

ASCHER'S HOUSE ON FIRE

A strange series of house burnings in Nördlingen 1911
narrated by Rolf Hofmann



Noerdlingen Town Hall at center and Ascher's house right next to it
(painting by Carl Boegler 1859)

The summer of 1911 was unusually hot and dry. There was a threatening smell of disaster in the air. Hoof-and-mouth disease had spread nearly everywhere in the area around Noerdlingen in Southern German and destroyed the farmers' cattle stock. Besides that a series of mysterious house burnings had been frightening the people of Noerdlingen since spring of that year; the most spectacular incident being the burning of the Ascher family's house.

The ancestors of the Ascher family had moved from Lauchheim (between Noerdlingen and Aalen) to Moenchsroth (close to Dinkelsbuehl) in about 1720. As high ranking members of the Jewish Community there, they succeeded in acquiring considerable wealth as merchants of silver and bohemian wool in the

nearby Imperial Town of Dinkelsbuehl. A few generations later, Amson Ascher moved his family and business to Noerdlingen. Together with his sons he managed a trading company dealing with hops and pitch. The seat of this family business was house number D 28 at Eisengasse, very close to the Town Hall. Today there is an open space, the building doesn't exist any more. At the time of the spectacular fire in 1911, Amson Ascher's son Leopold was the manager of the company. Leopold Ascher was born in 1851 in Moenchsroth. He had married Anna nee Spiegel. The couple had nine children, all born in Noerdlingen. Leopold Ascher was a well respected man, who also served as President of the Jewish Community in Noerdlingen.

When the firealarm bells awakened the people of Noerdlingen in the early morning hours of August 1 in 1911, the house of the Ascher family was engulfed in flames. The fire had started on the ground floor in a storage area for oil, paint and pitch. So the people in the upper floors were unable to flee down the stairs. The fire brigade had to use ladders to rescue the inhabitants of the building. Luckily the flames didn't reach the nearby Town Hall, but Leopold Ascher's house was burnt down to the ground. So the property of this merchant family was destroyed within of few hours.

Besides the material damage the most tragic incident of this fire was the killing of Ascher's twenty-year-old maid, Peppi Rusch, from nearby Gremheim. A few days later her bones were found in the still warm ashes and ruins of the building. She had been trapped in her room when the fire occurred and could not escape. Rumours back then spoke of arson, as on August 21 another fire broke out on the property of the Hahn family at Baldinger Strasse. But official proof of this speculation was never found. Relief of this threatening situation came on September 15, when heavy rainfalls ended this long period of drought.

The only party who "benefited" from the fire at Ascher's house was the Ostertag Company in Aalen, who had provided the heavy metal safe for the Ascher Company. This safe, as the Noerdlingen newspaper pointed out, had survived the fire with no major damage, leaving all the papers and money inside unharmed. Ascher's house was never rebuilt. Today the only memory of this building consists of an oil painting done in 1861 by Carl Boegler. This beautiful painting is part of the holdings of the Noerdlingen City Archives and shows the Ascher House next to the Town Hall. Leopold Ascher died in 1916 at the age of 66, his wife followed him in 1933. Both found their eternal rest at the jewish cemetery of Noerdlingen.