GERMAN-JEWSH RELATION, TODAY AND TOMORROW

A German Perspective

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I. Introduction

The only part of German history that seems to arouse much interest abroad is the Nazi period. The half-century or so which has followed Germany’s awakening from that sick dream is thought to be a time of peaceful but dull respectability, with the Federal Republic characterized by nothing much except material prosperity.

To me, I have to say, that material prosperity, that peacefulness, even that supposed dullness, represent an achievement at which I never cease to marvel or to be moved. Federal Germany began life after the Second World War as a graveyard in which almost every city had been reduced to rubble, and almost every institution and political resource contaminated by complicity in the crimes of National Socialism; yet from this utter desolation its citizens constructed one of the most stable and decent states in Europe, the cornerstone of a peace which has endured now, at least in Western Europe, for nearly sixty years.

This assessment of postwar Germany and how it is seen (or not seen) abroad was made by British playwright Michael Frayn, who wrote Democracy, performed with great success in both London and New York.

Michael Frayn points to Germany’s general image abroad, but also to an issue at the heart of German-Jewish relations. Since World War II, Germany has tried—to use Frayn’s words—to construct “one of the most stable and decent states in Europe.” To be sure, the German government and many Germans have hoped for a recognition of these efforts from the outside world.

However, Germans often get the impression that it is not Germany’s “decent” present that the world notices, but only its “indecent” past, and that it is this past that shapes the general image of the country abroad. Of course, Germans understand that the magnitude

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and unique character of the crimes committed by Germans during the twelve years of Nazi rule would not and could not be forgotten by the outside world—least of all by the Jewish people. But many Germans also wonder why there often is such a discrepancy between how they see themselves and how the outside world sees their country.

All postwar German governments as well as many concerned German citizens have made deliberate attempts—to word and deed—to close this gap, to “correct” the image, to gain acceptance and respect from the outside world. Of equal, if not greater importance, has been the desire to regain self-respect. Concrete action was thus taken to prove that Germany had understood the lessons of its indecent past. These actions can be easily seen in Germany’s Basic Law, its legal, political and social system, in many domestic and foreign policy decisions, and in everyday life. What is less easy to locate is clear evidence that the world has been convinced about the “lessons learned.” For such efforts to reach a degree of real success, information and ongoing dialogue are prerequisites. For obvious reasons, the Jewish people has been both the most important and the most difficult partner in this dialogue.

II. The German-Jewish Dialogue

Hope for a genuine German-Jewish dialogue and for the respect of the Jewish people has become one of the strongest driving forces of postwar Germany’s foreign relations, in both the political and civic realms. But this has also been one of the most difficult goals to achieve. The question of whether and what kind of dialogue Jews should and could entertain with Germany after the Holocaust has been an equally difficult issue for Israel and American Jewish organizations, let alone for many individual Jews.

The scope of this paper does not allow for a detailed description of all aspects of the German-Jewish dialogue, but focuses on only a few of the major issues and their relevance for the future of this dialogue, in particular between Germany and American Jews. I have included my own thoughts and feelings, as a private German citizen and as a German official who has served as a diplomat in Israel and America. A formal and comprehensive study of the dialogue between American Jewish organizations and Germany was published in 1999 by the Israeli historian and political scientist Shlomo Shafir. Its title, Ambiguous Relations, sums up the essence of this dialogue.

Shafir’s study and other documents show that the American Jewish attitude toward a dialogue with Germany has evolved over time. It has differed from one organization to the other. Furthermore, it has never been clear to what extent Jewish organizations express the general opinion of American Jewry at large. Thus, polls taken by the American Jewish Committee (AJC) and others indicate that Jewish organizations (and in particular AJC itself) and those Jews affiliated with them have usually been more open to the idea of dialogue with Germany than the average American Jew. In most cases, the dialogue, once it was established, led to a more positive view of Germany. However, many factors have shaped the respective views of American Jewish organizations on Germany. Some seem to have less to do with German reality and more to do with developments in American domestic and foreign policies, Jewish identity, changing advocacy priorities of these organizations, and even the healthy competition among them.

One of the underlying questions for all Jewish organizations involved has always been: To what extent should the German past dominate the German-Jewish dialogue and agenda in the present? In this respect, AJC has been not only the earliest, but consistently also one of the most active and outspoken advocates of a policy of engagement, involvement, and dialogue with postwar Germany. Its various exchange programs, particularly its people-to-people exchange with the Konrad Adenauer Foundation beginning in 1980, and the opening of its office in Berlin in 1997 are just two examples of the AJC approach.
III. THE MAIN TOPICS OF GERMAN-JEWISH
DIALOGUE IN THE PAST SIXTY YEARS

1. A Broad Agenda: From the Safety and Well-Being of the Survivors to Partnership in the Fight against Anti-Semitism

In the very early postwar years, American Jewish organizations focused on the urgent issues at hand, among them, the safety and well-being of Holocaust survivors from Eastern Europe stranded in Germany and the restitution of Jewish property. Soon after, goals such as the prevention of a recurrence of anti-Semitism, the thorough de-Nazification and democratization of Germany, and the prosecution of Nazi criminals were added to this agenda.

Immediately after the war, the organizations pursued their goals mainly by talking to the occupation powers in Germany (especially the U.S. government). After the establishment of the Federal Republic of Germany in 1949, some organizations came to the conclusion that it would be unavoidable to talk to the Germans directly about their concerns and interests. This became even more important when Germany quickly turned into a Cold War ally of the West and, in particular, of the American government. American Jewish organizations—AJC the first among them—slowly began to adapt to this change of paradigm. Meetings between the highest representatives of Jewish organizations and members of the German government became more and more common. Exchange programs involving a range of German and American Jewish civic groups (e.g., leaders of organizations, teachers, officers, young politicians) complemented the political contacts.

Of great importance were the trilateral talks, in the early 1950s, between the German government, the Israeli government, and the Jewish Material Claims Conference on the indemnification of Jewish victims of Nazism. The early German-Jewish agenda was then extended to many other topics over the years: ending the statute of limitations for the prosecution of Nazi criminals, Holocaust awareness and education, support for Israel, emigration of Soviet Jews, and—most recently—cooperation in fighting new forms of anti-Semitism.

2. Dialogue in Spite of and Because of the Holocaust

The Holocaust as such is seldom a topic directly addressed in the German-Jewish dialogue. The magnitude and unique character of the horrors and crimes, the inability to explain how they could happen, personal memories and emotions often leave the two sides numb and wordless. Self-consciousness and a fear of saying the “wrong” thing, of letting something “slip,” make dialogue all the more difficult. Nevertheless, the Holocaust, at least as a haunting subtext, remains omnipresent in any conversation between Germans and Jews.

Both sides share a high Holocaust awareness. Recent events have once again augmented that consciousness. Ceremonies in early 2005 commemorating the sixtieth anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz and other Nazi concentration camps are just one example. Many leading Jews and Germans participated. Nobel Laureate Elie Wiesel, Israeli Foreign Minister Silvan Shalom, and his German counterpart Joschka Fischer spoke at a Special Session of the United Nations General Assembly in New York. Federal Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder addressed the International Auschwitz Committee in Berlin. The German parliament, the Bundestag, held a special session. German President Horst Koehler and Israeli President Moshe Katsav participated in the ceremonies held at Auschwitz itself. Both met again a few days later in Jerusalem, where President Koehler visited Yad Vashem and addressed the Knesset. On all these occasions, the lasting great importance of the Holocaust for Germans and Jews alike was emphasized.

In the postwar German-Jewish dialogue the major question has always been, still is, and will continue to be: How can Jews and Germans deal with the legacy of the Holocaust, the most harrowing experience in Jewish— as well as German—history? There are many answers given to this question—official ones and very private ones. Said Chancellor Schroeder:
The vast majority of the Germans living today bear no guilt for the Holocaust. But they do bear a special responsibility. Remembrance of the war and the genocide perpetrated by the Nazi regime has become part of our living constitution. For some this is a difficult burden to bear. Nonetheless this remembrance is part of our national identity. We owe it to the victims, we owe it to the survivors and their families, and we owe it to ourselves.

This position is widespread in Germany: not to evade the past, but to face Germany’s history and, above all, the Holocaust, to draw the right lessons for life in Germany and for its external relations, including establishing a dialogue with the Jewish people that aims for reconciliation, and maintaining a special relationship with Israel.

But it is not only in important political speeches (like the one by former President Richard von Weizsaecker in 1985 or the one by Chancellor Schroeder in 2005) and in formal ceremonies that continuing German awareness of the Holocaust finds expression. Other examples include:

— Great public interest in publications, television programs, and films on the Nazi past and the Holocaust (e.g., for Anne Frank’s *Diary of a Young Girl*, NBC’s *Holocaust* series in the late 1970s or Steven Spielberg’s *Schindler’s List* in the 1990s, and also for historical books; in the preface to the English version of his bestseller *Eternal Guilt*, the Jewish German political scientist Michael Wolffsohn wrote: “Germany is a splendid market for books dealing with Germany’s past. Germans devour books that try to explain their past and present problems with their history—i.e., with themselves.”

— Great public attention focused on lively, sometimes very controversial debates in the German media (e.g., “Historikerdebatte”/historians’ debate in the mid-1980s; the discussion following writer Martin Walser’s Frankfurt speech in 1998, and after the publication of Daniel Jonah Goldhagen’s book, *Hitler’s Willing Executioners*, in the late 1990s).

— The imminent opening of a major Holocaust memorial in the heart of Berlin in May 2005; in addition, about 180 memorials have been created in former concentration camps, prisons, and synagogues.

— Highly visible special attention paid to Israel and Jewish matters by high-ranking and popular politicians (e.g., frequent visits of former Federal President Johannes Rau and of current Foreign Minister Fischer to Israel; both have also entertained an intensive dialogue with representatives of the American Jewish community).

— Germany’s active and high-ranking participation in events abroad commemorating the Holocaust (such as the sixtieth anniversary described above).

Against this background and the intensive coverage of the Nazi period in German schools, there is widespread knowledge of the past. (According to polls taken in January 2005, approximately 89 percent of all Germans know what happened in Auschwitz.)

A. Additional Personal Remarks

Remarks on this topic often have a very personal character—because any German or any Jew, in speaking of this subject, is bound to be personal if he or she wants to be sincere, and not just politically correct.

In my view, at the heart of the question is what is called in German “Vergangenheitsbewältigung” (translated as “coming to terms with the past”). There is not one German view or one Jewish view of this highly charged question. The individual answers to it depend on many factors, often more on personal experiences, emotions, and psychological characteristics than on objective facts. Key terms in the discussion originate not in historiography or political science, but in psychology, sociology, and theology: eternal guilt, personal guilt, inhibition, shame, atonement, indemnification, moral hectoring, mourning process, inability to mourn. Many individuals cannot find any words to express themselves or are unable to bridge the abyss between their feelings and their rational analysis. But those that speak and those who remain silent have one thing in common: They usually know what happened—maybe not all the details, but in essence.
What distinguishes Germans from one another is not their knowledge, but what conclusions they draw from it. While one may question their accuracy or reliability, polls and surveys have shown some general tendencies. In my assessment, the responses of Germans to their situation today can be described as follows:

1. On one side of the spectrum is a small radical fringe of neo-Nazis and their ideological mentors who try to deny, belittle, or relativize the Holocaust for their political purposes. Even they, of course, know what happened. Seen against the background of the moderate electoral success of the NPD Party (the far-right National Democratic Party) in the state of Saxony in 2004, and the subsequent behavior of its followers during the ceremonies commemorating the sixtieth anniversaries of the liberation of Auschwitz and the bombardment of Dresden, it becomes clear that while neo-Nazis are a small minority in Germany today, they must be taken seriously and challenged at every turn. The lively public debate on how best to address this problem indicates the resolve not only of top German politicians, but of wide sections of German opinion leaders, to effectively fight this kind of right-wing extremism, of which anti-Semitism and Holocaust-denial are important, but not the only aspects of their political propaganda. A new attempt to outlaw the NPD and restrictions put on its right to assembly reflect this resolve.

2. A larger group of Germans simply does not want to think about the Holocaust anymore, let alone be reminded of it or made to feel guilty about it by others. In a recent survey (by Prof. Wilhelm Heitmeyer of the University of Bielefeld) more than 60 percent of the respondents said that they more or less agreed with the statement: “I am sick of hearing again and again of the German crimes against the Jews.” And more than two-thirds agreed with the more far-reaching statement: “I get annoyed when still today the Germans are charged with the crimes against the Jews.” More than half of Germans polled expressed the view that Jews exploit the Holocaust today for their own benefit. Even though these questions seem somewhat suggestive, other polls (such as those taken by AJC in 1990 and 1994) on similar questions yielded only slightly different results. In a most recent poll (Forsa/Stern Magazine, January 2005) 20 percent of the respondents answered affirmatively when asked: “Do we Germans still have to feel guilty today for Auschwitz?” Seventy-nine percent answered negatively. On the question, “Do Germans still have a special responsibility towards the Jews?” the Germans polled were split: 47 percent did feel such a responsibility, 48 percent did not.

Thus, a large majority of Germans today reject the notion of guilt and do not want to be constantly reminded of the past, let alone from the outside or from other Germans who claim to judge from a higher moral ground. They are the ones that would like to draw a “Schlussstrich,” a final stroke, behind this chapter of German history.

How can this view be explained against the background of extensive knowledge of the past, great public interest in the subject, and a high degree of political attention? In my view, there are several elements to be kept in mind:

a. Most Germans today see the Holocaust in a historical context of “before” and “after.” They do not reduce German history to the twelve years of Nazi rule. For them, unlike for many people outside of Germany, German history and identity are not focused on the Nazi period, but mainly associated with Germany’s post-war history and present.

b. Sixty years after the end of World War II and of the Holocaust only very few Germans living today (those seventy-eight or older) could, at least theoretically, have been personally involved in the Nazi crimes. All others carry no personal guilt.

c. Without personal guilt, and with an identity shaped primarily by present realities, these Germans may indeed acknowledge some kind of collective responsibility or feel some kind of collective or national shame. But even this responsibility, this shame, is a heavy burden, difficult to carry. There is a kind of “guilt fatigue.” It would be easier to forget or at least not think about it. Chancellor Schroeder addressed this tendency in the German population when he emphasized in his January 2005 speech: “It is true, the temptation to forget is very great. But we will not succumb to this temptation.”
3. On the other side of the spectrum is a sizable if likely decreasing number of Germans (20 percent) who feel a personal shame, or a kind of “inherited guilt,” regarding the Holocaust. This attitude can take on extreme forms that have led even Jewish observers to raise questions. David Grossmann and others have observed that there are Germans who indulge, almost lustfully, in a boundless, all-embracing guilt, engaging in “ritualistic genuflections.”

In my view, these confessions of personal guilt and shame (as well as a certain type of philo-Semitism) may be well-meant and sincere, but often are little more than expressions of “political correctness.” However, a small number of Germans do take concrete actions that reflect their feelings of personal responsibility, for example:

a. Young German volunteers who go to Israel and other countries to serve in social and other institutions related to Holocaust victims, through “Aktion Suehnezeichen” or through the Catholic organization “Pax Christi.” (Aktion Suehnezeichen/Action Reconciliation is an organization that coordinates, at any given time, about 200 long-term and 400 short-term volunteers active in social services and educational projects in Israel, the U.S., and Europe; the programs involve work at memorial sites, in Jewish cemeteries, and in social service programs.)

b. Young German volunteers working in the former concentration camps.

c. Thousands of people involved in intergroup efforts for Christian-Jewish understanding (e.g., Woche der Brüderlichkeit/Week of Brotherliness and other activities organized by the German Coordinating Council of the Societies for Christian-Jewish Cooperation, which has eighty-three local chapters and 28,000 members).

B. A General Consensus

Across all these groups there is a general consensus in Germany today that present-day Germans are living in “one of the most stable and decent states in Europe” (again to quote Michael Frayn), a country no better or worse than its neighbors, a country where most people have learned the lessons of their country’s dark past and live these lessons in their daily life, e.g., through their engagement in a democratic and tolerant German state and society. A national, historical or collective responsibility for the German past may be felt in one way or another, but often in a very diffuse way.

In the view of most Germans, the period of moral probation for Germany has ended. They do not see a need to be reminded of their past or its “duties,” from abroad or from fellow-citizens who give the impression that they feel an imperative to judge from a higher moral ground. Even statements by elected political leaders to this effect, however correct or necessary, run a risk of being counterproductive, when seen as moral exhortations by large parts of the German population. This majority resents feeling accused—even if they cannot identify clearly who the accuser is.

Thomas Osterkorn, the editor of one of Germany’s most widely read weeklies, Stern, was probably speaking for a large majority of today’s Germans when, in an op-ed of January 25, 2005, he distinguished responsibility from guilt, and stated that, as a German, one may feel shame for what Germans have done, but must not feel ashamed of being a German. He wrote: “We can participate in this discussion with a new self-confidence. Germany has changed. We have left behind chauvinism, militarism and imperialism. We have become a civil society.”

C. The Reaction Abroad to the German Efforts

How are Germany’s efforts to draw lessons from its past seen abroad, especially by Jews? Despite the growing self-confidence, the response of others, as explained above, is an issue of great importance, not only for the German government, but also for many individual Germans.

Therefore, Germans today are very much encouraged when a well-known figure like Elie Wiesel, in his speech at the United Nations, said that in recent years Germany had become a true democracy. Or when another Holocaust survivor, Member of Knesset Yosef Lapid, quoted in Ha‘aretz, replied to President Kohler's
speech in the Knesset: “We will never forget what Nazi Germany did to us—murdering one-third of the Jewish people in the worst crimes in the history of humanity—but it would be an injustice if Israel did not recognize that Germany has changed, that it is democratic and free.” Lapid added that Germany had learned its lessons better than other peoples in Europe who took an “active part in the extermination of their Jewish communities and are not willing to take responsibility for it.”

In this respect, AJC polls taken in recent years also seem encouraging. In response to the statement “Germany today is making a sincere effort to deal with the legacy of the Holocaust,” about two-thirds of all American Jews (or more) have consistently agreed strongly or at least somewhat. Only slightly more than one quarter of those polled have held the opposite view. Well-informed groups and AJC leaders have an even more positive view of the German efforts, with 90 percent in agreement with the statement.

Thus, German efforts to deal sincerely with the Holocaust are not only well known to wide sections of American Jewry, but are also appreciated by a vast majority of them, especially those who have had direct contact with modern Germany.

However, this does not translate into a generally positive image of Germany. The same AJC polls in recent years show that Germany, in the eyes of the average American Jew, is the least popular European country—with the notable exception of France. Germany finds not much more sympathy among American Jews than China, or Arab countries like Jordan and Egypt. There is not much point in speculating about the reasons for these results. Against the background of the horrors of the Holocaust, one might argue that even such a limited popularity is cause for satisfaction from a German perspective. However, for the average German, these polls seem disappointing, considering Germany’s efforts to deal sincerely with the legacy of its past, particularly vis-à-vis the Jewish people.

3. Wiedergutmachung—Material Reparations

Postwar Germany felt a strong desire to learn the lessons of the Nazi period, not only by accepting a moral responsibility, but also by making material gestures toward the Jewish people.

The material side of the atonement is called “Wiedergutmachung” in German. This term translates into legal English as “restitution,” “indemnification,” or “reparation,” but literally means “to make good again,” “to repair the damage.” However, for most Germans and all Federal governments, it has been clearly understood that no amount of money, no matter how large, could compensate for the suffering of the Nazi victims. A meaningful and important gesture, however, was to address the injustice and suffering, at least in material terms.

Hence, in addition to the restitution of Jewish property, a comprehensive indemnification system was established in West Germany in 1951, and was continued and extended by a unified Germany since 1990. The most recent addition to the multifaceted system of restitution and compensation payments is a program for assisting former forced laborers. The Jewish Material Claims Conference has been a partner with the German government in many of these undertakings. Others are based solely on German legislation.

About one million Jews have received some form of compensation under one or another category. Until now, about $80 billion have been spent for that purpose, the greatest part going to Jewish victims of Nazism living in Israel and the U.S. By 2030 the payments will reach a total of approximately 80 billion Euro (at today’s exchange rates around $104 billion U.S.).

In material terms the German government has done what it could. But even with the enormous amount of money, it is clear to both Germans and Jews that neither money nor anything else can “repair” the wrongs committed. There will never come a moment when the two sides come to the conclusion that the matter is closed, that enough has been done materially, and that the injustices perpetrated have been “repaired.” Neither does the German government expect the victims and their descendants to regard what has been done as sufficient or satisfactory.

Very often the question is asked: What will happen after the last survivors have died? The French historian Henry Rousso remarked:
What shall we do after reparations? How to deal with a collective suffering which will be handed on from generation to generation? How is a guilt to be paid off which can neither be eradicated by collective consciousness ... nor by the considerable progress of historical knowledge nor by symbolic, juridical and financial acceptance of these crimes? Maybe the only acceptable answer will be to keep the question itself alive without trying to answer it.

4. The Jewish Community in Germany
For a long time, the question was asked: Is Germany after the Holocaust a country where Jews can or should live? The answers to this question vary widely.

From a German perspective, the presence of a Jewish community in Germany and its vitality and security can easily be seen as a kind of litmus test for the question of whether German postwar politics and society have drawn the right lessons from the past. Chancellor Schroeder recently said:

The Jewish community is and will remain an irreplaceable part of our society and culture. Its brilliant as well as painful history will continue to be both an obligation and a promise for the future.

The facts are: Approximately 120,000 Jews live in Germany today. The exact figures are difficult to determine, as many Jews are not registered with congregations. (About 105,000 Jews are.) The Jewish community in Germany has tripled since the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, and is now the fastest-growing in the world and the third largest in Europe. (By way of comparison, 600,000 Jews lived in Germany in 1933, 30,000 in 1989.) The recent rapid growth is mainly due to high immigration from the countries of the former Soviet Union, and was made possible through special immigration quotas. (About 190,000 persons entered Germany on this basis.) Their integration has not been easy. It has been assisted by the Central Council of Jews in Germany, founded in 1950 as an umbrella organization for the Jewish communities in Germany. The council’s work is supported by the German federal and state governments. In 2004 the federal government tripled its annual assistance to the council to provide for the rapid growth of the Jewish communities.

The council’s president, Paul Spiegel, sees the growing number of Jews living in Germany as proof of confidence in German democracy. He has said: “It is no bad sign when so many Jews decide to come to Germany.” Other individual German Jews have been less positive in this respect.

In addition to a growth in numbers, Jewish life and culture in many German cities is becoming more vibrant and visible, with new synagogues and other centers of Jewish life being built or rebuilt after their destruction during the Nazi period. In Berlin, Jewish life can even be called flourishing, with theaters, restaurants, and clubs. The Jewish Museum in Berlin counted more than 2.5 million visitors since it opened in 1999.

Michael Blumenthal, former U.S. Secretary of the Treasury, author of the book The Invisible Wall, on German-Jewish relations, and now director of the Jewish Museum in Berlin, said in 1999:

Relations between German Jews and non-Jews are generally peaceful and correct, though certainly not free of constraints and certainly not unencumbered by the painful past. A sense of guilt—and some fatigue at it—impacts one side; caution, suspicion and a continuing sense of “otherness” still haunts the other. It is, however, the third generation—that of the grandchildren—who are least encumbered by the past and most interested to understand and learn.

German law allows Jews whose German citizenship was taken away by the Nazis as well as their descendants to reacquire German citizenship, and approximately 60,000 Israelis now hold German passports, in addition to their Israeli ones. (It should be noted that this acquisition of citizenship does not indicate that these Israelis intend to live in Germany, though it can presumably be taken as a vote of confidence in modern Germany.) The number of those requesting German citizenship has grown in recent years and amounts to between 2,000 and 3,000 annually. Despite the rapid growth of the Jewish community and a rebirth of Jewish cultural life in Germany, it is clear that this cannot be compared to Jewish life in Germany before the Nazis took power. In his address to the Jewish community of Sao Paolo, Brazil, Foreign Minister Fischer said on November 19, 2004:
In their racist insanity, the Nazis destroyed a centuries-old blossoming German and European culture. The Shoah, that shameful crime against humanity, was committed in Germany and by Germans. And we must not forget: by persecuting and murdering German and European Jews, Germany also destroyed a major part of its own culture and of its own soul. The resulting void pains us to this day.

Relations between Germany and Israel

In his address to the Special Session of the United Nations General Assembly marking the liberation of Auschwitz on January 24, 2005, Foreign Minister Fischer declared:

The historic and moral responsibility for Auschwitz has left an indelible mark on us …. It is this responsibility for the Shoah that entails a particular obligation for Germany towards the State of Israel…. For us, German-Israeli relations will always have a very special character. The State of Israel’s right to exist and the security of its citizens will forever remain non-negotiable fixtures of German foreign policy. On this, Israel can always rely. This year we are celebrating the fortieth anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between Israel and Germany. The fact that Israel sees us as a reliable partner today is by no means to be taken for granted and fills us with profound gratitude.

This statement sums up the essence of German-Israeli relations and the firm position held by all postwar German governments. None of them has left any doubt about the special character of this relationship and about the importance of Israel in Germany’s foreign policy.

Forty years ago Germany and Israel established formal diplomatic relations. German President Kohler went to Israel to commemorate the event. Relations between the two nations, however, go back much further, to the very early postwar period, when both the State of Israel and the Federal Republic of Germany were founded at about the same time.

In the early years many Jews, both in Israel and the diaspora, found the idea of talking to Germans, let alone of having a genuine dialogue with them, offensive. Israeli and American Jews had common interests concerning Germany: the security and well-being of those Jews living or stranded in Germany after the war, their quick emigration to Israel, the restitution of Jewish property, timely collective and individual reparations and indemnification payments. Negotiations were typically of a trilateral nature, with Germany on the one side and Israel and the Jewish Material Claims Conference on the other.

But the situation of Israel and that of the American Jewish diaspora differed. The signing of the Luxembourg Treaty on restitution payments in 1952 ushered in a new chapter of German-Jewish relations at a very early date. Even though the Claims Conference encompassed a great number of American Jewish organizations and, for many years, was headed by Nahum Goldmann, the president of the World Jewish Congress, it was quite obvious that the payments made by the German government then and later impacted on the fledgling State of Israel and the many Jewish Holocaust victims living there more than they did on the large majority of Jews living in the U.S. as well as their organizations. Moreover, Germany did not only make payments to individuals living in Israel (approximately 40 percent of all indemnification payments, around 45 billion DM, in the course of the past five decades have gone to Israel), but also to the state itself. In 1952 there was an agreement on global payments by Germany to the State of Israel of 3 billion DM—at the time a very substantial sum.

Beyond the official contacts, many German citizens have felt a personal moral obligation toward Israel and the Jews living there. Over the years, a large number of German organizations became involved in programs and projects in Israel. On the Israeli side, many Jews of German origin, the so-called “Yekkes,” were among the first bridge-builders to postwar Germany.

Thus, Israel’s national interest was at the core of the motivation to establish contacts with Germany early on. Historical perspectives—especially regarding the Holocaust—were combined with diplomatic and pragmatic considerations. Living in a hostile neighborhood and with not too many friends abroad, Israel found Ger-
many’s friendship and support ever more important. Over the past five decades German-Israeli relations have become extraordinarily dense and multifaceted. Ron Prosor, the director general of Israel’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs, wrote on January 31, 2005, in *Haaretz*:

The relationship between Israel and Germany in 2005 is extensive and elaborate, encompassing cooperation in all fields and echelons. This is reflected in the close diplomatic contacts between the countries, the contacts in the security realm, inter-parliamentary and inter-party links, and the cooperation and numerous exchange programs in areas such as trade and industry, science, culture, twinned cities, youth groups, labor unions and sport.

Many Israeli leaders see Germany today as Israel’s second most important international partner after the U.S. And they publicly say so. For them, Germany’s support for Israel in the international arena—such as the United Nations or the European Union—is of particular importance. Foreign Minister Fischer restated this support in the UN General Assembly recently, addressing a forum where Israel today has not many reliable friends.

The intensive political dialogue, scientific, and economic cooperation, and, even more so, the dense web of exchanges between the civil societies have led to a great number of contacts between Germans and Israeli Jews. Despite the efforts of AJC and other American Jewish organizations to foster dialogue and exchange with Germany, nothing comparable to this intensive German-Israeli dialogue has been established in the German-American Jewish context.

When addressing the Knesset on February 2, 2005, German President Kohler formulated the essence of German-Israeli relations this way:

*Between Germany and Israel there can never be what is called “normality.” However, who would have thought forty years ago that relations between our two countries would develop so well, indeed in a spirit of friendship?*

On the same occasion Knesset Speaker Reuven Rivlin called the relations “complicated, warm and close.”

### American Perceptions of German-Israeli Relations

The reality of the intensive cooperation and the good state of the relations between Israel and Germany seems to be virtually unknown in the U.S. and even to a great many American Jews. In recent polls, the AJC asked American Jews how they rated the attitudes of various governments toward Israel. The results were remarkable. The average American Jew believes that the German government’s feeling toward Israel is much less friendly than that of the British government and somewhat less friendly than the feelings of the governments in Rome, Madrid or Warsaw—rating it as comparable to that of the leaders of Russia and the Vatican. Once again, only France is viewed with a much more critical eye by American Jewry. When comparing this assessment to the reality of Germany being Israel’s second most important international partner in virtually all fields, one may wonder about the reasons. Is it a lack of German public diplomacy?

### IV. Conclusions—The Future

Let me conclude with some general observations:

1. The most difficult relationship: The German-Jewish relationship has been one of the most difficult and complex between any two peoples in postwar history. Even though in the sixty years since the end of World War II, Germany has proven itself to be a decent democracy and Jews have managed to build a strong homeland in Israel and to develop an unthreatened, respected, and influential role in American society, the memory of a powerful, indecent, cruel and victimizing German dictatorship and of a weak, helpless, and victimized Jewish people continues to play a central role in the relations between Jews and Germans.

2. No normality: The Holocaust binds Germans and Jews together like probably no other two peoples. This creates potential for both hatred and opportunities. Indifference and “normality” are not likely to characterize this unique relationship in the foreseeable future. Thus, German-Jewish relations because of and in spite of the Holocaust have always had and will continue to have a special char-
acter. For a long time to come the past will always be present in any German-Jewish dialogue—even if, or especially when, the tragic past is not addressed directly.

3. The importance of the Holocaust for German and Jewish identity: The memory of the Holocaust is an important factor in the identity of both today’s Germans and Jews. However, it seems to be losing importance for the average German and the average Israeli as a determining factor in their identity and in today’s German-Jewish relations. Their respective post-Holocaust realities and its challenges seem to have developed greater weight for their identity than the Holocaust past. This seems to be less so for the average American Jew, including the younger generation, when it comes to their identity as Jews. For many of them, the Holocaust, and thus Germany as it was and not as it is today, seem to play an important role in shaping their own Jewish identity.

4. Differences between Israeli and American Jewish reactions: Those Israeli and American Jews who have had a chance to experience postwar Germany and its efforts to deal sincerely with the legacy of the Holocaust through visits, dialogue, or other direct contacts tend to have a more positive attitude toward Germany than those who get their views mainly through Holocaust education or collective memory.

Thus, numerous governmental and especially nongovernmental German-Israeli contacts over decades have created a good knowledge of each other. Many Israelis have also come to the conclusion that contacts and ties with Germany are useful for themselves and very beneficial for the State of Israel. A similar approach of engaging with Germany was adopted by many Jews of German origin and by segments of organized American Jewry and its leaders (especially in an organization such as AJC, which is so deeply devoted to German-Jewish dialogue).

In contrast, many individual American Jews have felt no necessity or urge to establish contact and dialogue with postwar Germany. This tendency has been reinforced by a growing Holocaust awareness in America that was not complemented by a similar awareness of what has occurred in postwar Germany. It therefore should not be surprising that Germany, with the exception of France, is today the least popular European country among American Jews. Germany’s good, intensive relations with Israel and sincere efforts to deal with the Holocaust do not carry much weight when compared to the heavy legacy of the Holocaust—from a German perspective an understandable, but also discouraging experience.

5. Germans know their past: In Germany, there is a wide variety of views as to what the legacy of the Holocaust entails for today’s Germany. But even those who do not want to be reminded and even the tiny minority who try to deny it are well aware of the past. They know what happened in the Holocaust. However, with the passage of time, collective memory and education will replace personal memories—the testimony or the silence of the last surviving victims as well as of the victimizers.

6. How to keep the memory alive: At a time when very few Germans alive are personally guilty of the crimes of the past, it is a great challenge for responsible German politicians and educators to keep the memory of the past alive and to retain a feeling of collective or national responsibility for it. Today there are striking differences between official German positions and those held by wide sections of the German populace (as there are between American Jewish organizations and American Jewry at large). When this challenge is approached in a wrong way, counterproductive reactions may follow. Efforts must reflect the fact that most Germans today view Germany as a normal country in Europe, no better or worse than its neighbors. They no longer want to live “on probation” or be the objects of moral instruction, least of all from abroad. Most Germans today would react strongly if the past is used to question their credentials as a decent people.

7. What is needed for a future-oriented dialogue: Against this background, a true and substantial German-Jewish dialogue may only be possible in the long run if two basic conditions obtain: a continuing readiness on the German side not to forget the lessons from the Nazi past both in Germany’s domestic and its foreign affairs; and
a readiness on the Jewish side to see Germany not as what it was, but as what it has become and is today. To achieve this goal, German authorities and intellectual elites must find an appropriate and effective way to counteract a widespread tendency in the German population to want to draw a final stroke behind the past. On the other side, American Jewish organizations may have to reinforce their efforts (through education, dialogue, and exchange) to counter a tendency in the American Jewish community to ignore Germany’s present and to focus exclusively on its past.

It will be difficult to take constructive, productive German-Jewish dialogue to the next step without such efforts. Progress of a meaningful sort will likewise be difficult to attain if Germans and Jews continue to see themselves or treat each other more or less solely in the roles of victim and victimizer, rather than as true and equal partners with a potentially wide-ranging common agenda for the future.

Furthermore, both sides in this dialogue will need to be genuinely open for dialogue, to be honest and not try to anticipate the other side’s views, to surmount mistrust, insecurity, and self-consciousness, to overcome prejudice, bias, and a restrictive victim-victimizer mindset.

Direct contacts through visits and exchanges, personal experiences, and glimpses of the reality have proven to be the best way to achieve these goals. But it remains an open question how wider sections of the German and Jewish public can be motivated for such an approach.

8. Possible topics for a future dialogue: A good way to raise interest for the German-Jewish dialogue is to find a common agenda that appeals to both sides and looks more toward a common future than toward a separating common past. Such topics include:

a. The common fight against anti-Semitism. The successful OSCE Conference on Anti-Semitism that took place in Berlin in 2004 was a good example of the usefulness of this approach. The close cooperation between the German hosts and many American Jewish organizations in this conference was very encouraging. The same is true for the fact that a German parliamentarian, Professor Gert Weisskirchen, has now become the first OSCE special representative for the fight against anti-Semitism.

b. An exchange of views and cooperation in the fight against all forms of intolerance, xenophobia, discrimination, and bigotry that exist anywhere in the world—in Germany, Israel and the U.S.—an area in which American Jewish organizations have a particular expertise.

c. The fight against international terrorism and the spread of weapons of mass destruction, including an open dialogue about root causes.

d. The development of democracy, human rights protection, the rule of law and tolerance, and also stability in the wider Middle East—a goal of equal importance to Germans and American and Israeli Jews.

e. An expansion of the role of American Jewish organizations in transatlantic relations at a time when these relations continue to be strained and run the risk of further deterioration in spite of the intensive efforts of the U.S. government and the governments of Europe to mend fences and look for common ground. Understanding between the civil societies on both sides of the Atlantic may be further burdened by the advance of the religious right and its conservative Christian fundamentalist agenda in the U.S., which looks increasingly incomprehensible from the perspective of a Europe that is moving in the opposite direction. In this situation, American Jewish organizations, representing an electorate sensitive to liberal concerns (irrespective of concrete party affiliation of their members), could play a major role as bridge-builders at this moment in time.

American Jewry could be helpful in preventing any further deterioration in transatlantic relations and any further strengthening of anti-American sentiment in Europe. A particularly vital role could be played by AJC with its strongly international orientation, its deeply developed dialogue with its European partners, its offices in Berlin and Geneva, and its new Transatlantic Institute in Brussels.

American Jews could remind Europe that a large segment of Americans of both major parties do not identify with the fundamen-
talist right—a fact easily and often forgotten in Europe. On the other hand, the Europeans and especially Germans in such a dialogue could remind their American Jewish interlocutors that not all Europeans take positions against Israel—an assessment frequently heard among American Jews. However, the European interlocutors might also advise their Jewish dialogue partners that quickly labeling any criticism of Israeli policies as an expression of anti-Semitism is not a fair or helpful approach. While indeed there are many anti-Semites today who hide their venom behind criticism of Israel, it can easily become counterproductive to too quickly brand any criticism of the Jewish state or its policy decisions as anti-Semitic, especially when that criticism comes from sources who have clearly shown support for Israel.

To sum up, remembrance of the Holocaust is an obligation, a solemn and sacred duty for all who seek to counter intergroup hatred and advance the cause of healthy intergroup relations. In the context of German-Jewish relations, remembrance of the past is the sad but inevitable starting point, the acknowledged or unacknowledged foundation for any true dialogue and exchange, and it will remain so indefinitely. But it cannot be the basis for moving forward into the future.

Continued progress in the German-Jewish relationship, which is so very possible, would not only carry with it great moral meaning and value, but would also be of great worth in practical and cultural realms. Germans, Jews, and the world at large all stand to benefit from continued forward motion in the German-Jewish relationship. Such progress, however, asks demanding things of the two parties involved. It asks that they proceed on a basis of sincere mutual respect. And it asks also, to some extent, for a willingness on both sides to look through the barriers of difference, through the realities of history, even in their most tragic dimensions, to see the other side in its full humanity, to engage the other side as it is in the present moment.

**Notes**

2. Speech in Berlin on January 25, 2005, on the sixtieth anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz, an event organized by the International Auschwitz Committee.