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Source: *Artibus et Historiae*, Vol. 9, No. 17 (1988), pp. 127-135

Published by: [IRSA s.c.](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1483324>

Accessed: 29/10/2010 05:10

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Reflection on Tombstones: Childhood Memories

I should like to introduce these somewhat personal reflections with a word of thanks to Professor Philipp Fehl. It was he who urged me to go back in my mind to my childhood days, and to revive the sense of wonder, a little fear and a strange attraction to the forms I saw in the Jewish cemetery. I hope I may thus be able to pay homage to a culture, past and lost, which, though "primitive" in certain respects, held many hidden treasures and was to me a rich source of inspiration. Often it seems to me that this irrevocably lost culture has not yet received the full attention it deserves. Professor Fehl, it should be gratefully said, also set the particular tone of these reflections, combining what little professional observation I can offer with memories and the sense of a personal involvement. What I should like to present are mainly questions. The answers I unfortunately do not know, and some of them will perhaps never be known. The questions, however, may suggest an abundant creativity concealed behind primitive forms.

The following observations are devoted to a single and rather limited subject: the images found on some of the tombstones in the Jewish cemetery of Czernowitz, the town where I was born and reared. I shall have to rely largely on personal memories, and on stories I heard as a child and adolescent.¹

Before I start with my reflections I should like, first, to indicate the historical span of time "covered" by the few monuments I have in mind. Czernowitz, located on the eastern slope of the Carpathian mountains, is not one of the very old Jewish communities; in the wealth of its history it cannot compare with the famous Jewish communities of central Europe, like Prague or Worms. This is of course reflected in the

tombstones in the Jewish cemetery. So far as I know, no Jewish funerary monument, either in Czernowitz or in the neighboring communities, precedes the mid-eighteenth century. Most of the "old" tombstones in that region were produced in the early or mid-nineteenth century. My second preliminary remark concerns what we are used to calling the "level of artistic achievement." Not too much should be expected. I shall have to describe the artistic character of the monuments as "primitive," without going into a discussion of what the term means, fully aware that the meaning is far from obvious. We can now turn to our subject proper.

I shall begin with whatever little I know about the social conditions in which the tombstones were produced, and the people producing them lived and worked. I shall then turn to some observations concerning the major artistic components of the monuments themselves.

The first thing that should be noted is that all the tombstones I shall mention are of local production. In Czernowitz there was, of course, no import of tombstones. For the local Jewish community that would have been far too expensive in financial terms and far too difficult in terms of transport. In general, I am not aware of any import or export of Jewish tombstones to or from Eastern Europe in the nineteenth century (though in the twentieth this may have partly changed). Czernowitz was surely not wealthy enough to form an exception. What is more important is that there seems to have been no immigration of highly trained tombstone carvers. It may be dangerous to make any positive, final statement about that fact, but there are no documents hinting in any way at such an immigration, nor have I ever heard any oral reference to such a movement of artisans. The

assumption that there was no influx of tombstone carvers agrees well with the rather low esteem in which these craftsmen were held in the Jewish community.

As a type of professional (sometimes, only semi-professional) artisan, these carvers constituted an interesting phenomenon. Both the social conditions of their work and the patterns of what, for want of a better term, we should call their training (that is, how they acquired and transmitted their skills) are worthy of careful study. The tombstone itself was known by its traditional Hebrew name, "Mazewe," and, in my native Yiddish, the carvers were commonly called "Mazewe-Schläger." *Schläger* is a term describing what the carver's activity looks like to an outside observer: it means "hitter" or "striker." In literal translation, the generic name of these carvers would, then, mean "tombstone hitters" or "tombstone strikers." Who were they, and how were they trained?

So far as I could see, the "Mazewe-Schläger," particularly those belonging to the orthodox segment of the community, were not organized in any body, whether of modern or semi-medieval form. The general public, especially in the more orthodox sector, did not regard their occupation as a full-fledged profession. In the nineteenth century — if we are to trust the memories of some of the older survivors of the community — at least some of the carvers were earning their living partly by doing some other jobs. According to oral traditions, the reliability of which I cannot check, these jobs often had something to do with the business of death: I heard stories in my youth about tombstone carvers who worked in the *Hevra kadisha*, the community organization taking care of funerary services; some, I was told, were grave diggers. Later on, owing to a rapidly growing community, tombstone carving became a full-time occupation, even a business.

It goes without saying that there was no formal institution for training tombstone carvers. Originally, the profession seems to have been mainly a matter of family tradition. To be sure, this was partly true also for many other occupations. But, if my childhood impressions do not mislead me, with tombstone carvers this seems to have been the case to a much greater degree than with most other professions. Even after the First World War, two families in downtown Czernowitz, that is, in the part of the city populated mainly by orthodox Jews, still kept alive the tradition of tombstone carving as a genuine family business and occupation. These families, Picker and Steinmetz, had exercised the same profession for several generations. The name of the latter (literally: stone carver) seems hardly accidental (though this was, of course, a common name). Dr. Diamant, the Czernowitz lawyer dedicated to the study of Jewish folklore, knew the last of the Picker family who was still a traditional tombstone carver, and told me about him in my youth. The then already elderly Picker

had acquired his skills by helping his father in the carving of tombstones. It should be noted that, as a rule, tombstone carvers did not carve any other objects, nor did they indulge in any other medium of the visual arts. But the descendant of the Picker family I have just mentioned seems to have been an exception. According to local tradition, some of the wall paintings in the "Groisse Shuhl" (great synagogue) in downtown Czernowitz were done by him.

The profound economic changes that took place during the nineteenth century, needless to say, also affected the tombstone carvers. During most of the century, so the story is told, these carvers did not have a regular "business" of their own; the carving of tombstones was an intermittent activity. Ancient (oral) lore has it that early in the century the family of the deceased would even have to acquire the stone slab themselves and bring it to the carver.² The latter would only provide his work, originally done in the own backyard.

In the later nineteenth century, with the growth of the Jewish population in Czernowitz, the conditions of the Mazewe-Schläger changed in all respects. Yet only around the turn of the century did tomb stone carvers physically separate their private homes from the place where they worked, so that the tombstone carver's "workshop" came into being. It was only in the twentieth century that the production of tombstones became a fully commercial enterprise.

II

The artistic treatment of these tombstones is rather modest. The basic shapes of the objects as a whole and of the essential features of their decoration were of course narrowly prescribed by tradition. Yet an attentive observer will enjoy a considerable amount of variation in the shapes and motifs that distinguish between one piece and the other. The process of shaping the traditional Jewish tombstone is essentially focused on two fields: the script, and some decorative motifs (which, in turn, may be divided into purely ornamental patterns, on the one hand, and certain figural motifs, on the other). The varying proportions in which the two basic components are combined circumscribe the formal variations of the tombstones here reviewed.

The script, of course, is always present. Invariably, it plays a primary part in the overall shape of the tombstone, as a rule occupying the major part of the slab's surface. It is the script to which the observer's attention is to be directed. Some of the old tombstones are devoid of any decorative forms except



1) Tombstone of Barukh, son of Shlomo, Czernowitz, 1794.

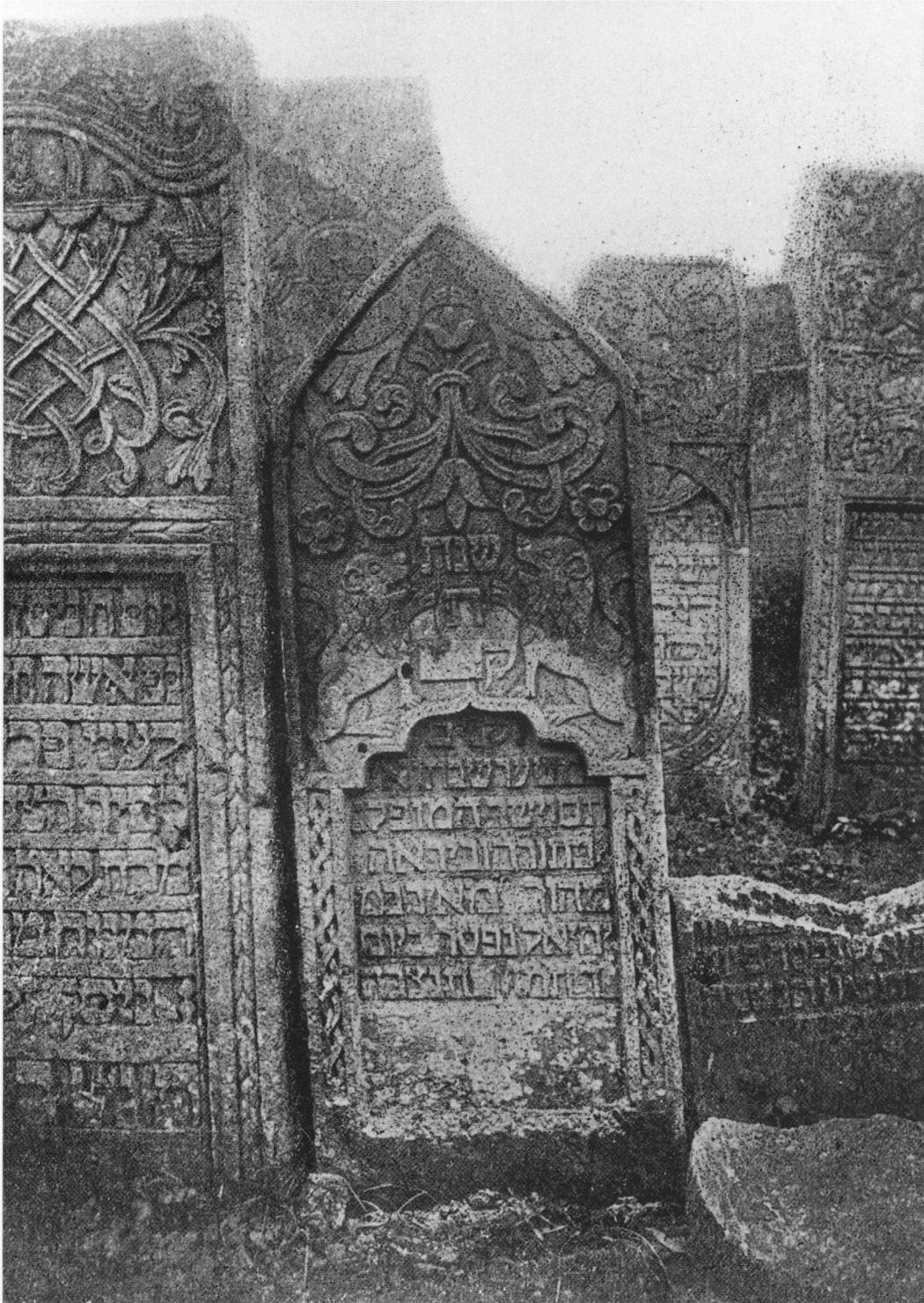
for the script itself. Look, for instance, at the tombstone of one Barukh, the son of Shlomo, done in 1794 [Fig. 1]. In most cases, to be sure, the script is topped by a more or less richly decorated field, and framed by ornamental borders. The text, however, remains the essential part of what we see when we look at the tombstone. Now, the tombstone as an art form gives, of course, primary significance to the text. Moreover, one is probably also safe in assuming that the more primitive

the tombstone, the greater the significance of the text in its visual configuration.³ Nevertheless, one has the feeling that in the Jewish tombstones the significance of the text is particularly striking, perhaps more than required by the need to tell who lies there, and more than seems explicable by the primitive conditions of artistic creation. The script is the essential part of what we see when we look at these slabs.

This is not the proper occasion for reflection on the central position of text and lettering in Jewish visual traditions and lore,⁴ and on the cult objects used in Jewish rituals throughout the centuries. Obviously, many artistic energies were oriented towards the treating of script. The rather extensive use of microscript in Jewish culture is a good example⁵. The shaping of letters on rather primitive tombstones is another. Humble as the craftsmen who produced these tombstones may have been, their use of lettering deserves our attention.

At first glance it would seem that the tombstone carvers had no room for variation or invention in the lettering they used. Not only is the square shape of the Hebrew letter prescribed, but the difficulty of producing this shape in stone — for obvious reasons, much greater than in writing on parchment — must preclude any deviations from the minimum of forms to be carved. The careful spectator of the lettering on these tombstones is therefore particularly surprised by the variations he finds. To begin with, two types of "writing" in stone are used in these simple artefacts. In most cases the letters are carved into the flat surface of the slab, they are sunk into the stone. In quite a few tombstones, however, the spaces between the letters are sunken. Among the objects here discussed, we already find the second manner (obviously harder to employ) in the early stages. On a tombstone of 1740 [Fig. 2],⁶ one of the earliest in the Jewish cemetery of Czernowitz, we have a fine example of projecting script. So far as I know, tombstone carvers in Czernowitz continued throughout the centuries to employ both methods of carving letters.

The shape of the letters also varies. On many of the tombstones the letter is not plainly quadratic and uniform, but frequently shows a fine distinction between verticals, usually more slender, and horizontals, as a rule heavier and bulkier. Sometimes the verticals are slightly indented, giving the letter a certain organic elegance, as can be seen on a rather elaborate tombstone of 1843 [Fig. 3].⁷ It is not difficult to detect the origins of the variations in the individual letter shapes, of which I have mentioned only two examples. What we see on the tombstones are not characters constructed in the geometric manner so well known in the history of European art; the carved letters of the tombstones are clearly derived from scripts written with a quill pen on parchment. They recall, however faintly, a scribe's hand.



2) Tombstone of Meier, son of Jechiel, Czernowitz, 1740.



3) Tombstone of a Young Woman (name not legible), Czernowitz, 1843.

A modern art historian cannot help wondering how these variations of lettering reached the tombstones. Writing the quadratic script was, as is well known, a highly regarded occupation. The *sofrim*, the scribes, in the way they saw themselves as well as in their intellectual status and social conditions in the community, were far removed from the tombstone carvers, who performed a kind of manual labor. No direct and specific interaction between these two types can be

assumed. How, then, did the refinements of the Hebrew ritual script (as differing from the normal cursive writing) reach the humble stone carvers? Were there alphabetic model books? So far as I am aware, nothing of such model books is known in Czernowitz of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Were the different shapes of letters transmitted from father to son, as part of the craft of carving? We do not know. One would also be curious to know who decided on the type of letters to be used on a given tombstone: was it the customer (whom we would thus assume to have a high degree of awareness in matters of aesthetics and calligraphy) or was it the stonecarver himself? A study of this seemingly rather limited and marginal problem, should it prove at all feasible, would constitute a valuable contribution both to our knowledge of the tradition of crafts and to our understanding of broader aspects of social and cultural life in Jewish communities of that time.

III

The decorative parts of the tombstones, consisting partly of certain figural motifs, of course attract most of the art historian's attention. Keeping in mind the rather modest quality of these monuments, one's expectations as to what the free exercise of an artist's skill may provide in them should not be too high. The repertory of motifs is indeed limited; for religious reasons no human figure could be portrayed. And yet one is often surprised by the variations invented by popular fantasy and executed by anonymous stone carvers. Since the present observations are of a somewhat personal character, I take the liberty to mention some of those motifs that struck me most, and which may have helped me to focus my iconographic interests.

On Jewish tombstones, as one knows, the depiction of certain animals is rather common. The heraldic lions facing each other are the motif best known in many fields of Jewish folk art, and we find them also in the cemetery in Czernowitz [Fig. 4].⁸ Symmetrically arranged birds (probably peacocks) are also found, though less frequently than the lions. I was, and still am, puzzled by the portrayal of a stag, or hart, unmistakably identified by his antlers, on Jewish funerary monuments. Look at the Czernowitz tombstone of 1810 [Fig. 5], where a hart is juxtaposed to a lion, or the tombstone in a nearby small location, produced in 1830 [Fig. 6], where the stag alone dominates the field of decoration.⁹ How did the stag get onto the crest of a Jewish tombstone? We of course knew our Psalms, and we remembered the famous verses that played



4) Tombstone of Rivka, daughter of Yehuda, Czernowitz, 1809.



5) Tombstone of Libzie, daughter of Arieh, Czernowitz, 1810.

such and important part in Christian art and imagery of the Middle Ages.

As the hart panteth after the water brooks
 so panteth my soul after thee, O God.
 My soul thirsteth for God, for the living God:
 when shall I come and appear before God?

(42: 1-2)

But can we really assume that such an iconographic feat — the personification of the soul in the image of a hart — was accepted both among the tombstone carvers and their customers? We are of course familiar with what historians so often claim: that images such as that of the stag form part of a tradition, and that they were employed as such without necessarily evoking a great deal of conscious reflection. The survival of past objects and the tenacity of past images are, no



6) Tombstone of Naphtali, son of Joseph, Siret (Bukowina, not far from Czernowitz), 1830.

doubt, powerful forces in every present.¹⁰ Artistic traditions, needless to say, have a tangible influence on the creation of every period. Art historians surely do not need to be told that tradition can be a formative force. And, yet, one cannot help asking whether, in our particular case, we are not taking tradition too much for granted. It would be fascinating to revive the intellectual and emotional world of an eighteenth- or nineteenth-century "Mazewe-Schläger" in Czernowitz, to find

out how much conscious reflection was taking place in these rather primitive conditions. Whether or not such a study will prove possible, it would seem that the stag's image could not have reached the tombstone without a rather significant amount of iconographic awareness, both among tombstone carvers and the public at large.

In addition, the stag once again raises the question whether model books were available to our craftsmen. How did the stone carver get the model for his beast? It is precisely because the stag is not so common that the question of how the carvers got a model of his image becomes so pointed. The symmetrical lions are found on many ritual objects; they were executed in a great variety of media. We may assume, therefore, that the stone carvers were somehow more familiar with the image, and knew how to execute it on tombstones. If this is indeed so, the same assumption cannot be made for the considerably less well-known image of the hart.

The bird is another motif that holds the student's attention. One cannot but be surprised by the variety of birds found on tombstones in many Jewish cemeteries, including Czernowitz. Differing from the lions, which were cast in the famous pattern of a symmetrical juxtaposition, on Jewish tombstones birds did not attain a typical compositional form that would deeply and inescapably impress itself upon the cultural memory. Birds, therefore, are more complex images. The very significance of the bird on Jewish tombstones raises interesting questions. Why, and in what function, was it represented? Attempts have occasionally been made to describe such a bird on a tombstone as a "Totenvogel."¹¹ Not many words need be wasted to show that this is an unacceptable reading. Surely, the bird is not rendered here as an image of death, or as a fearful omen. The bird, it is true, is a common feature in funerary art, appearing on sepulchral monuments of many periods and cultures. But, as one knows, in every period it carried different connotations: as a peacock it could have been understood as embodying the beauty and bliss of paradise, as an eagle it could have been read as the "psychopompos," the bird that carries the souls to heaven.¹² The role of the bird as an image of soul is also well known.¹³

In the Jewish cemetery of Czernowitz one finds different birds, and one cannot help attributing to them different meanings. Take, for instance, a tombstone of 1814 on which two big birds, with extended wings and long tails, are symmetrically affronted [Fig. 7], clearly following the pattern of the heraldic lions. Are they peacocks? And what were they originally meant to convey? Other bird images are less heraldic, but they call for interpretation. An art historian will certainly be attracted by the tombstone of a certain Hannah, the daughter of Hayim, who died in 1852. On her tombstone a seven-branched menorah, of rather unusual shape, is carried by



7) Tombstone of Sarah, daughter of Arieh, Czernowitz, 1814.



8) Tombstone of Hannah, daughter of Chajim, Czernowitz, 1852.

a big bird of an equally unconventional character [Fig. 8]. The bird, spreading its wings, does not fly; broadly squatting, it lowers its head (on a rather long neck) and seems to direct its beak towards its own breast. One of course immediately recalls the story of the pelican who herself tears her breast open with her beak, using the blood pouring from the wound to feed her children, or (in another tradition) to revive them. The

Christian interpretation of that story is too well known to require any documentation.

Now, it is perhaps not too difficult to imagine how, in the middle of the nineteenth century, an image of the Christian pelican reached an anonymous Jewish stone carver in a community on the eastern slope of the Carpathian mountains. After all, one recalls, in the middle of the nineteenth century

reproductions of famous images, in engravings or woodcuts, were available, and common enough to penetrate even the eastern provinces of the Habsburg monarchy. One can also understand how a humble stone carver, endowed by nature with an intuitive understanding of artistic forms, by sheer empathy instantly perceived the expressive character of the famous image. But how are we to understand that he was able to introduce such an image on a tombstone? Tombstones, it

¹ Not surprisingly, there seems to be virtually no scholarly literature on this subject. The only attempt to study these monuments, though not in a professional way, was made by a Czernowitz lawyer interested in Jewish folklore, Max Diamant. The little book in which he summed up the studies to which he had devoted much love, *Jüdische Volkskunst*, was ill fated. Printed in Vienna early in 1938, it was confiscated before it could be bound. A few copies, bound in Czernowitz, were distributed by the author (probably late in 1938 or early in 1939). I wonder how many copies (if any) reached libraries in Western Europe or the United States.

² I find it very difficult to either verify or contradict this tradition.

³ Interesting material can be found in Allan I. Ludwig, *Graven Images: New-England Stonecarving and its Symbols, 1650-1815*, Middletown, Connecticut, 1966, which deals primarily with the carving of New-England tombstones. Though the tombstones of New England are richer in carvings than those in Czernowitz, some striking parallels can be discovered.

⁴ So far as I know, there is no comprehensive study of this subject. For some fascinating aspects of the problem in medieval history, see

need hardly be stressed, are products of an essentially social art. The customers, and the community at large, must have interpreted the image of the bird in a way that could fit into their own cultural consciousness.

An interpretation of the humble monuments I have tried to conjure up holds, it seems to me, the key to an understanding of a complex and rich community life, a life in which images, however modest, had a significant role to play.

Gershom Scholem, "Der Name Gottes und die Sprachphilosophie der Kabbala," reprinted in the author's *Judaica III: Studien zur jüdischen Mystik*, Frankfurt/M, 1973, pp. 7-70, esp. pp. 31 ff.

⁵ Microscript, it should be noted, was a form of decoration that could be found in some of the homes of orthodox Jews. I remember in my grandfather's house an image of the Temple in Jerusalem "drawn" in microscript.

⁶ See Diamant, *op. cit.*, pl. 21.

⁷ Diamant, *op. cit.*, pl. 35.

⁸ See the tombstone of 1809 in Diamant, *op. cit.*, pl. 28.

⁹ Diamant, *op. cit.*, pls. 25, 22.

¹⁰ E. Shils, *Tradition*, Chicago, 1981.

¹¹ Diamant, *op. cit.*, p. 60.

¹² Though these connotations are well known, I should like to mention, particularly for the eagle, the still interesting investigations by Franz Cummont, "L'aigle funéraire d'Hierapolis et l'apothéose des empereurs", in his *Études Syriennes*, Paris, 1917, pp. 35-118.

¹³ Georg Weicker, *Der Seelenvogel in der alten Literatur und Kunst*, Leipzig, 1902.