

L'chaim,
Merle!



Jewish Life
in Berlin

Saturday Morning



Chapter 1

“Cool tattoo!”

Merle often hears comments like this. Mostly it is an excuse to flirt. But she finds the voice appealing and turns around to look at the speaker. A young man with dark-blond curly hair is standing behind her in the line.

“Hi,” says Merle.

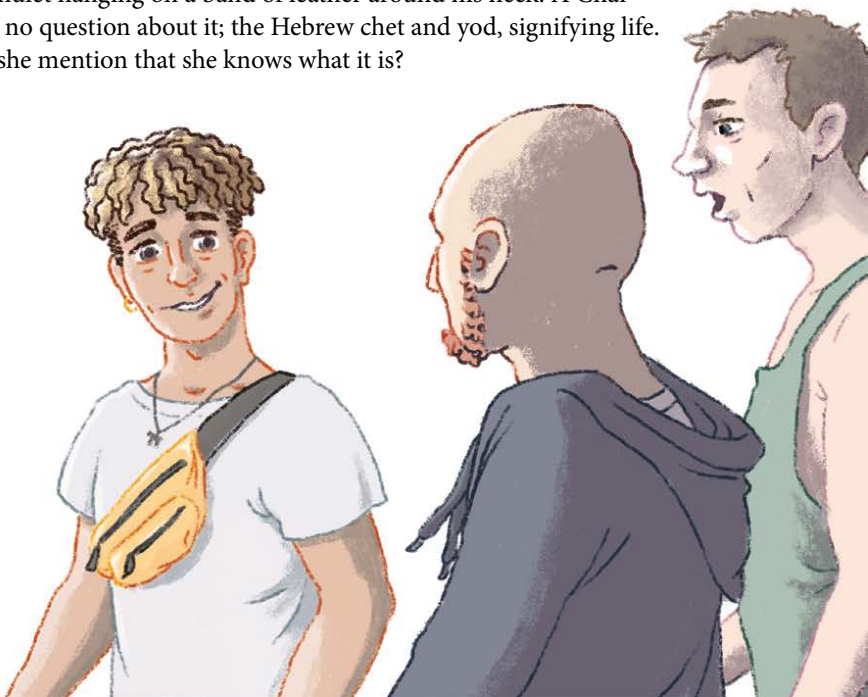
“Hi,” he answers and smiles, dimples cutting his cheek.

“Who did that for you?” he asks, pointing at the blackbird tattooed on Merle’s upper arm. He has a slight accent, which Merle cannot place.

“It’s my own design!” she laughs.

“Really? Awesome.”

Merle nods, “Thanks!” and hesitates a second as she catches sight of the silver amulet hanging on a band of leather around his neck. A Chai symbol, no question about it; the Hebrew chet and yod, signifying life. Should she mention that she knows what it is?

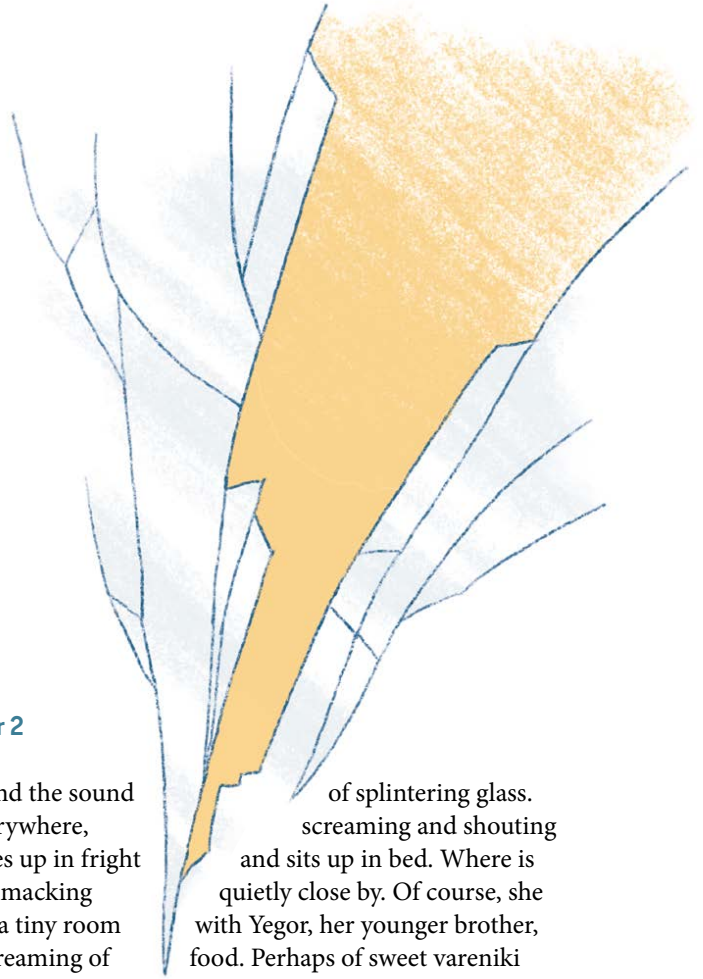


But then the club bouncer finally lets Merle and her girlfriends in, and the beats of techno music engulf them, the crowd pushing them headlong onto the dance floor. There they abandon themselves to the music under the spotlights—which don't really light up the space but dance around in hops and leaps too. Near midnight Laura presses a fresh bottle of beer into Merle's hand and the friends clink bottles, crying above the heavy, rumbling bassline, "Happy Birthday, Merle!"



Unexpectedly she hears the guy with the curly hair chime in, "Happy Birthday, Merle!" He too clinks bottles with her. Then he dances with them as if he has always been one of the group. As far as flirting goes, however, he has eyes only for Merle.

At one point he shouts something into her ear. She can't understand what he said despite his bending so close that their cheeks touch. Merle shrugs and laughs. He also laughs and takes hold of her arm for a moment. Then suddenly he disappears among the other dancers. Later she looks around to see where he is, but he seems to have vanished into thin air and is not even outside in the courtyard. It's no big deal. Merle is there to celebrate her twentieth birthday with her three best girlfriends. So she continues to groove, drink, laugh, perspire, scream, sing, and flirt until four in the morning.



Chapter 2

A deafening bang and the sound of splintering glass. People running everywhere, screaming and shouting loudly. Natalia wakes up in fright and sits up in bed. Where is she? She hears lips smacking quietly close by. Of course, she is in Berlin sharing a tiny room with Yegor, her younger brother, who is very likely dreaming of food. Perhaps of sweet vareniki filled with farmer's cheese? He can't get enough of them, sometimes stuffing ten down at a meal. Natalia gets up and goes to the window, opening it quietly so she doesn't wake him up. She peers out into the night. Outside everything is still, or at least pretty much so. Only a few cars are driving along the big road and in the apartment towers only the odd window is lit up from within. The house she lived in in Kyiv only had five floors, and her best friend, Maria, lived in the building next door. She too had to flee and now lives in Poland with her aunt.



Some of Natalia's new schoolmates must live close by in one of these large buildings, with their nondescript facades and tiny balconies. All of them look the same. None of her schoolmates have invited her to their homes yet. They all have friends already and probably find the new pupil who can hardly speak German pretty dull.

"Natashka, shcho ty robysh?"* her mother asks in a whisper, adding in Ukrainian, "Go back to bed, then you can sleep another two hours."

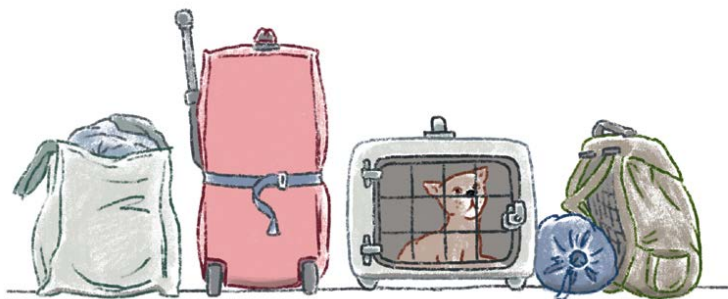
* "What are you doing, Natashka?" Ukrainian uses the Cyrillic alphabet. As it is only spoken in this story, we have used the Roman transliteration.

How did her mother know that Natalia was awake? She sleeps in the living room and shares the daybed with Natalia's older sister, Genia. Genia always gets really annoyed when Natalia hesitantly pads in at night. She doesn't dare to do it anymore. It is all the more soothing now to have her mother sitting on the edge of her bed and quietly humming a song, even if Natalia, now eleven years old, is too old for lullabies! On the other hand, nobody ever asked her if she were too young to experience how bombs fall on houses so that whole sections of apartment blocks collapse. In her dreams they implode again nearly every night, one floor into the next. Natalia hugs her mother's legs and snuggles her head in close against her.

"When will we see daddy again?" Natalia asks.

"I can't say," her mother answers sadly and sings on quietly: "Kotyk bude workotaty. Dytynon'ka bude spaty."*

Natalia then dreams of Maria and of Maria's cat and of a red balloon, which she lets drift high up into the sky.



* "The little cat will purr. And the baby will sleep." From the traditional Ukrainian lullaby "Oi Khodyt Son Kolo Vikon" (The Dream Passes by the Windows).

Several Days Later: Friday Evening

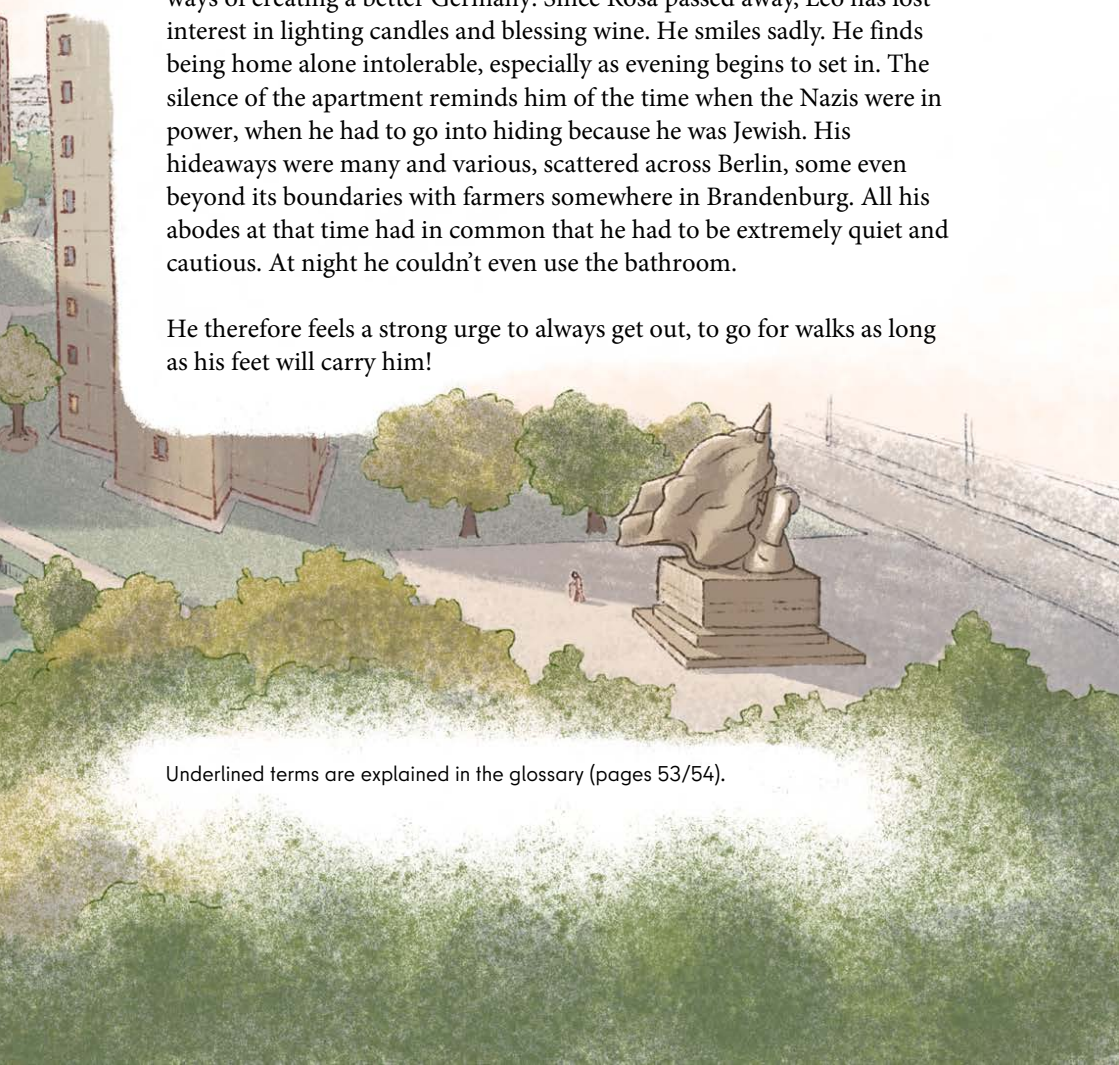


Chapter 3

Leo goes on his daily round, leaning on a walking stick. He walks slowly and cautiously, completing his circuit of Ernst Thälmann-Park. On a good day, he even manages a detour to the hockey pitches.

When Rosa was still alive, they lit Shabbat candles on Friday evenings and cozily ate a meal together. At least this was the case in the last years they had together. Before that and as young lovers they would go dancing or to the party meetings of the SED and discuss throughout the night ways of creating a better Germany. Since Rosa passed away, Leo has lost interest in lighting candles and blessing wine. He smiles sadly. He finds being home alone intolerable, especially as evening begins to set in. The silence of the apartment reminds him of the time when the Nazis were in power, when he had to go into hiding because he was Jewish. His hideaways were many and various, scattered across Berlin, some even beyond its boundaries with farmers somewhere in Brandenburg. All his abodes at that time had in common that he had to be extremely quiet and cautious. At night he couldn't even use the bathroom.

He therefore feels a strong urge to always get out, to go for walks as long as his feet will carry him!



Underlined terms are explained in the glossary (pages 53/54).



On his walks, Leo likes to take a good rest on a park bench near the pond. He's not the youngest anymore, aged over ninety. He often sees Peter there. They both worked for a while as tradesmen at the same production cooperative and then lost touch with one another for years. It is only by chance that they lately both enjoy the same bench in the park. They never specifically arrange to meet up there, but they always part with the words: "See you tomorrow!" They either sit together on their bench in silence or exchange a few words.

"It's warm today," one of them says.

"Yes, it is," the other replies.

Today, however, Peter comments: “The bombing in Ukraine is so awful. I dream so often of how it was years ago, when the sirens in Berlin warned of air raids and how everything was in ruins. Remember how it was?”

Leo nods and answers: “Terrible!”

Peter knows nothing of the nights and days that Leo had to spend in hiding. And Leo never asks Peter what his family did during Nazi rule and in World War II. Leo is simply glad to have found someone he can more or less call a friend, someone who also finds it intolerable to feel so lonely at home all alone.



Saturday Morning

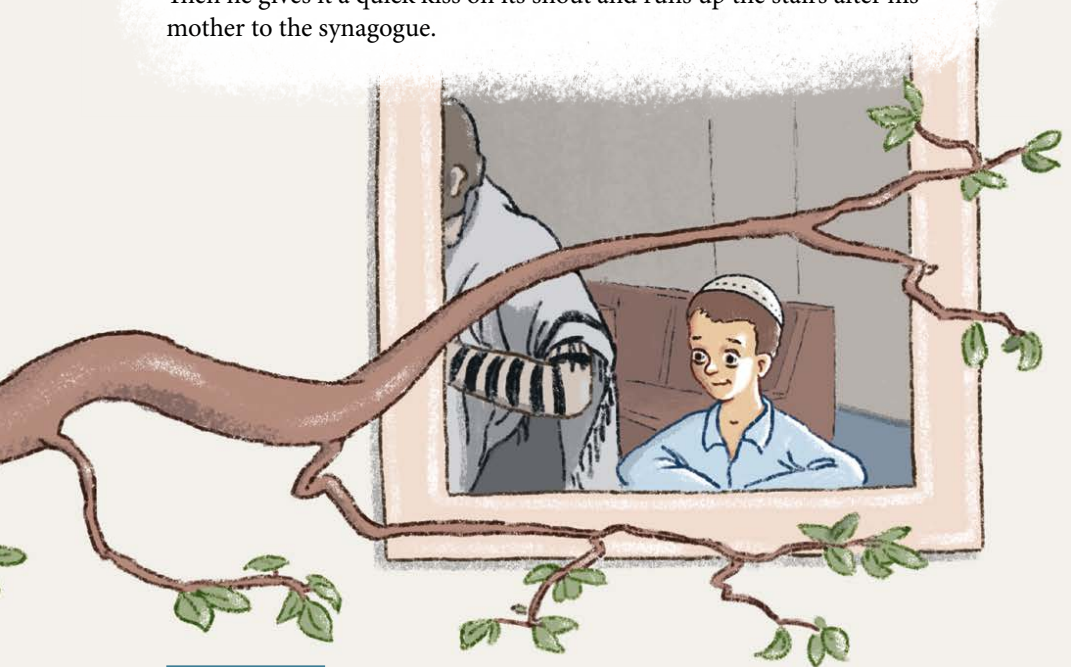


Chapter 4

Practically every Shabbat morning a cat roams about the entrance to the building where Tiferet Israel Synagogue is located. The cat is black with a white spot behind its left ear. Men in dark suits and women in their best dresses rush past the sociable stray, taking no notice of it. However, most people shoo it away if it tries to slip into the entrance hall with them.

“Ha! If only they knew,” the cat thinks and springs out of the way, looking rather peeved.

But the children are always thrilled when they catch sight of it. They crouch down by the cat, murmuring pet names as they pat it. The cat likes young Simon most of all. Simon always comes up with a new name for the cat, sometimes it is Motek,* sometimes Purr, Spot, or Rosa Negra.** His mother always has to call after him to tear him away from the cat. Then he gives it a quick kiss on its snout and runs up the stairs after his mother to the synagogue.



* “Cutie,” a Hebrew term of endearment.

** “Black Rose,” name of a vocal artist who sings in Ladino or Judezmo (Judeo-Spanish).

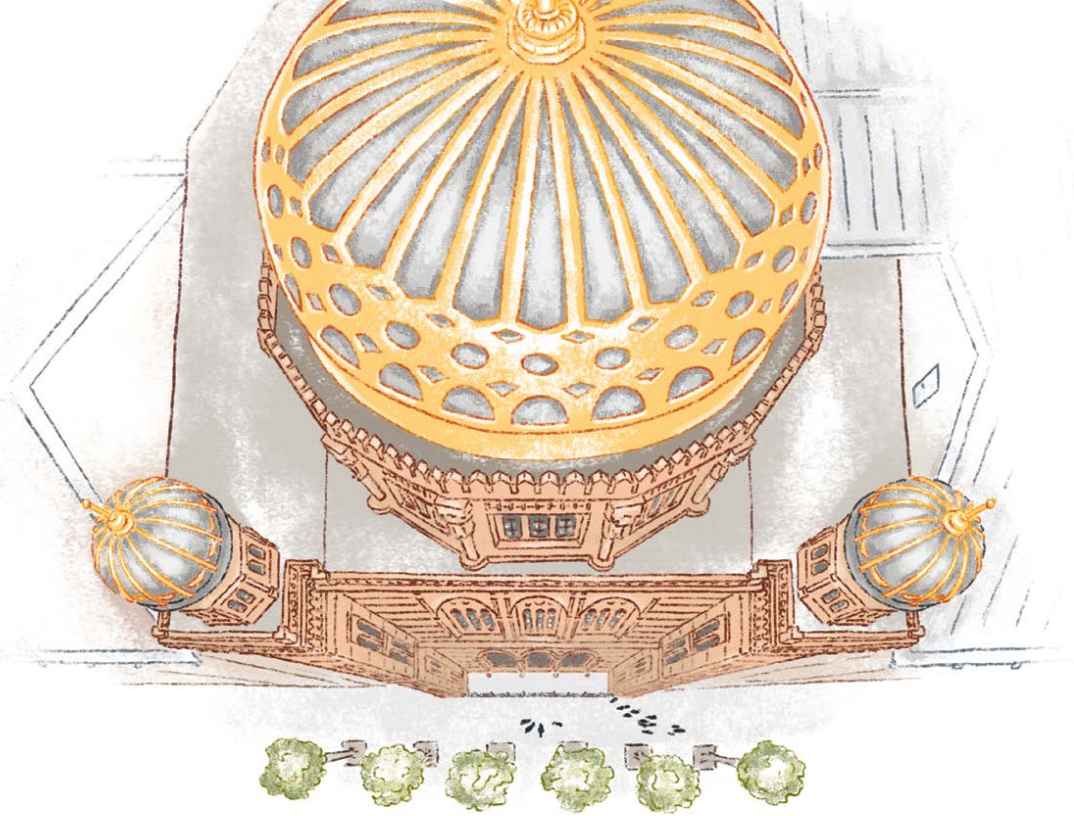
The cat slips away outside and nimbly climbs high up a nearby tree. Its branches almost touch the open window of the synagogue. Curling up in the fork of the branches, the stray listens to the men singing and praying. It also watches as Simon and his friends scramble about among the pews—or when Simon sometimes sneaks off to his mother in the women’s section.

The cat knows many of the synagogues in the city, the larger ones and the smaller ones, those with a large congregation and those so small that they don’t even open their doors to worshippers every Shabbat. It is only in the congregation at Passauer Straße that prayers are chanted or read in the Sephardic tradition. Here alone they read from the Torah in a way that the cat simply cannot resist purring on its perch in the tree. The sound of this chanting is part of its genetic makeup—its great-grandfather was the famous Rabbi’s Cat that had lived in the 1920s in Algeria.* To be precise, it is its 7,777th descendant—and proud of it too. She is, however, a little sad that her famous ancestor was a tomcat and not a female. But when it comes to cats, matrilineal or patrilineal kinship might not be relevant in the question of whether they are Jewish or not, thought the cat and purred even louder.**

* See the comics series *Le chat du rabbin* (The Rabbi’s Cat) by Joann Sfar.

** Jewish descent is matrilineal, i.e., if your mother is Jewish then you are too.





Chapter 5

How awesome! Natalia cranes her neck to look straight up into the sky to get a better look at the synagogue's golden dome gleaming in the sun. But what is the use of a golden dome to her if all the other children don't know who she is and regard her only as just the new girl?

"Just be patient," her mother reassures her as if reading Natalia's thoughts.

To get into the synagogue, everyone must pass through a security check, and then Natalia and her mother follow the arrows pointing the way to the Kids' Club.



“Welcome, shalom! I’m Yoram,” a friendly young man with unruly curls introduces himself, smiling.

“And I am Hanna. We’re both supervising the Shabbat group for teenagers who soon have their bat or bar mitzvah. Just like you, right?”

Natalia shrugs. She doesn’t want to celebrate her bat mitzvah if her dad can’t be there because he has to remain in Ukraine. In the war, Natalia feels lost and lonely amid the gaiety of the kids around her. Yoram’s and Hanna’s expectant smiles are lost on her.

The first game they play together is a pantomime guessing game. The children must pull cards on which different occupations and professions are written in German, Russian, and Hebrew.



Natalia is lucky, the word detective is the same in Russian and German. But how on earth should she act out the role of a detective? She holds her hands before one of her eyes in the shape of a magnifying glass and inspects the table and the floor for clues, traces, and evidence.



“Scientist! Gardener! Thingfinder!” the children call out excitedly all at once—as well as many more professions, mostly things Natalia has never heard of. Finally, a boy cries: “Detective!”

The boy’s name is Valentin. He speaks Russian and German fluently— as well as bits and pieces of Ukrainian.

“That’s because I was born in Berlin,” he explains later while showing Natalia where she can find the bathrooms, the small kitchen, and the stairwell that leads up to the rooms of worship.

Valentin’s parents come from Moscow. Natalia looks at him, startled. Of all places from Russia! But Valentin only shrugs and takes Natalia by the hand as he continues to show her about the building.

“The synagogue was really big before the devastation of World War II,” he explains in a mix of different languages while indicating the open area with a sweep of his arm. It was practically as large as a football field. “Spravdi?”* Natalia asks. “Were there that many Jews in Berlin then?”

* Ukrainian for “really?”

Chapter 6

Hanna and Yoram sweep up the mess of paper and art supplies on the table and sort the playing cards. One game had involved the children rendering quick sketches of the animals that are mentioned in the Bible and guessing what the others had drawn. Yoram is about to crumple up a sketch into a paper ball when he stops, smooths out the piece of paper and takes a closer look at the bird on it. It is a raven that looks more like a blackbird.

“Do you know of a good tattoo studio?” he asks.

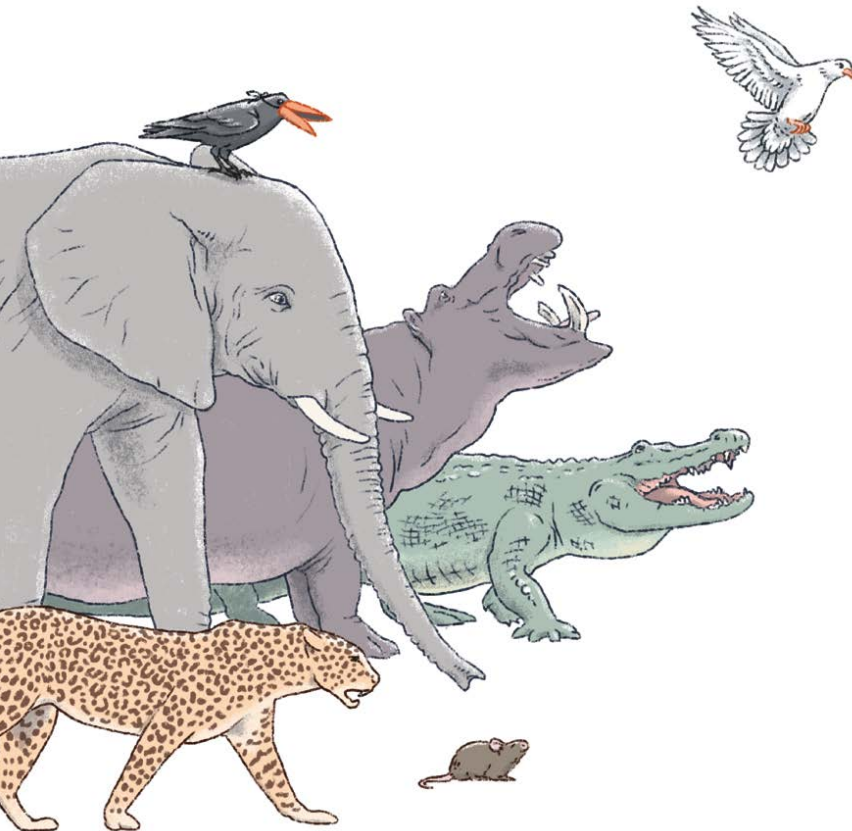


“Tattoo? Are you crazy? They’re ugly and forbidden according to Halacha,” Hanna retorts.

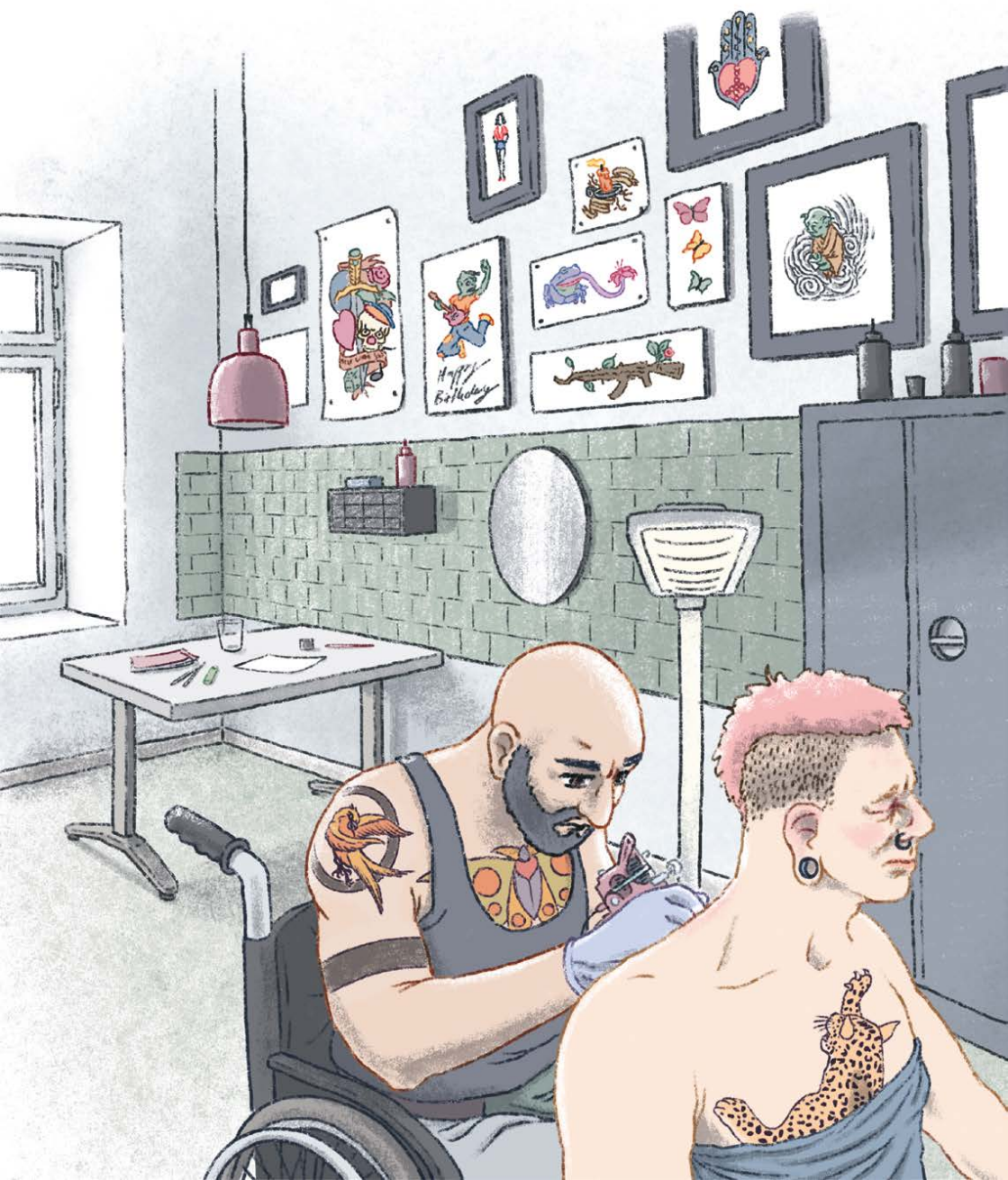
“You see many people with tattoos at the beach in Tel Aviv,” Yoram argues in his defense and reddens. Oh man, that doesn’t normally happen to him. And Hanna, of course, sees through it instantaneously and grins.

“Is there someone, perhaps, whom you could ask about a good tattoo studio?”

No, and that’s the problem, thinks Yoram. He crumples up the drawing of the raven in his fist and tosses it into the bin.



Tuesday Afternoon



Chapter 7

“That’s not a good idea,” states Merle. “Don’t get a tattoo with your partner’s name.”

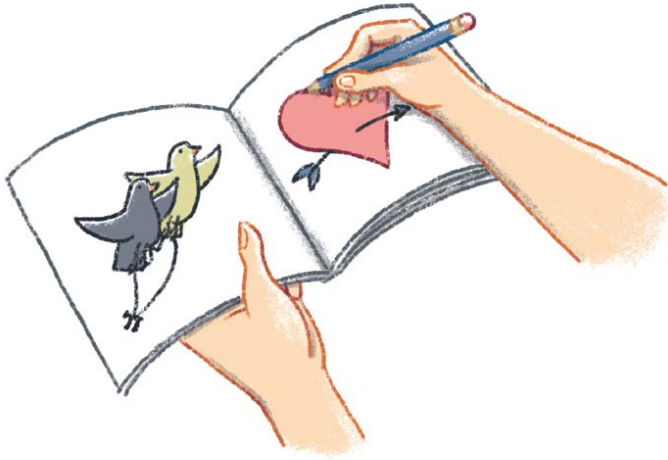
She smiles at André. He sits opposite at a small writing desk. André is in his early forties or thereabouts. In any case, he is starting to go bald and wears a polo shirt.

“Hello?! I’m not afraid of people knowing I’m gay!” he retorts resentfully. “And Benno is the one for me. With him it’s forever.”

“I didn’t mean it that way,” Merle tries to take the tension out of the situation and is mad at herself. A mistake that only beginners should make! What is wrong with her today? Normally diplomacy comes easily to her when she advises clients. They usually decide themselves that a personal symbol is a much better way of expressing their love for someone than a name or something kitschy like a heart or a colorful rainbow.



“How did you get to know one another?” she asks. “What do you like to do together?” André finally calms down and tells his story. Merle closes her eyes, opens them again, and begins drawing. Small sketches of unpretentious but meaningful episodes in his life. Moving staircases that approach one another, two surfboards, a rowboat. André smiles contentedly and adds a few details while he continues to narrate. At the end Merle hands him the sketches: “Sleep on it and come back next week.”



After André has left the shop, Merle wipes the sweat off her brow. The electric fan has broken down again. At least she has a few minutes' break before the next customer is expected. She goes out and stands in front of the studio. Outside it is sweltering hot too. But the heat isn't the only reason that she is distracted at work. She keeps thinking of the guy with the Chai medallion and the friendly smile. What kind of tattoo would she give him if he were in love with her? Oh no, Merle, since when are you so hopelessly romantic? Anyway, the city seems to have swallowed him—he seems gone forever. She went with Laura to the same club again on the weekend in the hope of seeing him again. Then she tried several other likely dives too. No chance. Or is there some other way of finding him? But what would that be or how should she go about it?

Erhan, her boss and master tattoo artist, steps outside onto the pavement and lights a cigarette.

“Hey,” Merle calls. “I’m designing a new flyer for us.”

“New flyer? One that needs to be printed? Our internet presentation is more important!”



“I’m designing it for social media as well, of course,” Merle adds quickly.

Erhan still hesitates. “I’m short of cash at the moment.”

“I’ll do it for nothing,” Merle responds, “if you give me free rein on it.”

“Tamam,”*Erhan agrees, “your ideas have always been pretty useful.”

“Pretty useful?! Well, thanks for the compliment,” Merle rejoins with a laugh.

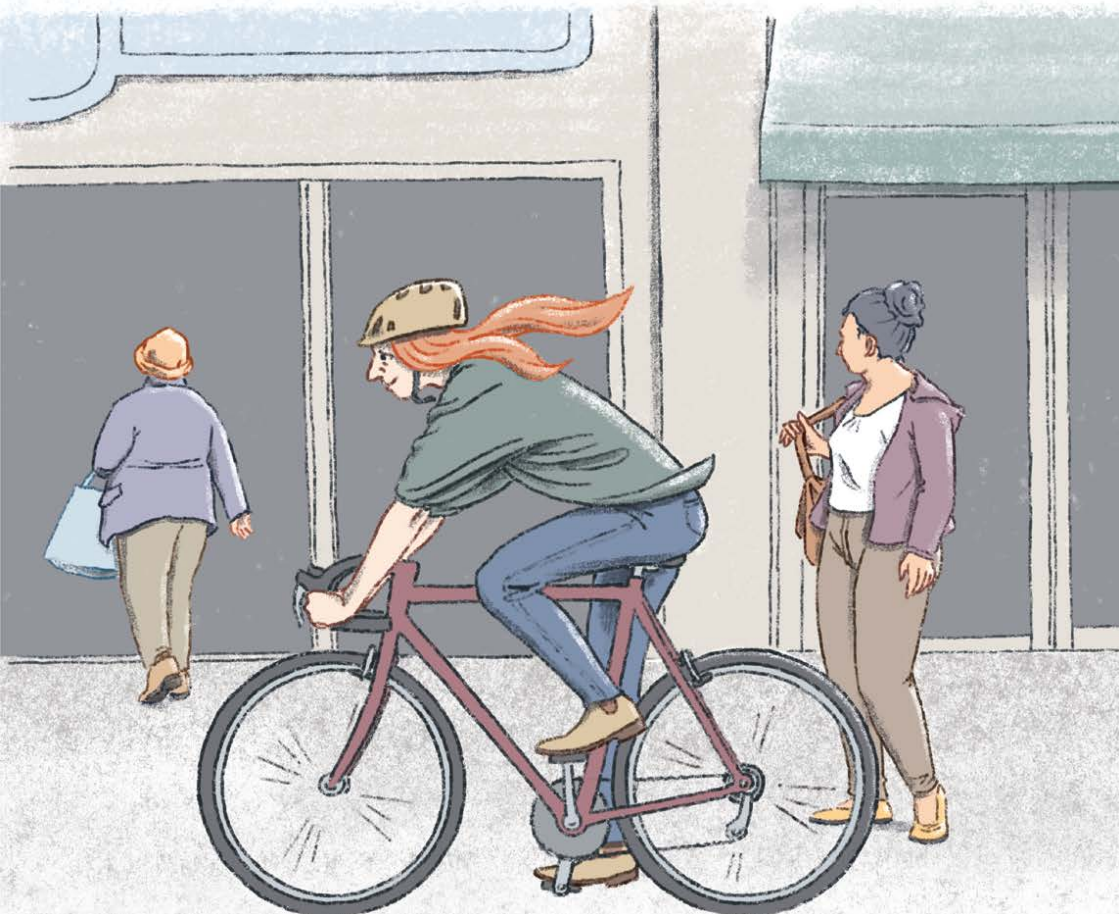
Phew! Got what I want! She will start with the drafts straight away this evening. Her plan is perfect and the only chance she might still have.

* Turkish for “okay.”

Chapter 8

Sitting under an umbrella at a metal table that brightly reflects the sun, Natalia, Valentin, and a few friends spoon ice cream out of cups. Valentin happens to live in the same quarter as Natalia and had simply suggested after the Kids' Club on Shabbat that they meet up some day.

Natalia can hardly understand the conversations of the others, even if Valentin briefly explains or translates something now and then. He refuses to translate jokes. "That's impossible," he claims. But the louder the others laugh, the more Natalia feels like an outsider. And she doesn't dare to talk to anybody about herself.

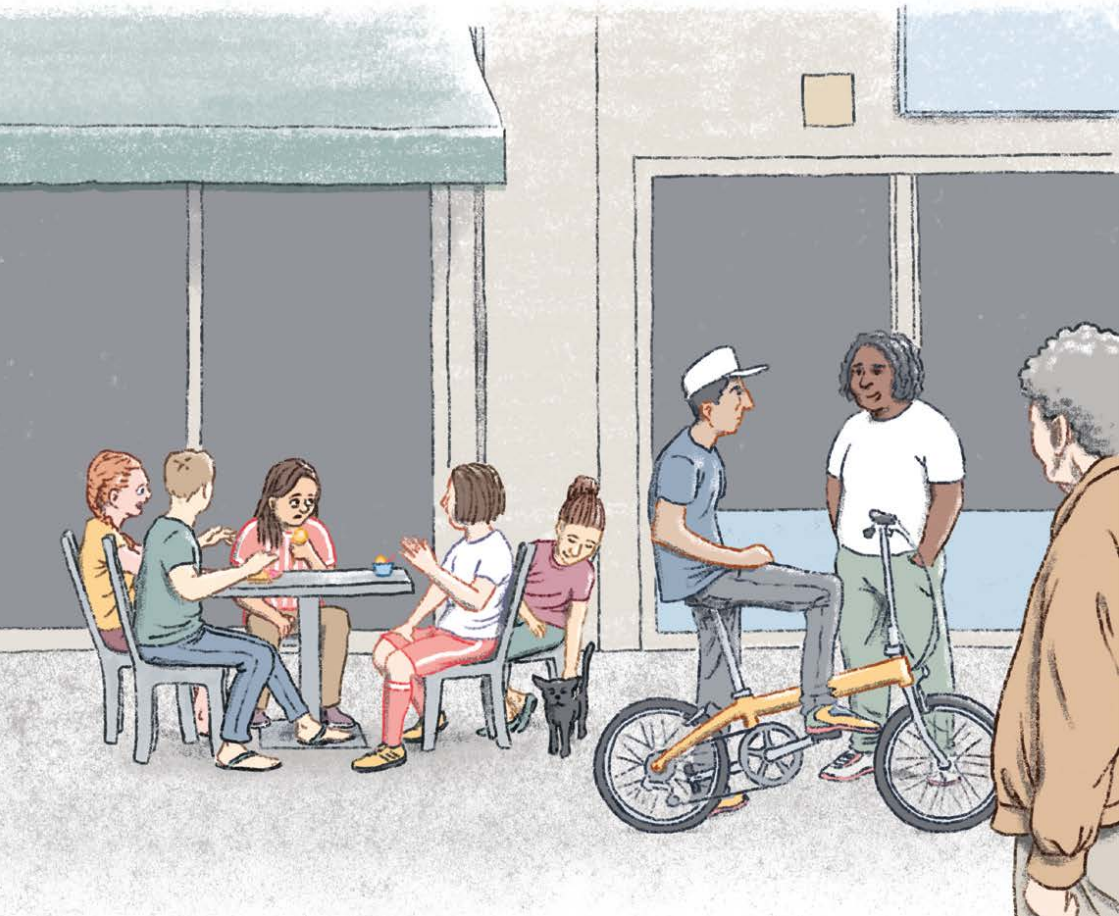


A black cat pads over the square directly towards Natalia and rubs itself on her legs, purring. Natalia dips her finger in her chocolate ice cream and lets the cat lick it off.

“What a cute cat!” exclaims the girl sitting next to Natalia and bends over to scratch the cat behind the ears. “Look, it has a white spot here.”

“My best girlfriend in Ukraine had a cat,” Natalia tells the girl to her own surprise. She actually has managed to say a complete sentence in German!

With its tail stretched upright like a candle, the cat purrs and wanders back and forth from Natalia to the other girl, pushing its head against the bare skin in the hollows of their knees.

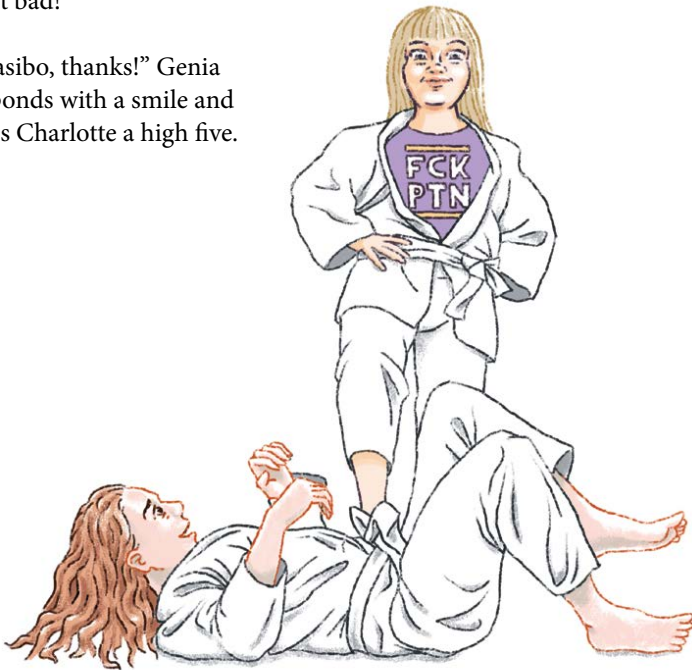


Chapter 9

Genia's shoulder throw is flawless as she flings her opponent onto the mat with a loud cry. That feels good! Genia is seething inside—the cramped apartment, the Russians and their shitty aggression and war, and the school, where she must repeat a class because she can't speak the language. But she knows her judo! In Ukraine, Genia was even runner-up in the championships for under 15-year-olds. Hard to beat that! And here in Berlin her few snatches of German and English were enough to convince the judo club to let her train there for free. That is the most important thing really.

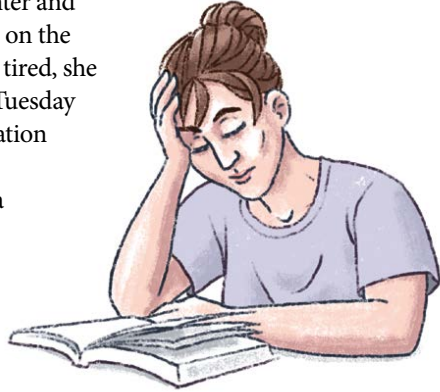
Charlotte gets back on her feet and pats Genia on the shoulder, “Not bad!”

“Spasibo, thanks!” Genia responds with a smile and gives Charlotte a high five.



Chapter 10

Natalia's mom, Darya, sits exhausted at a large table in the community center and copies the words that are written on the blackboard. Although extremely tired, she still attends German lessons on Tuesday evenings. A community organization for assisting Ukrainian refugees provides the classes. Darya is at a loss, though. Why is German so complicated?



Yet again her day had been much too long. Darya was out and about much of the day, filling out various official forms. Then she had to pick Yegor up from kindergarten and had an argument with Natalia. This was unusual and surprising, adding to Darya's burden of discussions with Genia, which are more than enough for her. Why on earth does her younger daughter want to meet up with this Valentin, a Russian of all things? What will her father say about that? There is a war going on and he is stationed at the front!

"Valentin isn't a Russian, he's German," Natalia cried. "And he's Jewish as well, just like we are."

Then she ran out of the apartment to see Valentin while Darya cooked the evening meal.

"Mein Sohn und meine Tochter," Darya writes in her exercise book and tries to focus more on her lessons, but with little success. At least Natalia has come home punctually and is now looking after Yegor, who is hopefully asleep by now. Darya sighs. To be fair, Natalia is actually right. Why shouldn't she be friends with Valentin?

Before the war, Darya and her husband also never thought about whether people were Ukrainian or Russian. And at the refugee center there are many volunteers who originally stem from Russia or the former Soviet Union.

“My son’s name is Valentin,” the teacher writes in German with her marker on the whiteboard and Dara looks up with a start.

Chapter 11

As Leo arrives at his bench near the pond a few evenings later, Peter is already waiting for him and grasping a flyer.

“This was lying here,” Peter tells him. “Take a look. I’ve seen this symbol somewhere before.”

“Not so fast, not so fast,” Leo wheezes and, leaning heavily on his walking stick, slumps down onto the bench. Then he takes the flyer and reads it, his brow wrinkling.

“This is outrageous,” he says. “Everyone has tattoos these days! They should be illegal. Especially here in Germany. No one has an inkling, and nobody remembers that numbers were tattooed on the arms of the Jews at Auschwitz. Like they did to my father.”

Peter turns to him in surprise. “Oh,” he murmurs and then, after a moment, adds, “I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay,” Leo reassures him and hands him the brochure.



Leo's hand trembles. After the war, the initial time of peace was a terrible phase in his life. The Nazis had murdered his mother, and his uncle and aunts never returned from the concentration camps. Leo lived alone with his father, who often just sat at the table without saying a word, his right hand always resting on his other lower arm.



The two men on the park bench are silent, not saying a word for longer than usual.

Eventually Peter asks, still holding the flyer in his hand: "But this symbol. What does it mean? I've seen it somewhere but can't remember where."

Leo glances over to the flyer and mumbles, "That is a Chai symbol and means life in Hebrew." Then he snorts, "You're kidding me. Of all things, a Chai symbol!"

Peter slaps his brow. "Now I remember. Yoram wears a medallion shaped like that around his neck. Yoram is a young student who lives in the same building and, when Covid began, always went shopping for me. Even these days he carries anything heavy for me to the third floor."

"Hmm," Leo mutters.

"I'll give Yoram the flyer next time I see him," Peter decides.

He folds up the flyer to stuff it into his pocket and sees the text in bold print under the Chai symbol:



Two Weeks Later



Chapter 12

“A customer for you,” Erhan calls to Merle, who is in the office out back. There she is working on a sketch for André. He decided on a tree, a maritime pine, which is steadfast even in the strongest wind.

“Hi,” she hears a familiar voice.

Merle looks up and pales. It really is him. Just like that.

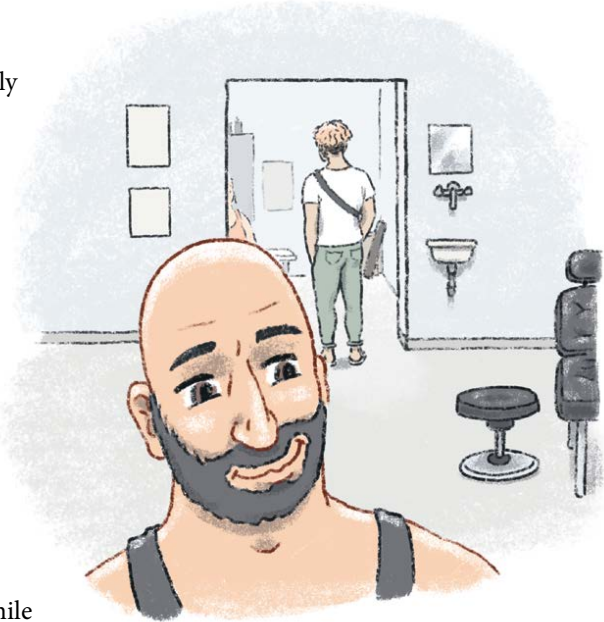
“Hi,” she greets back.

“I, I want to have a tattoo done,” he stutters, as overcome with shyness as Merle.

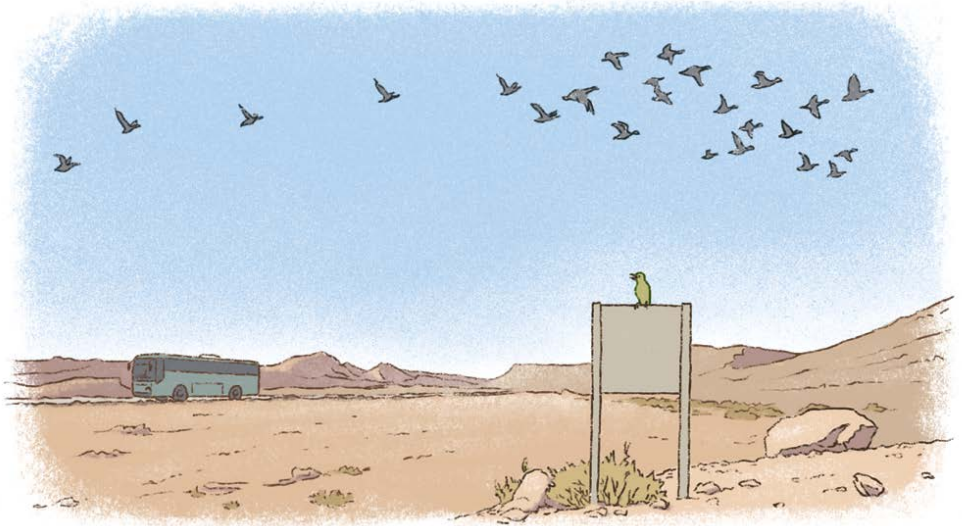
Quickly pulling herself together, she suggests he take a seat and pushes a chair toward him. “What’s your name?”

“Oh, sorry,” he answers as his smile makes his dimples reappear. “I never introduced myself. I’m Yoram.”

Then they both smile at one another for a long time until Merle finally asks what kind of tattoo he was thinking of. Yoram wants a tattoo of a bird. Merle is not at all happy about that. That’s encroaching on her territory a bit. The blackbird is hers and hers alone—because Merle means blackbird. She wouldn’t share her bird with anybody, not even with Yoram. Merle narrows her eyes and gives her client a questioning look. But all of a sudden, Yoram feels totally calm and begins talking.



“My great-grandmother’s name was Fejgele. That means little bird in Yiddish. She was born here in Berlin in the Scheunenviertel and then emigrated early enough to Palestine when the Nazis came into power. Her daughter, who is my grandmother, is called Zippora. That is the Hebrew word for bird instead of Yiddish. As a child I spent a lot of my time together with Grandma Zippora.”*



Merle swallows hard, moved by the story.

“What kind of a bird are you thinking of?” she asks.

“One of those colorful little migratory birds that can also live in the desert,” Yoram tells her and shows her a few photos on his smartphone.

* Yiddish is the everyday language that was spoken and written by Jews who lived a more traditional life in many parts of Europe and is still used today in a number of Jewish communities, especially in Israel and the United States. Hebrew is the language (besides Aramaic) used in the Hebrew Bible and the language that is spoken today in Israel. Zippora (Hebrew for bird) is a biblical name. Moses’ wife was called Zippora.

Chapter 13

Natalia and Valentin are sitting on the floor in Valentin's room with copies of excerpts from the Torah lying in front of them. The print has been enlarged to help them read the Hebrew script. This fall they respectively face their bat und bar mitzvah ceremonies. Natalia's birthday is unfortunately earlier than Valentin's—which means that her bat mitzvah ceremony takes place before his bar mitzvah does, despite the fact that she is only turning twelve and he will be turning thirteen.

“That’s the way it is,” Valentin reasons. “At least you have the better parashah. The story of Noah’s Ark is cool. All the animals were saved.”

Natalia finds the story depressing. So many were drowned in the Great Flood.

But Valentin has already pressed the play button, and Hanna's voice again chants the passages. Hanna has a wonderful voice. She'll be a great cantor one day. Focusing intently, Natalia and Valentin quietly sing along with her:

שְׁנַיִם שְׁנַיִם בָּאוּ אֶל־נֹחַ אֶל־הַתֵּבָה

Schnaim schnaim ba'u el-Noach el-hatëva,

זָכַר וּנְקָבָה כְּאֲשֶׁר צִוָּה אֱלֹהִים אֶת־נֹחַ:

sachar unekeva, ka-ascher ziva elohim et Noach.*

* “Two and two, male and female, went into the Ark with Noah as God had commanded Noah.” (Bereshit/Genesis 7:9).



“I’ve had enough,” Natalia groans after a while and falls back onto the pillow on the floor. Learning German is hard enough!

The walls of Valentin’s room are covered with posters of the Union Berlin soccer club. One has the autographs of many players. Next to it, a red-and-white fan scarf hangs diagonally across the wall. Cups stand on the shelf, probably won by Valentin’s club, and his soccer balls fill a basket in the corner. Three of them! Why does he need three soccer balls? And will they have anything to say to each other when they no longer are learning for the bat and bar mitzvah?

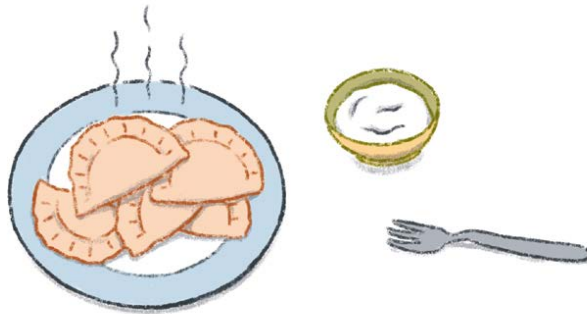
“Tomorrow my sister has her first judo tournament since we arrived in Berlin.”

“Your sister does judo? What’s her name? Which club does she fight for?”

“Genia,” Natalia says, “Evgenia Schkolnik.”

“I’ve heard the name somewhere,” Valentin muses while looking at his sport app.

After scrolling a short while he suddenly cries: “Wow, that’s your sister? She nearly became champion last year in Ukraine. Just look at those cool moves!”



Natalia didn't know that it was possible in Berlin to download the tournaments in Kiev that her sister competed in. And she is also not totally sure that she feels like admiring her sister with Valentin. Not really. Why didn't she think of something else to say?

Luckily Valentin's mother then knocks on the door: "Time for a break. I've got something for you in the kitchen."

Ljuba has cooked vareniki. Valentin and Natalia eat hungrily.

"Don't you want to come by with your family on Shabbat?" Ljuba asks.

"I'm not sure," Natalia says and shrugs. She thinks of the disagreement she had with her mom about Valentin. Since that happened, she mentions his name as little as possible at home.



"Why not?" Ljuba laughs. "Your mother is even in my language course."

Natalia nearly chokes and almost spits a piece of vareniki over the table. She holds her hand over her mouth in confusion. Ljuba is her mother's teacher and Valentin is one of Genia's fans. Is she supposed to bring Genia along to Shabbat too so that Valentin can take a selfie with her sister?! It's all crazy—but Natalia notices how a feeling of gladness warms her from within. Warm and sweet like freshly made vareniki.

Chapter 14

“So, you were looking for me?” Yoram teases.

He picked Merle up after work at the tattoo studio and now they are sitting together at the Fränkelufer. Their legs hang over the stone walls of the Landwehrkanal and there are a bottle of wine and two plastic cups between them.

“And you for me,” Merle grins back.

Yoram nods. “It’s unbelievable that my neighbor brought the flyer by. Otherwise, I would have never found you.”

“I guess,” Merle answers. “My boss didn’t want the new flyer on the website because someone was against the two Hebrew letters. He didn’t notice that I had snuck them in. He was pretty miffed when he found out.” She laughs.

“How come you know the Chai symbol? Are you Jewish too?” Yoram asks.

Merle shrugs. “Yes, no, perhaps,” she muses.

“I see,” Yoram answers. “That’s not very definite.”



“Alright then,” Merle laughs. “My father’s grandfather was Jewish, and my father was obsessed for a while about the Jewish roots in our family history. We sometimes visit the synagogue. Here at Fränkelufer. And I also attended the Jewish high school. I wanted to know more about Jewish traditions and such.”

“Luckily. Otherwise, we might have never become acquainted,” Yoram concludes and pours out wine and lifts his glass.

“Lchaim, Merle!”*

“Lchaim, Yoram!”

Merle’s face shines in the evening sunlight. Yoram notices the freckles on her nose for the first time and would like to kiss them, each and every one. But he’s afraid of rushing it. Without saying much more, they both drink their wine and enjoy the warmth of summer—until Merle suddenly feels absolutely famished.

“I know a good burger place close by,” she suggests.

“You’re kidding me! Hamburgers?” Yoram asks, frowning.

“Don’t worry,” Merle laughs, “although I want their cheeseburger, you can always order their veggie burger. That should be kosher enough, don’t you think?”

“I’m not concerned about it being kosher or not,” Yoram grins. “I’m not religious. I am vegetarian though. Come on then, off to get a veggie burger!”

Yoram packs away the bottle of wine and the cups in his backpack. They both jump up and run off hand-in-hand.



* “To life!” is also a toast.

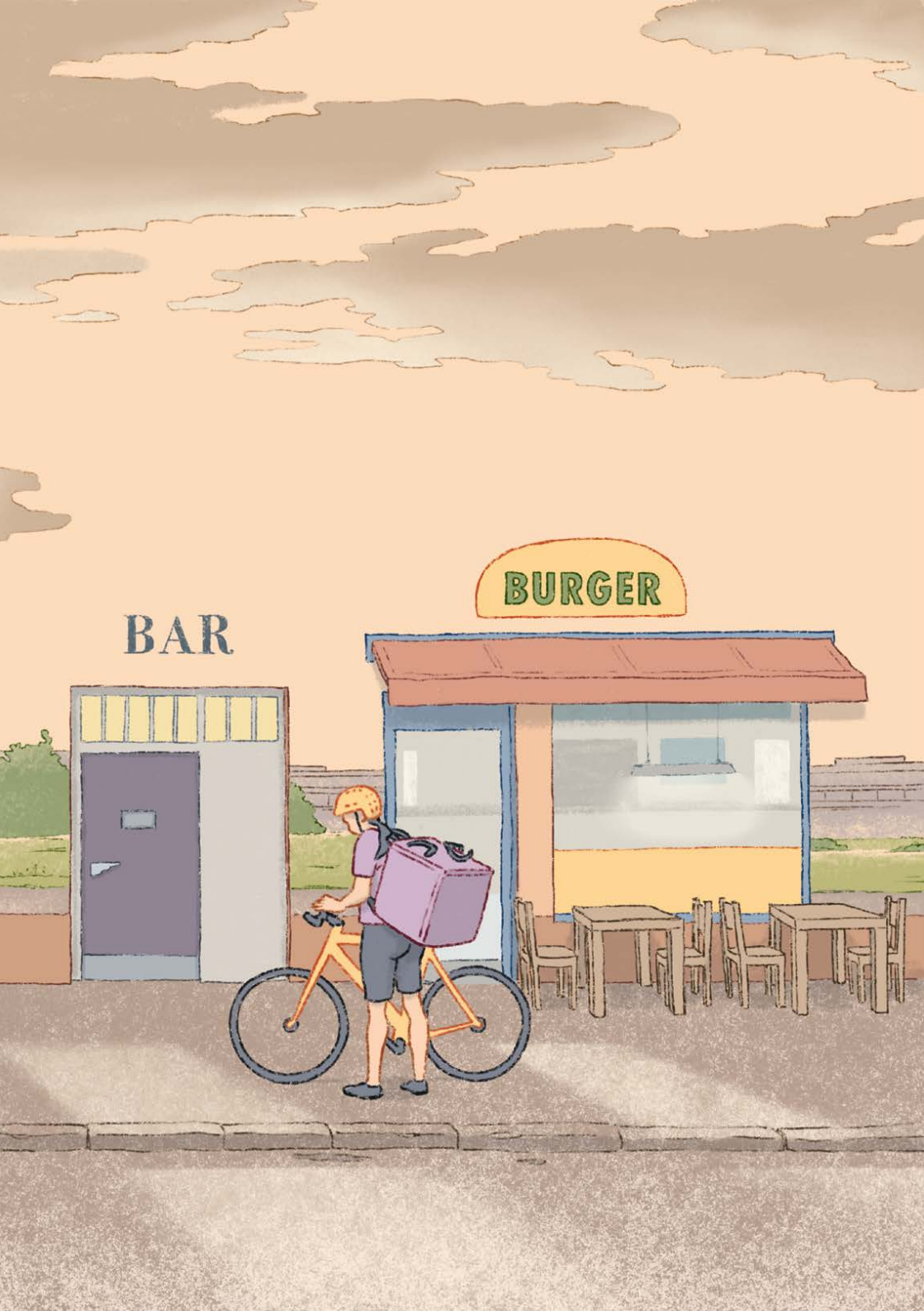


Falafel



BAR

BURGER



Shabbat



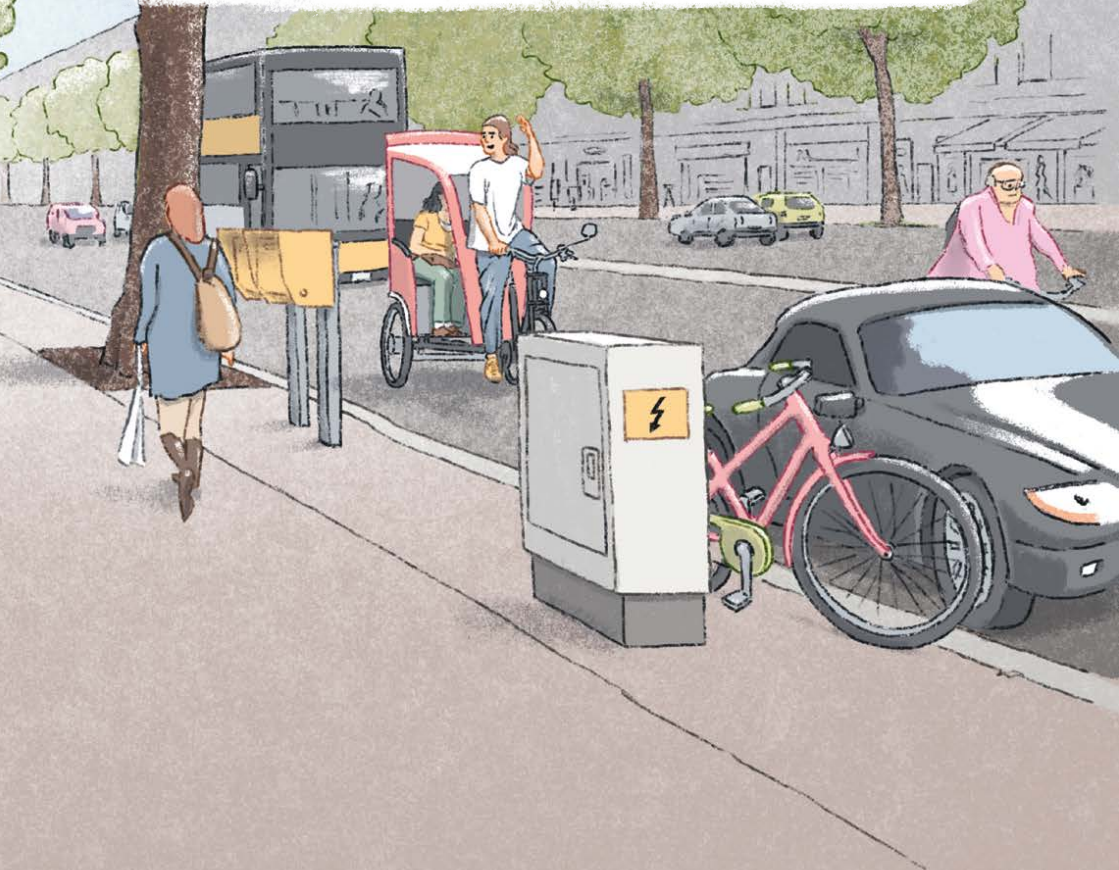
Chapter 15

“Come, come, Slinky,” Simon calls quietly after the service, coaxing the cat to come out on the sidewalk. The policeman guarding the synagogue greets the two of them with a smile: “Shabbat Shalom!”*

“Shabbat Shalom!” Simon greets back.

It is quite crowded on the sidewalk. Lots of people scurry by carrying large shopping bags, handbags, and backpacks. On the road, cars sound their horns in the fight over the few parking spaces being vacated by other drivers. They all have no idea that it is Shabbat, the day of rest.

* “Peaceful Shabbat” is said as a greeting and a goodbye on Shabbat.



Simon and his family walk home. On Shabbat they don't use public transport and not even their cellphones. Simon likes Shabbat because the whole family sometimes plays a game together or someone reads him a story. The pace of things is slow and easy. Something Simon enjoys, lagging behind again. He constantly bends down to pat the cat and nearly loses sight of his siblings and parents.

Suddenly he hears an angry, loud voice.

“Hey, do you think the whole street belongs to you?”



A man gives his father a whack on the back of his head and then walks on as if nothing happened. No one tries to stop him.

Simon quickly tries to hide the kippa on his head by covering it with his hand. This doesn't help, of course. The man is heading directly toward Simon and gaining speed. But then the cat takes a great leap and, hissing wildly, lands on the man's naked arm. He yells in dismay and the cat flees immediately. The man stands there, baffled, with deep, bloody scratches on his arm and he curses Jews for all to hear.

Simon runs to the safety of his mother's arms. A passerby picks up dad's kippa and hands it to him. Someone hurries to report the incident to the policeman guarding the synagogue while others hinder the man from running away or film the whole situation with their cellphones. A lot of people crowd around Simon's family and want to know exactly what happened. They unanimously agree:

"It's scandalous! People should be able to wear a kippa in public in Berlin without being molested. We must prevent antisemitism from poisoning our city! Together we're strong!"

"Next week I'll bring some tidbits along for my cat," Simon decides silently, pressing his face against his mother's cheek.



A Few Months Later



Chapter 16

Natalia is standing all alone at the front of the room and looks at the visitors in the synagogue. Wow, so many have come. She got through reading from the Torah all right. Hanna, Yoram, and Valentin had smiled at her proudly and given her the thumbs up. Now she only has to deliver a short speech in which she presents her interpretation of the part of the Bible she has prepared for.

“Feel free to voice any doubts you might have,” Hanna had told her in the preparatory course. “Questioning is part of Judaism.”

Natalia talks about the rainbow that God had spanned across the sky when the water of the Great Flood receded. The rainbow expressed his promise that such a catastrophe would never happen again.

“Sometimes I no longer believe in the rainbow. Too many terrible things are happening in the world,” Natalia says. “And sometimes I know perfectly well that the rainbow is there and builds a bridge to my father in Ukraine.”



Natalia looks at her mom who is filming all of this on her cellphone. She wants to send it to Natalia’s dad. Although it is forbidden to film on Shabbat and especially in the synagogue, they gave her mom special permission. Her mom cries a little while she films. Natalia is fighting back her tears and continues in a steady voice.

“The rainbow tells us that we are all different and nevertheless belong together.”

Natalia takes a deep breath. She has managed her speech too. Then suddenly candy rains on her from all corners of the large room. Natalia laughs as she dodges the flying sweets, and Yegor, together with a crowd of other children, collects as much candy as he can. The shower of candy doesn't seem to want to stop. Even the two old men in the second row are happily throwing treats.



Chapter 17

“I have to admit it, the tattoo is cool,” Hanna exclaims.

Yoram has rolled back the sleeves of his white shirt to show her the colorful bird ascending on outstretched wings. To the left of the bird, on what would be the ground, a small black Chai symbol is discernible.

“And you're the artist, I take it?” Hanna asks curiously.

Merle nods while helping the two of them dry the kiddush cups and store them away in the tiny kitchen. The visitors left a while ago and the synagogue is quite empty. Most of the dishes are washed up. Now Hanna and Yoram only have to bring the table standing outside in the courtyard, on which the food had been served, back inside to the communal room. Then Hanna says goodbye too.

“Good Shabbos!”*

“Shabbat shalom!”

* “Shabbat shalom” in Yiddish (i.e., good Sabbath)

Merle and Yoram stroll through the courtyard one more time.

“My artist,” Yoram whispers in her ear, even if there is no one around to hear them. They stop for a deep kiss while the black cat comes up and rubs itself on their legs, purring.



The Characters

The story and all the characters in this booklet are purely fictional. They are, however, inspired by everyday life as we know it today.

Merle turns twenty as the story begins and works in a tattoo studio. In her schooldays, she attended the Jewish Moses Mendelssohn High School and learned Hebrew there. Her great-grandfather was born in Berlin in 1912. Later he chose to be christened and during Nazi rule managed to survive with the assistance of his Christian wife and her family. Merle is not officially Jewish, but she feels a strong affiliation to the Jewish people.



Yoram (24) moved to Berlin from Israel three years ago and is studying biology in Berlin. He is a secular Jew who, despite not being religious, attaches great importance to Jewish culture and Jewish traditions. He has several jobs so he can pay his way. His favorite job is his work as madrich (youth group leader) at the Oranienburgerstraße synagogue.

Hanna (27) is madricha (youth group leader) at the Oranienburgerstraße synagogue. She and Yoram make a wonderful team! Hanna is training to be a cantor and can therefore help teenagers prepare for their bar or bat mitzvah. Hanna's family has been living in Berlin for many generations. When the Nazis were in power, however, they were persecuted and forced to flee.





Natalia turns twelve in the story and has been living in Berlin only for a few months. She fled with her mother, her sister Genia (16), and her brother Yegor (5) from Ukraine to Berlin shortly after Russia attacked in 2022. She has nightmares of the bombing attacks in Kyiv, her hometown, and misses her father very much. He stayed in Ukraine. She loves animals and is trying to learn German as quickly as possible, hoping that will help her find new friends in Berlin more easily.

Darja (43) worked in Kyiv as a secretary. She speaks Russian and Ukrainian fluently and is now learning German. She misses her husband and her colleagues at work. Here in Berlin, she struggles with the challenges that confront her daily in her new life (such as dealing with bureaucratic hurdles and searching for an apartment). And not least, caring as best as she can for her three children, Genia, Natalia, and Yegor, and attending to their needs, despite war and fleeing from her home. She is glad to find so many people wishing to help the refugees from Ukraine.



Genia (16) is what everyone calls her, but her first name is actually Evgenia. She insists that also here in Germany people pronounce her name correctly, as if it were written “Shenia.” She was vice-champion in judo for the under fifteen-year-olds back in Ukraine. In Berlin she found a self-defense club where she can practice without having to pay fees.

Valentin (12) will soon celebrate his bar mitzvah and hopes to be madrich later—like Yoram. He was born in Berlin. His parents were born in what was formerly the Soviet Union (in Russia, to be precise, one of the countries of the USSR) and emigrated as children with their parents to Germany as what is known as “Jewish quota refugees.”





Ljuba (48), Valentin's mother, is an elementary school teacher and works on an honorary basis in a community group helping Ukrainian refugees. In the former Soviet Union, she was considered Jewish because her father was Jewish. Because her mother was not Jewish, however, Ljuba converted to Judaism in Berlin in order to belong to the Jewish community according to the Halacha.

Leo (born in Berlin in 1932) survived Nazi rule in hiding—separated from his parents, who were deported. Later he completed his apprenticeship as a roofer and enjoyed working under the open sky. His wife, Rosa, who had passed away a few years ago, was born in England, where her parents had found refuge. After the war they returned to East Berlin. As committed communists, Rosa's parents decided to live in the German Democratic Republic (GDR). Leo and Rosa have a son who lives with his family in England.



Peter (born in Berlin in 1930) vividly remembers the bombings of Berlin in World War II. He was an avid member of the Hitler Youth and it was only in post-war times that he began to think seriously about the crimes of the Nazi regime and the Holocaust. He finds out, in the course of the story, that his friend Leo is Jewish. Peter's wife has passed away and his son works as a nurse in Hamburg; his daughter is married for the third time and lives in Rostock.

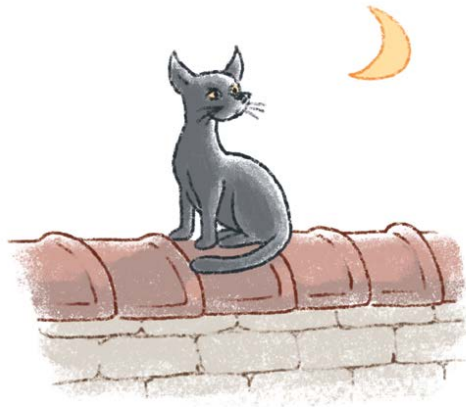


Erhan (43) was born in Duisburg. His paternal grandparents both came to Germany as Turkish “migrant workers.” His maternal grandmother is a Turkish-German writer. Erhan loves Berlin and opened a tattoo studio in the city nearly twenty years ago. Business is booming because he manages to fulfill the individual wishes of his clients.



Simon (5) loves animals and would dearly love to have a cat of his own. He is growing up with three older siblings (two brothers and a sister) in an orthodox Jewish family. The family lives close by the Sephardic Tiferet Israel Synagogue and always goes everywhere on foot on Shabbat.

The black cat loves the Sephardic synagogue in Berlin and is convinced that it is a descendant of the famous Rabbi’s Cat from Algeria. The black cat fights passionately against antisemitism. Otherwise, she is very friendly. The more people pat her, the louder she purrs.



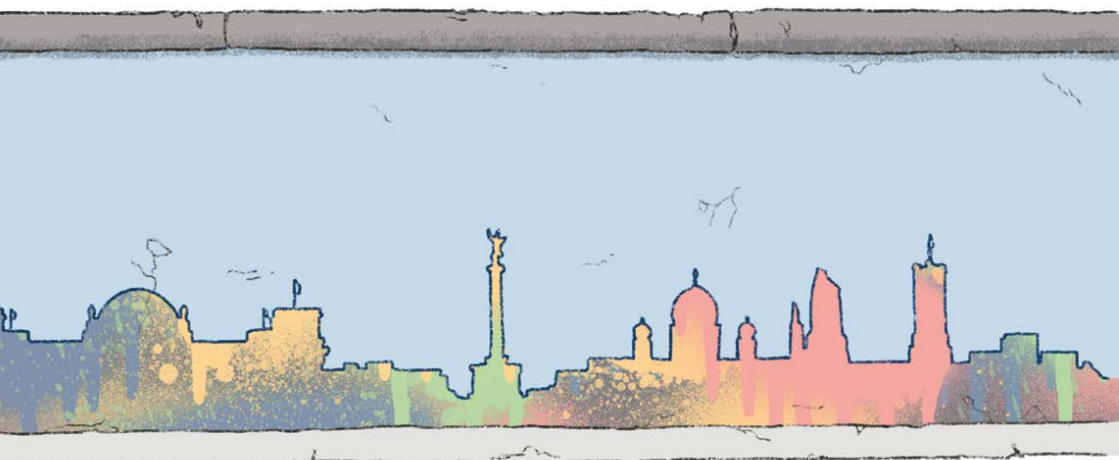


BERLIN

Berlin was a divided city from 1949 until 1990. It belonged to the German Democratic Republic (GDR) in the East and to the Federal Republic of Germany (BRD) in the West. Berlin was declared the capital city of reunified Germany in 1990.

Around 1930, that is, before the Nazis came to power and prior to World War II, approximately 160,000 Jews lived in Berlin. In Berlin, only 8,000 Jews survived the Shoah by living in hiding. Jewish life developed very differently in East and West Berlin in the post-war years. For example, camps for displaced persons for Jewish survivors and refugees from Eastern Europe were only set up in the occupied zones in the West. In West Berlin, 6,400 Jews were officially registered in 1989, in East Berlin only around 400. Of the Jews who had fled because of persecution and returned to the GDR after the war, only a minority belonged to the Jewish community and were religious. Many of them shared communist values and wanted to help build a “better” Germany. The two separate Jewish communities in Berlin merged in 1990.

Jewish life in Berlin is very diverse today. From 1989 to 1995, 4,000 so-called Jewish quota refugees emigrated to Berlin from the former Soviet Union. By 2004, some 250,000 Jewish quota refugees emigrated to the Federal Republic of Germany. Today, around 20,000 Israeli Jews live in Berlin. Often they are not officially registered in the Jewish community.



With Russia's war against Ukraine, many Ukrainian Jews fled to Berlin in 2022 and are again transforming Jewish life in the city.

Berlin is undoubtedly a city of change, diversity, migration, and transit. For example, today the city is home to 200,000 people whose families originally come from Turkey. And not only Jewish quota refugees emigrated from the former Soviet Union. German-Russians, i.e., Germans who emigrated to Russia or the Soviet Union in the past as well as their descendants who were born there, also moved to Germany. German-Russians are mostly Christian.

Jewish life in Berlin is very diverse also with respect to culture and religion. In Berlin there are twelve official synagogues or congregations, four Jewish kindergartens, various Jewish elementary and continuing education schools. Five restaurants and four bakeries supply kosher food. Berlin has, of course, numerous political institutions and cultural venues that cater to the Jewish community in particular and is the seat of the Zentralrat der Juden (Central Council of Jews) in Germany since 1999. On the whole, the Jews who live here proactively take part in shaping urban life in Berlin—as individuals, without waving any flag.

Glossary

Antisemites: People who are hostile towards Jews in any way.

Auschwitz: A complex comprising concentration camp, labor camp, and extermination camp that the Germans erected during World War II in occupied Poland.

Bat mitzvah (the Hebrew literally translates as daughter of the commandment) and **bar mitzvah** (son of the commandment): The status of maturity in regard to religion and the corresponding celebrations. Girls are regarded as coming of age at twelve years old, boys at thirteen.

DP camps/Displaced persons camps: Facilities offering temporary quarters to displaced persons who were homeless as refugees and/or had suffered persecution. Most of the Jewish displaced persons camps in West Berlin were closed down in the summer of 1948 due to the Berlin Blockade.

Halacha: The body of Jewish laws.

Hitler Youth (HJ): State youth organization for the Nazi Party.

Holocaust or Shoah: Terms for the persecution, expulsion, and systematic murder of Jews during Nazi rule.

Cantor: A person trained to lead the congregation in prayer and chant the Torah in a Jewish community or synagogue.

Kiddush: A blessing pronounced customarily over a cup of wine before Shabbat and on other festive occasions.

Kippa: A small round cap that is worn in synagogues and on other occasions by Jewish boys and men in particular (but not only).

Kosher: Food that may be consumed in keeping with Jewish dietary law.

Orthodox, liberal, and conservative are the most prominent denominations in Judaism today. Orthodox Jews obey the religious laws as closely as they can and live according to the Torah and Talmud.

Parashah: The Torah is divided up into 54 portions (parashioth), which are read in the synagogue each Sabbath. The full cycle of the Torah takes one year.

Tradesmen production cooperatives for the trades were organized in the GDR as an alternative to private businesses.

Shabbat: Weekly holiday and day of rest in Judaism. Shabbat begins on Friday evening when the sun goes down and ends Saturday evening.

Scheunenviertel: A part of town in the district Berlin-Mitte. Many Jews who had emigrated from Eastern Europe to Berlin lived in this part of town early in the twentieth century.

SED: The German abbreviation for the Socialist Unity Party of Germany (Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands) that governed in the German Democratic Republic or GDR, which was essentially a one-party state.

Sephardic: Relating to the Sephardic Jews, i.e., the descendants of the Jews who were banished from Spain around 1500 and who then settled near the Mediterranean Sea and in the Balkan region.

Soviet Union: Or, in full, Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR, 1922-1991), a union of fifteen republics, among them the Ukrainian SSR, which is now Ukraine.

Torah: Contains the Five Books of Moses that have been written by hand in the Hebrew alphabet on a scroll.

Palestine: Over 200,000 European Jews managed to emigrate to British Mandatory Palestine in the 1930s. After the British had withdrawn, Israel was founded in one part of the region in 1948. In 1988 the Palestine National Council meeting in Algiers proclaimed the establishment of the State of Palestine.

Films, Links, Literature

Films and Media for Children and Young Adults

- Arkadij Khaet and Mickey Paatzsch, dirs. **Masel Tov Cocktail** (Germany, 2021)
- Shirel Peleg, dir. **Kiss Me Kosher** (Germany, 2020)
- **Moooment! Rassimusfreie Schule** (Moooment! Racism-free school) (KiKa 2021)
- **Freitagnacht Jews** (Friday-night Jews) with Daniel Donskoy (WDR 2021)
- Anna Justice, dir. **Max Minsky and Me** (Germany, 2007), based on the novel by Holly-Jane Rahlens, **Prince William, Maximilian Minsky and Me** (Candlewick Press, 2005)
- **Bubales - Jüdisches Puppentheater** Berlin (Jewish puppet theater, Berlin)
- **The Prophet's Ring**. A tale by Ilse Herlinger, illustrated and animated by Florian Schmeling: → jmberlin.de/en/the-prophets-ring

Books for Children and Young Adults

- Joann Sfar, **The Rabbi's Cat**, 5 vols (Pantheon, 2007/8) (eleven volumes have been published of the original in French: Le Chat du Rabbin.)
- Eva Lezzi (author) and Anna Adam (illustrator)—an illustrated book series of four volumes about Beni and his family (Hentrich & Hentrich, 2010-2022)
- Eva Lezzi, **Die Jagd nach dem Kidduschbecher** (Search for the kiddush cup) (Hentrich & Hentrich, 2016)
- Andreas Steinhöfel and Melanie Garanin, **Völlig Meschugge?!** (Totally meshuga) (Carlsen, 2022) (also as a TV series, dir.: Frank Stoye, KiKa 2022).

- Books for children and young adults published by Ariella Verlag
- Books for children and young adults published by Hentrich & Hentrich Verlag
- Jooboox: Catalogue of literature for Jewish children and young adults:
→ brodtfoundation.org/de/jooboox

Links to Jewish Institutions in Berlin (a selection)

- Jewish Community of Berlin → jg-berlin.org/en.html
- Zentralrat der Juden in Deutschland → zentralratderjuden.de
- Jewish Museum Berlin → jemberlin.de/en
- Stiftung Neue Synagoge Berlin - Centrum Judaicum → centrumjudaicum.de
- Ernst Ludwig Ehrlich Studienwerk → eles-studienwerk.de
- Masorti Kindertagesstätten (children's daycare center) → masorti.de
- Heinz-Galinski-Schule (elementary school) → hgsberlin.de
- Jüdisches Gymnasium Moses Mendelssohn (secondary school) → jgmm.de
- Jüdische Traditionsschule Or Avner (elem. and second. school) → jschule.de
- Keshet Deutschland (LGBTQI*-Community) → keshetdeutschland.de
- Kompetenzzentrum für antisemitismuskritische Bildung und Forschung (Antisemitism Critique education and research competence center)
→ zwst-kompetenzzentrum.de
- TuS Makkabi Berlin (sport club) → tus-makkabi.de

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