

Michael Robinson

Summer Report

I was fortunate to spend the months of June and July in Jerusalem, interviewing and filming various Israeli-Palestinian dialogue groups regarding how productive space is imagined and advancement for the future. While I began with a focus on one specific organization, I quickly expanded to look beyond just Hand in Hand, talking with a multitude of groups including Machsom Watch, Citizens Accord Forum, Roots, IPCRI, Kids 4 Peace, and a couple others. Through the collection of various voices within the local grassroots front, my conception of conflict and change making methods were complicated and challenged in new and fantastic ways.

Through the course of the two months, I stayed in the German Colony and was able to explore some of the inner workings of the city. My filming partner, Rebeca Moscoso, and I were able to gain exposure and understandings of the myriad of different lifestyles all within such a small environment. Through this process, we attempted to connect with as many narratives as possible to really understand livelihood in Jerusalem as well as the socio-political climate which we were entering in. With film as the point of access, we were able to not only connect with organizational heads but also young Jewish students and activists, foreign nonprofit workers, and other Americans abroad in the country for the semester. Given the presence of the camera, those who were interviewed would “perform” for us, giving us a pitch or an aspect of their organization that they wanted not only us to know, but also whoever would watch the final film. As soon as I would put the camera down, personalities would alter and we began to connect with our subjects not just as members of their organization but as political bodies

themselves. It became a new way to engage and talk with people. These moments where a seeming switch would flip and people would change demeanors rapidly was so interesting to watch but incredibly informative given the climate of public personas. I too found myself performing aspects of a cameraperson, trying to connect and hear the narratives of people without compromising the aesthetics of the shot. I found myself heavily reliant on prewritten questions and prepped material instead of impromptu questioning. While this creates a bit of a divide in the present moment, a bit of just going through the motions, when I go back through the footage, I learn small aspects about each person. It's not just the narratives they tell but the small gestures they make, the moments when they look down and make a specific comment.

When interviewing the heads of organizations, we were able to hear various incredible personal narratives regarding individuals' interactions with the country and how Israel fits into their self-identity. In one interview with a Karin, woman working with Machsom Watch, she detailed her complex relationship with activism and being both leftist and a Zionist. She then drove us around Tel Aviv and explained the city through her own eyes, pointing out the old apartment complex that she grew up in, the parks she used to play in, and the first building she ever designed after architecture school. Through Karin, we were able to engage with the spaces and history in a completely new and incredible way. Similarly, talks with Rabbi Hanan Schlesinger gave us a greater understanding of how people became involved in activism and where they see their personal role in the movement for change. While many of these organizations did not agree on the best method to enact a positive impact or even on the baseline political agenda, they each were able to show us a very personal side to the incredibly complex issue.

While many of these instances were recorded, some escaped the camera, with the perfect collection of happenstances to make a truly remarkable experience. At one point, Goni Tsur, a member of Maschom Watch, was driving us back from the JFK Memorial Center and explaining her political beliefs and where she believes the Israeli government took too much land. This is happening while we drive on the side of a hill, looking out at land that was once Palestinian but now Israeli territory, a space that was once so isolated and now represents much more.

During the entire experience, I was able to apply skills and methods that I learned through my studies at Rice in Film and Anthropology to a field-like setting, exploring a tense socio-political moment through those devoting themselves to positive change and enacting it to the best of their abilities. I am incredibly grateful to Jewish Studies for providing me with this incredible and transformative experience, as well as the support of Dr. Melissa Weininger. I will be editing footage for the next several months and hope to have a final documentary film focusing on the discourse around political space and modern methods of enacting change in Jerusalem by the end of the year. The footage will also be featured in an installation video/sculpture piece focusing on the biopolitics of space and the position of the outsider in the Rice Media Center.



Hana Arnon, member of Maschom Watch, in her house in the German Colony



Gilli Mendel, the founder of the organization I Am You Are, which focuses on helping Palestinian and Israeli youth understand each other's narratives through filmmaking, while also figuring out how to tell their own



Nivine Sandouka (left) and Liel Maghen (right), co-directors of Israel-Palestine Creative Regional Initiatives (IPCRI)



Goni Tsur of Maschom Watch, standing in the JFK Memorial



Josie Mendelson, advisor of Citizens Accord Forum



Karin Lindler, member of Maschom Watch



Liel Maghen, co-director of IPCRI



Goni Tsur (left) and Rebeca Moscoso (right), standing outside of the JFK Memorial



Shaul David, member of Roots



Michael Robinson (me) filming B-roll outside of the IPCRI office



Me (left) and Goni Tsur (right) also standing outside of the JFK Memorial



Standing on the Mount of Olives



On our way up to the Old City