

"Friendships across religious boundaries"

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In Frankfurt's Bahnhofsviertel (main station quarter) district, there are many friendships that go back decades and in which national, cultural and religious differences play no role. © Rolf Oeser

Cultural sociologist Arndt Emmerich is researching Jewish-Muslim coexistence in Frankfurt's station district.

Mr. Emmerich, you conducted a study on the coexistence of Jews, Muslims and Muslim women in Frankfurt's Bahnhofsviertel district. What is the conclusion of your study?

The conclusion of the study is, firstly, that the neighborhood level is often very different from the national level and also from the national perception. Then I would say that a multi-ethnic and multicultural neighborhood like the Bahnhofsviertel has been characterized by resilience for decades. And also, a tolerance of ambiguity.

What does that mean?

You notice that conflicts, tensions and differing opinions are presented in a completely different way to what we know from the media and politics. Robust dialog formats emerge that you don't necessarily have on your radar. It's also about forgotten friendships and creative potential, as I

mentioned in an article: Jewish-Muslim encounters in Frankfurt's Bahnhofsviertel. In everyday life, these long-standing friendship networks that have grown over decades often go unnoticed. These friendships across national and religious borders, which have existed since the end of the 1960s, were the most impressive result of this study.

When did you carry out the study?

Between February 2021 and December 2023, although I continue to follow current developments in Frankfurt very closely.

So you carried out the research before Hamas attacked Israel on October 7, 2023. How meaningful is your study today?

That really is a very, very important question that we also ask ourselves in the social sciences: To what extent is this resilience to transnational tensions still there? I maintain that the station district is incredibly resilient in this respect. I would say that the results are still resilient. Let's take a look at the station district: You hardly see any Palestine flags, if anything, I once saw an Israel flag hanging over Muslim stores as well. I was shown Turkish goods with kosher signs to prove that there have been business relations between Israel and Turkey for a very long time. At the end of October, Jewish and Muslim business owners commemorated all the victims in various statements, Palestinian and Israeli, condemned anti-Semitism and racism and emphasized the inclusive and interfaith character of the station district so as not to be played off against each other by politicians.

To what extent does politics play a role in everyday life in the Bahnhofsviertel?

The Bahnhofsviertel has a basic attitude: it is characterized as apolitical. I have experienced this in my numerous conversations with Jewish and Muslim residents. For example, there is the quote: "The basic law in the station district is that politics and religion don't play a role. The point was that people don't necessarily talk about transnational areas of tension such as Israel and Palestine. The district is characterized by extreme diversity. There is also diversity within the Muslim community, and there is a political spectrum ranging from far left Kemalist-socialist to AKP or even ultra-nationalists or secular atheists. Kurds, Armenian Christians who grew up in Turkey, Jews from the former Soviet Union also live here: everything is close together, business next to business, apartment next to apartment. The media focus is currently very much on Jewish-Muslim in a homogenized perception. In the everyday reality of the neighborhood, this only plays one role out of many.

How did you proceed with the study? How did you find your interview partners?

In sociology, this is called an ethnographic approach, which can be compared in part to investigative journalism. This approach takes time: you go in carefully, allow the question to take effect, learn, as in my case, the languages and practices of this neighborhood, the manners. I had about three years to do this and I'm still learning new things. You look at what stories are circulating in the station district when it comes to Jewish-Muslim relations. I looked into the history of the station district after the Holocaust. Displaced persons, for example, did not go on to Israel or the USA, but built up a new existence in the station district in the 1950s and 1960s. You can also talk about the Yiddish station district because of the many Jewish stores. Then I looked at the migration history of guest workers. And I realized that there is definitely an interaction here that needs to be researched.

Are there already studies on this?

No. During my preparation, I benefited greatly from the academic work of the Fritz Bauer Institute, the Frankfurt Institute for City History and Goethe University, as well as the Jewish Museum's "Invisible Places" app. However, no one had looked into the long-term interactions between Jewish and Muslim life in Frankfurt's Bahnhofsviertel that I suspected. So I had to listen to the oral tradition and interview contemporary witnesses, including their children.

How many people did you interview?

About 70, including children and grandchildren of Jewish displaced persons and Turkish Muslim migrant workers. But also post-Soviet Jewish refugees and people from Iran, Morocco and Afghanistan. Young adults from the second or third generation were also interviewed for the data collection.



The study is part of a larger research project. © Rolf Oeser

Have you encountered any difficulties and if so, what are they?

People in the Bahnhofsviertel are very aware of the media attention that the neighborhood generates. And the reports are not all positive. I have felt that. Here comes the snooty Heidelberg sociologist - even though I lived in Frankfurt for three years - they sometimes said. Then I got rejections. I had to ask elsewhere, went to stores, introduced myself and sometimes got lucky. During the more intensive research phases, I was in the station district almost every day.

What impressed you the most?

Several things, such as this case study. A Muslim-Turkish businessman who grew up as a boy in Jewish families in the neighborhood is hurt by the current antagonism in society. And he simply tells me that nobody knows that these were and still are our older Jewish brothers for decades. Then I also met a Yiddish-speaking Muslim who worked in several Jewish stores for more than ten years. He learned a lot from concentration camp survivors, which was palpable in his sympathy, even when we passed stumbling stones on Münchner Straße.

Will there be a sequel to the Frankfurt study?

I would like to expand this station district study and not just focus on Jewish-Muslims. Contrary to its negative reputation, the Bahnhofsviertel is also seen as a safe haven for migrants, diaspora communities and their children with different hybrid languages, cultures and religions. As a result, it has created a variety of multicultural and multiethnic alliances. One of my Jewish interlocutors summarized this shared sense of togetherness of the Bahnhofsviertel as follows: "Jews still have something more in common with Muslims. Not just religiously, like no pork and stuff, but more about shared experiences, values and this shared sense of minority that automatically connects us."



Arndt Emmerich is a cultural sociologist. © Private

About the person

Arndt Emmerich is a cultural sociologist and junior professor at the University of Hertfordshire in the UK, a visiting researcher at the Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity and an academic speaker at the Maimonides Jewish-Muslim Educational Center in Ingelheim.

He completed his doctorate in Oxford in 2018 on the subject of Muslim minorities.

His station district study is part of the international research project "Encounters", which examines urban encounters between Jews and Muslims in six Western European cities, including Paris and London.

Emmerich's findings appear in German and English-language journals and will soon be published in an anthology by Campus-Verlag in Frankfurt. pz