

Motivation History

Following the tracks of Jewish life in Burghaun
Übersetzung ins Englische: Martin H. Siebert

Burghaun, located in the federal state of Hesse, approximately 150 km northeast of Frankfurt, is a nice, rather big village with an 800 year history. The town has a total of circa 3700 people, a good infrastructure, and one can live here rather comfortably.

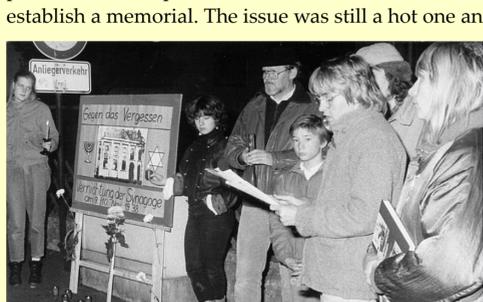
When I moved back to Burghaun in 1984 I settled in the Stadtstrasse, there are still some pretty old half timbered houses. My house is the red brick building to the right, which was built 100 years ago.



Memorial Plaque Initiative

When I moved back to Burghaun I knew next to nothing about the Jews, who were living here in former times. Only since about 1988 I have been occupying myself in various ways with keeping the memory of these people of our home county alive.

The reason for my following the tracks of Burghaun's Jews was triggered in 1988 on occasion of the 50th anniversary of the November 1938 pogroms when in quite a number of towns throughout Germany memorials in memory of former Jewish communities were consecrated. I firmly believed that such a memorial in Burghaun was overdue after these many years. I took the initiative and submitted a petition with approximately 40 signatures of Burghaun citizens to the city council. Very much to my surprise the petition caused quite some excitement, and I realized that it was going to be neither swift nor easy to establish a memorial. The issue was still a hot one and had to be put on Burghaun's agenda first.

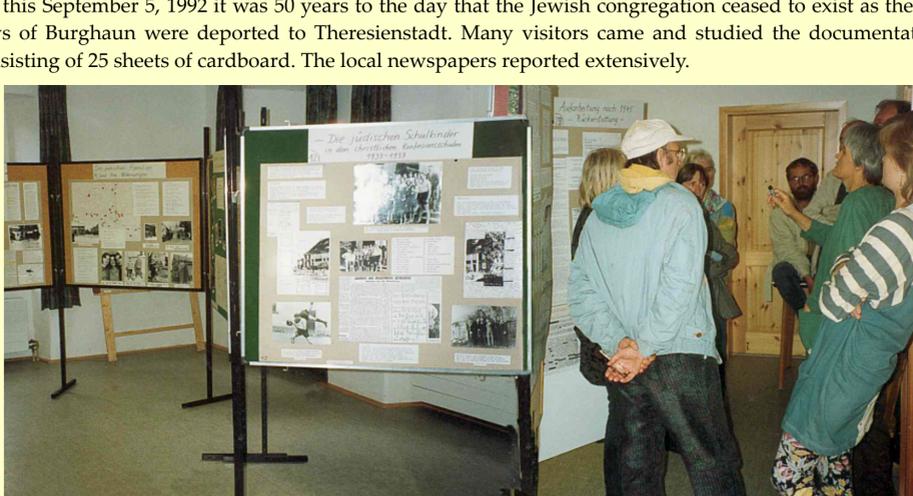


After the memorial-plaque-initiative had not come true for the time being, I organized a small memorial service on November 10, 1988 at the site where the synagogue used to be located. "Against forgetting the past". I also decided right then to work on a documentation of the Jewish history of Burghaun. Subsequently I travelled to archives, interviewed eyewitnesses at home and abroad, collected photos and documents, studied old newspapers and acquired pertinent literature. My idea was as follows: If I were to present the members of the city council with the long Jewish tradition and the suffering of the Jewish population during the Nazi era, it was not

going to be too difficult to gather agreement and support for a dignified memorial.

Four years later my idea became reality. On Sept. 5, 1992 I managed to present at 'Burghaun Castle' the documentation "Jews in Burghaun - Searching for their Tracks" to the public.

On this September 5, 1992 it was 50 years to the day that the Jewish congregation ceased to exist as the last Jews of Burghaun were deported to Theresienstadt. Many visitors came and studied the documentation, consisting of 25 sheets of cardboard. The local newspapers reported extensively.



In the meantime the topic became the talk of the town. The city council also had to concern itself with it again. I had convinced the rather small representation of 'Die Grünen' (name of the party) to look at my memorial initiative again, and submit it to the city council as an official motion.

After all parliamentary hurdles were taken, the mayor of Burghaun, Wolfgang Braun, on July 10, 1994 presented at the castle yard to the public a fine and appropriate plaque in bronze, which commemorates the Jewish congregation in Burghaun.



Dialogue with my father

From the very inception I had a personal motive for my researching the tracks of the Burghaun Jews. Allow me to elaborate on that since it was very important for my involvement: I was reared in Burghaun with my sisters and brothers, and since the fall of 1931 my beloved father had been the protestant pastor of the town. His ministry began before and extended far beyond the whole Nazi era. I was 12 years of age when we moved to Marburg in the spring of 1950.



The family picture was taken just a short while before our move. I am on the right behind my dad. My eldest brother Hans (ID photo 1944) was a 12 year old student when he was killed on November 21, 1944 during a bombing raid of the U.S. Army Air Corps at the railroad depot in the district town Huenfeld.

This special day when my brother Hans did not return from school in Huenfeld impressed deep in my mind and I never can forget.

When in 1988 I started with my 'tracing-the-tracks-project', I unavoidably asked my parents some critical questions. My mother wept sort of

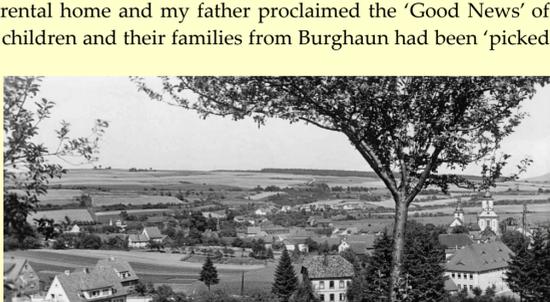
helplessly and seemed to know next to nothing. Quite obviously she was - especially during and after the war - totally occupied with the every day caring for her family and didn't realize too much of what was going on on the outside. I turned to my father, who very much to my astonishment did not remember too many details about Burghaun's Jews!

Although my father had not personally dirtied his hands - in fact ever since the Nuremberg Laws he had become a declared Nazi opponent - he had not dared much on behalf of the Jews either. Most honestly did he confront my critique, tried hard to remember details, and concerned himself with the results of my research and with pertinent literature. When he died rather unexpectedly in November of 1991 our dialogue that had only just begun ended abruptly. However, in one of our very last conversations about the conduct of the Church, her ministers and members regarding their relationship towards the Jews during the Nazi era, he expressed his conviction by saying: "We all failed the Jews", and as if he wanted to reinforce his statement he repeated: "We all failed the Jews!"

Whereas I was reared well protected in my parental home and my father proclaimed the 'Good News' of Jesus the Jew from Nazareth, numerous Jewish children and their families from Burghaun had been 'picked up' and murdered in the extermination camps of the Nazis, and I had not heard anything about it, unfortunately not even from my parents.

Nevertheless I did love the village of my childhood, a place surrounded by fields, meadows, and rolling hills.

However to realize later on what kind of a tragedy had occurred in that place was very painful, and it didn't let go of me ever again. I felt a deep obligation as a member of the former pastor's family - the Siebert family - to explore and research this suppressed chapter of town history.



Historical view of Burghaun - in the center of the photo the Protestant Parsonage, my family home

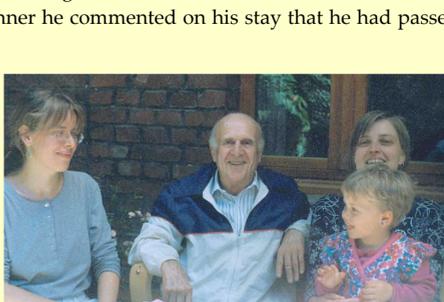
The first Jewish Witnesses

The first Jewish 'Burghauner' - former citizen of Burghaun - ,whom I met personally, was Fred - Fredrick M. Browning in New York, formerly Manfred Braunschweiger. - I met Mr. Browning on occasion of his trip to Germany in 1987. Ever since that visit we keep in touch as friends. - In 1999 he and his wife Hansi returned again to visit at the grave site of Fred's father David, who died at Burghaun in 1935.

In May of 2002 I was Fred's hostess. This time he stayed in Burghaun for the first time after he had visited his father's grave site. In a humerous yet praiseworthy manner he commented on his stay that he had passed a two days crash course in local history.



Frederick M. Browning with his wife Hansi at the grave of Fred's father David Braunschweiger who died 1934



Feiber Strauß 1995 with my daughters Andrea and Ruth Sternberg and Andrea's daughter Malina

Fred Browning introduced me to Feiber Strauss who also came from Burghaun. Feiber has been living in Frankfurt since 1957. During my visits with him he passed on lots of information to me, and provided me with numerous photos and documents. He comes to Burghaun quite frequently to visit his mother's and grandparents' Strauss grave sites at the Jewish cemetery in Burghaun. At these occasions he is my guest in my home at the 'Stadtstrasse'. - In June 2003 Feiber passed away after a very serious sickness. Thanks to Fred's and Feiber's help I found the addresses of almost all surviving Jews from Burghaun.

From the Exhibition to the Book

In the meantime the topic had taken on a character of it's own, and I continued to collect very eagerly everything that had to do with the Jews, although my interest now was focused more and more on the Jewish families.

On Nov. 10, 1993, the 55th anniversary of 'Crystal Night' I had the chance to present the exhibition 'Jews in Burghaun' a second time. This was done in cooperation with the city of Burghaun. Naturally not all the Burghaun people were sympathetic to my work, but I had not expected that anyway. Nevertheless many came and were interested in the exhibition. In the Huenfeld Daily on Nov.10, 1993- one could read a detailed report of my exhibition.

1997 on occasion of a visit with my brother Martin in Montana I took the opportunity to make contact with Jews from Burghaun who now live in the New York area. Most of them didn't want to have any visitors from Burghaun. At their age it might have been too disturbing for them. The memories of their hometown Burghaun and the fate of their families entails for many of them too painful, sometimes even nostalgic or angry feelings, which are too much to bear.

In spite of that I returned home very much enriched by some most impressive encounters and with additional informations. I decided to really work hard at writing a book about the Jewish life in Burghaun in former times. It was high time to recognize the lives of the Jews and their fate within the context of their historic roots in Burghaun.



Finally, in 2001 my book „Jewish life in the county of Huenfeld - Jews in Burghaun“ was published and available at book stores.

The publication got some people pretty much excited, but otherwise it was received and accepted rather well. The first edition of 500 copies has almost sold out entirely. Meritoriously the „Marktgemeinde Burghaun“ with his mayor Alexander Hohmann published a new edition in 2008.

In Nov. 2006 my second book was published: Jüdisches Leben im Hünfelder Land - Die Familie Joseph Strauss in Hünfeld / Jewish Life in the County of Huenfeld - The Joseph Strauss Family in Huenfeld. It is written in German and English. Since 2011 the project „Stolpersteine“ of the artist Gunter Demnig, is going to be realized in Burghaun.

