



## A short outline: the Collection of Jewish Ceremonial Objects in the Municipal Museum Göttingen/Germany

The Municipal Museum Göttingen was founded in 1889. It is a museum of urban and regional history that today houses about 150.000 Objects. It is one of the first history museums in Germany to establish an own department for Judaica at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

### The Jewish Ceremonial Items

The collection comprises about 200 objects, mainly from synagogal and personal contexts of Jewish religious life in Southern Low Saxony. There are various examples of Torah curtains, Torah wrappers, Torah shields and finials, Hanukkah candelabra, Seder plates, Shabbath lamps, Kiddush cups, *yads*, etc. Some are of exceptional artistic value and were made of precious materials; others were produced in a more modest fashion. In any case all of them possess an immense cultural-historic value to the Museum, to science and to the public. Many similar objects were lost due to the ravages of time and especially due to the lootings, melting downs (in case of objects made of precious metals) and destructions during the Nazi era and WW II. The earliest object in the Göttingen collection is a lamp from the 15<sup>th</sup> century made of bronze. The most recent one is a certificate, issued by the *Keren Hayesod* in 1967 to the local Jewish community in appreciation of their donations to the State of Israel during the Six-Day War.

The Torah curtains and Torah wrappers are maybe the most evocative objects in the collection. The Torah curtains were made by highly specialized artisans. They used precious materials like e.g. elegantly colored silk and brocade that came from the bridal dress of the donor, adorned with Jewish symbols and dedicatory inscriptions stitched on the fabric with gilded or silver threads. In contrast to the lavish curtains made by specialized artisans the Torah wrappers or *wimpel* from the collection are fine examples of Jewish folk art. Some of the earliest wimpels in the collection where made in the 17th century. The vibrant colors of the painted or stitched Hebrew letters, symbolic animals, flowers and zodiac symbols on the sober and coarse linen are suggestive of the hardships and joys of the long vanished Jewish life in the villages.

And in addition there are questions still to be shaped and answered. Who were the persons mentioned on the curtains and wrappers? How can the objects be interpreted in the context of the collection? How did the museum display the objects in the past and what messages do we want the objects to convey in the future? Questioning the objects, collection practices and the museum as institution itself means not only enriching Jewish cultural history. It can also be understood as a reconstruction of broader socio-cultural processes, identity building, knowledge production etc. The message for visitors could be: understanding the diversity of Jewish history and present means understanding culture and history in general.



On the left: Torah wrapper, probably from Adelebsen, 1646; on the right: Bima cover, donation of "Itzig, son of Mendel, from Fürth, 596 (1834)"; (Municipal Museum Göttingen).

## History of Acquisition

More than half of the number of Jewish ceremonial objects was acquired by the museum during its phase of establishment shortly before the 1900s. The Göttingen collection of Jewish ceremonial objects is quite old and large in comparison to other non-Jewish museums of medium sized German cities. Most of the items of the Judaica collection have a local origin. On the one hand this is due to the participation of middle-class Jewish families in the cultural enterprises of the city. The names of numerous Jewish citizens can be found in the inventory catalogue as donors, brokers or sellers of Jewish ceremonial objects: Müller, Hahn, Franck, Benfey, Gräfenberg, etc. Even three or maybe four individuals from the Gräfenberg family were involved: Carl Gräfenberg (born in Adelebsen, died 1907 in Göttingen), Carl's wife Johanna née Schönheim (1846-1931) from Bleicherode in Thuringia, Salomon Gräfenberg (1834-1918) and a certain "Herr Gräfenberg" (the according notice in the inventory catalogue lacks further details). The other reason is a demographical and cultural change in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Whereas in the past most Jews in German speaking countries lived in the countryside – the so called *Landjuden* –, deprived of civil rights, mostly poor and with limited access to a higher secular education, things changed with the foundation of the Kaiserreich. Many Jewish families moved to urban centers and made their careers. So the synagogues in the villages were disbanded, objects of a formerly pious and steady life changed their significance. Still in daily use for religious Jewish practice just a generation or two ago, later they were probably seen more like a family heirloom, apt to be given to a museum by donors who understood themselves in the first place as German citizens. But the generous donations of Jewish ceremonial objects and the welcoming attitude of the Museum – from the outset there was a department for "Israelite antiquities" – was also a field for mutual construction of identities that successfully integrated (in this case) Jewish, local, national, secular and religious aspects.

This limited success ended with the rise of National Socialism and its delusions about racial purity. The collection was stored away in the basement of the Museum in 1936. Everything Jewish – be it Jewish as an acquired or ascribed identity – was stigmatized; what finally led to the known catastrophic consequences. The attitude of the Nazi administration towards the collection can't be clearly interpreted from the sparse historic sources. Fact is that the collection survived.

In the 1980-90s the public discussion about the Nazi past in Germany gained momentum. In this time a second peak of acquisitions of Jewish ceremonial objects can be discerned in the documents. Those objects were mostly without any relation to regional history and in most cases bought on the national and international art market. Was it an attempt to fill a gap that was left by the Holocaust with Jewish objects? To calm down an unease, to let objects answer questions that were not yet clearly shaped? Was it helplessness, the mere and thoughtless joy of collecting or the attempt to

complete a collection of Jewish ceremonial objects? Hard to say today because the former museum administration left no documents concerning collecting policies.

## Glimpse into the Future

The present restoration of the Museum complex, the corresponding continuous movement of objects and current research paradigms like the process of creating knowledge and objects as a source of knowledge – all this poses a challenge and a chance at the same time for the Municipal Museum. The results of the ongoing research on the Judaica collection will be published in a catalogue raisonné in the coming year. It will also form the shape of the future up-to-date permanent exhibition.

To secure one of the fundamental tasks of a museum – to preserve and to display objects – a part of the total collection of the Municipal Museum was undergoing a preservative treatment this year. This was the case for a part of the Museum's collection of Jewish ceremonial objects, too. Objects consisting of organic material were being treated with nitrogen in order to prevent the potentially damaging effects of organisms like insects, microorganisms, etc.

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