

A Place of Memory: Baruch Auerbach's Orphanage



Baruch Auerbach's fundamental idea was one of creating a »family home for orphans«.

The imposing group of buildings with its brick gateway and elegant front garden looked out onto Schönhauser Allee. Inside, however, lay a sheltered spot, which was long able to offer protection from Nazi persecution – until in 1942 the last children and their carers were deported, the building destroyed and the site built over. Today, this place is barely visible from the street.

A ball lies at the side of Schönhauser Allee – where did it come from? Is there a child chasing it? The ball prompts us to look at the area afresh, to see the history behind the new façade: a slender glass panel points into the inner courtyard.

There, a fragment of the old Auerbach's boundary wall survives, framed by a gently curving platform. A circular bench invites visitors to pause. From close to, names and numbers appear on the old brickwork. Like messages from the past, the presently known names of 140 deported children and 12 of their carers have been engraved into the historic wall – as if they all gathered here for one big group picture before they were taken away, inscribing themselves into the wall as high as each could reach: I lived here.



Walter Frankenstein at the memorial site, 2014



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Place of Memory Baruch Auerbach Orphanage



Baruch Auerbach's Orphanage



The front of the Baruch Auerbach Orphanage and Educational Institute for Jewish Girls and Boys in its inaugural year of 1897, and playing ball in the courtyard, after 1936

In 1833, Baruch Auerbach (1793–1864) established a home for Jewish children in Rosenstraße. He had a groundbreaking maxim: »Orphans are not poor children, whom one must just offer food and shelter. Rather, orphans are parentless children whose foremost need is parental love, a father's and mother's heart. Therefore, if it is to fulfil its true purpose, an orphanage must be a family home for orphans.«

The home grew quickly and the »Baruch Auerbach Educational Institute for Orphans« was built.

In 1897, the first group of around 80 pupils moved into the new buildings at Schönhauser Allee 162, where there was also a sunny courtyard, playground and garden. After the National Socialists came to power, the girls and boys lived here as if it were an »island in a brown sea«, according to Walter Frankenstein, one of the last surviving »Auerbach children«.

On 19 October 1942, a year after the first deportation of Jews from Berlin, the 21st »East Transport« carried 959 people away from the German capital. Among them were almost 60 children from the orphanage, aged between 2 and 16, and 3 of their carers. The destination was Riga. There, members of SS shot most of the deportees in the forests.

The 23rd »East Transport« of 29 November 1942 contained 998 people, including 75 children between 10 months and 16 years of age, most of them from the Auerbach Orphanage. They and other children from the Orphanage were murdered in the gas chambers of Auschwitz.

Sisters Thea and Ruth Fuss



Ruth and Thea Fuss, photographed by Abraham Pisarek (1901–1983)

Thea was born on 16 January 1930 and Ruth on 4 September 1931 in Berlin. They grew up at Fehrbelliner Straße 83 in Berlin Prenzlauer Berg.

After 1933 the sisters and their father, the tailor Abraham Fuss, were counted as Polish, and later as stateless. Like 17,000 other Jews, Abraham Fuss was deported to Poland on 28 October 1938. He returned to Berlin and, after war broke out in 1939, was arrested once more and sent to the concentration camp at Sachsenhausen, where he was shot in 1942. Their mother, Hildegard Fuss managed to emigrate to Sweden with false papers; there, in 1940, she gave birth to a third daughter, Eva. Thea and Ruth remained in Berlin with their grandfather, who was later deported. Their mother tried in vain to reunite the family.

As a result, the sisters were taken in by the Jewish orphanage at Fehrbelliner Straße 92. When this was dissolved in spring 1942, they ended up in the Auerbach orphanage.

The Jewish old people's home at Große Hamburger Straße 26 was misappropriated by the Gestapo and used as a holding station for the deportations; from there, Ruth and Thea Fuss were transported to Riga on the 21st »East Transport« of 19 October 1942. Three days later, they were shot in the forests. Ruth was eleven; Thea was twelve years old.



Stolpersteine / memorial stones laid on 28 April 2012 for Abraham, Ruth and Thea Fuss at Fehrbelliner Straße 81 (previously no. 83)

Walter Frankenstein, born 30 June 1924



Walter Frankenstein aged 10 in Flatow (West Prussia) and with his wife Leonie and sons Uri and Michael in Israel in 1949

For over two years from 1943 to 1945, Walter Frankenstein, his wife Leonie and their sons Uri and Michael lived in hiding as Jews in Berlin. The family of four survived through their courage and resolution, but also thanks to help from a few non-Jewish Germans.

After Jews were banned from attending state schools, Walter Frankenstein moved in 1936 from Flatow in West Prussia to the Baruch Auerbach orphanage in Berlin. He went to school and later studied as an apprentice mason at the Jewish construction school. In 1941, he met his wife Leonie Rosner at the orphanage. The young couple married in 1942. Shortly after the birth of their first son, the family went into hiding, initially in Leipzig, and then largely in constantly changing locations in Berlin. In 1944, their second son Michael was born. After liberation, Leonie Frankenstein and her sons went to Palestine at the end of 1945, while Walter Frankenstein worked for the »Bricha«, before being held on Cyprus; he was only able to join them in 1947. In Israel he mainly worked as a mechanic. In 1956, he and his family emigrated to Sweden, where he worked as an engineer until he retired in 1984. Walter Frankenstein's retirement, living with his wife, was the happiest time in his life.

Until Leonie Frankenstein died in 2009, they frequently travelled together to Berlin. They championed the cause of a memorial to the Auerbach Orphanage together, with Walter subsequently continuing the work alone.

The Site in Schönhauser Allee, 1942–2014



The ruins of the Auerbach Orphanage (left: the surviving wall) and ceramic commemorative objects made by high school students in 2000

After the Jewish pupils were deported in late autumn 1942, the emptied orphanage was used by the Hitler Youth but subsequently suffered heavy bomb damage in winter 1943. The ruins were torn down in the mid 1950s. Only a fragment of the old outer wall survived.

For a long time, there was no indication that the orphanage was ever here, or of the fates of the children and their carers. In June 2000, however, students from the Kurt-Schwitters-School in Prenzlauer Berg worked with the artist Karla Sachse to make pottery toys in memory of the murdered children and then set them up on the low wall in the front garden. Only a few days later, the objects were destroyed by unknown vandals. Soon, new clay figures were made and these are now preserved at Pankow Museum along with the fragments of the originals. Young people bring the figures back here for commemorative events.

The State of Berlin had a memorial plaque installed on the facade on 5 September 2011, while in 2013 they launched a competition to design a memorial to be installed on the remaining historical wall of the »Baruch Auerbach Orphanage and Education Institute for Jewish Girls and Boys«. The competition jury unanimously approved the design by Berlin artist Susanne Ahner. The memorial site was established by the State of Berlin and it was opened to the public with the participation of current residents and in the presence of Walter Frankenstein on 26 June 2014.