

## THE IMAGE OF THE JEWS FROM MARAMUREȘ DURING THE INTERWAR PERIOD. AN ORAL HISTORY STUDY

**Abstract:** The appearance of the Jews is a special characteristic that is most easily perceived, most obvious and least difficult to describe. It marks the passageway into a world that has its own rules, with roots that go back thousands of years and adaptations to the special conditions of the places and times in which the Jews have lived. Described according to two main coordinates, namely their physical characteristics (the colour of their eyes, hair and skin, or their build) and their costumes (their beard and hair styles, headdress, and garments), the appearance of the Jewish men, women and children differed during the interwar period from that of the Christian majority, including Romanians, Hungarians, Ukrainians, or Scepusian Saxons. Based on the collective memory, the bibliography and the archives or electronic sources, we have outlined this thin outer layer in the vast domain concerning the image of the Jews from Maramureș.

In this study we have attempted to shed light on a few quandaries and to render, as accurately as possible, aspects of lived history, of a bygone world in which the Jews played a significant role and were visible especially because their outstanding appearance.

**Keywords:** Jews, Maramureș, the interwar period, oral history, imagology.

This oral history research - which aimed to outline the image of the Jews from Maramureș in the collective memory and was carried out between 2005 and 2012, when it was completed as a PhD Thesis coordinated by Prof. Dr. Doru Radosav from the Faculty of History and Philosophy, Babeș-Bolyai University - is based on the testimonies of 71 people, both Jews and Christians (Romanians, Hungarians, Ukrainians), who were born between 1919 and 1970. The reference space is the present-day county of Maramureș, a territory that is much more familiar today both for the witnesses and for the researcher, given that its administrative organisation underwent two changes during the interwar years - in 1926 and 1938 - and several others during the communist period - in 1950, 1952 and 1968; this led to the reconfiguration of the area that geographically included the interwar Maramureș County and parts of Satu Mare, Sălaj and Someș Counties.

The research also captured, among other important issues, the manner in which the Jews who once lived in Maramureș were perceived in terms of their appearance and the elements that distinguished them from the Christians, from the very first sight.

In this article we have tried to provide an overview of this subject, focusing only on the interwar period as a temporal segment, because it is in stark contrast with the appearance of today's Jews from Maramureș, our contemporaries, who are hardly distinguishable in their outward appearance from the Christian majority. Their clothing,

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features, and their way of being are much like the Christians'. However, what has remained imprinted in the collective memory is the appearance of the Jews from the interwar period, with inherent variations due to the material situation, which implicitly also entailed their social position, the urban or rural milieus in which they lived, the size of the community from which they came and the degree of the group's religiosity: ultra-Orthodox, Neolog (sometimes different groups dwelt within one and the same community, which were usually gathered together around a rabbi but among which disputes could sometimes break out - the case of Sighet). The question is whether the different appearance of the Jews was the result of genetically transmitted physical characteristics or it was a matter of a particular outward aspect being shaped by compliance with certain commandments, traditions, or religious customs. We have therefore decided to analyse separately these two important components of the overall appearance of the Jews in the interwar period, starting from the general - scientific researches, stereotypes - to the particular - real examples of lived experiences.

### 1. Physical features

By way of introduction to this subject, which appears to be uncomplicated and accessible, we should mention that there is an entire history of research conducted on the so-called "racial" characteristics of the Jews in Europe or the world. These features were used by the anti-Semites to justify the Holocaust both before and after its perpetration. However, Jewish researchers have also carried out studies attempting to identify the common traits of the Jews in order to demonstrate "their racial purity."

Thanks to a detailed review published in the journal *Science*<sup>2</sup> in 1885, I became aware of an article published in *The Journal of the Anthropological Institute of Great Britain* in 1884, entitled "Racial Characteristics of Jews" and written by Joseph Jacobs,<sup>3</sup> nearly 60 years before the Holocaust. (Through a technique that was famous at the time, a well-known photographer made a composite portrait by overlaying several photographs of Jewish teenagers, who were not related by kinship and came from several different countries; the resulting portrait, Jacobs believes, is "the nearest representation of the lad Samuel, or the youthful David. He also identifies the features of the captive Jews of Lachish in the Assyrian bas relief (B. C. 701)."<sup>4</sup> The observations and measurements made on these teen students, from the middle social layers, reveals that "they have fewer blue and grey-eyed individuals, and more brown and dark-eyed, than their Teutonic neighbours. So also their hair and skin are darker. [...] The common notion as to length of nose is supported by measurements, while that of the thickness of the lips is not."<sup>5</sup>

<sup>2</sup> *Science*, vol. 6, no. 140, (9 Oct. 1885), 322-324, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1760776>, accessed 28 October 2012.

<sup>3</sup> Joseph Jacobs 1854-1916, a Jewish historian, folklorist and literary critic, born in Australia, who in 1900 became editor of the *Jewish Encyclopedia* ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Joseph\\_Jacobs](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Joseph_Jacobs), accessed October 2012).

<sup>4</sup> Review, *Racial Characteristics of Jews*, in *Science*, vol. 6, no. 140, (9 Oct. 1885), 323, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1760776>, accessed 28 October 2012.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibidem*.

Such studies undertaken by Jewish scholars in the late nineteenth century were also mentioned by Daniel Vyleta, citing articles from the Zionist newspaper *Die Welt* (5, 12 and 19 July 1901) in which Jews were characterised as small in stature, with short limbs and thick lips, with black hair and dark eyes, brachycephalous (bevelled) skulls, excessive facial and body hair, broad foreheads, large noses and small chests. Jews were described as a race of workers with a weak constitution, intelligent yet not creative.<sup>6</sup>

Studies of this kind also appeared in Romania, evincing the general tendency to divide the world's population from an anthropological point of view; a Jewish man, by the name of Henric Sanielevici, wrote in 1920: "The typical Jew - just like the Armenian - appears to be of stocky build, with broad shoulders, a short neck and a round head, very carnivorous and very impulsive and precipitated in speech. The tenacity of the Jew, which so much has been written about, derives also from the great development of the will centres; for persecutions to bolster his tenacity, it was necessary for the Jew to have the tenacity to withstand such persecutions in the first place."<sup>7</sup>

At the end of the twentieth century, Josy Eisenberg, a French rabbi, claimed that these features were invented with the advent of anti-Semitism: "The Jews are no different from their neighbours either by name or by specific physical features or clothing. Obviously, 'the Jewish type,' with a hooked nose and a demoniacal gaze, which has appeared in caricatures since the twelfth century, is a projection and does not correspond to reality, as it was accurately rendered by the Christian artists of the early Middle Ages."<sup>8</sup>

What I have attempted to find out in this research is if the Jews of Maramureş differed in any respect from the others, if an awareness of the differences between the Jews and the Christians has remained imprinted in the collective memory and if these aspects are related to the respondents' personal experience, memories, or were influenced by the knowledge they subsequently acquired.

Frequently, the responses contain descriptions of the Jews' outward appearance pertaining to religious characteristics, and only at the interviewers' insistence are details of physiognomy given: "Somethin' like they was speckl'd, they 'ad somethin' on their faces, some of 'em was reddish, with elongated faces" (Timiş Ion, Rozavlea).

The stereotypes related to the image of the Jews are almost entirely ignored, as the respondents focus on another "problem" that Romanian peasants related to the Jews: the latter's avoidance of work in the fields, which was reflected in their appearance. "Jus' 'bout all 'em Jews, 'cause I was little back then, 'em was all white 'n' red. 'Cause 'em woudn't get out in the sun. Their 'ole lives was spent in the shade" (Mârza Toader, Rozavlea).

Danci Ion, 85, a former guard at the town hall in Săcel, recalls: "But there was beautiful Jewish girls. My oh my!" AP: "But what did they look like? Blondes,

<sup>6</sup> M. Kreuzer, 'Über anthropologische, physiologische und pathologische Eigenheiten der Juden', apud Daniel Vyleta, "Jewish Crimes and Misdemeanours: In Search of Jewish Criminality (Germany and Austria, 1890-1914)," in *European History Quarterly*, no. 35/2, 2005, p. 304.

<sup>7</sup> Henric Sanielevici, *Probleme sociale și psihologice*, Bucharest: Soccec & Co, 1920, p. 116, [www.dacoromanica.com](http://www.dacoromanica.com), accessed October 2012.

<sup>8</sup> Josy Eisenberg, *O istorie a evreilor*, Bucharest: Ed. Humanitas, 2006, p. 186.

redheads, brunettes?” DI: “All races, but most of ‘em were spongy. I don’t know how to tell ya... with ‘em spots.” The language used makes us believe that this respondent used no sources other than his own observation.

Jewish girls caught the eye because of their beautiful, curly hair or unexpected associations thereof: “They were dark-haired and blue-eyed, very rich, curly [hair], very beautiful. There were also redheads, but generally they were brunettes, the ones I met.” (Dăncuș Mihai, Sighetu-Marmației)

The descriptions are appreciative and the references to these genetic traits have no racist overtones: “The neighbour had extraordinarily luscious hair, a wonderful auburn, but very curly, like black women’s hair. I had a classmate, also Jewish, Berta Isacovits. They had very beautiful hair; I don’t not know what they did and what their genetic baggage was, but they had extraordinarily beautiful hair” (Sarkady Elisabeta, Sighetu Marmației).

The beauty of this hair during the teen years makes all the more significant the Jewish women’s relinquishment of this special ornament after marriage.<sup>9</sup>

Some Jews who were redheads stood out: “‘Cause his pap’s call’d Iancu’s Red. He was red. His hair, his beard, ‘twas red, all of ‘im” (Mârza Ioana, Rozavlea). The natural conclusion is that like Christians, Jews looked like their parents and, because of this, their features could be different: “Well now, every chip off its own old block. One was like this, another one like that” (Mârza Ioana, Rozavlea); never did the respondents make any remark concerning membership to a different race.

The Jews interviewed in this research often claimed that they could easily pass for Romanians, both their appearance and their names contributing to their inclusion in another group: “Apșan was a very Romanian name. I could speak Romanian very well and they sometimes didn’t realise I wasn’t Romanian and I liked to take them in about it” (Dora Apșan Sorell, Sighet).

Given the memory of racial purification that Hitler relied upon in initiating and committing the Holocaust, physical descriptions sometimes emphatically refuted that theory, outlining the irony of fate (given that many of the people described were killed in extermination camps): “My father was a handsome man, and my mother was beautiful too, both looked like Arians, both had blue eyes. I had very beautiful parents” (Margareta Mezei, Sighetu Marmației).

The testimonies collected do not confirm the existence of a stereotype entrenched in the mentality of Christians today; this is attested by references to the huge stature of the Jews. “That ol’ man, that Lazăr, was as big as a mountain. Well, it depends, there wasn’t a rule. They could be smaller and thinner, or they could be stouter. Especially those who were poor, who lived scantily, ‘cause they had many kids, they couldn’t make ends meet to keep them up and were more wretched” (Tureanu Ion, Copalnic Mănăștur). Mihai Dăncuș remembers the Jews: “They were very stout in terms of anthropological structure. They looked great.” About his Jewish classmates, with whom he squabbled during the breaks, Tureanu Cornel says: “Them was weak and

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<sup>9</sup> A topic more extensively approached in “Ipostaze ale femeii evreice în Maramureșul interbelic,” in *Anuarul de Istorie Orală*, XIII/2013, forthcoming.

feeble. Skinny, they were, like that, but we, on the other hand, were many and mightier.”

While the people interviewed, both Jews and Christians, had a general attitude that was quite restrained about highlighting the differences pertaining to the Jews’ physical traits, many more details were given about what really stood out in their appearance, more precisely their clothing and headdress, the way they let their beard or side-locks grow, all of these aspects being described more fully below.

## 2. Outward appearance

The typical appearance of a Jewish man during the interwar period was sober: almost all his garment items were black or dark, including the trousers, the vest and/or jacket, depending on the season, a long, light or warm overcoat, all black, the only spot of colour being the white shirt. “Long black clothes. Their shoes could barely be seen on ‘count of the clothes they wore’” (Tureanu Ion, Copalnic Mănăstur). Most of the times they wore curly side-locks under a black hat, whose shape and the fabric it was made of varied according to the individual’s social and religious status. Women and children were dressed in city clothes, but in richer colours: “For the rest of the time, women wore more colourful, polka dot dresses, but men wouldn’t wear colours. Men tended to go for black and white and nothing else, they wore no colours” (Timiș Ioan, Rozavlea).

After the war, the economic plight of ordinary peasants throughout Transylvania, but especially in Maramureș, an area that was almost isolated from the rest of the country, determined them to focus on their household products, for both food and clothing purposes. Hemp, wool and animal hides were used by the peasants to manufacture all their everyday and holiday garments. The differences were much more blatant in the rural areas, as the Jews preferred to buy their clothes or have them tailored after the fashion and with the fabrics used in making clothes for the city dwellers. “The peasants wore folk costumes specific to Maramureș, while the Jews had urban garments but also characteristic outfits” (Dăncuș Mihai). The clothes worn by the Jews were therefore called “gentlemanly,” “intellectual” and, by extension, also “Jewish”: “By contrast, they ‘ad gentlemanly clothes, bu’ the peasants back then call’ed ‘em Jewish” (Dunca Dumitru, Șieu). What is interesting is the chromatic difference between the Romanians’ clothes, made of hemp and white and gray wool, and the Jews’ sober, black, purchased clothes: “The Zhids wore trousers, a jacket, they had Jewish caps. Our folk would wear only hand-woven clothing, slacks, trousers made of wool, all ashen. The Zhids wore only black” (Măț Măricuța, Moisei). The peasants claim that *opanți*, a symbol of backwardness, were avoided and totally despised: “We, Romanians, all wore *opanți*, but they, no matter how wretched they may have been, they’d rather walk barefoot but not wear *opanți*... ‘Twas as if they were loathsome, ‘cause they’re call’d ‘boșcoroș’ in Hungarian, much like ‘optincosule’ (*opanți* wearer) in Romanian” (Tureanu Cornel, Copalnic Mănăstur).

Some of the interviewees stated that city clothes, which were probably quite expensive at the time, were dirty, unkempt: “Overall, during the Sabbath days, they were cleaner, better dressed, but they didn’t pay much for clothing. You should know they were dirty like that, usually” (Dunca Dumitru, Șieu).

This tendency of the Jews not to attach great importance to their garments is also underlined by Ioan J. Popescu: “Their consumption of everything is very low. Throughout their entire lifetime, they had only one pair of trousers, so much so that one could no longer tell what the trousers had been made of, since there were so many patches.”

Wearing the kippah or a wig was a specific custom of all the Jews, but, as the interviewees specified, in time these features remained the attribute of zealots, especially in the urban settlements: “Every day they dressed like anyone else. But on Saturdays they wore different attire. More beautiful, cleaner. But you could count on your fingers how many had side-locks” (Anonymous).

Living in Sighet, “My father had a small beard, he never had *paisli*, at home he always wore a shiny black kippah, while in the street he wore a hat” (Dora Apșan Sorell).

Apparently this kippah “was only instituted in Talmudic times (approximately the second century CE). The first mention of it is in *Tractate Shabbat*, which discusses respect and fear of God. [...] The head covering is also a sign of humility for men, acknowledging what’s ‘above’ us.”<sup>10</sup>

In the villages, not only the rabbi or ultra-religious persons, but all the Jews wore side-locks, as modernisation, emancipation made a late appearance: “How could I not tell them apart in the street? They were Jews, had twisted side-locks and all that. We, the peasants, said to them: ‘Listen here, you have side-locks like the Zhids!’ We call ‘em *chiți*, others call ‘em side-locks” (Gonda Gheorghe from Săcel).

We have made a brief introduction to the symbolism of these characteristic elements pertaining to the religious Jews, based on the literature and the information available on the internet.

The names given to these strands of hair vary in the descriptions given by the peasants from Maramureș (“paisli,” side-locks, “twisted side-locks,” “*chiți*”), which coincide with those in the description of the ethnographer Dimitrie Dan, made in 1899, quoted by A. Oișteanu: “The brown hair on the head is cropped short or even shaved with the razor. Sometimes the hair has a fair coloration, or even a red one. Close to the ears, the hair on the head is not cropped, but long plaits are allowed to grow, which are always crimped and are called *peoth*, side or margin or ‘side-locks.’ These locks are of the prescribed length when their ends can reach each other under the beard. The beard and moustaches are never shaven nor cropped, but are worn in their natural length.”<sup>11</sup>

In the scientific literature, they can be found under the name “payis,” “payos” or “pe’ot,” “side-locks” in English or “papillotte” in French.

In the Jewish Encyclopedia, their explanation is as follows: “PE’OT (plural of ‘pe’ah’ = ‘segment,’ ‘side,’ ‘border’): Side-locks worn by Jewish men, especially those of Poland and Russia. Strictly conforming themselves to the Biblical precept in Lev. xix.

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Judaism/Kippah.html>, accessed October 2012.

<sup>11</sup> Dimitrie Dan, *Evreii din Bucovina, Studiu istoric, cultural, etnografic și folcloric*, Cernăuți: Ed. Autorului, 1899, *apud* A. Oișteanu, *Imaginea evreului în cultura română*, Bucharest: Ed. Humanitas, 2001, p. 52. English translation in A. Oișteanu, *Inventing the Jew. Antisemitic Stereotypes in Romanian and Other Central-East European Cultures*. Trans. Mirela Adascalitei. Lincoln, Neb.: University of Nebraska Press, 2009, p. 46.

27, they allowed the hair to grow on both sides of the head and to hang down in curls or ringlets. The cutting of the side-locks was considered a heathen custom; therefore this law, as interpreted by some authorities, forbids the removal of the side-locks with a razor or the clipping of them with scissors [...]. According to Maimonides, [...] one is allowed to cut off hair of the side-locks with scissors. For many centuries most of the Eastern European Jews observed this Biblical law; but in 1845 Czar Nicholas I of Russia decreed that his Jewish subjects should no longer wear either the Polish-Jewish costume or side-locks. forcible means were used to enforce this ukase; nevertheless the side-locks are still extensively worn by Jews of Eastern Europe, as also of the Orient. Today some of the Ḥasidim also obey the Biblical law.”<sup>12</sup> Aside from explanations within the reach of all, there are also deeper meanings:

“Payot are considered to have mystical importance too, forming a symbolic separation between the front part of the brain (which is said to govern abstract thought) from the back part (which is said to govern and control the body). This is very much part of the Jewish tradition of keeping separate the holy and everyday life.”<sup>13</sup>

The Jews of the city consider themselves, almost without exception, religious but a little emancipated, which is apparently a general rule in the communities from the Maramureș area. “They weren’t zealots, Dad wore a small beard, that’s all, I even have a picture of my dad, what he looked like then” (Golda Solomon, Sighetu Marmăției). “My parents were Orthodox not Hasidic, that is they moderately complied fully with the prescriptions of the Torah and all the Jewish laws” (Markovits Paul, Baia Mare). However, emancipation was often due to advancement in social life and overcoming anonymity. “You can’t say that a high-class doctor, a lawyer of great renown or an engineer who is a factory manager could be ultra-religious” (Markovits Paul, Baia Mare).

Especially in the urban communities, alongside emancipation<sup>14</sup> there was a phenomenon of the loss of the numinous, which Jean Baechler defines as the “movement whereby the sphere of the sacred is slowly eroded by that of the profane, to the point that it vanishes almost completely.”<sup>15</sup> Both the wearing of specific costumes and other traditions are gradually ignored: “In Lăpuș only two Jewish families did not keep a kosher household, two lawyers: Dr. Samo Biro and Dr. Harnic. They were not religious at all, never went to the synagogue and did not eat kosher food” (Bernat Sauber, Târgu Lăpuș).

This is the same concept that Max Weber called *Entzauberung*, “desacralisation (disenchantment of the world).”<sup>16</sup> This process of assimilation, which took place during a period of tolerance, of normalcy as regards the minority policies, dissolved differences:

<sup>12</sup> [http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/12014-pe-ot\\_](http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/12014-pe-ot_), accessed October 2012.

<sup>13</sup> [http://wiki.answers.com/Q/What\\_is\\_the\\_history\\_of\\_Jewish\\_payis](http://wiki.answers.com/Q/What_is_the_history_of_Jewish_payis), accessed October 2012.

<sup>14</sup> A topic developed in Aura Comănescu (Pintea), “Between Tradition and Emancipation – Jewish Communities in Marmureș during the Interwar Period” in *Transylvanian Review*, vol. XX, Supplement no. 2:2, 2011. Edited by Oana Mihaela Tămaș, Cluj-Napoca Ed. Romanian Academy, Center for Transylvanian Studies.

<sup>15</sup> Jean Baechler, the chapter entitled “Religia” in Raymond Boudon, *Tratat de Sociologie*, Bucharest: Ed. Humanitas, p. 539.

<sup>16</sup> Max Weber, *Etica protestantă și spiritul capitalismului*, Bucharest: Ed. Humanitas, 1993.

“The very beneficence of the surrounding environment tends to diminish the Jews’ attachment to specific Jewish practices, languages, traditions and values, exception being made, sometimes, in the case of the latter, in the sense that values are reinterpreted in such a manner that they are effaced, emptied of meaning, reduced to a vague trace of Jewish specificity.”<sup>17</sup>

These factors increasingly led to the loss of the distinctive traditional features of Jewish appearance, to the extent that these images from the past are beginning to fade in the memory of the witnesses. Here is an interesting moment captured by the journalist Ioan J. Popescu in Sighet in 2011, which would appear to illustrate the fact that the subconscious of the Christians from this town, where the Jews used to represent the majority, still harbours misunderstood memories, a residual memory that has led the former to accept and not be at all surprised by the invasion of several hundred characters coming, as it were, straight from the past:

“Last year in February there came 255 rabbis, including Chief Rabbi Ruv Aaron Teitelbaum. What was interesting, and I myself watched this, as did my fellow journalists, was how the population accepted this invasion, these rabbis who seemed to have come out of the screen. The vast majority of the population had seen them only on TV and in movies. They did not react. It was somewhat natural that the people of Sighet should not have turned their heads. Here and there a kid would turn its head. And then, when Aron Teitelbaum returned to the Community, he said that he had also been surprised by this. He said it was the first time and it was the only area he had visited for the relics where the population welcomed them back as if they had never left” (Ioan J. Popescu, Sighetu Marmăriei).

Since it is in Sighet that there are plans to build, in the near future, the first synagogue in Europe since the Holocaust, the presence of the religious Jews will soon become not only a matter of habit, but also an opportunity for older people to remember more easily sequences from the past concerning the appearance and the life of the Jews in Maramureș.

This segment of the image of the Jews from Maramureș, the easiest to observe and describe, represented - for many of those who lived in and witnesses the period from the beginning of the previous century (when the Jewish population was significant in the area) - both a source of curiosity and a situation of normalcy to be found in their immediate vicinity. Although the most obvious visual impact was that made by garments, the memories of the interviewees also preserve anatomical details (skin, eye, hair colour), often accompanied by comments revealing surprise: “See, now that you’ve asked me, I remember” (Mârza Ioana, Rozavlea). Even these details have underlayers of meaning that complete the image of the Jews from a psychological and behavioural perspective (a pale complexion is interpreted as the result of laziness.)

For today’s generation, the shreds of memory sometimes elicited by insistence and using special techniques borrowed from sociology and psychology, from elderly people with age-specific issues, are genuine documents that will be preserved in the archives (both our personal archive and the archive of the Oral History Institute of Cluj-

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<sup>17</sup> Bernard Wasserstein, *Disparația disporei, Evreii din Europa începând cu 1945*, Iași: Ed. Polirom, 2000, p. 214.



Napoca) and can be reused when needed. The interwar history of Maramureș would be incomplete and false if the Jewish presence and activity in this area were not mentioned and illustrated with lived stories; as long as their collection is still possible, it is both necessary and desirable today, when dry historical data no longer attract young people towards knowing their past.