



# BLÄTTER ZUM LAND

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## The SHUM Cities of the Rhine, Speyer, Worms and Mainz – on the Way to World Heritage Status

### Beginnings

Until their extermination in the Shoah of the 1940s, Jews had been a permanent element of the European population for more than a thousand years. Already in Roman times they lived in the cities of the Rhine, and it was probably in late antiquity that they began to settle in Speyer, Worms and Mainz, which under the acronym SHUM – composed of the initial letters of

the three cities' Hebrew names – were later to become famous throughout Europe for their Jewish heritage.

The earliest clear documentary evidence of a Jewish presence in the important trade centre of Mainz dates, however, only from 906 CE.

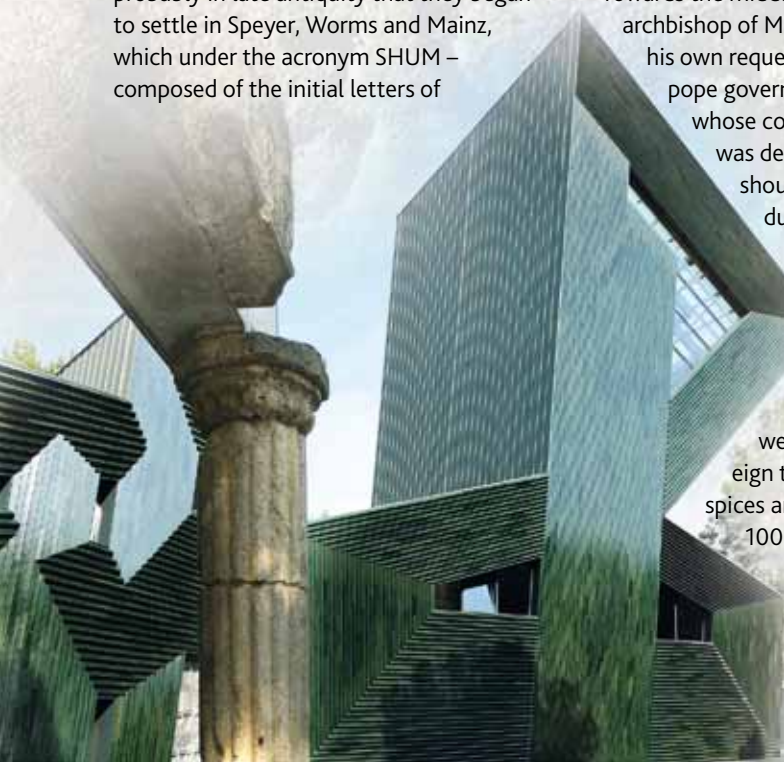
Towards the middle of the 10th century the archbishop of Mainz, Friedrich, received (at his own request) regulations from the pope governing relations with Jews, whose conversion to Christianity was desirable, he was told, but should not be exacted under duress. In the second half

of the 10th century references to Jews in Mainz increase in frequency; for Worms they begin around 960. Jewish

merchants from both cities were active, especially in foreign trade with luxury goods like spices and precious metals. Around

1000 CE their business took them to the fair in Cologne, and in the 11th century

*Mainz, New Synagogue with pillar and architrave of the destroyed 1912 synagogue, © Carsten Costard*



some well-established merchants began to act also as bankers.

When the Jews of Mainz were expelled in 1084 after trouble in the Jewish quarter – they were accused of arson – they were welcomed with open arms in Speyer. In return for an annual tax the bishop and overlord of that city granted them widespread privileges, among them the right to self-government and free trade, and soon a regular Jewish settlement grew up in the northern district of Altspeyer (Old Speyer). A few years later the Emperor Henry IV extended these privileges to the Jews of Worms, granting them freedom of trade throughout the Empire.

With these rights behind them, and confident of the support of the highest authorities, the Rhineland Jews initially underestimated the danger to which they were exposed at the onset of the First Crusade. When the crusaders reached the middle Rhine in 1096 they unleashed a pogrom, which in Speyer itself caused few casualties but in Worms and Mainz brought slaughter to all Jews who refused to abandon their faith. Yet after the restoration of imperial protection, the Jewish communities soon began to flourish again,

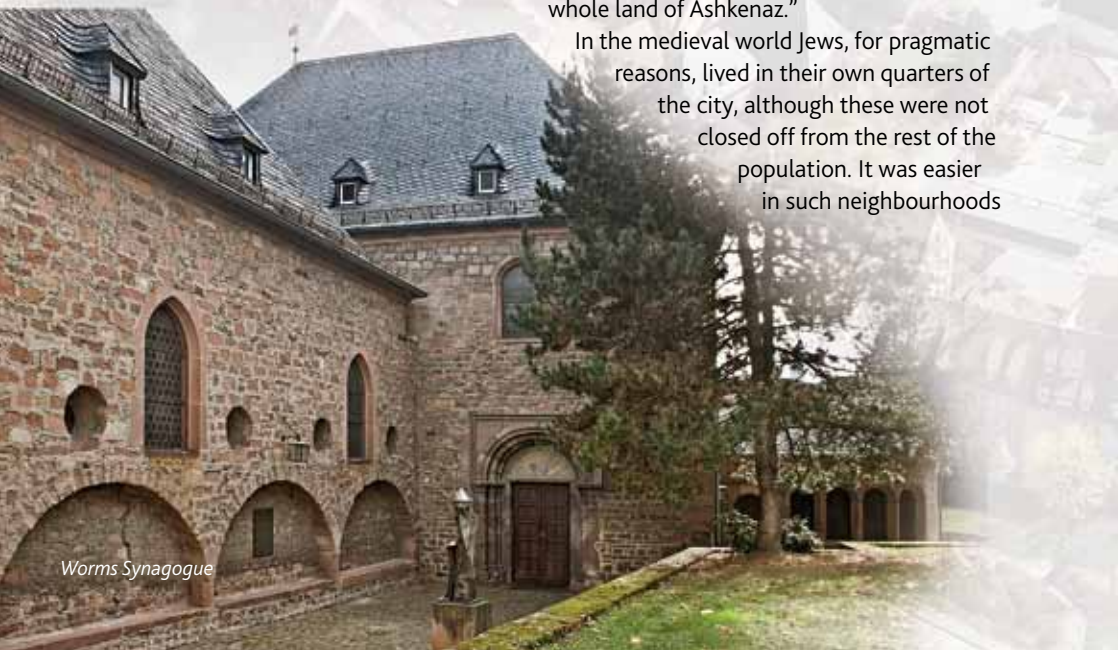
especially in Speyer, where a new synagogue was consecrated in 1104.

### **Kehillot SHUM – the Jewish communities in Speyer, Worms and Mainz**

Since the 10th century the kehillot (communities) in Mainz, Worms and Speyer had been among the earliest documented Jewish settlements in central and eastern Europe. They formed a unique network, whose culture, religious practice and legal enactments were held in high esteem throughout the Ashkenazic (central and eastern European) diaspora. Their close interrelation found expression in the coining of a single name for all three communities: the 'kehillot SHUM'.

Around 1200 the great Jewish scholar Isaac Or Zarua (d. c. 1250), who had studied both in France and in the SHUM communities, spoke of the importance of the SHUM in glowing words: "How true it is that our teachers in Mainz, Worms and Speyer belong to the most learned of the learned, the holiest of the Most High [...] From there their teaching spreads out for all Israel [...] Since the days of their founding all communities follow their example, on the Rhine and in the whole land of Ashkenaz."

In the medieval world Jews, for pragmatic reasons, lived in their own quarters of the city, although these were not closed off from the rest of the population. It was easier in such neighbourhoods



*Worms Synagogue*



to follow the precepts of Jewish law. In Mainz the Jewish quarter abutted onto the oldest residential area between St. Quintin and the Flachsmarkt (Flax Market). The synagogue and hospital were situated here and, close by, the Jewish butchery and bakery, both of which were subject to special ritual and dietary laws. However, until well into the 14th century, the quarter known as 'Unter den Juden' ('Jewry') was, in fact, populated largely by Christians. The Jewish quarter in Worms comprised the main 'Judengasse' ('Jews' Alley'), parallel to the city wall, and behind it the 'Hintere Judengasse' branching off to the south. At the beginning of the 12th century the Jews of Speyer had already started to move from their original settlement area of Altspeyer to the inner-city area around the cathedral. Altspeyer was finally abandoned in 1195.

### **Jewish law and Judenrecht**

Jewish law is based on the Old Testament and the Talmud – the post-biblical tradition of Judaic teaching. The rabbi, unlike a Christian priest, is not thought of as a sacred person, but as a teacher and interpreter of the law, a preacher, and an authority in matters of morals and legal order. The Judenrecht, on the other hand, was the medieval law promulgated by the Christian king or bishop as civic overlord, governing and at the same time protecting the Jewish community in return for a substantial financial levy. The Judenrecht also laid down the few occupations open to Jews, which essentially comprised trade (other than that pursued by the guilds) and finance, the latter being of major importance at a time when it was considered sinful for Christians to charge interest.

### **Jewish learning and the leading role of the SHUM cities**

As a religion of the book, Judaism demanded of its adherents at least some acquaintance with the traditional religious texts, with the result that many Jews – unlike their Christian neighbours – were literate. Moreover, through their trading activities, many also knew foreign languages.

In the course of the late 10th century Mainz became a centre of Jewish learning and culture. A prime agent in this development was the Kalonymos family, who probably migrated to the Rhine from Lucca in Tuscany. Moses ben Kalonymos the Elder brought knowledge of the liturgical texts of the eastern Mediterranean to the Rhineland. Illustrious names associated with the Jewish school of Mainz include those of Rabbi Yehuda ben Meir (called Leontin), who established the systematic study of the Talmud in Europe, and his pupil Rabbi Gershom ben Yehudah (c. 960-1028 or 1040), who became the most influential Talmudic scholar of Ashkenazic Europe. Widely known by his honorary title of 'Light of the Diaspora', he issued pioneering takkanot (rulings) on traditional religious law that adapted the practices of oriental Judaism to contemporary European life. He was

*Speyer, synagogue ruins*

responsible, for example, for enacting the confidentiality of written correspondence, the prohibition of polygamy, and a reform of the law governing divorce.

Gershom's pupils Isaac HaLevi and Jacob ben Yakar (d. 1064) went on to found a renowned yeshiva (Talmudic school) in 11th century Worms. The latter's most important pupil, renowned to the present day under the name of 'Rashi', was Rabbi Shlomo ben Yitzhak (1040-1105), whose commentaries on the Torah and Talmud spread throughout the Jewish world.

Thus in the course of time a tradition of learning grew up in Mainz, Worms and Speyer that gave the three kehillot a leading role in Ashkenazic Judaism. At a meeting in Troyes in 1146, the rabbis of Speyer, Worms and Mainz were accorded the highest authority in religious, cultic and legal questions. Their enactments, known collectively as the Takkanot SHUM, were regarded as binding – a status confirmed in 1220 by the Rabbinic Synod of Mainz.

## Plague and persecution

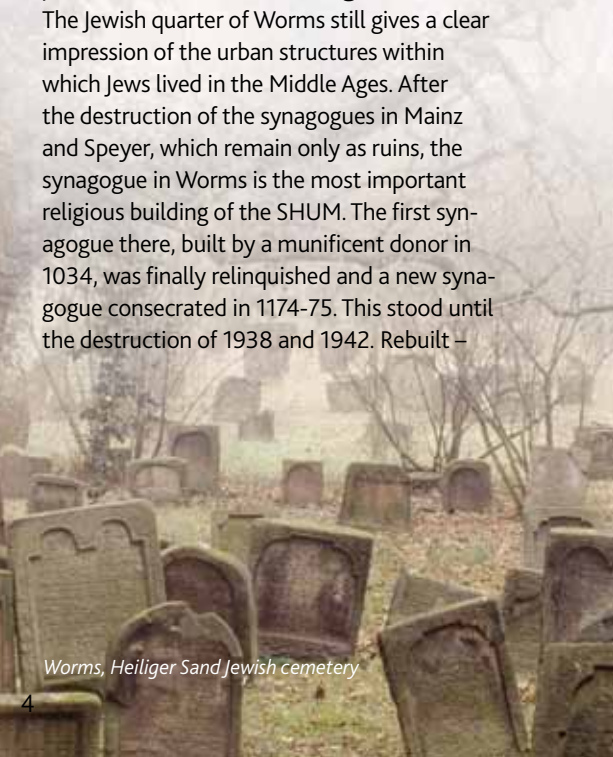
Local and regional persecution of the Jews, who were seen as a minority enjoying special economic, legal and religious status, had occurred on various occasions in the 12th and 13th centuries, but the inexplicable outbreak of the Black Death in the 14th century led to a massive pogrom throughout Europe. The Jews were accused of poisoning the wells. On August 23, 1349, after intense street fighting, the Jewish quarter of Mainz was burnt down and the community eradicated. The Jews of Speyer and Worms had already suffered the same fate; Jews were readmitted to those cities, however, in August 1352 and May 1353 respectively, in both cases with explicit appeal to the civic good. In Mainz a Jewish presence is again recorded from 1356. But in none of the three cities were they now allowed to own property. Jews were henceforth obliged to lease whatever property they used, even for religious purposes.

## Jewish architectural heritage

The Jewish quarter of Worms still gives a clear impression of the urban structures within which Jews lived in the Middle Ages. After the destruction of the synagogues in Mainz and Speyer, which remain only as ruins, the synagogue in Worms is the most important religious building of the SHUM. The first synagogue there, built by a munificent donor in 1034, was finally relinquished and a new synagogue consecrated in 1174-75. This stood until the destruction of 1938 and 1942. Rebuilt –



*Speyer, mikvah*



*Worms, Heiliger Sand Jewish cemetery*



with the help of the Federal Government – to its original plan after the Second World War, it was reconsecrated in 1961.

The Worms synagogue is a twin-nave structure with exterior walls of rough-hewn stone. Inside, its two pillars, crowned with fine capitals in the style of the Worms cathedral workshop, bear a six-fold cross-rib-vaulted ceiling. The Torah shrine is set in an apse-like niche in the east wall. Facing the shrine, a circular Romanesque window in the west wall allowed observation of the heavens to determine the onset of the Shabbat. A rectangular women's prayer-room was added to the northern side of the synagogue and consecrated in 1212-13; its cross-rib-vaulted ceiling is supported on a single central pillar with cubiform capital. The women could participate in the religious services in the men's synagogue by means of five small acoustic openings in the dividing wall. After widespread destruction during the Black Death Pogrom of 1349, a new vault and Gothic windows were added to the building. Further repairs and alterations were occasioned by destruction in 1615, and in 1623-24 a schoolroom complete with apse was added to the western end of the men's synagogue; from the 18th century onward this was known as 'Rashi's Schoolroom' or 'Rashi's Chapel'. Closely surrounded, meanwhile, by other buildings, the synagogue again suffered damage when the city was devastated during the War of the Palatine Succession in 1689. Rebuilt in 1700, the complex stood unchanged until

1938, when it was burnt down in the attacks on Jewish property throughout Germany in the Pogrom Night of November 10. The ruins were finally demolished in 1941-42. Some surviving fragments, however, could be reused in the reconstruction of 1959-61, which took as its overall model the medieval form of the complex, reinstating the pillar in the women's prayer-room, as well as the large Gothic-arched openings in the dividing wall made in the 19th century. A stone from the Holy Land was set in the reconstructed synagogue as a symbol of spiritual union. To the south of the synagogue complex stood (until 1971) the original medieval schoolroom or *Klause*, over whose cellars the present-day Rashi House, containing the Worms City Archives and the Jewish Museum, was erected in 1980-82. A further important element in the infrastructure of the Jewish quarter was the mikvah (ritual bath). Here observant Jews would, after specific activities or events, bathe by immersion in 'living' (i.e. naturally flowing) water. Constructed with the proceeds of a gift in 1185-86, the Worms mikvah was modelled structurally on that in Speyer. Its subterranean bath, fed from a well, is also the work of cathedral masons. Today the mikvah is once again accessible. Speyer's mikvah, built in the Romanesque style in the eastern part of the *curia Judaeorum* – the old Jewish quarter – between 1110 and 1120, has been preserved almost intact. The oldest ritual bath in Germany, it was used un-



*Speyer, mikvah*

til the expulsion of the Jews in 1534. A barrel-vaulted staircase leads down to an anteroom, next to which is a small changing room furnished with a stone bench. The anteroom opens onto the bath well through windows set in the dividing wall, and a curved flight of steps leads down to the bath itself. Apart from the ruined eastern exterior walls of the synagogue and women's prayer-room, the mikvah was until some years ago the only aspect of the traditional Judenhof still extant in Speyer. However, demolition of houses later built inside the synagogue ruins revealed further sections of the original walls, and archaeological research and conservation have more recently made it possible to gain a clear impression of the original building and the adjoining women's prayer-room.

Completed – probably by craftsmen from the cathedral workshops – and consecrated in 1104, Speyer synagogue was a flat-roofed building with a semicircular apse in the east wall housing the Torah shrine. It was originally lit by two double-arched windows and a single small circular one in the opposite gable ends. Destruction in 1349 was followed by reconstruction in the Gothic style, with the interior lighting improved by larger windows adorned with tracery, and a square apse replacing the earlier semicircular structure. The women's prayer-room was added in 1355; small acoustic openings in the dividing wall to the main synagogue are still visible. After the expulsion of 1534, the city used the buildings as an arsenal and armoury; the apse was demolished and new windows inserted. In an attack by French troops in 1689 the complex was burnt down to its outer walls, and subsequent decay and demolition, along with the embellishments of the 19th century, determined the appearance of the Judenhof until the mid 20th century, when excavations conducted in 1965–68 brought new material to light. Recent archaeological and historical investigations have yielded further knowledge of the architectural

and social history of both synagogue and Judenhof. Noteworthy remnants of the old synagogue, along with headstones from the 12th and 15th centuries, and other evidence of the medieval Jewish community in Speyer, are preserved in the Shpira Museum, which was opened in a house near the entrance to the Judenhof in 2012.

The ravages of fire, war and new building have eradicated not only the medieval Jewish quarter of Mainz, but also the ghetto which grew up later to the north-west.

With the relaxation of the Christian ban on lending money for interest, opinion developed in the 15th century that Jews were no longer needed, and in 1438 they were expelled from Mainz; the synagogue was used as a municipal coal depot. Seven years later they were readmitted. Another brief period of expulsion followed in 1462, and in 1470–71 they were forced to abandon the entire secular territory of the archbishopric. Archbishop Adolf II un-



*Speyer,  
New Synagogue*



derlined the irrevocability of this decision by converting the synagogue into a chapel of All Saints. For a whole century afterwards there was no Jewish community in Mainz. The following centuries saw Jewish communities settling again in the SHUM cities, but – as the relatively modest synagogues of the 18th and 19th centuries testify – they were no longer able to revivify the great SHUM tradition. The most impressive of these buildings was the new Main Synagogue in Mainz. Built to plans by Willy Graf in 1911-12, its monumentality reflected the self-confidence of the flourishing big-city community.

### **New synagogues**

Today all three SHUM cities again have consecrated synagogues. The reconstructed medieval synagogue in Worms was handed over to the community in 1961. The New Synagogue in Mainz, consecrated in 2011, stands on the site of the Main Synagogue, which served the community briefly from 1912 until its destruction in 1938. Designed by Manuel Herz, the spectacular New Synagogue refers architecturally to the important Jewish scholar Gershom ben Yehudah, who lived and taught in Mainz around 1000 CE. Speyer's New Synagogue, consecrated a year after that in Mainz, was built within the precincts of St. Guido's Convent to plans by the Frankfurt architect Alfred Jacoby. The Jewish communities of the three ancient SHUM cities are, however, no longer autonomous.

They belong now to large regional groupings: the Mainz community covers the entire Rhine-Hessen area, and Speyer is part of the Jewish community of the Rhineland-Palatinate.

### **Jewish cemeteries**

Judensand (Jewish Sand) the Jewish cemetery on Mombacher Strasse in Mainz, has been preserved to the present day. It was in use at least from the early 11th century as the final resting place not only for members of the Mainz community, but also for Jews from Bingen and the Rheingau. However, after the expulsion of the Jews from the city, many headstones were stolen for use in civic building projects, and the cemetery was turned into a vineyard. Its use as a burial ground recommenced in the late 17th century and continued until 1880. In the 19th century, especially in connection with the building of the railway, many stolen headstones were found. These became objects of interest and research, and in 1926 a 'Headstone Memorial Cemetery' was laid down in the grounds of the original cemetery. The oldest stone – now housed in the Rhineland-Palatinate State Museum in Mainz – is that of Yehuda ben Shneor, dated 1049. The much visited medieval memorial to Gershom ben Yehudah is also to be seen in Judensand cemetery. Speyer's Jewish cemetery suffered similarly from theft, but several dozen

headstones are now held in the museum there, the oldest dating from 1112-13.

The most ancient and important Jewish cemetery in Europe is Heiliger Sand (Holy Sand) in Worms.

Situated to the south-west of the cathedral, it was (with various extensions) in continuous use from 1058-59 until 1911,

*Mainz, New Synagogue*

and is still largely intact. Among the more than 2000 headstones preserved there, over 700 are medieval. The graves of famous rabbis still honoured and visited today include that of Rabbi Meir ben Baruch (called 'of Rothenburg'), a native of Worms, who became the leader of an emigration movement of Rhineland Jews to the Holy Land. He died, a prisoner of the king, in 1293; his body was only released for burial in 1307 on payment of a ransom by Alexander ben Salomo Wimpfen Süßkind. The headstones of both men stand next to each other near the entrance gate. The cemetery's 'Rabbis' Valley' contains the graves of many rabbis grouped around that of Yaakov ben Moshe Levi Moelin (abbr. 'Maharil'), an early 15th century scholar from Mainz, who was renowned during his lifetime as the highest Jewish authority in the entire Holy Roman Empire.

### On the way to World Heritage status

These are places of memory and admonition across which arches a centuries-long span of history – despite the many intervening breaks and catastrophes.

The unique significance of the SHUM communities in the episcopal cities of the Rhine, and the influential role they played throughout

the Jewish world, together with the wealth of evidence from the Middle Ages – above all the synagogues, mikvaot and cemeteries – have led to the submission (on August 1, 2012) of an application for the SHUM cities to be



Mainz, State Museum of the Rhineland-Palatinate: headstone from the grave of Yehuda ben Shneur (†1049)

entered in the UNESCO catalogue of World Heritage Sites. The three cities have agreed to intensify cooperation and research into the many different aspects of their Jewish cultural heritage. Following the initiative of the Jewish Museums in Worms and Speyer, the State Museum of the Rhineland-Palatinate in Mainz will in future also be presenting an exhibition on the history and heritage of the SHUM communities – an opportunity for all who are interested to deepen

their knowledge in this area.

In the same context the new Mainz synagogue, consecrated in 2011, plays a special role. With its marked references to the Golden Age of the SHUM and the scholars who inspired it, Manuel Herz's expressive architecture takes up a 1000 year span of tradition that, despite all breaks and catastrophes, is still alive today.

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### Photographs:

Front page: City of Mainz © Carsten Costard

pp. 2-7: State Conservation Office R. Deckers-Matzko

p. 8: State Museum, Mainz (Rudischer)

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