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## In Memoriam: Kazimierz Macciej Piechotka (1919-2010)

Samuel D. Gruber, Dr., *Syracuse University*



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## Kazimierz Maciej Piechotka (1919–2010)

Samuel D. Gruber

The talented and imaginative architect and architectural historian Kazimierz Maciej Piechotka passed away in Warsaw on 6 March 2010 after a long illness. Maciej was a successful architect for many decades in Warsaw, especially in the field of housing, but his lasting international fame will no doubt be the result of his brilliant work studying and bringing to life, through his exact and expressive drawings, the lost architecture and heritage of the Polish synagogues. This is especially true concerning the wooden synagogues that he studied for more than 60 years



in close collaboration with his wife Maria. Piechotka had superb spatial imagination; he was also a great organizer, coordinator, and administrator of architectural projects. This combination of personal ability and collaborative spirit allowed him to excel, and to undertake many large architectural endeavors in modern Poland during the decades of communist rule. It is difficult to know what type and style of architecture Maciej might have developed in a free market economy. His drawings suggest a tendency toward more expressive architecture than was preferred – or even allowed – under communism. Still, the organization and support of the art and architectural professions in Poland during his lifetime gave him opportunities that might not have otherwise existed. He made a tremendous impact in the field of housing, and he also taught and mentored many younger architects and engineers who worked with him on his projects.

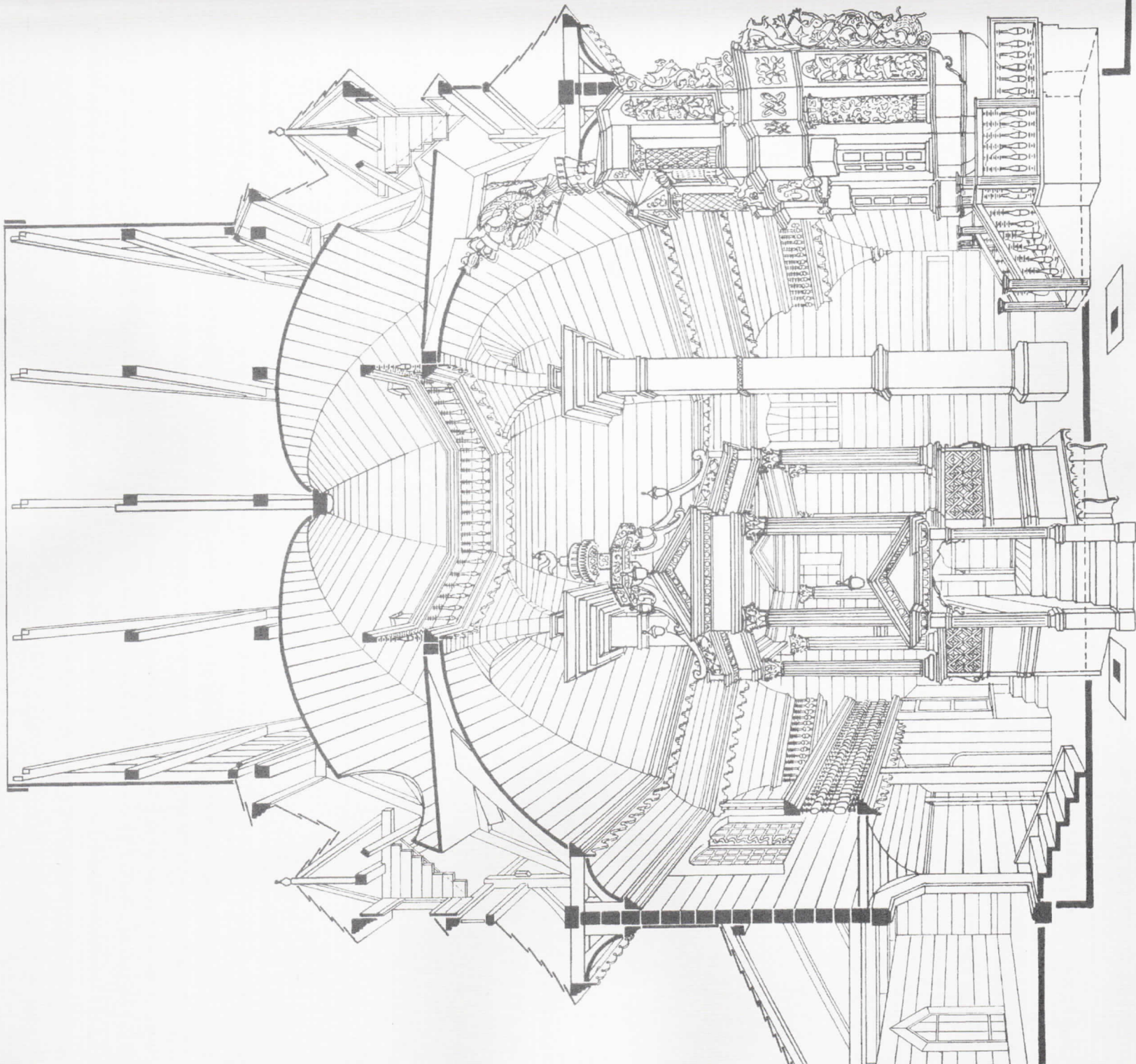
Kazimierz Maciej Piechotka was born on 20 November 1919. He was one of the last of a generation of Poles who

studied architecture during the interwar years, and one of the last survivors of that generation of Christian and Jewish Poles who, during the interwar years, came to appreciate the brilliance and variety of Jewish art. Maciej began his studies at the Faculty of Architecture of the Politechnika Warszawska (Warsaw Polytechnic, hereafter noted as PW) in 1937. Even during the occupation of Poland by the Nazis from 1939 to 1944 he continued working with the Faculty of Architecture of the underground PW. Maciej served as an assistant in the Department of Polish Architecture and collaborated with the Department of the Town Planning Research (Zakład Badań Urbanistycznych) during those years. At that time he also participated in underground competitions and guided some prize-winning students.

Beginning in 1941, he served in the Związek Walki Zbrojnej (Union of Armed Struggle, hereafter ZWZ), and then in the Armia Krajowa (Home Army [AK] – the Polish Underground Army of the Resistance Movement with its Commander-in-Chief in England) in the Department of Legislation, working for the secret service and counter-espionage of the AK. For this service he was later awarded the Bronze Order of Merit with Swords (Brazowy Krzyż Zasługi z Mieczami). He was honored for his participation in the Warsaw uprising in 1944, receiving the Cross of Valor (Krzyż Walecznych), as well as the highest Polish War decoration – the Order of Virtuti Militari.

It was a period of war and love, for during the Warsaw uprising, Piechotka married a fellow student of the underground Faculty of Architecture, Maria Huber. Thus





Olkienniki Synagogue, perspective section, drawn by Michał J. Piechotka. In: Maria and Kazimierz Piechotka, *Heaven's Gates: Wooden Synagogues in the Territories of the Former Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth* (Warsaw, 2004), fig. 92



began a devoted familial, intellectual, and professional partnership that endured for more than 65 years through both hardship and success. The marriage did not begin auspiciously; after the suppression of the uprising and the fall of Warsaw, both Maciej and Maria spent eight months in a German prisoner of war camp (Stalag IV B Mühlberg), where they served on the hospital staff of AK. Immediately after the end of the war they returned home to Warsaw, now a city of ruins.

Due to his training and war experiences, Maciej was immediately able to begin work rebuilding the city. Already in June 1945, shortly after the liberation of Poland, he became a designer in the Department of Architecture of Monuments of the Past (Wydział Architektury Zabytkowej) in the Bureau of the Reconstruction of the Capital (Biuro Odbudowy Stolicy) and he was also given a position as assistant lecturer in the Department of Polish Architecture (ZAP [Zakład Architektury Polskiej]) in the Faculty of Architecture of the reactivated Warsaw Polytechnic. He was now formally able to continue his own studies, and earned a diploma in architecture in 1946. In 1947–48 he was appointed vice-chief of the atelier of the most prominent Polish architect of the time, Prof. Bohdan Pniewski, and worked on a number of major projects, including the Parliament, the Saxonian Axis, and Ministry of the National Defense buildings.

As young architects in a war-ravaged country, Maciej and Maria first worked on a wide variety of architectural projects, including the plans for the rebuilding and redevelopment of several small towns and various public buildings; many of these were unrealized. They were awarded several prizes for additional projects, among them the buildings of the Union of the Musical Industry in Warsaw; the Polish Musical Society in Kraków; the Institute for the Improvement of Medicine in Warsaw; and cultural centers in Złotoryja and Sędziszów. Throughout the 1950s they also designed exhibitions and decorations for large congresses and other cultural-political events (World Congress of Peace, 1950; 2nd Congress of Polish Science, 1952; 5th International Festival of Youth and Students, 1955).

In 1948 the Piechotkas also established their own architectural partnership that worked on contemporary

and historic projects, authored numerous papers and books, and in time won a number of prestigious awards, prizes, and honors. Many of their architectural projects contributed to the rebuilding of Warsaw and the new face of Poland, though they concurrently turned their attention to the past. In 1948–52, when Maciej was still an assistant lecturer at the ZAP, they produced the outline of their first – and in some ways still most important – book, *Bóznice Drewniane*, which was published in 1957. Not only was this the first book about the lost Jewish heritage of Poland as a great architectural tradition, but it was also the first post-war publication of ZAP. The English language edition, *Wooden Synagogues*, was published two years later (Warsaw: Arkady, 1959) and immediately became a central text in international Jewish and architectural circles, in time influencing both historians and scores of contemporary artists and architects.

The data used in the book – especially the building measurements and photographs – had been collected in the interwar years by teams of architects in the ZAP, led by Szymon Zajczyk (1901–44). Most of these researchers, with whom Maciej had studied, were Jewish, and all had perished in the Holocaust. Although much of the material they had meticulously collected had been destroyed, enough survived to continue and publish their work. For several years Maciej and Maria sifted through the surviving material and added their own observations, eventually using sketches, photos, and building measurements to create a series of now-iconic illustrations of building plans, sections, and elevations. One theme of the book that made it unusual, and that extended beyond its architectural focus, was its presentation, in the context of architectural history, of the complex relationship and mutual influences between Polish and Jewish culture. This interdependence had existed from the time of the Renaissance through the early modern period. Stephen Kayser, then director of the Jewish Museum of New York, wrote in his introduction to the English edition that the book served as a memorial, presenting the now-lost synagogues as “witnesses of a destroyed world for which, throughout many centuries, these lands were God’s Lands.” Since its publication, the book has never ceased to be in demand and to be quoted and cited, both because of the valuable information it



contains but also, as Kayser sensed, because its role as a memorial text fills an important place in the Yizkor (memorial) literature. *Wooden Synagogues*, in fact, would be the last work on the subject that the Piechockas were allowed to publish until after 1990, when the Polish regime again became democratic. The book went out of print, and used copies fetched high prices in the West. The Piechockas' drawings were frequently reproduced in other books and in exhibitions, usually without the Piechockas' knowledge.

It was in the area of housing, however, that the Piechockas did most of their work. In 1951 they were named chief designers of the enormous Bielany housing estate in Warsaw. From the 1950s through the 1970s housing became Maciej's main field of interest and professional activity. He was the designer of the Bielany I – II – III – IV housing projects, huge complexes for almost 50,000 residents. From this project, his efforts turned to reconciling the inefficacies and creative obstacles inherent in large state-run projects with the potential of architects to design rational but varied housing developments. Maciej served as Chairman of the Section of Housing for the Polish Association of Architects (Stowarzyszenie Architektów Polskich) from 1956 to 1976. The social and aesthetic legacy of these projects is a mixed one, as he well knew by the last decades of his life when Poland was undergoing massive change.

From the 1960s through the 1980s the Piechockas' travel outside the communist bloc was restricted, and they were hardly aware of the impact of their book on their contemporaries in Israel, western Europe, and the United States. During these years, however, and especially after their retirement as active architects in 1981, they continued their research and writing on Jewish artistic and architectural themes, compiling a substantial body of work that would be ready for publication when the occasion allowed. This included ground-breaking work on Poland's tradition of masonry synagogues, on the Jewish settlement in Polish towns, and on the painted wall decorations in Polish synagogues. An entire room in their small but comfortable house, which they had designed themselves and built in an area of Warsaw popular with artists, was devoted to their files on Polish synagogues. Long before

they could visit the National Library or Yad Vashem in Jerusalem, or the Institute for Jewish Research (YIVO) in New York, they had devotedly collected, compiled, and preserved an unrivaled archive on Jewish Poland, a legacy that had nearly been lost. Even in the late 1980s Maciej and Maria had little knowledge of the lasting importance of their work. I remember their astonishment in 1989 when I showed them a copy of *Wooden Synagogues* on sale at a used bookstore on Broadway for about \$300 (they had never received any money for the book). From that time onward, they redoubled their efforts to publish their new book, and to prepare a second edition of *Wooden Synagogues*. This was published in Polish in 1996 as *Bramy nieba: bóżnice drewniane* and in English in 2004 as *Heaven's Gates: Wooden Synagogues in the Territories of the Former Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth*.

These volumes contained a substantial number of new texts and a large number of new drawings, expanding the earlier collection of sketches of roof construction details and including a series of especially revealing fresh perspectives of synagogue interiors. These drawings place new emphasis on the development of the *Aron ha-kodesh*, the *bimah*, and various types of wall decorations. With access to resources and colleagues in Israel and America, the Piechockas made much more extensive reference in their new edition to liturgical and communal developments as presented in Jewish sources.

In all, Maciej and Maria wrote five books, about twenty published articles, and dozens of papers about synagogue art and architecture. Beginning ca. 1990, at the international conference in New York, "The Future of Jewish Monuments," these papers were presented not only throughout Poland but also in Jerusalem, New York, Paris, London, and Berlin. In 2000 Maciej and Maria Piechocka were jointly honored with the Jan Karski and Pola Nirenska Award, granted by the jury appointed by YIVO in New York "for their lifelong work of documenting and thereby rescuing from oblivion the art and architecture of the synagogues erected by the Polish Jews on Polish soil." In 2004 the Polish National Committee of the International Council of the Preservation of the Monuments of the Past (ICOMOS) presented them with the international J. Zachwatowicz

Award “for their prominent achievements in the field of research and protection of monuments of culture.” The varied achievements of the Piechotkas were celebrated in Warsaw in 2008 in the exhibition “Maria and Kazimierz Maciej Piechotka: 70 Years with Architecture,” that demonstrated and celebrated Maria and Maciej’s creativity and intellect and also his zest for life. I experienced his generous mentoring spirit myself when I first met Maciej in 1989. I am glad to have known him for twenty of those years, and vividly remember the time spent with him and Maria in New York and Poland in the 1990s, and especially the 14-hour days we spent touring Poland just months following the fall of communism. For two weeks in June 1990 we traveled across much of Poland from four in the morning until close to midnight, stopping along the way to see ruined synagogues. Much of what I learned then from the Piechotkas went into the creation of the

Jewish Heritage Program of the World Monuments Fund.

One of the few objects in my life that I treasure is the large drawing of the interior of Wolpa Synagogue by Maciej that hangs in my dining room. Unlike most of the carefully-measured architectural drawings that he published in *Wooden Synagogues*, this scene resonates with life. The synagogue is filled with people and the sky is full of swirling stars, reminiscent of Van Gogh’s *Starry Night*. Maciej’s spirit will continue to reside among those stars. His friends will remember his warm and ebullient personality, his quick intellect, and his deft drawing hand. Maria wrote the finest tribute when she told me that Maciej “was really the most splendid, intelligent, multi-talented, charming, fascinating man and the best husband and father in the world.”

The author thanks Maria and Michał Piechotka for their help in researching this memorial.