



GATES OF HEAVEN



A photographic journey through the heart of Western Europe, where new and ancient Jewish synagogues resist a rising tide of anti-Semitism—behind fences, bollards, soldiers, cameras, and some very, very high walls. Photographs by Eli Singalovski



“ If I were asked to name the chief benefit of the house,” wrote the French philosopher Gaston Bachelard, “I should say: The house shelters day-dreaming, the house protects the dreamer, the house allows one to dream in peace.”

Last year opened and closed with a series of attacks in Paris that shocked Europe—first at *Charlie Hebdo* and Hyper Cacher, then at the Bataclan Theater—but for the Jews of Europe, these high-profile events follow an unnervingly long list of anti-Semitic incidents across the continent; for the Jews of Europe, peace is its own dream. This atmosphere has led governments and Jewish communities across the union to adopt heightened security measures to protect Jewish schools, synagogues, and community centers—most conspicuously in the form of privately employed armed guards and police units if not soldiers. Security is often communicated through visual cues: uniforms, guns, cameras, fences, barricades, bollards. But security is also perceived and felt and is central to our relationship with space, or runs contrary to it. It can become a sort of anti-architecture, an abnegation of architecture’s traditional desire to be seen and admired.

Israeli artist and architectural photographer Eli Singalovski recently spent a month photographing European synagogues on assignment for *Tablet*. He visited thirty-four communities across five countries: Germany, the Netherlands, England, France, and Italy. He took thousands of photos and eased the anxieties of guards, officials, and officers in three languages. He was detained once while photographing a synagogue in Marseille, after a miscommunication over his time of arrival, and held in custody for a few hours until a *Tablet* editor helped bail him out.

It’s not that these communities were hostile—on the contrary, they couldn’t have been more friendly and welcoming. But the measures presented a barrier even Jewish visitors had to overcome to interact with increasingly insular communities. I traveled with Singalovski for a few of these weeks, speaking with members of these communities, learning about their dynamics, hopes, and apprehensions, experiencing for myself the fraught discussion surrounding European Jewry.

In some modern Jewish houses of worship, security elements are embedded right into the building’s design. This is especially prevalent in Germany, where a number of synagogues have been built in recent years to accommodate post-Soviet immigrants. Some synagogues have bulletproof windows. Some have panic buttons that lock all the doors in the building. Some use retractable bollards to prevent unwanted vehicles from approaching. Most have a “security corridor,” a series of measures at the entrance to prevent intrusions. The cumulative

effect is sometimes that of a minimum-security prison. One approaches the gate to be greeted by a disembodied voice asking who is there and what is wanted; if satisfactory answers are provided, the gate opens.

Even the shape of these buildings can be a security measure, or a comment on the safety of Jews past and present. Four modern synagogues in Germany share a cube-like structure, a fortress-like disposition of hulking, somber presence. One barely has natural light. Another features an underground entrance. It is difficult to extrapolate these designs from their environment, as a reaction to the perceived world; and it is difficult to imagine the prevalence of this design in a different, safer atmosphere.

For older synagogues, the majority of synagogues in Europe, the options are more limited: They have to work with what’s already there. A common approach is the construction of a security fence surrounding the perimeter of the synagogue’s property, along with closed-circuit video cameras. Barred windows are also a frequent sight. This system seems especially prominent in the United Kingdom, where the Community Security Trust, a Jewish organization, installed more than eighteen hundred meters of perimeter fencing in 2015 alone (up from about six hundred in 2014). The severity of these measures is sometimes accentuated by the contrast to neighboring buildings. Edgware & District Reform Synagogue in North London, for example, sits behind perimeter fencing, security cameras, and a guard booth. At St. Peter’s Church, next door, you can walk right up and touch the door.

In Munich, there is a constant police presence outside the Ohel Jakob Synagogue, built in 2006, and plain-clothed Israeli security guards are positioned around the square at any given time, not inconspicuously. If you happen to sit or stand there for too long, and you happen to speak Hebrew, you will hear a description of yourself rattling around their radios; one or two will approach you and ask what you are doing there; you will respond in Hebrew; a friendly conversation will ensue; there are no hard feelings.

At the Jacob Obrechtplein Synagogue in Amsterdam, Singalovski and I were asked again and again to explain what we were doing there, first by police, then by soldiers, then by the community representative—and after a brief negotiation and corroboration, we were granted entry to the synagogue. But once inside, the assembled congregants were happy for visitors: They asked us where we were from, what brought us to synagogue, and if we would stay for services to make *minyan*. I agreed; Singalovski demurred. Another adult male arrived: *minyan* was made; the service began.

There were nearly as many people protecting the synagogue as there were praying in it.—*Alex Cocotas*



Tempio Maggiore,
The Great Synagogue
of Florence

Florence, Italy
Built 1882

Twenty-eight percent of Italians between the ages of eighteen and thirty-four responding to a 2015 Anti-Defamation League survey think people hate Jews because of how Jews behave.

Ulm Synagogue

Ulm, Germany
Built 2012

Architects Kister Scheithauer Gross (KSG) won a competition in 2010 to design a new synagogue next to the site where its predecessor once stood. Ulm’s original synagogue was destroyed in 1938 during the events of *Kristallnacht*.



Meor Hagolah Synagogue

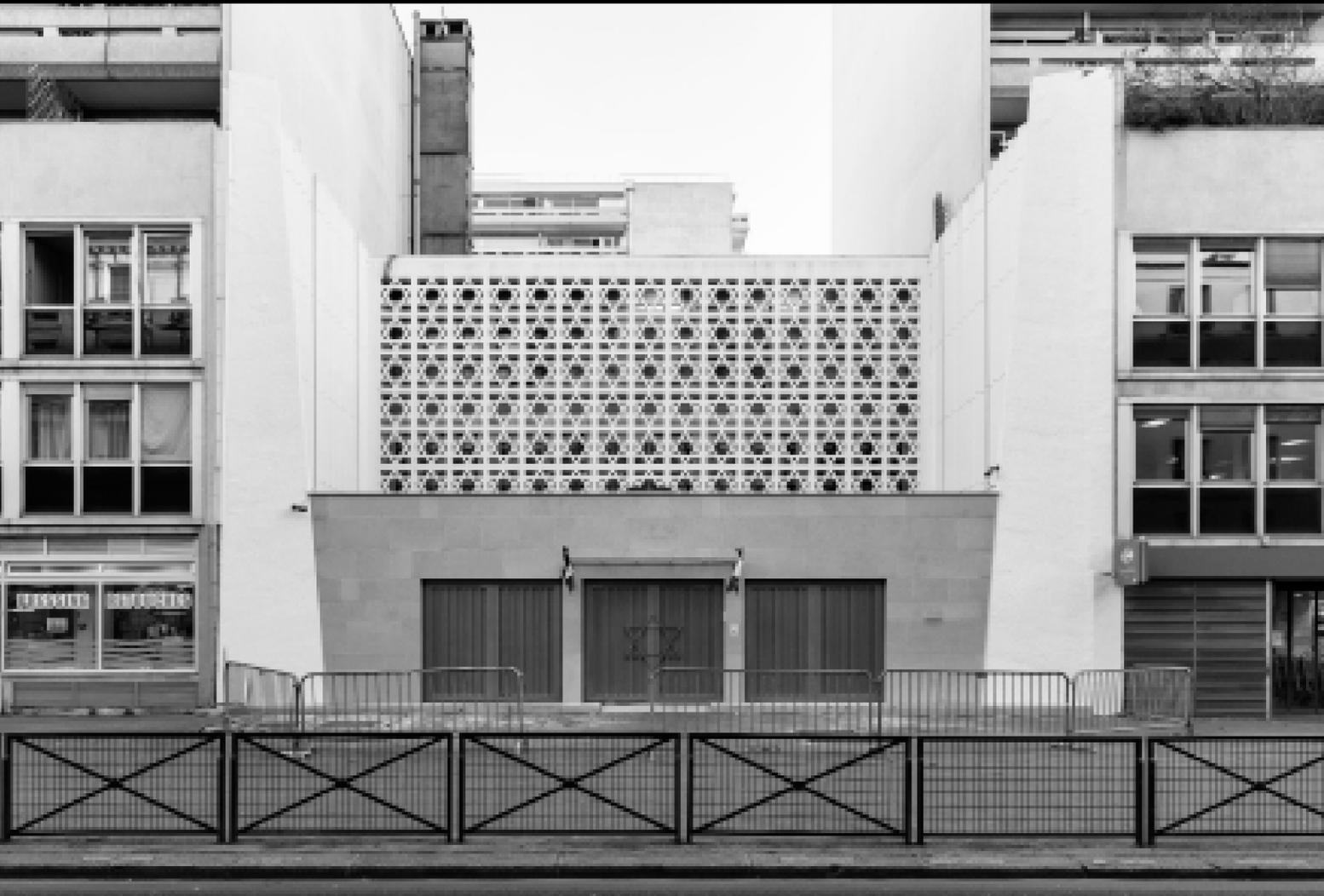
Mainz, Germany

Built 2010

Fifty-one percent of German responders to a 2015 Anti-Defamation League survey said Jews still talk too much about the Holocaust.

"I fulfilled all security demands that needed to be met—I just did it in a way that makes it as well designed and as open as possible."

Manuel Herz, architect of the Mainz synagogue.



Don Isaac Abravanel Synagogue

Paris, France

Built 1962

On Bastille Day in 2014, several hundred protesters, reportedly armed with knives, axes, and iron bars, surrounded the synagogue on the rue de la Roquette, chanting violent, racist slogans, waving the banners of Hezbollah and Hamas, and attempting to storm the synagogue, trapping hundreds of Jews inside for over two hours until police reinforcements arrived and announced it was finally safe to leave.



1	2
3	4
5	6

1 Jewish Community Centre and New Synagogue

Duisburg, Germany

Built 1999

2 Synagogue ACIP, rue Julien Lacroix

Paris, France

Built 1930

In June 2014, an unidentified twenty-one-year-old man reportedly approached the police guarding the synagogue on rue Julien Lacroix and aimed a Kalashnikov rifle at them before running away.

3 Central Synagogue

London, England

Built 1870; rebuilt 1958

On January 6, 2016, Jews (two men and a woman) in the Tottenham Hale area of North London were pelted with small gas canisters by a group of men in a pickup truck, who were reportedly shouting, "Hitler is on the way to you, Heil Hitler, Heil Hitler, Heil Hitler."



4 Névelh Chalom

Lyon, France

Built 1978

On September 2, 2014, two Muslim teenage girls were arrested for plotting to blow up a synagogue in Lyon.

5 Tempio Maggiore of Livorno

Livorno, Italy

Built 1962

6 Jüdische Kultusgemeinde Karlsruhe, Karlsruhe Synagogue

Karlsruhe, Germany

Built 1969

"I think the problems looking forward are how to find a balance between living open, constructive, healthy Jewish lives and maintaining an awareness of the level of threat that is out there. Maybe we had even hoped, maybe we had even expected to somehow or other be the generation that massively escapes from anti-Semitism. But, you know what? The reality is we're not that generation. Maybe a future generation will be, but it's certainly not who we are right now."
Mark Gardner, Director of Communications for Community Security Trust, United Kingdom.



La Grande Synagogue
de Marseille

Marseille, France

Built 1864

Anti-Semitic incidents in
Paris more than doubled in
one year, from 423 in 2013
to 851 in 2014.

**“Why don’t you
just photograph in
the daytime?”**

Marseille municipal
policeman, after detaining
photographer Eli Singalovski
outside the synagogue.



Ohel Jakob Synagogue

Munich, Germany

Built 2006

“The synagogue square is car-free, protected by appropriately imposing bollards. Nevertheless, we could not dismiss the possibility of an attack being carried out by a smaller vehicle, such as a motorcycle. The building is, therefore, designed accordingly. Security is created by deterring those in the know, i.e., there are certain security measures on the building that are not recognizable to regular people, but that are for professionals. Making this security invisible required much technological know-how.”

Rena Wandel-Hoefer, one of the architects, with Wolfgang Lorch, of the synagogue, in an interview with the German architectural magazine *Detail*.