

Jewish Group Returns to Berlin

U.S. Organization Aims to Improve Understanding

By William Drozdiak
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BERLIN, Feb. 9—With Germany now playing host to the fastest-growing Jewish population in the world, leaders of the American Jewish Committee today opened their first office here since the Nazi era vowing to sustain the memory of the Holocaust and to fight any revival of right-wing extremism.

While postwar Germany has cultivated close ties with Israel, relations with American Jews often have been testy and resentful. Executive director David Harris said the Washington-based organization intended to use its presence here to build new bridges between Germany and the 6 million Jews living in the United States.

"The U.S. lags far behind Israel in understanding developments in Germany over the past 50 years," Harris said in an interview. "This must change because Germany remains

important to the Jewish future in more ways than we can imagine."

President Roman Herzog welcomed the resurgence of the Jewish community in Berlin and held out hope that it would lead to a new era of reconciliation in the capital of a reunited Germany. "There is a chance that Jewish life can once again become an integral part of German culture and society," Herzog said at the American Jewish Committee's new address in Potsdamer Platz, once a desolate landscape along the Berlin Wall now being transformed into a showcase of modern skyscrapers.

Before the Nazis rose to power in 1933, Berlin was a flourishing financial and cultural metropolis that owed much of its dynamism to a lively and prosperous Jewish community. At the time, more than half a million Jews lived in Germany. Most of them perished among the 6 million who died in the Holocaust, and many of those who survived left for Israel or North America.

When Germany was reunified in 1990, Chancellor Helmut Kohl's government announced it would allow all Jews living in the former Soviet Union to emigrate here. The influx of Russian Jews has more than tripled the number of Jews living in Germany over the past eight years and the community now exceeds 100,000 people. Some 2,000 Jews arrive in Germany each month from the former Soviet Union.

Harris said the goals of the American Jewish Committee office would be to nurture the resurrection of a large Jewish community here and to help Germans cope with social and historical repercussions from their complex relationship.

He emphasized it was important for American Jews to continue bearing historical witness with the passing of the Holocaust generation and to thwart the activities of far-right extremists. As if to underscore that challenge, police reported today that neo-Nazi vandals destroyed 10 gravestones in the Jewish cemetery at Guben, about 60 miles southeast of Berlin.

"Without eyewitnesses, without survivors, there is always the danger of forgetting," Harris said. "We believe the [American Jewish Committee] has a role to play in the civil society of Germany."