

# New Jewish Life in Germany (2008)

## Abstract

In this recorded conversation, Susan Sideropoulos, her husband Jakob Shtizweg, and his sister Ina compare their experiences of growing up Jewish in (West) Germany from the late 1980s to 2008. All three live in Berlin, which has been one of the centers of Jewish life in Germany at least since the nineteenth century. After reunification in 1990, the Jewish community in Berlin, as in some other urban centers, experienced a revival, especially as a result of immigration from the former Soviet Union. According to the Central Council of Jews in Germany, there are now 105 Jewish communities with a total of approximately 100,000 members in Germany.

## Source

“Some people look at me as if I were an alien.”

Susan Sideropoulos, TV actress, 26, Berlin

Jakob Shtizweg, event manager, 27, Berlin

Ina Shtizweg, travel agent, 28, Berlin

[...]

**Susan:** [...] My grandparents fled from the Nazis to Palestine in 1938, but they returned in 1952. They always felt like Germans. My mother was eight when the family came back to Hamburg. It was here that she later met my father, he is Greek.

**Jakob:** My parents immigrated to Israel from Kishinev in 1979. My mother was pregnant with me at that time, and she already had two babies. My brother is two years, my sister only eleven months older than me. The start was difficult for the family. My father was immediately drafted into the army, and because he didn't know the language, he could only find work in a factory afterwards. But my father had an idea. He was a butcher by trade, and he opened a butcher shop in the north, in Acre, selling unkosher products. It was a scandal, the newspapers reported it, but it was also a huge success. He was soon able to open a second shop and actually wanted to expand all over Israel with a chain. But after the 1982 war, for which he had been recruited again, he had made himself a promise: Once I have saved enough money, I will leave this country. He had three children and knew that they all had to serve in the military at some point. When the time was right in 1987, he sold everything and went with us to West Berlin. He did not take this step lightly, we were doing well, but he did it for us children.

**Ina:** In Berlin he was not so lucky in business. He failed with a fast food restaurant. I don't think the time was ripe for it. He offered a kind of kebab made of mutton, an idea he had brought from Israel. Today you see such shops on every street corner. But back then people didn't get it.

**Jakob:** My father then gained a foothold in the arcade business. He worked as a cashier and changer, my mother too, and then he went into business for himself. Today he owns a few arcades himself.

**Ina:** We were still children when we came to Berlin. I was nine, Jakob seven and a half. We learned the language quickly, after only one year we could speak perfect German. But that was also because our parents always taught us not to speak Hebrew on the street. We lived in Moabit, where there also were many Turks and Arabs, and I

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think they were just afraid for us.

**Jakob:** My circle of friends at that time consisted mainly of Turks and Arabs, I was always hanging out with them on the street. When I was ten, I once told a Turkish friend that I was Jewish, and I remember how he reacted. He looked at me, totally shocked, and said: "My parents say Jews are very bad people." From then on, I never talked about being Jewish again. I never mentioned it again until I was ready to prepare for my bar mitzvah.

I can say today that for me Judaism is more an education than a religion. For me, the six months I worked for the bar mitzvah had a tremendous effect. Which of course was also because we had a great teacher. Before that I had been a huge mess, I never wanted to study, I was in a gang, I wanted to be a small-time criminal. Through the Bar Mitzvah I got into a completely different circle, and the friends I made there practically opened the door to Judaism for me again. I also went back to the synagogue, got to know even more people there, and over time a clique formed that still holds together today.

**Ina:** I also rediscovered my Jewishness when Jakob had his bar mitzvah. He practically brought religion back home. My parents once put us in a Jewish dance group when we were little, but they didn't accept us. We came home crying, and finally our parents took us out again. After this negative experience, I forgot my whole Jewish or Israeli mentality for a while, and my parents never pushed us to do anything. From birth they made us realize that we are Jewish, that they did. They said: "It is our tradition. We are not religious, but God is in our heart. What you decide to do with it later is your business." And of course they were happy when Jacob started to become very active in the community.

**Jakob:** Yes, that was the next step in my development. I started to work with children and later also with young people. I was an educator, had my own group and then went regularly to the *machanot*, which are summer camps for young Jews.

**Susan:** We met at one of these camps, in South Tyrol. I was 15, he 16. The idea of *machanot* is very old, its origin is in the kibbutz movement. My mother had already taken part in it, and she sent me there for the first time when I was eight. As a child I must have been to a camp like this about 20 times, later I became a camp counselor myself. The nice thing about this idea is that the children are taught Jewish identity in a playful way, completely without pressure, with a lot of fun. The older you get, the more interesting the topics and projects become. But what is even more important is the feeling of togetherness and the communication of values. You learn to be helpful, to take responsibility, to be there for each other. And of course you get to know an incredible number of people. Friendships develop that you can fall back on later in life at any time. It is like a network.

**Jakob:** Youth work is of course also about historical topics. Before commemoration days we developed programs to prepare the children. I think Jewish children have a special responsibility towards their history. When the Second World War or the Holocaust is dealt with in class, the whole class always turns its attention to the Jewish girl or boy. And we also know that at some point every Jewish youth has problems with their identity.

**Susan:** No.

**Jakob:** How can you say something like that ...

**Susan:** I didn't have problems.

**Jakob:** But think of the children at summer camp, every other one could tell a story from school.

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**Ina:** You always had to defend yourself somehow, Jakob is right about that. I felt it very much. When I transferred to another school in the eighth grade, it was great at the beginning. Everyone was interested, asked who this new girl was. At some point I told them that I came from Israel, and that was like pressing a button for all the boys in the class to see me as a victim and to terrorize me. I was 14, and that time shaped me for life, that was real terror. "Fucking Jewess, you are all pigs, you should all have been gassed, it's a pity that Hitler didn't manage that" – it went on and on. And it didn't just come from Arab youths. There were also Germans, and an English boy who had fascist parents.

I cried a lot back then, and at some point I went to the principal and complained. The woman just said: It's your own fault. You lose your temper too fast, you have to stay calm, pay no attention to them.

**Susan:** I am really shocked.

**Jakob:** You grew up in a completely different milieu. We were at a *Hauptschule*, you at a *Gesamtschule*. And you have your Greek last name. One doesn't immediately know that you are Jewish.

**Susan:** Sure, when people asked me, I just said: "I'm German." But I was aware from the beginning, since I can think clearly, that I am Jewish, too. My mom made sure of that. She taught me the basics, sent me to Jewish religious instruction, and she celebrated all the holidays with us. The holidays, that was the most important thing for my mom, that was the cohesion of the family. We went to the synagogue, and on the Shabbat we all sat around a big table.

But then my grandparents died first, and when I was 16, my mother died too. I was not able to continue the Shabbat gathering. I was too young.

**Jakob:** Judaism is an extremely positive religion. It teaches you that you can do anything you want in life. It's all within you, you have the power to change the whole world. As an educator, I taught my kids that, and at some point I realized that I first have to live it out for myself before I preach about it to others. That's why, after my training as a hotel and catering specialist, I went back to school and took the *Abitur*, it was hell. For someone like me, who barely managed to make it through school, it was torture. But I made it, also with the help of my Turkish friend who kept pushing me. Afterwards I studied marketing and communication and thought long and hard about what I should do with my life.

[...]

**Ina:** I was 14 when I found my way back into Jewish life through Jacob. Suddenly there was a world again that I had missed, a piece of home, and through this I also rediscovered Israel. When I was 15, I began to annoy my parents: "I want to go back to Israel." My parents insisted that I finish my education first, but after I toured Israel during the holidays, there was no stopping me. I started an apprenticeship as a hairdresser in Berlin, but my head was in Israel, and after half a year I left. In Eilat I entered the tourism industry and realized: This is my life, I want to do this. But then the attacks came, the tourists didn't come, I was laid off. After four years in Israel, I returned to Germany. My heart is still there, I am at home there, I love Israel. It is a wonderful country, the people are wonderful, but life is harder than here. There are guards everywhere, you have to undergo security checks, many things are difficult. But what I noticed positively was that many young Israelis are now interested in visiting Germany after their time in army. That was different in the past. There were big prejudices and still the fear of the Nazis.

**Jakob:** I must honestly say that to this day I still think carefully when someone asks me where I come from. I

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would never say immediately: "From Israel." There is just such an unconscious fear, which I got from my father. He always said: "There are many enemies, careful you're your identity." We lived on the ground floor and we never dared put a mezuzah at the door. When I asked my father why we couldn't, he'd say, "Why provoke someone? Let's leave it alone, we are fine the way we live and we will regret it if something happens. If someone smashes our windows, we will start to live in fear. We know who we are, we carry it in our hearts, we don't have to display it outwardly."

**Ina:** We are not afraid to walk down Kurfürstendamm wearing the Star of David. It's a different matter in Neukölln or Kreuzberg though, where there have already been serious attacks.

**Susan:** I have never had a problem with my identity, and I just don't want to have a problem with it. I'm struggling to keep it a secret. Sure, my dad is sometimes scared since I've become a public figure. For him it was a problem that I was always open about it. He said: "Really, do you have to mention it in the interview?" But when I'm asked, I don't want to deny my Jewish heritage. You also want to educate people, that's the only way forward. I'm a German Jew, and I want to make it clear that it works. That there's no contradiction between being German and Jewish. I also have a national pride when it comes to Germany. I think the country has really achieved a lot and has a lot to offer. Of course, we must not forget what happened. But education does not mean condemning the present generation. We must not categorically reject the issue, you have to create a connection between Germans and Jews, and that is what I am trying to do.

**Jakob:** I am still shocked when I meet people who say to me: "I have never seen a Jew before." In my work this happens sometimes, they look at me as if I was an alien. But I see a lot of things very positively. For example, Susan's brother is married to a Turkish woman, and my best friends include a Kurd and two Palestinians who were at our wedding. I think this is the future. This is the way it should be.

Source of the German original text: Jürgen Bertram, *Wer baut, der bleibt. Neues jüdisches Leben in Deutschland*. Frankfurt a. M.: Fischer, 2008, pp. 103-112.

Translation: GHI staff

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