Gwozdziec Wooden Synagogue Project

The Museum of the History of Polish Jews, in collaboration with Handhouse Studio, plans to rebuild components of an exquisite 17th-century wooden synagogue. This historic structure will be set within the stunning architectural space of the Museum’s modern building.

None of these extraordinary wooden synagogues survive today. The Nazis burned the last of them to the ground in 1939. Fortunately, excellent documentation survives for one of the most beautiful of these architectural treasures, the Gwozdziec wooden synagogue. We plan to rebuild its polychrome ceiling and timber-framed roof to 85% scale, using traditional tools, techniques, and materials.

The wooden synagogue is a perfect expression of the Golden Age of Polish Jewry during the 17th and 18th centuries. The Gwozdziec ceiling and roof, a centerpiece in our presentation of the 1000-year history of Polish Jews, will rise from the Core Exhibition and soar up into the grand public space of the Museum’s modern building. From the Core Exhibition, visitors will look up at the polychrome ceiling, while from the grand public space of this modern building, they will look through a cutaway in the roof and see the marvelous timber frame structure within.

Clockwise from near right: By referencing existing photographs and color studies of the Gwozdziec Synagogue from 1914, Handhouse Studio students paint the zodiac section of the west ceiling using traditional materials; the timber frame structure of a wooden synagogue as preserved in illustration and photograph; Handhouse students working on a model of the Zabludow Synagogue, an exquisite example of an architectural recreation to scale, bringing part of a lost world to life.
Update on the Core Exhibition
by Dr. Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, Core Exhibition Leader

The reconstructed Gwoździec synagogue wooden ceiling and roof will define a spiritual space at the center of which is the stunning Gwoździec wooden bima, reconstructed to 100% scale using traditional tools and techniques.

In November 2010, the Council of the Museum of the History of Polish Jews approved the entire Core Exhibition. In the months preceding the Council meeting, expert historians from Poland and abroad reviewed the work of the exhibition team. Also in November 2010, Jerzy Halbersztadt, Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, Marcin Wodziński, and Hanna Zaremska presented the Core Exhibition to colleagues at Tel Aviv University and Yad Vashem to very positive responses.

We are especially excited about the project to reconstruct to 85% scale the Gwoździec wooden synagogue painted ceiling and timber-framed roof, thanks to a generous gift from Irene Pletka. Working with Massachusetts-based Handsome Studio, whose motto is “learn by building,” an international team of students, historians, and master craftsmen will complete the timber framing during the month of June at the open air museum in Sanok.

Three painted ceiling workshops in Wrocław, Rzeszów, and Krakow will follow. The workshops can accommodate approximately 100 participants. Local communities will be invited to participate in the program of activities planned around each workshop. The media have already shown great interest in this highly innovative project.

The wooden synagogue ceiling and roof will be the centerpiece of the 18th-century gallery, which is dedicated to Jewish life in small private towns in the Commonwealth of Poland and Lithuania. It was in these towns, where Jews formed a large percentage of the town’s population, that they created a way of life that was uniquely Jewish and distinctly Polish, nowhere more clearly expressed than in the exquisite wooden synagogues.

These towns were also the economic hubs of noble estates, where Jews played an important economic role as managers of mills, salt mines, and breweries, and in a wide variety of occupations. Visitors will be able to explore economic life in an interactive marketplace, which is surrounded by the key settings that make up the “Jewish town”:

- the tavern, where visitors can explore the role of Jews in the manufacture, distribution, and sale of alcohol;
- the church, where the dramatic story of the heretic Jacob Frank and his followers is told;
- the home, where women’s lives come to the fore; and
- the cemetery, where visitors can learn about the art of Jewish tombstones.

Jewish life in this period was marked by the popularization of the Kabbalah and enhancement of spiritual life through the creation of new customs, elaboration of old ones, and mystical interpretations of texts and practices. More copies of the Zohar were printed in the 18th century than in any previous period, including a Yiddish adaptation. Many such books and pamphlets were printed in Zolkiew and other Jewish printing centers in the Commonwealth and elsewhere. Women’s supplicatory prayers, known as tikkunim, were infused with Kabbalistic meaning.

Visitors will explore how Jewish spiritual yearnings in the period gave rise to Hasidism, a story told through the Baal Shem Tov; the ideal of Torah study as exemplified by the Vilna Gaon; and the Jewish Enlightenment, as seen in the life and work of Mendel Lefin.

As they exit the gallery, visitors will find themselves in a new world, as the Commonwealth is partitioned by three empires: Russia, Prussia, and Austria. A new era begins, the long 19th century, and with it Jewish encounters with modernity.
MESSAGE FROM
Tad Taube
Co-Chairman, Distinguished Benefactors Committee

As the last stages of the building façade are put into place, we eagerly look forward to the 2013 opening of the Museum of the History of Polish Jews. Standing on the ground of what once was the Warsaw Ghetto, the Museum will be a site for the living, as well as a keeper of memories — as the flames of the lives that came before must also be kept alive for the benefit of humankind. This is an ambitious undertaking, and we bring with pride.

As we continue to welcome new supporters and distinguished visitors to participate in the Museum’s progress and success, we skillfully prepare the beautiful, modern, and interactive spaces that will serve as an invitation to all to learn about the history of Polish Jews, one inseparable from the other. I know, because Polish Jewish history is also my history. My family and I left Poland just before the Nazi invasion on September 1, 1939. A lucky child, I was able to live a free and prosperous life in the United States of America. It is that freedom and richness of spirit and hope that this Museum stands for, and will be its great achievement.

HANDS-ON HISTORY:
The Wooden Synagogue Cupola Project

This past summer, the town of Sanok, Poland, echoed with the sounds of axes and saws as an international group of volunteers — historians, artists, master timber framers, architectural preservationists, and students — came together to recreate the 17th century Gwoździec synagogue, destroyed during World War I. This reconstruction project is unique: under the tutelage of the Handshouse Studio and Timber Framers Guild, the volunteers are building the synagogue replica of the timber-framed roof and painted ceiling by hand, using only the tools and techniques of the period. This process of learning-by-building gives unparalleled historical authenticity and deep cultural significance to the re-creation, and makes it the perfect centerpiece for the Museum’s Core Exhibition.

This summer, in Sanok, Poland, an international crew of timber craftsmen and students worked on the building of a replica of the timber-framed roof of the ornate wooden synagogue that stood for 300 years in the town of Gwoździec, now in Ukraine.

Tad Taube
Honorary Consul for the Republic of Poland
Chairman, Taube Philanthropics
President, Koret Foundation
Once the roof was raised in Sanok, the team moved on to Rzeszów, Kraków, and Wrocław, where they hand-painted three of the eight ceiling panels. The workshop in Wrocław took place in the restored White Stork Synagogue, in cooperation with the Jewish Community of Wrocław. The last five painting workshops will take place in synagogues in different cities in Poland during the summer of 2012. The local population is always invited to presentations of the project during the workshops.

When completed, the synagogue exhibit will serve not only as a monument to the preservation of Jewish cultural history but as a symbol of the celebration of its continuation.

“It really is a labor of love, re-creating this synagogue, which was destroyed through all of this hate. But it’s going back to what was before, just centuries of people using these buildings and loving these buildings and coming together as a community, and we’re recreating that memory in the physical sense, just putting back what was.”

― Student participant, Sanok

Once all of the synagogue components are complete, they will be disassembled and shipped to Warsaw, where they will be installed in the Museum. Special thanks go to Ms. Irene Pletka, who joined the Museum’s circle of Distinguished Benefactors this April and has ensured that this replica of the roof and painted ceiling of the Gwoździec wooden synagogue will be a highlight of the Museum.

For more information on the Gwoździec Reconstruction please visit:

The Museum of the History of Polish Jews

The Timber Framers Guild
www.tfguild.com

MESSAGE FROM
Carol Stulberg
Western Regional Director

The Museum of the History of Polish Jews presents a historic opportunity to honor and preserve ten centuries of Jewish life, history and culture in Poland. This exceptional educational institution will serve as a living legacy, providing multitudes of visitors with extraordinary resources for understanding the achievements of Jews in Poland during major periods in Poland’s history.

This Museum will create a vibrant center where visitors from all over the world can discover, connect and learn about our rich heritage. It will illuminate for the world the light that the Holocaust failed to extinguish.

Please join in supporting the Museum of the History of Polish Jews. Your gift will enable us to fulfill our mission to present educational programs and experiences that preserve, explore and celebrate the epic history of Jews in Poland.

Carol Stulberg
818-386-1411
carol@stulbergassociates.com
HANDS ON HISTORY:
The Wooden Synagogue Project

The centerpiece of the Museum of the History of Polish Jews’ Core Exhibition is a reconstruction close to scale of the 17th century wooden Gwoździec Synagogue destroyed in World War I. It is being built by an international group of architectural preservationists, master timber framers, art students, and other volunteers. Under the tutelage of the Handshouse Studio and Timber Framers Guild, the dedicated volunteers first gathered this past summer in Sanok in southern Poland to build the replica of the roof and inner cupola of the Gwoździec Synagogue by hand, using only the tools and techniques of the period. The act of building itself offers unparalleled historical authenticity and deep cultural significance to the re-creation, and makes it the perfect centerpiece for the Museum’s Core Exhibition.

Once the roof was raised in Sanok, the team moved on to Rzeszów, Kraków, and Wrocław, where they hand-painted three of the eight ceiling panels. The workshop in Wrocław took place in the restored White Stork Synagogue, in cooperation with the Jewish Community of Wrocław. The last five painting workshops will take place in synagogues in different cities in Poland during the summer of 2012. The local population is always invited to presentations of the project during the workshops.

When completed, the synagogue exhibit will serve not only as a monument to the preservation of Jewish cultural history but as a symbol of the celebration of its continuation.

Once all of the synagogue components are complete, they will be disassembled and shipped to Warsaw, where they will be installed in the Museum. Lead funding for this project was provided by Irene Pletka, Founder and Chairman of the Kronhill Pletka Foundation and a member of the Museum’s Distinguished Benefactors’ Circle.

This project and the Museum have received excellent coverage in the New York Times, the Forward, the Jerusalem Post, and Tablet, among other media. The Core Exhibition has received endorsements from Yad Vashem, the US Holocaust Memorial Museum, and many other scholars worldwide.
The second stage of Gwoździec Re!Construction launched officially on May 22 during a press conference at the New Synagogue in Gdańsk. Its goal is to complete the reconstruction of the roof, bimah, and painted ceiling of a beautiful 17th-century synagogue that exists now only in image and imagination but will soon stand splendidly recreated inside the Museum of the History of Polish Jews.

An international team of experts and students is reconstructing sections of the elaborately painted ceiling and timber-framed roof. For two weeks in July, members of the public could see selected painted sections of the ceiling at the Royal Castle in Warsaw. The display, which included a video installation depicting the stages of the work, met an enthusiastic public response and much media attention.

Gwoździec Re!Construction is a joint project of Handshouse Studio, the Association of the Jewish Historical Institute of Poland, and the Museum of the History of Polish Jews. The reconstructed synagogue’s ceiling and roof—and the bimah, a gift from Handshouse Studio to the Museum—will be a centerpiece of the Core Exhibition in the 17th-18th-century gallery. Handshouse Studio is a Massachusetts-based non-profit organization dedicated to education and the perpetuation of the arts, history, and science with a hands-on approach.