

The Synagogue in Malsch

Hans-Georg Schmitz, translation by Peter Silver, April 2016

Early services of worship

From as early as the first half of the 18th century, regular Jewish services were held in Malsch. A surviving fragment of one of the headstones from Obergrombach cemetery, which was desecrated by the Nazis, belongs to the grave of Kalmann [Heß]. He died on October 12th 1761¹ and the inscription refers to him as *hasan* (cantor or singer). His name is given as Kalonymos². This could be a reference to the ancient Kalonymos family, probably of Italian origin, which came to our region in 1084 when the community of Speyer was established. During the 12th century, this family produced many scholars of high reputation, oft referred to as ‘the sages of Speyer’. The use of this name on the headstone apparently indicates the high level of religious education of the deceased. At the time, young men such as he were gladly employed by Jewish families to provide an education for their children. This might explain how Kalmann came to be in Malsch in about 1710, where he later married and settled. However, this is only speculation; he could just as easily have descended from one of the existing village families. So far we do not even know his father’s name. His position as cantor was probably a voluntary one. In any case, in the five known Jewish families living in Malsch in 1721 there were soon enough men, religiously mature children (*bar mizvah* from the age of about 13) and male employees to assemble a *minyán* or quorum of 10, for a regular service of worship. Initially, a room in one of the families’ houses was probably used for the services.

In 1818, community head Raphael Bodenheimer asked the Karlsruhe High Council of Israelites who should be responsible for appointing teachers and cantors in the event of any disagreement within the community³. Clearly, the teacher no longer was part of an individual’s domestic staff. So, very early on the Israelite community in Malsch funded this person who was delegated by the Bruchsal district rabbi. We even know the names of three predecessors. In January 1815 the *former Jewish teacher here*, Löw, died at the age of 75⁴. In 1813, Judas Zacharias from Hoffenheim taught in Malsch⁵ and from March 1816, Jakob Lißauer from Mönchsroth in Central Franconia was here for a year⁶.

The building of the Synagogue

In 1825, the Grand Duke’s Chamber granted permission to the Israelite community in Malsch to collect money from fellow believers in the area for the purposes of funding the building of a synagogue⁷. Similar permission had shortly before been granted to the

¹ Berthold Rosenthal Collection (excerpt from the Book of Obergrombach Cemetery, undated [1935]), Series II, Box 3, folder 10 (http://www.archive.org/stream/lbi_brc_mf484_reel07#page/n1172/mode/1up p. 1172): Kalmann קלמן. It also shows that the headstones for him and his wife Merle were erected in 1763.

² Staatsarchiv Ludwigsburg EL 228 b II (Landesdenkmalamt Baden-Württemberg: Dokumentation der jüdischen Grabsteine in Baden-Württemberg; collected by Zentralarchiv zur Erforschung der Geschichte der Juden in Deutschland) grave 1205. See also <https://www2.landesarchiv-bw.de/ofs21/olf/struktur.php?bestand=24368&klassi=105&anzeigeKlassi=105.001>. So far, no photo could be obtained.

³ Willy Messmer, *Juden unserer Heimat*, Bad Schönborn 1986, p. 158.

⁴ Generallandesarchiv Karlsruhe (GLA) 390 No. 6054.

⁵ Lc.; on 7.2. his son, Judas, was born here.

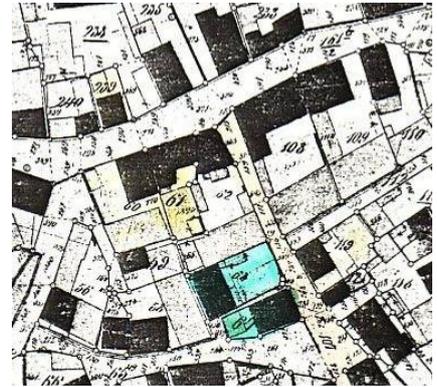
⁶ GLA 229 No. 63899, Microfilm (Karte 54); this document refers to his permission to remain in Baden. Dionys Wipfler, former Malsch mayor, published a number of findings on Jewish history in 1995. In an article in the Malsch local paper dated 26.1.1995, p. 5, he misspelled the teacher’s name as Jacob Lißnauer.

⁷ GLA 229 No. 63900, Microfilm (Karte 55). Cf. Dionys Wipfler, Memorial Plaque for the Jews of Malsch, in: *Rhein-Neckar-Zeitung* dated 20.1.1995, Wiesloch edition (reproduced in: *Malscher Gemeinderundschau* 1995 No.4, p. 4-5).

community of Wiesloch. On December 28th 1831, the community decided to build a synagogue⁸. All 13 family heads signed the document. In addition to Rafael Bodenheimer these were: Kalmann Heß (grandson of the above-mentioned Kalmann), Marx Bodenheimer (brother of Rafael), Mendel Heß (brother of Kalmann), Lazarus Falk, Lazarus Marschall, Abraham Strauß, Hirsch Bodenheimer (son of Rafael), Rafael Kahn, Isak Schuster, Simon Heß (brother of Kalmann), Isaak Schwed and Herz Hilb. The Jewish population here must therefore have consisted of 60 or more individuals.

As the Jewish neighborhood was mainly concentrated in and around Brunnengasse and Mühlgasse (also known as 'Judengasse' and 'Synagogengasse'), the necessary building plot was also purchased there (today No. 6 Brunnengasse; plot 64 on the older site map).

Problems arose twice during the building work. In June 1883, Hirsch Bodenheimer, who was by then head of the community, complained to the Wiesloch office that the foundations had not been professionally constructed. The builder who was called to task disputed this, but an independent technical expert confirmed that not enough lime had been used in the mix and that the foundations had not been laid correctly. It was therefore instructed that the faults be rectified within 8 days and that the rest of the work then be completed quickly. Everything then proceeded to the satisfaction of the Jewish community⁹.



Hauptstraße / Brunnengasse ca. 1900.
Highlighted in green: the synagogue.
Above that, also in green, the school.

The second problem was of a legal nature and occurred in December 1833, when the building was almost complete¹⁰. When the community applied for the grant of credit necessary to make the final payment, using the Synagogue building as security or collateral (referred to at the time as 'impawning'), the response came as a shock. This was because, according to the law, a Christian community was not permitted to 'impawn' its church; so the Israelite community could also not be allowed to do this. This triggered lively correspondence between the various parties concerned from which we glean important information about the building process.

The Karlsruhe High Council of Israelites had agreed to the building of the Synagogue on November 24th 1831. The plans (which have unfortunately not yet been found) had been redrawn and included an adjacent heated women's bath and a school room. In 1832, the Wiesloch District Office put the work out to tender and on November 12th invited the bidders and the Malsch Israelites to attend a meeting where the contract was to be auctioned off and awarded. Minutes were taken at that meeting. First, the Israelites explained that *1,000 guilders have already been collected and for the rest of the amount, capital will be raised by impawning the completed building. However, to allay any fears that the construction company might have about getting paid, we are all liable, jointly and severally, to settle any outstanding amount from our own assets.* Then the terms and conditions were specified. The work would have to start by March 1st 1833 and be completed by August 1st. 500 guilders would be paid when the building work started, a further 500 when the roof was in place and the rest when a building inspector had signed the work off. Then the auction began, first for each of the individual works and then for the overall construction by a main contractor. The contract was won by Friedrich Walburg from Mingolsheim, with the lowest bid of 2,080 guilders (about € 21,000 in today's money?).

⁸ Messmer lc. 158f.

⁹ Messmer lc. 159.

¹⁰ GLA 299 No. 63900.

The removal of the legal obstacles regarding the borrowing of the money (and consequently the length of time for which the contractor had to wait to get paid) took almost as long as the building work itself. But the Malsch Israelite community exhibited extraordinary tenacity and astuteness in the negotiations. Although none of the high level executives agreed, the Malsch people pointed out that this delay will mean the risk of losing the building, because the contractor insisted on being paid quickly. He also had the right to impawn the building himself and, if he so wished, to sell it. Besides, it had been agreed right from the outset and noted in the minutes of the auction meeting that a credit would be taken out on the building and nobody had raised any objection or revoked that provision. The members were willing to accept liability for the credit in any way required. Each of them, according to their financial position, contributed a weekly sum into the community pot so that the debt could be paid off within 6 years. In July 1834, Lazarus Marschall and Isaak Schwed appeared personally before the high council in Karlsruhe to present and explain their final plea. It is not clear whether they themselves had written this but the reports testify to great powers of speech, detailed knowledge and understanding of matters of law and a full appreciation of the position of their opponents. Also that they had the best interests of all parties in mind. The authorities clearly did not want the Jewish community lose its synagogue. They acknowledged by implication that the law was designed to protect the existing sacred buildings but should not be applied to hinder the erection of new ones. And so it was that on July 29th 1834 the regional council finally granted permission for the requested credit for the purposes of paying off the debt. In doing so, it emphasised the personal liability of all the community members. Whether the Synagogue had already been inaugurated early in spring or this ceremony only then became possible is not known.

The **Mikwe**, or ritual women's bath, stood directly next to the west facade of the Synagogue. The spring which provided the necessary water was particularly productive and during dry spells the 'Jews' Well' was one of the few still-functioning water sources in the village. In 1868, the Wiesloch district office criticised this bath because *it is situated in a small, chilly, cellar-like room without proper drainage and without adequate means of heating the water*¹¹. This warm-water bath had been required on the original planning permission¹². It was high time to have it appropriately equipped with a warm tub above the ground.



Picture taken in Brunnengasse ca.1925:
Behind the figures is the roof of the Mikwe. Far right, the west facade of the Synagogue. In the background is the

Subsequent history

The Synagogue community celebrated a special occasion in May 1891 when Abraham Marschall, one of the most respected members of the Israelite community, donated a new Tora Scroll to the synagogue. (He died in 1892 at the age of 62 and is buried in plot IX 3 in the Jewish cemetery in Mingolsheim). There is an informative report of the presentation of the scroll: *Visitors streamed in from near and far to take part in this important inauguration ceremony. The Tora Scroll was collected from the house of its donor whilst music rang out and the procession throng of visitors accompanied it on its way through the garland and bunting-festooned streets to the festively-decorated*

¹¹ Messmer lc. 160f.

¹² Cf. GLA 299 No. 63900: Communication from the Direktorium des Neckarkreises Mannheim to the Wiesloch regional office dated 6.12.1831, and the statement from the Oberrat der Israeliten dated 24.11.1831 with reference to its ruling dated 18.10.1822.

*Synagogue. The high point of the service was the speech by our honoured Rabbi, Dr. Eschelbacher from Bruchsal. Worthy of particular mention is the large number of Christian members of the population who took part in this celebration, which bears witness to the spirit of unity and peace here. The festivities were rounded off by a gala dinner on Saturday night, which united the festival-goers in joyful togetherness.*¹³ It is clear that a large proportion of the population of Malsch took part and helped to decorate the village as they would for their processions.

An Israelite women's association may well have existed prior to 1900. On March 23rd 1911, the teacher, Jakob Lewin, in his capacity as the association's secretary, applied to the regional office in Wiesloch to have its new constitution approved. After the constitution had been changed to indicate clearly that it was a matter of a "purely women's society", (that is to say a non-profit association), and not a private insurance company, the association was apparently recognised. The standing orders, in line with centuries-old Jewish tradition, completely conform to our modern-day understanding of democracy: voting or elections for fixed periods of office, annual meetings requiring accountability and so on. The purpose of the association was to provide support for the sick and needy within the community. As such, it included mostly things which were already the aim of the funeral society. With the setting up of their own cemetery in 1878, the Jewish communities of Mingolsheim, Malsch and Östringen left the Obergrombach funeral association and established their own. Its statutes are only known to us because contemporary documents refer to them as being in line with those of the Obergrombach association. They not only govern everything necessary for burials and the financial running and administration of the cemetery, but the statutes also contain precise instructions regarding regular visits to the sick, watching over the dying and the dead, supporting the poor whether resident in the area or not, etc. in other words, the whole gamut of charitable acts. The women's association was similarly involved in helping the needy and sick, supporting the bereaved and holding wakes.¹⁴ In 1914, an Israelite men's association was also established and its statute, dated July 4th, was approved by the regional office on August 18th. This association's purpose was also "to support sick members and other needy persons in the local community and beyond". The head was Samuel Schuster, the assessor was Isaak Hilb, and Jakob Lewin was the secretary.¹⁵ The weekly membership fee for both associations was 10 pfennigs.

As the accounts for the years 1929 – 1931 have survived¹⁶ we also know what expenses the Synagogue incurred during that period: 30 RM for minor repairs and fire insurance (40 RM for the school or parish hall), 120 RM for equipment therein, 120 RM for heating and cleaning. The largest expense was the salary for the teacher and cantor plus the fees paid to the treasurer and to the clerk, so staff costs came to a total of 1,022 RM. All in all the parishioners had to raise 1,433 RM through church tax and donations.

The teacher, Lewin, died on April 21st 1934 at the age of 75. As the number of children had rapidly diminished, he probably no longer taught towards the end of his life. During the 1930's and perhaps from even earlier, Ludwig Heß (known in Malsch as 'Hirsche Louis'), held the position of cantor, for which he received annual remuneration of 550 RM¹⁷.

¹³ Article in the journal "Der Israelit. Ein Centralorgan für das orthodoxe Judentum, Herausgegeben von Dr. Lehmann in Mainz" dated 20. May 1891.

¹⁴ GLA 356 No. 4602.

¹⁵ GLA 356 No. 4600.

¹⁶ GLA 356 No. [TBC].

¹⁷ 480 Nr. 4987 (restitution file).

During 'Kristallnacht', on the night of November 9th 1938, Nazi storm troopers from Wiesloch along with local party members smashed the Synagogue windows, tore down the stone tablets with the 10 commandments from above the main entrance, destroyed the interior and threw many items out into the street. Finally, they doused the building in petrol and set it on fire. The volunteer fire brigade was not allowed to extinguish the flames. Simon Hess VII, the vice-chairman of the community, ran from his house opposite and into the burning building to save the Tora Scroll. Not long after, he gave the scroll to Adolph Hess, who took it with him when he emigrated to America. It still exists today, somewhere in Israel.¹⁸ A few scraps from the prayer books are also still preserved today by descendants in the USA. As a thirteen-year-old girl, Resel Heß, from No. 1 Brunnengasse, had gathered them up the morning after the attack and taken them with her when she emigrated.

The Israelites of Malsch were forced to arrange for the removal of the debris quickly. On November 17th 1939 they had to sell both plots of land (Nos. 63 & 64) to the borough for 1,500 reichsmarks (140 RM for the site of the Synagogue and 1,360 RM for that of the school)¹⁹. Mayor Fleckenstein had even earlier considered this land as belonging to the borough and in February or March 1939 announced *drainage works on the site of the former Synagogue yard*.²⁰

It is hoped that, when designing the future market square, the modern-day municipality will consider marking on the paving the positions of the former Synagogue and Mikwe and also providing an appropriate and lasting memorial.

¹⁸ His son, Kurt, looked after this important relic from the Synagogue in Malsch until his death in 1993. As he had no children, his last community, Rodfei Zedek in Chicago, took it into safe keeping. It was eventually sent to Israel as no one had enquired about it for a long time. It was only after 2010 that Simon's grandson remembered about it when his grandson became bar mitzvah. A cousin then found out about where the scroll had gone. Whether its location in Israel can yet be found out is not known.

¹⁹ GLA 480 No. 12733: According to the fire insurance, the Synagogue, Mikwe and School with garden had a value of 7,800 reichsmarks in 1938. The purchase price was paid to Israelitischer Oberrat in favour of the Israelite schools and pensions fund. (These institutions were already under state control, which meant that the assets were misappropriated). The loss of cultural amenities and property was assessed at 2,340DM in 1950 as part of the restitution process. The Jewish Successor Organisation forewent the return of previous property and received a flat-rate compensation from Baden.

²⁰ Minutes of council meeting dated 4.5.1939 (p. 16); the proposals date from May 15th.