

The Future of Jewish Museums in Germany

by Bernhard Purin

In early post-war Germany there were only a few early efforts to present Jewish history and culture to the wider public, such as the exhibition ‘Synagoga’ in Recklinghausen and Frankfurt in 1960-61 or ‘Monumenta Judaica—2000 Years of Jewish History and Culture on the Rhine’ in Cologne in 1963-64. Those exhibitions gave a broad overview of Jewish history beginning with the Roman period up to the early 1930s. The Holocaust was not brought up for discussion and even the term ‘Holocaust’ did not exist; in both exhibition catalogues only the ‘fate of the Jews’ was described as something anonymous that happened in a dark but far away past.

Also, the main events in the early 1960s dealing with the German past—the Eichmann trial in Jerusalem and the Auschwitz trials in Frankfurt—did not initiate a new discussion of the German past. Only in the late 1970s, with the broadcast of a US miniseries, was there something like a turning point: *Holocaust*, the story of the fictive Weiss family during the Shoah was not only the first occasion when the persecution of the European Jews became visible in an individualized way, it also made the term ‘Holocaust’ common in German.

At the same time in the late 1970s, the ‘Dig Where You Stand’ movement of ‘barefoot researchers’, which started with local research on the workers movement, did

the first research into local Jewish history with a special focus on the Holocaust. This development reached its peak in 1988 when Germany commemorated the 50th anniversary of 'Kristallnacht'. In that year alone about 400 books on local Jewish history were published all over Germany.

Beside this research, more and more Jewish sites came into local historians' view. Jewish graveyards, former synagogues, Jewish schools and ritual bathes were rediscovered and renovated for use as small museums and memorial sites. Even to insiders the number of such small sites open to the public is unknown, but I would assume that there are about 100 such 'Places of Remembrance' all over Germany. In addition to these small places, a few main Jewish museums have been founded in Germany, starting with the Jewish Museum of Frankfurt in 1988, then in the late 1990s the Jewish Museum of Franconia with its two sites in Fürth and Schnaittach, and last but not least the Jewish Museum Berlin opened in 2001 to become one of the most successful and most visited museums in Germany. It will be followed by the Jewish Museum Munich, which will open in 2006.

At this point it should be noted that there is a significant difference between museums in Germany and elsewhere. Sabine Offe, a German scholar who recently published a book on Jewish Museums in Germany and Austria, remarked: 'Jewish Museums in Germany differ from those in the USA in that they are not embedded in contemporary Jewish life. They have been established for a largely non-Jewish public, mostly lacking in knowledge and experience of Jewish history, culture and religion. Those who conceive of, establish, and work within these museums are mostly non-Jewish'.

It is against this background—the difficulties of dealing with Germany’s past and the different non-Jewish staff and audience—that the controversies should be seen in which nearly every Jewish museum in Germany was involved during its development. I’ll not go into the details of these controversies but I see the main reasons for these conflicts in some kind of excessive demands that Jewish museums in Austria and Germany are confronted with. Jewish museums in Germany, even the smallest ones, should:

- teach students and adults local and general Jewish history
- explain 3,000 years of Jewish culture and religion in a concise manner
- document and remember the Holocaust not only as educational institutions but also as sites of remembrance for both the victims and the descendants of the perpetrators
- express the will of society to fight against racism
- and last but not least be a political statement of responsibility and political correctness.

But what about the future of Jewish museums in Germany? With the opening of the Jewish Museum of Munich in 2006 the years of the foundation of Jewish Museums will probably come to an end. Some of today’s existing museums, especially smaller ones, may be closed in the near future because of a lack of audiences. (It should be noted that there are number of small museums in former synagogues open only every first Sunday of the month and with fewer than 300 visitors a year.) The other museums, including the leading institutions, will change their profiles and their programs but also the type of visitors coming to them.

Actually I see three main challenges and changes that will become important for Germany's Jewish museums in the next few years and that will maybe create a new Jewish museum paradigm, which will of course influence the concept for the new Jewish Museum in Munich.

1. Like most German museums, Jewish museums are affected by the question of how to deal with looted art. But for Jewish museums it's a very sensitive field because they are more deeply involved in it than other museums. Nearly every collection item of a Jewish Museum older than 60 years was touched by the Holocaust in one or another way. These objects are silent witnesses of the Holocaust. And as the last survivors able to tell their own experiences pass away, these objects will develop a higher significance in the field of Holocaust education. While most of the German museums see the problem of looted art and Holocaust-related assets as only a legal issue, Jewish Museums could become an example in offering new ways of dealing with this issue. A number of examples that have taken place in several Jewish Museums in the last couple of years demonstrate this.

2. Another main new development that affects the world of German and Austrian Jewish museums in the last few years is the growing interest of descendants of Jewish families all over the world in becoming a part of the museum's community. In 1998 in Hohenems, for example, there was a first meeting of descendants of people from that area, a meeting that was setup and organized by them alone. Around 250 people attended it from the United States, Great Britain, Israel, and Australia. Most of them had never

visited the place before. None of them were born in Hohenems; nor were their parents, and fewer than five who joined this meeting had grandparents who were born in Hohenems. At least half of the participants of this three-day-meeting were not Jewish any more. Meanwhile, a ‘Society of Friends of the Jewish Museum Hohenems in the United States’ was founded, which is running its own website and publishing a newsletter two times a year. For the members of this society, a visit to Hohenems became a ‘must’ on every visit in Europe and they are also supporting the museum financially.

This summer, in the small village of Creglingen, 80 miles east of Stuttgart, a small Jewish museum will be opened, mainly funded by Arthur Obermayer, a philanthropist from Philadelphia whose grandparents immigrated from this small German village to the United States around 1900. On his website Obermayer explains his motives:

One of the most appealing aspects of this museum is that it represents a joint project of Germans and Jews. So many individuals from the community and region have given generously of their time and their support. The city as well has been a major donor to this project and the board has devoted countless hours to its success. This symbolizes the kind of healing process that the museum is intended to foster. What was not even an idea two years ago is now becoming a reality, and what started out as a genealogical venture is now turning into an important source of reconciliation between Germans and Jews.

Also, at other places like Halberstadt in the former GDR or in Fürth, there are first indications of such connections between those museums and descendants all over the world. Also for the Jewish Museum of Munich the relation to descendants will be an integral part of the museum’s concept. We’ll have an information and study area with special offers for them like databases on Shoah victims, genealogical materials, etc.

3. Also the consequences of the tremendous changes inside the German Jewish community since the collapse of the Iron Curtain affect Jewish museums. When the main Jewish museums of Germany were planned in the 1980s, fewer than 30,000 Jews lived there. The prospects of this community were very pessimistic. Most of the members were aged because many of the younger generation had left Germany. The Jewish museums were planned as a substitute for a lost culture, which was not visible any longer. But with the collapse of the Eastern bloc since 1989, about 100,000 Jews from the former Soviet Union moved from there to Germany and changed the German Jewish community dramatically. To illustrate this changes some numbers should be mentioned: The Jewish community of Munich for example had 3,000 members in 1989, and today it's the second largest community in Germany with nearly 9,000 members. Even in smaller places like Fürth such growth can be observed. There in the late 1980s only 50 Jews formed a small congregation, which grow up in the last 15 years to about 500 members.

As a result of this development Jewish culture in Germany became not only more visible but also for the first time in post-war Germany the diversity of Jewish cultures becomes more visible. Until the early 1990s Germany's Jewry spoke 'with one voice', but today the different orientations in Judaism build up their own lobbies and especially in cities like Berlin something like a new Jewish subculture has arisen. At this point it should be remarked that the Jewish Museum Berlin, for example, does not deal with these latest developments. Although the permanent exhibition tells the story of the Jews in Germany from the beginnings till today visitors will not find any information on the immigration of Jews from the former Soviet Union to Germany.

But it should become one of the main aims of Jewish Museums in Germany to be not only a place of remembrance of the German Jewish history but also a place where the majority of the Jews in Germany find their own roots too, roots which are not linked with German Jewish history but with Russian Jewish history.

Another phenomenon which can be observed in the last couple of years is the change in the staffs of Jewish museums in Germany. A few years ago not more than a handful of Jewish curators worked in Jewish museums, but today more and more well-educated young Jewish academics have started to work in Jewish museums and they will also change the profile of these institutions. German Jewish museums will probably become more 'Jewish' in that they will no longer be German cultural historical museums dealing with a lost culture. But unlike American Jewish Museums, which are in the framework of Jewish communities and visited mainly by Jews, in Germany there could be an opportunity to create a new type of Jewish museum, where Jews and non-Jews think together about their past, present, and future and where visitors, Jewish or not Jewish, are encouraged to deal with their common questions.

But these challenges could only be mastered if Jewish museums in Germany will not be any longer understood as Places of Remembrance and sacred spaces of memory but as laboratories where past, present, and future could be discussed by both curators and visitors.