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Jews and Muslims are not enemies (FAZ article 2 April 2024)

Arndt Emmerich researches Jewish-Muslim networks in Frankfurt's Bahnhofsviertel district.

His conclusion: Instead of conflicts, the relationship between the religions is characterized by respect.

Anyone who has the current disputes surrounding the conflict in the Middle East in mind, who is reading the numerous articles about "imported anti-Semitism", can quickly come to the conclusion that deep dislike determines the relationship between Muslims and Jews.

The members of the religions seem like natural enemies whose relationship has been characterized by conflict for centuries.

Whoever talks to Arndt Emmerich, a cultural sociologist and junior professor at the University of Hertfordshire, soon realizes how stereotypical this image is.

Before moving to England, Emmerich researched Jewish-Muslim networks in Frankfurt's Bahnhofsviertel from 2021 to 2023. His research in the district was part of the

pan-European research project "Encounters" six scientists in France, Great Britain and Germany investigated the relationship between Muslims and Jews in France, Great Britain and Germany.

They selected cities in which there are comparatively large Jewish and Muslim communities: London and Manchester, Paris and Strasbourg, Berlin and Frankfurt. How do Jews and Muslims interact in these "super-diverse places" with each other? How is everyday life between members of the religions? This is what the researchers wanted to find out.

It wasn't easy for him at first to get residents of the station district asking them about the district's past, and at first he "actually only got rebuffs", says Emmerich.

What he was looking for didn't exist in the neighborhood, some said. Others responded with platitudes: "Diversity always always brings unity," they said.

Only when Emmerich got to know some men who had already come to the station district in the sixties and seventies, the answers were more detailed.

And after the first contacts new contacts were made. More and more the researcher was able to delve deeper into the world of the red light district, learning more about the connections between Jewish and Muslim businessmen, about friendships and respect for each other.

Unlike today, the station district had not been a district with a dubious reputation for a long time. After the opening of the main railway station in 1888, the area became a district for the wealthy, with magnificent buildings, wide boulevards, hotels, cafés and restaurants. The decline began after the Second World War. Rooflessness, drug addiction and prostitution increasingly shaped the neighborhood.

However, this also made it an area that offered opportunities. Because it was cheap and unpopular, it was easier to set up an own business there. The first to take advantage of this in the 1950s were Jewish refugees from Eastern Europe who had been uprooted by the

Holocaust, known as "displaced persons" or DPs for short. In the Zeilsheim district, homeless Jews lived in a DP camp for a long time. Many of them dreamed of leaving the country. Others eventually built an existence and a future for themselves in the "land of the perpetrators" - often in the station district.

They set up their own business as fur traders, restaurant owners or pub landlords, reports Emmerich. And Yiddish was spoken on the streets of the station district.

The face of the neighborhood changed in the 1970s. From then on, it was also strongly influenced by Muslims who had come to Germany as migrant workers. They opened stores and restaurants in Münchner Straße in particular. Soon it was not uncommon to hear people talk of "Little Istanbul" when referring to the Bahnhofsviertel.

In his research, Emmerich has identified numerous networks and friendships between Jews and Muslims. And he collected memories. One is about a Jewish businessman who saved the life of the father of a young Muslim employee.

He had been in an accident on his motorcycle and suffered a severe skull fracture. The Jewish businessman organized for him to be flown from a NATO base to Frankfurt for an emergency operation, for which he advanced a deposit of 22,000 Deutschmarks and made countless phone calls. The rescue operation made him a hero in the neighborhood.

Another anecdote is about how a Jew helped two Muslim teenagers to set up their own business. Still others tell of Jewish-Muslim couples. Or of a rabbi who still prefers to buy his vegetables in the Muslim-run stores on Münchner Strasse.

Emmerich also spoke to a Jewish woman who works in the station district. She was not afraid there, she told the researcher. If she were to be attacked by a junkie, her Muslim neighbors would come to help her. A Jewish businessman described the coexistence as equal

and uncomplicated. "Everyone knows that we are Jews, but that is never an issue," he said. For him, the neighborhood is therefore the place in Frankfurt where he "feels normal", much more so than in "these bourgeois, German-dominated places".

The approach between the religions also takes place through languages, says Emmerich. Because the clientele in the station district is ethnically diverse, Jewish store owners have often also learned Arabic or Turkish. On the other side, there were also many Muslims who adopted Yiddish terms. An employee of a Jew shop owner whose family immigrated to Germany from Turkey became known as "the Muslim who speaks Yiddish better than many Jews". In the meantime, however, Yiddish is disappearing more and more. What is becoming more popular among young people, however, is a slang that mixes terms from different living environments.

Living together in the neighborhood is "determined by everyday pragmatism" says Emmerich. This is also related to the fact that interfaith conflicts or the dispute over the Middle East conflict in the district don't get out of hand. "We leave politics" is a widespread attitude in the district. Conflict-free coexistence is more important to the residents than "big politics". According to Emmerich, this can also be seen in the community of Turkish residents of the neighbourhood. They ignore issues with potential for conflict such as the question of Kurdish autonomy .

In the station district, Jews and Muslims have not only formed networks, but also learned a lot about each other's religion, about the other culture, reports Emmerich. From early on, people met at festivals, weddings, in the mosques and synagogues. The researcher describes interest and curiosity as great. And in contrary to

what is often heard now, he has found that the Muslims he met in the station district are well informed about the Holocaust. The suffering of the Jews and their persecution in Germany is present in their minds.

At present, there are often calls for more interreligious dialogs. The city is already doing a lot to initiate such discussion formats. In the station district, says Emmerich, they have been everyday practice at least since the seventies - on an informal basis.

The fact that he has gained so much positiv from this place which has such a bad reputation and has dominated debates in local politics for years sometimes seems strange to him, says Emmerich. And he doesn't want to close his eyes to the many problems in the district.

Nevertheless, the station district has an important role model function. Because it shows how coexistence characterized by respect and tolerance can be lived together.