



*Alles auf Zucker.* Dani Levy.

Reviewed by Cary Nathenson

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## A Polemical Review of Post-Wall Germany's First "Jewish" Movie

Less than one generation after it started, the process of German unification has reached a kind of quiet middle age. The images of jubilant crowds dancing on the Berlin Wall are trucked out on appropriate occasions, but the hope and the anxiety precipitated by this sudden opportunity to forge a new national identity have all but faded from memory. The desperately important struggles of unity's infant years—currency reform, de-Stasification, privatization of state enterprises, cultural hegemony, even the legacy of anti-fascism—no longer occupy a significant place in the public discourse. In the face of the overwhelmingly uneven battle between the former East and West, combined with the dulling force of tending to everyday life, the majority of Germans has resolved to call it a day and just be unified. <p> Whereas the primary dividend of unification for Eastern Germans has been economic and political liberalism, the major hope for Germany as a whole has been the promise of normalcy. Indeed the chief project of the Berlin Republic is the establishment of Germany as a nation among nations, a normal country in a sense that had eluded both German states (and to a lesser extent Austria) since 1945. In this quest for normalcy, the German-Jewish relationship—historical and current, real and perceived—is the last remaining obstacle to success. <p> The gulf between Germans and Jews had been narrowed, haltingly, between the end of the war and 1990, and much more rapidly since. The Jewish Museum in Berlin is one of the country's most popular destinations among tourists and natives alike. The painful and often embarrassing twenty-year battle over the Holocaust Memorial has been resolved. Berlin has once again become a capital

of European Jewry, albeit stocked primarily with Russian migrants. The German-Jewish "question" has become one of how, not if there is a future for German Jews. <p> Creating a unified, normal German nation is at the base of the film, <cite>Alles auf Zucker</cite> (<cite>Go For Zucker!</cite>), and it shares its premise with the Berlin Republic that Jewish-German co-existence is necessary to complete the process of unity. It is a weighty thesis, one that the film insists on trying to bury beneath insipid comedic elements. Most disturbing of all is that the successful resolution the film presents is predicated upon Jewish sacrifice: the struggle for German unity is portrayed on the micro level of the dying request of the Zucker family's mother. Overcoming the divisions of the past and the present depends on a harmonious and forgiving conclusion of Jewish mourning. It is an intensely satisfying fantasy for the majority German population, born out by the film's box office success and lavish awards. The Jewish family Zucker is doing the work of a nation. <p> It is fifteen years since the end of the GDR. Everything that should "grow together" seems to have done so; all save for one family, the Zuckers. The protagonists are two brothers: unreconstructed <cite>Ossi</cite> and self-proclaimed loser in the unification process on the one hand, openly observant Jew and apparently successful stock trader on the other. The brothers have not spoken in decades, estranged from each other by the Cold War and religious identity. Then comes that news that their beloved mother has died, and her deathbed wish is that the siblings overcome their differences to sit <cite>shiva</cite> together—that is, to observe a period of ritual mourning. Sentimentality be-

ing the gentle force that it is, her will holds a more forceful motivator: no unity, no inheritance. If the brothers cannot reconcile, the money goes to the Jewish community of Berlin. The chief rabbi of the community (Rolf Hoppe, playing as if he modeled his character after Werner Krauss's multiple Jewish roles in *Jud S*) is thus the third party angling for the money, a tempting conflict of interest, since he is also charged with adjudicating the brothers' reconciliation. Struggling to meet the seemingly impossible requirements of an inheritance is not a terribly original plot device, but then again, not much in this film is original. Still, both sides of the family are sufficiently driven to overcome their differences and get their hands on the money; each brother is desperate in his own way. The Eastern brother (Henry Hbschen) is most obviously on the outs with the new society. He runs a failing strip club decorated in late-Socialist Realism. His only real earning potential is as a pool shark, and as the opening credit sequence shows, that line of work is getting him nothing but black eyes. His wife (Hannelore Elsner) is leaving him. His East Berlin apartment is a museum of *Ostalgie* that looks to be the leftover set from *Good-Bye, Lenin!* (but what could be more authentic GDR than recycling?). The film even opens with a framing sequence that states (misleadingly and unfairly) that the character is already dead, so his loser status is complete and seemingly irreversible from the movie's first minutes. Just to round things out, it just so happens that he is Jewish. Talk about over-determined! The Western brother (Udo Samel) is much more subtly a failure, but "subtle" for a film that also finds time for a scene featuring accidental ingestion of Ecstasy. He is, apparently and remarkably, completely comfortable living as an Orthodox Jew in Germany; skinheads and more professional antisemites seem to have had no impact on his life or career. In fact, anti-Jewishness is never addressed in this movie, save for one lame exchange between the Eastern brother and the organizer of the pool tournament. Simply *being Jewish* is *a priori* normal in this film's universe, an outrageous conceit without which the story is impossible. *Alles auf Zucker!* is grounded in the premise that there is no German-Jewish problem; it presents a fantasy of pre-fab normality because it has no idea how to model obtaining normality. No, this brother's problems are more prosaic than historical: he needs money. He has apparently lost a considerable fortune playing the stock market. His wife, played by the thick-accented, Yiddish-Polish actress, Golda Tencer (the only actual Jew in the cast) whispers the indelicate

reminder of what the inheritance means to their family: "Ich sage nur: Neuer Markt." The political-historical layer lightly superimposed upon the characters mitigates the cliché of the money-grubbing Jew: the rich West and the impoverished East, both in dire economic straits. Nonetheless, the mainstream German media (but also *Die Zeit*) find it liberating to see a Jewish speculator portrayed without so much as a whiff of antisemitism, but these are the same media that think "political correctness" has a stranglehold on German society.[1] The antidote to PC's (imagined) assault on free speech and the right to laugh at absolutely everything? Apparently, it is something called "Jewish humor," and this movie claims to be loaded with it. "Der jüdische Humor zeichnet sich dadurch aus, dass er ziemlich schonungslos, frech und durchaus selbstironisch mit den menschlichen Schwächen und Macken umgeht—auch mit den Eigenheiten der Juden," explains director Dani Levy.[2] In other words, it's just like every one else's humor. If there is such a thing as genuine Jewish humor, this film's only claim to it is the ancestry of its director, Levy. But it is a mistake at best and a marketing gimmick at worst to call this movie "Jewish." It is clearly not even the intention of the filmmaker to carve out a niche for a distinctly Jewish culture in modern, multicultural Germany. Germans do not know Jews, Levy complains. With his film, he hopes to make their acquaintance to the mainstream audience, to make Jews seem less "foreign," in other words, less Jewish: "Wenn man *Alles auf Zucker!* gesehen hat, hat man nicht das Gefühl, dass man Juden gesehen hat; man ist Menschen begegnet, die einen berühren und bei die und mit denen man lacht." [3] "Jewish" humor in this movie is a variation on an assimilation theme: it is acceptable as long as it deviates in no way from majority expectations. The popularity of *Alles auf Zucker!* with a mass audience derives from its skill at convincing Germans that they have overcome their historical and cultural alienation from Jews by revealing that Jews are just Germans in costume. The plot lurches between these poles of normal and strange, creating awkward gaps rather than a productive conflict. The family reunion in Berlin is motivated by the mother's desire for reconciliation, but there is no storyline motivation for the Eastern brother's (Gentile) wife to make a sudden—and ill-sustained—attempt to convert her family to Orthodox Judaism. Her frantic shopping for kosher products and attempts to understand the difference between *milchig* and *fleischig* are too self-conscious to be a convincing parody of the philosemitism rampant in Berlin. Instead, it's just played for laughs, like everything else

in this film. Since we later learn that both brothers were raised in a kosher home, this scene can represent a fearful recreation of a time before the Wall, implying, strangely, that they were once an uncomplicated, observant Jewish family before East-West politics drove them and everyone else apart. This state of affairs shifts the proximate cause for disruption of Jewish life from the Holocaust to the Cold War, as if Ulbricht and not Hitler were the primary caesura in Jewish-German normality. But of course, the Wall could be torn down. 

The film follows this bumpy road to its inevitable, overblown conclusion. The contrived reconciliation of the brothers, as if not enough, is extended to the entire family. Alienated children forgive their neglectful parents, estranged couples cook together (kosher?), nymphomaniac daughter settles down incestuously (but that's OK!) with virginal, stuttering cousin. And a greater Jewish connection is also restored when it is decided that the (actually meager) inheritance will be shared with the Jewish community. Mama's last will is fulfilled, everyone is happy, debts are repaid, and the Eastern brother doesn't even die, although that wrecks the movie's framing sequence. That device is abandoned with the same ease with which the film obliterates all conflicts; narrative time/space rules are no match for this stubbornly happy ending. The conclusion is just as forced as its message of German normalcy and unity. There is simply too much riding "auf Zucker" to be undone by mere narrative logic. 

One short scene contains a rift, however, that betrays the limits of the entire project of forced normality. Importantly, it is a rift that will only be apparent to practicing Jews or scholars, and therefore is of no consequence to the film's intended audience. A congregation is praying in a Berlin synagogue. They are praying the *shema*, a statement of monotheism foundational to Judaism. But the most important word, "adonai" (God) is left out. In its place, the filler word "ha-shem" is used. Religious Jews say "ha-shem" (literally, "the Name") as a stand-in for "God" when they are not praying, thus avoiding the sin of taking the Lord's name in vain. "Ha-shem" signifies God without speaking His name. The substitution, no doubt a concession to the real or imagined offense

Jews could take at hearing "adonai" in a staged setting, disrupts the film's artifice of normality. No Jew would say "ha-shem" when reciting the *shema*. The fabric of normality, woven as it is in this film with a thread that has taken normal for granted, has a gaping hole. Anyone who catches the substitute word hears a jarring reminder that these are not real Jews, they are not really praying, that a German film in 2005, even a comedy by a Jewish director, cannot portray authentic Jewish life in Germany, cannot maintain a convincing semblance of the normal. 

This recognition casts a suddenly odd light on the exploitation of German unity as a plot device in this film. The grafting of an East-West conflict onto a Jewish family seeking reconciliation begs a lot of loaded questions: if the intent was to poke some gentle fun at a Jewish family (the "Jewish humor" argument), why this additional political layer? Would the movie, praised by German Jews and Gentiles alike for its light-hearted "see, we can be silly, too" attitude, be any less accessible to a mainstream German audience without the East-West divide as topos? At best, the East-West story is just one more level of over-determination pasted on to a weak film by an insecure director.[4] At worst, it is a political imperative: German unity is only possible, is only complete, when Jews agree to overcome (overlook) the past and collaborate in unity. The Zucker family achieves unity over the literally dead body of its Jewish mother. German normality has no choice but to be built over the dead bodies of six million Jews. *Alles auf Zucker* can be rendered as "everything depends on Zucker." Indeed, everything. 

Notes 

[1]. Pages of sycophantic reviews with titles like "Die neue Unbefangenheit" and "Schlamassel hinterm Alex" are posted at the movie's website: <http://www.zucker-derfilm.de>. 

[2]. In an unattributed interview on the film's own web site. 

[3]. Ibid. 

[4]. In an earlier version of the script, the Western branch of the Zucker family had immigrated to America. For Levy, changing the action to the former FRG and the GDR is just so much more "fertilizer" on his comedy: "Man kann den Konfliktboden fr eine Komdie gar nicht genug dngen" (Ibid.)!

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