

Jewish Community and Built Heritage in Arad, 1867–1939

PhD thesis

Summary

The core idea of the dissertation was to map and present the built heritage of the Jewish communities in Arad, applying an architectural-historical framework. However, due to the lack of fundamental research on the history of the community, it soon became evident that an architectural-historical study could not be carried out without at least a partial presentation of the history of the community and its institutional system.

A community's history and functioning can be outlined through the presentation of its built heritage, contextualizing it and drawing parallels with the institutional system it supported. Thus, the dissertation set out a dual goal: to present the two Jewish communities in Arad and their institutional system, as well as to document the built heritage that once housed these institutions.

The term "institutional system" refers to all organizations (associations, foundations, institutions) under the administration of the Jewish community, serving religious, charitable, educational, and cultural purposes. The built heritage associated with this institutional system includes all the buildings that housed such organizations. The dissertation, therefore, discusses both the organizational structure and the construction activities of the community, also addressing key buildings erected before the studied period, such as the "Synagogue and School Foundation House" or the Jewish hospital.

Due to the absence of a centralized and hierarchically organized Jewish church, various Jewish communities, including those in Arad, enjoyed autonomy in both religious and administrative matters. The community operated and built according to its own decisions—within the limits of its strength and financial resources. The lack of central authority had both advantages and disadvantages. While the state occasionally contributed financially to the maintenance of the institutional system (e.g., state aid for the Jewish school), the burden ultimately fell on the community, specifically on its members, who were required to pay community taxes and voluntarily engaged in charitable donations. The social safety net, sustained by the community and ultimately by its members, supported those in need. They provided for the poor (monetary donations and firewood for those unable to earn a living, free or cheap meals at the public kitchen, clothing for schoolchildren, etc.), cared for the elderly, the sick, and orphans. The establishment of a state institutional system did not diminish the Jewish institutions, as they continued their functions in accordance with Jewish religious and cultural traditions. The importance of this is exemplified by the following quote:

"For Jewish progress, it is of historical importance in our homeland whether the institutions of this community flourish, whether it harbors a spirit of self-sacrificing vigor, and above all, whether it possesses true religious devotion and piety, or whether it falls into shameful, cowardly apostasy and soulless indifference."

The dissertation aims to explore, document, and present the institutional system of the two Jewish communities in Arad—the Neolog community that emerged immediately after the Jewish Congress and the Orthodox community that split from it in 1909—along with the architectural heritage that once housed these institutions.

The dissertation seeks to answer how the two Jewish communities in Arad functioned between the enactment of the 1867 Emancipation Act and the outbreak of World War II and what kind of institutional system, consisting of charitable and cultural organizations, they maintained. The key questions regarding the institutional system include: When and how were these institutions established? What specific tasks did they fulfill? How were they financed? What was their organizational structure, and who led them?

Furthermore, the dissertation examines the buildings that housed these institutions, the sources of funding for their construction, when and by whom they were designed, and what architectural styles they represent.

Jewish residents had a continuous presence in Arad from the early 18th century. On May 1, 1717, Lieutenant General István Cosa, the commander of Arad Fortress, issued a protection letter for Márkus Mayer and Éliás Izsák but prohibited any other Jews from settling in the city. A quarter of a century later, county records show that six Jewish families lived in Arad, and their numbers began to grow, despite the challenges posed by official restrictions. This positive demographic trend, which applied to the city's population as a whole, continued into the early 20th century, with its most significant growth occurring around the turn of the century. Jewish communities were predominantly urban, with only a scattered presence in the surrounding county. According to the 1900 census, Arad had the second-largest Jewish community in the former Partium and Banat regions, after Oradea. The Neolog Jewish community in Arad was among the largest and most prestigious in Hungary at the time.

One of the most prominent rabbis of the "progressive-minded" community was Áron Chorin (Hranice, 1765/1766 – Arad, August 24, 1844), who served the community from 1789 until his death in 1844. As a leading figure in contemporary reform movements, he faced numerous attacks from more conservative rabbis. During the so-called "sterlet controversy"—a debate over whether sterlet (*acipenser ruthenus*) was kosher or not—Mordechai Banet excommunicated Chorin. Rabbi Chorin argued that Jews were not a separate nationality but a

religious group: Jews living in Hungary were Hungarian nationals, just like Catholics or Protestants, who, despite their religious affiliations, were part of the Hungarian nation. During his tenure, he placed great emphasis on education and played a key role in establishing the first Arad school that provided both religious and secular education.

During his tenure, the community also built the so-called "Synagogue and School Foundation House" (between approximately 1828 and 1832). This building, still standing today at the former Árpád Square 5 (now Tribunal Dobra Street 10), houses the community's synagogue. The two-story, classical-style residential building does not outwardly reveal its sacred function. Its likely architectural predecessor was Vienna's Stadttempel (Vienna, 1st district, Seitenstettengasse 4), designed by architect Joseph Georg Kornhäusel and inaugurated in 1826. Both the Vienna and Arad synagogues featured an innovative layout: instead of placing the Torah reading platform in the center, as per tradition, it was positioned directly in front of the Torah ark. The Arad synagogue also had an organ built in the 1840s, reflecting a broader effort to reform synagogue liturgy and, in parallel, to integrate Jewish communities into the broader society. Critics of this trend, especially conservative Jewish leaders, saw such changes as a threat to Jewish identity, equating them with complete assimilation and the eventual disappearance of Judaism.

Following Áron Chorin's tenure, only three rabbis served the Neolog community over the next century—Jakab Steinhardt, Dr. Sándor Rosenberg, and Dr. Lajos Vágvölgyi—ensuring stability. Their work continued Chorin's modernization efforts.

One of the first and most significant institutions of the Jewish community was the Chevra Kadisha (burial society), responsible for assisting the needy, caring for the sick and dying, preparing the deceased for burial according to Jewish traditions, and maintaining the cemetery. According to community tradition, the Chevra Kadisha was established in the early 18th century, with its first statutes drafted around 1750. In 1840, they built a hospital under their administration. The hospital building, still standing today, underwent several transformations over the 19th century but retained its function until World War I. In 1922, the Chevra Kadisha repurposed the building as a "House of Charity" to care for elderly individuals in need.

After the 1867 Jewish emancipation and the 1868–69 Hungarian Jewish Congress, the Arad community reorganized itself according to its new legal status, adopting the official name "Arad Israelite Community" while maintaining its Neolog orientation. Its statutes defined its responsibilities in religious, cultural, and charitable activities through its institutions. The community was governed by an elected representative body with full autonomy, with an executive board handling administrative matters.

The Arad Neolog Jewish Community grew into a thriving community following the 1867 Austro-Hungarian Compromise and the Jewish Emancipation Act, as evidenced by its extensive social institutions and related built heritage. The maintenance of these institutions was supported by voluntary donations from community members and a mandatory communal tax. The most generous patrons of the community were the baronial families of Végvári Neumann and Hatvani Deutsch. Although the Deutsch family, originally from Arad, had moved to Budapest in the 1870s, they continued to provide financial support to the Arad Jewish community.

Following the 1867 Jewish Emancipation Laws and the 1868–69 Hungarian Jewish Congress, the Arad community reorganized into a congregation in accordance with its new legal status. From that point onward, it was officially known as the "Arad Israelite Community," and although its name did not explicitly reflect it, the community consistently followed the Neolog movement. According to its statutes, the community defined its mission through the maintenance of religious, cultural, and charitable institutions. It was governed by a representative body elected by its members, which had full self-governing authority and served as the highest decision-making entity. Administrative tasks were handled by the leadership, which included the president, vice-president, chief secretary, and heads of various departments (Religious Affairs, Temple Wardens, School Affairs, and Financial and Economic Affairs). The rabbi was elected by the so-called "General Assembly," in which all tax-paying male members of the community without outstanding tax debts could participate.

During the Dualist era, the community undertook numerous construction projects to ensure that its institutions operated in suitable environments. A significant milestone in the history of orphan care in Arad was the establishment of the Jewish Boys' Orphanage, founded in 1870 by Ignác Deutsch and opened in 1874. Initially housed in a rented building, the community purchased a property on Lujza Street in 1877 with the generous donations of the (Hatvany) Deutsch couple, Bernát and Laura. The Lujza Street building was frequently renovated and expanded to meet the needs of the orphans. The façade received its final form in 1916, based on designs by Arad architect Emil Tabakovits.

The issue of caring for orphaned girls arose as early as the opening of the boys' orphanage, but a girls' orphanage was only established in 1926—more than half a century later—at a temporary location, the former Public Kitchen building. In 1894, the Arad Israelite Women's Association created an orphanage foundation, but it grew slowly. In 1896, Eliza Fischer, a wealthy Arad-based wine merchant and vinegar manufacturer, bequeathed funds for the construction and maintenance of a girls' orphanage. However, a few years later, she decided to implement the

plan during her lifetime. In 1905, she visited Budapest and Vienna with Arad architect Lajos Szántay to study similar institutions. By 1907, the girls' orphanage and an associated rental building had been completed. However, a dispute arose between Fischer and the contractor, József Frick, leading to prolonged litigation. Fischer decided not to open the orphanage, and the local press began referring to the building as a "closed house." After her death, the community inherited the property, and the orphanage finally moved into the Fischer Palace in 1930.

The community-maintained school operated in classrooms on the first and second floors of the Alapház (Foundation House). By the late 19th century, this arrangement proved problematic due to space limitations and non-compliance with public health regulations, as noted by the authorities. In 1902, a school-building fund was established, but the new school was ultimately built in 1904–1905 thanks to a generous donation from the Neumann family. The design and construction were entrusted to the Arad architectural firm of Fodor and Reisinger.

Elderly care was handled by the Chevra Kadisha. In 1890, a "Home for the Infirm Fund" was established to support elderly and incapacitated members. Two decades later, substantial bequests from Ignác Spitzer and Béla Haas enabled the establishment of a retirement home, which was built between 1912 and 1913. The architectural plans were drawn up by the aforementioned Fodor and Reisinger, and the construction was overseen by Emil Tabakovits. At the turn of the century, the community considered building a new synagogue. In early 1904, the renowned architect Lipót Baumhorn was invited to Arad to assist in selecting a site. The community intended to model their synagogue on the recently completed Szeged Synagogue (1903), but the idea met with mixed reactions within the community and among Arad residents. Due to issues with the site and likely financial constraints, the construction of a second synagogue never materialized. The outbreak of World War I and the economic challenges of the interwar period prevented the realization of the plan.

During the interwar period, the Arad Jewish Cultural House was established, and a second Jewish cemetery was opened along with its mortuary, marking two of the Neolog community's most significant achievements of the time.

Although the Orthodox community sought independence as early as the turn of the century, it only officially separated from the Neolog congregation in 1909. By 1921, the Orthodox community had 2,000 members, with 300 paying communal taxes, while the Neolog community had 8,000 members, of whom 1,732 were tax-paying. The Orthodox congregation was smaller and less influential than its Neolog counterpart, which was reflected in its construction activities. Between its establishment and the outbreak of World War II, the

Orthodox community built only a synagogue and a ritual bath. While the synagogue still stands today, the mikveh was destroyed. Nearly a century passed between the construction of the two (Neolog and Orthodox) synagogues in Arad. The Neolog community was ultimately unable to build a second temple, whereas the Orthodox group successfully did so within their available resources.

The Jewish communal institutional system presented in this dissertation, along with its built heritage, is unique in the history of Arad's religious communities and holds a prominent place in the history of Hungarian Jewry, though similar patterns can be observed in other Jewish communities.

Christian denominations in Arad primarily built sacred structures such as churches and investment properties (rental buildings) between the Austro-Hungarian Compromise and World War II. However, some cultural and educational institutions were also established, such as the Minorite Cultural House and the Romanian Orthodox Theological Seminary. A notable example of Catholic ecclesiastical architecture is the Minorite Church and adjacent monastic and rental building, designed by Emil Tabakovits and constructed between 1902 and 1911. Following the demolition of an 18th-century Baroque church and monastery, this new complex became one of the Catholic community's largest endeavors. In the 1920s, the Minorite Cultural House was added in the monastery's courtyard.

Among Protestant denominations, only the Lutheran Church undertook significant construction during this period, with the "Red Church" and its adjacent Lutheran rental building erected between 1905 and 1906, based on designs by Lajos Szántay. The Serbian Orthodox Church built the Serbian Bishop's Palace around 1908, which also housed administrative offices, designed by Emil Tabakovits. The Romanian Orthodox Church constructed a theological seminary in 1885 on what was then Sina (now Teologiei) Street.

Unlike the Jewish community, Christian denominations did not engage in large-scale charitable and cultural construction projects, likely because state institutions met their needs. In contrast, Jewish communities had specific religious regulations and requirements that state institutions did not accommodate—such as kosher kitchens, which were integral to Jewish hospitals and other communal institutions.

A similar institutional system and built heritage to that of the Arad Neolog Jewish community can be found in Budapest. The Pest Israelite Community, which brought together the majority of Budapest's Jewish population and followed the Neolog movement, maintained an extensive social and cultural institutional system, which was the largest of its kind in historical Hungary. As a result of continuous immigration, the total Jewish population of Budapest grew rapidly;

for example, in 1880, there were 70,879 Jews in the capital, while by 1910, this number had nearly tripled to 203,687. By the late 1920s, the population of the Pest Israelite Community was estimated at 250,000, of whom approximately 57,000 were tax-paying community members.

During the Dualist period, the Pest Israelite Community maintained a hospital and a separate children's hospital, schools, orphanages for boys and girls, an institute for the deaf (National Institute for Israelite Deaf-Mutes), an institute for the blind, a retirement home, a maternity home, and a charitable house to assist poor Jews. Between the two world wars, the community had four synagogues. The Dohány Street Synagogue was built between 1854 and 1859 based on the designs of Ludwig Förster. The Rumbach Sebestyén Street Synagogue was constructed for the Orthodox members of the community between 1870 and 1872. Its design was created by the young Otto Wagner at the beginning of his outstanding career while working in the Vienna office of Theophil Hansen. The Angyalföld Synagogue (Dózsa György Road 55) was built in 1909, while the Ferencváros Synagogue (Páva Street 39) was constructed between 1921 and 1924, both designed by Lipót Baumhorn.

Although multiple independent Jewish communities operated in Budapest, which led to a certain fragmentation of the city's Jewish population, the size of the Pest Israelite Community—following the principle that a larger community meant a greater influx of religious taxes and larger financial resources—enabled the establishment and maintenance of an institution system that was outstanding even by European standards. In Arad, the much smaller Neolog community developed and maintained a more modest but fundamentally similar institutional system, which was able to meet the charitable and cultural needs of the local Jewish population.

While the Jewish population of Timișoara (Temesvár) was roughly equal to that of Arad, a comparable institutional system and built heritage did not develop. This can likely be attributed to the fact that in Arad, a single unified Jewish community (the Neolog Arad Israelite Community) existed until the Orthodox group separated in 1909, whereas in Timișoara, multiple independent Jewish communities coexisted. During the Dualist period, the Jewish population of Timișoara was approximately 10% of the total population (in 1900, out of a total population of 53,033, there were 5,916 Jewish residents, around 11.15%). Four synagogues or prayer houses, which still stand today, were built in the second half of the 19th century. The Ashkenazi community built its downtown synagogue around 1865 (Mărășești Street 6, also known as the "Fortress" Synagogue), while the Józsefváros Orthodox community built its synagogue in 1895. The Neolog community constructed its synagogue in the industrial district

between 1897 and 1899 based on the designs of Lipót Baumhorn, while the Orthodox community in the same district built its prayer house between 1900 and 1901 (Ion Creangă Street 16). This fragmentation limited financial resources available for institutional maintenance and construction projects.

The interconnected study of Jewish communal institutional history and architectural history is still in its infancy, yet it represents an important direction for future research. In the case of Budapest, for instance, no comprehensive work has yet been published that examines both the institutional history and the architectural heritage of these institutions together.

For Arad, a significant research goal would be a more detailed study of Chevra Kadisha as an institution in an independent academic work. Such a study should explore one of its most crucial functions—burial services and cemetery administration, including the erection of tombstones.