

The Jewish School – Between Religion and Education

The history of the Jewish school

School and education play a big role in our life. This was also the case for young Jews. Learning the Hebrew language and religious education in general was particularly important to their parents; however, Jewish schools also teach basic skills such as reading and writing. In 1784, a general decree ordered the admission of Jewish children to Christian schools, as the general level of education was often low due to the predominantly religious instruction in Jewish schools. In several circulars, the government urged Jewish parents to send their children to Christian schools, although attendance was voluntary. Jewish schools were still allowed to continue as purely religious schools.

To avoid attending Christian schools, several Jewish families in Heppenheim resorted to private lessons. As a result, Isaac Löw Bendheim from Mannheim was hired by four families in 1822. The introduction of the simultaneous school in 1876, which made school attendance compulsory for all children and provided two hours of instruction per week for each denomination, marked the end of the Jewish school in Heppenheim.

Teachers at Jewish schools

The living conditions of teachers at Jewish schools were very modest due to their low pay, though not much different from those of teachers at Christian schools. Teachers often had to collect their salary and food personally from the families, and there were always some who did not feel obliged to provide it.

The job of a teacher required only the ability to read and write, as well as basic arithmetic. On this basis, the teacher who demanded the lowest salary was usually hired. This led to almost yearly changes in teaching staff, which significantly affected the children's level of education. Lessons were sometimes irregular and poorly organized. From 1850 onward, the Grand Ducal Hessian government pushed for proper teacher training and required certificates of prior education.

Timetable and level of education

At the Jewish school, there were 25 to 35 hours of lessons per week, held in the mornings and afternoons on weekdays, and partly on Sundays and the Sabbath. About half of these hours

were devoted to teaching the Hebrew language and providing religious instruction. The reduction to two hours of religious education in Christian schools greatly limited Hebrew teaching; nevertheless, several Jews from Heppenheim later stated that even these two hours were a great help for their emigration to what is now Israel starting in 1933.

The level of education among Jews improved in the second half of the 19th century as the number of secondary schools increased. While only 11% of Christians attended higher schools in Hesse, 52% of Jews did so. Around the turn of the century, Jews were highly represented in academic professions, showed a strong interest in higher education, and by around 1900 their wealth was three times greater than that of Christians. This development often contributed to anti-Jewish attitudes, which intensified with the propaganda of the National Socialists from 1933 onward.

(Text by Melina Guthier, Abitur 2023.

English version proofread by Jule Mandel and Emma Rapp, class of 2027.)