

# Jewish Life

The Endingen Synagogue,  
interior and exterior.

SANDY BORNSTEIN PHOTOS

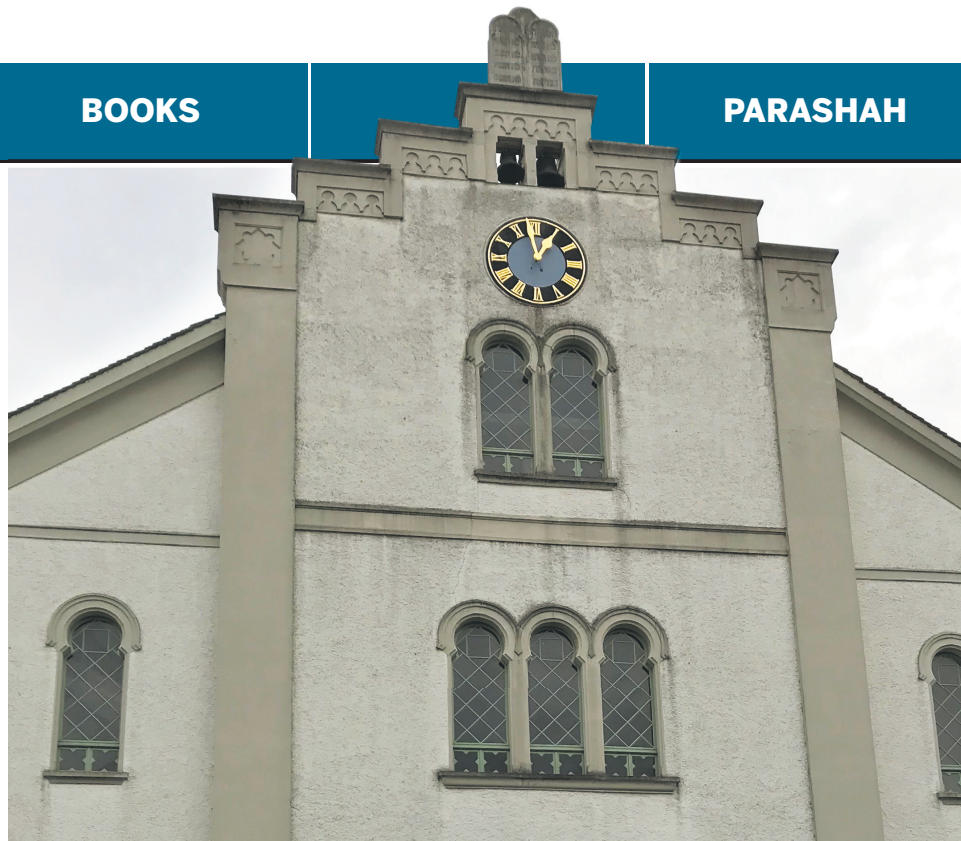
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## A slice of Swiss Jewish history

**SANDY BORNSTEIN**  
SPECIAL TO THE CJN

**L**ike many people, I associate Switzerland with chocolate, cheese and the Alps. I admit that during my visit last September, I consumed more than my share of chocolate and locally sourced cheese, and happily trekked through the Alps.

Simultaneously, I set aside a day to discover a fascinating segment of Jewish history by visiting Lengnau and Endingen, the two places where Jews were allowed to settle in the 18th century.

From Zurich, I travelled by train to Baden, where I met Roy Oppenheim, a local historian. From the moment we met, to the time we said goodbye, Oppenheim provided a detailed overview of Switzerland's Jewish history. Like much of the European Jews' plight throughout the Middle Ages, the Swiss Jews were repeatedly subjected to anti-Semitic legislation and violent pogroms resulting in them seeking refuge in another location or succumbing to a gruesome death from forced drowning or being burned on a stake.

In 1776, when the American colonists were fighting for freedom from the Brit-

ish and also withdrawing from their attempt to capture Montreal, Swiss Jews were granted the right to settle in the villages of Lengnau and Endingen, where they lived peacefully side by side with their Gentile neighbours for almost 100 years.

Unlike in other European towns, the Jews here were not relegated to living behind a walled-off area locked at night. The Jews accepted the government-mandated limitations on their commercial activities, prohibiting them from owning property, working as farmers, and being considered as citizens. Cattle trading and peddling were common occupations. It was not until 1866 that the Swiss Federation allowed the Jews in Lengnau and Endingen to settle elsewhere.

France's 1791 Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen opened the possibility for European Jews to be emancipated. European countries started to give their Jewish residents the fundamental rights denied to them. However, the Swiss government did not bestow equal rights upon its Jews until 1874. Many Jews chose to leave these two Swiss shtetls during the latter part of the 19th century and more followed

them in the next century.

Oppenheim parked his car across the street from the mid-19th century Lengnau synagogue designed by architect Ferdinand Stadler, a specialist in religious buildings. A series of rounded arched windows stand out as a striking feature of this towering, simple, beige-coloured Romanesque styled building with salmon-coloured trim and an inclined gable roof.

As we walked toward the entrance, Oppenheim recalled a time when Jews constituted 30 per cent of the Lengnau community. Today, only four Jewish families remain in the vicinity. I followed Oppenheim through the oversized narrow, wooden doors and entered a beautiful sanctuary with handcrafted wooden seats connected to locked tabletops. Light cascaded into the sanctuary from evenly spaced windows and a round, stained glass window above the ark. A metal tzedakah box with an open hand on top greeted me as I began walking down the centre aisle leading to the raised bimah and the ornate ark. On the floor in front of the bimah, Oppenheim pointed to the etched-in numbers 1847, the date of its dedication.

Creaky wooden stairs led to the

women's gallery where the seats faced away from the sanctuary toward the windows. I peered over the open lattice railing and became fixated on the hanging antique light fixtures with tilted candles. I later read that these hanging candlelit lamps are the oldest known examples from this era. Supplementary electric lighting was added in the 20th century. The cathedral ceiling and window arches had Arabic inspired motifs resembling geometric patterns, enhanced with royal blue rosettes recalling the Golden Age of Spain. While describing the craftsmanship, Oppenheim mentioned that the influx of distant cultures was fashionable in 19th century Europe.

Back outside, Oppenheim pointed to several nearby structures. Most of the buildings surrounding the village square had once been occupied by Jews. Since Jews and Christians were prohibited from living together, and Jews were also denied homeownership, houses were frequently financed by Jews and owned by their Christian neighbours. Side-by-side double doors were installed so the locals could theoretically conform to the cohabitation ruling.

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Many of the surviving homes remind visitors of this piece of history.

Before departing for the cemetery we took a short walk to a petite building housing the oldest surviving mikveh in Switzerland. For decades, the building had been used for storage. In the last few years, this mid-19th-century mikveh was restored. Oppenheim also identified a former 19th-century matzah bakery, the site of the first synagogue, and the Jewish Home for the Aged funded by the sons of Meyer Guggenheim, former residents of the town, and one of the wealthiest families of the time. Our last stop was a centuries-old building recently renovated into a visitor centre. Oppenheim hopes that this impressive space filled with historic pictures will provide additional opportunities to educate visitors unfamiliar with European Jewish history.

Before 1750, the Jews in this region were buried on an island in the Rhine River near Koblenz. This less-than-ideal location was subject to continual flooding. In the middle of the 20th century, the surviving grave markers were transported to Switzerland's oldest Jewish cemetery located between Endingen and Lengnau. The cemetery was established in the mid-18th century when Jews were finally per-



Inside the synagogue of Lengnau. SANDY BORNSTEIN PHOTO

mitted to purchase land. The oldest graves date back to that time.

Inside the cemetery which is filled with mature trees, Oppenheim pointed to the numbers on the back of almost 3,000 headstones. Each grave has been catalogued. Unlike many other Jewish cem-

eteries, the graves are not arranged by family plots, husbands and wives are not laid to rest next to one another, and the rows run from north to south instead of the traditional west to east with the feet facing toward the east.

I can understand the importance of the

numbering system since relatives appear to be scattered throughout the cemetery, and the engraving on the oldest stones has deteriorated. Nature has taken its toll on the centuries-old sandstone and shell limestone markers engraved in Hebrew. Mid-19th century and pre-Second World War gravestones tended to have German lettering while post-Holocaust marble gravestones are no longer in German. We stopped to acknowledge a handful of Israeli soldiers' graves who were descendants of Swiss Jews.

We walked to a simple black monument dedicated on June 2014. The memory of an unsubstantiated number of refugees who were prevented from entering Switzerland when the Nazis were in power and ended up perishing are remembered at this spot.

After a short drive, we arrived in Endingen and parked next to the town's cream-coloured neoclassic synagogue with Moorish arches, located in a back alley in the older part of the village. This synagogue was constructed after the community outgrew their original house of worship in the mid-19th century, when the Jews were approximately 50 per cent of the town's population.

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# Synagogue design connects Judaism with Orient

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Like the Lengnau synagogue, a clock is prominently placed at the top of the building near the gabled roof. Since Endingen never had a church, the residents have relied on the hourly sound from the synagogue clock for generations.

An adjacent structure had a dual purpose serving the rabbi's residence and school. Oppenheim also identified another school building, as well as the former ritual slaughterhouse and the mikveh housed in a yellow building. Once again, it was easy to see examples of buildings with double doors. Oppenheim discussed the repeated efforts that the Jews have made to rescind the Federal Council's 1893 ban on shechitah, the kosher slaughtering of animals. Kosher meat still needs to be imported into the country.

I watched Oppenheim use an oversized key to unlock the synagogue's massive lime green doors flanked by white columns. In the vestibule, I passed by a wall fountain for ritual hand washing. For the second time in the same day, as I walked into a sanctuary hand-painted with an Arabic-Islamic motif, I momentarily travelled back to the 19th century. Caspar Joseph Jeuch had created this synagogue with a similar message of connecting Judaism to the Orient by incorporating a Mudejar style.

The complexity of the architectural design and the multi-layered interior craftsmanship are well beyond my area of expertise. While the predominant colours were more muted than what I observed in the Lengnau synagogue, similar char-



The memorial inside the Lengnau Endingen cemetery. SANDY BORNSTEIN PHOTO

acteristics remained –hand-painted ceilings, wall and wooden trim decorations (glue paint on plaster surfaces and oil paint on wood), candlelit hanging light

fixtures, second-floor women's galleries, handmade wooden seats with desks, and prominent arks.

One notable difference in architectural

style is found in the Endingen synagogue. The ark was showcased in a floor-to-ceiling, Moorish inspired, semi-circle niche area with two windows near the top of the decorative arch. Two nine-candle menorahs flanked each side of this bimah instead of just one nine-candle menorah seen in the Lengnau synagogue.

I often leave Jewish historical sites unsettled. While touring Lengnau and Endingen and listening to Oppenheim's steady stream of stories, I sensed a more positive atmosphere than in other places. Jewish and secular groups are working together to preserve several chapters of Swiss Jewish history that could easily be forgotten.

Even though the Lengnau and Endingen Jews created distinct entrances to their shared cemetery, they maintained numerous communal institutions. Despite countless generations of anti-Semitism, government-imposed discriminatory edicts, and a lingering stereotype that Jews cannot be trusted, the Jews who once resided in these two communities lived amongst their non-Jewish neighbours with minimal issues.

In Lengnau and Endingen, Henry Miller's words ring true. "One's destination is never a place, but a new way of seeing things." For those planning to travel to Switzerland, a slice of little known European Jewish history is available by touring Endingen and Lengnau. ■

*Swiss Tourism and Zurich Tourism jointly hosted Sandy Bornstein during her two-night stay in Zurich at the Engimatt City & Garden Hotel.*



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