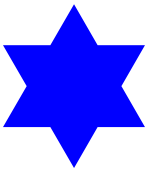
WALKING IN THEIR FOOTSTEPS
A Jewish Journey Back to Germany



von **Michael** *und* **Janine** (née Weiss) **Pollack**

We came from New York and California, and over half a dozen other American cities. From Jerusalem, Tel Aviv and Haifa in Israel. From Buenos Aires, Argentina. And Paris, France.

We ranged in age from 15 to 87. Strangers with different stories, speaking different languages, with one thing in common. Each guest was a descendant of a German citizen who'd been forced to flee religious persecution during the National Socialist regime.

We were invited to participate in the Jewish Visitors Program sponsored by the City of Frankfurt am Main. Partnered with *Projekt Jüdisches Leben*, the program hosted a weeklong itinerary centered on remembering the lives of former Frankfurt residents and learning about present day Jewish life in this city our families once called home.

In my case, it was my wife Janine's father who was born there. It was 1933, the year Adolph Hitler was appointed Chancellor and Germany was transformed from the democracy known as the Weimar Republic to the dictatorship of the Third Reich.

Lutz Herbert Weiss fled with his mother and sister in 1939, the year after their synagogue was burned down during the November Pograms, *Novemberpogrome* in German (formerly known as Night of Broken Glass, or *Kristallnacht*), and before the invasion of Poland considered to be the start of World War II. They would find sanctuary in the United Kingdom where the 6 year old and his family were detained in a British internment camp on the Isle of Man as a result of the Alien Restrictions Act since London had met its quota for absorbing German-Jewish refugees. He would eventually drop his unfavorable given name, opting for L. Herbert instead. He'd rarely speak of his early years in England, though he'd remain a loyal subject of the Crown even after emigrating to the U.S. decades later.

Not speaking of their respective experiences was a common thread among all who came together for a week exploring old cemeteries and new monuments.

“My mother never talked about it.”

“We were forbidden to speak German in our house.”

“I saw the number on my parents’ arms but never asked about it.”

Several guests were shown the homes where their families once lived. Some even met the current residents. In one case, while the visitors were standing outside their mother’s childhood home, they were invited inside by the owner. They learned their host’s grandfather had acquired the property, along with several others, from the Nazis who seized such real estate from Jewish families driven away or deported. She admitted that her family had known a good life for generations as a result of the misfortune that befell the former occupants. She never imagined she would sit across her table with their descendants. She broke down in tears. In a perverse twist of fate, the Jewish-American family found themselves comforting their German counterpart. They went on to take photos of their daughter on the stairs their mother ran up and down a hundred times a hundred years ago.

Former home of Janine’s father, aunt, grandparents and great grandparents

Over schnitzel and spundekäs at our first buffet lunch, I learn that the mothers of two of our fellow travelers attended the same elementary school at the same time and were likely playmates. A detail they only just learned at the Welcome Dinner the previous night when it was revealed by the volunteers who researched their families' histories.

Aboard the bus during our city tour, we learn that Frankfurt is over 1,200 years old and has been continuously occupied since the 1st century. Despite its proud history as a crossroad of commerce, many of today's buildings were once connected to the Third Reich "…and the horrors of that time," explains our German guide. The city was bombed 84 times, "But we must never forget we started the war," he acknowledges. "We were not only victims, we were aggressors."

Among our stops is the Frankfurt Cathedral, historic site of elections and coronations of German kings and Holy Roman Emperors.

On the final day of the program, we will attend a Farewell Dinner at the Imperial Hall of the Römer where newly crowned Holy Roman Emperors once held their coronation banquets. A portrait gallery displaying 52 German emperors and kings ranging from Karl der Grosse (Charlemagne), 768-814, to Franz II, 1792-1806, lines the walls of the regal reception space.

Opening remarks by the Deputy Mayor urge us to "Feel welcome as Frankfurters."

During our travels, we will learn that the frankfurter originated in this Hessian city.

A bronze ground plaque in the center of the Römerberg, Frankfurt's historic city square, marks the location of the 1933 book burning where Nazi students torched over 25,000 volumes by Jewish authors, artists, intellectuals, scientists and philosophers. It features a prophetic quote from 1820 by German-Jewish writer Heinrich Heine. "That was just a prelude Where they burn books, they will ultimately burn people too."

Elsewhere in the Town Square, Janine spots a bookstore window featuring the notorious wire-haired character Strewwelpeter, or Shock-Headed Peter. I wonder if she recognizes this frightening figure of children's books from her father's childhood library. She confesses with slight embarrassment that she is familiar with him from references on *General Hospital*.

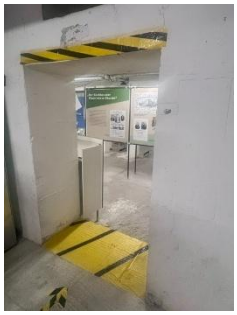
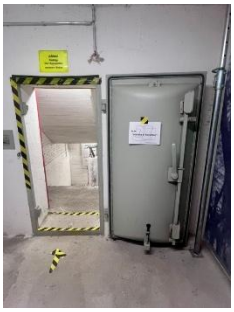
St. Paul's Church hosted the nation's first freely elected National Assembly in 1848
where the Paulskirche Constitution was drafted,
introducing basic human rights and civil liberties for the first itme in German history.
Outside are the names of Nazi concentration camps.

Our next stop is the Memorial to the Kindertransport, commemorating the rescue efforts that carried thousands of refugee children to safety in Great Britain.

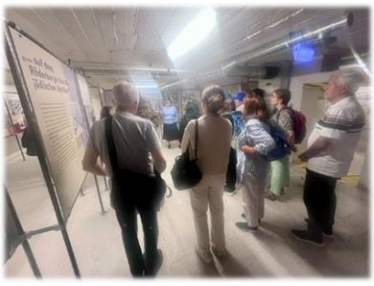
Angelika, Chairwoman of *Projekt Jüdisches Leben*, holds up childhood photos of specific youngsters from Frankfurt whose children are standing among us; fellow travelers here today as a result of those life-saving efforts.

Two families in our group learn their parents traveled on the same train.

The descendants pose proudly for photos alongside the memorial while the rest of us look on tearfully.

Back on the bus, we are advised to bring a sweater if we are joining tomorrow's excursion to the *Hochbunker* built over the ruins of a monumental synagogue burned down during the pograms of November 1938. "It's going to be cold in the bunker" is the scuttlebutt on the way back to the hotel as word is passed down the luxury coach. We will also discover the concrete reinforced site lacks wifi and satellite signal. "Bunkers have bad connectivity," Janine laments. "There's a sentence I never thought I'd say."

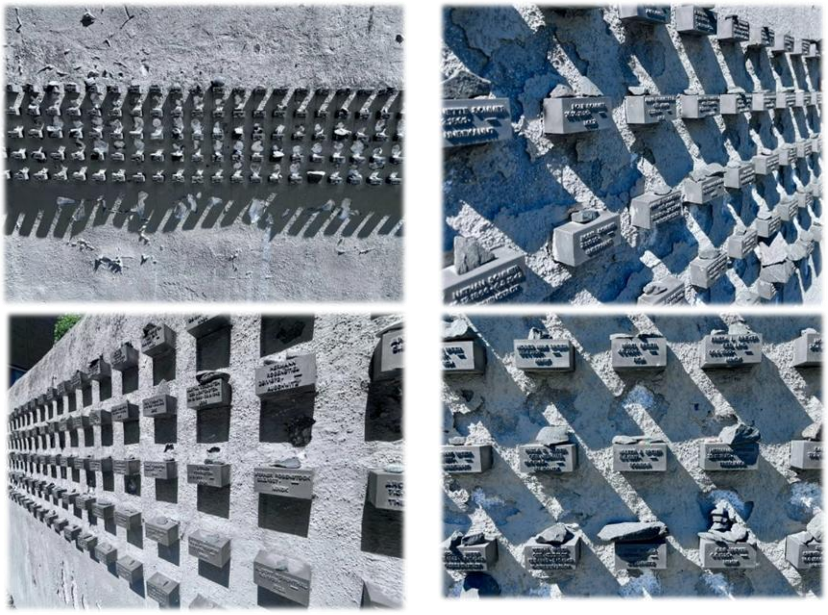


The main building of the Jewish Museum, located in the Rothschild Palais that once belonged to Baron Mayer Carl von Rothschild, exhibits artifacts of Jewish life in Frankfurt. Its archive contains a repository of documents, photographs, diaries, manuscripts and historical books from the community once considered the capital of the Jewish diaspora in Europe.

"The Glory and Misery of Our Existence (Sorrow of Others)" by German-Israeli artist Nir Alon sets tables, chairs and armchairs in artistic relation to one another.

According to the gallery signage, "These objects have traces of usage and point to a story from the past as they recall a feeling of reliability and stability that became precarious."

The Old Jewish Cemetery on Battonnstraße (*Alter Jüdischer Friedhof*) contains 800 years of Jewish History, including a tombstone from 1272, evidence of Jewish life in Frankfurt dating back to the 13th century.

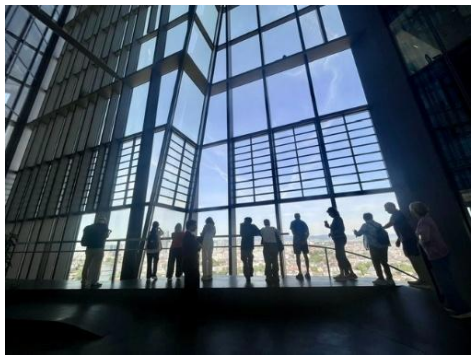
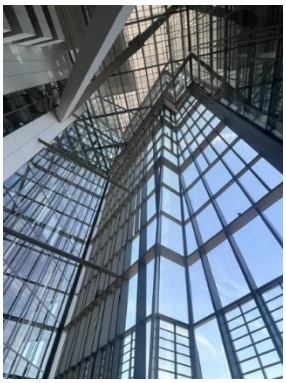


The wall surrounding the gated burial ground is the site of the Börneplatz Memorial, featuring 11,908 blocks bearing the names of Frankfurt citizens known to have been victims of the National Socialist annihilation policy.

Outside the Judengasse Museum, built over the of Europe's oldest Jewish ghetto, an inscription marks the spot of the synagogue that once stood there.

At the Stätel Museum,
Max Beckmann's *Die Synagoge in Frankfurt am Main* depicts the Börneplatz Synagogue in 1919.

The unique geometric shape–a hyperboloid cut–of the glass towers
of the European Central Bank is formed by a monolithic block vertically sliced,
wedged apart, and twisted to represent a multidimensional symbol of the European Union.

Beneath the soaring European Central Bank lies a dark, cavernous tunnel and cellar haunted by the horrors that once inhabited its halls. The Memorial to the Mass Deportation is now a sacred space commemorating the journey of German-Jewish citizens who were rounded up at dawn, rushed from their homes, marched through the streets, and crammed overnight in a hideous holding cell beneath the city's bustling fruit and vegetable market (Grossmarkthalle) before being loaded onto trains for transport to forced labor and concentration camps. Metal plates on the walls feature quotes by some who passed through and bore testimony. Ernst Ludwig Oswalt remarked, "I don't know what lies ahead of me and maybe it's good that way."

Only in Postwar Germany do you find historic spaces so explicitly named as the Museum of Forced Labor under National Socialism in Weimar, or the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe in Berlin. The magnitude of the crimes against humanity and the evidence of their execution dispels any claims that civilians didn't know what was happening at the time.

Janine and I forego an excursion to the spa in Wiesbaden and opt to spend our free time by paying our respects at Buchenwald, the largest Nazi concentration camp memorial in Germany. We note the sober reactions among our Frankfurt hosts when they learn of our plan.

At the car rental, Janine declines the offer of an upgrade despite the appeal of the model.

“You can’t drive a Mercedes to a concentration camp.”

Along the way, we reject various roadside truck stops while seeking a more scenic locale for our meal break. “I’m sure there must be some sort of cafe once we get there,” I surmise. After all, the destination is rather remote given its original purpose and the need to be hidden from the public. Regardless, “It’s no place for us to eat our salami sandwich and falafel *salat*,” Janine insists.

We arrive to a parking lot in a pastoral setting. Birds chirp, breezes blow, bikes and dogs and baby strollers pepper the haunted landscape with life and sound despite its heinous legacy.

In the wake of the recent 50th anniversary season of the long-running reality TV franchise, I unwittingly sport a branded cap bearing the *Survivor* logo as we embark on our self-guided walking tour of this prison camp responsible for over 56,000 deaths.

Among the free brochures at the information desk is a pocket-sized pamphlet containing the Universal Declaration of Human Rights adopted by the United Nations General Assembly Resolution 217 A (III) of 10 December 1948. Among the maps is a fold out *Informationen of Genenkstätte Buchenwald* identifying the *Lageplan* of the camp near Weimar with German text and color photography identifying 10 points of interest throughout the site, including the gate house, crematorium, and SS barracks.

The text at the opening display of the permanent exhibit addresses the suppression of rights under the Nazi regime. “The foundations of a peaceful order–the democratic separation of power, equality before the law, freedom of opinion and all other civil liberties–have been destroyed. The media, the justice system and state administrations operate entirely in keeping with National Socialist ideology.”

“Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.” The aforementioned quote by George Santayana, written in 1905, was famously adapted by Winston Churchill in 1948. “Those that fail to learn from history are doomed to repeat it.”

Such sentiments become the keynote on the final day of our program when we meet with a group of high school students at Carl Von Steinberg Schule to bring history to life by telling the story of our Jewish family’s escape from Nazi Germany. We go on to engage in conversation, compare our countries, and answer their questions.

- Do you have programs of education like this in the U.S.?
- Do you see similarities between the ICE agents who are deporting citizens in the United States and what happened here under National Socialism?
- In Germany, there are laws against saying the Holocaust didn’t exist. Are there similar laws in the US?
- Do you think it is important to have laws that protect democracy?
- How do you teach your children to learn about history?
- What topics do you handle in US history education?
- Have you experienced antisemitism directly?
- Where does ignorance come from? What can be done to address it?
- How does your history impact your everyday life?
- Are there ways that you connect to this country now that you are here?
- How can art tell the story?

Janine is so impressed by the students’ understanding of contemporary global issues and their awareness of their own country’s regrettable history, she invites them to call on us if they are ever visiting New York. She is pretty sure at least one of them will take us up on the offer.

Outside the school, we are embraced by a stranger who identifies herself as one of the volunteers associated with the program.

“I love Jews!” she exclaims with unrestrained enthusiasm as she hugs Janine and me before we board the bus back the hotel.

She apologizes with earnest sobriety for the terrible atrocities committed by Germany and for the hardships our family faced as a result.

We acknowledge her remarks graciously and find ourselves comforting her to some degree for the burden she appears to bear.

Throughout our journey, the German language underscores our adventure. We delight in repeating certain words even as they refer to certain disappointments. “Oh no, not *geshlossen*!” Janine exclaims upon seeing the sign indicating the bratwurst emporium she hoped to patronize is closed. “*Schmutzige*” warns hotel guests to refrain from taking the dirty drinking glasses. And the ubiquitous “*Schloss*” is seen everywhere there is a palace, stately home, or castle.

I pause to photograph the menu outside a Chinese restaurant in order to take note of the *Wan Tan Nudelsuppe*, *Chop Sui*, and *Kong Pao Gai* offerings in Bad Homburg. Janine is occasionally challenged in her auditory processing when distinguishing between the *Hauptbahnof* and *Hauptwache* train stations, not to mention addresses on the *Eichenheimer* and *Eshenheimer Anlages*.

Other reminders that we are in a foreign land are the buttons in the lift that indicate floors 0 and -1, and the peril of not understanding labels on hotel amenities resulting in washing my face with hand & body lotion.

Prior to the Farewell Dinner, our group gathers in a circle in the room where we first met.
Just as each participant passed a microphone around to introduce themselves then,
each now recounts their most memorable experience.

Alejandro saw where his father was born and lived. The current residents invited him in. "Something I never expected." He also saw where his grandfather is buried and got to put a stone on the grave. He learned that grave was the only one in the old Jewish cemetery that had never been visited. Until now.

Roberta saw graves of family members from the 1800s that she didn't even know existed.
Her dad lived to 90 but he only first talked about his experiences in the last years of his life.
She wished he was here so she could talk to him now.

Mark walked in the footsteps of his grandfather who was deported and murdered.

Shortly after returning home, Janine corresponds with one of our new friends who inquires how our school visit went. Her school visit was one of the highlights of her experience. Janine's reply resonates from New York to Cincinnati.

The trip surprised me. I didn't really know what to expect, maybe I was a little trepidatious…and then it happened. It was seamless and I met people like you, who in an instant were dear friends who it felt like I always knew and yet was happy to meet. I know you get it.

Since getting back, I've been catching up and sharing our experiences judiciously with friends and family I know can truly hear what I'm saying.

Like you, the school visit was very special. I'm comfortable presenting, especially to students. I've worked tangential to education all my career and now…volunteer with schools in need. These students were different. They were present, curious, knowledgeable and asked questions that to me, caught the essence of why we visited Frankfurt. It wasn't just to remember but to use knowledge to make tomorrow a bit better if at all possible.

“What were your three biggest takeaways?” I am asked upon returning home while sharing these experiences with an interested party.

- The duality of man. Our capacity for good and evil. The precarious thin line that divides darkness from the light. Beauty and ugliness, democracy and fascism, guilt and innocence, blame and forgiveness, pain and healing; opposing forces inescapably coexist all around us.
- The proximity of the sublime and the sadistic. The horrors of Buchenwald were perpetrated just beyond the pastoral landscape of the Goethe Gartenhaus. Nearby Weimar, a focal point of the German Enlightenment, birthplace of the nation’s first democratic constitution, a rich cultural home to artists, musicians and architects, was also the locale of prison barracks, forced labor camps and a crematorium.
- The parallels between the United States today and the Third Reich vis-a-vis suppression of free speech, loss of civil liberties, round ups of immigrants, and executive influence on the judicial system is unmistakable.

Most transformative of all was being in the company of 32 other people from around the world who all trace their Jewish family roots to Frankfurt. They have different stories of escape and survival during the Nazi regime, yet also much in common. We came together as strangers, but departed as family. It was an *Abenteuer und Reise*. That's GoogleTranslate for adventure and journey. (Yes, the German language capitalizes all nouns.)

Ein herzliches Dankeschön an das Team des Jewish Visitors Program, Projekt Jüdisches Leben und alle unsere Mitreisenden, mit denen wir diese lebensverändernde Reise geteilt haben.

FRANKFURT