



## Jewish Life in Flatow until 1939

### **ETERNAL ECHOES**

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# Jewish Life in Flatow until 1939

## The Town of Flatow

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Map of Prussia, 1908.

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Friedrichplatz in the centre of Flatow. Below: The synagogue in Flatow.

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Walter Frankenstein's hometown of Flatow (today Złotów in Poland) was a small Prussian town in eastern Germany, close to the previous border of Poland since the end of the First World War. As the district town, Flatow was a transit point for goods from the surrounding countryside, mainly agricultural produce, and villagers in turn came here with everyday goods.

When Walter was born in 1924, Flatow had nearly 6 000 inhabitants. The majority were Protestant, but there was also a minority of Polish speaking and predominantly Catholic citizens. In 1925 about two hundred Jews lived in the city. They represented 3.5 percent of the population and many of them were active in commerce.

In the town centre, the Jewish citizens built a synagogue with elements of the Moorish style in 1878-79. In terms of size, it was reminiscent of earlier times, as was the case in the 18th century when the Jews of Flatow made up half of the population. However, as a result of emigration to above all major cities and industrial regions, the Jewish population steadily declined over the centuries.

On a small hill above the city, the Jewish community had its own cemetery, which is where Walter Frankenstein's father was buried in 1929.



## Hitler Comes to Power

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Group portrait of Hitler (with crossed hands) and the inner circle of the Nazi party members, January 1933. All are dressed in civilian clothes with the exception of Reichsführer-SS Heinrich Himmler. (Note: The Nazis manipulated the photo. The figure of SA chief Ernst Röhm, originally standing next to Hitler, was erased after the SA scandal in 1934.)

Similar to many Protestant-dominated provinces of Germany, the district of Flatow was a stronghold of the National Socialists and in the last independent Reichstag elections in November 1932; Adolf Hitler's National Socialist German Workers' Party (NSDAP) gained nearly 50 percent of the votes in the district.

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Boycott of a Jewish shop with posters in German and English, 1 April 1933.

Soon after the Nazis had taken power in Germany on January 30, 1933, they ordered a nationwide "day of boycotts" against Jewish traders, lawyers and doctors on April 1, 1933. Shop windows were marked with antisemitic slogans, uniformed members of the Nazi "Storm Trooper" (SA) units blocked customers from entering, and some of the shopkeepers were violently attacked.

All over Germany continuing acts of exclusion and attacks against the Jewish population followed, so too in Flatow, where customers started to avoid Jewish businesses and did not repay their debts.

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Throughout the country, the Jews came under overwhelming pressure from antisemitic legislation and propaganda as well as acts of violence. Faced with such hardship, more and more left their hometowns, either to move from the provinces to larger German cities or to flee Germany. To cover the costs incurred, many were forced to sell their properties for far below the market rate. For Gentile businesspeople, this all represented a chance to profit and benefit from the plight of the Jews.

SA men and a "mixed" couple with posters around their necks, Hamburg 1933. The signs read: "I am the greatest swine in town, I mate only with Jews" and "As a Jewish boy I take German girls up to my room".



Children in Nazi uniforms and an SA man underneath a sign at the entrance of the village. The sign reads: "Jews are not welcome in Behringersdorf".

As in many places, Flatow's local authorities made some antisemitic decisions on their own even before Nazi laws decreed this. For example, the exclusion of Jewish pupils from the elementary school in 1936 was based on local directives that were in advance of the overall national provisions.

Everywhere Jews suffered from growing exclusion. Even without being legally required to do so, many clubs excluded Jewish members, businessmen sacked their Jewish workers, and students bullied their Jewish classmates.



Young Jewish athletes in Berlin 1937 proudly wearing the Star of David as their own emblem and not as the compulsory star introduced by the Nazis as a distinguishing mark in 1941.

About 129 000 German Jews escaped from their home country from 1933 to 1937. But many others still hoped for an end to the series of new measures and struggled to continue with their everyday lives. A phase of apparent calm around the 1936 Olympics in Berlin was deceptive since; soon afterwards, the forcefulness of Nazi hatred against the Jews became even harsher.



Antisemitic slogans painted on the windows of a textile shop in Frankfurt/Main 1933. The words read: "Talmud cheater", "filthy Jew", and "Jewish --- swine".

In 1938 Martha Frankenstein, Walter's mother, had to move to Berlin. After several attacks, she sold her shop after concluding that it was impossible to continue living in Flatow.

During the pogroms on the night of November 9th, 1938, the Nazis destroyed the synagogue in Flatow and Jewish men were imprisoned in concentration camps. The last shops owned by Jews were destroyed or otherwise forced to close down. The ruins of the synagogue were demolished in 1939.

The few Jews still left in Flatow after the beginning of the war were banished from the town in 1940 and forcibly taken to the nearest larger city of Schneidemühl. From there, in the autumn of 1941, they were deported to ghettos and extermination camps.

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