



Charlotte Kahn. *Resurgence of Jewish Life in Germany.* Westport: Praeger, 2005. 194 pp. \$84.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-275-97374-2.



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Germans and Jews with Each Other and on Each Other

Even the most casual visitor to Berlin these days is likely to notice the signs of a Jewish cultural renaissance, and a scan of German media would reinforce that impression. There are frequent exhibits on Jewish topics and premieres of Jewish-themed movies. Jewish studies is a popular field of concentration at German universities. The number of Jewish institutions in Germany has increased considerably to serve a dramatically larger Jewish population, and the leadership of the Jewish community engages in public debates with self-confidence. Now, more than at any time since 1945, German intellectuals are likely to know individual Jews. Other Germans, even if they do not know Jews personally, are likely to have some contact with manifestations of Jewish culture. These facts raise certain questions: how do Jews in today's Germany negotiate their identities or handle competing demands to choose certain identities? How "German" are Jews in Germany, and how "German" can they become? How do non-Jewish Germans feel about the resurgence of Jewish life? And how do Jews get along with non-Jews in today's Germany? These are questions that psychoanalyst and oral historian Charlotte Kahn seeks to answer.

Kahn, raised in a Jewish family in pre-Holocaust Germany, wanted to explore how Jews feel about their lives in today's Germany and to "present an accurate overview of the prevailing conditions between Jewish and non-Jewish Germans" (p. 11). She interviewed 89 individuals, including Jewish community members, church leaders, and students, primarily in the cities of Berlin, Offenbach, and Duisburg. While she is confident of their representativeness, one does detect a note of self-selectivity. Antisemites would likely not have volunteered for interviews, nor would they likely have been linked to the social networks that provided the interviews via the "snowball technique." That said, her 89 subjects do seem to present a fair assessment of that section of German society which would willingly have contact with Jews and Jewish groups.

In the initial chapters, Kahn provides a brief summary of the history of Jews in Germany, with an emphasis on their integration and identity, and describes Jewish institutional life today. For those without any background on the Jewish community in Germany, the introductory chapters provide a nice overview.

Resurgence of Jewish Life in Germany is essentially an annotated collection of interview excerpts. Portions of Kahn's interviews, followed by comments by the author, are parceled out according to subject: organization of Jewish life in Germany, Jewish identity, Jewish-Christian friendships, prejudice, youth issues, and religious observance. Many of the interview excerpts are enlightening and compelling, although their sheer number can also be overwhelming. The author's comments help link them together and elucidate many aspects of the Jewish experience in Germany, as well as some aspects of German society and culture. Unfortunately, the individual chapters have no concluding section to summarize the thematic findings and the reader must draw the conclusions together him or herself.

Since Kahn wants to elucidate Jewish life and Jewish-Christian relations, her subjects range from active participants in the Jewish community, to those on the margins on the community, to non-Jews with contact to Jews or Jewish groups. Many, if not most, of her non-Jewish interviewees developed an interest in Jewish-related issues as a result of their parents' or their own experiences under National Socialism. Among her Jewish interviewees, the children of pre-1933 German Jews view their identity differently from the children of eastern European Holocaust survivors who first settled in Germany after 1945. Yet for all Jews living in Germany, the issue of how others view them remains vexing. Media and politically sensitive individuals avoid speaking of "a Jew" or "Jews," but the phraseology "Jewish fellow citizens" (*Mitbrger*) has an exclusionary ring to it, as well. Additionally, Kahn found that an invisible wall separates non-Jews and Jews, but newly arrived Russian Jews, less directly burdened by Germany's history, seem less hesitant to have non-Jewish friends. Even younger, German-born Jews find a certain distance from their non-Jewish German friends, and they often relate well to foreigners. Moreover, a generational shift has occurred among non-Jewish Germans. While the older generation often walked on eggshells with Jews, young urban Germans feel more comfortable with Jews. That being said, when it comes to discussing Jewish religious practice and socialization habits, many of Kahn's younger interviewees harbor gross misconceptions and repeat stereotyped clichés, likely transmitted to them by earlier generations.

The issue of resurgent antisemitism and violence frequently appears. Representatives of the police minimize the danger, while non-Jewish friends of the Jewish community express much more concern, and Jews express their deep dismay that Germans exhibit so little civil

courage in confronting public racism. Even non-Jewish Germans disagree over the motivations of youths who engage in xenophobic violence. Are they right-wing, ideologically driven hate-mongers or merely misguided and socially alienated youngsters? Several youths whom she interviewed in Berlin explain the appeal of right-wing extremism. It provides instant cachet for a rebellious teen. Often adherents are confused young people looking for role models or acceptance despite their poor academic or professional achievement. Kahn's subjects look down on right-wing peers, but some also evince xenophobia themselves. ("Illegal workers have made a great market go totally bust"; "they don't pay taxes because they're working illegally and aren't registered. And they get social services to boot! It's a great deal for them"; "and Germany gets plundered" [p. 140]). Jewish teens, on the other hand, grow up a bit wary and cynical in an environment where their synagogues have guards and public confrontation (if not actual attack) by right-wing thugs is always possible.

Before 1990, virtually all Jewish communities in Germany were both unitary and officially orthodox. In the 1990s, with increasing cultural diversity and with the influx of irreligious Russian Jews, the communities faced enormous pressures to permit more modern or progressive forms of Jewish rituals. Old elites struggled to control the definition of exactly who and what qualified as Jewish as new forms (often coming from America or designed to appeal to considerably less religious Russian Jewish immigrants) challenged their hegemony. These tensions, which threaten to tear apart the community even today, form the theme of Kahn's penultimate chapter. What will become of the Jewish community remains an open question, posed by Kahn to her readers and worthy of serious consideration.

One notable weakness of *Resurgence of Jewish Life in Germany* is a disproportional emphasis on "German" Jews. Most of Kahn's older interviewees are pre-1933 German Jews or the children of pre-1933 German Jews, even though they form a minority of the Jewish community (and have for half a century). Jews descended from eastern European Holocaust survivors, who came to Germany as displaced persons, formed the majority of the pre-1990 community, but disproportionately few of them are interviewed. Meanwhile, the old German Jews' dislike for the eastern Jews is clearly discernible, and that dislike extends to their orthodox religious practice and their numerical control of Jewish congregations. Moreover, throughout the text, both the German Jewish interviewees and Kahn refer to the eastern European Jews as

“Displaced Persons,” as if their uprooted status has continued for fifty-five years. In fact, few former DPs are still alive, and it is their German-born, German-speaking children who head the Jewish communities today. Before the mass immigration of Russian Jews to Germany, the Central Council of Jews in Germany did consider changing its name to Central Council of German Jews as a new German Jewry, different from the old one, was developing.

Among errors, the most notable is that incorrect

names are provided for all three of Germany’s leading political parties, the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD), the Christian Democratic Union (CDU), and the Free Democratic Party (FDP). This book makes for interesting reading and is certainly a welcome addition to the literature on Jewish life in Germany today. It should appeal to sociologists or other individuals studying contemporary German Jewry. It should also interest lay readers looking to learn more about Jewish life in today’s Germany.

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