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The Jewish Museum Berlin: Special offers and suggestions for German-Israeli groups

1 History and Conception of the Jewish Museum Berlin

The Jewish Museum Berlin (JMB) opened its gates to the public on September 13th, 2001. Other than one may expect, it is **not a specifically Jewish institution** but an independent foundation directly sponsored by the Federal Republic of Germany, and it is the second Jewish museum ever established in Berlin.

The **first Jewish museum**, which was indeed closely linked to the Jewish Community of Berlin and its arts collection, was opened at Oranienburger Strasse No. 31 in mid January 1933. Its first director, Karl Schwarz, emigrated to Tel Aviv already in summer 1933, till the museum was closed by the Gestapo immediately after November 10th, 1938, its holdings confiscated. Since then, for more than 50 years a cultural “gap” could be felt in Berlin. However, the re-established Jewish community in both parts of the city after 1945 could not possibly meet the needs for a specific place of information on Jewish culture, religion and history.

From 1971 onwards, a communal political initiative was formed to re-establish a **second Jewish museum** in Berlin, but only in 1989 an architectural competition was set up for an annex to the Berlin Museum at Lindenstraße, the local history museum of Berlin (West), also hosting a large Judaica collection. Right from the start, the new **building of Daniel Libeskind** – his first major project and today an architectural landmark of Berlin – attracted thousands of visitors. It was opened to the public already in 1999/2000, even before the permanent exhibition was designed. In the meantime, under the leadership of W. Michael Blumenthal who became director in 1997, the JMB emancipated itself both organisationally and financially, today representing not only a national but international place of information and learning. Since 2001, its library and archives host a branch of the **Leo Baeck Institute** New York, offering unique opportunities of scientific or genealogical research.

The JMB's **permanent exhibition**, after much discussion, was finally designed as a historical presentation of Jewish life and culture in Germany and Central Europe over a period of almost 2000 years, from the first official document of Jews in the city of Cologne (321 C. E.) until the present. The exhibition is divided into 14 chronological portraits, each depicting a historical era, for which individual, theme-oriented tours are offered. Much space, however, is given to Berlin as the largest and most influential Jewish community in Germany from the 18th and 19th centuries onwards. Special emphasis is laid on Jewish – non-Jewish relations over the centuries, the different options of Jewish identity in Germany till today, the issue of political and social emancipation, Jewish tradition, religious reform and modernity, cultural achievements, and gender aspects.

Throughout the exhibition, a **biographical approach** is followed in order to create personal ties and empathy, just as guided tours are generally centred around some selected “Stories of an Exhibition”, as the title of the JMB’s catalogue runs, standing for the larger context of German-Jewish history. Moreover, according to an Anglo-Australian tradition, the JMB is designed as an open and interactive museum to explore and discover on your own, also appealing to **families**. This includes special arrangements within the exhibition, guided tours, holiday programmes or theatre workshops for children and teenagers.

As far as the expectations and notions of most visitors – both Jewish and non-Jewish – about the JMB are concerned, three things must be pointed out:

1. Despite the character of Libeskind’s building, the JMB is **not a Holocaust museum!** Indeed, there is some architectural reference to other (authentic) memorial sites in Berlin and the surrounding region (e. g. the Topography of Terror, the Holocaust Memorial, Sachsenhausen), thus suggesting some kind of „job sharing“ concerning the issue of the Shoah. Being both a memorial and a museum at the same time, the JMB tries to present the whole wealth of Jewish culture, religion and history in Germany over the centuries, adding something more to Jewish identity than merely being a victim of Nazi persecution in the years of 1933–45. Even the respective section concentrates rather on the reactions of German Jews towards their expulsion from German society and the deprivation of their civil rights, leaving only relatively small room for a detailed history of the Shoah itself.
2. The JMB is **no place „by Jews for Jews“**, i.e. it does not serve as a place of cultural self-assurance for the Jewish community in Germany – as Jewish museums in Eastern Europe tend to do today. As an independent foundation the JMB is also only loosely connected with the Jewish Community of Berlin. On the contrary, it rather represents a place of national German cultural memory, offering a wealth of information and interpretations of Jewish history and identity in past and present also for foreign visitors, though not especially for Jewish or Israeli ones. Captions are only given in German and English, not Hebrew, Yiddish or Russian!
3. The JMB is **not a “Jewish Disneyland”** presenting Jews and Judaism as exotic objects or remnants of a still untouched Jewish world in pre-Holocaust Europe. The continued “Klezmerisation” of Jewish life and culture in Germany which, as perceived especially by non-Jews, is erroneously identified with some elements of Eastern European Jewish tradition (e.g. black hats, long beards or Klezmer music), distorts the historical picture and eventually blocks the view on the specific conditions of German Jewry in the 19th and 20th centuries, including the re-organization of the Jewish community under Nazi rule.

2 Guided tours in the Jewish Museum Berlin

Guided tours through the JMB, just as any other pedagogical programme, are organized and co-ordinated by the **Educational Department** (cf. below). Detailed informa-

tion can also be obtained through the Internet: www.jmberlin.de. Besides a selection of standard guided tours of about 60–90 minutes the JMB will be happy to arrange individual programmes also for any German-Israeli group on different themes of Jewish history and culture.

The **staff** available consists of a dynamic team of about 40 specially trained free-lance guides, both Jews and non-Jews, most of them young academics at the age of 25–35, heading for an M.A. or Ph.D. degree in the field of Jewish Studies and/or History.

Tours are offered in all major **languages**, including German, English, Russian and Hebrew. Since the number of participants should not exceed a maximum of 15–20, German-Israeli groups are likely to be split up on their visit. In most cases, the organizers themselves decided to have separate German and Hebrew tours. However, to create a fruitful dialogue within the group, **common guided tours in English are strongly recommended**, even though the language skills of some participants, both Israeli and German, may be limited or their mother tongue, Hebrew, Russian, Arabic or German, might make them feel more “at home”.

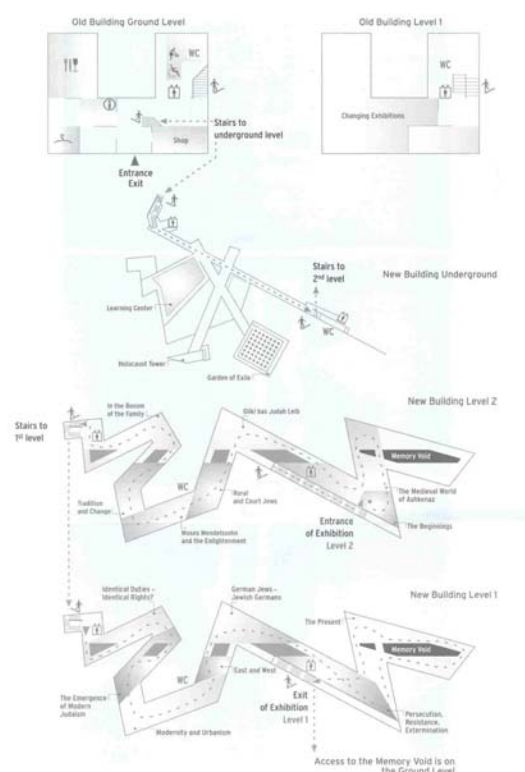
Presently, there are 26 different **options of guided tours** in the JMB, its vicinity or in co-operation with other institutions: 2 different tours giving a brief survey of both the JMB’s permanent exhibition and its architecture, 9 theme-oriented tours, 2 excursions in the vicinity of the Museum (only March – October), 8 additional or alternative tours for schools (some of them in combination with the Rafael Roth Learning Centre), 3 special tours for children (5–11 years), and 2 tours in co-operation with the Museum Blind Workshop Otto Weidt and the Anne Frank Centre at Rosenthaler Strasse (Berlin-Mitte):

General Tours [for adult groups only]:

1. Through the Museum in Seven-League Boots
2. Architecture within the Architecture

Theme-Oriented Tours:

3. The Jewish World in the Middle Ages [for both schools and adult groups]
4. Town, Country, Court [for schools cf. below]
5. Jewish Life and Traditions [for schools cf. below]
6. Moses Mendelssohn and the Promise of the Enlightenment [for schools cf. below]
7. Emancipation and Reform [for schools cf. below]
8. Start of the Modern Age – Jews in the Kaiserreich and the Weimar Republic [for schools cf. below]
9. The Jewish Response to National So-



cialism [for schools cf. below]

10. Survival Through Music: The Story of Coco Schumann (in combination with the Rafael Roth Learning Centre) [for both schools and adult groups]
11. Women in Judaism [for adult groups only]

Round about the Museum (March – October) [for adult groups only]:

12. Beyond the Garden of Exile (Searching the Museum's Exterior)
13. Along the Cobblestone Trail in Search of... (Searching the Vicinity of the Museum)

Additional Tours for Schools (6–18 years):

14. From the Diary of a Jewish Merchant Women: The Life of Glikl Bas Juda Leib
15. Rural Jewry – On Peddlers, Livestock Dealers and Court Factors
16. Jewish Life and Traditions (also in combination with the Rafael Roth Learning Centre)
17. Moses Mendelssohn or Nathan der Weise
18. The Revolution of 1848 and the Emancipation of German Jewry (in combination with the Rafael Roth Learning Centre)
19. The Emergence of Modern Judaism – From the Empire to the Weimar Republic
20. [alternatively] Discovery Tour: From Wertheim to Rathenau (A puzzle at the JMB)
21. German Jews' Reaction to National Socialism

Children's Tours (5–11 years):

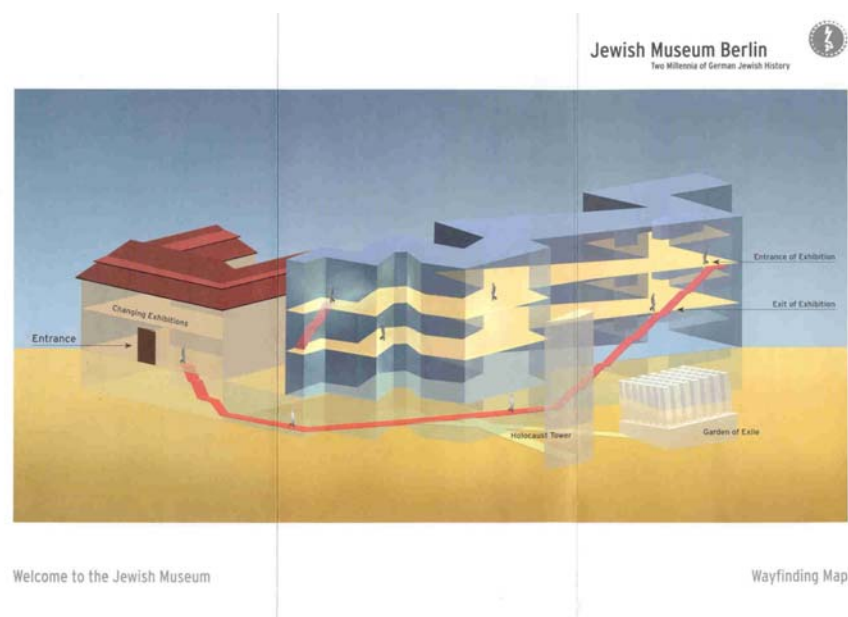
22. Who Can Help Pack the Suitcase? (The Life of Glikl Bas Juda Leib)
23. Halakhah and Plaited Bread – Have the Shabbat Prayers Been Said? (Jewish Life and Traditions)
24. The Crazy Crooked House – Daniel Libeskind for Children (Architecture)

In Co-operation With Other Institutions:

25. Museum Blind Workshop Otto Weidt – Dependency of the Jewish Museum Berlin, Rosenthaler Strasse 39 (Exhibition "Blind faith – Hidden at Hackescher Markt")
26. Combination Programme: Museum Blind Workshop Otto Weidt and Anne Frank Centre, Rosenthaler Strasse 39 (Exhibition "Anne Frank – a story for today")

The **choice of guided tours** booked since the opening of the JMB somehow reflects the expectations and notions of the visitors. The favourite tours are "Through the Museum in Seven-League Boots" (No. 1), "Jewish Life and Traditions" (Nos. 5/16), and "The Jewish Response to National Socialism" (Nos. 9/21), i.e. visitors either wish to have an "all inclusive" guided tour within 90 minutes or even less, or to find what they associate with Jews and Judaism in the first place: religion and the destruction of European Jewry. Sometimes, however, it is not clear whether a tour, e.g. on the Nazi period, was just booked by the organizers for pedagogical reasons or actually sought after by the participants themselves. This also applies to German-Israeli groups!

For groups it is highly recommended to concentrate on one of the theme-oriented tours although, for understandable reasons, every new visitor to the JMB is



first inclined to get an overall impression of the permanent exhibition which, however, presents an overwhelming wealth of material. Each theme-oriented tour will also include some explanations on the architecture of the building.

Some suggestions: “The Jewish World in the Middle Ages” (No. 3) provides a good alternative to “Jewish Life and Traditions” (Nos. 5/16), also giving a short introduction to the beginnings and the basic conditions of Jewish life in Germany, including Jewish – non-Jewish relations till the age of Enlightenment. For mixed German-Israeli groups the issue of Jewish emancipation and the emergence of a German-Jewish identity in the 18th and 19th centuries (Nos. 6–8/17–20) might be a good basis for further discussions on the complex situation of German Jewry on its way into the modern world – a period often overshadowed by the Shoah. However, the section on the Nazi period, in combination with the Rafael Roth Learning Centre or other institutions (Nos. 9–10/21 and 25–26), also sheds some new light on the Jewish community in Germany after 1933 itself.

3 Special offers and suggestions for German-Israeli groups

The JMB offers a broad range of programmes for schools, children and teenagers, as well as adults of every age. A selection of guided tours, as described above, is supplemented by special exhibitions, holiday activities, lectures, discussions, film series, musical events, theatre workshops and compact lecture-series. The educational programme is especially aimed at a young audience, as well as teachers and other educational representatives, including those active in German-Israel youth exchange. Detailed information can again be obtained through the Educational Department (cf. below), which will also be happy to arrange individual day programmes for any specific group.

Several **options for German-Israeli groups** may be pointed out which can either be used to prepare an exchange programme or be included into a common visit to Berlin:

- **A range of guided tours** through selected parts of the JMB's permanent exhibition (60–90 min.), especially Middle Ages, Moses Mendelssohn, *Jewish Life & Traditions, *Emancipation & Reform, Kaiserreich & Weimar, East & West, *Response to National Socialism. A common discussion may be added at the end of each tour.
- The tours marked with an asterisk (*) can be combined with several **multimedia programmes of the Rafael Roth Learning Centre**, presenting selected biographies and stories which are personally explored in detail and, at the same time, refer to the main exhibition (60 + 60 min.).
- A combined visit to both the JMB and its dependency at Rosenthaler Strasse 39, the **Museum Blind Workshop Otto Weidt** where primarily blind and deaf Jews had been employed and hidden during the Nazi regime. A visit to the Blind Workshop can also be combined with a tour through the **Anne Frank Centre** and its exhibition in the same building (60 + 60 min.), **encounters with survivors** and eye-witnesses, or a guided walk through the **old Jewish neighbourhood** of Berlin, the Spandauer Vorstadt.
- **Research workshops in the JMB's library and archives** in cooperation with the **Leo Baeck Institute**. Selected topics or biographies of individuals and families (maybe of the groups themselves) can be traced on the basis of original archival materials.
- **Theatre workshops on "emigration"** which combine theoretical and emotional learning (150 min.). Participants explore the issue of emigration through an improvised play based on historical reality, while using the architectural setting and some of the objects exhibited in the JMB.
- **Special activities, workshops and guided tours** on the occasion of Jewish holidays, school vacations or special exhibitions (e.g. animated films, puppet theatre, performances, T-shirt workshops, drawing and painting, baking in a traditional clay oven in the JMB's back garden).
- **Special courses and day-projects** for students and teachers, also in combination with the Rafael Roth Learning Centre (subject to personal arrangements).
- **Special training for teachers** and other educational representatives, including day-lectures, a special guided tour, distribution of a reader, and the evaluation of their own pedagogical work.

Generally speaking, the JMB's potential for German-Israeli groups lies in opening up **new perspectives on German-Jewish history**, which is not presented in retrospect but seen as a complex history of its own right before the Shoah. Both Jewish and non-Jewish visitors will therefore learn some more on Jewish life in Germany over a period of almost 2000 years, Jewish religion and culture, the variety of Jewish identity in the modern world (including Zionism), the rise of modern anti-Semitism and the Nazi period

from a Jewish perspective. However, the history of the Jishuv and the State of Israel, including the Middle East conflict, is not presented in the JMB.

Especially **Israeli students** visiting the JMB seem to display a certain degree of insecurity and, at the same time, openness towards Jewish life in Germany in past and present. This may just be a side effect of the insecure situation and the crisis of Zionism in Israeli society today, or actually the sign of a new relationship towards Jews in the Diaspora, including Germany. In any case, the JMB presents a vivid picture of the **richness und diversity of Jewish history and culture in Central Europe** over the centuries, which for some Israeli participants may also mean going back to their own cultural or ancestral roots. Actually, even among some Jewish visitors, there is little knowledge about Germany as the cradle of modern Judaism, the Jewish Enlightenment movement and the origins of modern Hebrew, the “Science of Judaism”, the religious reform movement, and also the rise of modern anti-Semitism from the late 1870s onwards.

The **architecture of Libeskind’s new building** plays a key role in every visit to the JMB, and maybe it is the most powerful impression a visitor takes home. Through its different layers of architecture, arts and symbolism the building creates a consciousness of the difference, on the one hand, between **constructed and authentic places of memory**, and on the other, between a museum presenting Jewish history and culture, and a place of living Jewish traditions, i.e. the Jewish communities themselves.

Certainly, the JMB can also serve as a **place to commemorate the Shoah** in a group, though it is not an authentic place and, unlike the Holocaust Memorial at Brandenburg Gate, was not primarily intended to be a memorial site. Within the building, there are especially three areas for a rather private form of commemoration without a ceremony: the “Holocaust Tower” and the “Garden of Exile” on the underground level, and the central “Memory Void” on the ground level, including the installation “Shalekhet” (“Fallen Leaves”, 1997–99) of the Israeli artist Menashe Kadishman.

To **prepare a visit to the JMB**, organizers should, in the first place, be well informed about the general setting and the range of options offered by the museum and related institutions in Berlin. Moreover, they should reflect on their pedagogical intentions and the role a visit to the JMB should play within their respective exchange programmes. In any case, the Educational Department and its staff will be happy to assist you and welcome you to the Jewish Museum Berlin.

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The Jewish Museum Berlin Educational Department

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