

Jewish museum opens in Germany amid row

01 December 2000

By REGINE WOSNITZA, BERLIN

A JEWISH MUSEUM opened in the small Bavarian town of Creglingen in southern Germany on Sunday - amid controversy over the town's Nazi past.

A member of the museum committee was fired by town officials before the opening for his outspoken insistence on highlighting anti-Jewish violence. Horst Rupp - a theology professor for history at Wuerzburg University and co-author of a book on Jewish history - has said his dismissal would not dent his determination to put the record straight.

He recalled having "cracked up" when he first found out, in the mid-1980s, that his own grandfather, Karl Stahl, was one of the main instigators in Germany's first anti-Jewish pogrom - in the town of Creglingen. "I simply had to research the whole history." said Mr Rupp, 51.

In the elections on March 5, 1933, 588 of the town's 776 votes cast had gone to the Nazis. On March 25, a Nazi mob led by Mr Stahl, the local branch leader, stormed the synagogue. Sixteen of Creglingen's 73 Jews were frogmarched to the town hall and tortured so badly that two men - Hermann Stern and Arnold Rosenfeld - died. They were in effect, Mr Rupp said, the first victims of the Nazi regime.

Six years later, Creglingen was declared free of Jews: Judenrein.

"People in Creglingen are afraid to deal with this history," he maintained. "They want to draw a final line under the chapter."

Arthur Obermayer, a US industrialist and museum co-sponsor whose family left Creglingen in the late 19th century, has backed town officials in the museum dispute. "It has been 55 years since the end of the Third Reich," he said. "Professor Rupp and many journalists seem to thrive on making Germans feel guilty."

Writing in the weekly Die Zeit, Mayor Hartmut Holzwarth declared: "Mr Rupp's statement that the Shoah started in Creglingen has to be rejected as unhistorical."

In the early 1990s, the town decided against commemorating the pogrom, and also rejected a proposal to give the name "Stern-Rosenfeld" to a local high school.

"I do not want to turn the museum into a Holocaust museum. But consider that part of history decisive," Mr Rupp declared.