

## **ISRAEL – GERMANY : Evolving basis of a special relationship**

My first visit to Israel occurred in April 1967, 45 years ago. Israel had applied for an association treaty with the EC at that time. The mighty Histadruth wanted to know more about the EC and the possible consequences of an association for the Labor Movement. They had invited a small group of European trade union leaders and I served as the secretary of the group.

During our trip we came to Kibbutz Ginosar and its beautiful guest house. In the early morning I was sitting on a bench below the palm trees to have a smoke. All of a sudden I heard two female voices from a bench behind me, speaking German, more precisely, conversing in pure Cologne dialect. I turned around, eager to make contact. And then I noticed that one of the ladies wore the forearm tattoo with her Auschwitz number. I was so shaken that I lost all courage to address them.

On another day we visited Yad Vashem, which had been opened not long ago. Deepest emotion here, as well. And two years later, when I revisited Yad Vashem with my boss, EC-Vice President Haferkamp, he fainted while trying to light the eternal fire.

On Arlosoroff Street in Tel Aviv we visited the headquarters of Histadruth, had long discussions with General Secretary Aaron Becker and received a wonderful book, "Man and his work", which documented and praised the multifold achievements of ordinary Israeli working people. We visited the cement factory and the harbor in Haifa, Kibbutz Givat Brenner, a Tnuva Export orange shipping facility and the Dead Sea Works down in the desert.

On the slopes of the Eastern shore of Lake Kinneret we saw the dug-in Syrian tanks, always ready to fire at the Kibbutzniks of Tel Katzir working in their fields down below. And when we visited the Dormition church in Jerusalem, Jordanian soldiers looked down at us grimly from its tower.

An official meeting with Prime Minister Levi Eshkol constituted THE highlight of our trip. In stifling heat we were waiting for him in a meeting room without any air-conditioning. A man, apparently a technician, came in and was organizing the table, the microphone and a glass of water. But then this "technician" turned around, looked at us and said: "My name is Levi Eshkol. It is a pleasure to meet you".

And a last of so many memories of this first trip to Israel. We visited the Knesseth, accompanied by an official from your Ministry of Foreign Affairs, meticulously dressed in his formal attire and with a fine leather briefcase. Our Egg-ed bus driver told him that he wanted to accompany us. The diplomat formally refused, looking at the shorts, sandals and rumpled shirt of the driver. I was so angry about this refusal that I stayed with the driver on the bus. He then told me that he had been a MK himself for a couple of years, member of Moshe Dayan's party. When the group came back, he flatly told the diplomat: "You will not enter the bus". The diplomat got very upset: "Do you know whom you are dealing with?". The bus driver:" Well, you are officially

accompanying this group. You may be entitled to decide who enters the Kneseth. But this is my bus, and I decide who will board it". He closed the door. And there he was, Yohanan Meroz, standing in the glaring sun right in front of the big Menorah. Yohanan has become an outstanding representative of the State of Israel and a first-class ambassador to Germany. When we discussed the matter many years afterwards, we were even able to laugh about it.

Only few weeks later Israel had to go to war, the Six-days-war, as it was called later on. On the third day of this war, a solidarity march was held in Brussels, where I lived. More than 20.000 people went down into the streets. The good news coming from the battle fronts made us all happy and jubilant. And when a poor Algerian in his traditional garb tried to cross the street, nobody got angry in any way. He was let through with laughter and jokes.

Why am I telling all these little stories?

Well, they are dear to my heart, of course. But in a way, they describe the initial basis on which the Israel – Germany relationship was built on the German side.

There was our common history. There was, towering over anything else, the Holocaust. There was our deep shame, even if we had grown up after the war or, like many German Trade Union leaders, had suffered from the Nazi atrocities. And there was a growing awareness of our everlasting responsibility.

There was "pioneer Israel". We all remember the years when you knew exactly where the border was to be found while the plane approached Ben Gurion airport. Where the land was green, it was Israel. Where it was barren, it was the West Bank.

There was a vibrant democracy, where stiff formality had no place and irreverence could be experienced almost every day.

And there was Israel, the "David", opposed to an Arab "Goliath" of seemingly overwhelming proportion.

Let me come to the late Seventies. At that time I had a repeated professional contact with one of the most remarkable men I have met in my life and one of Israel's unsung heroes: Nathan Dror, or Nathan Schwalb, as he was called in his youth. Nathan and I tried to find a solution for some major unsettled restitution problems touching several Jewish socialist organizations in Nazi-occupied Germany. Nathan brought me to Kibbutz Hulda, one of the oldest in the country, which he had been a co-founder of. In a tiny room, filled with books from the bottom to the ceiling, I met Amos Oz, already a well-known writer at that time. This was the beginning of a wonderful friendship, which lasts to this very day.

I mention this because many, thousands of Germans have met their Amos Oz over the decades. Dozens of partnerships between cities of both countries, sports, cultural exchange and scientific cooperation helped building personal friendship.

And in this way personal friendship underpinned the basis of a solid and fruitful relationship between our two countries.

But it was Amos who pointed out to me the grave dangers and multifold damages resulting from an ongoing occupation of West Bank and Gaza. And with the Lebanon campaign of the Eighties the old image of "David Israel" had gone. In the public perception of many Western countries, Germany included, the Palestinians seemed

to have become the new “David”, even for those who had no particular sympathy for Arafat and his companions.

The situation got more complicated due to developments in both our countries. In Israel the “First Intifada” had changed the general mood from optimism to a cautiousness, in which the need for security became overwhelming. The political center moved to the Right, and the growing assertiveness of the settlers and the haredim was not always easy to understand. In Germany the personal memories of the Nazi era had faded; many of my compatriots did not accept a historic responsibility when the personal guilt had gone. The arrogant “Anti-Zionism” of left-wing academics all too often turned into Anti-Semitism of the bourgeois middle classes.

And the media did what they so regularly do: Build and strengthen prejudice. Another personal memory:

When the first Iraq war broke out and Saddam sent his Scud missiles I took, like quite a few friends of mine, the next plane to Israel. I simply wanted to be with my friends. At the end of the trip I visited the German ambassador in his office high up in a Tel Aviv high rise. In the street, accompanied by television and video cameras, there was a “spontaneous” demonstration of some 50 people, attacking Germany because of a perceived collusion with the Saddam regime. They protested because the ambassador did not discuss with them. I got my friend Otto von der Gablentz, who was completely unaware of the demonstration many floors below, to come down with me to start such a discussion.

But when we left the building, the demonstrators had already folded their slogans and were ready to go home. The reason: the TV teams had left the scene. Oh yes, when analyzing the Israeli-German relationship, the role of the media on both sides would deserve a special chapter!

Later on German media correspondents in Israel told me that it had become increasingly difficult to publish in-depth and differentiated articles. Almost everything had to deal with enmity, blood and the tears of Palestinian mothers. And when I read “Ha’aretz” and the “Jerusalem Post” during my visits I am stunned by the choice of topics concerning Germany as well.

During the last two decades the Israeli-German relationship has seen its ups and its downs.

German Presidents, Chancellors and Foreign Ministers have unwaveringly stood by Israel, Angela Merkel making it even a part of our own state’s *raison d’être*. Prime Minister Olmert broke a taboo when he declared that Israel would not be opposed to a German military presence in the framework of international peace keeping forces in the area. And when I look down to Haifa harbor from my room in Dan Carmel the submarines lying there remind me of a special relationship, indeed.

Be it trade, investment, science or cultural exchange: the links between our two countries have become dense and solid. What is perhaps the most important feature of these links: They have become so normal that nobody makes a fuss about them anymore. (Story of the young lady in Herzlyia – Ra’anana).

On the other hand it is precisely this normalcy, which constitutes a problem as well. We care less about Israel than we once did. Many Germans are interested only if something extraordinary happens and is widely published in the media, TV in particular. The assassination of Itzhak Rabin comes to my mind, the Hezbollah and

Hamas missile attacks on the North and on Sderot, the ensuing campaigns in Lebanon and the Gaza strip, the big fire on Mount Carmel and Ahmadinejad's dangerous idiocies. There have been extensive reports and comments about the so-called "Arab spring", almost none of them probed into the ambiguous nature of this development and into the potential shifts of power resulting from it.

On the Israeli side public opinion has become a lot more inward-looking over the last years. The central importance of Israel's alliance with the United States has put Europe and Germany to the back burner. And - at least until last summer - your strong economic performance has led to an assertiveness, which is not taken well everywhere beyond your borders.

When, for instance, we ask for support for Haifa University in our non-Jewish German environment, we are often asked: "Why that? Israel is doing extremely well, and the Netanyahu government knows everything better anyhow".

Such developments on both sides may lead to dangerous consequences.

Last week the „Stern“, an influential German magazine published an opinion – poll in the wake of Federal President Gaucks visit to Israel. The results are sobering even if we bring the necessary qualifications to them:

70% of those polled agreed with the following phrase: "Israel is pursuing its interests without taking those of other people into consideration"

59% see Israel as an "aggressive country"

53% see Israel as a "fascinating country to travel to", but only 36% find it a "sympathetic country".

It thus is high time to actively consider the anchors of our special relationship, a good but never a normal one. It remains our German duty to keep our historic responsibility awake and to remember that Israel still is the only democracy around, firmly based on the Rule of Law. Your friends in Germany and elsewhere in Europe will continue to be on the side of the "Jewish state", provided that Jewishness is not defined as an exclusivity, be it a religious, ethnic or narrow historical one. That is why the relationship between Jewish and Arab Israelis is so important for us, that is why I think that our University is always faced with a particular challenge.

As far as the Israeli side is concerned I am not equipped to give a gratuitous advice. You know as well as I do that image-building remains necessary and should be improved. And you know that you cannot just produce a positive image but that it has to reflect realities.

Let me conclude with a last personal memory, dating back to my first visit in 1967.

Before leaving for Israel, the then President of the German Trade Unions, Ludwig Rosenberg, asked to see me in his Düsseldorf office. Rosenberg had had to emigrate to Great Britain in 1933. He had many friends in Israel and in the Jewish community. And he had a problem:

The Central Committee of Histadruth had decided a few years earlier that they would visit Germany only if all the Committee members voted in favor. There was one member whose whole family had been murdered in the Holocaust who refused. Rosenberg asked me to try to change this member's position. "You are young and eloquent enough to give it a try", he said. Well, young enough I was – 29 years old.

But I doubted my eloquence when I sat opposite this trade unionist in his office on Arlosoroff Street. I was nervous, lots of coffee and orange juice did nothing to calm

me down. I saw my vis-à-vis only as a silhouette, because he had placed me in such a way that I had to look at the white-washed walls of the Teachers' Union building on the opposite side of the street. After five minutes or so I felt sick and had to go to the lavatory. While coming back I decided to play it quit-or-double. He asked me: "How do you feel?". I said: "Better, but could we change seats, please?" He looked at me for some very long seconds. Then he laughed out loud. We arranged our seats in such a way that neither him nor me had to look into this gigantic inquisition light. We started the discussion again, and the next vote of the Histadruth Central Committee was a unanimous one.

When I heard about it, I was proud, of course. However, the conviction that we have to overcome our specific experiences and grievances, that we have to break through the shields of the past, that we have to meet each other as normal human beings – that conviction was even more important.

And this is my conviction until this afternoon. The basis of Israeli-German relationship remains sound, quarrels and problems notwithstanding. But it is up to us to stand up for it, to fill it with life and positive excitement. Ours is a good relationship. But it is not a normal one, even when most of its elements have turned normal.

On the German side our responsibility for our history is an everlasting one. On both sides we have to meet the same challenges: Peace, Human Rights, a living democracy, a fight against fundamentalism in all its forms. understanding and protection of those who cannot protect themselves as well as the majority can. It is really worth our efforts to work for this basis!

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