

Education

A singular Holocaust museum opens a new chapter

LONDON

London institution serves varied roles in study of Jews' fate in Germany

BY D.D. GUTTENPLAN

In a sun-drenched room overlooking Russell Square, a visitor's eye is immediately drawn to a display of cheerful coloring books, a brightly colored board game and photographs of laughing children. On closer inspection, the children in one photo can be seen crowding around a cake decorated with a swastika.

The board game, a German version of Parcheesi or Sorry made in Dresden in 1936, is called *Juden Raus!* (Jews Out!), in which the first player to chase six Jews out of the walled ghetto is the winner. A deck of trivia cards for teenagers features the faces of Nazi leaders. And in a beautifully illustrated book aimed at teaching good German boys and girls the alphabet, "A" is for "Adolf."

"A is for Adolf: Teaching Children Nazi Values" is the first public exhibition at the Wiener Library, a combination of museum, archive, research center and academic institution. Though long known among the small circle of scholars who study Nazism or World War II, the library languished for decades in relative obscurity in rented spaces crammed to bursting with books, photographs, letters, magazines and other material documenting the flourishing life and violent death of Germany's Jewish community.

"Through its combination of testimonies and records and current journals and works of scholarship, the Wiener Library has played a unique role for historians," said Richard J. Evans, the Regius professor of modern history at the University of Cambridge and author of a three-volume history of the Third Reich. As the principal expert witness defending the American academic Deborah E. Lipstadt in her 2000 libel trial against the British writer David Irving, who claimed that the Holocaust had never happened, Mr. Evans found the library's collection an indispensable resource.

Opened in December in a renovated Georgian townhouse flanked by the Birkbeck College history department



The renovated Wiener Library was officially opened on Dec. 1 at its new location in London by Ben Barkow, the director, left, and Princess Anne. Its origins predate Hitler's rise to power.

and the School of Oriental and African Studies at the University of London, the library "now has the space and modern facilities it deserves," Mr. Evans said.

Largely the product of one man's obsession, the Wiener Library is not only the world's oldest Holocaust museum, it is the only such institution whose origins predate Hitler's rise to power.

Alfred Wiener was born in Potsdam, Germany, in 1885 into a prosperous Jewish family. On finishing his doctorate on Arabic literature at the Heidelberg University, he worked briefly as a journalist before enlisting in the artillery corps during World War I, where he saw action on the Eastern and Western fronts and was awarded the Iron Cross.

His position as secretary of a Jewish civil rights group in the 1920s brought him into repeated contact with the rise

of anti-Semitism. After years of documenting the trend and trying to warn his fellow Germans about the Nazi Party's racist doctrines, Mr. Wiener fled the country, taking his dossiers and files to the Netherlands and then to Britain.

The collection first opened in London on September 1, 1939 — the day Nazi troops marched into Poland. Known then as the Jewish Central Information Office, the library essentially functioned as a private intelligence service, with Mr. Wiener paid a regular stipend by British government departments in return for keeping them informed about developments in Germany.

It was Alfred Wiener's new employers who apparently first referred to his enterprise as "the Library." After the war, the library found new patrons among wealthy Jews in Britain and the

United States. It also played a role in assisting in the prosecution of Nazi war criminals at Nuremberg. Yet even though its twin focus on documenting the devastation of Jewish communities of Europe and the ideology that led to that destruction was unrivaled — the Israeli memorial at Yad Vashem was not built until 1953 — the Wiener Library struggled to survive. Its widely publicized involvement in the prosecution of Adolf Eichmann brought only a temporary respite in a long period of decline.

In his biography of Mr. Wiener, who died in 1964, Ben Barkow blames a combination of the founder's personal failings, academic politics and the vagaries of ethnic institutions for the library's decline. But Mr. Barkow, the library's current director, believes that his institution is on the verge of a renaissance. "Al-

though we don't have any formal relationship with any university, we are very keen to be part of the life of our academic neighbors," he said in an interview.

Dan Plesch, the author of "America, Hitler and the UN," said of the library, "It's an astonishing resource." In researching his book, Mr. Plesch, who teaches at the School of Oriental and African Studies, came across a statement issued Dec. 17, 1942, by the British, American and Soviet governments that seemed to suggest fairly detailed early knowledge of the Holocaust, warning that the German authorities "are now carrying into effect Hitler's oft repeated intention to exterminate the Jewish people in Europe."

"The Wiener Library were able not just to authenticate the document but to place it into context," Mr. Plesch said.

Increasing the likelihood of such collaborations was a major factor in moving the library to Bloomsbury, said Joanna Bourke, a Birkbeck history professor involved in the negotiations. "It's one of the great underutilized resources," she said. "People tend to categorize it as being just about the Holocaust, or about European Jews. But I've used it in my work on women's organizations."

Referring to the library, Ms. Bourke added: "They wanted to retain their independence, which they have. But by moving them effectively onto campus, they'll get a lot more visitors, and a lot more researchers will be able to use the collection."

Nor are the new users all academics. According to Mr. Barkow, visitor numbers have tripled since the library moved to its new building. One of them was Martin Bright, a British journalist who was following a lead this month about British prisoners of war at Auschwitz.

"The Wiener has German documents from Stalag VIII-B, the main P.O.W. camp," Mr. Bright said. "In December 1943, these showed 10,537 British P.O.W.'s, of whom 772 were identified as Jews. On the next roll call, there are no Jews among the British P.O.W.'s. What does it mean? Did something happen to them?"

Even more visitors are expected this year when the Wiener becomes the British home for the International Tracing Service, an archive that Anne Webber, co-chairwoman of the Commission for Looted Art in Europe, calls "the most important Holocaust archive in Europe." Kept for decades by the International Committee of the Red Cross, which in 2007 allowed copies to be made of the files, the archive "has both humanitarian and scholarly importance," Ms. Webber said. "Access has come too late for many," she added, "but there is still the chance for individuals lost to each other since the war of finding each other."

Indeed, very few of the stories contained in the Wiener Library have happy endings. Yet Ms. Webber and Mr. Barkow say they are delighted with the library's new home. Which in turn pleases Barbara Weiss, the architect in charge of the renovation.

"If you're going to be reading about horrible things," she said, "you might as well do so in a nice, warm, secure place."