

THE JEWISH COMMUNITY OF BERLIN TODAY

Robert W. Case

The Jewish Community in Berlin today is divided into the eastern area, known as “*Mitte*” which was formerly under Soviet occupation, and the western Berlin community, where the majority of the Jews live. Today there are approximately 25,000 Jews living in the city, and most of them live in Western Berlin.

The Neue Synagogue

The Neue Synagogue, which opened in 1866, was designed in Moorish style and was Germany’s largest Synagogue. It was located in the center of the then large Jewish district, The “Scheunenviertel district” (Barn Quarter). The synagogue was desecrated during the infamous Kristallnacht pogrom in November 1938 and was totally destroyed in 1943 by allied bombing. It was finally demolished in 1958, and reconstruction was started in 1995, after the Berlin wall was demolished. Today, one can only visualize what a magnificent edifice this structure was from the restored façade – Unfortunately, the interior doesn’t exist! However, the “interior” of The façade has been preserved by a glass enclosure (see photo) and the actual interior chamber is marked by stones indicate the enormous size of the building, which accommodated up to 3000 worshipers.



Façade of the *Neue Synagoge in Berlin*

Photo by Robert W. Case

August 2000



Interior of *Neue Synagoge*

The interior wall of the façade is preserved in glass to protect it.

Photograph by Robert W. Case

August, 2000

Western Berlin

Western Berlin is a marked contrast to the East. In this area, known as the “Centrum” you will find many apartment residences owned and occupied by Jews, most of which are professionals and merchants. Most live on Kurfurstendamm (“Ku-dam”) or on side streets in the immediate area. This street is very similar to “Champs-Elysees” in Paris. On this street you will find Europe’s largest department store, “Kauffaus des Westens”, or as it is known by everyone, “*KaDeWe*”. Located on “Ku-dam” is the Jewish Library and Centrum, which is frequented by many Chassidic Jews, and is heavily guarded (as all Jewish sites in western Berlin) by armed German police. On the picture you will note the building was built back of an original arch from the previous edifice that had been destroyed. Unfortunately, we could not gain access to the building since we did not have our passports with us.



Photo By Robert W. Case

August, 2000

Central Berlin

In the very center of Berlin, virtually untouched by WWII is an old Jewish cemetery, “Moses Mendelssohn Park & Cemetery”. Moses Mendelssohn was buried here in 1786. He laid the foundation for much of the modern Jewish thinking, which was expressed in the 1871 constitution granting emancipation of the German Jews. In addition, also in the center of Berlin, is a Jewish cemetery dating back to the early 1700’s. There are more than 150,000 graves, and are in remarkable condition considering it survived the wars and the relentless bombing of Berlin by the allies! Certainly, one of the “miracles” of WWII! . In the picture below, my wife, Cele Case, is on the left, and our German-Jewish guide, Iris Hagalil, is on the right.



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East Berlin (“Mitte”)

Oranienburger Strasse is the main street in the Jewish section of East Berlin, and is somewhat reminiscent of the lower east side of New York City many years ago. You can, however, still see the communistic influence in the structure and design of the buildings so prevalent in Eastern Europe. Unfortunately, due to Germany’s very liberal immigration policies for Russian “Jewish” immigrants, there has been an influx of Russian Mafia, prostitutes, and other undesirables. The Russian Jews (under a special arrangement with the German Government) can come to Germany to settle permanently. When they arrive and start looking for work, they begin receiving considerable public financial support, social assistance, housing assistance, unemployment benefits, retraining, and language lessons. The great majority of the newcomers know nothing whatever about Judaism, other than the Soviets stamped “Jew” into their passports.

There are a few orthodox synagogues, kosher stores, shoppe’s, etc. in the area. I tried to go into the synagogue, but was stopped by a German policeman. My guide explained to him in German that I was Jewish, but to no avail. He finally allowed me to take a distant picture of the synagogue, providing he was in the picture!



Photo by Robert W. Case

August 2000

The Scheunviertel District



The “East side Tenements”

Photos by Robert W. Case

August, 2000



Remodeled East Side Tenements

My Impressions of Berlin

Frankly, my wife and I were very concerned about exploring the city. although we were in Berlin for 5 days, we only spent two days with a guide, the rest we did on our own. We had anticipated an overt anti-Semitic atmosphere, and did not find it. The dichotomy that exists between the Jews of the western part of the city and the Jews of East Berlin is extreme. Most Berlin Jews and, I am sure, most Berliners, regard the East Berliner Jew with distain. I imagine the feeling is the same that we have for “hookers”, drug dealers, and Mafioso here in the States.

We traveled on the trains, busses, and subways alone, and were never concerned for our safety .We ate in the local restaurants, asked the locals for help in translating the menu, etc. We walked a lot, and got “lost” going back to our hotel. The streets seem to run perpendicular off of “Ku-Dam”, but they veered off in every direction! The store “KaDuWe” was fascinating! It is very reminiscent of Herrod’s in London, with a huge food court. There was bread baked as a miniature *Reichstag* building.

The amount of construction in Berlin is astounding, especially in the East. Everywhere you look, there are literally hundreds of cranes and concrete being poured. We toured many museums, Alexanderplatz ,Bebelplatz (where The Nazi’s “burned the books”) art galleries, “Checkpoint Charlie”, The remnants of the “wall”, The 1936 Olympic Stadium, and on and on.

The train station- *Zoologischer Garten*, was most impressive. Not only do the trains run “to the minute”, but your ticket indicates exactly where to stand on the platform to get your train. There are also large electric signs telling you how many minutes before your train arrives. We saw a few “skinheads”-but very few. Since there are only 10,000 Jews in Berlin, and it is estimated that there are only 25,000 in all of Germany with a population of about 81 million, A recent study by the *Allensbach Institute for Demoscopy*, a highly regarded polling organization, states that 15% of Germans are anti-Semitic, and of these, 8% are “vehemently” so. These figures compare to statistics in the U.S. and most of Europe. Although the German Government does its best in arresting and prosecuting the hooligans, their actions are usually retroactive, not proactive. In conclusion, would I go back? --- In a heartbeat!

Postscript- November, 2002. *The situation in Berlin has very rapidly deteriorated. At this juncture, I would have to reconsider whether I would return. RWC*

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