German Jews: The History and the Heritage

Celebrating 60 Years of the Leo Baeck Institute

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Leo Baeck Institute – New York | Berlin
In 1955, a group of émigré intellectuals gathered in the Jerusalem home of Martin Buber to found an institution that would write the history of German-speaking Jews. Thanks to their courage and foresight at a time when many Jews wanted to look forward and not back, the cultural and intellectual legacy of German-speaking Jews has been, to a remarkable degree, preserved in the collections of the Leo Baeck Institute. This growing repository of 80,000 books and millions of documents formed the basis of the history that the founders set out to write, and it is preserved as a living resource to be discovered and interpreted anew by succeeding generations.

Michael A. Meyer was born in Berlin, Germany and grew up in Los Angeles, where he received his B.A. (with highest honors) from UCLA. His doctorate is from Hebrew Union College (HUC) in Cincinnati. From 1964 to 1967, he taught at the Los Angeles campus of HUC. Since 1967 he has been on the faculty of HUC, Cincinnati, where he is currently the Adolph S. Ochs Professor of Jewish History Emeritus. Professor Meyer’s books have won three Jewish Book Awards. They include The Origins of the Modern Jew: Jewish Identity and European Culture in Germany, 1749-1824; Response to Modernity: A History of the Reform Movement in Judaism; Jewish Identity in the Modern World; and a collection of essays entitled Judaism Within Modernity. As a co-author and editor of the LBI-sponsored four-volume survey, German-Jewish History in Modern Times, Professor Meyer was deeply involved in the principal historiographic project of the Leo Baeck Institute.

On November 8, 2015, the Leo Baeck Institute presented Professor Meyer with the Moses Mendelssohn Award for his scholarly contributions. On that occasion he delivered the 58th Leo Baeck Memorial Lecture, which is printed here.
LET ME BEGIN with a personal word. For more than half a century my life has been bound up with the Leo Baeck Institute. It has been for me not only an indispensable resource for my work; it has been the path to my own self-discovery of who I am as a German-born Jew living almost my entire life in the United States. But if the relationship has been more than academic, that has been due, as well, to my immense admiration for the man after whom this institute is named. Sadly, I never had the honor of knowing Leo Baeck personally, but his aura has guided me since first I learned of his heroic life and his rational, yet indomitable faith. As has often been noted, after the Holocaust Leo Baeck became the symbol of all the admirable qualities that marked German Jewry: the dignity, the learning, the spiritual resistance to evil. Many institutions have been named after him, but it is this one, the Leo Baeck Institute, of which he briefly served as international president before his death in 1956, that was perhaps closest to his heart. It is an honor to speak of it as it reaches the age of sixty years, and through its particular history also of the larger history of German Jewry itself.

Almost precisely 53 years ago, on November 7, 1962, I travelled to the Leo Baeck Institute, then located in a grand old building at 129 East 73rd Street, to attend a lecture by Professor Erich Kahler, a member of Princeton’s Institute for Advanced Study. A famed philosopher and literary scholar born to a prominent Jewish family in Prague, he had once been Erich von Kahler, a designation he chose to give up in America. Like so many Jewish immigrants from German-speaking Europe, Kahler had gravitated to the Leo Baeck Institute, which made him a fellow, and when he died, he bequeathed a large
part of his literary estate to the LBI Archives. That very year the international LBI published Kahler’s *Die Philosophie von Hermann Broch*, a study of the major Austrian Jewish literary modernist, as the ninth publication in its scholarly series, the *Schriftenreihe wissenschaftlicher Abhandlungen des Leo Baeck Instituts*, a series that today counts close to eighty volumes.

In 1962 I was a graduate student, nervously trying to get a grasp on the German-Jewish essence so that I could convey some element of it in my doctoral dissertation. I therefore listened closely to what the lecturer had to say. Kahler spoke of what he called a “psychic interpenetration” between Germanism and Judaism. He claimed to show certain similarities between Jews and Germans: the Jews, a people without a country, a particular people and yet one that conveyed a universal religion along with a broad love of the cosmopolitan; the Germans, a people that never succeeded in becoming fully united, who for many centuries lived their history within the Holy Roman Empire and, both then and thereafter, continually searched—searched desperately—for their own particular national spirit. The Germans excelled both at philosemitism (witness Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, Moses Mendelssohn’s close friend) and at antisemitism (witness National Socialism). The Jews were attracted to the German speculative soul but shunned the other half—what Kahler called “the body.” Nazism, the lecturer concluded, was the “revolt of the body.”

From its beginnings, sixty years ago, the Leo Baeck Institute for the History and Culture of German-Speaking Jewry (to give it its complete title) has been probing the nature of that interpenetration of which Kahler spoke—through its sixty *Yearbooks*, its variegated monographs, its conferences in America, Europe, and Israel, its manifold lectures and symposia. In its library, archives, and art collection here in New York it has stored up the evidence that makes possible an interpretation—or I should say: a variety of interpretations—of the German-Jewish experience. It has been active as well in Israel, in Great Britain, and in the Federal Republic of Germany. Now, after two generations, and beyond the material accomplishments, what have the LBI and those associated with it achieved in the quest to understand the exquisitely complex phenomenon we call German Jewry?

We gather today one day in advance of the 77th anniversary of the November pogrom of 1938, since 1945 often called *Kristallnacht*, 
the night of crystal, on account of the broken glass from thousands of vandalized Jewish shops, their shattered windows littering the streets—the detritus of destruction. That pogrom marked an endpoint. When it was over, there was no longer a Jewish community that was even semi-independent, and Rabbi Leo Baeck could do no more than bravely attempt to sustain morale, to save whomever could be saved, as German Jewry rapidly sank ever deeper into oblivion. The Holocaust was at the gate.

It has, however, never been the purpose of the Leo Baeck Institute to chronicle the destruction of German Jewry. That task was not in the minds of its founders sixty years ago nor of those who followed them. Other institutions, here in America and in Israel, have made the catastrophe of European Jewry the subject of recollection and research. We have chosen to look back to the years before Nazism and, more recently, also to those that have followed after it. And we have studiously avoided viewing German-Jewish history through the lens of the Holocaust, choosing instead to strive for an empathetic understanding of pre-Holocaust Jewish existence in its own time, and not with the hindsight of ours.

When the Council of Jews from Germany, under the impetus of leading German-Jewish intellectuals then living in Israel, founded the LBI in 1955, a charter was promulgated which specified that it was not to be a mere purveyor of nostalgia, simply recounting the triumphs and achievements of former generations. Instead, it was to be devoted to impartial scholarship, letting the chips fall where they may. But at the same time and in the first instance it was to serve the personal needs of the refugee community, to strengthen its historical memory lest the scattered remnants of German Jewry be forced to begin anew not only their practical lives, but also their spiritual and cultural existence, in the lands of the German-Jewish diaspora. The relevant passage from the charter reads: “We want to... give a faithful presentation, free from apologetic or tendentious coloring, of all that they [the Jews living in German-speaking countries] have done and felt, thought and created, where they proved themselves and where they failed. . . . We want to show the historic role of the community in which we have our common roots, wherever we may live today...”

That founding generation, which sought to preserve its history, has itself passed into history. On account of the deep wounds it
had suffered—loss of close relatives, exile from the landscape of childhood—its relationship to postwar Germany for a long time remained deeply ambivalent. On the one hand it wanted to pay tribute to pre-Nazi Germany, but only with difficulty could it imagine that the Federal Republic might be able to transcend the execrable heritage of the recent past and bind itself to that earlier legacy. Our founders regarded themselves, the refugees and exiles, as the self-designated stewards of the German-Jewish tradition and believed that the proper locations for that stewardship did not include Germany itself. It was only after much soul-searching that in 1985 the LBI for the first time initiated an international conference in Germany. The topic that was carefully chosen bore a whiff of defiance: It focused upon the 1930s, but not on the Nuremberg Laws or other Nazi measures of discrimination. Rather its lectures were devoted to how Jewish organizational and spiritual life had been sustained in the face of persecution, what we now term the spiritual resistance of German Jewry.

Those associated with the LBI today have no personal experience of the Weimar or the First Austrian Republics and very few suffered as adults during the Nazi years. They may or may not stem from German-Jewish families. They may or may not be Jewish. Their knowledge of the subject may come in part from a story told by a parent or grandparent, but more fundamentally their conclusions are the result of scholarly research. Whereas few of the early writers in the Leo Baeck Institute Year Book were trained historians, today’s LBI scholars regard themselves as members of the historical or of an allied academic profession. They have sought to bring the study of the German-Jewish past into the purview of contemporary scholarship.

The historical works that have been written on German-speaking Jewry, many under the umbrella of the LBI, have been of different kinds, depending upon the interest of the particular scholar and in some cases of topics that stood at the top of a broader scholarly agenda. I should like to suggest some categories into which I believe that they fall.

Those writings that have reached the widest readership have focused on the great names, the individuals who enjoyed the broadest familiarity and in whom there was the greatest interest: the
philosopher Moses Mendelssohn, the poet Heinrich Heine, the artist Max Liebermann, the scientist Albert Einstein, the psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud, the enigmatic writer Franz Kafka, the high-ranking politician Walther Rathenau, and others like them. Frequently, these works ask why it was that so many German Jews—so out of all proportion to their numbers—were awarded a Nobel Prize. In this context Jews by conviction tend to appear alongside converts to Christianity, and individuals with questionable Jewish attachments, or with little if any Jewish influence on their work, are not sidelined on that account. Karl Marx, who was converted to Christianity in childhood, for example, may receive far more attention than such principal figures of Jewish religious reform in Germany as Zacharias Frankel and Abraham Geiger. The composer Felix Mendelssohn, though a devout Christian, nonetheless receives due attention.

Eager to avoid even a smudge of parochialism, these works show little interest in the inner history of the Jewish community: in its religious life, in its community organization, and in Jewish education. I would term these histories of famous Jews, coining a German term, Spitzengeschichte, a history especially of those individuals who made it to the top, who managed, in large measure, to transcend Jewish origins and find their place within the larger cultural history of modern times. One example of this approach would be the immensely popular The Pity of It All by Amos Elon, which appeared in 2002. For Elon it is the Jewish attachment to Bildung, that unique combination of character and culture, acquired from its German milieu, which most accurately defines German Jewry. A second example would be the permanent exhibit of the Jewish Museum in Berlin, whose modern section centers upon the assimilated Jew, not the observant one. LBI scholarship, in general, has been more focused on the Jewish within the German-Jewish identity.

Given the Holocaust, it is not surprising that another sort of German-Jewish history has focused on antisemitism in the attempt to explain why so educated and cultured a nation could descend into such barbarity. Was Jew-hatred deeply rooted in the German character from earliest times or was Nazism more a product of its own age than of the German past? Almost twenty years ago Daniel Jonah Goldhagen propagated the theory that what he called “eliminationist antisemitism” was uniquely rooted in German history.
from medieval times and easily morphed into exterminationist antisemitism. But this volume, more of a lawyer’s brief than an objective historical work, neglected to deal adequately with the complexity of the phenomenon, with its appearance outside of Germany, and with how—if it was indeed so pervasive—by the time of the Weimar Republic mixed marriages of Jews with Christians had become so common.

Of course, the LBI could not neglect this subject. To have done so would have distorted the German-Jewish experience. But the scholarship done under its auspices has been far more nuanced than Goldhagen’s blockbuster work. To give what may be the most influential example: in the *Leo Baeck Institute Year Book* for 1978 Professor Shulamit Volkov of Tel Aviv University published an article entitled “Antisemitism as a Cultural Code: Reflections on the History and Historiography of Antisemitism in Imperial Germany.” For Volkov there was not a single antisemitism but various forms of it in different segments of the populace. Mildest, but perhaps in the end most pernicious since it manifested itself in the most influential circles, was the tendency to use it as a “cultural code,” a sign of belonging to a specific cultural camp that had no room for Jews. As a cultural code, antisemitism played a specific and symbolic role in German society. Though not itself violent, it made that society more susceptible to the crude *Radau* antisemitism, the violent variety shouted by the brown-shirted rowdies marching on German streets in the 1930s.

An older form of German-Jewish history pursued by the Leo Baeck Institute we may term “the history of emancipation.” Unlike France, where Jewish equality came quickly with the French Revolution, and Russia where there was no hope for it in the nineteenth century, a divided Germany provided Jewish emancipation piecemeal, at a different pace in one German state than in another. Jews were not to be given equality as a natural right but were expected to earn it by shaving away their particularities so that they could slip noiselessly into German society. The processes leading to emancipation varied not so much on account of ideological differences with regard to the proper place for Jews, as principally on account of tangible developments such as demographic and economic shifts and also in step with the political successes of liberal factions. Writers still focus on the popular champion of Jewish political emancipation, Gabriel Riesser.
But for all of Riesser’s eloquence, for all of his insistence that German ideals required the establishment of political equality, what ultimately made the difference was not Jewish advocacy but circumstances over which the Jews had little control. Although many scholars associated with the LBI have concentrated on this topic of Jewish emancipation, I would call particular attention to the insightful analyses provided by Reinhard Rürup, for many years professor at the Technische Universität in Berlin and the first prominent non-Jew to play a central role in the LBI as the founding chair of its Wissenschaftliche Arbeitsgemeinschaft, the LBI’s association of scholars in Germany. It was Rürup’s careful source-based study of the emancipation process, entitled “Jewish Emancipation and Bourgeois Society,” which appeared in the Year Book in 1969, that set an example for later work on the subject.

In the early years of the LBI a large portion—perhaps the largest portion—of its research was devoted to what the Germans call Geistesgeschichte, roughly a combination of intellectual and cultural history. One begins with Moses Mendelssohn and goes on to discuss other Jews who played important roles in German philosophy and literary culture. Of course, Heinrich Heine looms large here, but also Berthold Auerbach, Alfred Döblin, Nelly Sachs, and many others. Among the philosophers, the LBI has paid special attention to the most significant individuals, whose thought was influential beyond Jewish circles, such as the Neo-Kantian Hermann Cohen and the perennially popular Martin Buber.

Closely allied to Jewish Geistesgeschichte is Jewish Religionsgeschichte, the history of the Jewish religion. Here too the LBI has played a very large role. As has been so frequently pointed out, modern Judaism, as we know it today in America and elsewhere, emerged in its varieties in Germany during the nineteenth century. There the influence of modern thought, aesthetic taste, and the desire for political integration, inscribing themselves into Jewish theology and practice, created a spectrum running from the Neo-Orthodoxy of Samson Raphael Hirsch to the radical reform of Samuel Holdheim. Rabbi Leo Baeck represented the religious majority in Germany, the Liberal faction that respected tradition and Jewish unity but, unlike Rabbi Hirsch, insisted that Judaism dwelt within history and not above it.
In its approach to Jewish religious texts German Jewry, unlike other Jewish communities, was not drawn to Jewish mysticism—at least not until the twentieth century, and even then scarcely beyond a fascination with Martin Buber’s renderings of Hasidic stories. What characterized the German-Jewish relationship to Jewish texts was not the search for secret meanings but rather a more secular than pietistic approach—though religious motivation was not entirely lacking. It was the university and its critical approach to the past, not the yeshivah, that attracted young Jewish intellectuals at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Their academic studies led them to believe that only if, as within the university setting, Jews could treat their heritage in the manner that Christian scholars treated theirs, would Judaism remain viable within the dominant intellectual milieu. Thus yet another major contribution to Jewish modernity came into existence, the Wissenschaft des Judentums, the scholarly study of Jews and Judaism, which the long-time president of the New York LBI, Professor Ismar Schorsch, has investigated in enlightening detail, showing how traditional texts were henceforth explored not alone for their content, but also within their historical context. The broad world of academic Jewish scholarship today rests upon the pioneering work of Leopold Zunz, his associates and successors—a no less significant legacy of German Jewry than the modernization of the Jewish religion, which was so closely associated with it. And of course, the Leo Baeck Institute, in its research on German Jewry, is heir to the aspiration of attaining maximal objectivity in historical writing. One might say that in studying the history of Wissenschaft des Judentums, the LBI is both the inheritor and the employer of its mode of research.

By the 1970s, however, a major shift in emphasis was taking place. Intellectual history and biographies of influential figures were now increasingly regarded as representing too narrow a view of the past. More emphasis needed to be given to impersonal social forces and to non-political social groupings like the family. In books and in articles, some of them in the Leo Baeck Institute Year Book, Professor Marion Kaplan has done pioneering work in exploring such issues as, for example, marriage strategies of Jews in Imperial Germany. She and others have made the gender dimension a sine qua non for any study of German Jewry that lays claim to breadth of analysis. Thus
the history of German-Jewish women came to occupy an ever larger role within the scholarly agenda of German-Jewish scholarship. This attention to families, to women’s roles, but also, more broadly, to day-to-day activities of average people had earlier prompted the New York LBI, beginning in 1976, to publish a three-volume selection of the numerous memoirs, mostly by average German Jews, gathered in its archives in preceding years. Professor Monika Richarz, a leading historian, came across the ocean from Germany and spent many months choosing the memoirs of greatest interest and providing important introductions and notes. A generation later the LBI would undertake a project that would turn memoirs and other archival materials into a presentation of that aspect of German Jewish history known in German as Alltagsgeschichte. Initiated by the LBI, edited by Marion Kaplan, and published in English, German, and Hebrew, it appeared in 2005 entitled Jewish Daily Life in Germany, 1618-1945.

From its earliest days, the Leo Baeck Institute had set as its ultimate goal the publication of a synthetic, broadly encompassing history of the entire range of experience of Jews in German-speaking lands, what is called in German a Gesamtgeschichte. An early attempt to achieve this goal did not come to fruition. It was not until the late 1980s that the editorial process, which would by 1998 produce the four-volume German Jewish History in Modern Times, was set in motion. It was to include the big names, but also the experience of the common people and the work of the Jewish communities; the accomplishments, but also the shortcomings; the outer history of acceptance and rejection as well as the inner history of religious and cultural productivity. Its ten authors came from Israel, Germany, the United Kingdom, and the United States. I had both the burden and the honor of integrating the work of this distinguished, but fiercely independent group, aiming at a flowing, coherent, yet balanced and scientifically respectable work. In this I was immeasurably aided by my successor as International President of the LBI, Professor Michael Brenner.

Although the LBI had thus undertaken a comprehensive history of German Jewry, its participants had decided that the narrative, beginning in the Middle Ages, would end with the Holocaust. The postwar German-Jewish communities in the Federal Republic in the West and in the Socialist German Democratic Republic in the East were then regarded as a separate phenomenon, too far removed from
prewar German-Jewish traditions to be a part of the same narrative. The four volumes provided only a brief epilogue called “The German-Jewish Diaspora.” However, in the course of time, as the contemporary German-Jewish community grew and matured, as scholars began to examine the history of the Displaced Persons camps, the new community structure, the immigrants from Russia and Israel, and the prominent figures who had returned to Germany, the LBI could no longer exclude this subject from its historical purview. The rapidly developing communal, intellectual, and spiritual life required an expansion beyond the initially designated period from the eighteenth-century Jewish Enlightenment to the eve of the Holocaust. The LBI had already extended its chronological starting point, now giving attention in the Year Book to early-modern and even medieval German Jewry. Responding to the new community on the old soil, the LBI during this last decade, under the editorship of Michael Brenner, published a history of the Jews in Germany from 1945 down to the present time. This scholarly interest in the postwar community coincided with a sharper focus on the work on German Jewry being produced within Germany itself, a trend to which the LBI here in New York responded by the creation of a branch of its archives within Berlin’s Jewish Museum and the arrangement of a number of cultural and social events in the German capital.

Throughout the sixty-year history of the Leo Baeck Institute the question of the relation between German Jews and non-Jewish Germans raised by Erich Kahler has remained a central concern. Was it a productive relationship, a fruitful symbiosis, as many have claimed, a mutual fructification that resulted in amazing cultural productivity? Or was it rather, as Gershom Scholem famously insisted, an unrequited love that German Jews had pressed upon their fellow Germans? Does the history of German Jewry for contemporary Jews (and non-Jews), wherever they may live, point to a heritage worthy of admiration or rather one that calls for caution? It seems to me that this question rests upon an inadequate premise. It assumes that German non-Jews and German Jews represent two clearly distinguishable entities that interacted with each other during the course of a shared history. No doubt before the incremental process of Jewish
cultural integration began in the eighteenth century, that distinction held: Jews lived within their own sphere, not only religiously but linguistically and culturally as well. Few Jews had extensive contact with Christian Germans outside their commercial relations with one another. But over the course of the following century the all-encompassing Jewish identity contracted to make room for broader cultural identifications. The Jew living in German lands gradually morphed into the German Jew, whose Jewishness was increasingly defined, if not solely at least dominantly, by his or her religion. But it was not entirely a one-way process. Even as the German Jew absorbed Goethe and Schiller and fell in love with Beethoven and Mozart, so—if more gradually—at least some German non-Jews began to absorb characteristics that were widely regarded as Jewish. They read Jewish writers, purchased the works of Jewish artists, sought amusement from the barbs of Jewish satirists. Jewish self-critique and Jewish irony spread through the press, especially in the larger cities. By the end of the nineteenth century, Jew and German were no longer the clearly separate cultural categories that they had been before the beginning of Jewish integration. Of course the composition varied in different segments of the Jewish and non-Jewish populations and clearly Jews took in more Germanness than non-Jews took in Jewishness. Nonetheless, in 1880 the Jewish parliamentarian, Ludwig Bamberger, could remark: “To no other people have the Jews grown so close (haben sich so zusammengelebt) as they have to the Germans.”

And somewhat later the Jewish philosopher Hermann Cohen could equate Deutschtum and Judentum as possessing a common social and intellectual ideal. That the word Deutschtum thus lost some of its distinctiveness is evidenced by the fact that racist German writers often discarded it in favor of the more exclusive term Germanentum. Whereas Jews could claim the former, no amount of integration could give them access to the latter.

Thus it seems that in our contemporary examination of the German-Jewish experience, we need to understand German-Jewish identity as a dynamic category, which manifested itself in multiple ways, differentially over time and differentially in various segments of the Jewish population: widely ranging religiously from Orthodox to atheist, and ethnically from negation of any Jewish ethnic attachments, via a semi-ethnic attachment, widely
called *Stammsbewusstsein*, a strong awareness of personal Jewish origins, to a full commitment to Jewish ethnicity within Zionism. But we also need to recognize that the non-Jewish Germans are likewise not to be placed into a single category. Erich Kahler put it very well: There were the “alert, cultivated, open-minded, and open-hearted Germans who [were] self-critical and self-ironical” just like the Jews—I would add: like some Jews. But there was also what Kahler called “that opposite type of German, in whom German history produced an ineradicable inferiority complex, a persecution complex; who could not overcome a bitterness about Germany’s having missed her hegemonial day, the glory of predominance that all the Western nations have enjoyed, and who projected the national failure outward at the expense of other peoples.”

Given the prejudices anchored in German history, of course they projected that failure outward especially in the direction of the Jews.

If today German political leaders speak frequently of the Jewish cultural loss that needs to be restored, it is because Jewishness and Germanness of the humanistic strain had not remained two separate categories but had become increasingly interwoven over the course of time. By legislation, beginning in 1933, and then by violence in the November Pogrom of 1938 the Jewish elements were ripped out of the fabric of the German soul. Today there is a limited desire—which some believe to be quixotic—to interweave them once again.

The history of this cultural relationship between Jews and non-Jews in Germany, which Erich Kahler sought to define in his lecture, is yet another, and perhaps the central one of the topics to which the scholarly work of the LBI has been devoted. This area of inquiry, called *Beziehungsgeschichte*, literally: the history of relationship, remains especially difficult because, more than the other fields I have listed, subjectivity in this case is so difficult to control. We tend to generalize when we need to individualize.

Sixty years ago the Leo Baeck Institute, with its three branches, stood alone, the only scholarly institution devoted exclusively to the history of German-speaking Jewry. Today there are others in Israel and in Europe. Yet the work of understanding German Jewry in its complexity and many-sidedness is far from complete. For the LBI there
remains the task of ever and again giving fresh life to a remarkable historical experience through publication, lecture and exhibition. For the scholar there are new and not yet fully exploited tools of research, such as the DigiBaecck electronic access to our New York archives. In the course of research new questions arise, new foci emerge, new conceptualizations are put forward and subjected to critical analysis. Thanks in no small measure to the Leo Baeck Institute, interest in German-speaking Jewry has remained high over these sixty years. As the pioneer in its field, as the principal repository and transmitter of its written and artistic record here in the New York LBI, and as the publisher of serious scholarship in English, Hebrew, and German, the Leo Baeck Institute may look forward to a continuing central role in discerning the fascinating identity of the German Jews, their history and their heritage.

Endnotes

**Recent Leo Baeck Memorial Lectures**

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The history of Jews in German-speaking lands is a story of outstanding accomplishment and unprecedented tragedy, and the Leo Baeck Institute works to ensure that neither is ever forgotten. LBI was founded in 1955 by a circle of Jewish intellectuals who escaped the Nazi regime and resolved to document the vibrant German-Jewish culture that had been nearly extinguished in the Holocaust. For 60 years, LBI New York has worked to fulfill that mission by building a world-class research collection that is now the most important repository of primary source material on the history of Jewish people in Central Europe over five centuries.

Our founders’ mission remains relevant today. The stellar individual achievements of German-speaking Jews in the arts, science, business, politics, and beyond have shaped our modern world and given us powerful critical tools for understanding it. Beyond the achievements of luminaries, LBI collections tell a powerful story of the dynamic role that minorities can play in society when granted opportunity and democratic freedoms, as well as a cautionary tale about how fragile their situation can be in the face of bigotry. German-Jewish history also has a special relevance for modern Jews throughout the Diaspora, as Germany was the birthplace of major branches of contemporary Jewish religious practice—including Reform, Orthodox, and Conservative Judaism.

As a new Jewish community begins to flourish again in Germany, global interest in the past preserved at LBI is growing. The Institute provides an intellectual home for both the brightest and the most tragic aspects of the 20th century, and we must ensure that its lessons for the 21st century are preserved.