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The forgotten Jews of Kelheim

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This fragment of a Jewish morning prayer comes from Kelheim. At some point, long after it was written, someone tore it out of a prayer book and reused it as bookbinding material, a common fate for Jewish manuscripts in Bavaria after communities were destroyed or expelled. History remains.

Even when someone tries to paste over it. Even when it is hidden in a book spine. Even when centuries pass. And every fragment that resurfaces forces us to confront the truth: Jewish history in Bavaria was never silent. It was silenced, and that is not the same thing. But even when a text is cut apart, folded, glued into a spine, or pasted under a cover, it still speaks. And this one speaks very clearly.
The handwriting on the fragment, a fourteenth century Ashkenazic script, almost certainly belongs to Kelheim's second medieval Jewish community, the community that rose again after the persecutions of 1348 and 1349.

. Its survival contradicts the long held assumption that Jewish life in Kelheim ended abruptly in the fourteenth century. Instead, it shows that prayers continued to be recited, manuscripts continued to be copied, and a community continued to live, work, and worship long after its supposed destruction. When the page was later stripped from its book and repurposed as waste, the person who did so unintentionally preserved a witness to that persistence.

To understand the weight of this fragment, one must return to the first catastrophe that struck Kelheim's Jews. In 1338, Deggendorf became the center of a violent anti Jewish pogrom triggered by a fabricated accusation of Host desecration. The charge was a convenient pretext for eliminating debts owed to Jewish lenders. Duke Henry the Fourteenth pardoned the attackers almost immediately, allowed them to keep the stolen property, and declared all debts to murdered Jews void. From Deggendorf, the violence spread rapidly across Bavaria, reaching Kelheim and more than twenty other towns. Synagogues were burned, homes looted, and families murdered or forced to flee.

On the ruins of the Deggendorf synagogue, a pilgrimage church was built to sanctify the crime. For more than six centuries, the Deggendorfer Gnad celebrated a miracle that never occurred. Only in 1992 was the pilgrimage officially abolished.

Yet even this devastation did not end Jewish life in Kelheim. A new community emerged in the late

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fourteenth century, rebuilt by families who returned or resettled after the Black Death persecutions.

For roughly a century, this second community maintained its presence, its institutions, and its traditions. The Kelheim fragment is one of the few surviving traces of that world.

Its end came not through mob violence but through state policy. In 1450, Duke Louis the Rich of Bavaria Landshut ordered the expulsion of all Jews from his territories. The measure was deliberate, bureaucratic, and economically motivated. The duke and many urban elites were heavily indebted to Jewish lenders, and expulsion offered a convenient solution. Debts could be cancelled, property confiscated, and political authority consolidated. Jewish houses were seized or forcibly sold. Synagogues and schools were taken over.

Families were given only days to leave. In Kelheim, the entire community, rebuilt with such determination after 1349, was uprooted once again.

Many of the expelled families sought refuge in Regensburg, which remained one of the last major Jewish centers in southern Germany until its own expulsion in 1519. Others moved to Nuremberg, to towns in the Upper Palatinate, or across the border into Bohemia and Moravia. Their names reappear in tax registers, court documents, and communal records far from Kelheim, showing that the community did not vanish but was displaced.

One of the clearest examples of this continuity is the life of Jossel of Kelheim. Born around 1430, he belonged to the last generation raised in Kelheim before the expulsion. After 1450, he settled in Regensburg, where he became both a rabbi and a merchant. His wife, Kelein, appears in municipal records as an active participant in commercial life, a rare but important reminder of the economic agency of Jewish women in late medieval cities. In 1476, during an antisemitic campaign in Regensburg, Jossel was falsely accused of ritual murder. Despite the severity of the accusation, he remained a documented figure in the city's Jewish community and continued his religious and economic activities.

His biography shows how Jewish life from Kelheim continued in exile, carried by individuals who refused to let their traditions or identities be extinguished.

Taken together, the Kelheim fragment, the destruction of 1338, the expulsion of 1450, and the life of Jossel of Kelheim form a single narrative. It is a story of communities destroyed and rebuilt, of lives uprooted and re rooted, of memory suppressed and rediscovered. Jewish life in Kelheim was not a brief episode. It was a cycle of erasure and persistence, silence and survival. And sometimes, all it takes to recover that history is a torn page hidden in a book's spine.

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