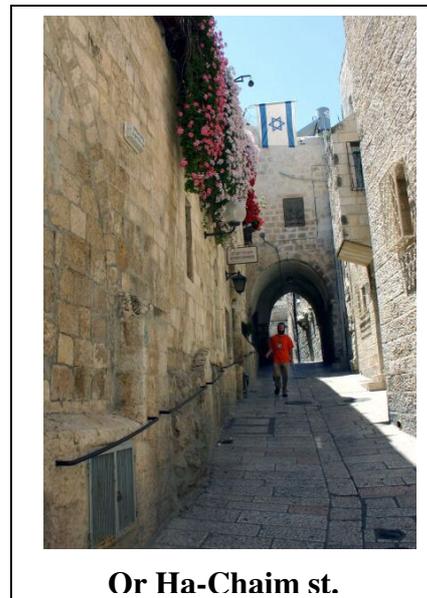


# Every object tells a tale...

By  
Galia Gavish  
Isaac Kaplan Old Yishuv Court Museum  
Jerusalem, Israel  
museumoy@zahav.net.il

Paper presented for the conference "Can Oral History Make Objects Speak?",  
Nafplion, Greece. October 18-21, 2005.

The Isaac Kaplan Old Yishuv Court Museum is located in the Jewish Quarter of the Old City of Jerusalem, "between the walls." The entryway is very narrow and dark, with a barrel-vaulted ceiling. One door leads out to the inner courtyard, the second to an additional yard, and the third leads into a typical room where one family used to live. Opposite the entranceway is a stairwell to the upper floor. As soon as one enters the building, it is possible to feel a mysterious sense of encounter with a different universe. The building apparently dates from the 15<sup>th</sup> or 16<sup>th</sup> century, and all signs point to it having been built over the ruins of a previous, more ancient structure. We regret that archaeologists have never excavated the site, nor has there been any research study of the building.



**Or Ha-Chaim st.**

## The "santour", or clay oven

Clay ovens from the Neolithic and Chalcolithic ages (around 9,000 years ago) have been discovered in archaeological excavations in Palestine, and this style is found in nearly all of the Mediterranean countries and in Ethiopia. According to Jewish tradition, the women would make several ovens of this type for their home before the Passover holiday, then use the stoves during the entire year. Before the next Passover holiday, they would break the old ovens and make new ones because it is not possible to make clay "kosher for Passover." Tears roll down the cheeks of



some elderly Jerusalem residents who were born and grew up in the Jewish Quarter when they catch sight of such ovens. Most of these elderly residents, from old Sephardic families, tell stories of how their mothers made the ovens and how they survived famine and siege. They used to use dried animal droppings to use as fuel, and went to gather edible weeds from between the ruins and in open fields, which they cooked during the famine years of World War One and during the 1948 siege of Jerusalem during Israel's War of Independence.

A Jew from the Yemenite community who lived in one of the rooms before it became a museum told the following story: "The women used to keep a tin of whitewash near the oven, as it would become grimy with soot. Every Friday, Mother would whitewash the oven and the nearby wall." Since his mother was very short, she whitewashed the wall only up to a height of about 1.50 meters. The previous resident had been slightly taller, and was able to whitewash up to about 1.60 meters. That is how several stripes of white were created on the wall at the height of each housewife.

People stopped using the clay ovens in about 1949 when they were replaced by the Primus stove and the kerosene single burner – the "ptiliya" [from *ptil*, or wick].

### **Copper table**

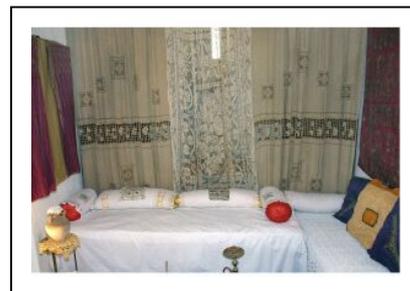
Donated to the Museum by Yohai Yehud in memory of his parents. They told him stories about his great-grandfather, who walked from Yemen to Jerusalem in 1881. Mr. Yehud himself lived in one of the rooms that is now the Museum as a child.



The table reflects a common phenomenon during the Ottoman period: nothing was ever wasted or thrown away. Instead, all tools and materials were recycled and modified for secondary use. The base of the table is made from the cover of a huge copper pot; the leg is from the remnants of a narghila stand; and the tabletop is a punched-work copper tray.

### **Linen curtain embroidered in the Assisi style**

The linen curtain, dating from the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, is a gift to the Museum honoring the memory of Yehuda Cohen Son of Rabbi Mordechai, who was a judge of the Jewish Religious Court of Benghazi, Libya, and in memory of his wife Bubah (1886-1974). Yehuda Cohen's grandfather, also named Yehuda Cohen, was an Italian citizen who was traveling by ship when they were attacked by pirates near Trieste.



The pirates sold him as a slave in Malta. Yehuda Cohen swore that if he were freed, he would make his way to Jerusalem. A Libyan Jew heard about the Jewish captive,

and bought his freedom. Yehuda Cohen fulfilled his vow and settled in Jerusalem. Three of Mr. Cohen's heirs donated the curtain in his memory.

### **Himmel bed – The “heavenly bed”**

Residents of the Old City of Jerusalem used to sleep on mattresses on the floor. Instead of cupboards, they had chests called “sanduk” or “bahoul.” After the Treaty of Paris was signed in 1856 ending the Crimean War between Turkey and the five Great Powers, changes took place in the life-style of the Old Yishuv. For the first time since coming under Ottoman rule, non-Muslims were allowed to purchase land in the Holy Land to construct churches and monasteries, schools, consulates, and renovate ancient churches that needed repair. Representatives of the Great Powers began to stream into Palestine, followed by flourishing construction and development, after being dormant for centuries. European notables refused to live under “native” conditions and sleep on the floor, and so for the first time in Jerusalem beds, cupboards, sideboards and other furnishings began to make their appearance.

At that time, Jerusalem had a population of about 11,000 residents, of which about 7,000 were Jews. At that time, the Jewish community owned six canopied beds, which the people nicknamed “Himmel bed” – the ‘heavenly bed.’ A husband who loved his wife and who could afford to do so, would rent the “Himmel bed” for childbirth, which would take place at home. Children would be sent to a neighbor, and the husband would go to synagogue to pray for the health of the new mother and baby. Amulets were hung around the bed to protect the woman in childbirth from attack by the Lilith-demon who would try to kill newborn babies and new mothers. For a boy baby, during the eight days preceding his circumcision, children 8-10 years old would come to the door of the childbirth room and recite Psalms. The new mother would sit in the bed and throw them “berelach” - candies shaped like bears - so that the prayers would be sweet.



The circumcision ceremony was modest, with the minimum quorum of ten men for prayer and blessings. Refreshments followed the ceremony – a cup of home-made wine and sliced “lekach” - honeycake. The small scale was to avoid arousing the attention of the Lilith. If the husband had enough money, he would hire the Himmel Bed for 40 days. The mother-in-law would sleep in the bed alongside the new mother, both to supervise her and keep the husband from coming to the bed before the wife's postpartum time of ‘ritual impurity’ were over.

### **Tin stoves and lanterns**

In 1868, Tuvia Solomon's father purchased a lantern in a grocery store. He lit the new, wonderful object that had piqued the curiosity of all his neighbors, who all came to see the big light. There was tremendous excitement that “one could now study at

nighttime as well.” After a while, Mr. Solomon thought to himself, “Too bad all this heat is wasted...” He went to the local tinsmith and ordered a “drei-fuss” - an iron hoop on a three-footed stand – that was slightly taller than the lantern. He placed his new apparatus on the tabletop, then placed a pot of water above it to boil. He sat there learning Talmud, when the water boiled over and shattered the lantern. Mr. Solomon did not despair, but took the pieces to the blacksmith and ordered an unbreakable tin lantern. During that same period, the American oil company, Shell, was marketing kerosene in tins. The Shell tins were then used to make both lanterns and the stoves on which they could place cooking pots.

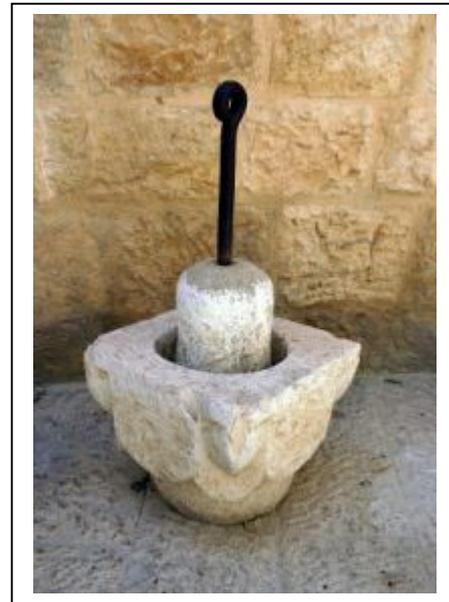


Mr. Solomon did not despair, but took the pieces to the blacksmith and ordered an unbreakable tin lantern. During that same period, the American oil company, Shell, was marketing kerosene in tins. The Shell tins were then used to make both lanterns and the stoves on which they could place cooking pots.

Jewish law prohibits kindling a fire on the Sabbath, and a Jew is not allowed to ask a non-Jew directly to re-light the fire. The story is told of how, if the fire went out in a Jewish home during the Sabbath, the man of the house would stand in the doorway, looking very downcast. His Arab neighbor would understand that someone was needed to light the fire, which he would do so without being asked directly.

### Stone pestle

Jerusalem went through a great many wars and changes of government, with each period leaving a legacy of buildings, leaders, stories and legends. During the battles, buildings were destroyed, with the fallen stones becoming the most available material at hand for new construction.



A legend about Justinian’s architect tells how he came to Jerusalem, only to find it in ruins. The Emperor had commanded him to build the largest church in the world, so he went around the area, when a miracle occurred. Nearby, he found large blocks of hewn stone, with carving around the edges of wondrous craftsmanship. He took those stones and from them built the big Nea Church.

The stones he found were from the collapsed ruins of the palace of Alexander Hyrkanos and the Second Holy Temple built by King Herod. The Nea Church was destroyed in the Muslim conquest in the seventh century.

The two capitals of stone from late Byzantine times were later used as stone pestles and wash basins.

## Kitchen cupboard

In 1917, General Allenby marched into Jerusalem and the British Mandate over Palestine began, lasting until statehood in 1948. Change in government led to a transformation of the Mediterranean-Middle Eastern way of life to a more Western European style. Those who could afford it purchased “modern” utensils and furniture.

The kitchen cupboard on display belongs to the Mandatory period, seemingly a typical early 20<sup>th</sup> century cupboard. But, if we take a closer look inside, we can observe a combination of kitchen items imported from Europe side by side with Middle Eastern cups and plates. Some of the porcelain items are cracked and have been restored with metal pins. The place settings are incomplete, unlike western sets. Wedding presents that people used to bring were one fork, one spoon, or a plate.

When I interviewed old-time residents of the Jewish Quarter, and asked them, “What did you own?” the answer was usually, “What we needed.” “And what did you need?” “What was necessary.” What was necessary? “What there was...” In other words, people “made do” with the absolute minimum necessary for day to day life.



There is another unique compartment to this cupboard: the two lower right-hand drawers are lined with lead, since they were used as the ice box. Housewives would place ice blocks in the drawers, then place the cooked food for the Sabbath on the lower shelves.

## Ha-ARI Synagogue

Oral tradition tells us that the noted Rabbi Isaac Luria, the “Great ARI,” was born in one of the rooms in 1534. He was one of the greatest Kabbalists of all times, and lived in the building until about the age of twenty, when he traveled to Alexandria to study commerce in Egypt. At the age of thirty-two, he attempted to return to Jerusalem, but was unable to do so because of riots against Jews. He settled in Safed, where mystics flocked to him and made the city a center of kabbalism, but the ARI died two years later of the plague. His birthplace in Jerusalem gradually became a synagogue in hiding.



Under Turkish Ottoman rule, it was forbidden to establish or repair synagogues and churches. The Jews arranged the room where Rabbi Isaac Luria was born to make it look like a cafe or family room, with mats on the floor and mattresses placed near the walls. One of the worshippers would be posted near the entrance to warn of any approaching Turkish policeman. When a patrolman was sighted, the men would immediately hide all of the Sacred Scriptures and begin lighting narghilas, drinking coffee, and playing backgammon.

The Crimean War ended with a treaty signed in 1856 between the five Great Powers - Russia, Austria, Prussia, France and Great Britain - and Turkey, bringing about significant changes in the lives of Jews and Christians living in the Holy Land and primarily in Jerusalem. Following the Treaty of 1856, for the first time in 500 years Christians could purchase lands in Jerusalem and build institutions such as consulates, churches, schools, hospitals, convents and monasteries.

After the foreign consulates were built and firmly established, they issued foreign passports to the Christian and Jewish communities. Holders of foreign passports were no longer subject to Ottoman law. For the first time ever, the synagogue furnishings were in the style of Sephardic Jewry, with the prayer-stand, or bimah, in the middle, surrounded by benches, and the Holy Ark facing in the direction of the Temple Mount (where the Mosque of Omar stands). The ARI Synagogue was active until 1936, and has not been renewed as a place of worship since then. The Arab pogroms against the Jews began that year, and continued until World War Two. During the rioting, the synagogue was burned. Israeli author S.Y. Agnon, Nobel laureate in literature, has described the burning of the synagogue in his novel *Tehilla*.

### **Every object...**

You have now seen several of objects from the Museum's collection. Each object in the exhibit may be valued for its beauty, artistic aspect, level of craftsmanship, rarity, and how it fits into the exhibition. When we add the tale behind the object, it takes on life and the still life becomes magical.

No museum of ethnography can create an exhibition without stories. Without the accompanying tales, the exhibition becomes a mere storeroom of meaningless objects. We collect the artifacts to reinforce the oral narratives, while they, in turn, illustrate the stories, making them magical.