

Jewish Cemeteries and Burial Culture in Russia – the Example of St Petersburg

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In the light of the subject we are addressing it is symbolic that the existence of the St. Petersburg Jewish community dates back to the foundation of the first Jewish cemetery in the capital in 1802. It is assumed that there were no Jews in the Russian capital before, however even at the court of Peter the First there were several quite high-standing baptized Jews who were not distinguished here from Judaist Jews. At the end of the 18th century, resulting from the partition of Poland, a huge Jewish population emerged in the Russian Empire. Its movement within the country was limited, not to mention that the permanent residence of Jews in the capital was still banned. Nevertheless, the temporary residence in St. Petersburg on commercial or judicial questions could last years, from which the need to allocate the territory for burying the deceased Jews arose. Upon an agreement with the Lutheran community a small land parcel was allocated at Volkovskoye Lutheran Cemetery on April 1, 1802, where several simple Jewish tombs dating from the mid-19th century still remain.

The need to arrange an individual Jewish cemetery grew by the end of the 1860s, when the population of the St. Petersburg Jews reached one percent of the total population of the capital (6 654 people in 1869). A significant increase of the Jewish community was the result of Emperor Alexander II's liberal reforms and the permission to settle outside the pale of settlement given to merchants of the 1st guild, persons with higher education, craftsmen and retired enlisted men. The petition of the community for an allocation of land for burials coincided with the adoption of the program on the arrangement of new municipal cemeteries by the State Duma. In 1872 the Commission on arrangement of suburban cemeteries purchased on 10th verst of Nikolaev Railroad near Obukhovo Station a large parcel of land, divided by the railroad in two parts. The western part of the parcel was allocated to the Orthodox Preobrazhenskoye Cemetery (today the Cemetery in Memoriam of the Victims of January the 9th) and the eastern part was intended for the arrangement of five non-Christian sections of Preobrazhenskoye Cemetery, including the Judaic one. In 1873 the administration of the Petersburg Jewish community concluded the agreement with the City Administration on receiving the land parcel with an area of 17 664 square sages (8.04 ha). With that, the City Administration assumed an obligation to arrange the cemetery on the basis of equality for all confessions, of not interfering with the Jewish community's internal affairs and keeping just the right of general supervision. The Jewish community administration was obliged to pay a fee to the city's treasury for every grave and to incur all cemetery expenses above general minimum, namely for enclos-

ing with fence traditional for Jewish cemeteries as well as construction of traditional building for washing and funeral services for the deceased.

In 1873–74 a two-storey wooden washing and funeral house was built based on the design of I. I. Shaposhnikov (later co-author of St Petersburg Choral Synagogue design). Elements of Arabic and Saracen architecture were used in ornamental finishing of the house. Works for the buildings and for the arrangement of the cemetery were conducted using funds collected by subscription. The ceremonial opening of the Jewish cemetery was held on February 16, 1875 before a vast assembly. Burials started in March, when victims of the explosion in Okhta Powder Plant were buried here. The chief of the chemical laboratory, Lieutenant of the Guard's Artillery I. I. Yuskevich-Kraskovsky was buried by tradition at Porokhovskoye Cemetery near the plant, while 23-year-old laboratory workers Berka Burak and Moshka Frisna were the first ones to be buried at the new Jewish cemetery of St Petersburg. The remaining sepulchral stele, made in the form of tables bears inscriptions in two languages, which by this time had already become a general rule for the Jewish monuments of the capital.

All questions related to the management of the cemetery and the organisation of burials were handled by the cemetery administration under the economy office of the St Petersburg Jewish Community. 12 people were elected to the membership of the cemetery administration; besides, social and clerical rabbis took part in its work. The central person at the cemetery was the caretaker, who lived in a house near the cemetery and was directly responsible for all related matters, supervised all works and maintained the documentation. The activity of the administration, caretaker, cemetery architect, attendants and workers was governed by special rules. Members of the cemetery administration frequently emphasized their succession from religious charity brotherhoods – Hevra Quaddisha (the Holy Brotherhood). They had the same attitude towards burial as the highest, voluntary and non-mercenary type of charity, so the cemetery administration included the most reputable members of the St Petersburg community.

It needs to be noted that the Petersburg Jewish necropolis type was formed rather randomly, mostly in accordance with the customer's will and taste as well as with the artistic favours of the architects involved in the construction of memorials. Sepulchral monuments of the pre-revolutionary period are a bright reflection of the type of Jewish culture that was formed in Saint Petersburg from the second half of the 19th to the beginning of the 20th century. By this time Jews from the capital mostly departed from the traditional



Fig. 1 View of the cemetery (Photo: Pavel Platonov)



Fig. 2 Search for a national style: gravestone and burial (architect Y. G. Gevitz, 1912), in: *Yearbook of the Architects'-Artists' Society, St Petersburg 1912 (№ 7)*

Fig. 3 Grave of the sculptor M. M. Antokolsky, 1909, architect: Y. G. Gevitz, sculptor: I. Y. Ginzburg (Photo: Pavel Platonov)



pattern of national lifestyle. The most conservative traditions related to the funeral and honouring the memory of the deceased was also modified in some way. The departure from traditions was the initial division of the cemetery territory to categories reflecting the social stratification of the capital's Jewry. The openness and even the pageantry of the St Petersburg cemetery had never been peculiar to old cemeteries in cities and towns within the pale of settlement. Instead of uniform plain stone steles covered with carved symbolic bas-reliefs and inscriptions, gravestones made of granite and marble were installed (as in Jewish cemeteries in other large European cities), often borrowing the shapes from similar structures in Christian necropolises, such as sarcophagi, obelisks, broken columns, steles, portals, shrines. Eastern architectural forms were the ones mostly used for adding the national character to opulent vaults; however a wide range of styles was employed, up to Gothic. Some traditional sepulchral pictures received sculptural forms as well, for example, the tombstone in the form of the Tree of Lamentation (a tree with cut-off branches) was in widespread use. Tombstone ornaments, along with conventional flower design and traditional symbols such as Magen David, menorah, Sefer Torah, Tables of the Covenant, the Tree of Lamentation etc. were complemented with elements alien to the traditional symbols of mourning: wreaths, urns, torches. Funeral inscriptions were mostly in two languages: in Hebrew with Russian translation. Only around one tenth of all remaining pre-revolutionary tombstones bear inscriptions only in Hebrew; at the same time, there are tombstones with Russian and German inscriptions only.

Attempts to prevent the national tradition from disappearing were repeatedly made, for example, in 1882 the administration of the Jewish community reserved the right to reject monuments and inscriptions that offended religious and moral feelings. The problem became especially acute at the beginning of the 20th century, when people began to put portraits of the deceased on monuments, which was contrary to tradition. The precedent occurred in 1903 with the mounting of a bas-relief on the monument to P. Y. Levenson. Rabbi A. N. Drabkin tried to oppose this novelty and demanded the image to be removed, but several years later the portrait had almost become a standard.

In 1909 a monument was erected on the grave of the famous sculptor M. M. Antokolsky. According to the intention of the tombstone's author, the architect of the Preobrazhensky Jewish cemetery Y. G. Gevitz, the structure had to comprise modern ideas of national-style monuments: menorah, Sefer Torah, huge Magen David, tables. The set of Jewish symbols was complemented by the inscription of the artist's full name in Hebrew. However, a pure new style could not be achieved: the main works of the sculptor were carved on the tables in Russian, and in the center of the monument was the bronze portrait of dying Antokolsky, made by his apprentice I. Y. Ginzburg. Nevertheless, the ceremonial opening of this monument was blessed by the presence of a rabbi.

The demonstrative attempt to depart from the intentional opulence of first-grade memorials was the nameless sarcophagus on the grave of publisher and philanthropist D. G. Ginzburg, deceased in 1910, who was one of the central fig-

ures in St Petersburg’s Jewish community at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries.

During the first years of Soviet power, the Jewish cemetery was desecrated along with other old Petersburg necropolises. The richest and artistically most valuable monuments and shrines made by famous Petersburg architects Y. G. Gevirz, B. I. Girschowitch, A. V. Malov, M. B. Kwart, were left without systematic care and attendance and were pilaged. Lost items include the bronze bust from the grave of M. M. Antokolsky.

Monuments of the Soviet period are similar to monuments of the time at graveyards of other denominations. The national symbols are generally limited to Magen David; sometimes inscriptions are duplicated in Hebrew.

At the end of 1968 the Jewish cemetery was formally closed by the decision of Lengorispolkom, but burials are allowed even today. We cannot omit to mention new monumental tombstones which appeared several years ago in the old area near the Washing House. No Judaistic symbols are used on these monuments, and their appearance rather evidences that some representatives of the modern Russian elite belong to the Jewish nation, but not to the Jewish tradition.

We need to mention at least briefly the huge memorial significance of the Jewish cemetery, where many prominent entrepreneurs, scientists, men of art and culture are buried. During the Soviet period only the graves of sculptor Mark Matveevich Antokolsky (1843–1902), of the participant of the revolution movement Vera Klimentievna Slutskaya (1880–1917), as well as two common graves from the period of the Siege of Leningrad (1941–1944) were put under state protection as historical and cultural monuments. This narrow circle can be expanded by adding tens of worthy names. It is easy to understand that the most prominent representatives of the community were forgotten due to ideological reasons:

e. g. publisher and philanthropist Baron David Horatsievich Ginzburg (1857–1910), or railway tycoons Abram Moiseevich Varshavsky (1821–1888) and Samuil Solomonovich Polyakov (1836–1888).

Along with four graves, a cultural heritage object of regional significance is the Washing House – the outstanding architectural ensemble created in the years 1908–1912 under architect Y. G. Gevirz. The reason for the construction of this new building for washing and funeral service was the dilapidated and even critical state of the initial wooden building at the beginning of the 20th century. In 1907 году A. A. Kaplun expressed a wish to donate funds for the construction of the taro building based on the example of the one built at the Jewish cemetery in Riga. Consequently, a commission was set up in order to formulate the conditions for an architectural contest. The project of Y. G. Gevirz was considered the best out of nine projects presented, because the subject of national expressiveness was elucidated most clearly. The project was refined together with S. G. Ginger and accepted for implementation. Funds for the construction of the Washing House were collected by community members; the most significant contribution was made by D. G. Ginzburg, who had already donated a large amount of money for the construction of the large Choral Synagogue. The foundations of the new prayer house were laid in September 1908. During the year 1909 the walls were erected under the supervision of Y. G. Gevirz, who was vested with the responsibilities of the cemetery’s authorized architect, after which the clerical rabbi D. T. Katsenelenbogen inspected the structure for compliance with ritual requirements. Simplicity and chastity of forms as well as the absence of excessive decoration absolutely conformed with the building’s purpose. A contemporary wrote that the building was “built in eastern style, closely resembling the style of Arabic buildings in Asia of

Fig. 4 Building of the House of Ablution in the Jewish cemetery in St Petersburg (architect: Y. G. Gevirz, 1911), in: Yearbook of the Architects’-Artists’ Society, St Petersburg 1911 (№ 6)





Fig. 5 Restoration of the House of Ablution in the Jewish cemetery of St Petersburg, 2011 (Photo: Pavel Platonov)



Fig. 6 Restoration of the House of Ablution in the Jewish cemetery of St Petersburg, 2011 (Photo: Pavel Platonov)

Fig. 7 Winter view (Photo: Pavel Platonov)



the 14th and 15th centuries”, an evaluation that also applied to the Choral Synagogue. Thus a unity of style of the Jewish ceremonial buildings in St Petersburg was achieved.

We shall also mention that the work of Y. G. Gevritz in his position as cemetery architect was an example of an integrated approach to solving architectural and planning tasks. A master plan of the whole cemetery and its sections with numeration of occupied and empty spaces was developed; also an alphabetical list of persons buried throughout all the years of the cemetery’s existence was set up. Improvement works, such as paving of walkways, laying drain pipes, planting trees, establishing of the utility yard, connections to the telephone line, electricity, water supply, etc gained a completely new, integrated nature – everything was done concordantly and was aimed at giving a proper appearance to the capital graveyard. The issue of organising a unity of the ensemble was the primary concern of the architect. He was also engaged in the design of headstones. There his search for a national style was reflected, as he combined neoclassical and modernistic elements usual for the Petersburg architecture of that time with eastern decorative motifs and Jewish symbolic details.

The Washing House was solemnly opened on September 23, 1912, which became a major event for the Jewish community of St Petersburg. The names of the members of the construction committee and of philanthropists, whose donations became the basis for the construction fund, were put on two marble boards in the vestibule.

During the Soviet years the House was severely neglected. Just like many Orthodox, Catholic and Lutheran temples, it could not avoid being used as a warehouse. Fires occurred several times. The state of the building at the beginning of the 21st century was therefore more than sad.

The start of the revival of this unique monument was marked in summer 2008. After reaching an agreement on handing over the Washing House to the St Petersburg Jewish community for unlimited and gratuitous use, the assignment for restoration was provided by the Committee on State Control, Use and Protection of Historical and Cultural Landmarks. The restoration of the Washing House was one of the most interesting research and design works of the last years. We are particularly proud of the high standard of the project. It is remarkable that a number of formerly unknown materials were provided by G. Y. Gevritz, the son of the architect, from his personal archive, which guaranteed maximum authenticity. The integrated project developed by Eskpertproekt LLC for the restoration of the “Washing House with galleries” became the winner of the honoured contest “Made in St Petersburg” 2010.

Today, as the restoration of the facades has almost been completed, the Washing House at the St Petersburg Jewish Cemetery has regained the perfection of its initial appearance as a prayer and mourning house. However, there are no gains without losses: prior to the restoration the Washing House was one of the most romantic sites in St Petersburg, in its full charm of solitariness and mouldering. It seemed as if a building from the time of the Old Testament had miraculously survived until the present day. Now the tinge of oblivion has gone and we have regained a perfect ensemble, which is the result of searching for manifestations



Fig. 8 Jewish cemetery of St Petersburg, walkway lined by little canals (Photo: Yuri Molodkovets)

of the national Jewish line in the Petersburg architecture of the second half of the 19th and at the beginning of the 20th centuries.

Zusammenfassung

Jüdische Friedhöfe und Bestattungskultur in Russland – das Beispiel von St. Petersburg

Als Ergebnis der steigenden Zahlen jüdischer Einwohner in St. Petersburg wurde 1875 ein eigener Friedhof eröffnet. Die Sepulkralkultur der Anlage repräsentiert die ganze Breite der jüdischen Kultur in St. Petersburg in der zweiten Hälfte des 19. Jahrhunderts und im frühen 20. Jahrhundert bzw. bis zur Oktoberrevolution 1917. Eine Abkehr von der jüdischen Friedhofstradition zeichnete sich mit der Einteilung der Anlage ab, die die Sozialstruktur des Judentums der russischen Hauptstadt widerspiegelte. Dank ihrer Großzügigkeit und Prachtentfaltung unterschieden sich die Anlage und die Grabmäler deutlich von den älteren Friedhöfen in den russischen Städten und Siedlungen.

In den ersten Jahren der Sowjetzeit wurde der jüdische Friedhof ebenso wie andere traditionelle Begräbnisplätze der Stadt stark vernachlässigt oder sogar geplündert, darunter selbst die Werke bekannter Architekten und Bildhauer.

Neu entstandene Denkmäler und Grabmäler der Sowjetära bedienten sich der Formensprache, wie sie auch bei anderen Religionsgemeinschaften oder Bestattungsorten anzutreffen ist.

Als Denkmal von regionaler Bedeutung – in der Russischen Föderation gibt es eine dreistufige Denkmalthierarchie, unterschieden nach internationaler bzw. nationaler, nach regionaler und nach lokaler Bedeutung – besonders geschützt ist das historische Waschhaus nebst vier Grabstätten, ein herausragendes Ensemble in einem orientalistisch-arabischen Stil nach Entwürfen von Y. G. Gewirtz (1908–12). Die erfolgreiche Restaurierung und Wiederinbetriebnahme setzte 2008 ein, nachdem die Anlage der Jüdischen Gemeinde von St. Petersburg zur dauerhaften Nutzung zugesprochen worden war.

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