

## Article

# Lithuanian Synagogues: From the First Descriptions to Systematic Research

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Received: 4 March 2020; Accepted: 15 May 2020; Published: 21 May 2020



**Abstract:** The article presents an analysis of the development stages of synagogue research methodology in Lithuania during the four major historical periods of the country—Lithuania in the Russian Empire (1795–1918), Vilnius Region in the interwar period and the independent Republic of Lithuania (1918–1940), the Soviet period (1940–1990), and the independent Republic of Lithuania restored in 1990. Each chapter of the article deals with the issues of synagogue research, heritage conservation and management, while the part about the restored independent Republic of Lithuania and modern days includes topical issues related to synagogue restoration, commemoration and putting them into operation. The study uses two different sources: archival materials and publications. Written sources and publications are reviewed in chronological order and start from the end of the 18th century. The study employs several research methods—the historical descriptive method, the comparative method and the analysis method.

**Keywords:** Lithuania; synagogues; conservation; restoration; renovation; rebuilding; management; commemoration

## 1. Introduction

The article presents several fields of study: (1) a review of the first descriptions of synagogues in Lithuania; (2) an analysis of the development stages of synagogue research methodology in Lithuania; and (3) a brief reference to synagogue restoration, renovation, rebuilding, commemoration and putting into operation—topics which are currently particularly live in Lithuania today. It is not possible to understand the existing trends in synagogue research in Lithuania without considering the country's past—the times of the Russian Empire, the interwar period and the Soviet period. Each of these periods has had its own influence on the concept of heritage and further development of heritage conservation and management.

The study uses two different sources: archival material and publications. Each Lithuanian museum and archive contains photographs and postcards with images of synagogues, including their respective drawings and plans. This article, however, focuses only on written sources, and visual sources are mentioned only briefly when necessary. The archival materials used for the purposes of the study consist of laws and decrees issued by the state and various types of documents and manuscripts, such as complaints, letters, memoirs, etc. The most significant material related to the first descriptions of synagogues in Lithuania has been accrued at the Lithuanian State Historical Archives (LSHA), and the material about reconstruction and restoration works has been accrued at the Cultural Heritage Centre (CHC). The research documents on the Vilijampolė Synagogue that were discovered there and which date back to the year 1925 allow setting the date of the first official synagogue research. Seminar papers prepared by Jewish students about synagogues (1931–1937), which are now part of the collection of the M. K. Čiurlionis National Museum of Art (CNMA), are important in terms of facts that they contain (dates and names of artists). Measurements and descriptions of the Pakruojis and Šaukėnai synagogues stored at the Šiauliai *Aušros* Museum, including descriptions of synagogues

from the Manuscript Collection of the M. Mažvydas National Library of Lithuania (MNLL) are equally important. These and other documents allowed the beginnings and further development of synagogue research, including heritage protection and management, in Lithuania to be reconstructed.

Publications cover articles in the periodicals published before the restoration of Lithuania's independence on 11 March 1990. General reviews on synagogues written by journalists and published in periodicals or on the internet after 1990 are not analyzed. Publications also cover scholarly articles in academic press, dissertations and monographs. The works selected for the purpose of scholarly research analysis included those whose authors' insights were important for the formation and development of synagogue research methodology. This research deals only with publications published in Lithuania by authors who used to live or still live here, and which are devoted to research of Lithuanian synagogues. The main focus is on publications in the Lithuanian language, as the analysis of publications on Lithuanian synagogues in Polish, Russian, Yiddish and Hebrew would result in an article the size of a monograph. However, some publications in languages other than Lithuanian are referred to here too in order to better reveal the general context of research into synagogue architecture in Lithuania.

Written sources and publications are reviewed in chronological order. The article employs several research methods: (1) the historical descriptive method allows us to present archival material and research on synagogues preserved in Lithuania; (2) the comparative method provides an opportunity to identify the essential features and importance of scholarly research in the general context of research on Lithuanian architecture and synagogues; (3) the analytic method allows us to create a common model of synagogue research methodology, as well as a common model of understanding Lithuanian heritage protection and management based on the opinions and observations of researchers.

The study naturally splits into four major historical periods of Lithuania—Lithuania in the Russian Empire (1795–1918), Vilnius Region in the interwar period and the independent Republic of Lithuania (1918–1940), the Soviet period (1940–1990), and the independent Republic of Lithuania restored in 1990. Each chapter of the article deals with the issues of synagogue research, heritage conservation and management, while the part about the restored independent Republic of Lithuania and the modern day includes topical issues related to synagogue restoration, commemoration and putting them into operation.

## 2. In the Russian Empire

Some of the first descriptions of synagogues are found in various complaints about the height and size of synagogues. The complaint by the parish priest of Eišiškės of 1782 states that the building of Eišiškės synagogue 'is new, built last year, is three storeys high and higher than the parish church' and 'contrary to requirements and law, is built without the permission of the spiritual authority, but with the approval of the nobility'.<sup>1</sup> The complaint of the parish priest was disregarded, and after the Eišiškės church burned down, the synagogue was not only the main but also the only tall building in the town (Miškinis 2002, p. 136). Bishop Motiejus Valančius (1801–1875) mentions a similar case: 'In 1719, when the authority allowed the Jewish elders to set up a *shul* in the town of Plungė, he made it clear that it should never be so high as to be equal in height to the Catholic Church. When the Jews built a higher *shul* building than specified, the parish priest of Plungė wanted to reduce the height by tearing off the roof. In order to avoid this happening, the Jews undertook the obligation to pay him 30 *timpa*<sup>2</sup> each year, for as long as the *shul* building remains of that height' ((Wołonczewskis 1848), quoted from (Valančius [1848] 1972, p. 152)). These complaints by the parish priests of Eišiškės and Plungė show that in Lithuania the laws dating back to the Middle Ages and limiting the height of synagogues were not always observed.

<sup>1</sup> Eišiškių klebono skundas, 1782. LSHA, f. 525, ap. 8, b. 667, l. 37.

<sup>2</sup> *Timpa*—the coin circulated from 1663 to 1766.

The architecture of the synagogue is described in a poem by Adam Mickiewicz (1798–1855) *Pan Tadeusz* published in Polish in 1834 and tells about the adventures of the nobility in the period from 1811 to 1812 (Mickiewicz 1834). The poet mentions the typical exterior details of wooden synagogues that are characteristic of Lithuania: a steep roof, a women's balcony, an arcade of columns, and arched windows. Mickiewicz originates the architecture of the synagogue from the 'Jewish tavern' building. The poet describes an old tavern, one part of which is a common hall with small rooms for rest, and the other part is intended for travellers' horses to rest, and emphasizes that:

The old tavern was built according to ancient  
plans, devised first by Tyrolean draftsmen,  
later appropriated by Jews who went  
along with this foreign style of architecture,  
which to this day in Lithuania endures.  
The front of this tavern recalled an ark  
like Noah's, though now more like a stable,  
where many animals lived in the dark quarters.  
[...]  
The back, however, was like a temple,  
recalling the edifice of Solomon,  
known to be the earliest example  
of Hiram's craft and artistry in Zion.  
The Jews adopted it for their own shuls  
and this design, in turn, can then be traced  
to taverns and stables—even the tools  
and the materials. And it was graced  
by a roof of wood-lath and straw, upturned  
and crooked as an old Jew's torn peaked cap.  
Down from that peak a balcony was formed,  
supported by columns, flared at the top—  
architectural wonders, for though they rot  
and lean like Pisa's tower of renown,  
instead of classical models, they lack  
capitals and foundations to hold them down.  
Under these columns rested wooden arches,  
imitations of the Gothic style,  
ornately carved, but more like peasant porches  
incised by a hatchet and not a chisel  
or an engraving tool. They curved like Sabbath  
candelabra—and button-shaped balls hung  
for praying Jews to wrap and then attach  
to their foreheads—these they call tefillin.

(Mickiewicz [1834] 2006)

The kind of 'Jewish tavern' from which Adam Mickiewicz originates the synagogue was located during the 2009 expedition to Oshmyany (Figure 1).



**Figure 1.** Jewish tavern in Oshmyany, 2009. The main dining hall and small bedrooms are in the front of the house, while the premises for the horses are located at the back of the tavern. Photo Vilma Gradinskaite.

The pyramidal volume of wooden synagogues, high roofs, wings and small towers of various forms, balconies, and colonnades attracted travellers' attention. From 1871 onwards, archaeologist and ethnographer Zygmunt Gloger (1845–1910) travelled on the River Nemunas from Grodno to Kaunas on several occasions collecting ethnographic material, exploring the banks of the river and the views of the townships settled there. In 1903, he published his notes ([Gloger 1903](#)). In his notes of 1899, Gloger mentions the Jurbarkas Synagogue: 'Those who come to Jurbarkas by the River Neman see from a distance not a church protruding from behind houses and trees, but rather the famous old wooden synagogue rising above the roofs of the town. As it was before sunset, we immediately went to take a photo of this remarkable ancient wooden architectural monument. The synagogues of Lithuania and Russia were peculiar already in the previous centuries: tall, ornate with porches and canopies supported by carved columns. There were a dozen such synagogues that survived from the 17th and 18th centuries. The most famous of them were in Jurbarkas, Zabludov, Volpa, and Pohrebyshche. Such houses of God used to exist in all the most populous towns inhabited by Jews, but time and fire destroyed hundreds of them. And the ones that still exist have not always been photographed. Therefore, it would be highly desirable for people of good will to draw them by depicting every detail or to photograph all Lithuanian synagogues' ([Gliogeris 1992](#), p. 112).

The origins of the protection of cultural monuments in Lithuania are related to the activity of Count Eustachijus Tiškevičius (1814–1873), a pioneer of Lithuanian archaeology, historian and collector. In 1855, he established the Vilnius Provisional Archaeology Commission to study the country's past and collect and preserve Lithuanian antiquities. The Vilnius Antiquities Museum was established at the Commission. Its members organized the collection of antiquities during their travels around Lithuania. At the beginning of the 20th century, the first restoration activities began. In 1902–1912, the churches of St. Ann and St. Archangel Michael in Vilnius underwent restoration. In 1905, the pillars of the ante-castle of the Trakai Island Castle underwent conservation works to a certain extent. The remains of the Upper Castle of Vilnius have been preserved by the efforts of the Lithuanian Scientific Society established in 1907, whereas the Vilnius Friends of Science Union, which had been operating since the same year, was concerned with the preservation of Polish heritage.

At the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, the Jewish intelligentsia of the Russian Empire demonstrated a casual approach towards its cultural heritage and its preservation. In 1878, art critic Vladimir Stasov (1824–1906), after seeing the collection of Jewish ritual objects collected by the director of Napoleon III's Parisian orchestra, Isaac Strauss (1806–1888), in Paris, started inviting Russian collectors to collect Jewish heritage too and to establish a Jewish museum ([Стасов 1879](#)). Veniamin Lukin notes that, at that time, Stasov's invitation did not reach the ears of Jews: 'At that time, the new Jewish intelligentsia, creators and users of secular national culture had not yet formed, and assimilation

had not yet provoked a hostile reaction from Jewish society, so the idea of a Jewish museum seemed irrelevant and lacked practical support from Jewish society activists and patrons' (Лукин 2004).

Historian and politician Simon Dubnow (1860–1941) also invited the Jewish intelligentsia to study their history. He talked about the establishment of a Russian Jewish Historical Society that would publish its own magazine, have a printing press, an archive and a museum, and that would set up a systematic programme for collecting historical sources. He called for the collection, recording and copying of historical material (Dubnow 1996). Dubnow visited Vilnius and later interwar Lithuania, where he attended various ceremonies and gave presentations and lectures, so his ideas were well known here.<sup>3</sup>

In the early 1910s, the anti-Semitic and national policies of the Tsarist government intensified. In order to maintain their identity, Jewish society became increasingly interested in its own cultural heritage. Writer Solomon An-sky (Shloyme Zanvl Rappoport, 1863–1920) was the first to take up the ideas of Stasov and Dubnow. Until then mostly interested in oral Jewish folklore, An-sky realized the need to expand the field of research and between 1912 and 1914 organized three expeditions around *shtetls*. The participants of the expeditions collected Jewish folklore and ethnographic material, bought ritual and household items, took photographs and described synagogues and cemeteries.<sup>4</sup>

Dubnow's articles and An-sky's expeditions encouraged the Jewish intelligentsia of 1913 Vilnius to establish the Society of Jewish Antiquity Lovers. From the outset, members of the Society had a clear goal of establishing a Jewish Museum in Vilnius, and thus, through expeditions, purposefully collected material and exhibits for it. The Jewish Museum was opened in Vilnius in January 1914. Unfortunately, the outbreak of World War I brought the society's activities to an end, and almost all of the exhibits and notes stored in the museum were destroyed. The name of the Museum's Department of Architecture, Applied Arts and Crafts suggests that synagogues were also in the Museum's focus (Залменсон 1914). Members of the Society are known to have photographed synagogues and cemeteries, but today it cannot be established whether any research, measurements and descriptions of synagogues were also performed or not.

### 3. Vilnius Area in the Interwar Period

After World War I ended and Lithuania regained independence, the situation in the Vilnius area remained unstable. At the end of 1918, after the German army left Vilnius, the city ended up in the hands of Polish nationalists for a short while. Starting with 1919, the Lithuanian–Belarusian Socialist Republic (Litbel) existed in the Vilnius area for several months. The Communists were again ousted by Polish forces and on 10 July 1920 Vilnius became part of Lithuania. On 24 March 1922, the Polish Parliament officially annexed the Vilnius area to Poland.

Even though the political situation was constantly changing, cultural life in Vilnius continued and intensified, especially when Solomon An-sky was forced to leave Bolshevik Russia and move to Vilnius. In 1919, thanks to the efforts of An-sky, the Jewish Historical-Ethnographic Society was established in Vilnius and the Jewish Museum was restored (Lunsky 1996). The Museum's staff collected many valuable exhibits (3000 items and over 100,000 other valuables), but little attention was paid to synagogues (Goldshmidt 1939). The attention to synagogue architecture was limited to their photography.

The search for articles in the interwar press published in Vilnius in Polish, Russian or Lithuanian and analysing the architecture of synagogues in Vilnius region was not successful. Nonetheless,

<sup>3</sup> Simon Dubnow lived in Vilnius for several years. In 1903, he participated in the opening of the Vilnius Choral Synagogue, in 1925 in the opening of the Jewish Scientific Institute (YIVO), and in 1931 in the opening of Kaunas Jewish Museum, etc.

<sup>4</sup> During this period, Solomon An-sky with his like-minded colleagues visited more than 70 *shtetls*, collected more than 700 objects, several hundred old documents, memoirs and letters, wrote down several thousand sayings, proverbs and saws, made about 1500 photographs, and drew several thousand drawings. For more information on An-sky's expeditions, see (Ан-скы 1915; Рappoport 1917; Belinfante and Dubov 1992; Gonen 1994; Сергеева 2003).



occasionally, messages of an informative nature appeared there, too. For example, according to the newspaper *Vilniaus Žinios*, at that time there were 97 Jewish prayer houses in Vilnius.<sup>5</sup> There are a couple of dozen articles on Vilnius synagogues in encyclopedias published in various languages, as well as in Yiddish and Hebrew newspapers. Heikel Lunskey (1881–1942/43), An-sky's colleague, named 80 private houses of prayer (*kloyzn*) and described the Great Synagogue of Vilnius and *shulhoif* in Yiddish in the book *From the Ghetto of Vilna: Figures and Pictures* (1920) and also in Hebrew in the four issues of the newspaper *Ha-tsefirah* (1921) (Lunskey 1920, 1921). In 1939, Zalman Shik's tourist guide to Vilnius and its surroundings in Yiddish titled *1000 Year Vilna* was published (Shik 1939). It included descriptions of several synagogues in Vilnius.

In 1925, the Jewish Scientific Institute (YIVO) was established in Vilnius. The staff of the institute collected materials and planned to establish museums of pedagogy, art and ethnography, sports, and Yiddish literature, but synagogue architecture was forgotten again. Unfortunately, World War II scattered and destroyed the collections of the Jewish Museum in Vilnius and the Jewish Scientific Institute.

#### 4. The Republic of Lithuania in the Interwar Period

The first synagogue research in the independent Republic of Lithuania dates back to 1925. It was research on Vilijampolė synagogue.<sup>6</sup> The Baroque synagogue of Vilijampolė (Slabada) was built in 1772 by two brothers: Rabbi Moshe and merchant Abraham Soloveitchik. It was the first masonry synagogue in Kaunas and its surroundings. The synagogue suffered greatly during the fire of 1892—its roof burned down and collapsed, but the Tsarist authorities prevented it from being rebuilt. In 1925, the synagogue was researched and photographed by architects Mykolas Songaila (1874–1941) and Moses Bloch (1893–1942), and engineer Leonas Ožinskis. Valuable findings were made, an inventory was drawn up, and the State Archaeological Commission was approached to declare that the object should not be demolished.<sup>7</sup> At that time in Lithuanian culture, which was based on Christian ideology and the national romanticism tradition, there was a strong differentiation between 'own' and 'alien' heritage, and this difference has only now begun to disappear. Thus, the State Archaeological Commission decided to demolish the Vilijampolė synagogue, which had not been in use for a long time and was often flooded. The building was demolished in 1930 (Figure 2).

Art historian Paulius Galaunė (1890–1988) was one of the first to draw attention to the architecture of synagogues. In his monograph *Lithuanian Folk Art*, published in 1930 in more than 300 pages and abundantly illustrated, he devoted a chapter of twelve pages to a general description of the structure and decor of a synagogue building (Galaunė 1930, pp. 143–54). It was only natural that, at that time in Lithuania, which was experiencing a national upheaval, Galaunė expressed an idea that synagogue architecture was a mixture of the architecture characteristic of Lithuanian wooden churches and noblemen's manors: 'Not nearly enough would have been said about Lithuanian architecture if we had not looked at Jewish synagogues ... because they are nothing but the echoes of development of Lithuanian architecture' (ibid., p. 143). According to Galaunė, the architectural features of synagogues emerged out of elements of local architecture and examples of decor. Later, this idea would be further developed by modern architects and art historians. In Galaunė's text, however, the synagogue is occasionally referred to as being 'strange', 'grim but majestic', and 'of peculiar construction' (ibid., p. 146).

<sup>5</sup> *Vilniaus Žinios* 1: 3. Vilnius, 1 January 1905.

<sup>6</sup> Research documents on Vilijampolė synagogue and related photos are stored at the Cultural Heritage Centre.

<sup>7</sup> The State Archaeological Commission was established in 1919. It worked sluggishly and was liquidated in 1934 (Valstybės archeologijos komisijos įstatymas. 1919. *Laikinosios vyriausybės žinios* 11: 1).



**Figure 2.** Ruins of Vilijampolė synagogue, 1920–1925. Cultural Heritage Centre, used with permission.

It should be noted that Galaunė did not actually study synagogue architecture on site. In his monograph he draws on old drawings and photographs and the opinions of other authors, which, as is evident from Galaunė's monograph, left a strong impression on him. He quotes an article by historian Maximilian Syrkin (1858–no earlier than 1928) on Belarussian wooden synagogues, where the latter argued that Jewish architecture becomes closely related with the architecture of the place where they live and that 'Jewish style in art only manifests itself in the form of recycling and adapting to the Jewish taste of whatever they see around them' (Сыркин [1928] 1930; Galaunė 1930, p. 150).

Vytautas Bičiūnas (1893–1943), an artist, writer and art critic, looked for the origins of the architecture of Lithuanian wooden synagogues. He claimed that synagogues had taken over the architectural forms of idolatry shrines (buildings where oracles would kindle the sacred fire): 'Our examples of old wooden construction (old wooden churches, bell towers, barns, synagogues) are truly spontaneous. [...] The emergence of Jews in Lithuania almost coincided with the introduction of Christianity. [...] The old Lithuanian idolatrous construction has disappeared. But its architectonic forms are not gone for good. The first Christian churches in Lithuania could not have had a mere sign of idolatrous construction, but they were boldly taken over by Jewish synagogues. [...] Therefore, there is no doubt that the old Jewish synagogues in Lithuania have taken their architectural traditions from the idolatrous Lithuanian construction of the Jagiellonian era. Looking at the old Lithuanian synagogues, we see characteristics that are quite different from those of dwelling houses. They boast original architectonics with numerous canopies, which later start appearing in old wooden churches' (Bičiūnas 1928). Contrary to Paulius Galaunė, Vytautas Bičiūnas did not claim that the architecture of synagogues originated from churches or dwelling houses, but rather stated that the architecture of both wooden synagogues and wooden churches evolved in parallel and stemmed from the old 'idolatrous' architecture, and that churches took over various wings with canopies from synagogues. This interesting observation of Bičiūnas did not find any resonance in contemporary research of synagogues. In 1933, Bičiūnas gave a public lecture on the architecture and style of Lithuanian synagogues, where he showed photographs and drawings (Bičiūnas 1933a) and published two reviews on Lithuanian synagogues in the newspaper *Di Yiddishe shtime* (Jewish Voice) (Bičiūnas 1933b).

Paulius Galaunė taught art history, folk art and museum studies at Vytautas Magnus University and encouraged his students, especially Jews, to become interested in Jewish art. Augustinas Janulaitis (1878–1950), head of the History Department at the Faculty of Law, commissioned students to write diploma papers based on data from the old *Pinkas* (minute book). Seminar papers by Galaunė's and

Janulaitis' students are stored at the M. K. Čiurlionis National Museum of Art.<sup>8</sup> Some of these works are more of a historical nature and speak about the decoration and ornamentation of synagogues stemming from the ancient times throughout the world,<sup>9</sup> while others describe specific synagogues of Lithuania, i.e., those of Jurbarkas, Lazdijai, Panevėžys, and Prienai. The first group of written works is based on the literature that was available in Lithuania at that time. The bibliography of the works shows that the most popular sources were *Jüdisches Lexikon* published in Berlin in 1927–1930 and a two-part article by Paulius Romanovas titled 'Jewish Painting and Art in the Ancient World', which was published in *Di Yiddishe shtime* (Romanovas 1924). The second group of students who described Lithuanian synagogues primarily relied on a visual source—the synagogue. Students described the synagogues as they saw them, explored their structure, drawings and inscriptions they found there, and talked with local rabbis and other townspeople about building synagogues.

Students describing Lithuanian synagogues, namely Ševa Štokaitė, Ch. Goldbergaitė, Mina Švabskaitė and Icikas Zingeris, used the correct specific terminology, such as *aron kodesh* (Torah ark), *bima* and *parochet* (Torah ark's curtain),<sup>10</sup> and accurately identified the objects depicted in the synagogue decor (used such words as *menorah*, *leviathan*, *etrog*, *lulav*, etc.) and scenes from the Old Testament (Isaac's sacrifice, Rachel's tomb, Abraham's tomb, etc.); they also copied, read and translated the inscriptions that they found in the synagogues.

Ševa Štokaitė<sup>11</sup> who wrote about the Jurbarkas synagogue, accurately reproduced and translated the Hebrew inscriptions on the walls of the synagogue, the *aron kodesh* and other items. Štokaitė also mentioned the colours and provided detailed descriptions of the decoration of the *bima* dome, *aron kodesh* and the synagogue walls. In her paper, Štokaitė mentioned that she spoke with the Rabbi of the Jurbarkas synagogue, who indicated that the date of construction of the synagogue was 1781 (not 1790 as most publications claim till this day).

The names of builders, carpenters and painters of Lithuanian wooden and masonry synagogues are basically unknown, because the interiors of the synagogues have not survived. The idea raised by Paulius Galaunė and Vytautas Bičiūnas that synagogues were mostly decorated by Lithuanian craftsmen is still alive today. Student works reveal important facts and a few names. Ševa Štokaitė mentions Tevje Katz, the master from Kaunas who made the *aron kodesh* for the synagogue of Jurbarkas, whose name was on the *aron kodesh* (Katz did not manage to decorate the entire synagogue in Jurbarkas because he died).<sup>12</sup> A student, who did not indicate his name, described the decor, carvings and wall paintings of the Lazdijai synagogue and mentioned that the local joiner Samuel from Lazdijai created the *aron kodesh* and *bima* for the synagogue, while the walls were painted by a Jew from Kaunas.<sup>13</sup> Ch. Golbergaitė's description of the Prienai synagogue also reveals a lot of important information.<sup>14</sup> The student points out that the date on the Rococo-style *aron kodesh* in the Prienai synagogue adorned with grapes, harps and vases refers to it dating back to 1740, and the inscription next to the date reads: 'This is my handwork and I am proud of it, Shimshon, the son of Yehuda-Leiba'. Moreover, the inscription on the walls of the Prienai synagogue shows that they were painted in 1782 by the artist Jochanen.<sup>15</sup> Today, we cannot verify all the dates and names of authors referred to in the students' papers because the synagogues have either not survived or their interior was completely destroyed.

<sup>8</sup> Seminar papers by Jewish students. 1931–1937. CNMA, Archive of Adelė and Paulius Galaunė, R-1499–1508.

<sup>9</sup> Goldšteinaitė, E. 27 05 1931. *Žydų ornamentas*, 7 p., CNMA, R-1499; Grinblatas, Natanas. 12 1933. *Tapyba žydų sinagogose*, 10 p., CNMA, R-1501; Kaplanas, Izrelis. 12 12 1933. *Altoriai žydų sinagogose*, 10 p., CNMA, R-1502; Movšaitė, Šul. 28 02 1936. *Žydų ornamentika*, 16 p., CNMA, R-1505; Stražas, A. 07 06 1937. *Sinagogų ornamentika*, 26 p., CNMA, R-1506; Pūneris, M. 14 05 1937. *Žydų ornamentas*, 5 p., CNMA, R-1507; Halperinas, F. *Žydų ornamentika*, 12 p., CNMA, R-1507.

<sup>10</sup> Today, in Lithuanian articles on synagogues, we may still encounter unprofessional use of terms where a synagogue is referred to as 'Jewish church', *aron kodesh* as 'altar', *bima* as 'pulpit', 'Mass at the synagogue is celebrated on Saturday', etc.

<sup>11</sup> Štokaitė, Ševa. 13 06 1933. *Jurbarko žydų sinagoga*, 15 p., CNMA, R-1500.

<sup>12</sup> Štokaitė, Ševa. 13 06 1933. *Jurbarko žydų sinagoga*, p. 9, CNMA, R-1500.

<sup>13</sup> No indication of the author. 24 03 1934. *Lazdijų sinagoga*, 4 p., CNMA, R-1503.

<sup>14</sup> Goldbergaitė, Ch. 28 01 1935. *Prienų žydų sinagoga*, 8 p., CNMA, R-1504.

<sup>15</sup> Goldbergaitė, Ch. 28 01 1935. *Prienų žydų sinagoga*, p. 3, CNMA, R-1504.



The seminar paper of Mina Švabskaitė and Icikas Zingeris on the Panevėžys synagogue<sup>16</sup> also refers to the exact date of construction of the synagogue—1794. Compared to the works of other students, this work has the clearest structure of description and is accompanied by 10 photos depicting the decor of the synagogue. The description begins with the story of the founding of the synagogue and further explores the exterior of the synagogue—the foundations, walls, windows, doors and roof, including the interior of the synagogue—its design plan, ceiling, floor, *bima*, *aron kodesh* and *menorah*. Students were also looking for similarities between the Panevėžys synagogue and Lithuanian folk art.

During the interwar period, the *Aušra* Society of Regional Research was active in Šiauliai. The Society studied not only Lithuanian churches and manors, but also synagogues. Their expeditions were attended by both Lithuanians and Jews, including linguist Chackel Lemchen (1904–2001), photographer Stasys Vaitkus (1907–1989), ethnographer Stasys Braškiškis (1896–1989) and artist Gerardas Bagdonavičius (1901–1986). They measured and described the synagogues of Pakruojis and Šaukėnai.<sup>17</sup> In 1941, the Šaukėnai synagogue was described by historian and restorer Juozas Petrulis (1904–1975).<sup>18</sup>

Šiauliai *Aušra* Museum houses a very important collection of visual material on Lithuanian synagogues—a collection of over 50 drawings by the artist Gerardas Bagdonavičius. The drawings were created between 1930 and 1940. The artist used pencil, ink and watercolour. The drawings depict the exteriors and interiors of the synagogues in great detail, including their decorations. Thus, today, the exteriors and interiors of Jurbarkas, Kelmė, Kražiai, Pakruojis, Panevėžys, Šaukėnai, Šiauliai, Ukmergė and Užventė synagogues, including the Great Synagogue of Vilnius and others, can be partially restored based on the artist's drawings.

Chackelis Lemchen' (1938) article on the wooden synagogue of Pakruojis is rather incoherent and cannot boast any system of description, unlike the seminar paper, for example, by Švabskaitė and Zingeris. However, Lemchen' measurement of the synagogue, translation of the inscriptions in the synagogue and description of its elements and colours of the decoration together with photographs by Vaitkus will be of great help in restoring the Pakruojis synagogue in the 21st century. Based on this material, in 2006, Sergey Kravtsov performed a virtual computer-based reconstruction of the Pakruojis synagogue in the Jerusalem Center for Jewish Art. The synagogue itself was restored in 2017. Lemchen writes in the article that on the door of the synagogue there was an indication of the date of its construction—1801—and that there was an *aron kodesh* carved in wood of rare beauty and painted by a non-local craftsman. In 1895, the synagogue was repainted and the drawings were renewed by a local master. The author notes that in the men's gallery the new master did nothing but renew the colours, and in the women's gallery he drew a train. Lemchen points out that in 1801 there were no trains in Lithuania (the first railway in Lithuania was built in 1851), so the first decorator could not have drawn a train in the synagogue. The author notes that the train was painted in the women's and not the men's gallery, because 'here the master felt freer to create' (*ibid.*, p. 419). Thus, in addition to describing the Pakruojis Synagogue, Lemchen also analyzed and compared the periods in time when its décor was created (Figure 3).

In 1931, the Jewish Historical Ethnographic Society of Lithuania established the Jewish Ethnographic Museum and Archive, which collected various documents, manuscripts, prints, books, photographs, and recorded folklore. In the meeting of the Society held in 1937, despite regretting that the funds of the museum were very limited, the need to capture the appearance of the townships was being debated, because, according to the rapporteur Natanas Jonasevičius, 'there are major changes taking place' (Jonasevičius 1938). Unfortunately, the work never started.

<sup>16</sup> Švabskaitė, Mina, and Zingeris, Icikas. *Panevėžio žydų sinagoga*, 21 p., CNMA, R-1508.

<sup>17</sup> The descriptions of the measurements of Pakruojis and Šaukėnai synagogues are stored at the Šiauliai *Aušra* Museum.

<sup>18</sup> Petrulis, Juozas. 1941. Šaukėnai synagogue. MNLL, Juozas Petrulis Manuscript Fund, F127–147.



**Figure 3.** Chackelis Lemchen explores the Pakruojis synagogue, 1938. Šiauliai Aušra Museum. Photo Stasys Vaitkus, used with permission.

The situation with synagogue research in interwar Lithuania can be summarized by the words of architect Algirdas Mošinskis (1905–1991). In 1937, he wrote: ‘Synagogues and mosques are scientifically unexplored with us; they are not mentioned and are not included at all in our research published abroad; whereas, for example, we can often see Polish research of the kind’ (Mošinskis 1937). The magazine *Technika ir Ūkis* (Technique and Economy) published in 1929–1940 by the Lithuanian Society of Engineers and Architects did not publish a single article on synagogue architecture, and in one of the articles engineer and architect Jurgis Getneris (1938) emphasized the role of churches and bell towers in shaping the plans, structures and panoramas of Lithuanian towns, but he did not say one word about the synagogue complexes standing nearby.

Galaunė was the first to speak about the destruction of heritage and the sale of valuables abroad in his two-part article entitled ‘Regarding the Fate of Ancient Monuments from Our Past’ which was published in 1926 (Galaunė 1926a, 1926b). In his monograph *Lithuanian Folk Art*, published in 1930, he speaks about the preservation and proper restoration of the old buildings. It also addresses for the first time the problems related to improper restoration of synagogues: ‘Some wooden synagogues were being demolished “because of their old age” and to give way to new, sometimes masonry synagogues boasting no peculiar external features. Others were for the same reason “restored”, or rather robbed, deprived of what was cherishable in them. Occasionally, their construction would be distorted, porches, galleries, balconies, corner towers and, in particular, small embellishments that seemed to be “unnecessary ballast” in the age of positivism, would be distorted and destroyed’ (Galaunė 1930, p. 143). It should be noted that Galaunė sought to transform an architectural building into a static and immutable object. He longed to return any structure that had changed in the flow of time to its former state, for the structure to regain its original, prime image.

In the early 1930s, modernization accelerated, and construction intensified in Lithuania, which resulted in changes to the historical spaces of towns and destruction of the old landscape. Part of the interwar Lithuanian intelligentsia, especially representatives of the religious world, did not always perceive and appreciate the uniqueness of the old wooden architecture of their towns. With the growing number of believers in the parishes, the clergy demolished the old wooden churches and proceeded with the construction of the neo-Gothic masonry churches which were so fashionable at

that time.<sup>19</sup> The same trend prevailed in terms of wooden synagogues. Many of them were replaced by masonry buildings. Churches, synagogues, and other historic buildings were demolished without being researched, described, or photographed.

At the same time, unauthorized repairs and restorations of historic buildings had begun. A lot of art treasures were irreparably damaged by unprofessional restoration work. Articles on the performed restoration work were published in the press. Artist Viktoras Vizgirda (1904–1993) wrote: ‘Many precious art objects were also destroyed by various restorers and other ill-intentioned amateur artists, who, in order to profiteer and to indulge uneducated taste, brightly “coloured” anew quite a number of good paintings or old frescoes and thus forever destroyed valuable works of art’ (Vizgirda 1934).

With the increase in the number of cases where old architecture was demolished and amateurishly restored, publications in the press calling for a halt to the demolition of historic buildings and ‘barbaric repairs’ became ever more frequent (Mošinskis 1937, p. 924). The authors of the publications unanimously spoke about the problems of heritage protection and heritage management and the necessity to issue a comprehensive law on the protection of ancient monuments (Latvia and Estonia already had laws on heritage protection), prohibiting unauthorized alterations or demolitions of historic buildings. The temporary Monument Protection Act, which existed until then, only referred to the ‘custody’ of the monument and did not even allow the monument to be inspected without the owner’s consent. According to Mošinskis, ‘custody and restoration actually depended on the good will of citizens’ (ibid.). The Law on the Protection of Ancient Monuments was not drafted until 1938,<sup>20</sup> and was only actually adopted on 20 July 1940.<sup>21</sup> During more than twenty years of Lithuania’s independence, no archive of Lithuanian architectural monuments containing descriptions, measurements and photographs thereof was created.

Very little attention was paid to protecting and managing the heritage of other national minorities. In 1935–1940, the Department for Conservation of Lithuanian Cultural Monuments of the Vytautas Magnus Museum of Culture started making an inventory of Lithuanian architectural monuments. However, the inventory-making efforts were mainly focused on archaeological monuments. Mošinskis insisted on an inventory of architectural heritage, including synagogues and mosques, because, as the history of Lithuania clearly shows, these buildings ‘are no longer so foreign to us’ (Mošinskis 1937). Architect Bloch invited the public to take care of the protection of synagogue buildings. Unfortunately, the voices of these architects were not heard.

In 1938, Mstislav Dobuzhinsky (1875–1957) summarized the discussions on heritage protection that appeared in the press of recent years, announced ‘the law of historical impartiality’ and stated that ‘everything that has been created in Lithuania over the centuries and has true artistic value must be protected regardless of which style the monuments represent or whose hands built them. They bear national value to the extent that they are consecrated by time and stand on the land of Lithuania’ (Dobužinskis 1938).

Thanks to Galaunė, Bičiūnas, Mošinskis, Bloch, Dobuzhinsky and others, in the late 1940s, the ethno-cultural approach to Lithuanian heritage began to change. Their publications allowed taking a much broader look at heritage by distancing oneself from Christian ideology and the relics of romanticism of the 19th century. Unfortunately, the onset of World War II, the Holocaust and the Soviet period stopped the bridging of the gap between ‘own’ and ‘alien’ cultural heritage.

<sup>19</sup> In 1933, a wooden church of Kernavė built in 1739 was demolished. In 1938, when it was intended to demolish the church of Plungė, architect Algirdas Mošinskis (1938) wrote that it was ‘a typical phenomenon with us: as the parish grows and it becomes necessary to build a new larger church, the old one is condemned to demolition and “robbery”. As a result, part of its artistic valuables inevitably perish. There is no respect for the past, for traditions’.

<sup>20</sup> Senovės paminklų apsaugos įstatymas, Kaunas, 1938. CHC, f. 17, ap. 2, b. 7, l. 290–314; (Galaunė 1938).

<sup>21</sup> Kultūros paminklų apsaugos įstaigos, paminkloaugos dokumentai, 1934–1949. CHC, f. 17, ap. 2, b. 7, 8, 50, 60.

## 5. In Soviet Lithuania

In June 1940, the Soviet Union occupied Lithuania and nationalization processes began. Manors and Jewish cultural heritage were particularly affected: more than 200 religious buildings, synagogues, yeshivas, and rabbinical houses were nationalized. During the Nazi occupation of 1941–1944, the Jewish museums in Kaunas and Vilnius were closed, the Strashun Library and other libraries were plundered, and valuables accumulated at the Jewish Scientific Institute were confiscated.

In 1944, after the Soviets occupied Lithuania, the policy of destruction of cultural monuments continued to be actively pursued. To put it ironically, at that time there was no dividing line between ‘own’ and ‘alien’ cultural heritage in Lithuania. During the period of collectivization, the entire Lithuanian cultural heritage suffered irreparable damage: entire villages and *shtetls* with cemeteries were destroyed, churches and monasteries, as well as synagogues, were closed and devastated, almost all historical monuments were pulled down, thousands of written and visual sources were burnt or taken to Russia.

In the first decades of the Soviet era, we would not find any descriptions of synagogues in any works dealing with architecture. The Great Synagogue of Vilnius was not mentioned even in the most important studies of Lithuanian Renaissance and Baroque periods. Architectural historian Algė Jankevičienė (1930–2015) was the first to mention the non-Christian prayer houses in Lithuania. In 1968, she published a paper in the book *Lithuanian Folk Architecture* (Jankevičienė 1968) where she wrote about wooden and masonry sacral buildings—churches, tombs, bell towers, orthodox churches and synagogues, mosques and kenesas. The author described the buildings in a structured manner. She divided the wooden synagogues into two types: (1) synagogues of laconic forms and compact in volume and (2) synagogues of complex volume and with ornate facades. The architect followed the idea raised by Paulius Galaunė already in the interwar period that the construction of synagogues and most of their façade elements did not differ from traditional wooden Lithuanian folk buildings and closely recalled of churches and barns, while their high-rising penthouse roofs and corner towers of the façades were adopted from manor architecture.

A number of bureaucratic institutions, committees and commissions were established in Soviet Lithuania, which formally took care of the research, protection and management of historical and archaeological monuments. In 1950, ‘consistent’ architectural heritage management works started, which led to the destruction of the entire complex of the Great Synagogue of Vilnius<sup>22</sup> and many other historic buildings. The buildings that formed the synagogue complexes, such as *mikvas*, ritual slaughterhouses, and *beit midrashes*, were demolished. Only the synagogue buildings as such survived, which, due to their size, were converted into warehouses, shops, production workshops and gyms, saunas, dwelling houses, libraries and schools. The exterior of the buildings was changed—most often, wider door openings were made and interior structures were redesigned. Partitions dividing the single space of the men’s prayer hall into separate small rooms were installed. Synagogues lost their sacredness and semantic meaning: *aron kodeshes* were dismantled, walls were repainted using one-tone colour, and decorative elements were removed. Only three synagogues were included in the list of historical, archaeological, architectural and art monuments of republican and local importance drafted in 1958–1972: the Red Synagogue of Joniškis (its roof was repaired in 1956, and in 1981 Asta Meškauskienė performed constructive studies of the synagogue) and a complex of two synagogues in Kėdainiai.<sup>23</sup>

In official documents, only positive achievements in heritage protection and heritage management have consistently been declared, but today, when looking at Gothic, Renaissance and Baroque buildings, it is impossible to distinguish between what is real and what was created during the Soviet era as a result of the reconstruction and restoration of those buildings. In 1988, an article by historian, art critic

<sup>22</sup> In 1955–1957, the synagogue was wiped off the ground and a nursery was built in its place.

<sup>23</sup> *Lietuvos TSR kultūros paminklų sąrašas*, pp. 385, 389. Vilnius, 1973.



and artist Vladas Drėma (1910–1995) published in *Švyturys* magazine revealed the tragic situation with heritage protection and heritage management and the extent of the plundering of artistic values (Drėma 1988). A comprehensive analysis of architectural heritage management covering the period of 1940–1990 was carried out by art critic Edita Riaubienė (2003) in her dissertation ‘Preservation of Lithuanian Architectural Heritage (1918–2000): Legal Possibilities and Results of Maintenance’. Having reviewed around 380 files on the reconstruction, restoration and conservation of various buildings, the author concluded that, during the Soviet period, only the scope and not the quality of heritage management were considered to be important, and any historical and architectural studies of buildings were carried out very superficially or not performed at all.

## 6. In the Restored State of Lithuania

In 1990, the independent Republic of Lithuania was restored. In 1993, the first scientific study of a synagogue was published. This was the study on the Great Synagogue of Vilnius performed by Algė Jankevičienė. Later, in 1996, it was published in the form of a monograph and reprinted in 2008 (Jankevičienė 1993, Jankevičienė [1996] 2008). This small-size publication describes the history of the founding of the synagogue and the course of its construction and reconstruction until its demolition after World War II. The author draws on the material stored in Lithuanian and Russian archives and presents many plans and drawings. As a result of long years of work, Jankevičienė has formed the foundations of Lithuanian sacral architecture research.<sup>24</sup> Her research method focuses on the structure of the building—the plan, the interior equipment and the most important elements of the interior. The author applied the same analytic method when studying the Great Synagogue of Vilnius.

Jankevičienė created the Kaunas School of Architectural Historians, where she promoted the method of structural analysis of architecture. One of her students was Marija Rupeikienė, an architect who has been working extensively in the field of synagogue research. Since 1996, Rupeikienė has published more than twenty articles in various scientific and cultural publications covering structural and historical research on synagogue buildings and analysing the stylistics of synagogues, where she demonstrated her special interest in Baroque synagogues.

The most important research by Rupeikienė is presented in her monograph *A Disappearing Heritage: The Synagogue Architecture of Lithuania* published in Lithuanian in 2003 and in English in 2008 (Rupeikienė 2008), which significantly expanded the boundaries of research and knowledge of Lithuanian cultural heritage. The author emphasized that synagogue buildings are equivalent to the sacral buildings of other religious communities in terms of shaping the layout, panorama and ‘spiritual environment’ of Lithuanian towns. She chronologically presented the changes in synagogue architecture that took place in the period between the second half of the 16th century (from the Great Synagogue of Vilnius) to World War II and the way they were actually inspired by various styles (Renaissance, Baroque, Classicism, Romanticism, Historicism, Modernism) as well as Lithuanian folk architecture, including that of Catholic and Orthodox churches. The researcher emphasized the uniqueness of Lithuanian wooden synagogues, which could only occur in the diaspora.

In parallel to the works by Rupeikienė, Algimantas Miškinis (1929–2015), an architect and urban historian, also studied Lithuanian synagogues in the context of small towns. In 1996, he described the synagogue of Jurbarkas (Miškinis 1996). In 1999–2009, Miškinis published six books under the title *Lithuanian Urban Heritage and Its Valuables* (Miškinis 1999–2009). Miškinis was the first to analyse the urban development of Lithuanian towns, including the architecture of other ethnic communities that lived there. He emphasized that in many towns that not only the church but also the synagogue

<sup>24</sup> The research activities of Algė Jankevičienė covered quite a wide field of research: Gothic buildings meant for public, residential and defence purposes, wooden manors, bell towers and churches, architectural iconography, and construction technologies. The author explained the typology and evolution of the architecture of existing and non-surviving wooden sacral buildings, analyzed the peculiarities of wooden churches characteristic of various ethnic regions of Lithuania and revealed the impact of professional architectural styles on wooden sacral buildings.

was dominant. His research showed that, in terms of volume and height, the synagogues of Eišiškės, Jurbarkas and Valkininkai looked very much like the churches situated there. Miškinis accrued a unique collection of urban imagery (about 23,000 photographs and postcards) dating back to the 19th–20th century, which are currently stored in the National Museum of Lithuania.

Synagogue research has been performed by local ethnographers and museologists, whose contributions are sometimes unjustly overlooked. It is worth mentioning museologist Lina Kantautienė and her studies of the Raseiniai synagogue (Kantautienė 2004), Genrich Agranovsky, Irina Guzenberg and Ilya Lempert who described the synagogues of Vilnius (Agranovski et al. 2005), regional researcher Bronislovas Kerys who studied the town of Viešniai (Kerys 2001), and Paulius Vaniuchinas who studied the town and synagogue of Salantai.<sup>25</sup> It is rather difficult to list all of them.

Research by Jankevičienė, Rupeikienė, Miškinis and others drew the attention of scholars, public and heritage protection officials to the rapidly disappearing synagogue buildings and changed the stereotypical thinking that formed during the times of the Russian Empire, and that prevailed in interwar Lithuania, where synagogues are considered as relics of a foreign culture, which are not worth knowing and protecting.

Although the aforementioned scientists did not rely solely on archival materials, but also did field studies and photo recording themselves, a clear system of synagogue research had not yet been crystallized. One step further was taken by architect Jūratė Markevičienė. In 2007, she developed a systematic research methodology not only for synagogues, but also for *shulhoifs*. She has prepared data tables for both exterior and interior inspection of buildings, including tables for environment and territory inspection, and tables for drawings with measurements. Several dozen students of Vilnius Academy of Arts and Vilnius University carried out in-depth research on Lithuanian synagogue complexes using the research methodology developed by Markevičienė. The resulting data was processed by Lithuanian and Israeli scientists and included in the two-volume publication *Synagogues in Lithuania* (Cohen-Mushin et al. 2010–2012). Thus, for the first time, synagogues and *shulhoifs* were studied in a comprehensive manner and in close relationship with the environment. Altogether, 96 synagogue complexes from 59 towns of Lithuania that have survived till now have been included in the publication. Three long-forgotten buildings of wooden synagogues were rediscovered in Joniškėlis, Troškūnai and Žemaičių Naumiestis.

At the same time, in 2011, a monograph by art critic Aistė Niunkaitė Račiūnienė analysing the symbols of Lithuanian Jewish traditional art was published (Niunkaitė Račiūnienė 2011). The researcher systematized the decor elements of Lithuanian synagogues and analysed their symbolism on the basis of global examples. Her monograph features extremely rich visuals: over a thousand photographs of synagogues and ritual objects held in various scientific institutions and private collections around the world have been collected and published.

After the restoration of Lithuania's independence, the system of protection of cultural monuments was reorganized. In 1996, Lithuania had ratified all international conventions of UNESCO and treaties of the Council of Europe, including other international treaties and conventions on the protection of cultural monuments. In 1994, systematic measurements and descriptions of synagogues started. In 1994–1999, the architects Jankevičienė, Rupeikienė, Antanas Rupeika, Birutė Vanagienė and others prepared architectural descriptions of synagogue buildings and proposed to the State Monument Protection Commission to include about ten synagogues in the Register of Immovable Cultural Valuables of the Republic of Lithuania.<sup>26</sup> Giedrė Miknevičienė, Jakovas Mendelevičius, Nijolė Steponaitytė, Janina Valančiūtė and other scientists continued with the work of the previous researchers who performed architectural, urban and historical research.

<sup>25</sup> Vaniuchinas, Paulius. 24 03 2014. Salantų sinagoga. *Salantiškis*. <http://salantiskis.lt/component/content/article/78-sraipsniai/120-zyd-sinagoga-salantuose>.

<sup>26</sup> Synagogue files can be found at the Register of Cultural Valuables: <https://kvr.kpd.lt/#/static-heritage-search>.

Today there are 79 masonry and 17 wooden synagogues in Lithuania; 49 synagogues or synagogue complexes are included in the Register of Cultural Valuables. In Lithuania, synagogues are owned by either Jewish communities, municipalities, individuals, or the Lithuanian Property Fund (they are state-owned and will later be sold to a municipality or community; synagogues are not sold to private individuals). All restored synagogues are owned by municipalities or transferred to them by Jewish communities under loan-for-use agreements. There are two functioning synagogues in Vilnius and Kaunas and a functioning prayer house in Klaipėda. All other synagogue buildings are used for other purposes or stand idle.

The first decade of the 21st century was a tragic period for Lithuanian synagogues: in 2005, the wooden synagogue of Seda collapsed; in 2005, the red-brick synagogue of Joniškis with the surviving unique Torah ark decor collapsed (synagogue was rebuilt); in 2009, the Pakruojis synagogue badly suffered as a result of fire (reconstructed); in 2009, the Plungė synagogue (Figure 4) was demolished and a shop with a parking lot was constructed on the site instead (the Jewish community sold the Plungė synagogue to a private company). Thanks to the intervention of heritage conservationists, the synagogue of Žemaičių Naumiestis, owned by Šilutė District Municipality, was preserved, even though the building was scheduled for demolition.



**Figure 4.** Plungė synagogue, 2007. Photo Vilma Gradinskaite.

The fact that synagogue buildings were falling apart and were being demolished led to louder and more intense discussion on the problematic issues of heritage conservation and heritage management. There has been an increase in the number of publications on the restoration, commemoration and putting into operation of synagogues. The archaeological investigations of the complex of buildings of the Great Synagogue of Vilnius that started in 2011 were warmly welcomed in the press.<sup>27</sup> In order to draw the attention of officials and the public to the dying heritage of Jewish architecture, synagogue buildings became the focus of various cultural projects. One of the most interesting and successful

<sup>27</sup> The research is being carried out by the Public Institution 'Cultural Heritage Conservation Forces', which is a joint team of Lithuanian, Israeli and American cultural heritage professionals funded by the Goodwill Foundation, Vilnius City Municipality and members of the archaeological research group. In 2011, the site of the Great Synagogue building was located and fragments of adjacent brick buildings were discovered. In 2016–2017, fragments of the public baths building, which belonged to the Jewish community, and the location of two *mikvahs*, were identified. In 2018, the perimeter of the Great Synagogue was researched and the northwest wall was detected. In 2019, the synagogue floor was uncovered, the sites of *aron kodesh* and *bima* were located, and the basement under the *bima* was uncovered. Since the excavation began, discussions have been taking place on how to commemorate the site of the synagogue. In 2017, with that purpose in mind, an international conference was held in Vilnius.

examples is from the year 2006, when Israeli artist Adina Bar-On presented her audio performance *Sacrifice* in the synagogue at the Alytus Biennial.<sup>28</sup> In 2015, museologist Monika Žasytienė presented her 3D project ‘Let’s Save the Švėkšna Synagogue’.<sup>29</sup>

The restoration of synagogues in Lithuania has been gaining momentum in the last five years. This is due, in no small part, to the work of heritage conservationist and historian Diana Varnaitė. In 2008–2018, she headed the Department of Cultural Heritage and together with her colleagues co-created a synagogue restoration mechanism. Throughout that ten-year period, Varnaitė travelled around Lithuanian towns, convinced local communities and mayors of towns about the necessity and benefits of synagogue restoration, and suggested plans for putting the synagogues into operation. The work of Varnaitė and her colleagues yielded results. Three synagogues in Kėdainiai, two synagogues in Joniškis, the Marijampolė synagogue, and the oldest surviving wooden synagogue in Lithuania located in Pakruojis were restored and put into operation. The Choral synagogue of Vilnius underwent some repair works, including the restoration of its decor. The renovated wooden synagogue of Žiežmariai and the masonry synagogue of Kalvarija are waiting to be put into operation. The restoration works of the Alytus synagogue and the synagogue in Vilnius located on Gėlių Street are about to be completed. The synagogues of Žemaičių Naumiestis and Švėkšna are also undergoing some repair works, too. It is expected that conservation works on the wooden synagogues of Alanta, Kurkliai and Tirkšliai should start in 2020.

## 7. Conclusions

At the beginning of the 19th century, under the influence of Romanticism, the interest in one’s own region grew, regional research was born, and museums started appearing in Lithuania. However, the ideas of Romanticism and Christian ideology, which were part of Lithuanian self-perception, formed a strong distinction between ‘own’ and ‘alien’ cultural heritage. A review of publications that appeared in inter-war Lithuania reveals that about 90 percent of the articles on Lithuanian cultural heritage and heritage protection do not mention the heritage of other ethnic communities. In Soviet times, the cultural heritage of other nations simply ‘did not exist’. This difference has almost disappeared thanks to modern scholarly publications, various educational projects and programmes. The putting into operation of restored synagogues and their involvement in joint cultural events help local communities to accept the synagogues’ heritage and perceive it as their own, including their value and potential.

The first descriptions of synagogues date back to the 18th century. They are found in various complaints about the height and size of synagogues, and later in fiction and travellers’ notes. More serious research on synagogues started in interwar Lithuania. The first one was conducted in 1925 when the Vilijampolė synagogue was described, measured and photographed. Articles published by Galaunė, Lemchen, Bičiūnas, Mošinskis and other intellectuals changed the understanding of inter-war society about what heritage was and why it should be protected. Unfortunately, these positive changes were interrupted by the Soviet era. Only three synagogues were included in the List of Monuments Protected by the Lithuanian SSR and only one article by Jankevičienė discussed the structure of synagogues in more general terms. Fundamental research on synagogues began after Lithuania regained its independence. Jankevičienė analysed synagogue buildings on the basis of the structural research method. Rupeikienė included the historical and stylistic synagogue research method too. Miškinis researched synagogues in the context of urban development of towns. Niunkaitė

<sup>28</sup> As the sun went down, screams, moaning, wailing, a dog’s bark, and a baby’s cry were heard from the window openings of the Alytus synagogue. The residents and guests of the town were shocked by such an unexpected breakthrough of pain from the wrecked Alytus synagogue building.

<sup>29</sup> A realistic 3D projection-film about the evolution of the building was shown on the wall of the Švėkšna synagogue. After the film, viewers were offered an opportunity to play an interactive puzzle: to become ‘architects’ and make visual changes to the appearance of the synagogue building.



Račiūnienė used the iconographic-comparative method for the purpose of synagogue decor analysis. Markevičienė prepared a systematic research methodology covering not only the synagogue but also the *shulhoif*, on the basis of which a two-volume work *Synagogues in Lithuania* was published, summarizing the surviving synagogue heritage in Lithuania.

Until now, the architecture of Lithuanian synagogues has been studied mainly in terms of structure, history and stylistics, and new fields of research are still waiting for their turn. A synagogue is an object of multiple meanings with a complex semantic system attached. We hope that the architecture of Lithuanian synagogues will be explored in the future by using other methods, too, and by looking for their spiritual content, including the semantics of their sacral spaces, semiotic meanings of synagogue complexes, and the change that they went through (e.g., the way the meaning and purpose of a synagogue changed as a result of turning it into an imprisonment place for Jews that are condemned to execution). These will be the new superstructures on the already firm foundations of synagogue research.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

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