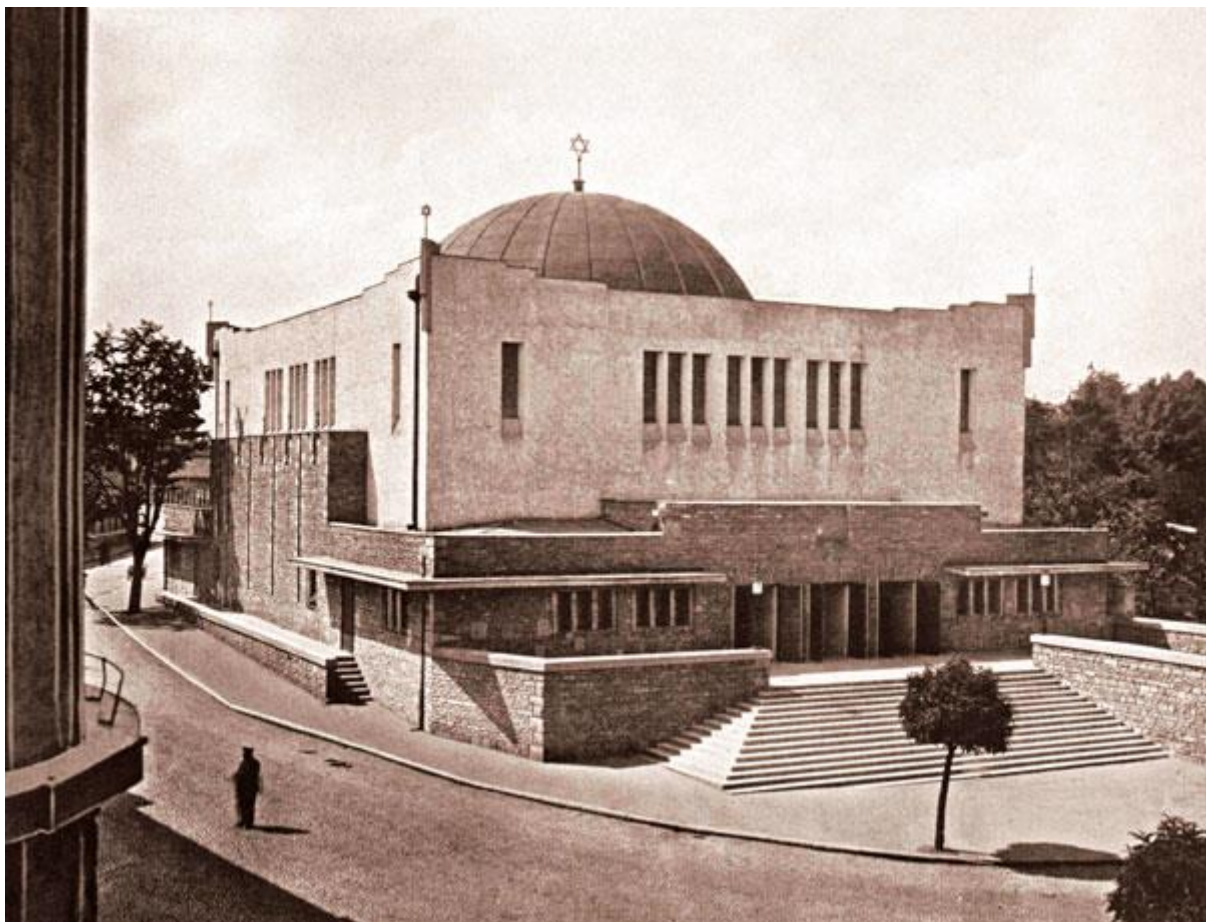
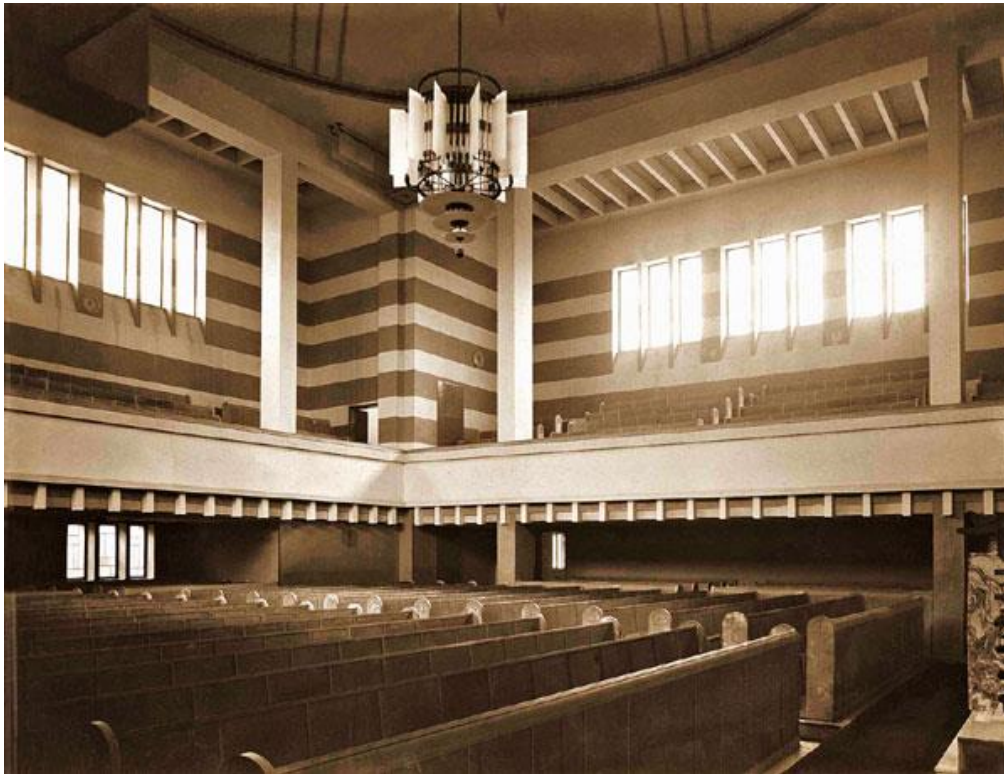


Case study: Buy Immortality Story of a successful fundraising campaign

Such was the title of the public campaign aimed at raising funds for the reconstruction of the *Nová synagóga* cultural centre located in Žilina, which began in 2012 and finished with the opening of the centre six years after that. Although some of the reconstruction work is still going on at this moment, and not everything was accomplished, we needed to close the list of the "immortals" on the day of the official opening, since it served as the libretto for the musical composition by Marek Piaček and Octet Singers. At the inauguration, three thousand names of people who supported and helped us with financial and material donations, or with volunteer work, were sung. No logos, just the names of specific people. Names from a community that arose around the new cultural centre, located in a monument by the world-famous German architect Peter Behrens, about which almost no one previously knew that it originally was a synagogue or that he was the author of its design. The names of these "immortals" can now be heard at the old synagogue's eastern wall twenty-four hours a day in a recording made during the opening concert. Why do we mention this fundraising success in the context of audience development? Precisely because of the number of contributors who simultaneously formed the foundation of our "then future" audience and who became rather a part of its story than just mere donors.

In the beginning, there was the small *Stanica Žilina-Záriečie*, another cultural centre, which we created as students by reconstructing a deserted but still functional railway station on the line from Žilina to Rajec. After ten years of operating there, the Jewish community of Žilina approached us to see if we could similarly revive the premises of the huge synagogue, which, during the 20th century, served also a communist cultural centre, a college auditorium, and a cinema.





We could not refuse the challenge, even though we were aware that this was a project that far exceeded the capacities of our small civic association. We could not disagree, being aware of the responsibility towards our ancestors who sent most of the Slovak Jews to concentration camps, as well as of the responsibility towards the important architecture of Peter Behrens, who was the teacher of Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, Le Corbusier or Walter Gropius, and about whom almost no one in the town knew. Due to our enthusiasm for the synagogue's architecture and its European significance, and for Jewish history, we immediately turned to the Ministry of Culture and to several large corporations, convinced of their support. The result was more than embarrassing, perhaps due to the timing, since it was shortly after the economic crisis of 2009. We realized that once again, just like with our little *Stanica*, we were dependent on fundraising, volunteerism, and on slowly gathering a community and doing the reconstruction on our own. We sobered up and returned to the underground.

Advertising agency *Istropolitana Ogilvy* helped with the idea for the campaign. After an initial two months of successful fundraising within our social bubble, donations stopped coming in to support the renovation. The advertising agency we approached on the basis of friendship to ask them to help us reach the public suggested a radical turnaround: we would be selling participation in the reconstruction project. We were not competing with charities, helping the sick, or saving the rainforest. We were selling immortality, something that actually cannot even be bought. Maybe there was something Jewish in it too – the idea that a man lives as long as anyone remembers his name. In addition to all the money raised from the fundraiser going towards the renovation of the New Synagogue, we were pledging that at the end of the fundraiser, a work of art will be created that will "immortalize" the names of those who would have contributed.

Thus began the story which, we later realized, we soon were not holding in our hands anymore. The helpers and donors we knew were replaced by those who came attracted by the campaign and whom we didn't quite know before. There were hundreds of such people. More and more people joined – such as the football club MŠK Žilina, which contributed with a portion of the profit made from each

match, or a clothing store that sold "immortal" T-shirts, a restaurant contributing with a portion of the profit made from every single meal sold, or a pilot friend who contributed with a balloon flight as a reward for a donation higher than 500 euro.



Add to that the reconstruction of the Synagogue, understood as a public event. The work of professionals was combined with volunteer brigades, and the first events, held as soon as the building was safe, helped expand the list of "immortal" donors. Even today, when the center is fully suitable for cultural events, it is difficult to hold them in a dusty reconstruction lot. And, of course, many artists joined and helped by donating their works for auction.



The list of “immortals” gets complete with the names of people from private companies, who decided to join because of the campaign. Some of these companies became fully convinced only after seeing their employees regularly volunteer for us – that is how the car company Kia became one of the main donors. The owner of the programming company *Počítače a programovanie*, who used to pass by the centre on his everyday way to the office, even asked how much it would cost to be a general partner in the reconstruction. And he became one, even though we tried to convince him that it was too much for his small company. All these are experiences that today, in hindsight, sound like something out of a fairy tale. Instead of a few rich patrons and big corporates, there were three thousand “small” people who gave from 10 to 100.000 euros. The help ranged from one day on the construction site to several days of volunteering spent there by the main architect Martin Jančok. All this gradually attracted the attention of politicians, starting at the local level and reaching Norwegian funds (EEA Grants), which eventually supported the final restoration of the Synagogue's interior. When you walk by, put your ear to the wall – you will hear the three thousand names of the people who helped and who have remained our audience to this day. A different kind of audience than the rest, because this audience is immortal.



The result is not only the successful collection and the reconstruction. It is also a commitment to the community of people we have created. A community of several thousand people, and not just people like us – from the bubble of people involved in contemporary art. The commitment lies not only in the declared immortality we promised them, which is on the display 24-hours a day at the Synagogue wall, but also in the program of the centre. We know that contemporary art exhibitions or progressive art festivals are not what many of them are interested in. That's why our current post-renovation programme is complemented by the community and other cultural events connecting audiences and the different “bubbles” through events like public markets, gatherings, pop concerts, as well as activist local campaigns that go beyond our originally planned “kunsthalle” dramaturgy. And we are having

fun. The wide range of our supporters has caused us to expand, which in the end we see as a positive thing, and not at all as a necessary compromise. An important festival, exhibition, or performance pleases us as much as meeting someone who dares to ask for the opportunity to celebrate their wedding or anniversary in the Synagogue. The result is a centre for contemporary art that works as a community centre – or, when necessary, as a test centre for Covid 19 or a refuge for people fleeing the war in Ukraine.



It took us six years to renovate the building – and we've continued another five since then. It was supposed to cost three million euros; we managed with half of that. Everyone, who could helped us, Norwegian and European funds, the Ministry of Culture, the town, foundations, football players, big and small sponsors, manufacturers of building materials... but the people contributed the most. Not by the amount, but by contributing from their private budget and their time. That is why they are immortal and why their names can be heard from the walls of the Synagogue and will be heard every time you walk by.



There are many versions of the story of *Nová synagóga* in Žilina, and there are many people who played important roles in them. The first is the story of the Jewish community in interwar Czechoslovakia, which made up a fifth of the town's population and which (finally) prospered, grew, and decided to build a new synagogue on the site of an older (and smaller) one. There is also the story of the world-famous German architect Peter Behrens, who (not entirely by chance) was approached in a competition in 1928 and asked to prepare the design for the new synagogue, and who was eventually chosen. There is also the story of the young Novák brothers who built it in two years. You can read about these stories and the important people who played roles in them in books. In them, you will also read other stories about the synagogue building, about the re-modeling and the changes in its function, about the high school that had its auditorium here for decades, about the *Centrum* cinema and the passionate cinema-goers who worked here for twenty years. In the books, you will also read how we (our ancestors) ordered most of the Jews to concentration camps. But many things will never appear in books. For example, the names of all the people who in some way played roles in the stories mentioned above. That is why we decided that at least in our story, the story of the reconstruction of *Nová synagóga* and its change into a cultural centre in 2012-2017, we will try to immortalize them. It happened not in the form of a book but in the form of a musical composition for which the names form the libretto. The names of the people who in some way contributed to the synagogue being restored and finding new life. Put your ear to the wall, you will hear them.