HARBURG PROJECT 1986 - 2008 JEWISH FAMILY HISTORY IN NÖRDLINGER RIES RESEARCH PROJECTS BY ROLF HOFMANN

ACQUISITION OF THE HARBURGER SYNAGOGUE

Between 1986 and 1989 Rolf Hofmann was involved in the acquisition and refurbishment of the former synagogue in Harburg (near Nördlingen in Bavarian Swabia), dating from 1754, and its transformation into a local cultural centre. Since the mid-1960s, this structure had been used as an office building and its original internal historical features had been obliterated. However, the facade had been left essentially unchanged and the building therefore represented one of the most prominent surviving synagogues in southern Germany. Its architectural forms, for example its pointed-arch windows, are typical of many medieval synagogues. Last but not least, the location of this synagogue in the region of the centuries-old Oettingen Castle, whose Counts and Princes were dominant in the Harburg region, makes it a historical site of considerable significance.



The former Harburg Synagogue ((Photo: www.jhva.wordpress.com)

HARBURG SYNAGOGUE CULTURAL CENTRE

The former synagogue was successfully transformed into cultural centre between 1989 and 1992. More than 120 stimulating events were presented: exhibitions, lectures, theatrical performances, historical events and classical and jazz concerts. One highlight was a program of piano concertos, played on a restored Blüthner grand piano. In 1992 the Association of the Volksbanken and Raiffeissenbanken honored the Donau-Ries administration and presented a certificate of commendation that recognised the district's concern for conservation and its support for the revived use of the former Harburg synagogue.



Former Harburg Synagogue. (The Harburg Castle can be seen on the hill in the background) (Photo: www.alemannia-judaica)

JEWISH FAMILY HISTORY RESEARCH

In 1992, Rolf Hofmann began the Harburg Project, which engaged him in several years of extensive study of the history of the twelve Jewish communities in the area of the former County Oettingen (focusing on the Nördlinger Ries as the core area). Data were derived from documents held in the Royal Archives of Harburg Castle. This research collection was supplemented by archival material held in various State and local archives. The research focused on studies of family trees of Jews who once lived in the region. Over 1,000 family sheets relating to more than 200 surnames were produced over the years. Various historical events led to extensive migration of these families, and this necessitated research on a global scale to find descendants of family trees and records of relevant family stories were published at www.alemannia-judaica.de/harburgproject.htm Over the years, the Harburg Project developed into a global operation. In 2006 it was recognised through the conferral of the internationally renowned Obermayer Award.

AN INVENTORY OF GRAVES IN JEWISH CEMETERIES

A second area of research, which also began in 1992, involved the compilation of burial lists for six Jewish cemeteries in the Nördlinger Ries region. Many years later, in 2008, similar work was carried out in the Jewish cemetery in Schopfloch in Middle Franconia, which belonged to the Oettingen administration in former times. The inventory work was carried out in close cooperation with fellow researchers. In addition to a list of names, essential family history details were recorded, together with a schematic plan of each cemetery. The lists of these graves have also been published on the internet on the alemannia-judaica website.

PHOTOGRAPHIC RECORDS OF JEWISH CEMETERIES

In cooperation with Mario Jacoby, the tombstones of the Harburg Jewish cemetery were cleaned during 1992, along with the noting and translation of the Hebrew inscriptions, assisted by Mario Jacoby's wife Ruth Litai-Jacoby. A printed publication (in limited edition) was produced with pictures of 50 gravestones (out of 150) which had legible inscriptions. This publication was unique for Bavarian Swabia. Similar cleaning, recording and photographing of Jewish gravestones was subsequently organized in 1995 in Mönchsdeggingen and Wallerstein. Rolf Hofmann then followed

the footsteps of Jewish emigrants and photographed a series of gravestones in the Salem Fields Cemetery in New York. Photographs in large format were framed and exhibited at Grosslaupheim Castle, in the Hainsfart Synagogue and in the Cronheim Museum in Gunzenhausen.

JEWISH RECORDS IN CIVIL REGISTERS

A request from Ralph Bloch in Canada in 2007 for assistance with an international initiative known as "Jewish Genealogy in Bavarian Swabia" led to the compilation of registers of civil records, derived from information gathered by the state authorities in Bavarian Swabia. The information began to be collected from Jewish communities in the 19th Century and were later copied on microfilm. The original records were lost during World War II. The data from many registers have been copied by Rolf Hofmann and transferred to the internet on the <u>www.jgbs.org</u> website. This information is published in English, which simplifies access for family researchers from abroad, especially for those who are unfamiliar with German language and with 19th Century German handwriting.

DEVELOPMENTS IN THE STUTTGART AREA

Although the Harburg Synagogue Cultural Centre was functioning extremely well, the concept was unpopular in some circles, and some high-level public figures exerted political pressure to have the facility closed down. Programs at the Centre ended in 1992 and three years later the venerable building was sold to a doctor's family and used both as the doctor's surgery and as the family residence. Rolf Hofmann subsequently returned to his birthplace of Stuttgart and began to occupy himself with studies of the biographies of prominent Jewish families that had once lived there.

As a result, biographies were written of important personalities such as Professor Ernst Guggenheimer (whose father, incidentally, was born in Harburg), Max Levi (co-founder of the Salamander shoe factory), Alexander von Pflaum (a major German banker of the late 19th century, originating from Pflaumloch near Nördlingen), Dr Emanuel Weil (whose daughter Else Weil was the model for the sculpture of the "Stuttgardia" at the Stuttgart City Hall in 1905) and the almost forgotten historian Dr Maria Zelzer (author of "Path and fate of Stuttgart Jews"). With the co-operation of Dr Joachim Hahn these biographies are now available on the internet at

www.alemannia-judaica.de/harburgproject_biografien.htm

LECTURES AND OTHER EVENTS

During his time in Harburg, Rolf Hofmann gave lectures related to the history and culture of the district. He discussed, for example, the Liebmann/Rheingold brewery in Brooklyn, New York, whose ancestors came from Aufhausen near Nördlingen. He spoke at the Community College in Donauwörth (which had co-operated with the Harburg Synagogue Cultural Centre in organising various programs). He outlined the history of the Swabian Jews at an annual conference held in the former Irsee Monastery in Kaufbeuren, Bavaria. Publications include a treatise on the Wallersteiner Rabbinate in the Nördlingen Historical Association 2007 yearbook and articles in local newspapers.

Several presentations have been given at the annual event known as the European Day of Jewish Culture. In 2006, in Stuttgart, Rolf Hofmann gave a detailed slide presentation on notable Jewish personalities. The following year, in Mönchsdeggingen, he presented guide material describing various Jewish cemeteries in the region. In 2008, in Oberdorf (near Nördlingen), he mounted 50 information panels containing text and images in the town's former synagogue, on the biographies of notable Jewish personalities. This exhibition then became available as a virtual exhibition on the internet.

This biographical note describing the activities of Rolf Hofmann between 1986 and 2008 has been translated and edited from the original German as an expression of gratitude by Dr Paul Gardner AM, a retired Australian academic. Mr Hoffman's extraordinarily methodical research into the family trees of the Kronheimer, Hamburger and Bernheimer families allowed Dr Gardner to discover previously unknown 18th Century ancestors, two generations further back than he previously knew. From his newly discovered ancestors to his grandchildren, his family tree now spans nine generations.