

## **Jewish Folk Art in Bavaria<sup>1</sup>**

By Theodor Harburger

*Among the impressive number of German magazines dedicated to exploring the subject of folk art, the journal "Bayerischer Heimatschutz," the organ of the "Bayerischer Landesverein für Heimatschutz" and the "Verein für Volkskunst and Volkskunde" in Munich, is at the vanguard.*

*The magazine, which marked its 26<sup>th</sup> year in 1930 with a larger collective volume, thanks its current appearance to its outstanding publisher Dr. Jos. Maria Ritz, in particular, who can well be referred to as the congenial successor to Adolf S. Pammers. In the last issue of "Volk and Heimat," the splendid Bavarian, popular educative magazine (published by G. Hirth, Munich), the Director of the Municipal Library in Munich, Hans Ludwig Held describes the various different German magazines devoted to the protection of local traditions, first and foremost the Bavarian magazine mentioned above. The following illustrated essay by Harburger has been taken from this. In his critique Hans Ludwig Held wrote: "An especially delightful essay can be found in Theodor Harburger's "Werke of Jewish Volkskunst in Bayern." I know only very few works of Jewish folk art in Bavaria; this survey, therefore, provides an insight into an almost completely unknown world (apart), even for specialists." Ed.*

A field of artistic activity which has been given little attention to date is that of works created for Jewish religious practices.

In his studies on Jewish history and Jewish spiritual life, the illustrious and, in certain spheres, seminal scholar David Kaufmann, pointed out that Jews also created decorative objects for use in prayer services and were particularly involved in adding ornaments to their manuscripts.<sup>2</sup> However, our knowledge of such works has only expanded and been essentially enriched over the past few decades.

As a result of the established scriptural prohibition on idolatry (II B. M., chapter. XX, verses 4 and 5 ; V. B. M., chapter. V, verses 8 and 9), it can be seen that Jews largely avoided plastic, figurative depictions—at least over the past few centuries—although their existence on certain specific objects used for religious purposes proves that, in earlier times, people were less inhibited in adhering to this so closely. It is a fact, however, that Jews are not to be seen as the initiators of such creations and that they only felt drawn to depictions of a figurative character in two-dimensional works. On top of this, there is the historical development, having become alienated from goldsmithery since the High Middle Ages, leaving them only with the possibility of demonstrating their artistic skills in illuminated manuscripts and miniatures, as the creators of embroidered hangings, and as medal makers and chasers. As a result, anyone wanting to investigate Jewish folk art in Bavaria, chiefly has to do with their most frequent and typical works, namely that of the draftsman in the broader sense.

The interior painting of synagogues holds a special position—simply on account of the scope of works. In Germany, this can be found uniquely within a limited geographical area—namely in parts of

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<sup>1</sup> Harburger, Theodor: Werke jüdischer Volkskunst in Bayern, in: Bayerische Israelitische Gemeindezeitung, vol. 7 (1 July 1930), pp. 195–199.

<sup>2</sup> David Kaufmann, "Gesammelte Schriften," ed. by M. Brann, Frankfurt a. M. 1908–1915, vol. I, p. 87ff.; vol. III, pp. 173ff, 229ff.

Franconia between the Upper Main and the Kocher valley. It is indeed only to be found in a few scattered cases and is the work of one individual, Elieser Sußmann, son of Salomon Z"L, of Brody or Brod. This indication of where he came from, as imprecise as it may be, does point us nevertheless to the area where the artist grew up and where we can find works which had an immediately influence on him. After being expelled from western Europe during the Middle Ages, Jews in Eastern Europe were able to maintain their cultural life under relatively favorable conditions until this was put to an end following a series of severe acts of persecution in the second half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, primarily linked to the name of the Ukrainian Cossack Hetman Khmelnytsky. Despite these limitations, several remarkable artistic achievements by Jews were created in the same period which we know of today through the fortunate coincidence of their conservation. Of the externally generally simple, even insubstantial wooden buildings, most have since fallen victim to the elements and other destructive forces. The painting in the synagogue in Yabluniv on the Prut, created around 1650–1670,<sup>3</sup> and that in the prayer house in Mohilen<sup>4</sup> (cf. fig. 5), completed at the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, are—or at least until World War II were—testimonies to a technical skill and trained sense of taste rooted in a much older tradition.

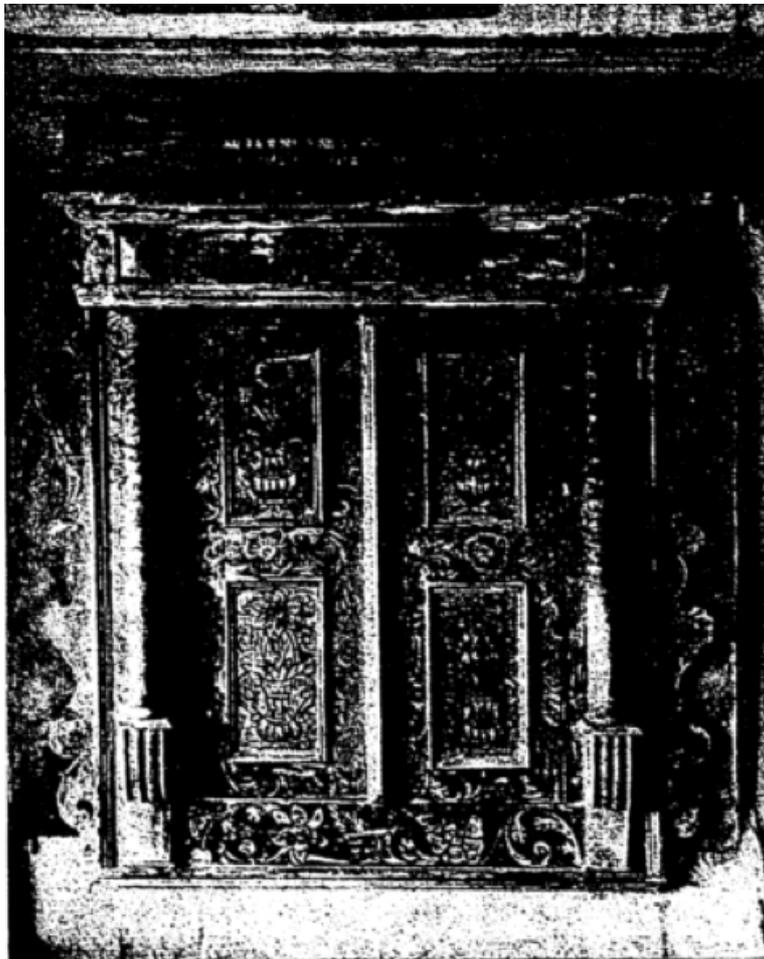


fig. 1: Torah ark from Colmberg.

<sup>3</sup> E. Toeplitz, "Von der Volkskunst. Synagogenmalerei," essay in Hebrew in "Rimmon, Zeitschrift für Kunst and Literatur," 1923, issue 3, in the Yiddish language in "Milgroim, Zeitschrift für Kunst and Literatur," 1923, issue 3.

<sup>4</sup> El. Lisitzki, "Über die Mogilever Synagog. Erinnerungen," essay in *ibid.*

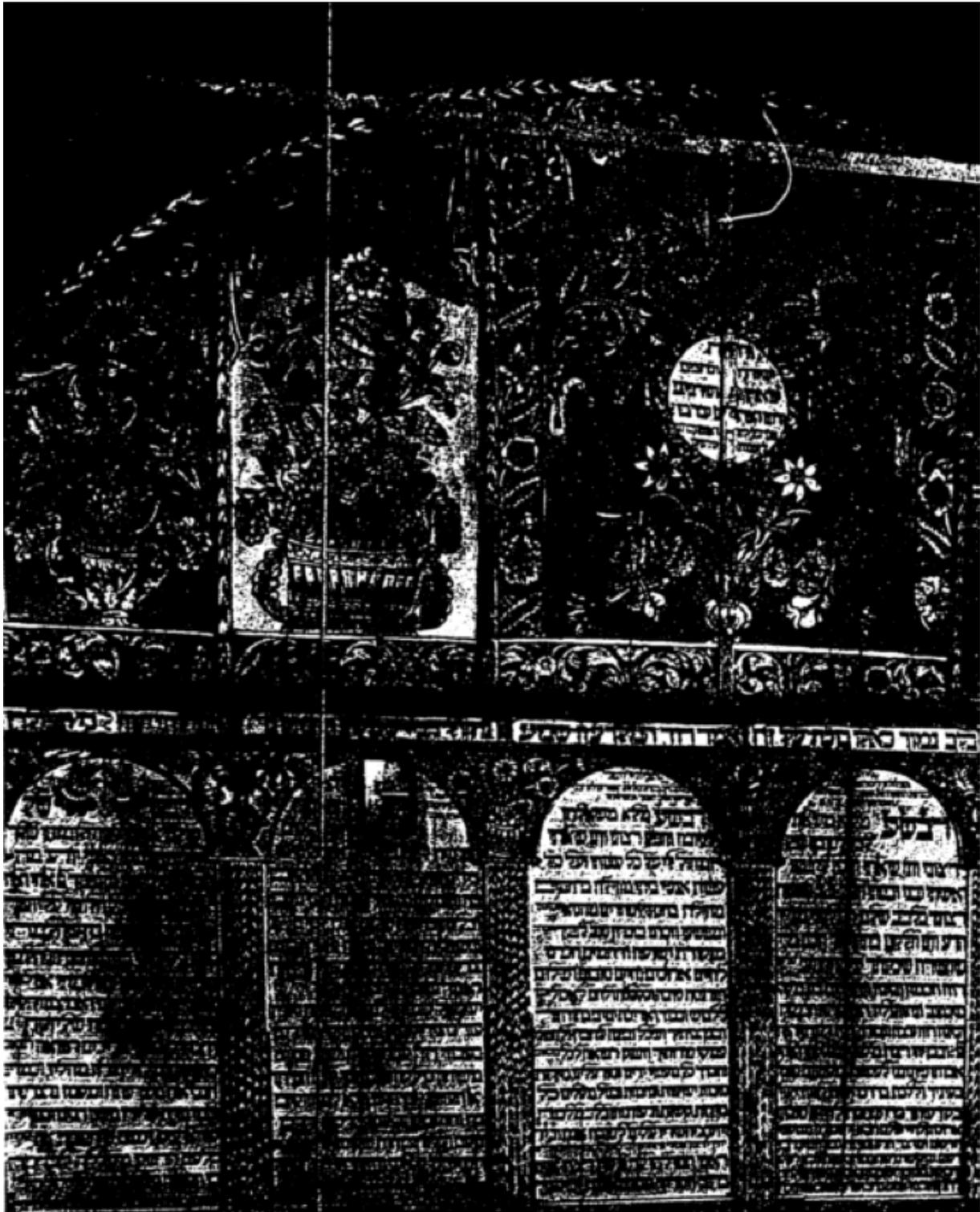


fig. 2 : Bechhofen Synagogue. Section of west wall.

The creator of the synagogue painting in Franconia also came from this artistic region. The interpretation of the native city as “Brody” is, therefore, more plausible than its deciphering as “Brod.” Elieser Sußmann Z"l, whose biography is unfortunately completely unknown, would seem to me to

have been among the throng of those fleeing persecution who came to Germany and demonstrated their artistic skills in Franconia.

The style of eastern synagogue painting is, of course, not free from the influence of the omnipresent Baroque. Like other paintings in Mogilev synagogue, the example in fig. 5 shows the rich embellishments covering the whole ground in which the heraldic creatures have been so harmoniously integrated, as well as ribbon ornamentation and scrolled cartouches. The urge to create pictorial depictions appears more prominently in individual scenes, such as that showing the city of Worms with its soaring towers, for example, defended by a dragon (a reference to the Nibelungen saga?), and including a ship and all sorts of different birds. Our Elieser Sußmann Z"l would have been perfectly familiar with the styles used in this painting. A detail in the signature in Bechhofen suggests that he was a prayer leader at religious services in the Franconian Jewish community. In addition to his work, he felt inclined to add ornamental pictorial elements to the walls and the barrel vault of the synagogue in Bechhofen (Middle Franconia), as well painting the former prayer rooms in Horb a. M., sections of which are now in the Bamberger Städtische Museum on Michaelsberg—unfortunately displayed in an unfavorable way; in Unterlimpurg near Schwäbisch Hall, now to be seen in the local municipal museum; and in Kirchheim, which now adds to the attractions at the Luitpoldmuseum in Würzburg. These works, already suitably recorded in literary sources,<sup>5</sup> were created in 1732, 1735,<sup>6</sup> 1739, and 1740.



<sup>5</sup> Rabbi Dr. A. Eckstein, "Die Synagogenmalereien von Horb am Main in der Städtischen Gemäldesammlung zu Bamberg," in "Bamberger Volksblatt," 1922; similarly in "Bamberger Blätter für fränkische Kunst und Geschichte," May 1924, p. 29ff.; Erich Toeplitz, "Synagogale Wand- und Deckengemälde," special edition to mark the Order's foundation, *Großloge für Deutschland V III U. O. B. B.*, October 1926; Erich Toeplitz, "Die Malerei in den Synagogen (besonders in Franken)," in "Menorah, Jüdisches Familienblatt für Wissenschaft, Kunst und Literatur," Berlin, Vienna, VI yr., November–December 1928; similarly in "Beiträge zur Jüdischen Kulturgeschichte," edited by the Gesellschaft zur Erforschung Jüdischer Kunstdenkmäler, issue III, Frankfurt a. M. 1929.

<sup>6</sup> The fact stated by E. Toeplitz that the painting of the synagogue in Horb was carried out in 1707, has to be corrected. The calculation of the date reveals the year 1735, as A. Eckstein has already mentioned. As such, the date of this work is closely related to other works by Sußmann Z"l. The discrepancy between 1707 and 1732 (the painting in Bechhofen) or even 1740 (the painting in Kirchheim), therefore, no longer exists, the works forming instead one overall entity.

fig. 3 : Former synagogue in Colmberg. Sample of ornamental work.

Our knowledge of the artwork executed by Elieser Sußmann Z"l has expanded over the past two years as the result of a project to catalog monuments of Jewish culture in Bavaria, commissioned by the Association of Israelite Congregations in Bavaria, during which I discovered traces of former painting, hidden over decades by later coats of whitewash, in the prayer room in Colmberg (Middle Franconia) which is no longer in use.

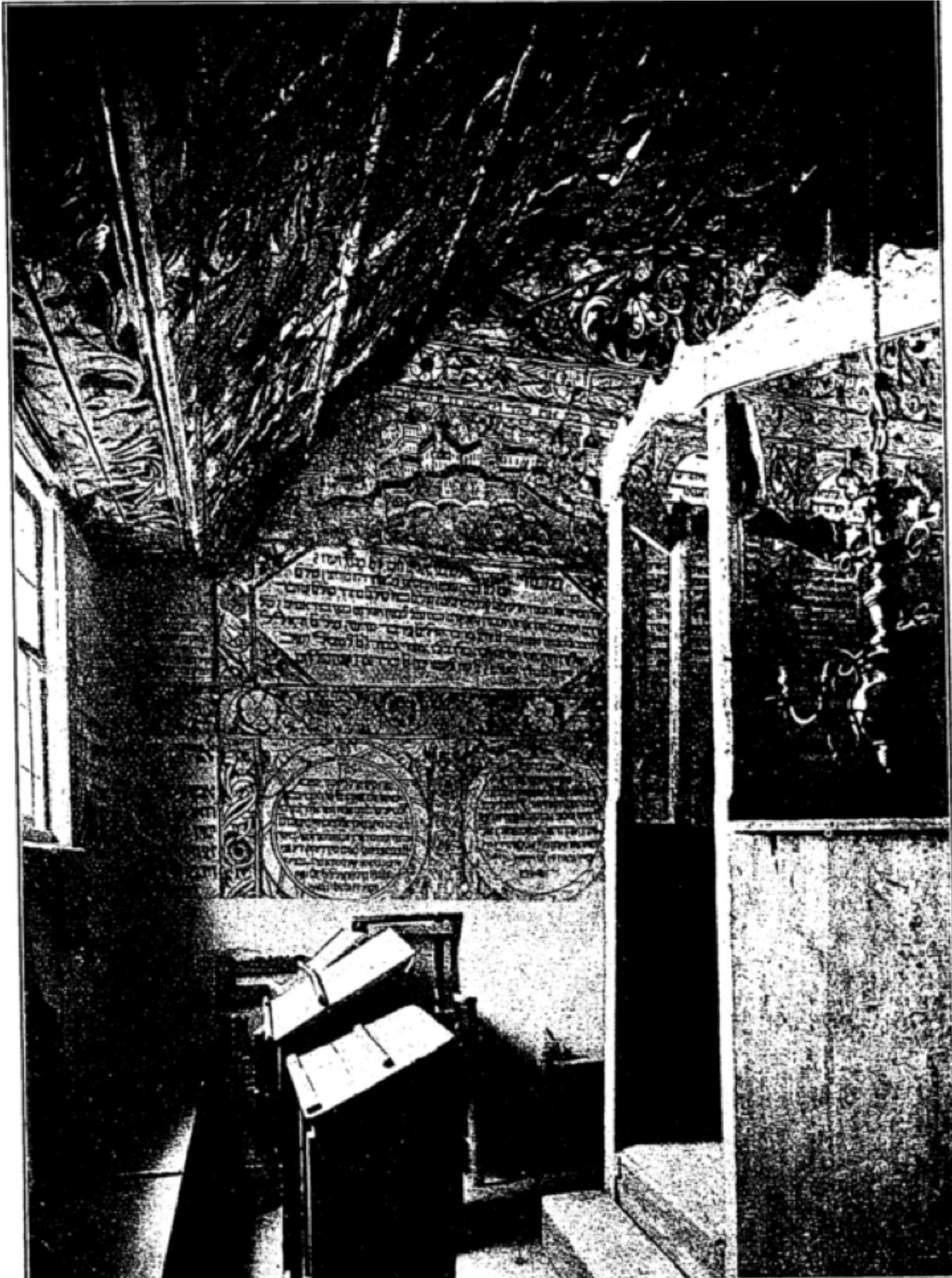


fig. 4 : Former synagogue in Kirchheim (Luitpoldmuseum Würzburg). Partial view of room.

Closer examination and the uncovering, carried out under the expert supervision of the Bayerisches Landesamt für Denkmalpflege, have revealed that what we have today is unfortunately no longer complete. It is probable that the painted sections did not originally come from Colmberg but were transferred from a larger house of worship which had become redundant. The preserved parts include the Torah ark, the dividing wall between the men's and women's sections in the prayer room, and a large part of the vaulted ceiling. These remnants are at present preserved in Munich at the Association of Israelite Congregations in Bavaria.



fig. 5: Mogilev Synagogue. Sample of ornamental work.

Characteristic features of the master painter can be found in all his works. He had a preference for light blue or green grounds on which he added interlaced ornamentation and animal figures, presumably of kabbalistic influence. The painter also used bright red hues, resulting in a colorful overall picture. In Bechhofen, his earliest datable work, he already emerged as an artist who created complete oeuvres. In those places where nothing has been changed and has survived to this day as a work of art in its entirety, the unadulterated beauty of the whole room can be grasped. Smaller prayer rooms, such as that in Kirchheim (figs 4, 9), are also testimonies to a pronounced artistic freedom and inner coherence.

Panels depicting scenes such as the city of Jerusalem in the Middle Ages, or others of the Temple lamps and the showbread, reminders of the desecrated holy site, divide the ornamentation that covers everything in an especially impressive fashion. While all these images were certainly executed in the spirit of the times, their appearance being rooted in the rural Baroque style, one element has been added that elevates the work of Elieser Sußmann Z"l above that of his contemporaries, namely the use of moldings and panels with the decoratively extremely effective Hebrew square script (figs 2, 6). Through this, it can best be seen that a distinct, Jewish artistic will governed the master's work—a will which also infuses those forms adopted from the wider world of art. This can be recognized in the

remarkable Torah ark from Colmberg (fig. 1) with its taste for the colorful and graphic. Tender animal depictions can be found in the peacocks in the synagogue in Colmberg (fig. 3) and Schäbisch-Hall (fig. 7), as well as rare motifs in other works by the master artist showing three hares arranged in a circle—something only familiar to us to date in Christian iconography—so that it appears that each hare has two spoons, although there are only three spoons in all. The importance of this composition, which can also be found in Colmberg, has not been researched within the framework of Jewish mysticism. It would appear that the origin of this is not a mere whim of the master painter, as it can also be found in engravings whose Jewish creators had no contact to Elieser Sußmann z"l at all.

The preoccupation with folk art of a kind which can be called Jewish does not just reveal something new—something unknown to a wide circle of people—but gives us the opportunity to expand our knowledge in this field of cultural history.

Not only do works such as those shown above contribute to this, but the many small works of art—such as miniatures in manuscripts and the decorative ornamentation of pewter objects—do so too. We hope to elucidate these in a later publication.

*(Translation: Christopher Wynne)*

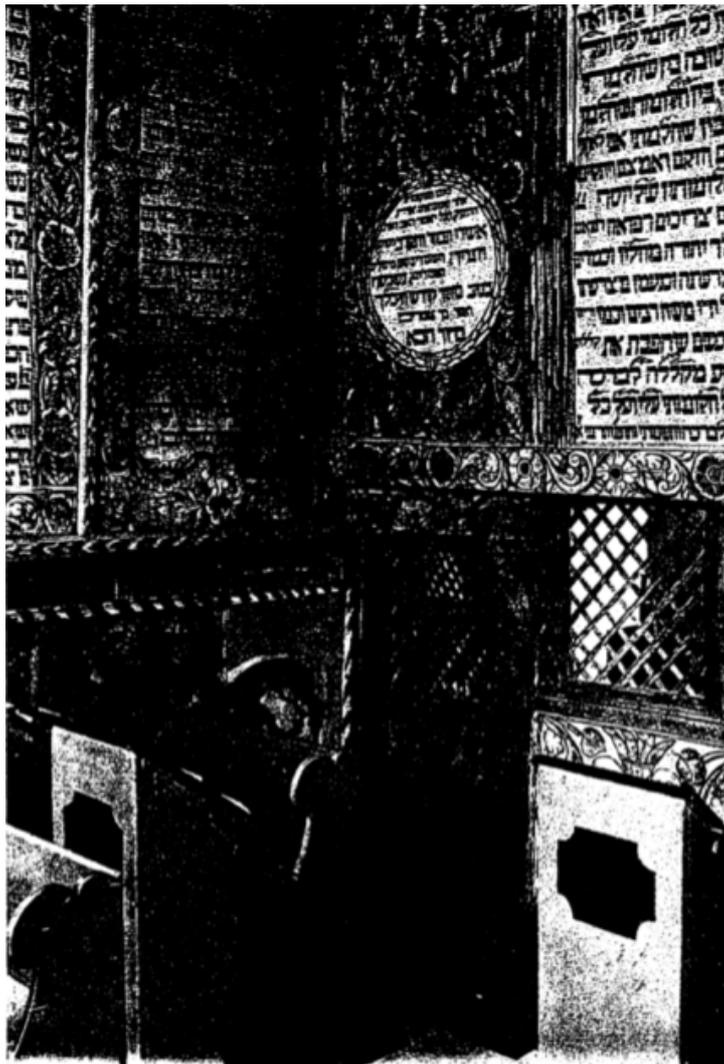


fig. 6: Bechhofen Synagogue. Southwest corner.



fig. 7: Former synagogue in Unterlimpurg (Museum Schwäbisch-Hall). Sample of ornamental work.



fig. 8 : Bechhofen Synagogue. Section of wall.

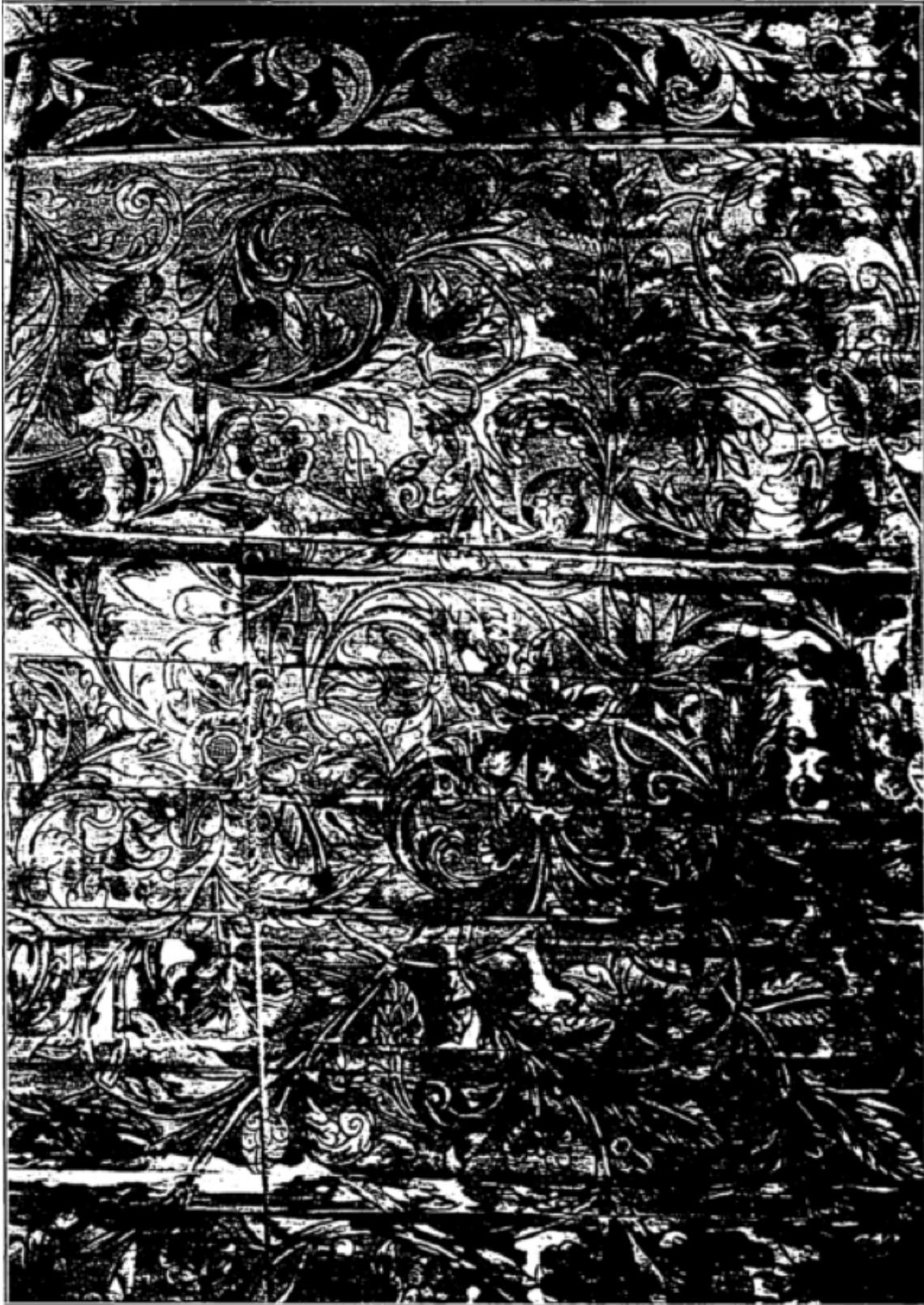


fig. 9 : Former synagogue in Kirchheim (Luitpoldmuseum Würzburg). Section of ceiling.