

BBYO Trip to Bulgaria: Jewish Teens from All Over the World

By Harper Moskowitz

Entering my senior year of high school, I knew I wanted to do something different over the summer. I looked at programs that could have taken me all over the world, from Ghana to Thailand and everywhere in between. In the end, I decided on a BBYO program called Ambassadors to Bulgaria. Even though I had been in BBYO for three years, I only knew one person who went on this program. This left me with many questions. What are we going to do? How long is the flight? Do you make friends with the people on the trip? Do you get to explore? By the time I left Bulgaria, I knew the answers to all these questions and more.

When I got to JFK on the afternoon of June 24, I went into the trip with a completely open mind, though I was scared for my first trans-Atlantic flight. Although the flight was long, it was great bonding time. I only knew two other people, so I took the flight time to make friends, who ended up being my best friends for this trip. When we finally landed in Sofia, Bulgaria, we heard the chant "AZA BBG BBYO." It was the other participants waiting for us to arrive. It felt great to land in a foreign country and know people are excited to see you.

What makes this trip special is that there were teens from ten different countries: Canada, USA, Bulgaria, Croatia, Slovakia, Ukraine, Estonia, Latvia, Serbia, and Lithuania. This gave me a whole new perspective on "Jewish Geography." In BBYO and summer camp, Jewish geography occurs all the time. The Jewish world seems small, then I went to Bulgaria and all of a sudden, the Jewish world wasn't so small anymore. My world instantly ex-

completely changed the tone of the trip. Not only was I learning about Bulgarian Jewry, but I was learning about Jewry in nine countries from people who were my friends, not teachers. Our Shabbat service was the moment on this trip where I really felt united with all the participants. We spent Shabbat in the only Orthodox synagogue in Plovdiv, Bulgaria, the second largest city. Although I didn't know every tune, and some prayers were longer than what I was used to, it was inspiring to chant Hebrew prayers with not only seventy participants from ten countries but also the local community. All seventy of us may speak different languages at home and to each other, but in that moment we were all speaking the same language and we all felt passionate about our Judaism.

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The second to last day of the trip was by far the most anticipated day; this was the day we were going to work with orphans. Before I left Charlotte, I shopped for toys and clothes for the kids, and teens from every country got donations and toys for the children as well. We were all so excited to meet them and hopefully bring joy into their lives. I had the pleasure of picking up the children from the orphanage. When they all got on the bus, every child seemed content just staring at their surroundings. Watching how something so simple kept them entertained reminded me that today was not about us, the participants, but about the kids, and giving them the best day we could. When the kids got to our hotel, the first thing they got to do was pick out as many toys and clothes as they wanted from all of our donations. One memory I have is that one little girl grabbed a stack of bracelets and instead of keeping them all for herself, she passed them out to all her friends and then to all the teen participants. Seeing how she came from a place with very little, but she still wanted to share everything was inspiring. I sat with a five year old boy on the bus and I



Friendships were forged on the summer trip to Bulgaria.

looked after him for the rest of the day, I got in a group with two American guys and together the three of us formed an unbreakable bond with each other and the boy. He didn't speak any English, but after a short time, it was easily seen that language was not a barrier. It didn't matter that we could-

n't understand each other; we were able to communicate on so many different levels. When the orphans left, I hoped I made an impact on his life, because he made one on my life.

Our last night, we went to a tradition Bulgarian restaurant, we sang and ate and it was a great

way to end the trip. The best part is that we weren't the only Jewish people in the restaurant. Sitting at a large table about three feet away from me was a group of Israelis touring Bulgaria, and together, we sang "Am Yisrael Chai" at the top of our lungs. This moment encompasses everything I loved about

my trip to Bulgaria. That being Jewish brings me closer to people I may have never met and that global Jewry is an important aspect of Judaism that we should all cherish. ✨



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