



Introduction

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Goals and Structure

The German antisemitism expert Monika Schwarz-Friesel defined antisemitism as follows: “The hatred of Jews is not a system of prejudice, but a belief system deeply rooted in European culture. Antisemites have a closed worldview; they believe that Jews are the evil of the world.”¹ This volume is based on the key assumption of antisemitism being a constant feature of German and European history. It is against this background and in the context of current debates that this book aims to contribute to the fight against new and old manifestations of antisemitism in Europe today. It intends to encourage individual and collective self-reflection and to reach out to a wider public. Therefore, the book focuses on the interaction between personal and societal factors.

Fifteen biographical interviews with Jewish Israelis reflecting on their experiences in Germany, Austria, Hungary, Poland, France, and Great Britain are at the heart of the book.

Due to the rise of nationalist forces, physical violence, and hate speech, antisemitism has become an omnipresent and controversial topic of the public discourse in these countries. The conversations present individual, sometimes controversial, perceptions and interpretations of antisemitism today.

They are not a representative sample, but just few pieces of a mosaic. They reflect different subjective perceptions, interpretations, and reactions of the protagonists to antisemitism today.

The interviews also provide multiple perspectives on Jewish-Israeli family (hi)stories, everyday life in Israel, and Judaism, as well as on Israel’s role in the context of antisemitism. Thus, they open doors to topics unknown to many readers. They also touch on social issues such as collective identity, inclusion, and exclusion.

These structured biographical interviews cannot be considered a substitute for a scholarly approach. Therefore, the essays of Moshe Zimmermann,

Samuel Salzborn, and Gisela Dachs constitute an essential and integral part of the book's concept. They provide a historical and sociopolitical framework for the "personalized history" expressed in the interviews. The essay of Moshe Zimmermann provides a historical overview of antisemitism and relates to its current manifestations. Salzborn analyzes the current development of antisemitism in Germany and the political instrument of the antisemitism report of the Federal Government. The concluding essay written by Dachs is an update on the situation, mostly in Germany, since *Nothing New in Europe?* was first published in German two years ago. The author also analyzes how highly politicized the debate has become. The article also adds a new dimension to this volume, focusing on the role of the media in the context of antisemitism.

Since *Nothing New in Europe?* is designed as a tool for informal and formal education, all its modules are designed to complement each other and provide the reader with the information needed for understanding the interviews. This can be particularly helpful for teachers who want to use the book in schools. The interviews intend to arouse curiosity about the topics of Judaism, Israel, Shoah, and antisemitism in different European countries and to encourage in-depth learning about these issues.

Why Look at Antisemitism Today: Biographical and Didactic Answers

I was born in Vienna in 1960 and grew up as a child of severely traumatized Jewish survivors. After the war, my parents lived in Austria, a country that was heavily involved in the Holocaust.

The Shoah was a rare topic in our family, but my father spoke a lot about antisemitism. He considered most Austrians of his generation National Socialists and antisemites. Therefore, I could not understand why he kept silent when confronted with negative remarks about Jews. I was all the more upset when he asked me to do the same. When I criticized his behavior, he only said, "You are still young and do not understand. There is no point in trying to dissuade antisemites from their stereotypes and hatred. Why should I bother? The price I paid is already high enough. My whole family was murdered, and I went through the hell of Auschwitz and Mauthausen." I was pained by his answer, but it did not convince me. My mother asked me to hide the Star of David on my necklace when I came to her shop. At the time, I reacted defiantly to my parents' behavior; today, I understand that they wanted to protect me. Over time, I developed a mechanism to prevent embarrassing and painful situations. As soon as I met unknown people in Vienna, I declared, "I am Jewish." Depending on their spontaneous reaction, I decided whether I would stay in touch with them or not.

My parents were worried that in an Austrian school I would be subjected to hatred of Jews. Indeed, many of my Jewish friends who went to Austrian schools had to endure insults from their schoolmates and even teachers. They were confronted with old tropes, such as “You must be rich, because all Jews have money” or “Jews dominate the world.” My parents wanted to spare me this kind of experience and therefore sent me to the French school (Lycée français de Vienne). This institution created a liberal and multicultural environment. The students originated from many countries and had different skin colors and religions. We were educated to have high esteem for diversity. The open atmosphere prevented antisemitism and any form of racism, for that matter.

Due to my family history, I did not want to stay in Austria. As much as I love Vienna to this day, the country could never have been my emotional *Heimat* (homeland). The only logical alternative for me was Israel, so I moved there in 1979. Since then, I have lived in Netanya, and today my two children are adults.

Current social developments, the conflict with the Palestinians, and the political shift to the right in Israel are not in line with the Zionist ideals that shaped me when I moved to the country. The reality on the ground does not correspond to the utopian and sugar-coated ideas of the egalitarian and liberal society I had dreamt of in the comfort of the Viennese coffee house. The discrepancy between my Zionist ideals and Israeli reality has increased more and more over the years.

Today, I am worried about the future of the country, and the fate of democracy here, yet I do not regret my decision to immigrate to Israel.

Israel has become the place where I belong, and it is here that I fight for my values. By that I do not mean flags or the anthem; national symbols mean little to me. Rather, I refer to the gratitude for the fact that the sovereign Jewish state has put an end to the history of persecution that has characterized Jewish life in Europe. Today, many Jews who live in Europe perceive Israel as a protective shield and a potential place of refuge. I see this country as a unique historical opportunity, and I admire the achievements of its founders. My children, who grew up here, have a clearly defined Israeli identity; they know the story of the Jewish people and of their grandparents well. But they do not deal with the topic in everyday life. They love their country and its lifestyle. They visit Europe regularly, but have little emotional attachment to the old continent.

Didactic Approach

On a personal level, my immigration to Israel has minimized confrontations with antisemitism. Nevertheless, the hatred of Jews, its culmination in the Holocaust, and antisemitic forms of criticism of Israel have become a central focus of my work. I develop educational programs and workshops for influ-

encers and students. It is my goal to encourage the participants to ask themselves the following questions:

- When I criticize Jews and/or Israel, is it for what they do or for what they are?
- To what extent am I guided by stereotypes?
- Do I try to understand Jews from their own self-perception?
- Are my opinions based on multiperspectival information and knowledge, or am I guided by prejudice?
- Are my attitudes toward Jews and Israel critical or hostile?
- How can I ensure that my opinions are not based on bias?

It is my deep conviction that the first step in combating antisemitism and all forms of group-related enmity is achieved through self-awareness. Young people and adults should be taught self-scrutiny with regard to their opinion formation. Self-reflection opens a door that expands people's horizons and deepens their ability to engage in a constructive dialogue with others. Therefore, I hold the question mark as a guiding symbol of the book. It brings to mind the questions I asked the protagonists, as well as those they asked themselves. But not less important, it points to the questions the readers will ask themselves.

Most people instinctively perceive the unknown and the stranger, the "Other," as a threat. Therefore, the challenge lies in creating curiosity and empathy for unknown cultures and people. From my educational experience, the biographical approach has proven to be an excellent tool to achieve this goal. It is effective in inducing intellectual and emotional responses. Once the readers empathize, they show interest in the stories and experiences of the interviewees. Thus, resistance to learn about unknown worlds can be turned into intellectual and emotional curiosity. In my workshops with adults and students, the participants talked about their own family, their own biography, and their perception of German society after discussing the interviews.

This process opened them up for the central educational question: "To what extent are my interpretations of antisemitism in its various manifestations guided by my family history or my socialization at school, at work, or among friends?"

The Interviews

Profile of the Interviewees

In order to find fifteen protagonists, I conducted research in Israel and several European countries, and approached over thirty potential candidates. The following criteria were the guidelines in finding the candidates:

- Cultural and religious background
- Geographical and historical parameters of the protagonists and their families
- Generational perspectives (the oldest is eighty years old; the youngest, twenty-seven)
- Gender parity

All of the Israelis I interviewed either grew up in Europe, live there today, or have a professional connection to one of the countries chosen. Six interviews deal with Germany, two with Austria, two with Poland, two with France, one with Great Britain, and one with Hungary. Some of the protagonists relate to antisemitism in more than one country or in different geographical spaces in the same country. Some of the interviewees grew up in religious families, while others are of secular origin. Bernadett Alpern, who grew up in Hungary, even recalls that until she immigrated to Israel, the Jewish origin of her family was a well-kept secret (see chapter 16).

The historian Miri Freilich compares Israeli identity to Jewish identity in the Diaspora: “Diaspora Jews are concerned with the question of whether Israel is a refuge for them in case antisemitism threatens them again. For me it is just normal and natural to be Israeli” (see chapter 13).

The youngest interviewee echoes this approach in a casual way: “Israel is my home. If you cannot walk around in pajamas at home, where can you?” Ronny Hollaender feels that only in Israel she is free to outwardly express her religious Jewish way of life and does not have to “tiptoe” like the Jews in Europe (see chapter 3).

Two of the protagonists participated in the project on the condition that they remain anonymous because the topic was sensitive for them.

The narratives of the following persons have been included in the volume:

- a religious businessman born in Romania, raised in Israel, and living in Vienna since 1984
- a political scientist from Vienna who has been living in Tel Aviv since 2016
- a former Israeli ambassador to France
- a historian born in Cracow who is an expert on the Jewish history in Poland
- the current representative of the Action Reconciliation Service for Peace in Israel
- a tourism expert who grew up in Moscow, moved to Germany, and has lived in Jerusalem since 2007
- an Orthodox expert in Jewish Studies living in Vienna since 1960
- a religious winemaker who studied in Germany

- a photographer from Hungary who has been living in Tel Aviv since 2015
- a translator and tour guide living in Munich since 1991
- a historian and expert on the subject of Holocaust denial who immigrated to Israel from France in 2008
- an office manager living in Berlin since 2004
- a tourist guide of Iranian descent who grew up in Germany and has been living in Jerusalem since 2007
- a prominent Israeli writer whose family came from Poland and who is very successful in both countries
- a journalist and education expert from the United Kingdom who settled in a kibbutz in 1966

The conversations were conducted between December 2017 and August 2018 and reflect the sphere of experience and the life situation of the protagonists until then. Any changes that might have taken place after this period could not be taken into consideration.

Method of the Interviews

A standardized and structured questionnaire was developed in order to provide readers with a basis for comparison on a broad spectrum of positions and experiences. The fifteen interviews were divided into identical thematic passages based on the following subjects:

- history of the family, including the Shoah
- individual history of the respondents
- personal and collective experiences with antisemitism in Europe
- Israeli politics, criticism of Israel, and antisemitism
- personal attitude and commitment to fight antisemitism
- view of Israel's role in combating antisemitism in Europe

The interviews were conducted verbally. They began with an open part relating to the respondents' family history and their own biography.

In the second part, the protagonists answered questions based on the leit-motif of "antisemitism," using the questionnaire mentioned above. Thereafter, the conversations were transcribed, edited, and translated. It was quite a challenge to transform the verbal conversations into reader-friendly written texts. In order to keep the authenticity of the conversations, the protagonists were asked for their input. All of them agreed to become active partners in the editing process.

Biographical Interviews: Expression of Subjective Perceptions and Interpretations

Biographical interviews and the ensuing personalization of history are by definition subjective; this is also true for the interviews in this book. The German historians Hols and Jarausch define interview responses as “self-representations in which the respondent offers his own memories, explanations and interpretations.”²²

It was not crucial for this publication to determine whether all the statements of the respondents could withstand a scientific examination. The many contradictions—not only between the observations of different protagonists, but sometimes in a single interview—reflect the emotional and subjective dimension of the conversations.

The interviews express the perceptions and interpretations of the protagonists and not “objective” facts. Some of the respondents fully realize that—for instance, Arthur Karpeles when he points out, “Even though I cannot prove it statistically, I have the impression that Jews are disproportionately often the protagonists of negative media reports” (see chapter 10). Another interviewee asked me to emphasize that she was expressing her personal opinions and that they should not be considered of general validity. The protagonists express their own subjective interpretations of antisemitism, racism, and Israel, no more and no less. The central message of the book lies in its pluralism and its multiperspectivity.

The compilation of interviews expresses different and also contradictory interpretations of enmity toward Jews. Thus, the reader faces several narratives for the same conflictual situation. In order to form an educated opinion on the broad spectrum of Israeli discourse on antisemitism and also on Israeli society, the reader should reflect on these contradictions and compare them.

With regard to antisemitism, the spectrum of statements ranges from the view that it is an incurable disease unrelated to other forms of racism to Guy Band’s statement: “People who exclude minorities do not focus on one group. An antisemitic person is most likely to reject refugees and LGBTQ as well. There might be exceptions, but from my experience, that is the way exclusion mechanisms work” (see chapter 5). The historian Stephanie Courouble Share offers a third interpretation. She thinks that there is a clear difference between antisemitism and racism, but she emphasizes the need to fight both (see chapter 14).

The diversity of voices also applies to the perception of Israel’s role as a safe haven for Jews. For instance, Sonja K. can in no way imagine what Jewish life in the Diaspora would look like today without Israel (see chapter 6). By contrast, other protagonists say that Israel does not strengthen their sense of security; several are even worried about the country’s future.

Although all the interviewees agree that there are forms of criticism of Israel that are antisemitic, their perceptions of Israel's role in the context of contemporary antisemitism are particularly divergent. One rare consensus in the conversations is the idea that many Europeans relate to Israel in an emotional way. The writer Etgar Keret points out: "Somehow, when it comes to Israel, many people feel obliged to position themselves. Speaking in terms of Star Wars, they must decide who is Luke Skywalker or Darth Vader, who is the good guy or the bad guy. And there is no room for any ambiguity or grey zones in the discourse; it has to be either black or white" (see chapter 12). The author refers not only to the unilateral condemnation of the Jewish state, but also to the opposite behavior, which he finds no less irritating: "I met many Germans who felt that they have to support Israel unconditionally. This attitude was intended as a kind of compensation for the crimes of their parents or grandparents. When it comes to Israel, people do not base their opinions on facts but on feelings and their relation to the past" (see chapter 12).

When the issue of Israeli politics is raised, several respondents do not mince their words in expressing their criticism. They are outspoken about it, regardless of their experiences with antisemitism in Europe. At the same time, all of them emphasize that their negative views of government policy are not to be understood as a rejection of Israel. Rather, they want to convey their deep concern about developments in Israeli society and politics.

Several protagonists believe that Israeli policies are fueling hatred. For instance, Raphael Shklarek declares: "Israel tries to present itself as a moral country, while often the opposite is being documented. Then again, Europeans are not aware of the very real threats Israel faces. I do not believe that antisemitism in Austria would fade away even if Israel would satisfy the moral expectations of Europeans. However, it would be easier to expose antisemitism" (see chapter 9).

Other protagonists do not share this view. Tirza Lemberger, for example, believes that Israeli politicians are intimidated by negative public opinion abroad: "Israel's policy, in my opinion, is too focused on 'What will the others say?' and that can sometimes harm the country's interests. Ultimately, this excessive consideration of public opinion abroad does not pay, because Israel is 'scolded' regardless of its actions" (see chapter 11). Ofer Moghadam, an Israeli tour guide, follows a similar train of thought, though in a more cautious way: "The mistakes of Israeli politics are often used as a pretext for antisemitic attitudes" (see chapter 8).

The respondents also give different answers to the question of whether the fight against antisemitism can be successful, and whether they are personally prepared to get involved in it. Lydia Aisenberg formulates her response as follows: "I must admit that for the first time in my life dealing with informal education around sensitive issues such as antisemitism, racism, hatred of the

other, I do not have the answers anymore” (see chapter 17). On the other hand, Guy Band expresses an optimistic view. He believes that most of the time antisemitic hate speech from teenagers originating from Arab countries is basically a call for attention. He is confident that acknowledging their distress and the right educational approach can change their attitude (see chapter 5).

These few quotes constitute a small excerpt of the polyphony characterizing the interviews. It is a challenge I experienced myself before presenting readers with it. During the interviews, I defined my role as a listener. I certainly do not agree with many statements; some even strongly contradict my own opinions. But I wanted to enable the respondents to have their say, and not to argue with them.

This is the message I would like to convey to the reader: we have to learn how to endure such a situation, to listen without intervening. In our communication with others, we should take into consideration the connection between their biographical and social context and their opinions.

Multiperspectivity and controversy are confusing. However, the confusion caused by *Nothing New in Europe? Israelis Look at Antisemitism Today* can be an important educational experience. It can make us understand that there are different perspectives on the same situation, none of which are necessarily right or wrong, but subjective. It is my hope that readers—as a consequence of their confusion—turn to self-scrutiny with regard to the way they form their opinions in the context of antisemitism. They are not expected to automatically change their opinions, but to put a question mark instead of an exclamation mark behind them. With regard to antisemitism in its different manifestations, I suggest the following questions to start the process of self-scrutiny:

- Do I know the historical and current context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict?
- Am I aware of Israeli position(s) and do I try to understand them?
- Do I base my opinion on information from different perspectives?
- Do I criticize Israel for what it does or for what it is?
- Are other countries criticized as sharply and as often as Israel?

In conclusion, I hope that *Nothing New in Europe? Israelis Look at Antisemitism Today* will motivate its audience to think about antisemitism and its connections to other forms of group-related enmity, as well as the link between criticism of the State of Israel and contemporary antisemitism, in a more educated way.

Beyond the specific frame of reference of antisemitism, this book intends to encourage readers to internalize self-scrutiny in the way they form their opinions. Putting a question mark behind one’s own opinions is an important

precondition for constructive dialogue between individuals and also between societies.

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Notes

1. Elisa Makowski, "Expertin Schwarz Friesel. Bei Antisemitismusbekämpfung ist Deutschland scheinheilig," *MiGAZIN*, 25 January 2018, retrieved 11 March 2021 from <https://www.migazin.de/2018/01/25/bei-antisemitismusbekaempfung-ist-deutschland-scheinheilig/>.
2. Rüdiger Hohls and Konrad H. Jarausch, *Versäumte Fragen. Deutsche Historiker im Schatten des Nationalsozialismus* (Munich: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 2000), 40.