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On Old Wooden Synagogues in Poland

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Cf. issue 8. under "Information"

The old synagogue in Wołpa is certainly worthy of a detailed description, both from an architectural perspective as well as in view of the number of ancient objects that have been hidden there for a long time. At very first sight, the variety of roofs of decreasing size on this cedarwood building are immediately apparent, as is the external balustrading which, as we have already seen, is characteristic of the early wooden buildings of Polish Jews. The little town of Wołpa, embellished by this ancient synagogue, lies in the Grodno administrative district not far from the left bank of the Niemen. In the 15th and 16th centuries it was the property of the rich Lithuanian Halshany princely family which attracted both Christians and Jews to promote trade, industry, and crafts. It was however the later nobleman Leon Sapieha who largely contributed to the rise of the small town.

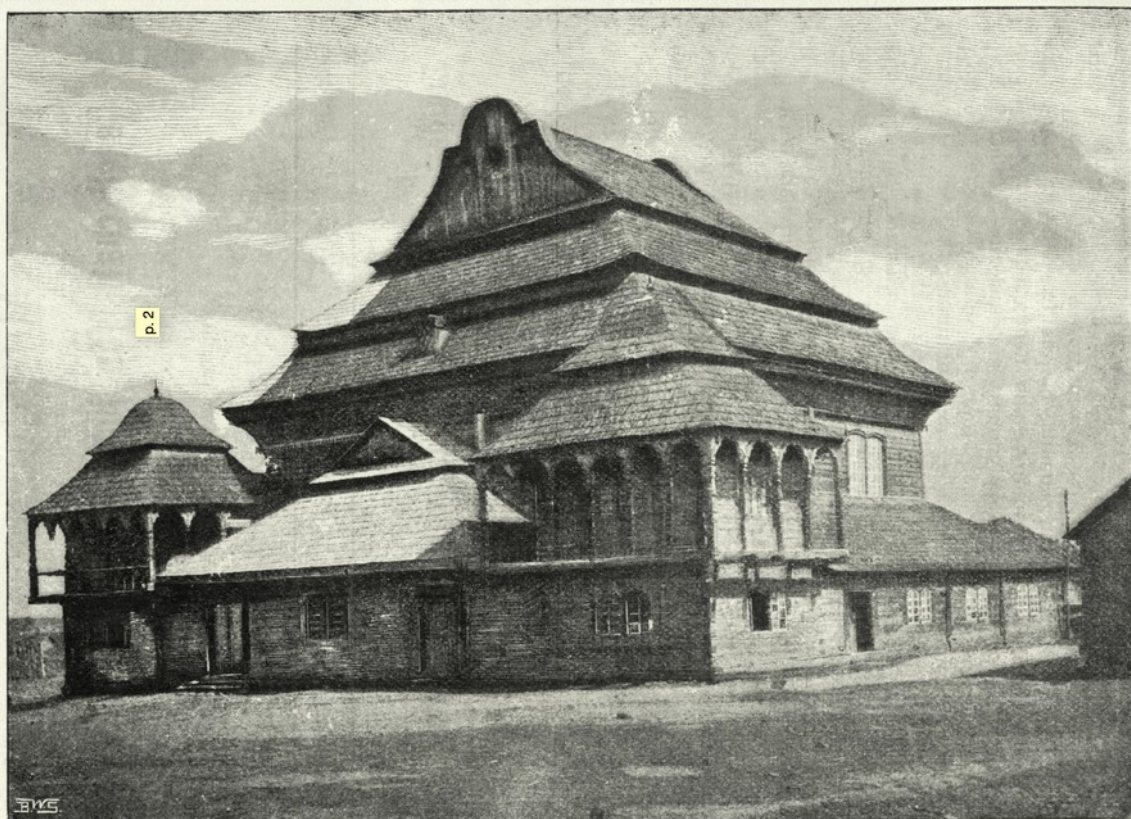


Fig. 1

The synagogue (fig. 1) presented here was probably built by wealthy local Jews in 1643, although this cannot be established with absolute certainty due to the lack of town records.

1 The wooden synagogue of Wołpa

With its three tiered roof, this beautiful monument to early wooden architecture towers above most other buildings in the little town and stands out due to its unique appearance. According to tradition this synagogue was erected 300 years ago by a Jewish master builder whose name is unfortunately not known. Inscriptions on several objects suggest that it was constructed at the beginning of the 17th century. A major fire which destroyed the town did not spare the Jewish congregation's *kahal* council building, and all books and archives were lost. The arsonists were Swedes who also removed all objects of value, including the famous, artistically crafted, seven-branched silver lamp, which could barely be lifted by three people. Miraculously, the Catholic church and the synagogue escaped this conflagration.

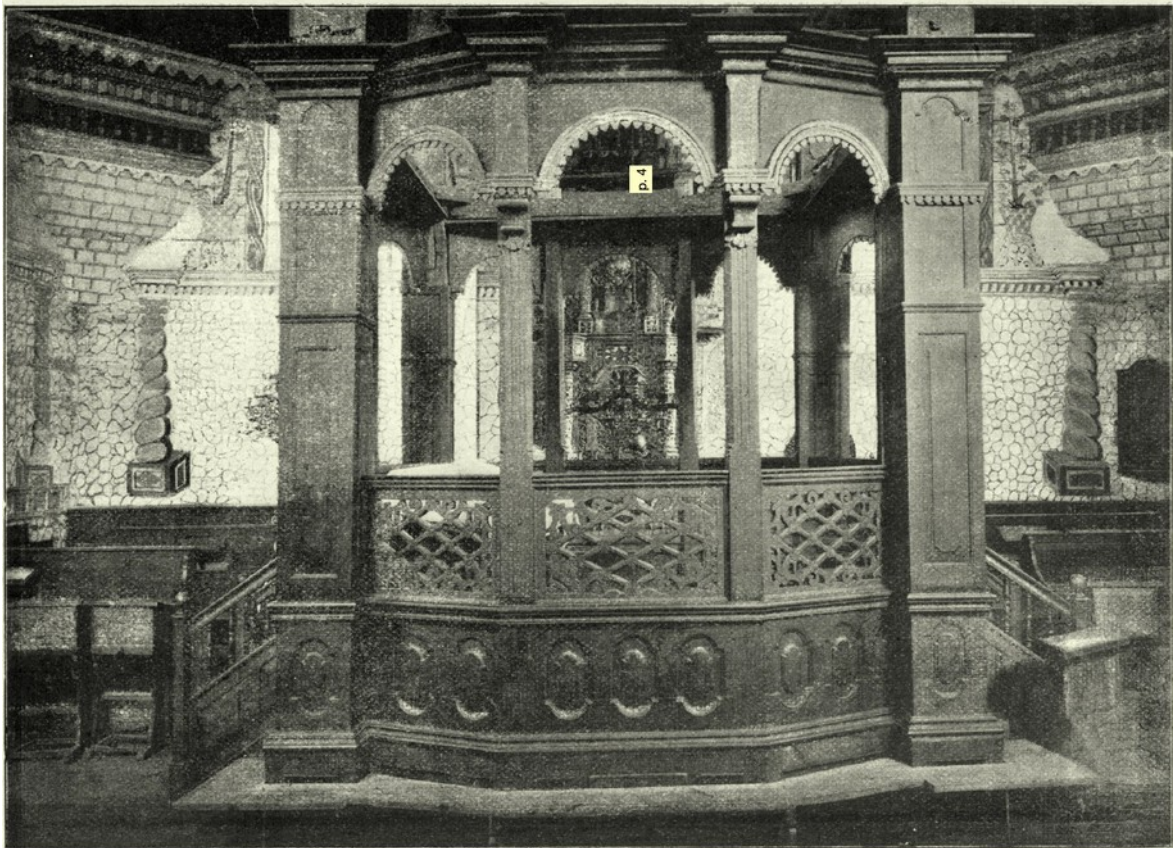


Fig. 2

Since the synagogue was built 300 years ago, its external appearance has not been altered. Only once, around 1781, were the roofs repaired and the building held up from within. The synagogue is 24½m long and 20m wide. Resting on four huge columns, an octagonal dome with five galleries rises in the center, each gallery being narrower than the one below, encircling the dome inside at an equal distance. These balustrades are made of beautifully carved wood. What appears to be an iron ball is suspended on an iron chain from the middle of the dome—it has, however, not been possible to ascertain its purpose. The vault inside the dome is painted dark blue with golden stars glittering against this background. The height of the synagogue, measured from the floor to the top of the arched dome, is more than 30m. In the middle of the four huge columns is an artistic and unique wooden *bimah* which can certainly be considered an masterpiece of early carpentry. The drawing shown here (fig. 2) allows us to see the full beauty of this structure.

2 The *bimah* in the synagogue in Wołpa

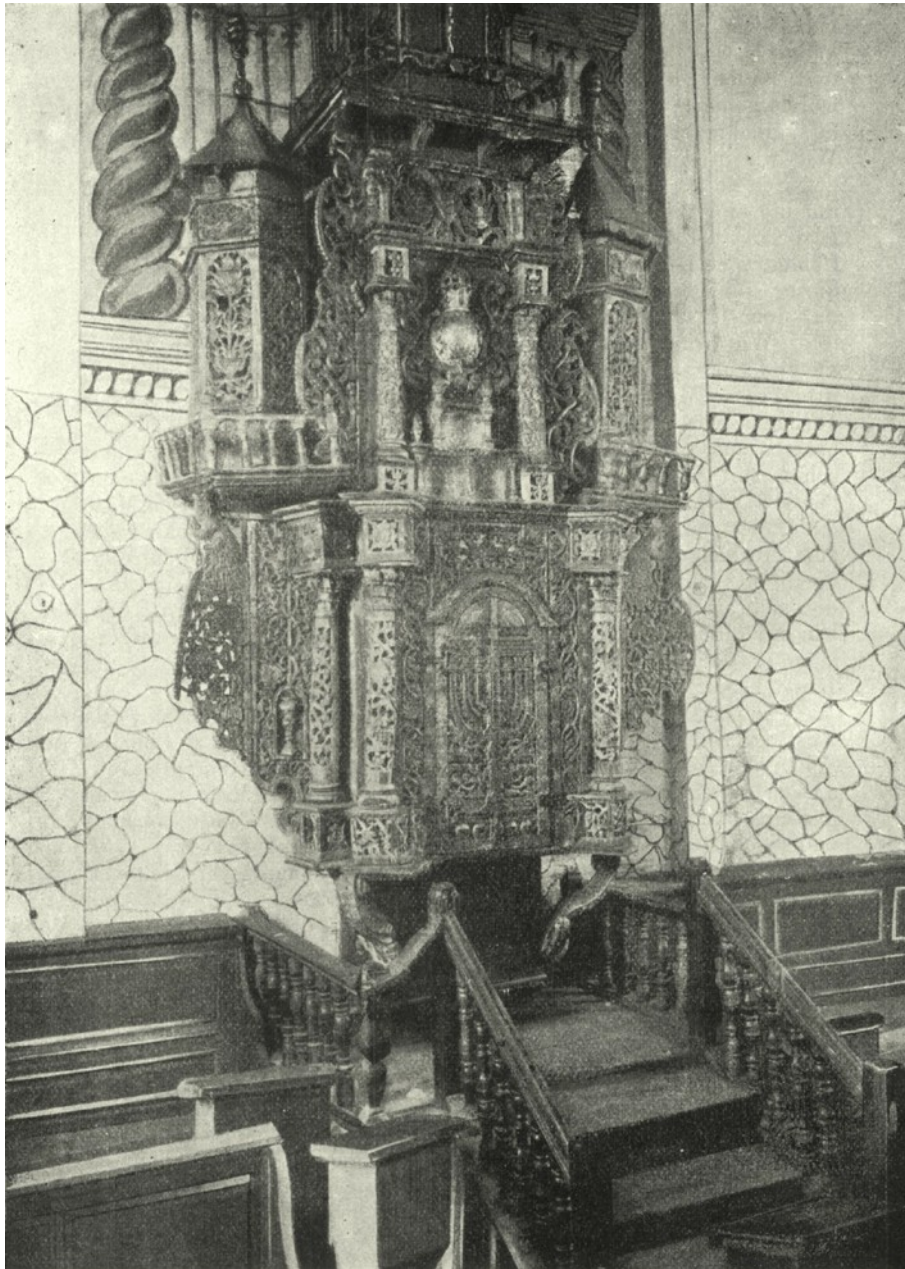


Fig. 3

The most unique and incomparably beautiful item in this synagogue is the “Aron Hakodesh” (fig. 3). Made entirely of oak, it is 10m high and 4½m wide. This Torah ark is certainly the work of a 17th-century carver; it is decorated with so many animal and vegetal ornaments, so many genuine Hebrew motifs, that looking at this monument in its original form is a real pleasure. The Torah ark is at a raised level, surrounded by a balustrade, with five wide, comfortable steps leading up to it; in itself it gives the impression of forming the front of a sublime house of prayer. The whole height and width of the double door, which closes the ark with the scrolls of the Law, is a beautiful piece of carving which depicts a huge seven-branched chandelier with various arabesques. As we can see in the illustration, artistically carved ornamental elements, entwined by vine leaves, are to be found to both sides of the ark. Large eagles spread their wings above. The photograph, taken in the synagogue, gives us as

accurate a picture as possible of the beautiful and artistic execution of this monument from the 17th century.

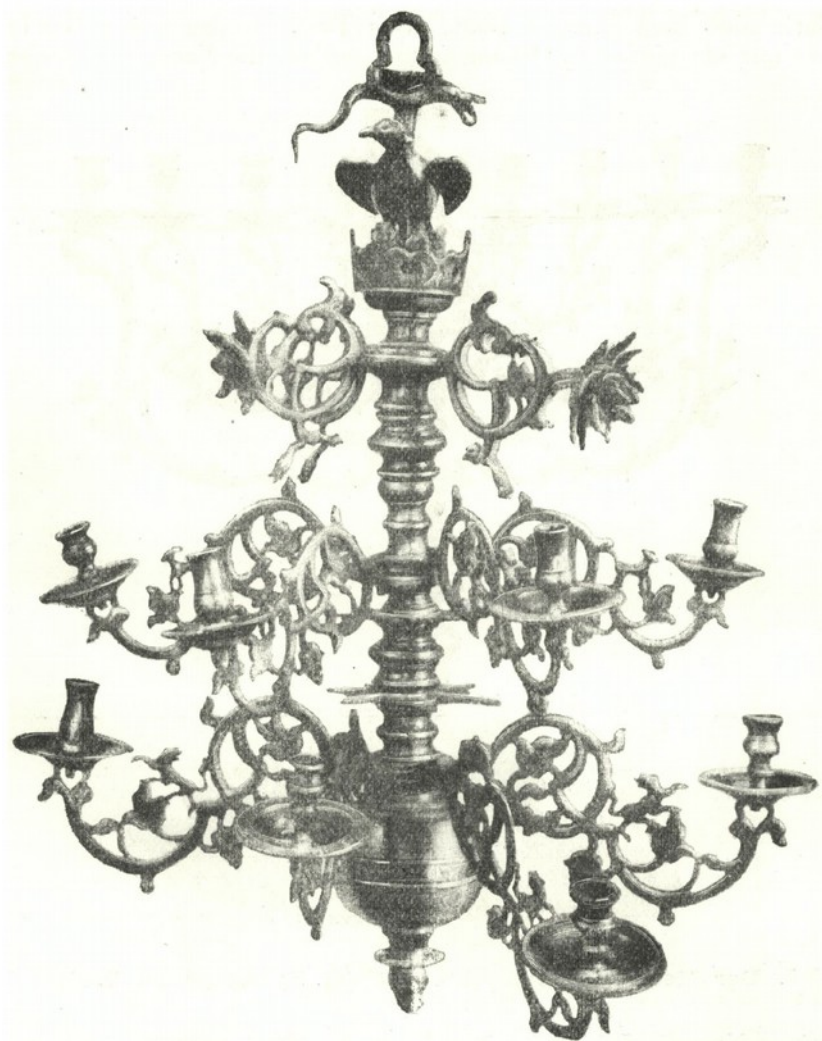


Fig. 4

As already mentioned, the synagogue in Wolpa houses many relicts from the past, including three large brass chandeliers that are still in place. One (fig. 4), which hangs in front of the altar, has been very carefully executed. It is made up of three parts which taper toward the top and are beautifully decorated with tendrils and chased lions and deer. Right at the top a crown can be seen, in the middle of which there is an eagle with outspread wings. A lug, needed to hang the chandelier, is fixed to its back. Who made this unique chandelier is unknown. The crown only bears the Hebrew initials “E.M.” and the year 1685. The engraving on the large brass sphere reveals that the chandelier was donated to the synagogue by Hirsch and his wife Debora in 1781.

The planar candleholders made of sheet brass hanging to each side of the altar are also characterized by their exquisite execution. The rounded metal sheeting, with a diameter of 20 centimeters, is polished. The middle is slightly convex and the wide rim, with a symmetrical groove, is surrounded by artistically chased fruits, vines, and garlands.

The synagogue in Wolpa also houses a very beautiful, seven-branched, brass candelabra which stands on the desk to the right of the altar (fig. 5). The design of this candelabra is light

and simple and is different on account of the base that rests on three artistically executed small lions. In the Torah ark in the synagogue are several old Torah scrolls decorated with crowns and silverwork.



Fig. 5

Several manuscripts should also be mentioned which are still housed in the synagogue.

The prayer book (*siddur*) for week days is especially worthy of note. It is a thick tome of parchment, without a title page or cover, but otherwise well preserved. It has been extremely carefully written in ink. It does not have any drawings or ornaments but instead has capital letters at the beginning of each main prayer which are decorated with delicate pen-and-ink drawings alternately painted gold, green or violet. This beautiful manuscript dates from the second half of the 17th century.

3 The Torah ark in Wołpa Synagogue

4 The brass chandelier in Wołpa Synagogue

5 The brass candelabra in Wołpa Synagogue

The second book is more interesting in every respect. It is the prayer book (*machzor*) for religious festivals, very delicately and uniformly written on fine, thin parchment. It comprises

two volumes; one has 104 the other 112 pages in quarto. Unfortunately the covers are missing here, too, but none of the pages in between. The title page of the first volume has a simple ornamentation and bears the name of the feast day. Only the first letter with which the title page starts is large, richly ornamental and highlighted in magnificent colors with small golden drawings. For scholars, this sheet is important as, at the end there is an inscription which, translated from the Hebrew, means: "This *machzor* was written by Chaim Meyerowicz, draftsman, who can pride himself on his skilled work, in the year 1781." It is, therefore, a manuscript from the second half of the 18th century.

6 The *machzor* in Wołpa Synagogue

The second sheet, obviously added later, includes a pen-and-ink drawing by Chaim Mayerowicz which is shown here (fig. 6).



Fig. 6

The donor of this *machzor* perpetuated his name on this sheet as the Hebrew inscription in the middle of the drawing tells us that it was Hirsch and his wife Debora who gifted this *machzor* to Wołpa Synagogue in 1785. As we have already established, this is the same family that donated the large brass chandelier to this house of prayer in 1781. We would like to point out that the beginning of each main chapter in this prayer book is embellished with letters beautifully painted in gold and other colors. On some sheets the artist drew primitive figures in the middle of the text which represent uniquely styled mythological animals holding banners in their paws (fig. 7).

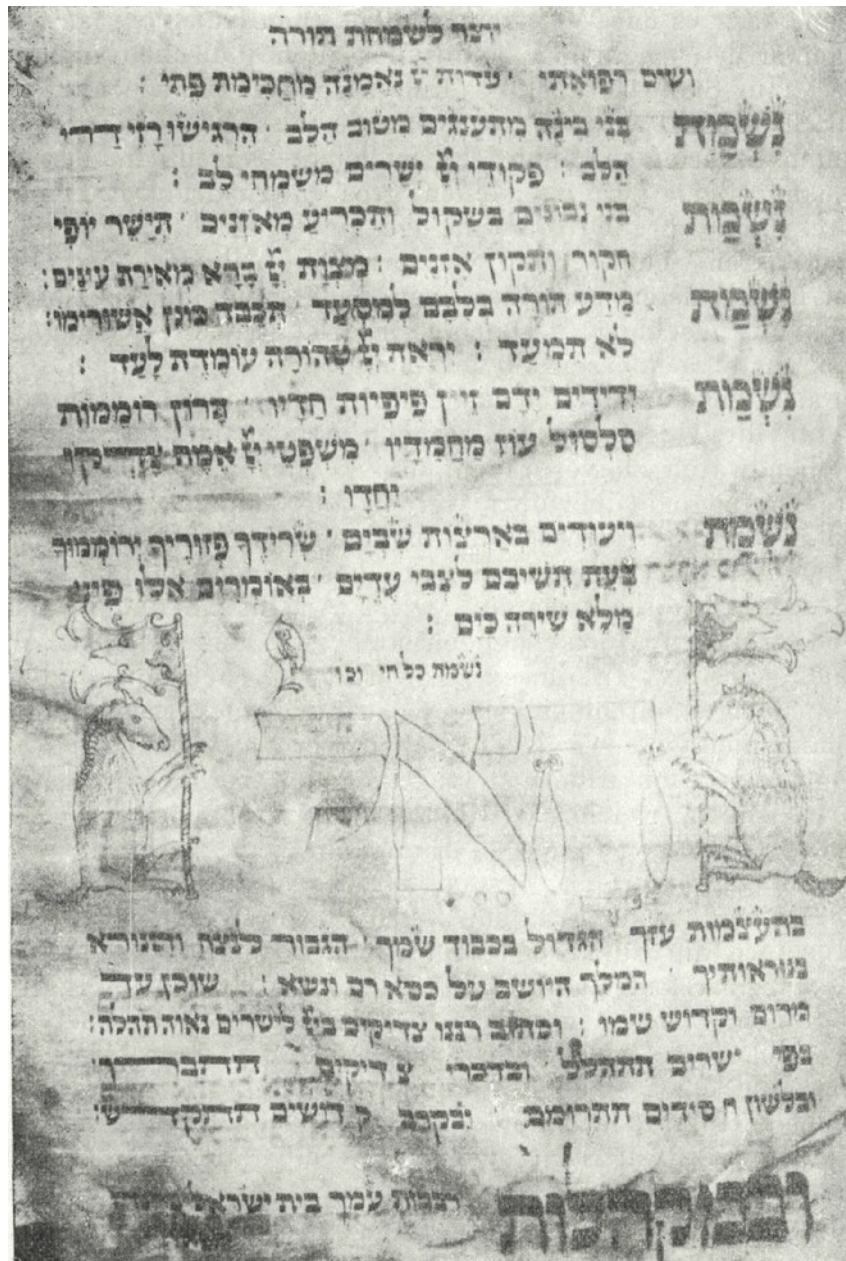


Fig. 7

7 The *machzor* in Wołpa Synagogue

At the beginning of the 15th century Jews settled mainly in little towns on the left bank of the Vistula. Although these were small congregations, they were well organized. Documents in Płock show that it was Prince Siemowit of Masovia who gave Jews the same rights as other citizens and allowed them to trade and run businesses, to build a synagogue, found schools and even construct a slaughterhouse and a steam bath. After the annexation of the Masovian crown, the kings were equally well-disposed toward the Jews. In 1521, they were granted the privilege to freely purchase and sell various wares at public markets in Piotrków by King Sigismund I. In 1576, King Stephen Báthory permitted Jews to acquire houses as well as space for a cemetery in Płock and to build a synagogue. In 1630, these privileges were confirmed by King Ladislaus IV and the wealthy Jews living there had a beautiful masoned synagogue erected. In 1671, King Michał Korybut gave permission to rebuild the synagogue

after it had burned down during the Swedish intervention in the Thirty Years' War. King John III (1677) and a number of bishops (1712) allowed Jews to build synagogues and trade and work freely in Maków, Ciechanów, Mława, etc., privileges which were also confirmed by King Stanislaus in August 1759 and by Prince Poniatowski, Bishop of Płock, in 1774. Supported by these privileges, rights, and liberties bestowed on them by princes, kings, and bishops, they enjoyed a certain prosperity, all the more as there are no historical records of any conflicts between them and Christian citizens. As a consequence, impressive wooden and stone synagogues were built. More about the latter will be explained later. We would like to mention the wooden synagogue in Nasielsk now, architecturally one of the most unique. For some time it no longer exists. The building was so old that it had to be demolished. The image shows exactly what it would once have looked like.

8 The wooden synagogue in Nasielsk



Fig. 8

Tradition has it that the synagogue was built at the end of the 17th century to plans drawn up by Simcha Weiss, the son of the Jewish architect Shlam of Zuck. We must admit that it is the work of a talented artist who preserved the original style adopted by old Jewish architects exactly. The synagogue is mentioned as the most beautiful of these known styles in Sobieszczanski's "Encyklopedyi Powszechniej" of 1865, vol. 19, pp. 227ff. It is easy to see how this house of prayer did not fail to make a lasting impression, especially as there is no other wooden synagogue which is decorated with such a variety of carvings. All ledges, pillars, doors, and windows are tastefully carved, albeit simply. The tin-roofed synagogue in Nasielsk was originally 30m long and 22m wide. Although artistically executed objects, decorative silverwork for the Torah scrolls, beautiful candelabras, etc., once existed, the items were too well-used to be transferred to the new synagogue erected on the same site. Here there are two large works made of hollow brass (fig. 9) which were fitted to either side of the Torah ark (Aron Hakodesh) as hanging wall lamps. This type of work can be found in almost all earlier wooden synagogues and is doubtlessly the work of Jewish master craftsmen. In this

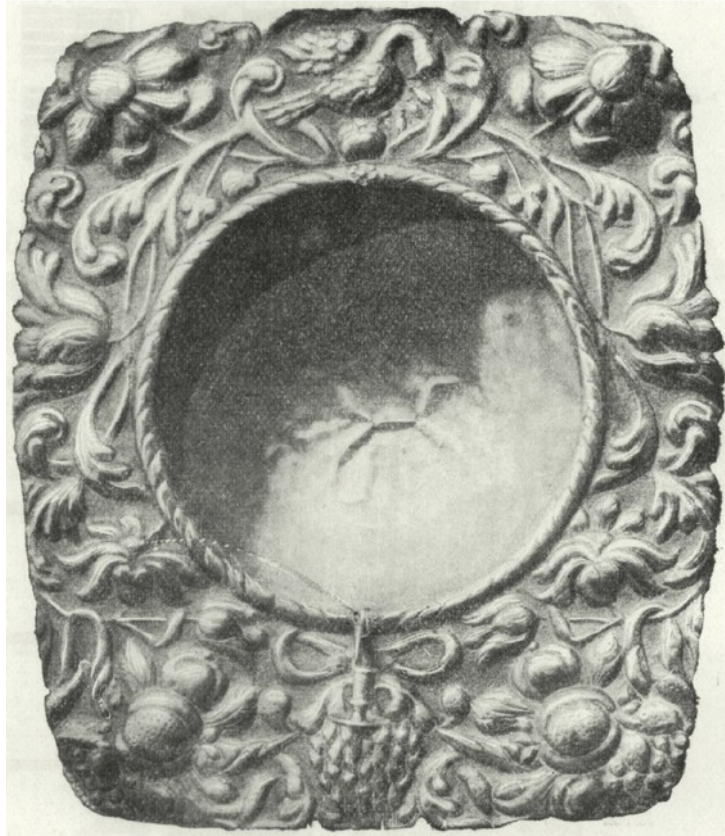


Fig. 9

profession, which Jews pursued with pleasure, a certain degree of perfection was achieved, as well shall see later.

9 Hollow brass object in Nasielsk Synagogue



Fig. 10

Of the old silver objects, only one ancient, chased hollow metal item survived which was used as a decoration to be hung on the Torah scrolls (fig. 10). The Hebrew inscription engraved on the same indicates that it was the gift of a certain Ber and his wife in 1750.

10 Hollow brass object in Nasielsk Synagogue

As embroidered items were used for a wide range of religious purposes, their creation was a



Fig. 11

very welcome activity for Jewish women. Evidence of this can be found in the many rich and artistically embroidered items which embellished the synagogues. One such item in the

former synagogue in Nasielsk (fig. 11) is illustrated here. It is a relatively artistically executed piece of silver thread embroidery on black velvet, 2m 4cm long and 1m 6cm wide. While the depicted elements are neither rich nor outstanding they are unique and purely Jewish in style. The wording reveals that this curtain was completed in 1770.

11 Curtain in the old synagogue in Nasielsk

After the Swedish intervention and various fires, the congregation in Nasielsk became so poor that it was not in a position to rebuild the buildings which had burned down. Following the beseeching appeal of the Jewish congregation and the intercession of the owner of Nasielsk, Stanislaus Wesel, King Stanislaus August appointed a special commission with the aim of providing the Jews in Nasielsk with help as quickly as possible.

The community of Nasielsk's heyday was at the beginning of the 18th century. At that time it was very large and wealthy; trade and industry blossomed and the new synagogue, as a meeting place, was impressive and rich with artistically executed ritual objects. The congregation's favorable status was largely attributable to the prudence and wisdom of scholarly Rabbi Haskiel in Nasielsk around 1701. He even enjoyed the trust of Nasielsk's owner. A document in the municipal archives of Płock states that "Stanislaus Wessi, son of the owner of Nasielsk and canon of Poznań," authorized Rabbi Haskiel to represent all Jews resident there before the court and to pass judgement on them according to Jewish law (1704). No trace can be found today of the beautiful synagogue in Nasiefsk. The illustration is the sole reminder of the past.

From several of the wooden synagogues described and illustrated here so far, the typical characteristics in early Jewish architecture can be recognized: high, tower-like roofs with a number of raised sections and open balustrades which run along the front of the buildings. In the further course of our work we shall see how Jews adhered to the same style for almost all synagogues in the larger cities. Synagogues in the smaller and less remarkable towns and villages take on a completely different form. As an example of an utterly different style, the simple synagogue building in Uzlen (Minsk administrative district) is shown here.

12 The wooden synagogue in Uzlen



Fig. 12

Made completely out of cedar, it would look more like a store were it not for the two tiered roof that recalls Jewish architecture. The congregation in Uzlen remained poor and few in number and was therefore not able to erect an impressive synagogue. This one was built at the beginning of the 18th century and has survived in good condition to this day. Only the ark for the Torah scrolls is worthy of particular note (fig. 13).

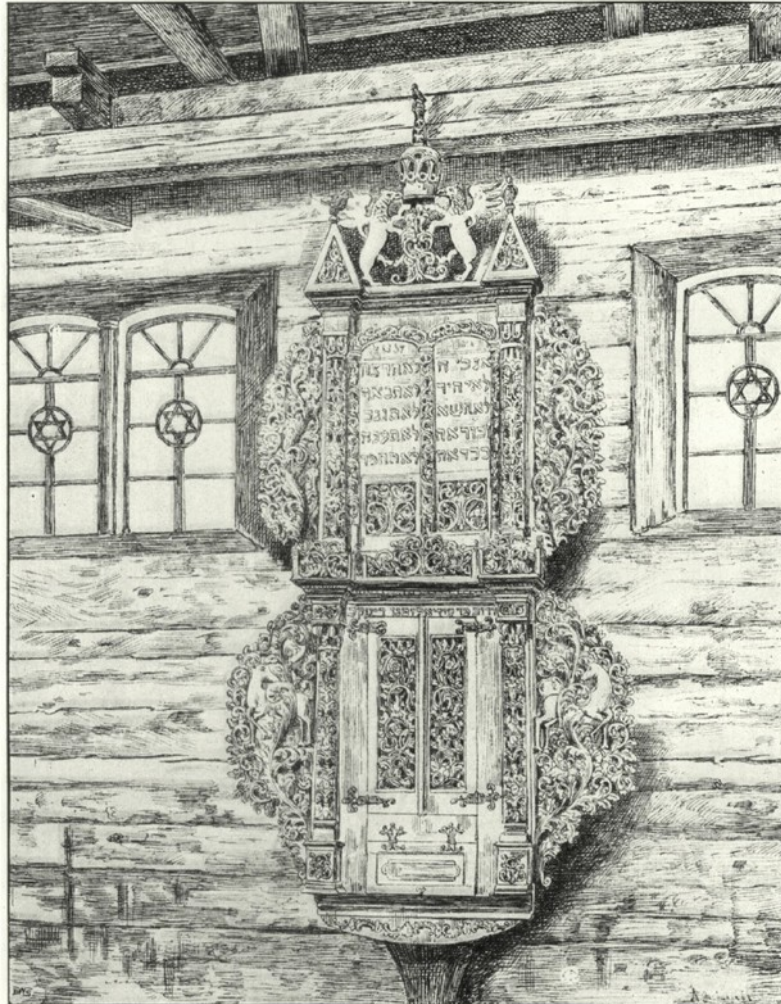


Fig. 13

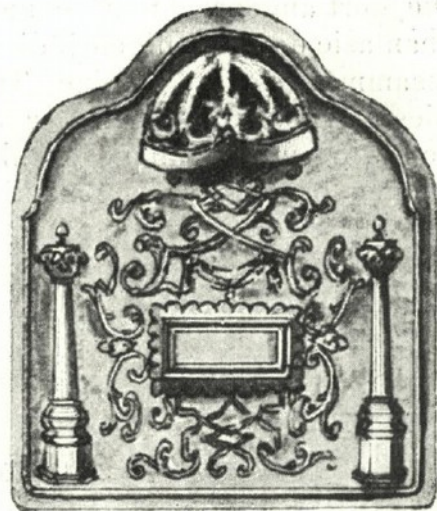
13 The Aron Hakodesh in der synagogue in Uzlen

The Torah ark is carved entirely out of wood and gilded here and there. This tasteful, open carving must be the work of a versed and talented artist. His name is known to us today: it is Beer, a son of Israel, who was also a sculptor.

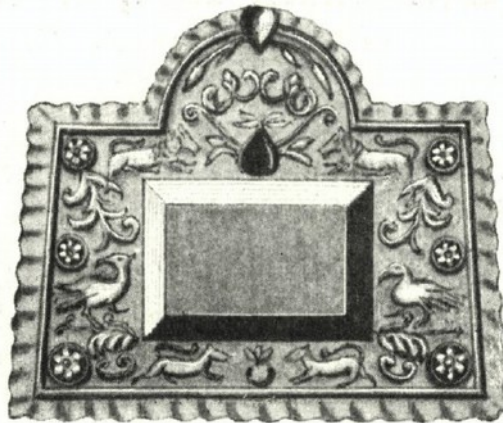
In this otherwise poor synagogue, a vestige of the past, three items made of silverplate, illustrated here, that served as decorations for the Torah scrolls, can be found. The first item (Lit. A) in particular is very beautiful and artistically executed. The lions standing on columns supporting the crown are well proportioned and carefully chased. This metal object was donated to the synagogue in 1786 by Sosiel Mawrowicz. The design of the second item (Lit. B) is much simpler, although well executed and chased. It was donated by Schmul Salkind of Vilnius in 1788. The last of the items (Lit. C) is slightly different in style than the other two. The design of the ornamentation depicted is typical of a Jewish draftsman's way of thinking at



Lit. A.



Lit. B.



Lit. C.

that time. Small animals, birds, and vegetal ornaments have been skillfully worked together. This metal object, which was donated to the synagogue in 1791 by Berek Zeilowicz, his son, was originally fitted with gemstones which were later replaced with small silver rosettes. No other items from the past are to be found today in the synagogue in Uzlen.