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## Emotional Experiences of Israeli Youth from the Journey to Holocaust Memorial Sites<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

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This paper presents results describing the emotional experiences of Israeli high-school students following their participation in the heritage journey to visit Jewish Holocaust memorial sites in Poland. 13 Interviewees who participated in heritage journey to visit Jewish Holocaust memorial sites in Poland, were asked questions that touched upon their family connection to the Holocaust, the decision to participate or not to participate in the journey to Poland, their learning experiences regarding the journey, their views towards the moral dilemmas faced by Jews during and after the Holocaust, the moral lessons they learned and their experience of participation in the study itself.

The results revealed tension between initial interest and motivation to go on the journey and participants' feelings of self-disappointment in relation to early expectations.

The conclusions with regard to the ongoing debate on the various contributions of the journey to Poland and its necessity, points out that insufficient attention has been given to the inner emotional aspects of the journey's effect.

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**Keywords:** Holocaust, expectations; emotional experiences; qualitative research.

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<sup>1</sup> This study is part of a PhD research on the subject: "Jewish Holocaust learning program forming moral attitudes of Israeli high school students toward Jewish coping with Holocaust and post-Holocaust moral dilemmas".

## 1. Introduction

The Second World War (1939-1945) may be considered the most important and influential historic event for humanity in the twentieth century and possibly the most terrible. One of the darkest chapters of this war and perhaps the most despicable is the Holocaust suffered by the Jews in Europe: the premeditated and systematic murder of more than six million Jews by the German Nazis under the leadership and vision of their leader, the Fuhrer, Adolph Hitler (Barley, 2007). The Holocaust was an enormous human tragedy and national trauma that shook the Jewish people and later the state of Israel. Without a doubt it will continue to occupy and influence Jews and Israelis for many generations to come.

In the reality of the Holocaust, Jews were subjected to daily persecution and deprivation, and normal living conditions were completely undermined before they were eventually murdered (Greif, Weitz & Machman, 1983).

Although the Holocaust ended on May 9<sup>th</sup> 1945 with Nazi Germany's surrender, its results and implications are always present. This is the reason why from the early days of the State of Israel, which was established in 1948, the Holocaust was conceived as a fundamental event that defined the nature of Israeli society at different levels. It therefore also had a major influence on the Israeli education system, although its appearance and content altered over the years (Machman, 1998). Over the last 25 years, the journeys to Poland have become the most important component of the Holocaust learning program in the Israeli education system. In this context, the visits to the Holocaust memorial sites in Poland have become a sort of "pilgrimage" for many of Israel's youth who participate in these journeys. Parents feel that the journey to Poland is very important and invest serious efforts to pay for the journey. The organized journeys began in 1983, the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. They have increased over the years and hundreds of thousands of Israeli students from state high schools have travelled to Poland within the frame of journeys organized by the Ministry of Education (Worgen, 2008). The journey to Poland includes visits to historical sites – ghettos, extermination camps, memorials, synagogues and additional sites (Lindenstrauss, 2012).

The research conducted with high school students in Israel up to now with regard to Holocaust learning program concentrated mainly on the journeys to visit Holocaust memorial sites in Poland. The national-educational contribution of the journeys for those students had been especially investigated (Davidovich, Soen & Haber, 2014; Feldman, 2001; Fisherman & Kaniel, 2004). Research on Holocaust learning over the years has found that the most effective means for this learning are the journey to Poland and listening to testimony of survivors (Cohen, 2010; Mimouni-Bloch et al., 2012). These findings support the effectiveness of the experiential learning offered by the journeys as an efficient and meaningful type of learning as previous studies on experiential learning revealed (Kolb, 1984; Fink, 2010). Other researchers emphasised various emotional reactions towards Holocaust victims following such journeys, including reactions towards Poles and Arabs (Kimchi, 2011; Mimouni-Bloch et al. 2012).

However, over the years, there has been growing debate about the justification for the journeys to Poland focusing on several main issues: the high cost of the journeys to the parents; not all students relate seriously to its educational aspects; students' inappropriate behavior in some cases (Rama,

2011). Lately, new arguments suggest that the journeys emphasize nationalist messages at the expense of universal values (Maltz, 2016).

The main goal of this paper is to gain enhanced understanding of the cognitive and emotional meanings attributed by high school students to the journey to Poland and therefore to contribute new insights to the discussion over the educational relevance and necessity of the journeys.

## **2. Method**

An individual interview is an ideal method for the study of people's emotions and meanings. Interviewees were asked questions that touched upon their family connection to the Holocaust, the decision to participate or not to participate in the journey to Poland, their learning experiences regarding the journey, their views towards the moral dilemmas faced by Jews during and after the Holocaust, the moral lessons they learned and their experience of participation in the study itself.

### *2.1. Participants*

The research participants were 13 Israeli high school students, boys and girls, from three public secular schools in northern Israel. They were all aged 16-17 years and attending Grade 11 when the research began in January, 2015. Out of the 13 students who volunteered to participate in the in-depth interviews, nine were girls and four boys. Nine students out of the 13 participated in the journey to Poland. The participants were all from middle class socio-economic backgrounds. Their political attitudes were not examined in this study because they have not yet reached voting age for Israeli parliamentary elections. With regard to the participants' religious-cultural status, they all defined themselves as non-religious Jews. Eight of the participants had a personal-family connection to the Holocaust. This means that they are the third or fourth generation after the Holocaust and have a grandparent or great-grandparent, who had experienced and survived the Holocaust in some way or another. All names used in this article are fictive names to protect the confidentiality of the interviewees.

### *2.2. Procedure*

In-depth interviews were conducted in January 2016, when participants were in the middle of Grade 12 and after they completed their Holocaust learning program.

### *2.3. Data Analysis*

The data from the in-depth interviews was recorded, transcribed, encoded and arranged by themes. Thematic analysis was chosen in order to reinforce and provide greater depth and validity to the research data (Braun, 2006; Gibton, 2002; Kassin & Kromer-Nevo, 2010; Shkedi, 2003). The main goal of this analysis process was to understand the meanings constructed through the participants' narratives in relation to their experiences during the journey to Poland.

### 3. Results

The results presented here only relate to two issues out of many others that emerged from the research: reasons why the student decided to participate in the journey to Poland, and student's emotional experiences during the journey.

#### 3.1. The reasons why students decide to participate in the journey to Poland

Israeli youth often undergo serious deliberation regarding the decision whether or not to participate in the journey to Poland (Bondi, 2014). Analysis of results presented here identified major reasons for the decision to participate in the journey. The results point up the existence of socio-cultural, family, cognitive and emotional factors which contributed to their decision, as indicated in Table 1 below.

**Table 1.** Reasons why students decide to participate in the journey to Poland

The reasons
1. School tradition and peer pressure (socio-cultural context)
2. Family support and expectations (family context)
3. The recognition of the historical-national importance of the journey (cognitive)

#### 3.2 Participants' explanations

The following are participants' different explanations concerning this decision: **Boaz** emphasized his family's support for the journey: *"my parents really supported the journey, especially my mother, they said: 'the rewards justify the expense; it's worth the money, its important'"*. **Aia** added: *"It is a family tradition; it's the desire of relatives who are survivors; all the grandchildren have flown there; my older sisters were there and it's also important for me personally to be there; it's terribly important for my grandmother; all my brothers were there; it's something that I have to experience; my grandfather explained it exactly to me - where he was, in which hut and in which bunk"*. **Rachel** emphasized her intellectual-emotional curiosity – the desire to see things directly: *"I want to see things with my own eyes, it's impossible to truly understand without seeing; I really needed to touch things"*. School tradition and peer pressure also played an important role, as **Ronen** mentioned: *"most of the students are going and all my friends are going; those who don't go will be sorry about it and have a feeling they missed something; it's an experience that you must have and it makes you more mature. I know many former students who returned more mature from Poland so it's important; it's also good for our group team building"*. **Miriam** expressed another thought: *"I don't know if I'll manage to do such a journey afterwards, I think it'll be more difficult; it's easy and accessible with the school"*. Another reason in favour of the journey was the recognition of the historical-national importance of the journey as **Lily** stated: *"it's the history of our people; these are processes that must be considered so that something like that won't happen again; it's something that every Jew has to do; I feel it's a moral obligation"*. A most interesting result was a difficult to explain inner sense of need to go on the journey, as **Yonat** reported: *"I could not decide and then at some stage I felt that I simply should; I didn't really understand what we will really going to do there but I have a feeling that it is important to travel there"*. Similarly, **Sara** said: *"although I do not completely understand why it's so important it really is! Something in your soul tells you that you must go... Unfortunately I didn't go because the*

death of my father few weeks before the journey" (crying) I just couldn't handle both things one after another".

### 3.3 Emotional experiences on the journey to Poland

In the interviews, participants reported both cognitive and emotional experiences which emerged during their journey. But because we choose to focus in this article only on the emotional experiences we now present these data. Table 2 summarized those experiences.

**Table 2.** Emotional experiences on the journey to Poland

The reasons
1. Sadness aroused by the sights and experiences
2. Excitement aroused by ceremonies
3. Pleasure due to the social experience

Most of interviewees reported sadness aroused by the sights and experiences in Poland relating to both concrete and symbolic actions: **Aia** expressed her feelings: *"near the execution ditches in the Lupochova forest it was cold ... we marched into the forest and there was no chirping of birds ... there was a ceremony beside the ditches ... everyone hugged each other and cried and we lit candles ... suddenly we understood ... there was a group of religious girls that went ahead of us, they shouted out 'The people of Israel lives' and then I understood the meaning of that phrase, it was a very strong experience"*. **Yonat** said: *"when I returned home I went to my grandfather and told him about the journey. I showed him pictures and he was extremely glad and shed a tear. He told me that I was a really good girl; these are things that you don't usually hear from my grandfather, it moved me so much"* (smiling). **Rachel**: *"I haven't yet internalized the journey completely ... I especially remember 'Maidenek' and 'Auschwitz' death camps perhaps because everything there was so concrete; at the ceremony in 'Auschwitz' in which we read out the names of our families and in which I read something it was very emotional; in 'Maidenek' on the mound of ashes there was a group of girls from another journey, who sang very loudly and it really shook the place and it was very impressive and moved me a lot"*. **Miriam**: *"During the journey everything came together for me and I really saw what had happened and that seriously changed my thinking when I saw everything with my eyes. My emotions were empowered. Anger and horror were stronger. After we were there I thought about more dreadful things and I pitied everyone more"*.

However, many students expressed a very different emotional reaction, the pleasure of the social experience, sometimes experienced simultaneously with the sadness **Ronen** stated: *"I really enjoyed it ... there was also free time which was pleasant and important and I really enjoyed being with my friends especially in the evenings"*. **Boaz**: *"The best thing about Poland is being with your friends...from this prospective it is a kind of trip abroad despite the special experiences that we had there"*. Other interviewees reported that they felt guilty because they did not feel sad or they did not have emotional difficulty in Poland in contrast to the earlier expectations that they had culled from their surroundings. They felt disappointed in themselves and their personal emotional reaction to the sights in Poland. They thought that they should have felt a lot more sadness and emotional difficulty, that they should have cried but they didn't feel the urge to do so. Furthermore they felt that they were

exceptional and had the impression that all their friends had more “correct” feelings. **Pazit:** *“I expected something more powerful and I was disappointed that it did not move me so much emotionally; it was very interesting but it was not difficult; I saw everyone crying and I was disappointed that I was emotionless, I was interested but they felt pain. This made me think 'what kind of person am I?'”* **Noa** had similar feelings: *“I felt that I differed from them all (the rest of the students); I was less sad than I thought I would be because in the preparation course they told us all the time that it would be difficult and that we might cry, but in practice it was something else and not what I thought it would be; I felt some kind of disappointment about myself”.* **Lily** went even further with her sharing: *“I must tell you something... (Moving uncomfortably in her chair), when we were in 'Aushwitz-Birkenau' death camp our guide told about the 'schlyse-commando' - the Jewish prisoners who forced to take care of the latrines. I don't know why but suddenly I and my friend looked at one another and suddenly we just burst into laughter...everybody stared at us surprised and I felt so bad...but you know, it wasn't because they stared at us, it was because I felt relief and I should have felt bad”.*

#### 4. Discussion

Most of our results regarding the reasons to participate in the journey to Poland are quite similar to those discovered by former investigators (Shalem, 2008; Rama, 2011; Bondi, 2014; Starkman & Dattel, 2016). However, while most of the reasons can be classified as "social", "cultural" or "environmental", the un-explained inner sense of need is different and the most interesting one. The participants who talked about this feeling explained that it is related to a moral perception of the need to do something about the Holocaust. This together with a feeling of moral obligation proved to be strong emotional motivation stimulants for the decision to go on the journey.

Previous research also revealed that experiences from the journey to Poland reinforce various emotions towards the Holocaust such as identifying with the victims and feeling a greater affinity to Jewish heritage (Mimouni-Bloch et al. 2012). Other researchers have emphasised different emotional reactions of the Jewish youth who travelled on the journey to Holocaust sites: positive towards Holocaust victims (Mimouni-Bloch et al. 2012) but negative towards Poles and Arabs (Davidovich & Hazan, 2011; Kimchi, 2011). The present study revealed new results regarding emotional reactions: deep feeling of disappointment in self due to a lack of "appropriate" personal emotional reactions to the sights in Poland and feeling of pleasure due to the social experience. We can assume that students did not mention these kinds of feelings in previous research because they considered them to be "inappropriate feelings"; while in the present research participants felt that they were encouraged to express emotions openly. The sense of pleasure due to the social experience of the journey is natural and understood. However at the thought that students, who volunteered to participate in the journey to Poland, investing a lot of time and efforts during the preparation and of course paying for the trip, return with feelings of guilt and disappointment regarding their emotional reactions is rather perturbing. It seems that wrong or exaggerated messages and expectations cause unnecessary emotional harm. This issue should be investigated further in depth to understand the magnitude of the phenomena.

## 5. Conclusions

With regard to the ongoing debate on the various contributions of the journey to Poland and its necessity it seems that insufficient attention has been given to the inner emotional aspects of the journey's effect. This study aimed to look more deeply in to the souls of the young participants and explore new aspects which may change something in our perspective on the journeys. The results demonstrate a connection between expectations and outcomes – when the motivation for joining the journey includes excessive and unadjusted expectations, the student might later feel disappointment that their emotions on visiting the Holocaust sites in Poland did not comply with these expectations. This may actually be an unnecessarily self-harmful emotional reaction which might be prevented through sensitive and appropriate preparation before the journey follow reflection and discussion after returning home. When this kind of unbalanced emotional mechanism occurs it is not beneficial for the young participants. Moreover, it could be even considered as a counterproductive outcome, hindering the attainment of the desired educational goal. Understanding the multi-faceted nature of psychological reactions to the Holocaust and to the journey to Holocaust memorial sites in Poland will improve our understanding towards the benefits and emotional cost of the journey in its present formation.

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