Contesting the Secular and Converting Space in Berlin? Becoming Jewish in an Urban Scene.

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Abstract

In recent years, Berlin has witnessed an ever-growing internationalization, predominantly through migration flows from all over the world. Its Jewish population has equally diversified: Berlin is now populated by Jews from the Americas, Europe and also by young Israelis who permanently live in the city. The migrant group of ‘Israelis in Berlin’ has attracted significant media attention in Germany, Israel and beyond and has often been portrayed as detached from the existing local Jewish community. My thesis interrogates this assumption and presents an ethnography which shows diverse and complex affiliations and Jewishness(es) entangled with nationality, ethnicity, religion, gender and sexuality. Through the immersion in ‘Jewish’ and ‘Hebrew’ Berlin, I span an interrelated ethnographic field which I construe as a scene. Focusing on a choir, and its connections to a synagogue and a queer Shabbat event, I investigate ‘how the scene constitutes itself as Jewish’. Combining ethnography with biographical-narrative interviews, I present how this scene is enacted and performed, embedded in the respective historical and socio-political contexts, and constituting itself by migration and conversion. By way of mirroring the biographies of migrants and converts, I argue that Jewishness in the scene is constituted by complexity rather than unity, ambivalence rather than certainty and contestation rather than agreement. The influence of Israeli migration to Berlin and the presence of Hebrew engenders the emergence of new ways of ‘being Jewish’. Under the specific representations of Jewishness in Germany, ‘being Jewish’ is always co-constructed alongside the negotiation over ‘being German’. Thus, by way of mapping trajectories of conversion and migration and their embeddedness in their respective socio-political contexts, I analyse processes of ‘becoming Jewish’ and their impact on this urban scene. In the framework of urban scenes, diaspora and secularism, I describe transformations towards new forms of urban (religious) socialities and aesthetics (music) and show how biographical research and the study of urban scenes offer profound insights towards new understandings of contemporary societies in the light of global transformations.
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1. Introduction

Jews . . . may constitute minorities under certain conditions, but that in itself does not make them becomings [. . .] even Jews must become-Jewish (it certainly takes more than a state). But if this is the case, then becoming-Jewish necessarily affects the non-Jew as much as the Jew.

(Deleuze and Guattari, 1987:291)

“… in Berlin, I can be the kind of Jew I want to be.” (Meirav, 38)

The above quote is from Meirav, a Jewish-Israeli who recently moved to Berlin from Tel Aviv. Meirav had moved to Germany in order to study and pursue a career as a classical opera singer. Settling in Berlin eventually led her to abandon her career as an opera singer and opt for a different professional pathway. I met Meirav as part of my ethnography in a project called the Hebrew Choir Berlin, which she had joined in order to embrace her passion for singing, spend time with other Israelis living in Berlin and enjoy a repertoire that evoked childhood memories and images of bygone times in Israel. She describes how life in Berlin has affected her sense of ‘being Israeli’ and ‘being Jewish’. She even started to occasionally visit a synagogue, which used to be an uncommon practice for her back in Israel. Elisa, on the other hand, a 44-year-old non-Jewish German, has just returned from an extended stay in Tel Aviv. The return to Berlin has engendered a sense of withdrawal from the cultural environment in Israel, as well as the realisation that she no longer identifies as Christian. As a consequence, she has begun to celebrate Jewish rituals and holidays. I met both women at the ‘Hebrew Choir’, a project where Jews from Israel, the Americas, the former Soviet Union and Germany, alongside Germans who converted to Judaism and those in the process of conversion as well as non-Jewish Germans, predominantly Christians with what I consider a historically embedded interest – desire - in things Jewish, came together to sing and perform Hebrew choral music in a church in the centre of Berlin. What first appeared to be a random assemblage of individuals, soon proved to be a sociological conundrum of layered complexity. The choir served different functions and attracted individuals seeking a network in the new environment of Berlin, nostalgic homesickness and longing for Israel, professional musical development, as well as learning Hebrew or engaging in ‘things Jewish’ as in the
process of conversion to Judaism, or with an interest in an interreligious dialogue of sorts. Common to all members was a passion for music and the interest to sing in Hebrew.

Given this complexity the Hebrew Choir is at the centre of this study of a newly emerging scene of Berlin. I analysed it as a laboratory, where fundamental questions of nationality, religious and ethnic belonging were negotiated, at its heart the question of ‘being Israeli, ‘being Jewish’ and ‘being German’ or ‘becoming Jewish’ in today’s Berlin. Construing a scene around this Choir in relation to a synagogue and other Jewish events, I investigate: how does this scene constitute itself as Jewish? How is Jewishness constructed in this scene and how individuals make sense of their migration to Berlin or conversion to Judaism biographically?

I joined this choir as part of my ethnographic research endeavour on Israeli migration to Berlin, investigating configurations of religion and the secular and examining how individuals make sense of their new environment in the German capital. My interest lay in the transformations which the move to the city could engender, particularly in relation to Jewishness or religious practice. Where and how would possible changes take place? Where are they negotiated? In the course of singing in the Hebrew choir and its significant number of Israeli migrants, I became aware of a connection to a Berlin synagogue which was engaged in renewal and innovation, as well as connections to other initiatives with alternative ways of practicing Jewish rituals and creating community, such as a ‘queer’1 Shabbat event. Through longer participation in various groups, including the Hebrew choir, I realised that these gatherings were part of a larger scene emerging in Berlin’s urban spaces: connected to Jewish rituals and the Hebrew language these were inhabited by Israelis and other Jewish migrants to Berlin as well as non-Jewish Germans in the process of conversion. Their stories were complex and perplexing as quite a number identified as ‘secular’ in relation to their Jewish practice. Their participation was a matter of finding a network in Berlin, or a search for ‘spirituality’. Why did individuals join these gatherings and how did they come to relate to their Jewishness? Could it be that they had become curious about ‘religious practice’, or was their participation merely a matter of ‘community’ and sociality? In the Hebrew choir, I found that individuals had very different ways of relating to their Jewishness as a matter of heritage, negotiation or active contestation. Yet they participated and became part of these

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1 By queer I am referring to the non-conformity to fixed identity categories and the interrogation of fixed identity categories.
groups, with various degrees of commitment and sometimes despite some inner ambivalence. Similar to the Hebrew Choir, the larger scene presented itself with very differing ways of practicing or relating to religious practice, Hebrew or things Jewish. The presence of Israelis and Hebrew appeared to bring together new constellations of individuals but also new forms of ‘being Jewish’, of a kind which was not detached from existing institutional structures and processes relating to migration and conversion. This evokes questions of membership, participation and tradition and necessarily involved fundamental issues of ‘being Jewish’, ‘being German’ and ‘becoming Jewish’. Based on the Hebrew Choir, the synagogue and the queer Shabbat event, I construed a scene which was loosely affiliated to the institution of the ‘Jewish Community in Berlin’, showed a strong presence of Hebrew (as well as English and German) and brought together individuals with very differing backgrounds and ideas of what it means to be Jewish.

Against this backdrop, this thesis presents an ethnography of an emerging urban scene, which shows diverse and complex ways of relating and constructing Jewishness(es) which are entangled with national, ethnic and religious belonging as much as with gender and sexuality. In order to show how the scene constitutes itself as Jewish, I present an ethnography which engages with place, space, dynamics, historical and socio-political contexts as well as actors’ trajectories. Instead of providing an answer to what Jewishness is, the complex affiliations and configurations involving nationality, ethnicity, religion, gender and sexuality reveal a complex entanglement between personal biographies and corresponding representations at a given place. Thus, instead of providing definite answers, I offer a deep immersion into this field, and thereby map differing processes and ways of being and becoming Jewish.

Engaging with the significance of the scene, its construction and formation, and most importantly its actors, I show how the negotiation of ‘being Israeli’ and ‘being Jewish’ is always co-constructed with negotiations of ‘being German’. As a consequence, rather than unity, agreement and certainty, this field is one of complexity, contestation and ambivalence where actors defy rather than fill certain categories. That is to say, as actors of the scene do not share a common background, they negotiate and contest existing categories and are ambivalent and changing in their identifications with them. I show that identifications and categories are constructed relationally and that they are reified in diverse contexts. In other words, actors entered these spaces with specific images and representations, which had
previously shaped their understanding of ‘the historical Other’. This is particularly relevant as a large share of the participants and actors in the scene sought to escape from seemingly fixed categories of ‘being Jewish’ or ‘being Israeli’ and ‘being German’ and enter into a process of becoming something new. As I will show, in relation to migration and conversion, actors enter into a mode of ‘becoming’. This is highly significant in this context, not only because the process responds to space and place, individual biographies and the given sociality in the scene, but because it demonstrates the significance of ‘doing’ over ‘being’ and thereby shows how actors actively shape and construct their social worlds.

My research interest was connected to growing scholarly and media attention on Israeli life in Berlin, which appeared to be part of an increasing internationalisation of Berlin and the development of the so-called ‘New Berlin’, which has attracted migrants from all over the world. Following the large post-Soviet Jewish migration to Germany and Berlin, the new flow of Israeli migrants gained particular attention in the context of the 50-year anniversary of German-Israeli relations. While Israeli migration to Germany and Berlin in particular dates back as early as after the Shoah (Diner in Brenner, 2012), the Israeli population in Berlin is believed to have multiplied over the past decade (Kranz, 2015). Recent research considers this migration to be a result of differing factors: the internationalisation and attractiveness of Berlin and its affordable lifestyle as well as the increasing dissatisfaction of Israelis with life in Israel, most notably manifested in the social protests in Tel Aviv in 2011. Research further suggests that this specific migrant group is relatively young, well-educated, predominantly of Ashkenazi origin seeking professional opportunities in the arts and humanities, music, academia and start-up scene, seeking adventure or following a partner. The migration is further enabled by German law, which grants citizenship to descendants of persecuted persons and emigrés between 1933 and 1945. While media representations suggest a size of 30,000 (even 50,000) migrants, academic surveys contest this and suggest an estimate of 15,000-20,000 people who permanently reside in the city (Kranz, 2015). Kranz et al. muse that the exaggeration of these numbers is a result of a ‘hyper-discourse’ and attention to this topic, evoking very different responses: while German media and official attitudes present this migrant group as the ultimate sign of normalisation and reconciliation between Germany and Israel, Israeli voices are more ambivalent if not critical towards the emigrants, leaving Israel and choosing Berlin ‘of all places’. This springs from a generally negative view of

2 See German Basic Law, § 116, 2.
emigration from Israel, which is officially regarded as a subversion of homeland and aliya politics, ‘yerida’ (Raz-Krakotzkin, 2013; Amit, 2018). A seemingly ‘desired’ migrant group by the German state, it has been argued that Israelis in Berlin have turned into a ‘phenomenon’, a catchphrase or buzzword, with very differing significations (Sapir, 2015).

Corresponding with the social position of Ashkenazi Jews in Israeli society, representations and recent research of this migrant group presented it as ‘secular, left and young’ and detached from the ‘local’ Jewish community in Berlin (Kranz and Cohen, 2018). This is in line with research on Israeli Diasporas elsewhere, such as the US, Australia or the UK (Gold, 2002; Moshkovitz, 2013). The arrival of Israeli migrants seemed to coincide if not be entangled with transformations in Jewish Berlin, where new initiatives and groups are created to offer alternatives to existing community structures, which no longer seem to cater for the demands of a young urban migrant population and their ways of practicing Judaism. Central to these groups was a connection to things Jewish, Israel, or Hebrew and trajectories of either migration to Berlin or conversion to Judaism or an interest in conversion. Interrogating the assumption of ‘secular’ Israelis, as well as engaging with the diverse groups of ‘innovative’ Jewish practice, Hebrew and Jewish ritual in Berlin, this study demonstrates a scene of inner and outer complexity. Embedded in specific historical and socio-political settings, the scene constitutes itself performatively, situationally in lack of unity, clarity and agreement, but as a matter of ambivalence, uncertainty and contestation.

Therefore, the categories which individuals negotiate, identify or contest were part of their individual trajectories and re-defined in the specific sociality at the given spaces in Berlin. This not only engendered confrontation, confusion and dissent but also the emergence of change and transformation. It is therefore, that this study seeks to understand the processes, the ways in which people came to construct, their ‘doings’.

The significant presence of Germans converting or having converted to Judaism and my own biographical entanglements in this scene, fostered me to ‘turn the anthropological gaze’ and interrogate how ‘being and becoming Jewish’ affects the non-Jew as much as the ‘Jew’, as Deleuze and Guattari suggest (see above). Combining ethnography, ‘observant participation’ (Hitzler and Honer, 2015) and in-depth biographical narrative interviews, I present a scene that is deeply shaped by place (Berlin) and its spaces, its history and its socio-political constellations. It is further deeply influenced by the trajectories of its actors - ‘migrants and
converts’- and their biographical pathways. ‘Turning the anthropological gaze’ and interrogating ‘being German’ equally involves my own positionality as a non-Jewish German engaging in a research field in which I became increasingly entangled. This entanglement was related to trans-generational transmission of guilt and shame, as well as personal experiences with otherness, societal norms and senses of belonging. For many of my participants their migration to Berlin or their conversion to Judaism were related to love, desire and romantic relationships (and marriage) with a non-Jewish German or a Jewish-Israeli/Jewish partner respectively. Thus, the scene was also imbued with passion (not only for music), and erotic attraction. Visiting the historical background to the emergence of desire, I show how interactions and dynamics are imbued with representations, images and memories from the past that these actors ‘inherit’ from family histories and their context-specific socialisations. Entering these new terrains (for migrants and converts alike), therefore, entails a border-crossing which puts the individual in a liminal position. It is the state of liminality which engenders uncertainties, ambivalences and the construction of hierarchies and distinction practices towards others.

On a larger level, I not only found that the presence of Jewish-Israelis and their recent migration to Berlin has fostered the presence and significance of Hebrew in Berlin, but also how the latter engenders realms that interrogate ‘traditional’ forms of relating Jewish practice, ritual, and the boundaries and demarcations of belonging. That is to say, the presence of Hebrew and the ambivalence with which (some) Israelis relate to their Jewishness and Jewish practice, permeates existing boundaries of (Jewish) belonging and not only allows for boundaries to shift but for different forms of constructing Jewishness. The permeation if not deconstruction of existing borders and frontiers deconstructs borders surrounding certain spaces and thereby leaves individuals to draw or negotiate them. The scenic structure allowed for differing aspirations to participate, yet, at points bearing explosive potential. It is through this diversity that existing categories became either increasingly blurred, contested outright or vehemently defended and thereby reified.

The thesis is organised in two parts and combines two methodological components. It is based on 19-months of ‘observant participation’, an ethnographic approach which places the emphasis on ‘doing’, participating in the scene, rather than merely observing. This approach emerged from the constitution of the scene and involved singing in the choir and different
ensembles, participating in religious rituals as well as community events and activism, attending private gatherings or concerts, theatre performances and getting to know people’s daily routines. Beyond this method, at the heart of this analysis, lies the approach of biographical narrative research. I chose the method of biographical-narrative interviews as it presents the most open tool to understand micro- and macro dimensions of social life and shows how the individual is shaped but also actively shapes his or her social environment. Furthermore, it offers the most profound understanding of how individuals make sense of their migration to Berlin, or their conversion (practices) to Judaism and the significance of this scene in relation to their biographies. Based on the complexity and the historical significance of this field, personal histories and trajectories provide deep sociological insights towards a historical understanding, trans-generational continuities and the particular socio-political contexts that came to shape individuals and their life choices. Beyond the analysis over the negotiation of ‘heritage’ and ‘inheriting a specific history’, it also provides insights into the meaning-making processes of individuals in relation to their ‘old’ and ‘new’ environments. Beyond providing reasons why individuals migrate or convert, the trajectories and narrated life stories allow us to understand how ‘the biographer’ constructs change and rupture and makes ‘biographical’ sense of it. This then reflects underlying structures of the respective national contexts (predominantly Israel and Germany).

Together, both methods enabled me to grasp a multi-faceted understanding of the dynamics, developments and sociological significance of this scene as well as the historical and political structures from within which it emerges. By way of this ethnography, I show how actors seek to contest existing categories and reconfigure them in the social settings at hand which make the dynamics and constitution of the scene as ‘Jewish’ highly context-specific. However, although projects like the Hebrew Choir, the synagogue renewal and queer Shabbat event can only be understood in their historical, socio-political and institutional contexts, as well as through the biographical trajectories of the actors that inhabit them, they nevertheless exemplify developments of social life which are not exclusive to Berlin.³ Thus, this ethnography offers insights into urban life and new religiosities and its spaces that are increasingly shaped by migrants, diasporic constellations and ‘scenes’ rather than communities. Such scenes correspond to processes of individualization and the way social

³ In his work ‘Post-Judaism’ Shaul Magid for example elaborates on transformation and change among Jewish communities in the US.
and ‘religious’ life is organised in fluid and less fixed forms than institutions can seem to cater for. This work shows that these transformations are based on ‘processes’ (Schütze, 2016) that are a complex reaction of biographical constructions and the way these are enacted in particular spaces and gatherings of the scene. These biographies are shaped by their national context but become increasingly transnational when moving to Berlin. Thus, I not only show the emergence of ‘transnational biographies’ but also the way in which national background continues to matter in a super-diverse context. Finally, researching biographies offers a way of transcending rigid and fixed notions of ‘identity’ and instead show the processual character of position and positionalities that happen in correspondence with ‘heritage’, space, place as well as external ascription and representation and how they shift and become subject to constant reconfiguration.

1.2 Be-longing in urban space

It follows from the above, that the biographies of converts and migrants are shaped by movement and rupture. At the same time, they also reflect the crossing of boundaries and an age, where it seems that ‘identity is no longer just fixed at birth’ (Brubaker, 2016) but, appears to become increasingly subject to individual choice. ‘Who, asks Brubaker, ‘has access to what categories and to the social spaces reserved for their members? Who controls- and patrols – the boundaries of categories? How do new categories – and new kinds of people named by those categories – come into being? Can one choose to become a member of a category that is generally understood as biologically based and fixed at birth? In a world crisscrossed by dense classificatory grids, is it possible to live between or beyond categories? (Brubaker, 2016:5). Brubaker’s questions resonate with the scene I encountered. Throughout this work, I show how individuals grapple with and make sense of these questions and its repercussions in the social context. In an age of ‘passing’ choosing identities, transracialism and transgender, the question of ‘just choosing’ one’s identity is subject to withering contestations and discussions over questions of appropriation, legitimacy and authenticity and exoticism (ibid). In this case, it bears the reverberations of Jewishness in Germany and the historical baggage, the ‘inheritance’ that continues to shape individual’s positionality, as ‘Israeli’, ‘Jewish’ or ‘German’. This entails the emergence of a ‘double consciousness’ (duBois [1903], 2013), the phenomenon of seeing and looking at oneself through the eyes of the Other.
The initiatives presented in this ethnography were not strictly reserved for certain members but sought to follow more open and pluralist approaches regarding Jewish frontiers and boundaries. This attracted members of various backgrounds and for various reasons. This then leads to the way in which the scene constitutes itself as Jewish: as a complex conglomerate of history and context, actors and their different trajectories and relation to Jewishness and finally the ‘enactment’ in the scene and the negotiations over ‘Jewishness’.

The open space of the scene allows for the presence of mutual exoticisms, orientalist projections which are related to ‘desires’ that are orientated according to what Ahmed considers ‘desire lines’ (Ahmed, 2006). As I will show, these are shaped by individual and collective context and dependent on space. Thus, I argue that Jewishness is not only constituted spatially but it also affects space (Massey, 1994). Furthermore, in the light of what Diner has referred to as the German-Jewish ‘negative symbiosis’ (Diner, 1987), I show that over thirty years since he made this argument, the often refuted ‘negative symbiosis’ finds new expressions and configurations in Berlin’s cosmopolitan space. At the same time, it is also part of a construction and enables a kind of ‘enactment’: with regard to an increasingly diverse ‘German’ society where 20.3% of the population has what is often termed a ‘migration background’ (Canan and Foroutan, 2016:10). In short ‘being German’ and Germanness has become subject to fierce debates and political struggles. In fact, in the light of the arrival of large numbers of refugees in 2015, the construction of a supposed ‘Germanness’ is at stake and has been given centre stage in the discussions on the makeup of society.

At the same time, choosing, renegotiating and interrogating given ‘identities’ and categories of belonging is strongly related to a global middle class. In my case, particularly Germans and Israelis who seek to symbolically distance themselves from their given ‘identity’. The liminality and uncertainty of belonging to this scene generates questions over power authority and legitimacy and are often resolved by distinction practices in order to receive recognition. Thus, in a space and social constellation that is marked by uncertainty and the absence of prescribed (religious) authorities, individuals negotiate and ‘carve out’ their place in relation to their own trajectories and in interaction with the sociality in their respective groups. As this elicits conflict and contestation, it also leads to the transient character of this scene, where initiatives reach an endpoint and are then replaced.
Thus, while my research presents the case of a ‘Jewish’/’Hebrew’ scene that is specific to the German context, it simultaneously exemplifies processes of negotiation over belonging, ethnicity, nationality and religion in increasingly diverse urban spaces more broadly. By mirroring the experience of converts and migrants from Israel, the U.S. and Hungary, I will show that individuals constantly cross and negotiate boundaries characteristic to ‘post-migrant’ (Foroutan and Canan, 2016) and super-diverse (Vertovec, 2007) urban settings. Combining processes of conversion and migration, I seek to put processes into a dynamic discussion: demonstrating that migration is not exclusive to ‘migrants’ but affects the non-migrants also. I suggest that migration cannot be merely thought of in spatial terms but should be re-considered as a ‘conversion’ process, a rupture and radical (dis-) or re-orientation.

1.3 The question of ‘Jewishness’

The ethnography of this scene and the process and ways of how it constitutes itself as ‘Jewish’, is conducted against the background understanding that Jewish belonging rests on differing definitions. According to halacha a Jew is someone who was born to a Jewish mother or who completed conversion to Judaism (giyur). The latter follows precise rituals and necessarily involves a long learning process, which concludes with the examination of the convert by the local Bet Din (Jewish Rabbinical Court). The examination by the Bet Din is followed by a ritual bath in the mikweh (which is preceded by the circumcision, for male converts). The question over who is a Jew has concerned Jewish communities and their surroundings for centuries (if not millennia) and its definition had the most dire consequences in the Holocaust when the Nazis defined Jewishness as a matter of race, which served as the basis for persecution and genocide (Anthias and Yuval-Davis, 1992).

In Israel, citizenship rights and social positions are ultimately defined by halachic definitions of Jewishness. Yet, the ‘right of return, as part of the fundamental constitution and immigration law of the state, equally accepts patrilineal Jews. All of my Israeli participants were born to a Jewish mother. For some, Jewishness presented a matter of ‘a collective

4 The halakha refers to the collective body of Jewish religious laws (De Lange, 2000).
5 Ibid.
heritage’ a tradition, or ‘culture’ while for others it was ‘religious practice and community’. A number of my Israeli participants in the choir however placed most emphasis on speaking Hebrew, to the extent that one of my participants referred to it as ‘home’. The diversity, openness and pluralistic approach with which many new ‘Jewish’ initiatives in Berlin approach this question are also a response to the rigid ways of sticking to halachic definitions by the official institution of the Jewish community in Berlin (Jüdische Gemeinde Berlin, hereafter JGB). As I will show in the course of this thesis, the category ‘Jewish’ or ‘religious’ evoked deep discomfort among some of my Israeli participants, who could only reconcile to identify with ‘Hebrew’ (which is why they joined the ‘Hebrew’ choir). As will become clear in the biographical cases I present, this is entangled with specific identity politics in Israel as well as positionalities of gender and sexuality (sexual orientation) and subsequent experiences of discrimination.

Nonetheless, the scene is deeply entangled with questions and contestations of ‘being’ and becoming Jewish and therefore enquires about the constitution of ‘Jewish’ in this scene. As I am aware of the potential violence that this ‘ascription of Jewish and the assumption of how the scene constitutes itself as Jewish can have, I am nevertheless using inverted commas to demonstrate its relational character and the way it takes up particular meanings and significations for the ‘actors’ and situations and the dynamics described. By way of contrast, Jewish institutions will not be written in inverted commas. Having stated that this ethnography and its constructions and constitution of Jewishness(es) relates to gender and sexuality as much as to religion, nationality and negotiations over ethnicity, it is a fact that “Jewishness – and I add Hebrew - *disrupts the very categories of identity because it is not national, not genealogical, not religious, but all of these in dialectical tension with one another*” (Boyarin and Boyarin, 1993:721). For many of the migrants to Berlin, the city held the promise and presented itself as a cosmopolitan enclave detached from wider Germany and therefore detached from questions of Jewishness which they sought to escape in Israel. However, a number of my Israeli participants had been or were in an intimate relationship with non-Jewish Germans, which triggered a different confrontation of positionalities over ‘being Jewish’ and their representation of ‘being German’. Generally, the move to Berlin seemed to trigger questions of positionality towards a non-Jewish majority, which

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7 I distinguish between ‘position’ as the relative place one comes to occupy ascribed by the sociological grid and ‘positionality’ as a reflexive process of self-positioning in correspondence with outside ascription.
fundamentally differs from the societal setting in Israel and the politics of belonging. The ‘becoming’ of a particular minority coincides with a general ‘uprooting’ and disorientation that the experience of migration triggers, and the ‘search for something’ which all of my participants found themselves in.

As I will show, the category of ‘Jewish’ in the German context, especially in unified Germany and the so-called ‘Berlin Republic’ after 1989 relies on specific representations of Jews and Judaism often in relation to Israel, the Holocaust, antisemitism or specific cultural attributes – even related to specific physiognomics - which are believed to be Jewish or represent Judaism. What has famously been coined as ‘Gedächtnisheater’ - memory theatre - by Michal Bodemann refers to a specific representation of Jews and Judaism which serves to attest to a certain degree of normalcy in German society in relation to its past (Bodemann, 1996). These representations are marked by clichés and most importantly what I consider the ‘lack of ambivalence’ and ‘refusal of dissonance’ referring to the inability to acknowledge narratives that disrupt, and contest generally held assumptions. The narratives, which are presented in this thesis confirm and equally contest commonly held notions. It is this contestation and rupture, which I aim to bring to the fore of this analysis and thereby give voice to unheard views but also interrogate simplified notions of ‘Jewish identity’ or the configurations of ‘German-ness’. This particularly builds on scholarly debates of a post-migrant society, which not only sees society in Germany to be fundamentally shaped by migration but also argues for a construction of German-ness and German society that is not defined ethnically (Yildiz, 2015; Römhild, 2014) or defined along a ‘somatic norm’ (Puwar, 2004).

1.3 Religion, the secular and the city

The fact that Jewishness and also ‘Israeliiness’ disrupt and blur assumed boundaries between nationality, ethnicity and religion make this scene to equally sit ambivalently between ‘religious’ or ‘secular’ or as some would put it ‘cultural’. Effectively, the institution of the Jewish community in Germany is defined as a religious community and within the secularity arrangements of the German state a corporate body under public law. Not only is this a result of post-1945 developments of re-defining the racialised categories of Jews, it also shapes the public image of Judaism as a religion, rather than all of the other categories it can cater for. Furthermore, estimations of the Jewish population of Berlin approximate 25,000-30,000 Jews
of which around 9,735 are members of the official Jewish community. It is assumed that half of the Jewish population of Germany are members of the official Jewish communities.\(^8\) Thus, this clearly shows that the majority of Jews in Berlin are not organised by the official Gemeinde (JGB). Jewish religious and non-religious life in Berlin is increasingly organised by international Jewish organisations financing and subsidizing alternative initiatives and networks, which can cater for an increasingly diverse population and diverse ways of practicing Judaism.

As my research endeavour was interested in the relations to existing institutions, the initiatives I chose to study, ‘took place’ either in a religiously-designated space, like a church in case of the Hebrew choir, the synagogue a traditional room of Jewish prayer, or were centred around a Jewish religious ritual taking place in non-religious spaces, like the queer Shabbat Event. While definitions of religious practice in Judaism are often defined along the observance of mitzvot (religious laws) and in Israel define a position in a societal structure, new forms of ‘religious practice’ and ‘spirituality’ have started to blur traditional boundaries of what counts as religious (Kaplan and Werczberger, 2015). While I will refer to the specifics of Jewish practice and ‘religion’ in the chapter of socio-historical backgrounds, the ambivalence of Jewishness not only comes with the category itself (Boyarin and Boyarin 1993) but also with my participants’ uncertainty towards these categories. This uncertainty is also linked to larger social processes of ‘individualisation’ (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002), and what Bauman has termed ‘Liquid Modernity’ (Bauman, 1999) where individuals are increasingly left with the task of ‘creating a biography of their own’ (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002) rather than following ready-trodden trajectories. This naturally engenders uncertainty and ambivalence.

These processes are based in urban centres and ‘global cities’ (Sassen, 2001) marked by complexity and globalizing forces, which are contact zones between cultures which further fuel the diffusion of fixed categories. This relates to religious identification as much as other categories. Along with the secularization thesis, cities, for a long time, were believed to present ‘secular’ centres and especially Berlin, with its socialist heritage, has been coined as the capital of ‘atheists’ and among the ‘most godless cities’.\(^9\) Historically however, it has

\(^8\) Source: Central Welfare Organisation of the Jews in Germany, 2017 (ZWST)
\(^9\) Cited from the Guardian https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2016/dec/07/where-world-godless-city-religion-atheist
been argued that secularization processes in the city often went alongside religious revivals and innovations. In his seminal account of secularization processes, David Martin underlines the significance of European cities which were marked by struggles between secular and religious authorities (Martin, 2005). Most significantly, it was Berlin that served as a centre for many renewals in Judaism and Jewish history.\(^{10}\) As Judaism blurs boundaries between what is believed as clearly demarcated categories, Talal Asad has most famously pointed at the fallacy of conceiving of ‘the secular’ as something ‘neutral’ and void of religious elements. As the classificatory practice of dividing between ‘religious’ and ‘the secular’ is related to power and government, but also relational, we can only understand the religious if we understand the secular and vice versa (Asad, 2003). Often, the sense of ‘neutral’ resonates with a certain majority tradition, prevailing in a particular public sphere and context. In fact, it is the notion of the secular itself, which as Jose Casanova does not tire to remind us, derives from the notion of ‘saeculum’ non-sacred time and is embedded in Christian time and space, in short Western modernity (Casanova, in Calhoun, Juergensmeyer and vanAntwerpen, 2011). This does not mean that the concept did not travel, was adopted, implemented and incorporated into non-Western contexts (Burchardt and Wohlrab-Sahr 2012). However, scholars have increasingly pointed at the way in which the secular is treated as a universal category, as well as building the basis for its political project (secularism) which then foster particular religious subjectivities which are conceived to be desirable and ‘fit’ a specific societal norm or governance (Asad, 2003; Mahmood, 2006; 2011; 2015).

Ranging from religion as community or even cult (Durkheim, 2001 [1912]), or Luckmann’s theories of transcendence (Luckmann, 1990) a ‘chain of memory’ (Hervieu-Leger, 2000), or simply a cultural system including ritual practices (Geertz, 2003), definitions are vast and were influenced and often co-constructed in relation to a secular, often perceived as neutral and void of religious content. The definition of religion thus confronts us with the question of what essentially ‘counts’ and does not count as ‘religion’ or religious practice? Does the practice of singing Hebrew liturgical choral songs in a church count as ‘religious’ or ‘secular’, and if yes, what kind of ‘religion’, Christian or Jewish? And further, does regularly attending synagogue services and activities make one ‘religious’? And finally: Becci et. Al (2013) ask how the presence of churches, mosques and synagogues affect the perception of

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\(^{10}\) Berlin served as an important centre of the Haskalah, the Jewish Enlightenment, the development of progressive Judaism and modern orthodoxy as well as an important centre for the Zionist project.
an urban space as ‘secular’. While the study of religion looks back at a plethora of ways of approaching, identifying or defining ‘religion’ and, for that matter ‘the secular’, I follow the notion that the categories are constructed ‘relationally’ and in correspondence with place and space. Thus, rather than conceiving of these categories as neutral, I observe how these categories come to be filled, performed and stylized in the scene, as well as in biographical trajectories, how migration and conversion has affected personal positions and the practice of drawing demarcation lines, ‘boundaries’ and ‘frontiers’ and what purpose these serve. In that sense, the openness towards what people ‘do’, rather than what they are supposed to ‘be’, allowed me to observe pathways of ambivalence and developments towards transformation which offer us insights into how actors are ‘doing’ and ‘performing’ their respective positionalities and create new categories. I not only found that these categories were context-specific and thereby sometimes clashed with concepts held by others, but I could also see how individuals started the process of ‘translation’ by entering in a process of ‘trans’-formation as a consequence of migration, conversion or engagement in this scene. By doing so, they also brought their own specific subject and biographical positions into the dynamics. It follows from this that my thesis chose to focus on various ‘stages’ where these negotiations were performed, rather than exclusively focussing on ‘religiously’ designated spaces. Thereby, I attempted to attend to the flows and dynamics of this field - ‘the scene’ and its ‘plot’, but also the multifaceted character of Jewishness and boundaries and frontiers which were constantly shifting, re-drawn, reified or contested.

1.4 Berlin


As mentioned above, it is the city – Berlin - that significantly shapes how the scene constitutes itself as Jewish. Just over seventy years after World War II and the detrimental destruction of the Holocaust, it is most significant that the Hebrew Choir, the revival of the synagogue and the Queer Shabbat event, in short, the scene which I describe, takes place in Berlin. Apart from having turned into a global city, a centre of Europe and a marker of ‘a new Germany’ after re-unification in 1989, Berlin’s topography also embodies the significance of borders and boundaries representing the remnants of a bi-polar world order.
Having left the insularity of being encapsulated in a socialist territory and turned into a ‘new’ city, Berlin’s aesthetics continue to reflect remnants of two world wars, the Prussian empire, its colonial legacies, National Socialism and the Holocaust. In fact, Berlin is in and of itself a space where trans-formation, ‘conversion’ and turn is a central aspect in its history and aesthetics.

With the establishment of the so-called ‘Berlin Republic’ post 1989, and especially over the past decade, Berlin has developed into a global city, which attracts migrants of all kinds. Under the slogan of ‘poor but sexy’ Berlin’s post-socialist urban topography has seen intense social, political and cultural transformation (Bauer and Hosek, 2018). ‘Opportunity and novelty have painted Berlin as an economic and avant-garde playground’ (ibid: 1) which ultimately also attracted Israeli migrants. Presenting a site of memory and memorialization, Berlin embodies presences and absences, particularly in relation to Jewish life. What is perceived as a space that is inhabited by free spirits, activists and political resistance, however, has become increasingly shaped by foreign capital, market forces and the politics of gentrification (Holm, 2006). Thus, although the rough urban aesthetics representing freedom, opportunity and artistic expression still shine through, the city has also become subject to neoliberal transformations and forces of globalisation (ibid.). Together with the arrival of over 80,000 refugees in 2015, the city has not only become home to all sorts of diasporic communities, but also increasingly become a site of struggle over space as a scarce resource. This exacerbates the negotiation of frontiers and boundaries of existing diasporic communities, in particular with regards to the accommodation of Islam and refugees from predominantly Muslim countries (especially Syria). This has led to the shifting of public discourses and discursive alliances such as the up-holding of a Judeo-Christian cultural heritage or the focus on antisemitic violence supposedly performed by refugees. The rise of right-wing extremism and populism have then further complicated (critical) positionalities towards Israel and Israeli state politics. I do not allude to this simply to complicate the picture, but to demonstrate the internal and external pressures that influence Jewish life and the construction of positions and positionalities in Berlin.¹¹

¹¹ Due to the scope of this thesis, I cannot elaborate in the detail on the differing positions and positionalities towards the migration and refugee politics held by the Jewish communities and individuals in Berlin. However, what is remarkable is the prominence of a narrative of a ‘Judeo-Christian’ cultural realm and value system in opposition to a supposed ‘Muslim other’.
1.5 From identity to sociality

Contemporary city life is increasingly structured in scenes (Blum, 2001) of which Berlin shows a plethora (Schwanhäußer, 2010). The way I came to think and conceptualise these gatherings and initiatives as a ‘scene’ corresponds with my findings in the field. The nature of the fluid, transitive character, varying degrees of commitment, its openness and the prevalence of ‘events’ do no longer fit traditional notions of *Gesellschaft* and *Gemeinschaft* as Tönnies had classically put it (1887;2012). Instead, German sociologists Hitzler, Honer and Pfadenhauer conceptualised the concept of ‘*post-traditionale Gemeinschaften*’ (2008) and the formation of “the social life in scenes” (Hitzler and Niederbacher, 2010). Equally, research on urban and migrant culture regard the constellation of social life in urban settings to be best captured in scenes such as the Berlin underground scene (Schwanhäußer, 2010) and Berlin’s Postmigrant Queer Club Culture (Kosnick, 2008; 2014).

The development towards social scenes has origins in the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS), where researchers analysed youth cultures in which young people make connections between their everyday experience and class inequality constructed as a matter of resistance (Hall and Jefferson, 1976). While youth cultures are also analysed based on their subversive potential, Hitzler and Pfadenhauer see the development of scenes in the context of a growing and all-embracing individualization, globalization and the increasing conditioning of self-cultivating practices (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). Modernisation, pluralisation and the diversification of social life lead to an enormous complexity of social life which also engenders an increase in uncertainty, arguably increasing the demand for social norms and structures. Against this backdrop, Hitzler analyses the development of scenes as social settings with a ‘common orientation’ which offer the possibility for a social positioning (Hitzler and Niederbacher, 2010:23).

Characterized by ‘events’ and a supposed ‘eventization’ of social life Betz, Hitzler and Pfadenhauer, (2011) offer significant insights, yet they do not sufficiently translate their analysis into ‘religious’ or ‘migrant’ cultures. However, as many sociologists of religion have observed, late capitalism and postmodernity have brought substantial changes to religious affiliation which must be seen as a matter of secularization, not as a matter of a vanishing
religion from the social, but as a matter of differentiation of ‘religious’ life, as Casanova convincingly argued (Casanova, 1994; 2011). On this matter, drawing on Kahn-Harris work on Heavy Metal Scene Moberg and Ramstedt make a compelling attempt to transfer the framework of scene to the study of what they call ‘post-institutional religious spaces’ (Moberg and Ramstedt, 2015). Kira Kosnick emphasises the analytical move from ‘identity’ to ‘sociality’ (Kosnick, 2014:27). Conceiving of a sociality of spaces over which people have to negotiate, promotes an analysis without a pre-constituted group, e.g. in her case ‘the Turkish community’ (ibid: 28). This indeed corresponds with my findings and the analysis of the scene whose constitution of ‘Jewish’ I am trying to portray. Kosnick further shows how the scene provides the possibility for a type of visibility which other forms of sociality do not provide. It is the possibility of meeting people, sharing sociality in reference with a certain positionality. Even when speaking and conceptualising a ‘religious’ scene, analytical care has to be taken towards the ‘religious’ character of the scene. In the German context, the attachment of an ‘institutional Jewish community’ is one way of defining religion. As we will see throughout this work, this does not necessarily correspond with the self-conceptualisations of individuals – Jewish or not. As my data suggests, the experience of being Jewish fundamentally varies with ‘being Jewish as a matter of choice’ or as a matter of ‘heritage’ which profoundly shapes the personal negotiation process, which Lena Inowlocki has termed as ‘doing of being Jewish’ (Inowlocki, 2000).

1.6 The significance of this research

As my research sits ambivalently at the nexus of overlapping issues, an extensive literature review on all topics involved would expand the scope of this thesis. I will therefore concentrate on works that are central to Jewish life and Israeli migration in Berlin. Throughout this work I will allude to specific works in relation to the different topicalities. Combining themes of diaspora migration, religion and the secular and conversion as well as music and aesthetics, my research presents a unique and innovative approach to recent phenomena by combining themes not brought together in previous research. Thereby it does not fall into the trap of ‘migrantology’ (Römhild, 2017), referring to the exclusive study of ‘migrants’ but instead turns the sociological and anthropological gaze focussing on migrants as well as converts to Judaism. This follows an approach of researching diaspora and diaspora space (Brah, 1996) which corresponds with developments and realities of urban life (Römhild, 2014, 2017). Furthermore, there has so far been no ethnography of a Berlin scene
combining ethnography and biographical-narrative research, investigating new developments and the constitution of a new Jewish scene.

In 2001, Fania Oz-Salzberger was among the first to write about Israelis in Berlin. In her work of the same name, the historian describes various experiences of Israelis who settled in Berlin starting already in the 1950s. While the account depicts personal accounts of people coming to terms with their experiences of trans-generational trauma and the legacy of the Shoa, she equally describes her own story and the conflicted and ambivalent relationship of her own European descent (Oz-Salzberger, 2001). Although she offers insightful stories, her elaborations do not present a social scientific study and in-depth analysis of societal and individual processes of migration and belonging.

Furthermore, having been published in 2001, the book predates the large arrival of Israeli migration, which is believed to have occurred over the past decade. A large-scale research project on Israeli migration to Berlin and Germany has been undertaken by the University of Wuppertal. Following a mixed method approach, the project was designed to provide insights into the community formation of Israelis living in Germany, individual and collective identities, and integration into “German society”, and the urban landscape of Berlin. The first publications present some important statistical data, such as number of migrants, ethnic origins, socio-economic background as well as citizenship status (Kranz, 2015). Kranz’ account suggests that the migrating Israelis are predominantly of Ashkenazi origin, highly educated, whose motivations to migrate are mostly based on the search for opportunities of different sorts (Kranz, 2015, 15). The study argues that individuals show little interest in the existing religious community and cherish a cultural identification of being “Israeli” rather than identifying as Jewish. By taking up the category of “Israeliness”, a not uncommon self-identification for secular Israelis, the research does not sufficiently address the complicated entanglements of nationality and religion and the reconsideration of being Jewish in a European, specifically German, context.

Although Kranz emphasises the importance of Judaism as a cultural anchor for the immigrant community, observance and long-term participation in local synagogues is believed to be rather low and therefore migrants’ religious affiliation rather insignificant (ibid, 24). My

12 There are indeed a variety of assumptions why Israeli migration to Berlin has increased over the past years some attribute it to the rising living costs in Israel (Kranz, 2015).
research presented me with a more complex picture in relation to recent research on religion which increasingly stresses the fact that contemporary ways of identifying with religion cannot be reduced to congregational settings and service attendance (Ammerman, 2007; Davidman, 2015).

In a different work, Kranz and Cohen address the particularity of Israeli migrants to Berlin and specifically focus on the way emigrants from Israel reconfigure their belonging in relation to the negative image of emigration from Israel ‘yerida’ (Kranz and Cohen, 2018). Generally, research on the topic falls into the trap of methodological nationalism (Wimmer and Glick Schiller, 2002) failing to consider the co-constructedness of Jewishness with constructions and representations of Germanness (e.g. Kranz and Cohen, 2018; Amit, 2018).

Research undertaken by Israeli researchers, however, has largely focused on trauma and the confrontation with the “German other”, without necessarily including a ‘German perspective’. Using trauma theory, Gad Yair’s account “Ahava ze lo praktish”, sets out to paint a picture of contemporary life in Germany through the Israeli experience (Yair, 2015). Furthermore, there are various literary accounts and films offering insights into the Israeli experience in Berlin (Goren, 2013), or the essay collection “We do not forget, we go dancing – 3rd generation accounts of Israel and German authors (Kron and Shalev, 2015). Some of these accounts reproduce existing stereotypes, which need to be reconsidered in relation to lived experiences and current demographics (Rau in Schoeps and Gloeckner, 2016). Ruth Preser and Hila Amit Abbas consider the Israeli diaspora from a queer theoretical approach and observe how queer Israelis reconsider their senses of belonging in the cosmopolitan spheres of Berlin and construe their migration as a matter of resistance (Preser, 2016, Amit, 2018). Similarly, the poet and writer Mati Shemoelof revisit the German-Jewish narrative by pointing at his personal background as a Mizrachi Israeli Jew intending to challenge the victim-perpetrator dynamic that often prevails in public discourse in Germany, Israel and beyond (Shemoelof, 2014). All of the above accounts however neglect the ‘religious aspects’ of this particular migration and treat the concept of the secular without distinct investigative interest.

Apart from the research on Israeli migration to Berlin, there have been various accounts of Jewish life in Berlin, and Germany, particularly on the Russian migration. Karen Koerber, (2005; 2011) and Julia Bernstein (Bernstein, 2010) undertake an anthropologically informed investigation on the daily lives, practices and interactions in the lives and communities of
Russian Jews. Alina Gromova took Berlin as a centre for her ethnography on young Russian Jews who navigate through the topography of Berlin and thereby negotiate their individual ways of being Jewish in Berlin. “Generation Kosher light” (Gromova, 2013) presents one of the few ethnographic accounts of Jewish life in Berlin. Although the connection between space and identities proves most fruitful, the ethnography falls short of presenting rich biographical data and thereby providing an understanding of the deeper societal structures at the intersection of the individual and society. In “Gedächtnistheater”, sociologist Michal Bodemann made a strong argument on the enactment of Judaism and memory in Germany and the ways in which Jewish life serves as a political stage. Bodemann seeks to deconstruct the idea of the Jewish community presenting it a representation of memory and remembrance in Germany (Bodemann, 1996). In their collection of essays, Leveson and Lustig combine various accounts that reconsider German Jewry. They argue that non-Jewish German participation in so-called spaces has forced the Jewish community to face the issues of diversity, rebuilding and continuity in the light of the Shoah (Lustig and Leveson, 2008).

Previous accounts on Judaism in Germany since 1945 include (auto-) biographies and literary accounts of a “Second”\(^{13}\) as well as authors of a so-called ‘Third Generation’.\(^{14}\) These non-academic accounts provide insights into German Jewry in the second half of the 20\(^{th}\) century. While Israeli migration to Germany is a fairly recent phenomenon, Israeli emigration to the United States, Canada or other European countries is hardly new (Gold, 2002; Shokeid, 1988). In his study, Stephen Gold (Gold, 2002) addresses the concept of “Israeli Diaspora” in LA, London, Paris and Sydney and describes how immigrants attempt to build a community around language and cultural factors like food, holidays and the believed shared cultural socialisation outside of Israel. Gold further describes how Israeli emigrants are mostly white, well-educated and receive fairly little media attention (Gold, 2002: 9). Rather than attracting attention in the country of destination, they are more prominent in the country of origin, Israel, where public discourse continues to see emigration through an ideological lens. This factor strongly differs from the situation in Germany, where the emigration of Israelis to Berlin and other parts of Germany appears as an endless source of curiosity and is less positively viewed in Israeli governmental discourse (Kranz, 2015). Looking at Israeli emigrants in London, Yuval Moshkovitz provides a well-crafted and insightful account, which combines migration and diaspora literature with a psychosocial approach incorporating

\(^{13}\) For example accounts by Micha Brumlik, 2010, Maxim Biller, 2009, Adriana Altaras, 2014

\(^{14}\) Dmitrij Belkin, 2016 and Armin Langer, 2016
issues of gender, particularly masculinity (Moshkovitz, 2013). While his approach is rich in theory and empirical detail, the situation described certainly differs from Israeli migration to Germany – particularly in relation to public discourse and representation. Thus, my research not only contributes towards the understanding of the complexities of Israeli life in Berlin, but it also sheds light on the interactions with existing initiatives and the transformations of urban (religious) life.

1.7 Music - A side note

While existing scholarship on scenes emphasise the importance of aesthetics, the musical dimension of the scene I construe deserves a note. While the relationship between music and religious experience follows a long tradition from Plato to contemporary philosophy, contemporary ethnomusicology has placed large emphasis on the significance of music in formations of identity and sociality (Born and Hesmondhalgh, 2000; Wood, 2010) and the significance of music and social life (DeNora, 2004), music and European and Israeli nationalism (Bohlman, 2008) as well as a cultural practice and form of distinction (Bourdieu, 1984). While music has an undoubted significance in religious practice (Cohen, 2015), particularly in Judaism where prayers are sung in Hebrew, the aesthetic and psychosocial dimension of singing and the relation to the Hebrew Choir deserves specific attention. While this thesis does not intend to contribute to the vast ethnomusicological literature on music and identity, this literature has nonetheless provided a background to the understanding of the significance of the choir and the act of singing and I will refer and allude to it throughout this thesis.

1.8 A note on categories:

Before delving into this research, a remark must be made about the categories I am using throughout this thesis. As the scene and its actors negotiated, contested adopted and rejected identity categories of various kinds, their sociological use is nonetheless vital towards understanding the issues at hand. As I have alluded to, this is particularly problematic when dealing with Jewishness. While ‘Israeli’ refers to a national belonging and a citizenship, its significance is entangled with being Jewish. Most significant in the German and Berlin context is that people use these categories interchangeably. Having said that, ‘Israeliness’ is not to be equated with Jewishness. However, in my field, all of my participants were Jewish-
Israelis. The same applies for ‘German’. While it refers to a citizenship, in this context ‘German’ and German-ness’ was often referred to as an ethnic genealogy. Intending to demonstrate how individuals use and negotiate these categories, I use them relational. Thus, I do not start from a fixed notion, but instead observed and analysed them ‘in action’. While the different chapters deal with the constitution of the scene as ‘Jewish’ and thereby complicate the different significations it can take, I mark the relational character in inverted commas. Furthermore, when necessary, I indicate further information such as ‘non-Jewish German’ to point at the issues at hand. This is also in order to underscore ‘German’ as an inclusive category, but equally demonstrate the sociological positionality of a person. For the context of the scene, all Israelis are Jewish, for German nationals I indicate their positionality in relation to their ‘Jewishness’ but equally continuously problematise it throughout this work.

1.9 Structure of the Thesis

This thesis is structured in two parts. Chapter (2), I will ‘set the stage’ by way of elaborating on the methodological and theoretical considerations which undergirded this study. Elaborating on my field and case selection, I present ‘how’ I studied this scene, namely using ethnography and biographical-narrative interviews. Psychoanalytically informed and based on my ‘existential involvement’ in this scene, I develop ‘scenic epistemologies’ which will recur throughout this thesis. Next to that stands the methodology of biographical research which provides a methodological as well as theoretical scaffold for qualitative research and a most adequate tool for this study. Here, I particularly work with the concept of ‘trajectory’ (Riemann and Schütze, 1991).

Chapter 3 then provides a thick description to the ‘stages’ of the scene, how I entered the ‘plot’ as well as the way I became involved and part of the ‘cast’. Thereby I describe the structure, organisation and ‘theatricality’ of the scene, but particularly its dynamics. Focussing on the Hebrew Choir, but also showing its overlap with the synagogue and the queer Shabbat event, I describe its entanglements with the institutions of the Gemeinde and show how it corresponds with space and place and the specific aesthetics of Berlin. By demonstrating the complex dynamics, I present the basis for the understanding of how the scene constitutes itself as ‘Jewish’.
In chapter 4 I take a historical detour and embark on the trajectory of post-war Jewish community-building and its challenges. In a second step, I map the trajectory of Judaism and Jewishness, and the outset of the Zionist project and the later state’s secular arrangements and secularism. This then leads to a third part in which I discuss the societal discourse and approach towards Jewishness in post-war Germany looking at Philo-Semitism and its relation to Orientalism. This will profoundly add to my argument about complexity, while also providing the background to the actors’ trajectories and dynamics in the scene.

In the second part, I then present the actors of the scene. While chapter 5 maps the trajectories of four migrants from Israel to Berlin, chapter 6 does the same for converts to Judaism. As the migrants physically distance themselves from Israel and come to negotiate their ‘Israeliness’ and ‘Jewishness’ in Berlin, chapter 6 shows how converts engage in acts of symbolic distancing from a current position in relation to ‘being German’. Thereby I show that the scene constitutes itself as Jewish through the complex trajectories and negotiations and does not present a picture of unity but of ambivalence and contestation. This sets the ground for Chapter 7 in which I will revisit the scene, discuss my findings and conclude with an outlook on future research.
2. Setting the Stage: Methodological and Theoretical Considerations

In the following, I present the methodological considerations to this study. In order to gain a detailed understanding of the constitution of the scene as well as the actors’ subject positions and trajectories, I chose to combine biographical-narrative interviews and ‘observant participation’ as research method and methodology. I will further elaborate how an ‘existential involvement’ can be developed into new epistemologies for researching scenes.

2.1 Becoming part of the cast and selecting the ‘stages’

At the outset of this study, the religious and the secular among Jewish-Israeli migrants to Berlin guided the procedure of this research. Following the flow of this scene led me to different ‘events’ and groups, which I later constructed around the choir, the synagogue and the queer Shabbat event. Thus, I became engaged in a ‘Life-World-Analytical Ethnography’ and became ‘existentially involved’ (Honer and Hitzler, 2015: 552). In my case, this entailed participating and becoming part of ‘the enactment’ of the scene. Soon, I not only allowed myself to become part but also found myself grappling with ‘existential’ questions of belonging and interrogated previously held categories of ‘being German’, becoming Jewish, religion, nationality, as well as the question of ‘home’ and belonging, just as much as it affected my participants. The critical reflection on my own involvement turned into the identification of vital epistemological moments: interrogating my involvement in this scene provoked a deeper reflection on the sociological mechanisms at hand. Consequently, I not only became ‘existentially’, but also ‘vulnerably’ (Behar, 1996; Page, 2017) involved, as I also shared some of my participants’ experiences and passions.

Apart from participating in various events, gatherings and discussions on the topic, as well as visiting exhibitions and performances, my main research sites crystalized in the Hebrew Choir, the synagogue and the queer Shabbat event. As will become clear in chapter 3, the way I ‘selected the cases’ to this ethnography was partly based on my own trajectory, which was guided by the interest in ‘religious’ practice of ‘blurred boundaries’ between ‘religious’ and ‘non-religious’. The Hebrew Choir was one such example. As it took place in a Protestant church, it corresponded with my own musical education but also attracted

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15 Due to the ‘theatricality’ of the scene, I adopted dramaturgical vocabulary. Thus, the stages refer to the ‘case’ selection.
individuals of various backgrounds, presenting fertile ground for my research endeavour. The presence of traditional liturgical Jewish music in this space, as well as the singing and music in itself created a realm, if not of a religious, then at least one of ‘spiritual’ nature. Moreover, significant to this project was the way it built on ‘cultural repertoires’: musical education and particularly choral singing is central to a German Bildungsbürgertum16 and within the Christian tradition thereby combined the ‘strange’ with the ‘familiar’. Most interesting was the choir’s connection to the synagogue, where a small group had started a project of renewal and revival. The network of this synagogue was connected with other Jewish initiatives, such as the ‘queer Shabbat event’.17 While the choir took place in a ‘religious’, but non-Jewish space, the queer Shabbat chose the ‘neutral’ non-designated space of a former theatre following the intention to offer an alternative space of Jewish ritual and prayer to the synagogue.

### 2.2 Urban ethnography

My ethnographic experience was shaped by the urban topography of Berlin, its diverse neighbourhoods and its remnants of the past. Studying urban dynamics looks back at a long sociological tradition, with the sociologists of the Chicago school at its pioneering start (Park and Burgess, 1925 [1967] Foot Whyte, 1993, [1943]) My experience resonated with the recognised difficulties of doing ethnography ‘at home’. Beyond that, I followed some of my participants back to Israel where I interviewed family members as part of a multi-sited ethnographic approach (Marcus, 1995). Not only did this expand the ‘urban ethnography’ it also deepened my understanding of ‘diasporic’ and transnational space (Brah 1996; Glick Schiller et al. 1992) and transnational biographies (Siouti, 2013), and made visible the array of individuals who are involved in the process of migration: those who move as well as those ‘staying put’ (Brah, 1996:16). The experience of the ‘urban ethnography’ is increasingly shaped by the virtual world and online communication: the Facebook group ‘Israelis in Berlin’ and later the launch of ‘Jewish Events in Berlin’ were helpful sources of information about events, but also an important component of the scene. Some of the conflicts were negotiated online on social media. Thus, it is not only the migration experience that is increasingly virtually mediated but social life more generally. These developments shaped

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16 Educated bourgeoisie

17 For reasons of anonymity, I have changed the names of the initiatives and the synagogues.
my research process, requiring ‘physical’ presence as well as paying attention to the scene’s dynamics online.

2.3 A ‘Scenic Understanding’?

It comes with the nature of the term that a ‘scene’ necessarily involves ‘performance’, ‘staging’ and dramaturgical considerations. Interactions and social dynamics in the scene were performative, that is to say they followed scripts and a plot. In these theatrical performances, actors, so Goffman, bring in a set of taken-for granted cultural assumptions, which they play out without being necessarily conscious of their meanings (Goffman, 2003:62). Furthermore, for the study and analysis of deeper structures of social interactions I drew on the work of Lorenzer whose concept of ‘scenic understanding’, (Szenisches Verstehen) seeks to operationalize and translate psychoanalytical concepts to the social sciences (Lorenzer, 1985). He believed that it is through the enacted ‘scene’ that the individual creates and thereby enacts previous situations and tensions experienced in their lives. My meticulously kept diary compiled my experiences in the field. I also drew on actual performances by the choir some of which were videotaped, photographed and recorded. Inside the synagogue, I strictly avoided using the Dictaphone and took notes from memory after each event.

2.4 Biographical-narrative interviews

At the heart of this sociological analysis is the method of biographical-narrative interviewing. I chose this method as it provides the most open and thorough tool to understanding the underlying structures of a social setting. Moreover, this method allowed me to capture and understand individual trajectories in terms of migration and conversion but also the significance the gatherings – the ‘scene’- came to take up in their lives in Berlin. The method proved to be a rich resource in understanding the dynamics between the individual and the collective, as well as offering insights into the socio-political and historical circumstances shaping individual lives and the way these are enacted. Since it relies on Grounded Theory and abduction from the data, it not only provided the method but also a theoretical framework for the undertaking of this research project. The origins of the method

\[18\] I am careful to distinguish between my own conceptualisation of the scene and what my participants ‘the actors’ perceive as the groups they attend. For this study, the terminology and construction of this scene refers to my analytical framework.
date back to the Chicago school, where Thomas and Znaniecki studied the life histories of Polish peasants in Europe and America in order to understand processes of migration. The method was particularly valued for bridging the sociological gap between macro- and micro perspectives (Apitzsch and Siouti, 2007). and Jansen, 2003; Inowlocki, 2000; Siouti, 2013; Breckner, 2009) as well as the study of conversion (Wohlrab-Sahr, 1999; Jindra, 2014; Steiner, 2015) and is based on the understanding that the narrated biography is indeed a social construction, which provides one perception of a social field (Rosenthal, 1995; Fischer-Rosenthal, 1995; Alheit, 2000).

Over the time of my fieldwork, I was able to collect over 60 biographical-narrative interviews with participants of the scene. These included Jews from Israel, the USA, Brazil, Australia, Hungary and Germany, non-Jewish German some of whom converts to Judaism or in the process of conversion. I selected fifteen interviews, which I analysed in close detail and which came to serve as primary cases. These were chosen on the basis of ‘theoretical sampling’ (Glaser/Strauss, 2006 [1967]), thus contrastive comparison as well as the centrality and significance of the actor’s position in the field. The latter could entail a) a leading role, b) the continuity of participation throughout my research process, or c) an interesting case demonstrating the particularities of the social field /the scene mostly in relation to religious positionality. Despite the large national diversity represented in my sample, for the purpose of this thesis, I chose to limit my case presentation to migrants from Israel and non-Jewish German converts to Judaism (Chapter 5 and 6).

Drawing on Grounded Theory, biographical-narrative interviews are based on ‘abductive analysis’, where knowledge production derives and is generated from empirical data, in which categories are not put onto the empirical data but derive from within it. The narration is analysed sequentially, as established by Schütze (1983, 2016). Referring to the understanding of the text in its sequential making, it seeks to understand the text in its structural form as a matter of ‘action as process’. Every action presents a decision of one option among various alternatives (Rosenthal, 1995:213). Every single choice, which we take out of the many options of memories and stories, means the opening of a specific realm of action, but at the same time the active exclusion of other specific thematic fields. Consequently, every piece of narration is the result of a selection process by the participant.
According to Rosenthal, the biographer selects those parts of the biography, which he or she considers worth or appropriate telling (Rosenthal, 1995). In addition, Oevermann pleads for the method of “case reconstruction” which aims to analyse and identify the particular in a given biography, while simultaneously discovering the regular in the particular (Oevermann, 1979). It is the goal of a reconstructive analysis to discover and understand the structural *Gestalt* of each individual case (Rosenthal, 1995). The regular is presented in the biographical structure, which is understood and analysed in sequences (Schütze, 1983). This approach first and foremost is oriented to generate theoretical groundings based on the collected data. It entails the identification of general themes, which arise in the documentation of the data. The collection and interpretation and data analysis are guided by “theoretical sampling” and the related contrastive analysis (Glaser and Strauss, 1967).

Biographical research assumes that the individual narration, which is heavily shaped by the situation of narration and the presence of the researcher provides insights into the personal experience of one’s own life but also into the societal and socio-political and historical structures at play. This aspect becomes particularly valuable for research on migration and transnationalism, where a central aim is to identify and understand individual strategies and ways of experiencing, making sense of ‘new’ and ‘old’ environments. By drawing on individual biographical-narratives, I aimed to understand how individual routes are shaped by belief systems and positions and how they are affected and potentially shaped or re-shaped and ‘trans-formed’ through the experience of migration (and conversion). In order for this method to flourish, researcher and interviewee agree on a working alliance in order for ‘the biographer’ to uninterruptedly develop an ad-hoc narrative (Rosenthal, 2005:142). The first phase of the interview is initiated by an impulse from the researcher to the participant to narrate his or her life story. In my case, I tended to start the conversation, with a phrase like “as you know, I am researching Jewish belonging and I would like you to tell me your life story…. how one thing came to another and how you arrived at the Choir/Synagogue/Queer Shabbat.”

The first part envisions the participant’s telling of his or her life story as an ad-hoc narrative, which only develops in the process. It is considered to be the main part of the biographical

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19 The intention of theoretical sampling is to contrast and compare a maximum number of cases of certain thematic fields. (Glaser and Strauss, 1967).
interview and comes to an end when the biographer decides, rather than the interviewer. Depending on my participants, this ranged from 10-50 minutes before reaching a so-called ‘coda’ (Rosenthal, 2002). During the second part of the interview, the interviewer can address issues, which were brought up in the narration. In the third part, the interviewer may ask questions targeting the personal reasoning behind certain biographical decisions and details which require further elaboration or other themes which were not introduced by the biographer (Rosenthal, 2002:14). This is to help elucidate the ways in which an individual makes sense of her or his biographical trajectory. The central premise for a successful interview is the establishment of trust between researcher and research participant.20 In my case, at the point of conducting interviews, I had already been participating in the scene for several months and knew most of my research participants on a personal level.

2.5 Interview Conduct

I arranged interviews with my participants in a café of their choice. This allowed them to choose a place in which they could feel comfortable and could easily access. From my perspective, it offered me a glimpse into their life worlds, the places they like, the part of the city they live or work in, or the specific preferences they have of Berlin café aesthetics. A few of my interviews took place at the person’s home, with mixed outcomes: for one this worked particularly well, for another it created an uneasy and asymmetrical power relation, which led me to return to the café as a meeting point. The use of language in the scene—and in the interviews—was of tremendous significance. While it has been addressed in terms of its significance for identification processes, it is often overlooked as a methodological issue (Brown and Masi di Casanova, 2014). I conducted most of my interviews in English and German. Although I had learned Hebrew before and throughout my research process, I did not feel comfortable enough interpreting complex biographical data in Hebrew.21 The fact that I did not conduct my interviews in Hebrew naturally engenders questions of power relations, of ‘forcing the participant to adopt the language of the researcher’ or the ‘authenticity’ of the narration. Taking this point seriously, I tried to critically assess this in my research, for example attending to the way my participants talked about their feelings and emotions. Often, however, I found that the use of the English language allowed for the articulation of things, as the words were not emotionally deep-rooted and prompted careful

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20 (working alliance/Arbeitsbündnis)
21 Nonetheless, interviews conducted in Israel were conducted in Hebrew.
explanations rather than an assumption of insider knowledge on my part. I paid close attention to the time when my participants made use of a different language (and German speakers using Hebrew words). The interviews were recorded and transcribed. I translated the cited material into English and, if necessary, commented on the translation or the translatability of certain expressions.

2.6 Interview Analysis

For the analysis of my interviews, I combined different approaches (schools), but largely drew on the analytical tools developed by Fritz Schütze, who proposes a methodological procedure, which consists of several analytical steps. First, the interview transcript is subject to a thorough textual analysis. Different segments are distinguished based on style (narration, argumentation), and then interpreted and analysed individually and separately from each other. This enables the reconstruction of process structures as well as different life situations—situations of happiness or suffering, as well as causes and consequences of high and low points. The textual analysis allows us to make assumptions about actual and experienced life stories. While a narrative style is often a description of experience, the argumentation reflects the current and contemporary perspective (Schütze, 1983, 2016). Schütze argues for the structural description which refers to a description of the narration. This methodological step proved to be particularly helpful in order to understand the structure of the narration and the ‘trajectory’ of the individual. Originally developed by Strauss, the notion of trajectory has been developed by Schütze and Riemann (Schütze and Riemann, 1991) and taken up by research on migration and transnationalism (Apitzsch and Siouti, 2007). Schütze and Riemann see the concept as part of the process structures, particularly in the way an individual biographically deals with external burdens, loss of control or extraneous situations and events leading to periods of suffering. Kathy Davis shows how the concept can also relate to biographical turns leading to joy and happiness (Davis, 2015), which indeed corresponded with my data and the processes of migration and conversion. The analysis of these ‘turning points’ or ‘conversions’ offered insights into the negotiation between external and internal pressures and the way the individual came to handle them.

Schütze and Rosenthal suggest transcribing the interview in its ‘authentic’ form in order to grasp and analyse utterings and non-verbal communication (Schütze, 1983; Rosenthal, 1995).
Gabriele Rosenthal sought to combine approaches by Schütze and Oevermann’s ‘objective hermeneutics’, engaging in the dialectics of experience, narration and remembering, (2002) combining ethnography and biography. I was most interested in the subjective construction the ‘inner perspective of the biography’. Thus, I combined different ‘schools’ and analysed structural description, paying attention to the dialectics suggested by Rosenthal (Rosenthal, 2002), while considering applying aspects of ‘fine analysis’ to specific segments of the texts (Oevermann, 1979). Analysing (1) interaction during the interview and (2) the biography itself, as well as (3) the cultural patterns and discursive rules, Dausien suggested a gender-sensitive approach when combining different ‘schools’ (Dausien, 1996). Due to the nature of my research and my interests in constructions of identification and belonging, the analysis of the encounter and the situation outside of the spoken text became particularly important.

I started the analysis of a case by reflecting on the interaction and the interview situation based on the audiotape and my notes. In most cases, I was able to compare the dynamics and interactions during the interview with previous interactions with that person in the field. In a second step, I analysed the biographic data. To do so, I relied on both previous information of the participant and the interview transcript. I also consulted historical sources, such as the socio-economic and political context of Israel or Germany at a certain time, investigated different religious groups and denominations as well as socio-cultural information in those individual contexts. In the next step, I reconstructed the biographical case structure. Central strategies of analysis assisted my sequential analysis. Here, I combined both: the socio-linguistic method of structural description and reconstruction of the case and its biographical formation (Schütze, 2016). After the case reconstruction, I was able to contrast and compare cases and thereby develop themes and analyse their relevance in the data corpus. In order to organise a large data corpus in relation to my research endeavour, I developed three meta-theoretical analytical categories deriving from the data (Wohlrab-Sahr, 1999) and divided them into (1) ‘biographical tensions’, (2) ‘the act and process of migration/conversion’, as well as the (3) ‘significance of the scene’ for the individual. This successfully combined the trajectory in relation to the processes of migration and conversion with the dynamics in the scene.

23 When combining ethnography and biographical research, Dausien and Kelle suggest the notion of “doing biography” (Dausien and Kelle 2005), referring to the way in which biographical experience plays out in social interactions. I do not particularly take up this approach in this research.
I chose the terminology of ‘biographical tensions’ in order to describe the combination of recurring biographical themes, struggles or issues which were salient in the individual’s trajectory and related these to the processes of migration and conversion. To an extent, this resonates with researchers who see conversion stories as a matter of resolving biographical crises. However, my data suggested a less urgent cause for this change, which I sought to capture with this term. The ‘significance of the scene’ was analysed as a combination of the first two categories and based on the described experience in the scene. This formed the basis to engage ‘biographical work’ as a successful replacement to the contested concept of ‘identity’. Instead, my three-tiered analytical categories revealed the processual character of identity formations as a matter of narration, memory and performance in correspondence with the social structures and social settings shaping and surrounding the individual (Apitzsch and Siouti, 2007; Inowlocki in Apitzsch; 1999; Rosenthal, 2000).  

I could observe and analyse what Alheit has referred to as the processual, transitory character of biographies, particularly in relation to biographies of migration, which are marked by rupture and risk (Alheit, 2000). In addition, Lorenzer’s scenic understanding proved to be a helpful tool in making sense of ‘the interview scene’ and the enactment that was staged, especially in terms of nationality, religion and gender.

Biographical research has also been subject to severe criticism, referring to the arbitrariness of the encounter or the power dimensions between researcher and biographer (Bude, 1985). For this research it proved to be an invaluable method as it allowed my participants to make their stories heard. Most of my participants were comfortable in providing detailed accounts of their experiences, presenting ‘the whole picture’ rather than responding to pre-selected questions common to journalists. Against the criticisms, I found that the method allowed a kind of knowledge production, which proved flexible and most responsive to the situations at hand.

24 Apitzsch and Siouti refer to a concept by Alheit: Biographizität, largely refers to the production of ethnography (Alheit, 2000, Alheit in Griese, 2010).
25 Further, in reference to classical ‘roads to the unconscious’ I paid attention to dreams, as well as humour and slips of the tongue. This included embodied practices or things that remained unaddressed by my participants or myself. Like psychoanalysis, the biographical-narrative interview draws on the assumption that human subjects and their social world – in short, the relationship to oneself and to others, one’s feelings and emotions - are constituted through narration. Through the form of narration, the human transforms natural time into human temporality. Thereby, she discovers who she must have been to become who she currently is and who she might become one day. (Dörr, von Felden, Klein, Macha Marotzki, 2008:7) In the introduction to their edited volume on Psychoanalysis and Biography, Dörr, Felden, Klein, Macha and Marotzki further argue, that in the process of narration, individuals go beyond the empty spaces of childhood through spaces of sorrow, pain, happiness, melancholy, dissatisfaction and enter rooms and spaces which belonged to parents and relatives of whose existence individuals might not have been aware (ibid: 8).
2.8 Existential involvement or scenic epistemologies?

The endeavour of researching Israeli life in Berlin in relation to ‘religion’ turned into an all-absorbing endeavour which involved the situatedness of my interest in this particular migrant group, their ‘orientations’ and negotiations of ‘being Israeli’ ‘being Jewish’ and ‘being German’, in which I increasingly became entangled with my own biography. This section on methodology therefore combines the articulation of my positioning as a German non-Jewish researcher and the way I came to experience myself as a symptom of this scene and the enactment and performances that took place there and the methodological and theoretical considerations. Instead of engaging in a distanced method of sociological knowledge production, I came to experience and engage with this scene in a way that strongly suggested turning the anthropological gaze onto myself. I came to see this study as one of ‘situated knowledge’ (Haraway, 1988). Upon further analysis, my often-perplexing experiences offered insights into the dynamics of the scene. Despite an occasional desire for invisibility, the process of writing and telling people’s life stories and aspiring to make their voices heard, did not allow me to remain an unattached and ‘objective’ observer. Rather, my biography and situatedness and particularly my body became part of this scene, the enactment, the plot, the staging and its actors.  

Becoming part of this enactment also in the process of writing offers epistemological significance and insights into the politics of belonging and the workings of historical frameworks, which we ‘inherit’ in social frameworks, narratives and the ways emotions are passed down across generations. It was much later that I realised the extent of the significance - and the historical echoes - of my particular engagement and ‘my role’ in the scene. That is to say, the emotions, actions and experiences ‘felt’ and encountered are not merely particular, but they resonate with a broader scheme of a “cultural politics of emotion” (Ahmed, 2014). In the light of feminist research and reflexive epistemologies, it is not at all novel to consider the personal ‘experience’ as part of politics and societal structures more broadly. Yet, it was the ‘generalizability’ of my experience in which I became increasingly interested (e.g. Chapter 6).

26 I was further inspired by the work of Kurt Grünberg, who asks for the possibility to do ‘objective research’ after Auschwitz (Grünberg, 2007).
It has been argued that too much involvement can hinder the analytical credibility of the researcher. However, not addressing difficulties and at times allowing oneself to become a ‘vulnerable observer’ (Behar, 1996) can evolve into an act of epistemic violence. That is to say, careful sociological analysis of the given field requires addressing personal issues in order to counteract silencing and the generational and strategic suppression of guilt and shame so central to post-1945 German society (Mitscherlich and Mitscherlich, 1967). The reflexivity on my own positionality as a researcher is neither to reject research objectivity nor to pursue an auto-ethnographic endeavour. Instead, through bringing in my own position, I seek to gain deeper sociological insights and develop necessary epistemologies in the study of social worlds, particularly urban scenes.

2.9 Enacting ‘being German’

Following from this it becomes clear, that one cannot embark on a project of studying biography, identity and belonging without addressing one’s own. While I had been theoretically aware of this anthropological standard procedure of reflexivity, the endeavour of researching Jews and Israelis in Berlin regularly confronted me with questions about the root of my interest. While some responded with enthusiasm, others scrutinized my understanding of internal Israeli debates and dynamics or tested my Hebrew. Most non-Jewish Germans showed a tendency to start a discussion on Israel-Palestine, Israeli politics, concentration camps, Holocaust survivors or Jewish-Christian dialogue. Or, they made a confession of familial guilt, offered some anti-Semitic or philosemitic remarks, commented on their recent trips to Israel-Palestine and parties in Tel Aviv, recalled their time as volunteers in a Kibbutz or their engagement in favour of Palestinians or elaborated on their recent fascination with the latest work of Amos Oz, David Grossman etc. In short, my topic of research was, in and of itself, subject to a plethora of projections, emotions and sentiments. Thus, the mere ‘naming of my research topic’ seemed to generate enough data for a separate thesis.

Researchers like Phil Langer have engaged in the critical reflection of their research interests. By asking ‘Why do I do what I do?’ (Langer, 2015) he convincingly engages in a critical scrutiny of his own situatedness within German society as part of an ethical, methodological and social scientific endeavour.

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27 As I cannot elaborate on this in full detail, what became apparent was the way in which people wanted to somehow demonstrate their expertise and knowledge of the topic, rather than learning about my project.
Similarly, I related my interest to my personal trajectory of having spent a year abroad in the United States during secondary school, staying with a Jewish family, where I became familiarised with Jewish practice and religion. Naturally, I had never considered the larger societal framework of an interest that stems from a specific German upper-middle class milieu oriented towards Israel, often with a parental experience of volunteering in a Kibbutz (mine included). Thus, the way my biography was embedded in German-Jewish, German-Israeli relations of structural reconciliation, it increasingly dawned on me in the process of research. The co-constructedness of ‘Jewish’ and ‘German’, which Dan Diner has framed as ‘negative symbiosis’ (Diner, 1987), necessarily involves the interrogation of ‘Germanness’ and of ‘being German’.

This is not to subsume any direct “responsibility” within my generation, rather it seeks to situate oneself in a societal context in which we ‘inherit a lifeworld’, a consciousness deeply embedded in the self-construction of society. Further, it is a history, in which the othering of a group had legitimised its systematic destruction and persecution, the consequences of which continued to be felt by my participants, whether in the form of trauma, migration and flight on one side, or the prevalence of guilt and shame on the other. I am also alluding to the phenomenon of racialised categorization28 and discrimination based on religious and ethnic belonging as it again appears to infuse contemporary discourse on religion, especially in the light of migration, refugees and asylum, which is related to the growing presence of Islam in Europe.

Based on my looks, I usually passed as Jewish or Israeli. I had been used to not being ‘seen as German’ from an early age. During stays abroad, I usually received surprised remarks about Germans as ‘tall, blond and blue-eyed’, all of which I am not. Due to my dark complexion and manner of behaviour, I did not usually stick out. Abroad, I had always enjoyed those moments, particularly in the light of early childhood (and in fact adulthood) memories when I had sometimes been asked, ‘where are you really from’? Or, received compliments that ‘my German was indeed formidable’ with further enquiries about where my

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28 Here I draw on the conceptualisations of Anthias and Yuval-Davis: “Race is one way by which the boundary is to be constructed between those who can and those who cannot belong to a particular construction of a collectivity or population. In the case of race this is on the basis of an immutable biological or physiognomic difference which may or may not be seen to be expressed mainly in culture or lifestyle but is always grounded on the separation of human populations by some notion of stock or collective heredity of traits.” (Anthias and Yuval-Davis, 1992:1-2)
parents were from. As a child, this all left me severely irritated and with a wish to be recognised as ‘fully German’. It was only much later that I realised these remarks were acts of ‘racialization’ and processes of othering, based on a certain phenotype. Ironically, the story of my mother’s parents involved a migration trajectory of leaving home and escaping Poland in the late 1950s. Indeed, they ‘strove for Germanness’ to reach full recognition in terms of German nationals as well as their degrees and professional backgrounds.

This allusion serves to exemplify how ‘being German’ is constructed, not only as a ‘somatic norm’ (Puwar, 2004), but also through the unease with otherness that appears to run through society. While growing up in a society imbued with guilt and shame while holding anti-Semitic and philosemitic stereotypes, my experience of otherness was indeed shaped by my elder sister who had acquired a severe mental disability at birth, the subsequent social treatment of her as an ‘other’ and my parents’ continuous efforts to obtain familial normalcy and cover up, if not erase difference. Thus, my situatedness sits ambivalently between the feeling of non-belonging to a German mainstream while still being positioned in a white, German (female) somatic norm, of a highly privileged educated middle class. The latter is part of the so-called majority society which continues to hold antisemitic stereotypes (Report on Antisemitism 2017). I am also alluding to this in order to show that throughout this thesis I am using the category ‘German’ not as an affirmative identity but as category that is constructed.

Thus, the experience of being othered was indeed twofold: the unease of being categorised by my body, as well as escaping the burden of ‘being German’ and embodying the ‘historical other’. It is in this respect that I entered this ethnography ‘through my body’, through what it feels like to be marked and placed in a category without ever having spoken about it. In short, external ascription. The experience of ‘passing as Jewish’ and the evoked desire to pass corresponded with other non-Jewish Germans interested in conversion who started to attend events and felt awkward about themselves being in those spaces while - still - non-Jews (see chapter 6). Returning to my epistemological reflection, Loic Wacquant refers to this as ‘sociology of flesh and blood’ where he urges for the ‘primacy of embodied practical

29 The Expert Report on Antisemitism published by the Federal Ministry of Interior, Building and Community problematises the research conduct on Antisemitic stereotypes. Distinguishing between classical anti-Jewish prejudice and secondary Antisemitism, different studies offer differing results. The Friedrich Ebert Foundation (FES, 2016) e.g. reports 10% of the research participants agreed ‘that the influence of Jews in society was too high’ (BMI, 2017:61).
knowledge, arising out of and continuously enmeshed in webs of action, upon which discursive mastery comes to be grafted.’ (Wacquant, 2015:2).

While Wacquant has been severely criticized for not considering his own positionality as a white researcher among black boxers (Davis, 2015), researchers have been for a long time considering how to do critical ethnography (ibid.) and whether this endeavour is possible or doomed to failure. Only through the involvement of one’s own situatedness (Haraway, 1988), the involvement of the body (as an intersectional experience) can one come closer to the craft of critical reflection of this very particular kind of situated knowledge production, which yet offers tremendous insight into social worlds. Inspired by Ruokonen-Engler and Siouti, who have provided a ‘roadmap’ on critical reflection in the process of doing biographical research (Ruokonen-Engler and Siouti, 2016), I began to understand my own biographical entanglements with the themes which I considered in my analysis and include throughout this work.

In this chapter, I thoroughly demonstrated the way in which I conducted this research and the methods and methodology that undergirded this study. I have shown how this method particularly traces processes and process structures (Schütze, 2016) behind social fields and its actors which was most suitable in understanding trajectories in this scene, its underlying structures and the background to what was being performed. I will now turn to the scene, its ‘stages’ and its ‘plot’.
3. Entering the Scene: ‘stages’ and the ‘staging’ of complexity

Entering a scene does not compare to entering a synagogue or a church building. It is not a specific building, a specific site or demarcated territory, it “is neither simply space, nor simply time”, (Blum, 2001:14). With that in mind, the way one enters a scene provides important insights into the dynamics and ‘workings’ of this social sphere, in my case entering a ‘Jewish’, ‘Israeli’, ‘Hebrew’ field as a non-Jewish, non-Israeli researcher. This chapter offers an in-depth description of how I encountered and entered into the scene, as well as the three initiatives, ‘stages’ where I became part of the ‘plot’. It follows the line of my own entering, into this ‘diaspora space’ (Brah, 1996). After describing the immersion, it seeks to provide a full picture of the sites I studied, which are guided by the analytical frameworks of urban scenes. The thick description contributes to my argument of complexity. Depicting ‘scenes’ from within the scenes, elaborating on process structures as well as the stages where this takes place, this chapter contributes to the understanding of how the scene constitutes itself as Jewish as well as alluding to the significance of ‘place’ for the scene. Before delving into my ethnographic trajectory, I will revisit existing theoretical work on urban scenes as well as the notion of diaspora, in order to place and locate this setting theoretically.

As alluded to earlier, Hitzler and Niederbacher conceive of scenes as having a certain social dynamic, a ‘glue’ that socially binds its ‘actors’ together. Further, they regard the scenic culture to be characterised by events, gatherings, communication and interactions, a specific ‘culture’ as well as a certain historical situatedness (Hitzler and Niederbacher, 2010). In relation to migrant scenes, Kira Kosnick emphasises the particularity of a ‘scenic sociality’ (Kosnick, 2014) which can cater for migrant groups and networks outside of existing institutions. While my data lent itself to thinking with and through ‘space’, ‘regularity’ organisational structures but particularly the dynamics of this scene, Blum’s concepts of ‘theatricality’ (2003:14) captures the dimension of performance significant to the field. As alluded to in the previous chapter, the notion of ‘scenic understanding’ (Lorenzer, 1985) provides a psychoanalytically informed concept in order to understand the underlying issues at work in this context. Most significantly, Blum characterises the scene as a matter of ‘doing, seeing and being seen’. Blurring the boundaries between public and private, the scene emphasises the thin line between the ‘view and the gaze’, (Blum, 2001).30 Passing the

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Hebrew speaking scene as an entry point to describe my encounter with the Hebrew choir, the synagogue and the Shabbat event, I demonstrate the interrelatedness of these gatherings as well as my personal ‘way in’. Attending to the group dynamics and ‘process structures’ (Schütze, 2016), I demonstrate its ‘transitive character’ (Hitzler and Niederbacher, 2010) and the ‘mortality’ of the scene (Blum, 2001) exemplified by the developments in the Hebrew choir. The enactments depicted in this chapter demonstrate how the depicted groups inhabit spaces in Berlin and thereby negotiate, reify and contest its constitution as ‘Jewish’.

Given the context of Jews migrating from Israel and elsewhere, the scenic construction needs to be related to the notion of diaspora. While original meaning of the term, “scattering “ or ‘expulsion’, is one traditionally used to describe the migratory experiences of Jews, Armenians or Greeks, who are seen as the historical prototypes of groups dispersed from their ‘homelands’. In light of the changes the term has undergone, the term calls for scrutiny in terms of its analytical value in this context. The concept of ‘Diaspora Jews’ continues to be applied to Jews living outside of Israel. In the light of a proliferation of ‘diasporas’, Brubaker opposed the inclination to treat everyone living outside his homeland as forming part of a diaspora. Instead, he suggested looking at diaspora as a condition, a practice, rather than a bounded group based on a common nationality and its potential longing to return to a specific territory (Brubaker, 2003:13). Together with a growing body of literature on transnationalism, scholars have ‘spatially turned’ the focus away from ‘homeland’ to the investigation of longings (Brah, 1996; Werbner, 2002) which are encapsulated in Brah’s concept of “homing desire”, which is dissimilar to the desire for a fixed homeland but refers to "a mythic place of desire in the “diasporic imagination”" (Brah, 1996:192). "In this sense it [home] is a place of no return, even if it is possible to visit the geographical territory that is seen as the place of ‘origin’. " (ibid: 192). Brah strongly suggests conceiving of a diasporic experience as historically and socio-economically specific: the same place can evoke very different experiences for individuals depending time, status, social position. In the context of a ‘New European Jewry’ Jewish studies scholars have similarly ‘spatially turned’ the idea of Israel as a ‘centre’ and Europe its ‘inferior periphery’ (Gilman, 2003; Aviv and Shneer, 2005). Evoking the debates around the concepts of diaspora seems vital, as all of my participants who migrated to Berlin ‘chose’ their migration to Berlin, as a matter of seeking opportunity, adventure or a better life, or following a partner. With frequent visits back to

31 Prior to Brubaker, Steven Vertovec had set a new research agenda in relation to three (possible) meanings of diaspora - ‘diaspora’ as social form, ‘diaspora’ as type of consciousness, and ‘diaspora’ as mode of cultural production (Vertovec, 1999)
Israel, they have the option of returning. This is particularly significant in the light of the recent arrival of large numbers of refugees seeking asylum in Germany and Berlin representing forced migration.

3.1 Entering Hebrew-Israeli Space

Based on my research interest on Israeli migrants in Berlin, I ‘entered’ spaces of Jewish-Israeli life by consulting Israeli friends, navigated the Internet about Israeli life in Berlin and drew on my existing ‘repertoire’ of Berlin’s Jewish life. Already in the process of rapprochement, the lines between ‘Jewish’, ‘Israeli’ and Hebrew were noticeably blurred. I joined the Facebook group ‘Israelis in Berlin’, a social media platform, whose administrator assisted people settling in to Berlin. Discussing practical and bureaucratic challenges, members of the group shared experiences, anecdotes, curiosities of their lives in and around the German capital, posted articles or engaged in political discussions – of varying sorts and qualities. At a later stage, some of my participants commented on the “kibbutz-like” nature of this group, referring to the unfiltered sharing of information or open criticisms of other users which tended to attract engagement and commentary much beyond personal involvement. Nonetheless, the group was largely seen as a helpful resource for advertising events, informing others about new groups and initiatives and exchanging general information etc.  

The rapidly growing group is not exclusive to Israelis located in Berlin: a number of my Israeli research participants had joined the group before moving to Berlin in order to gather information, establish a network or acquire a sense of the atmosphere of the city. Besides that, non-Israelis - Jews and non-Jews alike - joined the group in order to find out about events, follow discussions, improve their Hebrew or simply maintain a connection to Israel. 

Despite its popularity, I also met Israelis who purposefully avoided this group. Some of them regarded their migration to Berlin as a social and political escape from Israel, with a corresponding wish to cut various social ties with other Israelis. Most of my Israeli participants however kept an Israeli social network and emphasised the ‘comfort’ and ‘homeliness’ of speaking Hebrew. Some of them even revealed that they almost exclusively socialised with Israelis and Hebrew speakers. Yet, upon further enquiry, this was attributed to

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32 Others also indicated that the virtual existence of a community conveyed the sense of not being alone in the new city and feeling, a sensation of partaking in a larger community of individuals in a similar, if not equal position.

33 Some researchers on ‘Israelis in Berlin’ even used this group in order to recruit participants for their study (Kranz, 2015; 2016).

34 This is in line with one of the biographical cases examined in this work, ‘Inbal’ in chapter 5.
‘coincidence’ rather than intentional separatism. As many of my research participants confirmed, speaking Hebrew in daily life was a vital aspect of the migration experience. The social and professional circles also varied when a partner was either not Israeli or a Hebrew speaker. A number of my participants engaged in so-called language tandems’, where ‘Hebrew’ was exchanged with ‘German’. I also used them in order to improve my Hebrew and as an ethnographic tool to meet Israelis and learn about their lives. Apart from meeting Israelis in this scene, I also encountered a number of non-Jewish Germans at those events. Some had spent some time in Israel, had started to learn Hebrew because of a partner, others were scholars of Jewish studies, or ‘just curious’ about Israeli life in Berlin. In her work on diaspora space, Avtar Brah envisions a realm which is not solely inhabited by “those who have migrated and their descendants, but equally by those who are constructed and represented as ‘indigenous’.” (Brah, 1996:16). As will become clear throughout this thesis, the question of the ‘native’ became increasingly unclear. A number of Israelis I met had German citizenship and familial background from Germany. Thus, who, in fact, was the ‘native’ and who the foreigner? Was I, as a non-Jew and ‘broken Hebrew speaker’ not the foreigner to those spaces or was it the Israeli I met, whose grandparents had fled Germany in the 1930s and who had grown up in Israel and now spoke German with a markedly Hebrew accent?

The non-Jewish Germans attending these events, had either spent time in Israel or had been exposed to Hebrew and Israeli culture. As I explained above, my physical features and behaviour led to the assumption that I was not German. The open space of such events involved the practice of identifying people and marking them according to national and ethnic background as ‘Israeli’, (non-Jewish) ‘German’ or ‘other’. Inevitably, this was based on stereotypes, imagined group markers, styles and a certain ‘habitus’ (Bourdieu, 1992). Similar to everybody else, I engaged in an act of identifying one’s nationality, an act which Puwar considers common practice: the stereotyping by outward appearance and phenotype in places of diversity and heterogeneity (Puwar, 2004). Most of the artistic events were conducted in English, yet a discussion series, “ha Gimnasia”, in close alignment to the Haskalah movement and tradition, as well as a few readings and events organised by the Hebrew Library were held in Hebrew. The Hebrew magazine Spitz as well as the Hebrew

35 This resonates with research on Israeli Diaspora communities elsewhere, (Gold, 2002; Moshkovitz, 2013) as well as for Berlin (Kranz 2016; Rau, 2016)
36 Known as the ‘Sifriat haIvrit’, the ‘Hebrew Library’ is a private collection of Hebrew books in a private home. It came under discussion and scrutiny after Poet and Author Mati Shemoelof described it as the representation of a Hebrew Diaspora outside of Israel. While responses criticized him as idealising a private collection and an event-space of, in fact, limited
Library are examples of how the Hebrew languages helps create a diasporic social sphere which stands outside of the German speaking realm seemingly detached from the Jewish community represented by the “Jüdische Allgemeine”. In the framework of the celebration of 50 years of diplomatic relations, a variety of events, discussions and articles appeared, many with the intention of celebrating the latest development of German-Israeli relations: the growing “Israeli diaspora” in Berlin. While discussions in Israel seemed to reflect a much more complicated relationship related to the issue of “yerida”, artistic representations outside the mainstream discourse seemed to reflect deeper complexities than the superficially represented narratives of a “Jewish return” (Lapidot and Ilany, 2015). In these events, it was always taken as a given, that ‘Israeli’ referred to ‘Jewish’ Israelis, not e.g. Palestinians and other minorities with Israeli citizenship. Furthermore, in the light of increasingly heated debates on Muslims in Germany, demands for ‘integration’ related to German language skills so prominent in discussions on migration, were virtually absent from these forums.

3.2 The Hebrew Choir

A few weeks after attending some of those events, an Israeli colleague told me about the establishment of a Hebrew Choir. He jokingly suggested that ‘this could be my first case’. Due to my musical background, this project immediately drew my attention. I contacted the conductor who invited me to a rehearsal.

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37 Since its first issue in 2013, the magazine represents relatively high-quality journalism with interviews, essays, opinion pieces and reportages. After two years of existence, it also published a bi-lingual, Hebrew-German edition as “a sign of not staying entirely inward-looking” (as Tal Alon, the chief editor stated, 2/2015). It also opened to more public issues beyond the Israeli population in Berlin. Another publication, which began in 2016, was the Hebrew magazine of “Mi khan ve’elaih”, “From Here to You”, an independent magazine organised by Tal Chever-Chebovski, an Israeli specialising in Yiddish and Hebrew cultures outside of Israel. Together with Mati Shemoelof, they seek to revive a Hebrew culture outside Israel and thereby deterritorialise the Hebrew language and counteract territorial claims made by the Zionist project and contemporary Israeli state politics. (Amit, 2018).

38 Yerida is the term to refer to emigration from Israel. The somewhat derogatory term was often used to refer to Israelis moving to Berlin in Israeli media discourse (“yordim”).

39 One example is the National Broadcasting Company (Deutschlandfunk) and its series on Israelis in Berlin, 2015

40 Among the larger cultural events to emerge at this time was the ID-Festival, a German-Israeli cultural festival including fine arts, music and intellectual discussions. Supported by the Israeli Embassy to Germany and the Ministry of Culture and Education (Germany), the Festival brought together an Israeli orchestra, fine arts and artists, Israeli food, poetry as well as a philosophical cabaret, led by Ofri Ilany and Elad Lapidot. The festival continues to take place every year with differing themes around issues of identity, migration and Berlin more broadly Michal Bodemann considered this event to epitomise the divide between the Israeli and the local Jewish communities in Berlin http://www.taz.de/Archiv-Suche/?5271993&s=Michal%252BBodemann (last accessed, 27.07.2018)
The first time I came to rehearsals of the Hebrew Choir, I was slightly hesitant. It was a hot summer day when I first made my way to the church where rehearsals took place. I instantly recognize Aron, the conductor. He is the same charismatic presence as all the other choral conductors I had worked with in my life. And yet, this setting seems slightly different. I am seated among the Altos. A small circle is placed around the black grand piano. We start singing and soon the girl next to me gives me a puzzled look “how come you know it already? Do you read the notes?” I smile and nod. She seems surprised and shows me how she had put little arrows on the Hebrew text indicating where the voice has to go up and down.41

As seen from my fieldnotes, what first impressed me in the Hebrew Choir was the diverse range of nationalities, ages and musical ability. Gathering from the languages, the people I met at the first encounter were Germans, Israelis, an older lady with a British accent and a young man speaking a mixture of English and German. The rehearsal was located in the annex of a Prussian church, in a bare room paved in wood, which caused an intense and amplified sound. At this first rehearsal, the singing was hesitant and the fact that there was no audition required seemed to gather people from a wide musical spectrum. Complimenting my singing at the end of the rehearsal, the conductor expressed doubts as to whether this choir ‘was really what I was looking for’. I must have blushed, smiled and said that I would like to come back. I did not yet mention my research.

My first rehearsal described above took place in August 2014. I soon learned that the choir was established in April of that year as an initiative of a woman who had recently returned to Berlin after a stay in Israel. Having sung in a choir in Israel, she was hoping to continue her Hebrew singing in Berlin. She came across Aron, a young Israeli musician who had recently moved to Berlin in order to study at one of Berlin’s prestigious music schools. Well-connected in the Protestant church scene, she managed to find a rehearsal space free of charge at one of Berlin’s centrally located churches. Over the first year of its existence, the choir acquired more singers through advertisements on Facebook, as well as articles in Spitz and the Jüdische Allgemeine, which wrote about this unusual musical encounter in a church. Thus, the choir gained attention from the local Israeli and Jewish communities. While many members found the advertisement on Facebook, others heard about the choir via their offline

41 Fieldnotes, August 2014
social ‘network’. Nurit, an Israeli from Haifa told me that someone had applied to her for a job in the Hebrew tourist business. His application mentioned “Conductor of the Hebrew Choir” and she and another Israeli friend both found their way to the choir. Trained as an opera singer, Nurit had moved to Germany in order to pursue her professional training. Unable to find permanent employment in the musical world, she decided to pursue a different professional pathway. The choir offered a first reconnection with the musical world – yet in a new and non-professional environment.

As will become clear in chapters five and six, the motivations to ‘try’ and join the choir significantly varied. While some were interested in creating a social network, others sought the chance to sing elaborate choral music, learn to sing in Hebrew as a way of (re-)creating a homely environment far away from Israel, or support the project as well as the conductor and his musical talent. For the non-Jewish German members, the choir presented a way to sing in Hebrew but also a chance to connect to Israel, learn or improve their Hebrew, or connect with Israelis in Berlin. A few members were in romantic relationships with Israelis or had a Jewish partner. Some had already converted to Judaism, others were in the process of conversion, again others simply lived a Jewish life without formally converting. The Christian members were predominantly Protestant (all German-speakers) of whom many had spent time in Israel or had an interest in the Hebrew language and what I consider a ‘historically embedded’ curiosity - desire - in things Jewish. Among them were a few for whom the choir presented the first close personal contact with Jews and Jewish Israelis in particular. For a few Israelis who had just moved to Berlin, the choir equally was a first close contact with non-Jewish Germans. Combining professional, semi-professional and non-professionals with no or little previous musical education, musical and Hebrew ‘literacy’ strongly varied among its members.

Most of the members who had been schooled in Germany had received a musical education, while the musical ‘literacy’ varied among the Israeli members, similar with the Hebrew skills among Germans. For many raised in Germany, the choir presented a familiar a setting: the majority of them had either sung in a choir or had at one point been involved in some other form of musical ensemble or learned at least one instrument. While this is representative of a

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42 The term German includes Jews and non-Jewish Germans. It largely refers to individuals who were reared and educated in Germany, spoke German and held German citizenship. This is significant as the latter included Jews from Germany but not individuals reared in Israel who held German citizenship. This indication already reflects the complexity of drawing categorical lines corresponding with the self-definition of individuals.
German middle class, individuals disposed over differing degrees of ‘choral capital’ (Einarsdottir, 2012). For Einarsdottir, this is a combination of music reading skills, the ability to stay in tune and having developed a kind of habitus in choral singing (Einarsdottir, 2012). Having said this, in the Hebrew choir, the distribution of symbolic and cultural capital was indeed subject to negotiation: due to its great diversity, the ‘cultural’ reference frame was not clearly defined, and actors drew on their respective ‘cultural reference frames’ which in turn were shaped by their respective societal contexts and personal biographies. Beyond the cultural diversity, there was also a generational divide. The age ranged from ca. 24 to 83. The eldest member was a German Jew who fled Germany and immigrated to Australia in 1939, only to return to the German Democratic Republic in the 1960s. From the constitution of members, we can already see that ‘Hebrew’ was an important connecting sign, yet with very differing significations among the members. The conductor was among the youngest in the group. He had received musical and especially choral training at school, though had never led a choir prior to this project and was among the few who did not (yet) hold a university degree when starting the project.

3.2.1 Inhabiting a church space

At this point in time, the cityscape of Berlin no longer offers empty warehouses and vast amounts of space available for public use. As a consequence of vast gentrification processes, real estate management and diverse investment, space in central Berlin has become a scarce resource (Holm, 2006). Consequently, rehearsal space has to be rented and churches are often able to accommodate musical groups, especially if they benefit the image or interests of the particular congregation. The fact that rehearsals took place in this church was due to the ‘protestant’ network of the initiators. Given an exceptional location free of charge, the choir benefited from the ‘protestant infrastructures’ and was consequently also shaped by them. The group was expected to reciprocate the ‘hospitality’, e.g. by performing at certain events and services. The church had been built in the 18th century and was restored at the end of the 19th century. Some of the Israeli members expressed their awkwardness to be and perform in this space in front of the cross, others however preferred the ‘Christian’ over a ‘Jewish’

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43 This aspect will be taken up in chapters 5 and 6, where the societal context is considered in relation to individual biographies. In this context, Goffman would refer to cultural knowledge. I prefer to take the terminology from the arts and music and speak about ‘repertoire’, which is acquired and reflects different styles and genres that have been rehearsed.  
44 She has published her life story in two books.  
45 For reasons of anonymity I will refer to the church of rehearsal in italics hereafter.
space. In fact, some even said that if rehearsals had taken place at a synagogue, they would not have wanted to attend. The same member also expressed unease about performing at the synagogue and openly declared, performed and stylized his resistance against being, singing and performing there. The question of space was significant, as the structural demands of being and benefitting of that space shaped the dynamics of the choir. At the same time, the church space was also temporarily shaped by the bodies inhabiting it (Lefebvre, 1991; 1995, Löw, 2008). The presence of this diverse group temporarily turned the designated Christian environment into something different from its original designation. Nevertheless, the ‘Christian’ environment conferred upon the group an atmosphere (Böhme, 1995)\(^{46}\), which was instilled with the historical trajectory of the relationship between Christianity and Judaism. Unsurprisingly, the perceptions of the atmosphere differed across the participants. Undoubtedly, the space was constituted socially, but in fact, the social (of this gathering) was equally constituted spatially (Massey, 1994; 2005) and musically (Born, 2013). Thus, the space itself bore the aesthetic remnants of the past, while being located in a district that seemed to have arrived in the multicultural 21\(^{st}\) century global city. It was this space, which represented overlapping layers of history, ranging from the Prussian empire, the Weimar Republic, National Socialism and the German Democratic Republic, to arrive at a post-1989 re-unified cityscape of Berlin. The significance of singing in a church not only evoked discussion, contestation and negotiation among the choir members, it also reflects the positions of non-Jewish Christian members, who possessed the cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986) to make these spaces available. The congregation of the church in turn was ‘pleased to host its new Jewish neighbours’\(^{47}\) and the Hebrew Choir appeared to be a welcome signature, conveying openness and the image of enhancing ‘interreligious encounters and dialogues.’

3.2.2 Ritual and regularity in the Choir

Choir rehearsals offered a regular event one night per week. Often, choir members missed sessions due to visiting family in Israel or elsewhere or professional and family commitments conflicting with rehearsal times. One of the moments that stood out in this routine was the ‘arrival’ at the church before rehearsals. In the summer time, individuals gathered in the

\(^{46}\) For Gernot Böhme, atmosphere is something most people know, yet its ontological status is diffuse (Böhme, 1995:288). It is the reality of the perceived as a sphere of its presence and the reality of the perceiver as long as he is physically present and can feel the atmosphere (ibid: 298). Löw criticizes Böhme’s negligence of the impact of culture and socialization in the perception of atmospheres (Löw, 2008: 45). We can see how this is relevant here: different socializations perceived a different kind of atmosphere.

\(^{47}\) Statement by the pastor on the pastor in the memorial service.
church yard, in the winter, people gathered inside, some greeting each other with hugs and kisses, others with more distant salutary gestures conversing about the latest news. ‘The arrival’ suggested the existence of several subgroups, individuals who knew each other before, from synagogue, church or other networks. While at the beginning of this project shyness and uncertainty prevailed, the volume of the group soon increased. This not only coincided with the strengthening of group dynamics but also with the group tensions, to the extent that one of the members called it a ‘screaming choir’⁴⁸ and spoke my mind. Evidently, this inhibited the possibility to listen to and hear one another, or to form and create a balanced sound. Rehearsals were intermitted by a break, which according to the singers was ‘too short’ while ‘too long’ according to the conductor. This divergence epitomised the differing significations of the choir: while representing an important social space for some, it served the purpose of a serious professional musical endeavour for others. After the rehearsal, a small group of singers tended to continue the evening over beer at a local pub. Here, a few members - myself included - had more extended conversations about the choir, the repertoire, Israeli and German politics, Hebrew, housing prices in Berlin and the like. These conversations provided insights into the lives of the choir members and also created a certain in-group with connections beyond the rehearsal times. For some, the ‘after-beer’ was too late, while others minded the smoky bar. More significantly, these gatherings were not publicly announced but developed within a circle which seemed to create closer alliances. Only after a performance did the whole group gather over drinks.

3.2.3 Language

Rehearsals in the Hebrew Choir were held in English and it served as the common language. At the same time, German and Hebrew were equally present, and with varying degrees of Hebrew (or none) among Germans, similar to the German skills among Israelis. Language in the choir played a significant role as it functioned as a connection as well as a marker of group position and identification. Despite some Germans being fluent in Hebrew, they, for the most part, were not socialised in Israel and did not share the migration experience from Israel. The Germans with fluent Hebrew had spent time in Israel. Having said this, alliances were not solely based on language, but instead they corresponded with interests in and for the choir, gender and sexuality or connections of other kinds.

⁴⁸ German Original: ‘ein Schrei-Chor’
While manoeuvring different languages served as a means of communication, it also contributed to one’s status in the group. The ability to express oneself in all three languages seemed to add to one’s cultural capital in the scene and to the ‘Hebrew choral’ capital more generally. Yet, choral capital was also related to one’s performance and musical contribution to the choir. That is to say, speaking the three languages at hand together with musical capital (a kind of cultural capital) allowed to obtain a better position in this field. While in the beginning I had been under a certain assumption, that status rose with ‘being Israeli’ or ‘being Jewish’, it was rather the capital of a well-educated (German) bourgeois middle class, which seemed to affect one’s position in the field. However, having said this, as we will see later, this could vary situationally. Thus, bringing together cultural and national diversity, the ‘rules of the game’ (Bourdieu, 1992) and the subsequent distribution of capital were subject to negotiation and sometimes dispute. Inevitably, the distribution and accumulation of capital was entangled with the representations, ascriptions and images of ‘German’, ‘Israeli’. That is to say, that for some ‘German’ not only provoked the image of punctuality, correctness and ‘inherited’ authoritarianism or obedience, but also of high-class bourgeoisie that some wished to acquire in Berlin. Beyond the different languages, there was the tendency to adopt a specific jargon in the scene, to which I will return in chapter 5 and 6. This relates to the tendency to use words in their context-specific language, using Hebrew words in German or German words in Hebrew respectively. While Erdheim regards this as the migrant’s display of a certain expertise (Erdheim in Scheifele, 2008) we could also relate it to the correspondence of language with place. Thus, the language or ‘jargon’ reflected a transnational space.

4.2.4 Music

In the beginning, the choir was attractive because of its diverse repertoire: combining low-level choral music and arrangements of well-known liturgical songs. The repertoire consisted almost exclusively of Hebrew songs with a few exceptions. Originally, it had not been the conductor’s intention to only sing Hebrew music, but the initiator had insisted on

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49 Here I draw on an Interview with Orr (August, 2016).
50 For example, Adon Olam’, a liturgical song traditionally sung at the end of Schacharit service and has a plethora of different melodies from Ashkenazi and Sephardic traditions. The text sings to the might of the ‘Lord of the Universe who reigns above all and sings to a personal God who is perceived as the saviour. The song ends with: bejado afkid ruchi ‘in his hand I commend my soul (my spirit).
making Hebrew the dominant language. This even had to be stated in the charter of the Verein\textsuperscript{51}. The question over the repertoire and the language turned into one the biggest challenges for the Choir. The repertoire ranged from traditional liturgical songs from Ashkenazi and Sephardic traditions, as well as choral arrangements by 19\textsuperscript{th} century composers (i.e. Lewandowski, a representative of the reform tradition which soon vanished from the regular repertoire). The conductor also set choral arrangements from Israeli pop songs, such as the Israeli hit ‘haPerach Begani’ by Mizrachi composer and songwriter Avihu Medina.\textsuperscript{52} While the repertoire was largely based on the conductor’s compositions from religiously infused texts, members increasingly demanded to have greater influence on the choice of the repertoire. While some complained that the music was ‘too melancholic’ and rehearsals too strict, others were frustrated about the demands of the conductor and their difficulty to study and learn the challenging parts of the choir. In the meantime, a small offshoot of the choir, a vocal ensemble was established to sing more elaborate choral music and act as a ‘project-choir’ with a specific programme and a concert at the end of a rehearsal phase.

3.2.5 The plot unfolds

Over the first year of its existence, the choir attracted around 35 regular members consisting of Germans, Israelis, as well as participants from the Americas and Ukraine. In the beginning the number of Israelis and German nationals was almost even, but over time, the number of German singers increased. For some of the Israeli singers who wanted to keep a distance from religion, it was significant, that it was a ‘Hebrew’, not an Israeli, and especially not a ‘Jewish’ choir despite all Israelis being Jewish. As I have shown before, the categories of ‘Hebrew’, ‘Israeli’ and ‘Jewish’ are not meticulously separable, which increasingly played a role in the choir. This already became visible early on: a few months after its establishment, the rehearsal time fell on the first night of Chanukah in December and one of the members, a German convert to Judaism had brought a small Chanukiah. Upon lighting it, all started to sing Chanukah songs. Lighting the Chanukiah in front of the baptistry and singing the songs in the shadow of the crucifix created an unusual blend, yet the smiling faces revealed

\textsuperscript{51} German: Vereinsatzung

\textsuperscript{52} Avihu Medina is an Israeli arranger, singer and composer of Yemenite origin. His composition, the song HaPerach Begani was first sung and performed by Zohar Argov in a song contest entailing a breakthrough for Mizrachi (Jews from North Africa and Arab speaking countries) music and arts. The adoption of that song and its arrangement for choral music was indeed a conversion as it put the somewhat edgy politically significant song into a European style choral composition. While this evoked specific connotations among Israelis and Israeli singers, it had less cultural meaning attached to it for the non-Israelis.
untainted joy about singing familiar songs in a strange place. In this situation, Israelis could draw on their ‘Hebrew capital’, of being experts in these songs. Due to a number of members being part of the synagogue Bet Daniel, activities of this synagogue holidays and other special events were announced and often posted in the Facebook group. Some of the choir members regularly prayed in the synagogue, others had started to live a Jewish observant life and attend synagogue, without having officially converted. Others were regulars at the synagogue without being observant. On the other end of the spectrum were individuals like the initiator, a non-Jewish German, who upon return from Israel, had adopted a Jewish lifestyle, including celebrating Jewish holidays and— as far as possible— observing dietary laws, kashrut and tried to keep Shabbat. As will become clear in chapter 6, the choir represented much more than ‘just singing’ but a vital part in the endeavour of taking up and maintaining an Israeli and Hebrew sociality, which, for some, was entangled with the desire to become Jewish. While for some Israeli members the ‘Hebrew sociality’ was also important, it was the singing itself and the created music that was desired. Early in the beginning, I was intrigued by a few members who commented on the music referring to ‘the heavens’ or the ‘spiritual moment’ in reference to certain songs, and the aesthetic and embodied experience they described. It is well-known that music and especially singing and the human voice can engender and trigger the most profound human emotions (Middleton, 1990). While singing is an essential part of the Jewish liturgical tradition (Bohlman, 2008) the study of music and its connection to religion and transcendence looks back at a long tradition. Common references to the collective experiences of being ‘something bigger’ than the group or the ‘imagined community’ (Anderson, 1983) that it seemed to create, underline that the musical experience evoked the feeling of being ‘moved’, ‘touched’ by something that was beyond the immanent, as members stated.

After a year of its existence, the choir went on its first choral retreat to a village in the countryside of Brandenburg. This time was remembered as ‘particularly special’ by most participants.53 Referencing it as ‘paradise’, ‘the opening of the heart’ or ‘a very moving experience for body and soul’ the experience of a weekend in a self-catered house outside of Berlin seemed to resemble a utopian place as it created an ‘imagined’ and a real community among its members. Later, I learned that the somewhat neglected space in the former GDR re-created a Kibbutz atmosphere for some and evoked childhood memories and a sense of

53 Many participants referred to it in their individual interviews and recalled it as something extraordinary.
home. For others, it was the intimacy of ‘being together in a shared space’, that intensified the feeling of a group and of belonging. With hindsight, the group dynamics at this event were particularly significant as the amount of pressure of performing or meeting a certain standard were relatively low. Upon return the dynamics in the group had noticeably changed to a more familial atmosphere, which manifested itself in longer personal conversations, group jokes, common memories and affective interactions. The atmosphere was relaxed, and it was at that time that personal stories were shared and biographical trajectories unfolded alongside intensive engagement in rehearsing the repertoire. While some of the Israeli members had to encounter the harshness of this Eastern-German countryside the retreat had fostered a sense of group cohesion. Upon return, the first plans for a ‘real concert’ of the Hebrew choir took shape.

### 3.2.6 Performing with the Choir

From the beginning, there was a strong desire among the group for the choir to perform, to present the work to the public and thereby have an audience. After less than a year of its existence, the choir organised a first concert which took place in the church. Discussions prior to that concert had reflected on enlarging the limited repertoire of the choir by turning it into a ‘cultural event’. One of the non-Jewish members, Peter, suggested to read poetry and texts in between choral performances and suggested Martin Buber. This was not well-received by others. The conductor was at the forefront arguing against the conversion of the ‘concert’ into a ‘Jewish event’. The discussion revealed the different imaginations and ideas of what this choir should be or what it should represent. Peter’s comment (and his statements in a later interview) revealed the intermixing of Israeli and Jewish, Israeli choral music and early 20th century Jewish German philosophers. Later, he expressed that these texts had especially touched him during his studies. Before joining the choir, he had never been in close contact with either Jews or Israelis and often expressed a certain uncertainty towards ‘their culture’. Aron’s refusal to turn the ‘concert’ into something Jewish, revealed his intention of singing and performing Hebrew choral music without extending its scope to a ‘Jewish event’. Not only did this discussion reveal the differing positions present in the choir,

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54 On the journey to the countryside, the toddler of one of the members fell out of his pushchair on the bus which resulted in a shock reaction by his mother. As a matter of security, the driver called the police. The encounter with German police guards evoked even greater fear and anxiety among the Israelis unfamiliar with these procedures.

55 One of the first performances I came to be part of, was a service devoted to the commemoration of the Auschwitz-liberation held at the church combined with a reading by the eldest member, who had fled Berlin in the 1930s.
it also provided insights into the desires of its members: establishing a musical career or the desire to recreate or retrieve something lost, now ‘revived’. The issue was resolved by organising choral pieces with solo performances in-between, without reciting Martin Buber.

At the performance itself, the formerly eclectic group of individuals too shy to sing had become a representative choir: almost thirty choral singers in elegant black garb stood in front of the Altar room performing Hebrew music. The head of the board spoke about the ‘birth’ of the Hebrew choir still in children’s shoes and emphasised the ‘Jewish’ traditions where the songs and pieces derived from. Although the pieces were not perfect in terms of intonation, rhythm or the balance of sound, the particular success of this performance seemed to be the enthusiasm, the certainty, with which its members were part of this group and engaged in the act of singing together. The video-taped concert reflected a unified group which was focussed on Aron, the conductor, and his body language of communicating with the choir, his singers. Before the concert, agitated tension lingered among the singers and when the dress rehearsal was over, Aron initiated a prayer like chant of encouragement. The concert attracted a large audience of Israeli migrants and friends and families of choir members, as well as members of the church congregation. After the concert, I sought responses and heard appreciation and enthusiasm about Hebrew music being heard in this significant place in Berlin, the beauty of the choral music as well as the quality of the performance. A number of Israelis I spoke with afterwards also expressed their estrangement of performing in a church space, particularly in front of a large golden crucifix behind the Altar. In a different performance, this issue was taken up as one song was an adaptation of the ‘sh’ma Israel’, and was considered inappropriate to be recited in a church space, coming close to blasphemy. While it did not evolve into a dispute, the discussion ‘over the cross’ was only one among several disagreements ‘on religious matters’. Nonetheless, particularly appreciated were the arrangements of traditional songs such as Osseh Shalom, which many Israelis recognised. In one of my interviews with choir members, Mara stated: “we couldn’t stop talking about how genius these arrangements were, and how talented Aron, the conductor was”. Equally, Omer, another Israeli was in awe and repeatedly stated how he had

56 One of the central elements in the Jewish daily prayer. Nicolas de Lange comments on the Sh’mah: “The rhythm of the day is marked for observant Jews by the succession of prayers. There are actually two different cycles: the Shna (which is technically a scriptural reading rather than a prayer) is recited twice daily, in the evening and in the morning, while the statutory prayer or t’fillah (commonly known as Amidah, ‘standing’, because it is always recited standing up) is recited three times each day, evening, morning and afternoon Both the Sh’mah and the Amidah form part of the service of the synagogue, and many Jews prefer to say them, where possible, with a congregation. Nevertheless, strictly speaking there is an obligation for each Jewish man (and woman in the case of the Amidah) to say them even if alone.” (de Lange, 2000:95).
always wanted to support the ‘musical talent of Aron.’ One of the non-Jewish Germans, Silvia, found the experience ‘magical’ and was ‘totally overwhelmed’ by the performance with the group. Conducting for an audience of this size (approx. 200) was a premiere for the conductor and he was visibly impressed by his own achievement. The remarkable experience of this concert was the transformative experience described by performers and audience of multi-layered cause: it was not only the spirit of this diverse group, the re-emergence of Hebrew choral music performed in the middle of Berlin, but also the transformative power of sound that temporarily converted the Prussian church into an encounter of various sensory blends. Similar to the experience in the choir, the music allowed audience members and singers to hear what they ‘desired’ to hear: for some, familiar tunes from Israel in an elaborate choral arrangement ‘European style’, for other it was an almost nostalgic fantasy of a Hebrew and Jewish revival in Berlin embodied by ‘Jews’ and ‘Germans’ alike, merging into a unity, the ultimate ‘symbiosis’. In that sense, it was in the eyes of the ‘receiver’ the beholder and the performers to perceive what was ‘Jewish’ ‘Hebrew’ ‘Israeli’ or indeed ‘German’ about the performance or all of those categories together. While the Hebrew music had transformed the space, it was also shaped by its acoustics. Deterritorialized from Israel but presenting ‘home’ for some, it represented orientalised, exoticised fantasies for others and thereby exemplified the ‘diasporic space’. Taking place in a ‘Christian’ space, it blurred the boundaries between religion and the secular, interrogating rather producing existing categories. Musicologists like Nicholas Cook (2014) emphasise the vitality of performance as a group for the formation of identity in music. I have elaborated on this performance in detail, as the situation of the performance satisfied the needs of the actors. By way of the musical performance, categories were temporarily suspended and removed through the enactment of a unified group. This group was not marked by boundaries, but instead by the fluidity of categories enabled by this musical realm. These moments allowed for each member to define her own sense of belonging.

3.2.7 Frontiers, boundaries and lines

Having seen the temporary suspension of boundaries and frontiers, it was from the beginning, that interactions in the choir were characterised by ‘boundaries’ and ‘frontiers’. In correspondence with the different ‘cultural repertoires’ in the choir, the establishment of

57 I will return to this aspect in Chapter 4.
boundaries was characteristic for the entire scene which will become clear in the following. While social interactions tend to be marked by distinctions, categorisations and ‘frontiers’, the ‘frontiers’ I observed did not correspond with or confirm a kind of ‘ethnic boundary making’ some researchers suggest (Wimmer, 2013). In fact, frontiers could coincide with ‘ethnic lines’ but in many cases, they did not. In fact, alluding to such a notion would obscure the dynamics at hand. While Gilman considers Jewish identities to be constructed in relation to frontiers which can be of linguistic kind (Gilman, 2003), they could be racial (Anthias and Yuval-Davis, 1992) they can be acted out as a performative repetition (Butler 1993). In my field, and especially in the choir, ‘frontiers’ were constantly shifting, renegotiated, or played with. Depending on the social situation, I distinguish between frontier, boundary and what Sara Ahmed has called ‘lines’. For her, a boundary is a line which identifies an ‘inside’ and an ‘outside’, which serves the individual to orientate herself. It can serve as a means of ‘separation’, ‘orientation’ (‘desire lines’) and guidance for the individual in the social encounter.

In the choir, distinctions (Bourdieu, 1984) or lines of distinction were sometimes drawn according to ‘choral capital’ (Einarsdottir, 2012) or musical capacity, the ability to sing well and thereby contribute to the choir by ‘making it sound good’. For a few of the participants, lines of ‘disidentification’ were drawn based on ‘religion’ such as negotiation over the degree of ‘religious’ music with liturgical texts or texts from the Hebrew Bible as well as singing in the synagogue space, which is shown in the following example. It is the dress rehearsal for a concert:

*It is already late when I arrive at the synagogue. Aron had pointed out several times, that ‘we have to start on time since the synagogue needs to be vacated before the start of the Friday night prayer. Close to the gates, I meet Avital, a young woman about my age. We start a chat as we are suddenly interrupted: from the distance we see Tomer at the gates of the Synagogue on his bike. He stops in front of the fence, close to the two policemen. He apparently wanted to take his bike inside the grounds. I see the policemen pointing towards the outside of the designated area and Tomer shakes and I can see him bristling. “Ah, look”, says Avital, Tomer is being told off by the policemen. She laughs. None of us seems surprised by this. We enter the courtyard and, in this moment, Tomer joins us from behind: “This is why I hate those places, and that’s why I left Israel and came here…. Look at this – and he points at the*
policemen and adds: “This is crazy…”, he rolls his eyes. “I don’t want to have anything to do with this,” he says with an agonized smile. “Anyway,” he adds changing his tone, “how are you, guys?” and grins. Later inside the synagogue, he passes the pile of kippot waiting in a basket outside the sanctuary. Before we start, Mascha makes a warning sign by waving with one of them: “Tomer!”. She points at the kippah. Tomer decidedly shakes his head, bends down to his backpack on the floor and takes out a piece of shapeless textile that he puts on his hat. This grey-brownish hose-shaped-stretchy-something with a knot on the top is not exactly flattering. It fully covers his wavy thick hair.” That’s Davka” Shlomit says next to me and we both laugh.

(Fieldnotes, August 2015)

The given excerpt not only shows an incident from the scene at a particular locale, the synagogue, it also exemplifies the way in which members, Tomer, performs his position and thereby established a positionality which is a combination of being born Jewish, ‘being Israeli’ and the negotiation of his personal position in response to these categories. Influenced by the place of ‘Jewishness’ in Israeli society, he ‘dis-identifies’ (Muñoz, 1999) from what is believed to represent and express ‘Jewish’ authority. The reactions of his fellow singers (myself included), reveal the familiarity with his performative expressions. It is significant that the circumstance makes him stress his reasons for his migration to Berlin: the need to escape ‘Jewish’ authorities in Israel could be understood as the wish to escape fixed categories in general. Despite his rejection however, he nevertheless makes his way into the space as a matter of commitment and loyalty to his choir. It would be a fallacy to subsume this to ‘Israeliness’, in fact, Israeli nationals severely diverged over questions related to ‘religion’ and the function and representation of Jewish institutions.58

Despite these acts of resistance, Tomer was committed to the group and placed large importance on his commitments. To a certain extent, this caused surprise and amusement among some non-Jewish German members. While this boundary was performed and drawn explicitly, opinions and positioning were often entangled with organisational structures as well as the repertoire. Soon after the first concert, the conductor increasingly focussed on his

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58 I will return to this aspect in chapter five elaborating on the entanglement between biography and the relation to institutions in Israel and beyond.
own compositions. Most prominent was a three-movement choral piece composed as a dialogue between choir and a baritone solo similar to a Chazzan (cantor) and the congregation in the synagogue service. The text was based on excerpts from the Qumran scrolls. The first movement of the somewhat monumentally composed piece was an ode to Zion: “Azkirech Livracha Zion” – “I remember thee, o Zion”. The mixture of classical and romantic elements and monumental choral composition evoked discomfort among some singers who expressed their unease with “too religious music” or “too melancholic music”. Other members truly appreciated the composition and found it a beautiful and impressive piece. After having introduced the piece, the challenge expressed itself in an unusual exchange:

At about ten to ten, Aron said that he was exhausted and that we could call it a night. Peter, however insists to do the new song again.” It seems like a waste to not use the remaining ten minutes.”, he said. I am impressed with his zeal…. He adds a question about the meaning of the song addressed to Aron, who replies “Instead of me telling you what the song is “supposed to say”, I would rather have you say what you get from it, how does it speak to you…?” I hear exhaustion in his voice. “Alright”, says Peter, “I sense a kind of longing with this long ‘sigh’ at the beginning… a longing for Zion and Jerusalem”. There is a remarkable tension in the room. “It is a song of the Diaspora” Sulamit responds forcefully. Peter continues describing what he senses and Aron nods silently. Despite his usual ‘artistic distance’ from the music, this time, it seems to affect him more than expected. No one else comments and I notice a somewhat irritating silence.

(August, 2015)

Here, we encounter a situation where text and music are perceived in very differing ways and the meaning and connotations of the ‘longing for Zion’ among the singers: ranging from discomfort, nostalgic memory to mere curiosity about something unfamiliar. Nevertheless, despite the differing connotations, the composer (director) chose this text, with the intention of bringing old scriptures to life and setting something to music, which nobody had

59 Freud considered nostalgia to be part of an inner process connected to mourning and the psychic re-working of loss (Freud in Boym, 2002: 207). By the end of the 19th century, the term referred to a sentiment of longing for a specific time and place which had been or believed to be lost (Boym, 2002). This sentiment is nowadays associated with the longing to return to a place called home. Nostalgia, - from nostos return home and “algia”, longing is a longing for home that no longer exists or has never existed, she argues (Boym, 2002).
previously done. However, his emphasis on the originality, the strategic motivation behind his reasoning, might not capture the entirety of his motivation, I assumed. The text of the song is indeed a song of Zion and holds certain parts which some of the native Hebrew speakers found difficult to sing. Others saw it as ‘a piece of art’, abstract from any religious or historical connotation. Combining elements from early Israeli choir music which combined folk-styles and European music, the music evoked a sense of something oriental and triggered what one of the German members indeed expressed as a ‘longing for Israel’. For other German members, not well-acquainted with Israel, these were ‘unusual melodies which are brought to life’. On a later occasion, in an interview, one of the choir members, Yael, a Jewish-Israeli who grew up in a Kibbutz commented:

“I don’t have a problem with it, because I really consider this music,... well the music itself is beautiful anyway, and I think it represents musically this disharmony and harmony together and this is for me a beautiful story ....the lyrics... yes, they are religious but if you look through them, like esoterically, so, it’s a story of each and every one of us... it’s not necessarily of a nation or of a land or... so if they say Zion, for me it’s my Akropolis, the city inside myself. I think it’s really beautiful, so it doesn’t matter, each one takes the intention of it and implement it in his own world […] I am sure my grandfather, you know, if he would have read this text, he would have taken it to a totally religious path... but I don’t, because [...] I am a religious person in a different way.... I really believe in a way, we are all religious it’s just that our religion has different colours”.

This statement suggests that some members were able to dissociate from the texts by an abstractive distance towards the content of the songs. Rather than evoking disturbance, the song touched Yael and she was able to put differing significations into perspective, as a ‘reflexive’ measure. While other members articulated personal problems with this song, it came to be a negotiation and contestation in and of itself. This was only one of many incidents on which members disagreed. It also showed that the music evoked passions and came to represent very different things: while presenting home and familiarity for some, to others it was the appeal of the unknown that they wanted to embrace and naturally could not understand the emotional signification that ‘religion’ represents for some of the Israelis. One

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60 Interview Inbal, May, 2016
woman, Antonia, who had spent some time in Israel twenty years ago and who current
partner is a German Jew, expressed that this music made her understand ‘the essence of
Judaism on a much deeper level’. Another German participant, Martin, resumed, that “they
[the Israelis] really can’t agree on anything and had very little interest in religious life.” The
question of repertoire then turned into an expression of power struggles and negotiation over
authority and legitimacy in the choir. This went alongside the constant shifting of boundaries,
regarding of ‘Jewish’, non-Jewish ‘religious’, ‘secular’ ‘German’ and ‘Israeli’ gender and
sexuality.

The same protestant member also noticed that ‘politics’ and current political affairs seemed
to be relatively absent from the choir. Although I could see the basis of his claim referring to
the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, politics were by no means absent: negotiations over music,
authority and legitimacy seemed to represent and symbolise struggles related to power,
gender and sexuality, ‘ethnic belonging’ and representations of ‘being Jewish’ and ‘being
German’ and the implications this had on positionality .Thus, the personal and group issues
were projected onto the ‘music’, the ‘repertoire’ and the organisation of the group. Thereby,
though in differing garbs, politics were central to the choir.

3.2.8 Humour

At times, ‘boundaries’ were played with and drawn humorously. On one occasion - it was an
extra rehearsal before when Sopranos and Altos only women were present - the choir director
complained about the uncomfortable constitution of the chairs in the church and remarked:

‘Yep, this is how Jews are treated here.’ The comment was not followed by an
immediate response but did not go unnoticed either, especially by myself, raising my
eyebrows combined with an uncomfortable laugh. Looking around, my neighbour
Meytal grinned and Margret, a middle-aged German Protestant woman was waving
her head from one side to the other.

(Fieldnotes, July 2015)

Such comments were usually made when the mood was relaxed, when there seemed to be
room for some sarcastic play. Yet, the comment had some serious content. If the comment
bore some truth, it held an aspect of distinction as well as the probing of how the audience –
in this case, female singers, both Germans and Israelis - would react to this. The reference to sitting on a hard and uncomfortable chair, could equally refer to an uncomfortable position he holds as choir director but also as a Jewish-Israeli who came to Berlin and did not dispose over the same amount of cultural and social capital as the German majority. Firstly, the immediate situation as a choir director on a “hard, uncomfortable chair” and reference to ‘the treatment of Jews here’ could relate to his position ‘scene’ in the church, a position of discomfort. It could also refer to his position in the structure of the choir, as one of ambivalence and ‘sitting on an uncomfortable chair’. With the structure of the Verein he was put into the position of the director of the choir, while still being co-dependent on the expertise and symbolic capital of the ‘German’ board members.

While he wanted to be in the position of a musical leader and expert on ‘Israeli choral music’, the organisation but also his unfamiliarity with German institutional structures made him co-dependent on others, represented by the uncomfortable chair. Further, the diversity of the group and their different longings and aspirations projected onto him, could have also put him in a position of discomfort. “This is how we are treated here”, could equally refer to the situation of him as a migrant who not only lacks sufficient German language skills, but also the knowledge on infrastructure and the cultural and symbolic capital which is so determinedly passed on by the language. Here, the space in which the comment emerges matters: the rehearsal took place inside the protestant church in front of the altar with the massive crucifix. When considering the aesthetic realm of signifiers triggering a certain affective reaction, it is the historical relationship of Christianity and Judaism being evoked here. The historical trajectory of Christianity towards its ‘Jewish Other’, especially the various ways in which anti-Jewish stereotypes and sentiments have sustained the construction of a Christian identity (Nirenberg, 2014), the statement ‘this is how Jews are treated here’ that creates a scene resonating with personal trajectory and wider socio-historical developments. In that sense the aesthetic realm and the positionality as oneself as a Jew was approached in a humorous way trying to test the reactions of the audience. It is in that sense, that the place and constellation evoke a situational positioning and constitution of ‘Jewish’.

Apart from lines and ‘boundaries’, the practice of singing together had a bonding, cohesive effect. On various occasions, singers disagreed with the choir conductor, who followed a very decisive agenda of ‘professionalising’ the choir. Taking the choir as a springboard for a career as a choral conductor and for the entrance into music school in Berlin, he was trying to
raise the level of the choir. This engendered allies and oppositions, contesting the direction he was taking and asking for a less professional way of managing the group. Some of the non-Jewish Germans sided with the conductor, defending his leadership style arguing that “the choir would not be the same without him”. Not only was this related to his compositions, but also to the ‘special vibe’ he was believed to bring to the choir. Issues were discussed in one open and several private discussions over the repertoire, the way of leading the group and the general group coherence. The discussion not only targeted the repertoire but the structure of the choir, leadership and the atmosphere in this group. Members were dissatisfied with the repertoire and claimed their say in it, while the conductor who had to arrange ‘the suggestions’ and make them suitable for the choir which proved difficult, especially when not being paid for his labour and certain notes only available in Israel. More fundamental than the exact logistics, what became clear during this discussion, was the level of emotions and passions involved as well as the completely diverging visions for the group: while most people considered it their passionate hobby, the conductor and a few others saw the choir as a professional endeavour, with mostly non-professional singers. The structure of the Verein further obliged the choir to follow specific structural requirements, in terms of managing finances, doing board meetings and annual plenary sessions seeking the groups approval for its decisions. While these structural tasks required a certain amount of expertise in terms of infrastructure, these matters were largely undertaken by German speakers, while repertoire and artistic visions were resolved by the director and the Hebrew speakers.

3.2.9 Process Structures and ‘mortality’

After the first half a year of its establishment, the early enthusiasm seemed to fade. The conductor was determined to incorporate more challenging repertoire and perform his own compositions, choir members felt overwhelmed with the rigidity of the rehearsals, the slow “professionalisation” of the choir and the absence of ‘happy songs’ previously present in the repertoire. For others, the music had turned ‘too religious.’ These complaints coincided with general questions of group management, membership, decision-making processes and finances, combined with personal trajectories of the conductor and singers. Soon after its establishment, the choir had sought to become a ‘Verein’ a registered association, a central element in German organisational structures. This was done in order to have a structure to take executive decisions as well as allowing the group to receive donations and enjoy certain benefits, such as the registration in the ‘association of Choirs’. The establishment of a Verein
requires at least seven individuals and foresees a managing board of at least three representatives as a governing body of the association.\textsuperscript{61} The board members consisted of an Israeli member, a non-Jewish and a Jewish German as financial secretary, deputy director and Social Secretary. The conductor considered himself ‘musical director’ with no organising or administrative obligations outside of the repertoire and the responsibility for rehearsals. At the same time, taking certain “musical” decisions were directly bound with the budget of the choir, for example hiring a pianist and choral conductor who accompanied the choir and was able to assist with sectional rehearsals.\textsuperscript{62} The organising and managing structure of the choir was increasingly questioned and interrogated by group members who felt the need to establish more democratic structures, for example having a say in the repertoire which was managed by the conductor alone. While the differing aspirations will be touched on in chapter five and six and the analysis of individual trajectories, the administrative challenges of ‘leading the group’ became increasingly entangled with emotional overload resulting in numerous discussions and conflicts which resulted in members quitting the choir and finally, the conductor giving up the project at the end of 2016. It was at that point, when my fieldwork ended.

3.3 Old buildings new perplexities: the synagogue Bet Daniel

The entanglement of the choir in a wider scene emerged from the overlap of members, some of whom were regulars at a small synagogue community. A few years before the establishment of the choir, the small synagogue community was threatened with closure due to a community continuously diminishing in size. Encouraged by a regular Rabbi at the time, the younger generation was encouraged to ‘do something about it’. Starting out with community dinners (Kiddushim) on Friday night before Shabbat, a group of young attendees started their action against closure. In order to act more independently from the community structures of the Gemeinde, they established a Verein ‘Friends of Bet Daniel’ (hereafter: Friends) in order to revive the community activities of the small synagogue. In this effort, activists advertised special occasions, as well as regular activities and events on an internet page, as well as their own Facebook page and other Facebook groups such as the one of the Choir. The invitations then seemed to include all choir members.

\textsuperscript{61} Leitfaden zum Vereinsrecht, Bundesministerium für Justiz und Verbraucherschutz.
\textsuperscript{62} The choir was able to cover its costs by a monthly contribution of its members, ten Euro for students and twenty for individuals with regular salaries. The contribution fee was raised in February 2016 to twenty Euro in order to ensure the regular presence of the accompanist.
Not only did that encourage members from the choir to join, it also lowered the threshold for non-Jews to join the activities at the synagogue and existing boundaries seemed permeable.

On one occasion in the summer of 2015, a community Kiddush, Friday Night Dinner ‘Kabbalat Shabbat’ reception of Shabbat was advertised in the Facebook group. And indeed, on this day, a number of choir members attended the Friday night service and the subsequent dinner. That night, Dan, a friend from the choir and I decided to join the Kiddush at the synagogue together. For him, who grew up in Israel in a non-observant family distant from tradition, without having had a Bar Mitzvah, he claimed it was the first time to go to a synagogue or to consciously enter a synagogue space. While I was in fact more familiar with synagogue spaces, I was equally new to this community. The two of us, a Jewish-Israeli and myself, a non-Jewish German had this experience of joining the synagogue together and feeling a certain degree of ‘bodies out of place’ (Ahmed, 2006). Our conversation afterwards exchanged thoughts on this night and both expressed unease – for different reasons - while still enjoying the companionship and sociality. My unease was related to ‘being German’ and non-Jewish, his to the unfamiliarity and how to ‘behave’, how to inhabit the space, he was so sceptical about. But of course, I was not the only non-Jew, one young man brought his girlfriend who was not Jewish and had never been to a synagogue, as well as others who were in the process of conversion. Nevertheless, I was indeed concerned with ‘invading a space’ to which I ‘was not allowed’.

Together with her husband, another choir member had followed the invitation to the synagogue that night. The woman later stated in an interview that she found the atmosphere “fresh” and, through the synagogue came to understand the meaning and necessity of maintaining a Jewish community outside of Israel. The first time she came, she was worried about dress codes and Tsniut [modesty], since the synagogue followed an orthodox ritual. As she was told by her friends that she could come as she pleases, she felt welcome and at ease with entering and being part of the space and the event and could just be without any pressure. Before living in Berlin, she had studied in a West-German town and joined services for the high holidays in the small community, which she found ‘schrecklich’- [awful], lacking joy and happiness.
After dinner and the Shabbat ritual, I start speaking to a younger visitor to the synagogue who is from the East Coast of the United States and is spending the summer in Berlin. I tell her about my research, she is curious, and we agree to continue the conversation over coffee during the coming week. Upon leaving I want to write down her number and take out pen and paper and she looks at me with an uneasy expression of disapproval and discomfort. I realise I am trespassing. She observes Shabbat. I quickly put away my notebook and promise to find her on social media. My naivety seemed to have made her uncomfortable. At around 10 pm, the security guards outside the synagogue ask us to vacate the grounds. Dan and I continue our conversation over a drink at the surrounding bars. This was not an unusual way to end the Kiddush for some of the participants, yet, only for those who did not strictly observe Shabbat and were willing to consume non-kosher food and drink and use money.63

Others would go home and avoid any commercial contact or spending money on Shabbat and continue the celebrations at their homes. For others however going to a café or bar after service was entirely acceptable. Dan, for whom Shabbat was purely about sociality, had never considered to keep any mitzvot of this kind, he tells me. When I tell him about the ‘trap’ of taking out my notebook in front of Amy, the young student, he responds “Hi shomeret Shabbat? BeEmet?” [She observes Shabbat? Really?] 64 and I spontaneously smile at his irritation and disapproval.

In this situation, the lines were drawn according to religious rules and communicated by expressing disapproval and distance by means of his body and his facial expression. For a moment, I had felt ashamed at not having ‘thought about’ and sufficiently respected Amy’s religious – observant - position. On further reflection however, it seemed to be more of a distancing, than personal disapproval of my behaviour, especially considering that the laws do not apply to non-Jews. In turn, when evaluating the event with Dan, the fact that I had not been careful enough to respect ‘shomer Shabbat’ on synagogue grounds formed an alliance between me and him and a distance towards the American girl, although this alliance came from entirely differing perspectives. The given example was a standard situation, which

63 Although the use of money is not directly forbidden by the Torah, money counts as the very matter of business and conducting or even discussing business is strictly forbidden by the rabbinical authorities in Talmud (de Lange, 2000:96). Additionally, many business actions are recorded on paper and writing is among the thirty-nine prohibited activities on Shabbat.

64 Reference to Fieldnotes, July, 2015)
regularly occurred and took a variety of shapes. It seemed puzzling at first: while the synagogue followed an orthodox ritual, most of the members did not observe Shabbat.

3.3.1 The Synagogue Space

The Synagogue Bet Daniel was built in 1916 with the intention of being one of the largest synagogues in Berlin. Designed by a famous architect at the time, it contained over 2000 seats and even includes a side annex, which served as the room for morning prayers and youth services. As the main building was extensively demolished during the pogrom of 1938, the ruin was torn down in the 1950s and since then, the annex is used as the main sanctuary and prayer room. It holds approx. 200 people. On the right wing of the elongated rectangular building is the Kiddush Room, which barely accommodates 100 people. Despite the destructions by the Nazi Regime and its consequences, the synagogue was used for different purposes, as it is also the centre of the Jewish welfare bureau. From 1942-1945 the building served as a storage space for cars and wagons by the Nazis. Soon after the end of the War, in September 1945, Rosh haShana celebrations were already held in the building, an event documented by US photographer Robert Capa.65

While the historical developments of the synagogue after 1945 offer an insight into post-war Jewish life, what is particularly important in the context of my research is the fact that ever since 1945, the synagogue, which is part of the Berlin Einheitsgemeinde (JGB), has not been under permanent Rabbinical Leadership, a fact which has deeply shaped its somewhat anarchical community structures and the way community has (not) been governed but carefully organised. The governing body was influenced by three old-established families, who, to an extent, looked back on a family tradition of belonging to the synagogue since its inauguration. Furthermore, this also impacted on the ways in which the ritual was maintained and influenced the service conduct: following moderately orthodox style, with separate seating (though on the same level) and male-only Tallitim [prayer shawls] and the liturgy conducted in Hebrew except for the short sermon. The congregation and people who belong and pray at the synagogue represent a spectrum of observing practices, from observant to non-observant but frequenting services at synagogue and ‘respecting’ but not observing Shabbat.

65 This has been documented by the small exhibition that I was able to take part in for the anniversary of the synagogue. For reasons of anonymity, I am not revealing the original title of the exhibition booklet.
While Shabbat morning services usually draw 20-30 people, attendance at musical Kabbalat Shabbat on a Friday night can reach one hundred participants, most of whom are not official members of the Gemeinde. The synagogue sells so-called “Synagogen-Karten” [Synagogue Cards], on request, certifying individual membership of the synagogue, with assigned seats. Many of the card holders are not members of the Gemeinde but feel close attachment and belonging to the synagogue. While attendance of the synagogue had varied over the decades after 1945, it was in the early 2000s, that the synagogue experienced a significant decline in members. Minyanim\(^\text{66}\) which only rely on male participants, did not always complete on schacharit (Saturday morning services) and rumours circulated that the synagogue could be handed over to a different organisation, such as Chabad Lubawitcher, acting as financially independent Jewish entrepreneurs.\(^\text{67}\) It was upon this threat, that a number of young synagogue attendees developed the idea of a Verein, ‘Friends of Bet Daniel’ (Friends) which would allow it to raise funds and create a certain degree of independence from the Berliner Einheitsgemeinde as governing body of the synagogue. All of its seven board members are unpaid volunteers and devote a large amount of time and energy to the maintenance and running of this association.

### 3.3.2 Ritual and Regularity: Prayer, Shiurim and Kiddushim

Existing since 2012, the association Friends was intended as a ‘remedy’ to revive the synagogue community. Attention was first focussed on regular community dinners, the support for events on Jewish holidays, Friday night Kabbalot Shabbat as well as the holding of Shiurim Shabbat.\(^\text{68}\) Started by a community member, these were held by volunteers from the community, with varying backgrounds and ‘religious literacy’.\(^\text{69}\) The Verein does not receive any money from the Jewish Community but is entirely self-funded. This does not mean that events at the synagogue, especially concerning (high) holidays are entirely funded by the Verein. The Berliner Gemeinde continues to fund the standard services provided by the

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\(^\text{66}\) The Hebrew word simply refers to ‘number’ but it is referred to the number of members of the congregation required to form a public worship. Traditionally, it is a minimum of ten adult male Jews who are required for the recitation of certain prayers, particularly the Kaddish. Conservative and egalitarian services allow adult women to be counted in the minyan. In that sense, a ‘minyan’ is the heart of the distinction between public and private (De Lange, 2000:119).

\(^\text{67}\) For further elaboration on this issue see Lehmann and Siebzehner, 2006

\(^\text{68}\) It refers to Jewish learning sessions which were largely focussed on the Parashat haShavua, the weekly Torah portion, or other relevant themes, depending on the volunteer.

\(^\text{69}\) By this term, I refer to the degree of expertise: most shiurim were held by a few members with a family or academic background in Torah and Bible and Talmud studies (see chapter 5).
synagogue, such as Friday and Saturday services, Kiddushim and the holidays. Acquired through external funding, mostly from philanthropists and globally acting Jewish organisations, the association is able to contribute to certain events by organising them as well as occasionally acquiring external catering for the Friday Night Dinners, Kiddushim.

Prior to the establishment of the initiative, there were attempts, especially initiated by a young converted woman in the community, to bring the community together by initiating a discussion circle about the weekly Torah portion. Not uncontested, this method of teaching and discussion groups were extended to well-prepared Shiurim with alternating leadership. While the Shabbat morning services sometimes struggle to bring together a minyan, the synagogue ‘events’ such as the Shiurim and the Kiddushim are well-frequented and have become established gatherings of the scene. While the ‘events’ of Shiurim or Friday Night Kiddush followed a service, individuals often chose to come to the ‘event’ or the dinner, rather than attending the prayer prior to it.

The publicity and increased media attention were a measure to prevent the synagogue from closing with the logic that ‘a well-known place is unlikely to be closed down’. The unusual fact that this synagogue was not led by a Rabbi was first seen as an advantage to initiate and introduce new practices and ‘invent’ traditions in this place, and somehow make it correspond to a changing demographic and make it more attractive to new members. From its early years and in correspondence with the Jewish communities in Germany post-1945, the synagogue functioned as house of worship and community centre. Despite the maintenance of the orthodox ritual, it had witnessed movements of reform, such as the performance of a Bat Mitzvah and the reciting of Kaddish by female members of the congregation. In that sense, the synagogue had, since 1945, been home to members of differing observing practices and religious traditions with representatives of the entire spectrum. In that sense, like its

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70 Interview with one of the members
71 Bar Mitzvah, Hebrew for an adult male Jew, usually referred to the rite of passage of Torah portion recitation followed by a party. Bat Mitzvah is the female equivalent, only allowed in egalitarian, conservative and reform denomination, not in orthodoxy.
72 Kaddish is a hymn which is an essential part of the Jewish prayer service. It is also recited as a mourner’s prayer for deceased relatives (especially parents) and recited for 11 months after the death of the person. Along with the Sh’ma and the Amidah, it marks the central and most important elements in the Jewish liturgy. Most importantly, the Kaddish cannot be recited alone but requires a minyan. If women are not counted in an orthodox minyan, they are subsequently not allowed to recite the Kaddish. On one occasion, when a member of the synagogue was the only child of a deceased congregation member, she wanted to recite the Kaddish, which was received with severe disdain by other community members.
73 This information is based on archival research and interviews conducted with members of the community. By the term spectrum I refer to the width of Jewish observance practices.
leadership, the direction of the synagogue had always been ambiguous and – what some of my participants considered ‘slightly anarchist’. The invention of ‘new traditions’ and ‘Jewish events’, first created tensions among members who sought to ‘accommodate new members estranged and foreign to tradition’ and those attendees who positioned themselves as more observant and were therefore more concerned with the maintenance of halakhic rules and the overlap of traditional services with the accommodation of newcomers.74

This eventually culminated in a dispute over religious rituals which could be considered alienating for newcomers. These and a few other quarrels essentially split the original group and contributed to the strengthening of the promoters for greater outreach and accommodation of newcomers. In that sense, outreach and what some considered the eventization of services and Jewish rituals have evolved into a split from the orthodox attendees, who sought new places of worship. On the other hand, the political and religious pluralism, and accommodation of diversity inside the synagogue walls, have not only fostered the relationships to neighbouring religious communities, especially Muslim communities. It has also attracted more non-Jewish members with an interest in converting, or even curious spectators. In the beginning, I myself was a curious spectator before deciding on my research endeavour. Despite the police presence guarding the entrance and grounds of the synagogue, Bet Daniel was considered to be relatively easily accessible by my Israeli participants and those in the process of conversion.

3.3.3 Actors at Bet Daniel

On the other hand, as previously shown, the wide advertisement and outreach efforts had indeed attracted new attendees who would not have entered the synagogue space, such as the example of Dan and the couple mentioned above. The synagogue is experienced as a place they ‘can come to’ without being judged on their personal observance practices or lack thereof.

The ‘events’ offered by the synagogue were particularly popular for the High holidays, Rosh haShana, as well as Chanukah and Purim and attendance was experienced to be ‘Berlin specific’ and would not be taken up in Israel. Especially on the first night of Chanukkah early

74 Interview with a member.
in my fieldwork, the little Kiddush room in the synagogue was filled with many different people, so that the freshly-made latkes\textsuperscript{75} did not suffice for everybody:

\textit{Tuesday night, I arrive at the synagogue where I am welcomed by the Israeli security guard mumbling “Chag sameach”\textsuperscript{76}. I enter the small building and a shiny neon light welcomes me in the front room leading to the sanctuary. The front door is blocked by people who apparently have not found a seat. I see many familiar faces. I enter at the moment when little Chanukkiah are given out to the children. Everybody gathers around the big Channukiah and the Rabbi lights the big first candle. Then, Tal announces first in English then in Hebrew that everybody can gather in the Kiddush room where freshly made latkes were already waiting. Immediately, people impatiently swarmed over to the other side of the building. While exchanging a few words I also see an artist familiar from a recent exhibition and a few other familiar faces. The atmosphere is cheerful, happy in the tiny room which barely holds the number of guests. Then I see Rani a member of the choir and he says that he would like to go to Choir rehearsal. I join him. We leave the crowded synagogue and start making our way towards the metro. Rani explains to me how he likes to come there and see familiar faces: “I didn’t even have to make arrangements and it’s nice to have a bissl Yiddischkeyt”, he says, but in Israel he would never go.}

\textit{(Fieldnotes, 2014)}

The passage above reflects how someone who is unfamiliar, took the occasion at the synagogue, to ‘pass by’, see people and ‘be seen’, by a constellation of familiar faces. Most of the attendees to this event did not regularly attend services but came with families or on their own just like Rani, a 25-year-old student who grew up in Israel distant from tradition and observance. The synagogue was important enough to “to pass by”, greet people for Chanukah while here in Berlin. He later explained to me that, to him, these were part of ‘Jewish aesthetics’, food, traditions, which he enjoys for their connotation and connection they create between him and his ancestors from Eastern Europe, creating what Anderson would regard as ‘an imagined community’ (Anderson, 1983). It was on his way to the Choir rehearsal, so he considered it worthwhile to pay the synagogue a visit on that night. Some of

\textsuperscript{75} Traditional potato pancakes eaten on Chanukah
\textsuperscript{76} Hebrew: Happy Holidays!
the attendees found out via the Facebook post, others were informed through friends. There are many Israeli attendees at holiday celebrations, especially Chanukah, as it falls together with December and the pre-Christmas time, which was another reason for families to come, different to when still in Israel, where most of the attendees would not pay attention, let alone visit the synagogue, on that occasion. It seemed to be a combination of local availability but also the greater necessity to pay attention to those holidays when outside of Israel and convey to yourself and/or your children the importance of remembering the holidays, which are Jewish celebrations, but also correspond with Israeli national festivals. In a later biographical interview, Rani told me that he found pleasure in pretending that he was an orthodox Jew and literate in the prayers and the service. He perceived the synagogue as a stage, where he could think himself into a different world. Since it was indeed an irredeemable fact about his life that he was Jewish and there was in fact nothing he could do about it, he could also embrace the fun and joy of it: to share memories and community and be part of a collective of people with a common history. In that context, he starts wondering:

“...because for me to be a Jew means to have a common (hi)story?7 with other people. But it is hard for me to talk about Jews who are for example... converts... for me, there is always this question: what do we have in common? So, we neither believe in a common God, because I do not believe in any God, nor do we have a common (hi)story?7 but then the question is what do I and a Mizrahi Jew have in common? Because we barely share common memories and because the synagogue does not exist for me, or not really... Yeah, there are things, which mark my Judaism for example the fact that I am circumcised and all those things, which you didn’t really decide for yourself [...]"

We can see how the personal positioning evokes question of commonality, contestation and uncertainty. He questions the commonality between him and a Mizrachi Jew. Thereby he not only reflects the contingency of his position but also refers to the profound bifurcations and dilemmas within Jewish-Israeli society: the political, racial and socio-economic hierarchies of white Ashkenazi Jews over their Mizrachi Jews which are constructed alongside ‘secular’ and ‘religious’ categories (Khazzoum, 2003, Lehmann and Siebzehner, 2006). Considering

77 I purposefully maintained the ambiguous term, translated from the German „Geschichte“ which he used as it can equally refer to history and story.
that both his parents grew up in Argentina and made Aliya to Israel in their twenties, the memories, which he considers to ‘have’, are not based on personal experience or that of his parents. His ancestors came from Poland and Eastern Europe and he describes this heritage as a ‘memory’, which is cherished in his family, mostly through food and aesthetics. Furthermore, he emphasised, that he had no immediate family connection to victims of the Shoah. We can already see how the aesthetics and constellation of people present and gathering in Berlin and at that ‘event’ in particular trigger a whole set of considerations which demand a constant positioning and ‘suturing’ (Hall, 1996) of different partly overlapping fields of identification.

The core of the organisational team of ‘friends of Bet Daniel’, a group of six who changed over the course of my first encounter with the Verein, were converts to Judaism or had grown up in the Jewish tradition of German, American and Israeli national background aged 26-40. The attendees of the synagogue, the minyan, were between 50-80 and represented a different generation of synagogue community. They build the core of the minyan and struggle to bring enough individuals together. At points, there seemed to be enough individuals for a minyan, but it had not sufficed since women and non-Jews do not count.

3.4 Queer Shabbat or event for the ‘halachically challenged’

Connected to, and at times overlapping with the choir and the synagogue, there was also a third ‘event’ which I came to frequent for my research. The initiative of the queer Shabbat (hereafter QS) was established in 2013, when its initiator, a Rabbinical student, felt the need to create an alternative space of ‘Jewish spirituality’. It so happened that himself and the organising committee are gay, lesbian or/and identify as queer and therefore it became an LGBTIQ*79-friendly space. The Kabbalat Shabbat take place in a rented space, usually in an alternative theatre space. On one Friday night per month, the group gathers in one of the upper rooms of the theatre space. This theatre used to serve as an artist collective and was established after the fall of the wall and is one of the only still existing independent artist houses which were established after the Wall came down. In 1991, the house was handed over to an artist collective. Today, the space hosts a theatre, a cinema, a café and bar as well as studio and art gallery. The Queer Shabbat rents out the upper bar room. With its unconventional and laid-back atmosphere, it seems to fit the intention of the gathering:

79 Referring to Lesbian-Gay-Trans-Inter-Queer
providing an alternative space, different from a ‘conventional’ synagogue particularly in Berlin.

With its altered liturgy and repetitive chants by candlelight, sitting on cushions in a circle on the floor, the queer Shabbat offers a meditative atmosphere, in which individuals can easily join in, even if one has not heard the song before. Meetings usually attract between 50-70 people and the ceremony – the Kabbalat Shabbat liturgy – is followed by a Kiddush and a Vegetarian potluck dinner. The liturgy is based on the traditional Ashkenazi Kabbalat Shabbat Liturgy, however mainly sung in Carlebachian melodies and styles. Usually, Yossi guides participants through the service but wants to abstain from traditional functions of the Chazzan and sing all songs and prayers together rather than in alternation. In between the songs, Yossi usually offers insights from his personal journey in the Jewish tradition, his personal spirituality and Judaism in daily life. The liturgy has few gendered changes: at points ‘ata’ the Hebrew masculine pronoun for ‘you’ is exchanged with ‘at’ the female form, in order to make it more gender neutral. Most of the chants are melodies by Shlomo Carlebach.80 Yossi and most of the attendees consider the music and singing to be the central part of the meeting.81 The siddur which is a leaflet created for this occasion includes phonetic transcriptions. Starting as an independent initiative, the queer Shabbat now receives financial support from Hillel and the World Zionist Organisation (WZO). The organising committee had expressed the wish to remain independent from any political organisation, which, especially when looking for funding among Jewish organisations, proves difficult. The majority of the organising committee had spent a significant time in Israel.

Individuals who frequent the meetings are largely Jews who have migrated to Berlin, from the US, Hungary, and Israel. While the meetings often host visiting groups from across the world, mostly Jewish tourist groups, who want to get to know Jewish local life, there are also a variety of German non-Jews and those with intentions to convert and converted Jews. The QS also provides a platform for Jews to bring their non-Jewish partners or friends. While the atmosphere is non-restrictive, the circle of the organising team remains exclusive. One of the female organisers, Mara from Hungary, has a patrilineal Jewish background. She emphasised

80 Carlebach, a Jewish Rabbi who invented and re-invented liturgical songs is often considered central in the American Jewish Renewal movement and his songs sung in many Jewish settings aiming towards ‘new spirituality’. The repetitive meditative chant is in line with new age spirituality (Magid, 2013). Recently, his music and person came under attack in the context of ‘#metoo-debates’ and the claim of abuse and harassment of which he has been accused.

81 Interview with Yossi and other members of the organising team.
that Jewish tradition and a sense of ‘Jewish belonging’ was always very present in her family and she felt part of this tradition, more than anything else. In Hungary, it had not posed any problem to attend the progressive synagogue and participate in the community, while the Gemeinde did not fully accept her. She explains that QS is a place for those who feel ‘halakhically challenged’, like herself. While not all attendees do identify as LGBT or queer, the initiative is one of the only queer friendly spaces of this style. What is also remarkable is the way, this ‘service style’ has influenced and stimulated other initiatives such as the Chassidic Shabbat at Bet Daniel and a few other similar events at synagogues.

There organising committee consists of three Hungarian Jews, a German who converted to Judaism and an Israeli who currently is the representative of the World Zionist Organisation (WZO), a function, which was established to coordinate young Jewish life in Berlin. There are a few volunteers, who assist the team by playing instruments during the liturgy. In the interview the organiser stressed that he wanted to bring some spirituality into the Berlin Jewish scene and feels like he has caught onto an existing demand. A few of the organisers are currently enrolled in the Cantorial School or Rabbinical College. The college has not necessarily encouraged the existence and continuation of this group and has in fact warned the leader not to bind individuals around him before being formally ordained. Thus, relations to the Gemeinde are often in tension.

3.5 Summary

I have described the structure and constitution of the initiatives, the Hebrew choir, the synagogue and the queer Shabbat and shown how they are interlinked. I have emphasised that there is a core group, an organising team to each initiative and number of fluctuating members of different Jewish and non-Jewish backgrounds. I have further shown how these correspond with the urban topography of Berlin and use the given spaces to turn them into Jewish, Hebrew or pluralist spaces and the challenges that come with it. By describing and analysing the structure, networks, actors and organisation of these events, I have pointed and

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82 I frequently met two cantors, one also a violist, who entered the Cantorial school in addition to his studies at the University of the Arts in Berlin and another one of Ukrainian origin who had begun her studies in Israel and then moved to Berlin. The Cantors form an interesting network as they have a strong secular musical background in singing or an instrument and yet chose the profession of a cantor. Thereby, they can be placed at an intersection, as they hold important functions within Jewish congregations (or are trained to do so) but are largely non-observant. Interestingly, a number of Israeli migrants found their professional and musical niche within this realm and in this school, as it builds on the language they manoeuvre and appears to hold more stable career and job opportunities than a route as a soloist.
demonstrated the ‘theatricality’ of the scene. These are essential to understand the scene’s constitutions as ‘Jewish’. The ‘stages’ not only convey the complexity between space, place and members, but they also show how a young generation seeks to offer alternative groups with ‘transitive character’. The virtual sphere of this scene, particularly social media was vital for most of their groups, especially as a matter of outreach. It is the historical embeddedness of the scene to which I will now turn.
4. The historical embeddedness of the scene

The following chapter provides a brief background to the sociological understanding of the scene and shows how its constitution of Jewishness is shaped by (1) the German context and the emergence of Jewish institutions post-1945, (2) the sociological place of ‘religion’ and the ‘secular’ in Israel and how this affects my participants and the scene, and finally (3) the sociological construction of ‘Jewishness’ in Germany ‘after Auschwitz’, the significance of Philo-Semitism and the development of what I consider a ‘German desire’ for Jews and things Jewish and its relations to Orientalism(s) and cosmopolitan exoticism. This will support my argument about the complex constitution of ‘Jewishness’, in contemporary Berlin and the dynamics in this scene.

4.1 Jewish institutions in post-war Germany

Although ‘Judaism’ and Jewish life in Germany have an extensive history, contemporary Jewish institutions are a product of post-war constellations. Beyond that, Germany was the territory where some of the most significant (and most detrimental) developments for modern Jewish life occurred. Berlin, in particular, functioned as a religious and intellectual centre for the emergence of Neo-Orthodoxy, Reform Judaism, the Haskalah (‘Jewish emancipation’) and, most significantly, for the Zionist project (Jungmann, 2005:127). Equally, it was in Germany where the definition of Judaism as a race provided the grounds for persecution and the Shoah. The rich cultural and religious Jewish life, especially in Berlin was destroyed and literally murdered by the Nazis and their collaborators.

The rebuilding of Jewish life in Germany and in Berlin in particular was shaped by differing political agendas, first by the Allied sector governance, and later by the two German states. Grossman and Lewinsky allude to the irony that in 1945, after the systematic persecution and murder of Jews, homosexuals, the disabled, Sinti and Roma, people of colour and political opponents, in short, the ‘ethnic cleansing’ that the Nazi and their racial laws had attempted,

83 Sutcliffe and Karp, 2011. The Nuremberg Laws, Nürnberger Gesetze: established in 1935 by National Socialism, the Nuremberg Laws defined Jewishness and Judaism as a biological race, which was determined by matrilineal and patrilineal decent and family genealogy.

84 While the Federal Republic slowly embarked on a programme of reparation and in 1965 initiated diplomatic relations with Israel (Diner, 2015), the Socialist Unity Party in the East (SED) followed a rigid agenda of anti-fascism and an ideological critique of imperialism and capitalism which hindered the development of a nuanced view on the Shoah and the destruction of European Jewry and thus an adequate commemoration and treatment of the horrors of the past (Weiss and Gorelik, in Brenner, 2012).
the aftermath of genocide and destruction saw occupied Germany turn into a multi-ethnic territory (Grossman and Lewinsky, 2012). The chaotic situation of flight and displacement was solved by the creation of Displaced Person (DP) camps. The self-description of DP inmates as ‘Sche’erit Hapleta’ were Jews who had been partisans or who survived the Shoah in hiding places. For some, the DP-camps were merely an interim before the aspired departure to Palestine or elsewhere. However, despite being known as ‘the land of the murderers’ and its internationally bestowed cherem, a number of former DPs stayed in Germany largely due to illness, age, trauma or the incapacity to undertake another form of migration (Diner, 2012:21). A number of German intellectuals even returned to Germany from exile, which met with disapproval from overseas Jewry.

The cherem on Germany manifested itself in Israeli passports, which contained the signature ‘prat le’germania’ (with exception of Germany). The treatment of Germany as a ‘burnt territory’ put those Jews who stayed or returned under enormous political and psychological pressure. Diner argues that this pressure accompanied the Jewish communities in Germany for a long time (ibid, 31) entailing its strong provisional character, torn by uncertainty and ambivalence between staying and leaving, and about their inner and outer security on German soil. Together with the multi-national character of German Jews returning from exile, Eastern European survivors, DPs and others, it was this inner ambivalence of belonging that soon transformed into ‘a collective psychic constitution of a present absence’ as Diner puts it, and he considers this state to be a habitual attribute of post-1945 German Jewry (Diner in Brenner, 2012:31).

The organisation and re-establishment of Jewish life was enabled by the help of Jewish organisations from abroad: The Joint Distribution Committee (Joint) and the Jewish Agency.

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85 Hebrew: ‘the rest of the rescued’
86 When the Allied forces entered German territory in 1945, they found 8 million Displaced Persons who were either slave-labourers, prisoners of war or ex-concentrations camp prisoners. (Brenner, 2012).
87 The cherem is a traditional Jewish ban in order to excommunicate someone from a community. A famous cherem was exercised against Baruch Spinoza in the 16th century.
88 Gerschom Scholem was at the forefront of expressing his incomprehension of a Jewish return to Germany after the Shoah. This is most famously expressed in letters to Hannah Arendt but also to Hans-Joachim Schoeps, a German historian and later professor of religious studies in Erlangen who returned to Germany from exile in Sweden despite having lost his entire family in Auschwitz. Other intellectuals, among them Adorno and Horkheimer equally returned to Frankfurt and most famously brought the ‘Frankfurt School’ from the Hudson back to the Main river (Brenner and Frei in Brenner, 2012).
89 They were termed ‘liquidation communities’ Liquidationsgemeinden (Bodemann, 1996)
90 The often-referenced phrase ‘sitting on packed suitcases’ was coined during that time and presented a recurring theme in post-1945 Jewish communities in Germany and continued to shape the self-understanding of Jewish communities in Germany for decades (Brenner, 2012, Goschler and Kauders in Brenner 2012).
Three interest groups - German Jews returning from exile, Eastern European Jews and ex-DPs - shaped attitudes towards non-Jewish German society. While survivors envisioned the reconstructed communities to represent an ethno-national collective, ex-DP inmates regarded their time in Germany as temporary and returnees from exile were interested in a politics of integration and cooperation with the German state. Thus, from the very beginning of post-war Jewish community building, the communities were characterised by multi-national diversity and different religious traditions. The situation of return and rebuilding created an atmosphere of migration to post-war German territory. Moreover, multi-ethnic and multi-national Jewry gathered people with different degrees of trauma and therefore fundamentally diverging visions for the future of the communities (ibid).

1950 saw the establishment of the Central Council of the Jews in Germany, a corporate body under public law. Throughout Germany, the Jewish communities predominantly served as community centres, rather than centres of vibrant religious life. With the establishment of the Central Council, Jewish life in Germany was defined as a religious community, in order to reject the racial definition established by the Nazis and the Nuremberg Laws of 1935. The symbolic ban on the German state encouraged the Jewish communities to pursue close alliances with the state of Israel. As the political climate of the Adenauer-Era in the 1950s was still marked by silence regarding the Holocaust, the beginning of the Auschwitz trials evoked a climate of change and confrontation. With the student movement and the 1970s, the younger generation of Western-German Jewry increasingly questioned unlimited solidarity with Israel and critically opposed Israeli militarism and warfare. Instead of making Israel the

91 The Council committee was formed of delegates of all Jewish communities and an 18-people directory board acted alongside an administrative board formed of six members. It was a measure taken after the establishment of the German Federal Republic (est. 1949), providing the framework for an institutionally organised and governed Jewish life in Germany and signified that not all Jews would leave Germany (ibid). The executive board of the Central Council was exclusively represented by German Jews, despite the fact that the majority of Jews living in Germany at the time were Eastern European (ibid: 158). The progressive Jews of the 19th century had called themselves Germans Citizens of Jewish faith (Deutsche Bürger Jüdischen Glaubens) but the combination of ethno-national diversity and the cleavage between Jews and Germans rendered the terminology of ‘Germans’ impossible. To this day, there are uncertainties regarding definitions (Brenner, 2012) pointing to the impossibility of identifying as German and Jewish. This goes alongside external ascriptions and public discourse in which distinctions are made between ‘being Jewish’ and ‘being German’. Not only does this seem to be fostered by the cleavage of Auschwitz (Bodemann, 1996), but also by an ethnic, if not occasionally racialised understanding of German-ness. Furthermore, the distinctions made between ‘perpetrator’ and ‘victim’ genealogies as a national collective, can also create a kind of memory culture, with imprints of exclusive national belonging (Partridge, 2010). In his research on Holocaust memory and commemoration, Damani Partridge observes the performed exclusion of Turkish and Arab migrant youths in school contexts and critically discusses ownership over the Holocaust. (ibid.). This is especially significant in the light of establishing an inclusive non-ethnic definition of German citizenship and belonging.

92 The Nuremberg Laws (1935) further prohibited relationships and marriage between Jews and Aryans.

93 In 1950, the Jewish Agency even announced that any Jew who remained in Germany after 1950 could not be considered Jewish any longer.
centre of Jewish communities in Germany, Jewish life should centre around ‘Torah, Talmud, Tanakh and Halakha’, and show solidarity with Palestinians (Goschler and Kauders, 2012).

### 4.1.2 Post-1989

After re-unification, the Berlin’s Jewish community (JGB) was confronted with the merging of the city’s two Jewish communities. With 300 members, the Eastern Gemeinde was merely a small fraction of the 7800 strong JGB. Starting in the 1980s, the immigration of Russian speaking Jews from the former USSR changed Jewish life fundamentally and was vital for Jewish survival as a matter of demographic change. The arrival of approximately 220,000 so-called ‘quota-refugees’ grew the Jewish community to 105,000 members. This was connected to the hope that naturalization of ex-Soviet Jews could revive and revitalise and substantially diversify Jewish life in Germany and that migrants would ‘find their true Jewish identity’ in Germany. This was based on an ascribed identity emerging from post-war Germany: the organisation of Judaism in a religious community, Körber argues, lumped together the Jews into an ethnos, culture and Gemeinschaft whose roots were a ‘Jewish faith’, which was believed to be practiced in synagogues (Körber, 2009:239). The majority of ex-Soviet Jews had experienced their Jewishness as a national belonging in the multi-nation state of the Soviet Union and through anti-Semitic discrimination, exclusion and othering (ibid.). The ascription of a collective Jewish identity had the effect of creating cultural-religious communities often irrespective of the migrants’ self-definition. Moreover, the following of halachic definitions of Jewishness in the Gemeinden raised questions about belonging and acceptance and forced the Gemeinden to confront increasing socio-linguistic, national and

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94 During the 1970s and 1980s, the Jewish communities again became targets of anti-Semitic violence resulting in the establishment of police protection in front of Jewish institutions and synagogues. Meanwhile in the GDR, violent attacks on Jewish communities were often kept secret or attributed to the influence of fascist images by Western media (ibid: 348). The GDR was determined to convey the image of having successfully exterminated fascist elements from society (ibid.). One of my participants, returned to Germany from exile in Australia and became part of the socialist party in the GDR (SED). In her biography she describes her strategies of hiding or undermining her Jewishness in the GDR. Interview Sulamit, August, 2017.

95 What was first initiated by the GDR ended in the emigration and admission procedure by the government and from 1991 onwards, Jews from the former Soviet Union migrated to Germany as ‘quota refugees’.

96 Aktuelle Stunde des Bundestags, in Tagesspiegel, Oktober 26, 1990. In her study on the effects and consequences of this migration, Körber interprets this statement as an allusion to the revitalisation of a German-Jewish symbiosis and a philosemitic relief. Since the recently unified German state abstained from historically loaded connotations of defining Jewishness, emigration was based on patrilineal or matrilineal decent, the Einheitsgemeinden followed halachic definitions based on matrilineality.

97 The identification with Jewishness as a nationality also produced individuals who had little or no understanding or knowledge of Jewish religious tradition and ritual.
cultural and religious diversity, as integrating members who were distant from religious practice.98

4.1.3 Berlin

In Berlin, Jewish life was also significantly affected by Russian-Jewish migration beyond the challenge to merge the two communities. The topography of the city and the particular constitution of the ‘Berlin Republic’ substantially changed Jewish life in the capital. The gradual reestablishment of Berlin as the German capital also led to the shift of Jewish institutions (e.g. the Central council).99 The so-called Berlin Republic further stimulated a new self-conception of Jewry in Germany, one that had eventually dismissed the idea of an interim presence in Germany. With the arrival of Russian Jews, Jewish life in Germany diversified. For over thirty years, the Jewish community college had been the sole Jewish institution. In 1993, the Jewish Gymnasium opened its doors, as a state-recognised private school.100 In the 1990s and early 2000s, Jewish life in Berlin experienced a tremendous pluralization.101

The so-called ‘new Berlin’ has placed particular emphasis on the representation of Jewish life and the investment in Jewish (cultural and academic) institutions.102 This went alongside a refurbishment of Jewish aesthetics, which have been theorised as ‘Jewish space’ by several scholars (Pinto, 1997; Gruber, 2002; Leveson and Lustig, 2008).103 Despite the diversification

98 The immigrants saw the Gemeinde as cultural associations, rather than centres of prayer. While Russian Jews formed a distinctive majority in Jewish communities, German Jews continued to maintain positions of power. The question of whether the Gemeinden represented an ethnic or a religious community, or both, and to what extent, continues to challenge the Judische Gemeinschaft in Germany to this day. This starts with the question of language (German or Russian), religious laws, representation and inner and outer frontiers. The image of a common community of victims, ascribed by the non-Jewish German majority, created further discrepancy, especially as most ex-Soviet Jews had very little knowledge of the Shoah. The inner-conflicts of Jewish communities in Germany resulted in the invalidation of the immigration law for quota refugees. It changed into a legal arrangement where Russian Jews had to prove German language skills, the non-requirement of social welfare and acceptance by a Jewish community (Zentralrat der Juden, 2006). Much research has been done on ‘Russian Jewish Migration’ (Kessler, 2008 Schoeps and Glöckner, 2011; Körber, 2009, Bernstein, 2010, Gromova, 2013).
99 Similar to the rest of Germany, the JGB was faced with difficulties resulting from the post-Soviet Russian immigration and growth and the Gemeinde soon reached around 11,000 members. In Western Berlin, the Russians started to build an infrastructure, predominantly in Charlottenburg (Kessler, 2008).
100 It has currently around 60% of Jewish students and 40% from other religious faiths or non-religious backgrounds http://josberlin.de/top/ueber-uns/juedisches-schulleben/ last accessed 30/06/2018
101 In 1996, the Chassidic global movement of Chabad opened its doors. Furthermore, Yerushun Lauder was established and offers an orthodox minyan, yeshiva, community centre and Jewish day care outside of the Gemeinde structures.
102 One example is the so-called Klezmer Boom in the 1990s, when Klezmer music started to gain prominence, largely performed and consumed by non-Jews (Gruber, 2002).
103 While Diana Pinto maintained a positive view on the emergence of a new Europe and the revival of European Jewry, Leveson and others have been more sceptical towards the enactment of a Jewish life, that is not filled and inhabited by Jews but rather an anesthetization of filling a void and a nostalgic remembrance of filling a void of a culture which is lost – or rather has been destroyed. (Pinto in Lustig and Leveson, 2008)
of Jewish life, the official institutional representation of German Jewry remains the Central Council of the Jews (ZdJ), despite the fact that the majority of Jews in Berlin are not members of the Gemeinde.

4.1.4 Israeli Migration and Jewish Berlin post-2006

Against this historical backdrop, Israeli migration gains new significance. Already since the 1950s, Israelis started to return to Germany and Berlin (Brenner, 2012; Oz-Salzberger, 2001). Despite these early ‘returns’ to Germany and Berlin, it is over the past decade that Jewish-Israeli migration to Berlin has witnessed a tremendous growth. The extensive emigration of Israelis to Berlin is a geo-political concern for Israeli politicians and goes against the grain of Israeli aliya and homeland politics. Statistics as well as my data suggest a critical attitude of Israeli migrants towards the state of Israel. This ranges from moderate criticism to radical anti-Zionism (Rau, in Glöckner and Schoeps, 2016). The open criticism among the growing Israeli migrants in Berlin challenges the Jewish communities in Germany which held a somewhat idealised image of the state of Israel. Having mapped the trajectory of post-war Jewish institutions and the way Jewish communities have become a corporate body under public law we can understand how the close alliance to the state of Israel stands in contradiction with the recent arrival of migrants from Israel who are often critical towards the state of Israel, manifested in their emigration. In order to further understand this position, I will now turn to the societal development and the place of Jewishness in Israel.

4.2. The place of Jewishness in Israel

Scene: The Church after the Choir rehearsal

After the choir rehearsal, Frank asks everybody to clean up the room for the next day, which is a Sunday. There are little palm twigs inside the room and Gila is curious what they are for. It’s Palm Sunday tomorrow, says Frank. Don’t you celebrate this, too? And he looks just as confused as Gila and Geffen who are standing next to him. ‘It’s when Jesus came to Jerusalem.’ The moment he mentions Jesus it dawned on him, that he confused something here. ‘Ehhh… no’, says Gila and gives me a puzzled look. Later, Yuri who had overheard and observed the conversation says to me, ‘it’s all about religion all the time. I thought Europe was secular.’

(Fieldnotes, March 2016)
This incident provides an opening to this chapter which looks at the place of ‘Jewish’ and ‘religious’ positionalities in Israel. Here, we can see how the church space, and the members who identified as Christian, kept contrasting ‘their traditions’ to ‘that of the Israelis’. Some of the Israelis who felt distant from religion, like Yuri, showed irritation towards this kind of ‘interreligious dialogue’. Yuri’s annoyance derives from a severe scepticism and critique of religious authorities in Israel. With that in mind, this chapter will give a background to the place of ‘religion’ in Israeli society. Drawing a brief line from the early modern developments of Judaism as a religion to modern Zionism and contemporary Israeli politics of religion provides a background to the understanding of the actors’ positions in the scene.

One of the central issues in looking at Jewish belonging in Israel and particularly among Israelis in the realm of Western liberal democracies is the way in which Judaism sits uneasily within the liberal democratic categorizations of religion and the secular (Yadgar, 2014) that derive from a Christian-centred perspective (Casanova, 2011). This unease reverberates with a long history and the inherent struggle and tension of European Jewry between assimilation and emancipation and ‘the figure of the Jew’ as the epitome of an internal colonialism (Mufti, 2007).

The modern category of religion is a fairly recent concept which made its way into Western European societies around the time of the Enlightenment, separating the realm of sacred and saecular (worldly) time, particularly in the process of separation of newly-created states from the overarching powers of the Catholic Church (Casanova, 2011). The concept of religion - arguably coined with the emergence of Western democracies – (Asad, 1993, Mazusawa, 2005) stresses the importance of personal and voluntary confessions of faith (Fischer, 2013: 111). In modern Hebrew, the equivalent to religion is “dat”. However, until the 18th century, dat had no other meaning for Jews than religious law and there was no other word to signify culture or nationality. Related to the “Oriental question” of Jewish assimilation, German Jews were inclined to show loyalty to the German homelands and consequently engaged in the reconfiguration of the relation between religion and Jewish nation- and peoplehood.

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104 By internal colonialism, Mufti refers to the pressure for Jews to assimilate to a German norm and erase difference.
105 While under Napoleon the Jews had to become a religious group in order to be granted citizenship, the intellectual elite of Jews in Germany attempted to make the Jewish collective identity compatible with the German majority and structurally parallel to the German confessional system (Volkov, 2003).
106 It is in this context that Moses Mendelssohn is seen as a central figure of Jewish assimilation to the Enlightenment ideals of turning Jews into European citizens. Looking at a large body of literature on the ‘Jewish question’ in Europe, it has been argued that Jews became the object of internal colonialism and a significant orientalist othering (Mufti, 2007, Brown, 2006). The question of whether Jews could become part of the nation-to-be-formed in the 19th century evoked the fundamental
“From the eighteenth century onward, modern Jewish thinkers have been concerned with the question of whether or not Judaism can fit into a modern, Protestant category of religion. [...] Judaism has historically been a religion of law and hence practice. Adherence to religious law [...] does not seem to fit into the category of faith or belief, which by definition is individual and private. It is the clash between the modern category of religion and Judaism that gives rise to [...] the question of whether Judaism and Jewishness are matters of religion, culture, or nationality.” (Batnitzky, 2013:2,3).107

Although citizenship rights did not solve “the Jewish question”, it was exactly this tension between assimilation, emancipation and discriminatory practices, alongside the image of a ‘weak Jew’, that the early Zionists wished to leave behind.108 Incorporating religious mythology, images and especially language, the Zionist national project was to be detached from religion and aimed to create a ‘secular nation-state’ with the revival of Hebrew as a spoken language, rather than one reserved for prayer (Brenner, 2002:61). As stated, the Zionist project intended to transform the diasporic ‘weak Jew’, with its effeminate connotations and ‘normalise’ it through masculine imagery: ‘a nation like all other nations’ (Raz-Krakotzkin, 1993: 23). At the heart of the national project, to be established in Palestine, stood the revival of the Hebrew language. This was not a novel endeavour but had already been at the heart of the Haskalah movement, disconnected to the territoriality of the establishment of a Jewish state.109 The systematic revival of the Hebrew language by Yehuda Ben-Eliezer developed into a full-fledged cultural project, enabling a distinct cultural realm for the inhabitants of the Yishuv (settlement in Palestine) and beyond (Brenner, 2002). The language realm of Hebrew offered a new cultural framework away from the signs and signifiers of discrimination and anti-Judaism. Essentially, the Hebrew language offered the questions of emancipation and assimilation in correspondence with the Haskalah, the Jewish enlightenment and essentially resulted in the development and treatment of Judaism as a religious community.

107 Jewish secularism, as Naomi Seidman points out, did not deal with separate realms in the way Christian thought circled around the idea of the Luther’s two-kingsdoms-doctrine, but rather with the realms and limits of the Halacha (Seidman, 2015; Fischer, 2013). Thus, Jewish ‘secularization’ was concerned with bending and stretching the rules within, never outside of Judaism. While it might not lead anywhere to trace the paths of ‘Jewish secularization’, we might rather think of the secular as relational and as a configuration, as Asad reminds us (2003). That essentially leads us to think that the changing organisational and societal settings in 19th century Europe, necessarily impacted ‘Jewish secularity’, that is to say how individuals, intellectuals and communities re-configured their understanding of their position in relation to outside society. The changed citizenship status and recognition allowed for movement in different unforeseen directions.

108 On this see also Jacob Katz’ comprehensive historical account ‘Out of the Ghetto’ (Katz, 1973).

109 During the Haskalah movement, with Berlin at its centre, the Maskilim sought to re-invent Hebrew literature. Amit argues that there even existed a Hebrew magazine, established by Moses Mendelssohn, named Kohelet Musar. In the beginning of the 20th century, Poet Shmuel Yosef Agnon left Palestine for Berlin in order to further stimulate the Hebrew culture in Berlin. At the time, Berlin was the centre of the critical engagement with Zionism and Zionist ideas and intellectuals like Gerschom Scholem, Hannah Arendt, Martin Buber and Walter Benjamin, some of who were sceptical of Zionism as a national project (Amit, 2018).
possibility to identify with a reference frame which had a ‘Jewish source’. As we will see in Chapter 5, the Hebrew language has fundamental significance for some of my participants. For some, it was the primary reference frame of (national) identity.

4.2.1 Secular arrangements in Israel

The relationship between the religious and the secular in the fledgling State of Israel was laid down with the Status Quo, an agreement between Ben Gurion and ultra-Orthodox Jewry. Despite ideological objection, the end of World War II forced ultra-Orthodox emigration to Israel, which confronted them with the theological dilemma of committing to a heretical cause on the one hand, or actively failing to prevent the sinful Zionists from harming the sanctity of Eretz Israel on the other (Friedman, 1990). Opposed to a secular government in Israel, the Haredi prioritized saving their remnant communities, which required assistance from the government in order to survive (Friedman, 1990, p.128). Since an agreement between the British government and the Jewish community in Israel would radically undermine Ben Gurion's aspired autonomy from external forces, he agreed to the Status Quo. Granting exclusive authority to the Chief Rabbinate regarding Jewish marriage and divorce, the observance of Jewish holidays and kashrut, as well as burial laws, this compromise most importantly allowed the establishment of a separate state-funded religious education system (Friedman, 1995). Especially in the light of contemporary segmentation, fractionism and disputes over religion in Israel, Ben-Gurion’s decision has come under academic and public scrutiny (Kimmerling, 2008, Stadler, 2009). Granting religious authorities a decisive power over citizenship rights, it also bestowed them with the power of deciding who is a Jew. Thereby, religion and nationality are essentially collapsed into a single category. Yadgar asserts that the Status Quo is an expression of the State’s reliance on a narrow religious interpretation of the meaning of Jewish traditions for the purpose of regulating the public sphere and national politics (ibid.) Thus, the State of Israel established and maintained a citizenship which is distinct as it is a national identity which is reserved for Jews (Yadgar, 2014:7). While the Zionist movement made attempts to detach itself from Diasporic Judaism, it was still profoundly dependent on religious symbols in order to establish a collective national identity. Thus, the European concept of ‘the secular’ was adopted and translated into the State of Israel.\(^{110}\) In their outlook on secular Judaism in Israel, Yadgar and Liebman argue

\(^{110}\) Linguistic markers markedly point to the entanglement and proximity of Judaism in everyday life. The most remarkable example I consider the concept of “niphtar” referring to ‘passing away’, literally translated “to be exempt or freed from
that the creation of the State of Israel, along with the influx of new immigrants attempted to “breathe new life into Judaism” (Liebman and Yadgar, in Gitelman, 2009:152). Jewish symbols were used to build and strengthen a collective national identity and loyalty to the especially for new immigrants. Thus, the Zionist project nationalised Judaism (ibid.).

4.2.2 Jewishness in Israel today

Jewish-Israelis in contemporary Israeli society are often characterised by religious fractions presented as binary opposition between ‘dati’ (religious) and ‘hiloni’ (secular). This however neither captures the complexity of ‘religious belonging’ in Israel nor the function of construction and negotiation of religion predominantly within the Jewish majority and its geo-political significance. The Pew Research Center (2016) marks contemporary Israeli society with a 19% non-Jewish population divided into 14% Muslims, 2% Druze, 2% Christians and 1% as other religions. Out of the Jewish population, 8% are believed to be Haredi, 10% identify as ‘dati’ (orthodox) and 23% as Masorti (traditionalist) 40% as Hiloni (Secular). Despite territorial proximity, secular and religious are believed to have separate life worlds and even portray each other as an ‘Other’. Dati’im are traditionally observant in keeping kosher and observing Shabbat and are more integrated into Israeli society than Haredim, e.g. men usually serve in the Israeli Defence Forces (IDF). Masorti (traditionalists) are believed to occupy a middle ground between dati’im and hilonim in Israeli society. Many hilonim observe some religious traditions and generally oppose the Rabbinate’s control over marriage and divorce and believe democratic values to be more important before religious law. There are secular people [...] who observe a small number of mitzvot [...] because that is how they were raised. There are secular atheists, who do not believe. You can’t generalize all the secular people, treat them [as if they were] all behaving in the same way. (Yadgar, 2011:213)

It has been suggested that most Jews in Israel agree that Israel can be a democracy and a Jewish state but are fundamentally at odds with how this should be put in practice. The vast majority of hilonim say democratic principles should take precedence over religious law, while the majority of ultra-Orthodox place the priority on halachic guidelines (Pew Research

mitzvot”. Furthermore, the language of “Aliya” “Yerida”, and galut are direct biblical references implying the ascent to Zion, in equating the arrival in Israel with the religious ascent to the Holy Temple, referring to immigration to and emigration from Israel and the ‘diaspora’.
Report, 2016:6). Furthermore, most of the ultra-Orthodox say “being Jewish” is mainly a matter of religion, while secular Jews tend to say it is mainly a matter of ancestry or culture (ibid:6). Against this backdrop, Uri Ram observes the rise of ‘religious public discourse’ in Israeli national politics in recent decades. In order to pursue geo-political objectives towards the surrounding states and particularly towards Palestinians, the only convergence of an ethnically fractious society is over a supposed ‘religious positioning’. Hence, he sees a discursive and politically infused rise in ‘religion’ and the gradual fading of the Israeli secular project (Ram, 2008).

Most significant to secularism in Israel is the place of inner-Jewish social hierarchies. More specifically, the place of ‘Mizrahi Jews’ has gained prominence in political and scholarly debates on Israeli society, focussing on the strategic discrimination towards Mizrachim (Shenhav, 2006; Khazzoom, 2003; Illouz, 2013). Scholars emphasise how early on in the formation of the state of Israel, the European elites were considered superior in their ability to create and establish cultural and political leadership in Israel. It is only through the diverse constructions of otherness and ethnic cleavages by an ‘Ashkenazi hegemony’ (Swirski in Shenhav, 2006), that we can understand the significance that religious positioning comes to play in Israeli societal strata. This positioning is believed to have derived from the place of Jews in Europe and their subsequent realisation of the Zionist project. In short, the State of Israel was created by a white European elite, that sought to unite world Jewry in the state of Israel under their leadership. Khazzoom points at the dichotomising, ‘orientalising’ practices in Israeli society, which she traces to the early Zionist movement, and the constellation of orientalising practices towards Jews and by Jews themselves in Germany, particularly towards their Eastern Jewish counterparts, Ostjuden (Khazzoom, 2003:499). Accordingly, it was the Zionist intention of forming a secular, European nation-state in the Middle East, by which the Zionist movement developed its defining character towards its non-white Middle-Eastern counterparts. Thus, regardless of any religious practices, hilonim occupy a specific place in the socio-economic grid of Israeli society. Consequently, the identification of hiloni is not of clear-cut analytical value but emerges as a context-specific construction against an imagined ‘other’. This stresses the fact that religion, politics and economics are markedly entangled in Israeli society and cultural life and are not easily translatable to a different context.

111 ‘Seculars by definition’, have a strong sense of being Jewish and being Israeli, while being unfamiliar with the Jewish traditions only insofar as they have become part of the Israeli national societal folk custom, the historical moments, particularly the Holocaust which is a present discourse in society as well as the educational system (ibid: 157).
context. This background is vital in understanding the scene and the positionalities of its actors when moving to Berlin.

4.2.3 Religion and the Secular in Motion

While we can understand the fractions of Israeli society as societal enclaves bound up with socio-economic and political positioning, globalizing forces and migration have introduced new forms of ‘religious’ practice to Israeli society. Often identified as different from ‘religion’, spiritualities tend to combine non-Western religious practices with elements of Judaism (Ruah-Midbar, 2012; Altglas, 2014). The adopted practices of global phenomena essentially complicate the often-criticized binaries of ‘religious and secular’. Referring to a ‘Jew-Age’ (Jewish New Age), Ruah-Midbar suggests that there is growing engagement in New Age spiritualities, often connected to esoteric practices, Yoga and meditation, feminist and ecological movements often embedded in Jewish practices, e.g. Shabbat dinner, Torah study and Jewish holidays. The second movement in which this plays out are Yeshivot Hiloniot, Secular Yeshivas. While ecological movements are often related to esoteric practices, together with the Secular Yeshivot movement they can be seen as political reactions to the institutional clericalism and unchanging religious authorities in Israeli society (ibid.). Not only do they provide new reference frames of belonging, their alliances with feminism also interrogate standard gender relations in traditional Judaism and Israeli society, binary gender views and the prerogative of males over Torah and Talmudic study. In reference to earlier critics on the concept of ‘spirituality’ as detached from class and social strata (Altglas, 2014; Wood, 2007; Skeggs, 2004), Kaplan and Werczberger (2015) identify these practices as an Israeli ‘middle class’ ‘hiloni’ phenomenon which corresponds with neoliberal transformations of group membership, practices and belonging. Nonetheless, rooted in Jewish tradition and texts, these practices also emerge as a consequence of individualisation and experientialism (ibid:6). “Religiosity becomes a private matter that every Jew is entitled to mould and reconstruct according to her own personal goals, values and aspirations” (ibid: 7). The ‘choosing’ goes together with individuals who dispose of high cultural capital, and the ‘spiritual openness’ comes to exemplify a middle-class cosmopolitan orientation (ibid.) This indeed corresponds with some of my Israeli participants in Berlin.

112 One of the proponents of this movement was ex-Knesset member Ruth Calderon, who, promoted the idea of learning Talmudic Tales and a ‘secular’ reading of Bible and Talmud in the Secular Yeshiva Alma in Jerusalem.
So far, I have shown how Jewishness in Israel is deeply embedded in European history and the pathway of Judaism becoming a religion as well as the trajectory of the Zionist project and the revival Hebrew. Contemporary negotiations over religion in Israel respond to the institutional set-up as well as geo-political positioning in the Middle East and towards Palestinians. Finally, new ‘spiritualities’ have started to complexify traditional definitions of ‘religious’ practice in Israel today.

4.3 German society and the place of Jewishness since 1945

“Man’s desire is the desire of the Oher […] it is qua Other that he desires …”


I am indeed invoking the Lacanian notion of desire to start this section which aims to provide the background to an understanding of the scene, by way of mapping the signification of ‘Jewishness’ in a non-Jewish German societal context, often referred as Deutsche Mehrheitsgesellschaft. This aims to construct the societal setting which is part of the sociological analysis of how this scene constitutes itself as Jewish. It neither to reduce the individual having been socialised in this context to that experience nor to make any normative judgement about the potential ways this context influences the individual experience. Rather, it is intended to map a historical context which contributes to shape the formation of Jewishness in Germany and its influence on dynamics and enactments in the scene.

4.3.1 The emergence of desire

Beyond the diversity of post-war Jewish communities, there is also an ‘orientation towards Judaism’, which reaches its maximum expression in the demand for conversion. Barbara Steiner found that in the 1950s, requests for conversion of Germans to Judaism reached up to 6,000, while the Jewish Community in Berlin only counted 6,000 members. Aside from relationships with Jews, for some, the conversion to Judaism was borne out of the recent past, sentiments of guilt and the subsequent wish to ‘change sides’. Occasionally, this was attached to the hope to obtain better and more beneficial financial and material care when becoming Jewish (Steiner, 2015). Already after 1945, the large number of unregistered members with

113 German society of the majority
uncertain origins created the challenge for Jewish communities to define and negotiate the question of who counts as Jewish. Besides seeking opportunity, already shortly after the war, non-Jewish Germans wanted to get away from ‘being German’, since it carried the burden of guilt and shame.

When considering the place of Judaism and Jewishness in post-war Germany, one needs to bear in mind, that societal structures and orders did not immediately change. While de-Nazification was on the agenda of the Allied forces, effectively, German bureaucrats returned and stayed in offices after the end of the war. While scholars agree that Germany was a hyper-racialised society during the Third Reich (Chin and Fehrenbach, 2009:5), they have operated on the unspoken assumption that race disappeared after the Third Reich accepting that the post-war taboo against the term Rasse also meant that the question of how to define and deal with difference was no longer central (ibid:6). While the most brutal racialised violence ceased with the defeat of the Nazi regime, they suggest that more day-to-day practices, mindsets, orientations and attitudes were not rooted out so easily (ibid.). Fehrenbach demonstrates how so-called ‘mixed raced’ children of black American soldiers and German women were first illegal, then subject to severe discrimination and later treated as exotic objects, to give one example (Fehrenbach, 2009:49).

Linke traces the racial trajectories from post-war Germany until today and demonstrates how the German political imaginary is infused with a racialized violence that has persisted from the Third Reich until today. (Linke, 1999:1). This argument is insightful, especially in the context of the institutionalisation of ‘Judaism’ into a religious institution (Central Council of the Jews in 1950), and the erasure of racial terminology from the agenda from ‘race’ to ‘culture’ (Grossman, Chin and Fehrenbach, 2009) or religion. Thus, the ‘name change’ and the overwriting of a detrimental terminology legitimising genocide necessarily involves leaving ‘the issue un-addressed’. As I will show in the next chapter, the derogatory and discriminatory language towards Jews was equally replaced by positive expressions towards Jews, overwriting anti-Semitic stereotypes and attitudes. This becomes particularly

114 It was only in the late 1980s, when African-American writers and activists such as Audre Lorde came to Berlin, that especially mixed raced females could take up a position outside of a ‘double consciousness’ (Fehrenbach, 2009:51).
interesting when considering that up until the arrival of so-called guest workers, the non-Jewish majority of Germans was at least ‘culturally’ Christian. This suggests that it was a white Christian majority, which presented a post-war ‘German’ majority standpoint from which Otherness was defined.

4.3.2 The past and the encounter with the ‘Hebrew exotic’

Before delving deeper into the ‘German’ image, I want to emphasise that this section approaches a topic that has come under tremendous scrutiny in the recent past. Analysing a German majority society bears the problematic of reducing ‘German’ society to a white ‘somatic norm’, a notion, which I seek to distance myself from. However, in order to draw an analytical picture, I analyse a segment of German society, which is treated as ‘ethnically’ German. For the majority of my non-Jewish participants, the encounter with Jews and Judaism and Israel and Israelis was not novel: on the contrary, non-Jewish members in the Choir had had short or extensive experiences in Israel, as students, volunteers or professionals with varying Hebrew language skills. Despite this familiarity, a few of the non-Jewish German members had never been in close contact with Jewish people or Israelis. In order to illustrate this, I am citing from an interview with Peter, a non-Jewish German elaborating on his encounters:

P: ... And then I had profound experiences, for example while reading Martin Buber....

V: And would you say that ‘the encounter’ with Martin Buber was the first with Jewish texts or with Jewish religion or ‘Jews’ or was there something before?

P: “No, that was more or less the first contact. Well, in my adolescence, I had no contact. Except so to speak, historically, in history class, well, back then, always with, victim- and perpetrator stories. But no, there were no personal relations. During my studies, when you realise that Walter Benjamin, Franz Kafka and Heinrich Heine all have this background in another religion, then you ask yourself, what is the commonality? But, and I can’t really say why, but I know that the religious interpretations of Kafka’s texts gave me a lot. But I did not

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115 I am indeed referring to Jewish-Israelis and Jews of various origins and am not conflating the terms.
know any observant Jews. No practicing ones. Actually, until today. The choir is the first contact.”

**I: Interesting…**

**P: well, where should I have taken them from? They are not so present in Berlin.**

The given excerpt gives an example of the representation that the category ‘Jewish’ had for Peter, an image that was first shaped by ‘perpetrators’ and ‘victims’ stories from the Shoah. Then, this image is replaced by a ‘fictional’ encounter with ‘Jewish’ literature. His admiration for the Jewish writers and philosophers is finally related to the ‘real’ encounter with the Israelis in the choir. The lack of contact to living Judaism is explained with ‘their absence’ and the question of ‘where to find this collective’. Finally, in the choir, the encounter presents itself twofold: he aspires to understand their ‘collectivity’, ‘what ‘they’ hold in common’, yet slowly realises that they do not seem to present a believed collective. This disrupts previously held categories and interrogates the idea of ‘a collective’:

“I see that they have totally contrasting positions, in relation to spirituality and religion. And I think if you put a few Israelis in a room, it takes a while - perhaps a few ultra-orthodox might immediately agree but the others don’t. So, you have different opinions all the time. And what I really enjoy is that I get access to a different form of spirituality and religiosity. Albeit tentatively. […] I don’t have close relations to Israelis or practicing Jews…”

There is a realization of the difference between his idea of 19th-century Jews and contemporary Jewish Israelis he encounters. It seems as if the encounter with the unfamiliar evokes uncertainty and confusion, although the contact with them is held in high esteem, while regretting that they fail to teach him about Jewish traditions and religious practice. Aware of this ‘special occasion’ of encounterings and singing with Jews who primarily identify as Israeli, the aspiration to find a connection between a Walter Benjamin and a 25-year old student from Hertzeliya is searched for in vain. This is then combined with a fascination for the Hebrew language, which is appreciated for its exotic appeal.
“and at the beginning, it was the strange\textsuperscript{116} but also the great appeal of the sounds and the language, as well as the spirit [Geisteshaltung] behind that. And it was beautiful to have this experience of the strange together with other people.”

Here, the attempt is made to turn the encounter with the strange and unknown into a common group experience, suggesting that he is not alone in encountering the ‘unfamiliar’. What becomes apparent here is the mixture between a post-Shoah German biography\textsuperscript{117} marked by the absence of Jews and Judaism and their representations merely through learning about the Shoah. This absence then becomes entangled with the encounter with an oriental and exoticised ‘other’ embodied by the Hebrew language. The presence of Jewish Israelis serves the function of filling a void of a Jewish absence (Gruber, 2002) by representing what is perceived as an ‘uncanny’ other. The uncertainty with which Jews and Judaism is approached, conveys that Jews were approached as a ‘religious’ other, yet, most Israelis do not identify with that religion. We can see how the German aforementioned post-war institutional context is enacted here. More broadly, Peter, a non-Jewish German in his mid-forties and married to a Protestant theologian exemplifies a specific societal context.\textsuperscript{118} Not only does he demonstrate the dynamics of a ‘philosemitic milieu’, he also presents how Hebrew and Israel represent an exotic other, which evokes fascination. Starting with the concept of Philo-Semitism, I will now expand on its entanglement with orientalism and exoticism.

4.3.3 The question of Philo-Semitism

While we can relate the above described social behaviours as a matter of exoticizing Israelis – this particular behaviour emerging from the German context, needs to be placed in a context that has often been described as ‘philosemitic’. A large body of literature in post-1945 Germany—especially biography and fiction—deals with the question of guilt, shame and ‘Philo-Semitism’, as its behavioural offspring. \textsuperscript{119} The term came to refer to a particular

\textsuperscript{116} [unfamiliar, fremdartig]

\textsuperscript{117} Some members of his family were part of the NSDAP (Nazi Party). While this is important background information of potential latent guilt structures, the attitude displayed did not significantly differ from participants whose parents and grandparents were less involved in Nazi fascism.

\textsuperscript{118} I am not claiming that Peter* is the ultimate representation of ‘German’ attitudes towards Jews and Israelis. However, his way of articulating himself in this context can elucidate the way Israelis are perceived and contextualised into a societal ‘German’ framework.

\textsuperscript{119} For example (Biller, 2009, Dischereit, 1998; Mounk, 2015).
situation in post-Nazi predominantly Western Germany and is seldom sociologically defined. Thus, while it can refer to a certain caution with which non-Jewish Germans speak to Jews, in awe and adoration, as well as shameful attitude of empathy, the practice and philosemitic attitudes are often generally exemplified rather than properly theorised. This seems particularly relevant in cosmopolitan urban contexts like Berlin, which are characterised by boundaries and exoticisms (Römhild, 2017) and the celebration of ‘hip-otherness’ (Gutierrez Rodriguez, 2005). Above, I have shown how in post-war Germany the racialised notion of Jews and the detrimental societal anti-Semitism was replaced by the institutionalisation of Judaism as a religion and race and racialised images were not erased but translated into ‘culture’ and ‘religion’. It has further been suggested how the conversion to Judaism became increasingly attractive for German nationals in post-war Germany (Steiner, 2015). Frank Stern has analysed how the context of Western Germany triggered the emergence of what he calls a ‘philosemitic habitus’ (Stern, 1991). Taking the example of the Ruhr-area in Western Germany, post-1945, he argues that the supposed ‘De-Nazification’ did not remove Nazi and SS officials from German higher offices and civil services. However, the presence of Allied forces and their suspicion fostered and promoted a pro-Jewish attitude. This emerged partially out of fear of being accused of anti-Semitism, or denounced as an anti-Semite. Consequently, previously held antisemitisms were relegated to the private sphere and ‘talking about Jews’ became a societal taboo (ibid: 344).

The removal of ‘things Jewish’ from the public sphere, was neither an act of repression nor irrational, but indeed a rational one (ibid: 344). Positive references to Jews in public, Stern argues, were accompanied by private Antisemitism, What first emerged as a practice of daily life in post-war Germany, only later came to serve as an ideology on state-level. Antisemitic relicts and pro-Jewish images were combined into a pragmatic synthesis, of which the later had a cathartic function as it brings relief, and distance to ‘yesterday’s collective’. Thus, Stern suggests, the tabula antisemitica was overshadowed by a societal tabula philosemitica (ibid: 347), enabling German society to live with its guilt and legitimise the creation of ‘new society’. In this Stern contends a ‘philosemitic habitus’ which was not only marked by the sheer absence of Jews in the public sphere and the media in the 1950s, but also by the avoidance of speaking about ‘Juden’ and referring instead to ‘jüdische Mitbürger’¹²⁰ (ibid:352). The philosemitic habitus, so Stern, went beyond speech acts and entailed

¹²⁰ Jewish co-citizens
performative codes which emphasised not only *what* was being said, but *how* it was being said (ibid: 355). Equally, Jews would be put on a moral and intellectual pedestal, by praising their superiority and achievements within German cultural history (Stern, 355). The symbolic figure of the Jew then replaced the engagement with a Jewish presence, culture and history and made the ‘friendship towards Jews’ a mere ritual’ (ibid: 351).

Stern’s work was not only influential on later works (Kinzig, 2009), it also provides a useful way of thinking of the post-war (Western-) German climate and the trans-generational transmission of guilt and shame combined with the ‘inability to mourn’ over personal loss (Mitscherlich and Mitscherlich, 1967). However, the ‘philosemitic habitus’ is limited in its analytical applicability to contemporary Berlin cosmopolitan space. Furthermore, what makes the use of the notion of philosemitism fundamentally problematic is its analytical imprecision as well as its long trajectory beyond post-war Germany. ‘*Coined in Germany in 1880* […] “philosemitism’ was invented by avowed antissemites as a sneering term of denunciation of *their opponents*” (Sutcliffe and Karp 2011:1). What was first an antisemitic attack against pro-Jewish sentiments had already been present in church circles of the 18th/19th century, referring to the admiration of everything Jewish\(^{121}\). The use of philosemitism, Sutcliffe and Karp argue, cannot be neatly separated from antisemitism, nor can it be used unproblematically. The phenomenon could also be explained using more explicit terminology, as Rensmann and Faber suggest (2009). Against this backdrop, philosemitism is almost always regarded as deeply suspicious, sharing with antisemitism distorted, exaggerated, and exceptionalist views of Jews and Judaism.\(^{122}\)

Alongside the emergence of a supposed ‘philosemitic habitus’ (Stern), post-war Western Germany also saw the institutionalisation of reconciliation programmes. Starting in the 1960s with the Action Peace and Reconciliation, the volunteer movement in Kibbutzim, the inter-cultural exchanges and cultural relations including exchange programmes and – for a privileged middle class – encounters and interactions with Israel (Zander, 2009). Most significantly, churches were at the forefront of stimulating this exchange (ibid.).

\(^{121}\) In an edited volume by Diekmann and Kotowski, Wolfram Kinzig embarks on a conceptual definition locates the emergence of philosemitism to the circles around Heinrich Treitschke, which might be even an invention by the historian himself. Kinzig describes how Treitschke had caused the Berliner Antisemitismusstreit, the Berlin Anti-Semitism quarrel, in which some voted against the decision to restrict Jews from civil services and restrict migration. (Kinzig, in Diekmann and Kotowski, 2009:26,27).

\(^{122}\) It is therefore that Goldhagen argues that, philosemitism is ‘antisemitism in sheep’s clothing (Goldhagen 1997 in Sutcliffe and Karp, 2011).
Western Germany maintained close ties with Israel, the Berlin Republic increased investment in maintaining and cultivating institutional, cultural and social ties to Israel (Glöckner and Schoeps, 2016). Consequently, sociologically, we must differentiate between institutional, political and interpersonal pro-Jewish attitudes. Most important for the given context of the scene is the societally embedded ‘reconciliation structures’ that have affected families and biographies (Chapter 6).

4.3.4 Exoticism and Erotic Desire

Having visited the notions of philo-Semitism, I now turn to the practice of exoticisation and its entanglement with the erotic and desire. Exoticism and deeming something or someone exotic has been shaped by colonial encounters (Huggan, 2001) and has gained prominence in Said’s work on Orientalism (Said, 2003). “Exoticism” is derived from the Greek exōtikos, “foreign,” from exō, “outside” and is used in order to describe otherness from a particular point of view. Deeply connected with images of ‘the Orient’ it is constructed relationally as a “particular mode of aesthetic perception” (Huggan 2001,13). Moreover, the exotic is attractive because it is seen as being “different” (Todorov 1993, 264); exoticism makes otherness “strangely or unfamiliarly beautiful and enticing” (Figueira 1994:1 in Altglas, 2014). For Todorov, “the best candidates for the exotic label are the peoples and cultures that are most remote from us […] Knowledge is incompatible with exoticism, but lack of knowledge is in turn irreconcilable with praise of others; yet praise without knowledge is precisely what exoticism aspires to be…” (Todorov, 1993:265).

We assume that if these ideals and imaginaries not only emerge with an absent ‘other’, then they are based on certain imagined and constructed (body) images as well as a language (Hebrew). More generally, if the exotic represents something remote, foreign, strange and beautiful, it also physically differs from oneself: thus, it can trigger attraction through difference. Not simply connected to these specific body images and stereotypes, imagined ‘Jewish’ exoticism can also relate to Judaism as a religious practice. It is in this sense that Veronique Altglas analyses the tendencies of Western middle classes to embrace ‘Eastern’ religions and religious practices as a matter of ‘desiring the religion of the ‘other’ as an ‘religious exoticism’ (Altglas, 2014). It is through such practices that individuals can temporarily leave their familiar environment and ‘be part of’ the other religion and another cultural realm by mere practice. It has been argued that Orientalism is a gendered process and that exoticism involves the erotic (Yenenoglu, 1998). As the erotic is entangled with
sexuality, then, it necessarily is a ‘bodily matter’ for, as Judith Butler suggests, we are not only gendered but ‘sexed beings’ and relate with our bodies (Butler, 1993).

This ‘othering’ however is not one of explicit positioning of practices of ‘us’ and ‘them’ but rather is formulated by subtleties of exoticizing practices – deeming and perceiving someone as ‘interesting’, ‘fascinating’, ‘enticing’ and beautiful on the basis of her or his Jewishness. Furthermore, deeming someone as ‘other’ can be done on the basis of phenotype, attributing phenotypical characteristics to a person.  

In her elaborations on Orientalism, Sara Ahmed suggests that ‘Orientalism’ presupposes a ‘being oriented’ toward the East, which implies one’s own positionality as judging from ‘the West’ (Ahmed, 2006:113). Edward Said, as Ahmed reminds us, shows that these classifications are ‘man-made’ (ibid.) and indeed relational. This is particularly insightful in the context of Jewish-Israelis: in the Western World, Jews have been seen as occidental and oriental (Kalmar and Penslar, 2005). In that sense, the Orient comes to be desired by ‘the West’ by holding things that the West itself is assumed to be lacking (ibid:114). Being orientated towards something can entail reaching out toward an object, which involves an extension of one’s body. If the ‘Jew’ is indeed marked as ‘special’ in the German context, then there is an orientation toward Jewishness and Jews, which is marked from a position of the ‘non’-Jew. Moreover, it marks the Jew as something that one does not have (ibid.). If the orientation is toward Jewishness, then non-Jewishness becomes the norm from which one manoeuvres. Thus, the orientation toward Jewishness – similar to the orientation and construction of the Orient – becomes the defining marker not only to define the other, but to define oneself.

Evidently a whole nation cannot be oriented toward the same thing. However, I want to suggest that the absence of Jewish life and the marking of Jews as special and as a ‘desirable object’ have stimulated an orientation towards Jewishness, which is marked as ‘interesting’ and ‘positive’. I suggest that this orientation is embedded in the philosemitic trajectory of

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123 Effectively, an overwhelmingly positive image of Jews and Judaism can then lead to new alliances and exclusions. This has become most visible in the context and aftermath of the arrival of large numbers of refugees in 2015, which has been met with strong media attention and the reassertion of the idea of a Judeo-Christian Occident, an alliance, which is defined against, and by definition excludes, the Muslim minority. In such a way, the protection of the Jewish minority, ‘Germany’s stated reason’, has also provided the grounds for new exclusions, and ‘new’ others. However, the close predominantly discursive alliance between a Christian majority and ‘their Jews’, does neither prevent nor preclude the potential ‘othering’, as my data suggests: rather the existence of it appears to suggest that the supposed public alliance between Jews and Christians as large categories predominantly takes place on a discursive level.

124 Here, I am referring to the special segment of German society that I am analysing.
post-war Germany, yet, the practices involved in this are orientalising and exoticising. After this elaboration on the place of ‘Jewishness’ in Germany, I will now turn to the second part of this thesis and the actors of this scene.
Part II: The Actors of the Scene

5. Migration

After having seen the differing historical developments of Judaism and Jewishness showing the context-specific constructions, institutional structures and subsequent signification, the following chapter puts this background into context by mapping four biographical trajectories of migrants from Israel to Berlin. While they represent the ‘desired migrant group’ of Israelis in Berlin, their ‘Jewish’ positions differ as a function of gender, sexual orientation and relationship towards religion. Instead of analysing a certain ‘identity’, I am mapping the biographical trajectories, their migration to Berlin and their participation in the scene, in order to show the complex configurations of individual positionings. While all biographical cases presented here were born into a Jewish family – thus they are halakhically Jewish - and hold Israeli citizenship, they fundamentally differ in their ways of understanding and ‘working out’ their Jewishness(es) in Israel as well as after their move to Berlin.

This chapter is divided into two subgroups which exemplify recurring patterns but especially underscore differences and complexities in the way Jewish belonging is construed. This is to show the differing kinds of ‘doing being Jewish’ (Inowlocki, 2000) and ‘doing being Israeli’ but also to span a spectrum that shows the range of positions as well as the dynamic tensions of family, place, and individual trajectory in correspondence with moving to Berlin. Although my intention of mirroring migration and conversion appears to create a certain dichotomy, it is neither to create a hierarchy nor strengthen a binary opposition. Rather than emphasising the dichotomy between ‘born’ Jews and non-born Jews, I make an analytical distinction emerging from the field. My data revealed how both groups struggle with similar as well as dissimilar questions and searches of belonging, family, gender and sexuality and social positioning. However, the Israeli migrants face external ascriptions, of being confronted with their Jewish and Israeli belonging, whether they choose to or not.

The cases presented here negotiate their positions and biographical ‘turns’ (migration and conversion) in the presence of an ‘external social gaze’. This is what duBois has referred to as a ‘double consciousness’: seeing oneself through the eyes of others (duBois, 1903) and relates to and the general derogatory views on emigration by the Israeli state and society. While their reasons to migrate to Berlin differ, for all my participants, it was a matter of
choice and presents a way of spatially and symbolically distancing themselves. Moreover, the move to Berlin not only involves crossing national borders, it also involves a symbolic border crossing of living in Germany and, for some, having a German partner.

By way of giving voice to my participants’ struggles, joys and pleasures of being born Jewish, inheriting a history that is also marked by legacies of trauma and loss, I am demonstrating that ‘being Jewish’ is not merely a matter of situational choice or a ‘signifier’ which one can adopt according to circumstance. Nevertheless, Silverstein urges us to abstain from presupposing the existence of a ‘Jewish identity’ (Silverstein, 2000). Similarly, Inowlocki argues that “presupposing ethnicity commits the fallacy of taking for granted what is continuously being worked out, i.e. asserted, questioned, studied, dismissed, postulated, and so on.” (Inowlocki, 2000: 29). Consequently, the biographical construction is a time-specific narration and positioning. The first two cases demonstrate the entanglement of religion, gender and sexuality in Israeli society. While Tomer could be considered ‘anti-religious’, Inbal exemplifies how Jewishness is used as a cultural resource with ‘Hebrew’ representing home and belonging. Identifying as ‘secular’, both cases illustrate how ‘religion’ in Israel is entangled with specific socio-political structures and hierarchies. Both participated in the Hebrew Choir, which was valued for its (musical) aesthetics and as a group experience. The cases of Yaakov and Arbel present two young men from observant families, who have become active in the synagogue while working out their personal relationship to tradition and religious practice, together with their partners who have converted to Judaism. Contrastive to Tomer and Inbal, they relate to the aesthetics at the synagogue and consider it to be an important part in their lives. However, both seek to practice it in a way that ‘fits’ the circumstances of urban Berlin, of what I consider ‘Judaism Berlin-style’. This then suggests how Berlin can have the effect of a ‘converting space’.
5.1 Contesting the Secular and the Search for Makom

The case of Tomer presents a case of contestation, which emerges from his trajectory and particular positionality in Israeli society. I met Tomer in the choir. He was conspicuous as he frequently proclaimed his antipathy against Judaism and ‘performed’, stylized and acted out his averse against Jewish religious artefacts. Reluctantly and with proclaimed unease he would enter the synagogue space and was the first to announce his willingness to hold rehearsals on Jewish holidays in order to express his indifference towards them. His trajectory is one of searching for makom, “a place” of his own. It emerges from the analysis that it is not Judaism that he rejects per se, but the discriminatory, gendered and hierarchical structures which he associates with ‘religion’ in Israel and which is entangled with his own trajectory of pain and suffering.

5.1.2 Biographical Sketch

Tomer was born in 1974 in a small town in Israel as the first of two children. He grows up without any affiliation to religious tradition but reveals that his grandfather had a seat at the synagogue. He describes himself as a ‘closeted child’ in relation to his homosexuality, who was waiting to grow up and leave home. At the age of thirteen, his father dies in a car accident and the family moves to a new flat. A few years afterward, as a teenager he independently applied for a placement at a boarding school in Jerusalem and started to live away from his mother and sister. After finishing the boarding school, he starts the Army service which he spends as a ‘9-5 soldier’, serving during the day and staying with his mother. After finishing the army, he starts to study Graphic Design in Jerusalem. During his adolescence and as student at University he is desperate to leave Israel. After his studies, he moves to Tel Aviv to stay for eight years, a period which is marked by changes of apartments and partners. Eventually he gets married to his partner, Eran. After his friend and ex-partner, who is German, move to Berlin, he regularly visits the city. Eventually Tomer and his husband move to Berlin, where he begins to work as a freelancer. After a few years, they separate. At the time of the interview he had been singing in the choir for a year and a half and had just started dating a non-Jewish German man.

5.1.3 Biographical Tension

Tomer’s narrative is one of opposition to everything related to Judaism as religious practice.
He showed a reaction to anything remotely related to Haredim or other observant groups in Israeli society. The opening of his narrative set the tone for the biographical tensions that emerge from an entanglement between his sexuality, feeling out of place and the wish to escape:

\[ V: \text{“I am interested in your life story, Israel and how you came here and how you found your way into the choir...”} \]

\[ T: \text{“Ehm, is it important for you – I can connect everything like basically to being gay... like it's part of my experience of life, already as a child, as a closeted child... like you hear things at home like ‘when you grow up, you decide’, and things like that from your parents, so it's part of my drive to grow up and go away from home. And going to Berlin is part of going away, even further away from home ... so this is all part of that... “} \]

The biographical narration and the whole life story are centred around his sexual orientation. Considering himself a ‘closeted child’, he is desperate to grow up and leave home. We can see how his parents directed his autonomy and independent decision making to the future. Thus, in growing up and moving away from ‘home’ lies the promise of happiness\(^{125}\) for him. The feeling of not belonging and not being able to express his feelings, seemed to urge and foster the desire to escape. These are contextualised subsequently, explaining the migration to Berlin, as a way of distancing himself from his home and family:

\[ Y: \text{“that is why I am saying me being so far from the place where I was born part of it is also the fact that I am gay ... already as I child I was waiting to grow and be independent and go and do things for myself – and to just be independent that is the main word. So, in a way – even when I kind of in a very decent way, ...to go to a boarding school in Jerusalem. It was a very good school and my mum was just very proud and maybe later I told her do you realise that this was my way to run away from home? As a teenager that was my very – ordentlich [orderly] teenage rebellion – to go to a very good school [laughs] [...] – My father died when I was thirteen.... And ... his life insurance actually covered the price of the new apartment that we just} \]

\(^{125}\) Here, I borrow Sara Ahmed’s term. She describes how certain institutions and rites of passage hold ‘the promise of happiness’, which might actually never fully come true.
moved into, which he never got to move with us, that was part of the tragic thing –
changing house which is part of the trauma around the age of 13…”

The emphasis on independence is striking and a recurring theme throughout the narration. The escape from home is enabled by the enrolment in an elitist boarding school and described as an act of rebellion described by referencing the German stereotype ‘ordentlich’. This reflects his current locale of Berlin, which appears to influence his way of seeing his life and incorporating German words. The death of his father is introduced as abruptly as it must have occurred and is described as a fundamental rupture evoking change and movement. It is in this context, that the Army service, where he was given an office job, ‘made him suffer’, not because of the work and service itself, but because of having to live at home. We further learn about the tension of making his mother proud and happy while at the same time wanting to follow his desire to leave:

“And this is the thing I miss the most, like losing him [the father] too early, like not getting to know him more actually as a person, I loved him a lot, my parents were like…I … grew on this love that was in my house, they were a wonderful couple my parents…and a big part of my experiences of my father’s death was through my mother’s loss and … realising that she is not half a couple now, she was half a person when he died…”

We can see here, that the situation at home after his father’s death, made it unbearable for him to stay and seemed to have fostered the wish to escape home. Taking on his mother’s suffering is a double burden which might have left him with the impossibility to take care of his own grief, which can have severe psychological impacts for a young person. The narration reveals how his father’s death becomes entangled with the feeling of being ‘a closeted child’ seeking independence or seeking to ‘come out’.

5.1.4 Migration to Berlin

Along the narration, we learn that his sexual orientation of being gay encouraged him to seek ‘an alternative family’ rather than maintaining close ties with his relatives. The time after his studies is characterised by the search for a stable home and stable relationships, one of his partners was a German living in Tel Aviv who eventually returned to Berlin. His passion for music provides an ‘excuse’ to visit Berlin as often as possible, always in the context of
attending concerts. The passion for music is further entangled with the memory of his father who taught him how to play the guitar. After his close friends move to Berlin, he feels a strong incentive to also leave Israel and together with his husband who held German citizenship, they plan and undertake the migration to Berlin. Supported by the social welfare system Hartz IV he then continues to be self-employed as a freelance graphic designer. The migration to Berlin is narrated as an entanglement with the ‘Love’ for a German singer, whom he comes to frequently see in concerts. In retrospect, his migration to Berlin is not only related to his wish to go ‘far away from home’, gain independence and escape the restrictions experienced in Israeli society as a gay man, but also to the political situation in Israel:

Y: “One of the things I wanted to escape was this existential fear of practically existing like 75%... either it’s that or explode with a bus… I heard of few explosions with my own ears, like I lived in Jerusalem through the worst years of the Intifada [...] and it’s getting worse in Israel steadily and... the more extreme right-wing it gets, all the time, not only from the government but the society violence in the street, like people are... the rudeness of people, is getting worse and worse... you know that saying? A slave ...behaves as though he is the king... more and more little people in the street behave as though they own the place and you owe something... so it’s the ... intercourse ...haha, yeah, the discourse, this is the intercourse in the street! This is the way people interact daily…”

He conveys that another reason for him to leave is the socio-political situation, the ‘existential fear’ that accompanies daily life in Israel. Here, we have a direct reference to the Israel-Palestinian conflict and its effects on daily life. The Freudian slip, exchanging ‘intercourse’ and discourse’ hints at the way in which the public sphere in Israel is perceived as sexualised: the image of ‘the king’ references a ‘macho culture’, from which he might feel excluded as a gay man. Sara Ahmed shows how space is ‘inhabited’ by bodies with a certain ‘habitus’ referring to Bourdieu. The way a space becomes inhabited and subsequently experienced, depends on the bodies and their habits in that space (Ahmed, 2006:129). That is to say, Tomer’s experience of space could be one of ‘intercourse’ marked by a certain

126 Minimum amount within the German social welfare scheme.
understanding of masculinity and the experience of dominance and heteronormative prerogative in the public sphere. Berlin then comes to offer a different life and public sphere:

“there are no real big cities in Israel… and in Berlin, I get the chance to disappear, like to dissolve into this huge place… which is something that I like, which makes me feel like I belong, just as nobody belongs… and… the main point about that is that I never actually felt that I belong anywhere and sometimes I realise that I don’t feel here in Berlin that I don’t belong, not more than in Tel Aviv … I feel at home as I was in Tel Aviv or in Jerusalem… or anywhere else… I feel comfortable enough to call it my place and feel like a stranger here…”

He presents the appeal of Berlin as an urban space of anonymity embodying the idealised ‘independence’ since childhood. Berlin is experienced as ‘diasporic’ since ‘nobody belongs’. At the same time, he not only chose Berlin to be away from Israel, but also to be in close proximity to his friends. A large share of his circle of friends in Berlin are Hebrew speakers, thus, the city allows for him to construct his own hybrid, transnational space in an environment that is perceived as more suitable than the sociality of Israeli society.

5.1.5 Significance of the Scene

Tomer’s search for independence, ‘non-belonging’ and the wish to ‘disappear’ in the cosmopolitan space appear to stand in contrast to his commitment in the Hebrew Choir. He claims, that it was the musical talent of the Choir director, which made him stay. This admiration for musicians forms a recurring theme in his narrative and appear to provide him with the pretext to follow his desire: moving to Berlin or participating in the Hebrew choir. Only hesitantly, he describes his reasons to join the Choir:

“I had to make sure that it is the Hebrew choir, not the Jewish choir and not the Israeli choir like I asked my friend about it and he said “oh come on, it’s cool” and he didn’t like it that evening and he never returned since […] I originally thought I would enjoy doing that with him, but he left and I got stuck […] and I was still not sure, if I wanted to stay in this place, like I didn’t know what it would be like… like right now, too much Jewish music [makes a face]… but I can’t just stand up and leave because I am bound to the place.. I mean, I bound myself to this choir… I got stuck
there by my own volition...[laughs]...but it’s part of like declaring my allegiance – yes, this is something that I am taking seriously...

V: Allegiance to...?

Y: ...to the Choir [laughs] ...to... Aron’s musical talent and his ability to run this thing, to which... I came out of curiosity to see what’s going on there and I stayed because of the musical challenge... because of the fantastic arrangements and how difficult it is for me... much more difficult than in X [another choir], it’s much more elaborate musically... but this is like, in order to study to really learn musically and develop the challenges are much bigger... in our... in the Hebrew choir...”

The allegiance to the choir has to be compromised with his radical rejection of things Jewish. The assurance that it was a ‘Hebrew’ Choir, is treated like an entry requirement. It was essentially this musical space, which allowed him to overcome some of his rejections, especially since ‘Jewish music’, liturgical songs had been among the repertoire from the start. This reconciliation process and interpellation - between image and actual –positive – experience, was accompanied by performative boundaries.

The rejection of things Jewish has to be placed in the context of his life story emerging from a social and political position in Israel. The signifier ‘Jewish’ is not only attached to the political context in Israel, but it’s also deeply entangled with his unique ‘trajectory’ entangled with feeling ‘closeted’, experiences of discrimination, exclusion and alienation from a ‘somatic norm’ of heterosexuality and finally entangled with pain and sorrow, due to the early death of his father. While the ‘othering religious people ‘dati’im’127 and orthodoxy more generally is common practice among hilonim in Israel (Chapter 4), we can read the projection onto ‘Jewish’ as a representation of the conflicts he came to face during his lifetime: an absent father, experiences of discrimination because of his sexual orientation and the existential fear he faced in Israel. These are intertwined in so far as he mentions the murder of Rabin, which he identifies as a point of socio-political decay. Most significantly, Itzhak Rabin was murdered by a religious extremist. Then, my enquiry about his understanding of Jewish music is received with reluctance:

127 Often referred to as dossim by hilonim.
V: What do you mean when you say the music is ‘too Jewish’?

Y: (pauses)... If there is one thing that I have zero tolerance for, is what we would call the yiddische Krechz.... That is why I can’t stand Chava Alberstein\textsuperscript{128}... You know her?

V: [nods]

“... too Jewish... there is the Krechz and there are also the things are important just because of the place in the religion... [pauses] Where was I? Yeah, the Jewish shit... yeah, my big rejection of most things Jewish... ok... for me Jewish is like old stuff... few times I went to a synagogue was with my grandfather... my entire family, no one was religious, like both of my grandfathers had a seat in the synagogue, next to where they would live, where they would go for Yom Kippur or whatever, at least once a year... we didn’t eat specifically kosher or didn’t drive on Saturdays... something I shared with my shrink... who is ... she is an Ex-new Yorker Jew girl, also not religious but I told her that at my grand-parents place we could have Quark on the table and salami and could choose which one you wanted to eat but not on the same slice... you could eat one without the other but not on the same slice... that was the borders ... the Kosher-Grenzen of my family.

From the given quote we can understand that ‘Jewish’ for Tomer is not only related to ultra-Orthodoxy, but to his family situation and how tradition is perceived. We can see, the ‘kosher borders’ were merely symbolic. One could speculate that discrimination of his sexual orientation was not exclusive to ultra-Orthodoxy but might have been felt in his family. His grandfather’s ‘seat in the synagogue’ then comes to signify their place within a ‘religious’ ‘traditional’ world, where his views are not accepted, and he – literally and symbolically - does not have ‘a place’ (makom) at the synagogue. Despite rejecting spaces connected to Jewish religious practice, he nonetheless could find beauty in the aesthetics of the church as they seemed ‘distant enough’ from his personal experience. Thus, ‘religion’ and what he calls ‘spirituality’ are not rejected but they can become significant and meaningful when detached from traumatic memories and, it seems, in a realm that does not rely on fixed, prescribed classificatory systems, particularly when entangled with the socio-political situation in Israel.

\textsuperscript{128} Israeli Folksinger who sang in Hebrew, Yiddish, Arabic and English and feels close to the song tradition of Eastern Europe.
In that sense, his narrative reveals the negotiation of the entanglement between ‘being Israeli’ and ‘being Jewish’. To him, the concept of ‘Judaism’ is attached to oppressive institutions and symbols connected to it, such as the synagogue, the kippah and the dress-codes of 

_Haredim_.

Here, we could refer to what Munoz considers an act of _dis-identification_ (Munoz 1999). This is placing oneself outside of a certain category in a performative act. This act presupposes the existence of categories and their internalisation by the subject. For Munoz, _dis-identification is the hermeneutical performance of decoding mass, high or any other cultural field from the perspective of a minority subject who is disempowered in such representational hierarchy_” (Munoz, 1999:25).

Tomer then elaborates on the ways he continues to resist this framework:

“…and until today there is some side of me enjoying pork especially because I was devoid of that in my childhood, because I am doing something that I am not supposed to…there is still a small place with the “doch-ness”(_davka_130), that I am enjoying especially because … fuck fuck- fuck [holds up his middle finger] fuck you! So, hearing Yiddish in my grandparents place, and they were like sweet sweet people, but it was like the old people’s language…and also…. religion was a…hobby of the old people….this is how I experienced it, maybe as a child…and later realising how unaccepted I am as gay by religion…”

Here, we see how the realisation of discrimination is still aggressively filled and acted out against imagined authorities which are enacted in this small scene. At the same time, he seems to have internalised the Zionist ideology of rejecting the ‘old’ language of the diaspora. As I have argued in the previous chapter, it was part and parcel of the Zionist project to reject signs of ‘Diaspora Judaism’. Thus, Yiddish came to be the sign of an oppressed minority, which the Jewish people should abandon when settling in the land of Israel. The ‘new Jew’ spoke modern Hebrew and did not carry over the remnants of an oppressive past (Brenner, 2002). Here, we can clearly see how Tomer’s ways of identifying with the discursive structures are ambivalent and reflect a dilemma: while having internalised the Zionist narrative of the ‘New Jew’ and Yiddish as an old language, he equally rejects the

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129 We can also see the particular jargon he has taken on, similar to a language used in Woody Allen’s films, ‘Annie Hall’ or ‘Manhattan’ by referring to his ‘shrink’ and her as a ‘Jew-girl’ which also indicates a particular gender relation. In

130 The expression ‘_davka_’ has not literal translation but could be loosely referred to an expression of defiance.
oppressive structures of the state of Israel, such as its entanglement with the religious establishment by which he feels discriminated. The dilemma can be resolved by leaving the restrictive framework, thus leaving Israel and marking his ‘dis-identification’ through performative acts of symbolic and spatial distancing. These performative expressions occurred in various instances.

In one incident during the choir rehearsal, Birgit, a convert to Judaism and Mirjam, playing with the idea of conversion, just arrived from the synagogue. They had attended the shiur that day. Birgit placed importance on participating in Shabbat prayers at the synagogue but not necessarily strictly keeping Shabbat.

As Birgit was talking about the shiur, which took place that day, she got into conversation with Tomer and somewhat naively suggested for him to come one day and see what it was like. Tomer replied surprisingly earnest: ‘I feel like that they are mostly talking shit at the synagogue’. Birgit and Mirjam made startled faces of discomfort. I looked at Amos, who flashed me a telling glance and I felt having to suppress laughter.

(Fieldnotes, November, 2015).

The scene with Tomer, a born Jew and Israeli with a strong opposition to things ‘Jewish’ with two converted (or in the process of becoming) Jews, appeared somewhat absurd. The absurdity of it lies in the performative action, the humour but also the derogatory disdain he applied in relation to these women: he rejects the category which both of the converts aspire to be or to become. His dismissal of calling the ritual ‘shit’, marks a frontier. Applying faecal language, he draws a frontier in order to mark a difference between himself and the two women. This incident reveals a dimension of the scene, in which converts and ‘secular’ Israelis come to interact over things ‘Jewish’: both women adopted Judaism as a religion, the only way in order to officially become Jewish. By expressing his distance - even disgust - to religious aspects of Judaism, Tomer not only places boundaries and demarcates a positioning, he equally discredits their practices as ‘shit’. Thereby, the boundary presents an intersection of religion and gender.
The disidentification not only serves to separate him from the two women, but also to performatively reject the category that is ascribed to him and that he is expected to fill. Thereby, he disrupts the narrative of a ‘desired object’ of Jews in the German ‘symbolic order’ and symbolically distances himself. Not only is his way of (inter-) acting shaped by the embodied and internalised experiences of secularity and religion in Israeli society, but also by his personal trajectory which is deeply shaped by trauma, suffering and not ‘feeling accepted’ and recognised. It is in the light of his biographical pathway, that we can come to understand his performance in the scene.

Furthermore, in relation to the choir, it is further remarkable that Tomer’s life story is infused by the passion for music. This explains why and how the realm of the Hebrew Choir and singing Hebrew music in Berlin presented a way of identifying with something familiar, without having to conform to prescribed and fixed identity categories. In the course of increasing conflict and structural changes in the Choir, he leaves and drops the commitment to which he once ‘believed to have got stuck’. The process of complying to a supposedly unifying groupness is vehemently rejected as the demarcated group structure entailed the subordination to rules and structures seemingly ‘unfree’ of choice. In the light of his trajectory, it becomes clear why fixed frameworks are avoided and he rejects ‘getting stuck’ to pain and suffering. Thus, while Tomer developed an emotional attachment to the group and the project, he leaves it, when it no longer promised to provide the open framework which he enjoyed at first and where he found ‘a place’, Hebrew: ‘makom’. Beyond place, the term ‘makom’ also stands for ‘God’ and in his narrative he states how he has started to relate to religious experiences and God as ‘makom’. He claims to relate to ‘spirituality and religion’ through arts and music, yet outside of institutional frameworks. In that sense, the Hebrew Choir offered new pathways and spaces to discover ‘spirituality’, even ‘religious’ experiences, but it also had its limitations.
5.2 Migration as ‘coming out’ or Hebrew as a ‘portable homeland’

I met Inbal in the Hebrew choir. She called my attention because of her enthusiasm for the music and her regular remarks relating to feelings evoked by the music, referring to *hashamaim* – the heavens, or *yaffa*, beauty and other expressions hinting at a ‘spiritual’ experience. Similar to Tomer, Inbal identifies as ‘secular’, yet her experience and subsequent approach to things Jewish fundamentally differ from Tomer’s as religious ritual is attached to positive memories. Her narrative exemplifies how Hebrew represents a ‘portable homeland’ in the unfamiliar place of Berlin. Her case further demonstrates how the act of migration engenders conflict and feelings of guilt evoked by the act of leaving family behind. Coming from a Kibbutz, her case demonstrates the ambivalence between the individual and the ‘collective’. It further shows how the act of migration is preceded by negotiation and ambivalence. In line with many other of my participants, Inbal’s postion exemplifies the significance of Hebrew as a marker of identity, but also symbolising a realm which transcends national boundaries. In line with other Hebrew activists in Berlin (Chapter 3), this suggests an increasing dissociation of Hebrew away from the territory of Israel.

5.2.1 Biographical Sketch

Inbal was born and raised in a Kibbutz near Tel Aviv. Her parents are descendents from Holocaust survivors from Europe and her mother’s father is of Persian origin. She grew up with two brothers. At the end of her school degree, she decides not to sit the final exams and drops out of school without the bagruta (High School Diploma) as an act of rebellion. She then starts working in the Kibbutz, which was interrupted by her military service where she was placed at a special intelligence unit. The two years of the mandatory military service were followed by a year travelling in Latin America. After that, she took interior and industrial design courses and studied at a Humanistic Institute in Israel studying philosophy and alternative life styles. She then leaves the Kibbutz. After some time, she returns to the Kibbutz and continues studying at the school in Tel Aviv. During this time, she meets her future partner, Heike, a non-Jewish German from Berlin, with whom she starts a relationship. Up until this point, there has been no mentioning of any relationships. On her second visit to

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131 Here, I draw on Heinrich Heine’s term, who referred to the Hebrew Bible as the portable fatherland of the Jews. The relation between a national identity and national collective and a book can equally be traced to Martin Luther’s translation of the Bible as a crucial instrument forming the idea of the German nation, or the Bhaghavad-Gita for the Hindu religion or the Arabic Koran, as a vehicle of umma al-‘arabiya (Safran, 2008:172).
Berlin, she does not return to Israel and stays with Heike and they get married. At the point of the interview she had been living in Berlin for almost five years and had been member of the choir for two years.

As part of my multi-sited ethnography I was able to visit Inbal’s family in Israel and get to know her ‘home’ at the Kibbutz. Her mother was expressive in telling me about her discomfort with her daughter’s move to Berlin: not only because of the distance but also because of Germany, which she chose ‘of all places’. Nevertheless, she hastened to add that her daughter’s partner was someone she immediately liked and appreciated as a person, thus the German partner was dissociated from the symbolic meaning of ‘German’. It was the visit of that Kibbutz that allowed me to understand Inbal’s migration and biographical story from multiple perspectives.

5.2.2 Biographical Tension

Inbal’s narrative presents a struggle of finding her personal place. It highlights the tension between ‘the collective’ presented by the Kibbutz and the ambition to pursue her individuality in terms of career, place of living, romantic relationships and sexuality. Most significantly, the move from the Kibbutz is presented in much more precise detail and in an emotionally charged language than her move to Berlin. Thus, her biographical work and trajectory suggest that the process of distancing had begun long before the actual physical move to Berlin. The move to Berlin can then be interpreted as the resolution of the unsettled negotiation between pursuing individuality and the responsibilities to the collective represented by the family and the Kibbutz. In Berlin, she lives with her partner and works as a freelance artist. Born in 1972, Inbal’s life story marks a generation of major changes in the structure and organization of Kibbutzim in Israel.\(^\text{132}\) For her biography, this entails that the beginning of her childhood was still embedded in a functioning socialist community and then changed into a more privatized model. As I could witness during my visit, the former Kibbutz community is still communally organised, yet individuals earn their own living and maintenance independent from the Kibbutz organisation. A small part of the agricultural industries are maintained and individuals have kept a sense of belonging despite the

\(^\text{132}\) In 1970s and 80s most Israeli Kibbutzim started to privatize as a result of the policies put in place by the first non-labour government under Menachem Begin. Thereby, properties were transformed into more individualised communities in which families earned their private income instead of being maintained by a common Kibbutz fund (Haarscher in Ben-Rafae et al, 2006:214).
transformation from tight-knit socially organised community to a different model of cohabitation. Shaped by the culture in the Kibbutz, Inbal’s narrative is constructed around the themes of borders, border crossings, proximity and distance. It is through that story, that we can come to understand her migration to Berlin, which is portrayed to ‘be caused’ by her partner. The opening already alludes to her biographical tension:

“I was born in a very small kibbutz [...] the people that built the kibbutz were survivors from Europe [...] it is based a lot on the German culture [...] my father... he was born in this kibbutz and they used to sleep together like with the children... it coined them, like my father is traumatised from it [...] But in my generation we slept with the parents... I had a really rich childhood, rich with... culture and nature and music [...] we were like this really united, small group... and always very cultural [...] writing, composing, going to camps, so this was my childhood. But I never felt this togetherness, you know it was lovely that I was there but I felt always alone... as a child I was never... like it’s no wonder that I was in such a place because it was like a womb... it was like you have so many people around you, everything is given to you, taken care, [...] matter-wise, we didn’t have a lot, but we felt so prestiged you know like we had everything, it was amazing... I think this really influenced my life, like this richness of having so many people around you...”

In the opening of describing ‘her roots’, three aspects stand out: the first is her father’s traumatization by the rules and structures of the Kibbutz, particularly the Batei Yeladim, the children’s house in the Kibbutz. The second central aspect is the mentioned tension between the environment of being surrounded by a community of high esteem while at the same time feeling alone. The image of the womb suggests a sense of protection, but also a space of co-dependency and from which one cannot easily escape. The metaphor appeared to set the framework for her life story, the tensions of being surrounded and embedded but not being able to move freely. This can later be related to her migration to Berlin: to escape and

133 Two other of my participants describe that they still grew up sleeping in ‘Batei Yeladim’, despite being born in the 1980s where the children’s houses had been largely abolished. Common practice at the beginning of the kibbutz, kvuza and moshavim, children used to sleep in the children’s house not together with their parents and nuclear families. These structures tied into the socialist endeavour to have ‘educators’ and break open with the bourgeois family unit (Gavron, 2000). The discussion about education and child upbringing in Kibbutzim and the possible traumata individuals experienced because of the various persons of attachment is widely discussed. The intense and particular educational environment of the kibbutz is believed to have had significant impacts on the later psychological development. Opinions about this particular measure of Israeli socialist communities diverge among my participants. While some enjoyed the experience of being with children instead of adults, two others expressed their experience of discomfort and pain.
get out of the womb is a serious and difficult endeavour and resembles a birth, which is painful and sometimes dangerous, while beckoning with the potential of (giving) new life. The third aspect suggests a deeper inner ambivalence: At no point in the narrative does she fail to praise the life in the Kibbutz, her supportive family and the privilege of growing up in this environment. This indicates a significant ambivalence towards having left her family and having chosen to continue her life with a German woman in Berlin distant from them. The ambivalence between the collective and pursuing her own individuality already appeared earlier in her life:

*I left school before the exams... I was a really good student but I didn’t want to stand up to what society wants, you know, I was kind of rebellious... so one day before the exams I just ... like I studied everything and then I said ok, I don’t want to do this...*

The realization that she did not want to conform to the rules and demarcations of the Kibbutz culture surrounding her are remembered in the open manifestation of this rebellious act. She prescribes to the rules of the school (and the Kibbutz), which is described as being ‘a good student’. However, the system is being subverted, rejected and rebelled against at the point of the final exams, where she has already complied and performed most of her school career. The sentence - ‘I didn’t want to stand up to what society wants, I was kind of rebellious’ suggests the need for dissociation from a collective with which she could not identify. As she seemed to be the only one doing this, her way of refusing the structures suggest courage and a strong inner drive. Given her sexual orientation, this rebellion against ‘what society wanted from her’ already marks a way of refusing the norms, which, presumably, include the existing gender relations in the Kibbutz.

During the interview, the decision to leave school is reviewed and said to have shocked her environment, as a sign of fundamental disagreement and counteraction. The deliberation of her action to leave school and the ‘because’ which would refer to the Hebrew ‘dafka’, serves as marker of protest and defiance. She does not indicate whether what is entitled as ‘rebellion’ goes together with her realization of ‘otherness’ in terms of her sexual orientation. However, the main narration ends with the fact that she met this woman and follows her to

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134 Metaphors regarding birth, children, midwife and the like are a recurring theme among a variety of my participants. It is interesting that the parental role is taken up by a number of German participants, whereas at least two of the Israeli migrants compare their experience to that of children, such as here to a foetus inside the mother’s womb.
Berlin, which disrupts her life in Israel to be continued in Berlin. This seems to indicate that the conformity to structures was equally related to her sexuality. Later in the interrogative part of the interview, when I asked about the conditions of ‘coming out’ in the Kibbutz, she stresses that it was not the Kibbutz or her parents who made it difficult for her but ‘her own personal pathway’. This is interesting since her trajectory is deeply shaped by her family and the community she was reared in:

“I think the personal story was really hard... not really hard, but not easy, because it is a very close(d)135 society and you are an intimate person and it has nothing to do... but it kind of galvanised me.. it gave me a really good shield... that I could use wherever I go, because for me, it doesn’t matter what anyone or everyone – even if it’s a close person, but it doesn’t matter for me what people think about me... and it’s a good trait for life... that I don’t really pay that much of a... like a... way.. or attention to this... like a good... a good volume, but not too much....”

The excerpt points at a difficult personal story in relation to the social space of the Kibbutz and the proximity of living with other people. The reference to ‘you are an intimate person’ could refer to the intimacy of living in close proximity or it could refer to her way of feeling her own intimacy was surveilled and watched by the people in close proximity. After this revelation, the experience is turned into something positive of having ‘galvanised’ her, having provided her with a shield of protection enabling to remain oblivious to other people’s judgments. Developing a shield as a result of a personal coming out, suggests a certain intensity of this experience.

The narrative even takes a turn to suggest that she does not pay that much attention to other people’s opinion, but quickly corrects her views, which suggests a deep sense of ambivalence and perhaps even guilt to judge her family. She admits that she is not oblivious to the judgment of others, but explains that through this experience and over time, she established a certain confidence – presumably towards her sexuality. Since the open acknowledgment of her sexuality also involved a distancing from the Kibbutz, we can understand the ‘coming out’ as one of sexual orientation but also in terms of location and sociality: the narration

135 As the ‘d’ at the end of close was barely audible, close could either refer to the proximity of cohabitation in the Kibbutz or to the narrow-mindedness. Both seemed to have had an effect on her.
suggests that the culmination of meeting a German woman and leaving to Berlin is indeed deeply intertwined with the story of leaving the Kibbutz. Thus, ‘coming out’ could simultaneously mean coming out of the Kibbutz. Not only does the Kibbutz then stand for her home, but also for a space in which she had to fight for her personal life and her sexuality. Further reference is made to the liberating atmosphere outside of Israel. Israel and the tensions are described as a place ‘that really sucks your energy’. Apart from the stress level in Israeli society, this could be understood in the energy she had to invest and in order to conform to norms which are not reconcilable with her own positionality. Ironically, the Kibbutz and the environment she grew up in, are closely related to ‘German’ culture and the familiarity with ‘German culture’ is reiterated throughout the narrative. Yet, the German culture in the Kibbutz is not compatible to ‘German’ culture she found in Berlin where she is confronted with variety of cultures including in her relationship:136

“When I say Yekke from the Kibbutz, .....it’s about something very precise [... correct ... things have to be as they are... a time is a time... like you say a word is a word... these are the values that I was brought up with.... like sincerity, being true to yourselves and to the community .... everything is according to what you said and according to the society and according to the book ... so when I left school, it was like really against all expectations [...] when I did it, I did it deliberately. Because! ... so, it kind of tells the story what we are expected to do...like you have to do this...you have to be a good student, and it was a very elitist society... like if I would give the society of Israel, from zero to one hundred, it was the one hundred... it’s like, you are asked to be the best... but sometimes it is too much... but nevertheless it was a great place to grow up in... But it has a lot of ... shadows... A lot of people have been hurt because of this approach. Like, I am actually, I don’t consider myself hurt but a lot of my friends... they got really hurt...”

The Kibbutz is experienced as a comforting but also restrictive environment, which – similar to the womb – prescribes strict conformity.137 Loving and protected it equally prescribes a particular identity and behavioural framework offering little room for alternative and

136 A number of my Israeli participants in relationships with Germans spoke English as their common language.
137 Indeed, in his account on the Kibbutzim, Gavron describes the rigidity of some of the Kibbutzim and how equality among Kibbutz members was reached through a certain standard that had to be complied to. Individuality and non-compliance to the norms had to be abolished in order for the commune to function (Gavron, 2001).
individual pathways as occupying an ‘elitist’ position in Israeli society. By placing her social environment in the wider societal context, she emphasises what seems to be an overwhelming pressure to meet the standards and conform to what had been set by the inhabitants ‘the Germans’ from the Kibbutz.

5.2.3 Migration to Berlin

Most interestingly, Inbal describes the act of leaving the Kibbutz by comparing it to leaving a religious community in Israel, which often entails a radical the break with the past:

“And then I realised she [a friend] is right.. so I just decided I am leaving, yeah, and it’s a big step, it’s kind of [...] like leaving a religious life ... for people who left the religious life, it’s something a bit the same...And I made this step and it was like a really brave step because in my age, no one from my class left the Kibbutz because it’s a Kibbutz in the middle of Israel you know, you don’t have to leave it, you can still live in it you know and still accomplish yourself and do whatever you wanna do...But for me it was like an independence declaration of like doing what I want to do in the way that I want to do where I want to do it and not to be bound by these ... you know... social boundaries...”

The boundaries that she experienced thought he strict rules demarcated by the Kibbutz community are yet finally crossed, when she decides to leave. Most significantly, life in the Kibbutz is compared to a ‘religious community’. Thus, leaving the Kibbutz could be also understood as ‘changing the community’, changing the ‘religion’ or even conversion. At a later point in her life, her brother asks her to return to the Kibbutz, and she returns for some time. The act of leaving the Kibbutz was one of going back and forth, leaving and ‘being drawn back in’. Finally, it is the encounter with her future partner, which allows her to leave for good:

“Few months later I met Heike in Tel Aviv… and then when I saw her, I realised, well, the first time I saw her, it was she was with her partner – ex-partner but I didn’t know

138 Up until the 1980s, the Kibbutzim were placed at the heart of Israeli society and various military and political leaders like Ben Gurion were raised in Kibbutzim and placed large importance on them. In 1977 the persistent Labour government was replaced by Likud, a liberal right-wing party and eventually a large-scale privatization of the Kibbutzim was initiated (Ben-Rafael, 2011).
that … but few months later I saw her and she was alone and you know I had to approach her… because … the first time I saw her I knew that I am gonna marry her…

V: [laughs]

“I know it sounds funny but I knew… I told to myself ‘this is the woman that I am gonna marry but how come she is with another woman?’ you know you see your future and it doesn’t fit the presence…. [laughs]…. Then, four months after, she came to Tel Aviv […] I saw her sitting there […] it took me a while but after I approached her, so, we set a meeting […] we didn’t even talk, we just I just sat with other friends and then my friend asked me ‘why don’t you approach her?’ and I was like… ‘no, Berlin - Tel Aviv it’s such a bad idea! How would I do it? … but like a week later …. I realised, ok, it’s meant to be…and that’s it … one month after that she came to Tel Aviv … and two months after that I came to visit Berlin and I stayed. As simple as that..I just realised, ok, I packed, everything in my life and I closed it … even better than that […] I said I am not coming back until I don’t know … and I just left…”

This part of the conversation, is almost enacted, and creates a vivid scene between me and her in a way that she allows me to re-experience this story together. I reflect on my somewhat uncomfortable laughing as a way of bridging the sudden change of narration flow, which abruptly ended with the turn of her trajectory and how the experience of desire had put an end to search for a place between Tel Aviv and the Kibbutz. My laughter could also be a reaction to her way of straightforwardly following her desire, against the social and familial adversities which could stop her. We can now see that the decision to ‘just leave’ was preceded by a long search and uncertainty, a process of separation and how the possibility of being with her partner in Berlin came to resolve the ambivalence and uncertainty.

5.2.4 The significance of the scene

“I can say that it’s one of the things that has made Berlin so special for me is this choir… that there is this … harmony of souls… that not necessarily came from the same walks of life but they meet, you know, through that Hebrew choir…”
In search for a new choir to continue a childhood experience and continue a hobby she had pursued in Israel, she learned about the project on the internet:

“I think it’s really surprising community [...] before I couldn’t imagine … that people would come together around Hebrew music, which most of the people they don’t speak the language… that’s a big thing… and also… I think the level of the opening of the heart, I call it, after the Buddhism, is so high and I love it…. That, no matter what, people are people I love this feeling and I think we had this in the choir… so for me it doesn’t really matter, you know, [...] what we sing, it’s not important for me…for me the most important thing is that the people inside the community will be connected… That people feel they belong to something that is bigger than them…”

V: Why do you feel connected?

I: I feel connected because my house, is in the language, and for me if I speak the language, I feel at home and I feel that there are other people that feel at home with me, so we are in the same home… and I feel in this community, there are people that speak the same language, not necessarily Hebrew, but the same language of the heart… and then, you know, when we sing this song and people [...] and they want to discover what this text really means, for each one it will mean different things [...] so it’s like basically like to pray for ourselves, like the higher self of us...

Here, the Hebrew language serves the function of satisfying the ‘homing desire’, providing comfort in an environment where her relationship in a different language (English) and the ‘cultural differences’ of Berlin provide a challenge. More than a home, the act of singing together creates a community and the songs are compared to a prayer. Thus, it presents a ritualised communal act with unifying character, while leaving enough room for individual interpretations and significations. We can further see, how the aesthetic experience of singing and making music together is perceived as a ‘religious’ act. Having said that, it draws on traditions and a language familiar to some and not others, yet, it offers a common language, which transcends perceived national, ethnic and religious boundaries. Then, we not only see how the choir comes to stand for a religious activity of sorts, we also see that in its interpretation, religious traditions are combined as a kind of ‘bricolage’, taking elements
from Buddhism and esoteric practice (Altglas, 2014). Although Inbal always expressed an interest in the activities of the synagogue, she at no point participated, yet, her attitude towards it was relaxed and rather positive. She had a Bat Mitzvah in the Kibbutz and was interested in the study of Jewish traditions, yet not necessarily as a commitment or as a regular practice. Nonetheless, the personal identification as Jewish is not seen as a religious commitment, but as an unchangeable fact of her life:

“But I wouldn’t think about it unless someone would ask me ‘are you Jewish’? It’s like [...] you don’t need to think about you being a woman, cause you are a woman... [...] it’s part of you, [...] I can say I am a Jew, but ...I don’t think, I practice my Judaism as Judaism, it’s part of my culture, it’s part of who I am.... Really I don’t deny it.... But tradition... that is now that I am so interested in... tradition in ceremonies. But I take what is real for me through Judaism, not because I was born to Judaism...”

We can see that her Jewishness is taken as a given. Relating it to her gender identity, it is unquestioned, and naturally part of who she is. At the same time, it is in Berlin, that she has started to study and learn about Jewish tradition and incorporate it into her work in the fine arts. ‘Taking what is real for her’ could be understood as a reflexive process of re-visiting tradition and ‘heritage’ upon moving to Berlin and not being surrounded by her language and the familiarities of life in Israel. It is the aesthetic and artistic expression that helps her re-configure her sense of belonging.

For Inbal, her participation in the choir is significant for three different aspects: the recreation of something familiar in strange environment enabled by the Hebrew language, a community where individuals are connected combined with a nostalgic reminiscing of Israel and childhood memories and ritualistic, if not religious ‘spiritual’ significance, as she calls it suggested by ‘the prayer’.

We can see how Hebrew serves as a ‘home’, but also how ‘religious texts’ are abstracted, de-contextualised and incorporated into her individual narrative. Thereby, she presents an inclusive approach which allows for different narratives and interpretations to exist simultaneously.
Inbal’s intimate connection with the Hebrew language reflects the history of the Zionist project and its politics of imposing Hebrew on Israel’s population and all incoming immigrants. The way she ‘takes it with her’ as a ‘portable homeland’ away from Israel, equally undermines the territorialised homeland politics which tie Hebrew to the land of Israel. Rather, it shows how ‘home’ is neither spatially determined nor exclusive to a certain group: rather, it can be shared and ‘entered’ by others, particularly through the act of singing together. Most interestingly, while Heinrich Heine referred to ‘the book’ as the ‘portable homeland for the Jews’\footnote{For further details see Heinrich Heine, Sämtliche Schriften, 2005}, Inbal’s position shows how it is language, rather than religion that builds the basis for her sense of home. While we can conceive of modern Hebrew as a ‘secular’ substitute for the ‘unifying glue’ the Bible supposedly once served, both are nevertheless intertwined: “\textit{religions have preceded the nation-state; have served as the basis of the collective consciousness of the nation and the foundation of sovereignty; and have been major institutional supports of the state}” (Safran, 2008:171). Thus, Inbal’s identification with Hebrew as home is entangled and infused by Judaism and the Jewish tradition, yet it is neither strictly territorial nor exclusive to a specific ethnic group. Rather, it is presented as building the basis for a community, even if its basis is singing together in Hebrew. By her attachment to the language and her non-halakhic, non-restrictive approach to Hebrew and Jewishness as a cultural realm, she presents an inclusive understanding of Jewishness that is neither tied to a place, nor to one particular religious practice but can incorporate many, e.g. New Age spiritualities. Her ‘spiritual’ practices are continued in Berlin, yet, she seeks to connect them with Jewish traditions, ‘ceremonies’ as she stated.

We have further seen how her migration to Berlin is entangled with her biographical trajectory, in relation to gender and sexuality and negotiating individuality and acquiring ‘a biography of one’s own’. Following her partner to Berlin suggests a migration for love, however, we have seen how this is entangled with her biographical trajectory. This suggests that commonly held ‘reasons for migration should always be interrogated and compared to a biographical trajectory. We have seen that the Choir is significant in its initial way of providing an open and inclusive ‘community’ where connections are established because of the language and across and beyond ethnic, national and religious boundaries.

In sum, the two cases of Tomer and Inbal correspond with other ‘secular’ Israelis in the scene, regarding the significance of Hebrew aesthetics. The latter come to play a vital role in
the relationship to one’s Jewishness, e.g. through the arts, music and language. The cases of Tomer and Inbal both demonstrate how the Hebrew Choir provided a sense of home, community, ‘a place’ – *makom* and potentially a religious, ‘spiritual’ experience through the act of singing together.

5.3 A rebellious son140 or observance ‘Berlin-style’

The next subsection of this chapter combines two biographical cases of individuals who were reared in observant families and thereby present different ways of negotiating tradition and Jewish practice. Their trajectories show how Judaism can be perceived as ‘community’ but also corresponds with ‘place’. Arbel’s case shows how ‘doing being Jewish’ is fundamentally related to other people and community rather than strict observance and ‘frumigkeyt’141. Yaakov’s trajectory reflects the ‘peculiarities’ of the Jewish scenes of Berlin and the challenges it places on the personal negotiation of observance and Jewish practice. It is to his case that I will first turn.

Staging: A Berlin Kiez

Yaakov and I walk home from the synagogue. He is wearing his kippah. At the entrance of a gateway someone has put up a little yard sale. We stop at the table full of old clutter. I skim through the paintings and stop at one of them. It shows a bearded old man, with a long chin, an enormous witch-like nose, glasses and piles of golden coins in front of him. On his head is a kippah. Yaakov and I look at each other. I turn to the elder man sitting in front of the stuff: ‘is this a very old picture? I ask. ‘Nee’[no], he replies with a Berlin accent. ‘It must be from the 1980s. It’s not that old’ he says nonchalantly.

Yaakov and I exchange looks. He gently pushes me to leave, before I can say anything to the man. After a moment of silence and a distance I turn to him: ‘do you think he saw your kippah’? ‘He must have…’ says Yaakov. And I take a deep breath and I can feel a knot in my throat.

(Fieldnotes, August 2015)

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140 I am borrowing the term from the Talmud Tractate, Sanhedrin, 68b. Here, the Rabbis interpret a law directed towards a disobedient ‘rebellious’ son. The Rabbis’ interpretations of this law of punishing disobedience make it next to impossible to be ever carried out. The tractate is important for its details and the careful argumentation and negotiation that is being applied by the Rabbis. I take this analogy for Yaakov’s case, not only because it takes up his reference to ‘rebellion’ in relation to his life story, but also because, he, at one point explained this story and the significance of the Rabbinical discussion to me.

141 I use the Yiddish term for ‘being frum’, being observant, as Arbel himself used it.
I am evoking this incident before introducing the case of Yaakov in order to show how the young and buzzing urban multicultural atmosphere of Berlin continues to bear deep-rooted structures of anti-Semitic stereotypes. As alluded to here, stereotypes can be a matter of conscious or unconscious reproduction. My reaction reflects the feeling of shame and the deep discomfort of being - qua language – part of this ‘German collective’. Moreover, I insert this incident to show that making oneself visible as an ‘observant Jew’ by wearing a kippah in the urban space of Berlin, is not yet a normalcy. This is not to confirm the recurring debates on supposed ‘No-go-areas’, related to neighbourhoods with a strong Muslim presence, like Berlin-Neukölln - on the contrary, as a large share of my participants enjoyed living in that district. Rather, it is to show the omnipresence of subtle stereotypes and prejudice and their deep-rootedness in a non-Jewish German (majority) society and unreflexively continue to infuse daily life and social interactions.

5.3.2 Biographical Sketch

Yaakov was born in Israel in the 1980s as the eldest of four boys and lived in Jerusalem for the first five years of his life before moving to the UK. His mother is from an orthodox Jewish family, her parents were refugees from Germany in the 1930s escaping the Shoah to the UK. Yaakov’s father grew up in a non-observant (“secular”) family in Canada and together with his family moved to Israel, where the family became ‘religious’, and later became a Masorti Rabbi. Yaakov went to Jewish schools, his family was observant, reciting morning prayers, keeping kosher and observing Shabbat. Growing up, his social circles are almost entirely Jewish. After finishing school, he decides to join a Kibbutz in Israel and do his military service as an Israeli citizen. Soon after his arrival there, he ‘takes off his kippah’ and starts to negotiate his tradition. Over the years in Israel, he occasionally visits Batei Midrash or joins groups for Torah study but maintains an ‘undecided’ position in relation to his observance, partly related to the political positioning of religious groups in Israel. At the end of his twenties, after having worked as a social worker, he decides to move to Berlin where he seeks out a local Jewish community which would fit his personal Jewish practice. By coincidence, he comes across Bet Daniel and starts being active in the Verein, particularly

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142 Beyond numerous articles in response to the fear raised by the Central Council of the Jews, Armin Langer discusses this issue. (Langer, 2016)

143 Here, I also refer to studies on Antisemitism (BMI Report, 2017; Berek, 2018). The example evoked here cannot be taken as representative of a German majority society. Rather, it is to provide an example of the scope of experiences and interactions one can be confronted with as a Jew in Berlin, either being visible or invisible. A number of my participants recalled subtle stereotyping when revealing their Jewish or Israeli identity, often related to money and richness as an old stereotype of Jews.
in leading the Shiurim. Over his first year in Berlin, he decides to become a Rabbi. Simultaneously, his relationship with a non-Jewish woman intensifies. It is this environment, which stimulates the negotiation of his personal positionality. Yaakov describes his trajectory in close proximity to his family and the influence they had on his observance.

5.3.3 Biographical tension

The biographical tension appears to derive from his personal individuation process of negotiating between the position of his family and his own in relation to the theme of rebellion, a theme which marks the opening to his narrative:

“There is no big drama…[laughs]… the classic story would be some rebellion or something of that kind … My dad is a masorti Rabbi … he grew up in a secular home in Canada and they moved to Israel when he was thirteen, to a religious neighbourhood and the whole family became… I guess his parents became more religious and he […] he became religiously involved […] and my mum grew up in a pretty orthodox home in England… both her parents were German refugees and like her whole surroundings were orthodox, thus I grew up in that… and everything was very natural… I said sh’ma going to bed and kiddush on Shabbat … religious life and communal life and social life were mixed together, I was surrounded by it, going to Jewish school. It was orthodox in the English way. The institution was religious but most of the people were not … it was very natural for me that some people keep Shabbat and some don’t, and those who don’t, can’t invite those who do to their house … all sorts of things like that, which are a bit weird, seemed very natural, I didn’t ever question it…”

In his life story and the ‘turn’ and migration to Berlin what is most specific about Yaakov’s case is the way he describes his family background and the way he grew up embedded in Jewish tradition and community. As we see, his environment included religious frontiers according to observance. These were drawn inside Jewish circles and he describes how he only knew a few non-Jewish people. In order to understand the degree of ‘rebellion’ in his life, it is vital to understand his family context, on which he elaborates in detail. Thereby, he is careful to contextualise his trajectory, allowing me, as a listener, to fully follow his story.
After he finishes school, he decides to move to Israel, in order to ‘fix one identity’ and become ‘real’ Israeli’. Soon after his arrival, he reveals how he ‘took off’ his kippah inspired by the people surrounding him. He describes how this first felt empty while equally evoking the sense of having been freed from a weight on his head. Being surrounded by Jews who did not wear kippot, he did not feel the need to mark himself as an observant Jew. This was particularly as Israel, for him, evoked confusion about his religious belonging. While first embracing the military service as a way of becoming part of the national collective, he felt increasingly opposed and critical of Israeli state politics, the warfare, the entanglement of religious discourse and geo-politics and the treatment of Palestinians. This made the identification as ‘religious’ difficult, as ‘religious’ is largely represented by datiim-leumim, religious-nationalists, positioned on the political right of the socio-political spectrum in Israel. While maintaining some of his religious practices, he started to negotiate between his family traditions and his own trajectory in Israel. The reflexive process continues when moving to Berlin where the negotiation of Jewishness and boundaries is more present:

“I started going to,... eh... wherever the closest synagogue was, one time, didn’t really feel at home there, then I got invited to Shabbat dinner by a masorti rabbi who is teaching here [...] and the Rabbi’s wife said: ‘you can take the train, it’s fine in Berlin’ and I was like ‘Ok cool’ [laughs], then I adopted that...”

We can see that Berlin again triggers a different process of negotiating Jewishness. It is natural for Yaakov to find a synagogue as a part of his Jewish practice and his daily life which starts to become increasingly embedded in Jewish rituals, such as keeping Shabbat, daily prayers, kashrut and celebrating the holidays again. He confirms that the ‘Berlin scene’ had made him re-consider his personal position in terms of politics, Jewish practice and halakha. Thus, he entered into a reflexive process of re-visiting the tradition transmitted by his parents in relation to what is encountered in Berlin. Due to his religious upbringing, Yaakov differs from the majority of actors in the scene, not only due to the familiarity with traditions, but also due to his natural way of embodying and practicing them. Upon my question whether it was indeed the environment of Berlin, which triggered a process of negotiations, he responds:

“Yes, it was a mix of things… it’s like being in Berlin with all its strange identity things and being with Natalie.”
V: What do you mean by strange identity things?

Y: I don’t know… both within and without the Jewish community, Jewish identities… is a topic, in a way. it wasn’t in the UK, you’re Jewish or you’re not, that’s it… here you have this whole like… curiosity… German curiosity about Jews at all these events and… ehm… I’m trying to think, there is all this interfaith stuff, remember when I was at the theatre, …we had like a … yeah, they had like different religions in different rooms, I was “the Jew” and people could come and visit me and obviously you don’t have that in Israel, but we don’t have that in England either… people don’t care… and any kind of interfaith event, lots of non-Jews come to the Jewish events, they are curious and even at the synagogue, like you got some non-Jews coming… like it’s kind of very hip to be Jewish here…”

Berlin is perceived as a place where Jews and Jewishness is exoticised by curious spectators. This appears to create ambivalence: as an observant Jew, he is welcome as an ‘unusual rarity’, who, inside the scene is appreciated for being well-acquainted with Jewish practice and ritual disposing over ‘Jewish religious capital’ as he is well-read in Jewish religious text, Torah and Talmud, and fluent in Hebrew, English and German. Outside of Jewish contexts, he is exoticised and treated as a representative of a lost culture and religion. Nonetheless, ‘the strange identity things’ appear to also have strengthened his own positionality in this environment of complexity:

“…also just within the Jewish community I feel that there is lots of, like identity confusion here… which leads to different things, for some people, they need to be very closed and cautious of the outside world… but also in the kind of circles I’m in, I … it is lots curiosity and anyone who is like confidently Jewish attracts lots of attention…”

I: and how do you perceive that? I mean, how do you feel about that?

“Interesting thing… both of them… I am not critical of either… especially within the Jewish community … there is so much complexity, but I don’t need people to be like me… I … kind of feel… I feel the responsibility to be the… to be a voice that says “yes you’re welcome, yes you’re included… eh… cause of all this Jews not seeing other Jews as Jews I think… you’re only half Jewish, you’re Russian Jewish, you’re convert… you’re… like you are not really… and … I just see that as awful… so, I just I feel a responsibility to voice a more inclusive voice…”
Yaakov sums up the dilemmas of internal Jewish identity politics as he came to experience them. Yet, instead of engaging in the politics of belonging and hierarchizations, the situation in Berlin stimulates the development of a position that is rooted in Jewish ethics, for example in the responsibility to engage in Jewish education and represent inclusion. Less concerned with a public image and the representation of the community, he places importance on the practice which for him presents the heart of Judaism and his concept of it as a religion. This includes keeping shabbat and kashrut but equally negotiating whether a non-kosher vegetarian restaurant can occasionally be accepted for the sake of sociality and joining others. Therefore, the scene for him is related to religious practice as well as community with people who ‘do not necessarily have to be like him’. In the following, the case of Arbel presents a similar upbringing but his trajectory differs and therefore his position in the scene.

5.4.1 Jewishness as community and converting to Berlin

While Yaakov’s case showed the significance of tradition as a reflexive process and religious observance in relation to migration to Israel and then to Berlin, Arbel’s trajectory demonstrates the significance of Judaism ‘as community’. He further shows how Jewishness responds to national contexts but also transcends national boundaries. It is therefore that he presents a transnational biography (Siouti, 2013). I met Arbel at a University seminar where he showed unusual interest in my PhD project. Pointing me towards certain events, he came to function as my gatekeeper to the scene, especially to the synagogue as he had pointed me to the Hebrew Choir. Arbel not only acted as a gatekeeper for me, but also for Israelis who were curious, but reluctant to join the synagogue due to their ‘secular’ positioning and distance from Jewish tradition and religious practice. His passion for community was even enacted during our interview: towards the end, his friend Ronen came to join us and naturally involved himself in the conversation. This was most insightful about the way in which Arbel performed a way of ‘doing biography’. At the time of the interview, he had lived in Germany for over 13 years and speaks perfect German.144

144 The interview was conducted in German. Translations from German and elements of Hebrew into English are mine.
5.4.2 Biographical Sketch

Arbel was born in an Israeli suburb in 1979. He grew up as the third of four children, in a modern-orthodox family. His mother’s parents had immigrated from Poland, and the paternal father was from Morocco and migrated to Palestine in the 1940s. He kept a Sephardi ritual. At age seven, the family moved to New York City, where his father was offered a new job position. There, the family joined the modern-orthodox movement of „Young Israel“. The family maintained a Hebrew speaking community and the children went to orthodox gender-segregated schools. At school, he „had his first contact with secular people“ and started „not to be so religious“ anymore. At age 14, the family returns to Israel, where he continues his education at a boarding school. There he starts to rebel against the strict orthodoxy of the school and is frequently penalised for it. After school, he did his military service, which, he describes as a (sexually) liberating experience, in comparison to the orthodoxy of the family and the gender-segregated school system. After the military service, he spends some months in India, before moving to Berlin in the early 2000s for his university degree in the humanities. In his first years in Berlin, he has little contact with the local Jewish community, but lives together with other Israelis. At the time, there was no established ‘Hebrew infrastructure’ in Berlin compared to today. At the end of his studies, he meets his future wife, a non-Jewish German who converts to Judaism and they get married. He describes how her conversion process triggered his ‘return’ to Jewish practice and community life and he is now an active member of the Verein at the synagogue.

5.4.3 Biographical Tension

Arbel’s biographical-narration is told with comfort and humour. It is the combination of self-irony of his own trajectory as well as the desire to create a certain ease between him and his conversation partner. The ease might also stem from the frequency of giving interviews referring to how he has become a ‘professional Jew’. With his involvement in the synagogue and modern-orthodox background, Arbel presents a case of complexity, especially regarding to identifications of “secular Israelis”. His case demonstrates how Jewish belonging is always in flux and responds to context and circumstances. Arbel’s biographical tension circles around the question of individuality and community, a term he particularly focussed on in his narrative. Filled with anecdotes and detail, his biographical-narration shows the reflexive

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145 Sephardi prayers differ from Ashkenazi ritual in terms of melodies as well as the order of the prayers.
process involved in his ‘doing being Jewish’. It is deeply shaped by place and environment, most significantly in Berlin through the giyur of his wife. Her conversion to Judaism stipulates a conversion for him as well. It is therefore, that his biography presents the dynamics of roots and routes, most significant in the opening of his narrative:

“Ok, so I was born in the little town of Tel Aviv. At the age of three or four we moved to a suburb. My parents are modern-orthodox, my mother was raised in Bnei Brak, but not like today [...] ultra-orthodox but ... there was also a very big modern-orthodox community.... my father was raised in Tel Aviv, rather Southern Tel Aviv. I got my parents’ Ketuba, it has the professions written on it, the fathers’ professions only - my father’s father was a police man and my mother’s father was a ‘worker’, poel, just like that... hahaha”

Setting the scene for his life story of placing himself in relation to his parents’ backgrounds, he is careful to distinguish his family from Bnei Brak’s large haredi communities. The reference to his father and the addendum of “Southern Tel Aviv” suggests a certain socio-economic milieu of socio-economic deprivation and working class, often with Mizrachi background. The reference to his parents’ Ketuba set a subtle reminder of the gender relations in traditional Judaism. The ketuba was recently needed in order to acquire Spanish citizenship, thus a European passport, in order to facilitate his status in Germany.

“When I was seven years old, I was – well my whole education was in modern-orthodox schools. First outside of Tel Aviv then we moved to New York City [...] There we continued to live in the suburbs and were part of, a kind of Israeli, orthodox

\[146\] Today, Bnei Brak shows a large haredi population. In 2006, 81% of the 182,799 inhabitants voted for ultra-orthodox parties in the general election. 7% voted for religious-Zionist parties. It is one of the poorest and most densely populated cities in Israel (Ben-Rafael and Peres, 2005)

\[147\] Ketuba refers to the wedding contract which exists for Jewish weddings in Israel as a matter of necessity, outside of Israel as an optional attribute. Written in Aramaic, the Ketuba is seen as a legal document, and restates the fundamental conditions that are imposed by the Torah upon the husband such as the provision of food, clothing and conjugal rights and was originally established as a witness to serve a for the woman’s protection. Traditionally, it is not a mutual agreement: the woman only agrees to accept the husband’s proposal for marriage (deLange, 2000).

\[148\] It is uncertain whether his laughter at the end of the excerpt relates to the gender relations of mentioning the fathers’ profession, leaving out the mothers’ or the imprecision, almost derogatory way in which “poel” stands without further explanation or specification. Perhaps it is the crudeness of this reference or the classificatory practice, which then triggers the need to ironize this circumstance later, we learn that both of his grandparents immigrated to Palestine/Israel in the early years of the establishment of the state, which by trend, indicate a lower socio-economic status, as immigrants to Israel who came after the Shoah were either refugees from Europe or from Arab countries, both groups facing greater difficulties for upward mobility (Peled and Shafir, 2004).

\[149\] As he does not have German ancestry, Arbel is not eligible for German citizenship. Meanwhile the number of Israelis applying for European citizenship has increased tremendously. In his research, Yossi Harpaz suggests that between 2000 and 2010, the number of Israelis applying for European citizenship has tripled (Harpaz, 2013).
community, [...] ... we were part of this kind of... well even the synagogue itself was, was Young Israel...I don’t know if you know them, that is an organization that was established in the beginning of the 20th century.”

Apart from offering insights into his Jewish education, he sheds light on his routes taking a major turn, when the family moved to New York City, presenting a different country, language and differing ways of Jewish practice. Yet, the family sought an Israeli and Hebrew-speaking community. This ‘Hebrew diaspora’ will later re-appear in the context of Berlin:

“And there [the synagogue in New York], there was the big hall, but we did not pray in the big hall, but instead there was a small stibl151 where the Israelis, well, let’s say where they would do their own thing152 ...there were young families, mostly Israeli young families – there were probably also non-Israelis, but I was a child, I don’t know exactly, let’s say... that was already a little congregation within the bigger one... on Shabbat there were always visitors and guest at our house also when we were in Israel, but there [in the US] it suddenly was stronger, because [...]there was this kind of community, also with other Hebrew-speaking young orthodox – I am telling this [...] because of my relation to a synagogue as a community...”

The first sentence is indicative in terms of boundaries: here it seemed to be along the lines of Israeli socialisation and Hebrew, showing how the Israeli community gathered around the common language, rather than based on the potentially unifying element of religious ritual at the synagogue. Thus, boundaries were drawn inside the synagogue, despite the fact that prayers in a modern-orthodox setting are conducted entirely in Hebrew. The reference, to “Israelis doing their own thing”, points at the importance of Hebrew as a common language and identification. This is particularly interesting as research on Israeli diasporic communities

150 Young Israel was established as a Jewish orthodox innovation movement, which had the aim of re-inventing Jewish orthodoxy. David Warshaw traces its roots to 1913. The movement was advised by Rabbis Israel Friedlander and Mordecai Kaplan, two Eastern-European born Rabbis who moved to the United States. The latter is considered the founder of the ‘Jewish reconstructionist movement’ and was responsible for his daughter to perform her Bat Mitzvah, the first ever held Bat Mitzvah in the United States. The Young Israel movement draws significantly on his theology of ‘Judaism as a Civilization’ (1934). Here, Kaplan elaborates how he disagreed with both orthodox and reform Judaism as he believed that strict Jewish practice was reconcilable with modern forms of Life. For Kaplan, Judaism was not a religion but the sum of Jewish religion, culture, language, literature and social organization (DeLange, 2000)
151 Yiddish: small room.
152 In the original German: ‘wo die Israelis, sagen wir mal, ihr Ding machten’
usually see the markers of separation along the lines of religion and observance: in his seminal study, Steven Gold points at how Jewish-Israeli Diasporic communities maintain a distance to the wider Jewish communities, which is largely attributed to the dimension of religion and their identification as ‘secular’ reference to ‘being Israeli’ rather than Jewishness (Gold, 2002:183-184).  

He recalls that the prayer ‘stibl’ was largely in-habited by Hebrew-speakers. The significance of community at the synagogue and over Shabbat Dinners is remembered to be ‘stronger than in Israel’ implying a sense of ‘diaspora space’ (Brah, 1996) engendering particular ways of doing things in diaspora (Werbner, 2002). He himself reflects on the reasons for referencing the details of this community and relates it to his understanding of ‘synagogue as community’, rather than merely a place of religious observance. We can already see how ‘place’ affects his sense of Jewishness.

5.4.4 Transgressing lines and juvenile rebellion

Soon he starts to rebel against this community and the parental framework and provides a meticulous description of transgressing the boundaries:

“and then I went to High School. At that point, I was – gradually - not so orthodox anymore. I started smoking with my mates on Shabbat… the parents of one were not religious… because [they were] Israeli, they somehow wanted a Jewish education for their son […] They thought we will simply send our kid across the street to an orthodox school, so he’ll know something about Judaism, even if we do not keep it at home. Only when we were there, then they’d say that we should turn off the TV, because they knew that we came from different families… because of that, I also had direct encounters with secular people… although they were kids at a Jewish school…. So, you come to understand the ultra-Orthodox need for separation, the desire for same (ness)… because there, it had an impact… I remember, that I smoked on Shabbat and watched TV…. Without dying on Shabbat, right? Shabbat came and went, and I was still alive, I still am… hahaha!”

153 In reference to Liebman and Cohen (1990) Gold argues that Israelis speak a different language, eat different foods, have different political outlooks and enjoy different kinds of leisure activities from ‘diaspora Jews’ (Cohen and Liebman, 1990 in Gold, 2002:183).
The above presents a key passage in his trajectory where two elements stand out: the first is the description of how he came to distance himself from orthodoxy attributing it to the influence of “secular” non-observant schoolmates. Encountering non-observant people and keeping a mixed group of friends, he comes to break with essential pillars of his upbringing by engaging in their ‘non-orthodox’ practices such as smoking on Shabbat. According to certain orthodox and halakhic interpretations, smoking on Shabbat is strictly forbidden and the breaking of Shabbat laws, is threatened with death, hence the reference that he was still alive. Upon my laughter on this comment, he adds with a serious expression:

“...but the fear was there, of course, I was thirteen, you know...?”

My laughter evokes a serious response, in order to convey his fear of parental authority. Thus, breaking the rules and what he later considers ‘rebellion’, was indeed related to fear rather than merely enjoyment and pleasure. He sees the exposure to ‘secular people’ to provide the impetus for transgressing the boundaries. Thus, the social environment and the peer group trigger his ‘rebellion’.

Upon return to Israel he continues schooling at a modern-orthodox boarding school and continues to bend the rules but recalls that his parents did not enforce the punitive measures taken by the school, but instead supported his deviant behaviour by taking a holiday together during the time of those penalties. This raises the assumption that his efforts of non-conformity did not hit resistance but acknowledgment instead. Thus, his rebellion could not challenge parental authority. The description of his time at the boarding school is detailed, describing his role as “spoiler of the youth”\textsuperscript{154}. The punitive visits to the Yeshiva are positively connotated as “a good time with friends, drinking and smoking cigarettes” where the ‘deviant’ schoolmates formed his primary peer group. While the school is held in high esteem, the theme of ‘community’ then becomes the centre of a reflexive process of individuation:

“Well, I was raised in a big family, then boarding school, afterwards the Army... and that’s why it was important for me to go to India on my own, after the Army. Simply

\textsuperscript{154} German original: “Verderber der Jugend”
not go with others, not being influenced by other people anymore [...] and actually, it was about showing a kind of counter-community, where it is about doing your own thing. And once friends from Israel came to join, suddenly it was a large group of Israelis again... that, I didn’t like and... I [...] went back to Israel.”

This statement presents a turn. Evaluating his school experience, Arbel presents his current perspective on the past as a negotiation between ‘individual and community’. Being embedded in different ‘collectives’ of family, school and the Army, the need to distance himself from them presents a rupture. Ironically, the place of distance is sought in India, a popular destination for Israelis after the Military Service. The need to distance himself suggest the desire to create “a room of one’s own”. The solution is sought in escaping the Israeli social context, by choosing a place heavily populated by Israelis. The negotiation between community and individualism is a common and widely addressed theme of identity formation generally, but in the Israeli societal context most specifically (Ben-Rafael and Peres, 2005). This goes alongside the increasing pressures of individualisation regarded as inherent to postmodern social settings (Beck, and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002).

5.4.5 Migration to Berlin

As we have seen, upon arrival of ‘too many Israelis’, Arbel ‘escaped’ India. Soon after his return to Israel, he leaves to undertake his studies in Berlin. When he first arrived in 2003, the Israeli community in Berlin was relatively small, and he started living with other Israelis. This indicates that the desire to leave and create a room on one’s own, stood alongside the need to re-create home and familiarity in the unfamiliar environment he created “Israeli Kibbutz” in the shared flat. Despite never having lived in a Kibbutz, it stands for a communal Hebrew-speaking environment maintaining a ‘secular’ life style. Having very few interactions with the Jewish community he identifies a turn, connected to his partner’s conversion:

“It actually all starts with Linda’s giyur. [before that] I only went to synagogue when my parents came to visit... to Bet Daniel and also to Bet Avram because my father,

155 Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002) also draw on Virginia Woolf suggesting the creation of ‘a biography of one’s own’
156 Berlin Synagogue with an orthodox minyan where morning prayers take place on weekdays. Traditionally, Berlin synagogues are named after the street names.
that was his shiva year,\textsuperscript{157} he had to go to synagogue every morning ... then we went to Bet Avram during the week and on Shabbat to Bet Daniel. But I relate the idea of community to two things: the first thing was Linda’s Giyur in which I also participated, so I also was at their lessons ...And it was about them nonsense, ehm, them not telling them [the students] nonsense... my parents wanted her to do an orthodox giyur, and they still do...but I was sure I didn’t want an orthodox giyur, I didn’t see any sense in that, because [...] I didn’t want to be an orthodox Jew and also didn’t want to have an orthodox wife. ... no! So what sense does it make? We shouldn’t pretend... it only makes sense that we made a giyur... hmm... because when you actually discuss it, then it is about taking time to think about what kind of Jewish life we would like to live... And that’s how the question came back on the table...

\textbf{I: the question about?}

\textbf{D:} ... about Jewish identity...

I consider this passage to be central to his ‘biographical turn’, entangling a migration and conversion process. For a few years in Berlin, his connection to local synagogues was prompted by parental visits. Eventually, it is his non-Jewish German partner and her conversion, that trigger a turn, not necessarily in a sense of \textit{t’shuva}\textsuperscript{158}, but rather as a reconfiguration of Jewish belonging outside of the parental framework. Having grown up in an orthodox community, he is sceptical about the Reform practice and grants himself the authority over making sure that “they will not tell her nonsense”\textsuperscript{159} His participation in the lessons could also suggest his willingness to reciprocate her commitment. Most strikingly, the giyur is predominantly referred to himself, rather than her: \textit{“I was sure that “I” didn’t want an orthodox giyur. ”} This not only indicates that he took up a central position in this decision-making process, but that it also presented a conversion for him, \textit{his} conversion. Not only does this offer insights into the gender roles and hierarchies in the relationship, but it also demonstrates how a conversion process of an individual affects the environment and especially the partner as well.

\textsuperscript{157} Shiva – literally means mourning period after the death of a family member. It has to be ‘sat’ by family members, predominantly the children of the person who passed away. In this case here, his father’s mother had passed away (DeLange, 2000:117)

\textsuperscript{158} Religious return for ‘secular’ Jews to observance.

\textsuperscript{159} German original: (“\textit{dass sie keinen Quatsch erzählen...”}).
He does not mention what his partner might have considered and where her interests lied in relation to ‘her’ giyur but refers to it as ‘his’ choice evoking a need to position himself in relation to his parents and his personal Jewish practice. Here, we can see the dynamic tension in so-called ‘mixed marriages’ as well as the wide-reaching consequences a conversion to Judaism can have. It is with his partner, who is at first unfamiliar with Jewish traditions, that he re-enters community life in Berlin. His partner’s adoption of his tradition triggers a reflexive process regarding his own tradition. The expression of ‘bringing something back on the table’ in that sense has a double meaning, as evoking a negotiation of religion and tradition but more explicitly, of keeping kosher or keeping Shabbat which literally involves the table as well as the body and embodied practices, not merely a mindset. Instead, leading a Jewish life has direct practical implications.

Finally, his orthodox upbringing bestowed him with a profound knowledge of Jewish religious practice. The considered possibility of Reform Jews “teaching nonsense” indicates a distinction practice of positioning himself as an expert in relation to the German Rabbis. It is a profound re-orientation that characterise this process: following his desire and ‘crossing a boundary’ of marrying someone who is outside of his tradition does not entail a distancing from his tradition (as often feared) but rather a ‘turn towards’ a Jewish life. In that sense, his migration and her giyur merge in a common orientation towards a Jewish life of a kind which corresponds with place and circumstances. It is neither the orthodox life represented by his parental framework, nor one where Jewish practice and Judaism is absent. His partner’s conversion further suggests his deep-rootedness in Jewish tradition, which continued despite his changes in observance and differing lifestyles in relation to Jewish practice. In this context, the structure and Gestalt of the text reflects the content. Changing from narration, to evaluative argumentation (Schütze, 1983; 2016) suggests that the configuration of his own position might still be going on. The re-consideration of his personal position towards Jewish practice might further be influenced by the current situation in the community, where hierarchies among converts are being established, which relate to identity politics and the accumulation of Jewish (religious) capital.\footnote{160 Here I draw on my observations and several other interviews. See also Chapter 6.}
His involvement in the community was further triggered by his dissertation project on historical Zionism. The engagement and activism in initiatives working on the ‘Israeli diaspora’ he claims, was related to the intention to create and ‘envision’ a kind of alternative community, outside of (national) ideology and bound to Israeli identity politics and territorialism. The synagogue ‘which needed saving’, interrupted this engagement: ‘in the process of creating an alternative community, we ended up with Bet Daniel’. Although the situation of starting to take up responsibility and leadership roles in the synagogue is portrayed as coincidental, it has a distinct significance in his trajectory, an aspect to which I will now turn.

5.4.6 The significance of the scene

So far, Arbel’s case has not only exemplified how the categorisation of ‘secular’ has little explanatory value in the negotiation process individuals enter when migrating to Berlin. We have further seen how inner-Jewish boundaries and frontiers played a central role in his upbringing and how the way these were handled by his parents shaped his approach to his ‘being Jewish’. This becomes salient in his attitude in the scene. Despite his juvenile rebellion and symbolic and spatial distancing from his family and other close communities in Israel, Jewish practice and community are positively filled: they evoke positive memories, rather than contestation and rejection as in the case of Tomer. This is presented by a number of childhood memories. Arbel described how his grandfather, who came from Morocco, became an activist in movements preserving Sephardi tradition in the early years of the state of Israel. He recalls how he accompanied his grandfather to the synagogue, where he was often allowed to put the rebonim, the crowns, on top of the Torah scrolls. This indicates a positive occupancy of the synagogue space. By way of referring to his grandfather, he underscores the importance of tradition and the way in which tradition provides stability in the process of migration. Doing something familiar in an unfamiliar place creates a dynamic interaction between bodies and spaces and potentially ‘converts’ or transforms the place as well as the individuals inhabiting it.

Furthermore, upon closer interrogation about his family’s observance we learn that the approach to tradition and religious observance was characterised by flexibility:
V: and how was it at your home, all the time, kashrut and so on …?

“Yes, everything was kosher, I mean, it all depends where and when I cannot pretend that 30 years, we [the family] did the same thing… But of course, there was no question that it is something that you do […] but it wasn’t always easy… because as children we didn’t always want that… we wanted normal food and that’s why they [the parents] started doing things like… we’d drive into McDonald’s, we would do our own Kashrut examination, we’d see which kind of fish that is… is it industrial? And then they would allow more than the standards in strictly orthodox, but of course the question of Kashrut was there… how could it still - according to one’s own discretion - be considered kosher but still keep the kids quiet… they really had flexibility… but of course […] they were always cautious to keep separate kitchens, wait in-between meals […] Everything was always according to scripture, but …simply not obsessive, not like… like the goal is life… it was never a competition of frumigkeyt, … it was the complete opposite: they always tried, ‘how can we consider what’s going on in life?’ … how can we combine the two things…?”

This statement not only reflects his parents’ attitude toward Jewish practice, but also towards the role of tradition. Religious observance is not pursued with obsession but flexibility and the willingness to compromise and transgress boundaries under certain circumstances, such as the temporary suspension of kashrut laws. It is therefore that “the purpose is life” not only summarizes the perceived parental approach to Jewish practice, but their approach to life itself. It is this kind of flexibility, which he comes to adopt as well. This is reflected in his attitude towards the scene and community life in general: The goal is life, not frumigkeyt in of and of itself. Thereby, he also positions himself in relation to community conflicts related to observance and ‘Jewish authenticity’ frequently occurring at the synagogue. It is the combination of flexibility and the importance of community as ‘togetherness’ that characterise his position.

161 In order for a restaurant to be kosher it is examined and has a ‘kosher certificate’. An “individual” kashrut examination has no bearing on these standards especially not in fast food chains like McDonald’s.
162 German original: „das Ziel ist das Leben“
163 It closely connects to Deut. 30:12 “lo ba-shamayim” taking on central significance in Rabbinic Judaism, especially in the Talmudic tale of “the Oven of Akhnai” “where Rabbi Yehoshuah affirmed the independence of people’s interpretation from divine authority, since that is what God prescribed. For further elaboration on the ‘basis of Jewish secularity’ see Biale, D. (2002) “Not in the heavens” and Klapheck and Calderon (2015): “Säkulares Judentum aus religiösen Quellen” [in German].
The importance of this openness and the creation of a positive welcoming environment must be understood in relation to his transnational trajectory in which Jewishness came to be a thread ‘suturing’ different places, national backgrounds and communities (Hall, 1996). He underlines that rather than identifying with a particular nationality, he identifies with the cities of which he had become part: “I am not only Israeli, I am Ramat Ganian, Berliner, and New Yorker”. The attachments to different cities then replace a fixed national belonging and emphasise a transnational sense of belonging, relating to cities and communities rather than national collective. The fluency in three languages further adds to his sense of having multiple knots of belonging.

For him, so he states, embracing diasporic Judaism detached from the territorial politics of the state of Israel presents a way of voicing what he considers ‘a silent critique’ of the state of Israel and the Zionist project in its current formation. His involvement in the synagogue presents a way of offering an alternative community outside and beyond the nation-state. This relates to Diasporic Judaism as form of de-centring the state of Israel as the Boyarins suggest (1993). The synagogue is also referred to as a Kunstwerk (a piece of art), an aesthetic creation intended to make Berlin’s Jewish life richer, more colourful and presenting a more reflexive way of practicing orthodoxy than what is presented by orthodox institutions in Berlin and beyond. The intention, he states, was to revive and create a kind of Jewish community in which he would like to raise his future children. Having taken up a leadership role and embracing his commitment to the community, personal observance such as keeping Shabbat is not followed strictly and compares to a Reform attitude: Shabbat is referred to as the “hardest working day of the week”: “we have become professional Jews”, he states and acknowledges that he would not have made the same commitment in a different place where Jewish life is already thriving, such as New York City. Instead, it was ‘Berlin’, which encouraged this kind of involvement. Despite these transformative changes, he remains ambivalent to certain traditions and practices:

“…. It is not that I strongly believe in God, this aspect has not changed tremendously. ... it is not that I don’t believe in God, I just don’t believe in a God of creation ... I believe there is something that goes beyond our reason – like you think about someone and suddenly he calls.
I don’t believe in the direct relationship between the mitzvot and... God or whatever... that is rather a tradition for me... in my view of things... these are folkways, simply things that Jews do, and always did.”

_I: and when you pray...?_

_T: well, with praying I’ve always had a problem. Even as a young boy, that was the thing that I liked the least [...] I’ve got my issues with the formal Jewish prayers... I like the holiday prayers, those that are less cyclical, the regular prayers, which are always the same, they are not my thing, but I’ll take part, on Fridays, as long as there is enough singing, then it’s ok... I engage with the Torah and the shiurim, simply because I have this pedagogical idea in mind [...] the learning has always been more interesting to me than the praying...”^[64]

Here, we clearly see the differing ways of approaching tradition and Jewish practice. While Yaakov placed large importance on praying and religious practice, it is indeed less significant for Arbel. Furthermore, the passage reveals how the concept and dimension of ‘belief’ so central in Christian theologies and research on religion, is not central here at all. This is in line with most of my participants. Additionally, despite his involvement in the community, certain attitudes have not changed. Nonetheless, compared to his childhood, the participation in regular prayer on Shabbat are not enforced but have a become a matter of choice. As we have seen, this choice was influenced and shaped by his partner’s conversion to Judaism, his intellectual projects and Berlin itself.

5.4.7 Significance of the biographical case

Arbel’s case exemplifies the changing attitudes towards Jewish practice throughout a biographical trajectory. While he identified the tensions between community and individualism, his trajectory was shaped by migration and the flexible adaptability to different places. The migration from Israel to Berlin creates a spatial distance and separation to his family. Thereby, he crosses a boundary and creates ‘a biography of his own’.

^[64] One of the Jewish mitzvot is to study Torah.
Manifested in his migration, but most importantly in the marriage to a non-Jewish German who adopted his tradition, is the desire to cross boundaries and thereby negotiate a personal position.

Although his family history has been shaped by crossing boundaries and experiences of migration, he now represents a cosmopolitan transnational identity. Relating to different worlds- orthodoxy as well as ‘secular’ lifestyles, different languages and cultural realms, he acts as a gatekeeper whose Jewish practice is not driven by frumigkeyt and obsession, but flexibility and openness. His engagement in the scene is presented as a coincidence of ‘ending up’ with the work at the synagogue. However, the fact that the place has no Rabbinical authority further relates to his biography of struggling with too rigidly orthodox frameworks and following the religious rules imposed on him. It is this tension of valuing tradition on the one, while rejecting authorities on the other hand, that seems to create a productive tension. This, in turn, has an influence on the scene. Nonetheless, considering his roots and family upbringing in an orthodox family with an education at gender-segregated schools we can come to understand how his trajectory is also one of rebellion and carving out his own way of interpreting and living his own Judaism and deciding what kind of Jewish life he (and his partner) want to live. Despite its community challenges, ‘identity confusions’ (as Yaakov called it), Berlin is the place that has triggered and fostered a ‘re-orientation’, what I consider a ‘t’shuva Berlin-style’, that is, a return to Judaism and Jewish practice, yet, not by becoming orthodox, but adopting a Judaism that fits with an urban lifestyle and is specific to Berlin, which can hold the tension of being politically critical (e.g. towards Israeli state politics) and maintaining tradition and religion as a positive and important value. At the same time, the t’shuva Berlin-style, is also marked by finding a position of dealing with the exotic fascinations, and the curious spectators which Yaakov described.

Against the backdrop of the unusualness for religious and secular Israelis to socially interfere (Ben-Rafael, 2002; Peres, 2006), we can see how Arbel becomes a gatekeeper or rather door-opener for Israelis in Berlin who seek the comfort of a community but do not feel at ease with the institution of the Gemeinde and ‘religion’ as they know it from Israel. Finally, his comfort with Jewish rituals as well as with differing lifestyles and, not least, his ease and fascination with German culture, grant him a significant position for the scene. I have shown how this position is deeply entangled with his biographical trajectory and how a migration to Berlin
can become entangled with a conversion process. In that sense, his biography provided another example of ‘doing being Jewish’.
5.5 Summary

This chapter has presented a spectrum of experiences of Israelis migrating to Berlin in relation to their Jewishness. While these cases represent the statistical suggestions of a well-educated Israeli middle class of (largely) Ashkenazi belonging, I have shown that their positionality towards religion and ‘the secular’ is significantly more complicated than categorising it as ‘secular’ or distant from the Gemeinde or other forms of religious practice and initiatives in Berlin. Not only have I shown how their trajectories are deeply entangled with the personal as well as the political situation in Israel, I have further laid out how ‘doing being Jewish’ is a reflexive process entangled with sexuality and gender, family, community and finally with a partner and the new life situation in Berlin. We have seen how the place has an impact on one’s positionality and sense of ‘being Israeli’ and ‘being Jewish’. While it is unlikely that a position such as presented by Tomer will turn to religion in the future, we have seen how the Choir presented a realm to negotiate and reconsider his position, as well as performing his contestation and rejection of it.

Relating the biographical tensions to the migration to Berlin and adding to the complexity of the scene, we have seen how all four biographical cases resist prescribed frameworks and fixed categories and engage in a spatial as well as non-spatial border crossing by moving to Berlin or being with a non-Jewish German partner. By doing so, they defy a certain conformity to a norm, especially considering the ambivalence with which migrants to Berlin and emigrants from Israel are regarded in general. Not only does the move to Berlin hold the promise of freedom and opportunity, it also bears the confrontation with ‘being Israeli’ and ‘being Jewish’, evokes the question of ‘home’ and ‘what kind of – potentially ‘Jewish’ - life one wants to live. Thus, the migration not only engenders a ‘re-orientation’ (Ahmed, 1998), but also an up-rootedness and a reconfiguration of boundaries in a diaspora space (Brah, 1996).

Mapping these trajectories, we can see how the migration to Berlin is a choice is entangled with biographical themes, ‘tensions’, which shaped the biography: this can be a long-term desire to leave Israel and be independent (Tomer), or the ambivalent process of coming out (of the Kibbutz) (Inbal) negotiating individualism and community in relation to a transnational trajectory (Arbel), or as a part of a reconfiguring roots and routes (Yaakov). Finally, we have seen that they all grapple with the heteronormative prescribed frameworks
and have found individual ‘ways out’ (Amit, 2018) and thereby rejecting and resisting these frameworks that have shaped their trajectories. We can conceive of this of as a way of distancing and thereby negotiating one’s position inside a certain order. All of these biographies found an immediate reason to move: while Tomer followed his friends, Inbal appeared to migrate ‘for love’, and Arbel and Yaakov for new opportunities or career.

The individual engagement in the scene then corresponds with the ‘biographical needs’ at a given time. In correspondence with my other participants from ‘secular’ backgrounds, Inbal and Tomer first related to the choir because of the Hebrew language and an aesthetic experience. Eventually however, it turned into group and community they committed to, to the extent that it was perceived as a ‘spiritual’ experience resembling prayer and religious ritual (Inbal) Serving as a ‘portable homeland’ for Inbal, the Hebrew language is floating signifier in Berlin evoking a plethora of connotations. Most interestingly, what once was the unifying glue in her Kibbutz, binding individuals with different languages to a newly created ‘Israeli collective’, now represents her ‘home’ again in Berlin. Creating a sensation of ‘being understood’165, singing in Hebrew creates a common language beyond the capacity to communicate in it. This can be understood as ‘claiming a space’ in the city. Nonetheless, this realm was temporal for her. It was the openness non-restricted framework and the flow of singing and music as an embodied expression, which tied into Inbal’s trajectory of ‘coming out of the Kibbutz’.

For Arbel, Jewish rituals are positively filled and therefore, he does not rely on the aesthetics of music and Hebrew. While enjoying singing in the choir, his wish for Jewishness as community is fulfilled in the synagogue, where his commitment, especially to teaching, provide him with a sense of belonging. While for Arbel it is community engagement and the sociality the synagogue can offer, Yaakov derives his positionality from observance and establishing an ethical position in relation to the community politics and dynamics he encounters in Berlin. Adopting an observance ‘Berlin-style’, which fits Berlin and the sociality of the scene, he is confronted with exoticism of Jews while teaching and educating about Judaism. Thus, Berlin fostered a re-orientation of focussing his attention towards ‘doing Judaism’ rather than engaging in the politics of belonging and hierarchizations inside and outside the communities. Considering halacha as an important authority in his life, the

165 In the next chapter, we will see how this language provides ‘a way into’ Judaism and things Jewish.
openness of the scene challenges traditional boundaries and thereby diverge from the Jewish practice he was used to before. In contrast, Tomer is at the opposite side of the spectrum. While Tomer does not frequent the synagogue, his Jewishness does not prescribe to a religious authority. Rather, he derives a sense of ‘spirituality’ and belonging through in the arts, music and aesthetics outside institutional frameworks. Beyond making music, the Hebrew Choir and its connection to the scene offer a way of ‘seeing and being seen’ and ‘being heard’.

These processes of migration respond to the aesthetics of Berlin. They stimulate the drawing of boundaries which are not drawn based on ethnicity and national belonging but cut cross them and constantly shift. Whether the Hebrew choir, the synagogue or the queer Shabbat, these places offer a sociality that allow a temporary positioning which is not necessarily continuous, fixed or stable.

Finally, having mapped these trajectories, I have shown that they by negotiating ‘being Israeli’ and ‘being Jewish’ all participants presented here enter into settings where Jewishness becomes part of the question. This seems to engender a reflexive process of positionalities, in relation to biographical trajectory and desires. This process is a ‘turn’ a re-orientation and a kind of conversion to the space(s) they enter in Berlin. The cases underscore the complexity of Jewishness and further demonstrate that external ascription of what ‘Jewishness’ means, can be a violent misrepresentation of individuals’ positionalities and their personal ‘doing being Jewish’. The following chapter on Conversion will mirror this experience by analysing the processes of ‘becoming Jewish’ in Berlin from a different angle.
6. Conversion

“Why do people convert?” asks Talal Asad in his “Comments on Conversion” (Asad in Van der Veer, 1996:236). And indeed, the naively posed question captures the issue in its entirety, as the act of conversion is specific to social and political settings and accordingly differs in its significance. Asad further asks for the agent in this process: who undertakes this ‘turn’ or ‘change’ or is turned (converted) into something else? The process of conversion is tied to a certain temporality and has, similar to advertisements of transformative processes, a ‘before’ and an ‘after’. Thereby, it holds the promise of becoming something different. Daniel Barber suggests that “to convert is to move, but it is simultaneously to identify or to position, for conversion is a movement from one identity to another. Movement requires the emplotment provided by at least two positions, and these positions gain their meaning through the narration of the movement between them. (Barber, 2014:142). In the scene that I studied, I encountered a plethora of positions in the process of becoming Jewish. Furthermore, as we have seen that Jewishness can take a variety of different significations for different individuals, what is it, that individuals convert to?

From the migration trajectories we have seen that the act of migration can be motivated by a partner, a way to escape, or chance to pursue an individual pathway. The negotiation of one’s position in the new context can engender a variety of ‘doings’. It can be stylized and enacted in different ways, and, as I have shown, happens in correspondence with biographical tensions. In order to understand how the scene constitutes itself as Jewish, we need to understand the way Jewishness is constructed by individuals who ‘turn to’ or convert to Judaism. The turn towards Judaism appears to be a following of desires, whether represented by a partner, the symbolic representation of the language (Hebrew) or a specific cultural realm connected to Israel. In re-consideration of the context, this chapter shows that the scene consists of a wide spectrum of conversion processes of becoming Jewish, which seem to defy the determination of a fixed starting or endpoint. Furthermore, rather than perceiving of ‘conversion’ as the resolution of a locatable biographical crisis, as some researchers suggest (Wohlrab-Sahr, 1999; Steiner, 2015), I relate it to biographical tensions, which become entangled with the process of conversion and ‘react’ with the dynamics in the scene evolving from the context-specific representations of Judaism and Jewishness (Chapter 4). As Asad argues, it is indeed the context that makes the convert and shapes the act of conversion (Asad in van der Veer, 1996:272)
In the following, I will present the analysis of four biographical cases. By doing so, I am not only showing how the scene constitutes itself as ‘Jewish’ through complexity and complex conversion practices, but I am also developing a distinct approach to the understanding of conversion arguing three essential points: firstly, I suggest that instead of creating a typology of converts, these cases present a spectrum ranging from orthodox converts to self-defined Jews. Looking at religiously ‘authorized’ converts only, fundamentally limits our understanding of the complexity of conversion processes in general and the understanding of this scene in particular, as it seems to engender distinct modes of conversion.

Secondly, looking at the entire spectrum of what I consider ‘modes of conversion’ practices in various stages will bring to the fore the complexities of the psycho-social processes which emerge from this specific societal setting. While ‘converting’ individuals negotiate and symbolically distance themselves from ‘being German’ seeking to become something else, Judaism and Jewishness can become an object of desire. Due to the ambivalence and uncertainty attached to becoming Jewish, I will show how the positioning as a convert evokes distinction processes in order to establish a position within the field.

Thirdly, I demonstrate that Conversion to Judaism and conversion more broadly cannot only be understood as a matter of ‘religious conversion’ but as a process intersecting with various identity categories. Consequently, it is deeply entangled and intertwined with sexuality and erotic desire. The biographical cases presented here, reveal and underscore the significance of sex, sexuality, the erotic, gender and relationships for the process of conversion. This will evolve in a general discussion towards the understanding of conversion.

Thereby, my analysis of conversion not only contributes to the understanding of the constitution of the scene as ‘Jewish’, but it also intervenes in the literature on conversion and shows how failing to consider sexuality and the erotic leaves us with a deeply impoverished understanding of conversion processes. This will lay the grounds for a discussion of the position of ‘the German convert’ as a site of contestation, especially in the light of questions of authority and legitimacy, such as who has the authority to determine whether one ‘is’ or ‘has become’ ‘fully’ Jewish? Can being fluent in Hebrew or simply practicing the mitzvot make one Jewish? What about living with an observant partner?

While the Talmud is very explicit on the ritual of conversion, it is less so on the temporality of the conversion process. In other words, where does the ‘becoming’ start and where does it
end? Finally, becoming Jewish always stands in dynamic tension between adoption, adaptation and appropriation of an identity ‘that is supposed to be fixed at birth’ (Brubaker, 2016). As a consequence, I argue that conversion needs to be addressed as a holistic rather than merely a ‘religious’ process. It is then, that the study of conversion is most insightful for the sociological understanding of ethnic, national and religious belonging in the given context and beyond.

6.1 Religious conversion and conversion to Judaism

Before engaging with individual narratives and their differing ‘turns’ to Judaism, let me begin with a detour of analytical clarification and placing my argument into existing debates on conversion. As mentioned before, ‘conversion’ literally means to ‘turn’, or ‘change’. Religious conversion is usually thought of as ‘the change from one religious’ identity to another’ (Beit-Hallahmi, Argyle 1989, Buckser and Glazier, 2003). Despite a large body of research, the definition and ontology of conversion continues to puzzle researchers (Stromberg, 2015). Dominated by Christian conversion narratives of Paul and St. Augustine (Szpiech, 2013), the study of conversion has been shaped by particular research paradigms based on different disciplines (Rambo, 1999). Unsurprisingly, the particular analytical lens shapes the way in which researchers grasp the phenomenon of conversion. While William James’ reference to conversion as ‘twice born’ and a psychological dimension of change and renewal has become a classical text (James, 1985 [1902]), post-colonial theorists consider conversion practices entangled with Christian missions, imperialism and settler-colonialism (Comaroff and Comaroff, 1986; van der Veer, 1996). Feminist theorists have looked to the gender dimensions in conversion processes (Connor, 1994), while others have argued for the centrality of ‘narration’ and language in conversion (Stromberg, 2015), while biographical researchers looked at the function of conversion in biographies (Wohlrab-Sahr, 1999; Steiner, 2015). Lofland and Stark (1965) highlighted the processual character of conversion suggesting seven stages to the process in the context of ‘religious change’ (Rambo, 1999). Recent studies of conversion suggest that these processes cannot be separated from each other (Jindra, 2014). Including issues of gender, sexuality, erotic desire as well as the historical and socio-political contexts, my analysis shows that conversion processes are a matter of narrative as well as performance. Based in the urban scene of Berlin, my approach critically intervenes and goes beyond existing literature which does not suffice to explain modes of conversion in urban ‘religious’ scenes.
When understood as a change from one religion to another, conversion processes have to be contextualised within the realms of the particular religion and the specific ‘theological guidelines’ and institutional politics for accepting new members. However, as we will see, individual pathways might converge from the guidelines and norms set by institutions. It is this divergence which offers most profound sociological insights. Little research has been undertaken on the process that precedes decisions and acts of conversions. Taken from personal accounts, conversions are mostly studied in hindsight rather than foresight (Beit-Hallahmi and Argyle, 1989: 119).

Unlike Christianity and Islam, Judaism has often been defined as a culture and religion of boundaries, with little or no inclination to proselytize among non-Jews. Throughout the centuries, frontiers and boundaries towards a non-Jewish outside have not only been defined by Jewish communities, but also through external ascription by non-Jewish environments (Olmer, 2010). Despite the seemingly marked boundaries, conversion has always been part of Judaism. According to the Rabbinic descriptions, ritual immersion and ritual cleansing leads to the convert being born again, becoming part of the Jewish people, and taking on the genealogy as a son or daughter of Abraham and Sarah. Therefore, conversion to Judaism includes both, a bodily transformative process and a ‘religious’ confession of the convert committing to embrace the yoke of the mitzvot. Thus, Judaism exceeds the mere confession of faith since it has significant implications for bodily conduct. In the Babylonian Talmud, the Rabbis highlight that after immersion the convert takes on a new genealogy, a new identity as part of the Jewish people. In that sense, full conversions suppose a change of one’s ancestral genealogy.

166 The engagements of Chabad have often been considered as one version of proselytization in the Jewish context, yet their ‘conversion-lead’-movement focuses on born Jews only, rather than ‘converting’ non-Jews (see Leitmann and Siebzehner 2006).
167 Consequently, the convert is bestowed with the name ben-Abraham or bat-Sarah. Within the elaborations of the Babylonian Talmud, the Rabbis are explicit in the procedure of conversion, which is divided into three parts for women, or four parts for men. The Rabbinic discussion and subsequent elaboration on the process of conversion (which is in close reference to the Book of Ruth). In Biblical times, belonging to the Jewish people was defined through patrilineal decent. Various central figures of the Israelites and the Jewish lineage had non-Jewish spouses such as Moses, Joseph as well as King David and his successor King Solomon. Belonging to the Jewish people was defined by the ritual of circumcision and marriage. The establishment of matrilineality was only introduced in the 2nd century C.E. and its reasons are not finally confirmed. Historians suppose that it was a measure taken in order to make Jewish law compatible with Roman Law at the time. Another assumption is that the as the Rabbis of the time forbade the mixing of species in the natural world, they adopted this practice to Judaism (Olmer, 2010:97,207).
168 See Yevamot 47, Babylonian Talmud. For further details see also Cohen, 2000.
Standardly, conversion to Judaism involves taking on a Hebrew name. While some converts change their first names, others prefer to maintain their given names and solely adopt the Hebrew name as a new middle name. Some of my participants with Christian names changed to a Hebrew name, while others with more ‘neutral’ names, preferred to stay with their given name. For those who married an Israeli, some took on the Hebrew family name of their partners and additionally changed their first name. As a consequence, their original (German) name completely disappeared. This evoked the impression of a need and wish to erase traces of a previous ‘identity’.

6.2 The Berlin Context and the Judaizing Milieu

As I have shown, that the definitions of who is a Jew are context-specific, I will now briefly expand on contemporary discussions on ‘Jewishness’ in the Berlin context. This will also enrich the understanding of the constitution of Jewishness in the scene. Rather than bestowing the convert with honour for the devotion and determination to take up the yoke of the mitzvot, suggested in the Talmud, the German context engenders suspicion of a guilt-stricken (un)conscious and the need ‘to change sides’, (Steiner, 2015). Steiner reports that some Rabbis have started to require a psychological report attesting the convert’s mental health. The question over the acceptance of patrilineal Jews has caused controversy among Jewish communities worldwide. However, as shown in chapter four, the German context is particular as the German state naturalised Russian Jews based on patrilineal descent, while the Gemeinden did not accept patrilineality. This rule applies regardless of whether someone had been reared in the tradition or not. Even the German non-Jewish public is perceived to pay attention to this issue and the poet Max Czollek levelled an attack arguing that nowadays great attention is paid to halachic conventions of matrilineality – while the Nazis persecuted and killed indifferent of religious definitions of Jewish belonging outright. Yet, as explained in chapter 4, not only the German public but the Gemeinden continue to follow halachic standards of defining Jewishness based on matrilineality or full conversion (reform

169 For further details see Steiner (2015) where she describes how the conversion to Judaism can be taken as a resolution to a variety of other problems or psychological crises, not seldom in relation to a family history entangled with National Socialism.

and masorti\textsuperscript{171} conversions are accepted).\textsuperscript{172} Similarly, in Israel, the ‘law of return’ recognises Russian patrilineal Jews while the religious authorities performing civil services such as marriage and divorce do not. Some of my participants who were Jews of patrilineal descent expressed their reluctance to formally convert, especially those who had already been active members in their home communities, or those who lost family in the Shoah.\textsuperscript{173} Depending on their aspired functions in the community (e.g. pursuing a degree at the Rabbinic college), some decided to undergo full conversion in order to become recognised members of the \textit{Gemeinde}, others did not.\textsuperscript{174} Most significantly in this context, the fact that children of couples with a non-Jewish father and Jewish mother have children who are halachically Jewish renders conversion to Judaism entirely gendered.

Although conversion is recognised by \textit{halacha} and converts to Judaism are technically ‘full’ Jews, the recognition of converts remains contentious and the treatment of converts as ‘second class’ Jews is not a rarity. As discussed before, Steiner’s archival research revealed that the requests for conversion among non-Jewish Germans after World War II skyrocketed and Rabbis were confronted with establishing boundaries towards group members who suddenly wanted to become its previous ‘Other’. When seen in that context, (non-Jewish) German-ness necessarily relates to an ethnic if not racial trajectory, which is not defined by citizenship, but by a somatic and physical norm based on descent drawing on divisions between ‘perpetrator’ and ‘victim’\textsuperscript{175}. Against the backdrop of German belonging in a post-migrant society, where German-ness is sought to be decoupled from ethnic descent, this is of course highly problematic. Furthermore, one of my participants grew up in Germany to a Jewish mother and a non-Jewish father. Unsurprisingly, her positioning sat ambivalently between these constructed dichotomies.

\footnote{171}{A conversion in reform Judaism usually involves one year of conversion course while observing mitzvot according to Reform Judaism. A conversion within orthodoxy requires full observance of Jewish laws and can take up to three years of learning, often depending on the level of previous knowledge. A masorti-conversion (traditional) is a somewhat middle ground between Reform and Orthodox conversion. The length of the conversion process varied among my participants from ten months to three years.}

\footnote{172}{This is significant as the so-called quota-refugees, Jews from the former Soviet Union, included patrilineal and matrilineal Jews alike. Prior to their arrival in Germany the Soviet state had defined Jewish belonging as a matter of nationality. Upon arrival, a large number who came based on their ‘Jewish heritage’ faced non-recognition by the German \textit{Einheitsgemeinde}. Thus, despite their Jewish nationality and often experienced Anti-Semitism, by passport, the \textit{Einheitsgemeinde} did not consider them eligible members of the communities. In his account of his migration to Germany, Dmitrij Belkin (2016) describes his negotiation of Jewish identity and ultimate ‘conversion’ to Judaism in order for him and his family to be recognised Jewish.}

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\footnote{174}{Here I refer to my statements by participants as well as accounts such as Ruth Zeifert’s. In her work, ‘Not quite kosher’, Zeifert discusses the problematic and contentious issue of being born to a Jewish father and the complexities of identity that this evokes. Zeifert, R. (2017) Nicht ganz koscher. Vaterjuden in Deutschland. Berlin: Hentrich und Hentrich}

\footnote{175}{Bodemann describes how Auschwitz puts an ultimate ‘ethnic’ divide between Jews and non-Jews (Bodemann, 1996: 52).}
Until very recently, the topic of German converts to Judaism after 1945 had not been thoroughly investigated while having been subject to heated (public) debates. Steiner (2015) offered the first and pioneering study of 2nd generation German converts to Judaism. Out of her biographical narrative interviews, she developed a three-tiered typology: (1) those who are drawn to conversion as a religious search (2) conversion because of a Jewish partner; (3) and conversions motivated by family involvement in National Socialism where the conversion is an attempt to resolve this dilemma. Involving mostly individuals of the ‘3rd generation, my participants were largely of the second type, although my interviews included patrilineal Jews who had converted. Due to the scope of this thesis, I am not including them in the case analyses here.

However, rather than establishing another typology, my analysis interrogates the trajectory involved in the involvement of a Jewish partner and pays attention to the societal structures and biographical trajectories and passions leading to this formation. Despite a few males converts, the majority of converting and converted participants were women. I am focusing on these women in order to show that conversion in the scene is an intersectional (Crenshaw, 2011; Lutz; 2011) and embodied practice (Davis, 2015). Moreover, my own embodied experiences and ethnographic immersion will go beyond Steiner’s analysis, the latter being based on biographical-narrative interviews, expert interviews and archival research rather than observant participation and ‘scenic understanding’. Although Steiner speaks about the ‘staging of Jewishness’, her work does not portray actual stages and analyse them and therefore cannot sufficiently grasp the process of conversion in the making. Drawing on situations witnessed in my fieldwork, I seek to show how hierarchies and distinctions are constructed and how I became involved in their workings.

176 This is noticeable in inner- and outer public discussions, for example in the rejection of undesired opinions where attacks are paired up with discriminations based on ‘Jewish status Broder is an outspoken Jewish intellectual who has publicly announced his annoyance with converted Jews and continues to publicly discredit voices based on their Jewish status. (http://www.achgut.com/artikel/der_rabbi_von_neukoelln_und_der_juedisch_muslimische_dialog; Broder, H. (2007) ‘Zur Hölle mit den Konvertiten, in Homolka, W. (2007) Nicht durch Geburt allein”).

177 At the synagogue, demarcations of ‘Jewish’ belonging are necessarily more central as the prayer and other rituals can only be performed by halachic Jews. At the heart of these is the Minyan, the requirement of ten (in orthodox rituals male) Jews to conduct the prayer together. In some synagogues, individuals have to provide proof of their orthodox conversion in order to count as full Jews. In conservative and reform synagogues, women are recognised in the count.
All of my non-Jewish participants who had or were in the process of conversion could be considered to be part of what Bodemann has referred to as a ‘judaizing milieu’ (Bodemann, 1996). These are individuals who have worked or have been acquainted with German-Israeli institutions or associations, have started to learn Hebrew or were students and scholars of Jewish studies. Leaning on the work of Jacob Katz, Bodemann’s work ‘Gedächtnistheater’ argues that post-war Judaism in Germany is a ‘staging’ an enactment and ‘theatre’ of a memory culture which does not have to involve Jews. Instead, Jewish (cultural) institutions are maintained by non-Jewish Germans ‘professional-almost-Jews’ produced by German-Israeli relations and associations, a novelty in post-war Germany. He provides the example of non-Jewish Germans in the position of editor-in-chief of the ‘Jüdische Allgemeine’ the Jewish weekly newspaper as well as several non-Jewish German professors of Jewish studies and Jewish history. This, according to Bodemann, presents a curious case, most specific to Germany, where non-Jews are ‘filling the void’ and Jewish fields are increasingly represented by non-Jews.

Bodemann further argues that the majority of Jewish culture in Germany is constructed and created by this Judaizing milieu, rather than a common ‘lived community’. A culture in which museums and commemoration are dominant rather than Jewish family and community life. Over twenty years after the publication of Bodemann’s analysis, migration of Jews from Israel and elsewhere has affected Jewish life and scenes in Berlin, with the effect of diversification of Jewishness in the cosmopolitan space. Flows between Israel and Berlin shape different diasporic communities together with the virtual world to the extent that we need to observe the transformation in Jewry as well as the Judaising milieu. Beyond socio-political transformations and technological change, I argue that Bodemann’s analysis falls short in providing a thorough sociological analysis of the genesis of this milieu and its effects inside and outside Jewish communities (or contemporary scenes).

179 He further criticizes Michael Wolfsohn, who claims that reunification has provided a basis for Jews and Germans to form a common ‘Schicksalsgemeinschaft’. Bodemann argues that Wolfsohn pushes Auschwitz to the side, together with public intellectuals like Henryk Broder, Richard Chaim Schneider and Rafael Seligmann (Bodemann, 1996:53).
6.3 Dynamics among Converts

Similar to what Steiner describes, my observations inside the synagogues revealed that converts take up ambivalent roles, especially when their eagerness to engage in the learning of Jewish practice is accompanied by educating others. One of my participants, whose partner is Jewish while she herself decided against a formal giyur, claimed to sometimes find herself “much more knowledgeable than the real Jew”. While I will return to this statement below, this notion suggests that non-belonging to Judaism and the subsequent liminal status is dealt with by elevating one’s personal knowledge and comparing it to the ‘natives’.

Steiner describes how converts are often under pressure to conform to the regulations and rules at the individual communities, while at the same time having to prove their devotion and commitment to the religious laws. The task of finding a middle ground and adapting to communities with their complex multi-national, multi-lingual and multi-observant structures is a difficult, if not impossible endeavour (Steiner, 2015). A few converts confessed that they felt a strong sense of illegitimacy when first entering the communities and not having been formally converted. The uncertainty of converts regarding their own legitimacy has bearings on the dynamics in the scene, of ambivalence and uncertainty, something Yaakov alluded to in chapter five. Taking the cases of Inbal and Tomer from the previous chapter, their attitudes towards Jewishness was one of inclusion largely shaped by the Hebrew language. The politics of belonging in the Gemeinde and the scene, render initiatives such as the queer Shabbat which sees itself providing a forum for ‘halachically challenged’ particularly significant.

The act of conversion to Judaism (giyur) is only possible via the religious pathway: although there have been claims towards ‘secular’ conversion or suggestion to invent special statuses without full conversion (Magid, 2013), none of these have been implemented anywhere so far.

180 The fantasy of a ‘native Jew’ is a central aspect in the analysis of the conversion complex in German society. A complex which is barely dealt with in public and academic discourse, in particular the way that the embodied existence of Judaism is connected to the urge for atonement in German society (Diner, 1990) a topic to which I will return later.

181 Indeed, progressive and reform Judaism as well as other movements have sought to break open the restrictive definitions of orthodoxy and halacha, especially due to the entanglement of orthodoxy with the Rabbanut and Israeli state politics. Judaism can and has also been defined culturally or by mere self-definition. Writers like Amos Oz und Oz-Salzberger have attempted to propose alternative definitions for ‘Jews’ such as ‘whoever is crazy enough to consider oneself a Jew’ (Oz, A. Oz-Salzberger, F. (2013) Juden und Worte, Frankfurt: Suhrkamp. These attempts at self-definition outside of the halachic framework are often related to political interventions drawing attention to Israeli citizenship rights. Rights which are ultimately determined by halachic authorities (Rabbanut), as seen in chapter four.

182 This is a term used by one of my participants and organisers of the queer Shabbat.
During my research, I encountered a young woman who told me that after her progressive conversion in Berlin, she has now become ‘a secular Jew’. To her, this meant celebrating the holidays and occasionally attending synagogue. The observance which was required of her at the time of conversion has, however, slowly disappeared from her life. Another participant on the other hand was fully committed to her conversion. In order to get married to her observant Israeli partner who was from an observant background, she adopted a modern-orthodox lifestyle and started to wear a headband fully concealing her hair. Accordingly, her new identification as an orthodox Jew necessarily became a stylized public expression. In particular through veiling and the observance of modesty rules: tsniut. The desire to convert to Judaism presented a riddle to some of my Israeli participants. Some could empathize with conversions as a matter of marrying a Jewish/Jewish-Israeli partner, others however, could not understand the voluntary adoption of the ‘burden to be Jewish’ – without external incentives: ‘Kashe l’hiot yehudi’\textsuperscript{183} said one of my participants visibly perplexed by non-Jewish Germans converting to Judaism, some even called it ‘ger-mania’\textsuperscript{184}. Others expressed their admiration for the enthusiasm to take up Jewish practice and pursuit of knowledge. Unsurprisingly, the rejection was particularly present among those with a strong personal incentive to escape Israel and its ‘Jewish’ identity politics.

### 6.4 Convert without conversion

In what follows, I will present the biographical case reconstructions, spanning the spectrum from self-defined Jewishness to multiple formal conversions, I first present a case which is significant for the sociality of the Hebrew choir. The scope of conversion practices in the scene ranged from individuals with intentions to convert to those who had already undergone several giyurim in order to be fully recognised in Germany and in Israel. All cases belong to all from a white German educated middle class. The first case is Rachel, whom I met in the Hebrew choir. She called my attention as she was often talking in Hebrew, independent of individuals’ national background. She also assumed that I was Jewish, until she asked me to say the blessings for a Friday night Kiddush and was disappointed when I refused to perform this ritual. Rachel’s narrative shows how a prolonged stay in Israel can entail the biographical work and orientation towards Judaism. The experience in Israel are turned into the desire and necessity to become Jewish, against possible obstacles. The scene becomes a way of creating

\textsuperscript{183} Hebrew: “It’s hard to be a Jew”

\textsuperscript{184} ‘Ger’ refers to Convert
a Jewish belonging for oneself. Her detailed narration, the *Gestalt* of the text, resembles an eloquent stream of consciousness which is chronologically structured.

### 6.4.1 Biographical Sketch

Rachel was born in 1970s in France where she lived with her parents until the age of nine. Her father was a university teacher for Ancient Oriental studies who frequently travelled to Israel. Her mother worked in various jobs, including at the Jewish hospital. At the age of nine her family moved to Germany where her father took up a University post. Rachel continued her schooling in a small town in Germany where she describes to also have had her first contact with Judaism in her history class, and a few years later on a school trip to Auschwitz. Her school years were followed by a year as an Au-Pair after which she commenced a degree in the humanities with the intention of becoming a journalist. It is during her studies that she first visits Israel on a professional training programme. After completing her PhD, she started working as a journalist and met her later husband. Soon after the birth of her first child, she accompanied her husband to Israel where he took up a position for a few years. The second child is born in Israel. In Israel she joined a choir and with her return to Berlin she seeks to continue singing in Hebrew, which leads her to initiate the Hebrew choir. The opening of Rachel’s narrative provides insights into her family background:

> "I am from a French family, I have two French parents and father is ancient Orientalist and was teaching biblical Hebrew for his whole life at the university. And because of that, I kind of grew up with the letters of Ancient Hebrew in my immediate environment. But during my childhood, there were no direct connections to lived Judaism in our daily life. So, [...] for example, my parents didn’t have Jewish friends. My mother came from B. and there was a big Jewish quarter and she also worked at the Jewish hospital. But there was, different than in Germany, a taken-for-granted co-existence... but no close contact either or - on the side of my mother- no search for friendships, or no pertinent inclination towards contact. For my father, of course, this was totally different: because his whole life, he was occupied with the Hebrew Bible, [...] and researched various Ancient languages, including Aramaic."\(^{185}\)

\(^{185}\) The interview was conducted in German, translations are mine.
Unlike other conversion narratives, Rachel’s life story is constructed chronologically and starts with her biological family. The father figure keeps returning throughout her narrative and in relation to his profession, Hebrew is presented as a symbol of fascination. From the start, the narration is characterised by a distinction between mother and father, the latter seemingly carrying more symbolic weight, especially in the later relation to Judaism. Her biography starts with a distancing from a ‘German’ identity, despite the fact that for the majority of her lifetime she had lived and had been educated in Germany. This distancing, which corresponds with other converts who place a large amount of emphasis on ‘having never belonged to a German mainstream’ or always having felt ‘as an outsider to German society’, is contextualised within the framework of a ‘French’ nationality, which was only naturalised, during her teenage years when the family acquired German citizenship. Despite the emphasis of having had almost no contact with lived Jewish traditions, the connections\(^{186}\) are carefully emphasised since they are seen as relevant for later developments in her life. Although her father never actively taught her Hebrew, she remembers him reading biblical stories to her, which ‘seemed to have had an existential meaning for him’ and recalls reciting psalms in Hebrew. Her admiration for Hebrew corresponds with many other participants who describe the Hebrew language as fascinating or ‘magical’.\(^{187}\)

### 6.4.2 Biographical tension

The following excerpt begins to allude to what I identify as her biographical tension.

> So, [...] the next intensive encounter with what Jewish life once had been, was in history class. And that was in Germany. So, I went to school in Germany, and in 9th grade- [...] when you learn about National Socialism and the Shoah - I had a very good teacher. And from the beginning that very much touched me, it didn’t touch me in some abstract way, but very personally. Back then [...] I had the feeling that this was also my story. And that was very persevering... it was there. And then I changed schools ... and did the final school trip [Abiturreise] to Krakow and we also visited Auschwitz... I had a teacher, [...] who was a really cold person and not a good teacher and she was totally overwhelmed with everything that came up there. And

\(^{186}\) It is the metaphor of ‘implanted strings which were later oscillated’ Here, she uses one of many musical metaphors referring to string instruments, ‘in Schwingung bringen’

\(^{187}\) The cases of Anna and Naomi also reveal exoticising fascination for the Hebrew language.
when we were in Auschwitz, I had a mental break-down and was really, I couldn’t … [deal] with it myself, it was unbelievable, and I was unbelievably touched, appalled and shocked by it and I couldn’t find words for it. And it was like, I didn’t know how I could possibly continue living, what could really be, after I had seen this?”

The extract reflects how Judaism entered her life by way of being confronted with the atrocities of the Shoah. The described ‘break-down’ serves to convey the emotional labour and personal involvement in experiencing the site of catastrophe. Not only is this a response to the atrocities committed by ‘the Germans’, but the aforementioned coldness of ‘the German’ teacher is narratively portrayed as contributing to the break-down and frustration with ‘German culture’. A culture which she does not feel part of and from which she distances herself. In line with the whole narrative, she places herself as a single unit against ‘the Germans’ who approach the Shoah with cold, morbid distance. In the following narration sequence, she goes on to elaborate how due to her father’s profession the whole family soon took on German citizenship, despite inner reluctance. In the same sequence, the environment in Bavaria is described as narrow and ‘bone-crushing’.

The positionality of an outsider to Germany, literally ‘Ausländerin’, is taken on as a central reference point of identity and goes alongside the identification with Jewish suffering in the Holocaust. Most of my participants, converts and to-be-converted, distanced themselves from what is considered ‘German’ mainstream culture. Monika Wohlrab-Sahr (1999) describes the adoption of the ‘Other’ as a ‘symbolic battle’ against one’s own cultural background, in her case Islam. In this case, the discursive field of Judaism and Rachel’s positionality in this milieu do not compare to contemporary representations of Islam. Rather, within a certain segment of a German Bildungsbürgertum, the position of Judaism is elevated to a positively

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188 Here it is important to note that she refers to the ‘Shoah’ the ‘Jewish’ suffering, rather than the inclusive term ‘Holocaust’. It is not clear whether she deliberately chose the term to emphasise the genocide on the Jews only or whether her word choice relates to the need to use the Hebrew word and terminology in relation to Auschwitz.

189 She uses the German term erdrückend

190 The derogatory reference to foreigners and migrants which was commonly used until its discriminatory label was criticized and replaced by ‘migrant’ or person with a migration background (Migrationshintergrund). It implies the deviance from the national collective, the ‘somatic norm’ which is in the German context white and male. For further elaboration on the discursive shift from ‘Ausländer’ to ‘migration background’ see Mannitz and Schneider in Drothoheim and Nieswand, 2014. While Rachel was a ‘migrant’ to Germany, she would be regarded as an ‘expat’. Since I follow Regina Roehnhild’s claim to cease differentiations between expat and ‘migrants’ implying a subdivision among migrants and their statuses, she is indeed a migrant while the derogatory term ‘Ausländerin’ refers to non-European migrants, rather than to an educated middle class from Western Europe.
connoted marker. Jewishness is then considered a symbol of difference, which does not stand for radical alterity, but rather for a moderate difference or desired otherness.

Here, the ‘break-down’ and thick description of the teacher resembles a performative act of ‘symbolic distancing’ from ‘being German’ in the position of an ‘Ausländerin’. The act of com-passion\textsuperscript{191} with the Jewish people is described ‘as if’ it was her history. Through the embodied suffering at the site of the camp, she not only identifies with the victims but sees herself to be part of them, and thereby marks herself as ‘other’ from an imagined ‘German collective’ by way of making herself belong to the ‘victims’. It is this avowal and demonstration of suffering caused by the Shoah in which the narrative is first turned into a ‘Jewish’ story and where an incident and event of the past is turned (converted) in order to convey the basis of her wish to be Jewish and become part of the Jewish people. We can understand the suffering of being ‘mis-recognised’ by the teacher as an experience of rejection that increased and stipulated her empathy and triggered the desire to separate herself from this collective of ‘Germans’ and the taking on of a Jewish genealogy. Thus, the teenager’s experience of not being recognised in her emotionality triggers the sense of rejection of ‘being German’ and everything that is being seen as such. In that sense, it is the distancing which allows for the ‘ethnic’ conversion to unfold and the desire to be part of this people who had to suffer under ‘the Germans’, just like herself in the treatment by the German teacher. Linguistically, this is constructed using the distinction of ‘us’ and ‘them’, where she is not part of the Germans. The narrative is continued by an elaboration on the way she felt distant to German society while growing up, especially in what is perceived as a ‘narrow-mindedness’ of the regional context.

Despite the father’s professional connection with Israel, Rachel’s first visit to Israel is only during her studies. Nevertheless, an intimate familiarity she construes an intimate familiarity with place and culture. Consequently, the arrival in Israel on an educational programme is portrayed as the rediscovery of something that had laid dormant. Here the way the narrative unfolds resembles a classical conversion narrative:\textsuperscript{192}

\textsuperscript{191} Here I use the term in the sense of ‘to suffer with’.

\textsuperscript{192} Here I refer to Luther’s translation into German. The Paulinian conversion narrative is described at various points in the Gospel. In chapter 22.1 of Acts, Paul describes having seen a big light and the voice of Jesus speaking to him. He was blinded by that light and consequently was reliant upon God’s leadership. The biblical text serves as one source for proverbs which have entered the common language usage. In this case, it reverberates with the saying ‘hit by a flash’ ("wie vom Blitz getroffen").
“So back then, I didn’t just go to Israel as a tourist, but already had something to accomplish there [laughs]... Cause [...] my father went to Israel all the time and I grew up with endless mounted-slide-shows from his trips to Israel. So, everything was incredibly familiar when I arrived there. That was so crazy, totally new and totally familiar... and I didn’t find Jerusalem that great at first... but then, we spent some time in the North and briefly went to Tel Aviv afterwards. And the ‘flash’ came at the Galilee. When I was at the ‘Kineret’ and this magical mist was upon the lake and I believe it was a sunset, or sunrise or it was something, and as if I was hit by lightning in my innermost. That was really, really strong. And then we returned to Jerusalem and then I was on a totally different energetic level [laughs].”

The ‘flash’ as Rachel described it, occurred in an environment that is of great significance in the Christian tradition. According to the Gospels, it was the place where Jesus performed most of his miracles was the area of the Galilee. Thus, the construction of Rachel’s ‘Jewish’ narrative appears to remain infused by Christian symbols and metaphors. The spiritual moment of being ‘hit’ which I read here as her incident of transformation is now interpreted and seen through a ‘Jewish’ lens and in the framework of ‘becoming’ Jewish. Her description is followed by laughter, which can be understood as a relief from the recounted story allowing her from envisioning memory to re-turn to the present. We could equally read it as an affective emotion of embarrassment or even shame. In his psychoanalytic study of shame, Tiedemann describes how laughter can be a means of hiding feelings of shame in order to loosen up a situation of overbearing intensity (Tiedemann, 2006). Shame, which is often accompanied by blushing or awkward laughter, reveals and draws personal boundaries. While this shame can have multiple dimensions, we can understand it in relation to the personal revelation, on which she fears being judged.

It is equally possible that the Christian connotation of the Sea of the Galilee might have triggered embarrassment when realising the ‘fantastic dimensions’ of the narrative or her

193 She uses the Hebrew word ‘Kineret’ (Sea of the Galilee or commonly referred to as Lake Tiberias) one of many Hebrew words. The use of Hebrew words is a common habit within Jewish communities but especially for converts who seek to adopt ‘the jargon’ of the community. In his autobiographical account of his conversion to Judaism Yehuda Havemann describes the eagerness to learn and understand this jargon. The adoption of it was common to all converts and ‘players’. Interestingly, some of my Hebrew participants started to use German words in English or in Hebrew as a matter of adopting the jargon.

194 In a different case not presented here, a convert uses the metaphor Judaism had come to her ‘like Jesus to the virgin Mary’.

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emotional involvement in it. We might also understand the laughter in reference to a sensation of shame and guilt, particularly when placed in a broader societal framework of a German non-Jewish woman revealing her desire to convert to Judaism and having a spiritual experience, revealed to an outsider. The moment of shame and the view of the self through the lens of the other is one of ‘double consciousness’, (duBois, 2007:8 [1903]) where the individual regards and judges herself by the standards of the others. It appears as if Rachel then adopts the historical framework of a ‘German’ context, where the desire to become Jewish could be judged and deemed illegitimate. On the other hand, the experience and the emotions of this moment are transferred and presented with a sense of conviction that leave little doubt about the sincerity of her feelings. This suggests that the feelings and their subsequent revelation to an outsider evoke ambivalence.

Consequently, creating a conversion narrative to Judaism is considered in a particular German discursive framework. This then shows that she also sees herself as part of a German collective while equally wanting to distance herself from it. The continuation of her narrative however reveals that it was her experience in Israel which triggered the wish to become Jewish:

“From then onwards [after learning Hebrew], it was a unique maelstrom in one direction. And in respect to Judaism it was a great gift to just being able to live it alongside... without me making a terrible... that was just so natural and beautiful and not like ‘ah’ (makes a gesture with her hands) but simply beautiful. And we continued to go to church, got married in Israel... and I only started to realise that my heart was already elsewhere when we returned here [Berlin]. I somehow realised, that it was strange that a whole resonating cavity/reverberation was suddenly gone and suddenly I was there again with my identity as a catholic and could no longer find myself in this identity. “

The narration is followed by the description of accompanying her partner to Israel. The above description of being physically ‘sucked in’ to a maelstrom, presents a graphic metaphor for her experience of feeling a strong attraction whose direction is not explicitly identified. It seems to resemble a Lacanian ‘desire’ that never finds satisfaction.195 It is first mentioned

that living in Israel gave Rachel a sense of belonging. A sense, which I interpret as a melange of a Jewish/Hebrew collective, which is available to her after some effort to learn the language. This is inexplicitly contrasted to the experience of being non-Jewish in Berlin where the cultural environment does not cater for a ‘Jewish’ environment in the same way as that experienced in Israel. For Rachel, the return to Berlin is accompanied by the impossibility of taking up her ‘old identity’, which points at how aesthetics and environment affect a position. Berlin is experienced as a non-Jewish space lacking a ‘resonating cavity’ that had previously surrounded her. ‘Space’ and place here form an essential part in the constitution of be-longing or non-belonging. Rachel further describes how encounters with people in Israel evoked greater ‘emotional frequencies’ giving the example of an ultra-orthodox Rabbi from Israel. We can see how the feeling of being ‘drawn towards something’ is personified by a religious figure and embodied in desiring. This entanglement further underlines the connection between exoticization and the erotic attraction to representatives of Judaism. In other words, what Rachel considers to be ‘emotional frequencies’ could be translated into an attraction of various kinds: the orthodox Rabbi stimulates an imagination which seems to go beyond the encounter with a spiritual leader but the representation of unfulfilled desire.

Returning to Berlin as a realm, it is interesting that for the Israeli participants Berlin is experienced as a realm freed from the suffocating environment of Israel, as my informant Yara states: ‘In Berlin, I can breathe again’. For Rachel on the other hand, the environment is smothering, lacking the resonating frame of Israel. Here we see how perception of space varies with positionality and biography. Unlike Yara, Rachel did not have to conform to the challenges and civic obligations for Jewish Israeli citizens (e.g. the Military Service). The partaking in Israeli society as a non-Jewish German creates a situation which neither requires nor allows for ‘full membership’. Independent from Israeli institutions and hierarchies, she and her family occupied positions of a privileged minority of expats in Israel.

We can see how the environment in Israel enabled her to ‘just live’ a Jewish life, without

196 in German: Resonanzraum, another musical metaphor she uses.
197 Many of my participants expressed the stress and pressure they felt by the Israeli environment, referring to the conflict, the treatment of Palestinians, and the general living standard.
198 Expat largely refers to the voluntary migration of citizens deciding to temporarily reside elsewhere (Merriam-Webster 2017).
having to make a big effort. The Jewish life in Israel was a given rather than involving a laborious endeavour. The return to Berlin makes manifest a desire which emerged against adversaries such as her Christian partner and her children who are both baptized, she no longer finds herself in this identity. In reference to her positionality in the group setting, her constant speaking in Hebrew and proximity to the Israeli choir members suggest a performative way of identifying with ‘Jewishness and Israeliness, such as taking up of Hebrew jargon, celebrating Jewish holidays and the like. In a reference to Yom Kippur she even referred to her husband as ‘her goy’ who could do the driving on Yom Kippur for her.\(^{199}\) That incident revealed a distinction, a demarcation line of distancing herself from her husband and a distinction and self-elevation by way of keeping the mitzvot. That is to say, the practice of Jewish rituals and the knowledge she believes herself to have acquired, bestow her with the authority and possibility to refer to her husband as ‘the goy’. According to halakha she is a goy as well. By way of the derogatory reference she not only appropriates a status which she does not have, but also creates a frontier between herself and him. Furthermore, it appears as if the adoption of orthodox practices also idealises the ‘Jewish man’ as a preferred partner, rather than the ‘goy’. The Jewish man is implicitly made more eligible for Rachel, suggesting that she regards herself as an observant woman. While I will return to this aspect below, it is important to note that this comment was said jokingly. It nevertheless appears to bear some truth: adopting observance and orthodox practice becomes a way of practicing distinction (Bourdieu, 1984).

6.4.3 Self-defined Jewishness: ‘conversion’ upon return from Israel

It is in the environment of Berlin where the wish to convert is articulated and a progressive Rabbi is consulted:

"And then of course, he [the Rabbi] presented me with all the sobering\(^{200}\) facts which I, in theory already knew... that someone, who is married to someone who does not want to convert and who does not have religiously mature children does not have a chance to convert. But he said, that he’d be happy to teach me."

\(^{199}\) (Fieldnotes, August 2015).

\(^{200}\) My translation of ‘disillusioning’ refers to Rachel’s use of the German term ‘ernüchternd’ literally translated as ‘sobering’.

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The progressive Rabbi offered to give her lessons despite the impossibility of converting. The reference to ‘sobering’ regarding the politics of Jewish conversion suggests that the fantasy of becoming Jewish amounts to a state of inebriety, similar to drunkenness. The uncertain direction of pursuing her desire held Rachel in a liminal position, where the presentation of ‘facts’, took away the illusion of a potential satisfaction of her desires. Despite this rejection – which resembles a rejection by a lover – the desire to become Jewish is maintained nonetheless. It seems as if the act of ‘doing Judaism’ and keeping certain mitzvot is taken on with greater devotion after ‘being rejected’. Through the performance of certain rituals, mostly in the private sphere with her family, she creates her personal Jewish/Israeli framework. She reveals that she says brachot\textsuperscript{201} before the meals, tries to separate meat from dairy, celebrates Friday nights in her family and tries to stay away from obligations and weekly routines on Shabbat without strictly being shomeret Shabbat\textsuperscript{202}. Rachel states:

“Actually, if there wasn’t a Rabbanut\textsuperscript{203}, which would point their finger at me and said: ‘that is not halakhic what she says’ – and of course I don’t want to take the authority away from the Rabbanut, as there are reasons for it to be there - then I’d simply say, I am a Jew. Because I live for myself and in my family Jewish. But of course, you know all of that, all of those questions, how to you locate yourself where and how .... But there are certain mitzvot, which I really try to keep in my daily life, which, in this strange non-recognition, also paradoxically support me. Then friends always tell me: ‘you don’t have to separate meat and milk, that is superfluous. You don’t have to keep this!’ ... Jewish friends or Israeli friends. And then I say: ‘But it is good for me, it is beautiful. It is an act of affirmation.’

What is most central in the given sequence is the resolution of her identity dilemma through declaring herself a Jew and through keeping religious laws. This appears as an act of agency: the self-authorization as Jewish equally forms an act of subverting Jewish authorities and crossing certain boundaries. Despite her intellectual comprehension of the significance of halacha, she declares herself as Jewish. This is particularly interesting as her adoption and performance of Jewishness idealise and exoticise Judaism while its highest religious authority is subverted and thereby challenged if not rejected outright. By doing so, the described

\textsuperscript{201} Jewish blessings
\textsuperscript{202} The term lishmor Shabbat literally translated refers to observing shabbat and keeping it as a day of rest.
\textsuperscript{203} Rabbinical Authority in Israel.
incident points to the dilemma which is exacerbated by the German context: the act of subverting and challenging Jewish boundaries as a kind of Judaizing practice, oscillating between the freedom to choose a category that is usually believed to be fixed at birth (Brubaker, 2016) and appropriating something to which she has been denied access. The impossibility of formally being accepted to Judaism is, to an extent, circumvented by her active practice of Judaism, a kind of ‘doing religion’ (Judaism) (Avishai, 2008). Thereby she creates a reality which circumvents and subverts religious authorities. The performative practice - the ‘doing’ - as Butler argues, constitutes the identity of the person and creates a reality by repetition (Butler, 1993). On a different occasion Rachel revealed to me how her husband had expressed the fear of her running off with an ultra-orthodox Jew. Taking that statement further and relating it to the ‘sobering’ experience and the urgency with which ‘being Jewish’ is pursued, it is useful to relate her aspiration to become Jewish to sexual desire and sexuality in relation to her husband, ‘the goy’.204 Considering the dimension of function in her biography (Wohlrab-Sahr, 1999), the question becomes: why is this practice taken up at this point in her life and what does it express? This seems particularly relevant as her choice and subsequent practices involve her family and most importantly her husband. I will return to this aspect below.

6.4.4 Resolving the dilemma

The scene and the Hebrew Choir then become significant in her desire to become Jewish. The narrative concludes with an elaboration concerning the Hebrew choir. It appears as if the choir stands for a pluralist ‘Jewish-Israeli’ congregation and thereby a substitute for her longing for Israel and a community of Hebrew speakers, in short, the Jewish community to which she cannot officially belong:

V: and ... when you now place this in relation to your way of ‘being-Jewish’, how would you describe the choir [...] the connection to Judaism?

R: Well, it doesn’t have much to do with it... or maybe it does... It is just simply... lived diversity, everybody comes with his very own story, and longing and mixture of longing and arguments and that is fascinating. And there is potentially room for that... it can all land

204 The concept of desire is at the heart of Lacanian psychoanalytical thought (e.g. Seminaire V; VII).
there. Hm... But well, of course, when we sing Adon Olam or Osseh Schalom something like that, that is more than just a song for me. That really delights me to sing this as a choir [...] but, I can’t tell, can’t really say how far that is connected. [...] And ... and Azkirech there are passages that I find, that are really ear-piercing for me. That I consider to be a real enrichment, I consider that as a gift... and especially before concerts... it becomes a deeper part of yourself, you occupy yourself with it during the week, or so, the texts subside into you and that is different to when you just listen to Israeli Radio or TV for a couple of hours in passing-by. That is something very different!”

The way the choir is mentioned directly after rejecting the possibility of ‘proving’ a Jewish belonging, by doing a genetic test. This underlines the significance which the choir takes up for her. The act of singing in this group is described as the ultimate joy, a bodily experience within a non-exclusive group, for Jews and non-Jews alike. The highly idealised group then also presented disappointments and the initial euphoria slowly vanished. The disappointment is referred to through a bodily sensation of pains and the period before conflictive situations is further idealized: [at one point] I had the feeling that suddenly everything is open. Everything, the whole body sang [...] and everything was so joyful ... And now, it’s not like this anymore....it is entirely different but it is a whole different bodily feeling. We can see how the function and significance the choir had for Rachel diverged and converged with my Israeli participants in the previous chapter: while they also wanted to ‘feel at home’ the motivation to participate was evidently not coupled with the desire of becoming (Jewish) but to sing and have the specific sociality. Rachel’s emotional involvement then strongly differed from the conductor’s intention of ‘simply doing Hebrew music’.

Rachel’s self-definition as Jewish seems deeply tied to the experience in Israel. The created narrative first draws upon her migrant experience as ‘an outsider’ to German society in close relation to an adopted consciousness of the Shoah. The description of her early childhood and

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205 The German term is ‘andocken’ which is a metaphor for finding a haven or ‘dock taken from the naval world.
206 Both Adon Olam – Lord of the Universe and Osseh Schalom bimromav – “Give us peace” are liturgical songs. The former has been part of the Shabbat liturgy since the 15th century and has been adapted to various melodies. The origins of Osseh Shalom are not clear, but it is in the Hebrew folk song tradition and the used melody is based on Nurit Hirsh, an Israeli composer who became famous for her new arrangements of Hebrew songs in Israel. Both songs were set into choral arrangements by the conductor of the choir.
207 As mentioned before, Azkirech refers to a song composed by the conductor based on texts from the Qumran scrolls. ‘Azkirech livracha Zion’ – ‘I remember thee, oh Zion’.
208 Here, the term used in German is ‘durch Mark und Bein’, an ancient term to describe a full body sensation when listening to this music.
209 Interviews with Aron, 01/2015 and 08/2016
youth are turned into a ‘symbolic distancing’ from what is perceived a mainstream German cultural context. In Rachel’s case, she seemed to reject German identity, while the German discursive framework of ‘orientation’ and ‘orientalising’ with a philosemitic notion (see chapter 4) have been adopted. The significance of Hebrew in her biography is gendered as related to a male figure, her father and later her husband with biographical connections to Israel and Hebrew. Thus, the marker of Hebrew and Israel also come to stand for her gender identity and her relationship with her parents. The withdrawal from the libidinously filled environment in Israel cannot only be replaced by a secular ‘Israeli lifestyle’ and socialising with Israelis living in Berlin or practicing Hebrew. Instead, Israeli sociality translates into the desire to ‘officially’ become Jewish. She described the longing for Israel, the way she misses it and how the choir has helped her in temporarily soothe the longing not to be there.

We can therefore see how her experience in Israel is artfully tied into her biography interwoven with family history of gender relations, migrations and positionality in German society. While her practices could be described as ‘doing Judaism’ and thereby creating a reality, she also appropriates a positionality which she does not have and engages in the process of consuming a particular minority culture which is usually treated with exotic fascination and appeal in significant political contexts (hooks, 1992). This process is subject to constant reflection:

“Why it’s like that? Whether I went confused in a gilgul nefesh or whether I have to do a tikkun, because something remained unresolved from my previous life, I don’t know. Or whether I indeed have Jewish relatives somewhere...I don’t know. I can just somehow say, devotional! For me it is like that!”

One of my Israeli participants once remarked cynically: ‘all of a sudden everybody in Germany has Jewish relatives!’ Indeed, searching for Jewish ancestry was a common theme

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210 Apart from her idiosyncratic orthopraxis she has adopted and perhaps appropriated Jewish practices such as Friday night Dinner – in Israel ‘shishi baErev’- which is a common ‘institution’ in Israeli families, independent of observance. Further, she has developed a ‘love for the Hebrew language’ and Hebrew aesthetics (e.g. music), which are expressed in the active pursuit to continue singing in Hebrew in Berlin and the establishment of a Hebrew choir.

211 Fieldnotes December, 2015

212 Hebrew: Congeniality of souls

213 The reference to a previous life indicates a religious syncretism, which suggests an influence of Chassidic or Kabbalistic streams of Judaism which consider the possibility of rebirth and reincarnation, a syncretism of Buddhist and Chassidic/Kabbalistic approaches, commonly seen to be at the margins of Jewish practice, but having experienced a reinvention (see chapter 4 and Altglas (2014))
among my participants,214 Inventing a Jewish biography, conveys the desire of claiming Jewish ‘roots’ and thereby erase ‘German-ness’. In this case here, Jewish ancestry is believed to add legitimacy to the conversion project, particularly since some Rabbis only accept converts with Jewish ancestry.215 216 On a broader societal leave the search for Jewish ancestry appears as a strategy of transcending or vanquishing the binary distinction between Jewish and non-Jewish, acting as a dichotomising force between what are believed to be the camps of ‘perpetrator’ and ‘victim’. Bodemann’s ‘insurmountable ethnic break’, which Auschwitz created between Jews and Germans (Bodemann, 1996: 49) in reference to Dan Diner’s concept of a ‘negative symbiosis’ between Jews and Germans (Diner, 1987), which rejects the construction of a (positive) German-Jewish interdependency.217 More significant than the ‘real’ possibility of Jewish ancestry are the fantasies that are articulated. Recalling post-war desires for Germans to convert, here, the possibility of Jewish ancestry also offers a way of not occupying a ‘German’ body (Linke, 1999) and thereby joining a ‘collective’ which deviates from the somatic norm which is standardly male, white, and, I would add (since relevant here) of Christian cultural background.

In Rachel’s case, it is the realm of Israel and its evocation of higher ‘emotional frequencies’ which allow for this distancing and a different belonging - an idealised view of Israeli society. The constant allusion to inspirational rabbis and the fear expressed by her husband of her running off with an orthodox Jew further suggest a sexual dimension to her idealization. The impossibility of formally changing one’s identity is resolved with active Jewish practice, participation in the scene, establishing expert knowledge and acting as an expert on Israel. The establishment of the choir offers a way to create a community around her passion, where everybody can ‘find a haven’ – be accepted and recognised ‘being seen’ regardless of ‘authorised belonging.’ We can see how the interaction between a discursive framework, ‘symbolic battle’ and the adoption of a Hebrew, Israeli lifestyle goes alongside the desire to

214 references to invented Jewish biographies and incidences like the Wilkomirski syndrome. The reference to Bruno Dössékker, alias ‘Benjamin Wilkomirski’ refers to the case of a Swiss man, who invented a Jewish biography and published under this name, pretending to be a survivor of the Shoah. After receiving several prizes for his memoirs (published in 1995, Suhrkamp), his fraud was discovered by a journalist in 1998, followed by significant media attention. For further academic analysis of the ‘Wilkomirski-Syndrom’ see Schoeps, J. and Diekmann, I. Das Wilkomirski-Syndrom, Zurich, Pendo Publisher.
215 Rabbi Gesa Ederberg has changed her conversion policy accordingly, supposedly due to the amount of conversion requests she receives.
216 While Rachel’s search for Jewish ancestry is supposed to add credibility to her conversion project, other such claims suggest the wish to ‘change sides’ in a ‘perpetrator’-‘victim’ dichotomy. In Rachel’s case, Jewish ancestry, would provide a ‘last resort’ in order to be accepted for conversion. Although this search is evaluated as ‘unlikely to bring forth a real connection’, it is the way the desire is expressed in the pursuit of Jewish ‘roots’, highlighting the all-encompassing passion that seems to drive her wish to adopt Jewishness fully.
217 Dan Diner describes how the German-Jewish symbiosis is a construction, which came into life after Auschwitz rather than a co-dependent mutual relationship which emerged in the 19th century. For further elaboration see Diner, 1987
belong to a Jewish collective, and religious practice which is entangled with exoticised (and eroticised) embodied attraction suggested by the reference to ‘inspiring Rabbis’.

Rachel and her family actively practise what one could consider a religious syncretism of Christianity and Judaism. In that sense, her ‘doing Judaism’ resembles what Brubaker considers the trans of in-between (Brubaker, 2016).218 This not only draws attention to questions of authority, but also about the understanding of Jewish observance. One of my Israeli participants argued that this picking and choosing essentially causes a ‘protestantization’ of Judaism, where religious observance can be defined ‘sola fide’, by faith alone.219 Nonetheless, despite disagreement and judgment, one could argue that she is free to self-identify as Jewish and I will return to this debate below.

This case first exemplified how becoming Jewish and Judaism is construed as an object of desire and becomes entangled with sexuality and the erotic. This on the one hand emerges from the place of the Shoah in German society, but on the other hand from a symbolic distancing and non-belonging to what is perceived to be a German collective.

6.4.5 Shame

Before turning to the next case, it seems necessary to take a small detour on the concepts I have so far touched upon. Firstly, the notion of ‘double consciousness’. WEB duBois developed this notion in relation to the experience of black people and people of colour among white Europeans (Germans in particular). He emphasises how the self is viewed through the eyes of the other (duBois, 1903). While he refers to a concept of discrimination and ‘black consciousness’ am not intending to equate racialised discrimination towards black people with the experience of Rachel and the consciousness of the conversion process. Rather, I want to point at the entanglement of seeing oneself through different eyes, here, it is a historical lens which is entangled with feelings of shame. This concept then relates to the way in which she chooses to take up a position which is contentious in relation to what she

218 In his essay on transgender and transracial identities, Brubaker comes to compare the trans of migration (as in transnational?) and the ‘trans of in-between’ with religious conversion. The Trans of in-between is described as religious syncretism and the trans of migration as the act of changing one side.

219 Sola fide is a reference to Luther and his justification by faith alone, where he established the theological doctrine most central in his reformatory project, that Christians are saved by faith alone, rather than by good deeds and fulfilling certain commandments. This doctrine expresses a profound turn and divergence from the Hebrew bible and from Judaism, where halacha and observance is always in close correspondence with keeping and interpreting the mitzvot (commandments).
‘has been born into’. Despite Rachel’s desire, Jewishness cannot be taken up unambiguously and her educational and intellectual as well as her emotional ‘repertoire’ suggest to her the lens through which other people could judge her behaviour and emotions. This then triggers emotions of shame.

In her elaborations on shame, Sara Ahmed cites Darwin who suggests that ‘under a keen sense of shame there is a strong desire for concealment’. We turn away the whole body and more especially, the shame which we endeavour to hide. An ashamed person can hardly endure meeting the gaze of those present’ (cited from Ahmed, 2014:103) The intensity of the feeling is high to such a degree that the involved person is drawn in and cannot withstand the gaze of the ashamed (Lewis, 1971 in Ahmed, 2014:105). The boundaries of shame further provide glimpses of intimacy. Wurmser differentiates between the function of shame (what for?) and the cause (of what?), the object and the subject of shame. The object of shame is referred to as an internalised instance of judgment (Wurmser, 1990). We can imagine that in the situation at hand, my ‘sociological’ gaze came to present a sense of judgment and, as a result, vulnerability is revealed. Accordingly, the moment of shame not only triggers old internalised images of judgment, but it also reproduces and re-enacts them in the given situation in correspondence with the respective counterpart. With that in mind and most significant for the ‘scenic understanding’ and the wider scene, shame involves ‘the shameful’ as much as the person(s) included in the conversation or interaction. This is why I speak of an enactment of a (potentially unconscious) scenic plot to underline how representations infused dynamics in the scene and we can start to understand their origins.

6.5 Conversions without converts

Similar to Rachel, for Antonia, another participant, the Hebrew choir equally presented a space of ‘Jewish’ sociality, without having converted. Her trajectory exemplifies how a volunteer service in Israel, as part of societal structure, can be worked into biographical trajectories. Now in her 50s, Antonia had recently left her marriage in a West-German city and ‘stranded’ in Berlin where she found a new job, a new partner and a ‘new culture’ as she put it. After finishing school, she served as a volunteer in Israel, working and assisting in a hospital and other sites for over a year. There, she had met a Jewish Israeli, ‘her first Love’. The relationship, which she holds in high esteem, and romantic nostalgia ended because neither of the two could make a commitment towards living in Israel or Germany.
respectively. For him due to the Shoah, and for her due to the climate and the warzone: ‘it was simply too hot for me’, she stated. What appears to be a question of place also represented the cleavage between non-Jewish Germans and Jews that back then meant that the past was too recent to be overcome. She remained in Germany and got married to a German with whom she had a son. After twenty-five years of marriage she left and moved to Berlin:

“And then, there were turbulences in my private life. And I took a quick decision and stranded in Berlin and didn’t take my old life with me and made a new beginning here, so to speak. And there, I met a man, […] with whom a new Love sparked. And that is my current life partner and he is also a Jew, which I find fascinating. But it was like, like I said, it was not on my mind [referring to the relationship with the Israeli]. And when we first met, I remember he said: ‘I love you’ and then that sentence came: ‘Yeah, and I also have to tell you something. I am a Jew’. Pause. And for me, it was like ‘Well, so what?’ He could have said, I am a Muslim, or a Buddhist… That was totally irrelevant for me, because for me the only thing that counts is the person and not what is behind that… For him, it was somehow very significant. And: ‘I keep kosher’, and I said: ‘that fits perfectly, I am vegetarian [laughs].’”

We can see how her partner’s Jewishness is emphasised yet equally downplayed. Given her previous trajectory and the place of Judaism in Germany, the positionality of a ‘Jewish’ partner necessarily does not compare to a Buddhist or a Muslim. In her ‘new beginning’, the ‘conversion to Berlin’, a Jewish man is involved with whom she starts a relationship and they now share a flat and life together. Because of his way of relating to tradition, they start keeping a kosher home, have ‘kiddushim’ on Friday nights and occasionally attend services at the synagogue, especially on holidays. Although she states that ‘on paper, I am still Catholic,’ … ‘we live a Jewish life’ and household of which she is predominantly responsible. For her, it had been a ‘very interesting’ process of engaging with ‘his’ traditions and her constant interrogations about the meanings of traditions and practices have challenged him, to the extent that she found herself to ‘sometimes [I] know more than the real Jews’. While fascinated by his Jewishness, she also alludes to the problems she has with the ‘Jewish circles’ that she encounters.
After fearing to be treated as an outsider, she soon discovers that a large number of Jews in Berlin are ‘converted’ - mostly women, whom she claims’ are treated as second-class Jews. Her impression is that the Jewish collective does not really want to include outsiders and stays ‘within their own clan’. She relates this to a ‘lack of tolerance’ as the boundaries are largely drawn along the lines of Jewish and non-Jewish people rather than paying attention to greater diversities. For Antonia, belonging and singing in the Hebrew choir resolves the tension of ‘non-belonging’ in synagogue spaces. Furthermore, she describes how the melodies and singing in Hebrew to which she feels a connection make her understand the ‘essence of Judaism’ better.

Antonia has ‘adopted’ the religion and ‘culture’ of her partner and through her relationship has become part of the scene. She was invited to join the choir when attending the synagogue, an invitation she followed curiously and came to participate with diligence. In spite of this music ‘not being her favourite’, she enjoyed the melodies in relation to the somewhat familiar language and disposed over the right amount of ‘choral capital’ to participate. Although ‘her whole life is Jewish now’, she is still catholic ‘on paper’ and has no intention to formally convert, especially since she and her partner do not want children together, as she explains. Antonia exemplifies how one can ‘convert’ transform one’s life without ‘choosing the pathway of religious conversion’. Apart from the intimate negotiation over ‘being Jewish’ and ‘being German’ for her, it involves a symbolic distancing from what is imagined as a ‘Jewish collective’, thus she occupies an in-betweenness referring to an ‘identity on paper’, while ‘living a Jewish life’ and ‘doing Judaism’. Her case further exemplifies how German-Israeli ‘reconciliation structures’ shape and impact biographical trajectories, sometimes with a significant time lag.

220 The German original was ‘das Wesen des Judentums’. Interestingly, this is the same title of Leo Baeck’s work, ‘Das Wesen des Judenthums’, first published in 1905 which he wrote in response to Adolf von Harnack’s lectures ‘das Wesen des Christentums’ held 1899/1900 in Berlin. See also Friedlaender, 1990.
The Synagogue

After having demonstrated cases of members of the Hebrew choir, the following two examples predominantly relate to two biographical cases, which represent converts at the synagogue. Before I embark on these cases, let me show how I myself became part of the modes of conversion and thereby ‘existentially involved’ in the scene and its dynamics. As I became involved in the scene, my regular participation in the field - attending the choir, the synagogue and other events soon impacted my social and personal life. Apart from new acquaintances becoming familiar, I had also developed new routines and had adopted a certain kind of jargon. Unsurprising to anthropologists, the longer the immersion in the scene, the stronger the sense of attachment to it. The moment I first realised how deeply my ethnographic endeavour had impacted my life was when a friend enquired about my intentions to convert. Taking me by surprise, my inability to provide him with an answer resulted in his suggestion to consult a Rabbi known to both of us, in order to discuss the issue with him. Following his advice, the endeavour of ‘asking the Rabbi’ turned into an moment ‘scenic epistemology’ of enacting a ‘mode of conversion’. Despite a familiarity and comfort with Jewish practice there was an inability to define a convincing reason to convert. The participation in the scene had created a strong social bond, yet without a clear religious position, which is what the conversion process requires. Secondly, by invoking the possibility of becoming Jewish, I shared the experience of my participants undergoing this process. Apart from this, I had also become involved in the production of hierarchies:

On one occasion on Shabbat at the synagogue, Alina, a new attendant at services and shiurim approaches me. It is the moment after the Kiddush, when elders and families start to make their way back home and the younger attendees leave the Kiddush room and walk back to the sanctuary or outside, where shiurim take place. I stand beside the grass and watch the children play. ‘Do you come here often?’ Alina asks. Only a few times before, I had seen Alina here. I spontaneously answer ‘yes’ and immediately feel the need to add an explanation about who I am, but I hesitate. For the past few months, I have been coming here, so she treats me like a regular, ‘as if I belong’. She, in turn, has just started coming, does not speak good English or Hebrew and seems to have little knowledge about the rituals and procedures... In our conversation I instantly notice how she refers to Rosh haShana as ‘Shana Tova’. I involuntarily smile and ask ‘Rosh haShana’? I had just openly corrected her in her unfamiliarity with the chagim [Jewish holidays]. ‘Yes, yes’ she says, with an affective
expression of embarrassment and I feel ashamed for having corrected her. I later learn, that she grew up in the GDR and ‘discovered’ that her father was Jewish. This encouraged her to seek out a Jewish community and eventually embark on a conversion course.

(Fieldnotes, September 2015)

The sketched scene reveals aspects of the dynamics in the larger scene and my own entanglements in it. It reveals that the continuous fluctuation of individuals coming and going created a dynamic of uncertainty in terms of belonging. In this particular situation, I inevitably felt ‘more knowledgeable’ and ‘more of a regular’ than Alina, who seemed to be unfamiliar with ‘the basics’. More interesting than her unfamiliarity with ‘Jewish’ terminology was that I experienced a certain satisfaction by her lack of knowledge. Based on my own learning and background, I enacted a certain hierarchy and superiority. Taken literally, Alina had indeed not asked me whether I was Jewish, whether I ‘officially belonged’ but instead whether I regularly came. I chose not to elaborate on my research in this moment. Entering into a scene, a new community is a process of familiarisation, of acculturation, adaptation and of adoption of a particular language, a habitus and of the social dynamics at hand. Increasingly immersing myself into this scene, I - similar to my experiences abroad - started to pick up on as many ‘insights’ as possible in order not to stick out as an unknowing outsider. Paired with the experience of being categorised as Jewish or Israeli, I often encountered such situations of ‘passing’ which put me in an ambivalent position. In this moment I not only felt ashamed about resisting to clarify my status. More than that, I came to experience and embody how uncertainty and a liminal status engender hierarchization, if not degradation.

6.6 Performing authority and drivers of change

This relates to a different case which demonstrates how hierarchies are constructed and authorities negotiated. Leah was born in the 1980s in Germany to German non-Jewish parents. Throughout her degree in Jewish Studies she frequently visited Israel. On a longer stay, she meets her future husband and converts to Judaism in order to get married to him. In our interview she explains that she converted and did so twice, once via the orthodox and the second time via the ultra-orthodox pathway in order to be ‘fully recognised’ by Israeli authorities and prevent bureaucratic challenges for her children.
V: and did you convert after you met Eliran?

L: “Yes, because of him! Well, it would have never occurred to me ... I think... I don’t know... but it was because we were together and wanted to get married and it was clear, he is from a religious family, he is Jewish, and we want to get married, blablabla...”

V: Without him, you wouldn’t have considered it?

L: “hm... no. because... well, let’s put it this way, I was always, even before I met Eliran, in this semi-Jewish scene, simply because of the Jewish Studies, right? But simply because in my environment there were always so many people who were like Borderline-Runners, who like invented a Jewish identity for themselves this kind of Jewish Christianity, or Christian-Jewish was always overrepresented, such a thing like the Jewish Choir, or the Hebrew Choir already existed back then... All of these... especially because of that, ...I always tried to maintain boundaries in order to say, ok, I am either here or there... and I am not Jewish, that means I won’t participate in this Chanukah party, or I don’t organise a Chanukah Party... well I study this, but I AM not this... And from the moment when I decided to convert, it was clear, everything or nothing. I am not going to do this kind of ‘Berlin-Giyur’, you know, where you go once a week and read a book ‘how to be a Jew’ or all of those...so if, yes, then it should be a transformative process... I don’t want to do a giyur, which at the end leaves me where I already was. Only that I can put a badge on myself ‘I am Jewish’.

Not only can we see the hierarchization among converts, but also the distinction practices of separating herself from other converts. While the conversion because of her partner seems to stand in tension with her openly declared feminist project, she was outspoken about the drawbacks inside the Jewish community and scene especially regarding the question of ‘legitimate representation’. While I will not go into the detail of her case I will return to these claims in the discussion below.
6.6.1 Hebrew exoticism and the entry point into Judaism

The next contrasting example which fits with the scene and significantly shows how ‘Hebrew’ presents a realm of desire and ‘a way into Judaism’ is presented by Anna. Her case further demonstrates how desire can develop into a biographical turning point in the trajectory leading to the conversion to Judaism. Her case exemplifies a trajectory from an ‘exotic encounter ‘led to a conversion, marriage and commitment to a community. Anna’s conversion and her trajectory shows how certain symbols – Hebrew in particular – come to be presented as the pathway into Judaism. Through her case, we will see how erotic attraction and desire form a central part of the scene.

6.6.2 Biographical Sketch

Anna is in her thirties and grew up in Germany as an only-child with a single mother. Her mother came from a protestant milieu but refused the proximity to religion and thus Anna grew up distant from religious practice, except for Christmas services. After her school years she commenced her studies in Berlin as well as spending semesters and internships abroad. On a travelling route, she first meets an Israeli with whom she had a holiday affair. Upon return to Berlin she starts to learn Hebrew and meets her future husband, a Jewish Israeli living in Berlin. After spending some time in Israel with her partner’s family she converts to Judaism and they get married. Soon, she becomes active in the synagogue organisation and also participates in the wider scene. She embraced her commitment with enthusiasm and zeal, tirelessly working for the community alongside her full-time job. Her narrative and conversion experiences reveal an exotic fascination with things Jewish, predominantly Hebrew which is tied into her interests in languages but then leads to the encounter with her husband. The subsequent conversion to Judaism led to an active engagement in the community which is regarded as ‘her way’ of being and becoming Jewish. Most significantly her biography starts with the prelude to her conversion, rather than chronologically with her family background:

“The part that is interesting for you, began in Argentina where I was travelling and went backpacking to Patagonia had a 30-hour bus journey …. And half of the travellers on the bus were Israelis. And they were so loud and really annoying. And before, I had barely come across Israelis, or actually none really. And I was kind of
interested, who these annoying people are, they were nice of course [...] But, what I immediately found interesting was that the thing about belonging [...] they all had something with each other, some kind of connection [...] And in the next place, after a transformative hike, [...] I met an Israeli in the hostel .... And from the beginning onwards it was magical. It was a total connection and we both had gone on this hike, independent of each other and just continued our journey together. And somehow it was totally fascinating between us [...] well on the one hand, he was totally rude and somehow, I found that really interesting, that someone is so cheeky and also somehow totally captivating while also very personal and very deep... And then I, well, he taught me how to speak Hebrew. And already then, I said that I wanted to learn Hebrew.”

The opening to her life story is related to the encounter with an Israeli in Latin America and sets the tone for the trajectory that is perceived as an adventure. The group of Israelis are described as rude, loud and annoying while simultaneously perceived as interesting, somehow calling her attention. This alludes to the possible unconscious symbol of Hebrew, which a German of her age might have only encountered in the context of history classes and subjects dealing with National Socialism and the Shoah - that which Peter considered ‘perpetrator-victim-stories’ (Chapter 4). The fascination is related to the collective identity the Israelis are perceived and believed to share, of which she is not part, from which she is excluded, most evidently due to the language. The Israeli man and the Hebrew language are exoticised as ‘fascinating’ and disproportionally interesting, despite his ‘rudeness’. Here we can see how a certain fascination intersects with a gendered perspective of encountering a ‘macho-behaviour’, which is perceived as attractive and with an erotic appeal.

“And we stayed in touch and I said ‘I’ll come visit you. [...] and I returned to Berlin and really sat on my butt and started to learn Hebrew. And I can’t really say why. Well I, I mean I really liked the guy, I had a total crush on him, but why, I mean normally you wouldn’t learn the language and say I’ll come visit and I’m interested in you... that really developed. Then I started learning and met another Israeli and then slowly started to encounter Judaism.”
As seen from this excerpt, and in the whole narration, the Hebrew language is perceived as the main stimulator and driver for her interest in Judaism. Along the search and study of Hebrew in Berlin, she got acquainted with the Jüdische Volkshochschule, and “then I had a connection to Israel and then kind of Jewish. That somehow came together.” The enmeshment of Hebrew with ‘Jewish’ life is particular to the Berlin context as Hebrew classes are offered by the Jüdische Volkshochschule sponsored by the Gemeinde. Consequently, for Anna, the engagement with Hebrew necessarily entails an engagement with things Jewish. Perhaps unsurprisingly, upon enrolling in another Hebrew course at the University, she then met her future husband and adds to the description of their early dating phase “he had very little to do with Judaism.” She emphasises that the encounter with Hebrew and the Israeli added “something exciting” to her life. She then spends time Israel with Yotam, her future husband, and presents an idealised image of Israel:

“... and to be in Israel with Yotam was like paradise. I took days of work, was free and delayed my thesis [...] We just explored Tel Aviv and his parents were super nice, I really felt comfortable there from the first moment... and his siblings, too. They found it really cool that I already knew Hebrew, I think.”

Her knowledge of the Hebrew language is described as easing the communication and encounter with the family and the attribute ‘cool’ suggests being accepted and valued, belonging to the peer group. She soon returns again to Israel in order to attend his brother’s wedding where the ‘inauguration to Judaism’ is experienced:

“Then a few days later it was Pessach and as I said, I knew Hebrew, but I couldn’t read and so on. And then there was the reading, the Haggadah, taking turns, and I just did, I could read. And that was the moment, when the family took me on. As I read Latin letters. [laughs]. And yes, then I was in, and for me, that was the inauguration into Judaism. Simply the moment, that was highly emotional. And I have told the story so many times, that I simply cannot tell it in an emotional kind of way anymore.”

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221 Jewish Community College, which Bodemann identifies as one of the centres of a Judaising Milieu. Having taken lessons there myself, my observations suggested a specific German demographic of women with an Israeli partner, students who were about to spend a semester in Israel, or pensioners who had ‘always dreamt about learning Hebrew’.

222 Here she uses the German idiom: ’Nichts am Hut haben’, which derives from the custom to put trophies on one’s hat. The analogy to the head is interesting as the marker for an observant Jew would be also a hat or a kippah.
This part of the narration resembles the conversion narrative, the moment that signified the turning point, which happens in an intimate moment with the family of her partner as she reads and utters their language. This bridges a felt gap between her and the family, where the common language surmounts to the possible ‘historical divide’ between ‘being German’ and them ‘being Israeli’ and ‘being Jewish’. Hebrew then engenders and allows proximity and intimacy. It is further significant that she became part of this very specific text which marks a specific narrative of ‘liberation of the Jewish people from the yokes of Egyptian oppression and slavery’. While it is certainly among the most important Jewish holidays, it is also significant for ‘secular’ Israelis as it serves the national discourse treated as the manifestation of liberation and Exodus into the ‘promised land’. Katz sees in it the political function of incorporating Jewish sources into the national narrative (Katz, 2002).

Returning to Anna and her ‘conversion experience’ we can see how her experience was not only one of an ‘inauguration into Judaism’ but also into a new family, a language and cultural realm, by way of making her part of the ‘performance of the national narrative’. It was shortly after the experience that her boyfriend brought up the issue of (formal) conversion. The suggestion is experienced as a ‘great honour’, conveying the interest to ‘include her’- to want her to belong. Consequently, she embarks on a progressive giyur course. It was upon completion of her giyur that her partner proposed to her and she accepted. The wedding is described as a clash between a modern-orthodox Jewish family and the German family when realising that the family in Israel had explicit expectations about how the wedding should be undertaken: ‘and I thought, this is, what it’s like to have a Jewish family!’ which marks the difference between her, her family and the ‘Jewish’ family.

Only upon my interrogation does she comment upon her own family, the parental divorce of her parents at a young age an what it meant up with a single mother and an absent father. Something a number of female converts of my sample hold in common. Here, we also see that she considers the family ‘Jewish’ rather than Israeli and that the act of marriage is the establishment of a connection between a ‘German’ and a ‘Jewish’ family, rather than a German-Israeli one. Her childhood wish to grow up with siblings and in a vibrant family context is perceived to be fulfilled by marrying into a Jewish family and being accepted by them. Returning to the process of conversion and her acceptance in the community, she describes that she started to attend services and activities as part of her conversion course. After the completion of her conversion she becomes active in the community:
“I really enjoy very much that I am no longer treated like a stranger... in the beginning [...] I went to a synagogue. And I felt– I wasn’t converted then – they will find out that I am not Jewish and that was strange, right? I always felt, like a strange body somehow [...] And now [...] by doing, I gain my self-conception of my belonging to Judaism. [...] When I just come and consume, I feel less of a belonging, than if I am really doing something, organise and create... And recently [someone] asked me how the Jewish community here... react to me coming here thinking that I could change Judaism [...] for us it was always clear, that Judaism, that is community something needs to happen there. And I mean, that isn’t change of Judaism. I experienced that in the US, in Israel and elsewhere.... I don’t have the feeling I am claiming to change Judaism [...] I might have a fresher view as a convert, because for me this was all new at the beginning [...] And when you ask me about belonging, then I can simply say that this [the synagogue] is my baby, and I am so responsible for it [...].”

The given paragraph describes how she first felt ‘out of place’ (Puwar, 2004)\textsuperscript{223}, the synagogue is experienced as a space of people and bodies ‘unlike her own’. This suggests the notion of ‘being different’ and invading a space where she has no legitimacy to belong- of crossing a boundary. By actively participating in the community in a manner she describes as ‘doing’, she enters into an acculturation process of becoming. The described feeling of needing to hide and non-belonging, triggers the question of shame of participating in something in which she does not legitimately belong. I could relate to the feeling as at points I experienced my participation and participant observation as one of shame, where I felt that my gaze was returned to me with a sense of questioning of my legitimacy. Many of my participants have described the feeling which I also experienced, which leads to the question of why converts and those who consider the idea feel ashamed to reach out to the Rabbi and ask for permission to participate. We can only assume that this shame is triggered by the idea that one is afraid to reveal one’s non-belonging and identity as ‘German’ non-Jewish, which in turn triggers the confrontation with the personal motivation or the desire to belong.

\textsuperscript{223} As mentioned earlier, Puwar describes the way in which spaces constitute themselves by the „bodies that inhabit them“. In her argument, she builds on European public spaces being inhabited by an explicit societal norm, of European whiteness. Differing and diverging from this norm then creates the feeling of estrangement, non-belonging, in short ‘out of place’. In Anna’s case, this is significant, since she would in ‘other spaces’ be part of the ‘somatic norm’ – except for her gender as a woman.
In turn, one of my Jewish German participants revealed how having grown up in a non-Jewish environment distant from any Jewish ritual, she felt ‘out of place’, when first entering a synagogue despite being ‘halachically Jewish’. Jana’s discomfort seems to relate to an uncertainty and distance to ritual, rather than a shameful sense of having invaded a space reserved for a group to which she does not belong. One is the necessary crossing of boundaries which a convert has to undertake when entering synagogues and those spaces ‘designated for Jews’. As suggested here, this is a matter of overcoming fear and of courage and dealing with emotions of shame. It is the idea of being seen and being judged that seems to trigger these emotions: “...even if a subject feels shame when he or she is alone, it is the imagined view of the other that is taken on by a subject in relation to herself...” (Ahmed, 2014:106). By transgressing the boundaries of a designated space for Jews, the individual – in this case Anna, feels ashamed to enter a specific ‘historically loaded space’ and thereby enters into a realm of a collective, societal shame. The invasion of ‘Jewish space’ might trigger a sense of committing a repetitive act of violating and crossing boundaries. As I have elaborated in chapter 4, this can be attributed to the significance of being Jewish in Germany. That is to say, that the momentarily feeling of invading one’s space without official permission triggers a bodily sensation of feeling ashamed without necessarily being fully conscious of the reasons. Slowly, so she explains, she could work towards ‘earning’ credibility, despite being ‘only a convert’.

6.6.3 The significance of the Scene

Following from Anna’s narrative, her involvements in the community contribute to her ‘sense of legitimacy’, which is ‘earned’ by serious if not outstanding commitment in order to gain acceptance in return.224 Having passed this stage of an outsider to the community it seems as if she has now ‘paid her dues’ and even considers this project ‘her baby’. While the saying is standardly used to metaphorically refer to one’s personal project, it is equally an infantilization of the community, which could imply that she indeed ‘gave birth to the community’. The statement could also be read as a substitute for the children she does not yet have. The fact however that she is showing people what Judaism can be, adds to a sense of

224 This corresponds with my other participants. See interview with Mirjam (02/2016) or Birgit (08/2016). This coincides with my own comportment and way of carrying myself at the synagogue, where I felt the need to support the group similar to my participants, who were eager to help and contribute to the workings of the community.
‘nostrification’ making it into her own. Nonetheless, her position was earned by hard work and commitment. I further enquired about this commitment:

V: What can you say, what is your motivation to do this work?

A: I just thought about something, at the beginning, I kind of thought, that people are like, [...] I thought, ... well for example when I converted I sponsored a Kiddush at the synagogue, practically the first one after the conversion. And I didn’t say: ‘hey you guys, I am now one of you and the Kiddush is my treat, but that was more like the birthday Kiddush when nobody says anything, and everybody knows it. Because I totally, not at all wanted to be like ‘Yeah, I am converted now!’ and so on. But entirely like, I, very quietly wanted to be modest and not draw any attention.

The outspoken confidence about her own status and achievements in the community are relativized with the reference to her modesty in the beginning after her conversion. The lack of confidence to announce her conversion could relate to a shameful moment but also to the uncertainty towards how her conversion would be received. It is further interesting how my question concerning the motivation of her work is avoided. Instead, she points at her modesty in relation to her conversion. Upon my insistence, she explains how she was motivated by people’s enthusiasm, their participation in a community and working in a legacy of a long tradition of the building and the space. In her view, drawing public attention to the synagogue would help to prevent its closure. Thereby, she adds, she also wanted to contribute to a different ‘branding’ of the synagogue, namely that ‘a synagogue can be young, can be colourful, can be fun, can be a good neighbour, can work with refugees...’ instead of fuelling an image of a German synagogue which is associated with police guards and security, and the conflict-ridden dynamics of the Berliner Gemeinde. By opening up the doors and creating more permeable boundaries, she intends to foster an image of a Jewish community which is ‘accessible’ to the public: ‘[to show] we are not strange or foreign, but just have a different religion than the majority’.

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225 Here I refer to the process of adoption, acceptance and inclusion of something as part of one’s own, the creation of a ‘we’.

226 Upon my interrogation of the origins of her devoted commitment to the synagogue I sense a kind of suspicion and she asks ‘you mean as a kind of guilt-tripping?’ The abruptness of this suggestion forecloses a deeper engagement with this issue as I sensed a certain resistance to talk about family history or possible involvement with National Socialism.

227 There are numerous newspaper articles referring to the disputes of the Gemeinde in Berlin. In his work on Jewish Berlin, Jungmann extensively describes various disputes which have occurred over the years on which I cannot elaborate here. For further information, see Jungmann, 2007.
Here, we not only see that Anna has a particular vision and idea for the synagogue which stems from her own experience of entering the community. This statement further shows the process of ‘becoming Jewish’ of identifying with this collective, indicated by the reference ‘we’. The permeability of boundaries and her work for the synagogue also create a space to which she belongs and where she can feel at home, something she was lacking while growing up. Beyond this, her community involvement, which seems to be motivated by passion and enthusiasm and the commitment towards her husband, also serves ‘a biographical purpose’. A ‘function’ of providing a kind of family she did not have. On my question about the underlying reasons for her interest she responded as followed:

“I had always found things foreign and strange and new things interesting. And I always liked challenges and for me it was clearly [the pathway] via the language. I heard the language and had never heard Hebrew before and just, well, there was this Israeli, on whom I had this crush. [...] and learning Hebrew was real fun for me. And then the relationship between language, and then, towards the direction of religion...I have always had a connection to languages, but [...] I didn’t grow up religious and I somehow rather missed it. And I didn’t grow up with a family. That also is a point, since that is central to Judaism. In so far there is a slight masochistic mood when I sense the pressure of the family, as, on the one hand, I think ‘hello, what do you want again?’ and on the other hand, I think ‘ahh, family! [laughs]’”

While she previously stated that she intends to work towards the overcoming of ‘othering’ practices by mainstream society, Judaism and the Hebrew language remain to be perceived as a ‘fascinating other’ (Said, 2003), which stimulate curiosity and excitement. The ‘fascinating other’ is equally perceived as a challenge which is made accessible by her affinity for languages. The language provides ‘the way in’ but also the immediate impetus for her interest. The ‘special interest in Hebrew’ is thereby normalised and taken out of the German societal framework, where Hebrew bears a plethora of historical and socio-political connotations. In relation to her family, she merely describes how her father and his family developed a ‘fascination’ for Israeli fiction. Her mother’s milieu and environment are portrayed as almost anti-religious, as a response to her conservative Christian family background. The ‘region’ where she grew up in is described as conservative and infused by
Anti-Semitism, which she does not directly link to how this socialisation might have impacted her.

Not only does Anna’s fascination correspond with a long-tradition of ‘Hebrew orientalism’ in the German cultural context (Peleg, 2003; Said, 2003), we can also deduce from it the emergence and construction of her erotic attraction and desire. The language is further ‘normalised’ as it ties in with her passions for languages more generally. Thereby, it is presented as ‘just another language’ she became interested in. Here, I again draw on Ahmed and the notion of orientalism as ‘being oriented’ toward an object that is within one’s reach and thereby becomes ‘orientalised’: “To direct one’s gaze and attention towards the other as an object of desire is not indifferent, neutral or casual. [...] in being directed toward other... one is committed to specific actions [...] When bodies share and object of desire, we can say [...], that they have an affinity, or ‘they are going in the same direction’ (Ahmed, 2006:120). “Returning to orientalism, we can see how making “the strange” familiar [...] is what allows “the West” to extend its reach (ibid, p. 126). In Anna’s case, Hebrew becomes the means enabling reaching ‘towards the other’.

Ahmed suggests that the reach towards an object is always an extension of one’s body. If reaching towards the other is an embodied action, it necessarily involves sexuality, gender and the erotic. Thus, it is necessarily entangled with passion and (erotic) desire. For Anna, the Hebrew language in connection with the Israeli man offers a ‘becoming’ and entering into a conversion process, which allows her to move away from the position she had occupied. The exoticisation (and thus ‘orientalisation’) of Hebrew and things Jewish ‘becomes’ at the same time part of the erotic desire. The pronoun ‘we’, indicates that she, on the one hand, has become part of ‘the exotic’, while also continuing to exoticize it. Nonetheless, this remains an ambivalent negotiation where deep-rooted notions of (to an extent historical) ‘otherness’ are combined with the commitment to a partner, a family and to a different culture and religion of which she has become part. Becoming part of the collective and ‘earning’ her position inside the community, certain exoticisms might continue, although viewed from a different position, the position she now inhabits. This allows for ‘symbolic distancing’, and the act of distinguishing herself from others’ fascinations, who have not (yet) acquired the same kind of position she has taken up. This is seen in her reference to the Hebrew Choir:
At the very beginning, I found it rather silly, that one of the first rehearsals was on Shavuot, on a chag. So, what kind of a Hebrew choir is that, which rehearses on Shavuot? … The people have nothing to do with it [religion] … but still, I find the diversity exciting. There are really people who are religious, and there are people who are not Jewish. And there is everything in this spectrum. There are people who are not Jewish, but very religiously Jewish. So, they’re, let’s say, philosemitic … And I don’t know why, but I somehow always felt very comfortable in the choir. I don’t really care about the … the politics … I go there, and I like to sing….”

Here we see how the choir is appreciated for its diversity, yet Anna also distances herself from ‘the Philo-Semites’. Her own pathway to Judaism via the Hebrew language is seen as distinct from other people’s fascination with it. This might be attributable to the fact that she had already converted to Judaism when entering the Hebrew choir and is married to an Israeli. Compared to other members who are in a more liminal status of Jewish belonging and desire Jewishness, therefore, her own positionality in the group can remain a matter of singing rather than serving as a community of sorts. Given the fact that she and her husband do not maintain a strictly observant lifestyle the environment of the Hebrew choir might fit her approach of considering Judaism as a community, communal activity and a (Hebrew) culture, rather than strict observance of the mitzvot. The amusement over the ‘philo-Semites’ suggests the manner in which she sees her experience to be separate from others. Although the Hebrew choir is seen as separate from Judaism and the synagogue community, her surprise over rehearsing on a ‘chag’ illustrates how she enmeshes ‘Hebrew’, ‘Jewish’ and ‘Israeli’.

Finally, her experience in the ‘community’ intersects with gender-related hierarchies which she describes as the on-going maintenance of power positions by ‘macho-men’. The initial resistance experienced towards her involvement in the synagogue can therefore not only be related to the contentious position of the ‘German convert’ but also to an intersection of gendered power dynamics. Consequently, the ‘female convert’ seems to experience an intersectional edge of women representing a supposedly ‘historical other’. This intersection creates a complicated position, which make female converts ‘driving for community change’

228 They keep a vegetarian rather than a strictly kosher diet sometimes referred to as ‘kosher style’.
229 This is not necessarily specific to converts or the scene per se, rather individuals tend to regard their own biographical experience as unique. As I alluded to in chapter two, I also perceived my interest in Judaism and things Jewish as not fitting the norm, until I became aware of the larger German societal context triggering ‘a special interest’.
prone to pushbacks and resistance. At the same time, the latter can emerge on the grounds of resisting boundary crossing and the occupation of categories, to which one is not eligible. This contributes to the sense that eligibility must be ‘earned’.

Returning to the significance of Hebrew in relation to the larger scene we can see that the language not only serves as a ‘normalisation’ of a ‘special interest’, but also how ‘Hebrew’ and the encounter with it personified by an Israeli becomes a turning point, at which a trajectory is disrupted, and a different pathway unfolds. Hebrew is not only construed as an ‘object of desire’ but as ‘the way in’. The exotic fascination and ‘holiday flirt’ which emerges from a specific societal (historical) symbolic order evolves into a partnership, a family, a religious and community commitment taking up a role as a ‘driver of change’. We have seen, how the sense of having to ‘earn’ a position in the community appears to be an intersection between a historical ‘inherited’ positionality imbued with emotions of shame, while at the same time confronting a community which is male-dominated and gendered. The given case further shows the different ways of expressing a ‘homing desire’ (Brah, 1996) since the manner in which the trajectory unfolds has brought her (a) home. Notably here, in relation to Inbal’s case (Chapter 5) what once served as a unifying glue of Israeli society and Inbal’s perception of Hebrew as ‘her home’, becomes ‘the way in’ in Anna’s trajectory. Comparing those trajectories, we can start to understand the significance of the ‘Hebrew’ Choir, but also the manner of coming together in the scene more broadly. The case of Anna demonstrates how the erotic is part of exoticisms (Yenenoglu, 1998). The fascination with Hebrew and the subsequent act of becoming and ‘reaching out’ is then a negotiation of ‘being German’ and dealing – or not dealing – with one’s ‘inherited’ past. Finally, the case further exemplifies how the process of conversion and the subsequent establishment of a sense of belonging becomes a matter of performance in the scene and in the communities.

The Queer Shabbat Event

6.7 Conversion as embracing ‘Difference’

As the last case will confirm, a number of the ‘converting participants’ grew up with a single mother or describe an ambivalent relationship with their fathers. This corresponds with previous research on conversion (Beit-Hallahmi and Argyle, 1997:120). For a number of my participants, growing up with a single mother created a felt difference from ‘mainstream society’. The relation between individuals’ positioning at the margin of societal norms was a
recurring theme among my (converting) participants. This sense of ‘feeling on the margins’ seems to have stimulated a distancing from what was perceived as a ‘German’ society and everything associated with a mainstream.

In the case of Naomi (28) and of a few other converts in the scene, the conversion to Judaism correlates with queerness or the self-referenced ‘deviance from hetero-normative standards’ in terms of sexuality, sexual orientation and gender identity, as she identifies as bisexual and recently predominantly dated women. Having grown up in the regions of the former GDR, Naomi was reared in a Christian environment, which differed from the largely non-religious society around her. Her given Hebrew name set her apart from ‘the norm’ around her and she recalls ‘sticking out’ with that name along with other attributes. Her parents’ response to her enquiry about this special name referred to its normality in Israel, suggesting that she had to go to Israel one day. After finishing secondary school, she undertook voluntary service as part of the ‘Action Reconciliation Service for Peace’, one of the most prominent German post-war reconciliation initiatives. After her return, she starts a degree in Jewish studies and during a semester in Jerusalem, she starts a relationship with an Israeli woman. After her return to Berlin, she continues to maintain an ‘Israeli’ Hebrew speaking social environment, yet additionally attends services and becomes known as the ‘datia’ - the religious - among her ‘hiloni’- non-observant - Israeli friends who keep a distance from religious life. The decision to formally convert to Judaism came about with the prospect of future children and not being able to raise them in the Jewish tradition without having formally converted. Naomi’s ‘natural’ partaking in life in Israel is maintained when returning to Berlin by way of occasional visits to the synagogue and celebration of the holidays. While the synagogue corresponds with her Christian ‘religious upbringing’, she indeed realises that the pathway to officially become Jewish has to be undertaken religiously, rather than by mere ‘Hebrew sociality’. This was a commonly expressed sense among people who had returned from Israel: becoming part was only possible via the religious pathway.

230 The term queer emerged in the late 1990s and re-framed the field of gay and lesbian studies to include all non-normative sexualities. It has developed multiple meanings and can be used to question categories of sexuality (gay, straight) or can refer to a questioning or rejection of gender binaries (man vs. woman). More broadly, queer can refer to a resistance against regimes of the normal (Warner, 1991, p. 964 in Davis, 2015), whereby queer interrogates the status quo and ‘the norm’.

231 For further details see Wohlrab-Sahr, Karstein and Schmidt-Lux, 2009

232 Aktion Sühnezeichen Friedensdienst was established in 1958 and was among the first to initiate a German-Israeli civil society dialogue of this kind. Initially, German volunteers were sent to Israel and other countries to work with Holocaust survivors and today engage in care and community work of various sorts. Although there are no definite numbers, the phenomenon of German volunteers to Israel who later stay in Israel or convert is not unheard of and can be seen as an ‘outcome’ of these reconciliation initiatives.
Upon contacting a progressive Rabbi and discussing the issue of conversion, he raises concerns as to whether Naomi’s ‘conversion’ to a religious Jewish life, would disrupt her relationship with her ‘secular’ Israeli partner. This suggests that the Rabbi is familiar with the situation of a non-Jewish German wanting to convert to Judaism and the Israeli partner potentially feeling distant and estranged by it. Although she does not reveal details, the relationship with her Israeli partner indeed ended.

Thus, the act of choosing to become Jewish can also create the effect of distance, rather than proximity to the desired group (although the reasons for the breakup, as with any breakup, are supposedly manifold). For a number of Israelis Hebrew sociality and celebrating holidays must remain distinct from religious practice. Naomi’s biographical narrative does not draw a strong connection to her sexuality and sexual identification as bisexual, but instead the aspect of ‘difference’ is emphasised and can be seen as her ‘biographical tension’. Similar to other participants, there is a strong emphasis on the omnipresence of the ‘feeling of non-belonging’. That is to say, the self-understanding of being ‘deviant from the (somatic) norm’ might later coincide with the encounter with Israel and Judaism as part of the ‘reconciliation structures’. Israel and Israelis are not only presented as a fascination, but also as representing a societal group representing a collective deviance from the (heteronormative) societal norm. Subverting and undermining categories of East and West, European and non-European, in short, not fitting a binary or a certain category, Jewishness (in Germany) is then believed to represent the outside of the (heteronormative) norm, of which one (Naomi) does not feel part. More to the point, Jewishness seems to come close to queerness.

For some of my converted participants this was expressed by referring to growing up with a single mother, being queer or homosexual or being an Ausländerin (as seen above). All ‘deviances’ present a negotiation of ‘being German’ where German-ness is envisioned as a specific societal (and somatic) norm, that does not seem to allow for otherness. For Naomi, it is particularly the event of the queer Shabbat which has taken up significance as a space where she not only can freely embrace a sociality as a ‘new Jew’, combined with an Israeli vibe and Hebrew and spiritual singing, but also to be in an LGBTIQ friendly environment.

Boyarín, Itzkovitz and Pellegrini set out the project to tie together the connections of Jew and homosexual both of their effect in the co-constructedness and representation of a specific norm. These societal norms are argued to be entangled, and a white Christian majority is also imagined as a heterosexual norm (Mosse, 1996; Boyarin, Itzkovitz, Pellegrini, Ahmed, 2014).
where the norm has been temporarily suspended and in fact Jewishness (and queerness) become the norm. Naomi’s trajectory suggests that the feeling of difference became entangled with the middle-class structures of the German Judaizing milieu, going to Israel, falling in love with an Israeli woman and adopting the Israeli ‘cultural context’ and subsequent conversion to Judaism. This is an act of symbolic distancing. Effectively, the ‘queer’ conversion narrative exemplifies how the disidentification with a ‘somatic norm’ merge with ‘reconciliation structures’ and can lead to the adoption of Jewishness. Thus, one could assume that Jewishness presents a ‘queer’ alternative to the mainstream.

6.8 Towards an understanding of ‘converting’ practices

The given converting practices and processes present us with a picture of complexity: rather than the three types of German converts to Judaism suggested by Steiner, the given cases present us with a complexity which exceeds the typology offered by Steiner described above (Steiner, 2015). Firstly, the biographical trajectories cross-cut the second and third types and show that these typologies are indeed entangled. I have shown how the relationship with a Jewish partner emerges in a sociological milieu of a ‘judaizing’ German middle class. The relationship with a Jewish partner does not occur in a social vacuum but instead is a consequence of an extended stay and experience in Israel, the Hebrew language and the enmeshment of categories of ‘Israeli’- ‘Jewish’ - ‘Hebrew’. We have seen how representatives of a Judaizing milieu are indeed converting to Judaism and become representatives of a German Jewry. These developments are not detached from a Nazi past but are instead entangled with collective emotions of guilt and shame.

From the biographical narrations, it becomes clear, how the openness of the scene and its fluid character are significant in these trajectories but also how dynamics in the scene are shaped by them. This particularly relates to questions of legitimacy, authority and the politics of belonging. The presented spectrum further shows that conversion practices range from ‘over-authorization’ (Leah) to self-definition (Rachel) of Jewishness and thereby exemplify the complexities of the scene but also the biographical entanglements related to gender, sexuality, nationality and finally religious practice. Despite the wide spectrum and the complexities, all of the above cases hold in common the obvious dimension of sexuality and desire in their relation to the category ‘Jewish’ and becoming Jewish, and the exoticized fascination under ‘the weight’ of a specific ‘historical baggage’. We have seen that all
converts and converting practices hold in common the relationship to a Jewish (or Jewish-Israeli) man or woman or an erotic attraction accompanying their experiences in Israel and with Judaism. Despite biographical differences, all of the cases engage in an act of symbolic distancing. In order to approximate and understand this distancing, I will first turn to the context enabling the distancing.

6.8.1 Hebrew Sociality

All of the presented narratives derive from individuals who spent significant amounts of time in Israel and/or had an ‘intimate’ encounter with the Hebrew language, to the degree that they defined their pathway ‘into’ Judaism by way of Hebrew. This suggests that the tight-knit and well-subsidized, maintained and cultivated German-Israeli relations or ‘travelling routes’ enables contacts and encounters and extensive stays in Israel. The experience of a cultural context in which a ‘nationalised Judaism’ (Yadgar, 2014) largely dominates the public social sphere, they came to ‘live’ within a kind of ‘Jewish sociality’ which is not necessarily tied to observance and halacha but a socio-cultural realm and language of a Jewish majority. All of the women experienced an ‘intimate encounter’ with someone Jewish or the Hebrew language, where intimacy is reduced to sexual encounter. This encounter either resulted in a religious conversion because of marriage or evoked ‘modes of conversion’ based on a certain ‘orientation’ towards Hebrew, Israel and different kinds of Jewishness. The experience in Israel and ‘living among Israelis’ and as Rachel described it ‘naturally being part of an Israeli collective, enabled an environment far from ‘German aesthetics’ where ‘being German’ does not present the ‘somatic norm’. The sociality and the specific cultural realm within a complex socio-political society appears to diminish the confrontation with ‘being German’ as it is not backed by a majority. The Hebrew language not only creates a ‘desire realm’ triggering the desire to speak it and thereby ‘be part of the collective’, it also enabled an encounter which seemed to shift hierarchies and puts ‘the German’ into a position of the ‘foreigner’, the ‘migrant’ who is, to an extent dependent on the ‘other’, represented by Jewish-Israelis.

As seen in the previous chapter, this goes alongside the very differing attitudes towards ‘Jewishness’ by Israelis, such as rejection (Tomer) or an inclusive humanistic approach presented by Inbal. This is not to say that they represent the majority of Jewish-Israeli society. The diversity of ‘Jewish’ positions and ways of ‘doing being Jewish’ are guided by a socio-economic grid in which Germans are not included and the cases exemplified here.
present a well-educated middle-class, rather than arriving in Israel at the lower end of socio-
political spectrum. Nonetheless, their status can be liminal, open to derogatory treatment
accused of ‘border-crossing’ when in an intimate relationship with a Jewish Israeli (Kranz in
Diemling and Ray, 2016). Apart from that, in recent decades and especially with the growing
number of Israelis living in Germany and Berlin, many Israelis hold a positive image of
Germany as a stable democracy and important international ally and partner of Israel
(Zimmermann, 2013).

Returning to the converts, most of my participants identified Israel with a lifestyle far from
German realities presenting an idealised ‘desire realm’ libidinously filled. This was often
expressed referring to ‘the beauty of the country’, the climate, and a ‘Mediterranean’
lifestyle. Most interestingly, it seems to not represent the ‘white Christian male’ somatic
norm presented by ‘German society’, but something ‘deviant’ from it. If so, then this attitude
remains oblivious to the hierarchies in Israeli society that are also built around a male, white,
but of course, Jewish somatic norm, influenced by historic self-images of European nation-
states (Weiss, 2002; Shafir and Peled, 2004; Ram, 2008). Nonetheless, the language
facilitated the being and ‘inhabiting’ in Israeli space as expressed in Rachel’s comment of
‘naturally living and being part of that’ – that referring to Israeli - Jewish sociality. So, we can
establish the signification of ‘naturally living among Jews’ in Israel or in the Hebrew
language realm. Israel appears to soothe what one has longed for: being there and becoming
part of that society appears to fulfil the desires that remained unfulfilled in one’s life, thus in
correspondence with the biographical tensions.

Yet, how can we understand the entanglement with the erotic? Jones and Hostler point to the
centrality of sexuality in social dynamics and human practices: “Sexuality is inside the
symbolic order, not purely an expression of instinctual need. It is now commonplace that
sexuality has a history, that is, it is inside the contingency of culture, not merely fixed and
innate in a stereotyped way”. (Jones and Hostler, 2005) As elaborated in chapter 4, the
discursive framework that the category ‘Jewish’ comes to occupy in the German symbolic
order is entangled with a philosemitic trajectory. This relates to attitudes and specific
representations of Jews and Jewishness, largely established without personal contact. On the
other hand, it is not surprising that being and living in Israeli society people fall in love and
find potential partners. What is, however, important here, is the way this is incorporated into
a narrative and becomes (part of) a personal and social positioning in relation to the ‘culture’
one wants to ‘leave’, the line one wants to cross and the ‘other’ one wants to be part of. In short, the experience in Israel and encounter with Jewishness is portrayed as if the biography had always been shaped by ‘the interest in the other’, ‘not feeling part of a mainstream’, embodying ‘difference’ or the sense of belonging to the ‘Jewish people’. It seems therefore unsurprising that the ‘Jewish man’ (Israeli man) not only presents excitement and adventure but is also attractive not only as a body but also as a representation of one’s trajectory that is believed to be deviant from the norm.

The positively perceived ‘otherness’ of Jews and Israel seems to have impacted their sense of attraction: the uncanny exotic other, is erotically attractive. Through the enactment and the ‘acting upon’ their desires, these categories become ‘embodied’ and therefore inevitably ‘sexed’ (Butler, 1993) and a matter of gender and sexuality as it is inside the symbolic order. Lois McNay suggests that the body is the mutable and dynamic frontier between the physical, the symbolic and the sociological (McNay, 2000: 32/33) and we can see how this comes to be played out here. Jewishness becomes ‘embodied’ by Israelis, the atmosphere of Israel and a lived reality. Thereby, it is no longer a distant imaginary, but a (corpo)real experience.

We could further conceive of this mutual desire (between Germans and Israelis) as a consequence of Diner’s negative symbiosis. The reference seeks to demonstrate how after Auschwitz, Jews and Germans are negatively symbiotically related to each other. On the German side, this is marked by a continuous feeling of guilt, which constantly makes atonement and seeks forgiveness and, which keeps returning to Auschwitz. On the Jewish side, however, he suggests, Auschwitz triggers a profound feeling of a void, of helplessness and impotence, which is covered with substitute memories in order to be able to continue one’s life (Diner, 1987). Unquestionably, thirty years after its ‘invention’ the supposed negative symbiosis (ibid.) must be translated to the cosmopolitan context of Berlin with its ‘intercultural’ zones of (intimate) contact of all kinds. Translating it to contemporary Berlin, would this suggest, that sex and attraction functions as a means of a reconciliation process, in other words, the ‘ultimate symbiosis’? If assuming that there is an ‘inherited image’ of the Jew inside the German symbolic order and exoticism is inextricably intertwined with eroticism then this symbolic order is inevitably negotiated as a matter of intimacy, sex and sexuality. However, the dynamics in Berlin, Tel Aviv and the scene at hand suggest that the supposed negative symbiosis between Germans and Jewish-Israelis entail a sexual and erotic component involving sex and intimacy, but can beyond that, result in relationships and the
establishment of families and shared livelihoods. In sum, current developments and my case studies suggest that cosmopolitanism and contact enable German-Israeli and German-Jewish relations to be increasingly negotiated romantically and sexually.

It seems unquestionable, however, that the combination of negative symbiosis and reconciliation efforts facilitate the possibility of sexuality taking up a central role in ‘reconciling’ and ‘negotiating’ the past yet from diametrically opposed angles and differing intentions. However, are mutual sexual attractions towards the ‘symbiotic other’ a sufficient sociological explanation for the conversion practices described above? The relationship, ‘symbiosis’ with the historical ‘other’ appears to hold the promise of establishing a distance to a ‘the collective’ of one’s origins. This necessarily invokes the question why this symbiosis seems to be highly gendered and the majority of converts in my sample were women. Is there dimension beyond the religious law of matrilineal decent? Is there an aspect of females subordinating themselves to their partner’s religion potentially as a matter of ‘carrying the weight of German repentance and atonement’? A functional analysis of these relations and the reduction to domination and subordination as a matter of reconciliation does not seem to suffice as an explanation, especially in the light of the biographical cases above. The biographies reflect how women actively negotiate and contest norms, rather than merely ‘subordinating’ themselves to them.

One could easily suppose that Jewish law, halakha and the Israeli state requires the woman to convert, (rather than the male partner) if the offspring are to be recognised as Jewish. Additionally, women are more likely to show religious engagement and commitment. However, unpacking the trajectories of these women reveals gender relations of a German middle class. Unsurprisingly, the fascination with things Jewish and Jewish culture can mark the Jewish man or woman as an object of desire. Thereby it is not clear what came first: the fascination with Judaism and Israel or the Jewish (Israeli) man.

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234 Having said this, this surely depends on the ‘kind of scene’ we are talking about. While I am largely referring to ‘my sample’ described in chapter 2, especially my gay participants informed me about the way ‘the negative symbiosis’ German-Israeli relations are negotiated sexually, on dating platforms such as Tinder or ‘Gay Romeo’. Further research needs to be done on the nature and quality of (sexual) intimacy as a measure of commemoration and negotiation. Here, I was particularly interested in the relationship with religious commitment and affiliation, thus my ‘sample’ does not cover this dimension in sufficient detail.

235 Although this had also been the case before, as seen in the case of Antonia. However, increased mobility modifies the number of spaces of encounter.

In the case of Antonia, for example, we could assume that the experience in Israel and the first serious relationship that was with a Jewish Israeli, steered the later desire to date another Jewish man after her marriage ended. Equally, the time in Israel and the encounter with the Israeli man back then did not occur in a social vacuum but in a specific societal and discursive framework of a so-called second generation that spend time in Israel within a certain positionality and a specific agenda of German-Israeli reconciliation efforts. In this case, Israel and Judaism take up particular significance which she attempts to downplay by claiming indifference to his Jewish identity. Furthermore, the way in which the first love is remembered and referenced in relation to her current relationship reflect the structural significance that Israel and Judaism came to play in her life and the way this is embedded in her trajectory. It is clear from the narrative turns, that strong emphasis is placed on Jewish and Israeli identity as a sign of fundamental significance. Somehow, the relationship with a Jewish man seems to put existing gender norms into a different grid. In many cases, the religion of the partner is accepted. This raises fundamental questions of subordination, agency, authority and potential subversion, subjects which have been fundamental to the social sciences, but in recent particularly in the context of religious identities and gender.\footnote{See for example Avishai, 2008; Mahmood, 2011; Fadil, 2011.}

Central to these debates are the question over female submission to the prevailing rules and the question of whether agency necessarily equals resistance or whether it should rather be seen in the framework of individuals’ negotiation, motivations and the ways they agonise, negotiate and relate male dominated rules. However, these women do not accept the rules outright: the drive towards the exotic, the motivation to symbolically distance themselves from a German mainstream triggers a situation of submission which emerges from the desire for the Jewish man but also from the drive to get away from a German identity.

### 6.8.2 Symbolic Distancing

However, is the mutual sexual attraction towards the ‘symbiotic other’ a sufficient sociological explanation for the conversion practices above? Explanations for the conversion to Judaism and its continuous reliance on matrilineal descent fosters the woman to convert. Unpacking the trajectories of these women does seem to reveal an additional component to these practices which reflects on dynamics of gender constellations and intersectional embodied practices. As I have shown, Israel and the fascination with things Jewish and
Jewish culture can mark the Jewish man (or woman respectively) as an object of desire. For most cases, the gendered politics of belonging in Judaism offer the possibility of symbolic distancing form a previous identity. Thus, the dissatisfaction and distance they experienced from a German ‘somatic norm’ whether because of growing up with a single mother or a queer identity, the biographical tension, is believed to be resolved in the relationship with a Jewish man or woman. Thereby, the erotic construction and desire is entangled in a process of becoming by ‘taking up a different category’. This then allows them to enter into a process of non-being (hooks, 1992; Deleuze and Guattari, 1987), a position allowing to symbolically distance themselves from old categories, by adopting something new. This adoption is not free of contradictions and the somewhat idealised ‘other’ can also become subject to degradation.

In Antonia’s case, we saw how earlier in her life, full commitment to an Israeli partner was impossible. It only became possible thirty years later in the space and context of Berlin when her previous relationship ended. The entanglement of attraction, Jewishness and the subsequent erotic appeal of the new partner are presented as the solution to the demand and pursuit of radical change in her life and existing relationship. The eroticization of the Jewish man can first and foremost be related to the special place that Israel comes to occupy in the German symbolic order, where Israel predominantly represents Jews (Diner, 1987).

Attraction and the cultivation of desire emerges from a specific order. This order could be related to various representations of the Jewish man, one of which relates to traditional anti-Semitic stereotypes of the feminization of the Jewish man and his hypersexuality (Boyarin, 1997) and on the one hand the image of the strong and muscular Israeli soldier (Weiss, 2002). In her case, the exoticization of Jewishness coincided with the wish to escape the ‘old life’ and embark on something new. Most interestingly, this is undertaken via a relationship that holds something in common with the ‘Love of her life’ thirty years ago in Israel, which was not meant to work, as the historical boundaries of a common livelihood were not permeable (enough).

Judaism is then perceived as bringing fundamental change to her life. The gender relations of which she becomes a part – such as managing the kosher household - are attributed to Judaism and its strict gender regime, rather than the attitudes of her partner. While they

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238 Having said that, here I am speaking about this particular milieu. In the wider German society, Israel, of course, evokes all sorts of sentiments.
correspond to the gender roles she had in her previous relationship, the gender divide is now attributed to the orthodoxy of Judaism. This suggest how Judaism not only provides a possibility to distance oneself from an ‘old life’ but also a framework for leaving gender relations unaddressed. The way Judaism is adopted entails a certain syncretic approach towards her own traditions. Ultimately, the performative way of adopting Jewishness enables her to ‘sit on the fence’. This is similar to what Brubaker describes of the trans of in-between (Brubaker, 2016). The liminality of non-belonging can only be endured by way of a critical attitude towards Judaism, which is perceived as fascinating but also as strange, foreign and highly gendered. The negotiation process seems to entail strategies of bearing and resolving ambivalence. The emblem of the category ‘Jewish’ is needed in order to deal with the fact that the gendered modes and dynamics of her previous relationship have indeed remained the same. This leads to the idea that Judaism is thought of as an object, which is fixed and static rather than something that is negotiated and lived. Despite ‘living a Jewish life’ as she claims, she actually maintains a distance ‘being Jewish’ and does not aspire to claim this identity her own: effectively, she still is catholic, apparently not only on paper. Such liminality provides the possibility of remaining an outsider to a culture which is fascinating, but which ultimately remains distant. Nonetheless, it offers the excitement and novelties her ‘old life’ could not. By doing so, Antonia reinstates a positive image of herself as being open to ‘the exotic’ while actually not re-working previously held stereotypes. Not having formally converted, her position enable an in-betweenness, which does not require a definite positioning.

6.8.3 Subverting authority and self-defined Jewishness

In Rachel’s case, the impossibility of her conversion to Judaism equally seems to go alongside the exoticization and eroticization of Jewish men. Her Christian husband and children embody the reasons why she cannot convert. This needs to be seen in relation to his expressed fear that she might ‘run off with a Jewish orthodox man’. While we must take into consideration that this might indeed be what she longs for, if he indeed is worried about this possibility then she is involved as well. This not only indicates fascination, but also her desire for Jewish orthodoxy in general and the Jewish orthodox man more specifically, but also a dynamic in her current partnership, which seems to leave ‘room for desire’.

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239 Which relates to the stereotype of the hypersexuality of the Jewish man as noted before (Boyarin, 1997). Additionally, George Mosse, writes: ‘a female sensuousness was said to transform love into lust, Jews were said to have female characteristics just as homosexuals were generally called effeminate’ (1983:79).
The fascination with Judaism and Jewish orthodoxy in particular is constructed around an idealization of Israel which resonates with a more profound dimension in the biography, the father and later male figure. The developed desire to become part of the Jewish people reverberates with the father’s passion and profession but also with her project to leave the family behind and pursue ‘a religion of one’s own thereby drawing a line between herself and her family by taking up Jewish mitzvot. That is to say, her father’s profession and frequent trips to Israel offered the possibility of distancing himself from the bourgeois family frame life and of resisting structures by temporarily abandoning them. Similarly, Rachel’s relationship to Israel and the wish to convert to Judaism which is adopted and incorporated as the theme of her life story, symbolically distances her both from the German environment to which she does not want to belong and, through Judaism, from her current relationship. Thus, the religious practice and the object of ‘Judaism’ to which she longs to belong could symbolise a deeper dissatisfaction with a current life situation. Be-coming Jewish and Jewish practice enable her to resist the established structures of the bourgeois Christian family. Thus, fascination (and eroticization) emerge in a moment of dissatisfaction and represent a lack and subsequent void one wants to fill.

Returning to the process of eroticization, the construction of the (orthodox) Jewish man as an object of desire is presented as the potential obstacle that could be placed between her and her Christian husband. In addition to the traditional Anti-Semitic stereotype, Zionist rhetoric has also established the image of the strong, muscular and heroic Israeli Jew and his sexual potency (Presner, 2007). Furthermore, it has been argued that the Israeli middle class is increasingly presenting itself as a sexually liberated society (Kaplan in Seidman, Fisher, Meeks, 2011). Against this backdrop, we can see how the eroticization of Israel itself plays into Orientalist stereotypes and images of the Oriental other who threatens the Western subject but seduces her/him at the same time (Yegenoglu, 1998:45). In these images, ‘the orient’ represents a hypersexual realm and desire (ibid.). The experience in Israel is incorporated into a narrative that is infused by the German context, and the memory of the Shoah. Thus, the very notion of guilt that is taken from the German discursive framework seems to go together with the creation of Judaism as object of desire. The Jewish practices which are taken up follow an idiosyncratic measurement: observing Shabbat and Kashrut suggests that observance and certain Jewish practices are taken up is a matter of choice. Jewish then becomes a matter of ‘her’ choice and circumstances. The self-definition of
religious practice together with the self-identification then subvert formal religious authorities. Thereby, she undermines the Jewish religious authorities but also the (male) guards of this authority. Equally, the (male) authority of her husband is negotiated by following her desire to be (and become) what she longs for. It is in this sense that her conversion practice is not one of subordination.

6.8.4 Hebrew as ‘a way in’

The trope of eroticization and subsequent distinction practices is also visible in Anna and Leah’s accounts. In Anna’s narrative of her attraction to the Hebrew language, we can discern the physical element, as her first ‘encounter with Hebrew’ is with individuals who speak the language. Hebrew is presented as ‘detached’ from a social reality and Hebrew speakers. This is despite the fact that she fell in love with a Hebrew speaker, a Jewish Israeli, and the attraction to Hebrew is part of an erotic attraction to a person.240 Although the naïveté towards Hebrew and Israel is emphasised, Hebrew always carries symbolic meaning for someone who grew up and was educated in Germany. The emphasis on Hebrew serves the purpose of maintaining a distance from Judaism itself. Hebrew and modern Israel serves as the marker which appears to disassociate the people and practices she engages in from the connotation and baggage that Jews and Jewishness holds. The conversion only becomes relevant with the Israeli partner and his observant family suggesting her conversion. Hebrew as a marker of belonging is upheld in the Pesach narrative, where she reads from the Haggadah, which is considered her induction into Judaism. Hebrew then becomes a signifier which is related to her interest in languages and embodied by the Israeli men who are wooing her.

The macho attitude of the Israeli man is emphasised in the narrative and encounter in Argentina, where the rudeness of the Israeli, the Oriental man (Yegenoglu, 1998), is perceived as particularly attractive and seductive. This is not to suggest that erotic attraction is a necessary condition for her conversion. However, the encounter with an Israeli, the experience in Israel, the meeting of a Jewish orthodox man not only as an ‘incident’ of attraction but as a social phenomenon holds a particular place in the German symbolic order. The embodied lively Israeli presents a Jew who is alive and promises a future rather than the

240 Most significantly, the Israeli travellers in Patagonia were more of an exotic fascination than the Argentinians or Chileans who she might have encountered during her stay.
past and the image of the Holocaust. Although Hebrew is presented as her ‘gateway into Judaism’, it is entangled with the male Hebrew speaker, the Israeli she encounters and falls for. Beyond instant excitement at the beginning, a relationship is pursued which results in conversion and community commitment. Thereby, she not only has an ‘exciting partner’ but acquires a desired family and establishes a position where she ‘is seen’ and can ‘earn’ her recognition. Thus, the conversion to Judaism serves a variety of ‘biographical functions’ of which religion is one element, yet it does not seem to be its centre. Rather, it is part of embracing a new (and the partner’s) culture and thereby resolving a biographical tension.

We can see that the ‘orientation toward’ and later conversion enables a distancing from what is perceived as a ‘somatic norm’ inside German society. Thus, the act but above all the process of becoming Jewish, confirms not-being what one previously was. This can be a matter of somatic norm and mainstream society as well as an escape from the life one currently has, and one is envisioning and desiring to have. This then puts them into a different social positioning and societal ‘grid’: being ‘deviant from the German somatic norm, appears to carry the sensation of getting away from an ‘inherited’ ‘embodied’ transgenerational guilt and shame. By doing so, committing to a Jewish life and having children with a Jewish partner, they also become ‘bearers’ of ‘Jewish’ life by conceiving ‘Jewish’ children. We have seen that in Naomi’s case who, by the thought of not being able to raise her children in the Jewish tradition, decided to formally convert. Consequently, conversion to Judaism or to Israeli sociality, enables her to break from this genealogy and produce ‘Jewish’ children who supposedly grow up in a tradition with Hebrew as their second language and a different religious identification. As we have seen in Rachel’s case, the genealogy of Jewishness is taken up and incorporated into the biography suggesting that she ‘was never part’ of this norm from which she wanted to deviate, by claiming an ‘Ausländer-status’. My claim is further supported by Antonia, who explained to me that there was ‘no need for her to convert’ since she and her new partner already had children. Here we can see how the politics of conversion in Judaism, the importance of building and raising a family, encompass the wish to break with a German genealogy. Even Rachel, for whom formal conversion proved impossible, spoke about how it was her dream to have yet another child and raise it Jewish.

Having established the biographical and personal purpose and significance of this ‘symbolic distancing’, one is drawn to ask: how does this correspond with the social environment, the
space, the scene? We have seen how the Hebrew Choir enables a realm that offers a ‘Hebrew sociality’ and through the music a spiritual realm, which work as a substitute for a synagogue or even as its ‘better alternative’ for those lacking ‘authorized belonging’.

6.8.5 Negotiating Positionalities and distinction

But how ‘successful’ is the symbolic distancing? These women symbolically distance themselves from a mainstream society, they were socialised in. However, upon entering the Jewish religious field other categories ‘rules of the game’ appear to prevail. That is to say, ‘leaving’ the perceived mainstream, they enter into social circles where being Jewish represents the majority. As we have seen from the biographical trajectories, the new position is first seen through a double consciousness, with ambivalence and uncertainty. The position in the field has then ‘to be earned’ (Anna) or actively negotiated (Leah and Rachel). Nonetheless, the question remains whether becoming Jewish in this scene potentially reproduces or reifies the categories these women want to get away from? That is to say, is the formal act of conversion effectively and sufficiently transforming a previously occupied positionality? Becoming Jewish and the position they uphold in relation to being recognised by the state of Israel puts them in a liminal position, within ‘Jewish circles’ and another gendered regime where they struggle for acceptance. In some views, converts remain converts and ‘have not turned Jewish’. Although in a very different manner, this holds true for the Israeli migrants: the intention of getting away from Israel and ‘Israeli identity’ is undermined in certain contexts in Berlin, where they are again ‘turned Israeli’ if not ‘turned into Jews’.

The ambivalent position that the female converts takes up in different hierarchies and the lack of recognition that they seem to fear or indeed experience – triggered by their own uncertainties - stimulates ‘distinction’ practices and drawing boundaries between themselves and others to which I will now turn.

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241 One of my Israeli participants once used the phrase: ‘Berlin makes you Jewish’. This refers to external ascriptions towards him as an Israeli and a Jew.
In his work on *Distinction*, (Bourdieu, 1984) Pierre Bourdieu elaborates upon how an individual comes to establish a specific position in the social field. His analysis suggests that class, social position, and power are acquired through taste and specific actions in relation to one’s class belonging. “it [taste] functions as a sort of social orientation a ‘sense of one’s place’ guiding the occupants of a given place in social space towards the social positions adjusted to their properties, and towards the practices or goods which befit the occupants of that position (1984;2010:468/469)” Bourdieu describes how social agents implement cognitive structures in their practical knowledge of the social world, how they internalise it, and ‘embody’ it (ibid: 470). He further argues that individuals navigate the social field by acquiring symbolic capital, which they manage by way of their habitus, the learned structures of their way of conducting themselves which correspond to a certain social grouping in society. Returning to the ‘modes of conversion’ the women in this study are confronted with negotiating authorities, negotiate images held by society and most importantly negotiate if not fight their positions in the communities, and the wider scene. Distinguishing oneself offers a means to acquiring a position which is not that of a ‘German convert’ but rather one, which bestows oneself with a particular position and distinguishes oneself from others. The way in which this is undertaken, corresponds with the individual trajectory and can take a plethora of forms, as we have seen. It can be performed as a matter of intellectual expertise in the field of Jewish studies, or in relation to one’s conversion process (orthodox instead of reform) as a way of distinguishing oneself from others, or alternatively becoming an expert on Israel or distinguishing oneself by devout and zealous community engagement and becoming a driver of change.

In some of the cases, it is through the engagement and knowledge of Hebrew as well as an intimate acquaintance with Israeli culture that presents a form of distinction. The positions taken up are necessarily entangled with power and hierarchies and thereby further complicate the already complex and multifaceted positions converts are occupying. By means of an act of distinction the converts and converting practitioners acquire for themselves a particular status within the wider scene, a ‘Jewish’ symbolic and cultural capital combined with the cultural capital from the German context, over which they dispose already qua their middle-class status. This facilitates the distinction practices which seem to reconcile the tension between submission and agency and allow them to gain power in this complex structure of ambivalence, uncertainty seeking for recognition. The marginal position of a female German convert to Judaism, which carries the historical burden and its current understanding of
German-ness, is reconciled with becoming ‘drivers of change’. On a larger level, these women are not only negotiating their own position and that of their partners but also the position of gender in a German middle class more broadly, as seen in the relationship to their (mostly Christian, often absent) fathers. The given data does not allow me to draw substantive conclusion about the relationship between father and the ‘turn’ to Judaism, however we can assume that turning into different ‘symbolic order’ is an act of distancing oneself from the gender dynamics at play.

I have shown that these negotiation and distinction practices are entangled and accompanied by a double consciousness in which one sees oneself through the eyes of others. As Jewishness is often acquired and adopted by way of mimicking Jews, the embodied practice can entail an essentializing conception of Jewishness (Kravel-Tovi, 2017). In the case of Rachel, for example, her manner of distinguishing herself lies in the establishment of herself as a ‘German’ expert on Israel and by practicing Jewish ritual and observance. The position of a convert without conversion is maintained in the active participation and proximity that is presented to Israel and speaking Hebrew. With her name Rachel, her Hebrew speaking also triggers a ‘passing’ in the scene. A passing which on the one hand allows her to distance herself from being part of a German ‘Christian’ mainstream society, while on the other hand remaining in a liminal position. The distancing necessarily involves her Christian husband, who comes to represent the inability to ‘fully become’ and ‘fully escape’. The liminal position – enabled in realms like the choir - opens up a possibility for temporary escapes from reality.

In the case of Antonia, the fascination for Judaism experiences a turn when she discovers the difficulties, ambivalences and challenges that a religious and observant life entails. Equally, while the gender divide and the distinction and classification attributed to Judaism turn it into an object, the situation she wanted to escape from then partially repeats itself ‘under the label of Judaism’. Her case is distinctive insofar as she is observant and lives a Jewish life – therefore acquiring a Jewish identification by way of repetition. At the same Antonia maintains a distance from Jewish life by decisively ‘not wanting to convert’.

For all the pattern of being judged by the community is returned by a pro-active attitude- “I “do” more than others and have made myself valuable for the community’ – thus distinction by effort, work and quantifiable achievement. Having undergone a ‘double authorization’,
Leah separates herself from the ‘Berlin giyur’. Her narrative shows how Jewish authorities are on one hand looked up to and, on the other hand, criticized as a patriarchal system leaving individuals (women) vulnerable. Overall, the argumentative narration structures reveal that the distinction practices stem from a profound uncertainty and ambivalence regarding the personal position. It is in this line that the distinction and subsequent hierarchization among converts is related to a particular habitus, the bodily appropriation of certain traits which are considered ‘Jewish’. While Kravel-Tovi describes this adoption of certain traits and symbolic and cultural capital in order to establish this habitus (Kravel-Tovi, 2017), the uncertainty of the scene does not actually make the essentialising adoption of ‘things Jewish’ more complicated: As born Jews, Israelis and others are equally uncertain of what their Jewishness is, what it means and how they want to live it. One could argue, that the scene was lacking Jewish religious role models.

This brings to the fore a different aspect of the scene: the eagerness to acquire ‘Jewishness’ can engender uncertainty and ambivalence which can lead to rejection or competitiveness. Of course, the question of competition over observance is not foreign or novel to Jewish communities. As witnessed in Anna’s case, we can see how distinction practices and acquisition of a specific place in the community is achieved and maintained through work, which in turns can create tension between and among other community members who are less committed to the cause. Community organization is often combined with organizational skills and knowledge of German institutions, which, for example Israeli and other migrants do not have in the same precision as someone born and raised in German society. That bestows on ‘the German convert’ a cultural capital and a certain power position towards the ‘Hebrew’ expert.

The acquisition of what could be considered ‘Jewish’ capital can stand at odds with the non-observant Israelis and others who join the community because of its sociality rather than the religious aspects. Anna and Naomi, suggest that the accumulation of symbolic capital seems to be rather orientated towards Israeli and Hebrew culture, than Jewish religious observance. In Leah’s case, observance and was is presented as superior knowledge of Jewish religion is again used as a distinction practice against those converts who appear to be too infused by mere ‘consumption of Jewishness’ in the synagogue space and have undergone a ‘Berlin-giyur’. By making this claim, she seeks to distance herself from the ‘Judaizing Milieu’ and from the socially imbued (erotic) attractions and desires that must have also guided her.
trajectory, conversion and marriage to an Israeli man. It is therefore, that Jewishness is ‘staged’ and performed as a matter of desire lines as part of the symbolic order, ‘escaping’ ‘being German’ and breaking from the genealogy of ‘bearing German life’. Thereby these women negotiate their gender position, which is an ambivalent one. Most interestingly, the liminality of this position and the struggle for recognition inside the ‘Jewish spectrum’ leads them to distinguish themselves from other converts by various practices, some of which draw on the symbolic and social capital afforded by their German Bildungsbürgertum and middle-class status: e.g. organisational skills, cultural and financial capital or holding positions of epistemic power and knowledge production. By doing so, they ultimately re-draw on the resources and structures from which they want to distance themselves and thereby enter into a spiral entanglement of reifying their ‘German-ness’ and ‘being German’ in the scene.

6.9 Summary

In this chapter, I have described and analysed ‘modes of conversion’. This involved an analysis of the trajectories of converts and the way their ‘conversion’ or mode of conversion relates to their biographies and the related significance of the scene. Firstly, ranging from fully authorised to self-defined Jews, and having either undergone several or no formal ritual, I have shown that conversions do not have a starting or end point but are processual, context-specific and respond to their environments and socialities. Secondly, by focussing on these women, I have also shown that the concept of the Judaizing milieu falls short in that it disregards desire, the erotic and intimate relationships and their significance for conversion. I have further shown how the experience in Israel and a Jewish socio-cultural realm as well as the Hebrew language correspond to an ‘inherited’ symbolic order which is infused by shame and guilt while at the same time able to maintain relationships and intimacies that re-negotiate the ‘negative symbiosis’. While they continue to carry remnants of the past and come to enact them by exoticising, stereotyping, racializing and ultimately othering Jews, they also show transformation and change. Finally, ‘symbolic distancing’ and the battle with ‘being German’ is enabled by conversion and the acquisition of a Jewish partner. Yet the gendered position taken up fosters distinction practices which in turn lead the individual to draw on ‘German’ capital and thereby again undermine their symbolic distancing. The modes of conversion therefore reveal themselves as a complicated spiral move, marked by uncertainty and ambivalence, deeply entangled with gendered positions while also being drivers of change and ultimately fostering new forms and transformation of Jewishness in the
scene. It is the discussion of the significance of the scene to which I will turn in the next chapter.
7. Revisiting the Scene, Concluding Thoughts and Outlook

Based on my ethnographic trajectory, I have analysed how the scene constitutes itself as ‘Jewish’ and demonstrated how Jewishness presents a case of complexity and contestation, rather than unity, agreement and a common outlook. Starting from the phenomenon of ‘Israelis in Berlin’ and the current situation in the German capital, I have shown how a segment of a specific migrant group ‘reacts’ and interacts with local developments and engenders an active negotiation of what it means to be Jewish in Berlin. In order to complete this ethnography, I will now revisit the scene in order to summarise my findings. After a discussion on the relationship between conversion and migration, I will conclude this thesis by an outlook on future research.

Firstly, my study has made a methodological contribution towards the understanding of socio-politically and historically embedded scenes, like the one at hand. I have set out a research framework, which corresponded with the field and the themes that undergirded my research. I combined a dramaturgical and psychoanalytically informed ethnographic approach with biographical research on actors (migrants and converts) in the scene. Despite going beyond the scope of this thesis, it set out an invaluable programme for an in-depth understanding of this scene and its relation to biographical trajectories. The use of meta-analytical categories – ‘biographical tension’ – ‘migration/conversion’ and the ‘significance of the scene’ proved to be most adequate in relating individual trajectories to the dynamics. The inclusion of my own ‘existential involvement’ contributed to the development of ‘scenic epistemologies’, as I have shown.

Against the backdrop of a complex urban constellation and the ambivalence of Jewishness, I entered the construed scene via the Hebrew speaking realm and have shown how Hebrew establishes a realm that sits ambivalently between ‘Israeli’, ‘Jewish’ and local cultures. While Hebrew presents a vital category of identity and belonging, it also creates a sphere with permeable boundaries. Its overlaps with new ‘Jewish religious initiatives’ can be understood to counter-act Russian-German dominated structures in the Gemeinde as well as combining spaces of Hebrew sociality with sources in Jewish tradition. As I have shown, this corresponds with the urban aesthetics of Berlin.
Secondly, I have further demonstrated the historical trajectory of Jewish communities in post-war Germany. Not only have I shown and argued that these communities had a diverse interest and therefore diverse definitions of their Jewishness, but also how the German state(s) influenced the constitution of Jewishness. The historical trajectory has demonstrated the embeddedness of the scene and shown how the structures of the Gemeinde can no longer cater for the diverse Jewish population in Berlin. In a second step, I have shown the historical pathway of secularism. This brought to the fore the complex societal configurations of Jewishness in Israel and demonstrated how ‘secular’ positionings are context-specific and embedded in an Israeli societal grid. This context was contrasted by the post-war trajectory of Jewishness in Germany and the complexity of Philo-Semitism. Through connecting Philo-Semitism and contemporary cosmopolitan exoticisms and Orientalism(s) (which has been largely neglected), I have provided the background to the representations enacted in the scene.

7.1 Revisiting the Hebrew Choir

It is against this backdrop that we can understand the workings in the construed scene. As outlined in chapter 3, the Hebrew Choir was particularly significant in its way of drawing on different cultural repertoires and attracting individuals for very different reasons who shared a passion for singing. This combination of different presentations and enactments of ‘being Israeli’, ‘being Jewish’ and ‘being German’ and becoming Jewish in this place and the co-constructedness of these categories.

Its initiation as a joint force of an Israeli migrant and a non-Jewish German in the process of conversion, reflected how ‘migrant’ and ‘local’ expertise, the latter disposing over the cultural capital and the structural ‘know-how’ came together to establish and maintain this project. Through the biographical trajectories, it has become clear, how the signifier ‘Hebrew’ not only attracted Israeli migrants in their longing to recreate a homely sociality and enjoy singing, but how this relates to the socio-political and historical context. As seen in chapter 4, this emerges from a complex entanglement of ‘Hebrew’, ‘Jewish’ and ‘Israel’ in the German context and its reverberations in institutional (reconciliation) structures and their bearings on individual trajectories. Thus, the choir served the purpose of diaspora space, soothing “homing desire” (Brah, 1996), a kind of Hebrew congregation allowing (temporary)
conversion and ‘a way into Judaism’, alongside reconciliation endeavours or providing the springboard for a career after migration.

Since drawing on specific cultural repertoires, the constellation of people formed new terrains while also eliciting conflict and complexity. Through its initial openness engendered by music, it could cater for spirituality (Inbal), belonging (Tomer) as well as serving as a congregation (Antonia and Rachel) and presented a realm that blurred the boundaries between religion and the secular, but also evoked the negotiation of categories from which individuals sought to symbolically distance themselves. However, by drawing on the process structures, I have shown how the institutionalisation of the project as a Verein and the politics attached to it, fostered a ‘governance structure’ which assigned power positions according previously held categories. Furthermore, the group could no longer cater for the differing (biographical) needs. One participant summarised:

“It’s a choir mostly for converts and fetishists, who are trying to prove something, probably because something their grandparents did… that was very, very bad… nice people nothing against them as individuals… but they’re weirdoes. […] the things that people occupy their time with is insane, like the amount of emails and messages and meetings… for what? About completely made-up problems… we invent problems just to give us something to think about or worry about… it’s insane! So, I left … but if it works for other people that’s fantastic […] I mean there were a lot of layers crazy, like you already have this singing artistic kind and then you are adding all of this identity politics and culture and history and traumatization and victimization on top of the creative artistic thing… that’s a lot of layers of crazy …”

This outside perspective alludes to the ‘plot’ beyond the immediate interactions. I triggered a kind of chemical reaction, between the representations of ‘Israeli’ and ‘German’ as he said, ‘culture’, ‘history’, ‘traumatization’ and beyond. Thus, the underlying issues, wishes and desires exceeded the given structures. I have shown how the encounter and project was most productive, stimulating and even reached utopian potential when it was kept outside of institutionalised structures, when music blurred existing categories and ascriptions, in moments when singers were ‘doing’ (rather than being) the same thing. As the
institutionalisation of the project fostered the reification and establishment of power positions which were largely assigned alongside cultural capital. Thereby categories were re-assigned and reified.

Therefore, the choir could not survive the diverging interest of alternative ‘Jewish’ or syncretic congregation, Hebrew sociality, musical professionalism and interreligious dialogue - all of which were presented and performed with exuberant passion- but had to re-form and re-constitute itself on the basis of a common outlook. The level of emotional involvement in the choir, proved that it took on ‘existential meaning’ for some of its members, which can be understood in relation to their trajectories (Chapter 5/6). Thus, this formation lacked the ‘unifying glue’: while for some, the choir constituted itself as ‘Jewish’ in their own representation of Jewishness, these demands could not be fulfilled by those who wanted it to remain a Hebrew choir. It is this phenomenon that corresponds with a ‘transitive character’ and the ‘mortality’ of the scene (Blum, 2001). In respect to the visited biographies, we have seen that for some Israelis it was the ‘only possible’ way to confront and negotiate tradition and his ‘Israeliness’ and brought them to enter a synagogue space in Berlin. While offering a temporary community structure, it provided what Blum considers the possibility of ‘seeing and being seen’. In this case, I would argue, it also involved ‘being heard’.

Not only could we observe a realm of cultural production, but also one that was a form of ‘spirituality’ and thereby became part of the post-institutional scene, which was individualised fluid and dis-embedded from the institutional Gemeinde. Representing community, spirituality and the like, we must in fact ask whether a Choir can replace a congregation or synagogue. In response to the question at the outset, we see that for some singing Hebrew liturgical songs amounts to a ‘religious’ experience, while for others it is certainly ‘moving’, yet, not ‘religious’ in their understanding of religion as ‘belief’. Thus, it remains subject to individual definition. The ‘drama of the Hebrew choir’ and its ‘plot’ offered a profound understanding of the challenges related to the constitution of Jewishness in Berlin.

7.2 Revisiting Bet Daniel

Although occurring in very different form and garb, the dynamics in the synagogue equally engendered questions over legitimacy, authority and what some participants considered
‘authenticity’. As I have shown, the entanglement with the choir and the efforts to recruit new members, were part of an outreach programme as a response to the institutional ‘demise’.

The synagogue became part of the scene as it connected to the invention of new forms of engaging in synagogue life, *shiurim*, regular *Kiddushim* and offering ‘events’ which ‘fit’ in with urban lifestyles of Berlin. The creation of ‘events’ provide the opportunity ‘to make use’ of the ‘religious offers’ according to personal needs. Apart from the organising team which has committed to this work the majority of attendees makes use of the offer, as part of a larger scene of ‘Jewish events’ without necessarily resulting in long-term commitment. Nonetheless, for some (Yaakov) these ‘events’ are just an ‘add-on’ to his regular Jewish practice, which emerged from the tradition of his family. While this form of practicing religion seems to diverge from conceptions of Judaism as a form of life, I cannot comment on the long-term developments of this kind of religious practice. However, my findings suggest that the synagogue and its way of making itself adaptable to urban life affects people’s lives and sense of community.

At its initiation, consisting of differing Jewish ‘observances’ and ‘orthodoxies’ the *Verein* faced similar challenges to the choir, with conflicting ideas over the direction it should take. However, in the light of the differing trajectories, the dynamics at first appear to concern religious observance and governance, yet on closer analysis, they equally relate to gender hierarchies and the negotiation over legitimacy. Some of the conflicts eventually led more observant members to frequent more orthodox spaces in the city.

The new organisation of the community including the outreach programme was perceived as ‘Judaism as an event’, where the practice does not follow halachic prescriptions and the space is inhabited and governed by individuals who are ‘not literate enough’ in Jewish practice and tradition. Similar claims were voiced by one of my Israeli participants who, in his search for an authentic Judaism in the diaspora, complained about the ‘protestantization of Judaism’. The claim for ‘authentic Judaism’ however went alongside and active ‘consumption’ of the events offered by the synagogue. This is to say, claims and preferences over how the religiously designated space should be managed did not necessarily coincide with personal practice. Rather, it was a particular representation that was expected in a religiously designated space of the synagogue. For others however, as I have shown, it was exactly this openness that allowed them to visit the synagogue and become part of its wider community,
without necessarily taking up observance or becoming a ‘baal t’shuva’. Instead of a ‘return to religion’, the incorporation of religion and tradition was ‘Berlin-specific’. Thus, the synagogue became part of their community networks as migrants. Their presence at the synagogue and the presence of Hebrew (together with German and English) engendered an atmosphere that differed from other synagogue spaces in Berlin.

The presence of ‘migrants to Judaism’ (converts) equally fostered the ‘re-invention of tradition’ of engaging in a reflexive, communicative and sometimes conflictive process with what a synagogue ‘should be. This involved converts as much as (new) migrants bringing with them their own traditions of Jewishness(es). This is far from uncontested: In my ethnography I have shown how hierarchizations among converts function and how the category of the convert is worked by way of distinction practices, of which I myself became part. It was exactly these identity politics, which encouraged Yaakov’s position of ‘being the more inclusive voice’ seeking to get away from hierarchizations and divisions into Jewish, half-Jewish, Russian-Jewish or convert etc. While this appears similar to the Hebrew choir, it is a religiously designated space which acts under the auspices of ‘religious law’, at least formally speaking. The majority of regular attendees at Bet Daniel do not keep an observant life and lifestyle.

Expecting to find orthodox ritual and the observance of halacha there, which is not the case, excludes those members who in fact do keep an ortho-prax lifestyle. We can therefore see that these places are increasingly subject to re-configuration in response to the transformation of urban demographics infused by migration and conversion raising, fundamental questions over tradition and the prospects for Jewish religious life. This is by no means exclusive to Berlin: the question over the future of Jewish life and boundaries equally occupies communities in the US, the UK and other centres with diverse and large Jewish populations. However, it is the positionality and historical trajectory which make these questions specific in Berlin and also more contentious: transformation and change will always be and have to be considered in the light of the Shoah which not only creates an ‘attentive’ non-Jewish outside, but also make questions of conversion very specific. In spite of the differing observance practices, this particular synagogue and its potential to diverge from the norm, attracts individuals for its diversity, for the connecting to political life, working with refugees rather than paying close attention to kashrut certificates. It offers a place for a reflexive concept of tradition, which can also be ‘adopted’. Thus, we certainly diverge from a concept of religion
as ‘belief’ or merely ‘practice’ or ‘religion in the everyday’. Rather, religion ‘takes place’ and connects to the aesthetics and lifestyle of Berlin.

This is not to equate tradition with lifestyle (Inowlocki, 2001) rather, what we seen here is a dynamic tension and negotiation of lifestyle with tradition. This then amounts to a transformation of the concept of Judaism and of religion. Diverging from a Christian notion of ‘belief’, it does not match observance or non-observance either. Neither is it a practice of Reform Judaism, since it was exactly the orthodoxy, the ‘authenticity’ of the prayer held in Hebrew, which marked an importance for the Israeli members. Thus, what we find here, is a dynamic new concept of religious practice that is in tension with biography, history, space and sociality with questions of authority which are resolved collectively as much as individually: a Judaism ‘Berlin-style’.

7.3 Revisiting the ‘Event for the halachically challenged’

It is in the context that we can understand the queer Shabbat event. Acting independent from synagogues, it circumvents certain administrative and structural challenges. The non-religiously designated space allows for a policy of inclusion and openness, which is reduced to a monthly event, without forcing a community structure of inter-dependence. Not only does this offer a ‘queer space’ in the scene by way of its organisers’ sexual orientations, but it also focussed on offering a ritual rather than creating a community from the start. Placing large importance on musical aesthetics, it did not require previous ‘religious’ or ‘musical’ literacy and thereby neither explicitly draws on religious, nor cultural nor symbolic capital. Having said that, due to its organisers it is not entirely detached from the Gemeinde, yet it is financed by international institutions. Thereby, it is one of many initiatives in Berlin that are maintained by international organisations. This not only creates a sense of ‘post-institutional’ structures, (post standing for ‘after’), but also for a transformation of the institution.

7.4 Revisiting Migration and Conversion

After revisiting the stages of complexity, the second part of this thesis has portrayed the trajectories of migrants and converts. Through the narratives, I have shown the processual character of ‘doing being Jewish’ and becoming Jewish. Spanning a spectrum from anti-religious to observant migrants from Israel, I have shown how, Jewishness varies with family
background, previous migration experiences and what significance religious practice (or its absence) took throughout the trajectory.

Through analysing the biographical tension, I have shown how migration is chosen but is equally portrayed and can be understood as an outcome of the individual trajectory. Thereby it is not necessarily the resolution of a crisis, but rather the working, processing, negotiating of issues that steered the biographical trajectory. It is therefore, that we cannot merely understand the migration as agency of reaching towards love and following a partner (Inbal), pursuing an escape from Israel (Tomer), embracing a transnational trajectory and lifestyle, seeking opportunity and individuality (Arbel) or identifying roots and routes as part of a European family ‘heritage’ (Yaakov). Rather we have to understand these decisions as consequences of the biographical trajectory and in correspondence with issues holding the individual ‘tense’. This is a way of meaning making, but, as I have shown, also a product of societal and socio-political processes, the political situation in Israel, its institutions and beyond.

As I have shown, the scene becomes significant in these projects, as it offers ‘stages’ of ‘seeing and being seen’ but also providing ‘home’ and a group of belonging, in the case of the Hebrew choir. Here, identification is closely related to language but also goes beyond it and the musical realm is understood to provide aesthetics of spirituality, which help to find ‘makom’.

For Arbel and Yaakov it is the synagogue, which becomes a primary marker of identification of ‘community’ (sociality), ‘tradition’ and Jewish practice. It is not a Jewish practice as they know it from their families or other places (Israel, the UK, the US) but becomes ‘Berlin-specific’. This engenders a kind of ‘doing being Jewish’ for which place becomes an important component. What is negotiated are the degrees of observance, Jewish practice and Jewishness in the context of ‘Berlin’. That means a position is being negotiated of what ‘fits’ personal values and political (and ethical) outlooks in correspondence with the social and aesthetic environment. The trajectories portrayed here engage in an act of symbolic and spatial distancing: not only does Berlin - Europe – hold the promise of happiness and a better life, it also promises to hold the freedom to choose the ‘kind of life one wants to live’ and the kind of Jew wants to be’. Entering the scene offers the promise of re-thinking one’s heritage
and tradition, the significance of the Hebrew language and ‘Jewish’ aesthetic. Yet, the specific constellation of Berlin also confronts one with specific representations of Jewishness and Germanness and thereby limit the amount of to choose, or, as one of my participants put it ‘make you Jewish, if you want to, or not’.

As for the converts, I have shown that symbolic distancing is, non-spatial but symbolic: it is performed and narrated and offers the possibility to become something different. I have shown that it is enmeshed with erotic desire and sexuality. For my sample and the representatives of the judaizing milieu, converting to Judaism is not an unlikely option, but ties in with their socialisation. My study has shown that conversion processes have to find ways of studying conversion in its full temporal spectrum.

This brings me to the question of bringing together the process of conversion and migration. Can we simply understand migration as a conversion to a different place and conversion as a matter of migrating non-spatially? As I have shown, the causes for migration and conversion can be similar, for example, love and attraction, symbolic (and spatial) distancing or the quest for rootedness, home and ‘homing desire’. They entail processes of acculturation, learning a new language and adopting a culture, outside of the one in which one has been reared. The process of conversion and that of migration entail the feeling of being out of place, uncertainty and ambivalences questions of home and belonging, in short, a liminal position which both migrants and converts have described. I have further shown that both groups negotiate – if not reject – their given and ascribed identities as ‘Jewish’, ‘Israeli’ or ‘German’ and sometimes actively contest them by taking on a new one or contest and existing one. The act of symbolic distancing can further evoke a double consciousness – reflecting one’s position through the eyes of the surrounding society, discursive structures or even one’s family. For the converts, this is deeply intertwined and entangled with inter-generational feelings of guilt and shame in relation to the Nazi past.

While we can understand both processes as one of ‘biographical turns’ following desires and inner wishes, and as a fundamental transformation, the position of someone born Jewish and migrating to Berlin is also fundamentally distinct. As I have shown, ‘doing being Jewish’ means a constant and continuous reflexive process of one’s own position in relation to traditions that are emotionally attached to family or life in Israel and beyond. Being Israeli and ‘being Jewish’ is not a matter of ‘just leaving’ one’s identity and place of belonging as
Inbal’s trajectory suggested when leaving the kibbutz. Her trajectory exemplifies the confrontation with one’s ‘heritage’ when arriving in Berlin where ‘Jewishness’ and ‘Israeliness’ are constantly conflated. In a very different qualitative level, this is also true for getting away from ‘being German, yet the converts are in the position to ‘choose’ their ‘becoming Jewish’, which fundamentally differs from the migrants portrayed here.

If ‘doing being Jewish’ carries the tension of finding one’s position in Berlin – between past, present and future – then this correspond with a sociality and scene that is not fixed, but open and transitive in character. As I have demonstrated, the openness of the scene bears potential, but also the danger of reification of categories. Despite the differing positions of Jewish migrants and converts to Judaism, I have demonstrated that together they enable a process of a new kind of Jewishness, one that is no longer fixed to Judaism, but to practices that put urban lifestyle – tradition – political positionality and relationships (gender and sexuality) in dynamic tension.

7.5 Concluding Thoughts and Outlook

Considering the scope of my research project, this thesis has only allowed to present a snapshot of this dynamic ever-increasing diversifying field. Nonetheless, I demonstrated how the scene constitutes itself as Jewish through a complex combination of historical and socio-political pathways of migrants and converts who enter the process and (re-) invent tradition together in the space of Berlin. I have shown that the scene that establishes itself is infused by this diversity, individual biographical trajectories and the specific spaces. Through the ‘theatricality’ of the scene it is one of performing positionalities and temporarily enacting a plot which goes beyond actual situations. Through providing the trajectory of the scene, I have provided the background to this plot and have, therefore, enabled a ‘rapprochement’ towards the understanding of a realm infused by complexity, uncertainty and ambivalence resonating with gender and sexuality and nationality and religion.

Instead of a ‘New European Jewry’ we might rather think of a new ‘urban Jewishness’ one that is embedded in history and corresponds with place, that is equally transnational and not fixed to one framework only, but rather is flexible in their forms. The research on the ‘Jewish’ scene of Berlin opens up a plethora of further research directions. Further research needs to be done concerning the ‘eventization’ of religion and its interactions with existing
institutions and migration in the German context and beyond. Another compelling follow-up study could look into the workings of sex and sexuality and religion, particular conversion in more detail, such as the negotiation of religion and tradition in intermarriage. In this work, I could only allude to the effects of the new migration and arrival of refugees on Jews and Judaism in Berlin. Yet, its effects on the Jewish communities needs further attention.

Stepping outside of the national context, future research could look into a comparative perspective of Jewish scenes in major global centres in the US in order to underline or relativize the specifics of the German environment. This research opens up a plethora of new paths and dimensions in the study of urban and cosmopolitan life.
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