Israel and Germany

Five decades of diplomatic, scientific and cultural relations

From 1980 until the fall of the Berlin Wall
At the end of April 1981 the German Chancellor Helmut Schmidt visited Saudi Arabia. In his speech at the press conference in Riyadh, as well as in a television interview upon his return to Germany, and in the Government's press office's statements, Schmidt addressed the moral aspect of the Palestinian refugees, and their right to establish a state. His statements and the news that he had negotiated the supply of German weapons to Saudi Arabia, led to a confrontation with Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin, as well as harsh criticism from the leaders of the Labor (HaAvoda) party in Israel.
Schmidt’s sympathetic declarations towards the Palestinians and their right to statehood, and the fact that he chose to avoid references to the Germans’ moral duty towards the Jewish people caused a further deterioration in the tense relationship between him and Israeli Prime Minister Begin, which led to a bitter exchange of words between the two heads of state. Begin called Schmidt “arrogant” and “greedy”, and referred to Schmidt’s military service during the war, claiming that he knew of the killing of Jews and the executions of dissidents. Begin emphasized the Germans’ collective guilt, and excited anger in West Germany. Both the Christian-Democratic opposition and the West German press expressed solidarity with Schmidt. Der Spiegel even devoted a special issue to the relationship under the title “Are We All Nazis?”, and wondered if 36 years after the War Germans are still required to fall to their knees.

Later on, Schmidt and Begin tried to reconcile, but even then Begin did not invite Schmidt to visit Israel.
Since Brandt's visit at the beginning of the 1970's and up until the mid-eighties, no German Chancellor arrived in Israel. Schmidt was invited by Yitzhak Rabin for a reciprocal visit, but given the tense relationship with Begin, it never materialized. When Helmut Kohl was elected chancellor, Begin invited him to visit Israel, but the visit, scheduled for the end of 1983, was not carried out due to Begin's resignation. Kohl finally came to Israel in January 1984 as a guest of Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir. Central to the visit was the dispute between the two countries regarding the German weapon supply to Saudi Arabia, a subject highly criticized in West Germany as well. Another matter which provoked harsh criticism was Kohl's decision to exclude a Waffen SS veterans' organization from the list of prohibited organizations. Israeli papers reported Kohl's proclaimed impatience while visiting Yad Vashem and his declaration that most living Germans, himself included, did not take part in the crimes of the Third Reich and do not bear responsibility for them.

Chancellor Helmut Kohl and Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir talking at the Prime Minister's Office in Jerusalem, 24.1.1984.

Government Press Office (Israel), Photo: Sa’ar, Yaacov.
West German Chancellor Helmut Kohl flanked by Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir and his wife Shulamit, upon the Chancellor’s arrival at Ben-Gurion airport for a state visit to Israel, 24.1.1984.

Government Press Office (Israel), Photo: Sa’ar, Yaacov.
In May 1985, on the 40th anniversary for the end of the Second World War, Kohl initiated a symbolic act that sought to honor the memory of Wehrmacht soldiers and even Waffen SS soldiers who fought in the war. He invited US President Ronald Reagan to lay a wreath in a military cemetery in a small town in Southern Germany named Bitburg. Members of the Waffen SS were buried there too. This act was part of a German conservative right trend to strengthen a feeling of national consciousness. Its intent was to provide West Germans with a sense of pride as an important component in the protection of the Western world against Communism. The laying of the wreath and Reagan’s words that “Those young men are victims of Nazism also... they were victims, just as surely as the victims in the concentration camps” and that the Germans are suffering unjustly from guilt, provoked a wave of public criticism around the world. The visit at Bitburg was one of the starting points of a heated debate among both right and left German intellectuals over the place of the Third Reich in German history. A particularly heated debate, known as the Historikerstreit (the historian’s quarrel), took place among German historians. Central to this debate was the effort of “national historians” to relativize the Nazi crimes by comparing them to the crimes of the Soviet Regime. The debate took place mostly in the years 1987-1989 and arose much interest in Israel, mostly due to the tendency to minimize the Holocaust. It had subsided to a certain extent with the fall of the Eastern Block and German unification.
On October 8, 1985 Richard von Weizsäcker became the first West German president to visit Israel. Weizsäcker is the son of Ernst von Weizsäcker, a former secretary of state at the Foreign Office in Nazi Germany. During his father’s trial before U.S. military court for his role in the deportation of Jews from occupied France, Richard von Weizsäcker served as the assistant defense counselor. On May 8, 1985, about six months before his arrival to Israel, Weizsäcker gave one of the most important speeches in the history of German confrontation with the Nazi past. In contrast to Kohl’s efforts to reduce German guilt, Weizsäcker called the Germans to acknowledge the truth and take responsibility for the past. “All of us, whether guilty or not, whether old or young, must accept the past. We are all affected by its consequences and are liable for it. We seek reconciliation. Precisely for this reason we must understand that there can be no reconciliation without remembrance.” One of the highlights of Weizsäcker’s visit to Israel was a meeting with Israeli youth at the Van-Leer Institute, conducted at his request.


Left: West German President Richard von Weizsäcker and his wife Marianne during their visit at the “Yad Vashem” Holocaust museum in Jerusalem, 08.10.1985.

Government Press Office (Israel), Photo: Sa’ar, Yaacov.

Right: West German President Richard von Weizsäcker receiving an honorary doctorate from the president of the Weizmann Institute Prof. Michael Sela, Rehovot, 11.10.1985.

Government Press Office (Israel), Photo: Sa’ar, Yaacov.
West German President Richard von Weizsäcker (3rd from right) and Marianne von Weizsäcker (2nd from right) are welcomed upon their arrival at Ben Gurion Airport by President of Israel Chaim Herzog (3rd from left) and Aura Herzog (2nd from left), 8.10.1985.

Bundesarchiv, B 145 Bild-00062697/ photo: Schaack, Lothar.
Israeli President Haim Herzog’s visit to Germany on April 6, 1987 as the guest of the German President Richard von Weizsäcker was the first visit of an Israeli President in Germany. One of the high points of the visit was the ceremony in Bergen-Belsen. Herzog first arrived at the camp 42 years earlier as an officer of the British Army. The visit took place amidst intensified debates in Germany over the selling of weaponry to Saudi Arabia.
Der Spiegel addressed the criticism raised in Israel over Herzog's visit to Germany. The paper mentioned comments by former President Ephraim Katzir stating that it was not yet time to make such a visit, and reported that three Members of the Knesset refused to join the journey. One of the points of criticism against West Germany that Der Spiegel raised in light of Herzog's visit, was the appointment of the Free Democratic Party member Jürgen Möllemann to the post of Minister of Education in Helmut Kohl's coalition. Möllemann was known as a strong opponent of Israel and was called by the Israeli daily newspaper Maariv "a fanatic representative of the Arab interests". Nevertheless, Der Spiegel stressed Herzog's insistence on visiting West Germany. For Herzog it was "the new Germany," Israel's best ally after the United States. He felt that when he will commemorate the dead at Bergen-Belsen, the six million victims will stand beside him and it will be a great moment of victory for them.

panorama

Herzog-Besuch: „Das wird der Augenblick ihres Sieges sein“


Israels Präsident Herzog
24. THE FALL OF THE BERLIN WALL

On November 9 1989, the Berlin wall was demolished in a popular action from both the eastern and western sides. The wall was built in 1961 by the communist regime in East Germany to create a clear, physical obstacle to impede the passage between the east and west parts of the city. Both the public and the press in Israel closely followed the events that brought to the fall of the Wall. Alongside hopes for the end of the inter-block conflict, there were expressions of anxiety about the possible rise of nationalist elements with the unification of Germany. Israelis followed with interest the symbolic debates that took place at the Bundestag in the summer of 1991, regarding the location of the German capital—in Bonn, or in Berlin.

Remains of the Berlin Wall in the Ein-Hod Artists’ Village. A part of the Berlin Wall was brought to Israel in 1992 and it is kept today at the entrance to the Janco Dada Museum in Ein-Hod.