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Yeshiva University Museum

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SPANIER ARBEIT ATAROT (Collars for a Prayer Shawl)
in the Collection of Yeshiva University Museum
Bonni-Dara Michaels, Curator and Museum Registrar
Yeshiva University Museum

Spanier Arbeit

A tallit is a rectangular piece of fabric with fringes (*tzizit*) at the four corners. Until fairly recently, it was worn as a prayer shawl exclusively by observant Jewish males over the age of thirteen. In Ashkenazic lands, primarily Germany and Poland, a limited range of materials was used to make a tallit. It was made of wool or silk, and was white or off-white with a black stripe. The center of one long side of the tallit was often distinguished by some form of decoration. This decorated area would be worn at the neck, functioning as a neck band. The decorative band was called the *atarah* (pl. *atarot*)¹ meaning crown or diadem. Its decoration usually consisted of a panel of embroidery, sometimes incorporating metal thread. The subject of this paper is one variant of decoration for the *atarah* which incorporated metal threads and was known as *spanier arbeit*. It is characterized by a lavish use of metal strips, usually silver or silver coated, sometimes gilded, wrapped over or wound around a cotton or linen core in dense schematized floral or geometric patterns.

Arbeit means work. Combined with the Yiddish term *spanier*,² the term *spanier arbeit* has been translated as both "spun work," derived from the Yiddish word *spinnen*, and as "Spanish work," work of a type produced in Spain. The latter interpretation implied that the craft of lace making incorporating silver and gold threads practiced by Jews in fifteenth century Spain³ was the direct ancestor of *spanier arbeit*. While Jews of Mallorca, Barcelona and Toledo produced gold and silver lace in twelfth and fifteenth centuries,⁴ we have no evidence at this time to connect them to the Eastern European nineteenth century Jewish producers of *spanier arbeit*. Furthermore, the essential similarity of *spanier arbeit* to contemporary Russian⁵ and Eastern European passementerie and bobbin lace suggests that one need not look to far countries or distant periods for its origins.

Spanier arbeit was created on a table which held a drum rotating drum and a wooden framework from which hung four bobbins. The bobbins were threaded with cotton or linen, which was woven to produce a cord. Metal thread on shuttles was woven across the cotton or linen. The resulting cord was coiled, following a paper pattern resting on the drum, and secured to itself with a crochet needle.⁶ A surviving example of a machine used to produce *spanier arbeit*, exhibited in the Lvov Municipal Museum of Artistic Crafts in 1933 at an exhibition of Jewish Artistic Crafts, is now in the collection of the Museum of Ethnography and Crafts, Lvov, Ukraine.⁷

It is believed that this craft of *spanier arbeit* production originated in Poland and Galicia around the eighteenth century. A few articles written about it appeared in the 1930s,⁸ motivated by contemporary interest in ethnography and national culture in general, and the documentation and preservation of Jewish material culture in particular. By that time, *spanier arbeit* was only produced in the small town of Sasow, a town near

Brody on the border between Galicia and the Ukraine, part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire at the time. It is interesting to note that Mark Wischnitzer did not mention this craft in his publication on Jewish Crafts.⁹

Although *spanier-arbeit* work was said to have been produced in other towns, such as Berdichev, there is no extant evidence of this, and it is possible that Sasow was the home of the craft.¹⁰ A man named Mordekhai Leib Margulies is credited with establishing the craft in Sasow when he arrived in 1830. Originally a citizen of Berdichev in the Ukraine, he fled across the border to avoid conscription in the army of the Czar. According to tradition, Margulies had with him several spools of silver thread, and began a workshop to create *atarot*. Margulies initially obtained his metal thread in Russia, later purchasing it from Weisenburg, Germany, and Vienna and Pressburg, Austria. His sources apparently remained his trade secret. The workshop prospered, receiving orders from outside Poland, as far away as the U.S.. Margulies employed one hundred eighty workers, *spanier-maklers* (spanier weavers) and apprentices. Initially, the craftsmen were initially all male, though later women and girls were employed as well. Patterns were drawn either by the person who would actually create the piece, or by another individual. Both patterns and the pieces themselves were created by people in a workshop or by people such as school teachers who did this in their spare time. The workers were apparently not very well paid, and workers went on strike for higher pay in 1903 and 1911. The industry had declined by the 1930s, perhaps due to increasing production costs and changing styles, both in terms of the use of *spanier arbeit* as decoration, and in terms of the accessories such as the *plastron* which it was also used to decorate, and which appears to have gone out of style.

Although Jews commonly adapted contemporary forms of clothing and decoration, I have been unable to find a close parallel for the use of densely decorated silver neckbands on men's garments outside the Jewish population during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, or the period directly before.¹¹ During this period, the craft of *spanier arbeit atarah* production appears to have been a Jewish craft, producing items for exclusively Jewish use, and it seems safe to assign any similar piece of unknown provenance to both a Jewish maker and a Jewish patron.

The period between 1860 and 1890 was the heyday of the production of *spanier arbeit atarat*. Many contemporary paintings and photographs show individuals wearing articles of clothing decorated with *spanier arbeit*, demonstrating pride of ownership, a degree of affluence and, in images of older men, perhaps a certain degree of nostalgia. Additional items were sometimes decorated with *spanier arbeit*, although these are outside the scope of this present study. Some men owned a *kippa* (the ceremonial head covering worn by observant Jewish males) decorated with *spanier arbeit*, or a *kittel* (a white robe worn by adult males on Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur and Passover, often ultimately used as a burial shroud) decorated with *spanier arbeit* at the collar and cuffs. A woman might own a *brusstukh* (a *plastron*) or a cap decorated with *spanier arbeit*.

The decoration of an *atarah* usually consists of a border, called *kasten* (case or box) and an inner area known as the mirror, called *spiegel*.¹² A popular border pattern was known as *liske[s]*, a pattern of small circles resembling fish scales. The mirror was commonly densely decorated, and had clearly-defined terminal motifs. Different patterns used in the *spiegel* were popular among specific groups of Jews, for example, Zionists

often opted for an *atarah* decorated with a Star of David motif. Various other groups also appear to have worn *atarot* decorated with patterns of specific social or ideological significance. Although early discussions by ethnographers of the patterns used to decorate *atarot* refer to them as eye or heart patterns, or suggest that certain patterns were popular in particular areas, such as Moldauer (from Moldavia), the ethnographer did not illustrate the patterns, and we cannot assign a name to many of the patterns which survive today.

An observant Jew will not wear garments combining wool and linen so as not to contravene the Biblical proscription.¹³ Since the core threads of the *spanier arbeit* could be of linen, Juhasz¹⁴ cites Rabbinic opinion stating that those who wished to avoid the proscribed combination wore *atarot* with cast metal plaques in the form of scrolls¹⁵ or shells¹⁶ joined by rings. The relative cost of an *atarah* composed of *spanier arbeit* and one composed of silver plaques is not recorded, so we cannot determine whether the choice between *spanier arbeit* and plaques may on occasion have been guided by economic factors, such as relative cost, as well as unwillingness to wear proscribed combinations.

***Spanier Arbeit Atarot* in the collection of Yeshiva University Museum**

The Yeshiva University Museum collection includes seven examples of *spanier arbeit atarot*, six of which were removed from the tallit before entering this collection, and one additional example which is still attached to a tallit. According to family tradition, the tallit, 92.17, came from Sasow, Poland. It was brought to America ca. 1915-18 and given to the donor's grandfather. The tallit measures 65 x 54 inches. The decoration of the *atarah* on this tallit measures 37 ½ x 4 in. (10.3 x 96 cm.). It consists of 372 small loops (arranged in 6 horizontal and 62 vertical rows) which resemble fish scales. With the exception of the first vertical row on each end, the silver lamella of the fish scales alternates between plain and embossed lamella.¹⁷ A tallit bag associated with this tallit is dated 1914. While family tradition dates the tallit to the mid 19th century, and denies any association between the date of the tallit and the date on the tallit bag, we must consider the possibility that this tallit and its *spanier arbeit atarah* were made in the early twentieth century, perhaps as late as 1914 or 1918. [Juhasz mentions that one Hassidic group favored a fish scale design for their *atarot* for symbolic reasons,¹⁸ but does not specify whether the entire *atarah* would be decorated solely with this motif, as in the *atarah* on this tallit.] The loops are loose, less well-formed than on several of the other *atarot*, but whether this is due to the technique of the craftsman who produced it, or to degeneration of the craft by the early twentieth century is unclear.

A loose *atarah* in YUM's collection is decorated with a fish scale border and a pattern of concentric circles. Number 86.112, it measures 2 ½ x 25 5/8 in. (6.5 x 65 cm.), and is decorated with two kinds of metallic thread, lamella and filé over a white silk core. It is currently hand sewn to a blue silk ribbon border and machine stitched to a wool and cotton lining. This *atarah* is significantly smaller than the others in our collection, raising the question whether the size was governed by economic considerations, or whether the piece was produced for a youth, perhaps for his Bar Mitzvah. Since this is one of the pieces we acquired from Jewish Cultural Reconstruction, the question is

unanswerable at present.¹⁹

Jewish Cultural Reconstruction (JCR), the central organization which repatriated those Jewish items collected by the Nazis for which owners could be found. Items for which owners could not be located were distributed to museums and Jewish organizations around the world. Some bear a circular metal tag inscribed "JCR" inside a Star of David. This provenance means that the history of these pieces before the Holocaust is unknown. The *atarah* described above, and two others in Yeshiva University Museum's collection, come from this source.

One *atarah* in our collection more closely resembles contemporary lace composed with metal threads than do other examples of *spanier arbeit*. This is 83.84,²⁰ measuring 4 7/8 x 34 in. (12.5 x 86.5 cm.). It is also unusual among *spanier arbeit atarot* insofar as it incorporates open areas of mesh. While the majority of *spanier arbeit atarot* are characterized by density of pattern, this example is much less dense and more open, resembling earlier women's lace collars. This *atarah* has a border of open loops which do not resemble fish scales as closely as do tighter loops. It has six cartouches outlined with hobnail pattern lamella, filled with mesh composed of silver file. The cartouches are separated by four scrolls, the area around and between these scrolls is filled with mesh. Fan-shaped terminals are also filled with mesh. With the exception of the cartouches and mesh, all the metal threads are flat silver lamella. The differences between this piece and other *spanier arbeit* items brings to mind the question of dating, and the possibility that this example might belong to an earlier date than the more densely decorated examples.

Interestingly, Yeshiva University Museum has in its collection two *atarot* decorated with a Star of David pattern. One, 78.24a, measures 5 1/8 x 36 in. (13 x 91.5 cm.), came to Yeshiva University Museum through Jewish Cultural Reconstruction. This *atarah* is decorated with silver braid joined by stitches and oversewn with flat silver. At present, it is attached to cotton gauze, which was sewn to the back for an exhibition here in 1988. The decoration consists of a fish scale border, terminal motifs at either end of the mirror within the border, and four well-defined Stars of David oriented with the single points on the horizontal axis. Two kinds of metal lamella were used for this *atarah*: a plain, flat lamella which predominates, and a hobnail patterned lamella which was used for the triangles which form the stars. Within the stars is an oval motif. While the coils of the majority of the pattern are continuous throughout this *atarah*, those forming the stars were added separately.

The other *atarah* decorated with a Star of David motif is 78.24b,²¹ measuring 3 3/4 x 30 in. (9.5 x 76 cm.). This *atarah* was a gift from a Chaplain who acquired it in Israel in 1944 when the use of the Star of David was a popular motif on Jewish souvenirs in Palestine. He informed us that the seller represented himself as a Sephardic Jew, and claimed to have made the *atarah* for the tallit of the Chief Cantor.²² Whatever the truth of the details of this story, we are probably safe in attributing this piece to Palestine ca. 1944. This *atarah* is less densely decorated and less lavishly sewn with silver lamella than the previous example. It too has a fish scale border. The mirror is decorated with four Stars of David, each surrounding a circle with a dot inside it, alternating with three square motifs filled with four circles. These motifs are raised and reinforced with sewn windles of tow. The design is entirely oversewn with two kinds of silver lamella, one flat, the other hobnail patterned. The latter was used for the stars and the square motifs.

Like the previous example, the stars are oriented with the single points on the horizontal axis, and they were added separately.

Another *atarah* obtained from Jewish Cultural Reconstruction is 80.32, measuring 4 5/8 x 36 1/4 in. (13 x 82 cm.). It, too, has a fish scale border and a densely-decorated mirror. There are two alternating motifs in the mirror, one characterized by loops and repeated twice in full and twice only half of the form; the other formed around an arrow shape oriented along the horizontal axis and repeated three times. Half the loop motif is used at each end of the *atarah*. There are two kinds of metallic thread, silver filé and plain lamella. The embossed lamella was used for the arrows. This piece is currently sewn to a linen backing.

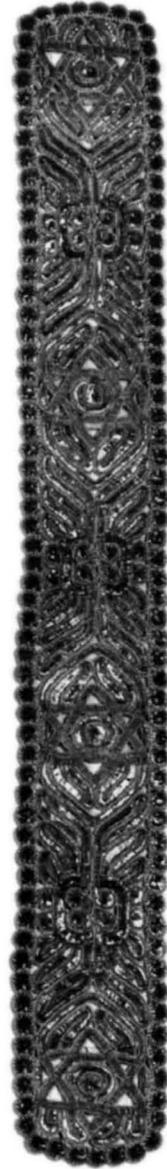
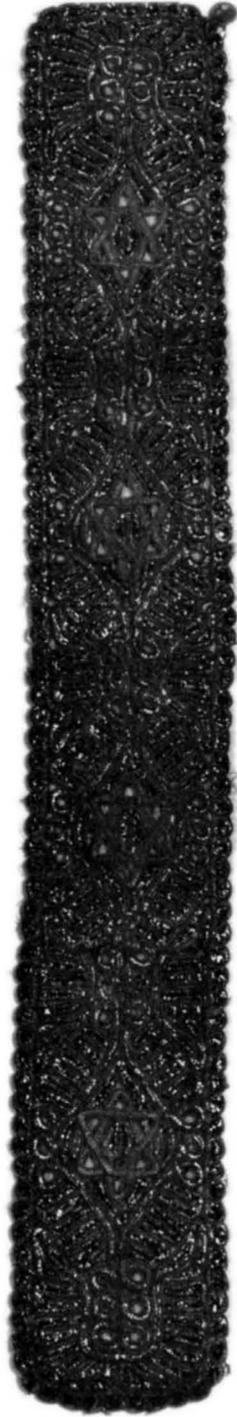
The fish scale border appears again on 80.33,²³ measuring 4 3/8 x 34 in. (11 x 86.5 cm.). Its mirror is densely decorated with looping motifs which resemble a butterfly with outstretched wings. The complete motif is repeated twice, alternating with diamond-shaped motifs. Half of the butterfly-like motif is depicted at each end of the *atarah*. It is decorated with three kinds of metallic thread: silver lamella, silver filé, and hobnailed lamella with a copper content. The latter is used to highlight a circular area at the center of the outside edge of each butterfly wing.

The *spanier arbeit atarot* in Yeshiva University Museum's collection thus provide us with a microcosmic overview of *spanier arbeit atarot* which allows us to make some generalizations and suggests areas for future study. The *atarot* are close to each other in size, which is logical given the size and shape of the tallit which they decorated. The majority, which are tentatively dated to the late nineteenth-early twentieth century, are densely decorated with passementerie of silver braid joined by stitches and densely oversewn with silver lamella, flat or embossed; some examples are additionally sewn with silver filé. The embossed lamella is exclusively used to highlight one area of the decorative pattern. One *atarah* in Yeshiva University Museum's collection (83.84), which is less densely decorated and incorporates mesh in its pattern, suggests the possibility of a progression within the development of *spanier arbeit* decoration from simple to complex patterns. The piece which we have reason to date to the 1940s (74.28b) seems to substantiate such an evolutionary model, since it is a simpler pattern and is decorated with less metal thread.

Examples of *spanier arbeit* have traditionally been dated to the late nineteenth - early twentieth century, or to the heyday of *spanier arbeit* production before the 1890s. Stories such as the one about the creation of 78.24b, and the recent discovery that craftsmen in Israel are still making *spanier arbeit* artifacts²⁴ suggest re-evaluation of this and other pieces of uncertain provenance. However, we must be careful. It is very easy to assume an evolutionary pattern that dates precise forms before the degeneration of form; which presumes that good technique predates poor and that tighter forms predate those that are less dense. Recognition of such evolutionary phases is an accepted methodology, but does not take into account differences between the work of various craftspeople. Perhaps at some future date, these *atarot* can be subjected to tests which might help assign a less arbitrary date.

ILLUSTRATIONS

Three *spanier arbeit atarot* from the collection of Yeshiva University Museum, New York: (top) 83.84 Gift of Joseph Arnon; (center) 74.28a Gift of Jewish Cultural Reconstruction; 74.28b Gift of Chaplain and Mrs. Joshua Goldberg.



ENDNOTES

1. Rubens calls it an *ata* rather than *atarah*. Alfred Rubens, *A History of Jewish Costume*, New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1967, p. 28.
2. Rubens refers to it as *spania*, *A History*, p. 28.
3. Mark Wischnitzer, *A History of Jewish Crafts and Guilds*, NY: Jonathan David, 1965, p. 102.
4. Florence Lewis May, *Hispanic Lace and Lace Making*, 1939 New York: The Hispanic Society of America, reprint 1980, pp. 290-292.
5. A helpful publication, available in French and English, is L. Yefimova and R. Belogorskaya, *Russian Embroidery and Lace*, foreword by Santina Levey, 1982, USA: Thames and Hudson, 1987.
6. The process is explained fully in Esther Juhasz, "*Shpaner Arbet*," *Treasures of Jewish Galicia: Judaica from the Museum of Ethnography and Crafts in Lvov, Ukraine*, ed. Sarah Harel Hoshen, Beth Hatefutsoth, 1996, p. 149.
7. *Ibid.*, cat. no. 159, fig. 128.
8. Among them is Piotr Kontny, *Oaza srebrnych kwiatow*, Lvov, 1932.
9. Mark Wischnitzer, *History of Jewish Crafts and Guilds*, New York: Jonathan David, 1965.
10. Good histories of the craft of *spanier arbeit* can be found in Juhasz, "*Shpaner Arbet*," and in Giza Frankel's "Little Known Handicrafts of Polish Jews in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries," *Journal of Jewish Art* 2 (1975) pp. 42-45.
11. Perhaps there is a connection to military collars
12. Frankel, "Handicrafts," p. 44.
13. The mixture of wool, whether sheep or goat, and linen is known as *sha'atnez*. Leviticus 19.19; Deuteronomy 22.11.
14. Juhasz, "*Shpaner Arbet*," p. 154 note 17 - Isaac Jacob Weiss [1902-1989], *Minhat Yitzhak*, Jerusalem, 1983, vol. 8, no. 117, after Yoseph Lewy, *Minhag Yisrael Torah*, Jerusalem, 1994, vol. 1, p. 72ff.
15. Yeshiva University Museum inv. no. 80.30.
16. Yeshiva University Museum inv. nos. 80.31 and 80.34. The use of the shell motif as decoration for an *atarah* is interesting since shellfish is not kosher. Apparently, this discrepancy did not disturb anyone.
17. I have relied on June Burns Bové and Desirée Koslin's notes regarding the materials used in these *atarot*. The notes were done for a 1996 grant proposal to upgrade storage of our ceremonial costume collection. The term Desirée Koslin used to describe the embossed texture of certain lamella in these pieces is "hobnailed," and will be used in this paper.
18. Juhasz, "*Shpaner Arbet*," p. 153.
19. A survey of extant *atarot* with secure provenance might provide more insight into this issue.

20. Gift of Joseph Arnon.
21. Gift of Chaplain and Mrs. Joshua Goldberg.
22. The seller's story cannot be accepted at face value. There is no evidence to connect Sephardic Jews with the production of *spanier arbeit*, although the craft could have been learned in Israel. Perhaps the story about the "Chief Cantor" was intended to make the *atarah* appear older and more attractive to the buyer.
23. Gift of Irving Cohen.
24. Juhasz, "*Shpaner Arbet*," p. 149.

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