“Normal relations between Germany and Israel are not possible and not appropriate,” wrote Israeli author Amos Oz in his 2005 essay “Israel and Germany.” The relationship is unique and it will always remain so. Despite, or perhaps even because of the burden of the past, the complex and multifaceted relationship between Germany and Israel has changed considerably in recent years. Germany has emerged as one of Israel’s closest political and economic partners. An ever denser network of cultural and social contacts has helped bring the two states and two peoples closer together. The United States, a close ally of Israel, has also played a special part in this development. Israelis today travel to and live in the United States and Germany as a matter of course, and vice versa. For many Israelis, Germany is no longer the land of the perpetrators, but rather a part of a new and modern Europe.

Under the title “Germans and Americans in Israel: Israelis in Germany and the United States,” the Third Junior Scholars Conference
in German-Jewish History sought to explore this shift in perceptions and to set it in historical context. The objective was to bring together a group of doctoral students and recent PhDs from Germany, Israel, Poland, and the United States for two days of intensive scholarly dialogue and discussion following current trends in both German-Jewish and migration history.

The first panel, chaired by Sybille Steinbacher, addressed Israel and Germany’s current perceptions of one another. Katrin Stoll opened the panel with a presentation on the debate over Tuvia Tenenbom’s 2011 book *I Sleep in Hitler’s Room (Allein unter Deutschen)*. Stoll pointed to a gap between public and private responses in Germany to the Nazi past. Whereas public engagement with the Third Reich is manifested primarily in the establishment of memorial sites and in a forced political correctness, individual identity and family history remain largely untouched by efforts to address the past. Stoll sees her work as an “intervention” in the debate on Tenenbom’s book. She focused in particular on Tenenbom’s description of a manic obsession in Germany with Jews and Israel. In the discussion following Stoll’s presentation, it was pointed out that an analysis of *I Sleep in Hitler’s Room* should take into account the ironic prose style the author uses in presenting his interlocutors’ often mind-boggling comments to the reader.

Patricia Pientka addressed a similarly contemporary topic in her presentation. In recent years, Berlin has become extraordinarily popular with young Israelis. More than 30,000 young Israelis have taken up residence in the German capital for a variety of reasons. As Pientka noted, this rediscovery of Berlin on the part of many Israelis is often mistakenly taken as an expression in interest in Germany as a whole. The particular importance of Berlin and Tel Aviv as metropolises, and the historical context of this phenomenon, have been overlooked. Pientka sought to address this research gap by examining the dynamic relations — personal, cultural, and spatial — between Berlin and Tel Aviv since the beginning of the twentieth century. These ties and the diverse reasons for Berlin’s popularity were explored during the discussion. Young Israelis have several incentives to take up residence in the German capital, including family ties to the city and Berlin’s low living costs, high quality of life, and reputation as a party metropolis.

The second panel, moderated by Pamela Nadell, considered internal and external perspectives on the Israeli state. Eva Maria Verst’s
presentation focused on German pilgrims to the Holy Land after the Holocaust. Verst called attention to similarities and differences in how groups of pilgrims dealt with the German past. Some Christian travelers linked their encounters with Israelis and visits to memorial sites with a sense of national German guilt, but at the same time avoided taking their personal pasts into consideration. Other groups of pilgrims saw the trips as purely religious experiences. Neither individual nor collective responsibility for the suffering of Jews in Nazi Germany played a role in their thinking about their travels. During the discussion, it became clear just how important such pilgrimages were for German-Israeli relations. Before the Federal Republic of Germany and Israel established official diplomatic relations in 1965, pilgrims were pioneers of informal relations between Germans and Israelis, Christians and Jews.

Shaul Mitelpunkt’s paper addressed a chapter in American-Israeli cinematic history. According to Mitelpunkt, the film adaptation of Leon Uris’s 1958 novel *Exodus* was of tremendous importance for the development of the Israeli state. Both the book and the film illustrated the Jews’ heroic and tragic struggle for survival in the Middle East and thereby made an essential contribution to American support for Israel. The Israeli government, Mitelpunkt explained, generously backed the film for political reasons and in expectation that it would be a box office success. Israeli filmmakers who presented a different image of their country, by contrast, did not receive similar backing. The Israeli narrative did not center on the struggle for survival of an oppressed nation whose continued existence was dependent on American goodwill. Rather, it presented a picture of a confident and modern country living in harmony with its neighbors.

The last panel of the day, chaired by Richard Wetzell, considered the traces of the Jewish legacy in Germany. In their presentations, Lina Nikou and Gal Engelhard examined the visitor programs run by German cities for expelled Jewish residents and their descendants. Nikou analyzed the development of the visitor programs in Munich, West Berlin, and Hamburg, concentrating on the initiation and development of the programs, the interaction between the cities and their former residents, and visitors’ experiences during the trips. For all the visitors, Nikou argued, the search for a lost home and for one’s own identity played a central role. The lost home was not necessarily Germany per se; rather, the emigrants’ memories were much more closely bound to the cities or regions from which they came.
Engelhard’s paper dealt with the interaction of hosts and visitors in the programs run by Berlin, Halberstadt, Leipzig, Nuremberg, and Rexingen and the function of the trips as a contact zone for Jews and non-Jews. Drawing on ethnographic research methods, Engelhard analyzed the life stories of multiple generations of Jewish visitors and non-Jewish hosts, along with the narratives resulting from those stories. Engelhard argued that they represent, convey, and create cultural memory, time, space, and identity. During the discussion of the two papers, it was stressed that the visitor programs were local initiatives and were thus often very different from one another. Munich’s visitor program was cited as exemplary. The city launched its visitor program comparatively early and worked on it intensively, in contrast to its otherwise rather hesitant approach to dealing with its Nazi past.

The second day of the conference opened with a panel, chaired by Lisa Leff, devoted to Shira Klein’s paper on the world of Jewish Italians who sought refuge in the United States in the 1930s and 1940s. She showed how the émigrés’ optimistic expectations of the United States as a safe haven for Europe’s victims of persecution were quickly dispelled after their arrival. Despite their identity as Jews, they were suspected of supporting Mussolini and spying on Italy’s behalf. Nevertheless, Jewish Italian émigrés served as soldiers, propagandists, and intelligence agents in the American war effort. In the discussion that followed her presentation, Klein addressed the contrast in Jewish émigrés’ perceptions of the non-Jewish residents of their respective native countries. Whereas German Jewish émigrés generally saw Germans almost without exception as supporters of Nazism, Klein contended, Italian Jews considered the great majority of Italians innocent of complicity in the Fascist regime’s persecution of Jews.

The final panel of the conference, moderated by Dana Hercbergs, dealt with Jewish migration since 1945. Ori Yehudai illustrated how the study of migration can illuminate the state-building process. His paper examined the controversial emigration of Israeli citizens using Germany and Europe as a transit corridor to other countries. Yehudai noted that the Israeli state and Jewish communities in Europe disapproved of this migration. They saw it as a form of desertion, as an anti-Zionist act or statement, and as a threat to the newly established Jewish homeland. Emigrants had a variety of reasons for leaving Israel, including family reunification, language difficulties, the climate, and reluctance to serve in the military. As
Yehudai stressed, the consequences of these entirely personal decisions quickly brought the migration out of Israel into public debate. The discussion of his paper focused on the discrepancy between the restriction of emigration from, and immigration to, Israel and it made clear how Europe remained important for Jews after the Holocaust as a “stepping stone.”

Jannis Panagiotidis’s paper also concentrated on Israeli emigration during the 1950s. Like Yehudai, he pointed to the controversial emigration of German Jews and their Israeli-born children to West Germany. In Israeli public opinion, the adult émigrés stood accused of immoral materialism and disloyalty, but their children were seen as victims. As members of the first generation of true Israelis, these children had been taken against their will to the “Country of the Perpetrators” and thereby prevented from making their contribution toward the realization of the Zionist dream. Panagiotidis stressed that this conflict must also be understood outside the context of the Israeli state-building process. The children’s tie to Germany was seen as an obstacle to Zionist efforts at consolidating the Israeli state and the anti-German boycott. As was made clear in the discussion, the strengthening of Jewish life in Germany through this migration did not result in their isolation and separation from Israel. Rather, the Israeli public debate on emigration led to a more intensive engagement on the part of Zionist and Israeli institutions with this new generation of the Diaspora.

Thematically contrasting from the two preceding presentations, Dani Kranz’s paper examined the migration of Jewish Israelis to Germany since 1990. Focusing on the scale of the migration and the migrants’ motivations and ambivalence, Kranz raised a series of questions: How are Israelis received in German society? How do their Jewish identities and ties to Israel change? What identity ultimately takes shape? The discussion following Kranz’s paper centered on the peculiarities of Israeli-Jewish life in Germany in the shadow of the Shoah. Whereas the identities of Israeli migrants to the United States are shaped by their being Jewish, the identity of Israelis in Germany rests on their being Israelis. They maintain a greater distance from the Jewish community than their counterparts in the United States, and fewer of them take part in religious life.

The conference concluded with a lecture by Eric Lichtblau of the New York Times on his book project The Flight of the Nazis to America. Lichtblau gave an overview of the escape of Nazi functionaries
and war criminals to the United States, specifically Lithuanians and Ukrainians, and the scandalous part played by the American authorities. It later proved difficult to prosecute Nazi war criminals in U.S. courts because there was no basis in American law for addressing crimes committed in other countries. Revoking their U.S. citizenship was one of the few means of pursuing accused war criminals, but deporting them was usually not possible. Determining their country of origin was often extremely difficult. Moreover, some faced the prospect of prosecution in their Eastern European native countries for having collaborated with the Germans during the war and were unlikely to receive fair trials.

The two-day conference demonstrated how the interwoven relations of the Israeli, German, and U.S. triangle have been reflected in migration and in cultural ties since the Shoah. The transnational perspective made it possible to expand views on German-Jewish history. Germany’s ambiguous role as the place of annihilation but also as the country of origin of German Jewry played a central role in all of the conference papers. The diverse research interests and papers made evident the dynamic of developments in German-Jewish history and shed light on the complexity of Jewish identity.

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