

Schermbeck, Germany revisited

By IRIS M. SAMSON, News Editor

When Marga Randall and her family fled from their home -- and the nazis -- in Schermbeck, West Germany, in 1939, only three Jewish families remained in the town.

Today she is "the last Jew of Schermbeck," the only survivor of a once-thriving Jewish community that can trace its roots back centuries.

What transpired in Schermbeck was a microcosm of what happened in villages throughout Germany. Small towns with active Jewish populations were made Judenrein -- free of Jews -- and many Germans born during or after the war have no knowledge of once flourishing Jewish communities in their towns.

"But one day I gave a sermon relating to Passover and a congregant came to me and told me she knew all about matzo. Her neighbors had been Jewish. That was in 1979 and at that point I began my study."

Bornebusch went through town archives, interviewed parishioners and began to research local Jewish history. He discovered that one Jew survived -- Marga Randall -- and began a correspondence that led to a wealth of history and a firm friendship. Randall made her first trip home to Schermbeck in 1981, and has been back three times.

To bring the issue before his parishioners, the Reverend "planned a series of sermons about Christians and Jews," he relates. "I decided that one sermon must be on the history of the local community." He also took his research to the local synod -- main church council -- to ask for help and to encourage other clerics to begin similar programs.

"I believe it's very important for the Jewish people themselves to tell their own story," he says, "and for us to explain Jewish traditions, to create a dialogue between Christians and Jews."

What did the Reverend's research uncover? "The oldest record of Jews in Schermbeck dates to 1690," he relates, "but it may be even earlier. Records of the town were destroyed in the 30 Years War of the 1600's."

Schermbeck's Jews reached their peak in 1855, when they comprised over 10 percent of the town population. The community had a synagogue, mikva -- ritual bath, Jewish school, butcher, stores and Yeshiva that drew students from as far away as the Netherlands.

Jews were able to buy protection -- physical and economic -- in the 19th century under Prussian rule, and records for their applications for that status date back to 1810.

"One of my aims in promoting the research and producing an exhibition is to show that anti-Semitism



SCHERMBECK in the 1920's. Marga Randall's former home is in the center of the photo.

didn't just happen in 1933. The Holocaust didn't just happen," Bornebusch asserts. Records of past sermons by Schermbeck clerics were anti-Semitic pre-1933 and the advent of the Nuremberg Laws.

"After 1933, however, the anti-Semitism became open," he adds.

Another of the Reverend's aims is to "promote dialogue with Jews to understand our own roots. We must be very sensitive," he cautions. "Even I, in my sermons, find anti-Semitic undertones, because in our theology Judaism stops where Christianity begins."

Bornebusch's efforts have been accepted, for the most part, by his parishioners. He has lectured in Munich and

nearby towns, and brought his exhibit to local schools. And his work has become even more pressing with the growth in Germany of neo-nazism.

"Young people," he asserts, "are doing what their fathers unconsciously think." Many Germans of his generation are frustrated and hurt, he believes, and family life has suffered.

"We have the problem of not wanting to know what our fathers did. Every son wants a father to look up to, and you never know what will turn up, what they did during the war."

The Reverend hopes that, in addition to promoting ecumenism and uncovering a rich history of Jewish communal life, he will also help project a better image of Germans.

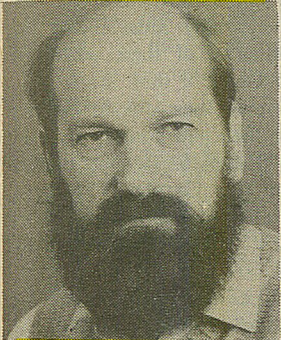
"The Germans feel shame about Hitler," he says. "And we will try to overcome the shame of our parents' generation."

Pope scores nazi atrocities

ROME, (JTA)—Pope John Paul last week assailed nazism as "a mad imperialist ideology" and condemned the atrocities that it bred, including the killings of the Jewish people who were "condemned to extermination."

In an Easter message delivered to more than 200,000 persons gathered in St. Peter's Square, the Pope invoked the 40th anniversary of the conclusion of World War II. He praised "the men and women in each country who offered their lives in sacrifice for the right cause, the cause of the dignity of the human person."

"They faced death as defenseless victims, offered in Holocaust, or defending with their arms the free way to life," the Pope said.



REV. BORNEBUSCH
Search continues.

This happened to Rev. Wolfgang Bornebusch, pastor of the Protestant (Evangelisch) Church in Schermbeck. He inadvertently discovered that Schermbeck was home to a large Jewish population before the nazi reign, and decided to research the history of the Schermbeck Jews.

Bornebusch came to Pittsburgh this week through the efforts of Marga Randall, now a Pittsburgh resident, and with aid from the Mobay Corporation in time for Yom Hashoa -- Remembrance of Holocaust Victims -- commemorations held throughout the city. He is here to describe his research and current efforts to bridge the gap between German Christians and Jews.

"The theme this year of liberation ties in with the work the Reverend is doing now in Germany," Randall asserts. "He's very exact that we must not forget what happened there."

"In the beginning," Bornebusch relates, "I knew there was a Jewish cemetery in Schermbeck, but I never put two and two together. I never realized that the Jews actually lived there."

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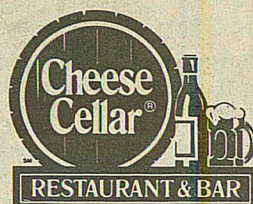


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