

Landmarks in German town reveal rich but sobering history

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Visitors find a deep thread of narrative in a synagogue and burial ground

By JENN DIRECTOR KNUDSEN
SPECIAL TO THE OREGONIAN

Worms, Germany, is a quaint town of about 86,000 people that my husband, David, and I walked in less than a day. The clear, crisp October day we spent there also was a sobering one, from a Jewish perspective.

This medieval city is home to one of only three Imperial Cathedral along the Rhine River. Adorning one of its facades are two stone statues. One, "Church," depicts a woman with coiffed long hair, head held high, cupping a chalice in her left hand and peering directly at another stone image.

That second image also is of a woman. Known as "Synagogue," her eyes are blindfolded, her head is downturned and her shoulders slouch. Her posture and forced blindness are symbolic of her rejection of the Church and all it represents.

Bookending the famous Worms Cathedral on one side of town is the narrow, cobblestoned former Jewish ghetto and, on the other, the Judenfriedhof, the spacious



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Jewish custom dictates leaving a rock atop a visited tombstone; these two, inscribed in Hebrew in Worms' 900-year-old Jewish cemetery, also have folded notes left by visitors.

900-year-old Jewish cemetery, the oldest preserved Jewish burial place in all of Europe.

A rich history

Clearly, Jewish Worms once thrived. Not only was it once home to an estimated 1,100 Jews, but Rabbi Shlomo ben Yizchak, or Rashi, made it his home for five years (from 1060 to 1065), a time during which he recorded such important commentary on Torah and Talmud that his writings are still considered piercing and relevant today.

A metal statue of Rashi,

Worms, Germany

Getting there: The closest airport is Frankfurt, which can be reached by air on several major carriers from Portland, starting at \$536 in a spot search for May. Only Lufthansa offers nonstop service from Portland. Detailed directions to Worms can be found at tinyurl.com/choq4v

Where to stay: Check out options at tinyurl.com/caolb4

One of the best, most spacious hotels we stayed in while traveling through western Germany, recommended at the above site: Parkhotel Prinz Carl, Prinz-Carl-Anlage 10-14, D-67547 Worms, e-mail: info@parkhotel-prinzcarl.de

Where to eat: Visit tinyurl.com/bq6l6c for options

What to do: Visit worms.de/englisch/tourismus

More info: tinyurl.com/dbleov

— Jenn Director Knudsen

900, the year it came to life, according to a French-language informational pamphlet.

Guide outlines history

We entered the spare yet warmly lit building through a side door and placed available yarmulkes on our heads. We knew what to do but, just in case, a sign indicates that one



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— men, at least — must don a head-covering here.

Breusing, the docent, explained the synagogue's tumultuous past: Portions of it were destroyed in 1096 during the Crusades and then reconstructed in 1175. In 1349, the town's Jews were blamed for the plague, and their synagogue again suffered.

Twice in the 1600s the synagogue became a target of gentiles' rancor. And, by 1942, the synagogue and the ghetto were destroyed. By the end of World War II, not one Jew remained in Worms.

Between 1957 and 1961, the synagogue was rebuilt, largely with money from the German government and using whatever

original materials remained.

Tombstones' stories

On our way to the centuries-old Jewish cemetery, we passed a bent, elderly couple who asked us — in broken, Russian-accented German — directions to the burial grounds.

The Jewish cemetery in Prague dating to the 1400s is more well-known, but Worms' deserves perhaps more recognition.

Resembling a mouthful of crooked, decayed teeth, the cemetery is expansive and filled with trees. In some sections, time and weather have erased the inscriptions on its canted tombstones. Stones, notes on paper and even melted candlewax speak to the people who have visited gravesites.

There is a clear delineation in the 1800s when the Hebrew inscriptions end and those in German begin. The most recent tombstone is for a death in the 1940s.

In the 1990s, vandals damaged some of the tombstones in the cemetery. Breusing said, but that incident was an anomaly. By and large, it seems that in a small town once virulently opposed to its Jewish residents, it's OK again to be Jewish.

E-mail Jenn Director Knudsen at travel@news.oregonian.com