

INDEX AND ARCHIVE OF INFORMATION ABOUT THE GREAT SYNAGOGUE PROJECT IN SLONIM

Preface

This report is a record of the work undertaken during an initiative to renovate the Great Synagogue in Slonim which commenced in 2017. The synagogue was built between 1635 and 1642 and is a hugely important heritage site for Jews and the Belarussian community. Political uncertainty following the election in Belarus in August 2020 derailed the effort and the project was terminated in early 2021. This record is an archive of the work, and it is hoped that it will be of use when there is a fresh effort to save the Synagogue.

The initiative arose out of two events. The [Foundation for Jewish Heritage](#) (FJH) had previously commissioned research to create an inventory of the historic synagogues that existed across the whole of Europe. It categorised each synagogue building according to its (i) significance and (ii) condition. The research identified over 3,300 sites and the FJH selected 18 of these as its featured synagogues, one of which was the Great Synagogue in Slonim.

In 2016 twenty six members of the Kaplinsky family who had roots in Slonim undertook a group visit. They came from 5 different countries. They discovered the Great Synagogue and some of the family undertook to investigate whether it could be restored as a memorial to their family and their community who died in the Holocaust. In 2017, members of the Kaplinsky Family and the FJH came together to initiate a project to restore the synagogue. A Steering Committee chaired by Simon Kaplinsky, which subsequently became a subcommittee of the FJH was created as a vehicle for taking it forward. In the early stages they were supported by The Together Plan (<https://thetogetherplan.com/>) who promote community capacity building through research, exploration, cultural events and dialogue and who were working with the Jewish community in Belarus. They subsequently withdrew from the project.

The vision that was adopted for the Great Synagogue was to ensure that this important Jewish, Belarussian, and European heritage site was recognised, preserved, and brought back into use in a way that honours and celebrates the shared heritage of Jewish and wider society, bringing social benefit to Slonim and Belarus as a whole.

The plan was that the Great Synagogue would become a major educational facility, cross-cultural meeting place, memorial, place of worship, and a cultural center which would ensure its future.

Introduction and Overview

This is an archive recording our activities, the purpose of which is to provide background to any future attempts to renovate the Great Synagogue in Slonim. It is divided into subject areas. The following narrative provides an introduction into each of the subject areas, and it is supported by copies of working documents in a series of appendices.

A first visit to Slonim was made by Steering Committee members in October 2017 who were warmly welcomed by the Mayor. Initial investigations revealed that the Synagogue was owned by the Slonim Municipality. The structure had seemingly had no significant restoration since the Second World War, apart from a major re-roofing of the main hall. During Soviet times the attached single storey buildings had been altered and repaired and were used for largely retail purposes. These surrounding buildings were seriously damaged or demolished subsequent to the repair of the roof to the main building.

There were no plans for the building, the roof was leaking and there was concern about the stability of the structure. The Mayor was welcoming and keen to have the synagogue restored but did not have plans or finance to commission improvements. A previous attempt by the Slonim Association in Israel had raised their hopes but it had not come to fruition. We offered to assist the Municipality in developing plans for future use and a memorandum of understanding was subsequently signed. Subsequently, a newly elected mayor took a more demanding stance and suggested that the Steering Committee should purchase the building. He stipulated that, if the City were to sell the synagogue, works had to be complete within 5 years of purchase. The penalty for failure to meet the timetable was fines and eventual confiscation of the building. This insistence on the 5 years was one of the reasons that prevented us from making an early purchase as in our estimation it could take up to 10 years to undertake the research, a feasibility study, raise money and to revitalise the building. In the event, before we could negotiate a longer timetable or complete our business plan, the synagogue was auctioned and bought in December 2020 by Ioanna Reeves, an artist and teacher. In 2022, following incurring fines for slow progress, she dissolved the charity which owned the synagogue. At the time of writing it is unclear where ownership of the synagogue lies. Following her purchase we provided support to Ioanna but on the re-election of President Lukashenko 2020 it became difficult to work in Belarus and so, after a period, we reluctantly closed our project down.

During its three years of activity, the Committee initiated research, repairs and designs. It commissioned a structural survey and measured drawings. As a first step, roof repairs were instigated which stopped water ingress into the main hall. A small number of movement monitors were placed on the main structure (which revealed that movement in the main structural walls was, if anything, slight, albeit based on limited information). An initial design study was arranged to provide an understanding of the potential of the building and to establish an order of magnitude of the cost of restoration. The study revealed that the surrounding area has significant historical importance and ideally any plans for the synagogue itself should be considered in the light of an urban plan for the surrounding area. This initial research and feasibility should be seen as the first step in the restoration, sufficient to provide orientation and direction for future development plans.

We found that there was significant appreciation of the history of the synagogue and its importance in Belarus and many people with a keen interest in restoring it. Much research and record keeping had been undertaken locally. The main organisations and people are listed in the relevant section below. We are indebted to them for all the assistance they afforded us. Any further initiatives to restore the synagogue should refer to this cadre for help, guidance and assistance. While the Authorities had recognised the importance of the synagogue and had declared it a national monument, the regulatory framework and governmental funding system proved to be difficult to negotiate.

Our activities helped to raise the profile of the synagogue internationally. While we were assisted by many people and organisations we take full responsibility for all the interpretations and conclusions. The work was funded by charitable organisations and individuals mainly from the families who initiated the project.

Much thanks is due to the Steering Committee and Technical Committee who oversaw the work, as well as to the Trustees of the FJH

A recently published article in 2022, **The Afterlife of Belarusian Historical Synagogues** (*Ida Shenderovich (Mogilev), Iryna Ramanava (Vilnius) and Ilia Rodov (Jerusalem)*)¹ describes the political and administrative framework that conditions work to preserve synagogues in Belarus. It cites examples, including on page 61 our work on the Slonim synagogue. The article is attached as Appendix 8

¹ THE HEBREW UNIVERSITY OF JERUSALEM, CENTER FOR SLAVIC LANGUAGES AND LITERATURES, RESEARCH CENTRE OF THE SLOVENIAN ACADEMY OF SCIENCES AND ARTS, JEWS AND SLAVS, Volume 27, Edited by Sergey R. Kravtsov and Polona Vidmar
JEWISH-SLAVIC CULTURAL HORIZONS: ESSAYS ON JEWISH HISTORY AND ART IN SLAVIC LANDS
Jerusalem – Ljubljana 2022

Technical Archive

The technical information is divided into the following sections. An introduction to each is provided in this narrative. They are supported by Appendices.

- Procedure and conditions applying to works to historic monuments in Belarus
- Post war renovation and restoration
- Structural Survey
- Monitoring of major cracks in the walls
- Design Feasibility
- People and sources of information
- The Committees supervising the project

This archive is a distillation of a huge quantity of reports and correspondence and the FJH holds the complete record which is available if further information is required. This report has been written by Simon Kaplinsky with editorial support from Deborah Kaplinsky.

Procedure and conditions applying to works to historic monuments in Belarus

The synagogue was declared a Historic Monument in 2018. The following is a brief outline of our understanding of the process for restoring Historic Monuments in Belarus.

Restoration can only be carried out in accordance with a complex statutory procedure. However, the Mayor can facilitate emergency repairs using simplified procedures. We used this power to obtain approval to repair the roof (illustrated by a photo in "Comparative Photographs Jan 2018, July 2018, Nov 2018, April 2019 and Aug 2022" in Appendix 5). The procedure for comprehensive works requires close consultation with the Ministry of Culture, initial submissions culminating in the presentation of full working drawings prior to approval. The submissions also require the Mayor's approval.

There is a requirement for construction professionals to be registered in Belarus. Separate registration is required for each discipline. Finding the right people is challenging when renovating an historic building because a wide range of skills are necessary. We received a good outline of the range of professionals who it would be necessary to employ and their registration requirements in a proposal to undertake the complete restoration of the synagogue from The Belarusian Voluntary History and Culture Monuments Protection Society. It is attached in Appendix 7. We did not accept this proposal but later commissioned them to undertake a smaller commission comprising the design (which is described later).

There are not many professionals registered to work on historic buildings. In general, the quality of restoration of historic buildings is low by western standards, but there is a core of professionals who work to a high standard. We were advised that if we were to proceed to the next stage, we should consider supporting local professionals with experts from other countries. The likely countries to consider would be Poland or Lithuania.

A copy of the listing as a Historic Monument is set out in Appendix 1. The conditions attached to the sale of the synagogue and site boundaries are shown in Appendix 2.

Post war renovation and restoration

Photographs from 1946 show the exterior of the synagogue to have changed little since the Nazi occupation. Works were subsequently undertaken to make the single-story parts useable as shops. We were told the main hall was used as a furniture warehouse

A photograph dated 1994 shows the single-story sections of the building may still have been in use. It is unclear whether the main hall was in use. However more important is that the main hall is shown heavily scaffolded and the photograph is labeled "Restoration" Records indicate that the World Monument Fund (WMF) undertook conservation work in about 2000. They were unable to provide any information about what they did. They told us their records were in their archive which was inaccessible. We do not know whether the restoration works were carried out by the city authorities or by the WMF

We have assessed the scale of significant repairs or restoration by examining the building and historic photographs. This is shown in appendix 3.

Structural Survey

The survey was carried out in November 2017. It comprised of a report on condition, measured drawings, an assessment of the strength of the materials and calculations on the adequacy of the main structural elements. Recommendations for repairing the structure were also included. The survey was carried out by structural engineers. It conformed to legal requirements for surveys in Belarus.

The following are attached in Appendix 4.

- Comments on the survey
- Survey in Russian
- Survey in English (poor but adequate translation)

- Photos in the survey captioned in English
- Measured drawings

The survey was undertaken by ArkhStroyConsult (director in charge Alexey Khmelnitski (khmelnitski@bk.ru)). The company was introduced to us by the Mayor.

Monitoring of major cracks in the walls

There are several significant cracks in the main walls, which are widest at high level. It is likely that they are due to multiple factors such as thermal movement, foundation settlement and fallen arches over openings. The immediate key question was to establish whether there was ongoing movement of any significance, and if so, what was causing it. After the survey, we commissioned the placing of gauges over the largest cracks in the main walls. Four cracks were monitored, two gauges were placed at each crack, one on the inside and one on the outside. The internal monitors comprised of micrometer gauges and the outer gauges were mortar plugs which would show cracks if movement occurred. We speculate that the choice of the device on the outside was because any mechanical equipment would be damaged by the cold winters.

We took readings over an 11 month period and only two cracks recorded movement, of 0.8mm and 1.0 mm. We did not regard this as significant but note that more extensive monitoring over a longer period would be required to draw more conclusive conclusions. We left the gauges in place and they can be reread in the future to establish any further movement since they were installed, if they remain in working order. Photos were separately taken of the cracks over one year and these are included in the appendix.

The following are attached in Appendix 5:

- Summary report of movement over the period 13/8/2019 to 27/7/2020
- Photos of gauges at commencement
- Photos of gauges at completion
- Readings taken on site
- Drawings showing location of gauges
- Comparative photos of cracks taken between Jan 2018 and Aug 2022

Design Feasibility

As described in the introduction, the Mayor demanded a quick purchase of the synagogue. The FJH required a feasibility study prior to purchase to demonstrate that there was a viable design and that there was a management plan in place to ensure the ongoing viability of the

proposed centre. A costed design was a prerequisite to the feasibility study, and we had to commence immediately with this in order to meet the Mayor's timetable. There was insufficient time to consult stakeholders in any depth. We would have preferred to undertake more historical research before setting a brief. Consequently, we treated this design as an initial analysis of what could be achieved. We accepted that once we had bought the synagogue we would have to start a more considered briefing process leading up to a substantive design proposal. The brief we adopted was guided by our vision.

"Our vision for the Great Synagogue is to ensure that this hugely important Jewish, Belarusian and European heritage site is recognised, preserved, and brought back into use in a way that honours and celebrates the shared heritage of Jewish and wider society, bringing social benefit to Slonim and Belarus as a whole.

The plan is that the site will become a major educational facility, cross-cultural meeting place, memorial, place of worship, and a cultural centre ensuring that the Great Synagogue has a sustainable future."

The vision could have been met by a range of solutions. The simplest was making the synagogue building safe and leaving it as a monument. The most ambitious was a complete external and internal restoration as well as the construction of a Holocaust Museum adjoining the synagogue. The site is large and could potentially accommodate additional buildings. The Mayor's insistence on a quick offer of purchase and requirement for a short construction period had a major influence on our chosen design brief.

Our approach was to limit the works, protect the historical aspects of the synagogue, and to leave open the possibility of further improvement in the future.

In essence, the brief to our consultants was to honour our vision bounded within the following constraints

- Restore the exterior of the main structure externally to match its form in 1939, ensuring long-term integrity of the structure.
- Undertake minimum works to the interior of the synagogue but sufficient to make it useable as a public space suitable for exhibitions and concerts. Low key preservation of the internal fabric, provision a new floor and heating.
- Rebuild the low mainly single-story buildings attached to and surrounding the main synagogue structure to match their form in 1939. Explore how the spaces could be used to support the use of the main structure.

- Undertake historical research to support the design
- Raise issues for consideration in further iterations of the design

The synagogue was unfortunately placed in an auction before we had time to complete a business plan. We were also unable to negotiate a change to the requirement to deliver a finished building within 5 years of purchase. This led to the decision not to make a bid. We did however complete the design study which is the subject of this section.

The design drawings and research illustrate the importance of taking account of the surrounding area. There is potential to create a tourist neighbourhood by extending the restoration to the areas adjacent the synagogue. Much of this land has temporary uses, is partly vacant and could be made available by the Mayor. A neighbourhood plan should be undertaken supported by economic and social studies in conjunction with the development of a revised brief.

The costings shown in the appendix to this section should be treated with caution. They are however sufficient to give an indication of the cost of the renovation. There is an "official" procedure, or formulae for calculating the cost of building work in Belarus. We speculate that this system has arisen in the absence of a system of competitive tendering as in the past most construction work was carried out by state owned organisations for a state client. More recently a private sector has come into being and there is a possibility of competitive tendering.

Our consultants provided us with cost calculations based on the "official" formula which they qualified in an email. Both are attached. We used these costings as part of our overall budget assessment with addition of an allowance for expert advice from outside the country. Our overall budget is also in the appendices.

The following are attached in Appendix 6

- Research in Belarussian *with an English translation at the end*
- Design Drawings in Belarussian
- Design Drawings with the notes translated into English
- Costs for the construction works provided by a Belarussian cost consultant
- Copies of emails qualifying the costs provided by the project manager
- Overall budget

The design team was led by Yuri Melyashkevich who is a project manager and who was born in Slonim. The research was undertaken by Anton Astapovich, and the design was undertaken by Anton Vantukh.. Their qualifications are recorded in Appendix 7.

People and sources of information

We are grateful to many people and organisations for their contribution to the project and in particular to the following:

The Mayor of Slonim is the key local decision maker and controls policy in relation to the synagogue. He is subordinate to the Governor of the Grodno Region who controls the overall policy and who has the final say on decisions.

Ministry of Culture sets and enforces standards for heritage buildings. Plans for works to monuments must be submitted to them for approval.

The Hebrew University of Jerusalem

The [Bezalel Narkiss Index of Jewish Art](#) holds detailed drawings.

Restabilis. A practice that is able to provide development plans, management of works on cultural heritage sites to ensure they meet the Ministry of Culture approved plans. The senior principle is Vadzim Glinnik and his partner is Roman Zabela.

The Belarusian Voluntary History and Culture Monuments Protection Society This organisation comprises of experts who aim to encourage the preservation of heritage buildings. The officers are Anton Astapovich, Head of the Republican Council, Yuri Melyashkevich, Deputy Head of the Republican Council, Anton Vantukh, Head of the architectural section. Yury was our main contact.

Bastalia An artists collective - <http://bastalia.minsk.biz/>. They have made copies of the wall paintings in the Slonim Synagogue. We met Alexandr Astraukh, Zimicer Yatskevich and Mikalai Volkau. They are well versed in Jewish history in Belarus and speak Yiddish.

The following individuals were of particular assistance to us, for which we are grateful -

Galina Levina an expert in heritage architecture who designed the memorial at the Trostinets Extermination camp near Minsk. A prominent architect and artist, she is an active member of the Jewish Community in Belarus and is knowledgeable about the synagogue in Slonim.

Ilona Ioanna Reeves (the pen name of Ilona Karavaeva) a musician, social activist, teacher and writer. Ioanna bought the synagogue at auction for R27,400 (about E 9,000) on the 29th December 2020. She aimed to renovate and preserve it. She has a presence on social media.

Eric Langham Founding partner of [Barker Langham](#) a cultural consultancy, specialising in the visioning, strategic planning and development of cultural heritage projects in Europe

Mordechai Raichin Chief Rabbi of the Union of Religious Jewish Congregations in the Republic of Belarus.

Shimon Levinger is a member of a New York Chassidic community who has established a center in Slonim for members visiting the shrines of the sages of their community who are buried in the town.

Steering Committee

The initiative to restore the synagogue was led by a sub-committee of the Foundation for Jewish Heritage, colloquially known as the "Steering Committee" chaired by Simon Kaplinsky. Great thanks are due to the Foundation and in particular to its CEO Michael Mail who was a source of immense information, wise advice and continuing support. In the early days, invaluable support was provided by the Together Plan in introducing us to Belarus and arranging initial contacts there. Great thanks to members of the Steering Committee, the supporting Technical Committee, Special Advisors and Patrons for their enthusiasm and hard work without which, nothing could have been achieved.

Members of the Steering Committee were

David Bearman
Debra Brunner (resigned Nov 2019)
Simon Kaplinsky
Artur Livshyts (resigned Nov 2019)
Michael Mail
Ezra Mehlman
Mikalaj Packajeu
Tszwai So
Derek Spitz
David Webster

Members of the Technical Committee were

Ian Angus
Deborah Lazarus
Tszwai So
Christopher Young

Special advisors

Sergey Kravstov
Vladimir Levin

Patrons

Fiona Gibbs
Margaret Hodge
Natasha Kaplinsky
The late Zvi Shefets