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**Robert S. Rifkind**  
President

**David A. Harris**  
Executive Director

January 28, 1998

Dear AJC Member:

We would like to share with you some very gratifying news. Last week—after several years of resistance—the German government announced its intention to provide \$110 million that will be used to provide pension payments for approximately 20,000 East European Holocaust survivors.

Commenting on the German decision, a *Washington Post* editorial (January 14) said: “Germany overall has set a positive model for the world, one that few other nations have matched, in facing up to the evils of its history and paying about \$60 billion in reparations for admittedly unrightable wrongs. But in the case of the Eastern Europeans, it stalled for nearly half a decade, offering varying untenable excuses. *Only when the American Jewish Committee went public with its tenacious campaign, beginning last spring, did it begin to make progress* [emphasis added]. Recent State Department pressure and a Senate resolution endorsed by 82 Senators may also have helped.”

There is a fascinating history to this story. It is worth sharing not only as a source of institutional pride, but, more important, as a case study in the way the AJC operates.

In the early 1990s, shortly after the break-up of the Soviet bloc, AJC began developing close working ties with the emerging leaders of the remnant Jewish communities in the region. One of the most effective vehicles for establishing this contact was our International Leadership Conference, held each year since 1994 in conjunction with our Annual Meeting. Understandably, these communities' first priorities were to reconstitute themselves, begin to identify fellow Jews, organize basic services, deepen links with world Jewry, and ensure their rightful place in the newly independent societies.

As they assessed their needs, they quickly recognized the importance of providing some modicum of support for the rapidly aging and often indigent Holocaust survivors in their midst. Unlike survivors in Western countries, these, despite identical wartime experiences, were denied pensions from the German government. Bonn's reasoning was that, even if it could reach agreement with the communist countries, itself doubtful, those regimes could not be trusted to live up to such accords. Hence these Jews became known as the “double victims.”

Once communism collapsed, Bonn offered other rationales for refusing to provide monthly payments—it feared a flood of new claimants from Eastern Europe well beyond the survivor community; its economy was battered, its budget already stretched, its unemployment rolls growing; it preferred to consider not pensions but modest one-time payments made through national foundations provided with German funds. (Such a fund was created in Ukraine, for example. The average one-time payment for Jewish and non-Jewish survivors was 600 German marks, about \$350!)

Our colleagues in the East European Jewish communities talked to us about this. Too small and weak to pursue the issue on their own, they sought our help, and we responded.

In 1995, an AJC leadership delegation traveled to Bonn and met with top German leaders, including Foreign Minister Kinkel. Several representatives of East European Jewish communities joined us and movingly described to German officials the situation of Holocaust survivors in their countries. Thus began a three-year joint effort by East European Jewish leaders and AJC to persuade Bonn to establish for Holocaust survivors in the East what it had already provided in the West: via the Claims Conference, a monthly pension payment as some compensation, however inadequate, for the unimaginable suffering the survivors had endured during the war.

We won't attempt to list all the meetings during the three years, but suffice it to say there were many, and they involved virtually the entire spectrum of German political leadership, including the President, Chancellor, Foreign Minister and Bundestag (Parliament) leaders.

In 1996, we discovered something else. While Holocaust survivors in Eastern Europe did not get pensions from Bonn the Third Reich's injured veterans in the region did. Astonishingly, a Latvian Waffen SS veteran injured during the war received a monthly check from Bonn, while a Latvian Jewish survivor received nothing.

With the passage of time, we became increasingly frustrated by the lack of progress despite our persistence, non-confrontational approach, and unprecedented access based on four decades of work in Germany. Following an unsuccessful meeting with Chancellor Kohl's chief of staff, in February 1997, we advised the German government that we would go public with our campaign in two months' time if no progress were forthcoming. We even spelled out the steps we would take, including an ad campaign.

At one point in the spring, an influential German, believing a breakthrough was possible, asked us to postpone the first ad by two weeks. We agreed. His efforts failed however, and so we resumed our plans.

In May, we held a press conference on Capitol Hill attended by U.S. and German parliamentarians, representative of East European Jewry, and the venerable Jan Karski, the Polish Catholic diplomat who had tried so valiantly, in vain, to alert the world to the destruction of Polish Jewry. The same day our first ad appeared in *The New York Times*.

Subsequently, we met with top White House officials who promised us that President Clinton would raise the issue with Chancellor Kohl during their meeting in Washington in July. We

spurred Senate interest as well, leading to an important initiative by Senators Dodd (D-CT) and Hutchison (R-TX) that garnered the signatures of 82 Senators on a letter to the German Chancellor. This letter urged pensions for East European survivors, who were diminishing in number and desperately in need of assistance and recognition of the hardships they had endured at the hands of the Germans and their accomplices. This letter too appeared as an AJC ad in the U.S. and abroad on August 17, 1997.

Three days later, the first encouraging signal from Bonn arrived. After years of refusal, Germany agreed to discuss this issue with the Claims Conference, the international Jewish body that for 45 years has negotiated compensation and indemnification issues with the German government. AJC's Rabbi Andrew Baker, whose dogged persistence was a key factor in this campaign, represented us on the negotiating team.

We kept the pressure on, and it paid off. On January 12, the German government announced the allocation of \$110 million over four years, specifically to provide pensions to the estimated 20,000 survivors in need who had spent six months or longer in a concentration camp or 18 months in a ghetto or in hiding.

What were the keys to the success of our campaign?

1. The opportunities that our international programming opened up for links with Jewish communities throughout Eastern Europe and the high level of trust that was established;
2. The many years of AJC dialogue with top German officials and the credibility we established as a fair-minded and committed partner in the historic enterprise of writing a new chapter in German-Jewish relations;
3. Our willingness to give quiet diplomacy every opportunity to succeed before deciding to go public;
4. Our strong presence in Washington, which permitted effective cooperation with the Administration and Congress; and
5. Our chapter network in 32 cities, which took up this issue with fervor and made it important to politicians, the media, consular officials and the general community.

As we write this letter, we are preparing for the gala opening of our new Berlin office, headed by Gene DuBow. A 100-person AJC delegation will be in Berlin from February 8<sup>th</sup> to 10<sup>th</sup> to mark this historic occasion. We will be meeting with Federal President Herzog, Foreign Minister Kinkel, Berlin Mayor Diepgen, the leaders of Germany's growing Jewish community, and literally hundreds of German friends, including many alumni of AJC programs, who will be attending the various events. Interest in the opening of our office is so high that a Berlin press conference held on January 13<sup>th</sup> to announce plans for the office amazingly attracted over 90 television, radio and print reporters.

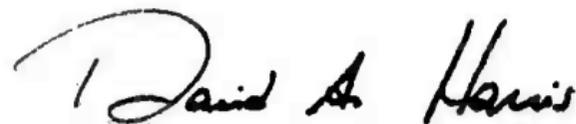
Once again, a number of our East European Jewish friends will join us next month in Germany. This time, though, it will be to celebrate how far we have come together, even as together we face the challenges and opportunities that lie before us.

As always, we welcome your thoughts and hope you will not hesitate to be in touch.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Robert S. Rifkind". The script is fluid and cursive, with the first letter of each word being significantly larger and more stylized.

Robert S. Rifkind

With best wishes,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "David A. Harris". The script is cursive and elegant, with a large, sweeping initial "D".

David A. Harris