



THE LANGUAGE OF EXPANDED HORIZONS

by Adam Sella

AS THE SON OF AN ISRAELI IMMIGRANT, I GREW UP SPEAKING BOTH HEBREW AND ENGLISH IN A MULTICULTURAL HOUSEHOLD. WHEN I WAS IN THIRD GRADE, MY PARENTS ENROLLED ME IN A PUBLIC GERMAN LANGUAGE IMMERSION SCHOOL. I SPENT FOUR YEARS STUDYING GERMAN AT THAT SCHOOL AND CONTINUE TO STUDY GERMAN TO THIS DAY. IN SEVENTH GRADE, I BEGAN STUDYING LATIN AS WELL. ALL OF THESE EXPERIENCES INSTILLED IN ME A LOVE AND RESPECT FOR LANGUAGES. WHEN I SPOKE TO PEOPLE IN THEIR OWN LANGUAGE, I FOUND THEM OPEN TO ME IN A WAY THAT THEY WEREN'T WHEN I SPOKE IN ENGLISH. I SAW HOW SPEAKING FOREIGN LANGUAGES DISSOLVES BARRIERS AND OPENS DOORS TO NEW CULTURES AND PEOPLE.

During the summers of my childhood, Israel was a paradise where I visited my relatives, swam at the beach, and just relaxed. As I grew up, however, I began to understand the complicated political situation between the Jews and the Arabs. While visiting Israel in 2014, I started to follow the national debate about Arabic language studies in Jewish Israeli schools. I was surprised to learn that Israel does not put more emphasis on teaching kids to speak Arabic. As a 15-year-old, it seemed to me that if people were able to communicate in each other's language, there would be more understanding. So that summer, I enrolled in a six-week Arabic course for Hebrew speakers at Tel Aviv University. This was the hardest course I had ever taken and I barely passed it, but still I enjoyed learning Arabic.

When I returned to school in the fall, I learned about the National Security Language Initiative for Youth (NSLI-Y), a U.S. State Department scholarship program in which American high school students study security languages abroad in an immersion setting. The prospect of being immersed in Arab culture while learning Arabic made applying a no-brainer. I had an interview after being selected as a semifinalist; then, in April, I found out that I was accepted. I would spend six weeks in Rabat, Morocco, studying Arabic intensively with 17 other NSLI-Y students while living with a Moroccan host family.

Local Time

Those six weeks were some of the best of my life. On a typical day, I would get up and meet two friends and take a taxi to school. We studied at Qalam wa Lawh, a villa-turned-school with an expansive garden and a camel-skin tent. After four hours of class, we would relax in the yard, studying and talking while eating a delicious lunch of tajine (a Moroccan stew) or couscous. After lunch, we sometimes took excursions to interesting sites in Rabat, but most days we were left to occupy ourselves. This meant walking in the medina (the old city), swimming at the beach, exploring the city, or simply napping in the tent at Qalam.



Relaxing under the camel-skin tent at Qalam



One of the main streets of the medina (the old city).

In the evenings, I would help my family with dinner preparations; after dinner, I either watched soccer with my host dad or soap operas in Arabic with my host sisters and mother. I enjoyed these routine evenings because I got to practice the Arabic I had learned that day and I indulged in and helped create amazing food.

In addition to the bliss of daily life, a few other vivid memories have stuck with me. When I arrived in Morocco, I felt acutely aware of my otherness. I knew very little Arabic and was ignorant of the societal norms and customs, and my white skin and bad accent made me stick out. However, as time passed, this feeling faded. One night during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, about three weeks into my stay, I decided to stay out and wander in the medina. It was nearly midnight, but since everyone stays up late during Ramadan, the streets were teeming with people and action. With darkness masking my pale skin, I was pushed by those behind me and pressed into those in front of me, part of the stream of people flowing through the windy streets. I felt an incredible sense of belonging.

In those six weeks, I experienced time differently. A guide at an archaeology museum told me that in America there are watches, but in Morocco there is time. Having just completed a stressful sophomore year consumed by school and homework, the Moroccan sense of time appealed to me. "Moroccan time" was how we NSLIers described the sense that time flows at a rate that conforms to one's needs. On Moroccan time, I found that I had time to think, time to eat, time to observe, time to talk, time to listen, and time to learn without ever feeling rushed.

I especially took advantage of Moroccan time with my fellow NSLIers. Every day after school, a troupe of us headed to the medina, whether it was to buy a *jalaba* (a traditional robe) or to try out a *falafel* stand. Once we tired of walking through the bustling *souk* (outdoor market), we headed back to my house, where we would sit and talk for hours. I had traveled to Rabat expecting to learn about Morocco, but conversations with my fellow NSLIers, who came from different backgrounds and different parts of the country—from remote rural areas of Idaho and South Dakota to major metropolitan areas such as New York and Philadelphia—taught me so much about my own country.

Countries within Countries

I returned from Morocco to the unfolding Syrian refugee crisis. The cold, isolationist stance the U.S. took (agreeing to accept only 10,000 Syrian refugees when millions needed help, and many governors barring refugees from their states) jarred against the welcoming experience I'd had in Morocco. I felt that I had a responsibility to help. At the same time, I was inspired by two friends from NSLI-Y, one from Wisconsin and one from Idaho, who had helped Arab refugee families in their communities and were active in bringing awareness to the problem.

I expected it to be easy to volunteer. I emailed refugee aid organizations in my hometown of Cincinnati and went to my local mosque to offer my help, but I was either told that I was too young or that someone would get back to me (they never did). I also learned from a newspaper article that most of the refugees in Cincinnati were not from Arabic-speaking countries, which meant I didn't have the language skills to help in the way I'd hoped.

Despite these initial disappointments, I started an organization through my high school: Students Together Assisting Refugees (STAR), dedicated to addressing issues refugees face and spreading awareness about the crisis. Once I had an official organization of about 20 members behind me, those same groups that had previously turned me away responded enthusiastically to my emails about organizing projects to aid Cincinnati's refugee population.

Reaching Farther

One of the most pressing needs of resettled refugees is an "extended welcome." When refugees are resettled in the United States, the government provides resources for the first 90 days, including rent,

basic household items, and services that help with finding jobs and learning English. Though some of these resources continue past the 90 days, this resettlement program is generally too short for these refugees, many of whom don't know any English upon arrival, to become self-sufficient and acclimated to their new environment. Since the inception of STAR, we have worked to extend the 90-day government welcome.

Our first event was a school assembly where two refugees from Bhutan shared their heart-wrenching and inspiring stories. We later organized a public showing of *The Good Lie*, a movie about Sudanese refugees in the U.S. This event not only increased awareness about the hardships faced by the Lost Boys of Sudan but also served as a fundraiser for refugee academic scholarships. We also organized a drive to collect bathroom items that we donated to 266 refugee families in Cincinnati; and more recently, STAR members began tutoring and playing with refugee children at a nearby public elementary school. In the coming year, we hope to extend STAR to other high schools to increase student involvement across the country.

My involvement in STAR has not yet made it possible for me to use my Arabic; however, this summer, I will travel to Germany for three weeks to volunteer with an organization that helps unaccompanied minors arriving from Syria acclimate and settle in Germany. I am really excited to be able to use my Arabic and German to help. Though I am going alone this year, I hope to develop a program to bring American high school students to Germany next summer to help at the epicenter of the global refugee crisis.

My experiences with NSLI-Y and my involvement with STAR have reinforced to me the gravity of the refugee crisis and have shown me that, sadly, Americans still seem to care very little about this issue. I am profoundly grateful to NSLI-Y for expanding my horizons, showing me a path to help address a global issue, and giving me the confidence and determination to make a difference in my community. ■



Adam Sella is a senior at Walnut Hills High School in Cincinnati, OH. Apart from his involvement in STAR, he participates in his school's Model U.N. club and Academic Quiz team, and serves as student body president. Adam loves reading, cooking, traveling, playing sports with his friends, and going to Cincinnati Shakespeare Company productions.



STAR members volunteering in the after-school program at a local elementary school

Learn how to start a STAR club in your community at StarRefugees.org or send email to info@starrefugees.org.
Learn more about NSLI-Y at www.nsliforyouth.org.