

## JEW BY CHOICE

A documentary film by David Bernet and Robert Ralston

52 mins.© 2006 gebrueder beetz filmproduktion, Idan Regev Productions. Co-produced by Westdeutschen Rundfunk (WDR) and Channel 2 Israel. In cooperation with Arte



They have chosen to leave everything behind them. Their family, friends, language, culture, and old faith. Three Germans go to Israel and convert to the Jewish faith: the former judge Yael Jenner, the nurse Secharjah Schwarzkopf, and Nico B., a young man finding his way between career and calling - „Jew by choice“.

The documentary portrays these three converts on their extraordinary and difficult passage to a new life with a new name and a new identity. Theirs is a journey full of yearning for spiritual fulfilment, a sense of belonging and a home. The directors David Bernet and Robert Ralston accompany their protagonists for six months as they take their first steps in an unknown world that welcomes them sometimes warmly, but often with great scepticism. To many Germans the converts' emigration might seem to be a misguided and naive attempt to make amends for crimes inflicted on the Jewish people in the past. The criminals' children in the nation of the victims. Many Israeli Jews do view such converts with ambivalent feelings, but for a completely different reason:

Being Jewish entails much more than a profession of faith. It means more than being – normally – the child of a Jewish mother and a member of the Jewish people. It is more than the observance of religious law and a life in accordance with the Jewish calendar. Jewishness can only be comprehended in its totality: as a culture, a tradition and a religion. In the current political situation, and with its history of thousands of years of pogroms and persecution, Jewish identity seems to be characterised by one thing in particular: a common fate.

How will the converts make a home for themselves within this culture? How will they ever find their place in a religious community that was not simply waiting to take them into the fold, and whose past can never be their own? How will they settle in a state that has not known peace since its founding in 1948, and in which attacks and military actions are part of everyday life?

**main office** klopstockstraße 1 50968 köln germany

**tel.** +49. 221. 397 96 96

**office berlin** heinrich-roller-strasse 15 10405 berlin germany

**tel.** +49. 30. 695. 669. 10 **fax** +49. 30. 695. 669. 15 **email** info@gebrueder-beetz.de

# GEBRÜEDER BEETZ FILMPRODUKTION

"Jew by choice" tells of a process that continues for many years. The *Gijuhr*, as the conversion is called in Hebrew, follows a detailed set of laws and must be recognised by a rabbinic court known as the *Bet Din*. In accordance with the *Halachas*, the religious laws, converts must openly profess their faith by taking up the *Oi mitzwot* or "Yoke of the Commandments", while men must also undergo ritual circumcision (*Brit mila*). The conversion to the Jewish faith is completed with the *Tvila*, a ritual bathing.

But even after all this, it will be many years before the converts are able to manage well in everyday life and can confidently choose just how strict and orthodox they wish to interpret and live according to the *Halachas*; until they will know, which foods are kosher and how to store them; whether or not to attend a Christian funeral; or to use electricity or drive a car on the Sabbath. Above all they will face the challenge of living their new faith while visiting their parents and in similar encounters with their „old“ lives.

As in his 2005 documentary „The Whisperers – a journey into the world of interpreters“ (WDR/arte), co-author David Bernet together with the award-winning filmmaker Robert Ralston have placed their focus on a topic that „one actually can't make a film about“ and on a particularly sensitive aspect of German-Israeli relations.

"Jew by choice" is an extraordinary document of intimate moments, conversations and observations. The film depicts a difficult and perhaps never-ending transition between worlds.

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