

A Plate Crosses Over

Felicitas Heimann-Jelinek

Judaica objects are ciphers awaiting reading and decoding. They are cultural means of expression, carriers of meaning that must be interpreted and can be analyzed. As such, they are multidimensional. Judaica have as many dimensions as we are ready to discover in and through them. While being primarily objects of identification with Judaism, they are always also carriers of much more than just religious information: Jewish ritual objects transport stories that are fragments of history. They can point to the crumbling and collapse of *Lebenswelten* (lifeworlds), to the destruction of life contexts as well as to the institution of the museum itself. They are able to inform not only about holidays, but about everyday life as well. They may reflect the origins of their patrons and tell stories of migration. They may equally enlighten on the economic power and social status of an individual or a community as on poverty and legal discrimination. They can point to more or less orthodox approaches to ritual and its practical-religious implementation. They testify to specific ideas about aesthetics, arts and crafts, and fine arts. They may point to general social processes and living conditions as well as to the participation and inclusion of the Jewish minority in the majority mainstream. Lastly, Jewish cult objects are able to render an account of fashion, taste, zeitgeist, and tourism without thereby diminishing their essentially religious or ritual character.

Consequently, Judaica objects are at all times carriers of the present as well, even if this present has become the past at the moment of the examining interpretation. Their creation or the idea and concept that led to their production in their specific form did not take place in a vacuum. The conception of an object presupposes a cultural context, a dialogue with the surroundings, an examination of the

Felicitas Heimann-Jelinek has organized numerous exhibitions and published widely in Judaica, Jewish history and Jewish identity in art. Since 1993, she has served as chief curator at the Jewish Museum of the City of Vienna, and beginning in 2004, as part-time senior Judaica curator at the Spertus Museum, Chicago. Dr. Heimann-Jelinek has taught at the Department for Jewish Studies at the University of Vienna and at the Hochschule für jüdische Studien in Heidelberg. She has served as a judge for the Adi Prize for Jewish Expression in Art and Design.

times in which it was created. On an intellectual level this requires an involved, active observation of cultural and artistic developments by the planner or designer and on a pragmatic and practical level also the identification of the needs of potential clients. The following is a classic example of a Judaica object, the analysis is the result of insights into culinary trends and of market observations as well as the question of how contemporary objects destined for secular use can be “translated” into a Jewish context.

The object is a seder plate from Karlsbad, typical of ones found in numerous Judaica collections. This type is not a traditional, magnificent old product, but a rather new one, of a quite average mass production standard. It is one of those numerous ritual objects, which have been included unquestioningly into the canon of collections not because of their unique character, but simply because they exist and are owned by every institutional and private collector. The golden-grounded plate from the holdings of the Jewish Museum Vienna displays six shell-shaped depressions with mother-of-pearl luster. Each of these depressions contains a Hebrew inscription for: “*Maror*,” “*Zroa*,” “*Beza*,” “*Harosset*,” “*Maror*,” “*Karpas*,” those symbolic dishes used during the seder night for liturgical purposes. In the center is a Star of David. Not by chance are the depressions shell-shaped, but a rather specific, if entirelyly pragmatic-practical meaning, lies behind it since the original use of this piece was – without the Hebrew inscriptions – as an oyster plate.

On the reverse, the plate from the Viennese collection displays a rectangular gold stamp: “Made in Czechoslovakia, Karlsbad.” The designation “Czechoslovakia” points to a manufacturing date after 1918 and before 1938. Although the state has never been officially called Czechoslovakia, this short form was mainly used between 1920 and 1938, which means that the plate was produced in the first quarter of the 20th century. The actual manufacturing place was Karlsbad, where already in 1792 a porcelain factory had been established in its surroundings. Thanks to the region’s rich deposits of the raw materials spar, quartz, and kaolin, industrial production of porcelain was eventually able to rapidly develop qualitatively and quantitatively. Besides practical utensils and everyday china, evermore decorative collectors’ porcelain as well as luxury parts were manufactured.

However, the region was not famous for its porcelain (and glass) alone. The Bohemian towns Karlsbad, Marienbad, and Franzensbad,

the so-called Egerland spa-triangle, were developed into spas of world renown in the course of the 19th century. While in the 18th and early 19th century they were still the exclusive destinations of the aristocracy, they became fashionable with the bourgeoisie in the second half of the 19th century. And already toward the end of the 18th century, the souvenir business developed in the spas. Oysters have stimulated peoples' fantasy since antiquity – as a delicacy with particular nutritional value and as a libido-enhancing elixir of life. Shortly before their ultimate extinction around 1900, oysters were cultivated for the first time. This happened in the wake of the rapidly increasing interest of the middle-classes in oysters – historically reserved for the wealthy and the aristocrats – especially during holidays. Any self-respecting spa visitor in Karlsbad, Franzensbad, or Marienbad was able to afford half a dozen oysters here and there. And industry reacted right away: since spa visitors and tourists liked to take home souvenirs for themselves or small gifts for their loved ones back home (it was not yet like today when we can acquire the souvenir of a specific place without ever having been there), the Bohemian glass industry followed by the Bohemian porcelain industry prospered enormously. The sale of souvenirs to the spa tourists quickly became an important source of income for the local inhabitants. Not only glasses, cups, and plates with representations of the mineral springs, the parks, etc. were manufactured, but also oyster plates that had just become the latest fad.

But how would it be possible to sell oyster plates to Jewish visitors? After all, oysters are certainly not kosher, in no way do they agree with the Jewish dietary laws. While the individual Jewish guest might on occasion – more openly or less so – disregard this commandment, to many people it still seemed rather inappropriate to get an oyster plate as a souvenir. But the Jewish spa visitors, who on average were proportionate to the percentage of the Jewish population of Prague and Vienna, represented, therefore, a number of potential customers not to be ignored. Moreover, when in 1921 and 1923 the 12th and 13th Zionist Congress took place in Karlsbad, the Jewish tourists represented a numerically significant economic factor.

These congress participants were an international audience to whom one certainly wished to sell souvenirs unique to the region. And the Jewish tourists were to have their keepsakes as soon as a resourceful mind came up with the idea that the well-known Karlsbad oyster plates could be used for the symbolic seder dishes. The plates

only had to be provided with suitable inscriptions and, voilà, the oyster plate had mutated into a seder plate. There was, of course, the problem of the different traditions and customs regarding the number of Passover dishes jointly arranged on the plate: While according to the Lurianic tradition six dishes are placed on the plate, which would render the oyster plate with the six depressions suitable, according to another tradition only five dishes are placed on it. The plate for the classic half dozen oysters, thus, had one depression too many for these clients. Apparently, different solutions were found for this issue: In the case of the seder plate in the Jewish Museum Vienna, two depressions were assigned to the *maror*. If this initially looks like an erroneous inscription, it can certainly be an intended duplication as well. After all, the *hazeret* is in its meaning the same as modern *maror* and, therefore (if at all), the same (bitter) herb is used as for the *maror* (that is, horseradish), whereby the *hazeret* is not eaten at all. Assuming not too profound a knowledge of religious ritual, it was possible to presume in good faith two *maror* dishes and to inscribe two depressions accordingly. In other cases, more correctly, six different designations were inscribed in the depressions, that is, instead of twice *maror*, once *maror* and once *hazeret*. Another solution was in an altered design of the oyster plate, where enlargement of the depressions or reduction of the plate's diameter space left just five depressions. Since this intervention with an established design was doubtlessly more costly than a Hebrew inscription, a corresponding demand can be assumed.

Shells are of special nostalgic value. This everybody knows from one's own childhood or anybody who ever went on a seaside vacation with children. One collects the shells to create the memory of an unencumbered, free time, of a time beyond the ordinary, of the special, which as such is destined to be impressed onto the memory. The shells brought home are the material carriers of memory, proof that this time was real, that the beautiful is not a dream, but a lived reality. The oyster seder plate must also be understood in this sense: Passover is the quintessential Jewish commemorative feast, the celebration that is connected to the fundamental event in the history of the people of Israel, namely, the Exodus. God's direct intervention into history enabled liberation from slavery, whose factuality is seen as a matter of course, and which subsequently shaped Israel's relationship with its God. Each year during the seder night this event is remembered and each dish on our oyster seder plate is dedicated to commemoration,

to remembrance: a roasted bone with some meat on it to remember the Passover sacrifice; a paste from apples and nuts to remember the clay for the bricks during slave labor; an egg to remember the feast sacrifice; parsley dipped into salt- or vinegar water to remember the hyssop, which was used to sprinkle lamb blood upon the side posts of the Israelites' doors; bitter herbs to remember Egyptian slavery; finally three *mazzot* to remember the haste in which one left Egypt, so that the dough had to remain unleavened before baking. In this context, the object is symbolically duplicated: it is carrier of memory in the sense of a souvenir – that is, of a beautiful, relaxing, healing time – and it is carrier of memory in the sense of a ritual object, which points to the narrow religious context of experiencing God. Thus, the object is an expression of a dual identification, which connects two different approaches: the oyster seder plates lent themselves to integration in the object world of the Jewish-religious culture of remembrance although they were created as objects of a touristic culture of souvenirs. They testify to a formal and aesthetic assimilation, which signals a completely secular self-concept and at the same time points to a particularistic religious practice that indicates Jewish identity.

Through this example it becomes apparent that even very simple means – one is almost tempted to say “tricks” – are sufficient to create cultural translations. In the case where culture is expressed as object (not as music, not as text, etc.), it appears that non-textual translations are possible as well. One may well call the object that was translated a hybrid, which simultaneously refers to something general as well as to a difference. It is, therefore, a kind of mixed object. But culture is nowadays, more than ever, a hybrid. The economic, political, migration-related, artistic, and, of course, touristic globalization, has turned heterogenous cultures into the norm rather than the exception. In so far, it only seems amazing that the object in question is already nearly one hundred years old, which means that it originates from a time that we do not usually associate with cultural superimpositions and unfamiliar recombinations of familiar contents and symbols. Possibly, this obviously transcultural object oyster-seder-plate signals us that there has never been such a thing as pure Judaica and that any attempt to create such misjudges the reality of the crossover structure of every society.