

Thursday, May 1, 2008

## Berlin exhibit equates security fence with Berlin Wall

By BENJAMIN WEINTHAL, THE JERUSALEM POST, BERLIN

**BERLIN - A highly controversial publicly funded photo exhibit equating Israel's security fence with the Berlin Wall has sparked political controversy in the German capital.**



A completed section of the security barrier near Ma'aleh Adumim.

Photo: AP

In late April, a majority of District representatives from the Green and the Left parties approved German photographer **Kai Wiedenhöfer's** "Wall on Wall" display, showing photos of the West Bank security fence at the East Side Gallery, a historical landmark containing sections of the Berlin Wall that commemorates a divided Berlin during the Cold War period.

"Especially given Berlin's international reputation as the German capital, no political propaganda should be made with the commemorations at the Berlin Wall, especially not agitation that is anti-Israel and contrary to the basic principles of German policy," Klaus Faber, a member of the Coordinating Council of German non-Governmental Organizations against Anti-Semitism, told *The Jerusalem Post*.

But speaking by phone from the US, Wiedenhöfer refuted the statement, telling the *Post*, "I am not doing propaganda."

Photos from Wiedenhöfer's book, *Wall* (2007), will be used for the exhibit set to open this summer at the large open-air Gallery along the Spree river, which runs through the heart of Berlin. Asked about the comparison of the Berlin Wall with the West Bank security fence, he said that the "Berlin Wall is a positive thing" because it "was overcome by peaceful means."

Still, the Social Democratic Party faction within the District council voted against the exhibit and wrote on its home page that the display "relativizes the SED dictatorship and at the same time condemns, among other things, the policies of the State of Israel."

The SED was the ruling party in the former East Germany.

Critics charged that the images in Wiedenhöfer's book fanned the flames of anti-Semitism and anti-Israeli sentiments. For example: A photo of graffiti on the separation barrier shows the message, "Warsaw 1943," accompanied by a swastika and Jewish star and the statement "America Money Israeli Apartheid."

**Dr. Clemens Heni**, a German political scientist whose area of expertise is anti-Semitism, said the photo was a "typical expression of the new anti-Semitism" because of the description of the Palestinian situation as the modern embodiment of persecuted Jews in the Nazi-controlled Warsaw ghetto in 1943, as well as the parallel between the swastika and the star of David.

According to the "Working Definition of Anti-Semitism" issued by the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, "comparisons of contemporary Israeli policy to that of the Nazis" are an expression of anti-Semitism.

Heni has organized an on-line petition campaign demanding that the Berlin government cancel the exhibit, and he called for the "creation of a partnership with the Israeli town of Sderot."

"In the motifs he chooses for his photos, Wiedenhöfer's political views become clear. In his work, he presents a completely distorted, one-sided image of the Israeli security installation. The lifesaving function of the wall is not taken into account," said Levi Salomon, the newly appointed representative of the Jewish Forum for Democracy and Against anti-Semitism, an initiative of the 12,000-member Berlin Jewish community which launched on Wednesday.

In response, Wiedenhöfer said, "this is an opinion" and one "can find someone else with an opinion" regarding whether the security fence has decreased the number of Israeli deaths due to Palestinian terror attacks.

According to Israel's Foreign Ministry, the security fence reduced the number of Israeli terror victims killed between 2000 and 2003 from 293 to 64 since the erection of the barrier in 2003 until 2006. The ministry says that as a result of the fence, the number of Palestinian terror attacks and wounded Israelis has significantly plummeted.

The Israeli Embassy in Berlin declined to comment on the exhibit.

"Freedom of art" is an important right, said **Regine Sommer-Wetter**, the Left party representative who voted for the exhibit. Asked about her party co-chairman **Gregor Gysi**, who delivered a blistering attack on anti-Israeli attitudes within his party in mid-April, Sommer-Wetter said she read the speech but it did not play a role in the "political valuation of the photos."

Gysi said, "Anti-Zionism cannot be, or at least can no longer be, a tenable position for the Left in general, for the party."

**Dr. Wolfgang Lenk**, from the Green party, supported the exhibit and told the *Post* that the District council was "only responsible for the authorization" and stressed that the images would have accompanying texts in order to avoid a "justification of Palestinian anti-Semitism."

**Günther Schaefer**, a prominent artist whose works address the Berlin Wall, remarked to the *Post* that it was "tragic that the political parties are taking part" in "using the East Side Gallery as a form of propaganda."

Schaefer, a member of the Board of Directors of the East Side Gallery, sees the Berlin Wall location to depict the Israeli separation barrier as an "equalization with the East German terror regime," and called this comparison unacceptable for Israel.