ANOTHER COUNTRY

Jewish in the GDR

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Preface

Hetty Berg

With the exhibition *Another Country. Jewish in the GDR*, the Jewish Museum Berlin (JMB) is illuminating an aspect of recent German history that has often been overshadowed by other narratives and experiences. Through the very first major cultural history exhibition about Jewish experiences in East Germany—and through this catalog—we seek to show a broad audience the links connecting Jewishness as a religious practice, a cultural frame of reference, or a form of community with broader life in the GDR—links that persist to this day. The exhibition thus enriches the current discourse on the relationships between East and West Germans by centering Jewish perspectives.

The theme of Jewishness in the GDR was not previously a focus of the JMB's collections. When we first embarked on this exhibition project in 2021, we sought out eyewitnesses, scholars, artists, and writers who could help us track down artifacts and do justice to the complexities of diverse lived realities. Issuing an open call to the public the following year helped us locate objects and connect with individuals willing to share their life stories. From the beginning, this collaborative and participatory approach guided our efforts. It also uncovered a vast range of East German Jewish experiences, navigating the tensions between non-Jews' preconceptions and Jews' self-perceptions.

Both the exhibition and this catalog are aimed at a broad audience, but Berliners in particular are encouraged to delve into this subject. Not only was Berlin the GDR's political and cultural center, but despite tremendous challenges, it also boasted the largest Jewish community.

I am very grateful to our sponsoring institutions, the Cultural Foundation of the German Federal States and the Berthold Leibinger Foundation. I would also like to express my gratitude to everyone who has participated in the exhibition project—the donors and lenders, the people who gave interviews and those who shared their expertise, and the artist Yael Reuveny, who conducted numerous interviews as part of a W. Michael Blumenthal Fellowship and is now presenting these conversations as audiovisual installations within the exhibition. I would also like to thank all our partner institutions: the Moses Mendelssohn Center, Stiftung Neue Synagoge Berlin—Centrum Judaicum, the Department of Cultural History and Theory at Humboldt-Universität Berlin, the Jewish Film Festival Berlin | Brandenburg (JFBB), and Sandra Anusiewicz-Baer and Lara Dämmig, who edited the book *Jung und jüdisch in der DDR* (Young and Jewish in the GDR).

My very special thanks go to the curators Tamar Lewinsky, Martina Lüdicke, Theresia Ziehe, and their team for envisioning this project and bringing it to life. *Another Country. Jewish in the GDR* is an important contribution to our mission at the JMB of telling the Jewish history of post-war Germany as a whole.

Tamar Lewinsky, Martina Lüdicke, Theresia Ziehe

Another Country. Jewish in the GDR

Foreword to the Exhibition

What did it mean to be Jewish in the GDR? This question guided us as we developed the cultural-historical exhibition *Another Country*. Encounters with eyewitnesses to history, who shared their biographies with us, played a key role in our search for answers (always in the plural and always diverse). The exhibition aims to show a broad audience how Judaism—as a religion, a cultural reference space, and a *Schicksalgemeinschaft*, or community of fate—was intertwined with experiences in the GDR and how these experiences shaped, and continue to shape, the lives of several generations.

We had the idea for the project while working on our new core exhibition about past and present Jewish life in Germany, which has been on view in the Libeskind Building since August 2020. The experiences of Jews in the GDR that we encountered while conducting research for the exhibition section "After 1945" have not only become a focus in our exhibition program but will also be permanently integrated into the museum's collections as an important aspect of Jewish history in all of Germany.

At the Jewish Museum Berlin, theme-based collecting as a methodological approach is an important aspect of the collection concept and has shaped the exhibition's narrative. The curatorial voice is restrained, and the focus is on autobiographical sources and the voices of those people whose stories are being told. In 2022, we issued a call for collection submissions that was published in various media outlets. Our goal was to make our project better known, locate objects, and gain access to biographies. Unlike other exhibition projects, we did not have a canonized collection linked to this topic that we could use as the starting point for our work. The response and interest in the call exceeded all our expectations and underscored the need and the willingness of people to tell unknown stories. In addition to potential lenders and donors, we were contacted by scholars who gave us insight into their own research and pointed us to relevant holdings. The exhibition gives concrete shape to our desire to preserve tangible and intangible heritage in a new section of our collection.

To do justice to the memories and accounts of the protagonists, our project uses a subjective and at times contradictory mode of narration and does not take a chronological, encyclopedic approach. The tour of the exhibition is structured thematically and presents the narrative from multiple perspectives, including that of the immediate present. The exhibition's themes are explored on a kind of documentary research expedition and are linked to visual art, film, literature, multilayered biographies, and extraordinary exhibits. They include return migration to the Soviet Occupation Zone and later the GDR, the returnees' hopes of building a different, socialist Germany, everyday and social history in and outside the Jewish communities, nodes of Jewish history in East Germany, the exodus to the West in 1952/53, and responses to the Six-Day War in 1967.

Sequences of biographical interviews support this narrative and transfer the diversity of experience to the exhibition spaces. The interviewees offer insights into historical developments, not only recalling the past, but commenting on socio-political conflicts and raising questions about the exhibition objects. The interviews were conducted specifically for the project by the documentary filmmaker Yael Reuveny as part of a W. Michael Blumenthal Fellowship. In eight film projections, she uses her recent recordings to explore a country that no longer exits but has left clear traces on the present. Her footage will be added to the museum's audiovisual collection. Based on a collage of DEFA film sequences, literary and cultural studies scholar Lisa Schoss analyzes the representation of Jewish experience in East German cinema. In the work *vom ich zum wir* (from i to we), shown at the end of the exhibition, Leon Kahane examines East German ideas about the enemy and the self in conjunction with his own family history.

Another Country. Jewish in the GDR also includes a forum for a more in-depth exploration of the exhibition's central themes and their profound implications for the present. We have integrated a modular space into the path through the exhibition to serve as a venue for conversations, panel discussions, and show-and-tell events. Presenting shifts in perspectives, ambivalent narratives, and debates on identity and belonging, it will spark exchanges of ideas and questions. Rahel Melis and the Büro für Konstruktivismus, represented by Silvan Linden and Sandra Bartoli, were responsible for the exhibition design and combined film, art, and exhibits in the exhibition space by means of a simple, clear aesthetics.

This catalog reflects our multi-perspective approach: authors deepen and expand on the exhibition's themes. Questions are raised by a plurality of voices and across generations; ambiguities are highlighted; new vistas are opened. Finally, the catalog will ensure that the exhibits—the tangible and intangible heritage of Jews in the GDR—will remain visible even after the exhibition is over.

This project would have been impossible without the intense dialogue with eyewitnesses to history and their descendants, with lenders and donors, and with friendly institutions and cooperation partners. We would like to express our heartfelt thanks for their valuable impetus, critical questions, encouragement, and cautionary tales, and we would also like to acknowledge their independent thought, in-depth reflections, and new ideas. The exhibition *Another Country. Jewish in the GDR* does not claim to provide a complete picture of Jewish experience and life in the GDR. It has been conceived as an incomplete mosaic and a prelude to conversations about old and new identities, changing interpretations, and the diversity of memory.

Introduction

Annette Leo

Singled Out and Viewed Suspiciously: Jews in the GDR

The history of Jews in the GDR did not begin with the country's founding on October 7, 1949. Rather, from May 1945 onward, in the period between the end of the Nazi regime and the Holocaust and the birth of the two German states, the course was set for the East-West division, the Cold War, the Stalinist purges, and the conditions of Jewish life in East Germany. At the same time, this period contained the seeds of a different course of history and other, unrealized options.

When the war and the anti-Jewish persecution ended, an extremely heterogeneous group of Jewish survivors found themselves in the Soviet and the other three occupation zones in the destroyed and dismembered "land of the perpetrators." The survivors had been liberated from the death camps, fought in Allied armies, or returned from exile. Others had survived in hiding or been protected by non-Jewish spouses. Some initially saw Germany as a way station on the road to Palestine or the United States. Others deliberately returned to Germany, hoping to help shape a new society there. The decision to remain in the country, to go into exile again, or even to flee new dangers, was not always linked to their original hopes or intentions.

The lives of Julius Meyer and Heinz Galinski, who became leading figures in the Jewish Community of Berlin in the late 1940s and early 1950s, are examplary. Both survived Auschwitz and other concentration camps. Heinz Galinski, who did not abandon plans to emigrate to Argentina until 1949, became the first chairman of the Jewish community in West Berlin and was the best-known representative of Jews in West Germany until his death in 1992. Julius Meyer was not only a member of the Communist Party of Germany (KPD), which later merged into the Socialist Unity Party (SED), but was also a deputy in the East German Volkskammer, or national parliament, and a member of the Association of Victims of the Nazi Regime.

He was committed to building a future for Shoah survivors in a democratic, socialist Germany but fled the GDR in 1953 and died in seclusion in São Paulo, Brazil, in 1979.[1]

Berlin, which was governed by the four occupying powers, was an important destination and hub for survivors and returnees. The newly constituted Jewish Community of Berlin had its headquarters in Oranienburger Strasse in the Soviet sector. Its first acting chairman was Erich Nelhans, a forty-five-year-old businessman who had lost almost all of his family members to the genocide and had survived with the help of a courageous neighbor. Nelhans belonged to the then dominant group in the Jewish community who did not consider Jewish life possible in Germany after the Shoah. He directed the Berlin branch of the religious Mizrachi Zionist organization, which advocated emigration to Palestine and the establishment of a Jewish state there. It also looked after Holocaust survivors from Eastern Europe, tens of thousands of whom had fled to the West to escape postwar antisemitism in Poland. Many showed up at the Jewish community in the Soviet sector of Berlin, which directed them to the American and French sectors, where DP camps had been set up.[2] Nelhans attracted the attention of the Soviet intelligence service after helping Jewish Red Army soldiers escape to the West. He was arrested in his East Berlin apartment in March 1948 and sentenced to twenty-five years in prison by a Soviet military court. He died in the Dubravlag camp in Mordovia in 1950.

In the summer and fall of 1945, Jewish communities were established in several cities in the Soviet Occupation Zone, mostly at the initiative of Jews who had been spared deportation due to their non-Jewish spouses. In the weeks and months that followed, these Jews were joined by survivors from the camps and ghettos, refugees from Eastern Europe, and those who had emerged from hiding. Membership in these first few communities in Leipzig, Zwickau, Dresden, Chemnitz, Erfurt, and Magdeburg initially grew rapidly but then, starting in 1949, declined just as quickly. The smaller communities in Plauen, Mühlhausen, Eisenach, Jena, and other towns were dissolved between 1948 and 1953.

New Beginnings

The attempt to reestablish Jewish life took place under contradictory conditions. The Soviet Military Administration and most regional governments in East Germany supported the founding or reconstitution of Jewish communities and ensured that the returnees and immigrants received the basic necessities of life. At the same time, antisemitism was still rampant

[1] See Andreas Weigelt, “Julius Meyer und Heinz Galinski: Die Spaltung der Jüdischen Gemeinden am Beispiel Berlins,” in *Widerspruchsvoller Neubeginn: Ostdeutsch-jüdische Geschichten nach 1945*, ed. Annette Leo and Peter Reif-Spirek (Erfurt: Landeszentrale für politische Bildung, 2022), 103–33.

[2] DP is short for “displaced person.” DP camps were set up by the American, British, and French occupying powers in their respective occupation zones to provide temporary housing for the millions made homeless by the war, including not only Holocaust survivors but also refugees from the Soviet sphere of influence, expellees from Poland and Czechoslovakia, liberated POWs, and forced laborers. No DP camps were set up in the Soviet Occupation Zone.

at the local authorities and in the population. In April 1946, for example, a police department in Erfurt issued a confidential order that referred to *Ostjuden* (Eastern European Jews)—most of whom had fled pogroms in Poland—as "undesirables."

Due to similarly dismissive attitudes, efforts to establish a Jewish community in Mecklenburg dragged on until 1948. Education Minister Gottfried Grünberg, who had returned from exile in Moscow and later became the deputy defense minister for the GDR, justified his obstructionism by pointing to the alleged "special interests" of the Jewish community.[3]

In this initial phase, the Jewish communities focused primarily on securing the daily lives of their members. Most had lost everything and needed a roof over their heads, clothing, health care, and financial support. Most importantly, in a country where hunger was widespread, they required additional food rations. To meet these challenges, representatives of the Jewish communities worked closely with the local committees set up to help the victims of fascism, which later became the "OdF" and "VdN" offices.[4] Earlier, in summer 1945, the OdF committees, most of which were founded by liberated political prisoners, had initially opposed recognizing Holocaust survivors as "victims of fascism." Their reasoning: while they "had suffered hardship, they had not fought."[5] Just a few months later, in October 1945, at the Leipzig meeting of the OdF committees from all parts of the Soviet Occupation Zone, this view was corrected. The reversal was primarily the doing of Julius Meyer and Heinz Galinski, who went on to establish the Department for the Victims of the Nuremberg Laws at the main OdF committee in Berlin. They were supported by the Western Allies, who governed Berlin in cooperation with the Soviet occupation force and would not tolerate Jews being excluded from the recognition process.

Urgently needed support for the survivors also came from the Joint Distribution Committee (JOINT for short), a Jewish-American relief organization whose food donations and aid were distributed through the Jewish communities (from 1947 onwards, also through the Jewish communities in the Soviet Occupation Z one).

The Association of Victims of the Nazi Regime (VVN) was established in all four occupation zones in 1947/48. It initially defined itself as a nonpartisan interest group that represented all persecuted people. Jewish victims of Nazi persecution constituted a large group within the association and in Berlin even formed the majority. Although the distinction between "fighters" and "victims" remained contested in the VVN,

[3] Gottfried Grünberg did not give up his opposition until members of the founding committee approached Premier Kurt Bürger and Franz Dahlem from the SED Central Secretariat. See Ulrike Offenberg, *"Seid vorsichtig gegen die Machthaber": Die jüdischen Gemeinden in der SBZ und der DDR 1945 bis 1990* (Berlin: Aufbau, 1998).

[4] OdF: victims of fascism, VdN: victims of the Nazi regime. Recognized victims were entitled to special social welfare and financial benefits.

[5] *Deutsche Volkszeitung*, July 1, 1945, cited in Elke Reuter and Detlef Hansel, *Das kurze Leben der VVN von 1947 bis 1953* (Berlin: Edition Ost, 1997), 80–81. This is probably a quote from Ottomar Geschke, the first chairman of the main OdF committee in Berlin and later chairman of the VVN.

cooperation between it and the Jewish communities initially went well, not least because many leading representatives of the Jewish communities held positions in the VNN. In addition to Heinz Galinski and Julius Meyer, they included Leon Löwenkopf, who had fought in a Polish-Jewish resistance group after escaping from the Warsaw ghetto. Löwenkopf was a member of the SED, chairman of the Jewish Community of Dresden, and one of the co-founders of the VVN. Fritz Katten, who had survived in hiding in Berlin with his wife and son, was likewise a member of the SED. In addition, he served on the VVN's executive board, was deputy chairman of the Representative Assembly of the Jewish Community of Berlin, and directed the Administrative Police with the rank of colonel. Jeanette Wolff was an SPD deputy in the Berlin City Council (an all-Berlin body until September 1948), a member of the Representative Assembly of the Jewish Community of Berlin, and co-chair of the Berlin branch of the VVN. However, just a few months after being elected, she resigned from her VVN position because she believed that the political neutrality of the organization could no longer be guaranteed.

The Cold War

With the separate currency reforms in 1948, it became clear that the four occupying powers in Germany would not act jointly to overcome the legacy of Nazism in Germany. The Cold War between the one-time allies and the founding of the two German states set new political priorities on both sides that led to the breakdown of the already fragile anti-fascist alliances. Changing ideas about who was the new enemy, which spawned anti-communism in the West and the hunt for imperialist agents in the East, also influenced the lives of Holocaust survivors.

The VVN continued to exist as an all-German organization for several years, but here as well, the East and West drifted apart. In 1950, the West German branch of the VVN was classified as a "radical organization" and monitored by the Office for the Protection of the Constitution. By contrast, the East German VNN continued to wield significant political and moral clout until it was dissolved in 1953. The eastern VVN provided representatives for district and regional parliaments and later for the Volkskammer, or national parliament. It ran health spas, published several journals, and owned a publishing house. It influenced the drafting of a reparations law and other legislation. In numerous cities and communities, local VVN groups helped Jewish communities repair destroyed and looted cemeteries and supported their efforts to recover Jewish community rooms and prayer houses confiscated during the Nazi era.

But the VVN's initially postulated non-partisanship soon existed only on paper. Beginning in 1948, the SED gradually took control of the association's governing bodies and began to subordinate all its activities to the new friend-or-foe mentality of the Cold War. Representatives of the Jewish community such as Meyer and Katten nevertheless hoped to continue their work in the victims' organization, which they regarded as their most important ally in the fight against the Nazi legacy. In a 1949 speech, Katten described the VVN as a "sturdy dam . . . that we are once again erecting against the rising brown tide."[6] He was arrested just a few weeks later and sentenced to twenty-five years in prison as an alleged American agent by a Soviet military tribunal. He was granted "early" release in 1956.

On October 5, 1949, two days before the founding of the GDR, the German Economic Commission issued the "Order to Secure the Legal Status of Recognized Victims of the Nazi Regime," which included a special pension system and the preferential provision of health care, housing, commercial space, household products, and scarce consumer goods. However,

it did not include a provision on the restitution of stolen property or on material compensation.[7]

With the start of the Slánský Trial[8] in Prague in late 1952, Jews in the GDR faced pressure on two fronts: first, they needed to defend themselves against continued and growing hostility from broad segments of the population, and second, they were subject to Stalinist antisemitism from the Soviet Union. Their persecutors in the intelligence services and the SED even claimed that the lists drawn up to distribute JOINT aid in fact contained the names of members of an imperialist spy ring.

In early January 1953, Julius Meyer was pressured to "confess" his intelligence ties in interrogations with both the Soviet and the SED Control Commissions. They demanded that he surrender the lists of recipients of JOINT packages and persuade the Association of Jewish Communities in the GDR to publicly distance itself from JOINT and to condemn Zionism. After the interrogations, Meyer traveled to Leipzig, Dresden, and Erfurt to warn leading Jewish community representatives of the impending persecution. Günter Singer, Helmut Salo Looser, Leon Löwenkopf, Fritz Grunsfeld, and Leo Eisenstädt fled to West Berlin that same day. Additional Jewish community members followed. Their exodus continued into the fall of 1953 amid antisemitic agitation in the media and under the influence of police searches of Jewish community offices and arbitrary measures taken by local authorities against recognized victims of persecution.

The suspicions and persecution were also aimed at state and party functionaries of Jewish origin who had no ties to the Jewish community. In November 1952, for example, Hans Schrecker, chief editor of the *Leipziger Volkszeitung*, was arrested in Leipzig in connection with the Slánský Trial. Stalin's death in March 1953 had brought an abrupt end to the antisemitic campaigns in the GDR, and the show trial of Schrecker was never held, but Schrecker nevertheless remained in custody and was sentenced to eight years in prison in February 1954 for spreading "militaristic propaganda." He was pardoned in 1956.

Disintegration of the Jewish Communities

The events of 1948–53 and their consequences shaped the lives of Jews in the GDR until 1989, regardless of whether they belonged to a Jewish community. Most of the Jewish communities no longer had board members and also lacked rabbis and cantors. Membership had declined dramatically, caused not only by Jews fleeing the country. Fearing reprisal,

[6] Landesarchiv Berliner IV L-2/15/007, cited in Reuter and Hansel, *Das kurze Leben der VVN*, 196.

[7] See the essay by Philipp Graf on page 232.

[8] Stalinist show trial of Rudolf Slánský and thirteen other leading members of the Czechoslovak Communist Party, who were accused of a "Trotskyist-Titoist-Zionist conspiracy." Eleven of them were Jewish.

many members of the SED had also left the Jewish religious community. The Berlin community split into an eastern and a western part. After Stalin's death, targeted antisemitic persecution ended, but the accusations and suspicions were never officially withdrawn; they lived on beneath the surface in the form of fear and resentment.

With the forced dissolution of the Association of Victims of the Nazi Regime, which the SED Central Committee replaced with the Committee of Anti-Fascist Resistance Fighters, the Jewish survivors—like many other persecuted groups—no longer had a voice in politics. The Jewish communities could not fill this gap because they were essentially restricted to religious practice. Their contact partner, supervisory agency, and funding authority was the East German Secretariat for Church Affairs, whose staff sought to influence their personnel policies. Of all people, the state apparatus relied on SED members for assistance who had not left the Jewish communities in response to the pressure in 1952/53. Among them was the Dresden native Helmut Aris, who had survived persecution as a forced laborer in his hometown thanks to his non-Jewish wife. After Leon Löwenkopf fled the GDR, Aris directed the Jewish community in Dresden, and from 1962 to his death in 1987, he chaired the executive committee of the Association of Jewish Communities in the GDR. Officials at the Secretariat for Church Affairs considered Aris a loyal partner, but this made him controversial in the Association of Jewish Communities.

Due not only to the small number of members, but mainly to failed reparation attempts, the Jewish communities were completely dependent on state funds. Although those in Leipzig, Dresden, Erfurt, and Halle had recovered at least some of their former real estate under SMAD Order No. 82, the Jewish community in East Berlin had not reacquired any of its property or assets.[9]

[9] SMAD (Soviet Military Administration) Order No. 82 did not apply in Berlin due to the city's four-power status. Berlin's division made a reparations agreement for the entire city impossible. In the eastern sector, real estate that had previously been held in trust was now declared "property of the people." See Ulrike Offenberg, *"Seid vorsichtig . . ."*, 75–77; Christoph Hölscher, *NS-Verfolgte im "antifaschistischen Staat": Vereinnahmung und Ausgrenzung in der ostdeutschen Wiedergutmachung* (Berlin: Metropol, 2002), 34–36.

Remembrance Policy in the GDR

Without a political organization to represent their interests, Holocaust survivors, regardless of their membership in a Jewish community, had few opportunities to participate in the public debate on the Nazi past. Until the mid-1980s, the topic of Jewish persecution and genocide played only a minor role at official commemorative events. The state's remembrance policy focused on the communist resistance. Nevertheless, the crimes committed by the Nazis in the concentration and death camps were not taboo. School textbooks showed photographs of piled-up corpses in Bergen-Belsen and mentioned the mass killings in the gas chambers—

[10] See Stefan Küchler, "DDR-Geschichtsbilder: Zur Interpretation des Nationalsozialismus im Geschichtsunterricht der DDR," *Internationale Schulbuchforschung* 1 (2000), vol. 22, 42–44.

though mostly without discussing their antisemitic background. The victims were described in general terms as "inmates from all European countries" or were sweepingly attributed to the resistance.[10]

For many years, commemoration of the 1938 November pogroms was limited mainly to the events in the Jewish communities, mostly accompanied by a brief newspaper note with a greeting from the SED Central Committee. The early 1980s saw changes to this well-rehearsed ritual, culminating in the major official commemorative event of 1988 which marked the pogroms' fiftieth anniversary. Members of the SED Politburo, all wearing kippahs and surrounded by TV cameras and flashing lights, lay wreaths in the Jewish cemetery in the Weissensee district of Berlin. On the next day, they laid the symbolic cornerstone for the reconstruction of the destroyed New Synagogue in Oranienburger Strasse. These actions were clearly motivated by foreign policy and economic interests linked to the GDR's relations with the United States; however, state and party leaders were also responding to the shifting situation at home, where committed representatives of a generation that had grown up in the GDR were taking seriously their anti-fascist education and were no longer willing to accept the ignorant, negligent treatment of the traces of former Jewish life in their surroundings. Their initiatives to restore destroyed and neglected burial sites and to study Jewish history in their cities and communities suddenly met with interest and were even promoted by the local authorities.

But beyond the narrow confines of the state's remembrance policy and long before the policy shifts of the 1980s, the history of the Holocaust in the GDR could be accessed through many other channels, including novels, autobiographical accounts, plays, and films. *The Investigation* by Peter Weiss is one example, a documentary theatrical collage dealing with the first Auschwitz trial in Frankfurt am Main. On October 19, 1965, the play premiered simultaneously in fifteen cities in East and West Germany. The East Berlin event, which was broadcast on TV shortly afterward, took place in the assembly hall of the East German Volkskammer, and the parts were read by actors, writers, cultural policymakers, and survivors of Nazi persecution.

An essay such as this which discusses Jewish life in the GDR cannot limit itself to members of the Jewish communities, but must also examine the much larger group of Holocaust survivors who descended from Jewish families but distanced themselves from their ancestors' religion and traditions.

Many had joined the labor movement before 1933 and become members of the KPD. However, it is also worth asking whether it is appropriate to treat these individuals as a group when they themselves never or only rarely emphasized their Jewish origins—either out of fear of exclusion or because they identified with anti-fascist resistance fighters or returnees from different countries of exile. They were loyal to the Soviet occupation force and the Communist Party, in whose sphere of influence they hoped for favorable living and working conditions. They consisted of writers, actors, directors, singers, composers, and visual artists. They assumed management of the newly founded publishing houses, broadcasting companies, and newspapers. They were appointed to university chairs, became factory directors, or performed functions in the party and state apparatus. During the Stalinist purges, many faced accusations, suspicions, or—at the very least—professional discrimination. And perhaps it was precisely the persecution they suffered during the Nazi period and their grief over murdered relatives that subconsciously bound them to the socialist project. With their creativity, professional skills, and cosmopolitanism, these women and men made an important contribution to rebuilding cultural life and new political structures in East Germany. Among the best-known are Anna Seghers, Lea Grundig, Arnold Zweig, Alfred Kantorowicz, Stephan Hermlin, Ernst Hermann Meyer, Alexander Abusch, Albert Norden, and Hanns and Gerhart Eisler.

One exceptional figure among them was Jürgen Kuczynski, a party loyalist and scholar who never gave up his intellectual independence. In 1936, after three years of working illegally for the KPD in Germany, he emigrated to Great Britain, only to return to Berlin in 1945 in the uniform of a US Army colonel. He soon resigned from the army and began lecturing at Berlin University. A few years later, he co-founded the Academy of Sciences. Kuczynski also directed the Institute for Economic History, where research was conducted in relative freedom by GDR standards. An internationally respected scholar, he served as advisor to Erich Honecker and often stood out with his undogmatic ideas and unusual initiatives in the closely managed East German public sphere. In 1992, he published a kind of supplement to his autobiography, fittingly titled *Ein linientreuer Dissident* (A Loyal Dissident).

Another exceptional figure was the singer and dancer Lin Jaldati, who grew up in a poor Jewish family in Amsterdam and joined the Communist Party of the Netherlands in 1936. After the Wehrmacht invaded the country, she joined the resistance against the occupiers. She was arrested and deported to Auschwitz in 1944 and liberated from Bergen-Belsen in 1945. In 1952, she moved to the GDR with her husband, the pianist and former German émigré Eberhard Rebling. She was the only artist to have success as a singer of Yiddish songs well into the 1980s.

Position on Israel

The SED leadership generally considered only members of the Jewish communities to be Jews. However, on certain occasions they exploited the Jewish origins of the many “others” for their propaganda. This occurred in 1961, when the journalists Max Kahane, Gerhard Leo, and Kurt Goldstein—all of whom came from Jewish families—were sent to Jerusalem as special correspondents for the Eichmann trial and instructed to highlight the Nazi past of Hans Globke, a state secretary in Bonn. In addition, in June 1967, one day after the start of the Six-Day War between Israel and its Arab neighbors, the SED Politburo decided to publish “statements by Jewish citizens of the GDR expressing outrage at Israeli aggression and the Israel- Washington-Bonn conspiracy.”[11] Its key motivation was probably to head off accu-

sations of antisemitism. Albert Norden had been charged with the task, but as he noted confusedly (or indignantly?) to Walter Ulbricht, many of the Jews he approached refused to participate, including Lin Jaldati, the writers Arnold Zweig and Peter Edel, and the president of the Association of Jewish Communities, Helmut Aris, otherwise known for his loyalty to the state. In this situation, it was no longer possible for Aris to ignore the resistance in the Jewish communities or his own inner turmoil. In the end, none of the signers of the declaration published in *Neues Deutschland* on June 9, 1967, were members of a Jewish community.

In a 1987 interview, Community chair Peter Kirchner explained that the Secretariat for Church Affairs and Jewish community leaders had reached an agreement that Jewish representatives would no longer be required to make any statements on Middle East policy in the future. According to Kirchner, the topic had become "a bit taboo" as a whole.[12]

However, Jewish community functionaries, particularly in the 1980s, became increasingly confident about criticizing antisemitic lapses in East German coverage of the Middle East conflict and Israel. For example, when the children's magazine *ABC-Zeitung* published a story in 1982 in which "Zion the little fire dragon" was fed by Palestinian children, only to rob them of all they needed for survival, the Jewish community in Berlin protested to the editors. In discussions at the Secretariat for Church Affairs, Helmut Aris repeatedly complained about the antisemitic clichés used in connection with Israel in the East German media. Eugen Gollomb, chairman of the Jewish community in Leipzig, wrote letters to newspaper and magazine editors for comparing the Israeli army to the SS in articles and cartoons.

As a result of the GDR's hostile policy toward Israel, the Jewish communities were largely barred from contact with international Jewish organizations. It was not until 1986 that delegates from the umbrella association were permitted to attend a meeting of the World Jewish Congress in Jerusalem. Earlier, after years of isolation, the Jewish communities had begun to send out feelers to the "external world within"—that is, to East German society. In the 1980s, they regularly held concerts, readings, and lectures in Berlin and Leipzig. Around the same time, working groups were founded in several large cities to promote Christian-Jewish dialogue. Members of Aktion Sühnezeichen (Action Reconciliation) performed volunteer work at Jewish cemeteries. Jewish community representatives were invited to speak at church events, and para-

[11] Protokoll Nr. 7/67 der Politbürositzung am 7.6.1967, Anlage 1; SAPMO-BArch, DY 30/J IV2/2/1 117, cited in Offenberg, *"Seid vorsichtig . . ."*, 201.

[12] Interview with Peter Kirchner in Robin Ostow, *Jüdisches Leben in der DDR* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1988), 36. In the interview, Kirchner does not say when this agreement was reached. It was probably 1973, when the Association of Jewish Communities once again refused to issue an anti-Israel statement about the Yom Kippur War.

[13] Offenberg, *"Seid vorsichtig . . ."*, 129.

doxically, as Ulrike Offenberg notes, it was there they were able to meet rabbis from abroad—the East German communities had not had their own rabbis since the death of Martin Riesenburger in 1965.[13]

In the 1980s, the Jewish communities in East Germany had a total of around four hundred members. Roughly two hundred belonged to the community in East Berlin. In 1986, the executive board in Berlin, under the leadership of Kirchner, took an unusual step to stop the decline and aging of the community. It invited many of the adult children of secular Jewish communist families to a community event. The response was overwhelming. The initiative met with growing interest among a younger generation that wanted to learn more about their roots and rediscover the values, traditions, and practices their parents or grandparents had given up so long ago. They formed the group *Wir für uns* (We for Ourselves) and took part in services, festivals, and Hebrew lessons—though few ultimately joined the Jewish community. Most preferred loose ties, discussions, lectures, and cultural events—in other words, membership in what was essentially a Jewish cultural association. This type of association was not founded until 1990, by which time the GDR's existence had almost come to an end.

The film stills shown in this catalog are taken from the audio and video installation
Neuland by Yael Reuveny (b. 1980), Germany 2023