

Association for a Jewish Museum in Breslau¹

1.

On Bsamim Boxes and Old Haggadot

By Georg Hermann

A few months ago I viewed the Jewish ritual objects in the Rothschild Collection in Cluny, Paris—a foundation set up by Baroness Natalie de Rothschild. Gold and silverware, books, Torah scrolls, and manuscripts, Shabbat and Hannukah lamps and Bsamim boxes, circumcision instruments, very rich and delicate filigree work, embroidery and curtains for Torah shrines, and so forth. I was left with sentiments of two kinds which were strangely contrary. On the one hand, there was that of the art lover and the collector who is used to seeing the artistic in things; the other was of a personal nature, for me as a Jew, for the people who used these objects. In fact, more than that, it was a feeling that I cannot describe but only outline. It results from how I felt about these ritual objects that date from centuries past ... a shuddering feeling: objects which served people who bore similar traits to me; which were like a shimmer of gold and silver in their lives; furthermore, objects that were crafted by people with similar spiritual characteristics. By craftsmen with a joy for artistic tradition and artistic aspects. On seeing these objects I had a heightened sense of *tatvamasi*—"I am that"—more than I otherwise have with works of art. All of these sentiments, however, are in conflict with one another.

Up until a few decades ago the notion existed that rituals held in the Jewish temple and the Jewish home were far removed from the world of art. Only through collections such as the one in Cluny and the museum for Jewish objects in Frankfurt, and more recently in Berlin, has a wider circle been taught otherwise. We have now become aware that, in both instances, finely executed items were created which we should neither oversee nor—as my interest over many years in the fine arts and perhaps even more so of the applied arts tells me—overestimate them. Even the best items merely modified the stylistic components of a period to suit their own aim. In most cases they preserve the styles of times long past with an idiosyncratic—one is tempted to say "Jewish"—tenacity. The silver Bsamim box from my grandparents' house is very much in the style of a Gothic monstrance (if the Gothic monstrance itself is not the Bsamim box). Everyone would think that the small, old synagogue rooms with their painted wooden panelling covered all over in arcanthus patterns, as exhibited by the Luitpold Museum in Würzburg and the Municipal Museum in Schwäbisch-Hall, were from the Late Gothic period if they had not been dated, as far as I can remember, to the beginning of the 18th century. The styles used in Jewish art, therefore, exhibit the same tenacity in adhering to designs that already existed as, for example, seen in various forms of rural art which picked up on urban furniture and fashion styles, altered them and retained them over centuries, while the originals had long since been forgotten and had become antiquated.

The emotive value, the fluidum, which these things exude, the aureole that surrounds them, is something that comes into its own when the place religious rituals have in our lives becomes one of lesser importance. When we catch sight of these things or even hold them in our hands something is

1 Verein Jüdisches Museum e.V. zu Breslau, Breslau [c. 1928].

triggered within us, similar to when we suddenly see the depiction of the great menorah on the Arch of Titus which the victorious Romans paraded as a trophy. We suddenly perceive this endlessly long ancestral lineage which extends to the present day, to us—something of which we are no longer aware—not as a symbol but as a tangible fact. What we have are the symbols of their lives.

There are not that many things which exude an air of holiness and which form a link to the past as our written and religious heritage. The few things we have, however, should be protected and preserved for those who come after us. To look after them, and to do this all the more than has been done up until now, is a totally primitive sentiment which has nothing to do with being pious and which—whether we accept it or not—exists in every Jewish person to the same degree and, by its very nature, has to exist, as the present is but a hyphen between a long and nebulous past and a long, unknown future. All we can do is to pass on this past to the future ... before we ourselves belong to the past.

I have often thought about how collections of Jewish artifacts should be expanded. We cannot deny that ritual art worthy of mention no longer exists today, or if it does exist then in a thoroughly different way to how it used to be. And yet Judaism—as this can hardly be called into doubt either—still exists today and indeed is barely less pronounced than in the past. Its expression is less obvious and less easy to define. Judaism no longer exists in a purely religious and ritual sense and is, in no way, more isolated from the world around it than before. What—I ask myself—will be left of it? What will be preserved? Where will one have the possibility to inform oneself about it, to create a picture for oneself? Today, this is already hardly possible and later it will be even more difficult. I find the sociological aspect of the Jewish family, for example, fascinating. I want to know to what extent we German Jews have contributed to German and European cultural achievements in artistic, scientific, social, philosophical, mercantile, in short in all creative spheres? Who can tell me about this? Where can I get a picture of this? And in another twenty, forty years, where will I be able to see what things were like today? Perhaps I would like to gain an insight into the structure of Jewish families from 1880 up to the present day ... but where and how am I to do this? Nowhere! Nowhere! To date, neither the one nor the other can be found anywhere in the world.

I see this as the main task of the Jewish museum. First of all ... to maintain Jewish family archives, to provide encouragement and advice and to conserve things. Portraits, photos, documents, books, certificates and achievements, characteristic furnishings and mementos which have belonged to my family over three, four, five generations are now scattered all over the place ... it would certainly be informative were everything gathered together and kept by one family member. Nobody has taken the initiative and in ten, twenty years time this will all have been forgotten and dispersed. Instead of this—you see—there must be a private or public place to ensure that does not happen, that everything remains together. Where, however, can we see the contribution made by German Jews in the past thirty years in the field of German painting, literature, music and theater? Nowhere! Nowhere! That people collect books about Jews can frequently be found (not only in my library does this genre in literature form a section of its own) but I have never come across a place where Jewish authors are collected. Or even an overview of the work of Jewish painters or one that shows the life's work of the likes of Ehrlich or Neißer (to mention just two residents of Breslau). All these things, however, are part and parcel of a Jewish museum just as much as the silver filigree work of an old Basmim box and a collection of the designs of old Jewish tombstones.

I know, I know—this is not something that can be done overnight but one must, at long last, slowly make a start to prepare and build up something of the kind.

2.

The Emergence of the Jewish Museum

By Dr. [Ernst] Rechnitz, Managing Director

How should we make old rituals, old customs in our religion easier to understand for our children, for outsiders; how can we make these more accessible? It is no coincidence that, in our time, which relies on the visual, the wish is emerging all over the place to collect and exhibit Jewish artifacts, and to expand and enhance the awakening renaissance of Judaism in this respect, too.

In its exhibition “The Jewish Woman—The Jewish House” in October 1927, the Social Group for working Jewish women and girls in Breslau provided some idea of existing Jewish ritual and artistic objects—objects which were equally well to be found in the East—for the first time. Although its motivation was a different one, the acclaim was so long-lasting that the elders of the Breslau synagogue congregation considered whether the present was a favorable time for establishing a permanent amenity for our large congregation.

Our location in the East seemed especially suitable to turn this plan into reality, as a substantial amount of material from the separated regions, which otherwise would not be saved, was still in existence. Recognizing the magnitude and diversity of the tasks that a Jewish museum would have to fulfill at that time, the council of the synagogue congregation only wanted to go ahead with the plan if friends could be found who were interested and prepared to give up their time and energy to set up a beacon for Jewish art in the East.

To prepare and define the scope of the task a committee was established which, in eager consultation, dealt with the advance work necessary to found the Jewish museum association. It was not just a question of founding a new association but much more a legal form had to be chosen which incorporated friends of this idea and benefactors most effectively.

The assembly elected the board members listed in Part 4 on March 29, 1928, who had in the meantime endeavored to increase the circle of friends so as to win those important local figures in the town and province to the idea.

That a Jewish museum is not solely a matter for our religious community but is something that would be an enrichment for everyone, was acknowledged by influential art circles in our city. Professor [Erwin] Hintze, head of the Breslau Schlossmuseum, in particular, is to be thanked for his recognition of the great and manifold tasks involved and his commitment in providing a home for our museal department in the Schlossmuseum itself.

In this way we can hope that, through the opening of the museum, we have created a new space which will enrich our city and the region, as well as our congregation.

Will there be a sufficient number of artistic objects, asks the skeptic, to justify collecting? Despite the fact that, through its very nature, no overview has been made to date of the overall number of

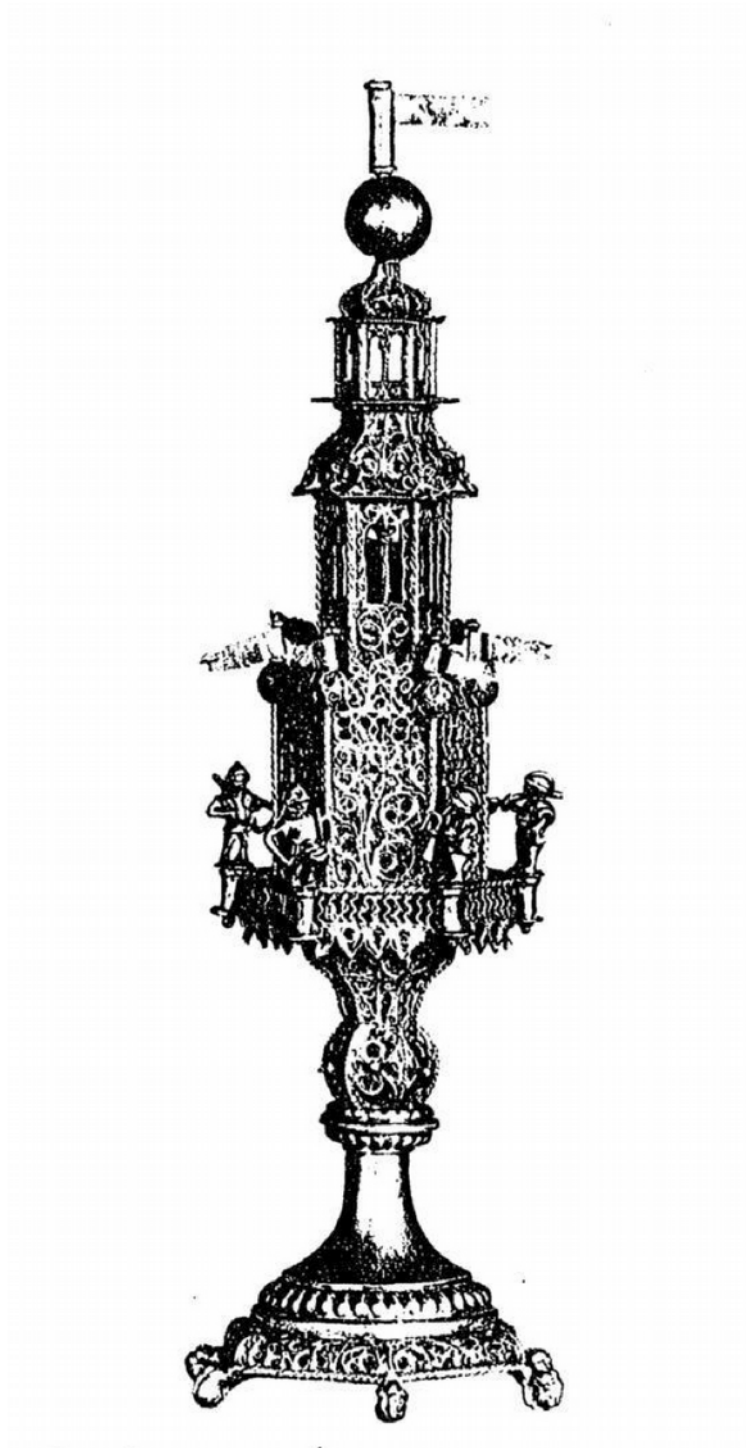
treasures, the history of Silesia and the separated territories are a guarantee for the fruitfulness of such an undertaking. It should not be forgotten that in East Germany, and Silesia in particular, through the absorption of Viennese and Italian, Slavic and Bohemian-Moravian influences in German art, a wealth of information can be found which is not available in other parts of the country where there are fewer nationalities.

Everyday, those running the society are inundated with new ideas, new perspectives, new associations. Building up a museum must take place behind closed doors. Here, where cultural works is carried out for the long term, it is not possible to report of success after just a few weeks or months. This would endanger the way our collective work is regarded. The larger the circle of friends and benefactors, the faster the idea finds fertile ground in wider circles in which such a location for scholarship and the arts is considered important. Needless to say, living artists will not be neglected in the course of collecting objects from the past.

Where are the men and women in the city and in the provinces who are prepared to donate funds to the association, the Jüdisches Museum e.V., which it needs to turn its aim into reality?



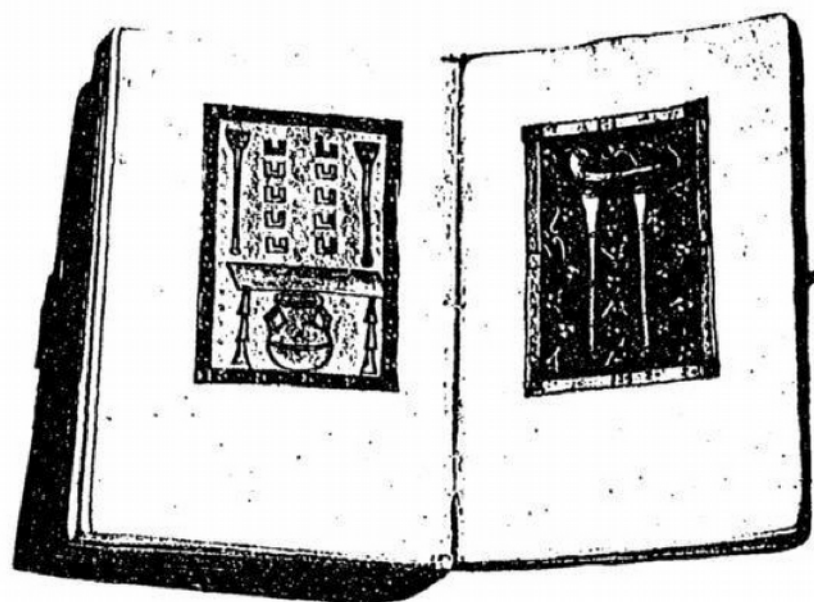
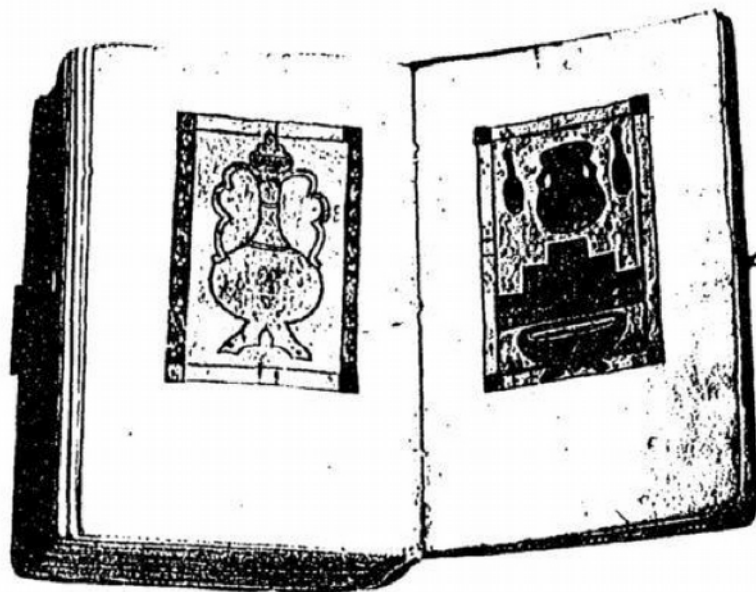
Gilded silver cup for Pesach celebrations in the home. Crafted by Johann Christoph Stengler, Augsburg, c. 1764. Hebrew inscription: "I will bring you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians" (Second Book of Moses, 6:6).



Filigree silver spice box from the 19th century.



Torah shrine curtain. In the centre: the Holy Ark with the cherubim. Inscriptions: Gift of Koppel, son of Chajim of Tworóg and his wife Chaja, daughter of Abraham of Proskow, 1783.



The manuscript from which the four plates have been taken belongs to the Saraval Manuscript Collection in the library of the Jewish theology seminar in Breslau. It comes from Italy and contains the Pentateuch and the Song of Solomon. It is written on parchment in delicate Italian block script and, in all probability, dates from the end of the 14th century. The ornamentation on the cover, however, points to the 16th century. The first parchment folios are largely illustrations related to Exodus, chapters 25 and 35–38.

The plates reproduced here show the following: 1. Altar and sacrificial objects; 2. Small oil jug; 3. Music instruments: shofar and trumpet; 4. Table (with a jug below) and showbread.

The works are Gothic in character. The images were created in Italy, probably in Florence, in the 14th century. The objects depicted in gold and silver are set on the parchment on a colored ground.

3.

What should be included in the new Jewish Museum?

By Prof. Dr. Ing. Alfred Grotte

Having dealt with the reasons leading to the constitution of our association in the previous chapter, the guidelines for establishing and expanding the museum are to be explained here.

The thinking behind the type of object to be acquired and the way these should be presented is to be adapted to modern approaches toward museum displays.

Structured and managed according to strictly academic principles the museum is to embrace two main aspects: purely business-orientated and art-historical. Who knows, for instance, that in 1689 R. Schabtei Baß, born in Kalisz, a Jewish scholar of the Prague School who learned the art of book printing and the book trade in Amsterdam, was given the privilege to print—a hereditary right connected with the House of Dyhrn near Breslau—and ran the first Jewish book printing company in the East which supplied all of East Germany, Poland, and Lithuania with books for religious services and Jewish teaching, books which up until then had had to be imported almost exclusively from Amsterdam? He and his successor, his son-in-law, had a strong influence not merely on Jewish scholarship but also on the development of the art of book printing. The people he worked with came from Amsterdam, Berlin, Austria, Venice, Hungary, Bohemia, (Prague), and Southern Germany—evidence of the broadness of the Jewish art business that had evolved here. The same is true of Jewish cabinet makers, gold and silversmiths, as Jews were present where they were not held in check by the prohibitions of guilds, and were extremely skilled and adaptable craftsmen. And as so little is known of the history of Judaism in Silesia, the dogged struggle for their centuries's-old *heimat*, their influence on culture, science, and the economic life of the country, all the printed material, photographs, purchase agreements, letters of protection, Jewish receipts, family documents, and royal decrees should be put on view. Maps and town plans will be used to explain the history of Jewish communities. Jewish family histories based on tomb inscriptions and other documents will constitute a valuable supplement to contemporary history. Busts, portraits, medallions, and coins will similarly be collected.

This purely art-historical department should also include several things from the ancient and medieval periods of Judaism as a whole without being restricted to Eastern Germany or Eastern Europe, something on which our museum places great importance—monuments from the beginnings of the history of Israel and photographs of old and ancient ritual sites, cemeteries, Jewish quarters, and ghettos.

The second museum group should entail art-historical objects, products of an artistic nature for ritual use in the synagogue and the home; these include exquisite silver objects, valuable ceramics, glasses, zinc, brass, and textiles. The collection is to be carefully supplemented by old paintings, portraits of outstanding Jewish figures, as well as individual artworks in black and white, and drawings. This section should include the singular and invaluable prints and manuscripts of which a large quantity exists in Silesia, and precious documents which trace the religious history of German Judaism. Just as

hand-written bibles are among the most valuable objects in non-Jewish museums, incunabula and prayer books with their rich, colored paintings will help arouse the visitors's interest. They will demonstrate the exquisite miniatures and initials and their glowing array of colors which monks once tirelessly created in silent seclusion, as well as medieval Jewish scribes who, with boundless love, provided illustrations for uplifting books, often dilettantishly, but also in the artistic style of the time which was, for Jews, otherwise so uncertain and martyr-like.

The purpose of the museum, however, should not be exhausted simply through its presentations. Many of the objects made available to us should, archivally sorted, be made accessible to anyone who wants to carry out research in the musuem, who wants to work through the systematically recorded material available here, which cannot be found in any other place in the East, for the good of Jewish art and scholarship.

In this way our museum should and will have a beneficial impact; it will help dismantle the old prejudice of Judaism's purely materialistic approach, of its reputed hostility toward art; it will finally show the contribution that German Judaism in the East has made to the cultural and social life of our fatherland in a more narrow sense.

(Translation: Christopher Wynne)