

'Châlons-en-Champagne Synagogue, France' Podcast

François Levy, Chair of the Châlons-en-Champagne Jewish Cultural Association

This synagogue was very much part of my childhood.

I was born in Châlons, and even if I am not very religious, my bar-mitzvah was in this synagogue.

I have spent happy times here with my parents, with my parents' friends and my own. And then, obviously, then there is a little of Proust's memory-laden madeleine cakes that hits me as soon as I cross the doors of this synagogue.

As is the case with all places where you regularly go, you do not pay much attention, particularly as a child, to the architecture.

Man of around twenty years old.

- Yeah! Well, I've noticed it, but I have no clue of what it is.

Anyway, it's not ugly, but I have no clue.

- In fact, it is a synagogue.

- Oh! Yeah? Isn't a synagogue for Muslims?

- Jews.

- Jews? Oh OK! Is that why there is a star?

- Yes, that's exactly right.

Woman of around thirty years old.

- The architecture may be specific to the region, perhaps, with the stars and other features...

Yes, I have visited it. Because we studied the main religions at high school.

Although... It was the final year... So... Nearly 20 years ago!

Then, it is true that before knowing what it was, I had never seen it. To be honest, I did not even know that there was a synagogue in Châlons and most people do not.

Man of around sixty years old.

- Is it a dwelling, it is a... ?

- It is a synagogue.

- Is it a synagogue? Alright. That explains the star. So, what has this to do with, what is the link with Mudejar art?

Dominique Jarrassé, art historian, specialist in Jewish heritage

Well, this façade is what is really remarkable about this synagogue. I would say it is nearly an anthology of typical Moorish Revival features, but with a real range of decorative vocabulary, where you can pause, if you have time, to look at the details of the interlacing decoration, double-lobed leaves...

The jury is still out on how local architects rooted in regions of France, whether Besançon or Châlons, were able to embrace Orientalist architecture in the broadest sense of the term.

As regards the façade, special mention should also be made of the coping, the merlons and so on... I would say that it can nearly all be found in the history books; not the history of art, but the history of architecture or the great collections if you consider that nearly all the details would, consistently, appear in the engravings of the Alhambra.

There are six-pointed stars, the Star of David, right at the top. Of course, that clearly raises many questions, as it seems obvious today that it is a symbol of Judaism, but that was not the case in 1875. It was a motif of Jewish culture, but it also belonged to the culture in North Africa and, specifically, in Morocco; but it still did not have that value, which we could call symbolic, that it took in the 20th century due to Zionism, to the Holocaust, for different reasons. But it is still there, and it is nonetheless on the façade, and so it has a symbolic value anyway. But it is not the major symbol. The major symbol in all the synagogues of France, and even of Europe at that time, was of course the Tablets of Stone, which appear on the gable. As without the tablets and the inscription in Hebrew, this could have been a summer citadel, a type of leisure building, as was often the case in the 19th century.

Man of around thirty years old.

- It is really beautiful. I think 'Wow!' every time I pass by.

In fact, it is slightly in the oriental style, particularly from the front. I often go to Morocco, and it reminds me of buildings there, and it is true that there... no, it reminds me of Judaism, because of the cross, I cannot remember its name, the cross of David, sorry.

Georges Rouch, former Chair of the Châlons-en-Champagne Jewish Cultural Association

And one day there was... I was walking past at 6.00 p.m., there was a young man looking through the railings and who was looking at the façade with a great deal of interest. Then, I stopped and asked him, I said: 'Are you interested in the façade?', then, he nodded. And then he did not understand. I said: 'I, French, and you?', and he said: 'Chechen'. I said: 'Chechen, yes, it's fine'. Then, he said 'mosque'. And I replied: 'No, it is a synagogue'. He had seen the oriental façade. That's why. And many people are surprised that there is a synagogue with an oriental façade.

In September, in just one month, there were groups, forty or so passers-by, who went in when they saw it was open. Tours were organised, one tour after another.

François Levy, Chair of the Châlons-en-Champagne Jewish Cultural Association

There is a pressing need for this synagogue to be considered as a heritage building to avoid the buildings being desecrated or being sold off to the municipality; which has happened in other communities – or rather due to a lack of communities, in short of people –. And then, unfortunately, the buildings often quickly fell into disrepair, as nobody looked after them. So, it is essential to avoid that and we argue that registering it as a heritage building would ensure it was saved, even if the Jewish community of Châlons petered out in the future.