

The New Synagogue in Görlitz

ALEX JACOBOWITZ



HENTRICH
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Every synagogue on German soil remains a memorial.

It is a sign of guilt and an indication of the need for regret and repentance.

Hans Geisler, Saxony Minister of Social Affairs
*Excerpt from his speech at the opening of the synagogue in July 1997,
with the participation of Yehudi Menuhin and the Sinfonia Varsovia.*

A kind of modernism explicitly based on “tradition” rose to preeminence in Germany before the First World War. This modernism represented an idea that all design disciplines were defined by a long evolutionary adaptation of form to the social practices of the user, and stood against the idea of design as expressive art. This modern traditionalism had its origins in the German design reforms of around 1890, saw itself as a branch of the British Arts and Crafts movement, and was tempered by a reaction against the related but opposed “new style” movements of around 1900 such as the Jugendstil and the *art nouveau*. The movement flowered in the hands of architects like Hermann Muthesius, Fritz Schumacher, and Theodor Fischer ... A number of similar-minded architects followed their lead (sometimes in rather different directions) including ... Lossow & Kühne ...

Erik Martin Ghenoiu
“Tradition” as Modernism in German Architecture and Urban Design, 1888–1918



כִּי בֵּיתִי בַּיִת־תְּפִלָּה יִקְרָא לְכָל־הָעַמִּים:

ישעיהו נ"ז:

For My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations.

Isaiah 56:7





Postcard Görlitz Synagogue, circa 1912, Charleston Libraries

Foreword

The “New Synagogue” on Otto-Mueller-Street in Görlitz, Germany, at the Polish border, is a uniquely wonderful neoclassical construction, built between 1909 and 1911. Since then it has been called the *Neue Synagoge*, to distinguish it from the *Alte Synagoge* on Langen Street in Görlitz, consecrated in 1853.

This book, largely based on the German version *Die Neue Görlitzer Synagoge*, published in summer of 2021, focuses on recent history, particularly since the synagogue’s reopening in 2008. Like most synagogues under the Third Reich, the Görlitz Synagogue was set on fire on November 9, 1938. However, the fire was extinguished in time to avoid major structural damage. Therefore, the Görlitz Synagogue is one of the extremely few surviving examples of synagogue architecture in this part of Germany. After the *Synagogen-Gemeinde* (the Jewish Community of Görlitz) was forced to sell the land to the Nazi *Stadtrat* (city council) for a tiny fraction of its value, they were dissolved on the eve of World War II. After the war, the occupying Red Army reassigned ownership of the synagogue to the tiny Jewish Community of Dresden, 100 km to the west. But since the means of that small community of Holocaust survivors were insufficient to manage the former House of God from a distance, the decision was reached by the Dresden board in 1953 to sell the synagogue to the by-then socialist city of Görlitz.

The sale was signed by both parties in August of 1957, but due to the *Stadtrat* then reneging on their own terms of agreement, the exchange of ownership and legal sale wasn’t closed until November of 1963.

The *Stadtrat* – the new legal owners of the synagogue – lacking money, personnel and expertise regarding what could be done with the building, had no clear path to preserve the structure, or even to create a concept for its later use – nor were they particularly willing to be influenced from advice outside the city. Decades of discussions led to few results – for many years the building was used solely as a storage space for city theater props. The synagogue fell into disrepair. Through years of neglect, a portion of the roof caved in, threatening a complete roof collapse. Only then did the discussions begin in City Hall about whether the building

should be saved – or demolished. The majority preferred preservation. After extensive internal water damage, the roof was repaired, and the synagogue survived. Somehow. Again, decades of inaction passed. After German reunification in 1990, the Görlitz city council grudgingly recognized the value of the building under their care. But it wasn't until 2006, when no more than 20 people could safely enter the building simultaneously, that serious discussions commenced about the future of the Görlitz Synagogue.

On November 9, 2008, the 70th anniversary of *Kristallnacht*, the synagogue was finally reopened with great ceremony to accommodate 230 visitors. In 2012, the house of worship was declared a “nationally valuable cultural monument” – and thus qualified for additional renovation funds. The synagogue was then closed for years of renovation. During this time, the women's section was repaired and restored, adding 80 seats. As of 2021, there are now over 300 seats in the main hall. The synagogue originally accommodated 500 worshippers. Final restoration work was completed during the spring of 2021, the key to the synagogue was handed over to the *Kulturforum Görlitzer Synagoge* in May. The long awaited reopening of the synagogue – twice postponed due to the corona pandemic and safety precautions – was celebrated on July 12, 2021, and was covered by the international press. Whether the sacred space will best be served in the future as a concert hall, a conference center, or its traditional synagogue function – or a hybrid of all three – is still the subject of lively debate in and outside the city. This book aims to bring some clarity to that discussion, through detailed discussions of its history so far.

This book does not aim to chronicle the Jewish history of Görlitz, about which several works already exist, albeit in German. Surprisingly little has been written about the New Synagogue, and until this book, nothing in English. Our goal is to show the synagogue from several angles: its architectural concept, its function during the 27 years it served as the synagogue of the Jewish community (1911–1939), the six years under Nazi rule (1939–1945), the retransfer under the Soviets (1945–1949), its administration under the Jewish Community of Dresden (1949–1963), under the Görlitz *Stadtrat* (city council) under the GDR (1963–1990), and under the Görlitz *Stadtrat* after German reunification (1991 to the present). It is about style, religion, politics, history, finances, but above all about the discussion by the responsible state administration concerning what purpose should and can be allocated to the synagogue in Görlitz.

A clear vision has been elusive for about 80 years, and perhaps only now, as the synagogue turns 110, is there some light on the horizon. Most people were dissatisfied with the continuing lethargic posturing, the petty bickering, the lack of resolve, and the painful projections of self-image onto what perhaps should have been a simple decision (the most direct of all). Of course, various forms of antisemitism also played an historic role here and there. The present compromise, long in the making, may ultimately be the best under the circumstances. The future will tell.



וַעֲשׂוּ לִי מִקְדָּשׁ וּשְׁכֵנֹתַי בְּתוֹכֶם:

Then have them make a sanctuary for Me,
and I will dwell among them.

Exodus 25:8

Acknowledgements

Of course, the effort involved in trying to bring this synagogue back from the precipice of destruction is enormous. I would like to use these lines to thank the many who have tried over the years to do the right thing.

I would like to thank my former fellow board members of the *Förderkreis*, Friends of the Görlitz Synagogue, of which I was a board member from 2008–2013: Joachim Eifler, Anett Böttger, Ekkehard Bartel, Klaus Wilmes, Michael Zimmermann, Dr. Marius Winzeler, Uta Bonadt and all other members of the association.

In addition, Baptist pastor Friedrich Windisch and the former board members of the Jewish Community of Dresden, including: Heinz-Joachim Aris (ה"ר), Dr. Nora Goldenbogen and Rabbi Alexander Nachama.

It is with deep gratitude that I am indebted to all the people who were constructively involved in the resurrection of the synagogue from its ruins, as well as to the people who were of great help in the formulation of this book. I had always wondered why there was no compendium, history or anthology of this wonderful house of worship over the years. There had been a few small efforts to peer into the abyss through dark shutters, but apparently the time had not yet been ripe. With this book, I hope to shed some light on its history, culture, and perhaps a glimpse of its future.

My special thanks go to Peter Arnade, the Leo Baeck Institute, Rabbi Zsolt Balla, Bernd Bloß and the Society for Christian-Jewish Cooperation in Görlitz, *Bet Tfila* (Braunschweig), Sebastian Beutler, Natalie ten Bosch, Daniel Breutmann, for access to the synagogue model, the Central Archive for the History of the Jewish People, Peter Chemnitz, Mira Gelehrter, Dr. Nora Goldenbogen, Avi Goldreich, the members of the Jewish Community Görlitz, the Görlitz *Ratsarchiv* and its Magistrate Siegfried Hoche, Steffen Heidrich, John & Brenda Katten, Judi Hannes Mendelsohn, Dr. Nataliya Karbouskaya from the German Foundation for Monument Protection, Dr. Katrin Keßler, Dr. Alexandra Klei, the Minister President of Saxony Michael Kretschmer, Lauren Leiderman for her work on the Hannes family history, Dr. Matthias Neuhaus, Andreas (Isak) Neumann-Nochten, Dr. Nora Pester (publisher at Hentrich & Hentrich) and the entire team, Cornelia Ritter, for help with organ research, Ute Schmidt, Andreas Schultz, Rev. Jürgen Schwarzbach and the Protestant *Kirchenkreisverband* Archive for Lausitz (for documents pertaining to Albert Neuhaus), Mayor Octavian Ursu, Dr. Frank Vater, Eva Wechsberg, and Jürgen Weise. My thanks go to all my photographers, but especially to Jördis Heizmann, Norbert Plugge, Nikolai Schmidt and Pawel Sosnowski,

ויהודית.



This book is dedicated to the Jewish communities of Görlitz throughout the centuries – and to their descendants, wherever their fate may have taken them.

My humble thanks to the Creator of us all.

Alex Jacobowitz, Bet Knesset Görlitz, January 2022
אלכס יעקובוביץ', בית כנסת גרליץ, טבת תשפ"ב

About the Author

The American-Israeli xylophone virtuoso and klezmer Alex Jacobowitz (1960) from New York was on the board of the *Förderkreis Görlitzer Synagoge e.V.* from 2008-2013 and is a board member of the Jewish Community Görlitz (JGG). He is committed to Jewish culture, music and literature in Europe. In 1998 he published his book "A Classical Klezmer – Travel Stories of a Jewish Musician". Since 2016 he has been included in the artist catalog of the Central Council of Jews in Germany. He is *National Artist of Israel* since 2018.

A Sanctuary for the People

by Rabbi Zsolt Balla

זְכוֹר יָמֹת עוֹלָם בְּיַגְוֹת דֶּרֶךְ-דָּר שְׂאֵל אָבִיךָ וְיִגְדֶּךָ זְקֻנֶיךָ וְיִאֲמְרוּ לָךְ:

“Remember the days of old, understand the years of each generation. Ask your father and he will tell you; your elders and they will explain it to you.” (Deuteronomy 32:7)

The Torah obligates us to explore our history. Only if we value our history and learn about it can we understand what role we have to fulfill in society. We, people living in Germany in the 21st century, have a special obligation to learn about our history. A house, even if it's merely wood and stones, can be built to fulfill the words of the Torah:

“They shall build for me a Sanctuary, and I will dwell amongst them” (Exodus 25:8) וַעֲשׂוּ לִי מִקְדָּשׁ וְשָׁכַנְתִּי בְתוֹכָם

A Sanctuary is not built so that God can live in it. It is built in order that we, the people, can feel God's presence. We need the physical aspects of a building to be able to understand that we humans need the divine. The presence of a House of God obligates us to try to listen to the voice of morality. It is therefore understandable, why one of the first steps taken to annihilate Jewish presence from Germany was to destroy synagogues all through the country during the terrible pogrom of the 9th of November 1938.

Today there are only two synagogues in Saxony that survived that fatal night: the Brody Synagogue in Leipzig, and the New Synagogue in Görlitz. The Leipzig synagogue, even if in a limited fashion, continued to function even under the German Democratic Republic. But after the Shoah, the Jewish community in Görlitz no longer existed. The city was left with a once majestic house of gathering, a witness of a once thriving community, which was proud to have this beautiful building as its crown jewel. Yet it was standing desolate. Nobody expected that Jewish life would return to Saxony. But it did. And this obligates us not to let the history of the Jews of Görlitz disappear into oblivion. Remembrance and researching into the synagogue's history played an important role in the historic decision of the city to renovate it and give it back its righteous place amongst the historical landmarks of the region.

This book is a living memory, brought to life by the extensive and thorough research of Alex Jacobowitz. It is our responsibility to remember the days of old, not just simply in order not to forget, but rather to bring forth new life. May this beautiful publication help to build a bridge between the past and the future, paving the way further ahead for a flourishing Jewish communal life in Saxony and synagogues, once again filled with the sound of prayer.

Rabbi Zsolt Balla, born in Budapest in 1979, is the State Rabbi of Saxony

Bringing Jewish Life Back to Görlitz

by Dr. Nora Goldenbogen

This opulent book by Alex Jacobowitz on the New Synagogue in Görlitz extensively documents the beauty of this building, which was erected 110 years ago. The numerous beautiful photographic illustrations reflect both the excellent restoration of the building since 2013 and the preceding phases of securing the building, which did not always match the magnitude of the task. Above all, however, this book illustrates the eventful and ultimately tragic history of the Jewish house of worship, which was consecrated in 1911 still with great participation of the Görlitz city community. At that time and again today, the restored Görlitz synagogue radiates the pride and the great, hopeful aspiration with which the Jewish community of that time had its house of worship built. The prehistory of the Görlitz community, some of its outstanding personalities as well as other architectural testimonies of the Jewish history of Görlitz are also traced in words and pictures by the author Alex Jacobowitz. At the same time, readers also learn a great deal about the darkest chapter of Jewish history in the city. At that time, it seemed as if Jewish life in Görlitz had been extinguished forever. The few Jewish survivors who still lived in the city and the surrounding area in the years after 1945 could not and perhaps did not want to link up with the past. Above all, the scholarly contributions by Alexandra Klei and Steffen Heidrich* in the present book document this historical phase precisely and vividly on the basis of thorough source analyses. Last but not least, the book also reflects the intensive efforts of the author to bring Jewish life back to Görlitz in the present 21st century. He is to be wished success in this endeavor.

Dr. Nora Goldenbogen, Chairwoman of the Saxony Association of Jewish Communities

*Only in the German version

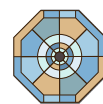
Explanation of Symbols



Quotes from multiple sources and individuals



Quotes from representatives of the City of Görlitz



Biographies and noteworthy details about people of interest



Synagogue, 2021
Andreas (Isak) Neumann-Nochten
150 x 100 cm
Acrylic on canvas



בני ישראל



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LEFT: The ten windows have been refurbished. The Ten Commandments – formerly between the two lions above – not yet.

Timeline 1300–1945



Timeline 1946–2022

Founding of East Germany **1949**
Görlitz, west of the Neisse, falls to today's Saxony, east of the Neisse to Poland, today's Zgorzelec



1949 Soviets assign the synagogue to the Jewish Community of Dresden
1951 Gravestone for the victims of the Görlitz concentration camp unveiled; War crimes trial in Görlitz

The Slánsky-Trial **1952**
Josef Stalin dies on March 5 **1953**
The June 17, 1953 Uprising
The fall of East Germany **1989**



1953 Jewish Community of Dresden decides to sell the synagogue
1957 First attempt to sell to the city of Görlitz fails; further deterioration of the synagogue
1963 Second attempt of sale is successful

German Reunification **1990**



1991 European Meeting and Information Center (EBIZ e.V.) moves into the synagogue
1993 Completion of the construction work to secure the dome
1994 *Conference on Jewish Material Claims against Germany* sues the city of Görlitz



2001 EBIZ e.V. becomes insolvent and is dissolved
2002 The city allows max. 20 visitors
2004 Founding *Förderkreis Görlitzer Synagoge e.V.*
2005 Founding Jewish Community Görlitz e.V.
2008 Reopening of the synagogue with 230 seats



2012 Synagogue is declared a national monument
2013 Synagogue closed for renovations
The hut on the property of the Catholic Church turns out to be a hospital barrack of the former concentration camp Biesnitzer Grund.

2019–2022
Covid-19 pandemic



2017 Last construction phase
2020 Restorations finished
Stadtrat votes to rebuild the Star of David
Reopening postponed due to pandemic
2021 Reopening in July
2022 Estimated reconstruction of Star of David

Des man dich suldich des bistu unsuldich
Daz du got zo helfi der himel vde
erdi giswef unde louf vde graf vde als
du gnad adonay vde sint gnedich i.
gothet we als du dree nimmis.
muzzel behaldin di got gar mozzel.

In large parts of Europe in the Middle Ages, Jews had to take an oath about the truthfulness of their testimony in court cases they were obliged to testify in. This led to a legal dilemma – the so-called *Judeneid* (Jewish oath). Since Jews traditionally would not swear on the Christian scriptures, they were allowed to swear on the Torah and Talmud. Over time, the *Judeneid* turned into a clearly anti-Semitic form of public mockery and ridicule, a method of discriminating against Jews over the centuries in many European countries. The first written record of the *Judeneid* in German was found in Görlitz and dates from the 12th century, suggesting that Jews were already resident in Görlitz a century before its first official mention.

In the *Shulchan Aruch*, a compendium of Jewish law by Joseph Caro from the 16th century, it is written that a Jewish community – if there is only enough money available for either a synagogue or a *mikvah* (ritual bath), must first buy the ritual bath and should pray in other places until the congregation is ready to buy and/or build a synagogue. We assume that that is what the Görlitz Jews did.

From about the year 1071, the first known documentary mention of the city of Görlitz, the area changed hands several times, and was alternately Sorbian, Saxon, Prussian, Bohemian, Polish, Silesian, and so on. The first tentative efforts to establish a Jewish community there began in 1329, after Görlitz came back under Bohemian rule, and King John of Luxembourg confirmed the settlement of Jews for the first time, although apparently some Jews had lived there before. As in so many other European cities, the Jews were blamed for the plague, insulted as

ABOVE: The Görlitz *Judenprivileg*, end of the 14th century, Ratsarchiv Görlitz

ABOVE RIGHT: The “Jews’ Street” sign in Görlitz

RIGHT: *Judeneid*, manuscript of the *Schwabenspiegel*, manuscript Brussels 14689-91, f. 204r, from the workshop of Diebold Lauber, around 1425



poisoners of wells, and expelled. The Jewish community of Görlitz, destroyed between 1349 and 1350, returned around 1380, built a new *Judengasse*, a Jewish Ring and the synagogue on Nikolai Street – only to be expelled again in 1389. They were tolerated again in 1391, only to be expelled again in 1395. The settlement of Jews in Görlitz was thereafter forbidden for more than 450 years, until the Prussian equality law of 1847.

In the same year a Jewish community was founded again in Görlitz. The city fought against this law in court, but lost their appeal two years later.

In the 16th century, the situation for the Jews in Görlitz improved a little: Jewish merchants were allowed to spend the night from Wednesday to Thursday in the city once a week. If they wanted to stay longer, they had to agree to convert to Christianity and be baptized.

