

*Paul Spiegel\*)*

# There are Signs of Hope

**On the 40th Anniversary of the Establishment of Diplomatic Relations**

In the view of many non-Jews, a Jew, whether German, French or Italian, is always also an Israeli. Anyone living as a Jew outside Israel, in other words in the Diaspora, knows the questions connected with this assumption all too well. No matter how apolitical the person asked may be, or how little part Judaism plays in his life, for his non-Jewish acquaintances his religion makes him a sort of unofficial ambassador for Israel. Whether it is historical details, individual elements of the latest Middle East peace talks or tips on what kibbutz would be most appropriate for their non-Jewish children – there is basically no aspect of everyday life in Israel in which Jews living outside Israel are not regarded as an authoritative source of information. German nationality is ignored – whether from ignorance or quite consciously – and a sort of vague double citizenship assumed. The late lamented Ignatz Bubis, my predecessor as President of the Central Council of Jews in Germany, never tired of relating the story of an incident he had once experienced, because he found it a perfect example of this phenomenon. After an impressive speech given by the Israeli president Ezer Weizmann during his visit to Germany in 1996, Bubis received the following compliment during a conversation: “Your president gave a wonderful speech to the Bundestag today.” Bubis remained perfectly relaxed and riposted, “Is that so? I didn’t know Roman Herzog had made a speech to the Bundestag today.”

Not only does this occurrence shed light on the past and present gaps in non-Jews’ knowledge and the deeply-anchored prejudices and the wounding ignorance of Judaism and Israel; it is also not devoid of a certain amount of irony. Weizmann’s visit to Germany attracted attention in many different ways at the time. One reason was that the highest-ranking representative of Israel spoke to the members of the German parliament and delivered a speech that was moving both in its content and in its literary language. Another was because in the run-up to his trip to Germany, he had already criticised frankly, even brusquely, the existence of Jewish life and Jewish communities in Germany after the Shoah. Weizmann said he could not understand how, after the misdeeds under the Nazis, Jews could still live in Germany. He said that even at the present time, Germans despised the Jews in their midst and spoke badly of them. This is a conclusion he repeated in modified form in a newspaper interview in Germany. To the official representatives of Jews living in Germany and to the Jewish community in general, these remarks were deeply wounding. This incident must also have left German Jews feeling they were sitting between two stools: in Israel, where their attachment to Germany had, until a few years before, met with utter incomprehension, they were criticised because in the Israeli view, German nationality and Jewishness were incompatible since the Holocaust, and in Germany they were considered to be Israelis rather than Germans.

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All these impressions have a direct connection to the fortieth anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between Germany and Israel inasmuch as 12th of May 1965 had no direct or immediately positive consequences for the Jews living in Germany. Almost to the contrary, at the time the absurd situation arose that the Israeli government from then on negotiated officially with the government of West Germany and cultivated contacts on various levels, while at the same time, of all people, the Jews in the population were punished with disregard and even rejection because of their supposedly inappropriate behaviour. At the time, hardly anyone in Israel gave any thought to this. It must be added that this was understandable, because for one thing, at about 30,000 members, the community of Jews living in Germany was extremely small and, along with its viewpoints, worries and needs, was scarcely noticed in Israel. For another, for large segments of the Israeli population, even discussing the question of establishing diplomatic relations with Germany meant a virtually unbearable confrontation with their memories of persecution, torture and death. The debate in the Knesset was correspondingly heated. Whether they had been directly affected or not, for many Israelis, with the decision of the parliament, a state of "normalisation" or even reconciliation loomed, which at that point seemed much too soon. This impression gained ground as the establishment of diplomatic missions and exchange of ambassadors began to take on definite form. As he took office, Rolf Pauls, the first West German ambassador to Jerusalem, saw himself confronted with a wave of anger that vented itself in stone throwing. His past as a major in the Wehrmacht and deputy military attaché under Franz von Papen in the embassy of Nazi Germany in Turkey played no insignificant role in this. On the other hand, political circles in West Germany feared that, through the official contacts with Israel, relations with the Arab nations would be endangered, especially as unofficial weapons deliveries to Israel had become known to the public in the early nineteen-sixties. The earlier activities for the Israeli secret service of Asher Ben-Natan, the first Israeli ambassador to Bonn, fed those fears even more. The fact remains that both diplomats made many contributions to German-Israeli relations in the following years.

I mention these two pioneers because while they were in office they showed openness, courage and diplomatic skill. They managed to lay the foundation for relations between the two countries which continually improved and strengthened over the following years. Youth exchanges, town twinnings, the opening up of cultural contacts between Germany and Israel – all these were initiated at that time. Regarding diplomatic relations, there has been a steady improvement in the relationship; seen from today, the balance could hardly be better.

The situation beyond institutional contacts showed itself to be much more complicated and it remains so: for the relatives of victims of the Shoah, for the succeeding generation of Jewish and non-Jewish Germans, for the survivors of the Holocaust and their descendants, for the victims of anti-Semitic attacks, and, equally, for the descendants of the perpetrators. They all find themselves in a constant, sometimes more, sometimes less conscious state of confrontation with the past, with the relationship of the two nations to each other and with the futile, often half-hearted attempts to master the scourge of anti-Semitism. Put another way: forty years of diplomatic relations proceeded nearly smoothly on an institutional level, in contrast to what went on in people's minds, hearts and souls.

In looking back, it is noticeable above all that, time and again, criticism of Israel, anti-Zionism and anti-Semitism have intermingled disastrously. Unfortunately, in this respect no positive development over the past forty years is discernible. On the contrary, in the past few years anti-Semitic prejudices and clichés which some optimists believed had already been conquered have resurfaced. With great apprehension, Jewish and Israeli observers have

noted that Israel's image has worsened steadily since the beginning of the so-called second intifada and the disturbances on the Temple Mount in late September 2000. Sharon's manner, the continued settlement-building, the resolute, sometimes drastic reactions of his government to Palestinian terrorist attacks, even as far as building the West Bank barrier, meet with incomprehension and criticism in the German and European public eye. Unlike the early 1980s, for instance, when the Israeli invasion of Lebanon evoked equally negative reactions, even consternation, and politicians and public personalities who were traditionally friendly towards Israel took great pains to justify Israel's actions, nowadays Israel is virtually demonised. In the eyes of the Western world the eternally unsettled Middle East conflict and the supposed insufficient readiness of a crushingly militarily and economically superior State of Israel to make peace with the Palestinians, are the source of the worldwide terrorism problem. The unending chain of Palestinian terrorist attacks and suicide attacks in Israel, in contrast, is indeed criticised and their victims regretted, but at the same time judged to be the desperate acts of an oppressed and persecuted people. The fact that, although the Middle East was often a point of reference in the devastating attacks of internationally active terrorist groups, the problem of international terrorism is far and away more multilayered and complex remains largely unconsidered. What is striking is the one-sidedness of the argumentation, which ignores the extent of the threat, denies the right of self-defence to Israel, and in doing so, ultimately calls into question the existence of the Jewish state.

Criticism of Israeli policies up to and including complete rejection and opposition are, of course, allowable. But discerning criticism distinguishes itself by not being anti-Semitic. The most often heard objection against Israel's occupation policies – that the Jews had been victims themselves and now were behaving no better towards the Palestinians than their former National Socialist torturers and slaughterers – is not only anti-Semitic but frankly perverse. To Jewish ears, "Learning from Auschwitz" has the same cynical sound as "Arbeit macht frei". Behind it lies the unspoken conviction that the Jews should behave in keeping with their status as a nation of victims. Self-portrayal, self-determination, independence, sovereignty and the defence of these values – all these are granted to other nations, but to Israel only with reservations and in conjunction with the accusation of racism. All in all, the message that can be deduced from this is: the Jews would have spared the world a great deal if they had relinquished the idea of having their own state – the founding of the state as the root of all evil. In the centuries before the founding of the State of Israel, the same accusation was raised, but formulated differently: that the Jews themselves bore the blame for anti-Semitism, through their behaviour, their appearance or some other pretext. Seen like this, part of the current criticism of Israel thus belongs to a disastrously long line of traditional anti-Semitic stereotypes.

Even among Jews there is a definite tendency to play down this form of anti-Semitism which backs itself up with politics and contemporary history – an anti-Semitism that claims to be nothing more than a critical assessment of Israel or Jewish-Israeli themes, but within this criticism conveys perfidiously anti-Jewish animosities. The so-called Möllemann affair is a prime example of this. Jürgen Möllemann's reply to the request of the Central Council of Jews to expel Jamal Karsli from the FDP outlines in one sentence the direction Möllemann wanted his party to follow: "I fear," said Möllemann, who was then the state and parliamentary party leader of the FDP in North Rhine-Westphalia and chairman of the German-Arabic Society, "that hardly anyone has done more to fuel the spread of anti-Semitism, which exists in Germany, and which we must combat, than Mr. Sharon and, in Germany, Herr Friedman – with his intolerant, spiteful manner." The remarks by Möllemann's protégé

Jamal Karsli on the supposed “Nazi methods” of the Israeli army and about the media as the tool of a “Jewish lobby”, underline the fact that in this case, as with Möllemann’s infamous anti-Semitic leaflet, this was not an isolated gaffe, but deliberate demagogery.

This opinion was held not only by representatives of the Jewish community but also by 100 German journalists and members of the media, who expressed their solidarity with Michel Friedman in a joint appeal. There was a whole range of similar reactions, and of course Möllemann met with opposition from many quarters. What was striking and, for the Jewish community at least, irritating was how long it took before more general protest set in and the FDP party leadership finally felt itself obliged to act. Once again, as shown by the Möllemann affair, the non-Jewish public initially provided a sort of bonus for “drawing room anti-Semites and anti-Zionists” like Herr Möllemann, with the glib excuse that these remarks had to be seen in light of the coming elections or other events and were not meant as they sounded. That may even have been the case, but it remains scandalous and repulsive. It misuses the Jews collectively as unbidden election campaign helpers to integrate, so to speak, the “right-wing fringe” of the political spectrum.

The Möllemann affair documents graphically the change German perceptions of Israel have undergone during the past forty years. The phase in which Israel’s existence represented a relief to non-Jewish Germans, even a sort of redemption from their feelings of guilt, is long over. Until the nineteen-sixties, admiration for the enormous achievements of the generation of Israel’s founding fathers dominated, both for the way they built up the country and for their handling of military matters. In addition to fears for Israel’s existence, both the war for independence and the Six-Day War of 1967 also evoked downright enthusiasm. The former victims had become heroes who were shown broad sympathy, partly from shame over the past but also from relief over the evidently successful consolidation of the state. But the occupation of the Palestinian territories and the beginning of the attacks by Palestinian terrorists in its wake initiated a change in mood whose effects are felt to the present day. The image of Israel as a ruthless aggressor and oppressor, communicated to lasting effect in the nineteen-seventies, most notably by the German left, has never been completely eliminated. Nothing of this is changed by the fact that, despite all the criticism from the ranks of German politicians and from ideological battles within the camps of the left and far left, Israel has always also evoked many positive emotions. The more swiftly the establishment and further development of Israel took place, the more non-Jewish German tourists flocked to Israel. To this day, German tourists constitute the second largest group of visitors nearly every year. Contact with the population, visits to holy sites and coming to terms with the past were and are primary reasons for these trips. Along with these goes a deep interest in Jewish culture, history and religion. But it would be naive to see a broader impact in these gratifying tourism statistics, because this is naturally, aside from a few exceptions, a specific clientele of non-Jews, the majority of them members of the educated middle class, who are interested in a thorough and discerning exploration of Israel and Judaism. That makes it even worse, more injurious and more dangerous when, as in the Möllemann case or numerous similar examples from the past decades, anti-Semitic and anti-Zionist slanders are voiced by precisely this class.

The current situation in Israel and the dramatic escalation in Islamist anti-Semitism observed in the past years foster the negative image of Israel among certain segments of the German public. The less differentiated and more one-sided the criticism of Israeli policies by prominent political and social figures becomes, the more shameless and morally reprehensible is the invective from the camps of those sympathetic to the far right. The re-entry

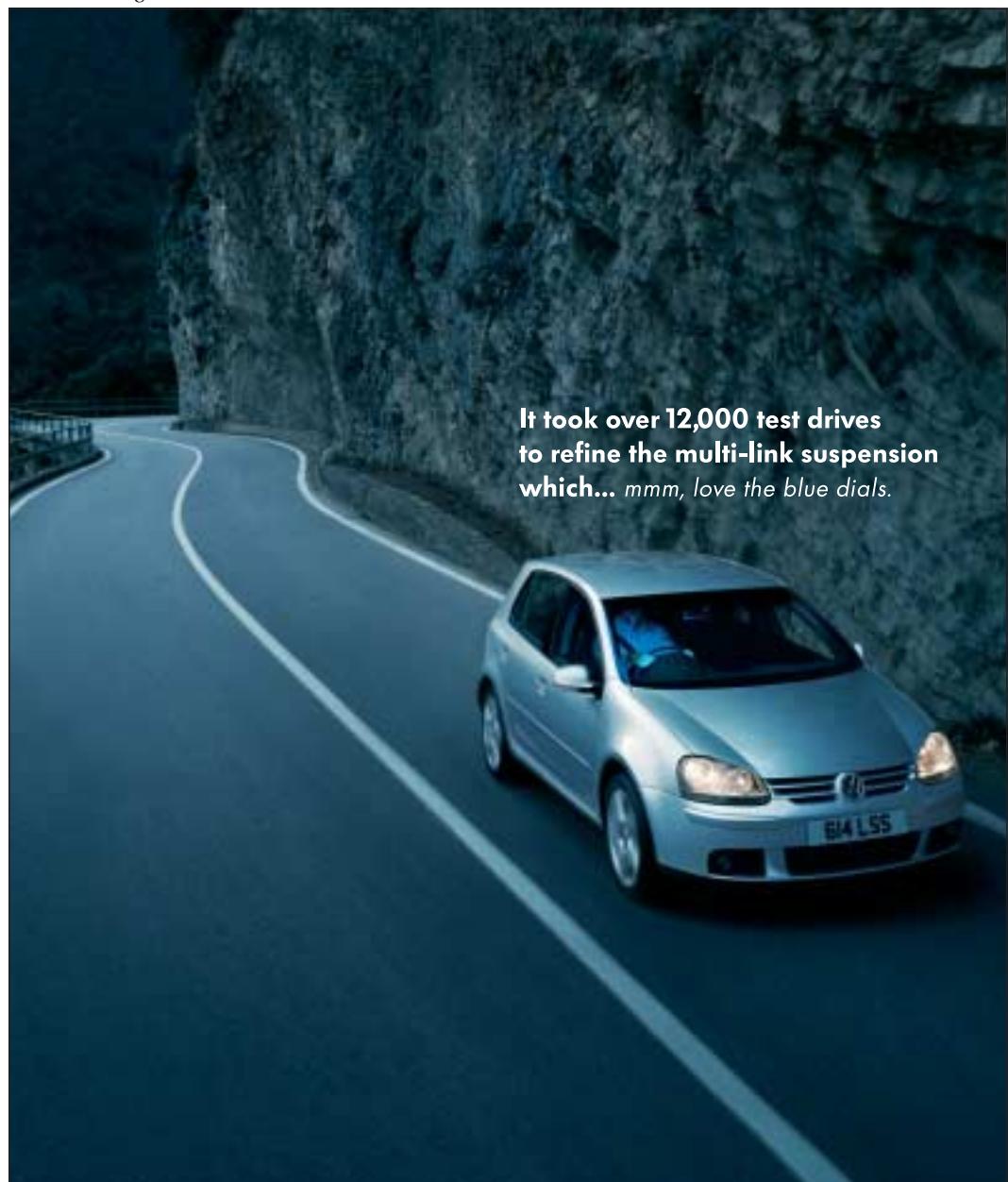
of parties like the DVU and NPD into the state parliaments of Saxony and Brandenburg in September 2004 is also an alarming sign. Social protest may have played an important role in this behaviour at the polls, but that never justifies casting a ballot for a racist, anti-Semitic and unconstitutional party. The established political parties, like society as a whole, face the undiminished challenge of developing joint strategies against the far right and pursuing them more rigorously than they have until now. In particular, the larger than average number of young people who vote for far right parties must be a reason to strengthen awareness and political education in schools and young people's organisations.

In the year of the hundredth anniversary of the death of Theodor Herzl, it is painful to have to draw such mixed conclusions in taking stock of the relationship of non-Jewish Germans to Israel. Herzl's vision that anti-Semitism could be overcome by the founding of a Jewish state has not even come close to becoming reality. The joy and pride of Jews around the world over the existence of Israel is in no way diminished by this – on the contrary. No matter how many kilometres lie between Israel and Germany, the sympathy among German Jews for Israel's fate is in no way diminished. With all the Jewish community's civic loyalty to Germany, there is a deep attachment within it to Israel, the existence of which gives every Jew who lives in the Diaspora support and a bit of additional security.

This feeling of solidarity is even more pronounced given the fact that Israel faces worldwide criticism for the course it has taken in resolutely defending itself. From a Jewish viewpoint, only one thing can be said to counter this: if, since its founding, Israel had bowed to all the reservations, impediments and threats from around the world, the State of Israel would have ceased to exist long ago. German Interior Minister Otto Schily spoke to this effect when, during his trip to Israel in September 2004, he rejected criticism of the West Bank barrier as out of touch with reality. He also said that comparisons with the Berlin Wall were inadmissible, because this was not a case of shutting people in and robbing them of their liberty, but that Israel was trying to protect itself from terrorists after decades of talks had been held without success. These clear words underline the fact that, despite all the reservations about the controversial course of the barrier and despite the consciousness that regarding this point, it cannot be sure it has the full support of the majority of the German public, the German government stands steadfastly on Israel's side. The Jewish community in Germany feels itself additionally strengthened by what have become truly amicable links between representatives of the Israeli government and Jews living in Germany. Ezer Weizmann's position is a thing of the past – a circumstance that owes a great deal to his successor in office, President Moshe Katsav, who has made great contributions as a bridge-builder as far as both German-Israeli relations and Israel's relationship to the Jewish community here are concerned. He has already visited Germany several times, and at each visit he has sent a clear signal. His presence and his spirited speech at the OSCE conference on the topic of "anti-Semitism in Europe" held in Berlin lent added weight to a long overdue event.

The presence of President Katsav at the dedication of the Bergische Synagogue in Wuppertal in 2002 was of great symbolic significance to German Jews. What had seemed unimaginable for decades became reality in 2002: together with the then German president, Johannes Rau, who had always promoted cooperation between non-Jews and Jews in so many ways, an Israeli head of state was the guest of the Jewish community on this historic occasion. From the Wuppertal synagogue and its dedication, and especially through the participation of the president of the State of Israel, a signal of hope and confidence was sent: hope for the further positive development of German-Jewish cooperation and for the relationship of non-Jewish Germans to Israel.

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