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In the Holy Land, a Rebuilding for the Generations

By **BENJAMIN BALINT**

Jerusalem

In this city so crowded with religious symbols, where houses of worship vie with one another to render the religious past visible, no synagogue bears more symbolic weight than the one called the Hurva, in the heart of the Jewish Quarter.

Just days ahead of its March 15 rededication ceremony, finishing touches still were being applied to the synagogue, once Jerusalem's grandest, which had remained in ruins for six decades. The rebuilt Hurva, made of the white stone that is Jerusalem's vernacular material, had already assumed its former prominence in the city's crowded skyline. Only interior details remained to be done.

Early this month, as the Israeli architect Nahum Meltzer looked on, a whorled woodwork crown covered in gold leaf was hoisted to its perch atop a two-story holy ark. The ark, which stands beneath the building's gleaming 82-foot-high dome, is a nearly exact replica of the original that stood on the spot more than 150 years earlier, encapsulating the basic principle that guided Mr. Meltzer's reconstruction: not innovation, but historical accuracy.

In a sense, however, this moment was the culmination not merely of eight years of construction, but of 300. The Hurva's story began in 1701, when a group of Polish immigrants to the Holy Land started to build a synagogue here. Two decades later, after the group had exhausted its funds and defaulted on loans, Arab creditors destroyed the building—and expelled the city's Ashkenazi (or European) Jews for good measure.

For a century, the synagogue—which came to be called the Hurva, or "ruin"—lay in shambles, a reminder of expulsion. But with the passing decades, the yearning to rebuild it hardly abated, and in the 19th century, with the statute of limitations on the original loans expired and Ashkenazi Jews permitted by Ottoman rulers once more to settle in Jerusalem, the aspirations of renewal could at last be realized. With funds from Sir Moses Montefiore, the Rothschilds and communities as far-flung as St. Petersburg, Baghdad, Cairo and India, the sultan's architect, Assad Effendi, was hired to erect a domed structure in the neo-Byzantine style much beloved of the Ottomans.

The impressive result, completed in 1864, became for the next eight decades not just the tallest Jewish landmark in Jerusalem and an architectural archetype for synagogues around the world. It also was a forum for public assemblies. Here the city's Jews held a memorial service for Queen Victoria; celebrated the coronation of King George V; thrilled to the orations of such Zionist leaders as Theodor Herzl and Zeev Jabotinsky; and, in 1942, conducted a mass prayer service for the victims of Hitler's genocide.

Yet Jews were not alone in recognizing the Hurva's symbolic significance, a fact that made the synagogue the prize of the fierce battle for the Old City during Israel's War of Independence. On the afternoon of May 28, 1948,

hours after the Old City of Jerusalem fell into Jordanian hands, and Jews once again were forced to flee, soldiers of the Arab Legion set off explosive charges and reduced the Hurva to rubble.

This time, the Jews' exile was shorter. Very soon after Israel recaptured the Old City during the Six-Day War in 1967, several architects—including Philadelphia-based Louis Kahn—envisioned an ambitious new Hurva that would serve as a national religious edifice. According to Haifa-born architect Moshe Safdie, Mr. Kahn's plan, incorporating both modernist and archaic elements, was "an inspired design, which would have been a building for the generations."

Mr. Kahn's masterpiece would remain unbuilt, undone perhaps by its own aesthetic audacity. Israeli critics of the plan, intimidated by Jerusalem's delicate religious balance, worried that a bold Hurva would compete with the Dome of the Rock and the Holy Sepulcher or overshadow the Western Wall. Instead, to commemorate the destruction of the Jewish Quarter, an austere 52-foot-high memorial arch was erected over the ruins.

But symbols of defeat cannot be expected to last long in this country. Eight years ago, the Israeli government commissioned Mr. Meltzer to build a replica of the Hurva as it stood in its 19th-century glory. (According to Nissim Arzy, director of the state-run Jewish Quarter Development Company, which oversaw the project, two-thirds of the cost of construction was donated by the Ukrainian Jewish oligarchs Vadim Rabinovitch and Igor Kolomoisky.) The design decision, which some derided as a choice of nostalgia over innovation, proved controversial. Mr. Safdie remarked that it bespoke "a lack of confidence that we can do something great; it says that we have nothing to say."

The reconstruction of this most storied of Jerusalem's synagogues may or may not be attended by a failure of imagination or by the pious illusion that the original still stands. What is clear is that the inauguration of the old-new Hurva—twice destroyed, and now twice rebuilt—represents a deep and irrepressible Israeli urge to heal and rebuild, not in order to obscure memory but to preserve it.

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