



Arndt Emmerich  
August 28th, 2025

# Die Zweiflers: media, identity, and coexistence in urban Germany

0 comments | 2 shares

Estimated reading time: 5 minutes



2 Shares

*In a world grappling with increasing polarization, the acclaimed German TV series Die Zweiflers offers a compelling case study on the power of media to shape narratives, challenge stereotypes, and foster understanding. The University of Hertfordshire's Arndt Emmerich explores how the show, through its unique portrayal of a Frankfurt Jewish family and their Turkish-German associate, illuminates the complexities of identity and coexistence in contemporary urban Europe.*

The ongoing conflict in Gaza has profoundly impacted global urban centres, with its reverberations felt across diverse political landscapes, from recent British elections to US campus politics. In Germany, this has led to **intensified scrutiny** of cultural expressions, particularly those touching on Israel-Palestine and Jewish-Muslim relations. Within this increasingly polarized public sphere, the highly acclaimed mini-series *Die Zweiflers*, which garnered several awards at the 2024 Cannes Film Festival and was hailed by *Die Zeit* as **"the best German series in ages"**, has remarkably navigated this scrutiny. It courageously tells a subtle yet significant subplot of Jewish-Muslim coexistence.

**Inspired by HBO's *The Sopranos***, *Die Zweiflers* focuses on the Jewish Zweifler family, delving into their messy, intergenerational complexities, including alleged ties to Frankfurt's notorious underworld. Creator David Hadda and his co-authors Sarah Hadda and Juri Sternburg refrain from repeating dominant Jewish victim narratives. Instead, they craft a self-determined and ambivalent storyline that traces the family's journey from Frankfurt's post-war survival years to its current cosmopolitan manifestation. This deliberate choice in media representation challenges established tropes and offers a fresh perspective on Jewish identity in Germany.

## The Jewish-Muslim friendship

While *Die Zweiflers'* portrayal of a modern German-Jewish identity was initially praised, a closer look reveals a compelling sub-theme: the historically embedded nature of Jewish-Muslim friendships in post-war Germany. Hussi Kutlucan plays Salih, the son of a Turkish guest worker who has worked for decades in the Zweifler family business. Salih, who repeatedly "sticks his (Muslim) neck out" for the (Jewish) family, is a close associate of Symcha Zweifler (Mike Burstyn), the family's patriarch. Across six episodes, viewers witness Salih's deep integration, managing restaurant affairs and defending the Zweiflers from competitors. This depiction highlights how media can represent complex, lived experiences of inter-communal solidarity.

This fictional dynamic resonates deeply with **my ethnographic research** in Frankfurt's Bahnhofsviertel, the neighbourhood where the series is set. Between 2021 and 2024, as part of the **pan-European ENCOUNTERS project**, I met individuals embodying the "real" Salih's and Symchas. Our study investigated social, religious, and ethnic encounters between Muslims and Jews in urban Europe, comparing cities like London, Manchester, Paris, Strasbourg, Berlin, and Frankfurt.

The Bahnhofsviertel has a unique urban history. **In the 1950s, Jewish survivors** (displaced persons) from Poland and other Eastern European countries began new business ventures there. From the late 1960s onwards, Muslim migrant workers also arrived, finding socio-economic opportunities. The fictional relationship between Salih and the Zweiflers thus mirrors historically evolved and, to some extent, still existing relationships. Beyond economic ties, these communities shared tea, conversed in Turkish barbershops, visited synagogues and mosques, and celebrated life events. This illustrates 'conviviality' – the everyday practices of living with difference in superdiverse urban settings – a concept the series effectively visualizes.

## Muslim in Bahnhofsviertel

Muslims (like Salih's character) are long-term employees in Jewish family businesses. They often personally know concentration camp survivors, gaining intimate knowledge of their family stories. This contrasts sharply with the dominant post-October 7th assumption that Muslims lack Holocaust-related knowledge and awareness of Jewish history in Germany. This narrative often frames Muslims as "outsiders" to Germany's remembrance culture, a perspective that, as anthropologist Esra Özyürek argues, partially erases **"the more than sixty-years-long history of millions of postwar Muslim migrants."** By depicting these intergenerational connections, *Die Zweiflers* challenges this media-driven narrative of ignorance.

During a walk in the Bahnhofsviertel, my interlocutor, Ahmet, and I passed a Stolperstein (a street memorial for Nazi victims). Ahmet, reflecting on the inscription, remarked, "Yes, sadly! It was your [German] family, [who killed him]." As a teenager, Ahmet feared Germans might also target Muslims. While he received basic history classes, his deeper understanding of Jewish history, including the Holocaust, was shaped by working in shops like the Zweiflers', where he "overheard the old Jews." These local stores became 'safe places' for young adults like Salih, fostering a horizontal identification and empathy with the Jewish experience. This highlights the role of informal social spaces in shaping understanding, a process that media can either reflect or obscure.

## New Ethnicities

The Bahnhofsviertel's rich cultural mosaic even led to Yiddish-speaking Muslims, a testament to the deep historical intermingling. Similarly, Jewish entrepreneurs like Symcha acquired Turkish and Arabic language skills, often passed down through generations. Ahmet once conversed in Yiddish with a Canadian rabbi, who, astonished, exclaimed, "Look at this Bengel [boy]. In Canada, we try to teach Yiddish to our children, and, here a Muslim can speak it." These anecdotes illustrate 'cultural crossing' and the organic formation of 'new ethnicities' – a concept that helps us understand how media portrays identities that transcend fixed categories.

Since the 2000s, this dynamic has evolved further, with the children of these Jewish-Muslim "friendship pioneers" forming alliances in sports clubs, schools, start-ups, and cultural projects. They've opened new restaurants and bars, fostered music scenes, and actively shaped the neighbourhood's identity. It is no surprise that *Die Zweiflers* authentically depicts these **modern, 'post-migrant' relationships** and 'global friendship cliques' in Frankfurt's "cool" Bahnhofsviertel. Key scenes, set against an Islamic backdrop of Turkish and Afghan supermarkets and mosques, highlight these long-standing and often forgotten Jewish-Muslim relationships in Germany, bringing them into the media spotlight.

The emergence of these Jewish-Muslim diaspora networks across Europe stands in stark contrast to notions of homogeneous national identity. Sociologists like Ben Gidley have shown how British-born South Asian and Jewish artists in East London **blended musical genres and rediscovered shared histories**. Similarly, German films by directors like Fatih Akin have explored how migration experiences have reshaped German society, combining **biographical stories with complex urban realities**. *Die Zweiflers* continues this tradition, using the medium of television to explore evolving identities and solidarities.

## Die Zweiflers: Prioritising local solidarity

*Die Zweiflers* is thus part of this important contribution by diaspora artists and filmmakers. It could be seen as the Hessian equivalent of **Mathieu Kassovitz's French film *La Haine***, shedding light on the interwoven life stories of young adults with diverse roots in a Parisian suburb. These minority alliances in Frankfurt's Bahnhofsviertel are revealed in conversations about religious circumcision, Islamophobic political campaigns, or historical arson attacks on refugee shelters and synagogues. The series develops local diaspora perspectives to promote empathy for different (post-)migrant experiences, highlighting the tension between conservative cultural heritage and urban diversity. Prejudices among migrant groups, everyday anti-Semitism, and anti-Muslim racism are not omitted, reflecting the complexities of 'convivial labour' and the persistence of 'non-convivial' moments that the media has a role in representing.

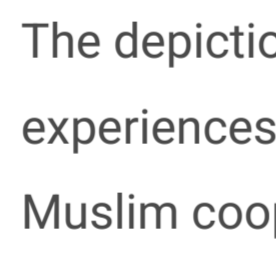
The depiction of these complex relationships in *Die Zweiflers* demonstrates that shared minority experiences reveal long-term patterns of coexistence and forgotten urban narratives of Jewish-Muslim cooperation. This coexistence endures, partly because the residents of the Bahnhofsviertel have largely maintained their local mantra of "non-politics," even after October 7th, 2023. This hard-won coexistence should not be jeopardized by political, (inter)national, and military conflicts, illustrating the sensitivity built through years of local cooperation. David Hadda, from Frankfurt, consciously focused on "everyday life" in *Die Zweiflers*. He emphasized that the decision not to directly address the Hamas massacre and ongoing Israel-Gaza war during filming was deliberate, aiming to focus on local, interpersonal relationships **"all too often forgotten in the undifferentiated discussion about the current war."** This editorial choice highlights the media's power to frame narratives and prioritize specific aspects of social reality.

Our research on Jewish-Muslim encounters and the fictional yet realistic relationship between Salih and the Zweiflers demonstrates how these communities overcome social boundaries by focusing on local challenges and multi-ethnic networks. These often-forgotten urban narratives show that Jewish-Muslim encounters are long-standing and remain relatively constant and convivial. The friendship and collaboration between Symcha and Salih therefore demonstrate a strong symbiosis characterized by resilience and the will to endure contradictions. This offers valuable insights for understanding how media representations can foster social cohesion and contribute to a more nuanced public discourse on identity, culture, and lived experience in contemporary urban diversity.'

*This post gives the views of the author and not the position of the Media@LSE blog, nor of the London School of Economics and Political Science.*

Featured image: Photo by Arndt Emmerich

### About the author



Arndt Emmerich

Arndt Emmerich is a Lecturer and Programme Leader in Sociology at the University of Hertfordshire. He is also a Visiting Fellow at the Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity and an Honorary Research Fellow at the Department of Psychological Studies, Birkbeck, University of London, and is on the board of the European Sociological Association's Sociology of Religion Research Network. His research interests include the governance of religious and cultural diversity, the sociology of religion and interfaith encounters.

Posted In: Media representation

### Leave a Reply

Your email address will not be published. Required fields are marked \*

Name  Email  Site

Comment

Post Comment

### Related Posts

- Citizen Participation and Politics
- Media representation
- Media representation
- Citizen Participation and Politics

- Elon Musk's Nazi salute, George Orwell and five lessons from past anti-fascist struggles  
FEBRUARY 4TH, 2025
- Editorial decisions and audience feedback in crime reporting: What happens when migrants commit crimes?  
OCTOBER 19TH, 2021
- Reflecting on media coverage of the war in Israel and Gaza  
DECEMBER 20TH, 2023
- A hierarchy of hate  
AUGUST 2ND, 2023