

# Contemporary German-Jewish writing and publishing in Germany

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Session VII-4

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My topic is contemporary German-Jewish writers and publishing in present-day Germany. The presentation will give a selective overview of a new generation of Jewish authors and publishing in Germany today.

In 1945 it was unimaginable to many that there could ever be another Jewish community in Germany. The Jewish community was destroyed that had existed before the war. The devastation that European Jews suffered at the hands of Nazi Germany and its collaborators was on such a horrifying scale that it seemed neither possible nor desirable for Jews to remain among Germans. <sup>1</sup>But the fact is that a solid, thriving community developed over the last decades with its own institutions, a diverse cultural life, a growing self-confidence, and a voice that is heard frequently on a wide range of topics. <sup>2</sup>

The Jewish community in today's Germany is still a fraction of the size of the prewar community of about 570,000 Jews. Today an estimated 120,000 German citizen of Jewish descent live in Germany, and it is one of the fastest growing Jewish communities worldwide. 88,000 were registered members of the Jewish community in 2004. Jews are not counted as minorities and do not show up in statistics about foreigners in Germany, because, for the most part, they are German citizens. <sup>3</sup> The majority of the members of the Jewish community are no longer Jews of German ancestry. During the last 10 years more than 50,000 Jews from the former Soviet Union immigrated to Germany.

Most of the post war literature published in Germany by Jewish writers before the 1980s consists of autobiographical accounts of the Shoah or life in exile. The first generation after the Shoah testified and bore witness: the Nobel price winner Nelly Sachs (1891-1970), the poet Paul Celan (1920-1970), the author Jurek Becker (1937 – 1997), etc.

A growing number of second and third generation German Jewish authors began to write in the 1980s or 1990s. They were born at the end of the war or after 1945 and they live in Germany or write in German. They successfully contribute to the literary scene and are very often perceived as representatives of Jewish culture. <sup>4</sup>

The anthology "*Contemporary Jewish writing in Germany*"<sup>5</sup> presents a collection of translations of the most prominent German Jewish writers in Germany today. Under the editorship of Sander L. Gilman at the University of Illinois, similar anthologies from other countries (Great Britain and Ireland, Austria, Poland, South Africa, Germany, Switzerland, Hungary, and Canada) have been published since 1998. This volume on contemporary Jewish writing in Germany is edited by two professors of German studies at the University of Minnesota and Mount Holyoke. It presents short stories written by Katja Behrens, Maxim Biller, Esther Dischereit and Barbara Honigmann. With this anthology for most of these authors their work is introduced to an English speaking audience for the first time.

The following slides will briefly present and introduce several prominent German Jewish writers and their works: the authors Barbara Honigmann, Viola Roggenkamp, Rafael Seligmann, Esther Dischereit, Katja Behrens, and Maxim Biller began to write about their lives in present day Germany in the 1980s and 1990s.

## THE WRITERS, THEIR WORKS, AND TOPICS

**Katja Behrens**, born in Berlin in 1942, escaped Nazi persecution by hiding with her family in Austria. They returned to Germany in 1945. She published a number of short stories, essays, novels, young adult books, as well as non-fiction books to an array of topics – such as a biography of the life of Helen Keller. Many of her books address German-Jewish topics, but not all of them. One of her most recent publications was a contribution to the book “*Ich bin geblieben – Warum?*” (I stayed, why?) which she edited. It contains a collection of essays by prominent Jews in German society that address the situation of Jews living in Germany.<sup>6</sup> She shares with other German-Jewish writers the concern not to determine places and names – in “*Arthur Mayer oder das Schweigen*” which was translated into English, place names and proper names are only presented by first letters. People and places are not fixed but instead are floating endlessly in a sea of possibilities.<sup>7 8</sup>

The journalist and writer **Rafael Seligmann** was born in Israel in 1947. He moved to Germany when he was 10 years old. He studied history and politics in Tel-Aviv and Munich, where he now lives and works as a writer. He was the founder and editor-in-chief of the Jewish newspaper *Juedische Zeitung* (which was published between 1985 and 1991). His articles appear regularly in German media. He is the author of the German-Jewish novels “*Rubinstein’s Versteigerung*” (Rubinstein’s auction) and “*Die jiddische Mamme*.”<sup>9</sup>

**Viola Roggenkamp**, born in 1948, works as an author and journalist for prominent German newspapers such as *Die Zeit*, *die taz* und die *Allgemeine Jüdische Zeitung*. She lives in Hamburg after having spent several years in Asia and Israel. She published her first novel in 2004 “*Familienleben*” (Family life.) “ She comes from a German-Jewish family and knows the circumstances of Jews living in Germany after the war very well, which she reflects in her first novel. Parts of this novel were published as an audio book.<sup>10</sup>

**Barbara Honigmann** was born in East Berlin in 1949, the daughter of socialists who returned to the German Democratic Republic after the war. She is one of the few German Jewish writers, who became observant. She joined the small Jewish community in East Germany in 1976. In 1984 she left the former GDR and moved to Strasbourg in France where she currently lives with her family. Her novels “*Roman von einem Kinde*” (*Novel of a child*) (1989), “*Eine Liebe aus Nichts*” (*A love made of nothing*) (1991), “*Soharas Reise*” (*Zohara’s journey*) (1996), “*Am Sonntag spielt der Rabbi Fussball*” (*On Sundays the Rabbi plays soccer*) (1998), “*Damals, dann, danach*” (*back then, then and after*) (1999) explore her life in France, her families past and her growing distance from Germany.

In her contribution to a collection of essays which were published under the title “*Nach der Shoa geboren – juedische Frauen in Deutschland*” (Born after the Shoah Jewish women in Germany)<sup>11</sup> Honigmann describes her complicated status as a German Jew living in the former GDR, a daughter of former emigrants who did not primarily identify as being Jewish. “*Realistically I was in search of a minimum of Jewish identity in my life, of a natural passing of years - not according to the Christian calendar, but according to the Jewish calendar, and a discussion about Jewish culture beyond the constant discourse about anti-semitism – a minimum, which I would still say today, which would work for my life between the worlds - but that was asking to much under German conditions.*”<sup>12</sup> In her novels Honigmann addresses the dilemma of navigating Jewish, German, and female identity. Her search for Jewish identity incorporates the experiences of her parents and her attempts to solve the mysteries of her family’s past.<sup>13</sup>

Barbara Honigmann was awarded the 2004 Koret Jewish Book award for the English translation of *A love made out of nothing* and *Zohara’s Journey*, her first books translated into English.<sup>14</sup>

**Esther Dischereit** was born in West Germany in 1952 and lives in Berlin. Her Jewish mother survived in hiding, her father was a non-Jewish German. Esther Dischereit is a prolific writer of poems, novels, plays and essays, and has played a prominent literary and cultural role in

Germany since the 1980s. Drawing on her own biography, Dischereit describes the experience of growing up Jewish in postwar Germany, a situation she has termed 'simply improbable, unreal as it were'. Her groundbreaking novel *Joemis Tisch* (1988) examines notions of Jewish-German identity from the perspective of women living in the shadow of the Holocaust.

Esther Dischereit's work explores the longing to escape the perceived burden of being Jewish, a weight that she feels has been placed on her in part by non-Jewish Germans and by the events of the Holocaust.

Dischereit takes up the challenge to deconstruct the meaning of Jewishness in contemporary Germany while at the same time criticizing the German obsession with Jewish culture. She makes fun at the fascination in the German media for things Jewish, but she laments the lack of insight into the meaning of the Shoah and the tremendous loss of life and heritage for Jews.<sup>15</sup>

In her works, she "presents Jews not as outsiders to German society but as major participants within that society where Jewishness or Germanness are but two markers of identity" as Leslie Morris and Karen Remmler write in their introduction to *Contemporary Jewish Writing in Germany*.<sup>16</sup> Esther Dischereit is also one of Germany's most well-respected feminist writers.

**Maxim Biller**, was born into a Russian Jewish family in Prague in 1960 and immigrated with his family to Hamburg when he was 10 years old. He studied German literature and journalism in Munich and writes regularly for *Die Zeit*, *Tempo* and other literary and political journals. He has published several collections of essays and short stories.

Biller's works are biting satires of the relationship between Jews and modern-day Germans. In his works, the perpetrator/victim roles seem etched in stone. He has become one of the most provocative writers in Germany today. He breaks taboos, and he imparts a language inconsistent with traditional "Jewish" writing. He has tapped a nerve in Germany that has literary critics both condemning and celebrating his work.<sup>17</sup>

This was a brief overview and introduction. Many of the German-Jewish writers of the second or third generation were born in East or West Germany at the end or after the war or grew up in Germany as children. They write in German, and are or are about to be discovered by non-German speaking publishing houses and readers. Many of them lived their entire life or important parts of their lives in Germany. Most of them had a secular up-bringing, but they have nonetheless strong Jewish identities.<sup>18</sup> Many are ambivalent towards official, mostly religious Jewish organizations in Germany. Their decision to remain in or to leave Germany is also a statement about their complex German and Jewish identity, which is shaped by a continuously difficult relationship that persists between Germans and Jews.

Their writings address a multitude of topics: from children's books over historical portraits over sensitive personal poetry to contemporary political, feminist topics, personal and generational conflicts, etc. Many books address especially the context of the German-Jewish writer in contemporary Germany: They offer interesting reflections on German-Jewish relations today as well as Jewish identity in Germany, gender roles, emigration, conflicts between generations, sexuality, etc. The stories reveal how heavy the burden of a traumatic history remains for the descendants of victims of the Holocaust. However, instead of being mournful and gloomy, these stories are sometimes even humorous reflections on German and Jewish approaches to memory, suppression and on the bizarre aspects of Jewish life in a country that only two generations ago planned for the annihilation of an entire people.<sup>19</sup>

Some topics are often addressed

- **HOME / Being at home in Germany: Living in Germany after the Shoah : Galut vs. Diaspora** (the voluntary dispersion of the Jews vs. the involuntary exile of the Jews)

The experiences of the second and third generation after the Shoah differ from those of their parents and grandparents. Some Jews have remained voluntarily after the Shoah, and many have emigrated to Germany later and made it their homeland of choice. Yet, there is also a "diasporic" consciousness due to the sense of isolation from mainstream German culture.<sup>20 21</sup> Many writers

address the strangeness living in a country where the absence of Jews drives political decisions, cultural identities, and social interactions. The example of Barbara Honigmann shows a writer who writes in German but from a safe distance in France where she explores and experiments with the religious Jewish heritage and searches for ways of expressing her newfound Jewish religious identity.

- **SHOAH: personal family history & societal commemoration**

The Shoah definitely plays an important role in most of the writers' self-understanding as Jewish writers living in Germany, but their identities are not only defined by the Holocaust. A common theme in their writings is the search for the personal family history and possible family ties that might have survived despite the silence of the parent generation, the fragmentation and destruction of the Jewish community in Germany. The second and third generation has no first hand memory of the Shoah, but is highly aware of the importance of its remembrance in contemporary Germany and its impact on relations among Germans, Jews, and others living in the now unified nation. Many however criticize the "fetishized commemorative practice that embrace nostalgic images of Jewish culture and that have resulted in a confused mixture of remembering a rich culture in a void through voyeurism and nostalgia. At times Jewish culture becomes reduced to Yiddish theater and Klezmer music, Jewish cemeteries, kosher delis and guided tours of past and present Jewish sites" <sup>22</sup> -- For many Jews, living in contemporary Germany means juggling the remembrance of the past while building a future in which Jewish communities become a vital part of German Society without being marginalized.<sup>23</sup>

- **IDENTITY: German & Jewish identity and self-perception (after the German re-unification)**

Barbara Honigmann wrote in an essay "*I am also a writer, and one can say lightly, a Jewish one. But I am not so sure about that, because what I have said does not make me into a Jewish writer. It means that I belong existentially more to Jewish culture than to the German one, but culturally I belong to Germany and to nothing else. It sounds paradoxical, but I am a German writer. Although I do not feel being German and I have not lived in Germany for years*"<sup>24</sup>. This statement shows the unease and ambivalence of the integration of German and Jewish identity. <sup>25</sup>

- **MIRROR: Observing the German society**

Many of the texts address the difficulties of the German society in dealing with living Jews. They address the strange situation of being Jewish in Germany and observing the Germans observing Jewish life in Germany today. <sup>26</sup>

Conclusion: The diversity of the writings shows the heterogeneity of Jewish life in Germany today. Since Jews comprise only a marginal percent of the German population, the reception of the work of Jewish writers and journalists is foremost by Germans. <sup>27</sup>

Jewish writers often face an ambiguous position. They carry the voice of authenticity that testifies to Germany's crimes during the Holocaust and therefore also to the politics of ritualized remembrance. Their works very often do not follow the tacitly expected script of Jews-as-victims. Their writings show that they cannot be reduced to this formula.

## **PUBLISHING**

Many major German publishing houses started Jewish literature series, which show that there is a strong market interest in Germany. Their programs include reprints of Pre-war German-Jewish authors, translations of Jewish authors outside of Germany, as well as new works by authors living in Germany or writing in German. There is also a number of publishing houses which exclusively focus on Jewish topics and authors.

In the framework of this presentation I want to briefly introduce 3 major Jewish publishing houses in Germany.

The **Jüdischer Verlag** was re-opened in Berlin in 1958. Since 1990 it belongs to the renowned German Suhrkamp Verlag. Currently the Juedische Verlag has around 100 titles in print among them various reprints of standard works like the Philo Lexikon, the Juedisches Lexikon, the Goldmann Talmud which is still the standard German translation of the Talmud, then works by e.g. Gershom Scholem, the poet Else Lasker-Schueler, and the German translations of books by the Nobel Prize winner Samuel Josef Agnon. It also publishes a series of photo books of Jewish sites in major European cities, and then German translations of books by e.g. historians such as Arthur Hertzberg, Sander L. Gilman, Israeli authors like Amos Oz, Lizzie Doron, as well as memoirs.<sup>28</sup>

The original Juedischer Verlag was founded in Berlin in 1902 several months after the philosopher Martin Buber demanded the establishment of a publishing house at the 5th Zionist Congress. Among the founders and initiators were also Chaim Weizmann and the illustrator E.M. Lilien. The first Juedische Verlag existed until 1938 and published scholarly works on Jewish issues, as well as German Jewish literature, Zionist publications and a broad variety of translations from Hebrew and Yiddish literature. The best-known works are the 5-volume *Jüdisches Lexikon* and the Goldschmidt Talmud translation, the first complete German translation of the Babylonian Talmud. The *Jüdischer Verlag* also produced the pioneering ten-volume *World History of the Jewish People*, by Russian-Jewish historian Simon Dubnow. (Dubnow was living in Berlin from 1922-1933 and had originally written this work in Russian. However, it first appeared in its German translation.)<sup>29 30</sup>

The publishing house **Philo & Philo Fine Arts, Berlin**, is a publishing house for Judaica, politics, philosophy, and art. It is not the legal successor of the former Philo Verlag, the publishing house of the Central-Vereins deutscher Staatsbürger jüdischen Glaubens which was founded 1919 and closed 1938. The “new” Philo Verlag tries to establish a connection to the tradition of the first Philo Verlag, e.g. reprint of the Philo Atlas from 1938.<sup>31</sup> The Philo Verlag represents ca. 370 titles in its program, among them many reprints and translations of Jewish authors.

The **Jüdische Verlagsanstalt Berlin** (Jewish Publication Society of Berlin) was founded in October 1999. Editor in Chief is Rabbi Walter Homolka of Frankfurt on behalf of the Union of Progressive Jews in Germany, Austria and Switzerland. Their goal is to provide books and educational materials for the emerging liberal Jewish congregations in German-speaking countries: for children and adults alike. At the moment the Juedische Verlagsanstalt has ca. 60 titles in its program<sup>32</sup>

Quite often the marketing of this literature emphasizes the Jewish identity of the authors even when the texts themselves do not concern themselves with Jewish topics. The “Jewish” content or biography of the author is highlighted in the press releases and reviews. Publishing houses must anticipate that emphasizing the Jewish identity of an author, whether the author accepts this designation or not, has a strong impact on the sale and reception of the book.

As Dischereit comments in her essay “*Kein Ausgang aus diesem Judentum*” (*No exit from this Jewry*) (1994)<sup>33</sup> publishers have a difficult time categorizing her work when the “Jewish” content is treated in conjunction with other issues of identity or when the images require a different view of “the Jew.” She calls for a recognition that Jews are contributing to German culture not as outsiders or as Mitbuerger (fellow citizens) but as Germans.

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- <sup>18</sup> *Contemporary Jewish writing in Germany* : an anthology / ed. by Leslie Morris & Karen Remmler. (Lincoln : University of Nebraska Press, 2002), 3
- <sup>19</sup> Baer, Ulrich. Review of *Contemporary Jewish writing in Germany*. *Library Journal* 2002 ; available from <http://www.amazon.de/exec/obidos/ASIN/0803239408/qid%3D1115000184/028-3671141-0550155>
- <sup>20</sup> Zipes, Jack. Book review of *Jews in Today's German Culture* ; available from [http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_m2220/is\\_n3\\_v38/ai\\_18796181](http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m2220/is_n3_v38/ai_18796181)
- <sup>21</sup> *Contemporary Jewish writing in Germany*, 27.
- <sup>22</sup> *Ibid.* , 26.
- <sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.
- <sup>24</sup> *Nach der Shoa geboren : juedische Frauen in Deutschland* / Jessica Jacoby...[et al.], (Hrsg.) Berlin : Elefant Press, 1994, 39 - 40
- <sup>25</sup> *Contemporary Jewish writing in Germany*), 8.
- <sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.
- <sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.
- <sup>28</sup> <http://www.suhrkamp.de/home/jv.htm>
- <sup>29</sup> <http://www.gwu.edu/gelman/spec/kiev/treasures/verlag.html>
- <sup>30</sup> Anatol Schenker: *Der Jüdische Verlag 1902 - 1938 : zwischen Aufbruch, Blüte und Vernichtung* . Tübingen : Niemeyer, 2003. Basel, Univ., Diss., 2000.
- <sup>31</sup> *PHILO-Atlas Handbuch für die jüdische Auswanderung*. Kommentierter Reprint der Ausgabe von 1938. Bodenheim: Philo, 1998
- <sup>32</sup> <http://www.juedische-verlagsanstalt.de/buecher/lieferbar.htm>
- <sup>33</sup> Dischereith, Esther “Kein Ausgang aus diesem Judentum” in: Dischereith Esther: *Uebungen, juedisch zu sein*. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1998.