



**Joint declaration of the Central Council of Jews in Germany
and
the Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education and Cultural
Affairs
on the Teaching of Jewish History, Religion and Culture in School**

(resolution of the Central Council of Jews in Germany dated September 1, 2016; resolution of the Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs dated December 8, 2016)

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1. Preamble

Judaism has been an integral part of German and European culture, history and society for many centuries.

Jewish life, however, is barely visible in many social spheres. In school textbooks and other educational media, it is often reduced to individual elements or a few historical epochs, and at times it is marked by distorted and undifferentiated depictions.

Furthermore, hostile attitudes toward Jews that become apparent time and again in different manifestations – in school environments and elsewhere – give cause for concern. It is unacceptable that Jews cannot allow themselves to be recognized as such for fear of anti-Semitic attacks and that people on the street use Israeli policy as a pretext to chant anti-Semitic slogans.

With this declaration, the Central Council of Jews in Germany and the Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs agree on steps toward a future-oriented and authentic discussion of Judaism in schools.

2. Objectives and principles

This joint declaration aims to present Judaism in schools in its diversity and authenticity, and to provide students with a lively and differentiated picture of Judaism. While the Shoah is an inseparable element of this, Jewish life in Germany and Europe must not be reduced to this one aspect. Jewish life after the Shoah, both during the period of the German division and after the German reunification, is also of great value for historical and political understanding. A further topic to be covered in schools is the special importance of the state of Israel to Jews.

Awareness and recognition of the diversity and complexity of Judaism are key steps toward gaining understanding and reducing prejudice. 'The' Jew does not exist, but rather a range of religious and cultural identities. School should relate the self-image of Jews and the view of Judaism from the outside.

While teaching in school cannot convey a complete picture of Judaism, it allows the use of selected themes to link past, present and future perspectives. It will be necessary to develop new and sensitive didactic and methodological approaches that take into account different types of access by students within a heterogeneous student body.

3. Judaism in the classroom

The curricular guidelines of the German *Länder* provide numerous points of entry for covering Judaism in the classroom. The content can be integrated in many subjects: in history and other sociological disciplines, in religion and ethics, in linguistic, literary or artistic courses and in the natural sciences. This potential has not yet been fully exploited, as analyses of curricula and textbooks shows. It is important to support teachers and professional staff in our schools in presenting the material in the classroom.

The manifold perspectives of historical and contemporary Judaism should be discussed in as many grades and subjects as possible. It is crucial here that students develop the openness to continuously ask new questions and to reflect on the different internal views of Judaism as well as the many external perspectives.

Anyone who learns to see from the viewpoint of others and through the lens of their cultural and religious orientation also learns respect and appreciation. This is the point of intersection of the schools' respective missions to provide comprehensive and future-oriented education and to convey the spirit of freedom, democracy, human rights, the rule of law and peace.

A special responsibility is attached to subjects and projects of historical and political education. The analyses of current political developments and past events and processes are inseparable in this regard.

The history of Judaism is more than a story of exclusion, persecution and victimhood. The achievements of Jews in business, science, politics and culture are part of the development of prosperity and democracy in Europe. This can be illustrated from regional and local historical perspectives, for example through research-based learning, retracing local history and other projects. However, discussions of the contribution of Jews to economic, cultural and political modernization must not obscure the fact that they still had to experience more or less subtle exclusion.

This context calls for reflection, not only on historical anti-Semitism, but also the still-virulent anti-Semitism in Germany and other countries and its various components (anti-Judaism, anti-Israelism, anti-Zionism).

In exploring contemporary Jewish life, drawing analogies to and identifying it with developments in and around the state of Israel must be avoided. At the same time, Israel's right to exist must not be put up for debate.

The aim of covering the state of Israel in the classroom is not only to see it in the context of the history of a conflict, but also to show its political, social and cultural developments as a Jewish state in all its diversity. Within this framework, it is necessary to highlight the founding

story of the state of Israel and to understand its special situation and the threat to its existence.

Religious education covering all faiths and subjects in the sphere of philosophy and ethics is just as important as historical and political education. A large number of people of different religions and denominations live in Germany today; at the same time, many do not identify with any religion.

For this reason, schools must provide in-depth knowledge and an authentic image of the religions in order to promote reciprocal understanding, respect and dialog as the foundations of a pluralist society.

A teaching approach oriented toward dialog encompasses criticism and self-criticism, including views and debates in Christianity and Islam on proselytism to Jews and anti-Judaism in the past and present.

The Jewish religion must be presented in its diversity on the basis of exemplary topics. In depicting Jewish religiosity, stereotypes should be avoided and Jewish life portrayed in its reality. For example, selected Jewish holidays are suitable to convey specifically Jewish everyday life. The examination of Jewish scripture also opens the door to the discursiveness and inner plurality of Judaism. This also lends itself to exploring common aspects of different religions and worldviews.

Many other subjects offer further points of contact to Jewish life, culture, religion and history, such as German (e.g. Lessing's *Nathan der Weise*), foreign languages (e.g. Jews in the United States), artistic subjects (e.g. Marc Chagall) or natural sciences (e.g. bioethics from a Jewish perspective). Another aspect is the history of subjects and disciplines as educational content (e.g. the history of sports and gymnastics).

4. Encounters with Judaism

Students need competence in interpretation and reflection, particularly with regard to the complexity and variety of the manifestations of Jewish life, history, religion and culture. Personal encounters with Jews and contact with Jewish organizations and institutions are particularly helpful in this regard.

This holds true even more so since Jewish children and youths are rarely present in individual classes and schools. History, religions and cultures are made accessible by rendering the lives of individual people visible and relivable. Encounters with Judaism can be organized by schools: For example, Jews can be invited to the classroom to speak about

their religion and culture, as well as their family history where relevant. Visits to synagogues or Jewish communities make it possible to experience the Jewish faith as alive and contemporary. Students can encounter Jewish history when visiting archives, museums or Jewish cemeteries, or by taking part in a competition.

Encounters with contemporary witnesses and their descendants leave particularly deep impressions. Witnesses of the Shoah are still able to tell personal stories about lives marked by marginalization, torture and the fear of death, about the loss of their relatives, and about their lives and emotional experiences as Shoah survivors.

Visits to memorial sites and documentation centers are fundamentally important. They present the Nazi crimes in authentic locations and thus offer the opportunity for an intense experience of the events – and individual fates.

Integrating the testimonies available in the databases of Yad Vashem and many memorial sites into classroom instruction can also be helpful. These include testimonies of the resistance and moral courage of people who helped Jews, as well as examples of Jews who retained their identity or organized and carried out resistance during a time of existential threat and under inhuman conditions.

Encounters can evoke lively interest and empathy. Teachers should, however, take potential critical reactions into account prior to encounters by methodically and didactically addressing any existing prejudices of the students and their families in a manner appropriate to their different educational backgrounds. Visits to concentration camp memorials and other places of Nazi crimes must be given adequate preparation and review – with the help of local specialists where appropriate.

Students should be encouraged to explore Jewish life, Jewish culture and Jewish history independently and to engage in a constructive dialog between religions, cultures and social forces.

Personal meetings, visits to places of learning outside of school and the use of encounter and exchange programs for students should not only shape the activities of our schools, they are also expressly recommended for the initial, further and ongoing training of teachers.

5. Conclusions

The Central Council of Jews in Germany and the Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs:

- are dedicated to jointly ensuring that Judaism is made visible in its diversity in everyday school life
- call on educators to seek and enable personal encounters with Jews in the school environment
- recommend visits to other places of learning in which past and present Jewish life can be experienced
- call for a more intensive teaching of Judaism and Jewish history in the initial, further and ongoing training of teachers and offer appropriate support in the development of a structured educational program
- are creating a structured collection of selected materials for the initial, further and ongoing training of teachers, and for use in the classroom and in projects, together with regional institutes and institutions of Jewish culture
- are developing teacher handouts on selected topics and aspects
- are setting up a joint conference on implementing the recommendations in schools.

6. References

Please refer to the following selected recommendations, publications and databases:

Jewish history in the classroom

- Leo-Baeck-Institut - Kommission für die Verbreitung deutsch-jüdischer Geschichte (ed.), *Deutsch-jüdische Geschichte im Unterricht - Eine Orientierungshilfe für Schule und Erwachsenenbildung* [German-Jewish history in education – a guide for schools and adult education], third edition 2015
- Martin Liepach, Dirk Sadowski (eds.): *Jüdische Geschichte im Schulbuch* [Jewish history in the textbook], Göttingen 2014
- Martin Liepach, Wolfgang Geiger: *Fragen an die jüdische Geschichte. Darstellungen und didaktische Herausforderungen* [Questions about Jewish history. Representations and didactic challenges], Bonn, 2014 (publication series vol. 1534)

The State of Israel

- German-Israeli Textbook Commission: *Deutsch-israelische Schulbuchempfehlungen* [German-Israeli textbook recommendations], Göttingen 2015.
- Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs of the German *Länder* and the Embassy of the State of Israel: *Kommunique zur deutsch-israelischen Bildungszusammenarbeit anlässlich des 50-jährigen Bestehens der diplomatischen Beziehungen im Jahr 2015* [Communique on German-Israeli cooperation on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of diplomatic relations in 2015].
- Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs and the Embassy of the State of Israel (ed.), *Deutschland und Israel - Stationen eines einzigartigen Verhältnisses - Eine kommentierte Quellensammlung für den Geschichts- und Politikunterricht* [Germany and Israel – stations of a unique relationship. A commented collection of sources for the teaching of history and political sciences], Frankfurt am Main 2015.

Culture of remembrance

- *Erinnern für die Zukunft - Empfehlungen zur Erinnerungskultur als Gegenstand historisch-politischer Bildung in der Schule* [Remembering our past for our future – recommendations for a culture of remembrance to form an object of historical and political education in schools], resolution of the Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs from December 11, 2014.
- Secretariat of the Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs (ed.), *Erinnern für die Zukunft - Deutsch-israelische Bildungszusammenarbeit* [Remembrance for the future – German-Israeli cooperation in education], Berlin 2015.

Religion, ethics

- Central Council of Jews in Germany and the Swiss Federation of Jewish Communities (eds.), *„Lehre mich, Ewiger, Deinen Weg“ - Ethik im Judentum* [“Show me thy way, O LORD; teach me thy paths” – Ethics in Judaism], Berlin 2015

Databases on the Shoah

- Yad Vashem: <http://yvng.yadvashem.org/index.html?language=en>
- Foundation Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe: <https://www.stiftung-denkmal.de/en/home.html>
- Freie Universität Berlin: <http://www.zeugendershoah.de/> (in German)

- The Silent Heroes Memorial Center: <http://www.gedenkstaette-stille-helden.de/en/memorial-center/>

Further publications and databases will be compiled in a separate collection of material.