

RE-MADE



Reading Leonard Freed

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Leonard Freed, 1970s

Open Door

Leonard Freed in Germany

by Paul M. Farber

Leonard Freed photographed Germany from 1954 through 2004, bridging historical eras and moving across the nation's internal divides. He witnessed sacred sites of memory, some fractured, and others leaning toward reconciliation and transformation. His investigations included post-Holocaust Jewish trauma, Cold War division, American GIs stationed far from their own culturally divided home, a multi-ethnic *Volk*, and reunification. During his numerous trips to the country, he captured over 800 rolls of film, a deep archive that includes photographs of noted Germans, and many more nameless others in street protests, storefronts, public parks, schools, retirement homes, cemeteries, and fortified border zones. Freed's call to action in the introduction to his 1970 *Made in Germany*, to "know your history and geography," was an indicator of his panoramic perspective, but not a promise of totality. Across his career, Freed was also concerned with fragments, lost relics, deliberate traces, and mistranslations; he could not envision Germany without sensing that rupture was also touched by hope, no matter the historical moment.

Readers of Freed's three books documenting Germany—*Deutsche Juden heute* (1965), *Made in Germany*, and *Berlin* (1977)—and dozens of photo-essays recognize in his images the overlapping layers of national history. Freed powerfully accounted for multiple generations of people against a palimpsest of architectural elements in the same frame. For example, children playing on war rubble near the Berlin Wall; pedestrians blindly walking near bygone memorials or others joyfully embracing their stone facades. He captured the effects of nature and human action in Ger-

many that together inscribe histories upon national or urban environments. He did so to draw the viewer's attention to spaces of political estrangement and converging temporalities, and to suggestively ponder the country's future. "What will be of Germany in twenty-five years?" he asks at the close of this 1970 introduction.¹ He surely must have been mulling the same question looking at the cranes and scaffolding surrounding Berlin's post-*Wende* ruins in the early 1990s. His speculations often rang true. His persistence in asking such questions can be measured on the scale of a career-long study, yielding a storied body of work that tapped deep currents of historical memory and embodies a complex meditation. In bearing witness and thinking forward, Freed also invited viewers to look through and past his images, to read his inscriptions, and to consider what might lie outside his frame.

The major haunt initially hovering over Freed's work on Germany was his own identity as an American Jew. "What led me to photography," he once wrote, "was the need to understand and analyze my relationship with Judaism and other issues that perplexed me."² Leonard's parents, Rose and Sam, were Jewish immigrants from Minsk, Russia, and escaped a hostile Europe in 1917 to settle in Brooklyn, only to find out years later that much of their extended family who had stayed behind were murdered by the Nazis during the war. Emigrating a generation prior, the Freeds had become survivors of the Holocaust.

The effects of World War II touched the Freed family in other ways as well. Leonard's brother, Milton, was a bomber in the Air Force who flew missions over Japan. Leonard was too young to be drafted, but was com-

pelled to leave America several years after the war to explore the legacy of violence on the continent of his parents' birth. He was not religious per se, but pondered his cultural inheritance. Postwar Europe was a puzzle for Freed: a land of great artistic civilization, ancestral aura, Jewish suffering, postwar destruction and potential redemption. In his mind, Germany was the central and most jagged piece.

For years after the Holocaust, many American Jews of European descent felt the urge to revisit upon old-world family roots. They would take trips to rediscover heritage, with one serious caveat: Germany was off-limits. This widely-held moratorium on setting foot in Germany meant the next generation of Jews would travel in zigzagged paths across the continent to avoid the former seat of Nazi power. The tension between patriotism and recent trauma shaped this aversion. As Americans, they could support the rebuilding of Germany, the Western half at least, as a fledgling democracy; as Jews, they remained suspect of the country. German-Jewish history was only to be approached in exile. The country was still seen as a weapon and a wound.

Freed went against this injunction and sought Jewish memory in Europe by seeking Germany as a site of transnational encounter. As a child, Freed was drawn to the symbol of the open door, kept ajar on Jewish holidays for the prophet Elijah to announce the coming of the Messiah, or to welcome strangers in need. The portal worked both ways for Freed, as he felt compelled to travel—at once summoned by the ghosts of his ancestors—and wanted to explore his identity. On his first trip to Europe in 1952, he arrived by boat and hitchhiked across the continent. He moved freely across borders. He began studying German while in Paris but did not have to wait to reach Germany to be confronted with the shadows of war. In London, after meeting the son of a Nazi General who was tried and hung in Nuremberg, he wrote in his journal what the man had related to him: "Everything would be all right if only America had gone in with Germany."³ In each case, Freed sought dialogue, not to forgive, but to understand the next generation.

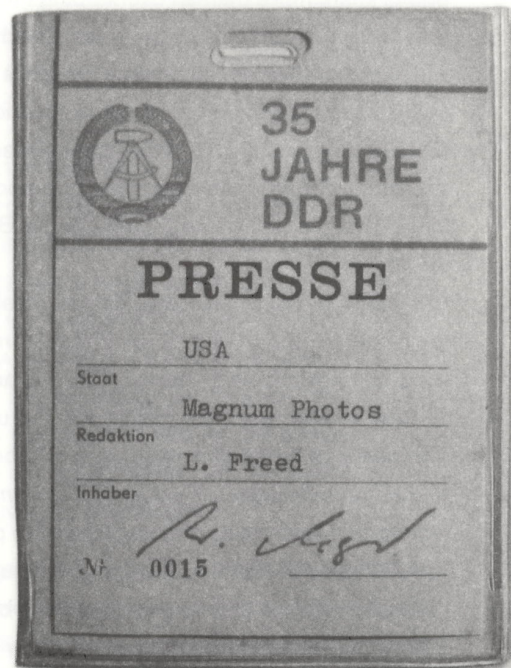
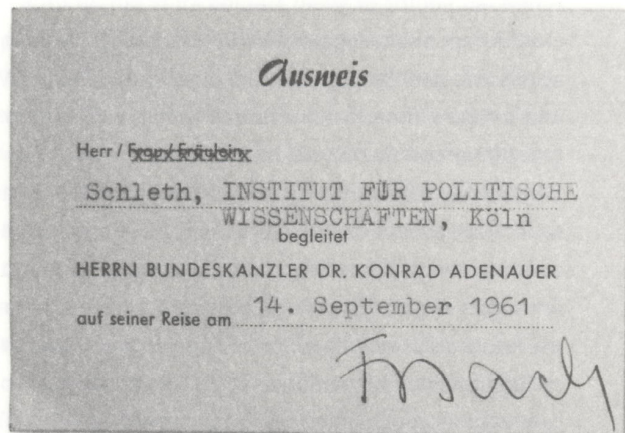
While in Europe, Freed began using photography as a relational tool, a medium for translating complex feelings and interactions. He had earlier obtained a Rollei-flex camera which he used to take several pictures on his travels. With this camera, he took one of his earliest German photographs, along the walled boundary of the Dachau concentration camp. Freed crouched by the remains of latticed wood planks along the former "blood trenches." He confronted the specter of genocide in the abandoned infrastructure and budding overgrowth surrounding the site. Soon after, Freed spent several months learning darkroom skills in Amsterdam before returning to Germany. In January 1954, he arrived in Cologne to buy his first Leica (the brand he would use for the rest of his career). While in the city, he photographed the days of the city's carnival, especially around the main cathedral which had survived the war (p. 6-7). "People were desperate for relief," Freed recalled, but "then it was quiet, slowly the party was over ... A few drunken stragglers slept out the night between the remaining buildings. For the rest it was, 'Arbeit macht Freude.'"⁴

In 1954, Freed returned to America for two years, where he photographed Brooklyn's Hassidic Jews who had survived the concentration camps. Freed's experience in Europe had not effected his own status as a secular man, but it did pique his kinship with pious Jews. According to curator William Ewing, Freed was drawn to them "not because he was one of them ... but because he *might* have been one of them had history dealt his Russian family another hand."⁵

By January 1956, Freed itched to return to Europe. He got the chance with an assignment from *Look* magazine. In May, while photographing in Italy, he met a young German woman, Brigitte, under a palm tree at a hostel in Rome. Brigitte was born in Upper Silesia, but her gentile family became refugees when their section of Germany was portioned off to Poland after the war. The two kept in contact, and that summer Freed drove his moped to see Brigitte in Dortmund, where her family eventually settled. He surprised them all by speaking to them in German. He was inquisitive, in part to find

out what they did during the war and asked so many questions that Brigitte's mother wondered if he was a spy. The local newspaper published a story about him as a traveling photographer, under the title "Ein Amerikaner sieht unsere Stadt" [An American sees our city] (p. 8). Over the course of two years, Leonard and Brigitte grew closer, and she joined him on photo shoots in Dortmund and Düsseldorf; he also went by train to Leipzig to document an East German trade show. Soon after, Leonard and Brigitte married in Amsterdam.

Ready to pursue his first book-length projects, Freed looked for traces of resilient Jewish life in Europe. His first book *Joden van Amsterdam* (Jews of Amsterdam) (1958) was inspired by a visit to the Anne Frank House in his adopted hometown. Next, starting in 1961, Freed shifted his focus to Germany's Jewish communities, their renewed rituals and recent scars, for the book *Deutsche Juden heute* (German Jews Today) (1965). Leonard and Brigitte made a habit of dropping off their young daughter Elke Susannah at Brigitte's family, for long stretches to go and pursue stories. Freed photographed across West Germany, attempting to build trust with his German Jewish subjects, continually measuring how much distance he should accord them. Freed demonstrated his feeling of affiliation with German Jews who returned to Germany. His portraits of prayer rituals, the rebuilding of synagogues and intimate intergenerational moments were balanced by others in which he seems to be photographing in isolation, apparently lost in Germany's ruined Jewish spaces. Freed's awareness of Germany oriented him toward the country's next turn of history. In August 1961, when he heard the news that a wall was being built down the middle of Berlin, he took a train from Amsterdam to see for himself. He was fascinated by the implications of this incipient Cold War barricade. The city was again the epicenter of global conflict, but now Germany was divided against itself. Freed spent his time during his August travels close to the center of the city. His photographs and recollections from that trip attest to his movements along Zimmerstrasse as he stalked the



Press passes (1961, 1984)
Leonard Freed Papers

wall's emergent path. With the world fearing the brink of war, Freed pointed his camera only obliquely at the actual eastern built border. He instead honed in on one of the West's last lines of defense: American GIs in the American sector of West Berlin.

One exceptional image stands in contrast to his oblique approach, one that faced head-on both the Berlin Wall and a fellow American in the same frame. This photographic encounter would haunt Freed, beckon his return from exile, and transform his practice. Here, at the wall in its nascent days, Freed snapped a single shot of an unnamed black soldier, standing at the edge of the American sector. The image signified for Freed a central contradiction of postwar American culture: the soldier guarded his nation's Cold War frontline abroad but was denied freedom back home (p. 26-27). Freed's photographs from this trip would spawn two simultaneous book projects—*Black in White America* (1967/8) and *Made in Germany* (1970). The two books share more than an overlapping image context—they were both printed by the same Dutch printer (Joh. Enschedé), through the same process (copper intaglio), and published by the same American publisher (Richard Grossman). In each case, Freed confronted the limits of American-sponsored democracy in Germany and placed himself close to the Berlin Wall to do so.

Over the course of the next decade—well after taking his photographs of the Berlin Crisis—Freed regularly traveled back and forth between Europe and the United States. In his books, he challenged the underlying dichotomies of home and away, past and present, countryman and stranger. *Black in White America* was an extended photo-essay that captured the prevalence of racial division in America. His image of the black soldier opened the book, and set the tone for a book aimed at marking and encroaching upon the color line. In *Made in Germany*, Freed favored photographing crowds over scenes of isolation, as a way to get a sense of the public at large. Through these photographs, he attempted to come to terms with Germany and its history, face to face and encounter by encounter. He negotiates his

critical stance by meeting people at public squares, nudist colonies, schools and industrial worksites, all of which seem to demonstrate Freed's ability to wander and observe freely. But he also drew attention to buildings that still display traces of poorly erased Nazi iconography, or structures of division. In each case he challenged himself and others to measure the benefits of reconciliation in transforming trauma, by playing between particular and collective stories. Like his earlier pursuit of sites of Jewish memory, Freed captures many individuals who are attempting to make sense of their pasts—including family homes haunted by old photographs, grandchildren wearing heirlooms tainted by the war, and those gathered for the funeral of former chancellor Konrad Adenauer. Rather than treating mourning merely as a private matter, Freed makes such rites public; he meets Germans at moments of profound grieving and attempts at political reinvention.

But Freed recognized his own limits and used his captions to address the gaps in his mode of witnessing. His prose became another important mode of representation, even if deliberately flawed or incomplete. He writes, for example, in one caption of a photograph in which students protesting their parents' actions holding a placard "Never forget Auschwitz" were beaten and their sign torn to shreds: "When the photographs do not show what [the photographer] has seen, it is not the reality but the inadequacy of the photographer and his tools that is to blame."⁶ Later, in a noteworthy set of textual reflections that appear near the end of *Made in Germany*, Freed recounts a series of "traumas" he experienced during his time in Germany. There are no images in this section. Instead, prose is used to describe moments in which clearly no image would suffice. Here he composes four vignettes on postwar German politics, including one detailing a conversation with a hitchhiker who scoffed at national reconciliation with Jewish people. Freed adds, "He left and I thought ... keep faith, one must not abandon those Germans still fighting to uphold democratic ideals."⁷ Freed counters his ambivalence with extended reflection.



Berlin map (1990)
Leonard Freed Papers

During the middle years of Germany's division, national upheaval was tempered with detente. In 1970, Freed and his family moved from Amsterdam to America, and he became a full-time member of Magnum Photos in 1972. He continued to photograph Germany on assignment, and his many journeys to the divided city of Berlin exemplify his visionary and fearless approach. In 1976, he lived in a flat in the artist co-op Künstlerhaus Bethanien with a curtain-less bedroom window that overlooked the wall as he photographed for a book on Berlin to be published by *Time-Life*. In 1984, he immersed himself in the Turkish community of Kreuzberg for a photo-essay that captured fraught belonging and hybrid German identities. Freed also was a credentialed press photographer at the 1984 East German celebration of the 35th anniversary of the GDR. Leonard Freed was in Paris in November 1989 when the border was broken open. Freed once again booked travel immediately to Berlin and arrived two days later to see the city without an intact internal border. His long studied approach to Germany's new turns and en-

during trends allowed him to create pictures that capture the proper range of emotionality of the scene: wonderment, shock, and the particular limbo wrought by sudden change. Perhaps no other image from this trip captures the stark shift as the one of the East German border guard of whom Freed coaxed a grin: "Yesterday if he had smiled while on guard duty this East German soldier would have been court-martialed. Today he can smile because he knows it will soon be over, the Wall has been breached" (p. 40–41).⁸ In his other images from the *Wende* period, Freed continued to look for evidence of historical overlap, not just triumphs nor willful erasures.

In the final decade of his life, Freed intended to follow up his earlier Germany-focused projects, to weigh the unified "New Germany" by juxtaposing contemporary images with others pulled from his own archive, many accompanied by diary-style annotations in which he pondered the past of Germany, of his career, in first person prose through the window of his present. Freed outlined his aim in a faxed letter to German curator Ute Eskildsen in 1990 at the onset of this project outlining his aims (p. 48):

"THE INTENTION IS TO FOLLOW UP ON MY 1970 BOOK WITH A SECOND, TO DEVELOPE [SIC] AND EXTEND MY EXPERIENCES AS I HAVE BEEN DOING IN BOTH EAST AND WEST GERMANY OVER THE YEARS SINCE ITS PUBLICATION. ... I FEEL BEING BORN IN THE UNITED STATES GIVES ME A FRESH OR EXTRA EYE TO OBSERVE WHAT THE AVERAGE GERMAN WILL OVERLOOK."⁹

Freed photographed in post-reunification Berlin and other cities across the country. He proposed several titles for this follow-up including *The Children of Reich*, *Die Neuen Deutschen* (The New Germans), and *An American in Deutschland*. He also worked with designers to conceptualize the contours and look of the project. Despite reaching more success during these later years, no publisher took on the project, perhaps

because it was too soon to look back and across German history. In 2005, Freed exhibited some of the newer prints, along with older ones, at the Haus der Geschichte in Bonn, under the title "Ein Amerikaner in Deutschland."

Freed remained active in his final years. He helped prepare the retrospective "Worldview", premised by the German term *Weltanschauung*, but did not live to see his own finished book or exhibition. He passed away from cancer on November 30, 2006. After his death, several drafts, letters, and the prototypes of his unpublished German book were found in his papers. As a living artifact, this project documents his relationship with both his own work and German history as a process of dynamic reflection and reinterpretation. His life's work on Germany was full but ultimately never finished.

Freed's rich archive opens possibilities for the continued study of transnational historical memory. In July 2008, the "Worldview" exhibition opened in Berlin, during the same week then-presidential candidate Barack Obama visited the German capital to much fanfare. Freed had foreseen this moment several years earlier while working in Berlin, a city from which he evidently was able to simultaneously weigh the past and imagine the future. Writing in his journal from Berlin on a night following the 2004 re-election of President George W. Bush, he had noted: "The left is now represented by a new Black senator from Illinois and Mrs. Clinton—not white men."¹⁰ Freed would not live to see the Obama presidency, but his wife, Brigitte, was inspired to begin working on a posthumous project, 2013's *This Is the Day: The March on Washington*, when she heard President Obama say to a crowd in the United States: "I am here because somebody marched."

Leonard Freed would surely have much to see in and say about Germany today. He could help us make sense of the nation's status as the robust economic engine of the Eurozone; navigate the more fully realized Holocaust memorial landscape in Berlin, even as Jewish communities continue to deal with a deep legacy of questioned belonging; or confront the nation's pro-

nounced fears over immigration from Central and Eastern Europe and waves of Islamophobia. We can imagine Freed would also continue to re-ask his own enduring questions: What will be next for Germany? What is the nation's cultural inheritance? His reflections, in image and text, evince the ways in which the past touches the present. Freed envisioned his work as one way to bridge divides, to look back and forth through history's open door.

1 Leonard Freed, *Made in Germany*, New York: Grossman, 1970, p. 2.

2 Leonard Freed, Introduction of *La Danse des Fidèles* (Dance of the Faithful), unpublished English translation, Leonard Freed Papers (LFP), Garrison, New York, 1984.

3 Leonard Freed Journals, 17 October 1952, LFP.

4 Leonard Freed, unpublished German book (uncatalogued), LFP, ca. 2005.

5 William Ewing in Leonard Freed, *Worldview*, Göttingen: Steidl, 2007, p. 15.

6 Leonard Freed, *Made in Germany*, p. 84.

7 *Ibid.*, p. 113.

8 Leonard Freed, unpublished German book (uncatalogued), LFP, ca. 2005.

9 *Ibid.*

10 Leonard Freed Journals, 7 November 2004, LFP.