

Fania Oz-Salzberger
Israelis and Germany

A Personal Perspective

It was a story of both enchantment and amazement. The enchantment of Israelis, mainly young Israelis who found their way into what was again the capital of the united Federal Republic of Germany in the 1990s and in the 2000s, with Berlin's global and postmodern charms; and the amazement that not only Jews from the former Soviet Union, but also thousands of Israelis, many of them coming from families that had some Holocaust memories and wounds and pains, have chosen to establish their abodes, temporarily permanently, in this new Berlin.

I began writing the travel book *Israelis in Berlin* in the autumn of 1999, during my sabbatical year at The Institute for Advanced Study, Berlin (*Wissenschaftskolleg*). What, I asked, was the secret code that allured thousands of Israelis, Jewish and Arab, most of them young women and men, to the former capital city of the Third Reich? I attempted to dig into the roots of their enchantment, and my own amazement, as well as the novelty of the story itself. For this story was new. It was not a run-of-the-mill narrative of Jews and Germans. It was about Israelis of my generation, or younger, and the city of Berlin, an urban landscape of many layers, already emerging as the globalized mecca for artists, musicians, and sophisticated culture-seekers that it has since become.¹

The book combined personal experience, scholarship, on-the-ground observation, and many conversations. I interviewed about twenty Israelis who lived in the German capital at the time, from the concertmaster of the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra, to young clubbers, members of the gay community, a rabbi, businessmen, old communists, academics, women and men who married a German and started a family in Germany, and others. These tags are obviously misleading: Not a single interviewee can be pushed into one slot of identity. All are complex, multifaceted, and if they have any common denominator, it is the awareness and reflection that comes naturally with this most self-conscious of migrations, that of Israelis to Berlin.

The distancing from regular Jewish-German discourse is a main theme of the book. Berlin is a city, not a country, and it is conducting a profound dialog with Tel Aviv, and sometimes with Jerusalem, over the heads of their respective states. Those dialogues are not at all new: Berlin has been paired with Jerusalem since

¹ Oz-Salzberger, *Israelis in Berlin*, 2001.

Moses Mendelssohn's philosophical opus *Jerusalem* (1783),² and with Tel Aviv at least since Agnon's novella *Ad Hena* (*To This Day*, 1952).³ Jerusalem had attracted Berlin both as a Christian symbol, from the seventeenth century, and as a target of imperial ambition since the age of Bismarck. Tel Aviv, in its turn, was shaped by Berlin both architecturally, through the Bauhaus school (which extended its touch to art and design), and culturally, with the rich influx of German-Jewish immigrants that helped reshape its art, music, theater, street, and café culture in the 1920s and 1930s. This urban exchange is returning today with new energies and scopes. Berlin and Tel Aviv are an excellent pairing and a fine demonstration that along the routes of creativity, cities can converse in many ways unavailable to countries and officialdoms.

The numerous conversations I had with Israelis in Berlin, then and ever since, can be titled "identity-dialogs." Such dialogs are held not merely between two people, but more poignantly between a person and his or her spheres of belonging. Identities, as I have already suggested, are prone to shallow representation. No young-artistic-liberal-Israeli-Berliner is exactly like the next one, although many of the Israelis currently residing in Berlin can be classed under these tabs. They also tend to be in their twenties and thirties, irreligious, global-minded, and politically critical of Israel's government or society. But their opinions on their homeland, on their Jewish self-definition, and on their personal relationship with their nation's history are far more variegated than this list of common characteristics may suggest.

Not all Israelis are Jews, not all Jews are Israelis: this self-evident truism is, all too often, ignored. Hence, my book had very little interface with Berlin's traditional Jewish establishment, with which Israelis, then and now, had little contact or desire for contact. By interviewing several Arab Israeli citizens residing in Berlin, an interesting perspective on "Israeliness" emerged. Some of them, indeed, felt "Israeli" for the first time when they took their abode in Berlin. One of the most interesting new perspectives I found in those conversations was with an Arab Israeli resident of Berlin whose interview took place in a nightclub. When I asked him the question I put to most of my interlocutors, what Israeli landscape he misses most, he expressed longing for the urban cityscape of Tel Aviv, rather than his native city of Akko (Acre). This was a telling response: cityscapes, real and imagined and longed-for, can pull our emotional strings in ways that transcend national fault lines.

Another interviewee, a Jew, provided a shrewd and unsentimental account of her veteran-Zionist family tree. Indeed, many Israelis in Berlin are vocally critical

² Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem*, 1783.

³ Agnon, *Ad Hena*, 1952.

of their homeland's politics, economic situation, or cultural preferences. But her particular narrative blended intimacy, involvement, and critique into a deeper self-distancing, based on ambivalent familiarity. That was when I realized that what I liked most about the Berlin vantage point on Israel is the unique set of vistas that Berlin can provide for us Israelis on our self-image and constructs of identity. It is a mind-boggling prism, challenging preconceptions, offering surprises. An Israeli Arab who longs for Tel Aviv may seem a rarity in Israel, but unexpectedly consistent in a nightclub near Nollendorfplatz. An Israeli Jew critically revisiting her parental legacy may be deemed a cliché in Tel Aviv, while acquiring new layers of complexity when speaking in Berlin.

The sensitive part-overlap of Jewish and Arab Israelis in Berlin, which I have experienced anecdotally, requires further treatment by researchers and by writers and artists. One important aspect, I suggest, is that this expatriate encounter could shed interesting light, and form interesting discussions with Berlin's own fabric of ethnic, religious, and cultural communities. There are meeting points between Israelis of various origins and Turkish-German Berliners. These meeting points are happening on street level (and home, shop, school, and kindergarten level) as well as in the arts and social activism. What new "identity-dialogs," I wonder, are emerging from these encounters?

Clearly, Berlin can tell us something new about Tel Aviv. But Tel Aviv can tell its German visitors and residents something new about Berlin, too: that of the past, especially the first decades of the twentieth century, and about present-day Berlin. This reverse perspective calls for another book by another author, and there is already a bookshelf compiled by Germans in Israel, especially in Tel Aviv.⁴ For me, it was enormously refreshing to view Israel and Israelis from Berlin.

These days I am preparing a new edition of *Israelis in Berlin*. Since the time of writing, back in 1990–2000, the floodgates broke open. Several books and dozens of articles, some academic but most in the popular media, have been dedicated to Berlin's Israeli denizens during the last decade. Likewise, dozens of films, both feature films and documentaries, and numerous television and radio reports have focused on the topic. In the Internet, the most flourishing and interactive scene, there are online magazines, chat groups, and Facebook pages, alongside other social media outlets, bringing Israelis in Berlin and their observers closer together than ever before.

Despite this constant rise in numbers and coverage, exact figures are hard to obtain. In 1999 I went to the Israeli Embassy to inquire how many of my fellow-

⁴ For recent works by Germans visiting or residing in Israel see: Kinet, *Israel*, 2013; Engelbrecht, *Beste Freunde*, 2013; Flohr, *Wo samstags immer Sonntag ist*, 2011; Höftmann, *Guten Morgen, Tel Aviv!*, 2011.

citizens actually reside in Berlin. The embassy did not know. A cautious estimate put the number at two to four thousand. Today, Israeli officials are still unable to provide reliable figures, since only a fraction of Israelis living abroad actually report their whereabouts to the consulates. But estimates have risen to fifteen to twenty thousand Israeli citizens in Germany, a significant majority of who resides in Berlin.

Today you can hear Hebrew spoken often in Berlin's public spaces, trains, markets, clubs, and concert halls. In the late 1990s it was very unusual to hear my mother tongue in loud exchanges on the streets of Berlin. When *Israelis in Berlin* recounts a Hebrew conversation, at night, on the streets of Charlottenburg, it refers to the year 1915, in Agnon's aforementioned novella *Ad Hena (To This Day)*. The narrator, ostensibly the young Shmuel Yosef himself, strolls with a group of other Eretz-Israelis, as they were called at the time, along the sleepy streets. They are students or artists, caught in Berlin during the First World War. Ambling aimlessly, they finally head for a bakery to get a cheap loaf of bread. Their Hebrew is first-generation modern Hebrew, spoken by a few thousand young Jews who were already born in, or migrated to, the Ottoman district of Palestine (*Eretz Yisrael*).

But even that early group of Eretz-Israelis already included a sculptor known as "Druzi". Agnon notes that he did not know whether Druzi was Jewish, Syrian, or Lebanese. He was probably a member of the Druze minority. In some sense, this figure – whether Agnon invented or really met him – is the predecessor of Israeli-Palestinians in Berlin today, like some of my interviewees. Moreover, his presence may explain why the conversation took place in Hebrew rather than Russian, or Polish, or Yiddish. This is ironic, but also important for our theme. The presence of 'non-Jewish Israelis' in Berlin is as old as Agnon, and today it once again redefines the boundaries of Israeli identity beyond Israel.

Let us dwell on groups and individuals. The tens of thousands of Israelis living in Berlin today are not clanned together. They do not resemble the old Jewish *Landsmannschaften* of families and congregations hailing from the same town, region, or country. They are tens of thousands of individuals; because what really characterizes Israelis in Berlin is that they are not forming what has been called in the scientific literature an 'expat' community, a close-knit neighborhood or network of expatriates. There are such Israeli communities in Los Angeles, and in Melbourne, in New York, and in other places around the globe. But Berlin caters to individualists. They are young, they are 'alternative,' they are rebellious, they are artists, they belong to various branches of the music scene, to various gay sub-cultures, some of them are hipsters, or at least hype-sters. Yet, they do form a loose federation of micro-communities.

Two currents are of particular interest to me, because of their capacity to form strong communities even among twenty-first century individualists. One of them

is the new sphere of digital communities, and the other is the ancient sphere of family life as a factor of regrouping.

Let us look at the social media first. Today there is an Israeli-German radio station, *Kol Berlin*, broadcasting in Hebrew and German. There are several journals, such as *Spitz Magazin*, with online as well as offline publishing and social activities. Several entrepreneurs are offering networking meetings for professionals in search of jobs, career, or business opportunities and, to some degree, social encounters. A series of such meeting has recently been held in the bar Louis Zuckerman in Mitte. Even more recently, a Hebrew library was opened, with its own Facebook page. Other Facebook pages offer a hub for digital socializing, mostly for practical purposes such as sublet hunting and job seeking, alongside bureaucratic advice on visas and administrative regulations. In parallel, and sometimes on the same social media outlets, exchanges on art, culture, and current affairs are on display.

Note, however, that the old impetus bringing immigrants together is at work among Israelis in Berlin, as well. While relatively few families migrate as such from Israel to Berlin, many young families are forming there, with parents of Israeli origin (one of them or even both). Parenthood tends to advance root seeking and a search for belonging. Israeli parents wish to get their children together to speak Hebrew, to celebrate the Jewish holidays together, to exchange Hebrew children's books and DVDs. Some of these parents have turned their back on 'everything Israeli' before starting a family, but wish to share their fondest childhood recollections, as well as their mother tongue, with their offspring born or raised in Berlin. Perhaps parenthood is only one aspect of this process: Rebels in their twenties sometimes become culturally nostalgic in their thirties.

The synagogues are not a popular venue for such realigned congregations. Most Israeli parents seek out the secular aspects of Israeli-Jewish identity, as practiced back in Israel: cultural (rather than religious) holiday celebrations, unorthodox versions of Jewish ceremonies such as bar and bat mitzvahs, and the vast array of cultural goods created in Hebrew, including literature, cinema, and songs.

Seldom is the synagogue part of this new search for identity. Nor is the non-Israeli Jewish community sought by Israelis to cater to such needs. Like many of the Jewish migrants into Germany from the former Soviet Union, these young Israelis are not in dire need of a religious common tent, but their Hebrew roots, rich with culture and ritual, also keep them separate for the time being, from the myriads of 'Russian Jews' in Berlin and elsewhere in Germany.

Thus, my present-day stocktaking suggests that there is no single Israeli community in Berlin; rather, there is an ever-growing network of micro-communities. A cautious, gradual 'normality' – the dispersed normality of twenty-first century

metropolitan transnationalism – is setting in. Already, some of the younger or hipper Israelis are complaining that Berlin is not what it used to be ten years ago. This dovetails with the parallel complaint of Germans who loved the old, pre-1989 Berlin, or the “poor and sexy” Berlin of the 1990s. The city has become expensive, middle-class (worse: bourgeois), and unbearably touristy. The ‘old’ fortresses of alternative culture were either closed down, like the Tacheles compound, or run over by cellphone-clicking tourists, like the Berghain nightclub. Berlin, to the horror of its hipper residents, is becoming gentrified. Some Israeli insiders, like non-Israeli Berlinites of a certain mold, are beginning to wonder which city is going to become the next Berlin: perhaps Warsaw?

In the original introduction of *Israelis in Berlin*, written in 2000, I asked a question that may no longer be relevant. How, I ask, can an Israeli live in Berlin without constantly hearing voices screaming from underneath the pavement stones, from the cellars, from the railway tracks? I thought that Berlin is full of dark secrets and underground ambushes aimed at Israelis like myself. I thought that memory will keep pouncing on us in unexpected moments.

Today I must rephrase this question. Israelis in Berlin do not constantly reflect on their choice to live in the former capital of the Third Reich. Nor can they. Nor should they. And yet, many of the current Hebrew-speaking residents of Berlin whom I have met in recent year, Jews as well as Arabs, are enchanted, fascinated, and sometimes even obsessed with the dark past. Berlin remains problematic for them, and they live their problematic life in it as a matter of choice; because life is not meant to be simple, and because this urban, highly cultured, intense global-polis is not offering its newcomers either harmony or simplicity. It is not part of the deal.

The fascination, of course, is mutual. Many Germans are deeply intrigued with things Jewish and Israeli. Political displeasure is part of this, of course, but older layers of mutual interest are still very strong. And the fields of enquiry that brought so many Israelis to Berlin (and quite a few Germans to Tel Aviv and Jerusalem) – art, culture, literature, and academia – are excellent grounds for exploring the perennial Israeli-German discomfort. Its staying power is enormous. It is not going away any time soon.

Look at Israeli literature. When I began writing *Israelis in Berlin*, in 1999, I had to dig hard for Israeli fiction written *about* Germany, let alone *in* Germany. Unlike the pioneering Hebrew authors of the early twentieth century, for whom Weimar Germany was an important life-station en route to Palestine (alongside Agnon, Leah Goldberg and several others wrote beautiful works about Berlin), the young Israeli writers of the 1950s and 1960s did not turn their gaze to that dark horizon: the Holocaust memory was too raw, and Israel’s War of Independence and the subsequent era of state-building, social growth, internal and external conflict,

provided sufficient materials. The silence was broken first by the young journalist and essayist Amos Elon, whose famous reportage *Be'erez Redufat HeAvar* (*Journey through a haunted Land: The New Germany*), brought together the poignant articles he wrote as correspondent for *Haaretz* in Bonn. Elon was the only Israeli journalist based in Germany in the 1960s.⁵ In the same decade Dan Ben Amotz published his novel *Lizkor veLishkoakh* ('To Remember and to Forget'), whose protagonist has an affair with a German woman in Frankfurt am Main.⁶ Berlin had not yet returned to the map of Hebrew fiction.

A. B. Yehoshua devoted one chapter of his novel *Molcho*, in the early 1980s to Berlin, which the book's eponymous hero briefly visits. But once in Berlin, Molcho mostly sits in a hotel room and reflects on his past marriage and his dead wife. This part of Yehoshua's novel is not about Berlin, but about Molcho, with the German city mobilized as the powerful backdrop of inner reflection, turmoil, and transformation.⁷ As I have argued elsewhere, Israeli novels have often tended to take their protagonists abroad without allowing 'abroad' – the geographical location – to play out as more than an exotic or foreboding backdrop for an intimate inner plot. Both author and characters remain deeply conversant with themselves, their family, their society, their nation and/or their home country. The host country or city, even Berlin, does not play a substantial part in the story.⁸

But something new has happened. Elsewhere, I have called the new phase of Israeli-German mutual sensitivity, which began in the 1990s, a "new abnormality." The strong, almost physical reflexes against the German language that characterized two generations of postwar Israelis began to weaken. German names, words, manufacturers, products, became acceptable in everyday speech. Thousands of Israelis began traveling, either privately or in groups, to Germany itself and to the central and East European landscapes of wartime horror and prewar remembrance. Yet, at the same time a different, deeper sort of memory was at work. Other strata of the mind became stamped with horror and pain. The skin-deep hypersensitivity gave way to an irremediable inner wound. For many Israelis of my generation, and for younger ones too, the pain about things German is no longer a matter for the eardrum; it is deeper in the guts. It will not disappear in the foreseeable future. Unlike some German contemporaries, we Israelis are not dealing with the question of 'normality' in our relations with Germany, present and past. Rather, we have developed a new abnormality, *eine neue Unnormalität*.⁹

⁵ Elon, *Be'erez Redufat He-avar*, 1967.

⁶ Ben Amotz, *Lizkor Ve-lishkoach*, 1968.

⁷ Yehoshua, *Molcho*, 1987.

⁸ Oz-Salzberger, *Israelis in Berlin*. In: Feinberg (ed.), *Rück-Blick*, 2009.

⁹ Oz-Salzberger, 2009.

The Federal Republic of Germany is dramatically different today from what it was in 1965. So is the State of Israel. Political borders have shifted. Historical moments have changed the face of geography, politics, and society. Both countries have developed a strong and lasting set of relationships: economic, scientific, and cultural. No other European country has given Israel more international support and full commitment to its existence and prosperity than Germany has done. Let me emphasize: the wounds are not healed. Yet, the new abnormality is not an obstacle for political and human relationship; rather, it is a particularly fruitful and unique field, albeit a tension-field, of international cooperation and cultural interaction. This uniqueness, this strong link established upon deep unhealed wounds, makes the fifty-year history of Israeli-German relations all the more remarkable.

During the last decade and a half, major Israeli works – novels, stories, poetry, memoirs, essays, plays, and scripts – are written not only *about* Germany, and especially Berlin, but also in residence, elsewhere in Germany but mostly in Berlin. Some recent Israeli books about Berlin are biographical or autobiographical, and as such they could have referred to other German cities and towns. The journalist and author Ruvik Rosenthal based his book *Rehov Ha-prachim 22* ('Blumenstrasse 22') on his own family history, stemming from his ancestor, Berlin bookseller Erich Freier, and ending with Rosenthal's own visit to his relatives in East Berlin in the 1970s.¹⁰ In a somewhat similar way, Israeli author Yoram Kaniuk's book *Ha-Berlinai Ha-acharon* (*Der letzte Berliner*) is based upon his own family history and recent travels.¹¹

Yet Berlin's role in this book is not just a biographical accident. Despite the fact that Kaniuk's parents grew up in Berlin and fled from it, his book does not home-in on Berlin merely for family reasons. In a plot-within-plot, the narrator (openly identified with the author), an Israeli writer making several trips to Germany in the wake of his translated books, plans to write a novel for young people. It will tell the story of an Israeli-born grandson and his German-born grandfather; "that man", we are told, "probably has to be a Berliner".¹²

And why so? Because the protagonist has inherited a secret map from his grandfather, a mental map based on hyper-accurate memories of Berlin in the 1920s. As he walks up and down the new Berlin, he re-enacts its map like a detective or a medium, raising ghosts from the earth. Not just human ghosts, but also the lost streets and vistas, shops and buildings, the spirits of a lost urban landscape. It is a cartographical *séance* that only Berlin, of all cities, can inspire.

¹⁰ Rosenthal, *Rehov Ha-prachim 22*, 2003.

¹¹ Kaniuk, *Ha-Berlinai Ha-acharon*, 2004.

¹² Kaniuk, 2004, p. 22.

Haim Be'er's *Lifney HaMakom* ('Upon a Certain Place')¹³ is another case in point. Like many other Israeli writers, Be'er was invited to stay in the Literary Colloquium in Wannsee, a beautiful writers' guesthouse founded in 1963 by Walter Höllerer in a former grand mansion on the shores of the poisoned lake. Its location, a short walk from the villa where the Final Solution came into being, creates a microcosm of Berlin's past and present pain. No other German city has a place like Wannsee. Be'er's complex and painful novel revisits the intellectual depths of Jewish Berlin that were lost and are being rediscovered, while disquietingly registering an Israeli's fear for the future of Israel's own cultural treasures, which face the threat of destruction by war. *Lifney HaMakom* is an untranslatable world-play: it is a traditional Jewish phrase that means "facing God" of "in the presence of God", but the word *makom* in modern Hebrew means a *place*, a geographic or mental location. The book's English title (as it appears in the book's credits page, since it has not yet been translated into English) is 'Upon a Certain Place.' And Berlin is the place. It is *the* place. The book's dramatic plot and deep layers and reflections hinge upon it. It is no longer a mere backdrop for universal human agonies or for Israeli inner conversations. Berlin has now become – comparably to old Amsterdam, dubbed *Mokum* by its erstwhile Jews and present-day residents – our own *makom*, our place.

I will not speak in detail of the cinematic field of Israeli-German creativity. Several major Israeli works, both feature films and documentaries were shot partially or wholly in Berlin. Then they often revisit Berlin, alongside many other Israeli films, in the annual Film Festival. They include, most famously, Eytan Fox and Gal Uchovsky's *Walk on Water* (2004) and Assaf Bernstein's *The Debt* (2007). In both these films, Israeli men and women visit Berlin to seek justice, to expose or punish perpetrators, and to have Berlin's sins, as it were, revisited upon it. But Berlin draws them into other plots, offering them new understanding of self and other.

For Israelis of my generation and younger, Berlin is no longer taboo. It has been 'de-tabooed.' By the way, this is true for Berlin far more than for Germany, because in such processes cities precede countries. Today's Tel Aviv walks ahead of Israel and today's Berlin walks ahead of Germany in their rich, personalized, informal dialogs. It has very little to do with the official Israel, Jerusalem if you like, or the official Germany, except where funding is involved. But civil-society funding and even governmental funding, in this unique case, mostly aims to serve rather than dictate.

Berlin today is not what it was when I first came there in the summer of 1990s, when parts of the wall were still standing. Nor does it resemble the scene

¹³ Be'er, *Lifney HaMakom*, 2007.

of *Israelis in Berlin*, completed in 2000. Sometimes I think our task as Israelis in Berlin is to tell Berlin what is happening to it on its fast track, from a halved city to a capital city to a global-polis.

So, the Israeli prism that I can offer, and there are many of them, but I will limit myself to one, is that the alternative Berlin, the poor, sexy and rugged cityscape of the old Kreuzberg, of Prenzlauer Berg before it was gentrified, of the *Tacheles* which has been just shut down and exists no more, this complex of alternative art and life – in this order, art and life – which so attracted young Israelis for the last two decades. The Chancellor's Berlin is slowly but surely pushing out, conquering the rugged Berlin with its quasi-socialist and quasi-revolutionary pretenses. Deep beneath, older Berlins, the sinister and the glorious and the literary and the philosophical, are still lurking. They tell some stories to the Israeli sensitivities, and other stories to other observers. We need to share our particular modes of listening to Berlin.

No less than Berlin, or Tel Aviv, other factors in our complex algorithm have changed dramatically over the years. Migration itself has been transformed. Twenty years ago, we Israelis still spoke, often with reproach, of *yordim*, the down-goers, those emigrating from Israel, as if they were stepping down from the high, from the elevated realm of the Jewish State. Then a more neutral tone emerged, the one used by social scientists, *mehagrim*, migrants. Nowadays scholars and commentators speak of “transnationals”, men and women freely roaming the lines between different countries and cultures, and able to be at home in both, or perhaps being at home nowhere at all. They can belong to more than one society and to more than one nation. They commute between them, physically and textually and digitally, with an ease that no previous migrants ever knew.

Some time ago I received an offer of friendship from the new Facebook page of the Ravensbrück concentration camp museum. I was very touched. My mother-in-law had been an inmate there, together with her sister, and their mother was murdered in that camp. Becoming the Facebook friend of the Ravensbrück memorial site is twenty-first century surrealism. Is it horrifying? Is it emblematic of our new abnormality? Is it part of an unimaginable future that we are already living? I do not know. I accepted the friendship request.

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