



Coordination Center
German-Israeli Youth Exchange

מרכז התיאום לחילופי נוער גרמניה ישראל

ConAct-Info

German-Israeli Youth Exchange

in the Past and Present

- A Short Overview for 2010 -

1. Data and Information on German-Israeli Youth Exchange

In 2010 youth exchange between Germany and Israel can look back on a history of more than 50 years. The first visits of young Germans in Israel led to the first exchange programmes, which significantly paved the way for the establishment of diplomatic relations between Germany and Israel.

In 1961, 60 groups of young Germans visited Israel and by 1963 their number had already increased to 200. In 1969 the "Federal Youth Plan" funded the Israeli and German participants with 1.1 million DEM; by 1971 this amount had risen to 2.2 million DEM for 5.900 participants. In 1969 the non-formal (i.e. not school-related) youth exchange between Germany and Israel was institutionalised and in 1973 - the "Joint Expert Commission for German-Israeli Youth Exchange" was established. This institution represented an important forum for exchanging experiences and making recommendations with regard to the funding of bilateral programmes. This raised questions as to funding, preparation of participants, programme planning, selection of participants-, and group structure led to the formulation of common principles and guidelines: To this very day these "Joint Provisions for the Organisation and Funding of German-Israeli Youth Exchange" are of central importance for determining the pivotal elements with regard to content, preparation and the actual complex implementation of youth encounters between the two countries, the main objective of which was to become acquainted with the other country, its people and culture while being fully conscious of the complicated German-Jewish history.

The figures for 1988 underline the statistical climax of German-Israeli programmes. In that year, 278 German-Israeli programmes with a total of 4,145 German and 1,901 Israeli participants received funding. In the nineties the youth exchange between the two countries received an annual 3 Million DEM from special funds provided by the "Children and Youth Plan" (CYP) of the Federal Republic of Germany. Around 3,500 German and 2,000 Israeli youngsters benefitted annually from these funds; 40% of the encounters took place in Germany und 60% in Israel. In addition certain programmes were funded by the Federal States ("Laender") and the municipalities, not to forget numerous school partnerships projects between the two countries. In 2001 there were 146 such partnerships comprising around 1,400 pupils. To this we should add voluntary services as an important part of the diverse youth contacts: In the nineties around 1,500 volunteers per year worked in social, educational and memorial institutions in Israel. If we extrapolate these figures over a period of 50 years, then at least 500,000 young people from both countries were able to benefit from the experience of German-Israeli youth encounters.

The implementation and orientation of German-Israeli youth contacts is always dependent on the current political development in the Middle East and its (media) coverage in Germany. In this connection and in retrospect the beginning of the so-called "Second Intifada" in 2000 can be considered a clear watershed – in addition to several more short-term upheavals due to political conditions – with regard to youth exchange between the two countries. As a result of security concerns, the number of programmes funded by CYP was reduced by 35% to 120 projects in 2002 and 2003. However, against the background of the difficult political conditions, the upheaval was less severe than often assumed. In 2004 the low had been

overcome and in 2005 a total of 182 programmes were already carried out from which 88 took place in Israel. Despite the difficult times, 25 new project partnerships came into existence between 2003 and 2006, leading to over 40 new exchange projects.

The war in Lebanon and the North of Israel in 2006 again led to short-term disruptions in the continuity of the encounters, and 164 projects were realised.

Times of crisis repeatedly generate similar dynamics with regard to youth exchange: Programmes in Germany normally take place whereas programmes scheduled to be held in Israel often have to be cancelled. Discussions and decision-making processes with regard to the venue of the programme are lengthy, involving all parties concerned – youngsters, parents, counsellors and decision-makers on the German and Israeli side. A feeling of disappointment on both sides with regard to the absence of reciprocity in youth exchange is often accompanied by political discussions on the current situation in the Middle East. On the German side these discussions are sometimes led against the background of attitudes critical of Israel and increasingly perceived manifestations of anti-Semitism in Europe.

In 2007 the positive trend of increase continued and was reflected in 214 encounters in Israel and Germany. Last year 240 programmes were supported and in 2010 as many as 320 programmes could be submitted for approval.

Currently 377 German partners are involved in extra-curricular youth and expert exchange funded with federal money (263 organisations from Western and 114 from Eastern federal states). On the Israeli side 269 partners are involved in funded programmes; among these around 25 partners originate from the Arab (Muslim, Christian, Druze and Beduine) population.

The declaration of intent regarding the establishment of offices coordinating youth exchange in both countries was signed in the year 2000 following the initiative of the German President at the time, Johannes Rau, the then Israeli Minister of Education, Yossi Sarid, and the then Minister of Youth in Germany, Christine Bergmann. The document led to the establishment of ConAct – the German-Israeli Coordination Centre for Youth Exchange on the German side. On the Israeli side, the Ministry of Education entrusted the Israel Youth Exchange Council – an institution dealing with youth contacts between Israel and numerous countries - with this task. However, increased funding and the assigning of additional personnel resources to German-Israeli youth exchange still remains to be accomplished on the Israeli side.

As a central institution working on a all-German basis, ConAct (with its meaning "joint action") engages in diverse activities on behalf of the Federal Ministry of Families, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth in support of the partners involved by organising seminars aimed at strengthening the existing contacts and establishing new ones. The work of ConAct as well as bilateral exchange programmes and further special projects are financed in 2010 with a total amount of 2 Million Euro of special funding provided by the CYF.

2. German-Israeli Youth Encounters: Significance and Motivation

When back in 2004 young German participants were asked about their motivation in taking part in German-Israeli exchange projects, the answers covered a wide, however specific spectrum of statements: A girl completing high school had studied Jewish life in the framework of a school project which motivated her to get to know the Jewish state personally. The interest of a (male) pupil was aroused through the coverage of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in the media and its presentation at school in consequence of which he wanted to form his own opinion "on location". Another young woman desired to study the mentality of people and the opinion of her peers living in a region affected by crisis for decades. A young Jewish woman, who had immigrated to Germany from Russia, was interested in contacts with Israel. Another participant had worked on a Jewish cemetery in the Czech Republic and received the idea of visiting Israel from a friend who had picked oranges there in the past. In the last 50 years since its inception, the motivation of young people interested in participating in a youth exchange programme covers a broad albeit focussed range of possible factors of attraction : Sometimes these are of more coincidental ("simply heard of a programme by chance") and sometimes of more conscious nature, e.g. a specific interest for Jewish or Arab culture, an interest in an encounter with the Jewish, Muslim and Christian religion, a desire to become acquainted with day-to-day life of youth in Israel, willingness to confront the history and reality of the Middle East conflict or a clearly voiced desire to explore the traces of German-Jewish history.

In a more or less conscious manner, the field of youth contacts has been and still is a "projection surface" in terms of dealing with history for participants, organisers, public funders and political supporters alike. Several generations of younger and older Germans and Israelis have – with their participation, personal initiative, their challenging willingness to show strong personal emotions, their different perceptions, points of view and opposed personal, family and social backgrounds in their respective countries – contributed to a rapprochement beyond all traumatic experiences that no one would have imagined just 50 years back. Having said that, in the first decades the encounters and discussions between young people from both countries predominantly took place against the background of the existing relationship between the descendants of the victims and the descendants of the perpetrators. In many cases the participants, organisers and central actors on both sides belonged to the second generation; on the Israeli side Holocaust survivors often played an important part.

If we look at the present day encounters between young Israelis and Germans, the "presence of history" seems to have undergone a transformation: Mostly the young people meet without bias and contact revolves around similar or different musical interests, comparing their everyday life and experiences as well as on a varying cultural environment. Initially it seems as if history has become insignificant. However, certain programme elements focussing on the memory of the Shoa, also in a more indirect manner, make history resurface in an unexpected and massive way, exerting a "divisive" effect on friendships that until then (seemingly) developed in a vacuum.

A productive encounter should consider, name and scrutinise these forces affecting the dynamics of contact on both sides in a mutual, open and sensitive manner. In this respect the often culturally diverse structure of German and Israeli youth groups allows many aspects relevant to the significance of history for the present to become apparent. An intensive, open and joint confrontation with individual issues and personal approaches of the participants can encourage intellectual processes of differentiation, thus helping unravel existing simplistic "black-and-white images".

In the course of the different periods of crisis there were and are central issues and points of contact that make the encounter between German and Israeli young people particularly difficult, but also productive to a high degree. The question concerning the lessons learned from the common fatal history led to different conclusions on the German and on the Jewish-Israeli side. While the universal German conclusion "never again should war emanate from German soil" was characteristic for the attitude of the German post-war generations, the Israeli "Leolam Lo" ("never again" related to the Shoa) at a first glance seems like a particularistic "never again shall we allow something like that to happen to us". In many discussions in youth exchange projects focussing on the war in the Middle East and the issue of peace in Europe, the ability to recognise these different conclusions drawn from the same history constitutes a major accomplishment and a prerequisite for a subsequent understanding of diverging positions. This is also the background for competent discussions on issues relevant to the young people from both countries such as the legitimacy and the necessity of military service, the current discussion about conscientious objection in Israel and military and alternative civil service in Germany. Frequent irritations and misunderstandings occur when the fundamentally different context and day-to-day experiences in Germany and Israel serve as a universally valid instrument to understand the reality in the other country. While Israeli visitors in Germany often appear as critical watchdogs with regard to how antisemitic and extremist right wing tendencies are confronted in Germany, German visitors to Israel are not seldom perceived as self-righteous moralist explaining what is right and wrong with a strongly moralising undertone.

Confronting and enduring these tensions, opposite tendencies, contradictions and one's own values and life concepts on the one hand and the given reality to be experienced on the other constitutes the main challenge to and at the same time the continued attraction of German-Israeli youth exchange.