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# Jewish St. Petersburg

By Sophia Kulich

St.Petersburg, the Northern Capital of Russia, is the most European-like city in the country and one of the world's largest cultural centers. The city is well-known for its unique historical monuments, unmatched as architectural ensembles. St.Petersburg's exceptionally rich past is inseparably linked with the heritage of Jewish people.

The late 18<sup>th</sup> century marks a significant turning point in Russian Jewish history, when many Jews left their small towns, known as *shtetls*, and came to St. Petersburg, the Czarist capital. As Russia's Jews became better educated, attained greater prosperity, and moved closer to the highest Russian authorities in their socioeconomic status, their influence was felt even among their brethren who still lived in the poor *shtetls* along Imperial Russia's Western border.. St. Petersburg became the center for Jewish publications, organizations, and social services that had an impact far beyond the boundaries of the city. This was an era of great flourishing in the cultural life of St. Petersburg's Jews, in Hebrew writing, in Jewish ethnography and history, in drama, art and music. Out of this community came such creative luminaries as S. Y. Ansky, Simon Dubnov, Marc Chagall, Yasha Heifetz, Osip Mandelstam, and Isaak Babel.

By the late 19<sup>th</sup>- and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, the small community of Jews, once temporarily living in St. Petersburg, had transformed into a permanent culture enriched by political and social traditions. Not only was St. Petersburg the nucleus of Jewish life in Russia, a dauntingly large country, but it had become an internationally significant center of Jewish life. St. Petersburg saw the creation of international Jewish organizations and the organization of Zionist congresses attended by the most famous Jewish political figures. Chabad-Lubavitch, an important movement in Orthodox Judaism, has many of its roots in St. Petersburg's spirited and socially-active turn-of-the-century atmosphere.

## A SAMPLING OF JEWISH SITES IN ST. PETERSBURG

The **Big Choral Synagogue** is an architectural monument of importance to all of Russia. The Synagogue complex includes the Grand Choral Synagogue, the Small Synagogue, the Wedding Chapel with the first Community museum, a kosher restaurant, a shop, and a Mikvah. Being the only synagogue in the city, the Choral Synagogue has become the center around which Jewish life in Saint-Petersburg takes place. Today the Grand Choral Synagogue is not only a magnificent monument of architecture, but also the "a pulsing heart" of the Jewish community. Many Jewish organizations are concentrated around the synagogue. It doubles as the visiting center for different people wishing to get acquainted with the Jewish tradition, religion, culture, food or simply to receive

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The exhibition at the **Russian Museum of Ethnography**, "History and Culture of the Jewish People on the Territory of Russia," traces the Jewish culture's history, from the epoch of biblical Patriarchs to the period when Jews lived within the Pale of Settlement, a term used to describe Imperial Russia's Western border region that was once populated with poor *shtetls*. At the opening ceremony, Mikhail Shvydkoy, the Director of the Federal Agency for Culture and Cinematography, stated that "the new exhibition is one of the stages of establishment of a full-scaled museum of Jewish culture."

The **Jewish Memorial Cemetery** in St.Petersburg was opened in 1875 as a Jewish section of the Preobrazhenskoe Cemetery. Its complex of buildings became the spiritual and cultural centre of the St.Petersburg Jewish community. The wooden worship house for cleansing and burial services was reconstructed in stone in 1908. Inscribed on old tombs, one can find an array of Jewish symbolism: the Star of David, Kohen`s hands, menorahs, Torah scrolls, tables of the covenant, and the tree of lament. Many of the monuments were designed by famous architects. The so-called Holy Brotherhood was in charge of burials, ensuring that all burial practices abided by special rules. The cemetery had a permanent supervisor (Shamash) and an architect. Among those buried here are railway entrepreneur and public figure S.S.Polyakov, publisher D.G. Ginzburg, sculptor M.M.Antokolsky, and historian M.S.Altman. Sailors of the Baltic Fleet, which perished during the Great Patriotic War, and citizens who died in the Siege of Leningrad are honored.

**Kolomna quarter** used to be a thriving Jewish neighborhood and was once home to Salman Rubashov. Here you will find important educational centers such as **Conservatoire**, founded by Anton Rubenstein, **State University**, the **Academy of Arts**, all of which were attended by many Jewish students and served as Jewish cultural focal points,

#### MUSIC AND CONCERTS

**Choral Concerts** are performed by Gregory Yakerson and the male choir of the Grand Choral Synagogue. The repertoire of Mr Yakerson includes many Jewish folk songs, professional vocal music written by Jewish composers, and Judaic-Baroque music.

Since 1995, a popular ensemble of **Klezmer musicians** has performed at the St. Petersburg Jewish Community Center. They perform chazzanut, folk songs, and of course, *klezmer musik*.

The music salon at the **Samoilov Family Museum**. was opened in St.Petersburg in 1994. A small concert hall revives the musical traditions of the Samoilov house, where regular musical soirees with celebrity guests were once held.

Suggested itinerary for Russia for Jewish Travelers  
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 For Cruise Passengers.  
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Big Choral Synagogue - Picture by Shmuel and Irene Karas

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