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# Jewish EXPONENT

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## Hesitantly ... Hamburg

**Old fears cede to new promise for a city of much history**

April 23, 2009 - Elyse Glickman, Jewish Exponent Feature

When it comes to European travel, there is one thing many Jews have in common -- an understandable hesitance to travel to Germany.

The truth of the matter rests in the fact that many countries we love have their fair share of anti-Semitic histories. In fact, it can be found in many parts of the U.S. as well. Even with the awareness of the world that comes with being Jewish, there were several things that convinced me that visiting Hamburg, Germany, could be an uplifting experience.



Once you arrive in the city's central train station, it instantly hits you that the bad guys of World War II would barely recognize the city. Every ethnic group from every continent is represented in the forms of fashion, food, design, the arts and day-to-day life.

It makes perfect sense, then, that the ideal starting point for this incredible journey around Hamburg is the Emigration Museum BallinStadt/Port of Dreams. The gentrified complex that once housed an immigrant city of up to 5,000 people now contains a research center powered by [www.ballinstadt.de/en/about\\_us.php](http://www.ballinstadt.de/en/about_us.php) and a carefully plotted sprawl of evocative, heart-tugging exhibits capturing personal stories about the immigrant experience (many about Jewish transplants to the U.S.)

Recently, the museum played host to "Points of Passage," an international conference where scholars from around the world examined and discussed the causes and circumstances that prompted emigration of Jews and other ethnic groups between 1860 and 1929.

"There are estimates that up to 50 percent of the Jewish American community has at least one relative that passed through Hamburg en route to the States," points out BallinStadt historian Jorge Birkner, who attended graduate school in Philadelphia.



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"Founder Albert Ballin, who was also general director of the Shipping Company, Hamburger-America Line, was himself Jewish and catered to Jewish emigrants, many of them coming from Russia, Austria-Hungary and Poland to escape pogroms.

"On site, there was a synagogue and a Christian church as well as two canteens -- a kosher one for Jews and another for Christians."

While Birkner and his team are justifiably proud of the exhibits and people's reactions to them, he feels the important thing on the BallinStadt site are passenger manifests containing nearly 5 million names of people who crossed between 1859 and 1935, that note not only their departure from Hamburg but their birth names and the countries where they originated.

The other side of Hamburg's Jewish story is revealed through small monuments scattered around the University of Hamburg and the now-trendy Grindel neighborhood surrounding it.

At the heart of campus, there is a mural depicting daily life at the intersection of MendelssohnStrasse and Benderstrasse, the hub of Jewish life until 1938. The artwork resembles a photo in a shattered frame, with a "missing spot" filled by the poignant words of poet/playwright Nelly Sachs.

Not far from there, a former parking area, Bonplatz, is transformed into a monument commemorating the city's only free standing synagogue pre-1938 via architectural lines worked into the pavement's design. A few blocks away from that spot, the Talmud Torah School (re-opened as a school and also transformed into the city's Jewish Community Center in June 2007) once again thrives as a hub of Jewish life, albeit with reminders -- in the form of golden "stumbling stones" in the sidewalks -- of the people who brought the area to life prior to World War II, along with their fates.

By my guide's admission, Jewish life in Hamburg is experiencing a gradual but marked recovery, evidenced by the presence of local groups (including a Reform community: [www.davidstern.de/ENGLISH/Home\\_eng.html](http://www.davidstern.de/ENGLISH/Home_eng.html)) and her own observation of Orthodox Jews returning to Hamburg's public in recent months.

While the Jewish community continues its re-emerging process, Hamburg not only accepts multi-culturalism but wears it as a badge of honor. The city carries this mentality further as a standard bearer for the 21st century, embracing a more environmentally conscious lifestyle in a variety of appealing, frankly fashionable ways.

The restaurant scene is a great representation of this. Though pricey "old school" restaurants and modern fusion cuisine spots dot the city, the most exciting eateries are moderately priced, sharply decorated and boast a "Bio" certification that ensures the guests that everything they eat is organic or sustainably-sourced (similar to the USDA Organic seals used this side of the pond).

Hamburg's downtown center is a delightful maze of shopping, bordered by streets Jungernsteig, Neuer Wall and Hanseviertel, classed up with canals, gardens and courtyards. Not surprisingly, major international labels abound. That said, two boutiques should not be missed: A stunning, William Russell-designed branch of Cos ([www.cosstores.com](http://www.cosstores.com)), flowing with beautifully tailored pieces that bridge "cutting edge" and "work appropriate"; and Gabor in the Europa Passage mall ([www.gabor.de](http://www.gabor.de)), an otherwise plain-looking German shoe store that offers something extraordinary ... on-trend knee-high boots that not only come in buttery leathers and many foot sizes but calf-widths as well.

**For more information, visit: [www.hamburg-tourism.de](http://www.hamburg-tourism.de).**



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