

AICGS Transatlantic Perspectives

April 2011

The Role of the German Jewish Community in Postwar Germany's International Recognition¹

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How did Jewish groups influence international recognition in East Germany versus West Germany?

What role does the German Jewish community play on the political stage today?

The German Jewish Community as Litmus Test and Pariah

In 1949, John J. McCloy, the U.S. Military Governor (and later High Commissioner) in Germany, stated at a conference in Heidelberg on the future of the Jews in Germany that the successful integration of Jews in a democratic Germany served as a litmus test for the new Bundesrepublik: "What this [the Jewish] community will be, how it forms itself, how it becomes a part and how it merges with the new Germany, will, I believe be watched very closely and very carefully by the entire world. It will, in my judgment, be one of the real touchstones and the test of Germany's progress towards the light."² More than fifty years later Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer sounded a similar theme when he said: "An important measurement of our capacity to be an open and tolerant society is the presence of Jewish communities in Germany. The question of whether Jews feel safe in our country speaks to the basic issue of the credibility of our democracy."³

Every German government has understood that the existence of a Jewish community in Germany, no matter how small and diverse, was essential to positive international recognition. After initial plans to appoint a special Advisor for Jewish Affairs, Chancellor Konrad Adenauer decided to work closely with the Central Council of Jews in Germany, the umbrella organization of all Jewish communities established in 1950. The Central Council or *Zentralrat* represented about 30,000 Jews, who had survived the war in Germany, had returned after the war, or were Holocaust survivors from Eastern Europe. They were later joined by other immigrants from diverse places ranging from Israel to Iran.⁴

The Central Council's most important representative during the 1950s and 1960s was its secretary general Hendrik Georg van Dam. He was very well aware of the heavy burden that memory imposed on this tiny group of people, comprised of not more than 0.05 percent of the total West German population. Van Dam stressed repeatedly that the role Jews played in West Germany's new democracy was largely a symbolic one. Thus, as early as 1951, he wrote in a letter addressed to all German Jewish communities that they should have no inflated perception of their own political importance just because their mere existence is perceived as an alibi for German democracy.⁵

While official Germany had a vital interest to keep its Jewish community alive, the very existence of this tiny German Jewish community was seriously challenged by worldwide Jewish opinion. The declaration of the World Jewish Congress (WJC) in Montreux in 1948 that Jews should never again live on the "bloodstained territory" of Germany expressed the dominant position of Jewish communities around the world.⁶ Israel's position toward Jews living in Germany was negative from the outset. Even after the two states exchanged their ambassadors in 1965 it took Israel another two or three decades to accept the presence of a Jewish community in Germany.⁷ The representatives of this community were conspicuously absent when the WJC convened a special session in Brussels in 1966 about German Jewish relations. There were Jewish speakers, like Gershom Scholem and Nachum Goldmann, and there were German speakers like Eugen Gerstenmaier and Golo Mann, but the German Jewish community was not invited to play an active role. Its protests were to no avail.⁸

It may have to do with this disrespect shown to the Jews of postwar Germany by Israelis and American Jews that rendered them eager to help when they were actually called on. If the Jews worldwide did not want the assistance of the German Jews, German officials did. Let me mention three examples from three different decades.

German Jewish Activities to Promote the Federal Republic's International Recognition

The first example concerns German relations with South America, which played a double role by hosting on the one hand large German Jewish émigré communities while on the other hand granting asylum to high-level Nazis. When in 1957 the Director of the Federal Chancellery Hans Globke was supposed to visit several South American states at the occasion of the first Lufthansa flight to Montevideo, this plan met with resistance among the anti-Nazi circles in South America. After all, Globke was responsible for the commentaries to the racist Nuremberg Laws and served for many as the foremost symbol of the continued service and respect many former Nazi officials enjoyed in Adenauer's Germany. The Uruguayan newspaper *El Plata* called Globke an "unwanted guest."⁹ As a result of widespread protests from Jewish and non-Jewish organizations in Uruguay Globke cancelled his trip.

To calm public opinion in South America, the federal government decided to send Karl Marx, the editor of the only German Jewish weekly, the *Allgemeine Jüdische Wochenzeitung*, to South America. Marx was a leading representative of German Jewry and a close friend of President Theodor Heuss. He had returned from England right after the war, convinced he could help to rebuild a democratic Germany. The Bundespresseamt organized Marx's three-week mission but tried to make it look like a non-official trip.¹⁰ In his report, Marx wrote to the Bundespresseamt that the aim of his trip was to counterbalance anti-German sentiments among German Jewish émigrés in South America, and "to provide them with a clear image of the positive democratic development of the Bundesrepublik." Both he and the embassies reported that he was very successful in influencing the Jewish and non-Jewish public opinion in South America toward a more positive depiction of Germany.¹¹

My second example is from the 1960s. When Germany and, more particular, the city of Munich sought to apply for the Olympic Games of 1972, it had to make sure that the memories of the former capital of the Nazi movement were outweighed by a tolerant and open city, in which Jews had their place too. As in the case with the crisis in German-South American relations, Jewish support was sought as a matter of moral weight on the international stage. The Munich Jewish banker Walter Feuchtwanger, who had returned from Israel in the 1950s, was crucial in convincing foreign skeptics about Germany's seriousness when it came to coping with its recent past. He was tireless in his efforts to speak to Jewish and non-Jewish international delegations about the sincere transformation that had taken place in Germany in the time that had passed between the Berlin and the Munich Olympic Games.¹²

A final example dates back to the 1970s, when German-Israeli and perhaps German-Jewish relations, too, were at a new low under Chancellor Helmut Schmidt. The reasons for this are rather complex, and have to do with a lot of factors: Schmidt's biography, his early enthusiasm for National Socialism but also his knowledge of having a Jewish grandfather (which he kept secret well into the 1980s), his strained personal relationship with Menahem Begin, and Schmidt's interest in improving economic relations with Saudi Arabia in times of the economic crisis after the Yom Kippur War of 1973. Schmidt was under attack not only by the Israeli government but also by Jewish organizations worldwide for his weapon deals with Saudi Arabia and for his position that ordinary Germans, including himself, were not aware of the Nazi atrocities and that the Wehrmacht stayed largely clean of these crimes.

Schmidt's local Jewish contacts, the banker Eric Warburg and the former mayor of Hamburg, Herbert Weichmann, tried to improve his image in the Jewish world. Both had returned from their exile in the United States and played a major part in strengthening German-American relations after the war. Warburg, a close friend and advisor of High Commissioner McCloy, was the leading spirit behind the establishment of both the American Council on Germany and the Atlantik-Brücke in 1952.

Weichmann and Warburg were involved in preparing Schmidt's appearance at the official fortieth anniversary of "Kristallnacht" on 9 November 1978. This was the first time that "Kristallnacht" became the occasion of numerous official commemorations, and it came at a time when Germany started to face this chapter of its past more intensively. Schmidt was chosen as the main speaker of the official ceremony hosted by the Central Council in the Cologne synagogue on that day. The world saw a somber Helmut Schmidt with a kippah on his head addressing the German crimes toward the Jews, in the presence of Werner Nachmann, the president of the Central Council and Nahum Goldmann, the former president of the WJC.¹³

The fact that West Germany re-emerged as a major player on the international stage in the postwar years had certainly many reasons: the Cold War and its military necessities, the economic boom of the *Wirtschaftswunder*, and the growing importance of facing the Nazi past. The symbolic role the Jewish community and its representatives played in this recognition should not be overestimated. It was, however, one of several factors in the process of international recognition.

The Contrast of East Germany

The situation in East Germany (DDR) was obviously very different. The official Jewish community was even much smaller than in the West, and of its 3,500 members a large part fled to the West during the anti-Jewish campaign in the late Stalinist days of the winter 1952/53. In contrast to the Bundesrepublik there were, however, quite a few prominent Jews in the East: not only writers like Arnold Zweig and Anna Seghers, but also politicians, like Hermann Axen and Albert Norden. Compared to the Bundesrepublik, a higher number of people with Jewish background were active in the DDR's Foreign Service. Among them were the deputy minister for foreign trade, Hans-Paul Ganter-Gilmans, and Gottfried Lessing, who had founded the Communist party in South Rhodesia before he became a high official in the GDR's state department, responsible for political relations with Africa, and president of the GDR's "Committee for the Advancement of Global Trade." There were Jewish ambassadors, like Stefan Heymann and the writer Friedrich Wolf in Hungary and Poland, and Horst Brie in China.¹⁴

What are the reasons for this rather surprising find? Compared to many other Communists of the first hour who had stayed in the country or returnees from Moscow, these were Jewish emigrants who had collected a lot of international experience in the west, came from the middle or upper middle classes, knew foreign languages, and often had expertise in trade and commerce.

Only during its last years of existence did the GDR use its tiny official Jewish community to improve its foreign relations. In the mid 1980s, the official membership of all Jewish communities in East Germany had dwindled to a mere 370 (!) but its very presence was now exploited to depict the image of a state well aware of its Jewish heritage. In 1987, the East Berlin Jewish community, which had been without a spiritual leader for over a decade, was allowed to bring in a rabbi from the United States. One year later, the fiftieth anniversary of "Kristallnacht" was turned into an official state-sponsored event. As a symbolic gesture, on 10 November 1988, the corner stone was laid for the renovation of the impressive golden dome of the Oranienburger Strasse synagogue in Berlin, which had been destroyed by bombs during the war. Erich Honecker took these steps, in close cooperation with the local Jewish community and the World Jewish Congress, in the hope of improving the trade relations between East Germany and the United States. These desperate efforts to help the GDR to survive came too late. When this building was finally inaugurated, the GDR had long ceased to exist.¹⁵

The Changing Position of German Jewry in United Germany

In unified Germany the Jewish community was now faced with a very different reality. With the opening of East-West borders, Jews emigrated in great numbers from the former Soviet Union, mainly to Israel and to the U.S. The only other country that could not say no to Jews knocking at its doors was Germany. As a result, over 150,000 Jews plus their non-Jewish family members from the former Soviet Union have immigrated to Germany in the last twenty years.

Under these circumstances the position of the German Jewish community within world Jewry

changed. While Israeli President Ezer Weizman still claimed at his official state visit to Bonn in January 1996 that he could not understand how Jews live in Germany, his successor Moshe Katzav was the first Israeli president to attend the inauguration of a synagogue in Germany a few years later and to express his hopes for a fruitful Jewish future in that country. The same shift of opinion could be seen among the public statements of the Israeli ambassadors to Germany. Unlike his predecessors, Avi Primor, Israeli ambassador to Germany in the late 1990s and early years of the new century, repeatedly stated that Israelis today have to accept that Jews continue to live in Germany.

The relations between world Jewry and the German Jewish community have also normalized over the years. Often, German Jewish emigrants played an important role in this rapprochement. The seminars organized between the American Jewish Committee and the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung are prominent examples of this encounter, especially among the younger generation. Since the 1990s, this American-Jewish-German triangle has regained new vitality with the opening of the American Jewish Committee's Berlin office.¹⁶

The Central Council and especially its president were at the height of their influence in the 1990s. This had certainly much to do with the personality of Ignatz Bubis who was even suggested as a candidate for the German presidency in the late 1990s. He and his successors Paul Spiegel and Charlotte Knobloch were highly visible and respected figures in German media and were constantly consulted with respect to German foreign policy in the Middle East, especially toward Israel. No German high official went on a trip to Israel without first consulting the representatives of the Central Council, who often accompanied them. In the absence of large pro-Israel lobby groups like AIPAC in the U.S., the Central Council has a lobbying function with respect to Israel and its vital issues, including Iran and the recent developments in North Africa. Individual Jews, on the other hand, play no role whatsoever in German politics. There has actually not been a single Jewish member of the Bundestag for decades now, nor any other prominent Jewish politician in an elected position—a situation very different from France, Great Britain, or even Italy, Switzerland, Belgium, and Holland with their much smaller communities.

Where does this leave German Jewry today? Just as H.G. van Dam made clear in the 1950s, it is still true today that the function of the German Jewish community on the political stage is a largely symbolic role. As for the future, this symbolic weight will change. This weight is dwindling at the same rate that the number of Jews in Germany is growing and their relations with the world Jewish community and Israel are improving. Germany is by now a most respected member of the international community, and the Holocaust is becoming an increasingly distant memory. The Jewish community is less needed today than it was in the early postwar decades.

In November 2010 the Central Council elected, with Dieter Graumann, for the first time a president who was born after the Holocaust. He carries with him less moral weight than his predecessors. This too, may be seen as a sign of a slow but certain normalization in German-Jewish relations. In an interview given in January of 2011, the Central Council's Vice President Salomon Korn appropriately summed this development up as follows: "[Our] political significance and the attention we receive diminish as times passes. But this is not necessarily a bad sign, if the Jewish community will be perceived as a totally normal social group, with its own history, its own identity, and its own cultural roots. If normality means to perceive Jews as a normal part of society, then a loss of political attention is actually to be welcomed."¹⁷

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NOTES

¹ I would like to thank the staff of AICGS for their support in preparing this essay, and especially Dr. Lily Gardner Feldman for her insightful comments on an earlier draft of the paper.

² Quoted in: Tamara Anthony, *Ins Land der Väter oder der Täter? Israel und die Juden in Deutschland nach der Shoah* (Berlin: Metropol, 2004): 61.

³ Speech of Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer at the Anti-Defamation League's conference on "Global Anti-Semitism," New York, 1 November 2002. Quoted in: Lily Gardner Feldman, "A Three-dimensional View of German History: The Weight of the Past in Germany's Relations with Jews in Germany, Israel and the Diaspora," in *Germany at Fifty-Five. Berlin ist nicht Bonn*, ed. James Sperling (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004): 112.

⁴ On the establishment of the Central Council see: Michael Brenner, *After the Holocaust: Rebuilding Jewish Lives in Postwar Germany* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995) and Jay Howard Geller, *Jews in Post-Holocaust Germany, 1945-1953* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

⁵ Brief van Dams vom 15. November 1951 an die Herren Mitglieder des Direktoriums und des Rates, alle Landesverbände und die Gemeinden Berlin, Bremen, Hamburg und Köln betreffs Juden in Deutschland und die Organisationen des Weltjudentums (Ausländische Organisationen), Zentralarchiv zur Erforschung der Geschichte der Juden in Deutschland (ZA), B.1/7.121, "Zentralrat: Korrespondenz mit Direktoriumsmitgliedern."

⁶ See Michael Brenner, *In the Shadow of the Holocaust: The Changing Image of German Jewry after 1945*, Occasional Papers of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (Washington, DC: 2010).

⁷ Lily Gardner Feldman, *The Special Relationship between West Germany and Israel* (Boston: Allen & Unwin, 1984).

⁸ Protokoll über die Sitzung des Verwaltungsrats des Direktoriums des Zentralrats der Juden in Deutschland am 30. April 1966 in München. ZA, B.1/7. 818. Zentralrat: Sitzungen des Verwaltungsrats.

⁹ *Der Spiegel*, 10/1957 (10.4.1957).

¹⁰ Dr. Unverfehrt (Bundespresseamt) an Karl Marx, 14.8.1957, Bundesarchiv B136-24654. "Bundeskanzleramt: Korrespondenz mit der Wochenzeitung der Juden in Deutschland."

¹¹ Bericht Karl Marx an Ministerialdirigent Dr. Janz, 14.11.1957, Bundesarchiv B136-24654, "Bundeskanzleramt: Korrespondenz mit der Wochenzeitung der Juden in Deutschland" darin: Pressereferent Hans Koster an Karl Marx, 7.11.1957.

¹² Personal Conversation of author with Dr. Hans-Joachim Vogel, former mayor of Munich.

¹³ See <http://www.compass-infodienst.de/Shlomo_Shafir__Helmut_Schmidt__Seine_Beziehungen_zu_Israel_und_den_Juden.6315.0.html#referenz_51> (4 April 2011).

¹⁴ Karin Hartewig, *Zurückgekehrt: Die Geschichte der jüdischen Kommunisten in der DDR* (Köln: Böhlau, 2000): 224-229.

¹⁵ There is an extensive literature on the Jews of East Germany, see e.g., Angelika Timm, *Hammer. Zirkel. Davidstern: Das gestörte Verhältnis der DDR zu Zionismus und Staat Israel* (Bonn: Bouvier, 1997); Lothar Mertens, *Davidstern unter Hammer und Zirkel: Die Jüdischen Gemeinden in der SBZ/DDR und ihre Behandlung durch Partei und Staat 1945-1990* (Hildesheim: Olms, 1997); Moshe Zuckermann, ed., *Zwischen Politik und Kultur: Juden in der DDR* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2002); Detlef Joseph, *Die DDR und die Juden: Eine kritische Untersuchung mit einer Bibliografie aller in der DDR zum Thema erschienenen Bücher von Renate Kirchner* (Berlin: Verlag Das Neue Berlin, 2010).

¹⁶ Shlomo Shafir, *Ambiguous Relations: The American-Jewish Community and Germany since 1945* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1999); Lily Gardner Feldman, "The Jewish Role in German-American Relations," in *The German-American Encounter: Conflict and Cooperation between Two Cultures, 1800-2000*, ed. Frank Trommler and Elliott Shore (Oxford: Bergahn, 2001): 179-187.

¹⁷ "Leitkultur ist nah dran an Kulturdiktatur." Interview mit Salmon Korn, 26 January 2011, <<http://www.sueddeutsche.de/politik/interview-mit-salomon-korn-leitkultur-ist-nah-dran-an-kulturdiktatur-1.1050817>> (4 April 2011).

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AICGS is grateful to the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) for its generous support of this essay.