



FIRST MODERN HEBREW MAGAZINE IN GERMANY

## Bursting the Israeli Bubble

Birthday, 2006

By Tal Alon

Writing this article feels like an attempt to connect dots, those of my personal story as the founder and editor of the first modern Hebrew magazine in Germany, and that of the fascinating but uncertain story of the growing Israeli community in the capital.

Some of the dots are easy to join up. I was born in Tel Aviv to parents who were also born in Tel Aviv, but their parents left Europe for Palestine a few years before it was too late. Growing up in Israel, I was not really preoccupied with my Jewish identity. It was very obvious even though our family was secular. Being secular in Israel is still very Jewish.

When I was 23 I fell in love with Olaf Kühnemann. According to his papers he is officially German, but he grew up in Israel. His mother fell in love with a Jewish-Israeli man when Olaf was four-years-old. They married and she moved to Israel with her children. When I met Olaf it was clear that Hebrew was his first language and Israel his home.

### The paper hopes to chart the growing influx of Israelis to Berlin and answer the perennial question: Why here?

to do with his German roots, or the fact that his mother was born in a shelter in Berlin during the bombardment of 1945, but concerned his fledgling art career. Though a successful painter in the Tel Aviv art scene, he knew Berlin was something else: *The place to be for contemporary artists.*

still, being an immigrant is never an easy thing. Are we really immigrants though? For a very long time, and sometimes even nowadays, I feel like a guest, mostly in the sense that I am more interested in observing, experiencing and analyzing than in integrating and becoming someone else. Certainly not in becoming German.

Thanks to technology, I can use the internet to keep working with Israelis and maintaining my relationship with family and friends. Slowly I began to realize that in many ways I could have taken my husband, kids and laptop anywhere in the world and things would not have been so different. It is one thing not to want to become German, but it is another thing to live in a bubble.

And while I was living in my bubble, apparently many other Israelis had also moved to Berlin. Was I part of a bigger phenomenon without even realizing it? Did all those Israelis have similar stories to mine, or was it just a coincidence that we all decided to move to Berlin at about the same time? I decided to burst the bubble.

#### Tradition of Hebrew magazines

How many Israelis live in Berlin? No one will ever know the exact number. A lot of them hold European passports and are not registered anywhere as Israelis. Rough estimates range from 10,000 to 20,000. Whatever the true figure, the indications are that the numbers are growing. To give just a few examples – there is a Hebrew library taking shape in Berlin at the moment, there are a considerable number of cultural events and initiatives, after-school activities for kids in Hebrew, a super vibrant Facebook group called “Israelis in Berlin,” and, of course,

there is a new magazine - *Spitz*. To the best of my knowledge it is the first Hebrew magazine in Berlin since *HaMaggid* was published here at the very beginning

German and Yiddish into Hebrew and is loaded with ambiguity. Something sharp, something ironic, but also something great (“*Spitze*” is German slang for the latter) can all come under its rubric. It sounds good too.

I see *Spitz* as a tool for other Israeli emigrants, guests, visitors – each by his or her own definition – to help burst their bubbles. It will encourage others to get a better understanding of German culture, politics, society and, unavoidable as it is in a city like Berlin, the country’s history.

I studied German and I keep working on improving it, but there are so many uncertainties and nuances that will take me years to understand or appreciate. I hope *Spitz* will help me and my readers to make this process faster and more successful.

In this regard I see *Spitz* as a bridge. But there’s another aspect to it. Most Germans have a strong desire to bring Jewish life and culture back to Berlin. When I look



Going back to the roots: Kühnemann’s mother Christiane as a child in Germany, 2009

of the 20th century. Berlin has a good pedigree when it comes to Hebrew magazines; the first in the world, *HaMessef*, was published in Berlin and Königsberg by Jewish intellectuals way back in the 1780s.

This latest addition to the city’s cultural landscape takes its name from a word which traveled from

around, my impression is that the most vivid part of Jewish life in the city is actually Israeli. Take the *Jüdische Kulturtag* (Jewish Cultural Days) festival held every August in Berlin as an example. A quick glance at this year’s program shows that the most prominent Jewish events are actually Israeli – the singer Shlomo Artzi, musicians Avi Avital and Omer Avital, the chef Israel Aharoni and many more. Might it be that the future of the Jewish life in Berlin is Israeli?

I have no idea how long I will still stay in Berlin and whether more and more Israelis will keep moving here. It is too early to connect up those dots, but watch this space.

Read more at:  
<http://www.spitzmag.com/>  
For Olaf Kühnemann’s work go to:  
<http://www.olafkuhnemann.com/>



Tal Alon painted by her husband, the artist Olaf Kühnemann, 2008

His German origins – let’s just assume that not ALL of his ancestors were Nazi opponents – did not really play a role in our relationship, the occasional outburst of black humor and sarcastic remarks notwithstanding of course.

#### Berlin calling

We already had two boys and quite a happy life in Tel Aviv when Olaf started talking about moving to Berlin. It had nothing

outside of Israel, finding out how it is to live in a normal place.

Well, Berlin, normal? Maybe not the perfect choice of words. However one calls it, it seemed back then that we chose Berlin just because of its extraordinary art scene and the fact that unlike London or New York it was also affordable. But connecting the dots almost four years later, there were obviously other yet to be discovered reasons for this choice.

We had a difficult start. True, it was nothing like the process my grandparents went through when they immigrated to Palestine, but

