

Press Kit

**“My verses are like
dynamite”**

**Curt Bloch’s Het Onderwater
Cabaret**

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JÜDISCHES MUSEUM BERLIN

Press information
8 February 2024

Opening of the exhibition “My Verses Are like Dynamite” Curt Bloch’s *Het Onderwater Cabaret*



Het Onderwater Cabaret, issues of 30 August 1943 and 3 April 1945. Jewish Museum Berlin, bundle/816, Curt Bloch Collection, loaned by the Charities Aid Foundation America with the generous support of Curt Bloch’s family

On 9 February 2024, the Jewish Museum Berlin (JMB) will open the exhibition “*My Verses Are like Dynamite*” *Curt Bloch’s Het Onderwater Cabaret*. Under threat from Nazi antisemitism, the young Jewish lawyer Curt Bloch (1908–1975) fled Dortmund for the Netherlands in 1933. He went into hiding there in 1942 and emigrated to the United States after the war. In his hiding place, from August 1943 to April 1945 Bloch produced a magazine with the telling title *Het Onderwater Cabaret* – “The Underwater Cabaret.” The JMB is now presenting Bloch’s work to the public for the first time.

A unique testimony to artistic resistance in hiding

Week by week, Curt Bloch created small-format booklets with artfully designed covers, containing a total of 483 handwritten poems in German and Dutch. His cover designs and poems referred to political and military events, addressing his situation in hiding and the fate of his family. He unmasked Nazi propaganda with caustic irony and sardonic wit, yet always fully aware that the National Socialists were committing mass murder against the European Jews.

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Hetty Berg, Director of the JMB, is very pleased to present *Het Onderwater Cabaret* at the JMB after extensive restoration work: “Bloch’s work is an act of artistic resistance – against the Nazi regime and its Dutch collaborators. The exhibition shows all ninety-five issues in the original and reconstructs the context and process of their making. In this way, it adds a further dimension to the images of life and survival in hiding that predominate in today’s German society: the dimension of Curt Bloch’s experience, which includes the humor and creativity he was able to bring to bear against Nazi brutality.”

Along with other works that Bloch wrote “underwater” – that is, while in hiding – the exhibition also introduces his companions and helpers, flanked by oral history interviews. The actor Marina Frenk has specially staged a performance with Richard Gonlag and Mathias Schäfer that brings a selection of Bloch’s verses vibrantly to life in an audio production and a video projection. Frenk sings her own musical settings, accompanying herself on the piano, and performs one of the poems as a duet with Gonlag.

Curt Bloch preserved his unique legacy in his New York home for many decades. Through his daughter, Simone Bloch, it has come to the Jewish Museum Berlin, where it is now shown to the public for the first time. Simone Bloch says: “It is very moving to see how the Jewish Museum Berlin’s curators have made my father’s long-hidden work visible, what they discovered along the way, and how they’ve brought the work to life with music. I take joy that my mother can share in the experience from afar. I marvel at the resources and attention expended in restoring and preserving the work. That this is happening in Berlin speaks powerfully to my father’s strong belief that times and people can change, and that one must never give up hope or the belief that one’s opinions and perceptions matter. *And* that there is almost always humor to be found. Somehow. My father would appreciate the irony that now the Jewish Museum Berlin is exactly the right place on earth to present and preserve this artistic testimony.”

Exhibition dates: 9 February–26 May 2024

Location: Jewish Museum Berlin, Libeskind Building, ground level, Eric F. Ross Gallery

Admission: free; timeslot ticket required

Special issue of the *JMB Journal*

A special issue of the *JMB Journal* will be published to accompany the exhibition. In hiding, Curt Bloch hoped his satirical underground magazine would find a large readership after the war – the *JMB Journal* will now help to fulfill that wish. The issue is available in print at the museum (price: €5) and digitally at <https://www.jmberlin.de/en/owc>.

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Online Feature

An online feature on the exhibition offers in-depth, multimedia glimpses into three selected issues of *Het Onderwater Cabaret*. You can also find background information on Curt Bloch's life in hiding and the readership of his magazine, and take a look behind the scenes of the museum's work, especially the careful restoration of the ninety-five booklets.

For the latest information on the exhibition, visit

<https://www.jmberlin.de/en/owc>

Press images are available for download with full acknowledgment at

<https://www.jmberlin.de/en/press-images-het-onderwater-cabaret>

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Factsheet

Exhibition “My Verses Are like Dynamite” Curt Bloch’s *Het Onderwater Cabaret*

Exhibition dates	9 February to 26 May 2024
Location	Libeskind Building, ground level, Eric F. Ross Gallery
Admission	free
Website	https://www.jmberlin.de/en/owc
Social media	Instagram: www.instagram.com/juedischesmuseumberlin Facebook: www.facebook.com/jmberlin X (former twitter): www.twitter.com/jmberlin Hashtag: #CurtBloch #JMBerlin
Exhibition space	400 m ²
Exhibition team	Aubrey Pomerance, Ulrike Kuschel and the JMB’s curatorial team
Exhibition management	Susanne Wagner
Exhibition design (concept, architecture, graphics)	anschlaege.de (Berlin)
Promotion campaign design	buerominimal Berlin
Core of the exhibition	Curt Bloch’s <i>Het Onderwater Cabaret</i> (OWC)
The magazine <i>Het Onderwater Cabaret</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• created in hiding between August 1943 and April 1945• 95 handwritten small-format notebooks (approx. 13.5 x 10.5 cm)• appeared every week• 483 poems in total, written in Dutch and German• 16 to 24 pages per booklet

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Other works by Curt Bloch on show	<p><i>Secret Service</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• size: 13.5 x 10.5 cm• appeared weekly from August 1943 to March 1944• contains love poems• donated by Robert Saunders
Total number of objects on display	approx. 150
Oral history interviews	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Simone Bloch, daughter of Curt Bloch, interview 5 January 2024 (Berlin/New York), copyright Jewish Museum Berlin• Karola Saunders, née Wolf, 1920–2015, place of hiding: Enschede (Netherlands), interview 2 November 1998 (London), copyright: USC Shoah Foundation Institute• Lide Schattenkerk, née Hulshoff, born 1934, lived with her family in Borne (Netherlands). Curt Bloch was in hiding with the Hulshoff family for a time. Interview 24 April 2023 (Tiel, NL), copyright Jewish Museum Berlin
Video installation	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• a large-scale video projection brings selected pieces by Curt Bloch to life in a performance specially staged by the actor Marina Frenk with Richard Gonlag and Mathias Schäfer• title: <i>On the Wing of My Imagination</i>• length: 22 min.• music: Marina Frenk• shown on a loop
Audio production	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• visitors can listen to 13 of the 483 handwritten poems from OWC and two from <i>Secret Service</i> on an audio track• 11 in German• 3 in Dutch• 1 in English• performed by Richard Gonlag
Media station	All issues of the OWC, supplemented by transcriptions, are available in digital form at a media station.
Video projection	Welcomes visitors at the entrance to the exhibition (2 min.) Performed by Richard Gonlag and Mathias Schäfer (sign language)
Publication	A special issue of the <i>JMB Journal</i> (German and English) will appear to accompany the exhibition. It is available at the museum in print for €5 and digitally at https://www.jmberlin.de/en/owc

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Online feature on the exhibition

Offers in-depth, multimedia glimpses into three selected issues of *Het Onderwater Cabaret*. You can also find background information on Curt Bloch's life in hiding and the readership of his magazine, and take a look behind the scenes of the museum's work, especially the careful restoration of the 95 booklets:
<https://www.jmberlin.de/en/owc>

Digitized original editions of the *OWC*

All 95 restored issues of the *OWC* are available online as high-resolution scans and can be viewed in detail on the JMB-Website. There, all pages can be enlarged and explored in detail.

Web project

In addition, the website www.curt-bloch.com – concurrently created by the Bloch family with several Rotary Clubs and other support in Germany – shows all the issues of the *OWC* magazine page by page, along with transcriptions of the poems and translations in three languages (Dutch, German, and English). The site also offers further background information.

Curt Bloch Collection loaned by

Charities Aid Foundation America (CAF) with the generous support of Curt Bloch's family

Press images for the exhibition “My Verses Are Like Dynamite” Curt Bloch’s Het Onderwater Cabaret

Runtime: 9 February to 26 May 2024

Current press photos can be downloaded at:

<https://www.jmberlin.de/presse>

Pictures can be used without requesting permission for current reporting only; we request you send a sample copy.

Object images

Images



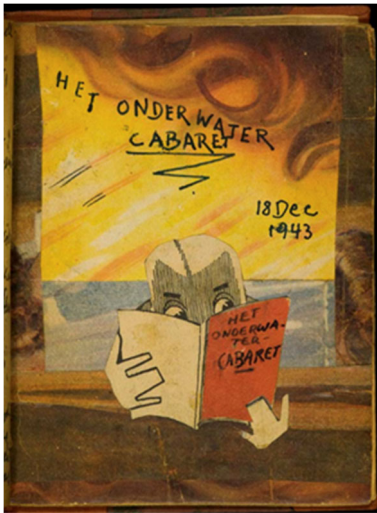
Quote to the image

Curt Bloch, Het Onderwater Cabaret, Magazine cover from 30.08.1943

Creditline

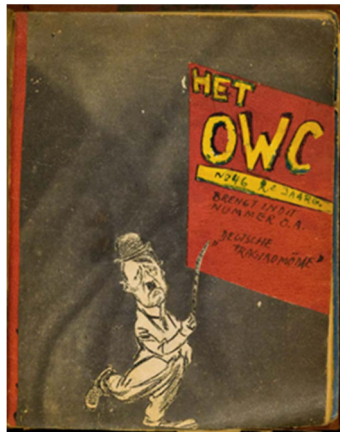
Het Onderwater Cabaret 30 Aug 1943; Jewish Museum Berlin, Convolute/816, Curt Bloch collection, loaned by the Charities Aid Foundation America thanks to the generous support of Curt Bloch's family

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Curt Bloch, Het Onderwater Cabaret, Magazine cover from 18.12.1943

Het Onderwater Cabaret 30 Aug 1943; Jewish Museum Berlin, Convolute/816, Curt Bloch collection, loaned by the Charities Aid Foundation America thanks to the generous support of Curt Bloch's family



Curt Bloch, Het Onderwater Cabaret, Magazine cover from 16.09.1944

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Curt Bloch, Het Onderwater Cabaret, Magazine cover from 03.02.1945

Het Onderwater Cabaret 30 Aug 1943; Jewish Museum Berlin, Convolute/816, Curt Bloch collection, loaned by the Charities Aid Foundation America thanks to the generous support of Curt Bloch's family



Curt Bloch, Het Onderwater Cabaret, Magazine cover from 3.04.1945

Het Onderwater Cabaret 30 Aug 1943; Jewish Museum Berlin, Convolute/816, Curt Bloch collection, loaned by the Charities Aid Foundation America thanks to the generous support of Curt Bloch's family



Portrait of Curt Bloch

Curt Bloch, undated; Jewish Museum Berlin, accession 2023/90/5, gift of Lide Schattenkerk

Exhibition texts

Intro text

Curt Bloch went underground in the Netherlands in 1942, which enabled him to survive the Holocaust. While in hiding, he created the magazine *Het Onderwater-Cabaret* (The Underwater-Cabaret), for which he was the author, editor, and graphic artist. Between August 1943 and April 1945, he produced ninety-five handwritten issues in a small format.

In 483 poems written in Dutch and German, Bloch dealt with the course of World War II, the crimes of the Nazis and their collaborators, his situation in hiding, and the fate of his family. With biting irony and sardonic humor, he exposed the Nazi propaganda and described the appalling horrors of the fascist atrocities.

Het Onderwater-Cabaret (OWC), which Bloch embellished with artistic collages and photo montages, is being exhibited for the first time. The unique work is a powerful testimony of creative resistance to war, disinformation, and persecution.

GERMAN JEWS IN THE NETHERLANDS 1933-1945

From 1933 on, the Netherlands was among the most significant countries of refuge in Europe. Roughly 24,000 Jews moved there from Germany, most of them settling in Amsterdam. Exile newspapers and publishing houses were founded and an active German-language cultural life developed, including cabaret. For many, however, the neighboring country was just a way station to a final destination.

After the pogroms during the *Kristallnacht* in November 1938, about 10,000 Jews entered the Netherlands. Some of them were placed in refugee camps, including the Westerbork Central Refugee Camp. After the Germans occupied the Netherlands in May 1940, the Nazis converted it into a “transit camp.” Most of the deportation trains leaving the Netherlands later left from there.

When the deportations began in July 1942, many Dutch and German Jews went into hiding. A total of more than 100,000 Jews were deported from the Netherlands and then murdered, which was approximately 75 percent of the Jewish population at the time of the German invasion.

“I HAVE SO MUCH FREE TIME ...”

Curt Bloch started writing poems about current events and his situation in hiding in 1943, probably as a response to the *Zondagmiddagcabaret* (Sunday Afternoon Cabaret). This fascist, antisemitic propaganda broadcast of Paulus de Ruiter, pseudonym of the songwriter and playwright Jacques van Tol, was aired weekly on Dutch radio starting in 1941.

Bloch might have wanted to counter the broadcast and presumably recited his poems as a “Sunday Afternoon Cabaret” in hiding. As of August 22, 1943, he compiled them almost every week as *Het Onderwater-Cabaret* (OWC) in booklet form. Over the following nineteen months he produced ninety-five issues of the “Underwater-Cabaret” for a very small circle of readers.

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In addition to the display of all the original OWC booklets in the showcases and selected accompanying verses, audio recordings in the original language and a video performance offer insight into Bloch's creative work.

HET OWC DIGITAL

"This month marks the first anniversary of the OWC and today I wrote my 600th (!!!) poem. I think there was a lot of chaff, though underneath also some very decent stuff. But time will tell."

Here you can page through the entire Het Onderwater-Cabaret. The digital copies of all ninety-five issues come with a complete transcription of the German and Dutch texts.

Have fun! Veel plezier!

A LOOK INTO THE WORKSHOP

Although he only had limited resources available while in hiding, Curt Bloch managed to design remarkably diverse and imaginative cover pages for Het Onderwater-Cabaret. At first he took the materials – photos, illustrations, caricatures, and advertisements – from illustrated Dutch magazines from the time prior to the German occupation. In March 1944, he obtained for the first time German newspapers and magazines through his helpers.

The cover pages of the OWC relate to one poem chosen from the respective issue. Bloch used several design methods: He cropped the images, placed them in a different context, or put together new messages made from various fragments.

POETITIS

Curt Bloch's literary work in hiding was far more extensive than just Het Onderwater-Cabaret. In September 1943, he completed *The Book of Piet and Coba*, which comprises twelve adventures of two adolescents who resist the German occupiers in Holland. An autobiographical text titled *Dortmund Beer Newspaper* was written between October 1943 and February 1944. The satirical puppet play *Odyssey through Outer Space* tells of the cosmic wanderings of the ghosts of Hitler and Mussolini in search of a final resting place.

Bloch composed all of these works in rhyming verse under the pseudonym Cornelis Breedenbeek. On birthdays and anniversaries of friends and helpers he also wrote cabarets and poems.

IN HIDING

Curt Bloch went into hiding in Enschede on August 25, 1942, some six weeks after the first deportation to Auschwitz from the Westerbork assembly and transit camp. He was supported by the resistance group around Pastor Leendert Overduin, which attempted to save Jews from Enschede and other towns in the Overijssel province. Bloch was taken in by Albertus and Aleida Menneken.

Starting in the fall of 1942, the Mennekens also hid Karola Wolf and Bruno Löwenberg in their home at Plataanstraat 15. The three in hiding already knew each other. They stayed in the attic, but could

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spend time in other rooms of the house at certain times of day. Bloch spent almost twenty-seven months there. During the last months before liberation in April 1945, he was hidden in Borne, twenty kilometers north of Enschede.

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Selected poems by Curt Bloch

The Cheater (04.09.1943)

And Goebbels swivels with the wind,
It gets quite rough sometimes,
At times he tells himself: poor soul,
The end is drawing near.

As long as they were scoring wins,
His work was more like play,
Now Tunis, Sic'ly, Stalingrad,
His plate is rather full.

The daily bombs on Germany,
Debris, civilians dead,
And Mussolini's called it quits,
The situation's grim.

Back then, after a victory
We'd shout it from the roof,
Declare the war already won
Upon our first attack.

That blissful time is over now,
Our role has shifted too:
To speak about humanity
And sneak behind closed doors.

The bombs were never Germans' fault,
Who'd do such things? Not us!
And good things come to those who wait
Is our new melody.

Be patient, please, and soon you'll see
Our luck will start to turn,
Then England will be suffering
Sit tight and keep the faith.

The weapon's being built right now
What can it be, you ask?
A secret that I mustn't spill,
Forgive me please for that.

You ask me if we stand a chance
And will this pledge be kept?
I say: the world will shortly see
Our secret weapon's scope.

This war is now in its fifth year,
Fatigued? No, not a whit!
Our mood is simply marvelous,
Our joy is sterile, pure.

We've got the trump card up our sleeve,
The card that wins the round,
We're simply not revealing it,
Its strength lies in surprise.

This is a game of poker here,
Of bluffing and deceit,
The goal is lengthening the war,
And Goebbels cheats and lies.

The watchword now is patience, please,
Endurance till we win,
The people, mollified for years,
Just want it done, this war.

When will they say enough at last?
When will they catch the trick?
When will they knock all of those cards
Straight from the cheater's hand?

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The Underwater-Cabaret (18.12.1943) (Original NL: Het Onderwatercabaret)

Carefully, one keeps it hidden,
One does not wish it to be found
For when it's found, believe me, friend,
One would truly be in trouble.

All that is said in here, indeed
Does not amuse the noble Germans.
The OWC firmly speaks
Its mind, each and every time

Is free from suppression and control,
Unrestricted by authority,
Seyss-Inquart has no power here
NSB dogs have no business here.

Is independent and free,
And opens its heart to all,
Coloured it is, in shades of freedom,
Indeed, it seems to favour red.

Is a messenger of a new era,
Which it impatiently awaits,

Yet, the readership for which it acts
Is quite small and limited,

But as one knows, these are not
The times for big publicity
Nonetheless, its readers up till now,
Are happy with the OWC.

One knows indeed, a different paper,
Wherever in Holland it may be
Can't offer its readership,
That which does the OWC.

Yet I hope it won't be long,
Until its life comes to an end
For when peace finally arrives
The OWC will vanish immediately.

So, naturally, one may desire
Its termination to be quick,
Willingly and full of joy then dies
The Onderwater-Cabaret.

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Greeting (29.01.1944)

Wherever you are lingering,
I'd like to greet you, sister dear,
And share in all your suffering
Just be there sitting at your side.

Your life has been so cruel and grim,
They robbed you of your youthful cheer,
I wanted all the best for you,
What came instead came not from me.

Oh, how you've always understood
You've always offered me support
And now you're in some distant land
With me, your brother, left behind.

Stand firm against the cruelties
So sinister, that menace you,
Stay healthy and stay safe and sound
Despite the hatred, lies, and scorn.

And when the war is gone at last,
Then off I'll go in search of you,
Within my mind I grasp your hands
And bid you quietly farewell.

I long to speak to you so much
My thoughts go flying straight your way
And deep inside my chest I feel
My breaking heart, it pains me so.

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Nazi Tyranny (03.06.1944)

More people die each passing day
More blood is spilled relentlessly
From heroes who defy your will
Who still resist you and your rage.

You keep the planet horrified
So horror's what you shall receive
For your misdeeds, those stubborn stains,
Are pillars holding up your world.

The people's panic props you up
The people's terror is your shield
You put their trembling to use
Atop your grisly, morbid shrine.

You never let the terror fade,
Oh no, you keep it strong, alive,
As you defame the German name.
By now, the world sees Germany

As evil's land, the headquarters
Of cruelty and tyranny.
The world has seen your German ways,
And what they've seen they shan't forget.

You've rounded up the multitudes,
You've flushed them out from hiding spots,

From everywhere and all around,
And yet you haven't reached your goal.

You've tortured and you've fired your guns,
You've wounded, maimed, and massacred.
The world is gushing with red blood
Because of figments of your mind.

Long sprees of theft and butchery,
Of ghastliness and savagery,
Are now, for you, affairs of state.
The murderers became police.

When people fight for liberty
They're hunted down like criminals
Until you end their misery:
Your rifles have the final say.

They speak in the new German tongue
The cant of Nazi tyranny
And yet revenge won't pass you by.
No, somehow it will reach you too.

As though alive, the bloodstained earth
Will speak to you vile murderers:
For freedom fighters you may kill,
But liberty shall never die.

Curt Bloch

Curt Bloch was born in Dortmund in 1908. He was the first child of Paula and Siegfried Bloch; his sisters, Erna and Helene, were born in 1912 and 1923, respectively. Their parents ran a delicatessen shop with kosher food. After completing secondary school, Bloch studied law in Bonn, Freiburg, and Berlin and completed his doctorate at the University of Erlangen. He did his clerkship in Lünen, Cologne, and Dortmund. The Law for the Restoration of the Professional Civil Service, passed in April 1933, brought an end to Bloch's legal career in Germany. He was also at risk due to his left-wing politics, and fled to the Netherlands.

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Simone Bloch **Daughter of Curt Bloch**

Simone Bloch is a psychotherapist and lifelong New Yorker. She graduated from Barnard College with a degree in German Literature and holds an MFA in playwriting from Columbia University's School of the Arts. She has worked a lot of jobs, among them stay-at-home mother, typist, teacher, tutor, and real estate salesperson. She earned a Masters of Social Work from Hunter School of Social Work, and a certificate in Psychoanalysis from the Institute for Contemporary Psychotherapy.

In the 1980's she had plays produced off-off Broadway and cabaret work performed at Lewis Black's West Bank Café.

She is a proud grandmother, whose children all speak German and are half Ashkenasi, half Christian Lebanese (Syrian Orthodox) from Oklahoma.

She lives upstairs from her 98 years old mother and down the block from Central Park.

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Hetty Berg

Director of the Jewish Museum Berlin

Hetty Berg became the Director of the Jewish Museum Berlin on 1 April 2020. Originally from the Netherlands, she has held various positions at the Jewish Historical Museum in Amsterdam.

She began her work there as a curator in 1989. In the span of her 30-year career, she created over 30 original temporary exhibitions, and oversaw the creation and implementation of five permanent exhibitions. Since 2002 she worked as the manager and chief curator of the Jewish Historical Museum in Amsterdam, which expanded in 2012 into the city's Jewish Cultural Quarter. Along with the Jewish Historical Museum, it includes a children's museum, the Portuguese Synagogue, the National Holocaust Museum, and the Hollandsche Schouwburg memorial site.

Hetty Berg was born in 1961 in The Hague. After studying dance for four years in London and Amsterdam, she studied theater studies in Amsterdam. While pursuing her career, she received a master's degree in management for non-profit organizations in Utrecht. Berg is proficient in six languages and is a member of several scholarly councils and committees; for example, since 2016, she has been a member of the Dutch National Committee for the Code of Ethics for Museums, and from 2007 to 2013, she was a member of the board of the Association of European Jewish Museums.

Her work and research focuses on cultural history, including Jewish performance, Jews in the Netherlands and museum studies. She has published numerous books and scholarly essays on these subjects; most recently in 2017 as coeditor of *Site of Deportation, Site of Memory: The Amsterdam Hollandsche Schouwburg and the Holocaust*, in 2020 as editor of *Waterlooplein: De buurt binnenstebuiten*, and 2021 as coeditor of *Reappraising the History of the Jews in the Netherlands*.

In addition, she has organized many international symposia and scholarly conferences, for example, together with the American historian Georg Mosse (1918–1999), with the Israeli demographer and statistician Sergio Della Pergola, with the American Rabbi David Ellenson, as well as with the American author and educator Susannah Heschel.

Hetty Berg has been a member of the Liberal Jewish Community in Amsterdam for over 40 years. Together with her partner, the French photographer Frédéric Brenner, she travels regularly to Israel.

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Curatorial team

Aubrey Pomerance

Exhibition Curator, Jewish Museum Berlin

Aubrey Pomerance has directed the archives of the Jewish Museum Berlin, and the JMB branches of the archives of the Leo Baeck Institute New York and of the Wiener Holocaust Library, since 2001. He was born in Canada in 1959 and studied Jewish Studies and East and Southeast European History at the Free University of Berlin. In 1995/96, he became a research assistant at the Institute for Jewish Studies there. From 1996 to 2001, Aubrey Pomerance was a research assistant at the Salomon Ludwig Steinheim Institute for German-Jewish History in Duisburg. At the Jewish Museum Berlin, he curated the exhibitions *Roman Vishniac's Berlin*, *Ruth Jacobi: Photographs*, and *Shrines, Papyri, and Winged Goddesses: The Archaeologist Otto Rubensohn*, and was also one of the curators of the JMB's new core exhibition, which opened in 2020. He publishes on German-Jewish commemorative culture, Jewish lives during the Nazi era, Jewish photographers in Berlin, archives, and archival education.

Ulrike Kuschel

Exhibition Curator

Ulrike Kuschel, born in Berlin, worked as an artist specializing in photography after completing her degree at the Berlin University of the Arts in 1998. She received the Gasag Art Prize in 2006 and several grants for her artistic work, including an artist-in-residency at the Villa Massimo in Rome in 2010. She has held teaching positions at art academies in Germany and in Hangzhou, China, and was a member of the jury for the art promotion program of the Stiftung Kunstfonds Bonn from 2017 to 2020. Between 2019 and 2022, she worked on various projects at the Deutsches Historisches Museum in Berlin. Following her assistance for the DHM exhibition *Hannah Arendt and the Twentieth Century*, she curated *Report from Exile – Photographs by Fred Stein* there in 2020.