

Westford Recollections



The second generation of Russian descendents broke away from the Russian churches in Lawrence and Maynard. Because the ritual and pagentry were similar to the Russian tradition, many joined St. Mark's Episcopal Church in Westford.

Russians - Part II

SECOND GENERATION: ALEXANDER BELIDA

"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 Company 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 yet 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 ball fields for us kids. I remember in the spring Father took us to the woods; he's 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 attractive. 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 eight to ten 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 cents a pair.

"The Russians never celebrated Christmas

much at all; they were like old Puritans. As the kids here got older they absorbed the custom 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 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.

"During World War II Abbot Worsted Company donated yarn for the making of mittens, scarves, hats and sweaters. The Russian women knit for the soldiers. Mother, as chair-lady, 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 line offered by one first generation father. Much of the tradition and history was passed down to the present generation through these accounts."

RELIGION: ALEXANDER BELIDA

"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 forty days of fasting. One of the rituals was the opening of the big brick stove



Many Russian men and women worked long hours in the Abbot Worsted Company mills at the turn of the century. (From the WESTFORD RECOLLECTIONS Series)



The Russian Brotherhood Cemetery is located on Patten Road. Older stones are lettered in Russian; more recent ones are lettered in English. The cross with two horizontal, parallel lines and a third line placed at an angle, is said to represent Christ and two thieves nailed to the cross -- one of them confessed. (A Downey photo from the WESTFORD RECOLLECTIONS Series)

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're 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 for 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 ModelT fruit truck, with benches and curtains along its sides, would 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, because 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."

RUSSIAN CEMETERY: ALEXANDER BELIDA

"From the time of arrival in this country, the Russians in Westford, being of the Eastern Orthodox religion, were buried in St. Catherine's Cemetery. About 1918, the influenza epidemic was raging; they had to find a place to bury their dead. Being clan-ish, and at that time illiterate, they didn't know enough to go to the town to apply for a grave. They figured they belonged to some other religion. No doubt they sought comfort in their unity. My father and two or three others organized a committee and showed town authorities where they would like an acre of land. Attorney Fisher came down. They say he paced it off and said, "This is where your bounds will be." He did the paper work for them; hence the formation of the Russian Brotherhood Cemetery on Patten Road. In their spare time this first generation of Russians cleared the brambles, scrub oak, big trees and commenced burying their own. Today, descendants of these very same families still meet twice a year to care for the cemetery themselves. Membership in the Russian Brotherhood Cemetery, with yearly family dues of \$2.00, guarantees an unlimited number of grave sites for a descendant, spouse and offspring. A newly married couple has a two year option to join the Corporation. In 1950 a second acre was purchased by the Russians.

"Some stones are lettered in the old Russian alphabet. When the first immigrants came, they had gone to school under the old Czarist regime. After the Russian Revolution the Bolsheviks discarded six or seven unnecessary letters making the language simpler and easier to read. The monument inscriptions of the twenties reflect this change. Now the newer generation uses English on their markers. Anyone could go and dig graves in the early days. The first graves in this cemetery were rather haphazardly arranged and without foundations. They have since been aligned. Russians are proud of their monuments; some have even been replaced. A hand-made cement one, still in place, was made by a chap from Forge Village.

"Common Russian and Polish names with their meanings are: Woroby, sparrow; Kovol-check, smithy; Chudak, magician or mystery man and Sosnowski, pine. Also, Pupchick, little button; Posnik, late or tardy. Belida, Kiver Secovich, Harasko, Beskalo and Minko are other names. They are not all Russian names on the headstones. Costello and McAllister, for example, are Irish; as sons and daughters married into other nationalities, their families would also be buried here. The first soul buried in the Russian Brotherhood Cemetery was an influenza victim of 1918.

"Russian wakes were held at home. People were never embalmed then. I do remember Mr. Healy having a little garage in back of his house. Those taken there had no family. Wakes were held for two or three days with someone keeping vigil around the body until time for burial. It was the place of women, mothers and daughters, to wail over the person -- a must in those days.

"Because Westford was too small to support a church, priests, dressed in regalia resembling Greek priests, came from Lawrence and Maynard for the funeral. They consecrated the ground and delivered a lengthy service. Some of the older folk continue to wear their babushkas and wail at the cemetery as was the Russian custom. Some of the younger members try to copy the tradition. It doesn't look good here in America. Many are cutting that all out. A long period of mourning followed a death. (To be continued)

This is article No. 50 in the continuing WESTFORD RECOLLECTIONS - 250 Anniversary Series.

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