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## Wladek Flakin: Some revolutionary Jews

BY WLADEK FLAKIN    DECEMBER 8, 2017



Cops search Scheunenviertel communists.

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As Chanukah is drawing near (Dec 12-20), I decided to take a walk through Berlin's old Jewish quarter just after sunset and tried to imagine the same place in the 1920s. I saw myself descending a staircase into a random building's half-basement, where I'd bump into people arguing in conspirative tones, using a

mixture of Berlinerisch and Yiddish. They would go silent and the mood would turn hostile – until I could prove my revolutionary bonafides.

This was my imagining of the home base of the KPD (Germany's Communist Party), illegal for long stretches of the 1920s. Their secret *Zentrale* was just a few blocks away at Hackesche Höfe, where Kino Central is today. Jewish life in Berlin was intertwined with the revolutionary underground. The KPD was founded by Rosa Luxemburg, and after her murder taken over by her lawyer Paul Levi. In 1924, a younger generation took over, with 29-year-old firebrand Ruth Fischer as chairwoman and Werner Scholem (less well-known than his brother Gershom, a scholar of Jewish mysticism) at the helm.

There is lots of ideological tension in these streets. My heroes from the past were planning for revolution. But now we're just demoralised hipsters trying to sell this memory to tourists.

This is exactly the tension expressed in the music of **Daniel Kahn and the Painted Bird**, who I saw in concert just last month – I had to at least partly realise my own fantasies. Kahn, a fellow *Neuköllner* originally from the US, has been making music in Berlin for more than 10 years. His band just published its fifth album, *The Butcher's Share*.

Kahn strikes me as the kind of character one would encounter in the 1920s: a rootless and multicultural *Revoluzzer* with a black fedora, leather jacket and full beard. He performs the classic hymns of the Jewish workers' movement of Eastern Europe – Klezmer music in the original Yiddish. Traditional songs like

"*Arbetslozer Marsch*" or "Arbeter Froyen" are filled with the pathos of millions of struggling proletarians condemning capitalism and conjuring up the socialist utopia.

But times have gotten less revolutionary. When Kahn sings a harmonica-laced ballad about a Vilna partisan waiting, gun-in-hand, in the dark woods for a German patrol, sure, it will make any lefty go teary-eyed. But then again, shooting Nazis is not currently part of our life experience. So Kahn also gives us new songs about the contradictions of revolutionary-minded hipsters living under capitalism – rejecting it, and yet still profiting in unintended ways from the awful exploitation. "Every pair of pants contains a horror story", he sings, because "there's blood and guts encoded in the value of the ware." This rather depressing observation about the ignored realities of globalisation is also the title of the album: *You have to give the butcher his share*.

We really want to believe in the socialist utopia with the same passion of our forebearers from the KPD, but in a time with few mass struggles it's easy to lose hope – this tension is the core of this modern Klezmer punk. Kahn would certainly be happier playing at a large revolutionary demonstration with a megaphone and an accordion, or at a secret assembly with a ukulele. But these aren't the times we're living in – at least not yet. Until the winds change, we'll be stuck living with our contradictions, enjoying socialist battle songs in a stuffy theatre where there isn't even space to dance.

But the memories still live on. And if it's too cold for you to take a walk down Linienstraße through the old

Jewish quarter this Chanukah, there's always another chance to catch the ol' Kahn instead.

**Catch Daniel Kahn and The Painted Bird at Werkstatt der Kulturen on Friday, Dec 15 as part of the Shtetl Neukölln festival.**

Music revolution Chanukah

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BY WLADEK FLAKIN    DECEMBER 8, 2017

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