

## Intergenerational Dialog in Families of Jewish Communists in East Germany: A Process-Oriented Analysis<sup>1</sup>

The reconstruction of the intergenerational dialog<sup>2</sup> in multigenerational families involves coming to terms with a network of different but interdependent ways of dealing with discontinuity. It offers an opportunity to understand the reciprocal relationships between a changing social world, biographical work and the dynamics within family systems. This is true especially when biographical research is done in families that have experienced the dramatic change of a political system with which their members identified.

The parents' generation of the families discussed in this article belongs to the group of Jewish Communists who returned to the Eastern part of Germany after having survived the Holocaust in exile.<sup>3</sup> According to Helmut Eschwege, who is the main chronicler of the history of Jews in the GDR, there were an estimated 3500 Jewish returnees to East Germany in the post-war period from Western countries (Eschwege 1988: 65). It is not known how many Jews were among the 658 Communists who returned from the Soviet Union to the Eastern part of Germany between 1945 and 1954. In spite of all kinds of different experiences during the time of exile and all kinds of motives for returning, one thing all these returnees shared was the desire to build a "better Germany", which meant above all an anti-fascist socialist Germany. Especially

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1 Thanks to the editors, Nora Goldenbogen and Gabriele Rosenthal for important comments on this article.

2 In using the term "intergenerational dialog", I am primarily orienting myself toward a combination of two concepts: the dialog model in systemic family therapy (Stierlin 1981) and the sociological concept of generation as developed by Mannheim (1928) and discussed by Matthes (1985). The concept in family therapy studies the dynamics among members of different generations of one family, whereas the sociological concept of generation focuses on the constitution of generations by common experiences in historical time. For a theoretical discussion of this combination see Rosenthal (1997) and Völter (1996).

3 In recent years a wide range of studies on Jews and Jewish life in East Germany have been published. An extensive bibliography can be found in Illichmann (1997). These publications deal mainly with life within Jewish communities. But hardly any studies exist which focus on Jewish Communists. An exception is the work of Hartewig (2000) and Herzberg (1999). The findings presented in the present article are the results of a study of a sample of nine families in which one to three generations and up to nine members of one family were interviewed from 1994 to 2000: see also Völter (1997, 1998a and b); Rosenthal and Völter (1998). In addition to narrative biographical interviews, family interviews were also conducted in which members of different generations were present.

for the returning Jewish Communists, who had suffered from Nazi persecution both for political reasons and under the racist Nuremberg laws, supporting the construction of an anti-fascist society was a way of biographically processing the experiences of discrimination. One of my interviewees, Hilde Kaufmann, expressed her feelings as follows:

*“A large number of the people who, well, had a say up there in the Politburo, they’d been in concentration camps themselves or had emigrated, they were of Jewish descent and so you somehow had a certain sense of security in that respect.”* (Hilde Kaufmann I, 1994: 23)

A key aspect of Ms. Kaufmann’s bond to East Germany, shared by many other returning emigrants, was the presence of anti-fascists in positions of power within the state as well as their anti-fascist policies and rhetoric. The leaders of the Communist Party and the government saw the socialist state as being free of all continuity with the Nazi past.<sup>4</sup> They declared the GDR the true anti-fascist Germany and the successor to the wartime resistance movement. According to the historical concept of anti-fascism, the economic basis of National Socialism was capitalism.<sup>5</sup> Anti-communism and Nazi terror against those who fought for revolutionary changes were interpreted as extreme anti-humanist ideology and practice. The Communists, not the Jews, were seen as the principal victims of National Socialism. This was one factor that influenced the culture of remembrance in the GDR, as evidenced in the concentration camp memorials, for example. Communist resistance to Nazism was emphasized and glorified, while in comparison, public commemoration of the Holocaust was played down (Kulturamt Prenzlauer Berg 1992). Jewish resistance fighters were exalted as anti-fascists, but their Jewish background was often ignored.

But how was this public discourse reflected in the biographical presentations of the subjects themselves, especially in those of Communists who were of Jewish descent?

A reconstruction of the biographies in families of Jewish Communists showed that there generally was a correspondence between the anti-fascist discourse and the life stories of the protagonists and interplay between them. The anti-fascist aspects of the family past were emphasized, while in most of the families the history of the Jewish victims was barely mentioned, and was in some cases unknown to the grandchildren’s generation. In other families the children and grandchildren characterized the Jewish family story as

4 Also, former Nazis could become confessing “anti-fascists” if they were engaged in building up the socialist German state under the rule of the Socialist Unity Party (SED).

5 This concept was based on Georgi Dimitroff’s characterization of fascism in 1933 as being the “open terrorist dictatorship of the most reactionary, most chauvinist, most imperialist elements among the financial capitalists”. The fact that victory over Germany was largely achieved thanks to the Red Army was later interpreted as the best possible proof of the model character of socialism and the superior society it brought forth (Groehler 1992: 111).

knowledge which had come to light or gained importance only during recent years.

This corresponded not only with the dominant public discourse of anti-fascism, but also with other norms of the East German state. Its ideal for humankind was the "socialist personality". Members of East German society were to be educated in order to act in conformance with a socialist conception of the world, ideological awareness, and socialist morals. They were to be molded as both patriots and internationalists. Since the ideal of the socialist personality was an image of humankind which aspired to universalism, separate identities were excluded to a great extent (Grunenberg 1993: 139–144; Meuschel 1992: 29–122). As regards Jews, this meant that cultural and life-history differences between Jews and non-Jews needed to be eradicated. This was in fact the consequence of Karl Marx's discussion of the "Jewish question".<sup>6</sup> It led to the general notion that Jewish particularity was religious, and had its place only within the niches of Jewish community centers—with which most of the Jews in East Germany, and especially the younger generation, were not associated. Interviews with Jewish Communists and their offspring show that the political aspect of their biographies was more significant than religious, traditional, or ethnic aspects of Jewishness. They did not actually deny their Jewishness during the existence of the GDR, but they did not consider it something which should consciously be passed on to their children and grandchildren. Children and grandchildren of Jewish Communists had been socialized as conscious and active members of society.<sup>7</sup> They learned that political activity was one important consequence of their family history, but apart from this they had no more than a hazy notion of what the fact of being Jewish meant for them. My reconstruction of the interviews indicated however that this was not only the result of public discourse and socialist norms. In all cases it became clear that a biographical and family constellation in the time before 1945 was the basis for this type of biographical structuring during and after the GDR period.

Even though this was the main basis of socialization in families of Jewish Communists, it must be described as a process which could lead to changes over time. Beginning in the early 1980s, when a wide range of groups in East Germany began to discover alternative identities,<sup>8</sup> and, especially after 1989, there was a revival of public discourse on Jewish life in East Germany and in

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6 One of the central statements of this treatise is that "the Jew" is by nature "empirical", has "egoistic" and "practical" economic interests. Therefore he represents the typical biography of bourgeois society. Marx concludes from this theoretical analysis that "the Jew will have become impossible" as soon as the economic basis of society has been transformed (Marx 1844/1976).

7 See also interviews with this group in Bornemann and Peck (1995); Ostow (1989).

8 Social scientists in GDR reflected and incorporated this development in their conceptualizations of a socialist "mode of life" (Meuschel 1992: 249–256), which help to diversify the idea of socialist personality.

Germany as a whole (Burgauer 1993: 273–280; Illichmann 1997: 219–312). At the same time, the political convictions and the biographical concept of life as a Communist in a socialist country were very unsettled. As a possible consequence, the biographical constructions of all family members may have been called into question, not only in the public sphere but also in the intergenerational dialog (Völter 1998b). The Jewish family history, and family members' experiences of persecution during the Holocaust, began to play a greater role in many families of Jewish Communists. In the social context of changing societies and transformations of public discourse, aspects of the family history which until then had been framed differently or had been more or less unspoken, were brought to light in these families.<sup>9</sup> But how are these processes reflected in the actual dialog between different generations in families?

In this article I will focus on the question of how Jewishness and Communism, as two biographical reference points in the life stories of different generations, are lived and balanced over a lifetime in changing historical contexts. In the first part I propose some reflections on the topic of “biographical structuring” and “biographical work” in the family context. In part two I focus on an exchange on the topic of Jewishness between a mother and her son after the political changes of 1989. Finally, part three presents an argument that the two generations necessarily communicate different perspectives which can be better understood if we take into account the entire biography and the process of the “biographical work”.

## **Biographical Structuring and Biographical Work in the Context of Family Interaction**

Members of one family are not only born into different historical times or into different family constellations. Their biographies are also constituted by different events which are experienced and reflected in different social contexts. Each interaction between the members of a family produces, reproduces or transforms these differences. In order to understand the constitution of each individual biography as well as the family dynamics, we must focus on how subjects orient themselves in processes of interpreting and reinterpreting their

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9 This is not evident for all families that lived through the political changes of 1989 in the GDR. In some cases the opening of the family dialog on the past was blocked by conflicts or secrets which dated from the National Socialist period. For the example of a non-Jewish family, see Rosenthal and Völter (1998); for an example of intergenerational dialog in a Jewish/non-Jewish family, see Völter and Rosenthal (1998).

lived lives. This is true not only in the context of a changing social world, but also in the context of ongoing interaction with the members of their families.<sup>10</sup>

Fischer-Rosenthal has discussed this biographical operation on a theoretical level as “biographical work” (1995a: 43–86; 1995b: 250–265)<sup>11</sup> or “biographical structuring” (2000: 109–125, and in this volume). Despite some terminological distinctions,<sup>12</sup> both terms signify that biographies are constituted in an ongoing process of interaction, interpretation, and reinterpretation over a lifetime, within changing social networks and a changing social world: “By means of communication we interpret what happens, pass on to others what is important, fix experiences and build up knowledge” (2000: 115). This corresponds to the main idea of a socialization theory which claims that socialization should be seen as the constitution of a subject who productively processes reality, and thereby not only builds up his or her personality but also takes part in the production of social structures (Geulen and Hurrelmann 1980; Hurrelmann 1998). In this view there is not just a transfer of habits and knowledge from the older to the younger generations. Children and grandchildren are understood to be active participants in socialization processes (Rosenthal 1997: 59).

Biographical research in multigenerational families helps to formulate an empirical understanding of how socialization processes function. Reconstructing biographies within the network of a family system allows us to understand more precisely *how* the process of biographical structuring is embedded and reflected in public discourses and in family interaction processes. At the same time, we cannot really understand the dynamics within families by concentrating on their present appearance. In other words, we have to focus precisely on the interdependent processes of “biographical structuring” in order to grasp the structure and the genesis of the intergenerational dialog. What does this focus yield?

By reconstructing single biographies as well as their interaction in the framework of family systems, we can gain insight into how a historical time, which is generally much longer than a single life-span, is biographically processed by different members of one family. Each member of the family experi-

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10 The reconstruction of the dialog by sociologists and social psychologists often deals exclusively with the interaction between family members (Hildenbrand 1999; Keppler 1995; Moller and Tschuggnall 1999). These studies focus on the dynamics between family members, giving little or no attention to the biographies of the individual members or to the genesis of the intergenerational dynamics.

11 The term is also used by Fritz Schütze (1994) and—with a different meaning—by Anselm Strauss (Strauss et al. 1985: 137f).

12 Without naming the differences precisely, Fischer-Rosenthal (2000: 114) uses “biographical structuring” as the “more general term”. Despite the similarities, “biographical structuring” is used in a more neutral way for all types of structuring of life before and after the event, whereas “biographical work” seems to denote more intentional and conscious operations of self-reflection, preferably during experiences of crisis and discontinuity.

ences and interprets the surrounding social world and the knowledge about the family history from a different biographical perspective. Furthermore, we can study how a changing social world, different historical events or periods, and different types of public discourse are reflected in the biographies of different generations. These different “versions” of a biographically shared social world can be interpreted within the dynamics of the family system. This dynamics, however, must at the same time be understood according to the inner logic of each individual biography. In order to grasp this multidimensional and complex structure of interaction and socialization processes, methods of narrative interviewing (Schütze 1977) and hermeneutic case reconstruction (Rosenthal 1993, 1995) are combined with methods which were originally developed in systemic family therapy.<sup>13</sup>

### Balancing Past and Present: An Intergenerational Dialog

But how are different biographical experiences and perspectives communicated between different generations in one family? How can we imagine the actual dialog on Jewishness in families in which political identification was dominant for many decades?

Let us turn to the example of a mother and her son, Ruth and Georg Rolloff,<sup>14</sup> talking about what it actually means to them to be Jewish. Some information about the background of this interaction is necessary. The dialog took place during what was to have been an individual interview with the mother, Ruth, in 1995. Ruth was then 90 years old; her son Georg was 47. The son had dropped in to have lunch at his mother’s house and began to participate in the interview. Ruth was telling about an exchange with an official of the Jewish community in 1993, on the day she asked to be admitted as a member, when Georg suddenly intervened:

*Ruth: “So he asked me what my name is since when I am part of the Jewish community. So I said that I was actually always in the Jewish community. I never announced my departure, but I also never joined officially. But now I want to join because, I’m rather old, and I don’t want to be, exhumed somewhere after 25 years and Jews don’t do this, and therefore, I told him quite openly and he accepted that and didn’t say anything except*

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13 In accordance with the principles of grounded theory, these methods are gradually developed within each study. This combination of methods was first used in a study on the “Holocaust in Three Generations” directed by Gabriele Rosenthal (1998).

14 All names of interviewees are anonymized. In the Rolloff family I was able to interview the mother, Ruth (born in 1905), her daughter (born in 1945), her son (born in 1948) and her grandson (the daughter’s son, born in 1979). Ruth’s husband had already died in 1956. In the present article I will concentrate on the biographies of the mother and son and on the dynamics between them.

to ask if I have a son, 'Yes, I do', and does he know that I'm Jewish? 'Ye-es, he does', and he also knows that he is half-Jewish from,

Georg: No, I'm a full Jew

Ruth: What?

Georg: I'm a full Jew,

Ruth: Or you're a full Jew. So that mm—

Georg: According to Jewish—actually according to Israeli law, which is based on Jewish law—and it is now known through the whole world—it depends on the mother. If the mother is Jewish then the son is also Jewish.

Ruth: And I am a full Jew. My father was two Jews, not one, he had two sidelocks, a short beard, a short beard, but he was a person with a wonderful soul." (Ruth Rolloff I, 1995: 32)

In the ensuing narration Ruth recounts that her father had told her always to attach a mezuzah to her doorjamb. Ruth explains to the interviewer and her son that she never denied her Jewishness, even when she was confronted by the Gestapo.

I would like to underline three aspects of this sequence and the interaction between mother and son:

First, Ruth joined the Jewish community in 1993. She tells the interviewer and her son that her main reason was her wish to be buried in the Jewish cemetery so that she would not be exhumed eventually. It is striking that Ruth seems to argue against an inner voice that reproaches her because she did not live according to the rules of Judaism during most of her lifetime. She has to justify herself by asserting that she never denied her Jewishness.

Second: There is obviously no agreement between mother and son concerning the question of how the son should define himself. Ruth seems to reject Georg's claim that he is a "full Jew" (*Volljude*). Using the category of "half Jewish"<sup>15</sup> to define the status of her son underscores this still further: by not acknowledging Georg as a Jew, Ruth implies that she is the last representative in her family who can fully claim to be a Jew. Her son Georg tries to prove his Jewishness by citing rules that are recognized all over the world. This tells us that, for him, being Jewish is not a naturally developed identification, but one which has to be guaranteed by official definitions. This provokes his mother Ruth to react with irony: by saying "My father was two Jews", she signals that she does not take her son seriously. In spite of Georg's explanation she again defines Jewishness as something transmitted by the father, thus conveying indirectly that her son is not a Jew. From the interview we know that Georg did not have a Jewish father. But the mother's rejection probably also communicates her guilt feelings at not having raised her son

15 The term "half Jewish" is used by Ruth herself and—despite her statement to the contrary—is probably not used by the official of the Jewish Community. It is out of the question that he would have had recourse to this racist category used by the Nazis. In any case, Ruth's son is indeed considered a Jew according to Jewish law.

according to Jewish commandments. Her son's argument on the basis of Jewish law is the stimulus for Ruth to change the perspective and to describe herself not as a Jewish mother, but as the daughter of a doubly Jewish father. In this way she avoids the duties of a Jewish mother.

Third: Ruth's description of her father seems to be ambivalent. Her argumentation can be read as follows: In spite of his piety, her father had a kind heart. She visualizes her father as an Eastern European Orthodox Jew with a traditional outlook. She defines her own Jewishness by reference to this representative of Eastern European devout Jewry. For her son, who was raised at a time when this culture had been radically destroyed, this leaves no chance of ever being a "real" Jew. It becomes obvious, furthermore, that she not only needs to explain to the Jewish community official why she was not an active member of the community during most of her lifetime: she is also engaged in an inner dialog in which she seems to be addressing her father, whom, on the one hand, she holds up as a model Jew, while on the other hand she repudiates him.

This interpretation of the dialog between mother and son already provides us with an important insight into communication about being Jewish in this family. We can complete this picture by taking into account the present perspective of the mother and son. In other words, what is the present background of this dialog?

At the age of eighty-eight, Ruth Rolloff officially became a member of the Jewish community. According to her, the main reason for doing so was that she wanted to be buried in the Jewish cemetery. The reconstruction of her biography gives various clues suggesting that, with the demise of socialism, the object of Ruth's biographical work became her own preparation for death. This also fits in with her statement in one of the interviews that her "life was tied together with socialism". Part of her biographical work was a trip she took together with her son Georg in 1992 to meet the family of her deceased brother in the United States. Thus Ruth was eighty-seven when she finally met her brother's wife, who had been a member of the family since 1934. Her brother had died shortly after the War. While living in East Germany Ruth had avoided contact with these relatives. As an officer in the Army her son had not been allowed to have any contact with this branch of the family. As a result of this trip, Georg's perspective on his mother's family history and Jewish background changed drastically. Together with his relatives in the United States he visited a synagogue for the first time in his life and participated in a service. In the context of meeting his relatives in the United States Georg learned a great deal about Jewish practices. The interview with him makes it clear that he began to identify with them. His Jewish family story and the new contact with his aunt, his female cousin and her family in the United States help him to overcome the experience of the complete failure of socialism, which had been the realization of his family's ideals.



Although mother and son together had recently experienced the meeting with their Jewish relatives in the United States—which for both of them forms an important part of their present perspective on their Jewishness—we could see that they have quite different interpretations of what it means to them to be Jewish. Embedding these findings in the context of their entire biographies helps us to understand their different perspectives in greater depth. When their biographies are taken into account, we see that their present views are part of the ongoing processes of biographical structuring and biographical work over a lifetime.

### **Different Generational Perspectives as a Result of Biographical Structuring over a Lifetime**

Ruth Rolloff was born in 1905. She was the eldest daughter of Jewish immigrants from Russian Poland who had difficulty surviving economically in Germany. She was socialized on the one hand into the charge of integrating into German society, and on the other hand of conserving the Polish-Jewish traditions. Following an occupational disease, her father was unable to work. Ruth's mother and very soon Ruth and her older brother had to work to support the family of four children. During the First World War the family was expelled from their town in southeastern Germany and sent to live in a sort of ghetto where immigrants with foreign passports from "enemy" countries, considered "dangerous" to the Germans, were interned. Thus already in childhood Ruth experienced discrimination as a Polish Jew. When she was old enough, she tried joining a Zionist youth group. But as the group's orientation was to leave Germany, she soon left it and made contact with young Communists. Ruth's mother died in 1927. In the same year Ruth joined the German Communist Party (KPD). When she started a relationship with a gentile Party official, her father found it hard to accept his daughter's new life. He beat her and forbade further contact with her Communist boyfriend. Ruth rebelled and left home to live with him, and later married him. Ruth was now integrated into a completely different milieu. In this new social framework her anti-religious position, which had originated in her parents' house in opposition to her father, was consolidated. Her biography could not integrate both loyalty to her devout Jewish family and her socialist identity.

When Hitler came to power, Ruth took part in the Communist resistance. She and her partner lived in hiding until they were arrested and imprisoned for several years. After her release in 1938, Ruth fled to the Soviet Union. She survived the War and the Holocaust in Moscow, where she worked for the Communist International and later for the *Nationalkomitee Freies*

*Deutschland*. The reconstruction of her biography shows that during the time of the Nazi persecution and her emigration she repeatedly experienced situations in which she had to conceal her Jewishness. At the same time she was confronted with the murder or stigmatization of other Jews, including Jewish Communists murdered by Stalin. In 1945 Ruth came back to East Germany to help build a socialist state. In 1946 she married her non-Jewish partner with whom she had been living since before 1933. Her husband had survived political persecution in a Gestapo prison and in a concentration camp.

According to the documents of the Jewish community of her town, Ruth joined the community in 1946. As she doesn't mention this part of her biography in the interviews, we can only imagine what it may have meant to her, who defined herself as "anti-religious". Historical studies of Jewish communities in the GDR show that supporting the Jewish community out of a deep feeling of solidarity without practicing the Jewish religion was common during the first post-war period (Goldenbogen 2000). This would seem to be the reason for Ruth's decision to enroll as a member of the community. Ruth told me that she continuously maintained some parts of the lifestyle she had learned in her parents' house, such as cooking Jewish and Polish specialties. But it also becomes clear that it was important to her not to shut out her non-Jewish surroundings. Through her narrative about the post-war period and her life in East Germany, we can see that Ruth's definition of anti-fascism included both her Jewish and her Communist identities.

Ruth's son Georg was born in 1948. His first name commemorates his father's father who was a Catholic. His second name is Samuel, after Ruth's father. In the individual interview, Georg recalled how he was told about his Jewish name:

*"My mother was a Communist and my father was a Communist (3). When I asked my mother about my middle name I learned that she actually was a Jew from her parents' house (2) but that was not important and had no significance (2). Mother just told me that, as if I would say, 'It's not long until Christmas'. More or less like that. She said something like: 'You know, my parents were Jews, and if you like you are actually a half Jew'. I don't think she even went that far."* (Georg Rolloff I, 1995: 38)

According to Georg's recollection, this dialog took place in 1953 or 1954 when he was about five or six years old. Recalled from his present perspective, one function of this presentation was to tell the interviewer why he later became a Communist, identifying with the political part of his family history was content with not knowing much about his Jewish background. Taking into account the public discourse on the Holocaust and on Jewish life in Germany after 1945, as well as the interviewer's research interest, he may have felt a need to justify his past.

Bearing this in mind, I would like to give some data and reflections on the biographical background of the mother and son during the fifties, corresponding to the date Georg attributes to the dialog. As far as Georg is con-

cerned, he was old enough then to go to school and thus to come into contact with institutions outside his family. His name and his family background were certainly significant to him. They structured his contact with others and helped him to understand who he was. We can imagine that this dialog gave him a hint that he was somehow different from other children in his peer group. His self-perception was mainly structured by the dominant message, that being Communist was the principal characteristic of his parents. This signified being part of a minority, but an elite one, whereas being Jewish was something Georg could not interpret. In his perception he had no opportunity to learn about it, neither outside the family nor with the help of his mother.

As far as Georg's mother Ruth is concerned, being a Jew at the time when she was confronted with the questions of her five or six-year-old son had an important political dimension. It could lead to insinuations by the Communist Party, which doubted the loyalty of all those whose biographical background could place them at any kind of political distance from the dominant group of non-Jewish Communists around Walter Ulbricht. As early as 1949, a special commission in East Germany was ordered to investigate all party members, but especially those who had returned after 1945 from exile in Western countries, or who had been released after years of Nazi imprisonment. They were interrogated about their past, their loyalty to the Party, and their personal or institutional contacts to Western countries (Keßler 1995: 52–105). These measures were carried out in the same context as the show trials in the Soviet Union, Bulgaria, Hungary, and most recently in Czechoslovakia. The GDR also planned to have a show trial after the model of the Slánský trial which, after years of preparation, was held in December 1952 in Prague (London 1991). Most of those who were condemned were Jewish Communists. They were accused of being "imperialist agents", "cosmopolitans", and supporters of "Zionist monopoly capitalists". At that time the Rolloff family lived in Prague, where Ruth's husband held a position as the cultural attaché of the East German mission. From her children we know that he had various contacts with Czech Communists with whom he had survived the concentration camp. Some of them had been among the accused in the Slánský trial. Ruth's husband, who even in the late forties had not been willing to submit totally to the Stalinist line, was dismissed shortly after the sentence was pronounced in the Slánský trial. Although he was given a position again in East Germany, we may presume there was a connection between his dismissal and the general suspicion against possible "internal enemies" of the Party. Obviously the Stalinist measures also had another impact on Ruth's biography. She left the Jewish community in 1951. We can surmise that one of her motives, if not the most important one, was her fear of being suspected by the Party. This interpretation seems plausible not only in light of her husband's experience. Historical research has shown that a growing number of Jewish Communists abandoned the Jewish communities from 1951 on because they felt threatened

by the suspicions of their party (see Illichmann 1997: 121; Goldenbogen 2000). Documents of the SED explaining how to “learn from the example of the Slánsky trial” reeked of anti-Semitism (*Dokumente* 1954). Many of those who were later prosecuted and/or expelled were Jews. Alarmed by the rising numbers of interrogations and arrests, some 450 Jews fled East Germany by late 1953. Among them were the most politically active members of the Jewish community and representatives of victims of racial persecution in the Association of Victims of Nazi Persecution. When a new course was embarked on in 1953, after Stalin’s death, the Jewish communities hardly had any members left. Furthermore, membership in the Jewish Community was considered suspicious by the Party even after this period. Neither Ruth nor her son mentioned that Ruth had been a member of the Jewish community after 1945 and had left the community again in 1951. Her son was apparently unaware of this part of her biography.

As far as Ruth is concerned, her presentation can be understood in the light of her present perspective on socialism. She tried to recount her biography without mentioning anything negative about her life under socialism. On the one hand this was probably because the interviewer was a West German. On the other hand, it was a result of the biographical work Ruth had carried on for most of her lifetime. Obviously she had continuously reinterpreted her cognitive and emotional dissonance with the Communist Party, and had managed to cope with its norms and practices. To give another example of her reinterpretations: Ruth explained in the interview that her husband was discharged from his position at Prague as a consequence of “the alcoholism of his superior”. From historical presentations, however, we learn that the superior himself was discharged one month after the Slánsky trial. He was indicted for political reasons and imprisoned as an “agent of the imperialist secret services”. This accusation was never proved. By projecting the guilt on this victim of Stalinism, Ruth is covering up the deeds of the Ulbricht regime.

Returning to the dialog with his mother reported by Georg some 40 years later, we can presume that it was strongly influenced by those historical circumstances. Despite the middle name which signified that he was Jewish, Georg grew up at a great distance from his Jewish family background. Furthermore, he fulfilled the mission of being a good Communist. He joined the army and became an officer stationed on the border with West Germany.

But what do we learn from the interviews and other biographical documents about the mother’s and the son’s changing perspectives on their own biographies?

Let us first look at the self-presentation of Ruth Rolloff. The reconstruction of her own presentation during the three meetings I had with her, the interpretation of her autobiography published in 1985, and the reading of

several biographical documents found in archives<sup>16</sup> revealed that Ruth was continuously reworking the presentation of her Jewish background, and especially her relationship to her father.

In two *curricula vitae* written for the Communist party in the early thirties, Ruth describes her family background in a very neutral way. She mentions her Jewish background, her father's profession, the family's emigration from Poland and her own professional and political career.

Several *curricula vitae* and biographical reports written in the forties, during her exile in Moscow, present a more detailed picture of her relationship to her family. She explicitly describes her father as a stubborn religious Jew. She claims that she never had any contact with him once she left home in 1928. Thus she distances herself from her Jewish background and indirectly "neutralizes" her father's influence over her. In her autobiography, which was published in East Germany in 1985, we can read how Ruth presented herself to an anonymous public in the Communist state. In her book she describes how she developed into a loyal Communist and member of the Resistance, who cast off her "petty bourgeois–Jewish" and religious background.<sup>17</sup> She mentions that her father beat her with his belt when he heard of her relationship with a non-Jewish Communist, and that he symbolically declared her dead and mourned her without moving or washing himself for the seven-day *shiv'ah*. She emphasizes that after moving out of her father's house she never met him again. In none of her biographical documents from the GDR period does she mention that her father was murdered in the Shoah.

The reconstruction of her biography tells us that Ruth's visit to her relatives in the United States was a turning point for her. Through this trip, the history of her father's persecution in particular gained new relevance for her. Despite information to the contrary, she had always secretly convinced herself that her father had died a natural death. She found out from her family in the U.S.A. in 1992 that he was last seen in the Warsaw Ghetto. Since then, she has regularly dreamed about her father, tormented by images of him helpless in the Ghetto. For Ruth, the integration of her Jewish family meant the onset of a new phase of grieving for her murdered father.

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16 The documents were found in the central Party archives of the SED (*Zentrales Parteiarchiv der SED innerhalb der Stiftung der Parteien und Massenorganisationen der DDR im Bundesarchiv*), as well as in the former Russian Center for the Storage and Study of Modern Historical Documents, now the RGASPI (Российский государственный архив социально-политической истории), Moscow. I would like to thank Carola Tischler for the search in the Moscow archive. In order to preserve the anonymity of the interviewees, the signatures of the archive documents cannot be published.

17 It is a general phenomenon that members of the generation of returnees who had participated in the Resistance against the Nazis wrote their autobiographies in the 70s and 80s, often after they had retired from professional life, focusing on their activities in the Communist Resistance. It is interesting to see, that after the fall of the Berlin Wall, in some families, these descriptions were augmented by books on the Jewish victims in the family written by members of the children's generation.

In the interviews I conducted with her in 1995, ninety-year-old Ruth offers a different and far more detailed version of her Jewish family history, her own experiences during the Shoah, and above all the history of her relationship with her father. This is certainly due to her age and to the very different situation of communication in an interview as compared with writing a CV or an autobiography. But it is also due to her different perspective on the past since the fall of the Berlin Wall; to the current public discourse which shows far more interest in Jewish life in Germany; and last but not least, to her experiences and discoveries during the trip to the United States.

In contrast to all her earlier statements, Ruth describes her most beautiful memory as being that of singing psalms with her father on the Sabbath. She recalls that, after she had left home, her father had accepted her non-Jewish husband: they met several times. Thus getting in touch with the Jewish part of her family goes hand in hand with a restructuring of the story of her separation from her Jewish home. The healing effect of this biographical work is evident in the fact that she is now able to talk about ambivalence and parts of her own history that she had previously blocked out. The biographical work entails a very painful element as well, however. It was accompanied by a new phase of mourning for her murdered father. In general we can say that when grief has been denied for reasons related to the social and life history constellation, it can resurface in situations of social upheaval and reinterpretation of the family history. Part of Ruth Rolloff's mourning is her grief at having been unable to live her Jewishness as something natural. She describes an image that impressed her deeply:

*"Now I can really have a say in the matter. I've been to America. And I've seen Jews going out on Saturday in their caftans and with their sidelocks behind their ears. And no one stared or said anything. I stood and stared because it was the first time I'd seen that. I've never seen that in Germany, except in the twenties. Because here they view every Jew as a ridiculous figure." (Ruth Rolloff I, 1995: 39)*

In New York, Ruth encountered familiar ground again. She felt solidarity with religious Jews in traditional outfits who present themselves as Jews in public. At the same time her own otherness in German society became significant to her. She has lost the protective veil of socialism, which allowed her to see herself as a Communist on the side of the establishment.

During the encounters with Ruth's son Georg,<sup>18</sup> it became obvious that the trip to the United States also represented a turning point for him as far as his conscious identification with his Jewish family background is concerned. Getting to know his relatives, he began to dream of a new life with new opportunities. He suffered a decline in social status, having been discharged from service as an Army officer on the border with West Germany in 1990,

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18 Georg was interviewed in three sessions. He also participated in parts of two of the encounters with his mother Ruth.

and now works as a taxi driver. He thought of emigrating with his family and running a business in the United States with the help of his relatives, but he eventually abandoned this idea. From Georg's version of the family history we can see that he structured the story of his Jewish family around his mother's father, Samuel. Unlike his mother, who reinterpreted the relationship to her father, Georg continued to cultivate a quite negative picture of his grandfather:

*"I knew that he was a very religious person, a man completely incapable of surviving on free market terms; who—apart from praying all the time—was not capable of supporting his family. His wife had to work herself to death; all he gave her was religious commandments." (Georg II, 1995: 63)*

It is striking that Georg seems to reject identification with the grandfather whose name he bears. If we bear in mind that, according to Ruth, the grandfather is the one "real" representative of Jewishness in the family, we might say that Georg actually rejects an identification with this part of his family background. He thus creates an inner distance from himself as a Jewish man.

Georg told me that when he and his mother heard from their relatives in the United States that his grandfather Samuel had been murdered in the Warsaw Ghetto or in Auschwitz, he immediately tried to change the topic of the conversation. The same thing happened during the interview when both he and his mother were present. Whenever Ruth started to tell about something connected with the Holocaust, Georg changed the subject. In one of the interviews conducted with him alone, he explained that he is frightened to see his mother suffering from her recollections of this part of her biography. He fears that one day she might die while remembering. Naturally Georg wants to protect his mother, but on the other hand he obviously has great difficulty in confronting the persecution and suffering of his grandfather and his mother's family. Georg is the only male grandchild of his maternal grandfather. When we realize that all the Jewish men in this family—his grandfather and both of Ruth's brothers, as well as his own father—were murdered, or died as the direct result of Nazi persecution, we can imagine how threatening this topic must be to him. Georg, who never got to know his grandfather, has persisted in accepting the negative account told by his mother for many years. Furthermore, he blocks communication about the fate of family members in the Holocaust and about what it means for his family to live in Germany today. Regarding the interaction between mother and son, we can observe that Ruth is very lonely in her reinterpretation and her work on her relationship to her father and his fate in the Holocaust. Yet at the same time, Ruth rejects Georg's attempts to identify with his Jewish family background.

For her, Jewishness had lost the status of a collective identity which should and can be transmitted to her children. Instead it has become an individual feature of her own life history, which will end with her death. In this family Jewishness is very much reduced to the ideal of a religious life in ac-

cordance with the traditions of Eastern European Jews, a culture that was destroyed by the Holocaust. Therefore in Ruth's perspective, her son has no chance of ever being a "real" Jew.

## Conclusion

The reconstruction of biographies and the intergenerational dialog in families of Jewish Communists shows the way in which the construction of an anti-fascist state and the idea of Communist universalism had an impact on the biographical level. These social conceptions helped people to process the traumatic and painful experiences of persecution and exile. Returning emigrants could see themselves as shapers of a hegemonic anti-fascist discourse that seemed to eradicate the differences between Jews and non-Jews. But adjusting their own biographies had its price. It not only involved distancing themselves from parts of their own life history, but also meant denying themselves feelings of otherness and the right to a separate identity. Biographical work became self-discipline in the sense of eradication of differences to conform to the socially desirable model. The discovery or recovery of a more open and conscious contact with Jewishness was therefore encouraged by the dissolution of the Communist self-conception with its powerful binding character. The theoretical and political acceptance of a diversity of lifestyles in East Germany since the eighties, as well as the intensive discourse on Jewish life in unified Germany in the nineties, can be described as an accelerating evolution of the social context of the biographies presented.

The process of reflecting on their Jewish family history also has different meanings in different generations, however. Especially for interviewees of the parents' generation whose family members were murdered in the Shoah, reflection could be accompanied by a new phase of grieving for their murdered relatives. Among their children, the Jewish family background was often a new discovery, which sometimes served as a biographical resource that helped this generation to detach themselves from socialism and the moral ideals of their parents.

The dialog between mother and son demonstrates that socialization processes should not be thought of as a simple transfer of knowledge and habits from parents to their children. In fact, socialization is an ongoing intergenerational verbalized and para-linguistic "dialog" in which meaning is communicated reciprocally. Instances of alternating speech by different members of one family during an interview help to understand the dynamics of biographical structuring in communication processes. By analyzing these dialogs we can gain insight into the structure of interaction between different members of one family.



Generally speaking, research on the network of biographical concepts in families gives us the opportunity to reconstruct how biographical structuring and biographical work are processed in interactions and within changing social contexts over a historical time which can be longer than a single lifetime. These changing versions of an individual's biography and of the family history must be communicated within and outside the family. However, as a consequence, family members may have very different perspectives, which can lead not only to differences between the generations, and thereby open up the intergenerational dialog, but also to a mutual blocking of the processes of biographical structuring. Thus processes of biographical work are formed in interactions in which different perspectives have to be communicated continuously. Their structure and their genesis can only be understood by taking into account the entire biography of each partner in the interaction.

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