

# Frankfurt – the past and the present

**SANDY BORNSTEIN**

SPECIAL TO THE CJN, FRANKFURT

A desire to experience Jewish life in Germany 80 years after the start of the Second World War precipitated an eight-day trip to a country I once vehemently avoided. From the time I studied the Holocaust at Spertus College in Chicago, Germany had remained on the top of my “never visit” list. For decades, I cringed whenever our family had a brief stopover in Frankfurt on the way to, or from, Israel or India.

I can’t explain why my intense feelings abated. Perhaps, the passage of time can transform ingrained beliefs. While I never imagined that I’d visit the pyramids in Egypt or Petra in Jordan, I cherish the memories from both of those extraordinary adventures. Was it possible to walk away from a trip to Germany with something equally as poignant? I wasn’t sure, but I was ready to explore the possibilities.

Lingering fears resurfaced as I planned the trip. Germany’s train system was recommended as an efficient form of transportation, but images of Jews being herded into boxcars flooded my thoughts. Suddenly, renting a car became the simplest way to travel.

On our first morning, we strolled through the blustery downtown streets as our guide, Wiebke Singer, offered an abbreviated history lesson each time we paused at a place of interest. A small plaque pinpointed the location where Oskar Schindler resided from 1965 until his death in 1974. Instead of recognizing Schindler’s heroic deeds while he was alive, German society totally disregarded his humanitarian efforts. In the aftermath of Steven Spielberg’s award-winning film, Schindler’s laudable actions were finally applauded worldwide.

Only a few vestiges of life before the war remain. Most of the buildings were constructed after the war. Occasionally, Singer shared black and white images so that we could appreciate what once stood on a particular site.

Early on, our attention was drawn to brass inscribed square blocks in the pavement. We paused and bent down to get a closer look. Since 1996, these controversial Stumbling Stones (*Stolpersteine*) have been placed in front of Holocaust victims’ former residences as a visual reminder of the atrocities that occurred when the Nazis were in power.

The fate of an individual is noted on each plaque. While these individual memorials are a chilling reminder of the Holocaust, I could understand why some would object to the fact that Jewish victims are demeaned when the plaques are stepped on every day.



The Westend Synagogue in Frankfurt, Germany. SANDY BORNSTEIN PHOTOS

To find out about Jewish life today, we headed to the Westend Synagogue. We couldn’t miss the Egyptian-Assyrian style reddish-brown dome and the tiled roof that was out of sync with the surrounding affluent residential neighbourhood. At the entryway, Gabriela Schlick-Bamberger warmly greeted us. She guided us through the hallways of the synagogue and offered us an overview of the synagogue’s history and life in Frankfurt today. She casually mentioned the presence of two other synagogues and Chabad. Like other synagogues around the world, the Westend leadership is struggling with the best ways to educate its youth.

Unlike Frankfurt’s other Jewish houses of worship, this early 20th century structure is the only synagogue to survive the Kristallnacht pogroms on Nov. 9-10, 1938 – when only the interior was damaged – as well as the extensive bombings of the city during the war. The synagogue’s proximity to residences of prominent individuals and important structures spared it from destruction.

Almost all of the descendants of this once liberal community have gone elsewhere. When the synagogue was restored in 1950, Orthodox Jews from Poland and Russia became its new congregants.

The synagogue’s gabbai, Fiszal Ajnwojner, offered us refreshments and shared some of his family’s history. Ajnwojner was born in a DP camp and was among the eastern European Jews who chose to resettle in Germany. His family moved to Frankfurt when he was two years old. He grew up in a Jewish enclave on the east end of Frankfurt.

The magnitude of the synagogue’s exterior dome is carried into the sanctuary where an oversized crystal chandelier

hangs from a vaulted arched ceiling over a central prayer desk. A beautiful blue and gold coloured wall is the backdrop for the elevated Aron Kodesh. Rows of prayer tables with chairs are arranged on a burgundy carpet. Positioned in the back balcony is a massive organ dating back to the time when the synagogue’s congregants were liberal Jews.

As we stepped back onto the street and gazed one last time at the synagogue, I found it hard to comprehend how this renovated building was the only tangible evidence of a vibrant Jewish community that numbered approximately 30,000 in 1930.

Moritz Bauerfeind accompanied us to Museum Judengasse, the cemeteries, and the memorial. Until 1987, when construction workers discovered numerous house foundations from the *Judengasse*, the former Jewish quarter dating back to the 15th century, Jewish history had disappeared in Frankfurt. This segment of Jewish existence was buried and forgotten. Frankfurt’s Jews, who had lived in the centre of the city since the 12th century, were forcibly moved in 1462 to a peripheral location surrounded by a wall with controlled access through gates. According to museum documents, this was the first Jewish ghetto in Europe.

To settle the controversy over what to do with this archeological site, the city decided to reconstruct a part of the *Judengasse* inside a museum located on the ground floor of the public utilities building. The museum opened in 1992, updated in 2016, and was subsequently awarded the Museum Prize of the Sparkassen-Kulturstiftung Hessen-Thüringen.

Artifacts and exhibits on the main floor offer a glimpse into the daily life of the Jews who resided in the *Judengasse* dur-

ing the Early Modern Period and simultaneously tell the story of Frankfurt’s Jews. Many of the displays on both sides of the suspended Plexiglas bridge with metal railings are geared toward individuals with a limited background of Jewish customs and traditions.

The first set of exhibits emphasizes religious life, Jewish-Christian relations, and the Old Cemetery. After crossing to the other side, visitors learn about ghetto occupations and can listen to personal stories harvested from archival research.

On the upper and lower levels, child-friendly stations encourage school-aged children to accept the opportunity to understand this period. Walking along the suspended corridor, we peered into the foundations of former *Judengasse* residences.

The most fascinating aspect of this museum was the opportunity to descend into the lower level where we traversed through the partially restored foundation walls. At times, it appeared like a maze as we entered former residences, explored the nooks and crannies, and also took steep, stone steps to an old mikveh.

After exiting the museum, Bauerfeind unlocked the gate to the cemetery, the oldest Jewish cemetery in Frankfurt. Burials took place in this cemetery from the late 13th century to the first quarter of the 19th century, with the oldest gravestone dating to 1272. During the Second World War, the majority of the headstones were destroyed and displaced. Decades later, it is impossible to restore any of the markers to their appropriate places.

My eyes scanned to my side where gravestones were propped up against the wall. These gravestones had been culled out from the masses due to their perceived historical value. As we walked further into a grassy area dotted with mature deciduous trees, we came upon piles of toppled gravestones. While circling back to the entrance, Bauerfeind showed us a small grouping of gravestones that he identified as famous rabbis. Previous visitors had left behind mounds of stones, small rocks, little scraps of paper, and yahrzeit candles.

Unlike modern cemeteries with just a few lines of identifying information chiseled onto gravestones, these moss-covered tablets offer detailed testimonies in Hebrew to centuries of Jewish life. I stopped periodically to examine the images that represented family names. While I have no direct connection to these Jews, I was profoundly moved by the helter-skelter arrangements of headstones.

We joined Bauerfeind on a train ride to visit a more modern Jewish cemetery in a less central location.

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A grouping of dormant plane trees guard the stark memorial at the Bornplatz Synagogue.



Inside the Jewish Museum Frankfurt.

At the Old Jewish Cemetery in Rat Beil-Strasse (Frankfurt-Nordend) the sanctity of the departed had not been disturbed. Near the entrance, a map pinpoints the location of notable grave sites from the 19th and 20th centuries. Many of these individuals were the movers and shakers of Frankfurt society before the rise of Nazism.

Walking in and out of the Old Cemetery adjacent to the museum, I glanced at the gray rectangular nameplates arranged in alphabetical order fastened to the outside cemetery wall. Bauerfeind told us that these small plaques remind people passing by of the approximately 12,000 Frankfurt Jews who were deported and murdered. It wasn't until the 1990s that the city chose to remember these victims by creating this minuscule tribute to their lives.

On the way to the memorial site, we stopped to read a more significant plaque attached to the back of the public utilities building that memorializes the destruction of the Bornplatz Synagogue, which occurred on Nov. 9, 1938. Inside the museum, we had watched a 1946 film clip of the postwar dedication.

A few steps further we stood in front of a large stone cube made up of bits and pieces from the excavation of the former ghetto. A small grouping of dormant plane trees appeared to guard this stark memorial. Bauerfeind pointed to strips that outlined the footprint of the destroyed synagogue and also described the five street signs that were just a short distance away. Each recalled the different names that were given to this once crowded plaza.

The European Central Bank sits on the

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*These small plaques remind people passing by of the approximately 12,000 Frankfurt Jews who were deported and murdered*

site where Frankfurt's Jews were assembled before they were deported. From the fall of 1941 to the spring of 1945, more than 10,000 Jews from Frankfurt and the Wiesbaden administrative region were sent from this location to ghettos, concentration camps, and extermination camps. Disappointingly, this was not included in our itinerary. Anyone wishing to visit the memorial at the Frankfurt Grossmarkthalle should be aware that advance reservations are necessary for part of the tour.

In 2012, the Frankfurt city councillors agreed to renovate the Jewish Museum, the oldest independent museum in Germany committed to preserving German-Jewish culture and history, and to also build an adjacent building to expand the available exhibition area. Since 1988 the Jewish Museum Frankfurt was housed in a building once owned by Baron Mayer Carl von Rothschild.

As we walked through the two buildings, crews of construction workers were busy rehabilitating the former Rothschild Pal-

ais' renaissance design, and other tradesmen were working inside the modern building with a plethora of windows.

With power tools booming in the background, I imagined spaces that will eventually illustrate Frankfurt's Jewish history from the transformation out of the ghetto through today, as well as a room for a library and a designated spot for a kosher deli.

Mirjam Wenzel, the director of the museum, pointed to an open area between the old building and the contemporary structure where the museum plans to showcase a 12-metre high sculpture with interlocking skeleton trees having one set of roots reaching toward the sky and another into the ground, by Israeli artist Ariel Schlesinger.

We strolled by another area where an exclusive Anne Frank collection will be housed. The Frank family lived in Frankfurt before relocating to Amsterdam. Before ending our tour, Wenzel mentioned a temporary exhibit focusing on the aftermath of the Second World War. She proudly boasted that this would be the first European exhibit to examine the immediate postwar years. Since a set reopening date for the museum has yet to be scheduled, I recommend checking the website for updates.

As guests of the 25Hours Hotel The Trip, we dined several times at the onsite restaurant, Bar Shuka. Israeli cuisine and a lively atmosphere are the main draws to this favourite spot for locals and hotel guests. James and David Ardinast, two Jews who spent most of their lives in Frankfurt, own the restaurant. Both brothers attended college abroad and opted to

return to Frankfurt. Their Polish grandparents were concentration camp survivors. The brothers work hand in hand with Chef Yossi Elad, the founder of the Machneyuda in Jerusalem and The Palomar in London. Bar Shuka, a trendy spot near the Central Train Station, will appeal to anyone who loves shakshuka for breakfast and a dynamic Middle Eastern marketplace environment for dinner.

In conclusion, visiting Frankfurt reaffirmed my prior belief that it is a vital part of life's journey to visit places with less than stellar histories. Books and movies can only retell part of their troubling story.

In Frankfurt, I paid tribute to the Jews who proudly strolled in the *Judengasse* centuries ago as well as the Jews who fled in fear after Kristallnacht or perished during the Shoah. My eyes watered as I learned about the small Jewish communities massacred in the 13th and 14th centuries and stood in silence in two Jewish cemeteries.

I ingested an unsettling number of disturbing facts during my three days in Frankfurt, but I simultaneously witnessed the rebirth of a Jewish community in a place offering little hope after the Second World War. Frankfurt's Jews' commitment to Jewish culture and traditions, along with the surrounding communities' response to a rise in worldwide anti-Semitism, will ultimately determine the future of Frankfurt's small Jewish community. ■

*Sandy Bornstein holds an MA in Jewish studies. She was a guest of the Frankfurt Tourism Board, 25Hours Hotel The Trip, and the Bar Shuka restaurant.*

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