

“One of the city's most popular citizens”

By Anja Reumschüssel

ALZEY. The Jewish community in Alzey has a long history. It already existed at the beginning of the 14th century. The traces left by Germans of the Jewish faith extend right up to the present day. We present the “Jewish Alzey” in a series.

Emil Liebmann built the largest department store in Alzey/Son Erich fled from the Nazis to the USA



The successful Liebmann merchant family ran the largest department store in Alzey. Repro: Axel Schmitz

You can't tell from the photo that they were Jewish. That is certainly intentional. The head of the family, Joseph Liebmann, is standing in the background in middle-class clothing, while his son Adolph and his wife Julie sit relaxed but dignified next to their three young children. Their eyes are serious, their parted hair is tightly drawn, their heads are raised - it is a representative portrait of a middle-class family “that is in no way different from its surroundings”, writes Dieter Hoffmann, an expert on Jews in Rheinhessen. In 1875, when the photo was taken, the Jews in Alzey were equal members of society and many played an important role in public life.

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The Liebmanns had already achieved some prosperity in Alzey. Almost 50 years earlier, Joseph Liebmann, once a member of the French cavalry, had settled in the Volkerstadt and founded the textile and fashion goods store "J. Liebmann". The store at Antoniterstraße 7 - 9, where fashion stores still sell their goods today, did well and was one of the largest in the Volkerstadt when Emil Liebmann took over its management around 1900. The family ran their business for more than a century, passing it on from father to son, until they too lost their livelihood during the Third Reich.

Another photo from 1921 shows that the family no longer stood out from the non-Jewish citizens of Alzey. Emil Liebmann is no longer a young boy, but still looks just as seriously into the camera. The Kaiser Wilhelm moustache is unmistakable, twirled up at the ends towards the temples, a patriotic symbol that was fashionable at the time. The young Liebmann left no doubt about his patriotism. "During the First World War, he was involved in organizing the war economy in his city and was awarded the 'War Medal of Honour' by the Grand Duke," Hoffmann reports. He later sat on the Alzey town council for the Liberals and was chairman of the Jewish community. In terms of patriotism, the Jews were in no way inferior to their Christian fellow citizens. When Emil Liebmann died at an early age, in 1924, of pleurisy, the Alzeier Zeitung praised him for his "commitment to the community and his charity" with the words: "A rarely large funeral procession escorted the mortal remains of one of Alzey's most popular fellow citizens, the deceased merchant Emil Liebmann, to the grave yesterday".

His son Erich was just eleven years old at the time. As the child of a respected merchant family, he was not granted a carefree life for long. When he was increasingly shunned by his neighbors after the Nazis came to power, when old classmates crossed the street when they saw him coming, Erich Liebmann must have decided at some point to leave his home, where he was hated for some unknown reason. Like so many Jews at the time, he emigrated to the USA. "I'm glad my father didn't have to live through that," he said in 1988 at a visitors' week for former Alzey Jews. Decades after his emigration, Erich Liebmann met Dieter Hoffmann in the USA. He waved a wooden hanger with the inscription "Liebmann Alzey" with a broad grin as a sign of recognition. He seemed "thoughtful, sentimental, but not bitter", Hoffmann recalls of the last scion of the Alzey Liebmanns. Erich Liebmann, the last descendant of the Liebmann family from Alzey, died on October 28, 2003. "The long tradition of Jewish life in Alzey will become history just as irrevocably as the contributions that the Jews of Rheinhessen once made to the politics and culture of their homeland and its communities," writes Hoffmann, who had interviewed Erich for his work on Jews in Rheinhessen, in an obituar.