



Wooden Synagogues of Europe



The project **Historic Synagogues of Europe** was undertaken by the Center for Jewish Art at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem (CJA) and the Foundation for Jewish Heritage in order to provide – for the first time – a comprehensive inventory of all 3,342 extant synagogue buildings in Europe. The inventory is available online (<http://historicsynagogueurope.org>) and indicates also the significance and physical condition of every edifice. Synagogues that are today still in existence in various forms account for 17 percent of ca. 20,000 synagogues in Europe before WWII.

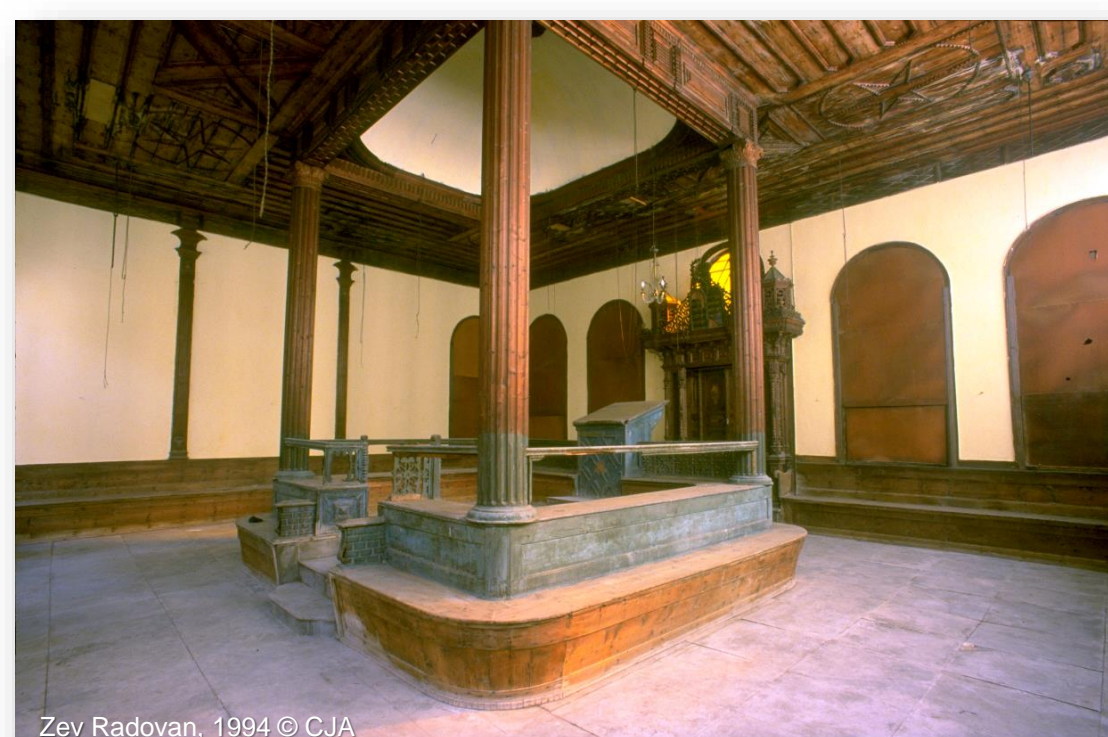
Distribution of preserved wooden synagogues by country

Lithuania	17
Ukraine	9
Belarus	8
Latvia	5
Russia	5
Germany	4
Poland	3
Georgia	2
Azerbaijan	1
Czech Republic	1
Romania	1
Turkey	1

Until the mid-20th century, the majority of synagogues in Eastern Europe were wooden buildings that were devoured in frequent fires, to be immediately replaced with new wooden or stone ones. The atrocities of two world wars, anti-Jewish policies of Communist regimes, and simple neglect wiped out most of these monuments. All magnificent wooden synagogues of the 17th and 18th centuries built by Jewish carpenters and often decorated with murals by Jewish painters have gone and are known today only from photographs and scholarly documentation. What has remained are modest unpretentious buildings which were used for various secular purposes after WWII.

Today, only 57 timber synagogues are preserved, although two were recently replicated in Poland. Among extant wooden synagogues, we rated 27 as having international or national significance and 24 as being in a poor or very bad physical condition. Notwithstanding several successful cases of restoration described below, we are facing the risk of the almost total disappearance of this unique historical and architectural phenomenon.

Synagogues at risk: every step should be taken to preserve these important historic buildings



Zev Radovan, 1994 © CJA
Istipol Synagogue in Istanbul, Turkey, 1898–1909. Abandoned.



Sergey Kravtsov, 2017 © CJA
Synagogue in Kurkliai, Lithuania, architect Povilas Jurėnas, 1936. Abandoned.



Zoya Arshavsky, 2004 © CJA
Synagogue and Rabbi's house in Kaltinėnai, Lithuania, architect Kazys Krulikas, 1938. Abandoned.



Sergey Kravtsov, 2017 © CJA
Synagogue in Alanta, Lithuania, late 19th century. Under reconstruction.



Vladimir Levin, 2015 © CJA
Soldiers' Synagogue in Tomsk, Siberia, Russia, architect Andrei Langer, 1907. Abandoned.

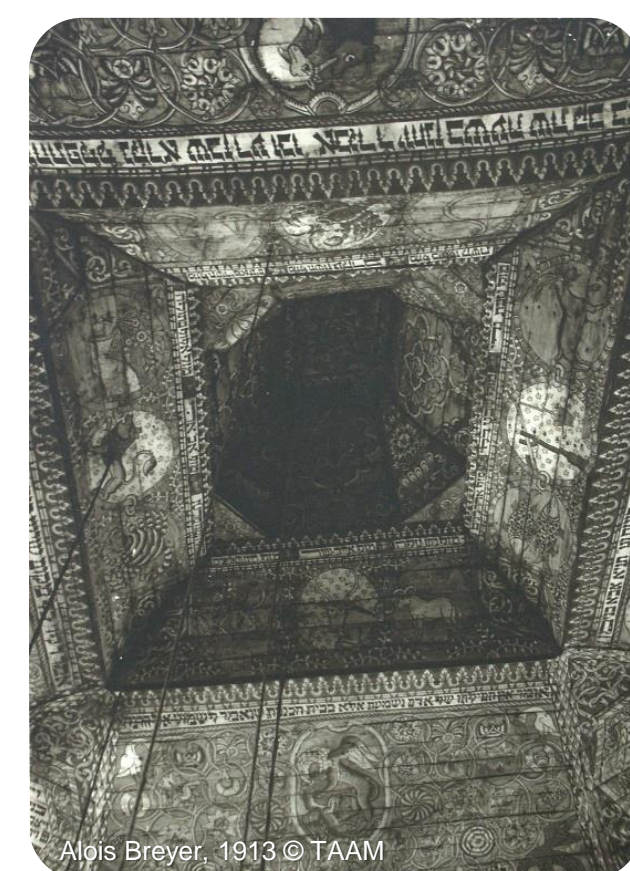


Vladimir Gorenstein, 1997 © CJA
Old (Small) Synagogue in Kulashi, Georgia, 1862? Abandoned.

Vanished wooden synagogues: physical destruction and perpetuated memory

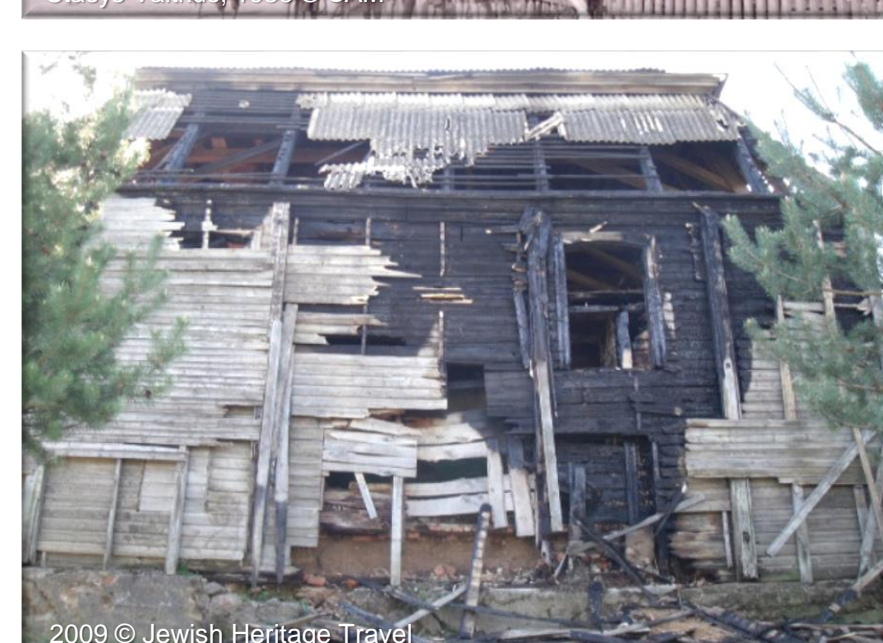


Hermann Struck, ca. 1916 © IS PAN
Synagogue in Voupa, Belarus, 18th century. Destroyed during WWII.



Algis Breyer, 1913 © TAAM
Synagogue of Hvizdets/Gwoździec, Ukraine, mid 17th – 18th century. Burned during WWI.

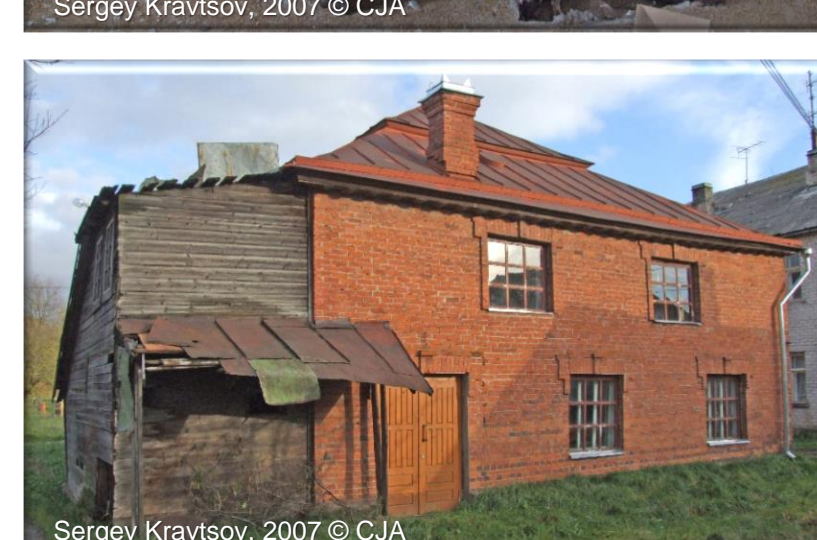
Salvaged synagogues: restoration in the last minute before collapse



Synagogue in Pakruojis, Lithuania, 1801

The €750,000 project was carried out over three years by the Pakruojis Regional Administration, with financing from Iceland, Norway and Liechtenstein under the European Economic Area and Norway financial grants mechanism (EEA). The synagogue was rededicated in 2017.

The building houses a children's literature section of the Juozas Paukštelis Public Library and also host concerts and other cultural events. An exhibit tells the history of the Jews of the Pakruojis region.



Great Synagogue in Ludza, Latvia. Built ca. 1800, brick clad in late 19th century

The €250,000 restoration project was mainly funded by a grant from the EEA. Other funding came from the city and state. The synagogue was rededicated in 2017.

The only synagogue in Latvia to preserve an inner cupola, the building now houses a museum with a multimedia exhibition on Jewish life, culture and local Jewish history, and a section on the World War II Ludza Ghetto.