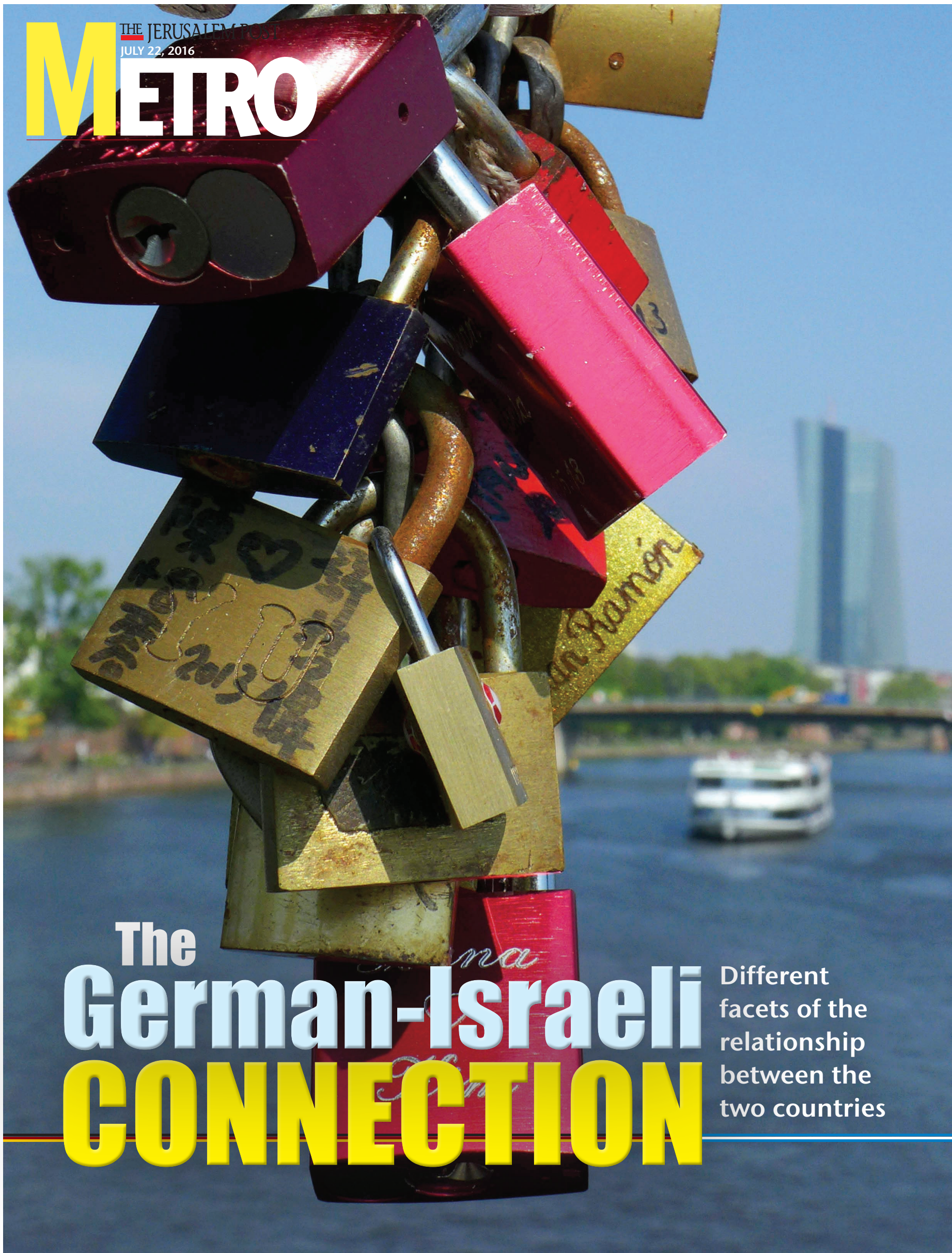


# The German-Israeli CONNECTION

Different  
facets of the  
relationship  
between the  
two countries







# A German-Israeli love story

Author and journalist Katharina Hoeftmann opens up about leaving Germany and raising her Jewish family in Tel Aviv

• By ORIT ARFA

**K**atharina Hoeftmann's cats followed us up to the balcony of her Dizengoff Street flat for our interview, curious to hear her story, too.

The questionable Jewish identity of her cats was the subject of a scene in her book *Guten Morgen Tel Aviv*, in which she debates with an Israeli supermarket cashier the necessity of kosher-for-Passover cat

food.

"I don't know if they're Jewish because I didn't give birth to them," she said to me, as we sat down on a balcony facing the sea – a precondition for Tel Aviv living after moving back here with her family from a three-year stint in Binyamina. The loud, busy Tel Aviv streets are a sharp contrast to her hometown of Stralsund in the former East Germany.

Hoeftmann, at first glance, looks like the stereotypical German: blonde hair, blue eyes, light skin. Her cats, on the other hand, are stereotypical Israeli – intrusive, blunt and full of chutzpah. She took them back inside the apartment, where her son Ari was asleep, in the care of her husband, Nahum, a project manager for the Israel Natural Gas Lines. Growing up in a town with hardly any Jews, she nev-

er thought she'd raise a Jewish family, let alone Jewish cats.

"The only Jews I knew were kind of the Holocaust Jews, so that was my only meeting point with Judaism," she recalled. During her "Holocaust phase" at age 12, she pored over Holocaust books she'd check out from the local library. She thinks the German education system has failed in not showing Jewish German life before the War; for example, she had no idea that famous poet and intellectual Heinrich Heine was born Jewish.

When she was 13, her parents took a tour to Israel, among other countries, to see the world after the reunification of Germany.

"It was the time of the intifada, and we were in Jerusalem, and there were all these machine-gun people, and it was

very surprising. But looking back, I don't think I was so much aware of it being the Jewish state. It's a weird relationship that Germans have with Israel. We talk about it so much, but I don't think many Germans understand the essence of Israel."

Her life-changing meeting with a "live Jew" came in 2005 when she met her husband-to-be on the sands of tropical Goa in India.

"He pretty much told me on the second or third evening: 'You're the woman of my life, and I'm really in love with you, but I'm Jewish and you would have to become a Jew. I was like 'whatever,' but he was the first actual Jew that I met."

Nahum visited her in Berlin two weeks later, where she was pursuing her degree in psychology. As their love deepened, so did her curiosity about Judaism.





The result of a life-changing meeting in Goa, India: Katharina Hoeftmann with husband Nahum and son Ari. (Thoré Schroeder)

"I don't think I understood what [converting to Judaism] meant, to be honest. I'm not baptized or anything. I was raised completely without religion, and my parents told me to pick the religion you want, if any. I never found myself in Christianity.... I had a fascination for Judaism, and somehow at some point I said: 'it fits,' but I didn't know how hard it was to convert to Judaism."

She soon embarked on an Orthodox conversion process.

"I'm a proud Jew, but I wouldn't call myself the most Orthodox Jew."

Through her relationship with Nahum and her subsequent visits to Israel, she came to understand the essence of Israel that eludes Germans. She got a gig writing a blog about life in Israel for the German newspaper *Die Welt*; it eventually evolved into *Guten Morgen Tel Aviv* (Random House). Her new book – a German

crime novel set on the Baltic Sea – was released by Berlin Verlag on the day of the interview, and it's the first of her books that isn't Israel-themed. Her previous crime trilogy follows brash Israeli detective Assaf Rosenthal through the streets of Tel Aviv, solving crimes while navigating Israeli social issues – from African immigration to Arab-Israeli relations in Jaffa. Today, she also edits "Israel between the Lines" ([israelzwischenzeilen.com](http://israelzwischenzeilen.com)), an online magazine focusing on Israeli lifestyle, economy, travel, technology, and politics minus the Arab-Israeli conflict.

"I never came to a place that was so inspiring in which everyone has a story to tell."

Hoeftmann's work has made her something of an expert in cultural differences between Germans and Israelis, although she always had a predilection for the more open, touchy-feely Israeli mentality, which explains her attraction to Nahum; they tied the knot in Israel in 2011, an occasion for her friends from back home to visit and enjoy her adopted country.

"[Germans] are not the most impulsive, emotional people, and I never fit that because I was always an emotional, lively, loud person."

Tel Aviv, she said, is not much different from hipster and/or yuppie neighborhoods in Berlin, like Prenzlauer Berg, Kreuzberg, Mitte, Neukölln, except it is squishier [more crowded], and Tel Aviv rudeness still surpasses notorious Berlin rudeness.

"Israelis like to be in herds and be very close together and have no awareness of privacy and space, and all these things are different from Germans, who don't like to be touched. If you took a German to the Carmel Market for the first time, he'd think: 'Why is everyone touching me, why are people getting in my way, why isn't the line moving?'"

Berlin is a coveted destination for young Israelis; about 20,000 Israelis are reported to live there. While Germans visit Tel Aviv, she doesn't think the fascination is mutual, nor is there any particular historical curiosity guiding them.

"I think they're attracted to Tel Aviv as much as they're attracted to Istanbul; maybe for some the Jewish thing gives an extra nice something."

She noticed how in a majority of her readings across Germany for *Guten Morgen Tel Aviv*, she'd get asked about Israeli settlements; she doubts an Italian author, for example, would get fielded such questions about a country's internal politics.

"I'd like to say Germans are kind of obsessed with Israel, but it's not true," she said. "The German media is obsessed with Israel, but Germans not so much."

She also believes Germans are less stigmatized for their national identity in Israel than Israelis are for their identity in Germany. In a Berlin bar, for instance, a German would feel free to criticize Israel's policies point-blank.

"It never happened to me that I was standing in a bar in Tel Aviv and people said to me: 'What you did to Jews was terrible.' Also, that famous question of 'Where was your grandfather during the war' was never asked."

(If you are wondering, her grandfather worked as a civilian mechanic, and while her grandmother harbored the Nazi ideology while having "Jewish friends," none of her grandparents participated in any slaughter of Jews.)

"My husband had a lot of f\*cked-up experiences: 'Oh, you're a Jew so you're rich.' Or, 'you're Israeli, I think we paid you enough.' Or, 'what you Israelis do to the Palestinians is what the Nazis did to the Jews.' Things I didn't imagine in my wildest fantasies that educated Germans would say."

Hoeftmann says that anti-Zionism, a politically correct form of anti-Semitism, is rampant in German media and even German society. She recalled how during Operation Protective Edge, pro-Palestinian protesters in Berlin shouted "Jews to the gas."

"If I hadn't had [Nahum] and our son, I would still find that wrong, but I could live in Berlin. It wouldn't personally attack me. But now it's my son they want to put in a gas chamber."

She's lost some friends over her staunch, but not uncritical, defense of the essence of Israel, which she sees as a beacon of liberalism. With others, the subject of Israeli politics is a no-go zone.

"When you live here there are actual issues and problems you have to face. So I'm very pro-Israel but I don't view everything that happens through pink glasses."

Her parents visit Israel periodically, but her brother stayed behind for her and Nahum's wedding out of fear of potential war and

terrorism outbreaks. He was about to make his first visit with his family this year, but the New Year shooting at the Tel Aviv pub down her street changed his mind.

"I think my mother was always supportive, and my father was very confused about my going a very different path than what he imagined. Now that I'm a mom myself, I do understand one thing: you always want to see yourself in your kids."

She calls the Hoeftmann household "little Germany." She speaks with Ari in German, and German children's books abound. She wants to instill in her son a proud dual identity, claiming it's "harder to Israelize a son in Germany than to Germanize a son in Israel."

Towards the end of the interview, Ari woke up, and she spoke to him in German about two birthdays coming up: Israel's 68th birthday, which they could celebrate by watching the airshow right above them, and her son's birthday, on Holocaust Remembrance Day.

She said she would allow herself to be happy on Holocaust Remembrance Day, especially considering all the writing she's done about the Holocaust. After all, it's the journey into those dark times that led her here, holding her Jewish, dirty-blond son.

"I still walk in the streets of Israel and Tel Aviv or whatever sometimes, and I think to myself, isn't it amazing that everyone around me is Jewish?"

It's fascinating to me in a way. More than being a good Jew, I'm actually a good Zionist. I really believe in the Jewish state, and it's amazing how it worked out after all that happened."

I think, at this rate, it's safe to say her cats are definitely Jewish, too.



'Guten Morgen Tel Aviv': Hoeftmann at the White City's port. (Martin Jeschke)





The slow, shy German approach: Biking in Berlin. (© visitBerlin)

# Another kind of romantic exchange

A different type of diplomacy is influencing the Jewish state's relationship with Berlin

• By ORIT ARFA

During last year's jubilee celebrations of the Jerusalem-Berlin diplomatic relationship, much fanfare was made about economic cooperation, cultural exchanges and academic collaborations, but one topic went little discussed: German-Israeli romantic relations.

Another kind of diplomacy is taking place in bars, restaurants – and bedrooms – in which the bonds of love (or lust) create unique and intimate intersections of German-Israeli past, present, and future.

But just as German-Israeli diplomatic relations can be fraught with complications, so can German-Israeli inter-dating, in part due to different mentalities and dating codes (and the issue of intermarriage, for some). Israelis and Germans of all ages who have dated on both sides of the Israeli-German curtain have offered some insights.

## The pick-up

The stereotype of the reserved Ger-

man and effusive Mediterranean could be summed up in a joke:

A German and Israeli man walk into a Tel Aviv bar and spot a pretty girl. Before the German even orders his beer, the Israeli approaches her while she keeps eyeing the German. The German sulks over his first – and second – beer, until he gets the drunken courage to ask her why she keeps looking at him.

"I wanted to talk to you, but you didn't approach me," she says.

The German man looks stupefied. "But I looked at you!"

Romina Rotem Moyal, of German-Italian descent, has dated both German and Israeli men until marrying her Israeli husband, who is of Libyan-Moroccan descent.

"Israeli guys don't need a drink or two before they have – how can I say it – the 'nerve' to just start a conversation with you," she said.

Israeli assertiveness could be a plus or minus, depending on the woman's preference.

Eliana Stern, an observant immigrant from Germany of three years, prefers the subtle approach: "Secular Israeli men – and to a certain extent surprisingly also religious men – are often quite aggressive when it comes to 'picking up' women. And quite often they are not looking for anything serious."

According to David (name changed

upon request), this "aloofness" is not reserved for men. "My experience in Germany shows more aloofness among Germans whereas Israeli women tend to let you know quickly whether they 'like' you or not."

## Dating and courtship

These qualities find themselves in the dating and courtship process as well.

Hadas Gorodetzky, a Rehovot native who moved to Germany in 2007 to study psychology, has noticed that Germans are generally more calculating in building a relationship.

"With Israelis I can connect very fast and get intimate (emotionally and mentally) very quickly if we have the right chemistry. Germans are different; they are more careful with people."

The slow, shy German approach, however, may prove more reliable in the long term. "On the other hand, Germans take everything much more seriously, so if a guy here makes a move, it means so much more than if an Israeli guy makes a move."

Jussy, a tall, red-head from Cologne prefers dating Israeli men for their dark features and sexier attitude, which she sums up as: "Israeli men have *esh batahat* [fire in their ass]." She describes them as warm-hearted and passionate.

"They make you feel like a woman."

Janin, a German attorney who splits

her time between Berlin and Tel Aviv, is also attracted to Israeli assertiveness, which has its downsides.

"They're more open. It's easier to get in contact. That's the easy part. But later it becomes more complicated," she said, attributing complications to a "big ego" stemming from a more macho society.

Since Germans often consider themselves "feminists," they are more likely to "go Dutch."

Moyal said you can't always count on Germans to pick up the tab on the first date.

"This happened to me twice, and it was only a coffee. Well, I never saw them again but they couldn't understand why this was a big deal for me."

But a German man's "liberation" has its upside. They are more likely to cook dinner for a woman and also fix things around the house.

"In Israel, mostly, your date's mom knows how to cook," Moyal said, "and if you are hungry, you visit his mom or a restaurant."

## Marriage

The constant threat of war and the Jewish commandment of "be fruitful and multiply," as well as the concern with Jewish continuity, have made Israel a much more marriage- and family-oriented society.

"In Israel getting married and having



children is something you must do," Gorodetzky said. "All your friends do it, so you feel pressure also to do it, and you get the impression this is the only right way to live. In Germany, it's not like that, so this means also the men here are less eager to make a commitment."

Moyal is an anomaly among her German friends: "I already have two kids, and I'm sure that some of my friends think those weren't planned at all. But they were."

For Nathan, who started a Facebook group for German-speaking singles in response to a post on this issue, the preoccupation with marriage makes dating more difficult in Israel.

"There is an obsession with getting married which is very unromantic. Procreation often seems to be the main aim of dating, not falling in love."

### Outlook on life

Due to the Israeli preoccupation with economic and physical survival, Israelis tend to "live for the moment," more willing to take risks in life.

"I think Israeli men have this confidence from the army, that is very good in life in terms of entrepreneurship and startups – and it's a survival skill in the big world, but this confidence could also affect their approach to women at a certain point," said Lisa (name changed upon request), an immigrant from the

US who lives in Tel Aviv, who has dated both German and Israeli men. Israeli boldness often leaves them wanting in sensitivity, finesse and subtlety in the romantic sphere.

According to Janin, the precariousness of life in Israel makes Israelis put a premium on relationships. "It's more focused on social things, on relationships, no matter what that is – friendships, love relationships. It's more important than for German people. In Germany, they focus on work."

Germans, on the other hand, generally feel secure in their financial and physical survival so they could take their time enjoying the finer things in life, like liberal arts education and world travels. And the difficulty of making it in Israel may affect a woman's romantic choice.

Nathan noted that many Israeli women are more concerned with a man's status and financial means. "The question is often: 'what are you?' – not 'who are you?'"

### The Holocaust question

The dark history between Germany and the Jews, which plays a role in Israel-German diplomatic relations, is a marginal factor in the dating life of interviewees.

"It creates tension around the question: 'What did family members (grandparents, for example) do during the war,

but I see the young generation and their parents as not responsible at all for the Holocaust," Gorodetzky said.

Diana (name changed upon request), a German artist who moved to Israel and married (and divorced) an Israeli, said: "I usually don't think about the Holocaust when I'm on a date, but when I do, I must admit that it can be a bit intriguing because of the feeling that love conquers death."

And while German-Israeli relations may be blossoming in more ways than one, for most, it's all about the individual and not the nationality.

"I think both of them have their advantages and disadvantages," Gorodetzky said, "but the most important thing to me is the person himself, how he treats me, and how the connection is between us. If we are a good match, then everything else is less important."



Wedding photo of Romina Rotem Moyal (of German-Italian descent) and her Israeli husband (Libyan-Moroccan). (Courtesy)



Splendor in the Berlin grass: While Germans tend to take their time enjoying the finer things in life, Israelis put a premium on relationships. (© visitBerlin)