

THE FATE OF USINGEN'S JEWS

The most moving memorial to the fate of Usingen's Jewish population during the Nazi dictatorship is represented by the so-called "Stolpersteine" – small brass plaques set into the pavements of the streets in the town centre. Initiated by pupils of the local high school with the active support of the town council, each plaque describes the fate of an individual Jew during the Nazi era. The following text is intended to provide information on the history and the fate of Usingen's Jewish citizens during the holocaust. The text is largely based on the tireless research carried out by local historian and former teacher, Stephan Kolb, for his book "Die Juden von Usingen". That this story will not be forgotten is largely due to him. Anyone interested in Usingen's history is recommended to read this book, recently updated by the author.

The massive campaign of discrimination and deprivation of civil rights and ultimate murder of Germany's Jewish population during the Nazi terror regime can also be traced in thousands of small towns in Germany, in which Jews had lived more or less peaceably for generations. This also applies to the town of Usingen, located in the picturesque Taunus Hills some 30 kilometres north-west of Frankfurt. The excesses of the so-called "Reichskristallnacht" (an allusion to the millions of glass fragments resulting from the smashing of the windows of Jewish homes and businesses) were in fact worse than in many other places in Germany, serious enough in fact that the local Nazi authorities prosecuted the perpetrators.

Local historians, husband and wife team Kaethner, record that Jews were already present in the Usingen area in the seventeenth century. In 1732 and subsequently in 1765, the local ruler Charlotte Amalie of Nassau-Saarbrücken issued a set of regulations ("Judenordnung") governing the lives of Jews in the Usingen area.

With the easing of the rules which had determined the day-to-day lives of Jews for centuries as a consequence of the Enlightenment, Jews became freer in their choice of profession and place of residence. The French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars brought temporary relief in the Emancipation of the Jews. Final equality in terms of full civil rights did not come however until Usingen, as part of the Duchy of Nassau, was annexed by Prussia in 1866.

Prior to the abolition of restrictions on Jews in the nineteenth century, the Jews had been excluded from the commercial and civil life of many small German towns such as Usingen. Amongst other measures, the regulations of local craft guilds protected manufacturing and trade from Jewish competition in most towns and cities. Excluded from other professions, the Jews of this area were forced into a precarious existence outside the towns as cattle traders, peddlers or frequently as

moneylenders, despised professions which branded all Jews as parasites, bloodsuckers and public enemies.

Following their emancipation, many Jews used their new-found freedom to set up in business in Usingen: for example, Leopold Goldschmidt opened a shoe shop on the corner of Kreuzgasse/Zitzergasse in 1866. Emanuel Hirsch set up a fashion shop in the Obergasse in 1874, S. Fuld sold textiles in his business on the Marktplatz, whilst Heinrich Gutenstein, a lawyer, opened an insurance agency in 1885. Many of these names may be found today on the Stolpersteine as their descendants became victims of the Holocaust. Jews also entered the professions as doctors, lawyers or academics.

Moreover, the Jews seem gradually to have found acceptance in the wider society. For example, representatives of other religious groups attended the inauguration of the Jewish cemetery in 1885.

As a young student, August Wilhelmj, a renowned violinist of his time, a colleague of the composer Richard Wagner and probably Usingen's most prominent celebrity, had lodgings with his teacher and mentor Ferdinand David, a converted Jew and himself a celebrated musician. Wilhelmj worked closely with contemporary Jewish musicians, who had a considerable influence on his whole musical environment. The same applies incidentally to the composer Richard Wagner. In contrast to the antisemite Richard Wagner, however, Wilhelmj always acknowledged the achievements of his Jewish colleagues.

Parallel with lifting of restrictions on Jews and the acceptance of their place in society, however, there were signs of increasing antisemitism in Usingen and elsewhere in Germany. Jewish cattle traders for example were subject to accusations of fraud and defamation, all of which were dismissed by the responsible local court in Usingen. Heinrich von Treitschke, the most widely read historian of

his time, wrote in a highly publicized article in 1879: *“The Jews are our downfall!”*; a call to battle subsequently adopted by the Nazis in their hate campaign against the Jews. From 1893, avowed antisemites were consistently elected to the Reichstag, the German parliament. The generally antisemitic mood in parts of imperial Germany is exemplified by the advertising used by many hotels (also in Schmitten, then a popular holiday resort, close to Usingen) that they were “judenfrei”, i.e. did not admit Jewish guests.

Such fateful developments were not restricted to Germany. In Russia, thousands of Jews fell victim to officially organized pogroms. In Vienna, Karl Lueger was repeatedly elected mayor from 1897 to 1910 with a blatantly antisemitic election programme. In France, the unjust condemnation of a senior Jewish army officer, Alfred Dreyfus, on false charges of treason provided the inspiration for the idea of the foundation of a refuge for Jews in Palestine (Theodor Herzl’s seminal work *“Der Judenstaat”*, published in 1896). This book gave rise to Zionism and 50 years later to the foundation of the State of Israel.

Other sources, however, demonstrate that the Jews in Usingen were not only accepted in society but were also well integrated. For example, Jewish citizens participated in the foundation in 1922 of what is still today Usingen’s most prominent school, the Christian Wirth High School and were also instrumental in establishing a public transport link between Usingen’s town centre and the railway station on the edge of the town. Usingen’s Jews were also active in the growth of clubs and societies – gymnastics, sport, music – in their local community. Right up to 1933, Jews were elected to executive positions in such organisations. The Jews also showed a surprising willingness to integrate into a largely Christian society. Bar mitzva, for example, (a Jewish ritual ceremony celebrating the passage of males into manhood at the age of 13 or bat mitzva for girls) was frequently referred to as “confirmation”, the Christian equivalent. Jews frequently adopted typical non-Jewish given names or even converted to the Christian faith. Prominent examples of this practice are the forbears of the composer Felix Mendelssohn, the poet Heinrich Heine and Karl Marx, the “founder” of Communism.

German Jews were also keen to show their patriotism and loyalty to the German emperor in the highly nationalistic fervour following Prussia’s crushing victory over France and the unification of

Germany in 1871. Moreover, they fully shared the warlike mood of many Germans on the outbreak of the First World War in July 1914. The Usingen Jew Moritz Rosenberg was even inspired to write a highly nationalistic poem which contains the lines:

“Do you want hoards of Frenchies to ravage our beautiful Usingen countryside, to destroy our farms?”

The death notices of soldiers killed in the war frequently include Jewish names. Even the Jews’ achievements in the war however gave rise to signs of antisemitism: for example, in a so-called “Jewish Census” carried out throughout the whole of Germany intended to show that Jews sought to avoid military service. The results of the count contradicted this spurious charge but were never published. A total of 12,000 German Jews fell in the First World War.

A permanent record of the Usingen Jews who died for “Emperor and fatherland” may be found on the war memorial which still stands in Usingen’s Schlossgarten. In fact, most of the costs of this memorial erected after the war were born by a Jewish family Hirschberg, formerly residents in Usingen, which had previously emigrated and achieved financial success in the USA. The monument was inaugurated in 1929, an event accompanied by patriotic speeches delivered by representatives from the town and its religious groups, including members of the Jewish community.

The outbreak of the international financial crisis in 1929 heightened political tension in Germany and gave a boost to Adolf Hitler’s National Socialist party. From about 1930, Usingen became a bastion of the Nazis when a local branch of the party was opened at Kreuzgasse 9. Public demonstrations organised by Usingen’s Nazis warned Jews to keep away: “no admission to Jews!”. The opposition Social Democrats however countered in a massive demonstration attended by “700 to 800” participants on Usingen’s Marktplatz. Given the feverish political atmosphere from roughly 1929, Usingen witnessed frequent fights between Nazi supporters and their political opponents.

In the still free and democratic elections for the German Reichstag in July 1932, the Nazi party in Usingen received 61.7% of the popular vote, compared with 37.3% throughout the whole of Germany. The Nazi vote was even higher in the rural farming areas outside the town. Prominent amongst opinion-formers for the Nazis in rural

areas were to be found schoolteachers and Protestant pastors, i.e. the intellectual elite”, who obviously had considerable influence in their community.

Soon after Hitler came to power as German chancellor on January 31st 1933, throughout Germany officials belonging to the SPD or who were otherwise not in line with the new regime were dismissed. In Usingen, the mayor, the head of the local police force and the director of the high school were dismissed within a few months of the Nazis coming to power. In its meeting on March 31st 1933, the members of the local council voted unanimously to elect Hitler as an honorary citizen of Usingen and to rename the Marktplatz “Adolf-Hitler-Platz”, the Untergasse “Hermann-Göring-Straße” and the Obergasse “Horst-Wessel-Straße”. In Usingen, as in the whole of Germany, April 1st 1933 was declared an “Action Day” on which Jewish businesses, lawyers and doctors were subject to a boycott. Stormtroopers of the local SA marched aggressively through Usingen in order to enforce the boycott. Although at this time no violence was used against the town’s Jewish population, this event effectively marked the exclusion of Usingen’s Jews from public life – barely a month after Hitler’s seizure of power! Jews subsequently reported that from the time of the Action Day in April 1933, open friendships between Jews and their non-Jewish neighbours virtually ceased. Privately, however, covert relationships certainly continued and even known Nazi party members maintained contacts with Jews, whom they had possibly known since their earliest childhood.

Moreover, Jews and other known opponents of the Nazis were systematically excluded from senior positions in Usingen clubs, societies and sports organisations, as these were integrated into the Nazis’ own strict reorganisation of society. The local dean of the Protestant church in Usingen commented at the time: “Thank God that he sent us the Führer!”. Christ’s servant was however silent when Usingen’s synagogue was plundered and ultimately defiled.

From 1933 onwards Germany’s new masters also pursued with absolute rigour their policy of discrimination and exclusion in Usingen’s schools. Dr. Heinrich Walter, the headmaster of the Christian Wirth School, who shortly before the Nazis’ seizure of power had made a courageous speech defending the Weimar Republic, was dismissed from his position due to pressure from

local Nazis. The only Jewish teacher at this school, Gustav Blum, was also dismissed and was ultimately murdered in Theresienstadt concentration camp. Nine Jewish pupils attended the school during the period from 1922 to 1937. Several of these pupils’ grades can be proved to have been unfairly marked down by their teachers. Pupils regularly appeared in class in their Hitler Youth uniforms and were even prominent at anti-Jewish demonstrations in 1938. It is therefore no wonder that several of these young men eagerly volunteered when war broke out. Ironically, however, four former Jewish pupils who managed to flee to the USA returned to Usingen as part of the US army of occupation after Germany’s defeat in 1945.

Initially, many German Jews naively believed that the Nazis “wouldn’t be so bad”, that Hitler and the Nazis would be a one-day wonder. In fact, keen to avoid unpleasant incidents before an international public, the Olympic Games in Berlin in 1936 brought the Jews a certain relief from the crudest forms of discrimination. At the latest by 1938 however these hopes proved to be an illusion. As part of a whole range of discriminatory measures, Jews were excluded from commercial life, forced to sell their businesses below their true value, barred from the media whilst Jewish doctors and lawyers were forbidden to practice and Jews were compelled to add the names Israel and Sarah to their given names. All in all, having been dispossessed and excluded from German society, many Jews saw no alternative but to leave Germany, the only country many of them had ever known.

Many Jewish families left their hometown and fled to Frankfurt and other major cities in order to seek protection and solidarity amongst other Jews. Many major cities were also host to foreign consulates which might be prepared to issue visas allowing Jews to flee Germany. In reality, however, countries like the USA and Great Britain pursued a highly restrictive immigration policy with regard to destitute Jews. In 1938, for example, the Rosenberg and Blum families left Usingen for Frankfurt, whilst the Rosenthal and Hirsch families sent their children to relations in major cities. The Gutenstein family, whose ancestors in Usingen can be traced back to the Thirty Years War in the 17th century, left Usingen only six weeks before the infamous “Reichskristallnacht”.

The plundering of Jewish property and physical attacks on Jews, which reached its height

throughout Germany on “Reichskristallnacht” on November 9th 1938, began several weeks earlier in Usingen. On October 1st already, the home of the Hirsch family was occupied by Nazi thugs and items of furniture stolen. The Usingen synagogue in the Klaubergasse was desecrated and the building sold. The local newspaper, the *Usinger Anzeiger*, almost expressed pleasure at this outrage, commenting “*The Usingen synagogue will now be put to a useful purpose, which better serves the people of Usingen*”.

On November 10th, after the Reichskristallnacht had passed its high point elsewhere in Germany, a group of Hitler Youth, led by well-known Usingen Nazis, drove the Hirsch, Rosenthal and Baum families from their homes and severely manhandled their victims in full view of the population of Usingen. Both of Frau Hirsch’s arms were broken. Herr Hirsch had to run the gauntlet throughout the town and was finally tipped into a local stream from a handcart used to transport the severely injured man. That he even survived this ordeal was only due to help from the neighbouring village of Wehrheim, including the local mayor Wilhelm.

It should be mentioned at this point that in Usingen’s neighbouring village Wehrheim not a single Jew was murdered as part of the Nazi Holocaust. Nor was this a coincidence or a matter of chance. Ordinary citizens in Wehrheim ensured in a coordinated action that “their” Jews, including their furniture and other possessions, were brought to relative safety in Frankfurt at a time when Jews were forbidden to own a motor vehicle. Shortly before the so-called Reichskristallnacht, the local Nazi-appointed mayor had even warned Wehrheim’s Jews that he could no longer guarantee their safety. The same situation occurred in nearby Anspach, a bastion of the Social Democrats, a banned political organisation during the Nazi era. These examples of civil courage on the part of ordinary people prove that not all Germans were intimidated by the Nazi terror regime and that ordinary decent Germans incurred considerable personal risk to assist Jews. But not in Usingen.

The incidents which occurred in Usingen cited above however are merely a few examples of the persecution endured by Usingen’s Jewish citizens. Stephan Kolb’s research reveals many more incidents which graphically illustrate the horrors of the Reichskristallnacht on the streets of Usingen. It is however important to recall that the

tormenters and their victims were not strangers but neighbours, former schoolmates, business colleagues, possibly even close friends at one time. Several of the Jewish victims were once respected veterans of the First World War, who in many cases still bore the consequences of injuries sustained in the war. Nor did these outrages take place in secret but in the presence frequently of 150 to 200 perpetrators and witnesses – citizens of Usingen. Nor are there any reports of Usinger people coming to the aid of their persecuted Jewish neighbours, whereby such assistance cannot be completely excluded. Nor are any protests from the religious communities – neither Protestant nor Catholic – recorded at the time. Church records also make no mention of the horrific events of November 1938, which occurred literally on the doorsteps of the local churches.

The events in Usingen were even considered by the internal Nazi judiciary to be excessive, leading to a sort of trial before a Nazi court, in which the charges were not the mistreatment of Jews but the plundering of property and theft which accompanied these events. Apart from a number of party exclusions however, all the accused were ultimately acquitted.

By 1939 Usingen was truly “judenfrei” (free of Jews). Most Usingen Jews fled initially to Frankfurt, frequently with the intention of leaving the country. Since however the regime had previously robbed the Jews of most of their wealth through confiscations, the forced sale of their businesses below value and similar measures and Jews wishing to leave the country were required to pay a special tax, for many Jews the option of seeking refuge abroad was excluded for financial reasons. Many German Jews fled to neighbouring countries in Europe (like the family of Anna Frank, who fled to Holland) where they felt secure until the German occupation after the war broke out meant that their apparent refuge became a trap, leading to their ultimate deportation to a death camp. Palestine became a popular destination but the British rulers of the time, who had been “mandated” by the Treaty of Versailles to govern the territory, severely restricted Jewish immigration, fearing a counterreaction from the local Arab population in Palestine. As Britain declared war on Germany on September 3rd 1939, German refugees in Britain, including Jews fleeing the Holocaust, were forcibly interned in depressing camps as “enemy aliens”. German Jews also found refuge in Turkey (including Ernst Reuter, for example, the first post-

war mayor of west Berlin), China and a number of countries in South America.

The most favoured goal for many Jews was of course the USA, where many Germans (including Jews) had lived and prospered for generations. Emigration to the USA however required either the right connections or sufficient wealth to pay the deposit required by the American authorities for foreigners wishing to remain in the country. Several former Usingen Jews achieved notable positions in the USA: Günter Gutenstein, for example, a former pupil of the Christian Wirth School, became one of the most renowned constitutional lawyers of his time.

Such successes were however rather the exception amongst the exiles. Most Jews who were able to seek refuge from the Nazi murderers arrived penniless in countries in which they did not speak the language, knew nothing of the way of life, their German professional qualifications were not recognised and the reception in their country of exile was anything but welcoming. German Jews ("Jeckes" in Yiddish) even had a difficult start in Palestine: the country needed farmers, construction workers, also men accustomed to handling weapons for self-defence, abilities which most new arrivals had to learn quickly in order to

achieve acceptance. Moreover, prior to the Nazis, Zionism as an ideology and the establishment of a Jewish state found little support in Germany, in accordance with the conviction amongst most Jews that "our homeland is Germany".

In Usingen, for example, there is absolutely no record of an event devoted to Zionism ever having taken place. Zionism was chiefly of interest to East European Jews!

Stephan Kolb's book lists the names of 62 Usingen Jews who were victims of the Holocaust and were murdered in Nazi deathcamps. No single Usingen Jew who survived this terrible period in German history returned to live in Usingen. In one sense therefore the Nazis succeeded in their goal of eliminating Jewish life in the town. The fate of Usingen's Jews has however had a sequel, which may be partly described as a "happy end". In 1989, the Usingen council invited all surviving Jewish emigres to a "Week of Reconciliation". This event gave rise to many meetings between Usingen Jews who had once been victims of persecution and the people of Usingen. Memories were revived and reminiscences exchanged. This terrible time is however not forgotten. Amongst other things, the so-called "Stolpersteine" ensure that it never will be forgotten.