

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I would like to take the opportunity to welcome you all on behalf of the city of Fulda. It is a pleasure to welcome you on behalf of Margarete Hartmann, city councilor, the head of our local parliament...

I would like to welcome the representatives of the Jewish Community in Fulda Ms. Gusman and Mr. Melamed.

As a city of Fulda, we feel honored to welcome you as our guests who have family roots here in Fulda. I would like to thank you for taking up our invitation and spending a few days here in Fulda. We are delighted to be able to look forward to greeting about 150 guests, among others from Israel, the USA, the Netherlands, Brazil and Mexico.

I would like to welcome you all on behalf of our former Lord Mayor Dr. Wolfgang Hamberger. He joined the opening session of the specialist Conference on "Fulda's Jewish History" on Monday. He has recently celebrated his 93rd birthday. It was at his initiative that as long ago as 1987 he invited people of the Jewish faith who had their roots here to come to Fulda. We are proud to be able to continue this tradition today. Welcome to all representatives of the city council and magistrate

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Organizing and hosting a specialist conference and extending a cordial invitation to guests whose family biographies are so closely bound up with Fulda in a tragic way may at first sight seem to be two very different approaches. However, they both relate to the same context:

The historians identify the beginnings of the evolution of Fulda in the foundation of the monastery in the year 744. Seen from this perspective, we celebrated a jubilee year in 2019 – 1,275 years of Fulda. We took "The Future needs Origins" as the motto for the jubilee and therefore focused our attention on our past history. Here, the focus was first on expanding our knowledge of Fulda's history and conveying historical knowledge to the city's current inhabitants. Secondly, we set out on the basis of our knowledge of the past to gain points of orientation for the future.

In the minds of the broader general public, Fulda's history is primarily bound up with the Monastic School here in the 8th and 9th centuries, as well as with the Baroque period, which shaped the face of the city and continues to do so to this day. However, those are but two aspects of the city's multifaceted history – with its high point and dark chapters.

It has for some time been our objective to research the difficult chapters in Fulda's history and ensure they are not forgotten. They include anti-Semitism, from the early 13th century to the catastrophic years from 1933 to 1945. A vibrant culture of remembrance that tasks each and every one of us to champion human dignity and freedom forms the basis of how we today understand democracy and the rule of law.

If we consider Fulda's history since the year 744 then it is also important to cast an eye at the important role that the Jewish community and Jewish life played in Fulda's economic, scientific, and cultural development. We can be grateful that since the 9th century people of the Jewish faith helped shape life in the city.

To date, exploring this part of our history was not addressed firmly in historical studies. It is time to change this! The Jewish community can be proud of a history that goes back an entire millennium and the invaluable contribution Jewish life made to Fulda's development is an important field for research. More scholarly investigation would not only be welcome but is imperative in order to breathe strong life into the claim that "The Future needs Origins".

We are very grateful to the participants in the specialist conference for dedicating themselves in the research work to Jewish life in Fulda. It is especially important for us as a city.

Most important, The City of Fulda is grateful that you took up our invitation. That was by no means a matter of course. Many of your parents, grandparents or relatives who lived in Fulda were murdered, expelled, and denigrated. Even generations later those acts and those losses define biographies, family histories and are associated with painful memories and traumas.

The fact that you have come to Fulda is a gesture of human kindness and a symbol of the willingness to build bridges.

The highly significant Jewish community in Fulda, which for centuries shaped the face of our city, was erased by the Third Reich. At the beginning of 1933, there were around 1,100 people of the Jewish faith in our city – which back then had about 30,000 inhabitants. The National Socialists scored comparatively weakly in Fulda in 1933 given the strongly Catholic tradition in the region. However, we must sadly summarize that in Fulda there were also only the one or other individual who put up resistance to the Nazi regime.

The then city administration and the overwhelming majority of the population did nothing actively to prevent hundreds of their Jewish fellow citizens being deported and tormented. And yes, there were too many who actively supported the Third Reich.

I personally am still deeply moved by what I was told 34 years ago by Julius Lump, who was born in 1916 in Fulda. He formulated it as follows: “For me, the time in the Buchenwald concentration camp was not the worst I ever experienced. For me, the worst experience was being driven like cattle through the streets of Fulda while many of my erstwhile classmates applauded and laughed.”

These words show how important it is not to consider anti-Semitism abstractly, but with a view to the actual occurrences locally.

All the city’s Jewish citizens who did not manage to leave town in time were deported in the years 1941 and 1942. Almost all of them were murdered.

This historical guilt fills us with shame. As the Lord Mayor I would like on behalf of the city to express our most profound regret given this historical guilt. We cannot undo those ghastly, unjust acts. We can and must, however, construe this historical guilt as tasking us all to remember, to prevent there being any forgetting, and to champion peaceful coexistence now and in the future.

After the end of World War II, people of the Jewish faith came to Fulda from eastern parts of Germany and Europe. For most of them, Fulda was only a transit point. In 1945, the Americans stationed in Fulda opened a Displaced Persons Office in the former schoolhouse on Von Schildeck Strasse where after the end of the war Jewish survivors from the concentration camps, hiding places and from abroad congregated. Until 1947, a total of 214 people sought help there, of whom only eight came from Fulda originally.

In December 1945, a Jewish Community was founded here. It was chaired, among others, by Hans Neumann and his wife Frania Neumann, the grandparents of the present director of the State Jewish Council, Daniel Neumann. Daniel Neumann joined us here on Monday – some of you had the opportunity to hear his speech.

It was a very small Jewish community. All the more remarkable are the initiatives of the former Lord Mayor Dr. Hamberger, who from the 1970s onwards made many an effort to help strengthen the Fulda Jewish Community.

In 1987, the former school was consecrated as a Jewish cultural center with a small synagogue. At that point in time no one could have foreseen that on November 9, 1989, the Berlin Wall would come crashing down. In subsequent years, the Fulda Jewish Community gained many new members who came here from Central and East Europe.

The population of the City of Fulda has also changed significantly since World War II. Fulda is a growing city and one that is changing.

At the end of World War II, about 30,000 people lived in Fulda. In the years 1946 and 1947, thousands of displaced Germans from the territories of what are now Poland and the Czech Republic arrived here, and the population rocketed as a consequence.

Fulda was only a few kilometers from the border with East Germany, which was founded in 1949. As of 1961, the border was an insurmountable obstacle. It divided Germany, and Europe, and during the Cold War separated the NATO states from those in the Warsaw Pact. When the border was opened in 1989, we in Fulda suddenly found ourselves in the very heart of both Germany and Europe.

In recent decades, Fulda has welcomed countless new citizens. Back in the 1970s, many people from Turkey arrived as “guest workers”, following in the footsteps of the Italians and Spaniards in the 1960s. Post-1989, thousands of immigrants from the territory of the former Soviet Union, Syria, and last year, from Ukraine arrived. Today, about 70,000 people from 144 different countries live in our city. Less than half the population is of the Catholic confession. The vast majority of the population does not have its roots locally.

It is therefore all the more important for us as the City of Fulda to master the task of conveying our history to the people who live here, first and foremost among them the younger generations. And the task of making very certain that the injustice shown to our Jewish fellow citizens in the past does not get forgotten.

For decades now there have been countless City of Fulda initiatives closely coordinated with the Jewish Community and the Society for Christian-Jewish Cooperation to nurture a vibrant culture of remembrance.

These activities include, for example, the annual remembrance events on November 9 to ensure that the destruction of the synagogue on that day in 1938 is not forgotten. Since 2010, the commemorative plaques on a wall on the site of the former synagogue honor the Jewish victims of the Nazis.

In recent years, we have set various initiatives in motion in order to remember the victims of anti-Semitism, to research the extremely important role the Jewish community played for Fulda and, metaphorically speaking, to build new connecting bridges between the present and the future.

For some years now, we have been pursuing the goal of transforming the Old Jewish Cemetery on Rabanusstrasse into a dignified place of remembrance. Most citizens cannot sufficiently discern what the place was, namely the traditional cemetery of the Jewish Community, which as such can and must never lose its shape. In close consultation with the Fulda Jewish Community and the State of Hessen Jewish Council we are busy ensuring its appropriate redesign.

The place will also be destined to bring to mind the deportations of the years 1941 and 1942 that all started directly on the other side of Rabanusstrasse. At present, we are trying to acquire the "Customs House" from the Federal Office of Administration: It was regrettably erected in the early 1950s on part of the grounds of the Old Jewish Cemetery. The objective is to redesign the building's rooms in such a way as to display and explain Fulda's Jewish history.

After much effort, three years ago the City of Fulda succeeded in acquiring the grounds of the former synagogue. It fills us with sorrow and shame that the Fulda Synagogue, and the building's origins date back presumably to the 15th century, was burned down in the night of November 9, 1938.

The fact that the City of Fulda has acquired the land creates an opportunity to redesign the space. After intense consultation with the Jewish Community and discussions with some highly committed individuals who have been regularly visiting Fulda for some years now, and in this context, I would like specifically to mention Ethan Bensinger and Michael Braunold by name, we have set out to create a lively space for Jewish culture and inter-religious encounters. This objective is also infused by the wish to forge a strong symbol showing that the Nazis did not succeed by destroying the long-standing Fulda synagogue in erasing Jewish life here.

The actual construction planning and realization of the building will not be possible until the archaeological investigations on site have been concluded. The organs of the City of Fulda have clearly stated their intention to realize the idea of a center for encounters.

As the City of Fulda it is important to us to create spaces and places for remembrance and encounters. And it is likewise our wish to forge links between people.

I am deeply grateful that Ms. Anja Listmann has since 2021 been active as our Commissioner for Jewish Life in Fulda. She has with great conviction and passion been advocating for research into Fulda's Jewish history. It is particularly important to her that we reach out to people who by dint of their family biographies are bound up with Fulda. Many of our guests have been in contact with her for some years now. And we have first and foremost her efforts to thank for the fact that we have been able to successfully research so many contact details to persons with roots in Fulda. My heartfelt thanks for your marvelous efforts!

Ms. Listmann and members of the Municipal Archive will gladly assist you if you wish to find out more about the history of your ancestors in Fulda.

At the same time, I would like to cordially thank Dr. Michael Imhof. For decades he has done us all a great service with his publications on Jewish history, devising and curating exhibitions on the subject, and reaching out globally to this end.

I also want to mention Gerhild Elisabeth Birmann-Dähne. She dedicated her work for decades now to do research on Jewish cementaries in the region.

I am most grateful that some of you, dear guests, have for years now been regularly visiting Fulda and thus expressing the connection you feel to us as a city. This fills us with deep gratitude!

On behalf of the City of Fulda, and with the support of various schools, Ms. Listmann is currently busy establishing links to Israel in order to lay the foundations for regular youth exchange programs. I am truly delighted that a project has already evolved with the City of Petah Tikva, which with its approx. 250,000 inhabitants is located about 40 kilometers east of Tel Aviv. It is remarkable and doubtless worthy of future research that it was in Fulda that some of the founders of Petah Tikva prepared themselves for life in Israel. For this reason, there's a very special basis for a youth exchange program and I am very grateful to the Winfriedschule for actively supporting the idea.

Those who took part in the Winfriedschule exchange program, namely 19 young people aged 16 to 19, will also be accompanying our guests over the next few days. This is an encouraging sign that we can manage to forge new links.

Education, encounters, and interaction between people, those are the prime building blocks on which to oppose anti-Semitism and strengthen an open society!

For me today both in my function as the Lord Mayor and very personally it is a special honor and joy to welcome you here as the descendants of our former fellow Fulda citizens.

I was born in Fulda in 1973 and in May 1987, at the age of 13, had a stroke of good fortune. During the visit back then of our former citizens, by chance my father met the neighbors in Petersberger Strasse of my grandmother, who was still alive at the time. I am deeply grateful that I was then able in 1989 to spend several weeks in New York as a guest of the family of Julius Lump. I personally am therefore firmly convinced that each encounter between people can be a small stone in the mosaic that will support us all in our joint resolve to champion a better world.

Encounters such as we will experience here over the next few days are only possible thanks to the dedication and efforts of countless supportive individuals. The highly diverse program for us all is a truly joint effort of many, so allow me in this context to most cordially thank Dr. Heiler, Ms. Ritz, Ms. Lenz, Ms. Listmann, Dr. Imhof, the active group of young people at Winfriedschule, Ms. Feldmann, Ms. Hamberger, Ms. Hohmann and Mr. Hengstler.

May this specialist conference expand our knowledge! May the encounters we make over the next few days strengthen existing connections and help foster new connections between people and to the City of Fulda!

May I welcome you most cordially here in Fulda!