

On the Construction and Embellishment of Old Synagogues¹

by Heinrich Frauberger

With 44 illustrations.

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Over the past few decades Jewish congregations have grown continuously in larger and medium-sized cities. Existing synagogues are not sufficient in size and extensions are in most cases impossible due to the lack of space. Due to the expansion of cities and the high price of larger sites in central locations, the building of a new, single, large synagogue is unpractical; occasionally the different religious service of Orthodox Jews and liberal congregations make the building of two houses of god preferable. As a result, many new synagogues, in some towns several, have recently been built, and every year competitions are held for the construction of new ones. As could be seen a little while ago with the competition for the building of a new synagogue in Düsseldorf, these benefit from the enthusiastic participation of architects.

Unfortunately, these calls for tenders generally produce unsatisfactory results. On the one hand, the local councils are uncertain when defining requirements; on the other hand, the architects have no knowledge of the form religious practice takes and how it evolved. They are completely unprepared for this task. In addition, it is difficult to find documentation with detailed preliminary studies. For a few years it has been possible to buy postcards of a series of new synagogues, showing both exterior and interior views. Volume XI of “Grundrißbilder von Gebäuden aller Art” (Ground Plans of Buildings of all Types) includes a well structured section on synagogues on pages 1460–1485 by the architect and engineer Ludwig Klaesen of Vienna. This describes a number of new buildings of this type with illustrations (ground plans, cross sections, and elevations) and draws attention to the most important features.

1 Frauberger, Heinrich: Über Bau und Ausschmückung alter Synagogen. (=Mittheilungen der Gesellschaft zur Erforschung jüdischer Kunstdenkmäler II), Frankfurt am Main 1901.

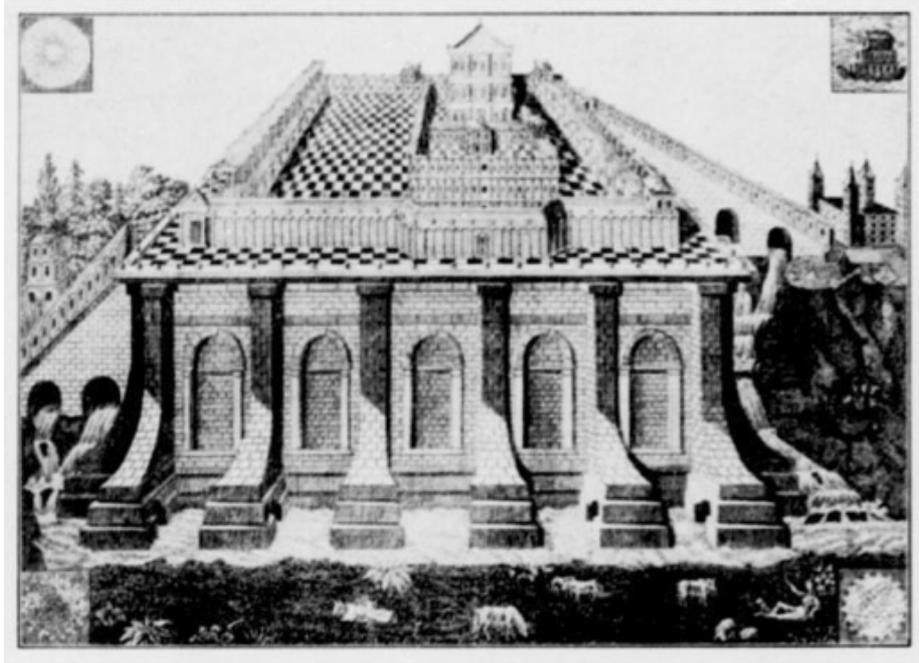


fig. 1. View of Solomon's Temple in Jerusalem. After a lithograph by J. Jh. Speder, 1824, of Kiel with the inscription: "Den Freunden der Wahrheit gewidmet" (Dedicated to Friends of the Truth).

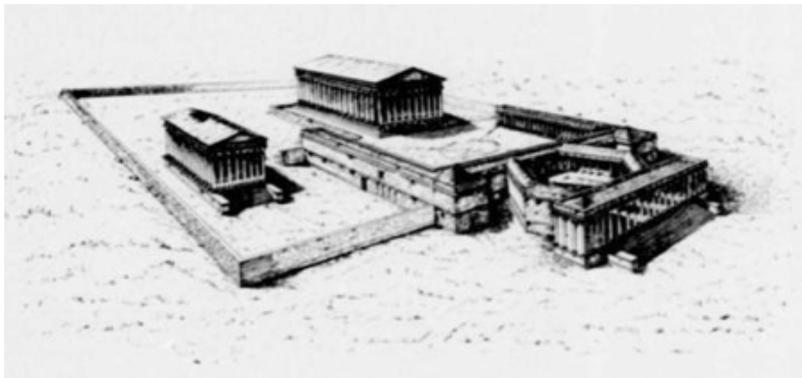


fig. 2. Temple site in Baalbek. After its restoration under the Roman Emperor Antoninus Pius, reconstructed by the architect Friedrich Halmhuber.

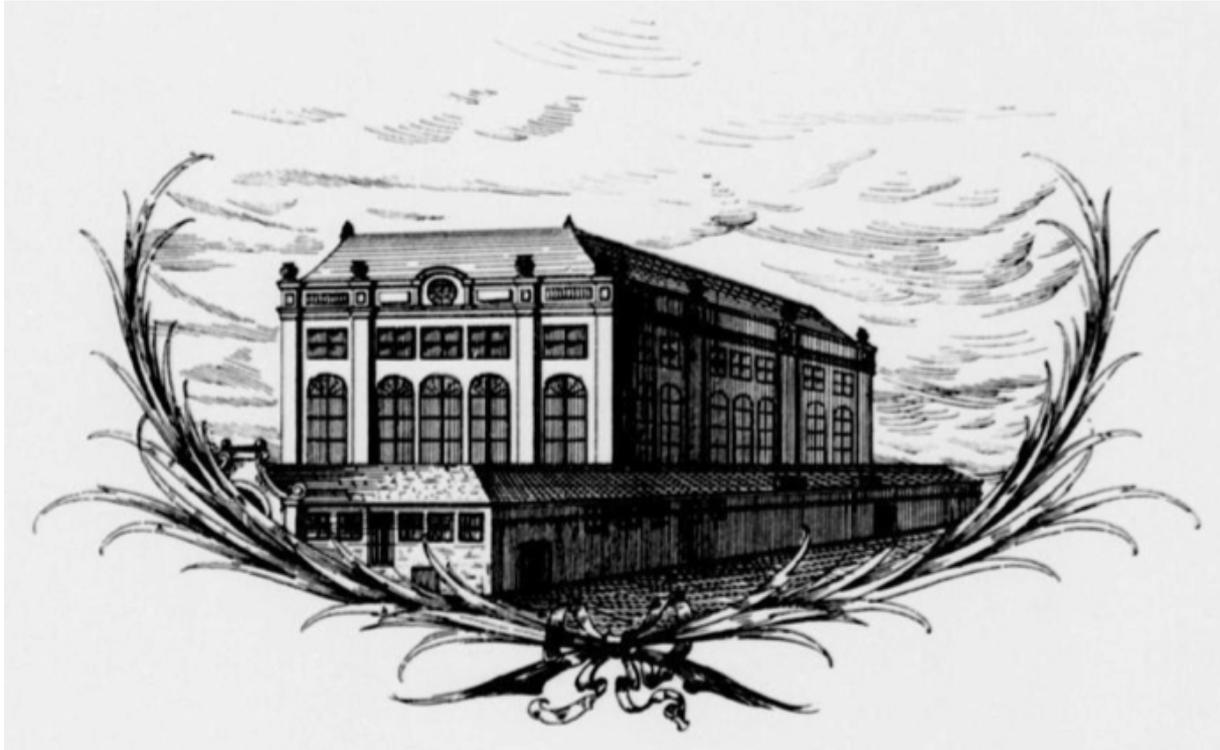


fig. 3. Perspectival view of the large Portuguese synagogue in Amsterdam. After a copperplate engraving.

With regard to technical aspects, the chapter provides some very usable suggestions and focuses on templates with regard to the decorative elements. For example “To crown the top” (of the synagogue) “a hexagram or Star of David is generally added; to crown the main gable or the portal the tablets with the first letters of the commandments.” This has been diligently put into practice and the Star of David has been added ad nauseam. It is also generally the recognizable sign that the building is used for Jewish religious purposes, as in all other cases, including the ground plan in the shape of the cross, it is exactly like a Catholic church down to the last detail. No work exists to date on the appearance of old synagogues that existed in the past and the fulfillment of religious requirements. The few illustrations available are scattered among different publications in different languages so that even the most conscientious architect shies from the task of gathering such material.

This was probably the reason why a number of our members and friends asked that the report for the 2nd issue should provide information on the essential features in the construction and embellishment of old synagogues based on documentary material already gathered. Certainly next to nothing has been assembled on the unquestionably many old synagogues that exist and the least of the illustrations examined by specialists or the architectural aspects studied and recorded. This collection of material is only growing very slowly. Alongside synagogues from the Middle Ages listed in Issue I, the following were added within a year: a Jewish building in Bury St. Edmunds, England, which was reputedly a monastery that came into the possession of Jews and was then used as a synaoguge; a building in

Norwich that was supposedly used as a synagogue; an alleged third Gothic synagogue in Trani; and a Gothic synagogue in Passau. Regarding old synagogues, I have since come across one or other remarkable building or a prayer room furnished in the old-fashioned way (Lich in Hesse; Brilon in Westphalia). The most noteworthy of these supplementary works is the wooden synagogue in Bechhofen in Bavaria, the interior of which was completely painted in the 17th century by a Jew. A publication is in preparation on this building and its ornamentation. Together with the objects listed in Issue I this does not represent a large quantity and hardly justifies more than a brief description of the individual buildings and an illustration of the same. Nevertheless, an attempt should be made to gather all available material together and to make some observations:

1. on the Temple area
2. on the external appearance of older synagogues
3. on the interior views of such buildings.



fig. 4. Entrance to Jassy Synagogue. From a photograph.



fig. 5. Interior of the synagogue in Jassy. From a photograph.

Important questions are touched upon regarding fitted and important movable objects in synagogues, on wall decoration and on symbols. However, there is no possibility at present to develop this in any special form for use in conjunction with future competitions for the building of synagogues.



fig. 6. Exterior view of the Romanesque synagogue in Worms. From a photograph.



fig. 7. Synagogue at the Tomb of Rabbi Meir, the Miracle Maker, in Tiberias. From a photograph.



fig. 8. Synagogue at the Tomb of Rabbi Shimon bar Yocha in Meron, near Safed. From a photograph.

The Temple Site

To this day, the tabernacle and Solomon's Temple have been popular subjects for attempted architectural reconstructions—the number of existing solutions being legion. The works (plans, vedute, models) show how exceptionally difficult it is to create a drawing of something that no longer exists, despite such an exact description as to be found in the Pentateuch. Of Solomon's Temple, only the foundation of the Temple site still exists.

The temple site that has been preserved covers a very large area. It is generally flat and, calculating the size of the buildings on it according to the dimensions given in the bible, these covered only a very small part of the site. However, the areas not built on would have provided enough room for many thousands of people for major celebrations such as sacrifices. There was also sufficient space for marches and processions. For Jews, parades and processions were not unusual. They had a talent for organization and a taste in decorating the streets and paths for processions. The parades in Rome following the election of the pope; the procession of the Jews in 1780 on Corfu which Gregorovius described in detail in his writing "Der Ghetto und die Juden in Rom," are just a few examples of many. Public parades by Jews have, however, not taken place for centuries. One remnant is the procession with the Sefer Torah in the synagogue which cannot be developed any more as the remaining space available has become less and less due to the present arrangement with the Ark, the reading desk and the raised platform close together on a few square meters of the floor. The desire for ceremonies which involve movement and processions was able to evolve on spacious temple sites, as in the case of Solomon's Temple (fig. 1); in Baalbek (fig. 2); in the large synagogue in Amsterdam, reputedly based on the Temple in Jerusalem, built in 1675 by Sephardim from Portugal (fig. 3), where low buildings enclose the site which has large and small squares and higher buildings in the middle. There is also an exemplary square of this kind in Germany—the Temple site in Fürth. Where such squares exist, delightful and ancient religious ceremonies, which have unfortunately become fewer and fewer, can be practiced without disturbance.



fig. 9. Photograph of the synagogue in Jerusalem.

The prayer after the appearance of the new moon can be said in the open; there is enough space to put up a *sukkah*; a wedding procession with the bridal couple under a canopy, the *chuppah*, can comfortably take its own course as frequently depicted in “The Minhagim” or in copperplate engravings dealing with the practices and customs of Jews, usually with the synagogue in Amsterdam or Fürth in the background, chosen because of their spacious sites. The ghettos in various cities (Krakow, Prague, Rome, Siena, Venice, Saluzzo, etc.) have square-like areas that open up between narrow streets just for such occasions. When planning the purchase of a site for a new synagogue it should be taken into consideration as to whether sufficient land can be bought to lay out a garden or a closed square. The Temple site in Fürth has enough room to accommodate three synagogues, a school, a community center with a house for the rabbi, and open areas. Half of this would be sufficient in most other cities.

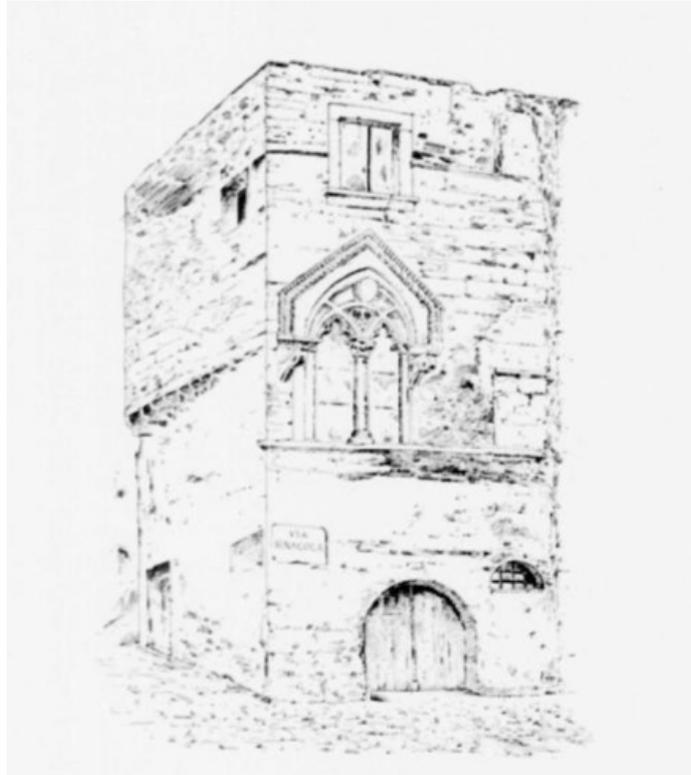


fig. 10. Building in the Via Sinagoga in Trani, probably the former synaogue itself. After a drawing by A. Hochreiter.



fig. 11. Building which formerly housed the synagogue in Metz. After a drawing by W. Schmitz.



fig. 12. Old-New School in Prague. After a colored copperplate engraving.

II. Exterior Views of Synagogues.

In the olden days little value was placed on the exterior of synagogues. For this, there are many different explanations. In some cases, the synagogues are very plain on the outside. The interesting, ancient Karaite synagogue in Jerusalem was only allowed to rise around 3 meters above the level of the street and, even today, any synagogue in Persia which is proven to be higher than any mosque must be demolished. The synagogue in Jassy (fig. 4) is downright primitive (fig. 4). Its splendid interior (fig. 5) shows that it was lacking neither means nor the power to add a more attractive portal or a façade with better proportions. Even the famous Romanesque synagogue in Worms with the women's Section and the Rashi Chapel has an extremely plain exterior (fig. 6).

Although the exteriors of many synagogues reveal the time they were constructed, they do not clearly articulate the purpose of the building. The synagogue at the tomb of Rabbi Meir, the Miracle Maker, in Tiberias with its Romanesque two-light window on the dome (fig. 7) and the synagogue at the Tomb of Rabbi Shimon bar Yocha in Meron, near Safed, with its eight pointed arched windows on the main front (fig. 8) are very similar in construction and in their grouping to Greek monasteries; the large synagogue in Jerusalem with several other synagogues housed in auxiliary rooms (fig. 9) to that of a mosque. The Gothic windows in the building in the Via Synagoga in Trani reveals the date of the building straight away (fig. 10). The demolished synagogue in Metz (fig. 11) is also Gothic. It reputedly once formed part of a monastery and was handed to Jews for their synagogue. The Gothic, so-called Old-New School in Prague (fig. 12) was purpose built as a place for Jewish religious practice. The slanting crenellations on one gable end and the deep-set blind windows on the other, as well as its modest rooms are based on the principles of the First Temple in Jerusalem with small enclosing structures and an open area within the temple complex. This is, of course, no longer recognisable today as the original building has since been altered by later additions. This small, monumental building doubtlessly makes a very good impression; through the shape of the roof and the

design of the gables it stretches energetically upwards in veneration of a higher being, without revealing in any way that it serves another as a temple or that it is for Jewish ritual use. Stylistically typical but without any particular instructional value are the exterior views of the synagogues in Pesaro (fig. 13) and Siena (fig. 14).



fig. 13. Synagogue in Pesaro. After a drawing by A. Hochreiter.

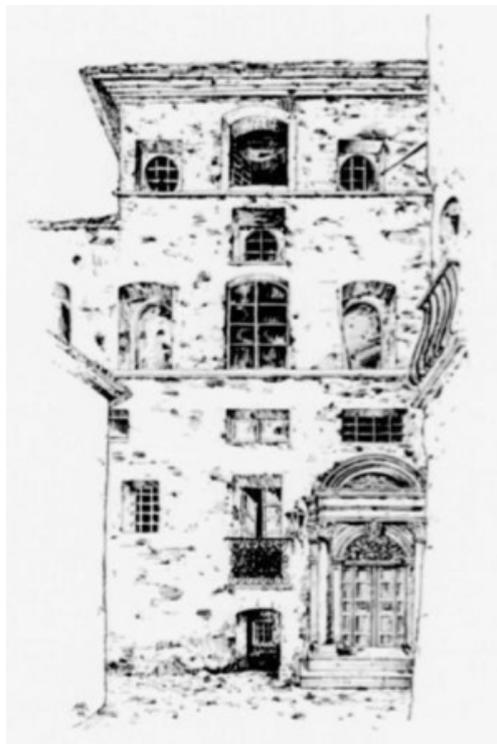


fig. 14. Synagogue in Siena. After a drawing by A. Hochreiter.



fig. 15. Synagogue in Livorno. From a photograph.

The transition to the characteristic synagogue façade is reflected in the main front of the large, rich synagogue in Livorno (fig. 15). The windows to both sides of the door with its arch, the three large windows of equal size above, the two octagonal windows and the round one in the gable, the small, pointed windows in the roof frieze, the long pilaster strip and the gable itself are all permanent references to the upward draw in the central part of the building, behind which the synagogue's prayer room is located, while the two narrow sections to the side contain ancillary rooms.

Of particular note and with an appealing exterior are the wooden synagogues in Poland which are generally erected amidst small, lower wooden houses and tower above them at double the height, indicating a purpose other than that of a mere house. Through the greater care taken in the treatment of the wood and the wealth of decorative forms these buildings stand out immediately from the simple residential houses. A prime example is the synaogue in Zabtudow (figs 16–18). The front (fig. 16), which has already been severely altered, presents a picturesque arrangement; the protruding central part, with the semicircular entrance door for men and the upper story with its wealth of windows and ornamental balustrade, comprises the section of the synagogue reserved for women, with a roof with three divisions. The first part of this has two dormer windows with triangular gables. At the top of the third part is the circular window of the men's synagogue with a triangular gable above which emerges from the sharply tapering roof, crowning that of the women's section. The women's section is flanked by two adjoining pavilions. On the ground floor of the right-hand one is a square window as well as a round one decorated with the Star of David. A wide, rectangular window is on the upper floor above. The remains of supports show that an ambulatory existed at this level. The left-hand pavilion, which can be seen in full together with the whole left side of the synagogue in fig. 17, has two windows on the ground floor, one on the upper story. The protruding beams show that an ambulatory once existed

here, too. The low school room is attached to this pavilion, with the massive, beautifully subdivided and vibrantly distinctive synagogue rising above it.



fig. 16. Front elevation.



fig. 17. Front elevation and view of the left-hand side.



fig. 18. View of the right-hand side and the back.

figs 16 – 18: Wooden synagogue in Zabtudow. From photographs by Matthias Bersohn.

Fig. 18 provides a good impression of the right-hand side and back of the synagogue. The difference in the treatment of the design of the two pavilions, the left-hand one being more stern and regular, the right-hand one more playful and delicate in appearance, the variety of roof shapes and the ornamentation of the gable, the decoration, design of the supporting columns and the embellishment above the window on the right-hand gable, the different roofing of the lower adjoining buildings left and right, the profiling of the timbers, the decoration of the effect, wide frieze, the roof gable and the ridge all testify to an excellently educated, doubtlessly Jewish architect and builder. The decoration of the interior is similarly characteristic and reveals its creator's strong will. Apart from several small ornaments in the carefully executed woodwork, the whole synagogue is bare; only the Ark of the Covenant is sculpted. The office of the head of the congregation in the right-hand pavilion, on the other hand, is richly painted with fantastic scenes.

This building style was repeatedly copied. The old wooden synagogue in Nasielsk dating from 1692 (fig. 19) and the wooden synagogue in Pogrebyszcze depicted in fig. 4 in Issue I, as well as the wooden synagogues in Wysokie, Mazowieckie, Ostropol, Jablonow, and several others all show the same grouping of buildings. Some differences can be found in the positioning of door and window openings, of supports and beams, in the shape and decoration of pillars, balustrades, ribbonwork, friezes, profiles, and other ornamental elements, as well as in the angle of the roof and the materials used. Our knowledge of the wooden synagogues in the former kingdom of Poland is thanks to Mr. Matthias Bersohn, who lives in Warsaw, who took an extraordinary amount of effort under huge sacrifice to seek out those places far off the beaten track and made drawings and take photographs of several of them, publishing them in the papers of the Royal Academy of Science in Krakow, albeit in Polish. Detailed research however would be very welcome and it would be a very worthwhile undertaking for a young architect with a special interest in wooden buildings to record the many

wooden synagogues still to be found in Russia (as well as in Austria, Galicia, and Hungary) and to publish the findings.



fig. 19. Wooden synagogue in Nasielsk. Built in 1692. After a drawing by Matthias Bersohn.

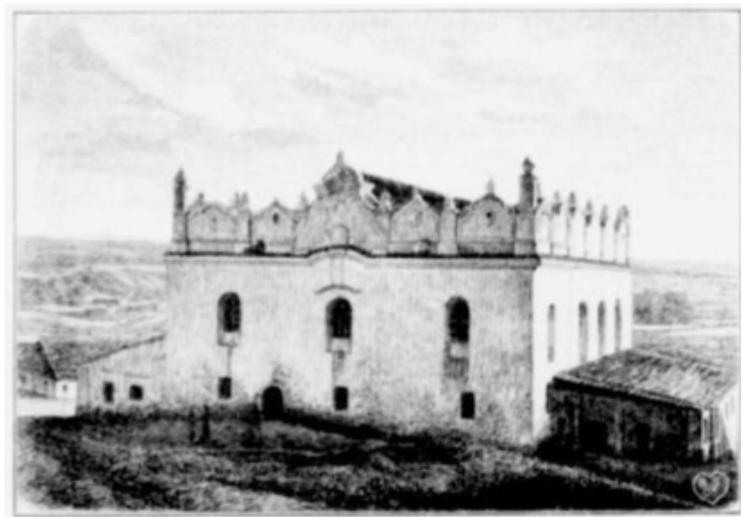


fig. 20. Stone synagogue in Zaragrod. After a woodcut.

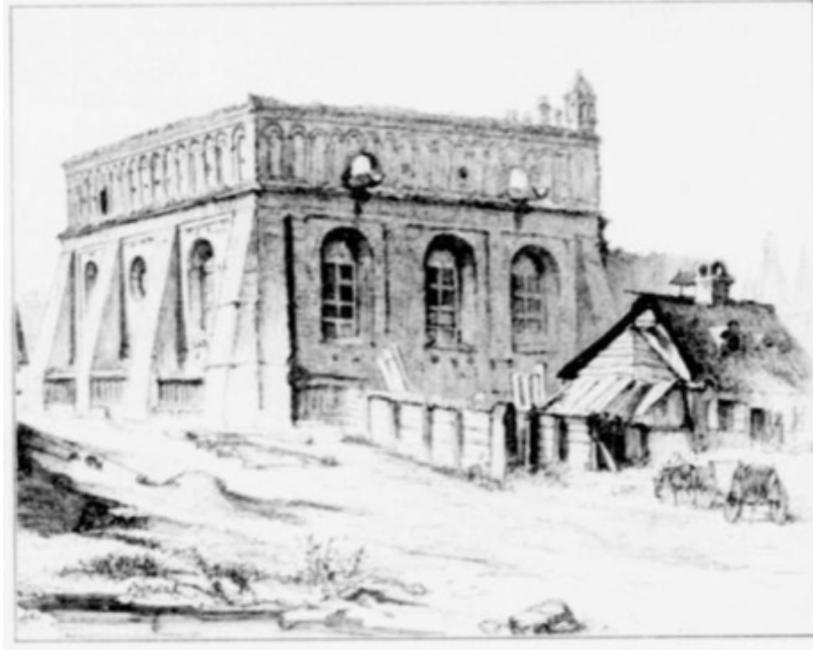


fig. 21. Synagogue in Zolkiew (Galicja). After a woodcut in the magazine “Kłosy.”

However, there is still a lot that can be learned from the walled synagogues in the old kingdom of Poland. The little that is known about them to date is also due to the work of Mr. Matthias Bersohn and begs to be the subject of fundamental research as a wide spectrum of questions that need to be asked remain answered due to the incompleteness of the photographs available. Fig. 20 shows the synagogue in Zaragrod. To the left and right of a tall, solid, almost cuboid synagogue building are low, massive additions with buttresses. The main front of the principal structure has three, small rectangular windows on the ground floor together with the low door, arched at the top. On the upper floor, by contrast, are three large windows set well apart from each other as in old Italian palaces. The side visible in the picture has four windows, the one nearest the front having the same height at the windows on the main façade. The three others are at least one meter longer and are probably the windows of the synagogue itself. An especially prominent cornice with a picturesque, richly decorated finial, presumably attributable to an Italian Baroque artist, rises above the upper level. The stone synagogue in Zolkiew in Galicja (fig. 21) with its very thick walls is supported by huge buttresses. The picture shows the rear wall and the left-hand side. The latter has three large windows with semicircular rounded tops; the former, to the left and right, similar windows with a round one in the middle, below which, without doubt, the Aron Hakodesh was located inside. A simple cornice, above which there is a very richly decorated and impressive finial together with a large number of arches, which in turn support an entablature with lantern-like corner turrets and crenelation-like superstructures on the sides. These and other synagogues, erected mostly in the 16th or 17th centuries, are fortress-like in character with, in the Italian style, generally flat roofs, from which the building could be defended should it be attacked by fierce neighbors. In such cases, as can be seen here along the side wall, the large round openings with massive channels were for the positioning of cannons.

Unfortunately this picture gives us no information about the main front, the subsidiary buildings, the interior or suchlike.

The synagogue in Ostroh in Volhynia (fig. 22), also erected in the 17th century, is an equally interesting building.

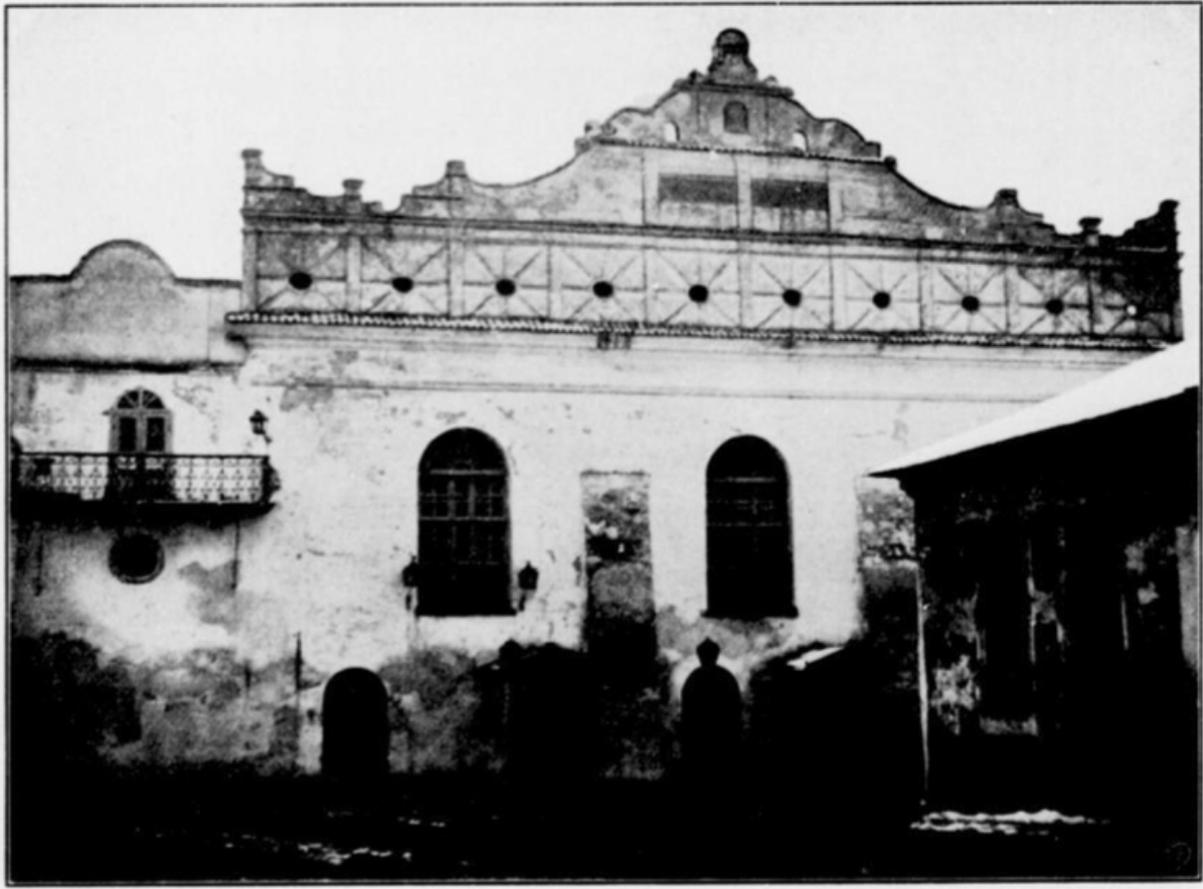


fig. 22. Exterior view of the synagogue in Ostroh (Volhynia). From a photograph.

The central main synagogue building with three windows and two doors on the ground floor, three large windows on the upper floor and a richly decorated finial above a plain cornice is flanked on both sides by slightly lower ancillary buildings. Part of the left-hand addition is visible. The interior view (fig. 23) suggests that this was a two-bay synagogue. The raised, richly carved Baroque Aron Hakodesh with its ornaments, baldachin, festoons, banderoles, griffins, the tablets with the Ten Commandments, as well as the framed sayings and prayers, the columns, elaborate capitals, and similar, has been squeezed into a window niche and is not in the center. In the foreground is the *almemor* with several Polish Jews dressed for prayers.



fig. 23. Interior view of the synagogue in Ostroh (Volhynia). From a photograph.

The large synaogue in Berdychiv in Russia (fig. 24) incorporates similar characteristic features of the time with its imposing, wide façade and an unusual gable-like superstructure on the front. Other plainer synagogues in this city also have these same elements.

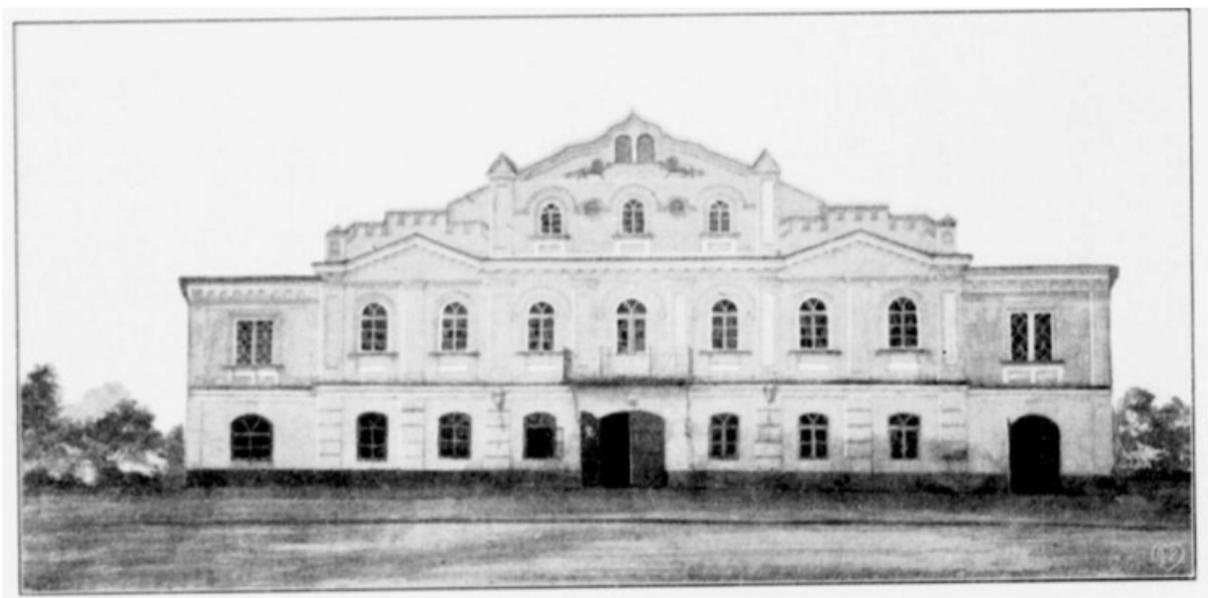


fig. 24. The large synaogue in Berdychiv (Russia). From a photograph by Faber.

The large synagogue in Jerusalem includes a number of prayer rooms for different rituals within the overall structure. These rooms vary from one another, some less, others more obviously. Five synagogues in Rome are similarly incorporated within one building (fig. 25): the Scuola di Tempio, the members of whose congregation profess to being the descendants of the Jews who came to Rome under Titus; the Scuola Catalana (Jews from Catalonia and their descendants and relatives); the Scuola Castigliana (Jews from Spain and Portugal whose descendants migrated following persecution in the 15th and 16th centuries); the Scuola Siciliana (Sephardim, who migrated to Rome from Spain via Sicily); and the more recent and the largest Scuola Nuova to which several descendants of the Sephardim belong as well as Ashkenazim who live in Rome. All of these buildings are linked together. Apart from their own individual synagogues they have different school rooms for the children, common rooms with interesting paintings, Arks of the Covenant with exquisitely decorated Torah scrolls, shrines in which beautiful, richly embroidered draperies and covers are kept, etc.

The assumption that the architect who built the large synagogue in Livorno made studies of older synagogues which existed at that time is certainly not wrong when one compares the sections to the left and right of the main façade shown in fig. 15 with that with a clock on the Scuola Nuova in Rome, and the entrance door and immediate surroundings with that of the Scuola Italiana, one of the three old synagogues in Padua (fig. 26).

The former “Neuschule” in Frankfurt a. M. was very picturesque (fig. 27). The stepped left-hand wall with the entrance and view of the stairs leading to the women’s section, the tall, virtually square façade with the four small windows on the ground floor, the four double windows, the top ones with semicircular arches, on the upper floor, flanked by two half-columns with capitals, stretching almost from the ground up to the eaves, which are a reminder of the two biblical pillars Jachin and Boaz, the right-hand extension with the entrance door and the superstructure with three windows, and the

stepped courtyard all contribute to making an attractive overall picture unlike any to be found on much admired, more recent synagogue buildings. On top of this, the architect clearly shows the purpose of the building and its individual sections successfully using just a few means, as well as incorporating a synagogue, school, women's section and obligatory women's bath, the counsel's room and a courtyard sufficiently large for certain ceremonies all in such a small space, with the façade opening onto the street, placing the synagogue eastwards and keeping three sides of it open.



fig. 25. Building with five synagogues in Rome. After a woodcut.

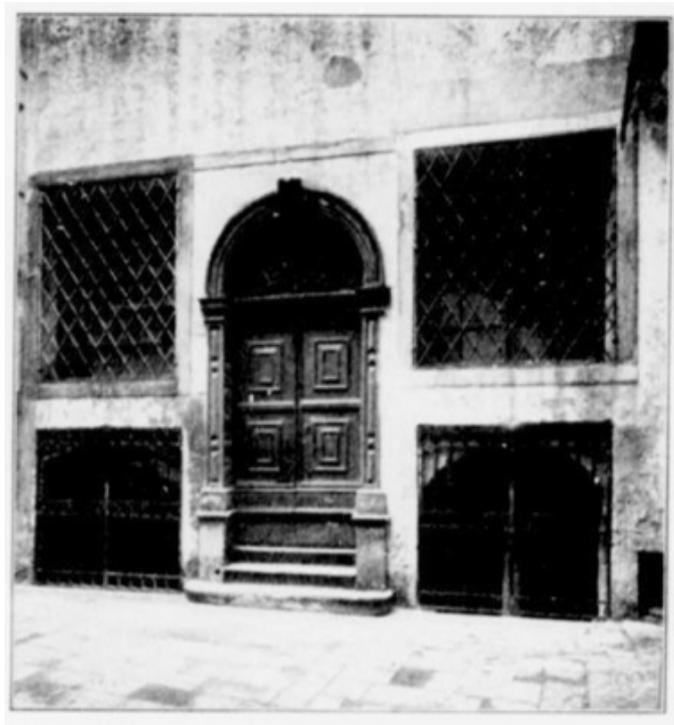


fig. 26. Entrance to the Old Synagogue (Scuola Italiana) in Padua. From a photograph.



fig. 27. The “Neuschule” in Frankfurt a. M. After a woodcut.

There are any number of exterior views of old synagogues, but little more of any importance, other than what is already known, would be gained. The synagogues in Armenia and Persia which can be accessed, for example, are very primitive.

A rectangular, some 4 meter-high building to the front rests on several (3, 4, 5 or 7) wooden pillars and forms the school in which boys, seated cross-legged on mats, are taught religion, reading, writing, and arithmetic. Behind this, with closed walls, is a rectangular wooden building with a simple entrance door which opens onto a narrow passageway to the left and, again after a right-angle turn, to the synagogue which is lit sparingly by small windows installed high up. No monumental examples are to be looked for in such cases; the only buildings to be found are those erected by a people who had to fear being plundered or expelled from their native homeland.

This anxiety negatively influenced the embellishment of synagogue façades up until the 19th century in virtually all countries. For this reason the exterior of synagogues in very many countries is plain and generally inconspicuous although monumental in plan and stylistically correct. Characteristic elevations evolved in Poland under the Jew-friendly Polish kings, created and influenced by Italian artists in the entourage of Queen Bona (from the House of Sforza) who had moved to the north. Idiosyncratic synagogue exteriors are to be found more frequently in Italy itself, less often in Germany.

Another very important element available to architects of churches but not found in synagogue buildings is the bell tower. To date, just one single tower-like structure is known to us—the minaret at the large synagogue in Jerusalem (cf. fig. 9). To indicate that this building served to worship the Almighty, the architect had to resort to lesser means to draw the eye upward: through raising the height of the wall, step by step, by making the actual synagogue building stand out from among the other ancillary buildings grouped around it, through elongated pillars and half-columns, through the steep pitch of the roof, through aspiring crenelations, long-drawn-out blind windows, and through jagged elements and lantern-like turrets. Still designed along the lines of the Portuguese synagogue in

Amsterdam which is very imposing to this day, the Temple area, with a front courtyard alongside the circle wall that encloses low ancillary buildings of all kinds, has retained its validity. In the middle of this courtyard the House of God towers above the secondary buildings (fig. 3).

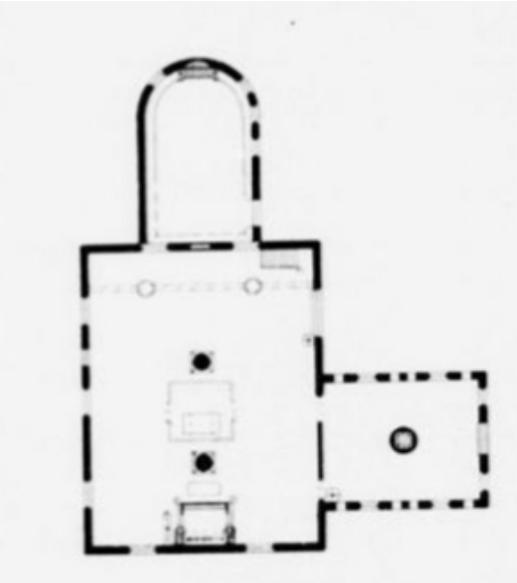


fig. 28. Ground plan.



fig. 29. Interior of synagogue.

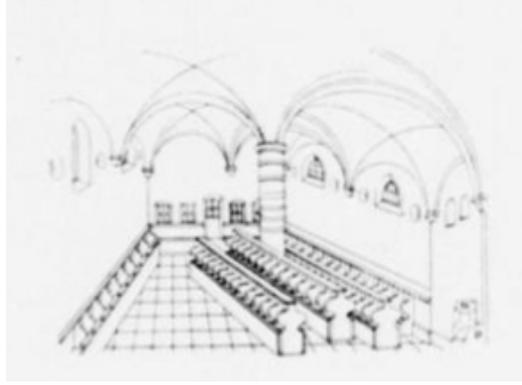


fig. 30. Interior view of the women's section.

figs. 28–30. Romanesque synagogue with women's Section and Rashi Chapel in Worms. After drawings by A. Hochreiter.

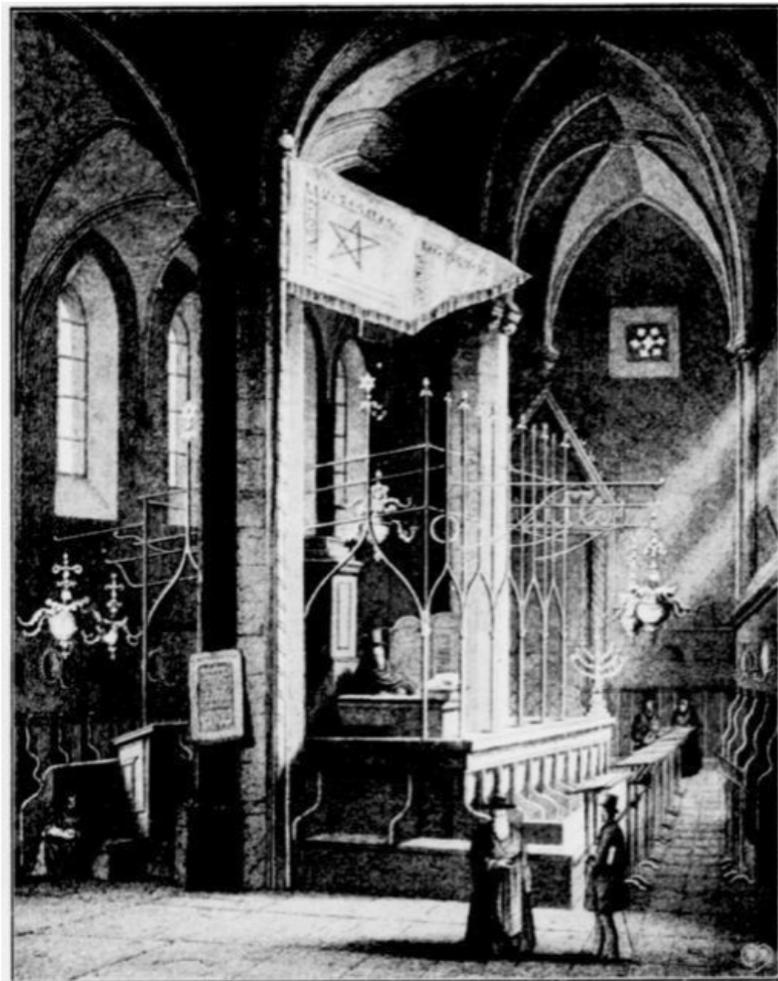


fig. 31. Interior view of the Old-New School in Prague. After a drawing by Wilh. Kandler.

III. Interior Views of Synagogues.

While the exteriors of old Jewish prayer houses are almost all of little artistic significance and virtually without ornamentation, everything was done to decorate the interiors of synagogues as richly as possible. Within this context, however, the development of Jewish communities themselves has to be taken into consideration. Ten Jewish men are sufficient to found a congregation. Their prayer room, their school or synagogue initially comprised one rented room, in which attention was paid at most that the shrine, the Ark of the Covenant, could be placed facing east.



fig. 32. Interior view of a synagogue in Damascus. From a photograph.

The synagogue remained in such rooms for hundreds of years if a congregations did not grow. With increasing prosperity, or a particular economic development in the respective city, the call grew for a building of their own, generally with a single aisle, not seldom with two. Where the congregation was large and wealthy, either naturally or through migration, buildings with three or even five aisles were built.

Some ground plans provide an initial impression of the division of the room and, in combination with perspectival drawings of the interior, highlight what was of importance in old synagogues. Fig. 28 shows the plan of the Romanesque synagogue in Worms with the women's section and the Rashi Chapel. All three buildings have their own entrances, all facing the same direction.

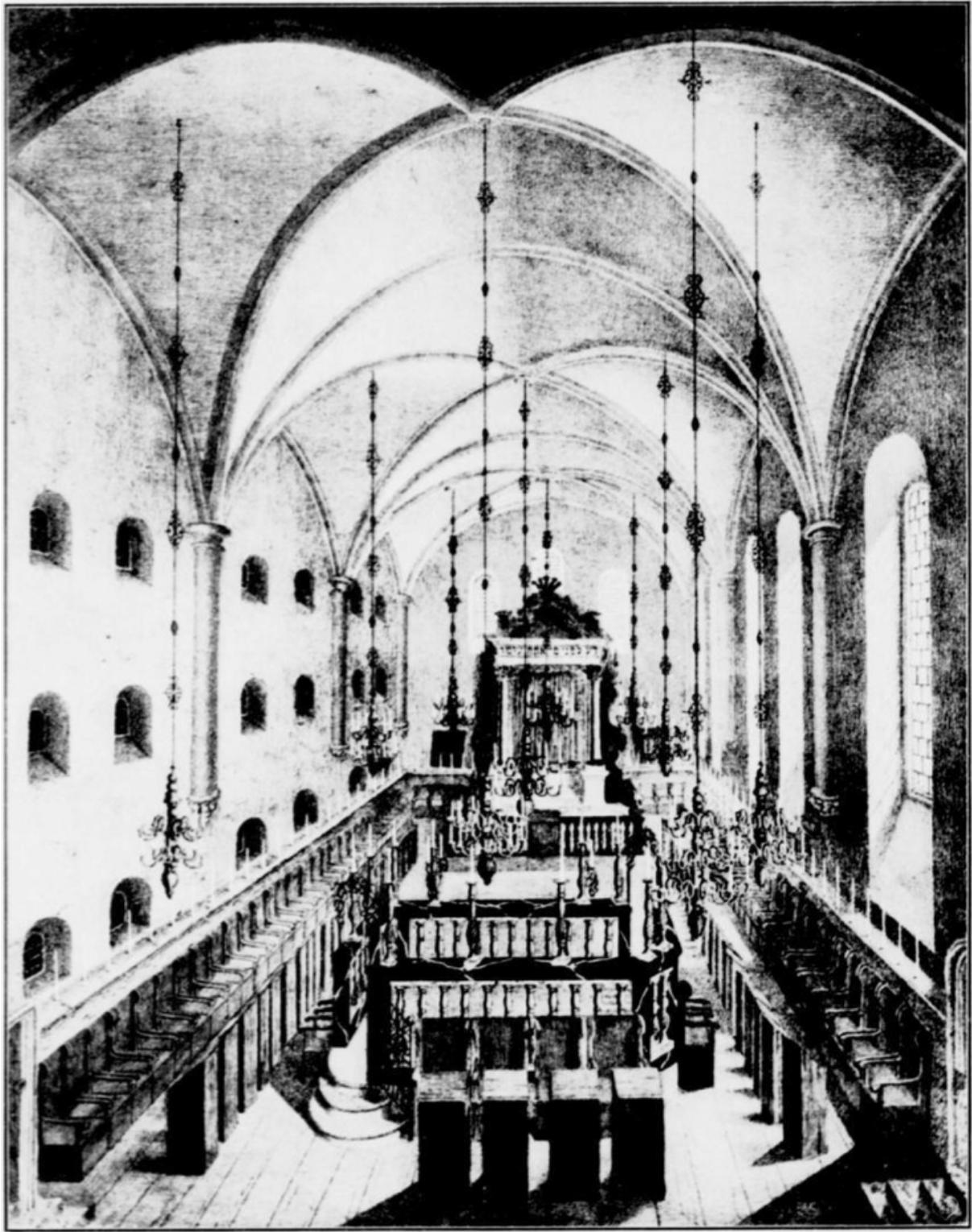


fig. 33. Interior view of the "Neuschule" in Frankfurt a. M., since demolished. After a pencil drawing.

To the right of the entrance in the synagogue are the stairs to the gallery; the way into the two-aisled synagogue itself leads past the collection box for donations on the left. A square structure, the *almenor*, is—or rather used to be—situated between two massive pillars. On the raised platform, reached via a few steps, is the Ark of the Covenant between the pillars and the shorter wall with windows; to the right of this is the Hannukah lamp used in the Feast of Dedication. To the left of the synagogue—fig. 29 shows a copy of a drawing in the Rashi Chapel how the interior used to look earlier—is the women’s section which (if one likes) is also two-aisled, with one pillar, the offertery box, and pews (fig. 30), whereas in the Rashi Chapel, apart from the so-called Rashi Chair made of stone, items of curiosity, exquisite manuscripts, chairs and similar are stored. What is occasionally said of the Temple site is true of this synagogue as it is set in a spacious garden in which a medieval bath used for ritual immersions in Judaism was once excavated. There was enough space for ceremonies to be held in the open without being disturbed. The Old-New Synagogue in Prague (fig. 31) is also a two-aisled synagogue, its impressive *almenor* similarly positioned between two mightly pillars with the Ark of the Covenant facing east on the shorter wall with the Hannukah lamp to the right.

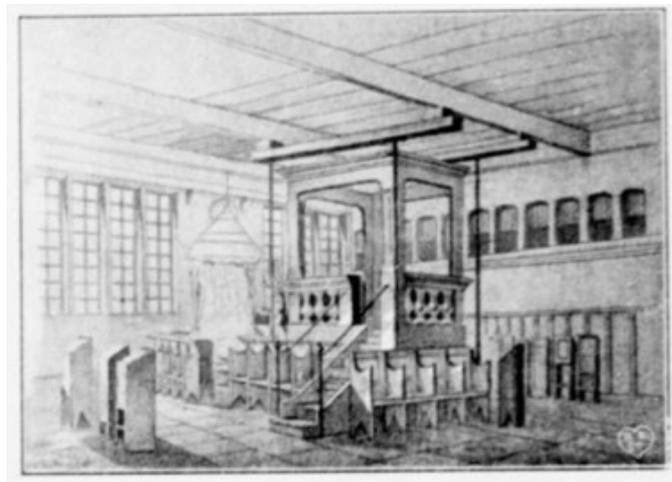


fig. 34. Interior view of the former synagogue in Metz, since demolished. After a drawing by Migette.

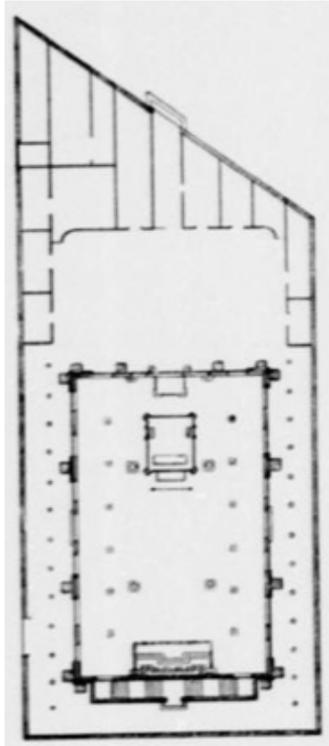


fig. 35. Ground plan of the three naved Portuguese Synagogue in Amsterdam.

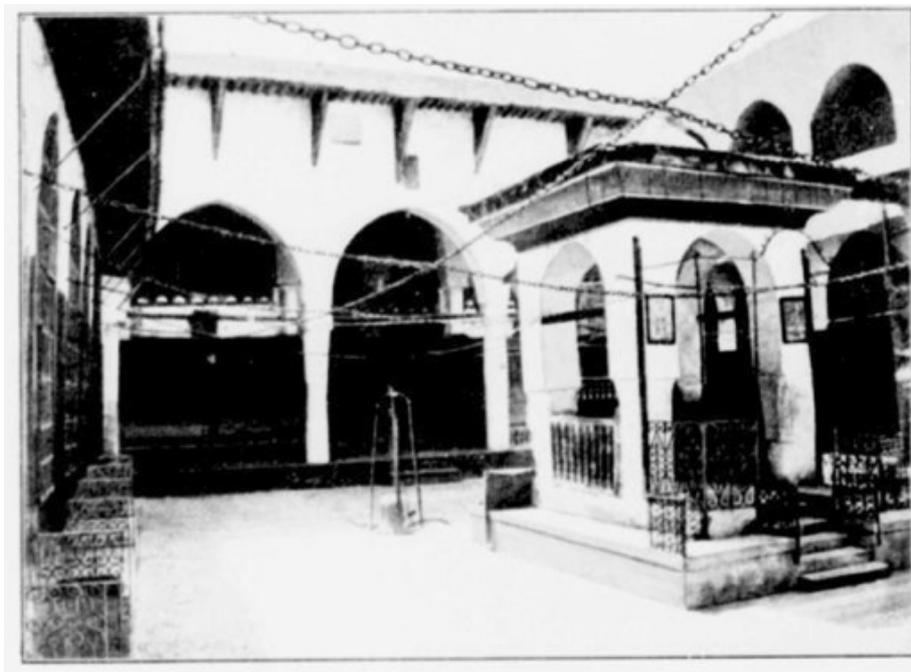


fig. 36. Inner courtyard of the synagogue in Aleppo. From a photograph by J. Euting.

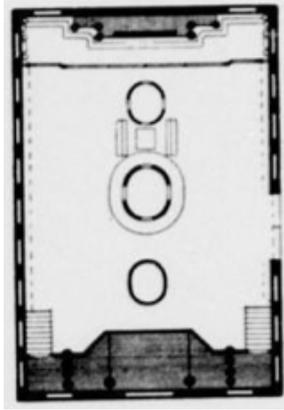


fig. 37. Ground plan of the synagogue in Ancona. By A. Hochreiter.

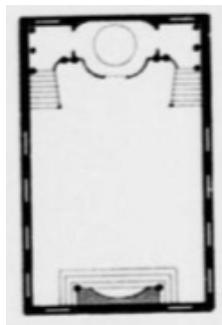


fig. 38. Ground plan of the synagogue in Pesaro. By A. Hochreiter.

The synagogue in Regensburg had two aisles (cf. figs 1, 2 in Issue I), as did the synagogue in Passau, a synagogue in Damascus (fig. 32) with two mighty pillars between which—albeit not exactly in the middle—the *almemor* was placed. In the synagogue in Ostroh (cf. fig. 23) the *almemor* is also positioned between two mighty pillars. As this synagogue was built between the 11th and the 18th centuries and the places Worms, Prague, Regensburg, Passau, Ostroh, and Damascus are very far from one another, it is probably not coincidental:

- that the building has two aisles;
- that the vaulted ceiling is supported by two columns or pillars and
- that, between these two supports, the *almemor*, where the most important religious ritual—the reading from the Torah scroll—and, in some cases, the recitation of prayers take place

was sited.

It would appear that the preference in the Middle Ages for building synagogues with two aisles was closely associated with the intention of supporting the ceiling on two columns or mighty pillars so that one is tempted to think of the biblical pillars Jachin and Boaz in such cases as well.

The siting of the *almemor* in the central aisle or the central section of the synagogue space can be found in the “Neuschule” in Frankfurt a. Main (fig. 33), which burned down in 1711 and has since

been completely demolished, as well as in Metz (fig. 34), where the baluster show that the *almemor* dates from the 18th century. The *almemor*, although now smaller, circular, and without a platform, is nevertheless still in the middle the room. In conservative congregations it continues to be obligatory that it is positioned in the middle of the space or even further from the Ark of the Covenant, as in the three-aisled Portuguese Synagogue in Amsterdam (fig. 35). In the Orient, where—as in the synagogue in Aleppo (fig. 36)—the outside courtyard is a place where Jews congregate on feast days, it is placed in this courtyard, near the fountain, a long way from the Ark of the Covenant which is behind the arched ambulatory.

In Italy, on the other hand, it is frequent that the Ark of the Covenant is in the middle of the shorter wall and the pulpit-like *almemor* structure in the middle of the other wall, as in Ancona (fig. 37), Pesaro (fig. 38), in the large synagogue in Venice (cf. fig. 3 in Issue I), and in many others. In the beautiful Scuola Italiana synagogue in Padua (figs 39, 40), which is no longer used, the Ark of the Covenant and the *almemor* are in the middle of both of the longer walls. While the ceiling is otherwise flat, a barrel vault in this central section rises above the two most important places in the synagogue. This vault is in turn broken by a round dome, its windows providing the women with a poor view of the synagogue.

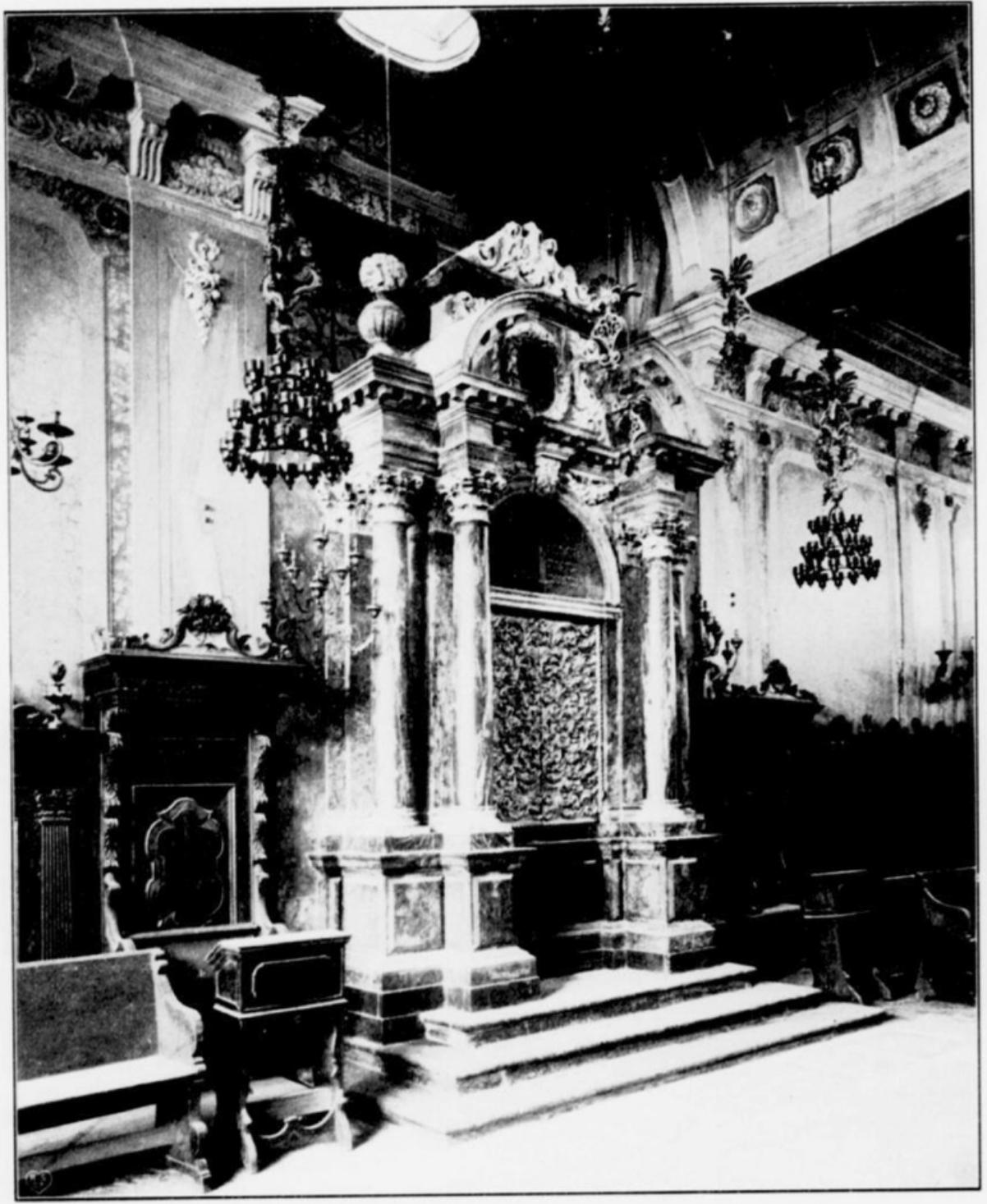


fig. 39. Interior view of the Scuola Italiana in Padua with the Torah shrine and the chairs for the rabbi and cantor. From a photograph.

The two arches which lead from the women's section to the synagogue in Worms, the little openings in the thick walls in the Old-New School in Prague, the many narrow, barred windows in the three stories above one another in the "Neuschule" in Frankfurt, only gave women a poor view and rendered their participation in the religious service insufficient. In the large synagogue in Venice, the women's section is immediately below the ceiling behind barred windows; in Livorno, the barred windows are one story above the men's section; in the large synagogue, the Sculoa Italiana in Padua (fig. 41), they are virtually on the same level as well as above them.

Within the space surrounded by the wrought iron grille and in the immediate area in these synagogues—now used for all ritual purposes—the Torah scroll is removed, uncovered, carried, read, re-covered, and returned to the Ark. The pews and chairs are arranged in such a way that everyone, both men and women, can follow what is happening comfortably on this one place. That used to be different, too. The Aron Hakodesh is considered to represent the Holy of Holies. It holds the Torah scroll which is removed according to the ceremony prescribed and later returned. It is carried to the *almemor* in a procession through half of, or around the whole synagogue. The ceremony of uncovering the Torah scroll by removing the *keter* and *rimonim*, the cover and the binder, its placing on the exquisitely embroidered cloth, the reading of the daily portion stipulated using the silver hand, the *yad*, to point out the words and lines to the reader, and covering it up again, until its ceremonious return to the shrine, was carried out here. The act on the *almemor* was a religious act by the members of a congregation with the rabbi and the reader, as well as others, being involved. The chairs were positioned to face all points of the compass; in front of these were cupboards (in which prayer shawls and books were kept). This positioning of the pews and synagogue chairs seems somewhat foreign; it implies that the pious should listen to the commandments but that the eye should be less involved.



fig. 40. Interior view of the Scuola Italiana in Padua showing the *almemor*. From a photograph.

Another characteristic found in old synagogues, that must be an intentional feature, is that the entrance to the Ark of the Covenant is not in the front, as almost always the case in more modern synagogues, but at the side. A view of the Ark is therefore only possible once the member of the congregation is inside the synagogue.

Just as in the case of the old synagogue, the Scuola Spagnuola in Padua (fig. 42), which is also no longer in use, the Aron Hakodesh—an ornate, architectural structure made of the finest of woods, with intricate inlays, in the rich shade of color of a material hundreds of years old—has an elegant appearance, so is the wealth of carved ornamentation on the stone ark in the large synaogue in Padua (fig. 41), with its with flourishes and pendants, pillars and columns, silver crowns, lamps and candelabras, exquisite embroidery and fabrics all the more surprising as one does not expect such a magnificent interior behind the building’s plain façade. In Spanish and Portuguese rituals the large, richly embroidered curtain is lacking. Instead, the doors of the Aron Hakodesh are exquisitely finished in rare woods.

Wall and ceiling decorations are not seldom in old synagogues either. In the Old-New School in Prague these were not whitewashed; instead, the dirty surface color was retained like the patina on metal. Otherwise, Romanesque and Gothic synagogues have no other ornamentation than vaulting ribs, embellished capstones, capitals on columns and pillars, occasionally in attractive relationships and appealing compositions. Renaissance synagogues, especially those in Italy, display a penchant for painted and sculpted inventions of the time, only with the restriction that, although animal figures sometimes appear next to plant motifs, the human figure is not used. Instead, objects are often depicted which are found in Jewish religious rituals or mentioned in the bible. In the large synagogue in Rome, for instance, David’s harp, Miriam’s timbrel, and the seven-armed lamp were exquisitely executed in stucco.

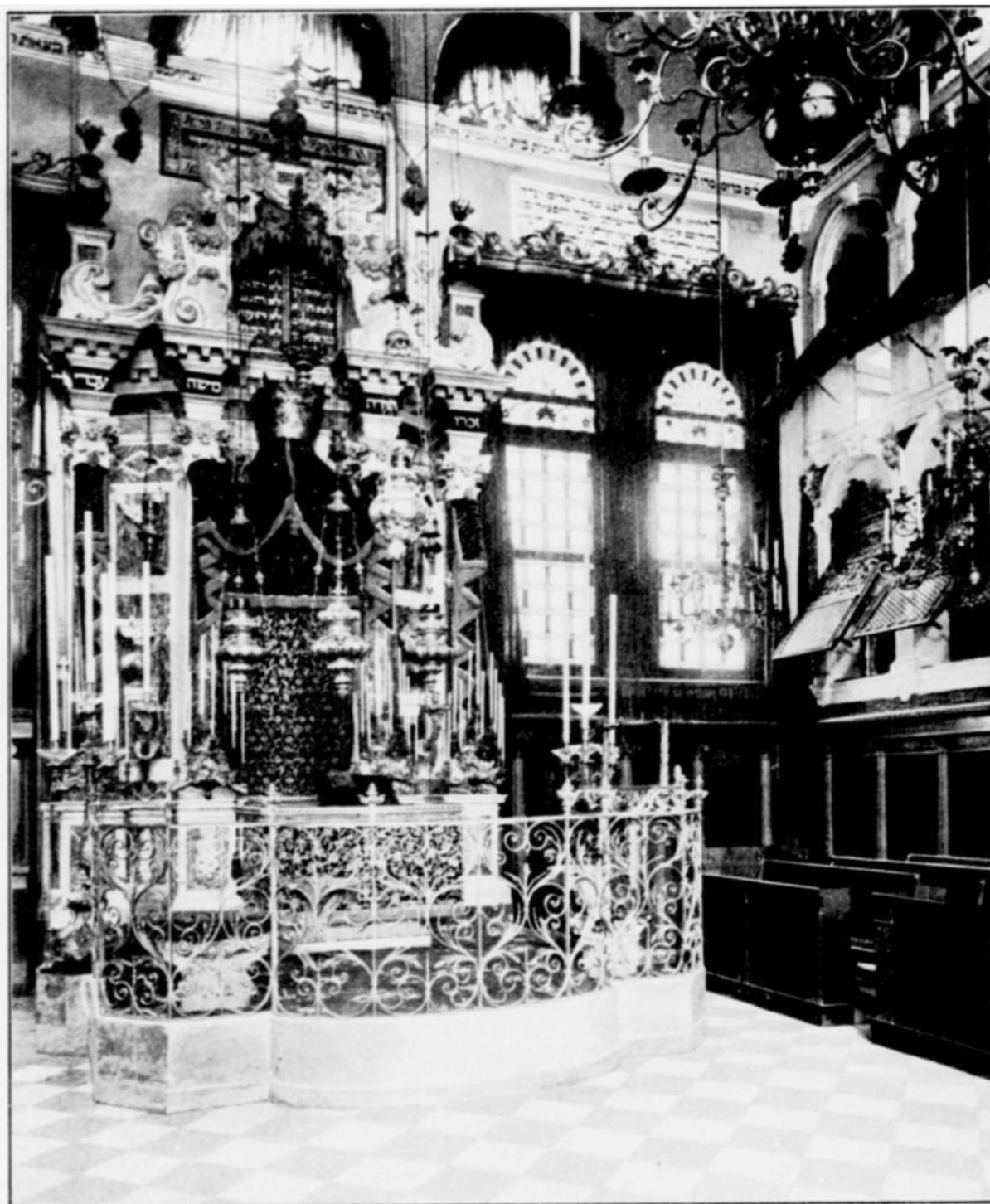


fig. 41. Interior view of the Scuola Tedesca in Padua with the Aron Hakodesh. From a photograph.

A synagogue in Damascus has an eminent richly painted ornamentation with Hebrew script which covers the whole wall and includes braided candles and several other emblems; Polish synagogues have painted or sculpted decorations as do synagogues in Italy from the 17th century and in Holland that date from the same period. Of the fields on the ceiling of the synagogue in Livorno, fifteen, of

average dimensions, have ornamental Hebrew lettering; on four, stylized floral garlands enclose rich rosettes from which large lights are suspended; no fewer than ten fields are decorated with stucco elements of the finest quality, the sculptor having skillfully incorporated some fifty objects mentioned in the bible which are used in Jewish religious rituals—the robe of the High Priest and the tablets with the Commandments, the crown and tables of showbread, the shofar and spice boxes, and many more as well. The synagogue in Modena also has a ceiling with richly decorated fields. In addition, the Claus synagogue in Prague boast rich stucco ornamentation. However, its embellishment forms a transition to decoration depicting objects which do not distract from the religious service as in the aforementioned case.

The extremely rich, large synagogue in Venice (Issue I, fig. 3) does without such images and has a most elegant, artistic appearance through the use of wood, stone, and bronze simply by means of its architectural arrangement, the fine linear structure of the panelling, the beautiful formation of the Ionic pilasters and the windows situated between them, the precise treatment of the ceiling cornice, the correct distance between rows of balusters around the women's section, and magnificent sculptural work on the ceiling where the field divisions and the huge rosettes between them intersect.

In the majority of older synagogues, the windows have hexagonal or round bull's-eye panes which have become dull over the years. Where there is a window above the Aron Hakodesh some of the panes are occasionally colored; according to written sources, real stained glass from older times was used, as allegedly was the case in the old synagogue in Cologne. It cannot be ruled out that remnants may exist in those synagogues we have not yet been able to visit and which were built at that time, as well as those where colored windows were favored. It would be particularly interesting to find out whether these included biblical depictions or Jewish symbols in the cartouches, or whether merely geometrical and vegetal ornamentation was added. Where this can be found, such as in the old synagogue in Ichenhausen, the work is of a recent date.

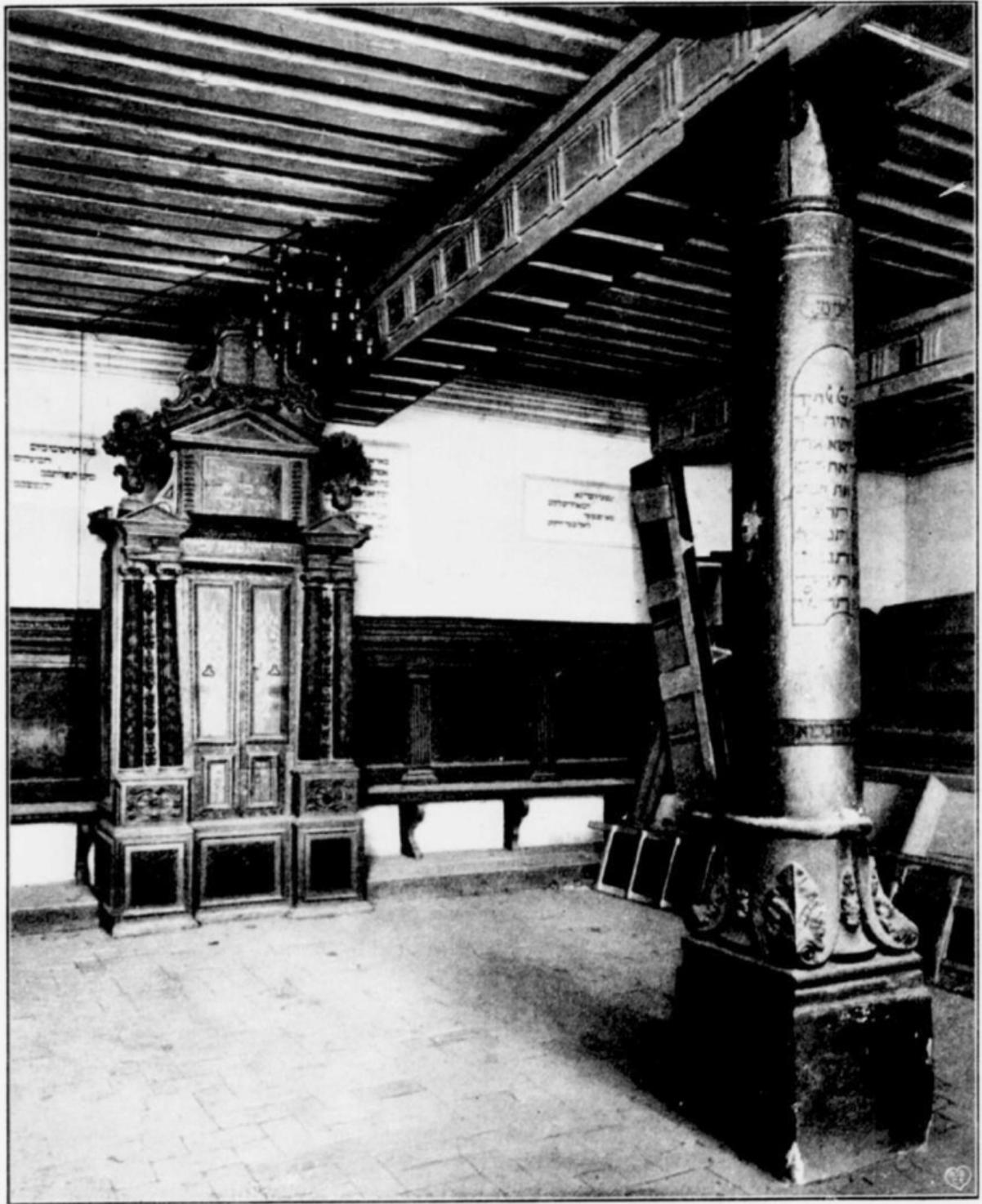


fig. 42. Interior of the Scuola Spagnuola in Padua. From a photograph.

The considerable appeal of old synagogues is achieved through the plentiful use of lighting fixtures of all kinds. They bring the walls and the whole space to life—cf. fig. 4 in Issue I and figs 31, 33, 39–42 in this issue. The lamp as the eternal light in front of the Torah shrine, sometimes 3, 5 or 6 of them, is

something that was first introduced in the Temple of Onias in Alexandria: the mighty bronze Hanukkah lamp to the side of the Aron Hakodesh with eight branches, together with the so-called “servant,” is a second type. In synagogues, it is generally made of brass, very seldom of iron, and has few ornaments. In the 15th and 16th centuries, however, lamps for use in the home were frequently decorated with small figures and animals and chased or cast in silver. *Yahrzeit* candles are either mounted on walls, as in the former Neuschule in Frankfurt a. M. (cf. fig. 33), as well as in the Romanesque synagogue in Worms and the Gothic synagogue in Prague, where a stone parapet runs around the wall on which, with the corresponding spaces in between, iron holders have been fitted for wax candles, or there are idiosyncratic iron stands to the left of the Aron Hakodesh and opposite the Hanukkah lamp in which the *yahrzeit* candles are placed or else fixed to each chair. In addition, wall lights with one, three or five branches can be found as well as a multitude of brass chandeliers decorated with lions, engraved Hebrew ornamental letters or other decorative elements. These chandeliers are either suspended from the ceiling of the synagogue or, as in the Orient, hung on chains which criss-cross the whole synagogue (cf. fig. 36). There are also impressive floor-standing lamps, often made to hold a host of candles, as can be seen on the interior view of the synagogue in Jassy (fig. 5). All of these forms of lighting serve to bring the space in the old synagogues to life and render it particularly festive. Lamps are evenly distributed; only around the Aron Hakodesh and on the *almemor* do they tend to be grouped together more closely.

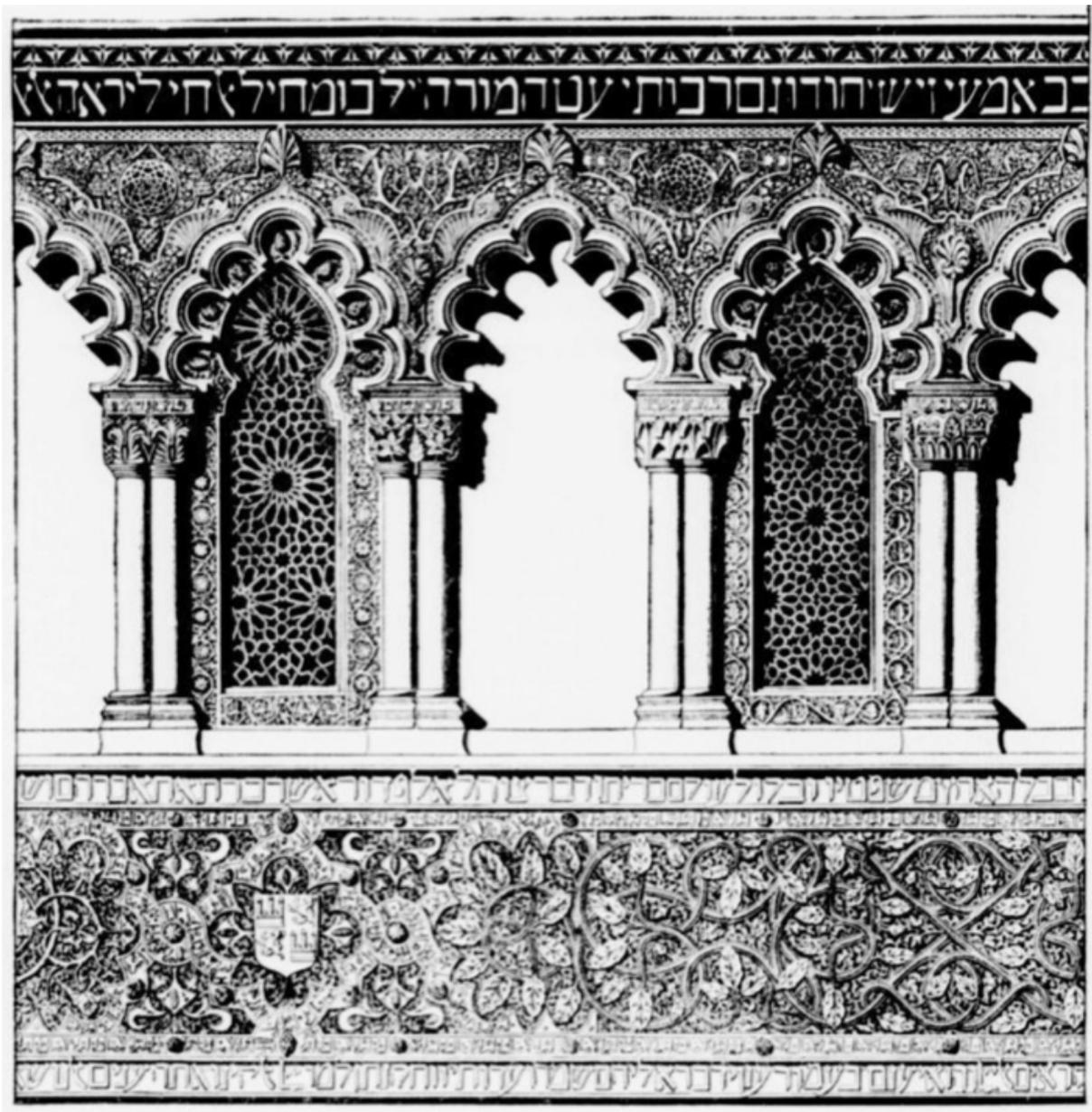


fig. 43. Detail of the decoration in the old synagogue (El Transito) in Toledo.

From this, it can be seen that the Old-New School in Prague, the Neuschule in Frankfurt, and the wooden and stone synagogues in Poland and Russia display certain characteristic features on their exterior façades. With the further expansion of the Society's collections the number of interesting examples will grow and ultimately provide enough material for scholarly research. There are also certain singularities in the construction and furnishing of the interiors of old synagogues; the predominance of two-aisled synagogues with two pillars between which the *almemor* is situated, its separation from the Torah shrine, the unusual shape of the chairs and their positioning, the location of the entrance door, the style of wall and ceiling decoration and the motifs, and the number of lights used to enliven the interiors of synagogues. These unique features will also increase in number when

the existing material is expanded ten-fold. These are doubtlessly already a source of inspiration for specialist architects and will encourage them to visit old synagogues as well when on study trips to Italy, Spain or the Orient—something that has virtually never been the case to date. It can then be expected that much richer and more suitable specialist material will reach the Society for the Study of Jewish Artistic Monuments than that provided by the preliminary and occasional images taken by professional and amateur photographers, most of whom lack specialist knowledge, which, with regard to technical, construction-related, and artistic aspects is of particular interest.

The special features in the architecture of the buildings constructed for Jewish religious rituals mentioned here represent just some of the few characteristics which have been ascertained in the course of just a brief preliminary study.

Of course, even after decades of studies, it has not be possible to define a unique architectural style, such as that of Greek or Gothic architecture, which can be called Jewish, and from which it has been proven that it had a huge influence on all peoples. However, there was very much a time during which the Jewish population boasted an outstanding level of knowledge and education.

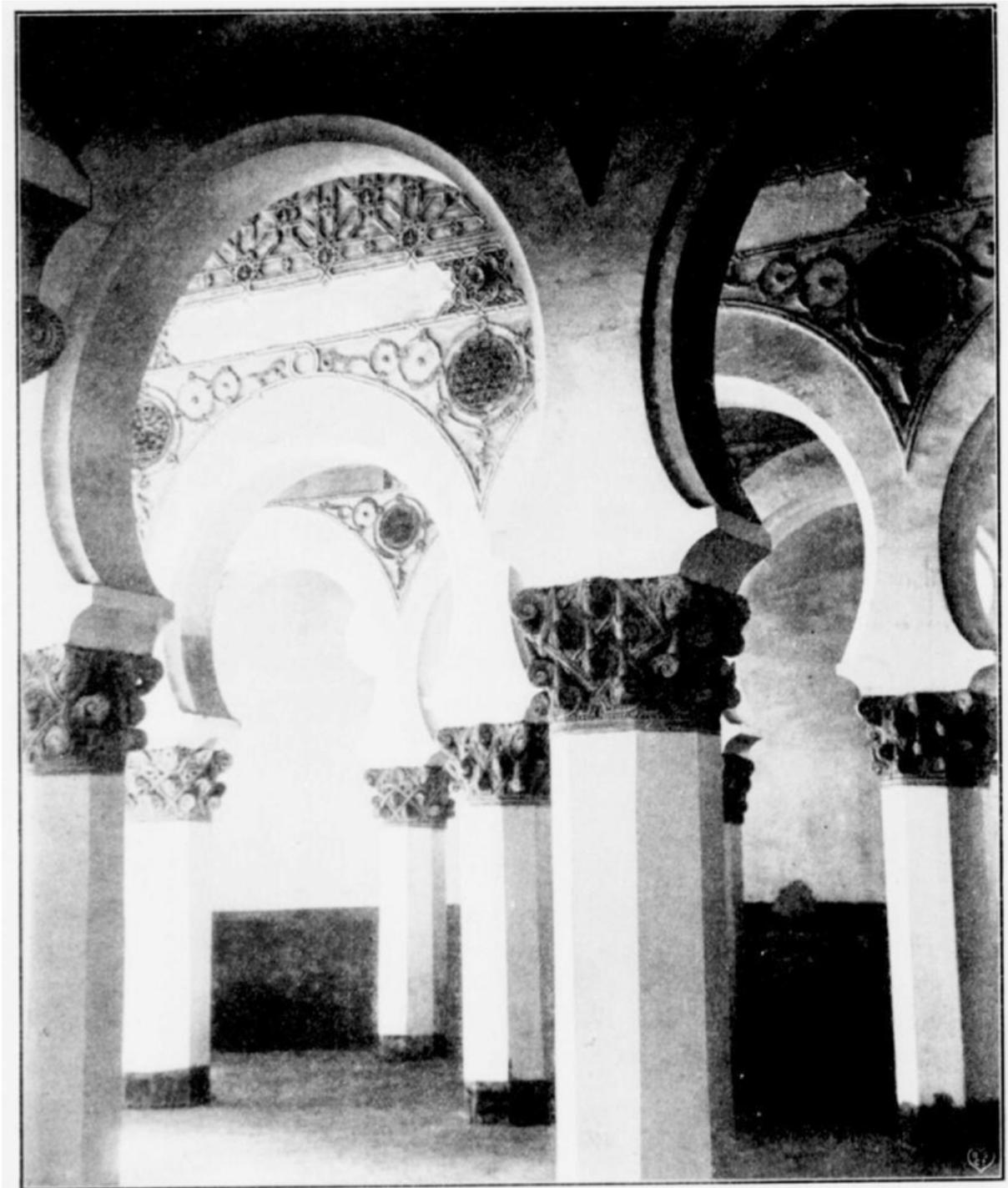


fig. 44. Interior view of the five-aisled synagogue (now the church of Santa Maria la Blanca) in Toledo. From a photograph.

During the Middle Ages in Spain, especially in the famous centers of education in the Moorish caliphate, there were a number of extremely learned Jews—astronomers, doctors, philosophers, poets. At this time of prosperity when Jewish intellectual life flourished, as well as afterwards, Jews were powerful ministers and successful financial artisans.

The buildings, erected under their instigation, were unique to a very special degree, as can be seen in the former synagogue in Toledo dating from the 14th century, now El Transito Church (fig. 43), as well as what is now the church of Santa Maria la Blanca (fig. 44). They differ in many of their details from related Arabian buildings constructed at the same time. The architect Franz Pascha, commissioned at that time with the conservation of all the mosques in Cairo and who also founded the Arabian Museum—and was a respected authority of the Arabian style—called this the Jewish-Arabian style in his works on the art of Islam published by Bergstässer, from which fig. 43 has been taken. Tracing this in the many buildings in Spain and Portugal, which have been dismembered or altered in part, or revamped inside to suit Catholic religious purposes while retaining their external appearance, may well also be a task for the Society some time in the future. For now, we can see that even the few remnants investigated to date can provide food for thought on the construction and embellishment of old synagogues.

Düsseldorf, 15 October 1901.
Gneisenaustrasse 36.

Director Frauberger.

(Translation: Christopher Wynne)