



## *From Jerusalem to Birobidzhan:*

Expedition of the Center for Jewish Art at the Hebrew University  
to document Jewish heritage in  
Siberia



*Wooden Soldiers' Synagogue in Tomsk, 1907*

The expedition was made possible thanks to the generous support  
of Mrs. Josephine Urban, London and an anonymous donor

August 2015

In August 2015, the team of the Center for Jewish Art at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem undertook a research expedition to Siberia. Over the course of 21 days, the expedition spanned 6,000 km. Overall, the CJA team visited 16 sites in Siberia and the Russian Far East: Tomsk, Mariinsk, Achinsk, Krasnoyarsk, Kansk, Nizhneudinsk, Irkutsk, Babushkin (former Mysovsk), Kabansk, Ulan-Ude (former Verkhneudinsk), Barguzin, Petrovsk Zabaikalskii (former Petrovskii Zavod), Chita, Khabarovsk, Birobidzhan, and Vladivostok (Figs. 1, 1a). Sixteen synagogues and four collections of ritual objects were documented alongside a survey of eleven Jewish cemeteries and numerous Jewish houses.

The team consisted of Prof. Aliza Cohen-Mushlin, Dr. Vladimir Levin, Dr. Katrin Kessler, Dr. Anna Berezin, and Arch. Zoya Arshavsky.



1. Map showing the expedition route



1a. Enlarged map showing the expedition route

# Acknowledgements

The expedition was made possible with the generous donations of Mrs. Josephine Urban, London, and an anonymous donor.

The success of the expedition was a result of the information and various support we received from the following people and institutions, to whom we express our sincere gratitude:

Nina Belomestnova (Petrovsk Zabaikalskii), Valeria Bulkina (Birobidzhan), Aleksei Cherepanov (Kansk), Eduard Cherniak (Tomsk), Taisia Chernykh (Babushkin), Natalia Dorokhova (Kabansk), Sergei Dubrovin (Irkutsk), Boris Eremin (Chita), Tatiana Fillipova (Barguzin), Victoria Gerasimova (Omsk), Elena Goncharova (Barnaul), Marina Kachan (Achinsk), Lilia Kalmina (Ulan Ude), Rabbi Levi Kamenetsky (Tomsk), Dugarma Khubitueva (Ulan Ude), David Kizhner (Tomsk), Vladimir Kolpakov (Kansk), Sofia Kuras (Irkutsk), Gleb Lanne (Vladivostok), Liubov Levitina (Ulan Ude), Iurii Lifshits (Krasnoyarsk), Larisa Maliuchenko (Kansk), Dmitrii Maltsev (Nizhneudinsk), Liubov Matskevich (Tomsk), Svetlana Mushnikova (Khabarovsk), Svetlana Nomokonova (Petrovsk Zabaikalskii), Sergei Novolodskii (Kabansk), Liudmila Poliakova (Achinsk), Rabbi Eliyahu Riss (Birobidzhan), Vladimir Rott (Toronto), Nikolai Ruban (Khabarovsk), Liubov Rubanenko (Irkutsk), Vladimir Shaidurov (St. Petersburg), Sergei Sheshukov (Mariinsk), Tatyana Shvankova-Shcherba (Mariinsk), Evgenii Solomon (Irkutsk), Valerii Stelmakh (Achinsk), Olesia Stepanenko (Mariinsk), Oksana Ulianova (Tomsk), Rabbi Aaron Vagner (Irkutsk), Rabbi Benjamin Vagner (Krasnoyarsk), Rabbi Shimon Varakin (Vladivostok), Irina Viaznikova (Vladivostok), Valentina Viktorovskaya (Irkutsk – St. Petersburg), Tatiana Volkova (Khabarovsk);

Achinsk Regional Museum, Birobidzhan Regional Museum, Beit Tshuva Community in Birobidzhan, Freid Community in Birobidzhan, Chita Jewish Community, A.S. Pushkin Library in Chita, Irkutsk Jewish Community, A.M. Sibiriakov Museum of Irkutsk Urban History, Kabansk City Administration, Kabansk City Library, Kabansk Regional Museum, Kansk Regional Museum, Khabarovsk Jewish Community, N.I. Grodenkov Museum of the Khabarovsk Region, Krasnoyarsk Jewish Community, “Historical Mariinsk” Museum, Petrovsk Zabaikalskii Regional Museum, Petrovsk Zabaikalskii Tax Administration, Tomsk Jewish community, Vladivostok Jewish Community, M. Khangalov Museum of the History of Buryatia in Ulan Ude.

The photographs used in this report were taken by Dr. Anna Berezin, Dr. Katrin Kessler, and Dr. Vladimir Levin.

# Introduction

Jewish presence in Siberia has been sporadically recorded since the 18<sup>th</sup> century, but established Jewish settlements appeared in the region only in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. Russian authorities prohibited Jews from settling in Siberia in 1837, after which time the Jewish population consisted mainly of those who were forcefully sent there.

One type were Jews who performed crimes in the Pale of Settlement and were sentenced to a lifetime of exile in Siberia. Initially the authorities dispersed them in villages, but later there was an influx of many exiles into rapidly developing towns, where they established themselves as successful businessmen. The second type of Jewish settlers were *cantonists* – teenage Jewish recruits to the Russian Imperial Army in the time of Nicholas I (1827-1855). They were conscripted for a 25-year long service and stationed in the towns with military garrisons. The majority of *cantonists* were forcefully baptized, but those who remained faithful to Judaism could practice religious rituals during their military service. After they retired, they usually stayed in the same towns and formed a significant part of the local communities.

By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Jewish population of Siberia reached almost 35,000 people (the same number of Jews lived in Vitebsk, for example). Jews constituted a significant portion of the population in many towns (from 6 to 15%). Synagogues (mostly wooden) and cemeteries existed in the majority of Siberian towns. In the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, many communities were already so affluent that they could afford to erect spacious stone synagogues. The construction of a synagogue in the Russian Empire was not only a matter of funding, like everywhere else, but also demanded permission from the authorities, which was not easily achieved.

Iu. Ostrovskii, who published a book about the Jews in Siberia in 1911, described Jewish communities, their synagogues and cemeteries thus:

*A majority of prayer houses in Siberia are of stone, spacious buildings. Though they are not radiant with beauty, Siberian Jewish communities are proud of them. Some members also love to adorn their cemeteries and erect beautiful gravestones to their deceased. This custom is well-established in Siberia (Iu. Ostrovskii, Sibirskie evrei [St. Petersburg, 1911], 39).*

After the Revolution of 1917, the Civil war of 1918-1921, and the firm establishment of Soviet rule in Siberia, new developments began. On the one hand, many Jews emigrated abroad to escape Communist rule. On the other, new Jews arrived from the former Pale of Settlement, especially in the 1930s, when Stalin's industrialization policy turned some of the Siberian towns into important industrial centers. In 1928, the Birobidzhan area at the Soviet-Chinese border was proclaimed the Jewish Autonomous Region, and a substantial number of Jews settled there, engaging in agriculture.

A new influx of Jews to Siberia occurred in the 1940s. After the annexation of Western Ukraine, Western Belorussia, Moldova, Lithuania, and Latvia in 1939-1940, tens of thousands of “bourgeois” Jews were exiled by the Soviet authorities to various remote regions including Siberia. With the beginning of the war between Nazi Germany and the USSR in June 1941, refugees arrived from the occupied areas as well as from the regions threatened with a similar fate, e.g. Moscow and Leningrad. Thus, the pattern of Jewish settlement in Siberia changed dramatically in the 20<sup>th</sup> century: Jews abandoned smaller towns and villages and concentrated in the large cities.

Soviet authorities conducted strict anti-religious policies. After a decade of anti-religious propaganda in the 1920s, the majority of synagogues, mosques and churches were shut down in the early 1930s. Their buildings were then used for other purposes. However, the fate of churches and synagogues differed in many cases. While churches were mostly destroyed, former synagogues housed various branches of the Soviet administration. Thus, in some towns a stone synagogue remained the highest and largest building, dominating single-story wooden houses (Fig. 2). During the Soviet period many old Jewish cemeteries were demolished (as were Christian and Muslim ones), but Jewish sections were allocated in the new municipal cemeteries.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, a significant portion of Siberian Jews emigrated to Israel and the USA. At the same time Jewish communities were re-established, some of them by the initiative of local Jews, others with the help of Chabad rabbis. In those cities where the synagogue buildings were preserved (Tomsk, Irkutsk, Vladivostok) the revived communities then took possession and reconstructed them. In the cities where an old synagogue did not survive, new synagogues were erected (Krasnoyarsk, Khabarovsk).



*2. Synagogue in Petrovsk Zabaikalskii (1911)*

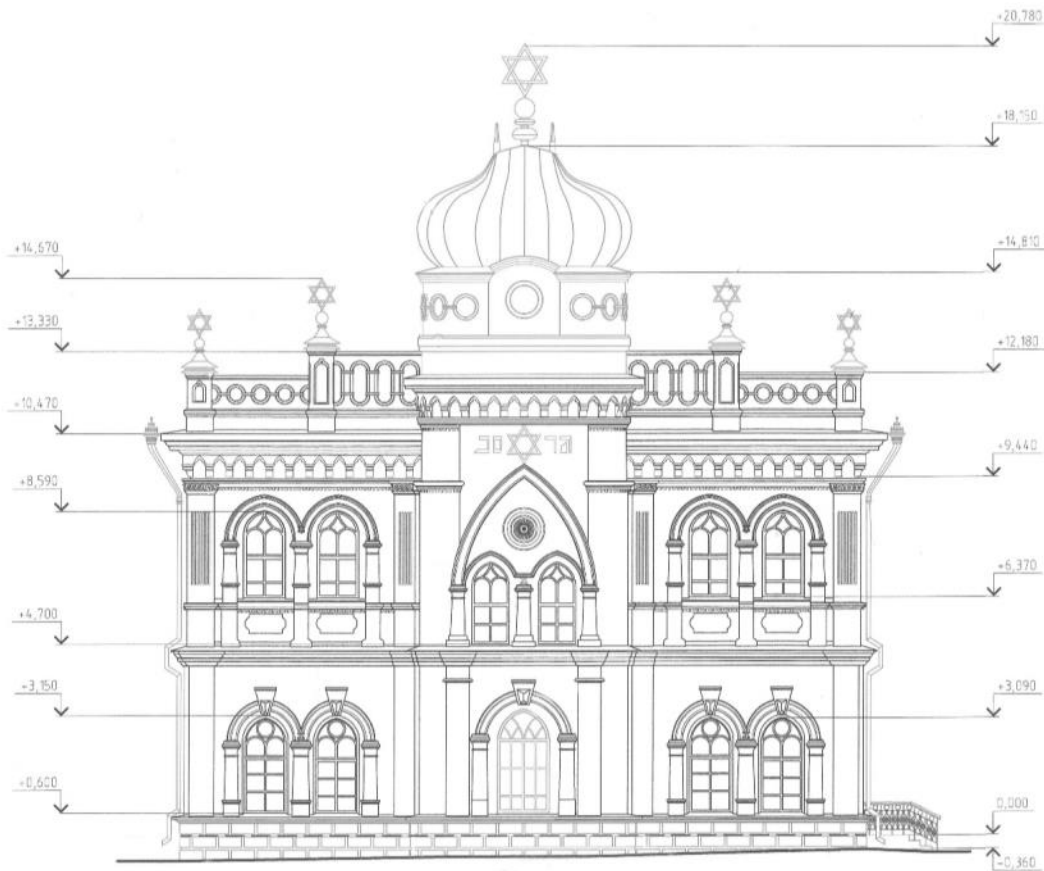


*3. Synagogue in Nizhneudinsk (1914)*

# Tomsk

In Tomsk, the starting point of our expedition, Jews arrived in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century as convicts and as *cantonists* (as explained above, teenagers conscripted into the Russian imperial army from the Jewish communities in the Pale of Settlement). In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century Tomsk was already a home to a Jewish community of 3,000 (6,4% of its total population). There were three synagogues in Tomsk, a Jewish cemetery and numerous Jewish institutions. Today there are about 600 Jews and an active religious community.

The community life is concentrated around the Choral Synagogue (Fig. 4). It was established in 1850 and its current building was erected in 1902. Soviet authorities closed the synagogue in 1929 and used the building to house various administrative institutions. They also removed the cupola, which emphasized the interior placement of the Torah ark. In 1999, the re-established Jewish community reclaimed the building of the former synagogue. As part of a large reconstruction the community re-installed the cupola and rearranged the interior, since the original one was completely lost (Fig. 5-6).



4. The Choral Synagogue in Tomsk, eastern façade



5. The Choral Synagogue in Tomsk, view from the east



6. The Choral Synagogue in Tomsk, interior view facing east

From a historic, artistic and emotional standpoint the former Soldiers' Synagogue was the highlight of our visit to Tomsk (Fig. 7). It was built from wood in 1907 (Fig. 8), converted into an apartment house in 1931, and currently stands neglected and almost abandoned (Fig. 9). The only remaining tenant in the building met the CJA researchers with an ax in his hand and initially refused to let us in. With the help of a local architect who studied the building, Liubov Matskevich, we were able to enter and document the interior. Although the building was divided into two large "communal apartments," each housing a dozen families, its interior preserved many original features: moldings, doorposts and wooden columns, which supported the women's gallery (Figs. 13, 14). On the exterior, wooden window decorations with curved Stars of David are almost completely intact (Figs. 11, 12).



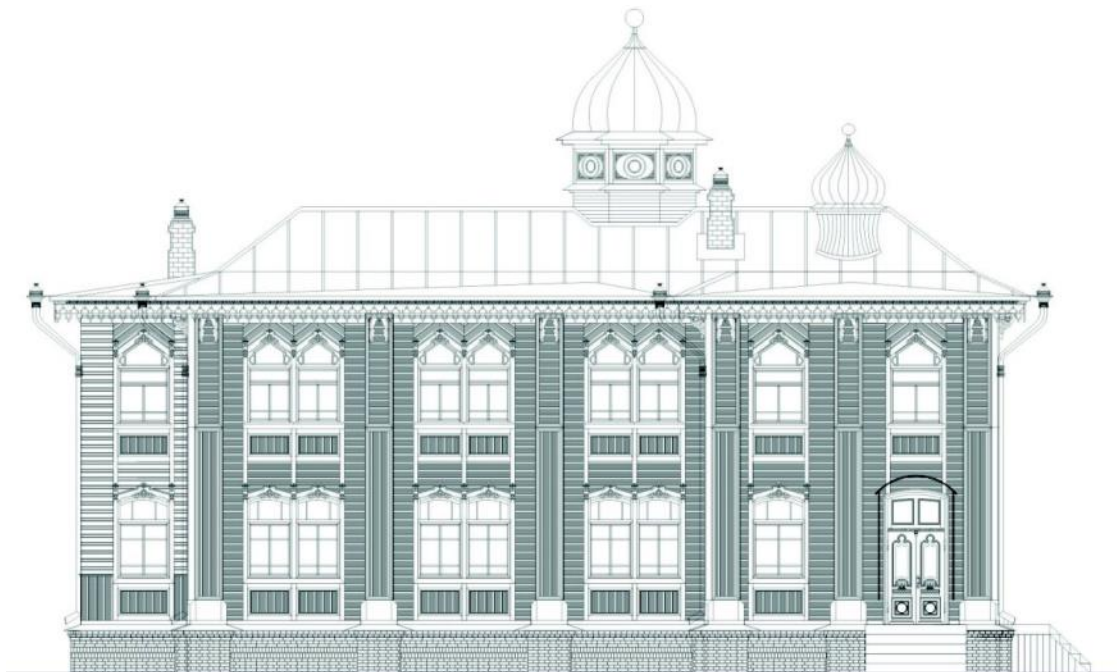
7. Soldiers' Synagogue (1907), window decorations on the upper floor



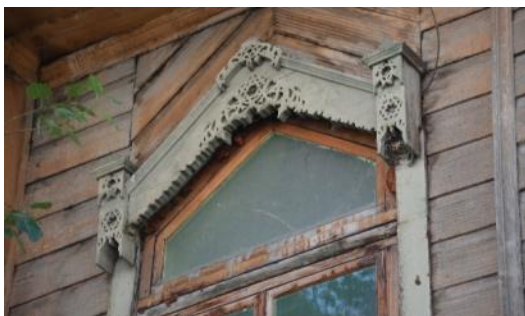
8. Soldiers' Synagogue in Tomsk, a photograph taken between 1907-1909 (After GertsI Tsam, *Istoria vozniknovenia v g. Tomske voennomolitvennoi Soldatskoi shkoly* [Tomsk, 1909]).



9. Soldiers' Synagogue in Tomsk, view from the northwest



10. Soldiers' Synagogue in Tomsk, northern façade, reconstruction by Liubov Matskevich



11. Soldiers' Synagogue in Tomsk, window decoration with a Star of David on the upper floor



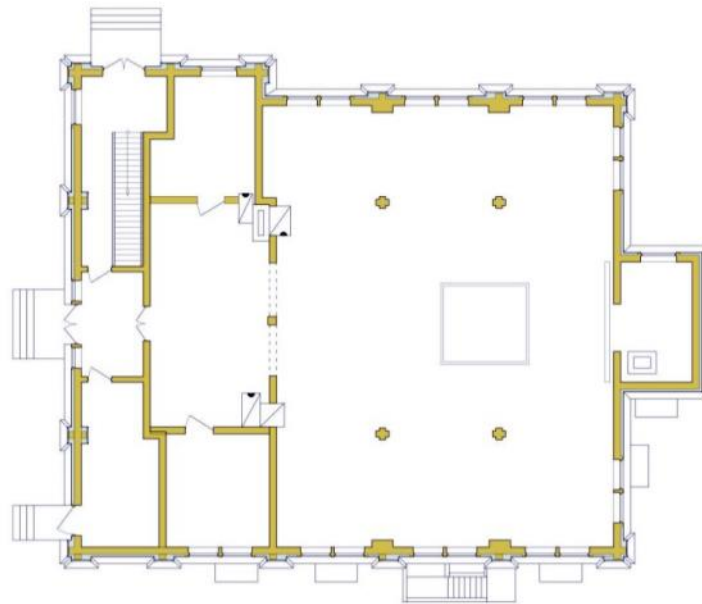
12. Soldiers' Synagogue in Tomsk, window decoration with a Star of David on the ground floor



13. Soldiers' Synagogue in Tomsk, remnants of synagogue interior on the upper floor: a column



14. Soldiers' Synagogue in Tomsk, remnants of synagogue interior on the ground floor: central pier of the door leading to the prayer hall



15. Soldiers' Synagogue in Tomsk, ground plan, reconstruction by Liubov Matskevich

While the old Jewish cemetery was demolished in 1951, the Jewish section of the municipal cemetery could be surveyed. The earliest tombstones in the section date back to 1942, marking the graves of Jewish soldiers who passed away in military hospitals during WWII (Fig. 16). The majority of those graves had only tin plaques, which

disappeared over the course of time. Many headstones from the 1950s have long epitaphs in Hebrew and Jewish symbols. These mark the graves of the Jews exiled by Stalin to Siberia from the areas annexed by the Soviet Union in 1940, including Lithuania, Bessarabia (Moldova), and Bukovina (Fig. 17).



16. Tomsk, tombstone from 1944. Under a five-pointed star, the Russian epitaph written with mistakes on a tin plaque reads: "Here is buried a soldier Leikin Levi Isaak son of Mendel, born 1900 in Ukraine, died of heavy wounds from the Patriotic War 3 August 19[44]. You are a dear brother; the memory of you we shall preserve." After the war, his sisters and daughter erected a metal fence with a marble plaque and later a photograph was added.



17. Tomsk, metal tombstone of Kopel Ziv from Shavel in Lithuania (1957), with a Hebrew epitaph and a Star of David

The expedition also surveyed several Jewish houses. Some of them are impressive wooden structures with richly carved decorations, built according to the local tradition (Fig. 18). Others were erected by modern architects in the styles fashionable in the Russian capital and abroad (Fig.19 ).



18. Tomsk, Jewish house, 10 Frunze St. (early 20<sup>th</sup> century)



19. Tomsk, Jewish house, 83 Lenina St. (early 20<sup>th</sup> century)

# Mariinsk

From Tomsk, the expedition travelled 220 km, partly on dirt-roads, to Mariinsk. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century it was a fast developing town serving nearby gold mines. There, exiled Jewish convicts turned into respectable merchants who dominated the local trade. While Jews constituted only 10% of the total population, in 1908 they accounted for 76% of Mariinsk merchants. Thus, several dozen large brick houses which belonged to Jewish merchants stand along the central street of the town (Fig. 26). According to the 2010 census, no Jews remain in Mariinsk.

The synagogue was built on the main street of Mariinsk between 1894 and 1896 (Fig. 21). Closed by the Soviet authorities, it served as a sports club and later as a post office. Originally the brick synagogue had a dome above its prayer hall, but it was demolished during the Soviet era. All other features of the building are still intact: attic walls with Stars of David emphasizing the entrances to the synagogue in the western part of the building (Fig. 23), the apse in the east where the Torah ark stood and plaster

frames on the walls of the prayer hall between the windows.



*20. The CJA team and representatives from the "Historical Mariinsk" Museum and a local charity organization in front of the synagogue*

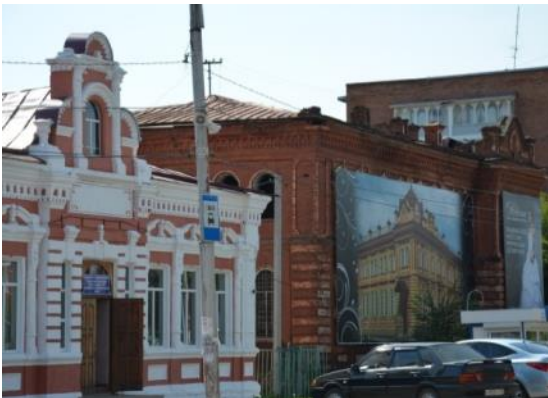
Currently the building is abandoned and is quickly deteriorating. The interior bears signs of recent fires, and piles of syringes testify to the local drug-addicts who settled there (Figs. 24, 25). The rabbi's house situated nearby is used today as an office building (Fig. 22).

Besides the synagogue and Jewish houses, the expedition surveyed Jewish

tombstones in the midst of non-Jewish graves in a cemetery situated in a forest (Fig. 27). Many tombstones from the 1940s to 1960s bear a depiction of a Star of David and the first two letters of the traditional Hebrew epitaph, .י.נ.פ., meaning "here is buried."



21. Mariinsk synagogue,  
view from the northwest



22. Mariinsk, synagogue on the right and  
rabbi's house on the left



23. Mariinsk synagogue, a Star of David on the  
northern façade



*24. Mariinsk synagogue,  
view facing the women's gallery*



*25. Mariinsk synagogue, view from the women's gallery  
towards the Torah ark*



26. Mariinsk, house of Elka Riskevish, who sold textiles and rented the ground floor to a pharmacy



27. Mariinsk, wooden tombstone from the 1950s with a broken Star of David

## Achinsk

From Mariinsk we travelled 200 km to the east and arrived in Achinsk. Jews had already settled there in the 1820s and by the 1850s there was a Jewish prayer house and a cemetery. According to the 2010 census only 35 Jews reside in the town.



28. Achinsk Synagogue, design by Vladimir Sokolovskii, 1907. Gosudarstvennyi arkhiv Krasnoarskogo Kraia, coll. 595, inv. 59, file 485, fol. 3

The present synagogue building was erected in 1907, according to a design by Vladimir Sokolovskii (1874–1959), an official architect of the Krasnoyarsk district (Fig. 28). Sokolovskii envisioned a Neo-Romanesque building, using as a model the large synagogues built in the main German cities in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. The synagogue had a central dome and two towers in its western part. In 1932, it was shut down by the authorities and its central dome was demolished (Figs. 29, 30). Numerous Stars of David decorating the synagogue's façades were removed, but their traces are still present (Fig 31). Since 1990, the former synagogue serves as an ambulance station.

The expedition also surveyed several former Jewish houses in Achinsk, one of them built in the Russian national style (Fig. 32).



*29. Achinsk synagogue,  
eastern façade*



*30. Achinsk synagogue,  
western façade*



*31. Achinsk synagogue,  
a Star of David on the western  
façade*



*32. Achinsk, house of the merchant  
Isai Patuchinskii,  
14 Lenina St.*

# Krasnoyarsk

Krasnoyarsk, 180 km east of Achinsk, is one of the major Siberian cities. The Jewish neighborhood there existed from the very beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and by the end of that century there were 1,100 Jews in Krasnoyarsk. Now the community numbers 765 people.

The wooden synagogue of Krasnoyarsk, known from numerous old photographs (Fig. 33), was dismantled in the 1970s. When the community was revived in 1991, it received a regular building instead, which was reconstructed to serve as a synagogue (Fig. 34). In the 2000s, a new large synagogue was erected nearby (Fig. 35). There we were welcomed by the head of the community Iurii Lifshits and its rabbi Benjamin Wagner (Fig. 36).



33. Wooden Synagogue in Krasnoyarsk, built apparently in 1878 and destroyed in the 1970-80s.

*Postcard, sent in December 1917.  
Collection of the Krasnoyarsk Synagogue*



34. Building that the Krasnoyarsk community received from the authorities which was converted into a synagogue



35. New Krasnoyarsk synagogue with kindergarten and mikveh



36. Iurii Lifshits, the chairman of the Jewish community, shows Prof. Aliza Cohen-Mushlin a damaged Torah scroll received from a museum collection (previously belonging to the synagogue in Minusinsk)



37. Krasnoyarsk, tombstone of Dov Bertson (1914) with two lions

The old Jewish cemetery of Krasnoyarsk, established in the 1870s is well preserved. There we were able to survey several major types of tombstones. Some are headstones of traditional form, bearing Hebrew epitaphs decorated with traditional images of lions, birds, crowns, menoras and women's hands blessing Sabbath candles (Fig. 37). Other graves are marked by more elaborate monuments, combining traditional Jewish features with local Siberian customs (Fig. 38). Many tombstones from the Soviet period also bear Jewish symbols, while others have no sign indicating the Jewish ethnicity of the deceased (Fig. 39).



38. Krasnoyarsk, tombstone of Libe Subbtovskaia (1899)



39. Krasnoyarsk, tombstone of Nadezhda (Rivka) Berkovich (1921)

Several prominent houses built by rich Jewish merchants remained in Krasnoyarsk (Figs. 40, 41). Some of them prominently display the Jewish identity of the owner by

integrating Stars of David into the decorations or using the Neo-Moorish style, characteristic of Jewish religious structures from the 19<sup>th</sup> century in Europe.



40. House of Iosif Itsyn in Neo-Moorish style, decorated with Stars of David. Architect Vladimir Sokolovskii (?), 1911-12



41. House of Libman in Art Nouveau style. Architect Vladimir Sokolovskii, 1909-10

## Kansk



42. Kansk synagogue, view from the northwest.  
Photo of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.  
Collection of the Kansk Regional Museum

A major discovery of our expedition was the synagogue in Kansk, situated 230 km to the east from Krasnoyarsk. The impressive wooden synagogue was erected in 1895 (Fig. 42), and in the 1930s it was converted into an apartment house and lost its prominent dome (Figs. 43, 44).

At the moment the building is abandoned. It bears traces of fire and the eastern, northern and southern façades are partly dismantled by locals, who use it as a source of firewood (Fig. 45). Some carved window decorations are still intact (Fig. 46). However, it

is likely that our team was the last to see and document this synagogue, since this extraordinary building might not survive the coming winter.



*43. Kansk synagogue, view from the northwest*



*44. Kansk synagogue, western façade, sketch by Zoya Arshavsky*



*45. Kansk synagogue, prayer hall, view from the east, with Dr. Katrin Kessler*



*46. Kansk synagogue, carved window decorations*

The CJA team also surveyed the Jewish section in the local cemetery. Jewish tombstones were covered with dog-rose bushes and it took us considerable time to find them. The most impressive gravestone in the cemetery is the monument of Isaac Shepshelevich from 1900: a stone base decorated with Tablets of the Law and

surmounted by a black marble column (Fig. 47). The motif of the Tablets of the Law was very common in pre-revolutionary graves in the Kansk cemetery. Among the tombstones from the Soviet period there are many with Hebrew epitaphs and Stars of David.



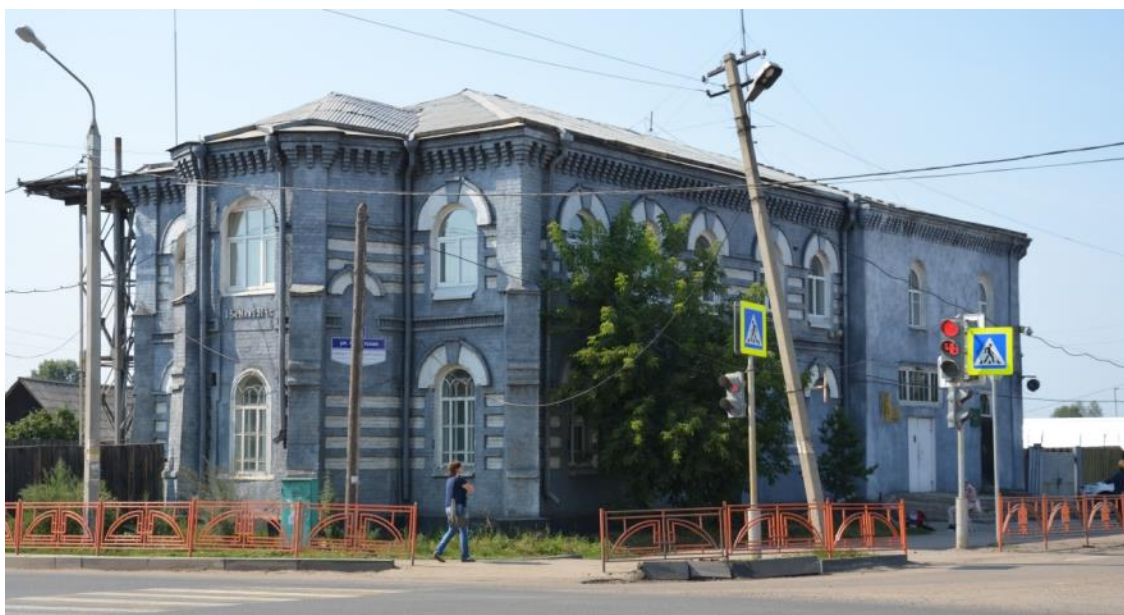
*47. Jewish section in the Kansk cemetery  
with Shepshelevich's tombstone in the center*



*48. Tombstone of Tevye Rudovskii (1901)  
in the form of a sarcophagus*

# Nizhneudinsk

The small town of Nizhneudinsk is 300 km to the southeast of Kansk. In its main thoroughfare, the CJA team found an impressive brick synagogue inaugurated on 15 May, 1914, two months before the outbreak of the First World War (Figs. 49, 50). Even today it is one of the largest and tallest buildings in the town. Like other synagogues in the Soviet Union, it was closed in the 1920s and converted into an administrative building. Nowadays it houses the local branch of the Federal Investigation Committee – the closest Russian equivalent to the FBI. Nonetheless we were allowed to enter the building and to document the remnants of its interior decorations (Fig. 51).



*49. Nizhneudinsk synagogue, view from the northeast*



*50. Nizhneudinsk synagogue, central part of the eastern façade with an inscription*



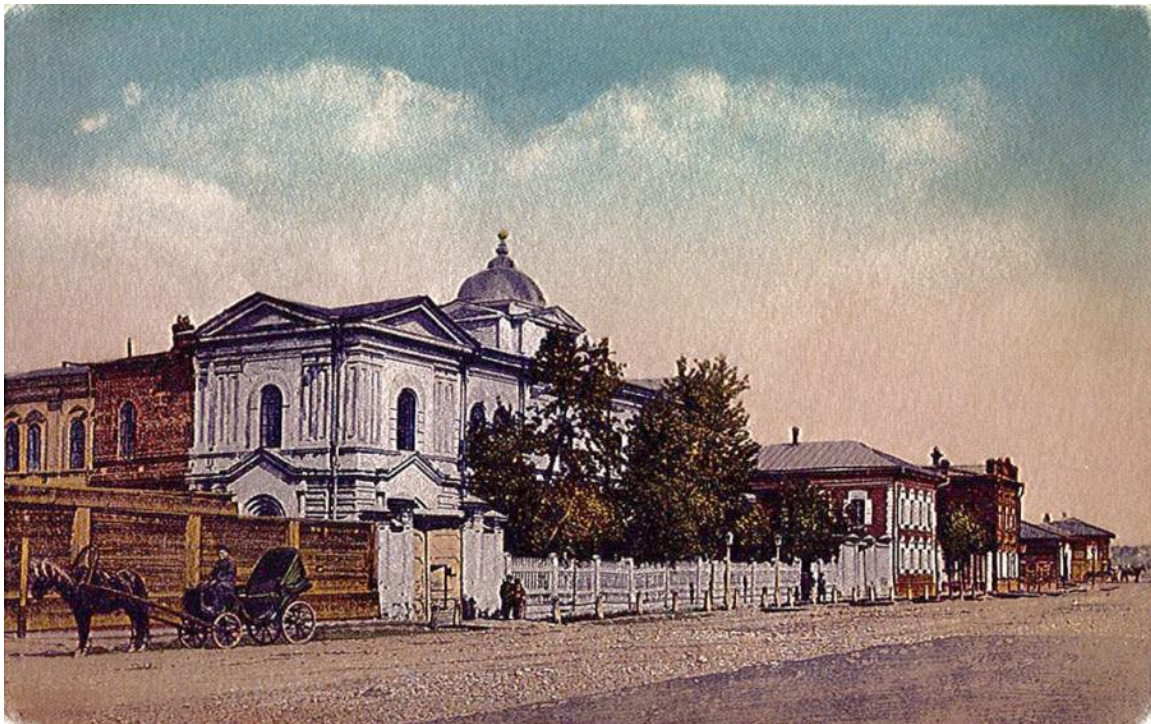
*51. Nizhneudinsk synagogue, interior, ceiling medallion of the former prayer hall*

# Irkutsk

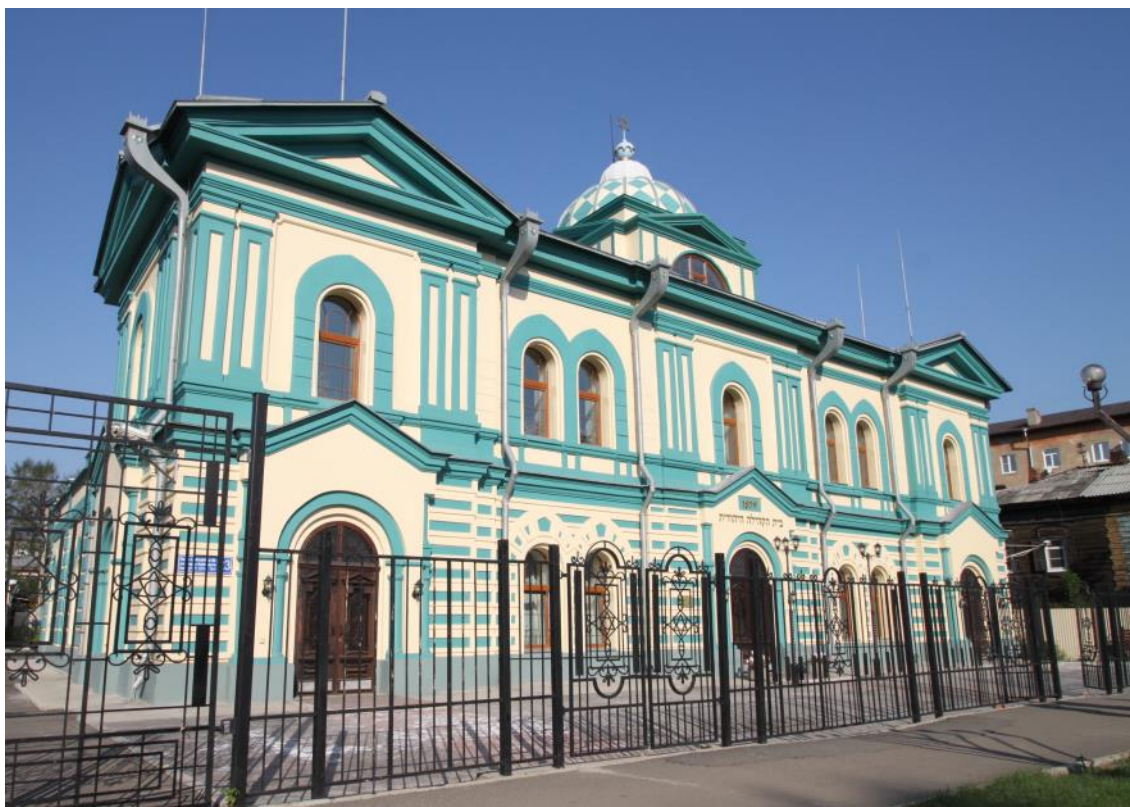
After travelling 520 km from Nizhneudinsk, the expedition arrived in Irkutsk, situated by the Angara River, not far from Lake Baikal. Irkutsk has been the largest city and the administrative center of eastern Siberia since the 18<sup>th</sup> century and therefore it is not surprising that it had a substantial and flourishing Jewish community. By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century there were 3,600 Jews, comprising 7,5% of the city's population.

The Irkutsk synagogue is the oldest preserved Jewish ritual building in Siberia. It was erected in the late 1870s and in 1881 it was crowned with a dome (Fig. 52). The façades of the synagogue were decorated with Neo-Romanesque and Neo-Classical elements; the women's section in the interior was supported by iron columns.

The Soviet authorities closed the synagogue in 1932, but returned it to the community in 1947. Thus, it was a rare example of a synagogue which was active during most of the Soviet period. In 2004, the synagogue was burnt and renovated afterwards (Fig. 53).



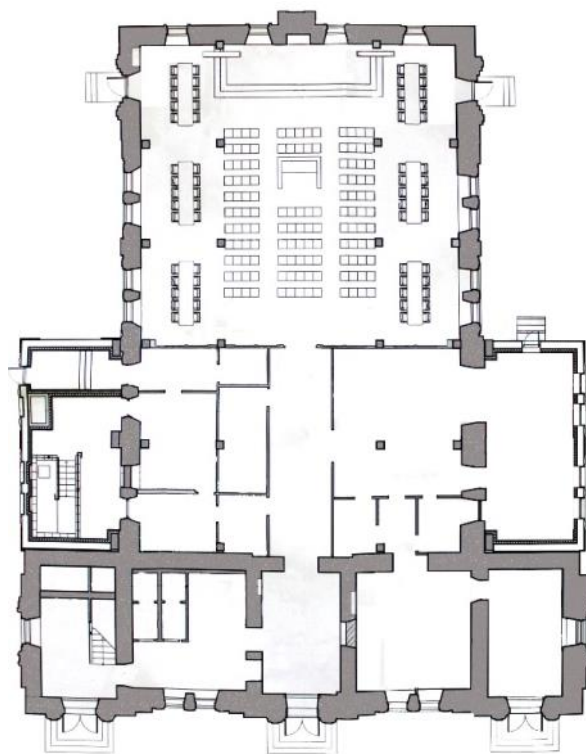
*52. Irkutsk synagogue, postcard of the early 20th century*



53. Irkutsk synagogue, western façade



54. Irkutsk synagogue, Torah ark



55. Irkutsk synagogue, ground plan



56. Irkutsk synagogue, renovation design, cross-section, facing east



57. CJA team and employees of the Museum of Irkutsk Urban History, examine a parochet from the Irkutsk synagogue

Some of the ritual objects from the synagogue were transferred to the Sibriakov Museum of Irkutsk Urban History, where they were documented by the CJA team (Fig. 57).

The Jewish cemetery in Irkutsk is remarkable for being the largest and most well preserved cemetery in the region. Pre-revolutionary tombstones reflect the wealth

of the local Jews, their adherence to the Jewish tradition, as well as their significant acculturation into the Russian society (Figs. 58-61).



58. Grave monument of Yakov and Isai Viner killed in the pogrom of 25 October, 1905



59. Grave monument of Solomon Sadovich, 1941



60. A rich metal tombstone, early 20th c.



61. Tombstone of Leontii Gerzoni, 1904

# Babushkin

Babushkin (previously Mysovsk) at the southern shore of Baikal, 280 km from Irkutsk, was the closest railway station to the Russian-Mongolian border and therefore quickly developed in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Jews had a prominent role in this growth and constituted about 20% of the population in the town by 1915.

The wooden synagogue of Mysovsk did not survive the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and neither did the cemetery. In 2010, Taisia Chernykh, the head of the local library, found the memoirs of Vladimir Rott (Toronto, Canada). In his book, Rott recounts stories about his and his wife's families who originated from Mysovsk. In this way, Taisia first discovered Mysovsk's Jewish history. An acquaintance with Vladimir Rott resulted in an idea to build a memorial on the spot of the looted cemetery. Together with her family and with Rott's support she searched for displaced headstones, translated Hebrew inscriptions, established the cemetery boundary, checked for names of the Jewish deceased in archives, and in 2014 erected the memorial "Shalom." The memorial bears the names of all the people once buried there. Some tombstones, found in the town have been brought to the cemetery and placed around the memorial.

A former Jewish house in Babushkin still has Stars of David interwoven into the traditional Russian-Siberian carved window casing (Figs. 64, 65).



62. Memorial "Shalom" in the Babushkin cemetery built by the Chernykh family with the support of the Rott family



63. Taisia Chernykh explains to Zoya Arshavsky and Dr. Anna Berezin the history of the memorial



64. Babushkin, the CJA team surveying a Jewish house decorated with the Stars of David



65. Babushkin, Jewish house decorated with the Stars of David

## Kabansk



66. Kabansk synagogue, western façade, early 20th century

The shortest journey of our expedition (73 km) was between Babushkin and Kabansk, a town by the River Selenga. The former synagogue is the only religious building that survived the Soviet period in Kabansk. It was built in 1907 and closed in 1930 to become the seat of the regional administration. The fire of 1955 or 1956 destroyed what was left from its original interior as well as the wooden cupola which towered above the entrance (Fig. 68). We were fortunate to find previously unknown photographs of the synagogue's exterior and interior in a museum in Ulan Ude (Figs.66, 67).

Several former Jewish houses are preserved in the town. One of them, which houses the regional museum, has Stars of David on its window frames (Fig. 71).

Only several remains of Jewish tombstones could be found in the former Jewish cemetery. As elsewhere in Siberia they have Hebrew and Russian epitaphs, testifying to the adherence to Jewish tradition and acculturation into Russian society (Figs. 69-70).



67. Kabansk synagogue, interior, view towards Torah ark, which is decorated with Tablets of the Law, lion and deer above it.  
Early 20th century  
Collection of Khangalov Museum, Ulan Ude



68. Kabansk synagogue, view form the northeast



69. Tombstone of Shlomo Epshtein (1922?) with a traditional inscription in Hebrew and a rhymed epitaph in Russian



*70. General view of Kabansk Jewish cemetery, near the village Niukki*



*71. Kabansk, the house of Eidelman, wooden window casings are decorated with Stars of David. After the revolution of 1917 it housed a police office, the local Communist party committee, an out-patients' clinic, and since 2007 - the Kabansk Regional Museum*

## Ulan Ude

Ulan Ude (Verkhneudinsk before 1934) is the capital of the Republic of Buryatia. In 1897, 900 Jews lived there – 11% of the population.

The synagogue of Ulan Ude was erected in the 1880s and, like other Siberian synagogues, had a cupola above the main entrance (Fig. 72). It was closed down in 1930 and the Technological University of Buryatia occupies this building today (Fig. 73). The university was the only institution which did not allow our expedition to document its building. Therefore we could only photograph it and to take several basic measurements from outside.



*72. Ulan Ude synagogue, view from the northwest, early 20th century*



*73. Ulan Ude synagogue, view from the northwest*

When the synagogue was closed in 1930, all objects which the authorities found inside were transferred to the M. Khangalov Museum of the History of Buryatia. Contrary to the university, the workers at the museum accepted us warmly and showed us their complete Jewish collection. Among dozens of ritual objects kept in the museum

the most outstanding are two stands for Torah scrolls (Fig. 79); a miniature Torah scroll, 10 cm high (Fig. 75); and a wooden carved Torah pointer with the inscription “Yosef Lifshitz, Siberia, 1916” (Fig. 76). An almost identical pointer bearing the date 1915 and the word “Siberia,” but another donor’s name, was documented by the CJA researchers in 1995, in the collection of the Lviv Museum of Ethnography and Crafts in Ukraine (see <http://cja.huji.ac.il/browser.php?mode=set&id=1536>).



74. Prof. Aliza Cohen-Mushlin documenting ritual objects in the museum



75. Miniature Torah scroll with three mantles and a case



76. Wooden Torah pointer donated by Yosef Lifshitz in 1916 and inscribed “Siberia” in Yiddish



77. Torah shield, 1875



78. Torah scroll staves, 1905



79. Torah stand with Torah scroll



80. Dr. Vladimir Levin explaining the usage of Jewish ritual objects to the curators of the Museum of the History of Buryatia



81. Shofars



82. Torah mantle (1895) decorated with Tablets of the Law, two lions and double-headed eagle

# Barguzin

After driving 320 km, half the distance on dirt-roads, the expedition arrived in Barguzin, a village in the beautiful Barguzin valley. Unfortunately, we were not able to enjoy spectacular views since the air was full of smoke, originating from large forest fires that struck the region in July-August 2015. We even saw in some places burning trees on both sides of the road.

Barguzin was once home to a wealthy Jewish community of 500 people (33% of the total population). The Novomeiski family from Barguzin, who became rich from developing salt production and headed the Zionist movement in Siberia in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, were the founders of the Palestine Potash Company in 1936 (now The Dead Sea Works).



*83. Jewish section in the Barguzin cemetery*

All that remained from this prominent community is the Jewish section in the local cemetery. Traditional tombstones with Hebrew epitaphs (Fig. 83) surround the impressive graves of the Novomeiski and other prominent families (Fig. 85); some of the monuments were produced in Irkutsk. The most interesting feature in this cemetery is wooden shells covering some graves (Fig. 87). As we learned in the museum of local wooden architecture, such shells were erected in order to protect a grave from wild animals which were likely to dig out and eat the corpse.

A local teacher, Tatyana Fillipova, who runs a school museum where a few remaining Jewish objects are kept, took the initiative to clean the cemetery and to record all existing graves.



84. Tombstone of Avraham Yakov Dubnikov (1909). The stone plaque with a short inscription in Russian, a traditional epitaph and an acrostic in Hebrew was recently destroyed. A similar pyramidal tombstone topped with a cross is found in the Christian part of the cemetery



85. Tombstone of Avraham Novomeiski (1916). It was once topped with a Star of David and includes a small niche, which once contained a photograph of the deceased



86. Tombstone of Miriam Polak



87. Wooden shell to protect a grave from wild animals

# Petrovsk Zabaikalskii

Our next stop was in Petrovsk Zabaikalskii, formerly Petrovskii Zavod, 215 km southeast from Ulan Ude. The place is well known in Russian history for the metallurgical plant, where the first Russian revolutionaries, the Decembrists, were convicted to hard labor in 1830-1839. By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, however, it already had a substantial Jewish population.



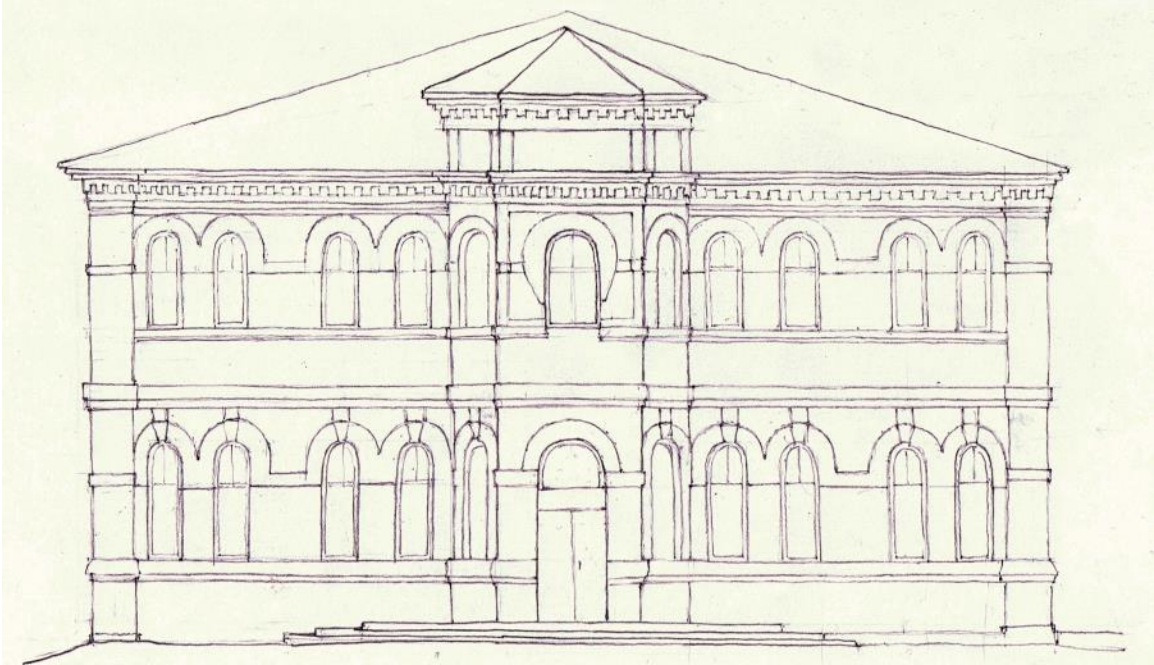
88. Petrovsk Zabaikalskii synagogue, view from the northeast, photograph from the early 20th century



89. Petrovsk Zabaikalskii synagogue, view from the northeast

The largest building in the old part of the town is, in fact, the former synagogue. It was built in 1911 and like other Siberian synagogues had a cupola to mark the placement of the Torah ark. The cupola is not preserved, but the central horseshoe window on the upper floor testifies to the intention to have a synagogue in a Neo-Moorish style. Today the building houses the local branch of the Tax Authority, the workers of which allowed us to document the former synagogue.

A dozen of Jewish tombstones are preserved in the upper part of the Petrovsk Zabaikalskii cemetery. Almost all of them bear Hebrew epitaphs and traditional depictions of animals like lions and deer.



90. Petrovsk Zabaikalskii synagogue, eastern façade, sketch by Zoya Arshavsky



91. Petrovsk Zabaikalskii, general view of the cemetery

## Chita

Chita, 460 km to the east of Petrovsk Zabaikalskii, is the main city in Siberia's Trans-Baikal region. Once it was a substantial Jewish center, but now only 146 Jews are living in the city. Only one tombstone has remained from its Jewish cemetery, but the exterior of the large and impressive synagogue is almost completely preserved.

The synagogue was built in 1907 in a style incorporating many Neo-Moorish elements (Fig. 92). It was not only covered by a large dome, but also had small towers flanking the entrance. After its closure in the 1930s the building was turned into a military hospital and its interior was divided into four floors. Now it houses the regional Administration of Prisons while several rooms in the basement were transferred to the local Jewish community (Figs. 93, 94).



92. Chita synagogue, view from the northwest, early 20th-century postcard



93. Chita synagogue, view from the northwest



94. Chita synagogue, view from the northeast

The only historical Jewish object kept in the Chita's Pushkin Library is a Torah scroll. According to some publications, it was commissioned to commemorate the coronation of the last Russian Tsar, Nicolas II, in 1894. Our documentation, however, discovered, that the only preserved original stave of the scroll bears an inscription in

square Hebrew letters, made by the scribe who produced the scroll. The inscription reads: "This Torah scroll belongs to Mordechai son of Tzvi Ripman." Thus, one may conclude that the scroll was commissioned by a private person and not by the community.



95. Prof. Aliza Cohen-Mushlin and Dr. Vladimir Levin explain the nature of the Torah scroll to the librarian of the Pushkin Library



96. An inscription on the inner side of the Torah scroll stave reads:  
"This Torah scroll belongs to Mordechai son of Tzvi Ripman"

## Khabarovsk



97. Torah mantle of the 124<sup>th</sup> Voronezh Infantry Regiment

In Khabarovsk, the largest city of the Russian Far East, 2000 km east of Chita, the expedition documented Jewish objects in the N.I. Grodenkov Museum of the Khabarovsk Region, surveyed the Jewish section in the municipal cemetery, and visited the active synagogue.

The museum has a small collection of Jewish ritual objects probably originating from the Khabarovsk synagogue, which was built in 1905, closed in 1926, and subsequently demolished.

The most interesting object found in the museum is a Torah mantle, which beside traditional decorations has an embroidered inscription in Russian, reading: "The 124<sup>th</sup> Voronezh Infantry Regiment" (Fig. 97). It is well known that the Jewish soldiers of the Russian Imperial Army commissioned and kept Torah scrolls. In some cases these scrolls were kept together with the regiment colors.

The 124<sup>th</sup> Voronezh Infantry Regiment participated in the Russian-Japanese War of 1904-1905, and it is possible that the Torah scroll, commissioned by its Jewish soldiers, was left after the war in the Khabarovsk synagogue. After the closure of the synagogue by the Soviet authorities, it was transferred to the museum.

The modern synagogue of Khabarovsk was built in 2000 and is comprised of a spacious prayer hall with facilities for communal activities.

The Jewish section in the large municipal cemetery is not especially interesting historically and artistically: the typical Soviet headstones have little which reflects the Jewish ethnicity of the deceased.



*98. Khabarovsk synagogue, exterior*



*99. Khabarovsk synagogue, prayer hall*



*100. Tombstone of G.M. Poliakh (1961) in the Jewish section of the Khabarovsk cemetery*



*101. Tombstone of E.M. Rud (1961), bearing the names of relatives who perished in WWII*

# Birobidzhan



*102. Sign at the entrance to Birobidzhan*

Birobidzhan, named after two rivers, Bira and Bidzhan, was established in 1928 as the center of the Jewish Autonomous Region. The creation of the Jewish Autonomous Region was an initiative of the Soviet government, an alternative to the Zionist project, which Soviet Communists considered utopian. Still the Jewish Autonomous Region was meant for the same purpose: to transform Jews into territorial people who engage in agriculture in their homeland and freely develop their national culture, in its Soviet, Yiddish-based variant. Although about 18 thousand Jews arrived in the region from the western areas of the USSR and even from other countries in the late 1920s and the 1930s, the Birobidzhan project was a fiasco. Jews never constituted a majority in the Jewish Autonomous Region. According to the last Russian census of 2010, there were 1,418 Jews in the city of Birobidzhan, comprising only 1.9% of its total population.

As stated above, religion had no place in the new Soviet society. Therefore there was no official synagogue in Birobidzhan during the 1930s. Only in 1947 did a group of elderly Jews succeeded in getting permission to establish a synagogue. The first synagogue burnt down in 1956 and was replaced by a new one. After several fires the building was falling to pieces and in 1986 the city authorities gave the community another wooden building to serve as the synagogue. Since 1996 this synagogue is known as Beit Tshuva. In 1998, the adherents of Chabad established a new religious community in the city under the name Freid. The community erected a communal center in 2000 and a synagogue nearby in 2004.

The Beit Tshuva Synagogue was thoroughly documented by the CJA team (Fig. 103). Its ritual objects – two Torah arks, an *amud*, and a *parochet* – were produced in 1956 for the inauguration of the new synagogue. They were made by a non-professional artisan and probably represent the last examples of Eastern European Jewish folk art: see, for example, the pair of lions which decorate the Torah ark (Fig. 104). The synagogue has a rich collection of books, many of them with stamps of synagogues and private persons from Eastern Europe. The prayer direction in the Beit Tshuva Synagogue is towards the west, i.e. Jerusalem. However, this orientation might have been unintentional.



103. Beit Tshuva Synagogue in Birobidzhan, view from the southwest



104. Beit Tshuva Synagogue in Birobidzhan, upper part of the Torah ark

The new Chabad synagogue and communal center Freid were also surveyed. The synagogue includes a small Jewish museum, where other objects from the 1956 synagogue were found (Figs. 105, 106).



105. Chabad Synagogue, interior view facing northeast



106. Museum in the Chabad Synagogue

The team also documented the collection of Jewish objects in the Regional Museum. All of them were brought to the museum from the Ukrainian town Sharhorod in the early 1990s. Among these objects there is a Torah finial produced in Vienna and bearing a Hungarian dedicatory inscription from 1924 (Fig. 107).



107. Torah finial produced in Vienna and bearing a Hungarian dedicatory inscription. Birobidzhan Regional Museum



108. Tombstone of Haia Vudina (1947) with epitaph in Hebrew and the family name written also in Russian

The CJA team also surveyed Jewish tombstones in the old cemetery. Since Birobidzhan was a new Soviet city and the center of the Jewish Autonomous Region, the authorities never allowed for the establishment of a Jewish cemetery. Thus, Jewish tombstones are dispersed among non-Jewish graves, and only a small minority have Jewish symbols or epitaphs in Hebrew or Yiddish (Fig. 108).

## Vladivostok

Vladivostok is the Russian outpost in the Pacific; its name means “the ruler of the East.” Jews settled in the city relatively late. In 1878, there were only 17 Jews and in 1897 the Jewish population increased to 326.

The permission to open a synagogue was obtained in 1907, and the current building was erected in 1916-1917, just when a new era had begun in Russian history.

In 1932, the Soviet authorities closed the synagogue and converted the building into a club house for the confectionary factory. In the 1990s it became a confectionary shop. The Jewish community managed to receive the building back in 2004, and in 2013 started the reconstruction, which has not yet been finished (Fig. 109). The only preserved detail of the original synagogue is a marble plaque with the Tablets of the Law on the street façade. Original windows decorated with the Stars of David were found during the reconstruction work (Fig. 110).



109. Vladivostok synagogue, northern façade, a pediment decorated with Tablets of the Law



110. Original windows decorated with Stars of David were revealed immured in the walls

# Preliminary Results

The Center for Jewish Art's expedition resulted in the documentation and survey of Siberian Jewish heritage in various states: active synagogues, former synagogues serving other purposes, abandoned synagogues in danger of collapse; well preserved and half-destroyed Jewish cemeteries; as well as ritual objects used in synagogues or stored in museums. We hope that our expedition not only documented Jewish buildings, tombstones and objects, but also contributed to raising awareness among locals about the value of Jewish heritage and the need to preserve it as part of their own culture.

For some of us it was the first expedition to the areas not affected by the Holocaust. Nonetheless, the state of preservation of Jewish heritage in Siberia does not differ significantly from the western areas of the former Soviet Union (currently Ukraine, Moldova, Belarus, Lithuania and Latvia). The only significant difference is the absence of mass graves and Holocaust monuments. All other typical features are present: the massive destruction of synagogues and cemeteries during the Soviet era, the adaptation of synagogues' buildings to other purposes accompanied by reconstruction, and the presence of general neglect and dilapidation. The synagogues returned to the Jewish communities were radically reconstructed, and their interiors resemble present-day synagogues in Israel and the USA.

Siberian Jewish heritage presents an interesting and important example of the convergence of traditions brought from Eastern Europe, fashions borrowed from the capital cities of the Russian Empire, St. Petersburg and Moscow, and local features characteristic of Russian architecture in Siberia. The Jews of Siberia adhered to Judaism and a religious way of life, but within a Russian environment, which strongly influenced them, even more than their relatives and co-religionists in the Pale of Settlement or in the European Russia beyond the Pale. The dualism of the preservation of traditions and a high level of acculturation was reflected in the synagogue architecture and the cemeteries. The attempts to express Jewish identity during the Soviet period and growing assimilation are especially visible in the tombstones. Jewish symbols and Hebrew epitaphs gave way to Soviet symbols and monolingual Russian inscriptions. The revival of Jewish life in the post-Soviet era finds its expression in the construction of new synagogues and the reappearance of Jewish symbols in the cemeteries.

The material collected during the Center for Jewish Art's expedition will soon be uploaded to the Bezalel Narkiss Index of Jewish Art (<http://cja.huji.ac.il/browser.php>). We also plan to publish a book presenting the little known Jewish heritage of Siberia found by our team in this vast and remote region.