

## City District Gets Historical Treatment

Neglected and often ridiculed, Kupchino is the subject of a new book that takes a different approach to the district.

By **Sergey Chernov**  
THE ST. PETERSBURG TIMES

**K**upchino, an area in the south of St. Petersburg that emerged as a Soviet residential “mini-district” in the mid-1960s and is now mostly filled with typical Soviet houses, has never been seen as deserving much attention from historians. The publication of a book to mark its 50th anniversary has effectively given the first serious glimpse into its history.

Called “Kupchino. Four Centuries of History. 50 Years of the Present,” it was written by local resident Denis Shalyapin. Shalyapin is a professional breakdown van driver who lives on Bukharestskaya Ulitsa, once the district’s longest street.

“I was born where I live, in the 12th residential zone (kvartal) of northern Kupchino, near the music school, which didn’t exist then. I am three years younger than Kupchino,” he said.

Shalyapin refers to himself as an amateur researcher, saying that he produced the book because there were only a handful of articles but not a single book about the district. “I have no degree in the arts. If someone writes a better book, it will only make me happy,” he said. “I see my book as a call to historians who know the subject.”

In 2007, Shalyapin launched a website, Kupsilla.ru, dedicated to his district.

“It can be said that the book has grown out of the website,” he said. “The website has more pictures, and they are in color. There is also more text there. The book is a compressed version [of the site].”

Covering the history of the district, the book also serves as a guide to Kupchino, describing every street in the district according to Shalyapin, who said that the definitions of the borders of both the streets and district are his own and sometimes differ from official records.

The history of modern Kupchino began in the early 1960s, when the extensive construction of uniform residential panel houses started under a construction program launched by the then Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev. According to Shalyapin, the first five-story panel building (“Khrushchyovka”) was built on Budapeshtskaya Ulitsa in 1964.

This was also the year when the streets of northern Kupchino were given their names – in honor of the capitals of the Eastern bloc countries, their party leaders and heroes.

Kupchino is roughly divided into north and south by Prospekt Slavy, where the Slava film theater and several of the district’s department store buildings were located. Southern Kupchino was largely built in the 1970s and 1980s and received its first metro station in 1972, 40 years before two more stations opened in the older, northern part of the district.

Kupchino has largely been neglected in literature, but was sung about by rock bands, some of whom came from the area, such as Billy’s Band, whose frontman Billy Novik titled a song called “Kupchino Is the Capital of the World.” The band Chufella Marzufella refers to Kupchino’s Tram 49 in one of their songs; “My route is 49 and I don’t know what to do,” its chorus goes.

The name of the seminal Russian rock band Akvarium is believed to have been inspired by a beer bar on Budapeshtskaya Ulitsa, a detail that the band’s changeable frontman Boris Grebenshchikov has both confirmed and denied in the past.

According to Shalyapin, the now-defunct pub was notorious for having had no toilet. “People had to go to take a leak outside. But Police Station 4 was right behind the bar, so the enterprising policemen reaped their rewards,” he said.

Historically, Kupchino began life as a village, which — according to Shalyapin



— was located further south of the area where construction started in the mid-1960s. Its center stood at what is now the crossing of Belgradskaya Ulitsa and Ulitsa Dimitrova.

It was first mentioned in Swedish tax documents in 1619 as Kuptzinoua By, when the territory was under the Swedish rule. Four tax paying householders were registered in the village at the time.

“The Swedes received this territory in 1617 as part of the Treaty of Stolbovo and began scrupulously registering the population in order to levy taxes,” Shalyapin said.

The village’s best known historic name, however, is the Finnish Kupsilla, from which Shalyapin took the name for his website.

The village of Kupchino was completely destroyed during World War II, with its houses being taken apart to build fortifications and bunkers.

Remnants of the war are seen in the pillboxes scattered around the southern part of the district. According to Shalyapin, a unique site where four pillboxes,

original trenches and ditches remain intact is located on Ulitsa Dimitrova.

During the Soviet era the site was fenced off because it hosted a transmission-jamming station to block Western radio stations, which prevented it from being destroyed by the ongoing construction. Some of the station’s 24 towers still stand, he said.

The village was rebuilt soon after the war but did not survive the development of the district. The last of the village’s wooden houses was demolished on March 6, 1976, after its owner, Aleksandra Nutskova, had been forcibly evicted. The site it formerly occupied on Ulitsa Dimitrova remains vacant.

In 2013, Shalyapin assisted in “The Last Wooden House of Kupchino,” a performance, installation and film by Irish artist Gareth Kennedy to commemorate the village. The book contains a photograph of the artist and a woman who once lived in the house posing with the work.

“He was inspired by my writings and created this curious installation last year,” Shalyapin said. “It’s the first time in my experience when a foreigner was inspired [by Kupchino].”

“The woman who lived in the house, Iraida Vasilyeva (nee Nutskova), is the oldest living resident of the village. Her family traditionally gathers on the site of the demolished house every year.”

Shalyapin’s website contains hundreds of the often unique photographs that he has managed to collect over the years, which he admits is one of the most difficult parts of the project because the typical Soviet buildings that stood in fields of dirt in summer and between snowy wastelands in winter were perhaps not very inspiring for photographers of the Soviet era.

“This is what I write about in the book,” Shalyapin said.

“Nobody has ever made any attempt to find something interesting in the ‘bedroom communities.’ That’s why there

have been no books. This is the first one.

“How did it start? I went to a library and asked for something about Nevsky District. I was given six books written by different authors. Go to a library and ask for something about Kupchino and you will stump any librarian.”

Hurrying to fulfill the construction plan, the construction workers — and occasionally prisoners — promptly built the houses without any care for the surroundings. People had to walk on planked pathways laid on the dirt to get from home to a tram stop.

“I write about the dirt of Kupchino as a separate phenomenon,” Shalyapin said. “It may not be original, but the dirt of Kupchino did exist. A bulldozer once got stuck in the dirt near my house. It was around 1978. There was plenty of dirt.”

Kupchino received somewhat of a boost in 2008 when Dmitry Medvedev became the Russian president to beat time for Vladimir Putin, who had served his allotted two terms by that time.

It was announced that Medvedev went to school 305 on Bukharestskaya Ulitsa and was a Deep Purple fan. The decrepit school was promptly fenced off and redesigned, and became augmented with a state-of-the-art gymnasium. Northern Kupchino’s first metro stations, Bukharestskaya and Mezhdunarodnaya, opened in December 2012, a full 30 years after the construction of the metro line had originally begun.

Shalyapin sees it as his mission to commemorate the historic village and the cemetery destroyed in the Soviet era and replaced by ponds. He believes that a memorial park with the village’s restored chapel should be created in the area.

He said the remains of the WWII fortifications should also be preserved and turned into a museum.

“It’s a unique site. The nearest other is in Belarus,” Shalyapin said.

“I wrote to everybody about this; the most recent letter I wrote was to Putin.”

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