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Remembering Southern Germanys Jewish past - initiatives and developments since the 1980s

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Martin Renghart

Remem- bering

Southern Germa- ny's Jewish past – *initiatives and developments since the 1980's*

Introduction

The following article tries to give an overview of the memorial work and the preservation of Jewish heritage in Southern Germany, mainly in its rural regions, since the 1980s. There exist around 20 memorials in the State of Baden-Württemberg and about the same number in Bavaria (Schönhagen, 2016: 10–11; Pflug, Steinbach, 2007).¹ Varying in size and ambition, many of them are housed in former synagogues or other buildings formerly in Jewish ownership and differ in size and scope. They are concentrated in the North of Bavaria, in the regions of Upper, Central and Lower Franconia and in the North of Baden-Württemberg, where from the 17th century till the 1930s many Jewish communities existed. I cannot describe the activities of the museums in detail here, but will focus on the following questions: What were the reasons for the sudden rise of interest in local Jewish history? What is on display? What were the main intentions of the initiators, and what have they achieved? What form of resistance, conflicts and criticisms occurred? But at the beginning some background information on the representation of Jewish culture in German museums seems necessary.

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Prehistory

Interest in Jewish cult objects by German museums dates back a long time. Already in the 19th century many museums acquired religious objects of Jewish origins (Judaica), several even installed Jewish sections. In two cases, in Braunschweig (Northern Germany) and Schwäbisch Hall (Württemberg) the complete interiors of synagogues were acquired and are still presented today (Hoppe, 2002: 95–101, 133–137). This points to the fact that Jewish culture was increasingly seen as a part of local or regional cultural heritage. But Jewish communities opened their own museums as well, as for example in Frankfurt and Berlin. These, however, attracted almost exclusively Jewish visitors. During Nazi rule, these museums were closed and Judaica were removed from public exhibitions. After 1945 they were only slowly put to their old places. (Hoppe, 2002: 26). Synagogues that had been demolished in the pogrom in November of 1938 and later profaned, were often demolished, in some cases still in the 1970s and 80s (Hoppe, 2002: 46–47; Schönhagen, 2016: 11). An overall change occurred only in the 1980s, when the first synagogues were restored. Since then, about 100 synagogues have been renovated (Grossman, 2008: 391), usually to become memorials afterwards. Rising interest in the Jewish past was articulated by publications about local and regional Jewish history and culture as well as by memorial events and new Jewish sections in existing museums.

Reasons for new interest

Various reasons and the interplay of many influences were responsible for this change. New interest developed in several stages; an important precondition was the appearance of a new generation not involved in the Nazi rule, without

¹ See as well: <http://www.gedenkstaetten-bw.de/2384.html> and <http://www.alemannia-judaica.de/>.

personal memory of Jews, but with an interest in local Jewish history. So, in the 1970s first attempts to save decaying Jewish synagogues or cemeteries were undertaken, often by preservationists or by Jewish communities themselves. But this was still the work of a few individuals. Then, at the beginning of the 1980s, larger groups of local residents got involved. Some synagogues became tourist attractions (Geppert, 2016: 36), and first plans for Jewish memorials or museums – a sharp division between the two cannot be drawn – were discussed (Hoppe, 2002: 29–30). Many existing local museums began to collect Judaica in large numbers, mainly from abroad – usually not a central task of such museums. The most popular objects were prayer books, Chanukah candelabras and Mezuzahs (63). One reason for this sudden change was an American TV series broadcast in Western Germany in January 1979 and attracting almost 20 millions of viewers (267). But a third impulse was needed for the first memorials to be installed: the 50th anniversary of the November pogrom in 1938, when almost all German synagogues were desecrated by Nazi mobs. At this occasion, throughout the year of 1988, memorial exhibitions took place in many villages, towns and cities of Western Germany. Most prominent among them were the opening of the new Jewish museum in Frankfurt and a large exhibition in Nuremberg about the history of Jews in Bavaria. In both cases, a pedagogical approach encompassing the whole of Jewish religious life was dominant (Lamnek, Schwenk, 1991; Dreykorn, 2000: 54). The exhibition in Nuremberg, organized by the Bavarian History House, a state-owned foundation for Public History, became a model for several other temporal and permanent exhibitions. The ongoing popularity of Jewish memorials and museums has several reasons: It proved difficult to find other usages for former synagogues while turned into museums they can be used by the community for various cultural events. The restoration, subsidized by public means, should, as communities hoped, increase the regional prestige of their places, often villages with only 1000–2000 residents. Usually, the procedure was the following: As a precondition, extensive research into local Jewish history was necessary. Then, an action group was created in support of the synagogue building. Connections to Jewish emigrants from the town were sought, meetings with them organized and they were asked for support. Thus, often reluctant village or town councils could be convinced more easily, and thereafter an association or foundation was founded for fundraising, promotion and further planning. The bulk of the costs were usually contributed by monument preservation and other cultural authorities. After the restoration of the building(s) and the acquisition of relevant objects, a concept for the presentation was drafted by a public history foundation or, as in some cases, by freelance museologists or local archives. Thus, the increase in Jewish memorials and museums is largely the result of an interplay of private initiatives, national memorial culture and practical interests alike. A feeling of shame after long years of complete neglect played a role, especially among the initiators, but was only one motivation. The new memorials were not undisputed. Objections were raised from ignorance, collective unease or Nazi past of own ancestors (Hoppe, 2002: 52, 154, Rupp, 2004: 39–47). In regions with formerly strong support for Nazism, like Central Franconia and Hesse, both with many historical Jewish communities, there are fewer memorials than in Lower Franconia or Württemberg, where adherence to Nazism was considerably lower. Although crimes of Nazi culprits were usually not explicitly discussed during the preparation, the project itself was a challenge for many communities and local politicians (Rupp, 2004). On

the other hand, Jewish emigrants themselves often did not want to talk about painful experiences during the Nazi rule and did not want to be seen solely as victims (Rupp, 2004: 61–68; Ries, 2010: 39, 83–86). In contrast to Jewish museums like Frankfurt and Berlin, the smaller memorials and museums have almost all been planned by non-Jewish Germans, sometimes assisted by Judaists. So they seem to be, as some Jewish observers have criticized, an expression of an exclusive German memorial culture. Due to the influence of public history foundations and administrations in Munich, Augsburg and Stuttgart, many show rather uniform appearances, while several individual solutions are noticeably different.

What is displayed and how

Permanent exhibitions in synagogues and other buildings with a Jewish background are usually divided into two sections. In the first section, Jewish religion is presented by Judaica and graphical illustrations. In the 1990s, often the complete interior of former synagogues was restored, including decoration and furniture, aided by old photos and plans. In recent years, traces of vandalism and desecration were left visible. (Geppert, 2016: 37; Nickel, 2016: 48). In several places, digged-out mikvehs or restored sukkahs were integrated into the presentation and described. But except these things, there was usually not much left from the old interior. Only a couple of museums possess (local) Judaica from before the Holocaust, for example the Museum in Schnaittach (near Nuremberg), which was able to preserve several objects from its ancient collection (Eisenstein, 2016: 64–66). The museum of Veitshöchheim (close to Würzburg) presents documents from a Genizah – a collection of Jewish religious documents stored for preservation – which had been found in the former synagogue (Edelmann, 2016). Several other exhibitions have received pieces from former Jewish residents, most notable among them the museum in Creglingen (Württemberg), itself the idea of an American Jew. Nevertheless, most museums wanted to present Judaica. The only way to do so was buying them on the art market, most prominently objects from Central or Eastern Europe or Israel. A Bavarian museologist justified this disputed practice as follows: “Souvenirs from Jerusalem can still tell more than museological silence.” (Hoppe, 2002: 67) The other section of the museums is necessarily dedicated to the historical development of a given Jewish settlement in the region and the history of the local Jewish community, usually in a chronological perspective. In several of the museums, a timeline is placed in front of the former local synagogue or – like in Munich – in the main room of the museum. This can help visitors to get a quick overview, but it can create the illusion of a continuous and progressive development of the Jewish religious life till Nazi rule, while in reality there were interruptions, migrations, setbacks and decline. Jewish-Christian relations are usually documented by only few objects. Till the end of the 18th century, Jews needed a protector when they wanted to live in Southern Germany. Protectors were princes, prince-bishops or other landed noblemen, who received a yearly protection fee from their Jewish protégés. Thus, in many of the museums, a letter of tolerance is presented, besides a portrait of its issuer. But Jewish-Christian relationships in everyday life are hardly present in the museums. Jews played an important economic role in retailing and cattle trade (Fischer, 2014), but relevant presentable documents therefore are rare. In several

exhibitions conflicts between Jewish retailers and Christian churchmen are mentioned, arising when Jews wanted to bargain with their customers on Sundays, for example. In public life Jews became increasingly active towards the end of the 19th century, and this is usually illustrated by photos of football teams, school classes or even warrior associations. But these photos are not self-explaining and can lead to the false conclusion of a harmonious coexistence. The strong Jewish interest in public life and their growing influence in local politics, however, was often seen as a menace by non-Jewish residents, fostering resentments and anti-Semitism. (Michel, 1988: 425) But like here, the ambivalence of many objects is often not discussed and useful background information is not provided. One of the few interesting examples for Jewish-Christian relationships is displayed in the museum of Emmendingen (Baden). There, an enlightened pedagogue tried to establish a school for Christians and Jews already in the end of the 18th century, but the project failed due to mutual aversions. Such prejudices often did not result from different religious practices, but from different mentalities. Living largely from retailing, Jews had other living habits than Christians and tended to imitated urban clothing and lifestyles. This fact is mentioned in several exhibitions. In Jebenhausen (Württemberg), a regional writer of about 1850 is quoted having seen Christian peasants humbly walking around while Jewish women were proudly wearing French fashion (Reuß, 2007: 135). But the visitor is told at the same time that Jews were not necessarily wealthier because of their urban habits. This is obviously done to refute traditional prejudices and clichés about Jewish usury and greed, but it sounds not quite convincing when Jews are simultaneously described as creditors of peasants and as donors. Thus, in Buttenhausen (Württemberg), a Jew founded a secondary school – for a small village an extraordinary achievement at this time (Deigendesch, 2007: 252). What could have been told as well, but has been omitted for similar reasons, are Jewish gifts of food and clothes to Christian children (Offe, 2000: 240) – but private relations are almost generally excluded. And Christian envy is likewise left unmentioned (245). There are still other Jewish peculiarities like their strong sociability, leading to curfews and other restrictions on them (233), that are not reported not to foster or maintain prejudices. And indeed, when Jewishness is defined by merely religious aspects and without regarding social and ethnological peculiarities, the phenomenon of German anti-Semitism can hardly be sufficiently explained. Already in the late Middle Ages, Jews were expelled from German towns not primarily for religious, but mainly for economic and social reasons, and the same applies to the strong appeal of anti-Semitic Nazi propaganda in several regions of Southern Germany. So one could ask whether stereotypes could not have been addressed more openly in order to be explicitly deconstructed afterwards. The result of World War I and the revolution of 1918–1919 that led to first violent assaults against Jews in several German regions, marking the gateway to a nationalist anti-Semitism, are not sufficiently discussed with their consequences. In some exhibitions, the whole period between 1900 and 1930 is hardly present. The era of Nazism is often only represented by a few documents. This at first seems to contradict national memorial culture and also history education, where it ranks high. But in many places, most Jews had left villages and towns for larger cities already before 1933, and the last of them had often emigrated before Nazi deportations in the years from 1940- to 1942. On the other hand, Nazi propaganda flocking the countryside can only displayed to a limited extent in a Jewish museum. Usually, besides information about

the Nazi movement in general, some anti-Semitic newspaper articles and photos are presented, furthermore the demolition of the local synagogue in 1938 and the personal fate of emigrants or Holocaust victims. An exception is, as in other aspects as well, the Jewish museum of Creglingen (Württemberg). There, commemoration of 17 victims of a pogrom in March of 1933, attracts special attention (Adams, 2005). But even in this case, neither the deeper reasons for such events, nor the relationship between Jews and non-Jews are discussed in full detail. The focus lies largely on the victims, while in several places, naming of Nazi culprits or reference to the collective guilt of ignorance led to protests among local residents and had to be removed again (Hoppe, 2002: 56). In many villages, the relationship between Jewish cattle retailers and non-Jewish peasants was complex. Many of them had a strong antipathy against Jews, triggered by agrarian crisis and Nazi propaganda. But although the Nazis tried to establish "Aryan" cooperatives, Jews proved to be indispensable as retailers and money lenders (Fischer, 2014: 231–233). While most of the culprits of the pogroms in 1938 were usually from neighbouring villages or towns, it would have made sense to have a closer look at mayors and other local officials at the least. Only rarely, condemnations of culprits after 1945 are mentioned (Geppert, 2007: 320), while rare cases of positive relationships are emphasized, like the following, if macabre, example from Bittenhausen shows: There local Jews had done so much for the village that its residents gave them before the deportation gifts for a new start in the "East" and the mayor accompanied them to their deportation train in Stuttgart. (Deigendesch, 2007: 254) An informed visitor will likewise miss information about the fate of Jewish houses and other possessions, which is absent due to local sensibilities: the second taboo besides personal relations and stereotypes. As visitors learn hardly anything about conflicts or cooperation between Jews and non-Jews, they might revel in the illusion of a quite comfortable and peaceful rural life, although clichés of that kind are not deliberately evoked. Presentations usually focus on the descriptions of objects and give only meager background information, partly certainly due to lack of sources. Jewish ego-documents are rare as well, and museum makers were reluctant in final conclusions or judgments. But there is one constant in Jewish life in the Southern German countryside that occurs again and again: migration. An often sharp increase in numbers till the midst of the 19th century is regularly followed by a just as rapid decrease, caused by overseas and urban migration. In the museum of Creglingen this is indeed used as a thread (Adams, 2002); but it is an exception. In many other cases, the strong local and regional focus disregards Jewish mobility. So, as a final conclusion – understandably not explicitly drawn – an educated visitor might resume that rural life was not attractive enough for a Jewish existence there. How are the two parts of exhibitions, the presentation of Jewish religion and that of local Jewish history, intertwined? Connections between the two are mostly weak, you have to say, not only since few visible remnants of Jewish religious life have survived, usually demonstrating general Jewish rites and not illustrating peculiar local customs. Thus, it is often difficult to get an impression of local religious and everyday life: Where did Jews get kosher food and how did they manage to stick to their Sabbatical rules? From such exemplifications the whole exhibition would profit. Some communities like Creglingen give leaflets to tourists with tours to formerly Jewish places of the town (Heuwinkel, 2001), and in several museums there are references to this topic, but not more.

Intentions and target groups

Museums have different functions: They can enable identification, fulfill educational tasks and serve as memorials. All three of them overlap. Jewish museums offer identification mainly, if not only, to Jewish visitors. On non-Jewish German visitors there is no such effect: individual visitors are rare and have usually a close personal relationship to Jews or a strong interest in Judaism. So, many local residents have not yet seen their museum. Touring exhibitions on non-Jewish Nazi victims usually attract more visitors than others. It seems, at least, that Jewish history, being studied by non-Jewish historians only since the 1980s, has in Germany not yet become an integral part of local or regional history. Museums and memorials have, together with publications and speeches, certainly made local elites more aware of local Jewish history, but wider circles have obviously not been affected. Larger Jewish museums, as the one in Berlin, have become tourist attractions. But even there, most of the individual visitors are non-German, and a substantial percentage is Jewish. This applies to Munich as well, where the Jewish museum is located directly beside the Jewish community center. Smaller memorials and museums as described here are occasionally visited by descendants of local Jewish residents who want to come to the places of their ancestors, but only rarely by present-day German Jews, mainly of Russian origin and having little connection to historical German Jewry.

Looking at the exhibitions, identification with Jewish history was apparently not intended by non-Jewish museum-makers, who themselves constructed and defined Jewishness as an alterity. German memorial culture does generally not allow such an identification as it is the case in parts of American society (Pieper, 2006: 93–106). There are, however, examples which seem to facilitate such an identification with local Jewish history, for example Jewish sections in local or regional museums or the “museum of Christian und Jewish history” in Laupheim (Württemberg), which attract more visitors but do not sufficiently intertwine Jewish and non-Jewish local history sufficiently. But this is not easy either, since Jewish and Christian environments there were just as in many other places, largely separated from each other (Hecht, 2007: 222–223). Since the exhibition in Nuremberg in 1988, dedicated to Jewish history in Bavaria, museum education is in the centre of many temporal and permanent local exhibitions. The central intention there was to teach children a basic knowledge of Jewish religion, and progress was minutely recorded. Today, a more active form of education is preferred, while at the same time overall religious knowledge and sensitivity towards religious attitudes has been declining steadily, so this task has not become easier. Matters of learning have largely remained the same and comprise Jewish ceremonies in synagogues and Jewish festivals, exemplified by Judaica. What is taught is an ideal, static and traditional image of Jewish religion; while Jewish festivals are regarded as a central content of Judaism, a comprehensive image of it is not delivered by the inscriptions. Guides, aware of Jewish culture and Christian-Jewish relations, but usually without closer ties to Jewish religion, cannot fill this gap. Furthermore, for religiously increasingly indifferent youths unaware of Jewish history, museum objects might look quite exotic, and evoke an impression of “otherness” of the Jewish religion. This was already noted by a careful visitor of the 1988 Nuremberg exhibition (Lamnek, Schwenk 1991: 62–63, 71). For such visitors they might even raise the question whether Judaica have belonged to

communities wiped out by the Holocaust and could have been acquired in an unjust way. This problem can be avoided when provenance is known and described, as it is done in the Jewish museum of Creglingen (Adams, 2005: 8). For adults, speeches and in some museums also workshops and courses are offered. But even in a city like Berlin, these only reach a fairly small number of educated and well-to-do residents (Helmig, 2014: 74–75). Meanwhile, there exist special offers for Muslims and interreligious talks take place regularly, but this matter is still a major challenge for museum education. In rural regions, the situation is still more difficult. But Jewish museums serve in Germany just like Holocaust memorials always primarily for commemoration. Although Nazi persecution and Holocaust comprise only a small section of the exhibitions, they play an important role, as expectations and interests of visitors are focused on them. Many pupils often do not know anything more about Judaism than some basic facts about the Holocaust. Most of the museum rooms are characterized by a somber atmosphere, undisturbed by visual or audible stimuli and by elements of reenactment. So, Jewish culture is presented as lost and passed-away. While the Jewish museum of Frankfurt has a special memorial room and the one in Berlin Libeskind's famous voids, in these smaller places the synagogue buildings, sometimes with symbolic traces of desecration, took the function of memorial sites. But what should be remembered in a Jewish museum? About this question, a debate arose in Creglingen (Württemberg) in 2000 (Rupp, 2004). The American Jew Arthur S. Obermayer wanted to establish a museum there dedicated to the Jews of the town, where many of his ancestors had been living, and he wanted to present Judaica from his own collection. His opponent, the Protestant theologian Horst Rupp, wanted to commemorate chiefly a pogrom in March of 1933, when two Jewish residents were killed by a SA squad and 15 more injured. A Jewish newspaper titled: "Jewish life or Jewish dying?" (Rupp, 2004: 167–169). Although Rupp was forced to withdraw from the museum committee, his concept was realized and the museum with its bare brick walls, its wooden ceilings and a memorial book for the victims of 1933 has become more than others a memorial for Jewish suffering. But in most cases, Jewish life is chiefly remembered. In a spectacular way this was intended by Bernhard Purin, an Austrian ethnologist, who wanted, as founding director of the Jewish museum in Fürth (Central Franconia, Bavaria), to avoid any direct reference to the Holocaust. (Rupp, 2004: 20–24) This was thwarted by the local Jewish community; but there had been also concerned reactions from non-Jewish visitors, since the Holocaust is certainly not the central issue of Jewish museums, but it is the focal point, for their makers as well as their visitors. Educational and memorial functions are interconnected: In many speeches, leaflets and guides you can hear or read stereotype and often quite vague appeals for present-day and future times. But since so little is explained in exhibitions about the reasons of the conflicts and persecutions of the past, they must appear rather as alibis. During the last twenty years, there has been a general tendency away from objects, mainly Judaica, towards a biographical approach (see for example: Ries, 2013). A possible intention was to reduce exoticism and strengthen the regional embedding. Following educational innovations, pupils are encouraged to ask questions themselves (Nickel, 2016: 47–50). In larger Jewish museums, e.g. in Fürth, in Frankfurt or Vienna, there are installations and cartoons to make visitors aware of their own prejudices, showing the ambivalence of objects and of views (Dreykorn, 2000: 56–63, Ostow, 2005). Apart from exceptions, this feature is still absent in smaller

museums, where the memorial and educational focus is preponderant. What is missing as well, are obvious attractive and entertaining elements, such as popular designs and elaborate multimedia presentations. There are only few exceptions from this rule: From 1993 to 2005 a private Jewish museum showing touring exhibitions in Munich tried to lure visitors by eye-catching posters alien to German memorial culture (Heusler, 2006: 17–49); in the museum for Christian and Jewish history in Laupheim, several effectively lit rooms with large images are dedicated to Hollywood film producer Carl Laemmle, who was celebrated as well in a splendid exhibition in Stuttgart in 2017, titled “A Swabian Jew invents Hollywood” (Hecht, Schrimpf, 2017). By such presentations, two central principals of German memorial culture (Assmann, 2013: 66–67) are violated: The commemorative purpose is weakened by an excessively popular presentation, and there is some kind of identification with Laemmle as a countryman and an attempt to claim his achievements for one’s native region.

Because of the absence of popular features and the strictly memorial and educational focus, most of the memorials and museums described have only between about 500 and 5000 visitors a year. This is about the same dimension as other local museums of the same size, but it is few when you consider renovation costs of sometimes up to 1 Million Euros for museum or memorial buildings. After increased interest in the first years after opening, visiting hours for individual guests were often reduced to Sunday afternoons. Larger museums in cities like Munich and Fürth have roughly between 10 000 and 20 000 visitors and only museums attracting international tourists as in Berlin have more than 100 000 tourists. Another problem for small Jewish memorials is that their initiators are slowly retiring and losing contact with families of Jewish emigrants (Geppert, 2016: 39). There are a few counterexamples, such as the old synagogue in Erfurt (Thuringia, Eastern Germany) with about 60 000 visitors a year, but this is largely due to the medieval building and the presented medieval handwritings and treasures (Beese, 2016). While German exhibitions dedicated to Nazi rule often attract quite a lot of residents even on the local level, it is remarkable that Jewish history is obviously not regarded as part of local and regional history, and thus not a central matter of interest.

Criticisms

The presentation of Jewish history or histories by Germans and for Germans could be an audacious task, as one might presume. But not for most of the curators or museum managers: this is at least the conclusion you can draw from their reports in museum periodicals. These are largely lacking in reflection, hardly taking care of current research and visitors’ interests, and not even of historical entanglement. There seems nothing peculiar about Jewish history any more – or is this only a superficial observation? In any case, non-Jewish criticisms are largely missing, apart from general requests to German memorial culture as by Aleida Assmann (Assmann, 2013). Thus, only several critical Jewish voices can be cited here. They do not stand for highly fragmented German Jewry in general, since even the German-Jewish newspaper *Jüdische Allgemeine* has only slightly criticized exhibitions and reported soberly about conflicts like in Creglingen or Fürth. For present-day Jewish-German relations, memorial culture certainly does not play an important role (Mikhman, 2002). Among the chief critics of Jewish museums in Germany were Cilly Kugelmann (Kugelmann, 2000) and Richard Chaim

Schneider (Schneider, 2001), both mainly aiming at the Jewish museum in Berlin, when still under construction. Both criticized that in German memorial culture a rather monolithic view of Judaism is presented, without integrating the present-day German or worldwide Jewish community, and that it should exculpate the German nation. With such accusations, both see these museums as places for identification: Germans, they suggest, would design a German-Jewish history fitting into a German-dominated memorial culture, with which Jews would not be able to identify. But Schneider's and Kugelmann's views do not hold for the large Jewish museums in Germany having been developed with considerable Jewish assistance – Kugelmann herself was until recently active at the Jewish museum in Berlin – and attracting many Jewish tourists. The smaller museums and memorials, usually installed exclusively by non-Jewish Germans, present, as it has been said, a German view of Jewishness, but neither serve Germans for identification. These facts are underpinned by Jewish as well as German reactions: While Jews obviously felt personally addressed by the new museums, non-Jewish Germans were not. The border between Jewish victims and German perpetrators was also not violated: although German culprits are rarely ever mentioned by their names, this can even lead to a perception of collective guilt by German visitors. But for some Jews, any German remembrance of Jewish history and the Holocaust is a product of German phantasms (Bodemann, 1996), and this view could have been contradicted better if German views of Judaism in the past would have been integrated into the exhibitions of memorials and museums. Drawing on Jewish criticisms, Sabine Offe, herself not a Jew, but with Jewish relatives, published a book in 2000, titled (in translation) "Exhibitions, Attitudes, Distortions" (Offe, 2000), where she tries to discuss the ambivalence of Jewish museums in Germany and Austria. Analyzing German memorial culture with its many Jewish memorials by means of psycho-analysis, she tries to make German readers aware of Jewish reservations. She names several concrete problems – the initiators of museums may have been themselves guilty during the Second World War, objects displayed could have been unjustly looted by them, and now they would like to wash their hands clean from their own or, more general, the German past (Offe, 2000: 239–248). Furthermore, she points out the disregard of Jewish religious symbolism by German museum makers, with reference to larger Jewish museums like Frankfurt and Vienna. Other objects of criticism are the strictly religious definition of Jewry by museum makers, its presentation as an alterity or even something exotic (Offe, 2000: 82, 101, 228) and idealization of Jewish-German coexistence (244) but what strikes present-day Jewish visitors most, is, according to her opinion, the gloomy, even morbid mood without any motions and sounds, untypical for busy Jewish life – and this atmosphere is indeed due to German national memorial culture (97, 202, 233). Offe's thesis suggests that obviously only Germans with personal contact to Jews can fully grasp Jewish feelings and that museum makers should get acquainted with modern Judaism in general as well as to Jewish memorial culture in particular. But with her rather abstract generalizations, she does not refer sufficiently to the complex process of the genesis of these exhibitions. Similar concerns have inspired the Jewish cultural center "Shalom Europa" in Würzburg with an incorporated museum², inaugurated by the local Jewish community in 2006 – in a region where many Jewish

2 http://www.shalomeuropa.de/_shalom_d/museum.html

memorials had been opened the years before. The center fulfills the three described purposes of a Jewish museum: It offers identification for Jewish visitors and community members, guided tours and educational programs for German visitors, especially school classes, and serves as a memorial place for all visitors. While focusing on the worldwide Jewish community of the present day, the center can be seen as an example that a certain common basis of commemoration exists.

Concluding remark

The labeling of exhibitions in former synagogues or other Jewish buildings oscillates between museum and memorial – just as the purpose of the exhibitions themselves. This ambivalence originates already in the places, which were sites of Jewish religious ceremony as well as Nazi devastation. Their intention is not so much to narrate local Jewish history but merely to document it. While Jewish presence is testified or in many cases only symbolized by objects, further explanations, considerations and judgments are largely missing or left to the spectator. Important themes like Jewish-Christian relations or details of persecutions are largely absent as well, partly due to local sensibilities and taboos, partly to national history culture. Since public foundations have donated most of the financial means for restoration and in many cases also shaped the exhibitions, these have become objects of German national memorial culture. But this is, difficulties in Jewish-German relations apart, also one of the reasons that, while school classes are among the most frequent visitors, interest of local citizens has been largely moderate and a deeper knowledge in local Jewish history has not been achieved in many cases.

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