

Synagoga Slovaca: Documentation Project of

Slovak Synagogue Architecture (May 2004)

by Maroš Borský

Slovak Jewish heritage is one of the most endangered cultural heritages of Europe. Currently, there are almost hundred synagogues and prayer halls in the country, two historical mikvaot, over six hundred cemeteries with an unknown number of cemetery chapels. Roughly five to seven synagogues/prayer halls are still used for religious purposes.

A few synagogues have been painstakingly restored and are used for cultural purposes, though most of them met different destinies. Some were demolished during World War II, while many more were destroyed during the Communist totalitarian regime, within the framework of megalomaniac urban projects or as a result of a targeted cleansing of the last traces of former Jewish presence in many cities (e.g., Galanta, Sečovce, Michalovce, Humenné, Hlohovec, and Nové Mesto nad Váhom). Other synagogues were altered by their new owners to serve different purposes and the original character of building has often disappeared (e.g., Huncovce, Krupina, Studienka, Skalica, and Spišská Belá). Many stand unused, dilapidated, and face imminent disappearance (e.g., Šaštín-Stráže, Příbeník, Veľká Ida, Stupava, and Bytča). Empty and looted synagogues, whose communities disappeared together with their rabbis, cantors, and Torah scrolls in flames of the Holocaust, remain in many Slovak towns as the last dying witnesses to the rich cultural past of once-flourishing European Jewish communities.

Most preserved synagogue buildings in Slovakia date from the 19th century or the first decades of the 20th century, but valuable buildings include the Baroque synagogue in Svätý Jur, the Neoclassical synagogues in Huncovce, Šarišské Lúky, Šaštín-Stráže and Liptovský Mikuláš and the nine-bay synagogues preserved in Stupava and Bardejov. Several examples of the once fashionable Moorish style remain: synagogues such as that of Malacky (architect Wilhelm Stiassny), Vrbové or Prešov. Leading art nouveau

synagogue architect Leopold (Lipót) Baumhorn designed the synagogues in Nitra and Lučenec, as well as the restored synagogue in Liptovský Mikuláš. A valuable Art Nouveau synagogue also remains in Trenčín. Significant inter-war synagogues can be found in Bratislava (architect Artur Szalatnai-Slatinský), Košice (architect Lajos Kozma) and Žilina (architect Peter Behrens).

The city of Košice features a valuable grouping of Jewish monuments. Prior to the Holocaust, this eastern Slovak city was home to several different Jewish communities representing a broad spectrum of religious streams. Communal buildings of former Hassidic, Orthodox, Neolog congregations, some still with their original inventory, have been preserved until today.

State of Knowledge and Previous Research

Several surveys and documentation activities have been conducted before our project and it is important to summarize them. A prominent survey was performed by Eugen Barkány in the 1960s (*Barkány, E.-Dojč, L.: Židovské náboženské obce na Slovensku. Bratislava 1991*), when many synagogues were still standing and cemeteries were less overgrown or plundered by the locals. Although outdated, this survey remains the most authoritative and the most consulted. Several surveys from 1990s are also available: one by the US Commission for the Preservation of America's Heritage Abroad, a private survey of cemeteries by the Slovak Jewish Federation, and an unpublished survey of the National Monument Office conducted through their regional offices. The last one I consulted for our project.

In the late 1980s and 2002, Rivka and Dr. Ben-Zion Dorfman of Jerusalem travelled to Slovakia within the framework of their private project Synagogue Art Research (Dorfman, R. and B.-Z., *Synagogues without Jews: And the Communities That Built and Used Them*. Philadelphia, 2000). Also well-known are the activities of a Bratislava-based physician, Tomáš Stern. Finally, the most recent survey was conducted in summer 2003 by the ICOMOS Israel, with work done by Israeli students in three Eastern Slovak cities: Košice, Prešov, and Bardejov. Unfortunately, we are not well informed about their work, since they were unwilling to communicate with local institutions.

Our Research

I have mentioned previous activities to give them credit for their work, since our documentation project has no ambition to compete with anyone. Synagoga Slovaca was launched in summer 2001 as a joint project of three Slovak institutions: the Institute of Jewish Studies of Comenius University, the Slovak National Museum-Museum of Jewish Culture, and the Faculty of Architecture at the Slovak Technical University. It is a systematic, detailed documentation project conducted by local Slovak institutions, with the project results archived in Slovakia and thus accessible to the larger public. Additionally, in the Museum, one of the most prominent Slovak institutions researching and presenting Slovak Jewish heritage, we are determined to be instrumental in a long-term strategy of preserving this endangered heritage.

Methodology:

Our methodology has been informed by the various research projects of our colleagues, while adapting them to local conditions and our shoestring budget. Two publications have been of particular interest for me. First, Hammer Schenk's *magnum opus* on synagogue architecture in Germany, and the research into Hungarian synagogues conducted by Anikó Gazda et. al. in Hungary during the 1980s.

Understanding the nature of the Slovak material, where almost a hundred buildings have been physically preserved but minimal archival documents have been available, we had to develop a strategy of obtaining full and precise measurements and plans of these buildings. Since the project's means have been, from the beginning, very limited, we knew that it would be impossible to rely on the work of professional architects.

Therefore, we adopted a scheme used in a joint project of the Center for Jewish Art in Jerusalem and the Technical University in Braunschweig, founded on student work. Moreover, I had the privilege of being introduced in detail to this project by my tutor, Professor Aliza Cohen-Mushlin, during an internship at the Center for Jewish Art in Jerusalem. In addition, I have also visited colleagues at the Technical University in Braunschweig, Germany.

We decided to model our documentation project Synagoga Slovaca on this successful German-Israeli project and developed a fruitful cooperation with the Faculty of Architecture in Bratislava. After three years of working with students, we can conclude that it proved to be a most suitable and truly cost-effective solution. The project has two goals: documentation and education.

Documentary Part of Project Expanded in Several Stages

1. *Identification.* This step was an important prologue. I spent the summer of 2000 evaluating information available at the archive of the National Monument Office in Bratislava. I studied the results of Bárkány's survey from the 1960s and compared it with the survey conducted by the National Monument Office during the 1990s. Though this research was never published, the reports of regional branches of the NMO are preserved in the archive. Based on this archival work, I compiled a list of about one hundred and twenty synagogue objects throughout the entire territory of Slovakia.
2. While planning visits to sites, we had to *identify* current owners, users, or wardens of former synagogues. Negotiating free access has been very delicate process.
3. *Photographic documentation.* Almost a hundred synagogues and prayer halls have been systematically documented in detail: in slide and digital images by myself, while Museum photographer Viera Kamenická, an experienced documenter of architectural monuments, produced photographs for prints. To date, we have visited and photo-documented all identified former synagogues and prayer halls. This task was divided into two field trips (summers 2001 and 2002) with a team consisting of a photographer, myself, and two colleagues from abroad: Janez Premk (Ljubljana University) and Dr. Samuel D. Albert (Hebrew University of Jerusalem). In addition, buildings we did not manage to document during these major campaigns, were visited with a photographer on numerous short trips from Bratislava and Košice.
4. *Further processing of fieldwork results.* The buildings' architecture is currently analyzed and described using on-the-spot sketches and photo-documentation.

- Thousands of print pictures taken by my colleague have been scanned at the Museum for a future digitalized archive.
5. *Archival research.* Over this coming summer we will be completing archival research in Slovakia, mostly searching for original building plans and historical documents, finding concrete attribution of buildings and exact dating. This stage of project, due to the complicated conditions in post-Communist archives, is one of most difficult.
 6. *Research into historical images.* For purpose of our knowledge about heavily altered or demolished synagogues, we have been in touch with numerous regional Slovak museums, important museums abroad, and various private collectors.

An important feature of our project has been close cooperation with Professor Matúš Dulla from the Faculty of Architecture at the Slovak Technical University in Bratislava. For the faculty we developed a specialized seminar on synagogue architecture, taught as an elective, and already in its third year. Its purpose is to educate students to understand and value synagogue architecture as a part of Slovakia's multicultural heritage.

The students, generally about twenty of them, produced as their semester project measurements and documentation of a particular synagogue object, one previously photo-documented by us. Plans at a scale of 1 to 50 are archived at the Museum of Jewish Culture and will be in the future accessible to the scientific public. At the moment, a group of advanced students under guidance of Professor Dulla has been processing the plans in AUTOCAD for catalogue and publication purposes.

Educational Activities

Educational activities form another, no less significant, aspect of our project. Aside from the architecture students, a seminar on synagogue architecture had been also offered at the Department of Art History at the Comenius University in Bratislava. This has been supplemented with a special seminar on Jewish art, which was the first introduction of a Jewish heritage theme into a university curriculum in Slovakia.

Promoting Slovak Jewish heritage on an international level has been of foremost interest for us. In June 2003 we co-organized a travelling seminar under the leadership of Professors Yom-Tov Assis and Shalom Sabar of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. The seminar climaxed with a reception by the Slovak president, Mr. Rudolf Schuster, who had been briefed on the importance of preserving Jewish heritage in Slovakia. Another seminar is scheduled for the summer of 2005.

Future plans of our project

The intentions of our project can be divided into two levels of time:

- A) *Short-term level (2005, 2006).* At the moment this project is a doctoral project that should be completed by submitting a dissertation in Heidelberg in the spring of 2005. We are preparing a publication for 2005 in the form of a website on Slovak Jewish heritage (www.slovak-jewish-heritage.org), which should provide on-line accessibility to our results. Monographic publication by the Museum is foreseen for 2006.
- B) *Long-term level.* Our vision is to transform this initial documentation project into an institutionalized form of the Synagoga Slovaca, the Slovak Jewish Heritage Center, which would be a subdivision of the Museum of Jewish Culture in Bratislava. The Center would be the leading state-co-sponsored institution researching and promoting Jewish heritage in Slovakia.

The Broad scope of the Center's activities would include following areas:

1. *Archive.* The Center would serve as an archive of the Slovak Jewish heritage. Anticipating that some still-standing objects will disappear due to their dilapidated condition and insufficient funding or lack of institutional will to save them, our documentation would mean their preservation in 'virtual' form as a museum object. In the future we would like to provide on-line accessibility to some of our archive items for the purpose of education, research, and tourism.
2. *Research.* After completing synagogue research we would like to continue with documenting Jewish cemeteries, especially in the rural areas of Eastern Slovakia, which were once dominated by Hassidic Jewry. Some

valuable material, rich in decorative imagery and liturgical texts, has been preserved. An unknown number of cemetery chapels remain, most of them, however, are in a catastrophic state with even smaller chances than the synagogues of being preserved. We would like to return again to the already documented sites within a framework of regular monitoring.

3. *Education.* The Center would continue a broad scope of education on the university and secondary-school level. Specialized programs, working with elementary-school-level youth would be highly recommended, since most damaged cemeteries have been vandalized by school youth. This is indicative of Nazi or racist attitudes. Some young people simply still believe that Jewish graves contain gold and other treasures! Aside from work within the Slovak educational framework, promoting Slovak Jewish heritage on the international level would be of major importance. Training and educational seminars would raise awareness about our activities. Media work and publication are of eminent interest to us.
4. *Consulting.* Though we have no intention involving directly restoring any object, we would like to assist with restoration projects by our expertise, advising on available funding (e.g., WMF but also EU-regional development grants). Similarly, there are possible donors and private individuals who should be briefed about the current situation of Slovak Jewish heritage.
5. *Promoting.* Promoting Slovak Jewish heritage is an important task, because without an audience, all our effort misses its goal. The development of cultural tourism, planning cultural routes that integrate Jewish heritage into a mainstream canon of tourist sites, is also of importance. This process has a ripple effect, leaving its impact on local communities and towns, helping justify our need to preserve Jewish heritage on the local level by municipalities and government. Cooperation with the Slovak Agency for Tourism and tour operators would be plausible.

Conclusion

Slovakia, a tiny Central European country, has preserved until today numerous monuments of its rich Jewish past. Many will disappear with time, but others have a chance to be preserved, if a genuine preservation program, based on cooperation between Slovak and foreign institutions, could be adopted.

Joining the European Union will certainly have strong effects on Slovak society and economy, and it would be hard to predict the extent to which this will influence the future of Slovak Jewish heritage. As new members, some underdeveloped regions would be eligible for EU funds, so it is not impossible that they could benefit by restoring synagogues for cultural purposes.

With its Synagoga Slovaca project, the Museum of Jewish Culture is dedicated to being instrumental in setting a long-term strategy of preservation for Slovak Jewish heritage. A long-term strategy based on a realistic vision of a decade or two should be formulated. This second (and last!) chance will be granted to synagogues and Jewish monuments to be preserved for future generations.



The project is possible thanks to help of friends and dedicated individuals. We are indebted for financial support of following sponsors:

- Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst (Bonn)
- Memorial Foundation for Jewish Culture (New York)
- Ministry of Culture of the Slovak Republic (Bratislava)
- VEGA – Scientific Grants Agency of the Ministry of Education of the SR (Bratislava)
- Jan Hus Educational Foundation (Brno)
- Central Union of Jewish Religious Communities in Slovakia (Bratislava)
- EZRA Foundation (Bratislava)
- Menorah – Jewish Heritage Foundation (Bratislava)
- SATUR Travel Agency (Bratislava)
- ENJOY SLOVAKIA Travel Agency (Pezinok)
- Helena Borská (Bratislava)
- Peter and Oldřiška Borský (Bratislava)