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Archaeological Prospecting of the
Relics of the Synagogue in Mikołów in
Upper Silesia**

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NULLA SED VIVIT IN MEMORIA.
**ARCHAEOLOGICAL PROSPECTING OF THE RELICS
OF THE SYNAGOGUE IN MIKOŁÓW IN UPPER SILESIA****Abstract**

In Mikołów (Upper Silesia), a synagogue building was blown up and demolished in 1972 – a significant event that is preserved in the memory of the local population. In 2023, on the initiative of local authorities and cultural institutions, archaeological and architectural reconnaissance surveys were conducted to uncover, survey, and document any surviving relics of the synagogue. The research yielded new, previously unknown information regarding the building's construction, including the discovery of the presumed floor of the synagogue's vestibule. The preserved and uncovered remains of the foundations were secured after the research was completed and will undergo revitalisation and partial reconstruction in the future.

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KEYWORDS


- Upper Silesia
- Mikołów
- synagogue
- Plac Synagogi
- archaeological and architectural survey

INTRODUCTION

The synagogue building in Mikołów, Upper Silesia, which has been defunct for nearly 50 years, still stirs memories for many town inhabitants, of whom many – as transpires from face-to-face conversations – still remember the stately building that existed near the Old Town (Polish: *Starówka*) until the 1970s, at the Synagogue Square (Polish: *Plac Synagogi*).¹

Although the history of the Jewish presence in Upper Silesia dates back to the early Middle Ages, the most significant period in the context of this work is certainly the last three centuries.²

The Silesian wars waged since the early 1840s saw the territory of Silesia incorporated into the territory of the Prussian state.³ As it turned out, this was important for the development of Jewish settlement in this part of Europe. The policy of the Prussian rulers towards the Jews was to adapt them socially and economically and to use them to increase the economic potential of the state.⁴ From the mid-18th century onwards, there was a steady influx of Jews into the Upper Silesian cities and towns, where the laws changing in their favour resulted in their rapid assimilation. Many towns experienced an increase in the Jewish population, e.g., in Żory in 1840, Jews already accounted for 12.8% of the total population.⁵ Population growth was also visible in Mikołów. K. Prus reports that while in 1701 there was only one Jew living in the town, in 1787

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¹ Until 2022 it was the Plac 750-lecia (750th Anniversary Square). Information about the synagogue was collected from the local population during site visits conducted by the author and Wojciech Szewc of the Mikołów Museum.

² Walerjański 2011, 105-106.

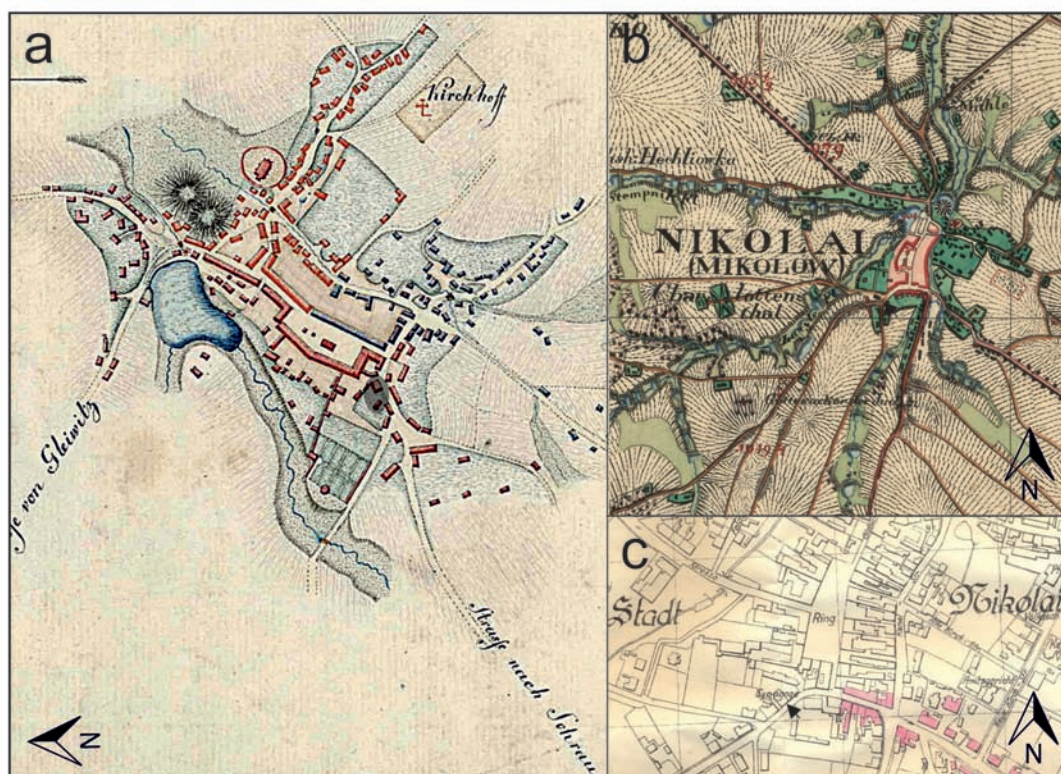
³ Wąs 2002, 187-195.

⁴ Morawska 2003, 248.

⁵ Jaworski 1997, 18.



Fig. 1. Mikołów: a – Part of the Mikołów town map drawn by Viebig in 1811, map title: *Zeichnung von der Stadt Nicolay*, collection of Polish National Archives, Rej. Opol. Kart., sygn. IX/51; b – Archival map of the examined territory from 1827, collection of the Staatsbibliothek Berlin, Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Kartenabteilung, Generalstabskarte, Preußische Urmesstischblätter 1:25.000 (1822–1872), Bande II, Blatt 4, Chart 3391 (Nicolai); c – Fragment of a plan of Mikołów from 1915, from the private collection of Mr Mariusz Dmetrecki.



there were already 84 Jews, followed by 272 Jews in 1825, and 389 Jews in 1840.⁶ However, it was not until the Prussian authorities passed a law on 23 July 1847 that the status of Jews in Upper Silesia was regulated.⁷ By law, synagogue districts (German: *Synagogenbezirke*) were established within individual smaller administrative units, usually county offices (German: *Kreis*), and the associated Jewish population gained the status of a religious group, organised into a community. The municipalities were to function as associations, governed by an elected board of directors, with their own statutes defining the organisation and rules of socio-religious life. Such a Jewish municipality was also established in Mikołów in 1854, and in 1861 it already consisted of 504 people.⁸ At the beginning of the 20th century, the Jews from Mikołów began to emigrate to North America and Palestine. This brought the population down to 175 in 1910 and 74 in 1928.⁹ First the Nazi persecution and then the events of the Second World War caused the Jews from Mikołów, like many others living in Upper Silesia, to meet a tragic fate.

THE SYNAGOGUE IN MIKOŁÓW

The synagogue in Mikołów was built in 1816 on the road leading towards Żory (German: *Sohrau*) (Fig. 1:a-c).¹⁰ It was built on a plot of land where a house of prayer had already existed in the late 18th century, in one of the buildings donated to the Jewish community by the Upper Silesian merchant and industrialist Salomon Isaac Plessner.¹¹ The location of this building is probably indicated on the oldest surviving plan of the town of Mikołów made in 1811 by the Prussian royal surveyor Viebig (Fig. 1:a).¹²

The surviving post-war description of the synagogue, built in 1816, describes it as a cuboid building covered with a gable roof. It was 20.82 m long, 14.42 m wide and its height to the ridge was 15.35 m¹³ (Fig. 2). The external walls were estimated to be about 80 cm thick. The building was not richly decorated. It had a profiled cornice, framed, semicircular finished windows with details in the Neoclassical style placed in shallow niches. An interesting detail was a window in the form of a triforium, divided by stylised columns, decorating the

⁶ Prus 1932, 395-398.

⁷ Morawska 2003, 253.

⁸ Prus 1932, 398. For comparison: in Bytom at the end of the 19th century there were about 2,300 Jews, cf: Lusek 2021, 26, in Katowice at the beginning of the 20th century the Jewish population numbered almost 3,000 people, cf: Walerjański 2015, 12.

⁹ Prus 1932, 398.

¹⁰ Kubit et al. 2021, 156.

¹¹ Adler 2007, 41-42.

¹² Cf. Grainer 2010, 15-18.

¹³ Similar dimensions of the building are recorded on the plan with internal divisions, preserved on the heritage record sheet kept in the collection of the Voivodship Office for the Preservation of Historical Monuments in Katowice / Wojewódzki Urząd Ochrony Zabytków w Katowicach, ref. no. 3475. Hereinafter referred to as WUOZ.

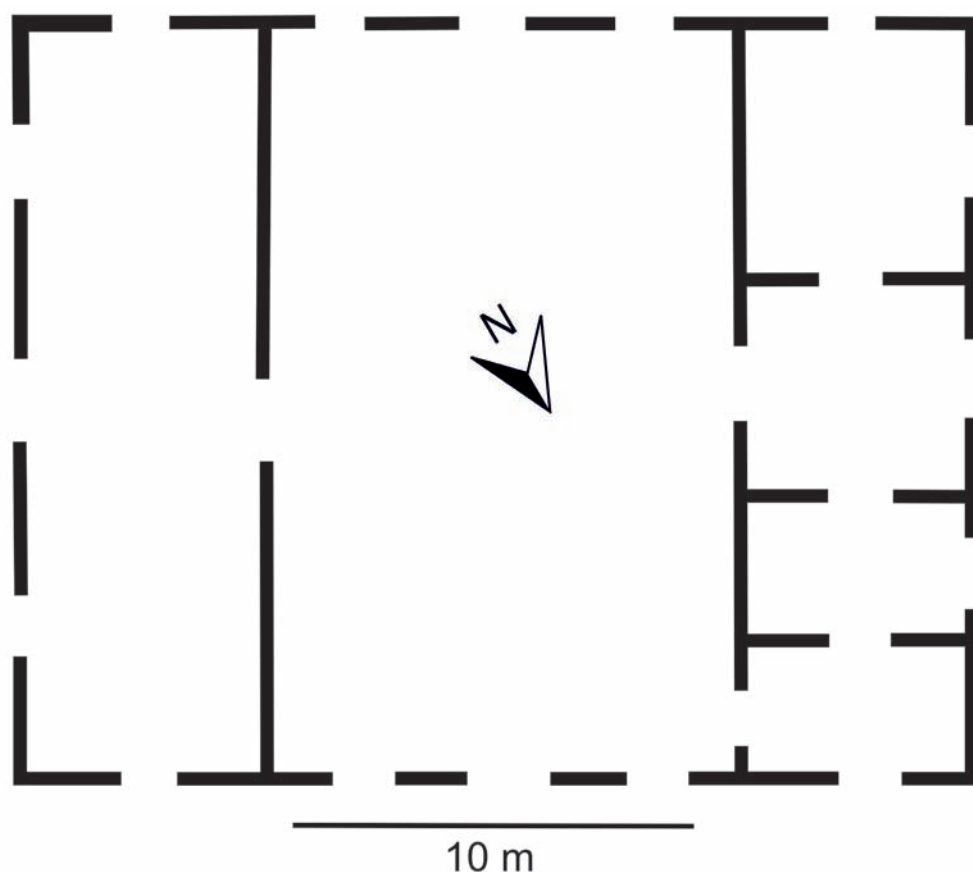


Fig. 2. Mikołów. Internal division of the synagogue building. Source: Monument card, ref. no. 3475. Archive WUOZ in Katowice. Redrawn: R. Zdaniewicz.

front as well as the rear tympanum (Fig. 3). In the rear wall, within the central risalite, an additional oval window was placed. The tympanum was crowned on the front and rear walls by semicircular pinnacles, in the corners by spherical pinnacles set on low pedestals (Fig. 3). The entrance to the building, as well as the windows, were also arched semicircular, with Classical styling with floral and zoomorphic details.¹⁴ Taking into account the size and financial situation of the local municipality the building was large but rather modest in its details.

Archive sources indicate that between 1888 and 1889 the roof, ceiling, and floor were replaced and window and door clearances were enlarged.¹⁵ This information is confirmed by relatively numerous archival photographs of the synagogue, mainly from the 20th century (Fig. 3). It is also important to note that from 1875, the Jewish community in Mikołów no longer had its own rabbi but the building was still cared for.¹⁶

The building survived the Nazi occupation period but was badly devastated. After 1945, it was used as a venue for boxing matches and later as a warehouse for food products belonging to

the Provincial Food Wholesale Office in Mikołów (Polish: *Wojewódzkie Biuro Hurtu Spożywczego w Mikołowie*).¹⁷ In 1972, the deteriorating condition of the building prompted the local authorities to blow up and demolish the building – a decision that was motivated by the need to rebuild the transport junction.¹⁸ A square, named Skwer 750-lecia (750th Anniversary Square), was created on the site of the demolished synagogue.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL-ARCHITECTURAL RESEARCH

In spring 2023, on the initiative of local authorities and cultural institutions, an archaeological-architectural reconnaissance excavation was carried out to uncover, survey, and record any surviving relics of the synagogue. Since it was difficult to establish the exact location of the original building on the basis of surviving town plans and archive photographs, test trenches were also opened to aid in this task. The restoration plan called for the revitalisation and possible partial reconstruction of the uncovered relics, depending on their state

¹⁷ Based on the monument card in the collection of the WUOZ, ref. no. 3475.

¹⁸ The archives of WUOZ in Katowice preserve an administrative decision to enter the building in the register of monuments on 31.05.1966, decision no: KLIII-680/489/66, as well as a decision dated 29.04.1972 permitting the demolition of the building, decision no: MOZ II-885-9/Mikołów/1.

¹⁴ F. Triest, writing about the temples in Mikołów, described the local synagogue as: ‘massiv erbautes’ (transl. RZ. ‘massive building’), cf. Triest 1865, 605.

¹⁵ Kubit et al. 2021, 156.

¹⁶ Prus 1932, 398.

Fig. 3. Mikołów. Archive photograph of the synagogue building, 1960s or 1970s. Source: Monument card, ref. no. 3475. Archive WUOZ in Katowice.



Fig. 4. Orthophotomap of the area of the present-day Synagogue Square in Mikołów with marked sounding trenches and hypothetical location of the synagogue building. Graphic design: R. Zdaniewicz, orthophotomap underlay for: www.geoportal.gov.pl, accessed 12.08.2023.



of preservation.¹⁹ The scope of work and the location of the excavation were very limited due to the presence of contemporary utilities and vegetation.

In the first phase of the works, a linear trench located in the northern part of the square (Trench 1) was explored (Fig. 4). In it, archaeologists found relics of the foundations and the side walls of the synagogue, which allowed them to confirm the original width of the building (Fig. 5:a). The front part of the building was 14.8 m wide. The foundations on which the building was placed were

approximately 1.1–1.2 m wide and were made of irregular blocks of Carboniferous sandstone,²⁰ laid in layers bound with lime mortar.

The foundation footing of the building was discovered at a depth of approximately 2.5 m from today's ground level, and approximately 1.6 m from the level of the relics of the floor discovered inside the synagogue. The side walls, which were about 0.4–0.6 m wide, were built of 7×15×30 cm machine-made bricks. Inside the building, between the walls of the building, relics of the floor were

¹⁹ The entire work was supervised and consulted by officials from the WUOZ in Katowice.

²⁰ Chodyncka and Probiez 1985, 329–333. Sandstone outcrops from the Carboniferous period are found, among others, in the vicinity of Łaziska and Mikołów, cf. Dulias 2018, 63.

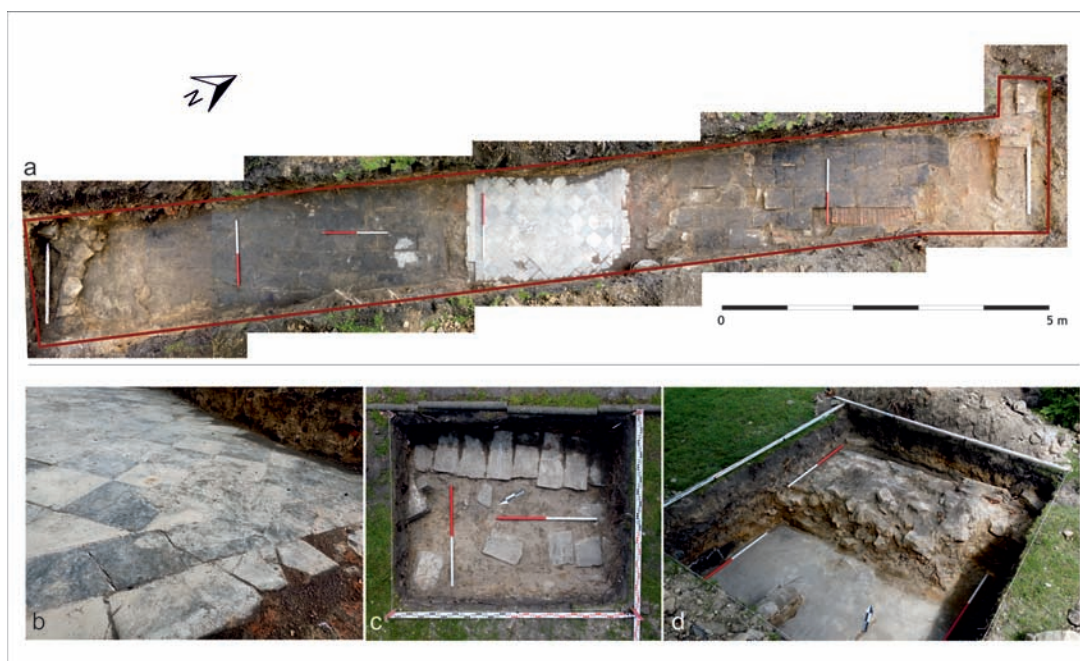


Fig. 5. Mikołów: a – Photogram of the vertical projection of trench no. 1 with architectural details discovered during the research; b – Floor in the central part of the synagogue vestibule, trench no. 1, detail; c – Former street surface, paved with stone slabs, in front of the entrance to the synagogue, trench 2; d – A fragment of the synagogue foundation discovered in trench 3. Photo and graphic design: R. Zdaniewicz.



Fig. 6. Elements of building fixtures and architectural details discovered in the collapse of the synagogue building. Photo and graphic design: R. Zdaniewicz.

discovered, as mentioned above, most probably of the vestibule of the synagogue. The tract in the central part of the building, about 2.5 m wide, was paved with white and dark grey floor tiles measuring 20×20×5 cm, arranged in a chessboard motif (Fig. 5:a-b). On the sides of the main tract, the floor was laid with sandstone slabs measuring approximately 5×30×48 cm, with milled surfaces. In the backfill layers (rubble) associated with the demolition of the synagogue, a few iron pieces

of building fixtures were found, including a hinge (Fig. 6:a), wedges (Fig. 6:b), brackets (Fig. 6:c-d), and the relic of a window grille (Fig. 6:e). No artefacts related to the functioning of the synagogue were encountered, including interior furnishings or items related to the liturgy.

Unfortunately, due to the presence of the pavement and street lighting lamps, it was not possible to expose the front wall of the synagogue. In the trench (Trench 2) established on the northern side

of the pavement, only the former street surface, paved with stone slabs, was encountered, where the main entrance to the building was originally located (Fig. 5:c).

The last of the trenches was located in the southern part of the square with the aim to expose the possible remains of the synagogue's back wall (Trench 3). Here, only the relic of a side wall foundation and a concrete spout were discovered, evidence of the building's adaptation to a storage function after the Second World War (Fig. 5:d).

SUMMARY

For technical reasons, the research work that was carried out did not uncover the most significant architectural elements of the former Mikołów synagogue, including the front part of the building. Nonetheless, much valuable information was obtained concerning the construction of the building, including confirmation of some of its dimensions, and determination of the structure and width of the foundations and side walls. The uncovering of the floor of the vestibule of the synagogue was also

an important discovery. Importantly, some of the preserved and exposed remains of the foundations have been secured and will be subject to revitalisation and partial reconstruction in the future. This will contribute to preserving the memory of the former synagogue building and the Jews of Mikołów. The site of this important building for the history of the town will thus remain forever in the consciousness of the people living here.

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DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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