

## **How to deal with the Bruchsal synagogue site**

### **A few basic considerations**

A comment

#### **A statement in the Bruchsal municipal council**

*"We want to see - quite clearly and unambiguously - a worthy remembrance of the history of this place implemented on this property. However, we also expect this area to be used in a sensible and economically viable way beyond commemoration. [...] Since the realisation of the property has already been priced into the medium-term financial planning, we assume that the administration shares our expectations."*

These sentences refer to the synagogue property, the further use of which is currently under discussion in Bruchsal.

The subtext in this statement is, however, only apparent on second reading. The CDU city council fraction expects a *"realisation"*, i.e. a sale of the property. Probably to an investor, since (the sales proceeds) *"have already been priced into the medium-term financial planning"*. In this context, the term *"price in"* is probably to be understood no differently than that the sale of the synagogue property is provisionally planned for a subsequent year in a budget plan of the city of Bruchsal. This would also enable the „multi-generation house“ (Mehrgenerationenhaus) proposed by the Bruchsal CDU September 2018, which, in the party's view, *„can be made by investors, grants, sales“*, since *„the area should be used commercially“*. The same would apply if the synagogue property were sold to the administrative district for the construction of an extension to the commercial school or the social housing construction favored by members of the SPD city council fraction. All three ideas would be surely very effortlessly for the city council to convert, they require nevertheless only a vote over the sales of the property. Everything else would lie then in the hands of an investor, who has finally also the planning sovereignty. Perhaps the city councils should keep in mind that in Bruchsal there are other plots of land of at least the same size, if not even larger, which are ideally suited for a multi-generation house or social housing construction. One could think, for example, of the car park behind the formerly District Office (if this has not yet been sold to an investor) or of the large property in Rollingenstrasse, between Friedrichstrasse and Schlossstrasse.

#### **Has the Bruchsal Jewish community ever been compensated for the loss of their synagogue?**

There is certainly nothing legally wrong with this approach, although it has not yet been clarified how the sales negotiations went after the destruction of the synagogue in November 1938. Was the large Bruchsal Jewish community ever adequately compensated for the loss, especially for the torched synagogue? And how did the sales negotiations with the JRSO (Jewish Restitution Successor Organization), which began in 1950, proceed after the transfer of the synagogue property back to this organization? Is it really the case that the negotiations between the city of Bruchsal and the JRSO were characterized by openness and honesty? Was the JRSO actually informed that a fire station was to be built on the synagogue site - and would a sale have been made if it had been known? Were the war damages on the property really so serious that the city of Bruchsal had to haggle with the JRSO over the estimated value, because it considered it too high? In fact, the JRSO reduced the purchase price for the city by 1/3 after the county was no longer interested in the property. Not only these questions should be clarified openly and honestly before a final decision is made on the use of the property. The Commission for the History (Kommission für Stadtgeschichte)

of the City would be the right place for this. This property is not just any property that is sold to someone for as high a price as possible to fill the city bag - too much Bruchsal history and mourning are connected with the synagogue property.

### **A place of remembrance in a positive sense. A place of encounter and everyday life?**

In addition to the purely financial consideration of the connection use of the synagogue property, on which there is now consensus in Germany, it is essential to consider the moral side when discussing the use of such a historically significant property. And such a consideration will certainly exclude one thing: The city administration's competitive brief for dealing with the synagogue foundation walls: *"However, a monument cannot / must not always necessarily be preserved. In some cases, documentation is sufficient. [...] Whether [...] the remains of the foundation will be preserved or not lies in the design decision [of the investor or planner]."* This is not contemporary thinking and does not correspond to the way of thinking of the State Offices for Historical Monuments.

Other cities deal with such sensitive topics in a completely different way, statements like *"des is alt, des kann weg"* (*that's old, put it away*) are certainly not (anymore) to be found in municipalities that are prepared to face up to their historical responsibility. For example, the city of Marburg has consciously preserved the foundation walls of the burnt down synagogue and set up a garden of remembrance there. The Marburg city council made 900,000 euros available for this purpose. In Freiburg, a water basin was built on the synagogue site as a *"place of remembrance"* (*Ort der Erinnerung*), which, however, led to great discussions within and outside the Jewish communities. In Leipzig, 140 bronze chairs are metaphorically lined up on a plateau on the foundation walls of the synagogue. In Wuppertal, the former synagogue site was used as a parking lot for a long time. The *"Old Synagogue Wuppertal Meeting Place"* (*Begegnungsstätte Alte Synagoge Wuppertal*) was inaugurated there in 1994. Granite slabs trace the ground plan of the former synagogue, parts of the foundation walls are still visible. An exhibition documents the history of the Wuppertal Jews, and the institution also sees itself as a meeting place.

These are just a few examples of how other towns and communities understand how to deal with such sensitive issues.

### **"This is written with tears because of the destruction of our people". (Rabbi Moshe Lebel)**

In November 2016, the European Rabbis Conference under the direction of Rabbi Mosche Lebel dealt with the Freiburg city administration's handling of the synagogue foundation walls found there. The conference came to the following conclusion: *"The city administration in Germany is trying to preserve this place where a synagogue once stood with honour and today they want to erase the memory of the synagogue by building a well and other things. It has been shown that the stones of the synagogue are sacred and must be left in their place according to the commandment "Do not do this to your G'd". It is also forbidden to build anything in this place that desecrates this holy place. [...] There is certainly no greater desecration of G'd than the desecration of this place where the name of Israel, G'd forbid, is no longer thought of."*

In another document on the holiness of synagogue foundations, Megillah 28a and Maimonides are quoted in chapter 11 of Halacha 11. According to them, the holiness of a synagogue remains even after its destruction. So to observe this religious aspect is a matter of respect for the faith and history of others. Should we not give the respect that we expect for ourselves to others?

**Everything that happens against conscience is sin.  
(Thomas Aquinas)**

These questions should always be at the centre of all considerations regarding the use of the synagogue site: What can and should we do to do justice to the past without forgetting the future? What would we wish in place of the synagogue if we were these very people who were expelled from Bruchsal between 1933 and 1940 or deported to concentration camps - or if we were their descendants?

**What is more important? A tree or humanity?**

The documents for the ideas competition call for *"the great tree at the (inn) SteakHouse to be preserved"*. This wish of the city administration must of course be respected, as this plane tree has grown splendidly over the years. However, with the best will in the world, it is impossible to understand why the synagogue foundations, which are so important for Jewish members of religion, should not be honoured other than the tree. Is this really how our city wants to present itself to the outside world? The synagogue foundation walls, which are considered sacred, can be removed - but the tree has to stand still?

**More participation and assumption of responsibility reduce annoyance  
(Prof. Dr. Rita Süßmuth, German politician of the CDU)**

What would it be like if the development of the synagogue site in Bruchsal were coordinated with the Israelitische Religionsgemeinschaft Baden (IRG) (Jewish Religious Community Baden) or a similar institution? In an interview, the city spokeswoman emphasized that in any case *"in some form"* one wanted to create space for commemoration *"and involve the citizens"*. A correct, promising approach. Perhaps the people who were directly affected by the events in the Nazi state or their ancestors should sit down together for a decision? The descendants of Bruchsalers of the Jewish faith sit at the same table as the descendants of those who remained in Germany and also suffered under the fascist Hitler system? Perhaps these people could initiate a project of which not only the Bruchsal city society could be proud.

For the city must not make itself guilty for a third time by desecrating the synagogue and then the property. 1938: burning down of the synagogue, 1953: construction of a fire station on this site. In 2020, the decision will be taken in favour of a use that pursues predominantly commercial investor interests and moves to the centre of considerations?

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