

Berlin

Berlin homes open their doors for Holocaust memorial

Visitors can step inside properties that Jews had lived in before being deported by Nazis



The apartment of Claudia Saam and Wolf Baumann will be open to visitors during the Denk Mal Am Ort weekend © Hannes Jung
Jo Glanville APRIL 20, 2018

As you enter the lobby of Matthias Schirmer's apartment building in Charlottenburg, west Berlin, you notice the ceiling first: a joyful, painted Art Deco display of flowers and birds of paradise. The next thing you observe is a simple plaque on the wall ahead, commemorating the building's architect, Kurt Messerschmidt, who was deported to Auschwitz in 1943. He had lived at the address with five members of his family; of these, only his son survived the Holocaust.

Schirmer, a journalist, has been researching the fate of the building's former occupants for the past six months. In the first weekend in May, it will be one of 23 locations across west and central Berlin — around a third of them private residences — that will open their doors to visitors, seeking to memorialise the lives of people who were forced from their homes by the Nazis. Individual Berliners will tell the stories of former residents through talks, readings, photographs and historical documents, while exhibitions and events will take place at public venues across the city.

Denk Mal Am Ort — now in its third year — is the initiative of the historian and artist Jani Pietsch and her daughter Marie Rolshoven, a Holocaust educator. The title is a play on words: it can be translated as “think on the spot” or “memorial at a place”. It was inspired by the Amsterdam project Open Jewish Homes, which has been running annually since 2012.



Dan Messerschmidt standing inside the building in Charlottenburg designed by his grandfather © Hannes Jung



A plaque in the foyer © Hannes Jung

The intimacy of the domestic settings helps to relay the facts of the Holocaust with a new immediacy: to stand in the kitchen or living room of a family that was murdered brings the horror of the past into the realm of daily life. Like the city's *Stolperstein* — brass plaques set into the pavements in front of homes from which Jews were deported — this commemoration compels you to engage with individual lives.

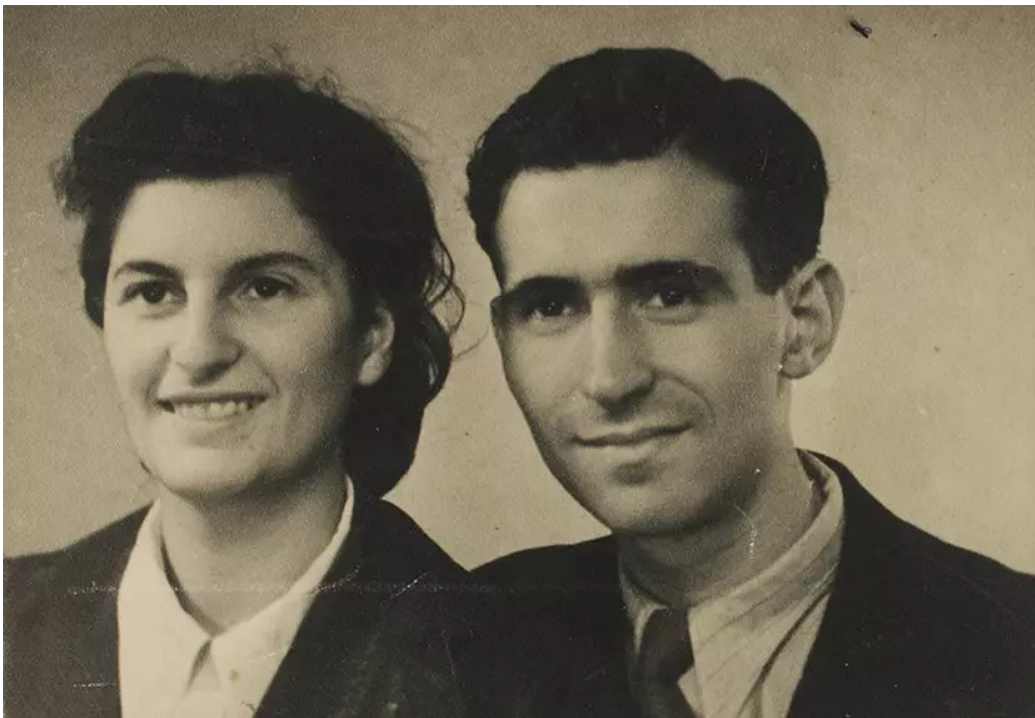
Schirmer describes the story of his apartment block as a “burning mirror for the Shoah”: at least 37 of its inhabitants were deported and murdered, approximately half the building's prewar occupants (the exact figures are unknown). This included one of the earliest Jewish victims of the Nazis' euthanasia programme targeting the mentally ill, a precursor to the “final solution”.

Schirmer also discovered that, from 1939, his building became what was termed a “Judenhaus”, where Jews were forced to live after being stripped of their rights as tenants and evicted from households owned by non-Jews. It even included two air-raid shelters: one for Aryans, one for Jews.

There is almost a hunger to understand these stories from the most awful period of Germany’s past

In recent years, with the rise of the rightwing Alternative für Deutschland party — now the main opposition in the Bundestag — the commemoration of the Holocaust has become a political issue in Germany. Last year, one AfD politician attacked the Holocaust memorial in Berlin as “a monument of shame”. Berlin’s Centre for anti-Semitism Research and Information recently released figures that

report a staggering 61 per cent increase in anti-Semitic incidents in 2017. These include 42 attacks against property, of which three-quarters targeted Holocaust memorial sites. “Anti-Semitism didn’t vanish from German society,” says Pietsch. “It’s been there all the time.”



Ilse and Hans Peter Messerschmidt © Hannes Jung



The backyard of Kurt Messerschmidt's Charlottenburg home © Hannes Jung

Pietsch grew up in the Harz mountains in northern Germany. She remembers first visiting Berlin in 1967 and being shocked by the blackened buildings, still ruined after the war. “It was really painful to see. For the first time in my life I got a glimpse of what had happened in this country before I was born. Where I was raised everything was painted over in very soft colours: you couldn’t see that there had been a war,” she says. “From the beginning I was very interested in what happened here. I think many of my generation had their focus on the perpetrators for many years. And it took a long time to turn the view to the other side.”

Pietsch is expert at navigating Berlin’s archives and with her help I tracked down the Charlottenburg home of my own maternal great-aunt, Mea Meyer. She and her husband,

Moritz, commissioned the Bauhaus architect Fritz Marcus to build the house, but lived there for just two years before fleeing to Paris with their son, Theo, in 1933, when Hitler became chancellor.

The house is now a kindergarten, and will not be part of the open weekend, but Pietsch and I visited it together. Walking through schoolrooms, it was hard to imagine the opulent family home that my mother had described to me. She had spent part of her childhood in Berlin and had been dazzled by her aunt's wealth — as well as haunted by the family's fate under the Nazis. After their flight to France, Mea later escaped to Switzerland and survived the war. But her 23-year-old son was murdered in Auschwitz, while her husband died from a heart attack after being interned by the French.



Matthias Schirmer © Hannes Jung



Ruth and Manfred Reich as children © Hannes Jung

The documents that Pietsch has since unearthed at the reparations archive in Berlin contain facts that were unknown to my family, including the assumed names under which the Meyers lived in France. Pietsch has given similar assistance to participants in the weekend, and the Denk Mal Am Ort website offers guidance to those wanting to conduct their own research.

Claudia Saam, who is opening her home in Charlottenburg with her husband Wolf Baumann, thinks that Berlin has yet to recover from the destruction of its Jewish community, which accounted for 4 per cent of the city's population in 1933. More than 55,000 Jews were deported

from Berlin; most of them were murdered. “We’re still suffering from this loss,” she says. Like Matthias Schirmer, she and her husband have unearthed extraordinary, untold stories that have had a profound impact on their own lives.

Baumann and Saam have researched 100 individuals who lived in their building. “I know all of them,” says Baumann, an economist and historian. “I feel connected. I never had that before.” Among them was Leo Blech, an eminent composer and conductor at the Berlin State Opera, who survived the Holocaust thanks to the personal intervention of Hermann Göring, Adolf Hitler’s second-in-command. “[Blech] was very popular among the Germans and had a high international reputation,” says Baumann. “Maybe that was why Göring put his protective hand over Leo Blech.”





Frida and Ludwig Katzenellenbogen

Thanks to funding from the Berlin Senate, survivors and their families will be taking part in the weekend of events. Ninety-one-year-old Joel Ludwig Katzenellenbogen will be returning from Israel to his family's flat in Schöneberg for the first time since they fled in 1939. Hugh Williamson, a former Berlin correspondent for the FT who now works for Human Rights Watch, lives in the flat with his family. He and his wife, Anke Hassel, have taken part in Denk Mal Am Ort since its inception.

"Very ordinary Germans come to our apartment and they're interested in the history," he says. "Literally in touching and feeling the history, being in the apartment and reading the documents. And that says to me that there is almost a hunger to understand these stories from the most awful period of Germany's past. It actually feels more current and urgent this year because of the AfD being in parliament."



Erich Kleiber, Musician, Conductor, with wind instruments of the Staatsoper in front of the house of conductor Leo Blech in Berlin 1931 © Fritz Heimann/ullstein bild/Getty Images

Schirmer will host the descendants of former residents, including Jack Weil, whose mother, Ruth Reich, survived the Holocaust. Her mother, father and brother were murdered. Dan Messerschmidt, grandson of the building's architect and now its landlord, will also be taking part. During the war, the Third Reich took ownership of the building. When Dan's father, Hans Peter, returned to Berlin in August 1945 from the Theresienstadt ghetto and transit camp, it took five years before he was registered as the rightful owner. The records of the building had been hidden in the coal cellar and were, remarkably, intact, which enabled him to prove his claim relatively easily.

Messerschmidt has joined a small group of residents who are researching the building's history with Schirmer. "I hope that by telling these small stories I can reach people in Germany who don't want to think about the war any more, and who think we've had enough of talking about the Nazis," says Schirmer.



Claudia Saam and Wolf Baumann in their flat © Hannes Jung



The backyard of the apartment block where Claudia Saam and Wolf Baumann live © Hannes Jung


Denk Mal Am Ort takes place on May 5-6; denkmalamort.de

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