

# JEWISH VOICE FROM GERMANY

## Special Report on Thuringia

2017

# Living Traditions and Lasting Visions

The green heart of Germany invites you to explore its cultural treasures



**Ladies and Gentlemen,  
Dear Readers,**

Thuringia has a rich Jewish heritage whose origins date back to the 11th century. Particularly in Erfurt's historic district, much of which remains intact, many architectural and cultural traces bear witness to the city's first Jewish community, which flourished there until the 14th century.

These include the Old Synagogue – one of the oldest, largest and best-preserved medieval synagogues, which also has a mikveh – as well as a large number of material relics such as gravestones, manuscripts, and of course the unique Er-

furt Treasure, which dates back to the 13th and 14th centuries. The Erfurt Treasure comprises more than 4,000 items, including silver coins, tableware and jewelry. The most important object is a Jewish wedding ring from the early 14th century; in 2015, a replica was given to the Beit Hatfutsot Museum in Tel Aviv. The Erfurt Treasure was discovered in 1998 during archaeological excavations and has since been displayed in New York, Paris, London among other locations. In 2009, it was installed in a permanent display in the Old Synagogue.

“Thuringia is brimming with discoveries – come take a look

Taken together, these witnesses offer a unique glimpse into Jewish daily life and communal existence as well as the coexistence of Jewish and Christian life in medieval European towns – with a wealth of detail and an intensity that is virtually unmatched elsewhere. In Erfurt we can retrace the blossoming of Central European Jewish culture. That is why with the sup-

port of the state of Thuringia, the state capital of Erfurt is applying for recognition as a UNESCO World Heritage site.

These efforts are accompanied by many other activities that make Thuringia one of the most important and exciting destinations for everyone interested in Jewish culture and history. For example, Weimar's University of Music has a chair dedicated to the history of Jewish music, while a research center at the University of Erfurt is dedicated to the study of religious practices and rituals. On the cultural side, the spectrum ranges from

– deserves its place at the top of the list of everyone interested in European culture and history. This year marks the 500th anniversary of the Reformation and the year in which Martin Luther made his 95 theses known in Wittenberg. 2019 will mark the 100th birthday of the Bauhaus movement, which was founded in Weimar and went on to become what is arguably the most influential art and design school in the world. This, too, will be celebrated in Thuringia in grand style.

From the Bauhaus movement, to the Reformation and Jewish culture, Thuringia offers a wealth of history and culture to explore. We would like to extend our warmest invitation to visit Thuringia and enjoy our famous hospitality. There is no other place in Germany or Europe where you will be able to find this unique combination of nature and culture, relaxation and excitement, as you will here. Thuringia is brimming with discoveries – come take a look at [www.visit-thuringia.com](http://www.visit-thuringia.com)

With warmest regards,

**Wolfgang Tiefensee**

*Thuringian Minister for  
Economic Affairs, Science  
and Digital Society*

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## THEN AND NOW

# Traces of Jewish Life in Thuringia

Embracing a rich tradition immigrants today secure the community's future

By Hartmut Bomhoff

About 600 years ago, Hillel of Erfurt, a Talmudic authority, left for Palestine to spend the remainder of his life in the Holy Land, thus fulfilling a vow he had made. When he had reached Vienna, he was seized by a longing to return to Thuringia because he was convinced that the Talmudical school of Erfurt would suffer through his absence. He then turned to the rabbis of Vienna who absolved him on the grounds that he had a greater task to perform in spreading Torah to the Jews of Erfurt.

Jewish merchants have been recorded in this part of Central Germany as early as the 10th century. The presence of Jews in Erfurt has also been documented during the 12th century. During the Middle Ages, Thuringia produced many scholars who contributed significantly to Jewish learning. The majority of Jews lived in free cities, which did not recognize the authority of the landgrave. After the Black Death pogrom, Erfurt became again the largest Jewish community at that time in Germany. At the end of the 14th century, Erfurt's Jewry called four or five synagogues their own, as well as four ritual slaughterhouses. However, in 1458, they were expelled from Erfurt, and in 1536, landgrave John Frederick the Brave, a fervent supporter of the Reformation, ordered the total expulsion of Jews. An act which was enforced in 1559.

The landgraviate of Thuringia subsequently experienced a period of disintegration and was divided into a large number of minor duchies and principalities. While prohibited from living in cities, as of the latter half of the 17th century, Jews were allowed to settle on the estates of the nobility, with a few rich court Jews granted protection by



The Old Synagogue of Erfurt

and Walldorf, the Jews are very fervent in their religious devotions!"

It was not until the first decades of the 19th century, that Jews in the four duchies received charters, with the community of Saxe-Meiningen becoming the largest one. In the early 1800s, Jews were permitted to live in Erfurt again, which then had become Prussian. A new synagogue was built in 1840, and eventually a larger one was built to replace it. The opulent domed structure of this Great Synagogue with seating for 500 stood until 1938, when it was destroyed in the Kristallnacht pogrom on November 9.

During the 19th century, numerous new synagogues and Jewish schools were built in small towns and villages, for example in 1842 in Mühlhausen, followed by Aschenhausen in 1843, and Berkach in 1854. In 1938, the latter, together with the neighboring school building, was spared from arson by intervention through local residents.

In the following year, the buildings were sold to the municipality. Renovated in the 1990s, the synagogue of the small city of Mühlhausen is now a listed monument and serves as a cultural center.

## Rapid growth

Another Jewish site nearby is the mansion of the Oppé brothers on Lindenbühl, a street near the center of town. These industrialists had a decisive influence on

the development of Mühlhausen as they were one of the largest employers in town. Today, the Jewish community of Erfurt is responsible for the two restored historic synagogues but doesn't own the Aschenhausen synagogue. The first two are used occasionally for worship, a concert, or other events, but are mostly maintained and kept open to the public by volunteers.

150 years ago, in December 1867, the "Israelite Community of Eisenach" was

founded in 1856 by Löb and Moses Simson in the city of Suhl. In the beginning, a steel hammer formed the basis of the company which would become known as a manufacturer of weapons and vehicles – mainly for the Prussian Army. From 1896 onwards, Simson expanded its product line into the civilian sector and built its first bicycles. Simson soon became one of the largest bicycle manufacturers in Germany. After World War I and the Treaty of Versailles, the factory was one of the few armaments plants in Germany permitted to continue operation. With over 4,000 workers, Simson produced small arms, automobiles – including the Simson Supra racing car – and other metal goods. In 1935, the factory was "Aryanized" in a particularly aggressive and public way. The owners were arrested and first escaped to Switzerland and later to the United States. Today, Simson vehicles are collector's items, but hardly anybody knows about the company's Jewish past.

Another example is the success story of Hermann Tietz, a merchant in Gera, a textile center in Thuringia. A Jewish community was formally founded in 1885, and in 1895, there were 90 Jews in Gera engaged mostly in commerce. Hermann Tietz and his nephew Oskar Tietz, who came to Gera in 1882, were the founders of Hertie, a department store chain with stores all over Germany.

## Towards destruction

In Erfurt, Jewish entrepreneurs belonged to the city's establishment, among them shoe manufacturer Alfred Hess, who made many generous donations of Expressionist paintings to the Angermuseum, financier Wilhelm Moos as well as horticulturalist Ernst Benary. "We bring beauty to the world" was the slogan of the seed and breeding company, founded in 1843 by Benary in Erfurt. It quickly became a household name in horticulture and counted Gregor Mendel among its prominent customers. Under



Community president Reinhard Schramm

the various princes. In consequence, Jewish life in the "green heart of Germany" became more rural, with peddling and cattle trade as the main source of income.

In 1783, German national poet Friedrich Schiller gave an account of Jewish life in the countryside. Staying at the Bauerbach estate near Meiningen, he remarked, "I'm just annoyed that so many Christians make so little out of their religion, while, as I see in Bauerbach

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Neither Hitler nor Stalin should have the last word. That's why I'm committed to help build a dynamic Jewish life

founded – which by 1904 reached a membership of 422. By 1869 the last restrictions were cleared and Jews moved back into the cities of Thuringia, gaining their much wanted and scarcely contested recognition and equality. However, a significant decline in the Jewish population was caused by anti-Semitism in the countryside which encouraged Jewish emigration.

In the second half of the 19th century, Thuringia's economy saw a period of rapid growth. An example for innovative Jewish entrepreneurship is the story of the Simson brothers. Simson & Co. was

Nazi rule, many members of the Benary family who had converted to Christianity, signed up for the German army to avoid anti-Semitic persecution. Today, Benary is an independent family business in its sixth generation and operates three breeding facilities in the United States, the Netherlands, and Germany. Their core business is the development and distribution of flower varieties for the professional bedding plant market.

After World War I, the many principalities were amalgamated into one state, Thuringia, with a Jewish population of about 3,600. On June 23, 1930, the Jew-





Non-Jewish pupils get immersed in the history of Erfurt's Old Synagogue

ish Telegraphic Agency reported: "Jewish visitors to the summer resorts of Thuringia are urged to disregard the warnings and threats of the anti-Semitic National Socialists against coming to Thuringia this summer in a published appeal by the Thuringian Tourists' Union, hotel proprietors, and owners of health resorts. A member of the anti-Semitic National Socialist party, Fritz Sauckel, recently declared in the Thuringian parliament that the Jews are not wanted at Thuringia's summer resorts. The appeal points out that Jews are never molested in Thuringia." Nevertheless, Thuringia fell under Nazi rule even before Hitler's appointment as chancellor, with stridently anti-modernist policies receiving considerable public support. In 1933, when Adolf Hitler assumed power, Thuringia was home to 4,500 Jews in 37 communities. About 650 Jewish family businesses fell victim to "Aryanization". As of the summer of 1937, the Buchenwald concentration camp near Weimar became the epitome of Nazi atrocities, and on May 10, 1942, the first transport with 515 Thuringian Jews departed from the Weimar train station to the Belzyce ghetto near Lublin. During the Shoah, the principal Jewish communities of Thuringia – Altenburg, Aschenhausen, Arnstadt, Eisenach, Gotha, and Meiningen – as well as many rural Jewish settlements were annihilated.

#### A Letter from Thuringia, July 1948

In July 1948, the London-based Association of Jewish Refugees (AJR) published a sobering report on the situation of their brethren in the Soviet occupied zone: "Altogether there are 350 Jews living in Thuringia. Communities exist in Erfurt, Eisenach, Jena and Gera. The 'Landesverband Jüdischer Gemeinden in Erfurt' is the successor organization of the dissolved former communities in the district. Most of the employable Jews have found work, by which, under prevailing circumstances, they just earn their living. There are, however, many old, sick, and widowed persons, and the communities are overaged. Religious service and tuition is only provided for in Erfurt (160 Jews). It is especially depressing that the Jews there are treated like the defeated majority and not as liberated

“Our congregation is a community of a shared destiny with a growing sense of religiosity, and we are in the process of creating a spiritual home for both the non-Orthodox majority and the Orthodox minority

victims. Former Nazis, unless they were particularly prominent, have the same opportunities as the Jews whom they wanted to exterminate. The members of the Jewish congregations feel themselves united by their common fate, though there are, of course, also some amongst them who, in the past, were less keen to be considered as Jews. The internal organization of the Erfurt Community (religious service, youth, and social work) is satisfactory. In normal times, Erfurt had 600 members; of these, only six are left. All the others have come, nearly without exception, from Breslau, from where they had been evacuated. It is due to the experience of the former large Breslau Community that the Erfurt congregation could be reorganized. The old tradition and culture is being kept alive in modest religious services without rabbi or chazzan.”

#### Troubled new beginnings

Shortly after liberation, the Jewish community of Erfurt, a mere handful of 15 people, re-established itself under the leadership of Max Cars, a survivor of the Theresienstadt ghetto. Later in 1945, between 400 and 1,000 German Jews – the data vary – transferred there from Breslau (meanwhile the Polish city of Wrocław). By August 1949, the number of affiliated Jews in Thuringia had shrunk to 130, signifying that only a few of the survivors identified as religious, or wanted to stay for good. One of them was Wolfgang M. Nossen, who was born in Breslau in 1931. However, after the founding of the Jewish state, he left Erfurt for Israel. In 1977, unforeseen circumstances led him to West Germany, where he somehow settled. In November 1989, the fall of the Berlin Wall opened new opportunities for him. After a short visit to Erfurt, he decided to stay, and in 1995, Mr. Nossen was elected president of the Jewish Community of Thuringia – an office he would hold for seventeen years and during which he witnessed the consolidation of Jewish life. However, it was a long and bumpy road to accomplish, and for many years, the prospects remained poor.

In March 1947, the city council of Erfurt granted a request for the restitution of the site on which the Great Synagogue had stood until 1938. The community immediately began planning the construction of a new synagogue, the only one to be built in the German Democratic Republic (GDR). However, shortly after the inauguration of the New Synagogue in 1952, a decline in membership began. In the same year, an anti-Semitic show trial against leading state and party functionaries of Jewish origin took place in Czechoslovakia. Also, in East Germany, many members of the Jewish community were interrogated, detained, or harassed. Jews were accused of "cosmopolitanism" and defamed as "agents of the West," "Zionists" and "traitors" intent on undermining the socialist state.

In 1953, around two thirds of all Jews living in the GDR fled, many of them to West Berlin. The Jewish community in Erfurt survived these troubled times, but the communities in Eisenach, Gera, and Mühlhausen vanished. With the dissolution of East Germany in 1990, only 26 Jews were registered with the Jewish community in Erfurt. Since 1990, the Erfurt community has had an influx of new members, primarily immigrants from the FSU. In April 2013, the ordination of two rabbis and the investiture of two cantors by the Abraham Geiger College marked a milestone in the Jewish revival in Thuringia. Today, the Jewish Community numbers around 800 members of whom about 500 live in the capital. Professor Reinhard Schramm, president of the *Jüdische Landesgemeinde* since 2012, puts it bluntly: "There would be no Jewish community here without the Jewish immigrants from the Soviet Union. I hope that the human and financial resources will be made available to build a children's and youth center with an integrated kindergarten."



Gravestone of David, the son of Tsadok (1250)



ACHAVA FESTIVAL

# A Vision Come True

Erfurt is a hotspot for connecting diverse traditions and people



The fabulous three sisters of A-Wa-Yemen-Tel Aviv performing in Erfurt

Stefan Kranz

JVJG

In 2015, the Hebrew word *achava* (“friendship” or “brotherhood”) became the name of a new festival in Erfurt, ACHAVA-Festspiele Thüringen. The name reflects the agenda: ACHAVA aims to convey concepts of understanding, tolerance and mutual respect to the general public. From August 31 until September 10, 2017, the festival – in its third year – will not only enrich the cultural landscape in Thuringia, but also set standards for interreligious dialogue. “The Jewish symbol of the fig tree, in the shade of which there is room for every-

each other with respect and attention,” explains artistic director Jascha Nemtsov.

The broad spectrum of topics and events is also reflected both by the festival’s venues and supporters. The crowds gather in churches, synagogues, public spaces, including a former heating plant, or in the open air. Among the many festival supporters are the Thuringian State government, regional businesses and media, as well as the Erfurt municipality, the Israeli Embassy in Berlin, and the Central Council of Jews in Germany to name but a few. Addressing and integrating more and more different social groups, including the Muslim

than 30 countries. In Erfurt, the day provides both a platform to combat indifference and prejudice as well as lots of fun and entertainment in a picturesque medieval setting.

Indeed, last year’s festival could already double the number of visitors compared to the first ACHAVA Festival in 2015 – a challenge this year’s program is glad to take on with a wide variety of concerts, dance performances, panel discussions, exhibitions, a street festival, children’s activities, films, and religious services.

The name “MoZuluArt” is already intriguing – and the festival’s opening concert of this Austrian-African band is bound to be electrifying with its synthesis of 18th century European music and traditional rhythms from Zimbabwe. The “Gypsy Soul and Jewish Heart” concert will also testify to a musical symbiosis of a special kind, whilst the Tatar Monks choir from Kazan introduces sacred music of the Christian Orthodox tradition. Jazz connoisseurs have the Erfurt festival firmly on their agenda already, but this year is special as the First ACHAVA Jazz Award will be presented. It goes to the duo “Fractal Limit”. Brazilian singer Tatiana Parra and pianist Vardan Ovsepian from Armenia quite simply convinced the jury with their music’s “magic and depth”. Of course, they will grace the award ceremony on September 9 with a performance – their first in Germany! “New projects like the ACHAVA Jazz Award open doors for further intercultural exchange,” says Kranz. Another jazz highlight will take place the following evening when Omer Klein and his trio will perform at the Heizwerk, the former heating plant and now one of the hottest venues in

town. Klein and his band will introduce the audience to Israel’s lively jazz scene.

## Examining the Reformation

The exhibition “Music. Resistance. Extermination” at the Erfurt memorial site Topf & Söhne will be dedicated to the Theresienstadt musicians who performed Verdi’s “Requiem” a number of times in the ghetto. The exhibition also traces the fate of Jewish musicians in the town of Weimar. The Staatskapelle Weimar and the MDR broadcast choir will dedicate their performance of the “Requiem” at St. Marien, Erfurt’s cathedral, to the memory of the murdered musicians. A concert and discussion entitled “The Violin of Buchenwald” explores the dramatic story of a unique collection

of instruments and the fate of their owners.

As 2017 also marks the 500th anniversary of the beginning of the Reformation in Germany, the “Erfurt Colloquies”, three panel discussions during the festival, will examine and evaluate the contemporary relevance of reformer Martin Luther. “Religious Freedom and the Secular State”, “Freedom and the Rule of Law” are topics which will certainly draw large audiences. “Luckily, people want to make up their own minds and take time to do so,” says Kranz.

Poet Heinrich Heine once said that the book is the Jews’ “portable homeland”. Israeli artist Nechama Levendel offers a fascinating new interpretation of this dictum. She collects discarded books from different civilisations, languages, and subjects, tears them apart

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People want to make up their own minds and take time to do so

one, is our programmatic basis. As one of the oldest world religions Judaism has, so to speak, great experience in analyzing man’s weaknesses and strengths,” says event organizer Martin Kranz. In the past, he has succeeded in bringing renowned Israeli musicians like Avishai Cohen, Ravid Kahalani, and Idan Raichel to Erfurt to perform at the festival. However, the ten days program is much more than an opportunity to promote artistic quality outside off the world’s large concert halls. “We are committed to engage in dialogue and debate, to accept dissent and to encounter

community, churches, teachers, and organisations from the adult education sector, the festival helps foster a sense of cohesion and community beyond religious and political boundaries and lives up to its name.

## Insight into Jewish culture

The main focus was and is to provide insight into Jewish and Israeli culture at large. ACHAVA Festival takes the opportunity to mark the European Day of Jewish Culture, a continent-wide Jewish culture and education festival that encompasses hundreds of events in more



Mozart meets Zimbabwe: Austro-African band MoZuluArt

Lukas Beck



and reassembles them. In this new synthesis she expresses her desire to act as a mediator between different cultures. The festival dedicates a special exhibition to Levendel's very own art of the book.

Martin Kranz knows that the festival is at the right place and comes at the right time:

"Thuringia is an excellent basis. Luckily, a number of gems of Jewish cultural history have been preserved here, especially in Erfurt. This is also why the concept of the ACHAVA Festival contributes to the city's current application for UNESCO World Heritage status. And, people from all over Germany come to our festival."

And Kranz is not the only one with this conviction: "Our first and foremost partner was the state of Thuringia, in the person of Prime Minister Bodo Ramelow. He immediately recognized the potential and current relevance and has sup-

ported the project with great enthusiasm and cooperativeness. Reinhard Schramm as president of the Jewish Community of Thuringia has also been with us from the beginning and every year helps to mobilize members and partners. In addition, we have programmatic partners such



Winners of ACHAVA Jazz Award: Fractal Limit

as all political foundations in Germany and, of course, corporations and individuals acting as sponsors."

What does the future hold for the festival? "Of course I wish ACHAVA Festival *mazal tov till 120 ...* but I know it's no good resting on one's laurels. Thus, I am looking forward to lots of constructive feedback so that



“The festival helps generate a sense of Jewish normality

we can ensure future ACHAVA festivals will be lively, up-to-date, and interesting. A festival for the people can only be done with the people."

Professor Reinhard Schramm adds: "The ACHAVA Festival

enriches everyday life in our Jewish community and in society at large with Jewish culture at its best. We are involved in the preparation and the conduct of Shabbat services and of cultural and political events.

The festival is complemented by the Jewish-Israeli Cultural Days and the program of the Yiddish Summer Weimar, as well as our own cultural activities. Together with government commitment for preserving Jewish heritage, this generates a sense of Jewish normality in Thuringia." Is there any better way to promote *achava* – friendship and brotherhood? ■

**ACHAVA Festival starts on August 31, 2017.**  
[www.achava-festspiele.de](http://www.achava-festspiele.de)

## MEMORIAL SITE TOPF & SÖHNE

# Remembrance for the 21st Century

Former headquarters of the "builders of the Auschwitz ovens" is now a museum

By Dieter Sattler

Always glad to serve you..." This was how the Erfurt businessman Ernst-Wolfgang Topf concluded a letter to the SS construction management at Auschwitz. This cynical salutation is now inscribed on the exterior of the former administrative building of Topf & Söhne, the company that built crematoria ovens and ventilation systems for Auschwitz-Birkenau, Mauthausen, and other German concentration and death camps. For decades, the history of this factory facility was largely ignored. After the successor company, a storage and malting equipment manufacturer, went bankrupt in 1996, the premises remained unused until 2001, when it was occupied by squatters. However, two years earlier, a society had been founded to research the history of J. A. Topf & Söhne. In 2011, the state of Thuringia took up this initiative, establishing a memorial and permanent exhibition in the former administrative building. The exhibition includes many documents that show how the organization and implementation of state-organized mass murder could only be carried out with the assistance of ordinary Germans. The history of Topf & Söhne thus serves as an instructive example for the complicity of the broader population. In her book *Industrie und Holocaust*, Annegret Schüle, who is also curator of the memorial, writes: "With Topf & Söhne, we encounter the ordinary face of Auschwitz's machinery of destruction, right in the midst of everyday German society." During the Nazi era, the Erfurt engineers served as veritable technicians



Kastner Pichler Architekten / Köln

of death. They delivered the crematoria ovens and other technology needed to carry out murder on a mass and efficient scale. Their expertise helped the Nazis implement their murderous plans quickly and efficiently. And they knew exactly what they were doing. Company employees spent months on-site, observing and monitoring the "operational reliability" of their systems, in the process becoming witnesses to mass murder.

The moral debasement that resulted from this willing complicity is exemplified by Karl Prüfer (1891–1952), Topf & Söhne's head engineer. In his early career, Prüfer had worked in the areas of waste disposal, cremation of animal corpses, and the design and construction of municipal crematoria. In 1931, Prüfer would still write, "cremation should not be debased simply to a

means of cadaver disposal." But the ovens that he would later design for the SS were intended for one purpose only: mass disposal of human beings.

Alongside historical documentation, the memorial center also focuses on questions of remembrance work and engagement with current issues. Among its notable initiatives was the November 2011 public commemoration of

the victims of far-right murders, as well as several events held in commemoration of the genocide in Rwanda. The numerous educational activities of the center include eyewitness testimony such as the accounts of Hungarian Auschwitz survivor Eva Fahidi-Pusztai, discussions about recent developments in right-wing populism and extremism as well as media reports on the topic, and discussions of the nature of complicity and business ethics as a whole. The center also hosts workshops for refugees living in Thuringia and for Muslim university students on topics such as human rights and democracy. The memorial website includes a "web dialogue" section where online visitors can post their own contributions.

In the early years, there were some who argued that the memorial was harming Erfurt's image

and "soiling its own nest." An argument to which then-head of the Jewish community of the state of Thuringia, Wolfgang Nossen, commented: "You should have given some thought to the city's image 80 years ago!" Today the memorial is welcomed by the city and its citizens, as is also evident by its close collaboration with other local institutions. One teacher from Norway commented: "When I go home tomorrow, I'll have questions, questions, questions." The exhibition "Industry and Holocaust" is shown at the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum until the end of October. For American audiences, an English and Spanish language version is available. ■

## JEWISH VOICE FROM GERMANY

### THURINGIA

LIVING TRADITIONS LASTING VISIONS

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Dirk Urban



## ARCHITECTURE AND DESIGN

# The Bauhaus: From Weimar into the World

Pioneer of modernity still shapes our daily lives



Haus am Horn in Weimar, built for the Bauhaus exhibition in 1923

By Elisabeth Neu

The story has a happy end. Although, for a while, it seemed unlikely. In 1919, all eyes were on Weimar, the tiny town in the heart of Thuringia. The German National Assembly had withdrawn here from the revolutionary hotbed of the Capital, Berlin. It had gathered to draw up a constitution in the “Spirit of Weimar” – home of venerated poets and thinkers like Goethe, Schiller, Wieland, and Herder. It was a spirit Germans conjured up to contrast the monstrosities of WWI. The constitution was to be that of a republic, the first on German soil.

Whilst the assembly noodled over details, Walter Gropius, a 36 year old architect, signed the contract making him director of the new Weimar Art School, the State Bauhaus. Weimar democracy was to last a mere 14 years before it was strangled by Hitler’s Nazis. Its demise was also to be the end of the Bauhaus. As a flagship of modernity this school was anathema to the Nazis. But German democracy came back to stay. And after its closure in Germany, the Bauhaus went global. It, too, is here to stay – defining style, taste and everyday life worldwide. And in 2019, the Bauhaus will be celebrating its centenary!

Its founding director Walter Gropius had dropped out of architecture school. Good looking and highly-decorated in WWI for valor at the front, Gropius had already made his mark with revolutionary designs like a factory building for shoe last producer Fagus in Alfeld

near Hanover. Now, Weimar was calling. In early 1919, the local Art School and the School of Arts and Crafts, both renowned institutions, had merged to create what would later become known as “the Bauhaus.”

This clearly called for a manifesto. Its opening sentence was a bombshell: “The ultimate goal of all art is the building!” Gropius went on to demand: “Architects, sculptors, painters – we all must return to craftsmanship! For there is no such thing as ‘art by profession’. There is no essential difference between the artist and the artisan. The artist is an exalted artisan.” Expressionistically intoxicated, he continued: “Let us strive for, conceive, and create the new building of the future that will unite every discipline, architecture and sculpture and painting, and which will one day rise heavenwards

from the million hands of craftsmen as a clear symbol of a new belief to come.”

Well, reality was a different thing. 1919 meant hard times. The economy was stalling, provisions were scarce. Soon students and teachers complained about the lack of materials, freezing cold working spaces, frugal meals. But Gro-

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Clear lines, geometrical shapes, modern materials were the basis for functional, simple furniture and everyday objects

pious was a highly gifted administrator, fund raiser, and organizer – and a talent scout. Within a very short time period, he persuaded the crème de la crème of the avant-garde to sign up as Bauhaus teachers: Lyonel Feininger, Johannes Itten, Wassily Kandinsky, Paul Klee, Gerhard Marcks, Oskar Schlemmer, and László Moholy-Nagy rushed to Thuringia to work as “Masters of Form.” “Workshop Masters”, on the other hand, were to teach the students the skills of crafts.

Committed to multidisciplinarity and pedagogics, Gropius also drew up the Bauhaus curriculum: “The students will be instruct-



The Wagenfeld lamp

ed in crafts and drawing, and painting, as well as scientifically-theoretically too.” Sculptors, stone masons, smiths, wood cutters, and weavers and many more were to be instructed here. Likewise, composition and drawing, as well as designing furniture and everyday objects were to be taught. Theoretical lessons entailed anatomy, history of arts, materials science. But the curriculum also included nitty gritty such as “basic knowledge of bookkeeping, contract closing, professional fees.”

## Form follows function

Top priority at the Bauhaus: Versatility! Love of experimentation! A laboratory of modernity had sprung up in Weimar. Henceforth, form had to follow function. Gone were the fussy interiors of the turn



Cradle designed by Peter Keler

of the century, the over-ornate facades, and cumbersome architecture. The new man – his creation was also an ambition of the Bauhaus program – demanded transparency, fresh air, and sunlight in his living and work space. Clear lines, geometrical shapes, modern materials were the basis for functional, simple pieces of furniture and everyday objects like crockery and cutlery, lamps and multi-coloured abstract tapestries. The steel tube chair “Wassily” designed by Marcel Breuer, Josef Hartwig’s chess set, Peter Keler’s cradle, Marianne Brandt’s tea set, the Wagenfeld and Jucker lamp have long become icons of style and design. In the 1920s, they were revolutionary. Also with houses, factories, and apartments form was now to follow function. Glass and steel constructions substituted heavy brick-work. The Golden Twenties craved innovation, provocation – the unconventional.

And now it was party time, too. Extracurricular activities were written law

U. Pohlmann

Samuel Zuder / Thüringer Tourismus GmbH

Alexander Burzik / Klassik Stiftung Weimar



at the Bauhaus: “Friendly intercourse between masters and students outside work; theatre performances, lectures, poetry, music, fancy dress parties. Building a buoyant ceremonial at these gatherings.” A famous photograph showing a group of Bauhausers in high spirits, bursting out of a door laughing and smoking testifies to the buoyancy, if not the ceremonial. Bauhaus parties quickly became legendary.

#### Art and technology

And how did the good people of Weimar react to all this? Not just the revealing was observed with suspicion – would these young wild things also rob the local craftsmen of their livelihoods? Were perhaps communists at work there? Early on, Gropius was forced to assure that all Bauhaus students were “Aryans”, of German origin, German speakers and that the 17 students of Jewish origin had mostly been baptized and were not receiving grants... However, two of the Bauhaus masters were of Jewish descent: László Moholy-Nagy and Marcel Breuer.

As for sustenance: The Bauhaus lot favoured healthy and communal fare. Home-grown vegetables were pureed, but the mash needed spicing up. Alma Mahler – later Werfel, in the interim also Mrs. Gropius – as vicious as she was beautiful, remarked that the one unforgettable characteristic of the Bauhaus was that its members “reeked of garlic.”

In the summer of 1923, the Bauhaus presented the fruits of its endeavors to the public in a large exhibition. In its epicentre: The Haus am Horn, a residential house built especially for the show. On a footnote: Gropius’ original design for the house had been rejected. Instead, Georg Muche, a young painter, woodcutter and weaver, received the commission. Comfort, functionality, and efficiency were the masters of this house. The interior, carpets, radiators, tiles, furniture had all been manufactured in Bauhaus workshops. The Haus am Horn has recently been lovingly restored to its original glory and is now part of UNESCO World Heritage sites in Weimar. If you happen to be in the area, don’t forget to take a peek into the kitchen –Theodor Bogler’s storage set is a must have for design lovers ‘til this day.

Never at a loss for a grand statement, Gropius pronounced “Art and Technology – a New Unity” at the opening of the show. This was a new departure for the Bauhaus since thanks to modern assembly methods and materials, objects designed in its school



In the White City Tel Aviv

could now be produced in large numbers. Good (Bauhaus) design became accessible to many people. The exhibition was a huge success with visitors, critics, and the press alike – also internationally.

But dark clouds had been gathering over Weimar’s Bauhaus for some time. Finances were a problem from the beginning although Gropius had somehow always managed to scrape by. Now in 1924, Thuringia’s social democratic government, which had been in favor of the Bauhaus, was superseded by conservative-nationalistic powers. Gropius was informed that not even half of the required means

would be available. Cautionary notice was given to Bauhaus teachers.

And thus, the odyssey began. In 1925, the school moved to Dessau. Three years later, Gropius left. His successor Hannes Meyer was director for a mere three years when he was given notice for political reasons. He was succeeded by Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, an architect like his predecessors. Then, the 1931 elections made the Nazis the largest party in Dessau. They immediately chased the Bauhaus out of town. The school continued as a private institution in Berlin; in 1933 it was dissolved under Nazi pressure.

Consequently, many Bauhausers left Germany. Walter Gropius emigrated to England, then to America where he was welcomed by the Graduate School of Design at Harvard. László Moholy-Nagy who had joined the Bauhaus in Weimar in 1923, set out to found the New Bauhaus in

Chicago. Here, the Weimar curriculum was developed further. A pioneer in architecture, design, and photography in North America, the New Bauhaus is currently celebrating its 80th anniversary.

Mies van der Rohe also left Germany for the United States; in the late 1950s he was to design the famous Seagram Building in New York. Naum Slutzky, Bauhaus master goldsmith, made England his home. He was to found the department of industrial design at the Royal College of Art in London.

#### World Heritage sites

But not just the teachers disseminated the Bauhaus spirit all over the world. Many of those who had studied there and left Germany took it with them. One of them was Arie Sharon. A student of Gropius, he was to become one of Israel’s leading architects.

Today, Tel Aviv boasts the largest assemblage of Bauhaus architecture worldwide. The “White City” is proud of its 4,000 buildings in the International Style, as Bauhaus

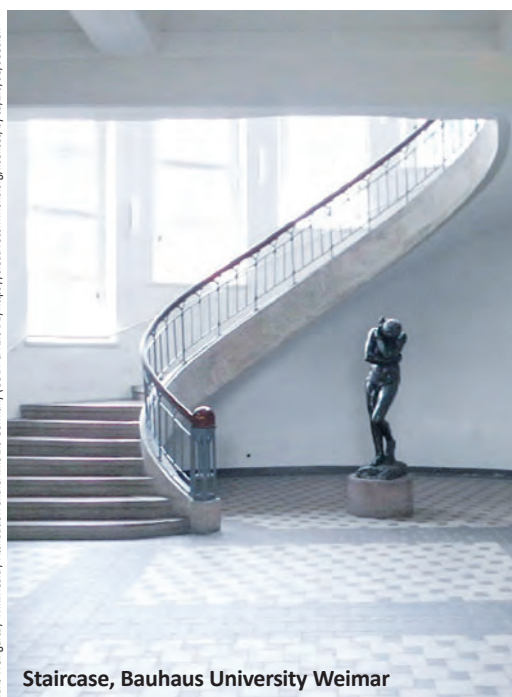
is called here. The original German architecture had to pay tribute to the climatic conditions of the Holy Land. Large glass fronts were replaced by small shutter like windows; narrow canopied balconies protect from the fierce sun and heat. Over the decades since they were constructed, most of the buildings have become the worse for wear. A UNESCO World Heritage site since 2003, Tel Aviv has begun tending to its Bauhaus treasure. Substantial renovations are being carried out. The German federal government supports the sprucing up of these buildings which are much loved by their inhabitants.

From Thuringia into the world – since 2009 Berlin photographer Jean Molitor has been following Bauhaus traces. His work beautifully documents Bauhaus inspired buildings, i.e. in Cuba, Turkey, Morocco, Tartastan, and Burundi. And Christian Benimana, director of the African Design Center in Kigali, thinks that today Bauhaus should serve as an inspiration for modern African urban planning.

But not all made it out into the world. One of the most talented Bauhaus students, Friedel Dicker, who had followed Johannes Itten from Vienna to Weimar, could not build a new life for herself in a distant land. Born in Vienna, the all-rounder had joined the Bauhaus in 1919. She was a photographer by training but also carved puppets, designed stage sets, costumes, jewellery, stackable chairs, kindergarten interiors. In 1942, she was deported to Theresienstadt. There she dedicated herself to caring for the children. During lovingly equipped theatre performances and painting lessons she granted the little ones short respites of normality and joy in the hell they were living in. In 1944, Friedl Dicker was killed in Auschwitz.



The New Bauhaus in Chicago: Illinois Institute of Technology



Staircase, Bauhaus University Weimar



## A CONVERSATION WITH THE PRIME MINISTER

## We Embrace Our Responsibility

Bodo Ramelow on his commitment to Jewish affairs

**Y**our first journey abroad as prime minister of Thuringia led you to Israel. It was however not your first visit. Why?

Israel is an exciting and fascinating country. You can say without a doubt that Israel is the country where world history began. Also, the world religions have their roots in Israel and its neighboring regions. As I am personally devoted to the training of cantors and rabbis in my function as a foundation board member of Abraham Geiger College, I have long been curious about Jerusalem, Tel Aviv, and the whole of Israel. So I first visited Israel to attend the 2008 ICCJ interfaith congress and returned to Germany full of new impressions and a huge curiosity to come back again.

I also met Avital Ben-Chorin who was born in Eisenach and escaped Nazi terror with a Kindertransport [a rescue mission for Jewish children] to Palestine. It was my special wish to help in adopting a resolution across party lines in the city council of Eisenach to grant Avital Ben-Chorin honorary citizenship and to accompany this process.

*What is unusual about your first journey is that it had Israel as its sole destination.*

My first journey abroad as newly elected prime minister in 2015 was focused solely on Israel especially because Thuringia with the concentration camps and Dora has an

obligation not to forget or relativize Nazi terror or the Holocaust. I wanted to make a point with my journey and had a Buchenwald survivor, Natalie Fürst, accompany me throughout my entire journey. With a large business and scientific delegation we visited many universities and companies in Israel and made new contacts. The first journey was a great success and we promoted Thuringia specifically in Israel to make people curious about our state.

*What makes the relationship between Erfurt and its partner city Haifa so special?*

Haifa is a beautiful city on the sea. Cosmopolitan and modern, relaxed and curious, and fits to Erfurt. The partnership has been alive and well for a long time. For instance, the Leo Baeck Education Center has visited Erfurt with its great musical program "Step by Step – Sauwa Sauwa". Thus, during my Israel journey, it was a pleasure for me to visit the mayor of Haifa together with the mayor of Erfurt to also set a sign of friendship.

*You emphasize time and time again how important it is for German-Jewish reconciliation to cope with the past.*

Definitively. From our perspective it is more than important to emphasize that Erfurt embraces its responsibility for its past during the Nazi era. Thus, the memorial

Topf & Söhne, the place where the incinerators were built, plays an important role in Erfurt as a place of gathering, as well as the Old Synagogue where the Jewish gold treasure is on display. History, the present and the past, is together connected with the UNESCO World Heritage proposal for Jewish life in Erfurt. The bright and the dark sides are connected in Erfurt so that we actively live with this responsibility, so that a "Never Again" to anti-Semitism has a lively home in Erfurt. We are happy to welcome guests from Haifa but also Jewish visitors from all over the world.

*What significance does the fostering of and support for Jewish life in Thuringia have for you and the state?*

We are grateful for the new Jewish life that enriches our cities and communities. It gives our home state Thuringia a fresh and sappy thrust of vitality, dynamics, future, and perspective. Every year we celebrate Jewish-Israeli cultural days in Thuringia that attract a growing audience. Thanks to the general enthusiasm for klezmer the Yiddish Summer Weimar has become one of the most renowned festivals for Yiddish music and culture worldwide. The Achava Festival that in 2015 took place in Erfurt for the first time has become something of a tradition. Dialogue stands at the center of the festival and allows for many interfaith and



TSK / Barbara Neumann

intercultural encounters. I am pleased that at the beginning of the 21st century we can witness how in a new, democratic Germany Jewish culture and Jewish faith are taking root again.

*What role does the Jüdische Landesgemeinde [the Jewish community in the state] already play and what role will it play in the future?*

For me as prime minister it is especially close to my heart that the Jüdische Landesgemeinde can shape Jewish life in freedom, protected as best as possible by the state and supported by society. The state government supports the state community in its efforts to preserve Jewry in all its traditional diversity and identity, is committed to the principles of the Torah as well as to a cosmopolitan understanding of Jewish life and culture.

*Bodo Ramelow is the prime minister of Thuringia*

## MUST-SEE FINDINGS

## Testimony of Medieval Ashkenaz

The Old Synagogue of Erfurt hosts a unique treasure



Papenfuss / Atelier für Gestaltung

the so-called Erfurt Treasure is on exhibit, a trove of gold and silver jewelry, tableware, and rare coins discovered about two decades ago. It was concealed within the foundation of a 12th-century house in the medieval Jewish quarter of the city and was in all likelihood buried by Kalman von Wiehe, the Jewish house owner, just before the Black Plague pogroms devastated Erfurt's Jewish community in 1349. In the same year, with the Jews being killed or expelled, the synagogue next door was converted into a storehouse.

The treasure, which has a total weight of about 28 kilograms, comprises more than 3,000 silver coins, 14 silver ingots, and over 600 pieces of jewelry and has been on display since 1999. The most prominent piece is a golden Jewish wedding ring from the early 14th century. Designed in the shape of a tower, its raised inscription reads *mazal tov*, good luck. The find was in several respects sensational. First, very little jewelry or artwork from wealthy private households of the Middle Ages has survived. Its non-ecclesiastical Gothic style goldsmith's work makes the treasure a



B. Stefan, Thüringisches Landesamt für Denkmalpflege und Archäologie, Weimar

unique collection. Second, the vast number of coins and ingots demonstrates Erfurt's status as a medieval center for trade and commerce. In addition, the exhibition offers a glimpse into Jewish life and culture in Central Europe, Ashkenaz, before the Black Death.

Another focus of the exhibition is a collection of medieval Jewish manuscripts that documents the highly developed intellectual life of the Erfurt Jewish community. Originally, a bundle of 17 manuscripts, they ended up in the hands of the municipality during the plague pogrom of 1349. The valuable

manuscripts were locked away until the second half of the 17th century, and then appeared on the inventory list of the library of the Evangelical Ministry in the Augustinian Monastery, from where they were sold in 1880 to the Royal Library in Berlin. The manuscripts consist of three very valuable Bible manuscripts, four Torah scrolls from the 13th and 14th centuries, and a number of other writings. The most impressive piece is the Giant Erfurt Bible, copied in 1343. Scholars say that the collection holds numerous clues to its reception after 1349 in the form of apostils and comments and

thus constitutes an important testimonial for early Christian Hebraism. In Berlin, the precious convolute eventually became an object of research for Jewish scholars.

It was only after 1990 that the original structures and the unrendered West facade of the Old Synagogue, were discovered and salvaged, and it took special restoration measures to preserve the traces of time. Together with the Stone House – a private building dating back to 1250 which can be related to Jewish owners – a medieval ritual bath, gravestones from the 13th century, the Old Synagogue forms a unique testimony to Jewish life and culture in Central Europe. It is only natural that the city is applying for UNESCO World Heritage status. The Small Synagogue, inaugurated in 1840 and today a museum devoted to the local Jewish history of the 19th and 20th centuries, adds considerably to this ensemble. No question, Erfurt has become a must-see destination for the traveler interested in Jewish history. Next spring, Rabbi Steinberg will be back – bringing with him a large group of synagogue members.

By Gideon Wollberg

**W**e had an amazing time," said Rabbi Richard Steinberg of Orange County in California, after a rather spontaneous stop-over in Erfurt. "We thoroughly enjoyed ourselves and learnt a great deal." The Steinbergs were absolutely enthralled by their visit to the Old Synagogue, a medieval gem in the townscape of Thuringia's capital. The Alte Synagoge with parts dating from the 11th century is the oldest synagogue in Central Europe that has been preserved from its foundation to its roof. In its cellars,