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U.S. Jewish Group Sets Up Office In Berlin as Sentinel Against Bias

By ALAN COWELL

BERLIN, Feb. 9 — Reflecting a gradual resurgence of Jewish life in Germany, the American Jewish Committee opened a permanent office in Berlin today at a site once owned by a Jewish family that fled the Nazis.

The inauguration drew high-level German officials together with United States and Israeli diplomats to ceremonies including the nailing of a mezuzah to the door of offices in the building that stands in Berlin's Mitte District, close to both the ruined center of Hitler's Reich and the construction sites that have come to symbolize the emerging new capital of a reunified Germany.

The building is also close to the proposed site for a German national memorial to the Holocaust — a project still surrounded by debate.

David A. Harris, the executive director of the American Jewish Committee, said, "We never expected the kind of fascination that has surrounded the opening of this office."

The remark, made in an interview, reflected the complex emotions felt by Germans seeking what Mr. Harris called Jewish "validation" of their efforts to come to terms with the Nazi past. But, he said, the point of the office was not — as he put it — to tell Germans that they had been "koshered" by the presence of an American Jewish organization. Rather, he said, the committee, which was founded in 1906 to fight anti-Semitism, saw itself as "another ally, supporter and watchdog" against any future "German fear that the demons will again come out of the closet, that with the fading of memory such a thing could occur."

Of particular concern to the organization is a surge of neo-Nazism in the economically depressed former East Germany, Mr. Harris said. Other officials of the group said a principal task was to promote a greater understanding of modern Germany among American Jews.

"American Jews' perceptions of Germany remain split and not very positive," Eugene DeBow, the director of the new office, said recently. The office, in the former East Berlin, is on a site once owned by the Mosse family, a prominent Jewish family in prewar Berlin. The family won back title to the land after reunification.

The site was sold to a German developer, and the architect who drew up the plans for a new building was Hans Strauch of Boston, Mass., the nephew of George Mosse, a historian who fled Berlin in 1939. The developer agreed to give the American Jewish Committee rent-free space for 10 years, Mr. Harris said.

Since the fall of the Iron Curtain in Europe, Germany's Jewish population has more than doubled, from 29,000 a decade ago to an estimated 70,000. The increase is ascribed to the arrival of tens of thousands of Jews from the former Soviet Union who, under German law, have automatic residence rights in Germany.

"There is a chance that this Jewish life can once again become an integral part of German culture and society," President Roman Herzog said at an official ceremony marking the inauguration.

The inauguration was accompanied by another undercurrent. The American Jewish Committee reportedly angered Chancellor Helmut Kohl last May by publicizing Bonn's refusal to pay compensation to Holocaust survivors in Eastern Europe. The dispute was finally resolved last

month when Germany agreed to set up a \$110 million fund for some 18,000 Eastern European Jewish survivors.

Mr. Kohl was invited to the ceremonies but declined, citing scheduling problems, and did not send a representative, American Jewish officials said. The absence of a representative was initially seen as a slight, the officials said. But it emerged later that Mr. Kohl had sent a message to the committee president welcoming the group to Berlin, German officials said.