

# Golden-Domed (Choral) Synagogue in Hlukhiv, Destroyed During World War II

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**Abstract.** Based on documentary sources, the article provides detailed information about the history and fate of the Golden-Domed (choral) Synagogue in Hlukhiv (Sumy region, Ukraine), which was destroyed during World War II. At the same time, for the first time, all available information about the external appearance, internal premises and interiors of the synagogue was collected and presented. By comparing visual sources (drawings and plans of the synagogue, as well as photographic documents depicting this building at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries), an attempt was made to describe the appearance and internal equipment of the synagogue. The documents used in the article and the complete plans for the lost Golden-Domed Synagogue are introduced into scientific circulation for the first time.

**Keywords:** Hlukhiv; Golden-Domed Synagogue; Choral Synagogue; prayer house; prayer school; Jewish school; Hlukhiv Historical Archive; Jews.

## INTRODUCTION

Speaking of World War II, we first of all recall the catastrophe that befell the Jewish people during these years. However, it is not limited to the physical extermination of most of the Jews who lived in the pre-war years on the territory of Europe. At the same time, many Jewish cemeteries, synagogues, religious objects, books, manuscripts and scrolls were destroyed. Most of the Jews who survived during World War II did not return to their former places of residence. World War II generally destroyed Jewish life and Jewish heritage in many parts of Europe. Material monuments of Jewish culture and art were lost to one degree or another throughout the European territory. Nobody was engaged in exact calculations of the Jewish values destroyed during the years of war. The number of synagogues irretrievably lost during this period can only be judged approximately, but it can be unequivocally stated that their number is enormous. On the territory of today's Ukraine in the 1910s (at that time – several provinces of the Russian Empire), there were 1298 synagogues and prayer houses. After World War II in Ukraine (at that time – a republic

of the USSR), there were only 33 synagogues. In subsequent years, their number only decreased. Most of the synagogues and prayer houses on the territory of Ukraine were closed in the late 1920s to early 1930s. Still, the physical destruction of most of the buildings is associated precisely with the time of World War II. Throughout Ukraine, hundreds of synagogues, which could rightly be considered monuments of Jewish history, culture and art, were burned and destroyed. One such object of Jewish heritage lost during World War II is the Golden-Domed (choral) Synagogue in Hlukhiv (Sumy region, Ukraine), which will be discussed in this article.

In the 19th-early 20th century, Hlukhiv was a county town in the Chernihiv province of the Russian Empire and a part of the Jewish Pale of Settlement. By 1910, the Jewish population of Hlukhiv was 5177 people, which was one-fourth of the total number of inhabitants of the city. By this time, there were three prayer houses in Hlukhiv. One of them was popularly called the Golden-Domed Synagogue. According to the Central Statistical Committee of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, in 1910, there were three syna-

gogues in Hlukhiv. Since the vagueness of the concepts of a "synagogue" and a "prayer house" was present not only in everyday life but also in official sources of that time, we will give data on the number of synagogues and prayer houses in the Chernihiv province without making any distinctions. By the data of the same Central Statistical Committee of the Ministry of Internal Affairs in 1910, 86 synagogues and prayer houses operated in the Chernihiv province. According to the cities and towns of the Chernihiv province, they were distributed as follows: Berezna – 2 pcs., Borzna – 1 pcs., Dobryanka – 1 pcs., Ichnya – 1 pcs., Hlukhiv – 3 pcs., Horodnya – 4 pcs., Klymiv – 2 pcs., Klyntsi – 5 pcs., Kobyzhcha – 2 pcs., Kozelets – 2 pcs., Konotop – 4 pcs., Korop – 2 pcs., Krolevets – 5 pcs., Mlyn – 3 pcs., Nizhyn – 8 pcs., Nikolska Sloboda – 1 pcs., Novhorod-Siversky – 5 pcs., Novozybkiv – 3 pcs., Novi Mlyny – 1 pcs., Oster – 2 pcs., Pohar – 1 pcs., Pochep – 4 pcs., Radul – 1 pcs., Svyatska – 1 pcs., Semenivka – 2 pcs., Seredyna-Buda – 1 pcs., Sosnytsa – 2 pcs., Starodub – 4 pcs., Surazh – 3 pcs., Vertivka – 2 pcs., Voronok – 2 pcs [29]. According to today's administrative division, these settlements are located on the territories of the Bryansk region of the Russian Federation, Chernihiv and Sumy regions of Ukraine. Of the 86 synagogues and prayer houses, only 23 have survived. None of them are used for their direct religious purpose. Of the 23 surviving buildings, four were rebuilt beyond recognition (the synagogues in Oster, Chernihiv region, were rebuilt into the House of Culture and the House of Youth Technology; the synagogue in Konotop, Sumy region, was rebuilt into the Bureau of Standardization and metrology; the synagogue in Novozybkiv, Bryansk region, was rebuilt into the building of the district administration), two wooden synagogues in Horodnya and Novi Mlyny, Chernihiv region, have survived only in fragments. The stone building of the former synagogue in Korop, Chernihiv region, is now abandoned and dilapidated.

The remaining 19 buildings, to a greater or lesser extent, have retained their historical facades and outlines while completely losing their interiors. In the Bryansk region of the Russian Federation, the stone building of the synagogue in Klintsi is used by the textile technical school as a sports hall; the post office occupies the stone building of the synagogue in Starodub. The building of the former synagogue in Pohar houses various institutions. In the Chernihiv region of Ukraine, the stone building of the former synagogue in Borzna

is occupied by shops; in the stone building of the former synagogue in Kozelets, a sports school is located now; various organizations also occupy the stone building of the former synagogue, in Novhorod-Siversky. In Nizhyn, four buildings of former synagogues and prayer houses have been preserved. They house shops and the District Department of the Interior. The Youth Theatre occupies the building of the only surviving synagogue in Chernihiv. In the Sumy region of Ukraine, a hotel is located in the former synagogue in Seredyna-Buda, and a children's art school is located in the former synagogue in Krolevets. In Hlukhiv, buildings believed to be the two surviving prayer houses are residential buildings. Thus, within the Bryansk region of the Russian Federation, the Chernihiv and Sumy regions of Ukraine, whose territory previously belonged to the Chernihiv province, most of the surviving synagogues, if they still retain their external appearance, then their interiors have been completely lost.

In recent decades, the issue of transferring historical synagogue buildings to Jewish communities or using them in the socio-cultural space of cities as objects of cultural heritage has been regularly raised. All surviving synagogues need reconstruction, restoration and, possibly, partial museumification. In this regard, studying the architecture, the historical appearance of the facades and interiors of these synagogues and their history is particularly urgent. Moreover, these studies require an integrated approach and analysis of preserved and lost synagogues in the context of Jewish and European history and synagogue architecture. Meanwhile, there are few severe publications on synagogues in Ukraine. Most are dedicated to the oldest synagogues in Ukraine's western regions [7; 10; 11; 12]. The synagogues of the eastern regions of Ukraine and those built in the late 19th-early 20th centuries were practically not studied. Some of them today can be read only in local lore works.

The unpreserved buildings of 63 synagogues in the Chernihiv province are evenly distributed between the Bryansk region of the Russian Federation and the Chernihiv and Sumy regions of Ukraine. No one has ever compiled their list; global studies of their history and descriptions of their appearance and interiors have not been carried out. Superficial references to the synagogues in eastern Ukraine and the Bryansk region of Russia destroyed during the Soviet era or during World War II can only be found in rare

works of local historians. Meanwhile, the memory of these synagogues, their appearance, history of creation and destruction is an integral part of the history of the Jewish people. Collecting and preserving information about the lost and existing buildings of former synagogues and making it available using modern digital technologies is one of the tasks of preserving cultural heritage. This work can become one of the steps towards solving these problems and aims to collect together all the information about the Golden-Domed (choral) Synagogue in Hlukhiv (Sumy region, Ukraine), destroyed during World War II.

To cover the state of the problem under study, we have analyzed scientific sources that have formed the theoretical basis of our research. Thus, different aspects of the life and culture of Jews, especially of the Hlukhiv Jewish Community, were the objects of numerous scientific works [8; 9; 13-15]. However, only three publications are devoted to the Golden-Domed Synagogue in Ukrainian historiography. The memoirs of old-timers about the destruction of the synagogue building are published in Mykhailo Chasnytsky's book "Hlukhiv. Jews. The memory is alive..." [4]. In the same book, for the first time, information is given about the year of construction of the synagogue, the author of the project, and its drawings are partially published in the book of the same author "Jews. Hlukhiv and Sumy region" [5] again provides general information about the Golden-Domed Synagogue and a brief list of its employees. Both books are of local history by nature, but this does not prevent them from serving as the basis for more severe Jewish research. Yulia Shishkina's article "Hlukhiv Synagogue" [28] provides more detailed information about the history of the Golden-Domed Synagogue. All three listed publications are not scientific by character and give only a general idea of this building that once adorned Hlukhiv. In the works of foreign authors, the Golden-Domed Synagogue in Hlukhiv did not find any reflection. The objectives of this article are to provide the most complete information about the history of the Golden-Domed Synagogue, destroyed during World War II, to introduce a complete set of drawings of this building into international scientific circulation, to collect all available information about the appearance and interiors of the synagogue, and also to attempt to describe them.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

**History of construction and functioning.** By the mid-1860s, there were two prayer houses in Hlukhiv (at that time, the Chernihiv province of the Russian Empire) located in the same courtyard on Krasna Hirka Street. The first of these houses was made of stone, 15 arshins (10.668 meters) long and 11 arshins (7.8232 meters) wide. The men's section occupied 11 arshins (7.8232 meters) in length. In the middle of this room, a canopy with an area of three square arshins (1.51741632 square meters) was arranged. The women's section of this prayer house occupied the remaining four arshins (2.8448 meters) in length. The people called this prayer house "Muiver". The second prayer house was wooden, 24 (17.0688 meters) long and 18 wide arshins (12.8016 meters). The men's section occupied 17 arshins (12.0904 meters) in length, and the women's one – the remaining seven arshins (4.9784 meters). In the men's department's centre was a canopy with an area of four square arshins (2.02322176 square meters). This prayer house was called by the people "Hinzlerler" [1]. With the constantly increasing number of Jewish residents of the city, the premises of these prayer houses became inconvenient for performing rituals, and on major Jewish holidays, due to the small premises, worship in them became extremely difficult. They couldn't accommodate everyone. According to the City Duma, there were 93 Jewish houses and 24 outbuildings in Hlukhiv [22]. According to the information of the headman of the Hlukhiv Jewish Community Volovik and the Hlasny of the Hlukhiv City Duma, the merchant son Mishulovych, by 1867, there were the following number of Jews who regularly visited prayer houses in Hlukhiv: 98 male merchants and 107 females, 1119 male burghers and 1138 females. In addition, 357 nonresident men and 200 women who lived in Hlukhiv, 60 soldiers and 17 female soldiers from among the Jews, as well as nonresident Jews who were in the city on their way to other places, regularly visited the prayer houses of the town [16]. With such many parishioners, prayer houses' tightness and poor ventilation led to the spread of colds and other diseases. Many Jews were forced to refuse to visit prayer houses and stay at home to pray.

In January 1867, merchants and townspeople, Jews of the city, at a general meeting, decided to build a new stone prayer house. In this regard, the Community of the Jews of the city authorized the Hlukhiv merchants Leiba Velkovych Kra-

sovytsky, Samuil Yeselyev Pysmenny and Israel Abramov Byelyenky, according to Article 258 of the first part of the code of laws of the 1857 edition, to declare to the government that, needing to arrange a prayer house according to the number of souls, the Jewish Community of Hlukhiv plans to build it on its land at the expense of voluntary donations. This amount was 3,000 silver rubles [25]. To construct a new prayer house, the Jewish community allocated and acquired a yard site according to a deed of gift from Hlukhiv Jew Mendel Holfarb [23]. It was a piece of land in the centre of Hlukhiv, with its northern part overlooking Kyivo-Moskovska Street. On the eastern side, the land acquired by the community was adjacent to the estate of Mendel Holfarb himself; on the western side, it bordered on the estate of Mesezhnikov; and on the south side – on the land of the Mykola church.

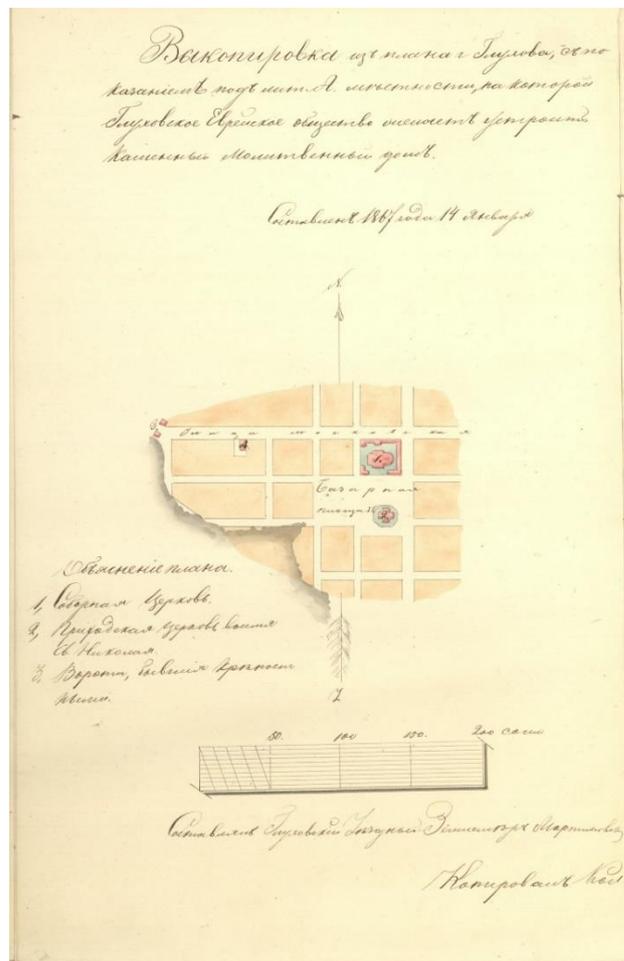


Figure 2 – Copy from the plan of Hlukhiv, indicating the area where the Hlukhiv Jewish Community wanted to build a stone prayer house. Compiled January 14, 1867 [31]

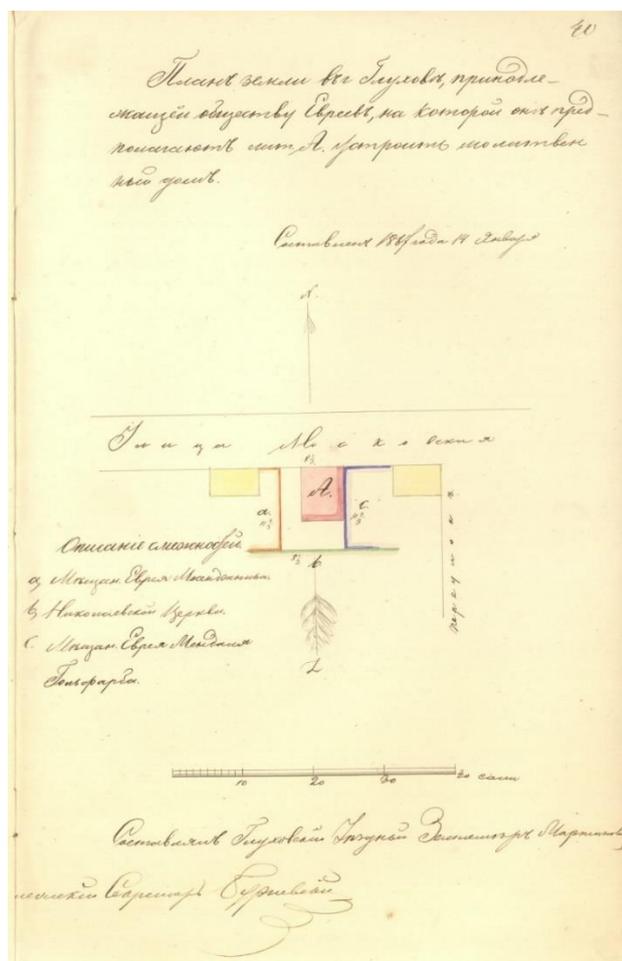


Figure 1 – The land plan in Hlukhiv, which belonged to the Community of Jews, where they assumed to arrange a prayer house. Compiled on January 14, 1867 [19]

Near the site intended to construct the third prayer house was the Trinity Cathedral (the Cathedral Church). The latter circumstance caused additional difficulties. By article 258 of volume 12 of the first part of the Construction Charter, prayer houses and synagogues built on the same street or square with Orthodox churches were to be located at a distance of at least 100 fathoms (213.36 meters) from these latter [6]. The Hlukhiv district surveyor carried out control measurements, and it turned out that the distance from the corner of the Trinity Cathedral to where the Jewish prayer house is supposed to be built is 101 fathoms (215.4936 meters). The distance from the fence of the temple turned out to be even less – 94 fathoms (200.5584 meters), and from the corner of the stone benches that bordered the churchyard, in general, 84 fathoms (179.2224 meters) [30]. There was no other land suitable for constructing a prayer house at the disposal of the Hlukhiv Jewish community, so it was necessary to look for some solution. And it

was found. According to article 258 of volume 12 of the first part of the Construction Charter, prayer houses and synagogues being built on a neighbouring street or square with Orthodox churches had to be at least 50 fathoms (106.68 meters) away from the latter. In Hlukhiv, in Kyivo-Moskovska Street, 84 sazhen from where the prayer house was supposed to be built, there was a continuous row of stone benches with a bell tower in the middle. These benches belonged to the church and surrounded the church cemetery. The church stood in the centre of the cemetery and had the main entrance from a completely different street. Under such circumstances, the essential question was: where is the church located – in the same street as the site of the proposed construction of a prayer house or another, since it does not stand in the same line with Kyivo-Moskovska Street, but inside on the territory of the churchyard, and has an entrance from a completely different street. If we consider the church, according to the location of its main entrance, overlooking another street, it is on it. The prayer house will be located a greater distance from the Orthodox church than the 50 fathoms required by law [17].

Somehow, the Hlukhiv Jewish Community presented the state of affairs in such a context. On September 27, 1867, the Governor of the Ministry of Internal Affairs notified the Governor of Chernihiv that there were no obstacles on his part to allow the construction of a Jewish prayer house in the city of Hlukhiv at a chosen location along Kyivo-Moskovska Street [20]. After the said consent of the Governor of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the Technical Members of the Construction Department of the Chernihiv Provincial Board again considered the case for the construction of the third prayer house in Hlukhiv and found that the rules of civil architecture did all the drawings and met the requirements. The corridor was ordered to be made of stone instead of wood (as corrected on the drawing in blue ink), and with this addition, the case was submitted for approval to the Chernihiv Governor. On October 30, 1867, Prince Serhy Pavlovych Holitsyn, the head of the province, approved the project to construct the third prayer house in Hlukhiv. On October 31, 1867, the file was returned to the Hlukhiv District Police Department for issuing for the beginning of work. The same Administration was instructed to monitor the construction progress and ensure that the Jewish prayer house was built on the site indicated on the plan and according to the approved facade [26].

The project's author was the architect Oleksandr Hross, who designed several more buildings in Hlukhiv and Hlukhiv district. Construction was completed from 1867 to 1870 [4, p. 17]. The first board members of this prayer house have yet to be discovered. On November 9, 1875, for the next three years, the following were elected as members of the Board of the third Hlukhiv Jewish Prayer House: merchant Samuil Yeselyev Pysmenny (headman), Berk's merchant son Velkin Krasovytsky (treasurer) and tradesman Velka Yankelyev Krasovytsky (scientist) [14, p. 73]. They were also approved for the next triennium [14, p. 102]. At a later time, the Hlukhiv merchant Shmuel Abramov Feinshtein was elected to the position of the headman, the merchant's son Isaak Yankelyev Aizenshtadt was elected to the post of treasurer, and the tradesman of the city of Horodnya, Chernihiv province, Meilakh-Sholom Mordukhov Borts was elected as a scientist [24].

The white-stone building of the third prayer house was popularly called the "Choral Golden-Domed Synagogue".

**Exterior and interiors.** Analysis of visual sources (Project for the construction of the third prayer house in Hlukhiv and photographs of the synagogue taken in the late XIX-early XX century) made it possible to get an idea of how the building of the Golden-Domed Synagogue in Hlukhiv looked like.

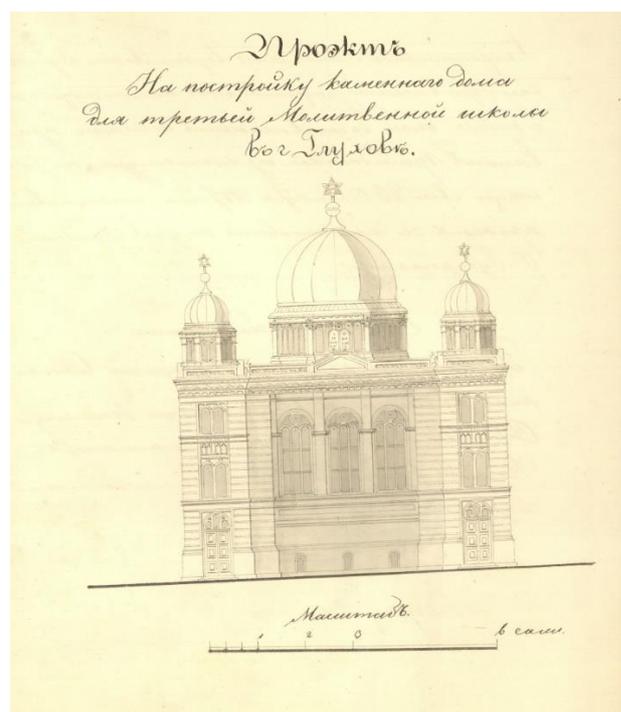


Figure 3 – Project for the construction of a stone house for the third Prayer School in Hlukhiv [21]

The architectural forms of the synagogue building can be attributed to the eclecticism of the second half of the 19th century. It is a dominant direction of the time. Some researchers also introduce the term "historicism" since the architects of this period worked freely in the styles of different eras or even combined their elements. The most consistent art historians believe that the expression "in the style of eclecticism" is illiterate since eclecticism means the absence of a single style. The synagogue in Hlukhiv was designed in forms that show Neo-Mauritanian and neo-Byzantine motives. The neo-Moorish style was called "synagogue style" in 19th-century Europe. Its features are domes, contrasting wall cladding, and abundant decor. These forms were built in most of the synagogues of the middle second half of the XIX century, including in St. Petersburg and, for example, Budapest—neo-Byzantine elements of the project – double and triple arched windows and drawing of doors.

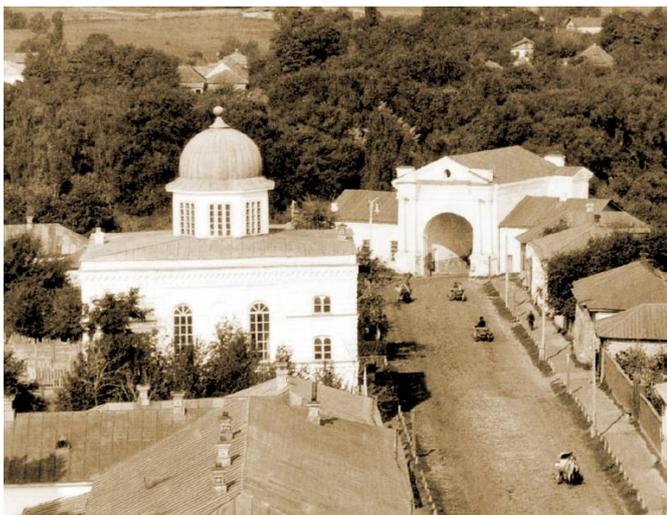


Figure 4 – The Golden-Domed Synagogue at the end of the 19th – and beginning of the 20th centuries

Comparing the surviving drawings with photographic documents depicting the Golden-Domed Synagogue in the late 19th-early 20th century (Figure 4), it can be argued that the project was partially implemented, and the architectural solution of the built building was greatly simplified compared to the project. Two small side domes were not made; proportions changed the central dome, its octagonal base is almost devoid of decor; simplified completion of the main volume (the central figured pediment and raised attics over side projections); on the eastern facade, the pattern of window fillings is solved in more strict

classical forms. The building proportions were also changed – the plan became more compact, and the eastern facade was symmetrical. According to the memoirs of the old-timers, the central dome of the synagogue was covered with a thin layer of gold leaf, hence the name of the Golden-Domed synagogue [4].

The plan is the only way to judge the synagogue's interior arrangement, equipment, and decoration in the pre-Soviet period (Figures 5-6).

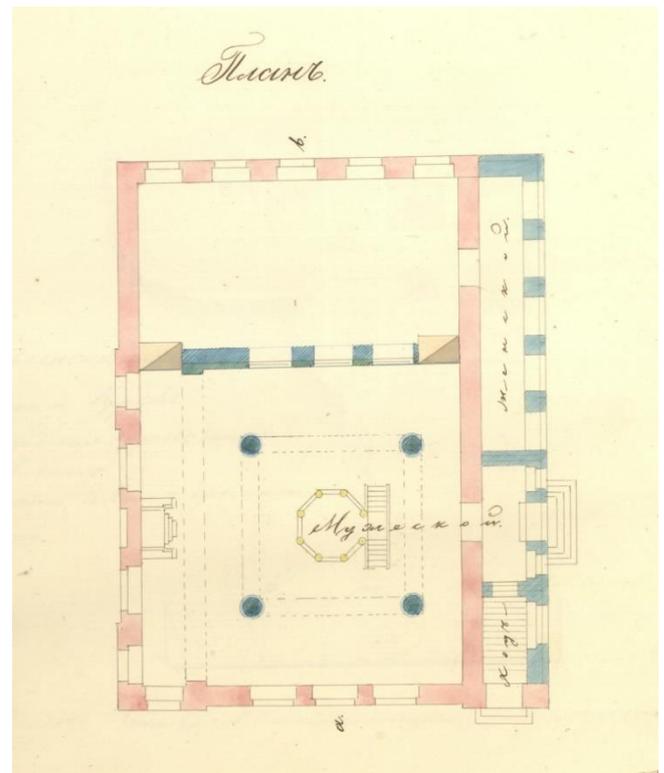


Figure 5 – Plan from the project for the construction of a stone house for the third Prayer School in Hlukhiv [18]

It can be said with certainty that the Golden-Domed Synagogue had a male and a female part. The latter was located in the southern part of the building, possibly on the gallery. In front of the prayer hall entrance was a corridor that replaced the vestibule, and the person entering had to leave all the thoughts and cares of the outside world. At the prayer hall's eastern wall was a cabinet (aron kadesh) for storing Torah scrolls. In the hall's centre, four columns support the light octagon. A unique platform (Bima) was between the columns, from which the Torah and sermons were read.

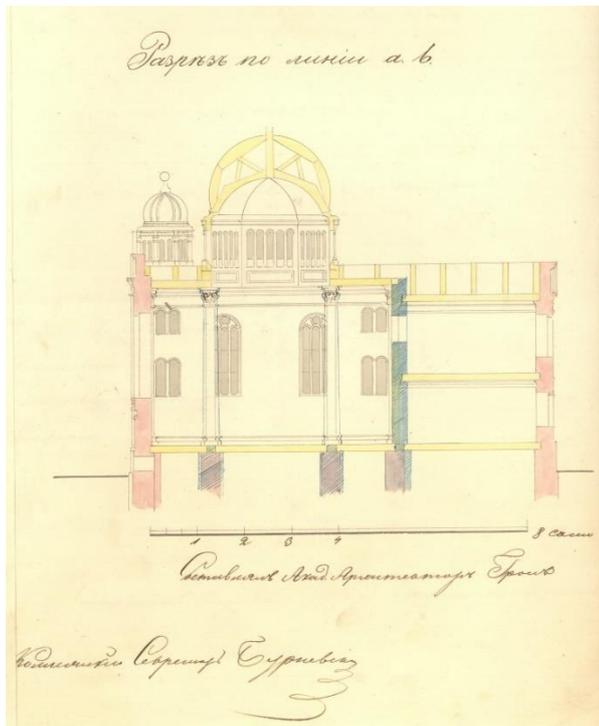


Figure 6 – Cut along the line a b [27]

No other documentary or pictorial sources have been identified that could testify to how the synagogue's interior looked during the Russian Empire. The only material evidence of the synagogue's former decoration is the ceramic tiles that once adorned its interiors. The tile's ornament traces the ancient Jewish symbol – the Star of David. This artefact, which survived after the synagogue's destruction (Figure 7), is now kept in the Museum of the History of the Jews of the Hlukhiv region.



Figure 7 – Ceramic tiles that once decorated the interiors of the Golden-Domed Synagogue in Hlukhiv

The synagogue existed until 1932 [33, p. 23-24]. After its closure, the premises were handed over to the Hlukhiv branch of the regional archive, which worked in the building of the former synagogue until 1941.

The only description of the lost building dates back to the Soviet period. The act of inspection of the building of the Hlukhiv historical archive, compiled in 1939, gives us the following information about the external and internal appearance of the former synagogue:

The building is two-storey, brick, plastered and whitewashed outside and inside. The internal partitions are wooden but plastered, the first and second floors are wooden (plank), the roof is iron, the windows are barred, with single and double sashes, and there are utermark stoves inside the room. The archive office is located in two rooms isolated from the archive. In addition, there is one working room on the second floor, specially designed for developing archival materials, and a room for storing secret archival materials. There is also a basement, which is not used because capital expenditures are required for its repair. The total area of the basement is 53 m<sup>2</sup>. The floor and ceiling are wooden – this basement can store archival materials. In the estate where the archive building is located, there are the following buildings: a residential mansion with two rooms (the apartment of the director of the archive) and a barn (wooden) [2].

Indeed, since its construction, the synagogue has had an outbuilding used as a watchman's quarters [32]. In 1932, the synagogue was closed, and the house of two rooms in the courtyard was nationalized. Since that time, it has been occupied by the archive's director (according to other sources – the watchman).

**Destruction.** With the beginning of World War II and the rapid advance of the German troops towards Hlukhiv, it became necessary to evacuate the archive. There wasn't enough time for that. As a result, it was decided that all documents should be urgently destroyed. The retreating troops of the Soviet army set fire to the archive building. As a result, all archival funds burned down. Partially destroyed by fire, the construction of the former synagogue was finally destroyed during the bombing during the subsequent retreat of the German troops [33].

During the fire and bombing that destroyed the archive and the building of the synagogue in

which it was located, the watchman's outbuilding survived. During the occupation of the city, it was used by a German policeman. In 1946, by the decision of the Executive Committee of the Hlukhiv City Council of Workers' Deputies, the house was leased to the Jewish community, which renovated the premises and used one room as a prayer house. Rabbi Abraham Leizerovych Haft moved into the other [3]. On February 25, 1947, by order of the Hlukhiv District Prosecutor, the Housing Department ordered the Jewish community to vacate the house administratively within a week without providing any space in return. The Jewish community did not vacate the house by the named date. On April 2, 1947, representatives of the Housing Department unceremoniously put Haft and all the property of the Jewish community in the street [33]. The further fate of this outbuilding is not known. Hlukhiv Jews never had a permanent place for praying and performing religious rites ever since.

## CONCLUSIONS

Today, less than 100 Jews live in Hlukhiv. The location of the two surviving synagogues is known only conjecturally. The Golden Domed

Synagogue was utterly destroyed during World War II. Of all the material traces of the once flourishing Jewish community in the city, only the stone tombstones of the ancient Jewish cemetery have been preserved.

Nevertheless, the information given in this article about the Golden-Domed (choral) Synagogue in the city of Hlukhiv, destroyed during World War II, should help preserve the memory of this synagogue, its appearance, and the history of creation and destruction. It is this memory that is an integral part of the history and catastrophe of the Jewish people, and it is this memory and experience that constitutes the non-verbal cultural heritage of the people.

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