

## A MODERN JEWISH COMMUNITY CENTRE FOR ORADEA

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### ABSTRACT

*After the end of The Holocaust, we have been writing a long funereal panegyric, confronting a cruel reality: the Jewish population that has drastically decreased and the decimated communities, leaving behind an immense heritage, needing today a lot of conservation, restoration and rehabilitation work to do. Regarding the built patrimony, the most important issue consists of finding the best utilization possible for each type of building (i.e. cultural, educational, religious or private use). All the work is done to support and revitalize the local Jewish communities, through the help of community centres, cultural centres, national and international trusts, funds, and grants. The role of community centres is undoubted. Jewish patrimony is a worldwide subject to reconsider, especially in Eastern Europe countries. Oradea, once representing the most important Jewish community of Hungary, and after 1918 of Romania, is nowadays a true, silent witness of the immense impact of Jewish culture, in almost all aspects of native society life.*

*Jewish heritage, Central and Eastern Europe countries, Community centres, Oradea*

### INTRODUCTION

After Hitler began, in Europe, writing the obituary of a millennial culture, many positions showing compassion and concern for the Jewish and the Mosaic faith occurred naturally, over the time. Worldwide Holocaust damnation was possible only through the setting up of some powerful facilities/centres, to support Hebrew values spreading of, and the importance of Jewish culture representatives' contribution to writing humanity history and progress. Their accomplishment is through cultural centres, foundations/trusts and many programs nationally or internationally funded, seeking the recovery of community values and its heritage conservation. Work regards from databases and archives establishing of (now, often, digital and online), including genealogy, written documents and photographs, family records, inventories, private libraries, etc., to special constructions restoration and revitalization projects or even to whole quarters (synagogues, baths, schools, houses, cemeteries).

The role of *community centres* always active as a factor, with coagulant role, reminding *the synagogue* and its architectural-artistic complexity, passing beyond the status of *social circumstance*, is undoubted.

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## JEWISH HERITAGE AND THE COMMUNITY CENTRE

In the latest years, we attend a worldwide phenomenon, more obvious in Eastern Europe: the reconsideration of *Jewish cultural heritage*. Most projects aim architecture, fine arts, including funeral art and cemeteries. It is a fact that Poland and Czech Republic have developed a real “tourist industry” based on the tourists’ interests on visiting the famous Jewish quarters and also the former ghettos and extermination camps. Its *eclectic nature*, based on a synthesizer mixture of races, nationalities and cultures, emanating both a strong *multiethnic and multicultural character*, could explain fascination on Jewish culture. Whatever the state of preservation, Judaic heritage, by its nature, reflects *an important part of European cultural heritage* and the attitude towards it, only strengthens the idea of multiple identities of Europe.

### **1. Jewish Heritage - an Exercise of Multiculturality**

It is no secret that the “Jewish problem” represented a challenge of modern history, especially in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Even now, anti-Semitism can be a strong alienating presence, observed in social life and society, sometimes implying political facts. Regarding Romania, as *a case study*, even though in Transylvania we do not confront such problems, in other parts of the country there are deep marks of anti-Semitism, generating an entire ethnic enmity not between Jewish and non-Jewish, but over the idea of *Jewishness*, as a cultural, social, even material affiliation.

On the contrary, historically and objectively speaking, in each nation’s case, attending the Jewish heritage “problem” represents a challenge and *an exercise of multiculturalism*. Jewish population presence occasioned the formation of some “unique” cultures, profoundly and directly adapted to historical-geographical areas in which Jews have settled, generating communities and continuously developing, undoubtedly contributing to emancipation of new social, cultural, economic structures. This meant a *composition* between the multi-century old values of already existing entities and those specific to Jewish tradition, simultaneous with a process of ethno-cultural synthesis, where the new elements graft on a rigorous background, strongly and deeply individualized, generating bipolar structure units (*Jewish-...*). These particular structures, often afflicted by social and political tensions, have opened new perspectives, brought by the evolution of society in all its domains, especially in the spirit and modernity era (late 19<sup>th</sup> century, beginning of 20<sup>th</sup> century), with the “vocation of inter-ethnicity” and creating “a well accomplished biography” [1], proving attachment and loyalty to adoptive states and nations. In addition, speaking of the “Jewish-Romanian”, Nicolae Cajal stated that “between the country

where our ancestors settled centuries ago and the people from which we descend, a beneficial osmosis happened, reflected by a history not without tensions, but full of intertwining that increased diversity in the Romanian context.”[2] Jewish heritage reconsideration and valorisation automatically means enlightening the remarkable Jewish-Romanian personalities within communities, but especially at national or even international level. Many Jewish organizations, centres and specialized institutes develop activities, studies and debates revealing the history of Romanian Jews and their precious and undoubted contribution to culture and civilization.

## **2. Jewish Heritage Issue**

Everything the Holocaust destroyed and left stray, without owner, becomes again, a private, also in common used *good*, that should be used by the local communities, continuing its normal existence, as religious buildings, museums, houses, commercial or services areas, etc., without focusing their existence in one direction – i.e. *memorial of the Holocaust*. Despite how terrible history was, communities’ life goes on, and they should customary and naturally use their heritage. It is weird that the whole preserved/remaining heritage to become only a memorial of exterminated Jews and proof of their existence. Jews still exist, live further on, and are part of society; therefore, their own heritage must be in current usage, not only seen as *a museum exhibit* or *sightseeing attraction*. In fact, it is rather an issue of the *future*, than that of the (indisputable) continuity evidence: to discover “what” and in many cases “for whom”. Not long ago, we pointed out: “... a property/heritage without a community that exceeds a certain critical mass is extremely vulnerable. A chance and a hope, under the present, come from the contemporary mutation of architecture transformed from wasteful of resources [...] into generator of resources due to the nowadays leisure time size (percentage), *loisir* and cultural tourism.”[3]

Over half a century after the Holocaust, Europe faces the problem of a huge Jewish cultural heritage reflected in physical form, requiring rehabilitation, maintenance and valorisation, especially in Central-Eastern countries, where Jewish minority represents a minimal fraction of the population, although before World War II, Jewish communities were very strong, rich, prosperous and well organized. Therefore, appears a paradox of presence by absence: without the Jewish people being numerous (there are cases where communities have less than 10 members or even no longer exist), Jewish presence is felt, both in spirit and especially physical. Cultural tourism encourages this phenomenon in countries like Germany, Austria, Poland, Czech Republic, Romania, Italy, Bulgaria, Ukraine, Latvia generating even a *trend* (in terms of tourism marketing), and monuments

related to Jewish presence, in many cases, receive the role of *cultural brand*. In recent years, thematic festivals have developed, promoted by performance, happening, workshop, concert, exhibition, conference type events, meant to draw more intensely attention on the Jewish heritage. There are dozens of museums devoted to the Holocaust and Jewish memory and lately, has become fashionable for synagogues to be restored, opened to tourists, but especially to host concerts (and that if they are not converted for artistic, educational, commercial, even residential purposes – exhibition halls, concerts, cafes, “cultural” cafeterias, libraries, homes, offices etc.).

People’s fascination with Jewish heritage is evident especially for architecture, arts and funerary art. The countries of Central and Eastern Europe are favourite destinations. This “phenomenon” has widespread the occurrence of art albums, various travel guides, travel agencies or websites dedicated to promoting European Jewish heritage. It is some years since famous Jewish quarters, with their synagogues and cemeteries, historical streets and markets and typical reminiscent atmosphere (retro cafes, restaurants, pubs, art galleries and themed museums, reflecting aspects of Jewish life) entered into the “must see” travel category (as main sightseeing attractions), and former ghettos and extermination camps became real places of pilgrimage. Ruth Ellen Gruber is one of the most prolific authors specialized in “Jewish heritage travel”. Should be mentioned here that her dedicated attention to Romania is not accidentally (the explanation is that some of her ancestors, and especially her great-grandmother are buried in Rădăuți Jewish cemetery). Two of her most interesting books are *Jewish Heritage Travel – A Guide to Central and Eastern Europe* and *Virtually Jewish – Reinventing Jewish Culture in Europe*. “Virtually Jewish” is a coinage syntagm defining the Jewish European space inhabited mostly by non-Jews; and this is a fact.

### **3. Heritage value and the “virtual shtetl”**

Regarding the built heritage, a fair and effective evaluation is required, following good system criteria that could be organised referring on one hand to its character, artistic-historical value and contribution (in terms of functional and historical significance) and on the other hand to analysing its degradations (meaning the overall state of degradation analysis).

For understanding real heritage property values for objects, architectural ensembles or areas, “five key components need to be put in place: 1. Identifying and understanding what is there (definition, analysis); 2. Evaluating the significance of what is there (why and to whom it is important) [...]; 3. Measuring the fragility or vulnerability of the site to human or natural actions; 4. Considering the impact of proposed change and

deciding whether to keep, modify, or lose what is there; 5. Conserving what is important to pass on to future generations, that is, deciding what, if anything, needs to be done.”[4]

Because of the so many aspects of Jewish cultural heritage and general lack of interest that generalized in time, currently there are two major directions in heritage protection and valorisation: **architecture** and **cemeteries**, both major factors of community memory, through physical evidence of the contribution made to society development. Often, *sciences*, *arts* and *literature* pass in subsidiary, transformed into annexes of the promotion centres. In fact, the community bases on buildings and their use for an own proper recognition appears normal: nowadays community centres could be a **true virtual shtetl**, emphasizing the values of their *entire cultural heritage*. The attitude towards most elements of Jewish heritage, can take *two opposite directions*. They would be seen either as *part of universal heritage*, or as *part of Jewish cultural heritage*, whose identity they represent. This contradiction, generating tensions will always be present. A question, with David Cesarani’s words concludes rhetorical: “is it a *dual heritage* or a *duel of heritages*?”[5]

#### **4. Nowadays community centres**

Foundations’ reactivation and Jewish communities’ revitalization has an immense impact on contemporary society, which probably, still less visible in our country, will become the subject of numerous case studies. Some of the most recent and interesting examples could be *Jewish Community Center – Duisburg (Germany 1999)*, *Russian Jewish Centre “YESOD” – Saint Petersburg (Russia 2005)*, *Jüdisches Zentrum Jakobsplatz – Munich (Germany 2007)* and *Jewish Community Centre – Cracow (Poland 2008)*.

Nowadays *community centres* have the most important role in preserving traditions, supporting social-cultural functions and ensuring the continuity of values, mostly fulfilled in the past by synagogues and the entire “equipment” around them. Their set up, in significant cultural areas, is justified in several steps, identified worthy for consideration: 1. documentation and historical study for the proposed area (to justify the value), 2. feasibility studies on possible proposed plots (cost, impact and influence surveys, at local and regional level), 3. analysis of existing built context (with revealing its formation stages and values, if any, and identifying parts that remain/are preserved, with true justifications and studies on their possible future public use – synagogues’ cases), 4. work out a project task, based on the results and background data, and the establishment of a project management (to ensure the future function’s

continuity), 5. development of the project itself (with possible conservation and/or restoration work of the existing buildings), 6. development of the new centre's good utilization complex program, for the whole community's benefit and touristic promotion, as to valorise the entire existing local Jewish heritage, with possible links to other cultural attractive sites.

Jewish cultural heritage's acceptance and especially its valorisation, is not just *an exercise in democracy* and *minority tolerance*, but rather a complex contextual phenomenon. This phenomenon is adapted to communities and contemporary society needs, constantly raising, new and new thematic manifestations, motivating the expression and recognition of individual identity. At this level, one can include Jewish community centres, performing activities in support of communities ("the Jewish"), but also to familiarize and initiate *the others* ("the non-Jewish") in "Jewish visual heritage" and its world ("Jewish Virtual World"), in overall representing "a cultural product", tackled frequently in research work and speculated in tourism.

### **5. Oradea Jewish Community and Lempert Family Foundation**

Oradea, once representing the most important Jewish community of Hungary, and after 1918 of Romania, is nowadays a true, silent witness of the immense impact of Jewish culture, in almost all aspects of native society life. The best historic research source on Oradea Jewish community is Tereza Mozes' book "Evreii din Oradea" [6]. It is notable that, after the Jew's emancipation, a real "appetite" for architecture developed, featuring Oradea as a centre of creative effervescence. The undertaken work quality justifies us to name it "a true late 19<sup>th</sup> Jewish Florence", revealing its affinity towards Art Nouveau and the profound European attitude both of the *mecenati* (mostly Jewish) and the Jewish artists, engineers and architects. They were all together, artisans of a modern, model new city.

There is an important Jewish legacy to protect and to transmit farther on, to heirs, in the memory of those 25 thousand Jews from Oradea, exterminated in Auschwitz-Birkenau camps, in May 1944, together with more than 6 million Jewish souls. Following other European examples, the Jewish Community of Oradea should rightly benefit by a modern, representative and multifunctional community centre, encouraging its further development. Lempert Family Foundation (LFF), through its work encourages and sustains a virtual community: Oradea Jewish Community. The two architectural proposals (Fig.1., Fig.2.), adjoined illustrated, envisage our concept connected to the initiative of LFF as to establish in Oradea *a new learning centre* and *a Jewish museum*, promoting "tolerance, understanding and generosity", "helping preserve the memory of the Jewish community of Oradea" and „remembering a once-thriving Jewish community in Eastern

Europe” [7]. Despite the initial given plot, at the “Teleki Street Synagogue”, the list for proposals remained opened, and so, after a discussion with the President of Oradea's Jewish Community, Mr. Felix Koppelman, we adopted and promoted the idea of implementing the proposed task, together with other facilities, near The Great Orthodox Synagogue (Mihai Viteazu Street). Thus, a complex ensemble resulted, with a symbolic architecture, for the community's fulfilment and recovery, through a revised history, carrying out all the facilities and functions needed.



*Fig.1. Oradea Jewish Community Centre. The Great Orthodox Synagogue (Mihai Viteazu Street) complex. Proposal A - Ionuț Julean*



*Fig.2. Oradea Jewish Community Centre. The Great Orthodox Synagogue (Mihai Viteazu Street) complex. Proposal B - Ionuț Julean*



## CONCLUSION

This material is a brief presentation of almost a year study documented work (August 2009 – July 2010), reflected in an architecture diploma project [8] at the *Faculty of Architecture and Urban Planning* from Cluj-Napoca – project advisor Arch. Ph.D. Prof. Mircea Moldovan. The proposal for a new modern and multifunctional Jewish community centre should not be regarded as a utopia project, in the present Romanian state and society context, but as a response to a belief, a faith in *good*, a faith based on historical facts, aimed on *a better future*, a faith in *mutual help* and *support* (even material) and absolutely not on *great expectations*...

It is not much to consider absolutely necessary the existence of a *Jewish community centre* in Oradea, gathering in the same place *the synagogue, the prayer house, a great hall, an exhibition hall, a museum, a kosher hotel and restaurant, a mikva, social, educational, medical and administrative facilities* offering to public use a great symbolic *media space*.

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