

Old Pasvalys in South Africa By Dovile Cypaite

In northern Lithuania lies the small city of Pasvalys, *Poswohl* in Yiddish. Some of the buildings that remain serve as fragments of the rich Jewish history and community that once lived here. Prior to the Second World War, Pasvalys thrived as a lively Jewish shtetl and a market-town.

700 Jews lived in Pasvalys at the beginning of World War II. Most made a living in commerce, while a small number made a living as craftsmen and farmers. However, by the mid nineteenth century and into the beginning of the twentieth century Pasvalys' Jewish community became a common example of extensive emigration from Eastern Europe. During this period, Eastern European Jews were attempting to flee the czarist regime. Furthermore, news of the violent pogroms starting in Odessa and Kyiv in 1881 spread fear throughout Jewish communities all over Russia. The fear of this heightened violence against Eastern European Jews caused widespread concern that the pogroms would soon occur in Lithuanian territory. As a result, many sought to leave Eastern Europe to avoid persecution and to pursue better future opportunities. Recorded in émigré memoirs and statistical data, their main direction for emigration was the United States, often referred to as "The Golden Land." In addition to the U.S., the Union of South Africa was an extremely popular destination among Lithuanian Jews. Data shows that 80% of the 800,000 Jewish emigrants who left Eastern Europe during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were from Lithuania.

Historical data shows that Jews from Pasvalys began emigrating to the Union of South Africa in the middle of the nineteenth century. In 1901, the Poswohl Friendly Benefit Society was created in South Africa to help Jews emigrate from Pasvalys and to establish their new lives abroad. Assistance was also provided to those who were born, married or had family connections in Pasvalys. The community settled in the eastern portion of what is present-day downtown Johannesburg. As their community grew by the beginning of the twentieth-century, a larger space for religious services was needed. Records show that "Poswohlers" held religious services in private homes. By 1920, the Jewish community was able to purchase real estate on which to build a synagogue. Funded by contributions from members of the Poswohl Friendly Benefit Society, in 1921 the synagogue was built and called Poswohl Synagogue. The name was given in honor of the community's rabbi Absilei who became known as the "Poswohler Rabbi." He later served as a rabbi in Vilnius.

As is noted in historical sources, "The synagogue was a manifestation of the faith that these emigrants from Pasvalys had in their old country and a token of their trust of religious tolerance." By forming their own congregation, these Jewish emigrants wove their community into the fabric of Johannesburg life while still creating their own distinct and complex religious and cultural pattern. Many examples of such communities can be found globally. One of the famous Lithuanian-Jewish émigré communities is The Vilna Shul in Boston, U.S., built in 1919 by emigres from "Vilna Gubernia."

The architecture of the facade of the Poswohl synagogue is in the Byzantine style. The architect, S.V. Mann, and the Poswohl congregation were clearly inspired by the Great Synagogue of Johannesburg. For decades, the Poswohl synagogue owed its preservation to the descendants of Pasvalys emigrants. They

continued to maintain the building following the departure of most of its congregation. This synagogue and its community flourished until after the Second World War. Following the growth of this part of the city as a commercial center, and the growing prosperity of the Jewish community, many families gradually departed to newer residential suburbs of the city. As their once thriving residential area became a more semi-industrial neighborhood, the synagogue slowly lost its congregation. The synagogue now serves as a monument to the memory and legacy of the Pasvalys community. Hymie Amolis, a Jewish community member in South Africa states in one of his articles that the Pasvalys synagogue acts as a monument to the community which no longer exists. Similarly, we can interpret this monument as a representation of the evolution of the Jewish émigré community in South Africa that over time has changed their location in the city. The main idea is that the synagogue also commemorates those who remained in the homeland in Pasvalys, as the entire community was destroyed in the Holocaust. Thus the Poswohl synagogue has become a symbol of daily life and collective experiences of Jews who remained and of Jews who left Pasvalys to live across the globe.

The synagogue was declared a National Monument under legislation on December 4, 1981. It is now a restaurant. Location: Mooit, Hillbrow, Johannesburg, 2038, South Africa.

The information about the Poswohl Synagogue was found in the Association of Lithuanian Jews in Israel Collection, and in the Goldstein-Goren Diaspora Research Center of Tel Aviv University Inventory. Documents used: A37/481.



