A DECADE OF TRANSITION: GERMAN, EUROPEAN, AND JEWISH PERSPECTIVES
A Seminar of the Friedrich Ebert Foundation and the American Jewish Committee

Nov. 10 - 12, the AJC and the Ebert Foundation jointly sponsored a seminar in Berlin for the second consecutive year. As Gene has reported, there was lively discussion and interchange among the participants. Given that the seminar ended with about half an hour of mutual thanks, it was obvious that both sponsors felt the seminar had brought the two organizations closer together once again, after several years of lackluster relations.

The seminar, which was titled "A Decade in Transition: German, Jewish and European Perspectives," focused on the cultural, psychological and political impact of German unification. The concept was to bring together panels of experts who would make short statements, as opposed to speeches, that would stimulate discussion. The program was prepared chiefly by Pia Bungarten, responsible for transatlantic relations at Ebert, Uwe Optenhuegel, director of international dialogue for Ebert, Andy Baker and myself. We all felt the concept worked well, attracting high-level government representatives, including cultural minister Michael Naumann, who engaged in an open dialogue.

There were three panels. The first focused on German responses to unification, the second on Jewish perspectives and the final one on foreign policy issues regarding unified Germany’s future.

PANEL I
UNIFYING A COUNTRY - UNIFYING A CULTURE? GERMAN PERSPECTIVES ON UNIFICATION

The first panel was moderated by the German broadcast journalist Siegfried Berndt, the former director of television for Deutsche Welle. While this was admittedly a personal connection (Siegfried brought me to Germany on a fellowship for Deutsche Welle), there was common consensus that he skillfully guided discussion on highly sensitive issues. The panel consisted of Michael Albrecht, the director of ORB, an eastern German broadcasting network, Michael Roth, a 29-year-old SPD member of parliament, Wolfgang Novak, advisor at the chancellor’s office, and Cem Ozdemir, a young Green member of parliament.
There was general agreement among the four of them that unification is broadly accepted by Germans but distinct differences remain between east and west. Michael Roth talked about his experiences trying to organize a coalition among younger members of parliament regarding the planned Holocaust memorial and said to his astonishment, the main obstacle proved to be differing attitudes between eastern and western members of parliament. He mentioned another even younger colleague, 23-year-old Karsten Schneider from Thuringia, who feels distanced from the Holocaust because he learned little about it in school. Although his school years took place after unification, the teachers remained the same and continued to emphasize the resistance of anti-fascists, virtually ignoring the Holocaust in their instruction.

Wolfgang Novak, who was a state secretary for education in the eastern state of Saxony in the early to mid-1990s, pointed out that eastern Germans feel the problems of unification more acutely, being far more affected by high unemployment, for instance. (Note- this is not true in the city of Berlin, with an employment rate of more than 17% - the districts with the highest unemployment are in the western part of the city, due to the general collapse of an industrial base in the city following unification. Otherwise, Wolfgang is correct.) He added that eastern Germans were called upon to make tremendous changes in their lives, a circumstance they do not share with west Germans and one that has an impact on identity-building.

Cem Ozdemir, who has been in parliament since 1994, said the challenge the past ten years has not just been for easterners and westerners to grow together but for closer ties between Germans and non-Germans.

He discussed his concerns about the rise of nationalism among young people, particularly in the east, due in part to false expectations that democracy brings jobs. He said more work needs to be done building a civil society in Germany. Young people must be taught that that democracy has its limits and that chasing foreigners does not belong to a democratic consensus.

Michael Albrecht said east Germans have had to cope with major disadvantages stemming from unification. They could not accumulate capital, which meant they could not form companies or hold top executive positions. They had little power in codetermination of the unification process. Albrecht felt the Federal Republic made a major mistake in failing to encourage leadership among the eastern German civil rights leaders who prepared the way for unification. Those who now feel a sense of nostalgia about the communist system, he suggested, is due to the lack of perspective they feel about the future.

Participant Volkmar Schultz pointed out a major achievement of the past ten years is not only the unification of Germany but the renouncement of some aspects of nationality.

Michael Roth made some personal comments about German-Jewish relations. He comes from a small town in the state of Hesse in central Germany and said until recently, he knew no Jews. On one of his first trips to the U.S. he met Andy at the AJC. He also visited Israel (he was part of the parliamentary cultural committee that visited Israel in connection with the preparation of a
recommendation last summer on the Holocaust memorial) and was impressed with the openness and humor of people he met.

At Yad Vashem, Roth saw the names of former Jewish communities in eastern Hesse, where he lives, maybe 15 of which no longer exist. This made a tremendous impression on him, crystallizing for him the tragedy in Germany that there is so little Jewish life today except in larger cities.

He talked about his interest in launching a dialogue with young Israelis and young German Jews (interestingly, he said he called Michael Blumenthal to arrange contacts with German Jews). He said he is most concerned that when the current political class is gone, that his generation will not be very interested in continuing a German-Jewish dialogue.

Jack Janes, the director of the American Institute for Contemporary German Studies in Washington, commented that identity formation is a process in which people must have a psychological stake. East Germans as well as Turks and other minorities must be able to have more of a stake in the system, he suggested. In any case, both in Germany and the U.S., he said, this is a healthy learning process.

HOW WILL CULTURAL SITES, ART AND ARCHITECTURE IN BERLIN REFLECT THE NEW 'BERLIN REPUBLIC'?

Minister of Culture Michael Naumann talked about issues of dealing with the past in contemporary German society. He lashed out against "the feeling of righteousness here about the Holocaust that expands into political correctness and that tolerates no other opinions." (Note - Naumann has been attacked repeatedly for at first declining a Holocaust monument then for his undemocratic attempt to turn the memorial into more of a museum. The battle on the final shape of the site continues.) By this he meant Lea Rosh, the initiator of the Holocaust memorial, whom he claims misused moral arguments to further her career.

He then discussed his difficulties with the concept of "Volk der Taeter" (people of the perpetrators), pointing out that Germans include Jewish victims as well as perpetrators. Furthermore, where do the country's Turks and other minorities fit into this concept? Naumann traced the concept of "a people of perpetrators" back to the 50s, when there was a widespread feeling of collective guilt.

Naumann then discussed the Wehrmacht exhibition, which has been under renewed attack in past weeks for mistakes on photo identification. He said the insistence of some groups that Wehrmacht soldiers did not participate in crimes against civilians reminds him of the FDP's efforts in the 1950s to achieve an amnesty for Wehrmacht officers.

He defended the exhibition, saying that the curators have been aware of the mistakes for some time but mindful of the discussion in the 50s, feared the entire exhibition would be discredited if they admitted the errors (which they now have done). He said there are complex processes of self-identification going on in Germany regarding the Holocaust.
Naumann feels he has been able to involve a younger generation of German Jews in the debate about the Holocaust memorial, an involvement that Ignatz Bubis did not encourage. He said Rahel Salamander (owner of a chain of Jewish book stores), Salomon Korn (leader of the Frankfurt Jewish community) and Michael Friedman (member of the Central Council of Jews in German) are prepared to contribute to the information center that will accompany the monument. He called this readiness to be involved on the part of German Jews "a large step forward in the German-Jewish dialogue."

In response to a question from Toby Axelrod, Naumann objected to Volk being translated as nation, because of the slightly racist, romantic connotations of the word. He then talked about the misuse of the notion of victim in east Germany, where he grew up. He said he learned nothing then about the Holocaust; former concentration camps were turned into memorials for slain communists. No mention was made of their use by communists as prison camps from 45 to 49.

In place of the Holocaust, Naumann said the east Germans invented another people of victims, the Sorbs, a minority of about 60,000 Slavs who live near the Polish border. He said as a result, the east Germans never developed a feeling of personal responsibility for the Holocaust because they considered only the West Germans guilty. Today, this is contributing to a lack of decency regarding minorities in eastern Germany, although he was careful to point out that these problems are in the west as well.

Today, he said Germany has functioning legislative and judicial branches. There are considerable social problems but these are not limited to Germany.

PANEL 2
GERMANY TRANSFORMED?
THE ROLE OF A UNITED GERMANY IN THE PERCEPTION OF JEWISH COMMUNITIES IN GERMANY, CENTRAL EUROPE, ISRAEL AND THE U.S.

PART A - GERMANY AND CENTRAL EUROPE

Andy Baker opened the session by talking about the ambivalence within the Jewish community on this subject ten years ago. He said the fears have not materialized and German-Jewish engagement is still quite strong. What has not been fulfilled, he said, were the expectations for redress and compensation for Nazi victims. This is due to issues of memory, history and feelings of responsibility.

The first part of the panel, moderated by Deidre, dealt with German and European reactions. Andreas Nachama (president of the Jewish community in Berlin), said unification created a feeling among many of a Schlussstrich - drawing a final line. He doesn't think the arson attack at the former concentration camp site of Sachsenhausen would have been possible before 1989. He said there is a new Germany with organized groups of thugs on the edges of Berlin, where members of the Jewish community are careful not to go.
He told a telling anecdote about the continuing lack of acceptance in Germany of Jews as Germans. At dinner recently, the wife of a state governor (from eastern Germany) asked him how long he had lived in Germany. My whole life, answered Nachama, somewhat perplexed. Oh really? The woman responded, I thought you were brought from Israel to lead the Jewish community here.

Nachama emphasized the importance of the democratic tradition now firmly in place in Germany. He said much political education was undertaken in West Germany to teach people the fundamentals of democracy and a similar effort now needs to be done in eastern Germany.

Christian Staffa, the executive director of the organization Action Reconciliation, disagreed with this east/west distinction. Staffa said he felt there were still considerable problems in western Germany with a democratic consciousness and he does not believe that it is so well-imbedded in the public mind. Furthermore, he feels he has needed to reorient his own West German identity since unification.

Staffa also spoke about the problem of Jews being seen as outsiders in German society. He warned against viewing right-wing extremism solely as a problem of east German youths, pointing out that they are taking their views from older generations.

Tomas Kraus, the executive director of the Czech Jewish community remarked how similar the problems are he faces. For instance, the Czech Jewish community did not join the National Council of Minorities, to avoid emphasizing an outsider status. Given the similarity of such dilemmas with other European Jewish communities, he felt it was time to talk about a European Jewish identity.

He talked about the difficulties of the Czechs overcoming communist ideology when confronting Holocaust memory. For instance, Theresienstadt is still viewed by many as a national monument of Czech resistance (there was indeed a fortress near the town where Czech prisoners were held but the town itself was a Jewish ghetto, where thousands of people died from malnutrition and disease). Kraus said the communists continued propagating many anti-Semitic Nazi policies. Even now, the Czechs see themselves solely as Nazi victims. This legacy has contributed to the delay in the Czech Republic to dealing with the issue of compensation for Czech Jewish property. Only now, he says, has a process of inner reflection begun within Czech society, adressing the questions of who we are, what we did, and why we were only bystanders and did not act.

Historian Diana Pinto felt there are positive signals that the battle for the past is slowly being won, but she expressed concern about the bearings of the triangle of European-Jewish-German relations.

She talked about the problems of Jewish identity in Europe, which she feels reflect core issues of a sense of belonging to a society. Those countries with few Jews today remember them as a distinct and extinct species. The precious experience of a small group with multiple identities has been lost, she feels.
Pinto is concerned about European countries better integrating minorities. The Jews are not a litmus test for this situation but a motor. The dilemma is that if a Jewish voice emerges, it singles out the Jews as a separate people. And the inevitable conclusion of that situation, she thinks, is a return to Israel, although she did not seem to advocate this as a realistic solution for European Jews.

She outlined three levels of reconciliation: 1) Diplomacy, on a state-to-state level; 2) Members of the elite, who work on reconciliation within nicely configured categories and 3) civil society, where reconciliation efforts are messy but healthy, delving into zones of grayness, whiteness and blackness. In eastern Europe, she said, all three levels are occurring at once, creating sometimes a sense of panic and pessimism. She said that a provocative thought might be to leave the business of the memory of the past to non-Jews.

Andreas Nachama took exception to this idea, claiming it would strip him of the right to mourn the memory of his grandmother, who was murdered during the Holocaust. Pinto disagreed that this was the inevitable conclusion of her idea and said she certainly did not mean in any way to diminish personal memory.

Nachama said he felt a Jewish community can only be religious in nature. Its political function emerges, he said, when civil rights are affected.

Michael Chlenov, the director of VAAD, the umbrella organization for Russian Jews, said a discussion of the immigration of Russian Jews to Germany was missing. He said given Germany's proximity to Russia, in comparison to Israel and the U.S., as well as the differing perception of the Holocaust by Russian Jews, means that this immigration will continue for the foreseeable future. Therefore, he thinks it is important for this issue to be examined more closely in the future, particularly given the numerous contacts between Jews in Germany and Russia.

Gene DuBow asked Andreas Nachama what future he saw for the German Jewish community in the post-Bubis era. Nachama said from the 60s through the mid-80s, under the leadership of Werner Nachmann, the Central Council of Jews did not play an important national role. The true spokesman for the Jewish community during that era, he said, was Heinz Galinski, the leader of the Berlin community. Today, he too (as current leader of the Berlin Jewish community) could easily use two more press spokesmen to cope with the requests he receives from journalists. He said it remains to be seen if future presidents of the Central Council will have the authority to take over Bubis position as central spokesman. He suspects there will be several national spokesmen for the community in the future, including those (he mentioned himself) who do not belong to the president's council, the inner circle of power within the Central Council.

Uwe Optenhuegel raised the question of the meaning of national identity at a time when issues of national sovereignty are being folded into European structures. He thinks in the future, national identity will be defined more through cultural characteristics and common history.

PANEL II - PART B
ISRAEL AND THE U.S.
The second part of the panel, chaired by Nick Lane, dealt with perspectives from Israel and America. Andy Baker stressed the importance of dealing with unfinished business from WWII, such as compensation for eastern European Holocaust survivors. When he pushed the issue several years ago, he was told it would create anti-Semitism but this did not happen. He urged the German political leadership to consider such issues their own responsibility.

Colette Avital, the leader of the Israeli Labor Party’s department of international affairs, said it was her first time in Germany and she felt the presence of history was overwhelming.

She described the changing nature of German-Israeli relations. Initially, many (internationally) wanted a small, meek Israel, she said, and when Israel’s image began to change it clashed with this earlier notion. German-Israeli relations have been characterized by the ambivalence between Machiavellian logic and the burden of emotions. Still, by any standard, these relations have developed into something exceptional - after the U.S., Germany is Israel’s second best friend. This is due to the honesty and courage that has characterized the relations, which cover a wide spectrum, from trade ties to defense, cultural, academic and youth exchanges.

Even 15 years ago, she said, German language classes at the Goethe Institute in Israel were filled by intellectuals and artists, many of whom later visited Germany. This is a marked contrast to the Arab world, she said, where it has not yet been possible to reconcile with the intellectuals, in Egypt, for instance. This intellectual contact between Germany and Israel is a mark of the transformation in relations, she says. Furthermore, many political leaders in the two countries met each other during youth exchanges.

Some voices now say that it is time for the special relationship to end and normalize relations. What does that mean, however, and with what will that special responsibility be replaced, Avital asked.

As for the EU, Germany has been Israel’s best friend and has defended Israeli interests. There is now a double challenge for Israel: What kind of special relations should there be with Germany and given the changing face of European Jewish life, what kind of communities should be rebuilt? Should they only be religious or communities that are integrated into the multicultural society that Europe is becoming? This will make it easier for young Germans and Europeans like Michael Roth to understand what Judaism is about, she suggested, not just as a religion but as a civilization.

Yossi Alpher, director of AJC’s Jerusalem Office, underlined Colette’s comments about cultural and political ties between Israel and Germany. He said the Ebert Foundation has become a real presence within the Israeli cultural scene at a time when the U.S. is reducing its public presence in Israel. Despite recent irritations, such as the Berlin declaration on Israel and the delivery by German ambassador Theodor Wallau of an EU declaration that Israel should be mindful of the original borders declared by the UN (Avital interjected her opinion here that this is a German concept more than an EU concept), Alper said the
German-Israeli relationship has remained very stable. These relations add an important dimension to the Israeli security profile.

Under the advent of the Barak government, the relations have clearly improved, he said, although he would not say they were negatively affected by unification of even by the Netanyahu government.

Nick Lane commented on the inherent dilemma in "normalizing" Israeli-German relations to a status that is not reliant on the burden of guilt. By shifting away from this position, he said, there is an implication that the relationship exists solely due to guilt.

**PANEL III**

**GERMANY'S TRANSFORMATION - IMPLICATIONS FOR GERMANY'S ROLE IN EUROPE AND IN THE WORLD**

This panel examined the question of whither Germany in the post-unification era. Karsten Voigt, the German government's coordinator for U.S.-German affairs, said the priorities for German foreign policy have changed considerably since 1989. He mentioned 3 areas.

First, the growing importance of European integration. Secondly, trans-Atlantic relations have been giving way to euro-Atlantic relations. In this area, Karsten emphasized that Europe will always try to engage the U.S. within Europe. However, to be taken seriously as a partner, he said that Europe must have the capacity to behave as a partner.

Thirdly, there are new areas of cooperation, where integration is not possible, such as with the case of Russia. The eastern enlargement of the EU is an integral part of the integration process, he says.

Karsten hopes there will be a new sense of assertiveness and self-confidence in Europe. Self-confident people are easier for partners to deal with, he believes.

As for Israel, he said that among the left, there are ties between Germany and Israel due to the European Labor Movement. He first went to Israel, for instance, in 1970. Karsten emphasized that as the only democratic country in the region, Germans tend to identify with Israel.

Jack Janes remembered how uncomfortable Germans were with a new concept President Bush tried to inaugurate in U.S.-German relations with a speech he held in May 1989 in Mainz talking about partnership in leadership. At the time, leaders said we want to be leaders in the second row. Now, Jack says Fisher has been demonstrative about emphasizing that Europe can not do what it wants without U.S. help in Europe.

Three key words in European integration at the moment, he says, are decoupling, discrimination (for instance, does a European identity include Turkey?) and duplication (of resources, such as in the defense area). For Washington, a key word at the moment is capability. Relations in the next 5 years, he believes, will be about showing capability. For the past few years, the U.S. has been skeptical about the success of the common European currency and the integration of European defense capabilities.
Jack admits that the U.S. is suspicious on some levels of an integrated Europe. Washington has always been more comfortable at dealing with national powers and playing them off of one another.

Another new factor since unification is that more actors on the foreign policy stage are influencing foreign policy. Non-government organizations, for instance, have a different role than during the Cold War era (an example is the Campaign Against Land Mines receiving a Nobel Peace Prize).

Washington is uncertain about how to come to grips with the new Germany, he said. We must wait and see how Germany defines itself. It will be a bumpy road, he predicts, given the search for new structures and missions and ways to define them.

Andy mentioned that there is some ambivalence in the U.S. about whether or not it wants Europe to get its act together.

Constanze Stelzenmueller, security expert for the "Die Zeit" weekly newspaper, talked about her changing notion of identity since unification. She is a diplomat’s child, born in 1962, growing up in Britain, the U.S. and Spain, but living in a German universe wherever her family went.

In her world, the Holocaust and Auschwitz were unique focal points and frames of reference for everything. She wondered if there were genes of social behavior that would make her capable of such behavior as well. She grew up with a Germany that was a perfect machine, happy to relinquish part of its sovereignty to the Allies and to relinquish the land east of the Oder-Neisse on the assumption that this was the price for the Holocaust.

When she returned to Germany to study constitutional law in Bonn in 1979, she came back to a culture of violent protests, which was strange for her after the openness of American society. At law school, she was taught to operate the perfect German machine, taught to have limited ambitions and goals.

At a leadership course at Harvard, where she was a McCloy fellow, Constanze said about half of the German scholars on the McCloy program refused to attend the course. Her generation, she said, was brought up to follow, not to lead, to rebuild but not to inherit.

We were blind to the notion of self-determination east of the wall, she said. The night the wall came down, she cried. It was clear that it was going to be the beginning of a new world for her.

Germans have started taking leadership on some policy points but they aren’t pulling along the EU. The enthusiasm for expansion has waned. Germany and Israel are going into different phases of existing within larger communities and both must learn to deal with this situation.

Germany will have to rebuild and redesign, Constanze said -how we do it and with whom hinges on the notion of who we are. She hopes the Jewish community will take an active role in this process.

Karsten said the description of leadership is one of perception. In terms of EU enlargement, it was German leadership, he said, that finally got the Europeans on board. Without Germany, the defense identity in Europe will not work. Still, Europe will have to learn how to deal with limited capabilities. At the moment, the Germans have a tendency to be overly moralizing on policy issues.
Uwe said he has a problem with the relationship of self-confidence to assertiveness. We have a moralist approach, he said, such as could be seen in the Kosvo crisis, but we lack professionalism, so assertiveness comes overmore than self-confidence, which for him requires a degree of humility. Uwe also took exception with Constanze's view of the drive for self-determination in eastern Europe before 1989, pointing out the widely varying situations in the different Soviet satellite states.

Jack commented that there is a possibility of Germany and America drifting more apart if the internal politics and social debates within each country become less relevant and lack transparency for the other partner. He also said there has been an impact on Germany of the withdrawal of most of the U.S. soldiers in the country.

Karsten ended by pointing out that there is a growing emphasis in the U.S. on unilateral defense measures instead of multilateral treaties. The two countries are not drifting apart, in his opinion, but there needs to be more frequent discussion of U.S. - German affairs.