

Jehovah's Witnesses in the GDR 1950—1990 Overview

August 1950: A slanderous press campaign prepares the people of the GDR for the planned ban of Jehovah's Witnesses.

August 30, 1950: Administrative buildings of the Watch Tower Society in Magdeburg occupied and confiscated by the State Security, and most workers arrested. Arrest of more than 300 Jehovah's Witnesses throughout the GDR during the next few days.

August 31, 1950: Official ban by the GDR Minister of Interior Affairs. Prior to the construction of the Berlin Wall, Watch Tower literature reaches the GDR through West Berlin.

October 1950: Mock trial of nine Jehovah's Witnesses with Hilde Benjamin as presiding judge, followed by other mock trials throughout the GDR.

August 1961: Immediately following the erection of the Berlin Wall, congregations receive just individual copies of Watch Tower literature. Primitive machines are soon built to reproduce literature.

1963: The State Security initiates operation "Sumpf" (swamp); the goal: Arrest of the leading Jehovah's Witnesses in the GDR. During the following years, the MfS employs various methods, such as spies, searches of homes, interrogations, and listening devices. The methods vary between applying long prison sentences as a deterrent and tiring social discrimination in daily GDR life.

November 1964: Arrest of 142 Jehovah's Witnesses as conscientious objectors.

July 1966: Trials of the so-called illegal leaders of Jehovah's Witnesses.

May 1971: Start of the Honecker era. From now on, the police impose fines on those Jehovah's Witnesses who publicly spread their faith. Discrimination and repression at school and work continue.

November 9, 1989: Fall of Berlin Wall. Jehovah's Witnesses from East Germany can travel to the West without hindrance, in order to get Watch Tower publications.

March 14, 1990: Legal recognition granted to "Religious Organization of Jehovah's Witnesses in the GDR."

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Jehovah's Witnesses, History Archive, 65617 Selters
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Permanent Exhibition at Forschungs-
und Gedenkstätte Normannenstrasse
(Research and Memorial Center)
Ruschestrasse 103, House 1
10365 Berlin

Exhibition opening hours:

Monday to Friday 11.00 a.m. to 6.00 p.m.
Saturday and Sunday 2.00 p.m. to 6.00 p.m.

Please arrange for guided tours in advance, calling
030/5536854 or notifying the administration office
of the Memorial Center.

How to get to the Memorial Center:

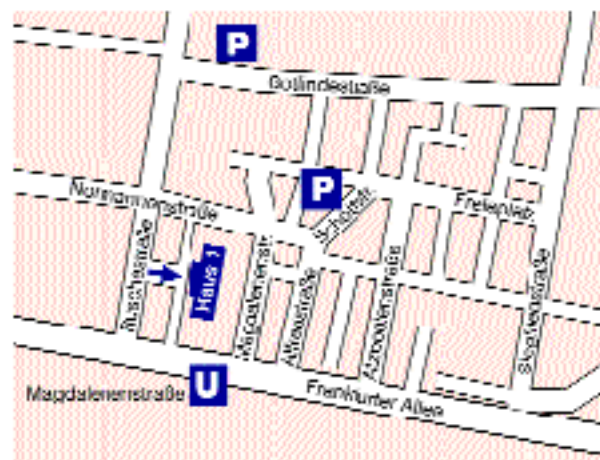
Subway Line 5, Subway-Station Magdalenenstrasse,
Exit Ruschestrasse

Literature references:

"Jehovah's Witnesses in the German Democratic Republic" and "The Persecution of Jehovah's Witnesses in Weimar, 1945—1990," in: *Persecution and Resistance of Jehovah's Witnesses During the Nazi-Regime 1933—1945*, by Hans Hesse (ed.), Bremen 2001.

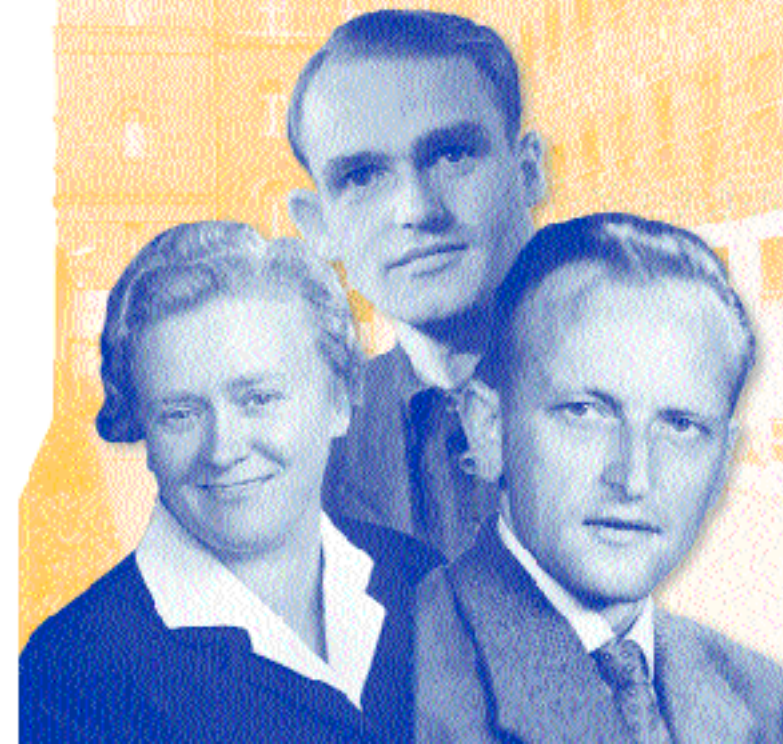
Repression und Selbstbehauptung: Die Zeugen Jehovas unter der NS- und der SED-Diktatur, by Gerhard Besier und Clemens Vollnhals (eds.), Berlin 2003.

Credit for picture on cover: "Roter Ochse" Memorial, Halle (Saale).



FORSCHUNGS- UND GEDENKSTÄTTE NORMANNENSTRASSE

PERMANENT EXHIBITION JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES IN THE GERMAN DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC (GDR)





Mock trial of nine Jehovah's Witnesses in October 1950. Some of them had already been imprisoned during the Nazi Regime by reason of their faith. Two Witnesses received "life sentences," the others were sentenced to prison terms of between eight and fifteen years.

Jehovah's Witnesses (Bible Students) have been active in Germany for more than 100 years. Members of this Christian faith remain neutral in political matters. They follow the principle: "We must obey God as ruler rather than men." (Acts, chapter 5, verse 29) This firm stance led to many suffering fierce persecution during the "Third Reich". About 10,000 Jehovah's Witnesses were taken into custody. Many of these suffered dreadfully and even lost their lives in concentration camps, where they formed a special category among the inmates, being stigmatized by a purple triangle. More than 250 Witnesses were executed as conscientious objectors.

After the end of the war in 1945, Witnesses were treated with respect and were granted the official status of "Victims of Fascism," together with other victim groups. During the era of the Cold War, the authorities in East Germany increasingly viewed their political neutrality as hostile to the state. Their lack of support for communism and the Witness belief in a world change after the war of God were interpreted as being "militarism or war-mongering." In 1950, one year after the founding of the GDR, came the ban which led to a wave of prosecutions, initiated by the Ministry for State Security (*Ministerium für Staatssicherheit*, MfS, also "Stasi").

Jehovah's Witnesses continued their religious activities and meetings, although now in inconspicuous smaller groups, reading the Bible and Christian publications. Also, they continued with their missionary work, altering their methods slightly. The State Security took note of the fact that the underground work of the Witnesses could not be stopped. Hence the MfS began to employ more subtle methods in order to combat the religious organization. So-called "IM" (*Inoffizielle Mitarbeiter*, unofficial workers) infiltrated the groups and reported about the underground work of Jehovah's Witnesses, with the goal of bringing parts of the organization to a halt.

In Gera, the group "Christliche Verantwortung" (Christian responsibility) was founded and brought into the combat—a further attempt to undermine the trust of individual Witnesses in the organization.

In January 1962, military service was introduced, which posed a new challenge to Witnesses of military age. Conscientious objectors were sentenced up to two years in prison. By 1985 more than 1,800 Witnesses had been sentenced, and many had to do labor work in a camp.

Between 1950 and 1961 (building of Berlin wall), the authorities of the GDR arrested 3,006 Jehovah's Witnesses. Fifteen persons were sentenced to life imprisonment. Of those Witnesses who were imprisoned during the 50's, over 300 had already been imprisoned under Hitler. At least 60 Witnesses died either in prison or shortly after release, due to the treatment in custody (as at 2003).

Did the State Security succeed with its methods? How did Jehovah's Witnesses cope with surveillance and reprisals? How was it possible for a religion under ban to organize its underground activities for decades? The exhibition "Immer wieder 'Zeugen Jehovas'" ("Jehovah's Witnesses' Over and Over Again"; title taken from a newspaper headline) takes a closer look at the 40 years of persecution of this religious organization, both in the Soviet Occupation Zone and the GDR.



Hildegard and Ernst Seliger

Hildegard Seliger, maiden name Mesch

- 1898** Born in Leipzig
- 1917** Work as office clerk at post office
- 1924** Baptism as a "Bibelforscherin" (Bible Student)
- 1925** Full-time minister
- 1936** Arrested and convicted to 15 months in prison; imprisonment in Cottbus, later in the Lichtenburg concentration camp
- 1939** Transfer to Ravensbrück concentration camp
- 1945** After liberation voluntary work at the office of Jehovah's Witnesses in Magdeburg
- 1946** Married Ernst Seliger
- 1950** Arrested near Torgau
- 1951** Sentenced to ten years in prison in Leipzig
- 1952** Imprisonment in Waldheim: One year solitary confinement and three weeks in "dark arrest" in a padded cell
- 1954** Imprisonment in the "Roter Ochse" penitentiary in Halle: Held in a basement cell with nothing to do
- 1960** Release before completion of sentence; deportation to West Germany; full-time minister
- 1991** Died on March 20th

Ernst Seliger is portrayed in the exhibition, along with three other Jehovah's Witnesses.