Photographing the Rise and Fall of the Lower East Side's Synagogues
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KATE CORDES: Hello, welcome everyone to Doc Chat. My name is Kate Cordes, I'm the Associate Director for Reference and Outreach at the Stephen A. Schwarzman Building at the New York Public Library. And this is Doc Chat, our final one of the year. And Doc Chat is a weekly program from the New York Public Library's Center for Research in the Humanities that digs deep into the stories behind the library's most interesting collections. And highlights ways that people can, teachers can incorporate them into the classroom. In this episode the Library's Mila Sholokhova is joined by Vladimir Levin. Dr. Sholokhova is the Library's curator of the Dorot Jewish Collections and the author of numerous publications on Jewish bibliography and the history of Jewish folk music. Dr. Vladimir Levin is the Director of the Center of Jewish Art at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. He co-authored a two-volume work on synagogues in Ukraine. And co-edited a two-volume catalog of synagogues in Lithuania. Our guests will speak for about 15 minutes before we open up the conversation. During the program feel free to use the chat function to share general comments. Though make sure that you change the setting in chat mode to panelists and attendees so that everyone's included in the conversation. Once we begin the question and answer segment, please use Zoom's Q&A function at the bottom of your screen rather than the chat function to pose your questions. If you wish to remain anonymous just click on that option before submitting your question. And we'd also like to know a little bit more about you, so I'm going to launch a poll, which you can fill out or not. And with that I will pass it on to our speakers. Thank you.

LYUDMILA SHOLOKHOVA: Thank you very much Kate. So when I brought the NYPL digital website up some time ago, I came across a large group of images. [from the Lower East Side by the photographer Morris Huberland, whose name was unfamiliar to me. The montage of photographs captured in the life of the street, on the streets of the Lower East Side, a large set of images with synagogues over 270 caught my attention. The synagogues were not identified and minimum information came from Huberland's descriptions on the sleeves of the negatives. I share the links with Dr. Vladimir Levin who is an expert in synagogues' architecture. And together we had a great time identifying the synagogues by examining the inscriptions on the buildings, exploring the details of the interiors, and comparing them with the images from the Bezalel Narkiss Index of Jewish Art, managed by the Center for Jewish, for Jewish Art. The process led Dr. Levin to explore the influence of European architecture on the style of American synagogues. Now a few words about the photographer. Morris Huberland, of whom we surprisingly do not know much despite the very large hope of his collection at the New York Public Library. So, it's about 18,000 images. And the Huberland Collection of negatives, and the negatives was acquired by the library in 1992. Morris Huberland was born as Moses Huberland
on August 1st, 1909 in Warsaw, Poland, into a traditionally rabbinical family, which traces its
roots to prominent Lublin and Sanz Hasidic dynasties. His father Eliyahu Chaim, or Elias
Huberland, came to United States in 1920, and his wife with all five children followed in 1924
when Morris was just 15 years old. After living briefly in Philadelphia, the family moves to New
York and settled on the Lower East Side. His father became a well known rabbinical authority in
New York. And Morris followed his footsteps at least in the beginning. He worked in a rabbinical
school but dropped out after a few years and he became interested in the photography at the
very, at the very young age, when he was only 16. At 18 he went to Mexico and where he
became fascinated where a new world opened up for him. And to follow photography to capture
it. So this trip changed his life and he became a professional photographer, he specialized in
photography in the New York street life. In 1940 he joined the famous Photo League that
propagated the style of socially conscious photography. Many members of the group were all
first generation Jewish immigrants. Unfortunately the Photo League didn’t exist for too long, it
was blacklisted in 1947 and disbanded in 1951 for its pro-Communist activities. So on the
picture you can see Morris Huberland with his colleagues during the Photo Hunt. It's, it was an
interesting experiment in itself. During World War Two Morris Huberland was in the American
Army. He joined the Army in 1943 and til 1945 participated in the war actions in Italy, North
Africa and Germany. He continued to photograph during the war years and never stopped until
well into his 80s. His art was exhibited at many premier art venues such as National Gallery of
Canada, the Museum of Modern Art, the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston, International Center
of Photography in New York, Jewish Museum in New York and many other venues. From 1980
to 1985, Huberland lived in Israel and over 1,000 photographs that he took in Israel, definitely
belong, come from this period. So Morris Huberland passed away in 2003 at the age of 93 and
he was buried in Jerusalem. So where does his interest in the synagogue’s architecture come
from? We know that he was an amazing street photographer and but we don't know much about
his work with architecture or buildings. So first we need to remember that his deep, his deep
religious family background. From his, and also his use on the lowest, on the streets of the
Lower East Side. So illustrates that here is his father, Elias Huberland photographed by Morris
Huberland sometimes in 1950s. Morris’ brother, Joshua Huberland, was a well known architect
and historian of the synagogue. And according to his obituary published in the Yiddish Forverts
Newspaper in June 1971. So at the time of his death, he was working on a book in Yiddish
about the golden synagogues in Europe. And we also know that he actually designed one of the
synagogues currently on the Lower East Side, it’s Lutowisker synagogue. Back to Morris
Huberland, 27 synagogues were represented in Huberland’s photograph of the synagogues,
each synagogue was captured multiple times. Was a program was selected just a few
synagogues to demonstrate the safety of the synagogues architecture. And the connections
with Eastern European synagogues. And here is my first question for Vladimir. How do
synagogues on the Lower East Side differ from the synagogues in Eastern Europe where the
majority of Jewish people on the Lower East Side came from?

VLADIMIR LENIN: Good afternoon everybody, Lyudmila thank you for your questions. So
indeed, within Eastern Europe is especially, a majority of Jerusalem Eastern Europe didn't live in
huge cities, they lived in small towns. Some of his small towns were enough of place to build the
synagogues and large and small synagogues as freestanding buildings. On the contrary, when we came to New York and especially to Lower East Side New York, and wanted to do something synagogues, they were in the completely different urban situation, living and working among those small plots of land of buildings which are only three window wide broad. So, we had to adjust the idea of how synagogues looked to the new conditions of the Lower East Side of a huge, huge and overpopulated city. And, yeah, and when we wanted to express something, they had, we didn't have a building with four sides, we had only one narrow facade to express some ideas.

SHOLOKHOVA: But how do Huberland photographs help us understand this?

LEVIN: Let's see in Huberland's photographs. For instance this is Podhajcer Shul on the First Street in the Lower East Side. And this, the shul was built by immigrants from Podhajce, it's a small town in Western Ukraine, today's Western Ukraine. Before Second World War it was in Poland. So, they wanted, he captured with a synagogue with, this was still a synagogue, now it's an apartment building. So what these immigrants wanted, they wanted to express their identity. Not only Jewish identity they put here a huge Jewish star, but they also wanted to say we are from Podhajce, and so how we do it? Look at the synagogue in Podhajce, it's a 17th century synagogue in Gothic survival style, you have lines that the Gothic windows is here. And already we do Podhajce when we added these, added additions to this synagogue in probably in the early 20th century. We also used... We also used this kind of lancet windows. So, the Podhajce, Jews from Podhajce in New York, they did the same. So, and these windows are not very characteristic for New York. In New York we have plain rectangular windows. But here they introduce something that reminds them about this original shul, the great synagogue of Podhajce. And for the entrance, they used the plain semi-circular arch like it was exactly in that Great Synagogue in Podhajce, where windows were lancet but the entrance was semi-circular. So we repeated this idea also in their show.

SHOLOKHOVA: So in the end of the 19th century, the end of the 20th century it was very common on the Lower East Side to buy existing church buildings and convert them into the synagogues. And now it is completely opposite, it is common that the former synagogues are sold to the churches, mosques and Buddhist temples. And how do Huberland's photographs help us to convey this message?

LEVIN: Yeah and indeed this synagogue in Podhajce shul was built from scratch. But many other synagogues indeed were purchased by Jewish communities from Christian communities and, for instance, we can see this Forsyth Street synagogue. And the New York Public Library has another collection by Percy Sperr, who photographed it in the '30s and we can see how it looked like when it was synagogue. And probably Jews in some point of time, they changed this huge Gothic window. We closed it and put here a wall with, again with Jewish star. And Huberland photographed this building after it was sold to be an Adventist church. And since when it's already changed and you can see my photograph, where they took last year in New York. So, Huberland photograph is very important to understand the original situation of this
building, original view of this building before it was changed, you see entrance is already different. And some of the decorations are gone. So, Huberland photographs are very important for us to understand in the history of building and the connection between what we see today and what it was during the 20th century.

SHOLOKHOVA: Do we have any other examples to demonstrate the importance of the Huberland's collection.

LEVIN: Yeah, there are a lot of examples, but we will take a look only at one of them and this is, in here, in modern our Israeli Hebrew I would Beth Hamedrash Hagodol. But, the people who pray they said it in Yiddish, [speaks Yiddish]. So this building, which was also built as a church and was converted into a synagogue in 1885, was photographed by Huberland probably in the '70s, when it still was an active synagogue. And now this building does not exist anymore. So, two years ago I asked Mila to photograph how it is being destroyed and last year in 2020, when I came to this site, I found only a pile of garbage on this site. So the photograph of Huberland very important and they provide us with exterior and interior. Then I would like to use this opportunity to call to all our listeners. Photograph buildings which are important for you. Your synagogues, the synagogues of your friends and relatives. And write down what is it and when it was photographed. Because for instance in order to understand that this interior belongs to this Beth Hamedrash Hagodol. It took me whole working day because Huberland didn't write what is it. But now we know what this interior of the, of this synagogue and it's very interesting. We can see here how a former church built in a Gothic, with many Gothic elements, was converted into a Jewish sacred space. Of course Jews removed all crosses and other Christian devices. But what they added to make it a Jewish space. Let's look. First of all we see here painting. Yeah, sorry, yeah here is the painting. And we see Jerusalem and Jews prayed over Jerusalem. So on the Eastern wall of the shul, they depict Jerusalem and how we know about this Jerusalem because you have the Dome of the Rock, the place of the temple of the Jewish temple in the middle. So it has nothing to do with real Jerusalem they live in. But, Dome of the Rock says, whether it's Jerusalem. Let's look in another picture of this Eastern wall. Here on the right side, another dome building. And it says in Hebrew here, beyond [speaks Hebrew] building in Jerusalem. What is it? It's domed, maybe it's a, the temple, but not we have a temple already in the middle, so what is this? And here we can understand what this is. If we look at the postcard of the design for the building of the Hebrew University, university where I work. So this design was not realized, but it was printed on many postcards and it was spread to, along the entire Jewish world. So, probably the painter of this Beth Hamedrash, or the heads of the synagogues well, we gave him this postcards and we want this building here on the East, on our Eastern wall. But we pay attention. They didn't say that it's Hebrew University of Jerusalem, say it's a building in Jerusalem. And the idea to depict this building on the eastern wall, it all, the interior of synagogue is not American idea, it's also Eastern European idea. Let's look at the synagogue in Piatra Neamt in Romania. These photographs comes from our archives, Archives of the Center for Jewish Art. It was made by Zusia Efron, Israeli researcher. And you see the same building as depicted in this Taylors' Synagogue in Piatra Neamt. But in
Piatra Neamţ they were not so anti-Zionist as the Orthodox Jews in New York. So they wrote here, the Hebrew University.

SHOLOKHOVA: That's really so interesting. So, but here is my last question, and I understand we're ready to wrap up. And last question is, so what else can we learn from the photograph?

LEVIN: Okay let's try to see another thing. We see here the bema in the center of the hall and the bema on the corners there are some strange columns with lamps. So it's not very understandable what is even, why you need such devices on the corners of the bema. Again if we're look in Eastern Europe, we see within the 17th century new type of synagogues develop there. With huge columns supporting the vault. All columns divided evenly in the, dividing the hall evenly into nine parts, nine bays. All columns grouped together around the bema. And they're needed for construction, otherwise the ceiling will collapse without those columns. In the 19th century you don't need such devices to vault large holes. So in some places, but the idea with bema has to have four columns was already accepted and it was popular and Jews wanted to continue with tradition, so others put steel columns supporting the ceiling, like here. Or they just put columns without anything. And the thing in classical architecture, columns should support something. But here in this case columns supports nothing, they put here some vase. So column supporting a vase. Four columns supporting four vases. And it's what happened in New York also like in Romania. We see here the same columns supporting something giving light. So it was done also in New York in Beth Hamedrash Hagodol. With this columns supporting some lights, be providing light for the ceremony of the torah read.

SHOLOKHOVA: Well this is brilliant in ways and find. What, I can't even understand how you could identify the synagogue. So, it's probable we'll discuss this in our questions and answers part of the program. But now to conclude, let's see a few images by Morris Huberland of people near and inside his synagogues. Just to get the feeling how it was like when these Low East Side synagogues were still active and served this purpose. And I'd like to thank my colleagues at the, well I would like to thank Julie Golia for this program, for giving us this opportunity. And also our colleagues at the Division of Art, Prints and Photographs for their assistance in preparing this program. And mainly it was Zulay and Emily who responded to all my reference questions and provided additional information on Morris Huberland, thank you very much.

CORDES: Thank you both, we're now opening up to questions and Mila or Dr. Levin I have a question for you. About just a little bit of a context of Jewish life on the Lower East Side. I know Huberland's photos were in the '40s and so but when did this transformation take place? Like, is it still ongoing or they're still active? You referred to the vibrant Jewish life on the Lower East Side, was it a complete transformation?

LEVIN: On the main, a small number of those synagogues are still active and the majority were sold in the '70s. So when Jews started to leave Lower East Side for the upper west side and other good places, so, new immigrants from Eastern Asia ended up there,. And whereas
synagogues converted into Buddhist temples, synagogues bought by churches and for some of them converted into apartment buildings.

CORDES: Thank you. Yes we had a question about one particular synagogue that you mentioned. I believe this is a reference to the one in New York, the Podhajce synagogue. Is it still, is it, was it, is it still in use or has it been taken over?

LEVIN: It was reconstructed as an apartment building, people live there. Only the facade is preserved.

CORDES: Okay. That was another comment from one of the attendees about the Adventista Temple, how there's still these echoes, there's still a Jewish star on it and I think that's, you see that sometimes in the windows, I guess that's why they're attractive.

LEVIN: I will go to the picture, yep. Yeah they put the cross on the Jewish star. I don't know why. I didn't ask them because they were closed.

CORDES: Another question from Zachary about the interior shots, was it common for the arks in synagogues that were located and repurposed or former churches to face in other directions than east?

LEVIN: I didn't make a statistics, but I think the majority of churches also try to face east. So there is not big, usually not big problem but it should be checked individually, with every shul, every synagogue.

CORDES: The, let's see, whoa, we just got a bunch of questions, pardon me. Are any, oh I'm sorry, we have lots of questions. Let's see, about Huberland, do you know, Mila do you know if Huberland eventually shot in color later on or was he focus, you say there's a lot of shots of synagogues, did he also do other architectural photographs or was this his main focus in that area?

SHOLOKHOVA: Yes it's a very good question. But actually I didn't, I didn't see any, I actually really tried to find whatever was possible about him and of his works, and I didn't see any pictures in color. No, and I'm not aware.

LEVIN: No we have two pictures in color from one of the synagogues. Only two.

SHOLOKHOVA: By him?

LEVIN: Uh-hum.

SHOLOKHOVA: I didn't, I didn't, okay so there are, I didn't, I was not aware. And, actually interesting, he mostly photographed people on the streets. There's only two topics that, he
photographed only those of the, with synagogues on the Lower East Side and also in Israel. When he was in Israel for five years, and when I browsed this part of the collection I also saw a lot of landscapes and buildings.

CORDES: Right.

SHOLOKHOVA: I, I saw two exceptions, Israel and the synagogues on the Lower East Side. And there are some objects that he took pictures in the museums, in the Metropolitan Museum of Art. In terms of architectural buildings it was only Israel and Lower East Side.

CORDES: A question about using these photographs in a teaching context, how would you recommend that someone incorporate these into the classroom using the photographs to incorporate the visual context you shared today with students? Like how to read the photograph and take away what you have touched on here?

SHOLOKHOVA: Well I think it's an exciting topic to incorporate some curricula about Jewish New York. And maybe about architectural design of the buildings in New York City and architectural period in art schools. And I think because of the photograph actually in the difference of other photographs of the buildings and so it actually allow for a very high resolution, really zooming in on the details of the building, I think it can be of interest of art students of different kinds. Interested in art and in architecture. What do you say Vladimir.

CORDES: I would say, just looking at the questions here, which we have a reference team that can answer a lot of these, but there's like some questions about the landsmannschaften and if they were influential in building synagogues, I think there's some traces of immigration patterns also in times, like you said the similarities, the lancet windows and.

LEVIN: Yeah, landsmannschaften were very active in the creation of the synagogue because it also it's, when you are immigrant you are trying to begin part of a new country, but also to preserve your own identity. And in this huge meeting of Jews from all the different places, it was important to them to express themselves and therefore they organized in landsmannschaften. So they supported each other people from one place, from one city, one town. We supported each other, we supported the town back in Eastern Europe. And we also expressed identity where they were not simply no-name Jews from no-name land. But we are from Podhajce, or from [foreign word], or from [foreign word], from [foreign word]. All these synagogues have these geographical names of the people who built them, who came from Eastern Europe. And maybe I would like to add about using the photographs if your students are in New York, or not far from New York, it would be wonderful if you study photographs and you go to the places and see these buildings today. It could be very very good for the students.

CORDES: Yeah those are, those, the comparison shots you shared were very striking.

LEVIN: Yeah, yeah.
CORDES: They generated a lot of questions and I apologize, it's the nature of the Doc Chat, that it's a short dip into a collection before we retreat. And I would like to say, I'm going to share a few links in the chat now, but as Mila mentioned, Dr. Sholokhova mentioned these photographs she discovered on a Digital Collections page and they are there for you to look at yourself, the link is in the chat. Following this episode, which is recorded, we will be sharing a blog post with all the resources, and collections, other institutions collections that were discussed today. And a link to that post and the recording will be sent to everyone who registered. And we'll have the contact information of our excellent team of reference librarians in the Jewish collection who can answer everything that we didn't get to here. They answer these questions all the time. And be very helpful to be familiar with them. And I really want to thank Dr. Sholokhova and Dr. Levin for hosting this final episode of the year and I'm just, the turnout and the participation has been great. Again, sorry it's so short. So that's it. So, thank you Dr. Levin, Dr. Sholokhova, it's been a pleasure learning about this collection from both of you. And I wish you all a very good day. Thank you.

LEVI: Thank you very much to everybody.

SHOLOKHOVA: Thank you.