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(Candle)sticks on Stone: The Representation of Women in Jewish Tombstone Art

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Cover Page Footnote

I was aided in this project by two grants from the Hadassah Brandeis Institute, a research grant in 2009 and a visiting scholar grant at the Hadassah-Brandeis Institute (HBI) in 2011. I thank everyone involved for the opportunity to become part of the HBI community. Thanks, too, to my 2009 traveling companions to northern Romania, my cousins Arthur Schankler and Hugh and Asher Rogovy, as well as cousins Merrick and Nancy Gruber and my late aunt, Pearl Gruber Kaplan. I am also grateful to Boris Khaimovich and Sergey R. Kravstov for their aid and encouragement. A version of this essay was published online as a “working paper” on the website of the Hadassah Brandeis Institute, following my fellowship there in 2011. A version was also published in *Juden in Mitteleuropa 2011—“Ostjuden”Geschichte und Mythos*. St. Pölten: Institut für Jüdische Geschichte, 2011, 60–67, and portions are used here with permission of the journal. In addition to the Candlesticks on Stone blog for this project, I have posted a number of times about Jewish cemeteries, my field trips, and the candlesticks motifs in articles, on my blog Jewish Heritage Travel (jewish-heritage-travel.blogspot.com), and on the website Jewish Heritage Europe (www.jewish-heritage-europe.eu), a project of the Rothschild Foundation Hanadiv Europe.



IN THE FIELD

(Candle)sticks on Stone: The Representation of Women in Jewish Tombstone Art

RUTH ELLEN GRUBER

Candles and candlesticks are a common and potent symbol on the gravestones of Jewish women because lighting the Sabbath candles is one of the three so-called “women’s commandments” carried out by female Jews; it is the only one easily represented in visual terms. This essay describes the author’s field research, photographic, and writing project, “(Candlesticks) on Stone,” carried out mainly in 2009–2011, to explore the variety of ways candles and candlesticks are depicted on women’s gravestones in Eastern Europe. It also questions the transmission of the candle-lighting tradition from her East European ancestors to later generations.

[T]he branches, cups and flowers of the pure candlestick are broken.

—Epitaph, tombstone (now destroyed) of the legendary
“Golden Rose” of L’viv, who died in 1637

In 2009 I began a field research, photographic, and writing project, “(Candlesticks) on Stone,” to explore the carving of candles and candlesticks on Jewish women’s gravestones. Candles and candlesticks are a common and potent symbol on the gravestones of Jewish women because lighting the

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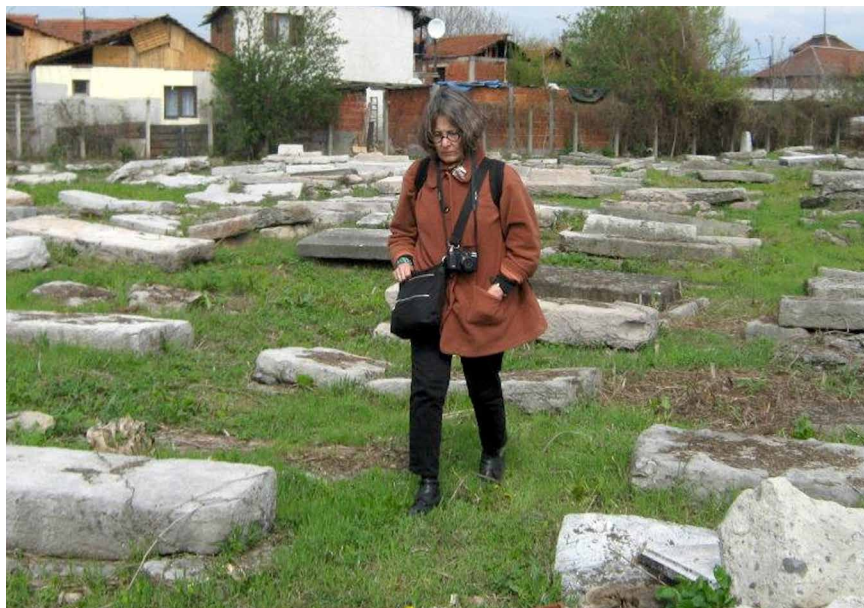


Figure 1. The author in the Jewish cemetery in Niš, Serbia, 2012. In accordance with Sephardic tradition, the gravestones are oriented horizontally. Photo by Jasna Ćirić.

Sabbath candles is one of the three so-called “women’s commandments” carried out by female Jews. It is the only one easily represented in visual form: the others include observing the laws of *niddah* separating men from women during their menstrual periods, and that of *challah*, or burning a piece of dough when making bread.

My fieldwork discussed in this essay focused mainly on regions of northern Romania, western Ukraine, and Poland, where tombstone carving became an especially vivid folk art form in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and where denoting women’s graves with candlestick imagery became a norm in the nineteenth century. This essay draws from documentation that I posted on the web site and blog I established for the project (<http://candlesticksonstone.wordpress.com>), which combines artistic visual imagery and on-site documentation with research and commentary.

A primary aim of my project was initially to present the tombstone carvings as examples of art and to show the many ways in which candlesticks are portrayed. But as a Jewish woman who has almost never lit the Sabbath candles in my home, I also could not fail to consider what the candlesticks representation means. Candlesticks, in a way, often form a schematic shorthand denoting both gender and Jewishness. Even in the present, they may be placed on the grave markers of women who had little to do with traditional Jewish observance.

My own mother, for example, who died in 2007, is buried in a municipal, not a Jewish, cemetery in Santa Monica, California, and she lies surrounded by people of other faiths and even languages. An accomplished artist, my mother possessed a strong Jewish identity, but I do not recall ever seeing her light the candles on a Friday night. Nonetheless, the flat metal plaque marking her grave includes the representation of candles—in her case, a seven-branched candelabrum, or menorah. And, despite her own failure to light candles at home, a major self-portrait she painted when she was in her fifties prominently featured a pair of Shabbat candles.

Carvings

The first time I saw a Jewish woman's tombstone bearing a representation of candlesticks was in 1978, when for the first time I visited Rădăuți, the small town in the far north of Romania near where my father's parents were born and from which they emigrated to the United States in the early twentieth century. The tombstone in question was that of my great-grandmother Ettel Gruber, who died in 1946 and in whose honor I received my middle name. Her gravestone is a simple slab, tilted over a bit, with a five-branched candelabrum topping an epitaph, which reads, in translation: A positive and dedicated woman, fair and kind in all her doing, [she] offered hospitality and charity to the poor and set a full table for the tzaddikim. Ettel, daughter of Ephraim, died 17 Heshvan, 5707 (figure 2).

Since then, and particularly over the past three decades and more, I have visited scores if not hundreds of Jewish cemeteries in East-Central Europe, photographing them and writing about them in books, articles, and on the web.



Figure 2. Gravestone of Etzel Gruber, the author's great-grandmother, in the Jewish cemetery in Rădăuți, Romania. She died November 11, 1946. Photo © Ruth Ellen Gruber 2009.

Carvings on Jewish tombstones include a wide range of symbols representing names, professions, personal attributes, or family lineage—as well as decoration reflecting local folk styles and religious iconography. In what today is northern Romania and parts of Poland, western Ukraine, and nearby areas, the carved designs on Jewish gravestones became exceptionally ornate, particularly from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The ornate style continued through the nineteenth and even into the twentieth century in various locations, although by the late nineteenth century unique hand-carving had often given way to more standardized (though often still elaborate) templates.

The styles on Jewish gravestones in this part of Eastern Europe are different from those found on even the most highly decorated Jewish gravestones further west, such as those in the Old Jewish Cemetery in Prague, in provincial cemeteries elsewhere in Bohemia and Moravia (such as in Mikulov), and in parts of Germany, or on the wonderfully ornate Sephardic tombstones such as those in Hamburg Altona, Germany; Venice, Italy; and Ouderkerk aan de Amstel, the Netherlands.

Studies have traced some of the influences to Christian tombs and carving as well as to Jewish mysticism. In the areas of Eastern Europe where I have concentrated my fieldwork, these concepts have been transformed into a distinctive set of styles and aesthetic sensibilities.

Much of the carved imagery on the stones, in fact, is also found in other Jewish decorative art, such as the detailed paintings that adorned the now-destroyed wooden synagogues; in the elaborately carved and painted Torah Arks, some of which still survive in synagogues in several Romanian towns, including Botoșani, Iași, Roman and Fălticeni, and particularly from the nineteenth century in traditional Jewish papercuts (for more on arks, see Yaniv 2018; for papercuts see Shadur and Shadur 2002). The exuberant mix of religious iconography and folk-influenced styles is sometimes described as “Jewish baroque” (Wodziński and Kotlyar 2020; Shadur and Shadur 2002, 47 ff.; Wodziński 2010).

Jewish tombstones in this region include a variety of wonderfully vivid motifs in several categories such as *animals*—lions, birds, stags, bears, and snakes, as well as unicorns, griffins, and other imaginary beasts; *flora and foliage*—flowers, grapevines, garlands, vines, trees, and geometric patterns; *religious images*—the pitchers of the Levites, the crown of the Torah, and the hands of the Cohanim raised in blessing; and other *symbols or objects*—books, charity boxes, buildings. In combination, depictions on the tombstones might include the hand of God plucking a flower or breaking off a branch from the Tree of Life, to symbolize death. Some stones still retain traces of the brightly colored painted decoration that once adorned them. Candles and candlesticks became an almost across-the-board marker for women from the mid to late nineteenth century onward.

I am far from the first to fall under the spell of these marvelous yet often overlooked examples of Jewish art and artistry. Rabbi Arthur Levy wrote an illustrated book about them in 1923, based on his observations as a field rabbi in World War I; and the American writer Marvin Lowenthal waxed lyrical about East European Jewish cemeteries in his Jewish travel book *A World Passed By* (1933). The Russian photographer and researcher David Goberman (2000) began documenting Jewish gravestones in what is now Belarus, western Ukraine, and Moldova in the 1930s, and a number of other more contemporary authors, such as Lajos Erdélyi

in Romania (1980) and Monika Krajewska in Poland (1982, 1993), have written and published photographic and other works. In addition, scholarly research and documentation have been carried out by Boris Khaimovich, Binyamin Lukin, and others associated with the Center for Jewish Art at Hebrew University in Jerusalem; the Jewish Galicia and Bukovina Organization (JGB); the Sefer Center for University Teaching of Jewish Civilization; the Petersburg Institute of Jewish Studies, and other institutions (Nosonovsky 2009).

Still, scholarship, analysis, and even appreciation of these sculptural forms have been surprisingly limited, as most past research on Jewish cemeteries focused on the epitaphs. For example, in 2004 Aviva Ben-Ur referred to the marginalization of historical research on carved Jewish tombstones in a lengthy article on Jewish tombstone iconography in Suriname, noting:

an academic print culture that regards sculpted stones and cemeteries as largely peripheral. [. . .] The historian's focus on the written word has also meant that stone imagery is at most a secondary consideration. Research on Jewish sepulchres has thus focused on inscriptions, and has been primarily concerned with local community history, genealogy of distinguished members, and linguistic aspects. (Ben-Ur 2004, 31–32)

This attitude was borne out by the distinguished Israeli art historian Moshe Barasch, who in 1988 wrote an article, “Reflection on Tombstones: Childhood Memories,” recalling the Jewish cemetery in his native Czernowitz (now Chernivtsi), Ukraine. Concerning the “level of artistic achievement” of the stone-carvings, he asserted:

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. [. . .] 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. (Barasch 1988, 127, 131)

I strongly disagree with Barasch! And indeed, to my mind, the illustrations of elaborately carved gravestones that were provided with his article also prove him wrong. He does admit, though, that one can be “often surprised by the variations invented by popular fantasy and executed by anonymous stone carvers” (Barasch 1988, 131).

Much more in line with my way of thinking is the analysis by Boris Khaimovich, who described Jewish tombstone decoration in this part of Eastern Europe as developing through the eighteenth century into “an evolved and independent artistic form” (Khaimovich 2005, 89), and that of David Goberman, who describes many of the stones he documented as “genuine masterpieces of carved stone art” (Goberman 2000, 10). Marvin Lowenthal adds, “The images now are drawn from the wells of Jewish mysticism, and their execution is free, naïve, and what modern jargon likes to call ‘expressionist.’ It is the work of sincere, untrammelled craftsmen, possessed more with their inward vision than the outer show of things” (Lowenthal 1933, 376). More recently, the Jewish Galicia and Bukovina Organization described gravestones that its teams documented in Romania as “real masterpieces of stone-cutting art” (“Expedition” 2023).

It is more than probable that the vast majority of elaborate, centuries-old tombstones that existed before World War II were destroyed during or after the war, and those that remain are deteriorating. Many surviving cemeteries have been vandalized or are overgrown with vegetation. Levy and others, including the Zionist activist Israel Cohen and the German novelist Alfred Döblin, described many East European Jewish cemeteries as appearing overgrown even earlier (Cohen 1953, 214; Döblin 1991, 111, 131; Levy 1923, 2–3). Nonetheless, in some cemeteries, the carving on the stones is so distinctive that one can still discern the hand of individual, if long forgotten, artists. And while later stones, often carved according to stencils or templates, present a more uniform appearance, their style and format can be highly elaborate and still vary greatly from town to town.

“Innovations of one individual could define a whole group of gravestones or, in the case of a powerful creative style, shape an entire stream of creative design,” David Goberman noted. He concluded that “almost every cemetery offers examples of one cutter who produces variations of a theme, each making more demands

of the master's talent than the previous one" (Goberman 2000, 15–16). In my own field research, I found variations especially striking in Siret and particularly in Botoșani, Romania, where one finds distinctive carving approaching Art Deco in style.

Most tombstone carvers remained anonymous, but several sources, including Goberman and Barasch, report that stone carving was often a family business, passed on down through generations. In particular, Barasch refers to families of carvers named Picker and Steinmetz (the name means "stone carver") (Barasch 1988, 128), and Goberman mentions the Raizers and Tsellers (Goberman 2000, 16). In his analysis of the Old Jewish Cemetery in Siret, Silviu Sanie notes the presence of Jewish families named Pietraru, from the Romanian word for stonecutter or mason. (Sanie 2000, 271, 314).

In some places, however, particularly from the latter part of the nineteenth century, it is not uncommon to find individual *matzevot* that bear the "signature," or advertisement, of the stonemason or workshop. Khaimovich reports an inscription of a gravestone as early as 1835 in the Jewish cemetery in Sataniv, Ukraine, testifying to the name of the carver (Khaimovich 2005, 156) The gravestone from the Jewish cemetery in Serock, Poland, of a woman named Sheyna Gitil, daughter of Yosef, who died in 1916, is decorated with a three-branched candlestick, and it also bears the name and address of the stonemason, carved at the bottom of the stone, in Yiddish, in letters that are even larger than those used in the epitaph itself. He was one Hirsch Kolbe, whose workshop was at ul. Letnia 8 in the Warsaw district of Nowa Praga, near the large Bródno Jewish cemetery.¹ This and other gravestones from the Serock cemetery had been uprooted by the Nazis and used to construct a stairway on a nearby hill. The *matzevot* were rescued and now form part of a memorial lapidarium completed in 2023.

Typology of Candlesticks

Candlesticks on tombstones come in many types, styles, and degrees of ornamentation. As Goberman suggests, considering all the variations "would make

an interesting study in itself” (Goberman 2000, 23), and interpreting patterns in the variations of gravestone design has been an important aspect of my fieldwork.

The earliest women’s grave markers bearing candlesticks that were found and described by Boris Khaimovich (2005) in Ukraine and, in the old Jewish cemetery in Siret, Romania, just on the Ukrainian border, by Silviu Sanie (2000) and later researchers (Jewish Galicia and Bukovina Organization 2023) date from the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries; most women’s tombstones before this period seem not to have that special female iconographic marker.² By the mid-to-late nineteenth century, however, and particularly by the latter part of that century, the candlestick imagery appears to have been almost universal, or at least widespread, in parts of Eastern Europe, although other symbols, such as birds and flowers, could also be used, especially to denote young (unmarried) women or girls.

The prevalent use of the candlestick imagery was evident in an interview conducted in 1926 with the last professional tombstone carver from the town of Ozarintsy (Ozaryntsi) in today’s western Ukraine—a young man named Goldenberg—and cited by Khaimovich in his PhD dissertation.³ The interviewer, a Ukrainian scholar, wanted, according to the part of the interview cited by Khaimovich, to find out “what guided him in carving certain images on a tombstone: whether definite rules and tradition, or the wishes of the dead person’s family, or perhaps his own imagination.” Goldenberg, he said, was “young, and apparently has poor knowledge of ancient tradition” (Khaimovich 2005, 158). But he adhered to some of the old tombstone stone-carving conventions and told the interviewer that he was “usually guided” by certain considerations.

Regarding women’s tombstones these considerations show how strongly engrained the candlestick tradition had become. They were:

(1) for the grave of a young girl—a chopped down tree, a small fir-tree, a wreath, a bird;

(2) for the gravestone of an important woman—a candelabrum (since the mistress of the house must light Shabbat candles), two candelabra, two birds.” (Khaimovich 2005, 158)

Khaimovich concluded:

Apparently, the “poor knowledge of tradition” referred to the fact that the carver neither used nor knew the meaning of the motifs depicted on old Tombstones. [. . .] This means that the tradition was totally lost by the turn of the 20th century. At the same time, the carver’s testimony sheds some light on the nature of this phenomenon, and clearly points at the existence of a special symbolic language, of which Goldenberg’s generation retained no more than vague notions and echoes. (Khaimovich 2005, 158)

The depictions of candlesticks on stone range from what I would call “classic” Shabbat candles—two (sometimes more) matched candles in individual candle-holders—to multi-branched candelabra of various types and with various numbers of branches. Some appear as if they could have come off of a typical household’s shelf. Others look like the classic Menorah of antiquity as God commanded its construction in Exodus 25:31–32: “And thou shalt make a candlestick of pure gold: of beaten work shall the candlestick be made: his shaft, and his branches, his bowls, his knops, and his flowers, shall be of the same. And six branches shall come out of the sides of it; three branches of the candlestick out of the one side, and three branches of the candlestick out of the other side.”

Sometimes (particularly in more modern times) they are simple silhouettes, such as that on my great-grandmother Ettel’s tomb in Rădăuți, or even crudely scratched figures. Yet extraordinarily complex bas-relief sculptures are also found. Many of the depicted candlesticks are elaborately ornamental but still look like physical objects. But others are intricate figures that weave and twist and entwine the branches of the candelabrum and/or its base into fanciful convoluted forms. And some clearly combine the imagery of the menorah with that of the Tree of Life, in which the candelabrum sprouts leaves and shoots, or its branches turn into tendrils. Candles also may be treated as symbols of death: in some examples the branches of the candelabrum may look like snakes, and in many instances broken candles or flames being extinguished represent the ending of life. Animals, birds, flowers, and other designs often accompany the candlesticks, embellishing



Figure 3. Gravestone of Malka Mirel, daughter of Zev Wolf, died August 17, 1867, Busk, Ukraine. Photo © Ruth Ellen Gruber 2006.

the design (see figure 3). And in northern Romania and parts of Ukraine in particular, along with candlesticks many tombstones bear depictions of a woman's hands blessing the lights. The tombstone of Ester, daughter of Yitzhak, showing hands blessing candles in a menorah dating from 1781 and found by Khaimovich in the Jewish cemetery in the town of Kosiv, Ukraine, may be one of the earliest examples exhibiting this trope (Wunder, Lukin, and Khaimovich 2005, 123).⁴

Two publications from the early 1990s, both by women, expand on the types and symbolism of candles and candlesticks on women's gravestones. In her book

A Tribe of Stones: Jewish Cemeteries in Poland, Monika Krajewska (1993), a post-World War II pioneer in the study of gravestone imagery, poetically describes the wide variety of typology of candlesticks:

Some stone-cutters produced unusual forms, like a five-branched candelabrum made of snakes, or ones with branches that end with birds' heads, oak leaves, or imaginary fish with lions' heads. The foot of the candlestick may also take various shapes, such as an anchor or griffons' heads. Candelabra made of floral ornaments derive from the mystical concept of the menorah as a Tree of Life, even though the stone masons who rendered such carvings might have been unaware of the association. (Krajewska 1993, 27)

She notes the many ways that stone-carvers used candles being broken or extinguished as "elaborate death metaphors":

These include an eagle shown extinguishing candles with its claws, or a griffon putting out a flame with its beak. The following image is also rare, as well as intriguing: in the center of the relief are candles in candlesticks, some broken and others not; on one or two sides, hands hold new candles and seem to be lighting them from the old ones. Is this an allusion to the handing down of tradition, or of transmitting life itself? (Krajewska 1993, 27)

In an essay titled "Visual Motifs In the Decoration Of Tombstones In Ukraine," Ariella Amar expounds on the possible symbolism of candlesticks that goes well beyond their reference to the women's role of lighting them on Shabbat (Amar 1992, 31). She notes that in some depictions of candelabra, the candles have flames that all lean toward the center flame (as on the gravestone of Ester in Kosiv, cited above). This, she writes, "is a direct reference to the traditional description of the flames of the menorah in the Temple, recorded by the commentator Rashi" and also appears on the painted walls of contemporary East European synagogues. She adds that the menorah "appearing as a plant or a tree is quite familiar in Jewish iconography," and in some depictions, "the candelabra are

significantly formed by vines; in many cases it is difficult to decide if the primary motif is a menorah or floral decoration” (Amar 1992, 31). As “a well-known utensil of the Holy Temple,” she writes, “the menorah emphasizes not only the past but also the yearning for the future rebuilding of the Temple. The Tree of Life, which will be planted next to the Temple in the Messianic days, commonly symbolizes eternal life.” She describes some specific gravestones on which the candlesticks are depicted as tree trunks “with fruit-bearing branches.” There are examples where the fruit is shown being eaten by animals “identified with the name of the deceased.” This, she writes, emphasizes “the notion that the fruit of the Tree of Life, together with the Leviatan and the ox, will provide the feast for the righteous in the Messianic days” (Amar 1992, 31). She adds a caveat, though: “One must note, however, that floral and bird motifs also appear in non-Jewish folklore in the Ukraine, and may therefore be intended purely as decorative elements” (Amar 1992, 31).

The menorah, or candelabrum, was also a widespread image in Jewish paper cuts, a form of folk art whose development can be charted from the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. Elaborate paper cuts were used for a variety of ritual and decorative purposes, including as “mizrachs,” or wall decorations that show which direction was east. (Shadur and Shadur 2002, 57–58). In fact, regarding the twisted, braided, or convoluted menorah in particular, Joseph and Yehudit Shadur write that this image appears almost exclusively in just two places—in traditional East European Jewish paper cuts (where they are often dominant compositional elements but do not seem to reflect any special female reference) and on “some East-European Jewish tombstones of the same regions” (Shadur and Shadur 2002, 170). The Shadurs write that this image appears to represent a development of the “endless knot” motif:

As far as we could ascertain, neither the convoluted menorah configurations nor the endless-knot motif have [*sic*] ever been considered as distinct visual symbols in Jewish iconography. And yet, they are so common and figure so prominently in East-European Jewish papercuts that they can hardly be regarded as mere decorative motifs. (Shadur and Shadur 2002, 170)

They theorize that:

the metamorphosis of the traditional menorah of antiquity and the Middle Ages into the convoluted, endless-knot configurations appearing in the papercuts coincides with the spread and growing popularization of messianic mysticism and the Kabbalah throughout the Jewish communities of Eastern Europe from the early eighteenth century on—along with the development of the entire papercutting practice itself. (Shadur and Shadur 2002, 170–71)

In *A Tribe of Stones*, Monika Krajewska—who is also an accomplished contemporary paper cut artist—offered another interpretation that also makes some sense. She likened the twisted branches of convoluted menorahs to the braiding of challah loaves—and in a way, that would mean that those images denote two of the three “women’s commandments,” candle-lighting and taking the challah. (Krajewska 1993, 27). I have come across one gravestone where the challah image may be more explicit. In the Jewish cemetery in Bolekhiv, Ukraine, the gravestone of Ester, daughter of Meshulem Zalman, who died in 1835, bears the carving of classic Shabbat candles flanking what looks as if it could be a tray holding a braided challah (figure 4). Shabbat is further evoked by bunches of grapes, which may evoke the kiddush wine. Rabbi Levy provides an example that goes further: a woman’s grave from 1906 whose carving shows an entire Shabbos table, with an empty chair and with candlesticks and challah, and with the deceased—represented by a bird—holding a prayer book (Levy 1923, 48). Marvin Lowenthal, clearly based on Levy’s photograph of the stone, goes further in his interpretation: “there are five sockets in the candlestick, only two of which are lit with candles—Sarah Treina, mother of five children, of whom two survive, has left a vacant chair, but her spirit still graces the blessing which ushers in the Sabbath” (Lowenthal 1933, 377).

Transmission of Tradition

As part of this documentary project, I examined what I call the transmission of tradition. Specifically, I looked at what happened between the generations of my



Figure 4. Gravestone of Ester daughter of Meshulem Zalman, died 1835, Bolekhiv, Ukraine. Photo © Ruth Ellen Gruber 2008

women ancestors buried in the Jewish cemetery in Rădăuți, Romania—and the generations in the United States who came after. As I traveled to Rădăuți in 2009 with several cousins who were eager to “walk in the ancestral footsteps,” I investigated the transmission in my own family. In addition to our great-grandmother Ettel, one of our great-great grandmothers, Chaje Dwora Herer Halpern, who died in 1904, is also buried in the Rădăuți Jewish cemetery. On the 2009 trip, I found her gravestone there, after consulting a map of the cemetery on a web site for Rădăuți descendants and also old registries in Suceava, the county seat. (There is

some discrepancy about the date of her death—the epitaph, as translated for me by the Yiddishist Dov-Ber Kerler, of Indiana University, puts it as 16 Adar Rishon 5664, corresponding to March 3, 1904, but the registry book in Suceava has it as February 22, 1905—that may simply be when it was entered into the registry.) My cousins had already left town, leaving me alone to carry out my cemetery photo-documentation project in Rădăuți and elsewhere. At the Rădăuți cemetery, a caretaker, a Mr. Popescu, showed me the row, and I entered the tilting forest of stones, crunching through the undergrowth in my cowboy boots. I had to scrutinize the Hebrew epitaphs on each one, testing my basic Hebrew to its limits. After half an hour or so, there it was: I could read the name.

The candelabrum on my great-grandmother Ettel's immediate post-war gravestone is a simple silhouette. But the five branches of the one on great-great-grandmother Chaje Dwora's tomb, more than 40 years earlier, form a geometric braided pattern under carved blessing hands; and it looks, too, as if the candle branches are emerging from a plant, or leaves of some sort—life; there are also traces of red and green paint that once embellished the stone (figure 5). For all its ornateness, the carving is, however, what looks like a mass-produced design based on a stencil or template. Scores of headstones around it bear similar patterns. And in what appears to have been a decorative convention, the blessing hands are held reversed from how a woman, at least in today's practice, would hold them over the flames: a woman would hold them with the palms toward her eyes, thumbs pointing upward. The gravestone carvings uniformly depict them with the thumbs pointing down and palms facing out, reminiscent of the depiction of the hands raised in blessing that often mark the gravestones of (male) Cohanim.

Chaje Dwora's granddaughter, my grandmother Rebecca Rosenberg Gruber Rifkin, recalled, in a memoir she wrote by hand when she was in her sixties and living in Los Angeles, how she had lived with her grandparents in Rădăuți for two years as a young girl, "the happiest two years of my life as a child." Chaje Dwora, she wrote, "saw that my clothes were nice and clean, she had meals on time, and my hair was always combed nice and neat." They had, she wrote, little money.

This ancestor, Chaje Dwora, my grandmother's grandmother, had probably



Figure 5. In the center, the gravestone of Chaje Dwora (Halpern), the author's great-great-grandmother, Rădăuți, Romania. The epitaph, as translated by the Yiddishist Dov-Ber Kerler, puts her death date as 16 Adar Rishon 5664, corresponding to March 3, 1904, but the registry book in Suceava has it as February 22, 1905—that may simply be when it was entered into the registry. To her descendants in America, her name appears to have been anglicized as Ida Devorah Alpern. Photo © Ruth Ellen Gruber 2009

never crossed my mind before this trip. Her epitaph describes her as an “honest and modest” woman. This inscription and my Grandma Becky’s brief recollection in her memoir may be all that is left of what we know about her. (In a family tree in my parents’ wedding book from 1946, I recently found her name anglicized by her descendants to Ida Devorah Alpern). Standing in front of her gravestone, I pulled away a strand of stray vines: not sure what, if anything, I actually felt. I was glad to be there—cognizant of distance, time, realms, and the passing of time and history. And I wondered what she had looked like.

As orthodox Jewish women, Chaje Dwora and Ettel surely fulfilled the women’s commandment to light Shabbos candles—and most likely fulfilled the other two

commandments too. But what about us today, their descendants? I myself am not observant, and in my generation and younger, I doubt that more than few of us carry out anything more onerous than eating lox and bagel, holding or attending a Seder, making sure (maybe) that children are bar/bat mitzvah and going to synagogue occasionally. Almost all the marriages of my generation of 21 cousins on my father's side have been "out," to non-Jews. As part of this documentary project, I asked some of my aunts and cousins about their relationship to Jewish tradition, observance, and identity, and, in particular, candle-lighting.

I started with my father's older sister, Aunt Pearl Gruber Kaplan, who was the oldest child of my grandparents who had emigrated from Rădăuți in the early twentieth century. She passed away in 2011 at the age of 94. Two years earlier, in 2009, when I was beginning my candlesticks project, I asked her what her recollections were about her mother (my grandmother) lighting Shabbat candles in their home in Akron, Ohio, in the 1920s and 1930s and what her own relationship with the tradition had been. Grandma Becky had been left a widow, with seven children, in 1930. Pearl, ever iconoclastic, had this to say:

Yes, my mother lit the candles, closed her eyes and said the blessing; then we all sat down to the traditional (and always the same) Friday night dinner of roast chicken. I don't know whether she continued the ceremony after my father's death. But I have the candlesticks, and I've painted a still-life of the lit candles. My parents emigrated from Eastern Europe and brought their religious observances with them. Success, for a man, was measured by his profession and /or income; for a Jewish girl, it was marriage and her role as Queen of the Kitchen. She was the guardian of the various rites and rules of the Orthodox faith, which she observed seriously and zealously. The mother of a friend had four daughters, three of whom (including my friend) were successes, i.e., married. The "failure" was the unmarried administrator of a large hospital in another city. That was then, but the cultural mindset remained pretty much the same until the Conservative and Reformed [sic] congregations loosened things up a bit. And of course Betty Friedan, Gloria Steinem, et. al. (email, April 16, 2009)

Pearl sent me a photograph of herself with her mother's candlesticks, and the painting she had done of them. I do not know what has happened to either. My cousin Merrick (one of the seven children of my father's younger brother Matthew) offered a thoughtful meditation on the meaning of ritual and tradition, and particularly moving and evocative memories of her childhood in Toledo, a small mill town on the coast of Oregon, where hers was the only Jewish family for many miles around. Her mother, she wrote me in an email in 2011, lit the Shabbat candles every Friday night when she and her siblings were growing up and still blessed the lights in a way that was reminiscent of the hands on so many carved tombstones, including that of our great-great-grandmother:

Even though Mom is not especially religious she probably didn't ever consider not lighting Sabbath candles, but I suspect Mom & Dad had a special appreciation for this weekly ritual because we were so isolated from Jewish . . . anything. She didn't hold her hands over the candles or circle them at all, she stood with head bowed and said the blessing (in English); now she holds her hands over the candles and says the blessing in Hebrew. It was sort of a special honor when we were little to be the child who she held the match out to & got to blow it out. Later, I would like to watch her as she had a certain way she shook the match to extinguish it. Friday dinners were usually a more special menu too, something like a beef roast, rice, salad, & vegetable. The candles would usually burn for some time after we left the table. It was really kind of pretty to go back into the dark kitchen for some reason with the candles burning low. . .

She recounted a funny memory involving her non-Jewish boyfriend and the Sabbath candles:

We were all watching TV in the living room one Friday night when my (then) boyfriend (now husband), Mike, stopped by late and walked through the kitchen into the living room and joined in with us. After a while he remembered and said ever so helpfully, "Oh, Mrs. Gruber, you left the candles

burning in the kitchen so I blew them out.” We were all stunned, and then burst out laughing. We had to go in and look at the stubs of candles sitting there in the candlesticks. No bolts of lightning . . . and the house still stands.

Merrick went on to recall that her parents gave her a pair of candlesticks as a special gift when she and Mike got married, and that she regularly lit the candles when her own children were young.

I loved lighting the candles . . . for any number of reasons, but really one of them was the connection I felt to a long, long line of women who did this before me and with me. Whatever Jewish traditions, few as they are, that I practice they have always connected me more to my lineage than to God . . . Sabbath candles most of all. As my kids got older and life seemed busier and busier I looked forward to the brief moment of calm and gathering that lighting the Sabbath candles brought. It was refreshing.

When her children grew into their teens and became involved with activities that spilled over into Friday nights, she stopped the practice—but she told me that she planned to begin again.

Now that I’m a grandmother myself, I’m realizing my grandchildren will probably only know Jewish traditions (other than Hanukkah & Passover) if I do them. Lighting the Sabbath candles is something I will begin again this fall. It’s kind of funny though, since it’s been so long since I’ve lit candles I feel kind of awkward about doing it. Will my family all roll their eyes and indulge me? Or make fun of me? I want it to be just a very natural, real part of Friday night. I wish I wouldn’t have quit, because now I will have to work to maneuver it back to that. And maybe I can’t get it there . . . Tradition? I grew up as a member of the only Jewish family in a rural Oregon town. I admire how much tradition Mom & Dad (and grandparents and family) were able to pass on to us in that situation, but there are big gaps. I’m aware of that. But

I still live in Toledo so I don't have a very good gauge to know what Jewish tradition can really look like if you have a Jewish community. Right now, I don't have a lot of Jewish tradition that I practice, but like I said earlier, that will be changing . . . at least a bit.

The main work on this fieldwork, photographic, and writing project on Jewish gravestones and cemeteries was carried out in 2009–2011. A version of this essay in 2011 was described as a “working paper,” and this latest iteration, too, can be considered as such. Though the project's web site and blog remain rather dormant, in the nearly fifteen years since beginning this project, I have continued to visit Jewish cemeteries and photograph the candlesticks that denote the graves of women. And I occasionally still upload material to the website, contributing a distinctive (gendered) perspective to the various other Jewish cemetery documentation projects that can now be found on the web (e.g., <https://www.jgaliciabukovina.net/>). I still do not light the candles on Friday night. But I continue to marvel at the artistry and the diversity of how candles and candlesticks, and thus women, were portrayed, and at the distinctive enduring power of the image that in death symbolizes their—our—lives.

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Geschichte und Mythos. St. Pölten: Institut für Jüdische Geschichte, 2011, 60–67, and portions are used here with permission of the journal. In addition to the Candlesticks on Stone blog for this project, I have posted a number of times about Jewish cemeteries, my field trips, and the candlesticks motifs in articles, on my blog Jewish Heritage Travel (jewish-heritage-travel.blogspot.com), and on the web site Jewish Heritage Europe (www.jewish-heritage-europe.eu), a project of the Rothschild Foundation Hanadiv Europe.

Notes

1. See the image of a gravestone with a candelabrum in the Facebook post by Krzysztof Bielawski, September 18, 2023, with the lead sentence “Co wyróżnia tę macewę z Serocka?” <https://www.facebook.com/krzysztof.m.bielawski>. Accessed November 10, 2023.

2. See, for example, the elaborate braided candelabrum, with flames bending inward, of Pete daughter of David, October 29, 1788, in the Siret Old Jewish Cemetery. Accessed October 15, 2023. <http://jgaliciabukovina.net/226338/tombstone/tombstone-pete-daughter-david>.

3. My deep thanks to Sergey R. Kravstov of the Center for Jewish Art for identifying the interviewer and providing information on him. (Email, February 24, 2011). Khaimovich called him “Taranoshchenko,” but Kravstov identified him as Danylo Shcherbakiv’sky (1877–1927), who had a tragic history under the Soviet regime. Kravstov writes: “Research of Jewish monuments went on in the Soviet Ukraine. Ukrainian art historians and ethnographers included it in the curricula of the 1920s. Great efforts were undertaken by Danylo Shcherbakiv’sky, the museum curator and a professor at the Academy of Arts in Kiev, who organized student expeditions to Podolia and Volhynia. Shcherbakiv’sky tended to construct the art history of Ukraine along the lines of that of other European state nations, and thus his attitude to Jewish monuments was inclusive. Impeded in his many initiatives by the Commissars, he committed suicide in 1927; his name was blotted out of the Soviet curricula. Other great Ukrainian figures were a museum curator Stefan Taranushenko and his assistant Pavlo Zholtov’sky. By 1930, their documentation of Podolian synagogues in Mińkowce, Michałpol, Smotrycz, and Jaryszów had expanded knowledge about the wooden synagogues, surveyed in previous decades. However, the stifling atmosphere of the Soviet Ukraine barred any possibility of a comprehensive study of these monuments. Both researchers were arrested in 1933. Taranushenko was able to return to Ukraine only in 1953. Zholtov’sky returned to Ukraine in 1946, and then he had the courage to study Jewish art in Lviv.” See Kravstov 2012.

4. See the documentation of it online. Accessed October 15, 2023. <http://jgaliciabukovina.net/170380/image/tombstone-ester-daughter-yitzhak-image>.

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