



Dr. h.c. Charlotte Knobloch

Former President of the Central Council of Jews in Germany,
President of the Jewish Community of Munich and Upper Bavaria,
Vice-President of the World Jewish Congress

*On the Occasion of the Jubilee: 70 Years Association of Jewish refugees (AJR),
20th December, 2011, London*

The spoken word takes precedence

Your Excellency, Mr. Ambassador!
Ladies and Gentlemen!

I would like to thank you very much for your invitation to this event which I have gladly accepted. At the same time, I beg you to forgive my poor English.

I am particularly happy to be with you today. The Association of Jewish Refugees is one of the most important Jewish welfare organizations worldwide. Founded in 1941 by Jewish refugees, it has dedicated itself to socially and financially assisting the Jewish victims of National Socialism living in Great Britain.

Approximately 70,000 people fled from Nazi Germany and Nazi occupied Europe to Great Britain during the latter 1930s, becoming interned. Such was the case of my aunt and her family, who were among them. After the war, they were followed by many more who had experienced and survived the Nazi dictatorship in hiding, in ghettos, or in concentration camps.

The Association of Jewish Refugees, the AJR, has taken care of all these people. The AJR has supported them in co[u]ping with everyday life, accompanying them on their trips to the authorities as well as helping them in legal questions and questions on restitution. For these people, who had experienced unspeakable horror, the work of the AJR was of inestimable value. For this we owe you our deepest thanks and supreme recognition.

Ladies and Gentlemen!

I have been invited to speak to you about Jewish life in Germany. In doing so, I am fully aware of the fact that, with the Shoah in the background, many Jewish people abroad cannot understand why Jewish women and men would have remained in Germany.

In the past, I used to understand this skeptical attitude and continue to do so, yet, it has been my central concern, and still is, to explain to you my deepest conviction that the Federal Republic of Germany can be relied on a hundred percent. I have the fullest confidence in that this country – which is my native country – rests on a firm free and democratic basis, and this is also true of its politicians and citizens.

Dear Guests!

For more than 1,700 years, Jews have lived in the area of what is now Germany. They came here with all their knowledge, their experiences, their long history.

During the past 200 years, they generally represented never more than one percent of the total population.

They came here hoping and longing to find a place to stay, even a home in a country that was not yet formally defined to a people that had just started to emerge as a people.

It took a very long time until this country did accept them, until the „Jews living in Germany“ had become „Germans“.

These Jewish Germans used to play a significant part in the political development of this country as well as in its economic rise in the 19th century.

These Jewish Germans used to participate in creating the legislation of the Reichstag, the German Parliament.

These Jewish Germans used to work in the operating theaters, in the hospitals, and in the factories.

Germans who got involved, who made efforts and were ready to completely assimilate – in order to become part of German society, to be accepted free of any prejudices as its members with equal rights. Jewish communities had started to blossom already during the time of the German emperors. Quite a number of them turned to the modern society in which they used to live, assimilating fully and consciously.

World War One finally represented the decisive time for a change in the conscience of German Jews. For many of them, the start of the war offered them the opportunity to prove that they were German patriots.

Of the 80,000 soldiers serving in the front line, 12,000 never came back home. 35,000 were given decorations of all classes.

In fact, after World War One, Jewish involvement in German society became more pronounced.

The Republic of Weimar brought with it many significant improvements. Jewish scientists, artists, and writers played a notable part in the important achievements and works of this era.

And although the German Jews made every effort to assimilate as much as possible into society, they did never succeed in one endeavor: to overcome the dull anti-Semitism which was dormant in the population and which, in the end, triumphed. It was under Hitler that anti-Semitism and anti-Judaism finally got their way, being realized in the „final solution“, which was the systematic Holocaust of the Jews of Europe.

Ladies and Gentlemen!

Thanks to luck and a few courageous people, I survived that era of terror. I have looked down into the deepest abysses of human hatred.

On the other hand, I also know that religion has been planned so that it will be expressed in life's reality, in life. At present, some 120,000 Jews live again in

Germany, although this represents only 0.15 Percent of the total population – still, this should be considered a miracle. The fact that I am standing here today in front of you, this too, is like a miracle.

66 years ago, the few surviving Jews in Germany, who had been robbed in this country of everything – of their dignity, their possessions, and their dearest ones – these Jews were confronted with the probably most difficult decision of their lives. Was German Jewry to capitulate in the end because of fear, hatred, and delusion? Or should this country and its people be given a second chance?

As definite and insistent Jewish organizations abroad called for the exodus from Germany so were the German Jews torn in their hearts.

My father was firmly determined to continue to live in the previously called country of murderers. I, for my part, followed him only against my will – there were my packed suitcases in the closet, as the proverb goes.

It was only in the course of the years that he succeeded in infecting me with his unflinching confidence. And then, on 9th November, 2003, the day when we put down the foundation stone for the new main synagogue of Munich into the earth – on that day I knew what, until then, I could only have hoped: It had been right to stay. It had been right to be confident. On the eve of that day, I unpacked my suitcase.

The Jewish center is located in the heart of my home city. To me it is the symbol of the return of Jewish life into this country. A life which is much more than purely existence – it is a life in the center of society. A life as a fixed natural part of society sure of itself.

In spite of the open wounds which the Shoah had left, many Jews decided consciously, after 1945, to remain part of German life. During the first postwar decades, however, they lived hidden in a kind of snail-shell.

We lived in hiding so to speak – although we no longer needed to really hide, but we did not show ourselves openly as Jews, staying in the background – after all, we were all heavily under the impact of the years of persecution, many still suffering from trauma.

Ignaz Bubis in honored memory, one of my cherished predecessors, had put into motion a change of paradigms. He broke out of his snail-shell gathering all his energy in order to show himself to the federal citizens as a „German citizen of Jewish faith“. In the end, there was German reunification, which for the Jews, too, may be considered a new start in the years to follow. Thus, the year 1989 represents a kind of cut: At the time when the Soviet Union collapsed and there emerged concurrently a number of independent states, the fear of Jewish citizens from anti-Semitic hostility and attack was growing. The Federal Republic of Germany became their place of refuge. Within the framework of „Jewish immigration“, a total of 220,000 people have come to Germany during the past two decades. Today the Jewish communities of Germany have four times more members than in the year 1989.

Their necessary integration represented an enormous challenge for the communities, and it continues to do so. The Jewish infrastructure, intended for some 30,000 members, was not up to integrating approximately 100,000 new members. In spite of

the extension which has since taken place, not all the difficulties have yet been solved.

Still, it can be observed that the German model of the Jewish united community, where the different streams of Judaism are united under one roof, has proved itself. In lots of cities especially in the new German states communities were founded anew or again, and new synagogues were inaugurated. Immigrants are increasingly taking up leading positions in the Jewish communities, and this is a process which will have to continue.

The immigration of such a great number of Jewish people to Germany was a gift and a pleasure, the advantages of which far outweigh the conflicts which at times make difficult the exchange between immigrants and longstanding community members.

Not only the quantitative factor has played an essential part in all this, but the mental one, too. As already stated, Jewish life in Germany in the first decades after the Shoah was far from natural. The immigration from the former Soviet Union has brought about a fundamental change in the psychological state of the Jews.

The Jews in the German diaspora led a life suspended in the air, so to speak. The immigrants of the former Soviet Union have established Jewish life in the Federal Republic on a permanent basis. Their „mentality of staying“ put an end to the „living out of the suitcase“. At the same time their conviction brought about a change. Many of the old-established members, who had formerly decided of their own free will to stay, were now able to shed their feelings of guilt because of this decision.

Modern German Judaism which is sure of itself has started to leave its snail-shell. The communities consciously open themselves up to their non-Jewish citizens.

New synagogues in Berlin, Dresden, Schwerin, Limburg, Magdeburg, Chemnitz, Bochum, Krefeld, Bamberg, and lately in Speyer are visible signals as symbols of the new thinking of German Jews looking upon themselves as a natural part sure of itself within the wider German society. The communities have built new centers, formed groups for the young, and founded cultural organizations.

I have already mentioned my home city Munich as an example. Here, 68 years after the destruction of the former Munich main synagogue, the Jewish community left its life in a backyard returning into the heart of the Bavarian capital. On the occasion of the laying of the foundation stone for the new center, the former President of Germany, Johannes Rau, in honored memory expressed the following wish: “That this place may become a place of dialogue, a place to meet and to become acquainted with one another. A place which will influence our society far beyond Munich.”

A few weeks ago on the 9th of November we celebrated with a big ceremony the first five years of existence of our new main synagogue, and I am happy and proud to be able to state that we have come very close to this aim. Our new home in the middle of Munich has become a center an open place a forum for the citizens a point where inhabitants of Munich and tourists meet where the representatives of all denominations come together.

Regarding the urban, cultural, and social life of the city and with respect to the more than 9,500 community members, this move into the center of the city may be

considered an impetus of historical dimensions. Thanks to it, Jewish life in Munich has acquired once again the same importance as it had before its destruction.

Until this day more than 220,000 visitors have taken part in guided tours through the Munich main synagogue Ohel Jakob. The wide range of cultural programs is eagerly taken up by a big public interested in them. The restaurant in the community center invites all the inhabitants of Munich and the visitors to the city to a kosher brunch and dinner.

Adult education centers in Munich, Berlin, Potsdam and Frankfurt appeal to everybody, no matter which denomination, offering a diverse educational program of Jewish culture, history, and Jewish languages.

Klezmer concerts attract fans all over Germany to listen in both small theaters as well as in bigger cultural institutions.

And finally, the long-term character of Jewish life in Germany manifests itself in the ordination of rabbis in the Federal Republic. For the first time in the history of the country after the Shoa two orthodox rabbis, graduates of the Rabbinical Seminary of Berlin, were inaugurated into their position. The Rabbinical Seminary, which since its foundation in the year 2005 has formed orthodox rabbis, continues the brilliant tradition of important places of learning of the German speaking orthodox Jews which was founded by Rabbi Esriel Hildesheimer in 1873 in Berlin.

Regarding the formation of rabbis, the plurality of German Jewry comes to the fore. Even before the orthodox Hildesheimer Rabbinical Seminary, the liberal Abraham Geiger College was founded in autumn 1999 as the first rabbinical seminary in Central Europe after the Shoah.

Since then, quite a number of rabbis formed in Germany have been ordained – a few days ago once more at Bamberg.

A number of rabbis have come from abroad in order to take care of the Jewish communities in Germany. Compared to 1989, the number of community rabbis has more than tripled.

This is, however, not yet enough. Many communities do not yet have a rabbi of their own taking care of them. Thanks to a number of so-called roaming rabbis, the situation has been slightly alleviated, but this cannot be a lasting solution. This is also because many of the immigrants mentioned before have been alienated from Judaism in their former countries. In their case, it is necessary to teach them their Jewish identity and religious life practically from the start.

Ladies and Gentlemen!

Even though the rate of immigration has slowed down in the past years for the sake of continuing integration, the communities will be required to show quite some talent for improvisation, creativity, and personal engagement in the years and decades to come.

The future development of the Jewish communities will essentially depend on whether we will succeed in having the new members of the communities firmly rooted in their Jewish heritage.

Dear Guests!

Wherever I have had the opportunity to represent the Jewish community in the past years, positive signs could be recognized. German Jewry has risen again; it is now up to us to face our tasks.

The challenges of the future are clearly visible before our eyes: With the assistance of the Federation countries and communities, the Jewish communities will develop to become a supporting pillar of civil society, and they will have to prove themselves in this role in the years to come.

Like any religious community, Jews do not exist only for themselves, but they will have to take into consideration the life and the well-being of all people. In the future, it will be necessary for us to show this much more to the outside world by involving ourselves both in social life and political culture.

Among ourselves we will have to become a community with a Jewish identity which will be diverse, engaged, and long-lasting, continuing to live on even if the generation of the Holocaust survivors is no longer around. We will have to take care of the education of the coming generations. We will have to succeed in teaching them to reflect on their own existence within the context of Jewish tradition.

A major factor will also be whether we will succeed in closing the gaps between the different directions of Judaism. All those responsible for the Jewish community in Germany will have to be the other's keeper.

Respect and recognition of the achievements of others represent the necessary basis of our positive results.

Ladies and Gentlemen!

Allow me to mention at this point some of the topics which worry us as a Jewish community.

For years, social scientists have established that there is a hard core of 15 to 20 percent of German society cultivating tendentially anti-Semitic attitudes. These opinions, which are totally unfounded, have proven to be „frozen“ so to speak; meaning they are resistant to any rational arguments. And the Neo-Nazis are helping them.

The modern anti-Semitic does not sport, most of the time, either a bald head or special boots, and more than once he is somebody with an academic degree. To him, Jews and Israelis are one and the same. Perhaps he will even express sorrow for the Jews who have been dead for 70 years, but he is against those who are still alive as well as their offspring, and Israel is what makes him utter his protests the loudest.

In Germany, anti-Semitic resentments are increasingly expressed more openly and unashamedly. This is all the more depressing since this is not just a problem of a lower class, but rather one coming out of the middle of society. We might meet with it everywhere: out of the mouth of neighbors, colleagues, fellow students, pupils, or even friends.

Dear Guests!

Abroad we have got above all Iran which is arming – not only verbally. Ahmadinejad and Khomeini do not hide their preference for a map without Israel.

To me, the situation in the Near East and Northern Africa looks rather disquieting after the so-called Arab spring, which both in Germany and in Europe has been greeted with much euphoria without looking more closely at who will occupy the resulting vacuum and with which intentions.

Until now it has been the policy of the Federal Republic of Germany to stand at the side of the Jewish community as an absolutely reliable partner, no matter which party has been in power. This has been true both for its internal policy as well as its foreign policy. These reasons of state will – I have no reason to doubt – also continue in the near future. And still, even in Germany there have been signs of a creeping change in tune. In the future, the turbulences which shake our parties might further increase this tendency. Parts of the political elite have shown that they will quite easily get caught in populism – looking upon it as a kind of wrongly interpreted closeness to the people.

Another alarming development is the immense increase in anti-Jewish resentments among the Muslims living in Germany. It is especially this tendency which causes me great sorrow, since it spreads among Muslim youngsters whose influence on the other pupils should not be underestimated.

Another big challenge for German society may be seen in the unholy alliance between Islamists and the nationalistic Right.

On the other hand, a transfer of ideology takes place between Islamic groupings and the anti-Zionist Left.

Allow me, at this point, to add a few words on the latest discoveries about the neo-Nazi terror structures in Germany. For decades, we as the Jewish community have warned of the much underestimated Neo-Nazi danger. For a long time, our warnings and even the threats have not been taken seriously. The alarming new facts may and should now have the effect that the NPD, the rightist, yes, the extreme rightist party with its inhuman and anti-constitutional body of thought, will be banned, depriving it of its legal platform which has been financed by the state.

We now need authorities who are both active and defensive in prosecuting the enemies of our peaceful and free world with all – and I repeat – with all possible and necessary technical instruments in order to stop the Neo-Nazis.

We must no longer watch how this group infects our young people with their hatred. It is especially the young people who are vulnerable and open for the temptations of these ideologues aptly handling others.

It is now necessary more than ever before to stress that Hitler did not just fall from the sky. The National Socialists had been acting both perfidiously as well as systematically in order to successfully prepare their path from the twenties on –

cleverly and effectively using the social, the economic, and the mental events of their time.

The state with all its might will have to do everything in its power in order to prevent that hatred and intolerance will again take over in Germany.

And with these words, ladies and gentlemen, I have reached the end of my speech.

It has been right and important – nay, it is good that we as Jews have stayed in Germany, and that we continue to live as Jews in Germany. Free and democratic Germany was built on the ruins of civilization under the influence of the Weimar Republic and the so-called Third Reich. Heirs of a state and a society without God, without any conscience of nor any respect for the dignity of man. It was founded out of the responsibility and the firm decision to permanently secure future German generations the blessings of peace, of humanity, and of a state under the rule of law.

I have consciously lived in this country out of the firm conviction that it has been my personal triumph over the Nazis to live not just to survive in this country as a Jew and as a formerly persecuted person. I am firmly convinced that it will be possible to live the idea of human dignity the basic values of freedom equality and mutual tolerance. This has been my call and it still is. Democracy requires rational and responsible citizens who care and who engage themselves in civil society or in politics, accepting responsibility – for themselves and for others as well as for their home country. We are free people. Let's make use of this freedom – every day anew. Judaism is the religion of hope – ha-Tiqva. We always look ahead. As I have said when starting out: Religion aims at expressing itself in life.

The fact that, at present, some 120,000 Jews live again in Germany comes close to a miracle – and it is due to this unbroken faith. For me too, I have also lived in this total, this unshakable hope that Jewish life will succeed in this once broken country.

Very dear Ladies and Gentlemen!

I would not stand in front of you today if I did not believe in miracles.

Dear Guests!

Let me finish by saying: Happy Chanukka – chag sameach as well as Merry Christmas.

I wish you all happy, joyous and blessed Holidays with your families and friends and a happy new year!