

If you build it, they will pray

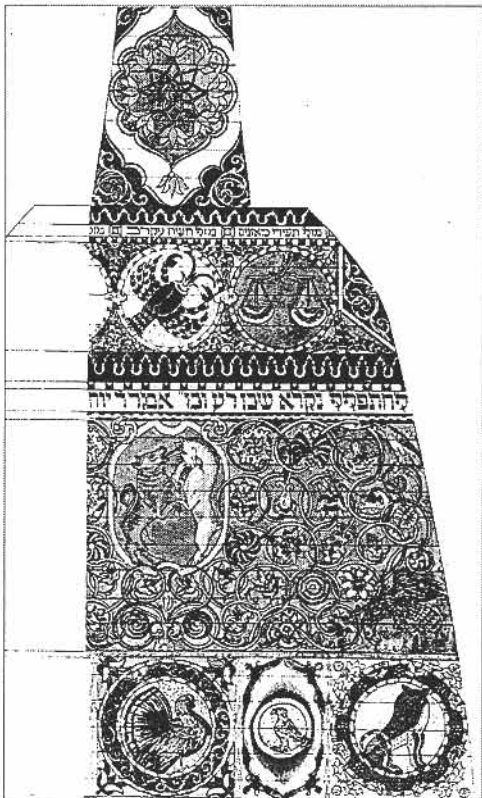
Rebuilding the
Zabludow shul in
Poland is working
dream of husband-
and-wife team

BY PENNY SCHWARTZ

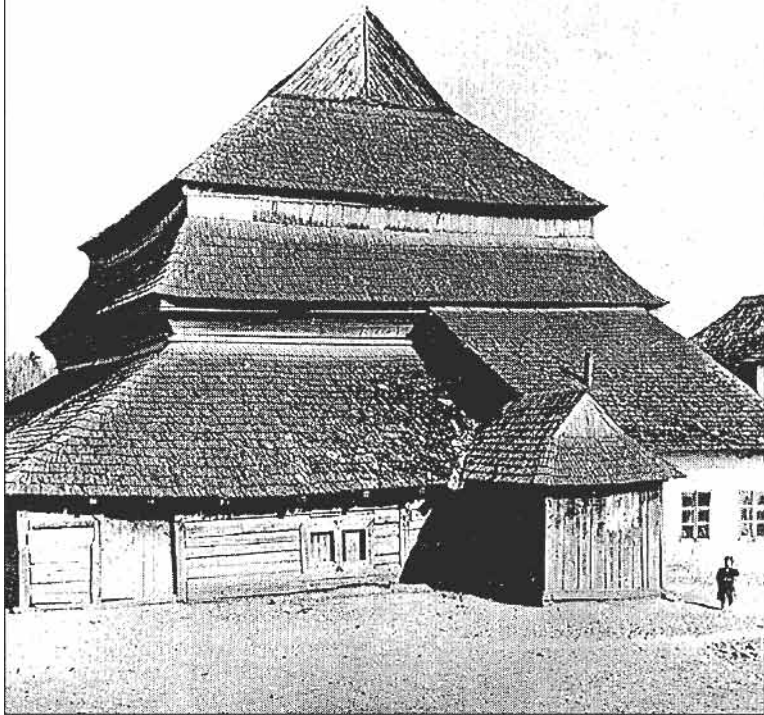
ADVOCATE STAFF

BOSTON — If all goes according to the high hopes and inspired teaching of Laura and Rick Brown, a replica of the Zabludow synagogue in Poland, destroyed by the Nazis during World War II, will rise again, reconstructed to near full splendor as a museum in Poland. At one time, there were 200 wooden-structure synagogues in Poland which were active houses of worship.

The Browns, a husband-and-wife artistic team — he a professor and she an adjunct faculty member at the Massachusetts College of Art and founders of Handshouse Studio in Norwell — are part of an international initiative to rebuild a model of the Zabludow synagogue. Last year, the Browns' students built a model of the synagogue with its unique timber framed roof structure over the main prayer hall. The model has been exhibited at the Univer-



A study of the north ceiling of the Gwozdziec synagogue, which had been built in 1731 in Poland and destroyed by the Nazis during World War II, illustrating the detailed wall paintings found in 18th-century shuls.



The view of the outside façade of the Gwozdziec shul, c. 1910. The photograph is published in "Resplendent Synagogue," by Thomas C. Hubka, courtesy of the Tel Aviv Museum of Art.

Wooden shuls of Poland's past to be recreated

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sity of Wisconsin at Milwaukee and plans for other exhibits in the U.S. and in Poland are in the works.

This term, the Browns are teaching a course on the iconography of the wall paintings. Students from a variety of colleges have built a wooden replica of the cupola of the Gwozdziec synagogue which was originally built in Poland in 1731 and destroyed during the Nazi invasion during World War II.

As part of the course, MassArt and Brandeis University sponsored a public lecture. "The 18th century wall-paintings from the Polish wooden synagogues: Jewish liturgical art in Polish context," by leading scholars Thomas C. Hubka, professor of architecture at the University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee, and Marc Michael Epstein, professor at Vassar College.

The Gwozdziec synagogue was a majestic synagogue with a multi-tiered roof with a tent-like cupola on the outside; inside it was adorned with elaborate paintings.

"It's a wow!" Hubka said of the building, as the photographic image emerged on the screen.

"It comes from a different time and place."

The Gwozdziec synagogue is uniquely and unmistakably Jewish, Hubka said. Describing the synagogue, which he has spent 20 years of his life studying, as a multi-tiered, hipped roof, Gambrel-style, with a square prayer hall and with various out-buildings. Hubka said Gwozdziec is one of the best documented synagogues of the

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Thomas C. Hubka, describing the Gwozdziec synagogue

200 which once stood in Poland.

"It had a Polish shape outside and a Jewish inside," he said. Gwozdziec, a relatively prosperous trading center, Hubka explained, is located in the former Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in what is now part of western Ukraine. It's the focus of Hubka's book, "Resplendent

Synagogue," and its wall paintings are among those discussed in Epstein's, "Dreams of Subversion in Medieval Jewish Art and Literature."

Hubka's scholarship brings a personal touch; while he is not Jewish, his grandfather emigrated from a peasant Polish village in 1916. He has learned about Jewish Polish life through "Pop" Scheckman, his brother's father-in-law, whose family of Jewish carpenters emigrated in 1906.

Through their stories and his research, Hubka has come to believe that without underestimating the antagonism between Christians and Jews, the synagogue could not have been built without a long period of peaceful coexistence.

The synagogues and their artwork were documented by the Poles beginning in about 1895. In 1923, a professor at Warsaw technical university, fearful of the destruction of the synagogues, asked for funding to draw and photograph the buildings. Remarkably, some of his students' work survived the war, and is the basis for current scholarship.

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Polish Jewish history restored

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Epstein enjoys rethinking the standard art historical interpretations of the animal images in the wall paintings, having loved animal imagery since he was five years old and first visited the Cloisters, the museum of medieval art in New York with his father, he told *The Advocate*.

"It's not surprising to see images of the lion, leopard, eagle and deer, familiar as the four animals mentioned in the opening sentence of 'Ethics of the Fathers,'" Epstein said.

But he asserted that images of a unicorn battling with a lion, "fighting for the (Messianic) crown," as seen in one of Gwozdziec's ceiling paintings, can also be seen through a more subversive lens.

Other images, in which rapacious beasts devour innocent beasts can represent the oppression of the Jews, yet, in these, the innocent beast always escapes – a hopeful outcome, he suggests.

The Browns' all-encompassing approach to the study of art and architectural history is not the more typical slide-oriented

course where dim lights in a lecture hall invite snoozing. Instead, they engage their students in hands-on, studio-based learning where notebooks and in-depth academic research is combined with woodworking tools, paints, and plaster of paris.

They've also taken students on a field trip to Poland to see first-hand the Polish wooden structures they are studying.

Ed Levin, a timber framer and historian who traveled with the Browns to Poland, is one of the consultants to the project.

"It's exciting from a Jewish angle. It's a link to that history," Levin said in a phone conversation from his home and workshop in Hanover, N.H. Levin, who grew up in Newton, created the drawings which the students used to construct the model of the Zabłudow synagogue.

"There's not a lot to work with. We're working from some photographs and the drawings from the Warsaw Institute," he said.

It's a point Rick Brown finds especially touching, noting the symmetry of their MassArt students continuing the work begun by Polish students before the war.