

Russian immigrant wedding: Time of custom, assimilation

By June W. Kennedy

This is the third in a series on Russian immigrants in Westford.

The Russian immigrants who came in great numbers to this town at the beginning of the century left a legacy of memories and ethnic traditions for the generations that would follow.

Second generation Russian Alexander Belida has many recollections of his Eastern European roots:

"The ethnic weddings of the 20s and the 30s are a by-gone era. The bride's folks did the entertaining; there would be a big bash...spend all kinds of money. Nothing was too good for the bride and groom.

"Always held on a weekend, the celebrating began on Friday; Saturday was the day of marriage. For many weeks before the event, food and drink was being prepared. Friends and relatives of the bride made all kinds of pickled cucumbers, sauerkraut, salads, kielbasi and a lot of beer.

"I played accordion in a little orchestra. We played for the dancing in the living room or biggest room one had. The room was stripped right down to the bare floors; just a couple of chairs remained. If not, the chairs would be broken; the guests really got rambunctious.

"About 9 or 10 o'clock on Saturday morning the bridal party left for Maynard or Lawrence to the strains of a lively bride's march. They took off blowing horns all the way to church...really raucous.

"Upon their return we'd play an entry march. Then the dancing really began! Anyone coming into the room the first time generally tipped the musicians. There was a box there or they'd put it in a violin or a guitar. We'd split up the profits.

"The family always made a big cake, two, three or four tiers high. The bride kissed the groom and threw the bouquet [an American custom].

Greenbacks custom

"No one brought any presents to the bride; it all had to be in greenbacks. People would save for that kind of wedding so they could generously give.

"On the wedding night when the time came for donating, everybody got up close and began contributing \$5, \$10, \$15 or \$20 — whatever one could afford or depending who the relative was. A godfather was



Photo courtesy of June W. Kennedy

The 1918 wedding photo of Alexandra Sekovich and Wasil Belida (center, front row) shows members of the wedding party decked out in the finery befitting such a celebration. The simple lifestyle of these new immigrants was put aside for weddings, when all stops were pulled out on food, dancing and general carousing.

expected to donate heavily; for that, he received a slice of cake. That's what they called 'cake-cutting'.

"I remember one time some Irish folk came to a wedding. One said to the other, 'Look, whatever you do, eat anything you want but don't go up to get any cake because you gotta pay for it.'

"They didn't understand the custom. When the cake was gone, there would be a basketful of money. It puts us Americans to shame...consider their salaries.

"Prior to cake cutting, an older custom of donation was held especially for the menfolk. For 5, 10 or more dollars they would get so many flat dinner plates. They were supposed to hit them with their fist to break them.

"The more you paid, the more plates you got. Of course, a big guy would come up and demand five or six plates; he'd probably give \$50. He'd cut his fist all to pieces, but it was a great honor to break plates.

"After a while the tradition went out. They stuck to the tame old wedding cake.

"Men and women really let

loose and joined in the merriment. After a few drinks they'd sing. The songs would consist of romantic subjects. Lively folk dances, polkas and mazurkas were popular.

"As the festivity of the marriage day came to an end and the couple said their farewells, the mother went through a ritual of crying about her daughter's leaving home. There was something special about the old home weddings!"

Fantastic food

Steve and Mary Beskalo are the only Westford second generation couple of pure Russian descent. Mary remembered there were no written recipes from the old people. "You had to learn by trial and error...this and that."

Loaves of raisin bread, unsalted bread and Paska at Easter were common fare.

"There was always tea on the back of the black iron stove. It would be there for a week...very strong. You'd pour it in a cup and just add the boiling water."

Both orange and dried plum were popular for tea.

Mary also recalled both her

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mother and father making braided rag rugs on Sunday afternoons — from need, as well as for pleasure. Menfolk helped wash and scrub the clothes, too, especially if their wives worked in the mill.

Steve enjoyed the professional ball games offered by Abbot Worsted with the beloved Jack Abbot in attendance.

The folk, he recalled, were proud of their big gardens and shared a friendly competition in the raising of crops. Consequently their pride and hard work forbade any relative from entering the Town Farm or Tewksbury State Hospital. To them this was shameful. They cared for their folk at home.

Florian Witowicz, also a second generation Russian, recalled:

"Russians are great mushroom eaters. Even today the older ones gather them. My Mother used to have me pick them. I still do. I dry them to put into soups. Some fry them.

"There are only a couple of bad ones. The flying angel is the most poisonous of all the mushrooms. It is a yellow mushroom and looks like it had oatmeal on top. Then there is the fly amoneta. Russians would boil it

and set it in a bowl on the table to catch and kill flies.

"Several years ago I found a puffball right off Howard Road. It was 13" in diameter and 43" in circumference.

"I've also gathered nuts and grapes for years. There are a lot of wild grapes throughout the town. Everybody used to go nutting. In back of Palmer's Quarry, the forest was so dense you could get a 20 or 30 pound bag of chestnuts in the burr. When frost came and the burr popped — three nuts to a burr — we'd pop them like popcorn on top of the stove.

"The blight has changed all that, but there are a few trees left. There are still a lot of hickory and hazelnuts and some pignuts and butternuts. The black walnuts are mostly cultivated, growing on someone's lawn.

"I remember my Mother had us gather cranberries in a bog. They are still plentiful in town. She had a big porcelain crock that would hold maybe 30 gallons. In the fall we'd cut the cabbage up. She'd mix the cranberries with the cabbage, seal it with grape leaves and put a big block of wood on top of the stone

crock. Then we'd have sauerkraut all winter.

Alexander Belida has mouth-watering memories of ethnic food:

"Russian food was plain, but wholesome. Store macaroni? No! Mother rolled it out like a pie crust, laid it on a bed on paper to harden. Then she'd roll it up and chop it like macaroni, boil it and add milk like a porridge. It was good tasting."

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

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