

# Cseh, Viktor: Zsidó örökség. Vidéki zsidó hitközségek Magyarországon [Jewish Heritage — Rural Jewish Communities in Hungary].

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## BOOK REVIEW

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Viktor Cseh, historian of Jewish culture, synthesizes his research, carried out over ten years with varying intensity, in his significant work *Jewish Heritage — Rural Jewish Communities in Hungary*. As the author — as well as the publisher, the Hungarian Jewish Cultural Association [Magyarországi Zsidó Kulturális Egyesület] — emphasizes in the foreword, the primary motivation for the book was to counterbalance the Budapest-centricity of research on Hungarian Jewish history, culture and society. By almost completely destroying rural orthodoxy, the Holocaust irrevocably restructured the life of Hungarian Jewry. Due to the shift in the ratios between assimilated and traditional, urban and rural communities, research often set certain priorities, bringing the historical and ethnographic exploration of the history of the Hungarian capital and rural cities with larger or smaller Jewish communities to the fore.

The culture of Hungarian Jewry, once living in villages and towns in the countryside, can today be discovered almost exclusively in built objects that are reminders of communities, such as synagogues, ritual baths, schools, religious community buildings, cemeteries, residential buildings — the outlining, assessment, and recording of their condition could only begin in the last 20–30 years. In this process, one thing became clear: in the time since the Holocaust, the abandoned prayer houses and other buildings in settlements left without Jewish communities

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mostly faced demolition or conversion due to loss of function, while nature took over in hundreds of abandoned cemeteries. However, since the 1989/90 regime change, one question has regularly arisen: whose heritage do the memories of rural Jewry's past constitute, or, as scholarship puts it: who considers them their heritage? Multiple social actors have tried to answer this question: both within the narrower and broader Jewish community, as well as within the civil associations of rural settlements, there have been numerous initiatives aimed at the heritagization of Jewish memories that have been an integral part of the history of the local society.

What we can see today as the heritage of rural Jewish communities is presented in the book of Viktor Cseh from two perspectives, along two interpretations. On the one hand, the author aims to elaborate the past of a particular community, thus in the course of writing its history, he presents certain segments of the local Jewish past (the lives of famous personalities based on sources or narratives, now defunct buildings) as heritage — also stemming from his assumed emic position. Additionally, however, even if not explicitly delineating the issue this way, the author also examines what the contemporary Jewish and non-Jewish society considers to be its own heritage from the local Jewish past. In elaborating the topic, the Holocaust emerges as a tragic caesura, and Viktor Cseh reiterates that he does not intend to approach the terrain of the Jewish past and Jewish heritage in the light of destruction (XII). Rather, he strives to provide a “deeper and more intimate” picture of the “golden age” of Jewish communities (XII), so that the book as a whole may “contribute to the conscious processing of the loss” by recording the surviving memories and heritage(s) (683).

The central theme of the book is based on the sources of historical, mainly Orthodox and Neolog Jewish religious press materials, which are supplemented with data and information collected during fieldwork in 134 settlements in post-Trianon Hungary. The 134 settlements are listed not in alphabetical order but by their geographical location, by Hungarian regions (Northern Hungary, Northern Great Plain, Southern Great Plain, Central Hungary, Central Transdanubia, Southern Transdanubia, Western Transdanubia). This way, excluding the opening and closing chapters, the book is divided into seven large units. The author justifies this choice by saying that this approach was intended to preserve and reflect the location-bound characteristics of rural Jewish culture, insofar as within a region, due to physical proximity and greater likelihood of contact and “more frequent interrelations,” unique socio-cultural relationships and specifics can be observed.

In addition to treating settlements with similar cultural patterns and historical connections as a system, Viktor Cseh also considers it important that, in the comprehensive, detailed introductory chapters that form the basis of the entire volume, he provides an overview of one of the most important cornerstones of Hungarian Jewish cultural research: the development of Jewish religious factions in Hungary. The Jewish Enlightenment movement (*Haskalah*), which began in the 18th century, resulted by the middle of the 19th century in the division of Jewish society in Hungary, too. The division culminated in 1868/69, for it was then that the Neolog, which emphasized the importance of social openness and assimilation, the Orthodox, which strictly adhered to traditions, and a third faction, which rejected the Schism and advocated the restoration of the *status quo ante*, emerged. Following the Schism, the factions organized their community and religious life according to their ideology, and sought to display their principles and norms in appearance and formalities, e.g., synagogue architecture, rite organization, cemetery use and design, clothing, participation in the arts and sciences, etc. Neolog



practices sought to incorporate the schemes of Christian churches: a synagogue built on the street frontage, an organ in the synagogue, the rabbis' clothing resembling a minister's robe, the use of the Hungarian language within the rite, etc. The Orthodox not only renounced and rejected these, they also prohibited their members from entering synagogues operating along such principles. These conflicts — illustrated in the volume with numerous press sources — were real social interactions, so much so that they continue to define the dynamics of Hungarian Jewish culture to this day. In addition to the already mentioned aspect — rural Jewish communities being primarily Orthodox — the author's precise compilation of the factions is also important because it facilitates the contextualization of the material heritage of Jewish culture that he presents and illustrates with photographs. Upon opening the book, it becomes clear that, in light of the last 150–200 years, each segment of Jewish culture can only be examined today if there is such contextualization that considers these trends and historical aspects.

The three subsections of the introductory part can also be interpreted as a kind of magnifying glass. Since the book focuses on the Orthodox-majority Jewry of rural Hungary, after the section presenting the Schism of Hungarian Jewry, the author not only describes the complexity of the Orthodox faction but also assesses how the different groups of traditional Jews reacted to the religious reforms brought on and advocated by the (Jewish) Enlightenment. First, he talks about the spread of Hasidism in Northern and North-Eastern Hungary. In this faction, the communities were organized around a rabbi of great knowledge and spiritual energy (a so-called *rebbe*, considered a “miracle rabbi”), who established dynasties spanning settlements and gained followers for their doctrines (e.g., Belzer, Sanzer, Spira, Teitelbaum, etc.). According to the author, another characteristic of the faction is: “Hasidism prioritized joy over rigorous religious practice. In other words, the quality of devotion and the experience of prayer came before the strict observance of religious commandments and the study of the *Torah*, but in a way that fundamental religious laws were not violated” (20).

After the Schism, the Hungarian Orthodoxy was most profoundly influenced by the Pressburg (today Bratislava) school, i.e., the “Pressburg Yeshiva.” This faction promoted conservative religious practice, the basis of which is studying the *Torah* and fully committing to a lifestyle that is in accordance with religious laws. Orthodox leaders fought religious reform and often relied on the Hasidim to do so.

It is beyond the scope of this review to cover all the settlement descriptions that make up the core of the book, so I will only mention a few interesting examples from the perspective of the (possible) definition and interpretation of local Jewish heritage.

The construction of Jewish cultural heritage is intertwined with the memory of destroyed communities and with the mechanisms of remembrance from its own point of view. Although the following grouping does not materialize in the book, seven types of patterns can certainly be outlined through the empirical material presented. There are settlements where Jewish memories go “unclaimed” because either the local society lacks the intention or the resources to see them as heritage, or the fading of knowledge and withering of personal connections over the past seven decades prevents Jewish communities that once lived locally from becoming part of the local history (e.g., Szerencs, Abaújszántó, Gönc, Vepelét, Mezőkeresztes). In the book, we also come across settlements where the opposite is true and the municipality or local civilians keep the Jewish cemetery in order, for example, where they even organize commemorations when appropriate, or display the surviving memories of local Jewry in the local history museum (e.g., Mezőcsát, Szikszó, Hajdúböszörmény, Tiszadada, Hévíz). However, there are also



settlements with an active Jewish community, so the interpretation of the Jewish heritage is done either exclusively by them or defined by them but in dialogue with local non-Jewish and national Jewish organizations (e.g., Gyöngyös, Miskolc, Nyírac nád, Keszthely). The book also cites examples of places where very few people identify as Jewish, but who nevertheless took it upon themselves to preserve the local Jewish heritage (e.g., Balassagyarmat, Pásztó, Nagykanizsa). The life worlds of the already mentioned Jewish religious factions, parallel but occasionally converging and still conflicting today, also outline phenomena that might be of interest to humanities and social research in connection with the formation (and preservation) of heritage. Such as, for example, what can be observed in the former Hasidic centers in North-Eastern Hungary. The gravesites of Hasidic *rebbe*s resting in the Jewish cemeteries of Bodrogkeresztúr, Sátoraljaújhely, and Nagykálló are considered international pilgrimage sites, visited by thousands of people every year. The neglected Jewish monuments of the surrounding settlements were recently renovated by the Hungarian Chabad community. In addition to making the region's Jewish heritage attractive to outsiders by developing tourism, the organization also strives to establish a living Jewish culture. Beyond these mechanisms of heritage construction, in some settlements there is also cooperation between emigrants and international organizations (e.g., Érsek vadkert, Siófok). Though they belong in a different category of heritage, it should nonetheless be noted that certain buildings and tombstones are subject to monument protection due to their uniqueness or age (e.g., Tata, Sárospatak) — which are also listed in the book.

It is clear from the foregoing that the definition of “Jewish (cultural) heritage” requires extensive research at the settlement level, taking into consideration various social roles. This is also supported by the fact that at the end of the book, the author compiled a list of the leadership of functioning Jewish congregations along with their contact information, giving those who are interested the opportunity to gain further knowledge and make contact. This intention is also confirmed by the index of personal and place names at the end of the book, as well as the fact that each settlement description concludes with the exact address of the local Jewish monuments, be those defunct, remodeled buildings or abandoned cemeteries, or symbols seen as part of the locality's history — as heritage.

The language and style of Viktor Cseh's book — presumably due to his assumed emic position — shows deep empathy, compassion, and sensitivity, which sometimes goes beyond what is required by academic neutrality. However, in my opinion, one cannot fault an author who has undertaken to present the contrast delineated by the prosperous past of dozens of destroyed communities and their present — in this case heritage — that always reminds them of the destruction. And although the tragedy cannot be separated or dissociated from these communities, it is the author's persistent objective to register and share every last sign of life when examining each settlement. The purpose of scientific research is not to highlight what is missing, but to take stock of current results and outline future tasks — both for academic and for Jewish and non-Jewish society with a potential for action.

The intention to counterbalance the Holocaust narrative that has been reduced to loss and numbers is also confirmed by the rich imagery of the book, which strives for balance in presenting the “golden age,” the second half of the 20th century, and the present. Not only the quantity and selection of the visual resources but also their implementation in the body of the text deserves a mention. The photos, which sometimes cover an entire page, not only tell their own story but are complementary from settlement to settlement, providing a picture of how a prosperous culture became a collection of memories and heritage(s).



The work of Viktor Cseh rightly claims the interest of historians, anthropologists and ethnographers. The author researches — both in archives and in the field — then processes and guides. Nevertheless, the underemphasized articulation of the problem-centered approach may leave the reader with a certain sense of absence. Heritage, cultural heritage — and within it Jewish cultural heritage — are broad concepts in the humanities, social sciences, and Jewish studies, filled with special content and meaning with every scientific work. Even if their horizon of interpretation varies from settlement to settlement, it would have been important to conceptualize the term “Jewish heritage,” which also features in the title of the book, in the multi-stage introduction.

Despite any criticism, overall, it can be said of the book *Jewish Heritage — Rural Jewish Communities in Hungary*, based on a decade of research, that it fills a gap in taking stock of the representatives of Jewish culture that can still be observed in Hungary’s rural settlements. And although there is still a living Jewish culture in some segments of rural Hungary, in many localities only small traces remain, the existence and history of which are only meaningful to the initiated. Those who lived in these settlements, and not only blessed the Eternal God in their morning prayers — for giving sense to the rooster to distinguish day from night — but also heard the crowing of the rooster. The book of Viktor Cseh, in line with the author’s intention, commemorates them first and foremost.

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