

**The Future of Synagogues in Poland:
For Whom, For What, How Many, and Other Questions**

by Eleonora Bergman

I was invited to talk during a session whose title ('The Conservation and Restoration of Synagogues and Jewish Historic Sites') implies a strictly professional approach. So I must start by saying that in case of any site to be conserved, we need detailed historic research and a survey, then appropriate conservation methods, appropriate use and maintenance. The conservation is a general issue, and Jewish heritage preservation is like any other preservation, unless we define its specific conditions, limitations, values, and goals. But this brings us to topics from the previous session: Is there a consensus among Jews about what aspects of material culture are worthy of protection so that they can be passed down to future generations? What happens when property restitution or historic recognition becomes a burden on resources and a barrier to achieving community goals? I am quoting these questions from the program, and adding to those which I put in the title of my talk.

Over fifteen years ago, together with my friend and colleague Jan Jagielski, we collected all of our knowledge about the use of synagogue buildings in Poland. Of the 242 buildings whose existence we were aware of at that time, just one-sixth were used more or less properly or with slight reservations, as houses of prayer, Judaica museums,

some other museums with Judaica sections, or libraries. The proportions changed for the worse when we put together all the information found in the following years in our 'Catalogue of Extant Synagogues and Houses of Prayer' published in 1996, in which we were able to include 320 sites, many of those newly added being *shtiblekh* or less prominent or totally remodelled buildings. Of these 320 synagogues and houses of prayer approximately half are landmarked. Now coming back to our article of 1989, we wrote there: *It is not our aim to establish a hierarchy of needs, or to suggest priorities in the area of repairing or altering the function of former synagogues.* In 1993, when talks began on the restitution law concerning Jewish communal property, our hopes were that the Jewish communities would establish a hierarchy of needs and priorities. But this has not happened.

The restitution process started with delay and great difficulties. After long discussions with the World Jewish Restitution Organization, a Foundation for the Preservation of the Jewish Heritage in Poland was established. The idea of the Foundation is fair: there are just a few Jews in Poland, and the property that still remains is a result of work of many generations of predecessors of those who are now living all over the world. Their interest in the fate of this property is legitimate. At some point, the Foundation board came to the conclusion that in order to ensure the appropriate management of property being recovered through the restitution process, the Foundation needed to establish a Historical Committee whose task is to assess the historic value of this property. These assessments are to assist the Foundation in deciding on the future disposition and/or sale of the property. The Polish part of this Historic Committee (still not functioning, but this is another problem) consists of Jan Jagielski and me, and on

request of the Foundation we have submitted the criteria for evaluation. We have certainly proposed the generally accepted criteria, with particular focus on the Jewish aspect in the case of historical, artistic and functional values. The Foundation, however, expected us to define what Jewish heritage is and what has to be preserved ‘by definition.’ We have stated clearly: *In view of the destruction of vast portions of tangible Jewish cultural property, all the extant property has the status of historical testimony; thus, its historical/documentary value takes precedence over its aesthetic or artistic value.* In other words, we reject the division into ‘heritage’ and ‘non-heritage’. Extant Jewish cultural property is by definition invested with symbolic value, as it is often the only evidence of a Jewish presence in a given locale.

Choices should be made, but on a different basis.

We have learned that once a property is sold, Polish law gives the seller no possibility to require anything from the new owner. The only body authorized to intervene is the regional conservator of monuments—if a building is landmarked. This shows the absolute need for cooperation with the authorities for anybody who is interested in saving Jewish property as historically Jewish, not necessarily as Jewish-owned. Here is the basic disagreement between the Jewish organizations in the world, and the Polish reality. It has to be stressed that the problem of saving traces of Jewish culture as part of the Polish-Jewish past (common, perhaps, very often only in terms of a landscape or townscape) seems to have met with continually greater understanding within Polish society. The result is not only publications, lessons, etc. but also protests of the general public in cases when properties are reclaimed by a Jewish community, and then sold.

From our point of view, and here I mean the Institute, the priority is not to reclaim everything and put it in 'Jewish hands', but to save traces of Jewish culture in this country. We should cooperate with the state and with various nongovernmental organizations. We have to acknowledge their interest, and devotion, and understanding, and educational efforts which we can only support.

For a long time, one of the most positive examples of synagogue building use was the case of Tykocin. Built in 1642, remodelled in the 18th century, richly decorated, destroyed partly during World War II, it was rebuilt and conserved by the state in the 1970s. From 1976, it has been a branch of the Regional Museum of Białystok. Due to the great leadership of Ewa Wroczyńska, it became a cultural centre not only for the locals but it also attracts about 30,000 tourists a year, including participants of the March of the Living. Tykocin residents, none of them Jewish, take part not only in various events commemorating the murdered local Jews, but also in *Purimshpils* performed in the adjacent former *beit midrash*. The constant care, good arrangement, suitable furniture, meticulous conservation, and well-trained staff made the synagogue an educational centre and in addition made it look ready for a service. There is no Jewish institution in Poland which would be able to maintain it in such a condition. Nevertheless, the Jewish community has claimed the building. What for?

In Ostrów Wielkopolski, one of the most important 19th century synagogues is still extant. Several years ago, the director of the local music school proposed to use the building as a concert hall. I could not even dream of any better use. But the Jewish community did not agree.

A few years ago, I was asked to consult on the project of restoring the only remaining synagogue of Oświęcim. It was devastated most probably during World War II and was later used to store carpets, until it was reclaimed six years ago by the Jewish community of Bielsko-Biała and passed to the then newly founded Auschwitz Jewish Center in New York which decided to restore it back to its original purpose. The main idea was to create a centre recalling pre-war Jewish life in this town which is associated only with a death camp. So the structure was cleaned, and examined carefully, and whatever traces of the old decoration were found were then preserved. But the building was an empty shell except for two memorial plaques on the wall, dating back to 1900 and 1928, respectively. There was no evidence of the look of the former interior. I invited the directors of the Foundation and designers of the building to our Institute for a sort of seminar, at which I presented pictures from various small Warsaw private houses of prayer and suggested which one could be a pattern for the Oświęcim shul. The decision was made shortly thereafter, and the Ark and the bimah were soon ready, and also several benches. Later on, some tables were added, and some bookshelves filled with prayer books. Last February, Tomasz Kuncewicz, director of the Center, told me that one of the visitors from the US said that the synagogue's interior looks exactly as it had before the war, and another one was surprised that it had not been destroyed. You can imagine how I felt.

Is this a good example for other cases? Yes and no. Yes, because it shows that something can be done. And no, because the case is unique: somebody (Fred Schwartz) was determined to realize his idea; he succeeded in raising enough money not only to restore the building but also to maintain it and to hire the staff, in situ and in New York.

The Center offers both education and a place for services. And there is no conflict between the Foundation and the Jewish community.

Now I will try to answer the title questions:

For whom?

First, for ourselves, if we feel that our duty is to pass it on to future generations. Then, for everybody who cares, now and later. The more buildings we save, and interpret, and put on the maps, and include in the guidebooks, and make part of life—the more we contribute to the memory of the Jewish past in more places, and the more we will make more people aware and care. I do not think that a consensus should be only among Jews about what aspects of Jewish material culture are worthy of protection. I am sure that there will never be any consensus among Jews on this subject, neither in Poland nor abroad. We should rather think: Who and what is really to decide?

For what?

Again, as evidence, as a testimony. In this case, I think also of those non-impressive, non-characteristic buildings and sites which should be provided with markers. The question is: How to make it a rule and not allow it to remain dependent on an owner's good will?

I am also referring here to synagogues' empty sites. To the Jewish communities, these are considered the easiest cases, ready for sale after being reclaimed. But shouldn't we insist on putting markers there as well? I think we should.

When I ask ‘for what’ I also have in mind the future use. I think that when the present use is appropriate, or acceptable, Jewish communities should consider *not* claiming such a building. I know this is not a popular view.

How many sites?

We know we should claim and protect all the cemeteries, also those with no gravestones. There are approximately 1100 cemeteries in Poland, and perhaps ten percent of them are cared for properly. But we know precisely how to deal with cemeteries. Their conservation does not present a methodological problem. The problem is time and money, and people. The problem is that we hardly have any, but if we had, we would know clearly what to do. In my view, there is no answer to how many synagogues or synagogue buildings can or should be saved—unless we answer the previous questions.