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0521833531 - Jews in Post-Holocaust Germany, 1945-1953

Jay Howard Geller

Excerpt

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By the 1930s, Jews had been living in Germany for at least 1600 years. Although they faced tremendous persecution during the Middle Ages, their communities persisted, and German Jews were among the first to enjoy the fruits of post-emancipatory integration. Germany became a beacon for Jewish immigration, and the Jewish community of Germany was among the most culturally assimilated in the world. Most German Jews considered themselves at home in German culture and society, and their participation in the First World War is a testament to their devotion to Germany. Despite this high degree of integration – or possibly because of it – German Jewry still faced persecution. Conservative bastions of society, including the army and the professorate, remained largely impervious to Jewish participation before 1914. Throughout the nineteenth century, there were anti-Jewish riots, though they did not find state sanction until the advent of the Nazi regime.¹ In the 1930s and 1940s, Hitler and his followers unleashed an all-encompassing genocide designed to make Germany, and all of Europe, free of Jews. No aspect of European Jewish life or society was safe from Nazi supervision and destruction. The very nature of the genocide has caused some historians to term it “the war against the Jews.”² Despite this overt goal, the Nazis failed, and Jewish life continued – even in Germany.

¹ For a distillation of views on the topic, see Christhard Hoffmann, Werner Bergmann, and Helmut Walser Smith, eds., *Exclusionary Violence: Antisemitic Riots in Modern Germany* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002). One of the most poignant observations of the failure of the so-called German-Jewish symbiosis is Gershom Scholem's essay “Against the Myth of the German-Jewish Dialogue,” in Gershom Scholem, *On Jews and Judaism in Crisis: Selected Essays*, ed. Werner J. Dannhauser (New York: Schocken, 1976), originally “Wider den Mythos vom deutsch-jüdischen ‘Gespräch,’” in *Auf gespaltenem Pfad. Zum neunzigsten Geburtstag von Margarete Susman*, ed. Manfred Schlösser (Darmstadt: Erato, 1964).

² Lucy Dawidowicz, *The War against the Jews, 1933–1945* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1975).

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After social exclusion, concentration, and the ultimate decimation of German Jewry, not long after the war's end, Germany witnessed a miraculous reemergence of Jewish life. A German Jewish population, comprised of those who had gone underground, emigrated, or survived the camps, refounded religious congregations and other Jewish institutions. Moreover, the nascent German Jewish community was joined by an influx of Eastern European Holocaust survivors who did not wish to remain in their homelands after their liberation from the concentration camps. Together, they formed a fractious community, divided on cultural, religious, and even political grounds.

This is a book about Jews, Jewish institutions, and Jewish issues in Germany in the critical first decade immediately after the Second World War. It tells a multifaceted story focusing on the reestablishment of the Jewish community in Germany, on the community's interest representation, and on the manner in which German political elites related to Jewish issues – including the reconstruction of the community, restitution, and reparations – as German society rebuilt itself. Despite the Jewish community's small size, the very presence of Jews in Germany had importance, both providing interlocutors for a reconciliatory dialogue and serving as reminders of Germany's historic failings.

In the years immediately after the war – coinciding with the years of Allied occupation of Germany – instability characterized the reemerging Jewish community. The majority of the Jews living in Germany did not wish to remain there, preferring to settle in Palestine; however, a significant minority of Jews did wish to stay in Germany. Their enduring presence proved confounding and controversial to Jews around the world who felt that Germany was no place for a Jew to live after 1945, and especially not after 1948, when the establishment of the state of Israel permitted an exodus of Jewish refugees from Europe.

As a small group, acting largely without the support of Jews abroad, the community in Germany needed cohesion. Overcoming social and religious differences, Jews in Germany united for the purposes of political representation. Simply put, they needed a coordinated voice to advocate their interests, both to the German governments and to Jewish groups around the world. Two organizations took up this task. In West Germany, the principal representative was the Central Council of Jews in Germany (Zentralrat der

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Juden in Deutschland). This group's origins, internal structure, leadership, and relations with the Bonn government and Jewish groups abroad stand at the center of this study. In East Germany, the State Association of Jewish Communities in the German Democratic Republic (Landesverband der Jüdischen Gemeinden in der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik) functioned as the Central Council's equivalent or nominal subsidiary. Its struggle on behalf of the Jews of eastern Germany, showcased in chapters 3 and 5, forms an interesting contrast to the western experience. Despite the differing political conditions each faced, both groups relied heavily on personal ties between their leaders and influential Germans, a policy that had the potential for great success and catastrophic failure.

At the same time that the Jewish community was coalescing and organizing, non-Jewish Germans sought to rebuild their society. Starting in 1949, two German states came into being, and German administrations assumed most governmental functions previously under Allied control. In western Germany, winning support for liberal democracy, which had failed before 1933, was not easy. Politicians faced critical decisions regarding any confrontation with the legacy of Germany's crimes against humanity, most particularly against the Jewish people of Europe. While dealing with these issues in an open and forthright manner would have reflected a renewal of civil society and progressive public discourse, it also had the potential to alienate millions of Germans who did not unqualifiedly reject the previous regime. The decisions made by state and party leaders regarding the Jews and Jewish issues are central to understanding the conditions under which the Jewish community developed.

In many ways, Germany's break with its past and its official relationship with the Jews characterized its progress toward a democratic, liberal future. This study seeks to clarify the manner in which German politicians and political parties addressed Jewish-related issues. In particular, it examines Jews' relationships with state and party leaders. Because of the recent German past, Jewish leaders, representing a small community (between 20,000 and 40,000), acquired an influence greater than their constituency would have merited under normal circumstances.

In the most overt sense, this study poses a number of questions. How did the Jewish community of Germany form after the tragedy

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of the Holocaust? What was the nature of the community, and how did it regard itself? What were its relations to other Jewish groups in Israel and throughout the Diaspora? How did the state and individual German leaders deal with the Jewish community? How were Jewish or Jewish-related issues regarded by the political class in both German states? Was there a difference in domestic Jewish-German relations and Israeli-German relations, possibly colored by German Jewry's own relations with Israel? This book attempts to answer these questions and to demonstrate their interconnect-edness.

My examination begins even before the defeat of Nazi Germany, as Allied officials began considering the reintegration of Jews into German society and the fate of refugees after the war. Indeed, from 1945 to 1949, the Allied occupation governments were the primary focus of policy formation, including policy on Jewish matters. While German politicians certainly did consider and debate Jewish-related matters before the advent of German statehood, prior to 1949 – even afterward to some degree – the Jews in Germany concentrated their lobbying efforts on the military occupation governments. Thus, as this study traces the reestablishment of the organized Jewish community, it also elucidates the relationship between that community and the Allies, and in particular the Americans, whose zone had the largest Jewish community.

In some senses, the years 1945 to 1949 were merely a prelude to the story of renewed Jewish life in Germany. In September 1949, a West German government formed; the following month, an East German government came into being. After the Israeli war of independence, tens of thousands of displaced persons left Germany for the new Jewish state. In 1950, the Jewish community, having been reduced to a core population, overcame its internal divisions and united for representative purposes under the Central Council of Jews in Germany. By the autumn of 1950, the community had a hierarchical organization and German partners for dialogue in the West German federal government and the government of East Germany. Therefore, after the pivotal transitional years of 1949–1950, explicated in chapters 1 and 2, this study focuses on the policies of the governments and leading political parties regarding Jewish issues and the relationship of those bodies with the western Central Council and the eastern State Association. Additionally, an examination of the Central Council's troubled relationship with

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Jewish groups in other countries, including Israel, elucidates the challenges facing the community.

Concentrating on political and collective aspects, particularly on the national or federal level, my analysis reaches its terminal point in the year 1953. That year, West Germany established its policy regarding Jewish survivors of the Holocaust, ratifying a treaty for reparations to Israel and foreign Jewish groups and legislating reparations to individual victims of the Nazis. At the same time, the West German Interior Ministry began an institutionalized relationship with the Central Council, supporting it through regular subsidies. Finally, in 1953, with the goal of reparations achieved, the Central Council began an internal reorganization and reorientation. It sought to change from primarily a political advocacy group to the principal coordinator of Jewish social and cultural life in Germany. The year 1953 was also critical for East German Jewry. Following a precedent already established elsewhere in the eastern bloc, the Communist Party began a purge of Jewish and philosemitic members. Additionally, the regime harassed and arrested the leadership of the Jewish community. Ultimately, the community's leaders fled East Germany, necessitating a state-supervised reorganization of the State Association and the individual Jewish communities in eastern German cities. The patterns of German-Jewish political rapport that were established by the end of 1953 prevailed for the next twelve to fifteen years, if not longer, as both Jewish communities settled into a routine of bureaucratized administration and institutionalized relations with the state.

As noted, during the era of Allied occupation, the largest segment of the Jewish population in Germany was comprised of displaced persons (DPs) from Eastern Europe. Many of these Jewish Holocaust survivors simply found themselves on German soil on 8 May 1945; others fled postwar conditions in Poland and Romania. Although they could not emigrate to British-occupied Palestine, they could stay in the Allied occupation zones of western Germany, where they felt relatively secure. While waiting for their final settlement status to change, these refugees recreated in Germany a version of Jewish Eastern Europe. Their DP camps eventually became loci of Jewish culture and education, and Zionist politics thrived in the camps. This refugee community, with its renaissance of Eastern European *yiddishkayt*, has become a popular topic

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of examination for historians in America, Germany, and Israel. Among the earlier studies of the displaced persons in postwar Germany are works by Mark Wyman and Wolfgang Jacobmeyer.³ More recently, Jewish displaced persons specifically have received increased attention. Angelika Königseder and Juliane Wetzel have thoroughly examined the structure of political and social life in many of the different DP camps in the occupation zones. Their investigation looks at DP life until the dissolution of the camps. Angelika Eder deals with cultural matters. In contrast, Zeev Mankowitz examines many aspects of DP life and politics, but his analysis concentrates on the years 1945-1946, with later years receiving less attention. Additionally, his story, rich in detail, is primarily a Zionist one.⁴ Hagit Lavsky and Joanne Reilly have focused on the Belsen displaced persons camp, located in the British zone of occupation. In fact, Belsen was one of the most organized and successful camps, eventually becoming a locus of Jewish life in northern Germany – inside or out of DP camps. Lavsky also argues that it was the breeding ground for a grassroots-organized, Zionist civil society.⁵ Rather than focusing on a single camp or zone, Michael Brenner has incorporated the story of the DPs into the wider history of Jewish resettlement in postwar Germany. Using newspapers and other scholars' works, which contain rich quotations, Ruth Gay has constructed a ground-level view of DP life in Germany. Atina Grossmann has examined the displaced persons and the question of gender as part of a larger project on the

³ Mark Wyman, *DP: Europe's Displaced Persons, 1945-1951* (Philadelphia: Associated University Press, 1989); Wolfgang Jacobmeyer, *Vom Zwangsarbeiter zum Heimatlosen Ausländer. Die Displaced Persons in Westdeutschland 1945-1951* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1985).

⁴ Angelika Königseder and Juliane Wetzel, *Lebensmut im Wartesaal. Die jüdischen DPs (Displaced Persons) im Nachkriegsdeutschland* (Frankfurt: Fischer, 1994); Angelika Eder, "Kultur und Kulturveranstaltungen in den jüdischen DP-Lagern," in *Leben im Land der Täter: Juden in Nachkriegsdeutschland (1945-1952)*, ed. Julius H. Schoeps (Berlin: Jüdische Verlagsanstalt, 2001); Zeev W. Mankowitz, *Life between Memory and Hope: The Survivors of the Holocaust in Occupied Germany* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

⁵ Hagit Lavsky, *New Beginnings: Holocaust Survivors in Bergen-Belsen and the British Zone in Germany, 1945-1950* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2002); Joanne Reilly, *Belsen: The Liberation of a Concentration Camp* (London: Routledge, 1998). Wolfgang Jacobmeyer alleges that the DPs' Zionism was not a deeply held political conviction, but merely a reaction to the desperate contemporary political situation. Wolfgang Jacobmeyer, "Jüdische Überlebende als 'Displaced Persons.' Untersuchungen zur Besatzungspolitik in den deutschen Westzonen und zur Zuwanderung osteuropäischer Juden 1945-1947," *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 9, no. 3 (1983): 423-424.

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displaced persons and debates on victimhood during the Allied occupation.⁶

While most scholars dwell on the irony of traditional eastern Jewish culture thriving in post-Hitler Germany, their ultimate focus is not on the permanence of this Jewish life in Germany, but rather on its transience. As Hagit Lavsky has argued, this transitional phase of internment in Germany helped to rehabilitate these Jews, both physically and culturally. Restored to health, the DPs had the highest birthrate of Jews anywhere in the world after World War II. To a large degree, the population made the transition from Yiddish Eastern European culture to a more modern Hebrew, Zionist orientation. By the time the refugees left Germany, they were a lively, politicized population, eager to aid in the construction of the new Jewish state.

Although most DPs did depart for Israel after 1947, it is critical to note that many remained in Germany. The merger of the German Jewish community and the residual displaced persons community marked the real establishment of a new and enduring Jewish community in postwar Germany. Thus, with a focus on that new community and its political development, it is critical to regard the DPs, or at least some of them, as future constituents of the Central Council of Jews in Germany. However, their presence in Germany complicated the situation of the Jewish community. Though some eastern Jews had lived in Germany before 1933, these newcomers were culturally alien to Germany, and differences between them and German-born Jews manifested themselves as political tensions. Thus, in addition to examining some aspects of the DPs' Zionist politics, relations between eastern Jews and German-born Jews require elucidation, both before the founding of the Central Council (chapters 1 and 2) and after the coalescence of the community (chapter 8).

The Jewish communities of both West and East Germany are the subject of a number of studies. Henry Maor's dissertation,

⁶ Michael Brenner, *After the Holocaust: Rebuilding Jewish Lives in Postwar Germany*, trans. Barabara Harshav (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997); Ruth Gay, *Safe among the Germans: Liberated Jews after World War II* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002); Atina Grossmann, "Victims, Villains, and Survivors: Gendered Perceptions and Self-Perceptions of Jewish Displaced Persons in Occupied Postwar Germany," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 11, nos. 1/2 (January/April 2002), and *Victims, Victims, and Survivors: Germans, Allies, and Jews in Occupied Postwar Germany, 1945-1950* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, forthcoming).

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written nearly thirty-five years ago, is generally considered the first scholarly examination of the topic; however, it is little more than a statistical and sociological overview of the community's composition.⁷ Since the mid-1980s, there has been a profusion of sociological analyses. While many do address the history of the community's politics and role in German society, few undertake a serious archival examination of the community's origins.⁸ This study seeks to root its analysis in archival evidence. A number of scholars have looked at psychological or sociological phenomena related to being Jewish in Germany or to Jewish-Christian social relations, topics not surveyed here.⁹ More recently, Michael Brenner's study provides an introduction to the renewed Jewish community, terminating its analysis in 1950, the year of the Central Council's establishment, and Ruth Gay gives a view of the community's genesis before quickly moving forward to the present day, with an emphasis on individuals and personal stories.¹⁰ My analysis reintroduces Jewish institutions, particularly political representative bodies, to the story of the renewal of Jewish life in Germany. Without these groups, the community could never have received the critical support it did from non-Jewish political leaders.

⁷ Harry Maor, "Über den Wiederaufbau der jüdischen Gemeinden in Deutschland seit 1945," Dr.phil. diss., Universität Mainz, 1961.

⁸ Micha Brumlik et al., eds., *Jüdisches Leben in Deutschland seit 1945* (Frankfurt: Jüdischer Verlag bei Athenäum, 1986); Anson Rabinbach and Jack Zipes, eds., *Germans and Jews since the Holocaust: The Changing Situation in West Germany* (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1986); Erica Burgbauer, *Zwischen Erinnerung und Verdrängung – Juden in Deutschland nach 1945* (Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1993); Michael Cohn, *The Jews in Germany, 1945-1993: The Building of a Minority* (Westport: Praeger, 1994); Uri Kaufmann, *Jewish Life in Germany Today*, trans. Susan Schwarz (Bonn: Inter Nationes, 1994); Günther Ginzel, ed., *Der Anfang nach dem Ende. Jüdisches Leben in Deutschland bis heute* (Düsseldorf: Droste, 1996).

⁹ Micha Brumlik, "Zur Identität der zweiten Generation deutscher Juden nach der Shoah in der Bundesrepublik," in *Jüdisches Leben*, ed. Brumlik et al.; Jael Geis, *Übrig sein. Leben "danach": Juden deutscher Herkunft in der britischen und amerikanischen Zone Deutschlands 1945-1949* (Berlin: Philo, 2000); Peter Sichrowsky, *Strangers in Their Own Land: Young Jews in Germany and Austria Today*, trans. Jean Steinberg (New York: Basic Books, 1986), originally *Wir wissen nicht was morgen wird, wir wissen wohl was gestern war. Junge Juden in Deutschland und Österreich* (Cologne: Kiepenhauer und Witsch, 1985); Susan Stern, ed., *Speaking Out: Jewish Voices from United Germany* (Chicago: edition q, 1995); Lynn Rapaport, *Jews in Germany after the Holocaust: Memory, Identity and Jewish-German Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); Micha Brumlik, ed., *Zuhause, keine Heimat? Junge Juden und ihre Zukunft in Deutschland* (Gerlingen: Bleicher, 1998); Leslie Morris and Jack Zipes, eds., *Unlikely History: The Changing German-Jewish Symbiosis, 1945-2000* (New York: Palgrave, 2002).

¹⁰ Brenner, *After the Holocaust*; Gay, *Safe among the Germans*.

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Adding to the variegation of existing examinations is a host of local histories. German historians, in particular, have focused on the history of individual Jewish communities.¹¹ While these studies add to the general understanding of the Jewish experience in the postwar years and illustrate the great difficulty in reestablishing Jewish life in Germany, they cannot address many of the wider issues relating to the survival of Jewish life in Germany. In a highly politicized atmosphere, replete with debates on victimhood and on the postwar state's relationship with the past, the Jewish community of Germany only fared as well as it did because it organized on a nationwide level and sought recognition of Jewish demands from the West German federal government as well as the East German government. This study seeks to elucidate the supraregional and national coordination of the Jewish community in Germany to demonstrate the success of this model of organization.

Although there were some basic similarities between the Jewish community of East Germany and the community in West Germany (reconstitution of the community, centralizing organization, critical relations with state elites), the eastern Jewish community faced a unique set of difficulties. An increasingly centralized society and authoritarian government confronted it with serious challenges, not the least of which was regime-sanctioned antisemitism. This special circumstance has made the East German Jewish community

¹¹ Monika Berthold-Hilpert, "Die frühe Nachkriegsgeschichte der jüdischen Gemeinde Fürth (1945–1954)," in *Menora. Jahrbuch für deutsch-jüdische Geschichte* 9 (1998), ed. Julius H. Schoeps (Munich: Piper, 1998); Monika Berthold-Hilpert, "Jüdisches Leben in Franken nach 1945 am Beispiel der Gemeinde Fürth," in *Jüdisches Leben in Franken*, ed. Gunnar Och and Hartmut Bobzin (Würzburg: Ergon, 2002); Barbara Johr, "Die Jüdische Gemeinde Bremen – Neugründung und Wiederaufbau 1945 bis 1961," *Arbeitserbewegung und Sozialgeschichte. Zeitschrift für die Regionalgeschichte Bremens im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert* 7 (July 2001); Ina Lorenz, "Jüdischer Neubeginn im 'Land der Mörder'? Die Wiederanfänge der Hamburger Jüdischen Gemeinde in den Nachkriegsjahren," in *Leben im Land der Täter*, ed. Schoeps; Anke Quast, *Nach der Befreiung. Jüdische Gemeinden in Niedersachsen seit 1945, das Beispiel Hannover* (Göttingen: Wallenstein Verlag, 2001); Donat Strathmann, *Auswandern oder Hierbleiben? Jüdisches Leben in Düsseldorf und Nordrhein 1945–1960* (Essen: Klartext, 2003); Alon Tauber, "Die Entstehung der jüdischen Nachkriegsgemeinde [Frankfurt am Main], 1945–1949," in *Wer ein Haus baut, will bleiben. 50 Jahre Jüdische Gemeinde Frankfurt am Main. Anfänge und Gegenwart*, ed. Georg Heuberger (Frankfurt: Societäts-Verlag, 1998); Juliane Wetzel, *Jüdisches Leben in München, 1945–1951. Durchgangsstation oder Wiederaufbau?* (Munich: Stadtarchiv München, 1987); Jürgen Zieher, "Kommunen und jüdische Gemeinden von 1945 bis 1960. Studien zu Dortmund, Düsseldorf und Köln," Dr.phil. diss., Technische Universität Berlin, 2002; Ulrike Offenber, "Die jüdische Gemeinde zu Berlin 1945–1953," in *Leben im Land der Täter*, ed. Schoeps.

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a point of particular interest for scholars. Early studies of community did not have the advantage of the archival sources available since 1990, and they relied almost exclusively on interviews and memoirs.¹² More recently, scholars have explored many aspects of the small Jewish community in the east.¹³ Despite a strong focus on relations with the state and Communist Party, the central role of the State Association and its internal debates have not figured as prominently as merited. In fact, even before the Jewish communities in western Germany united, the Jews of eastern Germany founded their umbrella organization, the State Association, under the politically active leadership of Julius Meyer. In chapters 3 and 5, the importance of the State Association to Jewish life in the east and the efficacy of Meyer's leadership receive critical examination.¹⁴

This is a story both about the Jews themselves and their relations with non-Jewish, German political elites. An important factor impacting these relations was the manner in which members of German society remembered the years 1933 to 1945. Naturally, those years had a very different meaning to Jewish Germans than to non-Jewish Germans. Moreover, interpretations of the recent past differed among various German social groups, and political leaders in West Germany viewed the legacy of the Nazi past differently from their counterparts in the east. Not only did the treatment of the past reflect German society's self-image after 1945, it also had practical ramifications for German interactions with Jewish victims of the Nazi regime. The historiography of memory has clarified our understanding of politics and society in postwar Germany; however, my work concentrates on the importance of political

¹² Robin Ostow, *Jews in Contemporary East Germany: The Children of Moses in the Land of Marx* (New York: St. Martin's, 1989), originally *Jüdisches Leben in der DDR* (Frankfurt: Jüdischer Verlag, 1988); Vincent von Wroblewski, ed., *Zwischen Thora und Trabant: Juden in der DDR* (Berlin: Aufbau, 1993).

¹³ Mario Keßler, *Die SED und die Juden – zwischen Repression und Toleranz. Politische Entwicklungen bis 1967* (Berlin: Akademie, 1995); Lothar Mertens, *Davidstern unter Hammer und Zirkel. Die jüdischen Gemeinden in der SBZ/DDR und ihre Behandlung durch Partei und Staat, 1945-1990* (Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 1997); Ulrike Offenber, "Seid vorsichtig gegen die Machthaber." *Die jüdischen Gemeinden in der SBZ und der DDR 1945-1990* (Berlin: Aufbau, 1998); Lothar Mertens, "Schwieriger Neubeginn. Die jüdischen Gemeinden in der SBZ/DDR bis 1952/1953," in *Leben im Land der Täter*, ed. Schoeps.

¹⁴ On Julius Meyer and the State Association, also see Jay Howard Geller, "Representing Jewry in East Germany, 1945-1953: Between Advocacy and Accommodation," in Leo Baeck Institute, *Year Book* 47 (2002), ed. J. A. S. Grenville (Oxford: Berghahn, 2002).