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The Impact of the Treaty of Versailles on the Synagogues of Hungarian-Speaking Jews

The ‘long’ nineteenth century gave Hungarian-speaking Jews an unprecedented opportunity to become part of the Hungarian nation and acquire a strong Hungarian identity. The fall of the Habsburg Empire and the partitioning of the historic kingdom of Hungary after World War I shattered this identity of largely assimilated Hungarian Jewry, both in post-Versailles Treaty Hungary – still officially the kingdom of Hungary, though lacking a king – and in the successor states: Czechoslovakia, Greater Romania, the Kingdom of the Serbs, Croats and Slovenes,¹⁵ Austria and Italy.¹⁶ Generally, Hungarian-speaking Jews were better off outside Hungary in terms of political freedom, and often economically too, than those in Hungary proper, due to the rising tide of anti-Semitism, which began in 1920 with the passing of the *numerus clausus* law.

The plight of the Hungarian Jews in Hungary unintentionally prompted the integration of “non-Hungarian Hungarian Jews” into the successor nation states (Romania, Austria, Italy) and the multi-national, pan-Slav states (the Kingdom of the Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, and the Czechoslovak Republic). The only exception was the new Greater Romania, where the Jews did not obtain citizenship until 1923 as the result of international pressure, only for this to be withdrawn in 1938, due the new kingdom’s alignment with the Third Reich.

Some of the successor states treated the Jews very favourably, partly in order to “de-Magyarise” them. Perhaps the most striking and unprecedented measure was taken in Czechoslovakia, where Jews were given the opportunity to declare their ethnicity as Jewish, on a par with those claiming Slovak, Czech, German and Hungarian ethnicity, in stark contradiction to the former conception of Jews as a confessional group ensconced within nations, or as a national group within empires.¹⁷ This ploy reduced the number of ethnic Hungarians in the new pan-Slav, semi-nation state of Czechoslovakia, as some Jews began to declare themselves ethnically Jewish instead of Hungarians (Czechoslovaks or Yugoslavs) of the Jewish or Mosaic confession. However, out of inertia, many Czechoslovak Jews living in Slovakia and Yugoslavia, and especially in Transylvania, nevertheless declared themselves Hungarians and cultivated friendly relations with their co-religionists across the border. (During the intense Slovak synagogue-construction

¹⁵ After 1929 the ‘Kingdom of Yugoslavia’, ruled by the Serbian Карађорђевић royal dynasty.

¹⁶ In fact, only in Fiume/Rijeka, which after World War I was awarded to Italy and became part of Communist Yugoslavia only after World War II.

¹⁷ Rebekah Klein-Pejšová: *Mapping Jewish Loyalties in Interwar Slovakia*. Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2015.

boom of the 1920s and 1930s, they often hired Jewish architects from the kingdom of Hungary.)

Hence the collapse of the Habsburg Empire affected the homogeneity and cultural alignment of Hungarian Jews. As Milan Kundera put it, Jews were the unifying element, the intellectual cement of Central Europe¹⁸ (in fact, of the Habsburg Empire), from Czernowitz to Fiume, from Prague to Sarajevo. After the Versailles Treaty, this cementing role disappeared. However, it was not only the Jews, but the Empire itself, that united hitherto merely geographical regions, as for instance, Bohemia, par excellence Central European, and substantial parts of the formerly Ottoman Western or Eastern¹⁹ Balkans. Jewish emancipation, which started from Berlin and spread to the Habsburg Empire, levelled the aforementioned differences, as evidenced by synagogue architecture and Jewish funerary art.²⁰ In many of these formerly Ottoman territories, the Jews – whether Ashkenazim or Sephardim – spread Central European culture and connected the peripheral regions of Europe to the German *Kulturraum*. No wonder, then, that the Versailles Treaty was about to annihilate that *Kulturraum*, fragmenting Ashkenazi and partly Sephardi culture, too.

As in the Habsburg Empire as a whole, so in the kingdom of Hungary, too, this “Jewish levelling and cementing” effect also disappeared. In Habsburg times, Jews had contributed greatly to reinforcing Hungarian national identity, particularly in the southern regions of the kingdom with their Slavonic minorities. Jews were often publishers of Hungarian regional newspapers and organisers of Hungarian-language theatres and cabarets in the region and elsewhere. This applied particularly to the south of Hungary, which had for centuries acted as a military buffer zone protecting Central Europe from the Ottoman Turkish incursions, and was settled with a Slav population in the time of Empress Maria Theresa. For instance, in Szabadka/Subotica, Jewish architects created a Hungarian-style synagogue, town hall and other public buildings in order, as the architect Dezső Jakab put it, “to show the superiority of Hungarian culture”. The substantial Slav ethnic minority of the town reacted violently, pelting with rotten eggs and tomatoes the dignitaries attending the inauguration ceremony, including even the Empire’s Jewish-born Minister of War, Baron Samu Hazai.²¹

¹⁸ Milan Kundera: The Tragedy of Central Europe. *The New York Review of Books*, 31. (1984), 2. 33–38.

¹⁹ If we consider Transylvania part of the Balkans, which may be geographically, though culturally much less plausible, even if in some parts of it there was undeniably an Orthodox Christian presence.

²⁰ Sofia’s magnificent Synagogue radiates the spirit of Austria–Hungary; some gravestones are explicitly Austrian in, for example, Belgrade’s Sephardi Cemetery. See Rudolf Klein: *Metropolitan Jewish Cemeteries of the 19th and 20th Centuries in Central and Eastern Europe – A Comparative Study*. ICOMOS, Landesdenkmalamt Berlin. Berlin, Imhof Verlag, 2018.

²¹ There is substantial evidence that Jews propagated the Hungarian Secession as a national style. See Rudolf Klein: *Juden und die Sezession – Ein kurzer Überblick über Architektur und Gesellschaft in Kakanien*. In Aliza Cohen-Mushlin – Hermann Simon – Harmen H. Thies (eds.): *Beiträge zur*

A fair amount of the aforementioned Jewish zeal for the Hungarian cause disappeared in the interwar period, not just because of the new borders, but as a result of the earliest manifestation of post-World War I anti-Semitism in Europe, the introduction of the *numerus clausus* in the interwar kingdom of Hungary, as mentioned earlier. Not that a *numerus clausus* did not exist elsewhere, as for instance at a number of prestigious American universities, but this was the first time that a freedom and emancipation that had been previously granted was reversed, shattering the Jews' Hungarian identity and foreshadowing what was to come later.

Thus, the Hungarian identity of Jews suffered both in the radically shrunken kingdom of Hungary and in the successor states. "At home" their loyalty to the host nation was questioned, making Jews turn more inward. "Abroad", or beyond the borders – as this split is referred to today – they had to acquire new layers of identity over their Hungarian Jewish one in order to survive. In the successor states triple identities emerged: for instance, it started to be possible to speak of Yugoslav Hungarian Jews, Czechoslovak Hungarian Jews (as a matter of fact, "Czecho-Slovak" was itself an interesting construct), Transylvanian-Romanian Hungarian Jews, and so forth. Thus, Jewish "fitting in" became extremely complex, sometimes even contradictory, making synagogue architecture commensurately intricate.

The obliteration of the Central European *Kulturraum* resulted in the Jews finding themselves in new countries established on the ashes of the Ottoman and Habsburg Empires. Central Europe's southern peripheries were absorbed by new Balkan states. Thus, in Yugoslavia, Greater Romania's post-Ottoman territories were merged with post-Habsburg territories. However, the capital cities of these new states were former Ottoman sites – Belgrade, Bucharest and Sofia. Ashkenazim in these regions were face-to-face with Sephardim, who, in fact, were better integrated into the new states thanks to their Ottoman Jewish history. Very few synagogues were constructed there, for instance in Braşov, where not far from the large Ashkenazi synagogue built under the Habsburgs there stands a synagogue from the interwar period, hidden in a courtyard. The dilapidated building, now too dangerous to enter, features an extraordinary façade with two ceramic lions.²²

The architecturally most prominent synagogues of the interwar period were built in the Slovak part of Czechoslovakia, mainly in the former Hungarian-speaking counties, and in Hungary proper. These constitute the main subject of this paper and serve the

jüdischen Architektur in Berlin. Kleine Schriften der Bet Tfila-Forschungsstelle für jüdische Architektur in Europa, Band 2, 2008. 100–112.

²² A similarly understated Jewish place of worship is the Orthodox synagogue in Fiume, today Rijeka, which was under Italian jurisdiction in the interwar period. The basically modernist building was created by a Hungarian Jewish architect, co-designed by an Italian, in 1930. This synagogue survived the Holocaust, while the large Neolog building, created by Lipót Baumhorn, was damaged in January 1944, during the rule of the Croatian Nazi state, officially called Nezavisna Država Hrvatska (Independent Croatian State) and demolished in 1948, under Communist Yugoslav rule.

comparative analysis of synagogues constructed in Hungary proper and in the successor states.

The first element to be compared is the urban prominence of synagogues in the context of urban settlement. The urban prominence of a synagogue has two aspects: the position of the synagogue *vis-à-vis* its immediate environment, and its position *vis-à-vis* the town or city as a whole.²³ If a synagogue has a dominant position in the architectural-urban context of its milieu, it may have some impact on the city as a whole, but there are exceptions, when a synagogue situated on a major square may dominate its immediate neighbourhood, but due to its modest height does not impact the townscape.

It is worth comparing the number of interwar period synagogues *vis-à-vis* the number of Jews in Hungary proper and Slovakia. In 1930 there were 444,000 Jews in Hungary proper, who built nine major synagogues, while Slovakia's 136,000 Jews constructed five major synagogues: statistically this means that in the former case there were 50,000 Jews per new synagogue and in the latter 27,000 Jews per new synagogue. Moreover, what is significant is not just the sheer number of synagogues *vis-à-vis* the size of the Jewish populace, but also the urban prominence of the newly built places of worship. Out of seven new synagogues in Hungary, only one enjoys a highly visible urban position, the new synagogue in Gyöngyös, albeit lying a little further from what is strictly speaking the town centre. In Slovakia at the same period four new synagogues (80%) enjoyed a prominent urban position, with high visibility, for example the Neolog synagogues in Žilina, Lučenec and Košice. In the category of moderate urban visibility in Hungary proper, there are four synagogues, the Heroes' Temple, and the modernist synagogue in Lágymányos district, both in Budapest, the Orthodox Synagogue in Nyíregyháza and the synagogue in Nagykőrös. In this category, there is only one significant Jewish place of worship in Slovakia, the orthodox synagogue in Bratislava's Heydukova Street. The final category, "hidden" synagogues, are represented in Hungary proper by those in Páva Street, Bérkocsis Street, Hegedűs Gyula Street and Hollán Ernő Street in Budapest, all with their main bulk concealed amid apartment buildings or courtyards. In Slovakia there are no major "hidden" synagogues from this period,²⁴ which reflects the difference in social and political standing between the Jews in interwar Hungary and in Czechoslovakia.

Architecturally the most distinguished synagogue on the territory of historic Hungary in the interwar period was built in Žilina,²⁵ according to the plans of the leading Berlin architect Peter Behrens in 1928–1931. Behrens was the house architect and designer of the AEG factory – though officially only a consultant – and a friend of the Rathenau family. Behrens ran one of the most advanced architectural design offices in the world, where among others Ludwig Mies van der Rohe and Le Corbusier were employed.

²³ See details in Rudolf Klein: *Synagogues in Hungary 1782–1918 – Genealogy, Typology and Architectural Significance*. Budapest, Terc Publishers, 2017.

²⁴ The Orthodox synagogue in Žilina is in the shadow of residential buildings and relatively small in size, but that is not because of political pressure, rather the size of its miniscule congregation.

²⁵ See details in Maroš Borský: *Synagogue Architecture in Slovakia*. Bratislava, Jewish Heritage Foundation – Menorah, 2007.

In 1910, Behrens designed the AEG Turbine Factory in Berlin's Moabit district. He won the competition for the New Žilina Synagogue, beating the Viennese star architect and favourite of the Jewish upper classes, Joseph Hoffman, and the leading figure of Hungarian synagogue architecture, Leopold Baumhorn. After 1933, Behrens had a change of heart and allegiance and in 1936 became associated with Hitler's urbanistic dreams for Berlin, as the Führer admired Behrens's St Petersburg Embassy.²⁶ Nevertheless, he did not receive any commissions from Hitler.

Behrens created an extraordinary synagogue. On the exterior, it mixes some modernist elements with period synagogue architecture in the Holy Land, large rectangular volumes perforated by small windows. The main volume of the prayer hall connects to a smaller horizontal mass, the winter synagogue. The building is finished partly in stone, partly in harling. Its dominant horizontal lines associate it with modernism, but some details, such as raising the level of the main volume towards the corners and diagonal decoration link the building to expressionism, contributing to the richness of the architectural language of the building.

The dominant tin-covered central dome associates it with the orientalism of the interwar period. However, the interior is radically modern, rejecting Central European synagogue traditions. The ground plan is rectangular, but the main axis of this rectangle is perpendicular to the traditional east–west axis, subverting age-long synagogue traditions at ground level, while the women's gallery circumscribes a square. Emphatic reinforced concrete pillars and beams dominate the interior; at gallery level, striped walls recall the orientalist tradition. The dome emerges from a flat reinforced concrete slab. Recent restoration and conversion into an art gallery omitted references to the former Jewish religious elements, with no marking of the bimah or the Ark and no six-pointed star atop the dome.

The synagogue in Lučenec, designed by Leopold Baumhorn and completed in 1926 follows pre-World War I patterns of Hungarian synagogue architectural tradition in terms of mass composition, architectural language and the siting of the building. The building stood abandoned for decades, and trees began to grow from its roof. Restoration began in 2014 in a very creative way. Both on the façades and in the interior the architect of the restoration contrasted dilapidated, but stabilised, old surfaces – bricks and mortar – and counterpointed them with completely restored ones or new materials and structures in an original way. The work was completed in 2016. This technique resembles the restoration of the Neues Museum in Berlin, designed by the architect David Chipperfield, who was the first to employ such unorthodox methods of restoration on a large scale. The building currently houses a museum of contemporary art, but on the western side of the women's gallery there is an exhibition of Judaica displaying some

²⁶ Behrens joined the then still illegal Nazi party in Austria on May Day of 1934. Behrens died in the Hotel Bristol in Berlin on 27 February 1940, while seeking refuge there from his bitterly cold estate in the country. Stanford Anderson: *Peter Behrens and a New Architecture for the Twentieth Century*. Cambridge, Mass, MIT Press, 2000. 252.

furniture from the original building and objects reflecting local Jewish history and Jewish life in general.

One of the most interesting interwar period Jewish places of worship is the Heydukova Street Synagogue in Bratislava, the only one that still survives in the city.²⁷ Constructed in 1923–1926, it is a proto-modernist, stripped down classicist building with some elements of Czech Cubism, the official style of the new pan-Slav republic. Designed by the Bratislava-based Jewish born architect, Arthur Szalatnai-Slatinsky (né Schlesinger), it has an understated façade and a lavish interior. The architect’s biography, change of name and national identity vividly illustrate the vicissitudes of the post-Habsburg history of the region and its modernist, interwar period, which laid the foundations of modern Bratislava. The synagogue initially served an orthodox congregation, having a central *bimah* and *mechitza* on the upper floor that hid women from the sight of the devout males on the ground floor. The synagogue still serves as an active Jewish house of worship on the ground floor as well as housing the Bratislava Jewish Community Museum with a permanent exhibition, entitled “The Jews of Bratislava and Their Heritage”.

The prayer hall of the synagogue is hidden behind a colonnade on the street frontage, and is entered from the doorway, which leads to the communal courtyard. The prayer hall has a square floor plan with a wrought iron *bimah* at its centre, its Gothic arches referencing the Altneuschul, the famous medieval synagogue in Prague, the capital of the newly established Czechoslovak Republic. The interior mixes oriental elements with those of proto-modern Classicism and other architectural movements of the 1920s.

The Jews of the capital of Eastern Slovakia, Košice, erected two large synagogues. One was for the Orthodox Jewish Community, designed by Lajos Öry (1896–1984), who changed his name to L’udovít Oelschläger during the Czechoslovak de-Magyarisation. In Nazi times, he further changed his name to Ludwig Oelschläger, to show his allegiance to German National Socialism. He died in Miskolc, Hungary. The Orthodox synagogue does not look like a conventional synagogue. It has a longish interior, perpendicular to the street, widening out at the front, creating a solemn ensemble with long, arcaded horizontal spaces. All parts terminate in battlements, which is interpretable in period Hungarian terms as the so-called North Hungarian Renaissance style, but at the same time it also resembles the official architectural style of Czech Cubism. The interior, too, is stylistically conservative and elegant, with a touch of art deco. It is the only still functioning synagogue in today’s Košice.

The other synagogue in Košice, the Neolog, was designed in 1927 by the Hungarian Jew Lajos Kozma (né Fuchs). After World War I, during the short-lived Hungarian Soviet Republic of 1919, he became a leading figure in Hungarian art and architecture. Under Regent Miklós Horthy, Kozma quickly established himself as a prominent architect of the post-World War I Hungarian neo-Baroque, an epitome of the anti-liberal and anti-

²⁷ There were two major older synagogues in the city in the Jewish quarter, between the Castle Hill and the burghers’ town, both now destroyed. The Neolog one stood on an exposed location, not far from St Martin’s Cathedral. Recently a memorial was placed near the site of the synagogue, which was destroyed during the Soviet occupation of Czechoslovakia.

leftist state. Later, around 1930, he abandoned neo-Baroque and became an important modernist. Surviving the Holocaust in hiding with Tivadar Soros, the father of George Soros,²⁸ he again became a leftist, and was nominated in 1945 for membership of the Hungarian Committee of Arts for Architecture²⁹ and in 1946 to be the Rector of the National Academy of Art. Most probably, he would have become a leading figure of Soviet-style Social Realism, but heart failure in 1948 prevented him from changing his style once more. Kozma's synagogue, the only one he built, is yet another atypical Jewish place of worship. Based on a circular plan, topped by a vast polygonal dome with a long lantern, like a Baroque church, it is a Košice landmark. Unwittingly and posthumously, he became a co-creator of a prominent Stalinist-style piece of architecture: the synagogue was used as the concert hall of the local philharmonic orchestra, the Štátna filharmónia Košice, as late as 1968. Its tasteful, Communist-period extension is in perfect harmony with Kozma's synagogue, making it a blend of the neo-Baroque and Social Realism.

Leopold Baumhorn and his son-in-law, György Somogyi, designed in 1928 the largest post-World War I synagogue in Hungary in Gyöngyös, as a blend of Leopold's earlier domed synagogues and interwar orientalism with iwan-like central projections, as seen in some Persian mosques, low corner turrets, all topped with battlements and small domes. Though the large central dome dominates the building, it does not dominate the town centre, as the synagogue stands alongside its earlier counterparts, some way from the centre of Gyöngyös. Under Communism the interior was converted into a furniture shop, but it is expected to be fully restored by 2020 and to serve as a memorial centre.

The Heroes' Temple in the block of the vast Dohány Street Synagogue in Budapest commemorates the Jewish heroes who fell fighting for the motherland during World War I against Hungarian anti-Semitic movements that questioned Jewish loyalty to the Hungarian cause. In 1932, the architects Vágó and Faragó created a solemn courtyard along the northern side of the great synagogue, which terminates on the eastern side in the Heroes' Temple. The little synagogue without a women's gallery blends modern orientalism and art deco, serving as a winter synagogue to the Dohány Street Synagogue, where every Shabbat is celebrated, while the vast building behind is used on high holidays and for concerts, and is visited by some 300,000–400,000 tourists every year. The exterior of the Heroes' Temple is made up of a travertine covered simple rectangular space, topped with battlements along its upper perimeters and a dominating, copper-covered central, semi-circular dome. This synagogue does not enjoy urban dominance, but satisfyingly completes the monumental ensemble of the Dohány Street Synagogue.

The synagogue in Hegedűs Gyula Street in Budapest is a typical "hidden" synagogue, created by Leopold Baumhorn in 1927 in the courtyard of an apartment building with a seating capacity of 900. It is completely invisible from the outside, occupying the ground floor and mezzanine of the building. Its architectural language is typical of its designer, conservative and elegant, with a central bimah and a prominent holy ark.

²⁸ Tivadar Soros: *Maskerado: Dancing around Death in Nazi Hungary*. Edinburgh, Canongate Books, 2001.

²⁹ In Hungarian: Magyar Művészeti Tanács Építőművészeti Szaktanácsa.

Another synagogue by Baumhorn, designed in the same year, is located in Páva Street, a “semi-hidden” synagogue, with an entrance from the courtyard, but having its side-façade along the trajectory of the street; it serves today as Hungary’s Holocaust Memorial Centre. While exhibiting details typical of Baumhorn, it is built according to an interesting, trapezoid floor plan that follows the shape of the irregular site. Its interior space is divided into a regular rectangular nave and two triangular aisles, lending the building a dramatic spatial dimension.

The synagogues analysed in this paper support the thesis that the identity and social standing of Jews was different in post-World War I Hungary and in the successor states, those of the latter being more favourable up until the Nazi German expansion. In the successor states, synagogues continued Habsburg practices of boldly indicating the status of the Jews, while in Hungary proper this was a period of disenchantment and insecurity, resulting in non-exposed or even “hidden” synagogues. However, in both cases the Jews continued to contribute to European culture with highly original synagogue buildings, from Žilina to Fiume and from Košice to Braşov.

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