

[Slide Image 1]

Thank you, Phil.

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At the outset, please forgive me for my English. Lithuanians are trying to learn English – but it is still a “foreign” language for us.

As Phil mentioned, I am a practicing architect who lives in Lithuania’s capital city, Vilnius – Vilna. I thank the Jewish Genealogy Society of Greater Washington for inviting me to speak here today. I also wish to express my gratitude to Remembering Litvaks, Inc., and the International Lithuanian Federation for inviting me to the United States.

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Before continuing, I want to state that the comments and opinions that I present here are my own, and do not reflect those of my architectural firm or any of my clients.

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For nearly fifty (50) years the Soviet state controlled Lithuania. During those years, very little was said about the centuries of multi-cultural civilization that existed in Lithuania up to the Second World War. History, both as presented in the news and in academic curricula, was substantially distorted to fit the Soviet perspective of the world. From that perspective, the cultural heritage of buildings such as synagogues, churches, manor houses, and monasteries, meant nothing. Buildings were viewed solely with respect to their utilitarian value. If they had such value, they were re-purposed. Other buildings were destroyed or simply neglected.

[Slide Image 5]

For example, as many of you know, in the nineteen-fifties (1950s) the Great Synagogue of Vilna and its associated structures were demolished.

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A Soviet kindergarten was built on part of the site.

[Slide Image 7]

Not far away, in the old city of Vilnius, a Baroque-style church was converted into a “museum of atheism.”

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For people like me, who were born during or after the Soviet period, the surviving and decaying buildings, and references to them, are intriguing links to our past civilization. Like genealogists, we look for clues and understanding. Sometimes, information is found in long-ignored archival records or in private diaries. Other times, key information is found in a copy of a book that reached and was preserved in the West.

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My interest in synagogue architecture began in two-thousand-twelve (2012), when I was invited to study the design of synagogues in Belarus. Although Belarus and Lithuania today are two separate countries, for many centuries they were part of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, which also include places that today are in eastern Poland and northern Ukraine. The term “Litvaks” – Lithuanian Jews – refers to the Jews who lived in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. For this reason, the architecture of synagogues that have survived in any of those areas also helps to tell the story of the development of Lithuanian synagogues.

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Before continuing, I want to explain what I mean by the term “synagogue” in this presentation. According to Jewish tradition, the name “synagogue” applies to a “beis ha-knessas” -- a sanctified place that may only be used for prayers. A place that was used for prayer, study, and communal activities was called a “beis midrash” -- a place of study. For the purposes of my presentation, I refer to each building I discuss as a “synagogue.”

Before the Second World War there were between six-hundred (600) and seven-hundred (700) Jewish houses of prayer of various descriptions. Today, only about one-hundred (100) structures have physically remain. Of these, only two meet the classical definition of a “synagogue.” They are the choral synagogues in **Vilnius** and in **Kaunas**.

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In two-thousand-twelve (2012), when I was working at Lithuania’s National Museum studying the architectural history of buildings in Vilnius, I was invited to join a party of researchers who would study the architecture of fourteen (14) long-neglected synagogues in Belarus.

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I had never before even been in a synagogue. It is hard to explain what I felt when I entered the first one. On the one hand, it was clear that it once had been beautiful. On the other hand, the degree of destruction was shocking. When I returned to Vilnius I spent about eight-hundred (800) hours creating three-dimensional models of the synagogues.

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A year later, I returned to Belarus to see more synagogues and then began studying archival records and old photographs.

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From this was born my project called “**The Architecture of Disappeared and Disappearing Wooden Synagogues.**”

This project, which has toured the country, has given all Lithuanians a vision of this part of our cultural heritage.

[Slide Image 15]

Subsequently, I have assisted with two types of projects to recover and preserve the memory of the Jewish synagogues of Lithuania.

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First, where no synagogues exist, such as in **Rokiškis** and **Seda**, I have investigated what those buildings looked like and have designed informational signs that present three-dimensional representations of the synagogues that once stood there and drafted the text of accompanying information about their histories.

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Second, I have worked on restoring the physical condition of existing buildings. I am happy that so many Lithuanians take a sincere interest in this work. Some have been inspired to learn more about the history and traditions of the Jewish communities.

[Slide Image 19]

Now I will talk about the rules of synagogue construction and the degree to which they were – or could be – observed. According to Jewish tradition, synagogues should stand at a high point in a town. However, Jews in Lithuania – like Jews in many other European countries – were not allowed to build a house of prayer that was taller than nearby Christian churches. For this reason, synagogues in shtetls usually would not be located on a market square. Instead, they were on a nearby side street leading to the square. Often, they were hidden from the market square by other buildings. In a big city, such as Vilna or Kovna, there would be a choral synagogue but it too would be located on a secondary street leading to the city center.

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There was a requirement that the interior of a synagogue be bright and Jewish tradition required that the interior receive light from twelve (12) windows. However, from what I have seen, in Lithuania this rule was not rigidly followed. Some synagogues had as few as six (6) windows, while others had as many as eighteen (18).

Turning now to the interior, synagogues were oriented front west to east and typically had two stories. Since it was prohibited to directly enter into the prayer hall, men would usually enter into a vestibule and could walk from there into the prayer hall, which was reserved for men. Women had a separate entrance and stairs leading to a second-floor gallery that was reserved women.

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In the prayer hall, there were two principal architectural features – the aron kodeš and the bima.

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The aron kodeš, where Torah scrolls are stored, is the holiest place in a Jewish house of worship. In Europe, the aron kodeš was placed in or near the eastern wall of the prayer area – the place closest to the city of Jerusalem. In Aškenazi synagogues, Torah scrolls were kept in a vertical position.

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The bi-ma in Lithuanian synagogues was always in the middle of the prayer hall.

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Each community, according to its means, tried to decorate the interior of its synagogues. There were wall paintings, carvings, and more expensive furnishings and ritual objects. A good example of such decoration is preserved at the synagogue in **Tykocin**, near Bialystok.

There are various ways to classify synagogues.

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At a very basic level, some were heated and thus could be used year-round. Others were not heated and could be used comfortably only in summer. Some were for use by the entire community, while others were reserved for specific groups, such as artisans or professional men.

Some congregations followed the “misnagid” tradition, while others might follow the chasidic tradition.

[Slide Image 28]

Older synagogues in Europe were made of wood, and most have been lost. Fortunately fifteen (15) have survived in Lithuania.

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[Slide Image 31]

Since fire was a constant risk in the shtetls, communities that could afford to do so, built synagogues made of brick. Today, there are still about eighty-three (83) brick synagogue structures.

[Slide Image 32]

Let’s turn now to specific synagogues in Lithuania and how they looked before the Second World War.

[Slide Image 33]

The most impressive synagogue was the **Great Synagogue of Vilna**, which was among the largest and most magnificent in all of Europe. For centuries, it was as important to European Jews as the Vatican is to Catholics. The synagogue and its complex of associated buildings are also remembered as being at the center of the Misnagdim, a movement that opposed Chasidic Judaism.

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Construction of the Great Synagogue began in 1573. It had a deep foundation, which made it possible for the building to have an immense interior without violating the restriction on the height of synagogues. The exterior was in the Renaissance style. Over time, the building was enlarged and could accommodate up to five thousand (5,000) people.

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The vaulted ceiling was supported by four massive marble columns. A large candelabrum was suspended from the center of the ceiling. The bima was constructed of marble and was located in the center of the columns. The aron kodeš had iron ornamental doors.

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During the Second World War, the Great Synagogue was not severely damaged.

[Slide Image 38]

However, in 1956 the Soviets razed the building and built a kindergarten on a part of the site.

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Recently, a team of archeologists, led by Jon Seligman of the Israeli Antiquities Authority and Professor Richard Freund of the University of Hartford, began excavating the portion of the site that was not covered by the Soviet building. They have been pleasantly surprised to find that much of the below-grade portions of the building was not destroyed but simply covered over.

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One of the largest wooden synagogues in Lithuania was the one in **Šaukėnai**, which was one of the most beautiful in Europe.

Here are some examples of other synagogues that were lost.

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[Slide Image 43]

With the time that is left, I will discuss synagogue restoration projects that have been completed, those that are in progress, and those that are being planned.

[Slide Image 44]

These two synagogues are in **Kėdainiai**. Last year, restoration work was completed for two more synagogues in **Joniškis**, which are known as the “white” and “red” synagogues.

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These buildings are now used for cultural and educational activities.

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[Slide Image 48]

Now I will show four synagogues that are in the process of being restored.

The first one is in **Vilnius**. It located on “Flower Street” and is called the “Flower Synagogue.” The Jewish community would like part of the building to be used as a museum and the remainder will be used to fulfill the building’s original function – as a house of prayer.

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The second project is a synagogue in **Kupiškis** which was built in the first half of the Nineteenth Century as part of a complex with two other houses of study and prayer that together formed the “shul hof.”

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A fire severely damaged the building during the Second World War. In 1948, the Soviets reconstructed the building to create a venue for cultural events. Later, the building was transformed into a public library.

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A few years ago, one of my colleagues suggested that an effort be made to restore the interior appearance of the synagogue. Following historical and architectural research, and even an analysis of paint, we have a good idea of this appearance. Restoration activity began last year and should be completed in twenty-twenty (2020).

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The third project is a remarkable wooden synagogue in **Žiežmariai** that had eighteen windows providing light to the main prayer area. It was built in the mid Nineteenth (19th) Century and later burned down. In nineteen-twenty (1920), and it was rebuilt to the exact

specifications of the original synagogue. After the Second World War, the Soviets used the building as a warehouse allowed the physical condition to severely decay.

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Last year, the municipality began a project to restore the original appearance (yet again). The degraded wood is being replaced, the walls have been reinforced, and the roof structure has been repaired. This year the façade, windows, and doors will be restored. When the work is completed, the building will be used for cultural activities.

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The fourth project is the one to restore the **Pakruojis** synagogue, which was built in the Eighteenth (18th) Century and is the oldest surviving wooden synagogue in central Europe. As you can see, it was richly painted and decorated.

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[Slide Image 63]

The Soviets used the building as a cinema and the condition deteriorated. Here is how it looked when I first visited it.

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[Slide Image 65]

As part of the restoration, remarkable discoveries were made, including remnants of the original wallpaper and ceiling paint color.

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I was there two weeks ago. Most of the exterior work has been completed. As a result of careful research, nearly all of the original wall paintings on the wall will be recreated. The sole exceptions are images of an elephant and a leopard that once were on the wall in the women's gallery. So far we have not been able to learn what they looked like.

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This project will be completed in May 2017 and the building will then house an exhibition of Jewish life in **Pakruojis** as well as a children's library.

Now, I will mention several projects that are “on the drawing board.”

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[Slide Image 72]

As I mentioned, two of the three surviving synagogues of **Kėdainiai** have been restored. The third synagogue is one of the few surviving classicist brick synagogues in Lithuania. It is proposed to restore the building, which will then provide space for an art school, exhibitions, and educational activities.

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Only two synagogues that were built in the inter-war period survive. The one in **Švėkšna** was built in nineteen-twenty-eight (1928). After the Second World War, the Soviets used it as a gym and for concerts, meetings, and showing movies.

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Since Lithuania regained its independence, it has been abandoned. Last year, the people in the town enthusiastically agreed to restore the building to create a museum and a venue for multi-cultural activities.

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The second surviving synagogue from the inter-war period is **Kaltinėnai**. This is one of the smallest houses of worship in Lithuania yet is unique because attached to it is an apartment for the rabbi.

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I am currently working with the mayor of the regional municipality on a plan to restore the building. It will become a museum and cultural center.

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Finally, in the northern regional district of **Mažeikiai**, there is synagogue in the small town of **Tirkšliai**. The **Mažeikiai** regional municipality has proposed to restore the building to create a center dedicated to the cultural heritage of the region's Jewish people.

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The center will, for example, collect information about Jewish culture and history and their contributions to the arts and scientific achievements. The center will host various events, such as exhibitions, conferences, and musical evenings, and will develop educational programs, such as the culinary traditions of Jews related to the Jewish holidays.

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This concludes my presentation. Thank you very much for your attention.

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I would be happy to answer a few questions.

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[Slide Image 87]