

Germans and Israelis: The Past in the Present
Panel, Berlin IPAC 2007

Mira Erlich-Ginor

I will talk to the experience of the Israeli/Jewish participants in these conferences, by concentrating on the questions of the **resistances (why not)**, the **motivation (why yes)** and the: **mutative factor (how does it work)**. I will also present citations from contributions participants wrote for the GIC book.

As one of the initiators of this project, I might as well start with the question of what made me engaged with it for almost 20 years.

In 1998 we participated at the Ulm ski seminar for the first time. I enjoyed the ski in the morning, the PA discussion in the afternoon, but had awful headaches in the evening and retired to my room. We noted that in the clinical case presentations the War years were hardly mentioned at all. It was strange to us, since in Israel the relatedness to Holocaust experience is self evident in any intake of family history for large parts of the population.

The next year "I took myself to a serious conversation" – or - did a bit of self-analysis, and decided that either I stay at home or if I go - I am not running away from what I dared not face: which I understood as meeting German colleagues as people.

By not running away and engaging in conversations, we experienced the hunger of our colleagues for the opportunity to talk to us and share the "untalked-known" - personal stories of their parents' War years whereabouts, as well as their pre-occupations with the subject, doubts and fantasies. We let ourselves to be "used" in this way and thought that there is important work to be done - if it is given a suitable container.

My personal resistance and avoidance had a collective parallel when we came up with the prospect of mounting the first conference. Only 2 Israelis registered, including me. The rest had “headaches” and “retired to their rooms”.

Why not? The most voiced and obvious objection was: “I don’t want to give *them* space; I am not interested in their sorrow; listening to it is already a kind of absolution (reconciliation) - I will not give it to them”. In the words of Irene Melnick¹, one who did come to the conference, describing her hesitations beforehand:

I found out that the most powerful resistance came from my wish to keep my hatred alive and my enemy focused, clear and unchanged. It was one of the ways to remember the Holocaust and not to feel a traitor to my people and my family. Moreover, I could sense that in some ways the feeling of hatred gave me a sense of power that I found hard to renounce.”

Another resistance was that by meeting the “second generation” of Germans and acknowledging their damages, a false symmetry is created in which we are all victims and there is no real difference from which side we came - the victim’s or the perpetrator’s side. This symmetry might be seen as a specific form of “Holocaust denial”.

This resistance persists in the Israel PA Society until now. The society is one of the sponsoring organizations and contributes financial support; but on the other hand, there is constant reluctance to hear about the conferences and to participate in them. “Go ahead and do them on our behalf, but leave us alone”. It is interesting to note that on a personal and professional level there are many close and warm relationships between Israeli and German colleagues. These relationships can gloss over the “dark years”, turn them into ‘as if’ non-issues.

¹ Quotes are from a book in press: S. Erlich, M. Erlich-Ginor, H. Beland (Ed.): *Fed with Tears, Poisoned with Milk* (2008).

“Leave me alone” – to what end? So as “to have my projections well and alive and my enemy focused”.

These conferences are indeed subversive: like analysis, they attack the existing order and offer potential change. The change for the Israeli side is in giving up the position of the “just victim” role, giving up an identified and focused enemy as well as a whole internal organization around it having to do with personal and collective identity.

Why yes? Because of the price tag attached to this position of living under the shadows of the past and being filled with negative projections. As is demonstrated in the following citation of Yoram Hazan:

“But do I really want to? I don't 'feel like' coming. Too heavy. Once I see myself as an American (Jewish) soldier coming to this Nazi country in 1945, and once as a fearful Jew who tries to get lost unnoticed during the war otherwise he will be shot on the spot. I fear that I'll not be able to sleep all the nights there, and everyone will see how frightened I become, being on this land (Germany) and not be able to distinguish between fantasy and reality, between history and here-and-now reality. What is the reality anyway when a Jew is walking freely in Germany and yet there are still those who would rather wish him dead? But it is not a good enough argument because here (in the Middle East), we are not so welcomed too, and nevertheless I'm staying”.

To jump, for a moment, from the individual to the collective level - one view of the present political situation in Israel is that it is a result of traumatization during the Holocaust that creates vicious circles of paranoia - attacks and counterattacks.

Back to the personal level: Unconscious hatred on the on the part of victims and their descendants, and guilt on the part of the descendents of perpetrators, seemed to live on as insurmountable obstacles.

The post-holocaust syndrome of hypersensitivity, paranoia (“don’t trust them, they killed your grandparents”), seclusion and isolation, are well documented. They provide a good reason to go out from under.

Those (relatively few) Israelis who did come to the conferences, especially those who came more than once, could testify to the experience of feeling the freedom to move from the shadow of the past to the present, see the reality with less projections, relating to the German colleagues as people and not as shadows of projected perpetrators; moving from the stereotype ‘just-victim’ image to a more complex view of oneself and others.

For example, I cite from Daniela Cohen:

*Summer 2000, Bad Segeberg, plenary session, a beautiful German woman (Stereotype of the female SS in movies?) says: “I have an ordinary Nazi mother”. The lake and the forest are so beautiful, the ‘Appfel Kuchen’, the Herring and the ‘Kartofel Salat’ are so tasty. I am in a small study group with a German consultant, always critical towards him, difficulty to accept German authority, and here comes an amazing thought- I have an ordinary **Nazi-Jewish mother! Me?”***

How does it work? By providing a setting in which members of each group might use the other in order to get in touch with deeper elements of their own reality, especially with those elements bound by shared emotional defenses, which need the other group’s presence to be elicited and explored.

This is a setting in which experiences relating to the Holocaust that are ordinarily disowned could be discovered, voiced and comprehended. For each group the physical presence of the other served to bring to the fore complex and difficult feelings that included painful and entrenched group enmity, hatred, prejudice, cruel persecution and unbearable shame and guilt; once in the open they became available to be worked on. The work that takes place is therefore intensely personal, forging new bonds of trust across old divides, and allowing participants to examine the ways in which the legacy of

the past, alive within, bedevils the current relationships of individuals and groups.

I will give a short example: the context is a 4 day long “System Event” in which German and Israelis start in separate groups and have the task of studying the ongoing processes of establishing and developing relationships in the system as a whole.

The German and Israeli groups came together and the German group decided to meet alone for one of the sessions. Yoram Hazan writes:

“... I imagined them to myself – faces most of which I did not know well. When they told us that this was a majority decision (for the Germans to remain by themselves) I tried to guess who had voted “against us” – who had such a Nazi face. I made a selection, I divided them into good ones and bad ones, and I “knew” that I could tell the difference. Later I thought that “they are all the same” and that all of them should be finally eliminated. They deserve it – after all, they’re Germans. I even thought about how to do it.

When they gradually began to understand what had happened when they had decided to have a German-only session, I was left empty and wanted to get away from these people who had evoked this sort of hatred in me. I remember the next session vaguely; I wasn’t really listening. I have no idea what led me, at some point, to listen for their names and to connect their names with their faces. First it happened and only afterwards did I notice that it was happening. I played with the names, some of them foreign and cold – Rolf, Gertrude, Carl, Werner, Ziegfried, Thomas – and some softer – Michael, Gisela, Veronika, Christoph, Uschi. I know it won’t seem strange if I say that gradually, to my total surprise, they began to seem human.”

This seems like a “happy end” but, in the words of Irene Melnick, an Israeli:

“As empathy for their (Germans’) suffering began to emerge in the Israeli group , the question remained: what to do with our hatred. Is it useful or is it just a poison to our minds and to the minds of our children?”

“With no hatred, how do we remember or prevent it from happening again? When these processes started happening - it was suddenly much harder for the Israeli group“

In one conference after another there was a move from the well known, long lived defensive position (what did your father do), through repetitions (“the Israelis contemplated while the Germans acted”), through idealization of the Israelis by the Germans (“they know how to do it,” they can speak the language”) into uncharted territories in which the Israelis found their projected parts; their aggression, (even their fascism in one conference) their longings to their own and their parents' German parts.

Apart from many meaningful long lasting personal relationships that were created, those internal moves were the winner of the day and the revenue of the hard work.