

## “Finnish House” in the heart of St Petersburg

By Arto Mustajoki

In 2009, Finland celebrated historical events that took place two hundred years ago, though it was not quite clear what the main reason for the festivities was. In 1809, after a war between Sweden and Russia, Finland was transferred from its Western neighbour to the Eastern one. This was the beginning of the period of an autonomous Finland, known as the Grand Duchy of the Russian Empire. Becoming part of Russia – an enemy that Finland has fought against – might seem an unlikely cause of celebration for the Finns. However, the period of autonomy, which lasted for more than a century, is commonly regarded as a positive preparatory phase for the independence of the Finnish nation.

The anniversary year ended with an opening ceremony of the House of Finland in St Petersburg. The Prime Ministers of the two countries, Matti Vanhanen and Vladimir Putin, signed a certificate which meant that the renovation of the building had been finalized and the premises were ready for utilization. This was not strictly true, and the actual use of the building did not begin immediately; but the visit by the political leaders gave a great boost to the final stages of the repair work and to the public profile of the House. The various organizations involved will start their activities in the building in May 2010.

The House, located in the very heart of the city, will provide a unique opportunity for Finland to be more visible in St Petersburg. It brings together various Finnish organizations, such as the Cultural Institute of Finland; the Helsinki Centre, which accommodates not only activities of the city of Helsinki, but also of Tampere and Kotka; a representative office of the city of Turku; the Finnish–Russian Chamber of Commerce; FINPRO, the Finnish trade promoter; and promotion offices of the Jyväskylä and Mikkeli regions. The Finnish school, patronized by the Finnish General Consulate and intended for the children of parents working in the city, will also be based in this building. Some studio apartments are also available for Finnish researchers and artists temporary working in St Petersburg.

The initiator of the House of Finland concept has been the Finnish St Petersburg Foundation, which was founded twenty years ago by universities, churches, friendship associations, public organizations, ministries, and some private enterprises. Its main purpose is to maintain the Finnish Institute in St Petersburg. Finland has a total of 17 such institutes in various parts of the world. They are dedicated to the promotion of Finnish culture and research and to establishing links with the local authorities and a wider public. The institutes are independent actors, but receive a modest yearly subsidy from the Finnish state. Since the very beginning, the St Petersburg Foundation has been searching for a suitable location for the Institute. After multiphase trials three years ago, everything clicked into place when the City of St Petersburg approached the Foundation. After speedy negotiations, a building of 4,500 square metres in *Bolshaja Konjushennaja Street* (just off the *Nevsky Prospect*) was let to the Foundation for 49 years. It was obvious that the highest political structures of the City supported the endeavour, and so did the Finnish authorities.

The location of the building is ideal. The street is one of the most beautiful ones in St Petersburg. The area has a long tradition of accommodating famous inhabitants,

including the Nobel family and several Russian authors and poets. The house itself is “a piece of Finland” in St Petersburg. It is part of the traditional Finnish district, in the centre of which stands the Evangelical Lutheran church of St Maria owned by the Ingrian Church. The house was built in 1847. The famous Finnish priest Uno Cygnaeus, known as the father of the Finnish primary school, worked here before his career in Finland. Carl Gustaf Emil Mannerheim, an officer of the Russian army and subsequently Marshal of Finland, worked in the house, and an office of the Finnish bank was also located there. All these activities took place, of course, in the pre-Soviet times when there was no real border between Russia and Finland.

The renovation and modernization of a large building is a great challenge everywhere. It is no less demanding a task in a country like Russia. For a relatively small foundation it has also represented a certain risk. Besides the need to obtain all the necessary permissions and to find contractors, etc., additional difficulty has been caused by the special status of Institute. It has a director who signs all the official documents, but the money comes from the Foundation. The whole process would not have been possible without the help of several important partners: the City of St Petersburg, the Finnish Government, the Finnish General Consulate, The Ingrian Church, and numerous others. The costs, approximately 13 million euros, have been covered by a bank loan guaranteed by the Finnish Government.

We can say that the Finns have returned to their roots. The “Finnish House” will give a substantial boost to Finnish affairs in the St Petersburg region and in Russia more generally.

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*Photo: Seppo Muukkonen*