

For Jews in East Germany, a Life of Contradictions

An exhibition at Berlin's Jewish Museum explores the Jewish experience in the authoritarian, and officially atheist, communist state throughout the Cold War era.



By Nina Siegal

Reporting from Berlin

Published Nov. 23, 2023 Updated Nov. 24, 2023, 4:41 a.m. ET

Just before her 14th birthday, Cathy Gelbin asked her parents for a pendant necklace with a Star of David to celebrate her “Jugendweihe,” a secular coming-of-age ceremony for German young people.

But it was the 1970s, and no such symbol of Jewish faith could be found where she lived in East Berlin, in the communist German Democratic Republic, or G.D.R. Her mother asked a local jeweler to melt down silver to make a star, but he was scared and refused.

“Wearing any religious symbols was kind of stigmatized,” Gelbin explained recently in an interview, “as either opposition to, or a diversion from, East German ideology.”

Gelbin's story is one of nearly 20 personal narratives in the exhibition “Another Country: Jewish in the G.D.R.,” running at Berlin's Jewish Museum through Jan. 14, 2024. The show explores the often-overlooked history of Jewish life in East Germany, a country that existed for roughly 40 years following World War II until shortly after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989.

Gelbin remained committed to Jewish culture and religion, in spite of state ambivalence toward all nonsecular groups. As she grew older, she often questioned the G.D.R.'s socialist doctrine at school, and her teachers treated her with increasing suspicion. When she later came out as queer, she resolved that remaining in the country was simply untenable. She left for West Berlin in 1985.

But for the co-curators of “Another Country,” Tamar Lewinsky and Martina Lüdicke, there was no singular way to describe life for Jews in East Germany. They instead chose to feature multiple contrasting first-person testimonies, along with objects such as a silver torah shield, a handmade flag, a Seder plate and a prayer shawl, to illuminate this range of experiences.

“It's more like a mosaic,” Lewinsky said. “The focus was telling the story from different perspectives, and stories that sometimes contradict each other.”



Cathy Gelbin wearing her Star of David pendant necklace in Berlin in 1978. Cathy Gelbin, via Jewish Museum Berlin

Hetty Berg, the Jewish Museum's director, said that the museum hadn't focused on the experiences of Jews in East Germany very much before. But, she added, "We don't want to provide a single red thread, because then you oversimplify. People should find their own."

The catastrophic history of the Jews in Germany in the 1930s and '40s is better known than the second half of the 20th century, Berg said. Before Adolf Hitler's rise to power in 1933, there were more than half a million Jews in Germany, but during the first six years of the antisemitic Nazi regime, half fled to other countries. Among those who stayed, about 170,000 were murdered in the Holocaust. By the end of World War II, only about 15,000 Jews remained.

After the Third Reich was defeated in 1945, the Allies divided Germany into four occupied zones. Four years later, the British, French and American sectors became a parliamentary democracy, the Federal Republic of Germany, while the Soviet zone, led by a Marxist-Leninist party, became the G.D.R.

While few Jews wanted to live in Germany, or what they regarded as “the land of the perpetrators” in the war’s aftermath, denazification proceeded more quickly in the Soviet zone than in the West, and some Jews were attracted to the utopian vision of rebuilding a better society in the East, Lüdicke said: a “just, antifascist society, where being human was the most important value.”

The story of one such optimistic family is told through a traveling trunk owned by Josef and Lizzi Zimmering, painted with the cities that marked their trip back: “London, Brussels, Berlin.” After surviving the Holocaust in exile, they returned to the Soviet occupied zone in 1946. The trunk contained all of the family’s possessions after the war.

“It really stands for the optimism and hope — the exile and return — of people who believed in this utopia,” said Lewinsky.



Josef and Lizzi Zimmering’s trunk, which contained all of the possessions the family had left after World War II. Roman März/Zimmering family, via Jewish Museum Berlin

The number of Jews in the newly formed East Germany was just a few thousand, most of them committed communists, but within that population there were seven or eight distinct Jewish communities, each attempting to revive Jewish culture in its own way.

In 1952, when 14 Jews were tried in Prague in an antisemitic show trial known as the Slansky Trial, Jews throughout the Eastern bloc were vilified. In the G.D.R., they faced

hostility from broad segments of the population, stoked by the Soviet Union, according to the exhibition catalog. Jews were accused of being part of an “imperialist spy ring,” fired from jobs in the G.D.R., and forced to confess to espionage and condemn Zionism.

A pair of wooden skis tells the story of Werner Kussy, who returned to his hometown Dresden after surviving the Holocaust. In 1953, fearing antisemitic repression, he and his family pretended to go on a ski vacation, and instead defected to the West, ultimately moving to the United States.



Werner Kussy's skis, which were used to help him defect to West Germany in 1953. Jewish Museum Berlin

There was a shift behind the Iron Curtain after Joseph Stalin's death in 1953, and “targeted antisemitic persecution by the G.D.R. government ended,” according to a catalog essay by Annette Leo, “but the accusations and suspicions were never officially withdrawn.”

While Jewish religious observance was allowed in East Germany, any broader sense of national and ethnic Jewish identity was discouraged, as was contact with the state of Israel. According to Ruth Ostrow, a historian, the G.D.R.'s Jewish communities existed

for decades “in a state of hibernation.”

In the late 1980s, while much of the country celebrated the 40th anniversary of East Germany, the eight Jewish communities were “on the verge of demographic collapse,” with only about 400 members, according to the catalog. But then the Berlin Wall fell in 1989, and the G.D.R. began to collapse. In the republic’s last months, tens of thousands of Jews from the Soviet Union — another country on its last legs — traveled to the G.D.R., where they applied for political asylum, strengthening the Jewish community there once again.

Today, Cathy Gelbin is a film historian and cultural studies scholar living in Manchester, England. She eventually got her Star of David pendant, through friends from West Berlin who brought it to her in the East. It is on display in a vitrine at the Jewish Museum, next to a photograph of her wearing it, in 1978.

“I wore the necklace constantly,” she recounts in an oral history in the show. At school, she said, “people used to stop me and asked what it meant, and why I was wearing it.”

In the interview, she said she always took the time to explain. “They often fell silent and had to think for a while,” she said. “I had hostile reactions on one or two occasions, but mostly people were impressed, or intrigued.”

Another Country: Jewish in the G.D.R.

Through Jan. 14, 2024 at the Jewish Museum, in Berlin; jmberlin.de.