



המרכז לאמנות יהודית

THE CENTER FOR JEWISH ART

האוניברסיטה העברית בירושלים • THE HEBREW UNIVERSITY OF JERUSALEM



# Jewish Material Culture along the Volga Preliminary Expedition Report 2021



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The preliminary report on the research expedition  
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Front page image: The Choral Synagogue in Samara, arc. Z. Kleinerman, 1903–08.  
Window at the western facade. Photo: Vladimir Levin.

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## ROUTE

Between May 23 and June 9, 2021, the team of the Center for Jewish Art at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem undertook a research expedition along the Volga. Overall, the team travelled more than 4,000 km (2,500 miles) and visited thirteen cities and towns (Figs. 1,2):

- |                                |   |
|--------------------------------|---|
| 1. Tver                        | 8. Samara                                       |
| 2. Rybinsk                     | 9. Buzuluk                                      |
| 3. Yaroslavl                   | 10. Syzran                                      |
| 4. Kostroma                    | 11. Saratov                                     |
| 5. Nizhnii Novgorod            | 12. Volgograd (former Tsaritsyn and Stalingrad) |
| 6. Kazan                       | 13. Astrakhan                                   |
| 7. Ulyanovsk (former Simbirsk) |   |

Sixteen synagogues and four collections of ritual objects were documented, thirteen Jewish cemeteries surveyed.



1. Map showing the expedition route.

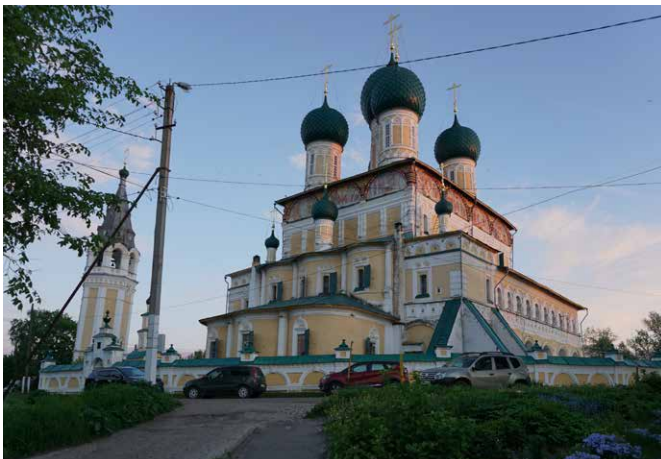


2. The Upper Volga. Photo: Ekaterina Sosensky.

## WHY THE VOLGA?

The Volga is the longest river in Europe; with headwaters located northwest of Moscow, the Volga empties into the Caspian Sea, some 3,500 km to the south. The river is located completely within the present-day Russia's borders and assumed an iconic status in the Russian national narrative. "Mother Volga" was immortalized in folktales, songs, and poetry; nineteenth-century painters discovered "authentic" Russian landscapes specifically in the river basin. Currently, the Volga and its residents are first and foremost associated with Russianness. However, only the Upper Volga could be considered an ancient Slavic land (Fig. 3). The regions of the Middle and Lower Volga were conquered in the mid-sixteenth century and were the first territories with non-Orthodox population acquired by the Muscovite state. These areas are exceptionally diverse ethnically and religiously until today (Figs. 3-6). Economically, the Volga was the principal artery of trade, and cities on its banks rose to prominence. Some of them like Nizhnii Novgorod, Volgograd, and Samara are ranked among the largest Russian cities even today.

The Volga basin had never been an area of traditional Jewish settlement. Itil, the capital of the Khazar state, was located somewhere in the lower Volga, but its archeological remains have never been identified. Even more, contemporary scholarship questions the legendary story about the conversion of the Khazar ruling class into Judaism in the eighth century.<sup>1</sup> Only in the modern period, Jewish communities emerged in the cities along the Volga as a result of the Jewish policies of Nicolas I (1825–1855) and Alexander II (1855–1881). Nicolas I drafted Jews into the Russian army and thus Jewish soldiers arrived to all the cities across the Russian empire. Alexander II permitted certain categories of Jews to live outside the Pale of Settlement, thus enabling the evolvement of the soldiers' communities into permanent ones. By the end of the nineteenth century, there were more than one thousand Jews in each major city along the Volga, while in Nizhnii Novgorod and Astrakhan there were more than two thousand Jews (Table 1). Such numbers were quite significant for the areas outside the Pale. During the Soviet era, several cities on the Volga



3. Russian Orthodox Resurrection Cathedral in Tutaevo, 1652.  
Photo: Vladimir Levin.



4. Moravian (later Lutheran) church in Sarepta, German colony near Tsaritsyn, c. 1780. Photo: Vladimir Levin.



5. Märcani Mosque in Kazan, 1766–70.  
Photo: Vladimir Levin.



6. The khurul (Kalmyk Buddhist temple) in Tsagan Aman, 1990s.  
Photo: Vladimir Levin.

1 Shaul Stampfer, "Did the Khazars Convert to Judaism?," *Jewish Social Studies* 19, no. 3 (Spring/Summer 2013): 1–72.

became major industrial centers and attracted thousands of Jews. An additional influx of the Jewish population took place during both world wars, when refugees and evacuees arrived from the western parts of the country.

Historians paid special attention to Jews beyond the Pale of Settlement, but the academic focus was concentrated on the capitals, St. Petersburg and Moscow.<sup>2</sup> The Jews on the Volga – one of the major trade arteries of the empire – hardly drew scholarly attention, even on the level of local history. Few published books deal with the largest communities<sup>3</sup> and there is hardly any attempt to conceptualize Jewish experience in the Volga region in general.<sup>4</sup> The same is true about the history of Jews on the Volga during the Soviet era. Needless to say that the material culture of the Jews in the region is not dealt with in any level. Thus, this report is, in essence, the first attempt to conceptualize the experience of Jews along the major Russian river and to look at the material remains,

which those Jews left as testimony to their history, identity, and culture.

The Center for Jewish Art launched a systematic documentation of Jewish material culture beyond the old centers of Jewish settlement with a trip to Siberia in 2015. The current field trip along the Volga is a continuation of this research. Taken in the conceptual framework of “Frontier Jews,” i.e. the Jews who settle in areas without established Jewish communities,<sup>5</sup> the research on the material culture of new Jewish collectives enables to ask questions about the transfer of traditions and culture, about adjusting the customs and habits brought from the old home to the new environment, about the emergence of new local identities and the creation of relationships with new surrounding populations, which had no previous experience of dealing with Jews. Material culture is an effective means for answering these questions.

**Table 1. General and Jewish population in the cities along Volga, 1897–1936**

	1897*			1910**			1926***			1936****		
	General	Jews	% of Jews	General	Jews	% of Jews	General	Jews	% of Jews	General	Jews	% of Jews
<b>Tver</b>	53,544	711	1.3	60,011	1,035	1.7	108,413	1,443	1.3	216,131	2,345	1.1
<b>Rybinsk</b>	25,290	359	1.4	29,485	418	1.4	55,546	1,098	1.98	139,197	No data	-
<b>Yaroslavl</b>	71,616	1,020	1.4	109,111	1,318	1.2	114,277	1,682	1.5	299,359	No data	-
<b>Kostroma</b>	41,336	542	1.3	65,274	480	.7	73,728	666	0.9	121,325	No data	-
<b>Nizhnii Novgorod</b>	90,053	2,333	2.6	98,852	3,099	3.1	643,689	9,382	1.5	643,689	14,319	2.2
<b>Kazan</b>	129,959	1,446	1.1	182,653	963	.5	179,023	4,156	2.3	398,014	5,278	1.3
<b>Ulyanovsk</b>	41,684	237	0.6	50,511	501	1.0	72,274	888	1.2	103,779	486	0.5
<b>Syzran</b>	32,383	119	0.4	41,940	160	.3	50,293	477	0.9	77,946	458	0.6
<b>Samara</b>	89,999	1,315	1.5	141,141	3,200	2.3	175,636	6,981	3.97	390,488	7,722	1.97
<b>Buzuluk</b>	14,362	130	0.9	18,721	187	1.0	24,568	No data		42,430	No data	-
<b>Saratov</b>	137,147	1,461	1.1	214,498	1,283	.6	215,276	6,717	3.1	372,002	6,417	1.7
<b>Volgograd</b>	55,186	893	1.6	99,838	1,377	1.4	148,369	1,985	1.3	445,312	3,789	0.9
<b>Astrakhan</b>	112,880	2,164	1.9	141,205	2,793	1.9	176,530	5,909	3.3	253,595	4,014	1.6

\*N. A. Troinitskii, ed., *Pervaia vseobshchaia perepis' naselenia Rossiiskoi imperii 1897 g.* (St. Petersburg: Tsentral'nyi statisticheskii komitet Ministerstva vnutrennykh del, 1903–1904), vol. 2, 40–41; vol. 14, 98–99; vol. 18, 94–95; vol. 25, 64–65; vol. 36, 56–57; vol. 38, 76–77; vol. 39, 60–61; vol. 43, 84–85; vol. 50, 78–79

\*\* *Goroda Rossii v 1910 godu* (St. Petersburg: Tsentral'nyi statisticheskii komitet Ministerstva vnutrennykh del, 1914), 216–24, 362, 388–89, 533, 562–63, 705, 716–17.

\*\*\* Demoskop Weekly, [http://www.demoscope.ru/weekly/ssp/rus\\_nac\\_26.php?reg=1](http://www.demoscope.ru/weekly/ssp/rus_nac_26.php?reg=1)

\*\*\*\* Demoskop Weekly, [http://www.demoscope.ru/weekly/ssp/rus\\_nac\\_39\\_ra.php?reg=0](http://www.demoscope.ru/weekly/ssp/rus_nac_39_ra.php?reg=0)

- Benjamin Nathans, *Beyond the Pale: The Jewish Encounter with Late Imperial Russia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002); Yvonne Kleinmann, *Neue Orte – neue Menschen: Jüdische Lebensformen in St. Petersburg und Moskau im 19. Jahrhundert* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2006).
- E. Burlina, *Evrei v Samare. 100 let* (Samara: Terem, 1992); B.M. Pudalov, *Evrei v Nizhnem Novgorode: XIX – nachalo XX veka* (Nizhnii Novgorod: Nizhegorodskii gumanitarnyi tsentr, 1998); Marina Mogil'ner and Ilia Gerasimov, “Evreiskaia obshchina Kazani,” in *Po evreiskoi Rossii*, 2nd ed. (Moscow: Mosty kul'tury, 2006), 154–65; Stiv Levin and Vladimir Khasin, *Evreiskii Saratov: stranitsy istorii* (Saratov: Proekt “Lo tishkakh,” 2012); V.N. Semenov, *Pod sen'u Saratovskoi sinagogi* (Saratov: Novyi veter, 2012).
- We know only one article devoted to the Jews of the Volga region in general, L. Rozenberg, “Evreiskoe naselenie Povolzh'ia v seredine XIX – nachale XX veka,” *Vestnik Evreiskogo universiteta v Moskve*, no. 3(7) (1994): 39–48.
- On the notion of Frontier Jews see Vladimir Levin, “Smolenshchina: granitsy i pogranič'ie,” in *Evrei pogranič'ia: Smolenshchina*, ed. Svetlana Amosova et al. (Moscow: Sefer, 2018), 17–30.

## JEWS ALONG THE VOLGA

Adventurous Jews seeking subsistence or new markets arrived to the Volga only in the early nineteenth century, soon after the partitions of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, when Russia annexed territories with a considerable Jewish population. This Jewish presence in the Volga basin, though, was illegal since the mobility of Jews in the Russian Empire was restricted to the Pale of Settlement: the western regions of the country annexed from the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and the Ottoman Empire in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.<sup>6</sup>

Permanent settlement of Jews along the Volga is first and foremost connected with military draft. From 1827, Jews, males reaching maturity as well as minors, became subject to conscription. Adult soldiers serving for 25 years were assigned to many garrisons across the empire and in many cities organized the first synagogues outside the Pale. Underage Jewish recruits were enrolled in preparatory training at the so-called *cantonist* schools, where they stayed until the age of 18, at which time they began their 25-year long military service. Some of the schools were located in cities along the Volga: Astrakhan, Kazan, Saratov, Ulyanovsk, and Yaroslavl. For example, in 1842, there were 1,868 Jewish *cantonists* in Kazan, 365 in Saratov, and 123 in Simbirsk.<sup>7</sup> Among other goals, the schools sought to convert Jewish minors into the Russian Orthodox Christianity. Some did accept baptism; those who remained faithful to Judaism were allowed to practice religious rituals during their military service. After retirement, former Jewish soldiers often stayed in the cities where they had served. In the case of the Volga, these soldiers almost exclusively formed local Jewish communities.

The policy of selective integration of Jews during the reign of Alexander II which granted certain categories of Jews the right to live beyond the Pale of Settlement,<sup>8</sup> did affect to a lesser extent the composition of the Jewish population in the Volga region. By the 1880s, Jewish soldiers still constituted the overwhelming majority of the communities, while first-guild merchants, university graduates, and qualified artisans were in minority.

Even at the end of the nineteenth century, the disproportion between Jewish men and women, which

may point to a large number of soldiers, was still very evident in Yaroslavl, Kazan, Simbirsk, Saratov, and Volgograd (Table 2).<sup>9</sup> Retired Jewish soldiers also developed a strong group identity which found concrete expressions towards friends and foes. Jewish soldiers in Nizhnii Novgorod, for instance, despised “non-soldiers” and scornfully called them “free kikes” [вольные жидки].<sup>10</sup>

By the end of the nineteenth century all major Volga towns had Jewish population; the largest groups of more than 2,000 Jews were located in Nizhnii Novgorod and Astrakhan, significant communities of more than a thousand lived in Kazan, Samara, Saratov, and Yaroslavl. By 1910, Nizhnii Novgorod and Samara numbered over three thousand Jews, Astrakhan approached this figure, and Tver, Yaroslavl, Kazan, Saratov, and Tsaritsyn had around 1,000 Jews (Table 2). Synagogues, Jewish cemeteries, and ritual slaughterers existed in all cities, crown rabbis were present and Jewish schools were established in many of them.

**Table 2. Proportion of Jewish man and women in the cities along Volga, 1897**

	Jews, total	Men	% of men	Women	% of women
<b>Yaroslavl</b>	1,020	657	64.4	363	35.6
<b>Kazan</b>	1,446	887	61.3	559	38.7
<b>Ulyanovsk</b>	237	153	64.6	84	35.4
<b>Saratov</b>	1,461	888	60.8	573	39.2
<b>Tsaritsyn (Volgograd)</b>	893	512	57.3	381	42.7

Notwithstanding the small percentage of Jews in the general population, which did not exceed 3%, the Volga region has a tradition of anti-Jewish violence. The most infamous among anti-Jewish excesses is the so-called Saratov blood libel of 1852, when several Jewish soldiers were accused of murdering two Christian boys. The case was considered until 1860, when two Jews and one baptized Jew were sentenced for hard labor and two Christians were punished as well.<sup>11</sup> In 1884, a bloody pogrom leaving ten Jews dead took place in Nizhnii Novgorod – it was the last pogrom in the wave of anti-

6 In 1804–1835, Astrakhan province was considered to be part of the Pale, opened for Jewish agricultural settlement. It seems that almost no Jews used this dubious possibility.

7 Yohanan Petrovsky-Shtern, *Evrei v Russkoi armii: 1827–1914* (Moskva: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2003), 129.

8 On selective integration see Nathans, *Beyond the Pale*, 45–82.

9 An additional reason to the disproportion could be migration, often illegal, from the Pale of Settlement. As Shaul Stampfer has shown, men were more involved in the migration for long distances than women, see Shaul Stampfer, “Patterns of Internal Jewish Migration in the Russian Empire,” in *Jews and Jewish Life in Russia and the Soviet Union*, ed. Yaacov Ro'i (Ilford: Frank Cass, 1995), 38.

10 B.Z., “N.-Novgorod,” *Russkii evrei*, no. 39 (September 24, 1880): 1535.

11 Andrew C. Reed, “The Saratov Case as a Critical Juncture in Ritual Murder History,” in *Ritual Murder in Russia, Eastern Europe, and Beyond: New Histories of an Old Accusation*, ed. Eugene M. Avrutin, Jonathan Dekel-Chen, and Robert Weinberg (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2017), 73–94.

Jewish violence, which followed the assassination of Alexander II in 1881.<sup>12</sup> A “mobilization pogrom” during the Russian-Japanese war happened in Samara in 1904<sup>13</sup> and the First Russian Revolution of 1905 brought in its wake bloody pogroms in Saratov, Kazan, Kostroma, Nizhnii Novgorod, and Yaroslavl.

The First World War brought a wave of refugees from the western provinces of the empire to the Volga basin and in major cities their number accounted for 20 percent of the town residents. Jews arriving to the Volga either fled the advancing German units or were deported by the Russian military command. These Jewish refugees at least doubled the urban Jewish population: c. 6,000 Jewish refugees were registered in Saratov province in 1917 and c. 4,400 Jews in Samara province.<sup>14</sup> The refugees suffered during the Russian Civil War of 1918–1920, which was fought inter alia in the Volga region, however, many of them remained in the region. The census of 1926 showed a disproportional growth of the Jewish population in many cities (see Table 1).

During the Soviet era, Jewish life along the Volga changed significantly. The prohibition of private trade in the late 1920s made the majority of Jews the employees of the state; Stalin’s industrialization in the 1930s created many large enterprises, which began to dominate the life of cities and towns. The evacuation of factories and people to the region during WWII also affected the economic infrastructure of the area and the number of Jews along the Volga.

The aggressive dissemination of the Soviet *Weltanschauung* the persecution of all other ideologies, as well as the possibilities opened for Jews in the new Socialist society, intensified the processes of acculturation and assimilation. The total prohibition of non-Communist political and cultural activities brought the Soviet-born Jews to the detachment from Jewish language and culture. The closure of all but two synagogues (Samara and Astrakhan<sup>15</sup>) in the region in the 1930s eliminated the only public place where the contact between the old customs and new generations of Jews could take place.

Nonetheless, some groups of Jews in the Volga continued their attachment to Judaism and Jewish culture. In all cities, after the closure of synagogues in the 1930s, illegal *minyanim* were established. Some, like in Tver and Saratov, were able to register as officially recognized synagogues in the late 1940s, when the state attitude toward religions became more relaxed.<sup>16</sup> In Ulyanovsk and Stalingrad such attempts in legalization failed,<sup>17</sup> while in Yaroslavl and Kazan, the communities were legalized in 1945 but closed again in 1953.<sup>18</sup> The tombstones from the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s with Hebrew inscriptions in all local cemeteries attests to the existence of Jews, who were interested in a Hebrew epitaph, as well as to the presence of artisans able to compose and carve them. An outstanding example of unofficial Jewish life could be found in Nizhnii Novgorod (then Gorky), where several *minyanim*<sup>19</sup> as well as the *Hevra Kadisha* functioned during the post-war period. Their popularity could be assessed through the large number of tombstones bearing traditional Jewish symbols and epitaphs even in the 1960s and 1970s.

The revival of Jewish activities in the period of Perestroika and in post-Soviet Russia is well noticed in the region. All but one of the cities we visited have active Jewish religious communities and rabbis belonging either to the non-Hasidic Congress of the Jewish Religious Organizations and Associations in Russia (KEROOR), or to the Chabad-dominated Federation of Jewish Communities of Russia (FEOR). In some cities, like Samara and Saratov, two competing communities exist, one under the guidance of a Chabad rabbi and the other under a rabbi of the Litvak current in Judaism. Moreover, even small communities of Progressive Judaism exist in several large cities.

12 John Doyle Klier, *Russians, Jews, and the Pogroms of 1881–1882* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 84.

13 Shlomo Lambroza, “The Pogroms of 1903–1905,” in *Pogroms: Anti-Jewish Violence in Modern Jewish History*, ed. John Doyle Klier and Shlomo Lambroza (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 216.

14 E.K. Maksimov, V.P. Totfalushin, *Saratovskoe Povolzh’e v gody Pervoi mirovoi voiny* (Saratov: Nauchnaia kniga, 2007), 46; E.Yu. Semenova, “Vzaimodeistvie gorozhan i bezhentsev na territorii tylovogo goroda v gody Pervoi mirovoi voiny (po materialam Povolzh’ia),” *Izvestiia Samarskogo nauchnogo tsentra RAN*, no. 3(2) (2014): 439. For example, 3,347 Jewish refugees were registered in the city of Samara in 1916 and 2,628 in the city of Astrakhan, see K.V. Frolova, “Bezhentsy Pervoi mirovoi voiny v Samarskoi gubernii (1914 – nachalo 1920-kh gg),” *XX vek i Rossiia: obshchestvo, reformy, revoliutsii* 5 (2017): 77; A.N. Alieva, “Materialy Astrakhanskogo evreiskogo obshchestva pomoshchi zhertvam voiny v sobraniakh Astrakhanskogo muzeia-zapovednika i Astrakhanskoi oblastnoi nauchnoi biblioteki imeni N.K. Krupskoi,” in *Vtorye Repinskie chteniia: sbornik materialov* (Astrakhan: Astrakhanskaia oblastnaia nauchnaia biblioteka imeni N.K. Krupskoi, 2014), 26.

15 According to the data gathered by Mordechai Altshuler, the synagogue in Astrakhan was closed in 1937 and reopened in 1945, while the community in Samara was registered in July 1945 (Mordechai Altshuler, *Yahadut ba-makhbesh ha-sovyeti: bein dat le-zehut yehudit bi-verit ha-moatsot, 1941–1964* (Jerusalem: Zalman Shazar Center, 2008), 400–401, 410.).

However, this would prevent the preservation of some ritual objects in those synagogues.

16 *Ibid.*, 408, 411.

17 *Ibid.*, 399, 407.

18 *Ibid.*, 404.

19 *Ibid.*, 402.



## SYNAGOGUES

First Jewish prayer houses in the Volga cities – like in almost every city beyond the Pale of Settlement, except Siberia – appeared in military barracks. There are no known depictions or detailed descriptions of “military” prayer rooms. However, it is clear that they were usually rooms, designated by commanders to enable the performance of basic Mosaic rituals as they were understood from the Christian point of view.<sup>20</sup> The first “military” prayer rooms in the region were mentioned in Astrakhan and Saratov in 1844 and 1845.<sup>21</sup>

The retirement of the first wave of Jewish soldiers in the 1860s brought the establishment of “civil” prayer houses. For example, there were four *minyanim* of former soldiers in Nizhnii Novgorod by 1871; ten years later, in 1881, the community started to erect a synagogue.<sup>22</sup> Other communities are much less documented and it is impossible to discern the change from *minyanim* in rented houses to permanent buildings. Moreover, communities often had difficulties to purchase or construct permanent buildings for their synagogues. Usually, the core of the community consisted of former soldiers: numerous, poor, and religiously conservative; they despised the “free” Jews, who arrived from the Pale of Settlement as a result of Alexander II’s policy of selective integration. In their turn, the “free” Jews were few, but comparatively well-off, educated, and high-browed; they saw themselves as the intelligentsia and in many cases were interested in “updating” the religious service in the “modern spirit.”<sup>23</sup> In some cities, like in Kazan, Saratov or Astrakhan, the Jewish population was also divided between the Litvaks and Hasidim. This very typical balance of power in the Volga cities often stipulated community unification for the sake of decent premises for a synagogue.

For a praying space, some communities succeeded to break down silos and managed to build synagogues, as in Astrakhan (1866 and 1879), Nizhnii Novgorod (1881, Fig. 7), Rybinsk (1872), and Samara (1880 and 1887, Fig. 8). In some cases, non-local Jews lent a hand to a community with the construction. In 1878, the community of Simbirsk managed to build the synagogue with a major donation of Friedland, a St. Petersburg merchant who was subcontracted to erect a gymnasium in the town.<sup>24</sup> In 1881, another, or the same Friedland bought a plot for the Yaroslavl community and took



7. Synagogue in Nizhnii Novgorod (1881–84), view from the north.  
Photo: Vladimir Levin.



8. Old Synagogue in Samara (1880), view from the northeast.  
Photo: Vladimir Levin.

<sup>20</sup> On the perception of Judaism through the eyes of Christian officials, see Vladimir Levin, “Civil Law and Jewish Halakhah: Problems of Coexistence in the Late Russian Empire,” in *Religion in the Mirror of Law: Eastern European Perspectives from the Early Modern Period till 1939*, ed. Yvonne Kleinmann, Stephan Stach, and Tracie Wilson (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 2016), 213–39.

<sup>21</sup> Yulii Gessen, “Astrakhan,” *Evreiskaia entsiklopediia*, vol. 3 (St. Petersburg: Brokgauz i Efron, 1909), 360–61; Steve Levin, “Iz istorii saratovskikh sinagog,” in *Evreiskii Saratov: stranitsy istorii* (Saratov, 2012), 114.

<sup>22</sup> Pudalov, *Evrei v Nizhnem Novgorode*, 33, 42–47.

<sup>23</sup> As an example, see a very illustrative description of the community life in Kazan in Serven, “Kazan,” *Russkii evrei*, no. 13 (March 26, 1880): 496; L. G-n, “Kazan,” *Russkii evrei*, no. 42 (October 15, 1880): 1658–1658; L. G-n, “Kazan,” *Russkii evrei*, no. 43 (October 22, 1880): 1697–98.

<sup>24</sup> Yakov Rashkin, “Simbirsk,” *Ha-Tsifah*, no. 146 (October 6/18, 1886); 3.

upon himself some expenses for the construction.<sup>25</sup> Under these circumstances, the communities united and managed to collect funds missing for the project.

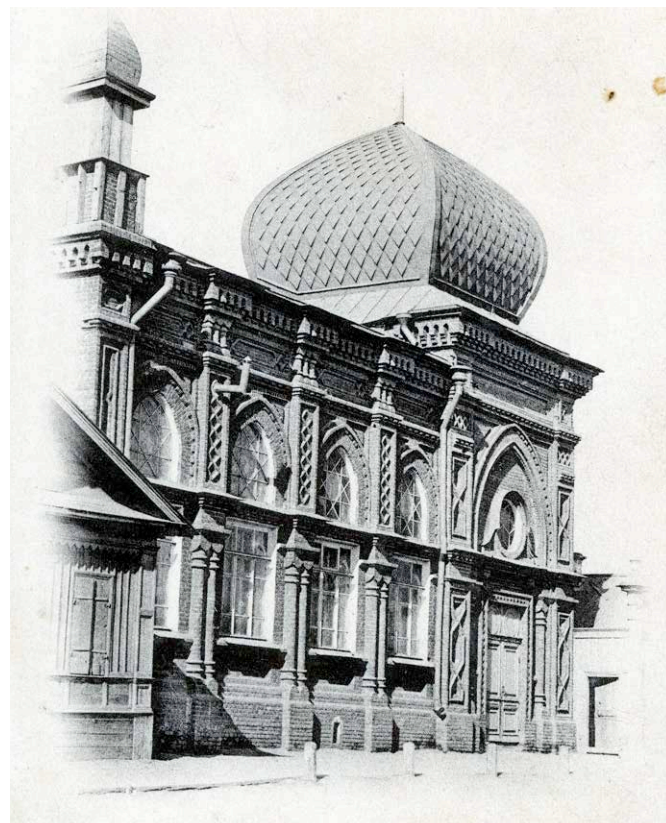
The construction of synagogues in the Russian Empire was regulated by the state since the 1835 Jewish Statute.<sup>26</sup> The case of Jewish communities outside the Pale of Settlement was integrated into the legal framework only in 1868, when the authority to make decisions on new synagogues was assigned to the Minister of the Interior. Such cases as Rybinsk, Simbirsk or Yaroslavl testify that province authorities sometimes “overlooked” the construction. In Rybinsk, the synagogue existed “half-legally” since 1872 with the permission of the governor, while the orderly permission from the ministry was obtained only in 1881.<sup>27</sup> For other communities, the consequences were more dramatic. In Yaroslavl, the community did not succeed to “legalize” the synagogue built in 1881 for decades, and it functioned as “a temporary prayer house”, i.e. was open for holidays only. In Simbirsk, the synagogue built in 1878 functioned for six years and was shut down by the authorities.<sup>28</sup>

Architecturally, the synagogues built in the 1870 and 1880s followed the traditions widespread in the Pale of Settlement: a lofty prayer hall with large windows on the east, while the western part featured small windows and was divided into two floors – a vestibule on the ground floor and a women’s section above it (the Ashkenaz [Fig. 9] and Sfarad synagogues in Astrakhan, the old synagogue in Samara, a wooden synagogue in Simbirsk<sup>29</sup>). An attempt to find a distinctive architectural shape for a synagogue was made only in Nizhnii Novgorod, where, due to the all-Russian annual fairs, Jews were relatively affluent. Built by the local architect I.F. Neiman in 1881–1884, the synagogue of Nizhnii reflects the situation when the traditional architectural forms common in the Pale of Settlement were already rejected, but no pattern for synagogues outside the Pale has yet emerged (Figs. 7).

A new pattern for a synagogue architecture appeared in the Russian Empire only after the inauguration of the Choral Synagogue in St. Petersburg in 1893 and it included the existence of a dome and/or the extensive use of Neo-Moorish decorative idioms. The most numerous and prosperous communities along the Volga erected their new synagogues basing themselves



9. Ashkenaz Synagogue in Astrakhan (1866?), northern façade. Photo before 1996. After: MKRU Astrakhan, <https://ast.mk.ru/social/2021/03/07/v-astrakhani-khotyat-isklyuchit-iz-reestra-9-pamyatnikov-arkhitektury-kotorykh-davno-uzhe-net.html>.



10. Synagogue in Saratov built in 1897, southern façade. Postcard, before 1905. The Regional Museum of Local History in Saratov, CMK 7869/2.



11. Synagogue in Saratov built in 1907, view from the southwest. Postcard, 1910s. The Regional Museum of Local History in Saratov, CMK 7821.

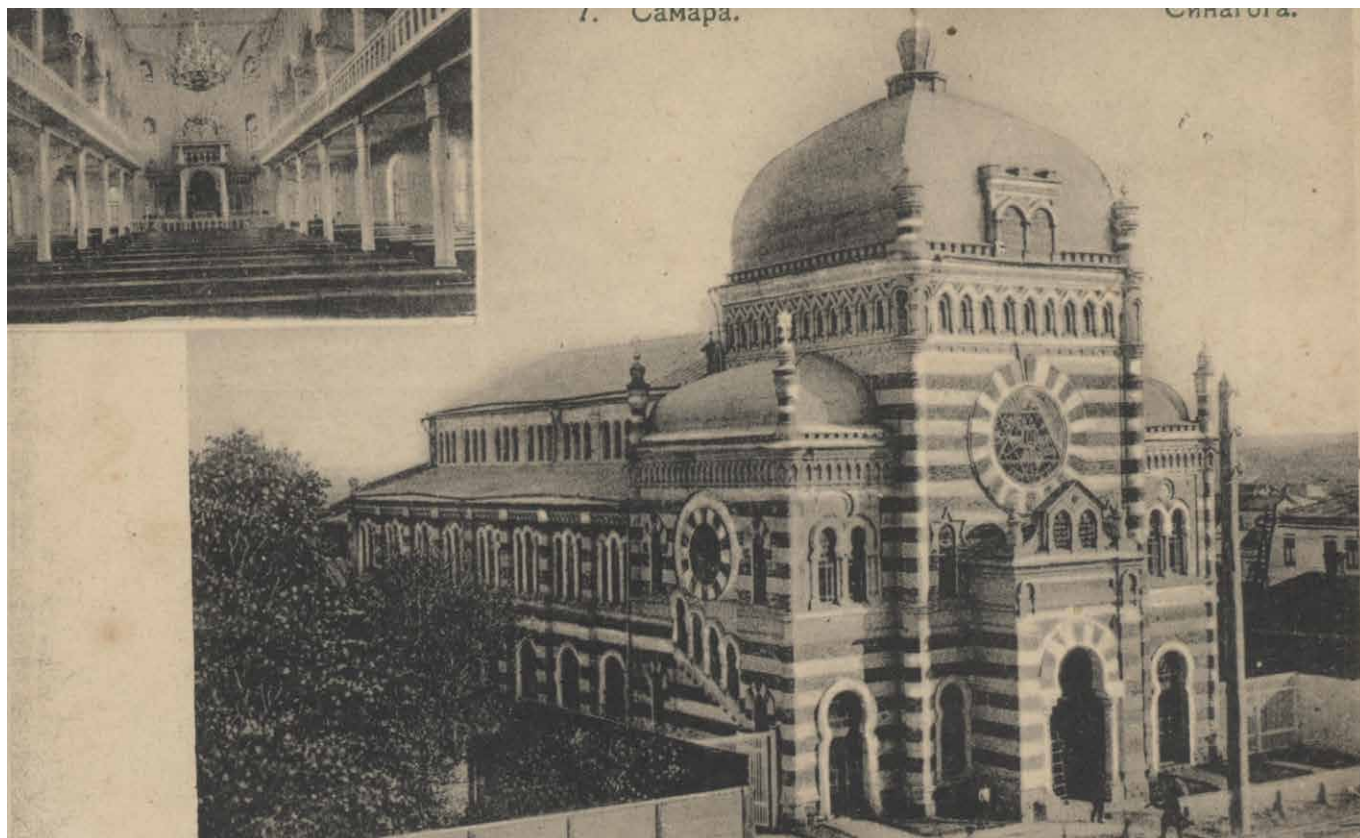
25 “G.Ph.M.L. pishet nam iz Yaroslavlja,” *Rassvet*, no. 26 (June 26, 1881): 1023.

26 On the provisions of the Jewish Statute concerning synagogues, see Vladimir Levin, “The Legal History of Synagogues of Volhynia,” in *Synagogues in Ukraine: Volhynia*, by Sergey Kravtsov and Vladimir Levin (Jerusalem: Zalman Shazar Center and the Center for Jewish Art, 2017), 26–28.

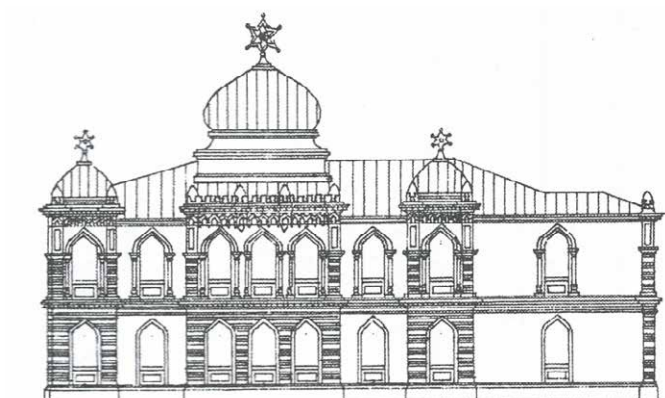
27 Emes, “Iz Rybinska,” *Russkii evrei*, no. 36 (September 3, 1881): 1418.

28 I.E. Sivoplias, “Kak Abramovich stroil momel’niu: o evreiskom obshchestve v Simbirске,” *Monomakh* 2 (2019): 62–64.

29 The synagogue is known from a verbal description, see Sivoplias, “Kak Abramovich stroil momel’niu.”



12. Choral synagogue in Samara (1903–08), view from the northwest and the interior. Postcard, 1910s. Gross Family Collection, Tel Aviv.



13. Choral synagogue in Volgograd (1908–11), design for the southern façade. After: Roman Shkoda, “Tsaritsynskaia sinagoga,” *Tsaritsyn.RF*, 2013, <http://царицын.рф/article/articlestsaritsyn/154-sinagoga.html>.



14. Samara’s Choral Synagogue, depicted on an interior wall of the Kusaev house (1914) in Samarkand, Uzbekistan. Photo: Mavlyuda Yusupova, 2005.

on the St. Petersburg model: the choral synagogues in Saratov (1897, drastically reshaped in 1907, Figs. 10, 11), Samara (1903–1908, Fig. 12), and Tsaritsyn (1911, Fig. 13) had domes and were decorated with the Neo-Moorish vocabulary on the exterior or in the interior. The prominence of the synagogue of Nizhnii in the cityscape was minor, since it is situated in the city center but at a side street, and its two domes are hardly seen from afar (Fig. 7). The synagogues of Saratov, Samara, and Tsaritsyn, in contrast, were quite prominent in the urban fabric. The most known of them was the synagogue of Samara, which was widely publicized through numerous

postcards and its depiction even appeared on the wall of a rich Jewish house in Samarkand, documented by the Center for Jewish Art in 2005 (Fig. 14).<sup>30</sup>

Smaller communities pursued the traditional synagogue pattern even in the first two decades of the twentieth century. They were usually built in the “brick style” — a way of building fashionably in the Russian province, where brick façades are not plastered and all exterior decorations are made of exposed brickwork (Tver, Rybinsk, Syzran, Figs. 15–17).<sup>31</sup> Attention should be drawn to the fact that three synagogues in the Volga region were

30 The Bezalel Narkiss Index of Jewish Art, <https://cja.huji.ac.il/browser.php?mode=set&id=15554>.

31 On the brick style see Sergey Kravtsov, “Synagogue Architecture in Lithuania,” in *Synagogues of Lithuania. A Catalogue*, ed. Aliza Cohen-Mushlin et al., vol. 1 (Vilnius: Vilnius Academy of Arts Press, 2010), 63; Sergey Kravtsov, “Synagogue Architecture of Volhynia,” in *Synagogues in Ukraine: Volhynia*, by Sergey Kravtsov and Vladimir Levin (Jerusalem: Zalman Shazar Center and the Center for Jewish Art, 2017), 117.



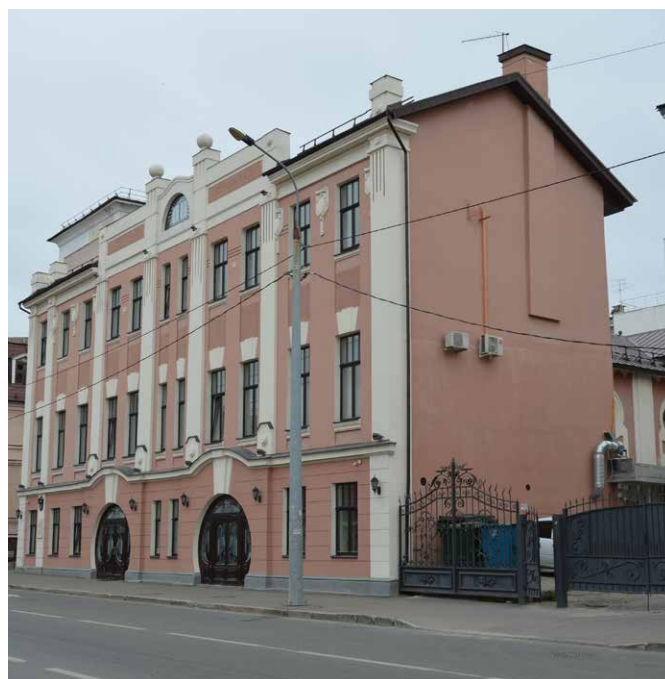
15. Synagogue in Tver (1909–12), view from the northeast.  
Photo: Vladimir Levin.



16. Synagogue in Rybinsk (1916), northern façade.  
Photo: Vladimir Levin.



17. Synagogue in Syzran (1910?), view from the southwest.  
Photo: Vladimir Levin.



18. Synagogue in Kazan (1915), view from the west.  
Photo: Anna Berezin.



19. Synagogue in Kostroma (1907), view from the north.  
Photo: Anna Berezin.

constructed in 1915 and 1916, during the First World War (Yaroslavl, Rybinsk, Kazan, Fig. 18). This may point to the affluence of local Jews, which grew during the last pre-war decade; and moreover, that during the war it was possible to conduct building activities in the region.

Among the synagogues documented during the expedition, the synagogue of Kostroma (1907) draws a particular attention because of its timber building material (Fig. 19). Its mass and layout are very similar to wooden synagogues constructed in the Pale of Settlement in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, except for the entrances for women and men placed next to each other, and the staircase leading to the upper-floor women's section built as an integral part of the building and not attached on the exterior.<sup>32</sup> The second wooden building documented during the field trip was a house

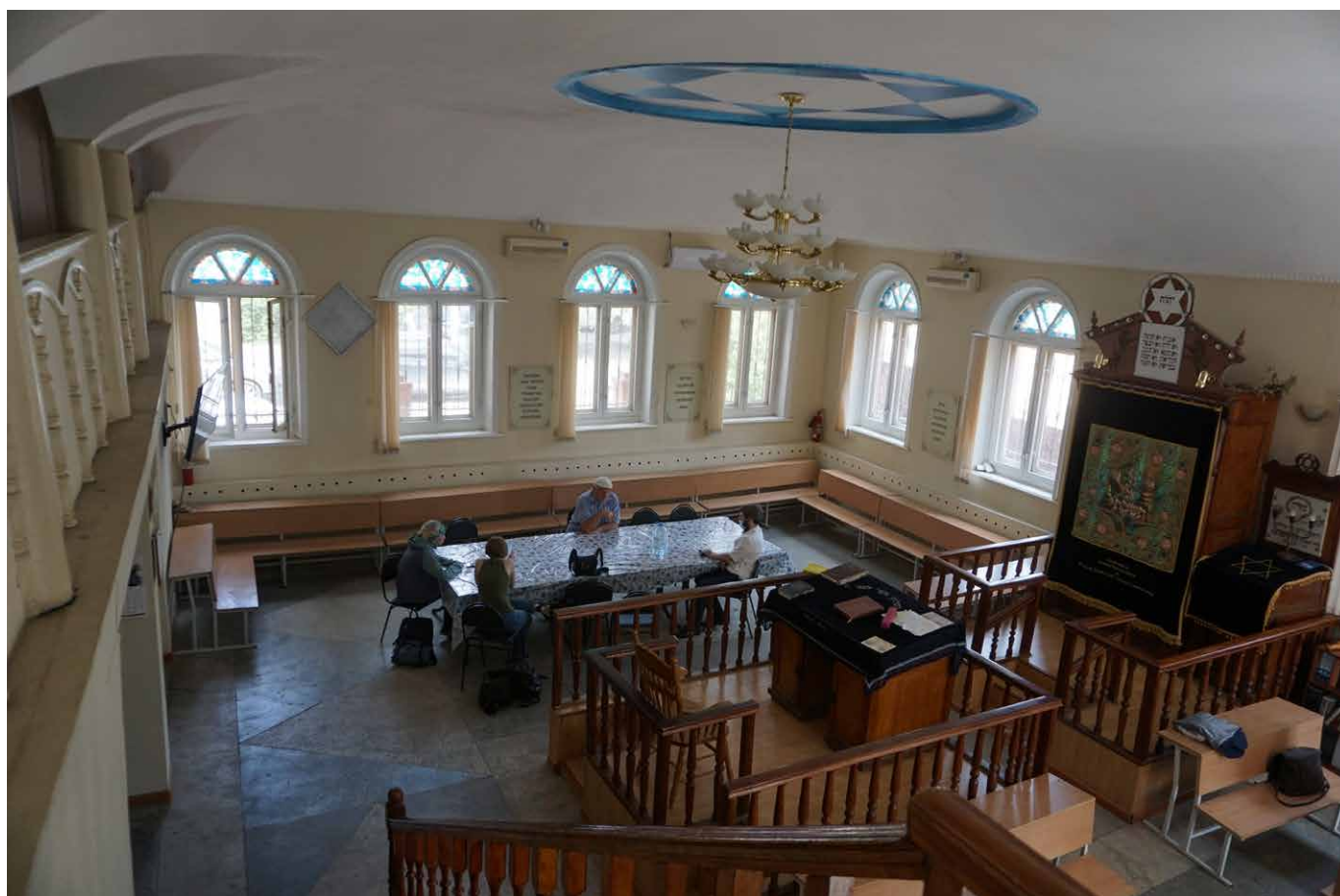
<sup>32</sup> On women's sections see Vladimir Levin, "The Architecture of Gender: Women in the Eastern European Synagogue," *Jewish History*, forthcoming.

in Buzuluk. To all appearances, it was not specially constructed for the purpose of public worship, rather it was a private Jewish house where a prayer room was situated. Its major distinction from other wooden dwelling houses in this town is the extensive use of the Stars of David on the façades (Fig. 20).

The collected material does not allow a detailed discussion of the interior arrangements of the Volga synagogues. Only two synagogues among those that were built in the nineteenth century have preserved interiors, the Sfard Synagogue in Astrakhan and the older synagogue in Samara; both follow the traditional scheme, with the *bimah* in the center and the Torah ark at the eastern wall (Fig. 21). A photograph capturing a prayer hall in Kazan after the 1905 pogrom also shows



20. Jewish house in Buzuluk, western façade. Photo: Vladimir Levin.



21. Sfard Synagogue in Astrakhan (c. 1900), interior view towards the north. Photo: Vladimir Levin.

the central *bimah* (Fig. 22). However, the synagogue built in Kazan in 1915 already had the “choral mode” of worship, with the *bimah* situated in front of the Torah ark (Fig. 23). The Choral Synagogue in Samara (Fig. 12), the 1907 synagogue in Saratov (Fig. 24), and the Choral Synagogue in Tsaritsyn (Fig. 25) were also built according to the “choral mode.” In other words, communities in the major cities strived to the modernized prayer service, which was “ordered” and solemn in comparison to traditional synagogues. Women’s sections in the Sfard Synagogue in Astrakhan and the wooden synagogue in

Kostroma were situated at the upper floor above the vestibule, while the synagogues in Tver, Rybinsk, Nizhnii Novgorod, Kazan, Samara, Syzran, Saratov, the choral synagogue of Tsaritsyn, as well as the wooden synagogue in Simbirsk,<sup>33</sup> had galleries for women inside the prayer hall – also a modern feature, which arrived to Russia only in the mid-nineteenth century.<sup>34</sup>

Besides the Sfard synagogue in Astrakhan and the older synagogue in Samara, all other synagogues were closed by the Soviet authorities in the 1930s and converted

<sup>33</sup> The synagogue is known from a verbal description, see Sivoplias, “Kak Abramovich stroil momel’niu.”

<sup>34</sup> Levin, “The Architecture of Gender.”



22. Prayer hall at Bolshaia Prolomnaia St. in Kazan damaged during the 1905 pogrom. Photo 1905.  
The National Museum of the Republic of Tatarstan, HMPT KIIIu-116336.

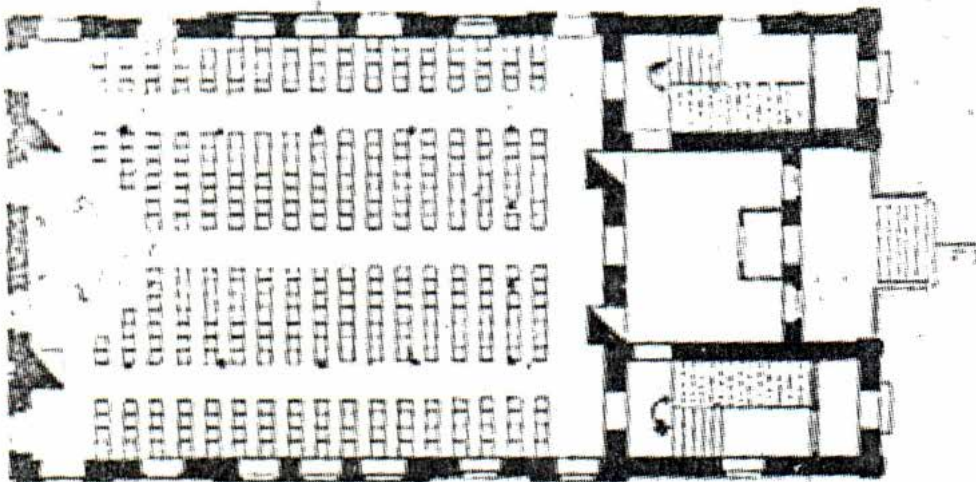


23. Synagogue in Kazan (1915), interior view towards the northeast. Photo c. 1930.  
The National Museum of the Republic of Tatarstan, HMPT KII-35972/248.



for secular purposes. However, religious life in the Volga region continued legally or illegally. In some cities, the contemporary communities are the direct continuation of the *minyanim* and synagogues from the Soviet era, while in the others the illegal *minyanim* ceased to exist in the late 1970s. In the 1990s, the former synagogues were returned to the revived Jewish communities (except Ulyanovsk and Buzuluk) and underwent extensive renovations in recent decades.

24. Synagogue in Saratov built in 1907, Torah ark. Photo before 1939. The Regional Museum of Local History in Saratov, CMK 66591.



25. Choral synagogue in Volgograd (1908–11), design for the ground floor. After: Roman Shkoda, "Tsaritsynskaia sinagoga," *Tsaritsyn.RF*, 2013, <http://царицын.рф/article/articlestsaritsyn/154-sinagoga.html>.

## CEMETERIES

Among thirteen cities visited by the expedition, the old Jewish cemetery from the middle of the nineteenth century is preserved only in Astrakhan. All other older cemeteries were demolished during the Soviet era. The cemeteries surveyed during the research trip were established either in the last decades of the nineteenth century or after World War Two.

Judging from the rare preserved remains, it could be concluded that during the nineteenth century Jews erected tombstones similar to the traditional grave marks in the Pale of Settlement – sandstone stelae with semicircular top (Fig. 26). More affluent graves were marked by low brick structures, in which such stelae or marble plaques were incorporated. Such structures are preserved in Ulyanovsk and Astrakhan (Fig. 27).

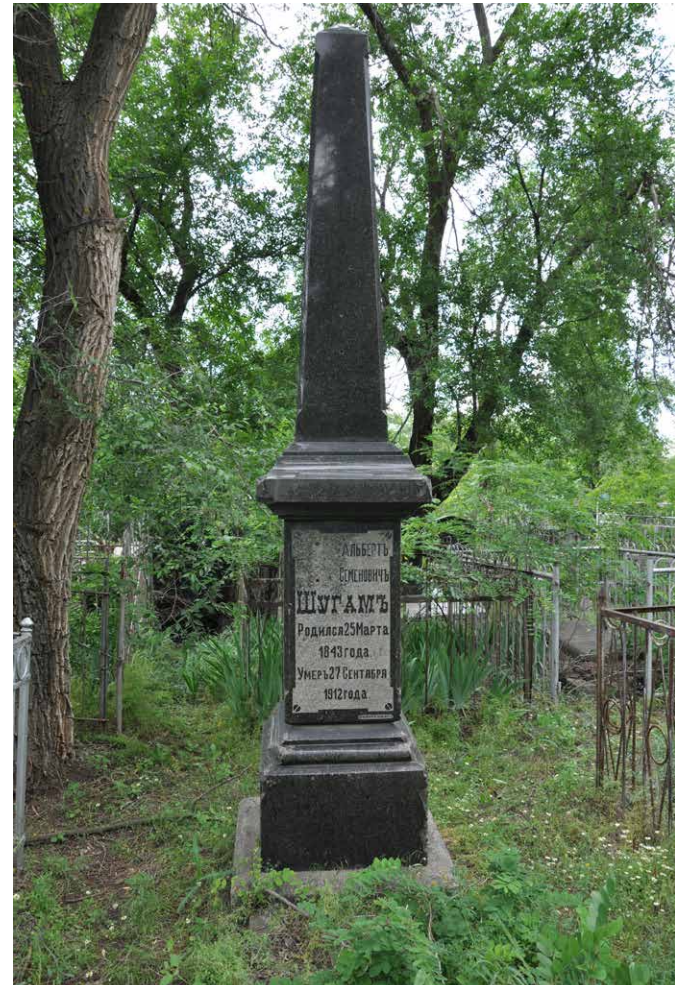
From the 1890s, the forms of tombstones became more diverse: while the poor continued to use the low stelae, more affluent Jews began to erect obelisks (Figs. 28), trees with broken branches, and other massive forms of tombstones.



26. Tombstone of Rashke bat Simha HaCohen in the Jewish cemetery in Astrakhan, 1867. Photo: Vladimir Levin.



27. Tombstone in the Jewish cemetery in Astrakhan, 1910s. Photo: Vladimir Levin.



28. Tombstone of Albert Shugam in the Jewish cemetery in Volgograd, 1912. Made by Dubinskiĭ in Kremenchug. Photo: Ekaterina Oleshkevich.



Tombstones after WWII often were typical Soviet grave marks made of metal or concrete (Fig. 29). More affluent families erected marble or granite memorials (Fig. 30).

The oldest tombstones usually have only Hebrew epitaphs, while by the turn of the twentieth century the common custom became to combine Hebrew and Russian inscriptions. This mode continued during the 1920s (Fig. 31), but faded out in the 1930s, when headstones devoid of Jewish symbols with only Russian epitaphs became more and more popular (Fig. 32). Some of them were decorated with prominent Soviet and Communist symbols (Fig. 33) However, some tombstones from the 1940s and 1950s were still made according to the old custom.

The greatest discovery of the expedition is two cemeteries in Nizhnii Novgorod, where a distinctive school of tombstone decorations with various Jewish symbols and Hebrew inscriptions existed in the 1950s and 1960s (Figs. 34–36). Even in the



29. Tombstone of Ania Livina in the Jewish cemetery in Syzran, 1978. Photo: Vladimir Levin.



30. Tombstone of Boris Pinski in the Krasnaia Etna Jewish cemetery in Nizhnii Novgorod, 1980. Photo: Vladimir Levin.



31. Tombstone of Ita Dvoira Finkelstein in the Jewish cemetery in Samara, 1923. Photo: Vladimir Levin.



32. Tombstone of Hirsh Pasternak in the Jewish cemetery in Samara, 1939. Photo: Vladimir Levin.



33. Tombstone of Ilia Leizerovskii in the Fourth Alley Sector of Arskoe Cemetery in Kazan, 1934. Photo: Vladimir Levin.

1970s and early 1980s, many graves in Nizhnii Novgorod reflected in one way or another Jewish religious traditions (Fig. 37). With the revival of the communities in the 1990s, the arrival of rabbis and growing contacts with Israel, the tombstones of the last two or three decades

are again bearing the Stars of David and other Jewish symbols and have the names of the deceased inscribed in Hebrew along with the Russian language (Fig. 38).



34. Tombstone of Raisa Edid in the Krasnaia Etna Jewish cemetery in Nizhnii Novgorod, 1956. Photo: Vladimir Levin.



35. Tombstone of Abraham Kapats in the Krasnaia Etna Jewish cemetery in Nizhnii Novgorod, 1958. Photo: Vladimir Levin.



36. Tombstone of Reiza Etkina in the Mar'ina Roshcha cemetery in Nizhnii Novgorod, 1959. Photo: Anna Berezin.



37. Tombstone of Debora Smelianskaia in the Krasnaia Etna Jewish cemetery in Nizhnii Novgorod, 1973. Photo: Vladimir Levin.



38. Tombstone of Azriel Aronovich and Haya Grudskaia in the Jewish Sector in the Churilkovskoe Jewish cemetery in Yaroslavl, 1990s. Photo: Vladimir Levin.

## RITUAL OBJECTS

Currently, historical ritual objects preserved either in synagogues or in local museums are sparse due to the closure of synagogues in the 1930s and multiple thefts from active synagogues in the 1990s. The provenance of objects is mostly unknown but, to all appearances, they belonged to local synagogues or individual Jews. All movable objects used before the 1917 revolution by the local communities were not produced locally, but brought from the Pale of Settlement.

Torah scrolls that apparently arrived from local synagogues were documented in Rybinsk, Nizhnii Novgorod, Samara, and Saratov (Fig. 39). The only Torah scroll decoration found is a Torah mantle of 1910 inscribed with the name of a donor from Canada (Fig. 40). The Torah mantle is decorated with topped Tablets of the Law flanked by two lions, one of the most widespread patterns for synagogue textiles in the eastern Europe in the 1910–1930s.

The oldest dated object originates from 1900 (Fig. 41). We have also documented Matzah bags, a Hanukkah lamp, a spice container, bags for *tallit* and *tefillin*, bindings for prayer books, and Torah scroll staves, etc. (Figs. 42–46).



39. Torah scroll staff, early 20th century. P.V. Alabin Regional Historical and Local Museum in Samara. Photo: Ekaterina Sosensky.



40. Torah mantle, 1910. The State Historical and Architectural Museum-Preserve in Nizhnii Novgorod, ГОМ 1788. Photo: Anna Berezin.



41. Tefillin bag, 1900. The State Historical and Architectural Museum-Preserve in Nizhnii Novgorod, ИТ 4064. Photo: Anna Berezin.



42. Matzah bag, Russian Empire, 1904. The National Museum of the Republic of Tatarstan, HMPT KII-10517/4. Photo: Anna Berezin.



43. Matzah bag, Russian Empire, early 20th century. The National Museum of the Republic of Tatarstan, HMPT KII-10518/1. Photo: Anna Berezin.



44. Hanukkah lamp, 19th century. The State Historical and Architectural Museum-Preserve in Nizhnii Novgorod, ГОМ 8264. Photo: Anna Berezin.



46. Torah scroll staves, early 20th century. Jewish community museum in Saratov. Photo: Anna Berezin.



45. Tallit bag, early 20th century. The National Museum of the Republic of Tatarstan, HMPT KII-10518/3. Photo: Anna Berezin.



47. Old Synagogue in Samara, Torah ark. Photo: Anna Berezin.

The old synagogue in Samara has an original Torah ark preserved (Fig. 47). An upper part of a small Torah ark is kept in Saratov museum, but its provenance is not clear (Fig. 48). The same museum also keeps dozens of plaques with the names of the owners of synagogue seats. (Figs. 49).

We were able to document several objects produced locally in the Soviet era: an *amud* made in 1927, a Torah ark apparently made at the same time and a *pinkas* of *Hevra Mishnayot* of 1924 in Astrakhan; and an *amud* and a circumcision chair made in the late 1940s in Saratov (Figs. 50, 51). The Jewish museum in the community center (*Hesed*) in Nizhnii Novgorod keeps the *pinkasim* of the *Hevra Kadisha*, which were in use in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, and written in Russian and Hebrew (Figs. 52, 53).

The Rabbi of Volgograd transferred to our expedition team a post-war mezuzah made of paper, two handwritten notebooks with Jewish prayers in Russian translation, which probably originated in a Subbotniks' community, and several



48. Upper part of a Torah ark, Russia, late 19th century. The Regional Museum of Local History in Saratov, CMK 7255. Photo: Ekaterina Sosensky.



49. Plaque with the name of an owner of a synagogue seat, early 20th century. The Regional Museum of Local History in Saratov. Photo: Ekaterina Sosensky.



50. Amud from the synagogue of 1947 in Saratov, 1950s. The Jewish Community Museum in Saratov.  
Photo: Vladimir Levin.



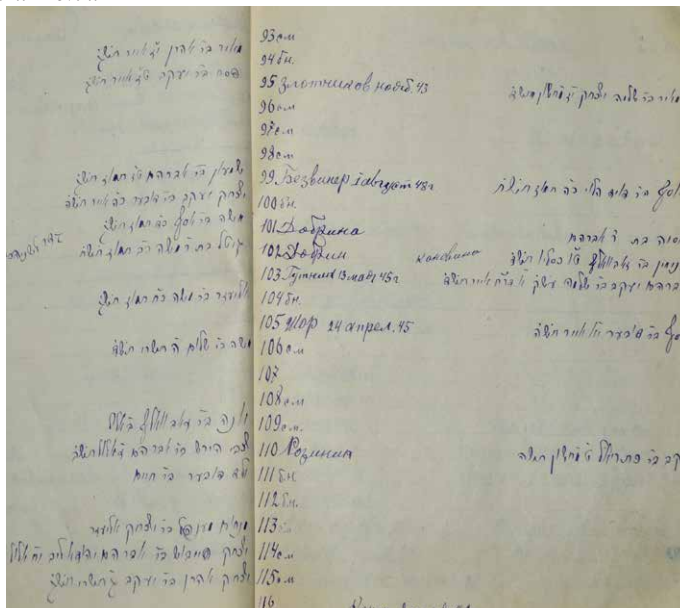
51. Elijah chair from the synagogue of 1947 in Saratov, 1950s. The Jewish Community museum in Saratov.  
Photo: Vladimir Levin.

Karaite books. After conducting the research, we shall transfer the notebooks to the Manuscripts Department of the National Library of Israel.

A special attention was given to the collection of 105 Torah scrolls in the V.I. Lenin State Regional Universal Scientific Library in Nizhnii Novgorod. The origins of this collection are unknown and none of the scroll staves bears any inscription identifying the place, from which they arrived to this library. The style of handwriting and the decoration and form of the staves, however, suggest East-European origin of all the scrolls.



52. Pinkas of Hevra Kadisha of Nizhnii Novgorod, 1932. The Jewish Community Museum in Nizhnii Novgorod.  
Photo: Courtesy of the museum.



53. Pinkas of Hevra Kadisha of Nizhnii Novgorod, 1960s. The Jewish Community Museum in Nizhnii Novgorod.  
Photo: Courtesy of the museum.

## JEWISH HOUSES

Our research in Siberia showed that quite a lot of Jewish houses had exterior signifiers of Jewish identity of their owners, mostly via decoration of the house with the Stars of David. In the Volga region, to our surprise, only two such houses were found and both have no connection to the Jews.

The house at 75 Krestovskaia St. / 7 Borodulina St. in Rybinsk has six-pointed stars, but they are part of the Neo-Classical decorative design of the 1820s–1830s (Figs. 54, 55) and have no Jewish connotations (cf. six-pointed stars at the doors of the General Staff Building in

St. Petersburg, built by the architect Carlo Rossi in 1819–1830, Fig. 56).

The second house with six-pointed stars is situated in Samara, at 45 Leningradskaia St. (Fig. 57). It was built in 1910 by the architect D. Verner for Alexei Nuichev,<sup>35</sup> a non-Jew according to his name, and the two six-pointed stars in the upper part of the façade are an integral part of the Egyptian style of the early twentieth century.<sup>36</sup> (cf., e.g. the house at 31 Zverinskaia St. in St. Petersburg, built by the architect Nikolai Nikonov in 1913, Fig. 58, or the house at 2 Smilšu Street in Riga, built by the architect Konstantīns Pēkšēns in 1902.)



54. Building at 75 Krestovskaia St. / 7 Borodulina St. in Rybinsk.  
Photo: Vladimir Levin.



55. Building at 75 Krestovskaia St. / 7 Borodulina St. in Rybinsk, fragment.  
Photo: Vladimir Levin.



56. Doors of the General Staff Building in St. Petersburg, arch. Carlo Rossi, 1830.  
Photo: Vladimir Levin, 2019.



57. Building at 45 Leningradskaia St. in Samara.  
Photo: Anna Berezin.



Building at 45 Leningradskaia St. in Samara, fragment.  
Photo: Anna Berezin.



58. Building at 31 Zverinskaia St. in St. Petersburg, arch. Nikolai Nikonov, 1913. Photo: Vladimir Levin, 2019.

35 <https://laperuz.com/zhiloi-dom-podryadchika-nuicheva-v-samare/>, accessed June 19, 2021.

36 The six-pointed stars in the Egyptian style of the early twentieth century often appear in conjunction with the depiction of the goddess Isis, syncretized with the star Sirius.

# CITY-TO-CITY DESCRIPTION

## TVER

### Tver (ca. 1135–1931) – Kalinin (1931–1990) – Tver (from 1990)

During the Middle Ages, Tver was a capital of a principality competing with Moscow for leadership. The struggle was lost in the late sixteenth century and Tver was incorporated in the Muscovite state. Starting from the eighteenth century, the prosperity of Tver was insured by its location at the road between Moscow and St. Petersburg, where the city was a key transit point with a pontoon bridge to cross the Volga. The importance of Tver diminished with the opening of the railroad between the two Russian capitals in 1851.

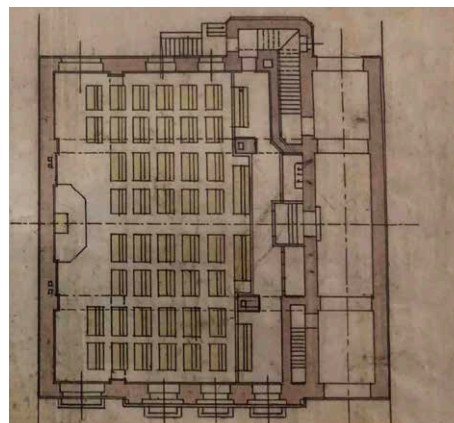
Jewish population in the city appeared in the middle of the nineteenth century and consisted mostly of retired soldiers and artisans. The first prayer house was registered in 1876.<sup>37</sup> The present synagogue was constructed in 1909–1912 (22 Pushkinskaia St., Fig. 59). Its northern, street façade was designed in the Neo-Classical idiom, with four Doric pilasters and a gable in its center. The building was crowned by a dome, which had no reflection in the interior. The prayer hall was situated in the ground floor with women's galleries at the upper one. A Torah ark stood at the eastern wall and was surmounted by three narrow windows. According to the design, the interior layout followed the scheme of the choral synagogue, with the *bimah* combined with the ark (Fig. 60).

The synagogue was closed by the Soviet authorities in 1935 and the building was turned into a bank branch, while the dome was removed and the interior reconstructed. During the two months of the Nazi occupation in November–December 1941, the former synagogue served as the headquarters of a German unit. After the liberation by the Red Army, the building housed a military hospital and after the end of the war – the office of a pig farming company; in the following years, it changed many hands. In 2001, the building was returned to the revived Jewish community.

The synagogue was reopened in 2002 as the Ohel Rachel Synagogue and renovated in 2003–2005. Now it contains four levels. The lower level (cellar) serves as a youth club and museum; the second level (ground floor) houses the offices; the prayer hall is situated in the third level (Fig. 61); and the attic serves as a social hall. A column and a pilaster are the only original details in the interior. The dome was restored according to the original design. While initially the prayer hall was oriented towards the east, after the renovation the direction of prayer is towards the south, to Jerusalem.

The revived Jewish community belonged to the non-Hasidic Congress of the Jewish Religious Organizations and Associations in Russia (KEROOR), but in 2011 it joined the Chabad-dominated Federation of Jewish Communities of Russia (FEOR), retaining, however, the same rabbi and the prayer according to Ashkenaz custom.

The old Jewish cemetery in Tver was demolished in the Soviet period. The modern municipal Dmitro-Cherkasskoe cemetery has a Jewish section with some hundred tombstones.



60. Synagogue in Tver, design, ground floor, 1909. Copy in the Jewish community museum of Tverskaia oblast'.



59. Synagogue in Tver, northern façade. Photo: Vladimir Levin.



61. Synagogue in Tver, upper floor, interior view towards the southeast. Photo: Vladimir Levin.

37 "Tver'," *Evreiskaia entsiklopediia*, vol. 14 (St. Petersburg: Brokgauz i Efron, 1913), 774.



## RYBINSK

**Rybnaia sloboda (1504–1777) — Rybinsk (1777–1946) — Shcherbakov (1946–1957) — Rybinsk (1957–1984) — Andropov (1984–1989) — Rybinsk (from 1989)**

The small town of Rybinsk received an impetus to commercial development with the establishment of the new capital in St. Petersburg in 1703. Redirection of water routes made Rybinsk an important hub of wheat transportation. During the long nineteenth century it was a district center of the Yaroslavl province.

The first Jew, a tailor named Loyal Ginzburg, settled in the town in 1809, but the regular Jewish population – soldiers and their families – appeared in Rybinsk by the 1850s. By the end of the 1870s, half of Jewish families in Rybinsk were families of former soldiers. The synagogue was opened in 1872, in 1881 it received an official recognition, and its building still existed in 1920.<sup>38</sup> Rybinsk also had a crown rabbi, who registered births, weddings, divorces, and deaths not only of local Jews, but also of the Jews from Yaroslavl, Kostroma, Rostov, Mologa and other places. Thus, in the late nineteenth century, Rybinsk became an unofficial Jewish center in the Upper Volga. The authorities in Yaroslavl, refusing to permit a permanent synagogue there in 1897, stated that Jewish “religious needs” could be satisfied in Rybinsk, since “with a completion of the railroad a trip from Yaroslavl to Rybinsk will take only three hours.”<sup>39</sup>

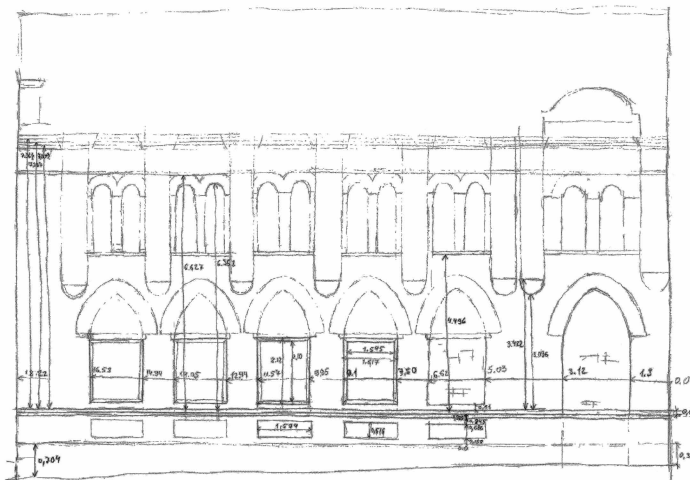
The new synagogue (preserved, 47a Chkalova St.) was constructed in 1916. It is a brick building, located in a courtyard, which comprised a prayer hall with a women’s gallery. The windows of the ground floor were wide lancet windows, while the gallery was lit by paired windows divided by pilasters (Fig. 62). Some original frames of the upper-floor windows are preserved. The entrance for men on the northern façade was accentuated by a parapet; the entrance for women was probably situated at the western façade. The eastern façade featured two



63. Synagogue in Rybinsk, view from the northeast.  
Photo: Vladimir Levin.



64. Synagogue in Rybinsk, view from the southeast.  
Photo: Vladimir Levin.



62. Synagogue in Rybinsk, northern façade, sketch.  
Drawing: Ekaterina Sosensky.



65. Synagogue in Rybinsk, upper floor, interior view towards northwest.  
Photo: Vladimir Levin.

<sup>38</sup> Vladimir Riaboi, “Rybinskie evrei v otechestvennoi istorii” (unpublished, Rybinsk, n.d.), 165–66.

<sup>39</sup> M.S. Sapir, “Istoriia otkrytiia v g. Yaroslavle postoiannoi molef’ni kak primer vzaimootnoshenii evreiskoi obshchiny s gubernskimi vlastiami na rubezhe XIX–XX vv.,” *Innovatsionnaia nauka* 4–4 (2017): 65–66.

large lancet windows, which flanked the Torah ark and two small windows in the upper part, probably alluding to the Tablets of the Law (Figs. 63, 64). An extension on the southern side of the building was probably intended for a Jewish school (Fig. 64).

The first attempt by the local Soviet authorities to close the synagogue was undertaken in 1920, but the final closure took place in 1929–1930. A Torah scroll, currently kept in the local museum, probably originates from the closed synagogue. During the Soviet era, some windows of the former synagogue were bricked up and others were reshaped; the prayer hall was divided into two floors.

Local Jews organized the Jewish Culture Society “*Lechaim*” in 1994 and registered it as a religious community in 1999. The former synagogue was handed to “*Lechaim*” in 2015 and today the community uses the upper floor as its meeting hall (Fig. 65).

The existing Jewish cemetery in Rybinsk was established in 1886.<sup>40</sup> Overgrown and dilapidated, it is located not far from the entrance to the Christian Orthodox cemetery; only several dozens of gravestones are preserved. The oldest found tombstone bears the date 1899 (Fig. 66) and the latest ones – 1958 (Fig. 67). The only prominent tombstone marks the grave of the most famous local merchant, Ilia Averbakh (d. 1909, Fig. 68). Among the headstones from the Soviet era, there are some bearing prominent Soviet symbols (Fig. 67).



66. Tombstone of Miriam Shimnovich in the Jewish cemetery in Rybinsk, 1899. Photo: Vladimir Levin.



67. Tombstone of Mikhail Shpigluz in the Jewish cemetery in Rybinsk, 1958. Photo: Vladimir Levin.



68. Tombstone of Ilia Averbakh in the Jewish cemetery in Rybinsk, 1909. Photo: Vladimir Levin.

<sup>40</sup> Riaboi, “Rybinskie evrei.”

## YAROSLAVL

Established in the eleventh century, Yaroslavl is one of the oldest Russian cities; it was the capital of an independent principality until its incorporation in the Muscovite state in the late fifteenth century. By the beginning of the eighteenth century, Yaroslavl was the second largest Russian city after Moscow and a principal trade center, but the establishment of St. Petersburg in 1703 brought to its decline. In the nineteenth century, it was an ordinary center of a province.

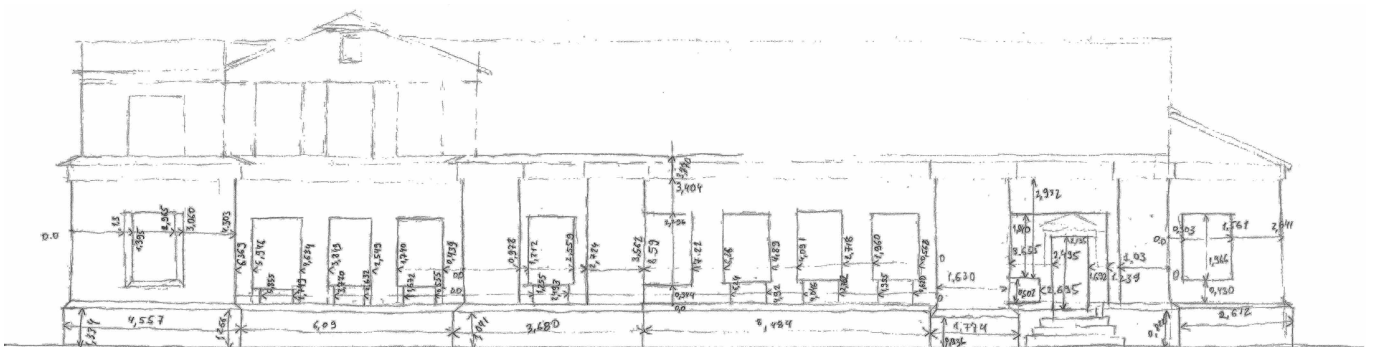
A considerable Jewish population appeared in Yaroslavl in the mid-nineteenth century. By the early 1880s, there were about 100 families of former Jewish *cantonists* and soldiers.<sup>41</sup> By 1910, there were around thousand Jews in town, but it seems that the community was relatively poor, since there were only 18 Jewish house owners in 1915.<sup>42</sup>

Even the first plot for a prayer house was bought by a certain “S.M. Friedland,” who was in Yaroslavl on a visit and did not belong to its permanent residents.<sup>43</sup> To all appearance, the wooden synagogue was built in 1881 before the community obtained a permission for construction. Jews first petitioned for permission of a permanent synagogue in 1878 but this petition was rejected as well as their further applications in 1881, 1886, 1895, 1897, and 1898.<sup>44</sup> Meanwhile “the house of Friedland” at Peshekhonskaia St. was used as “a temporary prayer house,” that was open only for holidays with special allowance of the local authorities.<sup>45</sup>

By 1913, “the house of Friedland” was dilapidated and the community received permission to erect a new synagogue. It was constructed three years later, in 1916 (54 Chaikovskogo St.).<sup>46</sup> There are no known photographs or drawings of the original synagogue and it is difficult



69. Beit Aaron Synagogue in Yaroslavl, view from the south. Photo: Vladimir Levin.



70. Beit Aaron Synagogue in Yaroslavl, southern façade, sketch. Drawing: Ekaterina Sosensky.

41 “G.Ph.M.L. pishet nam iz Yaroslavlia,” *Rassvet*, no. 33 (August 14, 1880): 1300.

42 A.V. Borodkin, “Evreiskaia obshchina g. Yaroslavlia v XX veke,” in *Evrei Evropy i Blizhnego Vostoka: istoriia, sotsiologiia, kul'tura. Materialy mezhdunarodnoi nauchnoi konferentsii* (St. Petersburg: Peterburgskii institut iudaiki, 2014), 177–78.

43 “G.Ph.M.L. pishet nam iz Yaroslavlia,” *Rassvet*, no. 26 (June 26, 1881): 1022–23; Ph. Lifshits, “Pis'ma v redaktsiiu (I),” *Russkii evrei*, no. 12 (March 25, 1883): 17–18.

44 M.S. Sapir, “K voprosu ob istorii sozdaniia v g. Yaroslavle postoiannoi evreiskoi molelni,” *Simvol nauki* 2 (2017): 139–41.

45 The prayer house in Yaroslavl was first mentioned in 1880, see Ph.M.L., “Nevozmumimyi indifferentizm,” *Rassvet*, no. 37, (September 11, 1880): 1456–57. The term “temporary prayer house” was mentioned in 1897, see Sapir, “Istoriia otkrytiia v g. Yaroslavle postoiannoi molel'ni,” 66.

46 Borodkin, “Evreiskaia obshchina g. Yaroslavlia,” 176–77.

to understand how it was designed. Apparently, it was planned as a building with a large prayer hall in the east (Figs. 69, 70); its façades were decorated by columns and pilasters (Fig. 71). The western part of the building has two floors, which may point to the existence of an upper-floor women's section in the original design, while two protrusions in the western side served as entrances for men and women.

The synagogue was closed by the Soviet authorities in 1934 and the building was reconstructed as a women's dormitory of a motor building factory. However, according to the testimonies of the Yaroslavl Jews, the prayers took place in a wooden barn at the synagogue's plot until the 1950s. An illegal *minyan* existed in the city in the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>47</sup>

47 Borodkin, "Evreiskaia obshchina g. Yaroslavl," 177–78.

48 Michael Beizer, *Our Legacy: The CIS Synagogues, Past and Present* (Moscow and Jerusalem: Mosty Kul'tury – Gesharim, 2002), 150–52; Borodkin, "Evreiskaia obshchina g. Yaroslavl," 179.

The Jewish Cultural Association "Tse Ulmad" was established in Yaroslavl in 1991 and the religious community registered in 1993. The synagogue building was handed back to the community in 1994 and reconstructed in 2000.<sup>48</sup>



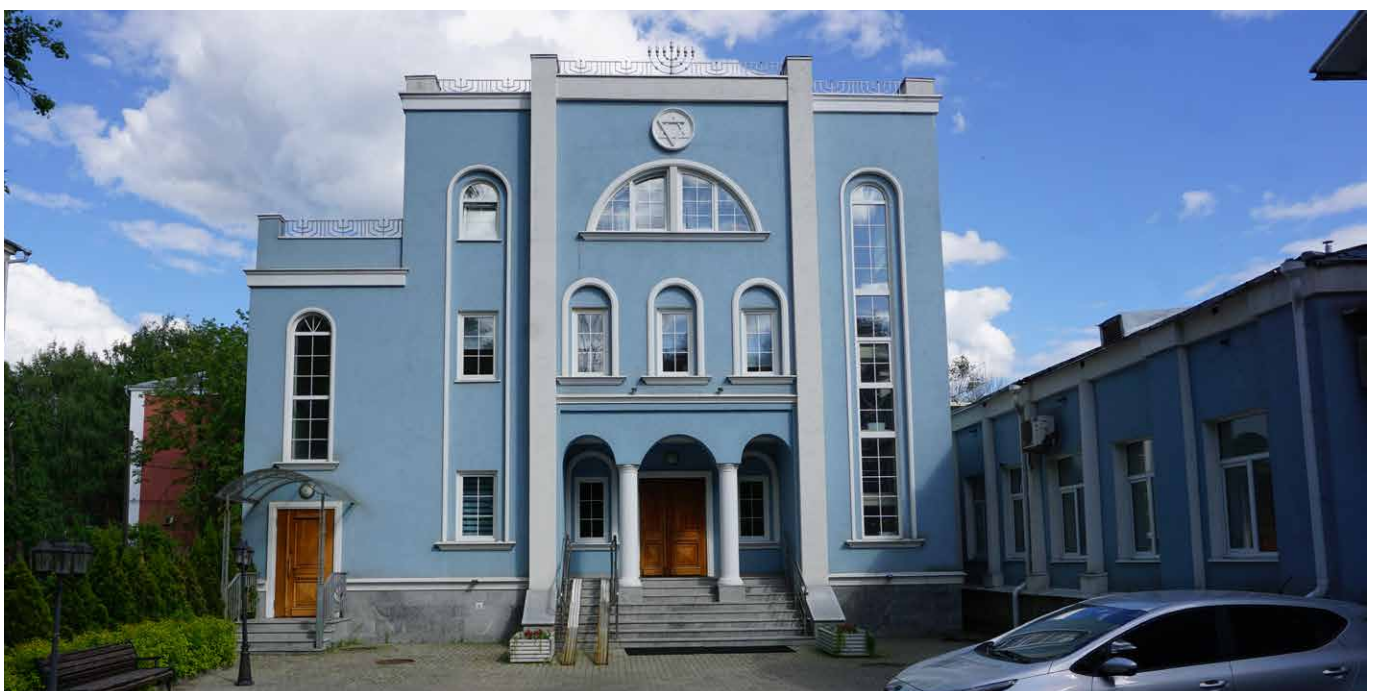
71. Beit Aaron Synagogue in Yaroslavl, northern façade. Photo: Vladimir Levin.



72. Beit Aaron Synagogue in Yaroslavl, prayer hall, interior view towards the east. Photo: Vladimir Levin.



73. Beit Aaron Synagogue in Yaroslavl, the Miron Sterin Museum of Yaroslavl Jewish Community. Photo: Vladimir Levin.



74. Beit Aaron Synagogue in Yaroslavl, the new attachment, western façade. Photo: Vladimir Levin.

The modern prayer hall (Fig. 72) occupies only a portion of the original one, while next to it social halls and offices are situated. The renewed synagogue belongs to the non-Hasidic Congress of the Jewish Religious Organizations and Associations in Russia (KEROOR) and is named Beit Aaron, after the grandfather of its benefactor, Aaron Chudnovskii. The upper floor of the building houses a small Jewish community museum, created in 1997 (Fig. 73). In 2015–2017, a new building housing two *mikvaot*, a kindergarten, and a rabbi's apartment was constructed on the northern side of the original synagogue (Fig. 74).

## JEWISH CEMETERIES

The first plot of land for the Jewish burials was allocated in 1862 near the Leontievskoe cemetery.<sup>49</sup> In 1880 the cemetery was not fenced and the “majority of graves” do not have any marker, so that visitors “do not know where their relatives are buried.”<sup>50</sup>

Currently, the Jewish sector of the Leontievskoe cemetery has about three hundred graves; the oldest tombstone dates back to 1887 (Fig. 75). There are also headstones of Jewish refugees from the time of the First World War (Fig. 76). The tombstones were inscribed with Hebrew epitaphs in 1920s and 1940s (Fig. 77), but later Hebrew went out of use.

The modern Jewish cemetery, which is part of the Churilkovskoe municipal cemetery, contains hundreds of graves from after WWII. Along with typical markers with Soviet symbols, there are several tombstones with Hebrew epitaphs and Jewish symbols in the 1950s, 1960s, 1970s and even early 1980s (Fig. 78).

Both cemeteries, as well as Jewish graves in the general cemeteries were documented by Evgeny Kirsanov, who began his work in 1985. This documentation allowed the community to mark graves that were vandalized and lost their tombstones in the last decades (Fig. 79).



75. Tombstone of Yosef Gotlib in the Leontievskoe Jewish cemetery in Yaroslavl, 1887.  
Photo: Anna Berezin.



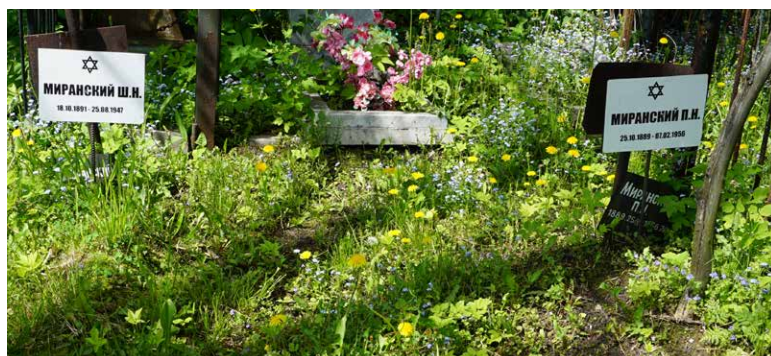
76. Tombstone of Sarah Libe Berman from Vilna in the Leontievskoe Jewish cemetery in Yaroslavl, 1917.  
Photo: Vladimir Levin.



77. Tombstone of Freyda Ente Giterman in the Leontievskoe Jewish cemetery in Yaroslavl, 1940.  
Photo: Anna Berezin



78. Tombstone of Nukhim Bromberg in the Jewish Sector in the Churilkovskoe Jewish cemetery in Yaroslavl, 1974.  
Photo: Ekaterina Oleshkevich.



78. Grave marks made in the 2010s in the Leontievskoe Jewish cemetery in Yaroslavl. Photo: Vladimir Levin.

49 A.V. Borodkin, “K voprosu o formirovanii evreiskikh obshchin v Verkhnem Povolzh'e (po materialam Yaroslavskoi gubernii),” in *Istoriia evreiskikh obshchin v Rossii. Materialy mezhdunarodnoi nauchnoi konferentsii M.G. Steina* (St. Peterburg: Peterburgskii institut iudaiki, 2012), 78.

50 “G.Ph.M.L. pishet nam iz Yaroslavl'ia,” *Rassvet*, no. 33 (August 14, 1880): 1300.

## KOSTROMA

Kostroma is an ancient Russian city established in the twelfth century. It is famous as the “cradle” of the Romanov dynasty: Mikhail Fedorovich, the first tsar from the Romanov family, received the news about his election to the Russian throne in 1613 when staying in a monastery near Kostroma. This historic event made the city a site of pilgrimage for the Romanovs, but apart from that, the nineteenth-century Kostroma was a relatively backward administrative center of a province with a limited commercial potential.

Kostroma is remembered by certain circles of Jews as the place of exile of the Sixth Lubavicher Rebbe, Yosef Yitzhak Schneersohn, in the summer of 1927. Apparently, Kostroma was chosen because of its very small Jewish community, so that the Rebbe would be banished from influencing a large numbers of Jews. Schneersohn spent only ten days in the city, until his exile was substituted by the expulsion from the country.

Besides, the history of the Jewish community of Kostroma is quite typical for the Upper Volga. The community emerged in the 1850s. The first known physical object testifying to the settlement of Jews in the city is a *ketubbah* from Kostroma dated 1857 (kept in the

National Library of Israel).<sup>51</sup> In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, there were about 500 Jews in town.

A prayer house in Kostroma was officially permitted in 1903<sup>52</sup> and a wooden building for the synagogue was built in 1907.<sup>53</sup> The synagogue (16a Sennoi Lane) consisted of a lofty prayer hall, a two-story western part with a women’s section in the upper floor, and a narrow entrance part with a staircase for women (Figs. 79, 80). Entrances for men and women were situated next to each other and accessed through a cast-iron porch (Figs. 79, 81). This arrangement of entrances, as well as the placement of the women’s staircase inside the building distinguishes this synagogue from hundreds of similar wooden buildings in the Pale of Settlement (Fig. 82).

The synagogue was closed by the Soviet authorities in 1930. In the 1930s and 1940s, an illegal *minyán* gathered in the apartment of the *shohet* Yerahmiel Kugel, who hosted Rabbi Yosef Yitzhak Schneersohn during his short Kostroma exile. In the 1960s, the *minyán* was still gathering in a private apartment.<sup>54</sup>



79. Synagogue in Kostroma, view from the north.  
Photo: Vladimir Levin.



80. Synagogue in Kostroma, view from the south.  
Photo: Vladimir Levin.



81. Synagogue in Kostroma, northwestern façade, sketch.  
Drawing: Ekaterina Sosensky.



82. Synagogue in Kostroma, view from the north.  
Photo: Anna Berezin.

51 “Marriage contract” (Kostroma, 1857), [https://www.nli.org.il/en/manuscripts/NNL\\_ALEPH003513451/NLI#\\$FL91318206](https://www.nli.org.il/en/manuscripts/NNL_ALEPH003513451/NLI#$FL91318206).

52 “Kostroma,” *Rossiiskaia evreiskaia entsiklopediia*, vol. 5 (Moscow: Epos, 2004), 170.

53 Beizer, *Our Legacy*, 153.

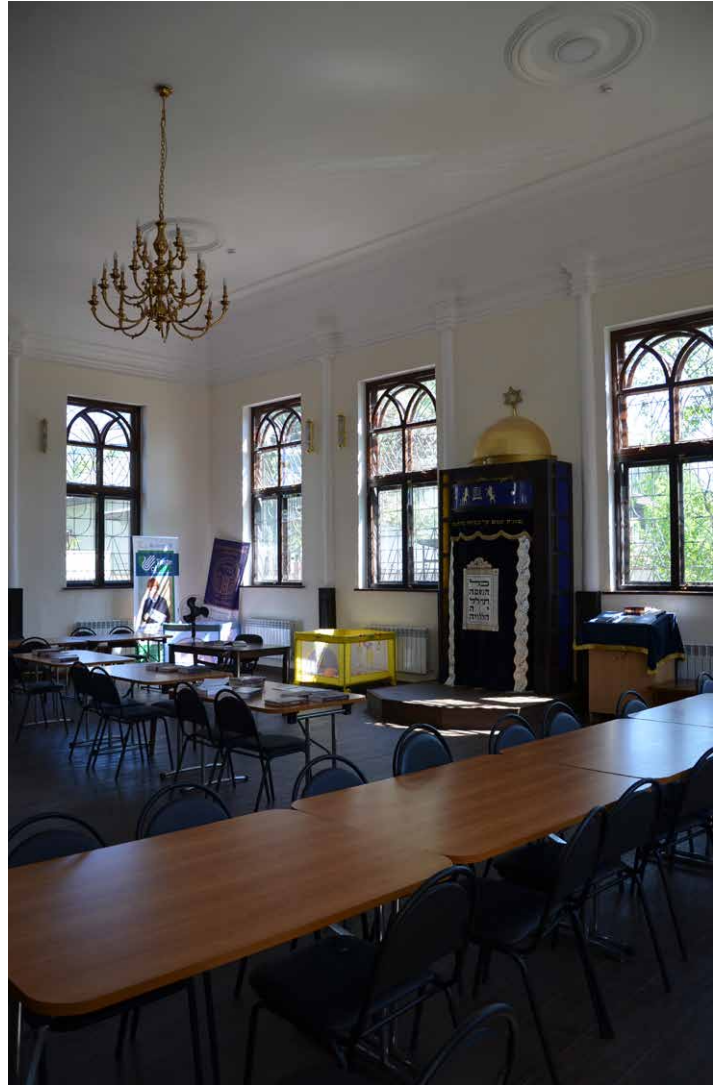
54 “Kostroma,” *Rossiiskaia evreiskaia entsiklopediia*, 5: 171.



83. Synagogue in Kostroma, window of the prayer hall at northeastern façade. Photo: Vladimir Levin.



84. Synagogue in Kostroma, window at northwestern façade. Photo: Vladimir Levin.



85. Synagogue in Kostroma, prayer hall, view towards the east. Photo: Anna Berezin.

The synagogue was returned to the revived community in 1995–1998. It was renovated in 2000–2001 and again in 2020.<sup>55</sup> Currently, the windows of the prayer hall (Fig. 83) are less ornate than the windows of the synagogue's western part (Fig. 84), but it seems the upper fragments of curved wooden decorations of the prayer hall was lost during the Soviet era. Moreover, an additional door was cut into the northern wall of the prayer hall (Fig. 82) and a brick attachment was added to the southern side of the building (Fig. 80).

In the interior, the walls of the prayer hall are divided by semicircular columns (Fig. 85), and a new Torah ark stands at the eastern wall. The synagogue serves a small community, which belongs to the Chabad-dominated Federation of Jewish Communities of Russia (FEOR). A small museum is in the process of installation right now.

The synagogue also comprises a *mikveh* built in the western part of the structure with the basin for rainwater outside of it (Fig. 82).

The Jewish cemetery in Kostroma, part of the municipal cemetery, contains several dozen tombstones starting from the 1930s. Only some tombstones from the 1930s have Hebrew epitaphs and Stars of David (Fig. 86). The markers on the graves of Yerahmiel Kugel (d. 1962) and his wife Esther (d. 1975) were renewed recently by the Chabad Hasidim; their epitaphs inform that Rabbi Yosef Yitzhak Schneersohn stayed in their house during his exile (Fig. 87).



86. Tombstone of Yona Tzvi Hirsh (Evgeny) Rozenson in the old Jewish cemetery in Kostroma, 1932. Photo: Vladimir Levin.



87. Tombstone of the shohet Yerahmiel Kugel in the old Jewish cemetery in Kostroma, 2000s. Photo: Vladimir Levin.

<sup>55</sup> Beizer, *Our Legacy*, 153.

## NIZHNII NOVGOROD

### Nizhnii Novgorod (1221–1932) — Gorky (1932–1990) — Nizhnii Novgorod (from 1990)

Nizhnii Novgorod is the last ancient Slavic city down the Volga and it was established in 1221 as a foothold to protect the lands upstream. The city was incorporated in the Muscovite state in the late fourteenth – early fifteenth centuries. In the nineteenth century, Nizhnii Novgorod became a location of the biggest annual fair in Russia, which rapidly promoted a city to state prominence.

Like in other cities along the Volga, Jews appeared in Nizhnii Novgorod as soldiers of the Russian Imperial Army in the 1830s and 1840s. The commercial importance of the city also attracted Jewish merchants and artisans starting from the 1860s.

By 1871, there were four *minyanim* in Nizhnii Novgorod.<sup>56</sup> In contrast to other communities along the Volga, the community in Nizhnii was affluent enough to construct a large building of the synagogue in 1881–1884 by the local architect I.F. Neiman.<sup>57</sup> Apparently, it was a synagogue with a modernized, choral worship, since the Russian-Jewish Encyclopedia states that “a small group of intelligent public activists built the synagogue.”<sup>58</sup>

In order to keep the prayer direction toward southeast (to Jerusalem), the building faced the street with its corner. The main façade had two domed protrusions and the prayer hall had a women’s gallery supported by wooden columns, one of which is preserved in the synagogue museum (Fig. 88). In a later stage, the wooden columns were covered by brick and such a column still could be seen in the ground floor (Fig. 89). A *mikveh* was situated in the cellar.

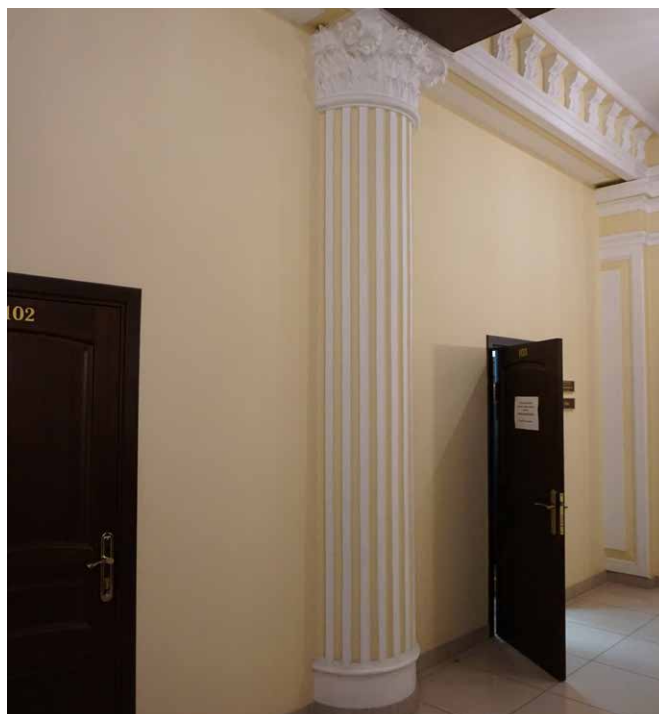
The synagogue was closed by the Soviet authorities in 1938 and the building converted into an accordion factory. Several illegal *minyanim* continued to function in the city during the entire Soviet period;<sup>59</sup> in the 1980s a *minyanim* was gathering in a house at 29 Priokskaya St.<sup>60</sup>

The revived community received the former synagogue building in 1991 and performed its reconstruction in 1998–2000 (Fig. 90). Currently, the building houses a synagogue and a community center.

While originally the prayer hall was situated at the ground floor, the new design placed it at the first floor. The upper floor with a women’s gallery and a social hall was added in 2005. Currently, the prayer hall with a skylight has an impressive rectangular Torah ark against the wall made of Jerusalem stones (Fig. 91). The two domed protrusions of the main façade were reinterpreted as the



88. Synagogue in Nizhnii Novgorod, a wooden column from the original building, 1881–1884. Photo: Vladimir Levin.



89. Synagogue in Nizhnii Novgorod, a masonry column from the original building, c. 1900. Photo: Vladimir Levin.

56 Pudalov, *Evrei v Nizhnem Novgorode*, 33, 42–47.

57 Beizer, *Our Legacy*, 18.

58 “Nizhegorodskaya guberniia,” *Evreiskaia entsiklopediia*, vol. 11 (St. Petersburg: Brokgauz i Efron, 1911), 697.

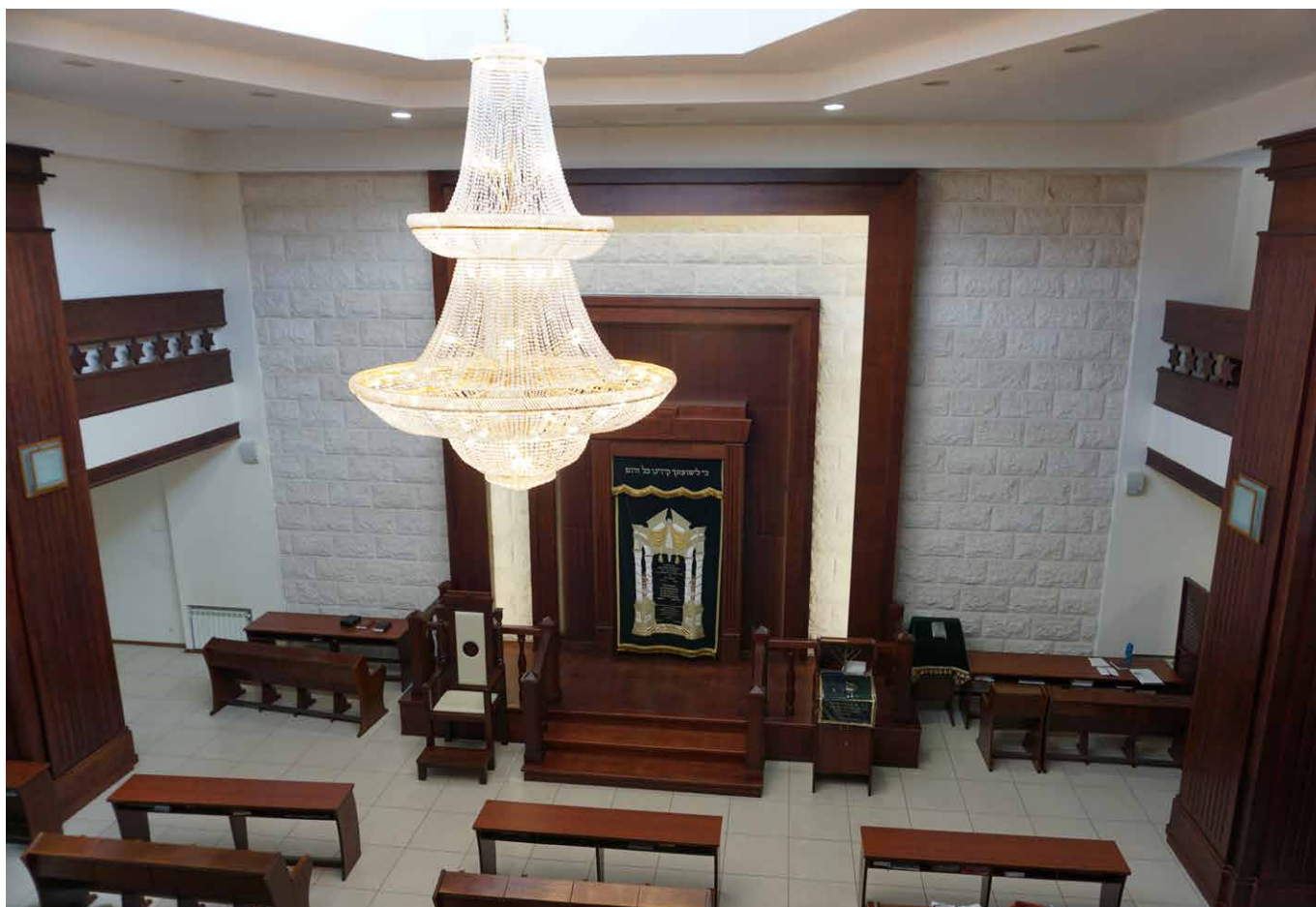
59 Altshuler, *Yahadut ba-makhbesh ha-sovyeti*, 402.

60 The address is mentioned in a photograph kept in the synagogue.





90. Synagogue in Nizhny Novgorod, view from the north. Photo: Vladimir Levin.



91. Synagogue in Nizhny Novgorod, prayer hall, view towards the southeast. Photo: Vladimir Levin.

two staves of the Torah scroll and became the logo of the new synagogue.

There is a small Jewish community museum in the building. The museum keeps a handwritten *ketubah* from 1969, originating from Nizhnii Novgorod and several *pinkasim* of the *Hevra Kadisha* from the Soviet period (Figs. 52, 53, 92).

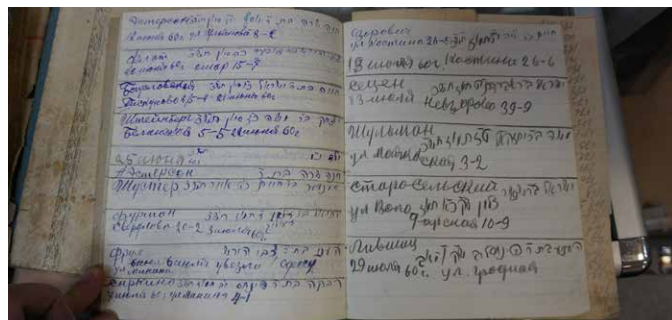
## JEWISH CEMETERIES

The pre-revolutionary Jewish cemetery is not preserved, except for the tombstone of the medical doctor Yaakov Idelson placed now at the entrance to the synagogue (Fig. 93). Idelson died in 1892 fighting the cholera epidemic.

There are two Jewish sectors in the cemeteries established in the Soviet period, at Krasnaia Etna (from 1934) and



93. Tombstone of Yaakov Idelson placed at the entrance to the synagogue in Nizhnii Novgorod, 1892.  
Photo: Vladimir Levin.

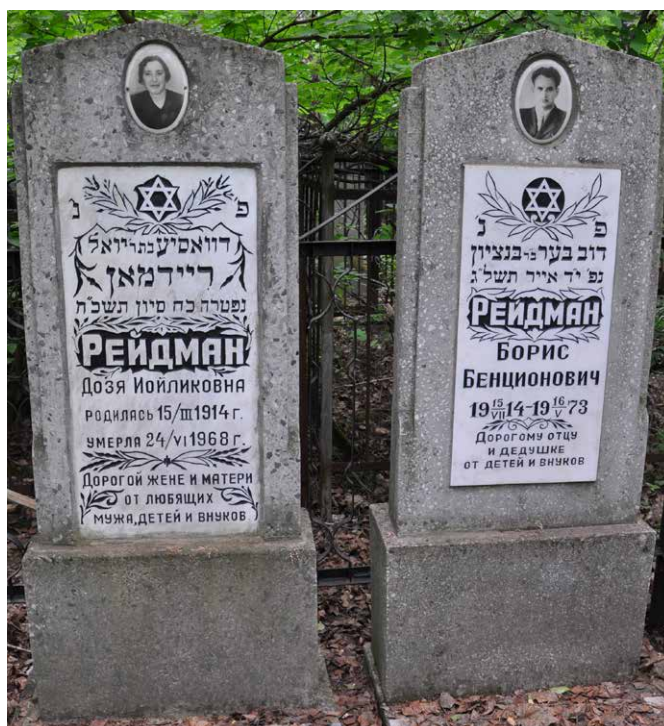


92. Pinkas of Hevra Kadisha of Nizhnii Novgorod, 1960. The Jewish community museum in Nizhnii Novgorod. Photo: Vladimir Levin.

Mar'ina Roshcha (from 1938). Tombstones surveyed at these cemeteries are the most surprising discovery of the expedition in regard to the Soviet Jewish culture. Not only that the Stars of David and Hebrew epitaphs decorated gravestones on a mass scale well into the 1970s and early 1980s (Figs. 94, 95), but there was a continuous and stylistically coherent production of gravestones with Hebrew inscriptions and Jewish symbols, like the shofar (Figs. 96, 97), menorah (Figs. 98, 99), and hands in a priestly blessing (Figs. 100, 101). The local school of tombstone makers which emerged in the late 1930s (Fig. 102) and continued until the 1960s, created a distinct form of tombstones which do not appear in any other city (see also Figs. 34–37).

An interesting feature of the Krasnaia Etna cemetery is that tombstones are not placed inside the metal fence, like everywhere else, but are incorporated in one of the fence's sides (Figs. 100, 101).

A modest Holocaust monument has been erected in the Mar'ina Roshcha cemetery in the previous decade (Fig. 103).



94. Tombstones of Dvosia and Boris Reidman in the Krasnaia Etna Jewish cemetery in Nizhnii Novgorod, 1968 and 1973.  
Photo: Ekaterina Oleshkevich.



95. Tombstone of Boris Gershevich in the Krasnaia Etna Jewish cemetery in Nizhnii Novgorod, 1972. Photo: Vladimir Levin.



96. Tombstone of Hana Plitt in the Krasnaia Etna Jewish cemetery in Nizhnii Novgorod, 1955. Photo: Vladimir Levin.



97. Tombstone of Rode Malka Kratzer in the Krasnaia Etna Jewish cemetery in Nizhnii Novgorod, 1957. Photo: Vladimir Levin.



98. Tombstone of Basia Itzkovich in the Krasnaia Etna Jewish cemetery in Nizhnii Novgorod, 1967. Photo: Vladimir Levin.



99. Tombstone of Sima Teitelbaum in the Mar'ina Roshcha Jewish cemetery in Nizhnii Novgorod, 1959. Photo: Vladimir Levin.



100. Tombstone of Abraham Hoykberg in the Krasnaia Etna Jewish cemetery in Nizhnii Novgorod, 1958. Photo: Vladimir Levin.



101. Tombstone of Meir Slabitker in the Krasnaia Etna Jewish cemetery in Nizhnii Novgorod, 1963. Photo: Vladimir Levin.



102. Tombstone of the twins, Yehoshua Leib and Moshe Azriel Tartak in the Krasnaia Etna Jewish cemetery in Nizhnii Novgorod, 1938. Photo: Vladimir Levin.



103. Holocaust monument in the Mar'ina Roshcha Jewish cemetery in Nizhnii Novgorod, 2000s. Photo: Vladimir Levin.

RITUAL OBJECTS

The V.I. Lenin State Regional Universal Scientific Library in Nizhnii Novgorod possesses 105 Torah scrolls, ten of which were transferred to the synagogue. The provenance of the collection is unclear, but the style of handwriting and the staves suggest an East-European origin for all of them (Fig. 104).

The State Historical and Architectural Museum-Preserve in Nizhnii Novgorod also keeps a Torah scroll, which could originate from the local synagogue (Fig. 105). There are also a Torah mantle, donated by “Yehezkel bar Avraham from Canada” in 1910 (Figs. 40, 106), a *tefillin* bag dated 1900 (Fig. 41), several *tefillin*, a Hanukkah lamp (Fig. 44), a spice container, a shofar and a medallion with the depiction of Moses and the prayer *Shma Israel*.



104. Torah scroll staves, Eastern Europe, c. 1900. The V.I. Lenin State Regional Universal Scientific Library in Nizhnii Novgorod. Photo: Vladimir Levin.



106. Torah mantle donated by Yehezkel bar Avraham from Canada, 1910. The State Historical and Architectural Museum-Preserve in Nizhnii Novgorod. Photo: Vladimir Levin.



105. Torah scroll staves, Russia, c. 1900. The State Historical and Architectural Museum-Preserve in Nizhnii Novgorod. Photo: Vladimir Levin.

## KAZAN

Kazan, the capital of the Kazan Khanate, was conquered by Ivan the Terrible in 1552. It was the first non-Slavic state annexed to the Moscow Tsardom and its conquest opened the way to the Russian expansion down the Volga as well as to the Ural and Siberia. Along with its commercial importance, Kazan became a key educational center with the establishment of the university in 1804. Currently, Kazan is the capital of Republic of Tatarstan within the Russian Federation; Tatars account for 53% of its population (2010).

Jews appeared in Kazan in 1832, when a *cantonist* school was stationed in the city.<sup>61</sup> This school had a disreputable name among *cantonists* as a place where Jews were forcibly baptized. A legend about Jewish *cantonists* who drowned themselves in the Volga to escape baptism was connected with Kazan.<sup>62</sup> In 1897, 1,446 Jews were living in the Kazan.

In 1880, Jews in Kazan had two prayer houses. The bigger and better one belonged to the Litvaks, while the Hasidim took shelter in a small rented house: one room was used as a prayer hall and the second – as a women’s section and Talmud Torah school.<sup>63</sup> As it happened in other cities, prayer gathering and official allowance to gather did not always coincide. In 1889, Jews for the first time petitioned for a permission to open a synagogue, and after several attempts the permission was granted in 1897. While the community negotiated with the authorities about the location of the plot or excessive decoration of

the synagogue (designed by K.S. Oleshkevich in 1901 in “eastern style”),<sup>64</sup> the community continued to pray in rented rooms. For example, a prayer hall damaged in the pogrom of 1905 was located in the downtown (the house of Smolentsev at Bolshaia Prolomnaia St., Fig. 22); this prayer hall was fixed and functioned until 1912.<sup>65</sup> That year the community bought a house, where the synagogue is located today. By 1915 the rearrangement was finished; an upper floor was added to the existing building, the façade was redecorated with elements of the Art Nouveau style (Figs. 107, 108), and a spacious prayer hall was constructed in the courtyard (Figs. 23, 109). The new synagogue (15 Profsoiuznaia St.) was inaugurated on March 12, 1915.<sup>66</sup>

The synagogue was closed by the Soviet authorities in 1929 and its building converted into the House of Jewish Culture (Figs. 23, 108, 110). Later it was occupied by the House of Pioneers and the House of Culture. In 1940, the former prayer hall was remodeled into a theater hall and the building façade changed into an early Stalinist Neo-Classicism (Fig. 111).<sup>67</sup>

After the closing of the synagogue, the religious life of Kazan Jews continued in an illegal *minyán*. In 1947, the



107. Synagogue in Kazan, design of the southwestern façade, 1915. Copy in the Jewish Community Museum of Kazan.



108. Synagogue in Kazan (1915), southwestern façade. Photo c. 1930. The National Museum of the Republic of Tatarstan, HMPT KII-35972/245.

61 “Nemnogo istorii evreiskoi obshchiny Kazani,” World ORT project “Chibur” – Kazan, [http://chibur-kazan1.blogspot.com/2012/04/blog-post\\_22.html](http://chibur-kazan1.blogspot.com/2012/04/blog-post_22.html), accessed June 20, 2021.

62 Grigorii Galich, “Iz vospominanii kantonista,” *Zametki po evreiskoi istorii*, no. 20(123) (December 2009), <http://www.berkovich-zametki.com/2009/Zametki/Nomer20/Galich1.php>, accessed June 20, 2021.

63 L. G-n, “Kazan’,” *Russkii evrei*, no. 43 (October 22, 1880): 1697–98.

64 G.G. Nugmanova, “Evreiskii molitvennyi dom v Kazani v kontekste rossiiskogo stroitel’nogo zakonodatel’sтва,” *Izvestiia KazGASU* 1 (11) (2009): 13–14.

65 Mogil’ner and Gerasimov, “Evreiskaia obshchina Kazani,” 155–56.

66 “Nemnogo istorii evreiskoi obshchiny Kazani.”

67 Ibid.; Beizer, *Our Legacy*, 102.



109. Synagogue in Kazan, northwestern façade of the prayer hall. Photo: Anna Berezin.



110. Entrance to the House of Jewish Culture (the former synagogue) in Kazan. Photo c. 1930. The National Museum of the Republic of Tatarstan.



111. Synagogue in Kazan, southwestern façade before the reconstruction of 2015. Photo: Vladimir Levin, 2014.



112. Synagogue in Kazan, southwestern façade after the reconstruction of 2015. Photo: Anna Berezin.



113. Synagogue in Kazan, vestibule, 2015. Photo: Vladimir Levin.



114. Synagogue in Kazan, prayer hall, interior view towards northeast, 2015. Photo: Anna Berezin.

*minyān* was officially registered, but the registration was recalled in 1953.<sup>68</sup>

The revived Jewish community received the synagogue building back in 1996 and undertook renovation works.<sup>69</sup> By 2015, to honor the centennial of the synagogue, the government of Tatarstan provided funds for an additional restoration of the synagogue. As a result, the façade of the building was restored in the Art Nouveau style (Fig. 112), the vestibule was decorated with marble and mosaic panels (Fig. 113), and the prayer hall was remodeled (Fig. 114). There are two *mikvaot* and a small Jewish community museum in the synagogue.

## JEWISH CEMETERY

Arskoe Cemetery (first mentioned in 1766) is Kazan’s central cemetery; it has three Jewish sectors and hundreds of Jewish tombstones. The Fourth Alley Sector has the oldest graves, starting from the 1890s. A mausoleum without an epitaph is said to mark the grave of one of Kazan rabbis; judging from its architectural style, it was erected in the first two decades of the twentieth century (Fig. 114). Other pre-revolutionary tombstones are quite typical for the communities outside the Pale of Settlement and bear the traditional Hebrew and Russian epitaphs. Such combination of two languages continued in the 1920s and 1930s. In the 1940s, Jewish graves appeared also at the Tenth Alley Sector and in the so-called Polish Sector, which is close to the entrance to the cemetery and seemingly was considered more prestigious. While the majority of gravestones were now inscribed in Russian only, Hebrew epitaphs were quite common until the



115. Tombstone of Eva Kertsman in the Polish Sector of Arskoe Cemetery in Kazan, 1951. Photo: Ekaterina Oleshkevich.



114. Mausoleum of a rabbi in the Fourth Alley Sector of Arskoe Cemetery in Kazan, early 20th century. Photo: Vladimir Levin.



116. Tombstone of Yulii and Sura-Haya Shleifman in the Fourth Alley Sector of Arskoe Cemetery in Kazan, 1976. Photo: Vladimir Levin.

68 Altshuler, *Yahadut ba-makhbesh ha-sovyeti*, 404.

69 Beizer, *Our Legacy*, 102.

1940s. Some tombstones from the 1950s and 1960s bear Hebrew epitaphs and/or Stars of David (Fig. 115). There is also a distinctive feature in Russian epitaphs in Kazan: many of them contain a phrase “This is the last present” to the deceased (Fig. 115).

The latest attempt in the Soviet period to write in Hebrew was found on a gravestone of Yulii son of Boris and Sura-Haya daughter of Aaron Shleifman, who died in 1969 and 1976 (Fig. 116). The Hebrew part of the epitaph contains only their names, spelled according to the Yiddish pronunciation: “Yidl-Leib BorekhAizik’s [sic!], Sure-Khaye Arn’s.”

## RITUAL OBJECTS

The National Museum of the Republic of Tatarstan has in its collection a prayer book binding probably made in Vienna in the late nineteenth century (Fig. 117), two matzah bags (one of them made in 1904; Figs. 42, 43), a bag for *tefillin* (Fig. 118, cf. a bag for *tefillin* from Irkutsk documented by CJA in 2015, Fig. 119), and a bag for *tallit*. The provenance of all these objects is unclear.



117. Book binding, Vienna (?), late 19th century. The National Museum of the Republic of Tatarstan. Photo: Anna Berezin.



118. Tefillin bag, Russian Empire, early 20th century. The National Museum of the Republic of Tatarstan. Photo: Anna Berezin.



119. Tefillin bag, Russian Empire, early 20th century. The Sibiryakov City History Museum in Irkutsk. Photo: Katrin Kessler, 2015.



# ULYANOVSK

## Simbirsk (1648–1924) – Ulyanovsk (from 1924)

Simbirsk, founded as a stronghold in 1648, was in the nineteenth century the administrative center of a province but still a distant backwater. In the Soviet period, the town became a center of pilgrimage as the birthplace of Vladimir Lenin, the first leader of Soviet Russia, whose real surname was Ulyanov.

The *cantonist* school existed in Simbirsk since the late 1820s. This school had comparatively few Jewish *cantonists* – 39 Jews (24 baptized) in 1839, 129 Jews (6 baptized) in 1842, and 95 Jews in 1843.<sup>70</sup> By the mid-1850s, there were some 350 Jews in the town and a prayer house which functioned “half-legally.”<sup>71</sup>

The wooden synagogue was constructed in 1878. Among the local donors was a St. Petersburg merchant and subcontractor, M.F. Friedland, who at that time erected a military gymnasium in the town. In 1886, the synagogue was closed since it was built without permission; the authorities also confiscated the community seal and registry books filled in by *gabbaim*, but the prayer gatherings kept on going. In 1887, a masonry *mikveh* was erected behind the synagogue. This wooden synagogue burnt down in a large fire in 1888, but the *mikveh* remained.<sup>72</sup>

In 1889, a new brick building was constructed on the same plot (4 Krasnogvardeiskaia St., Fig. 120). Apparently, the prayer hall was situated in the upper floor, since the space in the eastern façade between two pairs of windows allowed the interior placement of the Torah ark (Fig. 121).<sup>73</sup> The synagogue was closed by the authorities in 1894 and the entire plot was sold to a non-Jewess who rented out the *mikveh* in her yard to the Jews.

## JEWISH CEMETERY

The old Jewish cemetery of Simbirsk is situated in Robespierre Lane. A dilapidated brick building of the early twentieth century that probably served as a dwelling for a caretaker, stands at the entrance to the cemetery (Fig. 122).

The oldest found tombstones date back to 1871 and 1874. They are brick structures above the graves with sandstone stelae bearing Hebrew epitaphs (Figs. 123,



120. Synagogue in Ulyanovsk, northern façade.  
Photo: Vladimir Levin.



121. Synagogue in Ulyanovsk, eastern façade.  
Photo: Vladimir Levin.



122. Building in the Jewish cemetery in Ulyanovsk,  
view from southeast. Photo: Vladimir Levin.

<sup>70</sup> Petrovsky-Shtern, 124, 129.

<sup>71</sup> I.E. Sivoplias, “Simbirskii obshchestvennyi ravvin, kollezhskii sovetnik Itska Movshevich Leiba Galpern,” in *Evrei Evropy i Blizhnego Vostoka: istoriia, sotsiologiia, kul'tura. Materialy mezhdunarodnoi nauchnoi konferentsii* (St. Petersburg: Peterburgskii institut iudaiki, 2014), 169; I.E. Sivoplias, “Kak Abramovich stroil momel'niu,” 62–64.

<sup>72</sup> M. Piatriakovski, “Simbirsk,” *Ha-Tsfirah*, no. 102 (August 7/19, 1886): 3; Yakov Rashkin, “Simbirsk,” *Ha-Tsfirah*, no. 146 (October 6/18, 1886): 3; Sivoplias, “Kak Abramovich stroil momel'niu.”

<sup>73</sup> Cf. also <http://nasledie73.ulgov.ru/28/1061/1006.html>, accessed June 20, 2021.

124). From the 1890s, Russian inscriptions were placed along the Hebrew ones (Fig. 125). This fashion became a rule in the 1920s (Fig. 126), but by the 1950s it faded (Fig. 127). A Star of David was placed on a tombstone at the latest in 1956.

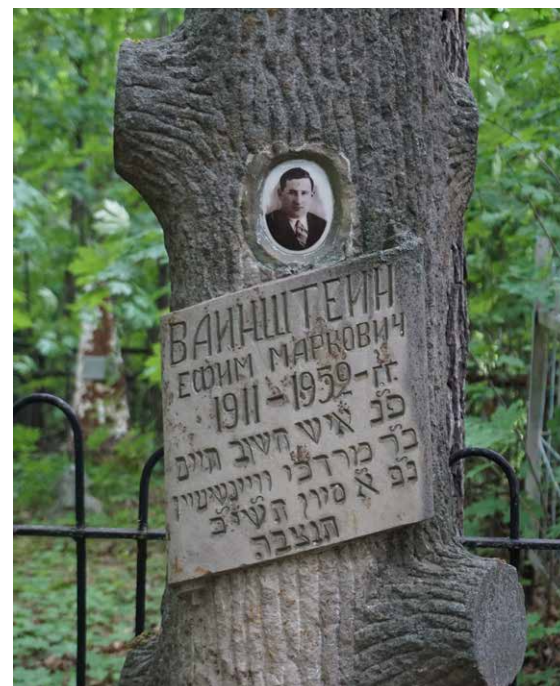
A notable exception is the grave of colonel Iosif Kaplun, which is situated apart from the other graves. Kaplun was an officer in the Red Army and participated in WWII.<sup>74</sup> For the successful crossing of the Dnieper by his brigade in 1943, Kaplun was among two first officers decorated

with the Order of Bohdan Khmelnytsky (second class).<sup>75</sup> Ironically, this order, created to celebrate the liberation of Ukraine, was named after the notorious leader of the 1648 Cossack rebellion, which whipped out entire Jewish communities. Colonel Kaplun died in 1971; the tombstone has his photograph in military uniform with all the decorations, an epitaph in Russian and in Hebrew. Judging from the style of the Hebrew letters and spelling mistakes, this epitaph was made in the 1970s or 1980s. It reads “Kaplun, reb Yosef bar Noah, deceased on the first day of Kislev 5732” (Fig. 128).



123, 124. Tombstone of Moshe Shimon Blinsen in the Jewish cemetery in Ulyanovsk, 1874. Photo: Vladimir Levin.

125. Tombstone of Meir Beilenson in the Jewish cemetery in Ulyanovsk, 1888 or 1894. Photo: Vladimir Levin.



126. Tombstone of Moshe Levitas in the Jewish cemetery in Ulyanovsk, 1922. Photo: Vladimir Levin.

127. Tombstone of Efim Weinstein in the Jewish cemetery in Ulyanovsk, 1952. Photo: Vladimir Levin.

128. Tombstone of colonel Iosif Kaplun in the Jewish cemetery in Ulyanovsk, 1971. Photo: Vladimir Levin.

74 <https://www.jewmil.com/biografii/item/742-kaplun-iosif-naumovich>, accessed June 20, 2021.

75 [https://uk.wikipedia.org/wiki/Орден\\_Богдана\\_Хмельницького\\_\(СРСР\)](https://uk.wikipedia.org/wiki/Орден_Богдана_Хмельницького_(СРСР)), accessed June 20, 2021.

## SAMARA

### Samara (1586–1932) — Kuibyshev (1935–1991) — Samara (from 1991)

Samara was founded in 1586 as a fort on the eastern bank of the Volga to protect the transportation along the river from the nomads of the Great Steppe. The construction of the railroad in the 1870s connected Samara to the central regions of Russia and gave an impulse to its fast development. By the end of the nineteenth century, Samara grew into a wheat trade center and a railway hub. During the WWII, in 1941–1943, the Soviet government was evacuated to this city.

Until the construction of the railway in 1875, there were about 30 Jewish families of retired soldiers and artisans, but in 1897 the Jewish population of Samara reached 1,300.<sup>76</sup>

The first prayer house was built in 1880 (84b Chapaevskaia St., see below) and the second one – in 1887 (138 Chapaevskaia St.); they were officially recognized only in 1895.<sup>77</sup>

The oldest synagogue at 84b Chapaevskaia St. was constructed in a courtyard and therefore unseen in the cityscape of Samara (Fig. 129). This synagogue was never closed during Soviet times and it functions today as the Chabad community. The original columns of the women's galleries, the *bimah* and the Torah ark are preserved (Figs. 47, 130). An addition to the building was made in the early 2000s and it includes communal spaces and a *mikveh*.

The Choral Synagogue in Samara (49 Sadovaia St.), one of the most prominent Neo-Moorish synagogues in Russia, was constructed in 1903–1908 by the Jewish architect Zelman Kleinerman, a graduate of St. Petersburg School for Civil Engineers (Figs. 12, 131). The synagogue was closed by the Soviet authorities in 1929. Three Torah scrolls, which are kept in the P.V. Alabin Regional Historical and Local Museum in Samara, probably originate from the Choral Synagogue (Fig. 39). The building was first used as a Jewish club named after the Third International (the Comintern), but after WWII converted into a bakery. In 1994, the building was returned to the community. Several attempts of its restoration failed,<sup>78</sup> and in 2018 the eastern part of the



129. Old Synagogue in Samara, view from the northeast.  
Photo: Vladimir Levin.



130. Old Synagogue in Samara, view towards the east.  
Photo: Vladimir Levin.



131. Choral Synagogue in Samara, view from the southwest. Photo: Vladimir Levin.

<sup>76</sup> E. Burlina, *Evrei v Samare. 100 let* (Samara: Terem, 1992), 23–24, 34.

<sup>77</sup> "Samara," *Evreiskaia entsiklopediia*, 13: 843.

<sup>78</sup> <https://golema.livejournal.com/32622.html>, accessed June 20, 2021.

prayer hall was demolished, apparently to prevent its collapse.<sup>79</sup> Quite ironically, the almost only original part of the synagogue – besides several window frames (Fig. 132) – is the entrance which bears the inscription “named after the Comintern.” The original wooden window frames and iron columns, which supported the women’s gallery could be seen lying near the synagogue (Fig. 133). Currently, the building is being rebuilt (Fig. 134).



132. Choral Synagogue in Samara, western façade, original window frames. Photo: Vladimir Levin.



133. Choral Synagogue in Samara, iron columns from the prayer hall. Photo: Vladimir Levin.



134. Choral Synagogue in Samara, eastern façade built anew. Photo: Vladimir Levin.

79 [https://samcult.ru/news/16478?fbclid=IwAR2UGyJCyqqhmRBNTYI2BWgDI9JqZRDLdBvBk6s3\\_3mMgQjeuDpT7-v3\\_s](https://samcult.ru/news/16478?fbclid=IwAR2UGyJCyqqhmRBNTYI2BWgDI9JqZRDLdBvBk6s3_3mMgQjeuDpT7-v3_s), accessed June 20, 2021.

## JEWISH CEMETERY

The old Jewish cemetery in Samara has been demolished. The current cemetery, established in 1908, is situated next to the Tatar one, at Novouritskaia St. Its oldest parts were demolished in 1960 so that only a dozen pre-revolutionary tombstones are preserved (Fig. 135). Among thousands of graves, there are the tombstones of the Rabbis Moshe Yehezkel (d. 1926), Yehuda Leib Palterovich (d. 1934) and Menahem Mendel Openstein (d. 1975). The latter, unusually combines a traditional inscription with a photograph of the deceased (Fig. 136). Hebrew epitaphs disappeared from the tombstones already in the 1920s, but the Stars of David remained a common feature until the 1940s and sporadically appeared even in the early 1980s. A tombstone of 1995 presents another way of expression of Jewish identity: Russian letters in the epitaph are stylized as the Hebrew ones (Fig. 137).



135. Tombstone of Moshe Mamanov in the Jewish cemetery in Samara, 1910. Photo: Ekaterina Oleshkevich.



136. Tombstone of Rabbi Menahem Mendel Openstein in the Jewish cemetery in Samara, 1975. Photo: Vladimir Levin.



137. Tombstone of Klara Neilshtut in the Jewish cemetery in Samara, 1995. Photo: Vladimir Levin.

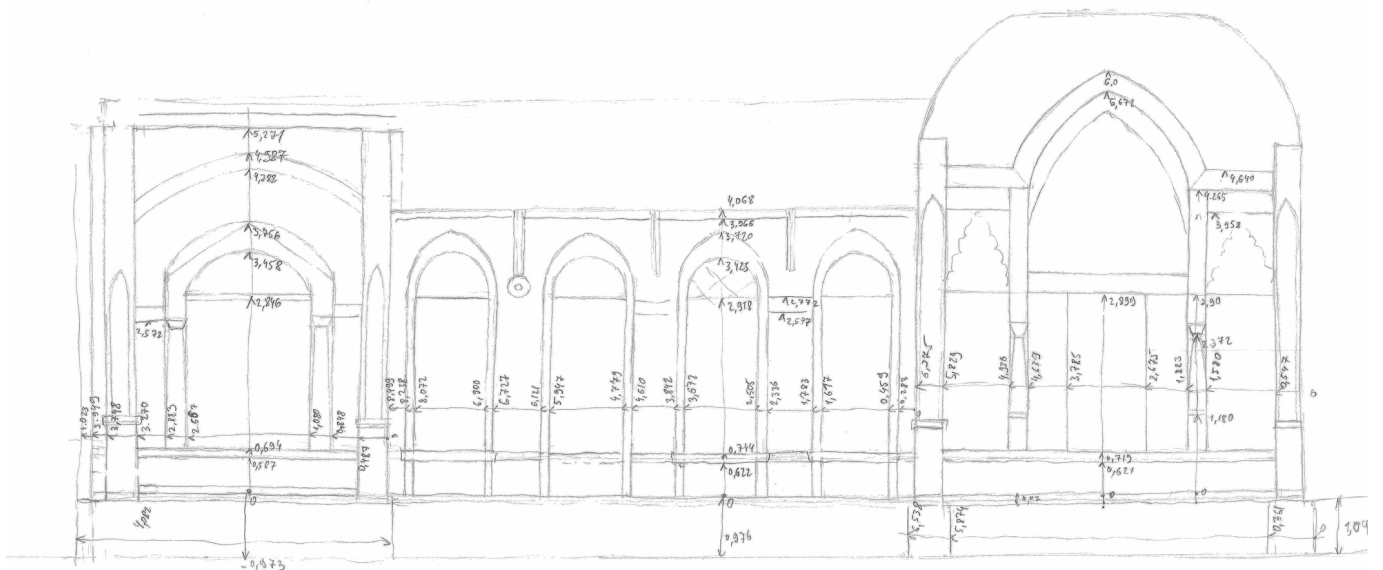
## BUZULUK

Buzuluk was established in 1736 as a fort protecting the border between the Russian Empire and the Kazakh nomads. In 1851–1928 the town was part of Samara province, but from 1934 belongs to Orenburg province. It was always a small town with some 14,000 residents in 1897, among them 130 Jews.

In 1887, the local Jews applied for permission to have a synagogue, but their petition was rejected. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the prayer gatherings took place in the house of Iosif Tsapskii (77 Oktiabr'skaia St. / 35 Yarosha St.).<sup>80</sup> The wooden building was apparently constructed in the early twentieth century (Figs. 138, 139). The decoration of the street façades features neo-Gothic lancet arches, Doric pilasters, and a large number of the Stars of David (Fig. 140). Currently, the building is divided into 6 apartments and its original layout is unclear. Nevertheless, two original doors in the interior are preserved (Fig. 141).



138. House of Iosif Tsapskii in Buzuluk, southwestern corner:  
Photo: Vladimir Levin.



139.. House of Iosif Tsapskii in Buzuluk, western façade, sketch. Drawing: Ekaterina Sosensky.

<sup>80</sup> Report prepared by the City Museum of Local History in Buzuluk.

## JEWISH CEMETERY

A prerevolutionary Jewish cemetery of Buzuluk was part of the general cemetery at the end of Turgeneva St. and did not survive to our days. Some Jewish graves of the twentieth century were situated in the general cemetery, among Christian graves, but we located only one of them, of Maria Gorovitz (d. 1957), the wife of a Jewish physician and a Menshevik, executed by the Czechoslovak Corp in 1918 (Fig. 142).



140. House of Iosif Tsapskii in Buzuluk, northern fragment of the western façade.  
Photo: Anna Berezin.



141. House of Iosif Tsapskii in Buzuluk, preserved interior doors.  
Photo: Anna Berezin.



142. Tombstone of Maria Gorovitz in the cemetery in Buzuluk, 1957.  
Photo: Vladimir Levin.

## SYZRAN

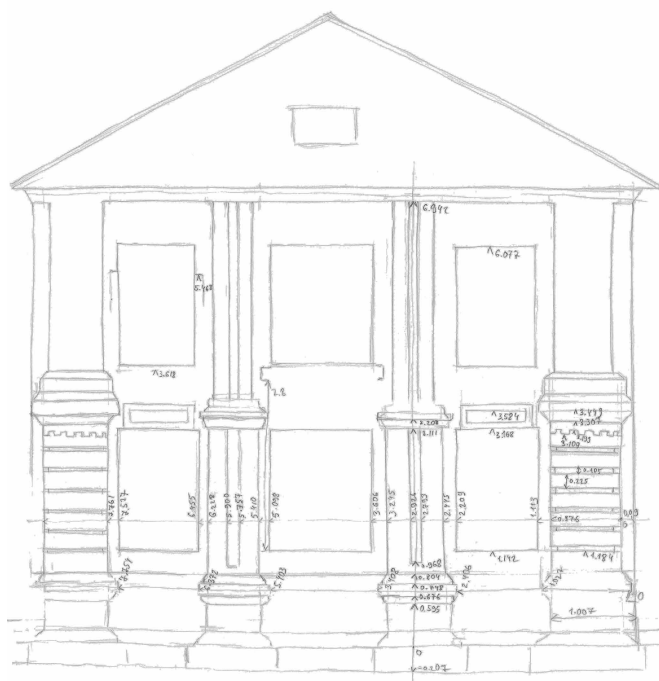
A small town of Syzran, established in 1683 as a fortress, became a principal transit point when the first bridge across the Middle Volga, and for four decades the only bridge, was unveiled nearby in 1880.

The town's economic role as a transportation center attracted a small number of Jewish merchants and artisans at the turn of the twentieth century.

A prayer house in Syzran was mentioned in 1910 and the existing brick-style building of the synagogue could well be constructed around this date (10 Kirova St.;



143. Synagogue in Syzran, view from the northwest.  
Photo: Vladimir Levin.



144. Synagogue in Syzran, western façade, sketch.  
Drawing: Ekaterina Sosensky.

Figs. 143). The synagogue functioned until 1930 and later on the building was adjusted for offices. After WWII the building was extended upwards and divided into two floors (Fig. 144–146). A clumsy attempt was made to adjust the new portion of the street façade to the original building. In 1998, the former synagogue was returned to the revived Jewish community.<sup>81</sup>

The original layout of the interior is not clear. It seems that the main entrance was situated in the southern façade (currently bricked up) and the entrance for women in the same façade led to a staircase in the eastern protrusion. Windows in the upper floor of the western, southern, and eastern façades and three columns in the interior seem original. Thus the only possible place for a Torah ark was at the western or northern walls.

Currently the building serves a small and lovely community of local, mostly aged Jews. They are trying to reconstruct the building so that it will better serve the needs of the community, mostly as a meeting space. In the gathering hall, there is no Torah ark, but an open closet with a Torah scroll and several other symbolic objects (Fig. 147). The scroll with beautiful staves is not local and its origin is unknown (Fig. 148).

A dilapidated wooden house next to the synagogue (8 Kirova St.) was used by a rabbi or by a Jewish school before the 1917 revolution (Fig. 149). Currently the community received the ownership of the building and is planning to demolish it in favor of a new community center.



145. Synagogue in Syzran, eastern façade.  
Photo: Anna Berezin.

<sup>81</sup> Beizer, *Our Legacy*, 170.





146. Synagogue in Syzran, ground floor, interior view towards the west with the community members. Photo: Vladimir Levin.



147. Synagogue in Syzran, closet symbolizing Torah ark. Photo: Vladimir Levin.



148. Torah scroll in the Syzran synagogue, Russia, c. 1900. Photo: Vladimir Levin.

A house where an illegal *minyán* gathered in 1950–1953 is situated a hundred meters from the synagogue, at 18 Kirova St. (Fig. 150).<sup>82</sup>

## JEWISH CEMETERY

The Jewish cemetery is part of the general cemetery “Fomkin Sad” at Neftiannaia St. The two oldest gravestones of 1956 bear Hebrew epitaphs (one of them

with mistakes and Yiddish words) (Fig. 151), but later no Jewish symbols were used until the 2000s. The only exception is the gravestone of Lev Pleser (d. 1974), whose son, according to the testimony of his granddaughter, created Russian letters stylized as Hebrew ones for the inscription (Fig. 152).



149. Rabbi's house at 8 Kirova St. in Syzran, early 20th century. Photo: Vladimir Levin.



150. Building at 18 Kirova St. in Syzran (early 20th century), where an illegal *minyán* gathered in the 1950s. Photo: Vladimir Levin.



151. Tombstone of Usher Telpner in the Jewish cemetery in Syzran, 1956. Photo: Vladimir Levin.



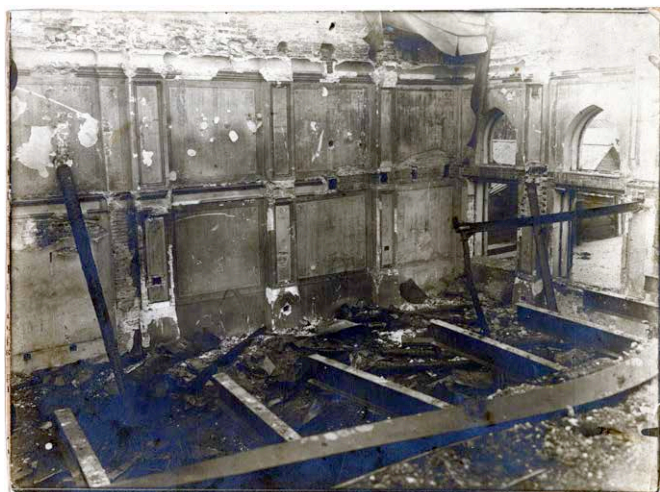
152. Tombstone of Lev Pleser in the Jewish cemetery in Syzran, 1974. Photo: Vladimir Levin.

<sup>82</sup> <https://rusarchives.ru/publikacii/otechestvennye-arhivy/5584/dokladnye-zapiski-o-deyatelnosti-evreyskih-obshchin-1948-1959>, accessed June 20, 2021.

## SARATOV

Saratov, founded in 1590 on the western bank of the Volga, was better connected to the areas in central Russia, especially after the construction of the railroad in 1871. By the end of the nineteenth century, this major center of wheat trade became the largest city in the entire Volga region.

A “military” prayer house existed in Saratov already in 1845, but in 1858 it was shut down. For the next several decades, the Jews of the city petitioned for opening a synagogue, and the 1896 petition lobbied by the crown



153. Synagogue in Saratov (1897) after the pogrom of 1905.  
The Regional Museum of Local History in Saratov.



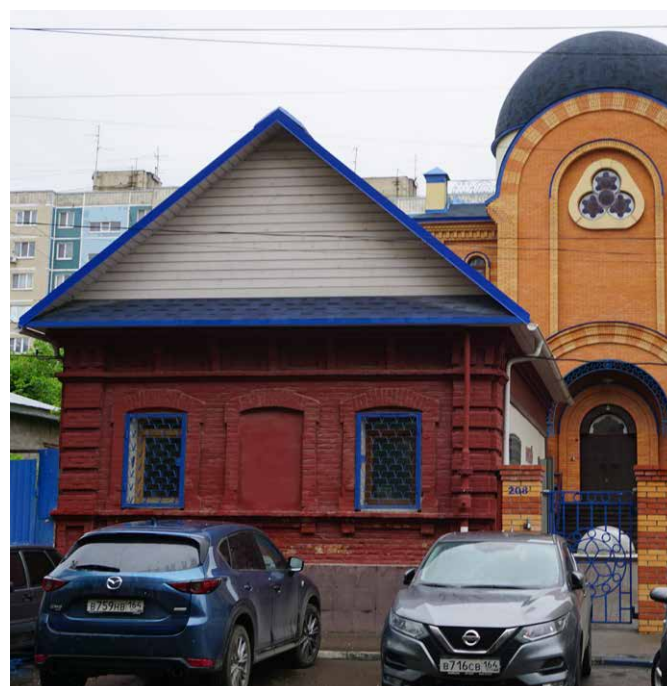
154. Synagogue in Saratov (1907), view from the southwest, 1939.  
Photo: A.V. and V.V. Leontievs. The Regional Museum of Local History  
in Saratov.

rabbi of Tsaritsyn (today Volgograd) was granted.<sup>83</sup> The synagogue at 63 Gogolia St. was built in 1897 and was an impressive building with a dome above the entrance (Fig. 10). Initially, Litvaks and Hasidim prayed under one roof, but in 1902, the Hasidic community (52 members) received a permission to pray separately in a rented house (Tsyganskaia St, today Kutiakova St.).<sup>84</sup>

The synagogue was severely damaged in the pogrom of October 19–20, 1905 (Fig. 153). In 1907, the community completely reconstructed the synagogue in the Neo-Moorish style and erected a prominent dome above the prayer hall (Fig. 11, 154). The interior was likewise designed in the Neo-Moorish style and organized according to the “choral mode of worship,” with the *bimah* placed in front of the Torah ark (Fig. 24). The synagogue was closed by the Soviet authorities in 1939 and later rebuilt as a factory.

After the closure of the synagogue in 1939, there was no synagogue in Saratov until 1946, when a new Jewish community was officially registered. In 1947, it was able to purchase a small brick dwelling house (208 Posadskogo St., Fig. 155). In 1958, a *mikveh* was constructed in the synagogue’s yard – probably the only *mikveh* built in post-war USSR. This Soviet-time synagogue held prayers until recently.

Since the 2000s, Saratov has two communities: the non-Hasidic one develops the plot acquired during the Soviet period, while the community lead by Chabad received the historical plot at Gogolia St.



155. Synagogue of 1947 and Beit Shimshon Synagogue  
(2010–15, in the background) in Saratov, view from the south.  
Photo: Vladimir Levin.

83 Steve Levin, “Iz istorii saratovskikh sinagog,” in *Evreiskii Saratov: stranitsy istorii* (Saratov, 2012), 114–18.

84 *Ibid.*, 118–19.

The Litvak community (belongs to the Congress of the Jewish Religious Organizations and Associations in Russia, KEROR), turned a small Soviet synagogue into a community Museum (Figs. 50, 51, 156, 157) and built a new synagogue nearby. The Beit Shimshon Synagogue with a prominent dome was constructed in 2010–2015 (Figs. 158, 159); it also houses communal spaces and a *mikveh*.

The community museum houses both the Soviet artefacts (Figs. 50, 51, 157) and ritual objects from the



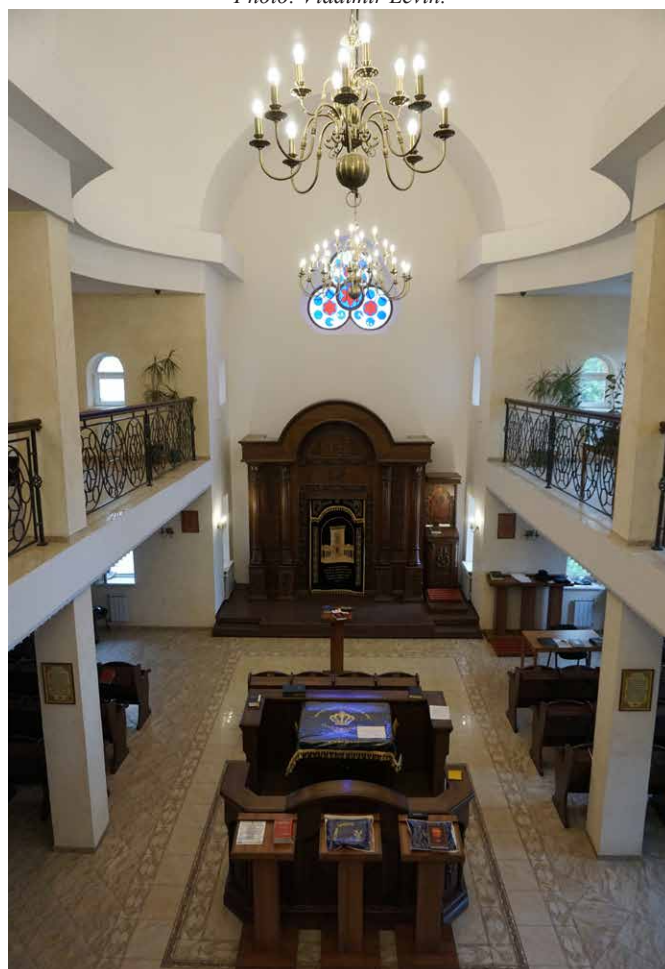
156. Jewish community museum in the building of the synagogue of 1947 in Saratov, interior view towards the south.  
Photo: Vladimir Levin.



157. Amud from the synagogue of 1947 in Saratov, 1950s. The Jewish community museum in Saratov.  
Photo: Vladimir Levin.



158. Beit Shimshon Synagogue in Saratov, view from the south.  
Photo: Vladimir Levin.



159. Beit Shimshon Synagogue in Saratov, interior view towards the north. Photo: Vladimir Levin.

historical synagogue at Gogolia St. that were received from the local museum in the 1990s. The Chabad community demolished the remains of the old building and constructed a replica of the Neo-Moorish synagogue of 1907 according to preserved photographs (Fig. 160). However, the interior arrangement is very different from the original prayer hall. The inauguration of this synagogue is planned to Autumn 2021 (Fig. 161).

## JEWISH CEMETERY

The Jewish cemetery at Murmanskaia St. has about 3,000 graves from the 1920s on. Already in the 1930s, the number of tombstones with Hebrew epitaphs and Jewish symbols became very small (Figs. 162, 163). However,

single tombstones with Hebrew inscriptions appeared still in the 1980s (Fig. 164).

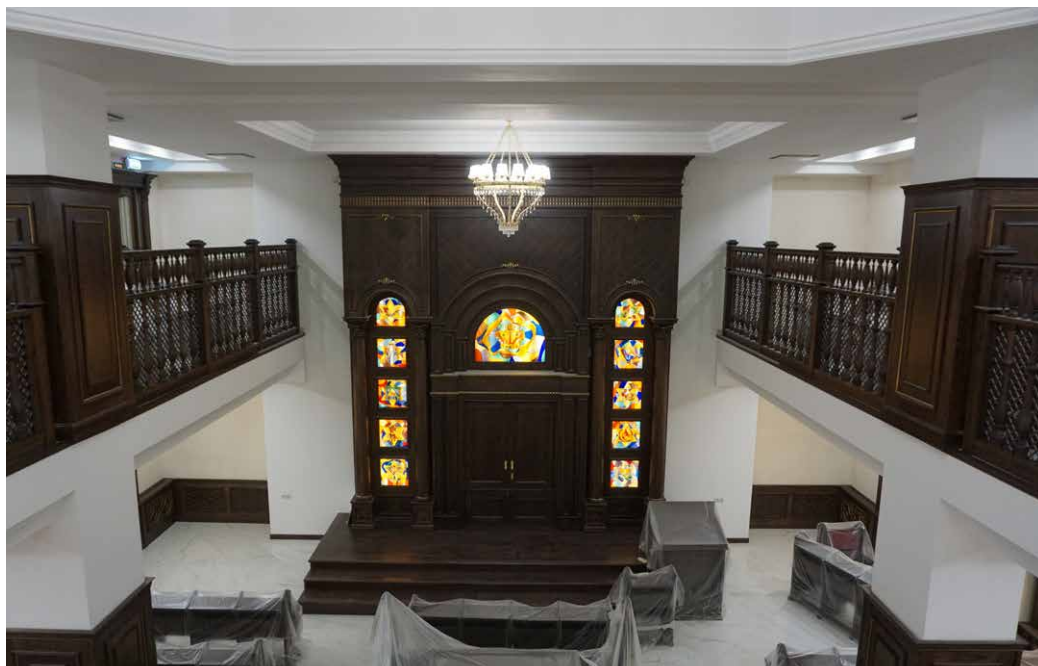
## RITUAL OBJECTS

The Regional Museum of Local History in Saratov has several Jewish objects in its collection. The most impressive of them is an upper part of a Torah ark, featuring the Tablets of the Law above clouds (Fig. 48). The provenance of the object is uncertain.

Among other objects there are a tin alms' box inscribed "Tzdaka tatzil mi-mavet," i.e. it was obviously used during funerals (Fig. 165), several plaques with the names of the owners of synagogue seats (Fig. 49), and another alms' box without any Jewish identification.



160. Gogolia Street Chabad Synagogue (replica of the 1907 synagogue) in Saratov. Photo: Vladimir Levin.



161. Gogolia Street Chabad Synagogue in Saratov, interior view towards the east. Photo: Vladimir Levin.



162. Tombstone of Hena Bukhanovski in the Jewish cemetery in Saratov, 1923.  
Photo: Anna Berezin.



163. Tombstone of T. Srogovich in the Jewish cemetery in Saratov, 1937.  
Photo: Vladimir Levin.



164. Tombstone of Haya Liba Zak in the Jewish cemetery in Saratov, 1982.  
Photo: Anna Berezin.



165. Alms' box, Russia, early 20th century. The Regional Museum of Local History in Saratov.  
Photo: Ekaterina Sosensky.

## VOLGOGRAD

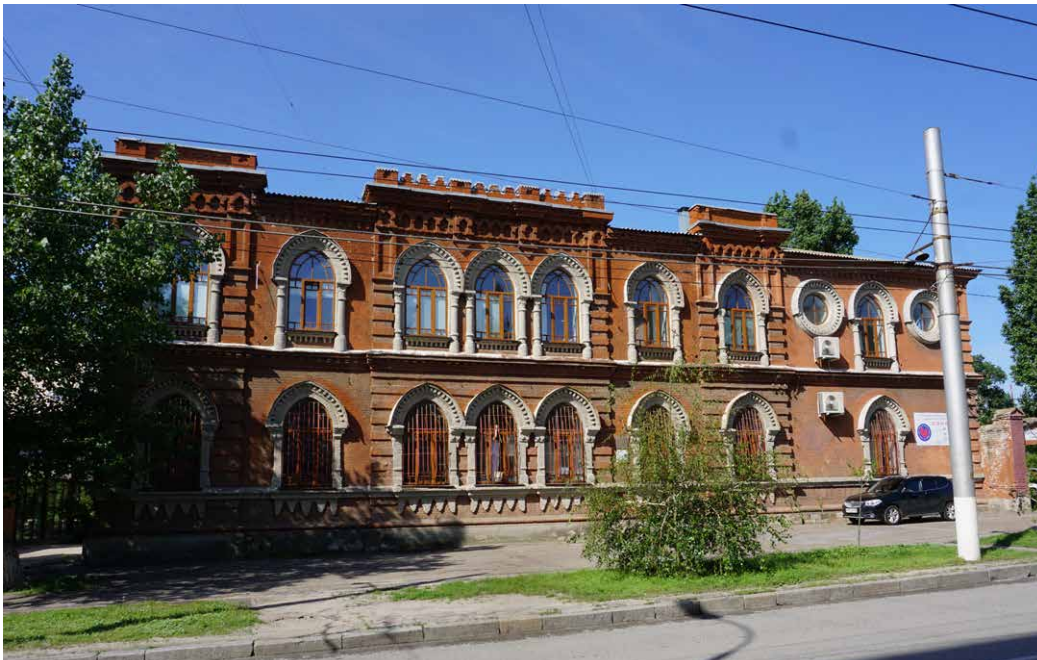
### Tsaritsyn (1589–1932) – Stalingrad (1925–1961) – Volgograd (from 1961)

Established in 1589, Tsaritsyn became a “boom city” in the late nineteenth century when a railroad connected it to the Don River and the Russian central areas. During the Russian Civil War, its successful defense by the Reds eventually determined the victory of the Bolsheviks: two White armies acting in the Don area and in Siberia were not able to unite forces and the Reds could defeat them separately. Since the defense of Tsaritsyn was headed by Joseph Stalin, the city was renamed Stalingrad in 1925. Under this name, it became the scene of the most crucial battle of WWII, when the Red Army did not allow the Wehrmacht to reach the Volga and later encircled the German 6<sup>th</sup> Army, which surrendered at the beginning of February 1943. The battle of Stalingrad caused almost total destruction of the entire city, where house-to-house fighting took place for several months. Surprisingly, two

buildings of synagogues survived the battle and were also not demolished after the war.

The first wooden synagogue was established in 1888 in the Zatsaritsynskaia, southern part of the city.<sup>85</sup>

The new, choral synagogue was constructed in the city center in 1908–1911 (11 Port Said St.). It is a brick style building, which originally was crowned by a large dome and four turrets on the corners (Figs. 13, 25, 166). The synagogue was closed in 1929 and converted into a medical clinic; from 1968 it houses a physio-therapy clinic.<sup>86</sup> The exterior walls near the entrance and at the east, in a place corresponding to the Torah ark, were decorated by brick Stars of David. Although leveled down, they are still visible. Surprisingly, the interior



166. Choral synagogue in Volgograd, northeastern façade. Photo: Vladimir Levin.



167. Choral synagogue in Volgograd, upper floor, ceiling. Photo: Ekaterina Oleshkevich.



168. Choral synagogue in Volgograd, ground floor, southern corner. Photo: Vladimir Levin.

85 Roman Shkoda, “Tsaritsynskaia sinagoga,” *Tsaritsyn.RF*, <http://xn--80aqp2ad9a.xn--p1ai/article/articletsaritsyn/154-sinagoga.html>, accessed June 20, 2021.

86 Ibid.

preserved original elements: the columns supporting the women’s gallery, the staircase leading there, a wooden entrance door, as well as Neo-Moorish stucco decorations of windows and ceiling (Figs. 167, 168). Broken pieces of a marble plaque inscribed with the Ten Commandments, probably originating from this synagogue, are preserved in the current synagogue (Fig. 169).

The current synagogue at 6 Balakhninskaia St. was constructed c. 1900 in the “brick style” in the Zatsaritsynskaia part of the city (Fig. 170). Local historians doubt that the building was erected as a synagogue,<sup>87</sup> but the community is of a different opinion. The original interior structure of the building is uncertain, but it seems that the prayer hall occupied the upper floor, the windows of which were decorated by the Stars of David. The building was completely reconstructed in 1999 and since then serves as the Beit David Synagogue, named after David Kolotilin, a leader of the unofficial *minyán* in the late Soviet period. The prayer hall is situated in the ground floor (Fig. 171), with communal offices on the upper floor. Since the building blocks situated between the synagogue and the Volga were destroyed during the Battle of Stalingrad, today the synagogue has a marvelous view towards the river and is well seen from the embankment promenade.

## JEWISH CEMETERY

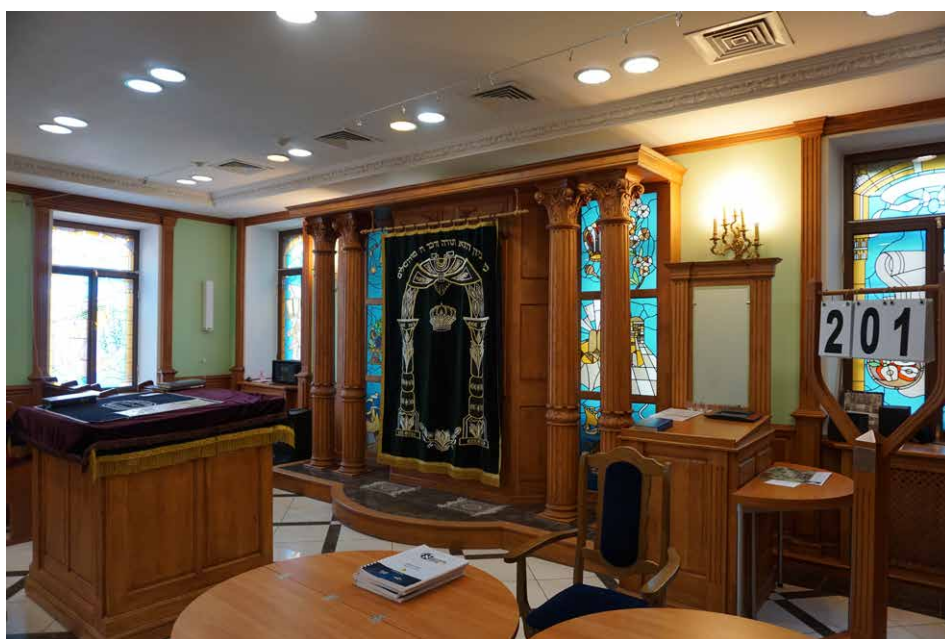
The old Jewish cemetery was situated in the Lenkoranskaia St. and has not been preserved. The newer cemetery is part of the general cemetery of Voroshilovskii district, but is separated from it by a fence. There are several tombstones from before the 1917 revolution



169. Pieces of a marble plaque, probably from the Choral synagogue, in the Beit David Synagogue. Photo: Vladimir Levin.



170. Beit David Synagogue in Volgograd, view from the south. Photo: Vladimir Levin.



171. Beit David Synagogue in Volgograd, prayer hall, interior view towards the southwest. Photo: Vladimir Levin.

87 [https://ru.wikipedia.org/wiki/Бейт\\_Давид\\_\(синагога,\\_Волгоград\)](https://ru.wikipedia.org/wiki/Бейт_Давид_(синагога,_Волгоград))



(two of them produced in Kremenchug, now in Ukraine, Fig. 172), some from before the war, and the majority from the post-war period. Epitaphs in Hebrew appear on all preserved headstones from before the war and also on

some stones until the 1960s (Fig. 173). A tombstone from 1980 has no Hebrew inscription, but the Russian letters are stylized as the Hebrew ones (Fig. 174).



172. Tombstone of Reisha Boltiansky in the Jewish cemetery in Volgograd, 1911. Made by Dubinskii in Kremenchug. Photo: Vladimir Levin.



173. Tombstone of Aron Nudel in the Jewish cemetery in Volgograd, 1956. Photo: Vladimir Levin.



174. Tombstone of Lia Pulson in the Jewish cemetery in Volgograd, 1980. Photo: Vladimir Levin.

## ASTRAKHAN

Astrakhan is situated in the delta of the Volga, close to the Caspian Sea. It was annexed by Ivan the Terrible in 1556 and since then served as an entrepôt, through which goods from the Caucasus, Central Asia, Persia, and India entered Russia. According to the Jewish Statute of 1804, the province of Astrakhan was opened to Jewish settlement, and the first Jews settled in the city in 1805.<sup>88</sup> The community, however, was very small, and when the government decided in 1835 to expel all Jews from the province, there were only 49 Jews in the city.<sup>89</sup> A new community of Jewish soldiers emerged in the 1840s: in 1844 it received a “military” prayer house, which existed until 1871, and established a *Hevra Kadisha*. By the 1860s, the community numbered about 300 Jews, mostly soldiers and their families. In 1897 there were already 2,164 Jews.<sup>90</sup>

Four synagogues existed in Astrakhan in the early twentieth century. The oldest, known as Ashkenaz or Choral, was established in 1866.<sup>91</sup> Its building at 14 Shaumiana St. captured in a photograph (Fig. 9) was probably built in the late nineteenth century and burnt down in 1996. The synagogue named Sfard was established in 1879<sup>92</sup> and is still functioning (see below). Sfard means that the worshippers of this synagogue

prayed according to *nusah sefarad*, i.e. they were Hasidim. The Artisans’ synagogue, also at Shaumian St., was founded in 1904 in a wooden building and was demolished in Soviet times.<sup>93</sup> The last synagogue, that of the merchants, appeared in 1911. It rented the upper floor in the building at 39 Kuibysheva St. and this building is still preserved (Fig. 175).<sup>94</sup> A single story brick building of the Jewish school (opened in 1907, in the 1920s functioned as the Jewish labor school) is also preserved at 19 Shaumiana St. (Fig. 176).<sup>95</sup>



176. Building of the Jewish school in Astrakhan, 1907.  
Photo: Vladimir Levin.



175. Building at 39 Kuibysheva St. in Astrakhan, where the synagogue of merchants was opened in 1911.  
Photo: Vladimir Levin.



177. Sfard Synagogue in Astrakhan, view from the northwest.  
Photo: Vladimir Levin.

88 A.R. Bimbad, “Kak v Astrakhani poiavilis’ evrei,” *Shalom: Gazeta Astrakhanskoi evreiskoi religioznoi obshchiny “Sfard”*, no. 2(2) (September 2005): 3.

89 Yulii Gessen, “Astrakhanskaia guberniia,” *Evreiskaia entsiklopediia*, vol. 3 (St. Petersburg: Brokgauz i Efron, 1909), 359–60; A.R. Bimbad, “O zhizni perykh evreev Astrakhani,” *Shalom: Gazeta Astrakhanskoi evreiskoi religioznoi obshchiny “Sfard”*, no. 3(3) (November 2005): 2.

90 Yulii Gessen, “Astrakhan’,” *Evreiskaia entsiklopediia*, vol. 3 (St. Petersburg: Brokgauz i Efron, 1909), 360–61.

91 *Ibid.*, 361.

92 *Ibid.*, 361.

93 *Ibid.*, 361; A.R. Bimbad, “Ot voiny k revoliutsii (iz istorii evreev Astrakhani),” *Shalom: Gazeta Astrakhanskoi evreiskoi religioznoi obshchiny “Sfard”*, no. 6(9) (November 2006): 2.

94 A.R. Bimbad, “Pered nachalom groznykh sobytii (iz istorii evreev Astrakhani),” *Shalom: Gazeta Astrakhanskoi evreiskoi religioznoi obshchiny “Sfard”*, no. 1(15) (August 2011): 2.

95 Gessen, “Astrakhan’,” 361; A.R. Bimbad, “Evreiskoe obrazovanie v Astrakhani (iz istorii evreev Astrakhani),” *Shalom:*

The building date of the Sfard Synagogue at 28 Babushkina St. is unclear, since its facades were covered by modern bricks in the 2002,<sup>96</sup> which does not allow a precise stylistic analysis (Fig. 177). It was probably constructed in the late nineteenth century. The building featured twelve round-headed windows, a vaulted ceiling, and a women's gallery on the western side of the prayer hall (Fig. 178, 179). This synagogue was never closed and

therefore preserves quite rare objects originating from the Soviet times. The Torah ark probably was made in the 1920s (Fig. 180), like the *amud* which bears the date of 1927 (Fig. 181).

The synagogue keeps a *pinkas* of *Hevra Mishnayot* that was established in 1923 in the Ashkenaz Synagogue (Fig. 183). The bylaws of the *Hevra* reflect the new trends



178. Sfard Synagogue in Astrakhan, interior view towards the northeast. Photo: Vladimir Levin.



179. Sfard Synagogue in Astrakhan, interior view towards the west. Photo: Vladimir Levin.



180. Torah ark in the Sfard Synagogue in Astrakhan. Photo: Vladimir Levin.



181. Amud in the Sfard Synagogue in Astrakhan, 1927. Photo: Vladimir Levin.

*Gazeta Astrakhanskoi evreiskoi religioznoi obshchiny "Sfard"*, no. 3(13) (August 2007): 2.

<sup>96</sup> On the history of renovations of the synagogue see A.R. Bimbad, "Kto otremoniroval sinagogu?," *Shalom: Gazeta Astrakhanskoi evreiskoi religioznoi obshchiny "Sfard"*, no. 1(11) (February 2007 2006): 3.



Although the Russian-Jewish Encyclopedia states that the oldest tombstone in the cemetery was dated 1845,<sup>98</sup> the earliest tombstone that we succeeded to find dates back to 1856 (Fig. 184). Epitaphs on some tombstones say “Soldier” (Fig. 185) thus testifying to the occupation

of the significant part of the community. The existence of Hasidic Chabad community in Astrakhan found its expression in the epitaph of Meir Zalman Zeligson (d. 1889), which says that he was a Hasid of the Tzemach



183. Entrance gate to the Jewish cemetery in Astrakhan. Photo: Vladimir Levin.



184. Tombstone of Zevulun ben Yosef in the Jewish cemetery in Astrakhan, 1856 – the oldest tombstone found. Photo: Ekaterina Oleshkevich.



185. Tombstone of soldier Gutman ben Elimelekh in the Jewish cemetery in Astrakhan, 1863. Photo: Ekaterina Oleshkevich.



186. Tombstone of the Chabad Hasid Meir Zalman Zeligson, 1889. Photo: Ekaterina Oleshkevich.

<sup>98</sup> Gessen, “Astrakhan”, 360.

Tzedek of Lubavich and later joined the Chabad branch in Liady (Fig. 186).

While the tombstones of the nineteenth century are mostly traditional in their form, language, and the text of epitaphs, this mode changed in the early twentieth century, expressing acculturation and social advancement. Among numerous sandstone obelisks, our attention was drawn by the granite headstone of Mark Sokolskii with art nouveau decoration (Fig. 187). This stone of 1908 is an exact copy of the tombstones of the Golant brothers in St. Petersburg, produced by G. Brakhman in 1907 and 1908 (Fig. 188). Even the epitaphs in Astrakhan and St. Petersburg are similar:

instead of the traditional beginning *po nitman*, they read *po yanuah*, and all three of them use the phrase *yakar ruah*, “dear spirit.” All this allows to conclude that the tombstone of Sokolskii was also made in St. Petersburg by G. Brakhman and brought to Astrakhan from there.

Many tombstones of the 1940s and 1950s are prerevolutionary marbles from demolished cemeteries in secondary use. While in other cities their origins are usually well concealed, in Astrakhan dozens of stones have clear signs of removed original epitaphs (Fig. 189), while several stones have the original epitaphs preserved, including epitaphs in Armenian.



187. Tombstone of Moshe Sokolskii in the Jewish cemetery in Astrakhan, 1907. Probably made by G. Brakhman in St. Petersburg.  
Photo: Ekaterina Oleshkevich.



188. G. Brakhman, Tombstones of Zeev Vulf and Saul Golant in the Jewish cemetery in St. Petersburg, 1907 and 1908.  
Photo: Vladimir Levin, 2021.



189. Tombstone of Dr. Mark Sheinfein in the Jewish cemetery in Astrakhan, 1941.  
Photo: Vladimir Levin.

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