



United States
of America

Congressional Record

PROCEEDINGS AND DEBATES OF THE 114th CONGRESS, FIRST SESSION

Vol. 161

WASHINGTON, TUESDAY, JULY 7, 2015

No. 104

Senate

THE LOST SHUL MURAL AT OHAVI ZEDEK SYNAGOGUE

Mr. LEAHY. Mr. President, I am proud to recognize Aaron Goldberg, Jeffrey Potash and the greater Ohavi Zedek community for their tireless efforts in relocating a treasured artifact in our State's Jewish community. For nearly two decades, the historically significant Shul Mural—a 105-year-old rare mural—has sat hidden behind the walls of Chai Adam Synagogue in Burlington's north end district. In May, after years of careful restoration and planning, the mural was safely moved to its new home, where it will finally be displayed to honor a prominent period in our State's Jewish history.

Burlington's Jewish history dates back to the mid-1880s, when a large influx of Lithuanian Jews traveled from Eastern Europe to settle in Vermont. Ohavi Zedek Synagogue was established in 1885 by the Lithuanians, and has since remained a thriving community stronghold for Burlington's Jewish population. In 1889, the Chai Adam Synagogue was created by a group of Orthodox Jews previously aligned with Ohavi Zedek. It is here the Shul Mural was created.

Stretching floor-to-ceiling, the Shul Mural depicts two lions and the Ten Commandments, two iconic symbols in the Jewish faith. The Shul Mural, painted by Ben Zion Black, uses a rare artistic style, one that dates back to before World War II and was prevalent in wooden synagogues across Eastern Europe. At that time, vast murals of iconic, hand-painted images sprawled entire walls and ceilings to capture the imagery held in Jewish Torah readings. The Shul Mural presents a rare folk design mixed with modern painting techniques, yet little is actually known about its genre, as most of these works were sadly destroyed during the Holocaust.

In 1939, Ohavi Zedek and Chai Adam rejoined, and the old Chai Adam was sold and used as retail space and later a rug store. It was here that Aaron Goldberg, a volunteer and historian of Ohavi Zedek Synagogue, discovered the mural. Through the years, the Shul Mural sat uncovered and ill-preserved, until 1986 when the space was renovated to an apartment complex, and Mr. Goldberg along with Ohavi Zedek archivist, Jeffrey Potash, pleaded with the new owner to cover the mural with a false wall so that it would not bear further decay.

Over two decades later, when the apartment building was again sold in 2012, its new owner, Steven Offenhardt, agreed to donate the mural to Ohavi Zedek. The false wall that had covered the Shul Mural for more than 20 years was lifted, and the construction team worked with Constance Silver, a conservator from Brattleboro, to stabilize and recover what was lost. At that point, decades of deterioration had taken their toll, and the once vibrant paint began to dull and flake away. Piece by piece, Constance reinforced and restored the painting.

On May 6, 2015, after decades in hiding, the mural was successfully transported to Ohavi Zedek where it will be cleaned and further restored. The hard work and dedication of the entire team with the support of Burlington's community—which raised over \$400,000 to support the restoration and transportation of this historic piece of art—made this incredible feat possible.

Aaron Goldberg, Jeffrey Potash, Steven Offenhardt, Constance Silver, and the many other members of the Ohavi Zedek and greater Burlington community should be congratulated for their support and dedication to protecting and restoring one of our State's most significant treasures. This important piece of Burlington's Jewish history will finally be on proper display for all to enjoy.

I ask unanimous consent that an article on the Shul Mural from the Burlington Free Press be printed in the Record.

There being no objection, the material was ordered to be printed in the RECORD, as follows:

[From the Burlington Free Press, May 14, 2015]

"Lost" Jewish Mural Finds New Home

(By Zach Despart, Free Press Staff Writer)

When the project was done, it might have appeared to onlookers that a construction crew had no difficulty moving the Lost Shul Mural to a new home in the Old North End.

After all, the construction crew only had to remove the roof of a Hyde Street building, lift via crane a brittle, multi-panel, 105-year-old rare piece of art, place the mural on a flatbed truck, drive it nearly half a mile uphill and, with the strength of many workers, push the artwork, on rollers, into Ohavi Zedek Synagogue.

All in a day's work for a volunteer group of local residents, who for almost three decades have been trying to find a way to move the historic artifact from a hidden alcove on Hyde Street to a more suitable location.

"I had hoped to someday move the mural, but it's been over 29 years we've been waiting for this time," Ohavi Zedek archivist Aaron Goldberg said Wednesday. "It's a remarkable achievement for the community to have this here."

The story of the lost work begins in 1910, when Burlington's Jewish community commissioned Lithuanian artist Ben Zion to paint a mural within the Chai Adam synagogue, which was built on Hyde Street in 1889. The floor-to-ceiling mural contains three panels that depict Jewish iconography, including two lions and the Ten Commandments.

In 1939, Chai Adam merged with Ohavi Zedek and vacated the Hyde Street building.

Congregants, in an effort to preserve the mural, hid the piece behind a false wall. The ownership of the building changed hands several times in the

following decades, and a private owner in 1986 converted the building into apartments.

That year, Goldberg and other archivists persuaded the owner to wall off the mural permanently with Sheetrock, so the art would be safe for a later move. Many tenants over the next two decades never knew the mural was there.

But Burlington's Jewish community never forgot about the lost mural. In 2012, some 26 years since the mural disappeared from public view, the archivists of Ohavi Zedek worked with the owner of the building to uncover the artwork.

They decided to move the artifact to Ohavi Zedek and proudly display the mural in the lobby. For the next three years, a dedicated group of congregants developed a plan for the big move, and raised more than \$400,000.

"This is a very innovative job," Goldberg said. "This took two and a half years of planning."

THE BIG MOVE

The moment Goldberg had waited decades for arrived Wednesday. Shortly after 8 a.m. on the warm, calm morning, crews used a crane to lift off a pre-cut section of the roof of the synagogue-turned-apartment-building on Hyde Street, exposing the old cupola that held the mural.

The mural itself was not visible to onlookers. For protection, it was encased in cushioning made of Chinese silk and other materials. Bob Neeld, the structural engineer, said this project required special attention to minimize any vibrations that could damage the mural.

"Even a three-story building can be built to handle several inches of movement," Neeld said. For this move, Neeld added, the crew was hoping to limit movement "to a couple thousandths of an inch."

The mural itself is made of less than half an inch of plaster on a wood lath. To stabilize the century-old material before the move, crews reinforced the artwork with mortar.

After the roof was off, the crane lifted the fragile mural, encased in a specially built steel frame, from the second floor of the structure and placed the artifact onto a flatbed truck. The mural and frame stood about 12 feet tall and 15 feet wide, and weighed about 6,500 pounds.

Next came a slow parade through the Old North End, as the truck crept north on Hyde Street, east on Archibald Street and south on North Prospect Street, onto the lawn of Ohavi Zedek. A crowd of congregants, many of them with cameras, followed the informal procession. Burlington police blocked the intersections along the way. Perplexed motorists scratched their heads.

In front of the synagogue, another crane lifted the mural onto a makeshift bed of rollers on a wooden "landing pad." Once there, about a dozen laborers pushed the 3-ton mural through an opening into the lobby. Next week, crews will hoist the mural above the lobby, where the art will hang for visitors to see, much as it did on Hyde Street 105 years ago.

Organizers planned the move to take 12 hours, but it took just three—a result engineers chalked up to good weather and meticulous planning.

COMMUNITY SIGNIFICANCE

Thousands of European synagogues—and the ornate murals within the places of worship—were destroyed by the Nazis during the Holocaust. The Lost Shul Mural is one of the few remaining murals from that time period in existence, said Goldberg, the Ohavi Zedek archivist.

Rabbi Joshua Chasan said the restoration of the lost mural was important not only to Burlington's Jewish community, but to Jews around the world.

"It's a benefit to the Jewish people internationally to have a piece of folk art from the world the Nazis destroyed," Chasan said. "In that sense, it's a memorial to those who died in the Holocaust and... to that Jewish world that perished."

Goldberg said that in addition to being a Jewish relic, the lost mural is an important connection to Burlington's rich history of hosting immigrants. Among the European immigrants who settled in Burlington during the 19th century were a group of Lithuanian Jews who moved into the city's North End, a neighborhood that for decades came to be known as Little Jerusalem.

"This is immensely important to the preservation immigration history in Vermont," Goldberg said. "It is the only example of its kind we know of in the U.S. and one of the few remaining remnants in the world."

Janie Cohen, director of the University of Vermont's Fleming Museum, said having such a rare piece of art in Burlington is remarkable.

"The fact there are so few of these left in the world, and we have one in Burlington—it's phenomenal," said Cohen, who watched the move Wednesday.

Former Vermont Gov. Madeleine Kunin, who helped raise money for the move and the restoration, walked with the crowd that followed the mural as the truck traveled through the Old North End.

"Today is so exciting, because many people thought it would never happen: How can you move something that's part of a wall?" she said.

One man on the synagogue lawn had a special connection to the lost art. He remembers seeing the mural 76 years ago. Mark Rosenthal, 84, grew up in Burlington and remembers seeing the mural as a child at Chai Adam in the 1930s.

"My father and I would go on holidays," Rosenthal said. "I remember the whole scene where the mural was, and I'm moved and touched by what is taking place today. I can't believe it's happening."

Patricia Leahy