

Saving the Vilna Shul

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Alliance Letter

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6 Tucked away on the north side of Beacon Hill is a unique and valuable relic of Boston's past—the Vilna Shul, at 14-18 Phillips Street. Built in 1919, it is the oldest remaining structure in Boston built for use as an Orthodox synagogue.

Currently closed and badly deteriorated, the Vilna Shul may soon be protected by designation of its interior as a Boston Landmark. (The exterior is already protected as part of the Beacon Hill Historic District.) The landmarking petition is one part of an ongoing effort to preserve and renovate the building for a use appropriate to its historical significance.

A SYMBOL OF BOSTON'S IMMIGRANT PAST

The Vilna Shul served the community of Eastern European Jewish immigrants who settled in the West End and the north side of Beacon Hill in the late 19th century. Many of the newcomers were from the largely Jewish town of Vilna, which at various times had been part of Russia, Poland and Lithuania. Since the 18th century Vilna has been known as a center of Jewish cultural, political and intellectual life. Perhaps its most notable landmark was the Grand Synagogue, which was destroyed in World War II.

The Boston settlers from Vilna met for worship in various locations around Beacon Hill and in 1903 were granted a state charter as a religious corporation, the Vilner Congregation. In 1919 the Congregation bought two dwellings at 16-18 Phillips Street, which were demolished to make way for their new synagogue.

The architect for the shul was Max M. Kalman, although most records cite Boston cabinetmaker Sam Katz as the person most responsible for the building's layout and interior. The interior design is, in fact, an intriguing combination of features from the traditional Eastern European synagogue and the American Colonial meeting house.

In keeping with Orthodox tradition, the main sanctuary on the second floor has separate sections and entrances for men and women. The first floor contains a lobby, offices, and a function room that could have been used as a secondary sanctuary. The floor of the vestibule is tiled, with "Vilner Congregation" written in tile across the center. Large marble plaques in the men's and women's sections list in Hebrew the names of the founding members of the Congregation.

Sam Katz seems to have drawn upon several European synagogue plans for the design of the Vilna Shul. Its distinctive L shape resembles that of the famous Worms Shul in Germany. The *altneushul* (Old-New Synagogue) in Prague, built in 1280 and the oldest synagogue still in use, may have been another resource.

IMPACT OF DEMOGRAPHICS

According to Historic Boston's feasibility study on preserving the shul's interior, "In its heyday, the Vilna Shul was a center for religious worship and study and provided the immigrants with outlets for socialization, mutual support and cultural activities."

However, changing demographic and religious trends over the years acted to reduce the congregation. Starting in the late 1920's many of the Beacon Hill and West End Jewish immigrants moved outside the area, frequently to Dorchester and Roxbury. At the same time, the reform and conservative movements within Judaism gained in popularity at the expense of orthodox congregations in general. The demolition of the West End in the 1960's was the final blow, scattering what remained of the immigrant ethnic communities.

By 1985 the Congregation had one surviving member, Mendel Miller, who petitioned to have the Congregation corporation dissolved. He attempted to sell the building to Edward J. Denning, who planned to replace the building with a parking garage. But Denning failed to

meet the financial conditions of the purchase and sale agreement, which is likely to be invalidated soon. The building is now in temporary receivership, and in February the Boston Landmarks Commission accepted a petition to landmark the interior.

The Vilna Shul was one of the stops on the Alliance's 1988 walking tour of Beacon Hill-West End religious sites. The Alliance supports its landmark designation and hopes that it will be renovated for use in keeping with its historic status. Suggested uses include its becoming a museum on the life and culture of Boston's Jewish immigrants, offices for local Jewish organizations, or perhaps even, once again, a place of worship.

For more information on the Vilna Shul project, contact Stanley Smith at Historic Boston, 227-4679.

The Vilna Shul, 14-18 Phillips Street

