



Foundation for
Jewish Heritage



המרכז לאמנות יהודית
THE CENTER FOR JEWISH ART
האוניברסיטה העברית בירושלים • THE HEBREW UNIVERSITY OF JERUSALEM



Mapping and Evaluating Synagogue Buildings in Europe



*Great Maharsha Synagogue in Ostroh, Ukraine (1620s)
Photo 2011 by Sergey Kravtsov*

**A Project of the
Foundation for Jewish Heritage**

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Center for Jewish Art, Hebrew University of Jerusalem

Introduction

During two millennia of residence in Europe, Jews built numerous synagogues, large and small, impressive and modest. The synagogue went much beyond a place of worship; indeed it was the main public space of the Jewish community and its symbolic representation. Therefore Jews and non-Jews assigned to the synagogues a special importance, as the embodiment of Jewish presence and Jewish communal and religious life. The urban situation and the exterior aspect of the synagogue reflected the position of the Jewish community in the structure of the local society, ranging from "ghettoization" to complete acculturation.

The annihilation of the majority of Jewish communities in Europe during the Holocaust was accompanied by mass destruction of synagogues, and the remaining buildings were left mostly without care. Especially pitiful was the fate of former synagogues in Eastern Europe under Communist rule: they were demolished, reconstructed for various purposes or simply abandoned. In the West, where the state of preservation was significantly better, small Jewish communities were unable to maintain numerous synagogues; and in the United Kingdom, unaffected by the Holocaust, natural migration of the Jewish population from the city to the suburbs left historical synagogues abandoned, sold or demolished.

After half a century of neglect, the two last decades witnessed **a growing public interest in synagogue architecture**. The number of publications devoted to synagogues increased manifold, many buildings were repaired and opened to the public. All in all, **Jewish built heritage is now perceived as an integral part of local cityscapes and of European culture in general**. Nonetheless, the situation with synagogues remains vague. While numerous publications are being devoted to outstanding buildings and to country-wide guides, a general comprehensive picture concerning preservation and current conditions of Jewish built heritage is missing. Moreover, demolition of many former synagogues continues in the present.

The Center for Jewish Art at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem investigates Jewish visual heritage and architecture since 1979. During these 35 years it has collected enormous research materials and architecturally documented about 1,500 synagogue buildings worldwide. **The Foundation for Jewish Heritage is commissioning the Center, using its archives and research library as the basis, to map out all extant synagogue buildings in Europe, define their architectural and artistic value and single out those at risk.**

The project

The aim of the project is to map out all extant buildings in Europe which serve or once served as synagogues, identify the most important ones in terms of their architectural, artistic and historical value, and single out those which are currently at risk of destruction and should be urgently restored.

The project's importance

The project provides for the first time a comprehensive survey of the Jewish built heritage in Europe. Arranging the existing synagogue buildings according to their architectural and historical value and noting those at risk, gives a useful instrument for formulating preservation policies at a national and pan-European level, and the ability to carefully distribute the available resources to the restoration of the most important synagogues most at risk.

By forming an all-European list of extant historical synagogues, the project will also reveal the contribution of Jewish built heritage to wider European heritage and strengthen the interconnection.

No less important, the all-European list of extant historical synagogues will contribute to the development of tourism and the inclusion of outstanding synagogues into touristic routes.

Duration of the project

The project is planned to take a year and a half.

Definitions

According to the Center for Jewish Art's preliminary research, there are about 3,700 extant historical synagogue buildings throughout Europe. By "historical synagogues" we mean buildings, or parts of buildings, purposely built or adjusted for Jewish worship before World War II. By the word "extant" we mean any currently existing building notwithstanding its condition ie this may vary from a fully preserved active synagogue to a ruin, or to a completely reconstructed building where only some authentic structural elements (e.g. walls) are preserved (Fig. 1).



*Fig. 1. New Synagogue in Genthin, Saxony-Anhalt, Germany.
Built 1926–28, arch. Walter Pomplun, reconstructed into a dwelling house in 1936–37
View from southwest, photo 1928 View from southwest, photo 1997 by P. Beuchel*

Evaluation of significance

The researchers of the Center for Jewish Art will evaluate the synagogue buildings in terms of their architectural, artistic and historical significance. The exact criteria and principles of evaluation will be formulated at the beginning of the project, using the standard definitions for architectural monuments which exist in various European countries. Inevitably this system will take into account such components as originality of architectural design and its place in the history of synagogue architecture, the urban setting, authenticity, layout, fenestration, constructions, sculptured elements, stained glass, wall paintings, ritual appliances, furniture and fixtures. The assigning of a significant grade carries the danger of “devaluation” of structures which could not be designated as monuments of “European importance.” Therefore our system will take into consideration the national, regional and local architectural context of each building and their status in the local registers of monuments.

The historical value of a synagogue derives from its age, important historical events or personalities associated with it, as well as its evolution as a place of collective memory.

At this stage we estimate that the system will include several grades of importance and a “most important” grade for outstanding monuments which are masterpieces of art and architecture. (For example, Jewish Heritage UK surveyed 147 synagogue buildings, of which only four [2.7%] were listed by the state authorities as Grade I, fourteen [9.5%] as Grade II*, and 33 [22.4%] as Grade II.)

Identification of risk

Identification of risk will be done only for buildings defined as upper grades of architectural, artistic and historical importance. The definition “at risk” will be divided into several grades taking into consideration, when possible, the current usage of a building, its present owners and its physical conditions. Since the project does not include an *in situ* inspection, the risk will be estimated according to secondary sources.

The identification of risk involves the most problematic part of the work, i.e. finding out the up-to-date state of a building. For example, the Great Maharsha Synagogue in Ostroh was documented by the Center for Jewish Art in 1994 when the building served as a warehouse, had a roof and was relatively well maintained. 17 years later, the building is abandoned, the roof was dismantled, and the risk of collapse is imminent (See Fig. 2 and the photograph on the title page).



Fig. 2. Great Maharsha Synagogue in Ostroh, Ukraine (1620s)
Photo 1994 by Ihor Fuhol

Photo 2011 by Sergey Kravtsov

An opposite case is the Great Synagogue in Dąbrowa Tarnowska in Poland. When documented by the Center for Jewish Art in 1995, the abandoned synagogue was in a dilapidating state. 18 years later the building was not only repaired by the local authorities, but its interior murals were also restored, and it serves now as a museum (Fig. 3).



Fig. 3. Great Synagogue in Dąbrowa Tarnowska, Poland (1965, 1936-37)
Photo 1995 by Boris Khaimovich

Photo 2013 by Vladimir Levin

Therefore, in order to find out the up-to-date situation of a building, thorough research will be undertaken using local contacts, the Internet, and the most recent printed publications. All information on the “at risk” state will be carefully dated, while the sources of information for the physical conditions of a building will be duly acknowledged, thus also providing an up-to-date bibliography.

Uploading the project results to the Internet

The results of the project will be available on the Internet through the Foundation for Jewish Heritage, while also being available in the Center for Jewish Art Bezalel Narkiss Index of Jewish Art.

We plan to create a distinct interface for the project, containing a short statement about its purpose and system, and interactive possibilities for search according to country, city, grade of architectural, artistic and historical importance and grade of risk. The database will also be linked to the searchable list of historical synagogues within the Index of Jewish Art providing additional information and images of the synagogues.