

ACCESS MISSION TO BERLIN
Participant Journals

Sunday, October 29th

The mission began with a welcome dinner at *Dolce Restaurant*. The wine was flowing as our group of 25 (mainly from Los Angeles and San Francisco – but also 1 participant from Chicago and 1 from Tel Aviv) bonded with one another. Anja Spiller, from AJC’s Berlin office, shared an overview of our weeklong program – it promises to be packed and engaging. We were thrilled to have special guest, Jason Isaacson, AJC’s National Director of Government and International Affairs, join us.

Our first mission as AJC-ACCESS Ambassadors began after dinner as most of the group explored Berlin’s nightlife and mingled with young locals. Thank you David from AJC Berlin for helping to making this happen!

Monday, October 30th

The first morning started somewhat late – our one and only opportunity to “sleep in” – with a walking tour past the Neve Synagogue and Brandenburg Gate on our way to the Reichstag where the Bundestag (German Parliament) meets. We saw bullet holes and Russian graffiti juxtaposed against the modern structure designed by Sir Norman Foster. We scaled the famous dome with a spectacular view of the city. It was there that we came across a bar in the main press hall (hint hint Washington, D.C.).

We visited the *Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe* and then proceeded to have lunch at the AJC office with Deidre Berger, Director of AJC’s Berlin Office, Maren Qualmann and their incredible staff. We learned that AJC was the first Jewish organization to have a fully operational office in Germany and discussed their important work in Berlin and Germany.

From there we went to the fortified U.S. Embassy where we met with two high-level officials. We discussed many subjects, mostly surrounding the important role that the State Department plays in enhancing the U.S. – German relationship.

The day ended with a Middle Eastern themed feast. We were privileged to have local and international journalists join us to share their experiences and personal stores.

Tuesday, October 31st

The day began with a discussion in Kreuzberg, the Turkish community in Berlin. Turkish immigrants represent the largest minority group in Germany and face a number of challenges – many of which AJC Berlin helps to mitigate. We met with the President and Secretary General of the Turkish Communities of Berlin and with the Kreuzberg

Initiative Against Anti-Semitism (KlgA). KlgA's is unique in its mission to fight anti-Semitism among migrant workers in the Turkish community.

The program continued with a traditional Turkish lunch with various representatives and journalists from the community.

We then visited the Strasi (secret police of the former GDR) Archives. The archives include secret personal files that stretch 180 km long – impressive, but frightening information.

The official program ended with a presentation examining the communist dictatorship in East Germany.

Tonight was a free night. A number of L.A. ACCESS participants chose to attend *Tosca* at the Berlin State Opera House on Unter Den Linden.

Berlin is beautiful. The people friendly, the streets clean and the sites breathtaking. Our group is great and the experience unique. More at the end of the week. Bis Dann (until then)...

WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 1

At 9 A.M. we entered the Library Room at Cafe Einstein, an elegant coffee shop famous for its apple strudel, and we met **Israeli Ambassador Shimon Stein**. For the entire hour, he tackled our challenging questions and shared with us practical advice on how to conduct diplomacy among Europeans, especially when issues such as anti-Semitism and Israel are concerned. Despite his eloquence, humor, warmth and sophistication, he faces a rising tide of anti-Israel and anti-Jewish sentiment that seems almost impossible to curb. The role of Israeli Ambassador to Germany seems extremely challenging, and I think we were all grateful that Stein has stayed for an unusually long tour of six years.

We then took a public bus to the **German Foreign Office**, an archetype of Nazi Architecture that formerly served as the Reichsbank, and held discussions with **Karsten Voigt, Coordinator for German-American Relations**. He opened our meeting with a summary of the shifts in German "geo-strategy" following the Cold War's conclusion and German reunification, with an emphasis on how such shifts affect Germany's relationship with the United States. We then discussed issues such as the "War on Terror," on which there are some noticeable disagreements, but a shared set of values that will serve us moving forward. Afterwards, we lunched with Voigt and his colleagues at the Foreign Office cafeteria.

Immediately following lunch we headed over to the office-building that houses members of the **German Parliament, the Bundestag**. In a very modern conference room that overlooks the *Reichstag*, Diedre Berger, Director of AJC's Berlin Office, moderated a panel discussion with MP's **Ursula Heinen (CDU/CSU0, Markus Loning (FDP), and Bodo Romelow (Left Party)**. Although their parties have diverging platforms, these

three representatives seemed unified in their support for Israel and desire to combat anti-Semitism. We were impressed by their thoughtfulness and courage, and we can only hope that they gain greater influence within their parties.

From there we took a coach to the **Foreign Office's Academy**, which trains **thirty-five attaches** annually in the art of diplomacy. We met with the second-year class, an exceptionally talented and educated group that represents the *creme de la creme* of the Foreign Office (approximately 1% are accepted after a grueling nine month application process). We mingled with them for a couple of hours on their picturesque campus, and then most of them decided to change in to jeans and join us for a concert of the **Israeli funk and-hip hop band Hadag Nachash at the Neue Synagogue**. For many of the attaches, it was their first exposure to American Jews and Israeli culture, and I hope we left them a favorable impression. After the concert, a more informal type of diplomacy took place at Berlin's fine drinking establishments, thereby capping an exhausting and enlightening day for us all...

THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 2

Early Thursday morning, groups set out to 4 high school campuses across the city that are participants in AJC's "**Hands Across the Campus**" program, whose wide-ranging initiatives seek to strengthen democracy education for high schoolers. At the Amelia Earhart school in outer eastern Berlin, where students are exposed to substantial radical right-wing influences and are those who will not be able to go on to a University due to their lower test scores, Access members engaged the students on a number of topics (as well as playing hand-ball, foosball and pool) and collaborated with them **on painting a beautiful mural of Amelia Earhart on a large wall (within four hours!) as the group's gift to the school**.

At the Kurt Tucholsky school, we had the opportunity to meet one-on-one with children in grade 13. The children were welcoming, friendly, and inquisitive as to our presence in their school. To conclude our visit, we took a group picture and presented the children with souvenirs from Los Angeles and San Francisco. We were also given a comprehensive tour of the school where we observed classes in progress, including a history lesson, art lesson, and computer lab. This experience enabled us to interact with teachers and children from all different grade levels. It was an eye opening and uplifting experience that all enjoyed.

Access then regrouped at the **Jewish Museum Berlin**, designed by Daniel Libeskind and completed in 2001. A tour highlighted the museum's viscerally evocative and symbolic spaces, which speak to the Jewish experience in Germany. This was followed by a rare period of unscheduled time during which members met with various Berliners to discuss future projects or relaxed and unwound.

FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 3

The AJC participants took a 45 minutes bus ride to the **House of Wannsee Conference Memorial and Educational Site**. This villa built in 1915 and used from 1941 to 1945

by the SS. On January 20th, 1942, fifteen high ranking representatives of the SS, the NSDAP held a ninety minute breakfast meeting where plans for the "Final Solution to the Jewish Question" had been discussed. We stood at the very room where the plans for the genocide of the Jews were made.

After the visit to the house of Wannsee Conference we had a **tour of the Jewish Berlin** by bus with our informative tour guide. We went to a memorial sites. Our first stop was where Jews were boarded on trains to the concentration camps. Our other stop was a site of a burned down temple with memorial plaque of the eighty six the Berlin synagogues prior to kristalnacht. We went to an old Jewish cemetery and walked around the old Jewish Berlin areas.

We came to our hotel for the meeting at the conference center with the **Christian Staffa, Executive Director, of Action Reconciliation Service for Peace** learned about their organization providing to all people who suffered violence at their hands (Germans/Nazi) to allow us to perform good deeds and reconciliation through volunteer services, educational work, confronting German history and etc...

We meet with **Thomas Lutz, Head of the Memorial Museum of Topography of Terror**. The Topography of Terror Foundation's International Memorial Sites Overview offers a worldwide overview of the most important memorial sites, museums and research institutes and addresses the crimes of National Socialism and commemorates the victims. We went to **Shabbat services at oldest temple in Berlin** which was built in late 1800 had sitting room for 3,000 survived the kristalnacht; however, was hit by bombs during the WWII. After the services we had a very nice dinner at a restaurant. Some of the participants after the dinner went to listen to eclectic and techno music at a place on the 13 the floor on a high rise and saw the skyline of the Berlin at night.

SATURDAY NOVEMBER 4

Participants were free to do whatever they wanted. Some went out to the site of **Schsenhausen Concentration Camp**, others explored **Checkpoint Charlie**, while some saw the new **Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe** (located near the Brandenburg Gate and future Israeli Embassy) with its hundreds of coffin shaped cement blocks and impactful underground information center. It also allowed the group to see non Jewish sights such as the huge communications tower in the former east side with the "Pope's revenge" reflection of a cross, the amazing department store **Ka-De-We, the Pergamon or Bode Museum, the gay museum and gay bars, Charlottenberg Palace** or more of the diverse neighborhoods around Berlin.

(In conclusion, let me add an overview provided by one of the trip's participants...)

"The Mission most certainly added nuance and context to issues with which I was already familiar, and exposed me to challenges (such as the integration of its Turkish minority) of which I was not yet aware. I must say that Germany has done a remarkable job in preserving the Holocaust's memory and taking necessary political steps to ensure that it doesn't happen again on German soil. Whether the German government does more to

protect Jews living in Israel from a nuclear Iran or a suicidal, homicidal Palestine is uncertain and not entirely promising.

Exploring Berlin, however, was a new experience and an absolute adventure. I can think of no better words to describe it than “humbled dignity,” or perhaps, “dignified humility.” No building better represents that theme than the seat of their parliament, the *Reichstag*. And I can think of city knows how to better display the glory and horror of its past, And yet the cranes that dot the skyline point to an optimistic and ambitious future. So much – from its buildings and monuments to its artwork and nightlife and politics– suggests that the city yearns for modernity. And its vibrant and engaging youth seem determined enough to see that vision through to fruition. The trip would not have been as enlightening or enjoyable without the staff from the AJC Berlin Office. In fact, the trip would not have happened at all without their thoughtful grant application and careful planning. They all went well beyond the call of duty to create a truly memorable experience, and I am grateful to count them all as dear friends. And as memories fade, I hope that our friendships grow stronger. *Prost!*