

## ADDITIONS TO THE JEWISH HERITAGE OF THE EDELÉNY DISTRICT

### Visual anthropological study of the Israelite cemeteries of Nyomár, Hangács and Lak

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#### **Abstract**

*With my study, I would like to contribute to the exploration of some abandoned, untended, small Jewish cemeteries in Northern Hungary. In the lack of proper attention and protection, cemeteries with only a few gravestones are likely to be lost or forgotten within a few decades. The settlements listed in the title belong to the Edelény district. Their inclusion was justified by the geographical delimitation of the research project Creative Region III.*

*Cemeteries occupy an important position in the fabric of society. The trauma of the Holocaust is not exclusive to the Jews, but is a trauma for society as a whole, and is exacerbated by the lack of public awareness. There are parts of the world – and Northern Hungary is one of them – where it is impossible to ask how Jews and non-Jews lived together. For this reason, only secondary sources can speak of a time when coexistence was natural. In my study I examine the funerary heritage of local Jewish culture in three settlements – Lak, Hangács and Nyomár. My study also seeks to present the current state of the burial grounds and to provide data for further research.*

**Keywords:** Jewish culture, cemetery, funerary architecture, visual anthropology, social heritage

#### **1. Introduction**

The settlements mentioned in the title are located in one of the most remote parts of Northern Hungary, on the Cserhát. All three of these tiny villages are, to varying degrees, but economically and socially are even more disadvantaged settlements in a disadvantaged region. All three villages share a beautiful geographical landscape. The hilly countryside, the colourful alternation of fields, the rhythm between forest and villages and the distances of a few kilometres make this a very pleasant landscape. In the lack of jobs and services, it is characterised by poverty and a steadily declining population.

Northern Hungary, especially the smaller villages, has always been one of the poorer areas, so they were not primary targets for Jewish settlement, but from the 1700s onwards there is evidence of settled Jewish families in every village. We know from the records of the Hungarian Jewish Archives of the first half of the 18th Century that “their fate was the same as that of the poor. They earn their bread by peasant labour. If they are overburdened with taxes, they change their place of residence” (Grünvald, 1963: 26).

In the smaller settlements there could be only a few Jewish families, whose proportion to the majority of the population ranged from 3 to 10%. After the Second World War, even the extremely few survivors left the area within a few years, so that after 1945 there were no Jewish families living in the study area.

In the years following the war, until the change of regime, people did not talk about the Holocaust. The best expression for this social phenomenon is perhaps mutual silence, as neither the perpetrators nor the victims were talked about. Today, the only remnants of Jewry are almost exclusively the gravestones in the cemetery.

I have made a visual inventory of the abandoned cemeteries, including aspects such as the location of the cemetery within the settlement, the examination of the gravestones, the iconography, and the social environment of both the interior and exterior of the cemetery.

I will investigate the study using the tools of visual anthropology. I recorded still and moving images of the cemeteries and, where possible, I used drones to capture the environment, location and visibility of the cemetery within the settlement. With the help of interviewees in the settlements, I tried to explore the relationship of the locals to Jewish cemeteries.

## **2. Why visual anthropology?**

Visual information plays a crucial role in the life of a society. It influences our thinking, namely the “image” we have of something (Tokaji, 2014: 5–6). Visibility within a settlement can determine our perception of a social group, and can change our value judgements regarding that group.

According to András Bán, “visuality (i.e. still and moving images, but beyond that the environment, space, the system of shapes and objects) is a constitutive part of culture, and its study is the task of visual anthropology” (Bán, 2008: 10).

Every culture can only perceive facts in the way it has learned to see them. Many cultural anthropological endeavours attempt to respond to the visual challenges of the perceptual world. The fundamental difference between anthropology and other sciences is not its field of investigation but its approach and methods. “One of its most important features is that through its empirical investigation it tries to position itself in the situational actions of the observed culture and to make objective observations while being aware of its own duality. A very important characteristic is the ambivalent comparativity which seeks to compare all hypotheses and outcomes both in time and space. At the same time, anthropology uses all types of information, even those which seem to be unrelated to the subject or which might be unworthy of a scientific approach, and which are outside the boundaries of codified disciplines” (R. Nagy, 2000: 33).

According to József R. Nagy, visual recordings not only offer the advantage of collecting valuable and tangible data, but also the advantage of preserving the richness of the recorded visual facts in their present context for later analysis. The main objective of visual anthropology is to extract the facts from the photograph as accurately as possible. (R. Nagy, 2000: 38) Visual anthropology usually examines existing images, visually interpretable documents. In this case, the photographs were taken by the author. The photographs were taken primarily for documentary purposes, but there was also an effort to present the context of the particular site.

## **3. Why do we focus on the cemetery?**

As a result of the Holocaust, Jewish communities in Northern Hungary disappeared. 95% of the local Jewish population died as a result of deportations. With a few exceptions, the returnees left the country after the Second World War. The possibilities for studying this social group narrowed as the studied

Jewish cemeteries were closed due to the Holocaust. The nearly 80 years since then have prevented research from exploring the nature of individual memory. The legacy of Jewish families, their family photographs, their belongings, and thus their material culture has been dispersed, making it impossible to examine them both in a material system and a cultural context. The silencing of the Holocaust by Socialism has also extinguished local memories and the possibility of oral history. In the years following the change of regime, a series of reminiscences have appeared, but they are fragmentary and difficult to reconcile with other individual sources. For this reason, I also believe that it is important to describe the cemeteries under study in as much detail as possible, because these are one of our few available sources, and if we do not preserve the remaining forms, texts and places, in a few years' time the visual memory of local Jewish communities will be indecipherable. This is what I would like my study to contribute to.

#### **4. The relationship between Jewish cemeteries and local culture**

There are records of approximately 1600 Jewish cemeteries in Hungary. Several organisations are involved in the preservation of cemeteries. The focus of protection is on the cemeteries of larger communities, whereas the cemeteries of smaller communities with 2-3 families can easily be forgotten.

You might think that having accurate coordinates and descriptions would make it easy to find cemeteries. However, a number of circumstances still make exploration difficult. Sometimes a cemetery can only be accessed from private land, which means that permission must be obtained from the landowner to visit the cemetery through his land. The vegetation around unvisited cemeteries is so thick and uncleared for many years that accessing the gravestones can be a serious physical challenge.

The communities in the Edelény district are predominantly Roman Catholic and Reformed. In some settlements, other religions, mainly the Greek Catholic Church, are also present. According to data from the census of the 1880s, 2–9% of the villages in the area were of Israelite religion. The Jewish burial system is stricter and contains many more rules than those of any other denomination in the area. Both the layout of the cemeteries and the relationship between the cemetery and the rest of the settlement were kept within strict boundaries by religious rules. According to the Jewish faith, the cemetery is a sacred place where exclusively the members of the Jewish community rest.

István Balogh points out that an important difference between Jewish and Christian cemeteries is that while the removal, relocation and dismantling of graves in Christian cemeteries is allowed by religious rules, this is not possible in case of Judaism. For this reason – if they do not eventually get destroyed, as has often happened in the past, just as today – the cemeteries are preserved, and as a result, in many settlements Jewish cemeteries are now the oldest burial places. The graves are also the oldest documents of individual history and, of course, monuments of the own gravestone culture of Jewry (Balogh, Bányai, 2013).

Cemeteries have been shaped by a wide range of overlapping influences, now often inextricably intertwined. The cemetery is linked to the local culture as a whole in multiple ways. The choice of site, its location, the vegetation covering the area, and the artificial forms it contains (grave markers, graves, buildings, signs leading to the site) are primarily testify about the relationship between the settlement and the environment (Kunt, 1983: 7).

Ernő Kunt points out that the denominational segregation was the result of large-scale spontaneous peasant migrations and colonisation throughout the country during the 18th and 19th centuries. The local residents and the newcomers were often of separate religions and thus chose separate burial places. (Kunt, 1983: 14–15). The layout of Hungarian villages is characterised by this duality, with two

dominant denominations, Reformed and Catholic, and as a result of this separation, most villages, often even the smallest ones, have two cemeteries and two churches.

There are multiple arrangements for the location of Jewish cemeteries. Rarely there are Jewish cemeteries wedged between Reformed and Catholic cemeteries. Such an arrangement is found in Rakacaszend. It is common to find Jewish graves in the corner or at the edges of the cemetery, alongside the Reformed-Catholic separation. We can see examples of this in Balajt, Ziliz, and Szakácsi. (The Jewish cemetery marker on the maps: pointed triangular gravestones between fences.)

In several cases, we find Catholic-Reformed and Jewish cemeteries at opposite ends of the settlement. This usually occurs in cases where the Jewish community had land ownership in the settlement, and thus created their own ground for burial and accompanying ceremonies. The Jewish community endeavoured to purchase land for its dead that was safe (protected from water, on higher ground) and preferably sustainable over the long term (Balogh, 2018: 49–50). On the other hand, the change in the location of the cemetery also reflects the shift in the macro-position of Jewry (Balogh, 2018: 54). Most of the Jewish cemeteries founded from the 19th century onwards were already designated next to or near the newly established communal cemetery.

The way the gravestones were created also characterizes the local community. In smaller settlements, stone carvers often used the same stones in Jewish and non-Jewish cemeteries, and the design was more similar than in larger communities, such as large cities, where funerary architecture was also a representative space for the local community (Tóth, 2018). No such cemeteries are found in the villages studied. In Edelény, Szendrő, Boldva (in the enclosed cemeteries) we find graves whose material differs from the use of gravestones in the mainstream society. In the smaller settlements, limestone and sandstone were most often used (and rarely marble), which makes the cemeteries look schematic. However, if one looks closely, it is very rare to find identical gravestones. The stone was bought and brought by the family of the deceased. The carving was undertaken by the community or by the Cemetery Society. Thus, even the poorest parishioner could have a tombstone (Szabó, 2010). Despite their simplicity, we find a variety of forms in shape, decoration and placement of the inscription.

In the Hungarian peasant culture, for a long time gravestones were the privilege of the rich, and poorer peasant families only replaced headstones with gravestones from the second half of the 19th century onwards (Kunt, 1983: 55). The graves in Christian cemeteries are gradually being replaced, thus only in exceptional cases do some older monuments remain, for example those of former religious leaders, pastors and teachers. In comparison, the Jewish cemeteries have been preserved in their original state, and are now mostly closed and permanent units (Balogh, Bányai, 2020).

A cemetery fence is used to separate the cemetery space. There are many different types of fences in terms of material. Most often, a wire fence runs along the perimeter of the cemetery, but sometimes it is lined with vegetation. Some of the Jewish cemeteries are enclosed by high concrete fences, the gates of which are usually closed. Visits to the closed cemeteries are much more regulated than to the Christian cemeteries, which are open to the public during the day. The Jewish cemeteries of Ziliz, Lak, Hangács and Nyomár are not protected by a fence, instead, the lack of maintenance serves as a protection, and the dense vegetation makes it difficult to access the graves. A ditch alongside the cemetery physically separates the cemetery from the surrounding area.

Another dominant feature of the townscape, which is worthy of mention for the purposes of this topic, is the monument in the main square of the village, commemorating the deceased who have died far away. In the villages of the Edelény district, we find a succession of memorial columns and plaques commemorating the victims of the First and Second World Wars. The names on these memorials are seldom identified by denomination, and are most often in simple alphabetical order, without any

indication of ethnic or religious affiliation. The lack of distinction is due to two different reasons. During the First World War, local Jewry was more strongly integrated into the fabric of local society, and the survivors were locals, meaning that grief was shared equally by Jewish and non-Jewish residents. Typically, those who died in the war were killed in similar circumstances. However, most of the memorials to the Second World War were no longer erected with the participation of local Jews. In most of the memorials, the victims of the Holocaust were mixed with the soldiers who died in battle. In only a few places is there any reference to the fact that the names under the heading “victims of the Second World War” signified the deportation of entire families. The remembrance policy did not separate the victims of the Holocaust from those who died in the war. The placement, design, alteration, or even removal of the memorial, the text on the monument, demonstrates the current memory policy of the local community government, and at the same time visually declares to the community how to think about the traumas of the 20th century. In the absence of personal experience for the younger generation, culture, art, local action, and the strong visual attraction of the community memorial, play a key role in shaping communal remembrance.

## **5. Hangács**

Hangács is a tiny village of less than 600 inhabitants, 10 km from Edelény and 40 km from Miskolc. Its neighbouring villages are Nyomár, Damak and Ziliz. The history of the settlement dates back to the 1300s. In the first half of the 18th century in Borsod County there are already records of a Jewish family living here. In those years, there were only 9 Jewish merchant families in Miskolc (Gyulai, 2015).

In Abaúj County, the majority of Jews were of Polish origin, while in Borsod County the situation is different, with Moravian immigrants in the majority. The census of 1727 records only a few Jewish families settled here. Three families are mentioned in Hangács, the earliest of which is the person who came there ten years earlier from Holleschau in Moravia, where Rothal was the landlord. His wanderings in Hungary are also known, first “he settled in Liptó County, from there he went to Zemplén, until he finally arrived here in Borsod, and half a year later his wife’s uncle from Silesia joined him with his Polish servant”. (Grünvald, 1963: 24)

According to the 1880 census, 74 people of the Israelite religion lived in the village. [Number of Jewish population per settlement 1840–1941 (1993). NEDA]. At the beginning of the 20th century, 540 Roman Catholics, 496 Reformed, 1 Evangelical and 29 Israelites lived here. In 1940, the census reports only 11 Israelite inhabitants. (NEDA).

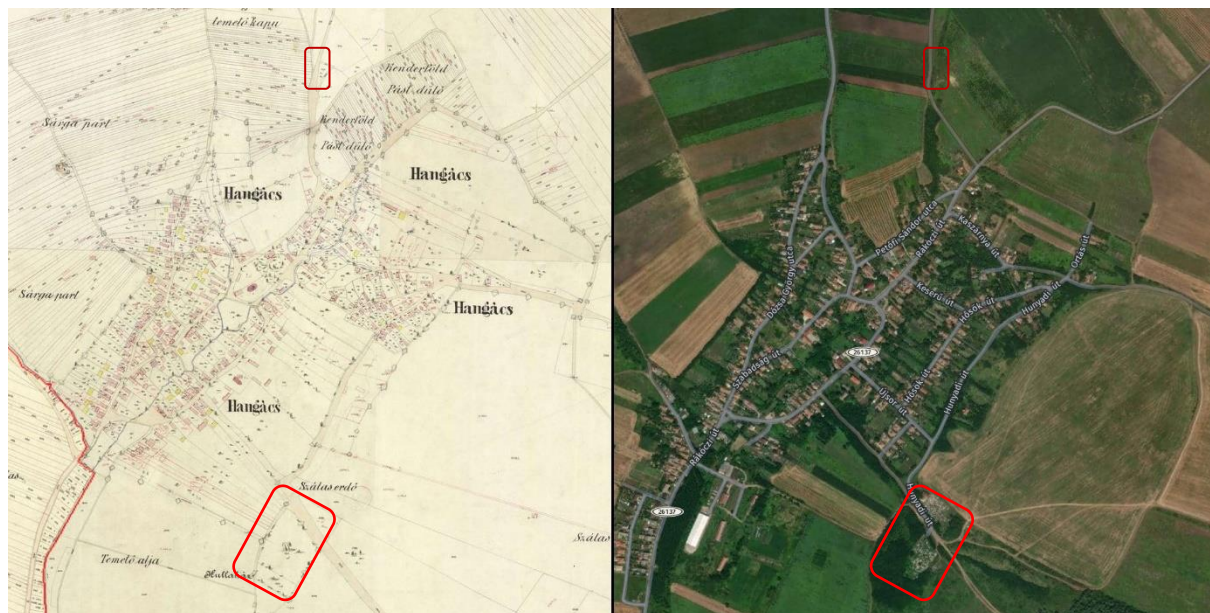
The Israelite cemetery is located in the northern part, while the Christian cemetery is in the southern part of the settlement. The remaining monuments of the cemetery are located along a dirt road at the edge of the village.

There is no fence, but the area around the gravestones appears to have been periodically maintained. There is a ditch between the gravestones and the dirt road, and there was probably no fence enclosing the cemetery.

The old road to Damak runs as a narrow dirt track past the cemetery. The Reformed and Catholic cemeteries are in the southern part of the settlement, opposite the Israelite cemetery. All three denominations have separate cemeteries.

The cemetery is located on the highest part of the village, with a beautiful panoramic view of Hangács. The area around the 11 standing monuments is not well maintained, some of the gravestones have been moved and are lying on the ground or in the dust. The previous description was written around

the year 2000 (izraelitametok.hu), but compared to the present experience, we can say that approximately 4-8 gravestones may have disappeared from the cemetery.



**Figure 1.** Synchronised maps of the cadastral survey of Hangács cemetery (1856–60) Source: Habsburg Empire – Cadastral maps (19th century) maps.arcanum.hu. (Edited by the author)



**Figure 2.** Gravestone in the cemetery of Hangács (Photo taken by author in 2023)

The four rows that can be identified contain both female and male gravestones. Three of the legible tombstones contain only Hebrew inscriptions, the other tombstones are inscribed in Hebrew and Latin letters. Several members of the Reinitz family can be identified on the gravestones. The Reinitz surname also appears on the World War II memorial in the centre of the village, erected in 1936 and restored in 1989.



**Figure 3.** A woman's gravestone in the cemetery of Hangács (Photo taken by author in 2023)



**Figure 4.** A man's gravestone in the cemetery of Hangács (Photo taken by author in 2023)



**Figure 5.** Gravestone in the cemetery of Hangács (Photo taken by author in 2023)



**Figure 6.** Gravestone in the cemetery of Hangács (Photo taken by author in 2023)



**Figure 7.** Gravestone in the cemetery of Hangács (Photo taken by author in 2023)



**Figure 8.** Gravestone in the cemetery of Hangács (Photo taken by author in 2023)

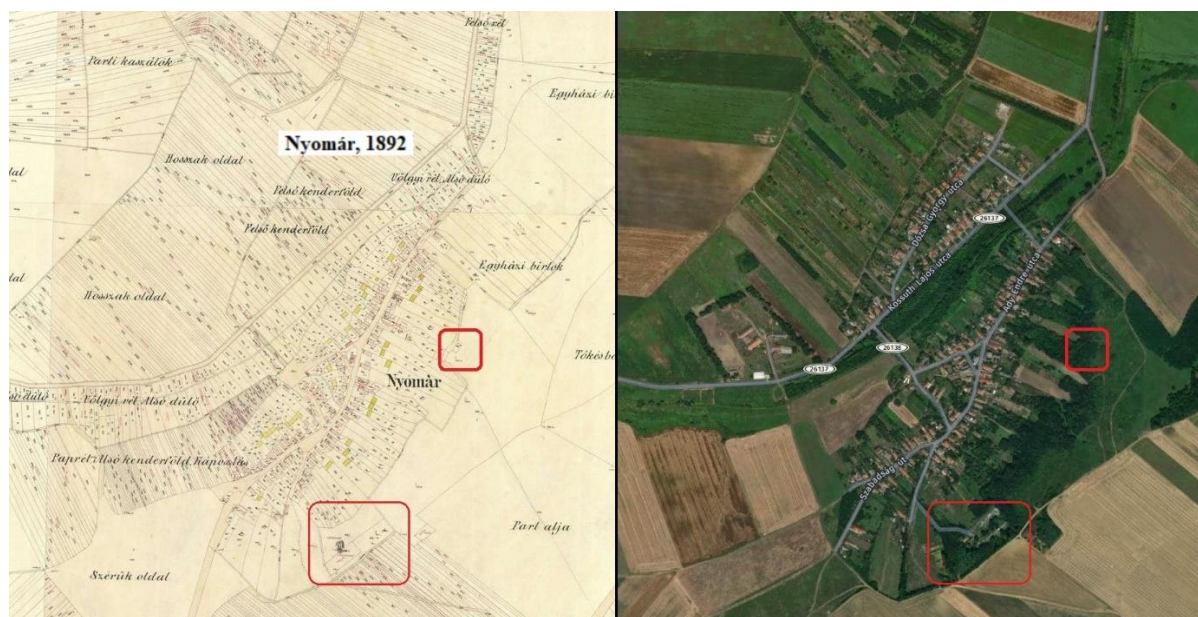
## 6. Nyomár

Nyomár is a tiny village of less than 300 inhabitants, located 13 km from Edelény and 25 km from Miskolc. A settlement exists since the 13th century. According to the census of 2011, it is populated by a Roman Catholic and Reformed majority, but a Greek Catholic population is also present. According to late 19th Century records, the village was inhabited by 17 Israelites.

Finding the cemetery was not easy, even if the specific coordinates were known. With the help of local people, I found my way to a private plot of land, where the landowner helped me find the graveyard with a few gravestones.

The cemetery is located on a hilltop in the village, near the Catholic church, in an overgrown, wooded, bushy area, and is difficult to find if one is not familiar with the area. The graves are not tended by anyone, but the graveyard is clearly present in the memory of the village, as all the interviewees (two elderly women, one middle-aged man and one young man) knew of its existence. No Jewish families are known to the locals, only the existence of the cemetery and its location can be recalled today. In the cemetery there are 5 gravestones in three rows and a pedestal.





**Figure 9.** Synchronised maps of the cadastral survey of Nyomár cemetery (1892) Source: Habsburg Empire – Cadastral maps (19th century) maps.arcanum.hu (Edited by the author)

The inscriptions on the stones are mixed, there are Hebrew only, and Latin only, and there are also gravestones with mixed inscriptions in the cemetery. The presence of the Latin lettering and the majority language – Hungarian – on the gravestones also indicates that the Jewish community rarely or never used Hebrew. The use of mixed lettering is typical of neologic trends, but in such a small cemetery it is difficult to find details indicative of trends.

In the images 10–11, the very similar, regular rectangular headstones, engraved only on the front side and placed far apart, bear the same surname: Samuel Salzer and Mrs. Samuel Salzer. The dates suggest that they could have been a married couple. The man's tombstone also bears a Star of David.



**Figure 10.** A man's gravestone in the cemetery of Nyomár (Photo taken by the author in 2023)



**Figure 11.** A woman's gravestone in the cemetery of Nyomár (Photo taken by the author in 2023)



**Figure 12.** Gravestone in the cemetery of Nyomár (Photo taken by the author in 2023)



**Figure 13.** Gravestone in the cemetery of Nyomár (Photo taken by the author in 2023)



**Figure 14.** Gravestone in the cemetery of Nyomár (Photo taken by the author in 2023)



**Figure 15.** Gravestone in the cemetery of Nyomár (Photo taken by the author in 2023)

## 7. Lak

Lak is a small village of 672 inhabitants, 32 km from Miskolc. It is mentioned from the 13th century, and is one of the minor nobility villages in the Borsod Castle area. The village has historically been of Reformed affiliation, but at the 2021 census only nearly a quarter of the village professed to be Reformed, while 57% were Roman Catholic.

At the time of the first Hungarian census (1784–87), 29 Israelites were recorded in Lak (Varga, 2005). In 1880, 9.2% of the village (70 people) were Israelites, but by 1940 this figure had fallen to 1.7% (NEDA).

There is a functioning cemetery in the village. The old Reformed cemetery is the village's public cemetery. The Israelite cemetery is located on a densely overgrown hill near the road towards Hegyemeg.



**Figure 16.** Synchronised maps of the cadastral survey of Lak cemetery (1892) Source: Habsburg Empire – Cadastral maps (19th century) maps.arcanum.hu (Edited by the author)



**Figure 17.** Gravestone in the cemetery of Lak (Photo taken by the author in 2023)



**Figure 18.** Gravestone in the cemetery of Lak (Photo taken by the author in 2023)

The cemetery has only 2 standing gravestones, one of which has an illegible inscription. The other gravestones are broken, tilted, and leaning against each other among the thick vegetation. 3 rows can be identified, but some of the stones are no longer in place. Upon asking the residents of Lak, no one could tell us where the cemetery was located. Most of the population has been replaced over the past few decades, and the community has not preserved the memory of the Jewish families who lived here. In presenting the history of the village, neither the village's identity manual, nor its website or other information interfaces, mention the Jewish population living here.

One local history work mentions the memory of a local Jewish man who was a victim of the Holocaust: "To the glory of God, surprisingly there is more than one mention of the Jewish Bernát József among the donors [to the Reformed school]. (Perhaps this is the reason for the sympathy with which the people of Lak mourned their deported fellow villagers in 1944, and have since been remembering the families who never returned.)" [Archives of the Reformed Church of Lak. Smaller prot. 1827. V. 13. Quoted by: (Varga, 1995: 21)]



*Figure 19. Gravestones in the cemetery of Lak*  
(Photo taken by the author in 2023)

## 8. Conclusion

The Israelite cemeteries of three small villages in close proximity to each other do not bear any particular distinctive features. Lak, Nyomár and Hangács have no great names, no great battles for historians to record. For this very reason, the villages were less devastated by the losses of the wars and lootings. The three villages provide good examples of the tranquillity and continuity of everyday life. The cemeteries, which are legally protected but, more importantly, have a social significance, are evidence of the settlement and integration of the local Jewish population. The few remaining memorials should be made visible, as a testimony to the peaceful coexistence of everyday life in these villages before the Holocaust and to the fact that posterity remembers the inhabitants of these villages with dignity. I would like to use

my study as a contribution to the exploration of everyday life and the preservation of Jewish culture in the region.

The present study is one stage of the research, and the photographic and data collection of further settlements is in progress.

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