

ABSTRACT

The PhD dissertation titled *Jewish Communities in Transylvania: from the Beginnings to the Present in the Light of Cemeteries* explores the Jewish society of Transylvania, a region in the heart of Romania, in the light of the cemeteries that exist today and can thus be subject to research.

The history of the Transylvanian Jewish communities is part of both Hungarian and Romanian history, which partly explains its uniqueness. Six major periods can be distinguished in the history of the Transylvanian Jewry. They are determined by turning points in Hungarian and Romanian history that also brought changes in the perception of the Jewry: 1) The first period is from the age of the Partium to the first emancipation. It is the time when Transylvania was the land of religious freedom and saw the settlement of the Jewry. 2) The second period started with the 1848-49 Revolution, which liberated the Jews from feudal bondage, and lasted until the 1867 Austro-Hungarian Compromise and the First Jewish Congress. This is the period when most of the Jewish communities were established and the Jewish population appeared in the Transylvanian towns. 3) The period between 1868 and 1918 is the Golden Age of the emancipated Transylvanian Jewry, diversified in terms of religion. 4) The period between 1919 and 1940 was characterised by integration and development of the Romanian denominational frameworks; it is also the time of restrictive measures and growing antisemitism. 5) The period from 1940 to 1944 was the era of total disenfranchisement and the Holocaust. 6) After 1945 the survivors re-erected the frameworks of religious communities. Others became communists and moved away from their earlier religious life. Yet others chose to emigrate. As a result, after 1970 Jewish community life virtually ceased to exist in small-town Transylvania.

The choice of topic of this dissertation has been motivated primarily by an ethical commitment. It is aimed at exploring a people in the light of its cemeteries whose sons were deprived of the last stage of natural rites at the end of human life by the million: their bodies perished to become ashes and dust, or are cast aside unmarked along the highways of Europe. The moral and emotional motivation is rooted in the researcher's conviction that the Jewish cemeteries all over Central and Eastern Europe continue to survive as faithful and visible witnesses of local history. In their wake a whole host of once flourishing communities can be rekindled.

Exploring the Jewish population of Transylvania primarily on the basis of its cemeteries is a highly complex task. Falling in step with the scientific process initiated by the great elders in research, this paper attempts to reconsider the issues and supplement them with the author's own

research findings and conclusions. As Lajos Erdélyi put it, 'The Jews in Transylvania die in Hungarian.' Is this a general truth or is it relevant only to certain historical periods or events or places? Was it still valid after the Treaty of Trianon or after the Second Vienna Award? How does it appear in North and South Transylvania? After Auschwitz? After World War II, in liberated Romania?

We intend to prove – and this is the *first hypothesis* of this dissertation – that the answers to the question of assimilation with the Hungarian population and to issues of dual identity are manifold and depend on the age and historical circumstances. Aligning with the ruling order and power or with the dominant culture, assimilation, integration, separation dual identity are perceived differently by the various social and religious groups of the Jewry. The *second hypothesis* of the research putting Transylvanian Jewish cemeteries into focus is the following: The Jewish society in Transylvania was both large and strong. Surprisingly, there is very little indication of this in scientific thinking. Few are aware, for example, that there are as many as 131 Jewish cemeteries in the part of Szatmár County that belong to Romania today, each has an address and a caretaker, and each can be visited, albeit some are in ruins. The next two hypotheses of this dissertation are closely linked to the first two and they are also inseparable from each other: Not only is the history of the Transylvanian Jewry unknown, a blank spot, but so is the tremendous intellectual achievement which could duly be the pride of not only the Jews but also Hungarian culture as well as universal civilisation. This aspect also transpires from the study of Jewish cemeteries. Chief Rabbi Sámuel Kohn would sadly ask: 'what is a Jewish scholar worth if he is Transylvanian, and mainly if he speaks Hungarian?' In an attempt to prove this hypothesis the author parades those prominent figures of Transylvanian intellectual life that are less known in Hungarian and universal cultural history. My fourth hypothesis will offer two sub-points to justify, and also prove through the world of cemeteries, that the Transylvanian Jewry has a place in the universal history of the Jews in a highly specific way: this was the region where a) the Sephardim were the closest possible to the Ashkenazim; and b) this was the region where the strong Transylvanian Jewish orthodoxy, the Transylvanian version of Hasidism as well as the middle class urban Jewry live and breathe side by side. The first four hypotheses give rise to the fifth: it is possible to describe one-time Jewish communities and trace social mobility through their memorial places, and primarily through the cemeteries of the Transylvanian villages. Comparing the characteristics of well-known former communities with the information offered by cemeteries motivates the researcher to try to describe lesser known, unknown or long-forgotten communities on the basis of their cemetery residues.

The largest towns and villages of seven counties and their cemeteries were selected for the analysis of the Jewish communities of Transylvania in the light of their cemeteries. Szatmár County [Jud. Satu Mare] (including Satu Mare and Nagykároly [Carei]) was chosen to head the list because of the substantial size of its Jewish communities. The Orthodox, Hasidic and 'status quo' Judaism were represented in equal proportion. The towns and their Jewish communities are particularly good examples of the fact that Central Europe meets Eastern Europe. Imbued with reforms, Austro-Hungarian Jewish traditions emerging as a ruling trend in Transylvanian towns met the *shtetl*, the main form of settlement of earlier times Máramaros County [Jud. Maramureş] (including primarily Máramarossziget [Sighetu Marmătiei]) were chosen for analysis because they were the centres of Hasidic Judaism in the region where many charismatic rabbis with miraculous powers lived and worked. At the same time it is the research site for the poor Jews: workmen, farm labourers, woodcutters – the world of the 'pariah.' Bihar County [Jud. Bihor] (including primarily Nagyvárad [Oradea]) was the town with the largest middle-class Jewish population in Transylvania. The achievements of the Nagyvárad Jewry (primarily their intellectual achievements) are outstanding in the entire Hungarian-speaking world and also by European standards. The Jewish community of Kolozs County [Jud. Cluj] (including primarily Kolozsvár [Cluj-Napoca]) was one of the most populous and certainly the strongest. Its culture, institutions, press, theatres and a number of other factors raised this community to renown and recognition among the Transylvanian Jewry. The most influential personalities of Transylvanian Zionism came from among the leading figures of the Kolozsvár Orthodox and neolog Judaism. Fehér County [Jud. Alba] (including primarily Gyulafehérvár [Alba Iulia]) was selected mainly because it was in Gyulafehérvár that a few Sephardim Jews first settled in Transylvania (forming a religious community as early as 1591). Although their Jewish communities were not large, Maros County [Jud. Mureş] (including primarily Marosvásárhely [Târgu Mureş], Szászrégen [Regin], Segesvár [Sighişoara] and Ludas [Luduş]) are typical representations of the Szeklers Land in Transylvania, their typical stratification by trade, where trading and transporting salt was always an important activity over the centuries. Temes County [Jud. Timiş] (including Temesvár [Timişoara]) is representative of the Bánát [Banat] region. In contrast to the counties mentioned previously, Temesvár had a prominence of Sephardim. The Jews of Temesvár were saved from deportation and the worst outcome of the Holocaust. In this respect this town stands apart from the towns explored in other counties. In the dissertation, the analytic description of the settlements selected for the research in the individual counties is followed by the synthetic and comparative proving of the hypotheses, and finally, by the conclusions. The dissertation draws attention to the role of the publishing house *Kriterion* in keeping alive the memory of the Jewry in

Transylvania, its intellectual achievements, memorial places and the Holocaust in Romania, and mainly in transylvania, since the 1970s.

The dissertation is supported and illustrated by rich iconographic materials: the 450 photos, most of them taken by the author, include 15 maps. The symbolism of Jewish cemeteries, the interpretation of the language and dates of the epitaphs is preceded by a historical and into iconographic introduction.