

THE GRAND CHORAL (GREAT) SYNAGOGUE IN ST. PETERSBURG, RUSSIA

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We visited St. Petersburg in 1994, a month before the 1994 “Goodwill Games” opened on July 23. The residents of St. Petersburg were busily engaged in renovating, refurbishing, and cleaning up the city. Thousands of people were sweeping the streets, painting, etc. and the professionals were cleaning the palaces of the czars, museums, and the Kirov stadium, which would have stand-only crowds of over 70,000 in attendance.

We hired a taxi with an English-speaking driver, and we were on our way to the Great Synagogue. We arrived at this magnificent edifice, and a young man (25-30 who spoke excellent English) offered to take us on the tour. Upon entering, the shock of the disrepair was overwhelming. The inside was barely useable, and there were a few people in the synagogue who were doing menial work, but did not speak any English.

At that time there were approximately 100,000 Jews in St. Petersburg, and 200,000 in Moscow. The total Jewish population in Russia is approximately 450,000 out of a total Russian population of 148,126,000 people.

The Grand Choral Synagogue was started in 1874, but was not dedicated until 1893. Despite its exotic exterior, the interior is of Moorish style. The *aron ha-kodesh* is at the eastern wall (though, in fact, Jerusalem is located due south!) There is a women’s gallery, and the synagogue was originally designed to seat 2000 people. When the synagogue opened, the Russian authorities ordered all Jewish meetinghouses and synagogues closed, and they all had to move to the new synagogue. This necessitated partitioning of the building, considerably altering the interior arrangement and allowing a seating capacity of 1200. It has a domed central section and two lower projecting wings. (I tried to take interior pictures, but they made me check my camera). The entrance is very reminiscent of an Islamic gateway-there is an arched entrance with turrets on either side-(similar to the Great Doheny St. synagogue in Budapest)



Bob and Cele on the steps of the Choral Synagogue in St. Petersburg, Russia

In September of 1998, the leadership of St. Petersburg's Jewish community announced the beginning of work aimed at the complete restoration of the Grand Chorale Synagogue. The work was targeted towards the synagogue's Original architectural appearance, as well as the communities present needs, Including room for its educational and charitable programs. The critical restoration needs included complete replacement of the worn-out electrical system, a new heating system, major roof repair, strengthening of the structure, reconstruction of the ceramic floor tiles, and restoration of the unique stained glass windows. There was an aggressive campaign to raise the funds, and thanks to a large financial grant by Edmond and Lily Safra, the project began. (*Edmond Safra came from a long line of Jewish Bankers, who started the Trade Development Bank in Switzerland. He sold this to American Express in 1983 for \$550 million in stock, and in 1966 founded the Republic National Bank, which had been accused of "money laundering" and arms trafficking as well as being involved with the Russian Mafia. The Republic National Bank was sold to HSBC holdings in 1998. Shortly after giving This generous contribution, in December of 1999, he was a victim of a disastrous fire in his fortress-like enclave in Monaco, apparently started by two masked intruders who were believed to be Russian Mafia. It has never been proven.*)

Of Course, an article on the Choral Synagogue could not be complete without reviewing the history of the Jews in Russia!

It is thought that the earliest arrival of Jews was in Armenia and Georgia, arriving from beyond the Caucasian mountains and the shores of the Black Sea. Either they came from the Ten Lost Tribes (c.721b.c.e) or with the Babylonian Exile (585 b.c.e.). Ruins, writings, and inscriptions on tombstones testify to the existence of Jews in this period. There is also evidence of Jewish communities in Babylonia and Persia in the 7th century.

The earliest record of “Russian Jews” traces back to the ninth century from The Turkish kingdom of *Khazaria*. The Khazars were ruled by a succession of Jewish kings, as both the Khazarian royalty as well as a significant portion of the Khazarian Turkic population embraced the Jewish religion. Khazaria. This area was located between the Byzantine Empire, Bulgaria, Hungary, Persia, and the Holy Roman Empire. (*see map: attachment # 1*) The Jews had a great history of ethnic independence until the 13th century, when the Mongols invaded in 1237, and caused much suffering to the Jewish people. Later, in the early 1300’s, The Lithuanians gained control over western Russia, and they granted extensive privileges to the Jews, and communities flourished. There were repeated incidences of anti-Semitism, however (notably during the reign of *Ivan of Terrible* (1530-1584), but the community still continued to flourish.

In 1768, Catherine II, czar of Russia (Catherine the Great) established the “Pale of Settlement” (The Pale) to prevent the Jewish people from influencing Russian society and to be a buffer zone between Russia and its Western neighbors. Special permits were required of Jews to travel “beyond the Pale”. The Pale consisted of the Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova, Lithuania, and Poland. This was the beginning of the “shtetl”. Life was considered untenable with growing poverty, overcrowding, and massive expulsion.

During the reign of Nicholas I, the position of the Jews deteriorated even more. From 1827 onward, Jews were conscripted into the army for a period of not less than 25 years! In 1843, the Jews were expelled from Kiev, where they lived for centuries. The Jewish communities were required to supply children between 12 & 25 to be recruited as “Cantonists” The children were “re-educated” in the Christian religion and forced to convert. Often, children were kidnapped by so-called “khapers” to fill the necessary quota.

The Pale existed until the Reign of Alexander II when, in 1861, the oppressive measures were relaxed, and Jews once again started to participate in the intellectual and cultural life of Russia. This was, however, short-lived, and anti-Semitic agitation was expressed in the newspapers, accusing



the Jews of forming a “state within the state”. Even the old myth of the Blood Libel, outlawed by Alexander I in 1817, was again brought to life in 1878.

At the end of the century, the Jewish population was so impoverished that there were no jobs, and no hope. This was the beginning of the mass exodus of the Jews to leave Russia.

EPILOG

On May 31, 2002, President George W. Bush visited St. Petersburg’s Choral Synagogue. This was the first time a U.S. president ever visited a Russian synagogue.

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Interior of Synagogue -Ark

August 2002

Photo courtesy of Dr. Stan Mannes



Overall view of Synagogue interior

August, 2002

(photo courtesy of Dr. Stan Mannes)