



American Jewish Committee
A Century of Leadership



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OBERMAYER
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Dear Arthur and members of the Obermayer Award Jury, dear award winners, honored Parliament President Walter Momper, honored guests,

In 1985, shortly after moving to Germany to work as a foreign correspondent, I was fortunate to conduct one of the last interviews with Heinrich Boell. Despite his critical perspective of post-WWII Germany, I sensed in his writing a deep and abiding affinity for his countrymen. I asked him if he loved the German people. Oh yes, he replied quickly. Then perhaps he could explain to me, I said, why so many Germans told me they did not know about the Holocaust until after the war. This time, he paused before answering. It is not that they did not know, it is that they did not WANT to know, he said, looking me in the eyes. It will not be easy for you here, my dear, he said sadly.

I can not count the times in the following years that I stopped to reflect on Heinrich Boell's wise words. At the time, I did not yet know much about the complex layers of German-Jewish history, the interplay of two cultures that seemingly merged to the point of assimilation, nonetheless without intermeshing, creating a false sense of security for German Jews.

There are many Germans who have posed the question, examining relentlessly their own family histories and those of the townspeople and citizens of their cities. Starting in the 1960s, a grassroots interest in local history emerged in a haphazard patchwork to research the fate of escaped and murdered German-Jewish citizens. Since then, experts estimate that thousands of

monographs of local Jewish communities have been published. Tens of thousands of Germans have devoted their time – often risking the wrath of family, friends, and neighbors – to painstakingly piece together the history of a largely vanished German-Jewish culture.

It was Arthur Obermayer's inspiration to honor these largely unsung heroes, men and women from every walk of life who have found a calling in the retrieval of German-Jewish memory. Thanks to their efforts, many Germans know more about the contours of a once familiar world that has rapidly receded into the recesses of memory. While those receiving awards are working on a local level, the sum of their efforts has made a remarkable contribution to the preservation of German-Jewish history. As stated in the Talmud, he who has saved a soul has saved the world. In this spirit, each of the honorees has touched the lives of many far beyond the borders of their towns and municipalities.

By creating the German-Jewish history award, Arthur has created a living memorial to the rich and enriching history of Jews in Germany. A fourth-generation American Jew of German descent, he established the award as means of paying tribute to the many members of German society who have courageously explored the life and death of victims of a genocide conceived by Germans and perpetrated largely by Germans.

How appropriate, therefore, that the Obermayer German-Jewish history award is bestowed in connection with the day of Remembrance for the Victims of National Socialism. I call upon state educational authorities, together with the Federal Agency for Civic Education, to make details of the work of those honored today and in the past available widely to German pupils, particularly in the weeks leading up to Holocaust Remembrance Day. In this way, students and teachers can be motivated by outstanding role models to examine Jewish life, past and present, in Germany. They can be guided by the work of those who make history a living affair, embodying the notion that each generation must examine and reassess individual and collective history. While the voices that were extinguished can never be brought back, the Jewish contributions to German history will not be forgotten as long as individuals of conscience continue to weave German-Jewish

history into contemporary German and European narratives.

However, with each passing year, as survivors become ever scarcer, there is an incremental danger that the history of Jews in Germany and the history of the Holocaust will diminish and gradually fade. This may sound like an absurd thought. But, sadly, polls in Germany show a decline in knowledge about details of the Holocaust. An American Jewish Committee poll in 2005 reflected that in Germany, only 77% could identify Auschwitz, Dachau and Treblinka as death camps, only 55% in Great Britain, and only 44% in the U.S. Information about Jewish life, past and present, is absent from most school curricula. Jews are presented largely in their role as victims of the Crusaders and then the Holocaust. The knowledge that Auschwitz was conceived and operated by Germans has faded so rapidly that the Polish government rightfully applied to UNESCO to call the memorial site "Former Nazi German Concentration and Extermination Camp Auschwitz-Birkenau," a move that was wholeheartedly endorsed by the American Jewish Committee and other leading American Jewish organizations.

The moral shock of the Holocaust long ago wore off. Young people head into classrooms with the superficiality of knowledge gleaned from internet and television, confronting an aging corps of teachers whose moral outrage seems ill-placed to many of the students. Furthermore, the classrooms of today have a large proportion of students with ethnic, religious and cultural backgrounds vastly different than the students of the immediate post-WWII era. A 2005 government statistic shows that more than one in every four Germans under 25 has an immigrant background. Many of these students have what experts call "competing narratives" in their minds, historical traumas relating to their own people and cultures that have little or nothing to do with the crimes of Germany during WWII.

One in every five German pupils lives in the eastern part of Germany, where history is taught largely by teachers who experienced communism, a form of totalitarianism more recent in their minds than National Socialism. On a European level, the communist crimes in Eastern Europe are a much more immediate experience than the crimes of the Nazis, despite the vast suffering inflicted by the Nazis on Jews, Romas, Poles, Russians and many

other groups and nationalities. In those countries, there is little public discussion of the Holocaust and virtually no educational material. In many western European countries, including France and Holland with their considerable Muslim minorities, teachers are reporting numerous cases of hostility to education on the Holocaust. I might add that this phenomenon is also well-documented here in Berlin classrooms.

Understandably, there are also competing factors for public attention regarding the issue of genocide 60 years after the collapse of the Nazi regime. Since 1945, Cambodia, Srebrenica, Halabja, Rwanda, and Darfur are just a few examples that knowledge alone does not prevent carnage. Furthermore, the brutal nature of totalitarianism has scarred the lives of tens of millions during and after the Cold War era.

Still, the competition for the memory of genocide and massive human rights violations can not and must not allow us to let the history of the Holocaust to fade from our collective conscience. There are new dangers ahead: The trivialization and denial of the Holocaust is gaining legitimacy with each passing day.

Even more alarming is the broadening currency of Holocaust denial in the Muslim world, spearheaded by Iranian president Mahmud Ahmadinejad. In speeches and interviews, he has publicly and repeatedly cast doubt on the existence of the Holocaust.

Holocaust denial is increasingly linked to the negation of Israel's right to existence. Israel lives under threat of attack from many of its surrounding non-democratic neighbors, as well as from terrorists and supporters of terrorism based worldwide. The terrorists have emphasized repeatedly their hatred of Israel, the U.S. and other friendly nations.

Anyone concerned with conflict resolution in the Mideast needs a clear awareness that the existential threat to Israeli security is a threat to the transatlantic alliance. From the vantage point of the beginning of 2007, Germany is in a strong position of international leadership, at the helm of both the European Union

and the G8, the Group of Eight. Both German Chancellor Angela Merkel and Foreign Minister Franz-Walter Steinmeier have signaled a strong interest in advancing diplomacy and conflict resolution in the Mideast. I am confident that Germany will use its current aggregation of power to create new initiatives, together with its allies, to bolster Israeli security, to combat terrorism in the region, and to counter Iranian nuclear ambitions.

Not everyone in the Muslim world subscribes to the crass anti-Semitism propagated most prominently by President Ahmadinejad. It is important for us to identify and support those individuals and organizations raising the voice of reason against the forces of hatred and extremism in Islam. It is vital that public and private funding be made available on federal, state and local levels to keep such non-governmental organizations running.

Support for organizations working to counter the spread of anti-Semitism and Holocaust denial in the Arab-speaking and Muslim world is critical.

As the number of anti-Semitic incidents in Europe rose dramatically in 2000, a number of German educators and social workers approached the American Jewish Committee's Berlin office to ask if they could hold an emergency meeting to discuss educational responses to anti-Semitism inside and outside the classroom. The meetings evolved into the Task Force: Education on Antisemitism, coordinated by the AJC Berlin office. Several dozen educators and representatives of nongovernmental organizations continue to meet every 6 weeks to work on educational strategies, including a recent paper with recommendations on educational strategies to deal with the rising anti-Semitism among some in the Muslim world. The pathbreaking work of the Task Force has received recognition on a European scale. The Task Force: Education on Antisemitism, however, is only one of many examples in which German-American initiatives are on the front lines in the battle against anti-Semitism.

International cooperation is another example. For instance, as a result of strong German-American cooperation, with significant French assistance, the 56-member state Organization for

Security and Cooperation in Europe decided to focus considerable resources on combating the problem. The highly successful OSCE Conference on Anti-Semitism held in Berlin in April 2004 remains an outstanding example of the importance of this cooperation in the creation of greater public awareness and the promotion of concrete measures by member states to counter anti-Semitism. As follow-up measures, both the U.S. and the German governments have named special envoys responsible for monitoring and promoting countermeasures to combat anti-Semitism.

And yet, despite such laudatory measures, efforts to combat anti-Semitism in the 21st century are in their infancy. Fewer than 10 of the 56 countries of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe collect consistent statistics on antisemitic incidents. According to the latest report by the European Union Monitoring Center on Racism and Xenophobia, antisemitism in 2005 rose more than 20% compared to the previous year.

While it is important to denounce and, if relevant, prosecute those who promote hatred, it is equally important to examine new forms of antisemitism and combat it at its roots. There are numerous challenges to face: How can we commemorate the Holocaust in ways relevant for a new century? How can we discuss the horrors of the Holocaust in light of other genocides that have occurred? How can we better integrate the role of Jews in German and European history into education and public awareness? How can we prevent anti-Semitic stereotypes from being perpetuated by future generations?

To answer these questions, we need a multi-pronged strategy to deal with three critical issues: methods to keep Holocaust memory relevant; the role of Jews and Jewish history in European consciousness; and ways to advance German-Jewish relations.

Polls show that a strong interest in the Holocaust among a majority of the younger generation remains. Still, it is critical to develop new curricula of interest to students today to create a greater understanding of the Holocaust and its ongoing relevance.

The more varied ethnic backgrounds of students in classrooms create additional challenges for educators, particularly with the spread of Holocaust denial in the Muslim world. Educators are only now beginning to consider new strategies for reaching students of migrant background. They are searching for points of reference within the Holocaust to other cultures and nations.

With the discussion in Germany focusing with each passing year more on German suffering during WWII, lines between cause and effect can become increasingly blurred.

There must be a concerted effort by those of us in public life to resist attempts at inaccurate historical comparisons, with all due respect for the enormous suffering of German civilians. Attempting to diminish the horrors of the Holocaust paves the way to denial and oblivion.

As for greater awareness of Jewish history and contemporary Jewish life, a number of projects have been launched in recent years that point the way to greater possibilities. Firstly, the Obermayer Award has done much to create public recognition for the tireless efforts of thousands of individuals in Germany who are dedicated to keeping alive local histories of German-Jewish residents. It is an exemplary project that could be replicated in other European countries. Several years ago, the Leo Baeck Institute issued an extensive set of guidelines for incorporating Jewish history into school curricula. It is essential that Berlin and other German states look more closely at the thoughtful recommendations.

The more government and local support there is for Jewish community life in Germany, the greater the potential for young people to come in contact with Jews and Judaism. There are currently more than a hundred Jewish communities in Germany, composed largely of recent Russian-speaking immigrants. Virtually all of these communities need substantial assistance to create and maintain the basic institutions of Jewish life. It is also important to place more emphasis in schools and in the public sphere on the Judeo-Christian ethic that helped shape European thinking.

Finally, it is essential for all people in Germany to work together on the present, mindful of the past while facing the

greatest challenges confronting us today. Let us develop together a program for the 21st century to deal with dangers from without and within.

On the foreign agenda,

We need to combat transnational terrorism emanating from Iran and Syria. It threatens Israel, Iraq, Lebanon, other countries in the Mideast, and ultimately, all of us.

We must prevent Iran from becoming a nuclear force, further destabilizing an already turbulent region and presenting an existential threat to Israel, a country that Iranian leaders have repeatedly vowed to extinguish.

We need to exert more pressure to stop the genocide in Darfur that unfolds in front of our eyes without serious intervention. Tolerating genocide anywhere in the world erodes our understanding of civilization, threatening the consensus of values that preserve human dignity and the value of life.

On the domestic front,

We must work together to help democracy function better with heterogeneous population groups. It is in our own self-interest to improve forms of coexistence between and among the various ethnic, religious and national groups in each country. The changing demographics in Europe leave no choice but for each nation to assign high priority to the process of integration, individually and at a European level.

We should address with urgency the restructuring of our educational institutions and systems. Schools need to encourage interdisciplinary thinking and shape social competencies to help the young generation deal with a complex and fast-changing world. Stereotypes can best be fought in the very young, if children are given the tools to recognize and reject propaganda and extremist ideologies. In the age of the Internet, the foremost need for education is to promote critical thinking and research skills. Educational institutions themselves need to embody the



principles of democratic thinking they want the young generation to carry into public life.

Both on the foreign and domestic front, the dangers to democracy from without and within are manifold. I would like to suggest a four-point plan to concretely move forward the German-American Jewish agenda for the 21st century:

1. We need to establish an annual joint German-American conference for Holocaust studies. The last survivors will not be long among us. It is essential that Holocaust memory does not fade with the passing of survivors and witnesses. An annual conference bringing together leading researchers and educators would contribute greatly to sustaining Holocaust memory. We must not allow the stage to be dominated by dubious academic institutes in Teheran. The American Jewish Committee is in the process of establishing an annual transatlantic Holocaust studies forum, together with German partner institutions.
2. On the educational front, curricula changes are necessary to create a more comprehensive understanding of Jews and Judaism in German and European life. The overall depiction of minorities in curricula should also be examined, toward the goal of greater inclusion of positive examples of contributions to society by minority members. Secondly, schools should be assessed for the degree of democratic education to which students, teachers and administrators are exposed. Existing programs should be implemented and additional curricula

should be designed, including at the grade school and kindergarten levels.

3. The basis for western civilization is the Judeo-Christian ethic, with important contributions from the Muslim world. I would like to challenge think tanks, foundations and transatlantic organizations in Germany, working with American counterparts, to promote lectures, publications and conferences on these ethics. It is important not to lose sight of the tremendous contribution of Jewish thinking to our modern understanding of law, politics, and human relations.

These ideas are just a few of the many possibilities to advance mutual understanding and democracy. The Arthur Obermayer German-Jewish History Award is an outstanding example of what just one person can accomplish with an idea and a commitment to German-Jewish relations. The work of the honorees this evening is a challenge to us all to find new ways to keep history, and its many lessons, alive. Let us boldly meet this demanding challenge.

In closing, I would like to share two quotations with you from a photo exhibition currently on display at the International Youth Meeting Center in Oswiecim that documents encounters between survivors and the young generation of today. Tadeusz Sobloewicz, a former prisoner in Auschwitz, said in 2005: "Remembrance is just as important as peace." Can young people born decades after the Holocaust, however, sustain remembrance of events for which they have no memory? Let us listen to the comment of Kalina Dulko, a young Polish woman, after visiting Auschwitz in 2003: "We need empathy, which, in contrast to pity, gives us strength, as it is not just a gift of the mind, but also of the heart."

Kalina's words, I think, should be seen as a summons to all of us: To remember with our minds and our hearts and to pass on the remembrance to our children and our children's children.



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