

## NATIVE AND FOREIGN – SOCIETY, CULTURE AND RELIGION

### TREASURES OF JEWISH ART: THE 1673 ILLUMINATED SCROLL OF ESTHER OFFERED TO A ROMANIAN HIERARCH

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The Library of the Romanian Academy in Bucharest holds a rare piece of Jewish art from the seventeenth century, an illuminated scroll of the Book of Esther, dated 1673. This piece of art, which henceforth will be called *Megillath Esther Iași 1673* or simply *Megillah Iași 1673*, is a unique example in terms of Jewish art, because of two distinct components which it exclusively possesses. One of them is the date indicating a year in Cyrillic characters, viz. 7181 since the creation of the world according to Byzantine chronology, corresponding in the Gregorian calendar to the year 1673. The second component is the coat of arms of the Principality of Moldavia, placed within the escutcheon in the ornamental section at the beginning of the scroll.

These essentially biographic elements indicate an age for this type of *megillah*, and although this is not the very year when it first took shape, they prevent specialists from oscillating, between the sixteenth, seventeenth centuries, and the mostly preferred eighteenth century. In addition, the presence of the Moldavian coat of arms in the escutcheon or the place reserved for the name or the armorial bearings of the person it was meant to be addressed to, or of the owner, points to a Romanian holder. Moreover, the fact that the blazon is identical to the one reproduced in *The Psalter* translated in Romanian verses by Dosoftei, the metropolitan of Moldavia, printed precisely in 1673, is undeniable proof that the person this *megillah* was meant to be offered to was the Romanian hierarch. At the same time, the association in itself leads to the conclusion that there were several cultural and spiritual relations between two noted scholars of the time. One of them is Dosoftei, the Romanian archbishop, the other, the cabalist Nathan Nata Hanover<sup>1</sup>, rabbi for over fifteen years (1657-1673) of the Jewish community in Iași, the capital city of the Moldavian principality.

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<sup>1</sup> Nathan Neta Hanover is the form adopted in Israel mainly. In Western Europe, by and large, as well as in *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, Jerusalem, the form Nathan Nata Hanover predominates. The French version has two “n” at Hanover. As the bulk of the bibliography we consulted comes from Western Europe and the United States, we adopted their transcription.

We also adopted the Jewish consecrated term for the scroll of the Book of Esther, namely *Megillat Esther*, or simply *Megillah* (the term itself came to be identified with *Megillat Esther*), *Megillah Gaster I*, *Megillah Klagsbald*, *Megillat Esther Iași 1673*, *Megillah Iași 1673*. Therefore the reader will come across formulas such as *Megillah Gaster I* (= *Megillat Esther* type *Gaster I*), *Megillah Klagsbald* (= *Megillath Esther* type *Klagsbald*), *Megillah Iași 1673* (= *Megillat Ester Iași 1673*). All these examples correspond to the forms of Nominative, Genitive, sg. For the plural of the same term, *megilloth* was preserved.

After this brief introduction, we will now look at the landmarks that allow us to reconstruct the special circumstances leading to the dedication of such an important object of Jewish art to a Romanian hierarch in Moldavia in 1673.

This essay is comprised of three parts:

The first part describes the content of the Book of Esther, the legendary history of the Jews under Babylonian rule related to their rescue from the massacre planned – by drawing lots (*pur*) – to be carried out on the 13<sup>th</sup> and the 14<sup>th</sup> of the month of Adar, by Haman, the prime-dignitary of the Persian King Ahasuerus. It also presents the story and myth of the actors and events of that time, when Esther and Mordecai are glorified as heroes of the Jewish people.

The second part covers a chapter of Jewish art history. It concerns that special, festive type of engraved/illuminated *Megillath Esther*, identified by Dr. Mendel Metzger, a true authority on the subject, as *Megillah Gaster I*<sup>2</sup>. Under the same headline one describes *Megillath Esther Iași 1673* as belonging to the same type of *Megillath Esther*.

The third part reflects a cultural-religious aspect of the Moldavian Principality between 1657 and 1673 of the “Golden Century,”<sup>3</sup> the golden century of Romanian culture illustrated by Romanian learned hierarchs and diplomats viz. Miron Costin, the chronicler (1633-1693), Nicolae Milescu, the diplomat scholar (1636-1708), Dosoftei (1624-1693), the man of letters, the hierarch, distinguished theologian and poet, creator of Romanian cultivated poetry. A century which culminated in Bucharest with the *1688 Bible*, known as the Bible of Șerban, where Moldavian contributions are also present (Milescu, Dosoftei). A century when, why should we not announce it already, the Romanian theologian and scholar, Metropolitan Dosoftei, was honored in 1673 by a Jewish scholar, preacher, cabalist, and chronicler, with an illuminated manuscript bearing the Moldavian princely coat of arms. Attention is focused on the personalities of the prominent Romanian Archbishop Dosoftei and the cabalist scholar Rabbi Nathan Nata Hanover.

In order to comply with the interest aroused by the existence of an item of Jewish cult which bears the heraldic insignia of the Principality of Moldavia and the date inscribed in Cyrillic characters, being the same year when the Romanian versified *Psalter (Psaltire pre versuri tocmită)* was printed, the present study is conceived into distinct volumes: in Romanian and English. The Jewish language is represented by the text of the *Megillah Iași 1673* itself reproduced in extenso. Likewise, the title page of one of Nathan Hanover’s works – *Sha’arei Ziyon* (The Gates of Zion) – is tantamount to a biographical description of the author. The significance of this cultural, artistic, and historical event of 1673 is increased by the rich illustrative material included, which confers to this book the value and characters of an *album*.

<sup>2</sup> *The Earliest Engraved Italian Megilloth*, in “Bulletin of the John Rylands Library”, Vol. 48, No. 2, Spring, 1966, pp. 381-432.

<sup>3</sup> *Un veac de aur în Moldova, 1643-1743: Contribuții la studiul culturii și literaturii române vechi*, Chișinău, Bucharest, 1996.

*The Book of Esther*

The Old Testament narrative begins with the feasts organized by the Persian King Ahasuerus in the third year of his glorious rule. The first banquet was made in honor of the high dignitaries and the leaders of his armies in the one hundred and twenty-seven provinces. The feasts lasted for one hundred and eighty days, during which the amazing riches of the king and his kingdom were displayed. The second banquet, which lasted for seven days, was made for the people living at that time in Shushan, the capital of the kingdom, and took place in the sumptuous gardens of the palace (1:3-8).

Queen Vashti also made a feast, for the women, in the royal house (1:9). On the last, seventh day, Ahasuerus, completely intoxicated, sent the servants to bring in the beautiful Queen Vashti to show her to his guests and courtiers. However, Vashti did not obey the royal commandment. On the advice of the king's counselors or wise men, Vashti was deposed. Royal messengers were dispatched to all the provinces of the kingdom to condemn the action of the former queen (1:17-22), as an example and warning to all wives to give all due obedience and honor to their husbands.

After all the necessary searching and preparations (2:2-4), Hadassa (Esther) was chosen from among all the beauties introduced to Ahasuerus. However, Esther did not reveal her origin: an orphan Jewish girl, educated by her cousin, Mordecai.

While sitting in the gate of the palace, Mordecai overheard a plot framed against Ahasuerus by two of the courtiers, Bigthan and Teresh (2:21). He revealed this conspiracy to Esther who, in her turn, revealed it to the king. The plotters were executed, while Mordecai's deed was written in the book of the "Chronicles" of the kingdom (2:23).

Meanwhile, Haman, son of Hammedatha the Agagite, was the first dignitary of the kingdom and favorite of the king. Honored by all courtiers and subjects, Haman was not, however, saluted with all due honors by Mordecai (3:2-5). This offence made Haman angry, and since Mordecai had declared himself a Jew (3:4), Haman ordered the destruction of Mordecai and the entire Jewish people in captivity in Persia (3:6). The date for carrying out the plan was decided by drawing lots (*pur*), for the 13<sup>th</sup> of the month of Adar, that is the twelfth month of Adar, that is the twelfth month of the Babylonian year (3:7). The order was announced throughout the entire kingdom with Ahasuerus's approval (3:8-15).

The sorrow of Mordecai and the entire Jewish people in captivity was harrowing (4:1-3). Finding out about the plot, on Mordecai's insistence (4:7-14) Esther decided to go to the king to unmask Haman. When received by the king (5:1-3), Esther at first did not intervene in favor of her people's cause. She only invited the king to participate, together with Haman, in a banquet of wine offered in her apartments (5:4-5). During dinner, Esther asked the king to come again the

following day, also accompanied by Haman, when she would ask him for a great favor (5:8). Delighted with the new invitation, but at the same time angry at Mordecai's behavior (5:9), Haman was advised by Zeresh, his wife, and his friends to order the gallows to be built for Mordecai the Jew (5:14).

During the sleepless night that followed the first banquet, Ahasuerus was read to from the "Chronicles" of the kingdom about Mordecai's unrewarded deed (6:13-3). As a consequence, at Haman's suggestion, the king ordered the former to lead Mordecai in honor on horseback through the streets of the city (6:6-11).

On the occasion of the second banquet, Esther revealed Haman's cruel action as an oppressor and enemy of hers and of the Jewish people (7:2-6). In his wrath, Ahasuerus rose from the table and went into the garden of the palace. When he returned, seeing Haman at the feet of Esther, he grew angry and ordered that Haman be hanged on the gallows he had prepared for Mordecai (7:7-10).

Haman's fall brought about Mordecai's ascension (8:2). Esther also obtained from Ahasuerus the right for Mordecai to reverse the letters against the Jews devised by Haman in the king's name (8:3-8).

The king thus granted all the Jews living in all the hundred and twenty-seven provinces of the Persian Kingdom to fight for their lives, to attack in their turn, to destroy, and slaughter all of Haman's people who had been given the order to assault them on the 13<sup>th</sup> of Adar (9:5-13). The massacre in Shushan and the attacks of revenge also continued the following day, on the 14<sup>th</sup> of Adar, when all of Haman's ten sons were hanged (9:13-15, 24-25).

The celebration of the Jewish victory, called *Purim* after the drawing of the lots (*pur*), took place on the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> of Adar (9:17-19). Mordecai, as the high dignitary of the kingdom, ordered that the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> of Adar be observed by the Jews as their days of redemption and be commemorated with gladness and feasting (9:20-24). The decree of Esther confirmed Mordecai's order, asking the Jews by letters to observe the Purim days for the rest of their history (9:29).

The holiday thus established, as Mordecai and Queen Esther had decreed (9:28-31), celebrates and glorifies annually the redemption of the Jewish people from the Babylonian wrath.

### *Truth and Legend*

It is well-known that Esther's story is steeped in legend. It is a myth the narrative core of which is not rigorously authentic. "Accepting Esther as veritable history involves many chronological and historical difficulties"<sup>4</sup> as Albert I.

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<sup>4</sup> Albert I. Baumgarten, *The Scroll of Esther*, in *Enciclopedia Judaica*, vol. 14, 1973, columns 1047-1057. An exhaustive analytical synthesis of the Book is also to be found in *The Jewish Encyclopaedia*, vol. V, 1963, KTAV Publishing House Inc. ("Esther," pp. 232-241). See also Carey A. Moore, *The Book of Esther*, in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. 2, Doubleday, 1992, pp. 633-643. Also C.A. Moore grouped in one a volume a number of 37 *Studies in the Book of Esther. Selected with a Prolegomenon*, KTAV Publishing House, Inc., New York.

Baumgarten wrote in his article “The Scroll of Ester.” The literature and historiography on this topic are extensive and varied,<sup>5</sup> many times contradictory and full of paradoxes.

We present, without entering into details, some of the most frequently mentioned anachronisms, incongruities, and criticisms. If it is true that Mordecai was made prisoner and taken away from Jerusalem together with those who were led into captivity by Nebuchadnezzar (in 589 B.C.), as it is suggested in the Book of Esther (2:5-6), then he must have been more than one hundred years old during the reign of Ahasuerus. The king, in his turn, is none other than Artaxerxes I of Persia, called Xerxes by the Greeks (485—464 B.C.). Esther, in her turn, could not have possibly been young since she had been taken into captivity at the same time as Mordecai. According to Herodotus, Xerxes’s wife was neither Esther nor Vashti, but Amestris, the daughter of a Persian general . . . . According to some exegetes, the events presumably took place at the Egyptian court of Ptolemy the Euergetes (second century B.C.). Other interpreters consider the names of Mordecai and Esther are deriving from the names of two Babylonian deities, Marduk or Merodak and Ishtar, the latter meaning “star” in Persia. Haman and Vashti would represent, according to this theory, Humman and Mashti from Elam. The removal from the throne of Vashti and Esther’s ascension would correspond to the dethronement of the Elamite deity and its replacement with the Babylonian myth of Esther. The translation or interpretation of the Persian word *pur* would be, in some exegetes’ opinion, “oracle” rather than “lots”. Many other critical commentaries were made concerning the vindictive, bloody vein of the narrative, as well as the absence of any invocation of the divine power. It was generally admitted that a Babylonized theme was adopted in the Bible.

#### *Megillat Esther*

As suggested by the title, the major concern about the Book of Esther relies upon its presentation (illuminated on parchment) as an object of Jewish cult. Consequently, we will not refer to the representation of this theme in Christian art: manuscripts, stained-glass windows, frescoes, portraits, scenes, etc., which have

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<sup>5</sup> It is worth pointing out the entry on Esther in *Enciclopedia Română* (commissioned and published under the aegis of the Association for Romanian Literature and Culture of the Romanian People by Dr. C. Diaconovich, Sibiu, Vol. II, 1909, p. 334) that runs: “Esther [is] the famous Jewish woman, niece of Mordecai and wife of the Persians’ King Xerxes, also called Ahasver, named Assuerus by the Greeks. In 510 B.C., by her appeal to Xerxes, she saved the Jews from the plots of the king’s minister, Haman, who wanted to put them to death. The book of the Old Testament depicting this event is attributed by some to Esdra, others attribute it to Mordecai and Esther.” In the same *Enciclopedia Română* it is mentioned that “Esther is the topic of Racine’s classical tragedy (with chorus) as well as the topic of two other tragedies, one by Pierre Mathieu (written in 1585), the other by Du Ryer (written in 1645), as well as the topic of a comedy by the German F.G. Gotter, written in 1795; all bearing the same title: *Esther*.” It is worth mentioning the publication in more recent times of the Romanian historical novel by Romulus Dianu (b. 1913), *Fata din Suza*, Bucharesti, 1982.

generated an extensive bibliography<sup>6</sup> and an equally rich exemplification. Exception will be made for certain works of Christian art considered to have inspired some illustrations of the type of *megillah* to which the one under discussion belongs. Also as an exception we reproduce the painting by Rembrandt (1665) in which Haman implores Esther's forgiveness. This was included to underline its presence in the collection of the Romanian National Museum of Art in Bucharest,<sup>7</sup> as well as to highlight its absence in certain specialized dictionaries or even from several monographs on Rembrandt.

According to Jewish rabbi belief, the story of Esther represents the only biblical text than can be figuratively illustrated. The main reasons for this tenet are: there is no mention of God's name in the narration, the depicted episode occurred in some post-biblical period, after the destruction of the first temple, and took place outside the Holy Land. As a result, "artistic expression, far from being prohibited, was actually encouraged, either for educational purposes or for what is known as *hiddur mitzvah*, that is an adornment of the implements involved in performing rituals. Once these reasons were established, a place for artistic expression was found in Judaism. Gradually, art gathered momentum. Embellishing biblical, ritual, legal, or even secular Hebrew books and manuscripts was one of the most important ways in which the Jew could express his devotion to the written word."<sup>8</sup>

Images or scenes inspired by the Book of Esther are to be found, therefore, in several Hebrew Bibles and prayer books as early as the beginning of the thirteenth century. Rachel Wischnitzer-Bernstein (c. 1885-1989)<sup>9</sup> identified in 1948 the images of Ahasuerus and Esther on the mural painting of the synagogue from Dura-Europos (a synagogue dating back to the third century<sup>10</sup>), in the area of the Euphrates. C. Kraeling<sup>11</sup> in 1956, and Joseph Gutmann (b. 1923-)<sup>12</sup> in 1979 reproduced, in color, the entire fresco from Dura-Europos which also includes "Mordecai's triumph."

The content of the Book of Esther is read every year twice on the occasion of the celebration of Purim: on the eve of the feast and on the following morning. The obligatory shape in which the text was copied is a scroll, the so-called *megillah*

<sup>6</sup> See among others: Louis Réau, *Iconographie de l'Art Chrétien*. II. *Iconographie de la Bible*. I. *Ancien Testament*, Paris, 1956; *Lexikon der christlichen Ikonographie*, ed. Engelbert Kirschbaum S.J. Rom., Freiburg, Basel, Wien.

<sup>7</sup> See figure 2. See also Eugen Schileru, *Rembrandt*, București, 1966, pp. 95-97.

<sup>8</sup> Quoted from Cecil Rooth's "Foreword" to Bezalel Narkiss, *Hebrew Illuminated Manuscripts*, Jerusalem, Keter Publishing House Ltd., Third printing, 1978, p. 13.

<sup>9</sup> *Who's Who in World Jewry. A Biographical Dictionary of Outstanding Jews*. Olive Book of Israel, 1978; also the necrology in *New York Times*, 24 November 1989.

<sup>10</sup> Rachel Wischnitzer, *The Messianic Theme in the Painting of the Dura Synagogue*, Chicago, 1948, pp. 29-34, 71-73; Idem, *The Esther Story in Art*, in Philip Goodman (ed.), *The Purim Anthology*, Philadelphia, 1949 (The Jewish Publication Society of America).

<sup>11</sup> C. Kraeling, *The Excavation at Dura-Europos. Final Report VIII, Part I, The Synagogue*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1956, pp. 151-164 and colour pls. LXIV-LXV.

<sup>12</sup> Joseph Gutmann, *Purim in Jewish Art*, in *Purim: The Face and the Mask. Essays and Catalogue of an Exhibition at the Yeshiva University Museum, Feb.-June 1979*. New York, p. 21, fig. 31.

(*rouleau* in French, *Rolle* in German, *ròtolo* in Italian, *sul* in Romanian). Such a *megillah* may be comprised only of the handwritten text. The simple manuscript therefore must be used in synagogue. This manuscript meant to be read aloud by one person is listened to in silence by those present. The scroll is folded in order to be read, this with a view to recalling the shape of the letters sent by Esther to the Jews under Babylonian captivity – letters by which she confirmed the decision for the celebration of Purim as well as the obligation to commemorate this event henceforth. During the rest of the year the scroll remains rolled up.

In its festive form, *Megillath Esther's* is illustrated with scenes of the story of Esther and decorated with floral and zoomorphic motives, with linear and geometrical drawings.

Several rules codified by tradition are to be observed in the making of an illuminated *megillah*. The rules described by Mendel Metzger<sup>13</sup> applied to the types he called *Megillah Gaster I*, and *Megillah Klagsbald*, also correspond to the exemplar we called *Megillah Iasi 1673*.

Thus, it is compulsory to write the text by hand. This is accomplished in columns equal in height and width. Between chapters the text should not present breaks larger than a few words. The paragraphs within the chapters are indicated by a space equal to eight or ten letters at the most. The only deviation from the unitary aspect of the text-columns is represented by the sixteenth column comprising the name of Haman's ten sons. Their names are written in bigger characters meant to occupy the entire columns. The total number of text-columns is nineteen. Eighteen of them are grouped in nine pairs, the nineteenth standing alone. *Ha' Melech* is a type of *Megillath Esther* in which every column begins with the word "Ha' Melech" ("the king"). This is also the case with the *megilloth of Gaster I* and *Klagsbald* types, as it the case of *Megillah Iasi 1673*. In the types here described the ornamentation frames the text-columns. One distinguishes, first, the upright column/band decorated with floral motifs separating the text-columns from each other. The same motif is repeated eleven times. The superior and inferior borders along the nineteen text-columns are reserved for the illustration of the scenes or the episodes of the Book of Esther, a real iconographic fresco of the entire story. Each episode depicts one or two moments, or even three (more rarely) contained within a multilobed frame. There are twenty such illustrations, ten for each of the two borders. The interval between the images is filled by a geometrical structure of plaited elements.

The long band obtained from the framing of the text-columns and the upright decorative columns is extended to both ends in a decorative hemisphere. The one on

<sup>13</sup> Mendel Metzger, *Le Livre d'Esther. Un aperçu des manuscrits et de l'illustration enluminée* in "Bulletin de nos communautés" (Strasbourg), 16<sup>e</sup> Année, No. 5, Mars 1960. Idem, *The Earliest Engraved Italian Megilloth*, reprinted from the "Bulletin of the John Rylands Library", vol. 48, No. 2, Spring 1966, pp. 388-393; Idem, *The John Rylands Megillah and Some Other Illustrated Megilloth of the XVth to XVIIth Centuries*, in ibidem, Vol. 45, No. 1, Sept. 1962 (hereafter quoted as "The John Rylands Megillah"); Idem, "Eine illustrierte Esterrolle der zweiten Hälfte des 18. Jahrhunderts im Historischen Museum Frankfurt am Main, mit einem Anhang über Megilla-Hülsen." Sonderdruck aus *Schriften des Historischen Museums Frankfurt am Main*, Heft XIII, 1972, Ammerkung Nr. 6.

the right side of the scroll has in the center an escutcheon supported by two rampant lions. The rest of the interval is filled with floral elements and foliage; one distinguishes five figures of animals: a leopard, an eagle with its wings spread, a stag, a lion, and two dolphins. By and large, the presence of the animals in this frame is considered to bear some symbolical value,<sup>14</sup> since they appear often on objects of Jewish rite. Although they have no connection with the story of Esther, they can express the spirit and feeling in which the *mitzva* of reading the *megillah* has to be accomplished.<sup>15</sup> As a matter of fact, birds, animals like lions, stags, leopards, as well as fishes are to be found decorating medieval funerary stones.<sup>16</sup> The ornamentation at the left end of the scroll is a design of flowers and plants positioned parallel to both sides of a horizontal stem. The escutcheon here has a slightly different shape from the one on the right side of the *megillah*. M. Metzger suggests it may have been meant to comprise the name of the owner of the *megillah*, as is it also possible that both escutcheons may have been meant to comprise the “blessings” which are pronounced at the beginning and end of the reading. Both escutcheons, however, were left uncompleted. “Among the various *megilloth* of this type known to us” – Metzger concludes – “none has any inscription in these escutcheons, neither blessings nor the name of an owner.”<sup>17</sup>

In fact, the absence of a text such as the blessings is not surprising given the disproportionately small space. Usually, these are to be found in the addenda distinctly attached at the beginning of a *megillah*. For a better understanding, see the text of the blessings in footnote.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>14</sup> M. Metzger, *The Earliest Engraved Italian Megilloth*, p. 388.

<sup>15</sup> Thérèse et Mendel Metzger, *Vie juive au Moyen Age*, Fribourg, Office du Livre, 1982, pp. 33-34, 64, 65, fig. 92.

<sup>16</sup> See Silviu Sanie, *Dănuire prin piatră: Monumentele cimitirului medieval evreiesc de la Siret*, București, 2000, pls. XVI and LXII; according to Sanie, the presence of fish images on funerary monuments points to one of its essential meanings, regeneration. The fish is also the symbol of Ephraim tribe. As for the dolphin heads, see figure 3 reproduced *infra*, representing a candlestick of the old synagogue in Iași.

<sup>17</sup> M. Metzger, *op. cit.*, p. 388.

<sup>18</sup> A French translation is to be found in *Encyclopédie de la mystique juive*, eds. Armand Abécassis et Georges Nataf. Paris, cols. 1411-1412. For the English version, we quote from *Siddur Sim Shalom for Shabbat and Festivals* (Prayerbook to Instill Peace : For Shabbat and Festivals), the Rabbinical Assembly, the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism, New York City.

At the beginning, after the official unfolded the scroll, the faithful declare:

“Praised are You Adonai our God, who rules the Universe, instilling in us the holiness of mitzvot by commanding us to read the Megilah.

Praised are You Adonai our God, who rules the universe, accomplishing miracles for our ancestors from ancient day until our time.

Praised are You Adonai our God, who rules the universe, granting us life, sustaining us, and enabling us to reach this day.”

After the reading, the following is recited :

“Praised are You Adonai our God, who rules the universe, championing our cause, avenging the wrongs done to us, liberating us from our enemies, and bringing retribution upon our persecutors. Praised are You Adonai, the saving God, who brings judgment upon Israel’s oppressors ...

Cursed be Haman who sought to destroy us;

blessed be Mordecai, the Jew.

Cursed be Zeresh, the wife of the one who terrified us,

blessed be Esther our protector

and may Harvonah also be remembered for good.

Amen.”



While the handwriting of the biblical text was a “science,” a rigorously observed art, the scribe not being allowed to make any mistakes, not even one letter, the miniaturist did not have any interdictions or canonical limits in decorating and illustrating the *megillah* intended for private use. Inspiration is, in this field, at home. It varies according to the artistic talent of the designer,<sup>19</sup> be he a recognized painter, a professional draughtsman, or an amateur. There are *megilloth* in which the outline of the illustrations and the general decoration was imprinted from engraved plates. This is also true for the *megillah* under discussion. All the same, there are differences distinguishing among the same type of *megilloth*. They consist in the quality of the parchment used, but mostly in the carefulness and the skill, the rush and the awkwardness proved in the execution of the engraving. It occurs equally in the application of the colors.

There were, apparently, also workshops where the commissioned model did not present all the component fragments engraved. For instance, when the ornamentations at the beginning and at the end of the scroll were missing, one resorted to their hand-made imitation. In most cases the result proved to be far inferior in quality in comparison to the engraved model. In other cases, differences can be observed in the framing of the illustrations corresponding to the text-columns, in the superior and inferior borders mentioned above: when the multilobed frames are replaced by rectangular frames. This modification of the frames was considered to be a variant of the prototype *Megillah Gaster I*, which M. Metzger named *Megillah Klagsbald*.<sup>20</sup>

It is worth mentioning that usually the so-called *Megillah Gaster I* and variants (*Megillah Iaşi 1673* included) are mounted on a wooden roller (turned wooden handle).<sup>21</sup> We ought to add that the same type of *megillah* is also kept in cylindrical or polygonal cases made of silver worked in filigree, or of copper, wood, or ivory. However, it is considered that none of these cases is older than “the end of the seventeenth century.”<sup>22</sup> However, part of the copies of the *Gaster I* type variants have these cases. An explanation would be that the latter are copies manufactured later on, at the height of the eighteenth century. The dating of such late copies might have been done on the basis of the newly occurred element (the case), ignoring the age of the model itself. Hence also the chronological confusion. In other words, one may conclude that the age of the same type of *megillah* oscillated over centuries<sup>23</sup> and not only because of the uncertain appreciation of the style of the illustration and decoration.

<sup>19</sup> M. Metzger, *The Engraved Italian Megilloth*, pp. 389-390.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibidem*.

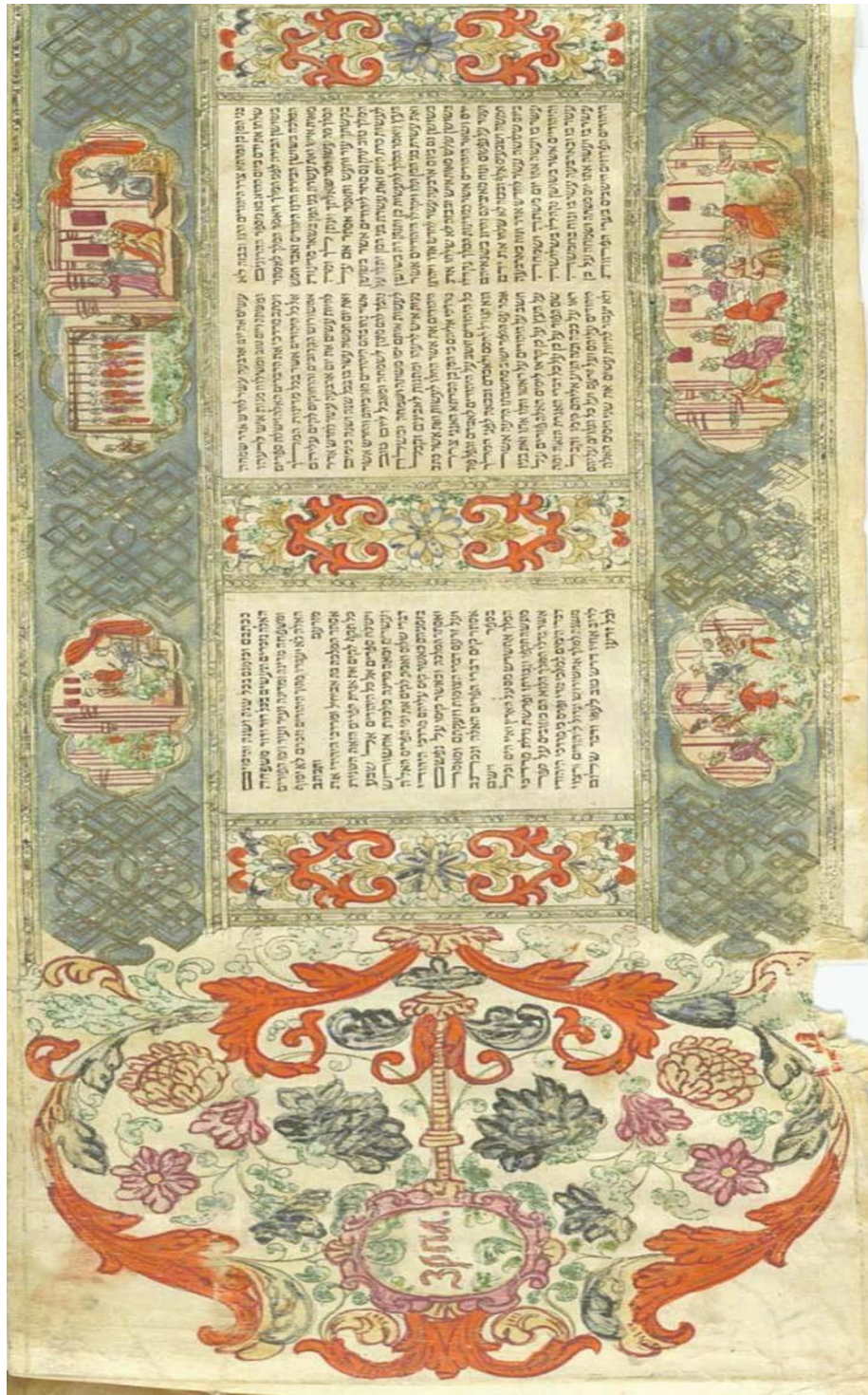
<sup>21</sup> For other examples, see Sotheby, *Important Judaica*, 1986, fig. 103, also reproduced in Jacobo Furman, *Treasures of Jewish Art from the Jacobo and Asea Furman Collection of Judaica*, Hugh Lauter Levin Associates, Inc., c. 1997, p. 20; the Library of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, N.Y., Special Collections (*Megillath Esther* nos. 28, 50, 56, 227); *Jewish Tradition in Art. The Feuchtvanger Collection of Judaica*. Jerusalem, the Israel Museum, 1981, pp. 155-156 (figs. 408, 410, 411).

<sup>22</sup> Joseph Gutmann, *Purim in Jewish Art*, in *op. cit.*, p. 23.

<sup>23</sup> Besides the exemplars mentioned in Metzger, *op. cit.*, pp. 393-397, see also idem, *Eine illustrierte Esterrolle*, pp. 106-110.







*Megillah Gaster I*, of the former collection of Moses Gaster, today held at the John Rylands Library (MS 710), was considered, apparently by the eminent philologist, folklorist, literary historian, rabbi, and preacher Moses Gaster (1858-1939),<sup>24</sup> as dating back “approximately to the sixteenth century, eventually earlier.”

Two other disputed viewpoints bring closer to our argumentative conclusion. In 1895 Michael Adler quoted the *megillah* from “The Parish Church at Great Yarmouth”<sup>25</sup> as dating back to “the second half of the fifteenth century,” while experts in Hebrew manuscripts opined that the text in the manuscript was written later, in the nineteenth century, by some German-Jewish scribe.<sup>26</sup>

In 1930 Rachel Wischnitzer-Bernstein estimated that same model named afterwards *Megillah Gaster I* as being made at the end of the seventeenth century or the beginning of the eighteenth century, giving even a precise date: 1680. As for its origin, she considered it was “born in France” under the influence of the painter Antoine Coypel (1661-1722)... M. Metzger disapproves of the thesis of French influence, proposing that *Megillah Gaster I* is “the work of a popular second-rate artist” (p. 395), incompatible with the genre of great painting. It is worth mentioning that he accepts the year 1680 signaled by Rachel Wischnitzer as the date of the transcription of the handwritten text of this particular scroll, but not of the illumination: “For the illustrations this late date must be rejected” (Ibid., p. 396). The French expert quotes E. Namény<sup>27</sup> who inclines to the seventeenth century. One also justly recalls that A. Coypel was not the only artist of the seventeenth century who painted biblical scenes, but one could add as well Poussin (1595-1665) or Rembrandt (1606-1669). In this case why should we not mention also the works by Rubens (1577-1640) or Bernardo Strozzi (1581-1644)?

The French expert’s opinion is that “the *Megillah Gaster I* belongs to the beginning of the seventeenth century not only because the type of clothing depicted in its illustrations was worn then, but also because the architecture represented belongs to the end of the sixteenth century, or, at the latest, the beginning of the seventeenth. The decorative elements, like the two cartouches, are, without doubt, of a type which belongs to the beginning of the seventeenth century,” (Ibid., p. 397).

In our opinion, one of the strong arguments in favor of the aforementioned thesis is represented by *Megillah Iași 1673* itself. Even if admitting (and it is not the case) that the year 1673 is not far from the date of the first engraving of the *megillah* under discussion, it definitely invalidates Wischnitzer’s thesis. It suffices to calculate the period of time between 1673 and 1661, Antoine Coypel’s birth year, and the answer is plainly negative.

<sup>24</sup> We use this opportunity to specify that the major field of his philological, folklore and literary research was Hebrew and Romanian at the same time. In 1929 Moses Gaster was elected an honorary member of the Romanian Academy.

<sup>25</sup> M. Adler, *Notes on the Jews of Yarmouth*, in “The Jewish Chronicle”, 1895, Sept. 13, pp. 15-16.

<sup>26</sup> M. Metzger, *The Earliest Engraved Italian Megilloth*, p. 394.

<sup>27</sup> *La miniature juive au XVII-e et XVIII-e siècles*, in “Revue des études juives”, CXVI, 1957, pp. 37-38.

Another inference which can be drawn when comparing the exemplars of *Gaster I* type concerns the accuracy in the painting execution i.e. the miniature itself: the distribution of colors, the selection and blending of nuances make the identification of the prototype and the sequence of the exemplars questionable. The difference becomes obvious even when we confront the images reproduced in these pages. Consequently, *Megillah Gaster I* seems to have some well-preserved competitors in claiming an equal qualification or even priority.

Most experts agree that the largest part of the extant *megilloth* come from Italy. Rome, Padova, Florence, Venice may be considered as centers of art production since it is here that the Jewish communities enjoyed certain prosperous life conditions. Ferrara, Sabbioneta, Mantua, Riva di Trento, where Jewish scribes and painters worked,<sup>28</sup> can also be taken into account.

Among all the mentioned centers, Venice is the one which granted the Jewish population the greatest liberty. "To live in the Venetian Ghetto at the height of its fame" – Cecil Roth (1899-1970) points out in his *History of the Jews in Venice* – "was in itself a liberal education."<sup>29</sup> There, in the cosmopolitan Mediterranean harbor, the Jews did not distinguish themselves only in the maritime trade or credit banking operations, but also in medicine, Jewish scribal art, and decorative painting. We anticipate here by mentioning that the preacher-rabbi, cabalist, lexicographer, and chronicler Nathan Nata Hanover – who is the subject of our discussion in the following pages – spent a couple of years in Venice. Here he published his well-known chronicle *Yeven Mezulah*, the book comprising experiences and hearsay testimonies on the persecutions of the Jews from Volhinia (Kingdom of Poland, present Ukraine) during the 1648-1649 uprising led by Hetman Bogdan Chmielnicki. Our suggestion is not limited to the simple bio-bibliographic aspect. It has in view the larger stock of knowledge of the Jewish scholar who must have certainly been familiar with the existence of the Italian *megilloth*.

#### *Megillah Gaster I – Megillah Iasi 1673*

Let us return to the *megilloth* grouped in the conventionally denominated *Megillah Gaster I* category, and to their direct resemblance to the exemplar we called *Megillah Iasi 1673*.

As mentioned, there are no landmarks concerning the paternity of the prototype. A name of an engraver-painter such as Andrea Marelli, for instance, is out of question, since he was active around 1567-1572. Too early, consequently, if compared to our exemplar. Shalom Italia was born only in 1619. As for Francesco Grisellini, the engraver par excellence of the seventeenth century, information is not convincing. What is left, through the process of elimination, is the formula of folk inspiration. Where exactly and when it came into being, still remains without answer.

This presentation is therefore limited at wording the identical nineteen historiated cartouches illustrating the whole story of Esther. Here is the list of

<sup>28</sup> M. Metzger, *op. cit.*, pp. 400-401; Linda Altshuler, *Ahasuerus in Venice. Seventeenth and Eighteenth Century Esther Scrolls Recall the Luxuries of Another Age*, in "The National Jewish Monthly", Feb. 1977, Vol. 91, No. 6.

<sup>29</sup> Cecil Roth, *Jewish Communities Series. Venice*, Philadelphia, The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1930, p. 164.

illustrations with their corresponding captions to which the numbers of the chapter and biblical verses are added:

*Text-cols.*

I-II:

*above:* The feast made by Ahasuerus in the gardens of the palace (1:3-8)

*below:* The feast of Vashti, for women, in the palace (1:9)

III-IV

*above, right:* Ahasuerus, infuriated by the queen's, asks for the wise men's advice (1:13-15)

*above, left:* Messengers are dispatched all over the kingdom to announce the king's decree (1:22)

*below, center:* Hegai the guardian and the maidens waiting to see the king (2:3)

V-VI

*above, center:* Esther becomes queen; she bows in front of the king who crowns her (2:17)

*below, right:* Mordecai, by the king's gate, overhears the plot framed against Ahasuerus (2:21)

*below, left:* The king promotes Haman as first dignitary of the kingdom (3:1)

VII-VIII

*above, right:* (Mordecai bowed not in front of Haman) the all-powerful Haman plans the destruction of the Jewish people; the scribes put down the orders (3:12)

*above, left:* Esther, together with her servants and chamberlain in the yard of the palace (4:4-5)

*below, right:* Esther send Hatach to Mordecai (4:5-6)

*below, left:* Mordecai informs Hatach (4:7-8)

IX-X

*above, right:* Esther in front of Ahasuerus who held out to her the golden scepter (5:2-4)

*above, left:* The king and Haman at the festive banquet of wine given by Esther (5:5-6)

*below, right:* Zeresh pointing to the gallows she had advised Haman to build for Mordecai (5:10-14)

*below, left:* Ahasuerus is read to from the "Chronicles" about the service Mordecai had rendered to him (6:1-12)

XI-XII

*Above, right:* Ahasuerus asks Haman how a man should be rewarded by this king (6:6-10)

*Above, left:* Haman leads Mordecai in triumph through the streets of the city of Shushan (6:11); also the scene where Haman's daughter throws filth upon the head of her father

*Below, right:* The second feast given by Esther to the king and Haman (7:1-6)

*Below, center:* The king sees Haman prostrated at the feet of Esther (7:7-8)

*Below, left:* Harbonah speaks to Ahasuerus, suggesting hanging Haman (7:9)

## XIII-XIV

*Above right:* Haman is hanged on the gallows prepared by him for Mordecai (7:10)

*Above, left:* Mordecai before Ahasuerus (8:1)

*Below, right:* Esther imploring Ahasuerus to reverse Haman's decree against the Jews (8:5); in the background, the scribes of the king (8:9)

*Below, left:* Riding messengers are dispatched with the new royal decree (8:14)

## XV-XVI

*Above, right:* Mordecai honored by Ahasuerus (8:15)

*Above, left:* Happy Jews banqueting (8:15-16)

*Below, right:* The 13<sup>th</sup> Adar massacre (9:5)

## XVII-XVIII

*Above, right:* Esther and Ahasuerus (9:12-13)

*Above, left:* Haman's ten sons, hanged (9:7-10)

*Below:* Celebration, feast, and banqueting for the Jews in Shushan (9:18)

## XIX

*Above, right:* Esther writing letters to the Jews, with veritable words of peace (9:29)

*Above, left:* The letters are dispatched by riding messengers (9:30)

*Below:* Purim holiday: music, dancing, jesters, feast.

The aspects that individualize the exemplars of the same type of *megillah* are mainly two: one responds to the choice of colors, the second one to the meticulousness, the carefulness with which the colors were applied. These traits can be observed also in the images reproduced in the present study (see fig. 5). But the best results would be obtained only by a "live" confrontation. Comparing the exemplars I succeeded to check, as well as those reproduced by passionate collectors in exhibition catalogues,<sup>30</sup> the difference in quality between the black and white reproduction and the color ones is obvious.

The accomplishing of such a *megillah* implies: 1) the handwriting of the text; 2) the engraving of the framework, and 3) the illumination proper. With *Megillah Iasi 1673*, what raises a question mark is the moment when the two Romanian elements were introduced: the coat of arms of the Moldavian principality and the year expressed in Cyrillic characters. This operation might have been fulfilled concomitantly. But it would have reached much the same ending if the two new elements would have been added on an already completed *megillah*. In our opinion this was done at the same place and by the same hands, since both the coat of arms and the date are colored with the same nuances as the entire illumination. This leaves no doubt about the concomitance mentioned above. These three operations, together with two new elements, could have responded to a single commission.

<sup>30</sup> See, for instance, *Purim: The Face and the Mask*, quoted as *supra*, n. 12; Jay Weinstein, *A Collectors' Guide to Judaica*. With 352 ill, 32 colour. Thames and Hudson; *The Hebrew Book. A Historical Survey*, ed. Raphael Posener, Israel Ta-Shema, Jerusalem, Keter Publishing House Ltd; *Sotheby's Important Judaica*, Dec. 18, 1986; Linda A. Altshuler, *A Descriptive and Critical Catalogue of Eleven Italian Illuminated Esther Scrolls in the Collection of Hebrew Union College – Jewish Institute of Religion*, Case Western Reserve University, 1975; Idem, *Ahasuerus in Venice. Seventeenth and Eighteenth Century Scrolls Recall the Luxuries of Another Age*, in *op. cit.*; etc.

The two Romanian elements have their provenance in *Psăltire a Svântului Proroc David. Pre limbă rumânească ... pre verșuri tocmită ... de smeritul Dosoftei Mitropolitul de Țara Moldovei* (Prophet David's Psalter ... Versified ... in Romanian ... by the Humble Dosoftei, Metropolitan of the Principality of Moldavia), printed in 7181 [1673] in the printing house of the Unieiv Monastery.

The scroll may have been brought from Italy, already engraved, hand-written, and illuminated. At the most, the whole process was presumably done in Venice. The deduction that it was not accomplished in Moldavia is supported by a detail which can be easily observed in the composition of the Moldavian coat of arms: *the absence of the third astral body, the star on the forehead of the aurochs*. This omission would not have been done by any Moldavian miniaturist. The star is not absent from any of the heraldic variants of Moldavia, as it is not absent from Dosoftei's version of coat of arms (see fig. 7, the back of the title page of the 1673 *Psalter*).

The question which persists is who might have commissioned the *megillah*? And for whom?

#### *Metropolitan Dosoftei – Rabbi Hanover*

After a step by step analysis, the two names left answering the question are the Romanian Metropolitan Dosoftei, the dominant personality of the spiritual life of the Moldavian seventeenth century – as addressee – and Nathan Hanover, the cabalist rabbi who shepherded the Jewish community of Iași for more than fifteen years, and who commissioned the *megillah* also indicating its destination.

The reasoning which pointed to these two names is the encounter on a common spiritual field. In the Bible, it corresponds to the Book of Psalms and the Book of Esther. Dosoftei confesses, on the very title page of the *Psalter*, that it took him many years of strenuous effort to do the prose translation and five years of “great endeavor” to do the versification. Bio-bibliographically speaking, his literary work began between 1645-1649, when he was around 21-26 years old. In the meantime, Dosoftei is credited with the translation from Slavonic of a 54 page volume printed at the printing house in Iași. From the booklet under discussion there is just one copy left which has no more title page. It comprises “*Paraclisul Precistii*” (The Bidding Prayer of the Holy Virgin) and two topics from the Old Testament under a common title: “*Cuvinte și jele la robia Ierusalimului, când din Ierusalim la Vavilon l-au mutat Navuhodonosor împărat și Pomenire și de năpaste ce-au năpăstuit acei doi giudecători pre Susana*” (Words and Grief at the Bondage of Jerusalem when from Jerusalem He Was Displaced by King Nebuchadnezzar and the Mentioning of the Persecution that the Two Judges Made Susan Suffer).<sup>31</sup> All these three tenets are translations from Slavonic. The last two are preceded by an introduction in verse.

<sup>31</sup> N.A. Ursu, *Debutul literar al lui Dosoftei*, in “Limba Română”, XXXVI, 1977, No. 6. The call number on the only copy extant at the Library of the Romanian Academy is CVR 48 A. The identification of this copy has known a large bibliography, beginning in 1955 with Dan Simonescu's first note in *Contribuții la Bibliografia românească veche*, in “Studii și cercetări de bibliografie”, I, 1955, pp. 247-248. Summing up also in N.A. Ursu, *op. cit.*



In 1673 Dosoftei was 49 years old. More than two decades had passed since his first publication, since his great research efforts through the holy books, since his five years devoted to the versification of the Psalms. In 1648 he became a monk, apparently at Proboța; in 1658 he was bishop of Huși; in 1659 – bishop of Roman, and in 1671 he became metropolitan of the Principality of Moldavia. The biographers and exegetes of the scholar archbishop and poet confirm he knew Slavonic, Latin, and Old Greek, as well as modern Polish, Ukrainian, Russian, and neo-Greek. There is no mention that he knew Hebrew. Still, we are tempted to believe, thanks to one indication, that in his “strenuous research efforts among the holy books” he also had to deal with Hebrew texts. It is the explanatory note attached to Psalm 118 (119), which reads as follows: “*Această catismă<sup>32</sup>-i făcută pre a, b, alef, beth, buchiile evreiești*” (This section of the Psalter is realized according **a, b, alef, beth**, the Jewish characters). In other words, the characters sequence, from **a** to **t**, read **alef** to **tau**, forms in all 22 Hebrew characters which separate the 176 verses of the longest of the 150 (151) psalms.

It is true that the Hebrew characters can also be found in the Catholic Polish, French, English, Spanish, German, etc.<sup>33</sup> versions of the Book of Psalm, but we are of the opinion that in Dosoftei’s case it implied something more. It is unlikely that the presence in Moldavia of a scholar, philologist, lexicographer, the cabalist, rabbi and preacher, such as Nathan Nata Hanover, in the same period when the Book of Psalms was translated and versified, passed unnoticed by Dosoftei. Even if we only mention Hanover’s polyglotism as the author of the Hebrew-German-Latin-Italian conversation lexicon *Safah Berurah* (1660), one can presume that the passionate Romanian verse polisher might have been tempted to consult it.

We do not minimize the fact that in 1662, when Hanover’s prayer book *Sha’arei Ziyyon* (The Gates of Zion) was printed, it was mentioned, on its title page, that the author was “the great scholar, the learned cabalist, our teacher, Rabbi Nathan Nat’a, [...] head of the Rabbinic Court and of the Talmudic Academy in *Wallachia* [italics added] presided on his banner in the holy community of *Iași* ...” [italics added].

It is equally important to point out the existence of two of his unpublished works.<sup>34</sup> The first, entitled *Yefe Nof*, is a commentary on the Psalm from a cabalistic point of view. The second, *Tokef Yayin*, is a cabalistic interpretation of Purim (A.J. Mesch, p. 21). Hence, two topics which could have occurred frequently in the

<sup>32</sup> *Catisma* is a part or section of the Psalter.

<sup>33</sup> The 176 verses of this psalm are divided into 22 groups of eight verses each which start with the same letter, and the whole being arranged in Hebrew alphabetical order: **alep, beth, gimel, daleth, he, vau, zain, chath, teth, jod, caph, lamed, mem, nun, samech, ain, pe, tzaddi, koph, resh, schin, tau**. (The Holy Bible, Authorized (King James) Version, The Gideons, 1957, Psalm 118)

<sup>34</sup> Abraham J. Mesch, *The Life and Work of Nathan Hanover*, in Nathan Hanover, *Abyss of Despair (Yeven Metzulah). The Famous 17<sup>th</sup> Century Chronicle Depicting Jewish Life in Russia and Poland during the Chmielnicki Massacres of 1648-1649. Translated from the Hebrew by Abraham J. Mesch. With a New Foreword by William B. Helmreich*, new edition, New Brunswick (USA) and London (UK), 1983, p. 21 (Judaica Series).

discussions of the two exegete scholars. For if the interest of the Romanian hierarch in translating the Psalter could have been expressed in years of work, he was also interested in the Purim matter. This is testified by one of his unpublished manuscripts.

We gave priority to the reference to the two biblical books (the Book of Esther and the Book of Psalms) because it is through them that we come closer to the atmosphere which, we guess, facilitated and created the background to the encounter between the two thinkers and spiritual shepherds – a Christian Orthodox and a Jew.

It would not have been surprising that Rabbi Hanover and Metropolitan Dosoftei discussed in Polish, Ukrainian, or Russian, languages familiar to both of them.

Given the persistent reference in *Yeven Mezulah* to the story of the Book of Esther in comparison with the sufferings of the Jews from Volhinia (Kingdom of Poland) caused by the “oppressor Chmiel[nicki]” (as a counterpart to Haman), it is presumable that Nathan Hanover had with him a copy of the Illuminated *Megillath Esther*, brought from Italy, most likely from Venice.

The references to the Book of Psalms in Hanover’s *Yeven Mezulah* are not scarce at all, beginning with the title of the chronicle itself – *Yeven Mezulah* – inspired by the first verses from Psalm 69 (68).<sup>35</sup>

But who was, actually, Rabbi Nathan Nata Hanover? What circumstances in his life made him leave Italy, come to Iași in Moldavia, and sojourn here for more than fifteen years, between 1657 and 1673?

Relatively little has been written about Nathan Hanover’s coming and staying in Moldavia. The item in *Encyclopaedia Judaica* (1973), for instance, has not gone further than what can be gathered from I. Israelson’s article, published post mortem.<sup>36</sup> In the article by David Kaufmann,<sup>37</sup> besides the data concerning the martyrdom of Hanover’s death, there is considerable incongruence. In the Hebrew-Romanian historiography, the historian M.A. Halevy’s<sup>38</sup> appreciations and additions (1931) did not enter the general bibliographic network. The sense of the aforementioned question can be grasped from the special studies on *Yeven Metzulah* and its author, signed by Abraham Mesh (1983) and Jean-Pierre Osier (1991), already quoted. But especially from the references by Gerschom Scholem in his impressive monograph on *Sabbatai Ševi: The Mystical Messiah 1626-1676*.<sup>39</sup> The

<sup>35</sup> *Yeven Mezulah* in English corresponds to “deep mire” or “miry pit;” with “bourbier profond” in French; and with “noroiul adâncului” in Romanian (in Dosoftei’s version, “gloduri cu pâcle adânce”). For the English title see *supra*, footnote 34. The French edition reads as follows: Nathan Nata Hannover, *Le Fond de l’abîme. Les Juifs dans la tourmente des guerres cosaco-polonaises 1648-1649*, Présentation, traduction de l’hébreu et notes par Jean-Pierre Osier, selon la publication numérotée du Centre d’études Don Isaac Abravanel, U.I.S.F. Paris, Les éditions du Cerf, 1991.

<sup>36</sup> I. Israelson, *Nathan Hanover, Sein Leben und seine litterarische Tätigkeit*, in “YIVO Historische Schriften”, I, 1929.

<sup>37</sup> *Die Verheerung von Ungarisch Brod durch der Kuruzzenüberfall vom 14. Juli 1683*, in “Monatsschrift für Geschichte und Wissenschaft des Judenthums”, N.F., I. Jahrgang, Breslau, 1893, pp. 270-282, 319-331.

<sup>38</sup> Dr. M.A. Halevy, *Comunitățile evreilor din Iași și București*, vol. I *Până la 1821*, Bucharest, Institutul de istorie evreo-română, 1931.

<sup>39</sup> *Op. cit.*, Bollingen Series XCIII, Princeton Univ. Press, 1973, XXVII, 1000 pp.

piece of information that Hanover's coming to Moldavia corresponds to plans for organizing the institutions of the Moldavian Jewish community, shaped on the model of the Polish system, is undoubtedly confirmed. This organization was initiated, in the sixth decade of the seventeenth century, by the Jewish refugees from Poland and Ukraine, consequence of the persecutions developed during 1648/1649.

The circumstances under which those Jews arrived in Moldavia are described by Nathan Hanover in *Yeven Mezulah*, as it runs: "In those days the oppressor, Chmiel, together with all his army, attacked the provinces of *Wallachia* [italics added]<sup>40</sup> and destroyed them because they sheltered many nobles and Jews and because the Wallachians acquired from the Tartars by force hundreds of captives and gave them their freedom. Upon their return from the provinces of *Wallachia* they [the Tartars] brought with them a vast amount of booty and sold much of it to the Jews. But no Jew suffered injury this time because there was peace with the Jews."<sup>41</sup>

The author's odyssey was even more dramatic. He left his native place and started wandering and preaching on his way towards the West throughout the German lands and Holland. "The 1648 catastrophe, the troubles and the massacres which continued until 1655," states Gershom Scholem, "fell like a stunning blow on the Polish Jews. It was one of the tragic irony of history that it was just in 1648, the year of catastrophe, that was the focus of the most enthusiastic hopes of redemption," (p. 88). "It was also one of the triggering factors of the Sabbatian messianism," again Scholem's statement (p. 1).

This meaning suggested by one of the most recent interpretations of *Yeven Mezulah* by Jean Pierre Osier, the commentator and translator of the text from Hebrew: "On comprend mieux à présent pourquoi il serait naïf de prendre le texte d'Hanover pour une simple chronique" (One can better understand now why it would be naïve to consider Hanover's text as a simple chronicle).<sup>42</sup>

The bio-chronology reconstituted by A.J. Mesh (*op.cit.*, p. 17) records Nathan Hanover's presence in 1652 in Venice, where he also published his chronicle. The following year (1653) Hanover is attested as rabbi in Leghorn, after which he returned to Venice. This time, he spent two years there in the Yeshiva of the brothers Abraham and Daniel Mugnon. After two years, 1654-1655, Nathan "went to Wallachia" (to be read Moldavia). For A.J. Mesh the reason for which

<sup>40</sup> The denomination "Wallachia" for Moldavia is used in Western Europe as well, at the time. Jean Blaeu, printer and geographer from Amsterdam, in his *Géographic Blaviane* (vol. 2, 1663), gives the following definition: "La Moldavie qui reçoit ce nom du fleuve Moldaw qui l'arrose, est aussi nommée grande Valachie, de même que l'autre la Petite, & par les Turcs *Carabogdanie* ... Ce pays, avec la *Bessarabie*, l'une de ses parties ..." (*op. cit.*, p. 11).

<sup>41</sup> Nathan Hanover, *Abyss of Despair*, p. 105; see also Nathan Nata Hannover, *Le Fond de l'abîme*, 1991, p. 114. In the 1855 edition, *Quatre années de guerre des Polonais contre les Russes et Tartares (1648-1652): Persécutions des Israélites de la Pologne*. Traduit de l'hébreu Iavan Messoula par Daniel Lévy ... Tlemcen, Imprimerie des Ageux, 1855, p. 57, the same passage runs as follows: "Hamil en Moldavie. Les Moldaves ayant donné asile à quelques Polonais et israélites, et arraché aux mains des Tartares quelques-uns de leurs prisonniers pour les rendre à la liberté, Hamil envahit leur pays avec ses Cosaques, portant partout le pillage et la mort; puis ils revint chargé de dépouille, mais ils ne fit aucun mal aux israélites de la Moldavie, avec lesquels il était alors en bonne intelligence."

<sup>42</sup> Jean Pierre Osier, *Présentation*, in Nathan Nata Hannover, *Le Fond de l'abîme*, p. 34.

Nathan left Venice appear not to be known. For a historian familiar with the local circumstances in Poland and Moldavia at that time, they are perfectly explainable.

The Jewish author's minute emphasis on each and every prophetic vision, confirmed by the little bio-informative knowledge at our disposal, provides new elements associated with another bio-spiritual aspect of his personality: his strong belief in a forthcoming Jewish Messiah. This is noticed in the following verses at the end of the chronicle of the tragic years 1648-1650:

“The Lord should hearken to our cries and gather our dispersed from the four corners of the earth, and send us our righteous Messiah, speedily in our day. Amen. Selah.”<sup>43</sup> That is why one can easily deduce that his *Safah Berurah*, as well as the book of cabalistic prayers *Sha'arei Ziyon*, was drafted in Moldavia.<sup>44</sup>

In 1657 the building of the brick synagogue of Ashkenazi rite also began in Iași, inspired by the classical rules of religious art in Poland. M.A. Halevy is of the opinion that “the well-known Nathan Nata Hanover, himself a refugee from Ukraine, was, perhaps, the first spiritual shepherd of the Jews in Iași.”<sup>45</sup>

The confusion and the chronological discrepancies concerning Rabbi Hanover's life and activity are to be noted regarding the year when he left Iași for Ungarisch Brod, Moravia. Namely, was it 1670-71, 1672, or, later on in 1673? The 1670-71 version came out from the erroneous interpretation of the passage on the title page of *Sha'arei Ziyon*, first edition, 1661-62, read as being something new in the second edition, dated 1671-72, Amsterdam. Here is the passage: “And the rabbi-author [Nathan Hanover] sent his brother, the wise Rabbi Mordecai Gompricht, son of the martyr Rabbi Moshe, mentioned above ...” This is the passage published identically in both editions. We quoted from the first one!

The date “around 1671” was consequently taken by David Kaufmann for the year of Hanover's retreat as “an ascetic, maybe even at Ungarisch Brod,” considering that this was the fact that made him charge his brother Mordecai with the supervision of the printing.<sup>46</sup> Halevy took over as such this interpretation as well (*op. cit.*, p. 37). Ipso facto, Hanover's presence and death at Focșani was considered apocryphal (*Ibid*, n. 2).

If for the date of 1672 as the moment when Hanover left Moldavia (*Wallachia*, as it was named by him and other contemporaries, as it was considered by Stephen the Great himself<sup>47</sup>) I do not know any documentary evidence, or I did not find any (!), I found, instead, *Megillah Iași 1673*, which is not a simple bearer of a date, but much more, a testimony: *the eulogy of a spiritual understanding*.

We wonder if it would not be correct to consider Rabbi Mordecai Gompricht as the very intercessor who contributed in obtaining the *megillah* offered to the versifier of the *Psalter*, a biblical text common to both Jewish and Christian faiths alike.

<sup>43</sup> Nathan Hanover, *Abyss of Despair*, p. 121.

<sup>44</sup> We take advantage to present here an unremarked yet bibliographical item: the book of prayers *Sha'arei Ziyon*, published in dozens of editions in time, was printed in Iași too, in 1842 (Gregorian calendar), 1843 (according to the Hebrew calendar system). Out the back of the title page, one reads – in Romanian, with Hebrew characters –: “Printed in the city of Ieși, at Albina Institute, 1842, unde the rule of Mihail Grigore Sturza, Prince of Moldavia, in the ninth year of His Majesty's rule,” (fig. 13). We owe the reading and the translation to Mr. Rabbi E. Glanz, Bucharest.

<sup>45</sup> Halevy, *op. cit.*, pp. 36-37.

<sup>46</sup> *Op. cit.*, *supra*, n. 38.

<sup>47</sup> Prince of Moldavia, 1457-1504.