

**LUBO STACHO:****Obchodná 1984 – 2014****Obchodná Street in Bratislava: ever changing, yet still the same***Vydavateľstvo O.K.O.;**SLOVART, Bratislava 2015, 400 p.*

In the first half of the year, photographer Lubo Stacho published a unique publication *Obchodná 1984 – 2014*. The book contains 500 photographs of shops and their windows as well as random situations captured on the Obchodná Street in Bratislava during the last 30 years. In the end of the book, there is a theoretical chapter included, with four essays by authors from various academic fields; curators and art theorists Aurel Hrabušický and Petra Hanáková, sociologist Miroslav Tížik and historian and theorist of architecture Henrieta Moravčíková. The book presents itself in an attractive but simple design provided by Boris Meluš.

Stacho's project represents a consistent visual-anthropological concept. It's a longitudinal study, that uncovers broader socio-cultural contexts and the changes of society in time. As Miroslav Tížik reflects in his essay, the photographer provides us with a close perspective of the pedestrian as opposed to the distant or – as David Harvey puts it – in a way impersonal from a skyscraper like view of the sociologist (Harvey, 1989). Consequently, Stacho's effort resembles more a qualitative approach of the (visual) anthropologist. He is walking on a single street, enabling us to abstract the whole picture from the set of singularities.

In most of the photographs, people are presented as mere extras, random by-

standers or passers-by. Mostly, we perceive them as blurred contours, flashing by the main protagonists of the story. Although, on some of the photographs, a person is the main subject, an epicentre of the situation captured. A man, standing in front of the winery, curiously looking into the objective of the camera, with a straw hat clutched in his hands. A shopkeeper in front of his shop, with his hands crossed on his chest, covering our view of the shop's window. A young woman, looking up at the tram, waiting at the tram stop. When looking at these particular photographs, one becomes fully aware of the absence of the human factor in other pictures in this publication. Nevertheless, when we take a look at the specific person, we cannot help but wonder: what is their individual story? How do they feel in that captured moment in time? In what way do they perceive the society they live in and how does it treat them? Therefore, the photographer's (intuitive) focus on material culture is a carefully and well-chosen one. It shifts the reader's interest from the individual stories to the broader contexts. Hence, in singularities they look for the generalities. Simultaneously, as formulated by Tížik, the pedestrian's perspective "gives us a way to identify with the space, and remove the distance customarily within the photographic image" (p. 334). According to him, this helps us to perceive the substance of urban life and understand its spirit.

The publication clearly shows that visual representations may be worth more than hundred words. The material environment and things reflect different times and regimes of the society before and after the



fall of the socialist regime in 1989. The pictures are assembled chronologically. A reader takes a virtual tour through the street building by building, while examining them in the flow of time. The peculiar but also distinctive commodity deprivation during socialism, often combined with visual representations of ever present political ideology – posters and signs related to various political events and occasions (anniversaries, celebrations or commemorations). Exactly this tension between the mundane context of commerce in combination with the visual representations of (in)authentic and obligatory political devotion gave Stacho the initial impulse to capture the shop windows in the long term: “When Leonid Ilyich Brezhnev died in 1982, ‘normalization’ was running full steam ahead. The shops windows on the street named Obchodná [Eng.: “Shopping Street”, the actual name of the street] all displayed his photograph, but I didn’t have nerve to put it all on film. Then 6 months later it all repeated on the February 9<sup>th</sup> 1984, when the next comrade, General

Secretary Yuri Vladimirovich Andropov, passed away. Once more the whole street was awash with portraits. This was what initiated my Obchodná documentation,” (in the book pretext). In regard to this, Hrabušický writes about a paradox when the shop window as “a place to assemble the best goods available, as a means to lure and entice consumption, simultaneously become(s) a place of political manipulation and ideological subordination” (p. 317). However, this combination comes to me as a quite natural one: one illusion wed with another one. The siren call of consumption is an ideology in itself; it could be as two-faced and deceiving as the political one. A sort of the meantime or a non-time was represented by the short period of authentic expressions of folk creativity during the revolutionary months of 1989. The street with its shops and their windows became a setting or a theatre stage for what Hrabušický calls “the political graffiti” (p. 319), just to be succeeded by a contrasting overflow of commodities and influx of visual represen-

tations, characteristic for early capitalism. At that time, Stacho was considering concluding the project, but “capitalism hit Obchodná harder than the creeping of state socialism”. Therefore, according to him, the things got “once again interesting” (in the book pretext). From today’s perspective, it is obvious that his decision was the right one. Stacho’s longitudinal approach, which covers both regimes, the old and the new one, brings out specific dilemmas and contradictions of the societal change, reflected in material culture.

In regard to this, the authors of the theoretical essays in the publication also tend to analyse the shift of regimes through a set of paradoxes. For example, Hrabušický writes about the inner tension of visual representations as seen in the shop windows during socialism. He understands it as a result of two contradictory activities: conscious effort and unconscious displacement (p. 319). According to him, almost all new photographs are lacking this paradox. Also the other authors perceive the visual representations in socialism and postsocialism as full of contradictions. Hanáková writes about socialist uniformity and capitalist neglect, when shops of items (clothing, drugstore, pharmacy...) gave way to shops of brands (Teranova, DM, Dr. Max...) (p. 324). According to her, in a sense a self-sufficient world was exchanged for a second-class space: without meaning and integrity. However, a reviewer in the role of the devil’s advocate may also look for the traits of *Ostalgie* in her own words, looking for a deeper meaning and substance in the time past while being unable to see one today. In the end of her essay, she perceives the street as an “unassailable proof” of how “we the citizens of Bratislava are still the same old... bumpkins” (p. 325), as she bluntly (but perhaps not without a speck of sentiment) puts it. In regard to this, I am more in agreement with Tížik’s perspective of Obchodná Street as a piece of wilderness and “sanctuary of real diversity” (p. 338) in the periphery of the somewhat sterile Potemkin centre of Bratislava. In the changes of time, what persists is the street’s lasting spirit. In the end, this is also reflected in Stacho’s photographs. Indeed, the ever changing street always remains the same.

A small world existing for its own, yet reflecting the wider contradictions and dilemmas of society.

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**PETER SALNER:**

**Požehnaný spravodlivý sudca:  
Súčasný židovského pohrebu  
(Blessed Fair Judge: The Current  
Forms of Jewish Funeral)**

*Institute of Ethnology of the Slovak  
Academy of Sciences, Bratislava 2014,  
183 p.*

For over two decades, the books and studies by Peter Salner have provided a great deal of empirical knowledge about the present and past life of the Jewish community in Slovakia and about the different aspects of change in the daily and holiday cultures and identity of its members. The fact that the author focused in the reviewed publication on the current forms of Jewish funerals (as there is more than one such form) is highly welcome. I understand the reasons of Peter Salner for avoiding this topic in the past, as described in his *Introduction for the Reader*. It is indeed a difficult task to study funeral rituals, as it can strongly affect both the respondents and the researcher. Participatory observation of a funeral ritual may also become emotionally exhausting and arduous for the researcher and for other participants, too, which is one more reason to appreciate this publication. I welcome this book also because this type of work was absent in the Slovak ethnological literature. With the exception of the study by Marta Kernátsová (1990), experts did not dispose of sufficient information about Jewish funerals in Slovakia in the past and the present. This situation thus limited the possi-

bilities of studying the image of culture in Slovakia from various confessional and ethnic perspectives.

The aim of this publication is to respond to several questions: What are the forms of Jewish funerals at present? In what ways are the changes in the forms of funerals expressed and what are the factors influencing such changes? In what way do funerals reflect the relationship (of the deceased and the survivors) to Judaism, tradition, the general population and (political) power? What can be said about the Jewish community in Slovakia and Bratislava and about the identity of its members through the example of funerals?

As a member of the Jewish Religious Community in Bratislava (JRC), the author has participated in over 200 funerals since 1990, and conducted a focused ethnological research of this topic at the turn of the years 2012/2013. Besides ethnographic interviews and observations, he also used archive official documents of the JRC in Bratislava and of the Central Union of Jewish Religious Communities in his publication, as well as secondary literature. It can be affirmed right at the beginning that Peter Salner has collected a great deal of empirical knowledge about the studied cultural phenomenon from the past and the present. His publication is easily read thanks to attractive information, its excellent interpretation and, last but not least, cultivated language and style.

The book opens with information about the Jewish community in Bratislava, including the JRC. The author focuses on the post-Holocaust period after 1945 and the transition period from 1990 until the present. In justified cases, he returns to the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century for explanation, for example, of the reasons and the course of the split of the religious community into the Orthodox and the Neolog currents. In this context, the reader can better understand what “unity” meant for the Jewish community, as established by Decree of the Slovak National Council No. 231 of 1945. This decree requested the creation of united Jewish religious communities in each town and their regulation and organisation through a single Central Union of Jewish Religious Com-



munities (CU JRC) in Slovakia. It is interesting, though, that for rational reasons the CU JRC did not divide the Jewish religious communities into Orthodox and Neolog ones after 1989 and preserved the principles of a single JRC in each town. The reason behind this was the undesirable split of the communities and subsequent possible property disputes.

Peter Salner begins his study on Jewish funeral rituals with a chapter on cemeteries. He explains to the readers the relationship of Judaism to the dead which entails great respect to the deceased ones and untouchability of their remains. This has further consequences: except for extraordinary reasons, the exhumation of remains is prohibited, and the cancellation of graves or entire cemeteries is impossible. This chapter also contains an interesting and important part on Jews' relationship to cemeteries. The author demonstrates it on the basis of testimonies - e-mails from the website *Stretnutie* (later *Svetlo*). Peter Salner, however, describes the testimonies of only those respondents who come from Slovakia but have been living in emigration for longer periods of time. The readers thus lack information about the relationship to cemeteries of re-

spondents currently living in Bratislava or Slovakia, about their opinions on what needs or should not be done, how cemeteries should or should not be maintained, preserved, etc.

The next sub-chapter about JRC-managed cemeteries in Bratislava brings detailed information about the old and the new Orthodox and Neolog cemeteries, about their roles and changes. Especially valuable is information about the use of cemeteries by also “those alive”, for example, as a refuge during the Shoah. In this context, it is interesting to read the short note about what other functions a cemetery could play in its “role of the saviour” – for example, as a place for engagement or the wedding ceremony to prevent the spread of epidemics. It is a pity, however, that the author does not inform the reader about where such phenomenon was recorded. As he notes, no such cases are known in Bratislava. Is it information from the nearby territories?

The relationship of Judaism to death and graves is very well illustrated with the preservation of an old Orthodox cemetery in a rabbi district and the exhumation and transfer of other graves to a new Orthodox cemetery in 1942 – 1943. From the point of view of an ethnologist, an equally fascinating expert topic is the restoration of this place as Chatam Sofer Memorial at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. The author analyses thoroughly and in detail the circumstances of the cancellation of the old unused cemetery in the World War II period, overcoming the presumption that the enormous efforts exerted by Jews related exclusively or mainly to the preservation of the rabbi district. The author’s arguments are convincing. The reader, however, can raise certain questions with regard to the threat to the historic Jewish cemetery in Prague which was used by the author to support his deductions according to which the rescue of the cemetery in Bratislava concerned also “ordinary”, not only “rabbi” graves. Why did he use the example from the Czech Republic so obviously? Is it because it was one state with single legislation, with interconnected Jewish religious communities in Slovakia and the Czech lands? Or is it simply an argument from two communities of the same faith? The reader would need a closer

explanation of this issue. In the summary, the author observes the common features and differences between the Orthodox and the Neolog cemeteries in Bratislava. The final demonstrations of epitaphs from the graves of the old Orthodox cemetery provide the reader with a certain idea about these special texts.

The sub-chapter *Maintenance of Cemeteries* brings information about the management of cemeteries by the JRC and about the opinions on this field of activities by the members of the community. As demonstrated by the author on the basis of correspondence, reports and other official documents of the JRC from the end of the 1940s, this topic met with great interest throughout many years and formed a closely observed area of activities of the community. The documents quoted by the author end in the 1980s. The question which automatically emerges is: what is the situation today and what are the current opinions of the members of the Jewish community about care for cemeteries?

For obvious reasons, the chapter *Funeral* forms the core and the largest text of the book. Peter Salner starts this chapter with an explanation of the funeral brotherhood Chevra Kadisha. It was a society which had certain functions related to funeral rituals and the maintenance of cemeteries. Its members, however, had many other duties: they cared for sick people, prayed by the dying ones, and gave consolation to survivors. As the author notes, thanks to these activities the members of the funeral brotherhood enjoyed respect in the Jewish community. What is interesting is the fact that the brotherhood “thanks to its own funding, often formed the opposite pole to the decision-making structures of the community” (p. 75). This opened for the author another field of research, observing the power relations within the community, potential tensions, and the possibilities of solving them. The next part provides a picture of the funeral brotherhood from 1945 until the political changes in 1989 on the basis of archive materials: gradual cancellation of the society as an independent legal entity in the 1950s, and efforts to restore it in the 1960s. The author also explains that the fu-

neral brotherhood worked during the respective period, but was subject to the community's competences, which was, certainly, reflected in its activities and the resolution of disputes. The situation remained unchanged after 1989. This means that several individuals – men and women – fulfil certain tasks which used to be carried out by the members of the funeral brotherhood during funeral rituals in the past.

In the sub-chapter *Dying and Death*, the author describes the principles of Judaism with respect to death, belief in the after-life and resurrection, as well as the rules for relatives and close ones on how to behave in the presence of a dying person. The information based on the publications by Frieder (1941) and other authors is completed with information about the execution or non-execution of acts and the observation of the rules of behaviour in Bratislava at present to a limited extent. The reader is thus not always able to distinguish whether certain acts and models of behaviour still exist or not, or what is their form in the present.

In the sub-chapter on preparations for the funeral, the author provides short information on how a certain phase of the ritual looked like in a traditional Jewish community, i.e. staying with the dead body and praying until the funeral. Peter Salner explains the changes in this part of the ritual with the start of use of cooling boxes by undertakers and hospitals. The corpse of the deceased no longer stays at home or in a morgue, but is placed in a cooling box. The author's information corresponds to the outcomes of my own research on funerals among Roman-Catholic believers, where the decline of praying and guarding of the deceased was due to the same reason: the body was supposed to be placed in a cooling box (Kiliánová, 2007). However, as I learnt in my research location, there was a certain transition phase of this part of the ritual which lasted for several years. The survivors let the body be brought home one or two hours before the funeral to be able to pray and take leave of the deceased. This finding points out the efforts to preserve all the phases of the funeral ritual and resistance to changes. In the west-Slovak municipalities in which I conducted my research, this tran-

sition period occurred at the turn of the 1970s and 1980s. When did this situation occur with respect to the Jewish community in Bratislava?

The author's detailed descriptions of the next preparation phases of the funeral (washing the body, dressing the death, etc.) are highly valuable, as well as information about the actors of the ritual: who performs the ritual, what is the role of the JRC at present, etc. Peter Salner describes in detail the funeral as such: the carrying of the dead to the cemetery and to the grave pit, and its ritual placement in the grave. He also focused on the difficulties faced by the Jewish community today with regard to its efforts to ensure decent funerals. The descriptions of the burial seem to concern, in particular, rituals for deceased men. With the exception of a short note on page 108, the reader would not learn whether there were any differences in this part of the ritual between men and women, younger and older ones, single and married ones, etc. As evidenced in numerous sources of ethnological literature both from European and non-European cultures, there used to be differences on the basis of gender, age, status and possibly other criteria in funeral rituals.

I highly appreciate the parts on exhumation within the environment of a Jewish community and about cremation as a modern phenomenon after 1945. Peter Salner establishes a justified link to the changes in the values of Jews after the Holocaust. He concisely describes the actions by the JRC when dealing with the question whether it is possible or not to place burial urns with ashes in cemeteries. Finally, he focuses on the building of a columbarium for these purposes at the Neolog cemetery. The author demonstrates through concrete cases how cremation and the placement of urns cause different tensions and conflicts even today and how the JRC seeks to deal with these issues. The last part of this chapter presents religious holidays accompanied by recollections of the deceased, as well as other commemoration ceremonies of the Jewish community in Bratislava and in Slovakia.

In the *Conclusion*, Peter Salner summarises the knowledge about the different forms of present-day Jewish funerals which oscil-

late from traditional Orthodox through Neolog up to civil forms with some traditional elements or even without any links to tradition. This picture is completed with forms which fully contradict the principles of Judaism, such as cremation. On the other hand, this modern form became for some members of today's Jewish community an expression of their relationship to their predecessors who died during the Holocaust or were burnt. On the basis of his research, the author affirms that funeral rituals demonstrate both the diversity of the Jewish community culture and tensions between the religious and secular parts of the identity of its members. He also believes that the community finds itself in the process of changes, but presumably not in a process of extinction.

The book is enriched with numerous, carefully chosen photos. They serve not only for illustration, but, as a medium of same importance, they complement and expand the information contained in the text. The book by Peter Salner is a very good study about Jewish funeral rituals at present. The author handled the unenviable task of the first-climber. He could not use any previous ethnological works from Slovakia, with the exception of the above-mentioned study by

M. Kernátsová. In spite of that, he provides an overall picture of Jewish funeral rituals from the moment of death until burial. He did not leave out information about the period of mourning of survivors and about cyclical religious and other commemorative services. He points out a link between funeral rituals and changes in the Jewish community as a religious and secular group, and shows ritual as a social activity which relates to the value system of the community, is subject to changes, represents an arena of power and other disputes, and last but not least, it is a fundamental human service provided by the human community to the deceased and survivors.

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