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'Yellow Bar Mitzvah': Mobilisations of Gangsta Rap as Futures Oriented, Agential Jewish Heritage in Germany

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Abstract:

State-approved and -funded Jewish cultural heritage has largely focused on concrete tangible spaces or structures, such as synagogues and *mikvaot* (ritual baths), and material objects. They often represent and evoke an idealised, unchanging Jewishness of the past that is presumed to be acceptable to non-Jewish audiences, yet one that bears little resemblance to lived Judaism, whether past or present. Using hip-hop by Jewish subjects in Germany as a case study, with a special focus on rapper Dimitri Chpakov, this article investigates the mobilisation of popular culture in the twenty-first century by diverse Jewish subjects under the radar of state-sanctioned conceptualisations and representations. Past studies have examined Jewish hip-hop in Germany within the authorised heritage discourse around Holocaust commemoration and anti-Semitism. This article argues that Jewish hip-hop initiatives need to be explored as alternative statements of Jewish heritage, Jewish communal identity, and Jewish diversity, geared towards young living Jewish community members. Such functions tend to be ignored or misunderstood in top-down discourses perpetuated in the public sphere. This article examines the extent to which present-day German Jewish hip-hop prompts a counter-heritagisation process: by creating compelling, deeply personal, and imitable musical forms, it reimagines and reforms conventional definitions of heritage in the service of young Jews living in Germany.

Key words: Jewish heritage, hip-hop, minorities, migration, Holocaust

Jewish heritage in present-day Germany

Heritage is not something fixed but rather something continuously negotiated by stakeholders in the heritage-making process (Smith 2006). Jewish heritage in the public realm in present-day Germany is almost exclusively overseen by non-Jewish heritage gatekeepers or by gatekeeping processes in the service of non-Jewish state apparatuses (Ross 2024). State-approved and -funded Jewish cultural heritage in Germany has been described as part of the national *Erinnerungskultur* (culture of commemoration) (Ross 2024: 36). This is a rather loose term to describe the totality of non-academic, public uses of heritage across a wide variety of means and for a variety of purposes that are united by their commemorative function, specifically in relation to the Holocaust. Such constructions of heritage result in a dominant, backward-looking historicisation of often symbolic Jewish subjects that functions in the service of non-Jewish subjectivities, often to create a progressive, enlightened pan-European secular identity forgiven for the sins of the Holocaust (see, for instance, Bodemann 1996, 2025; Assmann 2020;

Ross 2024). In the context of modern Europe, scholars have discussed how Jewish cultural heritage sites and related Jewish objects have been instrumental in constructions of a post-war identity, first European and later of the European Union (see, for instance, Diner and Wunberg 2007; Probst 2003; Ross 2024). A few Jewish figures have assumed or have been placed in key positions in service of the German state, with some academics and museologists, often from Israel, working on heritage initiatives in key Western German cities such as Berlin and Frankfurt. However, this is the exception rather than the norm and such figures tend to contribute to projects of a national culture of commemoration rather than representing bottom-up emic Jewish perspectives. There remain what Ross (2024: xi, 36) terms 'lop-sided power relations' in the representation and maintenance of Jewish heritage as a 'culture of commemoration'. Ross and Kranz (2023) show how the presentation of Jewish heritage in Germany to align with state-approved mandates is quite different from, for instance, its presentation in North America where 'Jewish heritage' (which they differentiate from *Jüdisches Kulturerbe*) is for the most part community led. In this context, 'the state' does not constitute a monolithic bloc but a multitude of apparatuses and positionalities (Carr 2009). In effect, these state-sanctioned heritage sites and discourses often serve purposes and goals not aligned with the stories of the people that they tell and even less with the tangible well-being and sustainability of their surviving descendants (Podoshen 2016).

The state-sanctioned heritage approach has led to the assembly of Jewish objects into thematically grouped heritage formations, part of an extensive project of the communication of culture. In these constructions, physical spaces are marketed as meaningful experiences: iconic, authentic objects and authentic places are generalised to meet the demand and sustain consumption, a process that marketing scholars have dubbed 'heritage branding' (Fournier and Alvarez 2019) or 'place marketing' (Napolitano and De Nisco 2017). Heritage-wise, with the absence of the former Jewish 'enemy' reconfigured into the (dead) Jewish victim (Lapidot 2021), German non-Jews are regarded (and regard themselves) as the only legitimate gatekeepers for Jewish heritage in Germany:

> *The logical conclusion of this argument is this: because the former cultural context of this heritage has been destroyed, there can be no Jewish cultural bearers and stakeholders today, which is why the non-Jewish society must take on this heritage, and maintain and preserve it. (Ross 2024: 55)*

In practice, Jewish heritage in present-day Germany is almost exclusively focused on concrete tangible spaces or things – synagogues, *mikvaot* (ritual baths), and other spaces and objects that are organised to remember Jewish life that was ruptured by the Shoah. As such, state-sanctioned displays of

Jewish cultural heritage tend to be considered as important *lieux de memoire* in which

> *memory crystallizes and secretes itself [...] at a particular historical moment, a turning point where consciousness of a break with the past is bound up with the sense that memory has been torn – but torn in such a way as to pose the problem of the embodiment of memory. (Nora 1989: 7)*

Such sites and configurations of Jewish heritage are viewed as having the important pedagogical capability of 'preventing antisemitism' or discrimination more broadly (Pearce 2007: 126). Whilst the use of Jewish heritage as German commemoration is still largely normative, in recent years some have begun to question the meaning and even the ontological dynamics of heritage in Germany, particularly heritage relating to Jewish people (Ross and Kranz 2023: 1). Some Jewish museums have made efforts to diversify Jewish heritage displays, to draw attention to the intangible elements of Jewish heritage and to the diversity of current Jewish voices (as, for instance, the Jewish Museum of Berlin with its 'Music Room'). Others are increasingly offering guided tours that represent alternative Jewish voices (such as the Queer Jewish tour offered by the Judengasse Museum in Frankfurt). However, the material and visual-based focus on the Holocaust remains largely the norm.[1]

The Jewish populations of Germany were destroyed during the Shoah. As a result, there are currently relatively few 'German' Jews. The 1990s saw a proliferation of 'Russian' Jews arrive in Germany after fleeing from the former Soviet Union. With them, these Jewish people brought not only a different conceptualisation of what Judaism is and how they experience and express it but also different notions about Jewish heritage – including musical heritage. These communities of 'New-New German Jews' (Ross 2024: xxxv) make up 90% of the current Jewish population in Germany, which numbers approximately 300,000 in total. The largest New-New German Jew communities are in Berlin and Frankfurt (Kotowski 2019: 107–109; Cronin 2019).[2] The second and third generations of these Jewish communities have been searching for alternate forms of heritage-making through which to exercise agency and create heritage. They are doing so in a way that mobilises their own futures-oriented, existential concerns. This stands in contrast with the dominant memory culture that surrounds them and that defines how Jews should be (symbolically) understood in the public sphere.

1 In my research, I differentiate the term 'Holocaust' – a reified 'event' that is understood and processed at the national level – from that of the 'Shoah' – the attempt to understand how Jewish subjects or other descendants of survivors process or respond to commemoration (Crowdus forthcoming).

2 Recent accounts maintain that the percentage of Russian Jews might even be as high as 98% (Ross 2024: xxxiv).

In the context of the culture of commemoration through which Jewish heritage in Germany is largely conceived, hip-hop, and particularly its gangsta sub-genre, seems like an unlikely expression of heritage, let alone Jewish heritage. However, there are a few key instances of Jewish subjectivity in Germany in recent years that draw on hip-hop's grassroots and agentive potential. In fact, it could be argued that these Jewish rappers have drawn on this medium as a highly potent, emic, and alternative form of heritage. Music performed by Jewish subjects rapping about Jewish concerns constitutes an intervention to the dominant commemoration-oriented constructions of Jewish heritage. This article investigates the Jewish mobilisation of gangsta rap under the radar of state-sanctioned conceptualisations and representations in Germany. It does so by focusing on Dimitri Chpakov (b. 1989), a second-generation New-New Jew and a gangsta rapper.

This study is based on the textual analysis of secondary sources in the academic scholarship and on fieldwork that examined Jewish and non-Jewish attitudes in present-day Germany towards Jewish cultural heritage and the sites and objects associated with it. The fieldwork was conducted over the periods 2017–2019 and 2022–2025. Interviews were conducted with New-New Jews in West and East German towns and cities, across all adult age groups (from 18 to 70 years). The article applies a musicological analysis to Jewish gangsta rap in Germany but also draws on analyses of Jewish-themed rap on a global level. It offers a detailed analysis of Chpakov's lyrics and the reflections he offers on his music in his autobiographical account, *Yellow Bar Mitzvah* (Sun Diego and Sand 2018).

Chpakov's gangsta rap

Rap music problematises material-focused, past-looking conceptualisations of heritage. This is achieved in part by rap's effectiveness in drawing attention to what Pinn (cited in Heck 2001: 44) calls 'nitty-gritty hermeneutics', namely 'a form of interpretation that is much more comfortable with the nastiness of life'. These forms of engagement, Pinn argues, are easily given life through the medium of rap music because of the way it can emphasise 'real' and everyday experiences. Giving 'primary orientation to human existence', what 'nitty-gritty hermeneutics encourages', Pinn (1999: 116) writes, 'is the full presentation of black life with its full complexity, untainted by static tradition'. Whilst Pinn's (2024) work deals with important aspects of African American struggles in the United States, what it effectively highlights here is that the subjugation of certain peoples or groups or their symbolic use by the majority can be challenged through attention to the messiness of real life and lived experience.

In Chpakov's music, no song demonstrates this 'nitty-gritty hermeneutics' and highly personalised Jewish oral history so well both lyrically and

musically as the song 'Rostov on Don'. The song's title refers to the Russian town where Chpakov's great-aunt Sofia and her two children had fled from the Nazis in 1941. The song opens with a solo violin of 'Hava Nagila', a Jewish folk tune that is widely known well beyond Jewish circles. As soon as the melody is established, the instrumentation changes into a distorted electronic version. Whilst this opening is relatively slow, the lyrics are introduced in fast and acerbic 'double time', which immediately references the history of Chpakov's family: 'Rostov on Don | komm' von Beton | wollten entkomm'n | Koffer genomm'n' (Rostov-on-Don | come from concrete | wanted to escape | took the suitcase).[3] The song pivots between the experience of fleeing and Chpakov's Jewish past with statements placing current Jewish affiliation in contrast with normative German society, such as: 'Kabbala Schrift statt Ballermann Hits' (Kabbalah script instead of Ballermann hits). By denouncing the 'Ballermann hits' (a reference to the German hit parade), Chpakov declares that he is following a different 'script', a Jewish mystical one that trumps the superficiality of the hit parade (and the word 'kaballah').

Chpakov's over-the-top persona, glaring idioms, and provocative lyrics offer an alternative model of Jewishness in the public sphere. It is an alternative to Jewish masculinity, both different from the stereotypical weak and nerdy Yeshiva 'bochor' and the strong Israeli pioneer (see, for example, Rubin 2021; Krondorfer 2009). And whilst the way in which women appear in his music videos might be perceived as demeaning (young, scantily clad, and without faces), the women who feature in his narratives are family members who are presented as modest, tough, and strong – indeed, stronger than most rappers fancy themselves. In this account, Jewish men are raised by powerful survivor women whose skills and strengths far outshine 'wannabe' rappers, as Chpakov raps in 'Yellow Bar Mitzvah': 'rappers act like cocaine dealers | but were never in the ghetto like my grandma Sofia'. At this point in the music video, we see a gravestone marking the passing of Sofia. In his book he also recounts her harrowing story escaping the Nazis. Here too he narrates his own refugee story and positionality alongside narratives of his experiences with gangsta rap. Chpakov relates how his mother fled from the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic to the Federal Republic of Germany in 1992. Chpakov places his Ukrainian-Jewish positionality and internalised migration history as well as his grandmother's persecution and experience of violence in a Nazi ghetto at the centre of his subjective narrative (Sun Diego and Sand 2018: 15–18).

In Chpakov's representation, and especially in the imagery he uses, being Jewish is linked to strength. Chpakov raps on a throne surrounded by a giant Star of David, with a flamethrowing menorah flaring up in the background. The deliberately over-the-top imagery and lyrics typical of gangsta

3 Unless otherwise indicated, all German concepts and lyrics have been translated into English by the author.

rap portray Jews as enacting living heritage, laying claim to Jewish symbols and using the performativity of rap to push back against their usage in state-sponsored representations. For instance, social mobility is one of the key tropes in rap music videos, namely the ability of the disempowered to become socially mobile and enact their own agency. Chpakov raps in his song 'Yellow Bar Mitzvah': 'from coke dealer to Lambo owner' (SpongeBozz 2017). In this case, they can do so all whilst embracing a fresh and modern form of Judaism and Jewish pride. Moreover, as suggested by fellow contributor to this volume Samuel Everett, the video also works with anti-Semitic imagery, such as rats, and neutralises these with the power of his agential position (Everett, personal communication). Also in 'Yellow Bar Mitzvah', Chpakov calls out other rappers for behaving in a negative manner attributed to Jews by anti-Semites: '[t]ell me, if money doesn't stink, why can the rats [other rappers] smell it?' (SpongeBozz 2017).

Chpakov's songs that tell his personal story hold references to an indelible, almost 'branded' Jewish identity. Jewish identity in the former Soviet Union is quite different from that in America, Canada, or even Europe since in the former it takes on a form of 'national' identity. Soviet Jews have the designation 'Jewish' stamped on their passports as their nationality, a designation enforced by the state, which may have impacted Jewish self-perception in various ways. For this article, it is important to note that for Soviet Jews, being Jewish it is an unavoidable designation and one that likely strengthens communal identification, regardless of the individual's level of religiosity or ritual observance. This certainly shapes how Chpakov represents Jewish identity in his music, which carries an indelible marker of Jewishness. His song 'Yellow Bar Mitzvah' is charged with it, as in the line: 'Spongie is the one and only ghetto star, Star of David' (SpongeBozz 2017). The implication of Chpakov's reference to Jewish heritage is that Jewish identity and the lived experiences that come with it cannot be merely symbolically donned for commemorative purposes. It is not an identity that one chooses or that can be escaped or denied. It is one that is permanently and inevitably branded on one's documents and even one's very body, until death.

Gangsta rap in Germany: the bigger picture

German-language gangsta rap has developed into the most successful rap genre in Germany since the 2000s. It is difficult to provide a concise definition of 'gangsta rap', but one attempt at a description is the following:

> *At its core, gangsta rap is [...] a musical and lyrical description of the world of a gangster. The term 'gangster' is flexible: it can be the petty criminal hashish dealer from the Märkisches Viertel [Berlin] or the Italian American mafia boss from Brooklyn [New*

> *York]. The description can be given from the perspective of an observer or in the first person. (Szillus 2012: 41)*

Most German gangsta rap negotiates experiences of discrimination, racism in its varied forms, class prejudice and unequal opportunities, difficult family life and the lack of stability, mental or physical illness, or the problems that reunification poses for East Germany. Typically characterised by loud, decisive beats and smooth flows, gangsta rap often tells the story of the rappers' difficult upbringing in precarious, hopeless circumstances. Often the singers have achieved various degrees of success through their music, requiring them to reiterate their difficult past or the obstacles that they have overcome to maintain their authenticity and 'street cred' (Dorchin 2012; Crowdus 2019). Gangsta rappers often portray themselves as up-and-comers and use violent language and images that make them appear as hardened, almost unassailable winners. It is precisely the fact that rappers provoke and do not appear to follow the majority of society that make them attractive for many young people – regardless of whether they themselves have experienced discrimination (Dietrich and Seeliger 2013).

One lens through which scholars have examined the rap genre in Germany is that of Holocaust commemoration and anti-Semitism, areas located firmly within authorised heritage discourse (Köhn 2025). Yet to be looked at extensively in the scholarship is the fact that these musical initiatives can also be understood as alternative configurations of Jewish heritage, Jewish communal identity, and Jewish diversity, geared towards young living Jewish community members. This article suggests that such creations prompt a counter-heritagisation process – which is relevant both in the German and the post-Soviet context – that reimagines and reforms conventional definitions of heritage into a forward-looking (rather than a backward-looking) conceptualisation of Jewish heritage that works in the service of young Jews living in Germany today. Concurrently, such contributions also mark the participation of young Jewish rappers in global hip-hop culture, a culture built by 'a global urban style that is underpinned by the racial experience of Black Americans [that] provides a discursive repertoire with rich imagery that can be appropriated and actualized in different local contexts' (Dorchin and Crowdus 2024: 101). As such, we can say that such participation marks alternative Jewish and global hip-hop constructions of heritage simultaneously.

Owing to the relative absence of heritage initiatives and representational possibilities led by local Jewish communities, Jewish people in Germany of the third and fourth generations after the Shoah seek out other avenues of representation through which they can communicate their Jewish histories, legacies, and, most importantly perhaps, a forward-looking, sustainability-oriented vision of their Jewishness. In many cases, such endeavours make up for the absence of such visions in past-looking heritage formations

endorsed by the state (Crowdus forthcoming). Popular culture that lies at the margins of public discourse, especially rap music, has become an effective medium to contest hegemonic conceptualisations of heritage and formulaic expressions of the culture of commemoration. Hip-hop culture and rap in particular have often been romanticised through the lens of 'resistance' (Crowdus 2019).[4] Rather than conceptualise the rap examined here as 'resistance', I examine how it offers 'replacement ideologies' – discursive iterations of alternative ways of being – to critique or engage with status quos that are perceived to be problematic (Crowdus 2019). Such iterations can enter into conversation and dialogue with other, surrounding, and more publicly visible expressions of Jewish heritage, such as the culture of commemoration.

Rap music in particular becomes an effective alternative to larger-scale forms of Jewish heritage owing to its expression of what I call the 'extreme local' – a reference to local streets and shops, to living people, whether mentioned affectionately or with the goal of 'dissing' them, and to one's own family members, including those who have had a formative influence. The personal, 'enmeshed' (Ingold 2021) expressions of the 'extreme local' (Crowdus 2019) are foundational elements of many rap songs. Articulations of the 'extreme local' are not simply a reference to the rappers' immediate surroundings but to the way they experience these surroundings intimately and sensorially and are 'entangled' or enmeshed in relations with other human beings and non-human beings and urban surroundings (Ingold 2021). Such localisations serve to redirect heritage from a national scope to a local, urban one, reinventing and reframing the experiential lens through which this heritage is communicated to others. These and other grassroots place-making dynamics, which allow a potent articulation of oral history, identify rap as an efficient – albeit marginal – tool for not only alternative projections of Jewish identity and heritage but a revision of the 'lieux de memoire' aspect of heritage sites into something that acknowledges rupture but is also living, fluid, and dynamic.

Rappers in Germany today have different national, ethnic, social, and religious origins, some of which they choose to highlight as part of their persona or directly in their lyrics. Other aspects of their identity might be underplayed because they are considered unimportant or hidden for other reasons.[5] Chpakov was not the first German-Jewish rapper to explicitly reference his Jewish roots and identity in his music. Berlin-based rap artist Ben Salomo combines discursive negotiations of 'being Jewish' with state-

4 Rap's potential for resistance is rooted in the fact that it is viewed as edutainment and culturally peripheral and therefore as not capable of fully challenging the status quo (Crowdus forthcoming).

5 Jew hatred has been described as an ongoing problem in the German rap scene, gangsta or otherwise. Baier describes it as a discourse that legitimises anti-Semitism (*antisemitischer Legitimationsdiskurs*) that hides or denies antisemitic content or even justifies it (Baier 2025: 395).

ments against racism, discrimination, and right-wing populism in his songs. In this process, he draws on memories connected to National Socialism and the Holocaust and interweaves them with other historiographic and political representations. The track 'Identität' (Identity), which was released on his 2016 album *Es gibt nur einen* (There is only one) (Salomo 2016), makes this particularly clear. Salomo uses aspects of Jewish history and liturgy and connects them to autobiographical, family, and wider collective memories (Köhn 2025). Köhn (2025) draws on the concept of 'alternative narratives' (Crowdus 2019) to describe the process that Salomo is invoking, namely, rewriting the story of Jews from that of victimhood to one of agency coming out of oppression. Building on this observation, I posit that the efforts of the few Jewish rappers in the German gangsta rap scene who evoke their Jewish identity in their work are more than just shedding the designation of victimhood. These works normalise Jewish spaces that are free from acting on behalf of others and that are not beholden to a moralising currency (Ross 2024) or identity politics. These spaces are rather geared towards young Jewish people and linked to their current struggles and their well-being and sustainability in the here and now. Thus, such efforts serve to normalise Jewish agency in such processes and stand in contrast to local and national public representations of Jewish heritage.

Such mobilisations of rap can also be viewed as an attempt to redefine 'the scene'. Straw defines a 'scene' as

> *particular clusters of social and cultural activity without specifying the nature of the boundaries which circumscribe them. Scenes may be distinguished according to their location [...] the genre of cultural production which gives them coherence (a musical style, for example, [...]) or the loosely defined social activity around which they take shape (as with urban outdoor chess-playing scenes).* Scene *invites us to map the territory of the city in new ways while, at the same time, designating certain kinds of activity whose relationship to territory is not easily asserted. (Straw 2004: 412, emphasis in original)*

Purely by existing and being involved in Jewish events and family life, many New-New Jews 'live' an alternative form of Jewishness that stand in contrast to state displays of Jewish heritage. However, the public-facing aspect of popular culture and directness of gangsta rap in particular provides a discourse that goes beyond lived experience and communal life. In other words, whether rappers draw on their Jewish pasts and presents deliberately or not, they coalesce the gangsta rap scene with the New-New Jewish 'scene', rendering the latter's realities and concerns palpable and distinguishable from those that operate outside this tiny German minority. Arguably, the reason why artists like Chpakov are able to do this with credibility is because they are

firmly committed to both forms of identity and belonging, Jewish and gangsta rap, in practice and discursively.

Battling in 'spongeface'

It was arguably Chpakov's participation in the gansta rap culture that gave him the space and infrastructure to learn the skill sets that would effectively allow him to express an alternate form of Jewish heritage through gangsta rap. He did not start out in the German rap scene as openly Jewish; and in the European summer of 2024, he left the scene in an act that was accompanied by a dramatic Instagram post. German newspapers cited anti-Semitic hostility and violent threats, also directed at his family, as reason for this step, but also the high pressure in the gangsta rap scene to perform (Hallstein 2024).

Chpakov's career started from humble beginnings and was characterised by many ups and downs, including rivalries with other rappers. At first he showed his talent by delivering hard and fast rhythms and insults during rap battles, which can be defined as

> *war[s] between or amongst rappers, dancers, DJs, emcees, for prizes, bragging rights and to see who is best. When lyrics are involved, it is what is said and how it is delivered – the cadence and complexity of the lyrics; if music is used, the originality and quality of production also are judged. (Westbrook 2002: 6)*

Chpakov's aptitude for 'battling' later provided him with the canniness and creativity to articulate his past and present Jewish persona with the same presence, energy, and conviction.

Chpakov's skill at creating fast, hard-hitting lines is exemplified in his first rap battle, in 2004. He demonstrated a savviness for using forms of popular culture and German slang fluidly and lucidly, achieving a smooth flow and being concise with the words he used – dominating the technique for his own purposes. At the time, he rapped under the pseudonym 'Capri Sonne', chosen for the empty bottle of Capri Sun juice on his desk when asked to pick a name, a choice that exemplifies his combination of creativity and pragmatism. Through the 2000s, Sun Diego (a new stage name Chpakov assumed in 2013) worked hard at remaining relevant in the rap game. In 2011 a quarrel erupted between him and the up-and-coming rapper Kollegah, which undermined his position. At some point, Kollegah went so far as to produce an aggressive video about Sun Diego, mocking his choruses and autotune. It 'made Sun Diego look like a joke' in Germany's rapping community (described in Kielman 2017).

Perhaps in response to Kollegah's video, in 2013 Chpakov began to don a SpongeBob SquarePants outfit and participate in rap battles. It is also possible that Chpakov's decision to don the costume was motivated by a desire

to make a comeback after yet another harsh criticism directed at him, this time by JuliensBlog, aka Julien Sewering, a German rap commentator and YouTuber. But certainly this move led to Chpakov's first real successes. Calling himself SpongeBozz, he wore a SpongeBob SquarePants outfit that completely covered his face and most of his body, making it impossible to identify him. This highly recognisable outfit, which is imbibed with a strong element of humour 'straight outta Bikini Bottom', drew the attention away from Chpakov's identity and rather placed it on his rapping. His delivery was strong, marked by acerbic wit, strong flow, ruthless 'disses' and a tongue-in-cheek humour. Chpakov's rapping was described as follows: 'the dialogues of the various characters appeal to different age groups. SpongeBozz disguises his voice by imitating SpongeBob's German dubbing voice, which underlines his cheeky acerbity' (Steckert 2024: 462).

In spite of the costume, or perhaps exactly because of it, Chpakov experienced notable success as SpongeBozz. For instance, during a 2013 rap battle hosted by JuliensBlog, he was far ahead of his fellow participants both lyrically and musically. The popular rap blogger who goes by the pen name Martine_Canine (2017) describes SpongeBozz's delivery as being marked by a 'double-time [that was] faster than Kollegah's, highly multisyllabic, unexpected and witty rhymes, and an overall attitude somewhere between menacing and cartoonish, making each punchline twice as hard-hitting'. People debated about SpongeBozz's real identity and known artists such as Kollegah, BattleBoi Basti, and JuliensBlog himself were amongst those assumed to be his true identity. The most popular opinion was the correct one, that it was Chpakov seeking a fresh start for his rap career. He achieved notable success, winning the popular German YouTube rap contest 'JuliensBlogBattle' in 2013 and 2014. In 2013, SpongeBozz battled Gio, the winner of the previous season. In the battle, SpongeBozz spun a fictional story around Gio, portraying him as a Nazi, paedophile, and liar. He ripped Gio apart with braggadocio lyrics and 'disses' that mocked Gio's appearance, even comparing him to Adolf Hitler:

> *Yo, social parasite, I shoot bullets from the barrel*
> *Into the spastic Hartz IV recipient with Down syndrome*
> *You son of a bitch!*
> *Call yourself Adolf Gartner [...]*
> *I'm just alive to destroy your image [...]*
> *You should be gassed, you skinhead [...]*
> *But you are so ugly, not even the maggots want to eat you*
> *You look like you've taken a beating*
> *I opened your image in Photoshop and it uninstalled itself*
> *I puke when I think about it [...]*

Even Gollum would say: 'What the fuck? Gio is fucking ugly, my precious!'
Again Leonidas, again Ephialtes
Again I punch this care case away for sure
And Xerxes did not defeat them with blades
The 300 saw you and jumped off the cliff [...]
And the worst thing about the Nazi photo still was
Your shitty face, cause it looked like Quasimodo's asshole.
(SpongeBozz 2013)

The 35-minute battle earned SpongeBozz the nickname 'God of Battle' and has been referenced in other rap songs since then. This was the last time that Chpakov participated in a battle rap tournament as SpongeBozz. His 'disses' are rife with references to Ancient Greek warfare, but also to popular culture, such as with references to the films *300* and *Lord of the Rings* and to malfunctioning computer software. What is important to note here is that this performance and its content are absolutely typical of rap battles as regards quickly and smoothly delivered hyperbolic insults. The rap firmly cemented SpongeBozz's presence in the shared practices and values of global hip-hop heritage, here exemplified by rap battle heritage. In this battle, Chpakov for the first time begins using elements of the *Erinnerungskultur*: when comparing his opponent to the most undesirable elements of society, he references not only Nazis, his grandparents' past, but also 'skinheads', contemporary Nazis and bigots. Chpakov reveals himself as an artist savvy in negotiating the social and cultural capital around him to create biting lyrics and creating a successful costume (his attempt could have backfired were it not done with such an impact and, arguably, humour). It is through his canny usage of affordances – possibilities for engagement that depend on leveraging existing expectations, norms, conventions, and cooperative social practices – that Chpakov's 'coming out' as Jewish should be understood.

Coming out

Despite his success as SpongeBozz, Chpakov reinvented himself again a few years later after another nasty feud with Kollegah in 2017. In the music video for his song 'Started from the Bottom' (2017), Chpakov performed wearing a yellow bandana across his lower face instead of wearing the full Spongebob costume. In 2018, he published the coterminous book and album *Yellow Bar Mitzvah*, in which he expressly outed himself as Jewish. This was against the stated wish of his grandmother, who according to him was always afraid of identifying as Jewish and often denied her own identity out of fear:

> *My Baba didn't like the idea of me discussing my Jewish roots. She asked me to think about it again. To this day, she is afraid that there will be a rollback in Germany at some point. That the social mood could change again. And that my son would have to suffer in the future because I had so openly declared my Jewishness. Her fear alone was an indication of what a major social issue anti-Semitism still is. And I noticed this in my circle of friends too. (Sun Diego and Sand 2018: 161)*

According to some of Chpakov's fans, acknowledging his Jewish identity was partly done pre-emptively to mitigate the anti-Semitism he was shown by other rappers in the German scene. According to political scientist Jakob Baier (2022), it was a daring move. Baier describes reports of anti-Semitism being on the rise in the German gangsta rap scene amongst both immigrant groups and young Germans removed by generations from the lessons of World War II. In his estimation, the fact that the scene is dominated by Arab and Turkish artists is partly responsible for this, although these are not the only rappers from whom anti-Jewish hate emerges (Baier 2022). Indeed, some of the country's most popular rappers have put out videos featuring Jewish stereotypes and lyrics drawing on anti-Semitic conspiracy theories; Chpakov experienced some of this even before his 'coming out' when not wearing the Spongebob outfit, although some of this anti-Jewish sentiment seemed to form part and parcel of the normal 'ribbing' amongst rappers in social settings and certainly would have been 'fair game' if drawn on with skill in a rap battle. Interestingly, given this context, incorporating his Jewish identity into his new persona seemed to intrigue fans, rather than repel them: '[w]hen I put out the book and the videos, it was like I had been resurrected. Finally, I have an identity of my own and can do something with it' (Chpakov, cited in Curry 2018). Chpakov's explicit use of 'disses' and street talk can be viewed as creating a cognitive dissonance in relation to symbolic depictions of Jews in the public sphere, defined by stereotypes that are 'frozen in time' before World War II. Thus, Chpakov can be viewed as reclaiming a German appropriation of Jewish heritage within a frame of post-Soviet Jewishness, showing minoritised 'street cred' and his ghetto origins with which much of the non-Jewish German public is deeply unfamiliar.

The lack of familiarity with a Jewish identity outside of how it is typically mobilised in the *Erinnerungskultur* caused quite some confusion and even astonishment amongst the German public. An encounter that I had with a journalist exemplifies this confusion and the inability to understand – or arguably even the will to understand – what Chpakov was doing on his own terms. It was 2018, not long after the book *Yellow Bar Mitzvah* had appeared. It is an autobiographical account that chronicles the life and times of Chpakov with a direct, slightly humorous narrative voice. Knowing that I was doing research on the rather niche subject of Jewish or Jewish-themed rap at

the European Centre for Jewish Music, a journalist interviewed me about the book and the artist's controversial music video of the same name. The journalist expressed his shock in particular at the video's opening scene in which Chpakov, dressed in an expensive tracksuit, sits on a golden throne, flanked by a yellow Lamborghini, scantily clad young women, and cocaine, in a set that carries numerous explicit Jewish symbols: the star of David on the rapper's sleeve, a flaming Star of David behind him, a video of Chasidic men dancing to Hava Nagila on a retro television set, and the gravestone of Chpakov's great-aunt Sofia, who survived the Holocaust. At the time I had seen the music video and had begun reading the book.

> *Interviewer: It is a parody of Judaism, don't you think?*
>
> *Crowdus (MC): No, I don't. Not at all.*
>
> *Interviewer: No, but I mean – it is making fun of Judaism [...] and Jews, isn't it?*
>
> *MC: No, I don't think so. That is not what I think the artist is doing.*
>
> *Interviewer: So, it is not a parody to you?*
>
> *MC: No.*
>
> *Interviewer: What is it then?*
>
> *MC: You should ask the artist. But it seems to me he may be acting as an example for all young Jewish people in this country from the former Soviet Union, providing them with a new, fresh, if not German-Jewish culture, then Jewish-in-Germany culture and heritage with which they can identify.*

To my knowledge the interview never made it into any newspaper or podcast. I certainly did not understand Chpakov's book and new album to be a parody of Jewishness. And if it were a parody at all (and that was debatable), then it was one of the culture of commemoration that he 'sampled' so well.

A year later, Chpakov confirmed my reading of how he staged his Jewish identity in his music when he stated in an interview with the *New York Times*:

> *So far there hasn't been a really big and well-known rapper in Germany who has declared himself Jewish. And yet identity is an extremely important topic, especially in the hip-hop scene. The kids have many Muslim, Christian, German, Turkish, American, Lebanese or Kurdish role models. There hasn't been a Jew as an identification figure in the German rap scene so far. So I thought it was time to make a confident statement. (cited in Curry 2018)*

Chpakov's oeuvre represents Jewish agency that ruptures the suffocating formulations of the *Erinnerungskultur* that could feel quite disconnected from the experiences and concerns of Jewish people, and even of myself. During my fieldwork in 2023, many young New-New Jews commented that Chpakov's work was 'different' and 'refreshing', noting that he was taking 'ownership' over his Jewish identity. Whilst one *rebbetsin* (rabbi's wife) commented that gangsta rap was distasteful in general, she still understood it as an attempt to provide an outlet for Jewish heritage which stood in contrast with the 'dead Jews in the museums'. Clearly, this form of Jewish heritage will not resonate with all Jewish positionalities: queer and feminist Jewish people, for example, may find the images and lyrics objectionable at best and an example of extreme heteronormativity and toxic masculinity at worst; religious Jews may find his music highly improper or immodest. Chpakov's artistic contributions suggest, rather, that rapping offers an agency-rich alternative rubric through which to create and transmit Jewish heritage. Overall Jewish people saw Chpakov as pushing back against the state's perceived lack of support for Jewish subjectivities in everyday life, even as such support was consistently symbolically celebrated and performed in national-oriented commemorative practices.

Yellow Bar Mitzvah: keepin' it real in commemoration culture

The book *Yellow Bar Mitzvah* is ostensibly about a rapper who mobilises music as an escape from his difficult upbringing and unfavourable surroundings and who is passionate about his art. The book gives an account of Chpakov's rap journey and is structured around the rapper's Jewish identity – but not in a static or stereotypical way. His story is highly personalised and seamlessly enmeshed in his identity as a newcomer to Germany, growing up in temporary refugee accommodation, not doing well in school but having lots of creativity and being street smart, to becoming a budding rapper. Jewish identity and Jewish practices are presented as formative, lived experiences but ones that are marked by tension and experienced both profoundly and superficially in different ways. There is a sense of 'realness' to the way in which Jewish aspects are described that is totally different from how Jews and Judaism are represented in the public sphere. The chapters, for instance, are ordered according to Hebrew letters. These do not merely correspond to the Hebrew alphabet but to a specific story that Chpakov's grandmother used to tell him and that still fascinates him:

> *My Baba told me a story every night before I went to sleep. She knew an infinite number of stories. I liked listening to the ones from the Torah the most. Or some Jewish folk myths. One of her stories fascinated me in particular. The story of Moloch. (Sun Diego and Sand 2018: 24)*

The story of Moloch is one about idol worship that aims to show 'that Judaism had established a [...] humane faith. That it brought civilisation to people. And a God who did not demand sacrifices' (Sun Diego and Sand 2018: 24). But Chpakov read a different meaning into the story; for him it spoke to the depths of human nature: '[h]ow could they be willing to sacrifice something they loved? Just to give themselves a better life. I couldn't understand it' (Sun Diego and Sand 2018: 24). This telling of stories from the Torah is a Jewish experience to which the young Chpakov relates; however, he enacts his own agency about what he finds relevant. Jewish heritage is at once collective and individually focused: it is alive through personal memories and forms the structure for the unfolding of the narrative.

The highly personal Jewish-oriented formation structures the book and shows how our collective pasts and collective belongings inform our individual destinies. Chpakov does not see this as something negative but rather as something inevitable – and yet also something of which he is proud. The book starts on a dramatic high, with Chpakov's arrest by the police who find weapons in his studio. He concludes the first chapter by stating:

> *A person's story is the sum of their crises. Every crisis is a test that gives us the opportunity to grow beyond ourselves. To face our shadows. To prove ourselves. But in my case, the shadow of the catastrophe had already fallen over my life long before it had actually begun. Like a curse that you can't escape. (Sun Diego and Sand 2018: 17)*

The chapter leaves the reader hanging, wondering what catastrophe Chpakov might be referring to. The second chapter takes the reader there. It opens with a scene from Rostov on Don in south-western Russia on 19 November 1941 – a scene that has shaped his current situation and informed the way in which he relates to the world. The protagonist is his great-aunt Sofia who decides against the wishes of other family members to leave rather than stay and fight. With her two small children, she makes her way through to Tashkent, Uzbekistan. Chpakov describes the situation she is escaping as follows:

> *These were not easy stories to tell. They were horror stories that could not have been made up any worse. In the best case, it was said, the Germans would simply take the men as prisoners of war and shoot the women and children on the spot. In the worst cases, the women were brutally raped by the soldiers. In front of their men and children. And in the worst cases, you were Jewish. And as a Jew you were deported and taken to Germany and put in concentration camps. That was the worst of all. Either you were cruelly gassed there or even more sadistic things happened. (Sun Diego and Sand 2018: 20)*

Chpakov goes on to describe brutal experiments performed by Nazi doctors. It is unclear here whether this reflects Sofia's experience; indeed, it is unlikely that Chpakov's great-aunt would have been aware of these experiments, the horrific details of which often only emerged later. It is more likely that this is Chpakov's account of his wider knowledge of what the Nazis perpetrated. Whilst this story could be interpreted as a form of *Erinnerungskultur* in which rap becomes a way of remembering the Holocaust (Köhn 2025), I do not believe this to be the main motivation behind Chpakov's work. Unlike Salomo's music, Chpakov's work is firmly rooted in the 'hood', whether this is his local neighbourhood of Osnabrück, where he still lives, or the historical 'hood' in which his Jewish family resided in the past. This rootedness in local spaces inhabited by everyday people helps – in hip-hop terms – to 'keep it real', to convey a sense of genuine lived experience in contrast with the symbolic use of Jews and Judaism as imparting a moral message. On the contrary, this 'realism' is reflected in Chpakov's more general reflections on the Holocaust. Chpakov does not regale us with trite messages like 'never again' or hopeful ones that atrocities like these will not happen again.

What makes Chpakov's book particularly powerful as regards how it negotiates his Jewish heritage is that it neither corroborates nor contradicts some of the central aspects of *Erinnerungskultur*. It is indeed a story rooted in the tragedy of the Shoah, which validates it according to the dominant forms of remembrance and Jewish heritage. But it also deviates drastically from these agendas in that it is characterised by the agency of a complex Jewish young man, not primarily in the service of a national identity but as a role model specifically for Jewish youth. Again, we can say that Chpakov is 'sampling' *Erinnerungskultur*, as he did during the rap battle against Gio.[6] But it is a more sophisticated form of sampling, referencing in particular the propensity of the culture of commemoration of highlighting oral histories and broadcasting them to a general public. Here, however, he links up the story with that of his own contemporary and slightly criminal life. He has a special message for his young Jewish public and negotiates it on his own terms through the transformation of his family history into gangsta rap.

Anti-Jewish hate in the rap scene

Anti-Jewish discrimination in the gangsta rap scene has proven to be significant. Baier (2025) and Baier and Grimm (2022) note that there were two other openly Jewish rappers in Germany but that they were subjected to and silenced by anti-Semitism to the point that they (more recently than Chpak-

6 'Sampling' is a common practice in rap music of citing or recontextualising sections of existing songs and sounds to create new music. Here, I propose that sampling does not need to be confined to the 'borrowing' of audio tracks but can include the borrowing or integration of discursive subjects and significations, such as those belonging to *Erinnerungskultur*.

ov) have left the rap scene. Baier (2025: 176) describes the abnormally high content of anti-Jewish lyrics and behaviours in the gangsta rap scene. These are often dismissed as normative 'rap battle' behaviour, but such excuses, Baier (2025: 176) argues, serve to mask anti-Semitism and in some cases even bolster Holocaust denial. Based on an examination of lyrics, documentaries, numerous interviews, and secondary sources, Baier (2022: 26) is able to lay bare the anti-Semitic codes and dog whistles that are well understood by those within the gangsta scene. Given this state of affairs, it is unsurprising that Jewish rappers leave the scene:

> *The fact that anti-Semitism is virulent in German rap is probably due, on the one hand, to the lack of Jewish perspectives and debates about them in the scene. On the other hand, anti-Semitism is repeatedly put in competition with one's own experiences of discrimination or it is even assumed that the accusation of anti-Semitism only serves to silence rappers with a Muslim migration background. (Baier et al. 2023: 37)*

Indeed, the two other Jewish rappers who left the scene, Ben Salomo and Arye Sharuz Alicar alias Bozz Aro, both left exactly because of anti-Jewish discrimination (Köhn 2025). Ben Salomo ended his long-standing project 'Rap am Mittwoch' because of anti-Semitism in the hip-hop scene,[7] and Arye Sharuz Alicar went to Israel to be able to live his Jewish-Persian identity freely, something he felt he could not do in Germany: 'I felt like an outsider [in Berlin], excluded everywhere, by Germans, Arabs, Jews. I didn't really fit in anywhere, I couldn't identify with any group' (cited in Jäger, Gross, and Méndez 2022: 37). The fact that Jewish rappers, or rappers of any minority, are not welcome in the German rapping scene and are effectively 'chased out' owing to this identity (and not for their bad rapping) is cause for concern. However, despite this difficult situation, Chpakov was able to briefly engage with broader structures in the local scene and transnationally that had to do with Jewish heritage, agency, and the realities of being Jewish in Germany today. This does not mean that his alternative form of heritage discourse is somehow invalid: first, the fact that he felt obliged to discontinue his rap career is not a criterion for invalidating this expression of Jewish heritage – and others may follow in his footsteps, whether on German soil or elsewhere. Second, technological innovation and the accessibility and streamability of popular music means that rap songs remain publicly available even when their creators leave the scene. It can continue to be enjoyed and consumed by youth – including Jewish youth – from different spaces and positional-

7 When I met Ben Salomo in 2017, he also spoke about having children to care for, becoming a family man, and becoming more religiously observant. These considerations may also have influenced his decision to leave the rap scene, even though he did not explicitly say so.

ities for many years to come.[8] In other words, he acted as a role model for an alternative expression of an agency-based Jewish heritage and leaves this rubric as a legacy for a younger Jewish generation, to emulate and be inspired by. Whether they will do so while openly claiming a Jewish identity or not remains to be seen and is perhaps not only dependent on them.

Conclusion

Today, the children of the New-New Jewish communities in Germany are growing up. Fieldwork with people across the age groups from these communities in cities across the western parts of Germany reveals that many are in some way interested in and devoted to their Jewish identity. They are often traditional if not religious and tend to be politically conservative and staunchly Zionist in their commitment to Israel. They describe continuously facing anti-Semitism in the public school system, directed at them from many different groups, whether people whose families have held German citizenship over generations or Germans of Turkish and Syrian origin who have arrived in the past thirty years or so. Many interlocuters expressed that there were few prospects for them as Jews in Germany owing to this anti-Semitism and a general lack of recognition. They often saw their futures in Israel or in English-speaking Western countries like the United States and Canada. These sentiments remain almost completely outside the purview of Jewish heritage discourses in Germany today.

Regarding heritage, Chpakov's coterminous album and book are neither part of the culture of commemoration nor a parody of Jewishness. They are rather an alternative for Jewish youth, who constitute a tiny minority in Germany today. These youth are almost exclusively part of the New-New Jews of Germany who struggle to find their place in a changing society. Rapping might even be a way of making sense of their intersectional identities in an affirming and popularly accessible way. This younger generation is continuously negotiating existential fears and worries about integration into German society, particularly considering the increasing anti-Semitism (Baier 2022). This disconnect between the lived reality of Jews and the temporally static symbolic Judaism in heritage sites and state-led initiatives is most visible in the state's lack of acknowledging the concerns and post-Soviet identities of

8 This music is not only consumed by (Jewish) youth. Indeed, I played Ben Salomo's song 'Es gibt nur Einen' at a workshop for orthodox Jewish women in Montreal to showcase the wide-ranging and inspirational elements of Jewish-themed rap for Jewish identity making. It should be noted, though, that Salomo's rap is clean and spiritual in nature, expressing a form of liberal Zionism based on inclusion – an appropriate German Jewish rap song to play in that context. Sun Diego's 'Yellow Bar Mitzvah' would have been decidedly inappropriate.

New-New Jews.[9] In drawing attention to his personal story as a New-New Jew, Chpakov perhaps inadvertently offers a new type of Jewish heritage that is embedded both in the history of the Holocaust and in the experiences of Jewish people from the former Soviet Union. Arguably, Chpakov's connections with the Shoah, but also those of Salomo and Arye, serve not only as commemoration but as legitimisation for present-day German Jews to claim access to a German society that is largely excluding them or considering them as unimportant.

Chpakov's Germany-based 'Yellow Bar Mitzvah' song is firmly embedded in representations of Jewishness, with the same goals of exploring Jewish identity, representing lived experiences, and working towards the sustainability of Jewish communities.[10] By participating in the shared values of global Jewish hip-hop, Chpakov establishes himself as a rapper on a global level. He creates new ways to express the 'extreme local' in order to negotiate a deeply personal heritage rooted in phenomenological experiences and close personal relationships, local surroundings, and family histories. Overall, his work echoes a broader Jewish message: be twice as good as the others; when in doubt, perform in costume to showcase their talents to a world that will judge them not for their Jewish identity but for owning *being Jewish* and publicly defining it as something that is important, both in the past and in the present. Perhaps nothing could be more important that keeping this message alive even after Chpakov left the rap scene, so that others can continue on the path of creating new, fresh, forward-looking Jewish-infused heritage for a younger generation.

9 This is not unique to Germany but arguably reflects a worldwide problem with how the state and other structures that minorities must negotiate represent and mobilise minority heritage.

10 It is not possible to fully reflect on global resonances here, but it should be noted that many of Chpakov's approaches are also used by Jewish rappers outside of Germany. This includes representing the experiences of elderly Jewish family members and the Shoah in the songs, referencing personal life cycle events, enacting Jewish agency on its own terms, and pushing back against the marginalisation of Jewish artists. This often empowers an alternative Jewish role model for current Jewish youth. In these respects, Chpakov's work aligns most notably with the artists Remedy, Masta Killa, Koshadillz, and Jewcy in the United States of America and SoCalled and SHI 360 in Canada. In the song 'HYFR', for example, the Canadian rapper Drake uses images of his own bar mitzvah. The video that 'offers the platonic ideal of American Judaism' while eschewing the many 'kitschy and opulent' pitfalls of recent bar mitzvah portrayals in pop culture on shows (Klein 2012). His portrayal challenges the status quo through over-the-top portrayals, humour, and personally experienced Jewish moments.

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