

BY NESANEL GANTZ

THE LOST SHUL MURAL

The Restoration of a Lost Shul Mural Bridges Two Worlds in Vermont

In 1910 a small Orthodox *shul* in Burlington, Vermont, engaged a young artist from Kovno, Lithuania, to create a mural for their *shul*. The congregation dwindled, and the *shul* eventually closed in 1939. When it was subsequently turned into apartment units in 1986, it seemed that the stunning mural depicting motifs that echoed Torah and folk themes of the lost world of 19th-century Eastern Europe would be lost forever. And, indeed, this mural, an incomparable artistic and cultural artifact and bridge between two lost worlds, had disappeared... until now.

The tale of the lost mural that will soon be restored to its former glory is a story of the history of Jewish life in America and the longing of Jewish immigrants to bring a bit of their Old World tradition with them to the New. The saga has electrified the Jews of Vermont and beyond, engaging artists, historians and a group of interested parties who appreciate the significance of this major cultural find.

To discover the story behind the mural, *Ami* interviewed several experts on the art of the painting and the history of the town it was created in.



Noted Jewish art historian Dr. Samuel Gruber (left), founder of the consulting firm Gruber Heritage Global and lecturer at Syracuse University, spoke with us just after returning to Syracuse from working on the mural restoration. Dr. Gruber is an active member of the team that will ultimately restore the mural, and has lectured on the significance of the mural and its importance to the history of Jewish art.



Aaron Goldberg, a longtime activist for the restoration of the mural and an amateur historian and archivist from the Ohavi Zedek *shul*, has been involved in the mural project since 1985. He is a sixth generation descendant of the original Lithuanian settlers in Burlington, Vermont, and he provided many of the details of the history of the Jewish community in Burlington.

THE ORIGINS OF THE MURAL

In the late 1800s, Burlington, Vermont, consisted of a tight-knit *frum kehillah* made up primarily of Jews who had emigrated from Lithuania, most from a small *shtetl* called Cekiske. Congregation Ohavi Zedek, the largest *shul* in Burlington, was founded in 1885—back when membership dues were 20 cents a month. The Chai Adam Synagogue was founded a few years later, in 1889, and a third *shul*, Ahavas Geirim, consisting of German immigrants, was founded in 1906. All three *shuls* were within a block of one another, and all were Orthodox; collectively the congregations totaled 1,000 people. While the congregants had their differences, they all got along and, in fact, many were related to each other.

The *frum* community in turn-of-the-century Burlington was named “Little Jerusalem” for their staunch observance of Torah-true traditions in America. Yiddish was the *lingua franca*, and Ohavi Zedek in fact hired their first English-speaking rabbi only in the ‘40s.

It’s unclear exactly when the mural was executed, but sometime between the years 1910 and 1918 the Chai Adam Synagogue undertook the renovation of their *shul*. Desiring to recreate the *shtetl ta’am* and artistic style they remembered from pre-World-War-I Lithuania, they hired a young Lithuanian artist named Ben Zion Black who had recently emigrated from Kovno, Lithuania. Black spent six months painting a huge impressive mural, originally 100 feet by 50 feet in length, on the plaster walls.

The mural extended the height of two floors, with the lower part situated behind

the *aron kodesh*, and it was designed in three sections, featuring many intricate interwoven designs characteristic of those used in the Jewish folk art popular in turn-of-the-century Lithuania. The ceiling, of which nothing remains other than two small fragments, originally depicted a beautiful blue sky, graced with soaring birds. For his master work, which took a full six months of labor, Black was paid \$200, presumably the going rate for the time.



Ben Zion Black

“Black never painted another *shul* mural,” Dr. Gruber says. “He later painted backdrops for the theater, but apparently this was his only synagogue mural. After a brief career as an artist, Black opened a shop called B. Black: Signs of a Better Kind, and enjoyed some success manufacturing commercial signs, supplying almost all the store signs in Burlington. Though he remained a secular Jew, Black was steeped in Jewish tradition and was deeply attached to the ethos of Yiddish culture, which he considered the life-blood of Jewish civilization.”

THE LOST MURAL

The difficult economic situation of the 1930s brought about the merger of the Chai Adam *shul* and Ohavi Zedek. The combined congregation relocated into Ohavi Zedek’s premises in 1939.

After the merger, the Chai Adam *shul* no longer functioned as a synagogue and became the site of a series of commercial enterprises. One can only imagine the converted building, once a vibrant *shul*, converted into a carpet warehouse and retail store, with its walls incongruously bedecked with vibrant images that no longer gazed down at a congregation. In 1986, the owners of the building decided to convert the structure into apartment units, a project that threatened the demise of the mural. Enter Aaron Goldberg and Jeff Potash, amateur historians and archivists from Ohavi Zedek. Goldberg tried to find someone to rescue the mural but could not raise the funds necessary that would enable such a large move. But he did not want it to be lost forever, and he convinced the owners of the building to construct a protective wall in front of it to at least preserve it to some extent. Before it was sealed off, for what seemed might be forever, Goldberg reached out to Ben Zion Black’s daughters, who helped defray the cost of professional photographs, which are today the sole color representations of the mural and will serve restorers as the blueprint from which to reconstruct the mural.

A CHANCE

The town of Burlington, Vermont, is very proud of “Little Jerusalem” and the vestiges of the flourishing community that was the center of Jewish life a century ago. Vermont Public Television ran a comprehensive feature on Orthodox life in this quintessentially American town. With Aaron Goldberg and Jeffrey Potash as consultants, the program documented the history of Burlington’s Jews and featured the lost mural and the 1986 photos. The night the documentary aired turned out to be the number one fundraiser in Vermont

Public Television's history. The unexpected recognition and hoopla that the feature aroused gave Goldberg the idea that perhaps this would be his chance to do something about the mural; the timing seemed to be right. He approached the Jewish-owned company that owned the building, Offenhartz, Inc., and discussed the mural with the owners. They were interested, and they pledged to donate the mural to Ohavi Zedek in memory of their father—that is, if Goldberg could somehow get it out...if it even still existed.

LIVING HISTORY

Goldberg began by renting the apartment whose outside wall was covering the mural. With the owner's permission, he then made an exploratory breach in the wall, and there was the mural in all its glory! The greatest part of the original mural had been destroyed way before 1986; in fact the whole bottom portion of

the mural was gone, and all that remained was a part of the second floor mural.

The mural's destruction was so devastating that it seemed almost too late to save the precious treasure, and Goldberg knew he needed outside help. He reached out to Dr. Gruber, who was inspired to support the project the moment he laid eyes on the mural. "They sent me pictures and then they invited me down as a scholar-in-residence. Once I saw the mural and realized its significance, I was hooked. You have to understand that this mural bridges gaps of tradition and of a time gone by; it is also very rare. *Shul* murals, which were very common before the Holocaust, are almost non-existent today; they were almost all destroyed by the Nazis. In America there are some small murals, but nothing of this magnitude and nothing of this style. Ben Zion Black's work shows no American influence at all, but is a remembrance of the authentic style as he remembered it

from Kovno. Here we have, in essence, a vision of *shtetl* life in pre-World-War-I Europe, transplanted into a sort of *shtetl* that had been recreated, in of all places, Vermont. And against all odds, it survived until this day. That's special."

THE RESTORATION PROCESS

"The mural had seriously deteriorated," explained Gruber. "We hired a professional conservator, Constance Silver, an expert in preserving old murals and paintings, to clean the mural and oversee its eventual transfer. Silver explained that the paint is extremely unstable, since 85 percent of it has lifted away from the plaster on which it was painted. What this means is that the paint is extremely brittle and the oil base that bound the paint to the wall seeped into the plaster, making it extremely difficult to work with. Fortunately," Silver said, "we got it just in the nick of time; another few years and it would be unsalvageable."

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The community in turn-of-the-century Burlington was named “Little Jerusalem” for their staunch observance of Torah-true traditions.

Ms. Silver’s conservation work, which she estimates will take approximately two and a half months to finish, entails going over every inch of the surviving 18 foot by 10 foot mural and cleaning the paint while stabilizing it at the same time, a painstakingly slow process, as it is encrusted with years of soot and grime. Removing the old, brittle plaster wall in one piece is a delicate and complicated task, and part of the work includes finding which chemicals can be added to the plaster to strengthen it so that it survives the move. In addition, a cloth will be attached to the paint with a light adhesive so that if any paint flakes off during transport, it will not be lost. One of the exciting moments of the recent cleaning, according to Dr. Gruber, was the discovery of the true colors of the mural. While the curtains of the *paroches* depicted on the mural appeared to be green, after a small section had been cleaned they were revealed to be a bright blue, reminiscent of the historical *techeiles* of ancient times.

The restoration project is still in its early stages, and the road ahead is long and expensive. Goldberg established a website www.lostshulmural.org to provide a platform to raise funds, but there is still a long way to go. The move alone is estimated to cost upwards of \$150,000, not to mention the monthly rent to that point, of \$1,900. They hope to raise the money for this first stage by May, as they face a deadline of June 1, so that the move can be completed during the summer.

The lost *shul* mural has received the endorsement of many public figures, including Vermont’s former Jewish governor Mrs. Madeleine May Kunin, herself a Holocaust survivor.

The researchers have not entirely given up on the missing sections, either. Dr. Gruber told *Ami* that he will soon begin

a year-long investigative project to locate and interview people who might remember parts of the mural.

I asked Dr. Gruber how the mural is viewed from an art historian’s perspective. “It’s not like Michelangelo,” joked Dr.



Gruber. “However, it is a great example of traditional Jewish art. Remember, very few murals survived the Holocaust. I have seen fragments from Ukraine, but nothing this impressive. Ninety-nine percent of all Jewish murals from pre-World-War-II Europe are gone—except this one. It’s a great treasure and a transplantation of Lithuanian *shtetl* life pre-World War I to America. It’s a survivor and a bridge to another world, a lost world. It’s very beautiful and awe-inspiring.”

BRIDGING TWO WORLDS

The lost *shul* mural brings together two different worlds: the world of a small town in America where everyone spoke Yiddish, where they cherished and appreciated the

life and *Weltanschauung* of the European *shtetl* and the world of the *alte heim* of their memory that they tried to recreate in some way on these shores.

Since the early 1950s, Ohavi Zedek has been a Conservative synagogue. Ahavas Geirim is the sole remaining Orthodox *shul* of the original three *shuls* in Burlington, and it struggles to find a *minyan*. A new spark has been lit with the establishment of a new and flourishing Chabad *shul* under the auspices of Rabbi Yitzchok Raskin.

Rabbi Raskin expressed his enthusiasm for the mural project to *Ami*: “The lost *shul* mural is a powerful reminder of how our forebears strove to preserve the rich and vibrant traditions of Eastern European Judaism as they built a new community in Burlington, Vermont. By preserving this surviving piece of rare art, we will be able to educate and inspire future generations with appreciation of the sacred traditions of Torah and *mitzvos* to which our forebears dedicated their lives.”

In its new installation in the lobby of the Ohavi Zedek Synagogue, the historic mural will occupy a discreet space where it will be available to be viewed by all people and Jews from across all spectrums. It is intended to be the centerpiece of an educational curriculum that will teach future generations about the disappeared world that preceded us and laid our foundation.

Although the mural originally included numerous Hebrew inscriptions, the only words that survive are the two on top of the depiction of a crown—*Kesser Torah*. One hundred years ago, there was a small community of Jews in the “Little Jerusalem,” of Burlington, Vermont, who lived a life of Torah, according to the ways of their forefathers. How fitting it is that an actual surviving remnant of those times can serve as the bridge to join Jews together once again. ●