



Young Ambassadors. Youth Exchange and the Special Relationship between Germany and the State of Israel



Book Review

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Simone Heil: *Young Ambassadors. Youth Exchange and the Special Relationship between Germany and the State of Israel*. Baden-Baden 2011: Nomos Verlagsgesellschaft. 351pp.

Simone Heil's book is a study of youth exchange programs between Germany and Israel as they have evolved over some forty years, from the mid-1960s to the early years of the new millennium. It is based on a qualitative-interpretive reading of the voices of 130 interviewees who took part in making these exchanges possible either as direct participants in them – youngsters or staff members – or in administrative and political supporting roles of various kinds. It also draws on an extensive reading of archival and press material pertaining to these initiatives as well as on secondary writings, including previous studies of youth exchanges in general and studies concerning the arena of German-Israeli relations. Thus, while anchored in the research tradition of international relations in the field of political science, this study addresses a domain of people-to-people institutional practice that has been largely neglected in that tradition, arguing for an extension of international relations research into this new, uncharted domain. This proposal is grounded in a constructivist approach to the study of social life, using the research arena of youth exchange programs to make a theoretical point, exemplifying the interdependence between structure and agency in the unfolding of historical events. As befits a qualitative research approach, these disciplinary and theoretical concerns are addressed through a close reading of the interview and documentary materials the researcher has painstakingly gathered on the history – public and experiential – of the German-Israeli youth exchanges, their shifts over time, and the sociopolitical contexts in which these shifts were rendered meaningful.

An extensive overview of social science research on youth exchanges sets the stage for a consideration of the German-Israeli youth exchanges as a particular form of international collaboration. It clearly demonstrates that policy makers have long recognized the importance of youth exchanges in institutional efforts to shape the future possibilities of peaceful co-habitation in our increasingly interconnected world. Against this broader recognition of the great potential that lies in creating opportunities for young people to learn about each other's country in the intimate setting of personal encounters, the author elaborates on the special burden of the difficult past that

attends German-Israeli relations. This burden has given rise to a context-specific interpretation of the notion of a “special relationship” that has deeply affected participants’ experiences of the youth exchanges as well. The memory of the Holocaust has inevitably colored the German-Israeli youth exchanges as participants who were born after WWII found themselves struggling with the legacy of Jewish suffering and German guilt, balancing out the injunction to remember with the search for a new Jewish existence in Israel as well as a New Germany. Both organizing those exchanges and participating in them thus involved a delicate act of acknowledging the past even while orienting to the future. Initially, the balancing out of these different temporal and moral orientations in a manner that both parties to the exchange could accept and benefit from required unusual courage and empathy on the part of those directly involved. They needed to overcome the outright resistance to the establishment of these exchanges among at least some of the members of the German and Israeli public in the early years, as well as contend with the residual anxieties that accompanied them in the years to come. The persistence of the organizers and the support of the young participants and their families was indeed an act of faith that sought to affirm the possibility of reconciliation in human affairs. As the author shows, this significant and unusual venture in human relatedness was generated and carried forth by self-selected individuals, operating mostly at the municipal and interpersonal level, who labored to weave together the Cologne-Tel Aviv and Bremen-Haifa partnerships, turning the youth exchanges into a nationally recognized institutional reality.

The author’s extensive discussion of these background issues is crucial for the exposition of her empirical study, whose findings are at the heart of this book. The data gathered for this study provides the basis for two central analytic moves the author makes. The first involves a thematic analysis based on an interpretive reading of interviewees’ accounts of their experiences of the German-Israeli youth exchanges as retrospectively recollected in this research context. The second move involves a timeframe analysis whereby the author compares thematically organized sets of interview data pertaining to the different periods she has identified in relation to the changing contours of these particular youth exchanges. These changes are analyzed in terms of the impact of key political events, such as the establishment of diplomatic relations between Germany and Israel in 1965, the war of 1967, the massacre of Israeli athletes by Palestinian terrorists during the 1972 Olympic games in Munich, Willy Brandt’s visit to Israel and the Yom Kippur War in 1973, the 1990-91 events of the Gulf War, and the events following the outbreak of the second Intifada between 2000-2004. Each of these historical junctures affected German-Israeli relations in a significant way, putting them to the test and/or reinforcing their durability. Let me address these two research moves one at a time.

The thematic analysis addresses interviewees’ perceptions of a whole range of issues related to the youth exchange experience. The themes identified by the author as central include the individual motivations interviewees associated with their choice to participate in these youth exchanges, such as a historically grounded sense of mission, or a youthful pursuit of adventure. The image of the other country prior to and following the exchange experience also played a role in this choice. Other themes concern the role of the Holocaust and the impact of the Arab-Israeli conflict in shaping participants’ experiences. Another theme relates to the institutional arrangements involved in organizing the exchanges, such as financial matters and pre-departure preparations. The long-term impact of the exchange experience on individuals’ future life choices, their political stances, and their involvement with issues of German-Israeli relations was also a theme that was addressed in the interviews. Overall, interviewees’ accounts suggest that the youth exchange experience was indeed significant for many of them. It positively affected the youngsters’ images of the other country, providing them with occasions to learn about each other and about themselves as members of their respective cultures. On a personal level, they attested to having gained confidence and developed social skills. The impact of the exchange experience was not, however, restricted to those who directly participated in it but had repercussions in the wider society as well. Participants acted as what the author calls “multipliers,” circulating aspects of their experience among family and friends and mediating them to the community at large in both direct and indirect ways. The author convincingly argues that the existence of these exchanges as an institutional fact, and the ripples of

influence generated by pre- and post-trip formal and informal occasions in which the experience was given meaning and resonance, have all contributed to the process of normalization of relations between Germany and Israel over the years. Even though efforts were made to broaden the range of participants in these exchanges over the years, the fact that they initially involved youngsters from elite social groups in both societies, some of whom would become opinion leaders - such as politicians and journalists - in years to come, may have actually reinforced their overall social influence.

The process of normalization is one aspect of the dynamics of change the author addresses in her timeframe analysis of the German-Israeli youth programs, the second analytic move mentioned earlier. As the years went by, and as diplomatic and cultural relations between Germany and Israel grew stronger, the youth exchanges between the countries became part of an increasingly robust web of international contacts at both the political and at the people-to-people level. The author indicates that interviewees felt the historical weight of the Holocaust had become less onerous, and the sense of mission and national self-identification of the participants less pronounced. The author attributes this to the decreasing weight of the Holocaust in Israeli society, an assessment I do not find to be supported by the growing centrality of Holocaust studies in Israeli school curricula and public culture more generally. In fact, one could argue that the burden of the memory of the Holocaust could be eased in the context of these youth exchanges just because the presence of Holocaust memory has become so ubiquitous in the Israeli cultural landscape that the German-Israeli youth exchanges were no longer a uniquely identified context in which it was to be probed and cultivated (as was the case in the 1950s and early 1960s).

Whatever one's interpretation, the study demonstrates that participants came to experience the youth exchanges mainly as recreational and culturally enriching opportunities. As the years went by these opportunities were chiefly cherished for the quality of the human contacts they afforded with cultural others, which for some participants lasted over a lifetime. The home-stays with families in the other country were cherished in particular for the glimpse they provided into their daily lives. Yet despite this observation concerning the individualization of the youth exchange experience over time, the author does not paint a simplified picture of the change processes attending it over the years. She points out that while these people-to-people encounters progressively shed their collective historical weight, they also became more politicized in terms of the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict. This was especially the case after the outbreak of the second Palestinian uprising in 2000, when some German youngsters confronted their Israeli hosts with difficult questions about the occupation regime in the Palestinian territories. Attempts to create three-party exchange programs involving Palestinian citizens of Israel alongside Jewish-Israelis and German youth proved unsuccessful. Turning the German youngsters into brokers in the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was not a burden they could (or should) have been asked to shoulder. The shadow cast by the Israeli-Palestinian conflict reintroduces politics and a new version of collectivist spirit into these youth exchanges, putting moral issues and questions of victimhood and responsibility once again at the center of their pursuit of meaningful inter-country dialogue. Participant positioning, however, is very different in this case, when Israelis are required to renegotiate their victim role and take responsibility for their country's role as military occupier. The timeframe analysis is highly effective in bringing out this far-reaching change in historical and political sensibilities as they affect the German-Israeli youth exchanges while at the same time acknowledging the continuities that have helped to stabilize this project over the years. Just as in earlier times participants inconclusively wrestled with the question of whether to organize separate or joint commemorative Holocaust events for the German and Israeli group, the forms in which issues related to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict can be confronted remain tentative. The wealth of information this study provides about German-Israeli youth exchanges, its open engagement with difficult issues and the tentativeness of its approach - all recommend it as most valuable reading for those interested in youth cultures, in alternative forms of diplomacy, and in German-Israeli relations.

Editorial remarks

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