

Jewish Life in Germany: Past and Present

Tour of the Exhibition

PRELUDE

A projection of Hebrew and Latin letters hovers over the steps of the stairway that leads visitors in the Libeskind building to the new permanent exhibition. The letters gradually move together on the way up the stairs to form town names: Erfurt, Frankfurt, Worms, and other places that stand for the history of Jews in Germany from the Middle Ages to the present.

At the entrance to the exhibition, visible from a distance, is the Welcome Point—a wooden sculpture modeled after a tree. Visitors can use this for orientation or to ask questions or write wishes onto leaves and then attach them to the tree.

Theme: TORAH

The first room in the exhibition is dedicated to the Torah. Jewish religious life revolves around the Torah, which is the main exhibit in the center of the room. In order to be able to read from the Torah, children around the world learn the Hebrew alphabet, or alef-bet, starting at an early age. At an interactive station, visitors can learn more about the Hebrew alphabet, and they can listen to a world map that offers samples of Jewish languages that developed in the Diaspora. *Aleph Bet (Hosha'ana)* is a video piece by the Israeli artist Victoria Hanna. It takes up religious traditions and melodies, connecting them with hip-hop beats and reflecting on role models.

Theme: PRAYER AND PRACTICE

How are Jewish commandments lived and interpreted today? What is their significance in everyday life? The PRAYER AND PRACTICE room addresses these questions. The video projection *Visual Prayer* finds an impressive visual language for the strength of Hebrew prayers. In the interview collage *The Way You Walk*, Jews talk about their personal way of dealing with the religious commandments, about joyful, meaningful, and difficult moments. The dietary laws (kashrut) and the concept of giving charity (tzedakah) are explained at interactive hands-on stations. At the end of this section of the exhibition, visitors learn about Shabbat as a time of rest and contemplation.

Epoch: ASHKENAZ

The historical exhibition tour begins in the early Middle Ages. Jewish communities first emerged in northwestern Europe in the ninth century. Christians and Jews lived in close neighborly coexistence, but at times hostility and violence also broke out. In the course of movements for assimilation and for separation vis-à-vis the Christian majority, a specifically Jewish culture developed, which is referred to as Ashkenazic Judaism.

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The few extant original objects within the thematic areas of the ASHKENAZ section of the exhibition are supplemented through other narrative forms. Media stations introduce visitors to the world of a medieval city or they explain key structures of congregational life during this time. IMAGE OF THE SELF AND THE OTHER DEALS with the ban on images and the presentation of Jews in Christian and Jewish manuscripts. These show how closely Christian and Jewish artists worked together and at the same time they are evidence of the rich medieval image culture. The *Sefer Sinai* displayed in this part of the exhibition is a significant manuscript from the late fourteenth century.

Ashkenazic Judaism suffered persecution, murder, and expulsion numerous times in the Middle Ages. There is an installation presenting the places from which the Jewish communities were expelled in the sixteenth century.

Theme: MUSIC

What is Jewish music? Is there a specifically Jewish sound? In the MUSIC room, visitors receive more than just one answer to these questions. They become immersed in various soundscapes that include religious and secular forms of expression—the sound of the shofar, the bells on the Torah crown, the chanting of the prayer, or klezmer and Israeli pop music. There are booths where small groups can sit together. It is possible to select one's own favorite music from a playlist.

Epoch: IN THE EARLY MODERN PERIOD

After the expulsions in the Middle Ages, Jews settled largely in rural communities in the German lands. Most of them lived their lives in a state of dependence and worried that their residence rights could be revoked. Regulations pertaining to Jews varied in the more than 300 German territories. Territorial lords charged fees for so-called letters of protection—these are on display in the exhibition in a large-scale installation.

The early modern period was a period of upheaval, as depicted by means of selected biographies: The life stations of the traveling printer Haim Shahor offer insight into the cooperation between Jewish printers and Christian print shops and also tell about the circulation of Jewish printed materials.

The longing for redemption explains the success of the story of the false Messiah Shabbtai Zvi. His life story is presented in a media station. Parallel to this, visitors can respond to questions in a game to see how good a Messiah they would make.

Theme: KABBALAH

In his work *Shevirat ha-Kelim (Breaking of the Vessels)*, artist Anselm Kiefer interprets the kabbalistic teaching of the drama of creation as developed by Isaak Luria (1534–1572) in Palestine. The Kabbalah is concerned with the mysteries of creation and the essence of God. On tablets, visitors can read about the Lurianic Kabbalah.

Epoch: WHEN JEWS BECAME GERMANS

Along with emancipation came a new role for Jews in society. They participated in the fundamental changes in all areas of life—politics, economy, culture, law, and religion.

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The exhibition tells about this new period in a number of showcases that offer examples of selected focuses. **BERLIN, BERLIN** deals with the Prussian capital as a melting pot and the hub of change during the period of the Enlightenment. **THE TWO FACES OF WAGNER** explores the Jewish reception of music and of Richard Wagner. Daniel Barenboim and Barrie Kosky tell us in interviews about their attitude toward Wagner. The founding of political Zionism by Theodor Herzl and his demand for the creation of a Jewish nation-state is the subject of **A COUNTRY OF ONE'S OWN**. In **RELIGION AND REFORM**, visitors have the opportunity to take a stroll with VR glasses through synagogues that no longer exist. **IN UNIFORM** deals with the outstanding significance that participation in the war had for Jews, as an expression of their sense of belonging to Germany. The film installation **WEIMAR** forms the conclusion of this epoch. It presents Jewish experience during the Weimar Republic years, which were marked by a new interest in Jewish culture and history, by the accomplishment of social equality, yet also by a new form of violent antisemitism.

Theme: FAMILY ALBUM

The **FAMILY ALBUM** is the Jewish Museum Berlin's way of presenting itself as a place for collecting. Ten selected family archives displayed on an interactive wall invite visitors to participate in a very personal discovery of German-Jewish history and stories. The collections were entrusted to the museum by German Jews and their descendants, including the bequests of the Munich conductor Erich Eisner and the collection of the Berlin resistance fighter Dora Schaul. Objects from each collection will be shown, including documents and photographs, everyday objects, and works of art. The diversity of objects and the navigation make it possible to gain a very personal view of Jewish (family) history.

Theme: HALL OF FAME

The **HALL OF FAME** is a humorous bow to Jewish personalities worth remembering, from Maimonides to Amy Winehouse. It is located in the middle of the exhibition path, inviting visitors to take a break and chill. The portrait drawings on the wall vary somewhere between hero worship and comics. Places to sit offer visitors a chance to rest and browse through one of the booklets.

Theme: ART AND ARTISTS

Is there such a thing as "Jewish art"? The **ART AND ARTISTS** theme room opens up various perspectives on this question. Thirty paintings by Jewish artists from the 1820s to the 1940s are presented on glass panels. In addition to works by Felix Nussbaum, Moritz Daniel Oppenheim, Jankel Adler, and Jacob Liepmann, less well-known artists can also be discovered, such as Julius Jacob and Fritz Solominski. The room's main eye catcher is the larger-than-life-size abstract sculpture *Ascension* by Otto Freundlich. The theme is rounded off by the contemporary work *archiv* by Edmund de Waal.

The artworks on display are largely from the collection of the Jewish Museum Berlin, supplemented by individual works on loan.

Epoch: CATASTROPHE

Starting in 1933, countless ordinances were enacted against Jews. Almost 1,000 of them were selected for the exhibition. Printed on large banners, they form a large-scale installation that makes it possible to experience spatially the extent and perfidiousness of the Nazi regime's bureaucratic

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hatred of Jews. Opposite this is a map depicting violent attacks on Jewish individuals, stores, and community facilities in a way allowing visitors to identify them geographically and chronologically. No one knew in 1933 how the situation in Germany would develop. This exhibition segment offers a Jewish perspective on the very different reactions of Jews to the increasing exclusion from society.

The violent pogroms of *Kristallnacht* in November 1938 marked a turning point presented using exhibits that are almost all being displayed for the first time. While up to then emigration seemed to be a personal decision, afterwards fleeing became the only alternative. The exhibition examines the bureaucratic obstacles and escape routes, as well as the desperate hopelessness and individual distress in several interactive media stations. From September 1941 on, Jews were forced to wear the Yellow Star in public and they were prohibited from leaving Germany. Biographical materials on flight, resistance, life in hiding or with an assumed identity, and suicide reflect lives at the precipice. The deportations are presented by means of a photo series on the transport of Jews from Eisenach in May 1942, documents on the bureaucracy of the persecution, and final letters from people shortly before or during the deportation. The Lodz (Litzmannstadt) and Theresienstadt ghettos and the Auschwitz concentration and extermination camp stand as examples for the structural core of the Holocaust.

This chapter of the exhibition ends with interviews with Hannah Arendt, Yeshayahu Leibowitz, and Dan Diner.

Epoch: AFTER 1945

A 40 m (130 ft)-long raised walkway extends as a three-dimensional element throughout the AFTER 1945 epoch room. WAITING FOR JUSTICE, and the triangular relationship between ISRAEL, GERMANY, AND THE JEWS are also themes, as is Russian-speaking immigration starting in 1990.

Exemplary for the subject of restitution is the sculpture *L'amitié au cœur* (*Friendship of the Heart*, 1765) by Étienne-Maurice Falconet. The Nazis stole this figure from Baron de Rothschild's collection in Paris during the Second World War and brought it to Hermann Göring's hunting lodge Carinhall. The torso was discovered after 1989. Visible traces on the object are evidence of this turbulent history, and the sculpture tells its own story from a first-person perspective in an audio station. A case study from the area of compensation is presented together with an installation from the compensation files of a Berlin lawyer.

In the ANTISEMITISM segment, an interactive media station presents present-day case studies and allows visitors to take a stand on them. There is a group room where these cases can be discussed in greater detail.

Theme: THE JEWISH OBJECT

Is it possible to define what makes an object a "Jewish object"? What objects are sacred in Judaism?

In a showcase that looks like cut crystal, almost one hundred ceremonial objects are presented in an attention-getting and spectacular manner according to their degree of holiness. At the center is a Torah scroll. Because it contains God's name, it is considered *kadosh*, sacred. Accessories, such as the Torah mantle or crown, are also on display in the showcase. They are also holy because they

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come in contact with the Torah scroll. Some other objects gain religious significance only through their use in rituals. Any plate or candlestick holder—whether artistically designed, plain, or handmade—can be used for these rituals.

FINALE

The exhibition ends with the video installation *Mesubin* (The Gathered), a final chorus of Jews on twenty-one screens talking about their being Jewish in Germany. The images and the audio tracks combine to form a many-voiced, final chord of Jewish life today. As visitors leave the exhibition they are set on their way with a quotation from Ernst Bloch's Principle of Hope: „... *so entsteht in der Welt etwas, das allen in die Kindheit scheint und worin noch niemand war: Heimat.*“ (“*There arises in the world something which shines into the childhood of all and in which no one has yet been: homeland.*”)

Innovation in the Lower Level of the Libeskind Building

In the Rafael Roth Gallery, visitors can experience Israeli artist Gilad Ratman's video work *Drummerrsss*, which was commissioned by the Jewish Museum Berlin. *Drummerrsss* is a multi-channel video installation presented on three screens. Shot on an impressive film set, it shows two drummers from different perspectives. One is inside a pit dug into the ground and the other is suspended over it in the sky. As an emotional prelude to the exhibition, Gilad Ratman's installation takes up the past and present of Jewish life as the point of departure in examining questions of nationality, culture, and identity.

As previously, the showcases in the axes of the lower level remain dedicated to flight and the persecution by the Nazi regime. In addition to objects from the museum's collection, there is also information about the paths these objects took to reach the collection, and how their provenance has been and continues to be verified.