

THE CENTROPA JEWISH WALKING TOUR OF BERLIN MITTE

BETA VERSION 1.0

12 sites to see

*2 stories from the
Centropa Archive
to read*



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Part One: 12 sites to see

This section of Berlin Mitte, sometimes referred to as the Scheunenviertel (the barn quarter), or the Spandauer Vorstadt, is where Jews were first allowed to live when they were given permission to settle in Berlin in the 1600s. It would remain the heart of Jewish Berlin until the 1940s.

By the mid-1800s, as the city's population began to grow exponentially, so did the number of its Jewish residents. In 1850, less than 10,000 Jews lived in Berlin. By 1900 there were ten times that and the number would climb even higher, to around 175,000, after the end of the First World War.

Those were the years when more than 50,000 Jews lived in and around this neighborhood, and many had recently arrived from Eastern Europe, fleeing pogroms, revolution, and the coming of Communism in what had become the Soviet Union. A large percentage of these new arrivals were Orthodox and desperately poor. They depended on the Berlin Jewish community for help, which responded as best it could with medical care, job training, and housing. On Centropa's walking tour of Berlin Mitte, you will see some of those institutions — or at least the buildings they were housed in.

Although the Oranienburger Strasse synagogue (and its fine museum, Centrum Judaicum) still dominates the skyline, Berlin Mitte has not been a Jewish neighborhood since the Nazis drove its Jews away and murdered those who stayed.

After 1945, this was as dreary and gray a neighborhood as Communist East Berlin had to offer, and only after the fall of Communism in 1989 did Berlin Mitte spring to life again — but without its Jews, although the cultural programs at Centrum Judaicum and the Jewish school on Grosse Hamburger Strasse have brought a bit of Jewish life back to the area. There are less pleasant experiences in Berlin than to stand near the Jewish school and listen to the sound of Jewish children playing loudly in its courtyard. May they play long and loud; there is quite a vacuum to fill.

12 sites to see



1

Große Hamburger
Straße 25

2

Große Hamburger
Straße 26

3

Große Hamburger
Straße 15–16

4

Große Hamburger
Straße 27

5

Krausnickstraße 6

6

Neue Synagoge
Oranienburger
Straße 28–30

7

Auguststraße 11

8

Auguststraße
14–16

9

Koppenplatz

10

Gipsstraße 3

11

Hackesche Höfe

12

The Rosenstraße
Memorial Rosen-
straße 1–2



Stolpersteine

On this walking tour you will find scores, if not hundreds, of Stolpersteine, or stumbling stones. They are small brass plaques with a name, year of birth, date of death, and the place where that person was murdered. The Stolpersteine have mostly been placed directly in front of the home where each victim lived.

In their simplicity, in their size, they catch the attention of the passerby. People often bend down, read the family name, figure out the age of the victim, and ponder those words “ermordet in Auschwitz.” Murdered in Auschwitz...or Treblinka...or Theresienstadt....

Gunter Demnig, an artist in Cologne, initiated the project in 1992, and in very short order the concept spread throughout Germany. At first, Demnig laid every stone himself, but by 2019 tens of thousands have been laid throughout Germany (over a thousand in Frankfurt alone), along with Austria, Italy, Greece, and other countries following suit.

Grosse Hamburger Strasse 25

1.

Aside from a few gnarled looking grave-stones laid against the wall, the only grave-stone here belongs to that of Moses Mendelssohn, 1729 to 1786, and it is not in its original place. Mendelssohn arrived in Berlin as a teenager in 1743.

By the time he died (a few months before Frederick the Great), Moses Mendelssohn was perhaps the most famous Jew in the world. A philosopher, Mendelssohn was the first to explain to his co-religionists that they could indeed live as part of the greater world, while keeping their Judaism intact. In other words, it was Mendelssohn who first began leading Jews out of the ghetto and into the greater world, and translated the entire Five Books of Moses into German.

This cemetery is no longer consecrated ground since during the Second World War it was used as a common burial site. Wehrmacht soldiers, and perhaps even SS soldiers, are buried here.

Grosse Hamburger Strasse 26

An uninspiring small collection of sculpted figures (placed here in 1985 and created by East German artist Will Lammert) marks the spot where a Jewish old age home stood from the 1840s until it was bombed during the war.



Closed to patients by the Nazis in 1942, this was a collection point for the 55,000 Jewish Berliners who did not have the good fortune to flee (as did some 120,000 others). They were driven from here through the city to the suburban Grunewald station and sent to ghettos and concentration camps. Very few survived.

2.

3.

Grosse Hamburger Strasse 27

The Moses Mendelssohn School. Built on this site in 1860, this liberal Jewish school for boys taught a varied curriculum; it added girls in 1931 and was closed by the Nazis in 1942.

Between 1942 and 1945, it was used to deport Berlin Jews to their deaths. After the war, the school became an East German technical school, and in newly re-unified Berlin it was returned to the Jewish community. It is a high school once again, serving Jewish and non-Jewish teenagers.



Grosse Hamburger Strasse 15–16

The Missing House. Conceptual art at its most evocative. French artist Christian Boltanski was so moved by this bombed-out site between two standing buildings, he researched the names of those who had lived here, noted their professions, when they lived in the building, and on which floors they lived. Then he created the plaques you see before you.



4.

Krausnickstrasse 6

5.

Regina Jonas was born in 1902 and grew up in this house. With a passion for Hebrew, Jewish history, and religious texts, Jonas began studying with rabbis and in 1924 graduated from the Hochschule für die Wissenschaft des Judentums. While other women she studied with wanted to teach, Jonas was determined to become a pulpit rabbi.

The men overseeing the rabbinate did not grant her ordination. Jonas taught in Jewish girls' schools and after 1933, when Jewish children were thrown out of public schools, she began teaching to larger and more varied audiences. Jonas ministered in the Jewish hospital and began preaching in synagogues. Finally, in 1935, a Liberal (Reform) rabbinical association ordained her.

Two years later, the official Jewish community of Berlin employed her as a "pastoral-rabbinic counselor," and sent her to smaller communities throughout Germany, which now had communities of desperate, frightened Jews and no rabbis. Jonas was sent to forced labor in a factory during the day; she ministered in the evenings.

On 6 November 1942, she and her mother were deported to Theresienstadt. After two years of greeting trains and speaking with inmates, they were sent to the gas chambers in Auschwitz. Rabbi Leo Baeck, the most famous of German rabbis (and who had been the chief liberal rabbi of Berlin), wrote

extensively of his time in Theresienstadt, but never mentioned her.

And so, the name Regina Jonas literally vanished until 1991, when Katherina von Kellerbach found two photographs of Jonas in rabbinical robes. That led to her digging into the history of Regina Jonas. We are indebted to von Kellerbach for rescuing Rabbi Jonas from the obscurity in which she languished.



6.

Neue Synagoge Oranienburger Strasse 28–30

This monumental Moorish-style synagogue, built to hold over 3,000 congregants, opened to the world on 5 September 1866. With two massive balconies for women, and a circular stained-glass window so large it needed a circle of gas jets to keep it from frosting over in winter, this gold-domed synagogue dominated the skyline in this part of the city.

As in other liberal synagogues in Germany at that time, there was an organ and a choir and rabbis delivered their sermons in German. Set on fire during Reichspogromnacht [Kristallnacht] on 9 November 1938, a policeman, Wilhelm Krützfeld, demanded a local fire brigade extinguish the blaze, which they did. As the city's Jews fled Berlin, services continued until 1943, when, with almost no congregants left and bombs falling through its roof, the doors were bolted shut.

Badly damaged, most of the building was pulled down in 1958. Even before reunification, the East German government began restoration. Today the Centrum Judaicum offers a fine exhibition of the building's former glory.



7.

7. Auguststrasse 11

A fine example of Bauhaus architecture, this Jewish girls' school was designed by Alexander Beer and opened in 1930. The goal was to create a trade school so girls could learn the skills they would need in this bustling neighborhood of small factories: leather working, sewing, handcrafts.



The Nazis closed the school in 1942; it reopened as a secondary public school in 1950 but was closed in 1996. Today there are galleries and restaurants inside and do please take a walk through its first-floor hallways – it's a marvel of Weimar architecture.

Beer was a talented architect who could not find work in a country of rapidly rising antisemitism, but the Berlin Jewish community gladly hired him. Aside from the school, Beer designed the powerful memorial to Jewish war dead for the First World War (in the Weissensee cemetery), a Jewish orphanage (now a library in Pankow), and two synagogues (one is still partially standing in Kreuzberg).

Grosse Hamburger Strasse 15–16



If they gave halos to buildings, this sad and neglected one at 14–16 Auguststrasse would certainly be given one of the largest. Opened as a Jewish hospital in 1861, it became a soup kitchen for poor Jewish immigrants of the First World War in 1914.

Four years later, it became a Jewish orphanage, run by Beate Berger, who named it Beit Ahawah, Hebrew for "House of Love," and the photograph above was taken there. Once the skies darkened, Beate began finding funds to bring her young charges to mandate-era Palestine, specifically to Haifa. She delivered 100 children to safety but died in Haifa in 1940, age 54.

Her successors did not succeed in bringing other children out; most of them were murdered. The building today is a sad and empty relic, with only a tiny plaque to remember Beate Berger and her House of Love.

8.

Koppenplatz

Karl Biedermann designed “The Deserted Room,” pictured here. Visitors see a table and two chairs, with one knocked over. The memorial is often called the Nelly Sachs Memorial, after the Nobel Prize winning, Berlin-born Jewish poet whose “O the Chimneys” is inscribed around its base:



*“...oh the houses of death
invitingly appointed
or the landlord of the house who was once a guest
Oh you fingers,
laying the threshold
like a knife between life and death
Oh, you chimney stacks,
Oh you fingers,
And the body of Israel going up in smoke!”*

Gipsstrasse 3



Now destroyed, the Jewish kindergarten that stood on this spot opened its doors in 1895 and took in children from the ages of three to fourteen. The older ones arrived in the afternoons, after their regular lessons, and this is where working mothers sent their children.

Incorporating the most modern pedagogical ideas at the time, even the youngest children were taught how to sew and prepare basic foods.

Sala Kochmann (born in Rzeszow, Poland, in 1912) and her husband Martin (born 1912, in Wongrowitz), taught at the school, and belonged to the ill-fated anti-Nazi Herbert Baum Group, all of whose members were caught, tortured, and executed during the war. A plaque for the two of them was erected here during the communist decades.

Hackesche Höfe

Today, the Hackesche Höfe (courtyards) are filled with restaurants, bars, a museum, theaters, art galleries, and trendy shops. The first courtyard (out of eight) is a wonder of art nouveau and is a far cry from the grim and abandoned facades that were here during the neglected communist years (1945–1989).

The building began life in the 1700s but took its current shape in the 1850s. Here is a grand example of late 19th century mixed-use urban life. During the great urbanization and industrialization of Central Europe's larger cities, Buda-



pest, Vienna, and Berlin featured complexes like this: light industrial manufacturing was often concentrated in the first of the courtyards and, in courtyards beyond, apartments and offices filled high-ceilinged rooms that usually sported enormous windows to coax in as much of the northern European light as they could get.

Inside the Hackesche Höfe, you can visit Otto Weidt's Blindenwerkstatt, or workshop for the blind. Here his mostly Jewish employees worked and continued to work throughout the war. Weidt bribed Gestapo officers when he needed to, organized food and clothing for his charges, and even arranged for them to have false identification papers. When the war ended, he fought to have the Jewish orphanage nearby given

back to the decimated Jewish community and turned an old age home into one for Holocaust survivors.

Today his factory is a museum, "Blindes Ver-

trauen," or Blind Trust. Weidt was recognized as a Righteous Among the Nations by Yad Vashem in 1971.



12.

The Rosenstrasse Memorial, Rosenstrasse 1–2

By early 1943, the majority of Berlin's Jews had been arrested; most had been deported.

But a few thousand Jewish men remained, and they either worked for Jewish organizations under the direction of the Nazis (as they prepared records and documents), or, in the case of 1,800 Jewish men, they were married to non-Jewish women.

In the last days of February 1943, the Gestapo arrested these 1,800 men and brought them to a (now destroyed) building on Rosenstrasse and prepared them for deportation to the death camps." But singly, in pairs, and in groups, the wives of these men began gathering in front of the building to protest.



By 2 March there were hundreds of women standing before the gates, chanting "Give us our husbands back!" On 5 March 1943, the SS brought in a large flatbed truck, with a machine gun on it, and placed it in front of the building. The women were threatened. But they would not leave. The following morning, Joseph Goebbels, the Gauleiter of Berlin, ordered all of the imprisoned men released.

Historians have discussed this event for years. While it was said that protesting against Nazi policies would instantly lead to arrest – and worse – here was a flagrant protest by hundreds of women who refused to back down. Perhaps it was because this took place in the middle of the city that the SS chose not to shoot them, or even manhandle them, as too many witnesses would be there.

We honestly don't know.

But we do know those 1,800 men walked out of the building and were not bothered again for the duration of the war.

In the adjacent park there are two sets of statues to commemorate the protests, but you will notice there is very little context or explanation

From the Centropa archive

Part Two: Two personal stories from the Centropa archive

Centropa interviewed more than 1,200 elderly Jews in fifteen European countries. Our goal was to ask them to paint for us a picture of the entire twentieth Century, just as they lived it.

We interviewed two people who had been born in Berlin: Rosa Rosenstein and Hillel Kempler. They grew up only a few streets away from each other and as far as we know, they never met, as they were living in Berlin Mitte when more than fifty thousand Jews lived within a few blocks of one another.

Both were lucky enough to escape Berlin in the late 1930s—Rosa to Budapest, Hillel to pre-state Palestine. Neither returned to Germany. Tanja Eckstein interviewed Rosa in Vienna and Hillel in Tel Aviv.

On the following pages, they both share with us stories of growing up in what had once been one of the liveliest Jewish quarters in all of Europe.

From the Centropa archive



The Braw family, Berlin, 1919

ROSA ROSENSTEIN, née Braw, was born in Berlin in 1907 to Polish Jewish parents. She grew up in an Orthodox home, married an assimilated Hungarian Jew, Maximilian Weisz, and had two children, Bessy and Lilly.

In the late 1930s, with the Nazis in power and their lives in jeopardy, Rosa and Michi (as she called him) sent their children with her parents to Palestine, while Rosa and Michi fled to his hometown of Budapest. “Nothing can happen to us there,” he told Rosa.

In Budapest, Michi Weisz was sent off on a labor brigade to occupied Ukraine and died there. Rosa survived in hiding in Budapest and married Alfred Rosenstein after the war. Rosa moved to Vienna with Alfred and started a second family. Her two daughters and parents did not want to leave Israel, and for the rest of her life, Rosa continued to travel to Israel regularly, until her death, age 98, in 2005.

From the Centropa archive



Rosa Rosenstein's children in the
Jewish school on Gipsstrasse, 1936

Rosa Rosenstein on Jewish Life in Berlin in the 1920s

“It wasn’t difficult to keep kosher. There were only Jewish shops and religious people on Grenadierstrasse, on Dragonerstrasse, and on Mulackstrasse. This street was the center of Eastern European Jewry in Berlin. People spoke Yiddish and Polish and there were merchants with junk goods, butcher shops, fish shops, bakeries, and Jewish restaurants. My husband and I often went out to dinner and we really liked eating kishka with farfel. Farfel is a pasta, and tarhonya is an egg barley. Kishka is stuffed intestine. Then you roast it or cook it with the tarhonya. It forms a dough, a hard dough that you grate. Various shaped pieces come out that are sizzled in grease. It tastes wonderful. I used to make that a lot.”

Rosa Rosenstein on meeting her husband, Michi, at Hackesche Höfe

“I was working for my father in a factory building with large windows. My desk was at the window. There was a menswear business across the way. A young, good-looking man sat at the sewing machine. We would often smile at each other. I didn’t know who he was, and he didn’t know who I was. One day a man came by – earlier, the merchants would go from shop to shop – and he brought me a box of sweets: “This is sent from the young man over there.” That’s how it started. I took it, of course, and thanked him.”

Once I got to go home early. I went through Hackescher Markt to a large bookshop on Rosenthaler Strasse. I browsed the books, turned around and this man was standing there. He asked if he might accompany me — he was heading the same way. That’s how we found out that he was the nephew of the proprietor for whom he worked, and that I was the daughter of the proprietor from across the way. His name was Maximilian Weisz; we called him Michi.

He would sometimes accompany me, and then he asked me out. We agreed to meet on Schönhauser Allee at the subway station. I got dressed up, went to the hairdresser’s. My parents knew I had a date and my mother said, “Come on, get going already, or you’ll be too late!” I said, “If he is interested, he’ll wait.” I went down but there was no one there. Just great, I thought, I’m too late. Five minutes went by and, all of a sudden, he came running, out of breath.

“What happened?” I apologized for being late. He thought I was waiting at another station, so he ran to the next station and back.”

From the Centropa archive



Rosa Rosenstein on getting married in the Oranienburger Strasse Temple

“I insisted we get married in the temple on Oranienburger Strasse. People were invited just for the ceremony and others for the meal in a restaurant afterwards. Two married couples had to lead the bride under the chuppah. Those were, from my side, my parents, and from Michi’s side, his sister and brother-in-law. Two little girls, a friend’s daughters, scattered flowers. It was all very elegant.

Two little boys in sailor suits carried the train of my wedding dress. They were five years old. They fought the whole time; they were both tugging on the train and I had to struggle to hold on to it.

After the ceremony we went to a restaurant on Alexanderstrasse. My mother also made some real Polish carp — cold, with jelly — and challah. After dinner, people were supposed to dance but the music was awful, so we had an idea: a friend was a wonderful pianist, so we asked him to play the piano. Then we could really dance.”

From the Centropa archive



The Fasanenstrasse synagogue in Berlin after its destruction during the November Pogrom

Rosa Rosenstein on 1938

“In 1938, just after the November Pogrom, my father was arrested and deported to Poland [as were almost all Polish Jews living in Germany]. He was allowed to take ten marks and a briefcase. We still had relatives in Poland, and I got a visa for Poland. I wanted to go to my father and bring him money. Just as I was leaving the passport office my mother came up to me and said, “You don’t have to go. Your father got approval to come back. We’re going to Palestine together.”

When my father got back from Poland, my mother packed everything. My youngest daughter was about to start school, so Michi and I stayed behind. My father left with such a heavy heart: “I’m sinning against myself. I am leaving my child here and I am going!” And he said, “I won’t rest until I bring you over.”

From the Centropa archive



Hillel Kempler on his first day of school, 1932

HILLEL KEMPLER, was born in Berlin to a [religiously] observant family. His father, David, owned a pastry shop; his mother, Liebe, was a housewife. Hillel fled to Palestine in 1933 and was joined, in time, by his family. Hillel married, had two children, worked as a teacher, and lived well into his nineties.

From the Centropa archive



Liebe and David Kempler with their children, 1927.
Hillel is the youngest, in his father's lap

Hillel Kempler on living in Berlin

“We were a real Berlin family. We often drove around and were always out and about. My father would come, too, since his pastry shop was closed on Saturdays. On Sundays we’d drive down to Wannsee or Grunewald. We’d go to Alexanderplatz, which was really close by. There were always markets on Alexanderplatz, and often circuses.

I still remember a Zeppelin that landed in Berlin. We were there for that; the whole city was there. The Babylon cinema was located near Grenadierstrasse, on Rosa-Luxemburg-Platz, across from the Volksbühne [a Berlin theatre]. I often went to the Babylon to see comedies – they were still silent back then. In winter I would ice skate on the square in front of the Volksbühne with other kids. And we had good relationships with gentiles. It didn’t matter if someone was Jewish or not. You were accepted. I never heard “Jew” associated with anything negative from the people on our street. If Hitler hadn’t come, we definitely would have stayed in Berlin.”

From the Centropa archive



Liebe Kempler with her children Gusti, Miriam, and Hillel (in the baby carriage), 1925

Hillel Kempler on Jewish life around Hackescher Markt

“In those days, in the Scheunenviertel, there were a lot of very religious Jews with payot [sidelocks] and shawls, as well as modern Jews like my father and his friends, workers, and businesspeople. Initially my father rented the pastry shop, then later he bought it. It was a well-known pastry shop. It had a good reputation. In the shop there was coffee and a variety of cakes: cheesecake, apple cake, strudel, and such things.

There was also ice cream and beer. There were two rooms with tables for guests, next to which were two more rooms, and in one was the bakery with the machines. My father had an employee, but my mother also worked sometimes when there were a lot of guests.

A communist group met regularly in our pastry shop. There were Jewish and non-Jewish Communists. They exchanged information and played games. They often called to me: come, Hillel, play dominoes with us! They drank beer and coffee and ate a lot of cheesecake. My father’s cheesecake was pretty well known. They always paid for everything.

My father was an observant Jew, he didn’t understand politics and politics didn’t interest him at all. It was good for him that the Communists came to him, since they ordered so much. That was his interest. Our street was very Jewish, but we coexisted nicely with the Communists.”

From the Centropa archive



The Kempler family with friends, 1927

Hillel Kempler on 1938

“I want to talk about the day when everything changed. After Hitler won the elections in January 1933, the Nazis immediately took to the streets, breaking windows. They wore brown uniforms and boots. I can still see it right before my eyes.

The Süssapfel family lived below us. One night we heard horrible noises coming from the Süssapfel’s apartment. It woke us all up. My father was still in the pastry shop, preparing everything for the next day. Herta, our maid, quickly locked the front door. We were really anxious. Herta said that the family was being beaten downstairs, and that we weren’t allowed to go out.

Once the Nazis left, the family wanted to call a doctor for help, but no one wanted to come. They called an ambulance, which also didn’t come. Then the father went with the two sons to a hospital by foot. They carried themselves there and were bandaged. Afterwards, they came back home.

No one knew at the time if the Nazis had been there officially, or if they [the Süssapfels] could press charges with the police. My life changed that night. I didn’t know anything about politics yet, but that someone could just go into an apartment, beat the people there, is something that has stayed with me.”