



Five Historic Berlin Cafes

Alexander Wells delves into five of the city's iconic dives, past and present...

*"Secretly we all think of the café as the devil, but what would life be without the devil?"
—Else Lasker-Schüler, 1912*

The history of any great European city can be told through its cafés, whether those still standing from yesteryear or those long vanished. Germany's very first coffee house appeared in Bremen in 1672, with the beverage making an appearance at the court of the great elector of Brandenburg in 1675.

Berlin's cafe culture officially got going quite a bit later, in 1721, with an opening on the Lustgarten by a Frenchman, who had been granted permission by Prussian King Frederick William I. Others followed—The Royal in Behrenstrasse, City of Rome on Unter-den-Linden, Arnoldi, in Kronenstrasse, Miercke in Taubenstrasse, Schmidt in Poststrasse—including several Jewish spots opened by Philipp Falck.

By the time of Frederick the Great (1712–1786) there were at least a dozen coffee houses in the inner-city, with more informal tent-like venues serving up coffee in the

suburbs, and coffee had even entered homes, replacing flour-soup and warm beer at Berlin breakfast tables. Frederick, however, annoyed at the money being made by foreign merchants, opted to issue a decree against the substance later in 1777—a thinly disguised attempt to regain control of the trade and maintain it only for the wealthier classes.

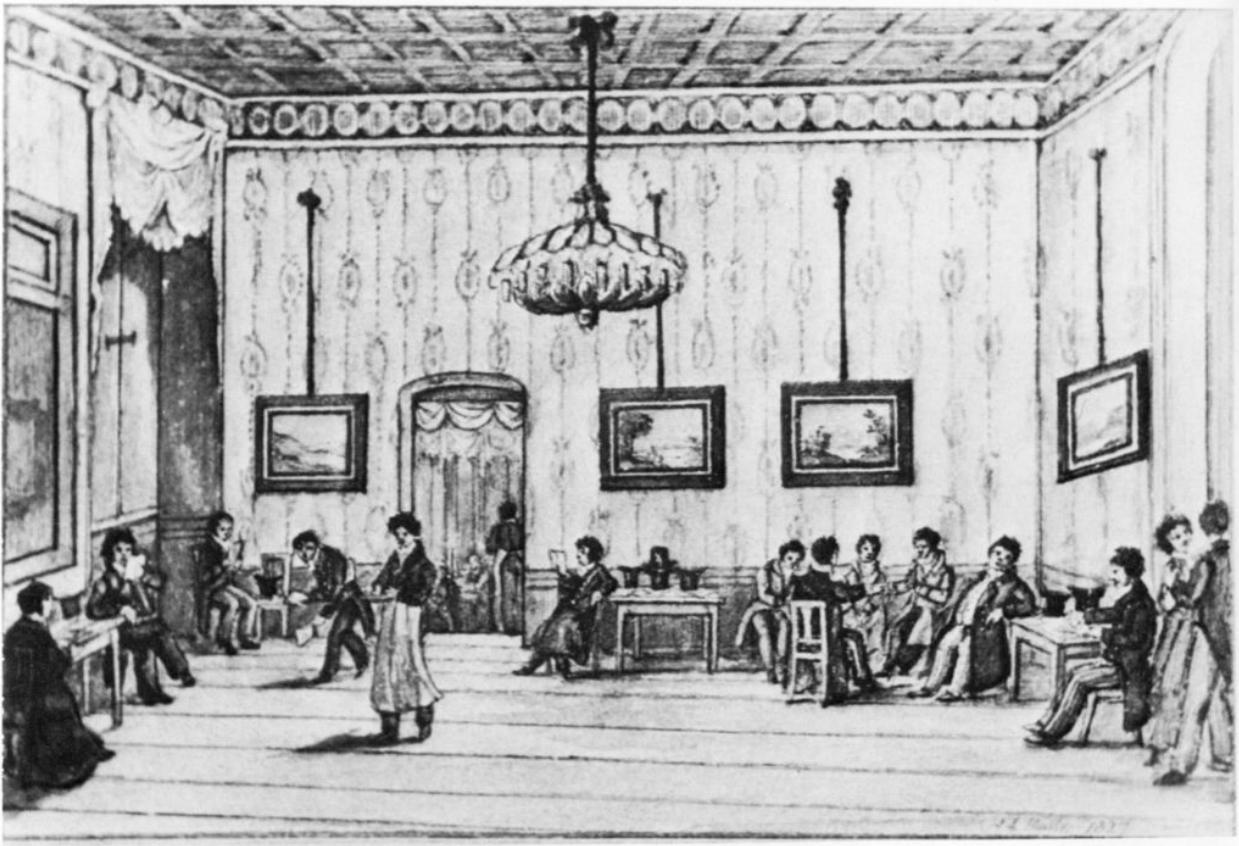
“It is disgusting to notice the increase in the quantity of coffee used by my subjects,” he wrote, “and the amount of money that goes out of the country in consequence. Everybody is using coffee. If possible, this must be prevented. My people must drink beer. His Majesty was brought up on beer, and so were his ancestors, and his officers. Many battles have been fought and won by soldiers nourished on beer; and the King does not believe that coffee-drinking soldiers can be depended upon to endure hardship or to beat his enemies in case of the occurrence of another war.”

Despite Frederick’s resistance, the word was out and coffee steadily gained in importance, seeping steadily into the veins of all classes of society, the poor included, where it has stayed ever since.

As the academic Shachar M. Pinsker has argued in *A Rich Brew: How Cafés Created Modern Jewish Culture*, the café was also vital in the development of the transnational Jewish modernity that emerged across cities from Vienna and Warsaw through Berlin to Odessa, Tel Aviv and New York. By the late 18th century, Berlin was home to a wealth of meeting places with mixed-religion crowds, such as the members-only Gelehrtes Kaffeehaus (Learned Coffee House) club that was frequented by Moses Mendelssohn, and several private intellectual salons run by Jewish women.

Below are some of the most notable coffee spots that have kept the city’s population dutifully caffeinated and also served as significant cultural, artistic and social hubs.

Café Stehely



Café Stehely am Gendarmenmarkt in Berlin. Aquarell von Leopold Ludwig Müller, 1827

Before Berlin's café culture was fully developed, the most prominent kinds of coffee houses were small Café-Konditoreien, which served as both cafés and confectionary outlets. One of the finest of these was Café Stehely (founded 1820), which stood on what is now Jägerstraße near Gendarmenmarkt.

Here, anyone who was interested in public life—mostly men who could afford such pleasures—could come and enjoy the café's drinks, desserts and conversation. Berlin journalist Ernst Dronke described it as the "Eldorado of Berlin's idlers" but also "the grandest, most often visited educational institution" of the city: while many of the city's other cafés also had adjacent "reading rooms" filled with periodicals and journals, Stehely's was considered to be the finest.

Every day, radical writers and students would meet in the café's Rote Stube (Red Room), which was named for the colour of the wallpaper, not the politics. Among its regular visitors was a clique of radical young Hegelians that called itself the

“Doktorenklub”, a club that happened to include a spirited young law student by the name of Karl Marx. Heinrich Heine and Gottfried Keller were also among the guests, as was Theodor Fontane, who said that after a visit to Café Stehely he always left with the sensation of having spent an hour in a consecrated locale.

As the 19th century went on, the Viennese style of coffeehouse gradually came to replace the Konditorei model, and Stehely was closed by the 1880s. Yet the coffeehouse remained of vital importance to the city’s growing Jewish population. According to Shachar M. Pinsker: “Berlin Jews went to certain cafés and, through them, gained access to—and helped to create—what became distinctly German-Jewish spaces.”

Café Josty



Café Josty was an icon not once but twice. The original was located on the Museum Island, right in front of the Royal Palace. Founded in 1812 by a Swiss migrant, it was a Konditorei in the traditional mould and, like Stehely and others, was associated with both Jewish Berlin and the progressive intellectual currents of the city.

The Grimm brothers were said to be regulars; so too (again) was Heinrich Heine, who wrote somewhat breathlessly in his 1822 *Briefen aus Berlin* (Letters from Berlin): “But before us now is the Stechbahn, a kind of boulevard. And here lives Josty! – O gods of Olympus, how I would be spoiling your ambrosia, if I were to describe the confectionaries piled up there.”

In the 1880s, when space near the Berlin Schloss was required for a monument to Kaiser Wilhelm I, Café Josty had to relocate to Potsdamer Platz. With unparalleled views of the famous square’s hustle and bustle from its outdoor terrace, the new Josty became a beloved locale for artists and intellectuals of the Expressionist movement (and later, too, of *Neue Sachlichkeit*).

A number of other cafés became associated with Berlin’s turn-of-the-century avant-garde movements, including Café Sezession, Café Monopol, and the Café des Westens on Kurfürstendamm; the latter grew to become the main bohemian hangout of prewar Berlin, particularly associated with the great artist and author Else Lasker-Schüler.

But Josty has been immortalised thanks to the Expressionist poet Paul Boldt’s famous 1912 sonnet “Auf der Terrasse des Café Josty” (On the terrace of Café Josty), as well as a scene in Wim Wenders’s *Wings of Desire* where the old man Homer is trying to find Josty’s old location on Potsdamer Platz but cannot make it out amid the border zone.

This version of Josty original closed in 1930, and the building was destroyed during the war, but the café also found an afterlife via a cameo in the Netflix series *Babylon Berlin*. Rather less poignant is the current restaurant in the Sony Center that shares Josty’s name, but almost none of its heritage or vibe.

Romanisches Café



Berlin's vigorous interwar café scene is well-known and described at length by the era's great chroniclers and columnists, many of whom set up semi-permanent residence in one or more local cafés themselves.

Perhaps the most iconic of the city's estimated 550 Weimar-era coffeehouse was the Romanisches Café, located opposite the Kaiser Wilhelm Church on Breitscheidplatz. The café's opening in 1916 could not have been better timed: the Café des Westens had recently shut down, so its literary regulars—with Else Lasker-Schüler at the centre—were on the lookout for of a new haunt.

Quite why the Romanisches Café, so-called for its Neo-Romanesque architectural style, became the venue of choice remains unclear: eyewitnesses seem to have enjoyed mocking its decor, its food, its cleanliness and its permanent veil of thick and toxic tobacco smoke: "The café, which so many aesthetes favoured," commented Hungarian-born filmmaker Geza von Caiffra, "was anything but beautiful."

But they didn't come for beauty—they came for the crowd, which included a who's-who of major intellectual and artistic figures of the time, from Bertolt Brecht and Egon Erwin Kisch to Joseph Roth and Billy Wilder, among others. In 1926, Pem (Paul Markus) described the scene: "Here they sit at the small, round marble tables, read countless newspapers and discuss everything from Lao-tse to modern theatre to the latest traffic ordinance, tread softly over literary gossip and, despite their worries, still feel like something special."

The Romanisches also appears to have been more accessible to women than the Künstlercafés of the 19th century, with Gabriele Tergit and Irmgard Keun both publishing commentaries and reflections on the place. And it wasn't exclusive to luminaries either, though the divide between the two worlds was manifest in the café's two separate rooms; one dubbed the "pool for swimmers" and the other reserved for "non-swimmers". Such lofty self-mythologies proved easy to satirise: Erich Kästner, then working as a journalist, wrote that the café was considered a "waiting room" for the talented—adding wryly that "there are people who've been waiting here, every day for twenty years, for talent."

The Romanisches Café also continued the association between Berlin's coffeehouse culture and its Jewish community, incorporating many new migrants from Eastern Europe. The Yiddish-language writers that frequented the café nicknamed it Rachmonische ("Mercy" or "Pity") on account of its shabby conditions and food. Daniel Charney called it the "transit hub of the entire Yiddishland" and says it was both "sanitorium" and "college" to him for a decade: "I healed my lungs with nicotine and caffeine, and I learned the most important rules of writing in the Romanisches."

Considering the café's rich history among both Jewish and non-Jewish Berliners, one can hardly imagine a sadder and more outrageous sight than members of the Gestapo claiming a regular table there—but that's exactly what they did in 1933. The café was destroyed in 1943, during an air raid. Two attempts to resurrect the Romanisches—or to profit from its legacy at least—have failed: once in the Europa Center (which now occupies the original site) and once in the nearby Waldorf Astoria hotel.

Romanisches Café



Kranzler-Eck on the corner of Kurfürstendamm and Joachimsthaler Straße, 2013. Image by Taxiarchos228.

Few cafés are so vividly associated with Cold War-era West Berlin as the Café Kranzler, a large and slightly kitsch coffee house whose terraces—famously covered by the venue’s red-and-white awning—occupied what is still a prime people-watching corner at the intersection of Kurfürstendamm and Joachimsthalerstraße.

Both the Kranzler name and the café’s location had serious history. The original café was a small, moderately popular 19th-century Konditorei turned coffeehouse located on Unter den Linden. But in 1932, Kranzler’s new owners opened up a second branch on the Ku’damm, which took over the former premises of the beloved Café des Westens.

Café Kranzler operated there, servicing a lively but rather less intellectual clientele than the Romanisches Café, until it was destroyed in the war. It was only when the café was rebuilt and reopened in the 1950s that it came into its own. Its central location and

generous outdoor seating were perfect for taking in the Kurfürstendamm scene, while its colourful marquee became a familiar sight even for out-of-town visitors.

Without ever quite being fashionable, the Café Kranzler became a fixture of West Berlin life. Open from morning until midnight, it served pots of coffee and ice cream sundaes to artistic movers-and-shakers, regular locals and American GIs alike, growing so famous that Udo Lindenberg even sang about it. As the Cold War dragged on, though, the café appeared to lose some of its appeal; the New York Times reported, in 1990, that the formerly elite meeting-place was now chiefly popular among retirees.

Kranzler struggled along after reunification, eventually falling victim to the city's new economy: in around 2000, the building was restored into a kind of faux-nostalgic version of its former glory, with the red-and-white canopy still intact but the interior taken over by a Superdry store. In 2016, the rotunda café on top was reopened by THE BARN, an ultramodern third-wave coffee company that has nine other outlets across Berlin.

Café Sibylle



Bundesarchiv, Bild 183-48556-0001
Foto: Ulmer, Rudi | 26. Juli 1957

Cafe Sybille in 1957, when it was called the Milchtrinkhalle. Bundesarchiv, Bild 183-48556-0001 / Ulmer, Rudi / CC-BY-SA 3.0

At the intersection of the magisterial Karl-Marx-Allee with the Straße der Pariser Kommune, sits the unassuming Café Sibylle—a remarkable holdout from the GDR period, and one of the very last original businesses to remain on the old Communist Prachtboulevard.

Sibylle has been continually operating there, with a few brief gaps and changes in ownership, since it was founded as Die Milchtrinkhalle (the milk-drinking-hall) in 1953. In the 1960s, the café was renamed after the popular GDR fashion magazine Sibylle,

and became—it is said—the go-to meeting place for that publication’s models, photographers and editors.

Workers from Friedrichshain, party-privileged residents of the boulevard’s apartment buildings, and assorted prominent citizens were all also welcome to enjoy ice cream or coffee while admiring the surrounding architecture of the “Champs Elysée of the East”.

Sibylle, like Kranzler, fell on hard times after reunification. But its reopening in the 2000s was somewhat more sensitive and successful, with the addition of a exhibition dedicated to the history of Karl-Marx-Allee, recreations of original GDR apartment furnishing, and heritage-listing of the café’s exterior and delightful neon sign.

Today’s Sybille is inevitably popular with tourists but also many of the neighbourhood’s elderly residents. In 2016, one 89-year-old Stammgast told German public radio that he loved to sit inside and look out onto the street: “You’re right in the thick of it, and you’re a part of it, and you pick up some of the flair.”

Landlord problems caused the café to close in 2018, but it was reopened some months later at a ceremony that rather oddly involved Hans Modrow, the Gorbachev-ite reform Communist who ran the GDR in its very last months. The café’s new managers told the online magazine of Gewobag—a public housing company that took the site over from Deutsche Wohnen—that they were committed to preserving Sibylle’s role in the community. That means keeping prices affordable and allowing groups that used to meet or hold events at the café to carry on doing so, in addition to hosting exhibitions, readings and other cultural activities.

With proper cakes and reassuringly unhealthy Eisbecher on the menu, flowers on the tables, and a communal library in the corner, the impression remains indubitably former East—right down to the kitschy illustrations of tropical fruits and sundaes in champagne flutes that were restored in the renovation process. Meanwhile, big windows and outdoor seating right on Karl-Marx-Allee maintain something of the city’s people-watching spirit.

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