

THE PRESERVATION OF JEWISH CULTURE IN EAST BERLIN: AN INTERVIEW WITH HERMANN SIMON

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Hermann Simon was born in Berlin in 1949. He studied in Prague and at Humboldt University in (East) Berlin where he received his Ph.D. in History and Oriental Studies in 1974. He is currently Curator for Oriental Medieval Coins at the Staatliche Museum zu Berlin. Dr. Simon is Vice-President of the (East) Berlin Jewish Community. He has written many articles in his field: his book, Das Berliner Jüdische Museum in der Oranienburger Strasse, was published by the (West) Berlin Museum in 1983. The interview, a transcript of which follows, was conducted by Dr. Ostow as part of a research project on Jewish identity and problems of Jewish communal organization in the German Democratic Republic.

H.S.: My parents are both Jewish: they were both members of the Jewish Community here before 1933. During the Nazi times my father fought with the Jewish Brigade in Palestine, and my mother was with the Communist Resistance in Berlin. After the war my father returned to Berlin, and my parents married. They are both Professors in the Department of Philosophy at Humboldt University. I was born here in 1949.

R.O.: What kind of Jewish upbringing did you have?

H.S.: A traditional one. We went to synagogue regularly, and we celebrated the holidays. I studied Hebrew with Rabbi Riesenburger,¹ and I had a Bar-Mitzvah.

R.O.: Do you keep kosher?

H.S.: No.

R.O.: Are you a member of the Party?²

1. Martin Riesenburger (1896–1965), known in the West as 'Red Rabbi,' served as the spiritual leader of East Berlin's *Jüdische Gemeinde* from 1953 until the time of his death.

2. The GDR has more than one political party, but the political party which dominates the political life of the nation is the SED, or Socialist Unity Party, frequently referred to as 'the Party.'

H.S.: No.

R.O.: Have you had any anti-Semitic experiences here?

H.S.: All Jews have anti-Semitic experiences sooner or later. Here, for example, sometimes when it's too loud, people say: "*das ist ja hier wie in einer Judenschule*" (it sounds like a Jew school in here), but it's not always consciously anti-Semitic, and it shouldn't be taken overly seriously. You know, if a Jewish child has to repeat a year in school the parents are often quick to accuse the teacher of anti-Semitism and reluctant to recognize that their child might be a slow learner.

R.O.: What about West Germany: have you had any anti-Semitic experiences there?

H.S.: Once in Cologne I saw a German harassing a Black on the street. I wouldn't say it's impossible for such a thing to happen here, but I can say that I've never seen anything comparable in the German Democratic Republic, and our state does take an unequivocal stand against anti-Semitism and against racism generally.

R.O.: Your most recent book is a history of the Berlin Jewish Museum which opened in 1933 and was dissolved by

the Nazis in 1938. The research and writing must have involved a significant professional and personal confrontation.

H.S.: That book was a very important project for me, and for Berlin Jewish history. The people who founded the Berlin Jewish Museum and maintained it for five years under increasing pressure from the Nazis are all dead now. Their children who still read German and who are scattered throughout the world have preserved some documents and photos of the museum. But the next generation, the grandchildren, will throw these valuable sources in the waste basket unless we save them first.

The research was particularly interesting for me in a number of ways. For one thing, professionally I've always dealt with much more remote periods in history. From eight in the morning to five in the afternoon I worked on medieval history, usually with coins and written documents. This kind of investigation involves a lot of reading, interpreting and reading between the lines to try to reconstruct the reality behind the artifacts. And there's no opportunity to confront the historical actors directly: the Sasanian kings can't walk into my office and confirm or disprove my hypothesis.

When I was working on the history of the Berlin Jewish Museum, I was using pretty much the same historical methods, but you can't imagine how thrilled I was when, in January 1983, Erna Stein, Director of the Berlin Jewish Museum from 1933 to 1935, walked right into my office here on the Oranienburger-straße, which is just a few meters away from her old office. I recognized her immediately because she was wearing the same gold bracelet she wore in a photograph of her sitting at her desk in the museum in 1934: that was the only good photo of her from

those years to survive the Nazis. She sat down, and we had a long talk about the museum; more important, she confirmed most of my impressions. Since I also work in a Berlin museum, I have a good feel for how this kind of institution functions.

Six months later she died in Israel — she had emigrated to Palestine in 1935 — and I wrote an obituary for her that was published in our bulletin, the *Nachrichtenblatt*.³ From there the German press in Israel picked it up and printed it, which suggests that the people who founded the Berlin Jewish Museum have been forgotten in the countries to which they emigrated. Had I not written an obituary for this woman who was so important in Berlin Jewish history, there probably wouldn't have been any.

R.O.: What is, for you, the importance of this small and short-lived Jewish museum?

H.S.: First, like any other cultural institution, it offered the opportunity for recreation, aesthetic enjoyment, and intellectual stimulation. But under those historical circumstances it also served to renew the Berlin Jews' pride in the past greatness of the Jewish people, and, through that, to sharpen their self awareness and give them the hope and courage to resist the Nazi persecution. And when I say "resist," I'm not talking about distributing flyers, exploding molotov cocktails, or industrial sabotage. I'm thinking, rather, of a spiritual resistance — what Ernst Simon (who is not related to me) called *Aufbau im Untergang* (building in the midst of destruction).

3. The *Nachrichtenblatt* is the bulletin published quarterly by the League of Jewish Communities of the German Democratic Republic. Simon's obituary for Erna Stein was printed in the September, 1983 issue, p. 7.

R.O.: Why was your book published in West Berlin and not here?

H.S.: In terms of the way the book came to be written and published, you've formulated the question wrong: I didn't write a manuscript, and then look for a publisher. I published a couple of articles on subjects related to the Berlin Jewish Museum in the *Nachrichtenblatt*: then the (West) Berlin Museum approached me. They wanted to publish something to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the founding of the Berlin Jewish Museum, and they asked me to write a piece for them, I agreed to write an essay, but it grew into a book.

To get back to your question, however, it would not have been easy to publish the book here. People are aware of the extent of the literature we publish with Jewish themes, and they also buy those books like crazy; but we live in a planned economy, and we can't publish as much or as fast as you publish in the West.

R.O.: In West Berlin there's an initiative to rebuild the Berlin Jewish Museum. Do you feel that this is a realistic proposition in either sector of the city, or even possibly as a cooperative venture?

H.S.: It would be impossible to rebuild the old museum simply because the objects it once housed are now scattered all over the world. But something along those lines should be done and will be done: the question is only when. I have some ideas on the subject, but I'm not yet ready to make them public.

R.O.: Is there currently a Jewish collection in the Museum where you work, or in any other museum in East Berlin?

H.S.: We have a small Jewish Museum in the town of Gröbzig, but here in Berlin, the individual museums—for example, the Museum of German History—have the one or the other

document or object of Jewish interest, but there is no permanent collection.

We did have a special exhibit once, though. In 1978 the Museum of German History organized an exhibit in the foyer of the synagogue on the Rykestraße to commemorate the fortieth anniversary of *Kristallnacht*.⁴

It was called *Vergeßt es nie!* (never forget), and it was about the persecution of the Jews in the years 1933–45 and its relationship to the Fascists' preparations for war.

R.O.: In November 1983 you attended a conference of progressive Jews from the Western German-speaking countries including, besides West Germany, Switzerland, Austria, and Denmark. What were your impressions of that conference and of the people you met there?

H.S.: Well, I was a bit surprised that it was so chaotic. I can't understand why people argued for an hour over the agenda, rather than just getting on with the business. But I was a guest, and it's not for me to criticize. I was also impressed and frightened by the reports about increasing neo-Nazism in West Germany. One issue that I did identify with, however, was the question of whether to work inside or independently of the established Jewish community. I think many Jews here have similar discussions, though they don't bring it up with me because my position on this matter is clear.

R.O.: You know, in the West, most Jews who consider themselves socialists are not religious, though many of them are interested in various aspects of secular Jewish culture—for example, Yiddish literature or folk music.

4. *Kristallnacht* (the Night of Broken Glass) which occurred on the evening of November 9, 1938, was the first official pogrom of the Nazi regime.

H.S.: You've already interviewed a woman who sings Yiddish songs here but doesn't circumcise her sons.⁵ Why don't you ask her how she feels about the Jewish Community?⁶ I'm of the opinion that you have to be consistent in your convictions: you shouldn't play games with them, and you shouldn't turn them into a business. You should join the *Jüdische Gemeinde*, and work with us. Especially in this country, if the Jews don't maintain their communal life, it will amount to delivering a belated victory to the Nazis—Jewish life in Berlin will simply cease to exist. But this is my very personal opinion, and it's the kind of thing each Jew has to decide for him- or herself.

R.O.: The extent of any individual's commitment to religious observance can have a lot to do with one's background and personal preferences. But in the West synagogues or congregations attract and maintain their membership, to a certain extent, by offering not only religious rituals, but also a variety of cultural programs, even sports.

H.S.: Look, America is very different from the German Democratic Republic, and you can't judge us by what happens there. And we do have a Youth Group,⁷ a Women's Group, a little bit of religious instruction, and regular cultural events which are good and well-attended. What more can we do? The *Jüdische Gemeinde* is, naturally, first

and foremost, a religious community and not a cultural association.

R.O.: What happens when people do apply to join the *Jüdische Gemeinde*? What do they have to do?

H.S.: There is no easy answer to that question because the decision to admit someone to the Jewish Community is made by a Rabbi and not by the Board of Directors. Since we have no Rabbi, Stein⁸ usually handles this, though he would never go against our wishes. The problem is basically one of evaluating the sincerity of the application, and it's very hard to generalize. We usually invite the applicant to talk with us at least two or three times, and then we judge each case individually.

R.O.: Could you describe a concrete case of an application for membership and how it developed?

H.S.: We're such a small community here that it would be impossible to talk about an actual case without breaching the confidence involved in such a personal procedure. And, besides, once we have accepted someone into the Jewish Community, he or she is considered a Jew like the rest of us, and we would never single him or her out as a newcomer. I can tell you, though, that the people who have the hardest time are those who come to us and say: "I just saw this movie, and what was done to the Jews was so terrible, and I was so moved that I wanted to be a Jew too." We have the least patience with them.

R.O.: How many applications for membership do you handle every year?

H.S.: In most cases the initiatives never reach the stage of becoming formal applications. What happens is that

5. Simon is referring to the folk singer Jaldä Rebling. Rebling has a Jewish mother, she publicly identifies as a Jew, and she sings at many of the *Gemeinde's* cultural events, though she is not a member of the Jewish Community.

6. The words *Jüdische Gemeinde*, *Gemeinde*, and Jewish Community will all be used interchangeably to refer to East Berlin's official and only Jewish organization.

7. The Youth Group is the *Jüdische Gemeinde's* program for its younger members and prospective members.

8. Because the GDR has no Rabbi, Rabbi Ernst Stein, the spiritual leader of the (Liberal) synagogue on the Pestalozzistraße in West Berlin, frequently officiates at weddings, funerals, etc., and serves as an advisor to the East Berlin Jewish Community.

someone new will start coming around to services, or on Sunday afternoons.⁹ We then invite the person to talk to us, and we suggest that he or she join the Youth Group: if it's a man, we make it clear that at some point he will be expected to undergo circumcision. This fall we're preparing to accept two women into the *Gemeinde*.

R.O.: What do they have to do?

H.S.: They have to demonstrate their knowledge of Judaism. That is, they have to be able to read Hebrew, they have to know about the holidays, and they basically have to be able to articulate their reasons for wanting to come to us.

R.O.: What about the *mikveh*?

H.S.: We have a *mikveh* here, but it's not working, so the Rabbi will have to make a decision. If he says it's not necessary, no one here will challenge him, but my own opinion is that if we're going to do this, we should do a proper and complete job.

R.O.: Does the Jewish Community here have any special projects or new programs on its agenda?

H.S.: We've just finished putting up a new wall around our cemetery at Weißensee. It cost 2.5 million (East German) Marks, and there's already a rumor going around that it was paid for by a rich Jewish woman in America. In fact, it was paid for by the Magistrate of the City of (East) Berlin, and the money came from the fund for residential construction. That means they'll build a couple of flats fewer this year.

And that reminds me that we have received complaints from visitors to our city about the condition of the Jewish cemeteries here: namely, that they're overgrown and that the graves are not

cared for regularly. I'd like to answer by reminding those who are interested that the Weißensee cemetery is the largest Jewish cemetery in Europe: it has almost 115,000 graves. In the early 1930's it was maintained by 150 fulltime employees. Today there are fewer than 200 members of the Jewish Community here. In other words, we've inherited a treasure that is far beyond our administrative capacity: but we do the best we can, and the State and City support our efforts.

R.O.: You've just taken over leadership of the *Jüdische Gemeinde's* Youth Group. Could you say something about what's happening there?

H.S.: I was appointed leader of the Youth Group two months ago, and I don't have any firm ideas yet about future programming. Right now I'm trying to get the young people to express their ideas about what they'd like to do. We are planning trips to see plays and films of Jewish interest. It's been suggested that we visit the Jewish Community in Prague: we now have to find out whether we can arrange it. In the past we've organized excursions to the Jewish Museum in Gröbzig and to a former farm in Stickelsdorf where, until 1938, the German Zionist Youth used to prepare themselves for emigration to Palestine.

R.O.: What other projects would you like to see the *Jüdische Gemeinde* here undertake in the future?

H.S.: Well, one thing we'll have to deal with is the ruin next door that used to be the synagogue on the Oranienburgerstraße.¹⁰ Sooner or later we'll have to rebuild it—even as a ruin, it's expensive to keep it from becoming dangerous—and

9. The *Jüdische Gemeinde* organizes a Jewish cultural event one Sunday afternoon a month from October through May.

10. In the first third of this century the synagogue on the Oranienburgerstraße was one of Berlin's largest, most elegant, and religiously most dynamic Liberal congregations.

the money will have to come from somewhere. I would also like to see our bulletin, the *Nachrichtenblatt*, upgraded. We have plenty of space there, and we can publish quickly. There's more than one opinion about this, but I think we should have more intellectual content—for example, more reviews of new books, films, plays, etc. Also 1986 will be the 200th anniversary of the death of Moses Mendelssohn, and something should definitely be done about that, perhaps a special issue of the *Nachrichtenblatt*.

R.O.: Moses Mendelssohn was a secular Jew and a capitalist.

H.S.: Yes, but he also stood for

enlightenment, religious tolerance, and for the Jewish contribution to Berlin's evolution from a small town to the great economic and cultural center it later became.

R.O.: Is there anything else you'd like to bring up?

H.S.: I know that many Jews in the English-speaking countries emigrated from—or come from families that used to live in—the Berlin area. I've tried to mention some of the sights here of Jewish interest, and I hope that when Jews travel to West Berlin, they'll think if visiting the German Democratic Republic too.