

Jewish Families – Between Integration and Discrimination

Around 1900, Jewish life in Heppenheim reached its peak. The Jewish community continued to grow, a new synagogue was built, and Jewish families were (well) integrated into Heppenheim society. Many Jews were members of numerous clubs and organizations, such as the volunteer fire brigade or gymnastics club, held honorary positions within their religious community, and had friends of both Jewish and non-Jewish faiths.

With few exceptions, Jewish families in Heppenheim were well-off and owned well-furnished houses, like the Bach family, or even villas, like the Meyer family. Like non-Jewish families, they usually had several children, many of whom attended the local Großherzogliche Oberrealschule, which was a middle school.

With the rise to power of the Nazi Party in 1933, everyday life changed abruptly for Jewish families in Heppenheim. Antisemitism became increasingly visible, partly through organized actions such as the boycott of Jewish businesses on April 1, 1933, but also through spontaneous outbursts—for example, when young people threw stones at Jews in the street and insulted them as “Jewish pigs.”

Jews increasingly lost their professions and were forced to sell their previously successful businesses, including the Bach department store at Friedrichstraße 34. Jews were classified as “non-Aryans” and were no longer permitted to own property. Their businesses were to be taken over by “Aryan” citizens, which is why notices in the local newspaper—such as “Reopening after takeover by Aryan owners will be announced”—were common. The Mainzer department store was also forced to be sold in 1938.

From 1935 onward, the Nazi regime pressured Jews to emigrate. Many fled abroad, including to the United States (such as the Goldblum family), the Netherlands (such as the Baruch and Meyer families), or South Africa (such as the siblings Gerda and Kurt Bach). After the November pogroms, Jewish men were forced to level the remains of the burned synagogue of Heppenheim, where they had practiced their religion for years. In 1942, the National Socialists began deporting the Jews of Heppenheim and exploiting them as forced laborers. “Deregistered to unknown destination” was noted in the registration records; neither the time nor the destination of deportation was specified. It is reported that around midday on March 18, 1942, Selma Hirsch and her daughter Erna, among others, were seen walking up the street Amtsgasse toward the

market square, where a bus was waiting. The mother carried a large sack, possibly containing bedding, while her daughter carried two suitcases. In March 1943, Albert Marx, the last Jew from Heppenheim, was deported. As the husband of a Protestant woman, he had managed to delay his fate somewhat.

A typical example of the history of Jews in Heppenheim is the Friedmann family. They were initially well integrated into society. Nathan Friedmann, the father, was a religious studies teacher at the Großherzogliche Oberrealschule, now known as Starkenburg-Gymnasium. He was also an active leader of religious services in the Heppenheim synagogue. His three sons attended the Oberrealschule and were members of the football club FC Starkenburgia, even playing on the first team. After 1933, Nathan was the only family member who remained in Heppenheim. His son Walter was no longer allowed to work as an opera singer and actor and initially moved to Switzerland. His son Hugo and his family left Germany in 1938. His son Ludwig, who had worked as a senior employee at a shoe factory in Frankfurt, moved to Montevideo. In 1938, Nathan was forced to sell his house at Lorscher Straße 3 and moved into a Jewish retirement home in Frankfurt. He died of illness in 1940. Unlike the majority of Jews, Nathan did not perish in a concentration camp but died of natural causes.

(Text by Annika Heinze, Emma Kuczera, and Fabio Wiesenbach, all Abitur 2023.

English translation proofread by Katharina Gremm, class of 2027.)