

Thilo Figaj, Lorsch, 9. Juli 2015

Debating Jewish History in Lorsch and Commemorative Work after the War

In 1987, the German-Jewish writer Ralph Giordano published a book entitled “the second guilt”. It is about the unwillingness of large sections of the German public to deal with the Nazi crimes or offer compensation for the victims of the NS regime; and about the political decisions that allowed accomplices to return to public office in our democracy.

Giordano's thesis was highly controversial 28 years ago, it was fiercely debated and often rejected. Today his term “Second guilt”, though still not recognized by all, is established in our language, and it is now used detached from the author. That shows how much Giordano was right in his analysis, however unpleasant it might have appeared to individuals or still is for some.

A second guilt assumes a first, but that – and the even then existing – denial of the Holocaust was not Giordano had set his focus on. Rather, the author summed up a general mood that imposed itself in the 1970s and 1980s, that may best be described with the typical questions asked in public debates.

- Had not post war chancellor Adenauer met Israel Prime Minister Ben Gurion as early as 1960?
- Had not he and therefore the German people agreed restitution to the State of Israel and to the Jewish Claims Conference, a total sum of 3.5 billion Deutsche Mark? (In todays value 7 billion Euros?)
- Had Germany not agreed to all these General compensations as early as 1952, signing the Luxemburg treaties?

The unlucky German term ‘Wiedergutmachung’ was established in those years, less than adequately translated with reparation. To the German ear ‘Wiedergutmachung’ is a bit more; it contains moral justice, something like re-establishing the old status. That of course was impossible. Whoever cared to think carefully about using this term must have come early to the conclusion that using it was part of the problem Giordano had identified. But compensation was not the only topic. More typical arguments were:

- Had not the German Justice – 1959, finally – established the Central NS Prosecution office in Ludwigsburg, an instrument that would help to identify and prosecute Nazis faster and more efficiently?
- Did we not have the 1964 Auschwitz and the other trials?

The latter in fact, was Fritz Bauer’s merit alone, the Jewish Chief prosecutor in our post-war State Hessen, in Frankfurt, whose saying was: “when I leave my office, I am in enemy country.”

And ever and again, the same phrases

- we ourselves did not know anything
- Concentration camps are not a German invention.
- The others also committed crimes.

- There must finally be an end to the accusations and trials; it should all be forgotten at last.

Giordano's analysis of 1987 appeared into the midst of a debate which was out here in Lorsch, too. It culminated in the dispute over the construction of the memorial where we just have been. Like everywhere, Lorsch was not an exception but the rule. Here it started with an argument over the wording on the panel.

Clear and true statements such as deprivation of civil rights, repression, expulsion, escape and death were avoided. Instead, the lapidary sentence "To the memory of the Jewish citizens of our city," was found the least common denominator. The "destruction" of the Synagogue is "remembered", just as if it had been a Natural Disaster.

The right place of remembrance and the installation of the panel were even more controversial. Some said it must be at the place of the former Synagogue. Others - who might have remembered better - voted for the place where it is today. The owner of a new building in the place of the Synagogue objected. Before the plaque was finally installed in 1988, it had to wait over a year in store.

At the house where the synagogue had actually stood, another small plaque was placed years later. Here at last the fate of the deportees became a little clearer in public space. However, the fundamental error of this little panel, namely taking the unchecked data of the 1942 deportations, which are entered as 'moving to a new place' in the forged town's registry files, remained unnoticed for another couple of years.

The historian Paul Arnsberg from Frankfurt has thoroughly explored the history of "Country Jews from Hessen" in the 1960s and published his two volumes in 1971. This work is still a standard. During his research he also inquired with the Lorsch Rathaus. The information he got were meager. However, he still had a chance to correspond with the expatriates. In this context he received from Karola Mainzer Kahn the only photograph of the Lorsch Synagogue that we know today. A poor copy of it was kept in our archives. We received a fresh copy from Otto Kahn only last year.

Arnsberg could build his chapter on Lorsch on a publication which came from local historians Paul Schnitzer and Hans Degen. The two had written their own chapter of Lorsch Jewish history for a book which was published 1964 to celebrate the 1200 years anniversary of the monastery. Going through Lorsch documents which are completely preserved since the Thirty Years War, it was first of all Schnitzer with this and following publications who created a sound base, especially concerning the data of early Jewish families. His story of the Jews of Lorsch does however end in regret and with the forged deportation dates. It has to be said however, that at the time of his writing he could not know of the forgeries. A closer look at the circumstances in Lorsch which were only 20 years ago when he published, was not granted, time witnesses who could have assisted Schnitzer in his work, did not contribute.

Karola Mainzer Kahn who received a copy, explicitly praised Schnitzer's work in her correspondence with Arnsberg which is preserved in his Frankfurt estate. That shows that even directly affected people had no interest in a sharp focus of the events they had lived through. Karola is satisfied with Schnitzer's description, the mentioning alone of a former existence of a Jewish Community in the anniversary book seems to make her happy. Recommending the book

to Arnsberg, she wrote: “they have not forgotten us after all,” adding that she had recently visited Lorsch and the Alsbach cemetery, and had found for herself “everything in best order.”

The economic importance of Lorsch Jews was outlined by Heinrich Diehl in 1985, and Walter Glanzner and others reported at last some minor details of the pogroms and the destruction of the synagogue. This was a full 40 years after the war, and in context of the public debate surrounding this date.

The destruction of the synagogue appeared to most of the contemporaries as a closed chapter. In 1948, the Darmstadt District Court had identified some of the accomplices, SA men of the infamous Brigade 50, and had convicted some for violation of public peace and arson. They had received minor prison sentences. Nazis from outside had so invaded the Lorsch Jews. The criminals, so it was repeatedly told, did not come from here. It was faded out, against better knowledge and against facts which were collected during the trial, that the nature and the extent of the destruction and the subsequent pogroms would have simply been impossible without internal and local participation.

Above all it had been the NS city council who ruled the razing and complete demolition of the Synagogue building which was burnt but was still standing upright. The job was finished within the four weeks of absence of the Jewish men from Lorsch who were kept hostage in the Buchenwald and Dachau camps following the pogroms. The demolition contractor’s invoice gives evidence and is kept in the archives.

A real public dispute, which persons destroyed the Synagogue in Lorsch, was only started 50 years after the pogroms. The trigger was pulled from outside. In 1988 the State Commission of the History of Jews in Hessen released a documentation ‘Kristallnacht in Hessen’ compiled by Arno Kropat. Here, for the first time people could read details of the Lorsch trial. Those who did got a new insight.

A first thorough work-up of individual people’s fates followed. An exhibition of the city’s documents was presented here, in this Rathaus. The core of the exhibition was those infamous “J” stamped identity cards which had been issued since January 1939. They had been retained when people immigrated, or taken from them on the day of deportation. Only with these images people got a real idea of the persons. Especially disturbing were images of the men. It looked like photos taken in a concentration camp. The assumptions were true. The younger people did not know that the men had been to the camps for at least 4 weeks. There is no record in Lorsch, nothing at all in the otherwise accurately kept city registries. On their return to Lorsch the men had to pose for this new “J” stamped card, with hair hardly re-grown.

In 1985 Jochen Franke, a teacher at Siemensschule, had led his 10th graders through a project investigating the fate of the local Jews. The students published their results in a school newspaper. A secondary exploitation in a Social Democratic Party brochure brought it to a broader public. Thanks to the teacher and his students we have a first collection of fate stories from expatriates. Franke had identified addresses of survivors and the students had written to them. Some responded, one was Ricardo Oppenheimer, a son of the murdered Leopold Oppenheimer of Karlstrasse. He had lived in Buenos Aires. And Claude Abraham wrote a remarkable letter to the students.

That he, Claude Abraham, born here 1934, finally came to Lorsch in 2001 goes to the credit of Karl-Heinz Huba. Abraham, whose parents were killed in Auschwitz, had for decades avoided to return for a visit, although his job as a professor led him to lectures in Germany several times in his life. He describes his feelings in his remarkable autobiography "on the raft" which most of us have read. With him a personality returned whose individual fate made comprehensible the dimension of the Shoa. Here was not some abstract figure from a book; here was a born Lorsch. This alone made the difference. Suddenly and unexpectedly oral history returned, memories were shared, some stories finally told. At least now it became clear what we had lost in oral history by silence and concealment. Those who could have spoken had chosen to say nothing.

It might appear that between the first publication of Paul Schnitzer and Hans Degen in 1964 and the public debates of 1985 and 1988 not much had happened in terms of Commemorative Work. This impression does not deceive. But two exceptions must be mentioned. In 1979 it is again Paul Schnitzer who goes deep into Jewish family research. For Lorsch and neighboring villages he evaluates the oldest city documents.

In the same year 1979, our late Ludwig Brunnengräber, then Bürgermeister made a remarkable trip to New York. There he met with expatriates, the Guthof brothers and Alfred Oppenheimer who lived in Washington Heights at the time. Benno Jakob came from Brooklyn and Karola Mainzer Kahn from Toronto. It was his private initiative and unfortunately he did not report much of his visit. The group had shared memories, he remembered in a 2009 writing, and that they had all agreed that they were happy to have gotten over "the hard times", "die schwere Zeit."

"The hard times" - this was the expression Germans had found for themselves. It covered it all: NS regime, persecution, Shoa, bomb terror, dead soldiers, German flight and expulsion, hunger, and reconstruction. It said everything to those who used it and nothing to the rest.

There were some more private visits of Lorschers, who renewed old friendships, here and in America, some as early as the 1950s. Encounters in Lorsch with people who had lost their direct relatives in the Shoa were always problematic.

Since the installment of the memorial we have a central event every year in the evening hours of November 9th. In the beginning just a handful attended. Now we have a growing number every year. That shows that people not only care to show their empathy but are eager to hear and learn more of the Jews of Lorsch and their once so rich contribution to our city's life. We regard it as our task not to restrict such events to cold, windy and rainy November nights. There is still a lot to do. Human encounter and dialogue is one of the main aspects. They also help us to deal with the tasks of our present and future. That is why we are so glad to have you with us. The fact that we are all human beings in God's hands and share the same planet was conveyed to us by Rabbi Troster this week. This was a wonderful example of how we can travel not only in the often sad chapters of the past, but be people in the present and work for our own and our children's future.