

BULGARIA: A SYNAGOGUE REBORN

In recent months, a number of restored synagogues were inaugurated across Europe, and plans for the restoration of others were announced. Seventy-eight years after the Nazis deported the Jews of the island of Kos (**Greece**) to Auschwitz, the island's Kal Shalom Synagogue is functioning once again as a place of worship. The renovation project was completed in partnership with the Municipality of Kos, the Central Jewish Council of Greece (KISE), the Jewish Community of Rhodes and the Civic Society of Hippocrates. The project aims to preserve the memory and culture of the Jewish community and enhance its role in the island's current life.¹

In **Belgium**, Antwerp's Great Synagogue (Machsike Hadass, Osten Shul), serving the city's Orthodox community, was reopened in May 2023 at an inauguration ceremony attended by the Belgian Prime Minister and Mayor of Antwerp. Constructed in the early 1900s, the full-scale renovations of the synagogue began in 2019, three years after the Flemish government awarded a four million Euro grant to restore both it and the Shomre HaDas (Dutch) Synagogue in the city.²

In **Lithuania**, for the first time since the Second World War, a religious ceremony was held at the wooden synagogue in Žiežmariai. The Žiežmariai Synagogue fell into disrepair following the war. It was reopened following a five-year renovation project in 2021 by the Lithuanian Jewish Community, local governments and other Lithuanian government bodies. While it can serve as a synagogue, it will also be used as a venue for cultural events and exhibitions.³

In **Germany**, more than eight decades after the Bornplatz Synagogue in Hamburg was destroyed on Kristallnacht, city officials transferred ownership of the site where it once stood to the city's Jewish community.⁴ The initiative to reconstruct the synagogue has been active since 2020. Funding for the reconstruction project will be provided by the Hamburg municipal government, the German government and private donations. Its eventual reconstruction will restore a vital piece of Jewish life to the city and its history.

In **Romania**, after a nine-year effort, the Romanian Jewish community announced plans to restore the Ashkenazic Great Synagogue in Constanța, a port city on the Black Sea.⁵

¹ KISE, "Opening of the Renovated Synagogue Kos," kis.gr, July 21, 2023, <https://en.kis.gr/index.php/anakoinoseis-menu/enkainia-gia-ten-epanaleitourgia-tes-synagoges-tes-ko>.

² "Antwerp's Great Synagogue Inaugurated after Renovations," *The Brussels Times*, May 8, 2023, <https://www.brusselstimes.com/493274/antwerps-great-synagogue-inaugurated-after-renovations>.

³ "First Religious Ceremony at Žiežmariai Synagogue since World War II," Jewish Community of Lithuania, June 5, 2023, <https://www.lzb.lt/en/2023/06/05/first-religious-ceremony-at-ziezmariai-synagogue-since-world-war-ii/>.

⁴ Jackie Hajdenberg, "85 Years after Kristallnacht, Germany to Begin Rebuilding Grand Synagogue in Hamburg," *Jerusalem Post*, September 29, 2023, https://www.jpost.com/diaspora/article-760953?utm_source=jpost.app.apple&utm_medium=share.

⁵ European Jewish Congress, "Romanian Jewish Community President Announces Restoration of Constanța Synagogue," EJC, June 22, 2023, <https://eurojewcong.org/news/communities-news/romania/romanian-jewish-community-president-announces-restoration-of-constanta-synagogue/>.

How do deserted, broken synagogues get restored after decades of neglect? The story of one glorious building recently revived in Bulgaria is revealing – and inspiring.

Due to its crossroad location, Bulgarian land has become a place where the legacies of different cultures are found. Here, diverse ethnicities have shared a long history of peaceful coexistence and mutual understanding for centuries. Vidin, a port city in the northwest of the country on the southern banks of the Danube River, was no exception from this rule and was home to a mix of ethnic communities well until the mid-20th century.

One of them is the Jewish community. In 1881, the community numbered around 1,300 people (approximately 10% of the city’s population at that time).⁶ The Vidin Jewry was an inseparable part of the city’s social, economic and cultural life. Highly educated and skilled, these respectable citizens of Vidin contributed in no small measure to the city’s prosperity. With some slight fluctuations, their number remained steady until 1950, when most Jews left Bulgaria and moved to Israel.

Jews in Vidin had an educational society (Prosveta, “Enlightenment”), a Jewish sports club (Zhabotinsky), a Jewish kindergarten, a Jewish school and a Jewish public kitchen. The regional archive in Vidin offers one of the richest collections on Bulgarian Jews. It preserved valuable documents on the daily lives of community members – black-and-white photographs, letters, postcards and official correspondence. The Jews of Vidin participated in political life, trade, culture, public events and charity. They participated in the wars Bulgaria fought for its unification. They were an integral part of Vidin’s social fabric.

The spiritual life of the Vidin Jewry revolved around the synagogue constructed in 1863. In the course of the Russian-Ottoman war of 1877-1878, in which Bulgaria was liberated after almost five centuries of Ottoman Muslim domination, Vidin was subjected to an artillery barrage. The synagogue burnt in flames and was almost completely destroyed.

Over its ashes, a new synagogue was built in 1894 in the free Principality of Bulgaria, serving as one of many symbols for the renewal and resurrection of Bulgaria. Funds were raised through nationwide donations. It took just one year from the point the cornerstone was laid until the temple was solemnly consecrated in the presence of high-ranking officials. At its completion, the synagogue in Vidin was the largest in Bulgaria and among the largest in the Balkans, with a capacity of 1,000 people.

In 1909, a bigger synagogue was opened in Sofia, the capital. Yet, as beautiful as that synagogue was, the Vidin Synagogue was superior in terms of the splendor and intricacy of the internal decoration. Thanks to its imposing silhouette, it was referred to as “the White Swan of the Danube,” from which it was visible. The architectural plan was harmonious, symmetrical, and highly ambitious for those times. It included a spacious central part. Four high towers. Dozens of arches and cast-iron columns. A stately façade. Rosettes with hexagonal stars and murals with floral motifs. Colored glass and elegant window grilles. Floor mosaics. Four marble slabs with inscriptions in Bulgarian and Hebrew with the names of donors and fallen soldiers of Jewish descent on the walls.

⁶ “Remembering the Vidin Jews,” “The Old Vidin,” Racho Milanov, 2021, p. 242.

No expense was spared. High-quality construction materials and luxury goods were delivered from the port of Vidin, brought there from all corners of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Wooden planks from Transylvania, paints from Bohemia, and chandeliers, lamps and furnishing from Vienna were among them.⁷

During the Second World War, Jewish religious and cultural life dwindled. Bulgaria allied with the Axis. Around 48,000 Jews living within the prewar territorial boundaries of the country were rescued from deportation to concentration camps largely due to popular resistance and the opposition of influential public figures and key institutions. Nevertheless, from the territories Bulgaria reclaimed and subjected to its administration in the course of the war, more than 11,000 Jews were deported. Moreover, Jews living in Bulgaria were subjected to a set of discriminatory measures during the war under the Law for Protection of the Nation (1941-1944).

By the late 1940s and following the emigration of the majority of the Bulgarian Jewry, the Vidin Synagogue lost its viability and gradually fell into a state of disrepair. The new communist regime had no interest in saving it. There was strong opposition to religious practices of all kinds. The synagogue was used as a warehouse, where construction materials, grain, and, at some point, the decors of a drama theater were stored. This considerably worsened the building's condition.

During the 1960s, the state invested more in archaeology, culture, renovation and conservation of monuments. As a result, in 1967, the building received the status of a cultural monument of national importance and, in the ensuing years, some partial repairs were carried out.

In the 1980s, as part of the nationwide campaign aimed at marking the 1300th anniversary of the establishment of the medieval Bulgarian state, the authorities declared their intention to restore the synagogue to its original state. Those in power turned it into a concert hall for the needs of the municipal symphonic orchestra. A huge organ was ordered, reinforced concrete columns were erected and the roof was removed with the idea of having it entirely renovated.

That did not happen. The democratic revolution of 1989 set other, more urgent priorities. The restoration plan was abandoned, leaving the temple with no roof. Another circumstance greatly complicated the situation – the building was restituted, and property rights belonged no more to the state authorities but to Shalom, the organization of the Jews in Bulgaria. Caught in this legal-bureaucratic complexity, municipal and state institutions were not able to apply for funding and launch a renovation project.

The synagogue crumbled, with overgrown vegetation extending to the point that there were trees inside of it. It became a place for homeless people, drug addicts and stray animals. Its vandalized outer appearance never failed to attract the attention of occasional visitors who expressed their dismay at the condition of the monument.

⁷ Elko Hazan, Ester Georgieva, Angelina Rashkova, and Sonya Levi, *Concise Illustrated Encyclopedia of Jewish Communities and their Synagogues in Bulgaria* (Sofia: Kamea Design, 2012).

After years of frustrated plans and empty hopes, a light at the end of the tunnel. On March 9, 2017, the General Assembly of Shalom, the property owner, decided to donate it to the Vidin Municipality.

A project was drafted and named the Restoration and Adaptation of the Vidin Synagogue into a Tourist Attraction and Cultural Center. The project sought to create a site that combines the functions of a museum, an exhibition space, a multifunctional hall for a vast array of public events and a park. The second floor was designed as a library with study spaces. One area was designated solely for the needs of the local Jewish community.

The project was approved and received funding along the lines of the Operational Program “Regions in Growth” (2014-2020) of the European Union under Priority Axes 6 “Regional Tourism.” This program aims to protect and promote cultural heritage through tourist development, including unused cultural tourism sites in Bulgaria.

This financial support is oriented to projects that conserve sites of national and world significance, but also for their popularization and development as sustainable tourist attractions. The program has a two-pronged approach: conservation of the cultural heritage, thus improving the competitiveness of Bulgarian tourism, and creating favorable conditions for local business initiatives.⁸

The revival of the synagogue cost almost 10 million Leva (roughly around 5 million Euro). Most of the funds were given in the form of financial assistance through EU programs. However, the Bulgarian government and the Vidin Municipality also contributed.

Architect Angel Nedyalkov and technical manager of the construction Genadi Ivanov led a team of engineers, designers, conservator-restorers and construction workers who cooperated closely throughout the complex process in the endeavor to bring the synagogue back to its authentic appearance. The Vidin Municipality, headed by Dr. Tsvetan Tsenkov, closely monitored the progress and provided assistance. Old photographs and the recollections of living witnesses were used to recreate the old appearance. Natural materials were used, refraining from plastic and styrofoam. Underground communications, video surveillance, heating and plumbing systems, artistic lightning, and fire protection systems were put in place. The four marble slabs mentioned above, which were kept in storage for decades, were restored and brought back to where they originally belonged.⁹ Adjacent to the temple, a brand-new tourist information center offers visitors brochures, maps, and souvenirs, and promotes tourist sights and upcoming cultural events.

⁸ “Priority Axes, Priority Axes 6: Regional Tourism,” Ministry of Regional Development and Public Works, 2020, <https://www.mrrb.bg/en/infrastructure-and-programmes/op-regions-in-growth/priority-axes/>.

⁹ Sonya Valerieva, “Marble Plates Preserve the Memory of the Vidin Synagogue [Bulgarian],” Bulgarian National Radio – BNR Vidin, September 4, 2023, <https://bnr.bg/vidin/post/101872864/plochite>.

The national census of 2011 revealed that only three self-identified Jews live in the Vidin region.¹⁰ In the 2021 census, their number increased to eight.¹¹ The renovated synagogue was thus not intended to serve primarily for religious rites. Upon donating the property rights, Shalom suggested that it should have a new main function as a cultural hall and honor the legacy of Jules Pascin.

Pascin, an artist of Jewish descent, was born in Vidin in 1885 as Julius Mordechai Pinkas. Already at a young age, he gained international acclaim and toured prestigious art galleries with his exhibitions, in which his primary subject was women. Pascin lived in Munich, in Paris (where he came to be known as the Prince of Montparnasse) and in New York (where he naturalized). His works are preserved in some of the most expensive private collections all over the world. He committed suicide in June 1930 because of unrequited love. In 2000, he was declared an honorary citizen of Vidin.¹²

The official inauguration of the restored Synagogue took place on September 4, 2023, and received nationwide media coverage. Among the distinguished guests on this long-anticipated occasion were the President of the Republic of Bulgaria, Rumen Radev; the Minister of Culture, Krastyo Krastev; the newly appointed Ambassador of the State of Israel, Yosi Levi Sfar; the Deputy Head of the Israeli Diplomatic Mission, Naama Levy; the Chief Rabbi of Bulgaria, Yoel Yifrah; and the Mayor of Vidin, Dr. Tsvetan Tsenkov. Members of the Jewish community and Shalom, members of the Central Israelite Religious Council, members of the diplomatic corps and citizens of this city were also present.

On this solemn occasion, all guests at the event watched a special video message by Israeli President Isaac Herzog. He said:

“[...] It is a moment when we come together to honor the bonds that history has forged over millennia between generations of Jews and the beautiful land of Bulgaria. The magnificent synagogue [...] tells us the tale of the proud local Jewish community of Vidin which flourished for more than five centuries in that city, and this is indeed a great Jewish and Bulgarian story. [...] I thank you graciously for everything you have done [...] to make this beautiful synagogue vibrate once again with life and tell the fascinating story of the Bulgarian Jewry to people from all over the world. [...] And I thank the local Jewish community of Bulgaria and its leadership who continue to make us proud.¹³

Bulgarian President Rumen Radev emphasized in his speech: “May this temple serve as a bridge through which the heirs of the Vidin Jews will be able to come back to their roots so

¹⁰ “Population by Ethnicity and Mother Tongue in Vidin Region [Bulgarian],” National Statistical Institute, 2011, <https://censusresults.nsi.bg/census/reports/2/2/r9.aspx>.

¹¹ “Ethnocultural Characteristics of the Population by September 7, 2021 [Bulgarian],” National Statistical Institute, 2021, p. 15, <https://www.nsi.bg/sites/default/files/files/pressreleases/Census2021-ethnos.pdf>.

¹² “Jules Pascin, 1885-1930 [Bulgarian],” Vidin Almanac, <https://vidin-almanac.bg/artist/%D0%B6%D1%83%D0%BB-%D0%BF%D0%B0%D1%81%D0%BA%D0%B8%D0%BD-1885-1930/>.

¹³ Embassy of Israel – Bulgaria, “Video Message of the President of the State of Israel Isaac Herzog,” Facebook, September 5, 2023, <https://www.facebook.com/100064583533988/videos/pcb.685499526946159/829326758742075>.

that the bond between Bulgarians and Jews and the friendship between Bulgaria and Israel grow stronger.”¹⁴

The synagogue has already started its new life as a cultural center. It is open for visits every day. The entrance fee is ten Leva (five Euro) for regular visitors and three Leva (one and a half Euro) for students and retired people. There is no entrance fee on most public holidays and on the European Night of Museums. The site is managed by the municipal cultural institute Dunav, which administers the activities of the other municipal cultural establishments. A permanent exhibition is dedicated to Jules Pascin’s life and Vidin’s Jewish community. The center received high-quality copies of valuable Jewish books and documents as a donation from the State Archival Agency. It has already hosted its first event: a conference that brought together researchers from Bulgaria and Serbia from the domains of ethnography and archival work.¹⁵

Yoram Elron, Israel’s former ambassador to the country, visited the synagogue days before his mandate’s expiration and its grand opening as a cultural center. He expressed his astonishment at the authenticity and high professionalism of the restoration works and stated that Vidin would be a privileged place in Israel’s tourism market.¹⁶

These words were highly appreciated in Vidin in light of the concerted efforts of local authorities to overcome the city’s geographic isolation and attract tourists. Because of its rich history and marvelous monuments, the city’s tourist potential is enormous. However, that potential has remained unfulfilled due to poor infrastructure and other problems.

The synagogue is located in immediate proximity to the medieval Baba Vida Fortress, the St. Panteleimon Church and the Osman Pazvantoglu Mosque. With the completion of its long-anticipated restoration, the synagogue has already taken its rightful place in the so-called “Triangle of Tolerance,” which is suitable for religious tourism. Close by are the Epigraphic Museum, the Ethnographic Museum, a huge riverside park, an old gunpowder magazine and remnants of the city’s fortification system known as Kaleto.

There is more Jewish heritage in the city. One can visit the monument dedicated to Jules Pascin in 2000. There is also the opportunity to see the monument on the city’s square erected in 2003 by the descendants of the Vidin Jews to commemorate the Jews who were saved from the death camps. The inscription on that monument reads: “We will never forget. [...] The attitude of the citizens of Vidin towards the Jews was expressly hospitable, tolerant and humane. [...] With eternal gratitude and love to our fellow citizens from Vidin and to the entire Bulgarian people for their human feat.”

¹⁴ TVV Vidin, “Official Inauguration of Cultural Center Julius Paschen [Bulgarian],” Vidin.tv, September 5, 2023, <https://www.vidin.tv/?p=10779>.

¹⁵ Krasimir Kamenov, “International Conference Brought Together Researchers and Archivists [Bulgarian],” Bulgarian National Radio – BNR Vidin, September 28, 2023, <https://bnr.bg/vidin/post/101884070/mejdunarodna-konferencija-sabira-izsledovateli-i-arhivisti-vav-vidin>.

¹⁶ TVV Vidin “Ambassador Elron: Vidin will be a Privileged Place in the Tourism Market in Israel [Bulgarian],” Vidin.tv, August 3, 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4UrFyB1IkxA>.

Mayor Tsenkov hopes that Vidin will attract a segment of Israeli tourists who visit Bulgaria annually. For the first six months of 2023, Bulgaria was visited by 130,000 Israeli tourists.¹⁷ In 2022, Bulgaria welcomed a total of 174,000 visitors from Israel.¹⁸ Indeed, no other country outside of Europe generates more visits to Bulgaria than Israel, including the United States, Canada, Russia, China and Japan.

Vidin is my hometown.

I remember the first time I discovered the synagogue. I was a child who observed from a safe distance this somewhat alluring and, at the same time, eerily disintegrating structure. “That’s the synagogue,” an old passerby told me.

At the time, I did not know what a synagogue was.

The building was encircled with a rusty fence, and there were signs in bold red letters, barely visible from lush vegetation, strictly prohibiting entrance because of safety concerns.

I am pleased to see the temple in its present state. Undeniably, this building being removed from the extensive list of endangered immovable cultural heritage is good news. Reviving Vidin’s authentic urban landscape is also a step in the right direction.

This achievement was used for political purposes by Mayor Tsenkov in his campaign for a second term. He launched his campaign with an event in the synagogue turned cultural center, where his team presented the public with a report of what has been done and what they plan on doing next. He won, and by an overwhelming majority, too.

Still, I regret to say that I do not share the optimistic view that the renewed synagogue has the potential to attract many tourists. Much more must be done regarding infrastructure, popularization, and solid placement on the regional and national tourism market. I am not even talking about the international one; this is too far-fetched.

The local government hopes that the cultural center will be financially self-sufficient and live off the money it charges for the services it offers. In case of low attendance by tourists, the municipality may find it difficult to pay expenditures. In the long run, maintaining the center and its personnel might become a financial burden instead of a source of funds.

I cannot help but wonder about one more thing. Why is it that the cultural heritage of Bulgaria almost always must be damaged to the point of no return only to be expensively and ostentatiously restored? That approach should change. Adequate management and timely intervention or prevention will save not only invaluable pieces of material heritage, but also great amounts of time, energy and public resources, which can be redirected to other intents.

¹⁷ Embassy of Israel – Bulgaria, Facebook, August 29, 2023, <https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=681564197339692&set=a.288855436610572>.

¹⁸ “Foreign visits to Bulgaria in 2022 by Countries and Months,” National Statistical Institute. <https://www.nsi.bg/en/content/1969/arrivals-visitors-abroad-bulgaria-months-and-country-origin>.

Much heritage is irretrievably lost with the current inefficacious model, falling victim to tedious bureaucratic procedures and shady private interests. Fortunately, this was not the case of the Vidin Synagogue.

Policy Recommendations

1. **Cooperate.** The case of the Vidin Synagogue presents a brilliant example of fruitful cooperation between state and municipal institutions on the one side and the non-governmental sector and civil society on the other. This comprehensive approach is highly recommendable for cases in which different interests are at play.
2. **Diversify.** The approach adopted by Vidin Municipality in drafting the project and seeking funds for its implementation offers a successful model that can be applied to other similar cases, especially in the context of EU member states. Where funds are insufficient at a local level, regional authorities should apply for funding through one of the financial instruments and operational programs of the European Union aimed at regional development, sustainability, tourism or environmental protection.
3. **Adjust.** Adjusting the purpose of religious monuments and new approaches to remembrance practices is particularly applicable to religious sites that have lost their original function due to the absence of community representatives or confession. In Vidin, Jewish heritage is put to new purposes while its essence is preserved and properly exposed to the public.
4. **Reach out.** The Jewish diaspora is a highly valuable asset in Israel's relations with other countries. Bulgarian Jewry is well-placed and involved in the relations between Bulgaria and Israel. It serves as a bridge for revitalizing intercultural and intergovernmental dialogue on a popular and political level. Israel should welcome and support more actively any grassroots initiatives related to the preservation of shared material and spiritual culture.

– *Stilian Steffanov*



The Vidin Synagogue Before and After Renovation