

# From Atonement to Peace?

## *Aktion Sühnezeichen*, German-Israeli Relations and the Role of Youth in Reconciliation Discourse and Practice

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In 1958, Protestant church functionary Lothar Kreyssig (1898-1986) founded *Aktion Sühnezeichen* (ASF, literally: Action Sign of Atonement) as an organization that was meant to atone for the National Socialist past. Throughout the 1960s, the organization established itself in the Federal Republic as a valued civil society actor.<sup>1</sup> In the founding appeal with the title *Wir bitten um Frieden* (We ask for Peace), Kreyssig sets the conceptual framework for ASF's reconciliation efforts, which is characterized by the ideas of peace, reconciliation, atonement, and forgiveness. The starting

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1 In the following decades, the organization received awards for its civil society commitment, such as the Theodor Heuss Prize in 1965 and the *Buber-Rosenzweig-Medaille* in 1993. For comprehensive studies about ASF, see Gabriele Kammerer, *Aktion Sühnezeichen Friedensdienste. Aber man kann es einfach tun* (Göttingen: Lamuv-Verlag, 2008) and Anton Legerer, *Tatort: Versöhnung. Aktion Sühnezeichen in der BRD und in der DDR und Gedenkdienste in Österreich* (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2011). I would like to thank *Aktion Sühnezeichen/Friedensdienste e.V.*, which kindly granted permission to explore its archival material in the Evangelisches Zentralarchiv Berlin (hereafter: EZA) and its Berlin headquarters.

point in Kreyssig's appeal was the acceptance of guilt for the crimes committed during the years of the National Socialist regime.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, the appeal was specifically directed towards those countries, which, according to Kreyssig, had suffered the most from German crimes: Israel, Poland, and Russia. They were asked to allow Germans "to do something good for them in their own country, with our hands and our means [...] as a sign of atonement".<sup>3</sup>

Kreyssig had initially intended to call the organization *Aktion Versöhnungszeichen* (sign of reconciliation), yet became convinced that *Sühnezeichen* (sign of atonement) would be a more fitting term: atonement is offered by or on behalf of the one who has become guilty, whereas reconciliation already describes the next step of a mutual agreement between two sides.<sup>4</sup> However, the terms "atonement" (*Sühne*) and "reconciliation" (*Versöhnung*) were not kept strictly separate, but rather appeared to be synonymous in many texts by ASF functionaries, and also in the reflections of ASF volunteers.<sup>5</sup>

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- 2 According to Legerer, *Tatort Versöhnung*, 37, a first draft of Kreyssig's appeal written in 1954 did not contain the reference to the extermination of the Jews. Legerer further argues that the intrinsic motivation of an acknowledgment of guilt sets ASF apart from other German and international Christian reconciliation and peace services. Legerer, *Tatort Versöhnung*, 16.
  - 3 Lothar Kreyssig, *Gründungsaufruf der "Aktion Versöhnungszeichen"*, recited by Kreyssig in Berlin on 30 April 1958, quoted according to Martin Huhn et al., *Abstand vom bürgerlichen Leben: eine empirische Untersuchung über Freiwillige im Friedensdienst am Beispiel der Aktion Sühnezeichen / Friedensdienste* (Heidelberg: Wissenschaftlich-Theologisches Seminar der Universität, 1977), 20. All German quotes were translated by the author.
  - 4 He became convinced by his friend Erich Müller-Gangloff, director of the Protestant Academy in Berlin. Kammerer, *Aktion Sühnezeichen*, 14.
  - 5 See my explorations below; see also the fact that *Aktion Sühnezeichen* in English would be Action Sign of Atonement, yet the organization officially calls itself Action Reconciliation; see furthermore Christine Gundermann, *Leiden ohne Täter? Deutsch-niederländische Kommunikation über die nationalsozialistischen Verbrechen*, in: *Diktaturüberwindung in Europa. Neue nationale und transnationale Perspektiven*, ed. Birgit Hoffmann et al. (Heidelberg: Winter, 2010), 132-

The founding appeal contains a further aspect that was also to become a recurring narrative of ASF's self-conception and the self-perception of its volunteers: the practical reconciliation work was not meant as a form of *Wiedergutmachung*, the official German term for compensation and restitution payments. For one ASF activist, *Wiedergutmachung* represented a "*Wiedergutmachungshandel*",<sup>6</sup> a compensation bargain. ASF therefore explicitly distanced itself and its work from the post-war international politics of Chancellor Konrad Adenauer who used the compensation payments for Israel to support West Germany's efforts of reintegration into the Western community of states.<sup>7</sup> ASF activists also explicitly supported the establishment of official diplomatic relations with Israel years before the Federal Republic would finally consent to it in 1965.<sup>8</sup>

It is noteworthy that Kreyssig, himself a judge in Nazi Germany who was imprisoned due to his protest against the so-called "Euthanasia" program, explicitly included his generation, even those who had opposed the

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150, here: 144-145, who observes this with respect to the activities of ASF in Rotterdam.

6 Abschrift Generationengespräch, EZA 97/63. For a critical stance see also the report of volunteer Matthias K., Report 10/72, EZA 97/39.

7 About the practice of *Wiedergutmachung* see *Die Praxis der Wiedergutmachung. Geschichte, Erfahrung und Wirkung in Deutschland und Israel*, ed. Norbert Frei et al. (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2005).

8 See paper by the volunteer group Israel IV, EZA 97/45; Legerer, *Tatort Versöhnung*, 211-212, mentions that also the executive board of ASF published a declaration in favour of taking up diplomatic relations. The Federal Republic refrained from establishing official diplomatic relations with Israel for several years in an attempt to avoid antagonising neighbouring Middle Eastern states. This strategy was intended to reduce the risk of an Arab diplomatic recognition of the German Democratic Republic, which in turn would have further reduced the chances of reuniting the divided Germany. Hannfried von Hindenburg, *Demonstrating Reconciliation. State and Society in West German Foreign Policy Toward Israel, 1952-1965* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2007). In this context, the West German Chancellor Konrad Adenauer and his government did not wish to establish official diplomatic relations with Israel, but nevertheless supported the establishment of unofficial contacts through West German civil society actors.

Nazi regime, in his statement of guilt.<sup>9</sup> He followed the tradition of the 1945 Stuttgart Declaration of Guilt by the Protestant Church,<sup>10</sup> which constituted one example among various attempts in the immediate post-war period to reflect on and to acknowledge German guilt, such as the famous university lecture by Karl Jaspers *Die Schuldfrage* (The Question of Guilt).<sup>11</sup> Yet Kreyszig went an important step further by turning rhetoric on guilt and reconciliation into his plea for active, hands-on reconciliation work. Through this practical work, ASF functionaries<sup>12</sup> and the volunteers themselves<sup>13</sup> sought to ask those who had bitterly suffered under the National Socialist regime for forgiveness.

In his founding appeal, Kreyszig did not specifically call upon young Germans to be involved in ASF. Yet de facto, in particular young Germans from their late teens to their early thirties followed the appeal to spend several months working with ASF. While the ASF functionaries, at least in the early years, mainly belonged to the war generation, the actual activists of atonement and reconciliation in Israel were to a large degree young Germans, who had not themselves (or only as children) experienced or supported the National Socialist regime. Thus, the reconciliation activity of

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9 Apart from this statement, the former perpetrators did not play a role in the reconciliation activities of ASF. The organization's functionaries in the post-war years represented a sub-group of German society, as they had mainly belonged to the milieu of the *Bekennende Kirche* (Confessing Church).

10 See Legerer, *Tatort Versöhnung*, 28-29, for further references to the Stuttgart Declaration of Guilt as background of ASF.

11 Jaspers differentiates four categories of guilt, of which the metaphorical guilt concerns all, not only those who have actually become guilty in a judicial, political or moral sense. Karl Jaspers, *Die Schuldfrage* (Heidelberg: Schneider, 1946), 31-32, 63-65. With his concept of metaphysical guilt and his plea for active purification of guilt, he does not explicitly extend guilt upon the young and the following generations. However, given the context of his lecture to students at the University of Heidelberg, it can be assumed that he also referred to them.

12 See the text *Probleme der Aktion Sühnezeichen*, written by Franz von Hammerstein in 1964 or 1965, EZA 93/692; and the text by Otto Schenk, leader of an Israel volunteer group in the early 1960s, for New Year 1964, EZA 97/693.

13 See report by Klaus K. who explained the idea of his reconciliation activity to a fellow Kibbuznik in 1971, EZA 97/391.

ASF was understood as a representative form of atonement and reconciliation that addressed young Germans, but did not involve the former perpetrators in its active reconciliation practice.<sup>14</sup> The young Germans were not only the object of various debates about the role of the young generation for reconciliation between Germany and Israel; they also exerted an impact on the ways in which reconciliation was discursively perceived and practically implemented.

This chapter explores the role the young generation played in reconciliation practice and in discourse about reconciliation in West Germany and Israel in the 1960s and 1970s. It demonstrates that the inclusion of young Germans was one of the crucial characteristics of the representative, hands-on reconciliation approach of ASF and that this inclusion led towards various and controversial debates about the young Germans as reconciliation activists. The chapter further argues that this integration of young people in reconciliation work created a dynamics due to which the reconciliation activities of ASF in Israel oscillated between the ideas of atonement and peace. In the 1970s, the idea of peace became more and more important, yet this shift towards peace never resulted in giving up the idea of atonement either.

In order to develop the arguments, the chapter provides an empirical chronological analysis of the activities of ASF in Israel starting in 1961, when the first volunteers entered the country and the Eichmann trial took place. It further focuses on the 1970s during which the political situation in Israel had changed to an extent that the need for peace in the Israeli-Arab conflict had become too obvious to be overlooked. The exploration of these activities is placed within the wider context of German-Israeli relations from the 1950s onwards, and within the various accompanying debates in Germany and Israel about ASF activities in particular and about issues of reconciliation and guilt in general. The chapter thereby outlines the charac-

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14 This representative form of atonement and reconciliation was based on the underlying theological concept of ASF. Referring to the New Testament (particularly to 2 Corinthians 5), founding father Lothar Kreyssig highlighted the analogy of the death of Jesus Christ as a representative act of atonement for the sins of mankind with the activities of *Sühnezeichen* volunteers for the sins of their fathers. Legerer, *Tatort Versöhnung*, 62.

teristics as well as the problematic and controversial aspects of the reconciliation activities of ASF in Israel.

## CALLING THE YOUNG GENERATION IN THE 1950S

Before ASF was founded in 1958, various civil society actors had launched initiatives in the post-war years in order to create a better understanding between Germans and (Israeli) Jews. Already in the late 1940s, Societies for Christian-Jewish Cooperation were founded, which since 1952 organize a so-called *Woche der Brüderlichkeit* (Week of Fraternalism) in the Federal Republic. At the end of the 1950s, German-Israeli study groups (*Deutsch-Israelische Studiengruppen*, DIS) were initiated at several West German universities. By 1962, DIS groups existed at nine West German universities with about 300 members in total.<sup>15</sup> Some of them were linked to the Protestant background, such as the one at the *Freie Universität* Berlin, whose foundation was supported by Protestant theologian Helmut Gollwitzer. In an article about the German-Israeli study groups, Dieter Fleck explicitly placed the activity of the study groups in the context of reconciliation<sup>16</sup> and he emphasized the role of youth on both sides for overcoming prejudices, which, according to him, were “almost not bridgeable”<sup>17</sup> for the older generation.

Young Germans were fascinated by the Holy Land and by the lifestyle of Israeli Kibbutzim and travelled there for shorter work stays and visits during the late 1950s and early 1960s.<sup>18</sup> These groups connected their quest

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15 Dieter Fleck, *Deutsch-Israelische Studentenbeziehungen*, *Israel-Forum. Zeitschrift für israelisch-deutsche Beziehungen* 4 (1962), 26-28, here: 26.

16 *Ibid.*, 27

17 *Ibid.*

18 See the report by ten German students in *Israel-Forum. Zeitschrift für israelisch-deutsche Beziehungen* 6/7 (1959), 3-4. See also Rudolf Weckerling, *Le Chaim – Zum Leben. Reise nach Israel* (Berlin: Käthe Vogt Verlag, 1962) about a work and travel stay of students in Israel. For journeys of young Germans in the early 1950s, see also Martin Kloke, *Israel und die deutsche Linke. Zur Geschichte eines schwierigen Verhältnisses* (Frankfurt a.M.: Haag und Herchen,

for dealing with the Nazi past with reconciliation activities directed towards Israel and Israeli Jews. Young Germans were to play an important role within these activities – repeatedly called upon, for instance, by the Protestant theologian provost Heinrich Grüber (1891-1975),<sup>19</sup> who was one of the founding fathers of the Society for Christian-Jewish Cooperation in Berlin and of the group *Pro Israel*, which supported the establishment of diplomatic relations between Germany and Israel during the 1950s.<sup>20</sup> Grüber asked the youth to “build a bridge between Israel and Germany, between Christians and Jews [...], as they are not as burdened by the past as the elderly”.<sup>21</sup> According to Grüber, the young generation’s personal non-involvement in the past constituted the main factor that qualified them for reconciliation activity. As we will see below, the fact that the youth has not been personally involved, responsible, or guilty for the past, yet was nevertheless asked to atone and to reconcile for it, also caused irritation.

Young Germans were not only called upon by members of the war generation, such as Heinrich Grüber and Lothar Kreyszig, but also became active themselves, for instance in 1957 when a Hamburg student proposed a gesture of reconciliation towards the Israeli youth on the occasion of a remembrance celebration for Anne Frank in Bergen-Belsen. In her talk, the Hamburg student explicitly referred to the future, and to the responsibility of the young generations to build a joint future by means of reconciliation. She furthermore asked the Israeli youth not to reject the hand offered by young Germans.<sup>22</sup> The Bergen-Belsen meetings were set within a framework of atonement, as the introduction of an atonement mass (*Sühne-Messe*) in 1960 demonstrates. According to the newspaper *The Jewish Way*,

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1994), 78, and Inge Deutschkron, *Israel und die Deutschen. Zwischen Sentiment und Ratio* (Köln: Verlag Wissenschaft und Politik, 1970), 176-177.

19 In 1961 Grüber was the only witness for the prosecution from Germany who testified against Adolf Eichmann in the Jerusalem trial; in 1964 he was named a Righteous among the Nations by Yad Vashem.

20 For more information on *Pro Israel*: [http://www.deutsch-israelische-gesellschaft.de/dig\\_information/der\\_schwierige\\_begin.htm](http://www.deutsch-israelische-gesellschaft.de/dig_information/der_schwierige_begin.htm), accessed 18 December 2011.

21 *Geleitwort* by Heinrich Grüber in Weckerling, *Le Chaim*, 5.

22 Kloke, *Israel und die deutsche Linke*, 81.

this event brought together 70,000 young people and “united [them] to atonement and contemplation”.<sup>23</sup>

The importance of the youth for German-Israeli understanding can also be found on the Israeli side. For Israeli Prime-Minister David Ben-Gurion references to the German youth constituted part of his aim to propagate the Federal Republic under Konrad Adenauer to the Israelis as the “new”, the “different” or the “other Germany”.<sup>24</sup> Ben-Gurion needed this construction in order to legitimize and support his policy of accepting compensation payments by the Federal Republic, which were highly controversial among Israelis.<sup>25</sup> Soon after the end of the war, Ben-Gurion’s policy towards West Germany was dominated by his wish to consolidate the Israeli state by integrating it into the evolving West European community and by receiving financial aid from the Federal Republic. In May 1960, Ben-Gurion and Adenauer met at the hotel Waldorf Astoria in New York City where they discussed further financial support for Israel. On this occasion, Ben-Gurion emphasized his belief that the young Germans, once they would learn about the crimes committed under the National Socialist regime, would feel “sorrow and disgrace”<sup>26</sup> for them. Even if Ben-Gurion’s emphasis on the new Germany was part of his political calculations – aimed at both sides, his Israeli voters as well as his German political counterparts – he was an important, though controversial voice in the Israeli public that set the tone creating an atmosphere of belief in the existence of a new Germany in which also other voices would join in.

## THE IMPACT OF THE EICHMANN TRIAL

On April 11, 1961, the trial against former Nazi functionary *SS-Obersturmbannführer* Adolf Eichmann began before the Jerusalem District Court. The Eichmann trial can be regarded as a turning point in Israel and the Federal

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23 *The Jewish Way*, Nov./Dec. 1961, 2.

24 For corresponding descriptions of the Federal Republic see for instance Tom Segev, *The Seventh Million. The Israelis and the Holocaust* (New York: Holt Paperbacks, 1991), 191.

25 Segev, *Seventh Million*, 190, 206.

26 Quoted according to Segev, *Seventh Million*, 319-320.



Republic in terms of their ways of dealing with the past,<sup>27</sup> as in both countries, the first 15 years after the end of the Second World War were largely characterized by a silence about the victims of the Holocaust.<sup>28</sup> The media reception of the trial strongly affected the public discourse on the Holocaust in West Germany and Israel, and about the youth in Israel and Germany and their relationship to the National Socialist past.

For many young Israelis the broadcasting of the trial was the first occasion to directly encounter the history and the atrocities of the Holocaust.<sup>29</sup> As Israeli scholars Tom Segev and Idit Zertal have shown, the Eichmann trial in 1961 was intended by Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion and the governing Mapai party as a historical lesson to educate the Israeli youth.<sup>30</sup> Within the West German media, the question to what extent the trial would help to historically educate the German youth was controversially debated, as shown by Peter Krause. While several journalists and publishers opted for providing the youth with the unadorned historical facts, others – most prominently Henri Nannen, the publisher of the *Stern* magazine – feared

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27 For the public reception of the trial in the German media see Peter Krause, *Der Eichmann-Prozess in der deutschen Presse* (Frankfurt a.M.: Campus, 2002).

28 A developing intellectual discourse of guilt in the immediate post-war years soon faded away. In the Federal Republic from the late 1940s onwards stories about the “German victims” were much more publically present than those about the “victims of the Germans”. Robert Moeller, *War Stories. The Search for a Useable Past in the Federal Republic of Germany* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003). In Israel, the victims of the Holocaust were publically pushed aside in order to foster the idea of Jewish resistance against the Holocaust. Memorials and memories of Jewish heroes, for instance the resistance fighters during the Warsaw Ghetto uprising dominated the public narrative in the 1950s, such as the Ghetto Fighters House museum *Beit Lohamei Haghetot*, founded in 1949, and *Yad Vashem – The Martyrs’ and Heroes’ Remembrance Authority*, founded in 1953. In the early 1950s, the Holocaust was primarily understood as an individual fate and not as a collective experience. Segev, *Seventh Million*, 226.

29 Idit Zertal, *Israel’s Holocaust and the Politics of Nationhood* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 92.

30 Zertal, *Israel’s Holocaust*, 97; Segev, *Seventh Million*, 338, 351, 353.

that a confrontation of the German youth with these facts would overburden the young generation with feelings of guilt and shame.<sup>31</sup>

In the context of the Eichmann trial Jewish philosopher Hannah Arendt also reflected on the German youth and its relationship to the past. In her controversial *Report on the Banality of Evil* (1963), Arendt referred to Martin Buber's claim that Eichmann's execution might "serve to expiate the guilt felt by many young persons in Germany".<sup>32</sup> Arendt continued with a statement about the German youth in which she vehemently rejected public expressions of emotions of guilt by the young generation in Germany. Within German society, she distinguishes two groups: young Germans who *feel* guilty and those former functionaries who are again in high positions, who *are* guilty but *do not feel* guilty. Yet she does not appreciate emotions of guilt expressed by young Germans, but rather delivers a negative judgement:

"Those young German men and women who every once in a while [...] treat us to hysterical outbreaks of guilt feelings are not staggering under the burden of the past, their fathers' guilt; rather, they are trying to escape from the pressure of the very present and actual problems into a cheap sentimentality."<sup>33</sup>

In Arendt's perspective, feelings of guilt of the young generation are not the same as admittance of real guilt and repentance for this guilt. She suggested that an involvement with the past by expressing feelings of guilt only results in ignoring the problems of the present. Indeed, there are accounts in which young Germans referred to sentiments of guilt, which also even might have resulted in a motivation to become engaged in reconciliation activity in Israel.<sup>34</sup> However, the example of ASF volunteers contradicts Arendt's assumption, since their activities were not only shaped by a wish to

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31 Krause, *Eichmann-Prozess*, 265-277.

32 Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem. A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Penguin, 2006), 251.

33 Ibid.

34 In the course of an essay competition of the journal *Israel-Forum*, young Germans Sybille von Foelkersamb and Helga Leonhardt answered the question "Why am I interested in Israel" by referring to feelings of guilt. *Israel-Forum. Zeitschrift für israelisch-deutsche Beziehungen*, 11 (1962), 23, and 2 (1963), 25.

deal with the past, but also by direct confrontation with the present political situation both in Germany and in Israel.

The Eichmann trial not only had an impact on larger debates about the National Socialist past and on the ways in which young people in Israel and Germany should be involved in this reflection of the past. The trial also affected reconciliation efforts by young Germans in Israel both in discursive and practical terms. During the time of the trial, Protestant student pastor Rudolf Weckerling from West Berlin travelled to Israel with a group of young German students and young professionals.<sup>35</sup> In the light of the trial, the fact that the group mainly consisted of young Germans was used as an argument both for and against such a trip. Before the group had left Germany, people in Germany and in Israel had advised the group to postpone their stay to the time after the trial; one argument was that young people could be overburdened by such a trip, as it would require consciousness of the past and a willingness to take over responsibility for the past. Other Israelis, however, supported the journey of the young Germans and differentiated the Germans in young people looking for ways to reach the Israeli people, and in those who were personally guilty.<sup>36</sup>

While Weckerling's group was allowed to pursue its two-month journey through Israel which also included some work activity in a Kibbutz, the trial against Eichmann had postponed the work stay of the first group of ASF volunteers in Israel for several months until fall 1961. In January 1961 the Israeli mission in Germany had declared that it would not support visits of German groups because of the trial.<sup>37</sup> Another problem was to find an in-

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35 The trip was organized by the *Deutsche Arbeitsgemeinschaft Christlicher Aufbau* (Weckerling, *Le Chaim*, 9) and supported by ASF (Legerer, *Tatort Versöhnung*, 188). Apart from Weckerling himself (born in 1911) and a secretary (born in 1923), the group consisted of young Germans born between 1929 and 1940, thus the participants were between 32 and 21 years old at the time. See the list of participants in Weckerling, *Le Chaim*, 176. Like Lothar Kreyszig and Heinrich Grüber, Weckerling was also former member of the Confessing Church. About Weckerling see *100 Jahre Rudolf Weckerling. Festschrift*, ed. Freyja Eberding et al. (Berlin: Aktion Sühnezeichen Friedensdienste e.V., 2011).

36 Weckerling, *Le Chaim*, 10.

37 Legerer, *Tatort Versöhnung*, 202.

stitution or a Kibbutz that would host the ASF group for a period of several months. Yet thanks to a combination of individual initiatives and institutional requests ASF volunteers were finally allowed into the country by invitation of the Kibbutz Urim in the Negev desert.<sup>38</sup> This first work stay was preceded by finally unsuccessful plans of the ASF headquarters together with the Catholic Una Sancta Movement and Catholic Church functionaries to build a triconfessional atonement monastery (*trikonfessionelles Sühnekloster*) in Jerusalem, which was meant to bring together Jews, Catholics, and Protestants.<sup>39</sup> While the *Sühnekloster* would have emphasized the spiritual aspect of atonement and reconciliation, the work stays stood for the practical reconciliation concept of ASF.

In early October 1961 the first eleven volunteers finally entered Israel to conduct social work in the Kibbutz Urim in the Negev desert. More volunteers followed in the next years, and by 1968, twelve ASF groups, each consisting of around 15 volunteers – mostly young professionals, but also university and school students – had worked in various other Kibbutzim and in social institutions.<sup>40</sup> For ASF volunteers, their practical work and the opportunity to live with Israelis for several months was a means to demonstrate their reconciliation efforts.<sup>41</sup> This hands-on approach of reconciliation activity and the fact that the volunteers did not complain about, and partly even volunteered for hard work was also valued by people who became to know the volunteers as working colleagues.<sup>42</sup> Yet, the developing images of

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38 For a description of the preceding negotiations between various ASF functionaries and Israeli institutions and individuals in order to set up the start of the first volunteer group see Legerer, *Tatort Versöhnung*, 200-205; Ansgar Skriver, *Aktion Sühnezeichen. Brücken über Blut und Asche* (Stuttgart: Kreuz-Verlag, 1962), 120-130; Kammerer, *Aktion Sühnezeichen*, 78-79.

39 Legerer, *Tatort Versöhnung*, 189-199.

40 Legerer, *Tatort Versöhnung*, 490, provides an overview over the projects of the twelve groups up to 1968. Most of the activities were of a social nature, while at three sites, a home for the blind in Jerusalem, a children's home in Alyn and in Kibbutz Bachan, ASF volunteers were involved in building activities.

41 Report 32/71, Dieter H., August 1971, EZA 97/391; Report 23/71, Klaus K., July 1971, EZA 97/391.

42 See the encounter between Christel Eckern and her Kibbutz colleague Ada, recounted in Christel Eckern, *Die Straße nach Jerusalem. Ein Mitglied der "Akti-*

German volunteers also depended on the circumstances in which they worked and on the people they met. Members of the ASF working group in Kibbutz Nir Eliahu in 1962 realized there was no interest among their Kibbutz chaverim – among them many young Israelis who had only heard of the Nazi crimes in the context of the Eichmann trial – to talk about German guilt or about the specific atonement task of the ASF group.<sup>43</sup> According to one observer the young Israelis lived for the future and for a new society,<sup>44</sup> and therefore much less in the past.

Even if the ASF volunteers were not the first Germans working in Israel,<sup>45</sup> their presence provoked public interest within the Israeli media reaching beyond the walls of the Kibbutzim in which the volunteers worked. In his article in the newspaper *Jerusalem Post*, the journalist Ben-Adi explained the main goals of the organization to his readers, by also pointing

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*on Sühnezeichen” berichtet über Leben und Arbeit in Israel* (Essen: Ludgerus-Verlag, 1962), 68-69. See also the letter of the director of the Ahava Home for Children and Youth in Haifa who appreciated the work of the ASF volunteers in her institution. Ullmann to von Hammerstein and Schenk, 14 August 1964, EZA 97/693. See also letter by Jehuda Riemer to the editor of the *New York Times* about the participation of Sühnezeichen volunteers in the work and social life in Kibbutz Urim, 1 December 1962, quoted according to *Geschichte(n) erleben. Aktion Sühnezeichen Friedensdienste in Israel 1961-2011*, ed. Aktion Sühnezeichen (Berlin: Aktion Sühnezeichen Friedensdienste e.V., 2011), 24, and the article *Some do repent!* by Jehuda Riemer, *Jewish Frontier*, 17 July 1962.

43 Diary entry, 23 June 1962, EZA 97/395.

44 Diary entry, 1 July 1962, EZA 97/395. As the number of Kibbutzim that would allow Germans to stay and work with remained limited – according to a report from 1965 only 7 out of around 240 Kibbutzim accepted German youth groups – it even happened that once the young people from Germany arrived, the Kibbutz members had already lost interest in them, as there had been so many other youth groups before them. This frustrating experience was reported by a youth group from the Bonn Society for Christian-Jewish Cooperation. Bericht über eine Begegnungs- und Studienreise nach Israel, 54, Politisches Archiv des Auswärtigen Amtes (hereafter: PA-AA) B36/193.

45 Apart from those already mentioned, Legerer, *Tatort Versöhnung*, 202, refers to groups of the *Christlicher Friedensdienst* and of the *Herz-Jesu-Orden* who helped building streets.

out it was young Germans who sought to take over collective responsibility for the German people and for the past by providing symbolic acts of atonement.<sup>46</sup>

## **AFTER THE ARRIVAL: GERMAN AND ISRAELI DEBATES ON THE ROLE OF YOUTH FOR RECONCILIATION**

The young German reconciliation activists operated within various realms of political and societal tensions in Germany and Israel, tensions that evolved out of diverging assessments of the past and the present. Throughout the 1960s, discourses about German youth continued in Germany and Israel, now often explicitly linked to the presence and the activities of ASF volunteers in Israel Kibbutzim, social institutions, and at Yad Vashem. Both the term atonement and the idea of reconciliation connected with the fact that the young generation was to pursue atonement and reconciliation on behalf of their fathers raised debate in both countries and among various social groups, producing positions that ranged from consent to objection.

Even if the young Germans provoked public attention, this did not mean that Israelis who commented on their presence would easily regard them as protagonists of the “new Germany”, as propagated by Ben-Gurion. The Israeli journalist Michael Schaschar from the newspaper *Haaretz*, for instance, remained reluctant in his evaluation of the young Germans. He had visited the ASF group in Kibbutz Hasolelim in July 1964 and engaged the volunteers in a talk about their worldviews, about their parents, and their knowledge of the past. He particularly remarked that the relaxed and open atmosphere of the talk changed when he asked the young Germans about their own parents, which only lead to vague answers. According to Schaschar, the young Germans acknowledged the past crimes, but they referred to the perpetrators as to an anonymous part of the population. The journalist remained critical and refrained from praising the reconciliation activity of the volunteers. He also wanted to know whether the young Germans believed that a new Hitler could rise in today’s Germany. The answers did not

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46 Germans work in the Negev, *Jerusalem Post*, 9 January 1962; see also Skriver, *Aktion Sühnezeichen*, 135, who refers to an article in the Hungarian newspaper *Nj-Kelet* published in fall 1961.

satisfy Schaschar and he even concluded his article with the remark that a large part of the German population still did not express moral regret for the past.<sup>47</sup>

While many German and Israeli politicians regarded the exchange of ambassadors between Germany and Israel in summer 1965 as an important step for the bilateral relations between the two countries, sentiments among the Israeli population were not that unanimous. The German magazine *Der Spiegel*, for instance, reported in July 1965 that many Israelis feared that the Germans would see the exchange as a “final act of reconciliation”, while for them “the atonement of the sons is not yet finished”.<sup>48</sup> An open rejection of everything connected with Germany was particularly common amongst the conservative and orthodox milieu in Israel.<sup>49</sup> Politicians such as the founder of the conservative Herut party Menachem Begin, whose parents had been murdered during the Holocaust, counteracted German-Israeli relations for decades, also on the level of cultural exchange.<sup>50</sup> Yet one particular German of the young generation also earned Begin’s respect. This was the “Nazi hunter” Beate Klarsfeld (\*1939). In a recent interview, Klarsfeld explained her good relationship with Menachem Begin: she argues that Begin was impressed by the fact that young Germans like her demonstrated their responsibility for the crimes committed under the National Socialist past.<sup>51</sup>

Negative or sometimes even hostile attitudes towards the German reconciliation activities were not limited to elderly people or Holocaust survivors. Young Israelis had their problems with the presence of Germans seek-

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47 Michael Schaschar, Sie kamen, die Verbrechen ihrer Väter zu sühnen, *Haaretz*, 24 July 1964, German translation in EZA 97/45.

48 *Der Spiegel*, 28 July 1965, 50.

49 Report by German ambassador von Puttkamer, 13 April 1972, 3, PA-AA, AV Neues Amt 2.357.

50 Segev, *Seventh Million*, 382-383, argues that the closer the relations between Germany and Israel became on the diplomatic, political and economic level, the more those who were against reconciliation with Germany concentrated on agitating on the cultural level.

51 Interview Klarsfeld with Esther Schapira, Hessischer Rundfunk, *Sonntagsgespräch*, 30 January 2011.

ing reconciliation, too.<sup>52</sup> In November 1966, German ambassador Rolf Pauls reported on a demonstration of Israeli students belonging to the conservative Herut party in front of the German embassy in Tel Aviv. The students showed banners reading, “There is no other Germany” or “No friendship with the murderers of six million Jews”.<sup>53</sup> Yet these open rejections did not remain uncommented among Israeli politicians. Knesset member David Hacohen, for instance, criticized the young Israeli’s unwillingness to support the Germans in their efforts to overcome the National Socialist past.<sup>54</sup>

Within the West German society of the 1960s, the reconciliation activities of ASF and other organizations provoked ambivalent attitudes, reaching from support to indifference<sup>55</sup> and open rejection; this ambivalence documents the existence of a highly fragmented West German society with respect to the issue of how to deal with the Nazi past in the present. Hostile antipathy towards ASF was expressed from notoriously known revisionist right-wing circles in their newspapers and in anonymous hate letters that reached the ASF headquarters.<sup>56</sup> Even though ASF evolved from a Pro-

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52 At the occasion of the Eichmann Trial, for instance, German observers reported back to Germany that many young Israelis were reluctant towards Germany and the Germans. Report by Gerhard von Preuschen, 13, PA-AA, B36/541.

53 Report German Embassy to Foreign Office, PA-AA, AV Neues Amt 2.357. German ambassador Pauls – a former decorated *Wehrmacht* officer – was, at least at the beginning of his service in Israel, a controversial person for many Israelis. Eckart Conze, Norbert Frei, Peter Hayes and Moshe Zimmermann, *Das Amt und die Vergangenheit. Deutsche Diplomaten im Dritten Reich und in der Bundesrepublik* (München: Karl Blessing Verlag, 2010), 500-502.

54 See the German translation of Hacohen’s statement in PA-AA, AV Neues Amt 2.357.

55 In October 1963, for instance, four ASF functionaries traveled through Lower Saxony, Hamburg and Bremen in order to give lectures about the organization’s work. As newspaper articles document, there was only little interest in these events. Kein Interesse für die Sühne, *Hamburger Echo*, 5 October 1963; Nur fünf kamen zum “Sühnezeichen”, *Landeszeitung für die Lüneburger Heide*, 21 October 1963.

56 Deutschland muss sühnen – sühnen – sühnen, *Deutsche National Zeitung*, 10 May 1963; letters to the editors of *Schlesische Rundschau* and *Deutsche Natio-*



testant background – which means that Protestant church functionaries and pastors had not only signed Kreyssig’s founding appeal, but also subsequently supported the organization idealistically and financially – ASF and its work in Israel were by no means equally praised in all parts of the Protestant church circles. In his *Report from the Biblical Land* in the *Evangelisches Gemeindeblatt München* (Protestant Church Newspaper Munich) journalist Helmut Winter wrote in November 1966 about his experiences in Israel and the reception of the work done by ASF. He raised doubts whether the activities of the young Germans in Israel were at all worthwhile. According to Winter, the Israelis were much more interested in receiving German weapons, and to see former Nazis punished than to acknowledge and approve of the reconciliation work done by the ASF volunteers. He even concluded that Jews would lack understanding for the Christian ideas of reconciliation and forgiveness.<sup>57</sup>

A critical stance towards reconciliation activities in Israel in general and those of ASF in particular was not limited to the right-wing background or to critical Protestant circles that raised doubts whether Christians and Jews could really speak the same language when it comes to reconciliation. Critique also arose from other parts of West German society. It was the connection of youth, guilt, and atonement that caused problems of understanding, particularly among young Germans. In a letter to the editor an anonymous reader of the *Neue Illustrierte Köln* from 1964 declared:

“Recently, I was asked to participate in an ‘atonement trip’ to Israel. I refused. I have nothing against the Jews. But I also never did them any harm. Thus, what should I atone for? [...] What do we have to do with the sins of our fathers? I am fed up with this talk about our guilt! I am not aware of being guilty of anything. [...] Why should we atone when the real perpetrators of the Third Reich lead a rather happy life as judges, politicians, and globetrotters!”<sup>58</sup>

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*nal Zeitung*, both in EZA 97/983. The anonymous writer of a postcard that reached ASF in den mid-1960s, calls the ASF functionaries “*Volksverräter*” and one anonymous hate letter was even written on grey toilet paper. See collection in EZA 97/582.

57 Helmut Winter, Bericht aus biblischem Land III, *Evangelisches Gemeindeblatt München*, 27 November 1966, 8.

58 *Neue Illustrierte Köln*, 43, 1964.

The author of the letter refused to be held responsible for “the sins of our fathers”, particularly when the perpetrators were still alive, and thereby pointed at a generational conflict. Linked with a dissent against the West German politics towards Israel, this attitude was also widespread among the young Left in Germany, which becomes apparent in a statement by trainee lawyer Eberhard Sommer who wrote to author Günter Grass in June 1967. In his letter, Sommer explicitly rejected the idea that the older generation would transfer their guilt to the young Germans.<sup>59</sup> These critical attitudes towards an involvement of young Germans in activities of reconciliation in and for Israel, centred on the same issues also young German reconciliation activists in Israel – those working for ASF as well as others – dealt with: the question of why the young generation should be involved in overcoming the past by means of reconciliation activities as representatives for those who had actually committed crimes in the past and had actually become guilty?

When in April and May 1965 a group of young Germans organized by the *Gesellschaft für christlich-jüdische Zusammenarbeit* in Bonn travelled to Israel, the young people aimed at building personal contacts with Israelis and also expressed their hope to contribute towards reaching mutual understanding.<sup>60</sup> During their trip, various occasions occurred during which the young Germans were not only faced with the German past, but at which they came to discuss about this past and their own relationship to it. The discursive framework in which these discussions took place was grounded in talks of the young Germans with Israelis about the German politics of *Wiedergutmachung* payments and about the diplomatic recognition of the state of Israel through the Federal Republic. These talks apparently triggered various and controversial debates about the West German policy towards Israel and about the role the German youth should play in the German-Israeli relations. Did young Germans have a specific responsibility resulting from the annihilation of the Jews and did this responsibility necessarily result in a particular political attitude towards Israel? Discussions reached a point at which the leaders of the study group proposed a model for further discussion according to which the youth was regarded responsi-

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59 Letter in Kloke, *Israel und die deutsche Linke*, 119.

60 The group wrote a lengthy report about their *Begegnungs- und Studienreise*, which can be found in PA-AA, B36/193.

ble, not based on an individual guilt, but through the “concrete, historically imposed obligation of all Germans to publically rehabilitate the German name”.<sup>61</sup> Yet this model was not accepted by all discussants and remained a point of open debate, as some regarded the answer as being too obvious, too often expressed in a society that was not open about the past.

A constant debate about these questions can also be found among the volunteers and functionaries of ASF. As already mentioned above, texts written by ASF functionaries suggest that the personal non-involvement of the ASF volunteers in the Nazi regime was understood as a representative form of atonement. Yet as Anton Legerer explored, the concepts of atonement and reconciliation in the programmatic texts were not clearly defined.<sup>62</sup> This might have been one reason for a constant debate about these terms among young ASF volunteers. Particularly the question of how to bring together the threefoldness of guilt, atonement, and youth was at the core of ongoing debate and reflection. This question was also closely connected with the practical reconciliation work of the volunteers. In October 1964, a group of volunteers working in Kibbutz Hasolelim visited the ghetto exhibition in Lochamei Haghetaot, which they described in their group diary as an intense experience that made them feel ashamed and sorry for the past. In this situation, the group that until then had several encounters with Israelis who all had expressed their appreciation for the young Germans, started to doubt whether they could at all atone for the past.<sup>63</sup> Asked by an Israeli student magazine to comment on the motivation for his reconciliation activity, a member of the same volunteer group explained that he/she as a German felt affected by what the German people had done during the National Socialist regime. In this context, the volunteer connected the guilt of the Germans with the practical reconciliation activity of ASF and explained: “I have to take over the guilt of the fathers [...]. Guilt demands atonement and I have to go to the people and tell them how sorry I am about what has happened”.<sup>64</sup> The volunteer furthermore explicitly re-

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61 Ibid., 31.

62 Legerer, *Tatort Versöhnung*, 54.

63 Diary entry of the group Israel IV, 23 October 1964, EZA 97/396.

64 Diary entry of the group Israel IV, 2 February 1965, EZA 97/396.

ferred to his activities in Israel as a representative activity for the parents' generation.<sup>65</sup>

ASF volunteers also connected their reflections about their role as reconciliation activists in Israel with political aspects. In July 1966, the volunteer group criticized that the West German ASF functionaries did not comment upon current political developments in the German-Israeli relations in their regular newsletters. According to the volunteers, these newsletters contained "only pious words" and were "only about the past".<sup>66</sup> The volunteers argued that the lessons from the past were useless if they were not applied to the present situation: "Should we not see the past in its connection with the present and the future?"<sup>67</sup> The fact that the idea of atonement and the integration of young people for pursuing atonement was and remained problematic in the understanding of the reconciliation activity of ASF not only was a repeatedly discussed topic among volunteers, but can also be seen in statements by those functionaries and supporters of the organization who through their theoretical reflections sought to set a framework for the reconciliation work of the volunteers.<sup>68</sup>

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65 This issue of representative reconciliation activity was also repeatedly reconsidered by ASF functionary and author Volker von Törne (1934-1980), for whom the question of generational responsibility and guilt also played a personal role. Von Törne was the son of an SS soldier, a fact he also reflected upon in his writings and his poetry. See his texts and poems as well as the speeches delivered on the occasion of his funeral in Volker von Törne, *Zwischen Geschichte und Zukunft. Aufsätze – Reden – Gedichte* (Berlin: Aktion Sühnezeichen / Friedensdienste e.V., 1981), which document the strong feelings of guilt that constituted a central topic for him.

66 Diary of the group Israel VII, 22 July 1966, EZA 97/399.

67 Ibid.

68 See the text *Was heißt Sühnezeichen?* about atonement and guilt by the director of the West German ASF branch Franz von Hammerstein, in EZA 97/10. While Hammerstein wanted to adhere to the idea of atonement, theologian and ASF supporter Helmut Gollwitzer declared in a letter from August 1966 that one cannot urge the young people to always solidarize with the guilt of their fathers, but that they have a natural desire for looking more towards the future. Gollwitzer concluded that the work of the organization must therefore be extended. Gollwitzer to K. Scharf, August 1966, EZA 97/10.

A critical (self-) evaluation of the connection of reconciliation and the youth is largely missing in 1960s diplomatic and political rhetoric of German-Israeli relations, in which a focus on youth and the young generation was also much prevalent.<sup>69</sup> There, the young generation was addressed as an important actor for German-Israeli cooperation, but without reflections about why young people should take up this role, and without a critical assessment of the inherent problematic aspects. In the context of establishing a German-Israeli commission that coordinated German-Israeli youth exchange, the German Minister for Youth, Family and Health Käte Strobel wrote to her Israeli counterpart Zalman Aran in 1969,

“I very much hope that we can achieve a partnership between the young generations of our countries. We would like to attract the young people to become engaged with reconciliation and peace by having a clear knowledge about guilt and the past.”<sup>70</sup>

To highlight the importance of the young generation for further developing German-Israeli relations and for reconciliation became a common theme in the diplomatic exchange between German and Israeli politicians. When German ambassador Jesco von Puttkamer presented his credentials in Jerusalem to Israeli president Zalman Sbazar in May 1971, they both put special emphasis on the continuation of the German-Israeli youth exchange. Sbazar made explicit that he shared Puttkamer’s aspiration that through the young generation in Germany “the good-will to open new pages in the rela-

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69 This also resulted in practical political consequences in the sense that there were various efforts on the German and the Israeli sides to establish and institutionalize a German-Israeli youth exchange, which was established already in the mid-1950s through visits of student groups, but became more institutionalized only after official diplomatic relations were established in 1965. For the history of the German-Israeli youth exchange see for instance Irma Haase, *Deutsch-Israelischer Jugendaustausch*, in: *20 Jahre Deutsch-Israelische Beziehungen*, ed. Deutsch-Israelischer Arbeitskreis für Frieden im Nahen Osten e.V. (Berlin: Deutsch-Israelischer Arbeitskreis für Frieden im Nahen Osten e.V., 1985), 85-135; *Der deutsch-israelische Dialog*. Teil III: Kultur, Vol. 8, ed. Rolf Vogel (München: K.G. Saur, 1990), 244-374.

70 Strobel to Aran, 4 December 1969, PA-AA, AV Neues Amt 2.232.

tions between the two peoples may be promoted”.<sup>71</sup> The political function of young German reconciliation activists in Israel became also apparent already before the official establishment of the German embassy in Tel Aviv in 1965. The ASF building *Haus Pax* in Jerusalem had already previously served as a meeting point for non-accredited diplomats and ASF members.<sup>72</sup> Moreover, after Rolf Pauls was officially appointed German ambassador in Israel, he met there with ASF volunteer groups in order to discuss the German-Israeli relations and his plans as ambassador.<sup>73</sup>

This positive attitude towards young Germans who traveled to and worked in Israel can also be found within the discourse in Israel. In the early 1960s, a volunteer group of ASF met David Ben-Gurion personally, who had retired in the meantime, and who called the young volunteers “ambassadors for Israel in Germany”.<sup>74</sup> Ben-Gurion’s perspective signifies the political impact that he attached to the ASF volunteers, as in his eyes they should help to support Israel and the Israeli case back home in Germany. In addition, other ASF supporters in Israel – such as the religious philosopher Martin Buber – argued that the main task of the ASF volunteers was not situated in Israel, but at home in Germany. When Otto Schenk, the leader of a volunteer group, visited Buber in his Jerusalem home in November 1963, he asked him what the young German volunteer could do once returned to Germany. Buber’s stance on this issue was that reconciliation with the people of Israel was not a question of German-Jewish relations but a mere German issue. For him, the young Germans were responsible for bringing about reconciliation among Germans, not between Germans and Jews.<sup>75</sup> Buber therefore rejected the idea of atonement and reconciliation of the young generation with Israelis or Jews, but he emphasized the need that the young generation was able to do something for the inner reconciliation

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71 Inaugural speech von Puttkamer and reply by the President of Israel, PA-AA, AV Neues Amt 2.353.

72 Legerer, *Tatort Versöhnung*, 21.

73 For instance, diary of the group Israel VIII, 19-25 November 1966, EZA 97/399; Dietrich P., Kritische Stellungnahme zum Einsatz der Sühnezeichengruppe Israel IX, 25 October 1967, EZA 97/710.

74 Otto Schenk, Als Deutscher in Jerusalem, EZA 97/693.

75 Abschrift Protokoll von Otto Schenk über das Gespräch mit Martin Buber, November 1963, EZA 97/692.

within German society.<sup>76</sup> Buber and Ben-Gurion were not the only Israelis whom the young Germans encountered and who emphasized that the main task for their reconciliation activities was not in Israel, but in Germany.<sup>77</sup> The idea that young Germans who had visited or lived in Israel could exert a positive impact on German society was not limited to the young volunteers of ASF as an article in the German-speaking Israeli newspaper *Jedioth Chadashoth* from April 1964 demonstrates, highlighting the role of German visitors to Israel for fighting against antisemitism in Germany.<sup>78</sup>

Young Germans in general and ASF volunteers in particular had also other prominent supporters in Israel. One of them was the author and journalist Schalom Ben-Chorin (born in Munich in 1913 as Fritz Rosenthal), who placed the German youth at the centre of one of his articles in *Jedioth Chadashoth* in June 1964. In his article, Ben-Chorin recounted an interview with Gideon Hausner, the attorney general and chief prosecutor in the Eichmann trial. The starting point for the interview was a public statement by Hausner in which he negated Ben-Gurion's claim that there is an "other Germany". Ben-Chorin did not consent with Hausner in this point and engaged him in a discussion about the German youth as a representative of this new Germany. In the end Ben-Chorin found a consensus with Hausner and both agreed that the efforts of German youth for a new Germany are to be acknowledged and supported.<sup>79</sup>

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76 This aspect was also emphasized by Helmut Gollwitzer. In 1978, he stressed the special responsibility of young Germans – who deliver those signs of atonement their parents were not able to perform – for securing a positive development of Germany in present and future times. Helmut Gollwitzer, *Die Aktualität der Aktion Sühnezeichen – einige theologische Anmerkungen, zeichen*, September 1978, 5.

77 See reports about conversations between volunteers and Israelis in the diary of group Israel IV, 2 June 1964, EZA 97/396.

78 *Die Motive des neu-deutschen Antisemitismus, Jedioth Chadashoth*, 10 April 1964.

79 *Gibt es kein anderes Deutschland?, Jedioth Chadashoth*, 19 June 1964. Ben-Chorin and his wife Avital backed the activities for Jewish-Christian understanding by Protestant church circles in various ways; they were among the Israeli friends of ASF, and Ben-Chorin used his publicity to campaign for the

Even the Israeli parliament Knesset discussed about the issue of German youth activities.<sup>80</sup> In a Knesset discussion in March 1966, Knesset member David Hacohen took a positive stance towards young Germans. He showed himself convinced that many young Germans were ashamed of the crimes of the parent generation. He also made clear that these crimes could not count as a valuable reason to reject activities of young Germans in Israel. For Hacohen, the fact that the German youth showed emotions of disgust and shame regarding the deeds of their fathers laid the ground to accept their presence in Israel and their wish to become friends of Israel by compensating for the past.<sup>81</sup>

Asher Ben Nathan, the first Israeli ambassador in the Federal Republic, also belonged to those Israeli politicians to whom it was important to address and to make contacts with the youth.<sup>82</sup> While serving as an ambassador in Bonn, Ben Nathan frequently met with young Germans and toured through various West German universities, giving talks and participating in discussions.<sup>83</sup> He also supported German-Israeli youth exchange, advertising this idea in the Israeli public, for instance in an interview with the Israeli newspaper *Jedioth Achronoth* in April 1966. In fact, for Ben Nathan the exchange between young Germans and Israelis was much more desirable

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German youth and its good intentions in Israel. Ablehnung auf sich nehmen, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 8 March 2011.

80 ASF volunteer Albrecht E. mentions a poll in the Knesset about his ASF group in a letter to his mother from 2 May 1963, EZA 97/712. Inge Deutschkron refers to a Knesset debate in January 1962 after Protestant pastor Dieckmann had visited Israel; Dieckmann had used this occasion to discuss with Israeli school students and their parents the Jewish-German relations and had then asked the young Israelis to establish an exchange of letters with young Germans. Deutschkron, *Israel und die Deutschen*, 185.

81 German translation of Hacohen's statement, PA-AA, AN Neues Amt 2.357.

82 Asher Ben Nathan, Herausforderungen im Schatten der Geschichte, in: *Israel und Deutschland. Dorniger Weg zur Partnerschaft. Die Botschafter berichten über vier Jahrzehnte diplomatische Beziehungen (1965-2005)*, ed. Asher Ben Natan et al. (Köln: Böhlau, 2005), 24-41, here: 31.

83 *Ibid.*, 36-38. At the time of the student revolts in the Federal Republic, Ben Nathan was frequently met by students in tumultuous situations in which he was accused as the ambassador of the aggressive state of Israel.



than, for instance, partnerships between German and Israeli towns as they would, he claimed, interfere with the sentiments of Holocaust survivors in Israel.<sup>84</sup> Young Germans, in contrast, would not harm these survivors due to their presence. Once back in Israel, Ben Nathan continued to support activities of young Germans in Israel and he sought understanding for their good intentions among Israelis, particularly among young Israelis.

However, it is noteworthy that even those Israelis who emphasized the positive character of the German youth and its role for German-Israeli relations, such as Ben Nathan, did so without explicitly referring to the activities of the young Germans as acts of “reconciliation”. Ben Nathan once wrote, “instead of reconciliation I was talking about understanding”.<sup>85</sup> This also was the case among decided supporters of the activities of ASF. In November 1962 the American magazine *Time* had published an article about German ASF volunteers in Israel. In response to this publication, Jehuda Riemer, leader of Kibbutz Urim in which ASF volunteers had worked, wrote to the editors of *Time* magazine: “The dreadful memories of the Hitler period and the successful survival of undiscovered Nazis in present-day Germany (both East and West) prevent a reconciliation of the German and Jewish Peoples.”<sup>86</sup> Nevertheless, Riemer explicitly appreciated and supported personal efforts of young Germans to help bridging the gap the past had opened between the older generations.

## IN THE AFTERMATH OF THE SIX-DAYS-WAR

With the Six-Days-War in 1967, the debates surrounding guilt, responsibility, reconciliation, and atonement continued, yet were supplemented with intensifying discourses about the notion of peace. Within West German society, the Six-Days-War constituted a turning point with respect to the overall attitude towards Israel. On the one side, there were increasingly radicalized left-wing students to whom Israel constituted the oppressive occupier, while the Palestinians were regarded as the suppressed or the “victims of

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84 Interview Asher Ben Nathan with *Jedioth Acharonoth*, 15 April 1966, German translation in PA-AA, AV Neues Amt 2.357.

85 Ben Nathan, *Herausforderungen*, 30.

86 Riemer to *Time Magazine*, 1 December 1962, EZA 97/708.

the victims".<sup>87</sup> On the other side, there was an increasing support for Israel and for its military successes among conservative Germans. This support was publically articulated through the West German *Springer* publishing house, owned by Axel Springer who regarded reconciliation with Israel a moral duty.<sup>88</sup>

Functionaries and Israel volunteers of ASF took a position between these extreme poles. Reports demonstrate that the volunteers' stance on Israel spanned from Israel-romanticism, pro-Israeli attitudes and a strong identification with Israel's politics throughout the 1960s, to emerging ambivalence and criticism in the late 1960s and early 1970s.<sup>89</sup> The conflict between Israel and its Arab neighbours, and the need for peace in the Middle East region were felt by ASF volunteers in their practical daily work in Kibbutzim and social institutions,<sup>90</sup> and in their every-day experiences.<sup>91</sup>

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87 For this complex relationship between the German Left and Israel see Kloke, *Israel und die deutsche Linke*.

88 *Unternehmensgrundsätze* of the Axel Springer publishing house, [http://www.axelspringer.de/artikel/Grundsätze-und-Leitlinien\\_40218.html](http://www.axelspringer.de/artikel/Grundsätze-und-Leitlinien_40218.html), accessed 20 May 2011. Springer's personal engagement in reconciliation between Germans and Israeli Jews still raises ambivalent evaluation, as the conference *Axel Springer. Juden, Deutsche und Israelis* (Frankfurt a.M., 27-28 March 2011) demonstrated.

89 A romantic view on Israel can particularly be found among the first Israel volunteers in the early 1960s, for instance in Eckern, *Straße nach Jerusalem*; Legerer, *Tatort Versöhnung*, 215-219. Those volunteers who had experienced the Six-Days-War in Israel even shared the enthusiasm for Israel's military success when they enthusiastically wrote on 28 June 1967 about the war as a new struggle of existence of the Jews in Israel who mainly belonged to the survivors of the Holocaust. Sühnezeichen, *Geschichte(n) erleben*, 26.

90 The diary of the volunteer group Israel VI provides a detailed account about a struggle between a group of Arab farmers and the Kibbutzniks of Kibbutz Bachan about the use of land. Diary entry of the group Israel VI, 21-23 July 1965, EZA 97/398. See also diary entry of group Israel II, 9 February 1962, EZA 97/737. See furthermore the report by Klaus K., EZA 97/391, who mentions that his Israeli counterparts were not much interested in his wish to atone for the past, as the present conflict was much more important to them.

91 This reached a critical peak in April 1978 when two ASF volunteers were killed and several injured through a bombing attack of a Palestinian terrorist. This

For several volunteers, it became more and more difficult to differentiate between the “Jewish victims” to whom they offered their signs of atonement, and the “Israeli perpetrators” whose behaviour they regarded as worthwhile criticizing. This situation was particularly problematic for those who went to Israel with ASF from the late 1960s onwards as *Kriegsdienstverweigerer* (conscientious objectors) who had opted against military service in the Federal Republic for pacifist reasons.<sup>92</sup> Volunteers told in their reports that they encountered barriers, when they wanted to discuss the Arab-Israeli conflict with Israelis, particularly elderly ones.<sup>93</sup> Among the volunteers were some who were very cautious whether they as young Germans were at all in a position to criticize the political situation in Israel,<sup>94</sup> whereas other volunteers exposed themselves and their criticism openly and identified with the Palestinians.<sup>95</sup>

It is not astonishing that the presence of German conscientious objectors was regarded as a problem in parts of the Israeli public, for which the Israeli wars and the Palestinian conflict meant to secure the threatened existence of the state of Israel. Even supporters and friends of ASF in Israel felt increasingly at unease with the organization and with some of its volunteers,<sup>96</sup> the more the ASF volunteers began to question or to criticize Israeli politics towards Palestinians and the more the aspect of peace became important to the practical work. In the late 1960s and throughout the 1970s the

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event intensified an already ongoing debate about the role of the organization in Israel and within this conflict.

92 In 1969, ASF was officially appointed to offer Peace Service (*Friedensdienst*) for those young male Germans who rejected military service. In the 1970s, two-third to three-fourth of all ASF activists in all countries were conscientious objectors. Lilach Marom, ‘On Guilt and Atonement’. *Aktion Sühnezeichen Friedensdienste and Its Activity in Israel, Yad Vashem Studies* 35 (2007), 187-220, here: 200.

93 Rolf T., Report 22/71, EZA 97/391.

94 Ibid.

95 See the book by ASF volunteers Jan Metzger, Martin Orth and Christian Sterzing, *Das ist unser Land – Westbank und Gaza-Streifen unter israelischer Besatzung* (Bornheim-Merten: Lamuv, 1980). About the book and the discussions within ASF about the book see Legerer, *Tatort Versöhnung*, 225-226.

96 Marom, On Guilt and Atonement, 201.

ASF programs in Israel were complemented by projects with Arabs, and activities to foster peace between Israelis and Palestinians.<sup>97</sup>

The emphasis on the aspect of peace in the everyday work of ASF in Israel, but also elsewhere, even led to a change of the organization's name. In 1968, the name was extended to become *Aktion Sühnezeichen Friedensdienste* (the official English name from then onwards is Action Reconciliation Service for Peace). At that time, many ASF volunteers and functionaries required the organization to also look forward towards peace instead of only looking backwards to atonement. Nevertheless, even the change in the organization's name did not stop discourses about the name and the future contents of the ASF activities. In spring 1970, the term atonement was once again highly debated within the organization.<sup>98</sup> In an official letter to members and friends of the organization, the organization argued that to abandon the term atonement would mean a trivialization of the work; furthermore, the letter explained that atonement and peace well belonged together as atonement is meant to lead towards peace.<sup>99</sup>

Reports by ASF volunteers and conscientious objectors from the early 1970s suggest that the aspect of reconciliation and the importance to deal with the Nazi past remained crucial to the activists in Israel, which they also took as a starting point for their engagement for peace.<sup>100</sup> ASF volunteers in Israel in the early 1970s found different, partly diverging answers

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97 For instance through work in *Neve Schalom* (Oasis of Peace), which sought to provide an interconfessional meeting space for Christians, Jews and Muslims. Report Edeltraud M. and Gottfried R., February 1973, EZA 97/392.

98 See the documents in preparation of the general meeting on April 10 and 11 1970, EZA 97/10.

99 Letter, 19 March 1970, EZA 97/10.

100 In 1974, a group of conscientious objectors wrote a joint report about their self-understanding as pacifists working in Israel. The reason why they chose ASF as organization for their peace service was, according to their report, their belief in the necessity of an active dealing with the past as precondition for reconciliation. As post-war generation they did not regard the question of guilt as central, but their active engagement for reconciliation between Jews and Christians, Jews and Germans as well as Arabs and Jews. This should be accompanied by a critical solidarity to both Israelis and Palestinians. Report by Michael D. and Hans-Volker K., March 1974, 7-8, EZA 97/392.

to the question of how to link the idea of atonement to their work in Israel and to their presence there as young Germans. Volunteer Hans-Joachim M., who worked in the Kibbutz Shaar Haamakim, reflected about his work with ASF in April 1972. He considered how he, born in 1947 – “two years after the liberation of the Concentration Camps” – and other young Germans of his age, could contribute towards atoning for the “misdeeds of the Nazi time”.<sup>101</sup> In his account, the crimes committed in the past are depersonalized, as he does not refer directly to his parents or his parents’ generation. For Hans-Joachim M. the caritative work with elderly Jews in his Kibbutz constituted the way in which he as a young person actively contributed to bringing forward the idea of atonement and understanding between the German and the Jewish people.<sup>102</sup> He thereby emphasized the character of the hands-on reconciliation approach by ASF, which he favored over a mere rhetoric of reconciliation. Other volunteers thought along similar lines by claiming that the personal contacts with people in Israel would contribute to improving the image of the German youth.<sup>103</sup>

But there were also generational discrepancies among the young German volunteers in Israel, discrepancies that led towards a diverging understanding of the issues of guilt and atonement. After Barbara G., a 22-year-old ASF volunteer in Israel in 1970/71 returned to her hometown Fulda, she gave an interview to a regional newspaper. She claimed that she and her 14 co-volunteers had not gone to Israel in order to atone; with their service they “did not want to nor could they atone for something for which they as young Germans did not feel responsible”.<sup>104</sup> This provoked vehement criticism of another volunteer, Lutz M., born in 1940, who was still in Israel at the time, and who expressed his unease with Barbara G.’s rejection of the young generation’s responsibility and the impossibility of atonement. Lutz M. referred to the representative understanding of atonement and reconciliation by young people who felt responsible for the guilt committed by the older generation. For him it was clear that “the age of the volunteers does not release them from the responsibility for Auschwitz, as it continues to

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101 Report Hans-Joachim M., April 1972, EZA 97/392.

102 Ibid.

103 Report Elfie G.-H., February 1971, EZA 97/391.

104 Quoted according to report Lutz M., 13/72, EZA 97/391.

exist in another form even in our present – and as long as we live we are also affected by it”.<sup>105</sup>

The idea of atonement not only remained a debated term among activists themselves, but also for their Israeli supporters<sup>106</sup> and particularly for those at which the reconciliation activities were directed to. Even Israelis who did not in principle object to establishing contacts with the volunteers of ASF expressed their doubts about the name *Sühnezeichen* and the practical implementation of atonement by young Germans. In April 1968 *Jedioth Chadashoth* published a letter to the newspaper’s editor, written by a reader who had been in contact with some volunteers, in which we can read the following:

“The name *Sühnezeichen* again has something to do with German fanaticism. How can the children of those who have become guilty wish to atone for something which they were not even part of? Their attitude is therefore unnatural right from the start.”<sup>107</sup>

The writer of the letter questioned whether the young German volunteers could fulfill the claim for atonement at all. The letter continued to criticize the attitude of the young German volunteers with respect to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which in the author’s opinion resulted in anti-Israeli sentiments that were also expressed by the German reconciliation activists. It concluded that “we should not have accepted this gesture of sacrifice, as this gesture resulted from a completely wrong view”.<sup>108</sup>

Another term that caused unease among Israeli Jews was the underlying idea that atonement and reconciliation are connected to the notion of forgiveness, a term that played an important role in the reconciliation concepts of the Christian churches and among reconciliation activists, such as

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105 Ibid.

106 See the texts by Israeli ASF supporters in EZA 97/785 about a discussion taking place in 1974.

107 *Jedioth Chadashoth*, 11 April 1968, 3, quoted in Legerer, *Tatort Versöhnung*, 215-216.

108 Ibid.

ASF.<sup>109</sup> The aspect of asking for forgiveness constituted a problematic issue for some of the recipients of reconciliation activities in Israel. Pinhas Rosen, Israeli Minister of Justice from 1949 to 1961, and member of the Knesseth until 1968, stated to the Israeli newspaper *Maariv* in December 1968 that he was far from hating all Germans and that he welcomed visitors from Germany in Israel. However, he continued to say that he was neither able to forget nor to forgive.<sup>110</sup> His statement points at a crucial issue in reconciliation matters. What if the one to whom reconciliation is offered cannot forgive and therefore does not fulfill a prerequisite for reconciliation according to the Christian conception of reconciliation; a conception that is present within the conceptual framework of reconciliation and atonement of Protestant German groups active in Israel, such as ASF? Additionally, according to Jewish moral law, it is not possible for Jews to grant forgiveness in the name of others.<sup>111</sup> It has also been argued that in the aftermath of the Holocaust reconciliation could only be possible between the murderers and the murdered.<sup>112</sup>

Even if the idea of peace became more central to debates about the young Germans for their reconciliation activities in Israel during the late 1960s and early 1970s, also the idea of atonement, as problematic as it was for many volunteers, remained important for the self-understanding of the activists (if not in a positive sense than at least as a term that was constantly

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109 See also Gundermann, *Leiden ohne Täter*, 144, who emphasizes this aspect of asking for forgiveness in her study about the activities of ASF in the Netherlands.

110 See German translation of the interview in letter German Embassy Tel Aviv to the Foreign Office Bonn, 23 December 1968, PA-AA, B36/458.

111 For the diverging Christian and Jewish conceptions of repentance, forgiveness and reconciliation see Peter J. Haas, *Forgiveness, Reconciliation and Jewish Memory after Auschwitz*, in: *After-Words. Post-Holocaust Struggles with Forgiveness, Reconciliation, Justice*, ed. David Patterson and John K. Roth (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 2004), 5-16.

112 See the argument by Theodor W. Adorno, referred to by Susan Neiman, *Das Böse denken. Eine andere Geschichte der Philosophie* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 2006), 384. Such an understanding has to reject reconciliation efforts by ASF activists.

discussed) and for the debates taking place about their work and their presence in Israel.

In the course of these debates, functionaries, volunteers and friends of ASF claimed that an “outward reconciliation” (*Versöhnung nach außen*) must be followed by an “internal change” (*Wandlung im Innern*).<sup>113</sup> This intensified an argument that ASF supporters in Israel had brought forward: that the main reconciliation task of the *Sühnezeichen* volunteers was not situated in Israel, but at home in Germany. In fact, already in the early 1960s, the returning Israel volunteers were invited by city majors, local schools, and church groups to tell about their experiences.<sup>114</sup> In the late 1960s, these programs intensified, and it became common practice for many volunteers to continue with their engagement for ASF by giving lectures to school classes and youth groups about their experiences as volunteers after their return home. At these occasions, the returned volunteers were met by other young Germans with interest, yet again with questions and partly criticism about the connection of atonement, guilt and the task of the young generation in offering atonement, in acknowledging guilt and in pursuing reconciliation.<sup>115</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Based on the Christian idea of representative atonement for a guilt committed by others, the reconciliation practice of ASF was shaped by the engagement of young Germans as reconciliation actors. Through the inclusion of young Germans the organization and its members showed that they regarded atonement and reconciliation as an ongoing task pursued by the future generations who did not simply draw a *Schlusstrich* under the past. In this

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113 Kammerer, *Aktion Sühnezeichen*, 114.

114 Diary entries of Israel groups III, VII and VIII, 18 March 1964, EZA 97/396; 21-24 September 1966 and 15-18 March 1967, both EZA 97/399.

115 Reports by Joachim R. about a four-week information tour through Württemberg in February/March 1973 and by Martin B., Vincent B. and Marion R. about their information week in Cologne in March 1973, both EZA 97/392; see also report by Susanne P. who held an information week in Stuttgart schools and congregations in July 1972, EZA 97/391.



way the young generation became the central reconciliation activists who committed practical reconciliation work as representatives of those who had actually lived through the National Socialist regime. The young Germans reflected about their experiences as reconciliation activists in Israel in various ways. They also attracted attention from those Israelis they met during their practical work, Israeli politicians, and the Israeli media. The integration of the young generation in reconciliation activities from the 1950s onwards provoked debates in West Germany and Israel, which centered on the issues of guilt, atonement, and peace, and which discussed the role the young generation was to play in reconciliation discourse and practice.

As demonstrated in this chapter, discourses on reconciliation and practical experiences of young Germans as reconciliation activists in Israel between 1961 and the 1970s oscillated between underlying ideas of atonement, resulting from the past, and ideas of peace, directed towards the future. While more and more importance was laid upon the idea of peace from the late 1960s onwards, the idea of atonement has not simply been displaced by the idea of peace, as both ideas were present in the ASF activities and concepts from the beginning, but were attached with different weight and importance at different times.<sup>116</sup> The integration of young Germans in reconciliation efforts between Germany and Israel – in the discourse about the role of the young generation for reconciliation and in practical reconciliation activity – impacted on and accompanied this shift. The more every-day life in Israel became dominated by the problems among Israelis and Palestinians and by the Middle East conflict, and the more young Germans tried to contribute towards achieving peace among Israelis and Arabs, the more these contemporary political issues became part of the young people's considerations about the past and about their role as activists for reconciliation.

The analyzed discourses on the role of the young generation for reconciliation also contribute to further developing a differentiated understanding on how guilt and atonement were transferred in the post-war decades. In her study about the transfer of guilt and atonement to the following generations, theologian Katharina von Kellenbach argued that a combination of

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116 In contrast to my understanding, Legerer, *Tatort Versöhnung*, 220, implies that the integration of the peace movement and the inclusion of conscientious confessors has led to a “dilution of the original mission”.

rather unspecified confessions of guilt – for instance the guilt confessions by the Protestant and Catholic Churches after the Second World War – together with a general amnesia within West German society in the early post-war period has led to a transfer of the moral obligation to deal with the Nazi past to the second and third generations.<sup>117</sup> Given the results of this chapter, it should be added to von Kellenbach’s argument that the transfer of guilt was not only – as she claims – rooted in an “unconscious participation in a solidarity community of guilt”.<sup>118</sup> As demonstrated above, this transfer of guilt was also consciously promoted by the various political and personal discourses on the role of German youth as reconciliation activists, discourses that developed parallel to the silence on the crimes of the past in the post-war years and went, as could be shown, further right into the 1960s and 1970s.

Looking beyond the timeframe discussed in this chapter, reports of ASF volunteers and other accounts of young people engaged in German-Israeli dialogue suggest that the debates about the role of youth in reconciliation discourse and in reconciliation practice did not cease, but continue to exist.<sup>119</sup> Each “young generation” working in Israel tried and tries anew to negotiate its own position and its responsibility with respect to the past. And each young generation is anew an object of debate concerning the role of youth for reconciliation.<sup>120</sup> These negotiations are influenced by contempo-

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117 Katharina von Kellenbach, *Theologische Rede von Schuld und Vergebung*, in: *Von Gott reden im Land der Täter. Theologische Stimmen der dritten Generation seit der Shoa*, ed. Katharina von Kellenbach et al. (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2001), 46-67, here: 63.

118 Ibid.

119 Sühnezeichen Friedensdienste Forum. Rundbrief für die Mitglieder und den Freundeskreis, 35 (1986); Protokoll 2/86, EZA 97/68. For more recent standpoints see the accounts of young Germans and Israelis in *Dissonant Memories. Fragmented Present. Exchanging Young Discourses between Israel and Germany*, ed. Charlotte Misselwitz and Cornelia Siebeck (Bielefeld: transcript, 2009).

120 See, for instance, the report about German-Israeli relations on *Kol Jisrael* radio station, 28 January 1984, and the weekend insert of *Haaretz*, 7 November 1986, both EZA 97/814. And most recently the former German President Christian Wulff who was accompanied by a delegation of young Germans on

rary developments such as the intensifying Israeli-Palestinian conflict, contemporary media debates about victims and perpetrators or own experiences as volunteers. At the core of these discourses about reconciliation there remain attempts to deal with issues of guilt and responsibility, atonement and peace.

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his state visit to Israel in November 2010, and who explained his idea of the youth delegation by explicitly referring to the concept of a generational responsibility for the past and the future. Interview with *Jedioth Aharonot*, 28 November 2010.

