

HAINSFARTH JEWISH CEMETERY

explanatory notes on history and present time

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Former synagogues as well as cemeteries are important memorial witnesses of once existing Jewish communities in the Swabian part of Bavarian. Of particular importance are the Jewish cemeteries since they provide the last remaining remembrance of people who lived there in our common home and neighborhood. Of great significance in this respect is the Nördlinger Ries district, once ruled by the counts and princes of Oettingen. Along with the somewhat outlying Steinhart there are ten old Jewish cemeteries in the region. All are well documented, not at least because of the work of Professor Dr. Herbert Immenkötter for Hainsfarth and the research initiative “*Harburg Project*”, which in 25 years of its existence has explored seven of the ten cemeteries and has published on the internet extensive grave lists with accurate family history details.

Original beauty of grave monuments

Regular public tours on some of these cemeteries confirm the saying that only the forgotten are truly dead. In times when descendants of the deceased lived here the commemoration was regarded as a mitzvah and observed commandment of Jewish tradition. Meanwhile the grave markers increasingly weather and crumble, so remembrance gets more difficult. On the initiative of Mrs. Sigi Atzmon from “*Freundeskreis Synagoge Hainsfarth*” (a group of people supporting cultural activities at the former synagogue) together with “*Harburg Project*” stonemason Karl Löffler from Nördlingen now has cleansed a remarkable number of twenty tomb stones. So the visitors now may have an impression of the original beauty of the grave monuments. The fresh bright ochre-yellow of the purified stones is impressive. The initiators were surprised as they realized that the grayish stone in the course of the cleansing gradually turned into stunning beauty. This also holds good for the mainly Hebrew inscriptions most visitors cannot read and understand, which however are impressive as token of an age old tradition. For Christians it also is a good reminder that Jesus himself was a Jew and stemmed from the Hebrew-Aramaic culture. Many forget too easily that Christianity and Judaism have related roots.

Historical quarry in Steinweiler

The mere sight of the grave stones on the occasion of a tour shows interesting formal differences which in their development were temporary limited. Before 1850 the dead from Hainsfarth Jewish community for centuries were brought to the central cemetery in Wallerstein and buried there. The transfer before the introduction of railways was so tedious and time consuming that the Jews of Hainsfarth were glad for the establishment of an own local burial site in 1850. The earlier grave

markers were created in a traditional rather modest way: thin limestone slabs, rectangular and narrow with rounded tops. The inscriptions were initially written in Hebrew from right to left, what indeed could not be read and understood by the masons who were mostly Christians, a problem solved by stencils or templates. According to stonemason Löffler the stones largely came from Steinweiler, a small townlet between Nördlingen and Heidenheim-an-der-Brenz, where until today you may feel some sort of importance when only passing by. Huge spoil heaps covered by boulder give a vague idea of some significant activities once have taken place here. This impression strengthens when one leaves the main road, where the land behind still shows marks of the big open pits of ancient quarries, founded in 18th century in order to break ground plates for the monastery of Neresheim. The hard Jurassic layered limestone was ideal building material for grave marker plates as well, as used at the Jewish cemetery of Hainsfarth.

The right to personal gravesites

Grave stones from the middle of the 19th century are rarely found at Christian cemeteries, unless they are part of historical parks such as “Süd-Friedhof” in Munich next to “Sendlinger Tor”. At Christian cemeteries the resting time of a buried corpse is limited in time, while in Judaism it is unlimited. Each decedent has his own grave, regarded as his possession until the end of all days, marked by a gravestone to avoid overlaps. Thus the memory of the deceased has traditionally been ensured for centuries. Yahrzeit charities, already bestowed in lifetime, have been used at the anniversary day of the death to provide a worthy remembrance on behalf of the decedent. However, the annihilation of Jewish communities during the dark days of Nazi rule has also destroyed this tradition in rural regions, where until today no Jewish communities exist anymore.

The layout of grave stones

The layout of grave stones in the decades after 1850 had changed basically, what also had been a consequence of the gradually progress of Jews regarding civil rights. Only in 1861 they were allowed to choose their residence place, and in 1871 they became equal citizens of the newly created German Empire. Increasing prosperity and civic awareness was also reflected in the design of grave monuments, which became more opulent and much taller, partly overly performed with lush sculptural decoration. According to the Talmud Jews actually are ought to be equal and modest in death, as reflected by a plain coffin timbered from some loose wooden boards as well as by the lack of any additional trappings. The first grave markers at the Jewish cemetery of Hainsfarth yet were traditionally thin stone slabs rounded at the top and with rather simple Hebrew inscriptions. During the second half of the 19th century only little was left from original modesty. Since late 1920s modesty again became more common in a modern style with no decoration. Impressive however are those stones with finely set inscriptions, which increasingly used German letters. The Hebrew inscriptions generally were directed eastwards, considered as towards Jerusalem, while the German inscriptions were on the rear. Also the dead were buried facing east. Worth mentioning is also the succession of the burials at the cemetery, which was from the back to the front at the entry, since it was regardful to get there without climbing over existing graves.

Difficult family history research

Ideally, a cemetery visit is always a direct encounter with people who had lived at the place. This is not at least also the aim of several grave registers that were compiled by “*Harburg Project*” research initiative in 25 years, such as for the Jewish cemetery at Haunstetter Strasse in Augsburg together with Professor Dr. Immenkötter. Regarding Hainsfarth one finds in Augsburg the grave marker of Wolf Obermeier, who from 1822 to 1863 served as teacher of the Jewish elementary school in Hainsfarth, that very building next to the synagogue which is still waiting right to its for long scheduled restoration. Genealogical elaborations are time consuming and bring no immediate success. That’s why graduates of historical faculties often avoid them, regarding genealogy as “non-scientific” and thus neglect the value of family history for descendants of the deceased.

Specific memory of the deceased

The tedious research however, time and again brings about quite interesting results as well as the acquaintance of quite remarkable men of old. In Hainsfarth for instance already the very first grave marker can verify this. The tomb stone from 1850 is modestly placed backmost at the wall. It belongs to Chaya Neumann nee Gift, whose father Loew Levi about 1748 came from Ichenhausen and settled in Hainsfarth as cattle dealer. He became the progenitor of the Gift family from which the still wellknown actress Therese Giehse (1898-1975) was a famous member. Therese Neumann was her great-great aunt. At the further end of the first grave row of the cemetery stands the grave marker of Mendel Joseph Ries. His son Michael Reese made a fortune in property speculation during the California goldrush. The upper part of the original sandstone monument was renewed in granite, probably in 1878 by Michael Reese during a journey to the places of his childhood and ancestors. The renovation was made by Max Koppel from Noerdlingen. Koppel was one of the very few Jewish stone masons in Southern Germany at that time, whose factory was equipped with the most modern machines and until World War One was widely known, especially for the production of high quality grave markers for Jewish cemeteries.

Hebrew and German grave inscriptions

A true sample for a copiously arranged Hebrew inscription can be seen on the grave marker of Gala Mannheimer (second row). The freshly cleaned limestone is shining again in its original ocher and beautifully brings off the homely set Hebrew characters. Some other inscriptions reveal the fate of the deceased or the grief of the bereaved, as for example in row 7 the grave stone of David Seligmann Ries. The German script on the plate from 1872 expresses the pain of his mother:

“The mother’s lament & balm, much has passed away from my lifes uttermost luck, not the want of a glowing heart held back the dear, so badly I was harmed, but the voice of the faith speaks: there in heaven is your hope, not on earth.”

Grave symbols and their meaning

Striking aspect of some grave stones are the symbols which in their deep historical significance characterize also essential aspects of the life of the deceased. The grave marker of David Bürger in row 8 for instance is decorated with a ram's horn (*shofar*) and a knife of a circumciser (*mohel*). Both were tokens of a great personality. David Bürger not only was head of the Jewish community when the synagogue of Hainsfarth was built in 1860, he also had the privilege to blow the ram's horn on the High Holidays in the fall, at the beginning of Jewish New Year, calling for repentance and reflection. Also the duty of circumcising boys on the eighth day after their birth in Jewish tradition is an outstanding office. Another symbol at some grave stones shows "blessing hands", which identify the deceased as a "Cohen" who can trace his paternal ancestry to the Biblical High Priest Aaron. One finds also tokens depicting a pitcher, a reference to descents from the tribe of Levi, whose members in ancient times were concerned with temple services.

Banker Heinrich Aufhäuser

From Jewish rural communities many young people during the 19th century headed to larger cities in order to chance their luck. In 1870 Heinrich Aufhäuser was one of them with the establishment of a banking business in Munich's Löwengrube next to the Frauenkirche. The nameplate "Hauck & Aufhäuser" still adorns the headquarters of the still existing bank. Heinrich Aufhäuser was buried in Munich, his mother Zilli Aufhäuser found her last resting place in Hainsfarth. Her grave is right ahead row 9. She died in 1880 at the age of 77 years.

Tragic victim of World War I

In the last row of the cemetery a man is buried whose hard fate is connected to the First World War. Julius Martin was 16 years old when the war began in 1914. He was sent to the Western Front where he was so severely wounded in a gas attack, that despite a later marriage and the birth of two sons he never again was able to cope with his life. Also his wife Selma suffered from the trauma of her husband and finally petitioned for divorce. The sons Hans and Lothar were put into care. Out of desperation about this family disaster Julius Martin hanged himself in 1930. In Jewish tradition suicides actually find no regular place at the cemetery. Obviously in regard of his severe and undeserved fate there was made an exemption and Julius Martin finally was buried in the midst of the other dead. The grave inscription does not mention the divorced wife, whose leaving of the family was not forgiven. Selma herself as well as her son Hans later became Shoah victims. Son Lothar Martin during the Second World War became a member of an armored division in the French Resistance. He survived the war and was honored to French citizenship for his service.

Although there are no more descendants of Jewish families in Hainsfarth, the remembrance of them is still alive in the frame of cemetery tours. As a visible sign now there are some substantially cleansed and preserved grave stones, which allow appreciating the original character of this cemetery in Hainsfarth. Currently there still exists no comparable project in Bavarian Swabia.