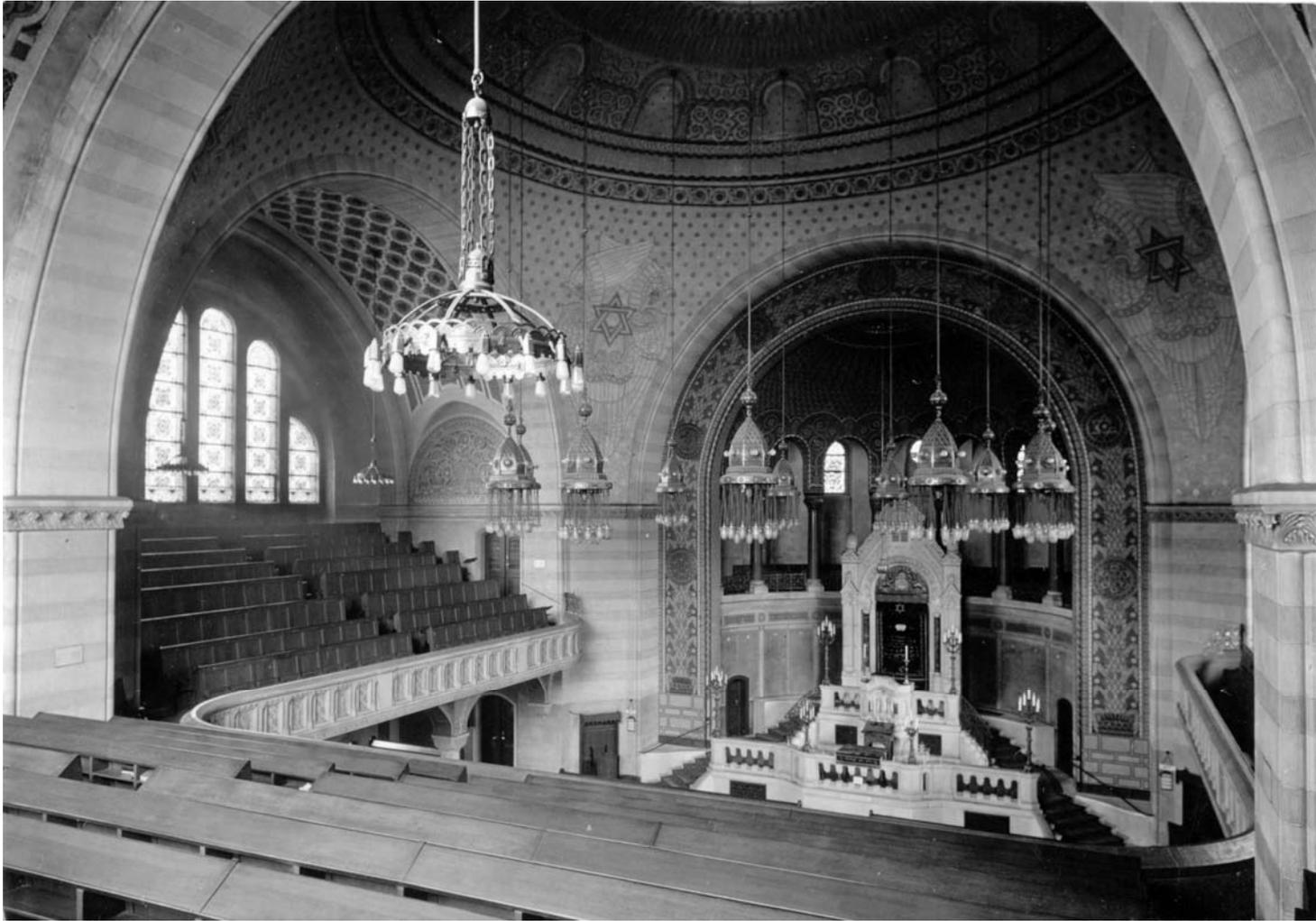


The Pool That was Once a Synagogue

By Teddy Weinberger



An interior shot of the synagogue taken by R.S. Ulatowski in 1928.

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An interior shot taken by Krzysztof Kwiatkowski in 2006.

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How do you turn a synagogue into a swimming pool? I had heard that there was a synagogue in Poznan, Poland that had been turned into a swimming pool by the Nazis, but I just couldn't envision it. When I recently traveled to Poland to watch my daughter Rebecca compete for Israel in the European Under-20 basketball championships, I was able to see for myself.

The Polish Embassy in Israel put me in touch with Alicja Kobus, head of the Poznan Jewish community (she is also in her second term as Deputy Chairwoman of the Municipal Council in the nearby town of Murowana Goslina). Alicja met me at Poznan's international airport, accompanied by Janusz Rajewski, managing director of the city of Poznan's Sports and Recreation Centers and his wife. What was Poznan's sports director doing accompanying a visitor from Israel on a tour of Jewish Poznan? It turns out that the pool that was once a synagogue is still in operation, and thus it fell under Janusz's jurisdiction. Six years ago the municipality transferred ownership of the pool to the Warsaw-based Union of Jewish Confessional Communities (of which the Jewish community of Poznan is a member). Since then, the Jewish community has been operating the pool. The goal of Alicja is to remove the pool and to turn the building into a center for Jewish culture and for inter-religious dialogue. It is a mark of her charisma that a man who might have been an antagonist became not only a friend but an active supporter of her cause. As Janusz says, "It is not possible not to help Alicja."

The building that housed Poznan's synagogue is still very imposing, despite the fact that it originally had an exquisite cupola that was lopped off by the Nazis. A plaque to the right of the entrance says: "This building, erected in 1907, was a synagogue and was used as a house of worship until 1939." I walked inside, and as I climbed the stairs I still didn't know what to expect. And then I was in the space that was once the synagogue. Wow! It was like being in a modern art installation whose purpose is to de-center and destabilize the viewer. There before me was a serene swimming pool (closed for the summer), but everywhere I turned the building said "synagogue." To my left and to my right were the areas designated for the women's sections, at the other end of the pool was a wall covered with small windows that evoked what must have been the area of the Torah Ark, and above me was all this magnificent space that was originally designed to take Jewish prayers heavenward. Alicja kept saying to me "isn't this tragic," but actually it was hard not to give in to the comic because of the incredible juxtaposition before me. I had to consciously think about the circumstances that led to the synagogue's becoming a pool before I could feel what Alicja felt.

It struck me that not every child who uses this swimming pool would be overjoyed to replace it with an inter-religious dialogue center. In a city with almost no halachic Jews (including Alicja, whose father was a survivor), is there a need for a restored multi-purpose synagogue building at the expense of a municipal pool? I brought this point up with Kacper Klewenhagen, a young man in his mid twenties who manages the pool. Kacper says that some kids would certainly be upset at the loss of their pool because

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there are not that many indoor pools in Poznan, but he said that "there could be a way to do it through education."

Alicja has gathered around her many Catholic friends to help with this educational work. Krzysztof Kwiatkowski, who helps Alicja with computer imaging (creating virtual images of the synagogue's past and future) strongly backs Alicja's plans. He views his work with Alicja as reclaiming himself and his culture, since "you cannot divide the Jewish people from the Polish people." My tour guide in Poznan, Jaroslaw Majchrzak, echoed this thought. He said that "while many Poles do not realize this, it's impossible to separate out Jewish culture from Polish culture--there is no dividing line."

Alicja's educational work will succeed if she can create a broad consensus around the idea that Polish Jewish history is a vital part of Polish history. In the meantime, Alicja is active on a number of other fronts besides the synagogue project. She helps program Poznan's annual "Days of Judaism" festival, including bringing in artists from Israel (with some concerts and other events held at the former synagogue), she recently oversaw the re-consecration of the burial site of the great early-19th century Rabbi Akiva Eger (located within a present-day Poznan apartment-building complex), and she is the town's chief Jewish watchdog. Her work in this latter capacity takes her to some unusual places, and so it was that the day after our meeting Alicja had an appointment at a local kindergarten. It seems that one of the walls of the kindergarten is constructed from Jewish tombstones.

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