Jewish Cemeteries of Romania: Alba Iulia Case Study

Abstract:

Places of memory and also holders of significant historical information, Jewish cemeteries were in Romania insufficiently subject to recovery efforts. The dramatic decline in Jewish communities led to the cessation of the use of several cemeteries and to severe deteriorations of funerary monuments. According to statistics from 2007, of the 810 registered cemeteries, over 750 were in places where Jews no longer existed. In the last decade a general inventory has been made and the risk factors for the preservation of gravestones have been indicated. However, concrete interventions for research and preservation of cemeteries have been delayed. In these circumstances, the question is whether their meanings (sacred places, places of memory, vestiges of the past) have been preserved for the non-Jewish communities, or whether they are doomed to oblivion, like the communities they served. My paper tries to answer this question, based on the results of an ongoing project, regarding the inventory and description of gravestones existing in the Jewish cemeteries of Alba County. The only city in Transylvania where Jews had the right of settlement from the seventeenth century, Alba Iulia hosted a large community of Jews, originally Sephardic, and later majority Ashkenazi. The cemetery, with continuing function attested from the mid eighteenth century, reflects the combination of strictly observed tradition and tendency towards integration into the host community, in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, when Jews acquired civil emancipation. The few monumental crypts belonging to rich families illustrate their full integration in the host Hungarian community. Similar situations are found in the other 18 cemeteries in the county, subordinated to the Community of Alba Iulia: urban Neologue cemeteries (such as those in Aiud, Blaj, Ocna Mures, Teiuş) and rural Orthodox (as one of the two in Valea Lungă). The project mentioned above aimed at the inventory and description of gravestones from each cemetery, as a preliminary to deciphering inscriptions and to analysing the symbols on the funerary monuments. The information provided by these true stone archives will be aggregated with the written sources (mainly civil registers) in order to reconstruct the evolution of Jewish communities and the manner of their integration into majority communities.

Keywords: *Jewish cemeteries, gravestones, family crypts, collective memory, religious identity, heritage preservation.*