**Unique instead of normal**

**“Israelis & Germans: The Exhibition” of the German-Israeli Association**

**This year, Germany and Israel commemorate the establishment of diplomatic relations 50 years ago. A reason to celebrate. But also a reason to look behind the scenes of diplomatic history. On this occasion, the traveling exhibition “Israelis & Germans” offers deep insights into these unique bilateral relations that extend beyond a “normal” relationship between two countries in many ways. The traveling exhibition highlights the stories of countless well-known and less well-known bridge-builders throughout the decades and provides new perspectives for visitors from October 2015 until the end of 2016.**

**Interview with Reinhold Robbe, President of the German-Israeli Association (DIG), and Dr. Alexandra Nocke, curator of the exhibition “Israelis & Germans”**

**Mr. Robbe, for the first time since its founding nearly 50 years ago, your association is organizing an exhibition. What moved you to take on this complex project?**

When we look around today, we can see a close entanglement of relations between the people of both countries. This closeness and diversity is unique, and it was unthinkable 50 years ago, only 20 years after the Shoah. Who made this network of encounters, friendships and cooperation across borders possible? It was people from all walks of life and across generations: youths and seniors, workers and professors, religious and secular. Their dedication has been at least as important as the big political efforts. Based on this, an idea evolved to acknowledge these actors from civil society and their commitment with a special exhibition. At the same time it is important to look at the historical context with agreements, contracts, wars, conflicts and ruptures in order to properly understand the thinking and acting of these bridge-builders. And, of course, by looking back, we also want to sharpen our focus on what lies ahead. How will the young and committed generation in Israel and Germany continue to weave the network of relations?

Given the project's complexity, we were very happy to recruit the scholar in Cultural Studies Dr. Alexandra Nocke as curator – who has risen to the challenge splendidly. The exhibition will offer fresh insight and garner deserved praise – I am convinced of this. And visitors will be able to see it for themselves in the traveling exhibition until the end of 2015 in Israel, and until the end of 2016 in Germany.

We are very grateful for the substantial support provided for the exhibition by the German Bundestag and Germany’s Federal Foreign Office, and we are thrilled to have been invited to be guests at the Paul-Löbe-Haus of the German Bundestag for the start of the traveling exhibition in Berlin from October 16 through November 13, 2015. Of course I am especially happy that the President of the Bundestag Prof. Norbert Lammert will open the exhibition on October 15, and that the Ambassador of Israel Yakov Hadas-Handelsman will be in attendance. I would also like to explicitly thank the Deutscher Sparkassen- und Giroverband (German Savings Banks Association, DSGV) for supporting the exhibition station in Berlin. Further locations will be supported by local branches of Sparkasse.

The traveling exhibition from November 2015 until the end of 2016 would also be unthinkable without the great dedication of the regional groups of the DIG in Augsburg, Dresden, Düsseldorf, Erfurt, Hamburg, Kassel, Leer, Nuremberg, Passau and Würzburg and the IDG, our sister association in Israel. The exhibition requires approximately 250 square meters of so-called gross space, so it hasn’t always been easy for the local organizers to find a suitable location.

**Ms. Nocke, since the end of World War Two, an abundance of official and unofficial relationships has developed between Israel and Germany. How did you approach this topic, and how did you incorporate the results of your research?**

As an adolescent, I participated in a school exchange in 1989, and established friendships that have lasted until today. Over a period of nearly 25 years, during which I visited Israel frequently and spent time living there, I developed my view on German-Israeli relations through private conversations and academic discussions – and this view is partially reflected in this exhibition. All of this time I collected stories from Germany and Israel that I could integrate into my previous work as scholar in Cultural Studies. Some stories were still waiting to be told.

Together with the German-Israeli Association I was confronted with the question of how we could approach the abundance of historical material in order to provide visitors with new, yet unknown, perspectives. Our approach: We wanted to tell the apparently small stories behind the official historiography and thus acknowledge the people who are not necessarily in the limelight.

However, the process of finding a structure was much more complex and challenging than establishing the underlying concept. After all, the relations have not developed in a linear fashion, and therefore a chronological division – for instance in separate decades – did not seem appropriate. Instead, we decided to divide the topics according to their content, organized through overarching and more abstract titles.

The six modules of our exhibition are called Prolog, Chasm, Rapprochement, Trailblazers, Connections, and Tilt. In these six chapters we tell the stories of about 160 politicians, people engaged in the cultural sector or media, sportspeople, scientists and entrepreneurs from Germany and Israel – via texts, quotes, photographs, letters and video interviews. A timeline from 1949 to 2015 provides an additional historical basis.

**Ms. Nocke, traveling exhibitions are usually associated with boards or roll-ups. Which display format did you choose for “Israelis & Germans: The Exhibition”, and why?**

From the very beginning it was important for us to develop a display format that would reflect the uniqueness of German-Israeli relations on an architectural level. At the opening of our exhibition on October 15, the guests will encounter six large, angular modules built from steel panels. These panels were zinc-coated to create a lively structure that allows some light to be reflected from the surroundings. The material is also a deliberation on the different perspectives and points-of-view regarding the complex topic. In addition, the structure reflects the at times contradictory relations. There have been cracks and breaks in the bilateral relations as well. Following the zinc bath, the images and texts were printed on the sheets using screen-printing. This exhibition architecture by the office of Lendler Ausstellungsarchitektur is both exceptional and surprising. We are all excited to see the reactions of the audience.

**Mr. Robbe, the German-Israeli Association (DIG) was founded in 1966. You have worked in an honorary capacity in the executive committee for the past 17 years. How do you evaluate the role of the DIG and its members with regard to the close connection between the two countries?**

Upon its founding in 1966, the German-Israeli Association has made it its mission to deepen the relationship between Germany and Israel in all public and cultural matters. In the exhibition, you will find traces of these activities wherever you look. In youth exchanges, travel groups of adults, public discussions, statements, or even through presence in demonstrations: Our members have always been involved in the debates of civil society, and have thus significantly facilitated the discourse between different opinion groups, both in our country and between both countries. In many cases, this was only possible thanks to our close cooperation with the Israeli-German Association (IDG). It is the IDG who is organizing the Hebrew version of our traveling exhibition “Israelis & Germans” which will open in Tel Aviv on October 29, and will then be shown in Beer Sheva, Haifa and Jerusalem. I am convinced that we couldn’t speak of such unique and diverse relations between both countries and their citizens without the civil engagement of both associations and their members.

Many thanks to Dr. Nocke and Mr. Robbe for this conversation.