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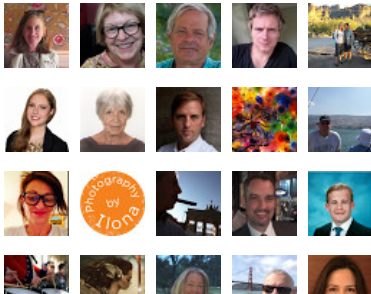
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Tuesday, March 11, 2014

The 1904 Sons of Israel Kalwarie Synagogue --Nos. 13-15 Pike Street



At the turn of the last century the Lower East Side was still the center of the German immigrant population in New York City. It had also become the enclave of the thriving Jewish community.

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The first Jewish citizens arrived in New York in the late 17th century and by now the city had the world's most populous Jewish community—twice as large as the next largest group, in Warsaw, Poland. In 1853 a faction of Russian-Polish Jews broke away from the Orthodox synagogue of Beth Hamderash, forming its own congregation which was named Beth Hamdrash Livne Yisroel Yelide Polen. The rather ungainly name translated to the House of Study of the Children of Israel Born in Poland.

Three decades later the congregation renamed itself; choosing another name that, too, did not readily roll off the tongue: Congregation and Chevra Ukadisha B'nai Israel Mikalwarie, or the Sons of Israel from Kalwarie. Kalwarie, or Kalwarja, was a small town on Poland, near Lithuania, from which many of the congregants hailed.

In 1882 the group purchased two building lots on Pike Street, Nos. 13 and 15, and remodeled the existing building as a synagogue. By 1903 it was the wealthiest Jewish congregation in New York and a new shul was deemed necessary.

On April 14, 1903 *The Sun* reported that plans had been filed for a new synagogue, "three-story and basement," to be built on the existing site. The article promised a "façade of ornamental limestone" and projected the cost of construction to be about \$75,000 (nearly \$2 million today). The estimate would prove to be highly understated.

In February 1904 Victoria Gordon's wedding date was nearing and she had her heart set on being married in the new synagogue. The trouble was that the building was still in the finishing phases of construction. Her father, Louis Gordon, (deemed by *The Sun* as "the Mayor of Canal street") was a powerful man. He was not only the chairman of the building committee, he was, as reported in the newspaper, "said to be the wealthiest real estate owner in that part of the city."

If Louis Gordon's daughter wanted to be married in the uncompleted synagogue, he would see to it that she got her wish. *The Sun* reported on February 22, "As a compliment to Gordon it was decided to allow the ceremony to be held in it."

The opulent ceremony (which the newspaper said "broke the records for gorgeousness") caused a near riot on Pike Street on February 21. "Victoria Gordon, the young and pretty daughter of Louis Gordon...and Joseph Edelson, a lawyer, were married last night and East Side social authorities say that no wedding on the East Side in years has been its match," reported *The Sun*.

Two hours before the 5:00 ceremony "the street in front of the synagogue for a block distant was packed from curb to curb by a crowd of girls and women. It was necessary to call out the reserves from the Madison street station to preserve order." As the guests arrived in smart carriages and shining automobiles policemen had to form a human wall from the sidewalk to the entrance to keep back the feminine mob.

Gordon not only got his way in staging his daughter's wedding in the unfinished structure; he was given other, more shocking, indulgences. "Although an orthodox synagogue, some innovations were permitted," said *The Sun*. "It is a rare thing for music to be allowed at an orthodox service, but for this occasion an orchestra and a choir of twenty boys were present."

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The Lost 5th Avenue Hotel -- 5th Avenue and 23rd S...

The Narrow 1855 House at No. 411 W 22nd Street

The 1903 Lyric Theater -- 213 West 42nd Street

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The 1911 Switzer Home and Institute for Girls -- 2...

The Lost 1849 Free Academy Building -- Lexington Av...

The Chester A. Arthur House -- 123 Lexington Avenue...

The 1928 Beaux-Arts Institute of Design -- No. 304...

The 1889 Livery Stable at No. 56 Barrow Street

The Mistaken "Jim Brady" House --No. 7 West 46th S...

The 75th Street Riding Academy -- Nos. 115-119 E. ...

The 1909 Lost Belmont Mansion -- No. 477 Madison A...

The John Hay Whitney House -- No. 163 East 63rd St...

The Admiral Farragut Memorial -- Madison Square

The Ever-Changing No. 746 Madison Avenue

The 1826 House-Store at No. 518 Hudson Street

The 1904 Sons of Israel Kalwarie Synagogue --Nos. ...

The Lost 1888 Home Bank -- No. 303 W. 42nd Street

The James Watson Webb House -- No. 145 Bleecker St...

The Richard Hurd House -- No. 12 East 68th Street

The 1897 Church of the Ascension -- 107th Street o...

Abraham Maze's Bookstore -- No. 237 Bleecker Stree...

Stanford White's 1907 Colony Club, No. 120 Madison...

The Lost George Crocker Mansion - No. 1 East 64th ...

Greg Wyatt's Peace Fountain -- 1047 Amsterdam Ave

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The ceremony was performed by Rabbi Israel Cooper, head of the congregation for 25 years. The cantor was renowned for his voice and was "spoke of frequently as the Jewish Caruso," according to the *New-York Tribune*.

Following the ceremony a reception was held in the Palm Garden on East 58th Street. The Gordon's influence was reflected in the guest list which included the Borough President, the Acting Mayor, a Congressman, two judges, three Senators, and various aldermen and other politicians.

Three weeks later the completed building was dedicated. On March 14, 1904 *The Sun* reported that the new synagogue of the Congregation Sons of Israel Kalmarie "was dedicated yesterday afternoon with elaborate ceremonies." The newspaper said it "is built of Italian limestone and will seat 1,500 persons. The interior is finished in hard wood and marble trimmings." The basement level served as a school where Eddie Cantor would study, and where a year later that he celebrated his bar mitzvah.



In 1978 Chinese-language signage is seen on the shops near the synagogue--a sign of changes in the neighborhood from the collection of the Museum of the City of New York http://collections.mcny.org/VP3=SearchResult_VPage&VBID=24UAYWBZ328G&SMLS=1&RW=1280&RH

The congregation had commissioned the little-known architect Alfred E. Badt to design the building. He drew on several styles to create the striking synagogue; heavily turning to the German version of Romanesque Revival known as *Rundbogenstil*. By placing a grand, split staircase on either side of the triple-arched entrance, Badt create the effect of a grand palace. The splendid European design in gleaming white limestone, was a striking contrast to the brownstone and brick tenements and commercial buildings along



Pike Street. *The Sun* said it "is considered the most beautiful Hebrew place of worship on the lower East Side."



Even though the synagogue was designed to accommodate 1,500 worshipers, more than double that amount showed up. The *New-York Tribune*, which now estimated the cost at \$85,000, reported that "Admission was by ticket only, several thousand persons being turned away."

Twenty policemen under Captain Shaw were on hand to preserve order as the throngs tried to gain entrance to the ceremony. "The interior of the synagogue was decorated yesterday with a profusion of American flags and bunting," reported *The Sun*. The patriotic decorations were not merely for show, apparently.

"Rabbi Schulman made a plea for the spread of Americanism among those of the Jewish faith who had not received the benefits of an education in our institutions, but he advised them also to see that their children, who are receiving an English education, are taught Hebrew also, that they may be able to teach their elders, in the tongue they understood, the principles of free government and give them some of the benefits of the education received in our public schools," said *The Sun*.

The *New-York Tribune* noted that Rabbi Schulman declared "that nowhere in the universe had Judaism such opportunities for development than in this country."

Five years after the dedication the congregation was shocked when, on January 12, 1909, the *New-York Tribune* reported that "the Rev. Israel Cooper, one of the best known and

oldest Jewish cantors in the city...died yesterday at the age of sixty-nine years, at his home." Rabbi Cooper had been suffering from "an acute nervous illness" for the past six months.

Before coming to New York Cooper had been cantor in Bucharest, Romania. An authority on Central-European music, he left five sons and two daughters along with his widow. His funeral brought a halt to the streets of the Lower East Side.

The following day the *New-York Tribune* reported "Twelve hundred Hebrews attended. Thousands lined the streets of the lower East Side as the funeral procession passed from one synagogue to another."

The services began at the Sons of Israel Kalwarie where one hundred well known cantors sang. After that ceremony, the body was carried to the Beth Medrasch Synagogue on Norfolk Street where another ceremony was conducted.

If mourners had been shocked by the suddenness of Rabbi Cooper's death; they were more so when they returned home to read the article in *The Sun* that afternoon with the headline "Jewish Singer a Suicide."

Apparently depressed over his worsening health, he "killed himself yesterday morning by inhaling gas through a tube at this home," reported the newspaper.

In 1911 the celebrated Reform Rabbi Judah Magnes was asked to give a series of speeches in the Sons of Kalwarie synagogue. According to Lawrence J. Epstein in his *At the Edge of a Dream: The Story of Jewish Immigrants on New York's Lower East Side*, congregants here wanted to lead traditional Jewish religious lives "but to do so in a specifically American way. They wanted to speak English. They wanted to be able to speak—or even dance—with women."

Thousands crowded Pike Street on the evening of his initial address and police once again had to be called in to maintain order. The Friday evening lectures laid the foundation for the Young Israel movement.

In 1912 another movement took root at Congregation Sons of Israel Kalwarie. Young people were seen to be drifting away from traditional Jewish values and observations. A mass meeting was held "to bring together the younger generation of Jews and stimulate them with a stronger religious feeling."

Justice Greenbaum recognized that "Young people had come to think that, as the clothes and traditions of their parents were old-fashioned, the religion of their parents also must be old-fashioned." But he saw a shared blame. "I fear, too, sometimes that the old people do not understand the dangers that beset the young. There are temptations here that must be fought, and the young must fight them. One of the saddest sights is to see our girls coming out of the factories, and then to see them again on Sunday on the streets with paint and powder on their faces, looking like women we cannot mention."

That same year, in March, The Sons of Israel Kalwarie held a two-day jubilee celebration of the 50th anniversary of its founding. In announcing the coming celebrations, the *New-*

York Tribune inflated the cost of the building once again, saying “the present synagogue was erected at a cost of \$200,000.”

As war ravaged Europe in 1916, congregants had difficulty obtaining news from Poland. So when Mrs. Mary Watkin of Borough Park returned from Kalwarya and offered to tell of her experiences on May 29, the synagogue was packed.

She told the audience of “the suffering and desolation” there. *The New York Times* reported that “Many of those belonging to the synagogue came from Kalwarya, and have either friends or relatives there. As Mrs. Watkin told her experience many were in tears.”

After spending a year in the little town she had seen much suffering and destitution. She told the congregants that “many had fled and were now scattered throughout Poland and Russian.”

Rabbi Samuel Schulman added to Mrs. Watkin’s experiences. “He pointed out that the Jews in the war-ravaged countries were caught between the millstones of war and many had been ground to death,” said *The Times*. “He depicted the destitution of those between the contending armies and how their full measure of suffering had come when their towns were captured and recaptured as the tide of fighting rose and fell.”

Following the speeches and collection for victims was taken. About \$1,000, specified for assisting those in Kalwarya, was turned over to the General Committee for the Relief of Jews in the War-Stricken Countries.

On January 18, 1917 a fire broke out in the basement of the synagogue. Although damage to the structure was minimal, it was a devastating loss to the congregation. *The Sun* reported that “Valuable Jewish records, costly books and scrolls were destroyed yesterday in a fire in the basement of the Sons of Israel Synagogue, 13 and 15 Pike street. “Many of the scrolls and records cannot be replaced.”

The wealth of the congregation was made obvious on March 16, 1928 when Murray Silverstein was arrested for burglary of the synagogue. The 20-year old was nabbed while pawning pieces of jewelry and silver candelabra in a shop on Second Avenue. Murray was accused of larceny of more than \$6,000 worth of “religious jewels, ornaments and shawls” on complaint of Israel Berg, sexton of the Pike Street synagogue.

As the century progressed, the Lower East Side changed. By the 1920s most of the German immigrant population was gone; and while the Jewish community still remained for decades, the ever-growing Chinatown area slowly engulfed more and more real estate.

In September 1979, just before Rosh Hashanah, congregants found themselves padlocked out of the Pike Street synagogue. Where once 1,500 worshipers crowded in for Saturday services, recently only about two dozen showed up. Without notifying the congregants, the trustees sold their synagogue to a Chinese group.

Esther Singer told Ari L. Goldman of *The New York Times*, “I was planning to come here Rosh ha-Shanah. Now they tell me don’t come—the place is for Buddhists.”

Trustees said that they accepted the \$180,000 offer—the funds from which would be used to maintain the synagogue's cemetery in Queens—because the Lower East Side had “drastically changed over the years to the extent that few Jews remain who attend religious services.”

The remaining congregants tried hard to save their synagogue. They held services on the sidewalk and vowed to prevent a Buddhist temple from taking over their building. They managed to stave off the sale on the legal grounds that religious property cannot be sold without prior notification of the congregation.

But in the end their protests and efforts were fruitless. In 1994 the building was sold to a developer who converted the school to retail space, a “community facility” (the Sung Tak Buddhist Temple) in the former sanctuary and residential apartments on the upper floors.

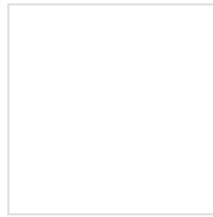


The façade of the Congregation Sons of Israel Kalwarie was designated a New York City Landmark in May 1997—two years too late to save the stained glass windows. Despite

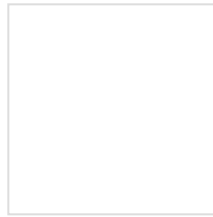
the architectural sacrilege committed to Alfred E. Badt's glorious structure, its integrity is still evident behind garish advertisements.

photographs by the author

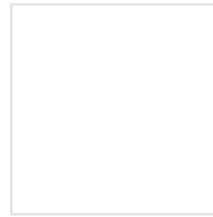
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The Lost 1892 Hotel Savoy -- 5th Avenue and 59th Street



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The 1887 Eldridge Street Synagogue

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Posted by [Tom Miller](#) at [3:21 AM](#)

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2 comments:

Anonymous [March 11, 2014 at 10:43 AM](#)

There's always the Eldridge Street Synagogue in NYC to relish the magnificent restoration done on both the buildings exterior and spectacular interior sanctuary. NYarch


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Anonymous [March 11, 2014 at 2:19 PM](#)

One of earliest influx of jews came from Brazil when they were booted out of there in the early 17th century arriving at New Amsterdam under Dutch rule.

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