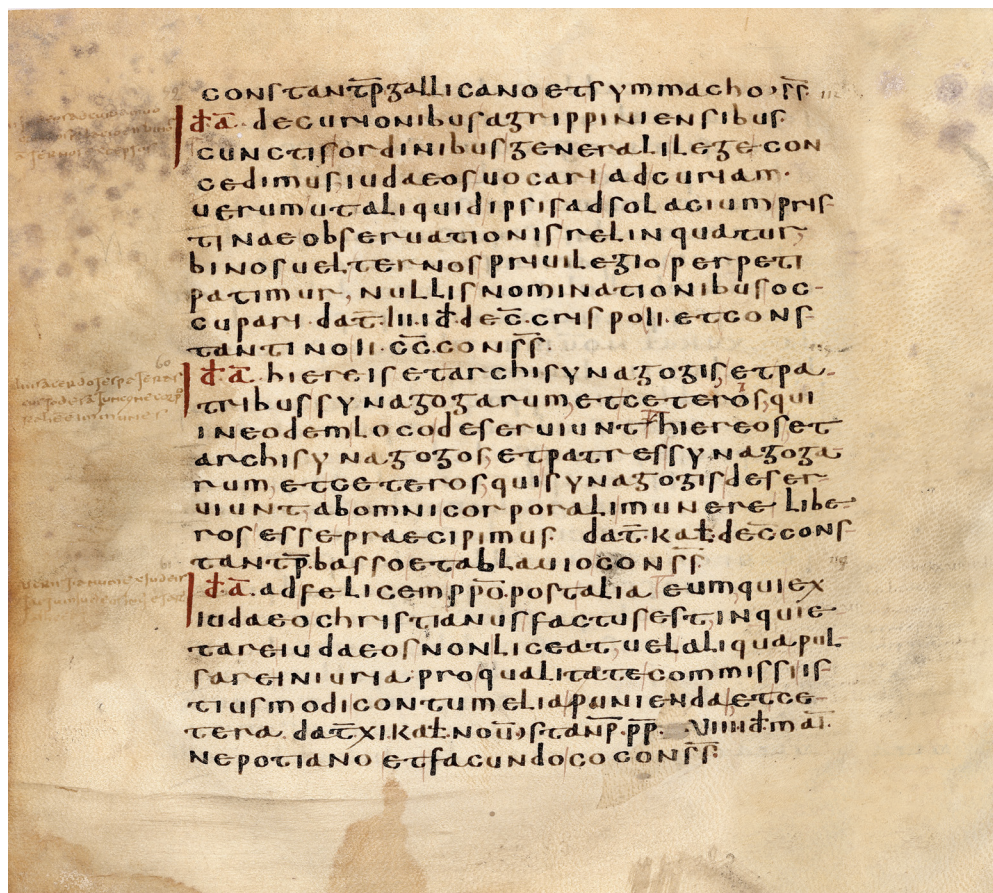# 1,700 YEARS OF JEWISH LIFE IN GERMANY

By the Leo Baeck Institute

The year 2021 marks the 1,700th anniversary of a Roman imperial edict representing the first historical evidence of Jewish life in the territory of modern-day Germany. Institutions in Germany and beyond are marking the occasion with a year-long festival of exhibitions, events, and commemoration.

The Leo Baeck Institute (LBI), a New York-based library and archive, is joining in the commemoration with its "Shared History Project" – an online exhibition of 58 objects revealing how interwoven the lives of Jews and non-Jews have been over these nearly two millennia.

Yet the project also tells the history of a minority that remained distinct from their neighbors for a remarkably long time. Processes of integration and acculturation of minority groups such as the Jews were always subject to persistent counterforces – whether they be the religious or national feelings of the Jews or the prejudice that led the majority to exclude them.

A century ago, Jews who felt confident of their place in society, but threatened by the rise of an

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ideology that painted them as alien, pointed to their ancient lineage in "German" lands as evidence that they belonged there. Questions about belonging and identity certainly aren't new in 2021. Who is a German? Who is a Jew? What conditions are necessary for a minority to retain its own identity and a secure place in society? Jews have grappled with these questions since the late Roman empire. The answers they developed can shed light on our own increasingly diverse and pluralist world.

Opposite page, left: Emperor Constantine's edict from 321, recorded in the Codex Theodosianus 16,8,3; Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana (Cod. Reg. Lat. 886), 6th century. *Opposite page, right:* Spice tower, 18th century (Jewish Museum Frankfurt). *Above:* Jews were expelled from Strasbourg in the 14th century but allowed to do business there until sundown. The "Gruselhorn" sounded nightly when it was time for Jews to leave the city. *Right:* Earring, dated to 1096. An example of medieval goldsmithing shows the flourishing exchange in craft between Christians and Jews in the Rhineland. (Jewish Museum in the Archeological Quarter of Cologne).

Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages (321–1450)

The history of Jews in the territory of modern-day Germany begins with a brief mention in an edict issued by Emperor Constantine in the year 321 CE regarding the city of Cologne. Jews in the Roman colony, like their upper-class pagan neighbors, could now be compelled to serve on the municipal council or *curia*, which bore responsibility for the financing and administration of the city. The edict proves that Jews were not just present but also numerous and wealthy enough to share in the expensive burdens of public office.

Archeological evidence from this early period testifies to the common roots of Jewish and Christian elements in provincial Roman society, which coexisted with pagan cults in a state of friendly competition. That changed with the Christianization of the Roman empire, initiated by Constantine and formalized in 380 with the Edict of Thessalonica. The first discriminatory measures against Jews were introduced not long after, and synagogues (as well as pagan temples) began to be converted into churches.

Nevertheless, historical and archeological evidence suggests that Jews were an integral part of urban life during the early Middle Ages under the Frankish kings. Some distinctions between Christians and Jews drawn by rulers in this period may have even been designed to prevent Christians from converting to Judaism. An uneasy co-existence continued. Later, the prosperous cities of Mainz and nearby Worms and Speyer became centers of Jewish learning on the Rhine.

A turning point came with the beginning of the Crusades in 1096, when Christian attacks nearly annihilated whole communities, including those in Mainz and Worms. In the ensuing years, Jews endured periodic violence and expulsion, culminating in the pogroms that swept across Europe during the Black Death between 1348 and 1350, when Jews were scapegoated for the pandemic and massacred.

Early Modern Period (1450–1648)

Following the enormous social disruption and transformation that came with the Black Death, revolutions in media, religion, and science ushered in a new world. Religious upheaval wrought by the Reformation, the invention and spread of printing, the scientific revolution and rise of philosophical and religious skepticism, the growing power of the centralized state, new ideologies and economic structures, and population growth and urbanization characterized the period beginning in the mid-15th century that historians refer to as "Early Modernity."

During this time, the German-speaking lands were a mosaic of approx. 1,800 small states, each with its own policies regarding Jews. These ranged from total banishment to discriminatory measures, such as a requirement to wear an identifying badge or exclusion from many cities or certain economic activities, to toleration by order of the local sovereign.

The intellectual and religious ferment of the times also brought Jews into new kinds of cultural exchange with Christians. An interest in studying religious texts in their original languages led to a generation of "Christian Hebraists," who studied Hebrew and Jewish ritual practice with learned Rabbis. Interested in the origins of scripture rather than Judaism per se and often holding deeply anti-Jewish attitudes, they nevertheless made Judaism accessible to broader circles.

On a more popular level, despite Martin Luther's incitements against the Jews, the Reformation's focus on the Bible brought biblical stories into homes. Protestant fathers integrated the Bible into domestic life and began to appreciate figures from the Hebrew Bible, naming boys Abraham, Daniel, Elias, or Benjamin.

Both the Reformation and the work of the Christian Hebraists were closely linked to the advent of the printing press. For Jews, however, the more rapid spread of information was a double-edged sword. Anti-Jewish conspiracy theories spread far and wide, even though some humanist scholars argued that they were not based in fact. At the same time, one consequence of the Reformation – the principle of separation of church and state – presaged the granting of more equal rights to Jews in a later period.

Absolutism (1648–1800)

The religious and political tensions resulting from the Reformation and the devastation of the Thirty Years' War led to the rise of the nation-state, which provided opportunities for Jews to gain rights and share in the developments of the era.

The Peace of Westphalia (1648) ended the war and imposed a new political system of territorial states with independent rulers. While Jews were prohibited from living in some of these states, in those areas where they were permitted, they shared and benefitted from this transformation. Provided with "letters of privilege," a few Jews became prosperous and powerful, although precariously protected by the ruler who issued the letter.

Most Jews continued to live impoverished lives in rural areas as a result of inordinate taxation and occupational restrictions. They lived side by side with Christians and engaged in trade (silk, tobacco, sugar, horses, and cattle) and practiced door-to-door peddling. Nevertheless, they were separated by custom and language, as most Jews spoke Yiddish dialects.

This began to change with the Enlightenment and its Jewish equivalent known as the *Haskalah*. Moses Mendelssohn (1729–1786) brought Jews closer to Germans, as exemplified by his translation of the Pentateuch into German.

The 19th Century to World War I

While Jews had shared a history with the majority population for at least 1,500 years by this point, it was not until the 19th century that civil rights and full citizenship were extended to Jews throughout German-speaking lands. Jewish intellectuals and reformers such as Leopold Zunz carried on the legacy of the *Haskalah* and linked Jewish emancipation to the broader movements for democracy and reform. It was not until the establishment of Austria-Hungary in 1867 and the united Germany in 1871 that Jews were finally granted full equality under the law in most German-speaking lands.

The expansion of political rights, accompanied by enormous economic growth in the wake of industrialization, unleashed unprecedented energies among the Jews. More integrated into economic, cultural, and intellectual life in German-speaking lands, many Jews adopted a German national identity, including more traditional German names, as well as bourgeois fashions and lifestyles.

Many of the same Jewish reformers who fought for emancipation also sought to reform Judaism through changes in worship, including shorter services, musical accompaniment, and German hymns. One such example is the New Synagogue in Berlin,

Clockwise from top left: Eyeglasses of Moses Mendelssohn, the Jewish philosopher known as the "Socrates of Berlin" during the Enlightenment (Leo Baeck Institute). Dress worn by the Jewish actress Marie Barkany in the first German-language presentation of Schillers' plays in Paris in 1910 (Jewish Museum Prešov, Slovakia). Salvarsan ampules belonging to the Jewish physician Paul Ehrlich, who transformed public health (Georg-Speyer-Haus, Frankfurt am Main).

where German texts were introduced alongside Hebrew texts for the liturgy and prayers were accompanied by an organ and choir.

The process of Jewish acculturation demonstrated a true shared history. Yet at the end of the 19th century, political antisemitism emerged as a threat in Germany and Austria-Hungary, with political parties espousing antisemitic policies under which Jews could not be German and lobbying for the exclusion of Jews from German society.

World War I through the Weimar Republic

Many Jews in Germany saw World War I as an opportunity to resolve the tension between their strong identification with German-speaking culture and its endemic antisemitism. Patriotic German and Austrian Jews eagerly signed up to fight for what they saw as their fatherlands, driven both by conviction and the hope that war service would put to rest any question about their national belonging. Instead, as the war dragged on, antisemites portrayed the Jews as shirkers or profiteers. The German military even ordered a "Jewish census" to show that Jews were avoiding combat service on the front. In fact, the results suggested otherwise and were suppressed.

The persistence of antisemitism during the Weimar Republic was still not enough to prevent a remarkable Jewish renaissance. The Weimar constitution made Germany a democracy in which civil rights were guaranteed without regard to religion. Women also became citizens with full rights. Philosophers like Franz Rosenzweig and Martin Buber cultivated new ways of engaging with Judaism. Artists and writers such as Max Liebermann and Alfred Döblin occupied the vanguard of artistic

modernism. Jews rose to positions of unprecedented political prominence. , However, the case of Walter Rathenau, the Jewish industrialist who became Germany's foreign minister but was assasinated in 1922, showed the perils of such prominence for Jews.

The new cultural freedom meant that Jews could choose to engage with their heritage in new ways – whether through religious renewal advocated by figures like Buber or through national renewal promised by Zionism – or push it into the background as a more or less tightly held religious framework for otherwise ordinary German doctors, lawyers and judges, business leaders, writers, or politicians.

National Socialism and the Holocaust

This period of freedom came to a painful end when the Nazis came to power in 1933, and it became abundantly clear that the rights Jews had gained over centuries could also be taken away overnight. Nazi Germany ratcheted up the legal persecution over the next five years, depriving Jews of their ability to make a living, confiscating their property, and defining their social horizons ever more narrowly. In November 1938, the persecution culminated in mass violence against the Jews across Germany and the newly annexed Austria. Hundreds of thousands emigrated by the end of the 1930s, but most of those who remained were murdered in the Holocaust.

Postwar to the Present

The Nazi period reversed all the gains of Emancipation, and the Holocaust surpassed the horrors of the medieval pogroms in previously unimaginable ways. Yet the story of German-speaking Jewry continued, and not just in exile.

The postwar German-Jewish community comprised German Jews

who had survived in mixed families or in hiding, the survivors of labor and concentration camps, returnees from exile, and the mostly Eastern European "displaced persons." Most of this "saved remnant" remained in Allied-occupied western Germany, although a tiny number of survivors also remained in or returned to the Soviet zone and the German Democratic Republic. After the founding of the State of Israel in 1948, most emigrated there or to other destinations.

A small number, however, remained. Though many lived "with packed suitcases," always contemplating emigration, they established new synagogues and communal institutions in Germany, despite the disapproval they often faced from Jews elsewhere. Thus, Jewish life continued in German-speaking Europe, however tenuously, after the Holocaust.

This quiet, almost invisible existence changed dramatically with the immigration of as many as 200,000 Jews from the former Soviet Union in the 1990s and then the arrival of Israelis in Germany, particularly Berlin, the new capital of united Germany, in the 20th and 21st centuries. The presence of a vibrant Jewish community in today's Germany has highlighted debates about the future: Does one count as a Jew in Germany only if registered as such? Can one identify as a Jew without religious beliefs? How will Jews respond to the rise of antisemitism in Germany?

And, how will the Jewish community share its history with an increasingly diverse population within Germany?