

Syracuse University

**SURFACE**

---

Religion

College of Arts and Sciences

---

9-1996

## **Silenced Sacred Spaces: Selected Photographs of Syrian Synagogues by Robert Lyons**

Samuel Gruber

Samuel D. Gruber  
*Syracuse University*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://surface.syr.edu/rel>



Part of the [Ancient, Medieval, Renaissance and Baroque Art and Architecture Commons](#), [Architectural History and Criticism Commons](#), [Asian Art and Architecture Commons](#), [Fine Arts Commons](#), [Historic Preservation and Conservation Commons](#), [Islamic World and Near East History Commons](#), [Jewish Studies Commons](#), [Photography Commons](#), and the [Religion Commons](#)

---

### **Recommended Citation**

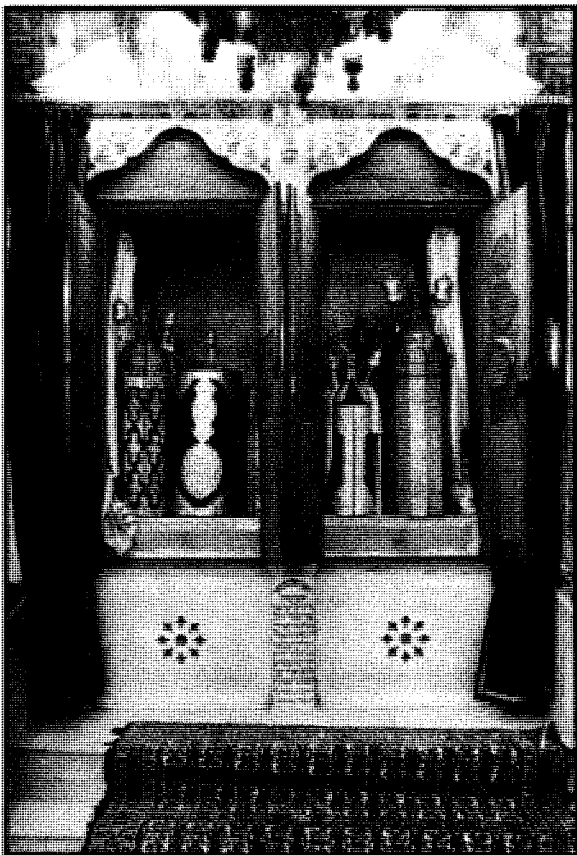
Gruber, Samuel D. "Silenced Sacred Spaces: Selected Photographs of Syrian Synagogues by Robert Lyons," exhibition essay, Lowe Art Gallery, Syracuse University (September, 1996)

This Other is brought to you for free and open access by the College of Arts and Sciences at SURFACE. It has been accepted for inclusion in Religion by an authorized administrator of SURFACE. For more information, please contact [surface@syr.edu](mailto:surface@syr.edu).

# SILENCED SACRED SPACES:

## SELECTED PHOTOGRAPHS OF SYRIAN SYNAGOGUES BY ROBERT LYONS

JOE AND EMILY LOWE ART GALLERY  
SCHOOL OF ART AND DESIGN  
COLLEGE OF VISUAL AND PERFORMING ARTS  
SYRACUSE UNIVERSITY



Jubar, Synagogue. Torah Scrolls in Ark.

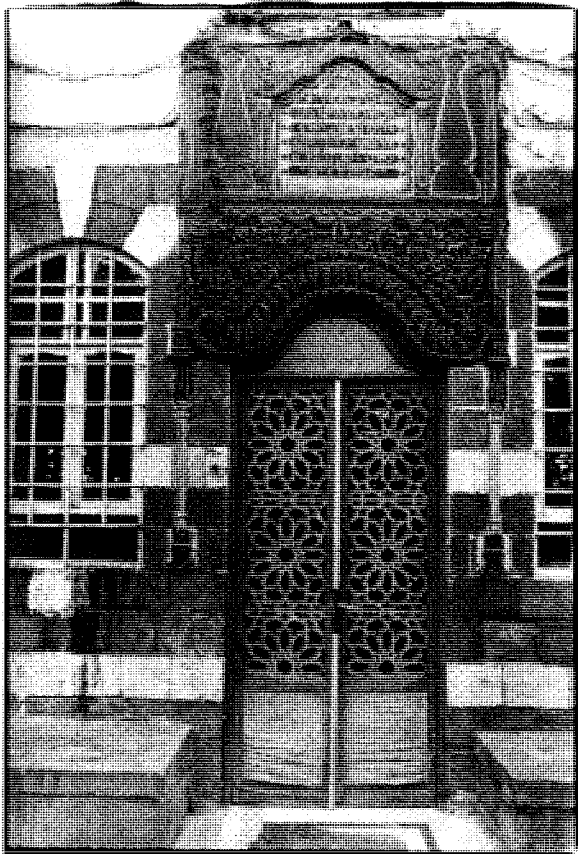
**R**obert Lyons' photographs of Syrian synagogues are remarkable both for their beauty and their subject. These images are dazzling in their composition, juxtaposing intricate patterns and shadows, and haunting in the quiet and emptiness they evoke. They are fascinating for

the richness of detail they describe. How these photographs came to be taken, and what they represent, is an exciting and exemplary story.

The synagogues represented in this exhibition are unknown to all but a small number of Syrian Jews. These buildings have never before been photographed. *Silenced Sacred Spaces* introduces this legacy to the public for the first time.

Of the thousands of synagogues erected throughout the world, only a tiny percentage survives. Natural aging and deterioration, deliberate destruction, confiscation by non-Jews, and mass emigration of congregations have all contributed to the loss. In this century, destruction of Jewish communities and their monuments has been overwhelming. In Europe, the Holocaust destroyed a millennium of history in a few short years. Since 1948, emigration of entire Jewish communities to Israel has left precious monuments behind. With rare exceptions, there was no forethought to document the buildings and artifacts before their abandonment.

The World Monuments Fund (WMF), an international preservation organization, established the Jewish Heritage Council (JHC) in 1988 to stem this loss to Jewish memory and the cultural inheritance of future generations. In 1989, the JHC surveyed the Jewish sites of Morocco. This work, however important, was 40 years too late to capture the essence of Moroccan synagogue art and life.<sup>1</sup> Syria was different. Forbidden to emigrate since the mid-1940s, Syrian Jews



Damascus, Racqy Synagogue. Entrance

maintained synagogues and holy objects *in situ*. Since 1990, emigration policies have been relaxed and thousands of Jews have left.

In April 1995, a unique opportunity allowed Robert Lyons to visit Syria and photograph historic sites. The Syrian Jewish Community helped arrange Lyons' itinerary and the project was underwritten by WMF. The extraordinary results comprise the only documentation of Syrian synagogues, and one of the finest photographic documentation projects of synagogues from any land. Lyons has captured the architecturally impressive and richly decorated synagogues in what, for the most part, is their intact state. What is missing, of course, are the congregants whose prayers made these synagogues truly sacred spaces. The process of synagogue closure and deaccessioning of synagogue holdings — through legal or illegal means — is only just beginning.

When most Western people think of Syrian synagogues, only one place comes to mind — the ancient city of Dura-Europos, located near the

Syrian-Iraqi border. Founded ca. 300 B.C.E. by Hellenistic Greeks, the city was later ruled by Parthians and then Romans. The synagogue was built in 244/5 C.E. After the city was destroyed by the Persians in 256, knowledge of the synagogue's richly decorated sanctuary was lost until the 1930s. Although located in modern Syria, neither its history nor its geography links Dura-Europos to later Syrian synagogues. Nevertheless, the Syrian National Museum in Damascus contains a reconstruction of the sanctuary as its centerpiece.<sup>2</sup> Until 1967, when Israel occupied the Golan Heights after the Six-Day War, little else was known in the West of ancient synagogues in Syria. Archaeology has now revealed numerous late-antique synagogues (2nd - 6th centuries C.E.) in the Golan region, evidence of a thriving ancient Jewish community.<sup>3</sup>

The status of Jews in Syria did not change dramatically after the Arab conquest of the 630s. Muslim rulers were generally tolerant of Jewish life. Through the centuries, various rulers came and went, but the Islamic world's multi-cultural realities overwhelmed all but the most tyrannical. Jewish populations required synagogues and these were built.

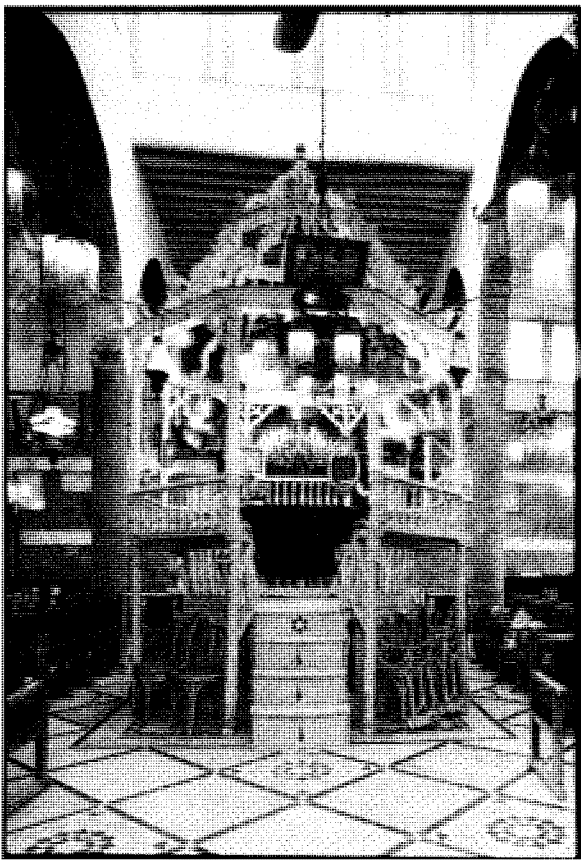
The Ottoman Turks conquered Syria in 1516 and welcomed the settlement of Iberian Jewish exiles — known as *Sephardim*, after the Hebrew name for Spain. Turkish rule and the presence of the *Sephardim* revived the commercial life of the Syrian Jewish communities, which in turn generated wealth allowing the construction of many of the large synagogues photographed by Lyons. The structures are essentially Ottoman in form and detail, although the fittings and furnishings are uniquely Jewish. In this period, Aleppo was the dominant trading center in Syria, but it declined after the 18th century as trade routes shifted south, leading to the rise of Damascus. The opening of the Suez Canal in the mid-19th century ended Syria's importance as a trading way station. By this time, tensions had increased between the Jewish and Muslim populations, resulting in increasingly discriminatory and repressive acts against Jews.

The conditions for Jews improved after World War I when Syria came under French rule. Jews suffered a reversal of fortune after Syria achieved independence in 1944. In 1947, about 15,000

Jews lived in Syria. About two-thirds of these left, especially after the 1947 anti-Jewish riots in Aleppo during which the synagogues of that city were destroyed.<sup>4</sup> It was only after 1990 that Jews were again allowed to emigrate, and today only a few hundred remain. Syrian Jews have reconstituted many of their traditional communal institutions in new settings — notably the United States and Israel.<sup>5</sup> They were obliged, however, to leave behind much of the material heritage forged by their hands and the hands of their ancestors over a period of centuries.

In August 1626, the Italian Jesuit Pietro della Valle (1586-1682) passed through Aleppo and visited the Great Synagogue of that city, which he described in detail:

*I went to see the Synagogue of the Jews at Aleppo, famed for fairness and antiquity. Their Street is enter'd into by a narrow Gate, and lyes so much lower than the rest, that it is descended to by a considerable number of steps.*



Damascus, Racqy Synagogue. *Teva*

*After I had gone through many of their narrow Lanes, which they contrive so, purposely to hide the goodness of the Building from the Turks, I came at length to the Synagogue; which is a good large square uncover'd Court, with cover'd Walks or Cloysters round about, upheld by double Pillars dispos'd according to good Architecture. On the right hand of the entrance, is a kind of great Hall, which they make use of for the Service in the Winter, when it is cold or rains; as they do of the court in Summer and fair weather. In the middle of the Court four Pillasters support a Cupoletta, under which in a high and decent place, like our Altar, lyes the volume of the Law, and there also their Doctor and principal Rabbi stands reading in a kind of musical tone, to whom all the people alternatively answer...<sup>6</sup>*

This synagogue was built in the Byzantine period, perhaps as early as the 9th century. Damaged in the Mongol sack of Aleppo in 1400, it underwent extensive changes in 1405-1418. With the arrival of the *Sephardim* in Aleppo in the 16th century, a wing on the eastern side of the main courtyard was built. On the southern part of this wing, facing Jerusalem, is a small room known as the "cave of Elijah." It was here that the Aleppo Codex, the earliest known vocalized and punctuated manuscript of the complete Hebrew Bible, was kept. (A portion of the codex survives in Israel). In a central spacious courtyard, surrounded by porticoes, is a raised, covered reader's platform around which the congregation sat. It was in this form that Della Valle viewed the synagogue. It remained essentially unchanged until it was looted and burned in the riots of 1947. The synagogue was partially rebuilt in the 1980s, but it now stands silent and empty.

Other synagogues, such as the Ezra Synagogue in Tedef, 24 miles east of Aleppo, have suffered a similar fate. Local tradition maintains that in the 5th century B.C.E., Ezra the Scribe stopped at Tedef on his return from Babylonia to write the Scriptures and the synagogue commemorates this event. The ruined walls bear inscriptions mentioning repairs from the late 14th century. Aleppo Jews were accustomed to making an annual pilgrimage to the synagogue and a Jewish community grew up nearby.

In 1990, there were approximately two dozen

synagogues in Damascus, eight of which are represented in this exhibition. Not enough is yet known to securely date them. Based on stylistic analysis, it is likely that many of the Damascus synagogues were built from the 17th century through the early 19th century. The strongest influence upon their architecture is local Ottoman building and design traditions. There is also a suggestion of Italian influence, particularly in certain decorative motifs. There was a strong cultural and religious link between Syrian and Italian Jewish communities for many years. An example of this connection is seen in the writing of another traveller, the Italian Rabbi Moses Bassola d'Ancona, who visited Syria and described the places he saw in 1522. Of Damascus he said, "The Jews there number about 500 households. They have three synagogues which are beautifully built and adorned — one for the Sephardim, one for the native Jews, and one for the Sicilians." Rabbi Bassola also described the exceptional pilgrimage synagogue at Jubar, a village on the outskirts of Damascus:

*There is a very handsome synagogue there, the like of which I have never seen. It is built in colonnades, with six columns on the right and seven on the left. Above the synagogue there is a beautiful cave in which, it is said, Elijah the Prophet — may his memory be blessed — hid. The synagogue is said to date from the time of Elisha. There is a stone upon which they say he anointed Hazael.<sup>7</sup> At a later period, Rabbi Eliezer ben Arakh renovated it. It is indeed an awesome place. According to what people told me, no enemy has ever dominated it, and many miracles have been performed there. In times of distress, Jews always gather in it, and nobody harms them.<sup>8</sup>*

One enters through a courtyard, a small bright space, filled with plants, which leads to the sumptuous three-aisled interior. Carpets cover the floor and walls. Chandeliers and oil lamps of bright and costly materials hang from the wood beam ceiling. Cushioned benches are built against the walls and others are set beneath the aisle arcades. Stairs to the right of the *hechal* (Holy Ark, where the Torah scrolls are kept) lead to "Elijah's Cave," where visitors light candles and pray.

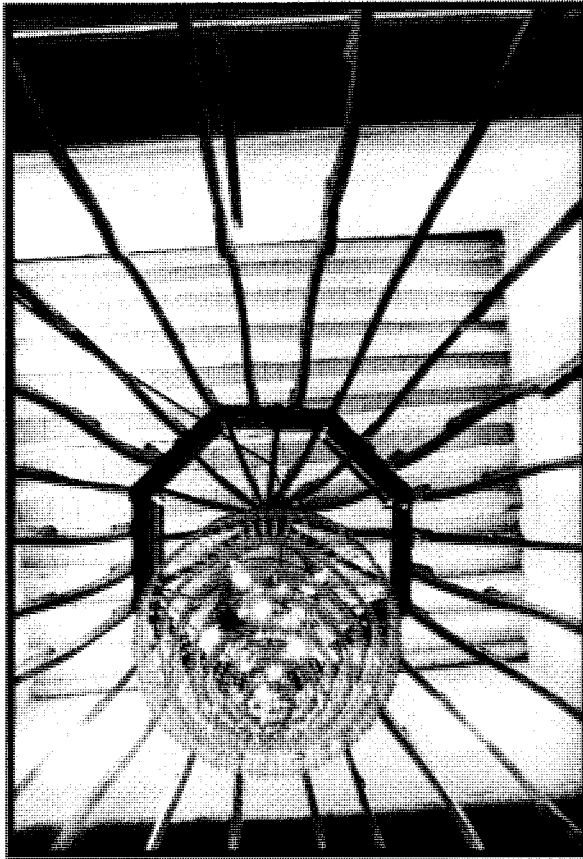
The large ornate *tevat* (plural of *teva*, raised platform from where the Torah is read), such as



Damascus, Menarsha Syangogue. Interior.

Lyons depicts at Jubar, are a remarkable feature of Syrian synagogues. Most Syrian *tevat* are octagonal and reached by four steps. Slender wood columns rise from the octagon corners to support an open canopy-like covering — always of wood. The *teva* is usually fenced with a metal grille or wood balustrade, or both. A similar, though less ornate, *teva* from the 16th - 17th century exists in the synagogue of the Ari in Safed, Israel.

Syrian synagogues are often entered through a gated courtyard, planted with trees or filled with greenery in planters, or shaded by a vine-covered trellis. In the center of many courtyards are fountains, often octagonal in shape, a form echoed within by the ornate *tevat*. Entry from the courtyard is usually through a narrow door often marked by an inscription or decoration. The synagogue interiors mostly comprise a wider central aisle and two side aisles — separated by arcades carried by columns or piers. The undersides of the high and slightly pointed arches are often decorated with painted tiles. The interior is roofed by simple



Damascus, Shema'a Synagogue.  
Detail of *teva* canopy and chadelier.

wood beam ceilings. Sometimes, the sections of the central aisles are raised higher to better illuminate the interior, especially the *teva* immediately below. This element is functional, since light is needed to read the Torah scrolls on the *teva*, but it is also symbolic. Upon entering the synagogues, one sees the *teva*, from where God's law is proclaimed, set apart in a square of natural light. Additional lighting comes from clerestory windows or through windows in the walls of the side aisles and from lamps.

The *hechalot* (plural of *hechal*) of Syrian synagogues are set in the south walls pointing toward Jerusalem. (In European and American synagogues, the Ark is usually situated at the East end.) Most Syrian *hechalot* consist of double niches, enclosed by ornately carved wooden doors, approached by three stairs. The *hechalot* are draped with ornamental curtains and are filled with Torah scrolls, kept in cases which stand on end and open like a book, revealing the scroll within. The Torah is read in its case, set vertically. As Lyons' photographs illustrate, these cases are

the most ornately worked religious items within the Syrian synagogues. Benches usually encircle the interiors — built into the walls or against them. Benches were also set around the *teva*, and often under the aisle arcades.

Synagogues usually served men only. Women could congregate outside the windows and doors, though Pietro della Valle described men and women grouped together in family units in Aleppo's Great Synagogue. The new synagogues, many of which date from this century, reflect to some degree French colonial design, and include sections for women's seating.

When Robert Lyons was in Syria, there was hope that a coming peace would allow his documentation to be the first step in a more fully developed process of education and preservation. That hope is now suspended and the value of his work stands out even more clearly.

For the moment, much of the Jewish heritage in Syria remains, although inaccessible to the public. What will become of this legacy is unknown. But if the experience of other countries is a guide, what is visible now will disappear soon, perhaps within a few years, or within a generation. Synagogues will be emptied, their contents dispersed. No longer will it be possible to view, let alone imagine, what the great Syrian worship centers were like. Whatever the future, Robert Lyons' photographs will keep the memory of these silenced sacred spaces alive.

Samuel D. Gruber

Arlene and R. Raymond Rothman Visiting Lecturer  
in Judaic Studies, Syracuse University

### About the Artist

Robert Lyons studied photography at Hampshire College and Yale University, where he received his MFA in 1979. He is the author of *Egyptian Time* (1992) and *Out of the Fire* (with Bonnie Miller, 1991). His work has been exhibited in dozens of museums and galleries including the Seattle Art Museum and Beth Hatefusoth, the Nahum Goldman Museum of the Jewish Diaspora (Tel Aviv). His photographs are in many collections, including the Microsoft Corporation Collection, the Polaroid Collection, the Princeton University Art Museum,

the Seattle Art Museum and the University Fine Arts Gallery, University of Massachusetts. He is a frequent contributor to *The New York Times* and other publications.

## Notes

1. See J. Zack, *The Synagogues of Morocco: An Architectural and Preservation Survey*, 2nd edition. (NY, 1994).
2. See C.H. Kraeling, *The Synagogue, Excavations at Dura-Europos, Final Report*, VIII, 1 (New Haven, 1956); C. Hopkins, *The Discovery of Dura-Europos* (New Haven, 1979); and J. Gutmann, "The Dura Europos Synagogue Paintings: The State of Research," in L. Levine, ed., *The Synagogue in Late Antiquity* (Philadelphia, 1987), 61-72.
3. Z.U. Ma'oz, "The Art and Architecture of the Synagogues of the Golan," in L. Levine, ed., *Ancient Synagogues Revealed* (Detroit, 1982), 98-115; and *ibid.*, "Ancient Synagogues of the Golan," in *Biblical Archaeologist* (June, 1988), 116-128.
4. On the history of the Jews of Syria see *Encyclopaedia Judaica* (Jerusalem, 1971-72), Vol. 15, 636-649.
5. See J. Sutton, *Magic Carpet: Aleppo-in- Flatbush: The Story of a Unique Ethnic Jewish Community* (NY, 1979) and *Aleppo Chronicles: The Story of the Unique Sephardeem of the Ancient Near East - in Their Own Words* (NY, 1988).
6. *The Travels of Sig. Pietro della Valle, A Noble Roman, Into East India and Arabia Deserta* (London, 1665), 277-278.
7. *Kings* 1, 19:15, 17.
8. Quoted in N. Stillman, *The Jews of Arab Lands* (Philadelphia, 1979), 289.

## Additional Reading:

- de Breffny, B. *The Synagogue* (Jerusalem, 1978).
- Juhasz, E., ed. *Sephardi Jews in the Ottoman Empire: Aspects of Material Culture* (Jerusalem, 1990).
- Porter, R. (ed.). *Jews in Arab Lands: Photographs* (Tel Aviv, 1996).
- Stillman, N. A. *The Jews in Arab Lands in Modern Times* (Philadelphia, 1991).

## Acknowledgements

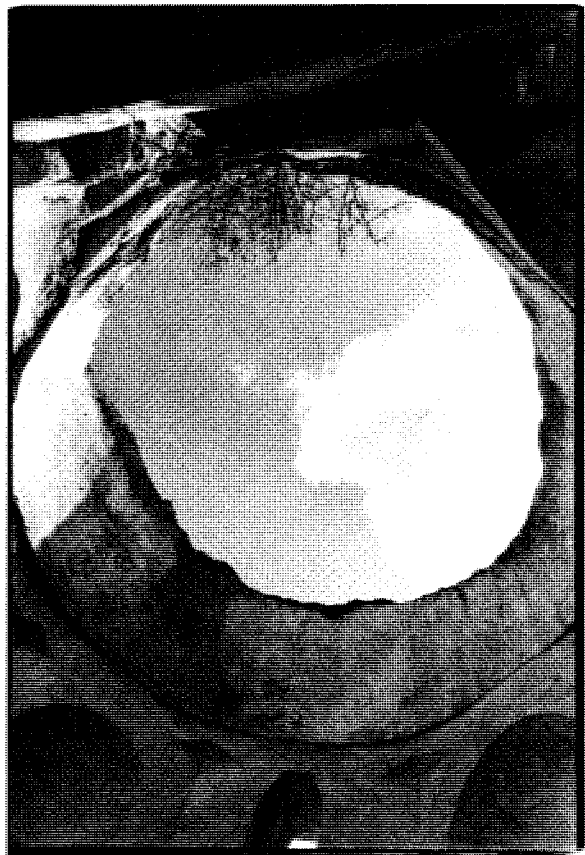
This exhibition is a collaborative effort. Many people helped make the World Monuments Fund survey of Syrian Synagogues possible. Foremost is Robert Lyons, who fully accommodated WMF's documentary needs. Josefa Mulaire is responsible for the remarkable printing of the black and white photos — ensuring the transformation of what was initially conceived as documentation into art. Bradley Hudson created all aspects of the installation, and also was indispensable in envisioning the exhibit.

The survey and the exhibition would not have happened without the support of Lisa Ackerman, vice president of the Samuel H. Kress Foundation. Ira Jolles and The Cahnman Foundation provided financial support to allow the survey to begin. Thanks are due to many people

at WMF who have supported this effort, especially Bonnie Burnham, Executive Director and Hon. Ronald S. Lauder, Chairman of the Jewish Heritage Council. Elizabeth Sherman Graif was crucial in organizing the survey. Rebecca Anderson's editing greatly improved the text. At the Jewish Heritage Research Center, Diana Turnbow and Laurie Hicks, provided valuable assistance. Thanks are also due to Ruth Porter of Beth Hatefusoht, Museum of the Jewish Diaspora (Tel Aviv), for crucial information about Syrian synagogues and the Syrian Jewish community.

My appreciation goes to co-curator, Edward A. Aiken, Director of the Lowe Art Gallery and Chair of the Graduate Program in Museum Studies for his encouragement and enthusiasm. At his urging, the results of the survey have been interpreted and made public for the first time. Under his coordination, this exhibition was first shown at the Lowe Art Gallery, Autumn 1996.

S. D. Gruber



Tadef, Ruined Synagogue.