

## How to mark 1,700 years of German-Jewish history?

With the Shoah still a live memory, the task of celebrating German Jews' rich history is delicate, but those behind 321-2021 are determined to show the positive side

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2021 MARKS 1,700 years of recorded Jewish life in Germany, an occasion that will be marked with twelve months of celebrations and commemorations throughout the country.



The first document verifying the presence of a Jewish community in Germany dates from 321, when the Roman emperor Constantine issued a decree allowing the town curia in Cologne to admit Jewish members.

Two years ago, the vice-president of the Central Council of Jews in Germany, Abraham Lehrer, and the ex-governor of the state of North Rhine-Westphalia Jürgen Rüttgers decided this anniversary should be marked. Both now sit on the board of “321-2021: 1700 Years of Jewish Life in Germany”, the organisation overseeing the year’s events.

321-2021’s ambition, the organisation’s CEO Andrei Kovacs told the JC, is to contribute to a shift within Germany in terms of how Jewish life and history is understood 75 years on from the liberation of Auschwitz.

“In Germany, you have a strong culture of remembrance” among Jews and non-Jews like, Kovacs said, and there is a lot of discussion about the Holocaust: in politics, in the media, within the culture and so on. In this anniversary year, however, 321-2021 wants Germans to think about the grand sweep of German Jewish history.

Mr Kovacs would also like to use the occasion to reflect on the multitudes of the contemporary German Jewish community — whether that means its Russian-born majority or Israelis living in Berlin — and the future of Jews in Germany at a time of rising antisemitism.

Germans often think of Jews now as a minority that needs to be protected. In 2021, Mr Kovacs would like to use the year to talk about Jews as a “normal part of society,” he said, establishing a different kind of relationship between Germans and German Jews.

The big kick-off will take place on 21 February and throughout 2021, 3212021 will be working with hundreds of partners to fund more than 450 projects and events to be held throughout Germany, organised by Jewish and non-Jewish groups from museums to universities, Jewish communities to Catholic and Protestant churches.

The year's events have the financial and institutional support of the German government in the guise of the interior and culture ministries.

German president Frank-Walter Steinmeier is the organisation's patron.

The drive behind many of these projects — including a national Succot party in October — is to bring Judaism to Germans in a country where Jewishness continues to be associated with the dead as opposed to the living, the past as opposed to the future.

“We want to contribute to finding a common language” in which Germans can talk about Judaism and Jewish life “in the hope that, in the future, Jewish life in Germany will be something normal and not mysterious”, Mr Kovacs told the JC.

Dialogue is also the theme of 2021's European Days of Jewish Culture, which will take place on or around 5 September.

This year's events will be held under the auspices of the project Networks Overcoming Antisemitism and will look to foster “positive narratives around Jewish culture in Europe”.

2021, then, will be a big year for the German Jewish community — as it will for the Romanian one. After 15 years in office and a decades-long engagement with Jewish life in the country, Aurel Vainer has stepped aside as president of the Federation of Jewish Communities in Romania (FEDROM).

Mr Vainer has been replaced by Silviu Vexler, his former deputy. Mr Vexler's election was opposed by 18 leading figures in the Romanian Jewish community who signed an open letter in November questioning his suitability for the role and in particular his party-political interests, which the letter's signers believe threatens FEDROM's neutrality in the eyes of the state and the population at-large.

In 2021, Mr Vexler will be tasked with leading the Romanian Jewish community through a period of change as its focus continues to shift away from its smaller, more rural and ageing communities towards establishing four larger communities in major population centres like Bucharest, where FEDROM is developing JCCs in partnership with the JDC.

FEDROM's prestige project with which it is involved continues to be the proposed National Museum of Romanian Jewry and the Holocaust in Romania, an architectural competition for which remains ongoing and should come to resolution in 2021.

In terms of internal Jewish communal politics, 2021 will also be a testing one for the Austrian Jewish community (IKG), as internal disputes continue to test internal unity.

The community's two largest factions have accused each other in recent months of systematic discrimination on the one hand and ethnic and political separatism on the other and the row shows no signs of abating heading into the New Year.

At the national political level, the most important event in central and eastern Europe will take place on Sep

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tember 26, when Germans will go to the polls in order to elect a new chancellor and federal parliament.

This national election will be preceded by state-level elections in Berlin and other states, acting as an indication of the way the political winds are blowing in Germany. For German Jews, the most troubling development of 2020 was that, throughout the German-speaking world in fact, this was the year conspiracy theories flourished amidst the coronavirus pandemic.

Several of these, as the World Jewish Congress covered in a recent report, included “anti-semitic sentiments and blamed Jews for various aspects of the disease.”

The corona-sceptic, anti-vaxxer protests including those organized by the German Querdenker movement drew in members of existing extreme-right and neo-Nazi political parties like such as The Right, The III. Path, and the NPD and brought out antisemitic rhetoric and imagery that minimized and trivialized the Holocaust.

Corona-sceptic memes have compared mask wearers to Holocaust victims, and at the end of November, a German anti-lockdown, anti-mask protestor in Kassel compared herself in the anti-Nazi resistance hero Sophie Scholl, prompting a security guard working the protest to walk off the job.

German chancellor Angela Merkel is enjoying a kind of popularity unheard of for someone who has been in office for 15 years.

Though she will not run for re-election in 2021, her party, the Christian Democratic Union, is well placed to end up as the largest party come September.

But in the context of the coronavirus outbreak, the street protests, and the roll-out of the coronavirus vaccine due to take place in 2021, the rise of the corona-sceptic, anti-vaxxer movement will be a test for German democracy, civil society and its Jewish community.

Simone Rafael of the Antonio Amadeu Foundation in Berlin told she is sceptical about whether a mainstream political party will try and pick up on the movement and attempt to harness its power in order to win votes.

The far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) party has shown an interest in the corona-sceptic movement. Politicians belonging to the party have taken part in protests and compared coronavirus-related laws to Adolf Hitler’s 1933 Enabling Act.

But the AfD “is deeply divided at the moment,” Ms Rafael said. “Part of the AfD would very much like to be seen as the corona protest party, but if that part of the party gets its own way, then the AfD will have become an openly extreme right and anti-democratic party” and would lose voters as a result.

The corona-sceptic demonstrators in Germany are united in their anti-semitism and hatred of democracy, Ms Rafael observed, and to that end they represent a challenge not to Germany democracy from within as participants but rather as wreckers from without, challenging and undermining the system itself.

“To what extent [the corona-sceptic movement] will damage the forthcoming federal elections remains to be seen,” Ms Rafael told the JC