

Speech by Dr. Christian Stocks,
Consul General of the Federal Republic of Germany
at the 64th Annual Meeting of the
American Jewish Committee, Los Angeles Chapter
(Los Angeles, April 22, 2009)

Dear Fredrick Levin, President of the American Jewish Committee, Los Angeles Chapter,
Honorable Dean and honorable members of the Los Angeles Consular Corps, Dear
Colleagues,
Dear Members of the Los Angeles Chapter Board of Directors,
Dear Seth Brysk, Executive Director,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I.

When Seth Brysk asked me a few weeks ago whether I would consider becoming the keynote speaker at today's General Meeting, it would be somewhat of an understatement to say that I was surprised.

His question was totally unexpected. I was speechless for a few seconds. And with all due respect, it felt like a decoration had been bestowed upon me. I took his asking as a sign of trust and respect, and, yes, as a token of friendship. Of course, I know that it is far from a matter of course that you should invite the German Consul to address you here today.

II.

And this is so for a very good reason.

Yesterday, on Yom Ha-Shoah or Holocaust Memorial Day, Jews all over the world commemorated the victims of the Holocaust.

They remembered the attempt to eradicate an entire people; they remembered the murder of six million European Jews, murdered by Germans, at German hands, on German command.

Millions of people were humiliated, defrauded of their rights, persecuted and murdered because they were born Jews.

This crime against humanity which was carried out in a factory of death, with efficient process and machinery will remain in history unparalleled, unprecedented, without comparison.

The Shoah's cruel effects continue to this day. There is almost no Jewish person anywhere in the world unaffected by it.

And because it was Germans that committed or instigated these crimes, I simply can not begin my speech without paying my profound respects to the Holocaust survivors and their families, and to those who have not survived, to those who have perished, and to those who have no graves where we can mourn them.

And I join the German Chancellor, Angela Merkel, who said in her speech to the Knesset last year, celebrating the 60th birthday of the State of Israel, and I quote:
“The Shoah is a source of great shame for us Germans. I bow before the victims; I bow before the survivors and before all those who helped them to survive.”

III.

In Germany, Holocaust Memorial Day falls on January 27. Thirteen years ago, the then President of the Federal Republic, Roman Herzog, proclaimed January 27, the day Auschwitz was liberated in 1945, to be Remembrance Day for the Victims of the Holocaust. And in 2005, the United Nations declared this day to be the International Day of Commemoration to honor the victims of the Holocaust— because the lessons history has to teach are important for everyone.

In Germany, on January 27, each year, the Bundestag - the German Parliament - celebrates a session which is entirely devoted to the commemoration of the Holocaust.

When then Federal President Roman Herzog proclaimed this day of national remembrance, he wanted us, the German people, to take stock on a yearly basis of what had been done, to fight xenophobia, to stand up against Anti-Semites in our own country and in other countries. And he wanted us to remember.

The first reason for us to remember is out of respect for those who have perished in the Holocaust. We remember the victims because we respect them. But the specific reason for us to remember the past is that we need to relate it to our own present and future. We need to learn the lessons the past holds for us. We have to remember in order to learn from history. And we remember for our own sake.

Remembrance means seeking the truth.

This holds true for all of us and this is an issue for all Germans, no matter when and where we were born, no matter whether we are the children, grandchildren or great-grandchildren of those who lived through the Third Reich.

IV.

Yesterday, at the Simon Wiesenthal Center Museum of Tolerance, I attended the opening of an exhibition about the fate of Jewish musicians, outlawed after 1933. This poster exhibit, accompanied by video-interviews and short documentaries, was presented by five high school students from Hamburg.

They had done their own research, spoken to witnesses, found survivors, conducted interviews.

The exhibition was very well prepared.

And they presented their study in impeccable English to high school students from the Los Angeles area.

I did not ask them how old they were. My guess is that they were high school kids of perhaps, 15 or 16 years old.

V.

Why do I tell you this story:

It shows me that we will keep on remembering. Each new generation in Germany will have to deal with Germany's past. Each generation will have to come to terms and accept the horrible crimes committed by Germans. And each generation will find their own approach.

For my generation, it was the so called *Auschwitz Prozesse* in Frankfurt, and the detailed presentation in the courts, of what Hanna Ahrendt describing Eichmann had called, "the banality of evil."

In the 1970s, an American TV mini-series called "Holocaust" influenced the debate and shifted the focus more on the suffering of the victims themselves. In the mid 80s, many intellectuals were shaken by Lanzmann's documentary "Shoah." For a later generation films like "Schindler's List" opened a way to cope with this legacy of German history. And writers and historians like Daniel Goldhagen impacted questions about the role of the Wehrmacht.

VI.

Remembrance can be realized:

Many schools encourage studies about the fate of Jewish communities. Students discover how Jewish citizens were treated in those years and experience a much needed feeling of empathy, which was so totally lacking in the 1930s and 1940s.

As the events become more remote, less personal, the German society is confronted with the question of how it should enshrine its crimes over the long term.

Looking at what the high school students from Hamburg have presented at the Museum of Tolerance, one might find the answer to this question in the very action of remembering.

VII.

And finally, we have memorials. Let me just take Berlin.

The best known, perhaps, is the enormous Holocaust memorial that dominates a large portion of central Berlin.

At the site of the former Gestapo and SS headquarters in Berlin, we will see the Topography of Terror Memorial and Museum finally completed in a few years.

The House where the infamous "Wannsee Conference" took place now houses a documentation of the Holocaust.

The Jewish Museum attracts hundreds of thousands of visitors every year.

For me, the most moving memorial is at the Grunewald train station. There right along the platforms from where the trains left with the deported Jews of Berlin, are far too many little cast-iron plaques with the date the train left, the number of deportees in that train, and the destination - which always meant death.

These memorials led the former Israeli ambassador to Germany, Avi Primor, to ask: "Where in the world has one ever seen a nation that erects memorials to immortalize its own shame?"

And he gave the answer, which I humbly report:

”Only the Germans had the bravery and the humility.”

Let me add on a personal note:

The crime itself was so horrendous, that not a million memorials would be sufficient to constantly remind us of the past.

One of the best ways to remember the innocent victims who were dragged from their apartments, herded into trucks and sent to their deaths in concentration camps was created by a sculptor who invented the so called “Stolpersteine” or stumbling blocks.

These stumbling blocks are inserted in pavements or footpaths in front of the houses where Jewish families lived 70 or so years ago, inscribed with the victim’s name, date of birth, and deportation, and the date when they were murdered. And children, passing by, at the hand of their mother, will ask: “Mami, what are these shining stones for?” And the mother will have to tell the story.

You find these “Stolpersteine” now in many cities. Cologne has some 1,400, Berlin more than 1,700. The numbers keep growing. In 2004, there were 3,300 Stolpersteine in Germany. Today the figure is around 13,000 in 280 cities.

VIII.

In Los Angeles, Holocaust-related projects have consistently received official German support. German cultural organizations, especially the Goethe-Institut, have engaged in joint ventures with Jewish and local American institutions.

The theme of Jewish and non-Jewish exile from Nazi Germany is preserved at the Villa Aurora in Pacific Palisades, the former home of the refugee writer Leon Feuchtwanger and his wife Marta, now a German-owned and financed cultural institution dedicated to the arts, the theme of exile and of German-American relations.

Some seventeen years ago, several friends founded a German American Cultural Society which includes a significant percentage of Jews (both German and non-German) whose charter includes a commitment to German-Jewish dialogue.

And finally, the German Consulate General, my predecessors and I have tried to foster friendly relations with Jewish organizations in Los Angeles.

We have co-sponsored many exhibitions, we have partnered with the Skirball , with the Hillel, with the Museum of Tolerance, with the American Jewish University, the Hebrew Union College, and, of course, with the American Jewish Committee, when it presented the Bad Arolsen Photo Exhibit.

I am very much engaged in bringing the music of composers, who suffered under the Nazi regime, to Los Angeles. With “Ostracized Music”, or, as James Conlon calls it, “Recovered Voices”, we try to give voices back to those who the Nazis tried to suffocate.

One example is the bi-annual four-day festival of Ostracized Music in Schwerin/Germany that teaches students from Germany and throughout Europe about the Holocaust and the short-lived careers of persecuted Jewish composers and musicians during World War II.

Right now, and under my auspices, and for the second time since 2007, the winners of this festival “Verfemte Musik” are in town and giving several concerts.

IX.

Ladies and gentlemen,

AJC's unique support for Israel through diplomatic, political and community engagement is well known in the United States.

For many American Jews it comes as a surprise to learn that the State of Israel and the Federal Republic of Germany enjoy very close, harmonious, and, of course, very special relations.

Last year, in his message of greeting on the 60th Anniversary of the Founding of the State of Israel, Federal President Horst Köhler said, and I quote:

“Today, Germany and Israel enjoy a partnership based on trust. In light of the unparalleled crime of the Shoah, the murder of millions of Jews committed by Germany, that by no means can be taken for granted.

Germany and Israel, Germans and Jews, are bound by both the memory of the Shoah and their shared commitment to a world in which such a crime must never happen again.

We accept this responsibility for the past and for the future.

This means that the citizens, politicians and leaders of society must raise their voices against denial or trivialisation of the Shoah and against intolerance, racism and anti-Semitism.

It means we must not look away; rather we must see and act. And it means we preserve and pass on the memory so that future generations also will remain vigilant.”

He went on saying:

“The right of the State of Israel to exist is and will remain a constituent element of German policy.

Germany supports the right of Israel's citizens to live in peace and security. To achieve this goal, there must be an end to the violence in the Middle East conflict.

We therefore vigorously support all efforts towards a just and lasting settlement of the Middle East conflict.

The path to peace leads to a two-state solution, with an Israel whose security and existence are guaranteed and with a sustainable Palestinian state within recognized borders and good neighborly relations with Israel.”

He closed by saying:

“Only those who take responsibility for the past can gain trust for the future.

In the awareness of our responsibility, we want to further deepen our good and trustful relations with Israel on the basis of our shared values.

I am very grateful that Jewish life, the creativity and vitality of which for a millennium has been a major part of German culture, is flourishing in Germany again.”

X.

Indeed, as the Jerusalem Post said in an article, Jewish life is thriving again in Germany.

Before 1990, there were only 23,000 Jewish community members in Germany. Today, it is after France and Britain the third largest, and the fastest growing Jewish population in Western Europe. Since the German government relaxed immigration laws for Jews following reunification in 1990, tens of thousands of Jewish migrants have come to Germany, mostly from the former Soviet Union.

The numbers vary. According to the Central Council of Jews in Germany, an estimated 250,000 Jews lived in my country in 2007, with some 111,000 of them registered religious community members.

Berlin has the largest Jewish community with 12,000 registered members and eight synagogues. But we always have to remember that in 1933, Berlin's Jewish community had 120,000 members – 10 times larger than today.

Synagogues that had been gutted by fire during *Kristallnacht* have been restored or received extensive makeovers. New synagogues and cultural centers like those in Munich and Dresden are now centers of flourishing Jewish life.

You again find Jewish schools and colleges.

The first rabbis ordained in Germany, after so many years, took their vows at the main synagogue in the city of Dresden.

XI.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

My time in Los Angeles as Consul General is coming to an end. My wife, Christine, and I, will leave at the end of June, and we will take the most cherished memories with us.

Never before have we been welcomed to a new posting with such open arms, and with so much goodwill. And the American Jewish Committee and so many of you present here today, played a very important role.

It was July, 2005: I had just arrived from Germany and was still suffering from jet lag, when Deidre Berger invited me to her meeting with AJC's International Group at the Hillcrest Country Club. It was there, that I met many of you for the first time.

In August that year, Honey Kessler Amado asked me to brief her about German domestic politics in the wake of the German General Elections the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung had invited her to observe. Out of that first meeting developed a friendship. We celebrated Sukkoth at Honey's and Ralph's home, discussed politics on the eve of forthcoming elections, talked about Germany and Israel, about life and religion, and even shed some tears.

Larry and Lee Ramer have been true friends, born diplomats, the two together have written an entire chapter on German-Jewish relations in general and in AJC-German relations in particular. Both are deeply involved in preserving Marta and Leon Feuchtwanger's beautiful Villa Aurora as a meeting place and a memorial for the German-speaking exiles who had found their refuge in Los Angeles.

I remember when Cliff Goldstein had just returned from a visit to Germany (he told me he had had a very hard time accepting that invitation) and Rabbi Gary Greenebaum asked me to meet with Clifford at the AJC's office to talk about international relations, foreign policy, Israel, the state of an insecure world.

So many meetings have evolved since, and I could go on forever - such as sharing German Sekt and a Riesling in the beautiful home of Sherry Weinman, who had just returned from Germany, where she had spent some time with Marcie Goldstein. They just wanted to tell Christine and me how much they had appreciated what they had seen and learned.

We will take with us the memories of long and always rewarding telephone conversations with Ruth Block, of the cordiality of Henry and Margot Bamberger, of the many discussions about the state of the State and the state of the economy with Joel Mogy, of the many concerts we heard with Esther Romano Blaugrund.

We will remember a sunny Sunday afternoon at our house, when Sherry Weinman, Deidre Berger, and I used the chance to explain to many young Jewish urban professionals that it might be worth while to sacrifice an important part of their sacred holidays to leave for a fact-finding mission to Germany. David Inlender and Adam Weiss are proof that this mission of ACCESS was a very successful one.

XII.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I assure you that I could go on and on, but I won't. What I will do, however, is to mention the more serious part of AJC's work:

When Cliff Goldstein, past-President Peter Weil and Steve Addison met with me to demand a more active German role in supporting Israel's strife with Lebanon, or the very serious discussions we had about Iran, and German companies still doing business with this country, or, this is going to be my last example, about an otherwise silent diplomacy we prefer not to talk about in public, AJC's criticism of the Durban Review Conference.

The Los Angeles Chapter, as other chapters of the AJC, had a very serious concern with regard to the Durban Review Conference which started the day before yesterday in Geneva.

When I was approached, I understood, shared and underlined this concern.

We recall how the World Conference against racism in Durban in 2001 degenerated into an anti-Semitic forum. In Durban, the agenda was supposed to address grievances from oppressed minority groups, such as the Roma in Europe and the "untouchables" in India, but it was derailed when the Israeli-Palestinian conflict took center stage and led to political recriminations. A draft resolution equated Zionism with racism and singled out the Jewish state for committing genocide, apartheid and other war crimes.

AJC voiced its concern about the Geneva Conference not only in Los Angeles, but spoke to my colleague in Atlanta as well and certainly to other European Consulates and Embassies. I would assume that Deidre Berger of the Berlin office did not sit idle, either.

To attend or not to attend was a difficult decision my government had to make. On the one hand, the Federal Republic had not missed a single UN-sponsored conference since both Germanys, then still in existence, had joined the UN in 1972. And my government is deeply convinced that the member states of the European Union should always act in solidarity, if possible as one. This required coordinated action.

On the other hand, there was a very broad feeling in Germany in favor of AJC's and Israel's concerns that this year's conference may, like the one in Durban, take an aggressively anti-Israeli, anti-Western line, given that the preparations for the conference were dominated by Libya, Cuba and Iran.

And, as the President and the Executive Director of this chapter had told me in a letter, good faith efforts to produce a draft of the Outcome Document devoted to the fight against racism

had failed. And it is true that until last changes were finally made the text had remained the basis for orchestrated efforts to put Israel alone on the accused bench.

Until the very last moment, German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier had tried to convince his European colleagues that a common line – and that meant not attending the conference - was needed.

When he realized that he would not be successful in this endeavour, Chancellor Merkel and he decided to boycott the controversial United Nations anti-racism conference.

German Foreign Minister Steinmeier explained Germany's position by saying: "This decision was not easy. As in Durban in 2001, this conference could be abused by others as a platform for their interest."

He said the decision was made out of concern that the events would be "misused as a platform for ulterior interests".

As AJC is well versed in the diplomatic vernacular, you all know what this means.

AJC Executive Director David Harris reacted immediately. He lauded Germany's withdrawal from the Durban Review Conference. He said, and I quote "We applaud Chancellor Angela Merkel and Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier for this reaffirmation of Germany's special friendship with Israel and its commitment to core democratic values."

In his statement he carried on with the expression of his hope that other nations might follow the now seven leading democracies that had determined not to attend the UN conference. He finished in saying, and I quote again: "As history has amply taught, the battle against racism and intolerance is too important to be left in the hands of those abusers, like Libya, Iran and Cuba, whose only goals are to deflect attention from their own misdeeds, protect one another from international scrutiny, and find ever new ways of vilifying Israel." End of quote.

Ladies and gentlemen,

This has been a long excursion but a necessary one, because it shows how well-chosen, discreet and efficient AJC fulfils its mission.

One of the missions of AJC is "to strengthen the basic principles of democracy and pluralism around the world, as the best defence against anti-Semitism and all forms of bigotry." Well said and well done!

All those among you who have followed the events on the opening day of the Durban Review Conference in Geneva, and I guess that means all of you, will in silence or in fury state to those who were present to listen to the speech of the President of Iran, and then decided to walk out: "We have told you so before!"

After the Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad had triggered a mass walkout among European delegates, more countries decided to boycott the meeting.

To save the final document from more instances of intolerance and hatred, the conference decided to move the passage of the final document up from Friday to Tuesday, and it was passed unanimously.

This final declaration makes no mention of the Middle East conflict.

XIII.

Ladies and gentlemen,

There are some who call AJC the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the American Jewry.

I think there is something to that. I have met among your members the most accomplished diplomats and the most knowledgeable connoisseurs of international politics. You certainly lead in international relations.

You constantly work to sustain the already excellent relationship with the consulates in Los Angeles. You offer hindsight, new ideas, sometimes a new perspective, when it comes to foreign relations. AJC's annual Consular Corps Tour which provides insight into important institutions and aspects of Judaism is already legendary.

You, in your own words, bring light to the future.

You provide impetus.

You build bridges.

Nowhere is this more visible than in AJC's relations with Germany.

The American Jewish Committee was founded in 1906 by a small group of American Jews, mostly of German descent. Their first focus was the fate of the Russian Jews. But this commitment to vigilance toward the situation of Jews worldwide, unfortunately soon became significant for the way Jews were treated in the German Reich, as well.

Since 1949, AJC has close relations with post-war Germany. It was a wise, and at that time bold, decision to open an office in Berlin in 1998.

The Lawrence and Lee Ramer Center for German-Jewish Relations has become a true Embassy of the American Jewish Committee right there on Leipziger Platz, in the heart of Berlin. And the Berlin office continues the good work, using its many contacts in matters of importance, such as anti-Semitism, democratization, tolerance, dialogue with the Muslim community, security - including that of Israel- and the quality of Jewish life throughout the world.

The American Jewish Committee and you, its board of Directors and its many devoted members, are bridge builders. Christine's and my job here in Los Angeles was to build bridges as well. Maybe that is the reason for our excellent relations – we share the same job, we are of the same trade. And we do speak the same language.

I do not mean that we share the same mother tongue. We share the universal language that is based on the common understanding that good will, a keen interest in one another, tact, and the belief that if we try hard enough - the world can be made a better place.

If we look hard enough, we find traces of this universal language in all languages spoken throughout the world.

I want to thank AJC for what it is and what it does.

I want to thank you from the bottom of my heart for your openness, compassion, friendship and for this honor to speak to you today.

Thank you very much.