

It began in Rehovot

**Tribüne Conversation with Edelgard Bulmahn,
German Federal Minister for Education and Research**

TRIBÜNE: This year, not only are we celebrating the fortieth anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between Germany and Israel; we are also looking back on thirty years of successful cultural and scientific cooperation between the two countries. In what disciplines does this cooperation exist?

BULMAHN: We have a very close-knit network of connections and cooperative activities in science and research. There is cooperation not only between universities and research institutions, but also between companies in Germany and Israel. It would, in contrast, be a difficult task to find a field of science or research where there is no cooperation. I consider that an encouraging sign, because it shows clearly that the relations that exist between Israel and Germany are sustained by many people. This dense network of friendships and institutional cooperation



is an indicator that German-Israeli cooperation has developed positively and fruitfully over many years, up to the present day, and that it will continue to do so.

TRIBÜNE: As a young woman, you spent some time in a kibbutz in Israel. What motivated you to go there? Have you been there since then, and what has changed?

BULMAHN: At the time, after I had finished school, I decided to spend a year in Israel, because I wanted to get to know what life was like on a kibbutz. In addition, I was very excited about the people and the country. I wouldn't have missed that year for the world. During my stay I got to know many interesting people: young Israelis, but also older ones who had suffered under the Nazis and had lost many of their relatives in the Holocaust. It was important for me to undergo this experience and to see how people in Israel had managed to build up such a beautiful country all on their own. I came back to Germany shortly before the Yom Kippur War – I believe it was two or three weeks before. Since then I have often returned to Israel, sometimes on private visits, but also officially, as a minister or representative. The country has changed in the thirty years since my first stay: the effects of the intifada are very evident.

TRIBÜNE: How do you experience the situation?

BULMAHN: It depresses me that people are so reluctant to live alongside one another and develop the region together. That is why science and education in particular play an im-

portant and fruitful role in cooperative development. I always cherish the hope that enlightened people will not be inclined so easily to call the rights of others into question, that they will see the necessity and sense of living together peacefully in this region. Science has very frequently played the role of a bridge-builder – take the contacts between Israel and Germany as an example. Even before diplomatic relations were established, there were scientific contacts; actually you could say it began in Rehovot. Relations between our countries were set into motion in the first place by cooperation between scientists, as early as the nineteen-fifties. That is why I hope that, through cooperation between Israeli and Palestinian scientists within the framework of European as well as German projects, more understanding and rationality can once again develop. I know it is difficult, but I consider it a matter of concern, and a bridge that we have to build, now more than ever.

TRIBÜNE: You know that the Israelis have made numerous attempts to establish peaceful co-existence with the Palestinians. But because the Palestinians have always demanded maximum concessions, such attempts have always failed. By now, every negotiation date is torpedoed by a suicide bombing as soon as it is announced. You cannot negotiate with anyone who still holds a blood-covered knife in his hand.

BULMAHN: Violence has been escalating for several years now. But I am still convinced that in the medium and long term, Israel and Palestine must manage to live and work together peacefully.

TRIBÜNE: There is no alternative to that.

BULMAHN: That's right; there is no alternative. That is why I believe it is necessary to look for ways by which we can again attain such peaceful cooperation. That's where science plays a great role.

TRIBÜNE: A very great role. There have been many attempts to bring Israeli and Palestinian scientists together in order to obtain a conciliatory stance for negotiations . . .

BULMAHN: . . . yes, to draw up plans for a peaceful future; for example, the cooperative Dead Sea projects, which deal with the use of water resources, which are of the utmost importance to Israel as well as to the Palestinian territories and Jordan. Here lie ways to a future in which people use resources together and develop the region together. I find that a very important point – knowing full well that these are tiny seeds that we are sowing. But these fragile plants can grow and bear fruit. We must use the opportunity that their growth and development give us. And the projects work. It has impressed me greatly that the scientists, both men and women, managed to meet, despite enormous difficulties. The Palestinian participants in particular had problems leaving the Palestinian territories to take part in this congress. Nevertheless, a great many of them came to the workshop together, exchanged their findings and are continuing their work. That gives me a ray of hope.

TRIBÜNE: You know that the founding of universities for the Palestinians was and remains one of the Israelis' great disappointments. Israel founded them in the hope that it would be more possible to make peace with people who were educated. But it was just these universities and institutions of higher education that became hotbeds of the intifada and rebellion. The unprecedented intolerance and radicalism expressed in academic circles there is unparalleled.

BULMAHN: But even here, you cannot generalise; you cannot condemn all the universities, because they are very diverse. Intelligence is no protection against intolerance. It would be naive to believe that. We've experienced that very painfully in our own history. Education per se is no protection against intolerance. It depends on the content of what is taught.

TRIBÜNE: But information can reduce prejudice.

BULMAHN: Information and education can do so. I also still believe they make it easier for people to reduce their prejudices. But it doesn't happen automatically.

TRIBÜNE: Let's take another look at the development of relations between Israel and Germany. Until 1965, scientific contacts, which many people opposed, especially in Israel, had to take the place of regulated relations. But the governments of the Federal Republic of Germany also rejected recognition of Israel for a long time, because West Germany had claims to be the sole representative of Germany, and following the logic of the Hallstein Doctrine, feared that the Arab countries could recognise the GDR as a countermove. In the early 1960s, when diplomatic relations were still a dream, the SPD and the unions campaigned for their establishment by collecting signatures. It was back then that, with the help of Walter Hesselbach, we organised the first trip to Israel by a delegation of students and a return visit by Israeli students.

BULMAHN: I can't remember that there was any heated debate among those around me about establishing diplomatic relations with Israel. For me personally, it was self-evident, because it wasn't just mutual recognition between two nations, but also, particularly at that time, the proper step towards reconciliation – even though it was still very difficult for some Israelis. It was an important step to cast this special responsibility in a form that plays a decisive role for sovereign states. That's because diplomatic recognition between nations means not only that they exchange diplomats, but also that they truly recognise each other as partners in terms of the principles that govern their politics, social welfare systems and societies as a whole. The association by some people of this with the Hallstein Doctrine and with the question of automatic recognition of the GDR by the Arab states was misleading. When I look back myself, this question was raised not so much by all young people or large sections of the population as by diplomats.

TRIBÜNE: It is often pointed out that, because of its lack of mineral resources, Germany has to maintain its position on the world market primarily through technological innovation and human capital. Israel's future is also greatly dependent on research and technology. Where do you see similarities and where do you see differences in the focal points of the two countries?

BULMAHN: For Germany and for Israel, skills and knowledge – the abilities of their people – are their most important resources. For both countries, the future depends greatly on whether they support their people in developing their opportunities. But above all, it also depends on high-quality research creating favourable conditions so they can compete internationally with technological innovations, excellent products and superior procedures. In both countries, the future lies in innovation. Innovation means, on the one hand, the technical application of knowledge and research, but over and above that, the appropriate services, organisation and management to accompany it. Both countries have an extremely strong common tradition in research and technology. That's not surprising, because they have the same roots. It wasn't first in the nineteen-twenties and thirties, but as early as the nineteenth century that German Jewish scientists had made a very considerable number of new, groundbreaking discoveries through their research. Albert Einstein is just one example among many. This common tradition was shattered by National Socialism, but since the nineteen-fifties and sixties, it has once again been restored in many cooperative efforts. So, you see, there are no differences between the two countries when it comes to the relevance of science, research and technology for their future. Admittedly, Israel recognised this relevance sooner and responded to it politically much earlier.

TRIBÜNE: Did that fail to happen in Germany because nothing moved for sixteen years?

BULMAHN: The fact is that, whereas in Israel great efforts were made in the nineteen-fifties and sixties, here, they were longer in coming. In Germany, supporting the status of education, science and research didn't return to centre stage until the past few years. This German governing coalition has specifically put education, science and research among its central policies, because we're convinced of their importance for our country. In the past few years, we have instituted many fundamental reforms. One example is the initiative I suggested early this year to develop elite universities which emphasise research. We have introduced achievement-based salaries for scientists and are working on modern labour legislation for those who are employed at universities. In Israel, young scientists have already enjoyed this greater and earlier autonomy for a long time. But it is just as important to place clear emphasis on research in biotechnology, in nanotechnology, and information and communications technology, which play a major role for our country in all important sectors: the automotive sector, mechanical engineering, chemical engineering and the entire service sector.

TRIBÜNE: But the discussion we are now engaged in, concerning the PISA and IGLU studies, was already being held thirty years ago about what was called the "crisis in education", and nothing has changed since then.

BULMAHN: No, thirty years ago, we didn't discuss it in the same way. Thirty years ago, we initially found fault with the fact that too few people in our country had access to educational choices and opportunities. They still don't always have them in the way we would have liked, but by now there have been several changes. This government has been the source of important initiatives to improve our education system – for instance, the discussion of more individual attention for children. We advocate full-day schooling, in which individual support is not just formulated as a right, but can also actually be put into practice. Evaluating the achievement of educational institutions is helpful in this respect. Not only pupils, but the schools themselves should be evaluated. At the same time, we need clear, binding standards in education. I want to stress emphatically that these incentives of ours have also been taken on board by the ministries of the individual federal states, and are now being put into practice. But the discussion has actually come too late. We should have introduced these developments back in the nineteen-eighties. That is what the countries of Scandinavia did, and they are now reaping the rewards of their efforts.

TRIBÜNE: During a stay in Israel, you visited universities and high-tech companies. The threat of terrorist strikes is ubiquitous there, as it is everywhere. Nevertheless, people in Israel try to wrest a bit of normality from everyday life. Their only possibility of defending themselves from the cowardly, perfidious attacks is not to let the attacks discourage them.

BULMAHN: During my stay in Israel three years ago, I was impressed by the will-power and courage with which people whose lives were under daily threat worked in their various regions. Even though their safety was constantly endangered, they remained committed to their undertakings – conducting their research, for instance, with unflagging curiosity. I was especially impressed by many young scientists whom we sponsored within the framework of the German-Israeli Foundation. Their outstanding research impressed us, and I noticed again and again that they refused to become discouraged. I have a great deal of respect for their attitude. I am convinced that in their country, but in ours as well, people need just this attitude: not to let the hardships of everyday life get them down, but instead to believe in what they're doing and commit themselves to contributing their abilities and knowledge to the community. It was noticeable in business enterprises as well as in the universities and research institutions. I found a very lively, creative atmosphere there, at the Weizmann Institute or at He-

bron University, to name just two examples.

TRIBÜNE: Theories and research are important to creating innovation. But real economic progress can only be reached when they can be successfully put into practice and transferred to industry. BIO-DISC, the German-Israeli cooperative project to support small and medium-sized enterprises, will receive a total of 50 million euros in private and public funding by 2010.

BULMAHN: That's right. We have very close and excellent cooperation between scientific institutions, universities and research institutions. We also have many cooperative projects between business enterprises. But they could and should be considerably expanded. That is why we've placed particular emphasis on them for three years now, without intending to neglect the exchange of established or prospective scientists. We still need this exchange as a vital cornerstone of our cooperation. But including business in the equation is of major relevance to both countries. Such cooperation gives us many different opportunities for further development. The cooperative programme to support the mid-size sector, which you mentioned, and which focuses primarily on small and medium-sized enterprises engaged in research, is one point of departure. There are larger projects, some of them in cooperation with the European Union. One example is Eureka, in which we motivate companies engaged in industrial research to team up together – with excellent results, because the cooperative developments enable them to act as suppliers as well, for instance, and significantly improve their position on the global market. We are especially successful where Israel and Germany have similar strengths in important fields. Both countries are extremely well-positioned in the field of optical technology, for instance.

TRIBÜNE: Isn't that an anachronism? There is such outstanding cooperation in this area, but the policies of the EU cannot exactly be described as friendly to Israel.

BULMAHN: As far as research is concerned, and that is the area I can speak of, that is not true. Germany supported Israel vigorously when it wanted to participate in the European Research Framework Programme, which it was able to do, as an associate member in 1996 and as a full member since 1998. Since then it has become evident that the decision was right. Israel successfully participates in European research and research funding. I am sure that in the coming years Israel will continue to play the important role it now plays in European research. In doing so, it has become an important partner in European economic policies, even though it is not an EU member state. The fact that nowadays Israel is involved in an entire range of European research institutions, such as CERN (Conseil Européen pour la Recherche Nucléaire, ed. note) shows just how closely knit those scientific relations have become.

TRIBÜNE: But despite the unity in research and science, there are strong political reservations. It is precisely in Europe that Israel's political policies are often portrayed very one-sidedly and condemned.

BULMAHN: Much as I'd like to agree, I consider the Israeli government's policies to be wrong on one point: the policy on the West Bank settlements. It plays havoc with opportunities for peaceful coexistence. I know how difficult it will be to pull the settlers out of this territory one day – that is, should that still be possible at all.

TRIBÜNE: But they were pulled out of Sinai . . .

BULMAHN: . . . but the people who settled there and the circumstances of their settlement were different.

TRIBÜNE: That doesn't matter. In the year 2000 at Camp David, Ehud Barak offered to give back 98 percent of the occupied territories and to dissolve the settlements. But the Palestinians simply rejected the offer.

BULMAHN: That is what I said to those Palestinians I spoke to at the time in personal

conversations. It was an honest offer and a mistake not to respond to it positively.

TRIBÜNE: The change in government that followed was to all intents and purposes caused by the Palestinian side, through its refusal to cooperate with Barak. But that has been completely forgotten in the meantime. In the fierce criticism of Israel's policies, only the current actions of the government are judged, not the uncompromising behaviour of the Palestinians in the past and the present.

BULMAHN: I do not agree with the current policy on settlement. But the offer Barak made was quite an extensive offer – a truly outstretched hand.

TRIBÜNE: And today it is unfortunately the case that as soon as a negotiation date is agreed, a suicide attack takes place within 24 hours. That impedes negotiations, because no prime minister can simply disregard the security of his population.

BULMAHN: It's a very difficult situation.

TRIBÜNE: "Education must" – I'm quoting you – "give orientation and support the development of the entire personality". But in Germany we seem to be far removed from that. Schools here are groaning under the results of the PISA and IGLU studies. At the universities, we don't invest in students' minds, but instead, with the recent introduction of tuition fees, reach into their pockets. A school and university system whose facilities and content are largely subservient to cost-cutting can scarcely afford to develop orientation and character in this way, as you have already emphasised in this interview.

BULMAHN: In Germany we don't yet have an education system that successfully supports individual children and young people and manages to develop all their potential and abilities. We simply haven't made enough headway. One reason for that is certainly because, for more than thirty years in Germany, the opportunity was missed to make a critical examination of where we actually stand; to ascertain the strengths and weaknesses of our education system. For many decades we have failed to take part in international empirical surveys. Now we are paying the price. But there is an opportunity in the shock felt so acutely in Germany in the wake of the PISA study. I see the opportunity in the educational establishments themselves. In many places, teachers, policy-makers, and pupils are in the process of changing their schools fundamentally, with great commitment and on their own initiative. The federal government's programme of all-day schooling has got something rolling, set something in motion. It has been seized on as an opportunity by both those who themselves work in these educational establishments and by many parents. That is why I find it so annoying that some people in Germany neither accept nor support it, and instead continually try to find fault with it – that they ignore the commitment of the teachers, pupils and parents. Our full-day school programme is not just a programme of investment but also an opportunity to change, to shake up the schools and alter them. Incidentally, that holds true not only for the schools, but also for the universities, which are undergoing change as well. In many places, universities are developing their own distinctive images. Young scientists are playing a greater role in this, building up research teams. The competition for elite universities has not only triggered fierce debate; it has also encouraged the universities on their way to developing their own special profiles. Admittedly, the discussion of tuition fees that is being carried on in this context comes at the worst possible moment. Tuition fees are often proclaimed as a panacea, but they don't help solve the basic problems the universities have. Israel has already perceived that clearly – Germany has yet to come to that understanding.

TRIBÜNE: But just what solutions exist for universities' problems is the big question. Some people believe endowment universities are the answer.

BULMAHN: I believe that, in the long term, our businesses should be more closely in-

volved with universities and institutions of higher education, especially in their facilities, by founding and building up institutes. Unfortunately, in Germany companies are all too often unwilling to invest their capital and especially their know-how in universities. Instead they want to establish their own small universities. These are often much less productive, because they cannot offer the entire spectrum of university studies. The combination of studies and research always means the opportunity to experience and get to know the academic paradise a university intrinsically presents. Incidentally, that doesn't mean people should study there endlessly, but that they must look beyond the narrow horizons of their own special subject. People who restrict themselves to a limited field of specialised knowledge will never be successful in life. Universities offer many people the opportunity to look beyond the restrictions of their own special fields. They can attend other lectures or conduct joint seminars with other faculties – something that is utterly impossible in these corporate universities. That is why I want to state emphatically that I wish German companies would learn from Israeli and some American companies. In Israel certain services, certain institutes, certain equipment, certain professorships or even grants are endowed by industry. That is a sensible allocation of resources.

TRIBÜNE: Looking back on your own years of study, do you think students' mentality has changed in comparison with the past? Are the students of today more achievement-oriented?

BULMAHN: The majority of today's students are absolutely achievement-oriented. They know that great demands will be made of them. That was true of a considerable number of students in my time as well. There were a number of disciplines in which students born in the years of the baby boom, and I number myself among them, knew they had to achieve good results in order to have good job prospects afterwards. In contrast to what is often said, young people nowadays are no less motivated than we were. Of course, there are always young people who notice only at their second attempt that demands are being made of them personally. But there are a great number who themselves want to accomplish something. I consider it an important political challenge to give them opportunities to do so.

TRIBÜNE: Younger Germans in particular see their country – many surveys support this – as a multicultural society. You observe that tolerance and acceptance of other religions and ways of life have risen. That may be true for some younger people. But the impression is often produced that, in trying to be tolerant and open-minded, they are no longer willing to recognise immediate dangers. The Islamist threat to Europe as well – bloody evidence of which was supplied in Spain – is often underplayed. Of course, the biased reporting of the media, which portrays Islamist terrorists as “freedom fighters” while denouncing as “state terrorism” the defensive measures taken by the Israeli nation against the danger, plays a role in this.

BULMAHN: It is an achievement of our society that people of diverse faiths and disparate cultural backgrounds are generally accepted in our country today. Incidentally, that goes a step beyond tolerance, because it's acceptance that is necessary for living together. Of course, conflicts still arise now and again. Unfortunately there are also some young people in our country who can summon up very little acceptance for people from other cultures. They often refuse to accept people who have other convictions and positions, whether they come from the same cultural background or not. Overall, I do not share the perception that an open-minded and tolerant attitude leads to an underestimation of the danger terrorism poses. If anything, I believe the danger from terrorism is assessed realistically here in Germany. But, in my opinion, that must not lead us to take a stance that shuts us off from other

countries and puts up barricades. That would be drawing the wrong conclusion. We also cannot generally forbid people from other countries entry into our own. In addition, we already have very restrictive immigration policies. As far as laws and legal regulations are concerned, to a great extent we have already taken the protection of the population well into account.

TRIBÜNE: But it is alarming that in anti-Semitism, an unholy alliance has arisen between right-wing extremists and Islamist fundamentalists.

BULMAHN: There is this dreadful common ground, although it does not always result in organisational alliances. But there are, unfortunately, once again people in our country with right-wing extremist beliefs. By the way, these convictions already existed when I was young. The difference between that time and this is that today's far-right youths are more prone to violence. Unfortunately, the number of those who have violent tendencies and who hold these far-right convictions has risen. But here, too, I am convinced that this danger is not being underestimated. This is evident in the public debate. I see it as a fundamental political task to let these young people with right-wing extremist beliefs know that most people in Germany do not tolerate their position and that they will find no support in our society. Their ideology is incompatible with the idea of humanity set down in our constitution. That is why it is a civic duty to take the offensive in confronting such beliefs and those who propagate them.

TRIBÜNE: Finally, a foray into the future: where will German-Israeli relations be in ten years, and what part will cooperation in science and research play in them?

BULMAHN: Recently, in a speech I gave to the Max Planck Society on the future of German-Israeli relations, I emphasised that I attach especially great importance to cooperation between younger scientists from both countries. Cooperative research projects and research residencies in Israeli or German institutions through student exchanges can create strong ties. We all know that German-Israeli cooperation has in large measure been shaped by scientists who are now 50, 60 or 70 years old. In order for this cooperation to persist in future, it must be maintained on a broad level by a younger generation. The close-knit network we have in science and research depends on the many people who sustain and play their part in it with great personal commitment. This is what makes the bilateral sponsorship of young scientists so important to me. That is why my Israeli colleagues and I launched a special series of grants within the framework of the German-Israeli Foundation, and why I am so emphatically committed to increasing the Foundation's budget. If that succeeds, and many people continue to work as they have done, German-Israeli cooperation will still be extraordinarily active and fruitful in another ten years.

The conversation was conducted by Otto R. Romberg.



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