

Russian America



San Francisco

Ever since the late 18th-century, when Russian fur trappers from Alaska first hunted along North America's Pacific coast, there has been a Russian presence in Northern California. From the first Russian settlement at Fort Ross in 1812, through large-scale immigration during the Soviet period, Russians have made their influence felt in Northern California, and particularly the San Francisco Bay Area.



Fittingly, the history of Russians in San Francisco begins with a love story. On April 5, 1806, Count Nikolai Petrovich Rezanov, a Russian nobleman and representative of the Russian-American Company, sailed his ship, the *Juno*, into San Francisco Bay. California was at that time a Spanish colony, Alaska a Russian dominion. Rezanov was desperate to get relief supplies for the starving Russian colony at Sitka, Alaska. He met with the *commandante* of the Presidio, Don Jose Dario Arguello, and the colony's governor, Don Jose Arrillaga. They were skeptical and curious about the Russian, yet decided to help him. Rezanov, for his part, hoped to build better ties and to secure a treaty with the local Spanish government for regular provisioning of the Russian outpost.

Through Arguello, Rezanov, a 42-year-old widower, met and began courting Arguello's 16-year-old daughter, Concepcion, or "Concha" as she was called. After several dances at the Presidio and many talks together, the dashing count and the young Spanish girl

exchanged pledges. Rezanov wrote of Concha in his report:

"Associating daily with and paying my addresses to the beautiful Spanish señorita, I could not fail to perceive her active, venture-some disposition and character ... dissatisfied with the land of her birth, she always referred to it jokingly as a beautiful country, warm climate, an abundance of grain and cattle—and nothing else. I described Russia to her as a colder country, but still abounding in everything and she was willing to live there ... when I proffered my hand, she accepted."

Rezanov departed from San Francisco on May 21, 1806. After replenishing the settlement at Sitka, he sailed on to Kamchatka, proceeding on to St.

Petersburg on September 14. While journeying through the wintry Siberian expanses, however Rezanov was stricken by a ferocious fever and died in Krasnoyarsk on March 1, 1807.

The likelihood, if not all hope, for the extension of Russian sovereignty on the American continent died with Rezanov. Sixty years later, Alaska was sold to the United States. The projected treaty with Spain was never signed, and Rezanov himself was largely forgotten by history. But what of his beloved "Conchita"?

Her betrothed having failed to return, Concha entered the Dominican Sisterhood, and spent the rest of her life as a teacher in St. Catherine's Seminary, the first convent school in California.

IN THE FAMOUS CITY BY THE BAY, THE Russian community is visibly concentrated in the outer Richmond District. This peaceful patch of pastel-colored apartments and quiet avenues is situated between two of San Francisco's best-known landmarks—Golden Gate Park and the Golden Gate Bridge. Strolling

down Geary Boulevard, the main artery of the bustling neighborhood, one instantly notices the Cyrillic lettering on the windows of Russian shops and restaurants, and feels transformed to another place.

Proceeding down Geary between 14th and 26th avenues, one comes across a myriad of Russian delis, food markets, gift stores, restaurants, and bakeries. A typical Russian business is the **Moscow & Tbilisi Bakery** on Geary Boulevard and 20th Avenue. Attracted by Russian delicacies like *pirozhki*, *bliny* and Georgian *khachapuri*, as well as cakes, cookies and sweets with names like *tri-bochka*, *lamur*, *tbilisi* and *srekrobovino*, Russians and non-Russians alike can often be found standing outside in the early morning hours, waiting in anticipation for the bakery, with its inviting aromas, to open for business.

There is no shortage of Russian food in San Francisco. In the neighborhoods surrounding the Richmond District, there are plenty of Russian restaurants to choose from. From **Russian Renaissance**, with its fanciful murals on the ceilings painted by local artist Sergei Smirnoff, and walls featuring dressed-up dolls and Russian *chochkes*, its décor is a stark contrast to the simplicity of **Katia's Russian Tea Room** on 5th Avenue at Balboa Street, which comes recommended by many Russian-Americans in the area for its creative and Russian-inspired menu (see Russian Cuisine, page 54).

Across the street from Katia's is the **Globus Slavic Bookstore**, and located not far away on Geary Boulevard near 17th Avenue is **Znanie**, the best-known of the city's Russian-language bookstores. Opened in 1958, Znanie carries a large selection of Russian authors, children's books and sheet music, as well as gifts and souvenirs from Russia.

San Francisco has several Russian gift stores peppered throughout the city, like **Babushka Perestroika** at Pier 39, near Fisherman's Wharf, and **Russian Treasure**, also located at the Wharf on Leavenworth Street. Russian Treasure features *matryoshka* dolls, lacquer boxes, Baltic amber, books, religious designs, chess sets and painted eggs. Downtown, on Post Street (between Powell and Mason streets), the discrim-

Going Russian in the City by the Bay



Above: The Holy Virgin Cathedral on Geary Boulevard, as seen from the air, its golden cupolas standing in stark contrast to the surrounding neighborhood. Opposite page: The Vodka Tasting Bar at the Annual Russian Festival, which draws over 3,000 expatriate Russians and Russophiles to the district.

DELIS, BAKERIES & MARKETS

- ◆ Cinderella Bakery, 436 Balboa St. Phone: 415-751-9690
- ◆ The Tiptoe Delicatessen, 5423 Geary Blvd.
- ◆ Gastronom, 5801 Geary Blvd. Phone: 415-387-4211
- ◆ Gastronom Sunset, 2801 Judah St. Phone: 415-664-1835
- ◆ New World Market, 5641 Geary Blvd. & 22nd St. Phone: 415-751-8810
- ◆ Odessa Russian Delicatessen, 5427 Geary Blvd. Phone: 415-387-8314
- ◆ Moscow & Tbilisi Bakery, 5540 Geary Blvd. Phone: 415-668-6959
- ◆ Europa Express, also sells Russian music, literature and postcards, 750 La Playa St. Phone: 415-751-1551
- ◆ European Food Wholesale, 3038 Clement St. Phone: 415-750-0504
- ◆ Quality Market, 1342 Irving St. Phone: 415-759-6500

RESTAURANTS

- ◆ Mad Magda's Russian Tea Room, 579 Hayes St. Phone: 415-864-7654
- ◆ Russian Renaissance, 5241 Geary Blvd. Phone: 415-752-8558
- ◆ Katia's Russian Tea Room, 600 5th Ave. Phone: 415-668-9292
- ◆ Russia House Restaurant/Nightclub/Bar, open Fri/Sat for dinner only 2011 Bayshore Blvd. Phone: 415-330-9991
- ◆ Traktir Restaurant, 4036 Balboa St. Phone: 415-386-9800
- ◆ Russian Bear Restaurant, 939 Clement St. Phone: 415-752-8197

BOOKSTORES

- ◆ Znanie, 4720 Geary Blvd. Near 17th Ave. Phone: 415-752-7555
- ◆ Globus Slavic Bookstore, 332 Balboa St. Phone: 415-668-4723
- ◆ Arlekin, also sells Russian CDs, videos, audio tapes, 5909 Geary Blvd. Phone: 415-751-2320

RUSSIAN LANGUAGE NEWSPAPERS

- ◆ *Russkaya Zhizn*, at San Francisco Russian Center, 2450 Sutter St. Phone: 415-921-5380
- ◆ *New Life*, at Jewish Community Center of San Francisco, 3200 California St. Phone: 415-346-6040.

ART GALLERIES

- ◆ Turov Ceramic Gallery, 3654 Sacramento St. Phone: 415-474-9999
- ◆ Light Opera Gallery, 460 Post St. Phone: 415-956-9866.
- ◆ Sokoloff Art & Framing Company, 150 San Marcos Ave. Phone: 415-566-8177

GIFT STORES

- ◆ Babushka Perestroika Store, Pier 39, P214A. Phone: 415-788-7043
- ◆ Russian Treasure, 2801 Leavenworth St. Phone: 415-346-1104
- ◆ Regina, 5845 Geary Blvd. & 23rd Ave. Ph: 415-386-8577

CHURCHES

- ◆ Holy Virgin Cathedral, 6210 Geary Blvd. Phone: 415-221-3255
- ◆ St. Nicholas Cathedral, 2005 15th St. at Church St. Phone: 415-621-1849
- ◆ Holy Trinity Cathedral, 1520 Green St. at Van Ness. Phone: 415-673-8565

MISCELLANEOUS

- ◆ San Francisco Russian Center, Museum of Russian Culture, 2450 Sutter St. Phone: 415-921-7631
- ◆ Museum of the Society of Russian Veterans of WWI: Sviatoslav Zabelin, "Sven" at. Phone: 415-386-8463
- ◆ Slavvanka Men's Russian Chorus, 9 Tioga Ave. Phone: 650-365-1363.
- ◆ Consulate General of the Russian Federation, 2790 Green St. Ph: 415-929-1035

inating Russian art collector can find a large selection of lacquer boxes and miniatures from Russia at the **Light Opera Gallery**. The store's owner, Eric Sinizer, is a noted expert on the miniatures. On an average day, more than 500 Russian lacquered boxes can be found on display here.

According to the Consulate General of the Russian Federation, headquartered on Green Street, the San Francisco Bay Area counts approximately 200,000 Russian "compatriots." "As a very friendly and multi-ethnic city, San Francisco historically was the first in which Russians settled," said Consul General Yuri V. Popov. "Nowadays, it has a lot of competitors—other California cities that have big Russian communities—Los

Church, which has 20 churches in the Bay Area. In the heart of the Richmond District, the imposing, Byzantine-style **Holy Virgin Cathedral** is a notable landmark, with its five onion-shaped domes covered in 24-karat gold. Over the door, the mosaic tympanum represents the Virgin Mary floating on a background of tiles, also covered in pure gold leaf. Inside the cathedral is the resting place of St. John Maximovich, archbishop of San Francisco, who died in 1966. Miracles were attributed to St. John before his death, and in 1994 it was found that his body had not decomposed. Today, parishioners often pray at St. John's coffin for his intercession.

Holy Trinity Cathedral, located at 1520 Green St., traces its history back to

in 1909—the original church having been destroyed by the earthquake of 1906.

Holy Trinity features seven bells in its belfry, five of which were gifts from Tsar Alexander III in thanksgiving for the emperor's and the Imperial family's rescue following a train accident near the town of Borki, Ukraine on October 17, 1888. Another unique feature of the cathedral is a grand chandelier donated by the last tsar of Russia, Nicholas II. According to tradition, the Emperor also donated a richly-decorated icon of his patron saint—Nicholas of Myra and Lycia—to the church. Holy Trinity is also in possession of the vestments of St. Tikhon, Patriarch of Russia and Confessor. The saint's prayer book, commemoration booklet, hierarchical liturgi-



Angeles, San Diego, Sacramento, San Jose and Santa Clara.

"The uniqueness of the Russian community in California is that we can witness it in all spheres: politics, business, science, culture, etc. You can feel Russian heritage everywhere from Fort Ross, to Silicon Valley, down to Hollywood," Popov said.

Popov said there have been three "waves" of Russians emigrating to the United States: "the first one was before and after the October Revolution in 1917. It is also called the 'white' immigration, many representatives of which are known in California as people from Harbin (China). The second one came after the end of World War II, and the third one left the USSR in the 1960s and 1970s up to now, and is the most numerous one."

One of the most unifying institutions of the Russian community in San Francisco is the Russian Orthodox

December 2, 1857, when the first Orthodox Society was founded in San Francisco. Holy Trinity is the only Eastern Orthodox Church in the city which conducts services in English (with some Slavonic). The oldest Orthodox cathedral community in the contiguous United States, the present building was dedicated



con, and monastic belt are carefully preserved in the cathedral's safe.

A third Russian Orthodox cathedral of significance in the city is **St. Nicholas Cathedral**, on 15th Street. The parish of the Russian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate in San Francisco was founded in 1935. In 1993, the Patriarch of Moscow and all of Russia, Alexei II, carried out a service in the church. St. Nicholas has also acquired from Russia large icons of the royal martyrs, Tsar Nicholas II, Tsarina Alexandra and their five children, which are displayed in the cathedral.

In addition to the Church, the nucleus of the Russian community in San Francisco is the **Russian Center** (pictured at left), located at 2450 Sutter St. Founded in 1939 by Russian immigrants as a focal point for the preservation of their rich cultural heritage, the

non-profit organization produces many cultural activities, including operas, dance concerts, folk dance classes, social gatherings like the “Vecherinka,” held on the first Friday of every month, and lectures. The center also holds an annual Russian Festival each February, a three-day extravaganza of food, art, music and dance. The event attracts over 3,000 people from all over the San Francisco Bay Area. The Russian Center is also home to “Teremok,” a state-certified Russian pre-school, Neva Russian Dance Ensemble, the Congress of Russian-Americans, a Museum of Russian Culture, *Russkaya Zhizn* newspaper, and an archival library that includes approximately 15,000 books published



GARY L. STREIBER

Russian-American Cultural Foundation, deputy director of the Foster Family Program for Congress of Russian-

area who don't read or understand English. “For some,” he said, “it is the only way they get the news and hear about upcoming events.”

Avisov is also president of the Congress of Russian-Americans, located on the third floor of the center. Founded in 1973, the Congress is a national organization with chapters in all major U.S. cities. Its members are U.S. citizens of Russian descent who are non-Communist in their beliefs. “One of the goals of the organization, Avisov said, “is to preserve our Russian spiritual and cultural heritage in the United States.”

Russian-born Avisov, who came to the Bay Area in the early 1950s after serving in a forced labor camp in Germany during World War II, said Russians feel a connec-



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Above: Mstislav Ivanitsky is a volunteer at the Museum of Russian Culture.

Below left: The San Francisco Russian Center and Museum of Russian Culture.



in pre-revolutionary Russia and by Russian immigrants, mostly in Russian.

“The Russian Center brings everyone in the community together,” said Natalie Sabelnik, manager of the center. “Our monthly ‘Vecherinkas’ attract the young and the old, and those who just enjoy being with Russian-speaking people.” Sabelnik, who was born in Shanghai, China to Russian parents, came to San Francisco when she was 3-years-old, after living in a displaced person’s camp in the Philippines for two years. It was there that she met Archbishop John, who later was canonized St. John Maximovich, and whose relics lay in the Holy Virgin Cathedral. “Archbishop John had a church there where we were living, and I am told that he came to see me when I was born,” she said.

Besides running the Russian Center, Sabelnik is also executive director of the

Americans, and an active member and soloist of the choir at the Holy Virgin Cathedral. According to Sabelnik, it is not difficult to understand why so many Russians are attracted to living in the city by the Golden Gate.

“San Francisco is a beautiful city, and it is conducive to many different types of people,” she said. “If you’re from another country, you don’t stick out like a sore thumb. Russians don’t have to suffer nostalgia when they come here, because they can shop in Russian stores, read Russian newspapers, and eat at Russian restaurants.”

George Avisov is the editor of *Russkaya Zhizn*, a weekly Russian-language newspaper that has over 1,000 subscribers. Founded in 1921, it began operating from the Russian Center in 1941. According to Avisov, the newspaper is particularly important for Russian immigrants in the

tion with Northern California. “We were a part of Alaska and Northern California before this country was established,” he said. “We feel that we belong here. Russians have a long tradition of bringing their culture to the United States.”

Also located on the third floor of the Russian Center is the **Museum of Russian Culture**, open free to the public every Wednesday and Saturday from 10:30 AM to 2:30 PM. Established in 1948, one of the museum’s goals is to promote Russian culture among Americans of Russian descent, Americans interested in Russian history, and the general public. The intimate museum features all types of materials, including memoirs and personal papers of prominent émigrés, governmental, public and private archives and libraries, and photographs, paintings, sculptures, medals, and artifacts pertaining to life in Russia before the



One of the most unifying institutions of the Russian community in San Francisco is the Russian Orthodox Church, which has 20 churches in the Bay Area. Left, Holy Trinity Cathedral. Below: Holy Virgin Cathedral.



revolution. Staffed entirely by volunteers, the museum's curator is Alex Karamzin, son of the Russian artist Alexander Karamzin, whose paintings adorn a wall of the museum, and great-great-grandson of the famous historian and writer Nikolai M. Karamzin (1766-1826). Next door to the museum is the **Russian Library**, which boasts thousands of books, including over 500 old and new titles of children's literature (contact phone number: 415-921-4912).

ONE OF THE MOST PROMINENT CHARACTERISTICS of the Russian community in San Francisco is its diversity. Although the "white" Russians who came here following the October Revolution of 1917-1918 account for the oldest and most significant wave of immigration into the city, more recently a Jewish Russian-speaking

population has settled into the Richmond District and other parts of the Bay Area, including Silicon Valley, where many work in the field of computer technology. *New Life*, a Russian-language newspaper operated by the Jewish Community Center of San Francisco on California Street, publishes a 40-page monthly tabloid devoted to Jewish immigrants from the former Soviet Union. According to the center, since 1979-80 over 40,000 Russian-speaking Jews have relocated to the Bay Area. In San Francisco, one-third of the Jewish population is reported to be either émigré or the children of émigrés.

Tatiana Menaker, a staff writer for *New Life*, came to San Francisco in 1987 from St. Petersburg (then Leningrad). A professional tour guide and journalist, Menaker was also a former classmate of President Vladimir Putin. "He was two years behind me at school in Leningrad," she said. "We also went to the same university, where he was in the law department, and I was in the philosophy department. He was educated by very good teachers," Menaker said. "I know, because I had them too."

Menaker said San Francisco is particularly attractive to Russians immigrating to this country, because a well-established Russian community already exists to help

new arrivals adjust to life here. "San Francisco has a nice climate, and the Russian community has existed here for a long time," she said. "Today Jews who come here from Russia are helped by Jewish Family Services, which has a huge émigré department. Russians can get help with their English, get vocational training and medical assistance, as well as counseling, if they need it."

For almost 200 years, Russians have made a home for themselves in San Francisco, contributing their rich cultural heritage to the diverse patchwork that makes the City by the Bay so inviting to visitors and locals alike. As a result, whether you seek a copy of Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* in Russian, freshly-made *pirozhki*, or a rare Russian lacquered miniature, San Francisco offers each in abundance—you only need to know where to look. **RL**

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Attracted by Russian delicacies like pirozhki, bliny and Georgian khachapuri, as well as cakes, cookies and sweets with names like tribochka, lamur, tbilisi and srekbrovino, Russians and non-Russians alike can often be found standing outside The Moscow and Tbilisi Bakery (left) in the early morning hours, waiting in anticipation for the bakery, with its inviting aromas, to open for business.

PHOTOS: AMY GOODPASTER STREBE