Israel and Germany

Five decades of diplomatic, scientific and cultural relations

The Reparations Accord and its aftermath
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Five Decades of Diplomatic, Scientific and Cultural Relations

On May 12, 1965 Israel and the Federal Republic of Germany established diplomatic relations. The bilateral relations had begun, however, 13 years earlier. On September 10, 1952, Chancellor Konrad Adenauer and Israel’s Foreign Minister Moshe Sharet, signed the Reparations Accord in Luxembourg and thereafter an Israeli mission headed by Felix Shinar was sent to Cologne. Prior to the establishment of formal diplomatic relations, the Israeli mission worked indefatigably to promote cooperation in various fields between the two countries.

Throughout the years, despite numerous obstacles, disagreements and controversies, the cooperation between the two countries has strengthened significantly and they have become close allies.

The exhibition offers an overview of major milestones of Israeli-German relations. It highlights various aspects of the relations between the two countries, such as politics, culture, science, trade, commerce and sport. It tells a story on how bridges were constructed over the abyss and sheds light on both peaks and valleys in the long and difficult process of rapprochement between the two countries.

The relationships between the two countries have been built in the shadow of the Holocaust. The tension between past and present, between memory and realpolitik as well as the meaning of "special" and "unique" in the relations between the two countries have been constantly debated by leaders and intellectuals in both countries. These issues are the common thread running through the various parts of the exhibition.

A large number of archives, Institutes and organizations in Israel and Germany gave us hand and generously provided pictures and documents. We are grateful for their assistance.

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Established only three years after the end of World War II and the Holocaust, Israel formally boycotted Germany. The most prominent expression of the boycott as well as its symbol was the clause in the Israeli passport (called travel certificate at the time), stating that the document is valid for all countries except Germany. Those who wished to travel to Germany had to submit a special application to the authorities. The clause was revoked only in 1956.
The young state, which absorbed hundreds of thousands impoverished immigrants, many of whom survivors of the Holocaust, was suffering from a severe economic crisis, high unemployment rates and dramatic shortage in foreign exchange reserves. The austerity regime (Tzena) enacted in 1949 did not change the situation. As a result, the state's leaders, including Foreign Minister Moshe Sharett and Prime Minister Ben-Gurion, were motivated to seek German reparations for Jewish property confiscated during the Holocaust - a demand raised already during the war by various individuals and by Jewish organizations, when the extent of the tragedy was yet unknown. These voices intensified after the end of the war. Initially, Israel appealed to the Occupation Forces in Germany, the Allies, in March 1951, asking them to demand West Germany to pay. However, soon it became apparent that direct negotiations with West Germany is the only way to advance the issue.

On the right: A passage from an article by Edmund Schechter in "Hamashkif" dated 17.09.1943 discussing the question “Could the Jews return to Europe”? In the passage Schechter suggests that Germany should pay reparations for injustices suffered by Jews in Europe.

Hamashkif - 17.09.1943 page 4
Historical Speech of Konrad Adenauer on September 27, 1951

In February 1950, the Israeli government decided to commence a direct dialogue with West Germany in order to find common ground for negotiations. Strictly confidential talks began in April 1951, particularly with Chancellor Konrad Adenauer, but Israel conditioned the beginning of the negotiations with a German acknowledgment of its responsibility toward the Jewish tragedy. In response, Adenauer addressed the Bundestag on September 27, 1951, acknowledging the crimes perpetrated by the Nazis “in the name of the German people,” and recognizing the obligation of the German government to pay reparations to the State of Israel and the Jewish organizations, as the representatives of the Jewish people. His declaration was unanimously approved by the Bundestag members standing up. This historic speech paved the way for open negotiations between Israel and West Germany.

“The Federal Government and with it the great majority of the German people are aware of the immeasurable suffering that was brought upon the Jews in Germany and the occupied territories during the time of National Socialism... Unspeakable crimes have been committed in the name of the German people, calling for moral and material indemnity... The Federal Government is prepared, jointly with representatives of Jewry and the State of Israel... to bring about a solution of the material indemnity problem, thus easing the way to the spiritual settlement of infinite suffering”.

Conrad Adenauer at the Bundestag (1955)
Bundesarchiv, B 145 Bild-F002449-0027/ photo: Unterberg, Rolf.
The intention of the Israeli government to open negotiations with West Germany triggered a public and political turmoil, perhaps the harshest in history of Israel. The opposition was led by the Zionist left party Mapam and especially by the right-wing Herut party, headed by Menachem Begin. Begin called for civic rebellion to "wipe the shame" of the intention to negotiate with the representatives of the people responsible for the murder of Jews. During the bitter discussion at the Knesset on January 4, 1952, a most violent demonstration took place outside the hall. Stones were thrown into the Knesset, and army forces were called to prevent the angry demonstrators from advancing.

25.2.1952 Demonstration against Reparation Agreement at Zion square in Jerusalem. The speaker is Menachem Begin, the leader of the opposition "Herut" party. The placard on the right reads: "our honor will not be bought with money; our blood will not be atoned with merchandise. We will erase the shame!"

2. Negotiations begin

Instructions sent by David Horowitz, the director general of the Ministry of Finance, to the Israeli delegation for the negotiations, instructing them to demand reparations amounting to a billion dollars, mainly in the form of goods to be transferred to Israel over a period of three to five years. An Israeli inter-ministerial committee was to decide the kinds of goods to be transferred.

After the Knesset declared its approval, the negotiations officially commenced in Wassenaar in the Netherlands on March 21, 1952. An Israeli delegation and representatives of the Claims Conference (an agency created by 22 Jewish organizations around the world towards the beginning of negotiations, headed by Nahum Goldman) coordinated between them the management of the complicated negotiations with the West German delegation. The negotiations lasted about 6 months.
An excerpt from the Israeli government’s meeting on September 4, 1952, convened in preparation for Sharet's departure to Luxemburg to sign the Reparations Agreement. At the meeting he presented a draft of the agreement, worked out after months of negotiations. He reported on the upcoming meeting to be held at the German Cabinet and on the objection of West Germany's Minister of Finance, Fritz Schäffer, to the agreement. Nevertheless, Sharet was confident that Adenauer would have the agreement approved by the government.
Dear Mr. Minister:

I have received through the Israel Minister in Paris your message of May 22 concerning the negotiations between Israel and the German Federal Republic on Israel and Jewish claims.

I have discussed this matter with Chancellor Adenauer and have reiterated the hope of the United States Government that a satisfactory settlement can be reached in the near future.

Chancellor Adenauer has informed me that the discussions have now been resumed in Paris and that according to his reports they are going well. It is also my understanding that the head of the German delegation has withdrawn his resignation.

Now that the negotiations have been resumed, it is my belief that with the good will which exists on both sides, it should prove possible to arrive at a reasonable and early settlement.

Sincerely yours,

[Signature]

His Excellency
Moshe Sharett,
Minister for Foreign Affairs of Israel.
3. SIGNING THE REPARATIONS AGREEMENT - SEPTEMBER 10, 1952

The agreement stipulated that Germany will pay Israel in installments over 12 to 14 years three billion Marks (about 715 million US dollars) towards acquisition of goods and infrastructures. In addition, Israel received from Germany foreign currency that allowed continued supply of fuel from Great Britain. An additional 450 million Marks (about 110 million US dollars) were to be paid to the Jewish Claims Conference via the government of Israel. Furthermore, The German government committed itself to legislate personal reparations for property and other damages. East Germany refused to discuss a similar agreement, arguing that it is not responsible for the actions of the Nazi regime.

The first page of the Agreement between Israel and West Germany. The Agreement is 121 pages long.
Left: Chancellor of West Germany Konrad Adenauer signs the agreement, flanked by two major figures in the German delegation to the reparations talks. On the right: the head of the German delegation Franz Böhn; on the left: Walter Hallstein, Adenauer's trusted colleague and one of the founders of the West German Foreign Office.

Courtesy of the Moshe Sharett Heritage Society

Right: Moshe Sharett signing the German Reparations Agreement, on his left side Nahum Goldmann, the president of the World Jewish Congress

Courtesy of the Moshe Sharett Heritage Society
Abschrift

SPD fordert Ratifizierung des Israel-Vertrages

Keine Haltungsänderung durch die Intervention der Araber

Die Bundestagsfraktion der SPD sprach sich am Dienstag für die baldige Ratifizierung des deutsch-israelischen Wiedergutmachungsabkommens aus, an dessen positiver Wertung die SDP nach wie vor festhält. Die Intervention der arabischen Staaten habe an dieser Haltung nichts geändert.

Die SPD sieht, so wurde von massgebender Parteistelle betont, in diesem Abkommen die Durchsetzung des Prinzips der Wiedergutmachung, für das die SPD von Anfang an eingetreten sei. Die deutsche Verpflichtung, das den Juden zugefügte Unrecht wenigstens zu einem Teile wieder gutzumachen, sei auch von den Arabern selbst anerkannt worden. Die SPD erklärte sich aber bereit, so wurde weiter betont, dabei behilflich zu sein, dass die jetzt entstandenen Schwierigkeiten in den Beziehungen zu den arabischen Staaten gemildert oder ganz beseitigt werden, wenn sich eine Möglichkeit dazu bilde.


A press release by the Social-Democratic party in the Bundestag, demanding to ratify the Reparations Agreement quickly, despite fierce objection from the Arab countries (a special delegation from the Arab League arrived in Bonn and pressured ministers and Bundestag members to vote against it). The party criticized the amateur way that the Foreign Ministry managed the relations with the Arabs on this subject, but expressed appreciation of the German delegation at the Reparations negotiations, which the party advocated as partial expression of the moral debt towards the Jewish people.

Politisches Archiv des Auswärtigen Amts
On March 18, 1953 the Luxembourg Accord was brought before the Bundestag for a second and third reading. The results were as follows: 239 for, 35 against, 86 abstained. Only half of Adenauer's coalition members supported the agreement. A significant number of CDU/CSU members, the parliamentary party which he headed, abstained from voting or were absent from the debate, expressing thereby their opposition to the agreement. The agreement was approved solely due to the unequivocal support of the Social-Democratic opposition, who voted unanimously for it. Among the persons opposing the agreement were ministers and other prominent politicians, such as the Minister of Finance Fritz Schäffer and the leader of the CSU Franz Josef Strauss. The supporters of the agreement, such as Dr. Eugen Gerstenmaier, one of the CDU leaders, claimed that the agreement is an expression of moral commitment both to the victims and to the fight for the good name and honor of the German people. The opponents of the agreement, such as Oskar Müller, a member of the Communist Party (KPD), claimed in the course of the deliberations that they support personal reparations, but they oppose collective reparations to the state of Israel.
After the signing of the agreement Israeli public opinion was still polarized. *Maariv*, the newspaper with the widest circulation at the time, took a neutral stance, while the *Herut* newspaper, affiliated with Menachem Begin’s Herut party, expressed a clear dissatisfaction with the agreement. The Agreement was ratified by the government on March 22, 1953. All the ministers present voted for its ratification, except Israel Rokach from the General Zionists party. The opposition dwindled in the course of the 1950s, with the implementation of the agreement and the improvement of Israel’s economic situation.

23.03.1953 *Herut*. Headline: “The Government Ratified the Agreement of Disgrace”

19.03.1953 *Maariv*. Headline: “Foreign Affairs Committee Assembled to Ratify the Agreement”.
Report of the Head of the Military Industries Zvi Dar (right) and a telegram sent by Simon Peres (below), Director-General of the Ministry of Defense, to the Minister of Defense Ben-Gurion. Both documents are concerned with the first ammunition deals between Germany and Israel. The focus of these deals was the export of Uzi submachine guns. When in spring 1959 the fact of ammunition transactions between Israel and Germany became widely known, it stirred up a public and political storm, and even became one of the major issues at the heart of the 4th General Elections that took place shortly after that.

IDF Archive
Raw materials, industrial equipment, products and goods exported from Western Germany to Israel as part of the Reparation Agreement gave a considerable boost to Israeli economy. Almost every sphere of Israeli economy, be it industry, services or infrastructure (including the Electric Company, the water supply system, the railways and the ports), benefited greatly from the Agreement. The graph on the right illustrates the rate of the reparations in the total import of equipment in the years 1953-1961 (in millions of dollars). The dark grey columns indicate the import of reparations and the light grey columns indicate the total value of imported equipment.

Israeli State Archive
4. SCIENTIFIC RELATIONS

By the end of the 1950s the contacts between Israel and Germany extended to the field of science.

Scientific cooperation between Israel and Germany began in 1957, when Amos de-Shalit, at the time chairman of the Department of Nuclear Physics at the Weizmann Institute, met with Wolfgang Gentner, who was the director of CERN. De-Shalit and Gentner raised the possibility of cooperation between German and Israeli scientists, provided that the latter did not have a Nazi past. The first meeting was followed by prolonged negotiations that lead to a suggestion to establish relations between the Max-Planck-Society (MPG) and the Weizmann Institute.

In December 1959, a delegation of the Max Planck Society, headed by its president Otto Hahn, visited the Weizmann Institute of Science in Rehovot, Israel. One of the outcomes of the meeting was a development of a general cooperation program to be funded by a special MPG fund.

Photo: A delegation of Max Plank Institute in Zurich airport, before departure to their visit at Weitzman Institute in Israel, 1959. From left to right: Prof. Feodor Lynen, Prof. Wolfgang Gentner, Gentners wife Alice, Prof. Otto Hahn and Dr. Josef Cohn from the European Committee of the Weizmann Institute in Zurich.

Photo courtesy of the Max Planck Society
Erich Ollenhauer, the leader of the Social Democratic Party of West Germany, was the first German statesman to have been officially invited by the Israeli Government. Many of the central members of the Social Democratic Party had actively objected the Nazi regime. After the war, the party was very friendly towards the Jewish people and Israel, and its leaders had close connections with the heads of MAPAI.

Photo: PM David Ben Gurion receives German Social Democratic leader Ollenhauer in his Jerusalem office.

Government Press Office (Israel), Photo: Gurfinkel, David.
6. A HISTORICAL MEETING BETWEEN KONRAD ADENAUER AND DAVID BEN-GURION

The meeting of David Ben-Gurion and Konrad Adenauer at the Waldorf Astoria hotel in New York, March 14, 1960.

Bundesarchiv, B 145 Bild-00009354 / photo: Wundshammer, Benno.
In a joint press release by Ben-Gurion and Adenauer following their historic meeting at the Waldorf Astoria hotel in New York on March 14, 1960, Chancellor Adenauer expressed his admiration for Ben-Gurion's achievements in the building of the modern State of Israel and mentioned the importance of the Reparations Agreement. Ben-Gurion stressed that the meeting strengthened his confidence that the new Germany is completely different from Nazi Germany. The issue of diplomatic relations was not addressed in the press release.

The secret details of the conversation were not disclosed to the public. These details include, in particular, Adenauer's oral agreement to lend Israel 500 million dollars in the course of 10 years and his offer of military assistance to Israel in the form of submarines and missiles. These details were previously discussed and agreed upon between German Minister of Defense Franz Josef Strauss and Israeli Director-General of the Ministry of Defense Shimon Peres.

Statement by Prime Minister David Ben Gurion of Israel

I was glad to meet chancellor Adenauer. My people cannot forget its past. But we remember the past not in order to brood upon it but in order that it shall never recur.

I said in the Knesset (Israel Parliament) last summer that the Germany of today is not the Germany of yesterday. After having met the chancellor I am sure that judgement was correct. I wish the chancellor every success in his efforts to guide Germany in its path of democracy and international cooperation.

March 14, 1960.