

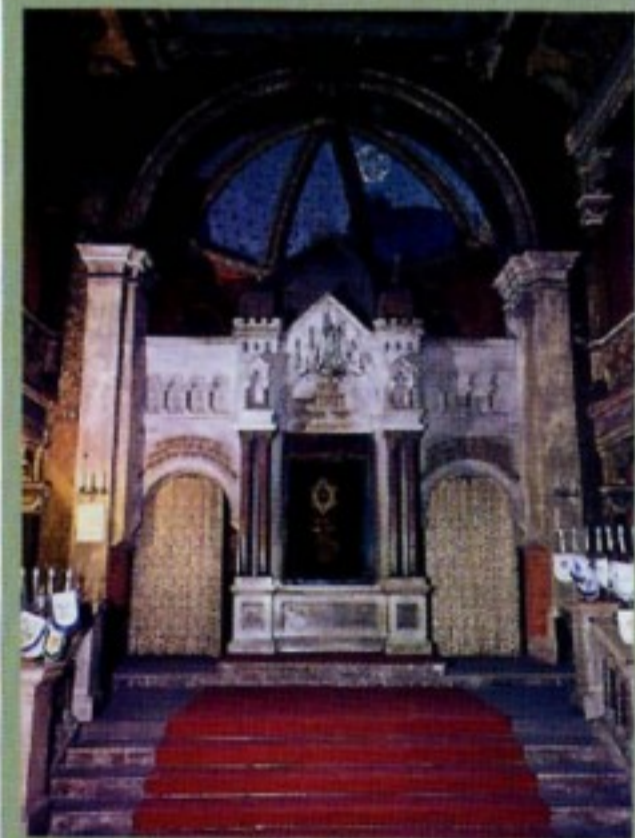
Two synagogues regain new life and tell of the old

By Mildred F. Schmertz, FAIA

Since the end of World War II, over a period of almost six decades, damaged or totally ruined buildings, districts, and older city centers in Europe and the former Soviet Union have been restored or completely rebuilt as close as possible to their pre-war state. Until recently, most preservation effort has been expended on buildings and sites of outstanding aesthetic, historic, or cultural significance, such as the recently completed rebuilding of the old city of Dresden and the restoration of the Reichstag in Berlin [RECORD, July 1999, page 103]. By contrast, restoration or conservation of little-known structures of perhaps equal architectural importance has begun in Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and Romania.

With the fall of Communism, the opening of Poland's borders to Western tourists has brought many Jews to visit the villages, towns, and cities where their forebears lived before the Holocaust. Many pass through Krakow on their way to and from the memorial on the site of the former death camp at Auschwitz-Birkenau. There is little that remains of Jewish life for these pilgrims to see and experience, however, because the Nazis destroyed Jewish neighborhoods, schools, libraries, and synagogues, and handed over Jewish homes to Germans and local collaborators. Today, contemporary Jewish culture does not flourish in the former iron-curtain countries because very few Jews care to live there. But remaining synagogues, if not empty ruins or reborn as movie theaters, warehouses, or put to other ordinary uses, are being adaptively reused as Jewish museums and libraries, while some are being

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The principal facade (top) and the ark and its setting (above) as they appeared before restoration. The prayer hall ceiling was blackened by decades of neglect. The synagogue interior and exterior were still intact and thus required renewal of surfaces and finishes rather than significant reconstruction, apart from extensive repairs to the roof.

maintained as living places of worship for existing congregations and visitors.

Soon after the lifting of Soviet control in 1990, Samuel Gruber, then founding director of the Jewish Heritage Council of the World Monuments Fund (WMF) and currently a consultant to WMF, prepared a list of 10 architecturally important Polish synagogues that were in need of restoration. Of these, he recommended that the 19th-century Tempel Synagogue in Krakow receive special attention by WMF. This synagogue is not only a magnificent building that emerged from the era of Polish Jewry's largest expansion and greatest prosperity, but it is also the only intact large urban synagogue of its type still to be found within the country. Constructed of brick and covered with stucco in 1860–62 by followers of Reform Judaism, the Tempel underwent additions and renovations in the 1890s and again in the 1920s. It survived because the Nazis used it as a stable and a warehouse. Neglected for more than 50 years and closed for a decade, the building required extensive restoration.

The small, poor, and elderly Jewish community of Krakow, owners of the synagogue, welcomed WMF's offer of help. Repairs began in 1994 and were completed in the late spring of 2000. Today the Tempel serves as a synagogue for Jewish groups visiting Krakow and for the larger religious ceremonies of the local congregation. It also functions as a concert hall because of its excellent acoustics. In addition to WMF, the Municipality of Krakow and the Citizens' Committee for the Renovation of Krakow's Monuments assisted the work, led by Ronald S. Lauder, chairman of the Jewish Heritage Program and WMF vice chairman.

As a manifestation of separate and distinct Jewish culture, the original builders of the synagogue intended that it not resemble a church but rival the best of them. Located at the entrance of Kazimierz, an old former Jewish district within Krakow, it was positioned and designed to dominate this 19th-century residential and commercial neighborhood. Similar to other examples of Reform architecture of the period, the main facade is a freely reinvented eclectic mix of Romanesque and Gothic motifs. Inside, the prayer hall shape derives from both Neoclassic and Renaissance sources, while walls, ceilings, cornices, and balustrades are patterned with painted and gilded Moorish ornamental motifs from the Alhambra. The plan is elongated and culminates in the Holy Ark at the east end. Like all Reform synagogues, it had no central reader's platform or table (bimah), although today a small bimah is located close to the ark to accommodate Orthodox worship.



Chevra Lomdei Mishnayot Synagogue, Oswiecim: This little synagogue in the Krakow region was completed in 1930; shown here (top) as it appeared in 1941 during the Nazi occupation. The brick-with-stucco facade and the tile roof have been carefully restored (middle). The synagogue adjoins and is part of the newly created Auschwitz Jewish Center (bottom).



didn't want this great room to look like new; instead it was to be a survivor of World War II, with a long history of previous use." Stubbs and the WMF team—Polish restoration architect Janusz Smolksi, preservation consultants Roman Kozlowski and Pawel Karaszkiwicz, and preservation student Mary Culver—were pleased that the original interior finishes had for the most part survived and possessed the patina of age. Given this, there were long discussions about the patina. Should it remain softly faded? Can we allow it to shine or glow in some places? "Everything we did was discreet and measured in our effort to blend old and new," Stubbs remembers.

A cultural icon is reborn in Oswiecim

In 2001, skilled Polish architects and preservationists, under the direction of New York architect Arthur Rosenblatt of RKK&G and Polish architect Ryszard Swietek, completed the conservation, restoration, and adaptive reuse of a little synagogue in Oswiecim, in the Krakow region. Today it is an industrial town of nearly 50,000 people, but only 10,000 lived there before World War II, and half were Jews. The German name for the town is Auschwitz, and the former death camp is less than two miles away. The Nazis destroyed the town's main synagogue, but left intact a small one, the Chevra Lomdei Mishnayot Synagogue, built between 1928 and 1930. Like the Tempel Synagogue, it is one of Poland's few remaining centers of lost Jewish life and is of immense historic and cultural importance simply because it still exists. And it is still there, like the Tempel, because the Nazis had a use for it, first as a place to store munitions and later as a warehouse.

The decision to bring the little building, which had most recently been used as a carpet warehouse, into the mainstream of Jewish pilgrimage to and from Auschwitz-Birkenau was made by the New York-based Auschwitz Jewish Center Foundation and a similar Polish-based group. The philanthropist Fred Schwartz, once known as "Fred the Furrier," established the foundation in 1995. After five years of lobbying, Schwartz persuaded the government of Poland to make the synagogue property the first to be returned to the Jewish Community of Poland under a 1997 national law regarding restitution of prewar Jewish communal lands. Because Auschwitz-Birkenau has no specifically Jewish



The original ark, benches, and bimah of the prayer hall were lost when the Nazis first converted the synagogue into a munitions warehouse. The new furnishings (above) were built following clues offered by old drawings and photographs. The former women's section (below) serves as an extension of the exhibition space in the Auschwitz Jewish Center. The windows connecting it to the main prayer hall have been restored.



ter, the Ronald Lauder Foundation purchased the large house next door to be remodeled as a small museum that would exhibit photographs and slide and film presentations of prewar Jewish community life, and include a room for communal gathering and an administration office.

The synagogue is a gabled building of stuccoed brick walls and a tile roof on wood trusses. While it was still a warehouse, except for two plaques concealed by rolls of carpet, the interior gave no clue that it was once a place where people came to pray. Ark and bimah were long gone. Original doors were filled in and concealed, with new doors added elsewhere, and the interior openings in the wall that divided the women's section from the main prayer hall were plastered over. The interior space had been badly diminished by replacement of the original ceiling by a lower one that dropped below the arches of the windows, sealing them off at the springline.

Because it was a secular building, the two-story house could be renovated and altered to become a museum. The synagogue itself, however, as a priceless survivor of the Holocaust, was restored to its original condition, except for the women's section, which, while carefully restored, serves as an extension of the adjoining museum.

Rosenblatt and his team renewed the stucco colors and projecting masonry patterns on the main facade and installed a new ceiling at the original height, allowing the formerly blocked-in window arches to emerge inside and out. A new ark was placed on the eastern facade, and a study of the building's foundations revealed the position, size, and shape of the original bimah that they then duplicated. Guided by old photographs and drawings of similar synagogues, the architects and preservationists assumed that the carpentry of the bimah, benches, and shelving would have been plain and practical, with a dark varnish, and so they were newly made.

Rosenblatt's conservators, Maria and Aleksander Filipowicz, like their colleagues at work on the Tempel interiors, took a similar interest in choosing the appropriate level of restoration of ornament. Careful peeling of layers of wall paint uncovered a frieze pattern under the ceiling that they were able to replicate. In the interest of conserving what was there instead of making new, they elected not to replace the pattern everywhere, but only along walls where traces were found. In discussing his work at Oswiecim, Rosenblatt often refers to the skills of Sweitek and the Filipowiczes. "They brought to this little synagogue the highest possible level of care and craft, equal in quality, if not in volume and scope," he says, "to the conservation effort made for the Tempel Synagogue in Krakow." ■