

## "A Successful Reconciliation Project"

### Why young Israelis move to Berlin

*The following is based on a talk Hadas Cohen gave at six panels organized by Action Reconciliation Services for Peace in the United States, in celebration of 50 years of German-Israeli diplomatic relations. The content draws on the research Dr. Cohen has been carrying out in Berlin centering on the Israeli community in the city. At the time in which the talks were given, she had been living in Berlin for five months.*



For Jewish Israelis Germany is a charged place. On the one hand, it is the birth-place of the Enlightenment movement, which only 200 years ago held the promise of assimilation and equality for European Jews. Kant and Goethe celebrated reason and rationality, and biases were forgoed when German Jewish philosopher Moses Mendelssohn was welcomed at the highest courts in Germany and Europe. At the same time, for Israeli Jews, Germany is a place of the apocalypse, where hundreds of years of persistent persecution against European Jewry came to their deadliest manifestation with the Holocaust. What was created by Enlightenment was violently erased by the man made horrors of the extermination camps, so much so, that no poetry, said German Jewish philosopher Theodor Adorno, could be written after Auschwitz.

It is no wonder, then, that young Israelis who choose to immigrate to Berlin, a poor European capital, rather than pursue economic opportunities in the United States, Canada or Australia, attract international media attention. In recent years, close to 15,000 Israelis moved to Berlin; they aspire to become opera singers or classical musicians, they pursue academic studies, or they relocate to join Berlin's blossoming start up scene. Others simply move to Berlin to enjoy the affordable life the city offers, similarly to other young transnationals from Italy or Spain. Warmly embraced by the German government, Israeli artists are provided with generous government stipends, academics are allowed to pursue advanced university degrees for free, at times even receiving living fellowships. Israelis with European Union and particularly German citizenships, enjoy the German welfare system, with its excellent healthcare and generous unemployment benefits.

In Berlin, however, the past is always present, and nothing and nowhere is neutral or devoid of historical meaning. As part of the German policy of atonement and remembering, the city serves as a living and breathing museum to the Jewish genocide, refusing to allow its inhabitants, both Germans and Israelis, to forget what was devised in it. Aside from famous memorials such as the memorial for the murdered Jews of Europe, with its grid of concrete slabs at the city center, numerous small memorials dot the city. Stumbling stones are embedded outside apartment buildings from which Jews were taken. Commissioned by the current residents, the golden squares exhibit the names of the victims, the camps in which they were murdered and their birth and death dates. At the subway entrance outside Berlin's renowned KaDeWe department store, commuters are greeted by wooden plaques on which the names Auschwitz, Bergen Belzen and Dachau are engraved in black letters. The German language itself, my interviewees tell me, triggers stressful

associations, and old people in the streets raise questions of their whereabouts and collaboration with the Nazi regime during the Second World War.

Yet, it seems that this proximity, both physical and emotional, to the source of Jewish apocalypse, works in unpredicted ways. For nowadays in Berlin, on the same ground on which the methodical annihilation of their grandparents was planned, these young Israelis are doing something much more extraordinary than simply living their lives. Paradoxically, they are creating a cultural center that centers around the use of the Hebrew language, thus reviving Berlin's rich Jewish culture that was abruptly halted by the Second World War. Israeli translators are translating German texts into Hebrew. Local galleries host Israeli and German artists who discuss what it means for Jewish Israelis to exist in the Diaspora, and particularly in Berlin. A hip Hebrew language magazine is published by a former Israeli journalist served the Israeli community in the city. On Sundays books in Hebrew can be exchanged at the home of a local Israeli woman, who opened her house to Israeli readers after receiving a large book donation.

It seems, then, that the seeds that were sown when Israeli Prime Minister Ben Gurion agreed to receive the reparation funds from Chancellor Adenauer, which he then used to build the young country's infrastructure, have now ripened into a successful reconciliation project. A project that defies the fate of most such projects, which as history has shown, are almost inevitably doomed to fail. But perhaps this Israeli "return" to Berlin could further provide a successful model for dealing with displacement, longing and a traumatic past, given, of course, that proper efforts are made by the perpetrators. And perhaps, as one of my interviewees said, it is time for Jews to be no longer be equivocated only with death in Berlin. Now, thanks for these young Israeli Jews, we are associated with life.



**Panel discussion on German-Israeli relations in Chicago**

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