

# Westford Recollections

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## Russians (Part 1)

The Russians came to Westford from 1900-1913. They hailed from Grodno, on the border of Poland and Russia. Of lowly 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 sixty 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.

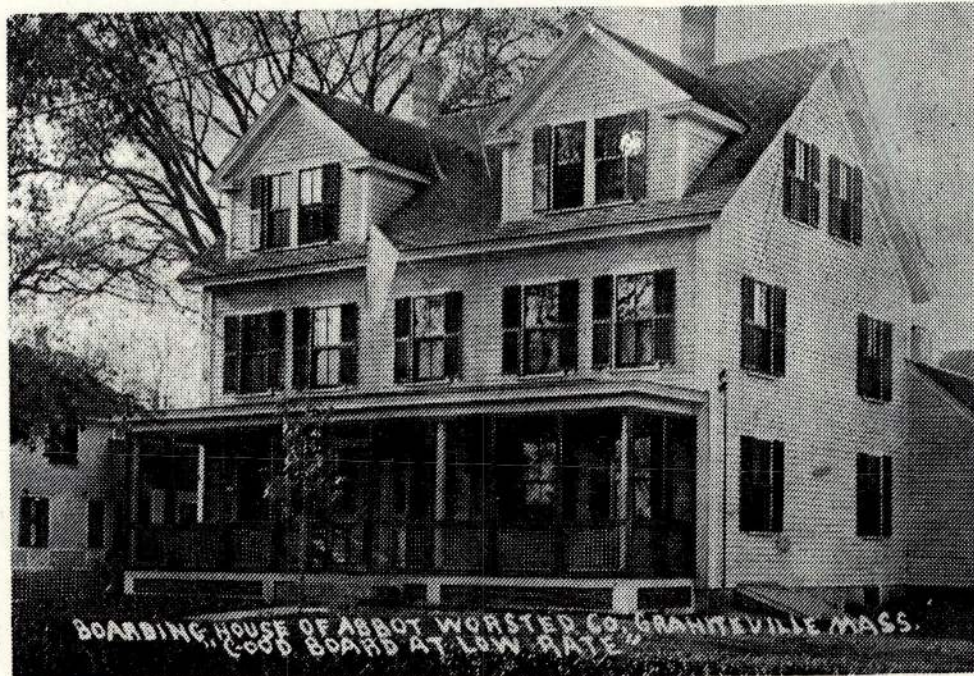
The Polish and Lithuanians from the Grodno area who arrived simultaneously with the Russians, melted in with them. They all joined for weddings and funerals -- one big family. Today, only a few of the first generation Westford Russians are still living. Second and third generations have intermarried with other nationalities. The simplicity, thrift, hardwork and fun-loving spirit of these immigrants deserves a sharing.

## First generation interview: Matthew Secovich

Credit to Ellen and Noel Rainville

"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. Matthew's hope was to earn money for a year in America and then to return to share with his family.

"Mr. Secovich came to this country on fare provided by his aunt in Forge Village (Westford), Massachusetts. She sent him \$100 which was to be paid back at a yearly interest rate of 20 percent. He walked to the Russian border where he hid under a bush until nightfall with six other fleeing Russians. (A Russian who left with a legitimate passport was obliged to return in six months. Russians, like Matthew, who desired to leave for longer periods had to 'steal' out.) At the border, he and his companions bribed a



Forty years ago, a substantial number of Westford's population were employed by Abbot Worsted Company in their three mills. Rooming houses and dormitories were provided for the workers. Over 500 units of duplex and single houses were rented to them. (A Perkins photo from the book WESTFORD RECOLLECTIONS 1729-1979 by June W. Kennedy.)

soldier with three dollars and he led them through a brook to German soil. (Three dollars was wealth to a Russian soldier whose pay was 45 cents in three months.) Matthew continued his journey by train across Europe and by cargo boat to New York City. From New York, he went to his aunt in Forge Village -- the U.S. would not admit immigrants unless they could present a definite address and responsible party as their destination. Matthew took the train from New York to Boston, from Boston 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 recalls, 'Me thinking all the time, me no speak English but I think: no know name, no pay check.' 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.

"The pay for a 54 hours week was \$6.50. Rent (at company rates) was \$4.00 a month for men and \$3.00 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 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 11:00 p.m. train back to Lowell. If they missed it, they walked twelve miles back to the city. He married his wife in 1917. He was 21. For the wedding, they bought twenty-one 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.) 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 fourth at going company rates. He told us how he bought clippers to give the boys hair-cuts and how his wife sewed all their clothes. Both

parents, however, worked twelve hour shifts -- Matthew at night, his wife during the day. Their schedules overlapped fifteen to twenty 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 (daytimes); 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 anytime 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!'

"Matthew related his hardships matter-of-factly. He did not seem bitter, only straightforward in his account. 'People no live then like they do today.' He knew his story was interesting; this would make a good book, a good movie, he told us. But he was more emotional and proud in his account of the Russian People's Corporation. In 1918 the Russians in Forge Village cooperated in buying a cemetery site; the men cleared it themselves. Six years later, a group of twenty-three Russians started a cooperative store. (Grodno No. 1 in Forge Village was located on Pond St.) It opened July 4, 1924. the store began as a form of protest and protection. The local butchers who sold people meat from their wagons, would arrive for business at 11:00 p.m. or 12:00 p.m. Because of the darkness, people could not see the cuts they bought. Often they were forced to buy bread (which the women baked themselves) if they wanted to buy meat. So the Russian people started a non-profit store. In 1925, Matthew got his license and drove the corporation truck. This truck served also as a school bus. He picked up the Russian children of the corporation and took them to a room in Graniteville where he taught them the Russian language, songs and dances. Eventually, the Company donated a store for the cooperate. (Grodno No. 2 in Graniteville - at River, Beacon, North and N. Main St.) When we expressed surprise at this, he explained that the people's participation in the store was like a guarantee -- people would stay in one place, they would work for the Company and their children would work for the Company. For Matthew, this was definitely the case. In 1942, he bought a Company house for \$3500. He worked for Abbot Worsted for forty years.

"The Russian People's Corporation still exists. Membership has grown from twenty to one hundred and thirty people. It was Matthew who suggested recruiting younger people to the Corporation. The original members were dying out. The pride and solidarity of this group also seems to be dying out. We asked Matthew if we should bring his son to talk with us. 'Oh,' he said, 'He no help. He knows nothing about this; he is of a totally different era.'

To be continued.  
This is article No. 49 in the continuing WESTFORD RECOLLECTIONS -- 250th Anniversary Series.