David Leupold Follow
Dec 20, 2019 · 7 min read

Jewish Franconia: A ‘Shadowed Place’ of Local Memory in Southeastern Germany

Stamp at the back of a Rosenthal plate manufactured for the Nazi propaganda organization ‘Beauty of Labour’ (Schönheit der Arbeit)

Known across Germany as the *Porzellanstadt* („city of porcelain“), the 17,000 inhabitants of the small Northern Bavarian town Selb take great pride in the town’s history in porcelain manufacturing. In spite of an ongoing structural crisis that hit the sector hard in the 1990s, Selb-based manufacturers continue to supply international customers from high-class hotels in Dubai and international airlines to the Café Sacher in Vienna and the Moscow Kremlin (Späth, 2004).[1] Spearheaded by the local entrepreneurs Carolus Magnus Hutschenreuther (1794–1845) and Philipp Rosenthal (1855–1937), the small town had produced almost half of the nation-wide porcelain during the heydays during the Weimar Republic in the first half of the 20th century.

“Yet, there was one blank spot in the local history, any pupil hardly learnt about at primary school — from 1934 until the fall of Nazi Germany the Rosenthal family lived in British exile: they were Jewish converts.”

-

During primary school education pupils would learn much about those “founding fathers of porcelain”, visit their tombs at the local cemetery and go on excursion to their factories. Yet, there was one blank spot in the local history, any pupil hardly learnt about at primary school — from 1934 until the fall of Nazi Germany the Rosenthal family lived in British exile: they were Jewish converts (Kerr, 1998: 9). Yet, given their important role in economy, the family was spared ultimate destruction in exchange for a continuation of their production activities — now at the service of the swastika.

Other Rosenthals were less fortunate: Willi and Rosa Rosenthal, a Jewish couple from Selb, who had resisted conversion to Christianity ended up being deported to the Kaiserwald concentration camp (Ķeizarmežs, present-day Latvia) where they perished. The story of the Rosenthals told at school and ingrained in the memory of most of today’s inhabitants included neither stories of those forcefully exiled nor that of disappeared Jews. After all, the purpose of *Heimatunterrich*t was different: to provide a romanticized narrative geared towards rooting the new offspring in the local community and its native homeland. This case from Southern Germany shows illustratively how the bonds of an imagined community, whether on a local or nation-wide level, are as much as they are built on a shared narration on the past — equally substantiated by the politically-sanctioned, yet often socially-contested, act of ‘collective forgetting’ (Rennan, 1882, Connerton, 2011: 35).

This act of silencing is reminiscent of what is called "shadowed places" in British social anthropology or "the field of what cannot be told" (*Nichtsagbarkeitsfeld*) in German critical narrative analysis (Douglas, 1986: 69–80, Jäger, 2001: 84). While in the deconstruction of national narratives great importance is attached to the study of *what is told,* it is of equal relevance to reveal the silences, and through meticulous historical research unearth *what is not told*. This means to look at what is longer tell-able (*sagbar*) in a particular society and the strategies of denial, relativization and de-tabooization employed to restrict the field of the tellable as a conscious effort to organize societal behavior. While national narratives glorify the history of the in-group (the nation), the historical experience of those segments of society located at the margin are often written out of the story (Müller, 2002: 9).

"Land Jewry in Franconia, void of a present, has left a past unclaimed. Yet even though the last image of a past may vanish, its vestiges pile up "wreckage upon wreckage" on history's field of debris."

-

In fact, silence may extend to a vast array of sensitive topics: it may comprise suppressed stories on violence perpetrated by one's "own" political leaders against one's own people, the existence of the other in what is imagined as the homeland and the resulting incongruence between imagined and actual place of origin. History, and the more so 'national history', is made not in an ideological vacuum. Instead, it is constantly made and unmade in the present, in a politically-charged field "filled full by now-time [*Jetztzeit*]" (Benjamin, 1969: 261). As the past is overshadowed by the present, "every image of the past that is not recognized by the present as one of its own concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably" (Ibid.: 255). Land Jewry in Franconia, void of a present, has left a past unclaimed. Yet even though the last image of a past may vanish, its vestiges pile up "wreckage upon wreckage" on history's field of debris (Ibid.: 257).

When in the wake of the Shoa the residents of Schnaittach village (Lower Franconia) showed fierce resistance to desecrate the Jewish graveyard, fifty members of the Hitler youth had to be brought on special order from Berlin to the village to perform the task (Uhrig, 2013; Schuster and Gumann, 2014[2]). For decades this legend prevailed within the village community where it coalesced with public silence and a shared sentiment that though the Holocaust did happen, it happened far from here (Ibid.; Liedel, 2006: 128–131). Yet, various discoveries over a half a century later brought the Shoah, literally speaking, right back into their backyards. During renovation works stones carrying in the eyes of local residents "weird signs" (*komische*

Buchstaben) suddenly resurfaced — from under the pavement of streets and beneath the riverbed.

"Today, not only grave stones but the remains of 106 Landsynagogen ('rural synagogues') constitute the material artifacts of a still largely silenced history."

-

Used by local residents as cheap building material, the lost grave stones — up to 300 to 400 — had found their eternal rest in private garage entrances, house walls or as in one case: as ornamentation for a garden pond. Some were sold and reappeared in other towns (Schuster & Gumann, 2014). Until today the landscape of Franconia is cluttered with the material remains of an untold story: that of Jewish life not in far-away urban cosmopoleis but in neighboring villages — until the 19th century 90% of all Franconian Jews lived in villages, constituting an absolute majority in places like Altenkunstadt, Demmelsdorf and Zeckendorf (Liedel, 2006: 10, Guth, 1988).

Unlike in other places, Franconian villages like Schnaittach did not have a ghetto. Instead, from 1478 up until the Shoa Jews and Christian lived side by side — albeit "stigmatized as a religious minority" with strongly curtailed rights (Liedel, 2006: 8–9; Schuster and Gumann, 2014). Today, not only grave stones but the remains of 106 *Landsynagogen* ('rural synagogues') constitute the material artifacts of a still largely silenced history (Liedel, 2006: 13). While the buildings of several synagogues were demolished even long after the Nazis in places like Nördlingen (1955), Gunzenhausen (1981) and Heidenheim (1988), other have survived, re-functionalized as workshops, storage, private housing or the local firehouse (Liedel, 2006: 14).[3]

The remnants of Jewish rural life in Franconia are a powerful remainder that remembering does not happen in a physical void. Benjamin, in his reading of Proust's novel *À la recherche du temps perdu* proposes an understanding of the past as deeply ingrained in the material world "beyond the reach of the intellect, and unmistakably present in some material object" (Benjamin, 1969: 158). Yet while they depend on being discovered, like the grave stones of Schnaittach, these specific objects — hence called *mnemonic artefacts* — serve as physical vestiges of a past that may lie beyond collective recollection. *Mnemonic artefacts* comprise in a broader sense every human-made piece of work from copperplate and working tools to architectural works, like a synagogue, a bridge or a tomb. We can further differentiate between movable artefacts such as tools, clothes or books and immovable artefacts such as houses, streets or stone engravings. As the latter are fixed in space they acquire a local dimension.

“A specific artefact constitutes the ruin, which distinguishes itself through its transience and ambivalence for the ‘ruingazer’, being open to differing representations ranging from rubble to memento mori.”

-

Thus when we refer to the Klaus synagogue or the *Judengasse* (“Jewish alley”) we refer both to the architectural edifice itself but also to the space it occupies as both are inextricably linked to each other. A specific artefact constitutes the ruin, which distinguishes itself through its transience and ambivalence for the ‘ruingazer’, being open to differing representations ranging from rubble to memento mori (Steinmetz, 2008: 211, Harbison, 1991: 7). Thus, while the object lacks a “memory of their own” (Assmann, 2008: 111), it constitutes the monade around which different narratives may crystallize. Consequently, while ‘Disappeared populations’ may leave the pages of school books and vanish from the canon of public speeches their vestiges may still persist in the physical landscape as *mnemonic artefacts* equipped with the potential to challenge the prevalent narrative even decades after its consolidation.

On July 2011 pupils of the Walter-Gropius high school together with the local history teacher Thomas Storch invited the political artist Gunter Demning to insert two *Stolpersteine* (“stumbling blocks”) — small, cobblestone-sized brass memorials — into the pavement in memory of the Rosenthals who perished in the holocaust (Scharf 2011)[1]. By doing so, they deliberately created new *mnemonic artefacts* charged with a radically different historical meaning. What had been silenced is now firmly ingrained in the material fabric of the town.

Further annotations:

[1] Späth, Nikos (09/05/2004). “Geschirr für Krankenhäuser und den Kreml“, https://www.welt.de/print-wams/article115289/Geschirr-fuer-Krankenhaeuser-und-den-Kreml.html

[2] Uhrig, Klaus (2013). “Landjuden in Franken: die vergessenen Nachbarn,“ *Bayerischer Rundfunk*, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dA7kpcIt4Rs, Schuster, Udo & Kroder-Gumann, Birgit (2014). “Gräber bezeugen jüdische Tragödie,“ *N-Land*, https://n-land.de/news/schnaittach/graeber-bezeugen-juedische-tragoedie.

[3] In Schnaittach the building of the synagogue harbors a branch of the Jewish Museum of Franconia.

[4] Scharf, Herbert (07/02/2011). “Verlegung von “Stolpersteinen” in Selb,“ http://www.alemannia-judaica.de/selb_juedgeschichte.htm.