

Center of Jewish History Aschaffenburg - Wolfsthalplatz

In 1978 an idea was born during the first visit of former Jewish citizens of Aschaffenburg. This took form in 1980: the discussions on town development and how to improve the area around Wolfsthalplatz where the synagogue had been brought about idea of creating a place of commemoration there. This would remind the people of the fate of the Jewish community of Aschaffenburg which was extinguished during the National Socialist era. From here it was only a short step to the recognition that there could not be a better place for commemoration than the building formerly used as Jewish school and house to the rabbi at Wolfsthalplatz. Though the building had survived the terror of Hitler's regime it was so dilapidated that it needed a general reconstruction. The Town Council decided to install an exhibition about the history of the Jews in Aschaffenburg in this building, rich in tradition. A study group began searching for sources. It entered virgin territory. Up to this point neither the contribution of the Jews to the history of the town of Aschaffenburg, nor the effects of the persecutions and murders on the Aschaffenburg community during the Holocaust had been systematically investigated.

In July 1984 the "Dokumentationszentrum" opened its doors. One hundred thirty former Jewish citizens of Aschaffenburg attended the opening as guests of the town. This was the fourth time that emigrants returned to their former home town after the visits of 1978, 1980 and 1981.

Two years after the opening the square of Wolfsthalplatz was changed to what it looks like at the moment. Carefully pruned plane-trees outline the area where the synagogue used to be which was burnt down during the "Reichspogromnacht" in 1938. The closed bordering walls of the neighboring buildings remained intact but are mercifully overgrown by a Wisteria. A commemorative stone and a plaque keep the spirit of the place alive. It was not intended that the square should be changed into a center of bustling activity. Instead it has become a peaceful oasis in a busy town where pedestrians enjoy resting on the benches in the shade.

Since 1992 there is a fountain right in front of the "Dokumentationszentrum". The artist Rainer Stolz created a bronze "time wagon" on which a man and a woman float on the river of history. The influential and politically powerful people of each era try to direct the course of the time wagon symbolised by rays of water from one side. It is not a monument which can be interpreted easily, but it is appropriate for this square. It provokes thoughts on the future and whether humans are ever given the opportunity of taking action within the process of time. The couple in the monument represents humanity and drifts towards a bronze plate on the other side of the street. The plate is both a warning and a reminder to keep to the right track in life and shows the mortal remains of a human being - the last human being.

The "Dokumentationszentrum" attracts many visitors. Students and study groups in particular make use of the tiny museum which does not only offer a permanent exhibition. There are also books on the culture and history of the Jews, references to the literature in the libraries of Aschaffenburg are given and students are assisted when working on projects on Jewish religion, Antisemitism or the dangers of intolerance. It has also become a home for functions dealing with Jewish life like recitals, talks or readings which are well-frequented by the Aschaffenburg public. Elisabeth Gehrig, the custodian of the Center, greets many visitors from abroad who use their short time in Aschaffenburg for a visit even after opening hours. A steady correspondence has developed from Elisabeth Gehrig's many contacts to people in and outside Germany who are interested in the Center and its work.

A private committee has been founded for the support of the house at Wolfsthalplatz. It promotes first and foremost the social aim for which the "Dokumentationszentrum" was established: to inform about the consequences of intolerance and ethnic hatred and to strengthen the resistance against the growing influence of right wing activism.