

# Finding New Uses for an Old Synagogue

by Dr. Karl August Morisse

Hidden behind the densely packed buildings lining Stommeln's village green is an old synagogue, which has been without its own parish since the late 1920s and, over the decades, has gradually fallen into oblivion. It was not until 1977 that the synagogue was brought to the attention of the public once again, when the Pulheim Historical Society made a strong case for restoring the crumbling monument. In the ensuing years, the Society found like-minded supporters.

Since 1975, Stommeln has been part of Pulheim. Pulheim is an up-and-coming, mid-sized town on the outskirts of metropolitan Cologne. Once the synagogue had been „rediscovered“, the Town Council and the local authorities were called upon to find an appropriate use for it.

The purpose of taking possession of and renovating a building may be simply to restore it to its original condition. This is certainly a legitimate aim for most buildings, but not for a former synagogue. Here, the restoration work must serve broader objectives: it must commemorate the millions of Jewish men, women and children who were murdered during the Holocaust, as well as the measures that have been taken to combat racism, intolerance towards minorities and all other forms of contempt for human dignity.

The crimes perpetrated against the Jews are so horrific as to transcend our ability to grasp their enormity. Indeed, many people begin to understand the cruelty and perversity of genocide only when faced with the fates of individuals. We are simply not capable of comprehending the suffering of millions, but we can readily empathize with the pain of individuals or small groups. And, by concerning ourselves with this suffering, we may be prompted to speak out against fresh injustices.

Bearing this in mind, and with a view to ascertaining what became of the Stommeln Jews, the leaders of the Town Council and the local authorities entrusted the Historical Society, in 1978, with the task of researching the history of Stommeln's Jewish community and, more specifically, studying and documenting the persecution to which it was subjected in the Third Reich. After intensive investigative efforts, the Society presented a two-volume work entitled *Juden in Stommeln* (Jews in Stommeln), which gave names to many of the previously unidentified victims.

Local citizens devoted themselves to salvaging the synagogue. However, their dedication was not sufficient to secure the building's future, guarantee free access to it or to restore the monument. Once the enormity of the undertaking had become clear, the Town Council agreed to shoulder the task. It succeeded in purchasing both the building and the land on which it stands. With the support of the State of North Rhine-Westphalia, the invaluable building was extensively restored, from 1981 to 1983.

Ruins may make good memorials; buildings do not, for they are not perceived as memorials. In order to ensure that a building serves commemorative and memorial purposes, means must be found to prevent the Holocaust being forgotten. The idea was to show the changes the memorial has undergone over time – and to present within it the complex and exacting process of remembrance and coming to terms with history. Care was taken not to lose sight of the modest, provincial setting, while finding ways of encouraging open-mindedness and tolerance, and respect for the dignity of all human beings.

The installations of the internationally acclaimed artists who have exhibited here have succeeded in restoring the Stommeln synagogue to the public eye. They have paved the way for viewers to tackle history, and their works have certainly kindled a lively discussion.

The inhabitants of Pulheim have responded to the issues raised by the project in a spirit of openness and tolerance. Many local citizens, school classes, social groups and associations visit the synagogue, squaring up to the responsibilities that such a monument demands of its visitors. Thus, the synagogue has become an important edifice for a town that is prepared to grapple with its past. It serves as a constant reminder that people should be aware of their responsibilities towards one another; to be on the watch, to stand up for one another and not to follow their own interests blindly, but to do their utmost for the welfare of others and the community as a whole.

Dr. Karl August Morisse  
Mayor of Pulheim

*(Published in: Art Projects Synagoge Stommeln Kunstprojekte.  
Publisher: City of Pulheim, Ostfildern-Ruit 2000, S. 8-11)*



SYNAGOGUE STOMMELN