L'CHAIN-AUF DAS LEBEN: SHADES OF JEWISH LIFE IN TWO FILMS

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Abstract. Film is an essential part of entertainment. Millions of people spend time in front of the big screen, enjoying mainstream movies. Special interest films reach only a limited audience. Jewish themed films focus either on the Holocaust or on Jewish life and culture. This study engages in a dialogue with the films *Auf das Leben*, directed by Uwe Janson, and *L'Chaim. Auf das Leben! Wenn das Überleben Leben wird,* directed by Elkan Spiller. Although the format and genre of both films differ, their cinematographic texts reveal significant parallels. Director Janson tells the story of Artur Brauner and his family. This Holocaust inspired story skillfully provides the background to the fictitious meeting of different pasts and selective presents, personified in the encounter between Jonas and Ruth. Elkan Spiller centers his documentary on his aunt, the Holocaust survivor Nechama Spiller, and his cousin Chaim.
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Introduction

Film is an essential part of entertainment. Millions of people spend time in front of the big screen, consuming commercially produced mainstream films. Special interest films, such as Jewish films, reach a limited audience and therefore have limited financial success. Produced and distributed by smaller companies, these movies lack the large budgets to attract top actors and actresses, or to pay for massive advertisement campaigns. Jewish themed films fall into two categories: they either focus on the Holocaust or on Jewish life and culture. This study engages in a dialogue with the films *Auf das Leben* (L'Chaim in Hebrew) directed by Uwe Janson, and *L'Chaim. Auf das Leben! Wenn das Überleben Leben wird*, directed by Elkan Spiller.

Discussion

Janson's film is a German production that looks at the Holocaust and Jewish life from the perspective of the dominant, in this case German, culture. Spiller's documentary, using predominantly a Jewish cast, gives his story an insider's voice. The format and genre of both films differ but by placing them within the same historical and cultural context their cinematographic texts reveal significant parallels. Director Janson tells the story of Artur Brauner and his family. This Holocaust inspired story skillfully provides the background to the fictitious meeting of different pasts and selective presents, personified in the encounter between Jonas and Ruth. Elkan Spiller centers his documentary on his aunt, the Holocaust survivor Nechama Spiller, and his cousin Chaim. Their Jewish lives are a rear projection on the big screen of German culture.

The cultural heritage of minority groups is typically connected to their native language. This is not the case for most Jews. Unable to speak Hebrew or Yiddish, Jews have adopted a national language for communication. This is particularly true for German Ashkenazi Jews who have chosen a path of integration and cultural

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assimilation since their emancipation in 1812. But in order to be Jewish, Jack Zipes argues that "what makes Jews in Germany definable as German Jews is their cultivation and use of minor literature and language to distinguish themselves as other than Germans" (Zipes, 1994). Moreover, the use of Hebrew or Yiddish for other than religion purposes renders any commercial product virtually unattractive. One exception is Jerome Robbins' 2018 theater production of "The Fiddler on the Roof" in Yiddish. In addition, the market for Yiddish or Hebrew productions is relatively small.

Michael Lipka lists the number of Jews in the United States, the largest concentration of Jews outside of Israel, at 5.3 million. He divides this number into 4.2 million Jews who identify themselves by religion and 1.2 million of no religion (Lipka, 2013). The ethnic, religious, linguistic, and geographic diversity of Jewishness is reflected in different film industries. Not surprisingly, U.S. companies have produced an impressive list of thematically diverse and commercially successful films. S. Spielberg, for example, directed the Holocaust themed film "Schindler's List," as well as "Munich." Q. Tarantino created the revisionist Nazi film "Inglorious Basterds. Films produced in Israel often have the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as their thematic focus or reflect daily life in contemporary Israel. These films debut generally in non-commercial venues of major urban centers with a sizeable Jewish population. Two exceptions are the Israeli television series "Fauda," which premiered on February 15, 2015, and the film "Tel Aviv on Fire."

Jewish-themed films produced by German-speaking production companies typically debut at Jewish film festivals, and very few make it to the big movie screen of a Cineplex, limiting its market and its financial success even further. Some exceptions are, for example, the following films: "Europa, Europa;" "Nowhere in Africa;" and "The Reader." Often state funded or subsidized, the thematic focus of the German films is the burden of the past, as reflected in the German word *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*. The following directors and their films have contributed significantly to the discussion of Jewishness and the German identity: N. Seelich and her film "Theresienstadt sieht aus wie ein Curort;," Lukas Stepanik's film "Kieselsteine;" Robert Schindel and Lukas Stepanik's film "Gebirtig;" as well as Ruth Beckmermann's films "The Waldheim Waltz," and "Those Who Go Those Who Stay." Viewers often tend to overlook some of the deeper messages within these films. By placing the cinematographic texts within a historical and cultural context, Janson's "Auf das Leben," und Spiller's "L'Chaim" portray multiple layers of Jewish life in and around Germany.

Janson's *Auf das Leben* involves several members of the Brauner family. Based on the childhood memories of Artur Brauner, the film is dedicated to his wife Maria, and produced by Brauner's daughter Alice. His niece Sharon Brauner plays the young singer Ruth Weintraub. This Holocaust inspired story skillfully provides the background to the fictitious meeting of different pasts and selective presents, personified in the encounter between Jonas and Ruth. The beginning of the film takes the viewer into a spacious art dećor apartment in Berlin. Here, we encounter Ruth Weintraub who has to move into public housing. When Ruth refuses to get into the moving truck, Jonas, one of the movers, offers her a ride in his van. Ruth, who once was a cabaret singer and now earns her living repairing string instruments, asks Jonas to deliver an instrument to a client. When Jonas returns to Ruth's new apartment to hand her the money for the repair, he finds her unconscious in the bathtub with her wrists slashed and takes care of her. While Ruth remains hospitalized, Jonas moves into her new apartment. After her release, Ruth

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and Jonas begin a relationship in which their pasts intertwine. Ruth escaped death in a Nazi concentration camp. Jonas is trying to flee from multiple sclerosis.

Ruth's past is overshadowed by the death of her entire family during the Holocaust. These traumatic events and her miraculous survival effortlessly merge into each other in Ruth's past and present life, however, her present is eclipsed by her own past and the collective past of her native Germany. While present and past overlap in her life, *Auf das Leben* has the audience convinced that the Third Reich is merely history and has little impact on post-War Germany. But history is written by the winner, and Ruth's Jewish past and the death of her family remain unsung. What is her past? German history is a succession of three political configurations, or Reichs, in which Jews were never center stage. Charlemagne's empire, the first Reich, lasted from 800-1805 and excluded Jews completely, since Jews were not emancipated until 1812. In the Middle Ages, Jews were excluded from the medieval guilds and from owning land, thus marginalizing Jews geographically, politically, economically, and socially.

The Second Reich, the period of enormous economic and political expansion, tricked German Jews into a complete assimilation, albeit only as assimilated Germans rather than as alien Jews. The period of the Weimar Republic (1919-1933) offered Jewish Germans a high level of social and political integration combined with relative affluence. Democracy had provided the Jewish population in Germany with a true homeland in which Jewish and non-Jewish Germans coexisted harmoniously. Hitler's successive Third Reich launched an unprecedented attack on Germans who happened to be Jewish. The Holocaust proper, or the decision to eliminate Jews, began with the Wannsee Conference on 20 January 1942. In an upscale villa outside of Berlin, Nazi offers decided the Final Solution. Assimilated German Ashkenazi Jews were originally not scheduled for mass killings, nor were Mischlinge, children of religiously mixed marriages. Of the 6 million Jews, who died in extermination camps, 200,000 were German and Jewish; 5.8 million Jews came from Eastern Europe.

To facilitate the killing of Jews, and as part of the political ideology, the Nazis had to stereotype all Jews as *Ostjuden*, a group of orthodox Jews from Eastern Europe, whose conservative way of life, their language, and Eastern physiognomy, corresponded to the image of what a Jew was supposed to look like to the uninformed German Gentile. Eventually, German Jews began to be deported to the *Musterlager Theresienstadt* by 1942. Only due to overcrowding, those assimilated, educated, integrated German Jews were resettled in Auschwitz. At the end of WWII about 20,000 Jews survived in Germany, either by hiding or by being married to non-Jews. Currently, Germany is home to about 250,000 Jews, of which 120,000 live in Berlin. Eighty percent of the Jews in Germany come from the former Soviet Union. Marion Kaplan explains that the Jews who lived in Germany before the fall of the Wall "were at best ignored and at worst vilified by other Jews for continuing to live among their former murderers" (Kaplan, 1994).

Indeed, German Jews are faced with the dilemma of celebrating their Jewishness in a host culture that has been reluctant to include others. According to Jack Zipes, German Jews are caught between "cosmopolitanism and victimization" (Zipes, 1994), between a global community of Jews of the diaspora abroad, and the remembrance of the Nazi Holocaust at home. Moreover, Israel is of particular significance for any Jewish person since *hok ha-shvut* or *oleh,* the law of return, grants any Jewish person the right to immigrate to Israel. Kaplan lists five obstacles facing the Jewish community in Germany: (1) the overall decline of Jewish communities in Germany. Even after the

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influx of growth post-Wall, the number of Jews in Germany remain small and in the "shadow of the 600,000 Jews of the pre-Nazi era" (Kaplan, 1994); (2) Young Jews in Germany are reluctant to participate in formal Jewish life, considering "the structures of the Gemeinden to be archaic and 'no place for young people" (Kaplan, 1994); (3) to find a common voice among the different Jewish groups even within Germany (Kaplan, 1994); (4) intermarriage in Germany, "as high as 70 percent" (Kaplan, 1994), is seen as a threat to conservative traditions; and (5) the influx of ex-Soviet Jews, according to Kaplan, has changed the particular form of Jewish life in Germany (Kaplan, 1994).

Kaplan also observes a unique interpretation of Jewishness among German Jews, who want to be Jews but not Jewish (Kaplan, 1994). This sentiment is in line with a German thinking that has historically rejected organized religion. Indeed, Germany has led the way in the denunciation of religion from Martin Luther, who rebuffed Catholicism, to Karl Marx, who wanted to abolish religion altogether, to the formation of the Jewish Reformed Movement, and the Ibn Rushd-Goethe mosque in Berlin whose female imam, the German Turkish-born lawyer and women's rights activist, Seyran Ates, breaks with Islamic gender taboos,. It seems that in order to be German one must reject organized religion. Kaplan states that "most of Germany's Jews are not religious," (Kaplan, 1994), and this is certainly the case for the protagonist Ruth Weintraub in the film *Auf das Leben*.

The viewer encounters Ruth in post-Wall Berlin as she is evicted. In her old and empty apartment, she encounters Jonas, who is one of the movers. Their stories are masterfully woven together through different chronologies by way of flashbacks (which take us to 1973) and flash-forwards. Pasts and presents begin to merge in the narrative of Ruth, played by Sharon Brauner and by Hannelore Elsner--an actress who has the stature of Meryl Streep in German cinema-and Max Riemelt who not only plays Victor, Ruth's lover from the past, but also the present day mover Jonas. Ruth and Victor's story, the past, is mirrored in the current love story between Jonas and his girlfriend Emily, played by the German television star Aylin Tezel.

Cinematographically, past and present are held together by casting the same actor to play Victor and Jonas. The fragmented existence of the Jewish Ruth is reflected in casting two different actresses. Her past is played by Sharon Brauner, whereas Ruth's present is played by Hannelore Elsner. Both actresses have striking physical similarities that make the double casting even more believable. Furthermore, the past is preserved in the present through film reels of Ruth's Yiddish song performances from the 1960s, and by the use of a consistent, monochromatic color palette, in which the present is filmed in the same faded beige tones as the past. Not surprisingly, takes are long in order to evoke an emotional response rather than the use of rapid visual stimuli so common in traditional Hollywood productions. Janson's film seems to distance itself further from Hollywood by applying the technique of a Plan Séquence-a technique mostly used in Soviet film. But what does the film mean?

Not much has been written concerning *Auf das Leben*, thereby permitting me to present a brief kaleidoscope of the existing critical voices: Tilman Gangloff calls the film: "eine Ode an die Lebensfreude" (Gangloff, 2021) [an ode to joie de vivre], reminding us of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, and the "Ode to Joy." Like Ruth, so Gangloff, Jonas too wants to run away from his fate. Ruth's running away from the Nazis is called survival. Ulrich Sonnenschein alludes to a subtle Harold and Maude theme with a stronger emphasis on pointed dialogues and sharp criticism concerning their indifferent surroundings and the possibility of rescue (Sonnenschein, 1991).

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Sonnenschein laments that the film lacks "narrative depth." Some internet bloggers are less kind and seem bored by the endless Holocaust scenes. Sheng Wang states online that "the exposition flashbacks, while entertaining, are way too long. They are the only things that screw with the otherwise good pacing of the film. Ninety minutes have never felt so long" (Volkan and Zintl, 2018). The perception towards *Auf das Leben* result a favorable audience score of 86% percent.

There is a general notion of anti-Semitism in these comments. The reviewer Thomas, for example, has a problem with the drama (what he means is the Holocaust): "Lets be honest here, it is way too much. Nazi references, Holocaust, dead parents, suicide attempts, heartbroken girlfriends, loneliness, destroyed careers etc. And yeah, I mentioned the Holocaust references already. In my opinion, this was done to make the film even more dramatically relevant, but it all rang pretty false to me and just included for the sake of it". How should the general audience read this film? Latently, or accidentally, or unintentionally resulted to anti-Semitic?

The very first shot in the film shows Jonas' van parked on a desolate underpass next to the train tracks. As the camera zooms in on the van, passing a ghastly urban landscape of dilapidated concrete, the viewer hears a song. At first, the female voice seems to be singing in German. Several beats into the song, the audience may recognize it as the popular "Bei Mir Bistu Schejn," sung in Yiddish by Sharon Brauner. The underlying message for the viewer is that Jews can be heard but should not be seen. Later in the film's soundtrack, Brauner and Elsner merge their voices in the Yiddish song "Rumenye, Rumenye," accompanied by Psychoband, the psychologically impaired members of a locked psychiatric unit of a Berlin hospital in which Ruth had spent time after her failed suicide attempt. Jews and Gentiles, Sharon and Hannelore, must literally be crazy, and they have the diagnosis to prove it. This message is echoed in the trailer. Here selected scenes are glued together by poster-esque shots reading: "Das Leben ist Absurd" [Life is absurd] and "Das Leben ist Bitter" [Life is bitter]. These two avowals certainly ring true when we add: for Jews.

The film tries to recapture, rewrite, or reinterpret the events of the Holocaust by applying the technique of foreshadowing. After her furniture is loaded, Ruth refuses to get into the moving truck. At first puzzled by her refusal, the viewer learns that Ruth and her family were taken by truck into the forest to be shot by Nazis. Ruth escaped execution by being pushed off the truck by her mother. This was the last time she saw her family. Ruth's permanent temporariness, and that of possibly all Jews in Germany, is symbolized by the lack of a bed in her old apartment. Constantly on the run, Ruth leaves no social or personal footprint, since she must remain vigilant against possible attacks. Unable to find safety and comfort in her environment, Ruth gets rid of her bed.

Furthermore, the film vaguely tells the survival story of Artur Brauner, whose daughter Alice Brauner is the producer of *Auf das Leben*, and whose niece Sharon Brauner plays the role of the younger Ruth. Born in Łódź, Poland as the oldest son of a Jewish family, Abraham, Artur or later "Atze" Brauner (1918-2019) fled Poland with his parents and four siblings for the Soviet Union, where he survived the Holocaust. Following the war, he and his brother, Wolf Brauner, went to West Berlin, while his parents and three of his siblings found refuge in Israel. Forty-nine of Brauner's relatives died in the Holocaust. Twelve of them were killed at Babi Yar. Chemno/Kulmhof, a place just outside of Lódź, coincidentally was the location of the first gassing of Jews in mobile T-4 vans that had previously been used for murdering mentally challenged German Gentiles. Brauner encouraged many emigres to return to Germany in order to

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take part in a new emerging West German film industry. In 1946, he produced the comedy "Sag die Wahrheit," one of the first films produced in post-WWII West Germany starred the legendary German actor Heinz Rühmann. Throughout his career, Brauner produced more than 300 films.

Like Brauner, Ruth's Holocaust story is irrelevant or even erased in the film. After her suicide attempt in the bathtub, Jonas washes Ruth's blood away, and with that seemingly the Holocaust. As a gift, Ruth gives Jonas a menorah. For Jonas, who symbolizes a German *Jederman*, this Jewish religious object is useless. By getting rid of the menorah, Ruth not only gives away her Jewish culture and Jewish history, but she also hopes to pass on the memory of the Holocaust to Jonas. But Jonas will have none of it. The cultural and historical distance between the Gentile Jonas and Ruth, the Jew, is also reflected on a linguistic level. In order to familiarize Jonas with her past, Ruth addresses him with the familiar form of the personal pronoun *Du*, whereas Jonas keeps his distance culturally and linguistically by addressing the Jew with the formal and distant pronoun *Sie*.

Is it necessary for Ruth to give away the Jewish menorah in order to be German? On the one hand German Jews have faced the dilemma of culture versus religion. Jeffrey Peck argues that German Gentiles, like Jonas, regard Jews with suspicion since "the distinction between their ethnicity and religion is ambiguous and casts doubt on their Germanness" (Peck, 1994). The question of Lesser Germany, debated in 1848-49 and 1870-71, laid the historical foundations for Germany's cultural and ethnic homogeneity, as well as the exclusion of otherness. E. Roudinesco suggests that a unified national identity "was superior to any form of diversity, whether regional, linguistic, racial, familial, or cultural" (Roudinesco, 2014). In this new world order, otherness meant to be discriminatorily different. Accordingly, Jews could be associated with "sodomites, sexual criminals, the abnormal, the marginal, the mystical, the insane, and their rebellious creators" (Roudinesco, 2014). Ruth must be aware of that history and gives away her symbol of otherness, the menorah. Her action has a historical, as well as a psychological explanation. Because of the Holocaust, and in light of an increasing anti-Semitism, German Jews are not only afraid of being Jewish but, as R. Seligmann claims, are filled with shame for being different (Seligman et al., 1994). This idea is not new, since many Holocaust survivors have remained silent out of shame of being Jewish.

In *Auf das Leben*, Jonas suffers from multiple sclerosis. Is his disease supposed to equate the sufferings and the brutal murder of 6 million innocent people? The film seems to suggest that Gentiles also suffered in the past. Currently, medical treatments have been developed that slow down the progressive nature of Jonas' disease. For those 6 million, who fell victim to the Holocaust, there was no reversal for death in the gas chambers by Zyklon B. Jonas inherited his disease from his mother, the generation responsible for the Holocaust. But *Auf das Leben* is not like an Ibsen play; here the previous generation does not pass on its guilt to the next generation. On the contrary, Janson tries to cut the historical connectedness between the Nazi past and post-War present.

In the end, the audience is presented with a partial happy ending. Ruth's love for Victor may have failed, but in the next generation, represented by Jonas and Emily, a loving relationship is attained. Some fictitious texts intertwine characters on different social or ethnic levels, but Ruth and Jonas' stories are kept separate. Neither Jonas nor his girlfriend Emily are Jewish, which means that there is neither love, nor a future for

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Jews. Except for Sharon Brauner, who is half-Jewish, none of the actors in the film are Jewish. Hannelore Elsner, who portrays Ruth, is known for unconventional and controversial roles; for example, she was the first naked woman on stage in a conservative Munich theater. In the absence of a Jewish actress, Elsner is a good typecast choice. Her black hair, dark eyes and overall physiognomy, as well as her character's Jewish sounding last name allow her to pass as Jewish, at least to the uninitiated eye. Moreover, Elsner gives a moving rendition of the Yiddish song: "Ich hob dich tsufil lib." Emily, Jonas' girlfriend and the implied heir of the childless Ruth, however, is played by the Muslim actress Aylin Tezel.

The future for Jews in post-war Germany looks grim. Ruth remains childless, and she gives away her menorah. Judaism in Germany is again confronted with anti-Semitism. During a performance of a Yiddish song in a bar, Ruth is verbally attacked by some members of the audience. While scenes like these represent historic authenticity, they also open the door for more anti-Semitic statements in public. In another example of the anti-Semitic climate in Germany, when Jonas recovers his stolen van, he discovers that the thieves had spray-painted the number 88 on the side of the van. The number 88 is a well-known neo-Nazi symbol for "Heil Hitler," since "H" is the eighth letter in most Western alphabets. The future for Jews in Germany seems marked by that number.

At first, Uwe Janson and Elkan Spiller's films seem to have only the title: *L'Chaim* in common. A closer look reveals significant parallels. First, both film share parts of their own family history. *Auf das Leben* tells the story of Artur Brauner, the father of the producer Alice Brauner and the uncle of the young female character Ruth Weintraub, played by Artur's niece Sharon Brauner. Director Elkan Spiller is Chaim Lubelski's cousin. Spiller's film *L'Chaim, Auf das Leben! Wenn aus Überleben Leben wird* labels itself as a documentary. In 92 minutes, the camera follows Chaim Lubelski, a jack of all trades, who, at age 63, gives up his own life to take care of his aging mother. The documentary is loosely arranged around ten segments each taking place in various locations. The film opens with a scene on a motorway in Belgium. Chaim is on his way to the Netherlands to buy marijuana. His choice of music in the car, as well as his physical appearance, associates him with Sinti-Roma at first, rather than revealing his Jewish identity.

The second segment of the film takes the viewer to Antwerp, where Chaim's widowed mother, Nechama, lives. The viewer learns that Nechama, a concentration camp survivor, has recently lost her daughter Letti. This fact, however, is kept secret from her since she might not survive the death of her child. Brief references related to the cutting of her hair in the concentration camp are swept aside in order to present Chaim's mother as a simple soul, whose main source of entertainment comes from the German *Bild-Zeitung*. The third segment creates a stark visual contrast. Whereas the first two segments are dominated by rainy European skies, the third opens with blue, sunny skies in Israel. The scenic differences are reflected in Chaim's different lives as well. In Jerusalem, he has rented a room for his religious books. Since his surroundings in Europe are devoid of any religious symbols, the viewer learns that Chaim indeed is observant. Aware of his Jewishness, but uncertain about Judaism in Europe, Chaim can fully practice his religion in Jerusalem. Jewish music, shorter takes and varying camera angles visually emphasize the abrupt thematic shift. Whereas Chaim's Jewish identity was not addressed at the beginning of the documentary, it becomes center stage in this Jerusalem segment. A group of orthodox Jewish children on a playground in Antwerp create the thematic transition to the fourth segment back in Belgium.

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During long dinners, Nechama, shares insights about her son and her own past before and after her internment in a concentration camp. After a quick visual return to Jerusalem, the sixth segment, presents footage of Chaim's stay in Brooklyn, where he purchased Levi jeans in order to sell them for a large profit in Germany. Through this scheme he was able to make $2 million. The next segment shows Chaim in Israel where he is purifying himself in a river. The arrangements of these segments invite the viewer to associate the river with a mikvah in which Chaim needs to wash away his secular lifestyle outside of Israel. While floating in the river, Chaim openly criticizes society as being too superficial. Back in Antwerp, the viewer now finds Nechama in a wheelchair. Because her health is deteriorating, Chaim is more committed than ever to his mother. He states that his goal in life is to be there for her. The camera fades out and his mother dies. The death of Nechama releases a wave of emotions; the viewer learns that Nechama's parents died in Auschwitz and that she never got over the loss. Before her death, Nechama wishes that the Germans, who killed her parents, burn themselves. Chaim utters that nobody can escape his own destiny.

The omnipresence of the Holocaust is the theme of the next segment filmed in Israel. For Chaim the Holocaust is present, not only as the child of a Holocaust survivor, but also in current threats against Jews. Caught between the Holocaust of the past and anti-Semitism of the present, Chaim sees his own life as one between destruction and mere existence. The final scene takes the viewer to his mother's cemetery. The gray sky reflects Chaim's mood since the death of his mother. In order to regain his own life, he visits friends in St. Tropez but a song about a Yiddish mother sung in French overshadows the scene. The past remains present.

Mindjazz Pictures, the small film company that distributed *L'Chaim. Auf Das Leben!* praises its film with kaleidoscopic quotation-bites on its website: "ein brillanter Film den man unbedingt sehen muss," [a brilliant film that you absolutely have to see]; "ein Dokumentarfilm, der berührt, weil sein Protagonist vor allem eins ist: menschlich" [a documentary that moves because its protagonist is human above all]; and "L'Chaim ist ein Loblied auf das Leben, trotz allem was geschah" [L'Chaim is a hymn to life despite everything that happened]. The overall reception of the film was positive, and it received several awards, such as the Audience Award at the Festival des deutschen Films (in 2014); the North Carolina Film Awards Directors Award (in 2015); the Silver Award winner California Film Awards (in 2015); and the Special Festival Mention at the 3rd Indian Cine Film Festival (in 2015).

Some critics, however, struggle with the role of the protagonist. Georg Dietz, for example, presents a different reading of the easy-go-lucky jack of all trades: "Chaim Lubelski ist aber auch ein großer Gescheiterter, könnte man meinen, ein Kiffer, der mal Schachprofi werden wollte, ein Millionär, der alles wieder verloren hat, ein Beau, der auf der Straße lebte, ein Sprachwunder, den sie überall mochten, wo er hinkam, selbst wenn er aussah wie ein Penner, mit seinem struppigen Bart und seiner ausgeleierten Jacke" (Diez, 2017). [Chaim Lubelski also is a great failure, one might think, a pothead, who at one point wanted to become a chess master, a millionaire who lost everything, a beau who lived in the street, a polyglot, who was liked everywhere, even if he looked homeless with his bristly beard and his worn jacket]. Dietz's assessment fits into the first scene of the film in which a disheveled man, listening to a mixture of polka and gypsy music, is on his way to buy marijuana.

Although Chaim is not immediately identified as being Jewish, his first impression on the viewer is that of a social outcast, or at least a loner. Spiller's introduction of

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Chaim leaves the viewer puzzled. Is Spiller telling his audience that Jews, like Chaim, are poorly integrated and remain on the periphery of European societies? Should Chaim's professional failures be read as his deliberate resistance to integration into his hostile, anti-Semitic surroundings? Is Spiller expressing his own feelings about Judaism through his cousin Chaim? This unconventional, idiosyncratic character turns him into the stereotypical wandering Jew of the diaspora. Jack Zipes sees great opportunities in Chaim's nomadic existence, "so that the mind and body can wander and create their own space and margins" (Zipes, 1994). Indeed, Chaim remains in his own space, but that space is social isolation.

Particularly in the normative German culture, Chaim's nomadic approach could offer "the potential for re-formation and re-arrangement" (Zipes, 1994) of a society that is stuck in the definition of *Leitkultur.* Ruth and Chaim, who are assimilated Germans while being other, could be cultural stepping stones in creating a more inclusive Germany by coming "together in a new way" (Zipes, 1994). But Ruth and Chaim oscillate between the "simultaneous undefinition and definition of what it means to be Jewish in a different-sounding and –meaning" (Zipes, 1994) environment. Chaim's life remains unsettling, and his restlessness is mirrored in the erratic structure of the documentary.

Because of Germany's cultural reluctance to include others, Spiller's use of Jewish family members must remain restricted as well. With the exception of a very brief scene with Chaim's brother Usher, scenes involving Jews juxtapose ultra-orthodox Jews in Antwerp and Jerusalem's Mea She'Arim with Chaim, a non-traditional Jew who himself oscillates between orthodoxy and an alternative lifestyle. Either lifestyle choice positions Jews on the periphery of a non-Jewish host culture in Europe. Maybe this is Spiller's indirect attempt to portray the social and ideological struggle of Jews in Europe. Since their emancipation, German Jews have been caught between the dilemma of abandoning traditional beliefs for the promise of being integrated into a non-Jewish majority culture, or of preserving Jewish customs in isolated religious enclaves such as Mea She'Arim, or Crown Heights and Williamsburg in Brooklyn. Neither choice has served European Jews well. Jewish shtetls were easy targets for pogroms and mass deportations to Nazi death camps, while assimilated, integrated German Jews ended in Theresienstadt or Auschwitz. That dark past is at the core of both *L'Chaim* films. Chaim's mother Nechama Spiller Lubelski was interned in the concentration camp Peterswaldau, Ruth's parents died in Auschwitz. Ultimately, both Chaim and Ruth are unable to combine their German and Jewish backgrounds successfully.

The question of a Jewish identity was rekindled after the fall of the Berlin Wall, when Jews, particularly from the former Soviet Union, emigrated to Germany. Karen Remmler argues that Jews living in Germany before 1980 "had been relatively reticent about their Jewish background" (Remmler, 1980). Henryk Broder, Michel Lang, Erica Burgauer, Lea Fleischmann, Barbara Honigmann, Rafael Seligmann, among others have struggled to combine their Jewishness with a German national identity. Is there room for individuals of different faiths and different ethnic origins? The question of who is German is imminent in the wake of rising violence against other Germans. Ruth and Chaim are presented with the dilemma of combining "Jewish identity and or culture within the specific historical context of Germany's past and present," (Remmler, 1980) the Holocaust and increasing anti-Semitism. Chaim is rendered immobile, while Ruth tries to commit suicide.

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To balance past and present is a challenging task for Jews. The past is irrevocably connected to the Holocaust, while building a future "in which Jewish communities can become a vital, central part" (Remmler, 1980) of an increasingly diverse Germany is problematic. Jewish culture is steeped in the past, not only in the form of remembrance, but also by its focus on the past in the form of *Yahrzeit*, the annual commemoration of someone's death. Both *L'Chaim* films obsess about the past, personified by their parents. Ruth's parents were murdered in a concentration camp, while Chaim, who takes too personally the fifth commandment to honor father and mother, gives up his life for his mother. In so doing, he neglects the present and strikes off the future. He has no children; neither does his dead sister Lotti. We are never told if Chaim's brother Usher has any children. Ruth too is stuck in the past because of the haunting memory of her parents' death. Since Ruth remains without children, her ancestral line ends too, consumed by the past and paralyzed in the present, there is no consideration of the future for either of them.

Conclusion

Although Germany officially closed the door to anti-Semitism, violence against Jews continues. Until recently German politicians and media have been reluctant to address this emerging problem, but the reality of increasing anti-Semitism cannot be ignored any longer, certainly not for Jews living in Germany. On 21 July 2014, Micki Weinberg from *The Times of Israel* quoted the president of the Central Council of Jews in Germany, Dieter Graumann: "We are currently experiencing in this country an explosion of evil and violent hatred of Jews, which shocks and dismays all of us.… We would never in our lives have thought it possible anymore that anti-Semitic view of the nastiest and most primitive kind can be chanted on German streets" (Weinberg, 2014). Finally, Steffen Seibert, a German government spokesperson, told the Israeli through one of the agency in online: "One has to be ashamed when hatred of Jews is put on display so openly on the streets of German cities" (Seligmann et al., 1994). Therefore, Rafael Seligmann's assessment of a future for Jews in Germany is appropriately grim: "In the current intellectual climate, a full-scale renaissance of Jewish culture in Germany is impossible. There are just not enough Jews. And those who do attempt something in this direction awaken too little interest among non-Jews" (Seligmann et al., 1994). At last we get to toast to life "L'Chaim," but are those lives Jewish?

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Conflict of interest

The author confirms that there are no conflicts of interests involved with any party in this study.

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