

## Faces of Our Regions

### “The reopening of the Great Synagogue is an immense joy”

**Chantal Reich**, President of the Jewish Community of Metz

The Great Synagogue of Metz is reopening to the public after two years of renovation work. It was inaugurated on Sunday, October 26, during a ceremony that Chantal Reich, president of the community, looks back on.

#### **The Great Synagogue reopened its doors last Sunday. What did you feel during the ceremony?**

**Chantal Reich:** A great sense of pride. This reopening to the public, after two years of work, is an immense joy. The ceremony was both memorable and moving, especially when the centenarians of the community opened the *Aron Hakodesh*. The Consistory of Moselle was the project's main organizer. Its president, Marc Cerf, and vice-president, Alain Aisène, worked on all fronts. The project was long and very complicated, but we made it through.

#### **The Metz synagogue is the first to benefit from the Jewish Heritage Program, launched by the Fondation du patrimoine with the support of the Edmond J. Safra Foundation. Do you see this as recognition of the Jewish presence in Metz as part of French heritage?**

**C.R.:** Yes, the Metz community is one of the oldest Jewish presences in France; Rabbi Gershom lived here in the 10th century... The Great Synagogue bears witness to our belonging to the diversity and richness of French religious heritage. And knowing that other synagogues, other communities, will be able to benefit from this support is very important.

#### **All the city's religious authorities attended the ceremony with emotion. What does this sense of fraternity mean in today's context?**

**C.R.:** It is essential. We regularly organize interfaith meetings with the imam, the pastor, and the bishop, who, by the way, all take part in each of our events. In the current climate, it's important to show that they are present.

#### **How do you hope to bring the synagogue to life from now on?**

**C.R.:** The synagogue must be fully alive — through prayers, songs, and moments of shared life. We will continue to develop our cultural offerings. On December 7, for instance, we'll welcome Rachel Khan and Steve Suissa for a performance of *Les Grands Tournants*. More broadly, we plan to increase activities to promote our beautiful city of Metz, which has every facility for Jewish life (schools, kosher shops) and is a wonderful place for families to live!

**Interview by Yaël Scemama**

## **“We are performing an act of the Republic”**

It was with this luminous phrase that the president of the Moselle Departmental Council, Patrick Weiten, described last Sunday’s reopening of the Great Synagogue of Metz, after two years of renovation work.

These words summarize both the anchoring of the Jewish community of Metz in the history of France and the strength of its model of interfaith coexistence.

*“May this Synagogue remain a home of spirituality and dialogue!”* wished the mayor of the city, François Grosdidier.

*“May its doors open to the faithful and to those who seek peace and understanding,”* added Marc Cerf, president of the Moselle Consistory, in front of an audience of 600 people, including all of the city’s religious authorities.

The rediscovered splendor of the building revived the memory of past generations. One of the most moving moments was the opening of the Aron Hakodesh - the holy ark containing the Torah scrolls - by the community’s elders, Léon Lejzerowicz and Bertin Ditesheim.

The Chief Rabbi of France, Haïm Korsia, turned this fidelity into a message of hope, expressing the wish that *“the old be renewed and the new be sanctified.”*

The Chief Rabbi of Metz and Moselle, Bruno Fizon, for his part, spoke about the influence and radiance of Judaism in Metz.

Metz will be the first city to be featured in the new series of programs initiated by the Central Consistory in the show *À l’origine* on national TV channel France 2, said its president, Élie Korchia.

*“France has many sites linked to Jewish culture and history, and this religious and cultural heritage is diverse and often little known,”* declared Alexandre Giuglaris, Director General of the Fondation du patrimoine, announcing the launch of the Jewish Heritage Program, supported by the Edmond J. Safra Foundation.

The Great Synagogue of Metz is the first to benefit from it.

## **Metz, memory of a millennia-old Jewish community**

The Jewish presence in Metz dates back to Roman antiquity, but it was in the Middle Ages that the community truly became structured. As early as the 10th century, Jews took an active part in the economic and intellectual life of the city, despite periods of persecution and expulsion. In 888, a first decree banned their residence, but they returned regularly, drawn by the city's commercial dynamism.

In the 17th century, after the annexation of Metz to France by King Henry II, the situation of the Jews improved. The city became a refuge for Ashkenazi communities fleeing wars and persecution in Central Europe. Metz then stood out for its intellectual influence, notably with the founding in 1705 of a yeshiva, a renowned Talmudic school. Great scholars such as Rabbi Aryeh Leib Günzberg taught there, making Metz a major center of Jewish thought in Europe.

The French Revolution marked a decisive turning point. In 1791, Jews obtained citizenship and were able to fully integrate into society. Throughout the 19th century, the community continued to prosper, building in 1850 a large synagogue on Rue du Rabbi Élie Bloch.

However, the annexation of Alsace-Lorraine by the German Empire in 1871 disrupted this situation. Many Jews left Metz for France, while those who stayed had to adapt to a Germanized environment.

The community experienced another trauma during the Second World War, with the deportation of many of its members.

Today, the Jewish community of Metz, though smaller, remains active. The synagogue on Rue du Rabbi Élie Bloch, spared during the war, stands as a living symbol of this tumultuous history. Associations work to preserve the memory of this millennia-old presence, recalling the importance and cultural richness of a community that has profoundly shaped Metz.

**L.C.-C.**