

## Fragments of Rural Hungarian Jewish Culture

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**Abstract:** Ethnographic research that focused mainly on agrarian groups living at the lower level of society did not really seek or find a handle to approach Jewish culture in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. At the same time, for its part, the Hungarian Jewry made no effort to deal with its own culture from the viewpoint of ethnography. Although ethnographic and anthropological research has been conducted since then, and important results have been achieved, it cannot be claimed that the subject has been exhausted. That is why the Ethnography Museum's exhibition *Picking up the Pieces: Fragments of Rural Hungarian Jewish Culture* was an important, unique and timely opportunity for both experts and audience. The exhibition aimed to conjure up an image of rural Hungarian Jewish life before the Holocaust based the materials in the museum. For the first time, the exhibition presented the Museum's small but important collection of Judaica, Jewish implements, objects that entered the collection through art dealers and private collectors, not to mention the rich photographic material. In addition, local "case studies" were utilized to grasp the distinctive culture of the everyday life of the Jewish population, their position within the majority society, and the possible paths (mazes) of modernity. Various issues were discussed, not in general but through concrete examples (family histories, specific communities, local characteristics, etc.), and in this spirit, several specific themes were presented, such as weekdays and festive days, various situations, occupations and social strata. In the second part of the study, special mention is made of a few highlighted objects from the exhibition through the eyes of visiting American students.

**Keywords:** Jewish ethnography, Jewish objects, rural Jewish culture, Jewish headgear, Jewish traders, Jewish iconography

### INTRODUCTORY THOUGHTS

In 2003 a thematic selection of articles in No. 48 of *Acta Ethnographica Hungarica* dealt with ethnographical and anthropological research on the Jews of Hungary. Studies by Leonard Mars, Richárd Papp, Miklós Rékai, Piroska Szabó and the present author examined various aspects of Hungarian Jewish culture (MARS 2003; PAPP 2003; RÉKAI 2003; SZABÓ 2003; SZARVAS 2003). Although ethnographical and anthropological research

has been conducted since then on the Jews and important results have been achieved, it cannot be claimed that the subject has come into the focus of interest of our discipline.

The present article makes no attempt at an overview or synthesis, it simply outlines a few thoughts in connection with an exhibition on rural Jewish culture held in the Museum of Ethnography in 2014.

The relationship of Hungarian ethnographical research to the Jews and of the Jews to Hungarian ethnography can only be interpreted in the context of their interaction. Ethnographical research in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, that directed its attention principally to the question of the national culture, and carried out research mainly among groups living at the lower level of society, did not really seek or find a handle to approach Jewish culture from an ethnographical angle. At the same time, for its part Hungarian Jewry made no effort to deal with its own culture from the viewpoint of ethnography. It strove to identify itself as either a religious or an ethnic community, or it sought to strike a balance between the two. The question of carrying out research on themselves did not even arise for the Jewish groups who remained faithful to their traditions, and at the same time the section of Hungarian Jews who were in the process of assimilation – most Jews in the academic world belonged in this group – did not wish to study themselves because this would have emphasised their difference even more. There were attempts in Jewish circles in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century to study the Jews from an ethnographical – mainly folkloristic – viewpoint and to collect their objects, but they were not really successful (RÉKAI 1999; SZARVAS 2003; 2015; TORONYI 2006).

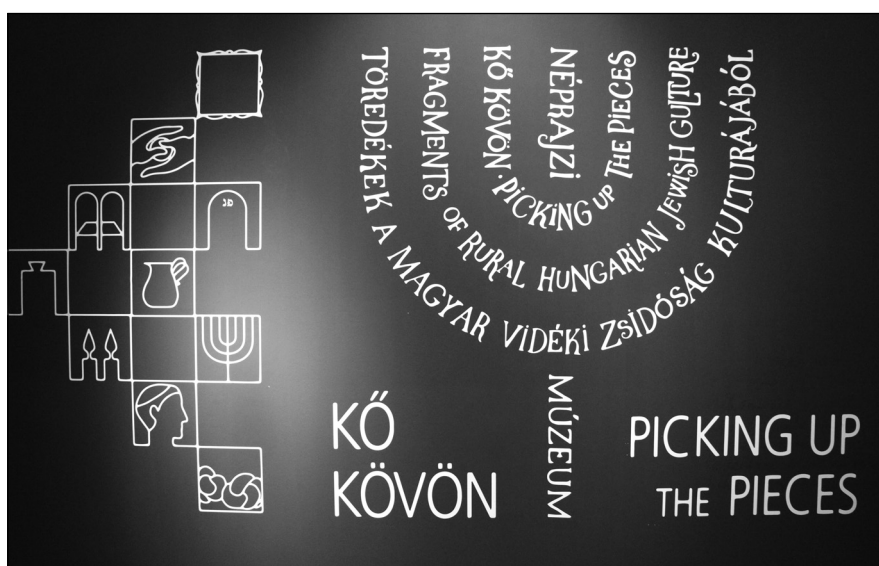
Nor did the Museum of Ethnography, one of the leading institutions of Hungarian ethnographical research, show any particular interest in research on the Jews. As for exhibitions, one of the first was an exhibition of photography by Tamás Féner opened in 1983, where most of the photographs shown evoked the everyday lives and festive days of Budapest Jews in the 1980s (FÉNER–SCHEIBER 1984). In 1995 a photo exhibition titled *Bitter Root* opened; it was based on research by Miklós Rékai on the traditional culture of the Hungarian Jews of Mukacheve, Western Ukraine (formerly Munkács, Hungary) (RÉKAI 1995). The museum's permanent exhibition on *Traditional Culture of the Hungarians* opened in 1991 includes a few Jewish ritual objects (without any commentary) in its presentation of the different religious denominations. The real breakthrough came in 2014 with the museum's exhibition *Picking up the Pieces. Fragments of Rural Hungarian Jewish Culture*.<sup>1</sup>

The exhibition aimed to conjure up the image of rural Hungarian Jewish life in the period before the Holocaust that can be formed from material in the museum. It used mainly local “case studies” to show the everyday life of Jews, the position they occupied within the majority society, certain characteristics of their distinctive culture, and the possible paths (mazes) of modernity. In doing this it also included references to elements of the surviving, reviving Hungarian Jewish culture. It did not aim to give a full picture, much rather it stressed the characteristic that it is now difficult to reconstruct that culture, it is no longer possible to present it as a whole, only certain of its elements can be evoked. It spoke of various questions not in general but through concrete examples (family histories, specific communities, local characteristics, particular details, etc.). In

<sup>1</sup> The exhibition was curated by Zsuzsa Szarvas, Timea Bata, Hanga Gebauer and Krisztina Sedlmayr.

this spirit it presented the Jewish weekdays and festive days, the different occupations and social strata, examining particular themes in this connection. One layer among the different frames of interpretation was placing the exhibition objects, photos and their stories in context. At certain points it used either iconographic references or historical and ethnographical parallels to throw light on contacts between Jews and non-Jews, and in various ways and a number of places it reflected on the relationship between research done by ethnography and by the Jewish individuals. The exhibition presented for the first time the Museum of Ethnography's small but important collection of Judaica, Jewish implements, objects that entered the museum through Jewish art dealers and private collectors, not to mention the rich photographic collection (SZARVAS et al. 2014:4–5).

### COLLECTION HISTORY AND THEMES OF THE EXHIBITION



*Figure 1.* Welcoming poster of the exhibition, Museum of Ethnography, Budapest, 2014.  
(Photo by Gábor Tamás)

For the collecting Jewish objects, just as for the entire collection of the Museum of Ethnography, the early 20<sup>th</sup> century was a decisive period: it was then that the majority of objects from the Hungarian-speaking territories entered the museum. One of the characteristics of this period was that the collection was expanded not only through ethnographers working in the field but also through the directed activity of art dealers, local intellectuals and teachers.

One of the most important collectors in this period was Gyula Grünbaum who enriched the museum's collection between 1909 and 1929 with a total of 1044 objects. The items he brought in represented mainly the material world of folk crafts, textiles and pastoral art, for the most part high quality works of folk art, often unique pieces filling a gap and evidence of the collector's sharp eye and excellent taste.



Figure 2. Scene from the exhibition, Museum of Ethnography, Budapest, 2014. (Photo by Eszter Kerék)

Grünbaum collected systematically mainly in Transdanubia. Although only 52 of the objects that entered the museum through him were of Jewish relevance (representing roughly 5% of his total contribution), they are very special pieces because they represent a slice of rural Jewish culture about which we have little information. He purchased the majority (42 pieces) between 1911 and 1913 in Sopronkeresztúr (today Deutschkreutz, Austria) (CSISZÉR 2004). Naturally, other objects also entered the collection of the Museum of Ethnography, but that of Grünbaum are the most important ones.

Taking the objects as the starting point and the focus of attention, the exhibition explored ten themes. With the help of a very special object, the 1829 offertory book of the *Bikur Holim Society* of Pápa (Society for Visiting the Sick), it gave an insight into the questions of *Mitzva and donations*, and the history of the Jews in Pápa (a town in Transdanubia). The section titled *Shtreimel and bonnet* was devoted to the headgear of Jewish men and women, and the world of ritual objects. The *Handlé and wholesaler* unit, built up around a *Matyó* embroidered table cover dealt with elements of rural Jewish merchants and their connection with local society, as well as how the Jewish objects found their way into the Museum of Ethnography. *Schulklopfer and synagogue* took the example of Bonyhád (a town in Southern Transdanubia) to examine the question of Jewish and non-Jewish spaces within the settlement; customs linked to the *Sabbath* were examined in *Barkhes and Besamin*, while *Seder Plate and Matso* presented the calendar of feast days. *Mizrah Plaque and Home Blessing* showed a few examples of the “images” placed on the walls of Jewish homes, and the *Kosher and Treyf* fragment discussed the characteristics of Jewish cuisine and questions of ritual cleanliness. *Hannukah and Eternal Flame* illuminated the question of light in Jewish culture, while the *Mourning and Kaddish* section explored customs related to death.

In the following I shall focus on a few of these and attempt to analyse them in greater detail.

### SHTREIMEL AND BONNET

The dress of Jews in the Diaspora was generally adapted to the clothing customs of the peoples living together with them. When dress was regarded as an indication of social status or ethnic identity, the Jews also had their own costume or certain elements of their costume were characteristic only of them (a high fur cap in the Middle Ages, a yellow or green patch on the outerwear in the Early Modern age, etc.). In periods of intolerance towards the Jews these could become signs for stigmatization and persecution. There were also cases where distinguishing signs imposed on them from the outside became incorporated into their traditions in a positive way and continued to be worn.

The custom of covering the head has two, almost inseparable, components: one is respect shown to God and the other is expression of the Jewish identity of the person wearing the headdress. According to tradition men and married women had to wear a head-covering at all times. In practice this became differentiated individually: a stratum arose whose members cover their heads. Thus the wearing of a head-covering also signals the degree of religiosity, as well as expressing identity, setting the wearer apart from others.

God's chosen people have to be different from all others. The forms of manifestation this takes are the externally visible signs: headdress, payess, beard, and the various religious requirements, such as the custom of circumcision or the dietary rules (F. DÓZSA 2008; SZARVAS 1993).

In the modern world, in the age of emancipation and assimilation Jews had to face the contradiction between their own religious requirements, in this case the obligation to cover their heads that could be interpreted as a sign, and the expectations of the outside world and its intolerance of otherness. They had to embrace their Jewishness and at the same time show the least possible difference and attract the least attention of the outside world.

In the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the process of Jewish emancipation and assimilation also influenced the ways Jews dressed; the majority gradually abandoned the traditional items of costume in an effort to assimilate into the host society. From the 1870s, after the different religious directions diverged within Jewry (Orthodox, Neolog, Status quo ante) the wearing of traditional costume and the types also marked out the religious allegiance. The Orthodox dress for both men and women was more conservative, and it insisted on certain items of clothing: for men the *kipah* and a hat, for women a wig, headscarf and bonnet. The typical item worn by *Hasid* men was the kaftan (*kapote* and *bekese*) and fur hat (*shtreimel*), for prayers the belt (*gartli*).

The forms of the ritual objects, the phylacteries (*tefillin*) and the prayer shawl (*tallis*) and the occasions on which they are to be worn are strictly required in the religious rules (RAJ 2002).

One of the best known, most typical pieces of male headdress is the *kipah*, a small cap. The word *kippah* means dome or heavens; besides being a sign of respect for God, it offers its wearer protection and spiritual security.

In fact, wearing a cap is an ancient Jewish (and in general Middle Eastern) folk custom. In ancient Rome slaves were forbidden to wear headdress, the slave had to appear before his master with head uncovered and bow down to the ground. This is the origin of the custom that people must enter Christian churches with heads uncovered. At that time for the Jews the wearing of a cap at home and in the temple was a symbol of

freedom. In the course of the Middle Ages it became compulsory to cover the head when reading the Torah and praying.

Wearing a head cover also became one of the central elements distinguishing Orthodox from Neolog (reform) Jews. Orthodoxy requires that the head be covered both inside and outside the synagogue, as proof of faithfulness to the Jewish tradition. In modern communities it is often optional in everyday life and compulsory only in the synagogue and on ritual occasions. Orthodox Jews generally also wear the *kippah* under the hat or *shtreimel* so that their head is still covered when they raise the hat.

The material and colour of the *kippah* are also important, and can depend on both the trend and the occasion: the more religious wear a black velvet *kippah*, the more modern a coloured, crocheted one; at feasts it is customary to wear a white one, often decorated with gold or silver thread (RAJ 2002; SZARVAS 1993). A head cover (*haybl*) is also part of men's burial clothing.

The black hat was mainly the typical headgear of Orthodox Jews.

Use of the fur hat – *shtreimel* – can be traced back to the regulations of the Catholic Church in the Middle Ages when it was prescribed that European Jews had to wear the tail of a fur animal on their hats as a distinguishing sign. The Jews modified this by sewing thirteen tufts of hair on their hats to remind them of the thirteen properties of God and the thirteen basic principles of the Jewish religion. Later, it spread from Poland to become the typical item of dress mainly of *Hasidic* Jews and this became a consciously accepted symbol of their separateness. It is still worn on feast days (together with the *kaftan*) by followers of the *Hasidism* trend.

A further characteristic of Orthodox Jewish men is the *payess* and beard. In traditional practice the biblical ban on cutting the corners of the hair and beard meant a ban on cutting with a blade (F. DÓZSA 2008).

The obligation to cover the head applies not only to men but also to married woman. There are a number of ideas on the origin of this and the reason for it. The Talmudic regulation can be understood to mean that beautiful, long hair is a kind of nakedness that arouses men's interest and so a married woman should hide her hair from everyone except her husband. The rule does not apply to single girls. Jewish women taking the path to assimilation liked to go about with their heads uncovered and limited the covering to the synagogue and to festive and ritual occasions.

The way the head was covered changed over the centuries and depending on allegiance to the various Jewish religious trends. In Hungary Orthodox women following traditional principles generally cut their hair short and in certain circles even shaved the head, covering it with a shawl and from the 19<sup>th</sup> century with a wig (*sheitel*) or headscarf. A headscarf, bonnet or hat could also be worn over the wig. The baldness was covered with a black cap that could be pulled tight over the head. We know from recollections that in some families the hair was cut in front of the children, in other places no one but the husband, not even the woman's own mother or grandmother could see her with her head uncovered. In some cases a little hair or artificial hair was left in front that could be seen under the headscarf, eliminating the need for a wig.

It was usual to wear a headscarf at home; great care was taken of the wig that was worn mainly on Saturdays and feast days. The headscarf was tied in front or at the back, at the nape of the neck. A dark-coloured headscarf was worn at home and a white one in the synagogue, on Saturdays and feast days (RAJ 1999; F. DÓZSA 2008).

The bonnet or headdress, like the headscarf was generally worn in Hungary, and not only by Jewish women. Women wore a bonnet on the street, on festive occasions. By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the bonnet was no longer generally worn (because of the Neolog trend and the change in fashion), but it was still often worn by Orthodox women in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Unlike the *kippah*, the head covers worn by Jewish women were not specifically Jewish items of clothing, but like the whole of Jewish women's clothing they preserved the fashion of earlier periods.

### HANDLÉ AND WHOLESALER

In the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the Jews filled a vacuum in the area of commerce in Hungary: they sold agricultural commodities produced by the local population, acted as intermediaries in barter trade between Hungary and other states of the Monarchy, and supplied the rural population with foodstuffs and manufactured goods. They sold on credit, lent money and through their external connections even handled international financial deals. The upswing in commerce also contributed to the beginning of the large-scale immigration of Jews from Eastern Europe into Hungary. This process was accompanied by strong assimilation and acculturation of a considerable part of the Jews. Many moved from the villages to towns and their internal social stratification also became more differentiated. Their numbers included peddlers, itinerant vendors, innkeepers, small merchants as well as pioneers of capitalist wholesale trade.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century Hungarian language the word *zsidó* (Jew) – replacing the word Greek – became a synonym for merchant, people went not to the shop but to the “Jew”. The *handlé* (junkman) and the local Jewish shopkeepers and merchants were important figures in village life. The junkman (*handlé*) went from door to door buying up anything that was no longer of use: old clothes, waste materials (leather, feathers, rags, bones, etc.). The Jewish wholesale merchants operated in the cities, mainly in Budapest (SZARVAS 2003; KÖRNER 2013).

By the early 20<sup>th</sup> century practically all villages in Hungary had at least one Jewish family; they ran the village shop and in most cases also the inn. They played the most important role in settlements located for example at the junction of major routes, or that had some kind of economic monoculture, or that perhaps had other distinctive cultural features.

In the smaller settlements the shop and the inn usually operated in the same building, and often the kosher slaughterhouse was also attached. At the same time the building also served as a dwelling. The smaller grocery shops were generally operated as a family business, without hired assistants. The inns – depending on demand – also operated on Saturdays. Because, according to tradition, religious Jews were not allowed to work on the *Sabbath*, a Saturday (non-Jewish) assistant was employed for that day (DEÁKY et al. 1994).

The credit activity closely related to commerce also ensured constant contact between the Jewish merchants and their customers. Purchases could be made without cash in the smaller shops too: the purchases made by regular customers were recorded in a book and payments had to be made at regular intervals. These were not always made in cash, in the smaller villages debts could be settled with produce or eggs. Among the customers who paid with cash, priests and teachers settled their account with the shopkeeper every month (SZARVAS 1990).

However, while there were many good examples of this credit relationship, often it placed the “client” and the shopkeeper in a position of mutual defencelessness. Perhaps this is one of the causes of the somewhat conflicted relationship that arose between Jewish merchants and the villagers.

### “KOSHER HUNGARICA”

Herend porcelain, Kotányi paprika, Pick salami, Zwack Unikum are all well-known “hungarica” (specifically Hungarian products) where Jewish entrepreneurs or merchants played a key role in creation, production and distribution. But famous products cannot always be linked to a single person. Jewish middlemen also played an important part in making certain products known nationally or even at the European level.

In Mezőkövesd (a town in Northern Hungary with a peasant population called Matyós, famous for its folk art since the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century) for example, during the interwar years it was mainly Jews who handled the trade in embroidery. They settled in the town in growing numbers from the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, and formed a mobile group undergoing rapid embourgeoisement. During that period around 20% of the economically active Jewish population were involved in the trade of folk embroidery. They sold the materials used, bought up and sold in other parts of the country and abroad the various *matyó* embroidery products that became a national symbol and important elements in middle-class home decoration. At the same time they also influenced the colours and decorative elements used in *matyó* embroidery (SZARVAS 1990).

In Tokaj (Northern Hungary), where vine-growing and consequently also wine played an important role, the wine trade was almost exclusively concentrated in the hands of the Jews. Jewish wine merchants arrived in Tokaj-Hegyalja in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century to buy grapes and make kosher wine, but we have evidence of their more permanent presence and settlement only from 18<sup>th</sup> century census records. The second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century marked the beginning of a mass influx of Jews from Poland and Galicia; the majority settled in counties along the border, such as Zemplén County.

There were two main groups within the Jewish population of Tokaj-Hegyalja. The basic stratum had arrived from Silesia, Bohemia and Moravia and were later joined by the Jewish immigrants from Poland and Galicia. In the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century Hegyalja (Submontanum) was one of the wealthiest and most densely populated areas in the country. Based on the wine production and trade around two-thirds of the area of Hegyalja developed into a market town agglomeration. Thanks to their great ability to adapt, the Jews became an integral part of this grape and wine economy and from the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century they monopolised the wine trade (FRISNYÁK 1995:77).

By the 19<sup>th</sup> century, in spite of the restrictions introduced the Jews who were rapidly accumulating capital injected new life into the economy of Hegyalja where the grape and wine economy had fallen into a state of crisis, while at the same time forming an alliance of interests with the nobility who were pushing for reform, a uniquely Hungarian phenomenon (FRISNYÁK 1995:78; HÖGYE 1986; KARÁDY 2000).

The destruction caused by *Phylloxera* in the 1880s led to a substantial migration away from the area, and with the loss of their economic basis the once flourishing market towns were no longer attractive, their population fell and they were reduced to village



status. Some of the population moved to towns in the region (FRISNYÁK 1995:78–81). However, the Jews retained their key role in local societies throughout this process.

*Hasidism* that emerged as a Jewish religious trend in Poland in the 18<sup>th</sup> century also reached Hungary, mainly the north-eastern part of the country, where it became influential in large areas. A number of researchers have dealt with the history and characteristics of the trend and its spread in Hungary, but a monographic study of the subject has still to be written (BUBER 1995; DUBNOV 1930; SCHÖN 1935; RÉKAI 1997, etc.).

*Hasidism* is not solely a religious trend, it is also a way of life, a distinctive spirituality that acts as a powerful force in shaping communities. It is organised in small local centres directed by the *tzaddik*, *rebbe* or miracle-working rabbi. Together with the unquestionable leading role of the *tzaddik*, the *Hasidic* communities also had a certain democratic character. Some of the *rebbes* kept a large “court” and behaved with a lofty air, while others were modest and bore poverty together with their flock. The superiority of the *tzaddikim* did not end with their deaths; structures were built over their tombs and on the anniversary of their deaths their followers and generations of their descendants gathered there (SZÁSZ 1986:41). These individuals with charismatic power were not only religious leaders, they also served social and educational functions as organisers, spiritual advisors and judges (KARÁDY 2000:11).

One of the centres of *Hasidism* in Hungary in the 20<sup>th</sup> century was Bodrogkeresztúr (Northern Hungary). According to Viktor Karády “the economic activity of *Hasidic* groups was confined to traditional tasks, even if they were able to achieve a monopoly position in certain branches of commerce or small-scale industry” (Karády 2000:11). In my opinion, the fact that a community was *Hasidic* did not prevent its members from participating in occupations brought by modernisation. (Naturally it can be questioned how far the wine trade can be regarded as an occupation of modernisation or whether it was merely one branch of “traditional” commercial activity.) It is obvious from my own local research that the local Jews played an outstanding role in the wine trade. Despite the gaps in available data, this is evident from an examination of the distribution of occupations.

It can be said that – a certain mystical inward turning notwithstanding – the *Hasidic* community lived a very rational outward life, and tried to engage in economic activity that would ensure a reliable livelihood. Because *Hasidism* was spreading to many areas at that time, it was easier for them to establish and maintain their commercial networks through their extensive connections, ensuring their success in the wine trade.

Although the *Hasidic* groups strictly insisted on their own traditions and so were quite closed in both external appearances and way of life living apart from the peasant community, they nevertheless participated in the same way as other Jewish groups in the activity of capitalist modernisation, and the preservation of traditions and seclusion at community level did not preclude far-reaching commercial activity. It was perhaps also the activity of the miracle-working *rebbe* that may have played a part in building up relations with the Christian population: his charitable assistance that was extended to anyone in need may have brought the members of the community closer to the outside world.

In Makó (Southern Hungary) Jews directed the special local monoculture, the onion trade. As a consequence of the favourable economic conditions and the expansion of the railway network, onion-growing and the onion trade played an increasingly important role in the settlement in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The Jews who had settled here since 1740 were engaged mainly in trade and industry. Their business connections and readiness

to take risks made it possible for them to conduct trade in onions both within the country and abroad. Around the turn of the century this trade was carried out mainly within the Monarchy but later in the interwar years they also traded Makó onions on the international market. In those days 80–90% of the Makó onion traders were Jews, and some of them not only bought up onions but also directed their production (HALMÁGYI 1985; SZABÓ 2003).

### MIZRAH PLAQUE AND HOME BLESSINGS

The ban on images in Jewish culture is based on the second of the ten commandments. However in Jewish tradition this is a rather complex question: the actual practice changed over time, it depended on the geographical place and is still changing in different communities. Depictions of both animals and human figures are found in the synagogues of Antiquity and in mediaeval Hebrew books.

In Jewish communities one of the ornamentations most frequently including illustrations is the *mizrah* plaque. The Hebrew word *mizrah* means ‘east’. In European Jewish tradition the eastern direction has special significance as it traditionally symbolises Jerusalem. Synagogues are oriented towards the east (to Jerusalem), the Ark of the Covenant is placed on the eastern wall, and worshippers pray towards the east. This is why it became customary to place decorated *mizrah* plaques on the eastern wall of Jewish homes and in synagogues in front of the prayer leader’s desk. The word *mizrah* appears in a central place on the plaques. Often it is surrounded by beautiful illustrations as micrographic depictions with the Jewish symbols: the *menorah*, stone tablets or a crown held by lions, it is also a characteristic feature that the writing forms floral motifs. *Micrography*, when sacred texts written with very tiny letters form various motifs was well adapted to the ban on figural portrayal, and this method was used for various depictions that appeared as decorations in the synagogue or home from the 18<sup>th</sup> century (ROSKÓ–TURÁN 2004; TORONYI 2012).

The idea that the omnipresent God protects and provides for the needs of those living in the house is well known in the monotheistic religions. The resulting home blessings are common in Protestant, Catholic and Jewish families alike. The most widespread text beginning “Where there is faith, there is love ...” is a literal translation of a traditional German *Haus-segen*. In non-Jewish environments at first this was painted directly on the wall or carved into a beam, then in the 18<sup>th</sup>–19<sup>th</sup> centuries painted glass pictures with a home blessing as well as figures became very popular. With the spread of printing versions printed on a board using a cliché came into fashion and entered the households of practically all social strata as popular wedding gifts. From the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the home blessing that spread under German influence was widely found in homes in Hungary; publishers often used a cliché to produce versions identical in appearance but in different languages. The fact that the familiar home blessing text could also be found in Jewish homes in Yiddish or Hebrew in part reflects the common Judeo-Christian traditions and in part the fact of coexistence.

Decorative childbed tablets with texts warding off evil were placed temporarily on the wall with a similar aim, especially in *Hasidic* communities. These were placed in the room of the woman in childbirth to protect the mother and child from harmful demons.

From the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century images of great rabbis, especially *Hasidic rebbes* in

the form of photos or prints appeared in religious Jewish homes in Hungary. In the same period prints of paintings by Moritz Oppenheimer and Izidor Kauffmann depicting a traditional Jewish world that was disappearing were placed on the walls in the homes of assimilated Jewish families (COHEN 2002; SZARVAS et al. 2014).

## OBJECTS

I would like to make special mention of a few objects from the exhibition. I have chosen those – adding short explanations and interpretation – that international students who were set the task in a seminar by their professor found interesting for some reason.<sup>2</sup> Objects selected:

### *Ritual objects: tallit, tefillin, baytl*



Figure 3. Prayer shawl, *tallit*, Museum of Ethnography, Budapest, 92015. (Photo by Krisztina Samyai)

*“I’ve realized that when you’re surrounded by people who don’t believe the same things you do, you become the spokesperson for your beliefs.” (K. B.)*

The *tallit* used by men at morning prayer is one of the best known religious objects. In reality it is not the shawl but – in keeping with the Torah laws – the fringes and knots at the four corners that are of religious significance: they are a reminder that the covenant with God and the religious laws must be respected. The *tallit* is generally made of wool, cotton or silk. It can be all one colour or patterned, most commonly with black and white stripes. From the 19<sup>th</sup> century the more modern Jews had a narrower, scarf-like *tallit* made for themselves. In Ashkenazi orthodox culture after marriage men wear the *tallit* for morning prayer, and at *Yom Kippur* also in the evening. However, Orthodox religious men wear the ritual fringes (*tzitzit*) every day under their shirts and over the underwear.

Another important everyday ritual object beside the prayer shawl used by men for the morning prayer are the *tefillin* or phylacteries consisting of two black leather boxes and straps.

<sup>2</sup> During the exhibition Ágnes Fülemile held an anthropological course (Ethnicity, Rural Society and Folk Culture in Historic Hungary) for mostly American university students at the Education Abroad Program at the Corvinus University, during which students evaluated and analysed the exhibition, and were required to write a more detailed report on an object they thought important or interesting.

The boxes contain texts from the Torah handwritten on parchment sheets according to strict rules. One is worn on the left arm, the other bound around the forehead. According to tradition this symbolises that the wearer serves the Lord with his physical strength (his arm) and with his intellectual strength (his head). Boys first wear the *tefillin* at their *Bar Mitzvah*, the initiation ceremony held when they reach maturity at the age of thirteen. The prayer shawl and the straps are kept in the *baytl* that often bears the owner's monogram, the year in which it was made and Jewish symbols (Star of David, *menorah*, the Torah crown) or flowers.

### *Seder plate*



Figure 4. Seder plate, Museum of Ethnography, Budapest, 88887. (Photo by Krisztina Sarnyai)

*"It is a cultural object that displays the family's values. It shows that when important events occur it is the family that they are to be celebrated with."* (K. G.)

A typical object of traditional Jewish culture, the *Seder* plate was made of pewter, porcelain, ceramic or wood, decorated, often with an inscription. The *Seder* plate is used on the first or second evening of *Pesach* (Passover), the *Seder* evening. The plates often have depressions and inscriptions marking the place of the symbolic foods to be eaten on the evening. The foods that always appear on *Seder* plates are: *zeroa* (shank bone), *beca* (egg), *maror* (bitter herbs, generally horseradish), *charoset* (mixture of grated apple, wine and nuts), *karpas* (vegetable, generally radish, parsley or potato), in some traditions *chazeret* (vegetable, different from the *karpas*), and on the *Seder* plate or beside it also *mé melah* (salt water). An additional compulsory ritual element is *matzo*, that is either on a separate plate, or sometimes the *Seder* plate itself is on a stand, and the *matzo* is placed on the other levels of the stand.

*Hallah baking mould*

Figure 5. Hallah baking mould, Museum of Ethnography, Budapest, 93.21.1. (Photo by Krisztina Sarnyai)

*“Hallah is the basis of traditional festive meals in the Jewish culture. Since Shabbat takes place weekly, Jewish people used to cook Hallot every week so that it is very present and this kind of pan is very useful and should be found in every kitchen of Jewish families.” (V. C.)*

The iron tin was used to bake the plaited *Sabbath challah* (*barkhes*). The plaited dough was placed in the tin to ensure that it kept its shape. Traditionally three long plaited loaves had to be made for the *Sabbath* meals (one for Friday evening and two for the Saturday lunch). The *challah* dough traditionally contains no butter or milk so that it can be eaten with both meat and milk dishes. In Munkács (now Mukacheve, Ukraine) a rhomboid baking tin was generally used.

*Eternal light*

*“The lamp in the exhibit looks very similar to the lamps I have in my church. In the Jewish religion the symbol of light represents the holiness of the place and correlates with the creation of the world. The symbol of light is universal and continues to bring happiness to all.” (S. A.)*

*“The Sabbath Lamp presented in the exhibition embodies the relationship between the Christian and Jewish religious tradition.” (K. T.)*

The “Sabbath lamp” from Kapuvár that its owner inherited in 1925 from his father, was used in the peasant way in the home; it hung in front of the “Mary house”, and burned



from Saturday evening till Sunday morning. Thus, at the time when it was collected it was not a synagogue object but an object used in the Catholic cult of Mary. Nevertheless the three eagle heads indicate that it could have been a synagogue eternal light (*ner tamid*). It is not easy to distinguish between the Jewish and Christian eternal lights because they are often made without inscriptions or symbols. This type of object could be part of the sacral object culture of a synagogue, a Catholic church or a Christian home.

Figure 6. Hanging lamp, eternal light, Museum of Ethnography, Budapest, 64.94.42. (Photo by Krisztina Sarnyai)

### *Shtreimel*



Figure 7. Fox fur hat, *shtreimel*, Museum of Ethnography, Budapest, 87412. (Photo by Krisztina Sarnyai)

*“The shtreimel is a fox fur hat which was commonly worn by most married men and some boys after their bar mitzvah. It was very common in the pre-holocaust time period because it’s part of many Jewish cultures to cover their head in order to separate themselves and god. After the holocaust, many of these traditional hats and fashion accessories which separated them in the crowd have been abandoned.”* (M. K.)

The *shtreimel* was a headgear typically worn by *Hasidic* men on festive occasions; it spread from Poland to the territories of Eastern Europe in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

### *Burial clothing*



Figure 8. Female burial cloth, *takhrikhim*, Museum of Ethnography, Budapest, 2002.70.1-8. (Photo by Krisztina Sarnyai)

*“To understand that Jewish tradition respect and handle their dead so delicately makes it hard to grasp all the lives that were not able to be respected and handled according to Jewish tradition during the Holocaust.”* (H. L.)

The burial clothing is personal and buried with the deceased. The two sets of clothing from Munkács (now Mukacheve, Ukraine) were made for the collector and his wife, they could not have entered the museum collection otherwise. The items were made by the wife of Ávrum Snájder who also worked for the local *Hevra Kadisha* that operated on occasion; she herself was a member of the Christian community. Both sets consist of clothing with a simple cut involving only the most essential sewing, with some of the details left unworked (the strips of cloth used as ties have not been bound and the edges of the items have not been hemmed either).

Burial clothing is always white, like the pure soul, it is simple and undecorated so that there is no distinction between poor and rich, it has no pockets because man takes nothing with him. The dead person is dressed in trousers, socks, without a *tzitzit*, shirt, head cover, soil from the Holy Land is placed in a bag beneath the head, the eyes are covered and a branch placed in the hands.

### Torah pointer



Figure 9. Torah pointer, *Yad*, Museum of Ethnography, 105820. (Photo by Krisztina Sarnyai)

*“Torah pointers are a perfect example how the Jewish people go out of their way to keep up with their religion.”* (A. V.)

When reading the Torah a pointer stick is used to follow the lines so that the hand does not touch the scroll and it is protected from wear. Torah pointers were traditionally made of metal or wood in the shape of a right hand with the index finger extended.

### Dreidel



Figure 10. Spinning top, *dreidel*, Museum of Ethnography, Budapest, 70304. (Photo by Krisztina Sarnyai)

*“If the people forget their traditional children’s games (including the dances and the songs) they are also forgetting an important part of their own culture.”* (R. V.)

On the evenings of *Hannukah* children play with the *trenderli* or *dreidel*. The gambling toy is made of tin, lead, silver or wood and the stakes can be beans, nuts, corn or small coins. In shape it can be winged (spinning around an axis) or square. Each of the four sides bears a Hebrew letter: H, for Yiddish *halb* (half), G, *ganc* (everything), N, *nist* (nothing), S, *stelt* (put in), as a reminder of a miracle that happened at the liberation of the Sanctuary in Jerusalem: “*Nes gadol haya sam* [A great miracle occurred here]”.



*Mizrah plaque*

Figure 11. Mizrah plaque, Museum of Ethnography, Budapest, 106969. (Photo by Krisztina Sarnyai)

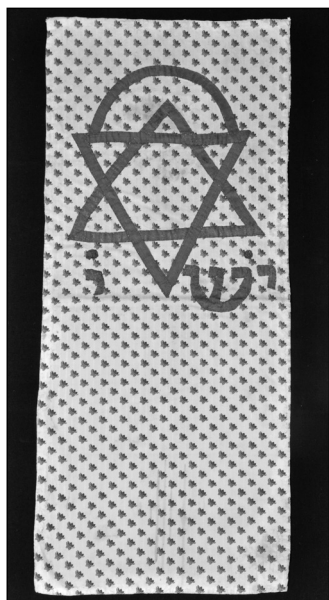
*“Microcalligraphy is a Jewish form of calligrams and was discovered in the 9<sup>th</sup> century. It is an art form whereby holy texts are written in tiny letters arranged to form various motifs. It is used mostly by Jewish artists because it is prohibited for them to draw figural images. This had to do with the second of the ten commandments.” (T. P.)*

A distinctive product of Eastern European folk art is the paper cut-out where the paper left white forms a lace pattern. The four-letter name of God and the word *mizrah* (it means east) can generally be seen on these images and there are often also quotations from the psalms. The paper cut-out spread from Polish and Galician territories and became popular in Jewish communities in the 18<sup>th</sup>–19<sup>th</sup> centuries. They were generally made by men. The object entered the collection as part of the furnishing of a *Sukkah*.

*Torah mantle*

*“When the scroll is stored a mantle cover is put around the Torah for safekeeping. These mantles are usually hand made of velvet with gold and silver thread.” (A. M.)*

When it is stored the Torah scroll is bound with a textile ribbon and protected with a Torah mantle. The mantle is generally made of velvet, richly embroidered in gold and silver thread. It is pulled over the two wooden rollers of the Torah scroll. Ignác Hajnal purchased several smaller Torah mantles from Csaca (today Čadca, Slovakia) for the Museum of Ethnography at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. At the time of the purchase these simple, old-style covers embroidered with silk were probably no longer



used by the local Jewish community. In view of their material, size and quantity the question arises whether these were genuine Torah mantles or only appeared to be such objects and had been made to meet market demand.

The exhibition also had two digital installations that were closely related to the subject of the exhibition. These too attracted the attention of the American students.

Figure 12. Torah mantle, Museum of Ethnography, Budapest, 103616. (Photo by Krisztina Sarnyai)

#### *Offertory book of Bikur Holim society*

*“The book exemplifies how the Jews materialized their faith by customizing their objects in accordance with their values.” (S. H.)*

*“This object represents and embodies a virtual cemetery, which might seem grim and melancholy, but for me I felt very connected to the people I learned about through my exploration... It presents age old stories using antique sources that are presented in a very modern, technologically advanced fashion.” (Z. E.)*

One emblematic object (the first thing visitors to the exhibition saw) was the offertory book of the *Bikur Holim* society of Pápa dating from the early 19<sup>th</sup> society that gives an insight into the work of one of the important charity organisations of the Jewish community in Pápa. Little pockets were placed on the pages and bear the names in Hebrew letters and Hebrew alphabetical order of the members of the community making donations. The pockets originally contained promissory notes for the sums donated. Donations were offered on the Sabbath or feast days, and since it is forbidden to deal with or touch money at such times, the paper stating the sum offered was placed in the pocket and then removed when it was paid (SZARVAS et al. 2014). After the Hebrew names were transcribed and compared with the census of Jews in Pápa made in 1848, using the material of the exhibition on *Our Forgotten Neighbours*<sup>3</sup> presenting family histories within the Jewish community of Pápa it was possible to link a number of present-day families with persons named in the book. The digital installation provided access to all this diverse content. On what appeared at first sight to be a traditional

<sup>3</sup> The exhibition curated by András Gyekiczki was held in Pápa in 2012 and in the Rumbach Sebestyén Street synagogue in Budapest in 2014.



Figure 13. Offertory book of the *Bikur Holim* Society of Pápa, Museum of Ethnography, Budapest, 88887. (Photo by László Nemes Takách)

showcase, a display screen appeared at a touch so that the visitors had the sensation of almost physically touching the object behind the glass; they could leaf through the pages, select a pocket and then a person listed to learn their biography and even see their photo. And expanding use of the screen by a single person to provide an attractive sight for visitors entering the exhibition, the names and images accessed were floated up to the wall above the showcase. Thanks to the installation visitors could leaf through the pages of the book that was presented open at a particular page in the showcase, and browse through the other content on the everyday life of Jews in Pápa, linking physical and virtual contents that presented family histories over generations. With this method we were able to show a real museological curiosity in depth and in a way that the visitor could experience personally. Museum, social history and Hebraistics research, expert restoration of the object, its exhibition in its physical reality and the digital installation that “brought it to life” all came together in a single object.<sup>4</sup>

### *Sabbath table*

*“The Sabbath is about coming together with family, and thus, by waiting for more than just one or two people to sit, this piece allowed for viewers to wholly become a part of the community experience.” (Z. T.)*

<sup>4</sup> The interactive application was created in the Creative Technology Laboratory of the Moholy-Nagy University of Art and Design. Project leader: Zsófia Ruttkay; Conception, visual image, programming: Zoltán Csik-Kovács, Gáspár Hajdu, Gábor Papp; Texts: Tímea Bata, Zsuzsa Szarvas; Translation: Viktória Bánai, Szonja Ráhel Komoróczy; Exploration and comparison of Pápa sources: Tímea Bata; András Gyekiczki, Réka Jakab; Restoration of the offertory book: László Nemes Takách.



Figure 14. *Shabbath table in function*, Museum of Ethnography, Budapest, 2014.  
(Photo by Eszter Kerék)

*“This object represented the exhibit’s ability to apply 21<sup>st</sup> century teaching techniques to explain a historic concept. The Sabbath dining room emphasized the importance of the family’s connection to God.”* (S. L.)

The *Sabbath table* was a projected short animation recounting the rites in the home at the arrival of the *Sabbath*. Visitors could see the evening celebration of a five-member family and their guests. The stylised drawings presented the traditional objects, implements and actions, from lighting the candles, through the blessing, to the supper. Extracts in Hungarian and English from the texts heard during the evening also appeared on the table. However the projection only started if at least three visitors sat around the table. Our aim with this gesture was to bring individual guests together at the same table: we invited them to cooperate and share the experience, while the modern language of digital museology transmitted this important element of traditional Jewish culture in a way that was also attractive for the young age group.<sup>5</sup> In this case the focus was not on the museum object and research, rather the high standard digital installation helped visitors to understand and *learn about* a given ceremony.

In place of a summing up, here are the final thoughts of one of the students analysing the exhibition:

*“The ability to relate to the information and material presented in the exhibition made the impact for me much stronger. The history of the hats’ relation to Christianity*

<sup>5</sup> The interactive application was created in the Creative Technology Laboratory of the Moholy-Nagy University of Art and Design. Project leader: Zsófia Ruttkay. Conception, programming: Ágoston Nagy and Bence Samu. Graphic art, animation: Dániel Huszár. Texts: Krisztina Sedlmayr. Dramaturgy: Tímea Bata, Krisztina Sedlmayr. Translation: Viktória Bányai, Szonja Ráhel Komoróczy. Music: Krisztina Pálóczy.

and their style's reflection of world fashion were the most relevant and relatable subjects for me as a Christian American woman. Also impactful for me was the telling of stories of the Hungarian Jews pre-Holocaust. It gave humanity to the facts and reminded of the lives these people lost and left behind when their world turned upside down. Learning about such a worldwide event in the region of its worst damage did more for me than any textbook in history class could. Possibly the most important aspect of the exhibition was its arrangement. The fragmentation of subjects and freedom of order allowed interpretation that gave guests a most personal experience. Some things felt out of order or less powerful than others, but the exhibition as a whole allowed a sort of chilling realization of missing pieces and history lost. It succeeded in leaving guests curious and thirsting for more to each story." (Laura Talbot)

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