



*Shared History:
1700 Years of Jewish Life in German-speaking Lands through 52 Objects*

*The Leo Baeck Institute – New York | Berlin
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Executive Summary

The Leo Baeck Institute – New York | Berlin (LBI) is undertaking a project to document the multifaceted narratives of Jewish history titled *Shared History: 1700 Years of Jewish Life in German-speaking Lands through 52 Objects*. The goal of the project is to illuminate the long and rich history of Jewish life in German-speaking lands. It is a “shared history” in the truest sense as the lives of Jews were, and still are, deeply interwoven with the peoples, regions, and countries throughout these lands. Furthermore, the project demonstrates how to teach history using original artifacts and to counter prejudice and the distortion of historical facts. As a result of the *Shared History* project, public audiences across Europe will discover the importance of this history and recognize its relevance to contemporary issues.

The *Shared History* project participants, consisting of scholars, curators, librarians, and archivists, will search for and select 52 unique objects that illustrate and exemplify Jewish history in Central Europe over the past 1700 years and will pique the curiosity of a broad audience. The objects will not be limited to physical artifacts. Instead, the *Shared History* project will also utilize metaphorical motifs, fictional concepts, mythologies, and imagery. The core element of the project will be realized in the form of an online exhibition, with one object and essay released each week during 2021, beginning with Emperor Constantine’s edict in 321 C.E. that allowed Jews to hold public office in Cologne and closing with a contemporary object that tells a story from 2021.

Additionally, beginning in late 2020, a small traveling panel exhibition using facsimiles and digital representations will provide an opportunity to initiate public programs and generate interest in the project in cities and towns, especially throughout the countries in Europe where German once was or still is the predominant language or an important language during that country’s history. So that the *Shared History* project can be utilized in teaching. Pedagogical materials developed out of the work of the project will be shared on the web site. LBI plans to publish a book with the 52 objects and related, extended essays for use by the general public and in pedagogical settings in late 2021 or early 2022. The *Shared History* project will be funded by a combination of individual, foundation, corporation, and government sources.

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Overview

While in all likelihood Jews lived in the province of Lower Germania as early as the end of the first century C.E., they first enter the historical record in the fourth century C.E. The earliest existing document referencing a Jewish community in Central Europe is an edict by Emperor Constantine the Great in 321 C.E. that is preserved in the Vatican Library. In it, Constantine permitted the aldermen of Cologne to appoint Jews to the city council thus granting them access to public offices.

The edict is noteworthy because it documents the existence of a large Jewish community with members who must have been relatively influential and affluent, since municipal honorary positions such as these came with considerable financial obligations.

To commemorate this special anniversary of Constantine's edict, the LBI is initiating a project titled *Shared History: 1700 Years of Jewish Life in German-speaking Lands through 52 Objects*. The goal of the *Shared History* project is to illustrate how the long and rich history of Jewish life in German-speaking lands is a "shared history" in its truest sense. Using objects and essays, *Shared History* will demonstrate that the German-Jewish history was, and continues to be, deeply interwoven with the peoples, regions, and countries throughout these lands.

The *Shared History* project will incorporate the multitude of voices that have formed this rich cultural heritage throughout the centuries. LBI will work with a number of academic contributors and institutional partners on the project, beginning with *Association 321–2021: 1700 Jahre jüdisches Leben in Deutschland*, which was established to coordinate plans to celebrate the anniversary of Constantine's edict in the City of Cologne and elsewhere in Germany. A Steering Committee made up of international academic and institutional leaders will help guide the work of the *Shared History* project and a Selection Committee composed of scholars and museum professionals from across Europe and the U.S. will be engaged in the process of selecting the 52 objects.

Most by now are familiar with the concept of using selected artifacts to convey a larger story, which became popular with Neil MacGregor's internationally acclaimed "A History of the World in 100 Objects". Commemorating the 1700th anniversary of Constantine's edict in 2021 provides a perfect opportunity to apply this successful concept in order to tell, for the first time, the complex story of Jews in German-speaking territories from 321 C.E. to the present through 52 objects. Working with academic experts in Jewish and European history from Late Antiquity, the Middle Ages, the Early Modern, and the Modern Era, the *Shared History* project will explore both the remarkable continuities and radical changes in Jewish life over the centuries.

The *Shared History* project team will identify 52 unique objects that illustrate this important history and pique the curiosity of a broad audience. Each object, metaphorical motif, fictional concept, mythology, or image will be selected based on its ability to tell a story that illuminates the narratives of Jewish history as a part of European history and the themes that occur repeatedly through the centuries. LBI will work with contributing institutions across

Central Europe, including, amongst others, the MiQua in Cologne, the German Historical Museum, the Jewish Museum Berlin, the Jewish Museum Vienna, and the Jewish Historical Museum Amsterdam.

The core concept behind the *Shared History* project is to use iconic objects to convey and teach history. The main element of the project will take the form of a virtual exhibition, with one object and a corresponding essay released each week during 2021, beginning with Emperor Constantine's edict and closing with a contemporary object that tells a story from 2021. LBI successfully employed this approach in the *1938Projekt* (www.1938projekt.org) where a total of 365 daily entries were revealed one day at a time in 2018, telling a story from the same date in 1938.

The goal is to pick visual artifacts that illustrate the overarching message of the project – namely that Jewish communities have existed in German-speaking lands for nearly 2000 years. While the objects will be revealed in chronological order, the *Shared History* project will also highlight issues and themes that recur in Jewish history: migration, inclusion, exclusion, persecution, acculturation, success, and resilience. It is critical to examine these issues given their contemporary relevance in a time when immigration and multiculturalism are major concerns in Germany, Europe, and around the world.

Obviously, languages have evolved, and ethnic and national borders have shifted significantly over the 1700 years since Emperor Constantine issued the edict in Latin in 321 C.E. Therefore, *Shared History* will establish broad geographical criteria so that the objects may come from territories that include European lands where German once was or still is the predominant language or an important language for a significant population.

Shared History will incorporate other elements to help publicize the work of the project. In late 2020, a conference of scholars and public officials will serve to announce the project to the public, examine the themes of the *Shared History* project, and emphasize the relationship of the themes to contemporary challenges. Also beginning in late 2020, a traveling panel exhibit will provide an opportunity to initiate public programs and generate interest in the project in cities and towns throughout Central Europe. There also will be an option to add facsimiles in cases to provide the exhibit with a three-dimensional component. Plans are in place to publish a book in late 2021 or early 2022 which combines the 52 objects and extended essays for use by the general public and in pedagogical settings. In addition, the work of the project that will be incorporated into teaching materials which will be shared on the project web site.

It is worth noting how the lessons from *Shared History* are relevant to other groups. Historian Salo Baron hoped that the study of Jewish history would have an impact “on general history as well, if viewed not from the traditional angle of the majority peoples but rather from the vantage point of a permanent minority.” In effect, Baron argued that study of Jews, as “a permanent minority,” reveals something new about the interactions between different ethnic, religious and cultural groups.¹

¹ Baron, Salo W. "Newer Emphases in Jewish History." *Jewish Social Studies* 25, no. 4 (1963): 235-248.

Outline of Project Phases

Nomination of the Objects (October–December, 2019). The Steering Committee will issue a call to museums and other institutions in October 2019 for the nomination of objects, with a due date in December 2019. The document will include a description of the goals of the project and of the nature of the desired objects. While physical objects will make up the majority of the 52 objects, the call will also encourage creativity in making submissions. Motifs or metaphorical artifacts, literary figures, myths, and places, buildings or monuments will be considered, for instance, Nathan the Wise, the Golem or the Ahasver, the myth of the “blood libel”, the Weissensee Cemetery in Berlin or the SchUM Cities (Mainz, Speyer and Worms) could be potential candidates.

Selection of the Objects (January–March, 2020). The Selection Committee will review the nominated objects. In the selection process, the committee will be guided by several criteria. Collectively, the 52 objects will cover the full range of Jewish history over time, from 321 C.E. to the present. The objects will be evaluated based on how well they:

- tell a compelling story of a specific event or phenomenon about German-speaking Jewish history;
- illustrate important aspects of Jewish culture and religious practice throughout this time period;
- add understanding to the broad message that Jews have been living in German-speaking lands for centuries;
- add to an understanding of one or more of the larger themes of the historical narrative (e.g., migration, inclusion, exclusion, persecution, acculturation, success, or resilience);
- document the interaction and on-going cultural, scientific and economical exchange between majority Christian, Jewish, and other populations;
- collectively represent a broad geographical area to be defined as territories that include European lands where German once was or still is the predominant language or an important language for a significant population; and,
- offer interesting opportunities for display in a virtual exhibition and in print.

After an initial meeting in January, the Selection Committee and project staff will select the list of 52 objects to be revealed weekly in chronological order throughout 2021.

Writing Essays about the Objects (April through August, 2020). Short essays (approximately 700 words in length) will be written by scholars about each of the objects for use on-line and the traveling exhibition. Longer essays will be written for a book to be published at the end of 2021. For the planned book, to be published in 2021, longer essays will be written. Essay writers will be recruited from the Steering Committee, the Selection Committee and the nominators.

Design and Construction of the Exhibition (January through December, 2020). Similar to the approach used in LBI’s *1938Projekt* (www.1938projekt.org), a design firm will be retained to create a comprehensive graphical approach for the web site, virtual exhibition, social media (including Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram), traveling exhibition, book, and

printed materials. The virtual exhibition will be ready for previewing at the opening conference and will be operational in the first week of January 2021. A traveling exhibition made up of panels (with the option of adding facsimiles of some of the objects) will be designed and constructed in time for the opening conference.

Hold Opening Conference (November or December, 2020). The *Shared History* project will hold an opening conference in Germany in late 2020. The goal will be to gather experts interested in the project to discuss the central themes (i.e., migration, acceptance, inclusion, prejudice, exclusion, persecution, success, and resilience) and to publicize the project and other activities related to the celebration of 1700 years since the edict by Emperor Constantine the Great.

Display Web Site and Social Media (January through December 2021). Each week in 2021, a new object and related essay will be released on the web site of the virtual exhibit and through social media. Press releases and other public relations efforts will be tied to the narratives, themes, geographies, and current events represented by the objects.

Traveling Exhibition and Events (January through December 2021). The traveling exhibit will be available for use in all of the participating countries. The format will be flexible for both larger and smaller venues. Public events will be held in each location where the exhibit travels.

Publication and Education (2021 and beyond). Like LBI's *1938Projekt*, the *Shared History* project will continue beyond its initial year. With all 52 objects and essays revealed, a book with the complete project will be published. In addition to the publication, which will be geared towards the general public, the objects and related materials will be developed into teaching tools.

Funding

The *Shared History* project will be funded by a combination of individual, foundation, corporate, and government sources. Support is needed for each stage of the project: object selection, web site creation, the opening conference, traveling exhibitions, programs and events, pedagogical applications, and publications.

Summary

Shared History: 1700 Years of Jewish Life in German-Speaking Lands through 52 Objects will have an impact across Europe as a demonstration of how Jews, as individuals and in communities, share a history with the towns, cities, regions, territories, and countries throughout German-speaking lands. The project demonstrates how to impart knowledge of history by using historical artifacts and to counter prejudice and the distortion of historical facts. As a result of the *Shared History* project, public audiences across Europe will discover the importance of this history and recognize its relevance to contemporary issues. The project will actively encourage new scholarship on European history and the creation of teaching materials that can be implemented in curricula for students of all ages.