

# Reviews

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Maria and Kazimierz Piechotkowie, *Bramy nieba. Bóżnice drewniane na ziemiach dawnej Rzeczypospolitej (The Gates of Heaven. Wooden Synagogues in Old Poland)*, Warszawa 1996, Wydawnictwo Krupski i S-ka, 411 pp. + 642 illustr., index of place names, maps.

Maria and Kazimierz Piechotkowie, *Bramy nieba. Bóżnice mrowane na ziemiach dawnej Rzeczypospolitej (The Gates of Heaven. Brick and Stone Synagogues in Old Poland)*, Warszawa 1999, Wydawnictwo Krupski i S-ka, 478 pp. + 627 illustr., index of place names, bibliography.

This is an unusual work of two authors who devoted many years of hard labour to reconstruct on the pages of their book and to save from oblivion Jewish temple architecture created in the Polish lands over the centuries and for the most part ruined during World War II. Wooden synagogues especially, partly due to the fragility of their material, were completely wiped out of Poland in the Holocaust, just like the people who prayed there. The reconstruction of this world of buildings, which most often do not exist any more, on the basis of extant iconographic sources and descriptions, required not only a lot of search, but also an enormous effort of imagination and intuition. Maria and Kazimierz Piechotka, architects by profession, lovers of art history by vocation, have accomplished a work deserving of the highest respect.

The Jewish temples, which according to *Genesis* were not only the houses of prayer but also "the gates of Heaven", constituted an important element of the architectural landscape of the Polish lands before the partitions. The authors discuss systematically the sacral buildings erected from medieval times till the 19<sup>th</sup> c. (incidentally also going beyond this post-partition century and even into the 20<sup>th</sup> c.) by the Jews resident in the Polish state within its successive borders. Thus this work has a very broad, not only chronological, but also geographical scope. The area under analysis covers, apart from the present Polish territory, also the territories of Lithuania, Byelorussia and Western Ukraine that were once part of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. Since the end of medieval times till World War II here was the greatest agglomeration of Jews in the world, here was the centre of their religious, social and cultural life. In old Poland the Jews, endowed with many privileges and occupying a special position in this country's economy, found excellent conditions to develop their culture as intensively as nowhere else, hence the dimension of their achievements.

The architecture of synagogues, presented in its development by M. and K. Piechotka, has been set against the broader background of the general development of Polish architecture and town-planning. Already in the *Introduction* the authors ascertain that synagogues were built "according to the Polish heaven and custom" — thus they were the fruit of the meeting and co-existence of two cultures: Jewish and Polish, a harmonious and fruitful co-existence over many centuries.

The first volume of this publication (although not numbered, both books are complementary and constitute one body) contains the discussion of the historical background and then presents the role of the synagogue in the life of the Jewish community. It emphasizes the essential features of the synagogue — a special

sacral building where — in contrast to the temples of other denominations — no sacrifices are made. It served the community as a place of meetings, common prayer, study and commenting on the *Scriptures* and also some administrative tasks (sessions of the elders, judicial functions, etc.) The analysis of the synagogue's role serves as a point of departure for presenting its particular architectural elements, i.e. the principal segment — a hall designed for men with a niche or cupboard (the so-called *Aron ha-Kodesh*) used for preserving the *Torah*, and bema — a platform for reading the *Torah*, delivering prayers and teachings. Interestingly, the place for women — the so-called women's gallery — started to appear in the Polish synagogues relatively late, only in the 16<sup>th</sup> c. Can one connect it to the changes in the general situation of women in Poland that began at that time? The authors do not seek any explanations. They devote a lot of space to the characteristic features of the construction of 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> c. synagogues and their decorations, especially signs and symbols (the so-called Tree of Life, presentations of animals such as the lion, elephant, eagle, stork, serpent etc.) They also analyze the rich polychromes. Although the book in principle deals with pre-partition Poland, it also discusses the synagogues that arose in the 19<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> c. This supplement seems rational and just, since as a result we get a comprehensive full picture of the development of wooden synagogues, a large part of Jewish sacral architecture.

The volume devoted to brick and stone synagogues opens with an extensive discussion of the tradition of Jewish sacral architecture since its biblical and antique beginnings through the European Middle Ages. Only then do the authors present the Polish historical context of the rise of the oldest brick synagogues in Poland (Kalisz, Cracow, Silesian towns). The most part of the book is devoted to the early-modern era, i.e. the period when the influx of Jews to the Polish lands was the biggest. Those who came were mainly the Ashkenazim from Germany and Bohemia, but also the Sephardim banished from Spain and Portugal, who came through Italy and the Netherlands. Another wave of Jewish immigration came when Jews were persecuted in Western countries during the Reformation (16<sup>th</sup> c.), and a third one during the Thirty Years' War. The number of Jews living in the Polish state was estimated at 28–30 thous. at the turn of the 15<sup>th</sup> c., 150 thous. in the second half of the 16<sup>th</sup> c., while in the middle of the 17<sup>th</sup> c. it reached, according to historians, 450–500 thous. people. At the same time important changes in the organization of Jewish life took place. During the 16<sup>th</sup> c. the so far informal unions of Jewish communities were transformed into a homogeneous multi-grade self-government, slightly resembling the structure of the Polish gentry self-government; it consisted of the Seym of Four Lands (*Waad Arba Aracot*), land dietines, consistories and subconsistories. Since 1580 this was the organization officially recognized by the Polish state and representing to it the whole population of Jews — inhabitants of Poland.

In connection with these transformations there was more demand for new synagogues — hence in the 16<sup>th</sup> and the first half of the 17<sup>th</sup> c. many of them were erected over all the area of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, and especially in its eastern lands, where most Jews settled. Apart from the erection of new buildings, the old wooden temples were increasingly replaced by brick ones. Their construction was financed as earlier on by the Jewish communities, however, private founders turned up as well, which testifies to the growing wealth of pious Jewish merchants. As a result, in the "Jewish city" itself, in the Kazimierz district of Cracow, not only was the Old Synagogue reconstructed after the fire, but also 6 other synagogues were erected. At the same time four synagogues arose in Lublin. Naturally, the eastern territories of the Commonwealth, with the most numerous agglomerations of Jewish population, saw the construction of the greatest number of synagogues.

Both volumes have been provided with an unusually rich and valuable documentation, especially illustrations. It is a pity they have not been furnished with foreign language summaries or foreign versions of chapter titles and captions

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under illustrations. This would also make the work communicative abroad. In the *Introduction* the authors thank the Art Institute of the Polish Academy of Sciences as well as the Wydawnictwo Krupski and S-ka for being helpful in the realization of their formidable task. They also ingratiated themselves with the readers: historians, who will use these books of fundamental importance to the research into the Jewish (and also Polish) culture, as well as non-professionals, interested in the world which exists no longer.

*Maria Bogucka*