

Education for early Russians extends to young, old alike

Compiled by June W. Kennedy

This is the last in a series on Russian immigrants to Westford at the beginning of the century.

Alex Belida, a second generation Russian who has spent his entire life in Westford, recalled the special circumstances of educating his young counterparts:

"Believe it or not, we had Russian schools in Westford. When we kids started growing up our parents figured we should have a little Russian schooling. The first school was on Storey Street in Forge Village — the home of Mr. Woitowicz.

"In Graniteville we had a couple of rooms in an upstairs house on Maple Street. The house has since burned down. That's where I first started.

"Later the schools merged and one was located in West Graniteville at a house owned by Mr. George Wolkowich. The school teachers here were Matthew Secovich and Peter Woroby. Mr. Gould had sold us the old benches and desks from the No. 9 schoolhouse up on the Groton Road. Here about 25-30 kids attended.

"Arrangement was the same as the little red schoolhouse of America. We had the first two rows of the advanced readers, second two rows of the basic readers, and the last row or two would be little kids starting the alphabet.

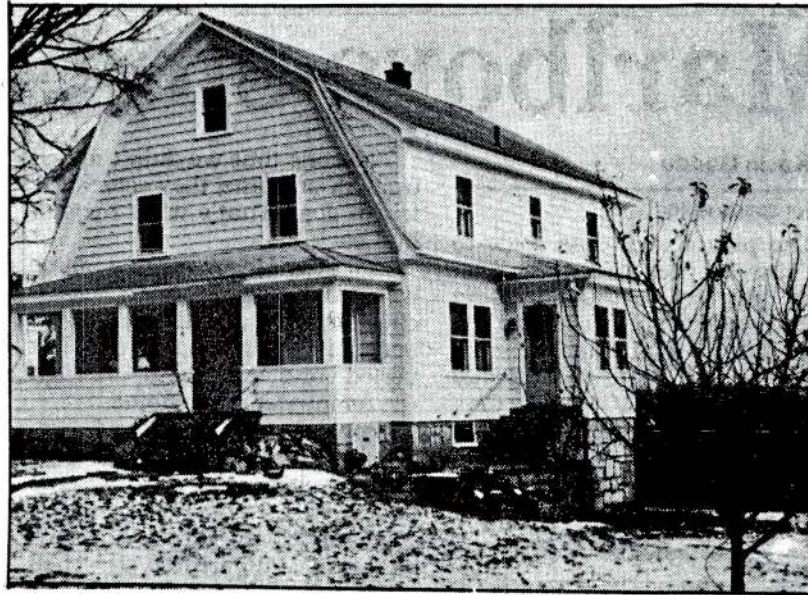
"I learned my Russian pretty well in there. That kept on for several years. As the kids grew up, I think they figured it was a little too square; they started dropping out and the school closed in the mid- to late-20s.

"Of the 40 to 50 Russian, Lithuanian and Polish who settled in Westford, not many had any schooling; most had none. A few men could read a little in Russian. None could read English.

"Many signed an 'x' to their weekly pay envelope. Russian men studied English at night classes offered at the Cameron School. As they learned to read and talk a little, they took out citizenship papers. A few just learned to speak broken English and got along.

"Appetites for education were whetted.

"As time went on, the women commenced to feel that they



Although an immigrant herself, Alexandra Belida (right) took it upon herself to educate fellow Russian newcomers in her home at 19 North Street (above) so that they could achieve the illusive dream of citizenship.



would like to become citizens. Someone had told them they could vote.

"Some of them were still working in the mills, and like the men, signing their pay envelopes with an 'x'. A few could scribble out their name. You could tell it was very artificial; they had learned to draw it.

"In the 1950s, a Citizenship School was opened up in the Grodno Hall (store basement) in Graniteville. Women from all the ethnic groups gathered to learn to read and write in preparation for citizenship.

"Because the Lowell teacher was, herself, French, the French women did well. But the Russians sat there confused, not knowing what to say. I went to the lady and asked if I might teach them myself. She replied, 'It's a good idea. I can't get to them because I don't speak the language.'

"My mother was unique in that she was the only Russian woman in Westford who could read and write. She already had

her citizenship papers. Well, Mother built a blackboard.

"We invited 18-20 ladies into her dining room on North Street. They were very skeptical at first. 'For us to learn, how can we, we're too old.' But I wanted to see these older women become citizens before they died.

"I started them in the English language. They knew nothing. When I started to show them how to form letters and words, why a big light would come over their face. 'Oh, gee! This is so interesting.'

"In about six months they could read simple sentences brokenly and write a little bit, mostly read.

"It made me feel good! I taught them how to fill out citizenship forms. When their turn came for examination for citizenship they drove to the Lowell North Middlesex County Court and passed with flying colors.

"The French teacher, with others from town, received theirs

Russians

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that day too. She grouped them all together. When all the papers were handed out to them, she had a special choir of girls and boys come up and sing a few patriotic songs. It ended on a nice note.

"These women treasured those papers something fierce. Only a few of the older generation live today. I felt good that they became American citizens."

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

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