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Kids from Morocco, Afghanistan, Yemen, West Bank flock to unique Israeli school

Out of the limelight, an experimental boarding school has sprung up outside Tel Aviv, drawing students from 60 countries, many on full scholarship

BY SIMONA WEINGLASS | February 20, 2016, 4:12 pm |

When hi-tech executive Oded Rose was 16, he received the opportunity of a lifetime. The son of an art teacher and merchant naval officer, his middle-class family could never have afforded to send him to private school. But the young Israeli by chance heard about Pearson College, a two-year boarding school in Canada that offers scholarships to students around the world to study toward the prestigious International Baccalaureate diploma.

Pearson College is part of the little-known United World Colleges movement, a network of 15 schools founded by a German educator in 1962 with the goal of bringing people of different nationalities together to foster peace and prevent further tragedies like World War II. Rose was the only Israeli at the school, but there was also an Egyptian, a Palestinian as well as students from Europe and the Americas. After graduation, Rose returned to Israel to join the army, but his experience at Pearson stayed with him.

“I was 25 when I said to myself, ‘a school like this that teaches peace. We should have one here in Israel, where we really need peace.’”

Twenty-five years later, with little fanfare or publicity, Rose has made his dream a reality.

A year and a half ago he opened EMIS, the Eastern Mediterranean International School, on the campus of Kfar Hayarok, an agricultural youth village located between Tel Aviv and Ramat Hasharon. The school currently hosts 140 students, 20 percent of whom are Israeli Jews and Arabs, 20 percent of whom are Palestinians or citizens of Arab and Muslim countries, with the remaining 60 percent hailing from lands as diverse as Germany, Cambodia, New Zealand, China and Ecuador. Almost all students receive full or partial scholarships, says Rose, funded by Israel’s Ministry of Education, foundations, and private donors. Almost none of the non-Israeli students are Jewish, and there are even students from Afghanistan, Venezuela and Yemen,

countries with which Israel has no diplomatic relations.

School spirit

On a balmy Thursday afternoon in February, EMIS students and staff are cheering and shouting a faculty vs. student match in the bleachers of Kfar Hayarok's soccer field. Students chat with each other in English, but occasional snippets of Chinese and Arabic can be overheard. Some wear shiny blue soccer jerseys emblazoned with their names, others sport t-shirts with the words "Peace and Sustainability," the twin mottos of the school, in English, Hebrew and Arabic.

Maayan Agmon, a student from Israel, says she applied for EMIS after spending a year in Russia, where her mother was an Israeli diplomat.

"I had a choice of going back to my old school or continuing with the international education. There is an American International School in Israel that is very expensive. Here, I got a 90 percent scholarship, so it's \$3,000 a year as opposed to \$30,000. Also, I liked the school's mission, of promoting peace and sustainability through education."

EMIS appears, to all intents and purposes, to be an elite boarding school, combining rigorous academics with small classrooms, sports, extracurriculars and access to the libraries and classrooms of Tel Aviv University. Some 12th graders in the program have already been accepted to prestigious universities like MIT and Yale. Rose says that full tuition is in fact \$30,000 a year, but only a handful of the 140 students pay this amount. One-quarter of students receive full scholarships, another half get 70 to 80 percent of their costs covered and almost all students receive some assistance. Even without media exposure, 250 students from around the world applied for EMIS's 2015-16 school year, its second year of operation. Only 70 of these applicants were accepted.

Rose says for most of the students at EMIS, the draw isn't necessarily Israel, but the opportunity to get a first-rate education at a relatively affordable cost.

"There aren't many schools that offer the International Baccalaureate at high level and offer scholarships to do it, so a lot of people who can't afford to pay \$40,000 or \$50,000 come here."

Maya Kogan, the school's admissions director, says that prospective students tend also to be interested in world affairs and drawn to the school's mission. "Our branding is that it's an opportunity to live in the Middle East with both Israelis and Palestinians and have an academic and social experience."

Although EMIS has not yet been accepted by the United World College movement, the movement's ethos informs the school, and many students were recruited to EMIS through referrals by the UWC.

In response to a question on Quora, "How are United World Colleges different from other international schools?" one respondent wrote: "International schools offer a more mainstream education and I developed a habit of following American TV shows, fashion trends, and celebrities."

Most UWCers live and breathe the idea that 'UWC makes education a force to unite people, nations and cultures for peace and a sustainable future'. So much so that the debates about fair trade school T-shirt suppliers, installing shower timers to conserve water and ethical treatment of canteen workers would drag heatedly on as everyone had their say."

No stamp on their passport

Near the soccer field, several Palestinian students and an Afghani student decline an interview, saying they are not sure how people at home will react to their studying in Israel.

But Dana, from Ramallah, is happy to chat. The young woman, who hopes to study fashion design and international business at an American university said that for a long time she harbored plans of studying for the IB as opposed to a Palestinian diploma.

"When I got the scholarship I was so excited and my parents were more excited than me. We visited the school; they told me to go."

Dana said that studying in Israel is not a big deal for her as she has entered Israeli territory many times, either on school trips or to visit relatives in Jerusalem.

"I was in a private school, and most of my classmates have come here. In the area where I live, people don't mind much, they don't care. But there are areas of Palestine where people would be more against it."

Asked if the experience of studying at EMIS is what she expected, Dana replies, "It's more than that, it means so much to me."

Muhammed, from Sana'a, Yemen, says he heard about EMIS from an Israeli friend he met abroad.

"In Yemen I've been active in community service, environmentalism and human rights since the age of 14. My friend said she could see me going to EMIS."

Because Yemen does not have diplomatic relations with Israel, Muhammed travelled to a third country to obtain a visa. Israeli border control is careful not to stamp his passport when he travels home, which is a moot point at present, since there is a civil war raging in the country and the airport is closed.

Muhammed says that before he came to Israel, he knew it would be developed, but expected the country to be more religious and stricter than he found it to be.

"When I go outside campus, to Tel Aviv, at first people are shocked and surprised. They say, 'No way you're from Yemen — are you a Jew or do you have another passport? And I say, no, I'm from Yemen. But afterwards they believe it and are really welcoming."

A bulb in the darkness

Oded Rose lives on Hakfar Hayarok's campus. He is not the school's pedagogic principal, but the CEO of the foundation that founded the school. Nevertheless, he often eats dinner with students in the youth village's kibbutz-style dining hall or takes part in their evening activities. EMIS students live and mingle with students from the much larger Kfar Hayarok boarding school, which has evolved over the last ten years from a school for underprivileged youth to one of the country's best and most selective educational institutions.

After his army service, Rose obtained a Master's degree in medical research from Tel Aviv University and an MBA from Wharton, and has spent 30 years in Israel's high-tech industry, most recently as CEO of Flow Industries, which develops technologies for water, oil and gas well stimulation. But six years ago, at the age of 45, Rose said to himself, "In five years I will be 50, I had better get on with my dream."

Rose approached the Ministry of Education and the Foreign Ministry about creating a school along the lines of the one he attended as a teenager in Canada. Both ministries were very enthusiastic, he says.

"It's not propaganda for Israel," he stresses. "The idea was to bring people together, to change preconceived ideas about people we don't know. Israelis rarely have a chance to meet Arabs, and Arabs don't meet Israelis except if they're soldiers with guns. There is a lack of information and lack of opportunity to meet each other. When you meet in a setting like this, you are a person, not an enemy. You can speak to each other even if you don't agree."

Rose said it was important to him that his school be multilateral rather than bilateral — not just Palestinians and Israelis, or Arabs and Jews.

"It's international, it's not just about the conflict. You don't talk about the conflict all the time and live the conflict. It's defusing the whole conflict issue, and people just become people: Mohamed and Roey and Sofia."

Rose says that if he can raise the money, he hopes to open several more schools like EMIS throughout Israel, with the first two planned for Givat Haviva and Jerusalem.

"It's like a lightbulb in the darkness. Things have become pretty bleak around here. If we have a few more bulbs, it's better than not having anything. In the dark, even a small bulb can be seen from afar."

But the school is not without its critics. In 2013, Shaul Amsterdamski wrote in the *Calcalist* financial daily that the planned EMIS school would offer, at taxpayer expense, conditions and opportunities that most Israeli high school students can only dream of: small class sizes, top-notch instruction, and a fast-track to the global upper class. Amsterdamski predicted that the presence of this school, and others like it, in Israel will spur the Israeli elite to abandon the public education system for institutions that offer bells and whistles like the IB.

"The International Baccalaureate is the winning ticket that will attract the best sons and daughters of the upper class," wrote Amsterdamski. "It is their exit ticket to the wider world. Finish high

school, my child, get your International Baccalaureate, take the foreign passport that mommy and daddy carefully prepared for you, and you're set. Good luck, don't forget to write home, and don't worry, we'll pay your college tuition abroad."

Defenders say that competition from private schools will raise the standards of Israeli education as a whole.

Happy, engaged and ambitious

Later in the evening, this reporter interrupts a few 11th graders playing "Capture the flag" to ask them what students at EMIS are like.

"We came here being the best in our schools," says Gebri Mishtaku, a Christian from Albania, whose dream is to get into MIT and become a mathematician. "Some kept their status; some are trying to keep it."

Mishtaku says the student body is very diverse, but if there's one thing that unites the students, it's that their ordinary schools back home seemed too small for their imaginations and aspirations.

"Some of us want to become politicians, some want to be scientists and mathematicians, like me. We're interested in politics and current issues, in higher ideals, in the bigger picture."

Nasma, from Marrakesh in Morocco, says that she had been involved with a group called United Youth Journalists, where students wrote about global issues and what was happening in their own countries.

"I really liked the atmosphere in that group. Through them I heard about EMIS."

Miriam Azem-gal, from a mixed Jewish-Arab background, said it wasn't easy leaving her Hebrew-speaking school in Haifa to take high-level courses in English. But the more she learned about the school, the more she felt it was for her. Azem-gal is taking high-level courses in math, physics and English and hopes to attend university in Canada.

Asked if she has a lot of homework, Azem-gal laughs, "I'll probably be working all weekend. I have three tests next week."

On top of their academics and sports, students at EMIS do community service projects like volunteering at the ARDC center for African refugees in Tel Aviv and tutoring children in the Arab village of Jasr A'zarka.

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"These students feel like they're part of something bigger than themselves, that they're making a real difference" says Rose.

But Mishtaku, the Albanian student, says that despite appearances to the contrary, EMIS students are not happy and engaged *all* the time.

“What surprised me is that sometimes we don’t get along,” he says, pointing to cliques in the school and situations where some students talk too loudly at night.

“We’re human, after all. We still have clashes and drama. We’re teenagers.”

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