

**50 years of diplomatic relations between Israel and Germany,  
Speech for Dinner,  
Professor Dr. Martin Stratmann,  
Tel Aviv, 10.02.2015,**

Dear Federal Minister Wanka,

I would like to thank you very much for honouring the role of German-Israeli relations for science with your presence today and for your eager commitment to continue these relations by which you uphold a tradition that is clearly in the spirit of your predecessors in office.

Dear Dr. Arnon,

Dear Dr. Zajfman,

Dear Dr. Strohschneider and Fellow Presidents,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Two weeks ago, the world commemorated the liberation of the Auschwitz concentration camp in 1945. The crimes that were committed there by Germans are on an unbelievable scale. Against this history, the reconciliation between Israel and Germany and the coming together of our two nations in science and politics is an achievement whose significance simply cannot be overstated. Fifty years of diplomatic relations between Germany and Israel really are a cause for celebration like we have it today. Last year we also marked the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Minerva Foundation, which I had the pleasure to chair for many years. The Minerva Foundation took up its work soon after *Otto Hahn*, the former Max Planck President, visited Israel for the first time back in 1959. *Prof Renn* and *Prof Gutfreund* gave us this afternoon an extremely thoughtful review on this history. They clearly showed that this process never has been straightforward. It has been full of reservation in both countries and it has been a long and curvy path until we arrived here today.

Looking back into this sequence of history we may ask ourselves: Is science better off than politics? Is it true that science is really neutral in political terms and that research merely follows its own objective laws? Can science precede politics? Can it take a lead? The answer could be: yes, sometimes – but not always! We in Germany have learned from our history that scientific independence is not always guaranteed and that scientists, like any other human beings, have failings.

A few weeks ago, the former president of the Max Planck Society, *Hubert Markl*, passed away. During his presidency he initiated a comprehensive and deep-rooted research programme on the history of the Kaiser Wilhelm Society, the predecessor of the Max Planck Society, and its involvement in the crimes of the Nazi regime. The outcome of this study was multifaceted and terrifying: Some scientists were able to evade political pressure, but many others failed. These scientists didn't act out of opportunism alone. Many acted out of an assumed rational scientific understanding; they provided research assistance for crimes and even organized crimes. They pursued their epistemological interests in defiance of all moral boundaries and justified them by claiming to be "serving the advancement of science". But inhumanity can never be excused in the interest of science!

The Max Planck Society recently decided to continue the historical analysis, and is launching a new research project on its own history. Among many other topics, it will look into the transition from the Kaiser Wilhelm Society to the Max Planck Society. I dare say the historians will also bring to light failings of the Max Planck Society after the Second World War.

What do we learn from our own history? Historical understanding is more than just knowing about the past. It provides the intellectual basis for shaping the future. The most important consequence for me is that, mindful of this history, we, the scientists and the scientific organisations, must prevent such inhumanity from ever being able to happen again. We are fully aware that science bears an ethical and moral responsibility. We are fully aware that scientific freedom ends where human dignity and human rights draw the line.

But: science also has also lots of merits! And many times science indeed allows to bridge cultural gaps and to bring nations together. Sometimes it takes a lead! There are too many people around who form their view of others based on prejudice, a lack of knowledge and a lack of understanding. Science cannot solve these problems, but we as scientists can champion the promotion of understanding between different cultures and nations. And by this science can lay the groundwork for real understanding of others. We speak a common language, are interested in similar topics, like the dispute and many times – not always – accept the view of others. And in scientific institutions people of different nations can meet on neutral ground, so to speak.

The collaboration between Israel and Germany has proven over the last decades that mutual respect between Germans and Israeli is possible – many times based on scientific exchange and collaboration. Thousands of Germans have spent part of their time in Israeli institutions, have found friends in Israel, like myself, and have learned to admire the cultural diversity of this country. And vice versa: many Israeli students and scientists have spent part of their life in Germany and have helped to build a new scientific culture in Germany after the Second World War. I am touched, after all, that the Max Planck Society has hosted and continues to host many brilliant students and scientists like *Daniel Zajfman*, who was hired from a Director's position at the MPI for Nuclear Physics in Heidelberg to become President of the Weizmann Institute of Science. And *Ada Yonath*, who spent 18 years heading a Max Planck Research Group at DESY in Hamburg and is now working at the WIS. She was honoured with the Nobel Prize in Chemistry in 2009. *Alon Chen* moved from the Weizmann Institute to the MPI of Psychiatry in Munich where he is now a Director. *Ayalet Shahar* will soon start her work as a Director at the Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity in Göttingen. She was born and raised in Israel and studied at Tel Aviv University. Many other Israeli researchers work at other German research institutions and universities. I'm sure that none of those who engaged themselves for the establishment of diplomatic relations between Israel and Germany 50 years ago could have foreseen this development.

For us today, this is joy and a challenge at the same time. We must ensure that, in the future, too, both Germans and Israelis learn to know and respect each other. So it is still today a task of particular relevance to foster the exchange of people, students and scientists. We are currently living through a period of growing resentment in Europe against certain cultures and religions – sadly also against the Jewish faith. We cannot allow this to happen! And we will do everything we can to engage ourselves and fight any tendency to violate the respect of others. That's why we are here - those who have responsibilities in their respective home countries - to take notice of the history, to celebrate the last 50 years and to inspire the next generation to continue in this spirit!