

HOLY STONES

Remnants of Synagogues in Poland

DRAWINGS

Joseph Cempla



DVIR PUBLISHERS * TEL AVIV

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INTRODUCTION
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In the midst of the havoc of the First World War S. J. Ansky produced a historical record in his classic study, "The Destruction of the Jews in Poland, Galicia and Bukovina". There he told of the destruction wrought by the various invaders who passed through the Jewish towns, quarters and hamlets that lay in the vicinity of the East European Fronts. Ansky was deeply moved by the vandalism displayed towards the synagogues and houses of study, which included such valuable artistic monuments as fortress synagogues on the one hand and wooden synagogues on the other. Only when that war came to an end, however, did it prove possible to assess the full dimensions of the havoc wrought. Historians of Jewish Poland, such as Balaban and Schipper, then sorrowfully declared that rare treasures of Jewish art had been pillaged, or were lost for ever; and that among these were the last historic remains of ancient communities.

Yet in his classic work Ansky could still relate how he succeeded in "rescuing" the treasures of the old fortress synagogue in Lutzk. "The Lutzk community", he wrote, "gave me a large case containing ancient treasures belonging to their Old Synagogue. Among these were a document of the eighteenth century; two silver candelabra on which various designs had been engraved by an artist of the end of the sixteenth or early seventeenth century; a silver ewer for Levites; a *hadass* for spices, a Torah pointer and a dish, all silver and of finest antique workmanship; two curtains for the Holy Ark, and an old table-cloth embroidered in gold thread. Their value was between twenty and thirty thousand roubles. I brought all these articles to Petersburg in 1918. When the Soviet Government proposed to take possession of the Jewish Museum I deposited the case, together with four others filled to overflowing with numerous articles, in the Alexander the Third Museum from which I obtained a receipt. All the cases are still there..."

At that time Professor Balaban could demand that "an inventory of what was left" should be taken. "For if we do not do that now, everything that our fathers fashioned on this soil in the course of nine hundred years will be lost."

Those who recorded Jewish history in Poland, and those who loved Jewish art in that country, never imagined that the day would come when their vital, effervescent Jewish community with its magnificent history would be blotted out; and that, as though by the sweep of a hand, thousands of synagogues and graveyards would vanish together with museum collections and libraries; all the great artistic achievement of long generations of Jewish craftsmen and artists.



The first isolated attempts to register the Jewish art treasures which were destroyed, damaged or located during the campaign of destruction waged against Polish Jewry (and including synagogues, buildings, ritual objects, etc.) were made as late as 1953. The Polish Ministry of Culture and Art published a short essay by Joseph Sandel on "Jewish Religious Art", in its "Works and Documents of the Reparations Office" (No. 13, Warsaw 1953). At about the same time the research worker Hannah Kubiak published a description of "Memorials of Jewish Architecture in Poland" in the Bulletin of the Jewish Historical Institute (Issues 2—3 and 4, Warsaw, 1953), listing about thirty synagogues which had either been completely destroyed or of which mere vestiges were left; and these only in the regions remaining in Polish possession after the War. However, the scanty material listed in these publications can give no more than a very faint idea of the dimensions of the terrible calamity.

A campaign commenced to record the remains of synagogues and cemetery gravestones. Its initiators, Eliahu Golomb of Vilna and the Polish painter Joseph Cempla, Professor at the Cracow Academy of Fine Arts, did not select renowned communities or special sites and subjects which were of artistic or historic "interest". Since they were not concerned with scholarly and scientific research, they quite correctly preferred a "planar" method, and travelled through extensive areas of Great Poland. They did not overlook communities which had once been cities and mothers in Israel, nor did they disregard small and outlying hamlets. And so they came to include within their artistic purview the remains of the interesting types of Polish Synagogue buildings. The most ancient and rarest in Poland are those with two aisles going back to the Fourteenth—Sixteenth centuries (such as the Old Synagogues in Cracow and the Sandomierz Synagogue) and built after the style of the famous synagogues of Worms, Regensburg and Prague (Altneuschul), whose archetype was discovered only a few years ago in the Nachmanides (Ramban) Synagogue in the Old City of Jerusalem. Then come a number of Renaissance synagogues of the end of the 16th and early 17th centuries (the "High Synagogue" and the Popper Synagogue in Cracow, as well as the synagogues of Zamość, Szczepleszyn, Pińczów, Wodzisław, Kolbuszowa) which serve as evidence of the beneficial effect exerted by the Italian Renaissance on Jewish culture in Poland in general, and particularly in the field of ritual art; and Baroque synagogues with four central pillars, in which the Almemor was first given a logical and aesthetic position in the centre of the

building. Among these synagogues the most interesting, both artistically and historically, are the fortress structures of the 17th century which were intended not only for prayer but also for self-defence in times of war and riot (such as the Synagogues in Rzeszów). Finally, mention should be made of the classic-style synagogues of the 18th and 19th centuries in Łaszczów and Modliborzyce, which were built under the influence of West European architectural styles.

To round off the characteristic styles of Jewish religious architecture in Poland for the purposes of the present collection, there should have been some specimens of wooden synagogues, those small houses of prayer with their original styles, whose interior ornamentation and wall paintings were so rich in Jewish folk motives. Of these, however, the Nazis have left no trace; neither in Poland nor in the neighbouring countries.



Cempla's drawings with their fine line and tender mood are significant not only artistically speaking but also, and maybe chiefly, as historic documents. For the Survey in the course of which they were recorded was undertaken under circumstances incomparably more tragic than the comparable scholarly and artistic expeditions of Ansky or Szydlowski during and after the First World War. The dimensions of the ruin and destruction they set out to trace have nothing with which they can be compared in Jewish history or in the records of national suffering anywhere.

Almost all the spots visited by Golomb and Cempla had been left empty of their Jewish inhabitants. Nothing was left, not even the remains of the dead. For in some cases the Jewish graveyards had been turned into public parks, while on occasion the gravestones had been taken by vandals and used as paving stones, or even as whetstones. In some towns no traces of the Jewish past were left. Still remains were discovered of synagogues which the savages had had no time to destroy. But now these have been given a new function. They have been used as storehouses, grain-stores or places of amusement.

The thousand-years-old Jewish community of Poland, whose beginnings almost coincide with the commencement of Polish history, created not only a national culture of its own but also an art with a strikingly original folk coloration. Its artistic values include both the monuments of the Jewish past and also their natural landscape, the Jewish street or market place, where the pulsing life of the community was always to be felt.

For this reason the artist has supplemented his sketches of ruined synagogues and remains of gravestones by a number of sketches of Jewish quarters in Cracow, Warsaw, Kazimierz and Zamość; and has given us some conception of the charm and colour which were so characteristic of such places.

DAVID DAVIDOWICZ



The artist Joseph Cempla was born at Biala (Bielsko) in 1918 to an impoverished artizan family. He spent the years of his childhood in the Jewish Quarter of his birthplace, and his talent for drawing and painting was discovered when he was still a child. After completing his studies at the local secondary school he was admitted to the Government Institute for Plastic Arts in Cracow.

When Cracow was occupied by the Nazis he was permitted to continue his studies for some little time. And here an interesting detail should be recorded, which sheds light on the artist's personality: Since Jews were not permitted to attend art schools during the period of the German Occupation, he "shared" the knowledge he had gained at the Institute with his Jewish friends, and more particularly with his comrade, the artist Marisha Dawidowicz.

In 1941 he was subjected to persecution by the Gestapo, and was compelled to leave Cracow. During that difficult period he was supported by his Jewish friends, though their position was even more tragic than his own.

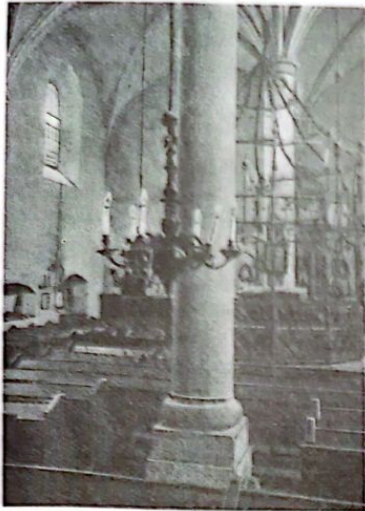
When the War came to an end he returned to Cracow in order to continue his studies at the Academy for Fine Arts. Some years ago he was appointed Professor of Arts there.

Cempla devotes himself with much affection to the graphic arts, and in particular to architectural drawings. Among his works in this field mention should be made of the magnificent collection of sketches devoted to the Wawel Royal Palace in Cracow (issued in three volumes) and to Bielsko where he was born. Among his recent works particular mention should be made of his series, "Relics of Jewish Art in Poland", portraying those vestiges which have survived the Catastrophe. He envisaged this as a memorial to his Jewish artist friends and martyrs.

Cempla is a renowned draughtsman, and one of the outstanding graphic artists of Poland.

1. The Old Synagogue in Cracow

The "Old Synagogue" is one of the oldest Jewish houses of prayer both in Cracow and in the whole of Poland. It was built in the 14th. century (in the 13th., according to Essenwein) in Romanesque style.



Cracow, Interior of the Old Synagogue (before the destruction).

In the course of time it underwent many changes and some Gothic elements such as the vaulted ceiling were added, as well as others from the Renaissance; more particularly the attic in the Cracow Renaissance styles, which serves as a handsome exterior ornament to the building. The changes were carried out according to the plans of the Italian artist, Matteo Santi Gucci of Florence. The Twentieth Century reconstruction was the work of the architect Prof. Zigmunt Hendel.

The "Old Synagogue" in Cracow is a classic ex-

ample of a two-aisled Polish synagogue. Its interior is divided into two aisles by means of two central pillars along the east-west axis. In this respect it resembles the wellknown two-aisled synagogues of Worms and Prague (the Altneuschul). Between the two central pillars rises the Almemor which was constructed of wrought iron.

The treasury of the Old Synagogue was one of the richest in Poland. It contained many valuable ritual objects, particularly *parochiuth* (curtains for the Holy Ark), as well as historic documents, etc.

The Old Synagogue, which was destroyed by the Nazis, is one of the few Jewish monuments in Poland to have been restored thanks to the initiative of the Cracow National Council. It will serve as a Museum of Jewish Antiquities in Poland.

2. The Sandomierz Synagogue

The synagogue of Sandomierz, once one of the famous communities in Poland, also belongs to the two-aisled type, Kandel has proved that it was built in the 13th. century. Balaban, however, while not imputing any doubts as to its antiquity, is of opinion that the original building was destroyed and the new synagogue was erected to replace it, possibly on its very foundations.

Though it was a relatively modest structure, the synagogue had exceptionally large windows which were constructed at considerable height, doubtless for security reasons, as well as flattish pilasters which ran the full height of the building. Its "broken" picturesque roof with its two storeys, covered with zinc plate, was reminiscent of the roofs of the wooden synagogues.

The walls and vaulted ceiling of the building were decorated with handsome frescoes interspersed with prayers and sayings of the Jewish sages. Ornamentation on the walls included ancient brackets decorated with eagles and Polish symbols. Part of these were confiscated under the Tzarist regime as being indicative of their Polish origin.

The synagogue was destroyed by the Nazis. Nothing is now left except the walls and the roof. It may be mentioned here that after the Catastrophe the Synagogue was made a research subject for students of architecture at the Warsaw Polytechnic.

3. The Kazimierz Quarter in Cracow (Joseph Street and the "High Synagogue")

In the Old Jewish Quarter known as Kuzmark (Kazimierz), which went back to the 14th. century and was once known as the "Jews' City", it was possible to find most of the surviving architectural monuments, including the "High Synagogue", a classic specimen of Jewish religious renaissance building in Poland.

The Synagogue was built at the end of the 16th. century. It was called "High" because the prayer hall was on its second floor. Its modest front, whose only ornaments were its powerful buttresses and lofty windows, hid one of the most beautiful interiors to be found among the old synagogues of Cracow. The lofty barrel-vault of the hall was divided into a number of sections by parallel bands supported by pilasters, and plastic ornaments in the Renaissance style adorned these bands.

The Holy Ark was made of wrought iron, like most of the Holy Arks of the better-known Cracow synagogues. The curves of the ironwork were particularly graceful, and were a fine example of the work of the anonymous Cracow artists of the 16th. century.

The "High Synagogue" was one of the first in Poland to be adorned with wall paintings on Biblical themes, such as the Offering of Isaac and Noah's Ark, depicting human beings.

All that is now left of the "High Synagogue" is the front wall.



Cracow, The Holy Ark of the "High Synagogue" (before the destruction).

4. The Popper Synagogue, Cracow

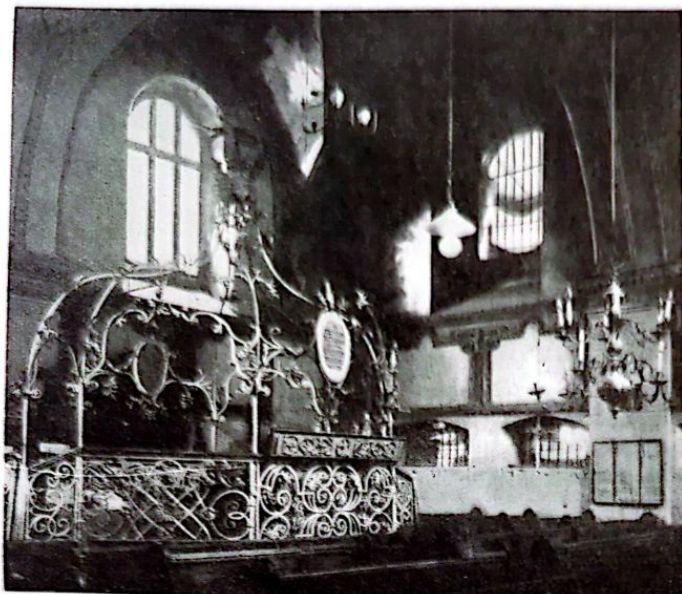
This small Renaissance Synagogue was built in 1620 by Zev (Wolf) Bocian, who was also known as Popper of the Chęciny community. Its longish prayer hall was also covered with a barrel vault. The deep and lofty windows gave evidence of the considerable thickness of the walls. Like the "High Synagogue" the building was notable for its powerful buttresses which supported the walls. Of the interior special mention should be made of the Holy Ark, which was constructed in the form of an iron gate. The Ark was ornamented with the Jewish motif of the four beasts, leopard, eagle, deer and lion, which symbolise the ideal qualities of Man. This is based on the saying of Rabbi Yehuda ben Teima, recorded in Aboth, Chapter V, 23, which runs as follows: "Be daring as the leopard and swift as the eagle and speedy as the deer and brave as the lion in doing the will of thy Father in Heaven."

This small synagogue was once one of the wealthiest in Cracow, thanks to the generosity of its builder and founder.

5. The Market-place in Zamość

The square market-place in Zamość is one of the most picturesque in the old Polish towns. In its centre rises the 17th. century Town Hall, built according to the plans of the Italian architect Bernardino

Morandi of Padua. Round it are houses bearing renaissance and baroque ornamentation, including the House of the Zamojskis, were the founders of the city. The Jewish life of the town was centred in



Zamość. Interior of the Synagogue (before the destruction).

this square. By the town hall stood the Jewish carters, while the Jewish merchants and shopkeepers had their stands and stores under the arcades of the buildings, known as the "Old Market Arcades". The Jews of Zamość were therefore often referred to as "The Arcade Jews" by the townsfolk.

This square provided the background for the romantic play "At Night in the Old Market" by J. L. Peretz, who was a native of Zamość.

6. The Synagogue in Zamość

The Renaissance Synagogue near the Zamojski House was built at the end of the 16th. or beginning of the 17th. century. The Record of Privileges given by Zamojski to the Sephardi Jews who were among the earliest Jewish settlers in this town provides *inter alia*: "They are given permission to erect a synagogue... and they are authorised to take timber from the Zamojski forests for its construction, also lime and stones, free of charge, in any quantity they desire".

The exterior architecture of the building was modest, and its main ornaments were the pilasters, and between them the windows with their semi-circular arches.

Many architectural features, particularly the "ante-room" in this synagogue, were reminiscent of the magnificent mansions which stood in the market square.

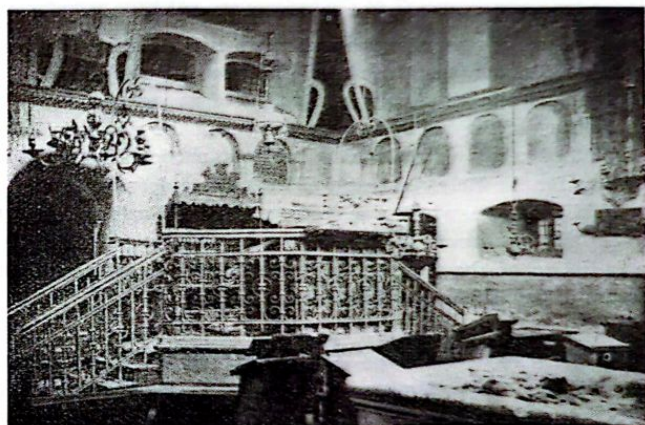
7. The Interior of the Synagogue in Zamość

The interior of the renaissance synagogue was lavishly ornamented with friezes and stucco reliefs showing considerable Baroque influence. On the walls were the particularly noteworthy "tablets, the

edges of whose frames were amply ornamented" (Szyszko-Bohusz). In the prayer hall special mention should be made of the beautiful bimah of iron and the "Children's Choir" built in the form of a balcony for the children of the Hadarim (Hebrew classes). This structure, which was supported by the western wall, had vanished from the interior of the synagogue by the beginning of the present century. Of the magnificent synagogue of the Zamość community, which was destroyed by the Nazis, nothing is left save the walls of the building, with a few interior remains of the mural decorations and the vaulted ceiling.

8. The Synagogue in Szczepczeszyn

The Synagogue of the Szczepczeszyn community was also built at the end of the 16th or beginning of the 17th century, and resembled that of Zamość in style. The building is supported by powerful external buttresses. The prayer-hall with its monastic vaulted ceiling was ornamented with stucco reliefs, painted cornices, polychromes and flat tablets on which prayers were inscribed. The Holy Ark, which was built of stone, was an excellent example of the local late Renaissance style. The furniture of the synagogue included *inter alia* a bimah of wrought iron and a canopied Chair of Elijah. The synagogue was destroyed in November 1939, and nothing is left of it except scorched walls.



Szczepczeszyn. Interior of the Synagogue (before the destruction).

9. The Synagogue in Pińczów

The building was erected at the end of the 16th Century, despite the typical Renaissance interior furnishings such as the Almemor, which is built without any structural connection with the building. Baroque characteristics can be seen in the outer architecture, which are typical of fortress synagogues. Indeed, the picturesque edifice is reminiscent in style of a little citadel, supported from the outside by lofty buttresses.

Professor Szyszko-Bohusz is of the opinion that the building was erected by the builder Yehuda Leib, the artist who ornamented the interior ante-room with original wall paintings.

Ringelblum refers to the destruction of the historic synagogue at Pińczów in his "Notes from the Warsaw Ghetto" and describes it as "one of the great cultural losses of Polish Jewry."

10. The Market place at Kazimierz on the Vistula

The small and picturesque town of Kazimierz on the Vistula used to serve as a regular gathering place for poets and artists, Polish and Jewish alike. In the square market there remain a few stone houses with attics in the baroque style, adorned with reliefs and polychromes. In addition surviving wooden houses were reminiscent of the form of the wooden synagogues. On the Sabbath Eve the market of Kazimierz would glow with the light of hundreds of Sabbath candles.

The Kazimierz community prided itself on its ancient synagogue, and the Jews of Kazimierz used to relate a legend of the *parochet* (or curtain) before the Holy Ark, which was donated by Esterka, the Jewish mistress or wife of King Kazimir the Great, the founder of the town. This synagogue also fell victim to the vandalism of the Nazi invaders.

11. The Synagogue in Wodzisław

The Wodzisław community was referred to in the *Pinkas* (Communal Register) of the Pińczów Community as early as 1661.

The Renaissance synagogue of Wodzisław, one of the few to have survived the catastrophe that befell Polish Jewry, is believed to have been erected in the 16th century. In the opinion of certain historians of art it had originally served as an Arian Church, but was given to the Jews in the 17th century and then transformed into a synagogue. According to another story, however, the Church was presented to the Jews of Wodzisław in the last century by the nobles of the Lanckoroński family to whom it had belonged, as a mark of gratitude because the life of one member of the family had been saved by Jews during the Polish Revolt of 1863.

With its considerable dimensions and many small windows the synagogue does actually resemble a monastery. At the same time the buttresses so characteristic of many ancient synagogues in Poland, and the two-storeyed roof with its wooden tiles, are reminiscent of the picturesque synagogues of Sandomierz, Kazimierz on the Vistula, and Janowiec.

The historian Nussbaum states that Jewish antique stained glass was to be found there. Unfortunately he does not describe it in detail, nor its connection with the synagogue.

12. The Synagogue Interior at Kolbuszowa

The Synagogue of this small community was built in the 16th Century, but its interior is not uniform in style on account of numerous alterations. However, from the remains of the ornaments and typically Jewish subjects of the wall paintings (signs of the Zodiac) it is clear that an artist with good taste gave this interior a handsome yet traditional appearance.

13. The gravestone of Rabbi Shalom Shachna in the Lublin Cemetery

Rabbi Shalom ben Joseph Shachna (1510—1550) was one of the greatest Talmudists produced by Polish Jewry. He was the pupil of Rabbi Jacob Polak, Head of the Lublin Yeshiva, who created the method

of "Pilpul" (casuistics) employed in the study of Talmudic literature. Rabbi Shalom Shachna objected to the publication of his writings, but many disciples "sat at his feet and drank his words with thirst."

14. Two Synagogues in Rzeszów

In Rzeszów there were two synagogues of historic and architectural value. These were "The Old Synagogue" (also known as the Town Synagogue, "Di Shtetishe Shul") and "the New Synagogue" ("Di Neishtetishe Shul"). Sty-

listically they both belong to the early Baroque. The research worker Hannah Kubiak has included the Old Synagogue of Rzeszów among the Renaissance synagogues on account of certain of its elements. Actually however, both synagogues belong to the four-pillared type; not only because their Almehors were placed between four massive central pillars but largely, it would seem, because of the fortress style characteristic of the Baroque synagogues of the 17th Century. In both



Rzeszów. New Synagogue with Bimah
Drawing by G. Loukowski (before the destruction)

synagogues the strong buttresses are well preserved, together with the large windows set at a considerable height for security reasons.

During the German Occupation these synagogues were used as storehouses, and were burnt when the Nazis retreated. Nothing is left of them now except ruins without vaults or roofs.

15. The Jews' Street (The Wązki Dunaj) in Warsaw

The Wązki Dunaj street (the Narrow Dunaj) is thought to be one of the oldest Jewish streets in Warsaw. Jews lived here as early as the 13th Century, while in the year 1564 it was named "the Jewish Street". In the 19th Century the name was changed "Abrahamowska" (Abraham Street).

At the beginning of the 15th Century the street included a typical "Shulhof" (Synagogue Square) which contained a synagogue, cemetery, hospital, slaughterhouse and probably a "bath house" well. The Synagogue stood on the present site of the house No. 7 Wązki Dunaj.

16. The Gravestone of Dov Beer ben Reb Shmuel Zbitkower

The versatile and talented 18th century Jewish artist David Feiländer left a considerable mark on the history of Polish Jewry, not only as a builder of synagogues in Wyszogród, Piotrków, Kępno, Łęczyca and Działoszyń, but also as a sculptor and designer of interior furniture such as the Holy Arks and balconies for (

ren's choirs in Wyszogród and Grójec. In addition he carved grave-stones in cemeteries. There now survives in the Warsaw cemetery a single gravestone beautifully carved by him in memory of Ber Sonnenberg, son of the renowned Shmuel Zbitkower, founder of the family from which the philosopher Henri Bergson derived.

A polychrome relief is found on each side of the monument. On the front the artist depicted a landscape showing a river (the Vistula) and a barge (indicating the commercial interests of the deceased), and a city surrounded by a wall with towers. The relief at the back illustrates "By the Rivers of Babylon" — a walled city beside a river. The Tower of Babel rises amid trees, on the boughs of which are hung musical instruments. This theme of "By the Rivers of Babylon" was one to which Friedlaender was very partial. It is found in a mural painting at the wooden synagogue of Grójec.

The magnificent monument was made at the beginning of the 19th century, and is therefore one of Friedlaender's last works.

17. The Synagogue in Łaszczów

The *Vaad Arba Aratzot* (The Council of the Four Lands which was the highest authority in the autonomous Jewish Community of Poland for two and a half centuries) met at Łaszczów in 1719. A synagogue was built there at the end of the 18th or beginning of the 19th century. In its pleasantly classical lines it is reminiscent of the country seat of a nobleman.

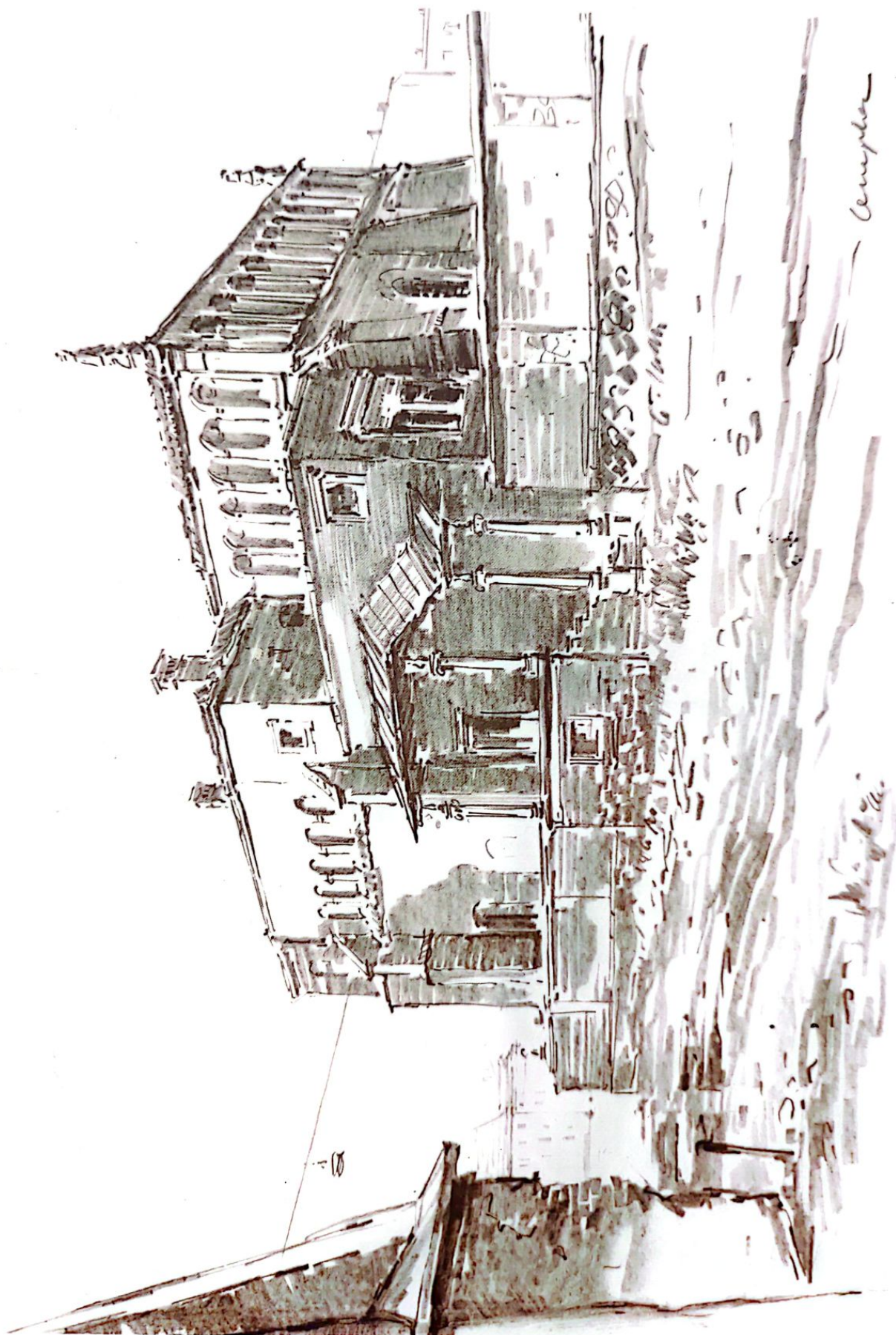
18. The Synagogue in Modliborzyce

The small Modliborzyce Community is referred to in a document of the session of the *Vaad Arba Aratzot* which was held at Jarosław in 1731. Here the Synagogue also had classicist lines characteristic of Polish provincial architecture in the early 19th Century. It was remarkable for its splendid front and particularly beautiful portico.

The synagogue was destroyed during the German Occupation and nothing is left of it save the remains of its front.

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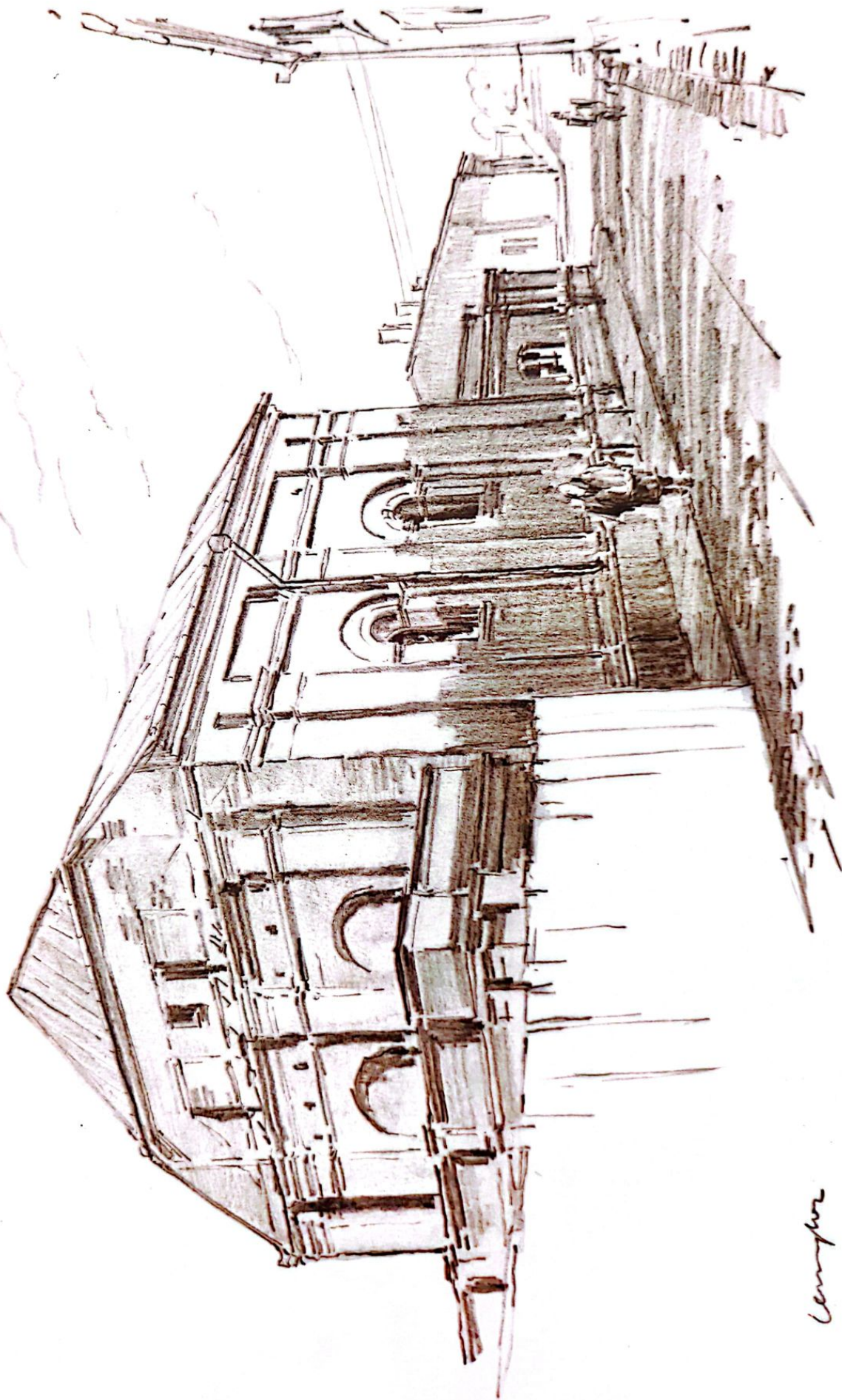


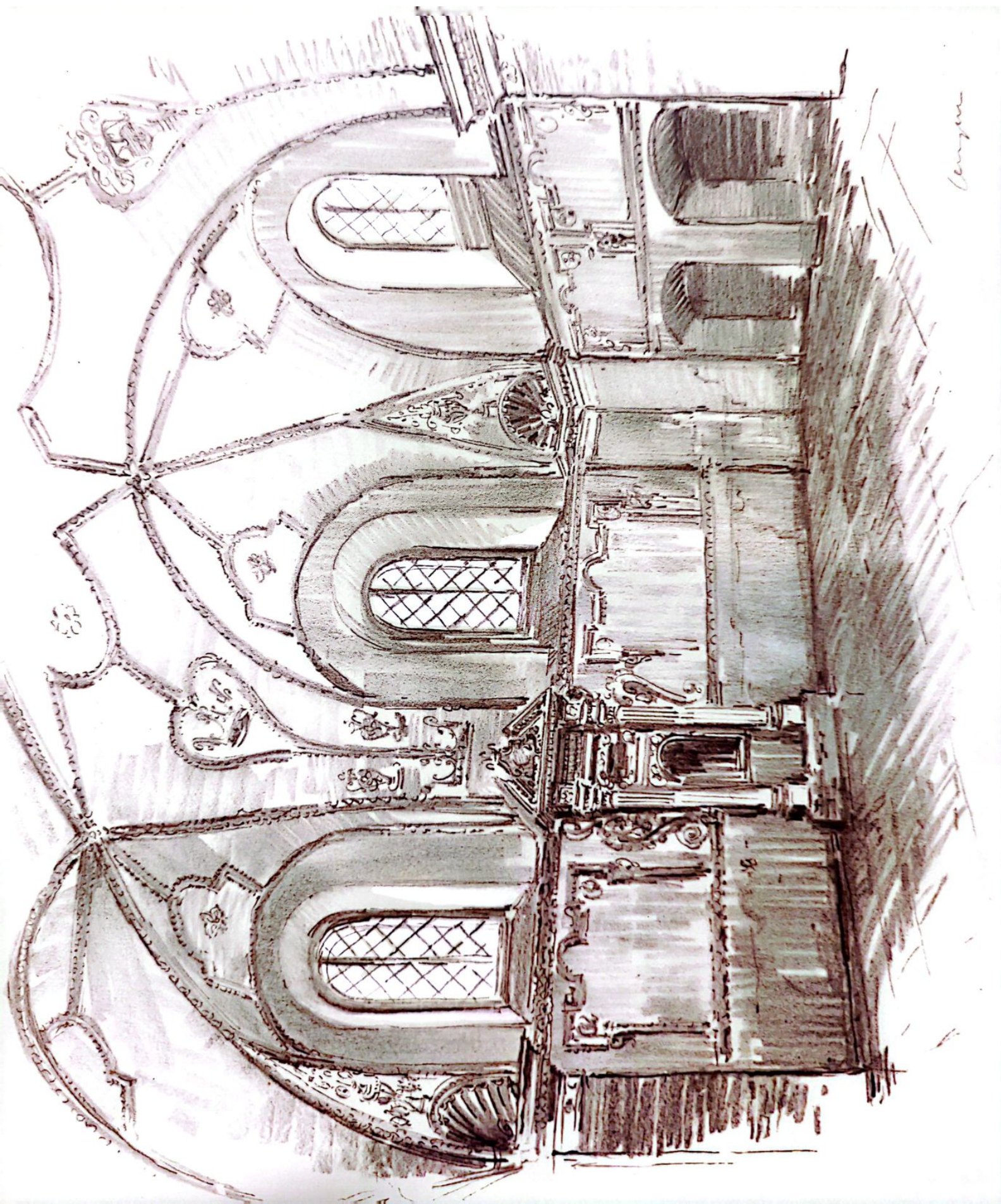












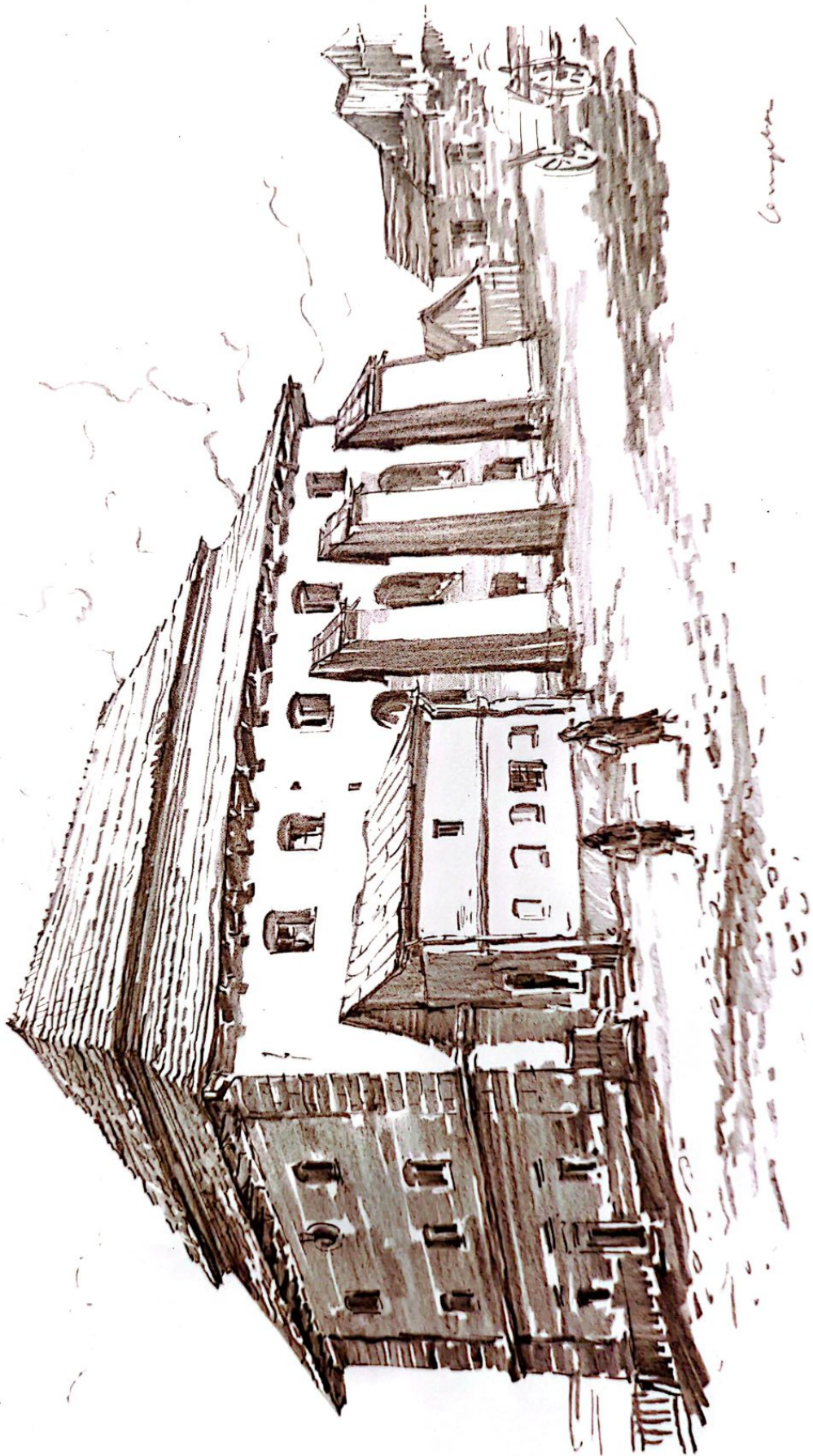
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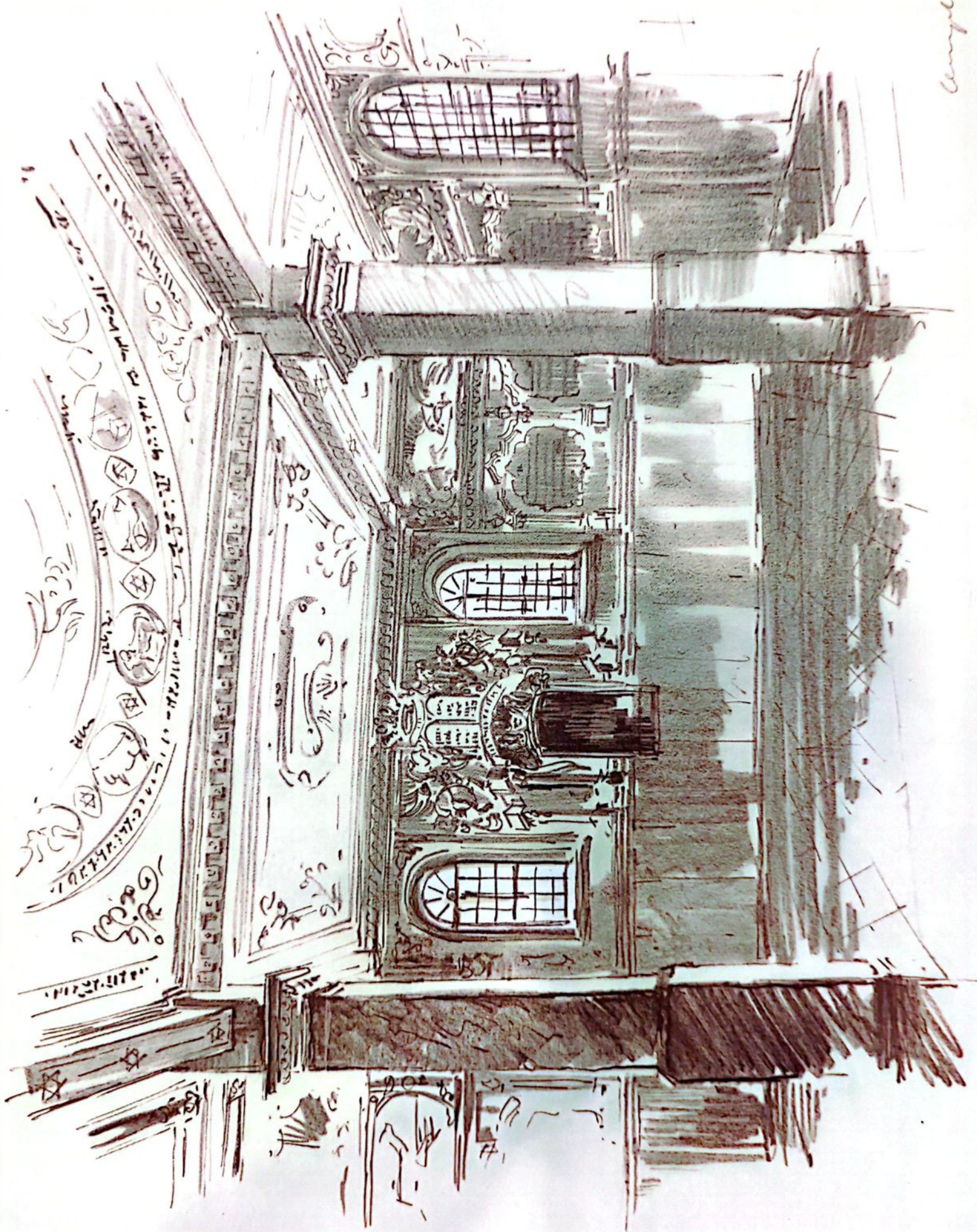




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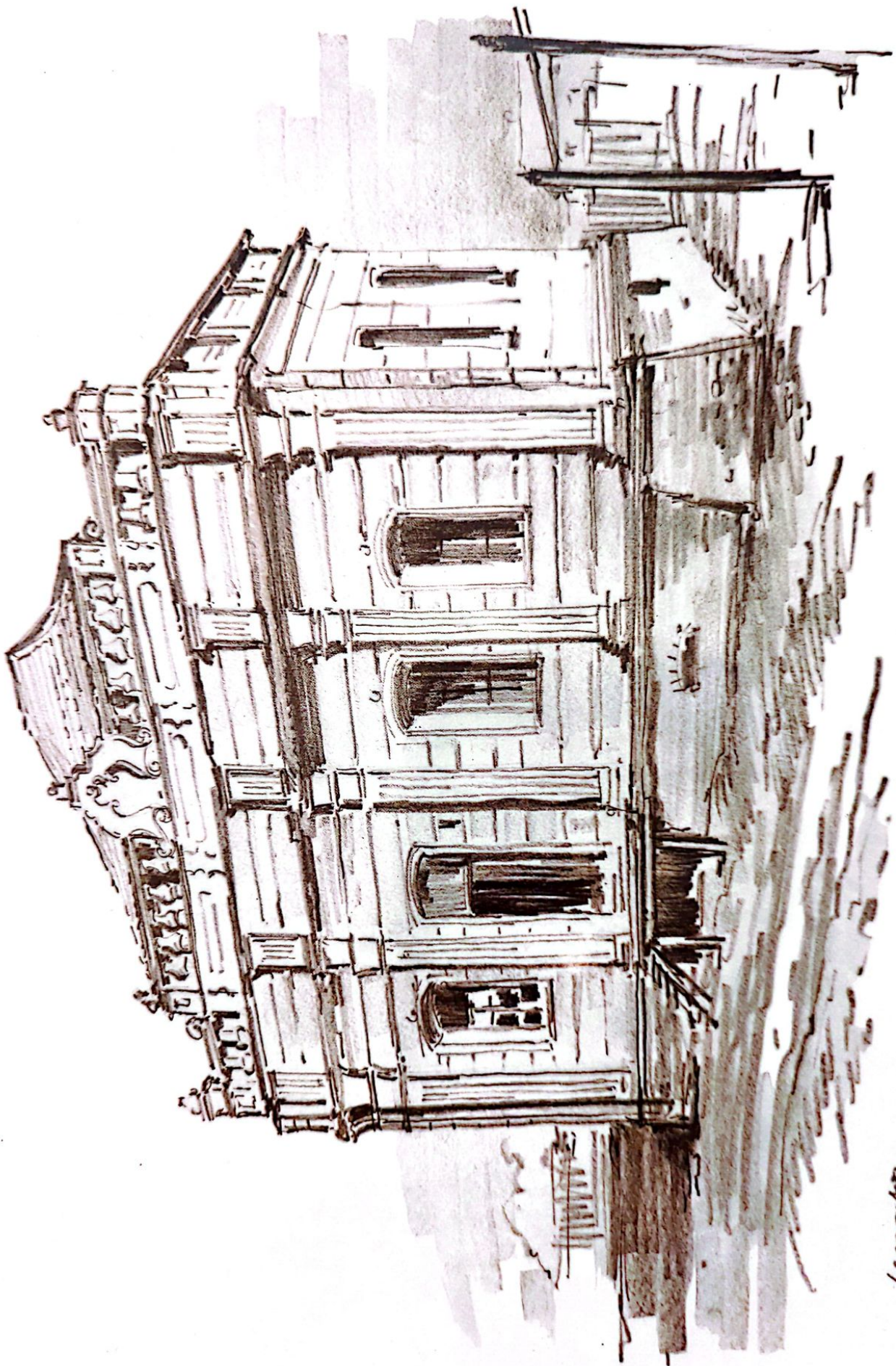
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תל - אביב



הוצאת דביר