

Not Frozen in the Past

The American Jewish Committee's Policy towards Germany

by Professor Dr. Beate Neuss

Seventeen years ago a group of twenty-five young professionals from Germany was waiting for its host at New York's John F. Kennedy airport. It wasn't your usual tourist group and the man who welcomed them, Associate Director William Trosten, was no tour guide. For the first time an American Jewish organization, the American Jewish Committee, had invited Germans to attend a two-week seminar; some time later, in another first, a German foundation, the *Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung*, was to invite young American Jews on a tour of post-war democratic Germany. An important bridge had been built. In July of last year the American Jewish Committee (AJC) became the first and so far only Jewish organization from the United States to establish an office in Berlin. The official opening in February of this year was attended by German Foreign Minister Kinkel.

What interest would American Jews have in financing a representation in Germany? Why would a group representing U.S. Jewish interests open its only European office of all places in Germany, even more, in the old/new capital of Berlin? Is German democracy, after more than forty years, still considered so fragile that it is warranted to send an observer and guardian?

The first question alone shows how little we know about American Jews. Few Germans are aware that 5.8 million Jews live in the United States, one million more than in Israel, or, 45 percent of the altogether 13 million Jews worldwide. Half of that population, about 3 million, reside in the New York metropolitan area. The Jewish community displays a large plurality: liberal, conservative, orthodox and ultra-orthodox Jews belong to various synagogues, represent different opinions and attitudes. No other ethnic or religious minority in America is organized in so many ways. The historian Abraham J. Karp noted when it comes to the Jewish population, we are talking about "a community of organizations lacking organization." Reference books list more than 300 Jewish organizations of diverse cultural, social, political, ethnic and religious orientations. 200 of those are of a religious character. Some are Zionist, others reject the state of Israel and consider its re-establishment a sacrilege against divine providence. None of these factions represents the majority of Jews. To speak of American Jews is an erroneous simplification. More valid is to view the plurality of these organizations

as a mirror image of the multitude of Jewish life in the United States and as proof for the eagerness to participate actively in the nation's affairs.

This is no accident. Jews are better educated than the national average. More than half have a college degree, and incomes are therefore commensurately higher. Jews participate more actively in elections and are more interested in foreign policy than the average American. For these reasons alone they are able to exert an influence on American policy. Their origins, suffering and concern about Jewish minorities outside the U.S. on the one hand, their education and professional involvement on the other breed this above-average interest in foreign policy.

The question why the American Jewish Committee would open an office in Germany can only be answered in terms of its work and its existing contacts to Germany and Europe. After all, the American Jewish Committee was founded in 1906 in New York primarily by German Jews - all well established in the meantime - as a non-Zionist organization. The action was prompted by programs in Russia in 1903 and 1905, which resulted in many deaths, injuries, homelessness and suffering. Although ad-hoc measures after the massacres were not able to safeguard Jewish lives in the long run, a permanent organization was to "prevent the violation of civic and religious rights of Jews anywhere in the world, to grant any possible legal support, to impede the threatened or actual violation of rights as well as alleviate the consequences of persecutions against Jews, wherever they may happen."

American Jews, who have mostly emigrated to flee the torments perpetrated on them as Jews, have always felt that the chances for a Jewish existence are dependent on the constitution of the society in which they live. The rule of law, democracy and equal rights for all citizens had always been the best guarantor against discrimination. Thus, the AJC soon considered itself no longer exclusively an organization to represent Jewish minority interests, but also as an organization for the defense of civil rights. It supported Catholics against the Ku-Klux Klan and was intensively involved in the civil rights movement, defending the interests of black Americans and other minorities.

Dialogue and education have always been paramount to the AJC: Firmly convinced that prejudice and racism are rooted in ignorance, the AJC made it its task to educate American society about Jewishness and Judaism. In recent decades interdenominational and inter-cultural dialogue has become another focal point. The AJC has its own research capabilities. It considers itself a think tank and thought innovator, issuing such publications as the American Jewish Yearbook and Commentary. In the fifties, a former President of the AJC allegedly said that the members of his organization are not counted but weighed. Today, the AJC as the largest national political organization of American Jews has some 70,000 members and has become an important factor of political life. To be sure: The

AJC is not the only Jewish organization in the U.S. involved in foreign policy. The Zionist American Jewish Congress lost some of its importance in the last ten years. B'nai B'rith, an international lodge founded in 1843 by German Jewish immigrants, together with its affiliate, the Anti-Defamation League, fight anti-Semitism and racism in the U.S. and abroad. The fact that Germans may have heard about the World Jewish Congress (WJC) may have its cause in the unhappy attempt of its president, Mr. Bronfman, to rally support in the international community against German reunification. The WJC, established in 1936 to fight anti-Semitism, plays only a minor role in American politics; it is merely an umbrella organization of Jewish representations in some 65 countries worldwide. Usually American Jewish organizations are quick to emphasize that they are not affiliated with the WJC.

It is, among others, owing to the WJC's policy oriented to the past, that in Germany the impression was created that American Jewish organizations are eager to freeze the unfavorable image of Germany in history. This is not the policy of the AJC. What can be said is that for a long time there was no genuine interest to inform [Americans] about the "new and improved" Germany. Dealing with Germany brings up many painful memories for many American Jews. Even if they themselves are not survivors or children of survivors of the Holocaust, the catastrophe is still a collective trauma: Everybody feels affected by the murder of six million of their brethren and the devastation of their rich culture on the old continent. In addition there is the feeling of having failed, of not having done enough to prevent the tragedy. Thus, dealing with Germany was painful, it was limited to attempts to compensate for opportunities lost. During the post-war years, the AJC together with other organizations was busy reminding those concerned to persecute war criminals, to ask for the return of Jewish property and for compensation payments to the Jewish state. Contrary to Israel and the Israelis, Jewish Americans were not forced to concern themselves with Germany. This denial went as far as to reach everyday life decisions: During a time when the first taxis in Tel Aviv were already Mercedes cars, no American Jew would have bought a German car.

When the young Federal Republic was faced with right-wing and anti-Semitic tendencies, all organizations watched carefully. However, since West Germany was to be reintegrated as a partner of the United States into the international community, it was definitely not only in the Jewish but in everybody's interest to embody democracy and tolerance in German society. The AJC did not view anti-Semitism as an incurable disease: It offered its proven tools - information and education - to be applied also to Germany. Despite criticism on the part of other Jewish organizations, the Committee was willing to take a leading, constructive role in the relationship with Germany.

An exchange program proposed in 1952 under the name "Operation Candle" proved, however, premature: Neither the German nor the American

government were interested. Only in 1959, against the background of anti-Semitic violence, which, although, as it turned out later, it was instigated by the GDR, did find an audience in the West, a travel exchange program for teachers was instituted. However, the AJC did not pursue this initiative any further.

And this remained the status quo: Germans had no knowledge about American Jewish life, as shown by a study commissioned by the AJC, together with the *Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung* and the *Georg-Eckert-Institut für Schulbuchforschung*. On the other side of the equation Germany's image among American Jews was frozen in the year 1945. At the end of the seventies, William Trosten, then Associate Director of the AJC, became increasingly conscious of this. He was aware of the number of Jewish tourists traveling to Israel who used their stop-over in Germany only for a trip to Bergen-Belsen or Dachau. A permanently distorted Germany image and a lack of dialogue with the most important supporter of Israel in Europe could not be in the interest of American Jews, nor could ignorance and the wrong ideas about American Jews on the part of Germans. The AJC's awakening interest in Germany had something to do with the debate about the statute of limitations for Nazi crimes in 1979, the increasing economic and political importance of the Federal Republic and the rapidly deteriorating German-Israeli relations after Israeli Prime Minister Begin came to power. The attention turned to Germany again when the film Holocaust was shown in 1978, first in the U.S., then a year later in the Federal Republic. All of a sudden Germans discussed the Holocaust as if before there had not been any information at all about the subject in books or TV documentaries. The country's compensation payments to Israel and its steadfast adherence to agreements even in times of crises earned it some respect on the part of the AJC. Still, the AJC had to cope with considerable criticism both from other American Jewish organizations and its own membership.

It was a lucky coincidence that Trosten, the driving force in the American Jewish Committee, met Wolf Calebow who at the time worked at the German Consulate General in New York. Calebow himself had been looking for partners among American Jewish organizations to turn the silence between Germans and American Jews into a dialogue. The only partner he could find was the AJC. In 1979 the AJC suggested to Chancellor Helmut Schmidt to initiate an exchange program. Germans born after 1945, "young future leaders" and opinion-makers, were to get to know living Jewish culture in the United States, and, in turn, young Jewish Americans were to gain their own impressions of the Federal Republic. At first only the *Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung* responded to AJC's proposal. Two groups, each consisting of 25 participants, had their first encounter in 1981 with the tricky business of German-Jewish dialogue. Both sides had a lot to learn. Both Germans and Americans showed initial apprehensiveness. While for most of the Germans this was their first contact with Jews, many of the Americans learned, much to their surprise, that not only the Third Reich, but also the genocide of the Jews, was a regular part of the German school curriculum. The Germans marveled

at the variety of American Jewish culture; at the same time, the American guests in Germany were treated to liberal thinking and critical insights into the past. Some of the first encounters were particularly painful and moving, such as the meetings with older Jews who were able to escape their murderers by emigration and were now returning to the cities of their childhood and youth. Or the first attempts at dialogues with children of survivors, who, traumatized by their parents' experience, were now confronted with Germans for the first time. It was always the goal to show not only the various Jewish ways of life, but the entire range of American life, that is, the United States not as a melting pot, but as a country with many ethnic groups who keep their own culture and religion alive.

After a successful start with the *Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung* in 1981, the *Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung* and the *Friedrich-Naumann-Stiftung* were soon ready to sponsor similar types of exchange programs with the AJC. Each program has its singular features and offers the American Jewish Committee a broad palette of contacts with German society. The *Ebert-Stiftung* initially limited the exchanges to its employees and AJC members. In 1993 a program for mayors belonging to the Social Democratic party was added. They were given the opportunity to exchange their views on racism and intolerance with their colleagues in large and small American cities. The joint program with the *Friedrich-Naumann-Stiftung* has been geared, since the early nineties, to a new German-American field of interest: Democratization of Eastern Europe. Since 1987 the American Jewish Committee and the *Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung* have been joint sponsors of the Alois Mertes Memorial Lectures. The lectures are an opportunity for high-ranking German political leaders as well as members of the AJC to express their opinions about certain issues to the American Jewish community. Among others, Richard von Weizsäcker, Hans-Dietrich Genscher and Klaus Kinkel were invited to speak at these large AJC annual meetings. The *Atlantik Brücke* in Bonn participates with conferences and the exchange between political leaders, scientists and artists. In addition there are frequent informal dialogues with German politicians from all parties, scientists and journalists.

What did these programs achieve? As a result of the exchanges a large number of people on both sides revised their perceptions. Germans, for whom Jewish culture is mostly dead, unless they happen to be part of the still very few Germans who have contacts with Jewish Germans or who visited Israel, are receiving insights into the rich cultural Jewish heritage, into the religion and the many different Jewish ways of life. School history lessons about National-Socialism and genocide provide little opportunity to imagine that besides the defenseless victims of the Nazis and very old survivors there are also Jews who are contemporaries with similar interests and outlooks on life. Jewish Americans gain a new perspective on Germany. Their travel reports show clearly that perceptions formed by history had characterized their perspectives. Of course, the young blond German with the crew cut sitting in a Berlin pub, ogling the guests with what is perceived as suspicion, is regarded by the visitor from Florida or New

York as a Neo-Nazi, until the conversation reveals that he is a young artist with substantial knowledge of Jewish life in Berlin before and after 1933, and that he didn't look over with suspicion at all, but with great interest. Personal contacts afforded by these exchange programs are an excellent tool to review and revise opinions frozen in history.

Even though many initiatives of the programs are characterized by idealism, partners on both sides have clear interests. The AJC manages to exert its influence in German-American relations as soon as Jewish aspects are affected. In the course of almost two decades excellent contacts were established with German policy-makers at all levels of government and opposition. Headquartered in New York, it is easy for the AJC to arrange meetings with Germany's political elite when they visit to attend U.N. meetings. Regular contacts between German politicians and representatives of the AJC have created personal relationships which in turn led to understanding of mutual perceptions and constraints and helped in critical situations to assuage concerns. Advantage accrue equally to both sides. Political decisions made in Germany are evaluated differently if they are not perceived, like a reflex, through glasses tinted by the past. Case in point: Although the controversial reconciliation meeting between President Reagan and Chancellor Kohl at the Bitburg military cemetery was criticized by the AJC as well, the Committee, more moderate than other American Jewish comments, did not immediately suspect a denial of National-Socialist crimes.

The reaction to the fall of the Berlin wall demonstrated what years of dialogue managed to achieve: While the WJC, in concert with the SED/PDS, tried in 1989/90 to mobilize resistance in the United States and Israel against German unity, the AJC saw no reason to view reunification with skepticism. On the contrary: Its "Statement on German unity", approved by its 1990 annual meeting, declared: "Democracy and human dignity are the winners; fear, repression and economic dirigism are the losers." Concerns in the Jewish community about a revival of German nationalism, new aggression and a denial of National-Socialist crimes, were countered by the AJC by pointing to a Federal Republic with four decades of democracy and cooperation in international organizations. The AJC saw only advantages in transferring democracy and the rule of law to Eastern Germany as well - not only because it would be the end of support to Middle Eastern terror groups and the very unilateral "antifascism" practiced by the GDR. As was expected, the AJC, as the representative of Jewish interests, reminded the GDR of its refusal to compensate for human lives, suffering and losses incurred between 1933 and 1945. Its essential requests from the "new" Germany: Understanding and sensitivity towards the concerns of Jews, in particular the remembrance of the Holocaust, continued good relations to Israel, protection of human rights, continued membership in NATO, renunciation of ABC weapons and exporting corresponding technology, continued work on European integration and inviolability of borders. Those who remember the excitement and agitation of

those months, can appreciate the sober enumeration of things which should be a matter of course.

One of the Committee's important goals is the promotion of the security of Israel. The AJC expected reunification to yield a positive effect, just as it now supports a permanent seat in the U.N. Security Council for Germany as an important EU member and close partner of Israel. But as demonstrated by remaining differences about the "critical dialogue" with Iran and persistent pressure over the last three years about compensation payments to Eastern European Jews, the AJC doesn't make a dialogue easy for Bonn. Based on good contacts also to opposition parties, the Committee is able to exert a more broad-based influence. For the last three years the AJC has tried to negotiate compensation for these [Eastern European] victims, within and outside the work of the Conference on Jewish Claims against Germany. A less than wholeheartedly satisfactory solution was recently found in an agreement on pension payments.

What is the Berlin office of the AJC to achieve in the future? The Committee is a lobbyist for Jewish affairs, which means that certain agendas are clear: Of constant interest, of course, is the way Germans treat their past. The AJC and its members want to make sure that the horrors of the Holocaust are not forgotten, that the memory of those murdered is not to lapse. Anti-Semitic and racist incidences will always be measured by a different yardstick in Germany than in other countries. Even if those working in the New York headquarters are well aware that such occurrences are by no means only a German phenomenon: What counts is that Germany has them despite its history. Germany is still regarded as a "dry alcoholic", whose relapses are alarming because a new outbreak of the illness must be feared. Even the AJC is not free from this perspective. The difference is that it will first seek a dialogue, like with the Defense Ministry in the wake of right wing crimes in the German army, in order to understand what images and fears are evoked by these events. For a long time American Jews have regarded tolerance of Jewish life styles as the litmus test for democracy and the rule of law in Germany - now it is increasingly applied to attitudes towards foreigners. Impressive is the future-oriented aspect of the tasks which the AJC has set for itself: To communicate knowledge about Jewish life in Germany, the U.S. and Israel, also and especially on the basis of personal contacts. This is of special importance to David Harris, Executive Director of the AJC, and Eugene DuBow, the head of the Berlin office. The collapse of the communist system has added new areas of work which made Berlin, as the door to Eastern Europe, the logical choice for a European representation. Together with the Federal Republic the Committee wants to stabilize democracy, human rights and religious freedom in Eastern Europe where there are still a number of Jewish communities. Besides, the immigration of Jews from the former Soviet Union into Germany makes speedy restructuring processes paramount and poses new tasks for Jewish communities in Germany.

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[REDACTED]. Rudolf Mosse, a publisher of a liberal newspaper, embodied the contribution of Jewish Germans to the establishment of the first German democracy. Today it is a matter of transferring these ideas to the East. Eugene DuBow, the head of the Berlin office, is a veteran of the Germany program and knows his German partners very well. Even though the AJC is financed mainly by fundraising, the program is financially sound. Lawrence and Lee Ramer - both had been integrated into the exchange program from the start - are sponsors of the Center for German-Jewish Relations named after them. The AJC representation in Berlin will strengthen the transatlantic dialogue. Germans tend to overestimate the influence of Jewish Americans on U.S. media and politics. German diplomats in Washington confirm that the AJC is the most important, transnationally acting organization in the framework of the German-American relationship. That is the consequence of the specific tie between Germans and Jews based on their tragic joint history - not the alleged influence of "world jewry". The American Jewish Committee owes its clout to its good relations to the U.S. administration, Congress and its intensive contacts to Israel. All of them will remain important partners of Germany.

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Picture caption:

The first European office of the American Jewish Committee is opened on February 9, 1998 in Berlin. Here: In keeping with an ancient Jewish custom the Mesusa, a capsule containing passages from the fifth book of Moses, is affixed to the door to bring blessings to the house.