



PATH OF
COMMEMORATION

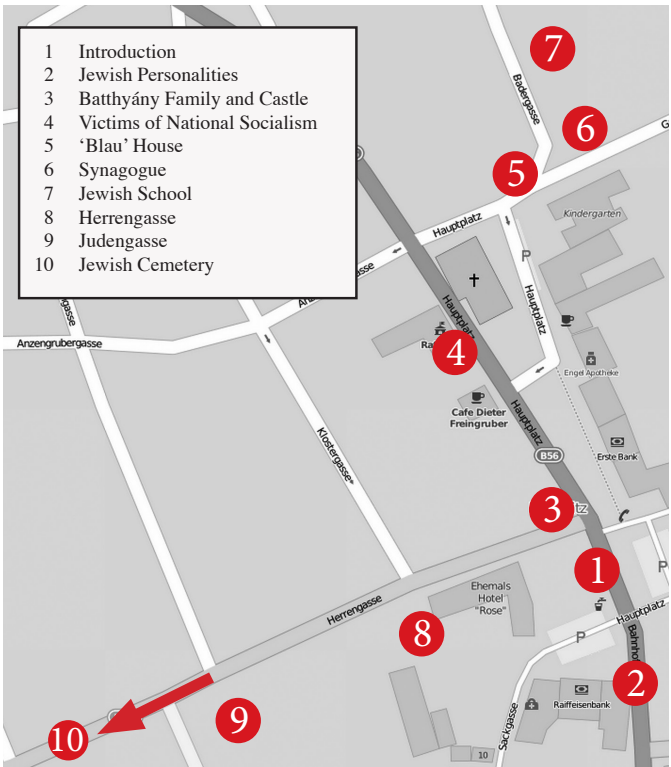
JEWISH LIFE IN RECHNITZ



www.gedenkweg.at

A project implemented by R.E.F.U.G.I.U.S.
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1 | Introduction



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Jews have probably lived in Rechnitz since as early as the 15th century. With the oldest written reference dating back to 1676, the Jewish community of Rechnitz is thus the oldest in Southern Burgenland. At its height in the first half of the 19th century, it had around 850 members. In the 1870s, the Jewish community began to shrink, due to continuing migration to economically more attractive regions and cities. In 1938, 125 Jewish men and women were still living in Rechnitz. All of them were expelled or deported by the Nazis. Most of them were murdered.

With the help of 10 information boards, the Rechnitz Path of Commemoration allows locals and interested visitors of the region to walk through and get to know places of former everyday Jewish life.

You can find information about the victims of the 'South-east wall' construction at the Kreuzstadl Memorial Site.

Key aspects: Sites of Mourning and Commemoration / Jewish life in contemporary Hungary and Burgenland / The 'South-east wall' construction / Jewish men and women at the 'South-east wall' construction / Crime Scenes / Crime Scene Kreuzstadl / Life stories / The massacre on trial / The Kreuzstadl Memorial

2 | Jewish Personalities



Gustav Pick (Source: Gemeindearchiv Rechnitz)

Gustav Pick, the son of a Jewish merchant, was born in Rechnitz on December 20, 1832. In 1845, his family moved to Vienna, and 40 years later he composed the famous ‘Fiakerlied’ (Coachman’s Song). Pick donated a sum of money for the renovation of the local monastery. He died in Vienna on April 29, 1921.

Joachim Heitler was the principal of the Jewish school from 1870 to 1917. He wrote the folktale ‘Vom öden Schloss’ (‘The Castle Ruin’) and worked as a journalist for the German-language ‘Volksblatt’, which was published in Szombathely. He was also on the board of directors of the Sparkasse, a bank founded in Rechnitz in 1873.

Several prominent Rabbis served in Rechnitz:

Gabriel Engelsmann was Rabbi from 1822 to 1850. He was born in Neustadtl in today’s western Slovakia. He was strictly Orthodox, opposed to any innovations or reforms. The Jeschiwa (Talmud high school) that he presided over was very popular.

Eleazar (also Elázár) Kalir taught in Rechnitz from 1768 to 1778. Before that, he had been Rabbi in Amsterdam and Berlin. When he received invitations to both Dessau and Rechnitz at the same time, he chose the latter, which attests to the prominent status of Rechnitz at that time. He was head of the local Jeschiwa for ten years.

Maier (also: Mayer/Meier) Zipser, a leading personality of the Hungarian reform movement in Judaism, served as Rabbi in Rechnitz from 1858 to 1869. Before his appointment to Rechnitz he had been Chief Rabbi in Székesfehérvár. His historiography of the Jewish Community of Rechnitz in the 17th and 18th century, long believed lost, has been published in the Wochenblatt für jüdische Theologie ‘Ben Chananja’.

3 | Batthyány Family and Castle



Castle Batthyány before 1938 (Source: Gemeindearchiv Rechnitz)

The Batthyány family, Hungarian aristocrats, ruled over the fiefdom of Rechnitz from 1527 to 1871. They significantly influenced the market town's development through their religious, settlement and economic policies. In the middle 17th century Adam Batthyány ordered the building of a castle with 200 rooms to replace the old Roman fort.

In a document from before 1527 (Baumkircher-Urbar), two Jewish families named Spiegel and Grünwald were mentioned in connection with the fiefdom of Rechnitz.

In the 17th century, the Jewish community was established under the protection of the ruling Batthyánys. „Letters of safe conduct“ regulated the rights and duties of the Jewish subjects right down to the last detail. These letters, which had to be paid for with protection money, were renewed on a regular basis. The Revolution of 1848 ended the dependency of the ‘Protective Jewry’, and the ‘Israelites‘ Law’ of 1867 awarded the Jewish population political and civil equality. In 1871, the Batthyánys sold their property to Julius von Szájbely, a lawyer. In 1906, industry magnate Heinrich Baron Thyssen-Bornemisza bought Castle Batthyány. The final ‘Lady of the Castle’ was his daughter Margit, who married Count Ivan Batthyány. From autumn 1944, the castle served as the regional head quarter of the Organization Todt, which was in charge of the construction of the ‘South-east wall’, a military barricade. Jewish forced laborers were billeted in the cellars and stables of the castle. On the night of March 29, 1945, the castle caught fire in the course of the fighting that went on during the town's liberation. After the war the castle was leveled, with only a few walls remaining.

4 | Victims of National Socialism



A group of Rechnitz deportees in Yugoslavia, 1941 (Source: Gemeindecarchiv Rechnitz)

The systematic persecution and expulsion of Jewish men and women in Rechnitz started immediately after Austrian Nazis seized power in the night of March 11, 1938. Jewish businesses were confiscated, Jewish citizens deported. Some of the expelled could flee from Vienna to Palestine, China or the Americas, others were murdered in concentration camps.

In April 1938, 43 Jewish men and women who had stayed in Rechnitz were transported over the Yugoslavian border and left without papers in no man's land. Only after intervention by the Gildemeester Aktion could they enter Yugoslavia. After its occupation by German troops in April 1941 however, most of them were murdered.

The Jewish religious community of Rechnitz was dissolved, their properties and assets 'aryanized' by the town. Only a single Jewish family returned after 1945. Former Jewish property got restituted, and was mostly sold by the heirs.

For decades, the once large and prominent Jewish community of Rechnitz was commemorated only by a small plaque on the former synagogue. Only when the castle grounds were redesigned in 2007, a memorial against war and violence was set up which is dedicated to the soldiers killed in both World Wars, the victims of the Kreuzstadl massacre, the four Rechnitz resistance fighters and the deported and murdered Jewish men and women of Rechnitz.

5 | The 'Blau' House



*Postcard showing Laci Blau's store, with the Synagogue in the background
(Source: Gemeindearchiv Rechnitz)*

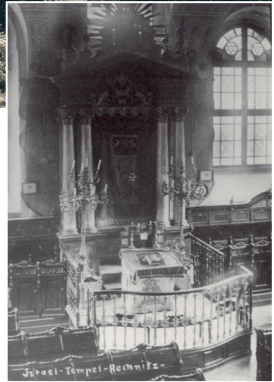
After 1945, only a single Jewish family returned to Rechnitz and settled there again: Netti Blau (born 1869), her son Leo Blau (born 1902) and her daughter Theresia, called Riza (born 1900). Leo Blau had been able to escape via Yugoslavia to Shanghai, from where he returned to Rechnitz.

His mother had spent the NS period in Palestine. Leo ran the general store of his uncle Viktor Engel, who had been murdered by the Nazis in Brcko (then Yugoslavia). Riza Blau had married in exile, changing her name to Rechnitzer. She was a popular violin teacher for many years, spending her final years in the nursing home. Her property was inherited by her nieces in Israel, who sold the house. When Riza died in 1984, she was buried in the Jewish section of the Vienna Central Cemetery.

6 | Synagogue



*Exterior View (Source: Burgenländisches Landesarchiv) and
Interior View (Source: Gemeindearchiv Rechnitz)
before 1938*



We can assume that a synagogue or prayer house stood in Rechnitz as early as 1649. The synagogue, commissioned by the Batthyány family and bought by the Jewish Community in 1707, was situated free-standing on a hill opposite the Catholic church. In 1718, an impressive baroque rebuilding was finished, with room for 400 people. In 1834, the synagogue was once more enlarged, and renovated in 1864. Valuable cult objects such as antique silver chalices, a silver Torah crown, a Torah curtain from 1649 and Torah shields from the 17th and 18th centuries, are evidence of the Rechnitz Community's distinction. During the NS period, the building was not destroyed but used for various recreational activities. After 1945 it was converted to a fire station (used until 1997), with private apartments on the upper floor.

In 1990, the town's council had a memorial plaque attached to commemorate the Jewish community of Rechnitz. Owing to the commitment of dedicated citizens and initiatives, the plaque was ceremoniously unveiled in November 1991.

Since 2009, three glass plates designed by students of the Bundesgymnasium Oberschützen symbolize the demise of the Jewish community.

7 | Jewish School



Exterior view of the Jewish school (Source: Gemeindearchiv Rechnitz)

Religion	Gut
Biblische Geschichten	Gut
Lesen, Rechnen und Lektüre	Sehr gut
Orthographische, Rechnen und Lektüre	Gut
Rechnen, Orthographie und Lektüre	Sehr gut
Rechnen	Gut
Rechnen, Orthographie und Lektüre	Gut
Rechnen	Mittelmässig
Rechnen, Orthographie	Mittelmässig
Rechnen, Orthographie	Gut
Rechnen, Orthographie und Lektüre	Gut

School report card of a Jewish pupil, 1857 (Source: Gemeindechronik Rechnitz)

The Jewish school, whose history reaches back into the 17th century, was a keeper of tradition and religion, and a cornerstone of the community. When the Jewish community flourished in the middle of the 19th century, 50 boys and 42 girls were taught in 3 classes.

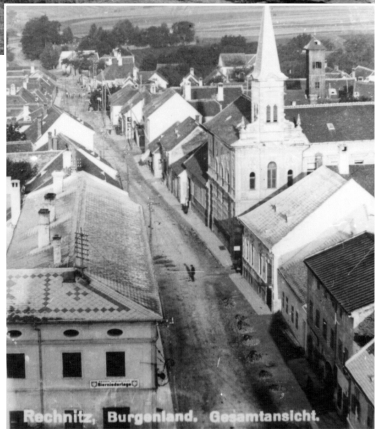
The most prominent principal was Joachim Heitler, who ran the school between 1870 and 1917. In 1914, 39 pupils were enrolled in 5 classes. The last Jewish teacher Fessler moved away in 1920, after which the school was led for some years by the Catholic teacher Margarethe Kraxner, until the school had to be closed in 1923 due to lack of pupils. Jewish children then attended either the Evangelical or the Catholic primary school, where they were exempted from religious lessons.

During the NS period, the building was used as a kindergarten. In 1953, the town council bought both the former synagogue and the Jewish school building. It housed the public primary school until 1974, when it became part of the town's building department. In 2005, the former school building was leveled to the ground.

8 | Herrengasse



above: Herrengasse around 1914
right: Herrengasse viewed from the Castle tower
(Source: Gemeindegarchiv Rechnitz)



The Herrengasse (formerly Batthyány-Gasse) was the center of Jewish trade and industry. Jews in Rechnitz were predominantly merchants and craftsmen such as butchers, furriers or tailors. In the 18th century, Jews also constituted 10% of the farmers in Rechnitz.

In 1840, Jews became allowed by law to become residents and to take up a craft or trade. The 89 Jewish stores and factories then active in Rechnitz played an essential part in the economical development of the town. One such example is Fanny Bogdány's 'First Austro-Hungarian Factory for Roux Soup à la Bogdány' in Rechnitz. In the 1930s, two Jewish doctors had their offices in Rechnitz.

At Herrengasse 16, Wilhelm Spiegel operated his store, and lived there with his family until they were expelled by the Gestapo in 1938. His son Jakob Spiegel was able to escape to Palestine. In 2011, Jakob's son Moshe came to Rechnitz with his two sons to look for traces of his family's past.

9 | Judengasse



Judengasse around 1910 (Source: Gemeindearchiv Rechnitz)

The Jewish settlements of Southern Burgenland were founded in the early modern period, which is why there are no ghettos. In Rechnitz, the Jewish families tended to live in the town center – on the Main Square, in the Herrengasse, Judengasse, Kloster-gasse and Anzengruber-gasse.

Led by Chief Rabbi Meier Zipser, the Jewish Community of Rechnitz joined Reform Judaism. The new liturgical language in the synagogue became German. Liberal ideas also affected everyday life, but Jewish customs and traditions were still adhered to.

On the Sabbath, called ‘the long day’ in Rechnitz, the stores remained partly open. Almost every family employed at least one adolescent Goj – a non-Jew – as household help.

Until the end of the 19th century, Rechnitz had its own Mazzes bakery (Mazzes is the traditional unleavened bread). There was also a shochet (kosher butcher), who slaughtered animals according to the prescribed Jewish rites.

Many Jews were members of Rechnitz’s societies and clubs, often holding executive offices, among others in the town’s Beautification Society, the Soccer, Casino and the Social Club. The ‘Jewish Ensemble Stern’, a music-band, did not only play in Rechnitz, but was well-known and popular in the spa town of Bad Tatzmannsdorf.

Social and cultural life was organized through societies: In 1746, a ‘Chewra Kadischa’ (‘Devout Brotherhood’) was established, a Burial Society that arranged funerals and the welfare of dependent surviving family members. In 1933, a local chapter of the Union of Jewish Frontline Soldiers was founded, and, in 1935, a local chapter of the Austrian Zionist Organization.

10 | Jewish Cemetery



Memorial Book of the 'Chewra Kadischa' Rechnitz, 1833
(Source: Austrian Jewish Museum Eisenstadt)

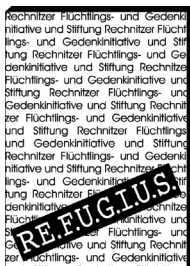
The Jewish Cemetery is a 'House of Eternity', a 'Good Place'. It is not a place of death, but a 'House of Life', where the departed wait for the Final Judgement and a new life in resurrection. The earth surrounding them belongs to the dead and must remain untouched.

Graves are oriented with their foot end pointing towards Jerusalem; Gravestones are usually set on the grave's head end.

The burial needs to take place as soon as possible, ideally still on the day of death. The 'Chewra Kadischa', the so-called Burial Society, takes care of the necessary arrangements for purification, the preparation of the body (eg. clothing it in a white linen cerement), the vigil, the organization of the burial and the memorial ceremony. The departed are carried to their graves in plain wooden caskets. The rabbi holds the funeral oration, the family members and funeral guests say three prayers. Then the grave is closed up with earth and the Kadish (prayer for the dead) is said. The family members observe a seven day long period of mourning in the departed's house, where they 'sit shiva' grieving for the dead, which in Rechnitz was called 'Taka-Sitzen'.

The project
'Path of Commemoration - Jewish Life in Rechnitz'
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and the town of Rechnitz

Impressum



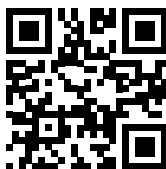
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