

The Atlantic Times

A Monthly Newspaper from Germany

Online Archive

[:: Return to issue.](#)

The following article is from our **December 2008** issue.

Doing Good Abroad *Americans of German descent support projects in the country of their ancestors – By Caroline Fetscher*

A young lawyer is bringing together American philanthropists with important initiatives in Germany. His non-profit organization makes foreign donations tax-deductible in both countries.

When Stefan Winheller, born 1976 in Germany, came to San Francisco to pursue postgraduate studies at Golden Gate University's law school, he soon was amazed at the number of people he met through friends and colleagues who still kept close ties to their ancestral land, Germany.



SVT BILD/DAS FOTOARCHIV.

Now, a couple of years later, Winheller is helping American donors to locate suitable and reliable projects in Germany via the American Friends of Germany, Inc. (AFoG), a non-profit organization he started in September 2005. One such project is located in the heart of Berlin: The Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe, Germany's main Holocaust memorial site built to commemorate 6 million Jewish victims of the Nazis.

The memorial, a field of concrete slabs or "stelae" designed by architect Peter Eisenman, also includes a subterranean information center. Both parts are maintained by a federal foundation whose board of directors is currently run exclusively by non-Jews. A "Hall of Names" is meant to return identity and supply biographies for as many victims as possible. Meanwhile, donors around the world are contributing to increase the number of names of those who perished.

AFoG is now helping to bring donors and the foundation together. Many Americans of German ancestry were more than willing to support German organizations or projects they considered worthwhile, Winheller found. "Americans in general have this deep need to give and to share," Winheller said. "Private foundations, individuals, trusts and companies donate about \$6.4 billion to charitable projects abroad annually."

However, as Winheller discovered while writing his dissertation on "Non-Profit Organizations under U.S. and German Tax Law," the mere technicalities of donating to projects in Germany appeared cumbersome to Americans: It was nearly impossible for them to donate the way they are used to with the same tax benefits and deductions.

Winheller sensed untapped potential. Here was a bridge to be built but no construction plans, no blueprints yet created. After starting to practice at a law firm in Frankfurt specializing in charities and tax law, he learned that his long-term goal was quite a task.

Struggling with a maze of rules and regulations, Winheller and some volunteer friends finally managed to establish AFoG as a non-profit organization with both U.S. and German jurisdiction: On Aug. 8, 2006, the group was recognized by the Internal Revenue Service as a charitable tax-exempt organization based in San Francisco with a branch office in Mannheim, Germany.

Afterward, Winheller and his companions, among them Adalbert Kurkowski, a foundation fund manager at Berliner Bank, found support among other lawyers, financial journalists and others, and started identifying the most worthwhile projects. They also plan to help organize charity dinners and transatlantic student and intern exchanges.

"Germany, and especially my hometown Berlin, has become one of the favorite travel destinations of Americans visiting Europe," Kurkowski said. "I often meet Americans who would love to contribute to maintaining cultural heritage sites in Germany but they lack an attractive platform for this. We can now offer this opportunity to Americans in the same tax-deductible way that they are used to in their home country."

Why donate to Germany, Winheller and his eight volunteer board members are sometimes asked, especially by Germans. We are not a Third World country, they wonder, why should we receive charitable support from the United States? The answer is simple: Because ties across the Atlantic are strong, they are special and they are treasured by many not wanting to lose touch, not wanting to forget.

This is especially true after Germany was salvaged from a barbaric era by the Allies, the U.S. Army in particular. Kurkowski believes it has become more important than ever to strengthen the transatlantic friendship, "now that many people's focus is shifting to China, Russia, India and Brazil."

"It happened, therefore it can happen again: This is the core of what we have to say" reads a quote in the lobby of the Holocaust Memorial Information Center from Holocaust survivor and writer Primo Levi's work, "The Drowned and the Saved."

That is also the motivation of 27-year-old Daniel Girl, a German of Czech origin, to volunteer at the memorial. The Berlin-based software developer whose parents fled Czechoslovakia in 1968 knows the power of communicating with young people via the Internet. "For instance, when someone donates online to the Hall of Names, they can pay a virtual visit to the memorial and witness their name as a donor displayed," she said. "They can place a virtual pebble on a part of the memorial – while we will put a real pebble on it for them."

What may sound strange or even alienating to older people can elicit profound responses among the younger generation. "This is so important," Girl said. "We are doing our work not only to alert and remind Germans of their responsibility, we want to remind all of mankind." He is glad that the Foundation for the Memorial has found a passionate partner in AFoG: "Nothing better could have happened to us."

Picture above: German immigrant Ida Zahler with her 11 children in New York before leaving for Ohio.