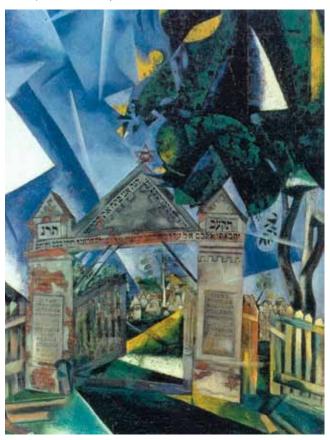# The Heritage of Jewish Cemeteries in Europe

Joachim Jacobs

The painting by Marc Chagall (Fig. 1) shows the entrance to the Jewish cemetery in his home town of Vitebsk. It sets the scene for this very short journey through the immense heritage of Jewish cemeteries of Europe [1]. But at the beginning, we have to look at Erez Israel first, where it was the norm since the time of the patriarchal fathers about 1 600 BCE to bury the dead in caves, as in Hebron. The majority of families buried their dead in their own, separate vaults. True cemeteries as communal burial places are found only in the post-Biblical period.

The creation of communal burial places reflects a process of increasing population density and urbanisation. The dead from cities and larger villages could no longer be laid to rest in individual graves or in caves scattered across the landscape. The growing number of dead and the ever-dwindling amount of space available ultimately led to the merging of subterranean single graves in specially-constructed, again subterranean cemeteries: the catacombs.

Fig. 1 The Cemetery Gate, oil painting by Marc Chagall, 1917 (artist's estate)

Burial in caves and catacombs remained the most common Jewish method of burial during the entire period of Antiquity. Unlike the caves, which were usually only intended to accommodate individuals or families, the catacombs offered purpose-built, collective burial sites, i. e. subterranean cemeteries.

Beth She'arim in Galilee in Israel became a central burial place for the Jews of Palestine and the diaspora from the 2nd century CE. With entrance gates, forecourts and rooms for setting up sarcophagi, these catacombs, which were used until the 4th century, are among the best-preserved examples of catacombs from the Roman period outside Europe and their typology is similar to that of the catacombs in Rome, which were built around the same time. In Beth She'arim, the evolution from a separate family grave to a communal burial ground was completed. The catacomb had become a subterranean cemetery.

Let's now turn towards Europe. To begin with, Rome was not one of the centres of Jewish life. It was only when Rome gradually grew to become a commercial metropolis in the following decades that more and more Jews moved there, creating large synagogue communities from imperial times onwards. Despite the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 CE, the living conditions of Jews in the Roman Empire were such that, often with the same legal status as Roman citizens, they enjoyed the same rights to religious worship. The system of polytheism gave the Jews enough scope to establish themselves as a tolerated minority within the Roman pantheon.

The dead were laid to rest in catacombs like those at Vigna Randanini and Villa Torlonia, in accordance with the tradition brought from Israel and in line with local topographical conditions. The term "catacomb" is derived from "catacomba", a compound of the Greek "kata" and the Latin "comba", meaning "near the sepulchres". Originally, it designated a specific place on the Via Appia near Rome, but since the 9th century it has been applied to all subterranean burial places in Italy as well as in other countries.

Rome's catacombs (Fig. 2) were situated on the metropolis's arterial roads. But in the empire's smaller cities too, such as Venosa and Syracuse, the Jews buried their dead in catacombs. This burial practice was adopted by the Christians, many of whom were initially Jewish. Non-Jews and non-Christians, on the other hand, buried their dead mostly in the ground or in monuments above the ground. "In point of fact, the mode of burial followed in catacombs is undoubtedly of Jewish origin." [2] Although some modern authors [3] see the origins of the Roman catacombs also as a result of lack of space above ground, scholars like Eric Meirs point out the

Jewish origins of the catacombs. And the late scholar Künzl notes: "The catacomb at Monteverde in Rome was built as early as in the 1st century BCE (…). Therefore the Jewish catacombs predate the Christian ones (…) and anyway, the Christians adopted the concept of subterranean burial places from the Jews." [4]

With the gradual decline and collapse of the Roman Empire in the 4th and 5th centuries, the Jews' social and economic positions suffered, too. The attempt by Emperor Julian (361–363) to suppress Christianity, which had spread like wildfire since the tolerance edict of Nicaea in 325 and to create a model for the state based on Neo-Platonist thinking was cut short by his sudden death in Persia. Julian, although brought up as a Christian, announced that he was not a Christian from 361 onwards and even planned to restore the temple in Jerusalem. Finally, Emperor Theodosius (379–395) elevated Christianity to the status of state religion.

In southern Italy, small Jewish communities survived in a few towns such as Venosa. Initially, the catacombs of Venosa appear to have continued in use. But some 23 known gravestones from the 9th century are not from the catacombs, but rather from a nearby cemetery discovered shortly after the catacombs.

"The dead were first buried in the catacombs and then, later, probably by no later than the 9th century, in a cemetery, meaning that the transition from the catacombs to the cemetery probably occurred in the early Middle Ages." [5] The same happened in Rome, where above the Porta Portese catacomb in the early Middle Ages a cemetery was created. Both in Rome and Venosa the transition from the ancient catacomb burials to above-ground cemeteries can be studied. No cemeteries from the 8th to the early 11th centuries have survived, however – only a few isolated gravestones. This led Sylvie-Anne Goldberg to conclude that: "Ordinary Jews were buried (…) in funerary spaces shared by others and doubtless without the benefit of headstones, as was customary in the *extra muros* cemeteries of the late Middle Ages." [6]

The presumption that Jews buried their dead alongside Christians in multi-faith cemeteries outside the areas where they lived – probably in separate sections – is a plausible explanation for the lack of Jewish cemeteries during the early Middle Ages. The Jewish parts of the cemeteries were then ransacked and destroyed together with the Christian graves over the course of subsequent centuries. The small number of preserved gravestones can also be explained by the fact that, up until the 11th century, these were frequently made from fast-weathering wood or no headstone marked the grave at all. This practice reflects the pronouncement by Maimonides (1135–1204) instructing that no gravestones should be erected at the heads of the pious, anyway.

Between the 9th and 11th centuries, a trend developed of performing Christian burials close to churches or actually inside them. This practice was of course not acceptable to the Jews and from the 11th century the first separate Jewish cemeteries, such as those in Speyer and Worms, began to reappear (Fig. 3). The creation of the Jewish cemetery of the later Middle Ages, as can still be seen in the cemetery 'Holy Sand' in Worms today, is thus the result of religious segregation.

Fig. 2 Rome, Via Appia, Vigna Randanini, Jewish catacomb, 2nd century CE (photo: Hans D. Beyer)

Fig. 3 Worms, medieval cemetery 'Judensand' (photo: Hans D. Beyer)

Fig. 4 Istanbul, view from the Jewish cemetery at Hasköy of the Golden Horn, English 19th century watercolour (photo: Joachim Jacobs)

From the 11th century, with the re-emergence of major cities and safer trading routes, architectural traces of Jewish life began to reappear in Europe. Thriving Jewish communities grew up in the major cities along the trading routes of

Fig. 5 Prague Olsany (Zizkow), the entrance, painting from 1840 (photo: Jewish Museum Prague)

the Rhineland, as well as in Spain, England, France and Italy. The Jews established synagogues and ritual baths (Mikwe), which were often built by the same architects responsible for the large Romanesque and later Gothic cathedrals that also sprang up around the same time. The cemeteries of this period mostly are the only remaining witnesses to communities that became the victims of murderous pogroms during the crusades and major plague epidemics.

The cemeteries of the Iberian Peninsula, which the Jews built until they were finally driven out in the late 15th century, however, have all been lost, at least superficially. Today, gravestones from this period are found in museums and in the excavations of Montjuic in Barcelona. Since most of the cemeteries in Spain and Portugal were built outside towns and villages, some have been retained as meadows, fields or parks. The gravestones have gone, but the graves are often still there.

The remains of later cemeteries like in Frankfurt, Venice and Prague show many structural similarities in terms of their design: they were originally situated outside or on the outskirts of the city, were surrounded by walls and most of them appear not to have had any *tahara* houses – the *tahara* ritual being performed in homes or community halls. The cemeteries were filled in chronological order, with law-abiding people, such as rabbis, being buried separately from sinners, who were generally interred along the cemetery walls. The graves were laid at the prescribed distance from one another, mostly in irregular rows without any walkway areas. The Jews were only rarely given extension areas for their cemeteries which resulted in cemeteries being very densely populated. This reflects the cramped living conditions of the over-populated Jewish quarters that were also rarely expanded. If space became short and the cemetery could not be extended, soil was laid over the existing graves and new graves dug without disturbing those underneath. Prague is a famous example for this. Here since the Middle Ages, the cemetery and residential area had formed so compact a unit that it is no wonder many gravestones bear a quote from Jeremiah (9 : 21): "Death is come up into our windows."

After the victory of the Catholic monarchs Ferdinand and Isabella over Granada, the last Muslim 'Moorish kingdom' in Spain, in 1492, the monarchs announced the 'Edict of Expulsion': Jews had to leave their homeland, known to

them as Sepharad, within four months. However, many Jews had left the Iberian peninsula for havens abroad long before the fall of Granada. Some went to North Africa, particularly to Morocco. A large number fled to Istanbul (Fig. 4), former Constantinople, which had been taken by the Turks in 1453. In the capital of fallen Byzantium, now the Ottoman Empire, they were warmly welcomed by the Sultan. Jewish life prospered under Turkish rule for centuries and a unique blend of Muslim and Jewish culture developed, which is clearly visible in the style of dress and gravestones in this picture.

Marranos had left the Iberian peninsula to spread across the globe. They went to England, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands and the New World. In many places they met Ashkenazi Jews, with tensions often arising. In some locations, Ashkenazim and Sephardim established parallel communities with separate synagogues, as in Venice and Istanbul, and – more rarely – also their own cemeteries, as in Amsterdam and London. Often, however, the dead were buried in shared sites. Berlin, Krakow and Rome are examples of such common ground. Despite the open anti-Semitism of Protestant reformers such as Martin Luther, life improved considerably for 17th century Jews in non-Catholic countries, as well as in the Ottoman empire. In Amsterdam, Marranos who had re-embraced Judaism in hordes, following flight from the Inquisition, were as well-treated as in Istanbul, London and Venice. While the reasons for this were primarily economic and political, Protestant powers such as the Netherlands and England, and later Prussia, proved increasingly tolerant on matters of religious practice.

In Prague's Olsany cemetery (Zizkov district), a new trend developed from the end of the 18th century (Fig. 5). For the 800 years in which separate Jewish cemeteries had been situated outside residential areas they were built in accordance with the rules of *halakha* but with little regard to aesthetic beauty. From 1784, however, Prague's Olsany cemetery featured the designs of contemporary English landscape gardens. The site aimed to counter sombre thoughts with beauty.

This beginning aesthetisation of the Jewish cemetery is a key developmental strand. The park cemetery of Prague's Olsany is therefore an important bridge between the traditional Jewish cemetery and the cemeteries of the time of the Emancipation. The process of emancipation for the Jews in Europe, based on the ideas of the Enlightenment, first led to legal consequences in revolutionary France and continued gradually and with varying degrees of success in the other countries of Europe. After the end of the First World War, and as a result of the collapse of the late-feudal regimes in Germany, Austro-Hungary and Russia, Jews in Europe were regarded almost everywhere as equal citizens. The Jewish cemeteries of the 19th century reflect emancipation and Jewish integration into their surrounding societies in a rather impressive way. But the adoption of building and grave constructions and of mourning customs from Christian compatriots also shows the other side of the coin: assimilation and the abandonment of Jewish tradition.

The nature of the generally walled-in Jewish cemetery lying outside the gates of residential areas remained unchanged until the end of the 18th century when, during the

Enlightenment and the French Revolution, rulers – just like the Roman emperors of their day – decreed that for hygiene reasons cemeteries had to be moved out of the cities and churches to beyond the city gates. Many old Jewish cemeteries, swallowed up by the cities' growth and situated within the extended fortifications of the city walls, now fell victim to this revived regulation and had to be closed, even though they were full anyway. The spatial separation between Jewish and Christian burial sites, which was complete by the later Middle Ages, was thus undone. Both were now once again located, just as in Roman times, outside the city gates, and it again became possible to build them next to each other or even create them as jointly functioning units.

The circle that started with the multi-faith cemeteries of the early Middle Ages therefore closed in 1804 in Napoleonic Paris, when once again a multi-faith cemetery was built: the cemetery of Père-Lachaise. For the first time in Europe, the emancipated Jews were assigned a separate section, initially separated by a wall. This trend for creating Jewish sections within cemeteries built by state organisations or town councils continued throughout the 19th century and into the 20th. At the same time, however, there were communities who insisted on their own separate cemeteries.

Virtually all Jewish burial sites created in cities in the 19th and 20th centuries, regardless of whether they form part of a multi-faith cemetery or are separate, share the already mentioned trend towards making the cemetery grounds more pleasant and less forbidding. The early example of Prague's Olsany park cemetery was continued throughout the 19th century, although its landscaped designs were rarely found until later years, the Rat-Beil-Strasse cemetery in Frankfurt being a rare example of just such a landscaped cemetery from the early 19th century.

In Dessau in 1787, a communal burial site was created that was to be pioneering for cemetery design in the next few decades. The square cemetery, with avenues of trees (therefore called 'Alleequartiersfriedhof'), central circular flower bed and enclosure of the grave areas became the model for the new cemeteries built outside the city gates.

It foreshadowed the cemeteries of the second half of the 19th century with their large squares, crossroads and spatial segregation of the classes of grave, representing a faithful depiction of the world of the living. The living conditions of the Jews, whether in palaces or villas, or in unhealthy, overcrowded tenements and the inherently strict social hierarchy were all reflected almost exactly in the cemetery. The maxim of equality in death, increasingly questioned since the start of the 19th century, was now completely abandoned. The rich built grave monuments whose size, style and material revealed a desire for an eternal presence this side of the grave, one that was often accompanied by an eroded belief in *olam haba*, the world of the future following the arrival of the Messiah. Berlin's Weißensee cemetery (opened 1880) surely represents the highpoint of this development towards the beautification of the Jewish cemetery in Europe. Its elaborately designed system of 15 km long avenues and squares and its grave monuments for the grand and the poor is in this form and size a unique expression of this process and of the integration of the Jews into the surrounding socie-

Fig. 6 The cemetery of Bobo, former Galicia, Poland (photo: Chris Schwarz)

ties. At the same time, many Jews left Judaism, converting to Christianity or leaving their communities and were thus never interred in the 'houses of life'.

In parallel to the design-related and functional restructuring of cemetery grounds, increasingly complex developments took place in cemetery buildings. Initially, there are the early simple *tahara* houses of the 17th and 18th centuries, such as those in Worms, Amsterdam, London or Georgensgmünd. However, in the second half of the 18th century, concerns over the burial of people who were merely comatose rather than dead became widespread and along with it criticism of the Jews' practice of a quick burial. As a consequence the cemetery buildings that appeared around the end of the 18th century were intended increasingly for the purpose of watching the bodies to make sure that the victims were not just comatose. Such a building was requested by the 'Society of Friends', set up in 1792 by Jewish Enlightenists of Berlin. Designed by Salomo Sachs, Prussia's first Jewish architect,[3] this cemetery building, to be built in the neo-classical style, featured a room for observing the bodies,[4] but no *tahara*.

The first Jewish cemetery buildings also started to make their mark on the town skyline around this time. Prompted by the spirit of the Enlightenment, the Prince of Anhalt-Dessau, for example, had his architect Friedrich Wilhelm von Erdmannsdorff (1736–1800) build a synagogue and a cemetery, complete with neo-Palladian ceremonial building, for the local Wörlitz Jewry. This ceremonial building no longer stood hidden behind walls, but instead took up a strong position, just like later synagogues in Europe, within the town's streets. Design then progressed from an 'inspector's house', complete with mourning room and *tahara* at the Schönhauser Allee in Berlin, plus an elaborate, neo-classical gatehouse with similar rooms in Frankfurt to the architecturally complete, complex cemetery buildings of Berlin Weißensee, St Petersburg and Kaliningrad. These buildings contained all the necessary functional facilities, such as a mourning room, waiting room, *tahara*, cool rooms, toilets, offices, archives, workshops and even horticultural nurseries. Furthermore, the mourning room, which was a new development of the 19th century, became the focus of the cemetery as a whole. Eulogies were no longer held outdoors from a pulpit but instead were delivered in the warmth of the often heated mourning rooms. Their elaborate décor and furnishings reflected the communities' wealth, and the

cemetery altogether, together with the graves themselves, became a representation of the Jewish bourgeoisie. Styles of the surrounding society were adopted everywhere, although the heated discussions that surrounded the construction of synagogues in the 19th century concerning the correct, ideally 'Jewish' style, were barely detectable in the cemetery buildings, probably due to the fact that they were less in the public eye.

Only a few architects, such as Béla Lajta in Budapest, tried to maintain a symbiosis of the country's national style and formal echoes of the Jews' Middle Eastern origins – in this case Hungarian castle entrance building and Mesopotamian Temple *tahara* building. And in 1929 Erich Mendelsohn finally came up with a deliberate, classic modern design for the construction of a Jewish cemetery in Königsberg (Kaliningrad).

However, a different world existed outside the large cities and towns of Europe in the grip of the First World War. In the villages and small towns of Western Europe and the *shtetls* of Eastern Europe, the old cemetery forms – narrow rows of graves, uniform headstones and strict separation from Christian cemeteries – were preserved (Fig. 6).

The Auschwitz concentration camp was finally liberated in January 1945. Out of the six million Jews murdered in Europe, almost none were accorded a place in a 'House of Life'. After spring 1945 the few Jews who had survived tried to leave Europe as quickly as possible. Everywhere in previously occupied Europe, the Jewish communities, which were slowly re-establishing themselves in spite of everything, remained extremely small. There was simply no need for new cemeteries. Berlin and Salonica are among the few exceptions and it is only since the collapse of the Soviet Union that the Jewish communities of Europe have begun to grow again and more new cemeteries are being built.

In 2003, a new cemetery in Amsterdam was opened. It exemplifies how the rules of *halakha* are followed by a liberal community with a strong sense of tradition and of the history of European Jewry. And an 'Israel' stone wall of the Amsterdam *tahara* house shows a very long journey from medieval Worms and its 'Holy Sand' mythically brought from the Holy Land.

Zusammenfassung

Das Erbe der jüdischen Friedhöfe in Europa

Von den jüdischen Friedhöfen des Frühen Mittelalters gibt es nur wenige Spuren, da sie wahrscheinlich Gemeinschafts-

lagen mit christlichen Gräberfeldern waren und zusammen mit diesen aufgegeben wurden. Nachdem um das Jahr 1000 Tendenzen einsetzten, christliche Begräbnisse an und in Kirchen vorzunehmen – eine Veränderung, der die Juden nicht folgen konnten und wollten – begann die Separation der jüdischen Friedhöfe von den Kirchhöfen. Aus diesem Grund finden sich aus der Zeit ab dem 11. Jahrhundert vermehrt erhaltene jüdische Grabsteine oder ganze Friedhöfe, wie der in Worms.

Bis ins späte 18. Jahrhundert sollte sich das Aussehen der Friedhöfe, von Unterschieden in der Bestattungskultur der Sephardim und Aschkenazim und lokalen und topographischen Unterschieden abgesehen, nicht grundsätzlich ändern. Sie waren meist ummauert, lagen außerhalb der Wohnorte und die Gestalt der Grabsteine folgte überwiegend dem Diktum der Gleichheit Aller im Tode. Die Friedhöfe waren dicht belegt und manchmal, wie in Prag, fanden Bestattungen übereinander statt.

Unter dem Einfluss der Aufklärung und aus hygienischen Gründen befahlen ab dem Ende des 18. Jahrhunderts nahezu alle Herrscher Europas, Friedhöfe innerhalb von Städten zu schließen. Das bedeutete auch das Ende der traditionellen jüdischen Friedhöfe. Erste neue Friedhofsanlagen außerhalb der Stadtgrenzen entstanden, und diese wurden nun nicht mehr nur nach praktischen Gesichtspunkten angelegt, sondern es wurde versucht, die jüdischen Friedhöfe als schöne und besinnliche Orte zu gestalten. Die zuerst im revolutionären Frankreich und mit Verzögerung auch im Rest Europas emanzipierten Juden hatten zusammen mit ihren Friedhöfen die Ghettos verlassen und kamen langsam in der Mitte der Umgebungsgesellschaften an. Die Friedhöfe spiegelten diesen Prozess deutlich wider. Frühen landschaftlichen Anlagen wie Prag Zizkov und Frankfurt am Main folgen bald Begräbnisstätten in der Gestalt von Alleequartiersfriedhöfen, dem dominierenden Typus jüdischer wie christlicher Friedhöfe bis zum Ende des 19. Jahrhunderts.

Der Friedhof Berlin Weißensee stellt mit seinen Kilometer langen Alleen, Rondells und Plätzen den Höhepunkt dieser Entwicklung dar. Diese jüdische Nekropole einer damaligen Weltmetropole ist mit ihren mehr als 110 000 Grabstätten ein getreuer Spiegel der wilhelminischen Klassengesellschaft. Stadtplan und Friedhofsplan ähneln sich in ihrer Gestalt mit Straßen und Plätzen. Vorne ‚wohnen' die Reichen, dahinter die Armen und die bis zu Tempeln auswachsenden Grabmonumente ähneln denen auf christlichen Friedhöfen. Das Trugbild der Integration durch Assimilation zerbrach in Deutschland ab 1933. Nach der Shoa blieben nur wenige überlebende Juden in Deutschland.

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[4] Hannelore KÜNZL, Jüdische Grabkunst. Von der Antike bis heute, Darmstadt 1999, p. 45 (translation by J. Jacobs).

[5] Ibid., p. 64.

[6] Sylvie-Anne GOLDBERG, Crossing the Jabbok, Berkeley / Los Angeles / London 1996, p. 25.