

“There is perhaps no other major Western city that bears the marks of twentieth-century history as intensely and self-consciously as Berlin”, stated Andreas Huyssen in his work *The Voids of Berlin*.

Berlin is, once again, a national capital and one of the most exciting cities in Europe. One of the grandest capitals in Europe for the first forty years of the twentieth century, it would, after the war, be divided until 1989. Today it is a vibrant city with a growing number of Jews, mainly of Russian descent. Indeed, it is the fastest growing Jewish community on the continent.

From a Jewish perspective, Berlin today is one of the most historically interesting cities in the world. Its Jewish past cries out from all around its streets and buildings. Memories and memorials exist below foot, at street level, on the sides of buildings. Berlin is enshrouded in guilt and apologies for the unforgivable on every cobbled street and avenue.

Jews first settled in Berlin, probably in the thirteenth century, and the medieval history is much like the situation of Jews in much of Europe, with the usual diet of ritual murder charges, blood libels, burnings at the stake, expulsions and readmissions. But Berlin was to become the hub of the intellectual Enlightenment, and was followed by Jewish Haskalah and fight for emancipation. Yet, the Jews’ fight for emancipation and acceptance was reflected in the Christian rejection of the Jew and change of medieval anti-Judaism into modern, political and racial anti-Semitism.

The twentieth century saw an explosion of modernity, advancement and war. The Jewish community of Berlin reached new heights of success in art, literature, business, theatre and religious endeavour. However, whilst the First World War was seen as the opportunity for the community to prove their allegiance to Germany, it also became the graveyard of emancipation with the unseemly rejection

Berlin – an exciting city

by

Dr Charles Landau

From 30 May to 2 June, Charles, with Rabbi Kaplan, will lead a party of HGSS members to Berlin, seeking out its Jewish history and learning how it is coming to terms with its past



The Jewish Museum, designed by Daniel Libeskind

of the Jews with the infamous Jew Census.

The decline of Germany and its Jewish 1000-year community is familiar to all. With the rise of the Nazis, Berlin became the epicentre of what would become the machinery of the Third Reich.

Whilst the tour will concentrate on Berlin, we will also travel out to Wansee – beautiful Wansee, with its summer villas of the wealthy, is infamous for the *House of the Wansee Conference* of 1942. At the conference were Reinhard Heydrich and Adolf Eichmann and other Nazi functionaries who collated the workings and responsibilities of ‘The Final Solution’. Today, the villa is a museum dedicated to the remembrance of the Holocaust. But a tour of Berlin is not only a tour

of Holocaust memorials – it is also a celebration of the greatness that was German Jewry. With that in mind, we shall visit the Wansee villa of the impressionist painter Max Liebermann, President of the Prussian Academy of Arts until 1932. The beautifully restored villa and gardens, with its 400 works of art by Liebermann, are a testament to the rise, success and destruction of Weimar, Berlin Jewry.

In Berlin we shall journey down the famous Unter den Linden, view the State Opera, Humboldt University, Museum Island and stop at the iconic Bebelplatz, the site of the book burning of 1933. There, one can contemplate the titles of 20,000 books that were destroyed, whilst gazing through the glass of the Micha Ullman memorial. We will be reminded of the famous line of Heinrich Heine “Where they burn books, they ultimately burn people”. Overlooking the Bebelplatz is St Hedwig’s Cathedral with its story of one of many ‘Righteous Gentiles’.

In contrast to the actions of the few righteous gentiles, we will visit the haunting ‘Platform 17’ with its memorial of ‘Hollow Figures’ and there, in the centre of a smart Berlin neighbourhood, contemplate the ‘innocence’ of the bystanders. From this Grunewald Railway Station, Jews

were forcibly deported to the East and every transport is recorded, dated and numbered.

Possibly the most powerful memorial is not a memorial as such. Before the war 16,000 Jews lived in the Bavarian Quarter of Berlin's Schoenberg district. Today, the creeping isolation, deprivation, exportation, deportation and murder of the Jews are remembered through 80 two-sided plaques on 80 lampposts throughout the area. Each plaque represents, through diagram and words, the gradual dehumanising of the Jews.

The Peter Eisenman *Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe* was first proposed in 1988 and completed in 2004. It is placed in the very centre of Berlin, close to the Reichstag and Hitler's bunker. It consists of 2700 concrete slabs over some 19,000 square metres. The ground on which the slabs sit is undulating and disconcerting. The meaning of this massive memorial is for you to decide. Underneath the memorial is the Information Centre which contains the names of millions of Holocaust victims. Equally famous is the Jewish Museum designed by Daniel Libeskind. More memorable for its design than its content, it contains within it a history of German Jewry, German Jewish women and German anti-Semitism. Part of the museum, with a brilliant use of light and space, evokes the feeling of loss, death and sadness, not through images but by silence and emptiness as in the Holocaust Tower and by noise as when walking on the 'Fallen Leaves' inside the haunting Memory Void.

Whilst visiting Checkpoint Charlie we will see the divide between East and West Berlin and hear many of the stories of life during the 'wall' period. A short walk takes one to the newly built museum of the Topography of Terror, a major documentation centre. Many of the exhibits are still to be seen along the street next to the museum.

In celebration of Berlin Jewry, we will contemplate the life and times of the Jewish Enlightenment, the Haskalah, the times of major personalities and rabbis, and the life and



Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe,
designed by Peter Eisenman



*The destroyed interior of the Fasanenstrasse Synagogue.
It has now been beautifully restored*

times of Moses Mendelssohn whilst visiting his grave.

The city was blessed with some of the most magnificent synagogues in the world. Germany's biggest synagogue has been beautifully restored on Rykestrasse. The façade of the Fasanenstrasse Synagogue has been kept at the entry to the Jewish community centre. But restored to its golden, shining magnificence is the New Synagogue on Oranienburger Strasse. Its dome is clearly visible from the top of the Reichstag and from much of Berlin. Inaugurated in 1866, it housed 3200 worshippers and was the most famous house of worship in the whole of Germany. Major personalities of German Jewry officiated under its huge dome, including Louis Lewandowski, composer of some of the most famous chazanut we still hear, sing and love to this very day.

He is buried in the Berlin-Weissensee cemetery which we will visit. It is one of the largest Jewish cemeteries in the world and gives an insight into Jewish life in Germany from 1880 to today. Nearly 120,000 people are buried in the cemetery and it has a special section dedicated to those that died in WW1. Its vastness and its beautiful mausoleums allowed a number of Jews to survive the war hidden in Weissensee, and it remained relatively unscathed by the Nazi period.

We will walk the streets of Berlin visiting sites of once great Jewish stores and banks, of secret hiding places during the war and Rosenstrasse the site of the only known women's protest against the Nazis in 1943.

Together, our small group will have an inspiring and powerful trip to Berlin. The HGSS group will be kept small for the benefit of manoeuvrability, social cohesion and access to the guide.

**To join the group, contact Charles Landau on
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