

Banning the “Flytilla” to Palestine: LUFTHANSA IN THE WAKE OF WW II WAS BARRED FROM FLYING TO GERMANY

Open Letter to CEO of Lufhansa

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“There is a higher Court than the Courts of Justice, that is the Court of Conscience. It supercedes all other Courts.” (Mahatma Gandhi, 1869-1948.)

Stefan Hansen,

CEO and Chairman of the Executive Board, Lufthansa Airlines.

Dear Mr. Hansen

I write, to coin a phrase, more in sorrow than in anger, that your airline caved in to pressure from Israel and joined Air France, Alitalia, Turkish and Brussels Airlines, Jet2 and Easy Jet (mission statement: “ ... to effect and offer a consistent and reliable product ...”) in refusing “flytilla” passengers en route to Bethlehem in Palestine, with fully paid tickets, on to your flights to Israel’s Ben Gurion Airport.

My own experiences of flights to and from the Middle East on Lufthansa are numerous, each with heart warming memories of conversations with crews, their kindness and their real love for the region, some with such affinity that they had moved there, embracing the complexities, uncertainties and above all the history and unique warmth of the people.

What makes Lufthansa’s stance so ironic is that as an airline, it was, for forty five years isolated and unable to fly in to Germany, its home country, as you will know, thus is uniquely placed to understand Palestine’s isolation, its airport near destroyed and forbidden its own airline.

When Iraq was near equally isolated, during the years of the embargo, Iraqi airways grounded by the terms of the UN freeze on the country’s access to just about anything, your crews and staff consistently expressed empathy, even outrage. It has to be wondered how they regard their company’s shoddy stance, adding to the siege and isolation of Palestine.

Lufthansa’s own isolation was also subject to deviant victors justice.(i) In 1945, at the end of the second World War when Germany was occupied by the Soviet Union, the US, France the Britain, the Berlin Wall went up and, as the Palestine - Israel wall, Germany was walled in or walled out, depending on the view point. Stark parallels.

British, French and US airlines had the monopoly of flights to West Germany and the Soviet Union to the East. Lufthansa, Germany's national airline, was barred from flying to Germany.

In spite of the shameful arrogance of the restrictions, just ten years after the war ended, Lufthansa had expanded its long distance flights - to the Middle East and Americas. Yet it was not until 1990, when the Wall came down, dismantled by the people themselves, that Lufthansa's distinctive colors finally landed back in Berlin for the first time since the Allied occupation.

I only learned this history a year before the Wall crumbled. I called Lufthansa to book a flight to Berlin. The booking agent said Lufthansa did not fly to Berlin.

"You don't fly to your own country?"

I still recall the humiliation in his voice as he explained the chronology of a great and proud carrier, established in 1926, being barred from its homeland and capitol city's airport.

Perhaps that was also the reason, when, on numerous visits to Iraq, traveling Lufthansa as far as Amman, Jordan and then on by road, due to the embargo's strictures, the crew would often talk the night away, in the quiet hours, in the galley, voicing outrage and concern at the plight of the people, the isolation. Lufthansa had flights to Iraq from 1956, until halted by the 1990 embargo.

Quite often the same crew would be operating the return flight, they would beam, remember, welcome me back and then, invariably, ask the same question one heard throughout the Middle East: "How is Iraq? How are the people?" As if asking about a family.

Lufthansa transported 1.56 million passengers to the Middle East in just the first four months of 2010, up forty one percent from the previous year: "An expression of the historically good relationship between Germany and the Arab states", commented analyst Juergen Pieper.

Germany's flag carrier enjoining in barring passengers from a journey described as: "A beacon of hope", by Nobel Peace Prize Laureate Mairead Maguire, a gesture of solidarity with Palestinians, a people near forsaken by governments due to pressures from those now occupying Palestine's land, is especially craven from your country which also has suffered the humiliation of occupation.

Lufthansa has joined in conspiring to scupper an initiative the world could well do with, one which Swedish writer, Henning Mankell described of another, sea borne initiative of solidarity as: "A declaration of peace."

Your company had not alone negated the rights enshrined in the founding charter of the United Nations and Vienna Convention of the right of all to travel freely, but validated the arresting of both Jewish and Palestinian newcomers, of the visitors, united at Ben Gurion airport, and incarcerated for holding cards of greetings - and in one case a drawing by a Palestinian child.

Perhaps Palestinian journalist Susan Abulhawa pinpoints the reason for a seemingly incomprehensible decision, by the airlines, but additionally uncomfortably applicable to Lufthansa. She writes:

“Everything – home, heritage, life, resources, hope – has been robbed from us to atone for Germany’s sins. To this day, we languish in refugee camps that are not fit for human beings so that every Jewish man and woman can have dual citizenship, one in their own country and one in mine.

“We are the ones who find ourselves at the other end of the weapons that Germany supplies to Israel. It is Palestine that is being wiped off the map. It is our society that is being destroyed. Of course, Germany’s silence is easy and convenient, but ‘understandable’ it is not.” (ii)

As one who has a deep affinity with Germany, her words make me infinitely sad.

Germany’s “Iron Curtain” has been jubilantly pulled down, whilst physically and aeronautically it now apparently endorses another one in the Middle East.

With the boycott movement ever gaining worldwide strength, it remains to be seen how it will impact on airlines complicit in sabotaging an international initiative conceived in humanity, in solidarity with a nation mourning sixty four years of isolation and ever creeping dispossession, in the month that Israel celebrates Independence Day, its sixty fourth birthday, in festivities world wide.

As for the profitability of future flights to Ben Gurion airport, in the words of an Israeli Foreign Ministry official: “We have insulted hundreds of foreign citizens ... Direct damage has been done to tourism and to Israel’s good name”, he said.

Indeed, with fifteen hundred potential extra passengers into the airport, what a dream chance for a charm offensive. Instead they were demonstrating with others, against involved airlines and Israel in numerous airports in many countries.

In anticipation of your thoughts on this sorry saga,

Yours sincerely,

Felicity Arbuthnot (Dr.Hon., Phil.)

i.

<http://www.fundinguniverse.com/company-histories/Deutsche-Lufthansa-AG-company-History.html>

ii. <http://electronicintifada.net/content/why-are-palestinians-paying-germanys-sins/11167>

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