

JEWISH HISTORIC MONUMENTS AND SITES IN BULGARIA



**United States Commission for
the Preservation of America's Heritage Abroad**

2011



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FOR THE PRESERVATION OF AMERICA'S HERITAGE ABROAD**

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UNITED STATES COMMISSION
FOR THE PRESERVATION OF AMERICA'S HERITAGE ABROAD

WARREN L. MILLER
CHAIRMAN

December 28, 2011

Message from the Chairman

One of the principal missions that United States law assigns the Commission for the Preservation of America's Heritage Abroad is to identify and report on cemeteries, monuments, and historic buildings in Central, Eastern and Southern Europe associated with the cultural heritage of U.S. citizens, especially endangered sites. The purpose is to help enable efforts to restore and preserve the properties. The Commission also seeks assurances from the governments of the region regarding the protection and preservation of these cultural heritage properties and encourages their restoration and maintenance.

The Congress and the President were prompted to establish the Commission because of the special problem faced by Jewish sites in the region: The communities that had once cared for the properties were annihilated during the Holocaust. The communist governments that took power after World War II throughout most of the region were insensitive to concerns about the preservation of the sites. Properties were converted to other uses or encroached upon by development. Natural deterioration was not counteracted. Vandalism has sometimes gone unchecked.

The Governments of the United States and Bulgaria entered into a Commission-negotiated agreement regarding the protection and preservation of places of worship, historic sites, cemeteries, and memorials in 2002. The agreement covers sites identified in this report.

I hope this report will enable American Jews who trace their roots to Bulgaria to connect with their cultural heritage.

Warren L. Miller
Chairman

Acknowledgements

Many people worked on the survey on which this report provides information. Work was carried out in two main phases. In 2003, part of the survey was prepared as a section of an overview of various ethnic and religious minority historic and artistic sites in Bulgaria by Professors Mark Stefanovich and Evelina Kelbetcheva of the American University in Bulgaria. Professors Stefanovich and Kelbetcheva and their students collected most of the historical information adapted to the introductory section of this report, and a substantial part of the information on Bulgarian synagogues.

A second part of the survey took place in 2005 and 2006 and included site visits, descriptions, and extensive photography of Jewish cemeteries. The Organization of the Jews in Bulgaria, “Shalom,” carried out this stage of the work. Becca Lazarova arranged for the survey on behalf of “Shalom.”

The following individuals, most of whom are members of the Jewish community of Bulgaria, participated: Avram Iossifov Alkalai; Nisim Benbasat; David Shalom Davidov; Samuil Eshkenazi; Moriz Eshkenazy; Michel Geron; Beta Harlanova; Fredi Nissim Israelov; Robert Jerassy; Anri Yosif Jivri; Maya Kozareva; Jacques Leji; Avram Levi; Josef Meshula; Solomon Mitrani; Jack Moshe; Elia Solomon Moskona; Yakov Plamen; David Madjar Simantov; Nisim Talvi; and Elin Todorov.

Most of the information about Bulgarian synagogues is based on research by Professor Rachel Angelova and architect Miriana Jordanova. It was supplemented by data provided by “Shalom,” the Jewish Heritage Grant Program of the World Monuments Fund, and the International Survey of Jewish Monuments. Former Commission Research Director Samuel Gruber made site visits to the synagogues and to Jewish cemeteries in Sofia, Plovdiv, Varna, and Vidin. Special thanks are given to Boris Yakov in Varna for hosting Dr. Gruber in that city. In addition, Commission Members Ned Bandler and Michael Levy visited the former synagogue in Samakov.

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Front cover photo: Fragments of tombstones at the Kyustendil cemetery. The sign reads: “Remnants from the devastations of Jewish graves.”

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Jewish Communities and Cultural Monuments

Jews have been present in the territory of modern Bulgaria for almost 2,000 years. An ancient synagogue has been partially excavated in Plovdiv. A late Second Century Latin inscription found at the village of Gigen on the shore of the Danube (near Nikopol, the site of the ancient Roman settlement Oescus) is decorated with a menorah, evidence of a Jewish community and a synagogue. The Latin inscription mentions the *archisynagogos* (head of a synagogue) Joseph. Approximately two centuries later, in 379, a decree by Emperor Theodosius I to the governors of Thrace and Illyria demonstrated persecution of the Jews in these areas.

There is frequent mention of a Jewish presence in Bulgaria during the Middle Ages. After the Muslim population, which developed in Bulgaria as a consequence of the expansion of the Ottoman Empire in the 16th century, Jews comprised, until the Holocaust and its aftermath, second most minority.

Historically and culturally, the Jewish community of Bulgaria had the two major groups of Jews culturally: Ashkenazi and Sephardi. Ashkenazi Jews were culturally linked to the medieval Jewish communities of Central Europe and included most Jews in Bulgaria prior to the 15th century. The Ashkenazi Jewish community, which came from Central Europe between the 11th and 13th centuries, settled especially along the Danube River, mainly in Vidin, Svishtov, Nikopol and Ruse.

The history and treatment of the Jewish people as a minority in Bulgaria has been varied. In the Middle Ages, Bulgarian Tsar Ivan Alexander (1331-1371) married Sarah, a Jewish woman. Although she converted to Christianity to rule under the name of Theodora, the Jewish community is reported to have flourished during her reign with many privileges. By the mid-14th century, however, the Jewish people were being persecuted, especially a heretic sect named, "Zhidove."

During the Second Bulgarian Empire, the capital, Veliko Turnovo, was an important center. The Jewish community lived in a neighborhood named Frenkhissar with other foreigners. Until the end of the 14th century, the synagogue reputedly dominated the skyline of the district.

The Sephardi arrived in the Ottoman Empire after 1492, when the centuries-old Jewish population of Spain was expelled from that country. Tens of thousands of Jews from Spain found refuge in Muslim countries, and many eventually settled in Ottoman-controlled Balkans, including Bulgaria. The Sephardi were concentrated in Southwest Bulgaria (e.g., in Dupnitsa, Gotze Delchev, Kyustendil, Sofia, Plovdiv, Yambol, and Burgas).

From the 16th century on, the Sephardi came to dominate existing Jewish communities. The newcomers were favored under Ottoman rule and, in addition to their roles as artisans and shopkeepers, they worked as businessmen, bankers, physicians, and served

as diplomats. Unfortunately, the architectural monuments from the Ottoman period, which included intensive urban development of Jewish neighborhoods throughout the Balkans, have not been preserved. For example, according to Angelova, at the end of the 16th century, there were five synagogues in Nikopol and there were four synagogues each in Vidin and Pleven at the end of the 17th century. Sofia had five synagogues by the end of the 19th century, with only one remaining today, the Central Synagogue built in 1905-10.

At the beginning of the 19th century, there were 28 Jewish communities in Bulgaria. During the 19th century communities were settled in: Svishtov; Ruse; Lom; Silistra; as well as in southwest Bulgaria in Dupnitsa, Samokov and Gornja Djumaja (today Blagoevgrad). After the Liberation of Bulgaria in 1878, there were 34 major Jewish communities in the country, with new ones in Somovit, Montana, Ajtos, Provadija, Haskovo, Kardjali, Chirpan, Assenovgrad and Nevrokop (today Gotze Delchev). According to the 1905 census, the Jewish population was slightly less than one percent in Bulgaria of the total population. In 1926, it was 0.85 percent; 46,565 people. Most of these people lived in urban centers, with one half concentrated in Sofia (Barouh 1998). Before the Second World War (1934 census), there were 48,565 Jewish people in Bulgaria.

At this time, the Jewish communities were still involved in occupations they were traditionally associated with: trade; local commerce; and manufacturing. They were not involved in agriculture or the state bureaucracy. The Jewish upper middle class preferred to practice the professions of medicine, law, dentistry, pharmacy, engineering and jewelry making, or to be owners of small and mid-sized businesses (Barouh 1998).

As early as the end of the 19th century, a strong Zionist current was present in Bulgaria. This may partially explain why, when they were given the opportunity in 1948, the majority of the Jewish population in Bulgaria opted to immigrate to Israel. Between October 25th, 1948 and May 16th, 1949, 32,106 Jews immigrated to Israel (Vassileva 1992).

Survival of Bulgarian Jews During the Holocaust

One of the relative bright spots in an otherwise dark period of Jewish history during the Second World War was the treatment shown to the Jews of Bulgaria by King Boris III, the leaders of the Bulgarian Exarchate (Orthodox Church) and the parliament. Bulgaria was an ally of Nazi Germany, but the Bulgarian government refused to deport its Jews to the death camps of the Third Reich. The government's obduracy in the face of the Nazi pressure was stimulated by protests by individuals such as Dimitar Peshev and by Bulgarian Orthodox Church leaders. Bulgaria was the only country during the Second World War where the Jewish community – which numbered around 42,000 – survived the war. Most of these survivors immigrated to Israel after 1948.

Still, the government instituted the so-called “Law for the Defense of the Nation” which took anti-Semitic measures.

In addition, Bulgaria was given parts of German-conquered Greece and the former Yugoslavia and the Jews of these areas were not saved. Although Bulgaria's Jewish citizens were saved, a high price in lives was paid. Approximately 13,000 Jewish people in Aegean Thrace and Macedonia (5,000 on Greek soil and 8,000 on Yugoslavian) were deported by Bulgaria to their deaths in the German camps.

Jewish Community in Present-Day Bulgaria

The Bulgarian Jewish community today numbers fewer than 2,580 people, almost all of whom live in major urban centers. Since 1992, the small population has been revitalized into a vibrant religious and cultural community. This community is represented by “Shalom” – the Organization of the Jews in Bulgaria. There is an excellent Jewish school in Sofia, a weekly Jewish newspaper printed in Bulgarian and an *Annual of the Organization of the Jews in Bulgaria – Shalom* that publishes scholarly articles about Judaica.

Jewish Monuments in Bulgaria

Today, the long history of the Jewish community in Bulgaria is represented by a number of monuments – synagogues, cemeteries and Jewish neighborhoods – in the major Bulgarian cities where the Jewish community was, and still is, active. Since the Second World War, several monuments have been erected by the Jewish communities to give thanks for their protection and salvation during the Holocaust. Examples of these unique ‘monuments of thanksgiving’ can be seen in Vidin and Plovdiv.

Under the present laws for the preservation of cultural monuments, several synagogues and former synagogues are registered as *national monuments of culture* and are under the protection of the state. All of these date from the second half of the 19th century to the Second World War.

Prior to 1989, four synagogues were demolished as part of new urban development in Kyustendil, Haskovo, Karnobat, and Dobrich. A detailed architectural study was made of the synagogue in Kyustendil, but only general archival plans and photos exist for the others.

The synagogue in Shumen collapsed from deterioration, and the synagogues in Burgas and Yambol have been turned into art galleries. The former synagogue in Gotze Delchev is now an apartment building inhabited by six families. The two synagogues that are in the best condition are located in Sofia and Plovdiv. These were recently restored – the synagogue in Plovdiv with the assistance of the Commission – and are still functioning.

Synagogues

Town	Synagogue	Date	Status
Burgas	Yes	1905-1910	Art gallery
Chirpan	No	Unknown	Destroyed
Dobrich	No	Unknown	Demolished prior to 1989
Dupnitsa	Yes	1859	Unknown
Gotze Delchev	Yes	Unknown	Apartment building
Haskovo	Yes	Unknown	Art gallery
Karnobat	No	Unknown	Demolished prior to 1989
Kazanlak	Yes	Unknown	Unknown
Kyustendil	No	Unknown	Demolished prior to 1989
Lom	Yes	Unknown	Destroyed
Pazardik	Yes	Mid-19 th cent.	Coffee shop
Pazardjik	Yes	Mid-19 th cent.	Warehouse
Pleven	No	Unknown	All synagogues demolished
Plovdiv (ancient)	Yes	Ancient	Ruin
Plovdiv (Zion)	Yes	1878	Synagogue
Ruse	Ashkenazi	1927	Jewish community center & prayer room
Ruse	Sephardi	19 th cent.	Church
Samokov	Yes	1850s	Abandoned
Shumen	No	Mid-19 th cent.	Demolished
Silistra	Yes	Unknown	Abandoned
Sliven	Yes	Unknown	Demolished
Sofia	Yes	1905-1910	Synagogue
Stanke Dimitrov	No	Unknown	Demolished
Varna	Ashkenazi	Early 20 th cent.	Offices
Varna	Sephardi	1890	Ruin
Vidin	Yes	1878-1894	Ruin
Vratz	No	Unknown	Destroyed
Yambol	Yes	Unknown	Art galley

Burgas (Bourgas)

Former Synagogue

Metropolit Simeon Str. 24

Tel. +359-56/84-21-69

The synagogue was built between 1905 and 1910. Italian architect Ricardo Toscani's eclectic design incorporates neo-Classical and Byzantine architectural and decorative elements. The building retains a two level gallery in the main sanctuary space. In the 1960s, the synagogue was transformed into a civic art gallery and cultural center with displays of contemporary Bulgarian painting and a collection of icons. The gallery is a popular venue for lectures, meetings, recitals and concerts. The small local Jewish community uses the building next door as its community center. Toscani designed other buildings in Burgas, including the train station (1917) and the Hotel Chiplakoff (1925).



Burgas synagogue

Dupnitsa (Dupnica)

The synagogue dates from 1859. The main gate is located on the western side of the building and faces the interior courtyard. The exterior is constructed with decorative stonework featuring a beautiful dome with six rows of windows.

Gotze Delchev (formerly Nevrokop)

The synagogue was converted into an apartment building. It is in relatively good condition.



Gotze Delchev synagogue



Gotze Delchev synagogue



Gotze Delchev synagogue



Interior of the Gotze Delchev synagogue

Haskovo

The synagogue was converted into an art gallery.

Pazardjik

Small Synagogue

Built between 1825 and 1850, one of the oldest synagogues in Bulgaria is the so-called “small synagogue” in Pazardjik. The synagogue’s dimensions are seven by 13 meters. It is an important example of combined local tradition and Western European influence. The building is used as a coffee shop.

Large Synagogue

Stavri Temelkov, a prominent representative of the Bratizgovo architectural school, built this synagogue in 1850. The symmetrical building is five meters high and has 30 windows. Typical of many 19th century synagogues of the Balkans during the period of Ottoman rule, there are four wooden pillars in the center of the synagogue on which would have been placed the missing *bimah* (an elevated platform from which Torah is read aloud). There are geometrical patterns carved in the wooden ceiling. The walls are covered with decorative paintings. The building is used as a warehouse.

Plovdiv

Ancient Synagogue

Located within the boundaries of the old walled city of Philipopolis, the synagogue remains were discovered near an ancient bath complex, a basilica and in an *insula* (block of buildings) with a large residential building. With traces of later reconstruction visible, only the substructure and a few parts of the superstructure were preserved. Initially, the building was a basilica, consisting of a central nave (13.5 by 9.0 meters) and two side aisles (13.5 by 2.6 meters) facing south to Jerusalem.

The entrance to the synagogue was from the north. There was probably an open area accessible from the street, which was the easternmost *cardo* (north-south oriented street) of the ancient city. This forecourt or yard probably had a well – a required water source for the synagogue. The synagogue and the yard took the whole width of the *insula* and about 20 meters of its length. Two floor levels both of the yards and the buildings were excavated. Three panels (3.0 by 3.8 meters each) with high quality floor mosaics were found at the lower level of the central nave. A translation of the Greek inscription in the two side panels reads: “Thanks to the sources and due to the Cosmian’s prudence so-called Joseph decorated (the synagogue), bless them all.” A *menorah* (a seven-branch

candleabrum) and a *lulav* (a palm branch) with a donor's inscription are depicted in the central panel. This probably dates from the second building period.

The synagogue was probably demolished in the time of Gothic invasions, but was restored soon afterward. At the beginning of 5th century C.E., when Christian persecution of Jews increased and many synagogues in the Empire were demolished, the synagogue was destroyed for a second time. It was, however, restored again by the mid-5th century and a new mosaic with typical 5th-6th century Byzantine geometric and floral patterns was laid over the one from the first building period. It is not known when the synagogue finally went out of use.



Plovdiv synagogue



Plovdiv synagogue

Zion Synagogue

Located in the remnants of an old Jewish quarter at Tsar Kaloyan Street 13, this synagogue is one of the first to have been built after the Liberation of Bulgaria in 1878 ending the Russo-Turkish War of 1877-78. It may have replaced a synagogue that existed on this site as early as 1711 and was rebuilt several times. The synagogue is now surrounded by new apartment blocks. As it appears today, the synagogue is one of the best-preserved examples of the so-called “Ottoman-style” synagogues in the Balkans. The 12 by 12 meter building has a non-descript exterior. Inside, the synagogue is colorful and elaborately decorated. The blue and green interior features geometric and vegetal designs and a Venetian glass chandelier which hangs from the center of the ceiling. Torahs are still kept in the gilded *Aron ha Kodesh* (holy ark). A cultural center and school have been added to the synagogue complex.

In 2003, the synagogue was renovated and restored with the financial assistance of the Commission. Commission Member Michael Levy raised funds from the Bennett and Geraldine Lebow Foundation and the Commission received a matching grant from the Hanadiv Charitable Foundation to cover the cost of the restoration. The project included the replacement of the electrical system and rewiring of the chandelier, installation of a security system, and restoration of plaster and painted surfaces.

Today, the Zion and Sofia synagogues are the only synagogues which hold services in Bulgaria.

Site of Karlovo Synagogue

The Karlovo Synagogue was located on the Ortha Mzar Square in front of the Turkish Baths. Jewish settlers from the near city of Karlovo founded the synagogue in 1850. The synagogue was apparently in use until 1948, when more than 90 percent of the Jewish Community of Plovdiv immigrated to Israel. For a short period, the building was used as a carpentry shop and then as a warehouse for theatrical scenery. No repairs were made to the building and it was demolished in 1955. Under the recent law concerning property restitution, the site of the former synagogue now belongs to the Plovdiv Jewish community.

Ruse (Rousse)

The Ashkenazi synagogue is located on a small market square around the corner from the Shalom Organization office. Built in 1927, the small, squat building was turned into offices for a sports lottery organization. The synagogue was recently restored and is now a Jewish community center with a small prayer room.

The late-19th century Sephardi synagogue was closed in 1952 and used as a factory and workshop. It was returned to the Jewish community which, in turn, sold the building to raise funds for the restoration of the Ashkenazi synagogue. It is now a church. In recent years, there have been ongoing discussions about the future restoration of the former Jewish Quarter.

Samokov

The former Synagogue of Samokov is the oldest existing synagogue in Bulgaria. Considered a typical example of Balkan architecture, it is listed as a historic monument. Until it was gutted by fire in the early 1980s, the synagogue served as a local museum. The local Jewish community led by the Jewish Arie banking family sponsored its construction. According to records of the family members, construction was begun in 1854 by artisans brought from Edirne. Other testimony says that the synagogue was completed between 1858 and 1860 by artisans from the famous Samokov School. A strong European influence is present in the artwork, especially in the wall painting. The synagogue is located in the Jewish neighborhood, the so-called Lower Section (*mahala*) of the town.

The synagogue's main section measures 15.5 by 18.2 meters. The entire building covers about 330 square meters, with two stories reaching a height of eight meters, and containing 38 windows. There is a Hebrew inscription in gilded letters over the entryway. Inside the synagogue are wall paintings and carved wood panels. Both interior and exterior have parallels with the local Bajrakli mosque and it is believed that both monuments were constructed at the same time by the same artisans from Edirne and Samokov.

Some of the wall paintings are deteriorating from exposure.

Located across from the synagogue is a small house that belonged to the Arie family. A larger house belonging to Sephardi Jews that had been located nearby was destroyed in 1947.

Sofia

The Central Synagogue

The Central Sofia Synagogue is a prominent architectural and urban landmark in downtown Sofia. Designed by Austrian architect Friedrich Gruenanger (1856-1929), the large domed structure was erected from 1905 to 1910. It is the largest Sephardi synagogue in the Balkans and one of the biggest in Europe. The eclectic architecture is characteristic of the period. It combines various historical styles, particularly Byzantine and Moorish, both of which in other settings had been used in synagogue architecture since the mid-19th century. The area of the building is 650 square meters and the dome has a diameter of 19 meters and a height of 23 meters.

Inside are the offices of the Jewish community, a small prayer room, the main sanctuary with women's galleries and a Jewish museum. The interior is decorated with multicolored mosaics, Carrara marble columns, ornamental carvings and other types of wall ornamentation. A brass chandelier weighing over 2,200 kilograms, a large candelabra and other decorations were imported from Vienna. The ceiling is painted to portray the heavens – a sea of stars on a blue background.

Except for the years 1943-44, when most of the Jews of Sophia were removed to the countryside, prayer services have been held at the synagogue regularly since its opening. Most of the wartime damage to the synagogue came from Allied bombing in 1944. The gallery and several columns in the sanctuary were partially destroyed.

After World War II, the majority of Bulgarian Jews immigrated to Israel and the remaining community did not have the resources to fully restore the synagogue. Although small repairs were made several times between 1945 and 1989, no full-scale restoration was attempted until the period of transition from Communism to democracy in Bulgaria. Beginning in 1989, the revived Jewish community, with support from Jewish people in Israel, Europe and America, began a full-scale restoration. The synagogue was officially rededicated in 1996. Restoration work continued for many years thereafter.

Varna

Sephardi Synagogue

The Sephardi community, which contained the majority of local Jews, owned a community center with a large meeting hall. The community operated a Hevrah Kadishah (burial society), a cemetery, and charity organizations such as G'milut Hassadim (general help for the needy) and Malbish Arumim (clothing for the needy).

Built in 1890, the stylistically eclectic Sephardi synagogue is currently in poor condition, with only its exterior walls standing. There are plans to restore the walls and build a new sanctuary within the space of the old building.

The synagogue exterior includes a mix of Moorish and Gothic elements. The 1890 date of the building is inscribed on a pediment (triangular upper part of a building) of the south façade. Inside, the synagogue once had raised galleries for women but these, like all the interior fittings, have been destroyed. The neo-Gothic door frames with Moorish style details at the main entrance, the triple-window openings and the gothic rosette at the center of the main façade are made of stone.

Ashkenazi Synagogue

Probably built in the early 20th century, the smaller Ashkenazi synagogue is characteristic of Central European *Art Nouveau*. After the Second World War, until the beginning of the 1990s when it was reclaimed by the Jewish community, it was used as a Judo club. Recently, the building has been remodeled on the inside for offices and rented for income. The exterior has been restored to its original appearance.

Vidin

Synagogue

The synagogue was built between 1878 and 1894 on a triangular lot between Baba Vida and Tsar Simeon Streets in the old section of Kaleto (fortress). Nearby is an historic mosque and the great church of the Orthodox (Christian) Patriarch of Vidin. Next to the synagogue are the ruins of a former Jewish school. The large building is now a standing ruin. When empty, it was damaged by an earthquake in 1976. Intermittent repairs were carried out in the 1970s and 1980s. The work stopped many years ago and the building has continued to deteriorate. The overall site is not kept clean or clear. Building rubble, garbage, and excess vegetation create an eyesore where once a beautiful building stood.

The former synagogue is a three-nave, single-apse basilica with four towers. The interior of the sanctuary is 21 by 10 meters. The eclectic architectural design of the building, and its decoration, is influenced by contemporary *Jugendstil* (Art Nouveau) as well as by Romanesque and Neo-Classical forms. The façade was marked with a large two-story

arch within which was set an arched main entrance surmounted by a round window. Stars of David inscribed in circles decorated the top of the façade just below the gable and a continuous corbel table, which was carried over to all sides of the building. Two massive square towers – set back one window bay from the entrance – flanked the façade. Similar towers are situated at the far end of the building. The nave extended between the pairs of towers, and each side of the synagogue was articulated with two levels of four pairs of arched windows (sixteen windows in all). In addition, the towers had two levels of single arched windows.

The synagogue had a massive vaulted ceiling supported on external masonry (brick) walls. Inside were wrought-iron columns that supported galleries along the two long sides of the sanctuary. The iron columns – which still survive – are fluted and surmounted with ornamental capitals painted and ornamented with spirals, palmettos and acanthus leaves. The floor was covered with mosaics and wood planking. The spacious interior had excellent acoustics. There were two crystal chandeliers. The ceiling construction was covered in wood and with ceramic tiles. The interior was decorated with stained glass, decorative grills and slightly accentuated pilasters. On the walls of the two vestibules, there are marble bas-reliefs and a bronze inscription in Hebrew.

Today, the synagogue is in a very poor condition: with no roof or windows and with its exterior brickwork eroding away. The building urgently needs repair to prevent its destruction. Discussions regarding repairs have taken place since at least 1973, when the Ministry of Culture resolved to allocate funds for the synagogue's restoration. Between 1974 and 1981 the National Institute for Cultural Monuments developed a project for restoration and conservation of the building. The project was approved in 1983 and implemented by the National Institute for Monuments of Culture beginning in 1984. The project continued until 1989 when it was stopped because of a lack of funding. The building has been given to the Jewish community in Bulgaria. Preoccupied with the restoration of the Sofia Synagogue and other urgent projects, the Jewish community has not been able to raise the estimated \$1 million needed to carry out the work. Complicating the issue is the problem of what use is there to put a restored synagogue to in a community with few Jewish citizens? If the building is to be used for some public purpose, the community argues that public funding should be provided.



Vidin synagogue



Vidin synagogue



Vidin synagogue



Vidin synagogue

Yambol (Iambol)

The synagogue is now an art gallery.

Cemeteries

Most of the Jewish cemeteries in Bulgaria are in a critically deteriorated state due to neglect and widespread vandalism.

This survey is the first effort to systematically visit and describe all the Jewish cemeteries in Bulgaria. In all, twenty-four cemeteries were identified and visited, but there are certainly older cemeteries that were not identified. Most of these were closed in communities when Jews began burying their dead in Jewish sections of municipal cemeteries. In some cases, human remains from older cemeteries were removed and re-interred. In other cases, earlier cemeteries may have been closed, abandoned and are now forgotten.

A central part of this work has been the photographing of the sites which are still recognizable as Jewish cemeteries, and which, in most cases, remain the responsibility of the Jewish community. In all, the survey team took almost 2,000 digital and color film images of cemeteries, documenting their overall condition and individual gravestones. Photographs demonstrate pervasive and systematic vandalism and destruction of Jewish cemeteries, especially those isolated cemeteries not within larger municipal burial grounds. Many cemeteries have been impinged upon by neighboring building projects and by pathways and roads.

The situation is apparently getting worse. Israeli researcher Zvi Keren documented the gravestones in seven cemeteries between 1992 and 1996 as part of a project of the Goldstein-Goren Diaspora Research Center of Tel Aviv University. He reports that the condition of many cemeteries has worsened since that time; and cites the especially alarming destruction at the Jewish cemetery in Vidin. This site was visited by Commission members in 2001. Commission member Michael Levy reported, as “one walks among the several hundred gravestones, one sees massive vandalism – on a scale I have not witnessed elsewhere. Every tomb (these usually consist of a horizontal slab resting close the ground on some other stones, and then often joined to a vertical slab with an inscription and often a portrait of the deceased) has been violated. The horizontal slabs have been pried off their bases, and the vertical slabs have been toppled. The glass or enamel that holds the portraits has often been smashed. The work is systematic – typical, we were told, of what one finds by those in search of treasure.” While the situation at Vidin is probably the worst situation in Bulgaria, it is indicative of the critical situation faced by the Jewish community in protecting and maintaining these sites.

Following is a list of identifiable Jewish cemeteries located and visited as part of this survey. Eleven out of twenty-four are located within larger municipal cemeteries. These

are, for the most part, the better protected and maintained of all Bulgarian Jewish cemeteries. In most of these cases, earlier Jewish cemeteries existed, but no trace of these is visible today. In Karnobat, there is an earlier and historic cemetery still partially preserved.

Burgas (municipal)
Chirpan
Dupnitsa
Gotze Delchev (municipal)
Haskovo (municipal)
Karnobat
Karnobat (new) (municipal)
Kazanlak
Kyustendil
Lom
Pazardjik (municipal)
Pleven
Plovdiv (municipal)
Ruse (municipal)
Samokov (municipal)
Shumen
Silistra
Sliven
Sofia (municipal)
Stara Zagora*
Varna (municipal)
Vidin
Vrats*
Yambol (municipal)

Note: Sites marked with an asterisk (*) have not been surveyed.

Burgas (Bourgas)

Since 1600, a Jewish community has been present in Burgas. Today, the community consists of just over 100 people.

Located on the road leading from the “Sunny” beach resort, the Jewish cemetery of Burgas is part of the municipal cemetery, established at the end of the 19th century. It is still in use. Many of the gravestones were lost when an earlier cemetery was destroyed and burial at the new location was established. The present site is small at only 0.2 hectares in area. It contains approximately 30 gravestones dating from the 19th and 20th centuries. Within the large municipal cemetery complex, the boundaries of the Jewish section are unmarked.

Although the cemetery is maintained by a caretaker, water drainage is a constant problem at the site. In the immediately surrounding cemetery sections, Bulgarians of Armenian and Turkish heritage are buried.



Burgas cemetery



Burgas cemetery

Chirpan (Shirpan)

The oldest cemetery in Chirpan, in the contemporary center of the town, is now a bus station. The cemetery with a separate Jewish section was included in the route of a recently constructed highway. Many of the gravestones were destroyed or built over during the construction process. The remaining gravestones were removed.

Dupnitsa (Dupnica)

143, St. Ivan Rilski Str.

There has been a Jewish community in Dupnitsa since the 16th century. Dupnitsa had a synagogue as early as 1578. The cemetery was established sometime in the 16th century and the last known Jewish burial at the site was in 1979. The granite and sandstone gravestones are inscribed in Bulgarian and Hebrew. The cemetery covers 13.5 hectares across a hillside. It has no fence or gate. The cemetery boundaries have shrunk as a result of surrounding housing development and a paved path has been built which cuts through the center of the site (and probably over some of the graves). The site is moderately overgrown and has water drainage problems. It has been vandalized with several gravestones stolen or toppled over the years.

The Jewish community owns the cemetery, but lacks the resources to care for it.



Dupnitsa cemetery



Dupnitsa cemetery



Tombstone at the Dupnitsa cemetery



Tombstone at the Dupnitza cemetery

Gotze Delchev (formerly Nevrokop)

58 Drama Str.

The Jewish cemetery is part of a municipal cemetery. It was established at the end of the 18th century, and the last known Jewish burial at the site was in 2000. The cemetery is 150 square meters in size and contains about thirty gravestones. The stones are made of granite and marble. The inscriptions are in Bulgarian, Hebrew, and Ladino. A fence, with a gate that locks, surrounds the municipal cemetery. There is a regular caretaker at the site. Vegetation overgrowth and water drainage are constant problems.



Gotze Delchev cemetery



Gotze Delchev cemetery



Gotze Delchev cemetery



Gotze Delchev cemetery

Haskovo

Plovdiv Road

The Jewish cemetery occupies a section of a municipal cemetery, which was established around 1830. The Jewish section contains about 40 gravestones that date from the 19th century. Some gravestones have portraits on them. The stones inscribed in Hebrew and Bulgarian are made of granite, marble and limestone. The cemetery is surrounded by a masonry wall with a gate that locks. There is not a caretaker, but relatives of the deceased contribute some maintenance work. There are about 35 Jewish people still living in Haskovo.



Tombstone at the Haskovo cemetery



Haskovo cemetery



Haskovo cemetery

Karnobat

A Jewish community was first established in Karnobat in the 16th century. The expansive Jewish cemetery is the largest pre-20th century cemetery preserved in Bulgaria. In the oldest section of the cemetery, flat gravestones – many with long beautifully carved epitaphs – cover an open hillside. A large farm nestles against the cemetery, and sheep graze on parts of the grounds, keeping the grass short. Other parts of the cemetery are seasonally overgrown, but most of it is passable. Other than the use of the grounds for pasture, it is not clear if the farm has in other ways encroached upon the cemetery boundaries.

“Shalom” provided financial assistance for a team from the Archeology Institute to inventory the gravestones and to re-erect some. The inventory attracted the interest of the Diaspora Institute at the Tel Aviv University, which has filmed all of the stones. With the assistance of the Archeology Institute, “Shalom” managed to prevent construction of a highway across this cemetery.

Founded in the 20th century, the new Jewish cemetery is part of the municipal cemetery. The present site contains only 50 gravestones. The granite and limestone gravestones bear inscriptions in Hebrew and Bulgarian. A wire fence with a gate that locks surrounds the site. The site is constantly overgrown.



Tombstone at the Karnobat cemetery



Karnobat cemetery

Kazanlak

Stadiona Quarter

There is no longer a Jewish community in Kazanlak. The cemetery contains about 500 gravestones from mainly the 19th century. Inscribed in Hebrew, Bulgarian, and Ladino, the stones are made of limestone. The last known Jewish burial in the cemetery was in 1960. Vegetation overgrowth is a year-round problem and water drainage is a seasonal problem. There is no protection of the site.



Kazanlak cemetery



Kazanlak cemetery

Kyustendil

Kyustendil is situated 80 km southwest from Sofia, 20 km from the border with Macedonia, and 35 km from Serbia, in a valley at the foot of the Osogovo part of the Balkan Mountains. Approximately 80 people made up the Jewish population at the time of the survey. The cemetery is situated 1.5 km east of the center of the town.

The original Jewish cemetery was situated on the left hill of the Adjundarski gorge, near the Katranlia mahala (residential district). The municipal cemetery was near the Sveti Mina church. The positioning of the cemeteries violated the local health law and, perhaps more controversially, created obstacles to the town's outward development. In 1894, the municipal cemetery was moved to a plot between the road to Sofia and the road to Dupnitsa, where it was far enough from the town and where there was no arable land. In 1900, the Jewish cemetery was moved to an adjacent location. Burials there continued until 1951.

The site is approximately 1.9 hectares in size and it contains about 600 gravestones with inscriptions in Hebrew and Bulgarian. There is no wall or fence protecting the site. The cemetery was repeatedly vandalized between 1989 and 1999. As a result, it is in a very poor condition. Eighty percent of the gravestones are broken and others were stolen. Despite several attempts to restore the cemetery, lack of funds have prevented a serious repair effort.

At the time of the survey, the cemetery was maintained by Shalom-Kyustendil and a regular caretaker. Vegetation is regularly cut and water drainage is not a problem.



Kyustendil cemetery



Kyustendil cemetery



Tombstone at the Kyustendil cemetery

Lom

The first Jewish people arrived in Lom around 1800. At the time of the survey, the Jewish population numbered only 20. Located in the western part of town, at the crown of a hill, the Jewish cemetery is owned by the municipality. Established in 1820, the last known Jewish burial at the cemetery was in 1974.

The cemetery is about one half hectare in size and contains approximately 100 gravestones, most of which are from the 20th century. The remaining stones are all horizontal slabs. Originally, some may have been vertical but have toppled over. The stones are made of granite and marble with inscriptions in Hebrew and Bulgarian. Several stones have lengthy Hebrew epitaphs in beautifully carved script.

Overall, the site is in very poor condition. The site has no wall, fence, or front gate. Many of the headstones have been vandalized. Vegetation overgrowth is a problem year round. Farm buildings and a house have been on part of the site. A dirt road cuts thorough the cemetery so that part of the area can be used as a garbage dump. There are many fences, utility poles, and other intrusive elements on parts of the cemetery.



Lom cemetery



Tombstone at the Lom cemetery

Pazardjik

The cemetery is located at the entrance of town, towards Dobrinishte village.

According to a legend, the Sephardi Jews settled here as early as 1492. At the time of the survey, the Jewish population consisted of about 45 people. The Jewish cemetery is part of the municipal cemetery and it is still in use. It is surrounded by a fence with no gate. It is 660 square meters in size and is divided between old and new sections, with the latter established after 1991. The old section contains about 720 gravestones and the new section contains about 100. The stones are made of granite and marble with inscriptions in Bulgarian and Hebrew. The graves in the old section date from the 19th century while most of the graves in the new section date from the 20th century. The Jewish community occasionally clears the overgrowth.



Pazardjik cemetery



Tombstone at the Pazardjik cemetery



Tombstone at the Pazardjik cemetery



Tombstone at the Pazardjik cemetery



Pazardjik cemetery



Pazardjik cemetery



Tombstone at the Pazardjik cemetery



Tombstone at the Pazardjik cemetery