

A snapshot of Jewish Zurich

SANDY BORNSTEIN
SPECIAL TO THE CJN, ZÜRICH

Before starting my private tour of Jewish Zurich, I joined Michel Bollag for coffee at Babi's Bagel Shop just a few blocks from my hotel, the Engimatt City and Garden Hotel. I watched a series of young Jewish mothers push strollers into the small café while Bollag and I casually introduced ourselves. As the former headmaster of one of the community's Jewish schools and an educator in Judaism at the University of Zurich, Bollag is well versed in Jewish history and Jewish life in modern Zurich. With little prior knowledge of Swiss Jewish history, I listened as he gave a primer on the subject.

After the Jews of Switzerland were emancipated in 1866, Jews had the freedom to leave the towns of Endingen and Lengnau. For almost 100 years, Swiss Jews were confined to these neighbouring communities. Zurich became one of the top choices for the Jews who wanted to start over in a nearby urban area. Lengnau and Endingen are approximately 30-35 kilometers from Zurich.

Within less than two decades, these Jews established a synagogue in what is now referred to as the Löwenstrasse neighbourhood, which is currently part of the business district. In the late 19th century, eastern European Jews looking for improved conditions in Switzerland sought out Zurich's 4th district.

Today, Zurich is home to approximately 6,000-8,000 Jews who reside in all twelve districts. Affiliated Jews with eastern and western European heritage tend to live in the first four districts where the synagogues, schools, bakeries and kosher stores are located.

Minjan Wollishofen

Our first stop was Minjan Wollishofen, the only homogeneous minyan in Switzerland.



Exterior of Synagogue Löwenstrasse

SANDY BORNSTEIN PHOTO

We walked down a steep ramp to reach the modern building housing this modern Orthodox, Zionist community. From the outside, one would never guess that a sanctuary for approximately 150 families was tucked inside. To respect the privacy and security of this synagogue, I didn't take any pictures of the building's exterior.

The sanctuary had the look and feel of a classroom. Long brown tables with wooden chairs cradled the focal point of the room, the bimah and the *Aron Kodesh*. A sheer curtain separated the men's section in the front from the women's in the rear. Wall-mounted bookshelves filled with Jewish books written in Hebrew and German clung to the walls along the perimeter.

LeShuk

We hopped onto another tram, and four stops later, we arrived near The Shuk, one of two kosher stores in the city. This small supermarket on Waffenplatzstrasse offers take-out service for prepared kosher

foods. In addition to the prepackaged items, patrons can choose from an assortment of freshly baked bread and kosher wine. The other kosher store is located in another Jewish section of the city.

Turnhalle Noam

For security reasons, I was unable to take any exterior photos or tour the inside of this modern Orthodox Jewish day school located in the heart of Zurich. Bollag spoke freely about the education that his adult children received years ago at this government accredited school, currently attracting a diverse group of Jewish students.

Synagogue Löwenstrasse Zurich

On the corner of Löwenstrasse and Nuschelerstrasse, sits the stately Moorish style 19th-century synagogue connected to the Israelitische Cultusgemeinde Zürich (the main Jewish community). It is hard to miss the beige and red-striped building with two towers. As we were entering the building, Bollag reminded me that this is Zurich's oldest synagogue.

Inside the wooden sanctuary, desks with straight back wooden chairs are anchored into a wood plank floor. The plain white walls with evenly spaced stained glass windows stand in sharp contrast to the ornately decorated synagogues in Lengnau and Endingen.

Old Jewish Quarter and Synagogengasse

After spending a few hours sampling modern Jewish life, little time was left to see the remnants of where Jews lived in the Old City during the Middle Ages. If I was in town for an additional day, I would have participated in a highly recommended walking tour designed to piece together the fragments of Zurich's medieval Jewish history. I did have time to meander for a short while through the narrow streets. Bollag directed my attention to a street sign, Synagogengasse and

translated a plaque written in German recalling the community and its synagogue.

I followed Bollag into an apartment building and up a stairwell where we looked upon segments of a colourful mural with Hebrew lettering dating back to the 14th century. Since the discovery in the 1980s, archeologists and Jewish historians have worked to preserve the artwork. When asked about the artwork's significance, Bollag mentioned that experts use this piece to illustrate how some affluent Jews were part of the upper echelons of medieval society.

Agudas-Achim Synagogue

Walking toward the Agudas Achim Synagogue, we passed small groups of Hasidic Jews. For over a century, these traditional Jews have lived in Zurich and created communal institutions to meet their needs. A second kosher store serves this community.

Male and female congregants of Agudas Achim have separate entrances to the modern building on the corner of Erikasstrasse and Weststrasse. Many of these Jews can trace their ancestry to the Eastern European Jews who immigrated from Poland, Russia, and the Baltic states near the end of the 19th century.

Jewish institutions and synagogues support an active Jewish presence in Zurich. Even though my tour included only a sampling of the communal infrastructure, I witnessed a revitalized Jewish community far removed from earlier Jewish history. Unlike Lengnau and Endingen, where the respective communities abandoned their synagogues, Zurich has numerous institutions meeting the needs of its diverse Jewish population. ■

Sandy Bornstein has an MA in Jewish studies. Swiss Tourism and Zurich Tourism jointly hosted Bornstein during her two-night stay in Zurich at the Engimatt City & Garden Hotel.




Jaguar Land Rover
Thornhill



Call me for all your
LAND ROVER JAGUAR INQUIRIES
905.889.0080 x 16248
Cell: **416.948.4118**
tali@jlrthornhill.ca
www.jaguarlandroverthornhill.ca

Thomas Minuk Ali
Sales and Leasing Consultant

434 Steeles Avenue West, Thornhill, ON L4J 6x6



BYES MOTHERS' ASSOCIATION
PROJECTPURIM

Send a Card, Deliver a Smile!

For only \$4 a name, you can send a beautiful Purim card to family and friends.

ORDER DEADLINE THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 27, 2020

www.projectpurim.com • 416-783-6181 x166