There are so many young Jews in Germany. They don't fit into one drawer. They're not like me. They're like you: different.¹

Interest in Judaism and Jewish culture in Germany has been growing for several years. But while the theme of “Jewish Popular culture” receives increasing international media attention, it has basically evaded the radar of researchers in German-speaking countries. At the same time, this field has made a significant contribution to Jewish culture in Germany and certainly deserves more attention. Cultural events such as “Berlin Meschugge! The unkosher Jewish night” party have developed a Jewish-Israeli “party scene” in Berlin. Appearances by Jewish comedians and concerts with Jewish bands are growing in popularity and are frequented by Jews and non-Jews alike. These developments, which may be observed primarily in Germany’s capital, are relatively new.

In a country where synagogues and institutions of Jewish life – schools, museums, book stores, food shops, and restaurants – require police protection against anti-Semitic attacks, Jewishness is not taken for granted. Anti-Semitism in media, in politics, and on the street is an everyday problem for Jews in Germany. “To be a Jew in Germany today is still not ‘normal,’”² writes Jeffrey M. Peck in Being Jewish in the New Germany (2006). “For Jews in Germany, homeland (...) remains, perhaps more than for any other Diaspora Jewish population, an unachievable or at least an ambiguous goal. (...) The shadow of German history to this day darkens even the most optimistic efforts toward reconciliation.”³ However, Peck detects a new development: “In fact, it has even become trendy to be Jewish or to associate with anything Jewish.” In 2000, the National Post in the U.S. reported that it had suddenly become “cool” to be Jewish in Germany.⁴ According to Peck, this trend, while it still may be more popular in the United States, reflects a changed attitude among the third generation of Jews in post-Shoah Germany, “most of whom do

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³ Ibid., 160.
⁴ Ibid., 19.
not have the same relationship as their parents, the children of the Holocaust survivors, to memory and identity.”

At the start of the new millennium the cultural practices of a group of mostly secular young Jews associated with “The New Jew Phenomenon” began attracting the attention of both scholars and media. The lifestyle magazine *Heeb – The New Jew Review* is the center of this emerging “Alternative Jewish culture” or “Jewish counterculture” in the U.S. Founded in New York in 2001, the publication is considered a “mouthpiece” for the various so-called “New Jews,” “Heebsters,” “Rejewvenators,” and the “Heeb Generation,” and they represent a kind of “guerrilla Judaism that is ironic, funny, entertaining, contemporary, playful, and empowering.”

Observing the developments in the U.S., *die tageszeitung* newspaper in Berlin concluded in 2004: “To rise up and rediscover yourself in society, to swim along with mainstream pop culture and yet find your own style – that seems to have been the norm in the USA for quite some time now. Here [in Germany] it’s barely imaginable.” The weekly paper *der Freitag* writes in 2003: “It will probably take some time before young Jews in Germany allow themselves to indulge in the same kind of self-deprecating and reflected ethnicism as the Heebsters do.”

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5 Ibid.
11 Ibid.
12 Ibid.
13 Cohen, Steve/Kehlman, Ari p. 6. In 2010, the quarterly print edition of the magazine was discontinued. Since then, *Heeb* has been published online.
“The New Generation: Young, Jewish, and in Berlin”¹⁶

Only a few years later one can observe a major change. In spring 2011 the German weekly Die Zeit reported on Jewish musicians in Berlin: “Shtetl goes global: After years as a protected minority, the younger generation has taken its position in the mainstream.”¹⁷ Even the cultural events run by young Israelis in Berlin attract media coverage: “Partying under a Star of David,”¹⁸ “Young Israelis take over Berlin night life,”¹⁹ “Unkosher Nightlife and humor – Israelis learn to love the New Berlin”²⁰ or “Nonstop Meschugge”²¹ read the headlines of articles that picked up this theme.

The large amount of media attention that the “Jewish boom” has been attracting also prompts scepticism and criticism among some observers. “The expansion of Jewish themes in the media and the public sphere across Europe has been interpreted as an oppressive form of philo-Semitism, producing low-quality entertainment, spreading stereotypes, and being detrimental to local Jewish communities,” observe Magdalena Waligórska and Sophie Wagenhofer in their publication Cultural Representations of Jewishness at the Turn of the 21st Century. Furthermore, they suggest that: “The translation and the incorporation of the ‘ethnic other’ into a cultural product, readable to the majority, risks simplification, misinterpretation and omissions.”²² Without wanting to decide whether one can actually speak of a “young, Jewish scene” in Berlin, I will use three examples to illustrate how leading figures of Jewish popular culture in Berlin take on with humor, irony and sarcasm the themes of philo-Semitism, anti-Semitic clichés, and the dissemination of stereotypes.

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¹⁷ Gross, Thomas, Großstadt, Kneipe, Punk, in: Die Zeit/14, 56.
²⁰ Halutz, Doron, Unkosher Nightlife and Holocaust Humor – Israelis learn to love the New Berlin, article, 21 January 2011 on www.spiegel.de/international.
²¹ Lanzke, Alice, Nonstop Meschugge, in: Jüdische Allgemeine, 16 September 2011.
“Let’s all be Jews!”

“Jewish humor is back in Germany!” announces the Web site of comedian Oliver Polak. Polak is in his thirties, lives in Berlin, and has become Germany’s most well known Jewish comedy star by telling stories about growing up in the only Jewish family in town. After seeing Polak’s stage show, author Maxim Biller convinced him to write a book. It was published in 2008 under the title, *Ich darf das, Ich bin Jude* (I’m Jewish, I dare to). In 2011, Polak went on tour with his second show, “Jud Süß-Sauer” (sweet and sour Jew, a play on the title of the 1940 anti-Semitic film *Jud Süß*). His tour poster reads: “Now available in Aryan – even more feelings of guilt!”

Part of the show is the song “Lasst uns alle Juden sein!” (Let’s all be Jews!). In the associated video clip the comedian lopes through Berlin in a “Ghostbusters” suit and turns *goyische* Berliners into orthodox Jews – and a German shepherd dog into a pug. The music video and song also play with the artist’s ironic self-presentation and with anti-Semitic clichés. At the start of the clip, a depressed Oliver Polak sings about his loneliness and his longing for a better world in which everyone is Jewish. To shake himself out of his mood, he sets about making everyone Jewish: “Auch du und du und du, auch du gehörst dazu!” (“And you and you and you, you belong to us!”). As Berlin passersby stare suspiciously, he dances around the city in skin-tight overalls, throws confetti, and promotes the benefits of Judaism: “Juden können besser einparken/Juden müssen sich die Zähne nie putzen/Juden dürfen sogar bei McDonald’s, ohne was zu essen, das Klo benutzen” (Jews get better parking spaces/Jews never have to brush their teeth/Jews are even allowed to use the loo at McDonald’s without having to buy anything to eat).

On stage, in sweatpants and hooded sweatshirt, with scruffy hair and a soda can in his hand, Polak intends to illustrate German clichés: “As soon as people read the word ‘Jew’ they think: ‘Oh, culture, cabaret!’ And then along comes a trashy guy like me on the stage.”²³ Basically, German up-tightness around Jews is a frequent target of his derisive humor. Polak is confounded: “I ask myself what are people afraid of (…) Obviously it’s really true that many people in Germany have never seen a Jew. I can really tell when I’m on stage. As soon as I say the word ‘Jew,’ people get confused.”²⁴ Instead of cracking jokes about the Holocaust, he makes fun of how Germans deal with the Holocaust. But he does not want his casual, ironic approach to this theme to be misunderstood. He rejects the attitude of many Germans that “it’s time to stop talking about the Holocaust.” That’s why

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²³ Quote from a video and radio program *On 3*, Bayerischer Rundfunk, 24 November 2010.
²⁴ Quote from an interview in *TIP-Magazin* on 8 February 2010 with Heiko Zwirner.
he recently added a new slogan to his tour posters and buttons: “Schlusstrich – Nein danke!” (Stop talking? – No thanks!)²⁵

Polak casts an ironic eye not only on anti-Semitic clichés or the tense relationship of Germans to Jews. In his performances he confronts his own Jewish identity with irony by using negative Jewish stereotypes. He represents himself as the unathletic, clumsy, and overprotected child. He makes fun of his neurotic and dominant mother and his stingy father. Wielding his sarcastic commentary, he barely spares any aspect of public, cultural, or religious Jewish life – the Central Council of Jews in Germany is just as much a target of his ridicule as is his local rabbi or German Jewish celebrity Michel Friedman. “My humor is often turned against myself, my family, against Jews and non-Jews, against do-gooders.”²⁶

Polak uses elements of traditional Jewish humor, inspired by his idols Woody Allen and Mel Brooks.

**Shtetl Superstars: “A new Generation of Jewish Musicians”**²⁷

It is not easy to define “Jewish music.” Is it enough if the artists are Jewish? Or is it more about a certain kind of music? Anyone who associates “Jewish music” solely with klezmer is overlooking the many different styles that have developed in recent years in Eastern Europe, Germany, Israel, and North America. “From chassidic punk to glam rock from Tel Aviv,”²⁸ there are a lot of sounds that don’t fit the common notion here in Germany of what constitutes “authentic” Jewish music. One glance at Jewish musicians in Berlin shows that “Jewish music” here can be anything – klezmer, hip-hop, pop, punk, electro, or everything mixed together.

A good example is the sampler *Shtetl Superstars* released by Berlin DJ and musician Yuriy Gurzhy in 2006, together with Lemez Lovas, member of a London band. It features many different Jewish artists from around the world. “So what is real Jewish music? What does it sound like? Where, how and by who is it played today? There’s no simple answer to this question. (...) The idea that a typical

²⁵ From the radio program *On 3, Bayerischer Rundfunk*, 24 November 2010.
²⁶ Quote from an interview in *TIP-Magazin* on 8 February 2010 with Heiko Zwirner.
²⁷ Gross, Thomas, 56.
²⁸ Ibid.
Jewish band of today originates from Israel and plays klezmer music is so far from reality as to be almost absurd,” writes Gurzhy about the collection.²⁹

By now, the monthly “Russendisko” that Ukrainian-born Gurzhy has put on since 1999 with the Berlin writer Wladimir Kaminer is well-known in their home city, and his band, RotFront (Red Front), has a serious following in Berlin. Twenty years ago Gurzhy couldn’t have imagined that Jewish music would make him a star. It was by accident, while he was spinning CDs, that the DJ first noticed how well the “Russendisko” clientele responded to both traditional and newer Jewish songs. In 2009 RotFront put out its first album, Emigrantski Raggamuffin. RotFront sees itself as a political band: “We may never actually sing about politics but by our own example we prove how naturally and harmonically the exchange between different nationalities, musical directions and cultures can function.” In their songs, a Ukrainian, two Hungarians, an American, an Australian, and five Germans mix ska, reggae, dancehall, and cumbia sounds with klezmer, sassy hip-hop, a dose of Berlin snobbism, Eastern European turbo-polka, Mediterranean melodies, and rock riffs. The texts, in Russian, Hungarian, German, and English, are about daily life in Berlin, about the adventures of immigrants in a big city.”³⁰

In a report about Jewish musicians in Berlin, the weekly magazine Die Zeit declared “Jewish music” to be an expression of the search for cultural identity: “There are themes and traditions that resonate in the forms of music that Jews make, and that are perhaps better understood when your own childhood reverberates in it.” Jewishness is something undefined, vague, something that can be recognized, felt, and expressed in music. “Jewish music” is ultimately just as hard to define as the term “Jewish”: “The very fact that the Jewishness of being Jewish cannot be clearly determined neither ethnically, nationally nor sociologically leads to a surprisingly simple conclusion: Jewish music is just music. You like it, or you don’t.”³¹ So it is not the traditional musical style that makes modern Jewish music “authentic” but rather an artist’s constant confrontation with her or his own cultural identity.

Music plays an important role in the lives of young people, and “new Jewish music” is one of many vehicles that can convey Jewish identity. Artists reach back to familiar traditional elements like klezmer and mix them with contemporary sounds. The great popularity of “new” Jewish music is no accident, suggests Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett. The manner in which artists sample music, mixing old and new, Jewish and non-Jewish, traditional and modern, may be

³¹ Ibid.
seen as analogous to the relationship that many young Jews have to their Jewish identity.³²

“Berlin Meschugge! The Unkosher Jewish Night” – Another Way of Relating to Judaism

Thanks to the generous attention of German media, the “Berlin Meschugge!” party series produced by 28-year-old Aviv Netter of Tel Aviv – aka “DJ Aviv without the Tel” – has been considered a major attraction and the flagship of Berlin’s “Jewish party scene” for a few years now. “It is young, wild, colourful, funny, optimistic and definitely not always politically correct: Berlin’s emerging Jewish night life begs to be discovered,” reported Deutschlandradio about just one of the many parties that the Israeli DJ throws in Berlin Mitte with a new theme each month.³³ Netter invited a Catholic “hot latino” DJ to a “Chanukah v.s. Christmas” party last December; they took turns playing Christmas and Chanukah hits alongside the usual pop songs. The Christmas decorations and Menorah next to the DJ booth fit in with the pending holidays, and a beamer projected family photographs of Chanukah and Christmas celebrations from the 1970s and 1980s.

“Netter (...) clearly gets a kick out of being the post-post-modern Jew in the disc-jockey’s chair,” writes the Israeli daily newspaper, Haaretz.³⁴ He is proud of the success of his events, his “Jewish project” is making history, and bringing young Berliners closer to Jewish culture: “I actually take the old tradition and ‘update’ it, I bring it to the young people. I think that it’s doing a great service to the Jewish culture. Jewish music now is a popular music here in Berlin that you can hear from time to time in clubs.”³⁵

Jews and non-Jews, Israelis and Germans, Berliners and tourists dance at Aviv Netter’s “Meschugge!” parties to a pop version of “Hava Nagila” under garlands of Israeli flags; they light the candles on a Menorah and get a kick out of the dreidels (wooden tops), that are handed out when one orders a drink at the bar. In this context the Israeli flags and national anthem are not a sign of national pride, the Menorah is not an expression of religiosity. Removed from their original context these symbols are primarily party decorations in the new context of

³² Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 7.
Berlin nightlife. Just like the music itself the symbols contribute to the image of “Meschugge!” as a “Jewish” party and thus are a natural expression of cultural affiliation. However, the separation of national, cultural, and religious symbols from their source mostly leads to the deliberate deconstruction of their actual meaning. By the way, the Star of David can also be found stamped on the wrists of all the partygoers upon entry.

The “orthodox Jewish” costumes with earlock-wigs and yarmulkas that some guests wear to the event, which is known as “queer,” may be seen as an ironic commentary on the homophobia of many orthodox Jews or as an allusion to the common German cliché of “typical Jews.” The image of a pig as a symbol for “unkosher” on early party flyers sent its own message: “I wanted to demonstrate that you can print a pig on a flyer for a Jewish party and nothing happens. We didn’t even create a mini-provocation, although the embassy did call to ask whether this was really necessary,” Netter tells Haaretz.⁴⁶ The music that the Tel Aviv DJ plays is part of his “unkosher Jewish” concept. He mixes dance classics like the Pet Shop Boys and Mariah Carey with chassidic music, the Israeli national anthem, and – in the case of the “Chanukah v.s. Christmas” party – traditional Chanukah songs. Although Netter insists he primarily wants his parties to bring fun and a good mood to Berlin night life, and he is delighted when visitors party down and dance, he makes one thing perfectly clear: “No one has a monopoly on Judaism. As I see it, ‘Meschugge’ is a new, modern way of being Jewish. The party’s also meant to crack the German myth that Judaism is only a religion.”³⁷

Ironic and playful-respect

What might seem at first glance to be a disrespectful “alienation” of Jewish symbols should not be seen as devaluation or outright rejection, but rather as an expression of the ambivalence with which members of “Generation Y” regard their own Jewishness, say Steve M. Cohen and Ari Y. Kehlman, authors of the 2005 Cultural Events study.³⁸ At cultural events attended by young Jews in New York, the authors found that humor, irony, and sometimes outright contempt for Judaism provide a needed excuse to confront Jewish culture. Irony, humor, and disrespect create a distance that this population needs to get involved in aspects of Jewish culture.³⁹ The initiators of that study link this ironic and playful-dis-

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36 Halutz 2011.
37 Ibid.
38 Cohen/Kehlman, 84.
39 Ibid., 85: “Irony becomes a kind of fulcrum that opens the door to participation.”
respectful attitude toward Jewish culture with Clifford Geertz’s notion of deep play. What seems “playful” initially may have a very serious background – irony, apparent disdain, and ridicule can be interpreted as a sincere confrontation with Jewish identity.⁴⁰ Participants “play” with their Jewish identity by getting involved with it and at the same time pushing it away. So no one has to fit a mold; cultural identity can remain undefined, open, and changeable. Even so, this process cannot be branded “shallow” or superficial – ultimately, the approach via parody or irony also affords a good look at the object of scorn.

The fact that many participants and presenters at cultural events consider themselves to be “nonreligious” does not mean they are rejecting Judaism. In interviews, Aviv Netter stresses that he is not religious and does not believe in God, but he does feel Israeli and Jewish. Despite his rather loose connection to Judaism, the “Meschugge!” evenings are actually an expression of long ruminations over his Jewish identity. When he is asked what “makes you Jewish,” he tells an interviewer: “The way that my finger claps on the table when I hear Jewish music, and enjoying Jewish food, family dinners – that’s what’s making me Jewish.”⁴¹ For Netter, the “Meschugge!” parties are part of the process by which he examines his Jewish identity to find out what “Jewishness” means to him. Besides, they are a way to express and “celebrate” his Jewish culture.⁴²

In New York, the initiators of the Cultural Events study observed that the “easygoing atmosphere” of the events they visited served to enhance this feeling of identity and can become a release for “honest enjoyment.” Participants may appreciate specifically Jewish content in music, literature, films, and events but it has to be kept “easygoing.”⁴³ The presentation of Jewish culture as “open-ended, welcoming and accessible”⁴⁴ also makes it easy for non-Jews to participate in these events. One can see this aspect in Berlin, whether at Aviv Netter’s parties, RotFront concerts, or performances by Oliver Polak – just like Polak’s call for everyone to “Come, let’s all be Jews,” the “Berlin Meschugge!” parties cannot be seen as merely jocular confrontations with one’s own cultural identity; they also convey this identity to others – to non-Jews.

The ironic and self-assured playing with clichés and mainstream anti-Semitism are typical within the generation of “New Jews,” observes Daniel Itzkovitz: “What makes more recent Jewish performativity different is its self-consciousness,

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⁴⁰ See ibid., 86.
⁴² Quote from the interview, “Ich bin Jude und mache Witze über Schweine” in: die tageszeitung, 28 March 2010.
⁴³ Cohen Kehlman, 85, 83.
⁴⁴ Ibid., 79.
its knowingness and its celebration rather than defensiveness over the capacity to deconstruct identity, so that now it is Jewishness itself that the so-called new Jews – in heretical fashion – perform.”⁴⁵ What Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett calls “In Your Face-Judaism”⁴⁶ can now be found in Germany, too: the RotFront anthem, “I’m Gypsy, Jewish and Gay,” is to be seen as an attack against racism, homophobia, and anti-Semitism.

**Conclusion**

In Germany, Jewish popular culture is evolving under different conditions from those in the U.S., although the developments in the latter may be seen as groundbreaking, and the two Jewish communities have many elements in common. Most consumers of Jewish popular culture in Germany are non-Jewish, and therefore artists must appeal to a non-Jewish audience in order to be successful. In the U.S., Jewish music, film, literature, and cultural events – in short, Jewish culture – have a long tradition, and Jewish popular culture is not a new phenomenon. After its destruction in Germany, Jewish culture has had to establish itself here anew. While fewer and fewer young people visit synagogues and community centers, the popularity of concerts and musical performances with Jewish content is growing. Those who reject institutional communal life can seek out connections to Jewish peers without any religious obligations or pressure to participate regularly – “to be among Jews without an agenda.”⁴⁷

Thus, young Jews in Germany today have various ways to find, define, and use their identity. “What’s new about it is that it no longer has anything to do with a Jewish monologue: Anyone with legs to dance on and a bit of sense is invited.”⁴⁸ This is how Jewish culture and Jewish traditions are transmitted to non-Jewish Germans – just by chance. Who knew before the “Purimspiel” parties began in Berlin’s “Suicide Circus” that you dress up in costumes for Purim? Who knew how many arms a Chanukah candelabrum has, or what a dreidel is? Jewish popular culture, so easily accessible, nurtures cultural dialog between a young generation of Jews and non-Jews in Germany – independent of official programs and with events designed to promote exchange and improve understanding. The fact that most of the events take place in Berlin nightspots and have become a fixture of this cultural aspect of Berlin helps to ensure that Jewish popular culture does

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⁴⁵ Itzkovitz, 247.  
⁴⁶ Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 3.  
⁴⁷ Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 5.  
⁴⁸ Gross, Thomas, 56.
not develop apart from non-Jewish society but rather in dialogue with it. The pop culture realm offers youth a forum for contact and confrontation, for dealing with difficult or complicated themes in a playful, “easygoing” manner. In this unique space, far from everyday conversations or formal events, inner-Jewish and inter-faith dialogues may flourish.

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