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Buchau – An extinct Jewish community



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Buchau - An extinct Jewish community

Situated in that part of South Germany between the Danube and Lake Constance which is normally called *Oberschwaben*, Buchau on the Federsee has always been an extremely small and unimportant town. Nevertheless, it received the status of a so-called Reichsstadt (Imperial City) and was directly subjected to the Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire until 1802. It was also the only town in South Württemberg with an uninterrupted history of a Jewish community since the late 16th century.

Thanks to the research of Herr Moritz Vierfelder and Rabbi Dr. Wallach, we know that already in 1382 a Jew called Moses, son-in-law of Markus, burgher of Ulm, was trading near Buchau. In 1401 the Borough of Buchau had to pay a Jew levy to King Ruprecht. Since 1571 several Jews owned estates in the neighbouring village of Oggelshausen, in which the Charitable Foundation of Ladies of Buchau possessed certain rights. The Abbess often tried to expel these Jews, but was not successful because they were protected by Squire von Schad, the Lord of Mittelbiberach and Warthausen. In 1577 the settlement of Jews in Buchau is mentioned for the first time in a treaty between the municipal council and the Abbess. It is believed that these initial Jews came from Grundsheim in the district of Ehingen, on the Danube, some time before 1577.

But no Jew is mentioned until 1589 in the tax demands of the Borough of Buchau. In that year some Jews were expelled from the neighbouring Imperial City of Biberach on the Riss, and it is recorded that they escaped to Buchau. Since then there was a continuous settlement of Jews in Buchau until 1943 when 122 persons were deported and perished in the Nazi concentration camps.

At the beginning of the Thirty-Year War in 1618, only four Jewish families lived there. After the end of the war the Jewish population increased only very slowly, although they had an exceptional position as the central community of the Jews at Mittelbiberach and Aulendorf. These communities used the Jewish graveyard in Buchau. Therefore in 1654 the principals of the Jews at Mittelbiberach and Aulendorf applied for a small piece of land to enlarge their burial ground. This purchase was arranged without informing the Abbess of the Foundation, who did not permit the transit of corpses through her territory without her prior permission. Several Jews were severely punished by the authorities of the Foundation because they disregarded these orders. Finally, in 1659, the purchase of the burial ground was completed, again under the supervision of the Abbess.

In 1665, for the first time after the Thirty-Year War, another Jew, Baruch Mosios Ainstain from Lake Constance, obtained permission to settle in Buchau. Presumably he was an ancestor of Albert Einstein, who was born in Ulm in 1879, where his family had moved the year before.

Jews lived in Buchau under the protection and patronage of the local authorities, but without enjoying the same rights as the Christian burghers. Permission to trade could only be obtained if it did not affect the business of the burghers. Therefore, most Jews traded in horses, hides and drapery. Nevertheless, they played an important part in the economy of the rural area of Buchau, as they usually gave advantageous conditions of payment and considerable credit to officials, priests and even to the local authorities.

During times of war in the 17th century Jews were also the most important taxpayers of the town. Though they did not enjoy equal rights, they were forced by the authorities to contribute to wars which the burghers could not finance themselves. Thus the local authorities had a financial interest in the Jews. At the same time they did not want the Jewish population to increase. There were always bitter complaints by Christian butchers against the Jews for slaughtering according to Jewish ritual. As a result of these conflicting interests the local authorities started to levy a protection tax which was assessed according to fiscal requirements and on the occupation of the Jews who applied for admission to the town. Sometimes Jews had to pay only 12 florins, sometimes 18 florins or more than 20 florins a year for permission to live in Buchau, and, from 1750,

the admission tax rose to 85 and even 130 florins. The authorities could expel the Jews whenever they liked. Comparing the letters of protection of 1673 with those of 1750, the change of policy towards the Jews can easily be detected. In 1673 the only restriction for a son of a local Jew settling in Buchau was that he informed the local authorities. But in 1750 the number of Jewish families was strictly limited to 45.

In spite of these restrictions the Jewish community grew, especially after 1694 when the Jews were expelled from Aulendorf, and most of them settled in Buchau. In 1700 there were already 12 ratepayers. When in 1722 the first census of Jews in Buchau took place the Jewish community consisted of 48 persons over 13 years of age. Their names are listed, and most of the well-known Jewish families of Buchau are already mentioned in this record. They were called Bernheim, Einstein, Neuburger, Mändle, Kohn, Ulmer and Löw, and there were also many persons who were not using surnames at that time.

Although Buchau had no actual ghetto, the housing situation in the Jewish residential area was extremely bad. Many families could not buy suitable dwellings as houses were usually offered to burghers first.

Until 1760, when the community built a small synagogue, divine services were held in small attics, but a rabbi had officiated since 1730.

The increase of the Jewish population during a period of war and economic decline in South Germany resulted in serious impoverishment for the Jews. This was the beginning of the Jewish hawking and peddling which lasted until 1828. Then a Württemberg law of emancipation of Jews marked the beginning of a better social and economic status.

An account of the fate of the Jews in Buchau from 1933 onwards is included in the comprehensive, six-volume work *“Dokumente über die Verfolgung der jüdischen Bürger in Baden-Württemberg durch das nationalsozialistische Regime 1933-1945”*, published by the Stuttgart Archives. Recently a special monograph, dealing with the persecution of the Jews in Buchau and neighbouring Kappel, was commissioned by the Buchau municipality. Its author is Joseph Mohn, a retired public notary. Under the title *“Der Leidensweg unter dem Hakenkreuz”*, the book also deals with the persecution of the churches and of the gypsies as well as with the war victims. The major part, however, is dedicated to the history of the destruction of the Jewish community. When the Nazis came to power, the number of Jews amounted to 200 (10 per cent of the total population) in Buchau, and to 57 in Kappel.

Mohn tries to trace the fate of each family and reports that 122 Jews were deported to various concentration and extermination camps. After the war, one of them, who survived Theresienstadt, Siegbert Einstein, was for several years a member of the municipal council and deputy mayor. He died in 1968. A special chapter of the book deals with the history of the synagogue, unique and well known by its bell. The synagogue was consecrated in 1839 and burnt down in November, 1938.

Publikationen und Archivalien

Publikationen

- ADLER, Reinhold, Dezember 1971. Buchau – An extinct Jewish community. *AJR Information*. (Dezember 1971). Bd. 26, Nr. 12, S. 7. ISSN 0001-1681. [Online]. Verfügbar unter: https://ajr.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/1971_december.pdf. [Zugriff am: 12. September 2025].

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Abstract

Der Beitrag behandelt die Geschichte der jüdischen Gemeinde in Buchau am Federsee, einer kleinen Reichsstadt in Oberschwaben. Im Mittelpunkt steht die durchgängige jüdische Besiedlung seit dem späten 16. Jahrhundert bis zur Deportation 1943. Die Arbeit beleuchtet anhand lokaler Quellen und Forschungen von Vierfelder, Wallach und Mohn die rechtliche Stellung, wirtschaftliche Rolle und gesellschaftliche Integration der Juden. Zentrale Ergebnisse zeigen die ambivalente Haltung der Stadtbehörden, die einerseits von jüdischen Steuerzahlern profitierten, andererseits deren Ansiedlung begrenzten. Die Gemeinde entwickelte sich zur Zentralgemeinde für umliegende Orte, erhielt 1760 eine Synagoge und erlebte nach 1828 durch württembergische Emanzipationsgesetze einen Aufschwung. Die Dokumentation reicht bis zur systematischen Vernichtung durch die Nationalsozialisten, als 122 Personen deportiert wurden. Historisch bedeutsam ist Buchau als einzige Stadt in Südwürttemberg mit ununterbrochener jüdischer Gemeinde über vier Jahrhunderte.

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