An important urban institution and emblem of Berlin modernism, the literary café was a place of fertile contacts among modernist writers working in German, Russian, Hebrew, and Yiddish. Several cafés emerged as important places for the creation and development of modernism in Berlin at the fin de siècle. At Café Monopol near Freidrichstrasse in Berlin Mitte (not far from the Scheunenviertel), such anarchist writers as Gustav Landauer, Erich Mühsam, and the Austrian Hermann Bahr mingled with young theater artists, who included Max Reinhardt and his circle. Several other Berlin cafés drew writers critical to the formation and development of expressionist art and literature. Public recitals and cabarets of Der Neue Club appeared at Café Austria, Café Sezession and Café Josty, and editorial activities of expressionist journals occurred around their tables. The most important place was Café des Westens on the Kurfürstendamm. By 1910 it had established itself not only as the chief gathering place for all of the expressionist circles centered in Berlin, but also as a magnetic pole drawing modernist writers and artists from all over Europe. It was famous for the extravagant dressing and eccentric behavior of its “regulars,” as well as for its artistic and literary activity. Poets, painters, critics, philosophers, actors, and directors packed the café in the evening. Periodicals such as Der Sturm and Die Aktion were founded and planned in the café, making it an indispensable ingredient of daily literary life for the Berlin modernists before the end of World War I.

After World War I and throughout the Weimar period, the huge and rather shabby Romanisches Café became the new headquarters of the expressionists, as well as the so-called Neue Sachlichkeit movement, and in fact of all writers, artists, and many other intellectuals and bohemians. The Romanisches Café performed many of the roles of the Café des

The Literary Cafés of Berlin as Urban Spaces of Jewish Modernism

Shachar Pinsker
Westens in the 1910s, even inheriting the dubious name “Café Megalomania.” Among many well-known figures who frequented the café were Else Lasker-Schüler, Franz Werfel, Kurt Tucholsky, Stefan Zweig, Alfred Döblin, Ludwig Meydner, Gottfried Benn, Erich Kästner, Walter Benjamin, and Berthold Brecht. They described it as a second home for writers during daytime; a place where heated debates on various subjects ensued far into the night and where collective activities, such as the founding and editing of periodicals, were pursued. The Romanisches Café reflected Weimar culture in many ways, including the fact that it was far from being the exclusive location of a small group of German expressionists, but rather a place in which “insiders” and “outsiders,” locals and strangers, bohemians and bourgeoisie, politics and art, avant-garde and mass culture (both “high” and “low”) coexisted in an elusive mixture.

Although these well-known Berlin cafés have been amply described and their role in the various stages of Berlin modernism has been clearly demonstrated, these accounts rarely recognize the presence of Hebrew and Yiddish writers, intellectuals, and artists. In the first decade of the twentieth century, the Hebraists of Berlin had a Stammtisch (regular table) at Café Monopol. Aharon Hermoni and Itamar Ben-Avi (who came to Berlin as a student) write in their memoirs that around 1908 even the waiter, Eduard, knew some Hebrew in order to accommodate the “Hebrew” or “Eretz-Israeli” table. This “Hebrew Table” included Shay Ish Hurwitz, Reuven Breinin, S. A. Horodetzky, Itamar Ben-Avi, Aharon Hermoni, and many other Zionist activists and Hebrew writers. Y.D. Berkovitz wrote that plans for Hebrew publishing ventures were laid out on the black marble tops of this plush café, with its oriental-like appearance in the heart of Berlin. Journals like Ha-olam and He-atid were edited in the café. The Hebraists in Café Monopol were far from isolated. Side by side with their Hebrew table were many “German tables” with which they interacted. There was also a “Yiddish table” that enjoyed visits by luminaries such as Sholem Asch, whose play El nekamot (“God of Revenge”) was performed by Reinhardt’s theater, and Sholem Aleichem, who came to Berlin with a dream to have his plays translated into German and produced by Reinhardt’s theater as well.

There is less evidence of the presence of Hebrew and Yiddish writers in the famous Café des Westens during the 1910s, but we know that Berdichevsky, Shay Ish Hurwicz and other Hebrew, Yiddish, and German writers used to meet every Thursday evening, first in Café Monopol and then in Café des Westens. However, the rather modest activity prior to the Great War was just a prelude to an expanded presence in the Romanisches Café throughout the Weimar period. Almost everybody who joined the Hebrew and Yiddish colony in Weimar Berlin attested to the café’s allure. Uri Zvi Greenberg, Ya’acov Shteinberg, Yeshurun Keshet, Avrom Noch Stencl, Dovid Bergelson, Nahum Goldman, Henrik Berlewi and numerous others all mention the café. In fact, some accounts create the impression that Romanisches Café was a kind of a pan-Jewish urban space. Thus, Nahum Goldman writes that “each [Jewish] group had its own table; there were the ‘Yiddishists,’ ‘Zionists,’ ‘Bundists’ and so on, all arguing among themselves from table to table.” The Yiddish author Avrom Noach Stencl in Loshn un lebn describes the scene of Romanische Café from the angle of Eastern-European Jewish intellectuals:

From those fleeing the pogroms in the Ukrainian shtetls, from the famine in the Russian cities, and from the Revolution, a kind of Jewish colony formed itself in the
west of Berlin, and the Romanische Cafe was its parliament. It was buzzing with famous Jewish intellectuals and activists, well known Jewish lawyers from Moscow and Petersburg, Yiddish writers from Kiev and Odessa, with flying party-leaders from the extreme left to the extreme right wing — it buzzed like a beehive.

In his characteristically fragmentary expressionist style, with expansive grammar and outrageous images, Uri Zvi Greenberg writes in his essay on Else Lasker-Schüler that they “drank together dark coffee in the Romanisches café, and until midnight this bitter drink was dripping in our hearts, and sipping through even deeper to the ‘inner existence,’ around the heart and beyond it like dark blood.”

Yeshurun Keshet described his encounters with the Hebrew and Yiddish writer Ya’akov Shteinberg, who spent most of days in the Romanisches Café. In Keshet’s memoirs, Maskiyot, the café emerges both as a kind of “Jewish urban space” but also as a place whose “regulars” are a “cultural elite full of decadence, smoke and the syncopated rhythm of the metropolis.” It is not surprising that Shteinberg, who was always attracted to this mixture of urban decadence and syncopated rhythms, to modernist literary activity in which he participated with a critical distance, devoted an entire cycle of sonnets — Sonnets from the Café (1922) — to the Romanisches Café.

Hebrew and Yiddish writers’ descriptions of the Romanisches Café, also known in Yiddish as Café Rakhmonishes (“The Café of Pity”), testify to the tensions between their “bohemian” existence and a sense of certain marginality, both physical and spiritual, in the café and, by extension, in Weimar Berlin. A.N Stencil, U. Z. Greenberg, and Shteinberg met Else Lasker-Schüler and other important figures of Berlin modernism in Romanisches Café, and