Host-stranger relations in Rome, Tel Aviv, Paris and Amsterdam. A comparison of local policies toward labour migrants

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This PhD project was conceived during my work in the Long Term Planning Department at the Municipality of Tel Aviv. From the mid-1990s I observed and participated in an awakening process within the municipality in response to the arrival of thousands of overseas labour migrants in that city. Doing background research for policy proposals on 'what we should do with the foreign worker problem', I came to realise that Tel Aviv was passing through a phase that cities in northern Europe had experienced several decades earlier (what I later called the shift from a Non-policy to a Guestworker policy response). Might we learn a lesson from the European experience?

The more I thought about it, the more it seemed that there was more to this comparison than merely a 'best practices' approach. In particular, I was interested in uncovering the hidden structures of knowledge that guide (often implicitly) the policy responses of local planners, politicians and administrators when they are faced with a strange and initially temporary population ('guestworkers') that shows signs of remaining in 'their' city. Having grown up as an Israeli immigrant in America, I was naturally drawn to the newcomers' view of this relationship. But my role in the municipality led me to explore this process not through the newcomer's eyes (on which volumes have been written) but through the eyes of the local host society. Thus the idea of comparing local policies toward labour migrants as an expression of host-stranger relations, trying to link between the visible policy responses to labour migrant settlement, and the less visible, less quantifiable substrata of attitudes and expectations toward strangers and Otherness.

Such a research project may have remained the wishful thinking of a municipal planner, if not for the election of a new mayor in 1999, who appointed a new City Engineer, who dismissed all the consultants whose contracts were up, including me. In the resulting free time, I wrote an MA thesis describing the changing concepts of Strangerhood. This led me away from policy documents and back to the writings of Georg Simmel, Levinas, Sibley and most crucially, Zygmunt Bauman. At the same time I participated in a comparative research network on local policies and migrant mobilisation (“Multicultural Policies and Modes of Citizenship in European cities”), submitting a chapter on Tel Aviv’s experience. The MPMC project became the main source of data for my literature survey on local migrant policies in Europe, which began when I was still in the municipality of Tel Aviv and was expanded in the PhD thesis.

Meanwhile, the new mayor of Tel Aviv, Ron Huldai, decided to implement the policy proposals prepared by the municipal bureaucracy under his predecessor. This led to the establishment of a
municipal 'Aid and Information Center for the Foreign Communities in Tel Aviv' (MESILA) in which I took part. My new career as a 'street level bureaucrat' in local migrant policy, this time in daily contact with the labour migrants themselves, was cut short after six months by the opportunity to undertake PhD studies at the University of Amsterdam. The scholarship offered by the Amsterdam study centre for the Metropolitan Environment (AME) enabled me to compare the experience of Tel Aviv with that of European cities, at several levels. I left Tel Aviv at the end of March 2000 and landed in northern Europe, once again a newcomer. In the following three and a half years I was able to experience again the Stranger's "simultaneous nearness and distance" described by Simmel.

This PhD project has involved researching, writing and above all LIVING in three of the most beautiful cities in Europe -- Amsterdam, Rome and Paris -- and one less lovely but home nonetheless -- Tel Aviv. This has been an incredibly stimulating, not to mention logistically demanding period (a total of seven apartments in Amsterdam and two each in Rome and Paris). In this process I have been helped, hosted and housed by dozens of people, of whom I can only mention the most outstanding below. Just as this research project has fused intellectual and personal experience in each city, the acknowledgements below are grouped by city and mix between those academic colleagues, local officials and NGO activists who freely gave of their time and openness, and the old and newfound friends in five cities who provided the logistical and personal support which made this project not only possible but very, very enjoyable.

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through his help in the Tel Aviv case study, and including his role as a discussion partner on the more theoretical aspects of the dissertation.

In MARSEILLE, where I spent two weeks of intensive research before transferring the case study to Paris, I learned much about the French context. Marcel Maussén introduced me to that city’s research community who were friendly without exception. ‘Merci biengue’ en particulier à Alain Reboul pour son amitié et son hospitalité Marseillaise.

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I dedicate this work to my father, Ernest Alexander. More than any other person, he gave of his time, spirit and intellectual talents to this project. His critical feedback at all the stages, from first rough drafts to the Conclusion chapter, was invaluable. Yom huledet 70 sameach!