

Rabbi Andrew Baker  
Remarks  
June 15, 2017

It is a great pleasure and honor to be here today to mark the twenty-fifth anniversary of our joint program, Promoting Tolerance, and to do so in the presence of its founders and partners and some of its notable alumni, as well.

It is worth recalling what we faced back then. The Wall had fallen, but the divide between East and West was still very much present. Change came peacefully in some places; violently in others. The challenges were enormous, but the sense of optimism and possibility was at its height.

The failure of Communism was self-evident—command economies that were unsustainable, political indoctrination that bred only cynicism, a controlled media that could no longer mask the social decay. But few people predicted its demise. Yet suddenly, what had been unimaginable was now immediately possible.

I recall some of those observers at the time reaching for metaphors that described the situation. As one put it, It's easy enough to make fish stew from an aquarium, but we have the job of turning that stew back into a sea of living, individual creatures.

Western democracies offered their help to develop market economies and to establish—or reestablish—genuine parliamentary systems. There were, of course, some remarkable individuals who emerged, former dissidents turned revolutionaries, who could lead and inspire. The Naumann Foundation, together with others, quickly established their place in these societies so as to make their own contributions.

Those of us at AJC and in the Jewish world joined in the celebrations. Individual Jews and Jewish communities had also been persecuted under Communism. Now they too were free—free to leave for Israel or elsewhere if they wanted, but also free to rebuild their own Jewish communities in this post-Communist environment.

But they had their own, special challenges.

Like their neighbors, they too had suffered under half a century of Communist rule. But for them that Iron Curtain had descended only after being decimated by the Holocaust. There were certainly very real questions about their ability to sustain Jewish life with such small numbers and limited resources. But these were not the only obstacles they faced. Antisemitism had been an ever-present and even virulent condition before German occupation and Soviet domination. It may have appeared to recede or to transmute into a state sponsored and state controlled form, but it had never disappeared. And with freedom of expression came the freedom to openly express prejudice and antisemitism.

It is also worth recalling that this was a critical time in German-Jewish relations.

The prospect of German unification was not universally welcomed. While AJC voiced its approval, there were other voices in Israel and the Jewish world that were more equivocal. But we were already engaged in cooperative programs with German partners, and we understood that a fully free and unified German State was surely a benefit.

One of the first challenges it faced was whether it would make a special place for Jewish immigrants from the former Soviet Union. The door had been cracked open during the brief period of an independent GDR, which acknowledged its responsibility for the Holocaust—a position steadfastly rejected by the “anti-fascist” Communist state—and welcomed these Jews. But the real policy would be set by the Federal Chancellor, Helmut Kohl, and he was lobbied by the State of Israel not to do so. (These Jews were not refugees, the Israeli Ambassador in Bonn argued, but free to make *aliyah* to the Jewish State.) He resisted. Thousands of new Jewish immigrants were resettled in Germany, and a German Jewish community that was on the verge of demographic extinction has become one of the largest and certainly most vibrant in all of Europe.

Meanwhile, in Eastern Europe we saw the difficulties of countries in confronting their own Holocaust-era past. There had never been an open and critical examination of their own societies during those years and the roles played as collaborators with the Germans in the murder of their Jewish neighbors.

Many survivors of the Holocaust, who had never received any compensation for their suffering during the Communist era, were still without help, as the German Government resisted extending benefits to them. Ironically, their non-Jewish neighbors who were veterans of the Waffen SS—and who may have directly participated in their persecution—were eligible for German military pensions.

With the reestablishment of independence some people and parties looked back to the fascist era in their history for inspiration. As such, we witnessed a revival and rehabilitation of the same leaders who were complicit in the Holocaust. People like Father Tiso in Slovakia, Admiral Horthy in Hungary, and Marshall Antonescu in Romania were now being honored.

This was the environment in which our Promoting Tolerance program was born.

We recognized that there was a natural sharing of our respective resources. The Naumann Foundation would be able to draw on the new network of contacts with emerging political leaders in Central and Eastern Europe, while AJC would bring forward its century of work to combat prejudice and discrimination and promote respect for pluralism and diversity in American society.

At the same time, it was not lost on us and surely would not be lost on our participants that this is a German-Jewish collaboration. If we could be partners in dialogue and

reconciliation after one of the most catastrophic events of modern history, then many other difficult challenges could also be addressed.

In welcoming our Promoting Tolerance participants to the United States, I have explained that if we have any solutions to share with them, it is because we have had all the problems. With such a diverse population of varied religious and ethnic backgrounds, a unified and harmonious society is far from automatic. Prejudice and discrimination were always present and combating them is a continuous challenge. From the beginning we have not seen our role as one to instruct or prescribe. Instead, we have attempted to present the various programs and initiatives undertaken by civil society and government and left it to the participants to determine what will work best for them.

Looking back now on twenty-five years, we can take pride in what we have accomplished, which is evident in the alumni of this program and what they in turn have meant for their respective societies. It is a fair and appropriate measure of success.

But we cannot ignore the fact that the forces of prejudice and intolerance have not diminished. If anything the events of recent months and years have demonstrated how much work we still must do. Some of those Central and Eastern European countries where developments had once seemed the most promising are again witnessing the growth of xenophobic and anti-Semitic political movements, the distortion of Holocaust history, and the promotion of "illiberal" democracy.

Here in Germany we have also seen the growth of right-wing movements such as Alternative for Germany, which has been winning votes by flirting with traditional anti-Semitic tropes and playing on new fears of immigrants. (Fortunately, the most recent state elections and opinion polls suggest their support is diminishing.)

But most distressing is surely the turn we have witnessed in American politics. We went through a presidential campaign that was unprecedented in its appeal to prejudice and intolerance and in its coarseness of language in public discourse. And now we are confronting its results. It is alarming, disheartening and disorienting.

And yet for all those reasons we cannot and will not retreat. If anything we need to redouble our efforts. And precisely because of these changes, when this year's Promoting Tolerance participants visit the United States they will see newly energized movements, greater civil society efforts to confront or compensate for what we might have in the past relied on government to address.

It is not an easy time, but there is plenty to do, and we will draw strength by doing it together. I am pleased that we can mark this anniversary but, more importantly, that we will keep on doing what we are doing.