



JDC International  
Centre for  
**Community  
Development**

## Interview with **MICHAEL BRENNER**

Paris, November 2009

**M**ichael Brenner is deeply dedicated to the study of Judaism both inside and outside of the university classroom. He is a renowned academic, holding a professorship in Jewish History and Culture at the University of Munich, as well as being actively involved in several informal and non-academic Jewish projects and teaching initiatives.

In this interview, conducted by the JDC-International Centre for Community Development, Brenner reflects upon the history and future of European Jewry, touching upon related subjects such as nationalism and cosmopolitanism, challenging historical stereotypes and identifying the nuances in the Jewish viewpoint towards the construction of Europe. When asked about Jewish identity today, Brenner stated that “every Jew growing up in Europe knows about being European [...] but less and less about what it means to be Jewish.”

He also spoke at length about his many “extra-curricular” Jewish activities, his personal involvement, as well his own family’s Jewish history.

His most important publications are: *The Renaissance of Jewish Culture in Weimar Germany* (Yale University Press, 1996); *After the Holocaust: Rebuilding Jewish Lives in Post-War Germany* (Princeton University Press, 1997); *Zionism: A Brief History* (Marcus Wiener Publishers, 2003). He is co-author and co-editor of the four-volume *German-Jewish History in Modern Times* (Columbia University Press, 1997-1998).

*JDC-ICCD: As an historian, how do you see the Jewish panorama in Europe today?*

**Michael Brenner:** Well, in general, Europe is really undergoing a very big change and the Jewish community in Europe as well. As an historian, when you see what Jewish Europe looked like maybe fifty or sixty years ago, it is quite surprising that there is Jewish life at all in Europe now. If you look at what the Holocaust survivors and their speakers were saying right after the liberation in 1946 and 1947; I remember one quote from a president of a Jewish survivors' organization in Germany among the displaced persons, who said, "When we think of Europe, we don't think of the Westminster Abbey, or the Cathedral of Strasbourg, or the art treasures of Florence—what Europe means for us is the crusades, and the pogroms in Russia and Auschwitz". So, that was the line of thinking—that there would be no Jewish life in Europe. Considering that point of view from this historical perspective, I think many observers back then would have been surprised by us even sitting here today talking about the Jewish communities of Europe. But of course, that's going back sixty years, if you look at it critically now, you can either say the glass is half full or half empty. I remember in the 90s there was a big discussion with two paradigms: one was Bernard Wasserstein's thesis *The Vanishing Diaspora*, where he said that in a few decades there won't be a Jewish community—it's like Chinese Jewry once was; the other one is Diana Pinto's very—back then—very optimistic thesis, that in Europe there would be a third pillar next to Israel and American Jewry. Coming back to your initial question, I would say that European Jewry today is a very fragile plant—it's not entirely clear yet how it will grow, but it's existing and it will exist for the next couple of generations, at least. How it will exist, that we can discuss, but it is existing and that is more than many people would have predicted, not only sixty years ago, but maybe even thirty years ago.

*JDC-ICCD: In our everyday contact with people in various communities, we sometimes have the feeling that more and more Jewish communities are very reluctant to see beyond their own local problems, and that the idea of working towards creating a Pan-European Jewry, institutionally or culturally, is not really a need. There is a kind of paradox: when the Europeans were provincials, the Jews were international; now that there is the European Union, the Jews are very provincial. Do you think that Jews are, in a sense, losing their cosmopolitanism?*

**MB:** I would see it a little bit differently; first of all, I'm not sure that Jews were always so cosmopolitan. There were

always Jews who were the intellectuals that we think of, but if you think back to the early twentieth century, the German Jews were real German patriots. Many of them didn't want to have anything to do with the French Jews, and the French Jews didn't want to talk with the German Jews and so on. I think many Jews, even back then, were not very cosmopolitan. I think there was a point where Europe became more cosmopolitan, maybe during the 70s and 80s of the last century, when the new Europe was exciting and people, not just Jews, were excited about it and Jews were a part of it. As they say *es yidlt sikh vi es kristelt sikh*—“Jews do the same as Christians do” in many ways. Then the enthusiasm went away a little bit, and skepticism, I would say, is a bit stronger now among the Jews—they're a part of Europe and of the whole population. At the same time, I think that Jews are a little bit more enthusiastic about Europe than most of the Christian population, for a good reason obviously—and it depends also where you're looking. For example, in Germany, Jews were always much more enthusiastic about the European Union than say, maybe in France or other places. It enabled them to identify, not with the bleak German past, which most German Jews have problems anyway to identify with, but with a very nice picture as European Jews in the future, a much better way to identify for the German Jews. So that's different, and I think the same is true for the very small communities. In France and possibly England, where the Jewish communities are stronger and maybe able to survive easier by themselves, there is less enthusiasm. And of course, I think most Jews have the same problems as the non-Jewish population—there are barriers, mainly the language barrier. As much as it's nice to talk about European Jewry, a French Jew and a German Jew may not necessarily have a common language in a literal sense.

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I THINK MANY OBSERVERS IN THE AFTERMATH OF THE II WORLD WAR WOULD HAVE BEEN SURPRISED BY US EVEN SITTING HERE TODAY TALKING ABOUT JEWISH COMMUNITIES OF EUROPE

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*JDC-ICCD: Many Jewish institutions and lines of thought we know today were created in the German-speaking world over the last 250 years: Hasidism, Conservative, Reform, B'nai B'rith, Zionism, and they were mainly created in response to the changes that modern times brought about. Now that we are in “postmodern” times, with new challenges and problems, is there a new Jewish thought emerging in Europe?*

**MB:** Again, I think the challenges of being Jewish in a modern world, since at least the last two hundred years—is to be part of two worlds. To be part of a Jewish world and thinking, whatever it means, to be part of the outside world. In order to do that, you have to know both worlds. I think, more or less, every Jew growing up in Europe, apart from the very small islands of ultra orthodoxy, knows about this surrounding world, knows about being European in the sense of German, or British or French culture; but fewer Jews know about what it means to be Jewish. So, in order to be a Jewish thinker in the 21st century, first of all, you have to have a foot in both worlds, otherwise what does it mean to be a Jewish thinker? And that's not a new problem; if you look back a hundred years or so—I dealt with this group of German Jews in my own research—just take people like, Franz Kafka, Franz Rosenzweig, Gershom Scholem, maybe some of the most important Jewish thinkers of the early twentieth century, they grew up in what I would call a post-assimilationist world. Their parents were already removed in many ways from Judaism, but they still knew what it meant because their grandparents were still a part of it and so these grandchildren, talking about people like Rosenzweig, Scholem or even Kafka, realized that in order to even know what it means to be called Jewish, they have to go back—as adults actually —, and learn it, and acquire the knowledge, and they did it, everyone in their own way, and I think to the big surprise of their parents' generation. If you look, for example, at Scholem, who grew up not as Gershom but as Gerhard Scholem, he said when he saw his great-grandfathers' gravestone it was only in Hebrew letters; his grandfathers' gravestone was in Hebrew and Latin letters; his fathers' gravestone—there was no Hebrew on it at all. And he thought, “Well, that's the way it goes”; his father would have been so surprised had he followed his son's career and seen that his own gravestone had no Latin anymore. That's an extreme example, but I think it shows that it's not a new problem. What is new, of course, is we are more removed—more generations removed. Franz Kafka, in his *Letter to his father*, expressed, “The little there is, in your generation—the few drops, they dry out”, if that's a good translation—“why should you try to transfer it to them?”—so you will have enough there to transfer to the next generation. That's our problem and I think in order to solve it, we have to address what is relevant to the generation growing up now, in their 20s, and its different issues than in the 1920's with Rosenzweig, Kafka and Scholem. We have to find out what these issues are. But I think there are a few ideas one can develop in order to create another generation of “post-post-assimilationist” Jews who will become interested and become excited—

I think that's important, to become *excited*—about their Jewish world.

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TODAY, FEWER JEWS KNOW ABOUT WHAT IT MEANS TO BE JEWISH

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*JDC-ICCD: Thanks to Michael Löwy and his book Redemption and Utopia we also know that these people had a rebellious component in their reinterpretation of Judaism. Today things are different since it is said to be a post ideological era. This makes things a little bit more complex than in the times of Scholem and Rosenzweig—*

**MB:** Yes I agree, I think there was a rebellious moment, they all, in a way—it sounds even amazing today—rebelled against their parents by becoming more Jewish. And not by becoming orthodox necessarily. And that's different today—I think one of the big differences is, of course, a topic we didn't touch yet, the Holocaust—the Shoah, in between these generations. Much of the identity of the European Jews in the last decades has been taken from the Shoah, from a negative experience. And as we all know, that is not an experience which can shape a positive experience in the long run. Of course, without any question, the memory of the Holocaust will, for many generations to come, constitute a big part of being Jewish. But if it's the only one, it's not going to work—we all know that. So what is it today? We can discuss it, but I think first of all I would say that what makes it even possible to think about why we're even sitting here, is that there seems to be something attractive in our own period about being different. In the 60s or 70s maybe that was not the case; there was an attempt to be, especially if you go back to the 50s (in America by the way, it was exactly the same) just like your neighbors. You went to synagogue and you went to church, but starting in the late 60s and 70s, and I think until today, there is the difference which is attractive. That's what ironically makes Judaism attractive to a large part of non-Jews and I think if we draw more on this attraction among non-Jews for our own community, we could gain a lot.

*JDC-ICCD: Today, people want to rediscover Judaism. Whenever a course is opened, we find that a lot of non-Jews are interested and are signing up—but still also a lot of Jews. We find that many Jews are saying: “Well, I don't consider myself a Jew because I'm not religious—I don't believe”. Modern times could be defined by the search of “how to be a Jew without believing”; for example it was Mordecai Kaplan who brought*

*this idea of Judaism as a civilization, that included religion, but that was not just religion. How do you explain, as an historian, this problem—that we are either a religion that belongs to a people or a people who have a history and a religion—how do you define it all?*

**MB:** That's a central question of modern Jewish history, because in Jewish history these two components have always been together and it was really only with the French Revolution and then with the whole development of emancipation in Western Europe that it started to be apart. In Western Europe, you had to be a German or French citizen of the "Jewish faith" to be legitimately integrated in the German or French nation and your "Jewishness" could no longer be your nationality. In Eastern Europe that did not happen, and actually in the twentieth century, certainly with communism, the religious side and atheistic state were taken away, but the ethnic component stayed. Today, there is a somewhat strange situation in that, for example, most Jews in Germany today are Russian Jews. When they came from Russia, their passports said, "Ethnicity – Jewish" and "Nationality – Jewish", and they came to Germany and the only way they could write "Jewish", was if they went to the administration of the city and were asked "what is your religion?", that was the only way—and the administration put in Jewish—but did they change? Did their "Jewishness" become different? No, but it's the State, and that is, I think, the European sense; it's the State which defines. Let's say that they go now to Israel, and again it becomes a nationality, so we have the problem that "Jewishness" was defined, for a long time, not by the Jewish communities themselves, but by what the State said—in that sense, I think that officially in places like Germany and most of Western Europe, "Jewishness" is a religious category—but does it mean that most Jews are observant, or even religious, or believe in God? Probably not more or less than Christians, who are a minority. But they still feel Jewish, and of course, the Holocaust is an element, but the whole history is an element. Again, I don't think that's such a new development. If you look back to before the Second World War, before the Nazi advent to power, you can see the same development in Germany where, even in the 1920's, most German Jewish organizations tried to move away from saying, "We are German citizens of the Jewish faith", and they tried to create new terms like *Schicksalsgemeinschaft*, a community of fate. Or they called themselves the "*Stammesgemeinschaft*", which is a sort of tribal community. They would say it's like the Bavarians or Prussians, "We are Jewish Germans". These were very ethnic terms already. Walter Rathenau, a very assimilated

Jew, used this term also, *Stammesgemeinschaft* and they would not say, "Religious communities". So, it's not that new, and today, I think it's more accepted in America where you have ethnic identities, although I think more and more in Europe as well. I think it doesn't matter so much if the State recognizes this or doesn't recognize it. In some European countries, such as in Scandinavia, Jews are also recognized as a national minority. However, I think it's more complicated than being a national minority, or a religious minority. In a way, it's an identity which grows out of a sense of common history, of certain common traditions and of practicing some things which have a religious component. For example, when you celebrate *Pessach*, it doesn't mean you have to be a religious Jew; we know about Israelis who are very secular, but it's also a national holiday, a holiday where you celebrate your own historical fact and maybe just where you have a sense of community. So, I think these categories, religion and nation, are not made for the Jewish case, and they came to the Jews, when they became integrated as European citizens.

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*JDC-ICCD: In that sense, Jews have a dilemma in some European countries, like Romania, for example, that has officially 19 minorities. If the Jews define themselves as an ethnic minority they share the same classification as the Sinti-Roma, Turkish, etcetera—but if they define themselves as a religious minority, even though the majority are not believers, they instead share a table with the Orthodox, the Catholics and so on. It seems that Jews have lost definitively their monopoly of the minority in Europe –*

**MB:** For better or worse. In Germany that happened earlier in many ways, and in France too, with the immigration of other minorities. The Jews in Germany were always the only really sizable non-Christian minority since the Turkish immigration, however, that changed in the sixties and seventies. I think it's a good thing in the end, because to be the only minority does open you up to being the only outsiders, however, there are many outsiders now—not only Turkish Muslims and Jews, but many others. Of course, Jews—and I think here we get into another subject—even though they are still present in almost all European states, they are a very small minority. There, I would be skeptical, because who knows, it's basically impossible for a group of only a few hundred

or a few thousand people, in many states, to survive for more generations.

*JDC-ICCD: We have just mentioned the fact that today more and more people are turning towards Judaism. What is interesting, is that they find a component of spirituality in Judaism. People are not becoming ultra orthodox, however they are demanding spirituality. Do you find this a European trend or a global trend?*

**MB:** I would say it's a global trend and I think you're right, people are still looking for spirituality, not everyone, but many people. One of our problems in Europe is really the lack of spiritual leadership. There are Rabbis, there are some Jewish thinkers, but you can count them on one hand—that's true and it's a big difference, we don't have Scholems, Rosenzweigs and Kafkas anymore. There are some really good Jewish writers and philosophers, but the group is extremely small. In most countries you hardly have any. It may still be more than their proportional number in the population, but it's very few, and that of course, is a big problem. The other thing is I think, if you compare the generation today with the generation before the Shoah—it was a very different age. We are living in a much more superficial age, an internet age; people back then were deeply immersed in the sources, they took time, they had time in many ways, and they could use it differently. Today, I think people are not looking for what I would call a whole immersion into anything, Judaism included. They are looking for, maybe it sounds degrading, just a little bit of spirituality (laughs). There are always single cases which will either be a part of ultra orthodoxy or part of a total spiritual immersion, but most people aren't looking for that, what they are looking for, I would say, is a "part-time" spirituality. They are also looking to leave their everyday life, especially in the age of internet with everything being so fast. That's why I think enterprises like *Limmud* or short time immersion enterprises are pretty successful. I was actually part of creating, together with my friend Rachel Salamander who you might know in Munich and who is very involved in the Jewish culture there as well, something called *Tarbut*, I don't know if you've heard of it. Every year or year and a half we organize a wonderful Jewish culture seminar in the Bavarian Alps with German, Austrian and Swiss Jews. There are 350-400 places and they're always fully booked. We have really wonderful speakers and actually it's a German Jewish cultural festival in many ways. It's never a problem to fill the spaces, because people love to come; they take a day or two off from their work and they have a Shabbat experience there, and I think it gives them much more than just a weekend. Like *Limmud*, it

gives them something to think about over weeks, months, maybe the year to come—I don't think this is enough—but these events are very important. That's why, I myself, was impressed when I was at *Limmud* many years ago—because there is something "living" about it and maybe in a few years that concept will become old and we'll have to think about something new. What is important, I think, is that it's hard to get people to come—people may go to synagogue every Shabbat or participate in a University class twice a week during the whole year—but they usually don't have much space in their agendas and they still often want something deep, but not too time consuming. That's a big challenge, which I think we have to fill—so *here* is probably a market for that generation growing up.

*JDC-ICCD: In fact, a trend we are perceiving today is that people no longer want to affiliate to a structure, however they want to attend important events two or three times a year. They are like an express train, only stopping two or three times along the way. But they stop at the Jewish station, where they can find a mix of intellectual and emotional elements, where they can celebrate Shabbat, but also where they can go and discuss and "feel" the place.*

**MB:** And here they have that sense of community to which they may not have in their own place.

*JDC-ICCD: Are there previous historical moments similar to the one we are in now?*

**MB:** No, never (laughs). I'm against the theory that history just repeats itself. I think it's very different. I don't think we've ever had a time when the non-Jewish population, and again it's not the whole population, but a large part of it was so interested in Jewish things; the Jewish population is maybe less interested. I witnessed this at a University in Munich, where probably eighty to ninety percent of my students were non-Jewish, which is a lot. I think it's interesting, that for very different reasons they are interested in coming; but it's *also* interesting that there are so few Jewish students coming. This experience is typical not only for German Universities. And then when you think about the book Ruth Ellen Gruber wrote *Virtually Jewish*, you see it all over Europe, and the Jewish museums and all that. Is it a thriving Jewish culture? I always thought it is not to be confounded—you could even say, once you open a Jewish museum, that it almost reflects on a culture which isn't dead, but somehow which is almost a memorial, and it was even an argument when they started opening Jewish museums in the early 1900's. However, a Jewish museum could also, and I think they're

good examples, *give* something to the Jewish population. I think we should start seeing that this whole interest of non-Jews in Jewish culture is –“Wow! It’s *something* that they are interested in our culture—why aren’t we?” We could take inspiration from that. And again, I’m trying, and I think other colleagues are as well—to not just teach my course and just wait for the Jewish students to come, but go to the Jewish communities and gather a group and teach there. When I came to Munich, we did something like a little *shiur*—we started reading the Bereshit, from the beginning—reading basically the Torah, for I guess six or seven years; we’ve just finished with Shemot now—and they’re all basically secular Jews who are reading it and we’re not doing the *Parasha HaShavua*; we’re just going on every week. We have psychoanalysts and doctors, and we have lawyers and people who are shop owners—they are a very different group. It’s important for our purposes that we meet not in the Jewish community, but in the University and it’s interesting—it’s kind of a closed group, and because we are full, it suddenly becomes interesting to other people and they want to join. If we say, “Oh, it’s open for everyone!”, then it’s not so interesting—now that’s an interesting idea! We meet once a week or once every two weeks and it’s very interesting—*that*, I think, would be a very nice model for many places. A kind of *Havruta* experience, where we are informally outside the formal structure of the Jewish community and without a religious authority, and I think it’s somehow important. I was inspired a little bit in Israel by Alma College, which is a college that is trying to teach in Tel-Aviv to the secular Jews—they say “you should know something about our [Jewish] sources”. And they read them and they discuss them—and they have a library where you have all the Rashi commentaries next to Freud and Spinoza, so that’s a context. I think that is a nice spiritual experience, ongoing for years, which could be done in many communities.

*JDC-ICCD: Were there common historical elements among Jews in Europe that can be traced back throughout time?*

**MB:** No more common elements than with a Jew outside Europe. I think if you went to a community in North Africa—it would be as common or as different for a Jew from Berlin to go to Salonika, which is in Europe, or even to Kiev. Also, interestingly, in the early 20th century or late 19th century, already that difference began to be very attractive for Western Jews. They discovered the *exotic Jews*, or the *authentic Jews*; they would travel to Yemen and to Ethiopia. Someone like Franz Rosenzweig, who grew up in a more Reform tradition, if at all Jewish tradition—before the First World War he was about to convert to Christianity, like many family members, and

he thought “Oh! Wait a minute, first I want to discover the religion I’m about to leave—I don’t even know about it!” And how did he discover it? He went to a traditional Eastern European-inspired service in Berlin. The same happened to other people during the First World War when they came to Eastern Europe. One famous German writer, Alfred Döblin who wrote *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, he went to Poland—after the First World War—and he said, “Here, I saw for the first time—Jews!” Now, he was brought up Jewish and married a Jewish woman—but these were *real* Jews! And of course, the most famous case, who rediscovered these authentic Jews, was Martin Buber with his Hasidic, or maybe some would say, his pseudo-Hasidic Tales. He said “Oh! *These* are authentic Jews”. The challenge for the twenty-first century is to make it fascinating and exciting for younger people. I don’t think we can expect that it will be similar to the previous experiences. Again, one reason is that we live in a faster age. We take a little bit here and a little bit there, however, you can take some elements like spirituality – which is still important, and you can take elements like mobility—I think one of the advantages of today is that it’s easier to be mobile—we are in the age of mobility. So you can have a place in Israel or you can go to Israel, it’s easier today. What this could mean though, is that there will be European Jewry, but many European Jews won’t *only* be European Jews; they’ll have one foot in America and one foot in Israel. I think it’s a good development for Judaism because Europe is small in Jewish ways, but once you have strong connections to the bigger centers, it helps European Jewry. Some things, as I said, are really lost and it’s unfortunate, all the local traditions, all the regional traditions—we retrieve them in the museums or we retrieve them artificially, but if you don’t grow up with them, it’s just not the same. Today, we have a more universalized Judaism, and I think in that respect, Jews will live in Europe, but if European Jewry is so different from Israel or it’s different from America, probably not.

*JDC-ICCD: If you analyze the contribution that European Jews have made to Judaism over the last 2000 years, from very different point of views: the prayers, the observations, the contemplation about Judaism—sometimes, those looking over from America or from Israel have not been fully aware of everything that has been accomplished.*

**MB:** Well—Judaism was not created in Europe, but modern Judaism in a way, was created in Europe. I think it’s ironic, for example, the Reform movement, Conservative—it’s now in America, in Germany it’s starting a little bit now, but many communities they don’t even know about it. Mendelssohn—I was once invited

to give a lecture to Jewish teachers of Jewish religious classes in Germany. “Mendelssohn?”, they asked. They almost objected to the name because, mainly in Israel, they would said “Mendelssohn, we only know about his children”, but of course you *have* to teach Mendelssohn, if you don’t teach Mendelssohn—he’s a taboo figure, and that’s not working. You can teach it in different ways, and of course you don’t have to glorify him either, but you have to know about European Jewish sources. I think it’s changing a little bit—I grew up in a small Jewish community in Germany and I remember in the seventies the whole Jewish community centre looked like a travel agency for Israel. There were pictures of the Negev, Mt. Carmel and Jerusalem of course, and Moshe Dayan and Golda Meir, but you didn’t know there were any roots in this Jewish community. Then they changed it slowly and of course the pictures of Israel are still there, and the big painting of Herzl, but you also have pictures of the Jewish life in that city a hundred years ago and some documents, and now they are all Russian Jews, but they have also learned about their own history. So I think, many places became a little bit more conscious and not just, let’s say, an agency of the State of Israel. One point you mentioned that I think is also interesting, if you look at European Jewry—a hundred years ago there was no European Jewry, there was not even German Jewry—I think there was Franconian Jewry, there was Alsatian Jewry, there was Tuscany Jewry, there was Piemont Jewry and so on, and they all had their own traditions, they all had their own *Nusach* or at least some melody or custom, so as sad as it is—that really disappeared. Today, in many ways, even before the Shoah, but certainly with the Shoah, the European religious practices or the customs are more or less unified, and it’s a pity. It also has a lot to do with the fact that a Jew who lives in Alsace, his ancestors may have lived in Morocco or in Russia, and that kind of European “Judaisms”, or different forms, practices and customs have disappeared and have given way to some unified melody and much of it comes from the East. For example, the whole Ashkenazi, even the pronunciation, the “au”, “Maushe” and so on, it’s almost gone; we have a Rabbi in Munich, who comes from America and he re-introduced that and had also a male choir and the whole new *Nusach Ashkenaz* and the German pronunciation. The Jewish community first thought that was very weird and they thought “What is that!” There were no German Jews in Munich, they were all Polish Jews! I think by now it’s more accepted and they find it very nice but, that’s an exception—because most of the spiritual leaders in these places are imported from Israel and from America, so that kind of particular European Judaism is gone, I think, forever.

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TODAY, I THINK PEOPLE ARE NOT LOOKING FOR WHAT I WOULD CALL A WHOLE IMMERSION INTO ANYTHING, JUDAISM INCLUDED. THEY ARE LOOKING FOR, MAYBE IT SOUNDS DEGRADING, JUST A LITTLE BIT OF SPIRITUALITY

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*JDC-ICCD: Given the existence of a large variety of regional forms of Judaism, if we had to create a Jewish currency in Europe—like the Euro—what kind of figures would appear?*

**MB:** Well I think most of the symbols or figures would probably be Jewish without being only European Jewish. If you think of symbols, of course, I don’t think there’s a European Jewish symbol—it’s interesting, you could take Maimonides who was born in Europe but lived most of his time in Northern Africa. You could take Rashi of course, who was a nice transnational Jew, Mendelssohn, as I said before, is tricky, there’s not even a *Rehov* Mendelssohn in Jerusalem, because there is so much hatred against him in orthodox and Zionists circles, so I guess we end up with many secular Jews. We could have Kafka and Freud, non-Jewish Jews in many ways (laughs).

*JDC-ICCD: But representative in a way—*

**MB:** Yes!

*JDC-ICCD: Einstein was more Jewish than them—*

**MB:** Einstein, that’s right. There were, of course, a lot of famous European Jews, but even Einstein didn’t finish his life in Europe.

*JDC-ICCD: There was a period when the Talmud was studied and basically there were more people reading it in Europe than anywhere else. In this sense we have a paradox: when Rashi was writing his comments, how many Jews were in Troyes?*

**MB:** Yes, that is a very good point. Even a hundred years ago if a community had 300 members it was a big community. Today, a community of 300 members is not a survivable community and that’s actually the core of one of the problems. Being Jewish in a more traditional Jewish society always meant something very different; and I think that it’s an important point—you didn’t have to be an intellectual. You didn’t even have to be that interested in spirituality. You could be a port worker in Saloniki, you could be a cattle dealer in Alsace, but you would usually know that on Shabbat the port was closed in Saloniki, and you wouldn’t deal your cattle. You didn’t

have to be a great intellectual, but you were part of a clearly defined framework of a society where you would even—maybe not deeply immerse in Talmud, but you'd somehow read the texts and you would go to Shul and Shabbat, even if you were not a big intellectual. Today, and this is the big difference, Jews are not always all intellectuals. The structure is being lost, the texts are not relevant for your everyday life—so, in that sense, Munich as a community of 10 000, the same size as before 1933, has only a few hundred Jews who have a *real* interest in practicing anything—maybe a thousand. The new Synagogue was built there, and it is a big building. The Synagogue and the community centre in Munich are the largest Jewish buildings in Europe built in the last decade. It's in the centre of the city; *every* non-Jew knows what it is. But even there, if you think there are about 500 seats in the synagogue, and then you have two or three smaller synagogues, altogether you have approximately 800 seats. So even during the High Holidays, if the last place is occupied—and there are 10 000 Jews in Munich—at the most only ten percent of the Jewish population would go to the services—even on the High Holidays; and it's similar in other places. Any practice, even a minimal practice, is part of a small minority now in the Jewish community. If the community has only 300 members, it's even harder.

*JDC-ICCD: Let's talk about your courses. What kind of questions or subjects are the most discussed by your Jewish students in the University or in this group?*

**MB:** Well, I'll try to tell you what I'm discussing the *least* in my university classes. I try not to focus on the topics I think are the best known ones. In my case in Germany, I think it is anti-Semitism and the Holocaust. Students—and again, it's a mainly non-Jewish audience—see that Jews are not always the victims of history, that there is something active, something creative—this is something surprising because *all* they learn in school about Jews is maybe a little bit about the crusades, persecution and the Holocaust and it's good they learn that, but they should also learn a little bit more. So I try to show the varieties of Jewish history as an active history. Anything from the Italian Renaissance to Zionism and American Jewry, and I think that attracts a lot of people; they say “it's not just what we know from school” and from our own Jewish history it's often very similar. I think many of our people also grew up with the feeling that we identify ourselves as a group which is always being persecuted and, of course Jewish historians objected to this early on. Salo Baron, who occupied the first chair for Jewish history, who was at Columbia University in New York, protested against what he would call the lachrymose version of

Jewish history, full of tears—it's not *only* full of tears.

*JDC-ICCD: What about Israel, how does it appear in your classes?*

**MB:** I try to teach a lot about Israel—and different sides of Israel. And I think that the knowledge of Israel cannot be taken out of Jewish studies at the universities now. Especially in Germany where there is not a single position, nor a single chair for Israeli studies—and I think that it should be created. For example, we bring in a lot of Israeli scholars and—we don't have to bring our different opinions, they see their own different opinions. We also take our students every year on a one week trip, which is not obligatory, but there is a lot of interest—I'm surprised myself, last year we only had fifteen places, and we had forty people who wanted to go on the trip. People came back from this trip with all kinds of really interesting experiences. It's a big part of our curriculum and it's just a normal way of seeing that Israel is a centre. America too, we also try to show that there is this other big centre of Jewish life and it's different from Israel and you have a different religious identification, you have legitimate Reform and Conservative movements—we have a real centre of Jewish studies in America. Today, unfortunately, I think Europe, is a little bit of a developing country, with respect to Jewish studies. However, we're doing better than twenty years ago, but we have to look at Israel and America and I think that the students always appreciate that.

*JDC-ICCD: And in these Havruta sessions, how do you discuss the texts? What kind of remarks do you make?*

**MB:** It's very interesting, and as I said, we have all these different people, and if we discuss, for example, Abraham and the *Akedah*, the psychoanalysts, they obviously treat all these questions from a psychological point of view—and it's fascinating. We have doctors and lawyers, who go to the legal points of the texts; we have even an art historian, for example, who brings pictures—so I would say that one thing that binds us together is always the question “What is the relevance of the text for us today?” And I'm surprised myself, because obviously I've read this text before, a few times, but you always read it differently when you have different readers next to you and different discussions, so I've been discovering new points and although everyone in this group is very busy in their professional lives, it continues with enthusiasm; and I've always tried to make time for that, it's very important.

*JDC-ICCD: You talked about a Conference you co-organize, called Tarbut...*

**MB:** Yes, we have it every year and a half, once in the winter and once in the summer.

*JDC-ICCD: What has surprised you over the last few years regarding this Conference?*

**MB:** Well, what surprised me was that in that framework, we were able to bring together people that wouldn't normally mix in the organized Jewish community. We had ultra orthodox, we had totally secular, and we had a person like Abraham Burg participating and the Israeli Ambassador and members of the Knesset, and we always have a different topic. I have actually one thing which was nice, but it's just a little anecdote—we have on one hand the representatives of the German Jewish Community, the Swiss Jewish Community, we have the Chief Rabbi of Austria, but we also have students, young people and families—so we have a children's program. I should also tell you it takes place in a very special place, in a beautiful resort, a spa resort in the Alps; so we have a group of little children and before Shabbat starts they do paintings and other activities and it is nice. Because you have this really, in a way, very German, Bavarian place—and there was this little child who saw the Shabbat service, and he totally identified it with the resort, which is called *Elmau* and he said “*Beit Knesset Elmau*”, and it was just so funny because, it is so not a synagogue! (Laughs). The service was also interesting because—I know *Limmud* is different, they try to keep it all separate—however, we had an orthodox Rabbi and a Reform Rabbi and they did something I've never seen before and maybe it exists—but they said, “We'll have one service and we'll have men here and women here and there will be one section where there are men and women together”, so it was all in one service—it was a very moving experience.

*JDC-ICCD: The population that comes to Tarbut—you mentioned children. Is it mid-generation with children?*

**MB:** Yes, yes exactly. Often very little is offered for the mid-generation Jews who have children that are already grown up; the mid-generation in their forties or fifties. It's very interesting for them. You have something for the students, you have something for the older people, but people in between, let's say 30 and 50-years-old or so, it's often very difficult—and they're a group which likes to come to these things.

*JDC-ICCD: Do you have mixed marriages there?*

**MB:** Yes we do, and one of the big problems, so to say, is that because non-Jews are so attracted to everything Jewish—you know that wouldn't make sense for us, but because they can come to my university, what's the difference? We wanted to have a Jewish event, but how do we announce these things? If we put it in the Jewish newspaper, it is read by more non-Jews than Jews in Germany, so that doesn't work. So we print flyers, approximately 10 000, and we sent them to the Jewish community and they sent them to their members and then of course, it gets around by word of mouth. But we clearly say yes, people who are non-Jewish spouses are more than welcome to come—because if they don't come here, what would we do! Also the Jewish community has to, and it's not a new thing, but a new demand, it has to do much more to approach these people. In America they're pretty good at that, however, in Europe I think they really have to learn, otherwise half of the population will be lost.

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TODAY, UNFORTUNATELY, I THINK EUROPE, IS A LITTLE BIT OF A DEVELOPING COUNTRY, WITH RESPECT TO JEWISH STUDIES.

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*JDC-ICCD: If we consider the fact that so many children over the last 50 years were born from mixed marriages; and when they want to connect with Judaism, they can go to Limmud or to Tarbut—but not necessarily to their official Synagogue.*

**MB:** I think that's at the core of the present split between the orthodox and the liberal community. I think it would be easy for them to be unified—you know Germany still has the idea of the *Einheitsgemeinde* where everyone is under one roof, which was possible before 1933, because at least there was basically no Halachic question, it was just Jewish; now that has changed. And from an orthodox perspective clearly that's not possible. From a Reform perspective it's maybe different and that's the main reason why, in many places, they stay separate. Every city is different. Berlin for example is a little bit different than Munich. Berlin had, from early on, different synagogues under one roof and Munich is different but, I think, that's the other question—how long can this model of the unity community even survive? But it survives also for a very practical reason because in Germany, unlike most other countries, it's the tax payer who pays the community for the synagogue and that structure is probably not going to change.

*JDC-ICCD: Do you have Muslim students among the non-Jewish students who attend your University courses?*

**MB:** I do have a few—which is very interesting. We had a student last year we sent to Ulpan in Israel, she is Moroccan. We have Turkish students, not many, but there are always some. And some of them study Hebrew. There is one position we created for the study of Jews in the Muslim world and it's a very interesting project. We just appointed a young Egyptian scholar who is namely analyzing Arab text books, school books—what they have said over the last hundred years about Jews and about Israel. That for me is one of the major points for the future. If we don't try to build that bridge—and I'm more optimistic in Germany where the population is Turkish and non Arab, but if we don't build *that* bridge, that could be a big danger. But then, of course, the other side has to build it too!

*JDC-ICCD: In this respect, do you have contact at a professorial or intellectual level with any center for Islamic studies at the University?*

**MB:** That's an interesting question because, maybe it's a specific German case, but in our case we do have contacts, however all the professors who teach Islamic studies are non-Muslim, Germans. It may change, but I think for Germany it's still very typical. I was on a panel, half a year ago, on Jewish and Muslim studies and all the Islamic studies professors were German and not Muslim and that was a little bit strange. Jewish studies in Europe, and that's maybe a different topic, but it's interesting how it developed; just when the Jewish community goes down, Jewish studies go up! There are not many Jewish students taking it, but I would say there is a certain tendency towards a growing interest in it.

*JDC-ICCD: Some months ago we started a process of gathering circles of young Jewish adults from European communities into focus groups. When asking about the future scenarios for Jewish life in Europe, many considered that tolerance would decline, and that people would live in enclaves, not just Jews, but different enclaves of Muslims, Christians and Protestants—and the question was, "What's the role of the government? Can anyone create a bridge among all these groups?"*

**MB:** Well it's interesting. I don't know if the Jews will be strong enough to live in an enclave, right? The Jewish identity in many ways is thinning out; one reason is because of mixed marriages, and not just because of non-observance, but because of a lack of knowledge. There could be a backlash of course, but I think, if you

look at England and its demographics, where it's a pretty comfortable life, much of the anti-Semitism against the Jewish community dropped immensely. Is there a place for enclaves besides the Haredi community? I'm not sure. One aspect you just mentioned that we didn't talk about, which is hard to predict too, is the growing Muslim presence and all the conflicts involved, which could be of course, as I've mentioned before—and it's in many ways nice that Jews are not the only religious minority—but if the Middle East conflicts continue as it is, it could be a major threat, we see it in France today.

*JDC-ICCD: Mr. Brenner, what's the scenario for Jewish Europe in 15 to 20 years?*

**MB:** I think Israel is the key element here and in many ways. If Israel continues to be economically and politically unstable, and especially politically of course, it's not a scenario I wish, but it's a scenario which is possible, many more Israelis will leave Israel, and without necessarily wanting to, Europe could become a strengthened Jewish community, at least for a temporary period, we're talking about twenty years. I could definitely see that, maybe not in the catastrophic sense—Philip Roth even imagined it in his novel *Operation Shylock*, where he has Jews return to the Diaspora. But it's possible, I mean we see it now in certain numbers and if the situation gets worse, which unfortunately is not impossible. European Jewry in the last decades has only survived because of outside influences; France because of the North African Jews, Germany and some other countries because of Russian Jews immigrating. Today, there is no pool anymore really; there are no more Jews in North Africa to come in. And in Eastern Europe or Russia, who wants to come? So what is the other source? It's only Israel ironically, but of course it could also go the other way; Israel, let's take an ideal scenario, could somehow come to some agreements in the Middle East conflict and stabilize, and as a result, it could attract European Jews to go there. I'm not saying that this is possible only if the situation in Israel is bad, and that European Jewry is better and the contrary, however, if Israel really improves it could become a viable center for reviving Jewish life in Europe; but I think Israel is a very crucial point here. Another one is—Jews are like everyone else. First of all, if they are doing well economically and they are not persecuted, then they stay where they are, or at least places who attract people. Who would have thought that Jews would come to live in Shanghai and Japan? We just have to see where Chabad goes, if Chabad has a center there, it's because there are some Jews moving there! Germany is a good example. It is doing pretty well economically and it has attracted many Jewish immigrants. Who would

have thought this would happen fifty or sixty years ago? The same is true for all of Europe, if Europe does well economically and is a stable continent—I think we will see Jews, not only living there, but coming to Europe from Israel and America. Nevertheless, I do agree, in a certain sense, with Bernard Wasserstein’s pessimistic view that the small communities will have a big problem surviving, whatever the scenario is, in 30 to 40 years. I think I’d rather be optimistic about some forms of Jewish life surviving in quite a few big centers in Europe, for maybe 20 to 25 years. However, the rest of Europe—although I’m not saying there won’t be a synagogue service here and there, will probably not have really vibrant Jewish centers. This is a big question now in Germany for example, where you had a lot of immigration in the last years and many, many synagogues were being built in places which have 300 Jews, 400 Jews, 500 Jews—even though, over the last two or three years for the first time, the number of Jewish community members has been going down, over all of Germany. So who knows what will happen with these new synagogues in one more generation—will they be empty? Some of them might be. I still think it’s the right thing to do, because if we don’t give an infrastructure, an attractive building and of course, more than just a building structure, it also has to be filled, that’s the only way we can go.

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EUROPEAN JEWRY IN THE LAST DECADES HAS ONLY SURVIVED BECAUSE OF OUTSIDE INFLUENCES; FRANCE BECAUSE OF THE NORTH AFRICAN JEWS, GERMANY AND SOME OTHER COUNTRIES BECAUSE OF RUSSIAN JEWS IMMIGRATING.

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*JDC-ICCD: And what is your family story, where are the Brenners from?*

**MB:** Oh! The family story—well, it’s in a way a typical post war German Jewish family story. My father was a Holocaust survivor from Poland from the concentration camps and he came to Germany as a DP [Displaced Person]—wanting to stay for a few weeks, and he stayed his whole life and he didn’t only stay in Germany his whole life, he stayed in a very small town which was the first town after the Czech border when he came from Poland. My mother was from Dresden and she wore the yellow star for the whole war period, and then actually the bombing of Dresden was the reason she survived, because the deportation order was imminent and they went into hiding. They stayed in East Germany until 1952, with the Slansky trial and the Stalinist persecution also in East Germany, whereupon they fled to the West.

I’m actually three-quarters East European Jew. My grandmother on my mother’s side was from Minsk, she came to Dresden when she was a baby in the 1890’s; so it’s a very typical story—but maybe what is less typical is that I think most marriages after the war were either between German Jews or Polish Jews, in my family’s case it was German Jews *and* Polish Jews, so I have both in my family. I grew up in the same town where my father wanted to stay for just a few weeks. His sisters, who survived the war, went on to Los Angeles, and he never went to live there. My mother said to him, “I don’t want to stay in this little town!”, but he had his textile business there, and he didn’t want to move, so he stayed. I grew up there and went to study in Heidelberg. I also studied in Jerusalem and went to get my PhD in New York and stayed in America for quite a few years to teach and then came back to Munich in 1997.

*JDC-ICCD: Why did you come back?*

**MB:** That’s a good question. As always, professional and private reasons are usually connected, but first of all, I was very curious—and I never said I would never come back, but I was curious about what was going on in Germany, particularly within the Jewish community. And it might not be the main reason, but one of the reasons was, in America—it’s an exciting field in Jewish studies, but in a way you’re pretty replaceable. There are so many good scholars and I was lucky to have a position at Brandeis University and I was happy there, but in Germany there are very few people and I felt maybe I was a little bit more needed there. I also like Europe, with all the problems and issues we are discussing, I think the lifestyle in Europe is still very nice. At the same time, there are many things in America I like and miss; I’m not saying that one day I couldn’t imagine going back there, but I still believe in Europe. I still think Europe, with all its difficult history and present conflicts, which I’m not idealizing, is a place where there is a certain lifestyle; New York has a lot of it, and some other American cities too, but many places in America have a very different kind of lifestyle and I’ve seen some American Jews and non-Jews move to Europe for this reason. That’s another thing which might happen—we all think America will always be stable, but it may not and maybe the new center—not in another 20, but 50 years—will be Shanghai and Beijing and we will have big Jewish communities there, it is possible!

The **JDC** International Centre for Community Development (JDC-ICCD) was founded in 2005. It aims to identify, understand and analyze ongoing changes and transformations taking place in Europe that impact particularly Jewish Communities on the continent.

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