



Estonian synagogues

Leo Gens lecture in Israel

Manuscript from the archive of the Estonian Architecture Museum.

The subject of my report is: synagogues in Estonia. During the WWII (Second World War) architecturally most remarkable synagogues on the Estonian territory in Tallinn (Reval) and in Tartu (Dorpat, Jurjev) had been destroyed. However the story of their birth is educative as a self-realization symbol of the local little Jewish community.

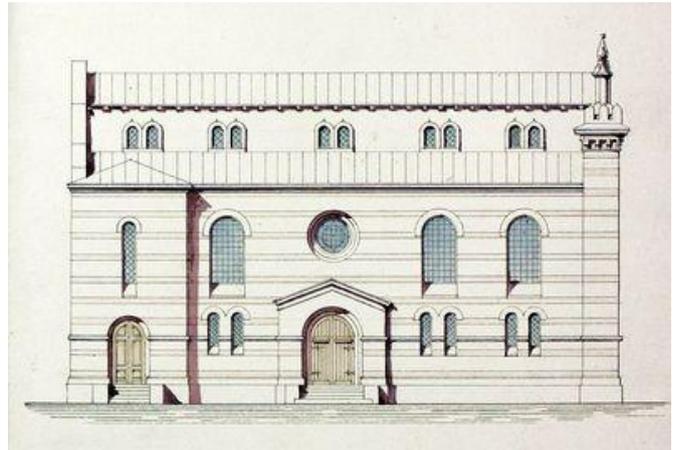
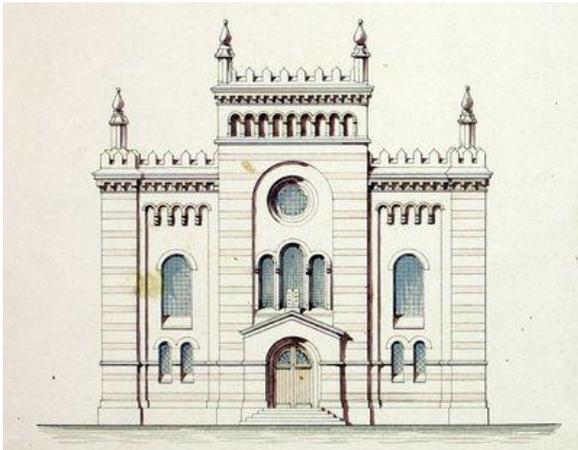
The Jewish community in Estonia is relatively young. The residential prohibition on the territories of former provinces Estland and Livland prevented the arising of local Jewish communities since the Medieval Ages. Only in the middle of the 19th century Jewish communities began to develop in Estonia; mostly former Nikolai soldiers and cantonists. Remind, Tallinn was one of the most important gathering centers for cantonists in the middle of the 19th century. Many child aged recruits were involuntarily Christianised, although part of them remained faithful to their forefathers' belief and after cantonist rank was abolished by Alexander II in 1856 many of them remained to live in Tallinn. They had their own cemetery on Magasini Street, founded in 1844. Onward also other members of the community were buried there.

Cantonists had their own synagogue, which was located in the gunpowder cellar of a fortress in 1867-1870. In 1865 the residential permit was given to craftsmen, traders of the I and II Guild and highly educated specialists. They had their own synagogues in apartments rented on that purpose. Congregation was increasingly growing and there were 963 Jews in Tallinn by 1881. There formed a united congregation, which under the leadership of a vital, wealthy businessman Shaje Levinovitsh (1839-1906) took measures to build a new synagogue. On that purpose a piece of land on Maakri Street was bought in 1876. The cemetery was boardened and a gate decorated with horseshoe arch and so-called almena parapet with mortuary and adjacent rooms was built by architect Nikolai Thamm in 1880.

Nikolai Thamm (1834-1907) was one of the most productive Tallinn architects; he had graduated from the St. Petersburg Art Academy in 1860 and had built a number of public buildings, factories, dwelling houses in Tallinn, mainly in New Romanic style.¹⁾

The New Romanic style was widely spread in Tallinn as the local building material - limestone was not suitable for delicate workmanship and due to that the New Romanic architectural forms were spread. It must be pointed out that architecture on the Estonian territory was orientated to Germany, as the baltic-german community, holding the leading positions here considered themselves as sustainers of German culture and local architects without an exception were Germans.

The architecture of Tallinn synagogue was also based on Romanic Style, or to be more exact on Rundbogenstil being popular in German architecture on the second half of the 19th century.



In the architecture of German synagogues it played the leading role and was especially popularized by German-Jewish architect Edwin Oppler from Hannover. An opinion, widely spread in German architectural literature that Jewish Communities in Germany preferred in the synagogue architecture the Romanic style on purpose for integration into German environment was argued by Harold Hammer Schenk, Dieter Dolgner and other German historians of architecture. At the same time when the discrimination of Judaism took place, the oriental architecture was demonstratively used. Naturally, this is a simplified treatment of the problem; mostly the Rundbogenstil eclectically mixed with Romanic, Byzantine, Islamic architectural elements had been preferred.



Thamm proceeded from a synagogue-style, spread in Eastern-Europe, Austrian- Hungary, Romania etc. The solution of Tallinn synagogue was quite simple. The main facade against the street was orientated to the south and therefore the main entrance was situated from the yard. The main facade was crowned by three-part Atticus. ²⁾

About such a synagogue type Carol Herselle Krinsky writes: "A three-part synagogue facade with the center part rising highest and all three sections flat topped reflects not only a basilican interior but also the facade of Salomon's temple as it was shown in many reconstructions." ³⁾

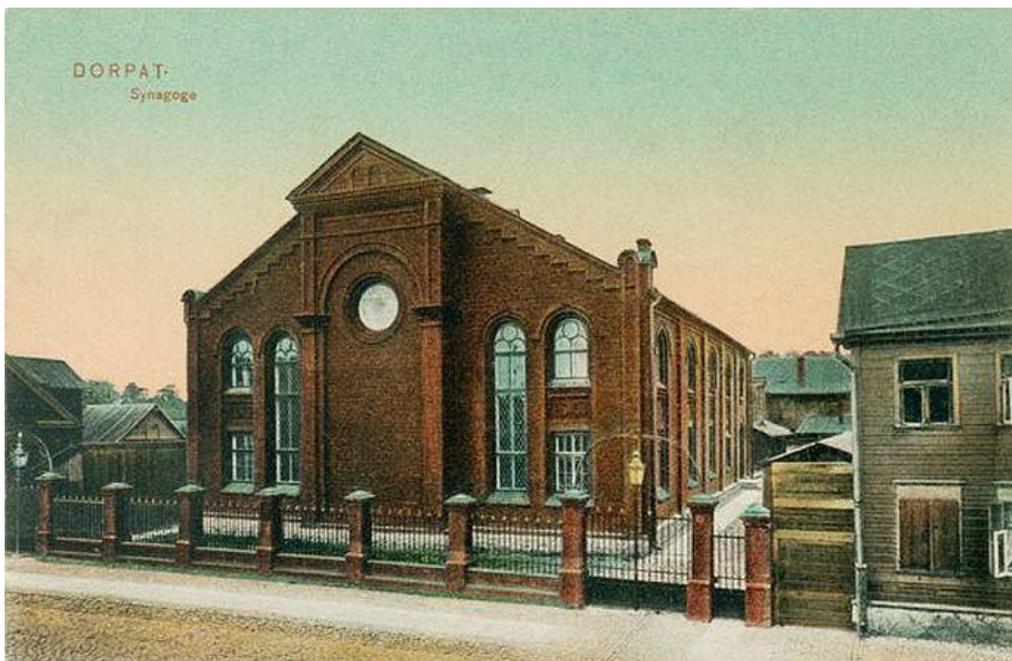
As the main facade was orientated to the south the basilican interior ran crossly with *Arun h'kodesh* and *almemor*. The main facade was decorated with round arched windows, decorative arched friezes and cornices, corner towers.

The interior was quite simple. The ceiling of the nave was jointed by arched braced, and prayer hall was surrounded by two-storeyed balconies which showed the 400 sq. m. large and 15 m high hall bigger. There was a monumental arch-shaped bay in the eastern wall where *Arun h'kodesh* was installed. It's a pity the original limestone facade was plastered later so the breath of Tallinn had been destroyed. ⁴⁾

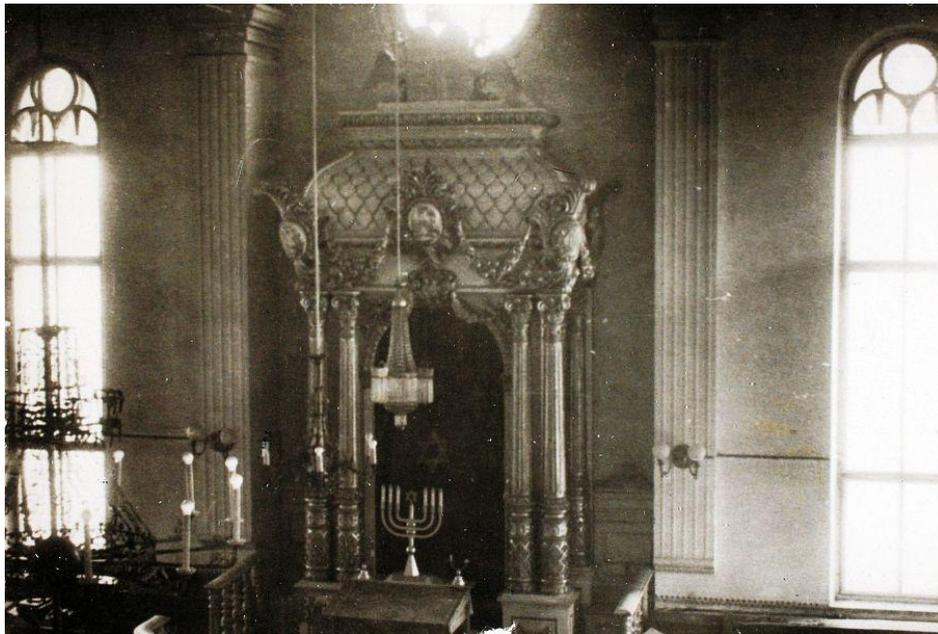


According to the project of architect L. Christoph a two-storeyed building was constructed by the side of the synagogue with schoolroom on the ground floor and apartments on the top floor ⁵⁾ During the bombing of Tallinn by Russians on the 9th of March 1944 the synagogue and the building besides had been destroyed and until nowadays Tallinn lacks a decent synagogue. ¹

Tartu lies closer to Latvia and Lithuania; a lot of Jews came here with and without permits. There were 1774 Jews in 1897 in Tartu - much more than in Tallinn. During the years of Estonian Republic the number of Jews progressively decreased and in 1934 there were 990 Jews left in Tartu ⁶⁾



¹ The new Tallinn synagogue was built in 2007[M.R.] .



The first synagogue of Tartu was housed in a wooden building on Turu street; it was opened in 1876. Money came, as it was usual in these days by selling the precise seats along the eastern wall. By selling the next two seat-rows it was possible to widen the synagogue in 1878. By then the synagogue possessed a new almemor. This synagogue did not satisfy the needs of numerous Tartu community and a festive ceremony of placing a corner stone for a new stone-synagogue took place on the same Turu street in 1909. The architect was Robert Pohlmann (born 1868 in Tartu), studied in Germany, worked in Tartu 1894-1914. Tartu synagogue was smaller and simpler than that in Tallinn. It was a saddle-roofed rectangle shaped brick red building in New Romanic Style. The narrower end facade opened to Turu street. The place of Arun h'kodesh was marked on the street facade by projecting risalite, decorated by triumphal arch with a rounded window in the middle and a projecting frontone. On two sides there were high round-arched windows. The longer yard facade was jointed by hood moulded arched windows. The main entrance was in the southern facade. The ceiling - roof was jointed by collar-beams. On three sides the hall was surrounded by women-galleries supported on pillars. ⁷⁾

Miraculously almost all ritual and ceremonial objects of the Tartu synagogue have been saved. In the opinion of the lecturer 132 relics are hold in Tartu in The Estonian National Museum. There are number of things among them that are of inferior value as tens of talesis, tefilims, sheets but also a big chandelier ,numerous Torah scrolls, Torah-mantles, the Torah arch curtain, Jortsait-menorahs, almemor cloth. ⁸⁾

It is known that the Jewish relics of culture were saved mainly by two outstanding figures of Estonian culture - Uku Masing (1909-1985) and Paul Ariste (1905 -1990).

First mentioned was a theological professor at Tartu University, who specialized in Old Testament He was dedicated to scientific research work and poetry when ignored by communist order during the after war years. The real greatness and amount of Uku Masing's scientific and literary work became evident only recently.

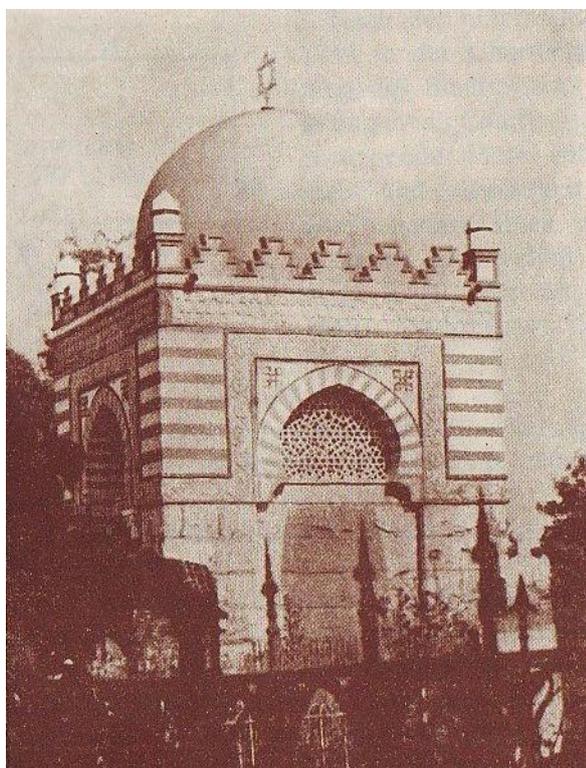
Paul Ariste was an outstanding linguist, internationally acknowledged specialist on Finno - Ugrian languages. He spoke fluently tens of world languages including Jidish. When meeting the lecturer P. Ariste principally spoke perfect jidish with pleasure.

Both of them were devotees of Jewish culture and real humanists risking a lot when organized

the saving of the valuables of Jewish culture during the German occupation. One example only. An antiquary was sent to Estonia from Leipzig, Germany to burn all Jewish libraries including precious libraries of the Jewish Societies. These libraries had been previously collected to the Library of Tartu University by Ariste and Masing. They were able to convince the booklover German that burning these books would be a sin and the antiquary composed an Active letter signed by Masing and Ariste that burning had been successfully completed. The antiquary left to Germany with such a paper and all Jewish libraries were saved. Ariste managed to rescue several big Torah-scrolls, hold now in the Estonian National Museum and in the archives of Tartu University. ⁹⁾

A pity that the masterful wood-carved New-Baroque Arun h'kodesh (Torah arch) had been destroyed together with the Tartu synagogue in the war.

Perhaps the most interesting cult building in Estonia is the chapel- mausoleum of the long-standing chairman of Tallinn Jewish Community Schaje Levinovitsh on the Jewish cemetery on Magasini street.¹⁰⁾ This original building was demolished at the beginning of 1960-s during the

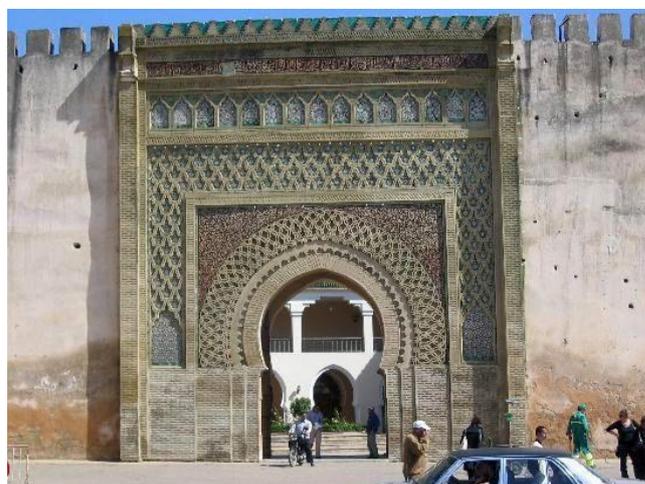


liquidation of the old Jewish cemetery replacing it with a motor depot. Old Christian cemeteries Kopli and Kalamaja were destroyed at the same time so that this campaign clearly demonstrated the anti-cultural policy of the ruling order.

The Mausoleum was projected by local baltic-german architect Jaques Rosenbaum in 1908 and was built up by the end of 1910.

Jaques Rosenbaum (1878-1943) was an outstanding figure in the circle of Tallinn architects. He studied at the Polytechnic Institute of Riga in 1898-1904, worked in Tartu at first and since 1907 in Tallinn. He built factories, schools, hospitals, dwelling houses, villas here. Rosenbaum was the representative of the decorative direction of Jugend style, preferred facades with rich ornamental and figurative decor, often eclectic. Rosenbaum was a perfectly suitable person for projecting a mausoleum as he could manipulate with different styles.

The shape of the mausoleum proceeds from the Islamic, or to be more exact from the traditions of Moorish architecture. Even an example could be found followed by Rosenbaum - the Meknes town gate in Morocco. The chapel is a 6.5 m high stone building with a square ground-plan the lower part of which is rusticated and the upper part is built up with plain blocks. Facades are decorated with horseshoe arches with an azure ornamental lattice in their tympanons that let the light inside. The horseshoe arches were surrounded by ornamental belts with typical Islamic ornamental motives. Together with the



horseshoe arches they formed alfizis (a rectangular molding, which frames a horseshoe arch). There ran a decorative frieze above them; cornice was crowned by almenas such as on the gate of the cemetery. A gilt David's Star was at the top of the cupola. Corners were accented with little towers. The plans preserved prove that Rosenbaum perfectly felt the rules of Moorish ornament.¹¹⁾

As it reveals synagogues on the Estonian territory were projected by baltic-german architects. These were not outstanding buildings moreover they showed an average level of local architecture. But nevertheless even like this they are interesting examples of synagogue architecture on the turn of the century.

1. Genss Nosson. Zur Geschichte der Juden in Eesti. I. Die Revaler Synagoge in Zusammenhang mit der Geschichte der Juden in Reval. Tartu, 1933, s.9-54.

2. Synagogen in Berlin. Zur Geschichte einer zerstörten Architektur. Berlin, 1933. Teil I; Dolgner Dieter. Historismus. Deutsche Baukunst 1315-1900. Leipzig, 1935, s.33 u.a.

3. Krinsky Carol Herselle. Synagogues of Europe. Architecture, History, Meaning. Cambridge Massachusetts and London England, 1935 p.9

4. TALA, t. 737, 1.1.3-9. (Archive of department for planning and building of Tallinn).

5. TALA, t.737, 1.1.10-12.

6. Jokton Kopl. Juutide ajaloost Eestis. Tartu, 1992. (Jokton Kopl. About history of Jews in Estonia).

7. EAA. f. 2623, n.1, s.141, 1.32^a. (Archive of Estonian History. Tartu).

8. ERM. D 81:1-133. (Estonian National Museum. Tartu).

9. Told by Movsha Michelson, Tartu.

10. TALA. t.344, 1.1. 1-3

11. EAA, f.33, n.3, s.2603, 1.3.

