

A World Lost in Berlin

Richard Kostelanetz

design by
Aryeh Cohen-Wade



A World Lost in Berlin

Richard Kostelanetz

design by
Aryeh Cohen-Wade

As a paean to Berlin before the 1930s, this book evokes a grand city not through familiar images such as the splendor of its modern architecture, its sumptuous cultural life, and the regal thoroughfares befitting a capital. That Berlin no longer exists; the Nazis destroyed it. When I resided in West Berlin in the early 1980s, to get a sense of this earlier Berlin I had to go into the East, on the other side of the infamous Wall, to find an artifact that better than anything else in Berlin then evoked coherently the city's greatest years. This artifact is the Jewish cemetery that was first established in 1880, because land in a cemetery closer to the city had been filled. With over 110,000 graves, this has been the largest Jewish cemetery between Warsaw to the East and New York to the West. Called Weissensee, after the suburb in which it is located, this cemetery has served Jews who lived in Berlin after 1860, the year when German Jews first received full civic equality, finally evoking an era when Berlin's Jews, though never more than five percent of the population, had a disproportionate presence and unprecedented prosperity.

From the outside, as it is approached from the street, Weissensee looks like other cemeteries from the late nineteenth century; but once inside, viewing its honor row, you see on the stones not the crosses familiar to Christian cemeteries but a different set of sacred signs, such as Stars of David. In this honor row, just inside the entrance to the cemetery, are the graves of those cultural distinguished, such as rabbis, educators, lawyers, writers, scientists, artists, musicians and community leaders—among them the composer Louis Lewandowski (1821-1894), the chemist Max Jaffé (1841-1911), the painter Lesser Ury (1861-1931), the writer Karl Emil Franzos (1848-1904) and the philosopher Hermann Cohen (1842-1919).

Though this book is mostly pictures, it is very much about reading—not books but gravestones, as closely as one would read any other text with words; for not only do gravestones in their variousness portray individual lives, but details surrounding them have their own truths to tell. Most of the inscriptions on these gravestones are in German and only in German, for one theme made clear throughout this cemetery is that these Berlin Jews felt themselves to be very German, loyally German. Indeed, many of the stones identify a birthplace somewhere else, usually east of Berlin; for these Berliners wanted their descendants to feel grateful that their forebears had gotten themselves to Berlin. Similarly, behind the gravestone for Leo Baeck, who was Berlin's chief rabbi into the Second World War, there is only one grave, which belongs to his wife, since Baeck himself survived the War, as did other Jewish Berliners, to be buried someplace else.

On a few stones are introduced languages other than German, and that language is sometimes Hebrew and other times Yiddish, both languages written with Hebraic letters. Not only is the inscription or homily in Hebraic lettering sometimes radically different from the German, but the names can also be different, especially when both sides of a single stone are inscribed. "Adolf" on the German side, for instance, turns out to be "Abraham" on the other.

The mausolea from the turn of the century display not only the wealth of some German Jews but the confidence they must have felt in Berlin, leaving behind monuments that they thought their relatives would visit and

honor, on plots and in crypts that they must have thought would include their children and grandchildren. Blank surfaces within family plots reflect the false expectation that descendants would likewise thrive in Berlin and be buried there. So many blank surfaces reflect a grievous error in their estimate of Berlin, which was, of course, a tragedy for themselves and perhaps for their descendants. By the 1920s, the stones were usually more modest; by the 1930s, no Jew had sufficient faith in Berlin to construct a mausoleum similar to those of only twenty or thirty years before, so drastically had their situation changed by then. Nonetheless, this hallowed ground in Weissensee survived the destructive designs of the Nazis, as well as the bombs of World War II, to become today an evocative surviving reminder of the lost Berlin.

These plaques also display a historical development in typography from the Gothic lettering favored in the nineteenth century to Roman letters with serifs or edges at the bottoms of their letters and then to the unadorned block letters of more modern typeface, sometimes itemizing the names of a family who perished during the Second World War.

A whole section of the cemetery is devoted to recent immigrants from the East, "Ost-Juden" as they were called, because they spoke Yiddish, as can be observed from their gravestones, which are entirely in Hebraic lettering. The German Jews whose ancestors had come earlier to Berlin were rather embarrassed by these newcomers who were less emancipated, and less

Germanic, so to speak, and so segregated those Eastern Jews not only in the city but here in the graveyard that memorializes that city. Even Jews already resident in Germany were moving to Berlin. According to the *Jewish Encyclopedia*, in the period between 1811 and 1828, only 1.4% of German Jews lived in Berlin; but by 1871 the figure was 7.03% and by 1925 it was 30.6%. Despite the intermarriage, apostasy and conversion to Christianity, all of which were inevitable in a great city, the percentage of German Jews residing in Berlin continued to increase, into the 1930s. At this time the great German poet Gottfried Benn wrote, "The overflowing plenty of stimuli, of artistic, scientific, commercial improvisations, which placed the Berlin of 1918 to 1933 in the class of Paris, stemmed from the most part from the talents of the Jewish people there: their international connections, their sensitive restlessness and above all their dead-certain instinct for quality."

The American historian Otto Friedrich has written: "When World War I began, the Jews expressed their sense of German nationalism by swarming into the army with an ardor as lemming-like as that of the gentiles. Some 100,000 Jews (one out of every six, including women and children) entered the German army." When my German filmmaking partner Martin Koerber first saw the section of the cemetery of Jewish soldiers from the First World War, he remarked that it looked just like other World War I cemeteries that he had seen in Germany. As Weissensee is a Jewish cemetery, he expected something different. The

truth of his perception was noticing how German they were, especially to themselves. These Jewish soldiers all had titled ranks: telegrapher, rifleman, and so forth, just as gentile soldiers did; for it was a very German custom, not just with soldiers, to put on the gravestone itself the dead person's professional identity.

Because Weissensee belonged to the entire Jewish community, not to an individual congregation, as is customary in America, every Berlin Jew was entitled to burial there, regardless of whether he or she attended synagogue, regardless of whether he or she was orthodox or secular, rich or poor, prominent or unknown, German-speaking or Yiddish-speaking. Indeed, Jews from elsewhere who died in Berlin, such as Russian soldiers killed in the First World War, were also buried there. Nonetheless, some Berliners of Jewish birth chose *not* to be buried there, because on one hand they had strayed from the faith, and were thus buried in public cemeteries open to all Berliners, or on the other hand they belonged to an ultra-orthodox synagogue, Adass Yisroel, which had its own cemetery physically near Weissensee.

The rare inclusion of a human face, a likeness, in a gravestone is contrary to the Second Commandment and its proscription against graven images. Thus, the fact that such an image appears embedded in the stone, along with the high Teutonic character of that face, becomes another index of how emancipated these Berliners were from orthodox strictures.

I first came to Berlin and to Weissensee in 1981, a century after the cemetery began.

What I saw in Berlin in general, but particularly in Weissensee, was evidence of a city like the one in which I was born and have always lived, New York—a city that, especially in the late nineteenth century, was likewise a magnet for immigrants from the East. I began to regard Berlin as a New York that went wrong after 1933. Thus, in this cemetery I see not only what New York has been but what Berlin could have become.

One question often raised is how this cemetery managed to survive the Nazi destruction of synagogues and other Jewish edifices. In fact, both Weissensee and the Jewish hospital were kept running throughout the war, initially because the Nazis had to preserve the illusion of normal life within Berlin, but also perhaps because they were afraid, not unreasonably, of disturbing the ghosts.

In the simple stones of those who died young in concentration camps, in this case Sachsenhausen, we begin to get a sense of Nazi terror. The crossed hands above his name indicate that this man was an hereditary Cohen, a descendant of the priestly class. Some stones portray differences in fate within a single family. Whereas one side of a stone tells of a son, born in 1909, died in the Maidanek concentration camp near Lublin in Poland, the other side honors a relative, probably an uncle, born in 1880, who died at Amiens in World War I and was thus a war hero. In a single stone is thus portrayed the different position of Jews during the two World Wars. Another stone records the deaths of a father in Auschwitz at the age of 58 and a son in Israel, only a few years later, at 26.

Stones of married couples dying on the same day tell of double suicides, mostly by older people reluctant to leave Berlin, as reluctant to move as old people always are, mostly on the eve of the so-called final deportations in late October, 1942. Of the more than two thousand Jews buried in Weissensee in the most terrible year of 1942, 805 were officially classified as suicides. The Nazis prohibited legal emigration from Berlin on October 23, 1941. Only five days before, on October eighteenth, the last transport of refugees left Berlin to Lisbon. Between May and October of 1941, 1,342 Berliners had been permitted to leave; but between October 23 and the end of 1941, only 62 persons managed to leave and in all of 1942 only nine people.

Historians customarily describe five phases of Berlin deportation: 1.) between the fall of 1941 and January, 1942, Berliners were sent to Kovno, Riga, Minsk, and Lodz, all in Eastern Europe from which many of them and their ancestors came; 2.) in the spring of 1942 to Lublin in Poland; 3.) between the summer of 1942 and February, 1943, to Riga and Tallin in the Baltic republics, to Theresienstadt, and to Auschwitz; 4.) in March and April of 1943 only to Auschwitz; and 5.) from the spring of 1943 to the end of the war, to Bergen-Belsen, Ravensbrück, Sachsenhausen and Auschwitz. The names of all these camps appear on stones in Weissensee. The *Encyclopedia Judaica* says, "Altogether there were 63 Osttransporte, or eastern-bound trains, carrying some 35,000 victims to death camps in the east, and 117 Alterstransporte carrying some 15,000 people, most of them elderly, to Theresienstadt. It is

believed that about 95% of the first and 90% of the second perished."

Of Berlin Jews in this period, the biographer of the department store heir Wilfred Israel wrote, "From being the proudest, most assimilated, and apparently most secure of all the European-Jewish communities, they now became, almost overnight, a harried minority struggling for unity and dignity under almost impossible conditions." And this changing truth too is reflected in the cemetery.

Berlin was declared officially "judentrein," meaning clean of Jews, on June 16, 1943. Nonetheless, several thousand Jews remained for special reasons—they had gentile spouses (and were thus excluded from deportation), or they had mixed parentage, or they were employed in the Jewish hospital. Hundreds more lived in Berlin underground, some even in the cemetery, which remained in use and which the Gestapo rarely entered.

Cremation is contrary to the law by which pious Jews live, and that accounts for why urns with ashes have their own section in Weissensee. Elsewhere in the cemetery is a wall with plaques marking human ashes that were returned from concentration camps. Trees so tall are scarce in Berlin today, which was heavily bombed during the War; and the fact that these are still standing indicates that the cemetery must have survived the bombing unscathed.

As the cemetery was in East Berlin proper, remarkably few West Berliners ever visited it, while East Berliners tended not to know about it, reminiscent as it is of a

past that that Communist country is trying to transcend, or forget. One East German intellectual characterized this cemetery as "the last relic of the bourgeois age"—a characterization that, in the cultural context of Communist East Germany, was not inaccurate. Nonetheless, even during the DDR days, Weissensee was open to the public, every day except for the Jewish Sabbath, for more hours each day in the summertime than the winter.

The noted American biologist Gunther Stent, born in Berlin in 1924, told me in 1984 about spending his sabbatical in 1960 in southeast Asia, at which time he visited the famous ruins of Angkor Wat. Traveling from there to Europe, he visited Berlin and Weissensee, where his mother and grandparents were buried. Returning to the cemetery after many years away, he sees that trees have split his mother's grave. He thinks that the place was coming to resemble Angkor Wat, a funerary city returning to nature. As he tells it, he had the impression that he "was visiting the site of some lost civilization that had existed in some distant past, and that by looking at all these things probably that would be the way to reconstruct that civilization that is no more." And that precisely is what the cemetery and our film and now this book are about.



Perhaps the second most prominent Jewish painter of his time, Lesser Ury was born in Birnbaum, the son of a baker. After the death of his father in 1872, he moved his family to Berlin. After study elsewhere in Germany, he returned to Berlin, which became the center of his activity, even after passing association with the Munich Secession in the late 1890s. Because an art school is located near the Weissensee cemetery, art students frequently visit, observing the Jewish custom of putting a stone on his grave that thus has more stones atop it than any other.



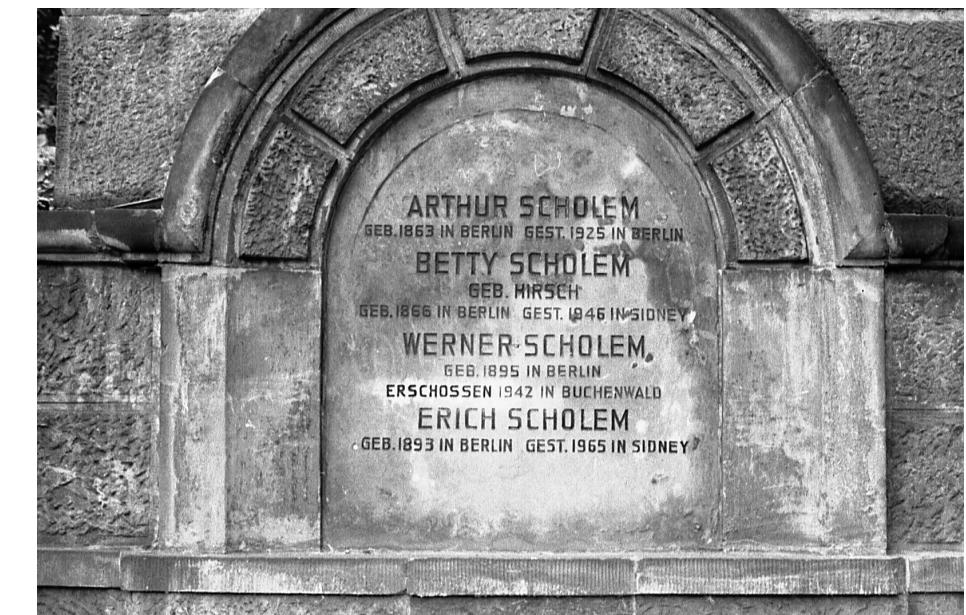
Customarily ranked among the greatest philosophers of the late 19th century, Hermann Cohen is credited with advancing the basic ideas of Immanuel Kant. After taking his doctorate at the university in Halle, he taught in Marburg, where he became the principal of an academic circle that attracted students from around the world, among them the aspiring Russian poet Boris Pasternak. Retiring from Marburg in 1912, he moved to Berlin where, according to the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, "He went through a substantial change in his thinking about the relationship between God and man and came to believe that reality is rooted in God rather than in human reason. This worked a radical effect on Cohen, and he turned to religion and to his ancestral Jewish faith." One epithet for his philosophical contribution is Ethical Monotheism.





Rabbi Leo Baeck, a leading Jewish theologian and philosopher whose great work, *The Essence of Judaism*, was published in 1905. As head of the *Reichsvertretung der Juden in Deutschland*, formed in 1933 in response to Nazi rule, he was a prominent leader of the Jewish community in Germany. His powerful position gave him many chances to flee the country, but he always returned to Germany to continue his efforts to assist Jews. He was ultimately sent to the concentration camp Theresienstadt in 1943. There is only the sole grave behind the stone; it belongs to his wife, since Baeck himself survived the Holocaust, emigrated to London after the War and is buried there.









22



/23



24



/ 25







Among the earliest stones here, this honors
a man born in the eighteenth century.



