

## BEYOND ANTI-SEMITISM AND PHILO-SEMITISM: SEARCHING FOR NORMALITY IN GERMAN-JEWISH RELATIONS

Roundtable Discussion at the GHI, May 24, 2004. Conveners: Simone Lässig (GHI), Jeffrey M. Peck (American Institute for Contemporary German Studies, Washington, DC), Dagmar Weiler (Bridge of Understanding, Munich). Participants: Omer Bartov (Brown University, Providence, RI), Gregory Caplan (SITE Institute, Washington, DC), Hanno Loewy (Jewish Museum, Hohenems, Austria).

The starting point for this well-attended roundtable was the recent discourse about a “new anti-Semitism.” The roundtable asked what was really “new” about this anti-Semitism, and whether there is something specifically German about this phenomenon. Here the discussion reflected on the last conference of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) in Berlin, which acknowledged that the number of violent actions against Jews was increasing in several parts of the globe.

In her introduction, Simone Lässig noted that anti-Semitism is, and historically has been, an international phenomenon. The Holocaust is part only of German history, but anti-Semitism is not and surely was never limited to Germany and German history alone. From this point of view, the roundtable discussion had to consider another phenomenon as well, a phenomenon that seemed to be more particular to contemporary Germany since 1945: philo-Semitism. Lässig reminded the audience that, on the one hand, both phenomena can undoubtedly exist without Jews. Anti-Semitism does not require the presence of a “real” Jew; neither does an apologetic attitude toward Jews and the current “Jewish culture,” which was invented by non-Jews for non-Jews. On the other hand, there can be no doubt that both phenomena affect Jewish life in Germany. The purpose of the roundtable discussion was to determine their impacts and implications for the “search for normality” in Jewish-gentile relations. In addition, the roundtable also intended to focus on politics. Here it was clear that a plainspoken anti-Semitism is still unacceptable within German and European political culture. However, it is also clear that there is increasing criticism of Israeli policies and of globalization, both of which often employ anti-Semitic stereotypes, but which do not automatically lead to anti-Semitism. From this point of view, the panelists had to address the question of how to identify the line between public discourse and anti-Semitism, as well as who defines this line. Because the conveners

were interested in discussing these questions both from a contemporary and a historical point of view, they invited experts in the fields of history, politics, and culture who would be able to represent a truly diverse range of views.

At the beginning of the roundtable, Jeffrey Peck spoke about the OSCE conference on anti-Semitism, which he had attended in Berlin, and gave a thought-provoking survey of the past and present situation in Germany. His depiction of the problem was followed by brief statements by the panelists, all of whom emphasized different aspects. Omer Bartov compared Germany with some East European countries, and made clear that even "philo-Semitism" is not a uniquely German phenomenon, but is to be found in Poland as well. Hanno Loewy offered an inspiring cultural-historical interpretation of more than a thousand years of Jewish-gentile coexistence in Germany, and closed with some reflections on the current situation, which is significantly influenced by Jewish immigrants from the former Soviet Union. Whereas Loewy concentrated more on internal problems of German Jewry and the historical as well as current relationship between Jews and Christians, Gregory Caplan pointed to what he defined as a new and especially dangerous threat. In his statement, which provoked much discussion, he warned of an anti-Semitism rooted in Islam, not only in the Arab world, but also in Germany and other European countries, including France. Finally, Dagmar Weiler presented impressions from her daily work with American Jews who visit Germany, and also some insights concerning the current situation within the Jewish communities in contemporary Germany.

It was especially this non-academic point of view that motivated many visitors to participate in the sometimes heated debate about the relationship of history to moral commitment. A further point of discussion was the question of whether and to what extent anti-Semitism is connected with the ideology and religious doctrines of Islam. Here, all panelists underscored the importance of integrating Muslims into European society, with some of them also cautioning against equating the Islamic world with anti-Semitism.

At the end, it became clear that the roundtable discussion could not address all of the questions on the table. Nevertheless, this event underlined the self-conception of the GHI as a forum for discussion that ensures that many voices are heard. While some people felt uncomfortable in dealing with anti-Semitism and the Holocaust, most in the audience expressed their deep interest in discussing the questions and problems addressed in this discussion.

*Simone Lässig*