

# POZNAŃ SYNAGOGUE PROJECT

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PL 61-758 Poznań

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## REGISTERED MAIL / RETURN RECEIPT REQUESTED

- Officers and Directors

Związek Gmin Wyznaniowych Żydowskich w RP Filia w Poznaniu

ul. Stawna 10

PL 61-758 Poznań

- Mgr. Alicja Kobus

ul. Łąkowa 60

PL 62-095 Murowana Goślina

**Re: Plans for the former synagogue on ul. Wroniecka, Poznań**

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I wish to be very clear about this. PSP and I have nothing against any of you personally. We would certainly prefer to be working together with you than against you. Furthermore, we think it is still possible to do so. Whether it will happen or not, however, is almost entirely up to you.

However, though PSP is not against you personally, and would truly like to work with you, it is strongly against the uninspired ideas, self-serving machinations, and small-minded approach that have so far been advocated by your spokesperson, at least as reported by *Gazeta Wyborcza*. PSP is so much against them that we hope to prevent them from progressing any further. However, we are not even sure if all of you agree with your spokesperson, for she never permits any of the rest of you to speak for your organization. Are there any differences of opinion amongst you or do you all follow her orders without question? We have been told, for instance, that about two years ago, more than half of the members quit the "filia" in protest against the tyrannical practices of your spokesperson.)

Poznań, Wielkopolska, Poland, and the European Union all deserve a world-class project to be built from, with, around, or in the former synagogue. This is an opportunity for everyone to win. It is, indeed, a remarkable example of what is called a "win-win" opportunity. However, what you have

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so far offered is a less than imaginative, less than inspiring, less even than ordinary project. Everyone will lose. We can say that the current ideas coming from the “filia” are better than the idea Mrs. Kobus expressed to me during my first meeting with her in May 2002 – when she said she thought the synagogue should become a “Jewish hotel and kosher restaurant.” But even your best ideas are still far from good – a bored teenager could do as well after 15 minutes of half-hearted consideration. With all the ideas that have been offered by others concerned with the synagogue – not least by PSP in its *President’s Report* of December 2005 – it is amazing that you have not managed to see that the synagogue, and the city that surrounds it, deserve so much better than you are willing to accept.

There are already major world-class Jewish “memory and education” projects in Frankfurt, Munich, Berlin, Dresden, Hamburg, Kraków, the north-east of Poland (the *Fundacja Pogranicze* in Sejny<sup>1</sup>), along with Lithuania, the Czech Republic, Austria, and Hungary. Furthermore, after a decade of delay, there will soon be another very significant world-class project – *The Museum of the History of Polish Jews* in Warsaw. There is already a *Forum for Dialogue Among the Nations* in Gliwice<sup>2</sup> and a similar project in Krzyszowa (the former home of the anti-Nazi conspirator, von Moltke, now the home of the *New Kreisau Foundation for Education and Tolerance*<sup>3</sup>). There are other similar organizations in Germany, the Czech Republic, and Austria. All this is not only evidence that such projects can work when they are imaginative and well done – it is also a warning that the space for further examples of “me-too” projects is already crowded. Those who propose mediocre projects that have nothing new to offer will not succeed.

How many more of these projects do you think northern Central Europe can accommodate? And where should new ones be located if they are to make the contributions that they are intended to make? Poznań is not exactly on the Jewish tourist itinerary, and if anyone thinks that fact can be changed by more than a few degrees, I must suggest they are guilty of wishful thinking. Even the prestigious grave of Rabbi Akiva Eger is unlikely to attract more than several hundred Jews to Poznań in any given year. That small number will not be enough even to pay the electric bills of the synagogue. Someone has got to come up with an idea for a project that people of all faiths and all ages will want to visit, use, enjoy, and feel proud of -- not simply something that you want to put your names on. The best way to do this is to invite everyone to have a say in the project. I find it ironic that *Gazeta Wyborcza* uses the name *Agora* for its holding company. The *agora* was the

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.pogranicze.sejny.pl/>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.jewishmemory.gliwice.pl/>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.krzyzowa.org.pl/>

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ancient Greek marketplace where democracy was born. Every idea could be given voice. Everyone had an equal chance. There was no censorship of ideas or emotions. Sometimes there was chaos, but generally the best ideas won out. But somehow you have persuaded *Gazeta Wyborcza* to go against the principles on which it was founded and which the “Agora” name suggests it still holds. What has happened to the marketplace of ideas? Where are transparency, democracy, and accountability in all this? Throughout the four and a half years that I have been concerned with the Poznań synagogue, I have seen a lot of mediocrity bolstered by a lot of propaganda, but I have not seen much else.

If the “filia” goes ahead as it has been going so far – refusing to listen, refusing to seek expert and creative advice, refusing to admit its own limitations -- it will create a situation in which the synagogue will become unfundable. The synagogue will then be left to fall deeper into a state of irreversible disrepair. When that happens, I predict, the ZGWŻ will make the argument that it did its very best to save the synagogue and still failed – using that failure as the perfect justification for selling the very valuable synagogue property for development. This is exactly the scenario PSP has been warning against since the autumn of 2003. Sadly, we see no reason to think things have improved or that the synagogue is, in real and demonstrable terms, safer now than it was then.

As I have said elsewhere, the synagogue project the “filia” has been offering is not a project appropriate for public finance. Neither the Polish nor the regional, nor the civic governments, nor the European Union, should put money into a project that: (1) has so little likelihood of long-term success, and (2) clearly benefits so few people. On this last point, I note that Mrs. Kobus cannot even manage to be consistent on the number of people in her group. In a recent interview with Jan Szczepański, a student from *Maryja Magdalena High School*,<sup>4</sup> Mrs. Kobus claimed to have 48 active members in her group. But in another interview, which she gave in January of this year to Dinah Spritzer, the Polish and Czech Republic correspondent for the international Jewish news service, the *Jewish Telegraph Agency*, Mrs. Kobus acknowledged that there are only 12 members. Either she can't count, or she isn't always telling the whole truth. Is this really someone who should be handling large amounts of public money or managing a difficult and complex project?

Taxpayer's money should not be devoted to an expensive project of an arguably religious nature. I would hope that principle was self-evident,

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<sup>4</sup> Mr. Szczepański interviewed Mrs. Kobus for an essay he prepared for a contest concerning “civic responsibility” that was sponsored by Polityka. PSP hopes to obtain a copy of the essay – if it does, it will post it on the PSP website: [www.pozsynpro.org](http://www.pozsynpro.org)

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though apparently it is not. No one wishes to impede the free expression and practice of any religion; but the government should not finance it. And fortunately, it does not have to. The governments of Poland and Europe should spend the public money they have collected to benefit the greatest possible number of their citizens in the best possible ways. These decisions should be made democratically, openly, transparently, and with strict accountability. When schools, hospitals, clinics, recreation facilities, public transport facilities and roads, proper care for the poor, for the aged, and for the disabled, and vigilance against crime and corruption, along with every other example of public infrastructure and public service in Poland, are all desperately in need of attention, upgrading, and additional funding, WHAT POSSIBLE EXCUSE CAN THERE BE FOR DIVERTING EVEN A SMALL AMOUNT OF PUBLIC MONEY INTO A MEDIOCRE AND UNCLEAR PROJECT FOR THE SYNAGOGUE?

This does not mean, of course, that the synagogue should not be cared for. The synagogues of Warsaw, Kraków, and Wrocław have all been rebuilt with private money, nearly all of the money coming from outside Poland. Why should the Poznań synagogue be different? It would not have to be different except for the fact that Mrs. Kobus doesn't have any experience in managing a complex international project, or in finding and making careful use of large sums of money, doesn't have a business plan, is resistant to any sort of transparency and accountability protocols, doesn't have a clear goal, hasn't done the necessary research, and has not reached out to engage the help of people who are qualified and experienced enough to get the job done properly. Ks. Jerzy Stranz may be very gifted as an instructor of ecumenism in the *School of Theology at Adam Mickiewicz University*, but this does not make him any more qualified than Mrs. Kobus, a former grade school teacher, to direct a complex project requiring experts from many disciplines and ideally from many countries.

As evidence of ks. Stranz's abilities in this area, and of the level of his boldness and imagination in general, we should look to the fact that each year his direction of *The Day of Judaism* in Poznań (17<sup>th</sup> January) has followed the same dull formula as the year before, often with the same guests and contributors. As a result, each year the *Day of Judaism* receives less press coverage and affects fewer people. Of course, we shouldn't expect ks. Stranz to be either a Sergei Diaghilev or a Steve Jobs. His *métier* is not that of an impresario or a visionary. However, if the *Center of Dialogue* project now being proposed by Mrs. Kobus is no more interesting or inspired than the annual *Day of Judaism* events, then the *Center* will fail. It might fail before it gets started, or it might fail after five or even ten years, but it will surely fail.

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Any money spent on it will have been wasted. Whatever is done must be far better and far bolder than what is currently being proposed.

In 2004, Mrs. Kobus went to Sweden to obtain the money she needed for “her” project from private sources. She came back to Poland without the money. Unable to find private money, she has been trying to pressure, with *Gazeta Wyborcza’s* help, the public officials of Poznań, Wielkopolska, Poland, and the European Union, into giving her the money she failed to raise privately. We must assume from these facts that private donors, whether in Sweden or America or Germany or Israel, have higher standards than Mrs. Kobus has so far been able to satisfy. Apparently, they have been unimpressed and unexcited by her proposals. This is not surprising. Private donors generally have very high standards for giving their money to projects. They want “bang for their bucks” as the American phrase puts it. Mrs. Kobus’s plans are unimpressive and unexciting. There is no bang, barely a whimper. Are they truly awful? No, they are not as bad as that – not since the Jewish hotel and kosher restaurant idea was put aside. But they are not nearly good enough either. They have a high probability of failure and almost no probability of long-term success. If the probabilities were reversed, private donors would be delighted to contribute.

Why is it that she and her supporters are so determined to push ahead on their own with something that is so unimpressive and unfundable? The availability of private money is a good test of the quality of a project. If there is ever something worth doing, private money will become available to do it. If, instead, Mrs. Kobus stubbornly insists on having things all done to her specifications, the only certain result will be that the synagogue will be far less than it could be and that scarce public money will have been thrown away with insufficient public benefit in return.

In the more than four years that I have known Mrs. Kobus, there has been one thing consistent and irrefutable about her: she treats the Poznań synagogue as her personal property. She will not even allow others to speak about it if she can stop them. She claims to care about the synagogue, but she appears to care more about her own importance. There is a reason she has been nicknamed “The Little Dictator” by at least some of the local press: she behaves as a dictator. Her small group of twelve (or perhaps forty-eight) isn’t even allowed to speak for itself. It clearly isn’t allowed to think for itself. In the four and a half years that I have been concerned with the synagogue there has been only one so-called “president” of the “filia,” and no other member’s name or opinion has, so far as I can determine, ever appeared in the newspapers. This is a strange, irresponsible, and clearly undemocratic situation. No one – certainly no public official or elected representative –

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should offer financial or other support to an organization that appears so undemocratic, irresponsible, and tyrannical.

Furthermore, Mrs. Kobus and the “filia”<sup>5</sup> are all relatively old people who spent most of their adult lives being influenced and propagandized under one or another totalitarian regime, and who have the narrow worldview of people who have traveled little and experienced even less of the world at large. While I accept that they have endured countless hardships, these are nevertheless not the people to decide the future of anything, certainly not the future of something so important as the identity and direction of Poznań, of which the synagogue must be clearly recognized as a very valuable part – as valuable in its way as the cathedral, the Franciscan church, the fara, the rathusz, and the zamek.

Look at a map and you will see the future: Poznań is at the center of northern Central Europe – halfway between Berlin and Warsaw, halfway between Gdansk and Prague. It has a history of regional importance older and more established than that of Warsaw. Only in the 20<sup>th</sup> century did its relative regional importance decline; there are plenty of reasons to believe that in the 21<sup>st</sup> century its position may once again rise. Poznań ought to be (and can be) a truly wonderful European city, not a tired, shabby, second-tier Polish city looked down on by Warsaw, Kraków, Gdansk, and even Wrocław. Seen in this context the synagogue doesn't belong just to 12 (or perhaps 48) old people. It doesn't belong only to the Jews of Poznań – meaning, of course, all of them, including the more than 100 with whom Mrs. Kobus won't speak. It doesn't even belong just to the Jews of Poland, as represented by the ZGWŻ. If it is to have any real and positive purpose in the decades to come, then it must have a meaning and purpose for Europeans of all faiths, both from Poznań and from far beyond Poznań.

It must, for one thing, be acknowledged by all that it began its existence as a German-Jewish synagogue in Posen, then a German city. This is a plain fact, not something to provoke a heated argument about patriotism. German Jews, who suffered the same fate under the Nazis as Polish Jews, should certainly be involved in the synagogue's rehabilitation. Furthermore, there are approximately 25 living survivors of the Holocaust who worshipped in the Poznań synagogue before September 1939. Their views on the future of the

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<sup>5</sup> Though Mrs. Kobus herself uses it, and has persuaded *Gazeta Wyborcza* also to use it, I do not like to use the word *gmina* in reference to Mrs. Kobus's small group, because the only Jewish *gmina* in Poznań that is officially recognized by the Polish *Ministry of the Interior and Administration* is the *Izraelicka Niezależna Gmina Wyznaniowa w Poznaniu*, which has at least 100 registered members. Unfortunately for everyone, Mrs. Kobus and her group will have nothing to do with the significantly larger group. The conflict appears to be one of personalities, rather than one of policies.

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synagogue should be sought out and given appropriate weight and respect. (The difference between the Holocaust survivors and the group of elderly people that makes up the “filia” is significant: the Holocaust survivors from Poznań have real experiences of what this city was like before the Nazi onslaught; they also have real experiences of what the synagogue was like. The synagogue belongs to them in ways that it cannot belong to anyone else. No amount of reading and no number of photographs can make up for the intensity of their personal experiences.)

Any reasonable and sensitive person must conclude that all these interested groups and individuals count for as much or more than Mrs. Kobus and her “filia”. Mrs. Kobus’s small group (or rather the ZGWŻ in Warsaw, of which the Kobus group is only a “filia,” not a “gmina”) has legal title to the synagogue, but that does not give them exclusive moral title to it. Until this is admitted openly and honestly, the concept of a *Center of Tolerance and Dialogue* will be a sham. So far there has been no tolerance and no dialogue – not even between the Jews on one side of Poznań and the Jews on the other side; and definitely not between the Jews on this side of the Oder and the Jews on the other side, though all of them come from the same *Ashkenazi*, and in many cases the same *Haskallah*, traditions. When Mrs. Kobus and her group can’t even speak honestly, openly, and respectfully with their co-religionists, what sort of *Center of Tolerance and Dialogue* can they possibly create?

Professor Jan Skuratowicz, Poznań’s much-respected architectural history specialist, and Poznań Synagogue Project, have each proposed that whatever is done with the synagogue should be decided by open and fair competitions that promote and reward excellence. Competition is the method most likely to bring out the best results at every level, from deciding on the project’s purpose, to deciding on its architecture and choosing the builders and managers. PSP has therefore begun organizing a competition (in fact, two competitions, to be conducted in stages). These will be held in Poland, Germany, and Israel. PSP will go ahead with its planned competitions whether or not Mrs. Kobus and her group choose to continue to cover their eyes and plug their ears. Mrs. Kobus speaks for only 12 (or perhaps 48) of the many hundreds of thousands (arguably even millions) of people who should be given a chance to participate in and contribute to this project. The greater the participation, the greater the likelihood of real success.

It’s clear that neither PSP, nor Prof. Skuratowicz, nor anyone else can make the Poznań “filia” listen to good sense or absorb the benefits of challenging and imaginative ideas. However, we can still give people in the

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three countries named<sup>6</sup> a fair chance to present their ideas in the hope of influencing the “filia,” the ZGWŻ, *Gazeta Wyborcza*, and the others who seem determined to close their eyes and cover their ears. Whether the “filia” and its admirers listen or not will always be up to the “filia.” The record on their listening has so far not been very good, but PSP continues to hope that things will change.

Instead of fighting, perhaps we could start to find ways to work together toward a common goal that is far more important than the personal wishes of any of the individuals involved. The goal for PSP is, and always has been, a world-class project that will attract favorable attention to the city, the country, and the region, and that will help to reconcile Jews and non-Jews, and Poles and Germans, while at the same time respecting the complex and painful history associated with the building and the region. Poznań is the ideal city for this, and the Wroniecka street synagogue is the ideal place in Poznań to do it. PSP will support anything that it thinks will yield these results or results as good as these. We will fight against anything that we think will yield poorer results.

PSP knows where and how to look for private money. It knows how to write grant applications. It knows how to examine and prepare legal documents. It knows how to develop and test business plans. It has contacts (both Jewish and non-Jewish) in the USA, the UK, France, Belgium, Germany, Denmark, Sweden, the Czech Republic, Poland, Romania, and Israel. It knows how to make professional-caliber presentations. It knows who the best architects are, and where they are. It has an extraordinary and experienced partner in the *Jewish Architectural Heritage Foundation*, an outstanding organization that has already successfully accomplished the renovation of a neglected synagogue in Romania, along with opening the first Holocaust Museum in Romania. We at PSP have always been ready to put our knowledge, experience, and contacts, to good use – and to further a world-class project. Nothing else is worth our, or anyone else’s time, money, or effort.

So, in sum, shouldn’t the “filia” try to find some way to work with PSP, and its partner, the JAHF, so that something truly great can be done with the synagogue -- something to last another 100 years? We feel sure that is what those who built the synagogue, and the memory of those who died in the Holocaust, deserve and would have wanted. I cannot imagine they would

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<sup>6</sup> The citizens of Germany, Poland, and Israel are not the only people we wish we could invite to participate in our competitions, but they are the only ones we feel we have the resources to invite to participate – if some benefactor wishes to help us expand participation, we would very much like to do so.)

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have wanted the quarrelling that has been going on, or the second-rate projects that the “filia” has so far proposed, or the use of public money that is so clearly needed elsewhere. Thirty years from now, no one in Poznań or anywhere else is going to know who Alicja Kobus or Jerzy Stranz or Andrew Hingston or Tadeusz Dziuba is or was. But with bold imagination and a great deal of selfless effort, the synagogue will still be there – still teaching its complex lessons about a complex time in a complex place. If we get things right, it will still be making Europe a safer, more tolerant, more multicultural place as a result. Whatever is finally done with the synagogue should be the best it can be. We invite the “filia” to give up its own intolerance and to join with PSP, JAHF, and many others in achieving the best results possible.

Yours sincerely,

Andrew Hingston  
President  
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