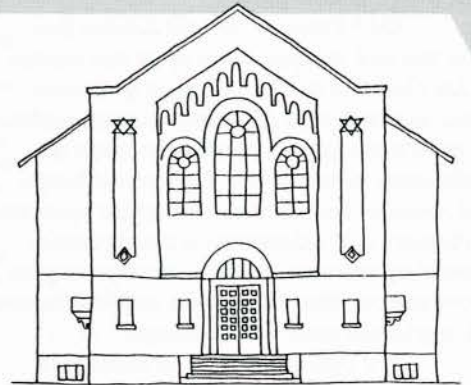


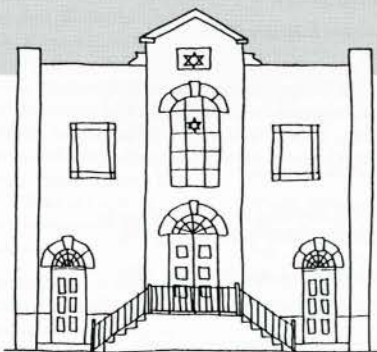
Adath Jeshurun (1904)



Agudath Achim (1912)



Machzikey Hadas (1926)



B'nei Jacob (1931)

The First Synagogues in Ottawa

While some Jews were living in Ottawa almost from its establishment as the capital of Canada, the Jewish community in this city began in earnest in the 1880s, when groups of Jews arrived in Ottawa as part of the wave of emigration from Czarist Russia.¹

In Eastern Europe, prayer services were an integral part of the traditional Jewish Orthodox lifestyle, and therefore it was vital for the early immigrants to have religious services. For these immigrants — many of whom were impoverished — arriving in the new world and having to learn a new language and adjust to a strange and challenging environment, the synagogue served, at least initially, as a comforting link with the world they had left behind.

Since Jewish law defines a synagogue as any place where a quorum of ten males over the age of 13 (*a minyan*) gathers to worship, early congregations in the new world typically began with individuals meeting in private homes. This practice reflected the tradition of the *Shuebls*, or unpretentious prayer rooms. Later, they would rent a space until enough money was saved to buy land to build their own building.

The tight-knit quality of the community and the focused origin of congregants gave rise to the architectural homogeneity of the first synagogues in Ottawa, Adath Jeshurun (1904), Agudath Achim (1912), Machzikey Hadas (1926), and B'nei Jacob (1931) (**figure 1**). These buildings were modelled after Eastern European synagogues, which employed the Romanesque style embellished with Byzantine details. At the end of nineteenth century the Gothic style had become strongly associated with Christianity, and Romanesque was chosen for Canadian synagogues because of its close links to the Eastern European homeland of the Jewish communities.²

b y H a g i t H a d a y a

Figure 1. The first four synagogues in Ottawa.
(Hagit Hadaya, 1994)

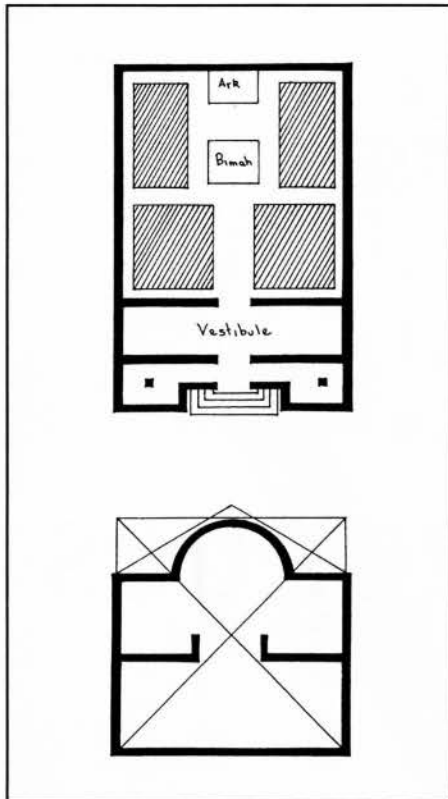
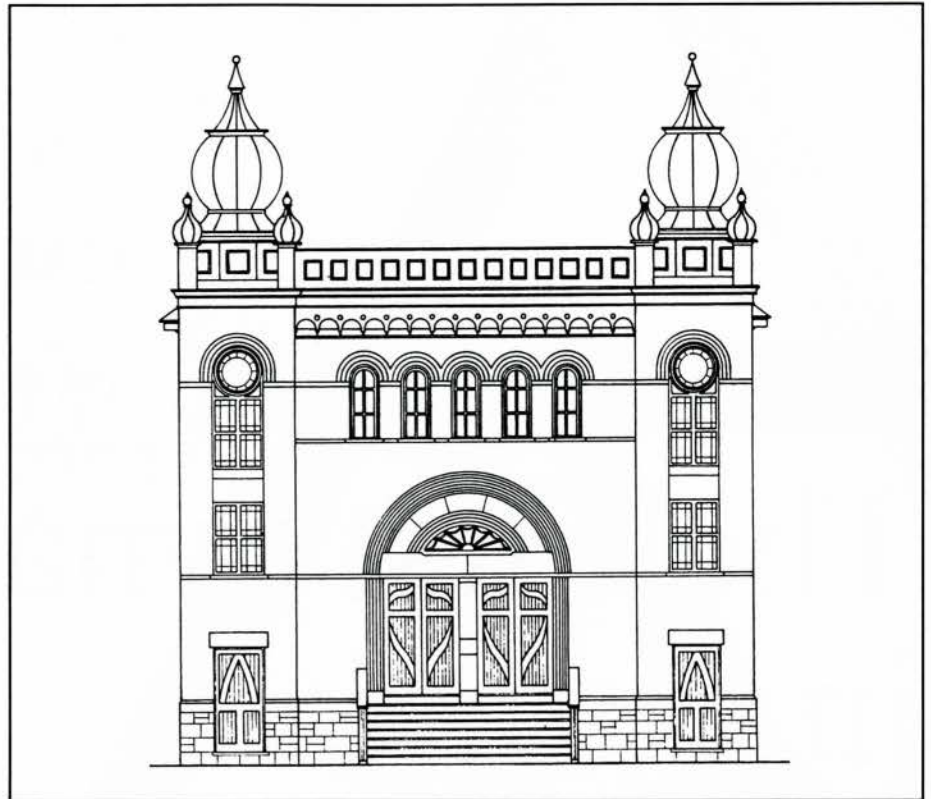


Figure 2 (above). Schematic plan and section of an Eastern European synagogue. (Hagit Hadaya, 1991)

Figure 3 (right). Adath Jeshurun Synagogue (1904), 375 King Edward Street, Ottawa, Ontario; front elevation. (R. Schingh Collection, Ottawa Jewish Historical Society)



Synagogues before the Second World War were commonly built on tight urban residential lots. The placement of these buildings created a uninterrupted connection between the street and the sanctuary, with the latter typically located half a storey above street level (figure 2). This elevated main floor made it possible to have a social hall and/or a study hall on the lower level, with windows for natural light. Since the congregations at the time were Orthodox and required a separate seating section for women, the second floor generally served as the women's gallery. This wrapped around the north, west, and south walls, allowing for a two-storey central space for the sanctuary itself and a visual axis to the Ark, placed at the east wall facing Jerusalem. (Although the practice of placing the Ark on the wall facing Jerusalem was a tradition, it never became a canon.)³

Most of the early Jewish immigrants came from Latvia and Lithuania,⁴ then part of Imperial Russia. The majority who arrived in Ottawa were Orthodox, and became peddlers or carried on small businesses of their own so they would not have to work on the Shabbat.⁵ The popular belief as to why Jews came to Canada's capital was that the cost of a peddler's permit was 10 cents rather than the \$25 charged in other major centres.⁶

Jewish immigrants to Ottawa settled in the Lower Town area northeast of King Edward Avenue and Rideau Street. They probably chose this location because of its affordable housing and its proximity to the market, where goods for peddling could be obtained. By 1889 there were 20 Jewish families settled in Ottawa,⁷ enough to form a *minyán*. As was typical in the rest of Canada, Jewish worshippers in Ottawa followed the pattern of meeting first in one another's home, then renting space until enough money was saved to buy some land and build their own building. Services were first conducted in the homes of the leading members of the day, Moses Bilsky and John Dover, who were the first Jewish settlers in Ottawa.

By 1892 the first congregation was formally formed, and adopted the name of Adath Jeshurun. The first synagogue building of this congregation was located at 264 Murray Street. A wooden structure to which a women's gallery was later added, this synagogue proved to be poorly located since it was near a food processor whose main product was pork and beans. During Shabbat services the odour of cooking pork carried into the synagogue. The odour itself was bad enough, but was doubly insulting to the congregation because, under Jewish law, the pig is considered an unclean animal.⁸

In addition to this problem, by 1901 the Jewish population in Ottawa had increased to 400⁹ and the synagogue structure could no longer contain the great number of congregants. The synagogue's leaders began to plan a program for expansion of their facilities and purchased land for a larger house of worship.¹⁰ A piece of land was acquired on King Edward

1 This description of Ottawa's first synagogues is based on a paper presented at the SSAC conference in June 1994. It is excerpted from my Master's research essay "In Search of Sacred Space: The Architectural History of the Synagogue in Ottawa, 1892 to the Present" (Carleton University, 1992).

2 Isaac Levy, *The Synagogue: Its History and Function* (London: Valentine, Mitchell, 1963), 36.

3 Sheldon Levitt, Lynn Milstone, and Sidney T. Tenenbaum, *Treasures of a People: The Synagogues of Canada* (Toronto: Lester & Orpen Dennys, 1985), viii.

4 R. Schingh, "Architecture and Ethnic Groups: The Ottawa Region Jewish and Italian Communities," Research and Development Project 80-461 (1981), 15, Carleton University.

5 Abraham Lief, *Gathering Rosebuds* (Toronto: Gall-Papenburg Computer Systems, 1986), 10.

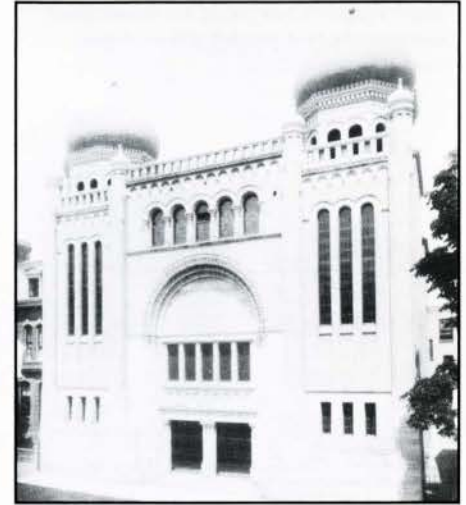
6 John H. Taylor, *Ottawa: An Illustrated History, The History of Canadian Cities* (Toronto: James Lorimer and the Canadian Museum of Civilization 1986), 124.

7 Herman S. Roodman, *The Ottawa Jewish Community: An Historical Chronicle of Our Community for the Years 1857-1987, 5617-5447: One hundred and thirty years of progress and achievement in the annals of Ottawa Jewry* (Ottawa: Jewish Community Council of Ottawa, 1989), 1.

8 Shirley E. Woods, *Ottawa: The Capital of Canada* (Toronto: Doubleday, 1980), 182.

9 Roodman, 2.

10 Woods, 182.



Avenue, and John W.H. Watts was commissioned to design the new structure.¹¹ Watts' symmetrical design for the front facade of Adath Jeshurun's building incorporated a large corbelled brick arch enclosing a pair of double doors, above which was a bank of five small arched windows, all bracketed by two slightly projecting stair towers capped with Moorish domes (figure 3). The windows followed the Romanesque tradition of rounded arches with radiating brickwork. The design of this facade resembled that of the original Holy Blossom Synagogue (now St. George's Greek Orthodox Church) on Bond Street in Toronto, designed by Benjamin Siddall in 1897 (figure 4), though the onion domes on Adath Jeshurun are smaller. (These two were the only synagogues in Canada to use Moorish domes to cap their stairs towers).¹² The roofline was changed in 1930 when a decorative parapet wall containing a circular window with a *Magen David* — Star of David — was added between the towers to hide the pitched roof (figure 5).

The interior of the Adath Jeshurun Synagogue (figure 6) is reminiscent of Eastern European models in that it is a long and narrow barrel-vaulted room with a lower flat ceiling over the balcony. The balcony itself is horseshoe-shaped, and is supported on metal columns that rise to meet the wooden ribs of the ceiling. The *Bimah* or reading platform was originally on the main axis of the room, but was removed when the synagogue became the *Hevra Kadisha*, or funeral chapel.

Agudath Achim, the second Orthodox synagogue, was begun at the turn of the century when a gentleman by the name of Myer Held began a *minyán* at his home on St. Patrick Street.¹³ This served as a nucleus for the establishment of the Agudath Achim congregation. Increased immigration also played a role in promoting the founding of a new synagogue. This congregation's first structure was a converted double house on Rideau Street which accommodated 75 male worshippers on the ground floor. A smaller number of seats for the women was available in the balcony.¹⁴

In 1910 another piece of land was purchased on Rideau Street, and the architectural firm of Burgess & Coyles was hired to design a building (figure 7).¹⁵ These architects also adopted the Romanesque tradition of arched openings and radiating brickwork. The arched entrance consisted of a set of double doors above which were three round-headed lead-paned windows. The two secondary entrances were on the sides of the projecting central frontispiece, rather than flanking the main entrance as in Adath Jeshurun.

At about the same time, and despite the fact that Adath Jeshurun and Agudath Achim were already in existence, another newly-arrived group of immigrants expressed a preference for their own house of worship and established the Machzikey Hadas congregation.¹⁶ The

Figure 4 (top). Holy Blossom Synagogue (1897), Toronto, Ontario; front elevation. (National Archives of Canada, RD 471)

Figure 5 (left). Adath Jeshurun Synagogue (1904), 375 King Edward Street; front elevation. (Hellmut Schade)

Figure 6 (above). Adath Jeshurun Synagogue; interior. (S. Levitt, L. Milstone, and S. Tenenbaum, *Treasures of a People: The Synagogues of Canada* [Toronto: Lester & Orpen Dennys, 1985], 41)

11 "Corner Stone Laid," *The Ottawa Journal*, 25 July 1904, 10. John William Hurrell Watts (1850-1917), a notable Ottawa architect, was born and trained in England. He had worked for the Chief Dominion Architect for 23 years before establishing his own practice in 1897. See Rhys Phillips, "Boastful Mansions by Architect John W.H. Watts," *The Ottawa Citizen*, 29 January 1994, F1.

12 Harold D. Kalman, *The Conservation of Ontario Churches: A Programme for Funding Religious Properties of Architectural and Historical Significance* (Toronto: Ministry of Culture and Recreation and Ontario Heritage, 1977), 113.

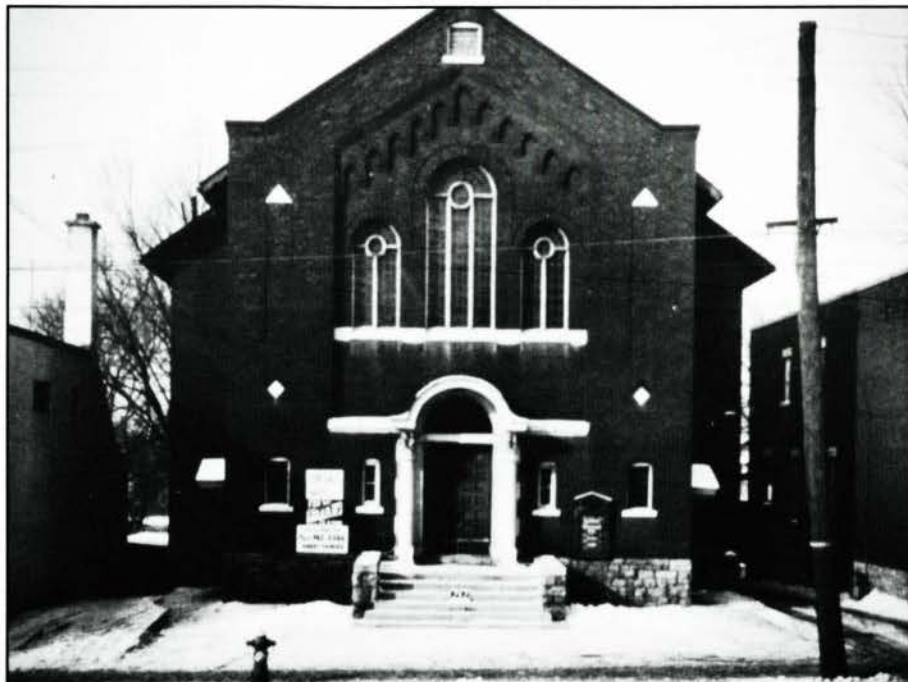
13 Agudath Achim Finding Aid, RG 5 A 02, Ottawa Jewish Historical Society.

14 *Ibid.*

15 *Ibid.*

16 Roodman, 2.

Figure 7. Agudath Achim (1912), 417 Rideau Street, Ottawa, Ontario; front elevation. (Ottawa Jewish Historical Society 5-062)



desire of new groups to assemble with people from the same place of origin was not uncommon. In Toronto, for example, the Anshei Kieve and Anshei Minsk congregations built their own synagogues in 1926 (Rodfey Shalom Synagogue) and 1930 respectively; the words “Anshei Kieve” and “Anshei Minsk” literally mean “people of Kieve” and “people of Minsk.” The practice of establishing their own places of worship allowed congregations to maintain their own identity and perpetuate their own particular customs.

Machzikey Hadas had its beginning, as did the other congregations, with communal praying in a private residence, in this case in an apartment on Murray Street in 1907. The congregation saved enough money over a year to anticipate the purchase of their first permanent premises in 1909, a soft drink factory building.¹⁷ Property on the corner of Murray Street and King Edward Avenue was bought in 1923 and services continued in the two houses which were on the property. These were razed when the growth of the congregation forced expansion. Construction of their new shul began in 1925-26, to be completed in 1929.¹⁸

Werner E. Noffke (1878-1964), a prominent German-born Ottawa architect, was commissioned to design the new building.¹⁹ He chose the Romanesque style with some Byzantine elements for his preliminary design for the Machzikey Hadas congregation (figure 8). The truncated corner towers and most of the ornamental features were eliminated when the design of Machzikey Hadas underwent revisions, though Noffke did not abandon the Romanesque tradition of gable roofs and large arched openings with radiating brickwork. In his second design he greatly simplified the building profile by removing the towers and allowing the lines of the pitched roof to extend across the entire front facade (figure 9). Most of the ornamental brick work also vanished. The executed building (figure 10) was a further modification, a compromise between the first two designs. This facade design resembled very closely the Agudath Achim Synagogue on Rideau Street. The whole facade was brought into a single mass, with a full-height frontispiece projecting only slightly from the body of the building. The pilasters which formed the frontispiece were extended above the roof line and capped by two small pointed domes. The full-height corbelled arch and the large round-headed window with the *Magen David* above the double doors were the only elements that remained constant throughout all the design revisions.

In the interior (figure 11), the visual focus was on the east wall where the Ark was placed. This was further emphasized by the women’s gallery, which wrapped around the north, west, and south walls to create a two-storey-high central sanctuary. Paintings by Louis Prefontaine and Leo Desjardins, commercial painters from the Levy Sign Company,²⁰ decorated the front of the women’s gallery. Executed in 1935-36, the paintings depicted the signs of the zodiac (with each of the twelve signs representing one of the original twelve tribes of Israel), the ancient Western Wall, and the Tomb of the Patriarchs in Hebron. This type of painting, typical of early twentieth century Canadian synagogue decoration, was inspired by European models. It represented a desire of the congregation to add to their building some

17 Mr. Laibel Steinberg, interview by Sam Brozovsky, 1973, transcript, p. 1, Ottawa Jewish Historical Society.

18 S. Max, “Retrospect and Prospect Presentation at Machzikey Hadas,” dedication, 16 June 1974, 2.

19 Noffke’s range of work was enormous during a career that spanned more than five decades, from 1908 to the early 1960s. See Halina Jeletzky and Barbara Sibbald, *Faces and Facades: The Renfrew Architecture of Edey and Noffke* (Renfrew, Ont.: Juniper Books for Heritage Renfrew, 1988), 31.

20 S. Berman, “Murray Street Synagogue Murals Restored,” press release, 1984.

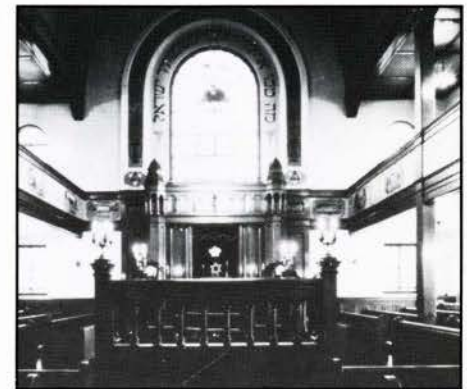
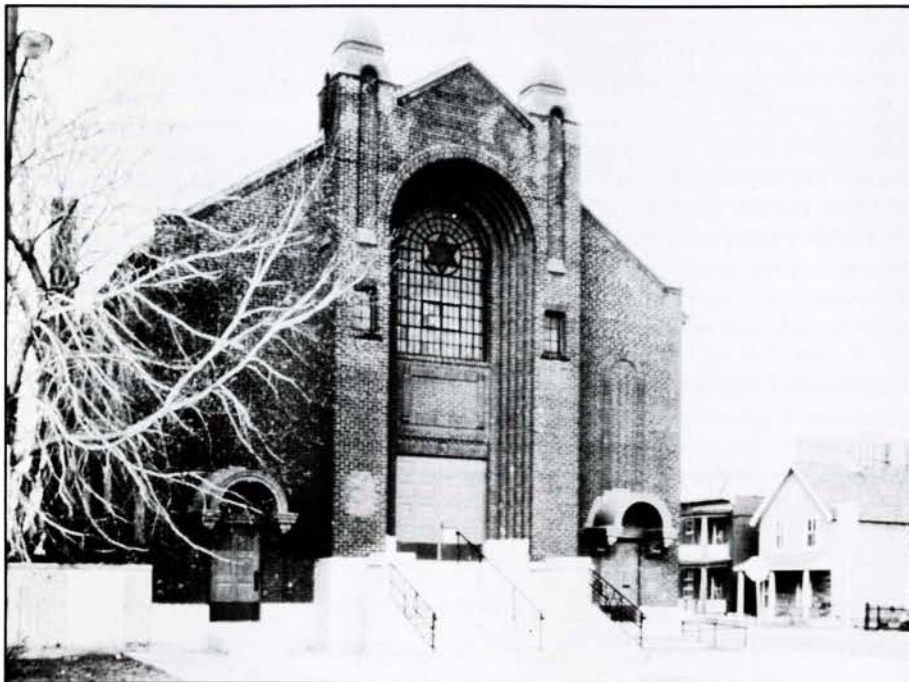
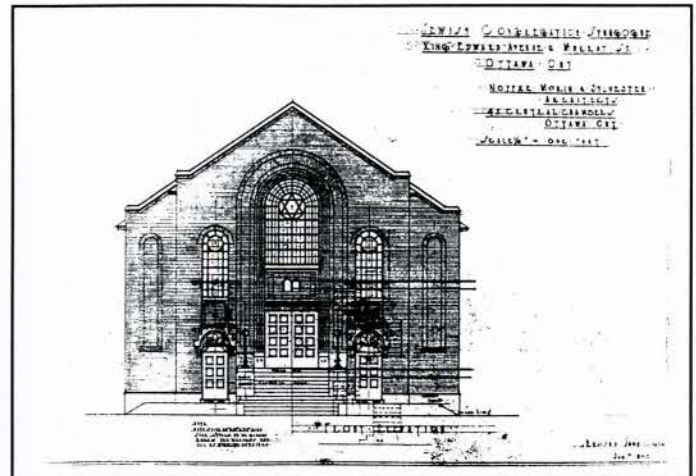
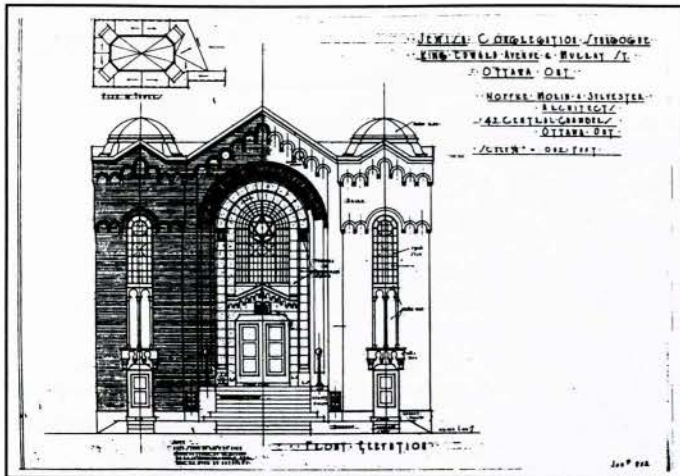


Figure 8 (top left). Machzikey Hadas (1926), 239 King Edward Avenue, Ottawa, Ontario; front elevation of the first design by W.E. Noffke. (National Archives of Canada, NMC 0016317)

Figure 9 (top right). Machzikey Hadas; front elevation of the revised design by W.E. Noffke. (National Archives of Canada, NMC 0016317)

Figure 10 (left). Machzikey Hadas (1926), 239 King Edward Avenue, Ottawa, Ontario. (Hellmut Schade)

Figure 11 (above). Machzikey Hadas; interior. (Hellmut Schade)

of the traditions they had known in their homeland. In Poland, the use of the signs of the zodiac was favoured by the Jewish folk artists who were responsible for decorating synagogues.

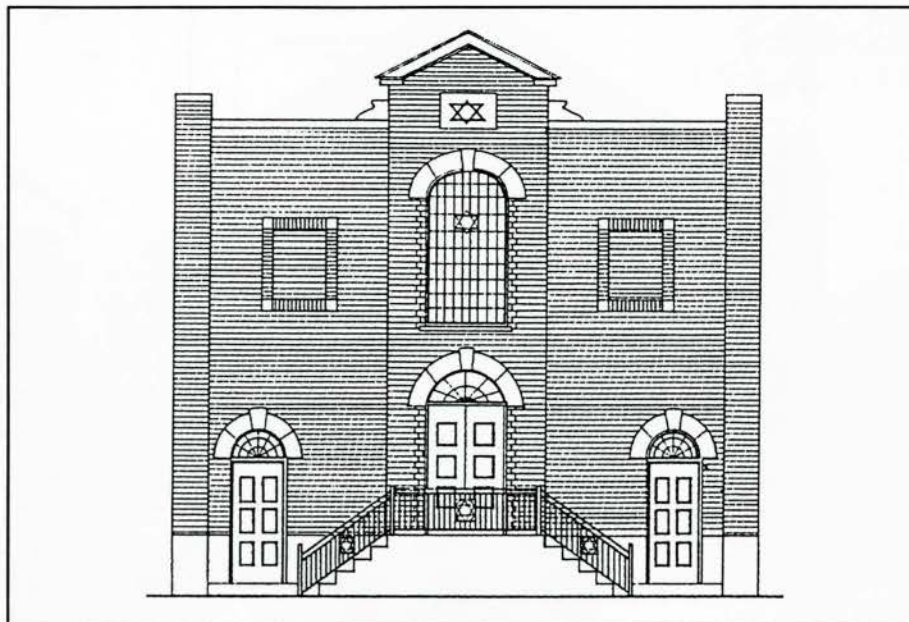
Work is not permitted on Shabbat, and since riding is considered a form of “work” in Jewish law (even animals are supposed to rest on the seventh day), the synagogue had to be within walking distance. Thus, in 1910, members of the Jewish community of Ottawa felt that a new congregation was needed for the Jewish residents of the area known as Upper Town, and the B’nei Jacob congregation was formed.²¹

A house on James Street was purchased and converted to function as a synagogue. Alterations were completed in 1931 (figure 12), the result being a simple two-storey brick structure. It was reminiscent of the Lower Town synagogues in that it followed the Romanesque style with a central projection and arched, stone-trimmed openings. The treatment of the central bay followed the Eastern European modes, with a central entrance and an arched window above. Side entrances repeated the arched motif on a smaller scale. The stairs leading to the entrance of this synagogue were approached from the side, most probably because of the small size of the lot and the building’s proximity to the street. The James Street Shul, as it was known, was the last Ottawa synagogue to manifest the traditional layout of an Orthodox sanctuary and to follow the Romanesque style of the Lower Town buildings.

As immigrants became more affluent they moved away from the central neighbourhoods and dispersed throughout other residential areas. Machzikey Hadas moved to the suburbs; the congregations of Adath Jeshurun, Agudath Achim, and B’nei Jacob

21 B’nei Jacob Finding Aid, RG 5 BJ 03, Ottawa Jewish Historical Society.

Figure 12. B'nei Jacob Synagogue (1931), 54 James Street, Ottawa, Ontario; front elevation. (R. Schingh, "Architecture and Ethnic Groups: The Ottawa Region Jewish and Italian Communities" [1981], 115.



amalgamated to form a new congregation, Beth Shalom. The urban synagogues were deserted and demolished or lost to fire, with the exception Adath Jeshurun, which was sold to the Hevra Kaddish and serves today as the funeral chapel. New synagogues have been built to serve the existing and new congregations. While the first synagogues were designed and decorated by non-Jewish architects and artists who were asked to interpret the requirements of the community, the new buildings were designed by Jewish architects. They are no longer based on traditional models, but follow contemporary trends in local architecture.

THROUGHOUT HISTORY, JEWRY HAS CREATED a world of its own in the midst of non-Jewish neighbours. It was a traditional Jewish Orthodox world that the immigrants brought with them from Eastern Europe, and it was the image of this world they tried to recreate in their synagogues, to serve as a comforting link to the world they had left behind.

Hagit Hadaya was the collection documentation assistant for the Ottawa Jewish Historical Society from 1991 to 1994. She is currently employed by the Ottawa Board of Education, and teaches a course on Ottawa architecture for Elderhostel Canada – YMCA-YWCA.