

## Hamburg cemetery gets large restoration donation

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By Regine Wosnitza

A JEWISH cemetery in Hamburg which is almost 400 years old has been given UN heritage status and received donations of nearly £1 million for its repair.

The cemetery, on Koenigstrasse, opened in 1611. It has been closed to the public since 1869.

"It is not only the oldest Jewish cemetery in Hamburg," explained Michael Halevy, who teaches Sephardic history and Ladino at Hamburg University, "but counts as one of the most prominent cultural monuments, because of the exceptional decoration on the gravestones and beautifully fashioned epitaphs in Hebrew and Portuguese."

The cemetery, Mr Halevy said, is also unique because of its size and because it has both Sephardi and Ashkenazi graves.

It escaped destruction under the Nazis only through the ingenuity of one man.

Hans Hertz was a lawyer. As he had a Jewish grandfather, he lost his job when the Nazis came to power.

He turned his attentions to preserving Hamburg's Jewish cemeteries and archives. Risking his life by staying in contact with the Nazi authorities, he was never arrested. Instead, he managed to convince the Germans that it would be far easier to establish the racial descent of Jews if the communal graves and records were left intact.

The Nazis duly had some 30,000 records photographed between 1942 and 1945 - leaving invaluable material to today's researchers.

Still, the cemeteries did not escape Allied air raids unscathed, and deteriorated further, after the war, due to vandalism and decay.

In the 1970s, however, the Hamburg Institute for the History of German Jews was set up, with Mr Hertz as one of its founder members. Its main aim was to research the cemeteries in the area.

Mr Halevy's family, for its part, fled Nazi Germany for Azerbaijan, but they returned to Hamburg after the war, when he was six.

Now 52, he has done extensive research into the 2,600-or-so Sephardi graves in the Koenigstrasse cemetery, and has published a series of academic works including a Biographical Lexicon of Hamburg Sephardim.

"It seems appropriate to have this cemetery at last included in the Unesco list of Cultural Heritage," he told the JC. "Grave decorations are records turned into stone. All the developments and reforms within a community can be shown on them."

The city of Hamburg, various charitable foundations, and the Department for the Protection of Historical Monuments have jointly put some £900,000 towards the restoration of the graves in the cemetery. About one-third of that amount will go towards researching the roughly 4,000, Ashkenazi graves, which are in a state of serious decay.

The project is expected to take up to eight years. Once the work is complete, the cemetery will again be open to the public.