

Visits – Bilateral Relations and Personal Encounters in Israel, Germany and Beyond. International Workshop marking 50 Years of Israeli-German Diplomatic Relations 1965-2015

Veranstalter: The Martin Buber Society of Fellows in the Humanities and Social Sciences; The Hebrew University of Jerusalem; Organizers: Kim Wünschmann, Lina Nikou, Stefanie Fischer

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On the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between Israel and the Federal Republic of Germany, Stefanie Fischer (Berlin/Potsdam), Lina Nikou (Hamburg/Jerusalem), and Kim Wünschmann (Jerusalem) organized an international workshop at The Hebrew University of Jerusalem hosted by the Martin Buber Society of Fellows in the Humanities and Social Sciences. Whereas diplomatic relations have frequently been studied with a strong focus on foreign policy and on official correspondences and contracts, this workshop paid central attention to personal encounters and human relations and how they unfold during visits. The conveners brought together scholars from a variety of disciplines – anthropology, sociology, history, art history, German and American studies, and sinology – in order to explore the practices, dynamics, rituals and representations of visits that took place in different geographical areas and at different points in time. Taking this broad perspective on visits was firstly aimed at pursuing a better understanding of visits and personal encounters as part of diplomatic relations in general. Its second aim was to probe the particularity of German-Israeli and German-Jewish relationships.

In her welcome address, RUTH HACHEN (Jerusalem), director of the Martin Buber Society, referred to the special relationship between Germany and Israel, recounting her mother's traumatic experience of having to leave her family home in Munich to emigrate to Palestine in 1937. Her return to the city with a delegation of the Jewish Agency

of Palestine after the war, when there was no one left to greet her, prompted her decision to never visit again. HaCohen recalled, however, that her mother did visit Germany „virtually“ in later years, through the stories of young Germans that she hosted during their stays in Israel. HaCohen emphasized the importance of these visits of young Germans to her mother's home. Meeting them and hearing about changes in Germany gave her a sense of reconciliation.

KIM WÜNSCHMANN (Jerusalem) posed some general questions in her introductory remarks, speaking also on behalf of her co-organizers, in order to help frame the presentations and the discussion to follow. These, among others, included: Are there universal rituals, habits or practices that accompany visits? How important is the „personal element“ – that is, the personal interaction between officials during state visits – in relationships between states? How important is it for migrants and refugees to relate to and stay connected to their place of origin and their roots? And, during visits of German-born Jews to Germany, how was personal and collective memory mediated between the visitors and the hosts?

The first panel set the stage for a broader investigation into visits and diplomatic relations. FRANCESCA FIASCHETTI (Jerusalem) showed for example that diplomacy, heavy with ritual and symbolism, was an important strategy for Mongolian rulers in the 13th century. The fact that the emperor, his envoys, and objects of diplomacy such as letters were regarded as divine meant that diplomatic interactions were not considered to be between equals. Mongol rulers used this complex symbolism and the authority of diplomatic practice to their advantage: the killing of envoys for instance was used as a common excuse or reason to wage war. TAWFIQ DA' ADLI's paper (Jerusalem), meanwhile, traced the journey of Abd al-Ghani al Nabulsi, a Sufi scholar and leading Muslim sage, to Jerusalem in 1689. Nabulsi's visits to shrines that are holy to Judaism and Christianity, as well as his interest in „earthly pleasures“ – such as visiting a Turkish bath and enjoying coffee and music with friends – gave insight not only into the interests

of that individual Muslim scholar, but also into religious and cultural encounters and community in the late 17th century. The last paper of the panel took conceptions of „the stranger“ into consideration. ORIT GAZIT (Jerusalem) engaged in a discussion with Georg Simmel’s seminal text, focusing on the relationship between physical space and social interactions. She drew attention to Simmel’s understanding of the stranger as a form of social interaction rather than a state of being, as well as his notion that strangeness is present in every relationship in modernity. This was useful in that it blurred the frequently evoked dichotomy between the stranger and the local, the visitor and the host.

GAD YAIR (Jerusalem) began the second panel on diplomatic relations between Israel and the Federal Republic by asking whether there is such a thing as Israeli diplomacy. Observing that Israeli officials from the left and right have repeatedly departed from international „diplomatic protocol“, Yair identified a cultural trauma, manifest in deep cultural codes, as the reason for this behavior. The roots of the trauma, he argued, extend beyond the Holocaust and date back to an older, Zionist post-traumatic position. JENNY HESTERMANN (Berlin/Frankfurt am Main) gave a paper analyzing Chancellor Willy Brandt’s official visit to Israel in 1973 and argued that it was a turning point in West Germany’s relations with Israel. Cautiously moving beyond an official rhetoric that emphasized reconciliation and the Federal Republic’s special relationship with Israel, Brandt invoked a new politics of evenhandedness that signaled Bonn’s interest in maintaining good relations with the Arab nations as well as with Israel.

Turning from the state to the regional level, the third panel focused on relationships of German-born Jews to their former hometowns. In her paper on the government of West Berlin’s program to invite the survivors of Nazi persecution to visit their former place of residence, LINA NIKOU (Hamburg/Jerusalem) illuminated the complex emotional entanglements that accompanied the program for both visitors and hosts. Nikou argued that programs of this kind were the first large scale commemoration efforts

dedicated to the victims of Nazism. One problem with the program, however, was that its focus on forgiveness and reconciliation did not allow room for the expression of other emotions. Kim Wünschmann’s paper, meanwhile, approached German-Jewish postwar relations through an examination of *Heimatsforschung* – local histories written by lay historians in the German countryside. Her examples showed that some historians struggled to include and explain the Jewish past of their towns, while others left it out completely. It was visits of former Jewish inhabitants to the towns that challenged such notions of an idealized German Heimat as a place without a violent anti-Semitic past. STEFANIE FISCHER (Berlin/Potsdam) began her paper by describing a similarly distorted picture, looking at the town of Gunzenhausen, where a local newspaper reported on the visit of former Jewish inhabitants as a carefree affair, avoiding any reference to the fact that the town had been a National Socialist stronghold in the 1930s. Fischer emphasized that a crucial reason for many Jews to return to such towns was to visit Jewish cemeteries. She also argued that the economic interactions between Jews and non-Jews in rural areas fostered tighter relationships than those between Jews and non-Jews in urban settings.

The last panel of the workshop continued the theme of German-Jewish encounters in the aftermath of the Holocaust. ALEXANDRA TYROLF (Berlin) examined autobiographical writings by Marta Feuchtwanger, Gina Kaus, and Victoria Wolff that deal with their first trips to Germany after the war. Tyrolf highlighted three prominent motifs in these accounts – empty spaces, estranged landscapes and lost homes and houses – and concluded that the visits left the women both homesick and sick of home at the same time. Although visiting Germany after the war was not an easy experience for Jewish refugees, it held, as ANNE SCHENDERLEIN (Washington, DC) argued, great importance for reinvigorating communal German Jewish refugee identity in the United States at a time when it was fading. She showed that a new discourse developed within the organized refugee community in the 1960s that encouraged trips to Germany. Acting as moral authorities, expert

witnesses of the past, and educators to Germans during their visits led refugees to embrace their heritage.

In her closing remarks, LINA NIKOU (Hamburg/Jerusalem) pointed to similarities in the visiting experiences and foreign relations interactions that became apparent in the case studies presented, even when they covered very different historical and geographical contexts. In this way, Jewish/Israeli-German interactions during visits are neither unique nor even unusual. Visits are commonly complex social interactions, rife with rituals and symbolism, which leave much room for misunderstanding and ambiguity.

The presentations made clear that special knowledge and the ability to interpret cultural codes are significant factors that influence the way a visit unfolds. Still, the different effects that visits can have on participants also depend in large part on the expectations and goals people hold for them. The workshop contributed to the deconstruction of the notion of foreigner and local as polar opposites by emphasizing that both may be strangers to each other's social experience. Moreover, including non-state actors and local perspectives into the study of diplomatic and foreign relations exposed discrepancies between state policies and everyday lived realities. In this regard, the use of sources such as travelogues, newspaper articles, memoirs, and letters proved particularly fruitful. All in all, the workshop showed that visits are a rewarding field of inquiry for historians and social scientists and one that warrants further, particularly comparative, research.

Conference Overview:

Ruth HaCohen, Director of the Martin Buber Society of Fellows (Jerusalem), Welcome
Kim Wünschmann (Jerusalem), Introduction

Panel I: Approaching Visiting Rituals: Cross-Cultural Perspectives and Sociological Concepts

Chair: Nitzan Rothem (Jerusalem)

Francesca Fiaschetti (Jerusalem), Lost in Translation: Diplomacy, Power and Cultural Encounters under Mongol Rule

Tawfiq Da'adli (Jerusalem), al-Rihla al Qudsiyya: 'Abd al-Ghani al Nabulsi's Jour-

ney to Jerusalem

Orit Gazit (Jerusalem), Georg Simmel's „Excursus on the Stranger“: Reflections on the Stranger as a Social Form

Panel II: Official Visits: Diplomacy in Israel and Germany

Chair: Ellinor Morack (Jerusalem)

Gad Yair (Jerusalem), Israeli Diplomacy: An Oxymoron?

Jenny Hestermann (Berlin/ Frankfurt am Main), Overcoming the Past? The 1973 Visit of Willy Brandt as a Turning Point in the German-Israeli „Special Relationship“

Panel III: Visiting Places of Origin: Local Politics and German-Jewish Encounters

Chair: Stefanie Mahrer (Jerusalem)

Lina Nikou (Hamburg/ Jerusalem), Between Personal Approach and Administrative Processes – Organized Visits for Jewish Former Citizens of Major German Cities

Kim Wünschmann (Jerusalem), Returning Home? German-Jewish Encounters in Post-war Rural Hesse

Stefanie Fischer (Berlin/ Potsdam), Visiting the Past: On Shame, Guilt and New Relations of Holocaust Survivors to their Former Hometowns, 1945-1960

Panel IV: German-Jewish Relations after the Holocaust: Locality, Memory and Identity

Chair: Stefanie Fischer (Berlin/Potsdam)

Alexandra Tyrolf (Berlin), Cautious Encounters: Rereading the Memories of First Visits to Germany after the Second World War

Anne C. Schenderlein (Washington, DC), Tentative Travelers: American German Jewish Refugees Finding Identity Through Trips Back to Germany

Final Discussion

Moderator: Lina Nikou (Hamburg/ Jerusalem)

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