

Jews in Germany Today

A Personal Perspective

Jews in Germany – for centuries the situation was similar to other countries in Europe. There have been old-established Jewish families and communities, some of them since the Roman Empire. Jews in Germany have deep roots: the Jewish community of Cologne is first mentioned in an edict by Emperor Constantine in 321, in a context hinting that the community must be much older. With some legitimation German Jews in late nineteenth, early twentieth century, called themselves “Germans of Jewish faith”. The situation changed dramatically soon thereafter, with the NS regime rising to power in 1933. Hundred thousands of German Jews were killed in the Shoah, Jewish life in Germany, developed over many centuries, came to a halt. But there are Jews living in Germany again. Who are they? Where do they come from? It may be helpful first to clarify the terms. Some preliminary discussion seems necessary to explain whom we call “German Jews” today.

Speaking about German Jews, we speak about people, Jewish or of Jewish descent, living in Germany, summarized under this name. Let us leave aside the question whether knowledge of the German language – subsequently the access to German way of life and culture – is a necessary condition. Because German Jews, for centuries excluded from the Christian mainstream society and its educational system, have developed their own language, Judendeutsch or Jiddish, that is not really German (and written in Hebrew letters), but proved suitable to maintain social contacts even in times of disturbed relations.

From the Jewish point of view, the question whom we may call a German Jew is a fundamental one. First: Who is a Jew? A person of Jewish religion? Or of Jewish descent? Or both? Of course, somebody is Jewish when he is Jewish by confession. That means: practicing the Jewish faith, fulfilling the *mizvot*, the commandments given by Mosaic law and its *halakhic* elaboration. And if not? There is a traditional rabbinical definition, fixed in the *halakhah*, focussing on the mother: a Jew is a person whose mother is Jewish. This definition is legally binding for most Jewish communities worldwide and for the Jewish state, the state of Israel.

Following this double-definition, Jewish people have per definition different attitudes towards their faith, towards religion. The twofold definition opens a variety of personal positions. Freedom of opinion – beginning with these

fundamental questions – is a Jewish peculiarity derived from the Biblical concept of man's freedom of choice, declared in the third Mosaic book, Leviticus 18,5. Jews are, to say it in a term of anthropology, libertarians. It is possible that somebody is Jewish by definition, although she or he is not Jewish by confession, even opposing Jewish faith, only because her or his mother is Jewish or her or his grandmother from mother's side was Jewish. Theoretically, a person can be considered Jewish when far distant forefathers – better foremothers – from mother's side have been Jewish, assuming that there was no interruption in this direct line of motherly inheritance.

Not everybody is satisfied with this definition. A young German Jew once told me during a discussion after a public reading I gave, he could consider Jewish only persons who kept the law *of halakha*. That means commitment to the 613 religious duties which *torah* law places upon a Jew. I answered that although I felt some sympathy with his youthful radicalness, I could not hold back the question how many Jews of that kind he thought would live in Germany today? Barely a *minyan* at every place, he answered after some thinking, and we both laughed.

In Germany there is another, special problem with the term "Jewish". It became custom to call Jewish everybody who has Jewish ancestors, no matter whether the direct motherly line was maintained or not, and no matter whether the person or her or his ancestors were Jewish by confession. This kind of view was evoked by Hitler's *Rassengesetze*, the Nuremberg laws, and the new aspect of this definition was to define the word "Jew" by the "race" of a person, not by her or his religious faith or the faith of her or his motherly ancestors. I quote from the Nuremberg law "for the protection of German blood and German honor" of November 1935: "A Jew is a person descended from at least three grand-parents who are full Jews by race." This could mean that the grandchild of only one Jewish grandparent, the motherly Jewish grandmother, was not considered a Jew in the view of the Nuremberg law, although this person is considered Jewish by the Jewish law, the *halakhah*. And, vice versa, the grandchild of three grandparents just excluding the motherly grandmother, a person being considered Jewish by the Nuremberg law, thus persecuted, treated like a Jew in the worst sense, is nevertheless not accepted Jewish by the *halakhah*.

Anyway, the question of religious confession was of secondary significance for the Nuremberg law, important only to decide some complicated cases of so called *Mischlinge*, persons in which, from the Nazi point of view, the "races" were mixed. In these cases the Jewish confession was aggravating the situation, often

with the well-known consequences. “A *Mischling*”, the Nuremberg Law says, “is also considered a Jew who was a member of the Jewish Religious Community, or was admitted to it subsequently.”

The racist definition of the term “Jew” had some strange consequences, for instance: converts to the Jewish faith, considered Jewish by the Jewish law, were not treated like Jews, but like *Mischlinge*, and most of them survived. For this reason, the Berlin Jewish community had a *minyan*, a quorum of ten Jewish men older than thirteen, until the end of NS-state, and at least one Berlin synagogue was active and holding regular religious services until the end – to the great astonishment of the Allied victors arriving in the NS capital in May 1945. On the other hand, hundred thousands of people who did not feel “Jewish” at all, who had no connection to Jewish faith or tradition, no knowledge about Judaism and no interest in it, or people who had left the Jewish community by converting to Christianity or adopting strict atheistic, even anti-Jewish positions (as many Jewish communists did) were suddenly pushed back to their ancestry for which they had felt indifference or which they had hoped to escape.

I feel neither capable nor willing to fathom out the NS-definition of being “Jewish”: what they meant with “Jewish race”, “Aryan race” or “race” at all. This kind of interpretation of the term “Jewish” remained a special German one and was not shared by other nations. Not even by the German allies at this time. In Italy, for instance, Jews were – and are until this day – considered Italian fellow-citizens of a different religious confession, and even during the fascist period most Italians refused to see their Jewish neighbors as people of a different “race” and to persecute them for that reason. When German *Wehrmacht* conquered Rome in the end of World War II, Italians helped most of them to escape or go underground. Fascist Spain even offered exile to German Jews who had to flee from their homeland.

The singularity of the Nuremberg law’s definition of being “Jewish” was followed by the singularity of the so called “Endlösung”, a serious attempt to exterminate the Jewish “race” completely. Because of this twofold singularity the relation of Germans and Jews lost its former “normality” and will not regain it in near future. The Nuremberg law remains a unique action of a nation’s law-making supreme authority that was – not to forget – brought to power in democratic elections. It tried to elevate Jew-hatred – a phenomenon well-known to other nations, too – to the level of legal force. Although the activism and aggressivity of the Nazi movement found many sympathizers and collaborators among other European nations, the idea to criminalize and then to exterminate another people

because of its different “race” was widely refused. The idea itself was widely considered mad, and the fact that Germany really tried to implement it, has severely damaged the Germans’ former reputation as an intelligent, reliable people. Until today, Jews of other countries express their disapproval towards German Jews who go on living in post-war-Germany. “You come from Germany?”, I was asked more than once, “How can you live there?” And was quite happy to avoid the argument being in the offing with the short answer: “I don’t anymore.” This question is symbolic for the German Jews’ special and singular situation within the Jewish world of today.

But whether approved by other Jews or not, thousands of Jews are immigrating into Germany and settle down there successfully. In fact, German Jews are the fastest growing Jewish community in Europe today. Most of them are newcomers and do not even master the language – nevertheless they try to cope with this – in Jewish eyes – rather dangerous country. To make the situation still more complicated, the German Jewish community of the post-war-period is not unified, rather fragmented. There are at least four very different groups within the German Jewish minority of today:

First the last real German Jews, that means the few people who descend from German Jewish families. They may be Holocaust survivors returned from concentration camps after the war, so called “Displaced Persons”, abbreviated DPs, or those who were hidden during the last years of the Nazi regime, several thousands all over the country, about two thousand only in the capital Berlin. Their German helpers risked their own lives, and the Jews surviving with their help learned in these dark days that there was still an “other Germany” than the official one. Many of them felt strong sentiments towards these “other Germans” and did not leave the country after their liberation. The survivors of the former German Jewish population are few in numbers. And although they had survived physically, they often lost their feeling of belonging together and to the Jewish community.

Second, there are Displaced Persons or their children coming from Eastern Europe, settling down in the few German Jewish post-war-communities for different reasons. They often felt too much exhausted to go a further step, for instance to Israel. Or they started the procedures of compensation, so called “*Wiedergutmachung*” granted by the West German government, and stayed just where they were, in a German town next to their Displaced Persons’ camp,

becoming German citizens. A special group among them are Jews from Romania who were allowed by communist party chairman Ceaucescu to leave for the West in the fifties and sixties. There were other Jewish refugees from Eastern Europe, from Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, East Germany and other satellite states of the Soviet Union, leaving their respective countries after new persecutions. They found the atmosphere of post-war-Germany more friendly and less anti-Semitic than in the countries, they came from, and often felt a kind of gratitude towards Western Germany with its democratic system. They even became members of political parties, helped to reconstruct the country's economy and other structures and got respectable positions in Germany's business life. These Holocaust survivors from Germany, East Europe or other places in the world, were the founders of today's German Jewish communities. Their children are German native-speakers and identify themselves with Germany in a degree that they express their positions in German media, cultural and academic life in an outspoken, self-confident and helpful way.

Third, there are thousands of Israeli citizens living in Germany today. Among them are children of former German Jews, now returning to the native country of their parents or relatives. Or young people married to Germans. Others who came to study there or to work. Most of them are temporarily living in Germany, feeling attracted by a wealthy, democratic European country. As Israeli citizens, they know that there is an Israeli Embassy which supports them in all practical matters and protects them against hostility. Although you can barely call them German Jews in the original sense of the word, they are Jews, living in Germany, and have to be counted in.

The fourth and largest group are the Jews from the former Soviet Union. They came and keep coming to Germany in the framework of a campaign organized by the German government. In their eyes Germany today is a Western democracy shaped by the Western allies and European integration. The German government offered these Jews citizenship and integration into the rich German society. Many communities in smaller towns were only founded to give these Jews from the former Soviet Union a new home and social structures in Germany. Today the Russian Jews are the overwhelming majority of those we call "German Jews". In Berlin, for instance, the number of Jews is about 10 000, and 9 200 of them, that means 92 per cent, are Jews coming from the former Soviet Union. They have to face some opposition, some challenge from within the German Jewish

community. There are questions like: Are these newcomers really Jewish? The community chairman of the tiny Jewish community of a Northern German provincial town, himself one of the rare survivors of a real German Jewish family, told me recently, in his eyes they were not. "I don't like to call them Russian Jews", he said, "I rather call them Russians. Most of them have never seen a synagogue before. They don't know Hebrew, they don't know how to pray, they have no knowledge of Jewish tradition and Jewish life, they don't know what it means to be a Jew." He complained that he was nevertheless obliged to absorb hundreds of them, because the German government would make any further financial support for his community depend on the number of its Russian members.

The dubious reputation of the Russian Jews is caused by a certain implausibility of their position: a disharmony between their public appearance as the new German Jews and their lack of knowledge in all matters of Jewish life. I have been in the former Soviet Union several times and know the depressing circumstances under which Jews had to live there. I remember what my Russian Jewish friends told me during my visits to Moscow or Leningrad in the late seventies and early eighties: how their families were persecuted during the Stalin era, how they had to suffer from both, traditional Russian anti-Semitism and communist anti-Zionism. To make bad things worse, they were not allowed to find the traditional Jewish comfort in dark times of diaspora: religious Jewish life. It was simply forbidden for decades. At least two generations of them grew up without knowing Hebrew letters, Jewish books, a real *shabat* or a Jewish festival.

All this was not only permitted in Germany, but even promoted, patronized by the government. In their eyes, old Bundesrepublik Deutschland was a place where you could live as a Jew much better than in the Soviet Union. Whatever had happened in the past, the present situation was inviting. From their point of view Germany was a dreamland. It was a democratic Western country without anti-Semitism on the part of the state, the administration. On the contrary, there was compensation payment for *shoah* victims and a lot of financial support for the state of Israel. In general, the country was prospering, there was work for almost everybody and, if one could not find work, the famous German social welfare benefits. And then: there were only few Jews and the German government obviously interested in increasing their numbers, founding new Jewish communities, rebuilding synagogues, reviving Jewish life all over the country. It seemed, as if the Germans as a nation had learned from history. More than other European countries, Germany had experienced what it meant to be "*judenrein*", a

country without Jews. The process of expelling, persecuting and killing the Jews was connected with Germany's disaster in World War Two. The holocaust was a Jewish catastrophe, but it had turned out to be the catalyst of a German catastrophe, too. Besides, the loss of Jews is always a brain drain, an enormous decline in a country's intellectual capacity.

On the other hand, the fact that Germany had been a homeland of Jews for so many centuries, may have given the Russian Jews the feeling, that there must be positive potentials within the German nation. Indeed it is questionable, whether the catastrophe in the 20th century could completely eradicate all Jewish memories of the symbiosis of Jews and Germans of so many centuries before. Does it make sense to forget, that German Jewry had once been "the proudest, most assimilated and apparently most secure of all European-Jewish communities", as British historian Neomi Shepherd states in her book about a famous Berlin Jewish family and its tragic fate? Does it make sense – from a Jewish point of view – to deny the tremendous contributions of Jews to German culture, science, medicine, technology and economy, literature, music and arts? Just the opposite. The memory of the fruitful, blessed presence of Jews in Germany should be kept alive. As we see, the memory of the hopeful developments of German Jewish history was strong enough to survive. The Jews from the former Soviet Union now living in Germany are the proof.

Before the Nazis came to power, Germany was one of the most respected countries in Jewish eyes. It is a matter of modern scientific research to find out, why. One reason may be, that Jews prefer reliable places, and German towns and villages sometimes seemed to be reliable. Another one: that German rulers often knew how to use the inspiring power of Jewish presence. Jews have learned that it is better to live some kind of well organized life, and at times Germany was looking like a well-organized society. Jews are committed to their law since thousands of years, and until 1933 Germany seemed to be a place of law and order.

The motivation of the German government to attract Jews to return to the country that so many of them had to flee or were expelled from, or, still worse, that had become a deadly trap for those who remained, was not free from self-interest. But this self-interest included the admission of a former failure and the Germans' awareness of this failure, the understanding that Germany, persecuting and killing the Jews, had damaged its own interests and was looking for a belated repair. In every period of German history many Germans have known that the Jews were of great benefit for their country. It was common knowledge, even

among those who did not like Jews. A German writer who was professedly no friend of them, Gottfried Benn, appreciated “the enormous contribution of that part of the population”, caused, as he put it, by “their international connections, their sensitive restlessness and their sure-fire instinct for quality.” The German campaign to re-attract Jews to the country included the statement: we need you. Germany needs Jews.

No wonder, that ten thousands of the deprived and humiliated Jews of the former Soviet Union felt attracted. They desired to become German citizens with all benefits, with all the possibilities of a new start in better circumstances. These Jews decided not to go to Israel – where they also were invited to come – but to Germany, the place of the *shoah*. What ever we think about this move, it has happened and produced in a very short time one of the biggest Jewish communities in Europe. The attitude of the official Germany, the Germany of politicians, media, academic and business people, has been welcoming and convincing. Impoverished and suppressed as the Russian Jews might have been in seven decades of communist rule, they would not have flocked into Germany in those numbers, if it was only a wealthy Western country. Without doubt, there was more. There were believable signs of a general change of mind, an atmosphere of reflection and self-correction, something that looked very hopeful, very promising.

The new Jewish immigration into Germany is not only an act that may bestow profit on both sides, the materially impoverished Jews from the former Soviet Union and the spiritually impoverished country they decided to immigrate into. There is something like an obligation. Both sides have to keep the promise they gave. Germany has to maintain the status of a democratic, tolerant country, friendly and cooperative to its Jews, and the Russian immigrants have to live up to the status of a Western country’s Jewish community in the real sense, that means Jewish as well as engaged in German affairs of all kind.

This Jewish engagement will be needed. Germany today is not the old *Bundesrepublik* of the eighties. The new immigrants have to realize that their former dreamland is about to change into a place struggling with problems unknown to the Germans for a long time: economic regression, poverty, the state’s heavy debts, mass unemployment, aggressive immigrants. A popular antisemitism spreads, this time mainly among muslim and leftish circles. Jews know from their long, turbulent history that yesterday’s safe places may not be the safe havens of tomorrow.

Speaking about Jews and Germans, we speak about two peoples living together for many centuries. First Jews came to Germany with the Romans in the first centuries AD. For a long time the great Jewish communities were settled in the Roman founded cities around the river Rhine, in Cologne, Worms, Mayence or Speyer. Mentioning these names is already pointing to the problem: these towns are well-known in German history as centers of prosperity and power, but also – and especially in Jewish memory – as places of infamous pogroms. Who can say whether these old venerable German towns would have become so prosperous without their Jewish minority? Without these powerless people who always carried on undaunted, started a new, accumulated wealth, gave credit to the mighty, the archbishop, duke or king? How often Jews helped out when the situation for a country, town or Christian neighbor was extremely awkward, how often did their indestructible will to survive, their know how to live through difficult times encourage their Christian environment? Without doubt, there was a better living in these towns and landscapes, with a minority so flexible, innovative, so trained in survival, in coming-up again after every war, epidemic, misfortune and pogrom.

Jews have lived in Germany for more than one and a half millenium. They have lived and continue to live at many places since Biblical times. As it seems, the juxtaposition of Jewish homeland and diaspora will continue also after the re-establishment of the Jewish state. Jews have proved to be a people capable to exist all over the world. Why not in Germany?

The necessary conditions for a new start of German Jewish life have been understood and – at least to some extend – fulfilled. There was a general change in the behavior towards one another: the former German attitude of arrogance and aggressivity has been reduced by means of soul-search after the catastrophe and education of the new generation. Jewish attitude of admiration and submission was replaced by a cautious and critical one. Jews will not fall a victim to the same error, the same self-delusion twice. Notably, there is one difference to the situation of former centuries. Since 1948 Jews all over the world – including Germany – are aware of a new background missing for almost two thousand years: their own state, Israel. Today Jews may live wherever they like, knowing that in the moment they sense danger there is a way out, a way into security.

But best would be, however, this won't be necessary for the Jews in Germany. Best would be, German Jews this time could stay where they are, without discrimination, hatred, persecution. Could live in Germany secure and respected,

doing their work, business, scientific research, without being troubled, for the sake of the country they have chosen to live in.

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Paper presented at the Symposium “Jewish Culture in German Society Today”,
Keele University, England, October 26th, 1996

(In memoriam of my late friend Prof. Eva Kolinsky, Birmingham)