

## PART III

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# The New Synagogue of Poznań

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# The Synagogues of Poznań

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SYNAGOGUE BUILDINGS have stood in Poznań from the Middle Ages to the present day. Today only one survives—ironically because it was converted in 1941 or 1942 by the Nazis into a swimming pool, which purpose it serves today. Neglect and the effect of water have had a seriously deleterious effect on its structure and its preservation. A more appropriate use is now a matter of urgency, particularly since the Member of the European Parliament for Poznań, Marcin Libicki, has called for its demolition and several synagogues which survived the Nazi occupation were demolished after 1945. It therefore seems useful to record the city's Jewish architectural history to show the importance and the value of preserving its last remnant.

By the first half of the thirteenth century, as Germans moved in noticeable numbers to the territory of Poznań (Posen), Jews entered with Christians; a few had already arrived. The ecclesiastical laws of 1267 specified that the Archbishop of Gniezno and the Bishop of Poznań had exclusive rights to grant approval for new synagogues. The earliest known Jewish settlement in what is now Poznań was apparently on the right bank of the Warta River on territory belonging to the king rather than to the city or bishop.<sup>1</sup> This was a common situation: for reasons of commercial development, kings issued privileges permitting Jewish residence, commerce, and worship. By contrast, where the Church's secular influence was effective, it often tried to limit the presence of Judaism and its followers, while merchants often kept Jews away to prevent commercial competition.

The first synagogue recorded in what became Poznań is documented in 1367. It was located near the intersection of modern Szewska and Dominikańska streets in the northern part of the walled town,<sup>2</sup> and is likely to have been the one that stood until 1908 at ulica Żydowska 15 (see Figure 1). This is probably the synagogue documented in 1449. The Jews of Poznań continued to live and worship in this district until 1939, near plac Wroniecki, where the surviving synagogue, of 1907 stands in much-altered form. The district occupied by Jews in the fifteenth

I am grateful to Andrew Hingston for supplying the photographs, which form part of the Poznań Synagogue Project; see <<http://www.pozsynpro.org>>.

<sup>1</sup> See also *Jewish Encyclopedia*, s.v. Posen, and J. Jacobson, 'Zur Geschichte der Juden in Posen', in G. Rhode (ed.), *Geschichte der Stadt Posen* (Neuendettelsau, 1953), 243–56.

<sup>2</sup> Z. Pakula, *The Jews of Poznań*, trans. W. Brand (London, 2001), 3–5, on the early history.

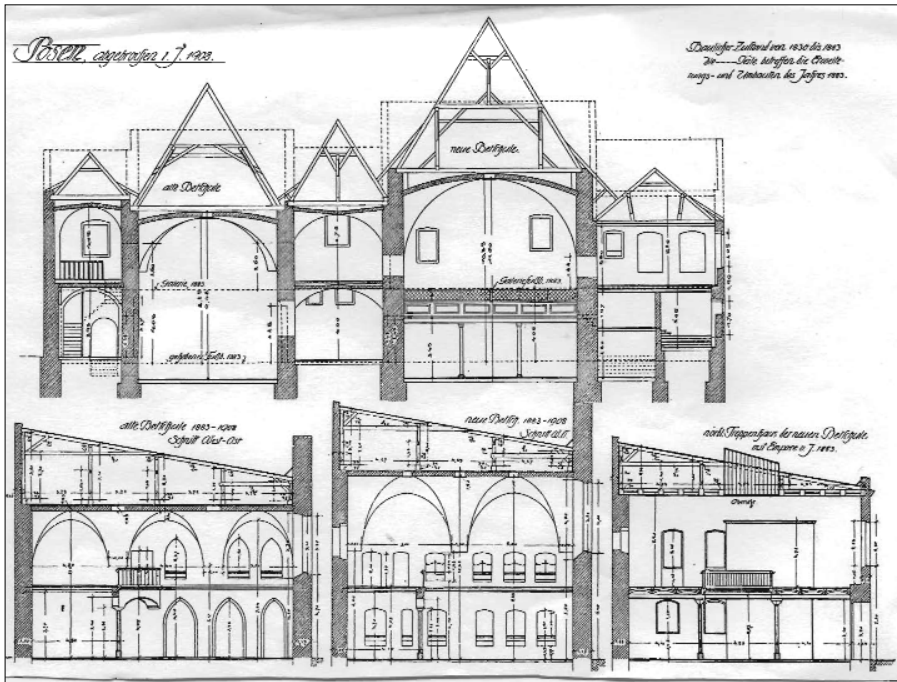


Figure 1. Sections of the Old and New Synagogues on ulica Żydowska drawn by Alfred Grotte, c. 1908

century was formed by ulica Żydowska (renamed from ulica Sukiennicza in the late fifteenth century and suggesting a permanent Jewish settlement), ulica Szewska, and part of ulica Wroniecka.<sup>3</sup> That the early building was located near the Dominican church may relate to the Dominican mission to control heresy, which could include watching the activities of Jews.

Investigations of the synagogue site in ulica Żydowska by the architect and historian Alfred Grotte, amplified by the architectural historian Richard Krautheimer, show that like many other pre-seventeenth-century synagogues and many later ones, this was a rectangular room of three bays made of brick and stone masonry, covered by three ribbed groin vaults under a pitched roof. The vault ribs had Gothic profiles characteristic of the late fourteenth century, though the vaults may have been added after 1367, if the synagogue was built appreciably earlier. Pointed-arched windows opened high in the wall, originally on both walls of the two eastern bays. A tiny rectangular vestibule at the south near the western corner provided protection from wind and rain. Annexes flanked the building. The northern annexe, which probably postdated 1590, north of which rose a New Synagogue,

<sup>3</sup> Pakula, *The Jews of Poznań*.

eventually contained stairs to the New Synagogue's women's gallery;<sup>4</sup> this annexe blocked the ventilation given by several original windows on the Old Synagogue's north wall. The annexe's south wall opened to the main room in a pointed-arched arcade. Probably in the eighteenth century, the southern annexe was constructed for a women's gallery on the second level; stairs occupied much of the ground floor. The openings to the men's hall are likely to have been windows originally. After 1818, women sat in a gallery at the west end of the Old Synagogue, possibly renewing an earlier one there, but one that certainly postdated the fourteenth century.

During the fifteenth century, as persecution increased farther west, Jews sought refuge in Poznań. Probably about six hundred men and boys attended synagogue around 1600. A new synagogue, begun after a fire in 1590, was finished only in 1618 owing to Jesuit persecutions, another fire, and temporary Jewish resettlement on the outskirts of town.<sup>5</sup> This New Synagogue, in the form known to Grotte, was of eighteenth-century date, probably erected after a great fire in 1717. It was a rectangle like the Old Synagogue but covered with only two ribbed groin vaults of more expert construction than those in the preceding house of prayer. The new building was supported in part by the north wall of the Old Synagogue's northern annexe. The New Synagogue, too, had an annexe at the north, which may have been built along with the main room's initial construction, as the western walls were aligned and of equal thickness. By the eighteenth century, and even by 1618, annexes for women were being built at the same time as men's prayer halls, and the stairs in this annexe suggest that women were seated on the upper floor.

Restrictions on the size and location of synagogues and the tendency of Jews to follow individual rabbis led to assemblies in several prayer rooms rather than in only one community synagogue. The seventeenth and eighteenth centuries saw persecutions and the disorders of war, leading to a decline in the Jewish population starting in the late 1730s, thus reducing the need for new, large synagogues. Those Jews who remained in Poznań in 1768 used three main synagogues and five smaller ones. They remodelled and rededicated the Old Synagogue after the fire of 1717. The New Synagogue is also likely to have been rebuilt after the same conflagration, and the High Synagogue was built in 1768, surviving until it burnt down in 1903.<sup>6</sup> At a time unknown, inscriptions and instruments inspired by Psalm 105: 4

<sup>4</sup> A. Grotte, *Deutsche, böhmische und polnische Synagogentypen vom XI. bis Anfang des XIX. Jahrhunderts* (Berlin, 1915); R. Krautheimer, *Mittelalterliche Synagogen* (Berlin, 1927); see also M. and K. Piechotka, *Bramy nieba: Bóżnice murowane na ziemiach dawnej Rzeczypospolitej* (Warsaw, 1999), 114–15. They show the Old Synagogue's plan after 1582 on p. 230. Grotte's compass indicator is reversed, as is shown by his location of the *aron kodesh*, which was surely at the east in the Old and New Synagogues. Krautheimer's text corrected Grotte's error, as did the Piechotkas' drawing. My description and chronological analysis follows Krautheimer's.

<sup>5</sup> Krautheimer, *Mittelalterliche Synagogen*, 223.

<sup>6</sup> For the three large and five small synagogues, see A. Heppner and I. Herzberg, *Aus Vergangenheit und Gegenwart der Juden und der jüdischen Gemeinden in den Posener Landen* (Bromberg, now Bydgoszcz, 1904–28), ii, 770.

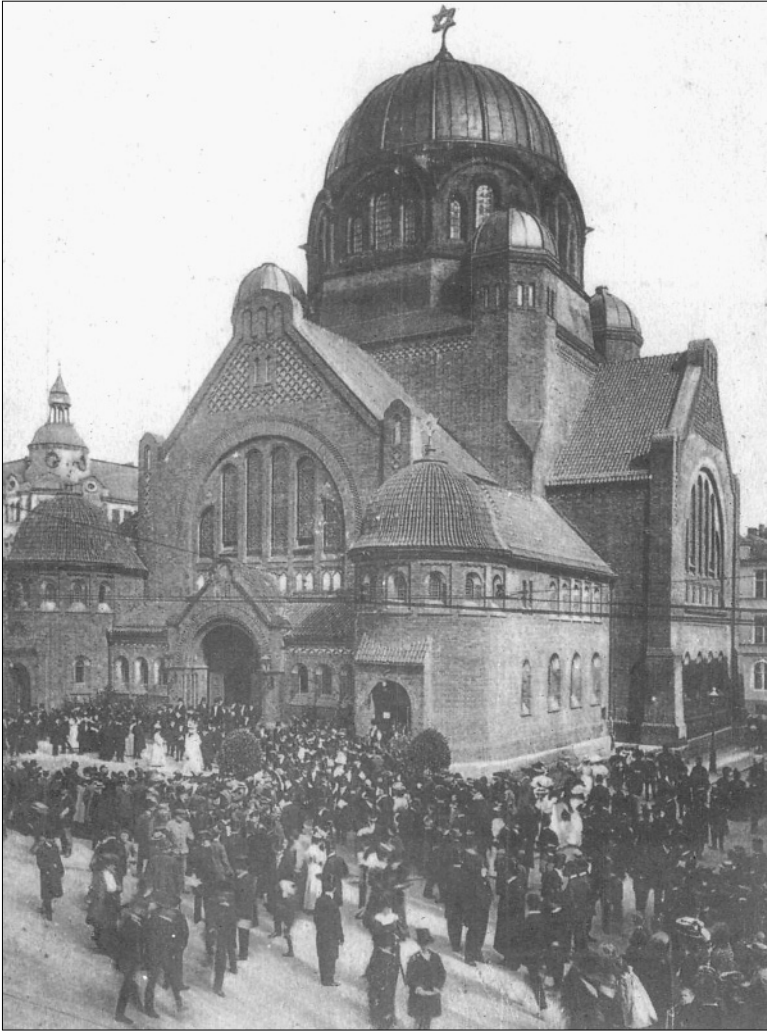


Figure 2. The synagogue in plac Wroniecki, as shown in a postcard c.1914. The synagogue was designed by Cremer and Wolffenstein of Berlin, built between 1905 and 1907, and dedicated in September 1907. Courtesy of Victor Edwards, Los Angeles

were carved in sandstone over the doors of the stone *aronot kodesh* in both the Old and the New Synagogues.<sup>7</sup> Poznań's Jews also had a prayer room near one of the larger synagogues; another known in the seventeenth century and led by Rabbi Mendel Abrusch; the Bachurim synagogue; another first mentioned in 1687; and

<sup>7</sup> Grotte, *Deutsche, böhmische und polnische Synagogentypen*, 30. For drawings of the ornament, see his p. 47.