

Landmarks Preservation Commission
July 8, 1980, Designation List 134
LP-1107

ELDRIDGE STREET SYNAGOGUE (Congregation Khal Adath Jeshurun with Anshe Lubz), 12-16 Eldridge Street, Borough of Manhattan. Built 1886-87; architects Herter Brothers.

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan, Tax Map Block 293, Lot 3.

On December 11, 1979, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the Eldridge Street Synagogue (Congregation Khal Adath Jeshurun with Anshe Lubz) and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 13). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. Nine witnesses spoke in favor of designation. There were no speakers in opposition to designation.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

The Synagogue of Khal Adath Jeshurun with Anshe Lubz, more familiarly known as the Eldridge Street Synagogue, was the first and finest synagogue erected on the Lower East Side by the Orthodox East European Ashkenazic Jews. Now an impressive monument to the American immigrant experience, it was built in 1886-87 by the architectural firm of Herter Brothers, and stands today as an enduring symbol of the Lower East Side as it thrived during the last decades of the 19th century. The imposing pressed brick and terra-cotta facade features elements of Moorish, Gothic, and Romanesque design, a combination which later would be used frequently by the Herter Brothers in their numerous designs for tenements in the Lower East Side.

Although the early history of the congregation remains obscure, it is known that Khal Adath Jeshurun (Community of the People of Israel) was the result of the union of two Ashkenazic congregations: Beth Hamedrash (House of Study) and Holche Josher Wizaner (Those who walk in Righteousness).

Established in 1852, Beth Hamedrash had quickly become the most important center of Orthodox Jewish guidance in America.¹ Under the tutelage of Russian-educated Rabbi Joseph Ash, the congregation trained Jewish scholars who were then in much demand throughout the country. In 1856 the growing congregation bought an old Welsh chapel at 78 Allen Street where they remained until the synagogue was built on Eldridge Street.

Typical of the mergers and divisions which characterized the Jewish community in the mid-nineteenth century, Beth Hamedrash was reduced in number and prominence by the secession of two splinter groups, the most crucial departure being led by Rabbi Ash in 1859. Ash established a

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rival congregation named Beth Hamedrash Hagodol (Great House of Study) which, in 1885, purchased a Baptist church at 60 Norfolk Street and transformed it into what is now the oldest Orthodox Ashkenazic house of worship in New York City.² The partnership of the remaining members of Beth Hamedrash and Holche Josher Wizaner, which ultimately became Khal Adath Jeshurun, could have been formed as early as 1884, although it did not exist as a legal entity until 1890, three years after their synagogue was built. A small congregation of Polish Jews, Anshe Lubz, joined with Khal Adath Jeshurun shortly after the dedication of the new synagogue.

There were many benefits to be reaped from such a union. A mass immigration during the last half of the 19th century transplanted one third of all East European Jewry to the United States in a generation and a half. In 1847 there were 13,000 Jews in New York City, by 1890 there were more than 200,000. Because of social and language differences, conflicts over cemeteries, and minor ritual changes, numerous congregations were formed by small groups of immigrants and usually met in rented rooms or halls. With the influx of East European Ashkenazic Jews into the Lower East Side, the middle-class population of German Jews and the remainder of the Sephardim who had arrived in America in the early decades of the 19th century, began to move uptown to the "nicer neighborhoods." The German Jews considered themselves far more cosmopolitan and more successfully integrated into New York society than the newly arrived immigrants. They had also begun to accept a less traditional, reformed style of Judaism. The consolidation of Beth Hamedrash and Holche Josher Wizaner into Khal Adath Jeshurun resulted in a larger, stronger congregation which was conceptually united in its opposition to Reformed, or Americanized Judaism.

A further consideration for their merger may have been the congregation's position in its own Orthodox community of the Lower East Side. There was much competition among the sixty extant synagogues in 1880 to be awarded the prized title of "Jewish Community of New York."³ Furthermore, there was a strong movement in favor of designating a Chief Rabbi for the entire Orthodox community, with each congregation naturally desiring to have its own rabbi so honored.

The members of the Khal Adath Jeshurun congregation therefore planned to build a synagogue which would not only house them in splendor, but would also be illustrative of its prominent position in the Orthodox community. Three lots at 12-16 Eldridge Street were purchased in 1886 for a total cost of \$36,050. This was to be the site for the new synagogue and the architectural firm of Herter Brothers was commissioned to design the building.⁴

Peter and Francis William Herter had arrived in America from Germany between 1880 and 1884. Little is known about them before this time, although it can be assumed that they received their architectural training in Europe before coming to the United States. The synagogue was their fifth executed commission in New York City and their first religious structure.⁵ Upon arrival in New York, their first commissions were

from German clients in Yorkville. In 1886, two tenements designed by the Herter Brothers, also for German clients, were built at 43-45 Eldridge Street, only a block away from the future site of the Khal Adath Jeshurun Synagogue. The fact that they were already working in the neighborhood must have been advantageous in obtaining the commission for the synagogue, for the Herter Brothers submitted completed plans for the new structure to the Buildings Department only two months after construction of the tenements began.

The Herter Brothers then had an intense period of activity on the Lower East Side which lasted until 1893, when they faced creditor suits totalling more than \$30,000 against their own local developments.⁶ From 1887 to 1893, Peter and Francis Herter had designed over fifty buildings on the Lower East Side, and a total of sixty in lower Manhattan. Twelve of these tenements still stand on the Lower East Side, as well as two loft buildings. Among the best preserved and most interesting examples are 3-5 Elizabeth Street, 14-16 Orchard Street, and 166 Henry Street, all built in 1887.

The tenements designed by the Herter Brothers were well known for being more spacious and offering better amenities than other such buildings being built at the same time. Peter Herter credited himself with being the first to build tenements on the Lower East Side with stoves and baths. It was felt these luxuries ensured full occupancy and high rents, resulting in a twenty per cent return on equity, or twice the expected average.

The facades of these tenements were a melange of styles and exotic shapes. The terra-cotta forms and horseshoe arches seen on the facade of the Khal Adath Jeshurun Synagogue are found time and time again on tenements designed by the Herters. Whether a building was built on a 23-foot wide lot or a large corner site, the decorative detailing is, for the most part, rich in its extravagance and slightly incongruous when considering the less-than-perfect living conditions inside the tenements.

For several years following their financial demise in 1893, the Herter Brothers did very little designing or building. The partnership eventually dissolved, and in 1899 each resumed independent practice with Peter starting a new firm, P. Herter & Son, with son Peter John (b. 1875). He later founded Herter Realty Company in 1902, and became important in the New York real estate market. Francis Herter practiced as an architect until the age of 72 and died seven years later in 1933.

The Herter Brothers must have felt extremely fortunate to have received the commission for Khal Adath Jeshurun Synagogue. Their practice was still in its fledgling stage and could only benefit from the rewards of designing a building which promised to be not only the most prominent synagogue in the area, but also the most splendid structure on the Lower East Side. Before the 1880s, few buildings in New York City had been specifically commissioned to be designed and built as synagogues. Most of these were located uptown where the wealthier German Jews were re-establishing their congregations after having left the Lower East Side. Only

three synagogues on the Lower East Side predate the Synagogue of Khal Adath Jeshurun in construction.⁸

As evidenced by speeches given at the dedication ceremony on September 4, 1887, the congregation was determined that the synagogue stand as a battlement against uptown Reform movements and act as a protector of the militant Orthodoxy to which they aspired. One observer at the dedication felt that perhaps the synagogue was too luxurious and questioned: "Is this the orthodoxy which we should strive to bequeath our children? A Judaism composed of carved wood and of ornamental bricks covered by a handsome mortgage is all that will be left for them to liquidate...."⁹

The cost of this monument to Orthodox Judaism was \$38,000, the sum being raised largely through the sale of seats in the sanctuary. With the most prestigious ones near the ark selling for \$1000 and those farther away and of less importance costing congregation members \$200, it is obvious that the Synagogue of Khal Adath Jeshurun was not to be a house of worship for the poor. The congregation was made up of prominent members of the Lower East Side community, including Sender Jarmulowsky, owner of the large Jarmulowsky's Bank on the corner of Canal and Orchard Streets, and Isaac Gellis of delicatessen fame.

A celebrated cantor, Rabbi Phincus Minkowsky, and his choir from Odessa were hired at \$5000 a year to help increase the membership and coffers of the congregation. This induced other congregations to hire their own famous cantors in order to compete with the fame and salary of Rabbi Minkowsky. The hiring of Minkowsky was looked upon as "but an advertising scheme to bring the new enterprise into more shining prominence, and achieve higher prices for pews and admission tickets."¹⁰

Amid all the political motives, whether implied or real, behind the synagogue's construction, and the rivalries which existed among the congregations on the Lower East Side, the Herter Brothers designed a structure which was truly splendid on both the interior and exterior. For the synagogue, which was to be the grandest expression of Orthodox Judaism on the Lower East Side, the architects chose to use a combination of Moorish, Gothic, and Romanesque styles with Moorish horseshoe arches acting as the predominant stylistic form.

Aside from the ark always being located at the eastern end of the traditional sanctuary, and the main entrance facing west, there appears to be no single or characteristic architectural plan which has developed during the long history of synagogue design. The same is true for the architectural styles of synagogues. Throughout history, European synagogues were generally designed in the popular mode of the time, whether, for example, Romanesque, Gothic, or Baroque. However, for all the variety of architectural styles from which to select in the mid-19th century, none was more conspicuous or controversial than the Moorish or Islamic style. Desiring to discard the more blatant aspects of Christian-inspired architecture, such as the Gothic pointed arch, Jews began to turn with increasing frequency to Moorish designs, finding them more reminiscent of their Eastern origins. Several important synagogues in Germany were built with

Moorish overtones; these were usually radially planned with a dome centered over a square hall. In America, the Gothic-influenced oblong basilica was used.¹¹

Occurring at the same time in Western architecture in the mid-19th century was a trend toward romanticism and exotic escapism, which was often expressed by using Moorish designs. The adaptation of Moorish motifs began in the English landscaped garden and continued with the 1838 publication of the Prince Regent's Royal Palace at Brighton, England. In America, P.T. Barnum's villa, Iranistan, designed by Leopold Eidlitz, helped to establish the vogue for the oriental or Moorish style.

The New York City synagogue which most assuredly influenced the Herter Brothers was the Moorish-inspired Temple Emanu-El, located at Fifth Avenue and 43rd Street until its demolition in 1928. Designed by Eidlitz and Henry Fernbach in 1868, the beautiful Temple Emanu-El was the largest synagogue in New York and stood at the forefront of the Reform movement. Fernbach's Shaarai Tephila Synagogue (1869) served the leading Orthodox congregation and was also Moorish in style, as was his Central Synagogue of 1870.

At the time of the construction of the Synagogue of Khal Adath Jeshurun, Eldridge Street was changing from a quiet residential street of the mid-century to a crowded and noisy thoroughfare, the result of the rapid construction of tenements and the elevated railway built on Division Street in 1880. The new synagogue was designed to contrast aggressively with its neighboring tenements, continually asserting its importance and strength in the neighborhood. Typical of many Jewish synagogues of this era, and because it is built on a tight, rectangular urban lot, the massing of the building is that of two twin stair towers, each flanking the recessed central bay which houses a large wheel window and is crowned by an arcaded gable. The original specifications called for a towered facade, but, for unknown reasons, it was eliminated before construction. The synagogue was also to have been built of Dorchester stone, but brick and terra cotta were substituted. It can be presumed that economic reasons precluded both the tower and the use of stone.

The brown pressed brick facade of the synagogue is horizontally divided, above a basement clad in matching brick, into three levels delineated by richly carved terra-cotta courses. The building is separated from the sidewalk by a simple iron fence anchored by cast-iron posts. From the street level, two stairways descend to the basement where small windows are decorated with dogtooth edging. Four stairways, one at each side tower and a combined pair in the center bay, lead up to the main sanctuary level. At the top of each stair is an entrance with double wooden doors, the panels of which are elaborately carved with stars of David. The entrances are delineated by slender pilasters and surmounted with large Moorish horseshoe arches edged with terra-cotta dogtooth molding. The two entrances in the center bay are flanked by narrow windows, which are each topped with a small horseshoe arch and share impost molding with the larger arches over the doors.

The rhythm of solids and voids established at the main level of the synagogue quickens at the second as a continuous clerestory of smaller horseshoe-arched openings stretches across the facade. A terra-cotta molding at impost height unifies the five windows in the center bay with the pair in each side tower.

The scale of the third level echoes that of the first with a single horseshoe-arched, stained-glass window in each side tower and a magnificent rose window entirely filling the center bay. Although the rose window is Gothic in form, the star of David patterns in the roundels leave no doubt as to its present affiliation. Two heavy terra-cotta cornices, which divide the second level from the third in each side tower, project into the recessed center bay and, acting as imposts, cause the entire bay and rose window to be read as one giant horseshoe arch. Located above the rose window is an arched gable consisting of horseshoe arches. Although removed in 1960, metal cresting, aediculae, and finials originally rose above the slate roof.

Because the synagogue shares no party walls, natural light illuminates the magnificent sanctuary from round-arched stained-glass windows which pierce the side walls. Brass chandeliers with glass shades hang from the 70-foot high barrel-vaulted ceiling which is bordered with hemispherical domes supported by slender columns with Moorish capitals. The Italian-carved walnut ark is located at the eastern wall, the point closest to Jerusalem, and is topped by a stained-glass window which repeats the horseshoe arch form seen on the exterior western facade. The space is enlivened by brass crowns on all the lighting fixtures, gold stars painted on dark blue walls, and Gothic trefoil designs found on the walnut pews. In 1894 the interior pinework was marbelized and trompe l'oeil frescoes were painted on the ark wall and in the vaults.

The synagogue made the transition into the 20th century with a congregation of over 4000 members. Well-attended services were held three times a day, and on holidays the crowds were so great that it was necessary to station a guard at the entrance. Unfortunately, this popularity would not last indefinitely. The peak of immigration into the Lower East Side occurred from 1900 to 1910, and after that time rapidly declined as the Jewish population began to establish enclaves in Harlem, along the Bronx's Grand Concourse, and in Borough Park, Williamsburg, and other, more rural, locations in Brooklyn. In 1924 a highly prohibitive immigration law put a halt to the further arrival of East Europeans. The result was a swift decrease in the Lower East Side's Jewish population, followed in the 1930s by the inevitable abandonment of synagogues. Congregations, which had once been forced to rent or buy abandoned churches before being able to afford their own building campaigns, now found themselves having to sell their precious synagogues to church groups.

The great sanctuary of the Synagogue Khal Adath Jeshurun was sealed in the early 1930s. Since that time services have been held in the basement whenever a minyan, or quorum of ten adult male members of the congregation, can be established. In 1944 the eastern rose window was destroyed by a storm and the stained glass was replaced by brick and glass blocks. In the mid-1970s the sanctuary was entered for the first time in 30 years,

and except for the peeling paint and layers of dust, nothing had changed. It is now justifiably considered one of the finest religious interiors in New York City.

The Synagogue Khal Adath Jeshurun is one of the most poignant reminders of the East European Jewish immigration to America. At the turn of the century it stood as a majestic structure amidst the crowded tenements of the teeming Lower East Side and served as the spiritual headquarters for the Orthodox community. Today the synagogue stands a silent presence over the decaying neighborhood. Its shrinking congregation is unable to keep up with the routine maintenance of the building and the damage done to it by vandals. A preservation committee has been established within the congregation, but it appears that only a massive effort by this group and other concerned citizens will be able to save this great synagogue.

Report prepared by Susan Upton Lawrence,
Landmarks Preservation Specialist,
for the Research Department

FOOTNOTES

1. Gerard Wolfe, The Synagogues of New York's Lower East Side (New York: Washington News Books, 1978), p. 25.
2. Wolfe, p. 52.
3. Hyman B. Grinstein, "Communal and Social Aspects of American Jewish History" (Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society, No. 39, 1950), p. 271.
4. The partnership of Peter and Francis William Herter, with offices at 191 Broadway, is not to be confused with the cabinet makers and design firm of Herter Brothers which is well-known for its theaters and residential interiors in New York City. The latter firm, located at 154 Fifth Avenue, was still active in the 1880s but was no longer under the direction of its founders, half-brothers Gustave (d. 1898) and Christian (d. 1883). Also practicing at this time was Henry Herter, a partner of (Daniel) Schneider & Herter, with offices at 48 Bible House on Cooper Square. Schneider & Herter designed the Park East Synagogue (1889) at 163 E. 67th Street, and a synagogue for Kal Israel Anshe Poland (1892) at 27 Forsyth Street, less than a block away from Khal Adath Jeshurun. Any relationship between Henry Herter and brothers Peter and Francis William has yet to be ascertained.
5. John Donald Stewart, "A Programme for the Preservation of Synagogue

- Kahal Adath Jeshurun with Anshe Lubz, 12-16 Eldridge Street, New York" (unpublished Master's thesis, Historic Preservation Program, Columbia University, 1979), p. 12.
6. Stewart, p. 13.
 7. Architects' and Builders' Record and Guide, May 5, 1900, pp. 764-765.
 8. Anshe Chesed, 172 Norfolk Street (1850), Rodeph Shalom, 8 Clinton Street (1853), 70 Hester Street (1882).
 9. Ish Yemini, "Dedication of Congregation Adath Jeshurun," The American Hebrew, September 9, 1887, p. 70.
 10. Mi Yodka, "New York Notes," The American Israelite, September 16, 1887, p. 4.
 11. Rachel Wischnitzer, Synagogue Architecture in the United States (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1955), p. 70.

FINDINGS AND DESIGNATIONS

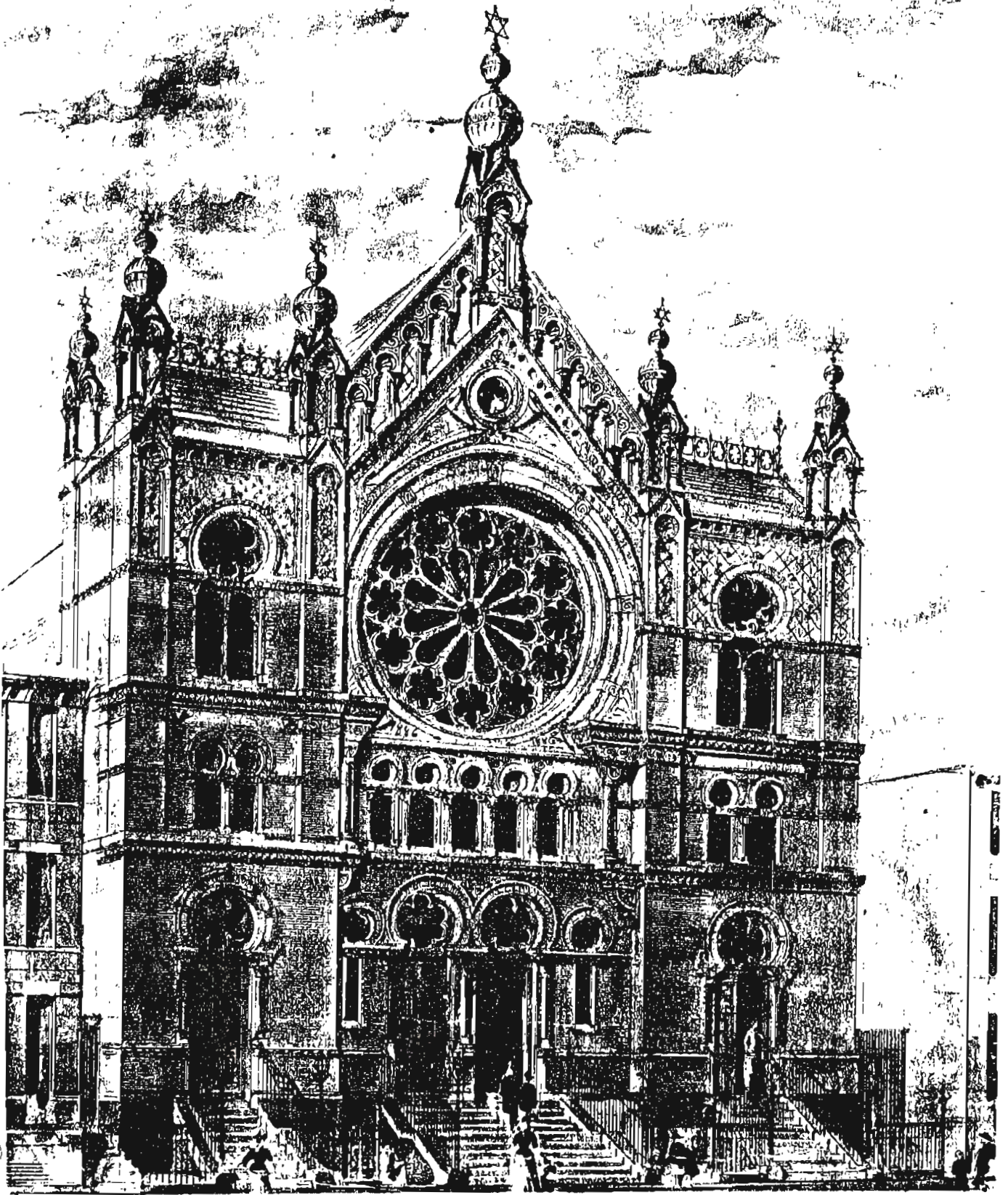
On the basis of a careful consideration of the history, the architecture, and other features of this building, the Landmarks Preservation Commission finds that the Eldridge Street Synagogue (Congregation Khal Adath Jeshurun with Anshe Lubz) has a special character, special historical and aesthetic interest 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 Eldridge Street Synagogue (Congregation Khal Adath Jeshurun with Anshe Lubz) is one of the very first buildings on the Lower East Side built specifically as a synagogue, and the first and finest synagogue built for the Orthodox East European Ashkenazic community; that its architects, the Herter Brothers, were prominent in construction on the Lower East Side; that its imposing facade, composed of Moorish, Gothic and Romanesque elements, is representative of the trend among synagogue architects towards oriental motifs and away from Christian European motifs; that it served as spiritual headquarters of the Orthodox community; that it is the grandest architectural expression of immigrant Orthodox Judaism in New York; and that it is one of the most poignant reminders of the East European Jewish immigration to America.

Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of Chapter 21 (formerly Chapter 63) of the Charter of the City of New York and Chapter 8-A of the Administrative Code of the City of New York, the Landmarks Preservation Commission designates as a Landmark the Eldridge Street Synagogue (Congregation Khal Adath Jeshurun with Anshe Lubz), 12-16 Eldridge Street, Borough of Manhattan, and designates Tax Map Block 293, Lot 3, Borough of Manhattan, as its Landmark Site.

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Synagogue Khal Adath Jeshurun, 12-16 Eldridge Street, New York City: watercolor, 1887? (courtesy of the Museum of the City of New York).



Eldridge Street Synagogue
(Congregation Khal Adath Jeshurun with Ansche Lubz)
12-16 Eldridge Street
Built: 1886-87

Photo credit:
John Donald Stewart

Architects:
Peter and Francis W. Herter

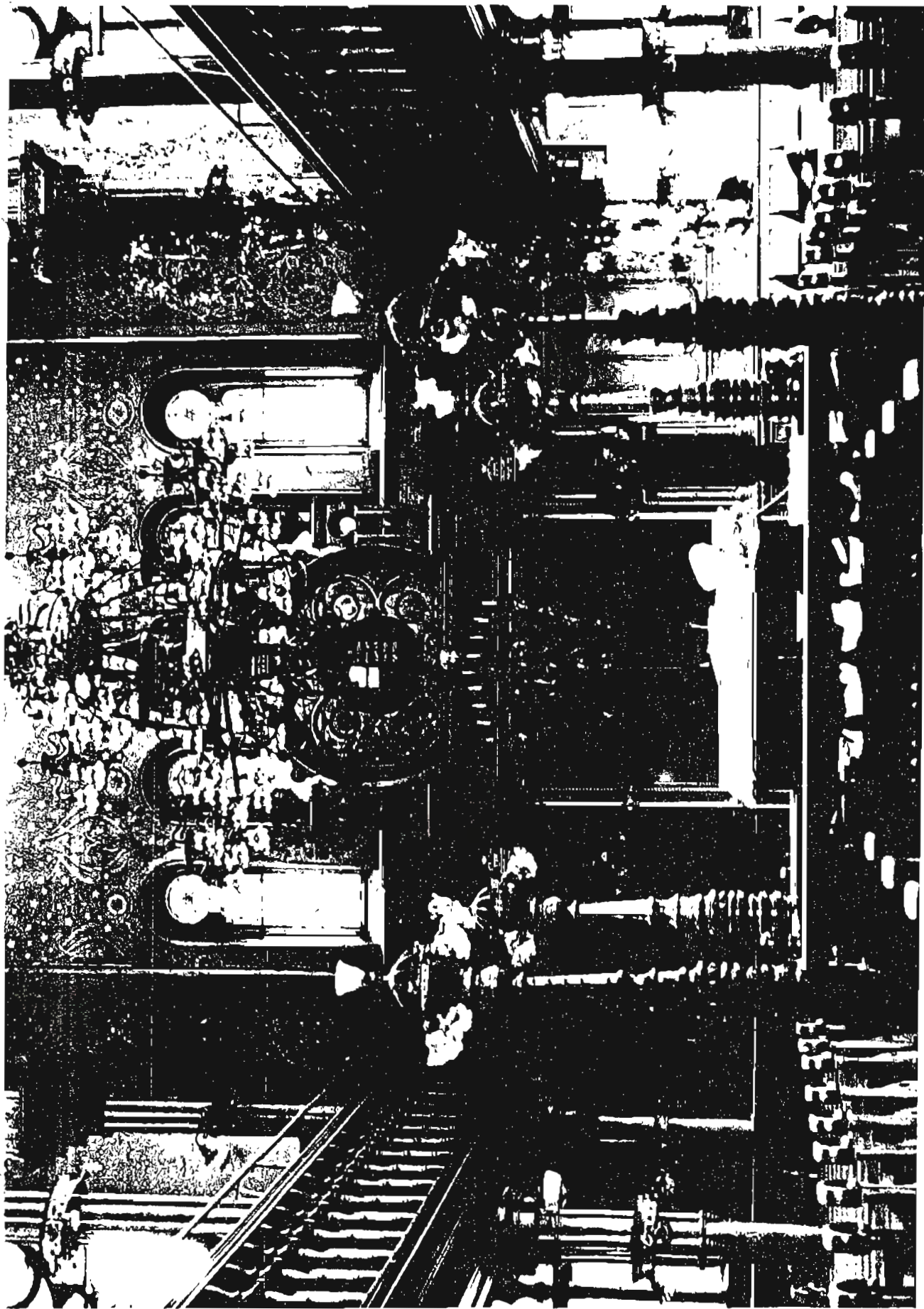


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John Donald Stewart

Eldridge Street Synagogue
View of Interior

Architects:
Peter and Francis W. Herter