

The Romanovs In The Urals & Siberia

Part One - Perm

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This article and the three that will follow in successive issues describe a tour that Arturo Beeche, three ERHJ subscribers and I undertook in Russia last September. Apart from describing some of the places we went to and some historical background, the articles will also include the opinions of Russian people that we met about The Romanovs and their fate. Obviously this is just their opinions, but I feel that it is of interest to share what the Russians themselves believe to be true about their own history. In some cases what the Russians believe disagrees with what we know or what we think we know.

We all met up in Moscow and went for dinner and a short walk round Red Square before going to the Yaroslavsky train station to board the "Rossiya" train to Perm. This is the premier train on the Trans-Siberian railway. It left Moscow at 9.20pm and we only reached Perm station No 2 at 7.12pm the following day having travelled 891 miles. Most of the day on the train was spent talking and looking at the scenery. We passed lots of silver birch woods and some more open vistas. The colours of some of the trees were spectacular (what Puskin described as "Golden Autumn") which contrasted against the green pine trees. There were many small hamlets and a few larger towns. The train only stopped a few times, usually to change the engine.

Perm lies on the western side of the Ural Mountains. It is this mountain chain which divides Europe from Asia. They are the oldest mountain range in the world and they have sunk making them little more than hills now. The Perm region was developed by the Strogonov family in the mid 16th century. It was given to them by Ivan IV (the Terrible) in 1558. The family was freed for paying taxes for 20 years. There was a plentiful supply of salt and they started salt production, which was very lucrative. They created wooden fortresses to protect the eastern edge of Russia.

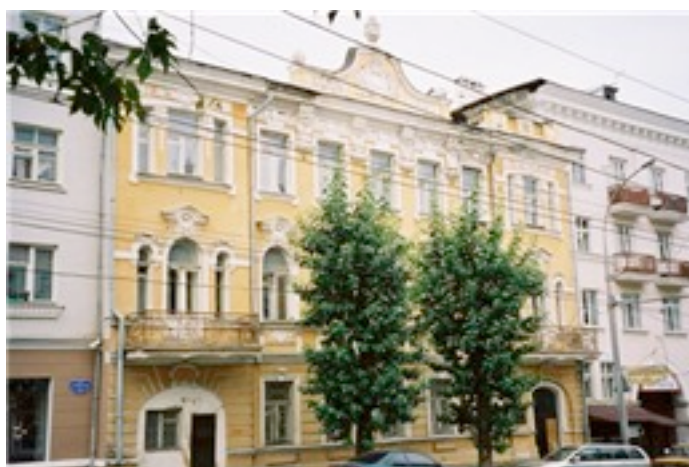
Yegoshikha (as Perm was originally called) was founded on 4th May 1723 when copper works were founded near the Peter and Paul Cathedral. The River Yegoshikha is a tributary of the wide River Kama which flows through Perm. On 18th October 1781 Yegoshikha was re-named Perm on the instructions of Catherine the Great. In 1763 the Trans-Siberian (or Great) road opened. In 1824 this was re-constructed and an alley of fir trees was planted along the road. This helped improve the general appearance of the road and it also help to maintain the road of that the weather didn't make it deteriorate too quickly. In the winter the tree lined road helped people to find their way. The railway arrived in Perm in 1878. A lot of the factories were transferred there from Western Russia during The Second World War. Between 1940 and 1957 Perm was called Molotov. In Pasternak's "Doctor Zhivago" it was the model for Yuryatin. Perm was a closed city until 1987, which made it even more interesting when we were taken to an outdoor artillery museum where some of the Soviet ballistic missiles were displayed. They also had on display the guns the Russians fire for altering their weather.

Perm has a population of just under one million. It is quite large, but rather run down. The roads have pot holes in them and exposed tram lines. It has some very nice old buildings mixed in with newer ones. Of course unlike many European cities Perm was untouched by bomb damage during the war. Sergei Diaghilev was born here. During the Second World War the St Petersburg ballet was evacuated to Perm. A theatre had been established there in the

1880s. The opera house named after Tchaikovsky was re-constructed in the 1950s. On an upper floor is a museum about ballet. Many colleges in the city were named after members of The Romanov Family. We also saw The Governor's House, where Lenin's mother had once stayed. The main street is called Siberian Street.

Alexander I visited Perm in 1824 on his tour of the region. During the carriage procession into town it was so dusty that The Tsar had to hold a handkerchief in front of his face. The citizens of Perm only got a clear view of him when Alexander appeared on the balcony of the house where he was staying. He was wearing snow white clothes, which impressed everyone very much. In 1837 the future Alexander II visited Perm. He travelled for seven months visiting thirty provinces.

On 19th March 1918 Grand Duke Michael Alexandrovitch arrived in Perm with his secretary Nicholas Johnson. At first Michael was confined in the medical unit of a prison. After a week he was released and allowed to live at the Korolev Rooms on Sibirskaya Street, which had been re-christened "Hotel No. 1". This building is still there and it is now painted yellow and



white. It is currently lived in by people who work at the opera house. Of course the interior is no longer the same as when Michael stayed there, but it is possible to identify which of the first floor rooms were his from the outside. One of them had a balcony and that is still there. There are two plaques on the front of the house commemorating Michael's stay there. A black plaque with a lighted candle on it reads "From this building Hotel Korolyovskiy on 12 July 1918 secretly and deceitfully were abducted and taken away for execution Grand Duke Mikhail Alexandrovich Romanov and his secretary, English subject Brian Johnson. Eternally remembered innocently murdered!" Another plaque with a relief of Michael reads "In this building in 1918 lived Grand Duke Mikhail Alexandrovich Romanov (1878-1918)".

It is interesting to note that Johnson is described as an English subject, although I don't think that this was true in spite of his English name. There is also some confusion over his Christian name as he is variously called Nicholas or Brian in books.

Michael had to report to the local police once a day but this left him with time to walk along the River Kama. Sometimes he sailed on the river. His wife Natasha joined him for a period and at Easter 1918 they both attended the service at the Peter & Paul Cathedral. Michael and Natasha looked at a number of properties in which they might live as a family if they had to live in Perm for the long term. In Michael's diary he mentions attending the opera house and sitting in the box seats on the left hand side of the auditorium. We were invited to sit in the same box when we toured the opera house. Michael made many friends within the local nobility. One



family was the Kobyak family who owned a house not far from where Michael was staying. Rasputin also knew this family and visited them in Perm. During his stay in the city Michael visited the local wax works museum which included a wax model of Rasputin!

One of our guides - a local journalist and historian called Vladimir 1 is particularly interested in Grand Duke Michael Alexandrovich and he has written a book about him in Russian, but it hasn't been published yet. He told us that there have been suggestions that Michael Alexandrovich should be canonised.

Late on the evening of 12th July 1918 three men arrived at the Korolev Rooms and took both



Michael and Johnson away. The usual story is that they were both driven some distance to the edge of the city and shot in the early hours of the morning. So far neither body has been recovered. On the outskirts of Perm a memorial church (*left*) to Michael is being built.

Vladimir has done considerable research into what exactly happened that night, which has included questioning local people as to what they thought had happened. He feels that there is a fifty-fifty chance that the church is being built on the location of the shooting. There are various theories as to how the bodies were disposed of. One is that they were burnt in a local industrial furnace. However it is known that it wasn't working at the time. Another is that the bodies were thrown into the River Kama. A third theory is that some peasants found the bodies and buried them in a local cemetery in unmarked graves. We visited the unfinished church and lit some candles for Michael and Johnson. We were then taken to see what was described as a portrait of

Michael recently painted by a local artist. It wasn't at all what we had expected. It was actually an allegorical painting with Michael in the middle of it. Behind his head are the family of Nicholas II; top left was Michael on a horse during the war; middle left was Michael with Natasha and bottom left were Michael with Johnson just before they were shot. Written at the top of the painting is "Memorial to Mikhail Romanov" and at the bottom "Murdered 12 July 1918 in Perm". It is actually a very clever painting.

In mid July 1914 Grand Duchess Elisabeth Feodorovna arrived in Perm with her sister Princess Victoria of Battenberg and her niece Louise (later Queen of Sweden). Katerina Shestakova (who was one of our guides) wrote about this visit in "German Princesses in the Heart of Russia" in ERHJ Volume 9 No.1. The Belogorsky (Whitehill) Monastery is situated between Perm and Kungur. Many books have commented on the importance of Elisabeth's visit here in 1914, but none of them have explained why the Belogorsky Monastery was so important. When Katerina started telling us last September about how big this monastery complex was and how so much of it was associated with The Romanov Family I began to understand just why Elisabeth had been so keen to visit it. The Monastery complex covered a very large area and the monks were virtually self sufficient. In 1910 there were some 400 monks there. Many were sent to the north of Russia as labourers after the revolution. Some eventually returned, but many died. The monastery complex was destroyed and it became a village of special surplus i.e. people from Belarus, the Crimea and the Ukraine were moved there. In 1990 it was returned to the church and it is being restored.

Elisabeth Feodorovna said she wanted to go to Alapaevsk in 1914, but it seems she didn't make it there as she had to return to St Petersburg as World War I broke out on 19 July 1914 (OS) the feast of St. Seraphim of Sarov. It was "her destiny to go there later" Father Stephen Lukanin said. Father John of Kronstadt is reported to have said that "there is a black cross above Perm district". At that time Ekaterinburg and Alapaevsk belonged to Perm district. However, in her memoirs which were written about 1942 Victoria Milford Haven said that

Elisabeth did go to Alapaevsk in 1914. Following her arrest in Moscow on 27 April 1918 Elisabeth Feodorovna would spend a few days in Perm again, this time staying in the Assumption Convent. On 1 May she left Perm for Ekaterinburg and her ultimate fate in Alapaevsk.

The life of Archbishop Vladyka Andronicus of Perm is interesting because of its connections with The Romanovs. In November 1914 he made his first visit to the Belogorsky Monastery and to the Seraphimo-Alexeyevsky skete near the monastery. A skete is a small monastic community, which consists of a few monks and they usually live in more isolated areas and have a more austere life than is usual. The rules were very severe. The monks prayed a lot. They had no property, except for religious books. They had to show complete obedience and their way of life was really ascetic. The skete superior was Hegumen (which means Priest Monk) Seraphim Kuznetsov. This is the same Father Seraphim who would later take the coffins of Grand Duchess Elisabeth Feodorovna and Sister Barbara to Jerusalem. He apparently published a chronicle of the Romanovs in 1913.

In 1916 Archbishop Andronicus visited the Shamarsky monastery which was built by a decree of Nicholas II issued on 8 March 1916. This monastery was dedicated to the Holy Righteous Elisabeth (the patron saint of Grand Duchess Elisabeth Feodorovna) and to St. Mary Magdalene Equal-to-the-Apostles. It was founded in memory of the visit to the province of Grand Duchess Elisabeth Feodorovna in 1914. It was built up by the efforts of Hegumen Seraphim Kuznetsov in the Maly Lyp tract at Shamarsky. This missionary convent of Saints Elisabeth and Mary is now being revived. The statute reviving it is based on the statute of the Saints Martha and Mary Convent founded by Grand Duchess Elisabeth Feodorovna in Moscow.

In 1916 Archbishop Andronicus visited army headquarters and on August 12 had a conversation with the Tsar in which he warned him about Rasputin to no effect. He gave Nicholas II a pair of soldier's boots - the province of Perm provided the army with boots. On 27 April 1918 (the Friday of Bright Week) Grand Duke Michael Alexandrovich was in the old Peter and Paul cathedral in Perm. He noted in his diary: "Archbishop Andronicus served the Paschal Vespers; he served very well." Vladyka Andronicus was arrested on 17 June 1918 (NS). There are different accounts of his death at the hands of Garvil Myasnikov (the same man who organised the killing of Michael and Johnson). The most likely version was that he was led out to the Motoviliha factory on the outskirts of Perm (the same area in which Michael and Johnson were killed) on 20 June where he was made to dig a grave for himself. He laid down in it, was covered in earth and then shot. In his memoirs Nicholas Zhuzhgov claims to have personally arrested both Archbishop Andronicus and Grand Duke Michael.

Countess Hendrikova and Catherine Schneider, who were respectively Lady in Waiting and Reader to The Empress Alexandra Feodorovna, accompanied The Imperial Family as far as Ekaterinburg. They weren't allowed to stay with the family but they were taken to Perm, where they were imprisoned. On 4th September 1918 they were shot. Countess Hendrikova was 32 years old and Catherine Schneider was 62.2 They are buried in a joint grave in Yegoshikhinskoye cemetery on a hillside overlooking their prison. Vladimir our guide who was with us put a new plaque on their grave (the earlier two had been stolen) and lit a candle for them.

From Perm we travelled 168 miles north by mini bus to Cherdyn which was founded in 1451, where we stayed the night. This was the first settlement in the northern part of the Urals. On the way we passed through the ancient town of Solikamsk which was founded in 1430, which was the former "salt-cellar" of Russia and former capital of the Urals. The size of the territory (or oblast) of Perm is equivalent to England and Wales put together. The iron for the roof of The Winter Palace was brought from Perm district and apparently the copper used in the Statue of Liberty came from the Urals. Although the Urals is still very rich in natural resources, there is no more malachite left there.

The next day we travelled 100 miles further north where it was noticeably chillier to place called Nyrob. This small town is very much in a backwater with its unpaved roads. Nyrob is

associated with the early Romanovs. The uncle of Tsar Michael I, also called Michael, was arrested during The Times of Troubles (which in Russia is known as "The Dark Period") and he was sent to Nyrob in September 1601. He was chained and put in an open pit outdoors. We later visited a museum in Cherdyn and saw these chains. The intention was that he should starve to death, but the local residents secretly fed him and he survived until the spring of 1602. Michael was a huge man who prayed all the time. He was buried nearby, where a blue cross now stands. In 1606 The False Dimitri had his body (which hadn't decomposed) exhumed so that he could take it to Moscow. The town would remind The Romanov Family of this pit episode every time they wanted something. For example Michael I gave Nyrob tax breaks. A chapel was built over the site of the pit in 1913 and a blue iron wall was put up around the area, the gates to which were topped by Romanov eagles. These were removed during the Soviet period. Today there is a small roofed structure with wrought iron sides covering the pit. On the 8th of September every year Nyrob re-enacts the episode of Michael being thrown into the pit. In 1913 Nyrob was decorated to celebrate The Romanov Tercentenary, but no member of The Imperial Family visited the town at this time. However, every member of "The Tsarist Family" (as our guide called them) "was dear to the people" according to an account written about the commemorative events in 1913. Nyrob was visited in 1998 by Grand Duchesses Leonida and Maria and Grand Duke George.

We then drove back to Cherdyn, a town of only 6,500 people, where we visited the Church of St John the Baptist. Like many churches in this region there is a lower church used in the winter and an upper church used in the summer. We went up the bell tower to get a good view of Cherdyn, which is situated on the River Kolva. Father Seraphim Kuznetsov of the White Hill Monastery was born in Cherdyn. During World War I there was an orphanage in the town that was under the patronage of Grand Duchess Tatiana Nikolaevna.

We returned to Perm before leaving on the 10 pm overnight train to Tyumen in Western Siberia. During the night at about 3.30am we stopped at Sverlovsk. This name is still used as the station name on the Trans-Siberian railway rather than Ekaterinburg. We would return here later on in our tour.

With many thanks to Katerina Shestakova for telling us so many interesting things about her homeland and to Marion Wynn for translating some Russian texts for me.

Notes

1. Vladimir and some friends have just founded a Permian Romanovs Fund, where they can discuss various subjects connected with The Romanov Family.
2. Countess Hendrikova was born in 1886 and Catherine Schneider in 1856. Sorrowful Angel, *Sergei V Fomin* [2001] Pages 750 and 792. In Russian. With thanks to Karen Roth for translating the title.

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