

Jewish World

The German synagogue renovated for a community that has no Jews



By Mati Shemoelof October 25, 2022

Invited to read his poems at the synagogue in Stadthagen, near Hanover, MATI SHEMAELOF feels uneasy as the families of the town's Jews come back to visit but not to live.

I am sitting in the [Stadthagen synagogue](#) surrounded by Germans young and old. The synagogue is lit up. Everywhere are photographs of former Jewish residents of Stadthagen, including Erwin Rautenberg. The synagogue was renovated thanks to his donations.

I am here to read my poetry, but all my thoughts are with the Jews who once prayed here. Can I read poems critical of Israel here? Perhaps this is not the time?

The story of my Arab-Jewish parents comes out in my songs or poems about exile and refugees. And I think, the countries my parents came from were closed to the Jewish-Arab community and we have no way to return. After World War II, the Jewish survivors of Stadthagen could have returned to this small town not far from Hanover.

According to local history books, one woman returned after the Holocaust but later emigrated to the US. She was the last Jew. This place is beautiful. Small streets with houses that have been preserved for hundreds of years.

I was invited here by the head of the local teachers' union. So, I knew that there would also be teachers and students from the local school. I knew I was going to read in the local synagogue, but I did not know its story.

For hundreds of years the Jews of Stadthagen wanted a synagogue. But only in 1855 did they buy their own building. There was a community of about 60 Jews. Shortly after the transfer of power to the Nazis, antisemitic actions began. On the nights of November 9-10, 1938, synagogues were set on fire all over Germany. Kristallnacht came to Stadthagen two nights later.



Mati Shemoelof

Mati Shemoelof is a poet and an author. His writing includes seven poetry books, plays, articles and fiction, which have won significant recognition and prizes. He has written a radio play for German radio WDR. A German edition of his bi-lingual poems was published by AphorismA Verlag.

On November 12, at about 4am, two women reported that there was a fire in the synagogue (they feared it would spread to their houses). The fire brigade extinguished the fire and there was little damage. But as a result of Kristallnacht and the following campaign of arrests, Stadthagen's Jews were forced to leave their hometown. In 1933, there were 59 Jews living there. However, most of them were transported to concentration camps from 1941 and killed there.

I am taking photos and sharing them on social media. But this isn't a typical reading. It is something else. Once in this synagogue there were people who prayed. Now there are poems. But maybe poems are like prayers? I enter the synagogue and pray. "Blessed are You, L-rd our G-d, King of the Universe, who has granted us life, sustained us and enabled us to reach this occasion." At the entrance of the synagogue are the words of Primo Levy: "It happened, therefore it can happen again: this is the core of what we have to say."

A survivor helped the descendants of the oppressors to give life to the synagogue even though there are no Jews left in the community.

After 1945, the synagogue had a new owner who later gave it back to what was left of the community. However, it took until 1988, 50 years after Kristallnacht, for the city to organise a commemorative event for the building. In 2017, the city council decided that the synagogue should be transformed into a permanent place of remembrance and learning about the time of Nazis in the district of Schaumburg.

The focus would be on remembering the Jewish victims, but also all other people persecuted by the Nazis. On October 29, 2017, the synagogue was inaugurated in the presence of Stephan Weil, Minister President of Lower Saxony. I skipped reading the poem *Why don't I write Israeli love poems*, and read a poem about my Iraqi grandma.

She died two years ago, and her death symbolised the closed door to the whole story of Iraqi Jews. Josefina, one of the students, is reading my poems in German. One old woman is asking me why I don't speak German well. She finds my answer hard to understand.



After the event, we go to the bar behind the synagogue. Here, the host, together with a local teacher, tells me that the synagogue was built with many contributions but only one of them was Jewish. I learn about the Erwin Rautenberg Foundation.

Rautenberg's parents, Leo and Rosa, ran a cigar and tobacco shop in Bückeburg, not far from Stadthagen. Rautenberg was born in 1920. In 1937 his father arranged for Rautenberg to flee to Argentina. He lost his entire family in the Holocaust. Rautenberg later became a successful businessman in Los Angeles. As he was childless, he founded the foundation and the conversion of the former Stadthagen synagogue into a place of learning, and commemoration was the top priority.

I finish my second dark beer and feel that the world is a strange but fascinating place. On one hand, Jews were exiled from their synagogue, on the other, the synagogue is like a phoenix rising from the ashes of its predecessor. And a survivor helped the descendants of the oppressors to give life to the synagogue even though there are no Jews left in the community.

We all drink a last chaser of whisky. It eases my feeling of being in a Jew-less community. My host tells me that the families of the Stadthagen Jews who escaped the Nazis still return to visit the place where their grandparents once lived. They don't return to live, only to visit. I can't visit my ancestors' synagogue in Baghdad. Would I help the people in Baghdad rebuild the synagogue of my grandmother? And would I go live and there?