



1700 Years of
Jewish Life in
German-speaking
Lands

Scan this QR Code and visit
the *Shared History* website.



The year 2021 marks the 1700th anniversary of the earliest document that mentions a Jewish community north of the Alps – an edict issued by Emperor Constantine of Rome permitting the Cologne city councilors to oblige Jews to hold public office.

The Leo Baeck Institute – New York | Berlin (LBI) established the *Shared History Project: 1700 years of Jewish life in German-speaking lands* to demonstrate how the history of Jews in this region has been deeply intertwined with the history of the majority population for close to two millennia.

The *Shared History Project* explores this history using 58 artifacts from over 50 different archives and museums, which are presented and discussed in historical essays and personal stories written by more than 60 scholars, archivists, and museum experts.

From Constantine's edict to Moses Mendelssohn's glasses to a pendant found in the ruins of the Sobibór death camp to the Jewish Museum Berlin, these objects illuminate multiple aspects of Jewish life in German lands over the centuries.

Throughout history, Jews and other minorities have been in a constant struggle for rights, recognition, and opportunities to participate in the larger society while maintaining their own group identities.

Studying this history is essential today as countries across the globe face radical ideologies that threaten cultural and social diversity. Understanding how a civil society protects and supports everyone, regardless of religion, culture, or country of origin is critical to the future.

In place of a chronological approach, this exhibit uses selected objects to examine themes – including migration, everyday life, acculturation, achievement, and persecution – that come up at various times through the centuries.

LBI hopes that this exhibition, the online essays (linked via QR codes on each panel), and the Shared History Project website – www.sharedhistoryproject.org – raise awareness of the rich history of Jews in German-speaking lands and its relevance to contemporary challenges around the world.



800

c. 1060

1096

1348


1450


58 BCE


321 CE

380

Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages







Julius Caesar leads Roman conquest of northern Gaul.

Emperor Constantine decrees that Jews in the provincial capital Colonia Agrippina (Cologne) can serve on the city council.

Emperor Theodosius I declares Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire.

800

c. 1060

1096


1348

1450

Early Modern











Charlemagne establishes the Holy Roman Empire. In 814 he issues laws forbidding Jews from moneylending and commerce.

Rashi studies at the Yeshiva in Worms. The cities of Speyer, Worms, and Mainz are in the midst of a golden age of Jewish learning.

The First Crusade. Crusaders carry out murders and expulsions of Jews on their way to Jerusalem.

The Black Death. One-third of Europe's population is wiped out. Many Jews flee to Eastern Europe to escape expulsions and massacres.

Invention of the printing press.

1492


1517


1618 – 1648


1783

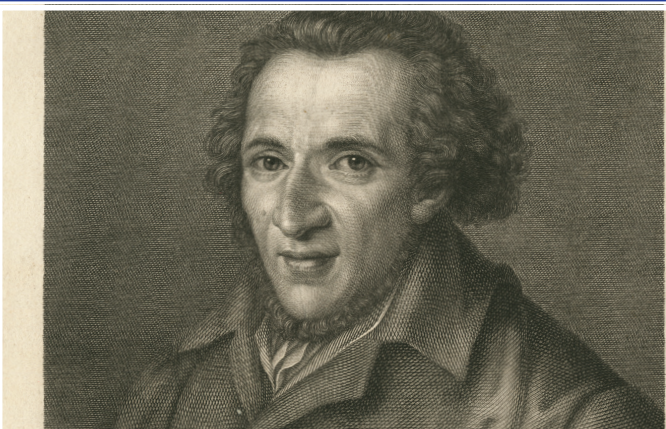
1789


Absolutism











Spanish reconquest of Iberian Peninsula from Muslim Umayyad Empire. Jews expelled from Spain.

Beginning of the Reformation.

30 Years' War leads to devastation and population loss.

Jewish philosopher Moses Mendelssohn translates the Hebrew bible into German.

French Revolution spreads universal rights.

1914 – 1918

1806


1848


1867

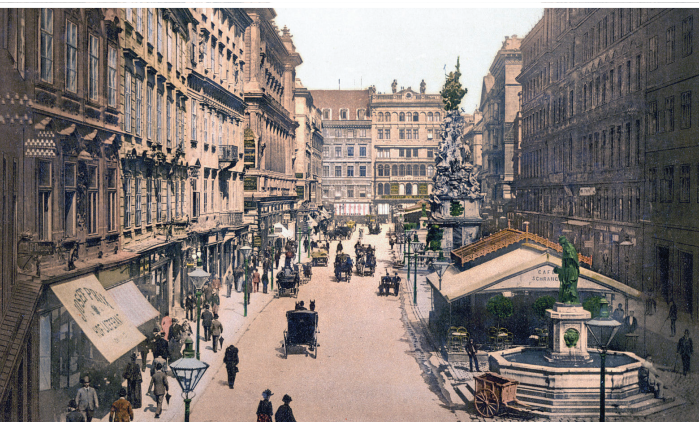
1871


1897


19th Century to World War I











Napoleon grants Jews equal rights of citizenship in German lands under French control (they are lost after Napoleon's defeat in 1814).

March Revolution. Attempts to establish a unified democratic Germany fail.

Austro-Hungarian "Dual-Monarchy" established.

Unification of Germany under Bismarck. Jews receive full rights of citizenship.

First Zionist Congress in Basel.

1914 – 1918

1918

1922

1929

1933

Weimar Republic and National Socialism











World War I. Tens of thousands of Jews serve on all sides.

Democratic regimes established in Germany (Weimar Republic) and former lands of the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

German-Jewish industrialist and Foreign Minister Walther Rathenau is assassinated.

World Economic Crisis.

National Socialists gain control of German parliament and suspend democracy.

1935


1938

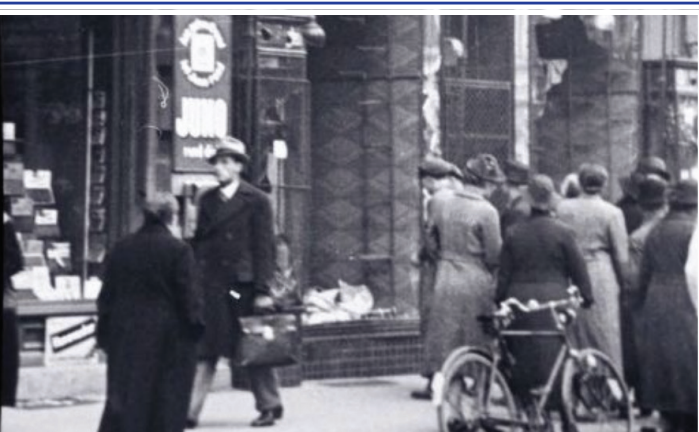
1939

1942


1945


The Holocaust











Nuremberg Race Laws.

Annexation of Austria (March) and November Pogroms. Massive emigration of Jews.

German invasion of Poland marks start of World War II.

The Nazis plan the murder of European Jews at the Wannseekonferenz.

Liberation of concentration camps.

1947


1948


1949


1961


1990

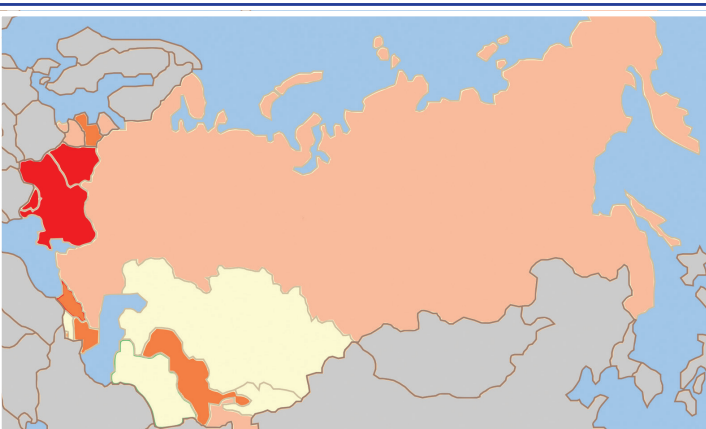
Postwar to Present











All but a small fraction of the approximately 250,000 Jewish survivors in the "Displaced Persons" camps in Allied-occupied territory emigrate.


Founding of the State of Israel.

Founding of the Federal Republic of Germany (West Germany) and the German Democratic Republic (East Germany).

Construction of Berlin Wall.

Reunification of Germany. Approximately 215,000 Jews immigrate to Germany from the former Soviet Union.

2020



Jewish Museum Berlin opens its new core exhibit, *Jewish Life in Germany: Past & Present*.

Jews first arrived in Roman settlements along the Rhine as traders, craftsmen, soldiers, and even slaves. Ever since, they have moved within, away from, and back to German-speaking lands in pursuit of economic opportunities or fleeing persecution and violence.

Migration is an integral part of human history, and the movement of Jews to and from German-speaking lands is a prime example. As was the case with other migrating groups, there were many push and pull factors that determined Jewish migration over the centuries. While economic opportunities in new places encouraged some entrepreneurial individuals to relocate, persecution and anti-Jewish riots also forced the relocation of entire Jewish communities.

Jews migrated into and out of German-speaking lands for many reasons over the last 1700 years, beginning during the late Roman Empire, when they first arrived as traders, craftsmen, soldiers, and even slaves. Moving for new rights and economic opportunities or away from persecution and violence, Jews established connections between German cities and across Europe. In the 19th century, many Jews left for new lives in America, while many Eastern European Jews migrated into German-speaking lands.

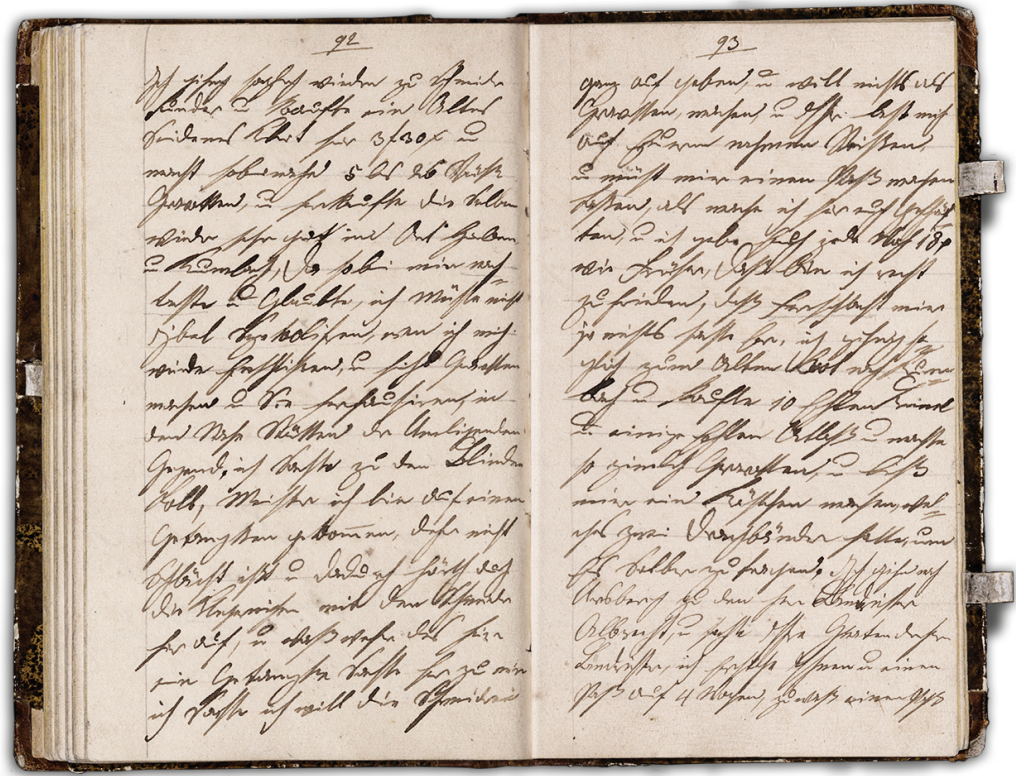


Hamburg during the Life of Glückel of Hameln

Glückel of Hameln achieved remarkable success in business in the 17th century while based in Hamburg, the city depicted in this model.

Initially, Glückel helped her husband establish a successful gold and pearl business. After his death, Glückel took over and became one of the few women who traveled on her own to distant trade fairs and negotiated business agreements as an equal partner. Jewish migration meant that Glückel had access to a broad network of business contacts stretching from London to Amsterdam, Bamberg, Danzig, Hanover, Copenhagen, Frankfurt, Leipzig, Berlin, Paris, Vienna and Saint Petersburg.

[📍 Hamburg, Germany](#)
[🕒 1646 – 1724](#)



The Memoirs of Lazarus Morgenthau

In his memoir written in the 1850s, Lazarus Morgenthau tells the story of his itinerant family and childhood poverty. For the Morgenthau family, as for many other German Jews, migration was linked to hope for moving up the socio-economic ladder. Morgenthau's memoir of a hardscrabble childhood includes several moves within Germany and ends with his early business success.

Later in his life, he moved even further in pursuit of opportunity, to the United States, where his descendants led successful and influential lives. Lazarus' son Henry became an American diplomat, serving as US ambassador to the Ottoman Empire during World War I. Lazarus' grandson, Henry Morgenthau Jr., served as Secretary of the Treasury to President Franklin D. Roosevelt.

[📍 Kleinwallstadt, Bavaria, Germany](#)
[🕒 November 30, 1842](#)



[Access essay here](#)



Reunion of Former Jewish Soviet soldiers in Frankfurt am Main

After the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, approximately 215,000 Jews migrated from former Soviet countries to Germany, transforming Jewish life in their new home. New Jewish communities were established, and existing communities saw a sudden influx of new members. The Soviet immigrants had to adapt to a new language and culture in Germany, but they also faced the challenge of building and retaining their Jewish identities.

They also brought a different set of historical experiences to the country that perpetrated the Shoah. For example, Soviet veterans who fought against Germany in World War II remain very proud of their service. Here they are gathered in a Frankfurt synagogue to celebrate May 9 – Victory Day – the anniversary of Germany's unconditional surrender which ended World War II.

[📍 Frankfurt am Main, Germany](#)
[🕒 May 9, 1991](#)

Jewish and Christian lives were also connected on a daily basis – in the marketplace, the workplace, and neighborhoods.

Writing history is a necessarily reductive enterprise, and Jewish historiography’s focus on the outstanding achievements of Jewish luminaries and the great violations committed against the Jews long overshadowed the everyday lives of Jewish people. Since the 1960s, however, historians have turned toward a systematic examination of everyday life, and we now have a richer understanding of the quotidian customs, joys, and sorrows of Jewish people. Some of them are unique to the Jewish experience, and many are shared with their non-Jewish neighbors.

The Spice Tower tells us about the strong interdependence of Jews and Christians in manufacturing, as well as about cultural and religious exchange in the 18th century.

Ritual Spice Tower

This Spice Tower from the 18th century is a ritual object used for the Havdalah ceremony at the end of Shabbat. It was commissioned by a Jew from Frankfurt and built by a Christian manufacturer in Schwäbisch Gmünd.

In addition to Jewish symbols, the Spice Tower displays biblical scenes based on Christian models, which shows that Jews were familiar with Christian symbolism and wished to integrate it into their own imagery.

[📍 Schwäbisch Gmünd, Baden-Württemberg, Germany](#)
[🕒 c. 1700 – 1750](#)





[Access essay here](#)

Simson “Schwalbe” KR-51 Moped

The Simson “Schwalbe” (Swallow), an East-German-made moped, is a cult-object that can still be found on German roads today. The beloved scooter is part of everyday life in Germany – but it is also a piece of Jewish history. It was produced by a formerly Jewish-owned company which was stolen by the Nazis and nationalized by the socialist government of the GDR.

The story behind the moped gives insights into the strong involvement of Jews in the German manufacturing sector during the industrial age. It shows that their success often meant a success for Germany as a whole. However, the rise and fall of Jewish entrepreneurs always depended on rights given or taken away by the majority society.

[📍 Suhl, Thuringia, Germany](#)
[🕒 Manufactured 1964 – 1986](#)

While an everyday object, Theodor Herzl’s postcard to his daughter represents the century-long struggle for the establishment of an independent Jewish state, as many Jews did not expect to ever experience the complete acceptance and freedom of their identity in German lands.

The Simson “Schwalbe” tells a story of a shared, interdependent, and yet disrupted history between Jews and the majority society in the German economy during the 19th and 20th centuries.

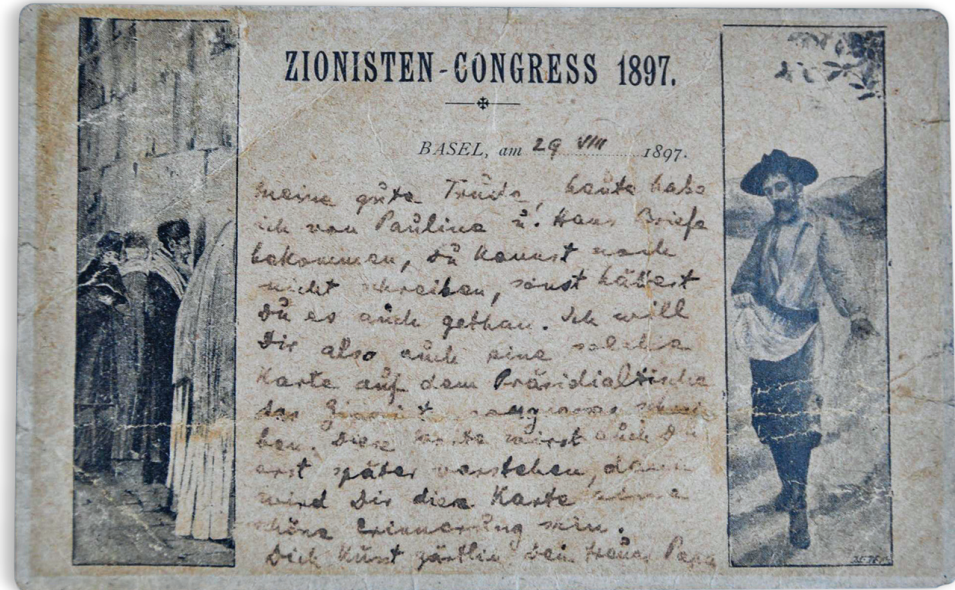
The study of Jewish everyday life shows that Jews experienced many of the same personal aspirations, joys, struggles and successes as their non-Jewish neighbors.

Card from Theodor Herzl to his daughter Trude

Theodor Herzl’s postcard to his daughter, written in 1897 right before his participation in the first Zionist Congress in Basel, represents his and the Jewish community’s sacrifices for the establishment of an independent Jewish state.

The postcard also gives insights into how much this struggle affected Herzl’s private life. He tried to live up to his role as a father through small gestures of care and affection, such as this postcard, but instead he provided poorly for his family as he spent most of his time and personal resources on Zionist activity.

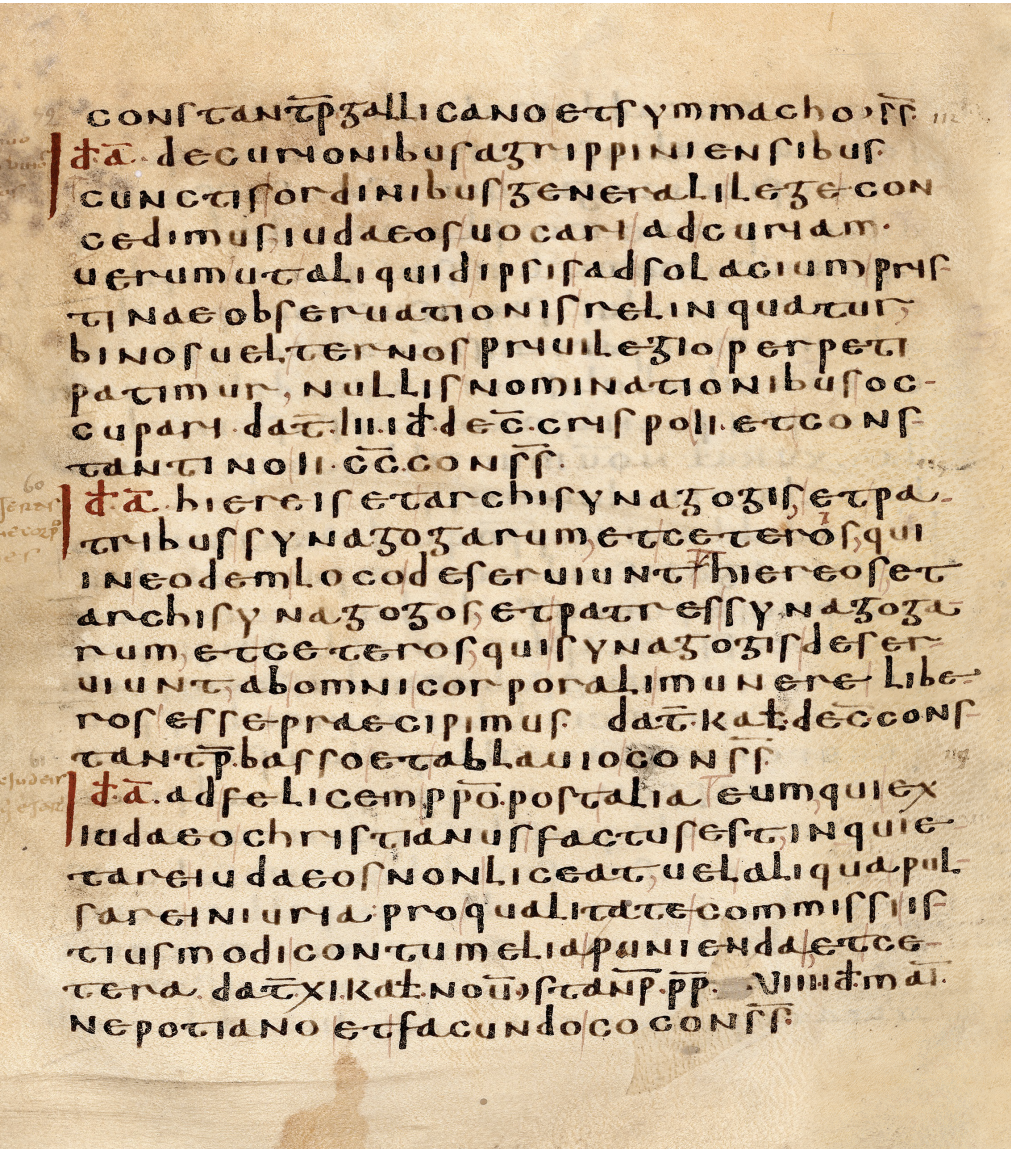
[📍 Basel, Switzerland](#)
[🕒 August 29, 1897](#)



When Jews did win their civil rights, it unleashed enormous energies. The resulting exchange made possible monumental achievements in the arts, science, and economies of the German-speaking countries.

In the late 20th century, the concept of “inclusion” arose as a model for ensuring the equal rights of groups marginalized from the larger society due to their religion, ethnicity, skin color, gender, sexuality, or ability. Given the way that societies have responded to human difference with oppression, the crucial component of inclusion in this sense is that it calls on those in power to take some extra affirmative steps to accommodate people in ways that ameliorate their oppression.

To what extent does this late 20th-century idea apply to 1700 years of German-Jewish history? Modern Jewish history, at least, is replete with events that reflect the self-consciously reformist impulse underlying today’s concept of inclusion.



Edict of Constantine the Great

In 321, the *decurions* (city councilors) of Cologne demanded that the Roman Emperor Constantine allow them to oblige Jews to serve in the *curia* (town council). Previously, Jews (and the small early Christian community) had been exempt from these obligations on religious grounds, since service in the curia was also associated with sacrifices to the Roman gods.

Participation in the curia brought rights, but above all duties. The decurions collected taxes and financed public services. The prerequisites for Jews and Christians to serve on the curia would have been a certain wealth and economic power, as well as social rank.

Cologne, North Rhine-Westphalia, Germany
321



Max Haller’s Medals from WWI

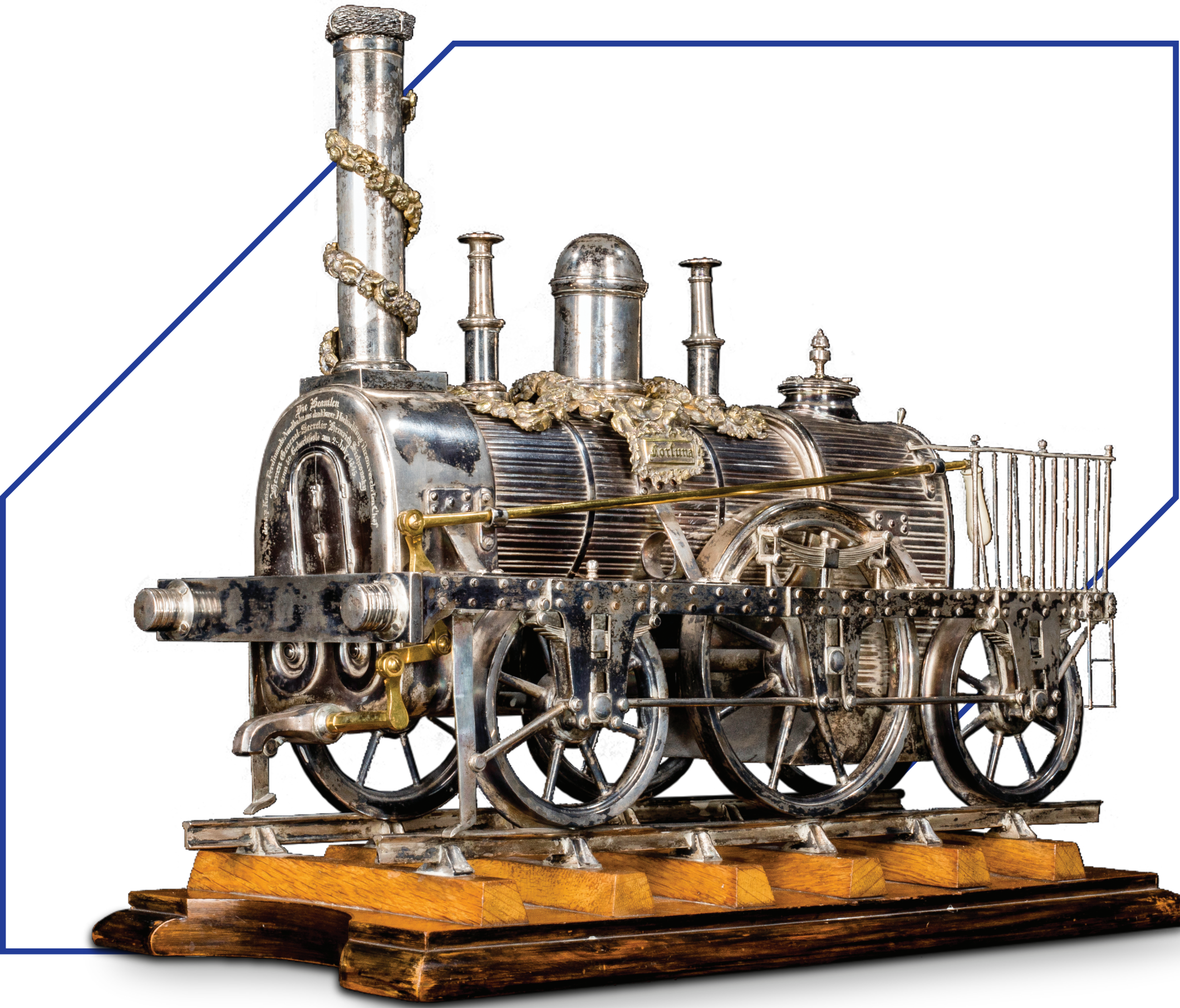
When the Nazis organized a boycott of Jewish businesses in April 1933, a WWI naval veteran named Max Haller defied the SA thug posted outside his Berlin radio shop and displayed his war medals in the window. The accompanying sign read: “I risked my life for Germany for four years. [...] Those who can reconcile it with German sentiments, let them boycott me now and not buy from me.”

Like most Jews, Haller had come to identify strongly with his German “fatherland.” However, an organized anti-Jewish movement had emerged that increasingly threatened Jewish status and security. Haller saw his war service as both a patriotic duty and a chance to put to rest any doubts about his loyalty, but the fatherland disappointed him bitterly.

Mediterranean Sea
1918

In 1819, a student named Leopold Zunz, who was among the first generation of Jews to study at Prussian universities, published a manifesto of sorts. He argued that to be included in mainstream society, Jews would have to undergo the same process of critically examining their own history and traditions that Christianity had undergone since the Reformation. His followers reformed Jewish religious practice, introducing sermons in the vernacular German, choirs and organs, and less rigid observance of ritual law. His Jewish opponents argued that while making Judaism into a private matter of conscience might help Jews win their civil rights, it would destroy Jewish continuity. Both sides grappled with the question of whether inclusion could alleviate oppression without erasing difference.

Jewish emancipation and inclusion did unleash enormous energies, and the resulting exchange made possible monumental achievements in the arts, science, and economies of the German-speaking countries. It also transformed Jewish life and tradition in ways that Jewish people both lamented and celebrated.



The Silver Locomotive

This silver model locomotive was given to Heinrich Sichrovsky as a gift in 1845 by the Kaiser-Ferdinands-Nordbahn railway. Sichrovsky was the scion of a Jewish Viennese family who accumulated expertise in the promising field of railroad construction through his work as a banker. In 1836, he was granted a charter to build one of Austria’s first steam railways. Coming from the banking sector, Sichrovsky benefited from an older form of inclusion in which a small number of Jews provided credit to the state. As rights for Jews expanded, he parlayed his experience into a major industrial undertaking. He was ennobled shortly before his death in 1866.

Vienna, Austria
19th century

Inclusion

Exclusion from some areas was mixed with inclusion in others. In many medieval cities Jews were not allowed to live or stay overnight but could enter during the day to conduct business.

For much of the last 1700 years, Jews in German-speaking lands not only often lived separately, either on the margins of town or in closed ghettos, they also faced restrictions on their occupations, their political and civil rights, and their cultural expressions. In the Middle Ages and then again during the Nazi period, they were even forced to wear special clothes or insignia to mark them as Jewish and thus facilitate their exclusion.

Sometimes, the exclusion of Jews from society was total and resulted in massacres and expulsions. More often, however, exclusion from some areas was mixed with inclusion in others. In medieval cities like Strasbourg, for example, Jews were not allowed to live or stay overnight but could enter during the day to conduct business.

In the Early Modern period, a small number of Jews came to enjoy a special status granted by local rulers, who made them “Court Jews” or “Protected Jews.” These Jews paid steep taxes, but they also gained a certain degree of stability. Most Jews, however, enjoyed no such special protection.

In the 19th century, the process of Emancipation eliminated most legal forms of exclusion, although antisemitism still presented barriers. All these gains were undone by the Nazi regime, which introduced increasingly restrictive laws that culminated in the forced migration or deportation and murder of all European Jews.



Grüselhorn from the Strasbourg Cathedral

This bronze horn was blown daily from the tower of the main church in Strasbourg to let Jews know when they could enter and when they had to leave the city. Jews had lived in Strasbourg until the late 14th century, when they were blamed for the Black Death and expelled from Strasbourg. Thereafter, Jews were not allowed to stay overnight but could return each morning to conduct business. Thus, Jews were included in matters of trade but excluded in terms of residence and civic life until the French revolution, after which the horn was stored in the city’s library.

Strasbourg, France
14th century



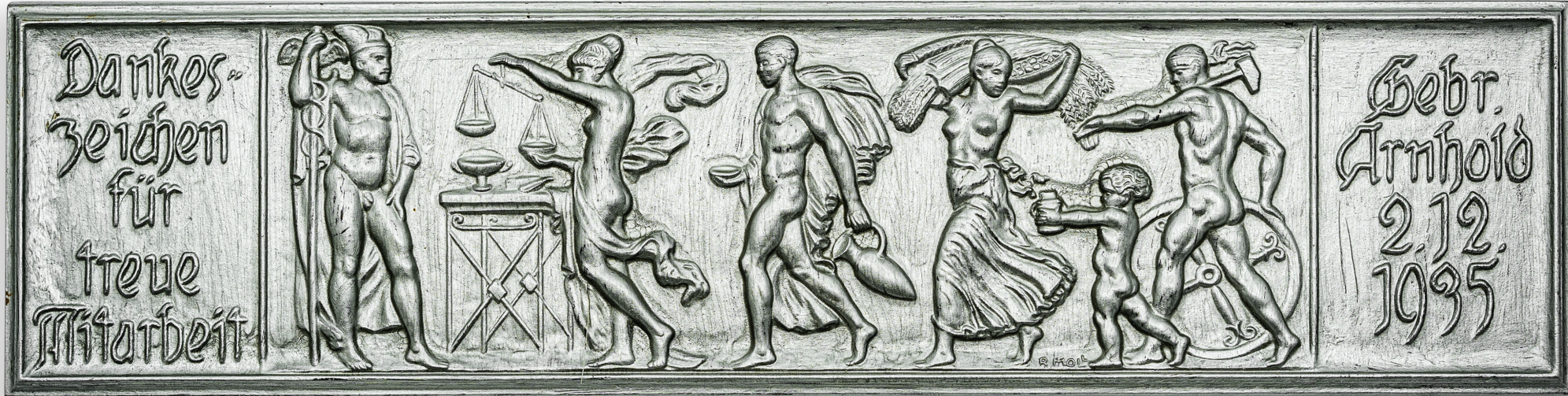
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Letter of Protection of Feist Hertz

Letters of protection – such as this one issued to a man named Feist Hertz in 1779 – were the customary form in which residence permits were issued to Jews in the Holy Roman Empire. Since Jews – unlike Christians – were not automatically regarded as subjects of their local ruler, they were not necessarily entitled to the ruler’s protection. Accordingly, they had to negotiate their own right to live in the ruler’s territory and carry out their occupation. This often entailed paying special taxes, but it also granted the protected Jew considerable legal and personal security that most of their fellow Jews did not enjoy.

Rülzheim, Rhineland-Palatinate, Germany
1779



Gebrüder Arnhold Plaque

The seizure of Jewish properties and businesses that began in 1933 reached the Gebrüder Arnhold Bank in late 1935, marking the beginning of the “Aryanization” of major banks. The company was among the five largest private banks in Germany at the time, all owned by Jews. When the Dresden branch of Gebrüder Arnhold was absorbed by the “Aryan” Dresdner Bank, the former owners had a cast-iron plaque made by the famous Lauchhammer foundry with the words “Dankezeichen für treue Mitarbeit” or “Sign of gratitude for faithful service” dedicated to the employees. All the branch’s Jewish employees lost their jobs and pensions.

Dresden, Saxony, Germany
1935

Exclusion

Adopting the dominant culture’s language, social mores, or other cultural expressions might allow a minority to overcome some prejudice, but that risks assimilation, in which the minority loses a valued group identity.

Am I who I think I am or who others tell me I am? Jews as individuals and as a group have wrestled with their ability to participate in and become a part of the predominant society while maintaining their own cultural identity. While the terms applied to this dynamic have evolved in modern times, the forces at work remain recognizable. Some Jews worked hard to maintain a separate identity, while others found their efforts to identify with the dominant culture constrained by the prejudices of those with power.

Adopting the dominant culture’s language, social mores, or other cultural expressions might allow a minority to overcome some prejudice, but that risks assimilation, in which the minority loses a valued group identity. Looking at German-Jewish history, recent scholarship has identified a process of

“acculturation,” in which Jews adopted some of aspects of the majority culture while retaining distinctively Jewish characteristics. In contrast to assimilation, the discourse of acculturation further recognizes that the majority society cannot remain unchanged in such a process.

In the 21st century, the debate continues about the extent to which minority groups can participate in majority cultures while sustaining distinct identities. From indigenous or diasporic minorities fighting for recognition and self-determination to recent migrants fleeing war and poverty or seeking opportunity, all must grapple with these questions. Who am I? Who are we? And how much say do any of us really have in the matter?



Moses Mendelssohn’s Eyeglasses

As he worked late into the night, Moses Mendelssohn’s eyeglasses were essential to his work as a German-Jewish philosopher. He envisioned a Europe in which Jews, Christians, and Muslims retained their individual identities while living together in harmony. Despite Mendelssohn’s accomplishments, Frederick the Great refused to confirm his nomination to the Prussian Academy of Sciences because he was a Jew. The tension between assimilation and acculturation is evident in the fact that four of the great Jewish philosopher’s children converted to Christianity.

📍 Berlin, Germany
🕒 18th century



[Access essay here](#)



Portrait of Bertha Pappenheim

Bertha Pappenheim, disillusioned with the prospects for young Jewish women of her class, dedicated her life to helping Jewish women. In 1904, she created the League of Jewish Women, through which she integrated the Jewish feminist movement into the mainstream German feminist movement. Her work reflected the symbiosis of her feminist and Jewish convictions. She supported Jewish acculturation to German norms but fought to preserve the communal and religious uniqueness of her people.

📍 Vienna, Austria
🕒 c. 1900 – 1930s



New Synagogue on Oranienburger Straße

During much of the 19th century, Jews thrived in German states where they won rights that facilitated their fuller participation in business and culture. Yet they also maintained a distinct group identity, as symbolized by the New Synagogue on Oranienburger Strasse in Berlin. Dedicated in 1866, the synagogue represents the confidence that German Jews felt to proclaim their place in the Prussian capital. At the same time, the Orientalist architecture was a self-expression of a separate Jewish identity.

📍 Berlin, Germany
🕒 1859 – 1866

Acculturation

It was not until 1871 that the newly founded German Reich granted Jews the equal rights they had fought for. The Jews seized these new opportunities energetically.

The ambitious vision of individuals, the successful cooperation of a few, or the aspirations and tireless efforts of a community – achievements can have many origins, but they share a common trait: Just as a spark can ignite a wildfire, sometimes a single idea is enough to change the world.

The *Haskalah* (Jewish Enlightenment) strove for an end to discrimination, for civic equality, and for recognition of Jews in the non-Jewish majority society. It was not until 1871 that the newly founded German Reich granted Jews the equal rights they had fought for. The Jews seized these new opportunities energetically. Previously only a few had been able to prove themselves in the economic sphere, but now numerous Jews succeeded in social, cultural, and scientific life.



Costume Worn by the Actress Marie Barkany

This costume was worn by the Hungarian actress Marie Barkany when she played the title role in Schiller’s drama *Maria Stuart* in Paris. The performance was part of a series of classic German plays produced in their original language for the first time in France. Her parents originally sent her to Vienna to be trained as an accountant, but Barkany chose to become an actress.

A good command of the German language was a prerequisite for Barkany’s chosen career; one critic praised her “impeccably correct pronunciation” when performing works of Schiller and Goethe.

Paris, France
c. 1900

Countless known and unknown Jews also benefited from new rights and accomplished much as individuals and collectively. Even though they may not all have made a revolutionary contribution to society, they nevertheless improved their living conditions or achieved private successes. The rapid rise of some of them illustrates the massive potential embedded in social minorities that can be realized when the structural conditions allow for equal participation.



Salvarsan Ampules

These inconspicuous glass ampules contain Salvarsan, the first modern antimicrobial agent for the treatment of syphilis. When the German-Jewish physician Paul Ehrlich and his Japanese assistant Sahachiro Hata presented Salvarsan at the Congress for Internal Medicine in 1910, they received frenetic applause. After centuries of battling the epidemic, Ehrlich had finally found a “Magic Bullet” – a single injection which would attack the bacteria that caused syphilis without harming its host. Not only were Ehrlich and many of his colleagues Jewish, but much of the research had been funded by a Jewish philanthropist.

Frankfurt, Hesse, Germany
1910 – 1930



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The Einstein Tower

The Einstein Tower in Potsdam was built between 1920 and 1922. It was designed to house experiments intended to validate Albert Einstein’s General Theory of Relativity, first published in 1916. The building, with its rotatable dome and its spectacular appearance, became an iconic representation of Expressionist architecture and a breakthrough success for German-Jewish architect Erich Mendelsohn.

Potsdam, Brandenburg, Germany
1920s

Cross-border family networks, trade relationships, and the exchange of knowledge among Jewish communities proved to be lifesavers in times of calamity.

Over the centuries, Jews repeatedly faced the loss of their hard-won status and modest prosperity due to persecution. Jewish communities developed unique strategies to persevere against the odds. Cross-border family networks, trade relationships, and the exchange of knowledge among Jewish communities proved to be lifesavers in times of calamity.

During the High Middle Ages in Europe, entire communities were expelled or murdered in pogroms. In the 12th century, the “Blood Libel” emerged, in which Jews were accused of killing Christian children for ritual purposes. Even when these accusations were refuted by Christian authorities, they regularly led to the destruction of Jewish communities. This scenario was repeated after the

Black Death and other crises in which the Jews were punished as scapegoats. In the 20th century, the Holocaust radically expanded the brutality and scale of Jewish persecution.

After the Holocaust, a small number of surviving Jews endeavored to start over in Germany. However, the current growth of radical movements and the resurgence of conspiracy theories tinged with antisemitism in Germany and elsewhere are raising old questions once again. Is this really the kind of society Jews want to live in? How much is one willing to endure before it becomes too much? Should Jews keep a packed suitcase just in case? Or is there enough support in the fight for social cohesion?



Record of the Trial of the Jews of Trent

The death of an infant and a slanderous rumor led to the end of the Jewish community in Trento. When in 1475 the body of little Simon was found not far from Jewish dwellings, Jews were accused of ritual murder, and the entire Jewish community was prosecuted. Under torture, the survivors made false confessions, and all defendants were sentenced to death. Even contemporaries doubted the legitimacy of the accusations. While all the men were executed, women were given the chance to save themselves by converting to Christianity.

Trento, Italy
1478



Torah Scroll from Sulzbach

This impressive Torah scroll was created in 1793. In the 17th century, Sulzbach had become a center of scholarship and Hebrew book printing, which spurred the growth of the local Jewish community. In 1938 it escaped destruction during the November Pogroms – the state-orchestrated ransacking of synagogues and Jewish businesses – because it had been hidden in the municipal museum of the neighboring town of Amberg, which had become its new home after the dwindling Sulzbach Jewish community ceased to exist in 1934.

Sulzbach, Bavaria, Germany
1938



Pendant Found at the Sobibór Death Camp

The Holocaust – the murder of six million of Europe’s Jews by the Nazis – represents a historical caesura, an unprecedented break with civilization. When the Nazis established the death camps, they intended not only to murder their victims, but to erase every trace of them. This pendant recovered in 2016 during excavations of the Sobibór extermination camp defied those efforts. To this day, it commemorates its 12-year-old owner, Karolina Cohn from Frankfurt, who was one of the 1.5 million children murdered in the Holocaust.

Sobibór, Occupied Poland
1940s

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Jews are hardly the only people to have experienced forced migrations, so why is exile such a central part of the Jewish story?

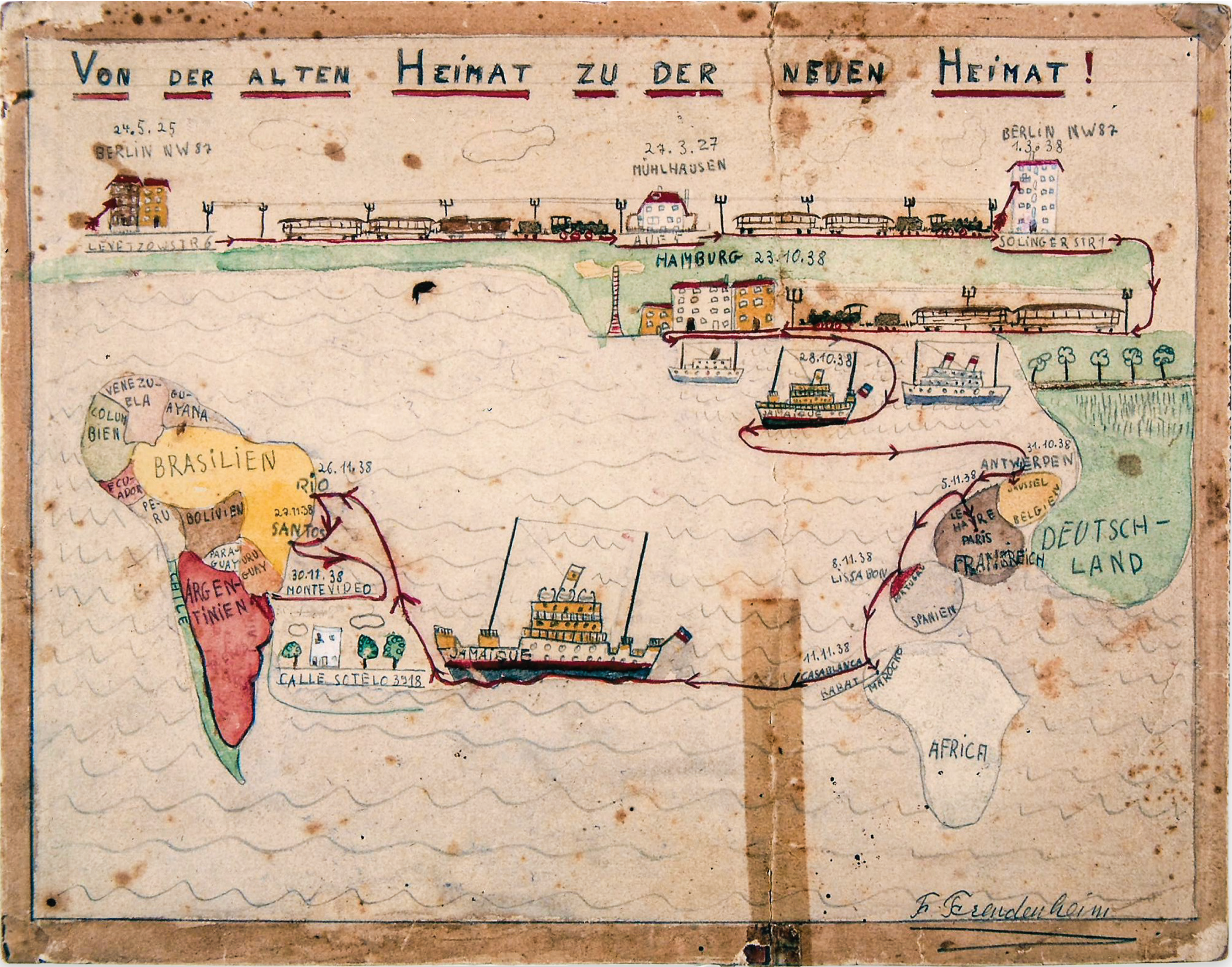
Exile – a forced, or at least reluctant, uprooting and transplantation to a life apart from the familiar, the secure, or even the sacred – is more than a motif of Jewish history. It is a recurring fact of Jewish history; the Hebrew Bible, for instance, offers the quintessential tales of exile in Assyria and Babylonia.

It is tempting to detect in these ancient stories a foreshadowing of the countless banishments, massacres, and persecutions that kept the Jews in movement from the time of the First Crusade until the Holocaust. But Jews are hardly the only people to have experienced forced migrations, so why is exile such a central part of the Jewish story?

The poet Heinrich Heine offered one answer with his remark that the Jews had made the Hebrew Bible into a “portable fatherland.” Other peoples subjected to forced migrations simply blended into their host societies in a few generations.

The Jewish people, in contrast, had learned to adapt to the languages, social customs, and laws of their host countries to ensure their immediate survival, while retaining a ritual, cultural, and emotional connection to their roots that ensured their intergenerational survival as a distinct minority.

However, Jews also developed strong emotional bonds to their native or adopted homes, including Germany and Austria. In the 20th century especially, this meant that many German-speaking Jews experienced exile not as a separation from a longed-for promised land, but as a violent expulsion from their “Heimat” (homeland).



12-year-old Fritz Freudenheim’s Map of his Flight from Nazi Germany

In the fall of 1938, 12-year-old Fritz Freudenheim drew this map during a transatlantic crossing from Hamburg to Montevideo aboard the ocean liner *Jamaïque*. Despite his young age, Fritz was coming to grips with leaving his “old homeland” for a “new homeland” on a different continent. Life in exile meant not just the loss of a comfortable middle-class lifestyle but the loss of a familiar culture as well. He struggled to master Spanish, but like many young exiles, he soon adapted. He began to call himself “Federico”, married, and moved to Sao Paolo, where he raised a family.

- Germany - Uruguay
- 1938



MS St. Louis Captain's Hat

This hat belonged to Gustav Schröder, captain of the German ship *MS St. Louis*, whose 937 passengers in 1939 were mostly Jewish refugees fleeing Nazi Germany. Forced migration was surely a bitter experience for the refugees, but after the violence of the preceding November, they knew that a life in exile also meant salvation. Even after a would-be exile boarded a ship, however, their fate was still not secure. The *St. Louis* was ordered to leave the Port of Havana by Cuban authorities, denied the right to dock at a US port, and sent back to Europe. 254 passengers perished in the Holocaust.

- Hamburg, Germany
- 1939



Heinrich Heine’s Opera Glasses

The German-Jewish poet Heinrich Heine converted to Lutheranism in 1825, believing his baptismal certificate would prove his “ticket of admission to European culture.” He was soon disappointed, and by the decade’s end, he was concerned that his subversive writing might land him in a prison cell at the Spandau citadel. Paris was more inviting. Although he became a celebrity in France and cherished the city’s cultural life, he felt a strong attachment to his native Germany. He once remarked that on his tombstone he wanted only the words: “Here lies a German poet.”

- Düsseldorf, North Rhine-Westphalia, Germany
- 1843



[Access essay here](#)

The escape and survival of the refugees in the diaspora as well as the establishment of new Jewish communities after the Holocaust depended on resilient individuals and Jewish institutions.

From the beginning of Jewish settlement in German-speaking lands through the time of Josel of Rosheim’s community activism during the first half of the 16th century and until the opening of a Jewish Museum in Berlin after the turn of the 21st century, Jews living in German-speaking lands have experienced ups and downs, persecution and advancement, acceptance and rejection.

The escape and survival of the refugees in the diaspora as well as the establishment of new Jewish communities after the Holocaust depended on resilient individuals and Jewish institutions. Political movements like Zionism and Jewish self-help agencies helped Jews survive the hardships of Nazi persecution until they could emigrate. Refugee papers like the *Aufbau* kept the

emigres informed and helped relatives find one another. *The Sharit Ha-Platah*, or “Surviving Remnant” was a list of survivors compiled in the Displaced Persons Camps that also helped scattered families reconnect and start to rebuild.

This internal resilience was crucial to the reconstruction of Jewish life in Germany, which was embodied by the opening of the Jewish Museum Berlin in 2001. The museum presents over one thousand years of German-Jewish history as a unique but integral aspect of German history. This was no longer a history of “the other,” but one of exchange, participation, contribution, and mutual influence.



Seal of Josel Rosheim

Josel of Rosheim, born 1478 in Alsace, was the most influential advocate for German and Polish Jews during the time of the Holy Roman Emperors Maximilian I and Charles V. He was appointed the governor of all Jews of Germany and recognized by the highest authorities. His family had experienced expulsion, persecution, and death during times of great upheaval, but his talent as a negotiator not only served him well in business but in dealing on behalf of the Jewish community. The seal was a sign of extraordinary privilege and influence far beyond that of other Jews.

📍 Baden-Württemberg, Germany
🕒 1551



Sharit Ha-Platah—The Saved Remnant

Initiated by the U.S. Army chaplain Abraham Klausner, a list of Holocaust survivors was compiled and distributed to the various Displaced Persons Camps in post-war Germany. By early 1946 there were six volumes printed by the U.S. Army and distributed by the Central Committee of Liberated Jews in Bavaria with 85,000 names. Eventually 250,000 survivors resurfaced. The dim hope of finding surviving relatives came true for a few. Approximately 15,000 Jews remained in Germany and formed the beginning of new Jewish communities.

📍 Munich, Bavaria, Germany
🕒 1946 – 1949



Jewish Museum Berlin

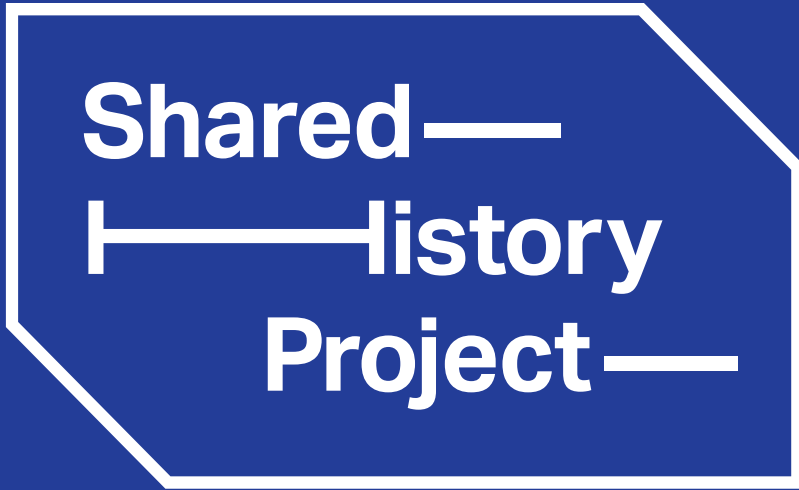
The Jewish Museum Berlin opened in 2001 after years of deliberations and preparations, the fall of the Berlin Wall, and the large immigration of former Soviet Jews to Germany. The Jewish Community founded the first Jewish Museum in Berlin shortly before the Nazi takeover in 1933, but it was closed after the November Pogroms in 1938. Significantly, the new Jewish Museum Berlin is not an institution of the Jewish Community, but a state-funded part of the rich Berlin museum landscape and very popular with both domestic visitors and tourists from all over the world.

📍 Berlin, Germany
🕒 2001 – Present



[Access essay here](#)

Resilience



1700 Years of
Jewish Life in
German-speaking
Lands

The objects, stories, and themes presented in these panels illustrate the richness and depth of Jewish life in German-speaking lands over the last 1700 years.

The lived experience of Jews, both in their glory days and in their most terrible moments, was always closely interwoven with the experiences of the Christian majority society.

The themes of migration and everyday life, acculturation, inclusion and persecution, as well as resilience and exile demonstrate the great extent to which this history was shared.

Today, Jewish life in Germany is flourishing again and represents an integral part of German society. Nevertheless, rising extremism, right-wing, and fundamentalist movements across the globe demand a close examination of the rights and wellbeing of Jews and other minority groups within their respective majority societies.

Based on an examination of 1700 years of Jewish history, the *Shared History Project* serves as a tool for this educational process by sharpening people’s awareness of both the long-term consequences of exclusion, persecution, and flight, but also the opportunities that can arise for a society when minority groups are granted equal rights.

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For more detailed essays on the featured objects in this exhibition or to view the full virtual project, please scan the QR Code or visit our website www.sharedhistoryproject.org.

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