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Germany's Jews

Latkes and vodka

Jan 3rd 2008 | BERLIN

From *The Economist* print edition

Immigrants from the former Soviet Union are transforming Jewish life in Germany



AP

IN 1938 Julius Schoeps's parents did what many German Jews who were present or lucky did at the time: they left. They went to Sweden, where Julius's father worked as an archivist. Julius was born there in 1942.

Then in 1947 Mr Schoeps did something few German Jews did at the time. He went back, followed by his wife seven years later, to join what for decades was a tiny, insular community. "These were years of silence. Everyone suffered because nobody would talk about the Nazi years. My father, who taught at university, often questioned his decision to return to Germany," says Mr Schoeps. His father grieved for his own parents, Käthe and Julius Schoeps, who had stayed behind in Germany: his mother to die in Auschwitz, his father in Theresienstadt.

German Jews who survived in Germany, or in exile, had a deeply ambivalent relationship with their homeland. Apart from guilt—that they had survived, and even stayed in the killers' country—many felt an almost physical revulsion when they came into close contact with Germans. So they retreated to live in yet another form of ghetto.

By the time the Berlin Wall fell, Germany's Jewish community had only 30,000 ageing members and was dwindling rapidly. Today it is

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Click to buy from Amazon.com: "Being Jewish in the New Germany", by Jeffrey Peck (Amazon.co.uk).

The Centrum Judaicum holds exhibitions in the New Synagogue Berlin. See also the Moses-Mendelssohn Centre for European Jewish Studies.

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the third-largest, and the fastest-growing, Jewish population in western Europe, after France and Britain. Between 1991, when the country was unified and immigration rules relaxed, and 2005, more than 200,000 Jews from the former Soviet Union emigrated to Germany. (At the same time, more than a million emigrated from the former Soviet Union to Israel and about 350,000 to America, leaving only about 800,000 behind.) In some parts of Germany, immigrants—usually referred to as “the Russians”—make up 90% of the local Jewish population.

A few of the so-called established Jews—those who lived in Germany before the fall of the Berlin Wall—are enthusiastic about the new arrivals. Hermann Simon, director of the Centrum Judaicum, a museum and research centre in Berlin, was born in 1949 of German parents, and grew up in East Berlin. He says that without the immigration of Russian Jews, the future for Germany's Jews would be dark.

Yet most established Jews disagree. The dapper Mr Schoeps, now director of the Moses-Mendelssohn Centre for European-Jewish Studies in Potsdam, near Berlin, argues that Germany's old Jewish heritage is gone. Its so-called “memory landscape”—memorial sites, commemorative plaques, cultural centres and museums—is now being guarded by gentiles who are merely interested in things Jewish; the sort of people who crowd to the Chanukkah market at Berlin's Jewish Museum to sample *latkes* and *sufganiot* (doughnuts) and to sip kosher mulled wine.

As for the immigrants from the former Soviet Union, most neither know nor care about Jewish rituals and traditions. Few of the newcomers keep a kosher home. Many men are not circumcised. When they arrive in Germany, they focus on the practicalities of life—jobs, flats, social security and health insurance. They play chess rather than Skat, a popular card game in Germany. Their cultural icons are Dostoyevsky and Tchaikovsky, not Goethe and Beethoven, let alone Mendelssohn or Heine, who were German Jews.

Established Jews find the newcomers *anders* (different from us), suspect that they are not “real” Jews and think they are mainly coming in search of prosperity and material help from the state and the community. “They take whatever they can get,” sniffs one.

There is also an argument over identity. For decades, Jews in the former Soviet Union did their utmost to hide from Soviet authorities and even to destroy proof of their origins. So when Germany started to admit Jews in 1991 under the “quota refugee law” (which granted them special refugee status), many could not assemble the papers required to prove their Jewishness. Thousands are reckoned to have got into Germany with false documents.

The strictly orthodox faction in the German community, which is by far the strongest, does not accept even the majority of those who came with proper identification. According to *halakha*, or religious law, only a convert or a child born to a Jewish mother is Jewish. Jeffrey Peck, a professor at Georgetown University and author of “Being Jewish in the New Germany”, a book exploring the diversity of contemporary Jewish life in Germany, says that about 80% of the newcomers are not halakhically Jewish. Yet they are the future of Judaism in Germany.

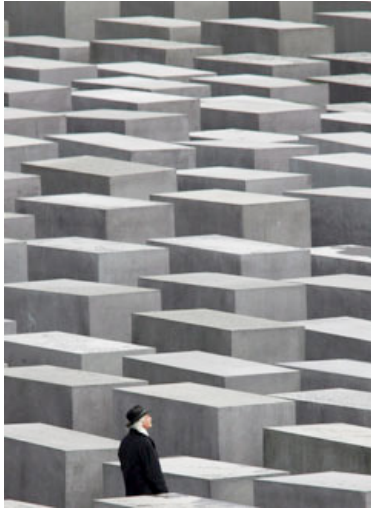
Judenrein no more

It is an irony of history that the country that Hitler wanted to make *judenrein* (clean of Jews) now has the fastest-growing Jewish community in western Europe. Before the Nazis came to power, about 600,000 Jews lived in Germany. At the end of the war some 1,500 survived in hiding; 9,000 were in concentration camps; and 15,000 survived by marrying non-Jews. A few hundred emigrants returned from exile in Shanghai and other cities.

Between 1945 and 1952 some 200,000 Jewish displaced persons lived in camps (often disused concentration camps) and urban centres in Germany. Most were zealous Zionists. Keen to leave the camps and build a new life, they became an influential force in the political debate about the creation of a Jewish state. Most of them emigrated to Israel as soon as they could after the state's creation in 1948.

By 1950 only some 20,000 Jews remained in Germany. About 8,000 of these were native German Jews; 12,000 came from eastern Europe, mostly from Poland. They were ostracised by international Jewish organisations because they had decided to stay in the land of the perpetrators of the Holocaust. Most of them considered their sojourn in Germany to be only temporary; they were “sitting on packed suitcases”, as they put it, and travelled to Israel at regular intervals.

EPA Defensiveness made German Jews try hard—



Remembrance of things past

Death", a play portraying a ruthless property developer referred to as "the rich Jew".

This new Jewish assertiveness became even more evident in the 1990s when Ignatz Bubis, a Holocaust survivor and chairman of the Central Council of Jews in Germany, started a public spat with Martin Walser, a well-known writer. In his speech of acceptance of the German Booksellers' Peace Prize, Mr Walser denounced the "moral battering-ram of Auschwitz" and pleaded for normality in German-Jewish relations. Mr Bubis accused him of "spiritual arson". A heated debate among historians, politicians and journalists followed. Indeed, it became so venomous that the then president of Germany, Richard von Weizsäcker, asked the participants to "cool it".

More recent arguments have taken place over the "memory landscape". Hundreds of memorials now dot Germany, from concentration-camp museums to brass bricks sunk in the pavement outside ordinary houses, naming the Jews who once lived there. As is often the case with Jewish issues, Berlin saw the most heated controversies. Eberhard Diepgen, former mayor of Berlin, was unhappy about the plan to build a Holocaust memorial, the chief national symbol of atonement, in the heart of the city. In a much-criticised speech in parliament, he argued that Berlin already had many memorial sites, including the Topography of Terror, an entire block in the city centre, which once housed the headquarters of the Reich security services. On the remaining foundations, uncovered in the mid-1980s, an open-air exhibition describes what went on there in grim detail.

Even so, the city and the federal government went ahead, and in May 2005, after many delays, the new Holocaust memorial was inaugurated. It is an undulating labyrinth of 2,711 concrete blocks on a site the size of a football field near the Brandenburg Gate. It is a place where visitors are meant to feel unsettled, lost and frightened, as the murdered Jews did. And the development of the memory landscape continues: at the end of September 2007 a new glass-covered courtyard opened at the Jewish Museum Berlin, a building inspired by the sharpness and angles of barbed wire. Last March a Jewish museum opened in Munich.

The Red Army faction

Germany's new Jews are not especially interested in any of this. Most of them suffered not under Hitler but under Stalin, who murdered millions of Soviet citizens or sent them to brutal labour camps. For them, Hitler was the enemy only in a military sense. Each year in early May, when everybody else in Germany solemnly commemorates the country's unconditional surrender, the Russian war veterans among Germany's Jews march around with their military decorations to celebrate the victory over Nazi Germany. "This was their proudest hour," says Mr Simon from the Centrum Judaicum, who campaigns to give the newcomers a voice and an honoured place. Last year he organised "From Soviet Star to the Star of David", an exhibition of wartime memories of 13 Red Army veterans, which included their personal stories.

German Jews complain that the newcomers have only the faintest notion of Judaism and Jewish traditions. In April Mr Schoeps threatened to establish a new group of Jews in Berlin, made up of those who feel alienated by "the Russians". The immigrant community, he complained, "resembles a Russian-speaking cultural club rather than a religious association." Albert Meyer, a former head of Berlin's

sometimes too hard—to be better friends of Israel than any other diaspora Jews. Anthony Kauders, an historian, says that they engaged in "shaming rituals" in the 1950s and 1960s to bully fellow Jews into donating money to Israel. They had donation rankings, and sent out letters that named and shamed anyone who proved stingy. A representative of Keren Hayesod, the central fund-raising organisation for Israel, once returned DM2,500 (then \$600) to a wealthy donor because it seemed too small a contribution.

Germany's growing prosperity and its readiness to come to terms with its Nazi past encouraged Jews to unpack their suitcases in the 1970s and 1980s. Cultural centres and new synagogues were built; Germany now has 89 synagogues. Jews made themselves seen and heard in public life. In 1985 Jewish protesters stopped the première of Rainer Werner Fassbinder's "Garbage, the City and

Jews who supported Mr Schoeps, accused the Russians of using "Stalinist methods" to influence other Jews and said they had no interest in faith.

Berlin's Jewish community is now troubled, not just by its cultural divide but also by mismanagement and corruption, involving both Russians and Germans, which have tainted its reputation. It has a whopping yearly budget of €25m (\$37m), more than 80% of which is paid by the city of Berlin. Most of the running costs of Jewish synagogues, schools, cemeteries, libraries, hospitals and nursing homes are met by the German state as an atonement for the past. "The community has too much money," comments Mr Schoeps. He believes this encourages misuse of the funds by Jews, both old and new.

"People of the second sort"

Although many German Jews concede that strengthened numbers—of both real and purported Jews—will reinvigorate their previously tiny community, many complain that they no longer feel at home in their community centres and synagogues, where Russian has become the language of choice. The Berlin Jews' monthly magazine is now published in both Russian and German. In spite of the government's offer of free language lessons, many older incomers—and most of them were already over 45 when they arrived—have not bothered to learn more than rudimentary German. "Of course Jews from the former Soviet Union, though highly educated, are people of the 'second sort' for the German Jewish establishment," says Anna Sokhrina, a Russian writer who now lives in Berlin.

What do those "second sorts" think? Nora Gaydukova, a sociologist who left St Petersburg in 1997 with her husband, a doctor, came in the hope of a better life and a western education for her second daughter, who is 14. (Her older daughter, who is 35, stayed in Russia.) During her first years in Germany she felt terribly unhappy; she missed her friends and her job. Her Soviet diplomas were worthless. The German authorities, who offered her lessons in German, English and computer skills on condition that she found a job, discouraged her from retaking the sociology exams.



Reuters "Today I am happy in Berlin, which has the only Jewish community that feels somehow real," says Ms Gaydukova on a rainy winter afternoon at the recently opened centre of the Chabad Lubavitch, a branch of Hasidic Judaism, in the western part of Berlin. She is employed as a social worker by a Russian cultural association, her daughter is at a bilingual (German and Spanish) high school and she has found new friends, though she admits that most of them are foreigners as well. "There is little contact between Russians and Germans," she notes.

He survived

The Lubavitcher community centre attracts many Jews from the former Soviet Union who, like Ms Gaydukova, are keen to learn more about Judaism. On the day before the mid-November election of the head of the Jewish community in Berlin, Gideon Joffe, fighting for re-election after two controversial years in the job, came to address members of the congregation while they shared a meal with their rabbis, who come from Israel and America. He was gently teased for coming only when he is campaigning for votes. He retorted that Berlin has nine synagogues and countless community meetings.

"Real" German Jews, rather than recent immigrants, still monopolise the leadership of Jewish communities everywhere in the country, although they now represent only about 10-15% of the total Jewish population. In the event Lala Süsskind, a 61-year-old woman who came to Berlin from Lower Silesia as a baby, beat Mr Joffe in the contest for the top job by a large margin. She had campaigned for unity of the Jewish community and pleaded with Mr Schoeps, Mr Meyer and other alienated Germans to avoid a split. "Her big challenge now is to integrate the Russians at last," commented a German Jew who voted for her.

Yet as Sergey Lagodinsky, a former programme director at the Berlin Office of the American Jewish Committee, who migrated with his family to Germany from southern Russia in 1993, says, one cannot integrate 85% of a community. In his view, the definition of Jewishness according to religious criteria is a chief cause of division; because the newcomers tend to be secular, it only alienates them further. In November 2006, when a front-page editorial in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, a conservative and highly respected newspaper, said that the biggest challenge for the Jewish community in Germany was to make Russian

Jews into authentic Jews, Mr Lagodinsky fired back with a polemic in *Tachles*, a Jewish magazine, entitled "False Jews, real problems".

The newcomers pose a difficulty for gentiles, too. Although the immigration authorities admit Jews under ethnic guidelines (ie, the father or mother have to be Jewish), most non-Jewish Germans insist on defining Jewishness in purely religious terms. "This is the result of German guilt about the Nazi obsession with race and racial stereotypes," says Mr Kauders. Most Germans believe that it is wrong to think of a Jew in terms other than adherence to the Jewish religion.

Yet the fact is that times have changed. Germans will have to adapt to having a big, largely secular Jewish community. Established Jews will have to accept that the glory days of sophisticated German Jewry—from Albert Einstein to Kurt Weill—are gone forever. The titles of the two most recent books about Jews in Germany since 1945 (both of which were published last September) suggest that Germany cannot be the long-term home of a forward-looking Jewish community. "L'impossible Retour" (The Impossible Return) was written by Olivier Guez, a Frenchman. "Unmögliche Heimat" (Impossible Homeland) was penned by Mr Kauders, an American. But the authors' conclusions are less stark and more hopeful than their titles. "Something new and different is being created with the Jews from the Soviet Union," concludes Mr Kauders.

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