

Revisiting History

The Lost Wooden Synagogues of Poland

by Terry Y. Allen

"It should be so, that the Synagogue in Zabłudow should take the most important place among the Jewish ancient treasures of Poland."

— MICHAEL LIFSHITZ, 1925

"From all the legends, perhaps the most famous one is that during all the ages many enemies tried to destroy the synagogue without success. One day there was a big fire in the area. It was very dangerous, but thousands of birds covered the roof and saved the synagogue."

— MINA BA-ON GELLERSTEIN, 2004





In June 1941, even flocks of birds could not protect the Zabłudow Synagogue, which had stood for three centuries in a small village in eastern Poland. German Wehrmacht troops doused the fabled wooden synagogue with gasoline and burned it to the ground. During the war years, the Nazis murdered three million Polish Jews, including those few who huddled in their native Zabłudow. The Nazis also systematically destroyed all the remaining historic wooden synagogues in Poland.

And so the traveling exhibition, “Zabłudow Synagogue Project,” hosted by the Book Center this year, is an astounding achievement of historical reconstruction. The exhibition’s chief feature is a meticulously constructed model of the old synagogue. Measuring four feet by four feet, the wooden-shingled miniature is based on archival drawings and photographs of the synagogue, which was built in about 1638 of larch wood. No nails were used in the original building’s construction. The model features a timber-framed roof, two completed sides with windows and dormers, indoor and outdoor balconies, stairs, and doors. Two walls are left unfinished to reveal the structural

details. Accompanying the model is a colorful replica of the painted interior cupola of the Gwozdziec Synagogue, built in 1731, at about the time the Zabłudow Synagogue was renovated.

A section of the exhibit at the Yiddish Book Center re-creates the Gwozdziec Synagogue’s cupola and wall. Photograph by Lee Hutt.

The model and the exhibition were developed by Rick and Laura Brown, cofounders of the nonprofit educational organization Handshouse Studio. Their organization uses historical objects as educational subjects – in their own words, they “revisit history by rebuilding objects through collaborative, hands-on projects.” The Browns are longtime faculty members in the Massachusetts College of Art in Boston. Two years ago they attended a conference in Bialystok, Poland, on “Annihilated Heritage,” which focused on the preservation of the historic wood building tradition. While at this conference the Browns first imagined a multipart curriculum for their students based on re-creating the lost Zabłudow Synagogue.

“The history of objects is usually loaded with meaning,” said Rick Brown, who has formal training in both sculpture and architecture. “Laura and I always look for rich historical and cultural possibilities in choosing a project.”

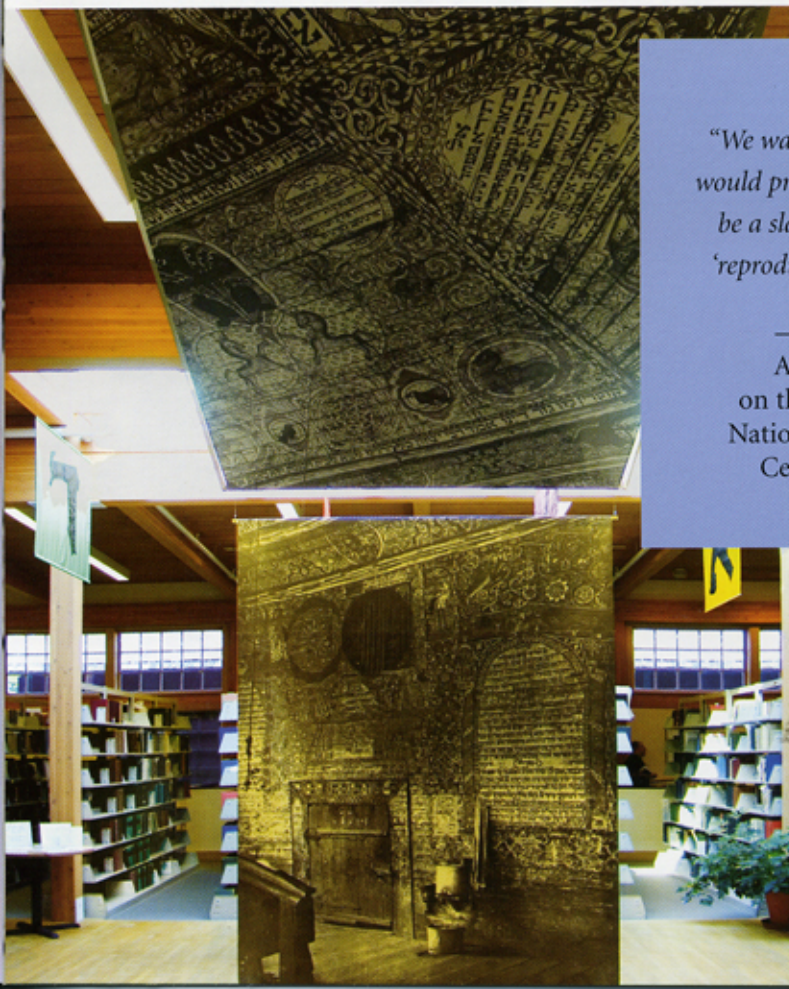
As the Browns learned, the Zabłudow Synagogue was located in a broad area of eastern Poland and what is now Ukraine, once known as the breadbasket of Europe. The area was home to numerous 17th- and 18th-century wooden structures built in a distinctive vernacular style. These included farm and municipal buildings, Catholic and Orthodox Christian churches, mosques, and over 200 synagogues. Though clearly a product of the Polish wooden vernacular style, the Zabłudow Synagogue was subtly and powerfully Jewish, said Brown.

In the 17th century, when the Zabłudow Synagogue was built, the Roman Catholic Church was the most powerful religious institution in the region. This was a period of relative tolerance and prosperity, said Brown, and other religions, including Judaism, were allowed, within limits, to flourish. Still, civil law of the time required that no building could exceed in height the spire of the local Roman Catholic Church.

Unlike the tall and narrow Catholic churches, the great wooden synagogues were massive, nearly cubic in shape, echoing the shape of the main prayer hall within. In a village composed of, at most, several streets, their enormous bulk posed a subliminal alternative to the Catholic presence. Architecturally, the wooden synagogues thus “represented a distinctively

“We wanted something that would provoke a recall but not be a slavish imitation or a ‘reproduction’ of anything.”

— ARCHITECT
ALLEN MOORE
on the design for the
National Yiddish Book
Center’s building





Detail from the ceiling replica of the Gwozdziec Synagogue. Photograph by Lee Hutt.

Jewish belief system and culture,” said Brown, and were a focus of Jewish pride.

“Doing this project, we’ve all learned so much about Polish Jewish history,” Brown said. He believes that the great Eastern European Jewish cultural legacy, including the lost synagogues, may be relatively unknown because of a tendency among experts to consign the works to the category of folk art rather than fine architecture. In Brown’s view, the destroyed synagogues of Poland should be ranked with the world’s premier wooden architecture. Better-known examples of the genre include the Shinto shrines of Japan, the stave churches of Norway, and Chinese pagodas. To Brown, they are “magnificent, amazing pieces of architecture, potent symbols of lost Polish Jewish culture.”

Happily, in the early years of the 20th century, some experts agreed, and a significant amount of documentation of these masterworks was created. As seen in the traveling exhibition, in 1923 architects and architecture students at the Warsaw Technical Institute prepared detailed drawings of the Zabłudow Synagogue. Early photographs survive from the years when it was the center of Jewish community life. The ceiling replica is based on pre-World War I drawings. These materials were invaluable to the Browns’ students in creating the model.

Brown said there were two principal reasons for the early documentation. “There was real fear that these wonderful old wooden buildings were vulnerable to fire,” he said. “The other was anti-Semitism, which predated the arrival of the Nazis. Many important buildings” – including the Gwozdziec Synagogue – “were deliberately destroyed during the First World War.”

In reconstructing the Zabłudow Synagogue, Handshouse Studio brought students together with architects, engineers, craftsmen, historians, designers, and

builders at a four-day model building workshop. Students from the College of the Fenway, the consortium of which the Massachusetts College of Art is a part, participated in several demonstrations, including medieval log hewing techniques and timber joinery used in Polish wooden synagogues. In 2004, accompanied by experts from Lithuania and Poland, the Browns and 17 students visited the region to measure, photograph, and further document remaining examples of wooden building. Zabłudow, like many area towns and villages, has been “defaced beyond recognition,” Brown reports. In a terrible irony, a fire house now stands on the site of the old synagogue. Handshouse is part of a vigorous international effort to build a full-sized replica on the site.

Brown believes they will succeed. With Poland now a member of the European Union, the time may be right, he said. On a deeper level, “The world has yet to come to terms with what happened to Polish Jewish culture.” Re-creating a lost treasure would be a first step.

“The Zabłudow Synagogue Project” will travel next to Vassar College, the University of Maryland, and other venues. The exhibition is the first in what will be a series of traveling displays in newly refurbished space at the Book Center. “Since the wooden synagogues of Poland were the architectural inspiration for the home of the National Yiddish Book Center, this exhibit was the obvious choice for our inaugural show,” explains Nora Gerard, the Center’s program director. Future exhibits will feature contemporary photography, children’s book illustrations, and, in 2007, “Fighting the Fire of Hate: America and the Nazi Book Burnings,” from the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. ▶

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