


Historical, non-existing synagogue in Przeworsk

Agata Mikrut-Kusy

a.mikrut@prz.edu.pl  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4703-8167>

Faculty of Civil and Environmental Engineering and Architecture, Rzeszow University of Technology

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Abstract

The history of southeastern Poland is inseparably linked with the Jewish community that settled mostly in larger cities located near significant trade routes. Despite limiting privileges, in many cities Jews managed to establish their own quarters, in which synagogues were the most important structures. Only a few cases of historical Jewish religious architecture, in varying states of preservation, have survived to the present. In Przeworsk, to the north of the town hall, an impressive, masonry Jewish synagogue had stood for several centuries. The building was erected at the start of the seventeenth century and up to the Second World War constituted a significant element of the city's spatial structure. Despite the passage of over eighty years since the demolition of the synagogue, its site has not been commemorated. This paper presents the genesis and architecture of the historical synagogue. The massing of the building, its functional and spatial layout, and its interior décor were investigated. The paper also discusses the commemoration of historical buildings, pointing to the significance of place-based identity and broadly understood cultural heritage.

Keywords: synagogue, Przeworsk, Judaist architecture, cultural heritage

1. Introduction

The Jewish population that once inhabited Polish lands in great numbers left behind it a legacy that included its cultural heritage, tangible examples of which are public buildings such as houses of prayer – synagogues or ritual baths – mikvot. The architectural heritage of the Israeli community, mostly due to wartime destruction, has survived only fragmentarily. Many buildings were demolished in the early days of the Second World War, others were ruined, while those that have survived up to the present have been subjected to adaptive reuse. Judaist architecture in Poland takes on individual forms that resulted from an interweaving of styles, ornaments or symbols of European and Jewish cultures (Orlenko, Ivashko, Kobylarczyk, Kuśnierz-Krupa, 2020).

One example of a historical, no-longer-existing house of prayer of high architectural value is the synagogue in Przeworsk (Gliński, 2019). Until now, no study has focused on this building specifically. The literature on the town features only isolated and laconic descriptions of the building. More detailed content can be found in unpublished works or materials included in the collection of the Museum in Przeworsk or the State Archives in Przemyśl. All mentions in documents and reports attest to the significance of this building in the skyline of historical Przeworsk, such as being due to its architectural value. This is signified by the fact that it had been acknowledged as a heritage building several years before its demolition, and that the decision, issued by the Lviv conservator of monuments, justified this by stating that the structure represents “a distinctive type of late-Baroque architecture” (AP, AMP, sign. 1285). For over three hundred years, the synagogue had been a testament to the presence of the Jewish community in Przeworsk.

2. State of the art – the literature on the synagogue under study

Up to the end of the nineteenth century, Polish synagogues had not been a subject of dedicated publications, and information about them was typically given in a rather general manner (Kuśnierz-Krupa, Tobiasz, 2019). In the first written descriptions of Przeworsk to be published in the seventeenth and nineteenth century, there was no mention of the synagogue among the city’s main buildings, which were listed as: the town hall, the parish church, a Bernardine monastery, or a town well. Only towards the end of the nineteenth century did the work *Słownik geograficzny Królestwa Polskiego i innych krajów słowiańskich* include a mention about a large, masonry synagogue visible behind the town hall (Chlebowski, 1888: 183–184).

Slightly earlier, a greater amount of attention was devoted to the Przeworsk synagogue by Józef Łepkowski in his paper on the history and monuments of Przeworsk, published in *Tygodnik Ilustrowany* (Łepkowski, 1865). The historian noted the original architecture of the building, and especially its interior décor, which he described as a combination of the Renaissance or Rococo with elements of Hebrew ornamentation. He called such a combination a type of architectural variation, and labelled the Przeworsk synagogue as its representative specimen. Łepkowski also highlighted the richness of detail and ornamentation, as well as the general luxuriousness visible in unique items and other elements of the prayer house’s furnishings. For a long time, his work remained the only publication to offer such a detailed description of this synagogue (Łepkowski, 1865).

Other mentions of the synagogue began to appear alongside literature on the history of Przeworsk’s Jewish community. The historian Maurycy Horn became a pioneer of these studies. Apart from presenting the history of Jewish settlement in southeastern Poland, he also explored the genesis of Przeworsk’s masonry synagogue (Horn, 1970).

More extensive descriptions of the synagogue could be found in the works by regionalist and founder of the Museum in Przeworsk, Józef Benbenek, who, mostly using archival materials, wrote a characteristic of the historical Jewish

temple (AP, AJB, 174). His research of Przeworsk's historical monuments, the synagogue among them, was published in a collective monograph on the city entitled *Siedem wieków Przeworska* (Kunysz, 1974).

A short note on the architecture of the Jewish Baroque development complex, and thus the synagogue and the rabbi's house, was featured in a study on Przeworsk's history and urban layout prepared in 1989 by Zofia Bieńkowska, Teresa Piekarcz and Irena Zając. The unpublished manuscript, with photographs of the synagogue and the Jewish quarter during the interwar period, is located in the archives of the Voivodeship Monument Conservation Office in Przemyśl (Bieńkowska, 1989).

In recent years, independent research on Jewish settlement in Przeworsk was conducted by, among others, historians Małgorzata Wołoszyn and Szczepan Kozak. The works of these researchers, apart from economic, demographic or religious aspects, also discussed matters associated with the historical Jewish quarter and the synagogue (Wołoszyn, 2012; Kozak, 2018).

Interesting analyses of the architecture of synagogues erected on Polish lands were performed by Mateusz Michalski. In his work *Gametrica, geometria i inne fenomeny w architekturze judaizmu*, he provided an overview of the types of such buildings while focusing on differences between and the forms of bimot. He later presented a study that confirmed the application of the golden ratio in the erection of these religious buildings. The synagogue in Przeworsk was also subjected to investigation (Michalski, 2020).

3. History of the Jews of Przeworsk

Jewish settlement in Przeworsk reaches back to the beginning of the sixteenth century (Spector, 2001: 1036), while the earliest mentions that attest to the existence of an autonomous Jewish community come from around 1597, when it was headed by rabbi Abraham Italius (Horn, 1970). Przeworsk, mostly due to its location along an international trade route, was an attractive place for the settlement and development of a Jewish community (Wołoszyn, 2012). According to research by historian Feliks Kiryk, several Jews must have been inhabiting the city already in 1444, while around the 1470s their number could have reached even up to eleven families (which would amount to close to seventy people). He reported that the Jewish community could have been founded already in 1463, yet without its own institutions and without a house of prayer (Kiryk, 1999). In the eighteenth century, adherents of Judaism comprised 24% of Przeworsk's population (Motylewicz, 1993: 248).

The relatively large grouping of the Jewish population in the city led to it occupying an entire, separate street quite early (the so-called Jewish Street – *Platea Judeorum*). In Przeworsk, it was the present-day Kazimierzowska Street, located to the north of the market square. It ran along the city walls. Thus, for religious reasons among other things, the community isolated itself from the other, Christian residents. From the beginning of the fifteenth century onwards, the main professions of the Jewish community included moneylending and trade, and over time a few members also began to practice craftsmanship.

Religious and economic considerations stemming from running competing businesses meant that Christian residents felt threatened by the influx of Jewish people. In order to limit their numbers, they made efforts to receive specific privileges that either completely or partially forbade Jews from living within the city (Motylewicz, 1993: 102). In fear of competition from Jewish traders, the owner of Przeworsk, Prince Konstanty Ostrogski, issued a privilege that limited Jewish settlement to two houses and prohibited the construction of new houses or the purchase of buildings from Christian owners. Furthermore, he proclaimed the erection of a building (the so-called lordly lease house) intended solely for Jewish families. Another privilege, *de non tolerandis judaeis*, which strictly forbade any Jewish settlement whatsoever, was issued in 1594 (Motylewicz, 1993: 102).

This royal privilege was only given to cities that were already inhabited by organized groups of Jewish faith. The prohibitions, included in successive legal documents, were not fully respected, as evidenced by the fact that up to 1640 at least five buildings found themselves in Jewish hands (Konieczny, 2016).

Galician documentalist Antoni Schneider, in a description of Przeworsk in the middle of the nineteenth century, wrote: “today, the city, flooded with Jewry into whose hands the last of the textile industry has fallen, has completely lost its former glory”. This fragment is also a reflection of the contemporaneous atmosphere and social attitudes prevalent in the city, caused by the development of the Jewish community and its gradual takeover of the properties of local Przeworsk residents. As reported by Schneider, the city had been inhabited by 1005 Jews at the time, with the total population count being 2607 (Schneider, after 1866).



Fig. 1. Przeworsk synagogue. etching from 1838 by Kajetan Kielisiński (source: <https://polona.pl/item/boznica-w-przeworsku,NzgwMDA1Mjc0/#info:metadata>, date of access: 2021/09/02)

4. The architecture of the historical synagogue

The exact time of the construction of Przeworsk’s masonry synagogue is difficult to determine as different sources provided a range of rather distant dates. Mentions in archival materials indicate that the synagogue, perhaps initially wooden, could have existed already towards the end of the fifteenth and the beginning of the sixteenth century. According to historian Ignacy Schiper, a masonry building was erected between the years 1500 and 1648 (Horn, 1970: 23). The decision from 1932 on acknowledging the building as a heritage site states that the synagogue was from the eighteenth century (AP, AMP, sign. 1285: 13). The publication entitled *Przeworsk i okolice* by Franciszek Młynek and Józef Benbenek lists the time of construction of the building as 1626–1629 (Młynek, 1960). This period appears to be the most probable, in part because of the form of the bimah, and especially due to the use of octagonal columns, distinctive of synagogues from the 1720s (Michalski, 2020).

The synagogue was situated on a plot between Kazimierzowska Street and Mickiewicz Square, close to the town hall and the market square. Its location resulted in the gradual takeover of the land in this part of the city by the Jewish population. The synagogue was set back relative to the building line of the northern frontage of the market square and was separated from the street by a wall (Fig. 6). In the northwestern corner of the plot there was also a masonry rabbi’s house, whose gable faced the road. Unfortunately, the exact location of this development complex is in no way visible in the present-day spatial layout of the city. In post-war times, the borders of plots were changed and secondary alterations were made, with the land being successively developed afterwards. The former location and outline of the synagogue were clearly presented on the city’s cadastral plan from 1852 and the field sketches from 1849 that had preceded it (Fig. 2).

The original synagogue, which consisted solely of a single-space prayer hall, was designed to have a plan whose shape was close to a square with external dimensions around 18 x 17 m (Fig. 4). The structure was made from brick, assuming an exterior wall thickness of 1.2 m. The building was supported by massive buttresses (Łepkowski, 1865). A total of six buttresses, three each on

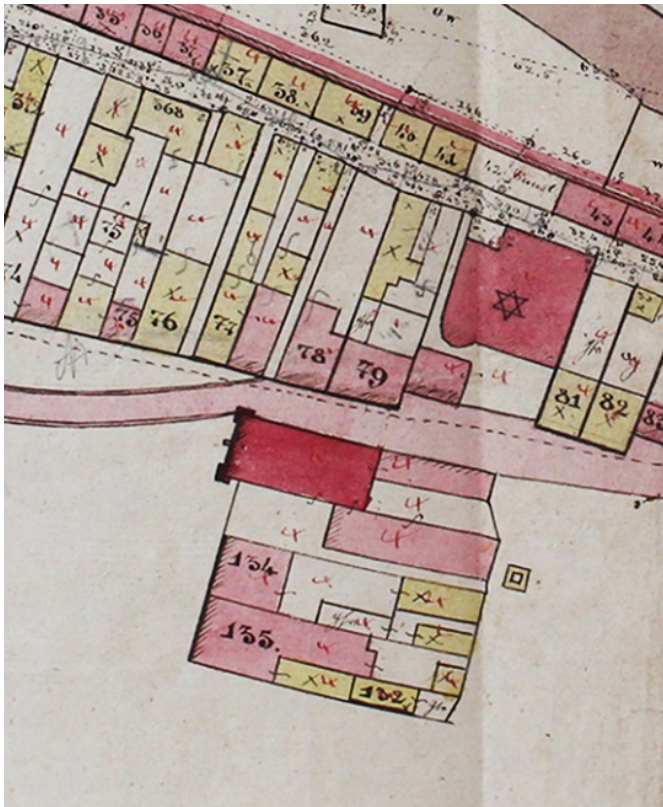
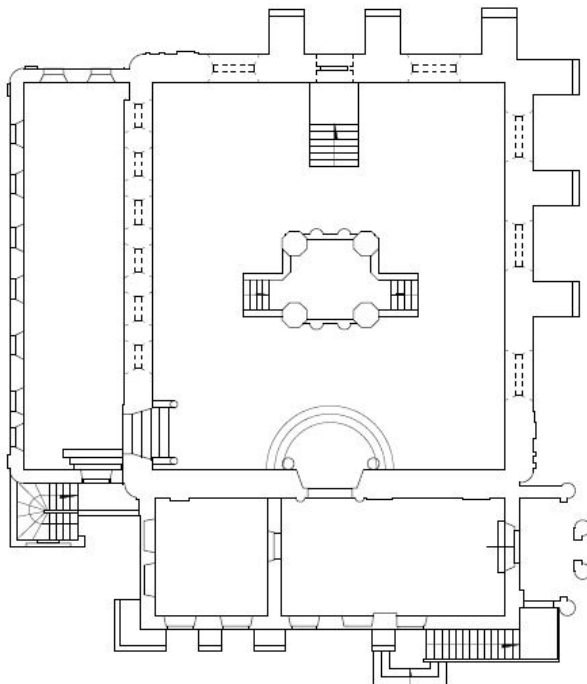


Fig. 2. Synagogue (marked with a star of David) on a map of Przeworsk from 1849 (AP, AG, sign. 2)



Fig. 3. Fragment of the northeastern development near the market square in Przeworsk – birds'-eye view. Markings: 1 – town hall, 2 – market square, 3 – Mickiewicza Square, 4 – supposed location of the historical synagogue. Markings: original work (source: <https://www.geoportal.gov.pl>, keyword: Przeworsk, confine: 181401_1.0003.3243/9, date of access: 2021/09/07)



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Fig. 4. Ground floor plan of the Przeworsk synagogue based on a manual drawing from the 1930s (AP, AMP, sign. 1285)

the eastern and western facades, had the following dimensions at their bases: ca. 1.5 m width and ca. 2 m length. Apart from an essential structural role based on transferring the thrust from the ceiling to the ground, they also had a symbolic meaning. They were made with arched volutes, which was depicted in detail on an etching from 1838 by Kajetan Kielisiński (Fig. 1). Their shape was most probably to reference impressive buttresses with so-called volutes, presented on a reconstruction of the Temple of Jerusalem as imagined by Juan Bautista Villalpando. The buttresses with arched volutes added a certain lightness to the heavy massing of the building. It should also be noted that Przeworsk's synagogue was the only such building to feature these types of buttresses (Michalski, 2020).

In addition, the southern and eastern facades of the synagogue were enhanced by pilasters, above each buttress, that reached up to the topmost cornice. The walls were dominated by tall, arched windows, typical of synagogues, placed between the buttresses. The building was covered by a tall hipped Mansard roof, which initially featured shingle roofing. Synagogues in Tykocin or Tomaszów Lubelski also had such roofs (Gliński, 2020).

The entrance to the synagogue was in the western part of the building and led to a vestibule (with a women's gallery on the upper level). Right near it there was a recess in the wall with hooks, the so-called *kuna*, which was used for administering punishments (Benbenek, 1968).

The western walls of the additional wing were also supported by buttresses, but they were much smaller relative to the massive buttresses of the main body.

The main part of the building consisted of a single-space prayer hall, intended solely for men, where a square bimah occupied the central, most important place. It was from where the Torah was read and prayers were conducted, and was located on an elevated platform. In the corners of the podium there were four pillars that carried a ciborium, a vault made in the style of an ornamental canopy. The capitals of the octagonal columns were disproportionate and consisted of densely placed profiled cantilevers. The use of columns with the same form was a typical design solution encountered in Jewish religious buildings erected in the 1620s (Michalski, 2020).

In Przeworsk, the bimah also acted as a support that reinforced the structure of the building. This type of support-bimah was also used in other nearby synagogues, e.g., in Tarnów, Dukla, or in the Old Synagogue in Rzeszów (Michalski, 2020: 68, 86). Another distinctive element of synagogues with support-bimah was the application of the golden ratio in the placement of columns on the building's plan.

Synagogues were oriented so that the aron ha-Kodesh, an altar container used to store the Torah's scrolls, was located on the eastern wall (Gosztyła, Jandziś, 2014). This placement was to also indicate the placement of the holy place, Jerusalem (Tobiasz, 2017). In the case of Przeworsk's synagogue, the custom of orientation was adhered to despite Jerusalem actually being to the south of the city. The altar with the place for storing the Torah was thus placed on an elevated platform, in the center of the eastern wall in the main prayer hall (Benbenek, 1968).

From the west, a vestibule in the form of an extension and an entryway, also called a gallery, played a range of essential functions (Benbenek, 1968). In its back section, the chamber was used by the kahal authorities and the rabbinic court, and in the years immediately preceding the demolition it also housed a Jewish school – a cheder. Above the vestibule there was a room for women, which was connected with the main prayer hall via a set of windows. It could be entered from outside via stairs that were covered with a wooden structure (Fig. 5). Along with the increasing number of residents who professed the Jewish faith, the prayer room for women proved insufficient. For this reason, another extension of the synagogue was carried out around the mid-nineteenth century. The new addition, initially with a single story, was placed from the north, along Kazimierzowska street (Benbenek, 1968). A second story was probably added in the beginning of the twentieth century (Kuźma, 2016).

Up to the 1930s, the interior of the synagogue was filled with historical artifacts, of which the most precious included: a richly sculpted, silver crown for the rodel, two silver shields, a silver-embroidered curtain with the Polish eagle, and a lambrequin. Equally valuable items included: a brass menorah that hung in front of the altar, a brass pitcher and basins, as well as around twenty brass sheets that decorated the walls of the prayer hall. These items were mentioned already in a stock inventory prepared in 1752 (Kuźma, 2016).

The synagogue suffered damage in a fire in 1761, which was reported in the foreword to Przeworsk's Pinkas (a type of chronicle kept by rabbis). Afterwards, a new wooden ceiling was built, which survived at least until the 1930s (Benbenek, 1968).

Based on a decision of the Voivodeship Monuments Conservator in Lviv, issued in 1932, the synagogue was acknowledged as a monument due to being



Fig. 5. Przeworsk synagogue, 1934 (BN, sign. F.118219/II)



Fig. 6. Synagogue in Przeworsk and the rabbi's house with a library (ca. 1880–1939) (NAC, sign. 3/41/0/-/1163)

a valuable specimen of late-Baroque architecture (AP, AMP, 1285).

In July 1937, a design of the renovation of the old synagogue in Przeworsk, prepared by Jarosław-based architect I. Metzger, was approved. The scope of the work covered the reconstruction of the wooden staircase that led to the second story of the masonry vestibule. Its primary elements were to be arcades with columns topped with block capitals and a balustrade with Baroque balusters. It was also recommended to cover the Baroque dome with impregnated shingles instead of using metal sheets (AP, AMP, 1285: 5).

Immediately prior to the Second World War, a renovation was carried out that resulted in the synagogue being fitted with a new roof from

galvanized steel sheets. Unfortunately, in that same year (12 September 1939) German forces set fire to the synagogue (Rosenberg, 1997). Nearby buildings, including the rabbi's house, which included a valuable library (Fig. 6) were consumed along with it. The ruins of the burnt-down synagogue, and those of Jewish houses, were dismantled in the spring of 1940 (Kozak, 2018: 48).

5. Examples of forms of commemorating the sites of historical synagogues

One of the most popular and widespread forms of commemorating places of significance from the standpoint of cultural or religious identity are memorial plaques, stones or monuments. Such solutions, intended to preserve

historical, non-existing synagogues in contemporary memory, were used in, among other places, Opole (commemorative stone at Piastowska Street) or in Lublin (a plaque on the site of the former synagogue complex at Tysiaclecia Avenue). The great synagogue in Gdańsk was commemorated in the form of a model cast from bronze, which depicts the synagogue to a scale of 1:70. In recent years, other, much more original forms of commemorating places have appeared. One example is the commemorative pocket park devised as a proposal for developing the site of the historical synagogue in Oświęcim. The authors of the design focused on creating a green, friendly place in the city center, which would not only serve residents and tourists as a place to rest, but would also



Fig. 7. Contemporary development at the site of the historical synagogue and Jewish quarter in Przeworsk. Photo by author

possess educational value, familiarizing people with the history of this part of the city (Kobyłański, 2019). Irregular stone slabs and the application of Judaist

ornamentation in the details of park furniture elements were to remind people of the ruins of the historical synagogue.

The cases presented prove that, even in the case of already developed areas of former places of worship, a suitable form of commemorating and highlighting a place in the public space of the city can be found.

6. Conclusions

Until now, the state of the art concerning the historical Przeworsk synagogue had been based mostly on laconic attestations included in publications about the city or on singular illustrations or interwar photographs which depict the impressive building. This information is supplemented by archival mentions included in the partially preserved documents of Przeworsk's Jewish community, or the city's files. Most certainly, carrying out an archaeological survey at Kazimierzowska Street would allow to, firstly, discover the remains (perhaps the foundations) of the demolished synagogue, and secondly, determine the exact location of the synagogue and the house of the rabbi, together with the fence that delimited the borders of the historical complex. Such a survey would significantly increase the value of further research and could form a basis for preparing a thorough historical and architectural study of the building in question.

It should be noted that documenting the original form and the successive transformations of the synagogue is essential for a number of reasons. In a broader context that concerns the conservation of architectural heritage, investigating non-existing monuments should provide knowledge and arguments for preparing conservation designs for analogous, existing historical buildings (Orlenko, Ivashko, 2019). Furthermore, from an academic standpoint, studying Judaist architecture, including the forms and design solutions applied in Poland, should be constantly supplemented and compared with up-to-date results of analyses of historical buildings. This would allow for conducting reliable research on local variations in Jewish religious architecture. We should also keep in mind the intangible values associated with upholding the memory of the cultural heritage of past generations and handing it down to future ones.

Only the complete identification of the values of a historical building can provide a basis for initiating efforts to preserve memory and select a proper form of commemorating a give place.

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