

## HALLE, GERMANY; YOM KIPPUR 5780

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A murderous attack on Jews in Germany feels different to murderous attacks on Jews elsewhere. The weight of history bears down heavily there; it is impossible not to draw the line back to the horrors of the 1930s and 1940s and wonder how it is possible, less than a century on, that the bloodletting can still happen there, of all places, this time in Halle.

Halle captures key elements of German Jewish history in a nutshell. Situated in the centre of the country, not far from Leipzig, its Jewish story begins in medieval times – different sources suggest the 11th or 12th century, perhaps even earlier. But Jewish life there was regularly interrupted by



persecution and violence: in 1207, Jewish-owned homes were looted and burned and the community was expelled, but they returned to rebuild, only to have their property confiscated by the Archbishop of Magdeburg in 1261. Like Jews elsewhere in medieval Europe, Halle's Jews were falsely blamed for causing the Black Death – the community was destroyed as a result – but it was reconstituted once more afterwards, until it was expelled again in 1493. It took until 1688 for Jews to be allowed to return – the twelve Jewish families who settled there consecrated a synagogue on Grosser Berlinstrasse in 1703, and went on to create a Hebrew printing press which produced a new version of the Hebrew Bible. Enlightenment in Germany brought emancipation to Jews – in Halle's case in 1808 – although new anti-Jewish regulations were introduced in 1847 limiting their civil rights and restricting their access to various professions. But the community grew thereafter – when its first rabbi was appointed in 1860, there were already close to 400 Jews living there, and the community prospered enough to prompt it to rebuild its synagogue in 1879 and expand it further in 1894. The Jewish population reached its peak of close to 1,400 just before the First World War, although like many German Jewish communities at that time, it suffered losses during the war – 31 Jews from Halle were killed on the battlefields fighting for Germany. By 1933, when Hitler came to power, just over 1,000 Jews lived there among a population of a quarter of a million. Twelve years later, at the end of the Second World War and the Shoah, official figures state that "about 65" were left. In the interim, alongside the murders, its synagogue was set on fire and totally gutted on Kristallnacht in 1938, before being demolished completely in 1940. Today all that remains is a reconstruction of the synagogue portal, situated incongruously on 'Jerusalem Platz' surrounded by modern apartments and office buildings.

The tiny post-war community struggled on, consecrating a new synagogue on Humboldtstrasse in 1953, but by the 1970s there were only a few elderly Jews left. However, as with the rest of the Germany, the Jewish population was boosted by a wave of migration from the Former Soviet Union after the collapse of communism, climbing remarkably to 731 members by 2004. But following years of persecution in the Soviet Union, most of these Soviet Jews arrived with fragmented Jewish identities, and the population is in decline today – the latest figures show a community of 555, close to half of whom are aged 60-plus, and only 66 of whom are aged 18 or under. The 70 or 80 Jews who gathered together to mark Yom Kippur in Halle at the synagogue on Humboldtstrasse this week were typical of such gatherings in many German cities and towns – locals sufficiently engaged in Jewish life

to turn up, alongside a handful of other German Jews from elsewhere in the country and a smattering of Jewish tourists from around the world.



None of those present were actually killed in the attack on Yom Kippur; the two people murdered were innocent bystanders. One, a 40 year-old woman called Jana Lange, was gunned down, it seems, as the killer's frustration boiled over at not being able to get into the synagogue. The second victim was somewhat more targeted; the killer drove to a nearby Turkish kebab shop clearly looking for immigrants, threw a homemade explosive which detonated just outside, then opened fire through the shop window killing a 20 year-old man.

But make no mistake: these two senseless murders are the result of antisemitism and anti-immigrant racism, and we mourn them as we mourn our own. For their families and friends, the murders will remain etched in their minds forever: incomprehensible and devastating.

As for Halle's Jews, much as I want to be hopeful and optimistic, I fear for the community's future. It was tough enough to sustain Jewish life in that context before Yom Kippur this year; following the attack, it will be all the harder for them to find the resilience to continue. What does one say to those 66 Jewish children living there? How many of their parents will have the courage or mental strength to take them to synagogue – or indeed any Jewish space in the city – going forward? Extraordinarily, the murder of six million Jews failed to destroy the Halle Jewish community completely, but even with the demographic boost from the FSU it left it sufficiently damaged to create a situation where the murder of two innocent non-Jewish Germans might just be the final nail in the coffin.

Yom Kippur is about life and death. It reminds Jews that our lives are short, that we must examine our behaviour and seek to do better in the year to come. And time and again throughout the day we ask for God's forgiveness, with the liturgy on hand to focus our minds. We try to wipe the slate clean, so that we might all start the year afresh with a generosity of spirit towards others and with genuine resolve to play our part in building a world redeemed.

That was the spirit the killer sought to destroy. It's not for anyone in the Jewish community to forgive him; only the families of the murdered are at liberty to do that. But forgiving the murders themselves is one thing; forgiving the attempted murder of a culture of forgiveness is something else entirely.

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