

(Candle)sticks on Stone: the Representation of Women in Jewish Tombstone Art¹

By Ruth Ellen Gruber

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[...] the 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

Candles and candlesticks are a common, and potent, symbol on the gravestones of Jewish women. That is because lighting the Sabbath candles is one of the three so-called "women's commandments" carried out by female Jews -- and 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.

In 2009 I began an ongoing project, (*Candlesticks*) *on Stone*, about the candles and candlesticks motifs found on Jewish women's gravestones. My work focuses mainly on regions of today's northern Romania, western Ukraine and Poland, where tombstone carving became an especially vivid folk-inspired art form in the 17th and 18th centuries, and where denoting women's graves with candlestick imagery became the norm in the 19th century.

This essay draws from material I have posted on the web site 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 is simply 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 cannot fail to consider what the candlesticks representation means. Candlesticks, in a way, often simply form a schematic shorthand denoting both gender and Jewishness, placed even sometimes on the grave markers of women who had little to do with traditional Jewish observance.

My own mother, for example, 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 don't 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 candelabra, or menorah. And, interestingly, a major self-portrait she painted when she was in her 50s prominently featured a pair of Shabbos 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 Radauti, the small town in

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the far north of Romania near where my father's parents were born. 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 very simple slab, with a five-branched candelabrum topping an epitaph.

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

Carvings on Jewish tombstones include a wide range of symbols representing names, professions, personal attributes, or family lineage — as well as folk decoration. 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 17th and 18th centuries. The ornate style continued through the 19th and even into the 20th century in some places, although by the late 19th century unique hand-carving had often given way to more standardized (though often still elaborate) templates.

The style and even iconography on Jewish gravestones here is quite different from that found on even the most highly decorated Jewish gravestones in the west, such as those in the Old Jewish Cemetery in Prague, in provincial cemeteries elsewhere in Bohemia and Moravia (such as at Mikulov), and in parts of Germany or in the wonderfully ornate Sephardic tombstones such as those in Altona, Germany; Venice, Italy; and Ouderkerke, Holland. Studies have traced some of the influences to Christian tombs and carving as well as to Jewish mysticism, but in the areas of Eastern Europe I examine, these concepts have been transformed into a unique set of styles and aesthetic sensibilities.

Much of the carved imagery on the stones, in fact, is also in found in other Jewish decorative art -- in the paintings that adorned the now-destroyed wooden synagogues (and also masonry synagogues); in the elaborately carved and painted Torah Arks -- some of which still survive in synagogues in several Romanian towns, including Botosani, Iasi, Roman and Falticeni; and -- from the 19th century -- in traditional Jewish papercuts. The exuberant mix of religious iconography and folk-influenced styles is sometimes described as the "Jewish baroque."

Jewish tombstones in this region include a variety of wonderfully vivid motifs.

There are lions, birds, stags, bears, snakes, griffins and other imaginary beasts; there are flowers, grapevines, garlands, vines and geometric patterns; there are the pitchers of the Levites, the crown of the Torah, and the hands of the Cohanim raised in blessing; and there are books, charity boxes, crowns, and powerful symbols of death: the hand of God plucking a flower, for example, or breaking off a branch from the Tree of Life. 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 19th century onward.

I am far from the first to fall under the spell of these marvelous yet often forgotten examples of Jewish art and artistry. The late Russian photographer David Goberman began documenting Jewish gravestones in what is now Belarus, western Ukraine and Moldova in the 1930s, and several other more recent authors have written and published photographic and other works. In addition, scholarly research and documentation has been carried out by researchers including Boris Khaimovich, Binyamin Lukin, and others associated with the Center for Jewish Art in Jerusalem.

Still, scholarship, analysis, and even appreciation of these sculptural forms remain surprisingly rare, as most past research on Jewish cemeteries focused on the epitaphs.

There is, wrote University of Massachusetts professor Aviva Ben Ur in a lengthy article about Jewish tombstone iconography in Suriname:

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.²

This attitude was borne out by the distinguished art historian Moshe Barasch, who in 1988 wrote a memoir article, "Reflection on Tombstones: Childhood Memories," about the Jewish cemetery in his native Czernowitz (now Cernivtsi) Ukraine. Concerning the "level of artistic achievement" of the stone-carvings, he wrote:

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.³

I strongly disagree with Barasch! (And indeed, to my mind the pictures 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."

Much more to 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 18th century into "an evolved and independent artistic form," (p 89) and David Goberman, who describes many of the stones he documented as "genuine masterpieces of carved stone art." (p. 10)

It is more than probable that the majority of elaborate, centuries-old tombstones that existed before World War II have been destroyed, and those that remain are deteriorating. Many surviving cemeteries have been vandalized or are overgrown with vegetation. Nonetheless, in some cemeteries, the carving on the stones is so distinctive that you 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 still varies 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," Goberman wrote. "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." (p 15-16)

Most tombstone-carvers remain anonymous, but several sources, including Goberman and Barasch, report on how tombstone-carving was often (or at least

²Ben-Ur, Aviva. "Still Life: Sephardi, Ashkenazi, and West African Art and Form in Suriname's Jewish Cemeteries" in *American Jewish History*, vol 92/1

³ Barasch, Moshe. "Reflection on Tombstones: Childhood Memories," *Artibus et Historiae*, nr. 17, 127-135, 1988

sometimes) a family business, passed on down the generations. In particular, Barasch refers to families of carvers named Picker the Steinmetz (the name means “stone carver”), and Goberman mentions the Raizers and Tsellers.

Typology of Candlesticks

Candlesticks on tombstones come in many types, styles and degrees of ornamentation. As Goberman put it, considering all the variations "would make an interesting study in itself." This, in fact, is part of what I have been trying to do.

The earliest women's grave markers bearing candlesticks that were found and described by Borish Khaimovich in Ukraine and Silviu Sanie in Romania (in the old Jewish cemetery in Siret, just on the Ukrainian border) date from the late 18th and very early 19th centuries; most women's tombstones before and around this period seem not to have this special female iconographic marker. By the mid-to-late 19th century, however, and particularly by the latter part of that century, the candlestick imagery was almost universal.

This was illustrated by an interview that was conducted in 1926 with the last professional tombstone carver from the town of Ozarinty -- a young man named Goldenberg -- and cited by Borish Khaimovich in his PhD dissertation.⁴ The interviewer, a Ukrainian scholar named Danylo Shcherbakivs'ki, wanted 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 apparently had “poor knowledge of ancient tradition.” But he did adhere to some of the old tombstone stone-carving conventions and told Shcherbakivs'ki he was “usually guided” by certain considerations. Regarding women’s tombs these considerations show how strongly engrained the 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 concluded that:

⁴ My deep thanks to Sergey Kravstov of the Center for Jewish Art for identifying the interviewer and providing information on him. Danylo Shcherbakivs'ki (1877-1927) had a tragic history under the Soviet regime. In a lecture that will soon be published, Kravtsov states: "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 Shcherbakivs'ky, the museum curator and a professor at the Academy of Arts in Kiev, who organized student expeditions to Podolia and Volhynia. Shcherbakivs'ky 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 Zholtovs'ky. 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. Zholtovs'ky returned to Ukraine in 1946, and then he had the courage to study Jewish art in Lviv."

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. (BK Dissertation, p. 158)

The depictions of candlesticks on stone range from what I would call “classic” Shabbos candles — two matched candles in individual candle-holders — to multi-branched candelabra (including seven-branched menorahs) of various types. Some appear as if they could have come off of a 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 very simple silhouettes, such as that on my great-grandmother Ettel's tomb, or even crudely scratched figures. Yet extraordinarily vivid bas-relief sculptures are also found. Many of the depicted candlesticks are elaborately ornamental but still look like physical objects. But others still are intricate figures that weave and twist and entwine the branches of the candelabrum and/or its the base into fanciful convoluted forms. And some clearly combine the imagery of the Menorah with that of the Tree of Life, where the candelabrum sprouts leaves and shoots or its branches turn into tendrils. They also may be treated as symbols of death: In some examples the branches of the menorah 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. And in northern Romania and parts of Ukraine in particular, many tombstones bear depictions of a woman's hands blessing the lights. (A tombstone showing hands blessing candles in a menorah dating from 1781 and found by Khaimovich in the Jewish cemetery in town of Kosuv, Ukraine may be one of the earliest examples exhibiting this trope.)

The menorah, or candelabrum, was a very widespread image in Jewish paper cuts, a form of folk art that developed in the 19th century. Elaborate paper cuts, usually created by men, were used for a variety of ritual and decorative purposes, including as "mizrachs" or wall decorations to show which direction was east.

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 East European Jewish women's tombstones. The Shadurs write that this image appears to represent a development of the mystical “endless knot” motif.

As far as we could ascertain, neither the convoluted menorah configurations nor the endless-knot motif have 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.

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 [.]⁵

In her book *A Tribe of Stones, Jewish Cemeteries in Poland* Monika Krajewska, a post-World War II pioneer in the study of gravestone imagery — who is also an accomplished 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.”

Transmission of Tradition

As part of this project, I have been examining — in an anecdotal way, to be sure — what I call the transmission of tradition. Specifically, I have been looking at what happened between the generations of my women ancestors buried in the Jewish cemetery in Radauti, Romania -- and the generations, in the U.S., who came after. In addition to my great-grandmother Ettel, my great-great grandmother Chaya Dwoira, who died in 1904, is also buried there. The candelabrum on Ettel's tomb is a very simple silhouette. But the branches of the one on Chaya Dwoira's tomb are convoluted: it is, however, what looks like a mass-produced design based on a stencil or template.

Both Chaya Dwoira and Ettel probably fulfilled the women’s commandment to light the Shabbos candles — and maybe the other two commandments, too.

But what about us today, their descendants?

I myself am not observant, and most of my cousins married non-Jews. As part of this project, I began asking my aunts and cousins about their relationship to Jewish tradition, observance and identity.

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, lit the Sabbath candles ever Friday night when she and her siblings were growing up, and today blesses the lights in a way that is reminiscent of the hands on so many carved tombstones:

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....

⁵ Shadur, Joseph and Yehudit. *Traditional Jewish Papercuts: An Inner World of Art and Symbol*. (Hanover NH: University Press of New England, 2002). p 170-171

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 [...]

Merrick went on to recall that her parents gave her a pair of candlesticks as a special wedding gift, and that she regularly lit the candles when her 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 she plans 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.

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the HBI community. For further and updated information on this project -- see the web site <http://candlesticksonstone.wordpress.com>

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