

Synagogues in Bulgaria: A testimony of eighteen centuries of Jewish presence in the Balkans

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The purpose of this article is to outline the general history of synagogues in **Introduction** Bulgaria within its present boundaries. The approach adhered to in following has been strongly influenced by the author's participation in preparing an exhibition for 2007's European Day of Jewish Culture organized by B'nei B'rith Europe, entitled "European Synagogues as Testimony of the Past" and designed by a team of specialists from the Jewish Museum of History in Sofia (JMHS). The team's work on the exhibition proved to be a 'treasure trove' in identifying the historical trends of development of synagogal construction on the continent. This is why the eighteen centuries long history of synagogues in Bulgaria reviewed here fits exactly into the context of the Braunschweig Congress—"Jewish Architecture in Europe".



It must be noted that seen in the long run, "Jewish history of Bulgaria" is 'no great exception to the rule', namely that of the European Diaspora in general. Following hereafter are the main historical-and-cultural 'layers' that could be traced both universally (*Euro-versally*)—and in particular (*country-wise*):

*h i r d t o f o u r t h
f o r m o s a i c s*

*1 Philipopolis/Trimontium
(now: Plovdiv), ancient*

*s y n a g o g u e (t
c e n t u r y C E ,*

*(Photos by E. Kesyakova,
1984)*

A Piece of "Modern *Haggadah*": "Jews settled in the land of ... since biblical times. Precise indications on the chronology of their first settlement are lacking"

Late Antiquity

You may be sure that this also refers to Bulgarian lands! Indeed, the Balkans has a wealth of synagogue and tombstone remnants from the Roman Era (in Albania, Bulgaria, former Yugoslavia, Turkey, etc.).

The oldest synagogue found in Bulgaria was erected during the reign of Emperor Alexander Severus at the end of the third century CE and was rebuilt several times during the fourth century. Its compound was located in the immediate proximity of the *cardo* of one of the most prominent cities in the Roman province of Thracia—ancient Philipopolis/Trimontium (present day Plovdiv). Archaeological excavations revealed the foundations of a basilica type building, a large courtyard, and a number of exquisite

Multi-colored floor mosaics. The most interesting of these depict a beautiful *menorah* and a *lulav* encircled by intricate ornamentations, while the remaining panes display geometrical motifs and dedicatory inscriptions in Greek which were comprehensively examined during the previous century.¹

Middle Ages

Notwithstanding the numerous signs of evidence of Jewish life and activity during the “Dark Ages,” very few examples of medieval synagogues are still extant on European territory—the oldest surviving are from the twelfth to thirteenth century (Prague, Vienna, Córdoba, and Toledo). The prevailing political and religious conditions in Europe did by no means create the conditions required for the construction of outstanding Jewish religious buildings. Consequently, Jewish community prayer houses were usually hard to distinguish from the surrounding houses.

Written documents and travelers’ accounts suggest that a sizeable number of *Ashkenazi* Jews from Hungary, *Sephardic* from Venice, et alia, lived among the Bulgarians, servicing trade links between the East and West. Documents reveal that Jews in these medieval communities settled around the then flourishing Bulgarian towns of Pleven, Etropole and especially close to the capital of the Second Bulgarian Kingdom—Veliko Tŭrnovo (Tarnovo/Tarnograd). However, only a few artifacts have been discovered up until now.

Renaissance and Imperial Conquest

The fifteenth century turned out to be a pivotal point in the history of European Jews. On the one hand, European Renaissance coincided with the Advent of the Inquisition and the resulting expulsion of Jews from Spain and Portugal in 1492 and 1497, while on the other hand Turkish sultans readily welcomed Jewish refugees and accommodated them within their newly conquered territories, including what had formerly been Bulgaria. This thoroughly changed the number and “blend” of the Jewish population in the southern part of the Balkan Peninsula. However, it took some time before this “reception” brought forth certain construction results as will be seen later on in this article.

Although it is universally acknowledged that “the center of each Jewish community is the synagogue,” it remains unclear for the most part whether the historical records refer to the latter as an institution or as a particular building.^{2,3}

Bourgeois Revolution and National Revival

Jewish-European history started to change dramatically during the Enlightenment and especially after the Napoleonic Wars. The granting of political and religious emancipation to the Jews in Europe gave a new impetus to Jewish life and culture.

The above-mentioned trends also affected Jewish communities within the Turkish Empire. New synagogues were erected in thriving Bulgarian towns, viz.: on the southern banks of the Danube (Vidin, Lom, Nikopol and Ruse (Rustchuk)); in the Danubean plain (Pleven, Shumen); south of the Balkan Mountains range (Samokov); Eastern Macedonia (Dupnitsa, Kyustendil); Northern Trace (Pazardzhik, Plovdiv). Most of these synagogues had a square or sometimes a slightly elongated plan, built-in galleries and a central four-columned *bimah* that was not necessarily associated with the position of the Torah stand (*amud*). In contrast with their relatively ostentatious outer appearance, these synagogues were sumptuously decorated inside with frescoes, woodcarvings, richly embroidered carpets and *parokhot* (ark curtains). Nowadays we can only speculate on their past beauty from a handful of archive photos.



Fortunately, the still standing synagogues from that period are also considered the finest ones. They were designed, built and artistically decorated by craftsmen from some of the most renowned Bulgarian master-builders'

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schools. The first one, located in the heart of the city of Pazardzhik, is

2 Kyustendil, synagogue
(1863), archive photo of the

interior, about 1
sy of the Bulgarian

Archive)



3 Pazardzhik, synagogue
(1850), the four-columned
interior (Photo by M. Pav-
lova, reprinted from "Evreiski
vesti" newspaper, 2006)



4 Samokov, synagogue (1858), gilded fresco from above the main portal (Photo by author, 2006)

famous for the intimate and picturesque layout of its compound. The perception of this “urban colonnade” is further intensified by the undulating porticoes of both the larger prayer hall and the smaller one (*midrash*), “exchanging glances” across the courtyard. Another interesting feature of the architecture of these two buildings is the disposition of their ceremonial axes at right angles to their geometrical ones. The complex underwent skilful restoration two decades ago, which brought back its brightness

and color. Astonishingly, at the present moment the *midrash* functions ... as a cafeteria and the big hall as a storeroom!

The condition of Samokov’s synagogue is even more appalling. Heavily damaged by fire and vandalism during the last twenty years, it now suffers from carelessness and neglect. Although its structural shell and wood-carved ceiling are still preserved, its window panes and lattice grills as well as the rich decorations (with the exception of two small frescoes) were weather-beaten or stolen! The sight is even more striking in comparison to the brilliant appearance of the “House of the Aries” and “Samokov’s Mosque,” built by the same master-builders and located in the same neighborhood, both perfectly maintained by the state museum authorities.

Industrial Revolution and Modern Times

The economic growth and social advancement of the Jewish communities in Europe by the middle of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century, along with the rise of the Jews’ self confidence, encouraged

5 Plovdiv, Tziyon Synagogue (end of the eighteenth century), interior (Photo by S. Frances, 2003)





6 Vidin, ruins of the four-towered synagogue (1894)
(Photo by S. Kalinov, 2000)

the construction of prayer houses, schools, hospitals, hospices, community homes, etc., whose architecture was no longer restricted by humiliating building by-laws. Enthusiastic Jewish leaders not only excelled in raising funds for the purchase of land and construction for these projects but also managed to commission outstanding local or foreign architects to design the buildings. The dynamics of the epoch were reflected in the abundance of architectural styles and artistic decoration used in the construction of synagogues.

Similar processes developed in Bulgaria soon after its liberation from Ottoman domination in 1878. One of the first synagogues to be erected was the Tsiyon (Zion) Synagogue in Plovdiv. Although its humble exterior resembles that of a “modern building,” inside it is a true architectural marvel. Four centrally-located slender imitation marble columns support a false hemispheric cupola depicting the “skies,” thus binding it architecturally to the traditional “four-columned *bimah* arrangement.” The exquisite beauty of this monument was adequately evaluated during the previous decade when the building underwent painstaking internal restoration funded by an international organization.

The first dignified “offspring” of the synagogue construction boom was the majestic Vidin Synagogue, erected in 1894 on the remains of older edifices. It had the shape of a false basilica and its side aisles supported longitudinal galleries. The exterior was probably styled on the Sarajevo Synagogue whose main feature were the four distinctive uniform towers at the corners of the building. After being in operation for fifty years, this synagogue was left to neglect in the 1950s and remains a ruin until this day.



7 Ruse, Ashkenazi synagogue (1927)(unknown author, ca. 1942, Courtesy of the Bulgarian State Archive)

8 Gotze Delchev/Nevrokop, synagogue(1922?) (Photo by author, 2006)

Later, two other well-established Jewish communities and congregations in the Danube towns of Silistra and Ruse erected their new prayer houses. New synagogues were also built at the Black Sea port of Varna (one Ashkenazi and the other Sephardic). The last two were designed in an eclectic mixture of styles and are now falling into decay, although they are still quite worthy of reconstruction.

9 Yambol, neoclassical synagogue (1920?)—transformed into an art gallery in 1970 (Reprinted from “Arch-Art” newspaper, 2003)





10 Architectural drawings of the synagogue of Kardzhali (1924) (Courtesy of the Museum of Kardzhali, 2002)

The picturesque synagogues of Sofa and Burgas were designed, built and inaugurated during the first decade of the twentieth century. This “couple” of synagogues has much in common, viz.: the fact that their architects were foreigners (the Austro-Hungarian F. Grünanger and the Italian R. Toscanini), that both buildings bear the distinctive features of the *Mudéjar* style (so highly favored by European Jewry), as well as for their exceptional richness of decoration, finest imported furnishings and light fixtures, etc. (A paper-cut model of the above mentioned Central Sofa Synagogue, rated one of the three largest in Europe, has been given to the Bet Tefila department at TU Braunschweig).

Other smaller synagogues built in this same period were the Neo-Classical synagogue of Yambol, and those in the towns of Gotze Delchev (formerly Nevrokop), and Khaskovo (Haskovo), Kazanlük and Karnobat, of which the last three have been demolished.

The last prewar synagogue (and the author’s “favorite” one, by the way) was erected by Jewish refugees fleeing the Balkan War. It was inaugurated in 1924 in the southern town of Kürdzhalı (Kardzhali). All that remains of it is a blueprint of the architectural drawings. Judging by them, it must have looked like a “fairy-tale house,” adorned with intricately curved yoke-shaped vaults and lacy woodcarvings....

Although (with some exceptions) not so great in number and size, synagogues in the Bulgarian lands comprise a wide range of types—dating from antiquity until “modern times” and displaying some outstanding examples of architecture and artistry.⁴ After the end of World War II, **Brief Summary**

some twenty-five synagogue buildings could be seen in Bulgaria. Three of them were professionally restored (Pazardzhik, Sofia, Plovdiv—the latter two are operational as prayer houses), few were given a facelift on being converted to art galleries (Yambol, Burgas), some became Jewish community houses or Christian churches (Ruse, Silistra, Gotze Delchev), others are now in use as cafeterias (Pazardzhik). Regretfully, the other half of the then standing synagogues was razed during the last fifty to sixty years. The worst thing about another quarter of the remaining ones, is the fact that they are in such poor condition (Vidin, Samokov, Varna-*Ashkenazi* and Varna-*Sephardi*) and are threatened by the same fate as that of the vanished! Despite the curiosity of the cultural public towards the ancient mosaics in Philipopolis, the issue when-and-where they might be seen, is hidden behind a “concrete wall” of bureaucracy and partial scholastic interests.

All of the above is even more shameful in view of the fact that Bulgaria was “home” to a number of outstanding Jewish personalities, such as Joseph Caro, Eliezer Papo, Elias Canetti, Jules Pascin and the living Carl Djerassi, Alexis Weissenberg, Michael Bar-Zohar, Shulamit Shamir and many others.

No communal or state funds and/or co-funds for the necessary comprehensive research and documentation of synagogues and other Jewish cultural monuments have been allocated as yet by any institution or private person. A team of specialists represented by the author of this paper is still enthusiastically compiling and evaluating historical and other relevant data on the subject and hopes to publish it one day. The first step in this direction was the exhibition, mentioned at the beginning.

Elena Kesyakova, “Антиквни синагоги в България” [Antique Synagogue in Philipopolis], in *Годишник на Българските Евреи* [Annual (of the Bulgarian Jews)] (Sofia, 1984), pp. 220–24.² Albertos Nar, “The Jewish Community of Thessaloniki,” in *brochure of the JCT*, ed. Jewish community of Thessaloniki (Thessaloniki, 2006), pp. 30–31.

Eli Baruch, “Jews in Bulgaria,” in *Историята на Евреите в България* [The Story of Jews in Bulgaria], ed. private, (Tel Aviv, 1960), pp. 16–17.

Vladimir Paounovski and Elko Hazan, “Synagogues in Bulgaria,” in *Синагогите в Европа като свидетелство от миналото* [Synagogues in Europe as Testimony of the Past], ed. Shalom (Sofia, 2007), p. 11-12.