

# In Berlin, Teaching Germany's Jewish History



Oliver Hartung for The New York Times

The Jüdisches Museum Berlin's slanted designs suggest a world fractured by the Holocaust.

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BERLIN — There may be worse Jewish museums in the world than the Jüdisches Museum Berlin, which opened in 2001. But it is difficult to imagine that any could be as uninspiring and banal, particularly given its pedigree and promise. Has any other Jewish museum been more celebrated or its new building (designed by [Daniel Libeskind](#)) so widely hailed? Is any other Jewish museum of more symbolic importance?



This is the largest such institution in Europe, a national museum devoted to exploring the history of a people this country was once intent on eradicating. Is there any museum of any kind more laden with the baggage of guilt and suffering, of restitution and tribute?

So many museums now deal with recollections of trauma that Berlin's fraught examples are illuminating. Ruin and relics are part of renovation here. When the destroyed Neue Synagoge was being restored, it was clear that the original 19th-century structure, with its ornate echoes of Alhambra, could never be reconstituted. So its extraordinary facade, rededicated in 1995, frames not a house of worship but a modest exhibition about a particular Jewish community and its once-thriving synagogue, while fragments of the original building's altar are pieced together like an unfinished puzzle.

The Jüdisches Museum inverts the formula. Here it is the new — the building created by Mr. Libeskind — that invokes scars and wreckage. The old is suggested by its contents, consisting largely of text, images, reproductions and interactive displays that are meant to conjure a past worthy of celebration.

This museum may even be considered a German example of a genre dominant in the United States: the "identity" museum. Typically, the identity museum recounts how a particular ethnic group has survived, chronicling its travails and triumphs, culminating in the institution's own prideful displays. Here, of course, the Holocaust interrupts the uplift. But the overarching idea was to reveal something about the people [Hitler](#) set out to obliterate by surveying the rich, complicated history of Jews in Germany.

So while the narrative begins with evocations of the Holocaust, it is meant to end, if not in redemption for Germans or Jews, at least in a kind of mutual respect. In the museum's catalog foreword, the German commissioner for cultural affairs, Julian Nida-Rümelin, points out that the institution may be providing "the only contact many non-Jewish Germans have with Jews and Judaism" outside their history classes.

The museum's curator, W. Michael Blumenthal, explains, too, that the exhibition's story "far transcends" the history of German Jewry, demonstrating "a widely shared determination" to apply its lessons "to societal problems of today and tomorrow," and promoting "tolerance toward minorities in a globalized world."

The resulting strain is almost bipolar, with the building aggressively screaming about apocalypse as its exhibition affirms harmonious universalism, with neither making its case.

The building, for example, proposes that the shattered, fractured world of the Holocaust is best suggested by shattered, fractured space. You enter the exhibition by descending a lobby staircase that leads into a world of skewed geometry. The floors are raked and tilted. Displays are off-kilter. And rather than feeling something profound, you almost expect moving platforms and leaping ghosts, as in an amusement park's house of horrors.

Add to this a sheen of pretense. One corridor is called the Axis of Exile, because along it are the personal effects of Jews who fled Germany during the 1930s. Another is named the Axis of the Holocaust, which shows letters and photographs of murdered Jews. And lest it all look too bleak, an Axis of Continuity leads upstairs, where you learn about where all of this fits into 2,000 years of German Jewish history.

Meanwhile, the items on display are so cursorily identified and their owners so obliquely described that they might as well have been anonymous points on an Axis of Victimhood. The space trivializes history rather than revealing it.

To see what else is possible, go in Berlin to the outdoor Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe: it, too, uses abstract space to symbolize tragedy, but doesn't prod or preen. Its thousands of pillars seem to emerge gradually from the city's street. But their array creates passages that lead you from daylight into dense alleys of looming stone, as if you are gradually submerged into a maze, obliterating the human. The pillars can resemble the tilted gravestones of Prague's ancient Jewish Cemetery, only here they are anonymous and ominous.

But as strong as this 2005 memorial, designed by [Peter Eisenman](#), is, an exhibition in its below-ground information center is even more powerful. The Holocaust is historically outlined and then made personally vivid. Embedded in the floor of a darkened room are illuminated panels inscribed with letters from the period, around which you walk as if navigating the memorial's pillars, until you enter, in dazed shock, another gallery that traces the way specific Jewish families from all over Europe headed toward destruction.



Far smaller than Yad Vashem in Jerusalem, and far more focused than the United States Holocaust Museum, it is the most extraordinarily informative and affecting display about its subject I have seen.

So such commemorations are possible. But the Jüdisches Museum amplifies its errors. If you emerge from the Axes into the top galleries where the chronological show begins, you see two dominant objects: a fake pomegranate tree and an enormous plastic garlic.

O.K., these have some significance — the pomegranate tree is a Jewish symbol of renewal, though hardly as fundamental as the museum suggests, and the garlic is a playful allusion to a Hebrew acrostic naming the three Germanic towns on the Rhine (Speyer, Worms and Mainz) where Jews settled in the Middle Ages. But you will remember garlic and pomegranates more readily than anything else.

There are few original objects here, and only scattered explanations of Judaism. You have to watch brief films to get any historical background and by the time you reach the 16th-century galleries, you have only the vaguest idea about what Jews believed or why they survived.

We read, for example, that learning and the Scriptures were highly valued; we see an electronic page from the Talmud and a prayer book, but get no real sense of their content or how they shaped Jewish life. Judaism here seems like a religion whose main importance is sociological.

One of the most extensive displays is based on a journal by a remarkable Jewish woman, Glikl bas Juda Leib (1646-1724), who left rare accounts of 17th-century Jewish private life. We learn more about her, though, than about the imposing rabbinical scholars of these lands, or how their debates shaped Judaism in Europe.

There is palpable relief when the premodern is left behind, for now we see Jews fully enter into secular history. After the Enlightenment, the museum finally feels on firm ground, recounting the ways in which Jews became central figures in German banking, commerce, journalism and the arts.

But over all, it is as if intellectual and religious substance had been drained from Judaism, leaving behind cursory accounts of rituals, tales of victimization and an accumulation of Jewish achievements that might inspire contemporary interest (like Leib's writings or the emigration of Levi Strauss, the jeans pioneer).

And while pointing out conflicts, the museum tends to become sanguine about the knotty relationship between Jews and Germans. You learn, for example, about the involvement of Friedrich the Great with the ideals of the Enlightenment, but you won't find out here that because he had trouble selling artifacts from his Royal Porcelain Factory, he forced Jews to buy second-rate porcelain if they wanted to bear children without paying exorbitant taxes.

Facts like those can disclose an entire world. But it would also make the museum more troubling. Instead, by making the German past seem more enlightened, and the Jewish past less particular, it has created an assimilated blandness in which antipodes unite in ersatz tolerance.

Imagine what the museum might have been had it decided to eliminate exaggerated effects and dull homogeneity. It might have been subtle, touching, unsettling. It might have taken history seriously. Perhaps it would have had the potency of the underground "Bibliotek" memorial built in the mid-1990s on the Bebelplatz, where the Nazis held a book burning in 1933, consigning thousands of volumes to the flames.

The memorial's creator, Micha Ullman, knew he couldn't reproduce the magnitude of the event or its destructiveness. So instead, he put a transparent window in the ground of the plaza, under which you can see an illuminated array of empty white bookshelves.

"Where books are burned," a bronze plaque simply reads, quoting the poet Heinrich Heine from 1820, "in the end people will burn."

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