

Report from Bonn by Rainer Apel

An attack on Germany that backfired

An unusually combative Chancellor Kohl leaks the anti-German role of Bronfman's World Jewish Congress.

Criticizing a private meeting in Munich March 27 between Germany's Chancellor Helmut Kohl and the outgoing President of Austria Kurt Waldheim, an article printed that day in the *International Herald Tribune* quoted Elan Steinberg, executive director of the World Jewish Congress (WJC), as saying that the meeting showed a "shocking moral insensitivity to matters of concern to Jewish people and to all people who were involved in the events of the Holocaust."

Because of the years-long campaign of unproven media charges (in which the WJC played a catalytic role) against Waldheim as a former German Wehrmacht officer allegedly involved in deporting Yugoslav citizens to labor camps during World War II, the "Waldheim" issue is a sensitive one, and everybody would have expected the German chancellor to stay silent. Instead, Kohl responded combatively to a reporter's query, and said: "Whom I meet with here in Munich . . . that is for me to decide as chancellor, and I don't need any advice."

Kohl added that Waldheim was the "freely elected President of Austria," and since Germany wanted Austria to join the European Community soon, that Munich meeting made sense.

Continuing, Kohl said he has been in a dispute with the WJC over its German policy because of an affair in November 1989, shortly after the Berlin Wall opened. "I want to recall that a leading emissary of the World Jewish Congress was in East Berlin at that time and spoke there against German unity and the right of the German people to self-determination in an outrageous way."

These remarks earned Kohl foaming comments from various quarters of the German as well as the international Jewish community and Israel; but some senior Jewish spokesmen, such as Vienna-based Simon Wiesenthal, came out in defense of Kohl's critique of the WJC. The WJC's big campaign against Kurt Waldheim in the mid-1980s did no good, Wiesenthal declared, because it flouted the needs of the Jewish community living in Germany and Austria.

Kohl's attack on the WJC made public for the first time what historians had discovered after Germany's unification in late 1990, when scanning through the secret files of the abandoned East German (G.D.R.) regime which also told about correspondence and meetings between G.D.R. officials and senior WJC representatives. Excerpts from these files were first publicized in newspaper articles in December 1990 by Michael Wolffsohn, a German Jew working as a lecturer at the German Armed Forces College in Munich, who is a longtime adversary of Edgar Bronfman and his WJC.

In a feature article of almost a full page in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* Dec. 21, 1990, Wolffsohn documented high-level talks between envoys of the WJC and the SED regime between October 1988 and May 1990, which were recorded in the G.D.R. Foreign Ministry files found after the unification of Germany.

The SED had tried already in 1985 to make direct contact to the WJC, but was rejected on grounds that East Germany was lending support to Palestinian terrorists. Edgar Bronfman gave the go-ahead for direct talks in late

1988. This apparently earned him the highest state medal from SED party leader Erich Honecker, when visiting East Berlin Oct. 17 that year. This odd diplomacy peaked on Nov. 30, 1989, when Bronfman's chief WJC envoy in Europe, Brussels-based Maram Stern, wrote a letter to the G.D.R. welcoming the reappointment of the regime's foreign minister, Oskar Fischer, and saying the "WJC is a friend of the G.D.R. and will continue to be."

Maram Stern explained that the WJC thought German unification should be stopped at all costs. Since this view couldn't be stated in public, WJC chairman Bronfman promised, through Stern, to activate his organization's channels of influence in the United States. He reassured East Germany that the State Department didn't want unification, either. The WJC would do its best to build up the G.D.R., and even assist the East German regime in setting up diplomatic relations with Israel. The services of the two Israeli ambassadors to Bucharest and Brussels—portrayed as "more reliable" than the ambassadors to Paris and Bonn—were offered in this particular context.

Bronfman signaled high interest in signing and mediating exclusive business contracts with the G.D.R.—keeping West German companies out. Maram Stern's correspondence with the East Germans, for example, advocates a contract with the U.S. firm ITT rather than West Germany's Siemens Corp. for the planned modernization of the G.D.R. telecommunication grid. Stern advised the East Berlin regime not to allow the "sellout of the G.D.R. to the F.R.G. (West Germany)" and to resist unification of the two German states. Historic reality has taken its own course, against the secret wishes of both the G.D.R. regime and the WJC: Germany was unified on Oct. 3, 1990.