

# Germany on the Right Way

TRIBÜNE Conversation with Moshe Katsav, President of the State of Israel

**TRIBÜNE:** For many long years, Germany's contacts to the Jewish state have been described in Germany as "special relations". Shortly after the founding of our two states, no one would have dared to predict that Germany and Israel would ever be celebrating not only the fortieth anniversary of diplomatic relations, but also their close partnership, even friendship, with so much enthusiasm.

**KATSAV:** Relations between Germany and Israel are both special and normal relations, and I emphasise the word "and" here. They remind us of a dark past and are nonetheless perfectly ordinary relations, which are developing quite positively and constructively. In my opinion, the normality of these relations is based on the mutual interests of our two countries and belief in the same system of values, whereas the special nature of the relations results from the memories of the past. My wish is that the structure of our relations will continue to be based on these two common components: on the one hand, their distinctive and unique quality, and, on the other, their shared interests and values.

**TRIBÜNE:** Nevertheless, the establishment of relations met with opposition, especially on the part of Menachim Begin, whom you see as your mentor. In fact, when the tendencies in German-Israeli relations are analysed now, even experts are not always in agreement as to whether relations have become better or worse, or stayed the same.

**KATSAV:** As I know and remember very well, Menachim Begin was expressing views that were not only his own, but were also being voiced on the political left. The socialist Shomer ha-Tzair even spoke out against establishing relations, as did the right wing of the Herut party. We are speaking here of the 1950s, scarcely a decade after the Second World War. Now sixty years have passed since then; that makes a considerable difference. Nonetheless, my wish is that the memory of the Shoah, consciousness of the Shoah and the lessons of the Shoah will never be erased from the minds of the Jewish and German peoples.

**TRIBÜNE:** As the only truly democratic state in the Middle East, Israel is seen by many as the most important partner and almost a natural member of the European Union – not only economically but also culturally. Do you see values that Israel shares with Germany or with the EU?



**KATSAV:** It is true that shared interests exist. There is cooperation not only in the business sector but also in science and the arts, in addition to their shared economic and political aims.

**TRIBÜNE:** While you were studying in Jerusalem from 1968 to 1971, you also taught history at a high school. Opening a way to the past for young people, awakening their interest in historical events, is indispensable. The commemoration of the 60th anniversary of the uprising in the Warsaw Ghetto was living history. The moving ceremony attracted attention and great interest around the world, including in Germany. Here the presence of the German chancellor was viewed with special anticipation. Some people saw in it a historical consequence of Willy Brandt's fall to his knees at the Warsaw Ghetto memorial. "There is no freedom without memory," as Chancellor Gerhard Schröder said recently in a conversation with TRIBÜNE.

**KATSAV:** The chancellor has put it perfectly. I would like to praise Germany's leading politicians at this point. They have come to grips with the Shoah and Germany's negative role in the Second World War with humanity, both universal and national. Today they face the problem of a flare-up of anti-Semitism in Europe. I believe that the German statesmen of our times recognise this danger. They sense that their educational system must convey higher values to the younger generation of Germans. They are devoting themselves to attaining this aim, because they are aware of Germany's accountability for the Shoah of the Jewish people and their responsibility towards the State of Israel. But they are also aware of their duty to stabilise the thinking of the younger generation of Germans, in order to ensure that German children grow up healthier, both spiritually and by acquiring moral values.

**TRIBÜNE:** The brutal suicide attacks, with their contempt for humanity, are accorded only general, vague public condemnation in Europe. On the other hand, the terrorists are styled "freedom fighters". The footage of Israeli soldiers armed to the teeth confronting stone-throwing youths creates a false impression. Sympathy arises – a false solidarity – with what is viewed as the weaker party. Unfortunately, Israel is subjected to constant criticism because of the measures the Israeli government has taken to protect the population against terrorism. The security barrier is even frequently equated with the Berlin Wall.

**KATSAV:** It seems to me that the Europeans, including the Germans, do not understand the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in the least. The fence we are building – 90 percent of it made from chain-link fencing – can in no way be equated with the Berlin Wall. That wall was built to prevent any contact between East Berlin and West Berlin, between West and East, between liberalism and communism. We live here in the reality of brutal terrorism. In the past five years more Israelis were murdered by terrorists than in the first 50 years since the state was established. After 1948 we had to endure many wars and numerous terrorist attacks, but fewer civilians were killed than in the past five years. Because not a single Palestinian has acted against this terrorism, it is our duty to take all measures necessary to keep the terrorist militias from spilling the blood of our population. That is why we are building this fence. It is a temporary fence, not for political aims, but for security and not for eternity. If, and as soon as, peace negotiations between us and the Palestinians can get underway and a final border is agreed, it will be no problem whatsoever to move it onto contractually agreed lines. Nothing like that was ever said in East Germany about the Berlin Wall.

**TRIBÜNE:** We often hear self-appointed "experts" saying pressure must be put on Israel in order to get talks with the Palestinians going again. While Arafat was still alive, peace negotiations were absolutely unthinkable.

**KATSAV:** After the election of Mahmoud Abbas, or Abu Mazen, the conditions and prospects for them are better. Abu Mazen expresses forcefully, even strongly, the fact that terrorism has brought the Palestinians nothing but disaster, and that it is therefore forbidden to them to carry out terrorist attacks. Now we can only hope that as leader of the Palestinian Authority, he can also work effectively against terrorism. It is not enough simply to explain and make announcements; action must be taken to put an end to terrorism. We are not willing to tolerate the bloodshed caused by Palestinian terrorists any longer.

**TRIBÜNE:** An alarming rise in anti-Semitism has been observed in most European countries in recent years. Last year, the EU was considerably enlarged through the accession of eastern European states – in some of which anti-Semitism is frighteningly virulent.

**KATSAV:** The Germans are understandably more sensitive to anti-Semitism than people in other countries, in which anti-Semitism is often much worse than in Germany. But it is true that anti-Semitism is on the rise all over Europe, including in Germany. Still, I am firmly convinced that the German statesmen strictly reject every form of anti-Semitism. I believe in their resolute determination to fight against every appearance of anti-Semitism, and I believe we can trust them. I would like to give special praise here to the former German president, Johannes Rau, who organised a European OSCE conference in Berlin on measures to prevent the further growth of anti-Semitism a year ago.



*Ambassador Rolf Pauls (left) presents his credentials to Zalman Shazar, President of the State of Israel.*  
*(Photograph: AP Photo Archive)*

**TRIBÜNE:** What must be undertaken to combat this growing anti-Semitism?

**KATSAV:** Anti-Semitism must be fought with four measures: first, by coordinating legislation; second, by monitoring to make sure all laws are obeyed; third, by integrating the subject into the curricula of schools; and fourth, by exerting influence on public opinion, in that opinion shapers from all areas unite to devote their energies to repudiating anti-Semitism. These four measures can limit anti-Semitism substantially, both in Germany and in Europe as a whole.

**TRIBÜNE:** Since the beginning of your presidency, you have visited Germany several times. The Jewish communities in the Federal Republic of Germany are growing – in 1989 there were still about 30,000 members; now there are a good 100,000. Nonetheless, until five years ago Germany was only in 12th place among countries where Jewish communities exist – and that was the case even though Jews had already been living there in the early Middle Ages and, in fact, since the end of antiquity. What do you think: can Jews once again confidently view Germany as their home?

**KATSAV:** I consider the State of Israel to be the home of the Jewish people – not only because I am the president of that state, but also because as a Jew I belong to a people that had to endure so much suffering in the course of its history. That is why I am not willing to see any other country as the home of the Jewish people – only the State of Israel. Above all, I do not agree that the world should continue to define Jews as refugees. Refugees can only be people who have no country of their own. Israel is the country of the Jewish people, in which every Jew can live. Nonetheless, I do not want to deny to any Jew the right to decide freely to immigrate to another country, because that is a basic democratic right that every person possesses. That is also why I do not oppose Jewish life in Germany. As you know, in the year 2002, I dedicated a synagogue in Wuppertal, together with German President Johannes Rau. So I do not in any way reject the existence of Jewish communities in Germany. But I firmly oppose any talk of any country other than Israel being the homeland of the Jewish people, or of any other state having the right to be a country of refuge for Jews persecuted in their current host countries. If a Jew has to endure suffering there, he has a place of refuge: the State of Israel.

**TRIBÜNE:** Would you be willing to address the subject, which is also being discussed within the Jewish communities in Germany, of Jews from the former Soviet Union being admitted into Germany, instead of considering immigrating to Israel?

**KATSAV:** Why not? Regarding the Jews of Eastern Europe, I want to emphasise that they were not integrated as refugees in Germany. I do not deny the Germans the right to enable Jews to live in their country, but not as refugees. Every Jew has a homeland, the State of Israel, and he can return here whenever he wants to, because here he is at home.

The conversation was conducted by Ilan Hameiri