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The Jewish Museum of Westphalia – An Institution Rooted in Civil Society

Westphalia is located in the north-eastern part of North Rhine-Westphalia and has a population of around 8.4 million. The largest cities are Dortmund, Bochum, Bielefeld, and Münster. Yet, the Jewish Museum of Westphalia is located in the town of Dorsten. Therefore, the first question is often: “Why is there a Jewish museum in this place?”. The answer is that it was here that local citizens thought it important to have a place where Jewish religion and the Jewish history of Westphalia would be remembered and taught after the Holocaust. This personal concern is expressed in the preamble to the statutes of the later museum’s supporting association, the Verein für Jüdische Geschichte und Religion e. V.: “As the descendants of those through whose fault Jewish life was extinguished, we feel responsible for securing and preserving the traces of Jewish life in Westphalia”.¹

A small but persistent group of committed citizens from Dorsten and the surrounding area concerned itself with Judaism, antisemitism, and Jewish history, first in the town and then in the region. The group gradually gained the support of the local administration and citizenry in order to establish a museum and gradually put it on a solid financial base. Over the next few pages, it will be seen how the museum came into being, how it has been developed and professionalised over the years, and why its roots in the community are still a great strength.

In 1982, the group “Dorsten unterm Hakenkreuz” (“Dorsten under the Swastika”) emerged around the journalist Wolf Stegemann and the Social Democratic town councillor Dirk Hartwich. It was one of many grassroots history workshops at the time in which the children and grandchildren of the perpetrators and bystanders of the Holocaust set about analyzing the history of their locality.² The participants included teachers, journalists, politically inter-

1 Archive of the Jewish Museum Westphalia, Verein für jüdische Geschichte und Religion e. V., Satzung, 1996, 4 (translation KP).

2 Inka Bertz, “Jüdische Museen in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland”, in: *“Ausgestopfte Juden?” Geschichte, Gegenwart und Zukunft Jüdischer Museen*, ed. Felicitas Heimann-Jelinek and Hannes Sulzenbacher (Göttingen 2022), 62–83. In November 1988, an eight-page special edition of the museum magazine *Schalom* was published in co-operation with various publishing houses. The magazine contained articles on the November pogroms of 1938 in the towns of the Recklinghausen district, 200,000 copies of which were enclosed with the newspapers in

ested lay, and, rarely, professional historians. Their initiative was part of the post-war generation's attempt at filling in the blanks in historiography that were left because of insufficient scrutiny of the history of the Nazi regime and the Holocaust by the generations before them.³



Fig. 1: Inauguration of a plaque to commemorate the destruction of the synagogue on November 9, 1938, at the Old Town Hall, Dorsten, November 9, 1983.

The individual group members had their own personal motives for participating as well. The co-founder and first honorary director of the museum was Johanna Eichmann, who was Jewish but had been baptized for her protection as a child in the 1930s and later became a nun. For her, this was “a departure and a homecoming at the same time: a departure to new insights and a homecoming to myself, to my own unknown history – via the history of local Jewish families and finally my own family too”.⁴ For another group member who still sits on the board today, the initial resistance of the population was a motivating factor because “if people don’t want you to uncover something, then there must be

the region. Archive of the Jewish Museum Westphalia, Dokumentationszentrum für Jüdische Geschichte und Religion in der früheren Synagogenhauptgemeinde Dorsten im Kreis Recklinghausen, Tätigkeitsbericht 1987–1990, 18–19.

³ Norbert Reichling, “Nach 20 Jahren”, *Schalom. Magazine of the Jewish Museum Westphalia*, 71 (2012): 2.

⁴ Johanna Eichmann, *Die Rote Johanna. Erinnerungen 1952–2012* (Klartext 2013), 126.

something behind it”.⁵ A second strong motivator for her even today is to help *emigrés* and their descendants to connect to their family history in the region. Another one of the five “hard core” members of the research group, which consisted of up to 30 people, was driven by her interest in history, which she was unable to pursue professionally as an accountant. She would have loved to become an archaeologist, she says.⁶

After just one year, the group published its first volume on the former Jewish community in Dorsten, followed by “Kirche zwischen Anpassung und Widerstand”, “Der gleichgeschaltete Alltag”, “1945–1950. Die Jahre danach”, and “Die Krisenjahre der Weimarer Republik”.⁷ The most comprehensive volume was “Juden in Dorsten und in der Herrlichkeit Lembeck” (“Jews in Dorsten and in the Territory of Lembeck”), published in 1989. Through its research, the group “opened up a large can of worms”, said the late chair of the board.⁸ Fears among the population that they could be prosecuted for aryanized property, however, were unfounded, as the group had already resorted to self-censorship and only wrote “was acquired by a Dorsten family” or used abbreviations. Nevertheless, there were occasional anonymous phone calls and nasty mail, and group member Elisabeth Schulte-Huxel even received death threats.⁹ Another person later heard she was described as writing “communist books”. Others simply boycotted the enterprise.

The idea of establishing a “documentation center for Jewish history and religion in the former synagogue community of Dorsten in the district of Recklinghausen” was conceived early on, and in 1987 an association, which in its heyday would have 550 members, was founded to support the project. With the idea to create the documentation center, the focus had shifted to Jewish history. The goal was to have space for all the documents and photos that the group had collected to present in schools and local associations. Over the years, they had also built up a collection of Judaica. By 1989, the group owned 400 exhibits, including old books, engravings, prints, religious artefacts, and coins from ancient Israel.¹⁰ By that time, the only regular income were the member-

5 Archive of the Jewish Museum Westphalia, Interview with Elisabeth Cosanne-Schulte-Huxel, co-founder of the Jewish Museum Westphalia, by Heidi Behrens, January 12, 2012, 6.

6 Interview with Christel Winkel, March 30, 2023. Both women assume that the group was so successful because everyone had their own speciality (and maybe also because the entire families were always involved).

7 “Church between Adaptation and Resistance”, “The Synchronised Everyday”, “1945–1950. The Years After”, “The Crisis Years of the Weimar Republic”.

8 Interview with Norbert Reichling, March 30, 2023, 2.

9 Interview with Elisabeth Cosanne-Schulte-Huxel, 5–6.

10 Wolf Stegemann, “Silberne Thorakrone ist eine Kostbarkeit”, in: *Schalom*, 6 (1989): 3.

ship fees of the supporting organization, who had 171 members in 1990. However, the annual football tournaments and flea markets, fundraising campaigns as well as annually awarded public grants also generated money to build up the collection and for exhibitions.¹¹



Fig. 2: Actor Cameron Mitchell visits the group in Dorsten, 1987–1990, Source: *Dorstener Zeitung*.

The request to use a dilapidated municipal property for this purpose went through the town council surprisingly quickly. Johanna Eichmann identified “two reasons for this, which are not to be found in enthusiasm for Judaism! On the one hand, our group had earned recognition through the work done in the previous five years”, the second reason was the desire of many city fathers and politicians to “bring a ‘highlight’ to Dorsten”.¹²

¹¹ Archive of the Jewish Museum Westphalia, Dokumentationszentrum für Jüdische Geschichte und Religion, Tätigkeitsbericht 1987–1990, 15–16.

¹² Archive of the Jewish Museum Westphalia, Johanna Eichmann, “Das Jüdische Museum Westfalen”, typescript for a lecture at the Lions Club Gelsenkirchen, dated September 27, 1993 (translation KP), 1–2.

The fact that she, the headmistress of the prestigious St. Ursula grammar school with connections to town and church, stood at the group's helm certainly helped. Moreover, among the members of the supporting association were the Head of the Jewish community of Bochum-Herne-Recklinghausen, the Head of the District and the first SPD mayor of Dorsten.¹³

Soon the city, the state (North Rhine-Westphalia) and the Association of Local Councils of Westfalen Lippe (LWL) and its Museum Office contributed money for the renovation of the building. The Museum Office, a regional advisory institution, advised and suggested calling this institution the Jewish Museum Westphalia, broadening its focus from the locality to the region.¹⁴ According to Norbert Reichling, the town mayor continued to be somewhat sceptical about the project, yet the tone had become more civilized and the grants for refurbishment and for the museum operation were never contested.¹⁵ The fact that on June 28, 1992, the Prime Minister of North Rhine-Westphalia and later German President, Johannes Rau, himself opened "the only [Jewish museum] between Frankfurt and Amsterdam",¹⁶ as the museum preferred to describe itself, and that the Israeli ambassador was present alongside other VIPs, certainly contributed to the institution's acceptance.

Once they had a building, they had to fill it, not least since the LWL Museum Office required the existence of a collection for its support.¹⁷ Judaica, in particular, totalling DM 320,000 and paid for by the newly established NRW Foundation were subsequently purchased at auctions in London and Amsterdam. The Judaist and historian Dr. Michael Brocke was on hand to provide advice. Where these objects came from or why they were on the market does not seem to have been a major concern at the time.¹⁸ In that period the museum did not have a written collecting policy, but an important focus lay on ritual objects.

13 Interview with Elisabeth Schulte-Huxel, 11–12; Tätigkeitsbericht, 6.

14 The creators were aware that the choice of the adjective "Jewish" for a museum established by a group of mostly non-Jews could be controversial. Johanna Eichmann, "Das Jüdische Museum Westfalen", 2.

15 Interview with Norbert Reichling, March 30, 2023, 2.

16 *Schalom* 19 (1992): 1.

17 As a condition for their support, the Museum Office required 1) sufficient original exhibits, 2) a didactic concept, 3) regular opening hours, 4) a museum director and 5) municipal co-sponsorship. See Wolf Stegemann, *Schalom* 3 (1988): 2.

18 Wolf Stegemann, "Hochwertige Qualität im Trend", *Schalom* 13 (1991): 8.



Fig. 3: Opening of the Jewish Museum Westphalia, June 28, 1982, in the presence of then Prime Minister of North Rhine-Westphalia Johannes Rau, Source: *Dorstener Zeitung*.

Parallel to the official remembrance policy, the connection between Jewish history and the history of persecution and the Holocaust was strong in the first permanent display.¹⁹ It consisted of two main parts, one on religious traditions and one on Jew hatred and antisemitism. At that time, regional history was not yet as developed as it is today, in part because research into it had only just started and the group had hardly any exhibits on the subject.²⁰ The founding of the state of Israel was another focus.

At the time, Judaica were collected as illustrative objects (“specimen”) for the explanation of Jewish religious and cultural practice, whereas their historical context initially played no role. The museum offered a program of lectures, panel discussions, readings, film, and music, which brought some dynamics to the rather static displays. It conceived itself as a “house of learning”.²¹ The list of exhibitions shows that a wide range of topics were addressed in the 1990s, including shows by Jewish artists, an exhibition on Cantor Salomon Sulzer, one on the synagogue, and one on Jerusalem. Yet, religion and Israel were quite strong foci of the events program.

¹⁹ Bertz, “Jüdische Museen”, 76.

²⁰ Helmut Knirim, “Lehrhaus und Begegnungsstätte ist für Juden und Nichtjuden offen”, *Schalom* 18 (1992): 4–5.

²¹ Johanna Eichmann, “Das Jüdische Museum Westfalen”, 5.

In 1991, for the first time, two research assistants were hired, one of them temporarily, the other was the curator who would remain in office until his retirement in 2023; at the beginning, he also delivered the learning program. Nevertheless, he thinks that even by then, the museum still presented itself as the project of an amateur group and the board took part in conferences and important meetings themselves.²²

In 1994, the appointment of a qualified business economist as the museum's administrator was another step towards professionalization. Although she was unpaid, she worked nearly full-time and brought the financial administration up to the state of the art by switching everything to digital. Her involvement made it possible to set up the museum's own foundation in 1998 to put the organization on a more solid financial footing and to manage the funding administration for a new building and extension (2000–2004).²³

That extension was a milestone and major achievement for a group still predominantly formed of volunteers. Yet, it also received the academic support of an advisory board assembling experts from the German and Dutch museum sector when developing its new permanent display. Moreover, after the renovation, the visitor services were professionalized. In the narrative of the new and extended permanent display, religion and the history of persecution were still closely linked visually, but regional history, illustrated through the use of exemplary biographies, occupied more space now.

From the curator's perspective, a landmark in the museum's recognition by specialists in the field was the subsequent study visit by the international Working Group on Jewish Collections ("Arbeitsgemeinschaft Jüdische Sammlungen").²⁴ Moreover, from 2004 onwards, the district of Recklinghausen delegated a former teacher to the museum to deliver the learning program. When he retired ten years later, a museum professional with experience in memorial sites and museums took over the position, which has continued to be financed by the district ever since.²⁵ At around that time, North Rhine-Westphalia through the Regional Agency for Civic Education started to become an active funder of memorial sites including the Jewish Museum Westphalia.

It was a stroke of luck that, in 2006, Dr. Norbert Reichling, an expert in historical political education, took over the role of museum director from founder Johanna Eichmann. For the next 12 years he would fulfil this honorary position

²² Interview with curator Thomas Ridder, March 21, 2023.

²³ Anke Klapsing-Reich, "Ich geh' ja nicht ganz". Interview zum Abschied von Gisela Brückner", *Schalom* 70 (2012): 6–7.

²⁴ Interview with curator Thomas Ridder, March 21, 2023.

²⁵ Anke Klapsing-Reich, "Mareike Böke folgt Udo Reese" in: *Schalom* 74 (2014): 2, 5.

alongside his paid job. The third permanent display since the inauguration of the museum opened at the end of 2018. It was developed with the help of a project manager who was also a subject specialist and a streamlined advisory board. In the development phase, there were public workshops and consultations with schools, universities, and youth groups. Norbert Reichling played a leading role in fundraising as well as contributing substantially to the content of the new permanent display and the subsequent production of the museum's academic publications. He also initiated two large-scale research and exhibition projects that were realised in co-operation with external experts: "Angekommen!?" (2009–2010) on Jewish migration from the former Soviet Union to Germany at the turn of the 21st century and "Heimatkunde" about Jewish-non-Jewish relations in the 19th century (2010–2014). His example and the example of the administrator illustrate perfectly well that the separation between "professionals" and "volunteers" or "honorary workers" is not always helpful to describe the division of labor or the level of professionalism adopted by the people involved.

Since the foundation of the museum, German-Jewish demographics had changed significantly through the migration of Jews from the former Soviet Union. The Jewish communities were revitalized and Jewish life became more visible. Museology had also shifted and museums started to be more inclusive and interactive. An important message of the latest permanent display, entitled "L'Chaim! – Jewish in Westphalia" is therefore diversity within German Jewry, both culturally and religiously as well as relating to age, gender, and location. The narrative was expanded to include the recent immigration as part of a wider chapter on "migration and flight". Moreover, sections on Jewish ethics, language, and Kosher food aimed at identifying Jewishness with more than religion in the strict sense.²⁶ The display was also adapted to meet today's museum standards with visual, audio, and interactive stations for young and old, with more contemporary relevance and a family-friendly design.

A final step in the professionalization of the museum was achieved in 2020 when the Association of Local Councils from Westfalen Lippe (LWL) started to grant regular funding on the condition that the museum was professionally-led.²⁷ The first major task of the new director was to coordinate the development of the museum's first written strategy. The newly formulated mission statement reads as follows:

²⁶ Cordula Lissner, "Auf dem Weg zu einer neuen Dauerausstellung in Dorsten", *Schalom* 80 (2017): 10; Anja Reichert, "Jüdische Geschichte(n) neu erzählt", *Schalom* 83 (2018): 8–9.

²⁷ Norbert Reichling, "A pretty big step", *Schalom* 85 (2019): 2.



Fig. 4: Jewish Museum Westphalia with the original building now housing temporary exhibition spaces and offices on the left. On the right, the 2000 extension with rooms for the permanent display and lecture hall, 2023, ©JMW, Navina Verheyen.

Through its research, collection, remembrance, exhibition and learning activities, the museum invites visitors to discover Jewish religion and culture in the past and present from a regional perspective. It arouses curiosity and helps to break down stereotypes and prejudices in the long term and combat antisemitism and other inhuman ideologies. Thus, it makes a lasting contribution to strengthening individual personality and civil courage as well as to social cohesion and democratic awareness.

The Jewish Museum Westphalia is a meeting place that invites people of all generations and cultures to participate and interact. It strives to be a place that has something to offer for everyone and a regional institution that is recognised beyond the region.²⁸

On one hand, this is a continuation of the originally intended purpose while corresponding with some public expectations.²⁹ On the other hand, the museum's task is now more specific and functional than in the past and it lacks the

²⁸ Jewish Museum Westphalia, Strategy 2024, 3 (English translation KP), www.jmw-dorsten.de, accessed January 20, 2025.

²⁹ Regarding the political expectations towards Jewish museums, see Barbara Staudinger, "Jüdische Museen als gesellschaftspolitischer Diskursraum. Neue Herausforderungen durch Antisemitismus, Fremdenhass und die Renaissance des Religiösen", in *Das umkämpfte Museum. Zeitgeschichte ausstellen zwischen Dekonstruktion und Sinnstiftung*, ed., Ljiljana Radonić and Heidmarie Uhl (transcript 2020), 201–211.

generation-specific perspective. Instead, it positions itself within a framework of historical political education. This corresponds somewhat to the second chair's assessment from 2012 that the focus had shifted from "remembrance" to "learning".³⁰ It aims at a high level of professionalism while opening up thematically and with regards to contemporary forms of inclusion and participation. In 2023, for example, a class from a local vocational college curated a substantial part of a temporary exhibition on Holocaust remembrance.³¹ In 2024, interpretive material for the permanent display in the form of a brochure or audio recordings for children and adults with cognitive impairments have been developed by two relevant groups. Further projects to become a more inclusive museum are planned in the forthcoming years. In contrast to the civil society initiatives of the founding years, such activities are project-based and the lead is with the museum professionals, although this might shift in the future towards a stronger input by voluntary groups in the decision-making process.

The museum has been cooperating with various Jewish communities since its inception. With the help of one board member in particular, the museum has maintained intensive contact with descendants of Jewish families from Dorsten over the years. With descendants of the Eisendrath family, who emigrated from the town in the mid-19th century, the museum developed its own website, which combines family research by the Eisendraths themselves and by the museum.³² Sixty family members met at a reunion in Dorsten in 2010. Two much smaller virtual family reunions followed in 2023 and one in 2024. Over the years, two streets in Dorsten were named after Jewish families who once lived here, on the initiative of the same board member. Such connections not only help both sides by exchanging knowledge about the respective family histories. More importantly, the museum seems to serve as a kind of anchor point in cases where family histories remain tragically incomplete. However, it is questionable whether such intensive personal contacts will be possible once the board member retires and a staff member takes over the contact.

There have always been links to, and joint projects with, the Jewish communities of the area. 2024 and 2025, several exhibitions are being realized in cooperation with Jewish communities and collectors with close ties to organized communities. The museum also maintains cooperation agreements with local schools and takes part in events such as the Dorsten Days of the Constitution, International Children's Day and various state and town-wide learning pro-

³⁰ Interview with Elisabeth Cosanne-Schulte-Huxel, 19.

³¹ "Werde Zweitzug*in" ("Become a secondary witness") by the association *Zweitzeugen* e. V.

³² www.eisendrath-stories.net, accessed January 20, 2025.

grams. It maintains contacts with integration councils and agencies and with the regional centers for teacher training. The museum has made a name for itself particularly with its learning program. In 2023, its offer was expanded to include workshops on antisemitism prevention for police officers. This is to be further developed for employees with the judiciary. Curatorial and learning staff present regularly as experts in workshops and conferences.

While the objects were initially collected to illustrate ideas, this has shifted in recent years as the museum was able to expand its collections through the donation of letters, photographs, and artefacts specific to the region. Today, regional provenance is a necessary condition for the acquisition of Judaica as well. It goes without saying that purchases and donations are viewed more critically with regards to their provenance today. In 2020 to 2021, a research project into the provenance of a number of Judaica and social history objects took place, over the course of which the museum restituted several items to communities and individuals. Today, the museum is a firm part of a network of professionals, including the Working Group of Jewish Collections, the European Association of Jewish Museums and the Museum's Association of North Rhine-Westphalia. For the near future, the development of a written collecting policy and the launch of a contemporary collecting project are planned.

The museum's work has long since arrived "in the centre of society" and become a flagship organization for local and regional politicians and an institution that the town prides itself with. In the meantime, a further 28 NS-memorial sites have been established in the region, to which the museum belongs as well, despite its different focus. This means that many other places offer learning programs on antisemitism prevention and historical political education. In addition, local and regional museums now also include Jewish history.

There has been strong continuity on the board of the museum, who are by now nearly the only volunteers still engaged with the museum. Between 1987 and 2012, the museum had only 11 different board members and in 2024, two members from 2012 are still on the board.³³ However, this is changing. As early as ten years ago, the question arose as to how the "generational project" can be handed over to a new board and museum's association membership base. It is no secret that associations with their rather old-fashioned rigid structures are no longer very popular. Initial soundings to recruit new board members in the

³³ In 2012, the museum had 2.5 full-time employees (excluding the visitor service) and 33 volunteers. Today it has 3.7 employees and perhaps another 15 volunteers. See "Zahlen, Zahlen, Zahlen", *Schalom*, 71 (2012): 15.



Fig. 5: Impressions of the permanent display, 2019–2022, Pictures top, mid-left and bottom left ©NRW-Stiftung_Werner Stapelfeldt, picture mid-right ©JMW, picture bottom right ©Axel Baumgärtel.

museum's own circles were unsuccessful. Based on positive experiences in the UK, the museum therefore placed a job advert on relevant online platforms to look for volunteer board members – and found them. In fact, the ad met with a great deal of interest, and the museum was able to recruit four experts. In addition to a shared interest in the further development of the museum, individual personal motivations such as balancing or supplementing their main job or expanding their skills, continue to play a role. Most of them are not locals, but this does not seem a problem given that the museum has a regional remit. Rather they will enrich the museum with expertise in the areas of marketing/PR, retail and collections management that are less strong among the permanent staff. Jointly we are establishing new ways to collaborate between professionals and volunteers.

The continuing support of a 400-strong museum's association is another sign of the museum's rootedness in civil society and a form of participation, albeit a weaker one and one that needs rejuvenating as well. In view of increasing right-wing extremist tendencies in German and European politics, it is good to know that the museum can retain a certain degree of independence. It goes without saying, though, that it would not be able to operate in its current way without public funding.

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