

## **Choral Synagogue in Kharkiv**

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The Choral Synagogue in Kharkiv, today a Chabad Hasidic synagogue called Beit Menachem, is the main synagogue of the second-largest Ukrainian city.

The synagogue occupies a plot of a Neo-Classicist manor house, rented as a Jewish prayer house in 1867–1912.

The present synagogue received its built form due to the architectural competition held by the St. Petersburg Imperial Society of Architects. The competition was elucidated in the Society's magazine *Zodchii* (1909). Seventeen authors proposed varied approaches to the synagogue design. For instance, Adolf Szyszko-Bohusz, the then young graduate of the St. Petersburg Academy of Arts, proposed the central core of the prayer hall modeled on the eighteenth-century baroque synagogue in Przeworsk. The competition jury, including its secretary Marian Lalewicz, criticized this design as inappropriate for a Reform synagogue, of sorts, where the Torah ark, the bimah, the cantor's desk, and the choir loft should compose a single spatial unit shifted to the east. Another project, by Mikhail Dubinskii, a St. Petersburg Jewish architect, utilized the shapes of prophet Ezekiel's messianic temple as envisioned by the French architect Charles Chipiez and archaeologist Georges Perrot in the 1880s. However, Dubinskii's design stylized Ezekiel's vision as a Neo-Classicist edifice with Assyrian, Egyptian, and Phoenician elements. In the jury's opinion, using an already outcasted archaeological hypothesis was the project's disadvantage.

The first prize winner was Yakov Gevirtz (1879, Odesa – 1942, Leningrad), a rising St. Petersburg Jewish architect. The jury wrote about his project: "The entire structure is a serene and beautifully accomplished mass, which is not without poetical interest. The author's imagination produced a dazzling remainder of large wall spans of the ancient edifices in Palestine." In fact, the architect proposed a "Jewish" interpretation of the Northern-European national romanticism, a

style associated with Finland and increasingly fashionable in St. Petersburg. The Kharkiv design combined the bare brick and plastered wall spans with massive buttresses, pointed reveals and the crowning cupola, all producing a mood of gravity and solemnity on par with moderate exoticism, although avoiding historicist quotations. The synagogue's interior features the prayer hall spanned with a cupola on intersecting transverse arches, women's triforium, an eastern apse, and the upper-tier singers' choir within this apse.

The architect shifted the synagogue into the plot interior to ensure the 100 fathoms (213 m) distance from the St. Nicholas' Orthodox Cathedral, mandatory under the Russian imperial law. The local architect Mikhail Piskunov, known for his Art Nouveau works, supervised the synagogue's construction during 1912–1913.

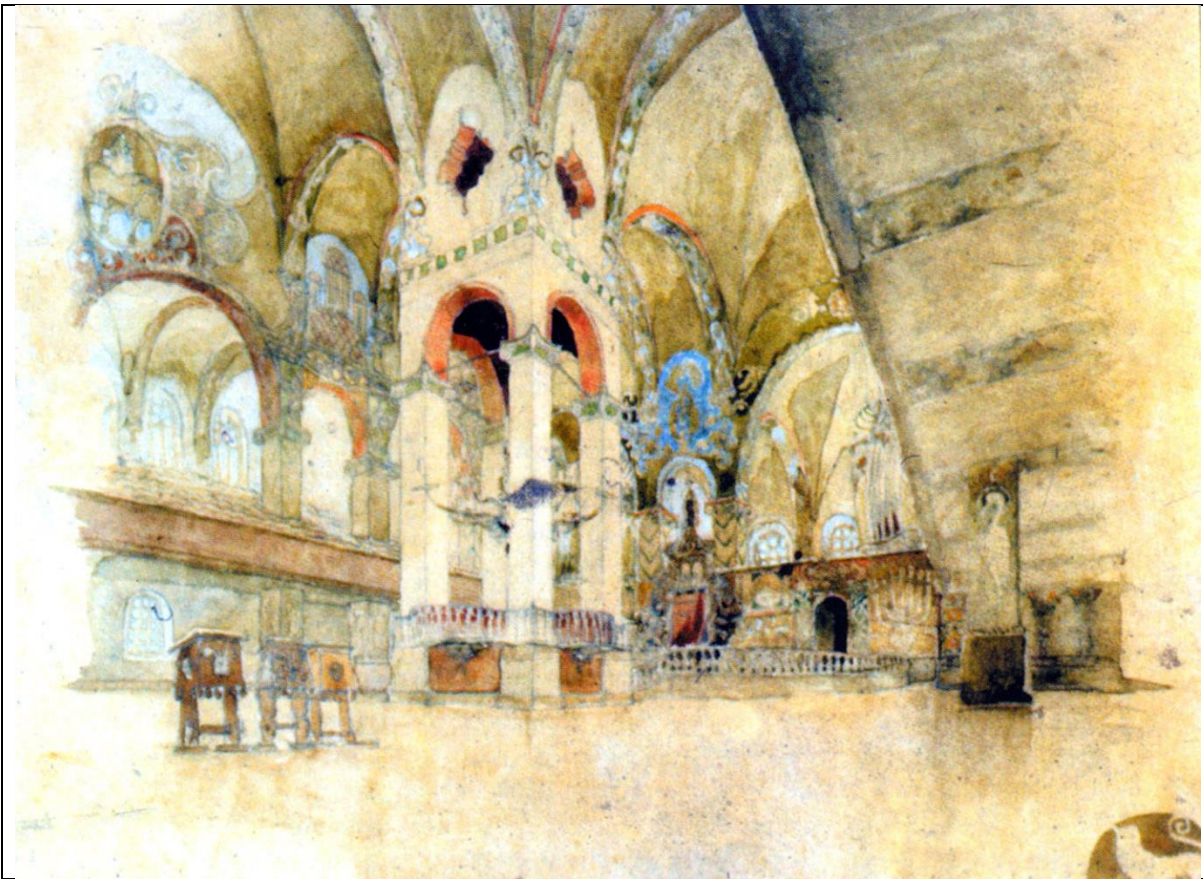
The synagogue was closed and converted into a workers' club by the Soviet authorities in 1923 and became a cinema theatre in 1941. It served the Jewish community in 1945–1949 and a sports club "Spartak" in 1949–1990. Restituted to the Jewish community of Kharkiv, it is run by the Chabad Hasidim and called Beit Menachem after Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson. In 2003, the synagogue was renovated by a renowned Kharkiv architect Vladimir Novgorodov.

#### Bibliography:

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Marian Lalewicz, „Otzyvy komissii sudei po konkursu proektov zdaniia khoral'noi sinagogi v g. Khar'kove,” *Zodczii* 38/40 (1909): 395—396, pl. 48–50. (Russian).

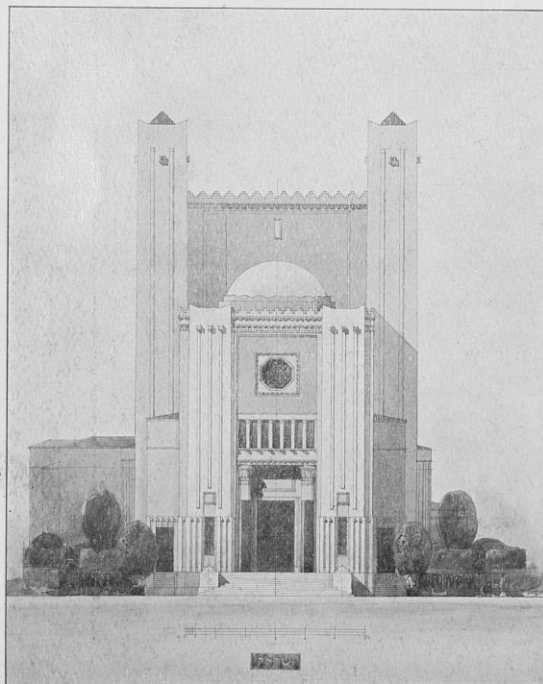
Maria Piechotka and Kazimierz Piechotka, *Bramy Nieba: Bóżnice murowane na ziemiach dawnej Rzeczypospolitej* (Warsaw, 1999).



Choral Synagogue in Kharkiv, interior view. Competition design by Adolf Szysko-Bohusz, 1909. Maria and Kazimierz Piechotka, *Bramy Nieba* (Warsaw, 1999), p. 444.

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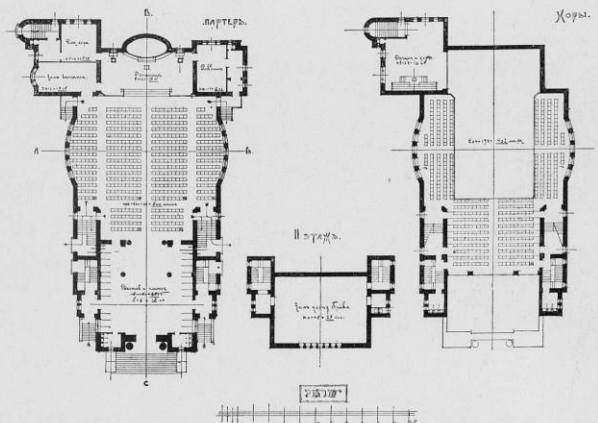
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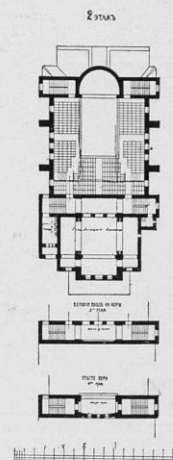
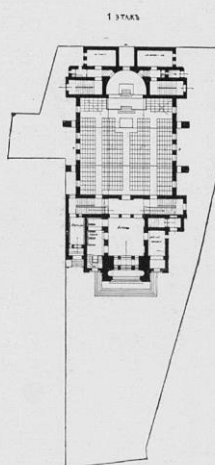
Choral Synagogue in Kharkiv. Competition design Mikhail Dubinskii, 1909. *Zodchii* 38/40 (1909), pl. 49.

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Choral Synagogue in Kharkiv. Competition design by Yakov Gevirtz, 1909. *Zodchii* 38/40 (1909), pl. 48.



Choral Synagogue in Kharkiv, photograph 2008. Wikipedia.org



Choral Synagogue in Kharkiv, photograph by Adam Jones, 2018. Wikipedia.org