



LEO BAECK INSTITUTE

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SIXTIETH ANNIVERSARY

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The Leo Baeck Institute (LBI) is devoted to the history of German-speaking Jews. Its 80,000-volume library and extensive archival and art collections represent the most significant repository of primary source material and scholarship on the Jewish communities of Central Europe over the past five centuries.



German-speaking Jews had a history marked by individual as well as collective accomplishments and played a significant role in shaping art, science, business, and political developments in the modern era, as evidenced by the continuing relevance of figures such as Albert Einstein, Sigmund Freud, and Franz Kafka.

LBI is committed to preserving this legacy and has digitized over 3.5 million pages of documents from its collections—from rare renaissance books to the personal correspondence of luminaries and ordinary people alike, to community histories and official documents. LBI also promotes the study and understanding of German-Jewish history through its public programs, exhibitions, and support for research and scholars.

LBI was founded in 1955 by leading German-Jewish émigré intellectuals, who were determined to preserve the vibrant cultural heritage of German-speaking Jewry, which was nearly destroyed in the Holocaust. They named the Institute for Rabbi Leo Baeck, the last leader of Germany's Jewish Community under the Nazi regime, and appointed him as the Institute's first President, establishing centers in New York, London, and Jerusalem. LBI-New York is a founding member of the Center for Jewish History in Manhattan and maintains an administrative office in Berlin as well as a branch of its archives at the Jewish Museum Berlin.

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by Roger Cohen

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In *Reunion*, Fred Uhlman's extraordinary 1971 novella exploring the Jewish loss of Germany, the teenage protagonist Hans Schwarz muses on his condition as Hitler rises to power: **"All I knew then was that this was my country, my home, without a beginning and without an end, and that to be Jewish was fundamentally no more significant than to be born with dark hair and not with red. Foremost we were Swabians, then Germans and then Jews. How else could I feel?"** His father, a doctor twice wounded in World War I, is convinced the rise of the Nazis "is a temporary illness." The proud physician lambasts a Zionist who is trying to raise funds for Israel: "Do you really believe the compatriots of Goethe and Schiller, Kant and Beethoven will fall for this rubbish? How dare you insult the memory of twelve thousand Jews who died for our country? *Für unsere Heimat?*"

The short book, a shattering exploration of young Hans' intense and ultimately impossible high-school friendship with the aristocratic Konradin von Hohenfels, is, among other things, a reminder of a German-Jewish devotion to the *Heimat* (homeland) that was as fervent as it proved misplaced. The compatriots of Goethe did indeed fall for the Jew-hating rabble-rouser from Austria. They went all the way to Zero Hour with him. In so doing, they severed Germany from a core part of itself, an incalculable loss. Jews departed or they went to their deaths.

Because of the enormity of the Holocaust, it tends to overshadow the life that preceded it: Jewish extinction obscures Jewish existence. The slaughter masks the sense of belonging "without a beginning and without an end," to which Uhlman's hero gives expression. Yet this German-Jewish feeling, this patriotism so intense it could be blinding, must be recalled, especially at a time when the Jews' place in Europe is again being questioned.

This is an uneasy time in a Europe susceptible to the poisonous politics of the Middle East. In Germany, of all places, refrains like "Jew, Jew, you cowardly pig, come out and fight alone" (it rhymes in German) marked several demonstrations that took place after the Gaza conflict broke out in the summer of 2014. Three men hurled a Molotov cocktail at a synagogue in Wuppertal. Hitler's

name was chanted. The foreign ministers of France, Italy, and Germany issued a statement saying "anti-Semitic rhetoric and hostility against Jews" has "no place in our societies." Frank-Walter Steinmeier, the German foreign minister, went further. What Germany had witnessed, he said, makes the "blood freeze in anybody's veins."

It does. Germany, Israel's closest ally apart from the United States, had been constrained since 1945. Since I lived in Berlin from 1998 to 2001, the moral shackles have loosened. Europe's malevolent ghosts have not been entirely dispelled from societies with growing, often alienated Muslim populations. Jews are murdered—in Toulouse, in Brussels, in Paris, in Copenhagen. Benjamin Netanyahu, the Israeli prime minister, tells the Jews of Europe that Israel is "preparing and calling for the absorption and mass migration [of Jews] from Europe." He says, "I would like to tell European Jews and all Jews wherever they are: Israel is the home of every Jew."

Yes, Israel is that needed home. But Europe is inextricable from Jewish life. It is the continent of Disraeli and Heine and Marx (all baptized, but still), of Hannah Arendt and Rosa Luxemburg, of Freud and Einstein, of Rothschild and Bleichröder, of Dreyfus and Herzl, of Joseph Roth and Stefan Zweig. It is the home of Yiddish, once the first tongue of millions, a language perhaps unique, as Isaac

Bashevis Singer noted, because it was never spoken by men in power. It was the scene of a great 19th-century struggle for emancipation beginning in France and stretching across the continent to the pogrom-stained Pale of Settlement. This battle, in many instances, ushered a stubborn people, with their eternal covenant of ethics entered into with a faceless God, to the summit of the professions; only for this progress, threatening to some, to end in the Nazis' industrialized mass murder.

Was Europe not, against all odds, the place where liberalism triumphed in the second half of the 20th century over the deathly totalitarianisms? The land of Isaiah Berlin who quoted Kant: "Out of the crooked timber of humanity, no straight thing was ever made." The continent where the

Through its decades-long accumulation of art, objects, manuscripts, books, memorabilia, and photographs—most of them now accessible through a remarkable digital library—the LBI allows us to re-imagine what Hitler sought to eradicate. It answers the anti-Semitic stereotype of the rootless Jew with a story of continuity. It reminds Europeans, whether of the German-speaking world or not, of how much Europe and the Jews owe each other. When anti-Semitism rises, this mission assumes critical importance.

Six decades ago there was scant interest in the United States or Europe in collecting documentation on the once-vibrant but shattered world of central European German-speaking Jewry. Post-war struggles demanded that Jews look forward. In the Diaspora a great striving to advance

anew had begun; in Israel a long battle for survival was underway. Zionism was many things, among them a reaction against the Jewish culture of Europe that had proved so fecund, but also so helpless. A sense of horror, and even of shame at having been so deluded before the Third Reich, militated against collective retrospection. And yet, despite these pressures to forget or look away from a lost world, a small group marked by learning and foresight came together in 1955 to found the

LBI. Six decades later, their perspicacity is evident. The Institute, a willing into life of a world that vanished, constitutes a remarkable victory over the attempted annihilation of the charged, creative, cosmopolitan society that, in an extraordinary burst of intellectual and artistic energy, produced many of the ideas central to what we call modernity.

Berlin today is the modern capital of the most powerful nation in Europe. The *Bundesrepublik* has earned the respect of the world through its conscientious examination of a shameful past and its absorption of the lessons of that past, evident in a vibrant liberal democracy. The opening by LBI-New York of an office in Berlin reflects this reality, unimaginable in the ruins of 1945. It also reflects recognition of the challenges facing all European societies,

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Jewish people survived after the attempted annihilation (in which the majority of Europeans were complicit), forming new communities—even in Germany, where today more than 100,000 Jews belong to over 100 congregations—a continent of crooked timber, of every expression and experiment in Jewish identity, and partial loss of identity, and merged and multiple identities.

In the important quest to understand this continuity through trauma of Jewish life, one institution above all is equipped to provide the full range of answers we seek. It has done so through the meticulous documentation of the trampled Jewish culture whose disappearance is still felt in Berlin, Vienna, Prague and elsewhere. That center of learning is the Leo Baeck Institute, which celebrates its 60th birthday this year.

including Germany: how to preserve a spirit of ecumenical tolerance as economic pressures rise, immigration becomes a fraught topic, and Muslims and Jews live in close proximity to each other, bombarded by a 24-hour news cycle of Middle Eastern violence in metastasizing forms. Learn from the past or relive it, goes the old adage. The LBI is a reminder of what Europe lost in its collective mid-century suicide. It is also a compass for the future.

In those now tranquil and oddly under-populated Berlin streets near the LBI-New York's branch office, there once existed what the writer Amos Elon has called "the crucible for every conceivable innovation in film, theater, poetry, painting, science, education, city-planning, music, architecture, photography, radio, and journalism." The crucible was fragile; its backdrop was Weimar, a republic that Alfred Döblin described as lacking "proper instructions for use." Perhaps the flame of creativity could only be so intense in a world so combustible.

The explosion followed, ultimately engulfing the world. A hole remains, both physical and psychological. A city so battered by the upheavals and fractures of 20th-century life cannot, it seems, recover the urban grain of Paris or London. A sense of dislocation remains part of the Berlin experience. The visitor looks in vain for that charged metropolitan energy so evident in Ernst Ludwig Kirchner's great depiction of the Potsdamer Platz of another time. Something got ripped out of Berlin, something got ripped out of all of Germany, that no rebuilding and no repopulation can replace.

The creative flowering of Berlin between the wars represented the apogee of the steady, immensely productive emancipation of German Jewry over several previous generations, men and women whose thirst for new opportunities was in many instances equaled by a great love for the country that provided them. To name but a few of the leading lights of Weimar culture is to be overwhelmed by such concentration of talent in so many domains: Albert Einstein and Fritz Haber, Kurt Weill and Max Reinhardt, Joseph Roth and Walter Benjamin, Otto Klemperer and

Arnold Schönberg, Max Liebermann and Ludwig Meidner, Gertrud Kolmar and Margarete Susman—all of them frequenting a city-in-a-hurry charged with sex and intellect.

To Hitler, of course, and the racist nationalists behind his rise, this was but a flowering of scum. His first intent was to eradicate the liberal world that had allowed so fruitful a mingling of German and Jewish culture. Seeing a procession of triumphant brown-shirted Nazis in 1933, Liebermann pronounced the memorable words: "it makes me want to throw up more than I can possibly eat." Within two years, at the time of the artist's death, only Berlin's Jewish Museum, itself soon to close, still exhibited his work. His wife committed suicide. So, too, would Zweig, Tucholsky, and countless others. Their lives were inextricable from a German-Jewish universe in brutal decomposition.

It was to the unlikely reconstitution of this world that the founders of the LBI dedicated themselves sixty years ago. Meeting at the Jerusalem home of the philosopher Martin Buber, they set themselves the task of saving from oblivion what Hitler had set out to destroy. They were driven by the conviction that the experience of German Jewry, however conflicted, however traumatic in its ending, constituted a culture that had to be preserved—for their descendants, for Judaism itself, and ultimately for the universal cause of knowledge and learning. Also at that Jerusalem table were Gershom Scholem, a leading scholar of Jewish mysticism; Max Gruenewald, a member of the Executive Council of German Jewry during the Nazi period; Robert Weltsch, once Germany's most prominent Zionist journalist; Siegfried Moses, Israel's first comptroller; and Max Kreutzberger, a prominent German Jew who went back after the war to work on critical restitution questions, before settling in New York. They were very different men but they shared one characteristic: probing and open minds that collectively demonstrated how wrong Goebbels had been in pronouncing the age of Jewish intellectualism dead.

One person not present was the man after whom they named the Institute: Leo Baeck. A liberal Rabbi who had been the last head of Germany's Jewish community, Baeck was then residing in London. He gave his consent, became the new organization's first president, and died the next year. But his contribution to the character and spirit of the Institute was profound.

A humanist, a scholar, and a modern theologian, a man deeply versed in both rabbinical study and Western culture, a military chaplain during World War One, Baeck was irreversibly committed to the cause of Jewish life in Germany. In many ways, he symbolized the delicate, fertile symbiosis of Jewish and German thought that characterized the years before Hitler's Reich. A stoic, Baeck remained at his post as the civilization he loved was shredded. He was a reluctant interlocutor with the Nazis from their rise through the Final Solution, a stance for which he was rewarded with dispatch to the Theresienstadt concentration camp. His persistence in choosing to represent Germany's Jews before Nazi authorities stirred some vehement criticism—from Arendt above all—but the camp of horror and starvation where he ended the war was testimony enough to where his loyalties lay. After the war, he reached out to the nascent Federal Republic, an example of dialogue that would prove a model for the Institute bearing his name. In his learning, his persistent and even perverse love of German Enlightenment culture, and in the unmistakably German texture of his Judaism, Baeck could scarcely be a more faithful symbol of the world the Leo Baeck Institute set out to recreate.

As the historian Fritz Stern has commented, the LBI is "a monument that German-Jewish refugees built as a memorial to their collective past, a troubled, anguished, glorious past to which many of them remained loyal even as National Socialism sought to deny and destroy it. It is impossible to generalize about German Jews in the modern era, but common to most of them was an earlier deep affection for their country, its language, and its culture. Perhaps they loved not wisely, but too well."

LBI should not be seen as a monument to horror; nor is it an institution focused, like Yad Vashem or the Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, on the Final Solution. Rather, it is dedicated to the notion that there was life before the Holocaust and that it is only with the knowledge of what came before it that the mass killing of Europe's Jews can be contextualized and the extent of the loss grasped. The founders of the LBI sought an evocation of a rich and vital life, not the death that followed. In the great collection amassed since 1955 they have seen their aims fulfilled.

The Leo Baeck Institute had modest but far-flung beginnings. Three centers were established in Jerusalem, London, and New York, with the latter to serve as the main library and archive. These cities represented the three main exile communities (Baeck had become a British citizen after the war and spent some of his time teaching at Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati), and so the greatest potential sources of material for its growing collections. Most of the initial funding came from German government compensation for "material losses" inflicted by the Third Reich or proceeds from the sale of heirless property, later boosted by annual allocations from the German Ministry of the Interior and the German Foundation on Remembrance, Responsibility and the Future. In addition to donations from foundations and individuals, membership fees, and bequests and grants, the German Foreign Ministry now provides significant support for microfilming and preservation.

That material is now so astonishing in its extent and variety that it seems almost inconceivable that the collection began its life in what had been the shirt drawers of the composer Leonard Bernstein. It was in Bernstein's former apartment at 1239 Broadway that the LBI first established itself in the United States, with Kreutzberger acting as director. From the outset, the Institute's mission was broadly defined. Of course scholarly volumes and first editions of great works would be collected. But so, too, would grainy photographs, recordings, business records of Jewish families, paintings, drawings, scrap books, memoirs, and assorted memorabilia.

Over the years, as the LBI's reputation grew, and as the Institute moved first to a mansion on East 73rd Street (donated by the banker Gustav Wurzweiler) and later to its current home in the Center for Jewish History on West 16th Street, donations multiplied. The result is that the library now houses more than 80,000 titles; the folders of papers and manuscripts stretch for over a mile; the LBI's art works number several thousand. An enormous amount of work in recent years has gone into digitizing the whole collection, an enormous service to scholars, in some cases adding clarity to near illegible manuscripts and, in all cases, providing virtual access to the archives anywhere in the world.

Eclecticism defines the collection. It includes first editions of Franz Kafka, Einstein's guest book from his house near Potsdam, collections of periodicals, children's board games, and pattern books for women's ready-to-wear clothing. As a portrait of the legacy of German-speaking Jewry, it could hardly be more comprehensive; as a resource for scholars of Jewish life in Germany before the Nazi rise to power, it is unrivaled.

In many ways, the LBI's story over the past half-century is one of difficulties overcome. Its founders could scarcely have imagined the degree to which the post-war reluctance to look back would yield to an almost obsessive desire among the scattered descendants of German-speaking Jewry—and among historians—to grasp every detail of the everyday life of a lost world. Nor could they have foreseen how important a place the Holocaust would assume in American culture. The notion that a united Berlin would house a revived Jewish Museum enjoying an intense and cooperative relationship with a branch of the LBI archive would have seemed utterly far-fetched to the founders in 1955. So, too, would the idea of a Holocaust Memorial of 2,700 concrete slabs standing adjacent to the Brandenburg Gate and opposite America's embassy in the restored capital of a Germany made whole.

The founders showed great foresight, but such an opening of Germany to memory, however painful, they could not have predicted. What they intuited, however, was the preciousness and vulnerability of memory. For memory is a living thing; it is never still, never fixed; it does not move in a linear pattern and it can be easy to manipulate. Thanks to those gathered in Buber's Jerusalem home, memory in this critical instance has the references and anchors it and Europe need.

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That memory is inevitably poignant, tinged with pain. It leads to the question: what might have been if the Nazi catastrophe had not occurred? Referring to the immense creativity of Weimar Germany, Joschka Fischer, the German Foreign Minister, once suggested in a speech at the LBI that "the 20th century could have been a German century in the best sense of the word." He was echoing a thought of the French philosopher and liberal political theorist, Raymond Aron, that lifelong opponent of fanaticism who once defined the "heart and soul of the human adventure" as "freedom of enquiry, freedom of controversy, freedom of criticism, and the vote." The Nazis had no time for all that, of course, and that hypothetical German century went out the window with the brown-shirted thugs.

What came to pass in Germany between 1933 and 1945 had roots, some deep, some going back only to the disaster of the 1914–18 war and its fragile resolution at Versailles. Those roots become clear in the LBI's archives. Indeed, one way to look at the Institute is as a fascinating portrait of the restless tug-of-war over a modern German identity and

the place of Jews within it. Would that identity be shaded by the nationalism, bigotry, and racism of, say, the 19th-century clergyman Adolf Stoecker? Or would the modern state embrace the democratic and liberal values that a Jew, Hugo Preuss, attempted to frame in the Weimar constitution? Jews lived with this uncertainty, sometimes avowed, often repressed. Torn between love of their country and a recurring self-doubt, they felt various shades of the sentiments expressed by the great poet Heinrich Heine, who upon his reluctant conversion from Judaism to Christianity in 1825, wrote: "I get up at night

inevitably bear a sense of responsibility, the question of modern German identity and modern German geography were settled at last. The "German question" disappeared from Europe's table. Germany became a force for integration rather than division. It embraced peace over war. Dialogue resumed—between Jews and Germany, between Israel and Germany, and between Germans from East and West raised on divergent accounts of World War II. All of this has served truth and openness, memory and cultural exchange, the very values that stand at the heart of the undertaking defined by the founders of the Leo Baeck Institute.

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The LBI's rich and varied mission is far from over as it celebrates its six decades. This mission is cultural, academic, and educational. Researchers and historians will continue to pore through the increasingly high-tech archives and collections of the Institute. But the LBI is also an important player in the transatlantic relationship. The Institute has been a constant bridge-builder; the need for such bridges is unabated. Indeed, it may be greater than ever. The West is facing,

in the form of the metastasizing ideology of barbaric jihadists, a long-term threat to its values.

Alienated Muslim youths troop off from Germany, France, and Britain to join the zealots. Some return with the intent of wreaking havoc in Europe. Their goal is the vanquishing of Western culture and the spreading of terror. The LBI knows in its very sinews what such objectives represent. The throat-cutters will not succeed. But Western societies cannot afford complacency or amnesia.

Closer to home, just to its east, the Germany of Chancellor Angela Merkel confronts a new instability and menace in the form of aggressive Russian nationalism. Europe has been jolted from its post-1989 sense of security.

For the LBI, memory is critical. It is the bulwark against totalitarianism in all its forms, the link that fosters commitment to a liberal order. Germany's Jewish population has now surpassed 100,000 for the first time since Hitler

and curse myself in front of the mirror." Julius Bab, a Jewish theater critic, was indignant during World War One when asked if he loved Germany. "What a question!" he retorted. "Do I love my own hair, my blood, my very self?" But a darker reality was succinctly captured by Walter Rathenau, the Jewish Weimar foreign minister assassinated on June 24, 1922, when he commented that, "There comes a moment in every Jew's life when he realizes he is a second-class citizen."

It took tragedy on an unimaginable scale to settle the outcome of such questioning and doubts. The Jews were not second-class citizens to the Nazis; they were *Untermenschen*, not even human. There the story might have ended. But, thanks in part to the work of the LBI, it did not. Through the foundation of the Federal Republic, Germany's integration into the European Union and NATO, the firm German-American alliance, and the steadily reinforced determination of post-war Germans not to look away from Nazi crimes for which they bear no guilt but

dispersed and destroyed the prewar community of more than 500,000 Jews. The actual Jewish population may be closer to 200,000, if Jews not registered with the community are included. Often, however, these Jews, many of whom have arrived since 1990 from the former Soviet Union, know little of Jewish history. Raised as Communists, generally angrier about Stalin's crimes than Hitler's, they are happy to have reached Western Europe and tend to take scant interest in Germany's past or in its current political life. Their children are fully integrated German citizens, but the strength of their Jewish identity is unclear.

There can be little doubt that the threads between the new Jews of Germany and their adoptive land, and between these Jews and their Jewish heritage, have not yet been woven. The LBI has always sought to link past to present and Jews to the once-vibrant culture of German-speaking Jewry. Its role in building the needed connections will inevitably be an important one. With its strong ties both to the German government and to Jewish communities, the LBI is also a critical channel for dialogue at a time when some Germans, 70 years after World War Two, mutter "Enough already" under their breath. They are tired of being reminded of the Holocaust, tired of what they sometimes feel to be an unrelenting emotional pressure from Jews who do not want to let them forget. The LBI's presence in Germany is important as a counterweight. It permits Germans to take pride in the Jewish heritage that flourished in their midst.

So the work goes on. That is not surprising, for the very idea of the Leo Baeck Institute is in some ways synonymous with modernity, whose essence is mobility, openness, and the shrinking of distances. Founded in three extraordinary cities, now present in four, homes to the spiritual and intellectual yearnings of millions of people, the LBI always carried within itself something of the restless spirit of the metropolis—the very quest for understanding and knowledge that so characterized Weimar Berlin.

Threats abound these days, but the fundamentals of the Western liberal tradition, so dear to Leo Baeck himself, endure. These values, rooted in the Enlightenment, of humanism and secularism, and the embrace of reason over superstition, are inseparable from the LBI, just as they were inseparable from the 19th and early 20th-century emancipation of German's Jews. Gabriel Riesser, the Jewish vice-president of the revolutionary German National Assembly of 1848, a body devoted to the political realization of Enlightenment values, declared before it that, "We are not immigrants—we were born here—and so we cannot claim any other home: either we are German or we have no homeland. Whoever disputes my claim to this my German fatherland disputes my right to my own thoughts, my feelings, my language—the very air I breathe."

Riesser's dream was not realized. We have to accept that reality in order to understand the vacuum we sometimes feel in the streets of Berlin. But nor, thanks to the Leo Baeck Institute, was his dream entirely destroyed. An Institute cannot be a fatherland. But it can be a sanctuary and it can conjure presence from absence. Over 60 years the LBI has proved this.

In *Reunion*, Uhlman's novella, Hans Schwarz is saved by his parents' decision to send him to the United States (they subsequently commit suicide). The pain of departure is redoubled by his discovery of the fierce anti-Semitism of the mother of his friend, von Hohenfels. Even von Hohenfels himself concludes in a valedictory letter to the Jewish friend who has changed his life that Hitler is needed because "only he can save our beloved country from materialism and Bolshevism, only through him can Germany regain the moral ascendancy she has lost by her own folly." The "demonic intensity and prophetic insight" of the *Führer* will salvage the homeland.

Schwarz troops off to Boston, then New York. He becomes a successful lawyer. Germany is far away, the world of his youth destroyed. He wants nothing to do with it. Then, one day, decades later, he receives a letter from his Stuttgart high school requesting funds for a memorial to students killed in World War II. He goes through the long list of classmates, many of them killed on the Russian front, or never found. Desperately he avoids the letter H. At last he can resist no longer and reads: "VON HOHENFELS. Konradin, implicated in the plot to kill Hitler. *Executed.*"

These are among the most shattering last lines in literature precisely because they offer redemption and hope where none seemed possible. The flickering flame of righteousness in the human spirit burns: Schwarz was indelible for von Hohenfels in the end, just as the Jewish story is indelible for Germany and, through the LBI, a source of ongoing strength.

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