

Germany, the Unlikely Friend

By Josef Joffe

MUNICH — Israel and Germany, now prosperous, powerful and middle-aged, belong to that category of tales beginning with: "Back then, only lunatics would have predicted that . . ."

Back then was 1948, when Israel was born, and 1949, when the western part of the defeated Reich was reincarnated as the Federal Republic of Germany. Back then, West Germany was a pariah among nations, and Israel a bad bet to make it through the summer of 1948, besieged as it was by half a dozen Arab armies. For all its weakness, though, Israel would have nothing to do with Bonn, and the West Germans would not dare suggest otherwise.

Today, Germany arguably is Israel's second best friend in the world, right after the United States. It is number three among Israel's top trading partners. And it isn't just oranges and tourists that are exchanged, but high-tech goods like arms, software and avionics.

As they say, only lunatics would have predicted such a turn. In 1948-49, even formal relations were inconceivable between the heirs of Hitler and the haven of the survivors. Until the mid-1950s, the Jewish state snubbed Bonn. Thereafter, West Germany cold-shouldered Israel. It took until 1965 for the two countries formally to recognize each other — ironically, with the help of Nasser, the Egyptian dictator.

Bonn refused formal relations because it feared retaliation by the Arabs who would then recognize Communist East Germany, the Federal Republic's rival and nemesis. So until 1965, the most interesting part of the relationship was secret. It rested on moral obligation, but also on the sturdiest foundation of them all: complementary interests.

Back then, Israel needed weapons and money, and West Germany needed above all moral respectability. Amends had to be made to the Nazi victims, and in 1952, Bonn offered 3 billion marks to the young Jewish state (about \$8 billion in current dollars). While the Israeli right was threatening revolt, the Ben-Gurion government calmly accepted in the name of *realpolitik*.

A mere five years later, a clandestine arms trade began to flourish. At first it was strangely one-sided, with Israel delivering Uzis and ammunition to the young *Bundeswehr*. But in March 1960, the principals — Konrad Adenauer and David Ben-Gurion — met secretly in New York's Waldorf Astoria to launch a much broader relationship.

Fifteen years after the liberation of Auschwitz, the two men hit it off right away, according to the recently declass-



In New York in March 1960, Ben-Gurion, left, and Adenauer established closer ties.

sified minutes. "We will help you, for moral reasons and those of practical politics," said the German chancellor to his Israeli counterpart. "Israel is the fortress of the West; Israel has to develop in the interest of the whole world. We will not leave you alone."

Ben-Gurion replied: "There are two things we need from you. The first are submarines. The second thing are missiles." Adenauer apparently pledged 200 million marks worth of arms plus 2 billion marks in credit.

But Adenauer was not quite as unselfish as he sounded. The favor he extended to Israel was, at heart, owed to Bonn's Cold War protector, Washington. Eager to extend military aid to Israel, but unwilling to reap Arab hostility, the United States pressed Bonn to act as the go-between for hundreds of tanks and other heavy equipment.

Of course, such massive transfers could not remain secret. In due time, Nasser began to flirt with East Berlin in order to put pressure on Bonn. In the end, when Nasser invited the East German leader Walter Ulbricht to Cairo, the gambit backfired, and an angry West Germany retaliated by finally dispatching an ambassador to Israel.

Still, secret arms deliveries continued to play a critical role in the relationship. During the Yom Kippur War of 1973, the United States resupplied Israel through the German port of Bremerhaven. The Bonn government closed both eyes, only to huff and puff with calculated anger when the local press got hold of the story. More significant than the formal protest, though, was the timing: late enough in the game for Israel to have turned the tables against the Arabs, finishing the war deep within Egyptian territory.

The government of Willy Brandt made explicit the essential nature of the relationship. Although *realpolitik* in the shape of the 1973 Arab oil embargo

demanding a pro-Arab turn, Bonn could not completely escape the hold of history. Brandt put it thus: While Bonn refused to choose sides in the Mideast conflict, there could be no "neutrality of the heart and the conscience." The relationship with Israel was of a "special nature," and there could be no "wiggling out" of the lessons of history.

This pretty much sums it all up. Given Arab numbers, wealth and markets, German policy logically should have tilted away from Israel a long time ago. But it does not because of the peculiar historical legacy that keeps both countries chained together. When the European Community, in 1973 and 1980, issued two famous declarations on Palestinian rights and Israeli obligations, Bonn, in each case, succeeded in blunting the sharp anti-Israeli blade wielded by the French and the British.

When the French seek to mediate in the Middle East in the name of what one might call "pro-Arab evenhandedness," the Germans pointedly refuse to tag along. Fearful of alienating the Arabs but conscious of their historical responsibility, the Germans will aid and protect Israel — but behind the scenes.

The pattern continues to hold. Take Gerhard Schroeder who was anointed in March as the Social Democratic chancellor candidate. In his youth, as leftist radical, Mr. Schroeder did not have many nice things to say about "imperialist" Israel. But now, a trip to the Jewish state was among his very first forays abroad.

Israel at 50 and Germany at 49 have come a long way from tragedy and immeasurable pain. Today, Germany is surely Israel's best friend in Europe. Sometimes one wonders, though, whether enough Israelis in power understand this.

JOSEF JOFFE is editorial page editor of the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* in Munich.

JHT 29. 4. 1998