

## **The Old Synagogue – a testament to over 600 years of Jewish history in Heppenheim**

In March 1943, Albert Marx, the last Jew remaining in Heppenheim, was deported; there was no longer a Jewish community, but there was still a synagogue. It is likely only because the house of worship had become too small for the Jewish community and a new building had been constructed in 1900 that the so-called “Old Synagogue” escaped its fate of destruction during Kristallnacht. Today, the building provides insight into how the Jews of Heppenheim practiced their faith.

The word “synagogue” means “assembly” or “place of gathering.” Any adult Jew may conduct a religious service; however, at least ten Jewish men are required for a service. Around the year 1800—at the earliest in 1791—this requirement was met, and the Heppenheim synagogue was built at Kleine Bach 3.

The two-story building first appears in 1811 in the municipal register of Heppenheim as a “Jewish school” (“Judenschul”). It is described as a “two-story residential house with a vaulted cellar,” likely constructed specifically as a place for worship, religious instruction, and the teacher’s residence.

The two long sides consist of rubble stone walls, while only the front and rear are actually timber-framed, with the front featuring decorative half-timbering. Until 1938, each of the two round windows displayed a Star of David made of blue and red glass. Under pressure from the Nazis, these were replaced with plain glass window panes.

The upper floor, covering an area of 70 square meters, is entirely occupied by the prayer hall. It features a blue-painted barrel vault without supporting columns, undoubtedly a complex and remarkable architectural achievement. The women’s gallery is located in the southern part of the room, which is illuminated by two dormer windows. The area for the Torah reading, measuring 15–20 square meters, is situated to the north, opposite the gallery.

On the ground floor is the teacher’s apartment, consisting of a kitchen, a bedroom, and a combined living and classroom space.

Initially, the building was designed for the then very small Jewish community. However, as the Jewish population in Heppenheim steadily grew, the capacity of 50 to 60 people was soon exceeded. While around 50 Jews lived in Heppenheim in 1800, this number had tripled by 1890.

The relocation of the teacher's residence and the school to other premises did not resolve the limited space for religious services. In addition, the building no longer matched the standards and character of newly constructed synagogues of the time, which is why in 1897, with financial support from the Hirsch banking house, the decision was made to build a new synagogue.

After the inauguration of the new synagogue, the old building was sold in 1901 to Emanuel Meyerhof, the owner of the adjacent neighboring house. In 1910, the building was remodeled: the ground floor was lowered to street level by lowering the cellar ceiling, increasing the ceiling height from about 2.70 meters to the current 3.60 meters. In 1934, the district savings bank of Heppenheim acquired the former synagogue building, before it passed into the ownership of Leopold Sturm in 1936. His son, Alfred Sturm, co-founder of the Starkenburg Observatory, used the former synagogue as a hair salon. The building remained in the family's possession until his death in 2016.

In 2017, the town of Heppenheim acquired the Old Synagogue and commissioned the association „*Förderverein Kulturdenkmal Alte Synagoge Heppenheim e. V.*“ with the preservation and development of the building. After the completion of restoration work, it is intended to become a vibrant place of encounter and remembrance culture, hosting lectures, exhibitions, readings, conferences, and other cultural events.

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