



Alexander Belida says he remembers when most of the cemetery was trees and brambles.

PETER COSTELLO

TUCKED AWAY IN WESTFORD

Russian cemetery ages, but memories thrive

By SHARON F. WEITZ
Sun Staff

WESTFORD — Tucked neatly into the side of Patten Road, bordered by a low stone wall, sits an acre teeming with history.

The tiny Russian Brotherhood Cemetery doesn't receive many visitors. A small contingent of area residents, descendants of the Russian-Americans buried there, care for the land and headstones.

But behind the aging headstones are hundreds of stories that will be lost if new

generations aren't willing to repeat and record them. Even Alexander Belida, a Westford resident who can still speak and read the Russian learned in his youth, is beginning to forget. But he doesn't want the histories and the heritage to disappear.

"I remember when most of this land was trees and brambles," said Belida, 78, his arm sweeping to encompass the entire cemetery. "The grass used to grow waist high here. The men cut it with scythes and cleared much of the land by hand. The women made lunches and lemonade. It sounds sexist today, but that's the way it was."

Near the center of the cemetery is the grave of Prokop Doroshuk, born in 1894. His wife Katerina, born in 1881 and a widow before marrying Doroshuk, is buried next to him. Doroshuk worked in a textile mill where he was taunted by many of the Irish-Americans working there, Belida said.

"He was registered at the mill with the name Bombush instead of Prokop, which was an insult," Belida said. "It's still in the records that way, and it's not right."

Wasil Halko, 1886-1960, was a storekeeper in town. He and his wife Dora,

Please see **CEMETERY/6**

Russian cemetery ages, but the memories thrive

CEMETERY/From Page 5

1895-1981, worked side by side for years, measuring out coffee, rice and beans for customers.

"When I'm here, I can almost hear their voices," Belida said, his eyes gazing off as the memories flood into his mind. "They worked hard to get that store and harder still to keep it."

Russian immigrants, including Belida's parents Walsil Belida and Alexandra Fechovich, flocked to this area in the early 1900s to work at textile mills in Graniteville and Forge Village. The mills' owners lived in the center of town.

Most of the Russians came from within a 150-mile region of Russia called White Russia, now known as Belarus. They planned to stay only a few years, make some quick money and return to their native land. But World War I interrupted their plans.

"With the German submarines sinking ships in the Atlantic, no one could cross over," Belida said. "By the time it ended, most Russians had married and settled. That's how the Russian community was formed."

Grodno cooperatives, No. 1 and No. 2, were neighborhood markets that doubled as social centers for the Russian immigrants. They both eventually closed, victims of a larger market that came to the town center.

The cemetery was established in 1918, the year of Belida's birth. It was a year when influenza ran rampant through the area, killing many of its sufferers. A few of the Russian-

Americans were buried at St. Catherine's Cemetery in Westford, but a new priest decided non-Catholics shouldn't be laid to rest there, Belida said.

The first to be buried in the new cemetery was Zaharie J. Rusko, who died of influenza in 1918 at the age of 31. His headstone is etched in English, but other graves dug the same year have stones with Russian writing. A few headstones have the older-Russian alphabet which had 40 letters before the Bolsheviks seized control in the early 1900s and cut the alphabet to 31 letters, Belida said.

But not only Russian names can be found in the cemetery. Surnames like McLenna, Milot and Cody can be found next to Scarmeas, Bobryk and Sidorovich.

"To be buried here, you have to be a descendant of one of the original Russian organizers," Belida explained as he righted a toppled green flower pot with the remains of a dead geranium inside. "Your name can be Murphy, McAllister or Tetreau, as long as you are a descendant."

For now, Belida is hoping Russian-Americans interested in their heritage will get in touch with others of the same background. He'd like to chat in Russian more often and wants the rich histories remembered by those who could be living in Belarus if their parents or grandparents hadn't crossed the Atlantic.

"We shouldn't forget the struggles of those who helped make us what we are today," Belida said, walking slowly out of the cemetery gates.