



On the Trail of German-Israeli Cultural History

Max Planck scientists cooperate with partners in around 120 countries worldwide. Here they relate their personal experiences and impressions.

For her doctoral thesis, art historian Anna Sophia Messner from the Kunsthistorisches Institut is tracing the life and work of female German-Jewish photographers in Israel – which has resulted in a variety of encounters between the past and the present.

My work in Israel is a bit like a treasure hunt. Every time I'm here, I discover new sources. Since completing my studies, I've specialized in German-Jewish cultural and art history. I'm particularly interested in artists who emigrated from Germany to Palestine in the 1930s. Due to the wealth of material, I had to narrow down the topic for my dissertation, and now I'm studying the life and work of German-Jewish photographers. Like numerous other German Jews, they had fled from the Nazis. Back then, there was a saying: "Do you come from Germany or from conviction?" There was certainly some truth to it. Many Germans held tightly to their German language and culture in exile and hardly identified with their new home at all. Some also later moved on to other countries, which is one of the reasons why the photographers were forgotten.

My field research took me to archives, museums and private collections. My research began with the sisters Gerda and Charlotte Meyer from Berlin, who opened a photography studio in Haifa in the mid-1930s. Their portraits were highly valued: they photographed famous personalities such as Arturo Toscanini, David Ben-Gurion and Golda Meir. In the



Anna Sophia Messner, 35, studied art history, Jewish history and culture, and classical archaeology at Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München (LMU), and completed language programs at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. She curated exhibitions at the Jewish Museum Munich and the city's municipal archives, and publishes on Jewish and Israeli artists. From 2012 to 2015 she worked as a scientific assistant at the LMU Institute for Art History. Since 2015 she has been working on her doctorate in connection with the Max Planck Research Group "Objects in the Contact Zone – The Cross-Cultural Lives of Things" at the Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florence.

1940s, they compiled documentation for industry, including for the Iraq Petroleum Company, which had refineries in Haifa. Both later left the country again, one to Canada and the other to England.

Since I started researching, more and more stories like this one have come to light. The photos and documents turn up in attics and basements, and sometimes even in garbage dumps. I have developed a network of Israeli colleagues who tell me when new material has been discovered. I also talk to relatives and contemporaries of the deceased, most of whom insist on speaking German with me. Even the children of the German emigrants frequently still speak their parents' language quite well, though the German may sound somewhat old-fashioned to modern ears – it's just how people spoke in Germany in the 1930s.

Life here in Tel Aviv is the same as in any other international metropolis. It's a bit like living in a bubble, because you don't usually hear too much about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which is definitely present in other cities. In Jerusalem's Old City, for example, there might be tensions particularly on religious holidays, especially around the Temple Mount. This is evident, for example, from the increased military and security controls around the city. Nevertheless, people in Israel try to lead a largely normal day-to-day life.

One question I'm frequently asked is how people treat Germans in Israel. I've had only good experiences. Particularly the third generation – people my age – are very open toward Germany. They're interested in the country their grandparents came from and are happy to connect with Germans. Some are even learning the German language. I have since built up a large professional network here and made friends. That's another reason I keep coming back to Israel.