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When you are officially invited to participate in a Jewish ceremony, you most likely will be carefully briefed on how to act and what to expect at the event. Attending the Jewish service as a Gentile could be a surprise – especially if it ends up with a joyful invitation to join the communal meal at the centre afterwards.

Thank you for the joy, says

*Chris Schuster*

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**The new Synagogue in Mainz, inaugurated 2010**

and situated at the very site as the Main Synagogue which was destroyed in 1938. The premises serve as Jewish community centre and also for intercultural meetings.

# Starting Point

## Traces of Jewish Life in Mainz



**EUGEN SALOMON:** *The street bears the name of the Jewish co founder of the Soccer Club. in the year 1905. The street leads from the »Europe Roundabout« directly to the new venue of club, 1. FSV Mainz 05 painted in their traditional colour RED.*

### **Perceptions: The image of Mainz is linked with Fastnacht (Carnival) and Soccer Club 1. FSV 1905.**

In post war Germany, Mainz, the capital city of the newly created province of Rhineland Palatinate has evoked an image of Fastnacht carnival revelry. Television transmissions of its festivities greatly contributed to establishing that cliché throughout the nation... even to the then communist part of Germany, the German Demo

cratic Republic GDR , and of course throughout Europe through the Eurovision system. This Fastnacht Culture received additional impetus when the Second German Television ZDF network moved its large headquarters to the outskirts of Mainz, and therefore was strategically placed to report all activities right next door. When people heard you come from Mainz, they immediately thought of you being a Fastnacht reveler. Mainly the older people remember enthusiastically the popular broadcasting of Fastnacht festivities, first on radio, then on TV, among them the *Gonsbachlerchen* Singing Gonsbach Larks , Gonsbach being a creek flowing through Mainz Gonsenheim.

Starting about 20 years ago, Fastnacht plays no longer its unique role as identifier for Mainz. The City has now a second symbol: it is its Soccer Club, 1. FSV Mainz 1905, in short the *Zero Fivers*. They themselves claim to be one of the *Fastnachtsverein*'s, organizations similar to the Samba Schools in Rio de Janeiro's carnival. Their fans like to drive home that point by very silly behaviour at the soccer matches... actually not that much out of the ordinary for fanatic soccer aficionados. Their specialty, however, is that they roar, no matter what the time of the year, Fastnacht hymns, fired on by the commentator at the stadium's P.A. The noise is quite exceptional, even for hardened soccer fans.

Since FSV 05 has made it into the top soccer league, the debt ridden City of Mainz did not hesitate to finance a new stadium which will accommodate some 35,500 spectators. Circumventing former limitations, the soccer stadium wound up to be built on fertile soil, to the detriment of mostly organically grown vegetable. Sunday July 3rd the stadium will be inaugurated but the term STA

DIUM is no longer *in* nowadays it is to be called an ARENA. The fans will reach the arena through what originally was to be called the Arena Avenue. But very lately, the name of the avenue was changed to EUGEN SALOMON STRASSE, honouring the co founder of the club.

At last, and belatedly, a trace of Jewish life in Mainz was brought to the fore by naming the avenue after the Jewish co founder of the soccer club. Not surprisingly, the club Eugen Salomon had helped to create outcast all Jews, including its co founder, right at the start of the Nazis coming to power in Germany 1933 and ignominiously had declared itself as *judenfrei* free of Jews . Shortly thereafter, the merchant Salomon, born in 1890, was able to emigrate to France. No one knows what has become of him afterwards. Now he is remembered by the street sign in the vicinity of the *coface arena* named after its top sponsor, an international finance group.

Besides this humble gesture of naming the street after Eugen Salomon, there arose however a much more powerful sign of Jewish culture renaissance in Mainz: the new synagogue. Let us not forget that Magenza, as the Jewish Mainz was called in the Middle Ages, was one of the SCHUM cities, three German cities famous throughout Europe in the early Middle Ages as the seats of Jewish learning: *Sch* for *Spira* Speyer , *U* for *Warmaisa* Worms , *M* for *Magenza* Mainz . Already in those times, life in the Jewish communities along the river Rhine was precarious, it fluctuated between cruel persecution and mild toleration.

During the French Revolution in 1791 important steps were taken to bring about Jewish emancipation. After controversial debates the Jews were entitled to civil rights in France but not without

fulfilling strict requirements. These civil rights were then implemented in the French occupied territories on the left bank of the Rhine as well. Mainz, having become part of the French Département du Mont Tonnerre, happened to install the first, though short lived republic on German soil and its Jewish population enjoyed a brief time of relief. After Napoleon's defeat and the return of French occupied territories to Germany, it was only as late as 1871 when the newly established German Reich granted equal legal rights to the Jews, almost a century after Joseph II. had issued his famous Edict of Tolerance for all of his subjects in Austrian lands, no matter what their religion.

Nevertheless, discrimination continued, although somewhat more subtly than before. A map displaying the distribution of Jewish inhabitants showed seven percent in Mainz and eight percent in Frankfurt in 1890. This was the time when new modern synagogues were built by followers of the mostly Reform Jewish congregations. As early as 1853 the liberal/Reform section of the Israelite religious community erected their own synagogue in the city centre of Mainz. Then, in 1912, the impressive Central Synagogue with adjacent study rooms and a library was consecrated in Mainz Neustadt along the Hindenburgstraße. An architectural jewel, with its huge dome, it was a showpiece. The synagogue in its Art Déco style was a perfect symbol of the modern open minded and self assured Jews. This beautiful centre of proud Jewish life was ransacked on November 9th 1938 during the »Night of Broken Glass« *Reichskristallnacht* as the Nazis euphemistically called their barbarian deed. The ruin was completely razed in 1940.

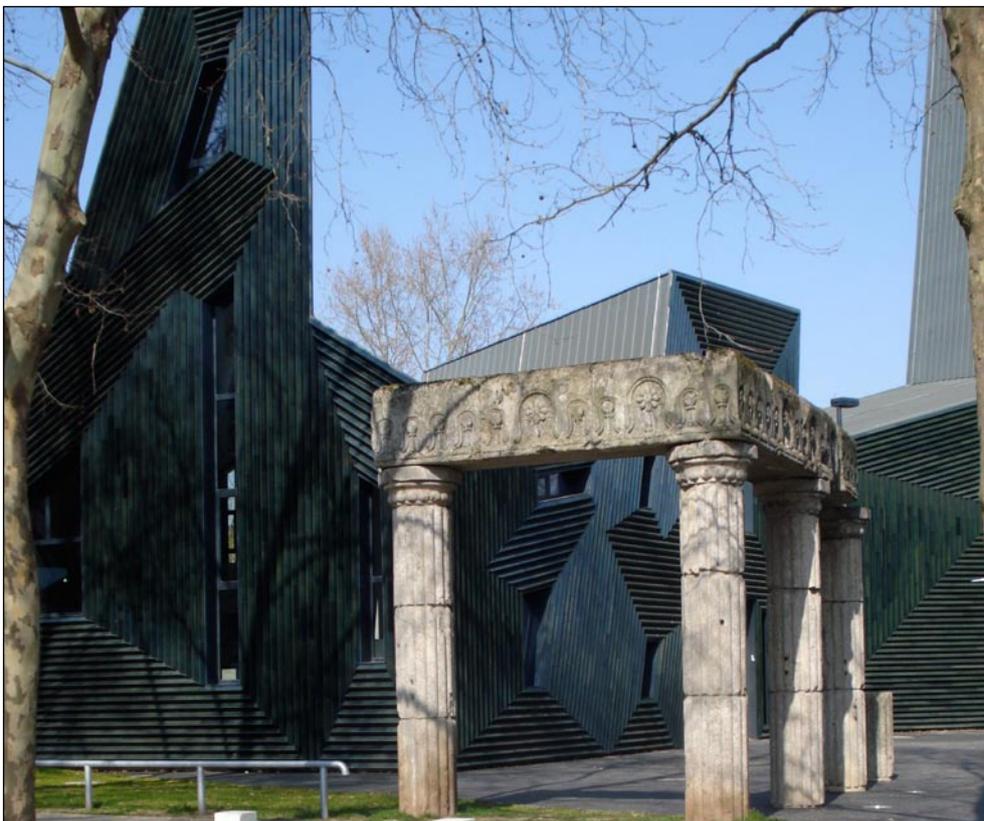


In September 2010, a new mighty synagogue was erected at exactly the same spot as the old synagogue. At its consecration, the highest representatives of religious and political life showed up to celebrate the beginning of a new era of Jewish life in the city. All men wore, like Germany's President Christian Wulff, the traditional Jewish skull cap, the Kippah. Quite an unusual vista which may have imparted the impression that already a huge Jewish congregation did exist again.

**ORNAMENTALS:**  
*the 100 year old remains of the former Synagogue the ravages of the seasons have left their marks.*

### Jewish Life in Germany almost completely devoid of German language

In real life the Jewish community of Mainz is far from its former greatness. Some thousand Jews may have settled in the vicinity of Mainz stretching



**REMAINS OF THE OLD SYNAGOGUE** in front of the new one: *The columns with the relief on top are the tiny fragment of historic Jewish buildings' substance in Mainz.*

from Worms in the South to Bingen in the North. But most members of today's Jewish community in Mainz stem from Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union FSU, many of them in the second half of their

lives, more women than men. The non Russian Jewish population in Germany is comparatively small, about 15,000 out of approximately 115,000 Jews today. The immigrants from the East had been unable to practice Jewish life and consequently prohibited to study Hebrew;

times during the ceremonies and also the gatherings afterwards a Russian German interpreter translates into German for the tiny German minority. Time will tell if German language Judaism in Mainz will flourish again when a new locally born generation takes over. Understand



**Entrance Door:** Only when looking closely one can detect that the relief of massive Hebrew letters are the cover of the main entrance door; notice the discreet CCTV camera and intercom on the left side. Who is able to decipher the Hebrew letters can read:

מֵאוֹר	<i>meor</i>	<b>Light</b>
הַכּוֹלָה	<i>bagola</i>	<b>of Diaspora</b>
בֵּית כְּנֶסֶת	<i>beth kneset</i>	<b>Synagogue</b>
מִגְּזֵר	<i>magenza</i>	<b>Mainz</b>

Atheism was the enforced »official religion« in the FSU and its satellites. Now, the East Europeans from the Ukraine or Belarus have to be provided with cyrillic transcriptions of the holy texts so that they can follow the ceremonies. Their current understanding of German language, especially in reading and writing, is less than fluent. The once omnipresent German language in Reform Synagogues has given way to the use of Slav languages in the now mostly Orthodox ones. Some

**GOLDEN-GLEAMING Relief Tapestry:** Rendition of Hebrew text originally written by Jewish sages in Magenza, during the early Middle Ages.

ably the worshippers' knowledge of the meaning of the powerful writings at the synagogue's main entrance door is limited at best. When asked, Mrs Stella Schindler Siegreich, Chairwoman of the Jewish Community, graciously and patiently explained the inscription.



**THE LIGHT FUNNEL** reaches all the way up to the top of the building, from the outside clearly visible like a bell tower. The flood of light enhances the texts seen on the wall. The picture shows an enlarged text part in its centre.

For all those who are fluent in Hebrew an unending joy of reading awaits them in the Prayer Hall. The interior is completely covered by golden gleaming high reliefs of letters composed of the scriptures of Rabbis who lived in Mainz during the 11th century. The walls and ceilings are mantled by tens of thousands of Hebrew letters in an unadorned but gorgeous font style without starting and ending point. The synagogue is overflowing with an ocean of golden letters. Only if one stands back, takes time to let the beauty of the

writings sink in, the law of rapport, that is the repetition of the patterns, makes it self felt. The ornamentation of the golden relief tapestry gives way to the structure of the text. In several places, enlarged letterings can be noticed. Could these be words the Jewish sages wanted to highlight? Even without the ability to read the Hebrew scripture one's visual senses slowly seem to discern patterns, which in one's mind fall together, into elaborate structures of verses. The modern Prayer Hall of the new synagogue of Mainz pro



**The Façade** is not only very interesting because of its shape but also for having been an incredibly complex logistic undertaking in its construction: Each ceramic element had to be cut precisely by mitre, delivered according to a tight schedule to be fixed on the spot to the base in concrete.

vides one's senses evidence of the close interrelation between Jewish religion and written text. One suspects that, alas, only a very few of the people entering the synagogue are able to read and comprehend the golden gleaming text.

### Mezuzah: House Blessing in Hebrew

Barely noticeable, a small oblong container made out of green ceramics



**MEZUZAH**, the blessing of the house: On the cover of the case, the silhouette of the Synagogue is lined out, also evoking the outline of the word »Kedushah« a blessing.

is attached to the side of the doorframe of the synagogue's main entrance, of the same material as the outer walls. It contains the Mezuzah, a small scroll in

scribed with a blessing; comparable to a Christian House blessing. The blessing itself are the verses of the most important prayer in Judaism, the *Sh'ma Israel* Hear, O Israel ... , carefully written on parchment by a specially trained scribe, in indelible ink, then rolled up and kept in the container. This blessing is to protect the edifice and all those entering or leaving it.

The cover of the Mezuzah at the entrance door to the synagogue shows a convex jagged line which not only symbolizes the silhouette of the building but also evokes the outline of the writing of the word קדוש *Kedushah*, meaning »holy« that same outline which inspired Manuel Herz, the architect from Cologne, to give this synagogue its shape.

A larger container shaped like a Mezuzah, but with a slot on top, serves as collection box. Somewhat apologetically, Mrs Schindler Siegreich comments: »It's a pity that the box is too flat bottomed, therefore the donors have to force into it the bank notes«, and she adds with a gentle smile: »I hope that the donors are not deterred by this, getting the impression that the box is already stuffed enough.« A suggestion to improve the collection box has already been made. □

## Impressum



**Chris Schuth**

Photo: Martina Pipprich, Mainz

*qualitalk* is edited by  
Chris Schuth | Max Planck Straße 45  
55124 Mainz | Germany  
phone +49 06131 / 476466  
Internet: [www.chris-schuth.de](http://www.chris-schuth.de)  
mail [schnabela@chris-schuth.de](mailto:schnabela@chris-schuth.de)  
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