Thomas Eckert, born in 1953 in East Berlin, is a third-generation socialist Jewish journalist. His maternal grandfather Hermann Budzislawski (1901–78) was the founder and, after 1934, Editor-in-Chief of Die neue Weltbühne, a well-known left liberal journal in pre-war Germany. In exile in the United States during the 1940s, he worked as a ghostwriter for Dorothy Thompson. After the war he returned to the German Democratic Republic and was appointed Director of the Institute of Journalism at the University of Leipzig. Budzislawski’s daughter, Beate Eckert, worked for many years with the East German television, radio and news agency. Thomas Eckert, her son, was a journalist in East Berlin. He is currently writing a PhD dissertation in Political Science at the Salomon Ludwig Steinheim Institute for German Jewish History.

T.E. All four of my grandparents were Jewish. I know almost nothing about my father’s parents. My mother, though, comes from an old Jewish family in Berlin. My great-grandfather was a kosher butcher: he had a shop in what is now Käthe Kollwitzstrasse in East Berlin. His wife helped him in the store; she died a natural death in Berlin in 1936. My great-grandfather stayed in Berlin until 1938, and then, at the age of seventy, emigrated with my grandparents and my mother: first to Czechoslovakia; then to France; then, in 1940, crossing the Pyrenees on foot, to Spain, Portugal, and finally the United States. Imagine a seventy-year-old walking across the Pyrenees! My mother was then fourteen or fifteen years old.

My grandfather’s Jewish identity was actually quite complicated. He was no Orthodox Jew. He was religious in his youth, and later moved to the left and became a Communist. To be a religious Jew and a Communist isn’t easy. But even as a Marxist and Communist, he was sentimentally Jewish. One example is the High Holidays. My grandfather never knew exactly on which date they fell, but he knew they begin in September, so every year at the end of August or the beginning of September he would start asking ‘When are the Holidays?’ Once he

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knew, he didn’t go to synagogue, but he thought about the Holidays at home, ate kosher food on the Holidays, and fasted on Yom Kippur. For him, being Jewish was no longer a *Weltanschauung*, but a culture. He was aware of his Jewishness and of the Jewish traditions, though he didn’t give me a Jewish upbringing.

*R.O.* Are you talking about your father or your grandfather?

*T.E.* My grandfather. I grew up in my grandparents’ house. My grandparents and my mother returned to the GDR from the United States in 1949. Like many other emigrés who returned, they had a very difficult relation to Germany. It was hard to go back there knowing that part of the family had been murdered. Though the political climate bore the promise of better times to come, the emotional relationship was nonetheless strained. My grandparents never resolved these problems, they just repressed them. My mother still hasn’t worked out her emotional relation to Germany. Perhaps because Nazism and emigration were childhood experiences for her, they were that much more emotional and traumatic, and less amenable to rational or political analysis.

*R.O.* Are most of her social contacts with other Jews?

*T.E.* There are very few Jews in the GDR, that is, very few who still own up to being Jewish. After the war many people stopped letting on that they were Jewish. You can see that in the small size of the *Jüdische Gemeinde*. But in the last couple of years that’s been changing.

*R.O.* Tell me more about your mother.

*T.E.* My mother studied history at Humboldt University. Then she worked for twelve or thirteen years with the East German television station. She later worked with the East German radio and with the news service. She now has a pension.

*R.O.* And your father?

*T.E.* He died two years ago. After the war he studied German literature. He then worked for many years in various Party functions and later held a research position at Humboldt University. He was also one of those Jews who never worked through their experiences of Nazism, and repressed everything that happened before 1945.

*R.O.* Are you an only child?

*T.E.* No. I have two sisters. One is a doctor: she’s a year younger than I am. And the other one just entered university. I think she’s studying Philosophy or Sociology, but I’m not sure, because I have very little contact with them.

*R.O.* How is it that you grew up in your grandparents’ house?