

A Moment of Gratitude: Thanking a Family that Saved a Jewish Boy from Death

David S. Bedein61
“The family’s name was Argoud. They lived on a small farm in an isolated village of Haut-Blok overlooking the road to Lyons. The parents, Joseph and Emilienne, had three children of their own, two boys and a girl. Yossi and Simon Haas, the other Jewish boy in hiding, soon would become the two additional brothers in the family.”

The Art of the Ketubah

Rochelle Kalisch (cover artist)97
“Written in Aramaic, the *Ketubah* is a legally binding document whose existence can be traced to the time of the Patriarchs. . . . Today, Jewish artists are creating *Ketubot* so that newly married couples can have them as an embodiment of the Jewish tradition in their home, and as a symbol of their love for and commitment to each other.”

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**A Jewish sociologist
in the other Germany:
An interview with Irene Runge**

ROBIN OSTOW

Irene Runge was born in 1942 in Washington Heights, New York City. In 1949 she moved with her parents to the German Democratic Republic. She received her Ph.D. in Economics and Sociology in 1979 from Humboldt University, where she is currently a Researcher in the Department of History. Dr. Runge is serving her first term on the Board of Directors of East Berlin's Jewish Community. A regular contributor to Sonntag, a cultural and political weekly newspaper, and to the literary magazine Temperamente (both in East Berlin), she has also written two books: Älter werden—alt sein (Growing Older—Being Old) (East Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1982), and Ganz in Familie (All in the Family) (East Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1985). The interview is an excerpt from Robin Ostow's forthcoming book on Jews in the German Democratic Republic. It was made possible through the generous support of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada and with the gracious cooperation of the International Press Center and the Jewish Community in East Berlin.

Runge: My father came from a religious Jewish family; my mother was originally non-Jewish, but she converted. My parents were married by a rabbi in Palestine in the 1930s. They had left Germany already in 1929, and they were also in Paris for several years. Then, when France was invaded, they went to the United States, where they lived from 1939 to 1949. So I was born in New York. My father, a writer and art historian, had a book and picture shop in Times Square, down in the subway station, and he also served as

secretary of the exiled German writers association. He used to organize exhibits and other cultural events—many of them took place at the New School building on Fourteenth Street.

Our family returned to Germany in 1949. My parents were politically disappointed in New York. It was the McCarthy era, and many of their friends were going back to Germany because they had political problems or feared they might get into trouble. At this time also the German Democratic Republic was being founded in the Soviet-occupied zone, so there were opportunities for returning emigrés to take part in reconstructing a new and better Germany. For the first year we lived in Leipzig, then in 1950 we moved to Berlin where my father worked in the Ministry of Information. For many years he produced radio programs and published a magazine for them. Later he worked freelance, translating American literature and writing.

Ostow: What was it like to move to Germany as a seven-year-old?

Runge: In a way, when I first came here, I didn't really come back to Germany because the people I met had all just gotten back too, and the children I played with were, naturally, the children of these returning emigrants. I don't even know when I first came into contact with normal Germans. We had a maid, but I didn't have much to do with other ordinary Germans 'til quite a bit later. In 1951 my mother died, and we changed apartments three or four times. I picked up German very quickly, but I was still very American. At the beginning I wore blue jeans and T-shirts. I never had long braids like the German girls had, and I never wore those long brown stockings. The German kids didn't understand that, and their parents didn't either. Then, after a while, I wasn't allowed to wear jeans anymore because they said it was American imperialist culture, and we shouldn't have any contact with that.

Ostow: You mentioned in your autobiographical short story¹ that schoolmates used to ask you whether you killed Jesus.

Runge: Yes, that's something I remember because I didn't really understand it then. I asked my father and other people what that meant, and they just told me not to play with those kids anymore.

This was in 1951, and the children probably didn't really know what Jews were, but they may have heard from their parents that all these Jewish people were coming back.

Ostow: Did you have any kind of Jewish home life?

Runge: Only very indirectly. In those days it was pretty tough to get meat, and my father never liked pork, so our friends brought us all kinds of recipes for preparing pork so that it tastes like chicken. My father always wore a hat. It was never really said that it had something to do with being Jewish: they said it was just because of the draft. And, naturally, we knew a lot of people who came from concentration camps; people would often talk about those days and what they experienced in the camps. I didn't realize 'til much later that that's not Germany, but a special social and political culture. Also we always had guests, and there were always parties going on: my parents and their friends needed to be together. That was very unusual in those days; normal Germans had birthday parties and that was it.

We never really had Christmas. My father bought a Christmas tree because he thought I needed it to be assimilated, but the way he did it never made me like it. But, you know, in my story I never mention the word "Jew" or being Jewish: I just wanted to describe the returned emigrant culture at that point in history. Still, all of my Jewish friends and acquaintances who read the story identified with it. The Germans who read it asked me a lot of questions because they didn't understand it.

After my mother died I had more contact with ordinary Germans. Their apartments were different from ours: they had less space than we did, but still they always had a *wohnzimmer*, a good room where they usually didn't sit. When I would ring the doorbell to ask whether a friend could come out and play, they would never invite me into the flat like our friends did, but they made me wait for my friend outside. And then—something I wrote about in that story—they had pictures of their families: an uncle, brother, or cousin in uniform, German uniform. But I was brought up to think of men in German uniforms as the enemy. They had relatives: they had their family around them, and we didn't have anybody. So the whole German family hierarchy didn't play for us the organizing

role it assumed in a normal German family. For us, our friends and comrades who also came back from emigration substituted for the extended family.

I had lots of problems in school. Our family's social circle consisted mostly of writers, intellectuals—very bright people. The teachers in school were very rigid and not so bright. We would read a novel in school, and the teacher would explain what the author meant. I would raise my hand and say: "But I talked to the author yesterday, and he said he never meant that." Then the teacher would reprimand me for raising negative and provocative questions. But I was brought up to think I should have my own opinion because every opinion is valuable.

The other thing is that when I was seventeen, I had a boyfriend. This was quite unusual—in those days you weren't supposed to have an affair while you were still in school—and it distracted me from my school work. I was also having a lot of trouble with my father at that time. He had remarried, and I didn't get along very well with his wife. And he really didn't have that much time to care because he was always with his books. So in 1959 I dropped out of school, and moved out of their place. Then I got married, had a child a few months later, and then got divorced. This happened to a lot of women I know, but in most cases after the women had finished school and started at university, or even later.

Ostow: Was your first husband Jewish?

Runge: No. But the problem was not that he wasn't Jewish: but rather this was the first time that I got involved with a real German family with relatives in the West and no anti-fascist background. I was very suspicious of them: I couldn't accept the fact that they had a family and I didn't, and I just couldn't manage. I tried to force my husband not to have any contact with his parents. Naturally, he went there secretly. When I found out about it, I got very upset, and the whole thing broke up.

After I dropped out of school, I worked for the press agency and the radio. For the most part I did filing and other unskilled clerical work, but I also did some writing, and sometimes I worked as an interpreter.

Ostow: Were you in the Communist Party or in any other political party at this time?

Runge: No. I wasn't disciplined enough.

I met my current husband Heinz in 1967. He isn't Jewish either: he's Protestant, and he doesn't want to convert, but he comes with me to all the cultural events in the Jewish community.² He's an opera director, and he knew lots of Jews professionally even before he met me, so it's really quite comfortable. Around this time I also went back to school. I got my *Abitur* (the German pre-university degree) in 1971, and then I studied economics and sociology at university.

Ostow: During your early years did you and your family have any relationship to the Jewish community here?

Runge: No. Most of our friends and acquaintances were Jewish, but none of them were religious. We talked a lot about being Jewish, and we told Jewish jokes, but the *Jüdische Gemeinde* seemed to be very religious, and we had no contact with it because our people weren't members. Then, in the early 1970s, a friend of mine became a member: she came to the GDR from Australia. She grew up there in a religious family, and had been a member of the Communist Party in Australia. She also had difficulty when she got here because she was much older, and she really didn't know how to integrate, so she became a member of the *Jüdische Gemeinde*. Through contact with her I also began to think that if you're Jewish, it makes sense to really identify as a Jew, and to do more about it, though I never was a very religious Jew. I think I would probably be a Reform Jew in the United States.

First I started going to the cultural Sundays³ we have here, and my friend took me to a Seder. Somewhat later I began to attend services at the synagogue, and I found out that they're not really very friendly there.

Ostow: What do you mean by that?

Runge: Well, if they don't know you, they don't really welcome you that openly. That's very German.

Ostow: And that didn't put you off?

Runge: No, because I knew people there. Hermann⁴ and I went to university together, and I knew other people who were already members. This made it easier for me: and so in 1976 I too became a member.

Ostow: Did you give your son any kind of Jewish upbringing?

Runge: Not really, because he was brought up mostly by his non-Jewish grandparents. But, from the beginning, he knew that there was a difference—that his parents moved in very different social worlds. And, as he got older, he tended to be more interested in our family. When Stefan was fifteen or so, I started taking him to synagogue. Naturally he didn't like it: he didn't understand a word, and he didn't know what was going on. But then he joined the Youth Group,⁵ and he liked that. Ultimately he decided that he wanted to become Jewish, so he got circumcised, he learned Hebrew, and, at a late age, he had a *Bar-mitzvah*; now he's also a member of the Jewish community. He got married last winter. His wife Katrin is pregnant, and she just applied to become a member too so that the baby can grow up as a Jew. They're both reading a lot of books about Judaism, they made a *Seder* for Passover this year, and they're really trying to make a Jewish home.

Ostow: What does Katrin have to do to convert?

Runge: I think she has to learn some Hebrew and have a *Bat-mitzvah*. One problem is that our *mikveh*⁶ doesn't work, and there's no point in spending lots of money to reconstruct it if we'll only use it once a year, at most. So the question is whether we'll use the *mikveh* in Prague, or the one in Budapest, or maybe a river.

Ostow: You've been on the Board of Directors of the *Jüdische Gemeinde* for a year. What do you feel are the major problems that the Jewish community here is now facing?

Runge: One very important problem is defining who is Jewish. The Jewish laws regarding this issue are very different from the Nurem-

berg Laws,⁷ and a lot of people fall in between the two. For example, people with a Jewish father or a Jewish grandfather were persecuted as Jews by the Fascists, and hence they and their children feel that they are Jewish—or at least partly Jewish. People like this apply to join the *Gemeinde*, and the *Gemeinde* tells them that they're not Jewish because you're only Jewish if you have a Jewish mother. I think the Jewish community isn't aware of how many people there are in this group. Such people feel they have no roots in German culture. Though they didn't have a traditional Jewish upbringing, they would like to be more Jewish. So they come around on Sunday afternoons, and ask to join the *Gemeinde*. But the *Gemeinde* really gives them a tough time. They have to prove that they're very serious, and they have to have a proper conversion. When people who feel that they're Jewish get turned away by the *Gemeinde* on the basis of Jewish law, they feel rejected, confused, and hurt: and usually they drift away again.

You also have to keep in mind that our Jewish community isn't just one congregation, it's the only Jewish organization we have. We have no Reform Jewish community. So it seems to me quite clear that sticking to this very conservative definition of Jewishness will lead to our organizational death. Many of our members are very old, and can't come to services anymore. It's already difficult to get a *minyan*⁸ together here, but somehow we manage—there are some kids who come and visitors who come over from the West. In the rest of the GDR they never have a *minyan*; I've heard that they have to get Jewish Palestinians in. And they don't count women either.

Ostow: There are rumors about initiatives to reconstitute here the Berlin Jewish Museum that the Nazis dissolved in 1938. Do you know anything about that?

Runge: I knew a woman who was interested in having a Jewish museum again. She got a lot of Jewish people who are not members of the Jewish community interested, but the Jewish community didn't like the idea too much. We don't have personnel with the knowledge to maintain a Jewish museum.

What I would like to see is something a bit different. There's talk about one day reconstructing the synagogue on the Oranien-

burgerstrasse.⁹ We already have a beautifully reconstructed synagogue which we can't fill on the Rykestrasse, so we certainly don't need another one. But we could reconstruct the facade of the Oranienburgerstrasse synagogue, and make it into a cultural center. We could have a permanent exhibit and move our Jewish library there. We could also use the building for meetings, for showing films; people who do research on the Holocaust or on Berlin Jewish history could work there. In the years before 1933 Berlin was a major center of Jewish life, and Oranienburgerstrasse is an historic street. I don't think we should wait until the city decides what to do with the ruin: we should tell them what to do. You know that synagogue was the building where Reform Judaism began, and maybe, with the help of Jews all over the world who are interested in Berlin and might make donations, we could again have some very exciting things going on there. That's my personal idea, though; I don't know whether the Jewish community likes it.

Ostow: In 1987 the city of Berlin will be celebrating the 750th anniversary of its founding. Will the Jewish community be taking part in any of the public ceremonies to mark the event?

Runge: I don't know that any plans have been made yet, but a cultural center like the one I just described could be part of it. And, you know, 1986 will be the 200th anniversary of the death of Moses Mendelssohn, and we could do something about that too. Unfortunately our Jewish community is a bunch of very old people, and a lot of them are not academic people, so we can't do it all ourselves. But, as an institution, we can try to encourage other people to do some of the work, and I think we should. We should talk more about these things, and be more active in public. This is part of German history, and I think it's also part of the Party line here.¹⁰ We spent a lot of money on Martin Luther Year in 1983. Moses Mendelssohn wasn't that important for German history, but the Jews were important for German history, and we have to make that clear. Books about the synagogues here,¹¹ and the *Scheunenviertel*¹²—even Hermann's own book¹³—have been published in West Berlin, but I think that's really something that we have to do.

Another case in point is the two memorials for the Herbert Baum Group.¹⁴ The inscription on the memorial at the Jewish

cemetery says that it was a group of young Jewish Communists, but the word "Jewish" is missing from the memorial at Marx-Engels Platz, and now that the memorial is there, they won't change it. I think we ourselves have to point out publicly what it means to be Jewish in East Germany today.

Ostow: Could you explain a bit about the research you've done on aging in the GDR for your book *Älter werdenalt sein* [*Growing Older—Being Old*]?

Runge: It's actually a pretty academic and theoretical book about the social aspects of aging. Once I had started the project, I realized that I was doing it largely to overcome my inhibitions about getting close to older Germans. In the end, though, I didn't succeed in talking to them or getting close to them. So I let other people do that, and I got involved with the older Jews and anti-fascists. I interviewed people who were active in the anti-fascist movement or had been in jail or in concentration camps during the Nazi times, and I wrote about them. I wanted to make these people better known personally, and I wanted to explore what motivated these people to resist. I felt I had to show that there was a way to resist, and that life does have moral content. And it wasn't only the Jewish variable: I was also interested in non-Jewish resistance fighters. And I found out that there was a lot of passive resistance in Berlin, especially among workers. Many Jews attributed their survival to the help of non-Jews who gave them food or warned them of impending danger. Some of the pieces I wrote have been published in *Sonntag*, particularly in their annual special issue for September 10—our National Day of Anti-Fascism.

These anti-fascists are pretty old now, but they're still very active and very politically involved. They go around to the schools and kindergartens to talk to the young people. They give presentations about fascism, and they provide an example of the kind of personality you should develop to be important to your country or your people. This includes getting involved in all kinds of neighborhood projects, and also opposing things that they don't like.

Ostow: And what about the Germans who weren't part of the Resistance?

Runge: Well, many of the real Nazis fled to the West because they were afraid of the Russians. Those who were uninvolved or maybe little Nazi functionaries stayed and rebuilt this country, perhaps as a kind of personal *Wiedergutmachung* [restitution]. There was a lot of work to be done, and we didn't import foreign labor.

Ostow: And how did these people react to you as a Jew?

Runge: Well, there is guilt and repression. When they were children they knew Jewish people, and then there were no Jewish people. When they heard I'm Jewish, they were shocked and didn't know how to behave. They didn't know what to ask me. It's something that's very complicated for them to deal with. For them being Jewish is associated with the distant past.

Ostow: Have you ever had any anti-Semitic experiences here?

Runge: There's no serious anti-Semitism here, but that doesn't mean you would never find an anti-Semite. In the GDR anti-Semitism and what happened under the Nazis is discussed thoroughly in the schools. The class is taken to visit a former concentration camp, and it's made very clear what anti-Semitism and fascism are, and that they're not acceptable. But many Germans who were born after the war understand that as something very abstract and remote, and don't relate it to the world around them. So there are lots of dirty jokes going around about Turkish people, Poles, blacks, Africans, and Arabs. And if you point out to them that those are the same jokes that their parents and grandparents told about Jews, they look at you, and admit that it's something they never thought of.

Ostow: In the last two years you visited New York City twice. Would you like to say something about your impressions and your experiences there?

Runge: I really loved and felt very close to New York. I went to see the apartment where we lived until 1949, and I met my former neighbors: that was a very moving experience for me. And then I found my family over there, people I'm related to, who look like

me, and who remember me when I was a baby. That never happened to me here. New Yorkers seem very friendly and very curious, but often badly informed. Most of the people I met there were Jewish and very bright. Many people told me they don't like Germans. They talked a lot about anti-Semitism and neo-Nazis, and they told me that they don't buy German products and don't want to visit Germany. I would tell them that I don't live in West Germany but in the German Democratic Republic, which is different. Then they would ask me whether that has something to do with Moscow and with eternal evil, and whether I'm a defector. I explained that our President, Erich Honecker, was in jail during the fascist times, and many people in leading positions in our country are Jewish, and others were in concentration camps or were refugees from the Nazis. And they were very surprised because they had never thought of that. I also made it clear that I plan to continue living in the GDR. We do have a lot of political problems, but we also have a very strong anti-fascist tradition starting with the founding of our state. And many people said that now that they know me, they want to find out more about the German Democratic Republic and to come visit and see what's happening here.

1. "Susannah" in Joachim Walther (ed.), *Brennesselsuppe und Hiatiti: Erzählte Kindheit*, Buchverlag Der Morgan, (East) Berlin, 1983, pp. 341-49.

2. The words *Jüdische Gemeinde*, *Gemeinde*, and Jewish community will all be used interchangeably to refer to East Berlin's official and only Jewish organization.

3. The *Jüdische Gemeinde* organizes a Jewish cultural event one Sunday afternoon a month from October through May.

4. Dr. Hermann Simon is currently vice-president of the *Jüdische Gemeinde*.

5. The Youth Group is the *Jüdische Gemeinde*'s program for its younger members and prospective members.

6. A *mikveh* is a Jewish ritual bath.

7. The Nuremberg Laws of September 15, 1935, denied German citizenship to Jews, and, among other measures, forbade marriage and sexual relations between Jews and German citizens. Regulations for the implementation of these laws referred to paternity as the criterion for determining Jewishness although, according to Jewish law, Jewishness is acquired from the mother.

8. A *minyan* is a quorum of, traditionally, ten men required for the carrying out of a complete prayer service.

9. In the first third of this century the synagogue on the Oranienburgerstrasse was one of Berlin's largest, most elegant, and religiously most dynamic Liberal congregations.

10. The GDR has more than one political party, but the political party which

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dominates the political life of the nation is the SED, or Socialist Unity Party, frequently referred to as "the Party."

11. Rolf Bothe (ed.), *Synagogen in Berlin* (2 vols), Verlag Willmuth Arenhövel, West Berlin, 1983.

12. Eike Geisel, *Im Scheunenviertel*, Severin und Siedler, West Berlin, 1981. The *Scheunenviertel*, an area near the Alexanderplatz in what is now East Berlin, was, in the first third of this century, densely inhabited by poor Jews who had recently immigrated to Berlin from Eastern Europe.

13. Hermann Simon, *Das Berliner Jüdische Museum in der Oranienburger Strasse*, Berlin Museum, (West) Berlin, 1983.

14. The Herbert Baum Group in Berlin was the only Jewish resistance group operating within Nazi Germany. In 1942 they were exposed by an informer, and all but two members of the group were executed.

Ten days in the Soviet Union

MARTIN J. RAFFEL

ANDRE, a new friend I have known for barely an hour, asks me to lead him on a tour of my favorite city, the eternal city, Jerusalem. While living there through most of the 1970s, it is a request I have enthusiastically responded to on many previous occasions. Yet I am anxious to play the role of guide once again. We have so much to see and so little time—I must be selective. We walk through the narrow crowded markets of the Old City. I point out the holiest shrines of Christianity and Islam and we witness the religious fervor of pilgrims who have traveled countless miles to be here. We move rapidly thereafter to stand together in prayer before "our" Western Wall. I marvel, as always, at the incredible power of this tiny tract of land.

I decide to show Andre the breathtaking view from atop Mount Scopus. The setting sun brings darkness to the Judean Hills behind and before us. In all its golden-hued splendor lies the capital of the Jewish world. It is truly a special moment for he sees exactly what I see and his love for this city glistens in his eyes also.

What made this particular tour stand out above the rest? Because it was a tour of the mind and of the spirit. You see Andre and I were not actually in Jerusalem but rather in his small Moscow apartment. We had very little time to talk about Jerusalem, or anything for that matter, as my wife Maris and I needed to dash off to visit the next Refusenik family on our list.

An orthodox Refusenik in his late twenties, Andre and his family have been waiting for over six years to receive the prized