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Das mehrsprachige Webportal publiziert fortlaufend Informationen zur historisch-politischen Bildung in Schulen, Gedenkstätten und anderen Einrichtungen zur Geschichte des 20. Jahrhunderts. Schwerpunkte bilden der Nationalsozialismus, der Zweite Weltkrieg sowie die Folgegeschichte in den Ländern Europas bis zu den politischen Umbrüchen 1989.

Dabei nimmt es Bildungsangebote in den Fokus, die einen Gegenwartsbezug der Geschichte herausstellen und bietet einen Erfahrungsaustausch über historisch-politische Bildung in Europa an.

"Jewish History in our Neighborhood,"

by Christina Willing and Andrea Stech

In order to learn about the Jews in Halle, some of the participants of our project group visited Dr. Helbig, former chairman of the Halle Jewish community. In an evening-long conversation, he told us a great deal about his people.

He reported that the first reliable reference to Jews in Halle was in 970 A.D. They were pillars of foreign trade, as they were in other important localities in the eastern Saale settlement area. They were willing to assume the risks and difficulties of the overland trade routes in order to sell salt, since the salt springs were the reason for human settlement in the vicinity of Halle. Salt, which was essential for life and therefore expensive, offered the citizens a chance for wealth and prosperity. However, once the trading routes were reasonably secure, Christian traders reclaimed the privilege of the salt trade, since they wanted the profits for themselves. Jews were only allowed back into the salt trade when Christian traders thought that the trade routes were too dangerous to do business.

The earliest evidence of a Jewish settlement in Halle, the so-called Judendorf [Jewish town], was in 1185. It was completely encircled by the first city wall of Halle, and was thus an integral part of the city. The "Judendorf" and synagogue were located at what would later become Moritzburg, while the

cemetery was outside, near today's Jägerplatz. In 1987, gravesites were discovered during construction work, which were identified as part of a Slavic and Jewish cemetery by the staff of the Museum for Prehistoric and Early History. In 1992, these bones were turned over to the Jewish community and reburied with a memorial stone at the Jewish cemetery on Dessauer Straße.

From the time of the creation of the "Judendorf" until the end of the 15th century, the Jews were driven out of Halle many times, for example, in 1207, when Christians burned Jewish homes. The reason for this is not known. People easily believed that Jews were responsible for various ills and catastrophes in the city, such as allegedly causing the plague in 1348/49 and poisoning the wells in 1382. The early Jewish community of Halle ended suddenly when Archbishop Ernst expelled all Jews from the Magdeburg diocese in 1493. For the following 200 years, there were no Jews in Halle. Many of the expelled went to Poland, where they were received with open arms. There they retained the use of their Middle High German language, resulting in the development of Yiddish, which is 70 percent Middle High German. The rest consists of Slavic influences. An example of a Yiddish word would be "schlamassel." Dr. Helbig told us a brief anecdote about those times: A young Jew from Poland who did not speak German but only his native Yiddish visited his uncle in Berlin. He was introduced to his uncle's friends and despite initial difficulties, they were soon able to understand each other splendidly. After he returned to Poland, he was asked how he had communicated with the Berliners. His reply: "There was absolutely no problem for me, for believe me, they all speak Yiddish there, but very poor Yiddish."

Only in 1688 were Jewish families again allowed to settle in Halle. They came overwhelmingly from Berlin and Halberstadt in order to increase trade in this city of the Saale. The newly created university in 1694 drew many students and professors to Halle, whose commercial needs the immigrants intended to supply. In September 1692, the first traditional religious service among the returned Jewish families took place on the Jewish New Year (Rosh Hashanah), and the first burial took place on their own land. After this, their situation continued to improve.

In 1704, the Jewish community was incorporated, receiving the "general privilege of the Jews in Halle"; which had begun with the consecration of the cemetery in 1693. The building of a cemetery, requiring at least 500 burials, meant that the Jewish community had developed roots and wanted to stay. In 1703 a new synagogue was consecrated, and civil court jurisdiction was established for Jews.

The first Jew graduated from Halle University in 1724. At that time, Jews were only allowed to study medicine, since the occupation of physician was the only independent profession allowed them. By 1800, with the support of the community, about 60 Jewish medical students had graduated.

A royal decree of 1808 granted full equality before the law and religious freedom between Jews and Christians and removed all special taxes and levies. However, the Prussian king Friedrich Wilhelm IV issued a "Law Concerning the Situation of Jews" in 1847 which re-regulated the economic and civil status of Jews just before the middle-class revolution of 1848-49. This law resulted in new limitations on the civic rights of Jews. For example, they were not allowed to work as policemen, judges, or to hold administrative offices; could teach only medicine, mathematics, geography, and languages at the university, and could not be appointed dean, rector, or provost. This law also established the creation of synagogue districts with elected chairmen or representatives, who could make decisions independently about communal needs, for example, opening cemeteries or private Jewish schools. Based on this legislation, the Halle Jewish community passed its first statutes in October 1885, and these were ratified in December 1885 by the chief executive of the province of Saxony.

The first rabbi of the Jewish community in Halle took office in 1860, and continued in this capacity for the next 28 years. Dr. Wilhelm Fröhlich, born in Moravia in 1831, was appointed to this position immediately after he completed his examinations at the University of Halle. This very popular rabbi initiated the building of a new synagogue located at Großen Berlin to replace the 1703 building that had already been expanded in 1829, opened a new cemetery, and participated in municipal civic affairs. Dr. Wilhelm Fröhlich died at the early age of 57, and his burial at the new cemetery on Humboldtstraße on September 4, 1888, was well attended. His obituary stated: "This prematurely deceased clergyman had served for 28 years in his first and only position with unrelenting conscientiousness. During this time, he not only received the love and respect of those of his own religion, but also the esteem of all other religious congregations as well as the citizens of Halle. His upright character and selfless devotion to everything good and noble will secure his everlasting remembrance in our community."

In 1894, the cemetery chapel, where Dr. Fröhlich was buried, was consecrated. This cemetery had been used since 1869, when the first cemetery at Töpferplan, near the Leipzig tower, had run out of

space.

Many Jews moved to Halle and the community steadily grew. Since several of the members of the community were wealthy, they were able to endow private charitable foundations to assist more indigent Jews. For example, in 1839, the "Society of Benevolent Brethren" and an subsidiary women's organization were created to assist sick and needy Jews, and to assist with their burials.

The First World War required sacrifices by the Halle Jewish community as well as the rest of Germany, and 31 sons of Jewish families were killed between 1914 and 1918.

Since 1904, the Jewish community had tried acquire a new cemetery, and it purchased ten hectares of land (ca. 25,000 sq. ft.) opposite the Gertrauden cemetery. The magistrate, however, refused to negotiate because of building plans for this area which already existed. In March 1924, new negotiations took place, finally resulting in the exchange of the acquired land for a 7.5-hectare section of land in Boelckestraße in April 1925. Since the new cemetery expansion had been very expensive, the community considered forgoing construction of a hall for memorial services. However, this idea was withdrawn when the communal representative assembly decided in 1928 to build a funeral chapel based on the designs of the Leipzig architect Wilhelm Haller; it was dedicated on November 20, 1929. In addition to the new cemetery, the community acquired the house at Germarstraße 12 in 1927, which together with the building at Große Markerstraße 13 forms the community center today. Despite the financial burden, the entire community was pleased with the acquisition of the new cemetery and communal center. No one could foresee that the "house of life" in Boelckestraße would become a "house of death" a few years later, serving as the last stop for many Jews before their deportation to the various concentration camps.

After the Nazis assumed power in 1933, anti-Semitism in Germany reached new heights. The massive attacks against the Jews began with the boycott slogans of April 1, 1933, that for example informed "Germans not to buy from Jews; the Jews are your downfall" and "Do not go to Jewish attorneys or tax advisers." Jewish professors and instructors were stopped by guards from entering Halle University and holding their classes. After several days, the national boycott ended, but those who believed that the anti-Semitic agitation had ended would, unfortunately, soon find out differently. The

events of 1937 revealed to what extent anti-Semitism was leading toward annihilation. The Nazi regime forced the Jewish community to desecrate their most sacred place – their cemetery – with their own hands. None of the methods used by the Nazis to oppress them had struck them as hard as being forced to move the 180 gravestones from the oldest cemetery at Gottesackerstraße to the Boecklestraße cemetery, since they strongly believed that the final resting places of Jews ought not to be disturbed. The bones were transferred by handcarts from Gottesackerstraße to Boecklestraße cemetery. The problem of directing the graves to face symbolically eastwards was solved at the reburial by using a collective grave. The bones were buried under a stone slab, at the center of a square constructed from the 180 gravestones, in which the newer stones on the outside projected the highest from the ground and the older stones toward the middle were buried more deeply in the earth. This procedure is unique.

An additional serious blow against the community was the pogrom night of November 9, 1938. After fanatical anti-Semites removed valuable gold and silver objects from the synagogue at Große Berlin, they burned the Jewish place of assembly down. Valuable Torah scrolls, carpets, and runners, as well as the organ were burned. Simultaneously, Jewish homes and business were vandalized and set on fire. Hermann Göring, then on a special train from Munich to Berlin, was informed by a train conductor that fires could be seen in Halle. During the pogrom night alone, 124 Jewish men were deported to Buchenwald concentration camp. During the next two years, 1939-40, the memorial chapel at Boelckestraße became a ghetto and served as a transit station for Jews from western Germany (as for example, from Baden and the Saar) for deportation to various concentration camps. In 1942, deportation trains took Halle Jews to Auschwitz and Buchenwald and even in 1945, the last transports were going to Theresienstadt. Jews were exposed to the worst persecutions. They were compelled to surrender their valuables, such as jewelry and electrical equipment, and forced to perform slave labor.

However, the worst tortures were those which the Jews, whether men, women, or children, had to suffer in the concentration camps, where death represented more of a release than a horror. The Jewish communities were wiped out of Germany through these atrocities; only very few Jews could attack the Nazi regime through the underground movement.

The memories of these horrible times are especially important today, to remind us of what human

beings are capable of doing. Dr. Helbig spoke of a legacy that the murdered Jews had given to him for his path through life: "Speak for us! Let nothing like fascism ever happen again in Germany!"

After their liberations from Hitler's fascism in 1945-46, those who had survived the Holocaust founded on January 31, 1947, the "Jewish Association," which revived the Jewish community in Halle as part of the charities of the province of Saxony. The first official act of the community was to reopen the memorial chapel on Dessauer Straße (formerly Boelckestraße) in order to bury the dead according to Jewish tradition. The unused section of the cemetery was utilized, as before, for raising vegetables. In 1947, the rebuilding of the cemetery chapel at Humboldtstraße as a synagogue was begun; it was finished, after several delays, in 1953. The synagogue had already been dedicated in July 1947, long before reconstruction was completed. After negotiations, the community also got the house at Große Markerstraße 13 back, where two communal rooms could be used. When the head of the Halle community, Herman Baden, was elected head of the Association of Jewish Communities in the German Democratic Republic, Halle became the headquarters of this Association in 1952. After Baden's death, the headquarters were moved to Dresden in 1962.

After the Berlin Wall was built, it was largely impossible to maintain exchanges with Jewish communities in the western part of Germany. Although the state did not support the communities, it respected them and did not interfere in their lives. The size of the Jewish community shrank steadily. Halle was a transit stop for survivors who moved on. The Holocaust had made Halle into an "elderly" community, since younger generations had either emigrated or been killed in the concentration camps. Only in the 1990's did the community population increase with the arrival of Jews from Eastern Europe, so that now, for the first time since the war, a more active communal life has become possible. In 1991, at Rosh Hashanah (Jewish New Year), the first Jewish emigrant from Eastern Europe was accepted ceremonially as a community member.

In August and September 1992, for the first time in sixty years in one of the new German states, the anniversary of a Jewish community was celebrated in an appropriate way when the three hundredth anniversary of the establishment of the Halle Jewish community was observed.

In this spirit, we wish the Halle Jewish community an additional 300 years without persecution, anti-Jewish boycotts and without anti-Semitism – without a Shoah.

"The ancient Jewish maxim of hope against all hope has found a small degree of fulfillment."

Our sincerest thanks to Dr. Helbig, who provided information for all of our questions.