

Maria Piechotkas: Why wooden synagogues were created just in Poland?



**INTERVIEW WITH FILIP LECH AND NICHOLAS GLINSKI ON 10.13.16
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"The differences really fascinated me. They were so wonderful and so different from anything I've seen before! And at the same time as Polish. I really wanted to see them in the wild " - says Maria Piechotkas, Nobel Prize.Irena Sendler in 2016.

Maria Piechotka was born on July 12, 1920, is an architect and researcher of Jewish culture. Together with her husband, architect Kazimierz Piechotka wrote a number of books on the history and culture of Polish Jews, including pioneering "The differences wooden " (1957). Together with her husband she designed numerous buildings, including the Warsaw residential Bielany I-IV, entered by SARP in the list of goods of contemporary culture.

Filip Lech: She wrote a book about Ms. synagogues, long before this topic became fashionable in Poland. How did your interest in Jewish culture?

Maria Piechotka: In 1938 I was a first year student of architecture at the Technical University of Warsaw. One of the subjects was the story of Polish wooden

architecture. Lectures led Professor Oskar Sosnowski, who soon after the formation of an independent Polish, in 1923, founded the Department of Architecture Polish. He omni extensive studies, including the Jewish architecture. He collaborated with the photographer and researcher of the Jewish, Simon Zajczyk.

Professor Sosnowski lectures showed photographs and measurements b of Oznice wood. These measurements, under the direction of Simon Zajczyk, within the framework of mandatory practices performed students of the Faculty of Architecture.

Synagogues these very fascinated me. They were so wonderful and so different from anything I've seen before! And at the same time as Polish. I really wanted to see them in the wild.

FL: Moments later, war broke out.

Professor Sosnowski died in September 1939. Zajczyk was murdered by the Germans in 1944, and the wooden synagogues ceased to exist. During the war I lived in Krakow. In the years 1943 - 1944 commuted to Warsaw to take the secret of the Faculty of Architecture.

There surprised me uprising. Immediately after the liberation of her husband returned from the POW camp to Warsaw to the Department of Architecture Polish WAPW, where my husband was his assistant then head of prof. Zachwatowicz.



Photo of Maria and Kazimierz Pieshotka. Photo courtesy of Michael Piechotka

The Department survived measurements and photographs of dozens of synagogues in the dozen or so wooden. The subject was known only to a small circle of interested parties. These had to be developed and disseminated. With the permission of prof. Zachwatowicz started together with her husband carry out work related to the subject of the study.

It was necessary first of all learn the history of Polish Jews, with their culture and religion. In 1957, she left our book " The differences wood " , the first post-war

publication of the Department of Architecture Polish. In 1959. It published its translation in English.

After a few years, we learned that this book caused a great impression on the Jews, especially American. They then met the phenomenon of Polish wooden synagogues. We were told that restored self-esteem so-called Ostjuden, that the Jews of Central and Eastern Europe are considered inferior in terms of culture of the Jews of Western Europe.

FL: Is this book sparked debate in Poland?

It was well received by professionals, but the publicity was not. It was not a time to disseminate the subject, the more that we have described also synagogues of not being in the range of post-war Polish Eastern Borderlands Second Republic. In other publications, censorship made sure that the contents of the books is not approaching this thorny issue.

It was also quiet in Israel. In the phase of building their country Jews consolidate its citizens rather isolating them from the resentment. That changed only in the 80s, but that's another story.

Nicholas Glinski: Do you remember the childhood any contacts with Jewish culture?

I do not remember. I lived in Tarnow, where 30 percent. of the population were Jews, but there were two worlds, almost isolated. That distinction did not relate to the Jewish intelligentsia, but it was a small group. There was no animosity, I mean I personally met with anti-Semitism. We lived next to each other.

FL: It was you the opportunity to see the pre-war Warsaw?

Warsaw - yes.

FL: A Jewish quarter?

My contact was limited to passing its tram. Its inhabitants were mostly Jews faithful to traditional principles, they differed in appearance, language and way of life. Assimilated Jews, Jewish intellectuals, lived on the border or outside the Jewish quarter. A huge mass of more than 300,000 people had lived in the Jewish quarter.

FL: You had the opportunity before the war to associate with the architecture of Polish Jews?

Before starting the study I did not know that this specific architecture exists.



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As I said, this interest began at the Faculty of Architecture of the historical wooden synagogues, then were going with her husband to take care of masonry synagogues, they were also very interesting. But it so happened that we took quite something else, architecture design.

Then, for the next years still we collected information about synagogues, thinking that maybe in the future we will revisit this topic. In 1980 he went into retirement and we wondered what to do next.

Already slowly began with political change. It was created when the program at the Art Institute of Sciences, devoted to Jewish architecture. We were invited to cooperate. We have gained access to previously inaccessible archives of Polish and

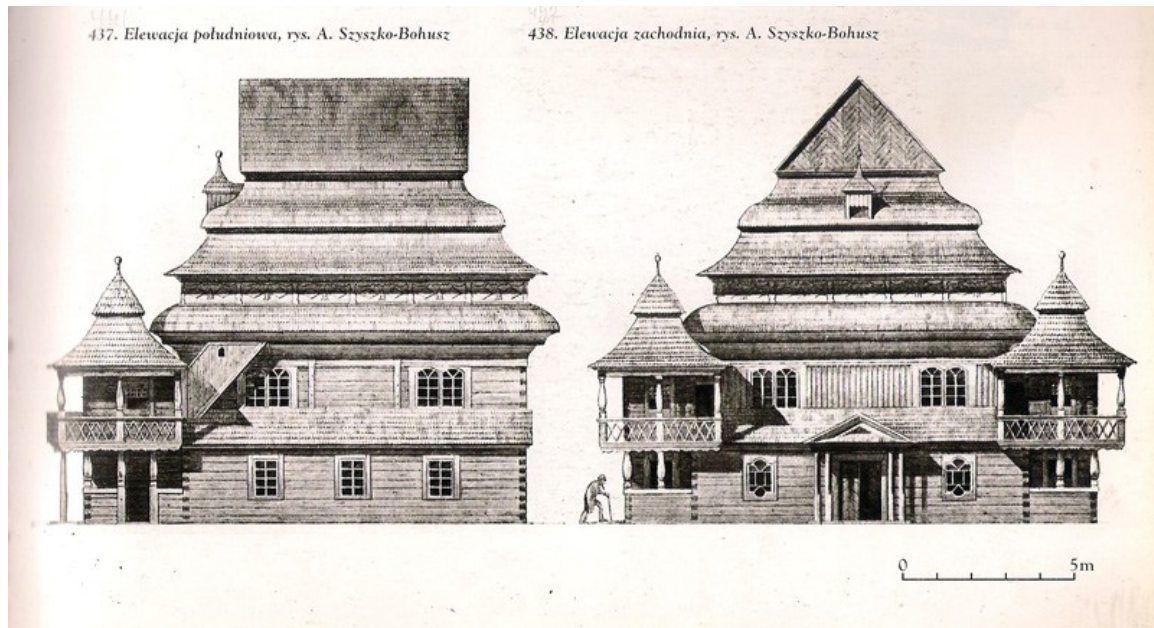
foreign. In 1986, the first mobility opportunities - Lithuania, Belarus, Ukraine, Israel, the United States.

In 1996, she published our second book on the wooden synagogues, with much of the previous extended range. Not only contain descriptions and iconography of a larger number of objects, but also took her Interior - Aron Kodesh, the bimah and murals. Her name was "*Gates of Heaven - The differences Wooden Lands Old Republic*". Then we took a brick synagogues, the book "*Gates of Heaven - The differences Brick*" came out in 1999. And then we developed "*Oppidum Judaeorum. Jews in the urban space of the former Republic*". It is released in 2004. The story of Jewish settlement, the formation of streets, neighborhoods and "cities" Jewish - until the end of the First Republic.

FL: What materials possessed state in the 40s and 50s?

These were primarily prewar measurements collected in the Department of Architecture Polish and photographs from the Central Bureau of Registration of Historical Monuments (later the Art Institute of the Polish Academy of Sciences). Besides gathered everything they could, the old publications and illustrations.

Interest in wooden synagogues began in Europe somewhere in the second half of the nineteenth century on a wave of revival of past peoples. Such scholars as Francis Mączyński, Charles Maszkowski and others were published in magazines or books, texts, drawings and photographs relating to individual objects.



Wooden synagogues in the early nineteenth century, the researchers were interested in a Jewish-German and Russian. She expedition Szymon An-ski, which in

1916 moved along the Dnieper River in search of the roots of Jewish culture. In 1934 he published a book of Alois Breier "*Holzsynagogen in Polen*", PhD thesis, which he defended in 1913. at the University of Vienna. Then I did a series of very interesting photographs, including synagogues that did not survive the First World War, we used them as well. Such single photographs, publications - it was what we used also to the development of the first book.

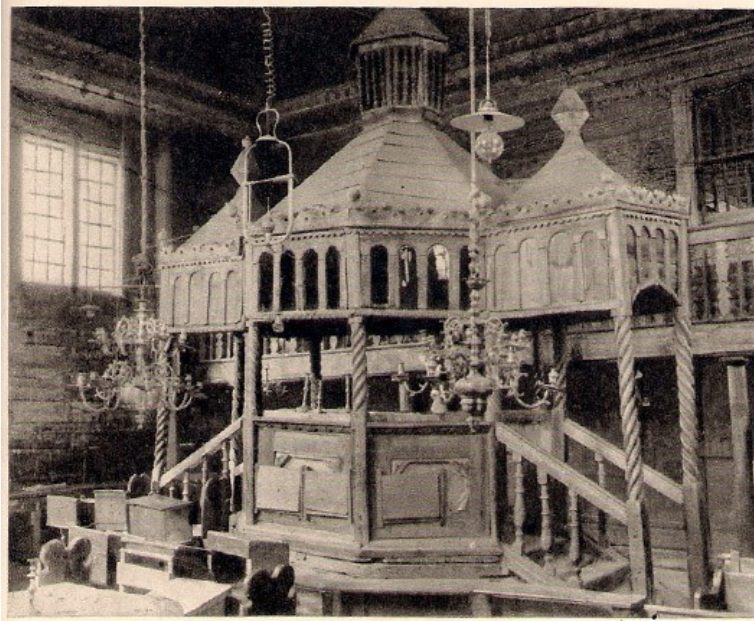
FL: You were granted access to the documents of the Jewish community?

No, because in our being developed all the municipal archives together with synagogues were destroyed. Only in the years 80-90. we could reach the state archives of the Ukrainian, Belarusian, Lithuanian. And there were many photographs, which we did not know before. It was a big expansion of our knowledge.

Recently we made the third approach. This was to be the second edition of the "*Gates of Heaven*" in 1994, but in the meantime revealed a lot of new material, had the entire book largely rewritten. My husband, unfortunately, almost seven years dead, had to do the same with the help of a cooperating team.

NG: What do you as an architect interested in these synagogues?

I wondered: why was created in Poland? Why these and not others? The architectural form, the uniqueness of the structure and the mutual influences and relationships between the Polish and Jewish architecture. The main difference between synagogues and buildings sacred Christian denominations is that the latter is the most important altar główny- place to celebrate Mass and located next to the pulpit from which sermons are preached, attention sitting in the pews participants devotion is facing one way. The natural system is split room for one or three naves with a relatively small width (the same is called synagogues. Reformed).



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Meanwhile, in traditional synagogues there are two focal points for the faithful: aron ha-kodesh - a wardrobe on the eastern wall, where the Torah scrolls are kept and - podium bimah in the middle of the room, on which a prayer. Worshipers stood by moving desks, returned in both directions. The system is thus room concentric shape similar to a square and a greater width than the nave of the church.

Why is the phenomenon of wooden synagogues was born in Poland? Because it was a country rich in wood conifers, pines, firs, spruces, larches. You could get a simple beam on several meters long! Excellent material for construction carpentry. In Western countries, it was much more of deciduous trees with a smaller straight sections and such structures were rarely used. It was the local specialty. Meeting with an area of one hundred and fifty, and sometimes more than two hundred square meters, often without internal supports, overlapping of built-in roof truss multilevel apparent domes.

These rooms have very interesting interiors that covered the rich polychrome resembled used by the Polish nobility "Turkish" representative tents - a reference to the Tent of the Tabernacle of the Lord.

FL: Who built b Oznice?

We are very interested. Lists of crafts practiced by Jews in the seventeenth and eighteenth and mid-nineteenth century. Were dozens of different professions, but there were builders. Therefore they had to do it by Polish builders. Why they created such structures? On request the client that they have to inspire. It was a combination of Jewish religious thought of the Polish art construction, a unique example of the interpenetration of cultures.



The synagogue in Olkiennikach, the culmination of the bimah and the interior of the dome, fot. Szymon Zajczyk, approx. 1936, Art Institute of the Polish Academy of Sciences, fot. Polin

While the rich furnishings, that is carved Aron Kodesh, paintings, furniture, the decor: textiles, embroidery, silver was Jewish crafts. The Museum of the History of Polish Jews POLIN is a replica of a synagogue in Gwoździec. There we see the construction of Polish and Jewish painting.

NG: In 1973, the famous American artist Frank Stella made a series of abstract works painting and sculpture, inspired by the state book.

This is a very interesting extensive work of the great painter, a high degree of abstraction and formal large distance from that which was the subject of inspiration. There were other painters who undertook this subject, mainly in the context of the destruction, inspired by the book, but they did rather realistic images, for example, showing the drama of combustion.

We got a letter once from Israel, written in very broken Polish. A kibucnik of Sokolka Moshe Verbin built on the basis of our books models of wooden synagogues. He joined two photographs of these models. Very gently, he did it with small pieces of wood. In 1986. During his stay at a conference on Jewish architecture in Jerusalem , we visited the kibbutz.

Very hospitably received us there, Moshe showed us dozens of their models, made extremely busy. Then, in 1990. We participated in the opening of the exhibition of

these models in a museum in Tel Aviv. We even wanted to bring this exhibition to Polish, but unfortunately exhibits were so delicate that no one wanted to take transport insurance.

FL: What do you think - what would happen to the wooden architecture of the Jewish, if there were no war, what would be waiting for the future?

The most valuable in terms of historic and artystycznym- like antique wooden churches and Orthodox churches - would probably be covered by conservation care. Other, perhaps destroyed over time or cause a fire, would be replaced with new brick.

NG: A brick synagogues?

Also among them they were many wonderful.

Remember that the Jews in the Middle Ages were from Western European countries expelled and their synagogues destroyed. Then came the Polish where they were kindly received, and here in the XVII - XVIII century. There was a great development of housing synagogue. It was then that form of synagogues found nowhere else. But during the Second World War, Polish Jews were almost completely exterminated by the Germans - with them fell victim to the Holocaust also synagogues, not only wood but also many masonry was completely destroyed, burned or at least devastated.

In many Germans garages, stables, warehouses. In some state this continued for some time after the war. Then some were renovated libraries, archives, cultural centers - also Jewish museums. Other users free of care and decayed. Fortunately, over the last several years, especially after joining the EU, most valuable in terms of historical and artistic interest was renewed principally by foreign funds. Many restored to their decor, have been adapted for cultural needs, some restored religious functions. In many cases, the ruins were protected and orderly environment.

There remains the problem with some objects.

There is a very beautiful and wonderful synagogue in Orla near Hajnowka. Very little town on the border, not a single Jew. The local Community Centre organizes the concerts, lectures and exhibitions, but has trouble getting funds maintained, not to mention maintenance.

FL: There were desecrated during the war and in times of the Soviet Union.

In the former Soviet Union, the fate of synagogues were different, they were arranged in the stables, garages, warehouses, a few museums and cultural houses, some abandoned demolished. After 1991 and there are a lot has changed.



The synagogue in Olkiennikach, general view, fot. Szymon Zajczyk, approx. 1936, Art Institute of the Polish Academy of Sciences

FL: When will the book be updated with new content that you managed to gather?

Maybe even in 2016, but probably early next, because we are in the last phase of work. It will take into account the state of pre-war, post-war state and the present. These are huge differences.

NG: Do any of the described by Member synagogues wood there?

All were destroyed. It survived only a few modest Jewish prayer houses of the twentieth century. Surviving thanks to the fact that did not differ in size and form from an adjacent small-town residential buildings. Now they are in community centers, kindergartens in one shop.

FL: A feature?

Together with them, they burned everything.