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978-0-521-58809-6 - Jews in Germany after the Holocaust: Memory, Identity and Jewish-German Relations

Lynn Rapaport

Excerpt

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Setting the stage: the Jewish community of Frankfurt and the voices of its members

“What is past is not dead; it is not even past.”

(Christa Wolf, *Patterns of Childhood*. Trans. U. Molinaro and H. Rappolt. New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 1980)

The ghetto in the city

Large modern skyscrapers explode from Frankfurt’s main streets, testimony to its postwar recovery. Old churches huddle in its alleyways, serving as landmarks to its history. The city is bustling as electric trolley cars transport city dwellers to and from school and work. The streets are congested with automobiles, and cyclists monopolize stone-paved paths on the sidewalks. Shoppers stroll down Frankfurt’s main boulevards, while others sit in outdoor cafes smoking, drinking, or just enjoying the day’s weather. Frankfurt has all the characteristics of modern city life, general bustle and commotion.

The city is a thriving industrial and commercial center situated about 330 feet above sea level on the banks of the Main river in the state of Hesse. Its location, north of the Upper Rhine Lowlands and about 19 miles east of the confluence of the Rhine and Main rivers at Mainz, makes it a crossroads for land and water traffic. The Frankfurt Rhine-Main airport, the third largest in Europe, is on its doorstep, its harbor is a center for domestic shipping, and the West German railroads converge at its train station. Two main freeways, the Hamburg–Basel highway and the Cologne–Nuremberg highway, intersect just 6 miles to the southwest.

With rapid postwar reconstruction, Frankfurt has become a modern international metropolis. It is Germany’s financial capital, the seat of the Bundesbank – the German equivalent of the Federal Reserve – and home

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to several hundred credit institutions, branches, subsidiaries, or offices of major domestic, continental, and foreign banks. It has become a center for international trade fairs, including exhibitions for furs, books, automobiles, and textiles.

The city is the largest in the state of Hesse, with a total population in 1994 of 652,412. It is populated with more immigrants than other German cities, and has a large American presence, including the United States military, other government agencies, and American business organizations. Excluding the US military, about 24 percent of Frankfurt's inhabitants are foreigners, more than in other German cities. Most are workers from Mediterranean countries – Turks, Yugoslavs, Italians, Greeks, and Spaniards.

A person visiting Frankfurt today would hardly notice a Jewish presence, but 5,715 persons are registered with the authorities as Jews.¹ These persons constitute the membership of the Frankfurt Jewish *Gemeinde* (community).² Jews are known to have been present in Frankfurt as early as the twelfth century. During the Middle Ages, Frankfurt was home to one of the largest Jewish ghettos in central Europe. The Börneplatz, a square just east of the old town center, harbors traces of this community's momentous past. There lies what is left of an old Jewish cemetery, the stone gates that once led to the *Judengasse* (the old Jewish ghetto), and a plaque to commemorate the site of an old Jewish synagogue that reads in English and in German: "Here stood the Börneplatz Synagogue that was destroyed by Nazi criminals on the 9th day of November, 1938."³ Next to the cemetery in the *Judengasse* museum, are ruins of five old homes, two Mikvahs,⁴ and the original wall that surrounded the ghetto.⁵

Today the Jewish community has moved away from the Börneplatz. It is dispersed throughout Frankfurt to various locations, but most of its institutions lie to the west of the old Jewish ghetto. The symbol of the community's existence, its main synagogue, lies in the Westend. The Westend is a mainly middle-class neighborhood filled with well-kept, freshly painted townhouses of various architectural eras. The synagogue is situated a few blocks north of the Bochenheimer Landstrasse, a one-time promenade. Just to its east is Frankfurt's famous botanical garden, the Palmengarten, that sits on the edge of the green pastures of Frankfurt's renowned Grüneburg Park.

The Westend Synagogue, an early-twentieth-century shrine, is a grand presence, as its 1,200 seats occupy over half of the block. It is the only synagogue in Frankfurt to survive the Nazi conflagration, and is the site where official commemorative services are usually held. During the high

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holidays, the synagogue becomes noticeably alive. As Jews take off from work, dress up, fast, and come there to pray, the German police, for security reasons, cordon off the surrounding side-streets.

A few blocks to the south of the main synagogue on a street called Westend, about 500 yards from where Max Horkheimer once lived, lies the headquarters of the Jewish *Gemeinde*. The *Gemeinde* center is a multiple-story complex of two modern white-stone and glass buildings, with a parking lot in between. The building facing Westend Street houses a kindergarten and the bureaucratic offices that attend to the financial and legal business of the community. During the day two German police vans remain parked in the driveway.

Around the corner on a street called Savignystrasse lies the other building. High above its entrance a giant metal Menorah stands grandly. To the left of the Menorah is a Torah (the Jewish tablet of law) carved out of white stone. The Torah is fractured to symbolize the break that exists in Jewish-German relations in the aftermath of the Holocaust.

Most visible community activity takes place within the *Gemeinde* center's walls. Jewish clubs hold their weekly meetings in it, and the youth center is headquartered there. Lectures, slide-shows, and parties take place there, and classes are given regularly ranging from elementary Hebrew to ballet. A restaurant serves kosher and Israeli-style dishes, and Sabbath meals can be ordered in advance. There is a ballroom, a gymnasium, and a grade-school, and there is talk of creating a Jewish *Gymnasium* (high school). It is also the site where Jewish students often congregate. They have a Jewish students' organization, and meetings and activities are held at least once a week. About fifteen students are regulars.

The buildings at first glance appear quite ordinary: modern office buildings on a commonplace, tree-lined residential street. But a closer look suggests a fortified secret lodge equipped with an elaborate security system, including bullet-proof glass, and electric security doors, features not often seen in Frankfurt on ordinary buildings.⁶ A security guard is posted in an office at the entrance hall and to enter the building one must be prepared to show identification.

The Jews who make up the Frankfurt community come from all age groups and all walks of life. Some are remnants of the original pre-war community, and some are their descendants. Others are newcomers who have settled there after being liberated from concentration camps, and some are their descendants. Some were strangers to Germany. Others had lived there before the war, and returned thereafter to claim pensions and to die in peace.

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Their waking hours are spent predominantly within the company of Germans, as they work, go to school, shop, pursue recreational activities, and attend to the daily business of living. Yet the Jews of Frankfurt will say that they live in an invisible ghetto. It is invisible because there are no physical barriers such as ghetto gates or walls to effectively block their contact with the city or to impede them from developing social relationships with Germans. Nonetheless, Frankfurt's Jews will say that they experience walls or barriers between themselves and the Germans in whose midst they live.

To see this ghetto, one must be aware of the culture of the community and of the institutions and organizations that constitute its social fabric. The central theme around which community life is organized can be summarized as an edict like "One Shall Keep One's Distance From The Germans." The institutions and organizations of the community contribute to this isolationist stance as they function to make the community self-sufficient. It is in this way that the Jews of Frankfurt and their institutions form a social and cultural ghetto. The ghetto is physically dispersed throughout Frankfurt, and its members are actively engaged in the dynamic life of this bustling city. Yet the Jews of this community are cemented together and isolated from the rest of the German population as they experience their problems and pursue common efforts and goals.

Voices of the present that call out to the past*Samuel: The decisive one*

Samuel talks openly and excitedly. He is alert, and moves quickly. He is tall and lean, with straight jet black hair and light blue eyes. He shows me into his law office. We are there after hours. Samuel is a professional man – an attorney with a solid income that makes him, according to German standards, upper middle class. He wears a *Mogen David* (Star of David) around his neck, a Jewish emblem that was given to him by his mother. "It's an emotional choice to wear it," he says. He is Jewish, and never wants to hide that fact. He believes that most people can tell that he is Jewish when they see him, but says that he is always surprised to find out that most of the time they don't know. Nevertheless, it is important for him that people know he is Jewish. It defines in a primordial manner who he is.

Samuel was born in 1948 in Freiburg, a city in the German state of Baden-Württemberg. His family moved to Constance after he was born. "Many Jews gathered in Constance at that time, because they thought it

was going to be annexed by Switzerland,” he explains. In 1961 his family moved to the United States, and settled in the orthodox Jewish community of Williamsburg, in the heart of Brooklyn, New York. They wanted him to learn more about Judaism. He and his family became immersed in the orthodox Jewish religious community life there, but it was too confining for his father’s tastes. Neither of his parents liked it there, or in the United States for that matter. At that time his father was forty-five-years old and found a job in a metal factory. “It wasn’t a question of money or of social status,” Samuel explains, “they just didn’t like it there.” They couldn’t adjust, and came back to Germany because they already knew the language, had friends there, and had networks and connections. After they came back to Germany, they said in retrospect that they should have stayed in the US. They had reservations about immigrating to Israel, because they knew that Samuel would have to go into the army. They came back to the place that they knew. “I don’t think the moral question ever entered their mind,” says Samuel.

Both of Samuel’s parents are from Poland and survived the war in concentration camps. His mother was in Bergen-Belsen. She saw her mother and sister go through the selection process. Her mother was placed on one side, and her two sisters on another. Her siblings wanted to go with her mother, and she saw them being taken away. “She has a guilt complex as to why she didn’t go with the others who were killed,” Samuel says. He tells me that his parents hate the Germans. “How can you not? My mother’s family was wiped out completely. Of course they hate them, and they have no social intercourse with Germans.” But they hate the Poles even more. “Compared to the Poles, the Germans were angels,” he says. Samuel has a more rational attitude toward Germans. Sometimes he hates them, just like his parents, but mostly for different reasons. “Being an attorney, I know what goes on in Germany,” he remarks. “Not much has changed in this country. I think German democracy rests on 250,000 American soldiers. All of Europe keeps a close watch on Germany. On the outside, that’s the only thing that keeps Germany democratic. On the inside, not much has changed.”

Like his parents, Samuel is very active in Jewish community life in Germany, where he belongs to many social clubs, and has many Jewish friends. He has a steady Jewish girlfriend whom he eventually wants to marry. There are many wealthy women that he could have married here in Frankfurt, he tells me, but that’s not what he is looking for. He’s looking for the warmth of a Jewish home. We are interrupted momentarily by a knock on the door. It is Samuel’s girlfriend Rachel, a tall, thin and lovely young woman with dark brown hair and sparkling emerald

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green eyes. He introduces me to Rachel, and tells her that he will phone her later when he is through with the interview. As she leaves, he asks me rhetorically whether any German woman could possibly compete in attractiveness with a Jewish woman who looks like Rachel. "German women don't look like that," he tells me with a wink.

David: the tranquil one

The doorbell rings uncannily at exactly 7.30 p.m. I walk to the door to greet David, a twenty-eight-year-old economist, who has offered to come to my apartment in Frankfurt for the interview. David is a young, athletic, and well-groomed man with straight, light-brown hair and big, round brown eyes. He is wearing tight stone-washed blue jeans, and an open-collared Oxford shirt, which makes him look younger than he actually is. He has boyish good-looks, and impeccable manners. His smile is warm and friendly. He is an elegant man, charming and well-bred.

He tells me that he doesn't have many problems living in Germany, although he did contemplate moving to the United States about two years ago, after he returned from living eight months in New York, where he studied urban economics at the New School for Social Research. He enjoyed living in New York. It was the first time he had left Frankfurt for an extended period. "Sometimes I have to say it felt good not to feel like a stranger," he says. "You have more than 2 million Jews in New York. It's more normal to be a Jew in New York. I enjoyed being something normal."

Nonetheless, he tells me that he has a pretty normal relationship with Germans. He can live comfortably in Germany and rarely feels disappointed. He doesn't rule out that the Holocaust could occur again, but he reminds me that the Holocaust did not occur only in Germany. Other countries throughout the world were involved: America implemented immigration quotas on Jews and Switzerland closed its borders to frantic persecuted refugees.

He thinks that other Jews have more problems living in Germany than he does because they isolate themselves as a group from Germans. He explains:

When you isolate yourself, automatically you are unhappy. Then others dislike you because you are not content, and then you live here as this strange person. Then you start feeling hate. Maybe hate is too strong a word, but I think that there are two possibilities. Either you assimilate, and this doesn't mean that you give up your Jewishness, but that you are willing to accept aspects of another

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culture, or you leave. . . I don't believe you can be happy living in a country that you hate where you isolate yourself from the other citizens.

David's interest in Jewish culture began when he was twelve years old. Prior to preparation for his Bar-Mitzvah, he knew very little about Judaism. He identifies with Jewishness because of his heritage, but he emphasizes that he is not a religious man. "I would never forget where I come from," he says. "Of course, I try to defend everything that Israel does, and what the Jewish people are doing. I know about my Jewish heritage and my Jewish tradition."

David has many good Jewish friends, and many good German friends. He deals with Germans quite differently from the way his parents do. His parents have very little contact with Germans, and don't accept most of his German friends. "There is only one German friend that I have that my mother accepts," he remarks. "She says of him [the friend], 'He is one who would have hidden you just in case. . .' That's what they think. That's the dimension." He says that he is one of the few Jewish people in Germany who has a very healthy mixture of Jewish and non-Jewish friends.

The problems he encounters living his life in Germany come most directly from his parents. In particular, he can never bring home a non-Jewish girlfriend. If he did, his parents would disown him. As Holocaust survivors from Poland, he says, naturally they are distrustful of Germans. They already disowned him once in his past when he had a serious long-term relationship with a German woman. They cut off his allowance, and continually urged him to break off the relationship. It created problems in his relationship with his girlfriend, because she had difficulty accepting that his parents were so painfully prejudiced against her. Nonetheless, he could imagine marrying a non-Jewish woman, even if it meant becoming alienated from his parents. That she might be German in addition to being a non-Jew, though, would clearly magnify the pain. "I don't know whether they would forgive me if one day I married a non-Jewish girl," he says, but he doesn't exclude the possibility. "I can't live on an island, or off on another planet here in the middle of Germany. I can't orient myself that way," he explains.

He contemplates the possibility of one day marrying a German woman. He doesn't feel very comfortable making stark categorical distinctions between Jews and Germans. The significant criterion for him is the quality of the person, regardless of their national origin or religious affiliation. "Of course I would have problems with a girl who comes from the bushlands, who is uneducated, illiterate, and hygienically under-

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developed,” he says. “But as long as they come from my cultural circle it’s really irrelevant to me if the person is Jewish, non-Jewish, American, or German.”

David believes he lives a fairly normal life as a Jew in Germany. Other Jews, he speculates, have more problems because they orient themselves toward the wishes of their parents, and conduct their lives according to their parents’ demands. This does not mean, however, that he is any less a Jew. On the contrary, he strongly identifies with his Jewishness, and will always try to pass on the tradition to his children, even if it is not within the context of a domestic partnership with a Jewish woman. His children, he believes, should have the opportunity to decide for themselves whether they wish to be Jews or Germans. “I see a future for Jews here in Germany,” he says. “I know people who aren’t coming to terms with this conflict. I can understand those people who move to America or to Israel. It’s a personal decision, and it depends a lot on how one was brought up. But me? I have a pretty normal relationship to Germans.”

Betty: the conflicted one

On a summer’s day on a lazy Sunday afternoon, I meet with Betty, a thirty-two-year-old Jewish woman who was born and raised in Frankfurt. With one sweep of her hand she adjusts her dark wavy hair, so that it falls more naturally along the contours of her delicate but beautiful ivory skinned face. She is intelligent, warm, friendly, and eager to describe to me the intimate details of her life. She holds a master’s degree in psychology, and works full-time as a practicing psychotherapist. She tells me that it was not a coincidence that she went into this health-care profession. She believes that living in Germany has made her reflect upon and try to analyze a lot of issues. We begin to talk about her family background.

Betty’s father was born in Kiev, Russia, in 1919. His medical studies came to an abrupt halt when the war erupted, and he was forced to enlist in the Russian army. After the war he became a military engineer, and for a short time held a professorship at the University of Warsaw. Neither he nor his family suffered terribly at the hands of Hitler. His family suffered more under Stalin’s rule, she says.

Betty’s mother was born in 1925 in a small Jewish shtetl near Warsaw. She first was transferred to the Warsaw ghetto, and while there fought with the partisans. Later, she was transported to Auschwitz. As the train made a stop while *en route* to the concentration camp, a member of the Gestapo let her off. He kicked her out, she explains. Her mother was a

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beautiful woman, only thirteen years of age at the time. Perhaps she was “making eyes” at him. Betty speculates it was her beauty that eventually saved her.

Betty’s mother then fled to Russia on false papers that stated she was married to a Russian man. Betty does not know how her mother spent the rest of the war years. Her mother barely speaks about it, only in bits and pieces. Betty tells me that her parents met at a party in Poland after the war. Her mother was then working as a diplomatic journalist at the Russian embassy in Warsaw. They fell in love, but were unable to marry, because her papers stated that she already had a husband in Russia. They made aliyah to Israel where they were eventually able to straighten out the papers and tie the knot.⁷

Her mother did not adjust well to life in Israel. Betty explains that her mother had created a very comfortable life for herself in Poland working for the diplomatic corps, and the conditions in Israel at the time were very harsh. The country was very rugged, and the hot humid climate exacerbated her skin problems until she became seriously physically ill. After four years in Israel, her parents decided to return to Germany because they had a cousin there, with the intention of eventually immigrating to the United States.

Betty doesn’t know why her parents never emigrated. More than forty years after they came to Germany, her parents still talk of leaving. Betty has a younger sister who is studying in Paris. Her sister, she says, was not happy in Germany, and never plans to return. Betty also wishes to leave someday. She dreams of moving to California, perhaps San Diego or Los Angeles.

Betty grew up in a non-religious home. Her family never celebrated any of the Jewish holidays, and her parents do not go to the synagogue. Her father comes from a family of staunch communists, and has an aversion toward religion. Her mother is not religious either. All of her mother’s family perished during the war, and because of that her mother no longer believes in God. Nevertheless, Betty states adamantly that she still received a very Jewish upbringing. She tells me that she is a proud Jew, being educated in Jewish history and literature. She acquired this pride from her father, who often read to her from the Bible. The pride is not based on the religious doctrine, but on the strength of Jewish heritage, its history.

She has been married for less than two years to a thirty-five-year-old German man named Klaus, who is Catholic. They have one child, a two-year-old boy. She feels guilty that she married a German man, even though her parents accept him wholeheartedly. She says her parents love

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him because “he is a good human being.” He’s not “typically German”: he is different – warm and loving. Yet she continues to feel conflicted.

As she speaks, tears roll from her eyes. She wanted to marry a Jew. Her first husband was a Jewish man, someone she grew up with and knew well her entire life. Their parents knew each other, and had been close friends. She dated him for several years, and finally married because it was “easy.” It seemed the right thing to do. The marriage fell apart after only four years. She outgrew him and realized that she was no longer in love.

With her second husband, it was love at first sight. She didn’t mean to fall in love with a German man. It wasn’t her fault. It was just something that happened, something over which she felt she had no control. She tries to explain to me why she feels conflicted. She describes the following incident. A while back, she had left her child at her mother-in-law’s house for the day. That afternoon the movie *Sophie’s Choice* was on television, and she decided to watch it. She began to identify with the main character, “Sophie,” a woman with two children living out the war in Auschwitz, who is forced to choose which of her children to save, and which to hand over to the Nazis to die. Betty then remembered how she herself had given her child to her mother-in-law. At that moment she didn’t see her mother-in-law as a close family member, but as a German, a Nazi. She kept repeating to me that she had given her child to a German woman. She questioned her actions – how could she hand over her child to a German woman? It made her sad, and she started to cry.

She says her husband sees the pain she goes through at such times, and it makes him also feel sad. Her parents tell her that she cannot blame her husband for Germany’s crimes of the past, because in essence he cannot change who he is. She could have chosen not to marry him, but, since she did, her parents tell her it is unfair of her to make him feel bad. She is still affected by this conflict, and during the interview she continued to cry.

Samuel, David, and Betty live in a world that is still haunted by the shocking events that occurred before any of them was born. None of them personally experienced Nazi persecution. The war caught their parents in diverse ways, in varying places, and at different stages of their lives. This drama of the past plays out differently in each of their lives, and they have each made different choices regarding how they will live effectively as Jews in Germany.

This book is about the role the collective memory of the Holocaust plays in shaping the lives of people like Samuel, David, and Betty, who grew up Jewish in post-World War II Germany. The choices that they have made in their lives regarding how to relate and interact with