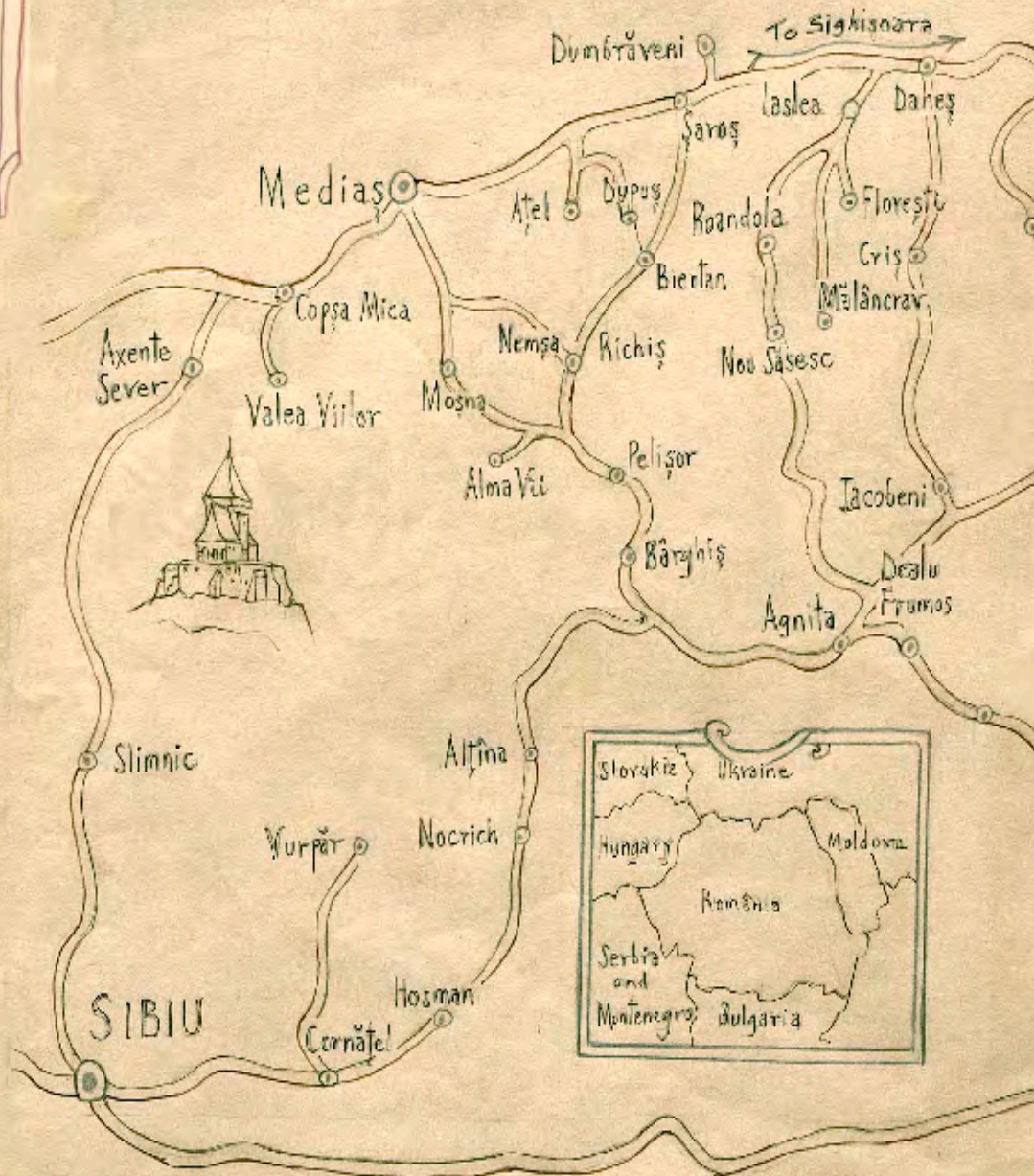


Mălâncrav Area Iaslea commune



Medias Synagogue

By Julie Dawson and Letitia Cosnean



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During Ceaușescu's dictatorship, the Trust helped dissidents keep in touch with western academic thought; and by alerting the world to his plan to bulldoze Romania's rural architecture, it played a part in saving hundreds of villages from destruction. After his death, the Trust turned its attention to the country's cultural revival and rural regeneration.

The Trust concentrates on the Saxon villages of Transylvania, a special case because of the age and richness of their past and the emergency caused by the mass emigration of the Saxon inhabitants to Germany in 1990, leading to the abandonment of many of their houses and a loss of awareness of the value of their heritage. These villages – farmers' houses and barns built around fortified churches, substantially unchanged since the Middle Ages – lie in spectacularly beautiful surroundings, rich in wild flowers. Wolves, bears and wild boar roam the mountains and the forests of beech and oak.

The Trust's initial mission was the rescue of crumbling ancient buildings and of the roofs and facades that lend harmony to the medieval streets. Employing local labour, it teaches long forgotten traditional building methods, including the use of the lime mortar and decorative stucco which give the houses their distinctive character.

To date, we have restored some 500 houses and churches in our pioneering Whole Village Project, which accords equal priority to restoration and economic re-birth. This Project includes converting homes into guesthouses, giving grants to enable farmers and craftsmen to start small ventures, and improving the villages' infrastructure. The community's full support is a prerequisite before we "adopt" a village.

Donations

Donations are gratefully received. Please make cheques payable to the Mihai Eminescu Trust and post it together with the form below to:

The Mihai Eminescu Trust
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Name: _____

Address: _____ Post Code: _____

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Amount you wish to donate: £ _____

If you are a British taxpayer, please also send us a gift-aid form with your donation.

with the Ten Commandments. The pediment is flanked by two carved wooden acroteria.

The mural paintings along the interior walls depict artistic representations of a menorah, vegetal motifs, lions, Stars of David, the Ten Commandments and a fortress, probably a romantic depiction of Jerusalem.

Intervention Concept

The project of the conversion of the synagogue into a cultural and exhibition centre aims to retrieve abandoned space. Plans for future use are described in the previous section by Julie Dawson.

The restoration will focus on stabilising the existing structure with minimum intervention, using the same techniques and materials as at the time of its original construction. The existing religious furniture and decoration in the building will be kept intact, providing a lesson in history and artistic development.

By Letitia Cosnean

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Building Stages

The Medias synagogue was built in 1896⁴ and since then has undergone alterations, the most important of which was an expansion by two lateral rooms on either side of the main entrance vestibule or *pulis*. Since the same construction material was used for both the annexes and the school and Mikvah building, we can assume they were constructed simultaneously.

The multiple layers of mural paintings revealed beneath the last preserved layer confirm the presence of an active community, capable of expressing its status and beliefs by artistic means.

Location

The Jewish quarter was often restricted to peripheral areas of citadels; thus synagogues were frequently found in close vicinity to citadel walls. The synagogue in Medias is located directly outside the medieval citadel, in the former moat area and defence strip of the historical medieval centre of the town.⁵

Description

The building is a “medium” synagogue,⁶ distinguished from its neighbouring environs by size and particular decoration. Nineteenth century eclecticism together with Romantic and Moorish characteristics strongly influence the decoration: lacy profiles, oversized facet pilasters, rounded, tall windows, etc.

The interior space is divided into two main sections: the entrance area and the ceremony hall. The entrance area consists of three rooms placed on the west side. The main vestibule (*pulis*) is accessed through a one-storey portico framed by four massive columns. A smaller room for Tora study is placed on the right side of the *pulis* and on the left side, with a separate exterior entrance for women, is the staircase.

The main ceremony space consists of a generous nave (18x11m) vaulted with a wooden, painted-barrel vault and surrounded on three sides by the women’s gallery.

Beautiful lacy wooden banisters visually separate the women’s gallery from the ground floor ceremony area. Thin, metal columns with stylized capitals in Secession style buttress the gallery.

In the middle of the nave is the bima with highly decorative sculpted elements surrounded by benches on either side. The Torah Ark (Hebrew: Aron Kodesh), located on a platform on the east wall, is the main architectural feature of the interior. It has two painted, wooden columns, one on either side, above which is a pediment crowned

⁴ Pursuant to a database of synagogues in Romania published by the Romanian Jewish Community Federation. This database is, however, not complete. To date, there is no accurate, comprehensive list of synagogues and former synagogues still existing in Romania.

⁵ Avram, 2006, p.6 – Medias layout from 1872.

⁶ A. Streja, L. Schwarz 1996, p. 36. According to the authors, synagogues can be classified into three main groups: small, medium and large, based on dimensions and capacity.

The Jewish Community of Medias in the Context of Transylvanian History

The town of Medias lies in the centre of southern Transylvania, just west of the medieval fortress of Sighisoara. Itself one of the seven original fortress cities after which the Saxon-settlers came to call Transylvania – Siebenbürgen, Seven Fortresses – the small town of 50,000 has a rich cultural and architectural heritage.

Jewish communities formed gradually in the Saxon regions. There are records of their presence from the 15th century onwards, though not in large numbers. In the mid-17th century an interdiction was announced forbidding Jews to settle anywhere other than Alba Iulia. This official law became increasingly difficult to enforce over time. By the late 18th century, individual Jewish merchants or traders received residency rights in larger towns, together with their families. As a community grew however, it was subject to sudden and groundless expulsion at the whim of the local government.

Unfortunately the census taken in 1785 by the Hungarian rulers was not implemented in the Saxon districts and thus not until the 1838 census is demographic



information available for Saxon towns¹. In 1838 Jewish populations of 10 or more were recorded in Aiud, Alba Iulia, Cluj, Dumbraveni, Fagaras, Medias, Odorhei, Sighisoara and Targu Mures but nowhere else in the region². However, just twelve years later in

¹Gyemant, Ladislau, *Evreii din Transilvania în epoca emancipării 1790-1867* (Bucharest: Editura Enciclopedică, 2000), 421.

² Ibid, 236. Note: Historic statistical documents are sometimes contradictory or misleading since census information for certain towns can be missing, giving the incorrect impression as to minority populations. Also, contradictions arise depending on census taking methods. Some Jews chose to be recorded as Hungarians or Germans if this was their mother tongue.

1850 there were Jewish communities in almost every town included in the regional census. This shift was a result of the Revolution of 1848, prior to which the Saxon towns enforced severe residency restrictions. Only after this date were Jews permitted to settle more freely in Saxon territories and the localities mentioned above remained steady or grew in size.

The Medias jurisdiction area recorded 19 Jews in 1838, comprising a full 44% of the Jews in Saxon territories. Though this is a tiny number, signifying of course that less than 50 Jews lived in all the Saxon towns combined, nevertheless it reveals an aberrant trend in Medias, which being smaller than both the major cities of Brasov and Sibiu, nevertheless had a larger Jewish population. The determinants for this are still to be researched. This same characteristic is demonstrated once more, 30 years later, in the census of 1870 in which, with a Jewish population of 158, Medias has 3 times the number of Sighisoara, double that of Sibiu and 50% more than the traditional trading town of Brasov.

Further evidence that Medias was home to one of the more progressive and active Jewish communities in the area was its selection by the Jewish Community as the capital of one of 8 school districts in 1866. At this time, the district of Medias (apparently defined by the Jewish community, not the government) counted 148 Jewish families or 705 people³. Records show that already in 1855 a synagogue of sorts was established, with the community coming together to worship in a private home. In 1858, however, the government ordered it shut down and reprimanded the families responsible. It appears that the synagogue standing today, constructed in 1896, was the first building erected exclusively for this purpose. What the growing community used for worship in between 1858 and 1896, remains elusive, though possibly buried in the Hungarian or Austrian State Archives.

Like other Jewish communities in Saxon towns, Medias Jews appear to have spoken primarily German, though Hungarian was also common. The hundreds of 19th century prayer books filling the synagogue balcony attest to this, many with German translations of the Hebrew prayers. After Transylvania became part of Romania in 1918, Romanian became the administrative language. Until World War II the Jewish population of Transylvania grew gradually and established a respected place for itself within the region. Most synagogues of the region were built in the latter half of the 19th century—beginning of the 20th century, reflecting the loosened restrictions on residency and building rights in the wake of civil emancipation granted in 1867.

World War II

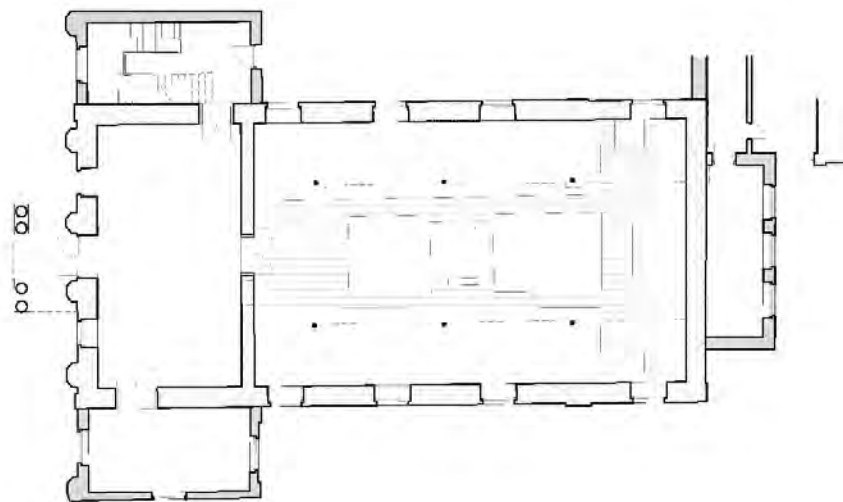
It is impossible to make generalizations regarding the fate of the overall Jewish population in Romania during World War II since events in each region varied significantly. In 1940 northern Transylvania was annexed to Hungary. This area included

³ Gyemant, Ladislau, *Evreii din Transilvania în epoca emancipării 1790-1867* (Bucharest: Editura Enciclopedică, 2000), 439.

History and Architecture of the Synagogue

In Transylvania, the architecture of the synagogues was much influenced by the styles of the late 19th century Austrian-Hungarian Empire: Romanticism (with some Gothic, but mainly Romanesque, influences), Secession and the so-called Moorish style.¹ In most cases, they are imposing, ornate, eclectic buildings.²

It can, indeed, be safely assumed that the Transylvanian synagogues of this period were modelled directly on what architects observed in Vienna and Budapest³ and adapted to local community needs and regional styles.



Overhead view

The architect of the synagogue in Medias is unknown and significant affinities with other synagogues remain unexplained. The composition of the main façade is, however, similar to the Neologue synagogue in Cluj-Napoca: a stepped facade, vertical registers separated by decorative facet pilasters suggesting minarets, ornamental stars of David, and a triple profile cornice accented by a blind arches frieze.

As evidenced by the multiple meanings of the word (prayer house, gathering house, education centre), a synagogue designates a religious space but at the same time a community centre. The Medias synagogue belonged to a complex of buildings required by a Jewish community in the late 19th and early 20th century: prayer spaces, the ritual bath (Mikvah), school (Talmud Tora), administrative spaces, rabbi's house, etc.

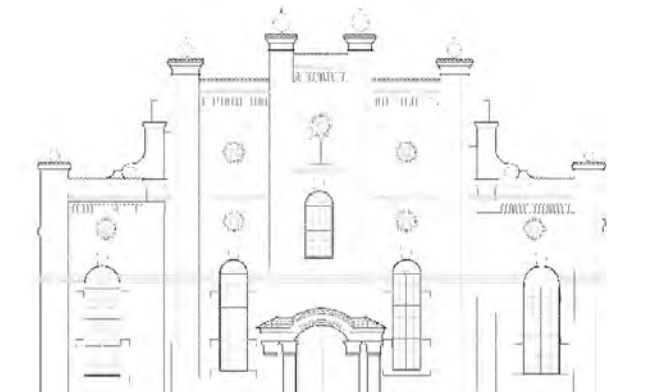
¹ Kalmar, 2001.

² Gruber, 2007, p.253.

³ A. Streja, L. Schwarz, 1996, p. 156.

Project Aims and Objectives

The project aims not only to restore the building, but, also, of equal or even greater importance, to create a centre for local schools and communities to learn about Jewish history, religion and culture. In a region proud of its multicultural history, it is ironic that the population has been so quick to forget one of the ethnicities which lived for centuries alongside the Saxons, Hungarians, Szekely, Romanians and Roma. Unfortunately few education programmes exist which teach Jewish-Romanian history and virtually no programmes provide any instruction on the basics of Judaism. Instead, century-old superstitions and anti-Semitic attitudes, in-



Facade

cluding “teachings” from the libellous “Protocols of the Elders of Zion,” are sometimes still passed from generation to generation. Nevertheless, it is the sustained deficit in educational opportunities and lack of museums and Jewish cultural institutes which perpetuates Romanian anti-Semitism more than any intrinsic bias.

The Medias Synagogue Learning Centre will provide information in a modern-day format. Children and adults will learn about Jewish holidays and traditions and be given an overview of the 5,000 year old religion, while being reminded of its relevance today for communities across the globe. The balcony area will be used for multi-functional purposes, including film screenings, lectures, seminars and temporary exhibitions. A small section will be devoted to local Medias Jewish history, a continuously-developing exhibition which will grow as more information is gathered, both from former members living abroad and as a result of research based on newly-discovered archival documents. Collaborative programmes will be developed together with the school system in order to encourage students to undertake small research projects of their own, investigating the history and lives of a once vibrant local community.

Finally, The Medias Synagogue aims to be a “best practice” model, on the basis of which other communities around the country can develop educational programmes oriented to their own specific needs and history.

By Julie Dawson

the Saxon fortress cities of Cluj and Bistrita, both of which had developed large Jewish populations over the last century. In spring of 1944 the entire Jewish population of northern Transylvania was put into ghettos and deported to Auschwitz by the Horthy government under the orders of the Nazis. Approximately 135,000 perished.⁴

In the rest of Romania, the Ion Antonescu’s fascist-leaning government maintained a highly anti-Semitic policy and gruesome pogroms in Iasi and Bucharest took place. In Moldova and Bukovina hundreds of thousands of Jews were deported to Transnistria where at least 280,000 Romanian and Ukrainian Jews died of starvation, exhaustion, exposure or were shot⁵. On the other hand, almost all of the Jewish population living in Wallachia, the Banat and southern Transylvania was spared deportation and mass murder. Though subjected to debilitating anti-Semitic legislation and often forced to work in labour camps, the vast majority nevertheless escaped with their lives. The fact that about 400,000 Jews or half of the pre-war Jewish population in Roma-



Damaged fresco discovered in 2008 in Medias synagogue

nia survived has less to do with any pro-Semitic policy of Antonescu, who remained a staunch anti-Semite up to his execution, but rather reflected the “pragmatic and opportunistic considerations”⁶ which began to take priority as the tides of war turned against the Nazis and their Romanian allies. Due to the Transnistria deportations and pogroms, the Final Report of the International Commission on the Holocaust in Ro-

⁴ Final Report of the International Commission on the Holocaust in Romania. (Bucharest, 2004), 459.

⁵ Ibid, 459.

⁶ Ibid, 464.



Damaged and abandoned interior of the Medias Synagogue

mania, published in 2004, concludes that “of all the allies of Nazi Germany, Romania bears responsibility for the deaths of more Jews than any country other than Germany itself.”⁷

After the war and the establishment of the state of Israel, mass migration began. The 1947 census records 15,847 Jewish people in southern Transylvania, comprising 3.7% of the entire Romanian Jewish population. Between 1947 and 1956 the Jewish population in all of Transylvania dropped by 50% due to emigration and continued to decrease rapidly over the next several decades. In 2002 the population was about 2% of what it had been in 1947⁸. For all practical purposes, the Jewish communities in all but the largest towns died off several decades ago. Most towns have their “last Jew” often referred to in somewhat legendary tones. There are others with Jewish roots but having grown up without a Jewish community, they rarely identify themselves with Judaism in religious or cultural terms.

Though statistical data for Medias in the 19th century is available in secondary sources, Medias is curiously absent from post-war population charts. It is safe to assume however that population trends followed those of neighbouring cities and towns – staying relatively stable during the war (probably between 300-500 people), increasing slightly after 1945 as refugees and survivors from Bukovina moved west to establish a new life, then decreasing drastically in the ‘50s and ‘60s as mass migration commenced. By the time of the revolution in ’89, there were probably 10-20 people, mostly elderly. Services ceased being held shortly thereafter. Today the abandoned synagogue and surrounding grounds, which include the former Rabbi’s house, the Mikvah, Jewish school (now a public school) and community offices, testify to the relative affluence and established presence of the erstwhile community.

⁷ Ibid, 464.

⁸ Gyemant, Ladislau. *Evreii din Transilvania: Destin istoric.* (Cluj-Napoca: Institutul Cultural Român, 2004), 288-289.