

• By GREER FAY CASHMAN

In the strange and sometimes strained relationship between Germany and Israel, the shadow of the Holocaust never disappears.

It is thus that Johannes Gerster, who returned to Germany last week after spending nine years in Israel as the Konrad Adenauer Foundation's representative, said his most enduring impression will be Jerusalem Mayor Uri Lupoliansky attending his farewell reception:

Lupoliansky's family comes from Karlsruhe, and many of his relatives perished in the Holocaust, Gerster told *The Jerusalem Post* on the eve of his departure. Yet Lupoliansky, "an ultra-Orthodox Jew," came – not for the first time – to pay his respects to "a German Christian who is a member of a nation that destroyed his family. This is a special honor for me. It's a miracle and it contributes to the good relations between Germany and Israel."

The KAF not only encourages and sponsors dialogue between Israel and Germany – with large-scale bilateral conferences of jurists, politicians, intellectuals and journalists – but is also active in helping Israelis and Palestinians develop projects with the aim of laying the foundations for future coexistence.

It is one of several German foundations operating on a regular basis in Israel – prominent among them the Friedrich Ebert Foundation, the Heinrich Boll Foundation, the Hans Seidel Foundation and the Friedrich Neumann Foundation. Some of their work overlaps, but in general, they have separate programs. Representatives of all the foundations come together four times a year with the German ambassador to review their activities and to share common problems.

Far from resenting what could be perceived as interference in internal affairs, Israeli government bodies and NGOs turn to these foundations for assistance. The KAF gets more than 200 requests per year from both governmental and non-governmental organizations, and all the foundations put together handle around 1,000 requests.

"We're not imposing ourselves," said Gerster. "We're only facilitators."

GERSTER, 65, said he's had a pro-Israel attitude for as long as he can remember.

A former parliamentarian, he chaired the German-Israeli Parliamentary Group, and for 16 years prior to taking up his post in Israel, he was vice president of the German-Israeli Society. In Israel he became vice-president of the Israeli-German Society.

Working until almost the last minute before his departure, Gerster escorted Konrad Adenauer Foundation Chairman Dr. Bernhard Vogel, who came to Israel to oversee the changing of the guard at KAF, on a visit to Yad Vashem.

Gerster estimates that he has been to Yad Vashem at least 150 times. "After every visit I'm ill," he said, explaining that it is always a painful experience to confront the inhumanity of his people, even though his own family was different. It is a matter of public record that his parents, Gottfried and Elisabeth Gerster, were members of a group brought together by the Bishop of Mainz to help Jews escape from Nazi

Departing, not parting ways

After completing nearly a decade of service as a good ambassador in Israel, the Konrad Adenauer Foundation's Johannes Gerster has returned to Germany to perform a similar function



Bishop of Mainz to help Jews escape from Nazi Germany.

However, Gerster said, his father never dwelled on the subject. "He said it was a normal thing to do. But the more I go to Yad Vashem, the prouder I am of my family. They were ordinary, working-class people, not academics, but because of them I have been involved in German-Israel friendship organizations for 45 years. The history of Israel and Germany and the Shoah is always uppermost in my mind."

As a German, Gerster said, he carries a special responsibility for Israel's well-being. "I don't feel guilty, but I feel responsible. It's like wearing a second skin."

Although he helped to arrange it, Gerster missed out on the state visit this week of German Chancellor Angela Merkel, who is not only the chief political leader of his country but also of the party of which he has been a member since 1960, the center-right Christian Democratic Union.

Prior to joining the KAF, Gerster spent 20 years as a member of parliament. His most recent position was as chairman of the CDU National Faction of Rhineland-Palatinate. Before that he was deputy chairman of the CDU/CSU Parliamentary Faction.

Since 1996, he has served on the CDU executive committee, in which capacity he assisted in the preparations for Merkel's visit on Sunday. Though he is not returning formally to politics, he said, he will act as an adviser to Merkel.

A lawyer by profession, Gerster will return to his practice in Wiesbaden, but he won't have very much time to attend to cases. He has more than 60 speaking engagements lined up throughout Germany for the next several months, which is in keeping with his belief that the most effective way to combat anti-Semitism is to present a true picture of Israel from the perspective of a German who has spent a long time living in the country.

In addition, he has been asked by The Jerusalem Foundation and Tel Aviv University to represent them in Germany in a voluntary capacity – something he said he is pleased to do, along with advancing KAF projects for Israeli-Palestinian cooperation.

LOOKING BACK on his period of service in



JOHANNES GERSTER. 'It's better to talk to each other than shoot each other.'

Israel, Gerster said that what amazed him most was the readiness with which Israelis accepted him. He had not anticipated, he said, being showered with such hospitality.

He also expressed pride in the Konrad Adenauer Conference Center that was built during his tenure, as it has become an integral part of Jerusalem's cultural scene and a venue for national and international events.

Among his favorite projects, said Gerster is an integration program – in conjunction with the Education Ministry, Ben-Gurion University, the IDF and

Bank Leumi – for Beduins and development town youth to improve their competence in Hebrew, English and math in order to be at a level at which they can hope to go on to higher education. The program operates in 29 schools throughout the Negev. Gerster said that whereas in 1999, there were only 53 Beduin students at BGU, today there are around 600.

Yet, Gerster said, the KAF works with all of Israel's universities. Together with Tel Aviv University, for example, the KAF produced a data bank with what Gerster described as "the most comprehensive information about Arabs in Israel."

He also gave the KAF credit for behind behind the free trade zone between Jordan, Israel and the US. Jordan was losing out in sending exports to the US, explained Gerster, because shipping took 37 days, compared to 19 days from Haifa. The KAF organized annual conferences between Israeli and Jordanian business people, he said,

and set up two huge tents along both sides of the border. Contacts established not only enabled Jordanian companies to send their exports to the US via Israel, but also resulted in a number of joint ventures. The volume of trade grew from \$29 million in 1999, he claimed, to more than \$1 billion in 2004, and continued to grow in 2005. Israel, he added, earns eight percent gross on the export costs.

The advancement of the status of Jewish and Arab women is another area Gerster pointed to with pride.

Sometimes, Gerster asserted, the KAF has succeeded where all other channels have failed. He cited as an example the ongoing "unofficial" Israeli-Palestinian dialogue during the height of the intifada.

"There were official representatives from both governments," Gerster said, assessing that the economic working group was the most regular. "And Prime Minister Ariel Sharon was always kept informed about these meetings, even though he had stopped official negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians."

"It's better to talk to each other," said Gerster of such dialogue, "than shoot each other."

Gerster left Israel with the strong conviction that regardless of how difficult conditions may be, "this country will have a stable future. I'm more optimistic than 80% of Israelis."

Promising that he will have a lot to do with Israel in general and Jerusalem in particular, Gerster pledged that he would return to Israel several times a year.

So, even though he has already been succeeded at KAF by his former assistant, Lars Hansel, those who bid him farewell know that it is not really goodbye, but simply *Auf Wiedersehen*.

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