



The Great Synagogue in Slonim

LATEST NEWS

Dear family and friends,

We are making great progress, have reached a key moment and we ask for your help.

I have just returned from Belarus having spent a week with Michael Mail Chief Executive of the Foundation for Jewish Heritage and Artur Livshyts our local Belarusian representative. We met and in some cases re-met officials at government level, local activists, consultants and of course the mayor of Slonim.

Our initiative to bring the 17th C synagogue to life has taken a big step forward. I want to tell you what we have done, where we have reached and about the challenges ahead. Our website describes our intentions and has great images of the past and present. It can be found at:

<https://slonimsynagogue.org/>

The time is right for our project. Civic society in Belarus is becoming more aware of the Jewish contribution and the need to acknowledge and highlight it and in particular to commemorate the Holocaust. In Belarus the Second World War has been memorialised as a tragedy for the nation as a whole, without acknowledging the magnitude of the disaster for the Jews in particular. There is now a growing recognition of the great contribution made by the Jewish community to the country over many centuries and we found widespread support for the retention and repair of the synagogue, in particular from the Museum of the Great Patriotic War in Minsk and from the Foreign Ministry. The Foreign Ministry is charged with increasing tourism and are big supporters. In London the Belarusian Ambassador acknowledged the lack of a Holocaust Museum in Belarus and suggested we consider providing one in Slonim as part of our initiative.

We visited a newly completed memorial at the Trostinets Extermination Camp outside Minsk designed by Galeena Levina. She is a prominent Jewish architect who is one of our greatest supporters and knows Slonim well. She participated in producing the record drawings of the synagogue in the 1990s which will guide us in our restoration. We met many other people from civic society. The most surprising and exhilarating visit was to the studio of what I call the "singing collective", a group of artists who have worked together for many years recording historic buildings and restoring the art work in them. They are avid Yiddish speakers and gave us a warm welcome. As we entered their studio they broke into song in Yiddish and when we left, it was to the strains of another Yiddish song. In the 1990s they visited the Synagogue and were appalled to find the frescos being ruined by water coming through the roof. They made drawings of the main frescos capturing their colour and vibrancy and also incredibly detailed drawing of the structure. A great find and, even if we do not reinstate the frescos, their drawings will have a prominent place in the

museum to be. Where ever we went we found surprising connections and support. The Chief Rabbi of Belarus has given us his full support.



Members of the singing collective



Their beautiful record paintings



With Members of the collective

We came well prepared with ideas and proposals for the mayor of Slonim, as success depends on his support. He is focused on growing the local economy quickly and smartening up the town. To get his full support we need to demonstrate that we are serious and capable. There have been many initiatives in the past to save the synagogue but they have come to nothing.

We could show that we have already repaired loose roof sheets and most recently installed devices to assess if the walls, which have significant cracks, are moving. They have to be left in place for some months before any result becomes available in about May 2020. This progress has been possible because of significant donations from members of the Kaplinsky Family. Some have been very considerable contributions. We warmly thank you for that.



Installing the crack monitors

The Mayor is supportive but very demanding. He has offered to transfer ownership of the building to the Foundation of Jewish Heritage at no cost subject to a number of conditions but we cannot take this support for granted. Negotiations are starting and he requires a short time table. Our original concept has had to be rethought to meet this time table so in conjunction with the Mayor we have revised our plans. We have to remember that he does not have to do business with us to meet his objectives. His alternative is to auction the synagogue. The building could be used for commercial purposes as has happened to many other synagogues in Belarus. The Ministry of Culture would in all likelihood only require the external elevations to be retained and allow it to be used for commercial purpose.



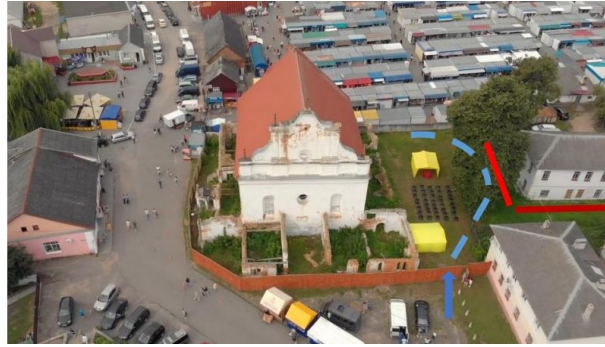
Negotiating with the Mayor

Our original idea was to undertake minor repairs to keep the weather out and then to conduct a detailed and long feasibility study to decide on the facilities that could be provided, to cost them and to develop a business plan. That suggested a 10 year timetable, too long for the mayor. Instead, after the initial minor repairs we will provide a small visitors centre in the form museum/meeting place and facilities to view the interior of the synagogue without doing any internal works. The exterior will be restored shortly after so that the building is not an eyesore. This will create an opportunity to display the Jewish story in Belarus and provide a tourist attraction much more quickly. The photographs show the idea. In retrospect this is a much better approach. A second stage will consider future uses of the building and how the interior could be improved.

We explored possible locations for the visitor centre. A simple approach would be to erect a temporary building on the grass alongside the museum but our advisors on historic matters say that the Ministry of Culture will not allow this. During the visit last week we found that a small building adjoining the green space had been put out for auction. It would be an ideal alternative and allow us to move more quickly and possibly cost less. Our ability to implement our plans hangs on being able to buy it. The auction is on the 22nd of November and if are to proceed, we have to secure funding before the 18th of November, 2019, in less than 2 weeks from writing this.

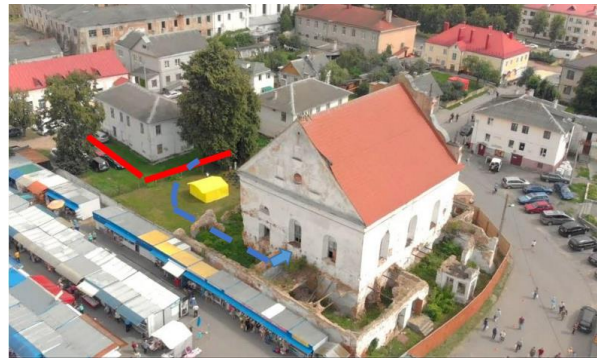
The overall cost is £40k, of which we already have £15k. Contributions of any size would help reach the target and would have to reach us by the 17th November

The site of the building is shown in red on the attached photographs. If you feel able to donate please use the facility on our website at <https://slonimsynagogue.org/donate/> Contact me directly if you have any questions. We could also do with other forms of assistance if you want to help, particularly in furthering our cause in social media. Please contact me if you want further information about that.



Route from site entrance to community centre and then to the synagogue

Proposed community centre is within the red border



Route from proposed community centre to entry into the synagogue



Roped off viewing area in the synagogue. Protected by balcony above.

Thank you everyone. I feel we are at a threshold. Success so far has in no small way been due to family member's participation.

Simon