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Dahn in June 2022

**'Mazel tov for the next life'
- A report about the synagogue in Dahn –
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If you want to know something about Jewish history in the Southwest Palatinate, you should first ask Otmar Weber. The former high school teacher has been researching this topic for decades. The 83-year-old has collected eyewitness accounts and archive material that was thought to have been lost and made it public. Weber found fellow campaigners in various working groups.

But he is the one who knows everything there is to know at the moment. The trigger for this also grueling work was a project on the Reich Pogrom Night in Dahn in 1988. Weber wanted to inspect the relevant files in the Dahn city archives, which the city leadership at the time refused to allow him to do. He was only allowed into the archive when the so-called Jewish files had disappeared. His commitment was honored last year with the Federal Cross of Merit on Ribbon. (Kka)

"Mazel tov" for the next life

Almost all synagogues in the Palatinate fell victim to the Reich Pogrom Night in 1938. In Dahn, a craftsman bought the building from the congregation a few months before the Nazi mob raged. It escaped destruction and is still largely intact. Now it is for sale, offering a rare opportunity for glimpses into the life of the vanished rural Jewry.
By Klaus Kadel-Magin

In retrospect, it can be seen as a stroke of luck that Ludwig Flory, a master carpenter from Dahn, bought the synagogue in August 1938. The building is said to have been in a bad condition at that time. Almost all the windows had been broken, Otmar Weber from Dahn found out.

Weber is known beyond the region as a researcher who tirelessly works on the history of rural Judaism in the Wasgau and over the years has amassed an impressive collection of objects from synagogues and Jewish households in the region.

If the Dahn carpenter had not bought the synagogue, it would probably have been torched in November 1938 like almost all the others in the country.

On November 9, despite its new use as a carpenter's shop, Dahn Nazis appeared, broke windows and smeared the base with feces. When some of them tried to set the building on fire, they were scared away by Ludwig Flory.

Lime plaster preserves the murals

The master carpenter was comparatively careful with the building. The elaborate murals inside were painted over with a coat of lime plaster, effectively preserving them to the present day. Otmar Weber is enthusiastic when he shows photos of floral murals in the men's and women's sections of the synagogue.

The former teacher at the Leibniz Gymnasium in Pirmasens had uncovered part of them together with students during a project week.

Weber is convinced that further parts of the paintings could come to light again during a restoration. What is already visible again even presents itself in relatively fresh and strong colors. Without the lime plaster, things would probably be different. Otmar Weber is quite enthusiastic about the starry sky in the women's section, which is still recognizable and could be restored with simple means. The floor plan and the gallery used by the women are still there as they were in 1930. The round window under the gable is original, as are the entrance doors separated by men and women, and the floor. The roof truss was not changed at all. The apse was removed at the very beginning by Flory, and the tall round-arched windows were replaced with the industrial windows that were common at the time.

On one side, the window openings were bricked up, as a result of which the windows of that time can still be guessed at today. Due to the ensemble with the Israelite school standing next to it, which is also still preserved in the ground plan as in 1930, an essential part of Jewish life in Dahn can be traced here.

The model synagogue is located in Billigheim-Ingenheim.

In contrast to the large synagogues in Landau or Kaiserslautern, the Dahn house was rather modest and simple in design.

At the beginning of the 19th century, the Jews of Dahn did not have their own synagogue and, according to Weber's research, held their services and meetings in a private house at Kirchgasse 5 in the village.

In 1820, a synagogue of their own was built, which was then replaced in 1871 by the building that still exists today on the same site.

However, the simple building may not have been the wish of the Dahn Jews.

According to Weber, the Bavarian King Ludwig I had decreed that the synagogues in the country should all be designed according to the same pattern.

The model synagogue was located in Billigheim-Ingenheim in southern Palatinate. The Jewish communities therefore did not have as much leeway as in Landau or Kaiserslautern, where truly, magnificent buildings could be built.

According to Weber's research, the peak of Palatine rural Jewry was in the years from the founding of the German Reich in 1870 to the First World War. During this period, the Jewish community probably numbered around 100 members. At times, the community in Busenberg, not far away, was considerably larger with 140 members.

There were other larger Jewish communities nearby in Erlenbach with 40 members and in Vorderweidenthal with about 60 members. Essentially, they were traders in livestock, furniture or hardware, as well as doctors and lawyers.

In Dahn, which had only 2500 inhabitants in the 1930s, the Jewish fellow citizens were well integrated. There were two kosher butcher shops where Christians also shopped, as Weber was able to learn from old Dahn residents. The stores were popular. Ovens from the Katz house, for example, are said to still be found in the town today.

The Christian priests from Dahn came to the dedication ceremony of the synagogue, and the local singing society framed the two-day celebration. The district official, who would correspond to today's district administrator, was the first to be allowed to open the new building with the key. By the way, this key has been preserved and reappeared: The Flory family had kept it and bequeathed it to Otmar Weber.

Outside the SA passes by with marching music.

The peaceful coexistence came to an end with the rise of the National Socialists. As early as 1936, the "minyán", the minimum number of ten adult male Jews required for the synagogue service, could no longer be raised. Even before that, the service had often been disrupted by Nazi provocateurs, Weber discovered, starting in 1933, SA groups marched past the synagogue, jeering loudly during services.

Windows were regularly broken and door handles smeared with feces. The doors were often torn open during the service and anti-Jewish slogans were shouted into the hall. An SA man is said to have patrolled the synagogue armed, and once an SA band even came from Pirmasens to play Nazi marches to eliminate the religious ceremonies. The last bar mitzvah, i.e. the celebration of a Jewish boy's coming of age at the age of 13, was celebrated in the Dahn synagogue in 1934.

The company founded by Ludwig Flory as a carpenter's workshop gradually turned into a funeral home after the war. The synagogue served as a coffin storage facility. Last year, the building was listed as a historical monument. The Flory family wants to sell the building along with the Israelite school, which was used as a residence.

"This is the opportunity," Weber enthuses, discreetly recalling that the city of Dahn always has a right of first refusal for the inner city. A living place of remembrance and commemoration could be created in the ensemble of school and synagogue, enabling encounters with Jewish culture as it was found throughout the region around 1900.

"I advocate buying the synagogue and transforming it into a place of encounter and remembrance of rural Jewry in the Wasgau," Weber says.

With its many Jewish testimonies, some of which are well preserved, the Wasgau region in particular offers the prerequisites for becoming a place for the preservation of rural Judaism, which has disappeared, he said. "The synagogue would be the ideal place where the abundant Judaica could be presented to the public," says the Dahner enthusiastically about his idea.

A great project that needs support

Judaica refers to sacred and non-sacred objects of Jewish culture. Many of them were donated to Otmar Weber by Jews from Dahn - from the 32-meter-long Torah scroll to birthday chalices, a prayer shawl or the "Mappa," a bandage for circumcision.

"More and more is accumulating," Weber says, presenting visitors with other smaller and larger Judaica in which he already sees exhibits for the renovated synagogue.

"But this should not and cannot be a purely Dahn project," he therefore calls for support from the state, the Pfalz district association and the county.

Sources

- "The Synagogues in the Palatinate from 1800 to the Present," Otmar Weber, 2005.

- "Jewish Life in the Palatinate, a Cultural Travel Guide," edited by Bernhard H. Gerlach and Stefan Meißner, Verlagshaus Speyer, 2013.

Captions

Based on the sketch of a surviving Dahn Jew, Pirmasens art educator Helmut Repp was able to make a drawing of the interior as it might have looked around 1930.

Photos: Otmar Weber

The synagogue building and the former schoolhouse are still completely preserved (right). Also the separate entrance doors for men and women have not been destroyed. Photos: Otmar Weber

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