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Ukrainian-born travel consultant Sophia Kulich offers a unique brand of customized Jewish heritage tours to destinations all around the world. (Photo credit: sophiastravel.blogspot.com)

Anyone who has read or seen the cinematic adaptation of Jonathan Safran Foer's *Everything Is Illuminated*, a tale of Jewish ancestral detective work that creatively weaves through multiple generations, cannot help but recall those hilarious moments when the main character (also named Jonathan) navigates rural Ukraine in a miniscule car with his translator, a smelly dog, and a blind old man who happens to be the driver. Like Jonathan, many of us yearn to uncover the lost stories of our Jewish heritage in distant lands, to trace the footsteps of our ancestors, to inhabit the space where they once stood. But unlike Jonathan, we choose not to travel in unsafe and unsanitary conditions.

Sophia Kulich, a Ukrainian-born travel consultant who lives in Palm Harbor, Florida, has just the solution. Sophia owns and operates a niche, one-of-a-kind travel agency specializing in Jewish heritage tours. While Kulich is a well-seasoned veteran of all-things-travel, her true passion is customizing tours for individuals, families, and groups wishing to personally experience their Jewish ancestors' cultural and physical landscapes. Working with a network of expert in-country guides and local tour operators, Kulich is able to conduct family-specific research, providing an unparalleled customizable experience for this type of travel. Recently she was able to help a group of clients find the Ukrainian family who hid and saved their mother from the Nazis in a Ukrainian village. Needless to say, it was an emotionally powerful encounter.

Kulich's Jewish heritage tours include, but are not limited to, countries throughout Western, Central and Eastern Europe, Scandinavia, Morocco, Turkey, Russia and the former Soviet Union. In addition, she provides kosher private tours and trips to countries with notable Jewish immigrant populations such as Peru, Argentina, South Africa, and China. Each tour has its own itinerary with room for customization. This article about Jewish Germany is the first in a series of countries important to Jewish culture, all of which hold a wide array of travel opportunities for exploring both the past and present.

A Brief History of German Jewry

Following the passage of progressive legislation in the late 19th century designed to safeguard religious freedoms throughout the German empire's provinces, the German-Jewish populace set into motion a period of cultural enlightenment that synergized ancient Jewish scholarship with the modern world. Contributors to this cerebral movement compiled Hebrew dictionaries, authored important legal and philosophical texts, and translated biblical corollaries, all while embracing the tenets of science and reason favored by enlightenment thinking. In 1901, Theologian Martin Buber famously referred to this flourishing of intellectual life as "a Jewish renaissance." By 1930, there were over 100 Jewish periodicals being published in Germany, covering subjects like art, literature and religion.

It was in this context that new Jewish sects crystallized, most notably the Reform movement. Leaders of Germany's Jewish Reform movement hoped to tailor the religion to more modern sentiments about the need to exercise one's Judaism and Germanness concurrently, to broaden Judaism's appeal beyond the traditionally observant segment of the community. *[Editor's note: This is not intended as an endorsement by the Jewish Voice, of the Reform movement, but rather as an historical account. It is worth noting that the intellectual environment in Germany that led to the above-mentioned factionalization, is also one in which thrived the work of renowned Torah scholar Rabbi Shimshon Raphael Hirsch.]*

As a testament to the symbiotic strength of German and Jewish culture at the time, approximately 100,000 Jews served in the German army during WW1. Preceding Hitler's reign, many Jews held prestigious positions in the German military, government, and foreign service.

In 1933, Jewish integration with German culture significantly slowed as a series of persecutory laws were passed to prevent Jews from holding upper-level positions. In the years to come, Hitler (Y"SS) would steadily intensify his anti-Jewish campaign, each phase more brutal than the last. By the Holocaust's end, it is believed approximately 200,000 German Jews were murdered by the Nazis. Prior to 1933, with dark clouds billowing on the horizon, approximately 250,000 emigrated to other countries.



Weather

NEW YORK

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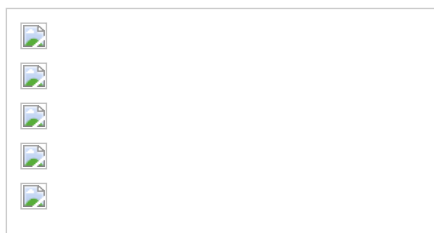
Cloudy

High: 85° Low: 67°
Wind: N 0mph

10 day forecast

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Jewish Germany Today

Today Germany has the third-largest Jewish population in Western Europe and the fastest growing one. There are approximately 120,000 Jews, many of them from the former Soviet Union and some from Middle Eastern countries such as Israel, Turkey and Morocco. In the 21st century, Germany has again become an important center for Jewish intellectualism. Given the similarities between German and Yiddish, many top German universities have Jewish Studies programs. In addition to synagogues in all major cities, there are Jewish day schools, kosher facilities and Jewish organizations. In Frankfurt and Munich Jewish cultural life is stronger than ever. Hip and progressive Berlin holds an annual Jewish Cultural Festival, houses a Jewish museum, and in 2007 celebrated the completion of an artistically novel Holocaust memorial comprised of eerie concrete slabs.

The German government has taken many proactive steps to help heal the deep wounds caused by the Nazi's murderous policies. In today's Germany, it is a crime to deny the Holocaust, punishable by up to five years in prison.

What to Expect on a Trip to Jewish Germany

While Holocaust memorials and concentration camps are a must-see and should be included in any Jewish heritage trip to Germany, Kulich's tour is more in tune with celebrating past accomplishments and current Jewish life. One of her tours might include a trip to Jewish Franconia, an extremely scenic valley developed by the industrious Jewish toymaker, a visit to the birthplace of Levi Strauss, or a tour of the restored synagogue in the small town of Ermreuth which contains centuries-old artifacts and doubles as a cultural center for promoting interfaith understanding. Regardless of the itinerary a client settles on, the trip is guaranteed to flow seamlessly from the pastoral to the urban, from the ancient to the contemporary, from the meditative to the celebratory.

Sophia's Kulich's Jewish heritage tours are available in virtually any country with a historical Jewish presence. Depending on the wishes of her clients, tour itineraries can be customized to family-specific and location-specific research as well as other forms of ancestral detective work. Kulich is more than happy to accommodate children, the elderly, and Jewish groups such as Yeshivot with kosher requirements.

For much more information and testimonials, or to make a reservation, visit her site at www.jewishtravelagency.com or call 877-466-2934 (toll free) or 727-254-4373. Bon voyage!

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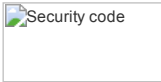
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