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The Synagogue of Zagreb 1867-1942

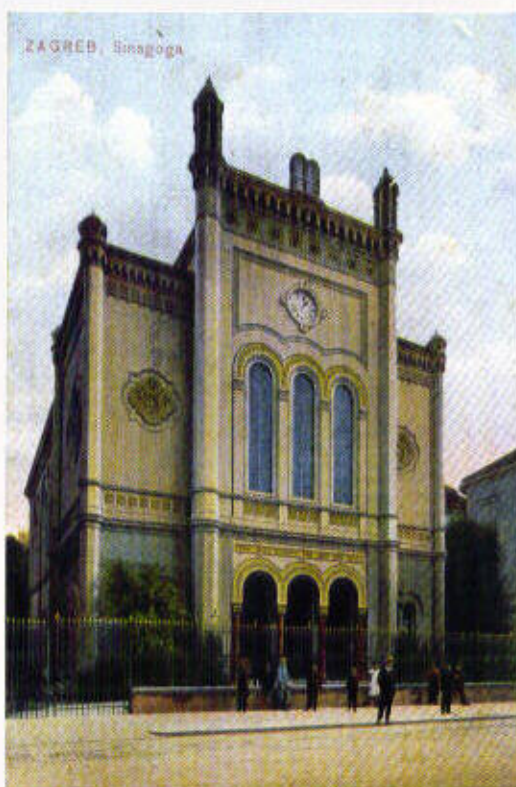
Jews began to settle in Croatian territory under Habsburg rule soon after the proclamation of the Tolerance Edicts (1781-1783) by Joseph II, the reformist emperor. The Edicts proclaimed the freedom of worship and took away the position of the Catholic church as the state church. The most severe restrictions on the Jews, the ban on real estate ownership and handicraft and farming activity, remained in force until the mid-nineteenth century, during which time the Jews were allowed to engage only in those traditional activities which they had previously pursued in the Catholic community – commerce and monetary transactions. In Croatia, permanent settlement was also limited, so that until the nineteen-fifties the Jewish communities in Croatian cities and townships were small compared with other places in the Habsburg Empire.

The revolutionary events of 1848 marked a turning point: the constitutional equality of all citizens was proclaimed regardless of their religious or any other affiliations. However, in the period of absolutist rule (1851-1860) the pre-revolutionary anti-Jewish rules were again introduced, including the ban on ownership of real estate. They were revoked with the restoration of the constitutional order in 1860, and in 1867 the Austrian law granted Jews full equality. The Croatian Parliament enacted the law on the equality of Jews in 1873 as part of modern liberal reforms.

Jews first settled in Zagreb in the late eighteenth century, and in 1806 some seventy of them founded the Jewish Community. In 1809 the community had a rabbi and in 1811 it had its own cemetery. The Hevra Kadisha charity was active from 1828 onwards. The Ashkenazi Jews who arrived in Croatia from different parts of central Europe settled in the suburbs of the two medieval Zagreb settlements – the free royal city of Gradec and Kaptol, the bishop's see. Kaptol subsequently became the Lower Town (Downtown) and underwent urban development in the second half of the nineteenth century, which made it the center of Zagreb. It was there that the first places of worship serving the Jewish community in Zagreb were founded.

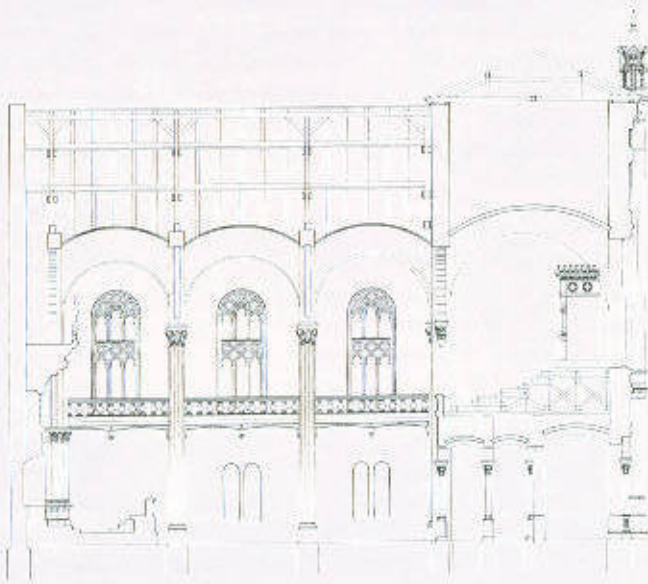
In 1855, with some seven hundred members already, the community decided to build a temple. The preparations started in 1861 with the appointment of the committee responsible for construction and funding. In 1862 the committee cast an eye on a site near the city's main (Jelačić) square. Negotiations with the city authorities lasted three years before the construction of the Synagogue could begin in 1866. The negotiations took so long because the site was selected in an area intended for a new street, which, however, could not be completed because of the lack of money. The building of the street was also substantially supported by the Jewish religious community and by individual Jews, owners of the building sites along the planned facility, which was opened in 1867 simultaneously with the opening of the Synagogue. The completion of the street marked an important step in the urban development of the Lower Town.

The Synagogue was officially consecrated on 27 September 1867 in the presence of repre-



View of the Zagreb synagogue, postcard, around 1900 (Private property)

Longitudinal section, computer reconstruction

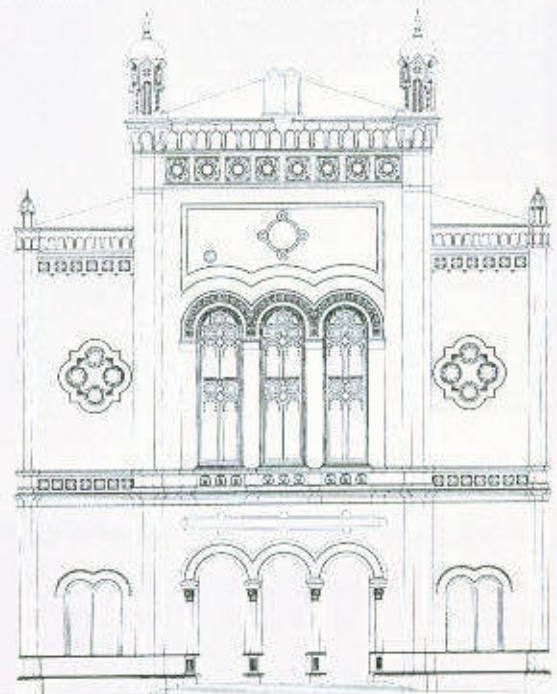


Blessed be he that cometh in the name of the Lord; we have blessed you out of the house of the Lord. The six-pointed star, *magen David*, in the internal window structure is incorporated into the overall system of the temple decoration. The horizontal division of the front into two zones gave the temple a more profane character as compared with its Viennese model. With its high three-part window on the front and the clock – anything but an unimportant detail – in the central axis, above the *Tablets of the Law (luhot)*, the Synagogue stood up to traditional, representative public buildings.

The sumptuous sacral interior contained stylistic and symbolic elements replicating Förster's and other reformist synagogues of the time. The decoration is unequivocally Moorish. The design of the eastern side with the *aron ha-kodesh* was taken almost literally from the Viennese synagogue. The rosette was not blind as in Vienna, but let eastern light in through the arabesque of its mesh. It was surrounded by the five medallions, symbols of the Pentateuch, the *Torah*, with a quotation from David's psalm (Psalms, 19,8): *The statutes of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart.* It symbolized justice and the law-giver, and indirectly referred to the Jewish kingdom, Jerusalem and the Temple.

The *aron ha-kodesh* had a three-dimensional, stepwise sunk frame with several joined and differently profiled arches, carried alternately by pilasters and slender fluted columns. The star, *magen David*, was within the archivolt, just above the *parohet*. The structure and the phials of the step-like gable above the archivolt were reminiscent of the gables of Northern Gothic town halls, and could be interpreted as a symbol of Jerusalem and, therefore, of the Temple.

Over its seventy-four years the Synagogue underwent only one major modification. At the turn of the century, when the Jewish Religious Community had 3237 members, the temple was adapted in order to accommodate a larger congregation. The project was entrusted to Zagreb's design



The façade of the Zagreb Synagogue, computer reconstruction



Computer reconstruction of the Zagreb Synagogue, 1996
Ivana and Tomislav Hušan

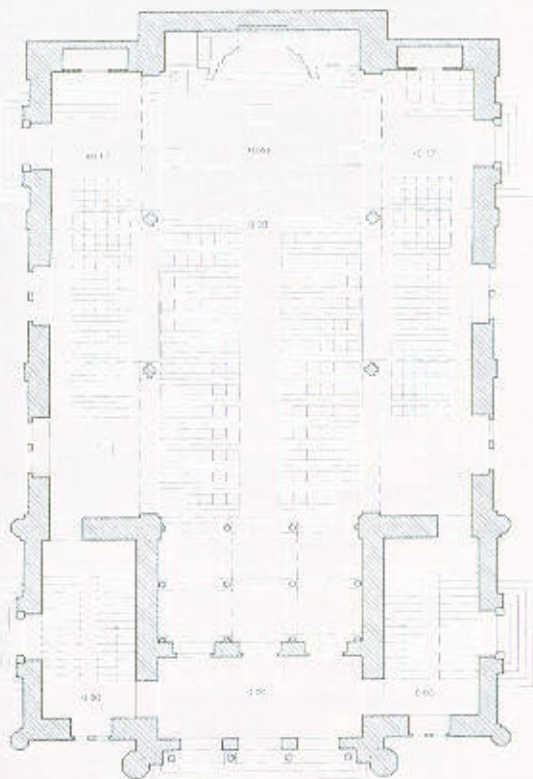
Separate staircases on either side of the forecourt led to the women's gallery above the side naves and towards the western gallery with the organ. The forecourt and the staircases were intended to constitute a separate unit, each with a separate roof, while their external faces – the impressive façade of the synagogue – had a pronounced esthetic and symbolic charge.

The composition of the main façade, with its dominant, drawn out and elevated projection and the two symmetrical, lower lateral parts, reflects the internal division into three naves. At ground-floor level the front was distinguished by the three-arch entrance and biforia, whereas the first floor level had a high triforium with an elevated arch and quadrifoliate rosettes on the staircases. The latter two types were taken over from the Viennese model. There were biforia at ground-floor level of the lateral façades and on the cen-

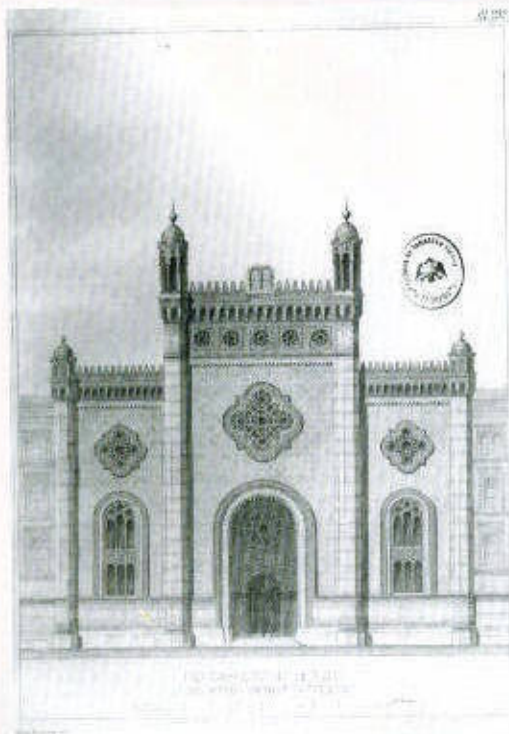
tral façade, while the first floor windows imitated the Viennese design. They marked the three bays dividing the interior.

Klein devoted the greatest attention to the two most important carriers of symbolic messages: the façade and the *aron hakodesh* with the *Bimah*, composed as a unity. By changing the form of the openings and the layout he structurally and semantically rearranged Förster's concept of the temple façade, and actually created a variant. He rejected the early oriental motif of the high portal, preferring the more Byzantine-style openings with elevated semicircular arches, and reduced the share of early oriental and Islamic motifs in the decoration.

Klein used monosemic Jewish symbols on the front. A decorative Hebrew inscription with a biblical quotation (Psalms, 118, 26),



Ground-floor layout, computer reconstruction



The Synagogue at Tempelgasse, Vienna, by Ludwig von Förster
Drawing from *Allgemeine Bauzeitung* XXIV, 1859

representatives of city and regional authorities, Zagreb public figures and many citizens. It was the first prominent public structure in the Lower Town, and its architecture and scale aroused general admiration.

The architect commissioned by the Jewish religious community to build the Synagogue was Franjo Klein (1828-1889), the only artist among the local builders of the time and the most important representative of romantic historicism. The model for the Synagogue in Zagreb was the great synagogue in the Viennese Jewish district of Leopoldstadt, in Wallischgasse (later Tempelgasse), designed by Christian Friedrich Ludwig von Förster (1797-1863), a leading representative of romantic historicism. The Viennese synagogue was built in 1856/58 and razed to the ground in 1938. Förster's synagogue in Tempelgasse was one of a series of impressive Moorish synagogues built in major cities, such as those in Leipzig (designed

by Otto Simonson, 1854/55), Frankfurt (Georg Kayser, 1855/60), Stuttgart (Gustav Breymann and Adolf Wolf, 1859/61), and Berlin (Eduard Knoblauch and Eduard Stüler, 1859/66). All of them were extensively reviewed in the leading journals in the eighteen-sixties and became models for synagogue design in central Europe. Förster's synagogue in Vienna, the first prominent synagogue to be built in the Habsburg Empire after 1848, soon became a prototype - in Austria as well as in other European countries - and was subsequently varied until the end of the century. This was due largely to Förster's eclectic-oriental style, a singular variant of the Moorish style, which was accepted by many Jewish communities as the expression of their cultural and religious identity.

Franjo Klein took over the concept of Förster's synagogue in Vienna, but not its complex symbolism, expressed most evidently by its style. That is, he did not take over Förster's early oriental motifs, but used the already developed round arch style (*Rundbogenstil*). The Synagogue was one of the most impressive examples of the style in Zagreb.

The Synagogue occupied the greater part of the 1540 square metre plot. It faced west, and it receded somewhat from the regulation line in accordance with the still enforced rule from Emperor Joseph's times whereby non-Catholic places of worship could not have a public entrance from the street, nor could they have spires or bells; it was also separated from the street by a fence. The central projecting part was 24 m, and the sides 18.5 m high; the width was 19.7 and the length 30 metres. The Synagogue was longitudinal with a wider and almost imperceptibly higher central nave, and two narrower naves; it did not have a basilical plan like the synagogue in Vienna. The internal layout followed the Viennese model. The western forecourt led into the main hall, with the *bima* and the *aron ha-kodesh* on the eastern side. The sacral axis dominated the strictly symmetrical layout. The synagogue had five entrances: the main one on the façade, and two on each side of the forecourt and the side naves, accessed by four low steps. The plastered walls were lined with smooth rustic ashlars.

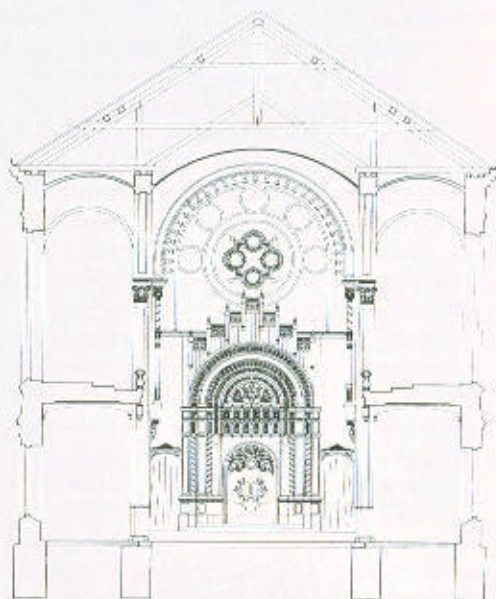
studio of Leo Hönigsberg and Julius Deutsch, also members of the Community. The actual reconstruction of the eastern part was not carried out before 1921, when the Community had grown to 5970 members. This was done by Oton Goldscheider, a professional employee from 1904 and co-owner from 1914 onwards of the Hönigsberg & Deutsch Studio. After 1921 he worked as an independent architect. The niche with the *aron ha-kodesh* was modified on that occasion: the rosette with the medallions was removed, the gable extended, and the organ placed behind it; the staircases were also completed. In 1933 the central heating system was installed.

At the height of the Holocaust, during the Independent State of Croatia and the Ustasha terror, the Synagogue was torn down by the decision of the mayor of Zagreb, ostensibly because it did not fit into the city's master plan. The demolition took place from the autumn of 1941 to the spring of 1942. Only a few fragments of the building have been preserved: the was-basin and two memorial tablets from the forecourt, today in the City of Zagreb Museum, and part of a column, also from the forecourt, today in the historic seat of the Zagreb Jewish Community at 16 Palmotičeva Street.

Several photographs from the nineteenth century and the blueprints for the adaptation of the temple from the early twentieth century provided the basis for the computer reconstruction of the Synagogue, produced in 1996 on the occasion of the 190th anniversary of the Community. It made possible the art-historical presentation of this lost monument of Zagreb's architecture and the most important testimony of Jewish presence in Zagreb. Finally, it renewed the memory of the building, fifty years after it disappeared from the cityscape.



Interior, view of the western side, computer reconstruction



Cross section with the *Aron ha-Kodesh*, computer reconstruction