

Fania Oz-Salzberger

## Berlin, Enlightenment and Other Thoughts



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I came to the Wissenschaftskolleg to complete a book on the European Enlightenment and went a long way toward its completion, but ended up with a book on contemporary Berlin. Here is a brief report on both books and on the unexpected shift from one to the other.

The Enlightenment – judging from the wealth of publications during the last three decades – still excites and increasingly provokes debate. Eighteenth-century Germany is one of the best possible vantage points for a new synthesis of recent Enlightenment research. It allows a broad European vista and sheds light on the transition of ideas, the translation of books and the voyages of persons across cultural and political barriers. It offers insights about Enlightenment and modernity, the roles of Reason and of Culture from then till now, and the European legacy as a usable past.

The Enlightenment, as it is emerging, was not the monolithic bastion of rationalism that several twentieth-century writers have made it out to be. An array of new sources and research questions now present it as a

complex web of ideas and practices, fed by disparate traditions and conceptual legacies. By its own lights, it cannot be taken for a “master narrative” ripe for demolition. Its rich (and self-conscious) variety of attitudes to religion, to Reason, to science and to human society and politics, is best exemplified if one moves away from France toward other parts of Europe. Also, away from the greatest of thinkers to many networks of men and women exchanging and changing concepts and ideas. Berlin can be an excellent observation tower for the hidden landscapes of Enlightenment Europe – no less so than Leipzig, and Lausanne, and Naples, and Amsterdam, and Edinburgh.

As my work advanced, the Berlin Enlightenment and its immediate interlocutors indeed proved an invaluable springboard for amending old clichés. Questions of metropolis (Paris) and periphery (rest of Europe) have acquired a new edge. The overemphasized irreligion of the Enlightenment (paganism, atheism, agnosticism) strongly begs reassessment. The role of women, of “ordinary persons”, of social interactions, of intellectual networks, is beautifully highlighted. The bearing of Reason on tradition, culture and language looks more intriguing when viewed from Göttingen, Weimar, Munich, and the Prussian capital.

Berlin, however, has its devious ways of deflecting good intentions. Soon I became enraptured by this city and ended up completing another book altogether. To be sure, Frederick the Great is in it, and so is Immanuel Kant. But this time they are conversing with unexpected figures, both living and dead: novelist S.Y. Agnon, poet Leah Goldberg, rabbi Yitzhak Ehrenberg, violinist Guy Braunstein, historian Jürgen Kocka, essayist Amos Elon, philosopher Jürgen Habermas, a waiter, a banker, a disk jockey, a tourist guide, five dead children, and many more. *Israelis in Berlin*, now in press, will appear in Israel and Germany next year.

Why did this happen? Am I entitled to lay some of the blame on the Wissenschaftskolleg? To be sure, many former Fellows have ended up with an unexpected, unsolicited book: Robert Darnton did, and Aleida Assman, and Moshe Zuckerman, to name but a few. The particular set of stimuli supplied by the Wissenschaftskolleg, the discursive threads woven through its colloquium discussions and daily lunch table talk and Thursday dinner table talk and newspaper-reading-room chats and bumping-into-fellows-at-the-photocopier prattle, all this lively fabric of Wiko intercourse, is very dangerous indeed. It is a slippery slope of intellectual temptation leading beyond one’s immediate fields of expertise into interdisciplinary talk, into crossroads of all sorts, and also into Berlin’s special kind of current affairs discussion, into its unique, nervous, history-laden brand of the *aktuell*. Thus, on second thought, perhaps the Wissenschaftskolleg is not to blame.

Berlin can bewitch. For five decades, Israelis have been coming to this city, among them people who once swore never to set foot in it. For many of us it is a burnt bridge, a ghastly ruin. But for some strange reason this burnt bridge is flowing with traffic in both directions; it carries more travelers than many good and solid bridges. How has this come about?

Israel has deeply affected many persons I have met in Berlin. But my story follows the opposite route, tracing Israelis who come to tour this city, to study in it, to recall their childhood, to seek dead relatives and sometimes even living relatives. Israelis arrive in Berlin to design buildings, to exhibit statues and monuments, to write books. They come to see the Reichstag, the museums, the Kurfürstendamm. They cross the Wall, buy pieces of the Wall, compare this Wall to the one in Jerusalem. They come to dance in Berlin's nightclubs, to play in its orchestras, to attend its film festival; to receive scholarships, honors, hospitality; to trade and to market; to look for history, meaning, sex, art, love. To experience attraction and disgust. To savor the sweet-sour taste of mixed feelings.

Berlin has affected our national fate deeply, stunningly, paradoxically. Wilhelmine Berlin, Weimar Berlin, Nazi Berlin, divided Berlin, have all stamped their mark on Israeli history. This particular metropolis focuses the all-too-broad vista of Israeli-German relations through a sharp urban prism. It conveys the bonds between many Israelis and their own European past. It can help to say new things and defy platitudes. It is full of bad secrets, it is hair-raising, it can be terribly sad, and it is profoundly attractive.

Amazingly, very little of all this has ever been recorded or discussed. The newspaper headings tell shallow political stories. Two years ago, security guards shot Kurd demonstrators dead at the door of the Israeli embassy. In the autumn of 1999, Ehud Barak was the first foreign Prime Minister to visit Berlin as an official guest of the newly located Bundesregierung. In the winter of 2000, the foundation stone for a new Israeli embassy was laid in Grunewald, and the Bundestag approved a very controversial Holocaust memorial to be erected at its gates. That's about it. But the truly interesting stories do not come from the official Israel, nor from the official Berlin, but from the numerous men and women for whom Berlin clarifies something about their own lives and something beyond their own lives.

Berlin allows us to measure how far we have glided away from Europe and to test the level of our longing for it. Collective memory is a strange affair: some Israelis come here to remember and would not forget for even a fleeting moment. Others have never burdened themselves to such a degree. And still others can visit the site of Hitler's bunker in the morning and shop for delicacies at KaDeWe in the afternoon, and their heads do not

spin. Berlin teaches something about the human talent, a wonderful and questionable talent, to mix and blend – in an everyday sort of way – the awful and the sensual, the spiritual and the consumer-friendly. Israelis come here to claim their heritage. To find something we once had, something that may have been brought to Palestine but faded away in the strong sun, or something that was hastily abandoned when our parents ran for their lives, that was murdered and deleted for us. And suddenly here it is: fresh and thriving like Berlin's jazz clubs, and bookshops, and tall chestnuts, and ancient oaks.

Up the Koenigsallee, at the Hagenplatz Café, I found my own long-lost madeleines. Here they are called *Lebkuchen*. Their commercial, slightly stale Israeli imitations were the stuff my childhood birthday parties were made from. This needs to be explained. I have tried to explain.

Berlin opens up secrets from books read long ago. Here is suddenly Erich Kästner, a beloved part of many Israeli childhoods. I went to see the very Nollendorfplatz where Emil and his detectives chased the thief, chased him all the way from my old Kibbutz library where the metal shelves were dusty and a cotton field glimmered beyond the window in the hot air. But the old Nollendorfplatz was dead and gone. Instead, I found the city of my childhood books, the early dreamlike imagining of a wintry European city, in corners of Charlottenburg and Moabit and Wedding. Berlin is the place where Manfred Herbst and his fiancée Henriette, Agnon's great protagonists from the novel *Shira*, daringly went for a nude swim in a lake, in a long-forgotten Brandenburg summer, some time in the mid-1920s. And here, off Tauentzienstraße, Leah Goldberg sat in an empty student café in 1934, all her revolutionary friends gone, brown-shirts marching in the street. She was, however, safe enough: she was only virtually sitting there, imagining herself in Berlin, walking the streets, talking to prostitutes, heartbroken by an unrequited love, but all within a novel written in Tel Aviv.

The dimness of it all, the faintness of it all, the tremendous work that must be done by archaeologists of memory, is one of the lesser crimes of Nazi Germany.

What does all this suggest? The implications are part of an inner-Israeli dialogue that German readers are welcome to listen to, if they like. One implication is that many treasures and many horrors still await us here to be dug up. What is more: we need to let go of America for awhile and get to know Europe once again and demand that Europe, and especially Germany, get to know us. But really know; not merely stereotype each other over and over again.

The set of problems that arises from this encounter has a great deal to do with the Enlightenment. It is deeply connected with the history of

ideas. It powerfully resonates historical and recent debates about the concept of Europe. Therefore, despite an occasional pang of academic guilt feeling, I held on to my fellowship at the Wissenschaftskolleg with relish, with pleasure, and with gratitude for a remarkable academic and human hospitality.