Conference Report

International Youth Conference ‘Stories That Move. Discussing Diversity and Discrimination’ (17-22 September 2013)

Participants (14–17 years old), youth advisors and project team from Austria, Denmark, Germany, Hungary, The Netherlands, Poland, Romania, Slovakia and Ukraine.

anne frank house

Day 1:
Welcome to Berlin!

"The Ukrainian girls are late, but they are coming," said Patrick Siegele, from the Anne Frank Zentrum Berlin, one of the conference's organizers, at the beginning of his introductory remarks on day one of the 'Stories that Move' event in Berlin.

The 41 teenagers from nine countries in Europe sat assembled in front of him in rows. Some were grouped by nation, for they had gotten to know their compatriots while travelling to Berlin. Still others sat amidst strangers who would later become friends.

The young people had applied to participate, coming from youth organizations or encouraged by their teachers back home to sign up. They had come tell their own stories of discrimination, both that witnessed and that personally experienced, and to help develop internet-based teaching tools for pupils and their educators, to discuss and reduce discrimination. The project team, composed of educators from around Europe, is led by Karen Polak from the Anne Frank House in Amsterdam.

Meeting and working in Berlin Wannsee

- → **Participants: the main actors of the international youth meeting: 41 teenagers, from 9 countries, between 14-17 years old.**
- → **Youth advisors: 9 young adults from 6 countries who had been recruited for an advisory meeting, held in Bratislava in May 2013. They travelled to Berlin with the participants. At the youth conference they held daily reflection sessions with the participants, were co-facilitators of workshops and took care of the warming up sessions.**
- → **Project team: staff from the Anne Frank House/the Netherlands, the Anne Frank Zentrum/Germany, Erinnern.at/ Austria and the Milan Simecka Foundation/Slovakia with additional trainers from Ukraine and Denmark and two conference assistants made up the project team.**
- → **The film team, photographer and reporter took care of 'catching' all that was taking place.**

A tall, lanky boy from Denmark introduced himself; and then a Dutch-Turkish woman in a hijab, one of the youth advisors, gave a rousing hello; and then came another introduction, and then another, and the next. Somewhere near the end, the two Ukrainian girls suddenly arrived: boisterous, blonde, and burdened slightly under the weight of their backpacks (they had just literally arrived from the airport). The young women knew each other from Ukraine, as was obvious from the ease with which both bantered quietly at the back of the room after taking their seats.

Patrick then asked the girls to introduce themselves. "My name is Susanna. I am from Ukraine. But I'm Jewish," she said, her voice dropping slightly, revealing perhaps an ambiguity about her relationship with her religion – or perhaps her unease at revealing it in such a public forum. But of course, it was because of this aspect of her identity that she was there - to share her experience. An awkward silence filled the room for a second.

Büşra, the Dutch-Turkish youth advisor, then turned around and said, smiling: "Be proud of who you are."

Büşra Halici, youth advisor, The Netherlands

The comment was forgotten as quickly as it was spoken. And then, a moment later, the participants are ushered outside by Tali Padan, a team member, and instructed to stand in a circle. The activity required space unavailable in the room, and so the participants were taken into the garden.

The game worked like this: one person was selected to stand at the circle's center. She or he was then asked by Tali to state which activity he or she liked the most.
While Susanna and her Ukrainian friend, Masha huddled close together to stay warm; and while Elias chatted with Anna and Romario (both also Danes);

Zoe from Germany volunteered to go first. Clad in tight blue jeans and a warm-looking gray sweater, she stood for a second, clearly thinking. Another moment passed, and then she said, confidently: "I like sewing." The 60 or so people paused as if to consider for a moment whether they, too, liked to sew. But no one moved forward to join Zoe in the circle. "Sewing," she clarified, rolling her eyes slightly, "You know, like making clothes." At this, two girls joined her in the circle.
Zoe left the circle and returned to her spot next to Tyrell, who like Zoe is also from Berlin.

Some of the declarative statements from people in the circle ranged from “I am a Muslim” (which attracted three participants to the circle) to “I like chocolate” (which attracted nearly everyone). A camera crew trio in the corner filmed the events as they happened: the tallest of their number held a boom microphone extending forward into the circle; a cameraman panned and zoomed; and their director stood aside, her eyes trained on the teenagers engaged in the activity.

The circle game lasted about 15 minutes, after which everyone returned inside and formed small groups. Tali then gave each group cards commensurate with its number of teens. Masha picked the card asking: tell a story that made you sad. She recounted the tale of her lost cat. Then Susanna, picked a card asking: what’s something you neglected to do. Her answer was wide-ranging: she said that she had missed her university entrance exams twice, because she didn’t make time to study for them. “That’s why,” she said, “I’m still working as a waitress after two years.”

During the conference the filmmaker Brigitte Maria Bertele interviewed the participants and filmed the activities.

Day 2:
Discussing Identity, Diversity and Discrimination

“Sometimes people say things to me, stupid things,” said Valentina, a Cuban-Austrian high school pupil. Valentina was responding to a question posed by Tali, who was leading a discussion about identity. “When I feel good,” Valentina continued, “I don’t hide it. But I also don’t shout it out loud.”

A few minutes earlier, Tali had handed out seven-point paper stars, and asked everyone to write one characteristic in each corner of the star. When it came time to review what the participants had written, Valentina, who volunteered to speak, said she didn’t include her sexual orientation on her star. Tali asked why. “Well, I don’t want it to define me,” Valentina explained, “So I didn’t write it on my star. Also, I know that no one else here wrote that ‘I am hetero’ on his or her star, so why should I write that I am a lesbian?”

And yet the issue of her sexual orientation did bother Valentina enough that it became a topic of discussion in the group – just as being Jewish in largely Christian Denmark had become an issue for Elias. “I feel like when I’m with my Jewish friends at my Jewish school, we just understand each other better,” Elias said. “We get each others’ jokes.”

Sitting next to Elias was Romario, another Dane, who has also experienced problems fitting in. But unlike Elias, who said with certainty that he "just felt more comfortable at Jewish school," Romario seemed to be caught between two worlds. An Assyrian Christian, he doesn't feel totally at home in Denmark's protestant, individualistic culture. But throughout the seminar, he pointed out numerous positive things about the country: that he was being paid to go to school, for example, or that healthcare is free. This notwithstanding, he noted that his closest friends are Muslims from the Middle East, in particular a Syrian-Muslim boy with whom he said he shares more in common than with the Danes at his school. "We just get along better, our cultures are more similar, even though we have different religions," Romario said.

The second part of this activity entailed allowing each of the young people in the room to chat with one another for a minute or so to see whether they had any matching ideas of 'what defines identity' on their stars. And after this, the groups split up into smaller groups, with youth advisor Andy, a Hungarian-American athlete, taking his group into the conference room next door. Andy then posed the second question relating to the identity discussion: "Do you think there are people who have it easier or harder in life because of who they are?" The consensus in Andy's group was that some people's lives are certainly harder – people born with disabilities have a harder time in life, the youngsters said, as do people born into weak familiar or social structures. Andy wrote down their suggestions on a paper board, and the list eventually grew to encompass the idea, proposed by Anita, that Muslim women's headscarves could be a detriment that makes life harder.

The teenagers did not, however, seem to grasp the idea of citizenship being something that could positively or negatively impact a person's lot in life. Tali suggested this idea earlier to the larger group (hinting at the ability to travel more easily if someone is from a Western country). The topic came up again in the smaller groups, though it was unclear if the youngsters grasped the value of the freedom of movement that they enjoy as Europeans.

After the smaller groups had answered the "easier or harder" question, everyone returned to the main conference room to present their findings to the group as a whole.

While each of the groups varied in its definition of things that define identity, the general trend was to see visible traits (skin color, age, disability) as more detrimental to one's ability to succeed in life than less visible traits (which the group defined as: sexual orientation, religion, interests, beliefs, gender, political views).
As the last group was wrapping up, Veronika Nahm, one of the organizers from the Anne Frank Center, observed,

"They were asked to talk about identity, but in some cases they veered into a discussion about discrimination."
After the lunch break, the groups reassembled. As in the morning sessions, each group was led by one facilitator supported by one youth advisor. Veronika, the facilitator, and Mateusz, the Polish youth advisor, asked their group:

"What is discrimination and what does it have to do with me?"

They explained how stereotypes lead to prejudice, which then leads to discrimination; and then, within their group, proceeded to define discrimination using a word chart. They came up with words and phrases: shame, judgment, hurting someone, injustice, isolation.
Many of the young people in the group said they had experienced discrimination. Two girls sitting together, one from outside of Vienna, and the other from Berlin had both experienced discrimination in their schools. Emely because of her religion, Hilga because of her sexual orientation. They shared their stories with the group. Emely said. "One time a guy in school said to me, 'you don't know anything, you're just a stupid Jew'." Hilga's story was similar – she explained how when she came out, her friends stood by her side, but her fellow pupils were downright cruel. "One person actually accused me of coming out to attract attention," Hilga explained to the group. "But when people eventually started to believe that I was, in fact, a lesbian, they then began making fun of me." When asked whether the girls sought help from their teachers, or told administrators, both said no. Zofia , a girl from Poland, then interjected. She said she could understand the pressure to deal with problems on one's own rather than by going to school authorities. "You don't want to be that person who tells the teacher," Zofia opined.

Using pieces of paper on which were written words describing different forms of discrimination, the next question the group addressed was “How is discrimination taking place?” The group ranked the worst kinds of discrimination, from assassination to condescending to bulling. They did the same thing with the question “Who is discriminating? ” They came up with: communities, groups, institutions, and unconscious, conscious, indirect, direct and structural discrimination.
They also discussed the framework for discrimination (normal/abnormal, societal, power, scope of activism, access to information). Zofia cited an example in her own country for the ‘society’ example: “Some people think the Polish government should only consist of Polish people,” she said. “They want to exclude others, like Germans living in Poland, immigrants, etc. – but that’s societal exclusion.”

Veronika, the group facilitator, then asked: “Due to what characteristics are people discriminated?” The group came up with these terms, ranked in order from worse to least worse: religion, skin color, sexual identity, gender, social status, disability, culture, speech, age. Finally, the youngsters and the youth advisors discussed forms of discrimination such as racism, sexism, migration, Islamophobia, homophobia, fear of Roma, anti-Semitism, homelessness, political, ageism.

The group was then read two examples. “Only three percent of university professors in Germany are women. Is that discrimination?” All of the participants went to the “Yes” side of the room, while Anna, from Denmark, went to the “No” side, but did not clearly enunciate her views on this topic. The other gender question was more divisive. When asked whether Male/Female signs on bathrooms are discriminatory, most of the group went to the “No” side or to the middle. Their sense was that the bathrooms weren’t forcing transgender people to conform to an unrealistic gender ideal. Youth advisor Busra stood firmly in the “Yes” side, however; she was, of course, playing “devil’s advocate” in order to spark a discussion. She highlighted and debated with the teenagers several reasons as to why she felt the signs could be considered discriminatory.

Day 3, part 1:
History and Today. People who made a Difference

Day three of the conference started out with the youngsters and youth advisors meeting in the main hall to discuss the building of a Sukkah hut to mark the first day of the Jewish holiday of Sukkot. Two experienced youth workers explained to the group what the hut means, at one point posing questions to the teenagers to see how much they already knew about the holiday. The participants were then broken up into two groups: one was tasked with making decorations out of paper, while the other actually built the huts outside. The advisors helped the teenagers create the hut, first by screwing together pieces of wood, and then by helping them wrap the newly created structure in white cloth, on to which the decorations would later be affixed. At 10 am, after the building of the huts was completed, Karen Polak opened the “biography group” session.

“Discrimination has a history,” she explained. “Why is there racism? Sexism? Why don’t we treat each other more equally?

History can help us understand.” Some of the questions to be addressed in this exercise were: Are the challenges today the same as in the past? And: Has there been as much progress as we hoped? After the introduction, smaller groups were formed and each person individually chose a story and then the group discussed which one they would work on together

Sasha Voitenko, a group facilitator from Ukraine, opened his small group by telling the story of his grandmother, whom he considered a role model: “Sometimes I think my grandmother has taught me more than Nelson Mandela,” he told his group. The participants in this group looked at several stories: that of Stefan Kosinski from Poland, a gay prisoner of the Nazis, convicted for writing a letter to the Austrian soldier with whom he had a relationship; of Sofie Haber, a Jew who was able to escape from Austria to Switzerland with the help of a Swiss policeman; and of Rudolf Douala Manga Bell, a German-educated, African-born freedom fighter in Cameroon who resisted German territorial incursions and resettlements in his country using his German legal education, but was ultimately hanged by the Germans in 1914 for his activism.

Sasha's group chose Manga Bell to present to the larger group. Two of the members of the group, Tyrell and Zoe, were black Europeans; but initially Zoe picked an alternative story. Tyrell made a persuasive case for picking Manga Bell's story; Christos, a Greek-Czech youth, agreed with him and also convinced the group to pick this story. After the group had narrowed their choices down to two stories, Zoe offered her opinion. "I think we should choose the Bell story," Zoe explained, "because he wrote letters to the Reichstag in support of his cause, and still, nothing happened. This still happens today when people complain to higher authorities." Tyrell added: "It is important to think about how the history of black people in Europe isn't just 20 or 30 years old, but really much older."

Sasha helped to clarify the young peoples' thinking on the matter. He explained that Manga Bell's story is relevant today because Manga Bell studied European laws, and tried to use them to support his cause, but was thwarted because of his race – which still happens today (and thus connects to what Karen had asked the group to think about when she introduced the activity in the larger session).

The group then made a poster using sheets of blue paper featuring maps, photos of Manga Bell, timelines, and other relevant

historical facts about his life and about Germany's colonial atrocities in Africa.

Curiously, not all the young people seemed to make the connection between the Manga Bell story and their own lives (i.e., how laws can be applied in unequal and racist ways). Miksa, a Hungarian who spent part of his childhood in Serbia, but whose family relocated to Hungary after experiencing discrimination – which they, perversely, still experienced in Hungary due to their historical ties to Serbia, struggled to 'get it', but wasn't convinced of the relevance of the story. About 30 minutes later, the small groups returned to the meeting room and presented their stories. After the presentations, Karen asked the group "What do we learn from looking at biographies?" One of the youngsters correctly saw the point of the exercise, formulating his thoughts this way: "there are still problems like this today."

After lunch, the youngsters took part in an "NGO Marketplace," in which different organizations based in Berlin presented themselves. The teenagers, in turn, listed their first, second, and third choices of the NGOs they would want to visit on Friday.

Day 3, part 1: **Meeting the Change-Agents**

NGOs (Peers)

Amoro Foro e.V.
Amaro Foro is a transcultural youth organization of Roma and non-Roma youths with the aim to create a space for young people to become active citizens. By means of empowerment, mobilization, self-organization and participation, Amaro Foro seeks to establish trust and mutual respect between Roma and non-Roma youths.

Berlin-Postkolonial
Berlin Postkolonial has been founded in 2007 by people from Germany and from former German colonies. The organization aims to critically reflect and review German colonial history in its global dimension. Berlin Postkolonial tries to disclose post-colonial and racist views and societal structures that are present today.

HEROES
HEROES has been founded in 2007 as an equality-initiative by Stohhalm e.V., which brings together young men from migrant families fighting against suppression in the name of "honor" and equal rights for women and men. Upon completing an educational program about questions of honor, identity, gender roles and human rights, these young men become "heroes" who are able to run their own workshops, for example in high schools.

Lambda
Founded in 1990, Lambda is the only organization for lesbian, gay, bi, trans*, inter* and queer (LGBTIQ) youths in Berlin and Brandenburg. Next to creating a safe space for LGBTIQ youths and representing their interests, Lambda seeks to address homophobia in high schools by running workshops with peers. Lambda is the Greek name for the letter "l" and an international symbol for gay rights.

LIKRAT
Likrat in Hebrew means „towards one another". The organization seeks to establish unbiased ways for high school students to approach Judaism. By working with young Jewish peers, Likrat aims to break through common stereotypes, to work against anti-Semitic resentments and to convey a contemporary image of Judaism in Germany.

Netzwerk behinderter Frauen e.V.
(Network of women with disabilities)
Women with disabilities and chronic diseases have founded *Netzwerk behinderter Frauen* in 1995 as an organization to fight against „dual discrimination" of being a woman and a person with disabilities. Mainstream organizations of disabled people, often represent the interests of men and are only specified on one kind of disability. By being inclusive and focusing on the situation of women, the network of women with disabilities addresses this imbalance.

Day 4:
Exploring Berlin with the Change-Agents

On Friday the groups set out for their visit to Berlin. First going in three groups to a museum that has a special youth program and then with their peer guides on their tour with one of the NGOs.

Museum visits

Anne Frank Zentrum
The Anne Frank Zentrum in Berlin is a partner organisation of the Anne Frank House in Amsterdam. Its main focus is to promotethe memory of Anne Frank and her famous diary across Germany. The activities of the Anne Frank Zentrum are aimed at young people and seek to strengthen the values of freedom, equality and democracy and combat anti-Semitism, racism and discrimination.

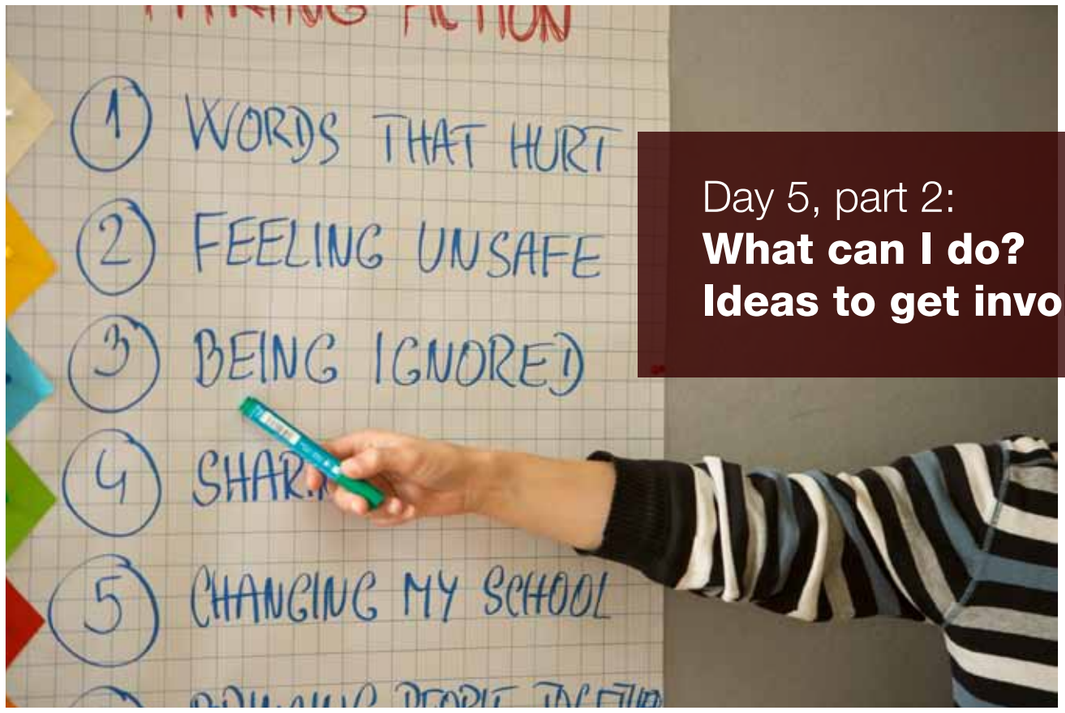
7x jung
The exhibition 7xjung is a project of Gesicht zeigen e.V. and aims to connect German history with the lived experiences and realities of young people in Germany today. The organization Gesicht zeigen e.V. works on a federal level against xenophobia, racism, anti-Semitism and right-wing-motivated violence with the aim to strengthen civil-courage and raise awareness for any kind of discrimination.

Youth Museum Schöneberg
The Youth Museum Schöneberg has been founded in 1995 as a successor of the museum on regional history of the borough Tempelhof-Schöneberg. It's main target group are youths aged 10 to 18 years. The museum is an intercultural activity space and exhibits many real objects and true life stories. It challenges visitors to be actively engaged with the exhibition.

Day 5, part 1:
Exchanging impressions

On Saturday, the participants reconvened with a warm-up activity led by youth advisor Claudia. Afterwards, they formed smaller groups and worked on the presentations of their visits to the NGOs, which they later presented to the larger groups.

Just one example of the presentations given was by the group that attended Berlin Postkolonial. The group highlighted Germany's colonial history in Namibia. The presentation looked at Germany's genocide in Namibia and unequal land reform – which unduly benefited German colonial descendants – after Namibian independence in 1990. The group's discussion was led by Tyrell, a British 14-year-old attending school in Berlin. He spoke of a movement to rename streets in Berlin that were named after German generals who committed atrocities in Africa during the early 20th century.



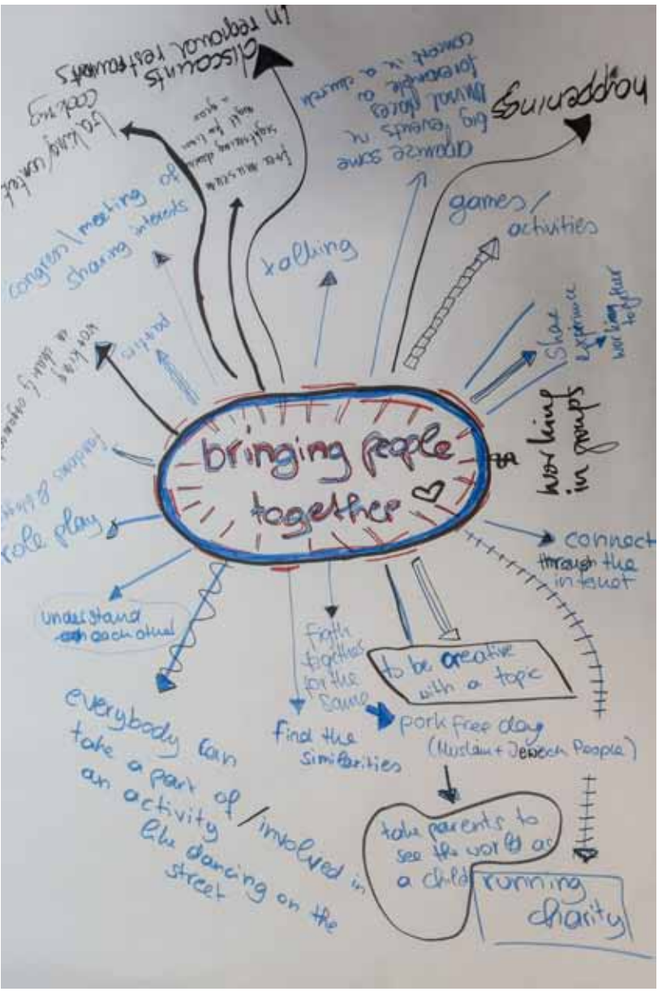
Day 5, part 2:
What can I do? Ideas to get involved!

After lunch, the groups sat together to discuss 'Taking Action'. And everyone was asked to think how their ideas could inform the creation of the diversity and anti-discrimination website. The participants were divided into seven groups under seven topic headers.

The *Words That Hurt* group felt that, overall, "a more entertaining way to talk about discrimination" should be found. They suggested using games. The *Feeling Unsafe* group thought it could be useful for the Anne Frank House to find relevant NGO partners, to create "how to react" sheets

as go-to materials in tense situations, and to give (reformed) bullies a place to share their stories online.

The *Being Ignored* group suggested an online initiative that would entail writing letters to school newspapers, and then transfer those letters to the website so others can see how such letters should be written. The group were then asked to give further thought to the issue of "cases where teachers don't take complaints seriously."



The *Sharing Back Home* thought it was imperative to give young people a place to blog about their experiences at the conference. They also wanted favor the creation of online profiles of prominent people from Eastern European countries from various backgrounds. Finally, the want to empower young people to themselves write profiles of the various people they met at the conference.

The *Changing My School* wanted to post a list of relevant movies online to help pupils who might be looking for coming-of-age films on the issues they face. They also favored the creation of games, music, and videos of young people telling their own stories. Their final suggestion is ambitious, but one which they believed would help the most: they want to involve local celebrities in campaigns to promote tolerance and diversity.

The *Bringing People Together* had an innovative set of ideas centered around street music festivals/parties and social events, such as a "Pork Free" day where people forgo pork products as a show of solidarity with Jews and Muslims. On a similar note, the *Website* group wanted to used the site to bring people together around social events, though chief among their ideas was to utilize the power of social networks to allow the group to maintain contact among themselves after the conference ends. There was also the suggestion from this group to post stories/experiences/profiles online so that others using the tool can learn about pupils from similar backgrounds. But Gerrit Netten from the project team suggested the group give further thought to finding a balance between authenticity and protecting the young peoples' privacy online.

Day 6: How do I stay connected?

The event wrapped up on Sunday with a session detailing how the groups may collaborate in the future and with a feedback session. While the participants' feedback was generally positive, there was one reoccurring theme: "Why aren't the bullies here with us?" To be sure, many of the teenagers felt that their less tolerant classmates back home could have benefitted from the experience they went thought at Wannsee Forum.
Other participants, however, recognized the wisdom of bringing tolerant teenagers together to learn from one another – and that, while to some this may have sometimes felt like "preaching to the converted," most of the young people realized that having a safe and accepting space to learn from one another went best with the conference's stated goal of listening to the participants' experiences of discrimination and allowing those experiences to inform the creation of an anti-discrimination website to be used in education settings. As for the timeline for the creation of the website, Karen noted that it would probably come online in 2015. She said she hoped that the youngsters in the "Stories that Move" conference would be willing to serve as local ambassadors for the website in their respective countries once the site goes live.

Moved by their stories

Behind the scenes at the International Youth Conference, Berlin-Wannsee 17-22 September 2013

In September, 41 students from around Europe met in Berlin at the international youth conference held at Wannsee Forum to tell their stories of discrimination – both those personally experienced and those observed secondhand in their schools and communities.

The students came from as near as Denmark and as far away as Ukraine. Some were community leaders, budding politicians in their own right – like Alexandra, a Roma youth leader. Others more shy, like Miksa, came from Hungary. He had witnessed discrimination himself in his early years as a member of Serbia's Hungarian minority. He and his family later emigrated to Hungary seeking a better life, and butted up against anti-Roma sentiment everywhere in their new country. Yet unlike so many Hungarians, Miksa's own experiences made him sensitive to the suffering of the Roma.

There's Elias, a Danish-Jewish boy who said that Muslim boys taunt him on the soccer field and threaten to beat him up because of his religion. There's Ardiola, a devout Alawite Muslim girl who is verbally abused by conservative Sunni Muslim boys in her school because she dresses in Western clothing and refuses to cover her hair. There's Lau, a transgendered Dutch boy who suffers taunts and threats in his school because of his sexuality.

There are countless others – and they, this week, at the "Stories That Move Conference: Discussing Diversity and Discrimination" were given a platform to express their stories in a safe environment.

Young voices

And the platform is indeed a necessary one – for, as the teens themselves reported, discrimination in Europe today is alive and well. On the one hand, the conference is a platform through which both its invited guests and its organizers can look at where Europe stands today in its long-standing battle against hatred. Yet it is also a forward-looking event, where those assembled can discuss together where Europe needs to go in the future. The voices of Europe's young people are themselves helping define this mission, with the goal being to create new online teaching tools, to bring the battle against the age-old scourge of hatred into the internet age. We might be shocked to read about the problems with discrimination. This isn't to say that post-World War II Europe hasn't made great strides – for it has, without a doubt. But its attempts at portraying to the outside world an air of a sophistication defined by the trappings of modernity – by its high-speed trains, avant-garde art, high fashion, and social welfare systems – is just that: a portrayal of a reality that belies a tension lurking right beneath the surface, visible to anyone who might choose to look – or listen.

Opening up

The main areas of discrimination outlined in the conference fall into these categories: anti-Semitism, Islamaphobia, anti-Roma sentiment, racism, and homophobia. Emely, a young Austrian girl of 15 whose father is Israeli and mother is an Austrian gentile was forced into an internal debate over her Jewishness one afternoon this past spring in her school outside of Vienna. "This friend and I began arguing about something trivial, I can't even remember now what," she told a group of her peers at the conference. "Then he came out with this statement that really hurt me. He said 'you don't know what the world is like, you're just a stupid Jew.' I asked him why he said this to me. I thought it was mean, unfair."

Though Emely had not, up until then, defined herself as Jewish, she learned for the first time that those around her did – and she began to question everything and everyone around her. "I don't really define myself as Jewish – or hadn't up to that point," she continued. "I felt like he was hurting my dad, my family. I don't understand why he said that." If there is a silver lining to this otherwise loathsome experience it is that it made Emely a more sensitive person. She began to think more about the hurtful terms bandied about in her schoolyard – about the word faggot, or the n-word, about other words that one will never apply to her. "It's not just people making fun of me for being a Jew," she explained, "Sometimes people use the n-word. I also hear kids making fun of Turkish or Muslim kids. Some students mock the way they talk. And the teachers just don't get involved." People like Emely can sometimes be transformed in a positive way by experiences of pain. They become more open to others who are different. They decide they want to make a difference, to stand up against the bullies in this world.

Lack of support

And indeed, just as Emely chose to attend the Stories That Move Conference to tell her story and to learn about others who have experienced discrimination, so too did her countrywoman Valentina. The Cuban-Austrian teen did not know Emely before coming to the conference, but the two bonded through a shared mutual interest in becoming better, more sensitive people – and in helping others to achieve the same goal.


Valentina from Austria

Valentina is gay, and she says she tries to be open about her life, but that most of the time, she just can't be. "It's still really difficult," she explains to Emely and to the rest of the group. "I am really nervous when I'm about to tell someone, or when it's about to come up. It's easier in my school because we have three openly gay boys, but still, there are a lot of homophobic comments and swear words. There are times when I've wanted to seek help from the teachers, but the thing is, you don't know which teachers will help you. There are some gay teachers, but they tend to remain quiet and not get involved."

What bothers Valentina the most, she said, isn't the bullying by her fellow students, but the lack of support from her teachers. "I don't understand why the teachers don't take a stand. If they saw a student stealing, they would say something – they'd punish the student. But when students use hurtful language, the teachers don't do anything. It's wrong," she said. "Once when I spoke up and said to a classmate, 'I am not ok with this, stop' I was laughed at and told, 'Don't be so sensible, stop being Mother Teresa.'"

She said she can't remember a day when students in her school weren't screaming 'you're a fag' or 'you homo' in the hallway or in the classroom. But, like Emely, she has also heard pejorative usage of the word Jew and the n-word. "And yet the teachers don't say anything," Valentina repeated again, almost exasperated, almost at the point of tears. "In fact, one of my teachers even makes racist jokes, and everyone laughs along with him. I keep asking myself, 'am I hearing right?' Some teachers are better, of course, but too many are laughing along with the bullies or just keeping quiet – and this is unacceptable. The teachers have to be more supportive. I'd like to add though, even if discrimination, homophobia and hatred toward anyone different are very present in the society I live in, it's mostly not that direct, and I actually have totally accepting friends and family."

Sitting next to Valentina in the circle was Hilga, from Berlin who came out as a lesbian two years ago. She was more composed than Valentina, who got quite emotional while recounting her story. At one point in the discussion, the students referenced a group activity that they had taken part in with their youth advisors earlier in the day. In order to engage the teens in a discussion about identity, the youth leaders asked: "Do you think there are people who have it easier or harder in life because of who they are?" The consensus in one of the groups was that some people's lives are certainly harder – people born with disabilities have a harder time in life, the students said, as do people born into weak familiar or social structures. One of the youth advisors wrote down the students' suggestions on a paperboard, and the list eventually grew to encompass the idea that Muslim women's headscarves could be a detriment that makes life harder. While each of the groups varied in its definition of things that define identity, the general trend was to see visible traits (skin color, age, disability) as more detrimental to one's ability to succeed in life than less visible traits (which the students defined as: sexual orientation, religion, interests, beliefs, gender, political views).

Words that hurt

And by that standard, Hilga from Berlin was having a comparatively easier time in life than Valentina from Vienna. "When I came out," Hilga said, "All the people in my grade knew me as a girly-girl – as someone very feminine, as someone who had a boyfriend. They were shocked when I came out. In fact, when I first started telling people, they didn't believe me. They accused me of seeking attention!" Though the taunts eventually subsided, and her fellow students accepted her, Hilga, like Emely and Valentina, also became more sensitive to those around her. "There were even instances when these dumb blonde girls were calling each other by the n-word. When I said something to them, that it's wrong, they accused me of overacting, they said I was the one acting inappropriate. They don't understand how their words are hurtful. And, when they use the expression 'that's so gay' – which they say in English or German – they don't understand how it hurts me," Hilga said. There was a pause in the group after Hilga said this.


Hilga from Germany


Zoe from Germany

And then Zoe – born in Italy, with family in the United States, and attending school in Berlin – stumbled upon a key idea that the other students missed, but with which they all immediately agreed after Zoe wisely explained her line of thinking. "We actually had a group activity about this yesterday," Zoe clarified. "We were asked to think about whether male and female door signals are sexist or discriminatory. They aren't, per se, but let's say then that baby-changing stations are always placed in the women's room, as they usually are in Germany. Because of this, women always end up changing babies' diapers. So we start to associate women with changing diapers. And this kind of supports a sexist image, if only in our subconscious. The same thing happens when kids use words like gay or the n-word in a negative way."

Immediately after Zoe's intelligent analysis, a series of proverbial light bulbs illuminated above the students' heads. They all nodded in agreement.

Speaking out

And if the conference accomplished one thing, it was this: it encouraged a group of intelligent, sensitive teens from across Europe to explicate to themselves why discrimination is bad. Why, when someone calling the boy sitting next to you in class a faggot, or the girl in the lunch room "a stupid Turk" – when someone attempts to put down his fellow student with a hurtful term – why one must speak up, call it out, and correct the behavior as quickly as possible.

Zoe's classmate in Berlin, Tyrell, provided a warning of what happens to a school in which no one speaks up, where every one sticks his head in the sand. He had seen first hand the adult byproduct of cowardice and laziness in adults who choose to look away – for, as he explained it, such people actually teach in his school. "It always starts with a lack of knowledge, and then it becomes a lack of willingness to apologize,"

Tyrell from Germany

Tyrell explained. "In my school, some teachers would read stories written by black authors or other older authors, and they would read out the word 'Negro' – and I'd say, I don't want that word to be used around me, it's hurtful. Or they will say 'mulatto' – this is a Portuguese word for a crossing between a horse and a donkey. I protested, said this bothered me but the teacher said 'oh yeah, sure,' then she carried on. I think it's also just ignorance. For me, it's not what the people say that bothers me – it's that they don't react with any sensitivity to how I feel about their words."

Tyrell said he often finds himself "telling the teachers 'hey, what you're saying is wrong' but they don't always agree, and that is frustrating." There is another pause in the room after Tyrell has spoken. Emely is thinking, her eyes trained on her hands. Valentina closes her eyes slightly. Hilga is looking at Tyrell, as if he might continue his sentence. But then Zoe speaks again. "Generally when you tell a person that you're hurt," Zoe said, "The person usually says one of two things: I didn't mean it that way, or 'you're being too sensitive, it's your fault for feeling upset.' But it is not Zoe's fault for feeling upset. It is not Emely's fault for feeling upset. None of these students should ever have to question the wickedness of putdowns, racist comments, and taunts around them. And if the fruitfulness of this week's conference is any guide, they won't: they will speak out, they will protest.

Alexandra from Romania

"My parents began a Roma rights and education foundation back in 1996," said Alexandra, one of 41 teens to take part in the "Stories that Move" international youth conference. The 16-year-old is a youth leader in her native Romania, where she works with her parents' foundation to create education programs nationwide.

"We do various projects for communities in our county," she said. "Recently, we went into rural schools in Bihor county, and explained to the kids Roma history and the situation Roma people face. We then explained to them how non-Roma kids can be involved in a change. We showed them how they can start within their schools, by spreading a positive message among their classmates." Alexandra's work as a youth leader also entails bringing together various minority groups. Recently, she helped start a project called "we're different but equal." "We brought kids together from different fields," she said. "One group was a foundation for autistic kids, one helps deaf kids, and the third was my parents' foundation, which deals with Roma issues. The groups told school children about their work, and explained to the children how they could get involved. They also tried to make clear to the children that toleration and discrimination are big issues to which we must be attentive and open to solving."

At the youth conference in Berlin, Alexandra said many people in attendance had never before met a Roma person like herself. Indeed, her roommate Anna, a Jewish girl from Denmark, noted that meeting Alexandra gave her a positive image of a people she had never met, but about whom she heard biased statements in the past. "I had never met a Roma person before," Anna said, "So it was cool to meet Alexandra and hear her story."

Alexandra said non-Roma students interested in engaging with Roma communities can find the financial support they need to launch innovative projects, both locally and nationally. "The European Union, for example, is very involved in getting the Roma people into the society and the system," she noted. "If you have an idea, just develop it, because you can, you have the opportunities," she said. But just as Alexandra taught the participants

Presenting the visit to the Monument for the genocide of the Roma and Sinti, after visiting Berlin with Amoro Foro

of the conference about the Roma people, she also learned about groups to which she had not yet been exposed. “As I was telling almost everyone here, this is the first time I have seen so many different cultures,” she noted. “We are so multicultural, so multi-religious, so multi-sexual. Though I didn’t find so many people interested in Roma issues, I made friends. I think that when I work on future projects, I will invite them to be part of it. We are going to stay in touch through facebook.”

As for the future? Alexandra said, emphatically: “I am not really sure! I am only 16, and I have one more year left to think about this!” But she does have a plan of sorts – she wants to attend university in her country initially, and then possibly study abroad. “For my masters I think I will go abroad, so that I can improve my English, and learn how other countries work. After this, I want to return to Romania, and make a difference there.”

Claudia Tran from Slovakia

Before the “Stories that Move” conference got underway in Berlin, youth advisor Claudia attended the preparatory meeting in Bratislava, where she and several others got ready for this week’s conference as advisors to the project.

“We did most of the activities that the participants are doing here when we met in Bratislava,” Claudia said. “The aim was to improve the activities and make them more effective. In some cases, activities weren’t appropriate for us, but for the group here, who are younger, they are enriching.”

Claudia is active in Slovakia, the country of her birth. “I take part in a lot of NGOs, and organize local events and even international projects,” she said. But Claudia said growing up as an Asian in Eastern Europe wasn’t always easy. Like some of the youngsters taking part in the conference, she also experienced discrimination. “I am a Vietnamese, but I was born in Europe, Slovakia,” she said. “I’ve always been different, in primary school, in secondary school. I’ve encountered discrimination, as well as racist attacks. Silly jokes and other offenses. I knew that little kids were just too young to realize what they were saying. In primary school, in such a young age it hurt me a lot, too. But as I grew up I learned how to deal with similar situations. Later on, as I was older, some people used to tell me that Asians come to Europe to steal jobs. These people didn’t understand what immigrants had to go through. They came to Europe to study, to have better opportunities. And people just don’t realize how hard it is to come to another country where you don’t know the language, don’t have friends or families to support you.”

Claudia said her parents were unable to find jobs after their graduation, due to discrimination against foreigners and problems with the language. “Nobody wanted to hire them,” Claudia said, “So they had to start their own business – a clothing business – like most Asians, who open clothing or food businesses.” Claudia said people in some Eastern European countries blame Asians for taking jobs. This comment is hurtful, she said. “I don’t like it when people say Asians in Europe steal jobs,” she explained, “because it’s simply not true.”

As for her participation in the “Stories that Move” conference? She said she learned as much from the teens as they did from her. “I think that each of us is pleased to be a part,” she explained, “It also helps us in our personal development. We have a lot to learn from the kids. They are very open-minded and they are not scared to express themselves. It’s very inspiring how easily they can talk about such personal things.”

Tali Padan from Denmark

One of the trainers at the “Stories that Move” Conference is Tali. The thirty-something has worked in the field of diversity counseling around the world. When asked why she decided to make her career in this field, she says her experience growing up in Israel and then moving to the United States as a child was the reason. There, she learned first hand the importance of dialogue and cultural sensitivity. “The transition was hard for me, at first,” she said of her family’s move from Israel to the United States when she was nine. “I adapted to life in Atlanta, Georgia – and learned a lot living there.” Tali has worked on a wide range of projects in the UK, Denmark, and Germany that have connect youths from diverse backgrounds through the story of Anne Frank’s life.

When asked how she got involved with the Anne Frank House – and its missions of tolerance – she says her own family background played a role. “I come from Israel, and I am different from my family in terms of how I think of Israel and Palestine,” she said. Tali said she broke with many of the beliefs that she grew up with, and became a strong advocate for peace between Israel and the Palestinians. “There is a predominate belief in my family about how things should be. And I just believed something different – in my heart I believed that there can be peace. I also saw first hand in my work life that when people sit down to talk, they can get along. But when we grow up in narrow, limiting environments – that’s harmful for us. We have to talk to one another.”

Indeed, Tali believes that open, frank, and honest communication is critical for solving problems – from understanding why students bully one another to achieving peaceful coexistence between the major monotheistic faiths. “I think that’s the strength of a conference like the Anne Frank ‘Stories that Move’ conference,” she said. “The more we encounter diverse opinions, the more we can get out of our own educational cages – the cages we grew up in, and sometimes can’t see outside of, unless we interact with other people.” She says it’s critical that youths in Europe be given a platform to discuss discrimination – both that which they experience personally and that which they witness.

“If you see one person opening up, it helps you to realize that it’s ok, and that you can do it too.” This week at the youth conference, Tali noted that she was impressed – but not surprised – by the frankness with which the students told their stories. She felt that the conference succeeded in giving the students a safe place to open up – quite possibly for the first time in their lives. “It takes courage to approach someone who’s in a position of authority,” she said. “And you don’t know, as a teen, what the implications might be – there is a real fear of telling on people, of telling teachers about what’s really going on. Sometimes teenagers who aren’t part of the ‘in group’ just want to ignore what they experience. So, no, I’m not so surprised that some of these kids are telling their stories for the first time here.” She said she is confident the students’ stories will help inform the diversity and tolerance website that Anne Frank House plans to launch in 2015.
“We really want to get input from young people on this – on what works, what doesn’t. That’s the purpose of this conference – to find out which stories to get out there

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