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Regina Scheer: AHAWAH. Das vergessene Haus. Spuren in der Berliner Auguststraße

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Ahawah ("love" in Hebrew) was the name of a Jewish children's home founded in the rear building of Auguststraße 14/16, on the edge of Berlin's *Scheunenviertel*, in the 1920s. Sponsored by the *Jüdische Gemeinde*, which ran several charitable organizations on property it owned on Auguststraße and in the surrounding area (Oranienburger Straße, Große Hamburger Straße), *Ahawah* cared primarily for children of Jewish refugees from Eastern Europe who had settled in the slums of the *Scheunenviertel*.

In 1947 the Soviet and East German authorities turned the building into a school, the *Max-Planck-Oberschule*, where—in the 1960s—Regina Scheer attended the *Erweiterte Oberschule*. Already then, she writes, she sensed the building's special history and began to inquire about it. Over the next 25 years, as she pursued her career as a journalist, married and bore children, and witnessed the collapse of the GDR and the subsequent societal change, Auguststraße 14/16 was never far from her mind; indeed, discovering—or better: uncovering—its past became an important part of her life.

Painstakingly locating people who had lived on Auguststraße before the war, including children from the home itself, sifting through old newspapers and ferreting out documents in various archives, such as the *Archiv des Oberfinanzpräsidenten* in West Berlin with its lists of Jews deported to camps in the East, Regina Scheer pieced together a detailed mosaic of Jewish life on Auguststraße from the 1860s to the end of WW II, in particular from 1914 to 1945. It was characterized, on the one hand, by the Jewish religious and cultural concept of *Zedakah*, of "Gerechtigkeit, die natürliches und soziales Unrecht ausgleicht" (36 et passim), which prescribed helping the less privileged and was the motivating principle behind the hospitals, schools, old people's homes, soup kitchens, child-care facilities, etc. maintained by the Jewish community; and, on the other, by anti-Semitism, which in the 1930s and 40s resulted in the confiscation of the property of the *Jüdische Gemeinde*, the closing of the charitable institutions on Auguststraße, and the deportation of the Jews living there. As Regina Scheer learned, starting in 1943, Auguststraße 14/16 had been a *Sammellager* for Jews being deported to Theresienstadt and Auschwitz.

None of this past was evident after the war. Nowhere in the school was there an indication of the Jewish origins of the building or of its function during fascism. The people in the neighborhood with whom Regina Scheer spoke had long since suppressed what had happened to the Jewish residents. Reconstructing this past, Scheer came to realize the failure of the GDR state, which had been founded on the principle of anti-fascism, and of its citizens to deal with the persecution of Jews.

Scheer draws parallels with today's situation as well, pointing to the at times hostile treatment of the latest Jewish immigrants from the East and the once again manifest anti-Semitism. Throughout the book she implicitly measures present as well as past German behavior against the Jewish law of *Zedakah*.

Regina Scheer's text is an intense depiction of the accomplishments, conflicts, and suffering of the Jewish population in this section of Berlin in the first half of the 20th century. It incorporates documents, conversations, and countless personal histories—Scheer clearly felt compelled to preserve the memory of as many as possible of those former residents of Auguststraße whom their German neighbors had chosen to forget. In its concreteness, and with its warmth and sense of human dignity, the book is reminiscent of the work of Heinz Knobloch. It is in keeping as well with the current practice of oral history and history "from below." Having read the book, one walks through the gray and crumbling Auguststraße with different eyes.

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