

The Robe of Solomon Molcho: its history, restoration, and current presentation

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Abstract

The textile collection of the Jewish Museum in Prague includes historical clothes, rabbinical cloaks, kittles (white Jewish linen or cotton robes), talises and head coverings. The most valuable garment in the collection is the robe of the messianist Solomon Molcho (born around 1500 in Portugal and burned as a martyr in Mantua, Italy in 1532). This article is about the history, restoration and current presentation of this important monument of textile art. Together with the Solomon Molcho banner it is now a part of the permanent exhibition *Jews in the Bohemian Lands, 10th-18th centuries* in the Maisel Synagogue in Prague.

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The textile collection of the Jewish Museum in Prague

The textile collection of the Jewish Museum Prague is one of the most important collections of Ashkenazi textiles in the world. It contains over 13,000 items. The largest part of the collection is comprised of synagogue textiles, curtains, valances, and Torah mantles. There are also clothes in the collection. The oldest garment in the textile collection is the robe attributed to the messianic pretender Solomon Molcho.

Solomon Molcho (1500 – 1532)

Solomon Molcho (originally Diogo Pires) was born in Lisbon around 1500 into a Jewish family which had converted to Christianity. He had a high level of education and held the post of secretary to the High Court of Appeals of his native country. Later, he became the scribe at the court of the king Joan III in Lisbon. In 1524, under the influence of David Reubeni (c.1490–1535/1541), he returned to Judaism. On July 27, 1532, he arrived in Regensburg, where the Imperial Diet of the Holy Roman Empire was held. Solomon Molcho wanted to present a plan to Emperor Charles V for a joint Christian-Jewish army against the Ottomans. However, he was arrested, handed over to the Inquisition and burned in Mantua on December 13, 1532.

The Solomon Molcho robe

Solomon Molcho held the high position at the Portuguese royal court. Through his high social connections, he was more of a diplomat and courtier than a radical eschatological prophet and mystic. We have very little information about how Solomon Molcho dressed. Rabbi Azriel Dienna ben Solomon from Sabionetta, Italy, wrote a letter defending Solomon Molcho against Jews who criticized his secular behaviour and his non-Jewish, even aristocratic clothes. The Solomon Molcho robe is made of white linen cloth, which was later stained brown (**Fig.1**). The robe is cut like a shirt, and pleated in small folds in the back and on the chest. The sleeves are also pleated and are almost the same length as the robe itself. They are slit lengthwise, and the two sides are connected by sparsely placed pairs of buttons. The lining is made of ochre coloured cotton twill.



Fig. 1. The robe of Solomon Molcho, Jewish Museum in Prague.

Solomon Molcho's robe is embellished with embroidery made of bright yellow silk yarn, which decorates the flat cloth that lines the neckline of the robe, the small folds and the chest area (**Fig. 2**). The embroidery is quite simple; there are two types of stitch: loop stitch and back stitch. This creates a system of plastically stitched holes, which are arranged in rhombic fields. These are framed by several lines formed by the back stitch (**Fig. 3**). A similar type of embroidery is known from Morocco, among the Jewish communities that settled there after being expelled from Spain and Portugal. At the neck and on the sleeves are spherical buttons, woven from twisted silk around a wooden core (**Fig. 4**). The origin of Solomon Molcho's robe is not clear, but it could have been made in Portugal as the embroidery would suggest.



Fig. 2. Right, Fig. 3. Below left, Fig. 4. Below Right: Embroidery details from the robe of Solomon Molcho, Jewish Museum in Prague.



Solomon Molcho's robe in Prague

It is not known when and how Solomon Molcho's clothes reached Prague. The robe was probably acquired in Regensburg. Until 1943, it was kept in Prague's Pinkas Synagogue. According to the Hebraist Otto Muneles (1894–1967), the relics of Solomon Molcho could have been acquired by Jewish merchants from Prague and were perhaps bought at an estate auction when Solomon Molcho was arrested and handed over to the Inquisition. It was probably Aron Meshulam Horowitz (who built the Pinkas Synagogue in 1635) who brought the relics of the martyr Solomon Molcho to the synagogue in order to support and consolidate the leadership of the Horowitz family in the Jewish city of Prague at that time.

The first report about Solomon Molcho's clothes dates from 1628, and was left by Rabbi Yom Tov Lippmann Heller Wallerstein (1579-1654). The reason why he mentioned these relics was to resolve the halachic question of the colour of the small tallit (a white poncho-like garment tied around the waist, with four fringes, two at the bottom of each side). A small tallit is always white, but the Solomon Molcho tallit was egg-yolk green.

Reports from 1666 and 1689 state that the robe was shown once a year, on the holiday of Simchat Torah. Simchat Tora is a Jewish holiday that celebrates and marks the conclusion of the annual cycle of Torah readings, and the beginning of a new cycle. According to a 1666 report, the robe was placed on the table on which the Torah was read. Men, women, and children had access to the robe, although women otherwise sat upstairs. During the rest of the year, the vestment was stored in the wall niche next to the aron ha-Kodesh (**Fig. 5**).



Fig. 5. Prague, Pinkas synagogue. Aron ha-Kodesh and the niche reopened during the reconstruction of the synagogue in the 1950's. A niche like this could have been the storage place of the garment of Solomon Molcho.

According to a report from 1689, the robe was hung in the Pinkas synagogue. There is no further explanation where: whether on the aron ha-Kodesh or elsewhere, most likely in the area of the bimah, which is a large, raised, reader's platform, where the Torah scroll is placed to be read.

Robe of Solomon Molcho and the Jewish Museum in Prague

The Jewish Museum in Prague was founded in 1906. In 1910 and 1912, unsuccessful attempts were made to borrow Solomon Molcho's robe. The garment was to be displayed in a closed glass display case, which would provide it with protection. The robe entered the collections of the Central Jewish Museum in 1943, during the Second World War. Between 1944 and 1945, the robe was part of an exhibition in the Ceremonial Hall of the Chevra Kadish funeral brotherhood about the Prague Jewish ghetto (**Fig. 6**); the garment was displayed there until 1956. After the war, the exhibition was changed to remove any Nazi ideological references. Both during and after the war, the robe was not displayed in a display case (**Fig. 7**).



Fig. 6. Left, Fig. 7, Right: The robe of Solomon Molcho and its installation in the Ceremonial Hall of the Chevra Kadish funeral brotherhood in Prague in the years 1944-45.

Conserving Solomon Molcho's robe

In 1957, Solomon Molcho's robe was officially conserved and cleaned for the first time. Unfortunately, the preservation report has not been saved. Later published reports indicate that the aim of the conservation was to restore the robe to its original white colour, which failed.

Display of Solomon Molcho's robe after the first conservation

Between 1962 and 1966, Solomon Molcho's robe was exhibited in the Prague Klausen Synagogue. Even though the garment was preserved, it was displayed on a mannequin, not in a display case, and was put in an open space near the aron ha-Kodesh. The aim of the unnatural stretching of the lower part of the garment "into the silhouette of a bell" was to show the lace surrounding its lower edge.



Fig. 8. The Robe of Solomon Molcho, the back side, before and after restoration in 1968.

Restoration of Solomon Molcho's robe

In 1968, the first professional restoration of Solomon Molcho's robe took place. It can be assumed that the condition of Solomon Molcho's robe was stable from the time it was brought to Prague until it was accepted into the collection of the Jewish Museum in Prague in 1943. The robe was exhibited only once a year. For the rest of the year, it was kept in an alcove of the Pinkas synagogue and protected from light and dust. The greatest damage to the robe was caused by its inappropriate long-term display during and after the Second

World War, until 1966. The shroud was displayed in an open space, unprotected from light, dust and from being touched by visitors. Before the restoration, the fabric of the robe was heavily soiled and fragile. In the past, the garment had been repeatedly unprofessionally repaired, sewn, and patched. The garment was stained and had been inexpertly dyed brown in an attempt to cover the stains (**Fig. 8**).

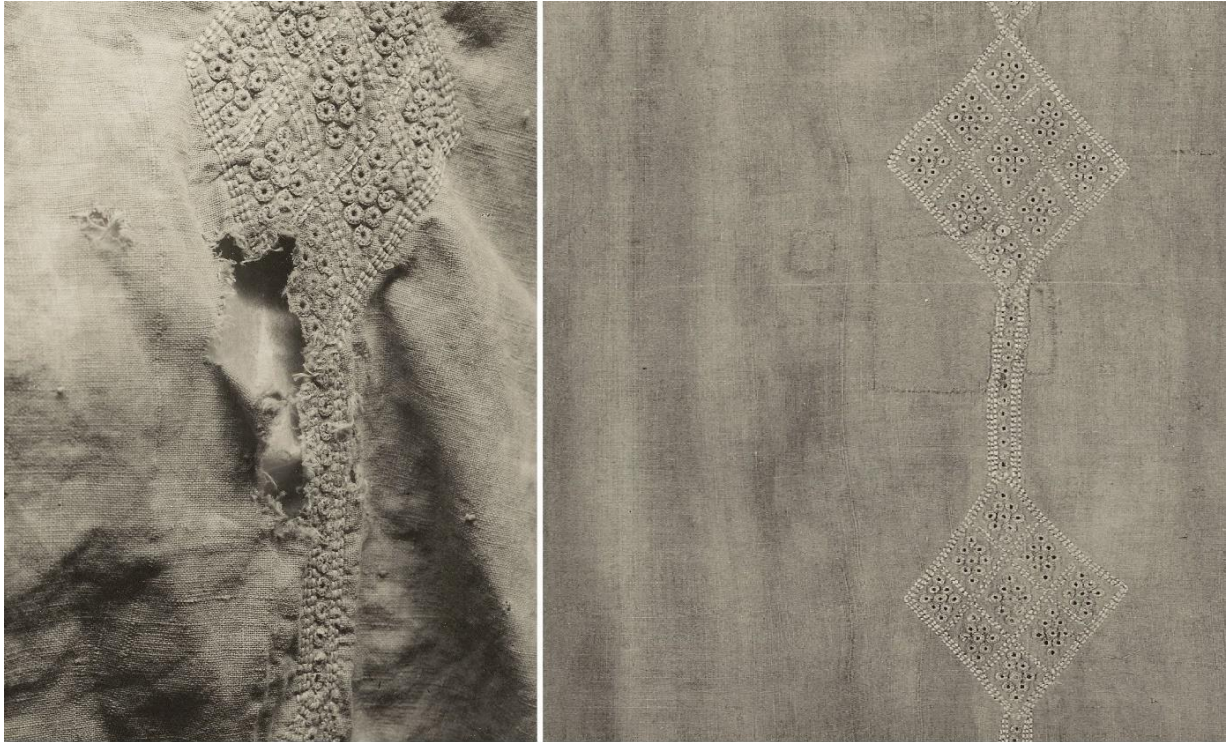


Fig. 9.. The Robe of Solomon Molcho, details of the embroidery before and after restoration in 1968.

During the restoration, the garment was repeatedly cleaned with distilled water. Old atches were removed and any holes were repaired. Missing embroidery was reconstructed, as were missing buttons (**Fig. 9**). The garment was ironed, and a lining was then added to strengthen it. After the restoration was completed, the robe was dyed to its pre-restoration colour. A fragment of unrestored fabric with embroidery was taken out of the garment and preserved for future research (**Fig. 10**).



Fig. 10. A preserved unrestored fragment of cloth from the robe of Solomon Molcho with silk embroidery.

Display of Solomon Molcho's robe after the first restoration

In 1968, the Millenium Judaicum Bohemicum exhibition was opened in Prague's High Synagogue. The new exhibition was to celebrate two jubilees from 1966: the 1000th anniversary of the Jewish community in Prague and the 700th anniversary of the Old New Synagogue. The newly restored robe was part of the exhibition and was displayed on a mannequin, in a display case. The exhibition was closed at the turn of 1976-1977, after a change in the policy of socialist Czechoslovakia towards Israel.

In 1982, the exhibition *Synagogical Textiles from Bohemian and Moravian* was opened in the same building, Prague's High Synagogue. The exhibition presented a cross-section of the collection of textiles of what was then called the State Jewish Museum and included Solomon Molcho's robe. The garment was displayed on a mannequin, in a display case protecting it from dust, and a windowless room was deliberately chosen to protect the garment from sunlight. The vestment remained here until 1994. At this time, the High Synagogue was returned to the Prague Jewish Religious Community, which now uses it for liturgical purposes. The exhibited textiles, including the garments of Solomon Molcho, were placed in the depository of the Jewish Museum in Prague.

The changes brought by November 17, 1989, and the fall of communism touched the entire Czech Republic, including the former State Jewish Museum. In 1994, the collections of the State Jewish Museum in Prague were restituted to the Federation of Jewish Communities in the Czech Republic. On October 1, 1994, the Jewish Museum in Prague was re-established. The museum immediately began renovating the synagogues it manages for new permanent exhibitions. In May 1995, the exhibition *History of the Jews in Bohemia and Moravia in the 10th-18th centuries* was opened in the Prague Maisel Synagogue. The robe was also part of this exhibition, but the high humidity of the synagogue did not allow the garment to be exposed for a long time. It was moved to the depository that year.

Contemporary display of Solomon Molcho's robes

After further reconstruction, the Maisel Synagogue was reopened in 2001. In 2002, the current modern air-conditioned display case (called a "vitrine safe") was installed to display the robe (**Fig. 11**). The current vitrine safe enables long-term display of Solomon Molcho's robe as it was designed to meet the increased demands for comprehensive protection of museum collections: safety, stability of the microclimate, adequate lighting and protection against UV and IR radiation. The walls of this space have been coated with a special paint that provides for a high degree of light absorption; this facilitates and improves viewing conditions with low intensity lighting. All heat from light sources is diverted away from the above space so as not to affect the micro-climatic conditions inside the exhibition. Thanks to the above solution, rare artefacts can now not only be well-preserved but also placed on public display. The condition of the displayed robe is regularly monitored by the museum's textile conservator. Continuous checking of the displayed vestments in the air-conditioned display case confirms its functionality and reliability.



Fig. 11. The current modern air-conditioned display case for the long-term presentation of the Robe of Solomon Molcho in Prague Maisel Synagogue.

Conclusion

Solomon Molcho's robe is the oldest garment in the textile collection of the Jewish Museum in Prague. The way it is currently presented in a stable environment of a custom-built display case provides ideal conditions with regard to relative humidity, temperature and light intensity. This preserves the memory of a man who, although he never visited Prague, was revered in Prague for his life, works, and martyrdom.

The study of Solomon Molcho's robe is not over. There are still questions: what is the origin of the robe? When and why did the robe come to Prague? How did it get here? There was a huge fire in Prague in 1689, which destroyed all the synagogues except the Old New Synagogue. At this time the Molcho robe was in the Pinkas Synagogue, which was heavily damaged. Is the robe we have still the original robe? Could it be a contemporary copy made after the fire? Was this also the case with the Mordecai Meisel banner, which was destroyed in the Maisel synagogue during the same fire? There is much to explore. We will continue to seek answers to those questions that will arise from future research.

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