

Landmarks Preservation Commission
March 18, 2008, Designation List 402
LP- 2261

(FORMER) CONGREGATION BETH HAMEDRASH HAGADOL ANSHE UNGARN, 242 East 7th Street, Manhattan. Built 1908, Gross & Kleinberger, architects.

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 376, Lot 13.

On October 30, 2007, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the (Former) Congregation Beth Hamedrash Hagadol Anshe Ungarn and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 5). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. There were six speakers in favor of designation, including Councilmember Rosie Mendez and representatives of the Historic Districts Council, the Metropolitan Chapter of the Victorian Society, the Landmarks Conservancy, City Lore and the Greenwich Village Society for Historic Preservation. The Commission has received many letters and emails expressing support, from Councilmember Tony Avella and others. There were no speakers in opposition.

Summary

This small, classical revival style synagogue building is a fine and rare surviving example of the numerous small synagogues that were constructed during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries on the Lower East Side of Manhattan. During this period, hundreds of thousands of Jewish immigrants came to the United States to escape persecution and to achieve a better life, creating in New York the second largest Jewish community in the world. The newcomers developed vital community and religious organizations for support, especially synagogues, and they were often organized by people who came from the same place. Many small congregations met in rented rooms or used existing church buildings; only the more established and wealthy groups could build their own buildings. This synagogue was constructed by a Hungarian congregation, the Beth Hamedrash Hagadol Anshe Ungarn, or the Great House of Study of the People of Hungary. Formed in 1883, they had outgrown several



previous sites before constructing this building. It was designed by the New York architectural firm of Gross & Kleinberger in 1908 and is a two-story dressed stone structure designed in the then popular classical revival style. The architects used the common synagogue arrangement of three symmetrical bays across the front, but created a highly refined, sophisticated design using applied engaged pilasters and a denticulated pediment and cornices. Over the years, the community on the Lower East Side changed, with many people moving away from the neighborhood, and most of the small synagogues were converted to other uses or demolished. This congregation held on to this building until 1975 and it was converted to residential use in 1985. It is an elegant reminder of the vibrant Jewish community that once filled the streets of New York's Lower East Side.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

Development of the Lower East Side-East Village Area¹

The Lower East Side consists of the section of Manhattan from the Bowery east to the river and south of Houston Street. The term is used as an umbrella for a number of different neighborhoods with complex, overlapping and interconnected histories.² North of Houston, to approximately 11th Street, the area is now known as the East Village, a term coined by determined real estate salesmen in the 1950s to distinguish it from its “lower class” neighbor to the south, but the history and development of the two sections are often indistinguishable. Except for a short period early in its development, the Lower East Side has always been home to poor immigrant groups seeking labor in the industrial city. Because it developed so early, it is tied to the earliest history of the city.

Under the Dutch, most inhabitants of New Amsterdam lived south of Fulton Street, where they could be close to each other for protection and close to the harbor for the essential shipping activities on which the colony depended. North of the settlement, many wealthy families owned large estates, used as farms and plantations and as country retreats, especially for those recurring times when epidemics threatened the crowded population on the Island’s tip. The area now known as the Lower East Side and the East Village was divided into a series of large farms, which by the mid-eighteenth century were owned by three families: the Stuyvesants, Rutgers and De Lanceys. The Rutgers property ran from Chatham Square to Montgomery Street between the East River shore and Division Street. The DeLancey holdings consisted of two large parcels (approximately 340 acres) abutting the Rutgers property on the north and east, acquired by Lieutenant Governor James DeLancey around 1741. Peter Stuyvesant, who came to the colony in 1647, owned a large working farm he called his Bowerie. It lay between present day 5th and 20th Streets, from Fourth Avenue to the East River.³

After slavery was outlawed in New York in 1827, many former slaves settled in several black enclaves, including one near the Bowery, another in Greenwich Village, and still another in the growing slum area that came to be known as Five Points. During the eighteenth century Greenwich Village had been a small rural hamlet, but also was the site of a number of summer estates for wealthy families from downtown Manhattan. Its population swelled during the large cholera and yellow fever epidemics that struck in the early nineteenth century. The 1830s brought a huge economic boom to New York, attracting many more people and a great need for more commercial space as well as housing. African-Americans and other poor people were forced northward as more land was opened to development for the upper classes.

The Commissioner’s Plan of 1811, which established the city’s grid system, created Tompkins Square as well as nearby Union, Stuyvesant, and Madison Squares. The square, located between 7th and 10th Streets and Avenues A and B, was the site of a farmers’ market in 1812. Originally known as Clinton Square, it was named for Daniel D. Tompkins (governor of New York and vice president of the United States under President James Monroe) in 1833 and the following year it was leveled, planted, and fenced by the city in an effort to encourage development in the area. Nearby streets such as Great Jones, Bleecker and Bond Streets were all being paved and built up with “genteel residences”⁴ while Lafayette Place and St. Mark’s Place developed into some of the city’s most fashionable addresses. The large landowners in the area began to sell lots for development in the 1840s. Many of the buyers of these lots were large speculators who purchased extensive property and built rowhouses here, waiting for the housing need to catch up. These individual houses were first rented, and then sold to middle class families.⁵ Middle class residents however, did not stay too long in this section.

By the 1850s, the population of New York soared, due primarily to an influx of European immigrants as well as newly-freed African-Americans who were drawn to Manhattan because of the availability of jobs.⁶ Immigrants had been arriving in New York continuously and already by 1825, over one fifth of the population of New York was foreign born. In the 1840s, many of these

immigrants were Irish who started coming in large numbers looking for work after the collapse of Irish agriculture and the rapid industrialization that displaced many workers.

Germans had always had a strong presence in New York, but after the failed revolutions of 1848, 70,000 more arrived in New York, fleeing “land shortages, unemployment, famine and political and religious oppression.”⁷ Many were poor and unskilled and tried to find housing in Manhattan’s notorious slum known as Five Points but the Irish and free Blacks who were already there did not welcome them. Although they were all classified as German, this name covered a multitude of ethnicities, and people tended to subdivide themselves, preferring to live among others who came from the same native communities and regions. Many German immigrants first congregated in the five-block span between Canal and Rivington Streets, but the newcomers were forced to look elsewhere as landlords continued to crowd more and more people into inhuman living conditions. They moved northward, up the eastern side of Manhattan island, pushing out existing residents of this area, including the African-Americans who had been there.⁸ Throughout the area existing homes were subdivided or changed into boarding houses, while others were torn down to make way for tenement buildings, constructed to fit more people into the same space. Eventually the area north of Division Street up to 18th Street and from Third Avenue to the East River filled with German immigrants until it became the third largest concentration of German speakers in the world.⁹ This section came to be known as *Kleindeutschland*, Little Germany, Dutchtown, or *Deutschlandle* and was “the first large immigrant neighborhood in American history that spoke a foreign language” and remained the major German-American center in the United States for the rest of the century.¹⁰

Jews in New York

Among the first settlers in New York were 23 Sephardic Jews who had come from Brazil in 1654. The Dutch allowed a certain freedom for the Jews and were more welcoming than many places. By 1800, there were approximately 400 Jews in New York, mostly living near the Battery. The only synagogue for this population was Shearith Israel on Mill Street, originally built in 1730 and rebuilt in 1818 as the population expanded. By the 1820s, as the city’s population started moving uptown, the Jews began to sort themselves out according to their social and economic levels. Those who were wealthiest lived west of Broadway, while those in the middle tended to settle between Broadway and the Bowery. The poorest of the group stayed near Centre, White and Pearl streets, near the Five Points, like the destitute of other groups. As new, poor immigrants joined them, they generally stayed in these areas as well.¹¹ Beginning in the 1820s, after the fall of the Napoleonic Empire, many Jews were among the large numbers of Germanic immigrants, fleeing political oppression and poverty. In 1825, these newcomers started their own synagogue on Elm Street, B’nai Jeshurun, that was more attuned to the religious practices they were used to following, called *Ashkenazie*. In the following years many other groups formed their own synagogues, as the Jewish population increased and new immigrants wanted a religious and communal experience that was close to that of the place from which they had immigrated. During the last twenty years of the nineteenth century, approximately half a million Jews from Eastern Europe moved to the United States, with an additional 1.5 million more coming between 1900 and World War I.¹² Most settled among the warren of tenements that had developed in the Lower East Side, which came to be known as a “cosmopolis” of individual Jewish groups. “Clustered in their separate Jewries, they were set side by side in a pattern suggesting the cultural, if not the physical geography of the Old World.”¹³

Among the huge numbers of Jewish immigrants arriving in New York between 1848 and 1914 were approximately 100,000 Jews from Hungary. Although they are generally considered part of the German influx that began as a result of the failed revolutions of 1848, the Hungarian Jews formed a distinct group. Like others coming from the expanded Austro-Hungarian Empire, the earliest immigrants tended to be more highly educated and left their homelands because of political dissent while those who came after 1880 tended to be labourers, artisans and trades people who came for economic gain. In Hungary, the Jews were more assimilated than in some

other countries, and saw themselves as more cultured than others from settlements further east.¹⁴ Within the Lower East Side, the Hungarian section was generally located from Houston Street to 10th Street and between Avenue B and the East River.¹⁵

Synagogues

Jews in Biblical times were nomadic herders and their religion required them to bring sacrifices to the Temple in Jerusalem several times a year. After the Temple was destroyed for the second time in 70 A.D. it was not rebuilt, but was replaced by synagogues which developed as locations for prayer and study. Ruins of synagogues dating from the first centuries after the destruction of the Temple have been found throughout Israel as well as in Rome, Turkey, Syria and Yugoslavia. The Bible contains no prescription for how these buildings were supposed to be constructed or specific layouts or the furnishings they should contain. On the interior, they required only an *Ark* (special cabinet) to hold the *Torah* (the written law) and a reading desk to place it on when it was read aloud during services. Beyond this, the synagogue could take any form the congregation desired. Through custom, these buildings usually faced east, toward Jerusalem, although not always. On the exterior, they tended to conform to the architectural forms that were commonly used in the local community. In a reaction to periodic incidents of persecution in Europe, it was usually deemed important to have small, unobtrusive synagogue buildings, so as not to draw unwanted attention to the activities of the Jewish groups using the structure.

In New York, as large waves of Jewish immigrants crowded the Lower East Side and the East Village, the numerous groups that developed were forced to find a variety of spaces for their synagogues. Often small congregations held services in a single rented room until the group increased in size and prosperity enough to rent larger quarters. It was also not unusual for a growing congregation to take over the building of a church congregation that had moved away, or to share quarters with another group. The design of the building was less important than having a place to congregate with other people of a common heritage. During the early years of the twentieth century, there were hundreds of Jewish congregations in community listings for Manhattan.

New York synagogues were generally vernacular designs, built by local architects and builders in the styles and with the materials popular at the time. On the Lower East Side, there were fewer purpose-built synagogues and they had to fit into the city's narrow lots. While they did not want to make their buildings incongruous to their neighborhoods, they did want passersby to understand that these were religious buildings and to distinguish them visually from the rowhouses or tenements surrounding them.¹⁶ By the mid-1880s, New York's synagogues had developed certain stylistic consistencies that were often used and adapted to the specific site and congregational requirements of each building. These design idioms included a tri-partite façade, a central entrance (leading to the sanctuary), and corner towers (indicating the stairs leading to the separate women's gallery). Within these broad parameters, architects could and did use Gothic, Beaux Arts, Romanesque or Classical forms and details to create their particular design.

History of the Congregation and the building

The Beth Hamedrash Hagadol Anshe Ungarn or the Great House of Study of the People of Hungary was founded in 1883 with the arrival in New York of large numbers of Hungarian Jews. Its first rabbi was Moses Weinberger (1854-1940), a very learned rabbi from Hungary who came to this country in 1880, among the first religious leaders from that country.¹⁷ The congregation first met in quarters at 48 Columbia Street but must have prospered because they made several moves to larger quarters, first to 67 Ridge Street (dates undetermined). In 1889, this congregation built a new building at 70 Willett Street which opened to great fanfare and ceremony.¹⁸ By 1908, when the congregation was ready to move into this structure, they were listed at 630 East 5th Street.¹⁹

The congregation purchased this property on East 7th Street in 1908 from Lena Zeichner who had bought it in 1906.²⁰ There was a three story brick house with a pitched roof on the property and the architects removed the front and rear walls and extended the building by four feet in the front and by 32 feet in the rear.²¹ The new building, two stories tall on a raised basement and faced in stone with a flat roof cost \$10,000. Its sanctuary seated 500 people, slightly less than the building on Willet Street.

Later in the twentieth century, as most Jewish residents moved away from the Lower East Side, many religious buildings were left empty and forced to close. Some congregations followed their members to the Bronx, Brooklyn or the suburbs, but the majority closed their doors and sold their buildings, to be torn down or converted to other uses. This congregation was able to maintain this structure until 1975, when they abandoned the building. In 1984 the building was purchased by a developer and in 1987 the first co-op apartments were sold.

Architects Gross & Kleinberger

Samuel Gross (dates undetermined)

Joseph Kleinberger (dates undetermined)

The architectural firm of Gross & Kleinberger, responsible for the design of this building, existed between 1907 and 1922 and was located at Bible House in lower Manhattan. Little is known about the background or training of either man. They are responsible for a Colonial Revival style apartment building in the Hamilton Heights/Sugar Hill Historic District and another in the Hamilton Heights/Sugar Hill Northwest Historic District. Additionally they designed several apartment buildings on upper Broadway and a factory building on West 130th Street. Beginning in 1900, Samuel Gross maintained an individual practice on East 84th Street and is listed as architect on several projects from the 1920s, notably tenements on the Lower East Side. After the breakup of the firm in 1922, Joseph Kleinberger continued to practice architecture until 1925. Mr. Kleinberger worked with the firm of York & Sawyer to design the Salmon Tower located at 11 West 42nd Street in 1925.

To date it is unclear why these architects were chosen for this commission.

Style of the Building

This synagogue building is less than 25 feet wide and located on the south side of a street filled with rowhouses and tenements. Its front façade is finished in a refined, classical style, with highly developed details and fine workmanship. The stone façade expresses the wealth of the congregation which had grown substantially over the years. Gross & Kleinberger designed it with a typical tripartite façade and central, raised entrance, although the architects did not include the usual corner towers. The building has a flat front that blends into the streetfront, but it is carefully detailed with stone pilasters, dentils and window moldings so that its use and purpose is immediately recognizable.

The “proper” style for synagogues had been the subject of ongoing debate, with some maintaining that Gothic was more associated with Christian ecclesiastical architecture, and others claiming that Moorish or Byzantine was appropriate because of associations with the Middle East. By the early twentieth century, the Classical Revival style had taken hold throughout the United States for most building types and synagogues were no exception. The classical style became particularly popular for synagogue architecture as it had the advantage of few religious associations.²² By 1907, prominent synagogue architect Arnold Bruner wrote in *Brickbuilder*,

I am unhesitatingly of the opinion that the latter (Classic style) is the one that is fit and proper for the synagogue in America. With the sanction of antiquity it perpetuates the best traditions of Jewish art and takes up a thread which was broken by circumstances, of a vigorous and once healthy style.²³

The synagogue built for Congregation Beth Hamedrash Hagadol Anshe Ungarn is a fine example of the use of Classical Revival forms applied to a small building in a rowhouse neighborhood. The finely-laid, light-colored stonework puts it immediately in the tradition of the “White City” created at the World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893, and sets it apart from the brick and brownstone houses and tenements on the block. New York synagogues were typically crowned by pediments, and this one is strongly articulated as a decisive finishing element on the compact design. The façade is well-balanced through the use of flat pilasters that define the three bays, and strong cornices highlighted by bold dentil moldings. The wooden paneled door topped by a stained glass fan light calls appropriate attention to the important central entrance. The stone moldings, window framing and informational panels are particularly well-executed, creating a refined presence in this busy neighborhood and a distinctive reminder of an earlier period of its history.

Description

The building constructed for Beth Hamedrash Hagadol Anshe Ungarn is faced with dressed limestone and completely fills its narrow lot. It is two stories high, on a raised basement capped by a broad stone watertable. Three bays wide, it is symmetrically arranged around a raised, central doorway and capped by a low pediment backed by a parapet.

Each bay is flanked by shallow, engaged pilasters with molded capitals. Above each story is a broad cornice; that on the top is marked by flat stone rondels above each pilaster. The cornices and the pediment have strong, denticulated moldings. All the windows have been replaced, although the window openings have not changed. The doorway consists of the original double, paneled wooden door surmounted by a round-arched transom filled by stained glass in a fan pattern and topped by a stone console bracket. The two side windows on the main story are small, narrow openings surrounded by broad stone moldings, each with a keystone. Above each opening of the main story is a stone plaque engraved (in Hebrew) with the name and dates of the founding congregation. At the second story, the central window is taller and wider than those on the sides, but all three are topped by round-arched transoms crowned with moldings and console keystone brackets. All these windows are double-height and are fronted by a short stone balustrade. The transom glass has also been replaced. Blank stone panels are located above the side windows.

To each side of the entry stairs, the walls of the raised basement are filled by replacement doors. The areaways in front of these doors are surrounded by iron fences. The concrete entry stairs are flanked by a short wall topped by an iron fence and historic iron lampposts with glass globes.

Report researched and written by
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NOTES

¹ Much of the introductory material is from: Edwin G. Burrows and Mike Wallace, *Gotham: A History of New York City to 1898* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999); Landmarks Preservation Commission (LPC), *513 Grand Street House Designation Report* (LP- 2270) (New York: City of New York, 2007), report prepared by Marianne S. Percival; LPC, *Hamilton-Holly House Designation Report* (LP-2157) (New York: City of New York, 2004), report prepared by Jay Shockley and LPC, *Children's Aid Society, Elizabeth Home for Girls Designation Report* (LP-2274) (New York: City of New York, 2008), report prepared by Virginia Kurshan.

² Malve Von Hassell, *Homesteading in New York City, 1978-1993. The Divided Heart of Loisaída* (Westport, CT: Bergin & Garvey, 1996), 39.

³ *Gotham*, 55.

⁴ *Gotham*, 448.

⁵ LPC, *NoHo East Historic District Designation Report* (LP-2129) (NY: City of New York, 2003), report written by Donald Presa.

⁶ *Gotham*, 479.

⁷ "Germans," in *The Encyclopedia of New York*, Thomas Jackson, ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 463.

⁸ Leslie M. Harris, *In the Shadow of Slavery, African-Americans in New York City, 1626-1863* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 267.

⁹ *Gotham*, 745.

¹⁰ "Germans," *Encyclopedia of New York*, 463.

¹¹ *Gotham*, 481.

¹² Moses Rischin, *The Promised City: New York's Jews 1870-1914* (New York: Harvard Univ. Press, 1970), 20.

¹³ Rischin, 76

¹⁴ Robert Perlman, *Bridging Three Worlds: Hungarian-Jewish Americans, 1848-1914* (Amherst, MA: Univ. of Mass. Press, 1991), 3-10.

¹⁵ Joyce Mendelsohn, *The Lower East Side Remembered & Revisited* (New York: The Lower East Side Press, 2001), 12.

¹⁶ Shari Goldberg, "Vernacular Synagogue Architecture," in *Common Bond* 16 (Winter, 2001), 2.

¹⁷ "Weinberger, Moshe," *Encyclopedia Judaica* 20 (Detroit, Thomson-Gale, 2007), 719. Weinberger was very unhappy in this country, believing that many immigrants lost their religious feeling and practice when they lived here. He wrote of his experiences in a book in 1887, although he did not return to Europe. He attempted to organize a yeshiva in connection with this synagogue but did not get support. After leaving this congregation, he started the Pitt Street Matzah Bakery, a forerunner of Streit's Matzah Bakery.

¹⁸ "New Synagogues," *New York Times* (Sept. 23, 1889), 2.

¹⁹ New York City Department of Buildings, Alteration 1033-1908.

²⁰ New York County Register's Office, Liber Deeds and Conveyances, Liber 178, page 371. The property was originally lotted and sold in the 1840s and passed through the hands of many residential owners throughout the rest of the nineteenth century.

²¹ New York City Department of Buildings, Block 376, lot 13. In 1902, this building had been declared unsafe.

²² Brian de Breffny, *The Synagogue*, (New York: Macmillan Publ. Co., 1978), 175.

²³ Quoted in Breffny, 186-7.

FINDINGS AND DESIGNATION

On the basis of a careful consideration of the history, the architecture, and other features of this building, the Landmarks Preservation Commission finds that the (Former) Congregation Beth Hamedrash Hagadol Anshe Ungarn (The Great House of Study of the People of Hungary) has a special character and a special historical and aesthetic interest and value as part of the development, heritage, and cultural characteristics of New York City.

The Commission further finds that, among its important qualities, the (Former) Congregation Beth Hamedrash Hagadol Anshe Ungarn (The Great House of Study of the People of Hungary), constructed in 1908, is a fine example of an early 20th century Classical Revival style synagogue surviving on Manhattan's Lower East Side; that this synagogue was constructed for a Hungarian Jewish congregation founded in 1883; that Hungarians were part of the large German immigration to New York in the late 1800s, settling among other Germanic immigrants in the part of the Lower East Side called *Kleinedutscheland*; that this large group of immigrants created a profusion of small congregations in the neighborhood, many renting small meeting rooms or sharing space with others and relatively few were able to construct their own buildings, as did this congregation; that this structure was designed by the New York architects Gross & Kleinberger who were active throughout the city, especially building apartment houses in northern Manhattan; that the architects worked within the traditional synagogue form of a narrow façade with three symmetrical bays, creating a sophisticated classical arrangement of engaged pilasters supporting a strong cornice and a shallow pediment, all set off by strongly denticulated moldings; that the finely carved stonework and well-balanced design provide a refined façade that clearly marks this building as an important religious structure and sets it apart from the houses and tenements on the street; that most of the small synagogues that existed in this part of the city were closed and many demolished as their congregations moved away; that the Congregation Beth Hamedrash Hagadol Anshe Ungarn lasted at this location until 1975 when they could no longer maintain the building; that it was converted to residential use and re-opened in 1987.

Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of Chapter 74, Section 3020 of the Charter of the City of New York and Chapter 3 of Title 25 of the Administrative Code of the City of New York, the Landmarks Preservation Commission designates as a Landmark the (Former) Congregation Beth Hamedrash Hagadol Anshe Ungarn, 242 East 7th Street, Borough of Manhattan, and designates Manhattan Tax Map Block 376, Lot 13 as its Landmark Site.

Robert B. Tierney, Chair
Pablo E. Vengoechea, Vice-Chair
Diana Chapin, Joan Gerner, Roberta Brandes Gratz,
Christopher Moore, Commissioners

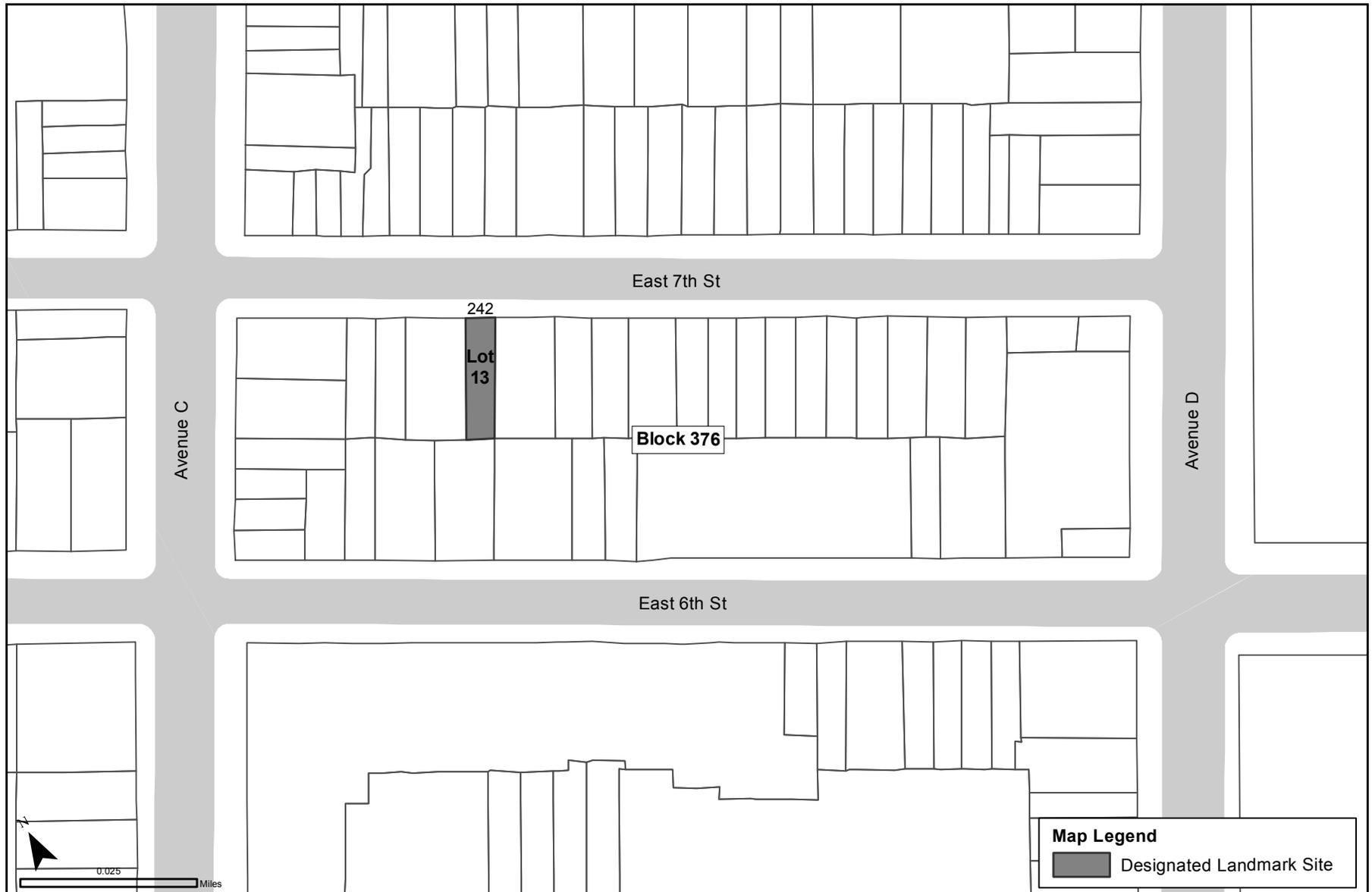


(Former) Congregation Beth Hamedrash Hagadol Anshe Ungarn
(Great House of Study of the People of Hungary)
242 East 7th Street
Manhattan
Photo: Caroline Pasion



(Former) Congregation Beth Hamedrash Hagadol Anshe Ungarn
242 East 7th Street, Manhattan
Photos: Caroline Pasion





(FORMER) CONGREGATION BETH HAMEDRASH HAGADOL ANSHE UNGARIN (LP-2261), 242 East 7th Street.
 Borough of Manhattan, Tax Map Block 376, Lot 13.

Designated: March 18, 2008

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 Author: New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission, JM.