

## AVA-BERLIN, ANNUAL REPORT FROM THE CHAIR

### DECEMBER 13, 2020 – HIGHLIGHTS

#### ORGANIZATIONAL MATTERS

1 . Our last annual business meeting was held on December 15, 2019, at La Parrilla, Albrechtstrasse 11 near Bhf. Friedrichstrasse. We reviewed the past year and made plans for 2020.

2. The following Executive Committee officers were elected for 2019: ANN WERTHEIMER (chair); PAM SELWYN (vice chair); ALAN BENSON (treasurer); JANE HARTMANN (assistant treasurer); ISABEL COLE, JON WOLFE, and CAROLYN PRESCOTT (associates).

3. ANN WERTHEIMER continued as mailing list administrator and PAM SELWYN as mailing list administrator backup.

4. JON WOLFE continued as our web master.

5. CAROLYN PRESCOTT and KAREN AXELRAD posted all relevant information on our web site [www.avaberlin.org](http://www.avaberlin.org) - including KAREN's great photo documentation.

6. KAREN AXELRAD, CAROLYN PRESCOTT, and PAM SELWYN posted links to events, articles, and petitions of interest to our membership on Facebook and responded to incoming questions.

AVA has had an ongoing discussion for some time about staying on Facebook. In February we decided to stay on Facebook for the time being because our page does get quite a few visitors and allows us to network easily with other groups. However, we should make sure to have more content on the AVA website and more links from the Facebook page to that content.

7. ANN WERTHEIMER continued as liaison to the United for Peace and Justice coalition, which we joined in 2006. As a local group with no employees, AVA-Berlin pays \$50 dues a year to UfPJ. See <http://www.unitedforpeace.org/member-groups/> to find us on the members map of the world.

8. The dues for full membership with voting rights in AVA-Berlin are still €30 per year, or a self-assessed smaller amount. See [www.avaberlin.org](http://www.avaberlin.org) and then click on MEMBERSHIP for details. ALAN BENSON, with JANE HARTMANN as backup, kept dues records, answered questions, and wrote reminders.

9. We held our monthly Stammtische at Café Daddy, a family-run Turkish café with homemade food at Kolonnenstr. 50 in Schöneberg through March.

In April, because of the public health crisis, we switched to virtual Zoom meetings. Thank you to JON WOLFE and KAREN AXELRAD for organizing, to KAREN for hosting the first Stammtische, and to JON WOLFE and FLORIAN SCHIEDHELM who offered everyone technical help. JON WOLFE continued to host the subsequent Stammtische. And DOUG HILLMER hosted an extra Stammtisch in mid-November as well as this Annual Business Meeting.

We were always lucky to have people who spend weeks, if not months in Berlin, and who while they were here, come to AVA meetings and events. Now, from Maryland to Michigan and from Massachusetts to Colorado, these part-timers have become full-timers.

## OUR AVA-BERLIN PROJECTS

1. On September 28, AVA, along with our friends from the Humanistische Union, sponsored a screening of *Rigged: The Voter Suppression Playbook* (USA 2019), directed by Michael Kasino and written by Timothy Smith. The documentary examines how, since 2008, right-wing groups have worked with certain states to make it harder to vote, particularly for minority groups and young people.

We had a small audience live at the Lichtblick Kino and a larger one on Zoom. The evening was organized by NATALIE GRAVENOR as part of the One World Berlin Human Rights Film Festival.

The discussion following the movie was moderated from the Lichtblick by AXEL BUSSMER from the Humanistische Union, our co-sponsors. Our Zoom host was executive producer of the film Mac Heller, who told us all about the creation of the film..

Special guests were our own DOUG HILLMER and JON OBERG, who both participated in the discussion from the United States. Doug worked at the Census Bureau for many years, especially on the American Community Survey, which helps local officials, community leaders, and businesses understand the changes taking place in their communities. Jon worked at the U.S. Senate and at the U.S. Department of Education for sixteen years. In retirement, he blew the whistle on the false claims of student-loan lenders, achieving settlements in 7 of 9 cases against them.

Our voter registrar ALAN BENSON staffed a table in the Lichtblick lobby to inform people about voter registration in the various states.

2. On October 13, AVA sponsored *Meet the Donors* (USA 2016), directed by Emmy-winning filmmaker Alexandra Pelosi. Pelosi takes viewers behind the scenes at top-dollar fundraisers and chats with dozens of ultra-rich mega-donors from both political parties to find out why they are pouring millions into the election. Armed with her hand-held camera and a sense of humor, she gains exclusive access to the donor class, and offers a peek into the lifestyles of the rich and political. Pelosi asks these billionaires and multi-millionaires about the extent of their contributions and giving philosophies. She also interviews experts on lobbying and campaign financing reform.

For the discussion afterwards, we could again call on DOUG HILLMER and JON OBERG, who both participated from the United States (see 1 above). ALAN BENSON again staffed a table in the Lichtblick lobby to inform people about last-minute voter registration. Special thanks, again, go to NATALIE GRAVENOR, AXEL BUSSMER, and ELISA ROSI for organising these two hybrid film events.

## **PROTESTS AND PROJECTS WE JOINED**

1. On January 11, AVA-Berlin joined a rally at the Brandenburg Gate under the motto: KEIN KRIEG ZWISCHEN DEN USA UND DEM IRAN! Für gewaltfreie und zivile Konfliktlösung!

2. On February 8, in reaction to the deal-making with the AfD in Thüringen, we joined our friends at Campact in a demonstration to make clear that no party may ever cooperate with the radical rightwing AfD, neither on the federal, the state, nor the local level.

3. On November 4, the Wednesday after election day, AVA-Berlin joined the Democrats Abroad for a rally at the Brandenburg Gate to send a message that we want to see a democratic United States that counts its votes! We rallied because:

- absentee voting is fair, proven and legitimate.
- all legal votes cast must be counted.
- we believe in the peaceful transition of power between administrations.
- we do not support the current administration's vision of a racist, intolerant, climate unfriendly, and 'America-First' United States.

## **LETTERS WRITTEN, PETITIONS SIGNED, AND SPEECHES GIVEN**

1. On April 1, we thanked Heather Cox Richardson for her newsletter, *Letters from an American*:

Dear Heather Cox Richardson:

We of American Voices Abroad Berlin are reading your newsletter regularly and want to thank you. It's just what we need to read every morning. Your review of each day's events — seen through a historical lens and in a broader political context than we get from the daily news — provides us with clarity and a deeper grasp of what is happening at this critical time.

We are a group of Americans living in Berlin, some of us for decades, along with other more recent arrivals. As a group, we meet and discuss political issues, seeking a factual basis for understanding them and maintaining a commitment to democratic values and social justice. Sometimes our experiences living in Germany help us to shed light on problems in the U.S. This week we will begin to hold our regular monthly meeting via Zoom, and we also want to consider how the impact of rallies and demonstrations generally can be translated into or expressed on a virtual platform.

We all send our best wishes and hope that you keep writing your letters from America for a long time. We need them.

2. On April 4, we composed this petition for MoveOn:

To the U.S. Congress and the 50 state legislatures  
Don't Silence Voters: Let Everyone Vote from Home

Pass vote-by-mail legislation so that all Americans can cast their ballots without leaving home. Americans who live abroad always vote by mail, and Americans in the 50 states should be able to do so as well. We of American Voices Abroad Berlin, like all other U.S. citizens who live abroad, have had trouble-free experience with voting by mail (absentee ballots) for many years.

Why is this important?

We need to be able to make voting easier and more secure, especially during this public health crisis. The long lines that have plagued recent elections, as well as the touch screens and crowded polling places, are now dangerous. We cannot let the pandemic shrink voter turnout. In addition, voting by mail provides a paper trail at a time when election security is increasingly at risk. While several states have already expanded their vote-by-mail options, we would like to see every state — and the federal government — pass vote-by-mail legislation so that all citizens, no matter where they live, can safely vote in November of this year.

3. On April 30, we sent this email message to the radio program *1a: Speak Freely* on WAMU, which is broadcast from Washington, D.C. (and also on KCRW Berlin at 4:00 PM). It was the first listener message read on the air.

Americans who live abroad always vote by mail, and Americans who live in the 50 states should be able to do so as well. We of American Voices Abroad Berlin, like all other U.S. citizens who live abroad, have had trouble-free experience with absentee ballots for many years. This is how we vote.

While several states have already expanded their vote-by-mail options, we would like to see every state — and the federal government — pass vote-by-mail legislation so that all citizens, no matter where they live, can safely vote in November of this year.

4. After the virtual Stammtisch on June 4, a group of us decided to compose a statement to express our thoughts about what is happening in the United States. We felt that we had a special perspective as Americans living in Germany. We asked AVAers to feel free to forward it to our senators and representative, our governor or hometown mayor. Everyone was welcome to add a salutation (Dear Senator...) and to type in their own name and U.S. address. Or it could also be sent as a letter or op-ed to our local newspapers, or forwarded to friends and relatives, posted on social media or on our own web sites

*American Voices Abroad Berlin is a group of Americans living and working in Berlin, Germany, who follow political events in the United States and vote from abroad in their home states. We would like to add our voices to the many that have been raised nationwide and internationally to protest the brutal murder of George Floyd by police in Minneapolis on May 25. We also want to protest the harsh and militaristic reactions of the federal government as well as some state and local governments.*

*We are heartened by the hundreds of thousands who have already raised their voices. We are encouraged by the many progressive organizations from whom we have heard. We are cheered to see police officers kneeling during demonstrations in several cities. As Americans living and working in Berlin, Germany, we want to add our perspective to these calls for an end to racism, injustice, and inequality in the United States.*

*All of us living in Germany have become familiar with German history, including the rise of fascism. We are living in a place where, in the middle of the last century, state-sanctioned murder was the rule in a ruthless dictatorship that drove the entire world into war. We have seen how Germany has tried to confront its criminal past, to acknowledge and in some cases make restitution for its Nazi crimes. Acknowledgement of this past and trying to learn from it are tasks undertaken by German citizens and at all levels of government.*

*Along with the Germans, we Americans living here have learned from this country's history and have become more alert to the warning signs of fascism in the United States: dissent is called treason; the judiciary loses its independence; corporations are privileged over labor; religious symbols are misused; the press is vilified and propaganda is distributed by the authoritarian leader; science is held in contempt; lying by officials is commonplace; conspiracy theories run rampant; the military is expected to serve the leader rather than the Constitution; racial, religious, and sexual minorities are persecuted; and a militarized police force acts with impunity.*

*People around the world who protest the murder of George Floyd recognize that his death is just the latest of many such incidents, exposing not only police violence toward Black Americans but also wider tolerance of and complicity with such violence. The President's responses to the protests and his condoning of the backlash against protesters are just a continuation of the shameless suppression of minorities. American society is permeated by racism and white privilege. The systemic character of racism and inequality in the United States is exemplified by African Americans' disproportionately high rate of infection and fatality from COVID-19.*

*To stop the murders of Black Americans at the hands of police, we must rethink and restructure the police force in every community. Ultimately, the police must be demilitarized. More fundamentally and comprehensively, we need a process of reflection and education about our racist history, a process that can be initiated in communities across the country. Our experiences in Germany show us that change is possible, that people can move from ignorance to knowledge, and that they can take moral responsibility for their own future and the future of their country.*

*Many people in the United States know little, if anything, about the nature of slavery, Jim Crow, the great migration, urban renewal, redlining, mass incarceration, and the history leading to current events. We need a process of truth and reconciliation that facilitates looking at our history, talking about racism, and understanding how the concept of race has functioned institutionally throughout our history. We do not think we can solve these problems as individuals alone; we have to address them collectively.*

*We would like to encourage and be part of a process in which our country, the United States of America, confronts its own racist history and finally lives up to its democratic ideals.*

5. On August 11, AVA joined other groups in signing this Greenpeace petition:

Millions in the U.S. and millions more worldwide have contracted COVID-19. This disaster has been magnified by policy failures and irresponsible decisions and statements by Donald Trump, who has sidelined respected health experts, abandoned the WHO, and made something as basic as mask-wearing a symbol of partisanship and division.

**President Trump has failed us.**

**America needs a bold, robust [Pandemic Prevention Plan](#) to stop the current crisis—and be ready for what comes next.**

There are deadly similarities between this pandemic and HIV, SARS, Ebola, Zika, and other pandemics. Pandemics are accelerating, as a result of corporate globalization, climate change, and systemic racism. Yet, we are not doomed to repeat history. With the right policies in place, we can bring the nation and the world to a safer and healthier 'new normal' that heals America, restores U.S. leadership, rejoins our allies, and protects the world from life-threatening global diseases.

A new pandemic plan is essential to stop this outbreak now, support a just recovery, and take the international action necessary to prevent future pandemics from happening. We cannot stop a pandemic anywhere until we stop it everywhere.

We demand that Congress and the next President of the United States enact immediate COVID-19 relief and create the lasting structural changes needed to prevent future pandemic emergencies. A robust pandemic prevention plan must include:

1. **Public Health Jobs Corps:** Launch a New Deal-level permanent program to create [300,000](#) new union jobs to meet needs for contact tracing, testing, vaccinations, and support for those who must be in isolation, and eventually moving on to address other health disparities that disproportionately impact communities of color;
2. **Affordable Medicines:** A guarantee of urgently needed affordable medicines and vaccines for everyone, everywhere, instead of high-priced medicines, invented with [our tax money](#), and hidden behind patent monopoly barriers; and
3. **Global Health:** Wealthy countries must [provide funds](#) for health systems and community support in low- and middle-income countries to detect and stop pandemics when they start—before they spread.
4. **Action Against Environmental Causes of Pandemic Diseases:** Combat global drivers of deforestation and wildlife habitat destruction to prevent diseases leaping from animals to humans. This includes prohibiting the sale of products in the US from irresponsible corporations linked to deforestation, outlawing wildlife trade and partnering with Indigenous People and local communities to protect their land.

Together, we will fight for affordable medicines, increased support for a permanent public health corps for contact tracing and testing, an end to climate-change related zoonotic outbreaks, and renewed funding for global health systems, as we build towards a world where the right to health is realized.

6. In September, AVA signed on to the People's Pandemic Prevention Plan sponsored by Elizabeth Warren and Ro Khanna. We're in good company. Among the national groups that have signed are Greenpeace USA, Friends of the Earth Action, Global Exchange, Indivisible USA, Grey Panthers, and many, many more. Smaller groups like ours number in the hundreds: <https://actionnetwork.org/letters/demand-the-peoples-pandemic-prevention-plan?source=email&&>.

## OUR OTHER MODEST CONTRIBUTIONS TO CIVIL SOCIETY

1. Although AVA-Berlin has no affiliation with any political party in the U.S. or in Germany, we are always happy to explore our common interests with the Berlin chapter of the Democrats Abroad, as well as with German groups like Campact, which lost its Gemeinnützigkeit in 2019.
2. AVA is always happy to announce political events around town, especially if they are in English and/or not widely publicized. Let us know if you hear of something that might interest others. And let us know about your own exhibitions, publications, and performances. Just send the information to [wertheim@zedat.fu-berlin.de](mailto:wertheim@zedat.fu-berlin.de).
3. ALAN BENSON, AVA's chief voter registrar for many years now, led our 2020 voter registration campaign.
4. AVA-Berlin placed voter registration ads in the ExBerliner Magazine.
5. Finally, as you will hear in the Treasurer's report, we made a €400 donation to Stacey Abrams's FairFight organization in Georgia. The money was available to us because we had so few expenses this year: no new leaflets, no new banner, no screening fees.