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Jewish Memory, Identity and Heritage in Sălaj County

SUMMARY OF THE DOCTORAL THESIS

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Keywords: Jewish funerary heritage; Jewish cemeteries; Sălaj County; cultural memory; community identity; Hebrew funerary epigraphy; synagogues; the Holocaust in Northern Transylvania; sites of memory; fieldwork

The Subject of the Thesis

The thesis "Jewish Memory, Identity and Heritage in Sălaj County" analyses the funerary heritage of the vanished Jewish communities of the Sălaj area, treated not as the object of a descriptive inventory, but as a primary historical source and as a site of memory, in the sense given to the term by Pierre Nora. The starting point of the research is a simple and, at the same time, disquieting observation: after the ghettoisation at Cehei and the deportation of the approximately 8,500 Jews of the county to Auschwitz-Birkenau, in May–June 1944, the cemeteries remained, in most of the localities of Sălaj, the only material traces of a communal presence which, for two centuries, had taken part in shaping local diversity. The synagogues of Zalău, Cehu Silvaniei and Nușfalău were demolished or lost, the communal archives were scattered, and the memory of the neighbourhood grew thinner from one generation to the next. In this context, the tombstones, the inscriptions, the spatial organisation of the necropolises and their state of preservation provide access to essential dimensions of the local past: family continuities, communal hierarchies, languages in use, expressions of religious culture and forms of identity memory.

The thesis rests on three premises. The first consists in a shift of methodological emphasis: from the use of cemeteries as auxiliary sources to their treatment as historical sources of the first order, comparable, in those localities where other categories of documents have disappeared, with written archives. The second premise holds that the analysis of funerary heritage cannot be reduced to a strictly artistic, epigraphic or descriptive reading, but calls for an interdisciplinary approach, in which social history, epigraphy, iconography, the anthropology of memory, heritage studies and fieldwork are articulated within a common interpretative framework. The third premise concerns the relationship between heritage and history: the present-day degradation of the cemeteries is not merely the effect of natural factors or of administrative neglect, but the expression of a major historical discontinuity, produced by exclusion, ghettoisation and the destruction of the communities that maintained them. On the conceptual level, we have worked with the idea of the Jewish cemetery as a minimal institutional marker of communal existence: even where the synagogue, the school, the local press or the archives proper are lacking, the existence of a burial ground of its own attests to the persistence of a religious organisation and of an avowed confessional identity.

The originality of the thesis lies in its integrated approach to the Jewish funerary heritage of Sălaj County, analysed in correlation with censuses, administrative documents, the local press, genealogical sources and field observation, as well as in the constitution of a

documentary corpus which extends the map of known sites and proposes a local typology of Ashkenazi funerary epigraphy and symbolism.

The Sources of the Research

The empirical basis of the thesis is the fieldwork carried out between 2019 and 2025 at 87 Jewish funerary sites in Sălaj County, of which 65 appeared in the records of the Jewish Community of Zalău, while 22 were identified or re-identified by us, including the mass graves at Dragu, Ip and Treznea. For each site we drew up standardised observation sheets, photographic documentation and, wherever possible, monument records, with the transliteration and translation of the Hebrew inscriptions. The resulting material, organised into a "Corpus of the Jewish Funerary Heritage of Sălaj County", is supplemented by a field journal and by cartographic documentation of our own.

The second category of sources is represented by the archival fonds. At the Sălaj County Service of the National Archives we drew on the fond Comunitatea Evreilor Zalău (file 7/1890–1944), the fonds Prefectura județului Sălaj, Primăria orașului Șimleu Silvaniei, Tribunalul județean Sălaj – seria Firme, the civil status registers concerning the community of Jibou and the fond of the Jibou Town Hall (Primăria Jibou), as well as the fond Consiliul Dirigent at the National Archives in Bucharest. The Archive of the Jewish Community of Zalău made available to us the cemetery inventories, the internal documents concerning the funerary sites from the period 1945–1992, the files of the synagogues of Zalău and Șimleu Silvaniei, the technical drawings of the synagogue of Jibou, the Hevra Kadisha registers of 1889 and 1899 and the collection of oral testimonies. To these fonds are added the cadastral and topographical documentation of the Federation of Jewish Communities of Romania, file no. 941/337/2019 of the Zalău Court of First Instance concerning the delimitation of the cemetery of Meseșenii de Sus, and the certificate of the Orthodox Parish of Dragu concerning the burial of the victims of 1940.

The third category is formed by statistical and edited sources: the Habsburg conscriptions, the Josephine census of 1785–1786, the series of censuses from 1850 to 1941 systematised by Varga E. Árpád, the general census of 1930, the volumes of *Izvoare și mărturii referitoare la evreii din România*, the *Pinkas Hakehillot* edited by Jean Ancel and Theodor Lavi at Yad Vashem, the memorial volume *Sefer Yehude Salaj–Siladi* (Tel Aviv, 1989) and the *Geographical Encyclopedia of the Holocaust in Northern Transylvania*. Finally, we have drawn upon the inter-war provincial press, especially *Gazeta de Duminică* of Șimleu Silvaniei (1920–1925) and *Meseșul*, as well as upon oral memory and local toponymy, used with critical caution, as heuristic instruments and not as substitutes for documentary verification.

Historiography

The history of the Jews of Romania and of the Central European space has, in recent decades, undergone a visible development; nevertheless, the studies devoted to the micro-regional dimension and, in particular, to Jewish funerary heritage remain insufficient in relation to the breadth of the subject. During the communist period, research into the Jewish past was marginalised, affected by ideological constraints, by selective access to the archives and by the priority given to the major urban centres or to the moments of major rupture. The small and medium-sized communities of the provinces, such as those of the Sălaj area, thus remained in the background.

For the historical contextualisation we have turned to the fundamental landmarks of the field: the syntheses of Moshe Carmilly-Weinberger and Ladislau Gyémánt on the Jews of Transylvania, the contributions of Victor Eskenasy, Lya Benjamin and Mihai Spielmann to the editing of the sources, the works of Jean Ancel and Radu Ioanid on the Holocaust in Romania, the research of Randolph L. Braham, Tibori Szabó Zoltán and Gidó Attila on Northern Transylvania, as well as the *Monumenta Hungariae Judaica* series and the research associated with the Rabbinical Seminary of Budapest. The older Romanian historiography, from Nicolae Iorga and Eudoxiu Hurmuzaki to Moses Gaster and the Schwarzfeld brothers, has been subjected to a critical reading. For the discursive dimension of inter-war antisemitism, the works of Lucian Nastasă-Kovács, Irina Livezeanu, Leon Volovici and Raul Cârstocea served us as a framework, and for Sălaj, the monograph of Petri Mór, the chronicle of Șimleu compiled by Szabó M. Attila and Iván József, Grigore Buda's thesis on the Jewish economy and society of Sălaj in the inter-war period, and the volume *Tiparul sălăjean*.

At the international level, the research devoted to Jewish cemeteries has already demonstrated their value as interdisciplinary sources for social history, genealogy, epigraphy and iconography. The works of David Goberman, Samuel D. Gruber, Ruth Ellen Gruber, Michael Nosonovsky, Avriel Bar-Levav and Pieter W. van der Horst, the documentation standards formulated by Clifford M. Brown, Petra Černá and Jan Vladař, as well as, for the Romanian space, the contributions of Silviu Sanie and Felicia Grigorescu on the funerary art of north-western Romania, have provided us with our working instruments. The theoretical framework of memory and heritage has been built upon the contributions of Maurice Halbwachs, Pierre Nora, Jan and Aleida Assmann, Paul Ricoeur, James E. Young, Michael Rothberg, Laurajane Smith and Rodney Harrison, in dialogue with the Faro Convention on the Value of Cultural Heritage for Society.

For Sălaj County, the persistence of a deficit of monographic studies on the Jewish cemeteries, on the local epigraphic typologies and on the relationship between heritage, memory and identity confirms the existence of a genuine historiographical gap. The existing documentation is dispersed among local archives, civil status registers, the press, memorial works, partial inventories and family genealogical documents. It is precisely this dispersion

that makes an integrative approach necessary, one capable of correlating the funerary heritage with the archival and memorial sources. In the absence of such a methodology, the cemeteries risk remaining mere objects of inventory or, on the contrary, being regarded exclusively in an emotional key, without being exploited to the full extent of their documentary potential.

Research Questions and Aim

The present research started from the question of whether the Jewish funerary heritage of Sălaj County can be read as an autonomous historical document and what exactly it tells us about the communities that produced it, given that these communities no longer exist. From this question others followed: what information concerning family structures, communal organisation, languages in use, social status and religious identity is preserved by the funerary inscriptions and symbols; to what extent the cemeteries of Sălaj partake of the Ashkenazi funerary tradition and to what extent they reflect Transylvanian and Central European influences; how communal memory was transmitted through rabbinical genealogies, institutions and the press; and, finally, how the present vulnerability of this heritage can be explained in relation to the rupture of 1944 and to the subsequent legal and administrative transformations.

On this basis, the thesis set itself seven objectives: the identification, localisation and systematic documentation of the Jewish cemeteries of the county and the assessment of their state of preservation; the analysis of the funerary monuments as primary historical sources; the proposal of a local typology of funerary epigraphy and symbolism; the correlation of the funerary heritage with archival, statistical, administrative, genealogical and memorial sources; the reconstruction of the relationship between heritage, memory and identity; the historical contextualisation of the present vulnerability of the sites; and the formulation of directions for conservation and valorisation grounded in rigorous documentation and in respect for the sacred character of the places. The aim of the thesis is thus twofold: a scholarly one, connected with the enrichment of historical knowledge about the Jews of Sălaj, and a memorial and civic one, connected with the recovery and protection of a heritage in a state of acute vulnerability. Through the whole of these objectives we have sought to demonstrate that the Jewish funerary heritage of Sălaj does not constitute a periphery of historical research, but a central domain for understanding the relationship between community, memory, religion and identity in a space marked by historical diversity and by traumatic ruptures.

Methodology

The methodology of the thesis is a mixed one, articulating documentary, fieldwork and interpretative dimensions. The order of the undertaking was deliberately progressive. In

a first stage we pursued the identification, localisation and mapping of the cemeteries, through direct observation, GPS geolocation, systematic photographic documentation and standardised site and monument sheets, in which we recorded the location, the delimitation, the typology of the monuments, the materials, the state of degradation, the inscriptions and the symbols. Rural localities not recorded in the official databases were approached through semi-structured interviews and through the analysis of local toponymy, expressions such as "groapa jidovilor" (the Jews' pit), "țintirimul vechi" (the old graveyard) or "locul evreilor" (the Jews' place) often preserving the memory of sites that have vanished from the records. In a second stage we carried out the epigraphic, iconographic and typological analysis of the monuments: the transliteration and translation of the funerary texts, the identification of the languages used, the analysis of the recurrent religious formulae and the extraction of genealogical, professional or communal information. For the epitaphs we proposed a five-step documentation protocol – material description, diplomatic transcription, transliteration, literal translation and interpretative commentary – with the degree of certainty of each reading marked. The third stage consisted in corroborating the funerary heritage with civil status registers, censuses, administrative documents, the local press, genealogical materials and memorial testimonies, in order to reconstruct the evolution of the communities and to verify the funerary data. Only at a fourth moment was the analysis extended towards the discursive dimension, through the examination of the inter-war provincial press, as a complementary element for understanding the ideological context of the rupture.

On the interpretative level, we have adopted an interdisciplinary method, situated at the intersection of social history, heritage studies, the anthropology of memory, epigraphy and iconography, the funerary monument being treated simultaneously as a heritage object, an epigraphic document, an identity marker and a support of communal memory. A fundamental principle of the research has been respect for the sacred character of Jewish cemeteries and for the halakhic norms concerning non-intervention upon graves: we have relied exclusively on non-invasive methods, we have avoided any displacement or material intervention, and we have protected the identity of the respondents, in a logic which we have called that of "symbolic reparation", seeking the restoration of the visibility of the sites in historical discourse, not their physical restoration.

The Structure of the Thesis

The thesis is organised into six chapters, corresponding to complementary directions of research, preceded by an introduction and followed by conclusions, bibliography and annexes.

The first chapter, "Historical and Religious Foundations of Judaism", establishes the conceptual framework and the chronological, demographic and legal landmarks of the research, moving gradually from the European scale to the Transylvanian and Sălaj scales.

We have traced the origin and evolution of the Jewish communities of Central and Eastern Europe, from the ancient indications in Roman Dacia, cautiously interpreted as traces of contacts mediated by the army and by trade, to the privileges granted by Gabriel Bethlen in 1623, to the Josephine edict *Systematica gentis Judaicae regulatio* of 1783, to the civil emancipation of 1867 and to Law XLII/1895 recognising the Israelite religion. The demographic data extracted from the conscriptions and censuses show the growth of the Jewish population of Transylvania from 2,092 persons in 1785 to 24,995 in 1869 and the consolidation, in Sălaj, of the centres of Șimleu Silvaniei, Zalău, Jibou, Cehu Silvaniei and Crasna. The chapter then sets out the religious principles of Judaism relevant to the understanding of funerary heritage – the conception of life and death, prayer as a substitute for sacrifice, the role of the siddur as practical memory, the norms of the *Shulchan Arukh* – and analyses the modernisation of the Sălaj communities between 1867 and 1944 in its double aspect, of integration and of vulnerability. We have shown that emancipation and citizenship were real, but permanently conditional, social and political antisemitism functioning as the medium of the passage from formal inclusion to legalised dispossession through the normative series of 1941–1942 and, ultimately, to the concentration of the 7,851 Jews of Sălaj at Cehei and their deportation in three transports, on 31 May, 3 June and 6 June 1944.

The second chapter, "The Synagogue and the Jewish Cemetery as Expressions of Sacred Heritage", applies this framework to the two fundamental categories of the communities' sacred property. Starting from the typology of the synagogues of Hungary elaborated by Rudolf Klein, we have reconstructed, on the basis of the Archive of the Jewish Community of Zalău, the fate of the synagogues of Sălaj: the dissolution of the temple of Zalău, documented by the rectification of the land register in 1963 and by the demolition permit of 30 October 1970; the synagogue of Șimleu Silvaniei, the only one preserved, documented by the survey of 1992; the complex of Jibou, inventoried in the report of the Pretura of 10 August 1939; the vanished temple of Nușfalău, known only through undated drawings; and the synagogue of Cehu Silvaniei, inaugurated in 1901 and demolished during the communist period. We have found that the places of worship survive today almost exclusively through administrative files, technical drawings and postcards, whereas the cemeteries remain the most extensive and most resilient memorial infrastructure of the Jewish presence in the county. The central contribution of the chapter is the inventory of the 87 funerary sites, mapped and systematically described, the largest being those of Șimleu Silvaniei, Jibou, Zalău, Hida, Crasna and Cehu Silvaniei. The chapter sets out the legal and religious framework of Jewish cemeteries in Romania, the rules of burial, the role of the Hevra Kadisha and of the SACRA Service, the sacred language and the Hebrew funerary acronyms, from P"N to TNZBH, and closes with an epigraphic case study on the matzeva of Rav Moshe HaCohen of Zalău, who died on 5 Nisan 5685, whose symbol of the hands raised

in the gesture of the *Birkat Kohanim* functions as a "religious blazon" frequently encountered in the necropolises of Sălaj.

The third chapter, "The Jewish Communities of the Sălaj Area: Modernisation, Institutions and Ruptures", constitutes the historical-institutional core of the thesis. We have demonstrated that the school was the principal engine of internal modernisation, producing a double competence, communal and civic, within an ecosystem made up of synagogues, the Hevra Kadisha, the Bikur Holim, women's associations, libraries and reading societies. On the basis of the fonds of the Prefecture and of the County Tribunal we have reconstructed, for the first time, the history of the Jewish printing houses of Sălaj, from the printing house of Heimlich Izidor, opened at Șimleu on 15 August 1895, to the eleven establishments of 1913, among them "Globus" and "Lovinger", with a Hungarian and Hebrew linguistic profile, up to the inquiry of 1946, which captures enterprises whose owners had been deported. The chapter then shifts the emphasis towards the rabbinical families as bearers of spiritual authority and memory: the Klein dynasty of Cehu Silvaniei, attested through the confessional registers and through the chronicle *Rabbi Smelke, the Life of a Gaon*, with a lineage that descends as far as Yair Lapid; the Cahene family of Crasna, placed within the horizon of the Kahana-Heller dynasty of Sighetu Marmației; and the Heller family of Zalău–Crasna, whose family tree we have reconstructed from local anchoring to dispersion and extermination. The final section analyses the representation of the Jews in *Gazeta de Duminică*, a publication ignored by the bibliography, on the basis of a typology in four registers – economic, moral-cultural, political-academic and popular-pamphleteering. We have argued that the newspaper functioned as a "discursive laboratory" of inter-war antisemitism, which translated the ideology of the elites into a local pedagogy of hatred, normalising exclusion through moralising, pseudo-rationality and humour and preparing the radicalisations of the following decade.

The fourth chapter, "Sites of Memory Identified through Fieldwork", is the empirical core of the thesis and its most extensive chapter. After setting out the fieldwork methodology, we have analysed the iconographic repertoire of the tombstones of Sălaj – the Kohanic hands at Ileanda and Crasna, the Levitical pitcher at Păușa, the candlestick of the women's graves, the Star of David of the modern monuments at Zimbor and Glod, the crown, the book, the broken tree, the stag at Șimleu and the broken column at Cehu – as a system of visual codes concerning the genealogical affiliation, the ritual role and the virtues of the deceased, as well as the stable structure of the Ashkenazi epitaph, with its opening and closing formulae, filiation and dating by gematria. We have then reconstructed the history of the communities of Zalău, Cehu Silvaniei, Șimleu Silvaniei, Hida, Jibou and Lelei, Nușfalău and Crasna, on complete demographic series between 1850 and 1941, bringing to light a recurrent pattern: a demographic peak around the year 1900, inter-war decline and structural rupture in 1944. The case studies on the Mosaic Community of Jibou in 1939 and on the

Scher family have highlighted both the richness of the administrative sources and the "archival silences" produced by the destruction of the fonds between 1940 and 1944. The descriptive repertory of the 45 localities, drawn up according to a unitary protocol, records for each site the location, the state of preservation, the earliest dating and the legal regime, from the well-preserved cemeteries of Zalău, Nușfalău, Buciumi or Agrij to the vulnerable sites of Borza, Cerișa, Brusturi or Zalha, situated on private properties, not restituted or in legal deadlock. The case study of the cemetery of Meseșenii de Sus, re-identified through the diasporic memory of the Holtzer family, through oral history and cadastral analysis and which became the object of file no. 941/337/2019 of the Zalău Court of First Instance, demonstrates that historical research can produce concrete heritage effects.

The fifth chapter, "Tombstones and Memorial Plaques in the Jewish Cemeteries of Sălaj County", deepens the epigraphic and iconographic analysis from an interdisciplinary perspective. After contextualising the evolution of Eastern European Jewish sepulchral art in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and the present state of the funerary heritage of the region, we have presented the case studies that constitute the empirical contribution of the chapter. At Dragu we have documented, on the basis of the certificate of the Orthodox Parish and of oral history, the mass grave in which three Jews from Chichișa, shot on 12 September 1940, were buried, demonstrating that the massacre of Treznea forms part of a regional chain of violence. At Zimbor we have analysed a poetic epitaph dedicated to Hilel ben Șahar, son of Iacob Brunner, who died in Budapest in 5678, and at Ileanda three monuments – a classic male epitaph of 5684, the stone of Meir Itzhak with the rare symbol of the lyre and the monument of Marat Gitel, with a candlestick and an epitaph of the *Eșet Ḥayil* type –, to which is added the rabbinical epitaph with a crown from Cehu Silvaniei, probably attributable to Șlomo Leizer Lisson. The comparative synthesis confirms the stability of the consecrated formulae regardless of gender, style or period, but also the penetration of Central European influences into the morphology of the stones and into the bilingualism or trilingualism of the inscriptions. The chapter closes with the analysis of the project "the Northern Transylvania Holocaust Memorial", conceived and coordinated by us together with the Jewish Community of Zalău and the Federation of Jewish Communities of Romania, as a form of public valorisation of the fieldwork and of the construction of memory through space and document.

The sixth chapter brings together the general conclusions, the original contributions, the limits of the research and the prospects for conservation. We have formulated seven major conclusions: the Jewish funerary heritage of Sălaj represents the principal material infrastructure of local Jewish memory; the cemeteries function as "archives in stone", comparable with documentary archives; the epigraphic specificity of Sălaj combines the continuity of the Ashkenazi tradition with Transylvanian and Central European influences, which shows that the funerary space of Sălaj is not culturally peripheral; the present

degradation of the sites is the expression of a structural discontinuity produced in 1944; the model of triangulation of sources – direct observation, oral memory, historical documents, cadastral records and mapping – is transferable to other counties; the research of Jewish cemeteries cannot be a neutral practice of inventory, but presupposes an ethics of the sacred place; and oral memory and toponymy are precious heuristic instruments, but not substitutes for documentary verification. The original contributions of the thesis lie on five planes: the documentary corpus constructed, the extension of the map of known funerary sites, the epigraphic and iconographic analysis of the heritage as a primary source, the methodological model of non-invasive documentation applicable to vulnerable rural sites, and the integration of the analysis of inter-war antisemitic discourse into a broader reading of the disappearance of material traces. The limits of the research – the incompleteness of the local archives, the degradation of some inscriptions, the fragmentary nature of oral memory and the difficulty of establishing exact chronologies – call for interpretative caution, but confirm the urgency of continuing documentation, digitisation and preventive conservation. As future directions we have proposed the extension of the corpus to the scale of north-western Transylvania, the development of an integrated GIS platform for Jewish funerary heritage, the deepening of the epigraphic and linguistic analysis, and the integration of the results into educational programmes on the Holocaust, multi-ethnic local history and the ethics of memory.

In conclusion, the thesis demonstrates that the Jewish funerary heritage of Sălaj County can be understood simultaneously as a historical source, an epigraphic archive, a sacred space and an infrastructure of collective memory. By articulating fieldwork with historical, epigraphic, memorial and discursive analysis, we have proposed an integrated model of research in which scholarly rigour is inseparable from the ethics of place and from the public responsibility of memory. The Jewish cemeteries of Sălaj thus appear not merely as traces of a destroyed past, but as active witnesses of a history which continues to call for knowledge, acknowledgement and institutional care: in the absence of such acknowledgement, this heritage risks remaining a heritage of silence; through research, protection and valorisation, it can become a heritage of responsibility.

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