

Westford Recollections



With the coming of the twentieth-century, Russians, Poles, French-Canadians, Italians and Britons immigrated to Westford to work in Stony Brook Valley mills. The first generation of Russians retained customs and speech of their homeland. Their solidarity is reflected in their ownership and maintenance of the Russian Brotherhood Cemetery on Patten Road. Spirited were the Russian wedding celebrations, replete with lively dancing, singing and hearty fare. Posing for their 1918 wedding portrait are Wasil Belida and Alexandra (Sehovich) Belida, front center. (A Belida photo from the book WESTFORD RECOLLECTIONS 1729-1979 by June W. Kennedy.) The second printing of this hardcover book will go on sale at the WESTFORD ACADEMY CHRISTMAS BAZAAR on Dec. 8 and will be available at the "Book-tique" and from the author for Christmas gift giving.

Russians Part III

Alexander Belida:

"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. Woirowicz. In Graniteville we had a couple of rooms in an upstairs house on Maple St. The house has since burned. 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 schoolteachers 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 twenty-five to thirty 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 twenties.

"Of the forty to fifty Russian, Lithuanian and Polish families 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 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 1950's 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 French, the French women did well. But the Russians sat there like toads, 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 eighteen to twenty 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. 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 that day, too. She grouped them all together. When all the papers were handed out to them, she had a

By JUNE W. KENNEDY

The limited, numbered edition of WESTFORD RECOLLECTIONS 1729-1979, featuring highlights from this column, has sold out. A second hardcover printing will be available for Christmas gift giving. Customers are advised to call or visit the "Book-tique" (692-2347) at 6 Carlisle Place, or the author, to reserve copies.

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."

Weddings

Alexander Belida:

"The ethnic weddings of the twenties and thirties 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. During Prohibition it was overlooked if the Polish Blast (moonshine) was served. It was your own fault if you didn't have enough and went home hungry.

"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 floor - just a couple of chairs remained. If not, they'd be all kicked apart; 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). 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 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, considering 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 bruiser 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 same old wedding cake.



"My mother, Alexandra Belida, was unique in that she was the only Russian woman in Westford who could read and write in the early 1950's," states Alexander Belida. "She and I opened a school in our home on North Street, and, as a result, several women received their citizenship papers." (A Belida photo from the WESTFORD RECOLLECTIONS Series)

"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!"

(This is article No. 51 in the continuing Westford Recollection 250th Anniversary Series.)