

Berlin awakens feelings of home

Many Israelis find their second home in Berlin – as photographers, journalists, musicians or bakers. Discover what it is about Germany’s capital that inspires them.

Christa Roth / 25.07.2019



Yehuda Swed has founded a photo agency in Berlin.

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Yehuda Swed proudly presents the modern equipment at his new office in the Berlin district of Prenzlauer Berg. Although the father of two young boys is not an overly emotional character, he goes into raptures when he talks about Seesaw, his photo agency. “If I’d stayed in Israel, I’d have probably had to take wedding photographs and would not be respected anywhere near as much.” Swed, who was born in 1983, came to Berlin from Jerusalem almost ten years ago after fighting in the 2006 Lebanon War and being fed up “with other people controlling my life”.

Young, confident, adventurous

Today, thousands of Israelis live in Berlin, the very city in which the National Socialists planned the Holocaust. Yet however strong the presence of the Shoah may be here, it belongs much more to the past than to everyday life – at least, for the many new immigrants from Israel.

In some respects, the Israelis who live in Berlin are very similar – young, confident and adventurous. Many come to party, to distance themselves from the Middle East conflict or to make a fresh start. According to figures published by the Berlin-Brandenburg Statistics Office, the number of Israelis registered in Berlin between 1993 and 2014 more than doubled to 6,265. In the meantime, however, there is talk in the media of up to 30,000. The Israeli Embassy puts the number at just under half that total. Reliable figures are rare, in part because many Israelis use their second passport. In any event, it is certain that 5,319 Israeli citizens were officially registered in Berlin in 2018.

“In Berlin, you can constantly reinvent yourself.”

Yehuda Swed came from Jerusalem to Berlin



Creating space for intercultural encounters

But what is it that attracts Israelis to Berlin? Does the German capital have the potential to awaken feelings of home? “I cannot precisely define the meaning of home for me,” explains Yael Nachshon Levin. “It changes all the time.” She left Tel Aviv with her family of four in 2016 out of love for her husband, the grandson of German Holocaust survivors, who was drawn to Germany – and to take some time out. “I wanted to open a new chapter after having cancer,” says 39-year-old Nachshon Levin. But, instead of taking things easier, she was soon organising regular living-room concerts and exhibitions in her old Berlin apartment. The success of Framed, as she called her “culture room”, led to the foundation of an association in 2019. The same cosy atmosphere is now offered in a studio in Friedrichshain, where readings and drawing courses are also held.





Framed, Yael Nachshon Levin's "cultural room", offers a setting for intercultural encounters.

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Personal fulfilment in the German capital

Anyone who still gets homesick can also effortlessly enter an Israeli-Jewish cosmos. In practically every district of the city centre you can eat not only Israeli, but also kosher food. Accordingly, no one has to do without falafel or shakshuka. In addition, you can read the latest issue of Spitz, the Hebrew magazine that is published in the metropolis on the Spree, or visit the privately run Hebrew Library and listen to Israeli musicians in the evening. And moments of spirituality are also provided for: Berlin has over ten synagogues. Jewish daycare facilities for children and (elementary) schools are also available.

Yehuda Swed says he regards himself primarily as an Israeli, not as a Jew. He communicates with his children in Ivrit so that they will also learn Hebrew as well as their German mother tongue. Swed, who is married to a German, still finds German rather strange – and in any event English is the best choice for his international agency.

Whether as photographer, fashion designer, journalist, start-up entrepreneur, baker or restaurant owner, many Israelis are setting up their own businesses on the Spree. The freedom to make the most of your own talents is irresistible. "In Israel, I constantly ran up against brick walls," explains Yael Nachshon Levin, who is also a musician and columnist. "In Berlin, I can realise my dreams." Furthermore, she adds, the city enables her to make friends with Syrians and Arabs, "people I don't even meet in Israel". For Yehuda Swed, too, the relaxed approach to his own identity also plays a major role: "In Berlin, you can constantly reinvent yourself, moving around the city anonymously or remaining am



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