

Assessing the importance of the Jewish urban cultural heritage in Oradea, Bihor County, Romania

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Abstract

The current study aims to assess the importance of the Jewish cultural heritage in the city of Oradea, Bihor County, Romania, an emerging and highly dynamic tourist destination. This synagogue was revealed as the most representative building pertaining to the Jewish cultural heritage was revealed based on a survey applied to the central public authorities, tourists and the local population. As a result, the Sion Neologue Synagogue stood out as the most representative of the Jewish identity heritage in a proportion of 90%, while 96% of the respondents replied that it is the most important tourist site of the city altogether, especially after its rehabilitation works. Among the other listed buildings, the Sion Neologue Synagogue was selected by the interviewees based on its uniqueness and novelty features, trimmed up in an eclectic style, imbued with Art Nouveau ornamentations.

Keywords: *Sion Synagogue, Jewish heritage, Oradea*

Rezumat. Evaluarea importanței patrimoniului cultural evreiesc din Oradea, județul Bihor, Romania

Studiul actual are scopul de a evalua importanța patrimoniului cultural evreiesc din orașul Oradea, județul Bihor, o destinație turistică emergentă și foarte dinamică. Astfel, pe baza unui sondaj aplicat autorităților publice centrale, turiștilor și populației locale, aceasta sinagoga s-a evidențiat ca fiind cea mai importantă clădire a patrimoniului cultural evreiesc. Potrivit rezultatelor cercetării, Sinagoga Neologa Sion a fost desemnată de respondenți ca fiind cea mai reprezentativă pentru patrimoniul de identitate evreiască în proporție de 90%, în timp ce 96% dintre respondenți au răspuns că aceasta este cel mai important obiectiv turistic al orașului, în special după lucrările de reabilitare. Printre celelalte clădiri enumerate, Sinagoga Neologă Sion a fost aleasă de respondenți datorită particularităților sale arhitecturale privind unicitatea dată de stilul eclectic, pigmentat cu elemente Art Nouveau.

Cuvinte-cheie: *Sinagoga Sion, patrimoniu evreiesc, Oradea*

Introduction

Cultural sites have a high impact on the quality of social life, economic choices and cultural production (Grodach et al., 2017), especially the culture that withstood the test of time, thus making its transition to heritage tourism (Gravari-Barbas, 2018; Barrere, 2016). Cultural heritage (Feeney, 2017) has managed to gap friendly the transition from the past to the present and trigger high interest for tourists, stakeholders, public authorities, local residents, etc. Given the interest which cultural heritage has triggered, many groups and communities call for its protection, sustainable management and governance (Joppe, 2017; Bertacchini & Segre, 2016) as some of the man-made resources are strongly affected and prone to constant degradation. On the backdrop of a globalized world, many cities are striving to protect their identity heritage (Throsby, 2016) through different means of policies and strategies, turning them into historical buildings, World Heritage Sites; networks involving many decision makers, the civic society and political actors (Cuccia & Rizzo, 2016).

On this backdrop residents of historical cities feel the urge to protect their monuments and such holds true in the case of Oradea which possesses a heritage whose beauty is represented by a prevailing Art Nouveau/Secession and eclectic style buildings erected at the turn of the 20th century, right before the first world war, at a time of great economic boom for Transylvanian cities. Modern ideas that arrived from Paris, Vienna, Bucharest or Budapest found a natural home in Oradea at that time and began shaping a taste for European culture in the local inhabitants, highly receptive to new European trends (Novicov, 2014). The Art Nouveau artistic and cultural emancipation during 1890-1910 converted the city of Oradea into a centre of Romanian art and culture with exceptional stucco and ironwork ornamentation on the buildings, thus creating an urban identity for the city (Huovinen et al., 2017). In Oradea, the Art Nouveau heritage is associated with an elitist society, namely the rich entrepreneurial or petite bourgeois Jewish burghers (Novicov, 2014). For this style, historical models were abandoned to make way for free, creative shapes inspired by nature (Howard, 1996).

The eclectic style prevalent in the case of the Sion Neologue Synagogue, the cultural site under scrutiny in the current paper, features many accents of the Art Nouveau style.

Art Nouveau and the eclectic styles refer to architecture and design, graphic and fine arts, theatre and dance, as well as individual items such as a vase, a tapestry, a poster or a bed, its vagueness of application rather identifies it to a period more than a style, encapsulating it between the fin-de-siecle and debut-de sicle, i.e. 1890-1910 (Howard, 1996). It was a period of prolific artistic output, as the year 1890 gave the world two innovations: cinema and Art Nouveau (Sembach, 2002).

Aiming to highlight and promote this heritage, in many parts of Europe less capitalized, a networking project was set up by an association of local governments and non-profit governmental institutions in 2000 during its first Plenary Meeting in Barcelona so as to allow its members to collaborate on the Art Nouveau sustainable management strategies. Currently, 77 cities have joined this network, among which two cities from the western part of Romania, Oradea and Timisoara as featured on the Art Nouveau European Route – Ruta Europea del Modernisme website. Distressing events play their role in tourism and a shift in the victimized ethnic group's behaviour, namely their effort to maintain their identity demanding greater respect in the parketplace (Padoshen & Hunt, 2011). The Jewish heritage represented by synagogues, palaces and private houses created an identity for the city of Oradea through the arabesques, floral and animal ornaments, feminine silhouettes and curved lines which feature a unique representation on each building, so that out of the 253 listed historical buildings of Oradea (according to the List of the Historical Monument Buildings of Oradea, 2004), it is uncommon to find two identical Art Nouveau or Eclectic style buildings. At present it is the historical buildings' uniqueness which gave rise to a dynamic urban tourism in Oradea counting 29,333 tourists in the peak season of August 2017 (INS, 2017a) and that inspired local tour guides to link past ethnicities and events to the contemporary Secession/Art Nouveau and eclectic heritage of Oradea

Local tour guides in Oradea strive to provide a successful interpretation rather than attract a high flow of tourists; it is meant to bring a degree of satisfaction and enlightenment to the learning experience (Wight & Lennon, 2007; Tătar et al., 2018) for the visiting of the Sion Neologue synagogue.

Research methodology

The data required for this study were obtained during October 2017 - February 2018, using the sociological questionnaire survey method, the quantitative method of data collection and analysis (Chelcea, 2007; Becker et al., 2012; Babbie et al., 2010; Ilieș et al., 2016; Tătar et al., 2016). Three types of surveys were applied to the central public authorities, tourists and the local population. From a structural point of view, the questionnaires were composed of 5 items referring to the degree of knowledge concerning the defining elements of the Jewish identity heritage in Oradea; considerations as to the extent to which the Sion Neologue Synagogue in Oradea represents an important heritage element for the city, namely a tourist attraction; considerations on the importance of rehabilitation of the Sion Neologue Synagogue of Oradea for the development and promotion of local tourism; knowing the distinctive elements by which the Sion Neologue synagogue of Oradea stands out in local and regional tourism; personal considerations about the respondents' expectations regarding the involvement of the public authorities, tourists and locals for the Jewish heritage tourist capitalization. Furthermore, socio-demographic data, i.e. gender, age, residence and ethnicity were also captured in the questionnaire.

Results and debates

Information on the monitoring of respondents' awareness of the Jewish heritage role in the development and promotion of tourism in Oradea was obtained by surveying 281 people, representatives of central public authorities (6 persons), the local population (133 persons) and tourists (144 persons). In the outline of the socio-demographic profile of the respondents, the following analytical aspects were addressed: gender, age, residence and ethnicity. This study included 139 males and 142 females aged between 17 and 78 years. From the analysis of the respondents by age groups it was found that the largest share is held by the young people group aged 17-34 years, 49% (138 persons), followed by the group of adults aged 35 - 49 years, 32% (91 persons) and the elderly of over 50 years, 19% (52 persons). As for the respondents' residence environment, 234 were from the urban area, with the remaining 47 from the rural area.

The Defining Elements of the Jewish Identity Heritage in Oradea

The history of Oradea city is closely linked to a wide ethnical composition (Dincă et al., 2012), but mainly to that of a Jewish community.

The Jews were recorded in Oradea since 1489 (i.e. Judeo Josa de Varad as he appears in documents) and later on in 1722 in Oradea 22 Jews were allowed in the city in exchange for a tolerance tax of 50 florini (Mozes, 1997). Across time the economic differences widened and along them the taxpaying burden. They held different jobs such as traders of fibre, silk, butchers, tailors, shoe-makers, masons, but the range of their business was only limited by law to trade, only later on their rights were extended and even doctors were allowed to practice in 1850. In 1873, among the Jews of Oradea there was a rupture between the reformist Hungarian Jews and the Orthodox Jews, attached to their traditions. By that time, in 1900, in Oradea lived 12,000 Israelis, accounting for 26,3% of the entire population. The Jewish education was set up in 1786 and continued until 1869. In the records of Oradea, out of 208 students who attended the Law Academy, only seven were Jews, but the Jewish intellectuals' number increased constantly due to their thirst for knowledge and permission to enrol in high education, so that in the first decade of the 20th century 29 Jewish teaching staff members were recorded (Mozes, 1997), along with 49 doctors, 6 pharmacists, 58 lawyers, 10 owners of printing houses, 8 journalists, etc. Franz Joseph who bore respect for the Jewish community and firmly intervened against anti-Semitism, stated that he counted on them for the Empire modernization. This liberalist approach yielded emancipation for the city and its high-class elitist citizens (Bodo, 2016). Unfortunately, this prosperity was abruptly stopped in the life of the Jews along with the fascist occupation and their deportation to Birkenau and Auschwitz concentration camps. So, we can speak about a Jewless Oradea on the 3rd of June 1944 when the last Jewish transport took place, all were deported except for 16 Jewish families which were exempted by the anti-Jewish laws. Nonetheless by 31st December their number increased slightly to 140 Jews (Mozes, 1997).

These distressing events played their part in the identity of the city and left a strong impact in the memory of its inhabitants. The built heritage that the Jews left behind gained recognition for the current tourists. These buildings speak of Jews' history and their cultural legacy needs to be further on disseminated and talked about, as it happens currently in the city of Oradea, as many have become tourist attractions.

Most Art Nouveau buildings in Oradea were the property of the rich bourgeoisie of Jewish origin. But unfortunately, out of 17,880 Jews that could be counted at the flourishing economic and artistic boom of Oradea in 1920 (Varga, 2010), barely 140 Jews could be counted at the last census in 2011 (according the Population and Residence Census of the National Institute of Romania, 2011), their

footprint leaving a high impact in the city's cultural landscape.

The city of Oradea boasts a prolific cultural production from the fin-de-siècle and debut-de siècle Art Nouveau period with 253 recorded historical monument buildings (according to the List of the Historical Monument Buildings of Oradea, 2004). Besides an architectural production, the city cultural output was highly intensive with more than 24 existing printing houses at around the year 1900, a trendy lifestyle that attracted tourists who could be accommodated and fed within more than 123 touristic units. Following this development trend, in 1903 the city was electrified with public lightning and the first functional tram lines in 1906 so that urbanistic ally the city gains its status of a reputed western city during 1985-1915 (Borcea, 2003).

Within the current local literature referring to the architecture of Oradea, it is stated that the Eclectic and Art Nouveau/Secession styles shaped the definitive image of the city (Zoltan, 2003). Today it stands out as a dynamic city which combines both tradition and modernity.

On this background, the Jewish identity heritage is an essential landmark for the history of Oradea and also a resource with tourist valences. Among the defining elements regarding the Jewish heritage of Oradea city, with relatively easy possibilities for promoting and capitalizing on tourism there are: synagogues (Sion Neologue Synagogue dating from 1878; the Orthodox Synagogue – 1890; Poale Cedek Synagogue – 1910; Sas Chevra Synagogue – 1908, Synagogue Viznitz - 1915), Jewish palaces (Black Eagle Palace dating from 1905, Ullmann Palace - 1913, Moskovits Palace -1910-1911, Miksa Moskovits Palace 1904-1905, Stern Palace 1904-1905, Sonnenfeld Palace 1911-1912) and other notable Jewish buildings (House Darvas 1909- 1910, The School for the Constabulary 1911-1913, Salamon Goldstein Building 1910, Adorjan I House 1900, Adorjan II House 1904-1905, Hotel Parc - 1915).

The knowledge of the defining elements regarding the Jewish identity heritage in Oradea, Bihor County was an essential aspect on which this study was focused. Thus at the first question: Do you know which are the defining elements in the Jewish identity heritage in Oradea? 178 respondents or 63% answered positively.

The most reputed Jewish identity heritage sites chosen by the respondents were: The Sion Neologue Synagogue (67% representatives of the local public authorities, 72% representatives of the local population, 47% tourists), the Orthodox Synagogue (67% representatives of the local public authorities, 57% representatives of the local population, 6% tourists), Ullmann Palace (17% representative of local public authorities, 1% tourists), Fuchsl Palace (21% representatives of local population), Black Eagle

Palace (100% representatives of local public authorities), Moscovits Palace (17% representative of local public authorities) and Darvas Moscovits House (17% representative of local public authorities).

Therefore, the interweaves chose the Sion Neologue Synagogue as the most representative Jewish identity cultural heritage of Oradea.

The Sion Neologue Synagogue in Oradea, an Identity Heritage Site and an Important Tourist Attraction for the City

Respondents (representatives of local public authorities, local population and tourists) were asked to assess to what extent the Neologue Synagogue in Oradea represents an important cultural heritage element for the city. Although only 63% of the respondents were aware of the defining elements regarding the Jewish identity heritage in Oradea; to the second question of the survey: To what extent do you consider the Sion Neologue Synagogue in Oradea: 2.1. Is an important heritage element for the city? 2.2. Is an important tourist attraction for the city? it yielded a greatly positive response, 90% considering it as an important heritage element for the city, and 96% of them an important tourist attraction for the city, respectively (Fig. 1, 2).

The Sion Neologue synagogue stands out as the most representative tourist attraction of the city in the tourists' and the local population's opinion in the context of a dynamic tourist flow, the tourists recorded as being interested in the urban cultural heritage (museums, memorial houses and public art collections) reaching half (i.e. 100,017) of the resident population in the year 2016.

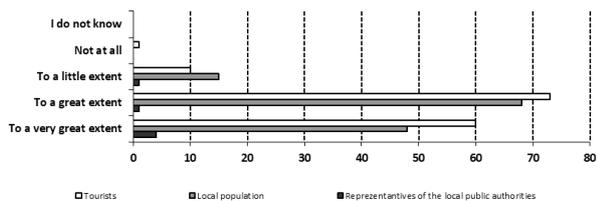


Fig. 1: Assessing the importance of the Sion Neologue Synagogue in Oradea as a heritage site for the city

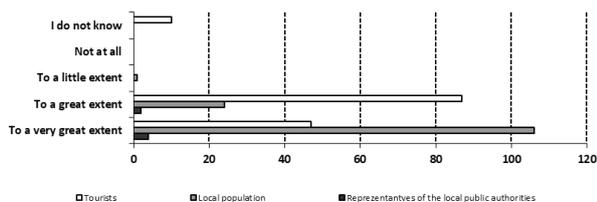


Fig. 2: Assessing the importance of the Sion Neologue Synagogue in Oradea as an attraction for the city

The Importance of Rehabilitation of the Sion Neologue Synagogue in Oradea in the development and Promotion of Local Tourism

Regarding the importance of rehabilitation of the Sion Neologue Synagogue in Oradea, in the development and promotion of local tourism, respondents were asked to evaluate its utility on a scale from 1 to 10, where 1 = Not at all, and 10 = To a great extent. The answers obtained for each of the three samples, in part, indicate high values regarding the importance of having restored the synagogue (Fig. 3).

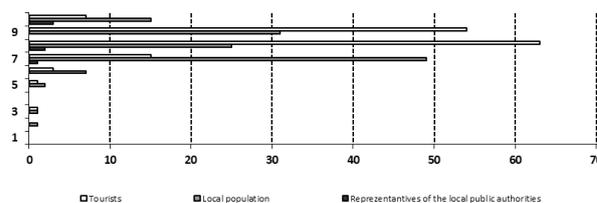


Fig. 3: Considerations on the importance of the newly restored Sion Neologue Synagogue in the development and promotion of local tourism

Among many city tours mentioned on the city's official promotion webpage (i.e. oradea.travel) the Sion Neologue Synagogue is intensely featured within the themed tours Religious sites tour as well as on the interactive map, on the main page at the monuments and heritage with the tourist circuit and on the ecclesiastical architecture sections. Local tour guides within the synagogue are striving on a sustainable interpretation of the site. The Sion Neologue Synagogue, built in 1878, is listed as a historical monument within the official list provided by the Ministry of Culture - The National Institute of Historical Monuments, classed in the II category of architectural monuments and representative for the local heritage (B). Due to the small number of Jews left in Oradea, the synagogue could not serve its initial religious purpose anymore and was handed over to the local community which restored it within the project The Promotion of Religious Jewish Tourism within Oradea-Debrecen and entered the tourist circuit as a museum in 2015. Besides its daily visitation availability (except for Mondays) it is a venue for concerts, exhibitions and other cultural and religious events.

In order to protect its historical buildings, Romania adopted in 2001 the law concerning the protection of historical monuments, i.e. law no. 422 which foresees a set of scientific, judicial, administrative, financial and technical measures meant to identify, research, store, classify, reserve, protect, maintain, reinforce, restore and capitalize the monument/building. The

article 6 of the Law Order 422/2001 stipulates that all the afore mentioned measures are incumbent, according to each case, to the owners or entitled persons having real and legal rights over them. Related further laws were issued according to the arising necessities, such as the Law no. 153/2001 referring to the enhancement measures for the environmental architectural quality of buildings; the law no. 10/1995 of the quality in constructions and the fiscal Code, which stipulates both incentive as punitive measures. Nonetheless even these proved to have shortcomings for the urban necessities of Oradea, so the City Hall (Chief Architect Department) commissioned a study which delivered, also electronically, individual files of the surveyed buildings, stating all degradation elements and the limits of possible interventions. This entire legal framework made possible the right inventory, classification, restoration and protection of the cultural Jewish heritage of Oradea city.

Distinctive Elements of the Sion Neologue Synagogue in Oradea in Local and Regional Tourism

For this approach the respondents had to choose from a set of provided choices such as: oldness; uniqueness; novelty; others; the ones that they considered important. The results revealed that respondents were in favour of the elements of novelty and uniqueness (Fig. 4).

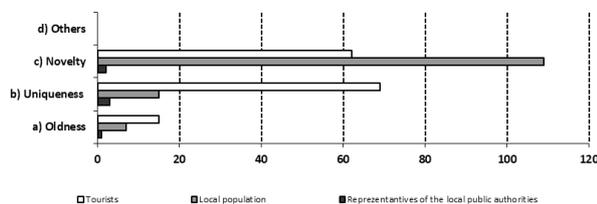


Fig. 4: Considerations regarding the distinctive elements by which the Sion Neologue synagogue in Oradea stands out in local and regional tourism

Both regionally and locally, tourism is an important economic activity (Herman et al., 2017) with deep implications in the preservation, valorisation and promotion of identity elements, specific to the place and human communities (Herman & Wendt, 2011; Herman & Gherman, 2016; Herman & Benchis, 2017). Nonetheless, against the backdrop of globalization, many of these identity elements, defining a human community that developed over time in a social, economic and political context are threatened with extinction, because the conditions that have competed for the appearance and affirmation of the place's identity have diluted, sometimes to extinction (Ilieş et al., 2009, 2010, 2014, 2016) as in the case of

many Romanian wooden churches and water mills from the surrounding villages of Oradea. In this context, tourism plays a particularly important role, meant to capitalize on those identity attributes that are related to old age and uniqueness. The age of cultural sites, combined with elements of uniqueness and novelty have often led to the declaration of a considerable part of the Jewish heritage in the category of historical monuments, thus stimulating and facilitating the tourist's interest (Herman, 2012; Tatar & Herman, 2013). In the meantime, the more prestige the site acquires, the higher the housing and real estate value become (Poria et al., 2013). This issue makes it debatable if increasing tourism numbers is desirable as many tourist sites suffer of an over-tourism phenomenon (Seraphin et al., 2018; Tourtellot, 2018; Higgins Desbiolles, 2017) which entails a whole process which finally marginalizes the local community out from the entire tourism entrepreneurship. As a rising touristic city, Oradea's tourists (i.e. 190,022, according to The National Institute of Statistics, 2016b) almost reached the resident population's number (i.e. 222,229 inhabitants according to the County Statistical Institute, 2016) in the year 2016, among which more than half of recorded visitors (i.e. 100,017 -e National Institute of Statistics, 2016c) target the cultural heritage of the city by visiting museums, memorial houses and public art collections.

The Sion Neologue Synagogue stands as an imposing building with a square shape topped by a dome and high windows. The outward ornamentations are inspired from the Moorish art. The most representative part of the synagogue is the main facade. The access is provided by three semi-circular-arched doors on the Western side for men, and two rectangular doors on the synagogue's lateral sides for women, the latter being actually the entrance in the current museum (Zoltan, 2003). One of its uniqueness elements refer to its valuable organ with its 856 pipes. The novelty avant-la-lettre feature is related to the term neologue, from its name Sion Neologue Synagogue which refers to the fact that the sermons were preached in Hungarian, a whole set of new more liberal rules, meant to remove the outdated habits were set at the Congress from Pesta on the 14th of December 1868, whereas the same Orthodox Jewish community, more conservative did not approve of the new rules and continued the same old practices in Hebrew. So, in Oradea we can speak of two split approaches towards Judaism, the neologists of the Neologue Synagogue Sion and the conservative of the Orthodox synagogue (Bodo, 2016).

The dome that topped the synagogue was finished in May the 26th 1878 and the inauguration took place on September the 24th, 1878. Due to its intense degradation over the years, it was rehabilitated it its

initial outlook in 2015 and since then it has entered the tourist circuit.

Assessing stakeholders' Involvement in the Tourism Capitalization of the Jewish Heritage

Personal considerations of the respondents' expectations regarding the involvement of public authorities, tourists or locals in terms of the tourism capitalisation of Jewish heritage was a benchmark for this study. From the analysis of the provided answers, only 14% of the respondents answered positively, the remaining 86% had no expectations. A relatively similar situation emerges from the broken analysis of the respondents (representatives of the local population and tourists), except for the local public authorities whose response rate was of only 50%. The qualitative analysis of the respondents' answers (14%) points to some ambiguity, uncertainty and ignorance regarding the involvement of the stakeholders in the tourism capitalization of the Jewish heritage in Oradea. However, some expectations that have been clearly highlighted by the surveyed respondents refer to the continuation of the rehabilitation and tourism promotion of all historical buildings in Oradea by the mayorality in partnership with the local population, involving citizens who hold real estate with historical value; the opening of a Holocaust museum; the involvement of NGOs and travel agencies operating within the city's territory for the Jewish heritage tourist promotion.

Conclusion

The role of the Jewish heritage represented by the Sion Neologue Synagogue is influenced by a set of results. Although the city of Oradea is identically defined by the Jewish heritage, this aspect is rather little known by the interviewees. The most prominent Jewish heritage elements were: The Sion Neologue Synagogue, The Orthodox Synagogue, Ullmann Palace, Fuchsl Palace, Black Eagle Palace, Moscovits Palace and Darvas House. 90% of the respondents considered that the Sion Neologue Synagogue in Oradea represents an important heritage element for the city, while 96% of them considered that it is an important tourist attraction for the city (Fig. 1, 2) altogether. The rehabilitation is justified by distinctive features of uniqueness and novelty (Fig. 4). From the analysis of the answers referring to the stakeholders' involvement for tourist capitalization of the Jewish heritage, it was found that only 14% of the respondents replied positively, with the remaining 86% having no expectations.

According to the survey it came out that the Sion Neologue synagogue stands out among the other Jewish cultural heritage buildings of Oradea as the

most representative for the tourists and the local population in the context of Oradea's highly dynamic tourist flow landscape, the tourists recorded as being interested in the urban cultural heritage (museums, memorial houses and public art collections) in the year 2016 reached half (i.e. 100,017) of the resident population.

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