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Uncovering, recovering and discovering our Jewish archival heritage: the Yerusha portal

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It was on one of those gorgeous Transylvanian spring mornings that the gendarmes finally came for the Jews. The small Jewish community in the village of Bezidu Nou (in Hungarian, *Bözödújfalu*; in German, *Neudorf*) had lived under the rapidly growing pressure of antisemitism for years. In May 1944 the occupying Hungarian authorities rounded them up and herded them into a brickyard in the neighbouring city of Târgu Mureş along with thousands of other Jews in the region. In a few weeks they were deported to the Nazi death camp of Auschwitz-Birkenau.

The village was an especially colourful patch on the vivid cultural tapestry of Transylvania. Its fewer than 200 homes were inhabited by Hungarians, Székelys, Romanians: Jews, Christians and Sabbatarians – a small community of the Székely ethnic group, which had been following Judaism since the sixteenth century, often secretly and in defiance of the law. They had a synagogue and a rabbi, but they were not always viewed as equals by larger, neighbouring Jewish communities. However, they shared a lot with the Jews. Intermarriages between the two groups were not uncommon. The Sabbatarians were also considered Jewish by the Hungarian authorities and therefore they were rounded up and thrown into the brick factory too.

Eighty-two-year-old Aranka Teichmann was most probably among the local Jews who were brutally seized from their homes on that fateful day in May 1944. Aranka, a widow by then, had been married to a Sabbatarian. Who knows what had brought her father, Jakab Teichmann, to the Transylvanian mountains from his distant native city of Lwów in the nineteenth century? Probably what brought many: the search for a livelihood and a family. He found both in this quiet corner of Transylvania. He started a peddling business and married a Jewish girl from a village near Bezidu Nou, Eszter Czitron.

Aranka was born in 1862. And while the Cuşmed creek running through Bezidu Nou had not changed much in her lifetime, carrying its weight from the mountains towards the plains phlegmatically year after year, the state borders around the region shifted multiple times in a few decades. In 1940 the region was annexed to Hungary and four years later the deportation of the Jews into Nazi death camps was launched. However, Aranka was not among the people herded into cattle cars by the Hungarian authorities in the brick factory. Perhaps she was released because she was married to a Sabbatarian. The local Catholic priest convinced the gendarme commander of the collection camp to let the Sabbatarians go, as they were not ‘racially’ Jewish. Some of them who were given the possibility to get out of the camp decided to stay, since they declared themselves Jewish and wanted to share their coreligionists’ fate.

Aranka died on July 11, 1944, a month after the final transport to Auschwitz had left. According to the death registries of the local Unitarian community, one day before she passed away, she converted to Christianity. What happened? Did she decide to leave her faith out of conviction after having witnessed the brutal destruction of her community? Or, barely escaping deportation, did she think it would be safer to convert – at least on paper? Or did those who took care of Aranka convince the sick, elderly woman to do so? We will probably never know. But we know of her family story because an American scholar, Julie Dawson of the Leo Baeck Institute, aware of the idiosyncrasies surrounding Bezidu Nou and its Sabbatarians, decided to look for traces of local Jews in the Unitarian vital registries. Julie is working in Transylvania as a researcher for the Yerusha Project – an initiative of the Rothschild Foundation (Hanadiv) Europe. She is not the only one – from Western Siberia to France and from Vilnius to Salonika, over one hundred researchers have been exploring documents for the project in close to four hundred archives of sixteen European countries.

What is Yerusha?

The vision of Yerusha (Hebrew for ‘inheritance’) is to unite scattered Jewish documentary heritage from across Europe through virtual means. We are in the process of creating an online portal and database which we hope will become a major hub and reference point for information regarding Jewish archival heritage.

We do not plan to digitise and publish documents like Judaica Europeana or other similar projects. We collect information regarding the archival collections. This is in the form of archival descriptions, which are texts describing the content of the material. Our researchers author these with a methodology based on the most acknowledged, international professional archival standards. We will not deliver the image of the actual document to users’ screens, but we will provide a plethora of detailed and precise information on the whereabouts of the records of their research interest.

Yerusha’s operational structure has three levels. The project is directed from the London office of the Rothschild Foundation (Hanadiv) Europe. The regional work is coordinated by a network of institutions of professional excellence, including, among others, the Central Archives for the History of the Jewish People, the Jewish Museum in Prague, the Hungarian Jewish Museum and Archives, the Jewish Theological Seminary of America and the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. Drawing on their extensive research experience and network of scholars on the ground, these institutions are responsible for recruiting experts who are intimately familiar with the local documentary material, languages and historical context – from small Jewish organisational archives in Belgium to major municipal and state archives in Ukraine.

We are well aware that a lot of work has already been done on mapping Jewish archival materials. We do not want to reinvent the wheel – we plan to incorporate these results, laid out in printed and digital finding aids and descriptions, into the database.

The National Library of Israel plays a key role in the implementation of Yerusha. It not only provides the technical infrastructure of the database, but will also serve as an institutional home for the project once it is launched. This will address one of the most pressing issues of all similar digital, online projects: long-term sustainability.

Scattered heritage

Why is Yerusha needed? As all those involved in Jewish archival research – be it for academic or for personal purposes – can attest, records are often hopelessly fragmented. While some collections are held in large local, state and municipal institutions, others may have migrated with European Jewish communities across continents and over oceans, whilst still others suffered the same fate as their creators: deported and even incinerated. Aside from the traumas of history, David E. Fishman points to another reason for the disarray in his published lecture “Securing our Inheritance”.¹ As a stateless people, Jewish communities had no mechanism or pressing need for detailed record collection on the scale of functioning states until quite late in their histories. So, while the Jews were always the people of the book, they were certainly not the people of the archive.

Beyond the desultory and fragmented nature of these collections, though, there is also the additional challenge of obscurity. It is one thing for a collection or a smaller group of documents to be housed in a large state archive; it is quite another for the researcher to be able to know of their existence without any previously published finding aids or knowledgeable and sensitive staff to turn to for guidance. Yerusha is intended to fill just this gap: mapping where collections now reside, even if that is far from the original site of their creation, and highlighting where relevant records can be found within immense holdings. Literally, the project aims to re-member the Jewish past in the true sense of the word, and working one collection at a time.

And it is now, for the first time in the long history of Jews and texts, that a project like Yerusha is possible. Not only do we now live in a globalised world where participants in a single project can be based in multiple countries, but there has also been a distinct attitudinal shift in the past few years.

There was a time not that long ago, when European institutions of memory viewed their Israeli counterparts – such as the National Library of Israel – as a definite threat. Their concern stemmed from the belief that Israeli institutions viewed Jewish European heritage as theirs by right: that it was Israel's moral duty to rescue relics of Jewish life in Europe and return them to their rightful inheritors, the Jewish people. This situation was further complicated by the influx in some areas of new Jewish communities, who occupy the same cities and towns as the Jewish communities of the past, but who are not actually descended from them. In such complex circumstances, to whom do the historical objects and documents of former European Jews belong? To the state in which they are found? To the descendants of the communities wherever they are now to be found, usually in North America, Israel, South Africa or Australia? And, what if – as is often the case in the post-Holocaust world – the grandchildren and great-grandchildren are dispersed across the globe? Should Israel take up the mantle as the keeper of the world Jewish heritage? There are no easy answers here, and sympathetic opinions are to be found on all sides.

Rife with moral quandaries and uncertainty, it was no wonder that collaboration in many cases remained a pipe dream. Happily, though, in recent years this reality has changed. By dint of the new possibilities of the digital era, there is no longer the same urgency surrounding questions of physical ownership. Digital copies of prized collections can be made and shared; divided collections can be reunited. It is for this reason, perhaps, that the relationship Yerusha has forged between European Jewish collections and the National Library of Israel has transcended the practical, in order to become an example of healing and openness; the fissures of past suspicions seem to have been mended and in their place the European institutions seem willing to trust, learn from and entrust their Israeli colleagues with some degree of care for the heritage in their possession.

Yerusha as a research tool

Yerusha will be open to anyone with Internet access and an interest in Jewish history. In practice, we expect that it will mainly be academic researchers who will use the portal. Our key aim is to create a research tool for the scholarly community, while remaining flexible and open to the needs of others. A typical Yerusha user would log into the database to look for information on a research topic, the documents of which are scattered in many archives. Examples can be found on our website: <http://yerusha.eu/case-studies/>

While Yerusha is not a genealogical research tool per se, we wish to make the database useful for family researchers as well. Comprehensive and easily searchable information on the whereabouts of various census data, tax registries, school books, community protocols and name lists, synagogue seat rental and other records might significantly contribute to the success of a genealogical research project, let alone provide clues on the location of thus far unexplored and lesser known vital registry entries, such as that of the death of the Jewish-born Aranka Teichmann in the Unitarian records of Bezidu Nou. The village does not exist any more. It lies in the depths of an artificial lake created by the Communist regime in the 1980s. A dam was built and the Cuşmed creek gradually flooded the village. The memory of the Teichmann family and the other locals – Jews, Christians, Sabbatarians – is kept alive by descendants of the villagers and a few researchers captivated by the story of a sunken community of many cultures. Yerusha aims to help them.

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1. London: Rothschild Foundation (Hanadiv) Europe, 2014.