

Life's hardships not over for Russian immigrants in mills

Compiled by June W. Kennedy, with Ellen and Noel Rainville Jr.

Russians came in great numbers to Westford in the first 13 years of the century. They hailed from Grodno, on the border of Poland and Russia. Of peasant stock, their Russian homes were but single-room, thatched-roof huts, with the animals living in the back. Agents from America promised big money to them here in the United States.

So, under the sponsorship of a relative, with just the clothes on their back, they boarded cattle boats and sailed under the poorest conditions to New York.

Some could read and write a little Russian, but not English. Many lost their Russian names because immigration officers couldn't pronounce or spell them; often the person didn't even know it was being changed.

One Lowell Lithuanian by the name of Koorkutski was assigned the name of Carson. And 60 years later, he died with that name of Carson.

The industrial mill towns of Lowell, Lawrence, Maynard and Westford offered good pay for unskilled labor. In Westford, immigrants worked in the quarries, ice-houses, on the railroads, but mostly in the mills.

Their hope was to make money and return to their homeland; very few intended to stay. When World War I erupted, they couldn't get back. Many made this town their home, got married and raised families.

The Russians were good mill workers. The Irish and English had the tongue, so they could sell themselves for better jobs as foremen; they were looked up to.

Russian men did strenuous work in the wash, spooling, combing and carding rooms; Russian women, being more skillful, found employment in the spinning room.

The Poles and Lithuanians from the Grodno area who arrived simultaneously with the Russians melted in with them. They all joined for weddings and funerals — one big family.

Today only a few of the first generation Westford Russians are still living. Second and third generations have intermarried with other nationalities. The simplicity, thrift, hard work and fun-loving spirit of these immi-



Photo courtesy June W. Kennedy

Over 60 years ago, Russian immigrants joined a substantial number of recently arrived foreigners to the villages of Westford, working as employees of the Abbot Worsted Company in its three mills. The company was paternalistic, renting over 500 units of duplexes and single houses to these displaced persons.

grants deserves a sharing. **Unique interview**

Ellen Rainville, now Fletcher Library director, and her husband Noel Jr. interviewed Matthew Secovich, a representative of the first generation Russians, at his Forge Village home in the early 1970s. Mr. Secovich has since passed away:

"When we first drove up to Mr. Secovich's house, we were greeted by a rain-soaked kitten and by Mr. Secovich at the side door. He led us into a spotless kitchen where we exchanged niceties about his Christmas cactus and his tablecloth before we sat down to hear his narrative.

"Matthew had prepared notes on a yellow sheet of paper which he folded and smoothed for the two hours we talked with him. He had come from White Russia in 1913 at 17 years of age. His plan was to make money in America and to return to Russia by age 18 — when he was eligible for the draft.

"Mr. Secovich belonged to the peasant class — he fell into the Archie Bunker malapropism of substituting 'pheasant' for peasant. Those Russian families with land had divided their farms through generations until the contemporary sons owned plots 'as wide as the kitchen table' and three to four miles long.

Russian immigrants: Hardship didn't end in mill

RUSSIANS-FROM PAGE 7

ton to Lowell, and from Lowell to Forge Village, interspersed with his first automobile ride from South to North Station.

"Matthew Secovich reached the 'New Country' on Easter Sunday, 1913. On Monday he rested; on Tuesday he began working in Lowell.

"Matthew worked that Tuesday through Friday under the supervision of another worker. No one took his name or came to speak with him — the worker received training, then pay.

"And Matthew recalled: 'Me thinking all the time, me no speak English but I think: no know name, no paycheck.'

"That Friday he decided to get in touch with his boss whom he had recognized by dress and by the attitude of his fellow workers. Matthew essentially 'lay in wait' by the elevators; when he saw his boss, he caught his arm and mimed writing on his left palm.

"The boss understood perfectly, took him to an assistant where Matthew's name was recorded and the next week, he received his pay.

Very meager pay

"The pay for a 54-hour week was \$6.50. Rent (at company rates) was \$4 a month for men and \$3 a month for women who helped with cleaning, laundry and cooking. Board consisted of tea in the morning, soup at noon, and tea in the evening.

"Besides living expenses, Matthew owed his aunt \$120. In his first year in America, he repaid his aunt and saved \$75 to send to his Russian family. He shared his room and bed with three other workers.

"Their mattress of wood-shavings and ticking was two inches thick. The pot of water by the bed would freeze at night. Matthew explained how they slept with a union suit, a sweater, a hat and blankets but were still cold because of the air coming through the mattress.

"When the war broke out in 1914 and no one was allowed to leave the country, Matthew forgot about leaving the U.S. after one year's stay. His wife-to-be, whom he had known in Russia, arrived on the last immigrant boat admitted before the war.

"Mrs. Secovich's uncle had

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Ellen and Noel Rainville Jr. on first generation Russian Matthew Secovich

sent for her; she rented a room from him with two other girls. This room was in a company house — all of the girls and the uncle worked for Abbot Worsted in Forge Village.

"Matthew did not give us the particulars on his courtship. He explained: 'Lowell have many boys; many girls in Forge.'

"On Friday nights, the Lowell boys took the trolley to Forge Village, being careful to catch the 11 p.m. train back to Lowell. If they missed it, they walked 12 miles back to the city.

Marriage and a move

"He married his wife in 1917. He was 21. For the wedding, they bought 21 kegs of beer at \$2 a keg. On a Saturday morning they were married; they celebrated Saturday, Sunday, Monday night and Tuesday night.

"Mrs. Secovich still lived with her uncle; Matthew began working for Abbot Worsted and moved into the uncle's cellar. He remembered it as dark and damp with dirt floors and stone walls. Besides himself, the cellar housed the pickles, the sauerkraut and the rats.

"He slept at first on just a

mattress; he later bought a discarded spring from a woman in Graniteville. He and the uncle walked five miles back to Forge carrying their \$1 purchase.

"Matthew and his wife had several children before they tried to rent a company house. (He did not remember the exact number of children. 'My wife have prigginahncy,' he told us).

"Matthew requested a house and was asked how many workers were in his family. 'Only two (his wife and himself),' he replied. When his children were of working age, they said, he could rent a house. And Matthew retorted, 'Where my children grow up — in bushes?'

"Eventually, Matthew got his house. His family lived in three rooms and rented out the fourth at going company rates. He told us how he bought clippers to give the boys haircuts and how his wife sewed all their clothes.

"Both parents, however, worked 12-hour shifts — Matthew at nights, his wife during the day. Their schedules overlapped 15 to 20 minutes every

morning and night. So when one parent was leaving and the other returning, the children were left alone. The children were awake during Matthew's sleeping hours (daytime); he recalled falling asleep while pushing carts at work because the children would not let him rest.

"Matthew and his wife saw each other on Saturdays and Sundays.

During Prohibition, Matthew made moonshine. The copper boiler was hidden behind the stove and camouflaged by the woodbox. Not only was liquor illegal, but company inspectors could walk through a house at any time looking for damage or moonshine.

"Matthew heated his stove with wood that cost \$1 a cord and \$1 for delivery. He laughed at his wife's frustration over the amount of dirt he created with that firewood.

"'Dirt! Dirt!' he'd say, 'The whole world is made of dirt! You never get rid of it!'

June Kennedy is a Westford resident and author of "Westford Recollections", a series of historical vignettes and photos. Ellen and Noel Rainville Jr. also reside in Westford and are avid historians.