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THE SYNAGOGUE IN CORSICANA, TEXAS

by *Jane Manaster*

The cultural landscape of Texas continually yields examples of architectural form elements derived directly from Europe. Distinctive German, Polish, Alsatian, Russian, and Irish vernacular structures have been documented, reflecting the diverse human settlement of the state.¹ Added to the well-known introduction of folk styles from the Southern United States and Mexico, these exotic buildings help lend regional character to different parts of Texas. Previous research has focused largely upon dwellings, and the potential contributions of many ethnic groups have not been examined. Attention in the present study is turned toward vernacular ecclesiastical architecture and to the small-town Jewish population of East Texas.

Folk architecture has been identified in churches standing in those rural towns, especially in the central part of the state, that look like nineteenth-century time warps overlaid with a modern American veneer of pick-up trucks, franchised fast-food stops, and gas stations. Corsicana, in East Texas, has a remarkable ecclesiastical heirloom, a synagogue with a near-identical counterpart that served a congregation in Poland. Both synagogues, though the Polish one is no longer standing, were two-story wooden buildings fronted by a gabled roof and squat twin towers, each exotically topped by an onion-shaped cupola or dome. (Fig. 1) In Corsicana, the mercantile potential of the area was recognized soon after the Civil War. This brought the railroad through from Houston, and also several Jewish families eager to set up in business. These families built the synagogue in 1990. The date of the Gabin counterpart in Poland is less certain. It is unlikely that the two near-identical and distinctive looking buildings could have appeared spontaneously. There was surely a path leading not only to its appearance in Texas, but also to its origins in Poland.

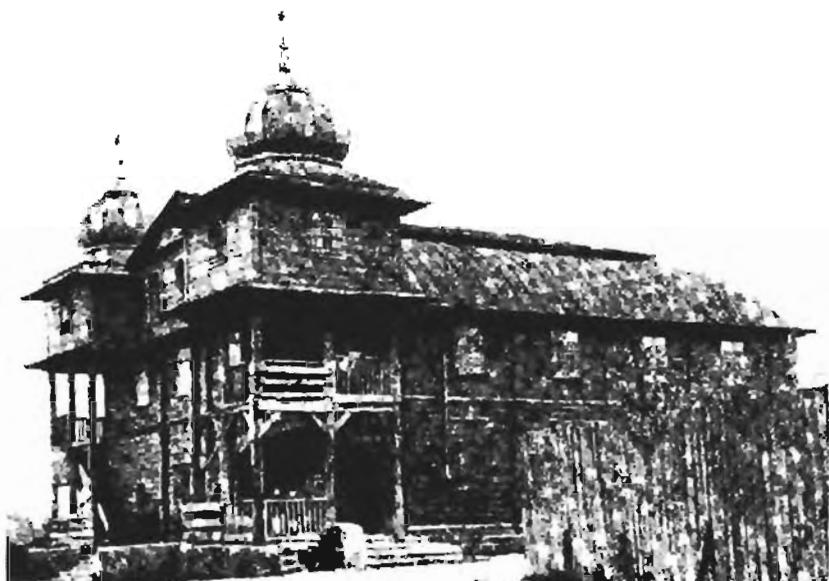
To find an answer, research lay in two fields: architecture and the migration of Jews. Before the study was long under way, it emerged that neither the synagogue in Corsicana nor the one in Gabin was unique, but fitted a pattern seen in other small cities in both countries. This raised more questions. Were the Gabin and Corsicana synagogues actually "related" or was their similarity linked to an unknown prototype? Did the other American synagogues, one built shortly before the one in Corsicana, owe their origins to Poland or some other European original?

HISTORY OF SYNAGOGUE ARCHITECTURE

The principal structural center of Jewish worship was the Temple in Jerusalem. Harassment and persecution of the Jews existed well before the Common Era, and communities were forced to leave their homes on

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FIGURE 1



Synagogue in Gabin, Poland. From "Wooden Synagogues," by Kazimierz Piechotka.



Synagogue at Corsicana, Texas. Courtesy of Texas Historical Commission.

several occasions. Archeological vestiges of synagogues, which served locally as houses of worship and gathering places, have been found in numerous Middle Eastern locations. Building styles included a Graeco-Roman

basilica floorplan and a Greek cross. Later, a double nave design was borrowed and modified by Jews and Christians alike from the buildings of the medieval mendicant orders. Jews adapted each of the three styles to accommodate their few religious stipulations: separate seating for men and women; an alcove or cupboard representing the Ark of the Lord; and a bimmah, or reading platform in view of the whole congregation.

The diaspora, the Jewish population outside the Holy Land, spread to the east and west. This paper is concerned with the eastern segment, though in the nineteenth century a period of Moorish revival architecture impinged, introducing exotic design concepts to Europe and this may be a clue to the Corsicana/Gabin design. As well as the traditional styles being scattered over the landscape, synagogues conformed with the architectural pattern of the churches and secular buildings in the region. Sometimes countries would stipulate rules, for example, on the permissible height of buildings. To explain the often unobtrusive appearance of synagogues, Rachel Wischnitzer suggested that "as a minority group with vivid memories of persecution, the Jewish community shunned ostentation and display."² George Loukomski wrote less equivocally that prior to modern times the synagogue was "singularly unimpressive externally. The reason for this was not lack of aesthetic appreciation, but sheer necessity. Canon law forbade Jews to build new synagogues or embellish the old ... and it was inadvisable to a degree for the synagogue to seem impressive or even dignified from the outside."³

Fundamental architectural changes occurred in the early nineteenth century as the aftermath of the Napoleonic Wars heralded an era of experimentation in ecclesiastical and secular design. Where financial restrictions prevented razing and replacing buildings, modifications led to an assortment of creative styles. One of these, which became known as Moorish revival, rapidly achieved popularity. The Moors had invaded the Iberian peninsula in the eighth century, bringing from the Middle East bloodshed and an insatiable need for victory, but also cultural and artistic ideas including exotic architectural styles. While offering a wide range of detail to the schooled eye, Moorish architecture supplied an overall impression of fluidity and visual extravagance, where curves and bulbous domes replaced the more familiar angularity. As an architectural revival movement in the nineteenth century, four centuries after the Moors were ousted from Europe, it provided a link between the Jews of East and West, a chance to recapture the glory of the Jewish civilization that preceded the Inquisition in Spain, as well as introducing a surprising feeling of well-being towards the world of Islam. In Dresden, Gottfried Semper designed a Moorish-inspired synagogue in 1839, and his student Otto Simonson captured the spirit of the Orient shortly afterward with the new synagogue at Leipzig in Germany. This building may well have served as a springboard for the spread of Moorish influence to other countries, for the annual fair in the city attracted visitors, including Jews, from Austria, Poland,

Denmark, France, Italy, England, Turkey, and even America.⁴

Seemingly a link existed between synagogues in the large cities and small towns. Professional and vernacular architecture blended, and stylistic features which first appeared in the cities made their way over time to the provinces. This may explain in part the distinctive appearance of the Gabin synagogue, but other factors, such as church design, Polish vernacular architecture, and the history of Jews in Poland must be considered also.

THE SYNAGOGUE AT GABIN

This study set out to determine why a synagogue in Gabin, Poland, should be replicated in Corsicana, Texas, but before linking the synagogues on the East and West of the Atlantic Ocean, the origins of the Gabin synagogue needs to be established. Lying west of the Vistula River in the district of Warsaw, and the seat of Gostynin County, Gabin was distinguishable from similar small Polish cities despite its remarkable synagogue. According to a census taken in 1564, Jews owned seven houses there.⁵ By 1765 eastward migrations had brought the Jewish population to 365, and at the end of the nineteenth century, when the synagogue had been modified to its familiar appearance, almost half the population was Jewish.⁶ Though not on a railroad, the city supported itself by manufacturing sugar, lamps, and liquor.⁷

A weathervane on top of the right hand tower, and a wooden plaque inside the building, are both dated 1710. Probably over two centuries modifications were made, and 1893, which is also given as the construction date, probably refers to major refurbishment.⁸ Apparently no floorplan or drawing of the Gabin synagogue interior survives, except a photograph of the *bimah*, or raised reading platform. Photographs of the exterior show several notable features. The two-story wooden structure is flanked by towers that reach to the roof and are topped with onion domes. A circular window is inset above the front entrance, below the gabled roof. Outside staircases lead to the towers to the second floor, strongly implying eighteenth — rather than nineteenth — century work. The photograph of the southwest elevation shows a curiously rounded roof, unlike those on other wooden synagogues. According to Piechotka, the treatment of detail reflects an imitation of masonry synagogues.⁹

The twin towers at the front of the synagogue, rising to the height of the roof, may be explained as elongated versions of the pavilions fronting wooden synagogues in the Grodno-Bialystock region of northeastern Poland, or adaptations of the Moorish revival towers first seen in western European cities in the middle of the nineteenth century.

The gabled roof and rose windows add to the synagogue's aesthetic appearance, but answer no religious or regional cultural demands. A synagogue in Sierpc, to the North of Gabin, was built in the late nineteenth century. Here the towers were integral rather than semi-attached,

and they, too, were crowned with onion-shaped cupolas. Sierpc had a gabled roof but no round window, and no outside staircase leading to the women's gallery. The windows were arched, unlike the simple square ones at Gabin, which suggests a more deliberate attempt was made here to emulate Moorish revival architecture. In Poland the wooden synagogues at Gabin and Sierpc seem to be the only ones with domed towers, though others may have existed, leaving no record.

At Gabin the most likely structural alteration in the nineteenth century was the sheet-iron roof which resembled a Victorian British railway station. Would the Gabin synagogue, prior to this modification, have looked like one of the intricately carved synagogues of northeastern Poland? Or was it closer in style to the rectangular structures common in the South-Central part of the country? In Malacky, near Bratislava, the synagogue designed by Wilhelm Stiassny, an early Jewish architect, had neither gabled roof nor circular window, but boasted two stories and twin domed towers which showed an affinity rather than a definite similarity to the Gabin synagogue. Though many pictures of nineteenth-century European synagogues exist, two links are missing: first, the prototype of the design that led to the synagogue at Gabin, and second, the path of diffusion which took the design across eastern and central Europe, then to the New World, to a handful of small synagogues in the United States.

SYNAGOGUE ARCHITECTURE IN THE UNITED STATES

While the path of synagogue architecture in Poland absorbed multiple styles and ideas over several centuries, in America time was foreshortened. On both sides of the Atlantic Jews respected the demands of Rabbinic law, and also on both continents a difference between the synagogues of large and small cities could be seen. In Europe, hundreds of small-town synagogues blended inconspicuously with the landscape because of the constant fear of persecution that would thrive on a visible target. The styles changed and diffused only gradually. In contrast to this necessarily low profile, American Jews could choose to worship in whatever surroundings they chose. But they confronted another kind of problem. Nineteenth-century Jews, especially in the small American communities, were uncertain. They had come from several countries and with no consensus of what a synagogue should look like. To make it even more confusing, for several generations there was no central body to which they could go for guidance.¹⁰ In effect, "It was by no means unusual to find, in the same synagogue building, forms and details drawn from half a dozen historical styles of architecture and mixed together with a remarkable lack of taste and consistency."¹¹

This situation, this hesitancy to establish a blueprint or pattern for synagogue design, did not arise until the mass migrations of the nineteenth century. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries Jewish Americans forged on according to tradition and to a belief in the appropriateness

of their chosen style. Certain fundamental rules crossed the Atlantic: the *Aren Kodesh*, the Ark of the Lord, belonged against the East wall; men and women needed separate seating; also, a *bimmah* had to be placed in view of all. Besides these few demands the options were predicated more on the availability of funds than anything else.

In 1824, the Jewish Reform movement reached America from Germany, and in the 1840s a surge of German Jews arrived who soon outnumbered the earlier Sephardic Jews. The population became increasingly heterogeneous, and it grew harder to accommodate the wishes of those who wanted to build reminders of their homeland. Moorish revival architecture took hold in the larger cities in the 1850s as the urban Jewish communities, no longer seeing themselves as immigrants, found a niche in American society. Congregations as far apart as Cincinnati and San Francisco, or New York and Salt Lake City, chose Moorish synagogues, and while the style was most evident in the interior of the buildings, the exterior appearance made a notable mark on the urban landscape. Though more a small town characteristic, even in the large cities an occasional synagogue was built by a group who came from a single European village or region. For example, a group of Bohemians organized the Ahavat Chesid congregation in New York, considered the last of the Moorish revival synagogues.

THE CORSICANA SYNAGOGUE

Although the synagogue in Corsicana, Texas, provoked this study because of its likeness to the one in Gabin, Poland, preliminary research to link the two revealed that the design of the Corsicana structure was not unique in America. There was a synagogue in Charleston, West Virginia, that was virtually identical to the one in Corsicana, and another, slightly modified, existed in Butte, Montana. All these three towns share a remoteness from the principal cities of nineteenth-century America, but such a view denies the mercantile importance small towns offered Jews — and others — as the population moved West. Many of today's backwaters went through a period of promise when it looked as though they might become important urban centers.

Corsicana, situated in East Texas between Houston and Dallas, currently has a population of about approximately 20,000, but with Anglo settlement dating back to the 1840s, it has known a lengthy optimism. The first prospect of growth occurred when the Houston & Texas Central Railroad reached Corsicana from Groesbeck in 1871. A handful of Jews, coming North from Houston and setting up shop at one railhead after another, came then to Corsicana. The population in the town rose from eighty in 1870 to 3,373 ten years later. It had reached 6,285 by 1890, by which date there were enough Jews to hold regular weekly worship services.¹² Many more came in 1894 when oil was discovered a few blocks from downtown when an artesian well was being dug to supplement the

city water supply. This was the first major oil discovery in the area, and the following year several producing wells were drilled. Corsicana became the first city in Texas to use natural gas for fuel and lighting and crude oil as fuel for locomotives and road building material.¹³ This led to the state's first well-equipped refinery. These happenings all suggested future prosperity.

Soon the Jewish community divided. One group included those of German origin who were mostly progressive Reform Jews. The others, more recently arrived East European immigrants, were more traditional. Congregation Beth El was organized in 1898, mainly by the Germans, and work began on the temple that so closely resembled the wooden synagogue near Warsaw. Early congregational records have disappeared, and city newspapers published before 1909 were destroyed in a fire. Because of this, although it is known that the building was dedicated in September 1900, it has not been possible to learn who designed the building. While Corsicana's Jewish Cemetery Association records are intact, the Jewish tendency to keep moving from one town to another limits the details of available birthplaces and family names.

Other sources which might provide information about Corsicana Jews had to be found. The United States Census of 1900 does not enumerate Jews specifically, but it can be used to build up a picture of Corsicana's Jewish community through familiarity with Jewish names and with probable European source areas. Migration to the United States from Europe was at a peak towards the end of the nineteenth century, when the pogroms in western Russia and eastern Europe led to the hurried departure of Jews. In Corsicana at the turn of the century, twenty-two heads of household listed their own or their father's birthplace as Germany, and sixteen listed Russian Poland. Six came from Russia, five more broadly stated "Europe," four came from Alsace (born before 1870 when it was still identified as France rather than Germany), and a scattering from elsewhere. The census did not separate the members of the two congregations, but showed that the Germans predominated numerically. This is unsurprising as most East Europeans settled on the Atlantic seaboard or the Midwest cities first, and only slowly left the security provided by a surrounding Jewish community. The Spanish name of the first president of Congregation Beth El, a Mr. Costa, suggests he was or was descended from a Sephardic family. The other officers had German names, and there were two leaders of the choral society with Alsatian backgrounds.¹⁴

The average age of the heads of household was thirty-nine, and of the sixty families identified as Jewish, twenty-two were in the dry goods business, either as wholesalers or retailers, and eleven were liquor dealers. There were two hardware merchants, pawnbrokers, cigar makers, tailors, and furniture salesman, and the remainder included a shoemaker, gambler, landlord, bookstore owner, jeweler, commercial adjustor, and a rabbi.¹⁵

With substantial information available about early days in Corsicana,

it is surprising and regrettable that no record survives about how the design for the synagogue was chosen, or even the names of influential members in the Jewish community who led in the choices being made. Eighty years later, in 1981, a group of local citizens applied to the Texas Historical Commission for community restoration funds. The application required an appraisal of the building, which included a sketch of the floorplan. This showed two floors, and an upstairs gallery to seat the choir rather than segregate the sexes. These stipulations indicate a Reform Jewish attitude, a rejection of absolute Orthodoxy. The single nave, the positioning of the Ark on the southeast wall, and the office and educational space suggest a functional rather than traditionally determined structure. Despite the conventional interior, the exterior is as extraordinary as the synagogue in Gabin. One resident, born in the town, says that as a child it reminded him of Baghdadian fairytales.¹⁶

Even more remarkable than finding a domed, Oriental looking synagogue in Corsicana, was finding a similar one, though not so gilded and glowing, in Charleston, West Virginia. Charleston, the capital of West Virginia, attracted the same type of Jewish mercantile settler, often of German background, as did Corsicana. Served by the Ohio and Chesapeake Railroad, Charleston transported coal from the surrounding mines after the rail lines reached the city in 1873, the year Congregation B'nai Israel was organized.

In Butte, Montana, the design reappeared, though over a distance of hundreds of miles it became almost a caricature of the other two. Instead of twin towers and cupolas there is only a single one. The gabled roof is more accentuated, and broader, and the circular window dominates the front of the building. Despite the exaggeration of features that distinguished the other buildings, the comparison is too striking to be serendipitous.

In attempting to sift through possible explanations for the distinctive architectural feature on the East Texas landscape, a series of choices may be considered. First, there is the unlikely possibility that the resemblance between the Orthodox synagogue in Gabin and the Reform one in Corsicana is coincidental, and similarly the resemblance between the Polish and West Virginian one. Second, both the European and American versions may have been influenced by an unidentified, intermediary prototype, that would likely have stood in Germany, the core of Jewish migration to America in the nineteenth century. A blueprint of the design may have been passed around the smaller Jewish communities during the 1890s. The transferral from an Orthodox congregation in Gabin to a Reform one in Corsicana is difficult to interpret. The range of permutations can be multiplied, but with the information presently available, the reason for the likenesses between the synagogue in Gabin, Poland, and the one in Corsicana, Texas, and those resembling them, remains hidden.

NOTES

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²Rachel Wischnitzer, *Synagogue Architecture in the United States* (Philadelphia, 1955), p. xxix.

³George Loukouski, *Jewish Art in European Synagogues from the Middle Ages to the 18th Century* (London, 1947), p. 37.

⁴Rachel Wischnitzer, *Synagogue Architecture in the United States* (Philadelphia, 1964), p. 180.

⁵*Encyclopedia Judaica*, (Jerusalem, 1971), p. 235.

⁶*Encyclopedia Judaica*, (Berlin, 1931), p. 511.

⁷*Meyers Konversations-Lexicon*, 5th ed. (Leipzig, 1897), p. 750.

⁸Maria and Kazimierz Piechotka *Wooden Synagogues* (Warsaw, 1959), p. 197.

⁹William G. Tachau, "The Architecture of the Synagogue," in *American Jewish Yearbook #28* (Philadelphia, 1926), pp. 155-192.

¹⁰Edward Jamilly, "The Architecture of the Contemporary Synagogue," in Cecil Roth, ed., *Jewish Art: an Illustrated History*; revised edition by Bezalel Narkiss, (New York, 1971), p. 278.

¹¹Tommy Stringer, "Corsicana, Texas: A most unlikely Canaan. A Brief History of the Corsicana Jewish Community," Texas Historical Preservation Grant Application, 1981.

¹²*The Handbook of Texas*, vol. 1 (Austin, 1952, 1976), p. 431.

¹³*Morrison & Fourny's General Directory: City of Corsicana 1901-1902*, p. 21.

¹⁴*Morrison & Fourny's General Directory*, p. 21.

¹⁵Interview with Corsicana merchant, Irvin Samuels, March 1984. Mr. Samuels recalled his childhood belief that the buildings was from a Baghdadian fairytale.