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A 300-Year-Old Synagogue Comes Back to Life in Poland

By RUTH ELLEN GRUBER
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SANOK, [POLAND](#) — In the far southeast corner of Poland, the warm summer air is resounding with the rasp of old-fashioned iron saws and the satisfying twack-twack-twack of ax blades on wood.

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Ruth Ellen Gruber

Laura Brown, a co-founder of Handshouse Studio, a nonprofit organization based in Massachusetts that is taking part in the project, with a scale model of the synagogue.

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Here, in the foothills of the Carpathians, an international crew of master timber craftsmen and students has been working on an intensely hands-on project that combines history, [art](#) and education. They are building a replica of the tall peaked roof and inner cupola of an ornate wooden synagogue that stood for 300 years in the town of Gwozdziec, now in Ukraine.

The replica, which will be 85 percent of the original size of the building, will be installed as one of the key components of the Museum of the History of Polish Jews, currently under construction in Warsaw and scheduled to open in 2013.

Its elaborate structure and the intricate painted decoration on the cupola ceiling will reproduce a form of architectural and artistic expression that was wiped out in World War II, when the Nazis put the torch to some 200 wooden synagogues in Eastern Europe. Many of them, like that in Gwozdziec, were centuries old and extraordinarily elaborate, with tiered roofs and richly decorative interior painting.

The Gwozdziec Synagogue, built in the 17th and 18th centuries, was a “truly resplendent synagogue that exemplified a high point in Jewish architectural art and religious painting,” the architectural historian Thomas C. Hubka, an expert on the building, has written.

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Ruth Ellen Gruber

Timber framers working with logs on the Polish construction site.

Constructing the replica is a joint project of the museum in Warsaw and the Handhouse Studio, a Massachusetts-based nonprofit organization that emphasizes learning by building, particularly the reconstruction of historical structures and other objects.

“There are certain things you can learn by making it that you can’t learn any other way,” said Rick Brown, who founded and directs Handhouse with his wife, Laura.

“Every time you pick up a tool or start a process or use a certain material, embedded in that is a very rich, almost unlimited learning experience.”

The Browns conducted years of research on Eastern Europe’s lost wooden synagogues before embarking on construction of the Gwozdziec replica in Sanok in May. They studied prewar photographs, drawings and other documentation, built models and made on-site investigations of wooden churches and other buildings still found in Poland and Ukraine.

While wooden synagogues were destroyed, many towns and villages in this corner of Poland, and also across the border in Slovakia and Ukraine, still boast fine examples of wooden folk [architecture](#). Dozens of evocative wooden churches dating back centuries are clearly signposted, both in Poland and Slovakia, as part of a “wooden architecture trail.”

There are also several impressive masonry synagogues within an easy drive of Sanok. The 18th-century synagogue in Lancut, now a museum, has beautifully restored interior painting and other decoration. One in Rymanow stood for decades as a ruin but has been partially rebuilt, with a tall peaked roof now protecting the vigorous but sadly fading frescoes of Biblical animals and Jerusalem that grace its walls.

In Lesko, the 17th-century synagogue was rebuilt in the 1960s and today houses a gallery of local arts and crafts. Lesko’s vast Jewish cemetery, just a short walk away, is one of the oldest in Poland, with massive tombstones dating to the 16th century.

“The Gwozdziec wooden synagogue represents the relationship between Polish vernacular architecture and Jewish liturgical architecture in one unit,” Mr. Brown explained. “They literally come together into one, very powerful, cultural statement.”

For the Gwozdziec project, an international team of nearly 30 master craftsmen from the Timber Framers Guild are being joined by groups of students from Massachusetts College of Art and Design, where the Browns teach.

Timber framers came from the U.S., Canada, Great Britain, Belgium and Japan to lend their skills, all on a volunteer basis.

All the work is being carried out using techniques and tools that the builders of the original synagogue would have used: axes, saws, mallets and other hand-held implements. The aim is to gain an understanding of just what went into the building of the synagogue and how its construction would have been envisaged and carried out — and also to lend authenticity to the replica.

“It brings back the lost story of the synagogue, the town, this culture,” said Patrick Goguen, a student at the Massachusetts College of Art and Design.

The project is occurring in several stages. Building the timber-framed roof and cupola is the first stage, running through June. Students and artists will hold workshops this summer and next summer to reproduce the intricate polychrome painting that adorned the ceiling of the cupola. These workshops will be held in eight Polish towns in masonry

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synagogues that still stand.

The timber framing is taking place in a corner of Sanok’s Ethnographic Park, a sprawling open-air folk-architecture museum that displays wooden buildings — houses, barns, churches, chapels and even beehives — that have been transferred from a number of villages in the region.

Here, thick logs are being hewn by hand into flat-sided timbers — a process that can take two days per log — and then manually sawed into thinner pieces. The components are then shaped and joined without nails.

“We’re of the cult of woodworkers; our texts are the texts of geometry and are expressed in the iconography of all the religions of the world,” said Jackson DuBois, from Bellingham, Washington. “To us, this piece of Jewish culture is about hewing logs. That’s why we’re using tools of the day.”

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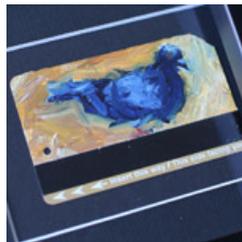


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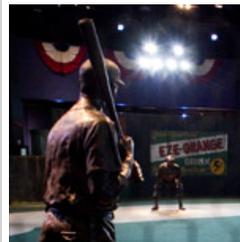
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