Episode Book

EPISODE #5499

Jerusalem's Russian Compound: 17 Acres, Three Churches

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SYNOPSIS

In the heart of Jerusalem, a 68-dunam walled district flies a flag that isn't Israeli. The Russian Compound — Migrash ha-Rusim in Hebrew, al-Muskubiya in Arabic — holds Holy Trinity Cathedral, a 12-metre monolithic column called the Finger of Og, and layers of history from Ottoman cavalry ground to Israeli city hall. This episode traces how the site was sold to the Russian Empire in 1858, built to house thousands of Orthodox pilgrims (over ten thousand came for Easter in 1911 alone), and then became a bargaining chip after 1917. Along the way: why the Crimean War's outcome is written in Jerusalem stone, how the Imperial Orthodox Palestine Society built a parallel church network from the Oak of Mamre to Jaffa, and why Israel paid for most of the compound in oranges in 1964.

TRANSCRIPT



Corn

Here's a question. You're walking through central Jerusalem, you turn a corner near Jaffa Road, and there's a walled compound flying a flag that isn't Israeli. There's a pub on one side of it called Glasnost, a design school on the other, and in the middle, a cathedral with four octagonal towers that's been there since before the State of Israel existed. What is that place, and why is it Russian?



Corn

That's essentially what Daniel wrote in this week. He wants the Russian Compound — that patch of the city centre that belongs to the Russian church — and he's asking three things. First, the origin story: how did this particular slice of Jerusalem come to be Russian in the first place. Second, why Russia still treats it as an important national asset, which he points out is strange given that Israel and Russia aren't exactly warm, and Russia's been bogged down in Syria for years. And third, how Russia managed relations with all the other states and churches that had pilgrims in the Holy Land before there was a State of Israel to negotiate with. He also flags something bigger: the Russian church's reach goes well beyond this one compound, and much of Jerusalem is church-owned and leased through mechanisms most people never see.



Herman

There's a lot in that, and the leasing part is the thread that ties it all together. But before we get to why Russia cares, let's actually stand in the place, because the buildings tell you most of the story before anyone opens a ledger.



Corn

So what's actually there?



Herman

It's sixty-eight dunams. About seventeen acres. Bounded by Jaffa Road, Shivtei Israel Street, and the Street of the Prophets — so it sits exactly on the seam between the Old City and the New Jerusalem that got built outside the walls in the nineteenth century. In Hebrew it's Migrash ha-Rusim, in Arabic al-Muskubiya, in Russian Russkoye podvorye. And it's not one building. That's the first thing people get wrong. It's a district.



Corn

Walk me through it.



Herman

At the centre, Holy Trinity Cathedral. Construction started in 1860, consecrated in 1872, four octagonal bell towers, paid for entirely by donations from ordinary Russian people. Then the Sergei Courtyard, completed in 1889, twenty-five luxuriously furnished rooms for Russian nobility. The Duhovnia, that's the ecclesiastical mission building from 1863, with the Church of St. Alexandra at its heart. Two pilgrim hospices from 1864 — the Elisabeth Courtyard for men, the Marianskaya for women. The Nikolai Pilgrims Hospice, 1903, built to hold twelve hundred guests. A consulate. And then, sitting in an ancient quarry on the site, a twelve-metre monolithic column they call the Finger of Og.



Corn

The Finger of Og.



Herman

Found in 1871, Second Temple or Byzantine period, and they just left it standing where it was. It's still there.



Corn

I like that the one thing nobody moved is the giant rock.



Herman

It's the only part of the compound that never changed hands. Everything else has been something else since. The Duhovnia housed all of Jerusalem's courts, including the Israeli Supreme Court, until 1992. The Elisabeth Courtyard is now police headquarters. The Marianskaya became the British Mandate's central prison, and it's now the Museum of Underground Prisoners. The Nikolai Hospice was British intelligence headquarters, and the Irgun bombed it twice in 1945.



Corn

So it's a palimpsest. Every regime that's held Jerusalem since the Ottomans wrote over the top of the last one, and none of them bothered to erase the layer underneath.



Herman

Exactly that. And that's why this matters beyond one odd patch of real estate. This is the clearest single case study of how church freehold, imperial prestige, and modern statecraft braid together in this city. If you understand the Russian Compound, you understand the machinery under half of Jerusalem.



Corn

Then let's go back to the beginning. A cavalry parade ground.



Herman

The Ottomans used the site as a Turkish cavalry parade ground, and they called it "New Jerusalem," which is a wonderful piece of bureaucratic optimism. It was sold to the Russian Empire in 1858. Construction ran 1860 to 1864, with the Sergei Courtyard added in 1889 and the Nikolai Hospice in 1903. And it was among the first major structures built outside the Old City walls — same wave as Mishkenot Sha'ananim, the Schneller Orphanage, Bishop Gobat's Protestant school. All of that was enabled by the post-Crimean War extension of rights to non-Muslims under Ottoman rule.



Corn

So the walls come down, legally speaking, and everyone with money and a flag builds outside them.



Herman

Everyone. And the Russians built biggest.



Corn

Why? What was the demand?



Herman

Pilgrims. Russians had been pilgriming to the Holy Land since their conversion to Christianity. By the nineteenth century they came in thousands, and in 1911 alone, over ten thousand Russians made the pilgrimage for Easter. The Russian Orthodox Church sent more pilgrims to the Holy Land than any other denomination. Some of them walked from Russia. On foot.



Corn

From Russia to Jerusalem on foot.



Herman

The compound existed to house them, feed them, and supervise them spiritually. The hospices were literally dormitories. The Elisabeth Courtyard held around three hundred pilgrims. The Nikolai Hospice held twelve hundred.



Corn

Twelve hundred people in one building. That's not a hospice, that's a small town with a roof.



Herman

And it tells you the scale of what was moving through. This wasn't a diplomatic gesture. It was infrastructure.



Corn

So what was the trigger? Because you don't build twelve hundred beds on a whim.



Herman

The immediate cause is the part most people miss. In 1851, Napoleon the Third pulls off his coup in France, and he forces the Ottomans to recognise France as the sovereign authority in the Holy Land. That moves control of the Christian holy sites from Orthodox hands into Catholic hands.



Corn

Which is a direct insult to Russia.



Herman

A direct insult, and a major trigger of the Crimean War of 1853 to 1856. Russia loses that war. And then spends the next half-century building exactly the institutional presence it failed to secure by arms.



Corn

So the compound is what a lost war looks like when it's rebuilt in stone.



Herman

That's the shape of it. And they built it properly. The first Russian Ecclesiastical Mission was sent in 1847 under Archimandrite Porphyrius Uspensky. The Ottomans didn't recognise it, and it was withdrawn during the Crimean War. It returns in 1857 with official Ottoman recognition, under Bishop Cyril Naumov, who arrives in January 1858. A Russian consulate is created the same year. And then, around 1860, the Imperial Orthodox Palestine Society is founded in St Petersburg, and that's the vehicle. It initiates and backs the construction, it runs the pilgrimages, it buys the property, it runs a theological seminary.



Corn

A society, not a state ministry.



Herman

A society. Hold onto that, because it matters later.



Corn

And the reach beyond the compound?



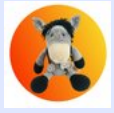
Herman

Enormous. Under Archimandrite Antonin Kapustin, the Mission acquires the land of the Oak of Mamre, the summit of the Mount of Olives, and the tomb of St Tabitha in Jaffa. It builds the Church of Mary Magdalene at Gethsemane in 1888 — seven gilded onion domes, commissioned by Tsar Alexander the Third for his mother, designed by David Grimm. There's the Mount of Olives Convent and Ascension Church, the Gorny Convent in Ein Karem, a hospice and asylum in the Muristan, schools, and properties in Bethany, Hebron, Jericho, Jaffa, Haifa, and Tiberias.



Corn

That's not a compound. That's a parallel church.



Herman

And they shipped everything from Russia to build it. Materials, furniture, all of it, on a shipping line they established for the purpose.



Corn

Which is the answer to Daniel's third question starting to form. How do you operate in someone else's empire? You bring your own supply chain.



Herman

And you play the politics. Against the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Jerusalem, Russia applied diplomatic pressure on the Ottoman sultans to refuse the berat — that's the investiture — to any patriarchal candidate who disagreed with Russia. They built churches using Church Slavonic liturgy, to what one account calls the great annoyance of the Greek



Herman (continued)

patriarchal element. And they championed the promotion of local Arab clergy to bishoprics instead of imported Greek hierarchs.



Corn

That last one is not a small move.



Herman

It's a long fuse. It drew Arab Christians toward the Russian Orthodox Church, and it sowed the seeds of the later Arab Orthodox Movement inside the Greek Patriarchate. That tension is still running today.



Corn

And against the Catholics and the Protestants?



Herman

It's a compound race. Britain, France, Germany, Russia, each building walled, semi-autonomous enclaves. European in appearance, gates closed at night, standing out hard against the Middle Eastern city. Each one is a flag with a postcode.



Corn

Give me an example of one of the others, so I can picture the pattern.



Herman

Take the German Colony, south of here. Templers — a German Protestant sect — bought land in 1873, laid out a straight boulevard they called the Reproach of the Pharisees, built stone houses with red-tiled roofs, ran their own school, their own clinic, their own wine press. Or the French, with the Notre Dame compound right on the seam of the Old City walls, and the Ratisbonne monastery, and the St. Vincent de Paul hospice. Every one of them is a walled piece of Europe with its own chapel and its own flag, and every one of them cut deals with the Ottomans that the next regime had to inherit.



Corn

So the Russian Compound isn't exotic. It's the biggest version of a pattern the whole city is made of.



Herman

Biggest, and the one with the longest afterlife, because of what happens to it after 1917.



Corn

So that's how the compound got built. What happened next is where it stops being a pilgrimage campus and becomes a bargaining chip.



Herman

The rupture. World War One. All Russian clergy are expelled from Palestine as enemy aliens, and the compound is occupied by Turkish soldiers. Then the October Revolution in 1917 cuts off both the pilgrim flows and the funding. Most of the properties fall into the hands of the anti-Bolshevik Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia — ROCOR. That's the fork that explains almost everything that follows.



Corn

Two Russian churches, one set of deeds.



Herman

And the deeds go where the politics go. In 1948, when Israel becomes a state, the Soviet Union recognises it. Moscow's support was crucial. And in appreciation, Israel returns all Russian church properties on its territory to the Moscow Patriarchate, including the Russian Compound.



Corn

So this was not a religious decision.



Herman

Not remotely. It's a Cold War transaction. Israel gains recognition. The Soviet-backed Moscow Patriarchate gains the property. And ROCOR, which had held it since the 1920s, is displaced. And note the asymmetry — properties inside Israel went to Moscow, while those in Jordanian-ruled East Jerusalem and the West Bank stayed with ROCOR until the late 1980s.



Corn

Same church, different passport, different owner.



Herman

Then 1964, which is the detail nobody forgets. Israel purchases most of the compound from the Moscow Patriarchate — everything except the cathedral and one building — for three and a half million dollars.



Corn

Paid how?



Herman

Paid in oranges. Israel had a shortage of hard currency at the time, so they paid in citrus.



Corn

They bought a chunk of imperial Russia with fruit.



Herman

The Jerusalem municipality and Safra Square were later built on that land. So the pilgrimage campus becomes municipal real estate, and the city hall sits on top of it.



Corn

I want to pause on that, because it's absurd in a way that's very Jerusalem. The city government of a Jewish state is literally sitting on land that a Russian tsar's charitable society bought from Ottoman cavalry officers, and the receipt is denominated in oranges.



Herman

And the oranges were real. This wasn't a symbolic gesture. Israel's citrus export sector was one of its few reliable sources of foreign exchange in the early 1960s, and Jaffa oranges were the brand. So the Moscow Patriarchate was essentially paid in the country's flagship export commodity.



Corn

Did the Patriarchate want oranges?



Herman

What the Patriarchate wanted was the money. What it got was the equivalent, in a form it could sell. Whether it got a good rate is a separate question, and I suspect it didn't.



Corn

And then Russia comes back for it.



Herman

October 2008. The Israeli government agrees to transfer ownership of Sergei's Courtyard back to the Russian government. The Israeli departments housed there — the Agriculture Ministry, the Society for the Protection of Nature in Israel — get relocated by March 2011, timed ahead of a Netanyahu visit to Moscow. And it remains Russian-owned today. It flies the Imperial Orthodox Palestine Society flag.



Corn

So a hundred and fifty years after the purchase, Russia is still clawing pieces back.



Herman

Piece by piece. And there's a darker version of that in the nineties. Under Russian pressure, Israel transferred ROCOR properties in Hebron and Jericho to the Moscow Patriarchate, forcibly expelling monks. Relations only recovered after the 2007 reconciliation between the Moscow Patriarchate and ROCOR. Today the Jericho properties are jointly administered.



Corn

Which answers Daniel's second question, I think. Why does Russia still care? Because it never stopped caring. This isn't a Putin-era ambition. The institutional presence dates to 1847, the land purchase to 1858. What we're watching now is a reassertion of a nineteenth-century position, not a new one.



Herman

That's the right frame. It's symbolic and diasporic, not strategic. Russia isn't projecting power from the Russian Compound. But it's a flag in the middle of a city that three religions and about six empires have fought over, and that has value that doesn't show up on a balance sheet.



Corn

And it's also a domestic political asset for Moscow. The Russian Orthodox Church is one of the few institutions in Russia that still commands broad public legitimacy, and the Holy Land is one of the few places where it can point to a physical, tangible, pre-Soviet presence.



Herman

Right. It's a legitimacy prop. The compound isn't there to project force. It's there to say: we were here before the Soviets, we were here before the Zionists, and we're still here. That's a claim about continuity, and continuity is what the current Russian state is selling.



Corn

Now widen it out, because Daniel's real question is about the machinery. How does church ownership actually work across this city?



Herman

The Greek Orthodox Patriarchate is the second-largest landowner in Israel, after the Israeli government itself. It bought most of its lands from the Ottoman Empire in the nineteenth century. And in the 1950s, shortly after independence, it leased most of its lands in Israel to the Israeli government for ninety-nine years, with an option to extend.



Corn

The Knesset.



Herman

The Knesset stands on Greek Orthodox Church land.



Corn

So the Israeli parliament is a tenant.



Herman

On a ninety-nine year lease. And that's the archetype — church freehold, long state lease, sub-lease to private owners. It's why buying a home in parts of Jerusalem means negotiating with an ancient church. You're not buying the land. You're buying a position in a stack of paper that goes back to the Ottomans.



Corn

That stack is contested.



Herman

Constantly. In 2005, Patriarch Irenaios is deposed after it emerges he sold church land in East Jerusalem to Israeli investors and settler groups, including Ateret Cohanim. Uproar among the predominantly Palestinian Orthodox laity. Theophilos the Third is elected the hundred and forty-first patriarch. Israel initially refuses to recognise him and freezes patriarchal bank accounts. Haaretz reported Israel offered recognition if he would give up control of valuable properties and sell church land only to Israelis.



Corn

Recognition was on the table as a trade good.



Herman

It was a negotiating position. And it hasn't settled. September 2017, hundreds of Palestinian Christians protest demanding his removal over alleged land sales to settler organisations. December 2022, the Patriarchate condemns what it calls the illegal seizure of church land in Silwan by settler groups. Then August 2025, Israeli authorities freeze all Patriarchate bank accounts over a disputed Arnona property tax bill — the church arguing historic agreements exempt its holdings. That disrupts clergy salaries, and it draws condemnation from the Palestinian Authority, Jordan, and other Christian institutions. The freeze was lifted by December 2025.



Corn

The Russian situation isn't an exception to Jerusalem's land system. It's the purest expression of it.



Herman

Same machinery, different flag. Church and state freehold, long leases, contested transfers, and a diaspora constituency with a claim. The 1964 orange payment and the 2008 Sergei Courtyard handback are the Russian equivalents of the Greek Patriarchate's ninety-nine year leases and its controversial sales.



Corn

Where does the Russian mission stand now?



Herman

Split in two. The Moscow Patriarchate mission, headed by Archimandrite Vassian Zmeev since late 2023, and the ROCOR mission, headed by Hieromonk Roman Krassovsky since 2025. And since the 2023 Gaza war, the Mission has been, in the reported phrase, living under attack. Missile strikes and drone fragments reported as recently as March.



Corn

Meanwhile the compound itself has flipped completely. The pubs were once named Glasnost, Cannabis, and Putin. Bezalel Academy of Arts and Design opened a four hundred and sixty thousand square foot campus next door in 2023, designed by SANAA.



Herman

The pilgrimage centre is now a nightlife and design district that still flies an imperial society's flag. The buildings didn't move. The city moved around them.



Corn

There's a piece of this that never makes the history books. The part Hilbert actually saw.



Hilbert

Four hundred and twelve crates.



Corn

Go on.



Hilbert

That was one consignment. Church furnishings, bound for Jaffa. I was a shipping clerk for a freight broker out of Piraeus, and one of the accounts I handled was Russian church goods moving into the Holy Land. Same trade the Palestine Society set up its own shipping line for, decades earlier. I never saw Jerusalem. I saw the bills of lading.



Corn

What does a cathedral's worth of furniture look like on paper?



Hilbert

Weights, mostly. Customs codes. A consignee line that reads like an ecclesiastical mission and a set of dimensions that never quite match what's in the crate. You learn to stop asking. The onion domes are the story everyone tells. The story I saw was tonnage.



Herman

Which is the thing the history books skip. An empire's reach is measured in what it can ship. Before the Russian presence in Jerusalem was anything else, it was a freight problem that somebody solved.



Hilbert

It was solved well. That's the part that stays with you. The paperwork was cleaner than anything else on my desk.



Corn

The consignee — was it the church? The state?



Hilbert

Neither. It was a society. The Imperial Orthodox Palestine Society. That's why the fights in the twentieth century got so messy. A state can't be split down the middle. A society can. It can be captured, or claimed by a rival church body, and there's nobody to appeal to. The paperwork was always in a society's name. That's why there are two missions in Jerusalem today.



Herman

That connects to something we said earlier. The whole thing was built by a society, not a ministry. And a hundred and sixty years later, that's the seam everything splits along.



Hilbert

I'd have to check the file. Anyway, I've got a load of fence posts in the back of the van and it's going to rain by four.



Corn

If the compound's value to Russia is symbolic and diasporic rather than strategic, what happens to it as the Russian-speaking diaspora here changes and Moscow's attention stays fixed on Syria and Ukraine?



Herman

The other clock is the Greek leases. Those ninety-nine year terms from the 1950s are running down. When the church freehold underneath a city starts to expire, somebody ends up holding the paper, and it isn't always the person who thought they owned the building.



Corn

Which leaves you with the image you started with. A walled enclave in the centre of Jerusalem. Pubs on one side, a design school on the other, an imperial society's flag still flying over the gate. In Jerusalem, the deed matters more than the border.



Herman

One thing that didn't make the main run — Princess Alice of Battenberg, mother of Prince Philip, is buried in the crypt of the Church of Mary Magdalene, right next to her aunt, Grand Duchess Elizabeth Feodorovna. Two German-born royals, one of them the mother-in-law of the British monarch, buried on the Mount of Olives under Russian onion domes. That's the whole nineteenth century in one grave.



Corn

Thanks as always to our producer, Hilbert Flumingtop.



Herman

This has been My Weird Prompts. If you enjoyed it, a review helps more than you'd think.



Corn

We're at my weird prompts dot com, or email us at show at my weird prompts dot com. We'll be back soon.