

The women's bath – a special requirement of Jewish life

The risk that “when a Jewish woman bathes, a part of the town would be left without water for a certain time” was a concern of the Heppenheim town council in 1836 and is representative of the many challenges the Jewish women's ritual bath in Heppenheim faced throughout its existence.

Jewish teaching prescribes that women are to take a ritual purification bath after menstruation, before marriage, and after childbirth. This takes place in a facility specifically designed for this purpose, also called a mikveh. Although men are also expected to take such a bath in certain cases, the bathhouse in Heppenheim was exclusively for women.

A Jewish women's ritual bath must meet certain requirements in order to be used. This includes ensuring complete immersion in the water and that the water flows continuously. The water must therefore neither be drawn nor pumped. A Mikveh generally consists of a bathing pool, a changing room, and an anteroom with a boiler for heating the water.

While large Jewish communities can afford to build a women's bath, this was not initially the case in Heppenheim. In 1715, records first mention the existence of a women's bath. It was still quite simple, as it was located in the cellar of a private person and filled with seepage water from the town stream.

In July 1825, the government of the area decreed certain standards (had) to be met in women's baths: the room had to be heatable and contain a boiler to warm the water. For hygienic reasons, the water had to be easy to drain. As the bath in the cellar did not meet these requirements it was filled in. However, there was another bath directly at the Liesen Bridge that met these requirements. Over the following years, the condition of this bath worsened significantly, therefore in 1833, it was shut down.

In 1836, today's Siegfriedstraße was to be expanded, which resulted in the demolition of the women's bath. The search for a new location was not easy, and eventually the “Roter Hut,” a tower of the town wall used as a prison, was chosen and then demolished.

Due to delays, the new women's bath was not built within the planned four weeks, but could only be put into operation in 1842, five years after the contract was concluded.

However, the new location at the junction of Siegfriedstraße and Hinterer Graben, as well as the new bath itself, also brought challenges. The problematic water supply remained, as only two to three public fountains were available for around 4,000 inhabitants. As a result of a legal case in 1847, a spring chamber was constructed to supply the women's bath with water from three sources. This reduced the risk that "when a Jewish woman bathes, a part of the town would be left without water for a certain time."

After its completion, the bath was no longer privately owned, and different fees were established for its users. Local Jewish women, for example, paid less than those from outside the town. Additionally, a female attendant was hired to manage the bath.

Around 1905, hardly any Jewish women still used the bath, as more and more Jewish families had similar facilities in their private homes. After the women's bath had not been used for 30 years and increasingly became a financial burden for the Jewish community, a private person purchased the building in 1935 and completely rebuilt the interior for residential purposes.

Although the bathing facility of the former Mikveh no longer exists, this place remains a reminder of the rituals of the former Jewish community of Heppenheim.

(Text by Lucy Pohl and Dorothea Seibel, both graduated from high school in 2023. English version proofread by Emilia Hartmann, class of 2027.)