

Restoration works at the oldest synagogue in Latvia completed

Due to the considerable quantity of authentic wooden details Ludza Great Synagogue can be considered the oldest synagogue not only in Latvia, but in all Baltic States. Wooden synagogues in Ludza Town (built circa 1800) and Rēzekne City (1845) of Latvia are unique monuments of Jewish culture in the north-eastern part of Europe, because similar buildings disappeared in Europe in the XX century. There is evidence that during 700 years about 700 wooden synagogues were built in the Eastern Europe. Now the total number of the existing wooden synagogues (with equipment) in Europe is not more than 4-5 buildings.



Photo: Ludza Great Synagogue after restoration

A reference issued by the State Archives of Latvia says that Ludza Great Synagogue was built in 1800 as a wooden building. Circa the third quarter of the 19th century, when technical problems occurred to the building, its walls were covered with clay bricks.

In 1937 in Ludza there were three synagogues and five meeting-houses. The Great Synagogue is one of rare buildings in the old centre of Ludza, which did not suffer in the big fire of 1938, when the entire town centre was completely ruined. The building was used as a meeting-house till the end of 1980s and it preserved its original image, architectonic facade composition, basic wooden construction, authentic planning (the vestibule, the praying room, the stairway to the first floor, the women's gallery, the auxiliary room (the Scripture study room) and principal objects or their parts – unique worship items of the Jewish culture dating back to the 18th – 19th centuries – the bimah, the Torah Arc (Hebrew – Aron Kodesh; a cabinet in which the Torah scrolls are kept), tables and benches.

In November 2013 Ludza Great Synagogue was included into the list of the state cultural monuments of Latvia as a singular wooden architecture monument. It is also a part of another monument – the Ludza Historical Centre, which is the state town-planning monument.

At the end of 2014 Ludza Municipality started realisation of the project “Restoration of Ludza Great Synagogue and Revival of Jews Spiritual Heritage”. Its main activities are restoration of the building, creation of expositions, workshops for craftsmen and experience exchange with the project partners – the Museum Centre in Hordaland (Norway).

The project partners – experts – initiated the idea of doing the dendrochronological analysis of the wooden samples from the Synagogue’s building. The analysis was performed last year in March. As a result of timber dating it was discovered that the relatively youngest annual growth ring had appeared in 1781 thus confirming the oldness of the original wooden details of the Synagogue and increasing its excellent rareness.

The restoration works were completed less than within a year – from March 2015 till January 2016. Builders reinforced the foundation, dismantled the red bricks covering the walls, insulated the log walls and covered them with planking. Cold pressed linseed oil priming and mineral pigment painting were used for painting of the wooden facade. The tin roof, which had been brought from Australia in 1930s, was preserved and painted; the wooden roof constructions were reinforced. The stairway auxiliary premises were dismantled, the new foundation for the stairway was renewed authentically using recovered decoration materials. Historical window leafs were restored. Window jambs in the praying room and door in the Women’s gallery were restored. Windows and doors for the rest of premises were made according to the historical samples.

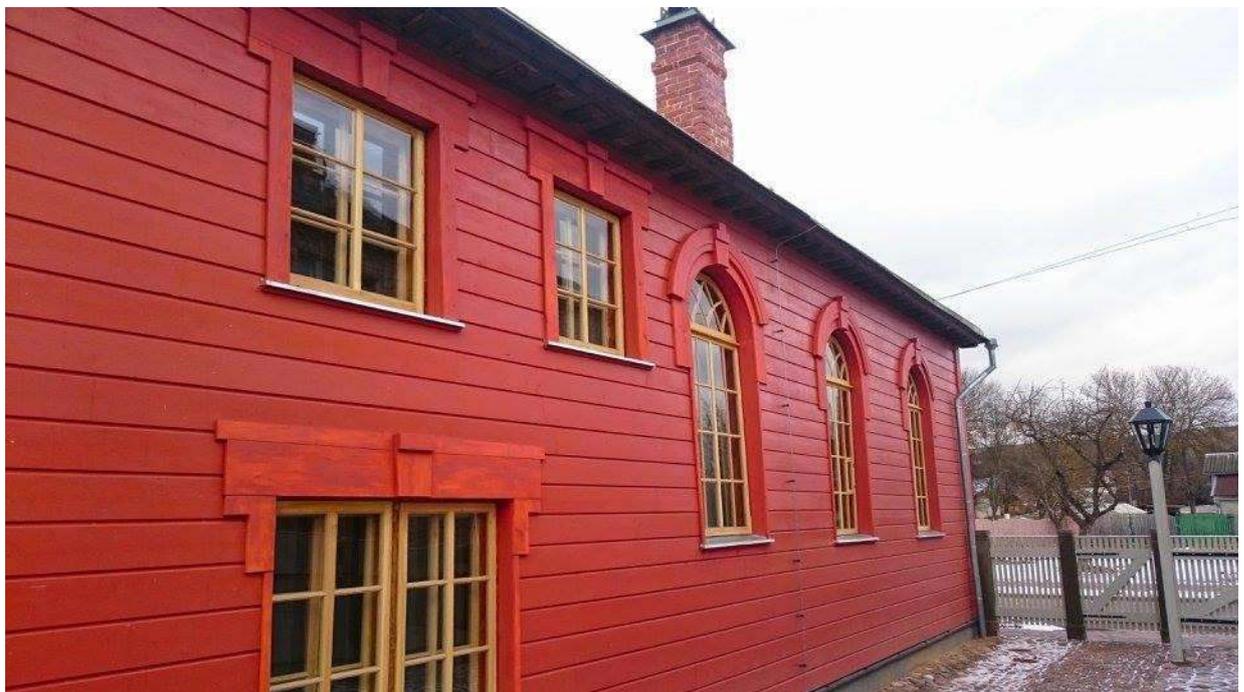


Photo: Ludza Great Synagogue after restoration

In the interior, significant restoration works were done: the authentic plank floor in the Women’s gallery on the first floor was restored, the builders matched the floor in the vestibule to the interior and made it from the dismantled bricks from the facade. On the ground floor, new wooden flooring was installed, three ovens were built.

About 65% of the historical plastering were preserved, the paint layers were strengthened, the authentic polychrome elements were preserved and partly restored. In the praying room you can

see a unique wooden plank dome, built in accordance with the Polish synagogues of the 17th – 18th century, which is the only dome of such a type in the Baltic Sea region.

In order to connect the building to the water supply and sewage systems, to drain the rain waters, to clean the rot off the logs, as well as for electric installation, lightning-rod and fire alarm system additional financial contribution was supplied by the Municipality and the Rietumu Bank's Charity Fund.

The restoration works were done by "Warss+, Ltd"; "Jurēvičs un Partneri, Ltd" provided engineering supervision; "Konvents, Ltd" under the guidance of the experienced architect Pēteris Blūms was responsible for author supervision. The dendrochronological dating of the original timber was done at the Dendrochronological Laboratory of the Institute of Latvian History by Dr.biol. Māris Zunde.

The Synagogue will open its doors to visitors in the beginning of August, 2016, when the expositions will be created and the synagogue equipment and furniture will be restored and installed there.

The project "Restoration of Ludza Great Synagogue and Revival of Jews Spiritual Heritage" (ERZLV04/GSKMS/2013/09) is being implemented with help of 201,875.00 EUR large financing of the European Economic Area Financial Mechanism provided by Iceland, Liechtenstein and Norway. Its aim is to preserve the cultural and historical heritage and to ensure the access to qualitative cultural services for the society. The project will be finished on the 31st of October, 2016.

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