

Armenians and Me

It is all happened because of curiosity and the girls from the Armenian Quarter: Kyanie, Nanar, Tania, and Nairy.

At the beginning of the summer camp the four introduced themselves as coming from the Armenian Quarter in the old city, and when they told us their names I felt right away that I was going to like them – and the fact they came from such a different culture stirred my curiosity. These girls are different, I said to myself. How different and amazing they are, I still didn't know, but that was one of the mysteries I wanted to discover at the camp.

And my quest was to discover who these girls are. First, I noticed that they spoke a strange language - I didn't understand a word. Where is Armenia? I asked myself. How do the people live there? Do they eat hummus like us? Do they live in old stone cities like us in Jerusalem? Even more perplexing was that the girls are Armenians and live among Armenians, all in their own quarter in Jerusalem, so near and yet so exotic and foreign.

With all these questions flying around my mind, just imagine how excited I was when they invited us to visit the Armenian monastery (where they live). I barely slept that night thinking about. I felt like we were jumping on a plane and going to the other end of the world.

Kyanie, Nanar, Tania, and Nairy met us at the youth center and guided us to their home. The walk from the youth center near Damascus Gate to the monastery in took ten minutes. We passed from Khan al-Zeet market to the Christian quarter, and after that we continued to Al Sharf (the Israelis called it the Jewish Quarter).

Finally we arrived to the Armenian Quarter. The first thing I noticed passing through a stone doorway leading into the monastery were two men wearing a special red costume and what looked like a tarbush hat on their heads. Written into stone in the Armenian language was a sign that looked important. What is that? I pointed. Nanar read it to us: "Armenians are exempt from paying taxes." Which sounded good even though I still don't know what it means exactly.

Inside the monastery a new world opened up, a place with amazing Armenian architecture and carved stone windows, arches, and walls. Up a flight of stairs we went. From the top I looked into the houses and courtyards and one thing stood out: so many flowers and plants. The Armenians sure love beauty.

Nairy took us to the roof of her house. Sitting up there she told us stories about the Armenians. One by one my questions began to be answered: how and when they arrived from Armenia. (Where Armenia is!) How they built the monastery so long ago. What happened to them during World War One.

Down the stairs we then went. This time we headed to where Nanar's grandmother lives. She fed us cupcakes and we drank tea, and after she told of more stories before we had to go back to the youth center.

I am happy because my curiosity pushed me to know other people with other cultures like the Armenians. One fact I learned was this: These people are Palestinian and have a Palestinian culture, but they also have their own culture. That's one thing I learned to love about Jerusalem. You can be more than one thing.

Samar