

An Overview of Jewish Community Institutions in Linz

Beginnings

The history of the Jewish inhabitants of Linz, in common with that of many other European cities, shows acceptance and rejection, toleration and expulsion as a cyclical phenomenon. It is unclear when Jews first settled in Linz, but a significant population increase has been documented from the early decades of the 14th century. There is also documentary evidence of the expulsion of the entire Jewish population of Linz in 1426 because of an alleged desecration of the host (the communion wafer used in the Catholic mass) in the nearby town of Enns.

It was only in the first half of the 19th century that significant numbers of Jewish traders from Southern Bohemia in today's Czech Republic arrived in Linz.

After the March Constitution

The Constitution proclaimed by Emperor Franz Joseph in 1849 conferred civil rights on Jewish families. However, their implementation was made exceedingly difficult due to the innate prejudice of the Christian population who felt threatened by strong Jewish competition.

In 1851 the first application to have the Jewish community accepted as an officially recognised religious association failed. By 1858 approximately 50 Jewish families were living in Linz, mostly as traders. Religious services could only be held in Badgasse and Adlergasse under strict supervision by the police. In 1861 the first house of prayer was instituted under the leadership of the first rabbi known by name, Wilhelm Stern.

In 1863 the Community succeeded in acquiring a small piece of land for a cemetery; previously the deceased had to be transported to Southern Bohemia for funerals.

In 1870 the City Council approved the bye-laws of an 'Israelite Cultural Association'. This came three years after the promulgation of the *Staatsgrundgesetz* (Fundamental Law), which gave equal rights to Jews and resulted in a marked increase in the number of settlers and business start-ups in Linz and Urfahr. Based on these legal rights further matters of concern could now be addressed. In 1872 the Jewish Community acquired a house with a garden in Bethlehemstrasse 26, which has remained the seat of the administration and the synagogue to this day.

In 1876 the foundations were laid for a very large temple. The official opening the following year by the President of the Association, Dr. Leopold Winternitz, and Rabbi Dr. Adolf Kurrein was a major public event as the monumental synagogue was a unique building in Western Austria.

From the beginning Jewish families in Linz tried to integrate with the Christian population as much as possible. They sent their children to the public schools; they attempted to make their worship understandable to their non-Jewish neighbours with a 'House of Prayer for All Nations'. During the Liberal period the Jewish bourgeoisie emulated the way of life of the non-Jewish bourgeois world. The cost of this conscious assimilation lay in a wider secularization and a gradual distancing from strict adherence to religious ritual.

Liberalism determined the *Weltanschauung* of Austrian Jews and remained important for many, even after it had lost political power.

In 1883 Linz received a new rabbi, Moriz Friedmann.

Late 19th and Early 20th Centuries

At the end of the Liberal era the conflict of nationalities within the Monarchy intensified. The Liberals were faced with a new opponent, a young, highly educated generation with radical nationalist and anti-Semitic business interests. Jews responded with Jewish-national and Zionist ideas. In Linz the first public propaganda can be traced to 1897. After Linz became a centre of the anti-Semitic Pan-German movement at the turn of the century, Zionism was established there with the foundation of a first club in 1906 (the individual club Linz of the 'Zion'-Association of Austrian clubs for the colonisation of Palestine and Syria). Until then the various clubs had been founded with humanitarian objectives, but now cultural interests clubs affiliated with the synagogue ('Equality' and 'Unitas') and Jewish national concerns (Girls' Club 'Esther', Youth Club 'Blue-and-White', Gymnasts' Club) also came into play. Jews were forced to retreat from an ever more hostile society and so wanted to counter the rising hatred by strengthening their self-confidence.

Before the turn of the century there had been a decline in Jewish immigration but then the number of Jews living in Linz and Upper Austria increased again until World War One. The majority lived in Linz and Urfahr; another centre was Steyr. Jews were also registered in Wels, Freistadt and other regional towns. Most of them were in business, many running family firms. The isolation of the Jewish Community continued, since the Christian artisan middle classes in particular were attracted to the anti-Semitism and anti-capitalism of the Pan-Germans.

In 1906 the sweets manufacturer Benedikt Schwager became the official leader of the Linz Jewish Community. He used his integrative and social abilities for almost thirty years, both within the Community and outside. As a child of the most liberal era and a representative of the assimilated Jewish bourgeoisie he was very open to the new

Zionist ideas promulgated within the Community, especially by his own children. At the same time he realised the importance of maintaining all the necessary institutions for those members of the Community who still lived strictly according to ritual law.

The effects of the non-Jewish youth movement in general and its anti-Semitism in particular resulted in a stronger cohesion amongst Jewish youth in Linz. Young Jews were often exposed to anti-Semitic propaganda, and their meetings were designed to strengthen their own sense of identity.

World War One

In World War One many Jewish men served on the different fronts and so gained insight into the different Jewish communities within the Monarchy. At the same time Jewish soldiers from many other areas were stationed in Linz and brought new ideas with them.

The problems of feeding and housing the streams of refugees from the East were grave, especially since many within the Community let themselves be caught up in wave of hatred for the supposedly 'uncultured Eastern Jews'. The Women's Association was the first to recognise the need for action to help their Jewish brothers and sisters living in overcrowded camps.

After World War One

After the collapse of the Monarchy in 1918 political polarization arose between the bourgeois parties and the Social Democrats. Politically ambitious Jews found a political home with the latter. In May 1919 some even ran for office in the Linz council elections, which were the first to be conducted according to the new laws guaranteeing direct, equal and secret voting rights for all including women – revolutionary changes which soon had their effect on the Jewish Community.

Young Zionists in Linz saw themselves as the representatives of a new Jewish nation that did not concentrate solely on religious needs. With the publication of the 'Jewish News for the German-Austrian Province' they made Linz an outpost of Zionist propaganda, independent of Vienna. This resulted in an optimistic mood as well as a certain amount of disquiet in the small community. The conflict between those members of the Community who wanted to follow the path of assimilation and the young, politically motivated reformers was intense but was always democratically resolved within the framework of elections. It also resulted in some constructive changes, e.g. the introduction of votes for women in elections to the Board of the Jewish Community as early as 1919 (in Vienna women were not allowed to vote until 1938) and the expansion of educational and leisure activities, for example language and general Zionist courses, the establishment of a department for Palestine, a job centre, promotion of sports and the expansion of youth work.

1923 saw the highest number of Jews ever recorded in a census in Linz, 931. This large number can be explained by the arrival of many refugees during and after World War One. The last rabbi of the congregation, Viktor Kurrein, took office that year.

During this phase of peaceful co-existence the Jewish Community celebrated the 50th anniversary of its synagogue (1927) and the award of the Silver Medal of the Republic of Austria to the President of the Community, Benedikt Schwager (1928). Both occasions were celebrated with the full participation of church and civil authorities of the city of Linz.

The World Economic Crisis

The number of Nazi sympathisers in Linz and Upper Austria increased steadily from 1931 onwards. Hitler sent Theo Habicht to Austria as a 'Country Inspector'. He was very successful in the recruitment of disillusioned members of the 'Heimwehr' (Home Defence Corps) and Pan-Germans. Walter Pfrimer, the leader of the 'Steirischer Heimatschutz' (Styrian Home Defence Corps), organised a 'March on Vienna' to eliminate democracy and establish a fascist dictatorship, the so-called 'Pfrimer-Putsch'. These events and their consequences, as well as the developments in neighbouring Germany, also affected the situation in Linz, and the political climate deteriorated.

The Jewish Community became very nervous. The Zionists reached their declared aim of a majority on the Board but the difficulties within the international Zionist movement filtered down to even the smallest local communities. Supporters of Jabotinsky and his rightist Zionist party (Zionist Revisionist) caused some disquiet in the policy of the Community with their radical demands. Benedikt Schwager, the representative of the assimilated members who favoured dialogue, resigned as President in 1934. At this time the Jewish Community in Linz numbered 671 members.

The Corporate State (*Ständestaat*)

With Hitler's accession to power in Germany, the number of Nazi rallies, demonstrations and marches increased greatly, also in Austria. The Austrian government reacted with a ban on all NSDAP activities in 1933 but introduced various measures against the Social Democrats as well at the same time. In fact, the government actively promoted the dismantling of democracy. Tensions culminated in the civil war of 1934, which started in Linz. As a result of the conflict, the Social Democratic Party was dissolved and made illegal, and an authoritarian Corporate State was proclaimed. Austria's Jewish population, though politically ranging from left to right and so of widely varying opinions regarding the Corporate State, was united in one chief concern, that Austria remain an independent state.

Given the political conflicts within the Jewish Community, effective work became increasingly difficult – unity was not achieved until 1938. The Zionist right and left

fought amongst themselves, mostly by way of their publications, '*Mitteilungen für die jüdische Bevölkerung der Alpenländer*' ('Information for the Jewish Population of the Alpine Countries'), '*Revisionistisches Nachrichtenblatt für die jüdische Bevölkerung*' ('Revisionist News for the Jewish Population'), and clubs of the various factions tried to recruit each others' members. The increasingly threatening anti-Semitic measures implemented in Germany, such as the Nuremberg Race Laws promulgated in 1935, added to the tensions.

With a moderate-left-coalition Zionist majority on the Board, various long-overdue demands could now be implemented, for example improved religious instruction, centralised cultural and social administration, youth assistance and increased assistance for the redevelopment of Palestine. The agreement concluded between the Austrian government and the German Reich in July 1936, which included the amnesty of imprisoned National Socialists and required two members of the National Socialist opposition to be admitted to the government, signalled a general turn towards National Socialism. At the same time anti-Semitism became official policy.

After 12th March 1938

With Hitler's annexation, Austria's autonomy ended even faster than feared. For the Jewish population the consequences were devastating. Immediately after 12th March 1938 a wave of arrests started. Representatives of the Corporate State, Jewish business people and executives of Jewish community organisations became the first victims. For this reason the panic-stricken Jews could not reach their leaders. Rabbi Kurrein no longer appeared in public. All the community's assets were confiscated. The brutality visited on the Jewish population, which until recently had considered itself well-integrated, drove an appalling number of the persecuted to suicide.

Max Hirschfeld, a member of the Burial Society in charge of funerals, was appointed leader of the Commission for Jewish Affairs installed by the new government. He appears to have proved a useful collaborator of the Gestapo. Together with his staff he was charged with implementing discriminatory practices and also became the organiser of the energetically pursued policy of 'emigration' of Linz's Jewish population. This function gave him the power over life and death. He knew how to use this positively for many members of the Community, while for others he became the instrument of disaster.

The implementation of the Nuremberg Race Laws saw the authorities overextended. They speculated and voiced suspicions as to who was Jewish. Catholic and Protestant parish registries became instruments of racial injustice, either voluntarily or through coercion. Since the authorities thought Linz would enjoy a privileged position as the Führer's hometown, they were interested in a quick dispersal of the Jewish population. Immediately following the *Anschluss* they attempted to withdraw the Jews' economic basis through the 'Aryanisation', confiscation, expropriation and

closure of Jewish businesses. In May 1938 Jewish children were excluded from public schools and thus a Jewish School was founded. During the summer months a number of children and young people left Linz for Palestine with the help of organisations such as the 'Youth Alijah' and 'Wizo'. The long tradition of Zionist youth work now bore fruit. Most young Jews had been members of the moderate Zionist clubs 'ITUS' and 'Blue-and-White' or the Zionist revisionist association 'Betar' since they were no longer admitted to public sports and youth clubs. In these clubs emigration to Erez Israel had been praised as the highest ideal and attempts had been made to make the young people familiar with the history and Hebrew language of Palestine.

Women and girls tried to find positions as home helps in England and Holland. The fear of searches and arrests and the worry about partners, sons and fathers who had already been taken to camps was always present. Free movement was increasingly restricted and isolation grew.

Violence by the National Socialist regime against Jews reached its sad peak with the attacks shortly beforehand. Many women and children were exposed to the brutality of the SA in the *Reichskristallnacht*, a particularly vicious and well-orchestrated pogrom, which took place throughout Germany and parts of Austria on November 9 and 10. The Linz synagogue was torched and destroyed. In the following days and weeks many members of the Community as well as those men and women defined as Jews by the authorities desperately tried to obtain entry permits to other countries. For many people illegal transport under dire conditions was the only salvation.

In April 1939 the entire register of the Linz Jewish Community was transferred to Berlin (it could never be traced again after the war), in June the ruined synagogue and the rabbi's house was transferred to the Post Office estates and in October 1939 the Jewish cemetery was leased to the administration of the St. Barbara Cemetery Trust. At the end of the year Max Hirschfeld left the 'sinking ship' for the USA. Most of the Jews of Linz had already escaped abroad or had been forced to move to Vienna and only a few remained in Linz and Upper Austria. Most of these were protected through marriage to Aryan partners or as parents of part-Aryan children. Hirschfeld's last co-workers, Otto Unger and Johann Kramer, remained in Linz until 1943. They could no longer leave at that time, were deported to Theresienstadt and did not survive the holocaust.

Most of the members of the Linz Jewish Community, which numbered about 600 in 1938, escaped to Israel, many to the USA, others to England, Holland and South America. Those seeking refuge in Bohemia and Southern Moravia were soon overtaken by the Nazis, and a similar fate later befell those who had fled to Holland and France. Most, however, remained for some time in Vienna, only a few in Linz. From 1942 mass deportations started from Vienna, often via Theresienstadt, or directly to Auschwitz. A few Jews from Linz and Upper Austria were taken on trucks to Theresienstadt. In 1943 Jews considered protected up to now were also moved into camps

or to Vienna or were at least threatened with deportation. The long tradition of anti-Semitism did not allow any opposition to arise.

According to preliminary research 194 Jews of Linz are commemorated as victims of the National Socialist regime on a plaque by the Linz Community. However, the number of murder victims is much higher if one looks beyond those on the residents' register on 12th March 1938.

After World War Two

After the end of the war Linz became the most highly frequented transit station for concentration camp survivors. Four camps for Jewish DPs (Displaced Persons) are said to have existed in the greater Linz area until 1950. The first Jewish Community, founded in Linz after the war, looked after the refugees. Only after 1948 and the founding of the state of Israel did the number of DPs diminish.

Between 10 to 20 Jews of Linz origin returned there, finally achieving legal status for the Community in 1951. Until then it was governed by a provisional Board, chaired by Ernst Hartmann. There were 161 members at that time.

The period after the war was spent searching for everything that had been lost, tracing murdered or expelled friends and relations, trying to re-enter one's profession, searching for documents, furniture and family mementos, finally seeking compensation and the possibility of living in Linz in dignity after the catastrophe, as citizens enjoying equal rights.

In 1968 a new synagogue was erected on the spot where the old one had stood.

In 1980 Dipl.-Ing. George Wozasek became the president of the community of approximately 50 Jews in all of Upper Austria.