

Jewish Cemeteries in France

G rard Nahon

The medieval cemeteries of the Jewish communities disappeared after the expulsions of 1306, 1394 and 1502. Eighteen museums keep steles, slabs, and fragments from these cemeteries: Aix-en-Provence, Antibes, Bourges, Carpentras, Clermont-Ferrand, Dijon, Lyon, M acon, Mantes-la-Jolie, Nancy, Narbonne, N mes, Orl ans, Paris, Saint-Germain-en-Laye, Strasbourg, Toulouse, and Vienne.¹ These remains, coupled with archival data, may give an idea of the funeral landscape of French medieval Jewry. There is a permanent exhibition of medieval Jewish tombstones at the Mus e d'Art et d'Histoire du Juda isme in Paris.

On the eve of the French Revolution, 80 Jewish cemeteries existed in the outlying areas of the kingdom:² in the French States of the Holy See, i. e. Avignon and Comtat Venaissin (Avignon, Carpentras, Cavaillon, Lisle-sur-la Sorgue); in Alsace and Lorraine which were annexed to the kingdom in 1648; in the south-west of Aquitaine (Bayonne, Bidache, Bordeaux, Labastide-Clairence, Peyrehorade), where since the 16th century Portuguese and Spanish New Christians gradually returned to Judaism.

Most of today's Jewish cemeteries – about 298 – were opened following the decrees or laws of 6 and 15 May 1791, 23 prairial year XII (= 12 June 1804), and 14 November 1881. Today, four historic and legal categories of cemeteries are in existence:

1. old community cemetery,
2. independent cemetery belonging to the municipality,
3. *l'enclos isra elite* in the communal cemetery opened in the 19th century,
4. *le carr e isra elite*, a Jewish plot in communal and inter-communal cemeteries of the 20th century.

This legal frame has been described by Isabelle Meidinger-Gravier in her articles and her unpublished doctoral thesis.³ The best of my information is taken from her works. The oldest of these cemeteries are now in a very bad state. The public authorities have registered some of them in the Inventory of Historical Monuments. Groups of volunteers are working to restore some of them under the guidance of Dr Philippe Pierret, keeper of the Mus e Juif de Belgique: La Fert e sous-Jouarre (Marne), Boulay, Cr ehange and Vantoux (Moselle).

For each of these categories I will show the possible and actual composition of the funeral landscape: enclosing wall, entrance and portal, resting place in the proper sense, depository called "house of purification" (in Hebrew *taharah*), memorial monument, private and collective graves. The publications of the "Cercle de G n alogie juive" include monographs on some cemeteries and listing the names of



Fig. 1 Cemetery of the Portuguese Jews (1780–1810), 46 avenue de Flandre, Paris (Photo: G rard Nahon)

the persons buried in the plot.⁴ Two sites on the internet provide a first inventory of the French cemeteries: www.alloj.fr/cimetiere.html and <http://judaisme.sdv.fr/>.

Categories according to history and law

Jewish community cemeteries go back to the old r gime. Almost all belong to rural or urban communities in Alsace and Lorraine. The oldest one, Rosenwiller (Bas Rhin)⁵ was in use before 1366. Generally speaking, since the rural communities in the *d partements* of Bas Rhin, Haut Rhin and Moselle are now in the process of disappearing altogether, their cemeteries are for the most part neglected.

In the South-East, the cemeteries of the four ancient papal communities, Carpentras, Cavaillon, Lisle-sur-la-Sorgue, remain. We may add that of Saint-R my-de-Provence, the cemetery of Nimes purchased by Comtadin Jews, the



Fig. 2 Portal of the Jewish cemetery opened before 1400, historic monument (17 April 2007), 13 avenue Antoine-de-la-Salle, Saint-Rémy-de-Provence (Photo: Wikipedia)

Fig. 3 Jewish cemetery opened in 1689, 14 avenue du 14 avril et chemin du Hargous, Bayonne, historic monument (15 July 1998), general view and house of purification (Photo: Philippe Pierret)



one of the Avignonese of Bordeaux in the South West, the Portuguese heritage comprises nine cemeteries: Bayonne, Bidache, Bordeaux (two, only one in use), Labastide-Clairence, Peyrehorade (three, one in use), depending on the Consistory of Bordeaux. The cemetery of the Portuguese Jews in Paris, purchased in 1780 by the famous Jacob Rodrigues Pereire and closed in 1810, belongs to the Consistory of Paris (Fig. 1).⁶

The Revolution had in mind to secularise all the cemeteries and withdraw the property from religious institutions. However, the Jewish communities pleaded the private character of their cemeteries and succeeded in preserving them until the beginning of the 19th century and beyond.

Twelve independent cemeteries in communal property are in use in Bourbonne-les-Bains, Fontainebleau, Gérardmer, Hagental-le-Bas, Hatten, Mackenheim, Marmoutier, Perpignan, Sedan, Seppois-le-Bas, Versailles (§ 4 Versailles), Vitry-le-François. They depend upon the control of the municipi-

palities with regard to the purchase of graves and burials. In practice these cemeteries are administrated by the *Hevra Qaddisha*, the brotherhood of the last duty, which manages the maintenance of the resting-place and the graves.

The decree of 23 Prairial, year XII (= 12 June 1804) established communal cemeteries with walls dividing special fields for each religion and so created confessional cemeteries called *enclos israélites*, or Jewish enclosure. Isabelle Meidinger counted 35 *enclos israélites* in 19th century France, starting with the seventh division of Mont Louis or Eastern cemetery in Paris, known as Père Lachaise, and Aix-en-Provence, Bar-le-Duc, Boulogne-sur-Mer, Brest, Cernay, Chalon-en-Champagne, Chalon-sur-Saone, Dunkerque, Elbeuf, Epernay, Epinal, Grenoble, Le Havre, Lille, Mâcon, Montpellier, Mulhouse, Nancy, Nantes, Orléans, Paris, Perpignan, Rambervillers, Reims, Rouen, Saint-Etienne, Saint-Dizier, Seppois-le-Bas, Tarascon, Toulon, Toulouse, Tours, Troyes, and Valenciennes.

The Jews carried out their burials according to their traditions and were allowed to build a house of purification for washing the dead and singing psalms before the obsequies. The house of purification, the dividing wall and above all the ban on renewing the burial plot distinguish the *enclos israélite* just as much as the community cemetery and the independent cemetery as communal property. The law of 14 November 1881 abolished confessional cemeteries but kept the old space and graves. However, it destroyed the dividing wall and the house of purification.

Nowadays, in the general cemeteries after the expiry of a temporary plot each grave is opened, the remains are gathered and removed, and the ground is then used for another burial. That practice is absolutely forbidden by Jewish law. The main problem for the Jews is that nowadays they have to submit to common law, except in the few old Jewish cemeteries still in existence but generally full.

In accordance with the law of 14 November 1881 towns opened new cemeteries without any religious character, i. e. to be used for the burial of all deceased regardless of their religious affiliation. Nevertheless, the mayors have the authority – but not the obligation – to allot to a particular confession an unenclosed ground. That ground is called *carré juif*, or *Division israélite*. A circular issued by the Home Office on 19 February 2008 described at great length principles and practices of something which appears as a departure from the common law. The *carré juif* is situated in Paris inside the *intra-muros* cemeteries of Batignolles, Belleville, Montmartre, Montparnasse, Passy, Père Lachaise, and especially inside six huge *extra muros* Parisian cemeteries at Bagneux, La Chapelle, Ivry, Pantin, Saint-Ouen, Thiais. We can also mention plenty of new cemeteries, starting with Clamart, Maurepas, Trappes, and Valenton. Their number is growing as far more new communities ask and receive such fields and as a consequence of their natural growth since the arrival of Jews from North Africa in the 20th century. Many communities, although they own their private cemetery, usually too small for their needs, also have at their disposal one *carré juif* inside the municipal cemetery. For instance, the Versailles community has in addition to its own cemetery the *carré israélite* in the cemetery des Gonards.

For the French Jewish community, the problem is that according to the law, in the general cemeteries they cannot bury their deceased in perpetuity; after a limited time the ground is used for new burials. Each community, even if it has an old cemetery belonging to the community, but which is now full, is obliged to ask for a *carré israélite* without any certainty that it will be allowed to keep the graves of the deceased in perpetuity.

The specific characteristics of the funerary landscape

Only the first two categories – community cemeteries and independent cemeteries belonging to the municipality – have proper architectural elements. There, the *Hevra Qaddisha* is generally empowered to manage the cemetery and its entrances, to plant trees, to improve the resting place and to build memorial monuments. A surrounding wall protects the cemeteries. At the entrance is a simple or monumental portal with a Hebrew inscription such as Psalm 118: 17 “אל תומא אל” I shall not die, but live, and declare the Works of the Lord” at Saint Rémy de Provence (Fig. 2).⁷ Inside the cemetery the community may build a depository or funeral chapel, “the house of purification” for washing the dead and singing psalms and prayers. Bordeaux and Bayonne show such monuments (Fig. 3). The community can also dedicate memorials to its members who lost their lives in the war and to the victims of the Shoah, for instance at Cronenbourg near Strasbourg, or at Nîmes (Fig. 4) and Offendorf.

The 19th century *enclos israélites* were delimited by a wall and had a house of purification. The two structures were destroyed in accordance with the law of 1881, except in the départements of Bas Rhin, Haut Rhin and Moselle. Collective burial vaults bought by friendly societies like *La Terre Promise* (The Promised Land, Fig. 5) or brotherhoods of people from Central or Eastern Europe, the so-called *Landsmanschaften* also exist in the contemporary cemeteries’ *carrés israélites*, especially in the Parisian cemetery of Bagneux.

The sepulchres

The old cemeteries have preserved the distinction between steles for the Ashkenazic deceased and slabs for the Sephardic deceased. Today, in the *carré juif* that distinction is gradually waning. One mixed pattern of funeral monument, a slab with a small wall, has come into general use. Marble, granite or sandstone is used according to the regions and the financial means of the families.

While exclusively Hebrew in 19th century Alsace, today the epitaph has become shorter and is normally carved in French. Sometimes it includes two or more Hebrew letters as פ”ט (here is hidden), as can be seen on Lieutenant-Colonel Alfred Dreyfus’ tombstone (1859–1935) at Montparnasse Cemetery. The traditional *explicit* taken from I Samuel XXV: 29 – almost universal until the end of the 19th century in the abbreviation הכצנת (The soul of my Lord shall



Fig. 4 Jewish cemetery, rue André Simon, Nîmes, memorial of the deportation (Photo: Wikipedia)

be bound of life with the Lord) – has resisted francisation and laicization. Instead of pious Hebrew formula we usually find today a conventional expression of love and pain for the dear deceased.

The 19th century *enclos israélite* shows a Jewish landscape influenced by the nearby Christian landscape, with neo-Gothic or neo-Romanesque chapels and the discrete Jewish symbol at the top. The grave of the well-known tragedian Eliza Rachel Félix (1821–1858), bearing at its top a

Fig. 5 Municipal cemetery of Versailles “les Gonards”, opened in 1879, 6 rue de la Porte de Buc, Versailles, division israélite, collective vault (Photo: Wikipedia)





Fig. 6 Père Lachaise Cemetery, 16 rue du Repos, Paris, 7th division, allée Rachel, tombstone of the Chief Rabbi Josep-David Sintzheim (1745–1812), the first Chief Rabbi of France (Photo: Gérard Nahon)

stylised candlestick, at Père Lachaise cemetery is paradigmatic, just as the monument of Isaac-Adolphe Crémieux (1796–1880), French Minister of Justice and President of the Central Consistory and of the Alliance Israélite Universelle at Montparnasse cemetery. People also loved neo-Gothic threefold frames, as used for the stele of the painter Camille Pissarro in Père Lachaise.

The Egyptomania found expression in pyramids, obelisks, pharaonic mausoleums, even for the choice of a rabbinical grave. This can be seen in the tombstones for the Chief Rabbis of France, Joseph-David Sintzheim (1745–1812)⁸ (Fig. 6) and Marchand Ennery (1792–1852), and for the Chief Rabbi of Bordeaux, Abraham Andrade (1749–1836). The broken column, a feature of Romanticism, stands for an existence cut off in the prime of life. Statues, traditionally alien to Judaism, found their way into the community cemetery as well as into the *carré juif*. On the tombstone of Doctor Lucien Dreyfus-Brisac at Versailles (1903) is the bust of the deceased. At Montmartre Cemetery a copy of Michelangelo's Moses rises above the grave of the famous patron Daniel Iffla dit Osiris (1821–1907) (Fig. 7).

Nowadays the *carré juif* has a character of identity which expresses itself in another way. It is very fond of the *Maguen David*, the Tables of the Law, more rarely the candlestick. In recent times, photographs of the deceased have appeared and also a kind of box for candles and keeping alive the flame, i. e. a lantern of the dead originating from a habit in North Africa. We also find atypical features, such as sticking of pebbles on the tombstone of the poet Paul Celan (1920–1970), or a Mosaic with the drawing of the Blue Bird and a literary device – which bears a traditional Hebrew carving by the psycho-analyst Jacques Hassoun (1936–1999): “I will take again the road of the world. I will go where I am a foreigner, where being curious of oneself in things we love is not sacrilegious”. This last feature of the French Jewish cemetery would confirm the opinion of Patricia Hidiroglu: “Maybe the cemetery is not so much the vehicle of a collective identity than the sum of individual identities”.⁹

Conclusion

The Jewish cemeteries constitute today a minority and a waning part of the Jewish resting places in France. Only old community cemeteries in Eastern France preserve the traditional landscape of a forest of steles with round cippus and exclusively Hebrew inscription. In the *carrés juifs* of communal and inter-communal cemeteries *extra muros*, different Jewish identities find their expression according to models provided by Jewish or non-Jewish influences, fashions, or personal taste. Though Hebrew is more and more replaced by French in the funeral discourse, the affirmation of identity has become more evident with a stamper like the *Maguen David* since the 1950s/1960s.

To conclude, we have to describe the architecture and scenery of French Jewish cemeteries and graves in their diversity, to draw up an inventory of Hebrew and French epitaphs, to make lists of the persons found on the tombstones of the French Jewry. So there is a huge scientific programme that needs to be tackled.¹⁰ The situation of Jewish burials in France, a lack of proper cemeteries on the one hand, and the missing right to bury the dead in perpetuity in the common cemeteries on the other hand, makes these works more urgent than anywhere else in Europe.

Zusammenfassung

Jüdische Friedhöfe in Frankreich

Die gemeindlichen jüdischen Friedhöfe des Mittelalters verschwanden nach den Vertreibungen von 1306, 1394 und 1502. Achtzehn Museen beherbergen noch Stelen, Platten und Fragmente von diesen Friedhöfen. Dennoch gab es direkt zu Beginn der französischen Revolution im Jahr 1789 jüdische Friedhöfe in Funktion in Ostfrankreich (Elsaß und Lothringen), in den französischen Ländern des Heiligen Stuhls und Aquitanien (Bordeaux und Bayonne). Die meisten

Fig. 7 Montmartre Cemetery, opened in 1825, 20 avenue Rachel, Paris, tombstone of Daniel Osiris Iffla 1825–1907) with a copy of Michelangelo's Moses and the carved words “Au plus grand législateur, Osiris” (Photo: Gérard Nahon)



der zeitgenössischen jüdischen Friedhöfe – ca. 298 – wurden mit dem Erlass der Verordnungen, Gesetze und Rundschreiben des 6. und 15. Mai 1791, 23 Gemeinderegister des 12. Juni 1804, des 14. Novembers 1881 und des 19. Februars 2008 eröffnet.

Es gibt vier historische und gesetzliche Kategorien von jüdischen Friedhöfen.

1. Alte Friedhöfe im Besitz einer jüdischen Gemeinschaft.
2. Unabhängige jüdische Friedhöfe, die einer Gemeinde gehören.
3. Die *enclos israélite*, ein eingemauerter jüdische Bereich in einem kommunalen Friedhof, der im 19. Jahrhundert eröffnet wurde.
4. Die *carré israélite*, die im 20. Jahrhundert in einem kommunalen oder interkommunalen Friedhof geschaffen wurden.

Tatsächlich darf nach französischem Gesetz kein Unterschied gemacht werden zwischen den Verstorbenen, und ihre Beerdigung muss auf einem kommunalen Friedhof stattfinden, unabhängig von ihrem Glauben. Jedoch kann der Bürgermeister die Anlage eines *carré israélite* erlauben. Dort wird nach Ablauf einer befristeten Grabstelle das Grab geöffnet, die Überreste werden gesammelt und entfernt. Danach ist dieser Platz wieder frei für ein neues Grab. Diese Praktik ist im jüdischen Gesetz verboten und ist das Hauptproblem der jüdischen Bevölkerung, da sie in den meisten Fällen dem allgemeinen Gesetz, außer auf den wenigen jüdischen Friedhöfen, folgen müssen.

Die spezifische Ausgestaltung der jüdischen Ruhestätten in Frankreich mit Mauern, Eingänge und besonderen Denkmälern kommt überwiegend in den ersten drei Friedhoftypen vor. Besonders künstlerische Grabsteine und Grabmonumente kann man auf den Friedhöfen des 19. Jahrhunderts, *enclos israélite*, sehen, wie z. B. dem *Père Lachaise* oder dem *Montmartre* Friedhof in Paris: eine neogotische oder

neoromanische Kapelle, worauf ein diskretes jüdisches Symbol abgebildet ist (wie die Gräber des bekannten Tragiker Rachel, von Adolphe Crémieux, des Malers Camille Pissarro). Die Ägyptomanie zeigt sich in Pyramiden, Obelisken, pharaonischen Mausoleen, selbst für ein rabbinisches Grab (Joseph-David Sintzheim, der erste Oberrabbiner von Frankreich). Eine Kopie des Moses von Michelangelo steht über dem Grab des bekannten Maecenas von Bordeaux Daniel Osiris Ifla. Bis heute zeigt sich im *carré juif* die jüdische Identität mit dem Davidstern, den Geboten und seltener mit dem Kerzenleuchter. In letzter Zeit erscheinen Photographien des Verstorbenen und auch Kisten zum Schutz der Kerzenflamme. Auch finden wir untypische Elemente, wie einen blauen Vogel, gefolgt von einem literarischen Satz: „Ich werde wieder den Weg der Welt aufnehmen. Ich werde dort hin gehen, wo ich ein Ausländer bin. Wo es nicht gotteslästerlich ist neugierig zu sein für die Dinge, die wir lieben.“

Heute stellen die jüdischen Friedhöfe nur einen sehr kleinen Teil der jüdischen Ruhestätten in Frankreich dar. Nur die historischen Gemeinschaftsfriedhöfe von Ostfrankreich erhalten die traditionelle Landschaft eines Stelenwaldes mit runden cippus und exklusiven hebräischen Inschriften. In den *carrés israélites* der kommunalen und interkommunalen Friedhöfe finden jüdische Identitäten ihren Ausdruck in den Modellen der jüdischen oder nicht-jüdischen Bestatter, Moden und des persönlichen Geschmacks. Obwohl hebräische mehr und mehr durch französische Grabinschriften ersetzt werden, manifestiert sich seit den 1950–1960er Jahren die Identitätszugehörigkeit vermehrt über Symbole wie den Magnen David.

Es fehlen Untersuchungen zur Architektur und zur Skulptur der französischen jüdischen Friedhöfe und Gräber. Wir warten auf eine komplette Inventarisierung der Friedhöfe, Gräber, Grabinschriften und bekannter Grabsteine von französischen Juden. Dies wäre eine Pflicht der Wissenschaft und des Andenkens.

¹ See Gérard NAHON, *Inscriptions hébraïques et juives de France médiévale*, Paris 1986.

² According to Isabelle MEIDINGER, “Laïcisation and the Jewish Cemeteries in France: The Survival of Traditional Jewish Funeral Practice”, in: *Journal of Modern Jewish Studies*, vol. 1, 2002, pp. 36–48.

³ Isabelle MEIDINGER, *L’Etat et les minorités culturelles en France au XIXe siècle. L’administration des cimetières israélites de 1789 à 1881*, Paris, doctoral thesis of 20th November 2002.

⁴ Jean-Pierre BERNARD, *Les cimetières israélites de la Moselle*, Paris, Cercle de Généalogie juive, 2002 [50 cemeteries of 44 villages]. Sylvain and Françoise JOB, Claude FREUND (with the collaboration of Jean Ginsburger and Jean-Pierre Bernard). *Le cimetière israélite régional de Lunéville (1759–1998)*, Paris, Cercle de Généalogie juive, 1999. Gilles PLAUT, *Cimetière de Montmartre: division 3 (B 232); Cimetière du Père-Lachaise: Division israélite (Division 7) (B233)*.

⁵ Cf. Robert WEYL, *Patrimoine d’Alsace. Le cimetière juif de Rosenwiller*. Strasbourg 1988, Avraham MALTHETE, *Registre du cimetière israélite de Rosenwiller (1753–*

1980). Traduction et présentation, Paris, Cercle de Généalogie juive, 2004.

⁶ Gérard NAHON, “Les cimetières portugais”, *Monuments historiques. Le patrimoine juif français*, n° 191, février 1994, pp. 73–74.

⁷ R. LEROY, “Le cimetière des Juifs à Saint-Rémy-de-Provence”, in *Les Alpilles, encyclopédie d’une montagne provençale*, Forcalquier, Les Alpes de Lumière 2009, p. 231.

⁸ Gérard NAHON, “L’épithaphe du Grand Rabbin Joseph-David Sintzheim (1745–1812)”, dans Maurice-Ruben HAYOUN, Francis KAPLAN, René-Samuel SIRAT, dir., *Le Livre du centenaire du Grand Rabbin Jacob Kaplan, Grand Rabbin du Consistoire Central, Doyen de l’Institut de France*, Paris, Editions Noësis 1997, pp. 201–216.

⁹ Patricia HIDIROGLOU, *Rites funéraires, pratiques de deuil chez les juifs en France au XIXe–XXe siècles*, Paris 1999.

¹⁰ We are in need of studies on the funerary Jewish art in France, for the present see Dominique JARRASSE “L’art funéraire au XXe siècle”, *Monuments historiques; le patrimoine français* n° 191 février 1994, pp. 75–79.