TALLINNA VANA JUUDI KALMISTU

The mausoleum of Šaje Levinovitš in 1920

Old Jewish Cemetery in Tallinn

The Old Jewish Cemetery is the earliest-known Jewish burial site in Tallinn. The history of Tallinn's Jewish community dates back to the medieval period. In slightly more modern times, however, during the Swedish and Russian periods, they were not allowed to live within Estonia's territory (then largely known as Livonia). For example, during the reign of Russia's Catherine II (1762-1796), Jews were only allowed to reside in restricted areas in what are now Lithuania, Belarus, Ukraine, and Poland, and they required a special permit to be able to travel out of those lands. The Jewish community in Tallinn remained rather small until Emperor Nicholas I decided in 1828 to extend conscription to Jews. Thereafter, Jewish military men or cantonists started arriving in Estonia, many of whom chose Tallinn to be their place of residence after their 25-year service period. The first Jewish congregation in Tallinn was founded in 1830. In 1845, a permit was obtained so that the community could build its own cemetery next to the Aleksander Nevski (Inner City) Cemetery alongside Magasini Street. Prior to the 1856 creation of the Jewish burial society, the 'Chevra Kadisha', however, the number of burials probably remained very low here. The local Jewish community only began to grow to a considerable extent during the reign of Emperor Alexander II (1855-1881), who alleviated restrictions which had previously been applied to Jews. In 1880, about a thousand Jews were residing in Tallinn. An elementary school was founded in 1880, and the Great Choral Synagogue of Tallinn at Maakri Street was opened in 1884, marking a very significant event for the Jewish community.

The Old Jewish Cemetery boasted with characteristic massive stone headstones and gravesites which were enclosed by forged fences, with the majority of the passed being buried in a shroud without a coffin, as required by an old Jewish tradition. Only sections of the lists of the cemetery's burials have preserved. The earliest building in the cemetery, the guard building with the gatehouse, was designed in 1880 by the architect Nikolai Thamm Senior. In 1910, the mausoleum of Šaje Levinovitš - the driving force behind the synagogue being established in Tallinn the first place and the leader of the Jewish community there - was erected within the cemetery (with the work being overseen by the architect Jacques Rosenbaum). In the same year, it was decided to close the cemetery as it was located in a boggy area which was unsuitable for burials, while some rather unpleasant odours from the site were disturbing local residents. Despite this, the last burial - which took place through the issuance of a special permit - was as late as 1936.

The old Jewish cemetery was brutally destroyed through a decision which was taken while the country was under Soviet occupation in 1963. In 1967, a car depot, repair workshop, and car park were built on the site of the cemetery. The demolition waste, including headstones, was used to construct coastal reinforcements between the Russalka monument and the Old City Harbour, where some of those headstones were discovered during the construction of Reidi Road in 2017. The guard building and gatehouse were demolished in 1979. The idea to restore the cemetery was born within Tallinn City Planning Department's Heritage Conservation Unit. Preliminary archaeological surveys were ordered by city officials in 2019. This was followed by the process of drawing up a project for the cemetery's restoration, in cooperation with the City Centre District Administration, the Jewish Community of Estonia, the Estonian Jewish Congregation, and local residents. The project was green lit at the beginning of the 2020s.