

# Teaching »Jewish Berlin«

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Few, if any, educational opportunities possess the intrinsic potency of study abroad: the chance to immerse in a subject in its own context and original language, where every chance encounter constitutes a potential »teachable moment« and the textbook is not a text at all, but a cityscape rich with foreground, background, and subtext. The intellectual and personal benefits of immersive study in a foreign context is increasingly recognized and forming a standardized part of the undergraduate educational experience; while year-long programs including language immersion remain the gold-standard of study abroad, for many students shorter, intensive single-semester and summer programs may be the most realistic opportunity to gain cross-cultural experience.<sup>1</sup>

Many academics in fields with an international component – cultural studies, world languages, comparative literature, and area studies, to name a few – benefit from the opportunity to teach in study abroad programs, and may well have entered our chosen fields in part because of positive international experiences of during our own educations. The challenges of teaching effectively abroad, however, are numerous, intricate, and highly dependent on subject matter as well as familiarity with the location where the international course is taught.

Here I offer insights gained from my experiences teaching »Jewish Berlin« as part of a six-week long immersive summer program offered by Duke and Rutgers in Berlin. The Duke/Rutgers program in Berlin has offered a course on »Jewish Berlin« on an occasional basis since its founding in 1988 (a very different Berlin from that of today!), most recently during the summer programs in 2012, 2013, and 2014. In this course, one of two courses students take as part of

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**1** | A substantial secondary literature on study abroad exists, and much of this derives from the area of German Studies. Among the studies I consulted in preparation for teaching »Jewish Berlin« are Lynda J. King/John A. Young: Study Abroad: Education for the 21st Century. In: Die Unterrichtspraxis/Teaching German 27 (1994), No. 1, p. 77-87; Julia Kruse/Cate Brubaker: Successful Study Abroad: Tips for Student Preparation, Immersion, and Postprocessing. In: Die Unterrichtspraxis/Teaching German 40 (2007), No. 2, p. 147-152; Bernhard Streitwieser/Robin Leephaibul: Enhancing the Study Abroad Experience through Independent Research in Germany. In: Ibid, p. 164-170; Ulrich Teichler/Wolfgang Steube: The Logics of Study Abroad Programmes and Their Impacts. In: Higher Education 21 (1991), No. 3 (April). p. 325-349.

the summer program, participants explore the Jewish encounter with western modernity – from the Enlightenment to the present day – through the lens of Berlin Jewish history and culture. The course, as currently constructed, emphasizes an immersion in Jewish spaces and locations of historic as well as modern significance, and it provides opportunities to discuss contemporary understandings and experiences of Judaism and Jewishness with diverse members of the Berlin Jewish community, including communal officials, rabbis, and students (seminarians and undergraduates). The course is offered in English and does not include any formal elements of language acquisition, but does provide opportunities for students at various language levels to make use of developing language skills.

By way of background: my area of scholarship is Jewish Studies, and my primary appointment is in a department of Religious Studies. With an intellectual background in medieval Jewish writings from the Rhineland, however, and a strong background in the rise of Reform Judaism in Germany (I possess rabbinic ordination in the Reform movement as well as a PhD in the History of Judaism), participating in a course such as *Jewish Berlin* possesses an intrinsic logic. In addition, my teaching benefits tremendously from the presence of a terrific graduate teaching assistant and co-instructor, Emma Woelk, now a PhD, whose areas of research in 20<sup>th</sup> century Jewish German literature and culture, and deep familiarity with Berlin, significantly enrich the course. Having taught similar courses stateside, over the course of a full semester, I am able to share a perspective on both the unique potential and distinctive challenges of teaching a course such as »*Jewish Berlin*« over six weeks on location.

## **BACKGROUND: COURSE ORGANIZATION**

In any class, syllabus structure constitutes one of the most fundamental challenges facing an instructor, and teaching on location in a foreign country, and teaching a subject as broad as »*Jewish Berlin*,« only compounds these issues. A palette of basic possible structures for this course readily presented themselves, each with obvious benefits and drawbacks.

Stateside, my course on the origins of modern Judaism – which closely overlaps with much of the material in *Jewish Berlin* – has a roughly chronological structure, which enables students to trace developments and trends across time and understand large cultural shifts whose echoes resonate even today. That said, a chronological structure can mislead students and suggest a simple, reductionist causality that keeps the instructor »un-teaching« what he or she teaches on a regular basis. It can make key events – the Holocaust – seem not only inevitable, but climactic.

Related to the general chronological approach is the »great person« structure, which focuses on various vivid and significant figures and personalities – Mendelssohn, Salomon Maimon, Rahel, and others – who bring such life to the »stage« of Jewish Berlin. The strength of this approach derives from its liveliness and memorability, and it can be particularly appealing in the compressed time-frame of a six-week summer course. Students respond to and remember these figures, and they lend themselves to a variety of innovative pedagogical exercises (reality shows, Facebook pages, game shows). At the same time, this approach – for all its appeal – grievously distorts the picture that students receive. It highlights issues relevant to a sliver of the Jewish upper-class, particularly the men, and obscures the reality of the Jewish experience of the rest of the Jewish population (and, in particular, women). The vividness and memorability can be as much a liability as an advantage.

Both the chronological and the »great figures« approaches emerge from the standard seminar approach to a course; when teaching abroad, a primary opportunity – obligation, I would say – is to use the city as a text. Even focusing on a single city (Berlin) and a single population (Jews), it is possible to spend almost every meeting of a six-week course (consisting of twelve three-hour meetings, as well as individual excursions and additional assignments, as discussed below) »on location.« The challenge with Jewish Berlin is that so many of the Jewish spaces are now simply voids (perhaps marked by a plaque) or memorials. As significant and powerful as these locations can be as remembrances, they, too, contain the potential to distort the student experience of Jewish Berlin, making it something »past tense«: a study of absence rather than presence.

In the end, the course as Dr. Woelk and I have shaped it reflects something of a hybrid. We assign Amos Elon's *The Pity of It All* as reading to be completed prior to arrival in Berlin. This work of popular history begins with Mendelssohn's entry to Berlin in 1743 and ends in 1933; it offers students a linear historical approach with an emphasis on some of the more memorable personalities of each period. With that reading as a common starting point (reinforced by written assignments that include both a critical essay, which helps students attend to some of the weaknesses of Elon's approach, and a timeline to help reinforce basic historical knowledge), we then select a variety of locations, projects, readings, and classroom guests who will bring the actual city of Berlin and the unique Berlin Jewish experience – past and present – to life.

I would venture that each iteration of the course has improved the syllabus, but also heightened my own awareness of specific challenges, some of which may simply be intrinsic, but others of which I look forward to attempting to resolve. These break down into two basic categories, the practical and the philosophical, and relate to three separate areas of the course: those pertaining to German Studies, Jewish Studies, and Religious Studies.

## PRACTICAL ISSUES

Most of the practical challenges involved in planning this course result not from the subject matter but from the nature of teaching off-site and in a very compressed fashion. The pre-departure assignment using Elon's *The Pity of It All* helps establish an academic tone for the course, distinguishing it (we hope) from an »academic vacation« – a junior version of Elderhostel, so to speak. And where a semester-long course has a certain luxury of time, at least comparatively, a six-week summer course (even an on-campus course, let alone abroad) leaves little time for sustained synthesis or serious reflection. Furthermore, the infrastructure of our program, at least, requires students to be flexible in their work methods, as they have to work without easy access to printers and inferior internet access, compared to what they are used to. In general, it can be a challenge to get a population of undergraduates who often seems risk averse to take risks and venture beyond the syllabus and program itineraries and take responsibility for fulfilling the potential of living abroad. As the instructor, I also have to be flexible: in 2013, the Jewish Museum's exhibit, with the notorious »Jew in the Box« exhibit, was a pedagogical gift; the exhibit in 2014 was simply not as compelling. Likewise, while I often find myself under the most routine circumstances regretting that the pace of the semester prevents me from taking full advantage of various activities on campus and planned by colleagues, that feeling is that much stronger – and the imperative to overcome inertia that much more urgent – in the summer study-abroad setting. The ideal of coordination with other courses (even other programs!) and integration of the residential component of the program is easy to articulate but difficult to implement.

Some practical problems are more course- and site-specific, such as the need to navigate language barriers (or anxieties) with class guests, the logistics of coordinating transit and meetings when students may be unfamiliar with public transit and unaccustomed to navigating without Smartphones. Similarly, the need to rely on English-language sources can skew the content of the readings (that is, always presenting an American or otherwise Anglophone ex-pat perspective on things). On a more technical level, students can struggle with nomenclature of Jewish life in Germany: the structure of the Gemeinde, of course, but even more basically the lack of alignment between American and German »Reform Judaism,« and other movement labels.

That said, it can be pedagogically useful for students to learn that they do not necessarily know even the things they may think they know, and likewise the intensity of a compressed semester can be useful, even as it is a challenge. Students have less time to forget material between sessions and thus sometimes display a greater facility at making connections between disparate topics and readings. Similarly, the rather manic pace of the course itself generates a significant bond among the students, particularly those taking the same set of courses

or otherwise sharing significant time together. The gains from this social aspect of the course may not be entirely intellectual, but such camaraderie can foster a willingness to explore beyond the confines of the class – e. g., attend Shabbat services together, as part of a Friday evening out – which might be intimidating to undertake alone.

## PHILOSOPHICAL ISSUES

More pressing, and interesting, than the practical challenges are the philosophical challenges inherent in a course such as »Jewish Berlin.« Indeed, grappling with these issues – even discerning what the underlying issues were, in post-mortems with my teaching assistant/co-instructor after individual sessions – often facilitated my own learning about the material.

The range of philosophical issues confronting the instructor in such a course is, upon reflection, quite impressive. To begin with, as is often the case in the contemporary humanities, the course is what I think of as an advanced seminar with no prerequisites. Simply stated, students have unpredictable and often thin background knowledge of European history, Judaism, or the methods of comparative, critical cultural study. It can be difficult to explain the significance of Jewish emancipation or the nature of various reforms and anti-reform reactions within the Jewish community, and similarly students are generally unaware of the nature of the Cold War. Even students who are somewhat more knowledgeable about contemporary Jewish practice, whether through coursework or personal background, are unlikely to understand how significantly different German modes of religious organization are. The Gemeinde system, and the support of religious organizations through taxes, with the consequence that synagogues are not supported by voluntary dues, raises a variety of challenges for students in understanding how Judaism was lived both before World War II and today.

In addition to a lack of useful, but not irremediable, factual knowledge comes a relative lack of sophistication about the nature of religion as an anthropological and cultural phenomenon. As a consequence of their own historical circumstances, students tend to evaluate various practices and tensions in highly individualistic ways, expressing strong opinions on issues ranging from intermarriage to circumcision to kosher dietary laws with little sense of context or phenomenology. Indeed, this material often seems to inspire strong sympathetic responses in students who identify, if not with the specific individuals whose stories we read then the extreme circumstances which generate their narratives; the pedagogical challenge is to help students transform their initial response – e. g., »Why didn't the Jews simply leave?« – into something nuanced, contextualized, and ultimately even more memorable.

Related to the issue of students relying primarily on instinct and personal identification in terms of their study of religion is the fact that many students enrolled in a course such as Jewish Berlin are motivated by personal issues of their religious identity and affinity. For example, students with one Jewish parent will, for obvious reasons, respond to various laws and policies determining Jewish identity not only in terms of the reasons for and consequences of governmental involvement in such issues of identity (and related issues which are at play in the US, such assignment of gender on driver's licenses), but in terms of how it would affect them as individuals.

The final major philosophical issue revolves around the Holocaust and anti-Semitism, as the Shoah is often the only element of German Jewish history with which the students are familiar prior to the course. The tendency of students to write about Jews in Germany in the past tense in their initial writing assignment (the pre-departure essay) exemplifies this unquestioned and deeply held assumption. Often students resist the material that doesn't engage at least obliquely with National Socialism – at the very least, they seem relieved when we reach the parts of the syllabus where we deal with the Nuremberg Laws, the Holocaust, and post-war memorials. In fact, in 2013 – my first year teaching the course – issues of memorialization in particular seemed to take on excess prominence, a result in part of the refashioning of many historical Jewish sites in Berlin into memorials and the inherent significance of locations such as Weissensee cemetery. The challenge lies in helping students understand not only the various strategies for memorializing victims of Nazi policies – to give them the emotional space and intellectual structures for thinking through the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe, the Stolpersteine, and all the smaller, localized memorials in ways substantive and critical – but to help them to understand that Judaism in Germany cannot be confined to that register without doing both past and present a form of injustice. Ideally, we seek to use the plethora of memorials to move students into a discussion of the whys and hows of such structures: issues of collective memory and history, both Jewish and German; and audience and function. In turn, we can extend their critical awareness to consider what it means to refer to »The Jewish Museum« as »The Holocaust Museum« – what in their own minds leads to such slippage, and what in the museum itself, and what the (overlapping? complementary? competing?) roles of museums and memorials are. In turn, they can extend this awareness to topics far beyond Jewish Berlin, including the 9/11 memorial in New York, Civil War monuments in the American south, and any other of a host of contexts.

The final philosophical challenge of this course is, in fact, determining how strongly to encourage students to discern parallels between the history of Jews in Germany and other populations – the assimilation (successful or not) of Muslims into Europe, and the stereotyping about Latinos in the US, for example; the question of whether Islam can »modernize« and whether – again to cite an example from class – whether the reality TV show »The Shahs of Sunset« is

a kind of cultural echo of the Jewish women's salons. While initially students may incline towards superficial or facile comparisons, learning to navigate the tensions between meaningful parallelism and parallelomania is itself powerful, and takes the experience of Jewish Berlin out of the classroom, out – even – of Berlin, and into the students' lives.

## REITERATION AND MOVING FORWARD

A course like »Jewish Berlin« will always be a moving target. The course will change as Jewish life in Berlin changes, and in dynamic with the students in the class. That said, as I anticipate a third iteration of the course, I have several additions and alterations to the syllabus which I hope to make, in order to enrich the intellectual and experiential substance of the course even further.

The most potent and memorable counterbalance to the possible over-emphasis on memorialization and »past-tense Judaism« is, in my experience, a focus on lived and living Judaism. Guests – whom we generally host in cafes or other casual sites conducive to conversation – share their biographies, which inevitably brings up the compelling material from the readings from both primary sources (particularly memoirs and autobiographies), secondary sources (which stress historical background), and literature. Furthermore, Emma and I have found the more living, breathing individuals the students can meet, and the wider a variety of opinions and perspectives, the more the students come to understand the complexity of contemporary Jewish life in Berlin and Germany. We have been lucky to have as class guests noteworthy individuals such as Hermann Simon and Rabbi Andreas Nachama, who speak from experience with the Gemeinde in more and less critical ways; students in the rabbinical program at the Geiger Kolleg in Potsdam (and an instructor at Geiger, whose area of study is American Judaism – a good reminder for our students that they can themselves be objects of study); and, the perennial favorite Jonas Fegert, the founder of Studentim (the undergraduate Jewish student organization in Berlin), who always resonates in particular because he is a peer of our own students. We are continually attempting to think of new perspectives to add to this roster and hope, in the coming year, to add a meeting with Peter Schäfer, the new head of the Jewish museum, to facilitate a discussion about the role of the museum in Berlin life and beyond. By having some of the same guests over the years, furthermore, we are able to build up relationships with them which let us orchestrate discussions that take us into more difficult material. This upcoming summer, I expect our guests to share responses to this summer's episodes of anti-Judaism and vandalism in Berlin and Wuppertal.

Another important facet of »Jewish Berlin« which I have come to believe would be valuable, at least as an experiment, is for students to attend not a single

synagogue service but, instead, a variety of services during the course of the six weeks. A single service would potentially mislead students into assuming that the service was somehow representative; attendance at a variety of synagogues – Reform, Progressive, Masorti, and Orthodox – would demonstrate the tremendous variety of Judaism as a religious tradition in a vividly experiential way. Such a component would not be simple to introduce, however, in part because of language issues and because making the service experience intellectually meaningful requires both a good bit of preparation and significant debriefing.

In addition to bringing these living voices to the course, a second avenue for enriching the class – but one perhaps more challenging to implement – would be to engage the students in research involving interviews or archival work. Research of this kind would deepen the intellectual content of the course even as it offered students a sense of competency, self-determination, mastery, and engagement with contemporary Jewish Germany in practical way. Furthermore, in an ideal world, it would also be possible to augment the pre-departure assignment with some form of preparatory seminar or colloquium for the students – perhaps via some form of »virtual classroom« so that Duke and Rutgers students may participate equally; and, creating a bookend, a similar virtual meeting could be arranged for after all the students have returned to their institutions. Such a follow-up would not only facilitate a discussion which would deepen the »take away« of the course by revisiting key elements one additional time, but it could also serve to encourage students to continue their study of the material, whether in terms of language, culture, or history, during the upcoming semester.

## CONCLUSIONS

The challenges of teaching a course such as Jewish Berlin are manifold, even were it not compressed into a six-week period. It raises issues and questions that require students to engage with and understand, in at least nascent ways, questions arising from Jewish Studies, German culture and history, and the academic study of Religion. That said, I will confess it is perhaps the most energizing and rewarding teaching experience I have yet had, in part because I am learning with my students and because the experience of working in Berlin is inherently so dynamic. The course will, like all the best courses, always be a work in progress – because its subjects are not frozen in some mythic past we can study from a distance but living, thriving, and always surprising real people.