

**Perplexing practices and  
the ambiguous position of German converts to Judaism**

In this paper I draw on my research on a new Jewish Israeli Scene in Berlin. Here, I examine Migrants predominantly from Israel to Berlin as well as converts to Judaism and the making of new ways of living and practicing Jewishness in the German capital: in short, new ways of becoming Jewish in Berlin. In this paper, I want to look at the way non-Jewish German converts to Judaism negotiate the intersection of race and religion. That is, the biographical turn of becoming Jewish as a new identity in relation to the adoption of a religion and culture, which was once racialized in Germany some 80 years ago when Jews were persecuted and systematically killed by the Nazis and their collaborators.

Through the example of the converts, I demonstrate that these forms of racialization do not just disappear over time but continue to shape images and imaginaries of non-Jews about Jews while co-existing with an active religious practice of Judaism. I am examining how individuals negotiate this tension in the context of their conversion and adoption of Judaism as a religion, often in relation to a Jewish partner, while continuing to hold internalized stereotypes towards Jews and Jewishness. The tension examined here, on the one hand, stems from the nature of Judaism and Jewishness which – as Daniel and Jonathan Boyarin put it – *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). Thus, converting to Judaism entails much more than merely adopting a religious practice. It also entails the idea of becoming part of ‘a people’.

On the other hand, we see how the German societal context affects this transformation and new identity construction being faced with the negotiation of one’s Germanness and internalized stereotypes. Thus, I argue that the non-Jewish Germans who are becoming Jewish are necessarily confronted with the intersection of race and religion. The observation of this intersection then has wider implications – especially in relation to the possible ambivalences and contradictions created by the intertwinement of race and religion.

## Background

This paper draws on my ethnography of a newly emerging Jewish-Hebrew scene of Berlin.<sup>1</sup> Here, Jewish and Hebrew life is populated by migrants and converts and constitutes itself by processes of migration and conversion. I construe a sociological scene which is organised around different events and initiatives in order to cater for the demands of a ‘super-diverse’ Jewish population. This diversity largely stems from different migration flows, lately especially from Israel.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, constructions and narratives of Jewishness in “the scene” are further diversified by the presence German converts to Judaism. At the heart of my ethnography lies the method of biographical-narrative interviews of which I conducted around 60 with Jewish migrants to Berlin and non-Jewish Germans who converted or were in the process or modes of conversion to Judaism.<sup>3</sup>

## Conversion and Becoming Jewish

“*Why do people convert?*” asks Talal Asad in his “Comments on Conversion” (Asad in Van der Veer, 1996:236). And indeed, the somewhat simply 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 is believed to have a ‘before’ and an ‘after’. Thereby, it holds the promise of becoming something different.

The turn to Judaism appears to be a following of desires, whether represented by a partner, the symbolic representation of the Hebrew language or a specific cultural realm connected to Israel, or as a way to escape a particular identity category, in this case “Germanness”. Rather than perceiving of ‘conversion’ as the resolution of a locatable biographical crisis, as some researchers suggest (Wohlrab-Sahr, 1999), I relate it to “biographical tensions”, which become entangled with context-specific representations of Judaism and Jewishness in Germany. Following Asad, it is indeed the context that makes the convert and shapes the act

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<sup>1</sup> This ethnography is based on my PhD entitled “Contesting the Secular and Converting Space in Berlin? Becoming Jewish in an urban scene.” (Cambridge, 2019).

<sup>2</sup> After the extensive post-Soviet immigration to Germany in the early 1990s, over the past decade Jewish-Israeli migration to Berlin has witnessed a tremendous growth. 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’ (Rau, 2019).

<sup>3</sup> My research comprised about 60 biographical-narrative interviews out of which I analyzed 20 in close detail.

of conversion (Asad in van der Veer, 1996)

In my work, I am developing a distinct approach to the understanding of conversion arguing that looking at religiously ‘authorized’ converts only, fundamentally limits our understanding of the complexity of conversion processes in general. Secondly, looking at ‘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 in my study negotiate and **symbolically distance** (Rau, 2019) themselves from ‘being German’ seeking to become Jewish, Jews and Jewishness become an object of desire. Due to the ambivalence and uncertainty attached to becoming Jewish for non-Jewish Germans, I show how the positioning as a convert evokes distinction processes in order to establish a position within the field. Thirdly, I argue that Conversion cannot only be understood as a matter of changing religions, but as a trans-formation, intersecting with various identity categories, among others sexuality and gender. This then brings us closer to an exoticising process of an object of desire, and allow us to come closer to an understanding of race and religion.

### **Conversion to Judaism in Germany post-1945**

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).<sup>4</sup> The religious ritual of conversion to Judaism includes both, a bodily transformative process and a ‘religious’ confession of the convert committing to embrace the yoke of the mitzvot.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> In this quote, Brubaker largely refers to gender and race ‘Trans’, rather than religion or relating it to Judaism. It is me who draws the connection.

<sup>5</sup> 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? 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 descent. 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 Salomon. 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 (Olmer, 2010). As a consequence, conversion needs to be addressed as a holistic rather than merely a ‘religious’ process. 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). According to the Rabbinic descriptions, ritual immersion 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. 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. See Yevamot 47.

Although conversion is recognised by *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. Historian Barbara Steiner has provided archival research on the topic, which 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’ (Steiner, 2015). When seen in that context, (non-Jewish) German-ness necessarily relates to an ethnic if not racial trajectory, which is defined by descent drawing on divisions between ‘perpetrator’ and ‘victim’.<sup>6</sup>

In my study, all of my participants who had been 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, had often spent time in Israel, studied Hebrew or were students and scholars of Jewish studies. 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. This presents a curious case, most specific to Germany, where Jewish fields are increasingly represented by non-Jews (ibid.).

### **Exoticism, philosemitism and the racial imaginary**

As after 1945 in the absence of Jews, Jews and Jewishness were constructed in a melange of emotions: ranging from discomfort, fascination, and a ‘philosemitic image’, a positive image and most importantly, constructions of Jewishness, in the absence of real-life experiences and encounters with Jewish people.

This led to a certain fascination and exoticism of Jews and things Jewish. Exoticism means 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).

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<sup>6</sup> Bodemann describes how Auschwitz puts an ultimate ‘ethnic’ divide between Jews and non-Jews (Bodemann, 1996: 52).

In my work, I construe of philosemitism, the positive flipside of antisemitism, as a combination of exoticism (towards Jews) and orientalism.

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. 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<sup>124</sup>, 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.

### **Racialization**

*“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 life-style 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)

Bringing these two aspects together, I argue that Jewish religious practice can be adopted despite the philosemitic (orientalising and exotixising) practices which can be intertwined with racialisations.

### **Adopting being Jewish and the figure of the Jew**

In order to illustrate my argument, I draw on an empirical example by *Antonia* one of my participants, who starts to live a Jewish life after she met a new partner. Her trajectory exemplifies how a volunteer service in Israel, as part of societal structures- which I call ‘reconciliation structures’ (the close cultural and educational relations between Germany and Israel most present in a bourgeois milieu) can be worked into biographical trajectories.

Now in her 50s, Antonia had recently left her husband and moved to Berlin. At the age of 19, she had served as a volunteer in Israel, assisting in a hospital 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, it was due to the Shoah, and for her due to the climate and the warzone: ‘it was simply too hot for me’, she stated.

30 years later, after a twenty-five years of being married to a non-Jewish German man, she leaves him, gets divorced and aspires to find a new life in Berlin:

*“I took a quick decision and stranded in Berlin and didn’t take my old life with me and made a new beginning here. And then, 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. And after we first met, I remember he said: ‘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. 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.

*Yeah, we live Jewish. Well, we also do, well now, there is a Kiddush, which we do every Friday, as best as we can. ... and we always celebrate all the holidays, whether Pessach, Rosch-ha-Shana, and they are celebrated at our house and I have to organise them all. [...] But it has been a very interesting process for me throughout those four years and, I believe, also for him.*

We observe a strong fascination and exoticization of Jews and things Jewish. At its flipside of this exoticization, comes the moment of degradation:

*Well, I find that Judaism does not really offer a room for tolerance, because it starts with, it is always Jews and non-Jews. Well, like for us, we say Christians and then there are Jews and then there are Muslims. But on the Jewish side, there are no others. There are simply Jews and non-Jews. Thus, the centre of my perspective is Jews and everything else what is not Jewish they are non-Jews. That for me already is... there is a judgment and a frontier. So, tolerance and boundary, yes, that really is a topic.*

*[...] well at the beginning [at the synagogue] I always thought: 'Oh God, I am the only one who actually does not belong here. And then I always thought: 'don't you dare attracting attention' and 'do everything right' and by now know that especially many women but also men are converted. [...] And that I find especially fascinating, when I look at that, that converts are never really accepted by the Jewish Community. They will always be the so-called 'goyas'. [...] they have to work really hard in order to be recognised. [...] But by now I think, those are not single cases. That has something to do with the system. [...] With this system, that if you are raised Jewish, you have to separate and keep to your clan... keep within your circles.*

We see how religious practice is taken up and adopted, identifying as 'living a Jewish life'. On the other hand, she is presenting her stereotypes in considering Jews 'as a clan'. It is an old anti-Semitic stereotype, that Jews tend to 'stick to their clan' and do not allow outsiders in. At the same time, 'clan' implies a family tie, that might be attached to a specific physiognomy and "collective heredity of traits" as Yuval-Davis puts it. While describing the converts at the synagogue, she mentions that she first 'did not notice' that they had all converted. This in turn also implies her imaginary of a certain 'Jewish phenotype'.

Antonia is one of a number of examples in how individuals negotiate internalised stereotypes with their new chosen form of life, often attached to a partner. At certain points, long-transmitted images of Jews shimmered through their new daily routines living with, or as practicing Jews. Unsurprisingly, this often occurred in the context of feelings of exclusion and the drawing of boundaries towards the 'outsider'. Her given example resonates with an old anti-Semitic stereotype of an alleged and supposed tendency of Jews to stick to themselves and exclude outsiders. At the same time however, Antonia makes a distinction between born

Jews and converts, the former being 'the real Jews'. She even sates: "*sometimes I find myself knowing more than the 'real' Jews*".

This implies an essentialising idea of a certain Jewish authenticity, which is attributed to genealogy. Combining this with the idea of the clan and a "Jewish physiognomy", place her view of Jews and Jewishness at the intersection of race and religion. Recalling Yuval-Davis definition, we can see that Jewishness is racialised and exoticized while at the same time taken and adopted as a religious practice. We observe the ambiguous nature of 'fascination' – which deems the object of fascination as to be outside one's norm. As Todorov states, the exotic is unknown, otherwise, it could not remain exotic and thereby necessarily *othered*.

### **Concluding thoughts**

In this paper, I provided an example how the adoption of Jewish practice intersects with internalized ideas of race and Othering. The fascination for Jews and things Jewish stems from a particular German middle class, a 'philosemitic milieu', often in relation to a Jewish partner (thus related to gender and sexuality).

The contentious position of German converts to Judaism provides examples of the intersection of religion and race towards Jews and Judaism but also as a way of negotiating one's own liminal position and belonging in Jewish circles as a convert or converting Jew. Apart from dealing with the transmitted guilt and shame, individuals are also dealing with the multiple significations of Jewishness going beyond nationality, ethnicity, religion and culture.

Similar to scholars who have worked on Conversion to Islam like Ezra Ozyurek, I notice that despite their devotion to Judaism and their partner, converts continue to engage in practices of racialization. This then suggests that internalized racialisations underlie and intersect with religious practice and intersect with processes of identification.