

= First Roumanian @-@ American Congregation =

The First Roumanian @-@ American Congregation , also known as Congregation Shaarey Shomayim (Hebrew : שְׁאֵרֵי שְׁמוּאִים , " Gates of Heaven ") , or the Roumanishe Shul (Yiddish for " Romanian synagogue ") , was an Orthodox Jewish congregation which , for over 100 years , occupied a historic building at 89 ? 93 Rivington Street on the Lower East Side of Manhattan , New York .

Those who organized the congregation in 1885 were part of a substantial wave of Romanian @-@ Jewish immigrants , most of whom settled in the Lower East Side . The Rivington Street building , built around 1860 , had previously been a church , then a synagogue , then a church again , and had been extensively remodeled in 1889 . It was transformed into a synagogue for a second time when the First Roumanian @-@ American congregation purchased it in 1902 and again remodeled it .

The synagogue became famous as the " Cantor 's Carnegie Hall " , because of its high ceiling , good acoustics , and seating for up to 1 @, @ 800 people . Yossele Rosenblatt , Moshe Koussevitzky , Zavel Kwartin , Moishe Oysher , Jan Peerce and Richard Tucker were all cantors there . Red Buttons sang in the choir , George Burns was a member , and Edward G. Robinson had his Bar Mitzvah there .

The congregation 's membership was in the thousands in the 1940s , but by the early 2000s had declined to around 40 , as Jews moved out of the Lower East Side . Though its building was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1998 , the congregation was reluctant to accept outside assistance in maintaining it . In December 2005 , water damage was found in the structural beams , and services were moved to the living room of the rabbi 's mother . In January 2006 , the synagogue 's roof collapsed , and the building was demolished two months later .

= = Origins = =

= = = First Roumanian @-@ American / Congregation Shaarey Shamoyim = = =

From 1881 through 1914 , approximately 2 million Jews immigrated to the United States from Europe . An estimated three @-@ quarters of them settled in New York City , primarily in the Lower East Side . Over 75 @, @ 000 of these immigrants were from Romania , where Jews faced antisemitic laws , violence and expulsion . These hardships , combined with low crop yields and economic depression , resulted in 30 percent of the Jews in Romania emigrating to the United States .

Romanian Jewish immigrants in New York City gravitated to a fifteen @-@ block area bounded by Allen , Ludlow , Houston and Grand streets . This " Romanian quarter " became the most densely populated part of the Lower East Side , with 1 @, @ 500 to 1 @, @ 800 people per block . These immigrants founded the First Roumanian @-@ American congregation , also known as Congregation Shaarey Shamoyim .

The origins of the congregation are disputed ; its establishment in 1885 may have been a re @-@ organization of a congregation originally founded in 1860 . Located initially close to the Romanian quarter at 70 Hester Street , and later situated at the heart of it with the move to Rivington Street , the synagogue was the preferred house of worship for the quarter 's inhabitants .

= = = Rivington Street building = = =

The Rivington Street building was constructed as a Protestant church around 1860 by the Second Reformed Presbyterian Church , which served the area 's large German immigrant community . In November 1864 the building was sold to the Orthodox German @-@ Jewish Congregation Shaaray Hashomayim (" Gates of the Heavens ") , which had been founded in 1841 . Though its Hebrew name was essentially the same as that used by the First Roumanian @-@ American congregation ?

Congregation Shaarey Shamoyim ? which later purchased the building in 1902 , the two congregations were unrelated .

By the late 1880s , the German @-@ Jewish community had mostly moved from the Lower East Side . In 1889 , Congregation Shaaray Hashomayim moved to 216 East 15th Street , near Second Avenue , selling the Rivington Street building to the New York City Church Extension and Missionary Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church , which built or purchased churches , missions , and Sunday schools in New York City .

The Church Extension and Missionary Society engaged J. Cleaveland Cady to design major alterations to the structure . Cady was , at the time , New York 's most famous church architect , and had designed many other public institutional buildings , including university buildings , hospitals and museums . His work included the original Metropolitan Opera building (since demolished) , the Richardsonian Romanesque West 78th Street wing of the American Museum of Natural History , and several other buildings for the Church Extension and Missionary Society . The renovations cost approximately \$ 36 @,@ 000 (today \$ 948 @,@ 000) , and included an entirely new Romanesque Revival facade in the reddish @-@ orange brick that Cady also used on several other churches .

Renamed the Allen Street Methodist Episcopal Church (or Allen Street Memorial Church) , the Rivington Street building 's new purpose was to " attract Jewish immigrants seeking conversion " . It was , however , unsuccessful in this endeavor . In 1895 , the church 's pastor stated , " The existence of the church here attracts few . Our audiences are small , and contain almost no Jews . "

= = Purchase and renovation by First Roumanian @-@ American = =

In 1902 , the First Roumanian @-@ American congregation / Congregation Shaarey Shamoyim purchased the Rivington Street building from the Church Extension and Missionary Society to satisfy a need for a larger building to serve the Lower East Side 's rapidly growing Romanian @-@ Jewish population . At the time , the property was valued at \$ 95 @,@ 000 (today \$ 2 @.@ 6 million) . The funds for the purchase were raised from the members of the congregation , and to honor those contributing \$ 10 or more , names were engraved on one of four marble slabs in the stairway to the main sanctuary . The most generous gift was \$ 500 , at a time when \$ 10 was two weeks ' pay . The congregation also took out two mortgages ; one for \$ 50 @,@ 000 (today \$ 1 @.@ 37 million) with the Title Insurance Company , and a second for \$ 30 @,@ 000 (today \$ 820 @,@ 000) with the Church Extension and Missionary Society .

The congregation commissioned Charles E. Reid for extensive renovations , at a cost of \$ 6 @,@ 000 (today \$ 164 @,@ 000) . The " eclectic Byzantine " remodeling involved converting it for Jewish use by removing Christian symbols and adding a Torah ark and bimah (central platform from which the Torah is read) at the sanctuary 's north end . The renovations retained the original " horseshoe @-@ shaped gallery supported by twelve Ionic columns " and wooden pews with reading shelves (likely from the 1889 Cady renovation) , but a number of structural changes were made . Steel beams were added to support the weight of the ark and bimah , the rear wall was re @-@ built and the gallery extended to meet it , two skylights were added (a concave stained glass one and a clear glass one over the ark) , and at the front of the building , on top of the shallow (14 feet deep) fourth @-@ story attic , an equally shallow fifth @-@ story attic was added .

The completed structure filled almost the entire width of its approximately 70 @-@ foot @-@ wide (21 m) by 100 @-@ foot @-@ deep (30 m) lot , and seated 1 @,@ 600 to 1 @,@ 800 . Dedicated in late December 1902 , it was the Lower East Side 's largest synagogue and only Romanesque one , and it became an " architectural and public showpiece " .

= = Early activities = =

By 1903 the synagogue was well established on Rivington Street , and , due to its capacity and prominence , was often the site of significant or mass meetings . In April 1903 a service to honor the memory of Reform rabbi and Zionist leader Gustav Gottheil was held there , and a similar service was held for Theodore Herzl the following year . At the latter service , which was boycotted by

Orthodox rabbis , Herzl was not eulogized , nor was his name mentioned .

The Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations of America (UOJCA) held its third annual convention at the synagogue in June 1903 , attended by around 100 delegates , and presided over by the organization 's president , Rabbi Henry Pereira Mendes . The most important resolutions adopted at that meeting were one which deprecated the granting of a get (religious divorce document) to ? or allowing subsequent re @-@ marriage by ? people who had not first obtained a civil divorce , and the request that congregations with mostly foreign @-@ born members " secure an English @-@ speaking rabbi for the benefit of their American @-@ born English @-@ speaking children " . Pereira Mendes spoke in favor of the creation of a committee to bring victims of the Kishinev pogrom to the United States , and against a proposal by the Union of American Hebrew Congregations (UAHC) that the Jewish Sabbath be moved to Sunday . Pereira Mendes also announced that the UOJCA would " unite " with the UAHC and other national " religious , philanthropic , or educational " Jewish organizations in Washington " to discuss the subjects of vital concern to Judaism and Jews " , while rejecting the proposition that " the main topic of the discussion at the first congress shall be the immigration problem . "

At the meeting Albert Lucas also spoke out strongly against attempts by Christian groups to proselytize Jewish children in nurseries and kindergartens . Ostensibly to combat this proselytization , in 1903 the congregation was one of several New York City synagogues that allowed Lucas the use of its premises for free religious classes , " open to all children of the neighborhood " .

In December 1905 a mass meeting was held at the synagogue to protest massacres of Jews in Russia and mourn their deaths , and the congregation donated \$ 500 to a fund for the sufferers . In March 1909 Orthodox groups held meetings there to organize opposition to the constitution and make @-@ up of Judah Leon Magnes 's Kehilla , an overarching organization intended to represent all of New York 's Jews , which lasted until 1922 . A mass meeting of local residents and businessmen to combat Lower East Side gangsters was held at the synagogue in 1913 .

The Rivington Street synagogue was also a preferred venue for airing issues relevant specifically to Romanian @-@ American Jews . In 1905 it was the site of New York City 's only memorial service honoring United States Secretary of State John Hay , who had worked on behalf of oppressed Jews in Romania . In 1908 , the synagogue hosted a meeting of over 30 religious organizations representing Romanian @-@ American Jews , at which the formation of a federation of those organizations was proposed , and again in 1916 hosted a similar meeting of " two hundred delegates representing thirty @-@ five organizations ... to plan incorporation of the American League of Rumanian Jews " . At the latter meeting steps were taken to raise \$ 1 @,@ 000 @,@ 000 (today \$ 22 million) for oppressed Jews in Romania , and to campaign for their " equal rights and their emancipation from thralldom " .

The congregation carried out extensive charity campaigns during the Passover season ; by 1905 the congregation was distributing wagon @-@ loads of matzos to poor Jews so they could celebrate the holiday . By 1907 ? 1908 membership had risen to 500 (up from 160 in 1900) , the Talmud Torah had 250 students , and the synagogue 's annual revenues were \$ 25 @,@ 000 (today \$ 630 @,@ 000) . The congregation ran into financial difficulties of its own in 1908 , and in October of that year raised funds by selling a number of its Torah scrolls in a public auction .

Members who would become famous included George Burns and Bucharest @-@ born Edward G. Robinson , who had his Bar Mitzvah there in 1906 . Robinson would later laugh that his propensity for taking the stage was demonstrated when he gave the longest Bar Mitzvah speech in the history of the congregation ? " but the men sat still and listened " .

In 1911 First Roumanian @-@ American celebrated its ten @-@ year jubilee at the synagogue . Guest speakers included United Synagogue of America president Solomon Schechter , Congressman Henry M. Goldfogle , and the principal speaker was William Jay Gaynor , then Mayor of New York City .

Membership had grown to 350 families by 1919 . The congregational school held classes daily , and had 4 teachers and 300 students . The American Jewish Year Book listed the synagogue 's rabbi as Abraham Frachtenberg , a well @-@ known cantor .

= = " Cantor 's Carnegie Hall " = =

The synagogue 's sanctuary had a high ceiling and " opera house " characteristics , and was renowned for its " exquisite " or " magnificent " acoustics . Known as " the Cantor 's Carnegie Hall " , First Roumanian @-@ American became a center for cantorial music , and many of the greatest cantors of the 20th century led services there . Yossele Rosenblatt , Moshe Koussevitzky , Zavel Kwartin and Moishe Oysher all sang there , as did Jan Peerce and Richard Tucker before they became famous opera singers . Having a reputation for good cantorial singing had a positive impact on a synagogue 's finances ; congregations depended on the funds from the sale of tickets for seats on the High Holy Days , and the better the cantor , the greater the attendance .

Red Buttons sang at the synagogue with Rosenblatt in 1927 , and when visiting the synagogue almost 70 years later could still remember the songs . Though his family actually went to a " small storefront synagogue " , Buttons was discovered , at age eight , by a talent scout for Rosenblatt 's Coopermans Choir , who heard him singing near the intersection of Fifth Street and Avenue C , at a " pickle stand " . Buttons would sing in the choir for three years . Eddie Cantor has also been claimed as a choir member , though this is less likely .

Oysher ? " the greatest of all popularizers of cantorial singing " ? became the synagogue 's cantor in 1935 , and the congregation 's membership peaked in the 1940s , when it numbered in the thousands . In a 1956 interview by Brendan Gill in The New Yorker magazine , Oysher described First Roumanian @-@ American as " the most orthodox Orthodox synagogue in town " . Oysher died of a heart attack two years later " at the young age of 51 " . The week of his death , he had said , " half @-@ jokingly " , that he wanted only one person to deliver his eulogy : Chaim Porille , rabbi of the First Roumanian @-@ American Congregation . Porille had been born in Uscieczko (then in Poland) in 1899 , and moved to the United States in 1927 , to serve as rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of Providence , Rhode Island . He became rabbi of First Roumanian @-@ American in 1932 , a post he filled until 1962 , and was a member of the executive board of the Agudath Harabonim . He died in September 1968 .

= = Subsequent building renovations and appearance in the 1990s = =

In the years following First Roumanian @-@ American 's initial purchase and renovation of the Rivington Street building , the congregation made a number of other structural alterations . These included :

1916 ? 1917 : Adding fire escapes on the east and west sides of the building .

1920s or later : Installing individual theatre @-@ style seats in the gallery .

1938 ? 1943 : Removing the staircase to the fourth floor , leaving access only from the fire escapes .

1948 ? 1950 : Reconstructing the portico with some of the existing stone and brick , and adding new " fireproof steel stairs with terrazzo treads " and light @-@ yellow and blue tinted glass windows on the east and west walls of the sanctuary , and other improvements .

1964 : Adding a kitchen to the basement " for social purposes " .

In the 1990s , the north @-@ facing orange @-@ red brick facade presented a large , compound arched brick and stone portico , with deeply recessed doors . This arch was " supported by three carved columns , two twisted columns , and a central column with a chevron pattern , each with a Byzantine @-@ style capital " , and had a stone coping on top . Carved into the portico arch in capital letters were the words " First Roumanian @-@ American Congregation " .

Originally there were large rectangular window openings on the ground floor on each side of the portico , each divided into two windows , but these had been bricked in by the 1990s . The second- and third @-@ floor windows above them were originally stained glass but later clear glass , each second @-@ floor window having eight square panes , and each third @-@ floor window six panes topped with an arch . " Ornamental red terra cotta panels " separated the second- and third @-@ floor openings . On the third floor , centered above the portico , was a similar window , this one flanked by two short recessed twisted columns , each " supporting a stone lintel incised with a cupid

's @-@ bow ornament " . Similar lintels capped three @-@ story pilasters at each corner of the facade , and these pilasters and lintels extended around the northeast and northwest corners . The six @-@ paned windows were each capped with a roundel and three spandrels , " two large and one small " , and these retained their original stained glass .

The shallow fourth floor was demarcated on the bottom by " a heavy frieze and corbelled brick cornice " , which supported " eight round @-@ arched windows with molded brick voussoirs ... massed in a 3 @-@ 2 @-@ 3 pattern " . By the 1990s these had also been bricked in . The attic on top of the fourth floor , added during the 1902 ? 1903 renovations , was " capped by a band of small red terra @-@ cotta blocks " .

The sides of the building were faced with plain brick , and flanked by narrow alleys with iron gates at each entrance . The walls generally had plain windows , though there was a round arched one on each side of the fourth floor . One fire escape remained , in the east alley .

Inside , the building held a two @-@ story balconied main sanctuary and dining room , in addition to the basement kitchen and bathrooms . The heating system was in a sub @-@ basement . The front ark and wood bimah in the sanctuary were ornate ; the red velvet draped ark was elaborately decorated , and the bimah was also decorated , and supported a large bronze candelabra . The sanctuary floor was wood , with wood wainscoting and plaster walls .

= = = Appearances in popular culture = = =

The synagogue building can be seen in the 1956 film *Singing in the Dark* , starring Oysher , and also starring (and produced by) Joey Adams . The entrance can be seen in the panoramic photograph of the corner of Ludlow and Rivington streets found on the Beastie Boys ' 1989 *Paul 's Boutique* album cover foldout , and the building (and Jacob Spiegel) can also be seen in Raphael Nadjari 's 2001 film *I Am Josh Polonski 's Brother* .

= = Decline = =

Over time the synagogue appealed to a broader constituency than just Roumanian @-@ American Jews . Nevertheless , membership declined during the latter half of the 20th century as the upwardly mobile Jewish population of the Lower East Side moved to north Manhattan , Brooklyn , and the Bronx . First Roumanian @-@ American was particularly affected : as it was an Orthodox congregation , in order to attend Sabbath services its members had to live within walking distance .

In 1980 First Roumanian @-@ American was one of the few congregations on the Lower East Side to still have its own Talmud Torah . This school had been housed in a small building on the east side of the synagogue that had formerly served as the church rectory . The congregation was eventually forced to sell the building , but the new owners retained the school 's carved sign .

Rabbi Mordecai Mayer , who had led the congregation for 20 years , died in 1981 , two days before his 66th birthday . Born in Chortkov (then in Poland) , he had graduated from the Chachmei Lublin Yeshiva , and had emigrated to the United States in 1936 . He had , for 40 years , conducted programs on Jewish topics on radio station WEVD , then owned by The Forward . In the 1970s he was a columnist for the Yiddish weekly *Algemeiner Journal* , and was the author of the English @-@ language books *Israel 's Wisdom in Modern Life* (1949) and *Seeing Through Believing* (1973) . He was succeeded by Jacob Spiegel .

In the early 1990s the congregation could still be assured of the required quorum of ten men for the minyan during the week , as local businessmen attended the morning and evening prayers before opening and after closing their shops . By 1996 , however , the membership was down to around two dozen , and Spiegel began holding services in the small social hall in the basement , as the main sanctuary had become too expensive to maintain .

With the decline in membership , the building deteriorated . In 1997 the congregation received a grant for preservation and repair of the structure from the New York Landmarks Conservancy , and the following year received \$ 4 @, @ 000 from the Landmarks Conservancy 's Sacred Sites program for roof truss repairs . That same year the synagogue building was listed in the National Register of

Historic Places at the local level . In the fall of that year Shimon Attie 's laser visual work Between Dreams and History was projected onto the synagogue and neighboring buildings for three weeks .

Spiegel had a heart attack and died in 2001 , leaving charge of the synagogue to the youngest of his three sons , Rabbi Shmuel Spiegel . The other sons , Rabbi Gershon and Rabbi Ari , were , respectively , synagogue president and assistant rabbi . In June 2003 the name " Rabbi Yaakov Spiegel Way " was given collectively to the corner of Rivington Street and Ludlow Street near the synagogue location and the stretch of Rivington in front of the synagogue .

The roof had long been in bad shape by the time of Jacob Spiegel 's death in 2001 and it was threatening to collapse . In December of that year , Shmuel Spiegel managed to raise \$ 25 @,@ 000 for emergency repairs . However , despite offering cholent (the traditional Sabbath lunch stew) at the Sabbath morning kiddush , Spiegel had to search local streets to make the ten men for the minyan . In 2004 the regular membership hovered around 40 . Spiegel kept the synagogue running at an annual cost of around \$ 75 @,@ 000 .

= = Collapse = =

On January 22 , 2006 , the roof of the synagogue caved in , severely damaging the main sanctuary . Joshua Cohen , writing in The Forward in 2008 , described the roof as " falling in respectfully , careful not to disturb the local nightclubs , or the wine and cheesery newly opened across the street . " No one was injured , and a party to celebrate that fact was later held at the Chasam Sopher Synagogue on Clinton Street .

The National Trust for Historic Preservation issued a press release about the collapse , in which it described " older religious properties , like the First Roumanian @-@ American Synagogue " as " national treasures " , and stated :

The roof collapse at First Roumanian ? American Synagogue this week demonstrates that houses of worship must have access to necessary technical assistance , staff and board training , and the development of new funding sources in order to save these landmarks of spirituality , cultural tradition , and community service .

Amy Waterman , executive director of a project to repair and renovate the Eldridge Street Synagogue , noted in The Forward :

Synagogues like the First Roumanian @-@ American Congregation , more familiarly known as the Rumanische shul , were the first spiritual homes for successive waves of European immigrants . They were built more than 100 years ago , and just like the bridges and tunnels of New York City , they 're bound to fail if not attended to .

Though First Roumanian @-@ American had hosted a wedding as recently as October 30 , 2005 , the sanctuary had not been in regular use for over 10 years as a result of the difficulty maintaining it . Services had been held instead on a lower floor , and by autumn 2005 the roof was so porous that on Yom Kippur ? even in the basement ? they prayed " with buckets " . After a contractor found water damage in the ceiling beams in early December , the three Spiegel brothers had been holding services in their mother Chana 's apartment at 383 Grand Street , where they placed the congregation 's 15 Torah scrolls following the roof cave @-@ in . The synagogue 's historic ark was also retrieved from the ruins . According to Shmuel Spiegel , " the insurance company [was] playing hardball . "

Because the building had never been registered as a National Historic Landmark , after the collapse it was demolished on March 3 , 2006 . The New York City Department of Buildings said that the decision to demolish was the congregation 's , but congregational vice president Joshua Shainberg said the Department of Buildings had left them no choice : " The Department of Buildings told us , ' You are to demolish it or we are to demolish it . ' There were figures of up to \$ 1 @.@ 5 million for demolition . " At the time of the building 's collapse , the Spiegel brothers vowed that it would be re @-@ built , but not nearly as large : " perhaps 20 feet high by 60 feet deep by 75 feet wide , which would cost about \$ 2 million to \$ 3 million . "

Richard Price described the collapsed building in his novel Lush Life , writing that , after the demolition , only the rear wall with a Star of David in stained glass remained : " The candlesticks

were standing up in the rubble , and the whole place looked like an experimental stage set ? like Shakespeare in the Park . " By October 2007 all that was left was " an empty lot dotted with weeds and crushed bricks " . In a 2008 addendum to his book *Dough : A Memoir* , Mort Zachter described the remains as " a multimillion dollar real estate opportunity masquerading as a vacant , weed @-@ strewn lot . "

= = Controversy = =

The collapse of the roof , and subsequent destruction of the synagogue , generated widespread concern and criticism among preservationists , who blamed Jacob and Shmuel Spiegel ? a charge the family rejected .

Julia Vitullo @-@ Martin , senior fellow at the Manhattan Institute and director of its Center for Rethinking Development , stated that First Roumanian @-@ American 's roof collapse and subsequent destruction dramatized an " ongoing though undocumented synagogue crisis ? particularly in poor neighborhoods " and revealed a broader problem peculiar to Jewish houses of worship :

Since Judaism , unlike Catholicism , lacks a hierarchy that could keep track of how many [synagogues] are abandoned and demolished , the breadth of the problem is more difficult to ascertain .

In the years preceding the building 's collapse , the congregation had received offers of assistance from the New York Landmarks Conservancy , the National Trust for Historic Preservation , Lower East Side Conservancy , and the New York State Office of Parks , Recreation and Historic Preservation , though reports on the amounts and types of assistance offered varied . The congregation , then under the leadership of Jacob Spiegel , rejected them . Joel Kaplan of the Lower East Side Conservancy stated that the congregation " didn 't want the several hundred thousand dollars in landmarking grants that went to other Lower East shuls , money that could have kept the shul in repair . "

The reasons given for this rejection also varied . According to Vitullo @-@ Martin , writing in *The Wall Street Journal* , Shmuel Spiegel was not sure why the offers were rejected , as the records were " buried in the rubble " . Vitullo @-@ Martin speculated that congregants might have hesitated to agree to a condition that they would need permission from the state for any sale or alteration of the building during the following 20 years . According to *The New York Times* , Spiegel stated that the repairs required were so extensive that the congregation could not have made them even with this financial assistance . According to *The Jewish Week* , Spiegel stated that the congregation " didn 't want outside interference " , was " uncomfortable with the idea of being landmarked and having to answer to landmark guidelines " , and was also uncomfortable with making part of the building into a " museum of past glory " , as others nearby had done .

Zachter writes :

A few blocks away , the Eldridge Street Synagogue survives . Why this synagogue was renovated , and the First Roumanian torn down , is a question for the rabbis and the historians .