

Football for Peace, Italian Style

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The mayor of Turin (in the sash) helped bring a football team Arab-Israeli and Jewish-Israeli boys to Italy

A joint Arab-Israeli, Jewish-Israeli soccer team comprising fourteen eleven-year-old boys visited Italy, March 19–26.

The UPF chapters of Israel and San Marino conceived of this project. (The Republic of San Marino, an independent country, is an enclave in central Italy.) UPF approached two sports teachers, one a Jewish-Israeli teaching at a school in the Jewish town of Afula and the other an Arab-Israeli teaching at a school in the Arab town of Iksal four kilometers away. These two men have known each other for thirty years.

The teachers selected seven boys each from their schools to form one team. Not only had two sets of boys never met before but the Jewish boys did not speak Arabic and the Arab boys did not speak Hebrew. The sport teachers invited the young players and their parents four times for icebreaking games and orientation.

The fourteen boys, accompanied by the two sport teachers, the headmaster of a school in the Arabic town, with the president of UPF-Israel, Hod Ben-Zvi, leading the group, headed toward Torino, 1,700 miles (2,000 kilometers) away. Boarding the plane, all in their new blue uniforms (donated by a group in Israel called City Free from Violence) the group drew much attention.

Arrival in Italy

The WFWP chapter in Torino played a key role with the active support of UPF-Italy, the municipal government of Torino, Italy, and the governments of the two towns in northern Israel. In addition, several Italian organizations and individuals were of great help, most notably the famous soccer clubs, Juventus FC and Torino FC, the other city team playing in the main league.

The feminine contingent of the Italian organizers decided to name the team Peace Dreamers. As the vice-president of WFWP-Italy and the tour organizer, planner and coordinator, I met them at the airport.

What they did in Italy

From the first day -- when the team visited a famous automobile museum -- the parents in Israel followed every move of their children "live" via a WhatsApp group and constant feeds from the accompanying teachers. The museum seemed to fascinate the boys, all of whom were experiencing their first trip abroad.

Cascina Marchesa, a special hostel located in a vast park dedicated to the Turin Marathon, accommodated this young Israeli team and its entourage.

The first challenges we encountered over the weekend were not on the football pitch but rather at the

dining table. Providing both kosher and halal food, as well as keeping the respective Sabbaths, proved complex. The good will and the benevolence of the Italian hosts were keys to overcoming those obstacles.

Juventus FC

By the second day, we were already down to "business." The Juventus Football Club invited the boys to visit their famous training facility, where they participated in a soccer tournament dedicated to fighting racism and discrimination. Since 2009 Juventus FC and the UNESCO Center in Turin have run an initiative called "A Kick to Racism: Play with me" aimed at helping children seven to ten years old from poor families to integrate into a group through sports. It has school programs, too, and grants scholarships for projects in favor of integration. UNESCO lauded this initiative as the best project in 2014 for its originality and effectiveness.

This year Juventus FC and UNESCO Center of Turin included our project "Football for Peace" in their event and hosted our Peace Dreamers through their program thanks to the mayor of Turin, who acted as the patron of the initiative, and to my being a member of the UNESCO Center.

The Juventus team coaches organized a professional set of games with mixed teams of Italian, Arab-Israeli and Jewish-Israeli boys. It was great fun for all and in the end, the hosts -- Juventus FC, WFWP and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) -- presented trophies and awards to all the children that participated.



Stark divisions exist generally between Jewish-Israelis and Arab Israelis, but despite this and not having a common language, the boys bonded while in Italy.

FC Turin, third day

The day began with a soccer tournament at the facilities of FC Turin, one of the top league clubs in Italy. This time the Peace Dreamers came up against a more difficult challenge as the Italian boys were trained players associated with the club. Pouring rain did not prevent friendly games from being played throughout the morning.

Mr. Giorgio Gasperoni, president of UPF-San Marino, who was instrumental in bringing the project to fruition, came to the event along with his son David. All the children were able to keep the full set of FC Turin club uniforms that they had used for the games as well as a soccer ball.

In the afternoon, after a long wait in the rain and cold, the gates opened for yet another highlight, the Juventus versus Genoa game -- the real thing! The boys were shivering from both cold and excitement and did not miss the opportunity to buy souvenir items from the winning team, Juventus.

Visit to UN facilities

On the fourth day, we went to the UN Campus to visit two organizations, the UNESCO Turin Center and the United Nations Interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute (UNICRI), which has its global headquarters in Turin. Since its creation in 1968, UNICRI's purview has expanded beyond crime and now

includes peace building. Lessening tensions in the Middle East is important to them; thus, they had a strong interest in our project.

Jonathan Lucas, UNICRI's director, had invited us to their facility. Dr. Lucas said he wanted to meet the delegation. Somewhat spontaneously, he asked the boys to write or draw something on the topic of "peace." That turned out to be a deeply satisfying event for the boys and all the rest of us.

Next on our agenda was a visit to a Muslim community of around fifty thousand inhabitants in Torino. At the Mosque, the imam gave the group an orientation and some traditional sweets. From there, we went to visit a high security Jewish compound. The community embraced the boys on short notice, providing lunch, followed by a spontaneous soccer match involving almost all the students in the entire school... The visit concluded with going through their impressive synagogue, which serves as a miniature museum for Jewish history.

Late in the afternoon, the team had the opportunity to play with the children of a village, Antico Borgoretto, for their local football tournament. The families of the children in Borgoretto prepared a wonderful welcome, with cakes and salads made especially for the Peace Dreamers.

The parents in this area are aware of the fact that a good relationship among children, families and teachers and coaches makes a difference in the education of the future leaders of our societies.



The Israeli team (in blue) played local Italian soccer teams.

An Alpine welcome

Day by day, the Muslim and Jewish children grew closer, sharing games on their cell phones and being scolded together when they exerted too much energy. On our fifth day, the team traveled to the lovely village of Bruzolo, Province of Turin, in the Piedmont Region. Just beside the snowy Alps, down in a valley, a warm community welcomed our delegation.

The mayor and a teacher of Italian literature showed the delegation around the two-story building that serves as both the city hall and the primary school.

The local children were utterly excited to see us and had a list of questions written in English. The Q and A session had of course to go through Arabic and Hebrew. The family restaurant served vegetarian food, the closest approximation to halal or kosher food, which the children ate together with all the dignitaries in town.

Finally, the big moment came and the soccer tournament with the Italian children began. Despite the rain and bitter cold wind from the mountains, all played enthusiastically and then devoured homemade pizza and cookies offered at the end of the games.

The final day of the visit, provided yet another highlight. The boys were treated to an exclusive peek at

the training session of the famous players on Torino FC. They even managed to take a few photographs together with the players. Torino FC, gave the Peace Dreamers the opportunity to meet children their age and gave the boys the unique opportunity of participating in training with their squad, behind closed doors, under Mr. Ventura, the coach.

Next, came a visit to the sports museum at the Olympic stadium, followed by a special soccer tournament organized by the Torino FC Youth Department.

The mayor of Turin, Dr. Piero Fassino, opened the games with Dr. Giovanni Maria Ferraris, a member of the Sports Council for the Piedmont Region. In attendance were also Mr. Carlo Zonato, the UPF-Italy president and his wife whose support of the project was essential.

Four mixed teams did their best despite drizzling rain and all joined in the closing ceremony. Mrs. Sabrina Gonzatto, the key coordinator with the Italian teams, choked back tears when receiving an ambassador of peace certificate prior to delivering the medals and trophies to the enthusiastic children.

The day ended with a farewell party prepared by students for the boys. Fun games went on well into the night, leaving the children with little time to pack all the presents they had received and take a short nap prior to their journey home.

Upon their return, the teachers decided to continue the friendships created between the children and scheduled future meetings.

Background on the project

The first act of this project occurred last September, when I decided to meet the mayor of Turin with a small delegation from Israel including, among others, Mr. Hod Ben-Zvi and Dr. Glaubach, of UPF Israel, and Dr. Giorgio Gasperoni of UPF San Marino. In that moment, we decided to present the project to the mayor, who immediately offered to sponsor it, considering that Torino is the European Capital of Sport 2015.

The mayor himself asked us to bring the delegation in March 2015. At that time, I had no idea of what the project required in terms of time, people and especially money, but we were aware of the large investment of the local members.

My personal interest was to involve the UN Campus somehow and to insert in the program some interfaith events. Everything was decided during the last week, even with the delegation already in Turin. Without knowing anybody I was able to fix a meeting with the local person responsible for the Union of the Islamic Communities in Italy, just half an hour before meeting with the Jewish Community's board of directors. I was deeply touched by how well they received and cared for the boys.

Another important factor media coverage. Thanks to a recent WFWP contact, Ms. Sabrina Gonzatto, writer and journalist, we had the opportunity to get in touch with the owners (two women) of the press office MAYBE, who offered their support free of charge and did an incredible job. People from local and national radio stations called us every day. Journalists from local and national newspapers and from local television stations interviewed various members of the entourage.

Despite the fact that a project involving football is usually considered under UPF, the reality in Turin is that most of the contacts with institutions and local government have been made by WFWP, so we decided to go forward under that organization and opened a new WFWP chapter in Torino.

We immediately informed new contacts made through WFWP, including Dr. Maria Paola Azzario, president of the UNESCO Torino Center and president of all the Italian UNESCO Clubs, and other important women involved in different areas of society about the possibility to be part of an important project related to peace in the Middle East and the Mediterranean. Ensuring the realization of the project took about five months due to the sluggishness of the sports councilor in the Torino municipality and uncertainty over the money necessary for the project.

Two weeks after the departure of the Peace Dreamers, we still have no idea of the total cost of the entire project. The municipality of Turin offered a bus for transportation during the eight days of the project, free entrance at the National Museum of Automobiles, the National Museum of Cinema and the National Museum of Sports, as well as use of the pressroom at the Olympic Stadium of Turin. It played the main role in arrangements with the hostel and with the management of Juventus FC.

Juventus FC, Torino FC, Union Valle di Susa FC, Palio dei Quartieri and CIT TURIN donated to each child a full set of sports equipment. Additionally, Juventus donated twenty-five tickets for their match against Genoa.

The Turin Marathon offered the hostel for the eighteen members of the delegation from Israel at half price. Naturando, a maker of health and beauty products, FFWPU Turin, UPF San Marino and UPF Ticino donated the cost of the air tickets. Mr. Mr. Sergio Coscia, of UPF Torino, guided the group and took beautiful photographs.

Where we go from here

This was just the first step of the project, the medium-term goal of which is to build a soccer academy dedicated to promoting peace. The next step involves our sending one or two coaches for special training in Israel. We will then prepare a seven-day workshop for ten to fifteen coaches from Israel that we will hold here in Italy.

This experience gave all of us the opportunity to gain a better understanding of cultural differences and the preciousness of the essential human desire to care for others in the world as brothers and sisters, part of the same large family under God.

Football for Peace is a program to help bring opposing groups together in friendly games on the soccer pitch; most often Football for Peace takes place in the Middle East.