



*Figure 1: Parokhet for High Holidays  
Courtesy of the Jewish Museum Vienna, Inv.  
No. 7445*

## B. THE GRUNWALD PAROCHET, FELICITAS HEIMAN-JELLINEK

How many characteristics or dimensions can an object contain? In how many different ways can we define an object? How many of its contexts past and present are we able and prepared to discover? Are we able to recognize a historical object in all its momentousness?

The relevance of these questions will be demonstrated with an object purchased by the Jewish Museum Vienna. This is about a Parokhet, a Torah curtain of Viennese provenance. The dimensions immanent in this curtain are of the most varied as well as complex nature.

First of all, there is the material dimension: this is a well-preserved textile of remarkable dimensions. Velvet is the chosen material; the restrained decoration is executed in couching and laid work. For a Judaica object, the curtain is rather modern, after all, the appliquéd golden embroidery cautiously, yet perceptibly reflects the Art Deco style. The rear lining material is made from cotton. Metal rings sewn on top make it possible to hang it on a round rod.

As already the name implies, a Torah curtain's place is in front of the Torah ark, meaning that its functional place is in the synagogue or in the private prayer house. However, the symbolic content of a Torah curtain points far beyond the individual synagogue, since its use in the Ashkenazi realm is derived from the curtain in front of the Holy of Holies in the Temple in Jerusalem. After the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem, the most important destroyed or looted symbols were transposed to the developing synagogues to highlight that the loss of the central sanctuary would not mean the loss of its most essential content – i.e., God's word – and that religious services were not bound to any single place. Now, in one and the same synagogue, various curtains are used in the course of a year since individual pieces are hung only on very specific occasions.

The Torah curtain described here is deliberately made from light cream-colored velvet and displays two embroidered Shofar horns in the upper center, which points to its specific religious application: This is a curtain that is used on one of the highest Jewish holidays, namely, on Rosh Hashanah, the New Year. Thanks to the Hebrew endowment inscription, we know that this curtain was dedicated on the occasion of a specific New Year holiday, namely, of the year 5682, which corresponds to October 3, 1921 according to the civil calendar.

This brings us to the historical dimension of the curtain. The endowment inscription attributes it to the Leopoldstädter Tempel. The notion to build—after the Stadttempel (City Temple) on Seitenstettengasse, inaugurated in 1828—a second prayer house for the Viennese community had become compelling as a result of the altered demographic situation in the wake of the Revolution of 1848. Already in late 1849, there was consensus among the community's functionaries—then still “representatives”—that new synagogue space had to be created. Yet, they were divided over the choice of location. It was the later ennobled Heinrich Sichrowsky who through his purchase of the plot on former Wällischgasse 569 destined the Leopoldstadt to become the seat of a new prayer house. The location was an unfortunate choice not just in the eyes of several community representatives: The imperial-royal police authority, too, who in 1852 had been asked for permission to build a second prayer house, openly expressed its fear of an increasing

“Judaization” of Vienna and of the Leopoldstadt district in particular. In its report of October 31 of that year, the request was commented on as follows: “...naturally, it must be feared that the establishment of a new large prayer house will have a special pull for new immigrants to the imperial city; and more particularly, the Leopoldstadt district, where baptisms and other Christian rites are significantly decreasing as it is, will attract the old name ‘Jew town’.”<sup>706</sup> With unconcealed regret, however, the letter further stated that one could hardly decline the request any longer in view of the meanwhile effected official recognition of Viennese Jewry: “... yet, if unrestricted toleration of the Israelites is to continue in this place, it is consequently impossible to deny them the requisite opportunity to exercise their religion.”<sup>707</sup> The ministry for religious affairs, as represented by Count Thun, was much more favorably inclined in this matter than the police, yet it had to leave the decision to the emperor himself. This was because the chief of the Supreme Police Authority was able to demand “to adjourn all further decisions until the question of the Israelites’ property and domicile capacity has been resolved.”<sup>708</sup> In October 1853, the property capacity of Jews had been restored to the status of January 1848. However, the emperor was gracious and permitted as of May 2, 1854 construction of the temple in Leopoldstadt. The house of God, designed by the renowned architect Ludwig Förster, was inaugurated on May 18, 1858.<sup>709</sup> The designated preacher, Adolf Jellinek, eventually second chief rabbi of Vienna and founder of the Viennese Bet Hamidrash, took up his office that day. Viennese Jewry was proud of its Leopoldstädter Tempel and demonstrated its pride openly. In contrast to the Stadttempel, which still had to hide behind an inconspicuous row of houses as a result of the restrictive regulations, the Leopoldstädter Tempel was an evident sign of Jewish existence in Vienna. All the harder thus were Viennese Jews hit by what the dedication inscription on the Torah curtain further reveals. The Parokhet had been endowed by the “committee for the restoration of the Leopoldstädter Tempel.” By “restoration” was meant the reconstruction of the left wing of the synagogue, where on August 17, 1917 a fire had erupted after a morning service for Jewish soldiers on the occasion of the birthday of Emperor Charles I. “Like a bird whose nest was robbed, our soul is mourning,” moaned then rabbi of the Leopoldstädter Tempel, Dr. Max Grunwald. “The feast for our eyes is a smoking heap of rubble! Our pride, a tangle of charred wood, molten metal, bent iron rods!”<sup>710</sup> Only after the war ended did it become possible to start raising funds for reconstruction, which was only completed as late as in summer 1921. When as of October 1921—in time for the Jewish New Year 5682—the operating permit for the renovated temple was issued by the authorities, the Parokhet was donated as well.

Naturally, the curtain was dedicated, first and foremost, to “the honor of the Torah,” but beyond this also, as it says, “to our teacher and rabbi, Meir, son of Rav Abraham Grunwald,” which brings the personal dimension of this textile object to the fore.

The already mentioned Max Meir Grunwald had been called from Hamburg to Vienna in 1903 as rabbi, initially to the synagogue in Vienna-Fünfhaus (15th district), then to the Leopoldstädter Tempel. Grunwald was married to the daughter of the combative Floridsdorf Rabbi Joseph Samuel Bloch,<sup>711</sup> who publicly exposed as preposterous the antisemitic concoctions both of the Prague theologian August Rohling as well as those of the Viennese priest Deckert. Margarete Grunwald née Bloch significantly supported her husband

<sup>706</sup> Quoted from: „Aus der Geschichte des Leopoldstädter Tempels,“ *Dr. Bloch's Oesterreichische Wochenschrift*, vol. XXXIV, no. 33 (August 14, 1917), p. 535.

<sup>707</sup> Ibid.

<sup>708</sup> Ibid.

<sup>709</sup> For details see: Ruth Burstyn, „Die Geschichte des Leopoldstädter Tempels in Wien – 1858-1938,“ *Kairos* 28 (3-4), 1986, pp. 228-249

<sup>710</sup> Max Grunwald, Unserem Tempel!, in: note 429, p. 533.

<sup>711</sup> Christoph Daxelmüller, “Dr. Max Meir Grunwald, Rabbiner, Volkskundler, Vergessener,” Bernhard Purin (ed.), *Wiener Jahrbuch für jüdische Geschichte, Kultur und Museumswesen*, vol. 1, (Vienna 1994/95), p. 94.

in his tireless and sweeping charitable efforts that grew beyond all measure especially in the wake of World War I. Their daughter Hilde, in turn, married Leon Kolb, art collector and chronicler of the Viennese Jewish Museum.<sup>712</sup> Thus, the cultural-historical relevance of the curtain becomes now comprehensible in another dimension as well.

Max Grunwald's connections to the Viennese Jewish Museum were longstanding and close; after all, he was founder of the "Society for Jewish Folklore" whose organ, *Newsletter for Jewish Folklore*, he published from its establishment in 1897 until 1922 and also largely penned himself. Until 1925, the *Newsletter* was followed by the *Yearbooks for Jewish Folklore* for another three years. Apart from that, he published numerous studies in the field of Jewish history and folklore. Special significance in connection with the Viennese Jewish Museum can be attributed to his *Hygiene of the Jews*, which appeared in 1912. Grunwald had drafted for the 1911 International Hygiene Exhibition in Dresden the—not undisputed—concept for the Jewish section. Realization of the project had only been possible in cooperation with the Viennese Museum that extended considerable support conceptually and financially, as well as the objects to be exhibited.<sup>713</sup> The exhibition's success turned out to be unexpectedly great: Overnight Grunwald became internationally renowned and recognized in professional circles—and with him the Viennese Jewish Museum. Several exhibits from this hygiene exhibition, including specially prepared models, have survived National Socialist confiscation in 1938 and are today at the Jewish Museum Vienna. Thus, we have reached the contemporary historical dimension of the curtain.

On the morning of November 10, 1938, the Leopoldstädter Tempel burned down completely. As with all other synagogues (with the exception of the Stadttempel on Seitenstettengasse), a raiding squad of the Verfügungstruppe (SS Special Purpose Troops) had thrown hand grenades. Twenty-one years earlier, Grunwald had expressed his satisfaction that city and government representatives had visited him in the wake of the fire of 1917 to demonstrate their sympathy. Deeply moved, he reminded that the cornerstones of both the Leopoldstädter Tempel and the Votive Church had been brought from Jerusalem by the first "secretary" of the Jewish Community, Ludwig August Frankl: "Adversity builds many a bridge. Does anybody remember that this temple of the Jews is standing on Viennese soil as an appeal to reconciliation? That the cornerstone of this emblem of a golden age long vanished since is hewn off one and the same piece as the stone placed into the ground beneath the Votive Church? That both originate from the Mount of Olives, both were shaped then and there by the same Jewish artist and were brought by the same Jewish envoy from the Holy City to Vienna?"<sup>714</sup> Vienna, too, mourns with our soul!<sup>715</sup> In 1938, Max Grunwald had to escape to Jerusalem where he lived until his death in 1953. Of the Leopoldstädter Tempel remained only the northern wing of the building. Cult objects also survived partially; today they are at the Jewish Museum Vienna. They were transferred to the Museum on permanent loan by the Jewish Community Vienna (IKG), which had been able to save a major part of the synagogal objects ahead of the pogrom of November 9 and (mostly) 10. No satisfactory explanation has been found to date for the fact that individual objects such as this Parokhet were not in the holdings when transferred but appeared bit by bit on the market. Here the issue of provenance research arises in the sense of questioning the ways the object went from the Leopoldstädter Temple to the market.

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<sup>712</sup> Ibid.

<sup>713</sup> Ibid, 102.

<sup>714</sup> For a revised view on this account see: *Gerhard Milchram*, "Jerusalem 1856. Ludwig August Frankl und die Gründung der Lämle-Schule," Hanno Loewy, Hannes Sulzenbacher (ed.), *Endstation Sehnsucht. Eine Reise durch Jeruschalajim – Jerusalem – Al Quds*, Berlin 2015, p. 127.

<sup>715</sup> Max Grunwald, *Unserem Tempel*, in: note 429, p. 534.

Finally, with the acquisition of such an item, the issue of its economic dimension arises as well. It should be pointed out, though, that with the acquisition of an object, its economic aspect is by no means exhausted: It must be insured, inventoried, restored, exhibited, stored, and preserved. Therefore it entails follow-up costs that are more or less calculable depending on its properties and condition. Yet the primary question always is what one buys for what reason and for what price. Moralizing about the dynamics of the market system in which we have to operate would be, in this context, out of touch with reality. All one can do is asking oneself rather pragmatically how much is history "worth?". And if one determines that it is worth the price demanded, then one has not only "brought home" a piece of history but also removed the object from the market and from speculation.

The seventy-year young Parokhet has told a long story that shows that a ceremonial object must not be just "another object" in a museum's or collection's holdings. The story is meant to make clear that an historical object does not necessarily have to be a mere illustration of an event or a situation. History provides the object with a "character" of its own. The latter becomes apparent only after closer examination of its material, functional, spiritual, historical, personal, and economic essence. Only after capturing these individual dimensions does this object become nearly whole and thus a museum piece in the sense of an object that should be preserved for the future also because it is meaningful. An object is meaningful that does not get neutralized<sup>716</sup> in the museum but positioned - an object for which clear positions are assumed precisely through the deliberate disclosure of as many of its inherent dimensions as possible. To be sure, complete access to an object will be hardly possible because its "seat in life" is in history, in a specific situation of the past that was determined by specific people of the past. Hence, its context cannot be reconstructed to the last detail. Nonetheless, an object need not simply be a messenger from the past that transmits the message to the recipient, only to then retire back into the past. And the message should not be reduced to its ostensible content - rather it wants to be read also in-between the lines and wants its codes deciphered. And finally, the recipient, i.e. today's viewer, must render himself account whether he wishes to accept the messenger's message altogether or whether it is to be sent back into oblivion—with the comment "recipient unknown", because today's owner and/or viewer is not interested in the message anymore.

Uncovering the different layers of the curtain and reconstructing a complex history by its inscription are not enough to establish the concrete provenance of an object. Further questions are not answered and should be examined during next steps:

As this object stems from a Viennese synagogue, it has to be clarified if the curtain was part of the amassed holdings of Viennese synagogues and prayer houses extant after the pogrom of November 1938 and stored away by the Israelitische Kultusgemeinde, the Jewish community (IKG). Verification of this is nearly impossible as no lists of the rescued objects were made.

A possible step is to turn to the Central Archives for the History of the Jewish People (CAHJP),<sup>717</sup> in Jerusalem, established in 1939. They hold the archives of hundreds of Jewish communities, of Jewish organizations and of the private collections of many individuals. You may search their holdings choosing a "Collection Type", a "Country" and a "Search Term". As for the "Collection Type" there are the options "Communities", "Private Collections" and "Organizations". As in the present case we are dealing with Austria, we are choosing this country, the collection type "communities", and "Vienna" as search item because the Parokhet was dedicated – as we have reconstructed above - there. You will come up with two

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<sup>716</sup> Already in 1953, Adorno deplored that museums pursued "the neutralization of culture." Comp. Theodor W. Adorno, *Gesammelte Schriften*, Rolf Tiedemann (ed.), vol. 10/1, Frankfurt/Main 1997, p. 188.

<sup>717</sup> <http://cahip.nli.org.il>

hits and choose “Inventories of the Jewish Community of Vienna, Part I (1626-1938)“. In these files you will find under “VI. D. 4” (Kultus und rituelle Angelegenheiten/Bethausverwaltung/Verzeichnisse der Bethäuser; Inventare) a list of Viennese synagogues and inventories.<sup>718</sup> It is likely that the inventories are very cursory but one might find a lead.

Another search option is to use our knowledge about the history of Max Grunwald and the parokhet dedicated to him. Choose as a collection type the private ones and for the search term his name. You will see that an estate of Max Grunwald forms part of the holdings: “Nachlass Rabbiner Max Grunwald – P 97”.<sup>719</sup> From the material listed it would sound promising to go through his autobiography, which exists only as a manuscript: “Achtzig Jahre meines Lebens”.<sup>720</sup> It might well be here that a hint to the curtain and its destiny may be found.<sup>721</sup>

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<sup>718</sup> [http://cahip.nli.org.il/webfm\\_send/589](http://cahip.nli.org.il/webfm_send/589): Nos.: 933-936, p. 102.

<sup>719</sup> [http://cahip.nli.org.il/webfm\\_send/675](http://cahip.nli.org.il/webfm_send/675)

<sup>720</sup> <http://cahip.nli.org.il/content/grunwald-max>: record number: P 97, 3.

<sup>721</sup> To explore the community files as well as the individual files you must visit the archive.