

# Judith Stolzer-Segall

## A cosmopolite between Europe and Mandatory Palestine/Israel

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*Edina Meyer-Maril*

Let us begin with a suitcase. It was discovered in 1994 in the basement of a Jewish retirement home in Munich where its owner, Judith Stolzer-Segall (May 20, 1904–December 1, 1990), spent her last years.<sup>1</sup> Among the contents were several passports from different countries, address books, various records and a typewritten curriculum vitae. These personal belongings create a mosaic of the life of a remarkable person and serve as a 20<sup>th</sup> century case study of Jewish destiny, recalling the life of a woman, architect, Jewess, émigré and cosmopolite, who is listed as an “Architect and European” on her 1941 marriage contract. Like so many Jews, she spent much of her life looking for a new *Heimat*, or home. She had Lithuanian, Palestinian and ultimately German citizenship.

A small postcard<sup>2</sup> was also found in this suitcase. It contains an image of the owner’s most significant accomplishment, the Hadera Synagogue, designed in 1935 and built between 1936 and 1940.<sup>3</sup> It is a magnificent reinforced concrete building, which, even today, is a unique structure in its surrounding region, displaying unexpected solutions for the fenestration as well as a sensitivity towards functional needs. The most surprising part is that its architect was female. (Figure 1)

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- 1 The suitcase was discovered in the Saul-Eisenberg-Seniorenheim, Munich, Germany. The documents found inside belonged to Judith Stolzer-Segall and were given to the Khan Museum in Hadera, Israel. Unless otherwise noted, all references to Judith Stolzer-Segall are taken from the documents in this collection.
  - 2 The photograph of the synagogue was made by Helene Bieberkraut (1896–1983), Tel Aviv.
  - 3 For photos of the synagogue, see: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Great\\_Synagogue\\_\(Hadera\)](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Great_Synagogue_(Hadera)), accessed on March 16, 2021.

## Stations on a long and circuitous path

For the architect, the path leading to the construction of the synagogue was long and circuitous, as she resided in different places throughout Europe before her arrival in Mandatory Palestine in 1933. At the beginning, the education and employment of her father, Joseph Segall (1874-1943), determined the route. Judith Segall was born in 1904 in Prischib, Ukraine, a Protestant and Roman Catholic German settlement founded in 1804, situated 50 km north of Melitopol.<sup>4</sup> A few months after her birth, the family moved to Berlin, where her father first studied law, eventually earning a doctoral degree in this subject from the University of Giessen in 1914.<sup>5</sup> Judith Segall went to a kindergarten in Berlin and, from 1911 until the outbreak of the First World War in 1914, was enrolled at the *Cecilien-Lyzeum* along with many other Jewish girls.

Her father, who was born in the region around Tauragė in Lithuania, had attended a German school and tried to obtain German citizenship but the war thwarted his efforts. After living in Germany for eleven years, along with other Russians, the family was expelled, and they traveled first to Sweden and then to Russia. Their next home was in Kharkov (Kharkiv), which became the capital of Ukraine after 1919, where Judith Segall attended the German *Gymnasium*.<sup>6</sup> When her father opted for a position as the director of the Jewish Public Bank in Kovno (Kaunas), the family located to Lithuania. There she went to the Hebrew *Gymnasium*<sup>7</sup> in Kovno, which she later referred to in her curriculum vitae as a humanistic *Gymnasium* to conceal her Jewish roots. She graduated with an academic high school diploma in 1924. This bilingual document, written in Hebrew and Lithuanian, shows Judith Segall's impressive breadth of knowledge and various talents. She mastered Russian, Lithuanian, German, French as well as Latin, crucial for the European humanistic tradition. Her grades in history, religion, physics and mathematics

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4 On some documents Melitopol is given as Judith Stolzer-Segall's birthplace.

5 This information was cordially conveyed by Dr. Felschow, Archive of the Justus Liebig University Giessen. Email correspondence from August 28, 2017 to the author.

6 The German *Gymnasium* (secondary academic high school) offered German as the main language of instruction.

7 The Hebrew *Gymnasium* (secondary academic high school) offered Hebrew as the main language of instruction.



*Figure 1: Synagogue in Hadera, model, 1935; photographer: Helene Bieberkraut (1896-1983). Source: Legacy of J. Stolzer-Segall, Khan-Museum, Hadera, Israel.*

were excellent, and her drawing and artistic abilities were also above average. A group photo with her teachers and her classmates reveals that her appearance was appealing too.

The next stop was Free City of Danzig (Gdańsk), because her father became the director of the local Jewish Public Bank. Although architecture was well suited to Judith Segall's abilities, technical studies were highly unusual for a woman at that time. Nonetheless she enrolled at the architecture department of the local technical university, where she studied from 1924 to 1929. Founded in 1904 as the Royal Prussian Technical University of Danzig,<sup>8</sup> one of Judith's professors, Albert Carsten (1859 Berlin–1943 Terezín), who used the name Cohn until 1899,<sup>9</sup> designed the monumental eclectic building. Classes were in German, and the curriculum followed the Prussian model.

During her studies, Judith Segall apprenticed in the office of Dr.-Ing. Abraham in 1927. He was an engineer who was involved in the planning of a new synagogue in Danzig-Langfuhr,<sup>10</sup> a project which provided her with

8 [https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Technische\\_Universität\\_Danzig](https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Technische_Universität_Danzig), accessed on March 16, 2021.

9 [https://pl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Albert\\_Carsten](https://pl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Albert_Carsten), accessed on March 16, 2021.

10 Schaefer (1928).

invaluable experience for her future career. In the summer of 1928, she took a job as a drafts person in the carpentry workshop of H. Scheffler. Summing up her activities, his letter of reference recounted her great enthusiasm for the work at hand, and that she took the opportunity to become acquainted with diverse aspects of joinery and furniture construction.

Judith Segall received her degree in 1929 after nine semesters with the final grade *ziemlich gut* (quite good). Her final examination project was a health resort, which displayed a hipped roof in a “moderately modern” style in the manner of Heinrich Tessenow (1876-1950). She subsequently worked from mid-April to mid-October 1929 for the architect Arthur Megies, with whom she later shared an office in Berlin. In his letter of recommendation, Megies noted that she quickly learned the functional requirements and financial aspects of residential design, and was versatile, as she easily worked out structural problems, in addition to construction, detailing and furniture. He praised her professional skills and engagement in his office, while acknowledging that she had decided to seek other work of her own volition.

At the end of 1929, Judith Segall went to Berlin, at the time one of the most important centers of modern architecture in Europe. The well-known Jewish architect, Leo Nachtlicht (1872-1942), hired her, but she only stayed in his office for two and a half months due to the onset of the Great Depression. Nachtlicht observed in his referral that she was extremely hard-working and competent, and while on his staff had worked out details for wood and steel constructions along with other architectural elements. Later Judith Segall found employment at the building department of the Jewish community in Berlin under the chief architect Alexander Beer (1873-1944).

Compared to her earlier places of employment, she was finally able to work for an extended period on large-scale public projects that engaged her sizeable talents and provided her with valuable training. Beer’s testimonial for the period of December 1, 1929 to September 30, 1931 reports that she developed the design and prepared details for a synagogue in Herborn and a mortuary hall in Forst, and planned a hall for sporting activities with an adjacent athletic grounds in Berlin-Grünewald. She was assigned smaller tasks too, such as the design of tombstones or the supervision of the interior painting of a synagogue in Stendal. Like her previous employers, Beer was completely satisfied with her professional skills, and complemented her artistic talent and practical knowledge.

Once again, due to a lack of commissions, Judith Segall was forced to seek other work. There was a general public building freeze in 1931, and in January 1932, she opened an office together with Arthur Megies and the engineer Max Heinrich Sinjen. Two private projects are known from this collaboration, a shopping passage and a large coffee house.

Segall and Sinjen were arrested in 1933 for political reasons. We know from an interview conducted by Myra Warhaftig with Judith Segall, which took place four years before her death, that she was a staunch communist. After her second arrest, possibly in connection with communist political activity, Arthur Megies was able to have her released from jail and brought her to Danzig. Apparently, it was Judith's father who convinced her to emigrate to Mandatory Palestine. In contrast to his daughter, he was a committed Zionist who had purchased a tract of land in Afula, the city known as the "Capital of the Valley" and planned by the architect Richard Kauffmann in 1926.

## Immigration to Mandate Palestine

Thanks to the various documents Judith Segall needed for her immigration, we know about her physical condition and some other details about her life. Her Health Identity Card stated: "structure of the body: middle robust, musculature well developed, nutritional condition good, sight: mildly short-sighted, hearing: good, lung and heart normal healthy." The Palestine Immigrant Certificate, issued in Berlin by the Jewish Agency for Palestine (*Palästina-Amt*), confirmed that she knew Hebrew, German, Russian and Lithuanian and that she was a member of Maccabi trade union. Judith Segall received her immigration certificate and left Europe from Triest on August 16, 1933, on the ship "Tel Aviv," later named the "USS Martha Washington."

Upon arriving in Mandatory Palestine, Judith Segall settled in Tel Aviv, commencing a period of residence that lasted twenty-four years. (Figure 2) In her curriculum vitae from 1968, only one event, her marriage in 1941 to the architect Dr. Eugen (Jenö) Stolzer (1886-1956), was recorded! Nonetheless, her career began auspiciously. She joined the office of the recognized architect Lotte Cohn (1893-1983),<sup>11</sup> where she won an internal competition for a

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11 Information cordially relayed by Dr. Ines Sonder, Moses Mendelssohn Zentrum, Potsdam, Germany.



*Figure 2: Judith Segall in 1940. Source: Legacy of J. Stolzer-Segall, Khan-Museum, Hadera, Israel.*

single-family house. In 1935 she was awarded the first prize in a limited competition for a housing development in Talpiot, Jerusalem, which included a restaurant, shops and community recreational areas. Although this scheme never materialized due to a lack of funds, other projects came to fruition. She entered a public competition for cooperative housing requiring 300 apartments with large garden patios in Tel Aviv (1935-36) and, of the twenty-one submissions, her scheme received the fourth prize along with a special commendation. Shortly thereafter, in 1936, Segall won a limited competition with twelve participants for the design of a neighborhood in northern Tel Aviv, which was realized.<sup>12</sup> Known as the “Kiryat Meir Neighborhood,” the quarter contains 200 freehold apartments, a kindergarten, shops, community rooms and extensive gardens, having been erected at the behest of the Jewish Public Bank. Professionals and the residents praised the layout of the apartments and the functional kitchens, and the neighborhood remains one of the most remarkable examples of public housing in the White City of Tel Aviv.

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<sup>12</sup> Judith Segal [sic!], Kirjat Meir Quarter, multi-family residential blocks in Kuppas-Am Bank, Tel Aviv, in: *Habinjam Bamisrach Hakarov* 1 (1937).

## The Great Synagogue in Hadera

The highlight of Judith Segall's professional life in Mandatory Palestine (and later the State of Israel) was undoubtedly the building of the Great Synagogue in Hadera. The competition was open to all Jewish architects in Mandatory Palestine and attracted 41 submissions. After the judging, the jury was caught off guard when the envelope containing the name of the winner of the first prize was unsealed and it was revealed that a woman made the design. Not only the rabbis but also those who were devoutly religious were confounded because there was no historical precedent for a woman architect in the history of synagogue architecture. However, they could not find any reference in the scriptures to prohibit women from designing a house of worship. Who could predict that someday women would be architects? At this time in Mandatory Palestine, women could win competitions only when they were anonymous proceedings, as in this case. Prejudice against women professionals was real and, to conceal their gender, they often used only their family name and their first initial when listing their services in the telephone directory.<sup>13</sup>

Back to the inception of the Great Synagogue in Hadera. The competition program was published on December 18, 1934, and the submission date was February 1, 1935, a short amount of time for such a large project. The construction site had an area of 6239 square meters and was the so-called *Khan*, a farmstead that had accommodated the first Jewish settlers in Hadera in 1891. A wall was needed to enclose the complex, and the forecourt required space for 4000 to 5000 people to gather in public assemblies. At this time Hadera had a population of around 3000 Jewish citizens. By 1941 their numbers had grown to 6,500 and today there are more than 90,000 inhabitants.

The synagogue's program called for a main prayer hall for 850 men, a study hall (*Beit Midrash*) for approximately 160 men and 50 women; an upper floor with a women's section containing 500 seats; and other facilities. The requirement to build a tower was unique. It was to house a water reservoir, a guard room and steps leading to the roof. In addition, it had to be at least eight meters higher than the main prayer hall. When completed, thanks to the elevated site, the tower offered a broad panoramic view of the region. The budget was limited to 8000 Palestine Pounds, and a further request was a

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13 Meyer-Maril (2019); Davidi (2017).

desire for simplicity. The choice between reinforced concrete or stone, to be faced in stucco, was left to the architect.

The jury was made up of two professionals. Dr. Ezra Rootmann (1907-1979) studied architecture in Italy and built many International Style buildings in his hometown of Hadera. Dov (Bernhard) Kuczynski (1891-1980), formerly from Berlin, was also an advocate of this type of architecture. It is therefore not surprising that the top prize winners among the 41 submissions were modernists. The protocol of the competition documents the selection process. It was completely anonymous and the envelopes with the winners' names were only opened after the final decision was reached. After the third round of judging, project no. 24, by Dipl.-Ing. Segall of Ha'Ari St. 32, Tel Aviv, won the first prize and received a sum of 80 Palestine Pounds.

The minutes of the jury's proceedings, written in Hebrew, mentioned that project no. 24 provided the best architectural solution regarding the topography and the use of the site to serve the exterior functions of a synagogue. It stated that the interior of the main prayer hall shows pleasing and elegant proportions; the quality of the lighting is satisfying; and the means of construction is good. Several details were criticized, such as the placement of the study hall, which was accessed via 20 steps and might be difficult for the elderly when they attended daily prayers, and that the delineator forgot to draw entrances to the galleries.

A comparison of the published designs of the top winners shows that Judith Segall's Hadera synagogue is a most impressive building.<sup>14</sup> The symmetry of the prayer hall and the tower intensifies the monumentality of this simple structure, especially when seen from street level. The numerous, nearly semicircular openings on the tower and walls of the building echo the form of the main entrance and the arcades. They are simultaneously functional and decorative and can be found in contemporary houses of worship like St. Kamillus Church (1928-31) in Mönchengladbach by Dominikus Böhm (1880-1955).<sup>15</sup> These openings have often been incorrectly interpreted as embrasures. In doing so, they connect the Hadera synagogue to the prominent Polish *Wehrsynagogen* (defense synagogues), like those found in Brody and other places. However, a closer look at these parabolic openings refutes this absurd statement.

14 *Habinyan Bamisrach Hakarov* (1935), 9.

15 Voigt (2005) and the photograph on page 14.



*Figure 3: Judith Stolzer-Segall and Dr. Eugen Stolzer, Jerusalem, October 1945. Source: Legacy of J. Stolzer-Segall, Khan-Museum, Hadera, Israel.*

## Marriage and partnership with Eugen Stolzer

With the money that Judith Segall earned for the synagogue, she opened an office in Tel Aviv in association with Dr. Eugen Stolzer,<sup>16</sup> with whom she had signed the contract to construct the Hadera synagogue. Stolzer, an accomplished architect, was of Hungarian origin. After studying in Munich, he moved to Berlin, becoming the partner of the famous theater architect, Oskar Kaufmann (1873-1956). In 1934, together with the architects Meir Rubin (1893-1967) and Alexander Friedman (1905-1987), Stolzer won the competition for the Yeshurun Synagogue in Jerusalem, known as one of the first modern synagogues in Mandatory Palestine and completed in 1936.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Warhaftig (1996), 180–183.

<sup>17</sup> Solomon (2015); Ormandag (ed.) (1934-35), 124. "Stolzer, Eugen, architect..., won the first prize for the plan of the new Yeshurun Synagogue, Jerusalem, also for the Hadera Synagogue, ...".

The construction of the Hadera synagogue was completed in 1940 and the building was inaugurated in the following year. In February 1940, Judith Segall received Palestinian citizenship. She had hoped to emigrate to the United States, but the apparent reason for the rejection of her July 1940 visa application was that her birthplace was in the Soviet Union and that she could not produce certificates issued by the police attesting to her character from all the places in which she had resided prior to her arrival in Mandatory Palestine.

Due to the outbreak of World War II, there was a general halt to all public construction in 1940. Together with many other Jewish architects, Judith Segall found employment as a “civilian draughtsman” (sic!) in the War Department of the Chief Engineer of Palestine. She moved to Jerusalem where she married Dr. Stolzer on August 13, 1941. They henceforth worked together in their own office. (Figure 3)

After the founding of the State of Israel in 1948, their most important project was the representative building of the *Histadrut* (trade union) in Jerusalem, erected between 1950-58, near to the border of the divided city.<sup>18</sup> The six-story building follows the curved street, which gives the imposing structure a unique form. Groups of different-sized windows rhythmically pattern the main facade. Panels made of massive, cream-toned Jerusalem limestone cover much of the structure, creating a contrast to the glazed horizontal, two-story entrance zone, which is articulated with two rows of columns. The motive of the columns appears again in the pergola, which articulates the top of the building and lends the composition a sense of lightness. Such elements and materials taken from the vocabulary of modernism create an impression of compactness. Local newspapers and professional publications praised the large complex with its different facilities, including a library, an auditorium and areas for sport.

## Return to Europe

For the Stolzer-Segall couple, the money that they earned after a long period of financial hardship enabled them to travel to Europe and enjoy the continent’s sophisticated cultural milieu, which they so sorely missed. They first stayed in Berlin where Eugen Stolzer was again able to see the theater buildings which he had built together with Oskar Kaufmann three decades earlier. He also tried to

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18 Warhaftig (1996), 183.

receive restitution payments. Their next station was Rome, where he died unexpectedly on December 22, 1958. He is buried in the Jewish cemetery of the city.

Judith Stolzer-Segall settled in Munich and also applied for restitution payments. Due to her affiliation with the *Deutscher Kulturkreis* (German Cultural Circle) and her professional work as an architect in Germany before the war, she eventually succeeded. She pursued cultural, political and intellectual interests, and her address book lists her contacts to pacifist organizations, progressive circles and Jewish groups. She was also interested in psychological and scientific issues but never again dealt with architecture. As a result of a car accident, she was declared profoundly handicapped. She spent her final years in a Jewish retirement home, largely forgotten, and died on December 1, 1990. She is buried in the Jewish Cemetery in Munich.<sup>19</sup>

Thus, the story of the suitcase ends.

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