

Russian reunion full of fun, reminiscing

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A reunion marking the 60th anniversary of the coming of the Russian immigrants to Homeglen in 1924 was held July 14 and 15 at the Homeglen Hall. Promoted, planned, and conducted by distasteful old timers Stan and Jessie Jones, Vic and Joan Osokin, Ken and Jean Riddiough, Jack and Evie Burns and Mike and Annie Polushin, the event was a decided success. The following is an account of the reunion, with historical details written by one of the visitors, Margaret Wagstaff of Elnora.

The sights and sounds of this anniversary were different. This gathering held memories as deep as a sob in the dark. It was the 60th anniversary of the coming to the Homeglen district of the Russian refugees from the revolution.

Sights of cheerful, happy, hardworking people, children of the time of upheaval. Some had been little ones who escaped with their parents, some born on the long exodus and some born here. Sights of rosy healthy, laughing children now, third and fourth generation Canadians.

Sounds of folk remembering and asking: "How has it been with you?" "Yes our children have all done well." "We have our sons on the farm." "We live in B.C. now." "Those who had left the Homeglen-Rimber area long ago, and lost touch, wanted yearningly to know the facts of their people. Sounds of laughter and sighs as old remembrance flowed. Most poignant of all—the sound of the old songs from Mother Russia, sung wholeheartedly and without accompaniment, by the older ones just sitting around a table.

This reunion was a weekend affair. Some folk had come on Friday, July 13 and some arrived on Saturday. They came from all parts of Alberta and B.C.

On Saturday after a potluck supper, enjoyed by about 130 guests, children and grandchildren, there were impromptu comments and informal speeches in the Homeglen Hall, with Mike Polushin as M.C. Many were the comments on the good fortune that had come to them in their new land. Warm appreciative remarks too about the kindness of their neighbors, and the help they had been given. There were words of thanks too for their new land, come to through so much agony. Mrs. Mary (McQuarrie) Dye, teacher of that time (1924-1926) attended, and was presented with a plaque in appreciation of her teaching, and helping little Russian immigrants adjust to their strange new world. Mr. John Polushin, who was 14 at the time of the revolution, made the presentation.

Dancing to the good music of Rodney Jensen's Orchestra from Ponoka took the rest of the evening, and of course there was visiting. A pancake and sausage breakfast was served Sunday morning, with more visiting and reminiscing.

Some made a small pilgrimage of a few miles to the little St. Mary's Greek Orthodox Convent and Church. The convent complex is cared for by two nuns who have been there for many years. Nine of their order came from Singh, China in 1938. The little church had been built in 1937 with logs donated by the Polushins from their farm. Wheat, oats and barley were given by members and sold to the Rimberley elevator. The funds raised were used to buy doors and win-

dows. Log work was done by Alexander Krevosheya in the 11th-century style. Later inside finishing work was done by Constantine Mishukoff.

In the cemetery in the woods are buried some of those first immigrants and some others. There is a Bishop (Greek Orthodox) of all Western Canada — Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Alberta and B.C. He was a frequent visitor and it was his wish. There lies a young princess, Antonina Andinsky. There too lies a famous painter and sculptor. It is a holy and quiet place.

Another note — when the Greek church reorganized and modernized, some of the old ones separated. They are the "Old Believers", and are buried in their own cemetery. A monk from Lehighridge was there the day of the visit. Monks and Nuns habits look the same as they must have done for centuries.

Back again at Homeglen Hall, set in a green country clearing, there was more visiting; then few by few, the visitors left with a warmth in their hearts after the old tales and old songs.

The revolution saw the Red Army forces victorious. . . . In 1919 there was no hope for the White Army. Escape was the only means of survival, and the only escape route for many lay through Siberia to China. Many risked death and many died trying to escape. Some managed to get on the Trans-Siberian Railway, some walked, some made their way by boat down the rivers. There were many comments on the kindness and helpfulness of the Chinese people. This was not a sudden journey. Always the people were watched. Some went as far as they dared without arousing suspicion, and settled. They established a home and lived for perhaps a year, before daring to continue the journey. Some simply had to hide. Many made their way to Manchuria, and on to Harbin, China. Finally from a Chinese port to Yagouover. The stories! How did they have the courage? The answer came matter-of-factly, "We had no choice, escape or die."

John (Vanya) Polushin was a young boy when his father was arrested and put in prison. In the Siberian fall, his father escaped and hid until spring. When he came back he found a White Russian officer riding his favorite horse, Marusha. How did this happen? The Red army officer who had taken her had been killed in a skirmish, the horse ran away and was captured by the other side. Negotiations. . . and Mr. Polushin got his horse again! Somehow he got his family on the Trans-Siberian Railway, but he could not leave Marusha, so he rode her over the Ural Mountains. His family waited seven weeks for him. John was about 10 and he remembers the bodies hanging from the telephone poles along the railway.

At this time occupation forces — Japanese, French and English — were there to help the White Army, but were unable to do much. John's father worked on an experimental farm run by the Japanese for four years before they could come to Canada.

One family was hiding in a cellar while the Red Guards searched the house. They gave the baby candy all the time, lest he make a sound and betray them.

Another story is of a high-ranking official, who with his wife and baby in a boat, positioned themselves beside the ferry

boat so as to be hidden from the scrutiny of the guards as they made for safety on the Chinese side.

One White Russian officer stayed at the Chinese-Russian border for seven years, hoping for a reversal in the tides of war so he could again fight with the White Russian Army.

Victor Osokin, slight and brown, recalled that his father was left with the women and children to care for when the men hid and escaped. It was a small village. As inconspicuously as possible, he got them to the River Kus, bordering China and Russia. The Russian side was constantly patrolled. Hiding along the river, the refugees got the Chinese to take the children in their junks. When the Russian boats appeared, the little ones were covered. All the guards saw was an old Chinese fisherman. Somehow they made it to Harbin. There for a time they had to live behind a high wall because of the bandits.

One official on the border watched his co-worker shot in cold blood just for his overcoat. He too escaped, knowing he would be next.

The Peter Sideroff family took long months and years for their journey . . . stopping and starting. Everywhere they were watched. Everything they had — money, possessions, livestock — had to be declared. Then it was confiscated. The bit of money which they had saved they hid in a flat ceramic jug, and put in the back of the wood stove. Gradually they worked their way into China to Harbin. They bought a street car and hired a driver, thus making themselves a living.

Many children of the escapees were born in China. Constantine Mishukoff was one. His father Alexander had moved to Harbin at the age of 15 on the suggestion of a landlord for whom he had worked as a timekeeper in one of the poorest parts of Russia. The landlord staked the boy under the condition that he return the money when he had established himself — no interest involved. He attended night classes and in commercial subjects attained honors. From a delivery boy he became an accountant, working for the Trans-Siberian Railway. When Constantine was 13 he too left for Canada.

Among the many people from all walks of life and from as far away as Leningrad (St. Petersburg), was a White Army officer, Colonel Peter Durnovo. He organized the people into groups. At this time Canada, Australia and South America were looking for immigrants with farming backgrounds to help open up the country. It was Colonel Durnovo who got in touch with the immigration authorities and the C.P.R. agents. It was he who arranged the homestead land for these courageous people, and the pathway to Canada.

The first group was comprised of 120 people, families, without a word of English at all, but all the courage and for titude it took to make a home and a future for their children in a strange land. So the first group, followed by two more, settled in the Homeglen area.

There were many stories, many heartaches for long-ago times, many triumphs, and many a song and a laugh here a Homeglen. Above all, this anniversary was a festival of gratitude for life, for freedom, and for lovely adopted land Canadians now, but with a wealth of culture brought from the oldland to enrich the new.

The Russian Colony

In 1924, something unusual happened in the district. We were very fortunate indeed when we received the greater part of some of the Russian immigrants. They came to settle the N.W. 1/4, 21, 44.

We should here pay a tribute to these fine people for their resourcefulness, kindness and their good neighborliness. Many have left the district, but fond memories remain of them.

We will now devote some of this book to a brief history of them. We are indebted to Joan and Victor Osokin for getting the information contained in this part of the history.

In 1924 about 12 families set sail from Harbin, China. They were bound for Canada. The first group to arrive in Homeglen consisted of three families of Sedoroff, three of Andrejffs, also Vodatyka, Ivanenko, Polushin, Lebed, Lebedkin, Kuzakoff, Osokins, Dournovo, Shiskin, Nasetkin and Mihailoff. To arrive later were the Troitskys, Zlatowsky, Matrossof, Misteckoff, Kashieff, John Pohaboff and V. Spiridonoff. The journey was long and hard. With sacks of dried or toasted bread they prepared before leaving, they managed to survive the rough journey.

Some of the families spent the first winter on Battle River north of Homeglen. There was a snowfall that first winter of about 40 inches. They were quite at home with these weather conditions as similar conditions existed in their native Russia. Later they moved down to Homeglen on the farm cornering Roy Burns to the southwest. This farm is now Victor Osokin's home. Here they put up little sod roof houses and shacks. They were built of logs, and split boards were used for shingles. Some dwellings had just one large room as their living quarters, others had one or more rooms. These houses were built about 300 yards apart.

We must not forget the community steam bath that was built near the spring adjacent to the Russian settlement. Everyone took part in the erection of this building and then also the maintenance of it. Saturday was bath day at the steam house, and it was not uncommon to see the smoke rising from this building all day long. This was a sure way of keeping the skin pores open and the skin clean.

All the families that came were not from farms. There were jewellers, opera singers and business men from the cities, consequently some found it quite hard to start farming.

These Russians brought their religion with them. After Willie Andreff moved to his farm north of the base line, they used this old home for the church. The church was of the original old Greek Orthodox Church. Some of their books were hand printed in Slavonic, which is the Evangelie or New Testament. These books were very heavy and it took a good strong person to carry them. They had brought these books with them all the way from Russia.

They also decided to erect a very large building of logs, to serve as a hotel and store. It was 150 feet long with one end being used for the store and the other end as living quarters for one family. They left the centre unfinished so as to be able to put on a few social evenings. They held dances, concerts and masquerades, all of which were immensely successful.

It would be in order here to mention one dance in particular that was a great success. It happened to rain that evening and the roof leaked rather badly. The home brew "Brogga" was wet, but the night got wetter. Many a fancy dressed lady went home looking a big washed out and bedraggled but none the worse for the outing.

When the Russians first came to the Glen they wished to form a colony with Mr. Dournovo, who had been a high ranking officer in the Russian army, as the head. Mr. Dournovo was of medium height, middle aged and sported a bushy, greyish beard and mustache. He used to sit in state in a huge homemade birch chair, and drank tea from a tall glass. His wife prepared this for him every hour or so. From the house that Victor Osokin now lives in, Mr. Dournovo would issue the orders and plans for the day. Mr. Dournovo moved to Calgary where he died a short time later. Mrs. Dournovo is still living in B. C. with her daughter.

As time went on, they found they were not too satisfied with the colony system, so most of the men went to work for themselves, and soon were able to buy a cow or two, a team of horses, etc. They also had to send their children to school, some to Lonesome Pine (Messick House) and some to Homeglen. These were the older children and when the new Lonesome Pine school was built the younger children began their schooling.

None of these fifty Russian children could speak English. The teacher, Miss McQuarrie (now Mrs. Dye) thought it best that everybody should try the English language first, but much to her dismay, she found that the few Canadian children caught on to the Russian language too fast. But Miss McQuarrie, then a young girl just out from Nova Scotia, who was blessed with a good set of lungs and a loud speaking voice, soon had her class under control.

She also possessed a good sound piece of belting, which she had to use on one particular student quite often. She gave the students a choice, they could have it either on the hand or across the rump. Emile Evanooff often had a chance at both.

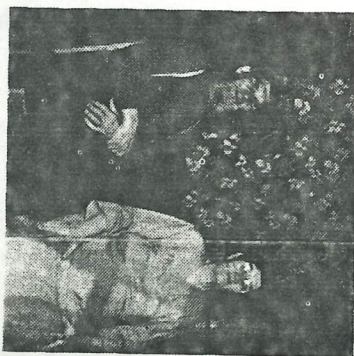
This student was known throughout the district for annoying folks. No matter how hard the strap or how bad the punishment, he would just cry a little and soon after he would be all smiles again. He was very forgiving. He served in World War II, and he no doubt made an excellent soldier. Unfortunately, his life was cut short upon his return due to a heart condition.

Shortly after the Russian children got into the new school the teacher discovered they had more on them than clothes; in particular - lice. Immediately the school board was notified Miss McQuarrie had the job of delousing the entire school class. With long over sized salt shakers she commenced her job. She had the girls undo their braids and spread them over their desks, while she applied the powder; this was no easy task.

Mr. Roy Burns, who perhaps the best known to the Russians, had to delouse some who did not get the treatment at school. He was also their chief translator, family counsellor and advisor. Not knowing their language too well he used a type of arm signals--sign language.

The Russian women used to line up at his place every morning for milk for their children until they were able to get their own cows.

In the late twenties, quite a number of the children moved away from the district as soon as they mastered the language and received some education. The Anderoff's, Sidoroff's, and the Naskins moved into the Hines Creek country of Peace River. Lebed moved to B. C. where he worked as a jeweller. His son married an Erwin girl by Rimbey. The Osokins were the only ones to remain on the section, that they first came to and farmed throughout their lives. Also here are some who are farming in the Rimbey area: Walter Polushin, Mike Polushin, Fred and Mike Troitsky and Ivanainkos.



Mr. and Mrs. Osokin.



Grandpa Osokin with water wheel saw mill.

Mary's Convent 1937

Russian Settlement 1924

