

Project Jewish Life in Frankfurt Tracing - Encountering – Exploring

Traces from the Past (late 70s)

The origins of the project Exploring Jewish Life

The origins of the group called *Projekt Jüdisches Leben in Frankfurt* dates back to the 1970s. During this time particularly union activists were involved in inviting witnesses of the anti-Nazi resistance for school talks. A project team in Frankfurt dealt with the questions how to prepare the talks in the schools. As a young teacher Angelika Rieber took active part in this team. She was impressed that the eye-witnesses conveyed the history of the Nazi era in a moving and vivid manner in contrast to university seminars on the topic which were taught in a very academic and aloof way. Another important aspect of the stories of the "red grandfathers and grandmothers" has been their own motivation to encourage young people to become politically aware and resist any kind of discrimination in the present.

Angelika Rieber realized the potential of these school talks to communicate the events of the past to the students in a vivid and specific manner, besides learning and discovering more for her own education. In the late 70s she set up a project team with four other colleagues to plan this kind of lessons. This group has existed up to now for nearly 40 years with changes in membership. The members of the project team invited witnesses of the resistance to their schools, organized alternative city tours and walking tours for school classes and offered seminars for teachers supported by HELP (Hessian Institute for Teachers).

Traces of Jewish Life (early 80s)

Increasingly, the project team focused on the Jewish history of Frankfurt, because at this time only very few experts dealt with this topic. The members of the team investigated traces of Jewish history, organized visits to the Jewish Cemeteries in the Rat Beil Straße and Battonstrasse in Frankfurt, in a way letting the «stones speak about former Jewish life". In addition, the project team compiled materials for the history curriculum and created materials for teaching.

Commemoration of the former Jewish life in Frankfurt (from the mid-80s)

In 1984, the project group's attention was drawn to the Visiting Program of the City of Frankfurt for the former Jewish citizens of Frankfurt that has been offered since 1980. The project group took the opportunity to establish its own contact to get first-hand information of eye-witnesses of the Nazi-era. Since this time the project has participated in the Visiting Programm. It started with members of the group interviewing the guests of the city in order to use these information to develop illustrative teaching material and at the same time to research the Jewish history of Frankfurt, commemorate the former Jewish life that had once thrived in the city and keep the memory of the persecuted Jews of Frankfurt alive. Many biographies of former Frankfurt citizens have been collected and published: books, articles, films, curricula and since late 2014 also a website.

Since 1984 the project has developed alongside and in cooperation with the city's program and has grown and extended its activities. In the late 80s a close cooperation developed with the Jewish Museum founded in 1988 as well as with the Fritz Bauer Institute.

"... that the Holocaust is not just like another page in the history book" –

Former citizens of Frankfurt in conversation with young people in their former home town
(since 1990)

Initially the members of the project hesitated to invite the visitors for testimonials at schools or other educational institutions. They realized that this kind of encounters needed careful preparation in order to be satisfactory for everyone involved. In 1989 Ruth Sommer, a participant of the visiting program, requested to talk in a school. Angelika Rieber invited her to her school. The talk turned out to be a positive experience for Ruth Sommer as well as for the young people. Ever since, these talks - giving young people the opportunity to talk to eye witnesses of the Nazi era in the town they live in - became a central task of the project.

Only a few of the guests had ever before talked to a school class about their experiences. Therefore an intensive preparation on both sides was and is still necessary. Since 1990 the project team has developed a concept for contacting the visitors and the schools well ahead of the visiting week in order to prepare the talks. This includes recommendations for preparation, structure of eyewitness interviews and follow-up, training seminars for teachers, a get-together between teachers, students and visitors at the beginning of the program, and a careful evaluation afterwards.

The results of this work have been presented at exhibitions, in publications and at conferences. Especially Angelika Rieber, who initiated the project, has been involved in the following activities: In cooperation with the Fritz Bauer Institute the project organized a competition called "Sie wohnten nebenan" ("They were our neighbours"), with the support of the City of Frankfurt a book titled "dass wir nicht erwünscht waren" ("... we were not wanted") was published. Members of the project worked together with the Jewish Museum in the preparation of the exhibition „Ostend - Blick in ein jüdisches Viertel“ («Life in the Jewish Quarter Ostend»). In collaboration with the Eckert Institute for textbook research and other institutions (among others Yad Vashem) Angelika Rieber presented results of the work in conferences and seminars. Twice a year she offered a course "Zeitzeugenprojekte in Hessen" ("Eyewitness projects in Hesse") for networking, exchange and professional training. Teachers' training is still a major pillar of the project's work.

"I am coming to learn as much as to share"

Continued dialogue with the subsequent generations (since 2012)

Soon there will be no more eye-witnesses of the Nazi-era. Are the lessons about the Nazi-time going to become a topic in history just like any other? These are the issues among many others that *Projekt Jüdisches Leben in Frankfurt* is increasingly concerned with. The continuation of the dialogue with the second generation became a major subject. Already in the 1990s, children accompanying their parents from the first generation were invited by the project to participate in the dialogue and to express their point of view. During the visit with their parents the project offered a seminar only for the children of former Frankfurt citizens. Furthermore in discussions about the future of the visiting program the *Projekt Jüdisches Leben in Frankfurt* has strongly promoted the inclusion of the second generation, especially in parliamentary committees.

As a result the City of Frankfurt is the only city in Germany having included the children of the former citizens in their visiting program since 2012. The invitation and the outreach of the project give the members of the second generation the opportunity to visit the former home of their parents or grandparents and at the same time to personally experience how Germany and Frankfurt in particular deals with and educates about the Nazi era. The project has continued organizing the school talks with the following generation. It supports and accompanies the visitors to "their" places of importance and does research for the visitors in advance. Every year approximately 15-20 schools participate and a number of institutions and individuals as well as most of all the visitors take part in these encounters.

The members of the project published a book titled "*Unsere Wurzeln sind hier in Frankfurt*" ("*Our roots are in Frankfurt*") in 2013, documenting the encounters of the first visiting program for the following generations in 2012. The intention of the book is to make the work of the project better known and encourage schools and other institutes to participate. Apart from this, the project offers a special teacher's training on its topic and has further developed questionnaires and information for schools and visitors who want to take part in the future.

An increasing number of children of former citizens of Frankfurt request help from the project during the year to find places and documents connected to the history of their family. The extension of the visiting program to the second generation has brought changes for the project group. More research is required to support the second generation before and during the visits. The dialogue between visitors and with members of the project gains importance. Not only the fate of family members can be found out, but also different points of view and the experience of the visitors can be communicated. As one of the visitors pointed out: "I am coming to learn as much as to share."

Past – present – future

There is a strong concern that Holocaust education will lose its significance for future generations the further away the events of the Nazi era lie in the past. And another concern is that young people with an immigrant background might not be interested in the subject because they do not have German ancestors. Our experience shows that the opposite is true. Many times they can relate their own or their parents' migration experiences to the stories of the visitors. The project takes this into account and uses it for the development of methodic and didactic materials for teaching about the Nazi era. For this reason the dialogue both with the eye-witnesses and the ensuing generations is a main task. Encounters teach about the experience in the past as well as about the impact of the Holocaust on our lives and our attitudes.

Remembering for the future (since 2014): www.juedisches-leben-frankfurt.de

Another focus of the current work of the project is to document the encounters of the past 30 years. The extensive archive of the project includes the recorded conversations and interviews at school, as well as the results of further research on the biographies of former citizens of Frankfurt. These are now being evaluated and gradually released. In 2014 the EVZ Stiftung Erinnerung-Verantwortung-Zukunft (Foundation Remembering- responsibility - future) supported the development of a website of the project featuring the biographies of former citizens of Frankfurt. The website is intended to be used by schools and other educational institutions, historians and local researchers, former neighbors or classmates and the interested public. The site is bilingual, in English and German, so the

former citizens and their children have easy access. Former and future visitors can follow the implementation of the biographies for educational purposes.

Current focus

Currently the following priorities are being pursued:

- organization of contact and meetings with eye witnesses of the Nazi era and their children
- Teachers` training seminars and consulting coaching schools and their teachers
- Development of curricula and didactic-methodical material for Holocaust education
- Research, documentation and publication of biographies of the former Jewish citizens of Frankfurt
- Networking and cooperation with archives, museums and local historians especially in Hesse
- Participation in exhibitions and “Stolperstein” initiatives etc.
- Research and documentation of the Kindertransports from Frankfurt with the aim of creating a Kindertransport memorial in Frankfurt

The project follows a local historical, biographical and communicative approach. The project is interdisciplinary because it involves teachers` training, didactic of teaching the Holocaust, in-service training for teachers and research.

Cooperation and networking

The work of the project is based on a large network with various institutions. The project for example invites all secondary schools in Frankfurt and in neighboring towns to participate in the visiting program and contacts local historians. Many teachers participate with their classes and several of them have become members of the project after their retirement and volunteer.

The project is connected to the Hessische Gedenkinitiative (Memorial initiatives of Hesse) the Hessische Landeszentrale für politische Bildung (The Hessian State Center for Political Studies) and the Gesellschaft für Christlich-Jüdische Zusammenarbeit (Association of Christian Jewish Cooperation). There also is a close cooperation with the Exilarchiv der Deutschen Nationalbibliothek (Exil-archives of the German National Library).

Particularly mentioned should be the good cooperation with the efficient and competent staff of the city of Frankfurt, who are responsible for inviting the guests and organizing the program. This is essential for the project planning. Since the early 90s, the Hessian Ministry of Education and the board of education in Frankfurt have supported the project due to the initiative of Angelika Rieber who was granted first a few hours less to teach for organizing the visits. This support alleviates the burden of organizing the visits. In no way however does it compensate the time actually spent on research and organization. Angelika Rieber, now retired, was the first teacher, who was supported by the ministry for her work for the project. Now this support has been transferred to other teachers.

From the beginning the project was only possible because of the work of the volunteer members - as it is still today. For many years the project was associated with the Hessian Institute for Teacher Training and later with the GCJZ (Gesellschaft für Christlich-Jüdische Zusammenarbeit). In 2014 the project members founded an association in order to create a stable foundation for future activities. Angelika Rieber was elected to become chairwoman. Till Lieberz-Gross was elected in 2016 as deputy chairwoman. Gaby Thielmann is the treasurer of the project.