

The Stommeln Synagogue Destroyed, yet Preserved

by Dr. Gerhard Dornseifer

Before 1938, twelve synagogues could be found in the region west of Cologne, in what is today the district of Erft. Moreover, evidence of Jewish communities having lived in this area dates back to the Middle Ages. These communities suffered considerably over the centuries, yet the liberal outlook that spread following the French Revolution enabled them to become more confident. Gradually, synagogues replaced the confined chambers in the house of the community elder, and proper houses of worship were erected. They were often tucked away behind the row of houses facing onto the street, nevertheless these buildings wished to make their presence felt in a Christian environment, as their representative architecture showed.

The Stommeln synagogue is situated behind house No. 85 on the village's main street. Work began on an independent Jewish house of worship in Stommeln as early as the late 1820s – on the site of the present building. On 18 July 1831, the Stommeln Jews submitted a petition to the Prussian King Frederick William III, requesting permission to make a collection to build a synagogue in Stommeln. The same year, a small, half-timbered building was constructed. However, it was not long before the community wished to have a larger, more representative house of prayer and, in 1882, the new synagogue – a simple, neo-Romanesque brick building – was consecrated. The architecture of the building's south façade, which is what is first seen by approaching visitors, is accentuated by a central projection containing an arched gable. In the middle of the round arch is a Star of David made of yellow brick. A frieze of yellow brick lozenges above the three round arched windows serves to embellish the brick masonry.

Under the pressure of anti-Semitism, which became ever more overt after the First World War, the Stommeln synagogue had been abandoned, even before 1933. Four years later the Jewish community in Cologne, in its capacity as the legal successor of the Stommeln community, sold the synagogue to a neighbouring farmer, who used it as a barn, a storage room and a stable. When the SA troops arrived on the so-called Kristallnacht, in 1938, the farmer was able to persuade them to leave by showing proof that he was the rightful owner of the property. So it was that the synagogue did not go up in flames that evening like so many other Jewish houses of worship. However, because of its new use, the building increasingly fell into disrepair. After the Second World War, the synagogue was simply forgotten. In the late 1970s, the newly formed Stommeln Historical Society and the town's volunteer fire brigade became interested in restoring the building. In 1979, the municipality of Pulheim purchased the synagogue and, in 1981, began restoring it. In 1983, the building was reopened to the public with an impressive ceremony, during which the cantor and members of the Cologne synagogue community offered the Mincha prayers. Since then, the building has been

used as a venue for events associated with the town's cultural programme and put at the disposal of the Jewish community in Cologne.

In the long term, however, this programme of thought-provoking cultural events – solo concerts, readings, art exhibitions – was not convincing. It was questioned whether this was an appropriate use for a monument and memorial. In 1990–91, a project called the „Stommeln Synagogue“ was launched, the impetus for which was given by W. Gies, an artist living in Cologne. Unusual exhibitions by major contemporary artists were planned as a means of creating greater awareness of the history of the building and of bringing this knowledge of the past to bear fruit for the present and the future. Within the framework of this project, artists take up the challenge of the history in which the synagogue is steeped, drawing visitors into a fascinating dialogue. Instead of becoming an empty shell, this historical monument/memorial has been transformed into an instructive, historical workshop that gives the building a new direction. The concept entails a series of artistic interventions in the building that interact closely with the site, its architecture, its history. Far removed from conventional cultural events, with their monumental edifices and big-name exhibitions, the Stommeln synagogue hopes to take a different artistic path, the path of reduction: one location – one room – one work of art.

The idea behind the project is to contribute one tessera to the mosaic that constitutes the ethics of remembering. We must not treat history in such a way that our attitude becomes one of immutable resignation. Let us accept the challenge to look for traces of the past, to keep drawing attention to these traces, to continue reading about the subject, to ask questions. If we do this, memories will not be repressed and forgetting will not occur. The artworks presented in the synagogue can provide meaningful insight into the process of remembering as well as lending force to the argument that it is important for a collective memory to evolve. Taking part in this process is the challenge of contemporary art.

Dr. Gerhard Dornseifer
Head of Cultural Affairs of Pulheim (1981-2001)

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SYNAGOGUE STOMMELN