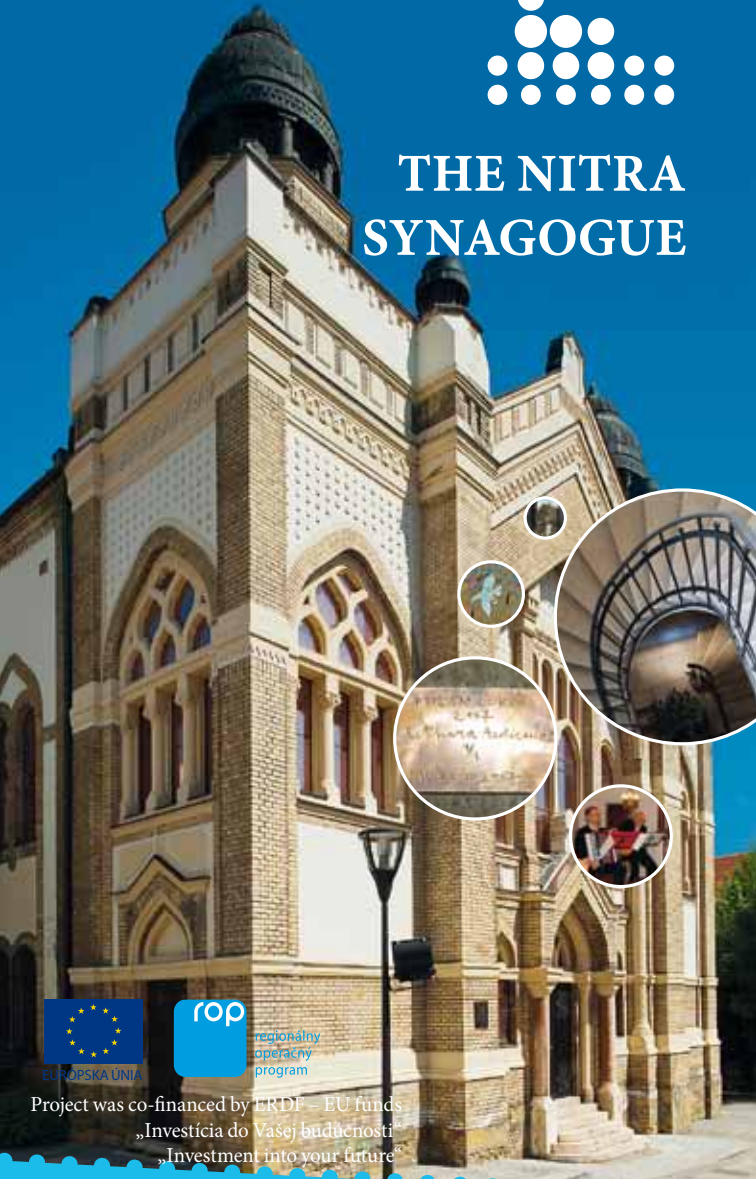




THE NITRA SYNAGOGUE



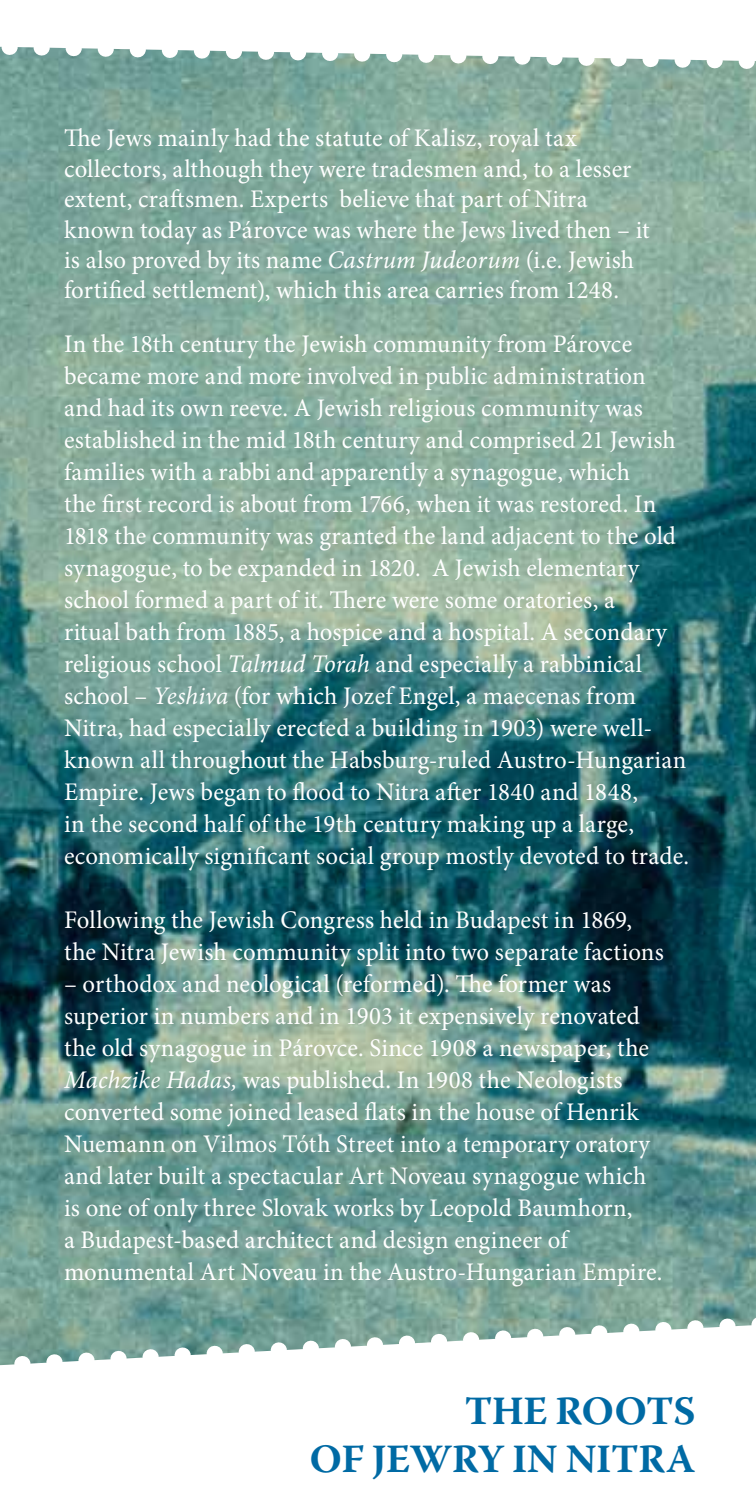
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discover the place, live the story

For centuries Nitra was one of the most significant centres of Jewish life in Slovakia. The first written record of Jewish presence in this territory, known as *Mons Judeorum* (Jewish Hill), can be already found in the second *Zobor Deed*, dating back to 1113; however, the archaeological discoveries of Jewish cemetery remains prove the existence of a Jewish community in the area at least one century earlier.





The Jews mainly had the statute of Kalisz, royal tax collectors, although they were tradesmen and, to a lesser extent, craftsmen. Experts believe that part of Nitra known today as Párovce was where the Jews lived then – it is also proved by its name *Castrum Judeorum* (i.e. Jewish fortified settlement), which this area carries from 1248.

In the 18th century the Jewish community from Párovce became more and more involved in public administration and had its own reeve. A Jewish religious community was established in the mid 18th century and comprised 21 Jewish families with a rabbi and apparently a synagogue, which the first record is about from 1766, when it was restored. In 1818 the community was granted the land adjacent to the old synagogue, to be expanded in 1820. A Jewish elementary school formed a part of it. There were some oratories, a ritual bath from 1885, a hospice and a hospital. A secondary religious school *Talmud Torah* and especially a rabbinical school – *Yeshiva* (for which Jozef Engel, a maecenas from Nitra, had especially erected a building in 1903) were well-known all throughout the Habsburg-ruled Austro-Hungarian Empire. Jews began to flood to Nitra after 1840 and 1848, in the second half of the 19th century making up a large, economically significant social group mostly devoted to trade.

Following the Jewish Congress held in Budapest in 1869, the Nitra Jewish community split into two separate factions – orthodox and neological (reformed). The former was superior in numbers and in 1903 it expensively renovated the old synagogue in Párovce. Since 1908 a newspaper, the *Machzike Hadas*, was published. In 1908 the Neologists converted some joined leased flats in the house of Henrik Nuemann on Vilmos Tóth Street into a temporary oratory and later built a spectacular Art Nouveau synagogue which is one of only three Slovak works by Leopold Baumhorn, a Budapest-based architect and design engineer of monumental Art Nouveau in the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

THE ROOTS OF JEWRY IN NITRA



Towns are telling us stories from the far past, but also from the near past. Some of them are locked into the walls of the buildings, cobbles and beneath them, in tomb stones, in eternal flame of temples. One of silent witnesses of Nitra's history is its synagogue.

THE SYNAGOGUE SAYS ITS STORY



Synagogue, the sanctuary



Synagogue is the centre of religious life of Jews. The word has a Greek origin and was probably used by Greek Jews for an assembly and community. During the centuries the synagogue worked as the centre of religious and social life of the community and had three functions: chapel, school for teaching religious laws and a place of public discussions of the community. During the next historical development the main function of synagogues became the spiritual mission.

A form of worship stated by Talmud remained nearly unchanged during the centuries. Communal Jewish worship can be carried out wherever ten Jews (a minyan) assemble. Worship can also be carried out alone or with fewer than ten people assembled together. However, there are certain prayers that are communal prayers and therefore can be recited only by a minyan, a cantor who is the representative of the community. He also manages prayers, pre-reads them and also pre-sings the melodies at certain parts of a service. Rabbi, a spiritual representative of the community, is a teacher of Torah, not a priest. He is not a mediator between the God and a man. He decides about cases connected do religious law, functions as a spiritual advisor and a speaker of his community, also as a teacher and an educator. He is a preacher, holds some religious services and ceremonies, such as weddings, Bar Mitzwah, etc. Rabbis were highly educated people, who were recognized for their education and manners. Among the most important personalities of Nitra's history belong more rabbis functioning there, for example miraculous Rabbi Ezechiel Beneth, Rabbi Samuel Ungar, the Katz dynasty and others.



The pivotal motive of synagogical services is the Torah reading and the inner organization of the synagogue is closely related to this. There is usually an architecturally depicted ark – the Tabernacle - in the east side and the synagogue's most valuable object, the Torah is placed in it. The Tabernacle which can be seen here is depicted in the form of an aedicule on three marble columns arched by a massive archivolt and finished by a full pediment. The Decalogue (board containing the Ten Commandments) is placed in the tympanum within the pediment. The doors of the Tabernacle were decorated with brass ironwork and a handle and they used to be covered with a fancy curtain with the motives from Jewish symbolism. In front of the Tabernacle is the eternal light which resembles the candlestick in the old temple. In order for everyone in the synagogue to hear the Torah reading properly, it is read out from an elevated cathedra, known as the almemar or bimah. The orthodox organization of the synagogue requires the cathedra to be placed in the middle.

The almemar of this synagogue was moved here after the year 1946 when the originally neological synagogue was made into orthodox. The spatial division of synagogues includes a vestibule, from where the religious people come to the main hall. According to a tradition, people shouldn't come into the synagogue from the street, but through the vestibule where everyone can leave his worries and problems which bother him in the outside world behind. Men and women enter the synagogue with covered heads. The Talmud divides the chapel into the main aisle for men and the aisle for women. Boys under 13 and girls under 12 are considered as children and they can move freely in the synagogue. After this age they are considered to be adult men and women.



The synagogue as an architectural landmark

The Nitra synagogue is a precious architectural landmark which is enlisted in the central list of The Monuments Board of the Slovak Republic. It stands in a monument zone and the protective area of town monument reserve. It's central ground plan is a square and on the south side it is extended by polygonal avant-corps. The main entrance is situated on the south facade which is directed into the street and is architecturally depicted as an aedicule portal with the donkeyback motif. The portal consists of double-wing entrance doors with rich decorative ironwork and a forged handle. There is a memorial plaque behind the main entrance with the names of the founders and donators who financially contributed to the construction. The building is completed by a central dome with polygonal shell and corner domes. The interior decoration is humble; there are no paintings, statues or other imitations of God. It results from the main dogma of Jewish religion, according to which the core of human life is different from the core of God's existence. Therefore the imitation of God in the form of artistic works made by humans is forbidden.

The outer forms and architectural solutions are not restricted by the tradition and religious principles. Only the main elements are followed. These are for example: the orientation of the synagogue to the east - to Jerusalem; its placement - where it can dominate the surrounding buildings; its division into men and women sections. The interior is composed by an atrium which

opens into the main dome. The main dome is held by four pillars with decorative heads. The central space is surrounded by a matroneum which is accessible by spiral staircases from three sides.



The story of the synagogue continues...



The story of Nitra's synagogue is marked by cruel events, which affected Europe and the local Jews during the Holocaust and the following years influenced by the communist ideology, which had a negative approach to the church and religion. The continuity of the coexistence of several ethnicities and religious groups was interrupted. The sacral objects were used as storage houses and so they decayed. The devastated Slovak Jewish community could not take care of their maintenance and running. The original

owner of the synagogue was the Nitra Jewish community and since 1982 the District National Committee in Nitra. The roof was reconstructed by 1990. In accordance with the law the synagogue became the property of the Nitra town in 1991. The next phase of the reconstruction began after 1996. The professionals



dealing with the project documentation focused on its specifics - the excellent acoustics and the reconstruction of the interior continued. The reconstruction was sponsored by the town and it was carried out thanks to the support of the Ministry of Culture of the Slovak Republic and the partner town Zoetermeer. The synagogue was publicly reopened in 2003 and it became a precious place for cultural and social events. It is the place of „The Fate of Slovak Jews“ exhibition of the Museum of Jewish Culture in Bratislava and it serves as a permanent exhibition of the prestigious Israeli artist Shraga Weil (1918-2009) who was born in Nitra and was its honorary citizen.

Since 2009 the synagogue is a part of the Slovak Jewish Heritage Route.

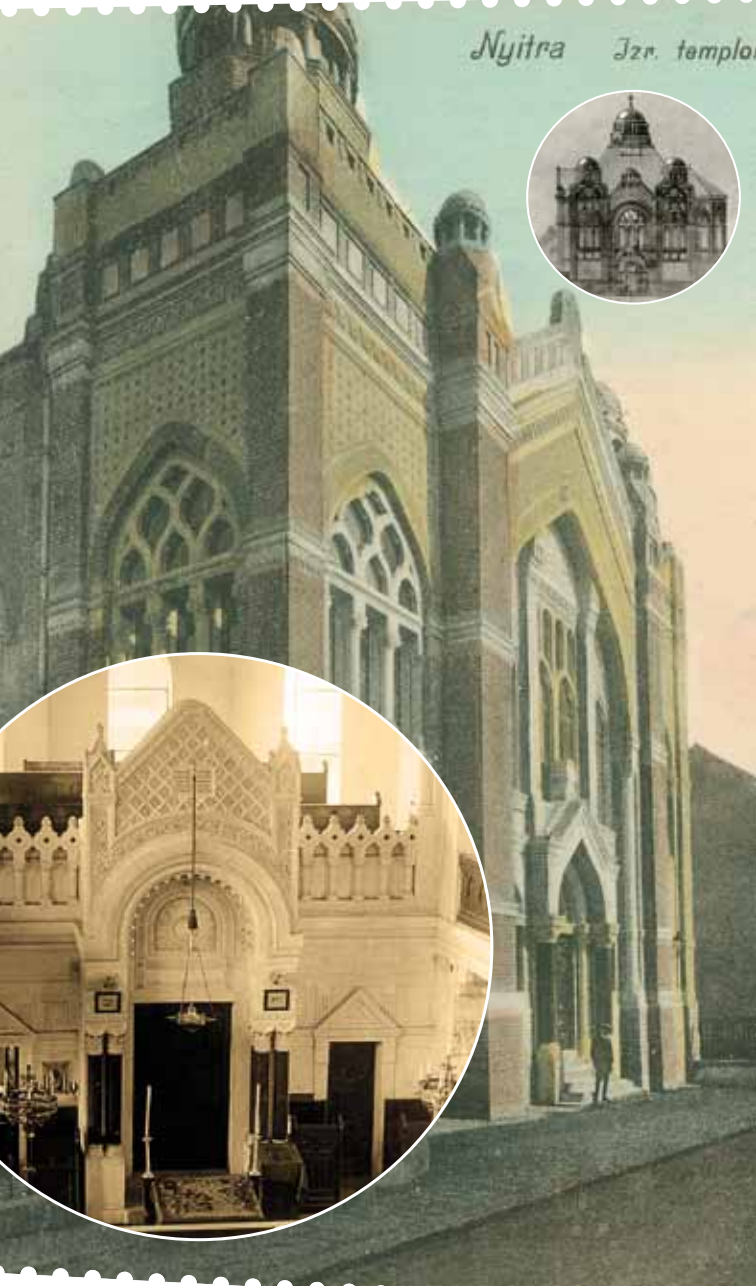


The Synagogue is used as a concert and exhibition hall of Nitra city since 2003, where susceptible audience can find rare artistic experiences.





Nyitra Izr. templom



**LEOPOLD BAUMHORN,
the builder of synagogues**

Although Leopold Baumhorn didn't belong to the most important architects of his time, his work was unique. Even if he designed many secular buildings, banks, palaces, schools and so on, history of architecture remembers him as the greatest and most fertile builder of synagogues from the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Within years 1888 – 1922 he created building layouts for 22 of them, more than any other European architect. He was also involved in reconstructions of many others. These monumental, elegant temples of bigger and smaller towns throughout the whole monarchy became the pride of not only Jewish communities, but the whole towns and cities; they were built in: Esztergom, Timișoara, Rijeka, Brașov, Kaposvár, Szeged, Pécs, Cegléd, Novi Sad, Arad, Győr, Kecskemét, Gyöngyös, Budapest; on the territory of Slovakia his work decorates Nitra, Trenčín, Lučenec or Liptovský sv. Mikuláš (reconstruction). The synagogues are the eyewitnesses of emancipation efforts of the Middle European Jewry on the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries. Leopold Baumhorn was born in 1860 in Kisbér, Komárom County in Hungary, to the family of a teacher. He attended secondary grammar school in Győr. After graduation his father sent him to Technical institute in Vienna, where he became a student of famous designers – König, Ferstel, Weyr. Completing his studies he returned to his birthplace for a short time, but soon set up a practice under Gyula Pártos and Ödön Lechner in Budapest, where he remained for following 12 years. Then he started his own business. His work was determined by easy drawings, fine and rich ornaments throughout his life. It was a typical “Baumhorn” eclecticism with Moor, Byzantine and Art Nouveau elements.

The architect died in 1932. His tomb in Jewish cemetery in Kozma Street in Budapest is decorated by the silhouette of the Szeged synagogue, which is considered to be his masterpiece. Many believe that it is one of the most beautiful synagogues in the world.



Even though former Czechoslovakia, established after the fall of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy in 1918, was the first European country to recognize the national rights of the Jewish minority, it did not manage to stand up to its democratic principles.



The formation of the Slovak State on March 14, 1939 meant a cruel period for Jews – it all began with the gradual abuse of human rights that culminated in the passing of the Jewish Codex in September 1941. This limited the property rights of Jewish population (over five hundred Jewish shops and craft manufactures were aryanised only in Nitra). The Jewish ordeal culminated in 1942 when 3,457 Nitra Jews were deported to the Nazi concentration camps where most of them died.

On the eve of Holocaust and Racial Violence Victims Day, September 8, 2005, the permanent Holocaust exhibition called *The Fate of Slovak Jews (Osudy slovenských Židov)*, organised by the Museum of Jewish Culture in Bratislava, was inaugurated on the top floor of the synagogue and remains to this day a unique exhibition of its kind in Slovakia. Through both documents and historical objects, the exhibition brings to life the most severe period for Jews during World War II. Each exhibit is not only a symbol and memento of terror of this era but it is also connected to a specific person, and so serves as a memorial to a specific person's fate and personal tragedy. An essential part of the exhibition is a symbolic monument dedicated to Holocaust victims. The distinguished Slovak artist Milan Veselý participated in its creation.



THE FATE OF SLOVAK JEWS



Shraga Weil, born František Weil (September 24, 1918, Nitra – February 20, 2009, Haogen, Israel), was born to a family of teachers, journalists and businessmen. He studied at the Architecture technical college and later at the Academy of Arts, Architecture and Design in Prague (1937-1939), although he did not graduate. His unfinished degree in architecture and sculpture predetermined his artistic orientation. During World War II, when many of his family members were taken to concentration camps, he spent some time hiding in Budapest. He spent most of his life in Haogen, Israel, a kibbutz where he retired with his wife and a group of other immigrants shortly after the war. He arrived there after a long and difficult two-year-long journey through Belgium, France and Cyprus. In 1954 he studied monumental painting techniques at the *Academie des Beaux Art* in Paris. His life and work was later significantly marked by his son's death in 1967. The painter's daughter still lives with her family in Israel.



Even though the core of his work is graphics, he also produced many book illustrations and monumental projects. His capricious works, created in cooperation with many architects, can be admired at various important places all over the world, such as the Parliament Buildings – Knesset – in Jerusalem and the monumental decoration of the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C. The artist's cultural affluence, full of life, colours and biblical figures dazzles us, especially his *Song of Songs (Pieseň piesní)* displayed in the hall representing Israel. In the last years of his life he moved from graphic works to oil painting in which he contemplatively returns to the events of this life. Despite his uneasy life story, his palette retains his originally radiant colourfulness.

Author of grafics
SHRAGA WEIL

This important artist, who spent his childhood and youth in Nitra, never forgot about his birthplace, not even after leaving for Israel after World War II. Shraga Weil spoke fluent Slovak even after many years spent in a new country; he visited his birth town twice and left here more than 30 graphic sheets. Almost all of them can be admired on the premises of the Nitra synagogue. These graphics are very valuable for Nitra, not only because of their author, but also because of their themes: the feature motifs clearly inspired by the biblical and Jewish traditions. The Synagogue houses works from some of the artist's graphic cycles, such as *The Song of Songs (Pieseň piesní)*, *Pardes* and *Biblical Musicians (Biblickí hudobníci)*.

Work Collections

Brandeis University, Waltham, Massachusetts, USA

Boston Public Library, USA

Israel Museum, Jerusalem, Israel

William Rockhill Nelson Gallery, Kansas City, USA

Fogg Museum, Harvard University, USA

Los Angeles County Museum, USA

Jewish Museum, New York, USA

Philadelphia Museum of Art, USA

Joslyn Museum, Omaha, Nebraska, USA

Judah Magnes Museum, Berkeley, California, USA

Published Illustrations

The Love of Samson – a poem by Lea Goldberg

Tracks in the Desert – drawing of the Negev

The Song of Songs

Ecclesiastes

The Dead Sea Scrolls

Chanukah

Joseph and His Brothers, author: Thomas Mann

Love Poem from the Hebrew, anthology by David E. Gorss

Awards

1959 – Dizengoff Art Prize, Tel Aviv, Israel

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1952 – Prize for bibliophilia Samson's
Love, Author: Lea Goldberg

Independent exhibitions

1960 – Tel Aviv Museum, Israel

1961 – Hazorea Museum, Israel

1962 – London, Great Britain

1963 – Tel Aviv, Israel

1965 – Museum of Art, Elath Jerusalem

Fine Art Gallery, Israel

1967, 1973, 1987 – Safrai Gallery, Jerusalem, Israel

1969, 1971, 1978, 1981 – Pucker / Safrai Gallery, Boston, USA

1973 – Jewish Museum, New York, USA

1983, 1986 – Safrai Gallery, Tel Aviv, Israel

Works in Public Buildings

Parliament in Jerusalem – Knesset, Israel

Weizmann Institute of Science in Rehovot, Israel

Hotel Hilton in Tel Aviv, Israel

President's residence in Jerusalem, Israel

John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing

Arts, Washington, D.C., USA



A Jewish cemetery, on the hill under the contemporary Klokočina, inconspicuously testifies the history of Jewish nation. A walk through the cemetery melts even the toughest heart. Tombstones talk – testify the lives.

The Jewish cemetery together with the Nitra synagogue is an outstanding monument. It may have originally belonged to Párovce; however, today it lies at the beginning of the Klokočina housing estate. The area it covers, as well as its more than five thousand tombstones, which have protected the peace of the deceased for more than 250 years, makes this cemetery one of the largest and best preserved in Slovakia. Many of its tombstones are fine examples of the stone carving art of their period. Their traditional shapes boast features of the Baroque and Classicistic styles. Their inscriptions reveal the fate of many distinguished but also simple hardworking people who contributed to the colour of the old Nitra. To mention but a few of them, we can catch a sight of a black marble tombstone

belonging to Nitra businessman and philanthropist Jozef Engel de

Peskodár (1836 – 1905), who was awarded a noble title by the Emperor for his charity; there is also the grave of lawyer Dr. Béla Szilágyi (1832-1918), who became the Mayor of Nitra in 1931; but we can also visit the last resting



place of brickfield owner Max Pollak (1832-1918); Eugen Dukesz (1877 – 1929), the founder of the Social-Democratic Party; Dr. Emil Kramer (1877-1918), who built the local asbestos cement factory; and Artúr Verö (1858-1921), owner and builder of the local foundry and granary.



A pilgrimage destination for Jews from all over the world and unique sight in the orthodox part of the cemetery (separated by a wooden fence) is the grave of a great scholar miraculous Rabbi Ezechiel Baneth (1773-1854), who died a saint and whose moral and religious authority was widely respected during his lifetime. He was very religious, and both Jews and Christians from Nitra worshiped him as the saint. His thoughtful statements were passed



on by people for many years. A local legend said that there was a fire column jutting out of his grave to the sky.

In the past, the cemetery was divided into two parts by a brick wall that was built in 1869 when the Nitra Jewish community split into orthodox and neological factions. During World War II the cemetery was heavily damaged since the orthodox cemetery served as a strategic place for the German division fighting the Soviets. Square openings that served as embrasures can still be seen on the remains of the wall. After World War II both parts of the cemetery were in a derelict a state, and their present appearance is the result of a long reconstruction process.

There has been erected a monument in a memory of the Holocaust victims in the orthodox part of the cemetery – more than 6,000 Jewish people from Nitra and its surroundings lost their lives between 1942-1945 in the concentration camps of Auschwitz, Majdanek, Lublin, Treblinka, as well as Kremnička and Ráztoka in Slovakia.

**Silently whispers human fates
... JEWISH CEMETERY**

THE SLOVAK JEWISH HERITAGE ROUTE

The aim of an innovative cultural initiative, coordinated by the Slovak Jewish Heritage Centre, is to unite the most outstanding sights of Jewish culture so as to best promote them as part of the Slovak cultural tourist product. This has resulted in a route comprising 22 sights former and still functioning synagogues, the Museum of Jewish Culture exhibition, three UNESCO World Cultural Heritage sites and three Jewish cemeteries. Only monuments used for religious, cultural or educational purposes with dignity or being restored for these reasons can become the partners of the project.

The project runs on the principle of partnership with the owners and curators of the sites involved, which helps to market them as part of a valuable Jewish heritage collection. Similarly, as commercial or hotel chains all over the world build their prestige, this cultural route also has the ambition to present common values which can thus better draw the attention of the laic and professional public alike, as well as other supporters and potential sponsors.

Internationally, the Slovak Jewish Heritage Route is an integral part of the larger European Jewish Heritage Routes project which was awarded the Grand Cultural Route status by the European Council in 2005. One of the essential parts of the project is to coordinate the European Day of Jewish Culture in Slovakia, which is the biggest Jewish cultural festival in Europe. It takes place once a year in more than twenty-five European countries on the first Sunday in September.

discover the place, live the story

This unique project presents the most spectacular Jewish monuments in Slovakia. Visit the best know places of the Slovak Jewish Heritage Route not only in the big cities, such as Bratislava (in the top centre picture), Trnava, Nitra, Žilina, Košice or Prešov, but also smaller monuments in Stupava, Sereď, Šamorín (in the top right picture), Šurany, Nové Zámky, Komárno, Šahy, Banská Štiavnica, Spišská Nová Ves, Spišské Podhradie, Bardejov (in the top left picture) and others which are gradually added to the route. For more information visit www.slovak-jewish-heritage.org.



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The synagogue in Nitra is a valuable architectural monument, enlisted in the central list of The Monuments Board of the Slovak Republic. It is located in the city's historical centre and in the town architectural reserve protected area.

Inhabitants of the city were awarded a Chatam Sofer medal by the management of the Slovak National Museum in Bratislava - the Museum of Jewish Culture in 2003, once reconstruction works were over and this cultural monument re-opened its door to the public. It is the part of the Slovak Jewish Heritage Route project since 2009.

THE NITRA SYNAGOGUE

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