

Jewish Societies in Wittlich

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It is not easy to document the activities of Jewish societies in Wittlich using archival material. Only few documents concerning these societies could be found in relevant archives. Nevertheless there were Jewish societies. In her paper about Jews in Wittlich, Maria Wein-Mehs enumerates several associations. She also mentions the Chewra Kaddischa, the B'nai Brith Order, as well as the Jewish Mosel-lodge in Trier, which is not a society that will be examined in this paper. It therefore will not be put under closer scrutiny.

The Chewra Kaddischa, the Jewish Burial Society, is supposed to be the oldest Jewish society. It concerned funeral fellowship, which was certified in Prague in the 17th century. The members are usually very religious people who are Shomer Shabbas, the keepers of the Sabbath. They prepare the bodies of the deceased, washing them and putting them in a Shroud and watching the body at all times until it is buried. The Chewra Kaddischa's purpose is to ensure that the deceased is buried and treated in a dignified manner. Also the Chewra Kaddischa is usually the first Jewish Group that is formed in a new Jewish Community. They had to act close to the Thora. Another religious obligation was to give the dead the funeral train, while the society was asked for donations. Once a year, on the day Moses died according to the rabbinical tradition, the whole fellowship fasted, and held a banquet afterwards. The scope of duties of the Chewra Kaddischa in Wittlich went further: It took over the support of poor members of the community under the patronage of the society's executive board.

Other Jewish societies besides the mentioned were: the Israelite Women's Society, the Israelite Young Men's Society, the Wittlich local chapter of the Jewish Women's Alliance, the Central Society of German Citizens of Jewish Faith, the local chapter of the Jewish Youth Alliance, the Zionist local chapters of Wittlich "Habonim" and "Makkabi" and the Empire's Alliance of Jewish front line soldiers. Some of these societies had already existed longer. The Israelite Young-Men's Society was founded in 1871, the Israelite Women's Society in 1884, the central organization of the Jewish Women's Alliance in 1904, and the Central Society of German Citizens of Jewish Faith in Berlin in 1893.

Charity was the main common purpose of many of these societies: "To practice charity is one of the most elementary demands for a Jew. The roots of Jewish benefit as an expression of charity go deep down into the Jewish religion." Mrs. Natalie Bär-Marks for example distributed food packages every Friday for some time, which were given by the Israelite Women's Society. Barely was an active unregistered society after its foundation in 1884. It was "re-founded" in 1914 for the main purpose of holding charity performances for the members of the Jewish community. In 1934, it consisted of 42 active and 18 passive members.

The main aim of the Israelite Young-Men's Society was to support needy persons in cases of illness or death. It was also a not-registered society. Emil Frank was the chairman in 1934 when it consisted of 28 members. The Jewish Women's Alliance, which had a local chapter in Wittlich, made it its business to advance youth charity. Cooperation between the district welfare center and this society was certified in 1932. In that year, the district welfare center asked the Jewish Women's Alliance for financial support, as otherwise a cure for a sick child could not have been paid. Another society recorded in archival documents was the Israelite Men's Society Wittlich. It practiced "charity inside the Israelite community" from its inception in 1881. Daniel Marks was its chairman in 1934 when it had 22 members.

The Central Society of German Citizens of Jewish Faith, or the two Zionist local chapters in

Wittlich had other functions. They followed primarily political aims. The tenet of the Central Society was: "The Central Society of German Citizens of Jewish Faith intends to collect the German citizens of Jewish faith without differences in religious or political directions to strengthen them in the maintenance of their civic sentiment." This postulated this organization's clearly political agenda. Its membership saw itself primarily as Germans of Jewish faith. This was the big difference when compared to other Jewish societies, which did not see themselves as Germans of Jewish faith, but as a Jewish people in the Diaspora. It is therefore possible that members of the Central Society participated in agitations against the "enemy" France, even though French Jews were affected. The Central Society tried to face the growing anti-Semitism in Germany by publishing leaflets and reports. It fought for an equal recognition of the Jews as Germans in all scopes of Germany. Emigration was not initially the aim.

The Zionist local chapters in Wittlich followed another goal. The translations of their names already give hints on that: "Habonim" means "the builders" and "Makkabi" refers to Judas Makkabeus, a Jewish freedom-fighter (165 BC). This expresses that their aim was independence within own borders. Zionist societies had already been founded in the 1890s. Theodor Hetzel, who had called for an own Jewish state since 1897, was the man in charge of that aim. While at first different areas in Southern America and Africa were discussed, Palestine crystallized after 1903 and became increasingly stronger after World War I as the destination for Zionist emigration.

The Zionist local chapter "Habonim" was listed as a Jewish society in Wittlich in 1934, where it was founded on 26 July 1934 under Walter Dublon as its first chairman. Ten members took part in the foundation. The burgomaster mentioned in his report about Jewish societies in Wittlich, which was written because of a decree from 9 July 1934. The object of the not yet registered society was to help to build a Palestinian state, and that they were expecting a rising number of members. Actually it increased up to 38 members in November 1936. There is nothing recorded in the documents about the activities of the local chapter "Makkabi". It is only known that it consisted of 22 members in 1936. In the already mentioned list of the societies in Wittlich from that year, there is another society named the Makkabi Wittlich with 44 members, about which nothing is known either.

Due to the aggravating political situation in Germany at the time, the Central Society began to increasingly become a Zionist organization. Emigration and the struggle against anti-Semitism in Germany was for them a possibility to escape from the persecution of Jews. Both societies demonstrated increasing numbers of members and contributions in the middle of the 1930s. Another society with political aims was the Empire's Alliance of Jewish front-line soldiers. It developed after right-wing groups in politics and society initially tried to blame socialists and afterwards the Jews for the loss in World War I. Jewish soldiers who saw their fighting at the front as a national duty organized against this reproach. Their main object was to restrain the accusations concerning their behavior in WWI. Politically, they stood close to the Central Society as the members of both societies that saw Germany as their native country. The local Wittlich chapter of this society was founded as unregistered in 1921. After 1924, the Empire's Alliance tried to bring their ideas to youth, such as by founding a sports organization serving to provide paramilitary training. This happened in Wittlich as well. This sports organization could train on property of the chemical factory owned by A. Ermann. The letter of the SA-leader Josef Teusch addressed this fact when he wrote: "The population of Wittlich is very angry about that and their dislike for this Jewish impudence will take effect sooner or later[...]". This sports organization seems to be the Jewish sports club mentioned by Wilfried Plohmann. Nevertheless, Jewish athletes went to their public events. The NS-burgomaster Dr. Hürter tried to forbid it because a "camouflage

for not controlling propaganda for a stay in Germany" was practiced. Even though the sport activities could not be stopped, public marches were forbidden. The representative of the district president prohibited them with this reason: "I see a serious danger when a completely Jewish sports club marched into the city when there is a sporting event. I would like to let the Jewish sports club know that they are free to exercise their sports in their own area, but that united appearance, e.g. marches through the city, could disturb the public peace and therefore cannot be allowed." Although the local chapter of the Empire's Alliance still existed in 1934 and consisted of 22 members, the annual report of 1934 said that the society had not been active for three years. On 19 October 1936 political activities were forbidden for the Empire's Alliance, and two months later on 21 December 1936, the "ban on Jewish assemblies and events" was declared.

The Jewish Youth Alliance developed out of the ideals of the German youth movement. A local chapter was founded in Wittlich on 5 March 1921, which was registered in the register of societies on 8 April of the same year. The main goals were the same as in the Christian youth movement: connection to nature, opposition against parents and nature. In addition to these declarations, there was another one in the Jewish Youth Alliance: "Only inside the Jewish community can love for Judaism flourish." One of these youth alliances was founded in Breslau in 1912 as the Blue-White hiking-club, the colors of the Zionist flag. It became the biggest German youth-group with more than 3000 members. The manual of the hiking-club says: "[...] the Blue-White hiking-club wants to bring the Jewish sex to nature and by doing that hopes to correct the mistakes of a wrong upbringing to a certain degree [...] it educates the children in contrast to the philosophy of life of the older generation and not in contrast to Jewish view[...]." Under the chairman Kurt Ermann, the youth alliance of Wittlich revived like all Jewish alliances after 1930. "The Jewish youth-unions in Germany including the sports clubs had about 40 000 members in 1930." After 1933, as all Jews were expelled from sports clubs by government decree, an independent sports department was founded. In 1934 with David Hartmann as chairman, the local chapter Wittlich consisted of 20 members. According to its statutes, the aim of the society was: "the maintenance of knowledge on Jewish area and sociability".

On 3 October 1938, there was again a reference to the ban on Jewish assemblies and events from 1936. On that day, the Berlin Gestapo informed the district offices that all Jewish organizations were obliged to present the report-manuscripts for public explanation and propaganda for planned events to the Ministry of Information if lectures contained political, historical, cultural or scientific topics." The events could not be held without prior approval. Until 10. October 1938, the number of registered Jews in Wittlich decreased to 86. It can be concluded that societies came to an end as a matter of that fact. In the summer of 1941, the Jews remaining in the city had to assemble for "transportation" into a camp. Thus ended the history of the Jewish community in Wittlich for a long time.

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