

Mainzer Department Store – Clothing, Equipment, and Home Furnishings Under One Roof

Since 1907, it has been an irreplaceable part of Heppenheim's cityscape: the former Mainzer department store. Today known as the "New Town Hall," housing the music school, the municipal tourist information office, the citizens' office, and parts of the city administration, this historic listed building is not only a "prime example of Reform architecture along the Bergstraße," but also a reflection of the trade and business activities of an important Jewish family in Heppenheim.

The Mainzer Family

In 1861, Jacob and Krinle Mainzer founded a shop for manufactured goods in a room of their home at Wilhelmstraße 10 (now No. 7). Their son Wilhelm took over management of the family business in 1865 and became its owner five years later. Around that time, Wilhelm married Babette Götz, the daughter of a merchant from Bensheim. The couple had nine children.

The freedom of trade allowed the Jewish family to expand its economic opportunities. First, a shop with a display window was established, and in 1891 the house was converted into a commercial building, enabling a broader range of goods to be offered. One of the first shops in Heppenheim with a display window emerged, selling industrially manufactured quality and mass-produced goods.

Thanks to economic success, the family acquired another house at Wilhelmstraße 3 in 1902, allowing the building at No. 10 to be used exclusively for business purposes.

Initially, only fabrics, shirts, bedding, tablecloths, handkerchiefs, and "health undergarments" were sold, but by the end of the 19th century the store had already expanded to include a lingerie department, ready-made clothing for men and women, and a custom tailoring service. In 1906, Wilhelm Mainzer handed the business over to his two sons, Jacob and Berthold.

The store's offerings targeted customers from various social classes, attracting not only people from Heppenheim but also from surrounding areas. Jacob and Berthold Mainzer aimed to expand their business to include interior furnishings and the in-house production of furniture and clothing, which required the construction of a new building.

Construction of the Department Store on Friedrichstraße

In 1905, the architect Heinrich Metzendorf was commissioned to build the new department store. However, the Mainzer family had to take out large loans and make significant investments for the project. Metzendorf designed a multifunctional building with modern display windows and large, bright rooms, consisting of a department store, production facilities, and residential quarters. This allowed the business to offer an even wider range of products. The old buildings on Wilhelmstraße continued to be used as a furniture workshop and storage space.

On November 23, 1907, the new commercial building of the “Wilhelm Mainzer Company” was opened at Friedrichstraße 19–21 in Heppenheim. With its size and scope, the department store could compete with other urban department stores established at that time.

In 1924, the “Wilhelm Mainzer” company was divided between Jacob and Berthold, with each brother continuing operations independently.

The Impact of National Socialism on the Business

The rise of the National Socialists brought severe changes for the Mainzer family. They were increasingly subjected to anti-Jewish repression. The revenues of both brothers’ businesses declined sharply, forcing Jacob in 1935 to sell his furniture business to a former apprentice before the company was finally dissolved in 1938.

Berthold resisted longer than his brother. However, his business also suffered increasing losses due to the boycott of April 1, 1933, anti-Jewish attacks, economic repression, antisemitic financial policies, and expropriations. In 1936, he converted his salesrooms into rental apartments. Shortly thereafter, the authorities in Heppenheim forced him to give up his international patents for clothing. As a result, the elastic “Bema men’s trousers” produced in Heppenheim could no longer be exported. Antisemitic economic and financial policies ultimately ruined his business, which was sold before the November pogroms to a canteen operator from Landau. The Jewish family received none of the proceeds from the sale of the department store. During the November pogroms, the business and apartments were looted and devastated. On May 15, 1940, the Heppenheim tax office enforced the final closure of Berthold Mainzer’s company.

In total, the Mainzer family lived and worked in Heppenheim for 140 years. National Socialism cost the lives of four family members, including Jacob and Berthold, while the rest of the family was forced to emigrate. The family never received adequate compensation for these injustices.

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