

The Israelis who choose to, make Germany home

FROM REGINE WOSNITZA, BERLIN

Israelis have as varied reasons as anyone else for moving to Germany.

"It is always interesting to see something new and get to know different mentalities," says Anat Levin, a 44 year old mother of two who moved to Berlin from London with her family eight years ago.

"There are, of course, difficulties from time to time," she says, "but this is the same, for immigrants who come to Israel."

Ms Levin and her husband are not considering returning to Israel. They say they have come to appreciate the lower stress levels that come from living away from a conflict zone.

And with their catering service in full swing, the Levins are about to open an Israeli restaurant in Oranienburger Strasse Berlin's Jewish district.

The Levins, are part of a 9,300 strong Israeli community in Germany.

German statistics show that 3,000 of the Israelis living in the country are aged 25 to, 40 and 1,200 are over 65 most of these, Holocaust survivors who have, to the astonishment of many Jews elsewhere in the diaspora, returned.

Some in the Israeli community say they have been surprised by differences between themselves and German Jews.

Ms Levin says she was shocked, for instance, that many visitors to synagogues remove their kipot once they step out on to the street.

"I am always very proud to say I am Israeli, especially when someone of the older generation asks me," she declares. "It is a good way to tread on their corns."

Ron Nir Vered, who came to Germany at the age of 22 to train as an optician, says: "I was born Israeli and never asked whether I was different from the people living around me."

In contrast, he says, he has found that many other German Jews tend to favour a more separate, less self-confident, communal existence.

All in all, he feels, "an Israeli has more in common with a German of Christian belief than with the Jewish community."

Still, the country's past remains at times difficult for him to deal with.

He made his first visit to the site of Dachau concentration camp just three months ago, at the request of his 13 year old son, Rafael.

Last year, Mr Nir Vered protested against far right attempts to stop an exhibition about crimes of German soldiers during the war.

He spent several days outside the exhibition hall, holding a poster, which read: "As a German Jew, I demand the ban of the Nazi demonstration."

Although he has noticed a rise in anti-Semitism, Mr Nir Vered is in Germany to stay.

"Leaving," he says, "is the last option, and before I go, I will fight. I do not see why someone else should decide whether I am allowed to live here or not."

Igal Avidan is a correspondent with the Israeli daily, Ma'ariv. He finds he is frequently drawn into discussions about the Holocaust, as well as the Middle East peace process.

"You are constantly pressed into being a representative of your country," he says. Shortly after arriving, in 1989, he had dinner with an acquaintance who did nothing but criticise Israeli settlement policy all evening. "I could not eat anything," he recalls.

Jael Botsch Fitterling, who came to Germany with her parents at the age of 16, willingly assumes the role of a "voluntary Israeli ambassador."

In 1994, she helped found Keshet "Connection" a friendship and cultural group, which consists of some 300 Israelis living in Berlin. Its members felt slighted last month when they had to ask the Israeli consulate for invitations to official celebrations of the country's 50th anniversary, as they were not on the guest list.

Israeli Consul General Myriam Shomrat acknowledges that she knows little about the lives of Israelis in Germany. "I represent Israelis living in Israel and cannot speak for those who choose to live in Germany," she says.

But she can speak for herself, and, as a child of Holocaust survivors, remarks that her diplomatic role in Berlin has held difficult moments. "History," she says, "is very much present everywhere."