

"Zum Rebhuhn", the Former Jewish Bath In Wiesbaden An Inquiry into a Community Mikveh

By Wolfgang Fritzsche

(Preliminary translation by Jochen Roth. Translation revised by Victoria Barkoff)

In July 1999, the Erich-Haub-Zais-Stiftung and the Denkmalschutzbehörde commissioned historical research on the building at Spiegelgasse 9/11 in Wiesbaden. This property is the Pariser Hof bathhouse, which was under Jewish ownership for a considerable period and, at least for a time, was used as a mikveh by the Jewish community of Wiesbaden. The research was spurred by the fact that the Förderkreis Aktives Museum Deutsch-Jüdische Geschichte had finally managed to rent part of the complex, the building at Spiegelgasse 11, for their exhibition rooms in 1999.

The research would essentially be based on detailed archival investigations and would provide new insight into the supposed mikveh. It was known that the Jewish community of Wiesbaden used some bathing rooms as a mikveh until the 1960s. As it was also known that the bathhouse had been owned by a rabbi in the 18th century under its former name "Zum Rebhuhn", it was presumed that there must have been a mikveh there from that time.

The following article is an inquiry into the building's use as a mikveh. Due to limitations of space, we have not included a detailed history or description of the building itself.

The mikveh in the Zum Rebhuhn and Pariser Hof buildings

Besides the synagogue and the cemetery, the mikveh is one of the three places that are essential for the existence of a traditional religious Jewish community. In contrast to the synagogue and the cemetery, the mikveh is accessible only to Jews. A mikveh (plural: mikvot or mikvaot) literally means a "gathering of water" or "basin". It is under strict religious regulations. It must have a minimum capacity of 40 *se'ah* (about 800 litres)¹, so that the body can be completely immersed. The mikveh also must be filled with „living water“ from a natural source, not with a vessel or a person's hand. Other strict rules specify that thermal water is not suitable as it is usually too warm and often clouded or coloured by mineral deposits; this problem can sometimes be overcome by letting thermal water cool down and bringing in other water.

A rabbi is authorized to test the quality and attributes of the water and to classify it as "living". Mikvot are usually dug below ground level and are entered via steps. The pool must be watertight or it would be useless. "If architecturally possible, the ritual bathhouse should have at least one window so that the onset of darkness can be easily perceived."²

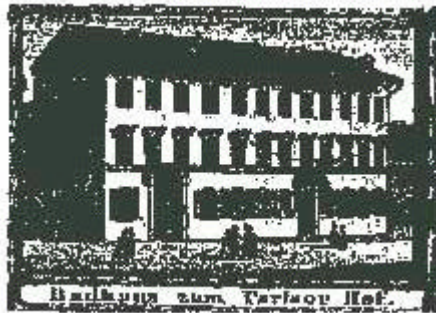
The mikveh serves for ritual, not physical, cleansing. Hence it follows that, besides the actual immersion bath, there must be a washing facility, normally a bathtub. "Every mikveh serves [...] for the dipping of tableware, tools, men and women."³ This usage resulted in the term "Tauchbad" (dipping-bath) within the Jewish community, while the official German written language obviously never used the word mikveh for this institution but the terms "Judenbrunnen/Judenborn" (Jewish springs), "Judenbäder" (Jewish baths), "Ritualbäder"

¹ Thea Altaras. *Das jüdische Rituelle Tauchbad und Synagogen in Hessen*, Königstein 1994, S. 7

² Ibid., S. 8

³ Zink, Wolfgang. „Mikvot in Herzogtum Nassau um 1840“, in *Denkmalpflege in Hessen.*, 1997, Heft 2, S. 44

(ritual baths), and in the 19th century often just the name "jüdische Frauenbäder" (Jewish women's baths). This non-uniform and inaccurate denotation easily leads to misunderstandings and makes it more difficult to prove the existence of a mikveh by searching the archives, especially when it is assumed to have been located in a bathhouse.



Ill. 1: The Pariser Hof in 1840

The development of the Jewish community in Wiesbaden before 1830

After much scheming and intrigue, the Jews of Wiesbaden were banished from the city on October 22, 1626 because they were imputed to be counterfeiting currency. However, the Jew Nathan was given permission to live in Wiesbaden again. He immediately rented "the bathhouse Zum Stern, the property of the citizen Dielmann Weber, and moved in without giving further notice to the municipal court."⁴ Just two years later, Ludwig von Hörnigk wrote that the Stern (literally "the Star") "is still under a favourable star and has its conveniences, but it is commonly the bath of the Jews or Talmudists."⁵ This raises the question of why von Hörnigk wrote that the Stern *still* had a favourable star and conveniences. Presumably, the reason is that at the time – in 1637 – while 21 bathing establishments were registered in Wiesbaden, 12 of them were listed as vacant or ruined. The Thirty Years' War had had its effect on bathing in Wiesbaden. In 1657, Nathan acquired the Zwei Böcke and the Halber Mond, which henceforth, like the Stern, would be Jewish baths for some time.⁶

A glance at the history of the city of Wiesbaden shows that reconstruction was slow after the Thirty Years' War. Until 1684, only three Jewish families lived in Wiesbaden.⁷ So it is not surprising that it is not until 1724 that an owner of the bathhouse Zum Rebhuhn is named on the Wiesbaden list of Jews. Along with the owner of the Rebhuhn, who, depending on the reading of the source, is listed as Jliof, Jekof or Jakob, seven other Jewish citizens are mentioned. The explanatory note says that there were no more than 10 wealthy persons, that those [in the plural] who owned bathhouses did not have a good income and that all the others lived in poor conditions.⁸ Two facts emerge here. Firstly, the number of eight persons listed may not be accurate because subsequently the number of wealthy persons is mentioned as "no more than ten"; and secondly, which is more important in this context, apart from the Rebhuhn, there must have been at least one other bathhouse run by a Jewish resident. This second bath, which is mentioned by Hellmund in 1731, was known as the Hirsch.⁹

⁴ Otto, Friedrich. „Die Juden zu Wiesbaden“, in *Annalen des Vereins für Nassauische Altertumskunde und Geschichtsforschung*, 23. Band 1891, S. 142

⁵ Hörnigk, Ludwig von. *Wissbad, Sampt seiner wunderlichen Eygenschafft*. Frankfurt 1637, S. 10

⁶ Otto, F.: *Wie Anm.* 4, S. 143

⁷ *Ibid.* S. 144

⁸ HStAW Abt. 131, Nr. III b 5.

⁹ Hellmund Egid. Gunth.; *Thermographia Paranetica: Oder nützliches Baad=Buch*. Wiesbaden 1731, S. 36

As the Judenschule (synagogue) was transferred from a private building in the Metzgergasse (today Wagemannstraße) to the Rebhuhn in 1732¹⁰, we can conclude that there was a mikveh there at that time.

Samuel Jakob was then the owner of the Rebhuhn, and we can assume that he was the former owner's son. Samuel (Schmul) Jakob was also the head of the Jewish community, which makes the establishment of a mikveh more probable.

After the presumed closure of the Hirsch around 1760, the community was not permitted to install a second Jewish bathhouse. By 1763, pressure was applied to the town council to allow another one. As part of these discussions, Sabel Marx applied to buy the Krone. This request was refused in January 1774, but he was given the offer to buy one of the four remote bathhouses Goldenes Kreuz, Lilie, Halber Mond or Zwei Böcke. By 1789, Sabel took over the Halber Mond and wanted to open the business. He was unsuccessfully opposed by Samuel Jakob, and nine rooms and eight baths were installed in the Halber Mond.¹¹

About 1760, the bathhouse Zum Rebhuhn was renovated from the ground up, including the establishment of new bathing facilities. The Halber Mond certainly presented major competition. It is remarkable in this context that, although there was much discussions even within the Jewish community, there are no comments in the files hinting at a ritual bath in the Rebhuhn. There may be several reasons for this. On the one hand, as a mikveh is closed to non-Jews, the argument for maintaining a mikveh in the Rebhuhn would not have been accepted by the Christian municipal court. Furthermore, as non-Christian customs were a thorn in the side of the magistracy, it was advisable not to mention them.

In 1789, the Rebhuhn had changed hands once again and was purchased by Rabbi Abraham Salomon. From this time on, it can be assumed that there was a mikveh there because as rabbi, the spiritual leader of the community, Salomon had to visit a mikveh for ritual spiritual cleansing before each Sabbath, after sexual intercourse and before the beginning of the High Holidays (Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur).¹²

The architecture of the Rebhuhn was different then. The owner's home was located along the Spiegelgasse, where guests could also be lodged (today Spiegelgasse 9). To the right, in the courtyard, was the bathhouse. To the left of the Rebhuhn, there was another small house at the end of the Kleine Spiegelgasse. Along the Kleine Spiegelgasse was another small dwelling, built in 1735 by the miller of the Firnselmühle (today Spiegelgasse 11). The exhibition rooms of the Förderkreis Aktives Museum Deutsch-Jüdische Geschichte are housed in this part of the building.

When Rabbi A. Salomon died in 1798, he left behind his widow, and his sons, Heyum Abraham, Moses Abraham, Salomon Abraham and Hirsch Abraham.¹³ His widow was the sole heir, and was to administer the entire property as she pleased for the rest of her life.

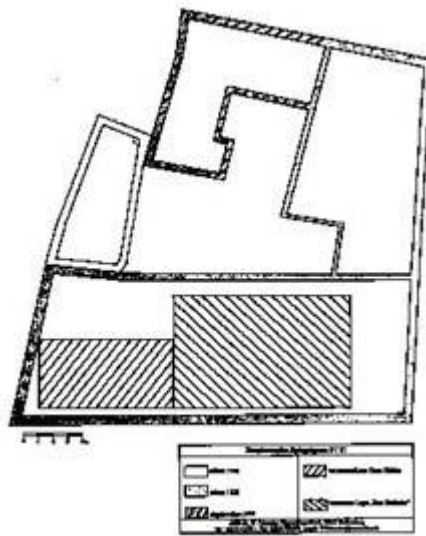
¹⁰ Otto, F. wie Anm. 4, S. 147

¹¹ The discussion about an additional Jewish bathhouse is described in detail in: Lothar Bembeneck, „Das jüdische Badehaus 'Zum Rebhuhn' in Wiesbaden“, in *Menora. Jahrbuch für jüdische Geschichte*, München Zürich, 1992, S. 99-120

¹² Letter from Wolfgang Se'ev Zink on May 12, 1997 to Förderkreis Aktives Museum Deutsch-Jüdische Geschichte.

¹³ Vgl. HStAW Abt. 137 IX, Nr. 198

Just two years later, Georg Heinrich Ritter published his *Denkwürdigkeiten der Stadt Wiesbade (On the City of Wiesbaden)*. It states that there were two Jewish baths in Wiesbaden, the Rebhuhn and the Halber Mond, „where Jewish citizens receive visitors of their nation“¹⁴. On the same page, Ritter includes a description of the city’s baths and we can assume that those of the Rebhuhn were similar. "Every house consists of two parts: the dwelling and the bathhouse: they are interconnected, so that you go from one directly into the other. The depth of the bath is between 20 and 40 feet: in most of them you just look up at the roof, which has one or more openings to let the steam rising from the hot water escape: [...] In such a bathhouse, from 10 or 15 to more than 30 baths are installed in small rooms, open at the top: their shape is often rectangular, about 8 feet long (more or less), about six feet wide and four feet deep: you walk down some steps and can dip in, according to your pleasure, up to the chest on stone benches or up to the neck if you sit on the bricks at the bottom."¹⁵



III. 2: Before and after reconstruction

From this information, it is possible to calculate the volume of one of these installations. If one old German foot equals about 30 centimetres, the length would be 2.4 metres, the width 1.8 metres and the depth 1.2 metres, which is equivalent to a volume of 5.2 cubic metres containing 5,200 litres. Both the dimensions and the capacity would suffice for the use of such a pool as a ritual bath, although the dimensions of the pools in the Rebhuhn might have differed.

It the late 1820s, the Rebhuhn was sold to Isaac Jacob Hiffelsheimer. At that time, bathing was very popular in Wiesbaden and all the bathhouses were modernized. Hiffelsheimer was one of the first to recognize this necessity. He bought the corner house on the Kleine Spiegelgasse (the Güttler house) and a piece of land to the south, had both buildings pulled down and built a new three-storey hotel. He also changed the name to Pariser Hof. A contemporary wrote: "In the centre of the city, I saw a little house made of wood and loam, six windows long and two deep, torn down in two days. A Jew bought it without any additional space, for 12,000 florins, to build a solid new building for at least the same amount."¹⁶

¹⁴ Ritter, Georg Heinrich: *Denkwürdigkeiten der Stadt Wiesbaden*, Mainz 1800, S.69

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Anglodanus, „Wiesbaden wie es jetzt ist“ in *Bibliothek des Neuesten Weltenkunde*, Aarau 1841, S.230

Apart from this mikveh, there might have been other private mikvot, because a list from 1811 says that at least five Jewish slaughters¹⁷ lived in Wiesbaden at the time and would also have required such an establishment. Again the terms for a public bath with a Jewish owner and a ritual bath are easily confused because of linguistic inaccuracies. They are two different establishments.

The Pariser Hof bathhouse

At that time, there were two Jewish bathhouses: the Pariser Hof and the Halber Mond. During the process of modernization, Hiffelsheimer got into more and more financial trouble and had to lease his bathhouse to the wine-merchant Freinsheim and finally sell it to the Christian assessor Friedrich von Wagner in 1833. The bathhouse frequently changed owners until the end of the 19th century, but always remained in Christian hands.



Ill. 3: The Pariser Hof Bathhouse, 1999

In the early 19th century, not only did bathing become more popular in Wiesbaden, but the Jewish community grew as well. After the death of Rabbi Abraham Salomon, the synagogue probably was moved to the estate of the Sabel family in Webergasse. There it existed until 1816 in the upper level of a wooden shed, which became dilapidated. For this reason, the community applied to build its own synagogue, which was finally erected in the Schwalmbacher Straße in 1824.¹⁸ We do not know whether or not it had a mikveh.

With this move, the Jewish community became polarized. An essential point of the dispute was the internal split into a conservative faction and a faction that wanted to initiate reforms. The discussion temporarily came to a halt in 1832 when the later eminent Reform rabbi Abraham Geiger was called to Wiesbaden.¹⁹

Geiger wrote to the Nassau government that the mikvot installed in the dukedom were injurious to health. He had two reasons for doing so: his own reform efforts and social concerns. The resulting fact-finding committee was ordered to examine the sanitary conditions and the potential health threat of all mikvot in the Nassau communities. These experts recommended the renovation or replacement of old mikvot. For example, around 1840, the state government decreed that a warm bath for women should be installed in the communities of Wallau and Breckenheim. Some members of the Jewish community objected

¹⁷ HStAW Abt. 246, Nr. 787

¹⁸ HStAW Abt. 210, Nr. 2778

¹⁹ Vgl. Bembeneck, *Das jüdische Badhaus „Zum Rebhuhn“*, S. 15

to this order as their wives „use the bath by law every month and go to Wiesbaden“. In another report from 1839, it is mentioned that a new bath was installed in Flörsheim, which was "as well equipped as the baths in Wiesbaden"²⁰.



Ill. 4: Bathing facilities in the Pariser Hof Bathhouse, 1999

Although most of the experts did not perceive any threat to health, Geiger achieved his aim. By decree of the state government, private mikvot in particular were closed and many Jewish communities were required to build new bathhouses or to convert mikvot, often at considerable expense.

Even though any corresponding documents from the city of Wiesbaden are now lost, it is clear that there must have been several ritual baths. However, it is difficult to determine their precise location. There are several possibilities: Spiegelgasse 11, built in 1735, can be eliminated because it had a Christian owner and, more importantly, the basement in question belonged to a third owner. The Pariser Hof became a bathhouse without any religious function, while the Halber Mond still existed as a Jewish bath. As the owner of the Halber Mond also was the head of the Jewish community and the synagogue was situated in his back building, it may be concluded that there was a mikveh there for a longer period.

During the period of transition to a Reform community, some traditional Jewish practices were lost, for example the community of Wiesbaden renounced the installation of a mikveh when the new synagogue was built at Michelsberg.²¹

Nevertheless, there is some evidence of the existence of mikvot in Wiesbaden in the mid-19th century: there was at least one Jewish slaughterer who needed this institution in order to practice his profession; and it is written in the state files of the Jewish community that its members used the baths in Wiesbaden. It should be noted that after the Rebhuhn was rebuilt, its bathing facilities were changed. An 1888 plan shows twelve bathing rooms. The actual pools are arranged as they are today. They are set in the ground and accessible via three steps. Each pool is about 160 cm long by 68 cm wide by 75 cm deep, with a volume of 0.816 cubic metres, excluding the volume above the steps. The capacity of these pools would be sufficient for them to serve as a mikveh.

²⁰ HStAW Abt. 227, Nr. 2624

²¹ I am indebted to Wolfgang Zink for this information.

In reaction to the Reform movement, an Orthodox counter-movement took shape within the Wiesbaden community. At the end of 1869, Elieser (Leo) Lipman Kahn left Berlin to become a teacher and then a rabbi in Wiesbaden.²² A traditionalist, he had this to say about conditions in Wiesbaden: "It is impossible to describe how frightfully neglected the Jewish religious traditions are in our civilized city. Not one child is able to translate a single Hebrew prayer; and the older boys and girls can barely read Hebrew. This is the result of the 26-year term of the community's rabbi."²³ At this time, the Orthodox movement had already rented a building where a synagogue was installed. There might have been a mikveh there, or in the house of Leo Kahn.

Later Kahn wrote in one of his publications upon entering into service: "Of course, my very first concern was to install a mikveh and a schechita."²⁴ This would seem to indicate that there was no municipal mikveh at the time. Officially, the so-called "separate community" (Austrittsgemeinde) was formed on November 2, 1876, one of the first in Prussia.²⁵ In the late 1870s, the separate community built a synagogue in Friedrichstrasse.

We can conclude that a part of this community wanted to follow their religious practices and rented rooms for mikvot. Witnesses from the period still report today that they or their parents would go to the Pariser Hof for bathing before World War II. The bathing rooms were nearly ideal as a mikveh: set in the ground, with a capacity of about 800 litres of water and – most importantly–filled with "living water" according to religious law.

After the main synagogue in Michelsberg was destroyed on November 10, 1938 (Reichskristallnacht), the synagogue in the Friedrichstrasse served as a prayer room, until the municipal police made it the assembly point for deportation in 1942. After the holocaust, a new community was founded here in 1946. As no mikveh was installed, the founders remembered the Pariser Hof and rented three bathing rooms in 1950.²⁶

And so we have come full circle: the Jewish community returned to the Pariser Hof and installed a mikveh.

²² Vgl. Rabbi Elieser Lipmann Kahn, in: *Bezahl Kahn, Citadel of Splendor. The 500 year legacy of Jewish Sulzberg*, New York 1995, S. 145-61

²³ *The Israelite*, December 20, [1869]

²⁴ Kahn, Leo: *Zur Geschichte der altisraelische Kultusgemeinde zu Wiesbaden*, Wiesbaden 1922, S. 5

²⁵ *The Israelite*, November 22, 1876

²⁶ I am indebted for this information to Mr. Mandelbaum, a member of the board of directors of the Jewish community of Wiesbaden for many years.