

# ons of Israel — Part I



Jonah Rohde as a volunteer on Israeli military base.

## My Special Visit To Israel

By Jonah S. Rohde

Two summers ago I had the opportunity to spend time in Israel as a volunteer and I would like to share my experience with the community. As I planned my journey, I sought an inexpensive way to get to Israel and wanted to be more than just a tourist. I investigated the various programs for college-age students such as the Kibbutz and University studies. After further consideration I discounted both of these options because only 3% of Israelis live on the Kibbutz, and I couldn't afford the University program. Finally, through my brother in New York, I found out about a program called Volunteers for Israel.

soldiers on the base. In my case I received and accepted many invitations to soldiers' homes and even to the beach one weekend. Most of the Israelis spoke some English. One of the benefits, however, was that I was forced to pick up a little Hebrew because some speak no English at all. In a group they naturally speak only Hebrew, so if you want to participate, you learn quickly. There also were classes taught on the base in elementary Hebrew and my years at Hebrew school did pay off. Surprisingly, Israelis have very little up close contact with Americans, and so they were very happy to have us there. This program is relatively new (it has only been around since the Lebanon war) to Israelis and so they didn't quite know what to make of us. Our efforts help relieve soldiers from reserve duty, during which time the things we were doing would normally be performed by them. Therefore, by taking part in this program, I got to see Israel from a perspective few get to see, and to really contribute to the country. What I gave were the only things I had to give: my time, physical labor, and, of course, my great wit and humor.

This program entailed working as a volunteer on an Israeli military base doing maintenance or warehouse work. They provided a subsidized round trip airfare from New York, as well as food, shelter and clothing. They also provided several gratis guided tours to Jerusalem, Masada, the Yad Vashem and the Diaspora Museum. I decided this sounded like an inviting experience which would offer a chance to really meet Israelis since everyone must serve in the army.

We departed as a group of about 25, and much to my surprise many in the group were older retirees. After an 11-hour flight, we arrived and were greeted by retired Israeli army General Aharon Davidi. He gave us an orientation and told us where we would be living for the next month, which in our case was near Beer-sheva in the Negev.

Breakfast was served at 6:30 a.m. and work began at 8:00 a.m. There were three meals served in the mess hall with the rest of the soldiers. The work week ran from Sunday until Friday at noon at which time we were allowed to go where we would like as long as we were back around 10:00 a.m. Sunday. If we wanted to, they would arrange for us to go to an Israeli family's home at this time or we could make our own arrangements with

I highly recommend this program to anyone wanting to see Israel from an insider's perspective. It was a most rewarding experience, and I would certainly do it again. It does help to be a little independent and outgoing, as well as to be tolerant of hard work; we did have a few "casualties" who quit the program. The accommodations are of a very basic nature and certainly not the King David Hotel. Anyone desiring more information can call me at 365-3616 or the Volunteers for Israel office in New York. The number is (212) 608-4848.

*Editor's Note: Jonah, 22, son of Mr. and Mrs. Gerard Rohde, has an associate degree in Technical Engineering Electronics from Central Piedmont. He is currently at UNCC and is a senior majoring in business administration.*

## Our Project Renewal Neighborhood

By Vicki Hopkins

The visit to Nazaret Illit, our Project Renewal community, was a joyful one. We arrived in this very special neighborhood amid the Purim celebration. We observed the physical make-up of the neighborhood: a series of four to five-story garden apartment buildings built on the hills in a six block area with grassy areas in between.

We were escorted into the Community Center where we met members of the Community Council and other community workers. We began to realize that it is the direct funds we raise in our local southern communities (Charlotte, Columbia, Memphis, etc.) that make this center possible. We observed kindergarten children with their moms learning to work and play together. This is a community of Georgian Jews who believe it is important to marry young. So some of these moms were, to us, still children themselves. They needed the parenting skills being taught in this program.

All the children were in costumes and very excited. The teachers read stories and then explained to the moms and their children the work plan for the afternoon. There were learning stations set up with a variety of manipulative activities for the moms and kids to team up and play with. We, of course, joined in with this learning play. One of our group members, with an instant camera, became the star of the day, taking everyone's picture. We saw the obvious success of this program by the

sheer gleam in the eyes of the children and their moms.

Next we visited a program for abused children. It was a center based upon a "family setting": one of the staff, being a positive father role, another the mother. The children remain in this setting during the time they and their real families are getting treatment. We brought gifts and toys to share with these and the other children. We sang songs, danced and had a Purim celebration with Hamantaschen and punch.

The Senior Adult Center is a gathering place for most of the older Russian Jews in the neighborhood. This is a meeting place for social and craft activities. It, too, was gaily decorated for Purim. The Center director spoke to us in Russian which was then translated for us by a member of our Mission group. The director emphasized his pride at being in Israel and wished we could join him there. At this point the language changed to Yiddish and experiences between members of both groups were shared.

During the trip back to Tel Aviv, members of our group told of their impressions and feelings of the day. Some Mission members stayed on in Nazaret Illit to participate in budget hearings. We would hear their impressions later. We all felt a much clearer understanding of Project Renewal and a direct linkage to the funds we raise.

*Editor's Note: Vicki's detailed account of the entire mission trip will appear in next month's issue of the "CJN."*

24 to January 3, 1986

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