

Gesine Schmidt:

The cemetery of the Jewish community in Niedenstein from 1832 until today

The Jewish cemetery in Niedenstein is an important memorial to the Jewish inhabitants who lived in this town since 1649. The synagogue was sold and turned into an apartment house during the Nazi era, just like the Jewish school and its flat for the teacher. The mikvah in the school house was filled up. 1938 an SA mob burned down the interior furnishing of the synagogue. All birth-, marriage- and deaths registers of the Jewish community were lost, too, and thus it is difficult to find out who was buried in this cemetery.

The project

For years descendants of former Jewish citizens of Niedenstein have been coming to Niedenstein to look for their forefathers' graves at the Jewish cemetery. Most of them come from the USA. All of them are very moved when they find them. But their search is especially hard, as we often do not know who was buried there. Most of the epitaphs are in Hebrew only, as it was the custom until the middle of the 19th century. The Jewish descendants, too, are often not capable of deciphering inscriptions which were written in Hebrew. Moreover, many of the stones, most of them were made of sandstone, are highly weather-worn. It is a race against time. They must be deciphered before the writing cannot be read anymore.

Every single of the 115 gravestones that are still there was photographed in the twilight with grazing light to make the characters more legible due to the shading. These photos were made by Mrs. and Mr. Wolfgang Köhler from the Fotoclub Niedenstein. The Hebrew epitaphs were translated into German by Mrs. Deborah Tal-Rüttger from Obervorschütz. She is a teacher of Hebrew and has already translated epitaphs from the Jewish cemeteries in Obervorschütz, Guxhagen and Zierenberg.

How to read these files

A file was made for each gravestone. It contains a photo and a text: in Hebrew and in German.

In the column on the right you find the inscription as it was engraved on the stone: in Hebrew and in German, if there is also a German inscription.

Parts of the inscription that cannot be read are marked by hyphens.

In the column on the left you find the German translation of the Hebrew text.

Further explanations by Mrs. Tal-Rüttgers referring to some inscriptions and the engraved emblems/symbols are to be found at the bottom of the page in question.

The birth and death dates of the deceased were added in the text below the photos. They were partly supplemented by the dates from Karl. E. Demandt: „Bevölkerungs- und Sozialgeschichte der jüdischen Gemeinde Niedenstein 1653 bis 1866“, Wiesbaden 1980. On the gravestones of the early graves from 1832 onwards, when the first burials took place at this cemetery, only the dates of death were engraved, not the birth dates.

The Commission for the Research of the History of the Jews in Hessen at the Landesarchiv Wiesbaden and the town of Niedenstein are to be thanked for equally sharing the costs for the translation of the Hebrew epitaphs. For the commission this documentation of the Jewish cemetery in Niedenstein is of importance to their research of the Jewish cemeteries in Hessen.

It is also important for the town Niedenstein because the descendants of former Jewish citizens of Niedenstein can ask the town to provide them with further information and because this way, too, it can be documented that the fate of former Jewish citizens is of interest. The key needed to enter the cemetery can be obtained in the townhall of Niedenstein. Telephone: 05624/99930.

The documentation is also important for the „Exploration Tour: Jewish Life in Niedenstein“ created by pastor Johannis Böttner, and for the confirmation classes. A visit of the Jewish cemetery belongs to the program in both cases.

And the Altenburg- und Stadtmuseum can complement its efforts to document Jewish life in Niedenstein. The museum has already erected two commemorative plaques for the Jewish family Silberstein and has integrated the houses of former Jewish citizens in the city model. The Evangelical Church of Niedenstein and Wichdorf and the Altenburg- und Stadtmuseum have supported the Fotoclub with a donation for its contribution to the project.

The Jewish cemetery as a „House of Life“

In the Jewish funerary culture the cemetery is considered a „house of life“, because the buried have the eternal right of rest as they wait for the resurrection and eternal life. The inscriptions or epitaphs mostly begin with Hebrew abbreviations: „Here lies buried“ or „Here lies hidden“ and end with the blessing „His/Her soul may be integrated in the Book of Life“. A short text in the middle states the name, the name of the father and special traits and good deeds of the deceased. For a long time only the date of death and the date of the funeral were engraved, but not the date of birth.

Generally, the order of the graves follows the order of the dates of death. As the graves were to have an eternal right of rest, cemeteries are very spacious. Burials in urns, a transfer of remains or the dissolution of graves as practiced in Christian cemeteries are not acceptable in a Jewish cemetery. Accordingly, it was especially unbearable for the Jews that during the Nazi era, starting with the pogrom of 1938, graves were desecrated and from 1940 onwards Jewish cemeteries were dissolved and „repurposed“ for secular needs. Even more cruel for the Jews was the way their fellow believers were buried, nameless and without any ceremony, in concentration and extermination camps or other mass burial sites.

In Jewish understanding all people are equal in death, that is why they are all buried in very simple undecorated wooden coffins. The graves are positioned in a way that the person faces Jerusalem when resurrected. The gravestones, too, are supposed to be unadorned. In Niedenstein almost all of them are made from local sandstone and, here too, decorations are rare and plain. In more recent gravestones, granite plaques were inserted for the inscriptions, but at the cemetery in Niedenstein almost all of them are gone today. For a deceased with priestly function two blessing hands were engraved, for the Levite who hands a bowl of water to the priest before his blessing, correspondingly a jug and a bowl of water. Often a Star of David and the sun are engraved as a symbol of resurrection. On the other hand, you can also find elaborate grave monuments in the Jewish cemeteries of large cities, which indicate the increasing orientation towards Christian gravesites at the end of the 19th century. According to idea of simplicity, the graves in Jewish cemeteries are not planted with flowers. Ivy, ground cover or grass is allowed to grow on the graves, or gravel is scattered. Visitors to a grave do not leave flowers, but a small stone on the gravestone to show that one has not forgotten the deceased and honors him or her. With the destruction of most Jewish communities in Germany during the Nazi era, knowledge of Jewish burial culture was also lost. For centuries, Jews in Germany were given the land for their cemeteries only far away from their villages or towns. In Niedenstein, too, the dead were buried on the outskirts of Obervorschütz until 1832, when the Jewish community was able to buy the plot in Voss. From the middle of the 19th century, however, Jews and Christians increasingly attended the funerals of their neighbors and friends, regardless of their religious affiliation.

Not only for the Jewish descendants of the deceased, who live scattered all over the world, and for local historians, the documentation of who was buried in the Jewish cemetery in Niedenstein is a treasure trove. It is also significant for every fellow citizen of Niedenstein

who is interested in the history of the place with its formerly strong Jewish community. The characterization of the deceased and their deeds give, for example, an insight into the values which the Jewish fellow citizens were committed to and by which values they were measured. At the same time, the cemetery is also a memorial to the former Jewish community in Niedenstein, whose members at times made up over 20% of Niedenstein's population in the 19th century. Thus, in 1885 there were 124 Jewish inhabitants, which was 22.9% of a total of 541 Niedenstein residents. Since 1649, when the first Jewish family Heinemann settled in Niedenstein, the Jewish citizens have significantly shaped life in the town. They were also clearly represented in the townscape. The former synagogue and the former Jewish school are located in the immediate neighborhood of the Niedenstein church.

The history of the Niedenstein cemetery

The Jewish community bought the land for the cemetery in 1832 from the farmer Heinrich Wurst from Ermetheis. At that time wheat was growing on the plot, which still had to be harvested. A rabbi, who came from out of town, consecrated the cemetery. Previously, the dead from the Niedenstein Jewish community were buried in the Jewish cemetery in Gudensberg-Obervorschütz. Unfortunately, only few gravestones from the early years are left in the cemetery. The vast majority of the gravestones still present today date from the years after 1870 to 1937. Further research is needed to determine the whereabouts of the now missing gravestones from the years 1832 to 1869, which, according to the chronology of burials, must have been located in the back rows of the cemetery. Here the cemetery today also has a free area (14 m in length, 34 m in width) where the graves must have been. It is also noticeable that especially the front rows of graves are arranged chronologically, as they were originally. In the middle and rear rows of graves this is mostly no longer the case. It can be assumed that some of these gravestones were brought back after 1945 and then arranged rather randomly. The ignorance of the Hebrew language has certainly played a role.

1933-1945

During the Nazi era, there were early efforts to eliminate the Jewish cemeteries. As early as 1935, municipalities asked the responsible authorities whether they could close the Jewish cemeteries and use them for other purposes. However, this was prohibited with reference to the legally fixed rest periods of 50 years for all cemeteries - for fear of epidemic diseases. In 1938, however, the Nazi government intensified its anti-Jewish measures. On March 28 of that year, the government degraded the Jewish communities, which had previously been corporations under public law - like the Christian ones - to merely private so-called "cultural associations" that had hardly any rights. During the pogrom on November 9 and 10, Jewish cemeteries were vandalized by Hitler Youth and SA almost everywhere in Germany, and the mortuaries were burned down like the synagogues.

In a veritable perpetrator-victim reversal, Jews were then held financially responsible for the damage caused by the Nazi pogrom. The "*Anordnung über die Sühneleistung der Juden*" (Order on the Atonement of the Jews) of one billion Reichsmark of November 12, 1938, and the „*Verordnung über den Einzug des jüdischen Vermögens*“ (Order on the Confiscation of Jewish Property) of December 3, 1938, formed the legal basis for forcing the Jewish communities to sell their properties, real estate, and charitable institutions. The Jewish „Kulturvereine“ („cultural associations“) were forcibly integrated into the "Reichsvereinigung der Juden in Deutschland" („Reich Association of Jews in Germany“), which was completely controlled by the Gestapo.

This put the elimination of the Jewish cemeteries back on the agenda. The district president in Kassel informed in 1940 that the police closure of the Jewish cemeteries would be ordered soon. As an example, a letter is reproduced here, how the closure was to be prepared by the respective mayor:

"...I therefore request a report as to when burials were made in this cemetery and what area it covers.

There are three parts of the Jewish cemeteries:

The old part, for whose graves the deadlines have passed for a very long time (50 years).

the part in use to date (so far), for which the deadlines are still running
the reserve land, which is still unoccupied.

Here, too, time and size are to be reported..." 1)

The text refers to the closure of the Jewish cemetery in Großkrotzenburg, Hessen. However, Jewish cemeteries as essential parts of the Jewish religious community were to be liquidated throughout Germany. Here, too, the authorities were only interested in the epidemiological-medical question of the time limits, while the religious aspect of respecting the right of rest for the dead apparently played no role. In order to give the whole thing a mock legal appearance, the headquarters of the "Reichsvereinigung der Juden in Deutschland" (Reich Association of Jews in Germany) in Berlin was now used as a "negotiating partner" for the forced sales, which, however, had no rights of objection. The cemeteries were to be sold either to the political municipalities or to private individuals for secular use. It is interesting to note that although the Reichsvereinigung had to serve as a (forced) sales partner for the sake of appearance, it was nowhere entered in the land register as the owner of the Jewish cemeteries.

If in Niedenstein presumably only the rear part of the cemetery, where the older graves were, was used for agriculture from 1940 onwards, this was due to the decree of the district president in Kassel not to use the piece of land with the newer graves for epidemiological reasons.

The situation of the Jewish cemeteries after 1945

Since the Jewish communities in Germany - except for the few surviving Jews and the emigrants abroad - had been wiped out, i.e. orphaned for the most part, in 1948 the Jewish Restitution Successor Organization (JRSO), on behalf of the former Jewish communities, laid claim to ownership of the Jewish cemeteries as well as the properties of the synagogues, most of which had been destroyed. In Hessen - as in other states under U.S. occupation - they were able to rely on the Restitution Act No. 59 of the U.S. military government of November 10, 1947, which demanded the return of property illegally confiscated by the Nazis or compensation for it.

Article 1 states as the purpose of the law the restitution of property to persons who were deprived of it in the period from January 30, 1933 to May 8, 1945 for reasons of race, religion, nationality, ideology or political opposition to National Socialism. Such property must be restituted to the original owner or his legal successor.

Article 2 lists as characteristics of an unlawful seizure all legal transactions, laws or decrees that are contra bonos mores or have been obtained unlawfully or by threat.

Article 10 specifies that heirless property or restitution rights are not to be assigned to the German state, but are to benefit a successor organization to be determined by the military government 2)

Soon similar laws were enacted by the military governments in the British and French occupation zones; only the Soviet occupation zone did not enact anything of the kind. When the Federal Republic was founded in 1949, the Federal Government enacted comparable restitution and compensation laws. In Niedenstein, the restitution of the Jewish cemetery to the Jewish Restitution Successor Organization (JRSO) was decided in a settlement procedure on October 26, 1950. In the document of the Office for Property Control and Reparation (file number Wi-Fri-A 23 843 "J"), the contracting parties: the Hessian Minister

of Finance and the JRSO state "...that the ownership of the land shall pass to the JRSO and approve and request the registration of the JRSO as owner in the land register." The land of the cemetery is designated as follows: Grundbuch des Amtsgerichts (Land register of the district court)) Gudensberg von Niedenstein vol. 25 sheet 753 Kt.13 Parz.31 Totenhof im Fosse.48ar.

After the founding of the Association of Jewish Communities in Hessen on June 3, 1948, which was approved by the Hessian Ministry of Culture on December 17, 1948 as a public corporation the JRSO sold the Jewish cemeteries in Hessen to this association, which has been the owner of the cemeteries ever since.

The situation of the Jewish cemeteries in Hessen today

In order to protect the Jewish cemeteries from decay or even vandalism, the federal and state governments developed a concept for the maintenance and upkeep of the Jewish cemeteries, because it was clear that the few surviving Jews who had returned to Germany and their communities could not afford this task. The costs for maintaining the cemeteries are calculated on a flat-rate basis according to the total area and are borne half by the federal government and half by the states. The practical care and maintenance, e.g. hedge trimming and mowing of the grass, is carried out by the municipalities. On 7.11.1958 the Hessian Ministry of the Interior issued guidelines which take into account the ritual regulations of the Jewish religion for the cemeteries as presented above. These also specify that on the Sabbath and religious holidays the cemetery may not be entered and that this must be indicated on a board at the entrance to the cemetery. On 1.1.1992, these guidelines were revised once again. Now it was also determined that, for historical and cultural reasons, the cemeteries are classified as cultural monuments in the context of the Hessian Monument Protection Act and must be preserved and protected as such. In the meantime, responsibility for the cemeteries has been transferred to the Hessian Ministry of Social Affairs. The financial resources are distributed to the political communities by the district presidents. For Niedenstein, the district president in Kassel is responsible for this. The employees of the Regierungspräsidium are also responsible for ensuring that necessary maintenance measures are carried out, such as re-erecting gravestones or upkeeping cemetery enclosures. The Jewish cemeteries in the administrative district are located in the six counties and the independent city of Kassel as follows:

- 2 Stadt Kassel
- 15 Landkreis Kassel
- 24 Schwalm-Eder-Kreis
- 22 Landkreis Waldeck-Frankenberg
- 22 Landkreis Hersfeld-Rotenburg
- 14 Werra-Meißner-Kreis
- 6 Landkreis Fulda

1) Hessisches Hauptstaatsarchiv Wiesbaden, Abt. 650, Bd. 4377, Teil 1.

2) Vgl. dazu: Reinhard von Godin, Rückerstattung feststellbarer Vermögensgegenstände in der amerikanischen Besatzungszone – Militärregierungsgesetz Nr. 59 vom 10. November 1947, Berlin 1948, S. 1.