

THE LUTHERHAUS IN EISENACH

by Michael Weise

The Lutherhaus in Eisenach is one of the oldest surviving half-timbered houses in Thuringia. Tradition holds that Martin Luther lived there with the Cotta family during his schooldays from 1498 to 1501. The Lutherhaus has been one of the most important sites of Reformation memory since the 19th century and, as such, was designated a “European cultural heritage site” in 2011. The Lutherhaus has been operated as a cultural history museum since 1956.

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1. History

1.1 Luther in Eisenach

Martin Luther resided in his “beloved town” of Eisenach several times during his lifetime. He spent three years of his schooldays there and translated the New Testament at Wartburg Castle.

1.1.1 Schoolboy Luther in Eisenach (1498 to 1501)

Martin Luther, son of Hans (1459–1530) and Margarethe Luder, née Lindemann (1459–1531), was born in the Central German city of Eisleben on November 10, 1483. Luther attended the Latin school in the neighboring city of Mansfeld, before moving to Magdeburg where he attended the cathedral school for one year in 1497. Young Luther moved to Eisenach just one year later.¹ He initially lived with relatives in his mother’s hometown. Since he still had to earn something for his keep, though, he went from house to house as a choirboy, something quite common for school students in that day. Luther’s first biographer Johann Mathesius recounts that the schoolboy’s singing pleased a young woman so much that she took him into her home.² She was young Ursula Cotta, wife of city councilman Conrad (Cunz) Cotta and daughter of Heinrich Schalbe. Her father was one of Eisenach’s most prominent residents in his day.³ At that time, the Cottas also had extensive influence and property in Eisenach. Since they owned several houses in the city in the early 16th century, including the present-day Lutherhaus, the schoolboy Martin Luther very likely lodged there for a while.⁴

In addition to his education at St. George’s parochial school, his spiritual growth during his days in Eisenach was primarily influenced by the *Collegium schalbense*, a circle of pious laypersons around Heinrich Schalbe with close ties to the Franciscans and shaped by their piety. Luther also attended meetings at the home of diocesan priest Johannes Braun, where those gathered made music, said prayers and discussed religious and humanist books.⁵ Luther departed Eisenach in early 1501 to attend the University of Erfurt. Luther had fond memories of his schooldays “ynn meiner lieben Stad” (in my beloved town)⁶ and remained in contact with several residents of Eisenach all his life.⁷

1.1.2 Martin Luther at Wartburg Castle (May 1521 to March 1522)

Newly elected Holy Roman Emperor Karl V summoned Martin Luther before the Imperial Diet of Worms in March of 1521 because of his Reformation writings. The monk from Wittenberg was called upon to recant his writings (April 17, 1521) but, after having been given a day to consider, he refused (April 18, 1521). Martin Luther departed from Worms on April 26, 1521, heading back to Wittenberg. On May 4, 1521, armed horsemen forced his escorts and him to stop in the Thuringian Forest near Altenstein Castle. They “abducted” Luther, who had foreknowledge of the plan, and brought him to Wartburg Castle above Eisenach. He was in fact being hidden for his own safety since he was threatened by the imperial ban ensuing from his refusal to recant in Worms. The Edict of Worms issued a short time later not only placed Luther under the ban and declared him a heretic but also officially forbade the printing and dissemination of his writings thenceforth.⁸

Luther, who had assumed the alias “Junker Jörg” in allusion to St. George, patron saint of the cities of Eisenach and Mansfeld, used the period of solitude and seclusion at Wartburg Castle to study the biblical New Testament texts intensively. Upon being

ambushed near Altenstein Castle, he had quickly grabbed his Hebrew Bible and Greek New Testament. Luther initially used them to continue his exegesis of individual Bible passages before beginning his epochal labor: Starting in mid-December 1521, he translated the entire Greek New Testament into “German” in just eleven weeks. Since there was no standard German language in his day, Luther used the language of the Saxon chancellery for his translation, which was relatively widespread through its use in diplomatic correspondence. Unlike his predecessors, Luther did not translate the Bible based on the Latin Vulgate. Instead, he took the original Greek text as his starting point and only consulted the Vulgate as a supplement. This enabled him to free himself of its characteristic Latin style and create a readable but elegant Bible text. Unable to find any exact German equivalents for many biblical terms, Luther created numerous new words and idiomatic expressions while translating the Bible.⁹ Luther had the finished translation manuscript in his baggage when he returned to Wittenberg in early March of 1522 because unrest had broken out there. He revised it thoroughly together with Philipp Melanchthon, professor of Greek at the University of Wittenberg and one of Luther’s confidants, before delivering it to Melchior Lotter the Younger for printing in the summer. The first edition of the so-called September Testament was published on September 20, 1522.¹⁰ Luther had already begun translating the Old Testament in the meantime. It took until 1534, though, for Luther, collaborating with numerous experts, to be able to present a complete translation of the Bible.¹¹

1.2 Architectural History of the Lutherhaus

The historic building’s architectural history was thoroughly studied and documented prior to the extensive restoration and renovation of the Lutherhaus (2013–2015).¹² The dendrochronological tests performed at that time revealed that the smaller predecessor building dates to 1269. This makes the Lutherhaus in Eisenach one of the oldest half-timbered houses in Thuringia. The domestic outbuilding to the south was expanded substantially in 1356, enlarging the Lutherhaus to its present architectural volume.

The exact date when the Cotta family came to own the Lutherhaus, which initially consisted of several individual buildings, is not documented. That the Cottas already owned the present-day Lutherhaus around 1500 is certain, however.¹³

In the early 1560s, Hans Leonhard, a Renaissance master builder in Eisenach, purchased the building, which was being used as a brewery at that time. Leonhard was long assumed to have created the Lutherhaus’s magnificent Renaissance facade too but recent architectural history research suggests that, although he created the Renaissance portal, the facade was originally part of the adjacent electoral palace and only added to Lutherhaus after the demolition of the palace in 1742.¹⁴

The date of the half-timbering is also disputed. Whereas older depictions of the Lutherhaus maintain it was only built after the conflagration of the city in 1636,¹⁵ current analyses suggest that construction had already been completed in the 16th century.¹⁶ The Lutherhaus changed hands frequently during the early modern period and its owners put it to different uses.

A restaurant and bar, the “Lutherkeller”, was located in the building from 1898 onward. Its proprietor Adolf Lukass decorated his establishment in “old German style” and also showed his guests the historic “Luther chambers” in which Luther supposedly lived as a student for a surcharge.

The Lutherhaus had survived every war and city fire largely undamaged until World War II. A British blockbuster bomb exploded over Luther Square on November 23, 1944. The explosion heavily damaged the building’s north facade, the southern section in which the Luther chambers and the half-timbered hall are located remaining intact, though. The damaged building was swiftly repaired after the war’s end.¹⁷

1.3 The Museum’s History

1.3.1 The Lutherhaus from 1956 to 2013

Once the house had been rebuilt, the Lukass family continued running the “Lutherkeller” restaurant until 1953. Following part of the family’s escape to West Germany, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Thuringia rented space in the house in 1955. It expanded the existing historic Luther site, housed the “Protestant Parsonage Archives” (see section 8) in it, and opened a site of memory in the Lutherhaus in 1956, which was a hybrid historic site, collection and museum. Karoline Schneider, wife of the late Mr. Lukass and owner of half the house until her death, bequeathed her half of the house to the Thuringian Regional Church in 1965. The church acquired the other half from the Lukass family heirs in 1997. The Thuringian Regional Church retained ownership of the Lutherhaus after reunification and used it as a Reformation site. The Wartburg Verlag GmbH ran the Lutherhaus from 2006 to 2013.¹⁸

Despite repeated restoration and renovation (in 1976-77 and 1983, among other times),¹⁹ the house soon reached its architectural limits. The storage conditions for the Parsonage Archives’ holdings proved to be inadequate too. The was one final modernization actions included the complete redesign of the permanent exhibition “Rediscovering Martin Luther” in 1996, which was state-of-the-art at that time and served as the model for the modernization of the Lutherhaus in Wittenberg. All the same, the Lutherhaus grew less attractive and less modern than other historic Reformation sites over the years.²⁰

1.3.2 The New Lutherhaus (2013 to the Present)

The Evangelical Church in Central Germany created out of the merger of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Thuringia and the Evangelical Church of the Church Province of Saxony in 2009 established the *Stiftung Lutherhaus Eisenach* in 2013 prior to the Reformation quincentenary in 2017 with the intention of establishing a modern museum that meets international museum standards. The Protestant Parsonage Archives’ holdings, previously the property of the *Verband evangelischer Pfarrerinnen*

and Pfarrer in Deutschland e.V., were donated to the newly established foundation and have been the basis of the museum's collection ever since. The Lutherhaus received its first-ever full-time director and curator, Dr. Jochen Birkenmeier, who also redesigned the museum's look and content and designed the current permanent exhibition "Luther and the Bible" (see section 2).

The Lutherhaus was completely renovated and restored from 2013 to 2015. During this time, the Lutherhaus's museum education and management units relocated to the nearby Creutznach House. The new Lutherhaus was reopened with a major festival worship service followed by a grand reopening party on September 26, 2015.²¹

2. The Current Permanent Exhibition "Luther and the Bible"

The house's interior and the exhibition were redesigned as the building was being renovated and remodeled. The permanent exhibition "Luther and the Bible" on display since 2015 explores Luther's historic translation of the Bible on three floors, presenting many (art) historical treasures, such as several paintings by the Cranach School, masterpieces of the *Römhilder Textilschatz*, and the parish register with the entry recording Johann Sebastian Bach's baptism. Moreover, numerous other exhibited objects and modern media stations enable the museum's visitors to access exhibition themes interactively.

Remodeling has largely made the Lutherhaus accessible for the first time in its history. Even the pergola in the courtyard is fully accessible for the first time. The permanent exhibition was revamped and expanded with new content in 2022 on the occasion of the quincentenary of Luther's translation of the Bible. Three new multimedia stations interactively present the eventful history of Luther's best-known hymn "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God", ideologically motivated alterations of the text of the Bible in the 18th to 21th century and the Luther Bible's international impact.

2.1 Ground Floor

The exhibition begins on the ground floor and takes a look at Luther's cultural world around 1500 and the forms of piety and religious practices he encountered. His schooldays in Eisenach as well as his path to becoming a friar and the evolution of his Reformation beliefs are explored.

2.2 Mezzanine Floor

Luther's translation of the Bible was indubitably one of his most significant and influential achievements. The difficulties and challenges of translation are examined on the mezzanine floor of the Lutherhaus. "German's" linguistic diversity is communicated engagingly and Luther's own statements about "interpreting" are presented as well. The role played by the numerous experts who collaborated with

Luther on his translation of the Bible is revealed at the same time. What is more, the historical Luther chambers on the mezzanine floor can also be toured.

2.3 Top Floor

Neither the Reformation nor the effective history of Luther's translation of the Bible ended with his death in 1546. On the contrary, Luther's translation of the Bible has been shaping German language, literature and music to this day. This can be traced in many individual examples on the top floor. The founding of the *Cansteinsche Bibelanstalt* and the development of standing type were extremely important for the spread and enduring success of the Luther Bible because these innovations were what made the Bible a mass produced product disseminated throughout the entire world in the wake of the missionary movement inspired by Pietism.

The darkest chapter of the reception of Luther's Bible and his writings has a place in the permanent exhibition too: Luther's anti-Semitic statements were frequently invoked in the Third Reich and put to use for Nazi propaganda. Founded in Wartburg Castle in 1939, the "Institute for the Study (and Elimination) of Jewish Influence on German Church Life" ("Dejudaization Institute") made it its mission to draft new editions of the New Testament Gospels in which every reference to Judaism and the history of Israel was expunged.²² The final exhibition gallery highlights the influence of the Luther Bible on vernacular Bible translations throughout Europe, the significance of the (Luther) Bible today and the challenges of the current revision of the Luther Bible.

3. "Dejudaization Institute"

Since 2019, the Lutherhaus has had a second major theme in addition to the history of the Reformation: the scholarly treatment and confrontation of the anti-Semitic "Dejudaization Institute", which was active in Eisenach between 1939 and 1945. In March of 2018, Lutherhaus-Director Jochen Birkenmeier launched the initiative to erect a "Dejudaization Institute" memorial, which was unveiled in Eisenach at a ceremony on May 6, 2019, eighty years after the founding of the institute. The Lutherhaus has been showing the special exhibition "Study and Eradication: The Church's 'Dejudaization Institute', 1939–1945" (curated by Jochen Birkenmeier and Michael Weise) since September 19, 2019. It will run at the Lutherhaus until the end of 2022. It examines the institute's historico-political origins and intellectual roots, the impact of its work, and the arduous path to confronting its history after 1945. It also explores the institute staffers' appropriation of Martin Luther and his anti-Jewish statements.²³ A second "Nazi bell" decorated with a swastika was added to the special exhibition in the spring of 2022.

4. Ai Weiwei: *man in a cube*

In 2019, the Stiftung Lutherhaus Eisenach succeeded in acquiring the sculpture *man in a cube*, which Ai Weiwei had created for the exhibition *Luther and the Avant-Garde* shown in Wittenberg during the 2017 quincentenary of the Reformation. In *man in a cube*, the Chinese artist explored his experiences of anxiety and isolation following his arrest by Chinese authorities: “My work is physically a concrete block, which contains within it a single figure in solitude. That figure is the likeness of myself during my eighty-one days under secret detention in 2011.”²⁴ Concentrating on ideas and language helped Ai Weiwei endure his imprisonment. He was also intrigued by the connectedness of freedom, language and ideas embodied by Martin Luther, to whom he explicitly paid tribute with *man in a cube*. It was erected in the courtyard of the Lutherhaus and presented to the public at a ceremony in October 2020, 500 years after the publication of Martin Luther’s treatise *On the Freedom of a Christian* (1520).²⁵

5. Special Exhibitions and Events

A private residential and commercial building was built on the empty lot to the west of the Lutherhaus concurrently with its renovation (2013–2015). A glass entrance hall connects it to the historic Lutherhaus. The *Stiftung Lutherhaus Eisenach* uses the ground floor of the new building as a reception area and museum shop. The new special exhibition gallery in which changing special exhibitions have been shown since 2016 is also located there.

What is more, the Lutherhaus regularly hosts events. This includes the annual museum festival on Luther’s birthday (November 10), the *KinderKulturNacht* (Children’s Culture Night), readings, concerts and lectures.

6. Museum Education

Groups of visitors can also take advantage of different museum education courses at the Lutherhaus in addition to the permanent exhibition. These include “School in Luther’s Day” and different workshop courses on calligraphy and letterpress printing. Worksheets are also provided to school and confirmand groups. Special educational programs were developed for the special exhibition “Study and Eradication. The Church’s “Dejudaization Institute”, 1939–1945” and Ai Weiwei’s sculpture *man in a cube*, which make the respective subjects approachable.

7. Accolades

The permanent exhibition at the Lutherhaus has received the 2016 ICONIC AWARD in the category “Architecture – Best of Best”, the “2016 Thuringian Tourism Award” (special award: “Digital Solutions Tourism”), and a special museum award from the Sparkassen-Kulturstiftung Hessen-Thüringen in 2016. The Museumsverband Thüringen awarded the Lutherhaus Eisenach its Museum Seal in October 2017. It recognizes museums that exemplarily meet the quality standards of the International Council of Museums (ICOM) and the Deutscher Museumsbund (DMB). The Lutherhaus was also certified accessible (Barrierefreiheit geprüft) that same year.

8. Collection and Protestant Parsonage Archives

The Protestant Parsonage Archives’ holdings are the basis of the Lutherhaus’s own museum collection. It was created in 1925 by August Angermann (1867–1948), pastor in Merseburg. Angermann had announced his intention to assemble a collection on the history and significance of the Protestant parsonage at the clergy convention in Giessen one year earlier. At the next clergy convention in Hamburg (1925), the Protestant clergy associations tasked him with putting his plan into action. In 1931, the collection already consisted of over 1300 individual items (paintings, drawings, etchings, photos, books, letters, manuscripts, insignia, coins, medals, family registers, etc.) on public display in three rooms of Wittenberg Palace as of November 2, 1932.

The collection was closed during World War II. After the end of the war, it was initially supposed to be brought to Eisleben but no suitable facility could be found there. Instead, the Protestant Parsonage Archives’ holdings were brought at Bishop of Thuringia Moritz Mitzenheim’s prompting to Eisenach where they were stored at Haus Hainstein until 1956.

The holdings were transferred to the Lutherhaus where they were presented to the public in a permanent exhibition that opened on May 1, 1956.²⁶ The exhibition on the top floor of the Lutherhaus remained largely unchanged until 1995. The thoroughly redesigned and updated exhibition “A Trip through the History of the Protestant Parsonage” opened in 1996. Since storage conditions at the historic Lutherhaus proved to be increasingly problematic for the collection’s holdings in terms of space and climate, a storage facility for the Protestant Parsonage Archives was added to the newly built Regional Church Archives in Eisenach in 2014 where the holdings are once again accessible for study.

9. Literature

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- Hans-Joachim Döring, Michael Haspel (Eds.), Lothar Kreyszig und Walter Grundmann. Zwei kirchenpolitische Protagonisten des 20. Jahrhunderts in Mitteldeutschland, Weimar 2014.
- Hagen Jäger, Luther House Eisenach. Transl. by Richard Hughes, Regensburg 2004.
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- Hans Eberhard Matthes, Das Eisenacher Lutherhaus mit einem Anhang ‚Das Geschlecht Cotta‘, Eisenach 1939.
- Hans-Dieter Meister, Das Lutherhaus in Eisenach, (East) Berlin 1989.
- Willy Quandt, Martin Luther als Schüler in Eisenach and das Eisenacher Lutherhaus, (East) Berlin 1965.

10. External Links

Website of the Stiftung Lutherhaus Eisenach:

www.lutherhaus-eisenach.com

Website of the Evangelical Church in Central Germany:

<http://www.ekmd.de/service/english/>

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³ Ernst-Otto Braasch, Die Familie Schalbe in Eisenach, in: Amtsblatt der Evangelisch-Lutherischen Kirche in Thüringen 34 (1981) No. 10, p. 85–87, here: p. 86.

⁴ Braasch, Schalbe, p. 86ff.

⁵ Jochen Birkenmeier, Das/The Lutherhaus in Eisenach, Eisenach 2015, p. 9–12; Hendrix, Luther, p. 25; Schilling, Luther, p. 69.

⁶ Martin Luther, D. Martin Luthers Werke. Kritische Gesamtausgabe, Vol. 30/2, Weimar 1909, p. 576.

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⁸ Volkmar Joestel, Martin Luther. Rebel and Reformer. A Biographical Sketch. Engl. Transl. by Stephen P. Glinsky, 4th Edition, Wittenberg 2013, p. 30ff.

⁹ Birkenmeier, Lutherhaus, p. 40f.; Hendrix, Luther, p. 107-115 and 126ff..

¹⁰ Heinrich Bornkamm, Martin Luther in der Mitte seines Lebens. Das Jahrzehnt zwischen dem Wormser und dem Augsburger Reichstag. Aus dem Nachlass herausgegeben v. Karin Bornkamm, Göttingen 1979, p. 81.

¹¹ Hendrix, Luther, p. 240; Schilling, Luther, p. 272ff.

¹² Dokumentation zur bauhistorischen Untersuchung des Lutherhauses in Eisenach. Erstellt vom Restaurierungsatelier Wolfgang Petzholdt, March 2012.

¹³ Hans Eberhard Matthes, Das Eisenacher Lutherhaus mit einem Anhang "Das Geschlecht Cotta", Eisenach 1939, p. 25.

¹⁴ Abschlussbericht Hauptuntersuchung, p. 45f.

¹⁵ Hans-Dieter Meister, Das Lutherhaus in Eisenach, (East)Berlin 1989, p. 8–10; Willy Quandt, Martin Luther als Schüler in Eisenach und das Eisenacher Lutherhaus, (East)Berlin 1965, p. 13.

¹⁶ Abschlussbericht Hauptuntersuchung, p. 51; Abschlussbericht Nachuntersuchung, p. 19.

¹⁷ Birkenmeier, Lutherhaus, p. 7.

¹⁸ Uta Schäfer, Das Jubiläum als Chance, in: Glaube + Heimat, 29.10.2010: <http://www.glaube-and-heimat.de/2010/10/29/das-jubilaum-als-chance/>

¹⁹ Meister, Lutherhaus, p. 7–10.

²⁰ Birkenmeier, Lutherhaus, p. 21f.

²¹ Luther's house in Eisenach reopens after renovation:

<http://www.dw.com/en/luthers-house-in-eisenach-reopens-after-renovation/a-18741464> (retrieved June 29, 2022).

²² Birkenmeier, Lutherhaus, p. 34–58; Karl-Wilhelm Niebuhr, Walter Grundmann: Neutestamentler and Deutscher Christ, in: Hans-Joachim Döring, Michael Haspel (Eds.), Lothar Kreyssig und Walter Grundmann. Zwei kirchenpolitische Protagonisten des 20. Jahrhunderts in Mitteldeutschland, Weimar 2014, p. 28–46, here: p. 35–38.

²³ "Study and Eradication. The Church's "Dejudaization Institute" 1939–1945", Website of the Lutherhaus Eisenach: <https://www.lutherhaus-eisenach.com/en/the-luther-house/special-exhibition.html> (retrieved June 18, 2020).

²⁴ Ai Weiwei, cit. by: Walter Smerling: Ai Weiwei, In: Walter Smerling (Ed.): Luther und die Avantgarde. Zeitgenössische Kunst im alten Gefängnis in Wittenberg mit Sonderpräsentationen in Berlin und Kassel, Köln 2017, p. 66.

²⁵ Skulptur von Ai Weiwei dauerhaft im Lutherhaus Eisenach (in German): Süddeutsche Zeitung online, October 9, 2020, URL:

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²⁶ Meister, Lutherhaus, p. 58–64; Birkenmeier, Lutherhaus, p. 24–27.