

# A second generation Russian recalls close-knit community

By June W. Kennedy

*This is the second in a series on Russian immigrants to Westford.*

**R**ussians came in great numbers to Westford in the first 13 years of this century. They left their peasant life in single-room, thatched-roof huts to follow the promise of agents from America that there would be big money here.

In Westford, immigrants worked in the quarries, ice-houses, on the railroads, but mostly in the mills of Forge Village and Graniteville. They hoped to make money and return to their homeland, but many made this town their home, got married and raised families.

Alexander Belida represents the second generation of these immigrants and still holds strong memories of his past:

"The Russians were home-oriented. They kept to themselves, which in part is attributed to the language barrier and their long working day in the mills. Abbot Worsted Co. kept a colony of company boarding houses in Forge Village around Canal and Bradford streets.

"Here the immigrant employees boarded singly, or as families, rented and ran a boarding house sheltering at least six additional workers.

"It was the era of outhouses and woodburning stoves. Quarters were cramped — two to three per bed, with some in cellars, but conditions were better than in the old country. (After World War II, Abbot Worsted offered the company houses for sale.)

"When we were kids we were poor, but didn't know it. Father and most Russians bought only a few substantial toys. We made our own crude locomotives and dug big sand and gravel holes in the yard.

"Our yard was never neat like today's yard, but Mother knew we were there. No ballfields for us kids.

"I remember in the spring, Father took us to the woods; he'd carry his sheep-skin-lined coat and spread it out in a sunny spot. Then he'd pick a few maple sapling whips, cut them off and make whistles — sometimes just pegs. He'd peel the bark off so white and attrac-

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Alexander Belida  
of his mother,  
Alexandra Belida



never had presents, but good cheer. You come to my house and we drink, dine and feast, but few presents. When the old folk came here they were amazed at people doing that. Christmas is too commercial today."

## Community service

"During World War II, Abbot Worsted donated yarn for the making of mittens, scarves, hats and sweaters. The Russian women knit for the soldiers. Mother, as chairlady, boxed the items to be sent to the Red Cross.

"In the Russian community everybody worked together; nobody paid anyone for help. If a man wanted a garage or shed put up, everyone turned out. Those that could, came with tools, picks and shovels.

"Say a man wanted to have his yard filled. A gang would go down, get Healy's team of horses and a driver. They'd go to a sandbank and fill the cart. A big supper was prepared by the womenfolk. Same as we did here years ago.

"Yet, in spite of their better lives here, the Russians longed for home. There's a march written 'Longing for Home' in a minor key. The majority of Russian music was in the minor key — probably because of the poor living conditions and oppression back home.

"Storytelling was an art amongst the Russian men. On Sundays in the homes they got together to tell fairy tales and yarns from the old country.

"I know, 'cause I was there; the wine was running down my chin," was the favorite last

tive. We'd prize those things for the longest time.

"Father and other Russian men could weave baskets from willow and alders. I still have one he made for harvesting potatoes — holds about a bushel.

"During the Depression, Abbot Worsted Company gave garden plots to its mill hands. They plowed up a big plot of land beyond their ballfield in Graniteville. We planted corn and potatoes there — produce that would keep through the winter. We'd raise 8-10 bushels of potatoes; it was a good cheap crop.

"Russians are good gardeners. Father would go up to Gould Road to pick the hazelnuts; they'd be green in the pod. He'd take them home and bury them in a sack in the ground for two weeks. That would ripen them. Then he'd bust them; we'd eat the little kernel.

"In her leisure, Mother crocheted portieres and wove beads into them. There were novelty bead shops in Lawrence. When I was little my mother bought a sock weaving machine. She made hose for all of us. She'd sit up late into the night; it was a lot of work. People brought yarn to her and she'd make them socks for 25¢ a pair.

"The Russians never celebrated Christmas much at all; they were like old Puritans. As the kids here got older they absorbed it in the schools.

"In Russia, Grandpa or Daddy Frost — Dedushka Moroz — was not a gift giver, but a cheer bringer. In the old country they

## Russians

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line offered by one first generation father. Much of the tradition and history was passed down to the present generation through these accounts."

## Rugged religion

"When I was a little boy I'd listen on Sundays to tales from the old country. Religion was rugged. Sermons were long; there were no pews in the church.

"When Russians came to this country and saw pews, they were disbelieving. One was supposed to stand up to God. My Mother said that when she was a little girl, the kids didn't like going to church; it was too long. But they were slapped fast if they fussed. Everybody was to stand quietly.

"Fortunately, Russians are a natural for beautiful choirs.

"When the Easter season came, the Russians had 40 days of fasting. One of the rituals was the opening of the big brick stove and the setting of all the kettles in there until they turned red to make sure they were purged of any fats. When you're gonna fast, you'r gonna fast the right way.

"On Easter evening in Russia, the congregation would form a procession parading around and around the church with the priest and clergy leading and carrying candles. The purpose of parading was to cast off the evil spirits. They were bone chilled when they got in. After a sermon, they went home to enjoy Easter.

"Both of these customs were carried on here for a while. People in Westford had no church, so on Easter and for other services they went to Lawrence or Maynard.

"The Grodno Store Model-T fruit truck with benches and curtains along the sides could transport a gang to church — rather ethnic that way you know. Men wore hats to church; women wore babushkas.

"I went only once. It was a long, dragged-out affair. Later on, as the second generation, my generation, became of age, the Russians attended other Christian churches — largely the Episcopal Church. The ritual and pageantry in the service was more nearly like their own.

"I like simplicity...was the only one who joined the then-Unitarian Church."

June Kennedy is a Westford resident and author of "Westford Recollections", a series of historical vignettes and photos.