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New Relations in the Making? Jews and Non-Jews in Germany Reflect on Shoah Memory, Unexpected Growing Jewish Pluralism, Israel, and New Antisemitism

The Nazi dictatorship from 1933 to 1945, World War II, and the Shoah ended the possibility of a German-Jewish symbiosis. For a long period of time after the war, a continuing Jewish community in Germany was deemed either utopian or undesirable. However, with the influx of a certain number of former Soviet Jews during the 1990s, who preferred immigrating to Central Europe as opposed to Israel or the United States, the situation changed considerably.

The current number of registered Jewish community members – about 90,000¹ – still makes up only one fifth of the Jewish population in Germany prior to 1933. Nevertheless, steady growth of the Jewish population during the 1990s and in the early 2000s has made space for a new Jewish pluralism, ranging from the emergence of Chassidic centres (Chabad Lubavitch) in some larger cities, the return of the Masorti movement, and Union of progressive Jews in Germany (a new liberal umbrella organization) to Ohel ha Chidusch, the German branch of the worldwide movement, Jewish Renewal, and several centers and schools of the Ronald S. Lauder Foundation. Vibrant cultural and educational centres, museums, galleries and restaurants, especially in metropolitan cities like Berlin, Frankfurt, and Munich, also sprang up in this period (Ben-Rafael, Sternberg, and Glöckner 2011).

For the time being, the question of a Jewish future in Germany has become irrelevant: from a demographic point of view, the Jewish community in the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) has become the third strongest, after France and the United Kingdom. The German Jewish community is considered an important factor of today's European Jewish diaspora. While Jewish emigration from the former USSR states has virtually come to an end, another surprise followed in the early 2000s with the influx of mostly young Israelis. At least 11,000 Israelis currently hold permanent residency in Berlin, the capital of Germany (Kranz 2015), while others live and work in metropolitan cities like Munich and Frankfurt.

1 Member Statistics of the Jewish Communities, Centrale Welfare Board of the Jews in Germany (2021), 5, accessed May 18, 2023, <https://zwst.org/sites/default/files/2022-07/ZWST-Mitgliederstatistik-2021-Langversion-RZ-web.pdf>.

Most German political elites, authorities, intellectuals, and civic forces (like the churches) have welcomed the influx of Russian Soviet Jews from the 1990s and the substantial growth of the Jewish community. Some media reports have even described “a new love” between Jews and non-Jews in Germany. Yet life for the current Jewish community is not entirely carefree, as troubling trends have arisen: problems in demographic structure (aging), ongoing secularization in younger age cohorts, and – as a rather new problem – uncertainties caused by several violent attacks on Jewish institutions and persons (for example in Berlin, Halle, and Hamburg).

Our narrative and expert interviews with Jewish and non-Jewish key figures in public and political life mainly focussed on the question of to what extent have Jewish-non Jewish relations changed, compared to the discord prior to 1933, and the general reservation and uncertainty after 1945? We also raised other key questions like: to what extent do Jews in Germany feel integrated into today’s non-Jewish majority society? What do they consider core elements of their Jewish identities? What is the meaning of Israel in their lives as Jews? How do they cope with new trends of antisemitism in Germany? As a complementary question, we wanted to know from our non-Jewish interviewees how different they consider Jewish/non-Jewish relations today? To what extent does Shoah memory (still) affect these relations? How do Jews and non-Jews cooperate in social activities, and are there new, joint strategies to combat antisemitism?

Our interviews revealed that Jews in present-day Germany do not romanticize their lives in the country of the former Nazi regime. However, they appreciate efforts by the state to promote future Jewish life, to carry out dignified politics of commemoration, and to ensure security. Antisemitism is perceived as a societal problem but not as an existential threat. None of the Jewish interview partners considered Germany as a place that is too dangerous for Jews. Memory of the Shoah is considered important, but building a Jewish future, especially for one’s own children, is the more relevant issue.

A key finding of our interviews in Germany is that a new generation of young Jews has grown up neither justifying living in the “country of the offenders” nor considering themselves representatives of the State of Israel. Young Jews in Germany run their own multifaceted networks, understanding themselves as Jews but to a similar extent also as Germans. Some of them enjoy participation in public and political life, deliberately acting in both roles.

For some Jews in Germany, Israel remains an important element of Jewish identity but not the most important one.² While making “Aliyah” (moving to the

2 It is worth noting that there has never been a large number of Jewish emigrants from Germany

land of Israel) is not typically considered an option, developments in Israel are followed closely. Among the Jewish interviewees, there was criticism of certain German media and political forces that (seemingly) try to profit from sharply criticizing Israel and Israeli politics. Our Jewish interview partners very much enjoyed an increase in interfaith and inter-cultural activities, seen as a valuable means to erase mutual stereotypes and the fear of close contact. We had two subgroups in the sample: first, Jewish theologians and artists; second was our non-Jewish interviewees, all of whom had individual experiences and ties to Israel through partnerships, political activities (from several political spectrums) or theological (mainly Christian) interest – three of them mentioned it explicitly. One could even presume that half of the interviewees were motivated by a threefold interest: being in contact with Jews/Jewish institutions in Germany with an interest in civic cooperation; being in contact with Israel as a modern Jewish centre and close ally of Germany, in political and cultural life; and finally being interested in close exchanges between Christians and Jews as an opportunity for mutual learning.

However, in one of the interviews with non-Jews, the approach was completely different. A young, left-wing politician from the former East Germany (GDR) came into contact with Holocaust survivors and then gained interest in Israel as a place of refuge for German Jews. Our non-Jewish interview partners were also sensitized to new trends of antisemitism and the assumed vulnerability of Jewish communities and individuals in the country. All of them were either actively involved in practical initiatives to combat antisemitism or they supported educational and/or political initiatives attempting to bring Israel closer to a wider public.

It became obvious in our case study that interrelations between Jews and non-Jews in today's Germany are much more complex than decades ago, and there are reasons for this on both sides. The "Jewish landscape" in Germany has become much more diverse, as outlined above. Non-Jewish stakeholders have become much more experienced with Jewish history and current Jewish life, and have more contact with Jews than previous generations. Younger non-Jews also tend to be open-minded enough to have dialogues where mutual, amicable critique is not only possible but desired.

There seems to be, in fact, a new quality of reciprocity, mutual exchange, and agreement as to what is possible together – and what is not.

to Israel (Olim Chadaschim) with the exception of the early years after the proclamation of the State of Israel. See: Anthony Kauders, *Unmögliche Heimat. Eine deutsch-jüdische Geschichte der Bundesrepublik* (München, 2007).

A Short Historical Review

The roots of Jewish life in Germany date back to the fourth century, when the first Jewish settlements and communities were formed in the Rhine Valley. As in other parts of Central Europe today, despite ongoing Christianization, the Jewish minority was permitted to openly practice its religion. Relations between Christians and Jews were relatively peaceful until the eleventh century. However, during the Reformation and on the eve of the Crusade, the Jewish population in the Rhine Valley experienced its first pogrom traumas. Crusader armies, before leaving for the Middle East and Palestine, killed hundreds of Jews and destroyed their property – acts of violence that were periodically repeated across medieval times and were called into question only at the beginning of European Enlightenment and the emergence of modernity.

Despite the fact that the legal emancipation of Jews in Germany happened almost 100 years later than in France (1791), German Jewry underwent an extremely dynamic and hopeful process of inner modernization and, allegedly, successful integration into German mainstream society. At the beginning of the twentieth century and even in the interwar period, Germany had become an important country of destination for Jews from Eastern Europe – especially Russia and Poland. At the same time, German Jews who numbered in the hundreds of thousands became very successful entrepreneurs, bankers, scientists (Nobel laureates among them), artists, publicists, intellectuals, and academic theorists. German Jewry was widely present in metropolitan towns, especially in Berlin, but also in rural areas, where they became established, for example, in cattle trade and winegrowing.

In general, German Jews had long been very optimistic that social acceptance and integration in daily life would improve in the long run. Affiliations to the growing Zionist movement (especially in Eastern Europe) were mere exceptions among the half million Jews living in Germany by the end of the 1920s and the beginning of the 1930s.

The Nazis' rise to power in 1933 caused a paralyzing shock for German Jews who were convinced that the process of social integration had already become irreversible. Now Hitler and his allies proved, step by step, that a turning back of Jewish emancipation was indeed possible. Around 300,000 of the approximately 500,000 Jews living in Germany before 1933 managed to flee, but around 165,000 were deported to death camps in Eastern Europe during World War II and eventually killed there. At the end of World War II, only circa 18,000 Jewish people had survived the Holocaust on Germany territory, either because of a non-Jewish spouse, which offered some protection, or having lived in hiding, with the help of non-Jewish Germans. At the end of 1945, the last German Chief rabbi, Leo

Baeck, declared from his exile in the United Kingdom that “the era of German Jewry has ended once and forever.”

New Beginning(s) after the Shoah

The re-establishment of local Jewish communities in several cities, which began a few weeks after May 8, 1945 (the date of capitulation of Nazi Germany), was considered a transitional phenomenon. In 1948, the World Jewish Congress called on all remaining German Jews to leave the “blood-soaked German soil.” Jewish life in Germany remained outlawed for about 20 years, and the Jewish communities in Germany remained more or less isolated from the rest of the Jewish world – not only from Israel but also from other countries in the Jewish diaspora until the middle of the 1960s.

Still, a certain number of Jews decided otherwise. Despite all predictions, some of the local Jewish communities survived and stabilized their membership numbers, though on a very small scale. Finally, in 1950, a Central Council of Jews in Germany resumed its work.

From that time, the number of registered Jewish community members in Germany remained more or less the same – around 30,000 – until the 1980s. Fatalities and loss of personal belongings could be compensated by re-entry to Germany, firstly by Jewish immigrants from Eastern European states that had fled communist dictatorships (i.e. Poland and Hungary). However, during the 1970s and early 1980s it became clear that the demographic collapse of most of the existing Jewish communities would be inescapable. Hitler, observers stated while shaking their heads, would celebrate “a late victory.” Germany would become, in the long run, “judenfrei” (“free of Jews”).

But history changes its path, and sometimes takes surprising turns. At the end of the 1980s, very few observers expected the quick downfalls of the Berlin Wall and the Iron Curtain and the fast collapse of all the socialist regimes in the Eastern Bloc, including the Soviet Union, which finally dissolved in December 1991.

Israel and the American Jewish communities had fought for decades for the release of Soviet Jews who were hindered in leaving their countries of origin and known as “prisoners of Zion.” By the late 1980s it became clear that the overwhelming majority of Soviet Jews intended to leave the country as soon as the borders opened – and they did. From the estimated two million Soviet Jews (recorded in a census in 1988), more than one million immigrated to Israel during the 1990s;

ca. 350,000 immigrated to the United States. The big surprise was that more than 200,000 Soviet Jews decided to immigrate to Germany.³

Revival of Jewish Community Life Caused by Immigrants From the Former Soviet Union

For complex reasons, not all of the immigrants joined the local Jewish communities but, ultimately, the number of registered Jewish community members increased from circa 30,000 to more than 100,000. In other words, the post-Soviet Jewish influx saved the very small Jewish communities in East Germany (former GDR) and also created opportunities for new, organic community building. Since the late 1990s, a few dozen new synagogues and community centres have been built across the country. Jewish kindergartens and new Jewish schools have been opened, even in East Germany. The Jewish cultural scene experienced a renaissance. In the 1990s, a discussion started about whether the model of the “Einheitsgemeinde” (“united community”) was still necessary and appropriate. This discussion continues today, but a process of differentiation had already begun in the late 1990s.

Jews in Berlin: Structure and Specifics After 1945/89

Berlin had the biggest Jewish community in Germany before 1933, and it was the case again after World War II and the Shoah. However, the figures are not really comparable. Some 160,000 Jews considered Berlin their home before 1933, which made up about one third of the overall Jewish population in Germany. Only about 6,000–8,000 Berlin Jews survived the Holocaust inside the city, and about 2,000 Jewish Berliners returned home after the end of World War II and the capitulation of the Nazi regime.

The Berlin Jewish community, once a bastion of liberal/Reform Judaism, counted only small groups of liberal Jews during the post-War decades. As in other cities in post-War Germany, a considerable number of Polish Jews, most of them from

³ See: O. Glöckner, “Immigrated Russian Jewish Elites in Israel and Germany after 1989,” accessed January 10, 2022, https://publishup.uni-potsdam.de/opus4-ubp/frontdoor/deliver/index/docId/4804/file/gloeckner_diss.pdf).

dissolved displaced person camps, became part of the synagogue congregation, and most of them were accustomed to Orthodox rites and practices.

Even during intensified periods of the Cold War, the Jewish community in Berlin had the fortune of having access to rabbis and cantors from several congregations. Contracts with the Senate of Berlin assured that the relatively poor and badly appointed Jewish communities were carefully supported in terms of infrastructure (kindergartens, schools, adult schools, and others, geriatric care and assistance for preserving and cultivating the large Jewish cemeteries in the city, including those in East Berlin).

After the downfall of the Iron Curtain and German re-unification, the Jewish community of Berlin witnessed a doubling of its membership numbers, thanks to the influx of Jews from the Former Soviet Union. As the Jewish community was struggling with the integration of a few thousand new members, new Jewish networks, cultural centres, associations, Jewish kindergartens, and schools were being established even outside of the Jewish community.

The growth of Jewish communities in Germany, as a result of the Jewish influx from Eastern Europe, caught the attention of the entire Jewish world and finally led to a rethinking of attitudes towards the German Jews. For example, in 1998, the American Jewish Committee expanded its European branch with an office in Berlin. International Jewish organizations like the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (Joint), United Jewish Appeal (UJA), and others began offering support for Jewish projects and initiatives, especially in the educational sector. At the same time, it became clear that German political representatives, state, regional, and local administrators were willing to accompany the trend of consolidation, or even “revival,” in contemporary German-Jewish life. “Those who build a house, just want to stay” is a popular saying among Jewish representatives in present day Germany.⁴ There has been a great deal of symbolic policy work to ensure that the Shoah and the trauma of the German and European Jews in World War II will never be forgotten.

When the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe was inaugurated in 2005, situated centrally in the heart of Berlin and within eyeshot of the Reichstag building (the historical German parliament), it was clear even to external observers that the new Germany – the “Berlin Republic” – was treading a path of commemoration that was significantly different from the politics of memory in other countries (even in the West). For a long time, Germany would become a country where Jewish newcomers were welcome, where Holocaust remembrance was anchored in so-

4 <https://www.juedischesmuseum.de/besuch/detail/wereinhausbautwillbleiben/> (accessed June 1, 2023).

ciety and where Jewish cultural and religious life was not only “tolerated” but also welcomed and desired.

Visions and hope during the late 1990s and early 2000s in this atmosphere of “decapment” in Germany tempted some observers to expect “a Jewish renaissance in Germany” (Pinto), which some foreign journals described as “a new love between Jews and Germans.”

Dynamic Development of Jewish Organizational Life Since the Early 1990s

However, in the period from the early 1990s (starting with fall of the Berlin Wall and the re-unification of Germany/Berlin) to 2004/2005, a considerable dynamic change took place within and also beyond the Jewish community in Berlin. The number of registered Jewish community members in Germany’s capital slightly more than doubled, rising from around 5,000 to approximately 11,000. Jewish communities with nearly the same number of registered members (up to nearly 10,000) are currently found in Frankfurt, Düsseldorf, and Munich. This growth was almost exclusively the result of the Russian speaking Jewish influx across the country. The few local synagogues, administrative, medical, social and educational institutions, and existing Jewish organizations did everything they could to adopt and integrate the “newcomers.”

It quickly became clear that new capacities had to be organized, and sometimes quite creative and innovative solutions had to be found. For example, in 2007, the education and family centre of Chabad Lubavitch Berlin found a home in a restored and re-constructed old electric power station. The leading rabbi there, Rabbi Yehuda Teichtal, declared: “There is a certain continuity: the power station produced light, and we do so as well.” Old synagogues were restored – for example the single but very large liberal-conservative synagogue in East Berlin’s Rykestraße and the traditional back-yard synagogue in East Berlin’s Brunnenstraße.

The massive growth of organized Jewish life in Germany during the 1990s and at the beginning of the 2000s opened up many unexpected opportunities for creative community building, and not only at the local level.

The significant growth of the Jewish communities has given room for a serious discussion about a new Jewish pluralism and a possible end of the model of the “Einheitsgemeinde” (united Jewish community). Today, more than 100 local Jewish communities exist across Germany, many of them counting only a few dozen or a few hundred members, especially those in rural areas.

A study by Ben-Rafael, Glöckner and Sternberg (2009–2011), based on a survey of more than 1,000 Jewish respondents and 25 expert interviews, revealed that the growing number of Jews in Germany, especially in the late 1990s and early 2000s, paved the way for a new Jewish pluralism, at least in terms of religious and secular identities.

(Ultra-) Orthodox	Liberal/conservative	Traditional	Secular
13,2 %	22,3 %	32,2 %	32,3 %

Ben-Rafael, Sternberg, and Glöckner (2011)

Jewish communities established long ago, especially in larger towns, are today being met by new communities, either self-proclaimed by mainly immigrants from the Former Soviet Union, or supported by foreign/ international Jewish movements and organizations like the World Union for Progressive Judaism (WUPJ)⁵ on the liberal side and Chabad Lubavitch on the traditional side. Some have been inspired by renewal or grassroots movements like Jewish Renewal,⁶ stemming from contemporary American Judaism and trying to combine elements of Kabbalah, Chassidism, and meditation.

In recent years, all major denominations of contemporary Judaism have been able to open a rabbinical school for their respective followers and communities: the Rabbinical Seminar of Berlin (modern orthodoxy following in the footsteps of the famous Rabbi Esriel Hildesheimer), the liberal Abraham Geiger College in Potsdam, and the Zacharias Frankel College, established by Masorti Germany (conservative). In response, the state has supported the construction of more than 30 new synagogues and community centres since the 1990s. Some of the local Jewish communities in turn have developed a very open-minded style of communication, and synagogues as well as Jewish community centres often serve as a space for joint cultural festivals, concerts, readings, public discussions, and family events.

In recent years, however, uncertainties have grown among the Jewish population in Germany. Heightened security measures have been put into place in front of and also inside Jewish community centres, partly as a consequence of deadly terrorist attacks in France (which have increased from 2012) and in response to

5 The WUPJ supported Jewish liberal movement in Germany (“Union Progressiver Juden in Deutschland”), though a small number of registered members in 20 local communities, is extremely active and also seeks an intensive and frequent exchange with other religious and cultural groups (including Christians, Muslims, and others).

6 Two local communities have been found in Germany, strongly affiliated with “Jewish Renewal” in the US: “Ohel Hachidusch” in Berlin and “Beth Avraham” in Munich.

the terrorist attack on the synagogue in Halle, Central-Germany (2019). Meanwhile, an open discussion has started about whether the German State is capable of sufficiently protecting local Jewish communities, and other Jewish spaces, in the event of increasing violent, anti-Jewish or even terrorist attacks.⁷

The relatively versatile Jewish landscape in present day Germany consists of a wide range of cultural projects: initiatives at local “Kulturverein” (cultural associations) and Jewish theatres; annual “Yiddish Summer Weeks” in Weimar, with the remarkable participation of Jewish musicians from all over the world; socially and politically inspired projects like the “Jewish Disintegration Congress,” initiated by the publicist Max Czollek and the dramatist Sasha Marianna Salzmann at the Maxim Gorki Theater in Berlin in 2016, which brought together alternative and contemporary Jewish attitudes.

Therefore, in general, Jewish life in contemporary Germany is considered to be thriving and diverse, at least in large metropolitan towns, and compared to Jewish post-war community life until the late 1980s. However, since the change of state regulations for Jewish emigration from the Former Soviet Union in 2005, demographic stagnation has become a serious topic again. The age distribution among the Jewish population is even more unfavourable than that of the average German population.⁸

Demographic fluctuation among Jews in Germany is rather low. The overwhelming majority of Jews in Germany has no intentions of leaving the country, and the number of former Soviet Jews who returned to their former homeland(s) is significantly low. The number of German Jews who decide to resettle in Israel (“Alijah”) is also very low, and this is now in sharp contrast to a growing number of Israeli citizens who decide to live in Germany, either for a longer period or even for all of their life.⁹

The Israeli community in Germany has grown significantly within the last 15–20 years, and has not yet been adequately researched. It is still too early for any conclusions to be drawn as to whether the Israelis in Germany will have any significant impact on the existing local Jewish communities in Germany or on Jewish life in this country in a broader sense. On the other hand, the very fact that thousands of Israelis, many of them descendants of former German-Jewish Holocaust survivors, decide to “return” to “Ashkenaz” says a lot about the changed atmosphere and perceived opportunities, at least for a single individual future for

⁷ Ronen Steinke, *Terror gegen Juden* (München, 2020).

⁸ Nearly half of the Jewish population in Germany is older than 60 years of age. See *ZWST Annual Statistics 2015*, 3.

⁹ Compare: Kranz (2016).

Jews. The overwhelming majority of Israelis who resettle in Germany live in Berlin (Kranz 2015, 2016; Stauber and Fortuna 2016). The number of Israeli people permanently living in Germany is estimated to be at least 20,000.¹⁰

Among the young Jews who have recently entered the public stage, with the explicit aspiration of not only representing Jewish life but also helping to shape German society, is the second generation of former Soviet Jews, including Astrakhan-born Sergey Lagodinsky, who is currently a member of the European Parliament for the German Green Party, and Kiev-born Marina Weisband, the former general secretary of The Pirates political party. This young generation, active and successful in politics and also in the arts, religion, and elsewhere inside and outside the Jewish scene, might be enabled to form the nucleus for an upcoming Jewish elite actively involved in modernizing the country.

At the same time, antisemitism is again realized as a serious problem among Jews in Germany, as the Second FRA study on European Jewish experience with antisemitic incidents has shown.¹¹ A considerable portion of Jews in Germany avoid being visibly Jewish in public, probably more so since the armed attack on the synagogue in Halle in October 2019.¹² Many Jews also avoid contacting officials or security forces after having experienced antisemitic incidents. On the other hand, all political parties represented in the German Bundestag consequently distance and condemn any public manifestations of antisemitism among their own ranks.

However, a frequent bone of contention among German politicians, and sometimes even between Jewish networks and personalities, is the discussion of resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, current Israeli policy towards the Palestinians, and the anti-Israeli BDS movement (boycott – divestment – sanctions). These heated debates are also reflected in general surveys among the German population where anti-Israeli sentiments (“Israel is running a crusade of annihilation against the Palestinians,” “Israelis are treating Palestinians like former Nazis did with Jews”) gain significant approval ratings. However, the share of the German majority that believes in antisemitic stereotypes has more or less remained at 15 to 20 percent for decades.

¹⁰ Estimations in media reports go up to ca. 30,000 Israelis permanently living in Germany.

¹¹ FRA Report 2018.

¹² On October 9, 2019, during the Yom Kippur celebrations, a heavily armed young right-wing extremist in Halle (Saxony-Anhalt, Central Germany) tried to attack the local synagogue and shoot as many Jews as possible. After unsuccessfully trying to enter the synagogue in Halle, he fatally shot two people nearby and injured two others, before being overpowered and arrested by security forces.

The majority of German society is actually undergoing its litmus test as to whether the bonds between Jews and non-Jews have significantly strengthened, or whether the Jewish community will become, as a whole, isolated once again, as a non-guarded ethno-cultural minority.

Sampling, Places of Interviews, and Priority Topics

Based on this thematic context, we recruited five interview partners each, among Jews and non-Jews living in Berlin, Potsdam or nearby. For these narrative and expert interviews we applied the same standardized questionnaire as with the other countries of focus.

In our interviews with Jewish people, special attention was given to: their individual backgrounds, Jewish identities and connections to Israel, roles and positions inside Jewish communities and networks, their views on the German majority and on Jewish-non-Jewish relations, confrontations with antisemitism, their future prospects for Jewish life in Germany, and their connections with/and views on Israel. We aimed to interview respondents from different religious denominations, Jewish functionaries as well as people active in grassroots movements.

In our interviews with non-Jewish people, it was important for us to talk about: the respondents' approaches to Jewish issues and their individual motivation for dealing with Jewish topics and connecting themselves with Jewish people and networks; their perceptions of Jewish developments in Germany in recent decades; their assessments of how Jewish-non-Jewish relations have changed in post-war/reunified Germany; their views on old-new antisemitism in Germany and how to combat it, the role/possible role and opportunities of Jews to help shape contemporary German society; and their connections with/and views on Israel.

Among non-Jewish interviewees, we aimed to interview respondents from different world views and political orientations. Important for both groups was that the respondents had frequent, previous intercultural (Jewish/non-Jewish) experiences. Most of the interviews were conducted in Berlin and Potsdam. The interviews lasted between 60 and 100 minutes. We assured our interview partners of confidentiality with the interview materials and agreements in case of official citations. They were completely transcribed (and some had to be translated into English) before qualitative analysis.

Interview Analysis

The significant demographic and structural changes in German Jewish communities in the last 25–30 years have been outlined above. But what about Jews and Jewish protagonists themselves, who grew up in a unifying Germany and a Jewish world also in transition?

Hannah Dannel, a young German Jewish woman who has worked as a cultural advisor for the Central Council of Jews in Germany for about 15 years, sees the general development optimistically:

Jews have always lived in Germany, since the 4th century – at least. And currently, there are indications that things work better inside Jewish networks and institutions, particularly in Berlin. But this is, of course, related to the size of Jewish groups and milieus here. In other cities and regions there are dynamic developments as well.¹³

Dannel sees a new trend of self-confidence among the younger Jewish generations in Germany.

This is something new, and even when I was a schoolgirl and teenager, I wasn't aware of a greater number of Jewish peers, friends, acquaintances, at least not in the immediate surrounding. Ok, I had the opportunity then to study at the Hochschule für Jüdischen Studien Heidelberg (College of Jewish Studies), which was a great gift, and then I got to know a lot of Jewish people and activists across the country. The Jewish Student Union (BJSJ) had its headquarters in Heidelberg back then and it was very active. But what we're seeing today is an impressive turn to many more Jewish initiatives and innovative projects where young Jews take part, or even initiate them. And the new thing is, they also have fewer inhibitions to go in public and show 'We are here.' Also, the kind of togetherness of young Jews from quite different backgrounds – German-Jewish, Russian-speaking, Polish, Americans, Israelis – you name it – brings hope.¹⁴

Dannel has lived in different parts of Germany (Bonn, Heidelberg, Berlin) and had many intercultural experiences with non-Jewish groups and milieus. "I have learned a lot from it," she says, "also finding out commonalities and differences in culture and religion. There were a lot of positive experiences, and I had no fear of showing my Jewishness. However, in some cases, antisemitic incidents did remind me of who I am."¹⁵ Hannah says that quite a few of her Jewish coevals

¹³ Author's interview with Hannah Dannel in Berlin, May 15, 2019 (in her office at the Central Council of Jews in Germany).

¹⁴ Author's interview with Hannah Dannel in Berlin, May 15, 2019 (at the Central Council Office).

¹⁵ Author's interview with Hannah Dannel in Berlin, May 15, 2019 (at the Central Council Office).

share these experiences of sometimes subtle and sometimes open antisemitic expressions in their surroundings, and she concludes: “This makes me and others, at a certain point, more careful. There are situations where you think twice before wearing a Magen David (Star of David) openly, or placing a sticker with an Israeli flag or symbol on your car. Suddenly you notice that a previous feeling of nonchalance has gone.”¹⁶

Dr. Christian Staffa, a well-known Protestant Berlin theologian, had felt from the very beginning of his theological studies that something substantial would have to be changed among churches redefining their relations with contemporary Judaism and its representatives. For many years, Staffa served as coordinator of the humanitarian organization Aktion Sühnezeichen/Friedensdienste (Action Reconciliation/Peace Service, ASF), which brought him to Israel many times. He often worked on social and humanitarian projects with retired and poor Holocaust survivors who received medical and moral support from young ASF volunteers. Staffa also maintains contact with local associations devoted to Christian-Jewish relations, and he is renowned for raising uncomfortable, self-critical questions, including questioning the past of his own church. Already in his time as program manager of the department of democratic culture and education at the Protestant Academy of Berlin (Evangelische Akademie) he has raised the issue of Jew-Hatred by the late Martin Luther and its fatal aftermath in German society. As a protestant theologian, well familiar with modern Jewish history and Jewish religious rites, Staffa has become one of the most favoured Christian partners for discussion inside the Christian-Jewish dialogue in Germany. For a number of years, aside from all the aforementioned obligations, Staffa has also been the Christian speaker of the “Arbeitsgemeinschaft Juden und Christen” at the biannual German protestant church congress, and is director of the board of trustees at “Amcha,” a German civic organization supporting and caring for impoverished old Holocaust survivors living in Israel.

“People need to understand,” says Staffa, “that the Holocaust is not just an issue of commemoration. The Holocaust is not history, it is present and perceptible. Those who care might see all those manifold consequences and aftermaths in our current society.”¹⁷

For Protestant representatives like Christian Staffa, it is a matter of course that Christians and Jews conduct an interfaith dialogue “on eye-level” in today’s Germany, and that Christian believers should show solidarity with their Jewish friends whenever they are attacked or threatened by antisemitic persons or groups. Final-

¹⁶ Author’s interview with Hannah Dannel in Berlin, May 15, 2019 (at the Central Council Office).

¹⁷ Author’s interview with Christian Staffa, April 28, 2019 in Berlin.

ly, in 2019, Christian Staffa became the first official commissary of the Protestant Church in Germany (EKD) for combating antisemitism.

In the meantime, vibrant connections between the Jewish communities and open-minded non-Jewish German politicians have developed across the political camps and are not necessarily bound by specific intersections of Jewish and Christian culture and religion. For example, Petra Pau, a former youth and pioneer leader in the socialist GDR and a current vice president of the German Bundestag and deputy of the left-wing party DIE LINKE (the leftist party), has become one of the closest and well-known friends of the Jewish community in Germany and Berlin in particular. Pau, a popular maverick, published a widely circulated book entitled *Godless Types* (2015),¹⁸ a first resume of her previous political carrier.

Pau reported that she had no connection to Jewish issues or Jewish persons until the fall of the Berlin Wall in late 1989. A talented organizer who held onto left-wing ideals – despite the collapse of the GDR – Pau became the head of DIE LINKE in Berlin in 1991. “I had to represent the Berlin PDS (a party in the GDR that fused with another party to form DIE LINKE, O.G.), also in contact with the Jewish community in Berlin, and it was clear to me, that this was a very specific challenge. It was the time to start meeting the Jewish representatives face to face, and you can imagine that this was a very new experience,” Pau remembers. “And the Jewish representatives started to gain trust and confidence in me as a responsible Berlin politician.” Pau succeeded in coming into close contact and exchange with very different Jewish groups and fractions in the German capital, including all large religious movements and Chabad Lubavitch. Today Pau is a welcomed politician in local Jewish communities in Germany, and highly esteemed for her commitment to combating antisemitism. She launched adequate legislative initiatives and supported new concepts and ways forward in the culture of commemoration of the Shoah.

Over the course of many years she has also managed to become a respected German political figure in the initially very skeptical Israeli political and public scene. “My journey to Israel in 2008 was very special,” Pau remembers:

I went to Israel officially as the vice president of the Bundestag. But then, shortly before, I got a lot of attention in the *Jerusalem Post*, attacking me indirectly as a left-wing politician. The rhetoric attack was more directed to then Foreign Minister Zipi Livni for inviting me, as they wrote, ‘a communist from Germany’. Therefore, I could not complain about getting too little attention.¹⁹

¹⁸ *Godless Types* was published in 2015 by Eulenspiegel Publishing House. By 2018 the book was already in its fourth edition.

¹⁹ Author’s interview with Petra Pau, in Berlin on September 3, 2019.

When asked about a frequently suspected estrangement between Israel on the one side and Germany/Europe on the other, Pau didn't confirm this concern:

I have met German-Jewish pupils who are now completing their schooling in Israel because they said they could no longer bear the situation in their home schools in Germany. And I know there are also some elderly (citizens) who now again emphasize that Israel is the haven for all Jews, and some start the discussion again about packing suitcases. However, I don't think that this is a trend. Instead of estrangement I see a lot of intensified exchange, especially among young Israelis and Germans.²⁰

At the same time, Petra Pau shows a lot of sympathy toward young Israelis moving to Berlin, either temporarily or even longer. She explained:

You know, we have this unique scholarship program here in the Bundestag, it's called the IPS program. And I currently have a female Israeli awardee here in my office, though she is not Jewish. However, I have also had Israeli Jews in my office, and some of them stayed. One of the most surprising cases was a young Jew from Russia, who first did Aliyah and is now here, living with his partner, and working for the German-Israeli society. And as mentioned, in my office I have had Christian Arab awardees, and now also have a Druse woman... Regarding the Israelis in Berlin, it is interesting to see how a lot of creative groups are mushrooming, and I am wondering who of them will also join synagogues.²¹

With her tireless commitment to strengthening her connections to both the Jewish scene in Germany as well as in Israel, Pau is anything but mainstream, being on the political left. Pau has adopted deep insights into the experiences and feelings of Holocaust survivors while meeting them frequently since the early 1990s.

Andreas Nachama, born in Berlin in 1951, grew up in a family of Holocaust survivors who recalled their experiences of the Shoah at home. His father was the famous Cantor Estrongo Nachama, and Andreas became a distinguished historian and rabbi in Berlin. He also established the central exhibition and conference centre *Topographie des Terrors* (*Topography of Terror*) in the heart of Berlin, which he has led for decades. For a time he was the chairman of the Jewish community in Berlin, and he is still the rabbi at a small synagogue in Berlin-Charlottenburg. Despite his numerous activities, Nachama takes time for interfaith dialogue, as it was ingrained in him since childhood as being imperative. "My family has a huge network of friends, a lot of Christians among them, and this for a good reason," Nachama said. "Some Berlin Christians took great risks in hiding my mother during World War II and saved her life."²² During his early academic studies at the

²⁰ Author's interview with Petra Pau, in Berlin on September 3, 2019.

²¹ Author's interview with Petra Pau, in Berlin on September 3, 2019.

²² Interview of the author with Rabbi Andreas Nachama, on May 15, 2019 in Berlin.

Free University of Berlin, Nachama attended courses on Christianity and Islam, and later on, when already a rabbi and in several positions as a Jewish representative, he joined the Coordination Council for Christian-Jewish Dialogue in Germany, where he has been the Jewish Chairman since 2016. Nachama is also the Jewish representative in the ambitious – and independent – Berlin project “The House of One,” a planned building and communication centre where a synagogue, a church and a mosque will be accommodated under one roof. In fact, the “House of One” is designed to motivate practising Jews, Christians, and Muslims to interact with each other, at the same time strengthening their own identities – and the centre will be open to the public. The project shall also serve as a model of peaceful coexistence, opposed to all atrocities committed in the name of religion. Although the building itself, in downtown Berlin, has not yet been built, there are already joint activities, especially in the educational sphere. In 2019, the fundraising campaign had quite successful results – three quarters of the estimated costs for construction (ca. 40 million euros) had been donated. The media echo has also been rather positive. However, there were skeptical voices doubting either the concept itself, or just questioning the practicability of fruitful cooperation in such a confined space. “In recent years we have had to overcome a lot of resistance against our project, also from our own religious groups and forces,” said Andreas Nachama, who adds:

Although I think this brought us, the protagonists, even closer together. We are breaking new ground, and of course, a lot of experiences will be unprecedented. Interestingly, in this stage of preparation, I have the feeling that the representatives from the smaller religions, that means the Imam and me, have the most in common, which comes from this constellation. We are the minorities but we go straight to the public and exchange. I am very curious. In any case, this project also has its special charm by opening up opportunities to destroy long-standing stereotypes and clichés about ‘the others’.²³

Nachama said that problems of antisemitism are present in Berlin and other German spaces, but specifies:

It didn’t appear overnight, it goes back to the 1990s. It is very deplorable, there are indeed some Jewish people who leave for Israel because they feel a certain anti-Jewish climate, and they make a decision. I have a few young people in my community who don’t see their future in Berlin or Germany. However, I think the bigger problem is that this society is not yet ready for a basic tolerance of otherness, at least not the majority. And when tensions between Palestinians and Israelis in the Middle East are followed in the news, people easily believe that a new conflict is imported – and this makes them even more reserved, which is a real pity of course.²⁴

²³ Interview of the author with Rabbi Andreas Nachama, on May 15, 2019 in Berlin.

²⁴ Author’s interview with Rabbi Andreas Nachama, on May 15, 2019 in Berlin.

“In the last thirty years, only one antisemitic incident has really hit me,” said Nachama. “And this was of, all places, in the expert commission that analyses anti-semitism on behalf of the German Bundestag.”²⁵ At the same time, Nachama added:

I don't want to whitewash or relativize antisemitism or Jew hatred in this country, but a general problem is that we live in a society where people behave rather intolerantly towards all kinds of minorities. If one of them is under pressure, it will hit the others as well. That's why there is already a longer tradition in Germany leading Jews to the front lines when any other ethno-cultural minority, for example Turks, is being attacked.²⁶

Nachama does not profess to forecast the future of German Jewry, but notes the evolution of Berlin's Jewish community: “In the 1960s, it was expected that Berlin's Jewish community wouldn't count more than about 800 people at the beginning of the new millennium. But thanks to the Russian-Jewish influx in the 1990s, the community counted about 11,000 people in the year 2000. You see, history goes its own way,” said Nachama.²⁷ He is glad to see that young Israelis who have made Berlin their new home have also joined his synagogue. When asked about his own considerations for Aliyah at any time in his life, he replies: “I was in Israel for a half year, in the early 1970s. Though I never thought about moving there, because my theological concept is not that strongly focused on Israel.”²⁸

In the German capital, Nachama has found open-minded, intellectual, and spiritual counterparts in Christians. For example, Reinhold Robbe²⁹ is a seasoned Social Democrat politician originally from North-Western Germany and a Synod member of the Protestant-Reformed Church. Robbe, who has also been the president of the German-Israeli Society and the head of the German-Israeli parliamentary group in the Bundestag for a couple of years says that his early encounters with woeful Jewish history started as a child when he was “poking through the library shelves for adults, randomly getting hold of the book ‘The Yellow Star’ by Gerhard Schoenberner.³⁰ After reading it, the topic never left my mind.”³¹ Robbe

25 Author's interview with Rabbi Andreas Nachama, on May 15, 2019 in Berlin.

26 Author's interview with Rabbi Andreas Nachama, on May 15, 2019 in Berlin.

27 Author's interview with Rabbi Andreas Nachama, on May 15, 2019 in Berlin.

28 Author's interview with Rabbi Andreas Nachama, on May 15, 2019 in Berlin.

29 From 1994 to 2005, Reinhold Robbe was a Bundestag Deputy for the Social Democratic Party (SPD) in Germany, and from 2005 to 2010 he functioned as the Parliamentary Commissioner for the Armed Forces in Germany.

30 Gerhard Schoenberner, *Der gelbe Stern. Die Judenverfolgung in Europa 1933–1945* (Munich, 1960).

31 Author's interview with Reinhold Robbe in Berlin, June 17, 2019.

considers it a great stroke of luck to have been socialized in the surrounding of the Protestant-Reformed Church of Ostfriesland (North-Western Germany) and says: “Christian missions to Jews were obsolete long before the Nazi era and here the debate on Christian complicity in the times from 1933–1945 started earlier than anywhere else in Germany.”³²

Still, as a teenager and then as a young adult in the early 1970s, Robbe became very committed to both the Association for Christian-Jewish Cooperation and the German-Israel Society:

I have been witnessing how dedicated Jews and Christians have established a vibrant and candid dialogue, and I think this has changed something on both sides. Though I am not sure whether the removal of anti-Jewish stereotypes and clichés that have existed since the medieval ages, has really succeeded at the base of Christian communities.³³

Robbe is also concerned that in some German churches, a critical debate on Israel’s current policy towards the Palestinians “quickly turns into an uncritical adaptation of ideological images of an enemy.” Robbe is convinced that German society and politics also have a special future responsibility for the presence and protection of Jewish life in Europe, as well as for the existential security of the State of Israel:

I am not talking about amicable political criticism, for example, regarding Israel’s current politics toward the Palestinians. But when Germany joins even a few of the flood of anti-Israel-resolutions in the UN, something is obviously going wrong. And this could, of course, damage Israeli-German relations in the long run.³⁴

According to Robbe, German society has failed to convey comprehensive knowledge about Jewish religion, culture, history, and the present, beyond the Nazi persecution and the Holocaust. “There was a lot of symbolic policy in recent decades, which also has its imperative, along with responsible politics of commemoration,” said Robbe. “But obviously, we have failed to make the German non-Jewish population more familiar with the Jewish world in general, and this makes things more complicated since now, the first time after 1945, a considerable number of Jews has deliberately decided to make this country its home again.”³⁵ Robbe expresses his delight about the new dynamic of Jewish life, since tens of thousands of former Soviet Jews immigrated to the FRG, especially during the 1990s:

32 Author’s interview with Reinhold Robbe in Berlin, June 17, 2019.

33 Author’s interview with Reinhold Robbe in Berlin, June 17, 2019.

34 Author’s interview with Reinhold Robbe in Berlin, June 17, 2019.

35 Author’s interview with Reinhold Robbe in Berlin, June 17, 2019.

I think the Jewish community in today's Germany can expect a hopeful future. On the other hand, I also hope and wish that the Jewish leading bodies and institutions appear in public more than previously, also with forward-looking topics. Of course, commemoration to the Holocaust will remain very important, the fight against antisemitism and the support of security of Jewish communities and individuals, too. But I wish the Jewish communities would also join more projects in society as a whole, just like some Jewish protagonists are already doing in education, politics and culture.³⁶

One of the shining “Jewish cultural ambassadors” in present day Germany is Jalda Rebling, a famous expert of Jewish music from the early Middle Ages to modern times, and more recently a chazan from East Berlin.³⁷ She addresses her Jewish and non-Jewish audience through a joint discovering of common spiritual traces, melodies, and joint prayer as well as by finding a new approach and bond to proximate nature. Rebling and her partner Anna Adam regularly tour across the region with a “Happy hippie Jew bus” whose purpose she quickly explains:

The idea is to impart aspects of Jewish life in an unconventional way, especially to young people, wherever they are in Germany, and of course with the support of local or regional institutions or networks. “The Happy hippie Jew bus” is also designed as a kind of peace mobile. It's a rebuilt Volkswagen bus, with “Shalom” in Hebrew and “Salam” in Arabic (painted) on the side, and it is full of didactic material, all kinds of plays and games for kids and teenagers who can learn, in a playful way, something about the Jewish world. Originally, the “Happy hippie Jew bus” was only planned for a few weeks, at a Jewish cultural festival in North-Rhine Westfalia, and then it developed and (stayed) for years. Our target groups grew very diverse, and we succeeded in starting really deep conversations and exchanges. We visited elementary and high schools, vocational school classes and even a boxing club in Frankfurt. It was fascinating to see how non-Jewish young people overcame their reservations, started to ask questions, and sometimes even wanted to hear more and more about Jewish life.³⁸

Rebling had already had several encounters and experiences with non-Jews during her time as a Yiddish singer in the former GDR. She succeeded in opening “rare niches” of exchange in a socialist dominated society, where Jews had barely been present in public. After the reunification she went to the United States, completed a cantorial study, and upon her return to Europe she started leading services in prominent European synagogues. After many years, however, Rebling gave up her metropolitan lifestyle in Berlin and now lives in a rural area in Brandenburg. She continues outreach activities with a non-Jewish audience, albeit in a quite different environment from her hometown of Berlin.

³⁶ Author's interview with Reinhold Robbe in Berlin, June 17, 2019.

³⁷ Jalda Rebling is also Director of Studies at the European Academy for Jewish Liturgy in London (EAJL).

³⁸ Author's interview with Jalda Rebling in Potsdam, May 15, 2019.

Jalda was one of the founders of *Ohel Ha Chidusch* in Berlin, the first independent Jewish Renewal community in Germany, affiliated with the American-Jewish Renewal movement ALEPH. This was a coherent step in her own development as a self-confident and open-minded Jewess in contemporary Germany. Rebling emphasizes the importance in overcoming rigid and narrow-minded structures and views inside the established Jewish bodies and communities:

I had endless talks with rabbis explaining what we do in our projects, and how we try to reach out to Jewish people in this country, and then they tell me: 'I would also like to do such things, but I cannot.' And then I ask them, for example: 'What is the problem with having gay or lesbian couples under a Chuppe – if they want that? Or making a blessing for an interreligious couple, with both partners strongly interested in Jewish issues?' Otherwise we will lose Jewish contemporaries again and again.³⁹

Rebling also regularly conducts interfaith services and offers concerts with Christian and Muslim singers and artists in Potsdam, for example, where parts of the audience might have their first experience with culture and religion "of the others." In fact, her way and means of coming closer is less discussion and more spiritual music.

Joshua Spinner, executive vice president and CEO of the Ronald S. Lauder Foundation, who came from the United States to Germany in 2000, works on very innovative Jewish projects in several German cities – mostly in Berlin, Leipzig, and Hamburg. He was co-founder of the Hildesheimer Rabbinerseminar Berlin,⁴⁰ which was re-opened thanks to support by the Central Council of Jews in Germany, but mostly by the Ronald Lauder Foundation. The seminar also cooperates with the Conference of European Rabbis and the Orthodox Rabbi Conference of Germany.

Interestingly, three distinct groups can be identified among the students of the new Hildesheimer Seminar. By far the largest is the group of immigrants or children of immigrants from the former Soviet Union to Germany, all of whom speak German fluently but also are able to use their Russian language and cultural skills effectively in the communities of Germany. The second group consists of students from outside Germany, primarily Hungary, but also the occasional western European or American. The final group consists of German speakers who were born and raised in German-speaking families in Germany. "There is no special demand

³⁹ Author's interview with Jalda Rebling in Potsdam, May 15, 2019.

⁴⁰ The Rabbinical School of Berlin is closely oriented with the life and works of Rabbi Esriel Hildesheimer (1820–1899), one of the most famous protagonists of European neo-orthodoxy in the last third of the nineteenth century. The Rabbinical Seminar to Berlin was closed by the Nazis in 1938.

for common dominators,” says Spinner, when asked about the certain cultural overlapping amongst the groups. “The Tora is the common denominator, and this offers enough inner cohesion.”⁴¹ Spinner and his allies represent a new generation of Jews that looks more into the future than back to the past. “Thanks to the influx of former Soviet Jews there is an opportunity to build Jewish life here in Germany, in the long term,” says Spinner. “But a sustainable Jewish life in any country in this world is only possible with Jews who, in fact, live as Jews. We work on the infrastructure and the frame conditions for all Jews who want to live as Jews, including kosher food, and sufficient Jewish education for all age groups – in Berlin and elsewhere.”⁴²

Joshua Spinner notes that contacts with the non-Jewish population around the new community center in Berlin Brunnenstraße (in Berlin’s Mitte district) are “pleasant and relaxed.” He adds:

Here, in this part of the city, people are well educated, cosmopolitan and accustomed to meeting others with very different outlooks. Of course, sometimes our community members feel unsettled by the news of antisemitic incidents or activities – the concern is rather about an unconfined guarantee of religious liberty, including kosher butchering and Brit Mila. Anti-semitism does not affect our daily lives, but of course, all of us are vigilant.⁴³

As the executive vice president of the Ronald S. Lauder Foundation, Spinner is also responsible for many Jewish educational projects across Europe. He is engaged in joint initiatives in which Jewish schools and communities develop specifically local plans for the future like *Educating for Impact*.⁴⁴ “Of course it is more difficult for Jews to live their Jewish lives in places outside metropolitan areas. But there is hope for tomorrow, especially when strong and visionary leadership is on the spot,” Spinner says.⁴⁵

Although they work in rather distinct Jewish religious and spiritual networks, what Joshua Spinner and Jalda Rebling have in common is their outreach to rather well-meaning, non-Jewish environments via uncomplicated channels and contacts.

Martin Kloke, a non-Jewish Berlin-based publicist and political scientist, has the impression that the encounters between Jews and non-Jews in Germany have not yet had a broad effect: “There is a network of contacts and co-operations between the Jewish community and a minority of non-Jewish interested individuals – activists of a religious or secular nature, friends of Israel, and academics. Sig-

⁴¹ Author’s interview with Joshua Spinner in Berlin, July 20, 2019.

⁴² Author’s interview with Joshua Spinner in Berlin, July 20, 2019.

⁴³ Author’s interview with Joshua Spinner in Berlin, July 20, 2019.

⁴⁴ <https://educatingforimpact.com/> (accessed April 5, 2021).

⁴⁵ Author’s interview with Joshua Spinner in Berlin, July 20, 2019.

nificant organizations in this regard would include Deutsch-Israelische Gesellschaft (DIG), Gesellschaft für Christlich-Jüdische Zusammenarbeit (GCJZ) and other NGOs that ensure that these relations are filled with life. Though, the majority of non-Jewish society doesn't participate in these things, or does so only in a small amounts."⁴⁶

Kloke also thinks that activities to commemorate flourishing Jewish life in Germany before 1933, the Nazi Crimes in WWII, and the Shoah are carried out by only a small share of the non-Jewish population. He states:

At the yearly commemorative ceremonies and events, Jews and non-Jews commemorate the horrors of the past, in large part, together. The 9th of November, the 27th of January and the 8th May are examples. This also happens in-between, when new 'Stolpersteine' are laid in front of the apartments or houses in which Jews previously lived before they were deported and murdered. But also in this setting, on the non-Jewish side, it is primarily official representatives of state and society, as well very engaged activists, who partake in such events and commemorate together with the Jewish community. Most members of non-Jewish society participate in these events only on a minimal level, if at all.⁴⁷

German media, especially public channels and broadcasts, regularly try to convey information about Jewish history, culture, religion, and also the modern State of Israel. Recently, German media has also sought to introduce various Jewish protagonists living permanently or temporarily in Germany, and the media, in fact, reaches specific target groups. This might be interpreted as a helpful balancing of the media and general public focus, formerly only focused on Jewish history starting with 1933, the rise of Adolf Hitler, and ending in 1945, with the liberation of Auschwitz and the end of World War II.

Even Yan Wissmann is a descendant of German Jews in the southwest German region of Baden Württemberg. His grandparents escaped to South America in 1939. He returned to Germany and was a student activist, and became surprised about the intensity of commemoration of the Shoah in some (non-Jewish) circles:

I think, in post-War Germany, all generations were urged to confront themselves with the extremely inhumane politics of the Nazi Regime, and with the mass crimes (...) and sometimes it became overwhelming. I don't have words to describe what happened. I think, repeating and repeating these kinds of facts, can, at the end of the day, lead to a kind of paranoia.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Author's interview with Dr. Martin Kloke in Berlin, December 7, 2019.

⁴⁷ Author's interview with Dr. Martin Kloke in Berlin, December 7, 2019 (emphasis by the author).

⁴⁸ Author's interview with Yan Wismann in Berlin, June 3, 2019.

At the same time, Yan Wissmann, Martin Kloke, and other interview partners are aware of trends of old and modern antisemitism, partly tarnishing the joy of a new dynamic development of Jewish life in Germany – notably the construction of new synagogues and the opening of Jewish kindergartens, schools, youth centres, Jewish galleries, restaurants, theatres, film and learning festivals.

Openly antisemitic expressions and brutal, physical or even terrorist attacks are currently rare cases in Germany, but Jews as well as non-Jews confirm experiences with anti-Jewish statements and remarks. Wissmann said ironically: *“I can’t see very open antisemitism, but I have already had experiences in former places of employment and in private encounters. Comments like: ‘The half of Berlin belongs to Jewish people’ and ‘Half of the houses are Jewish real estate’. I wish that were true, but it’s sadly not,” he said laughing.*⁴⁹

Martin Kloke considers the problem on a larger scale:

Antisemitism is an unbearable disaster for the political culture of this country, because it’s virulent in all social and political milieus. One of the numerous manifestations of antisemitism includes making “the Jews” responsible for the real or imagined mistakes of Israel. Alongside the traditional forms of antisemitism among the political right, we have seen a specific hatred of Jews become virulent on the political left and in the so-called ‘middle ground’, which is otherwise at home in largely Muslim migrant settings. This primarily anti-Israeli antisemitism has roots in both Europe and the Qur’an. As a result, it is often not taken seriously in mainstream society, or is simply silently “tolerated”, in part because antizionist resentment is widespread in the liberal mainstream, and in part because right-wing populist tendencies abuse “Islam” as a projection screen for anti-Muslim racism. One can of course debate whether antisemitism really is increasing or not. One thing is clear: hatred of Jews is showing its face more shamelessly and brutally than ever before.⁵⁰

Again, it is especially these groups, networks, and individual personalities of non-Jewish Germans who react intensely to the new forms of antisemitism and organize vigils, Kipa-“flashmobs” or even demonstrations against demonstrations. They may even directly call politicians for more state supported measures against antisemitism.

There have been no recent explorations of distinct non-Jewish support groups accompanying Jewish communities, expressing their specific solidarity in public events and backing the Jewish communities and individual Jewish people when confronted with antisemitic incidents. Neither the composition of the groups nor their specific motivations have been studied so far. However, many solidarity ini-

⁴⁹ Author’s interview with Yan Wissmann in Berlin, June 3, 2019.

⁵⁰ Author’s interview with Dr. Martin Kloke in Berlin, December 7, 2019 (emphasis by the author).

tiatives with Jewish communities are currently organized by Christian groups and by young anti-fascist groups.

A third group of very active civil stakeholders consists of German citizens who have some Jewish ancestors in their family tree but are not members of Jewish communities or do not consider themselves as Jews in a halakhic or ethnic way. On the other hand, they might perfectly function as connectors between a Jewish and a non-Jewish world in German society.

Dr. Thomas Feist, for example, the official commissioner of Jewish life and combating antisemitism in the State of Saxony, recalls his great grandfather who survived Auschwitz and was one of the re-founders of the Jewish community in the city of Leipzig in 1945. Feist, who also lives and works in Leipzig, and who served for two legislative periods as a deputy in the German Bundestag, grew up in a Protestant atmosphere, due to the Christian part of his family. He is an active proponent of Christian culture and sees great potential for Christian-Jewish cooperation in present day Germany. Feist also considers the Judeo-Christian connection “not as a myth but as fundamental.” Regarding Germany he concludes: “This wouldn’t have become a nation with such strong and prominent science and culture, if there hadn’t been so many leading Jewish protagonists in those disciplines.”⁵¹ Nowadays, and also in Saxony, Feist notes “a lot of vibrant Christian and also communal initiatives helping to overcome the huge trenches and divisions that have existed before and after the Shoah.” He is not contesting that some of the participating Christian initiatives may “overshoot the mark,” not clearly defining their religious views and motivations, and partly promote a transfigured and unthinkingly idealized picture of Israel. Nevertheless, he says: “These groups are ready to come into contact, communicate, exchange and share experiences with Jews, here and now and face the challenge where others stay away.”⁵² Feist also makes a smart distinction between fundamentalist Christians supporting the Jew Mission, i. e. enhanced Christian efforts to convert Jews to Christianity, as “unacceptable” and those Christians who want to communicate their principle faith in a redemptive history: “I see no problem if groups of Christians and Jews are meeting each other, even if having some diametrically core beliefs. Important is just to talk with mutual respect and honesty.” As in most German cities after World War II and until today, the Jewish inhabitants of Leipzig only represent a very small portion of the local population. “Apart from a few religious members of the community, (they are) almost invisible. However, the Jews who are in the public, in-

51 Author’s interview with Dr. Thomas Feist in Dresden, September 1, 2020.

52 Author’s interview with Dr. Thomas Feist in Dresden, September 1, 2020.

cluding the rabbi and also some artists and intellectuals, generally meet an open-minded atmosphere in this city,” notes Feist.

At the same time, Feist is very concerned about the lack of knowledge of Jewish history, traditions, and contemporary Jewry in large parts of German society, a deficit that might increase a general liability to antisemitic influences, primarily induced but not only by right-wing extremist groups and networks. “We need comprehensive educational programs for the prevention of antisemitism and Jew hatred,” says Feist, “and these programs should be directed especially toward young people. It is deplorable that knowledge of the longstanding, rich and changing Jewish history in Germany in general, and in the respective regions and cities in particular, is so marginal.”⁵³

Feist, in his role as the official commissioner of combating antisemitism in Saxony, is trying to mobilize schools and other educational institutions, and several milieus and forces of civil society, to speed up knowledge and education of Jewish history, religion, and culture. He is also a strong proponent of deploying excursions to Israel, especially for young people, “to enable them to get a picture of historical and modern Jewry.” Indeed, there are programs in progress in Germany to organize excursions to Israel, even for formerly right-wing extremists, thus trying to re-socialize them, and help them to dissolve a deep-rooted concept of “the enemy.” Feist states:

Particularly in east Germany, we have a fatal tradition of distancing and animosity toward Israel, caused by 40 years of disastrous anti-Israeli propaganda by the communist regime of the GDR. This tradition still continues to have effects.⁵⁴

Meanwhile, two controversies have arisen in German academia and the German public, regarding modern Israel and current antisemitism. The first controversy touches upon the following question: at what point does harsh critique of Israel – and under certain circumstances also political opposition – become subtly or openly antisemitic? The second controversy circles around the thesis that animosity towards Israel has become the dominating and accepted form of present antisemitism in Germany.

“Israel-related antisemitism is the dominating type of Jew-hatred in the digital age, in all spheres and at all levels of communication,” states Professor Monika Schwarz-Friesel, a professor of linguistics and research expert on antisemitism in German public statements. “Traditional anti-Jewish stereotypes are now project-

⁵³ Author’s interview with Dr. Thomas Feist in Dresden, September 1, 2020.

⁵⁴ Author’s interview with Dr. Thomas Feist in Dresden, September 1, 2020.

ed onto the State of Israel and its inhabitants, and its right to exist as a Jewish State is seriously challenged, while the Middle East conflict just plays a minor role.”⁵⁵

The first controversy, in particular, continues in an extreme way and polarizes scholars – especially social scientists and cultural scientists– but also journalists and publicists. And while scholars like Monika Schwarz-Friesel argue that many antisemites use alleged critique of Israel as a massive outlet of Jew hatred, other scholars predicate that the “accusation of antisemitism” is misused to muzzle any critique of Israel. The Jewish communities, traditionally closely related to Israel, follow the discussion with huge concern, fully aware that a large section of German people, when discussing the Middle East conflict, appear unable to differentiate between Jews, Jewish communities, Jewish diaspora, and the State of Israel. “I permanently have to explain to debaters, that I am not an Israeli citizen, that I don’t have an Israeli passport, and subsequently, I cannot vote for any Israeli government, and that I do not participate in Israeli politics,” says Kuef Kaufmann, the head of the Jewish community in Leipzig.⁵⁶

The heated inner-German debates about Israel might also affect, at least in the long run, the longstanding, traditional relations between Jews and Christians, maybe even in well-established platforms like the Associations for Christian-Jewish Cooperation, most of them already established in the 1950s and 1960s. At the moment, however, it seems too early to assess to what extent ongoing polarized debates about Israel and antisemitism will affect broader circles and networks frequently working at the intersections between Jews, Christians, and other ethno-cultural/ethno-religious groups in Germany. Or, in other words: it is not yet foreseeable to what extent the sustained conflict between Jewish Israelis and Palestinians in the Middle East will also considerably affect the encounters between Jews and non-Jews in Germany in the long run.

Conclusion(s)

A new quality of cooperation and mutual learning has taken shape among Jewish and non-Jewish stakeholders in Germany. Jewish leaders, artists, intellectuals, and some theologians show appreciation for a new quality of exchange “at eye-level” – also as a means to reduce mutual stereotypes and fears of interaction. Our interviews have also revealed that Jews in Germany go about different ways to develop

⁵⁵ Monika Schwarz-Friesel on idz: <https://www.idz-jena.de/wsdet/wsd8-5/> (translation by the author).

⁵⁶ Author’s interview with Kuef Kaufmann, Head of the Jewish Community in Leipzig, November 11, 2022.

and strengthen their Jewish identities. Israel is an important factor for many of them, but does not appear to be the most essential one. None of the Jewish interview partners were considering Aliyah (immigration to Israel).

Our non-Jewish interview partners offered a significant mix of motivations for being in close contact with Jews, Jewish communities, and Israel: sensitization to the Jewish revival in Germany, individual commitment in organizations of Christian-Jewish cooperation or German-Israeli friendship, or religious interest in Judaism and Israel. Combatting antisemitism was considered as a matter of course.

Our interviews revealed that Jewish-Christian encounters in Germany are not that broad or frequent, but the existing connections show promise of liveliness and sustainability. For Jewish stakeholders in Germany, commemoration to the Shoah remains an important element of their identities. At the same time, building a Jewish future here, in Central Europe, has become a similar priority. Israel is highly appreciated as a “safe haven” for Jews across the world and as a spiritual source – solidarity with Israel thus seems a matter of course. In a few interviews with non-Jewish interviewees, sorrow was expressed that German-Israeli relations might cool down due to different opinions and politics in Israeli-Palestinian relations. One of the interview partners principally hoped for more Jewish commitment in German politics and society.

In general, our interview partners believed that there is a Jewish future in Germany, though they abstained from any predictions. All in all, German society is considered as stable. Antisemitism appears as a problem that has to be combated. However, plans of leaving the country, due to feelings of uncertainty, seem to be rare exceptions.