Israel and Germany

Five decades of diplomatic, scientific and cultural relations

The 1960s and the beginning of cultural exchange
13. BEGINNING OF CULTURAL EXCHANGE

The establishment of diplomatic relations between the two countries allowed for the commencement of cultural and artistic exchanges. Israeli artists began performing in Germany and German films were approved for screening in Israel. Despite the criticism raised in political circles and by the public regarding the too-rapid warming of relations between Israel and Germany, in practice tourist relations and cultural and artistic cooperation between the countries began to flourish.

Above: “Israel will open a branch of the Tourism Bureau in Frankfurt,” Maariv, September 16, 1965.

Right: “Germany seeks to open a tourism office in Israel,” Davar, February 2, 1969. Davar reports on the arrival of a German tourism office representative. Following her meeting with Minister of Tourism Moshe Kol, she expressed her hope that the 18th German Tourism Office will open in Israel soon.
1967 — Israel lifts the ban on German movies

Up to 1967 Israel banned all movies produced in Germany, except co-productions.

One of the movies that aroused controversy was “Wir Wunderkinder” (Aren’t We Wonderful?) directed by Kurt Hoffmann. The movie was brought to Israel in 1960. The Film Review Council decided to approve the screening due to its anti-Nazi contents. A special screening of the movie for VIPs and government dignitaries took place on March 22, 1960, but on July 3 of the same year the government decided to ban the movie for public screening. In April 1967, Israel lifted the general ban on German productions and a few months later the movie was screened in Israeli theaters.

Part of an article from Davar newspaper, titled “Better Late...”. The writer suggests that while from artistic point of view the movie is not very remarkable, it could have been approved for screening at an earlier date.

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ה利好ה המשלמה:
לוסמר כ- ידוע ברשות סרטים רכושה וארל יותר מבית הפנימיה
למה נורא לשל שלועת, הבן שלוסמר וארל הלה להצגה סרטים מופSPATHראות ברמה.
המשלמה להצייר הצבת סרטים בכיל רעיון רכוב באתונה כלאי קולנועו אס סרני
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The Information Division and the Western Europe Division (Foreign Affairs) Jerusalem, to the Israeli Embassy in Bonn; April 12, 1967. The document states that the government is empowering the Film Review Council to decide which German movies and plays to show. It also states that the Council will not approve movies or plays if anyone with a Nazi background was involved in their production. This declaration officially lifts the ban on all German movies.

Israel State Archive
Inbal Dance Theater was the first Israeli dance company to perform in Germany. The company was established in 1949 by Sara Levi-Tanai in order to preserve Yemen Jewish culture and tradition. In 1968 the company performed in a number of German cities during its European tour and received much attention and praise.

In October 1969 the Batsheva Dance Company decided to visit Germany as part of its European tour, despite the fact that previously its members refused to do so. The Batsheva Dance Company was established in 1964 by the Baroness Bethsabée (in Hebrew: Batsheva) De Rothschild, and by 1969 had already performed successfully in Europe numerous times. Its first performance in Germany took place on the 1st of October in Berlin. It then travelled to perform in Hamburg, Cologne Leverkusen, Höchst and Stuttgart, and gained much praise. The dancers however, had mixed feelings about the performance, as demonstrated by what Rena Gluck, a dancer in the company, wrote in her memoir: "We told ourselves that we must perform our best and leave an ineffaceable impression there, but everyone felt dreadful. The memory of the millions who were murdered by the Nazis did not leave us for a moment. [...] It was strange to receive flowers from the Germans at the end of the show. I felt that we had crossed a line, and yet I was proud for dancing with an Israeli company in Berlin."


Photograph from Batsheva’s tour in Germany. Courtesy of Batsheva Dance Company and the Dance Library of Israel. Photographer: unknown.

Photograph from BatSheva’s tour in Germany.
In 1971, the Israeli Philharmonic Orchestra went on a European tour, which for the first time included German cities. The decision to perform in Europe agitated the older members of the orchestra, most of whom lost family members and friends and even went through the horrors of the Holocaust themselves. Abba Eban, the Foreign Minister, wrote a letter to the orchestra supporting the tour, stating that its performance in Germany will improve relations between the two countries. Eventually the orchestra decided to include Germany in its tour, and to comply with the request to open the Berlin Festival. Yet it allowed members who wished to refrain from playing in Germany to do so.

The opening concert at the Berlin Festival was a great success, and the orchestra was received with a standing ovation. Orchestra conductor, Zubin Mehta, chose to end the concert with the Israeli anthem, "Ha-Tikva".

Israeli Philharmonic Orchestra in Berlin, September 12, 1971. Conductors: Zubin Mehta, Daniel Barenboim. Pieces performed: "Qumran" by Ami Maayani, Beethoven's Piano Concerto No. 3 and Mahler's Symphony No. 1

Courtesy of the Philharmonic Orchestra Archives

Courtesy of the Philharmonic Orchestra Archives

Israeli Philharmonic Orchestra visits the former concentration camp in Dachau, September 1975.

Courtesy of the Philharmonic Orchestra Archives
Soon after the Israeli Philharmonic Orchestra returned to Israel from its’ European tour, it was requested to open the events of the “German Culture Week” that was scheduled to take place throughout the country in late 1971. Representatives of various Holocaust survivors’ organizations in Israel called to boycott the events. Following public protest the festive opening ceremony was cancelled. During the concert of the Philharmonic Orchestra two members of the Beitar youth movement burst onto the stage and recited the Yizkor (Memorial) prayer.

Headline (above) and photograph (left) from Maariv newspaper, 7.11.1975. The headline reads: “In a half-empty hall, in the midst of protests the German Culture Week opens.” Photographs in the article featured Beitar movement protesters (not seen here) and the German writer Günter Grass and his wife at the opening (left). Right: German Culture Week Poster.