Study Guide

Lost Synagogues of Europe: Paintings and Histories

Andrea Strongwater (JPS, 2025)

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Introduction to the Study Guide

We designed this study-guide to enrich the experience of reading and learning from *Lost Synagogues of Europe*, whether as an individual, in the classroom, or among friends and family. The curricula and project suggestions below will help you explore the themes, histories, and cultures so breathtakingly presented by Andrea Strongwater. We highly encourage experimentation.

We designed four activities to help the paintings and prose of *Lost Synagogues* come alive for readers. They offer opportunities for creative and imaginative reflection, while grounding participants in European-Jewish history before and after WWII. Each set of activities draws upon different faculties of creative expression, which empower participants to forge more informed and personal ties to the past.

- The Power of Storytelling: Identifying and Embellishing the Vignettes of *Lost Synagogues*
- Exploring European-Jewish Cultures
- Designing a Site-Specific Memorial
- Building Your own Synagogue

On *Lost Synagogues of Europe*

Lost Synagogues of Europe: Paintings and Histories, by Andrea Strongwater, offers a unique window into European Jewish history. It depicts in gouache paint and prose seventy-seven European synagogues demolished by European governments and organizations. The Nazis and their collaborators destroyed the majority of them between 1938 and 1945. Some disappeared before the Second World War, a consequence of rising nationalist and antisemitic tensions. Others vanished afterwards and for complexly different reasons, especially in communist Eastern Europe.

Each of the synagogues, so lovingly depicted, represents a once-thriving community. Each had its own story; its own history and culture, often extending centuries into the past. Some communities restored themselves after the war and wrestled with how to adapt to new political and social realities, not to mention with profound loss and the pressures of postwar antisemitism. In studying these synagogues, one by one, we honor the Jews and Jewish communities who built them, who maintained and relied upon them, who gathered and prayed in them, and who today mourn their absence. Through immersion in this work and by seeking to uncover stories nearly lost to time, we push against the attempted erasure and diminishment of European Jewry and culture.

Creative and Artistic Project Suggestions

Creative Project 1: The Power of Storytelling: Embellishing the Book's Vignettes

As you read *Lost Synagogues*, you will notice that Andrea Strongwater included short and fascinating stories into each of her site descriptions, designed to help Jewish history and culture come to life. Told in just a few sentences, they open windows into a rich heritage, prompting readers to meditate on the wonders and particularities of European Jewish life before the middle of the twentieth century.

Choose a vignette from this list of suggestions or identify one on your own. What stories stood out to you as you read *Lost Synagogues* and why? What more do you want to discover about the community and its tales? Where might you find answers to your questions? What do the stories have to teach about Jewish life in Europe and the specific region you've chosen?

Now that you have digested and explored your chosen vignette, complete the story on your own. Use your imagination and what you have learned about Jewish history and culture to embellish what you read in *Lost Synagogues*. The most effective stories will draw upon the context offered by Andrea Strongwater to invite readers into worlds long gone but of eternal importance and meaning.

<u>Aachen (page 75): The Jew and the Gift Elephant – A Jewish Diplomat's Gift</u>

"In 797 Emperor Charlemagne sent Isaac, a Jew, as one of the delegates to Caliph Harun al-Rashid, the fifth Abbasid Caliph (786-809) East. In July 802 Isaac returned to Aachen with an elephant to offer his reports and presented the elephant as a gift to Charlemagne."

- Why did the Emperor of a Christian Empire send a Jew to meet with the Caliph?
- How did Isaac obtain the elephant and what did the Caliph intend to communicate with this gift?
- What do you think happened to the elephant? What was its new European life like?

<u>Frankfurt (page 214): The Purim of Vincent – Saved by the Emperor</u>

"In 1612 Vincenz Fettmilch, a local grocer and gingerbread baker, marshalled an uprising against the municipal council, protesting grain prices, railing against the aristocracy's special privileges, and insisting that all foreigners in Frankfurt—especially Jews—needed to be expelled. His orchestrated assault on the Judengasse on August 22, 1614, drove out the city's 1,380 Jews. The Jews petitioned the emperor, who moved to protect them. Fettmilch and six others were condemned to death in Frankfurt's Rossmarkt (horse market) square on February 28, 1616 (20 Adar in the Jewish calendar). Meanwhile, imperial soldiers led the exiled Jews back into their Frankfurt ghetto and placed above the gates a stone imperial eagle bearing the writing: 'Protected by the Roman Imperial Majesty and the Holy Empire.'

The date of 20 Adar is now remembered annually as the Purim of Vincent, with a reading of the story composed by Elhanan Abraham. This Purim is one of many special Purims, Jewish days that give thanks, based on the biblical holiday of the same name celebrating the events in the biblical book of Esther."

- Why did Vincenz Fettmilch want to expel the Jews of Frankfurt and why did the Emperor restore them to their *Judengasse*, the ghetto?
- Why did the Jewish community of Frankfurt and Rabbi Abraham decide to commemorate their salvation with a special Purim?

- Try your hand at writing a Scroll of the Purim of Vincent? What tone would the rabbi have used? How would he have told the story? How would you have written it?

Niasviš (page 32): The Leviathan on the Ceiling – Terrifying Beauty

“Memoires of adults who grew up here describe the building as both scary and beautiful. On each side of the ark stood two giant painted trees, each with a gold stork standing on one leg on the top. Some say the giant trees were inspired by Prince Radzwill’s nearby farm, where Jews were allowed to stroll on the Sabbath; others say it was to commemorate the annual stork arrivals and departures. On the ceiling was a gigantic sea creature, the Leviathan, curled up so its tail was in its mouth. The story was told that if the creature let go of its tail, the entire world would flood in a minute. On the curtain covering the ark, small golden birds with bells in their mouths would tinkle whenever the Torah Ark curtain opened. Children told stories of demons who lived in the synagogue at night; if they passed the building alone, demons would carry them off and they would never return.”

- Why do you think the Jews of Niasviš decorated their synagogue so elaborately? What do all of the different features and figures mean?
- Why would children be afraid of their synagogue’s art? Why would their parents cultivate these frightening fantasies?
- Do you think the myths and magic—if one truly believed—could have real power in this world?

Tarnów (page 216): Adult Sleepovers for the New Year

“During the High Holy Days, Jews living in the surrounding areas often packed up and stayed in Tarnów for the celebrations. The small settlements around the city did not often have ten men for a minyan, and there were always family and friends in the city. Guests slept on friends’ floors or rented accommodations and enjoyed hearing trained prayer leaders during services, even as they worried about what might happen to their homes while they were away. Most Jews were poor, but there was a cultural and intellectual elite that included lawyers, doctors, musicians, and teachers.”

- Why did Jews in the Tarnów region gather together in the main city for the High Holy Days? If they loved being together so much, why did they not visit Tarnów more frequently?
- What was it like to have all of the Jews in the region sleeping at each other’s houses and celebrating the holidays together? What might it have been like for their children?
- Try to imagine what services were like, from the moment people woke up and walked to the synagogue until the last holiday meal? What did the travelers feel when they returned home?

Warsaw (page 114 - 115): The Name of God Welcomes and Repels – Hear, O Israel

"According to Alfred Döblin, a German Jewish visitor between the wars, 'This is the synagogue of the middle class, also the enlightened, the emancipated, and the assimilated.' The word among Orthodox Jews was to steer clear of the synagogue, because the rituals were untraditional and the singing inappropriate. Moreover, the two-sentence inscription of the central biblical and liturgical phrase *Shema Yisrael* ('Hear, O Israel' from Deut. 6:4) in the interior of the main hall spelled out all four letters of the tetragrammaton (the four-letter name of God) in the verse rather than following the traditional practice of finding alternatives to writing out this holy name. Another visitor, Bernard Singer, said: 'They were even afraid of the synagogue in Tłomackie Street. This was because it was located on a hill, so no longer *De profundis* ['Out of the depths I cry to you o Lord'], it had a choir, organs, a cantor, a preacher with trimmed hair, who dared call on the Lord in Polish."

- Why do you think Orthodox Jews felt so strongly about the synagogue's inscription which included the four-letter name of God? Why do you think the community decided to write it out?
- If Jews traditionally built synagogues in low places (and were also often forced to do so), why did the members of this Warsaw community build their synagogue atop a hill?
- What does this tell you about different visions for the Jewish future in the late eighteen hundreds?

Zabłudów (pages 11 – 12): Tales of a Seventeenth-Century Wooden Synagogue – Modern Myth

"Many tales and legends associated with older synagogues are found in synagogue notebooks that documented the comings and goings of the Jewish community. One recorded event in Zabłudów tells of a young man, a butcher, who was lashed at the synagogue as a punishment for having eaten in a Christian's inn in a nearby village on a Jewish fast day. The men who had come to the synagogue spat at him after the whipping. The punishment was deemed appropriate and sufficient for the crime.

One popular legend, preserved in a memoir by Michael Lifshitz published in 1925, says that a certain Rabbi Bendet created a clay golem, and every Shabbat eve, when the Sabbath law prohibited the Jews from engaging in any sort of work, the golem chopped wood and drew water from the well. The older people said that as long as the synagogue existed, the clay could be found in the attic, but not everyone was able to see it.

A custom instituted in this synagogue's early days was to celebrate the 'behaalotekha' Shabbat. This Torah portion, the thirty-sixth of the year, speaks of the light of the Tabernacle. To celebrate the light, the largest possible number of candles would be lit in the synagogue on that Sabbath. A few days before the holiday, Jewish officials would go door to door to collect candles from homeowners. On the afternoon before Friday services, klezmer musicians and the local comedian would entertain at the synagogue. The synagogue walls would be hung with the most beautiful Torah covers, and all would be illuminated by the light of the candles. The celebration lasted through the synagogue's existence, but the candlelighting died away once electric lighting was installed."

- Why did this community cherish so many legends and new traditions? How did they change?
- Can you imagine another myth or custom that would fit well into this tradition and heritage?

- Did you know that wooden synagogues often had jails for Jews who violated the community standards? Why do you think that was? What was it like to be a prisoner in the synagogue?

Creative Project 2: Design Your own Synagogue

As you read *Lost Synagogues of Europe*, pay special attention to what Jews wanted from their synagogues and how they wished them to look architecturally, aesthetically, and functionally (i.e., how they arranged their interiors to meet their religious and other needs). Imagine that you were tasked, individually or as a study-group, with designing a new synagogue.

- What would it look like and where would you build it? How would it fit in (or not!) with other structures and elements in the immediate area? Why did you select the site that you did?
- How would you design the interior structures and what would your synagogue look like from the outside? Why did you make these choices? Try to think back to examples from the text.
- Which Jewish symbols would you include? If you wanted to incorporate stained glass, what images and words would the panels feature?
- Who should be remembered on the walls and how?

When you have completed this exercise, paint your own synagogue or bring it to life using any media or artistic modality of your choosing. Especially when you are working in groups, there is no reason to stop there. Write a news article about the opening of the new synagogue or its renovation. You might even form yourself into a choir and decide what to sing on opening night.

Creative Project 3: Envision a Site-Specific Memorial for a Lost Synagogue

Imagine that you have been called upon by the descendants of community members to create a site-specific memorial for their synagogue.

- What would it look like and where would you place it? How would you negotiate the buildings and elements that occupy the once sacred landscape of your Lost Synagogue?
- How do you think the original community would have wanted their synagogue-memorial to look?
- What elements of the synagogue community's past and culture would you highlight? How would you work to ensure that the memorial is tailored to and evocative of the community's spirit?

Build a model or create a rendering of your memorial for posterity.

Creative Project 4: Delve into European Jewish Cultures

Select a synagogue that resonates with you, and explore the Jewish history and culture of its region:

- Find and prepare recipes for traditional Jewish dishes from your chosen region. Share your treats with your friends and family.
- Read Jewish literature in translation from your region. Try your hand at writing new Jewish stories in styles both old and novel.
- Find mention of your chosen community in Jewish newspapers like the *Forward*. Try your hand at contributing a column! Perhaps you will want to pretend that the synagogue and community

had never been destroyed and that it was planning to renovate or transform the synagogue. Cover this event as if you were writing for a personally interested audience.