

# Jewish Textual Architectures

Jewish Spaces, Places, and Architectures in Literature. Online Anthology

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Beate Lehmann

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## Born out of crisis: Siegfried Lehmann's idea for a youth settlement in Palestine

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### SOURCE DESCRIPTION

The diary of Jewish doctor and educator Siegfried Lehmann is kept in the archives of the children's and youth village Ben Schemen in Israel, which he founded. It is a thread-bound notebook in DIN A5 format with a semi-rigid black cover and blank pages. The first pages of the notebook, which were apparently written on, are missing, and the last pages, which were probably blank, have been cut out. The entries cover the period from December 29, 1924 to December 20, 1930 on 87 pages. The individual entries were generally written at long intervals. The entry dated February 28, 1925 deserves special attention. At that time, Siegfried Lehmann had already decided to give up his position as head of the Jewish orphanage in Lithuania and leave the children's home he had founded in Kaunas. His plan was to establish an agricultural youth settlement in Palestine, where children and young people from Kaunas would receive agricultural training that would enable them to earn their own living later on. In the entry dated February 28, 1925, Siegfried Lehmann describes what motivated him and how he envisioned the settlement. Siegfried Lehmann used various materials and methods to win supporters for his idea, including [brochures](#), lectures and films. However, Lehmann used his diary entries solely for self-reflection and to structure his thoughts. He never published the sketch of the planned youth settlement that accompanied the entry.

### Siegfried Lehmann and Lithuanian orphan care

At the request of the Jewish National Council, doctor Siegfried Lehmann from Berlin took over the care of Lithuanian war and social orphans in 1921. To this end, he founded the Kowno Children's Home, which within a few years became the largest orphanage in Eastern Europe with 200 places. The home took in children and young people who had lost their parents as a result of the events and consequences of the war, as well as those whose parents were unable to care for their own children. The reformist institution was financed by the local Jewish community, Jewish and non-Jewish aid organizations such as the Joint and the Red Cross, and private donors. In Germany, the home, which had medical, social, and educational departments, soon became a showcase project.

### Personal crisis, political change, and a far-reaching decision

It was not only the demanding work at the children's home that left its mark on Siegfried Lehmann. His personal situation also proved to be very stressful: after only a short time, his wife Annie, who had initially accompanied him to Kowno, returned to Berlin. She took their son Alfred with her. If Siegfried Lehmann wanted to see Alfred, he had to travel to Berlin, some 1,000 kilometers away. These trips demanded a

great deal of strength and time from him. Soon, the political situation in Lithuania also changed: although the minority populations living there, including the Jewish community, had been granted extensive self-government rights when the state was founded, these were curtailed from 1923 onwards. Conflicts with neighboring Poland led to growing nationalism in Lithuania, which was accompanied by increasing anti-Semitism. In 1924, the Jewish National Council and the Ministry of Jewish Affairs were abolished. From then on, the pupils of the orphanage could hardly hope to have the same rights and opportunities as non-Jewish Lithuanians. A self-determined professional future seemed almost impossible for them. The combination of professional and personal stress and the political deterioration led to Lehmann falling seriously ill in early January 1925, by which time he was completely exhausted. After several weeks of rest, during which he spent a lot of time thinking and reading, he made a decision: he would leave Kowno and go to Palestine. Having initially decided to take this step on his own, he soon made another important decision: he would not make Alija alone or accompanied by his new partner Rebecca Klavansky. A group of young people would join the couple. They wanted to establish an agricultural settlement in Palestine. Siegfried Lehmann recorded exactly what he hoped to achieve with this project and how he imagined it would be in his diary entry of February 28, 1925.

## **A task for Lehmann, a place for Jewish youth**

By the end of February, there was no trace of the despondency and grief that had weighed on Lehmann just a few weeks earlier. The decision to establish a settlement in Palestine with young people from Kowno had clearly put not only Lehmann himself but also the children at the children's home and the staff in a euphoric mood. Lehmann's entry reveals no doubts or indications of anticipated obstacles. He is also confident about his own suitability: calmness, reflection and, above all, personal dedication are sufficient prerequisites for the project in his view; he expects little from relevant reading and lectures. Preparing for Palestine is an extremely ideologically charged undertaking. And although he wants to go to Erez Israel, no Zionist motives can be discerned from the entry: there is no mention of a reconstruction project in Palestine to which Jewish youth should contribute. The agricultural settlement that Lehmann plans at the beginning of 1925 could also be located in another country. For Lehmann, the settlement is a place where Jewish children and young people can live and develop prospects for their own lives. For him, the project offers the opportunity to restore a small piece of the world, which he perceives as impure, torn and clouded, to its original state: a state of purity and beauty. He would turn chaos into cosmos. Lehmann does not describe exactly what he means by an impure and chaotic world. However, a glance at his biography shows that when he wrote his entry at the age of 33, he had already experienced much that could be subsumed under this heading: These include the war with life-threatening missions in Eastern Europe, the early death of his mother and brother, the hunger winter of 1917, the poverty and misery of orphans in Eastern Europe, and the rise of anti-Semitism and nationalism in Lithuania.

## **On the significance of nature and culture**

Lehmann had high hopes for nature. In his writings, it is less a place where one wants to live and work in the future than a source of energy, honesty, purity, and creativity. It is also the opposite of the city. Concrete plans to raise children under his care in the countryside first appear in his diary entries from January 1925: when the idea of founding a youth settlement in Palestine had not yet been born, Lehmann planned to send the children from the children's home, along with the furniture and the children's home

library, to the countryside in Lithuania for the summer. The boys and girls were to live there for several months in a Jewish village community and help with the farm work. Shortly afterwards, he decided to go to Palestine. In addition to nature, Siegfried Lehmann mentions culture as a binding and empowering element in his life. This reference is an indication of Lehmann's close connection to the cultural Zionist ideas of Martin Buber. Cultural Zionism aimed at the renewal of Jewish culture, which was considered essential for the Jewish Renaissance. This, in turn, did not seek to create a Jewish state, but rather to create a new Jewish people and a Jewish nation through education and culture. Accordingly, emigration to Palestine did not play a significant role. Jewish festivals, the Hebrew and Yiddish languages, and folk songs were considered to be identity-forming and unifying elements.

## **The sketch of the youth settlement in the Emek**

In his diary entry of February 28, 1925, Lehmann not only describes what motivated him to found a settlement in Palestine and where he found the strength to realize his plan. He also sketches what this “youth settlement in the Emek” should look like: it is a rectangular, clearly defined complex, clearly demarcated from the outside and with access to the surrounding fields. Inside the complex there are several buildings. In the center stands the most important house, both in terms of its size and the facilities it houses. The adult education center is located in the front part, and the ballroom is in the rear. It is surrounded by workshops, schools, and laboratories, of which there are 12 in total – a number that refers both to the number of sons of the patriarch Jacob and to the Jewish tribes. Around the large building in the center, Lehmann envisaged various houses to accommodate and care for the children living in the settlement, including a hospital, a crèche and a nursery – an indication that he was already thinking about taking in and caring for very young children at an early stage. Group houses are also planned, each of which will house 20 children and their educators. Although it is clear that the settlement is to be established in a rural area and that young people are to be trained for agricultural work, there are no buildings on the settlement site that serve this purpose: Lehmann plans neither stables nor barns, gardens, or shelters for machinery. The only reference to agriculture – “into the field” (Ins Feld) – refers to the land outside the youth settlement. The hospital and infant care station – institutions where Lehmann had already worked – make it clear once again that the complex was planned by a doctor, not a (budding) farmer.

## **A youth settlement like a temple**

In his mind, Lehmann draws inspiration from a well-known and significant building: the temple built by Herod, whose destruction in 70 A.D. marked the beginning of the dispersion of the Jewish people. The enclosure Lehmann sketches for his complex corresponds to the temple wall, while the courtyard, where he plans to build the buildings to house the children, corresponds to the temple square. The large, two-part building in the center corresponds to the sanctuary and the Holy of Holies, and a closer look reveals that Lehmann has even depicted an equivalent of the two pillars of the temple, Boas and Jachin. The fact that Lehmann places an adult education center in the place corresponding to the sanctuary reflects the high value he attaches to youth and adult education. A fundamental change applies to the Holy of Holies: in the biblical context, the place that only the high priest was allowed to enter once a year for sacrificial purposes, the room becomes the heart of the settlement, which is always open to all residents.

## Conclusion

Siegfried Lehmann's plan, formulated in February 1925, and his outlined idea of a youth settlement in Palestine were the result of a deep personal crisis caused by various factors. His view of the world and his values gave him strength in the months that followed. Realizing the idea proved difficult. It took time to find supporters and, above all, financial backers, and for a support association to begin its work. It was at least as difficult to find land in Palestine where the Kownoers could settle. By the end of 1926, when the decision was made in favor of Ben Schemen, several options had already fallen through and disputes with a group of Jewish women who also claimed rights to the settlement near the city of Lod were in full swing. In the end, it was Lehmann's group that stayed. At this point, the Ben Schemen settlement already had a varied history as an oil factory, agricultural research station and artists' colony. A large central building existed, as did barns and stables. Lehmann did not realize his project on undeveloped, open land as he had sketched it. The village's layout is also not reminiscent of the temple. But little by little, under Lehmann's direction, residential buildings, workshops, and medical facilities are erected. For all residents, the large hall becomes the center of the settlement. It is the room where people eat and celebrate together. Learning, working, and living together as a community become the central elements of Siegfried Lehmann's life's work. DFG project "Jewish Youth Movement and Zionist Education" (project ID: 392108129)

## Selected bibliography

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## About the Author

Beate Lehmann, born in 1964, is a doctoral candidate at the TU Braunschweig in the Department of Educational Sciences, a member of the executive team of the Jewish Welfare Working Group and deputy chair of the Judaica in Meimbressen e. V. association. Her research focuses on the life and work of Siegfried Lehmann, the history of Jewish social work and biographies of Jewish social workers.

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