 'Azrieli Institute of Israel Studies' Summer in Jerusalem program in the summer of 2017.

The Azrieli Institute of Israeli Studies worked hard for many months in order to realize this project. The wheels were initially set in motion thanks to Concordia University's President and Vice-Chancellor Alan Shephard. He was responsible for creating new partnerships between Concordia and several Middle Eastern universities, including Jerusalem's Hebrew University. The project was organized by the Azrieli Institute of Israel Studies in partnership with Concordia International.

Claudia Deme, the manager for Education Abroad Programs at Concordia International, said that from an organizational point of view, everything went smoothly, adding: "Working with the Azrieli Institute was wonderful and so



collegial and the host institution, the Hebrew University of Jerusalem was equally fantastic. We garnered enough student interest in the program to put together a full cohort for this first time!"

The program offered Concordia students the opportunity to travel to Jerusalem and earn 6 credits by taking two classes at Hebrew University, one of which was a political science class on Israeli government, taught by professor Csaba Nikolenyi, director of the Azrieli Institute. This month-long program required students to attend classes on a daily basis while living on the university campus, as well as participate in a number of field trips. Thanks to these field trips and the on-site accommodations, students were able to witness firsthand how processes and issues that they learnt in the classroom actually worked in the real world.



After an extensive application process, eleven students were selected to partake in the program. These eleven students could not have had more diverse backgrounds: not only did their ages range from 20s to 40s, their majors included Fine Arts Painting, Accounting, and Biology. Likewise, their previous knowledge about Israel and its politics varied, although most were fairly new to the subject. It was clear, nevertheless, that all of them shared similar reasons for participating in the program; every one of them had a strong desire to increase their knowledge about Israel, as well as to experience something completely new.

Chris Johnstone, a photography student, stated that his motivation was based in his deep-seated curiosity “to visit and live in one of the most historically important places in world.” Chris explained further, adding: “I had always considered doing an exchange in Jerusalem at some point in my academic career, and when this opportunity presented itself I applied right away.”

During the length of the program, the students lived in Hebrew University campus dorm rooms. The students all reported a positive experience, without major culture shock. They easily adapted to living in Jerusalem, despite the palpable tension surrounding the city.

Stephanie Chabot, an Accounting student at John Molson School of Business, appreciated the convenience of living on campus: “The dorms were really nice and well located in relation to the university classrooms, restaurants and grocery stores. It was also very close to the light rail so it was easy to get everywhere else.”

According Duane Drover, a Fine Arts Painting major, the learning environment was challenging but enjoyable, which he claimed was notable because he had taken his last course decades ago. While he did concede that initially it was an adjustment, Duane felt especially motivated due to the hands-on nature of the program. “Despite the busy schedule, at no time did I feel stressed”.

When speaking about the program, many students said the highlight was the weekly field trips.

Noa Isabel Ogilvy, a student majoring in Drawing and Painting with a minor in Chinese Language and Culture, found the field trips extremely beneficial. “The field trips had a direct impact on my learning in the classroom. I really enjoyed this way of learning, because it allowed for us to see firsthand the impacts of some of the political and social issues we were studying on Israeli society. These field trips greatly enriched the material we were studying, and added to the discussions we were having in the classroom.”

“My favourite field trip was our class trip to the border with the Gaza Strip. Both of our guides were fantastic, and I thought their political disagreements and the conversations they had about each place we visited brought the region’s political reality to life as we travelled along the border. The part of the trip that I most enjoyed was listening to a woman from Moshav Netiv Haasara tell us about her personal life and political reality living under constant rocket fire from Hamas. Having the privilege of listening to her speak, and hearing her message of hope and peace, was very moving and greatly impacted me.”



The second field trip was to the Israeli Parliament, at the Knesset, where students witness the Israeli political system at work. During this field trip, they had the opportunity

to meet and listen to Member of the Knesset Anat Berko, a co-chair of the Canada-Israel Parliamentary Friendship Group.





The third trip was to the Negev, but this time the goal was to visit Sde Boker (the Ben-Gurion Museum), as well as a Bedouin village. Duane really enjoyed visiting the museum, and spoke of his strong admiration and respect for Ben-Gurion, stating: "I felt it was a privilege to see where he had lived." The students, who were in the midst of preparing their

final projects, were given access to the Sde Boker Ben-Gurion Archives. Having access to such valuable primary materials was a unique opportunity, especially for those focusing their projects on Ben-Gurion. During this outing, the students also had the privilege of listening to a presentation by Salima, a Bedouin resident, who discussed her community's culture and identity.





The final field trip took students to the northern town of Shfaram (Shefa-'Amr), which had a huge impact on several students. As Chris expressed: "The most important field trip was to Shefa-'Amr because it was here that we were able to obtain and engage with a different perspective. It is hard to understand one culture in a place like Israel, without understanding or at least hearing from the other."

Sarah Conley, a Political Science major, similarly considered Shfaram to be an experience during which she felt completely immersed in a different culture. She mused:

"[It was an opportunity] in which I had to set aside my personal identity, customs and beliefs and exercise an open mind and a willingness to see new people and places I would never be able to anywhere else in the world."



When discussing the addition of the field trips into the course syllabus, all who were asked agreed that the excursions enhanced what they were learning in the classroom. Karina Arseneau, an English Literature major with a minor in Legal Studies, said: "Getting to visit so many of the places we discussed in class

anchored the subjects we learned about and helped put a lot of it into perspective." Karim Hilali, a Biology student, considered it to be the "best way of learning, it gave a tangible experience to the readings and discussion completed in class." As for Chris, he highlighted key differences in learning practices:

"The field trips were essential to the program. I did enjoy and appreciate all the effort that was made in order to facilitate both the formal and informal field trips, given the higher than usual tension in Jerusalem during our stay. Having been given the opportunity to listen to people speak about their personal experiences in a small group, and being able to ask questions and engage is something that I will take away from this experience as something I valued and will remember."

The students' favourite memories weren't exclusively attributed to the field trips. For many, their most precious memory is of a Shabbat dinner hosted by Professor Nikolenyi and his wife, Andrea, in their Jerusalem home, following a traditional Friday night service in the historical synagogue of the Yemin Moshe neighbourhood. Professor Nikolenyi recalled how touched and impressed he was by the students' interest as this program was completely optional. "It demonstrated their genuine interest in learning new things - eight or nine students had never been to a synagogue service beforehand!"



PARTICIPANTS

Karina Arseneau, English Literature

Stephanie Chabot, Accountancy

Sarah Conley, Biochemistry

Nohely Devoto-Prieto, Psychology

Duane Drover, Studio Arts

Adam Gazith, Early Childhood and
Elementary Education

Karim Hilali, Biology

Benjamin Holser, Translation

Chris Johnstone, Photography

Noa Isabel Ogilvy, Drawing and Painting

Mansour Sandrimanesh, Philosophy



The students made many positive comments on the impact that this program has had on them, personally and/or academically, since their return. For some, such as Karina, the program resulted in a change of major, and wishes to pursue a Master's Degree in Legal Studies rather than in English Literature. For Duane, it was learning how to be a student again after such a long time. Sarah, in her case, commented that being in a "challenging academic setting was mind opening", and plans to pursue a minor in Israeli studies. Noa expressed how valuable this experience had been for her, and stated:



"The classes I took at the Hebrew University have both expanded my world view and renewed my interest in politics, especially the politics of the Middle East. I truly feel that my learning and experiences that took place during my [time] in Israel will affect all my other studies in a positive way, and that I now possess better critical thinking skills."



Chris described the benefits the program offered: "It was also an experience where I was able to bring in other elements from my university training and critical thought to express a personal opinion on a subject that I knew little about, but which has great importance in the world of history, politics and religion." As for Karim, he declared with enthusiasm: "It's amazing the amount we learned in such a short time."



"I would have loved to stay for an entire semester."

What the students experienced during those four weeks cannot easily be summed up in a few pages, however, through their testimonials, it is evident this particular program was much more meaningful than a traditional course.

"In essence, it was the privilege of hearing firsthand accounts that concretized the learning experience, adding a human element to it," says Nikolenyi.

"The concepts they learned and experiences they lived will not soon vanish from memory as other class materials might. This is something they will be able to recall for the rest of their lives."



**FACULTY OF
ARTS AND SCIENCE**

Azrieli Institute of Israel Studies

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