A DRAMATIC ERA IN HISTORY

by

JACOB BLAUSTEIN

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This address, originally scheduled for the Anniversary Banquet, May 12, 1966, was delivered at the closing luncheon of the American Jewish Committee’s Annual Meeting, at the Diplomatic Reception Rooms of the U.S. State Department, on Sunday, May 15, 1966.

Mr. Blaustein (who is Honorary President of the American Jewish Committee and Senior Vice President of the Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany) generously relinquished his time at the Anniversary Banquet for the presentation of the AJC American Liberties Medallion to President Lyndon B. Johnson.
It is difficult for me to accept the fact that the American Jewish Committee is only 60 years old. I had thought that I myself had put in more time than that at the AJC—but I guess it only seems that way.

Whatever the count of years may be, there is one thing of which I am very sure: each year has brought its own burdens and its own rewards. It has been the nature of the American Jewish Committee not to shrink from the sternest of tasks; but its satisfactions have kept pace with its challenges.

I can think of many examples, but it is not my intention this evening to relive the entire past. There have been great dramas in our 60-year-old history—episodes that illustrate the special quality that distinguishes the American Jewish Committee.

That special quality is not easy to define, but I think that courage and foresight are among its most precious ingredients—whether it involves the education and persuasion that helped bring about the inclusion of the human-rights provisions in the United Nations Charter; or the ongoing work with religious leaders of all faiths to improve religious teachings and free our people of the burden of a centuries-old slander; or the tremendously important task of being focal in the negotiations of the historic agreements with the West German Government that are securing an ultimate sum total estimated at $10 billion for the rehabilitation of, and the indemnification to, the surviving individual victims of Nazi persecution—approximately $6¾ billion of which has already been paid.
The American Jewish Committee played a most important role in bringing into existence both the Jewish Restitution Successor Organization and the Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany. As we look back and realize what this has meant for Israel, for hundreds of thousands of Jews and Jewish communities throughout the world and, yes, for Germany itself, we tend to forget the immensity of the task and the many practical difficulties that overwhelmed us at the start. And indeed, some difficulties exist even yet.

We forget, for example, that the American Jewish Committee's pragmatic position toward postwar Germany, and our insistence that 60 million Germans could not be kept forever beyond the pale of world society, but should be afforded an opportunity to become decent members thereof—meeting proper standards, including democratization—we forget this attitude subjected us at the time to tremendous criticism from other Jewish organizations. Incidentally, it was our kind of attitude which prompted Chancellor Adenauer to say—in one of your speaker's early conferences with him on February 19, 1952, and since repeated—that Germany must forever repay by conducting itself honorably.

There were those who argued that even to sit down and discuss with the German Government any payment of reparations and restitution was "to put a price" on our six million dead.

But we knew—and the German Government itself acknowledged—that these negotiations did not have—nor could they have—such an interpretation.
We knew—and the German Government and the German people knew—that all the wealth the earth contained could not expiate the crimes of the Nazi regime, could not atone for the Nazi murders and tortures. But we also knew that the victims of Nazism were in desperate need, and that the German nation could and should take the first steps to help ameliorate their terrible plight and, in some measure to indicate, in a tangible way, the profound sorrow and poignant sense of shame at the hideous and unspeakable crimes that were committed against humanity in their name. And we were determined that this help should be secured.

With this goal in mind, we managed, at the end of the war, to convince the American Military Government to designate a Jewish Restitution Successor Organization, which would be empowered to claim title to heirless and unclaimed properties that belonged to the victims of Nazism.

But much, much more was needed. Before a comprehensive reparations principle could be established, it was essential that the German Government acknowledge and accept responsibility for the Nazi crimes. There is no time today to recount in detail the countless meetings and the complicated diplomacy, here and abroad—in Bonn, Washington, London, Geneva and at The Hague—that ultimately brought this about. It will take a historian with hundreds of pages at his disposal to tell the adequate story.

Let me merely record that after consultation with the American Jewish Committee, Chancellor Konrad Adenauer, on September 21, 1951, made this historic statement in the Bundestag. I quote:
"Unspeakable crimes were perpetrated in the name of the German people which imposed upon them the obligation to make moral and material amends, both as regards the individual damage the Jews have suffered and as regards Jewish property for which there are no longer individual claimants. . . . The Federal Government will see to it that the restitution legislation is rapidly completed and that it is justly implemented."

On October 25, 1951, representatives of the 22 major Jewish organizations of the free world convened to discuss the Jewish response to this statement, and to establish an organization to represent the Jewish position. So the Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany was born. Dr. Nahum Goldmann of the Jewish Agency was elected President; Jacob Blaustein, who had been the American Jewish Committee representative, was elected Senior Vice President; and the late Moses A. Leavitt of the Joint Distribution Committee became Treasurer.

I pause here a moment to pay tribute to Moses Leavitt, and to express our great sense of loss when he died during one of our Conference sessions last year in Geneva.

The three Senior Officers were charged with most of the negotiations, the implementation of the agreements and with the Claims Conference operations and allocation of funds. Our task would not have been possible were it not for a most able and dedicated staff and the splendid help and cooperation of the Claims Conference Board as a whole and the individual members thereof—with decisions subject always to the approval of the Board.

The actual negotiations with the German Government were indescribably complex—strenuous, often very diffi-
cult, several times near a break and at one point broken off altogether. But what helped immeasurably was the conviction on the part of the German leaders and many of the German people that they had to make substantial amends for the Nazi material crimes; that not only were these reparation programs humane and decent, but wise from the standpoint of Germany itself, realizing that these programs could produce a favorable reaction in the free world as to whether Germany should ever be accepted again into the family of nations. And it was especially important to Germany to gain the approval of the American Government and public opinion. As Adenauer later said, he could never have come to the United States had he not made the declaration of restitution and followed it up with compensation.

The agreements were signed in Luxembourg on September 10, 1952, just one year after Chancellor Adenauer’s statement in the Bundestag. That so much could be accomplished so quickly was due not only to the efforts of our negotiators and to the underlying willingness of the German Government to reach agreement, but to the unswerving support of our own United States Government officials. President Truman was truly a tower of strength; and we can never forget the tremendously effective backing of former U.S. High Commissioner John J. McCloy. It should also be added that in the continuing negotiations—there have been many—each United States President and Secretary of State and U.S. Ambassador to Germany (including President Johnson, Secretary Rusk and U.S. Ambassador George McGhee) has been extremely cooperative and helpful.

Now what was actually accomplished by these historic negotiations? Despite the vastness of the sums involved,
it is sometimes easy to lose sight of what the reparations have meant. Let me, therefore, for a few moments review the facts of the situation.

As to Israel, for example, the $715 million received by the Government during the last 12 years, to reimburse it for the costs of resettling the persecutees who came there to live—plus the indemnification received by the individuals who settled there—have made up by far the largest single item in the Israeli balance of payments. In fact, receipts from German reparations and indemnifications have considerably exceeded Israel's combined income from the United Jewish Appeal and Israel Bonds. It would be difficult to exaggerate the impact of these funds upon the economic development of Israel.

As to the victims who reside outside of Israel, the Conference has often been called the Jewish Marshall Plan—and I must say that I find the comparison very apt. One hundred and seven million dollars was received by the Claims Conference for the rehabilitation of these persecutees. The transformation in Jewish life that has taken place over the past 15 years in the Jewish communities of Western and Central Europe challenges all belief.

In the early 1950's, the Jewish communities on the European continent—the bearers of centuries-old historical traditions—were all but destitute. Sacked and plundered in the Nazi drive for planned destruction and extermination; the populations decimated and the survivors by the hundreds of thousands in dire need; their communal leaders, rabbis and teachers in great measure murdered or driven off to other quarters of the globe; the wealth that had accumulated in the space of centuries looted; and
synagogues, schools and the other communal institutions razed or reduced to ruin—the prospects of their ever being rehabilitated within our lifetime seemed utterly remote.

Today, scarcely a Jewish community exists in the countries of Western, Central and Southern Europe which cannot show one or more capital projects aided by Conference funds. These are part of some 475 capital projects in 29 countries in Europe alone, undertaken with Conference aid.

It should be a source of lasting gratification to all of us that, over the years, Conference aid has helped in meeting the pressing needs of so many of our suffering fellow Jews and given them hope, that it has assisted many Jewish communities to revive and to provide for their own needs, and that it has given stimulus to Jewish education and Jewish creativeness in many countries. It is our firm belief that these achievements will leave a mark on Jewish life which will remain clear for all to see for decades and decades to come.

The American Jewish Committee, building upon this foundation, has played a vital and continuing role in helping this educational and cultural revival in Europe through its Community Service.

The path of progress has not always been an easy one. Great difficulties have arisen time and again, first in the negotiations as I have said, and later in the implementation of the Luxembourg agreements. Further problems—which we hope and expect to clear up—developed only recently when the German Government, for budgetary reasons, decided to defer certain payments. If this defer-
ment is continued, it will cause great hardship to these certain persecutees, who have already waited over 15 years.

Otherwise, the payments have in the main been met as due, and ultimately by the time all the provisions are implemented, the Germans will have paid approximately a collective $10 billion to Israel, the Claims Conference and the individual claimants. While this sum is impressive, it is small compared with the material losses alone suffered by the victims, and small compared to the size of the West German budget.

It must be recalled that the statement by Chancellor Adenauer, and the subsequent agreements signed by the West German Government with Israel and the Claims Conference in Luxembourg, are unique in the history of international relations. For the first time, a head of state recognized his country’s responsibility for crimes committed by a predecessor government and affecting a new and sovereign state—Israel—which did not exist when the crimes were committed.

It is true that the horrors and crimes of Hitler also did not have any parallel in human history. Nevertheless it should be noted that no similar recognition of responsibility could be obtained from the East German Government, which has consistently refused to make any kind of restitution or to grant any compensation whatsoever.

Nothing like the Conference on Jewish Material Claims had ever existed before. Thus, all the procedures for negotiations and subsequent allocation of funds had to be worked out step by step after painstaking consideration.
Among other things, in addition to giving relief and making capital expenditures, the Conference initiated programs of research, documentation and commemoration of the catastrophe.

It also provided legal aid for individuals, without which the claimants would have had to pay out a large part of their compensation money for legal fees to private lawyers.

Also, claims were filed against private German companies which had employed slave laborers during the Hitler period, most of whom were Jews. Such claims were made against I. G. Farben, Krupp and other giants of German industry. As with other Claims Conference activities, this required considerable negotiation and the support of the American Government—which we asked for and received in full measure. The Conference succeeded in obtaining tens of millions of dollars for the former slave laborers. For many, especially the older ones, unable to work any longer, these funds represented life itself.

Before closing, if your speaker will be pardoned for referring to a disturbing aspect, one cannot refrain from stating that we have been concerned lately by reports that gains were being made in recent municipal elections in Germany by various extremist and right-wing political groups.

We have faith that the West German leaders, not only ex-Chancellor Adenauer and present Chancellor Erhard, but the others with whom we have been in contact over the years, will be alert to the situation and take steps in time to avoid any resurgence of Nazism—and we trust the
German people, having seen the inhumanity and futility of Nazism, will never again sanction a repetition of the past.

Along with our efforts to insure that the small remnant of our people left in Europe should be enabled to live out their remaining years in comfort and dignity, we have an ongoing concern that our co-religionists or any people shall never again be subjected to the same fate. We are not satisfied only to make sure that the victims of Nazism receive reparations for the past—we want to avoid any possible repetition of that past.

When our Executive Vice President, Dr. John Slawson, was in Germany two months ago, he found that what the teams of educators who have come to the United States each year, under an American Jewish Committee program initiated in 1960, to study American methods of civic education—he found that what they have learned here has begun to have a considerable effect on political and civic education in West Germany.

We fervently hope that the coming years will witness a vast expansion in the democratic way of life in Germany.

I have tried to recount for you very briefly an especially significant chapter in present-day Jewish history. The Claims Conference has been a phenomenon without precedent—and it seems to me that the American Jewish Committee on its 60th Anniversary can derive much satisfaction out of the fact that it played a leading role, and has been an integral part, of this great humanitarian enterprise.