

The Jewish community of Floss, 1684-1942: the history of a rural Jewish community in Bavaria

Translated and condensed by Otto Schuett from Renate Höpfinger, "Die Judengemeinde von Floss, 1684-1942 : die Geschichte einer jüdischen"

The Jewish Community and its Relation to the Government and State Authorities

During the Middle Ages, Jews seemed to have lived temporarily in Floss (between 1412 and 1416), since Duke Ludwig the Bearded One had decreed that every Jew living in the Floss region would have to pay ten Hungarian guilders annually. The records from 1588 to 1598 do not refer to any Jews, but only contain directions as to the payment of Jew Duty. The Dukes of Neuburg in the years 1555, 1568, and 1592 issued strict orders disallowing Jews from settling there. Jews were not even allowed to remain overnight within the Floss territory. When Duke August of Sulzbach discovered that the Jews had the audacity, against the orders in the Floss area, to deal in trading, thereby creating hardships for the local citizens, he ordered his functionaries to investigate and forbade the trade entirely. If anybody was indebted to the Jews, he did not have to pay.

Duke Christian August (1634-1708) studied the Hebrew language and Jewish history. In 1666, with his permission, Jews emigrated to Sulzbach, which soon brought further immigration from the east, thereby developing into a strong community. About 1670, some Jews banished from Vienna requested asylum in Floss. It remains unclear if their application was declined or if they did not make use of their permission.

In 1684 the Jewish families living there were driven out of Neustadt-on-the-Waldnaab by Prince Ferdinand August of Lobkowitz and also out of Störnstein, the communities dissolved, and the cemetery and synagogue destroyed. It is said that the reason for the banishment was offensive behavior against the Catholic religious ceremonies. Apparently, they had looked out of their windows on Corpus Christi day, which was forbidden. Another story has it that the Prince demanded such a high money penalty, which they could not afford, and therefore they left Neustadt. In the county of Störnstein, eight Jewish families had already settled prior to 1552. They lived outside of Neustadt in the so-called Jew Alley. Based on the decree of Prince

Lobkowitz in 1641 concerning the rights of the Jews, they had to remit annually for two of them 6 guilders and 15 pence, the rest 12 guilders and 30 pennies each plus one goose or 45 pence in cash. To the town they only had to pay house taxes. The citizens became very agitated when the Jews did not have to partake in the billeting of soldiers during the Thirty Years' War. While the townspeople had to suffer under severe financial burdens and became poorer and poorer, they would see the Jews trading with the soldiers and making more and more profits. In 1621 the Mansfeld troops were shown to the Jewish houses which were then plundered. The anger against the Jews, the constant complaints of the Neustadt citizens, probably became the reason for the high money demand of the Prince and a pretext for the banishment.

In 1659, nine Jewish families lived in Neustadt, 14 Jews were traders. In 1684, at the time of the expulsion, there were still 9 Jewish families located in Neustadt. Four of them moved to nearby Floss, where they had already peddled for years. Since Floss was located close to their previous domiciles, they could retain their trading areas. They recognized that Christian August, who had permitted the establishment of a Jewish community in Sulzbach and had set up a Hebrew print shop, had a friendly attitude toward Jews and thus was likely to give them permission to remain in Floss. In 1684, Christian August allowed the brothers **Henoch** and **Hirsch Meier** as well as **Eisig** and **Nathan Feifas** and their families to settle in Floss.

Count Christian August gave permission to the four Jewish families banned from Neustadt to remain in Floss for one year with the payment of 50 guilders protection money. During that time they were supposed to search for a permanent domicile. After negotiations with the government and agreement to carry their share of administrative etc. expenses, plus a surcharge of one guilder and 30 pence annually, they finally received permission to settle in Floss and received a safe conduct letter which contained the conditions under which they could remain.

On June 22, 1685, they received a kind of safe conduct letter, which in 18 paragraphs provided a series of restrictions and duties. The four families remaining in Floss were required, during their stay in the Dukedom of Sulzbach, to remain loyal and to obey the rules and orders of the Duke, to pay the safe conduct dues promptly, and not get involved in the business affairs of the Jews living in Sulzbach. They were allowed to rent rooms from citizens or farmers in the countryside, but were not allowed to build houses of their own until further notice. Their needs for Kosher meats were to be covered by the butchers in Floss, who were to let the Jews kill the animals under their own religious rules.

The other orders covered the economic side of life for the Jews, not being allowed to have any animals, restricted them to deal in farm products only. The Jews had to change their business methods to those of the weekly market, not to offer bad quality items, and not to compete too much with the product offerings of the local merchants. They were forbidden to trade lard. Wool, skins, yarns were to be offered first to the Floss weavers and tanners or to be taken to the weekly Floss market before they would be offered elsewhere. So that none of the 12 tailors would be disadvantaged, each of the four Jews should always give orders to three tailors. A special order required compulsory purchase of eight pieces of cloth annually from tailor Johann Lohr at the prevailing price levels. The safe conduct letter, confirmed in 1699, 1713, 1725 and 1732 covered only the Jewish trading activities. It contained no rules or regulations concerning religious activities or organization of the Jewish community life. Eventually, the Floss Jews obtained permission to build their own homes and their economic situations improved.

The firm refusal of the Christian side to become involved in any Jewish matters led to the need for the Jews to create their own administration which they built like a guild and which they were able to maintain into the 19th century.

By 1716, the four families in Floss had doubled to eight. The government gave the order to stop the enlargement of the community and, if possible, to reestablish the previous condition. From each Jewish family, only one child, son or daughter, could stay in Floss. This ruling remained in effect throughout the 18th century, many times repeated. But exceptions were made which allowed protection for various children or Jews from out of town. However, there were also times when requests for exceptions were declined. A number of Jews who did not receive protection remained in Floss anyhow. They were single, traded in a small way, just enough to support their existence.

The Commission of the Greater Main River Area requested all the Jews from Floss to appear for a meeting on April 26, 1814. Sixty-four families were entered into the records and sixty-four remained the number allowed which could not be exceeded. All Jews swore their allegiance. Those who had family names already kept them. (e.g. **Bloch**, **Bomeisler**, and **Boscowitz**). The others, known by their first and/or father's names, took on German family names. Everybody had to register their names. Those who were illiterate made a sign, about a third used Hebrew symbols, and two-thirds signed in German. It took a few years for the new names to be readily used. Later on a few names were revised so as to take on a German sound. For instance, "Veit" became "**Bomm**" and "Levi" was changed to "**Flosser**". Family names were based mainly on first names, father's names, mother's or wife's place of

origin. The registered families received the numbers 680 - 743. Each family received a register copy for identification purposes.

In the following years, the local government ordered a reduction of numbers to 40. When **Salomon Langermann** wanted to settle in Floss in 1848, he was denied and advised that the number of 40 remained exceeded. Sometimes a special exception was made, e.g. under conscription laws, a person who had served in the army was entitled to special consideration. The court always obtained the opinions of the Floss business people. Responses were mainly negative since any increase in the number of Jewish people was considered "damaging."

MARRIAGE RULES

The normal procedure for Jews in Floss, upon settlement, was that the father would apply to the government for Protection on behalf of his son or daughter. This enabled **David Low Pomeisler**, who moved from Bohemia in 1757, to settle in Floss, since he married the only daughter of **Daniel Moyses** who had already received protective status. Thus, one could obtain protective privilege by marrying someone who already had it. Complaints arose regarding the steadily increasing number of Jews which was said to be the fact that Jewish children married family. The first age restriction for Jewish sons to get married was 25 years of age (same as for Christians). In the following years, the authorities became more involved in marriage matters, which earlier had been exclusively the concern of the Jews. For instance, the drafting of a marriage agreement, which was a legality between a couple and their parents, fell under the competence of the Rabbi who wrote the agreement in the Hebrew language. The courts demanded a review and frequently returned the agreement for correction of various points. Afterwards, the agreement had to be presented to the court again. It is assumed that the court wanted to prevent any unclear conditions, which could lead to lawsuits.

After 1813, marriage and the start of a family depended totally on obtaining protective status. For many young Jews, there was no chance or settling in Floss. During the 1840's, they left in groups and emigrated mainly to North America. Of the 94 emigrants, registered by name and date, who left Floss up to 1848, 78 went to North America. 66 were younger than 35 years of age and only 17 of them had been married.

All the Jewish families of Floss can be traced back to the first four settlers from Neustadt. Through the marriages, everyone was related to everyone else. Negative marriage consequences occurred, many families having retarded children. Of the

Jews remaining in Floss until the end of the community, not one entered into a Jewish-Christian mixed marriage.

APARTMENTS AND HOUSES

In 1687, the Flosser Jews were able to purchase a piece of land from the Flosser tailor, Johann Harrer. The property was next to the town on a small hill. On May 10, 1687, the government authorized the construction of four Jewish houses because "the present quarters being much too small and difficult." However, the value of the buildings was not to exceed the value of the house of the average citizen. The first houses were constructed out of wood. In 1700 a conflict ensued. The reason for this was that **Nathan Feifas** had built his house partially forward of the building line, enabling him to easily watch the entrances of the other houses. The other Jews complained that he was watching them and taking their customers away. **Isaac Bloch** piled wood in front of his house with the road becoming so narrow that some horses drawing wagons fell down the hill. The families became very bitter toward each other, both sides were penalized, and it appears that peace returned. Soon, other houses arose on the "Jew Mountain." In 1712, the number of families had doubled to eight. Citizens complained because the Jews wanted to add 2nd floors to their houses.

Due to the tight wooden construction methods, fires were a frequent occurrence. In 1808 four multiple family dwellings and one barn burned down. In 1809 the Jews agreed to observe the building codes. Nevertheless, in 1813 there was a big fire in Floss and two-thirds of the town, i.e. 116 houses, was destroyed including 12 Jewish houses and the wooden synagogue. The new houses had one family in two rooms, almost all with a stable and a small back yard.

In 1832 the houses got their own numbers. Alleys and lanes in the Jewish quarter had to be maintained by the Jews at their own expense. Also in 1832, work was started to pave the streets.

The massive emigration to North America during the 1840's and the continuing departure of Jews from Floss into the cities developed into a situation where more and more Jewish houses became Christian possessions, resulting in a steadily increasing number of Christians settling on the Jewish mountain.