

HGSS FRIENDS OF LVOV

Restoration of the Synagogue on
Brothers Mykhnovskych Street



LVOV, capital of Western Ukraine and Eastern Galicia, otherwise known as Lemberg or Lviv, lies just 70 kilometres from the Polish border. During the last 100 years the City has, remarkably, been governed by Imperial Austrians, Nationalist Poles, Soviet Socialists, German Nazis, Soviet Socialists (again) and, currently, Independent Ukrainians.



The Opera House

It is said that before WWII more than 30 languages were spoken in Lvov's shops and marketplaces. Here Christians (Orthodox, Catholic and Protestant),

Moslems and Jews all rubbed shoulders. Tatars and Cossacks lived alongside Turks, Gypsies, Aryans and Slavs.

The magnificent opera house, the wealth and variety of its churches and cathedrals and the elegant houses of the old city, all astonishingly preserved from the ravages of conflict and development, make Lvov the unsung jewel in Middle Europe's architectural crown. The city centre largely dates back to the 16th and 17th centuries. Such is its historic importance that UNESCO has designated Lvov a World Heritage Site.

Today a revival, started by Glasnost and Perestroika and continued by Viktor Yuschenko, is underway. As Ukraine turns its gaze from Moscow towards the European Community, Lvov finds itself in the vanguard of rapprochement with the West.

As the economy moves slowly out of first gear, businesses establish themselves and tourism begins to take off, hitherto neglected buildings are undergoing repair and refurbishment. Thus it behoves us, as Jews, to restore the magnificent Synagogue on Brothers Mikhnovskych Street.

LEMBERG, as Lvov was known in Yiddish and German, was at the core of Jewish life in Europe for 700 years. It was home to countless Rabbis and Talmudic scholars. It became the epicentre of Chassidism in the 18th century and the cradle of the Haskala (Enlightenment) movement in the 19th century. Amongst its most famous sons in the modern era were the philosopher Martin Buber and the Nazi-hunter Simon Wiesenthal.

When the Nazis occupied the city in 1941 over 100,000 Jews (a third of the population) lived in the city. Another 50,000 were brought into the ghetto from surrounding towns and villages. No more than 200 survived, including a handful in the sewers and a few boys in a monastery. The vast majority died in the ghetto, in the camp at Janowska Road or (with their co-religionists from all over Galicia) in the death camp at Belzec. After WWII the Soviets re-populated the city and imported many Russian-speaking Jews for their professional and managerial skills.

Currently (despite more than 100,000 Jews having left the region in the last 15 years for Israel and elsewhere) the Jewish population is between 5,000 and 10,000. Only one working Synagogue remains – on Brothers Mikhnovskych Street. This courageous building, unprepossessing from the outside, survived 50 years of abuse from 1941 (when the Nazis seized it) until 1991 (when the Ukrainian Government returned it to the Jewish Community).

The Synagogue was built in 1924 by the Tsori Gilad Society (founded in 1899 by Rabbi Joachim Guttman). Stripped of its fixtures and fittings and employed variously as stabling for horses, as a barn and as a warehouse, the Synagogue's magnificent hand-painted interiors survived quite miraculously.



The Synagogue

There is a theory that the murals were painted by Henryk Mund, who presented 20 sketches of synagogue animal and floral subjects to a 1927 exhibition in the city. Another suggestion is that they are the work of the Fleck Brothers who prepared sketches for the “Great Suburban Synagogue of Lvov” in the same period. The Centre for Jewish Art at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem has been particularly helpful in trying to identify their authorship.



Above is the stained glass window beneath the cupola.

Left: the views of Rachel's Tomb, the Western Wall, the Temple and Mount Sinai, as well as k'lei zemer (musical instruments). The deterioration caused by damp and neglect is clearly visible

Right: the paintings on the walls above the upper gallery and the ceilings.



Nowadays, the Synagogue and the Community are cared for by Rabbi Mordechai Shlomo Bald and his wife, both originally from New York. Services take place on Sabbaths and Festivals and three times each weekday.



Rabbi Bald

There is a mikveh on the Synagogue site as well as a modern kitchen and dining room. The kitchen supplies strictly kosher meals for members of the community – for many people these are the only hot meals of the day – which are either eaten on the premises or home-delivered by way of a meals-on-wheels programme. In a suburb of the City, Rabbi Bald and his wife also run a Jewish School for well over 100 children.

World Jewish Relief and **B'nai Brith** are active in Lvov providing welfare programmes to the elderly, the infirm and the poor.

Our Project is not just a matter of art conservation. By restoring the Synagogue we will help to restore the dignity of the Jewish community and return Lvov to its rightful position on the Jewish map. Many Jewish visitors pass through Lvov's International airport: on business or en route to ancestral villages and the graves of holy rabbis. The restored Synagogue will encourage them to visit Lvov's Jewish community, thereby boosting its morale and its economy.

The tradition of hand-painting the interiors of Synagogues in Poland and Ukraine dates back at least to the 17th Century. Many fine examples were destroyed during WWII. The Lvov Synagogue may well have been the last to have been decorated in this way.

Professor Shalom Sabar of the Department of Jewish and Comparative Folklore, Department of Art History of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem writes about the Lvov murals:

“They carry on the familiar iconography of older (18th-19th c.) Polish synagogues; but a new dimension is added – modernity; modernity not in the sense of new ways of expression (it is not Chagall) but rather a more professional style than the one commonly used in the older synagogues. The artist was not an amateur or folk artist as in the previous generations, but someone who is familiar with three dimensional illustration, perspective, landscape, etc. My humble opinion is that it is important to preserve these paintings as they record a transitional stage in the development of Jewish art in Eastern Europe. So I’m all for preservation if possible; not many monuments with such splendour and bright colours survived the Holocaust”

Aaron Ostreicher, of Jerusalem, is world famous as a Synagogue Architect. He designed the 700-seater Belzer Shul in Jerusalem and is currently working on the refurbishment of the New Synagogue in Egerton Road North London. He has refurbished 19th century Ukrainian Synagogues in Kiev and in Kharkov. We are delighted that he has accepted our invitation to oversee our project too. He will also be working closely with Government agencies and contractors in Ukraine and, of course, with Rabbi Bald.



Aaron Ostreicher

The Conference of European Rabbis, in 1990, resolved to assist emerging Jewish communities in the former Soviet Union by “twinning” them with established communities in the West. As a result Hampstead Garden Suburb Synagogue (“HGSS”) in London, a member of the orthodox “United Synagogue” grouping, was “twinned” with Lvov. The relationship has been guided for many years first by Rabbi Edward Jackson and more recently by Rabbi Reuven Livingstone. It enjoys the full support of the officers and members of the Synagogue.

HGSS Friends of Lvov is a registered charity dedicated to furthering the “twinning” arrangement. Its primary function is to ensure a steady supply of funds to support the work that Rabbi Bald and his wife undertake in the Synagogue and in the School. Money is raised in numerous ways, including a voluntary levy paid by members of HGSS and an annual “showcase” Chazanut concert – starring HGSS’ own Chazan, Avromi Freilich, accompanied by international guests.

A second function is to enable the community in Lvov to re-establish itself and make itself more independent. The Synagogue refurbishment forms part of that plan, further initiatives will be announced once work on the synagogue refurbishment has commenced.

Regular visits are made to Lvov, both to give moral support to the community and to inform HGSS members of the extent to which their assistance is required and effective. On one such trip, in 2001, a new Sefer Torah (specially commissioned for Lvov by the Tager family) was presented to the community. This was, without doubt, the first new Sefer to reach Western Ukraine for nearly 70 years. In 2002 HGSS members hosted a group of young people from the Jewish school in Lvov who were visiting England to participate in a Jewish Drama Festival.

For more information about our work please visit our website:

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