

The New Synagogue – a victim of the November pogrom

On the steep slope of the „Schlossberg“, more precisely at the corner of „Bensheimer Weg“ and „Starkenburgerweg“, only a memorial plaque commemorates the Heppenheim synagogue today, which stood in the middle of a garden above the wall at the memorial site, between 1900 and 1938.

After the Old Synagogue at „Kleine Bach 3“ became too small for the growing Jewish community, the construction of a larger synagogue was decided upon. It was financed by the brothers Adolph, Heinrich, and Leopold Hirsch, who were born in „Heppenheim“, but emigrated to London in the mid-1880s, where they became rather wealthy as bank owners.

Between 1899 and 1900, the New Synagogue was built according to the plans of the architect Heinrich Metzendorf in a country-house style. This style is not only typical of Metzendorf but is also based on regional traditions and makes use of local building materials. In this way, a strong sense of attachment to the homeland was expressed—the Hirsch brothers' choice of Metzendorf was therefore by no means accidental.

The building, measuring 20 meters in length, 10 meters in width, and 17 meters in height, was constructed from red and light yellow sandstone from the surrounding area and was oriented eastward in accordance with Jewish tradition. A hexagonal Star of David adorned the top of the gable. The roof was covered with black clay tiles. An external staircase led to an open, arcade-like entrance porch. From there, one could access not only the main hall but also the stair tower, a distinctive feature of the synagogue that led to the women's gallery on the upper floor.

The synagogue could accommodate 180 worshippers, 80 women and 100 men. The prayer hall, painted in a cream color, had a vaulted and plastered ceiling. A carpet runner in the central aisle separated the two rows of lecterns and extended to the semicircular apse, which contained a built-in ark for the Torah scrolls. Overall, the interior furnishings were rather modest. The stained-glass windows along the sides of the main hall allowed soft, filtered light into the space; the synagogue was also equipped with electric lighting and warm-air heating.

The new building was inaugurated on October 10, 1900. In a ceremonial procession, the Torah scrolls were carried from the Old Synagogue to the new one, after which nine-year-old Martha

Hirsch presented the key to Wilhelm Mainzer, head of the Jewish community during that time. The houses, including those of Christian residents, were decorated with flags; Adolph and Leopold Hirsch had traveled specifically from London, the celebrations were held in the evening at the “Halber Mond” and the “Goldener Anker.”

The entire population took part in the inauguration of the house of worship, and at that time no one imagined that the new building would only stand for 38 years.

During the November pogrom, on the morning of November 10, 1938, the synagogue was set on fire by SA men; the massive walls were then blown up, and Jewish men were forced to demolish the remaining parts of the building. The National Socialists aimed to erase all memory of Jewish life.

According to the foundation agreement, the synagogue was to pass into the ownership of the Jewish community of Heppenheim after 50 years. This provision was never fulfilled; in March 1943, the last Jew of Heppenheim was deported.

Today, a remnant of the southeastern buttress of the synagogue can still be seen on the site, and beneath the ground parts of the foundation walls and the tiled floor of the apse remain. In 2016, the property was transferred to the newly established Heppenheim Citizens' Foundation, which plans to develop the area into a place of encounter and remembrance in the long term.

For those who wish to gain a more complete impression of the Heppenheim synagogue, a trip to Oslo, Norway, is worthwhile. The synagogue there was built in 1920 based on Metzendorf's plans. Although it is larger and made “only” of concrete, it is nevertheless a replica of the Heppenheim house of worship. The synagogue in Oslo escaped destruction because German occupiers used it as a storage site for ritual objects during the Second World War.

(Text by Zahar Habibzai and Leonie Kolb.

English translation proofread by Ben Kersjes, class of 2027.)