

Speech given by Dr Johannes Rott on behalf of 'Jewish Life in Malsch' at the inauguration of the village square on May 6th 2022

Dear people of Malsch, dear guests,

Every town square tells a story about the buildings which stand or stood there and about the people who live or lived in those buildings. And every square tells a story about the events which took place there. That is particularly true of our own village square, which is being inaugurated today.

If we let our gaze wander over the square, we see a broad expanse, around which houses stand. Ninety years ago, this place looked very different, as it was densely built-up.

Follow me on a virtual tour of the square as it looked in those days. We start with the barn, which has now been restored. The house next to it on the right, in Brunnengasse, belonged to a Jewish cattle-dealer. Continuing in a clockwise direction, next to that was a small house, and then another, also owned by Jews.

To the right, along Mühlgasse, are properties belonging to Christian families. The house which once stood above that garden wall, was the home of a Jewish family lived. Where the steps are today, stood the school in which the Jewish children were taught religion. In the middle stood the synagogue, and next to it the Mikveh or ritual bath. It is interesting to note that Jewish and Christian families lived next door to each other.

For over 100 years, from 1834 until 1938, the synagogue was the religious hub for the Jewish community. But for even longer - almost 300 years, Christians and Jews lived together in the village. The Jews traded livestock and agricultural products such as hops and tobacco.

In general, a good neighbourly relationship existed between the Jewish and Christian populations. Allow me to read a quote about that from the magazine 'The Israelite'. *"On Friday the 8th and the Sabbath, the 9th of May 1891, an important religious ceremony took place here. Mr. Abraham Marschall, one of the most respected citizens and members of the Israelite community, donated a Torah to the local synagogue. Guests streamed in from near and far to take part in this uplifting inauguration ceremony. To the sounds of music, the Torah was collected from the donor's house, and accompanied by a large crowd of guests, processed through the festooned and flag-lined streets and into the festively decorated synagogue. It is particularly worth mentioning that a significant number of Christians also took part in the celebrations; this participation bears witness to the spirit of unity and peace which is prevalent here."* End of quote.

Fifty years later, that spirit of unity and peace lay in ruins due to hate and violence. During the 'Night of Broken Glass', on November 9th, 1938, the synagogue was defiled, and its fixtures were set alight. Only a few weeks later, the synagogue was demolished. On 22nd October 1940, the last remaining 15 Jewish citizens of Malsch were deported to the camp at Gurs in France. All traces of Jewish life were to be for ever obliterated.

This plan almost succeeded. After the war, only two of those deported returned to Malsch; and when they passed away there were no more people of Jewish faith here. In 1950, a building housing a wine press was erected adjacent to the barn. Later, this became home to the public works department. After that building and the Jewish schoolhouse were demolished, this area remained a wasteland in the town centre for many years.

In 2013, a group of residents got together with the aim of researching the history of the former Jewish community and reviving interest in and awareness of this important part of village history. They formed the group 'Jewish Life in Malsch', on behalf of which I speak to you today. First of all, we interviewed the last remaining eyewitnesses, who had personally experienced life alongside the Jews in the village. Some had sat next to their Jewish friends in the same classroom. Soon, contact was established and maintained with descendants of the Malsch Jews. Some of those descendants have since visited the home of their forefathers. On October 22nd, 2015, Rolf Hess, along with his family, visited Germany and his former home for the first time. As a child, he had been deported from Malsch exactly 75 years previously to the day. In 2018, the first Stolpersteine were laid in Malsch for his family and for the Hilb / Hamburger families. These small brass plaques, which are set into the paving in front of the former homes of victims of the NS oppression, represent a sign of commemoration and remembrance. They are situated at the entrance to the upper town square and in Mühlgasse. Just recently, one of Ruth Hamburger's sons wrote to us saying how he and his family had felt so warmly welcomed by the locals during their visit to Malsch. The candid way in which the people of Malsch deal with their Jewish heritage is recognized and valued by the international circle of descendants.

When, in the middle of the last decade, planning commenced for the redevelopment of the town square, our group contributed suggestions as to how Malsch's Jewish heritage might appropriately be represented here. And so it was that outlines of the synagogue and mikveh were marked out in the paving to illustrate where those structures once stood. Our group also designed an information board, on which you can read the clearly represented history of Jewish life in Malsch. The older memorial stone was returned to its place next to the board.

Every square tells a story. In the case of our village square, it is the story of vibrant village life, of destruction, and of rebuilding in the spirit of the times. May our village square be a place where the people of today can gather cheerfully and remember the people of the past!