



A Symbol of Trust

Scholarship paved the way for the new German-Israeli friendship – long before politics



Sason Shaik, Helmut Schwarz and Yitzhak Apeloig: conducting research without frontiers for decades
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Many years of scholarly and personal friendship unite Helmut Schwarz (TU Berlin), Yitzhak Apeloig (Technion Haifa) and Sason Shaik (Hebrew University of Jerusalem). Not only have they been involved in joint research projects, they also helped prepare the ground for the development of German-Israeli relations. These three professors of chemistry, all recipients of numerous awards and honors, find themselves reunited at the TU Berlin today, where, as laureates of the Humboldt Foundation, Yitzhak Apeloig and Sason Shaik are currently members of Helmut Schwarz's working group. They spoke about their experiences, memories and the challenges they had to overcome to develop trust against the dark background of history which unites and divides Germany and Israel. They all share the same conviction: scholarly endeavor is "a means of developing trust".

Today there is great diversity in German-Israeli research. Yet after World War II there were many hurdles to be overcome on a political and human level. How did everything come about?

Helmut Schwarz: In order for diplomatic relations to be established, Federal Chancellor Konrad Adenauer and the first Israeli Prime Minister Ben Gurion had to meet in New York, such was the controversy surrounding these talks in Germany and to an even greater extent in Israel – and with good reason. They didn't take place until 1965.

Yitzhak Apeloig: My own uncle was incarcerated for protesting against the talks. But you have to believe in miracles - we, too, as scientists.

HS: Yes, the academic world was some way ahead of politics in this and assumed the leading role, particularly the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation. Back in 1958 the jurist Eve Chava Landau came to Frankfurt as the first Humboldt scholar. But progress was slow. As late as 1959 the visit of a delegation of leading German researchers, including Otto Hahn, Feodor Lynen and Wolfgang Gentner, to the Weizmann Institute in Israel was conducted as a secret operation. At that time people with a National Socialist mentality were still to be found within the German civil service and ministries. These scholars really helped pave the way for the rapprochement between Israel and Germany.

Sason Shaik: But this visit was also to prove the springboard for the Minerva Centers which were dedicated to developing cooperation between German and Israeli researchers. The Minerva Foundation, through a joint endowment, has today established 25 centers throughout Israel, offering a wonderful and highly flexible program for funding research. By the way, Ben Gurion himself was greatly interested in the development of a common German-Israeli research landscape, perhaps not surprisingly given that his advisor on scientific issues was the chemist Ernst David Bergmann who completed his doctorate in Berlin in 1927 before emigrating to London and later Palestine.

HS: According to a recent evaluation, the Lise Meitner Minerva Center, founded twenty years ago under the directorship of Sason Shaik, is the most successful of these research centers, viewed from the perspective of binational cooperation, output, the interaction between countries. It is a symbol of the trust that can be built through academic cooperation.



Prof. Dr. Yitzhak Apeloig is an expert in the area of organosilicon chemistry and an honorary doctor of the TU Berlin. Until 2009 he was president of the Technion Haifa and among the many honors he holds is the Federal German Cross of Merit awarded to him by Federal President Christian Wulff.
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When did the German-Israeli relationship begin for all of you on a personal level?

HS: I swore that I would never go there again when I first went to Israel to attend a conference at the Weizmann Institute in August 1978. You see I also spent a full day on the beach in Haifa and got sun burn, which forced me to spend the rest of my time there in a

darkened room...Since then I have been back to Israel some 125 times.

SSH: I married in 1980 and at that time my academic life was closely linked with Heidelberg. I suggested to my young bride that we spend our honeymoon there. I had been studying rather a lot and she presented me with a choice: my books or her. Naturally I chose to devote my time to her and to my first tentative steps towards a rapprochement with Germany. We've been back here many times since. My involvement with Helmut Schwarz's outstanding group of researchers later allowed me to see a different Germany, also from a human perspective. Back in Israel, I became very involved with the Minerva Centers and set up the Lise Meitner Center, which today consists of some 14 working groups. By the way, Helmut is chairman of the advisory committee and Joachim Sauer, HU UniCat researcher, was also involved with the institute for many years. This helped us develop very strong links to the next generation.

YA: I completed my PhD thesis in 1973 and entered the army with the intention of going to Princeton/USA as a postdoc when that was over. But the Yom Kippur War intervened and I had to do another six months of military service. By that time, the entire working group from Princeton had relocated to Munich and it was suggested that I go there too. I agonized over this for a long time as I didn't want to go to Germany. In 1974 there were still many people there who had been actively involved with National Socialism. In the end, I decided I would go to Munich and what I experienced there came as a surprise. I encountered young Germans who were well-educated and who had a critical view of the past. In 1979 Helmut Schwarz came to Technion, where I had just started my career. I invited him to eat with me and that was how our working association and friendship began. The Technion itself does, after all, have German roots, with the name deriving from "Technikum". It also houses the Schlesinger Chair, set up by the Technische Universität Berlin and The German Technion Society was for many years located directly at the Technische Universität. Over a number of decades there have been regular binational conferences, congresses, summer schools and much more besides.



Prof. Dr. Sason Shaik researches in the area of computational chemistry and is director of the Lise Meitner Minerva Center for Computational Quantum Chemistry at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. He has received many awards including, within Germany, the August Wilhelm von Hofmann Commemorative Medal from the German Chemical society
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What is your approach to working together today?

HS: We look to build bridges – that's always been our way. We publish jointly and achieve a high citation rate. My most recent work with Sason Shaik for example was published in 2017 and dealt with a problem concerning the thermal activation of methane. Scientific research is, of course, a competitive area, but one from which we all stand to profit. The golden path to success is to cooperate while remaining in competition.

YA: I also work a great deal with the TU excellence cluster UniCat, with Professor Matthias Drieß, as one of my main areas of research deals with organosilicon. We now have a common scholarship: GIF, or German Israeli Foundation Grant. Collaboration with Helmut Schwarz has always given rise to extensive cooperation.

What does "freedom" mean for you? Personally, politically and also in relation to science?

SSH: Being able to think what you wish to, the freedom to dream and above all to be able to express your thoughts and dreams and put them into practice. I try to teach my students not to be frightened of their own ideas and to be willing to question and not automatically accept everything that their professor tells them as right and as a given. If you can do that, then there is freedom.

HS: Free thinking is most important. I have always had many unbelievably talented doctorate and postdoc students, a great many from China for example. Yet they often come from cultures where you are scarcely permitted to have your own thoughts, to question, to probe deeper. It is a difficult challenge to encourage them to voice their doubts, let alone think the unexpected or unthinkable. By the way, for Germans this is also something that is often much harder than for, say, Israelis.

YA: Israel began life as a rebellious state with communist ideas. We have flat hierarchies, even in the army. The students are not used to such a disciplined environment and there is scarcely any distance between professors and students. Yet freedom, the freedom to try something out, is often restricted by fear of failure. That is not how it should be. If something doesn't work, then it is no disgrace, you just try again. If you don't believe in yourself, you can't achieve anything.

HS: Israel is much more actively involved in raising funds from private persons than we are here. A university like Technion raises about 100 million euros annually. But Israeli institutes also allow themselves the right to reject donations, where accepting them would result in conditions that restrict the freedom of research. In this sense, we here have much to learn from other countries.



Prof. Dr. h. c. Helmut Schwarz teaches and researches at the TU Berlin, specializing in molecular chemistry. He has been awarded many honors and prizes including the Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz Prize. He has been president of the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation since 2008.
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What are your wishes for the future and what advice would you give to the next generation?

SSH: The future is already defined in the present. Germany has become Israel's best friend and I am very optimistic concerning the future. Benefit from this friendship and seek to make it stronger.

YA: But we must remain vigilant and keep furthering the developments that have been made. It is worth struggling for the special relationship that exists between Germany and Israel.

HS: It is important to continue to invest in individuals, to foster self-belief and open and free spaces. We also have to strive to ensure that the wrong people do not get to have too much influence again. This is a particular challenge for the next generation, including the next generation of scientists. I would say to them: talk to each other, establish alliances, work together, build bridges.

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[1] http://www.pressestelle.tu-berlin.de/fileadmin/a70100710/TU_intern/Bilder/2017/Okttober/2017_10_13_Shaik_Schwarz_Sason_PHD_0390.j

[2] http://www.pressestelle.tu-berlin.de/fileadmin/a70100710/TU_intern/Bilder/2017/Okttober/2017_10_13_Yitzhak_Apeloig_PHD_0330.jpg

[3] http://www.pressestelle.tu-berlin.de/fileadmin/a70100710/TU_intern/Bilder/2017/Okttober/2017_10_13_Sason_Schaik_PHD_0254.jpg

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