

ESCAPING WITHIN: LOST IN THE BOUNDARIES: A REPORT FROM THE FIELD

Eva Jane Neumann Fridman

This is the narrative of a journey made to visit a community which had escaped far from centralizing power, further and further into the outermost boundaries of Russia, subsequently the Soviet Union and now again defined as Russia. Concepts of nationhood may have changed, but the community has remained enclosed, isolated, self-sufficient and distant. These are the Old Believers of Russia, a religious sect which broke away from the Russian Orthodox Church in the period between 1654 and 1666 as a result of church reforms under Nikon, the patriarch of the Russian Church.

Alone on the broad avenue in front of the parliament building in Kyzyl, my jeep - an old army standard Russian issue - was waiting for me with a driver, Alek and a guide, Volodia, neither of whom I had seen before. I knew the jeep, borrowed from its owner, Tolya, which had taken me to the western steppes of Tuva to visit shamans and lamas a few days previously. These drivers were not Tuvinians, but ethnic Russians. Already I was moving into a different world. It was late afternoon, 3:30 p.m., in September but we wasted an hour hunting for extra gas and a spigot, an unnecessary search because not only had Tolya put by some extra supply but also our actual mileage on the jeep was not to be much. It was more my drivers' perception that the distance we were about to traverse was so great that supplies had to be laid in.

We were headed for the Lesser Yenisei, along which the Old Believer villages were hidden in the taiga. Reaching the river in the late afternoon, we got stuck waiting for the car ferry to pull us across. For an hour and a half we waited while workmen repaired the access road on the other side of the river with a scooper. The car ferry was a large raft which was moved across the river by means of a cable stretched between two towers to which the ferry was attached by yet another stout cable. Primitive as it seemed, it worked. Once on the other side of the river, we came to the village of Saryg-sep. By this time, it was 7 p.m. and we pulled into the courtyard of a typical Siberian village home belonging to Natalie, a friend of Volodia's, where we stayed overnight. Natalie, a transitional figure between two worlds, wore a scarf tied over her hair in Old-Believer style. The house was filled with tomatoes - on the windowsills, on the living floor, in the corners of the room, under the armchair. Outside was a garden still planted with potatoes and cabbages. Next morning she told me that she had had 24 chickens; a few days before the neighbor's dog had come and killed every one.

We continued on our trip by jeep over a heavily rutted, muddy road for one hour to the settlement of Belbei. The jeep jounced up and down, sometimes moving along ruts gouged in between stands of larches and pine trees, at other times Alek selected the harder surface of the yellow-flowered meadow floor. The settlement of Belbei consisted of 3-4 houses on the left bank of the Yenisei River. It was thought that a car might be sent down an (invisible) road on the other side of the river from the larger of the two Old Believer villages. We waited in indecision for two hours, part of the time having tea in the cozy kitchen of the boatman's home. Finally when it seemed the car would not come, we decided to proceed up the river by motorized rowboat. Our boatman, dressed in fur hat and sheepskin jacket, steered against the current up the Lesser Yenisei.

Uninhabited forest, garbed in fall foliage, streamed past us. Birches, spindly against rocky cliffs, yellow blazing against the gray stone. After an hour on the Yenisei, we docked at the village of Erdjei. It was 2:30 p.m. The journey, although not particularly far in kilometers, had taken almost 24 hours.

We were greeted by our hostess, Luba, with a huge lunch of various hot and cold dishes in the summer kitchen. She then offered me the facilities of the *banya*, a typical Russian small wooden house which consisted of an entryway with a bench where clothes could be removed, and a larger room with an ample vat of heated hot water and a vat of cold water. Birch twigs were also lying on the shelves of the *banya*. Amply fed and properly cleansed, we walked through the woods to visit the schoolteacher who taught seventh grade in the village of Sizim on the other side of the river. Alek and Volodia stayed behind in the summer kitchen, lounging on the bed and drinking, as they would continue to do during my entire stay. Luba and I walked briskly through the rich woodland and she said to me, "*Ya dvevernaya*" (I am a two-believer), just before we approached his house. Without being fully aware of it, I had been cleansed, prepared, and given access to enter into the world of the Old Believers.

What was this world, this community at the periphery of the world? How had we arrived at this point? The journey, the passage itself from the outside world to the isolated enclave of the Old Believers, had significance because it was in this long and difficult travail, this moving beyond the boundaries of normal, ordinary Russian society that the Old Believer lifeway and religious belief system, grounded in that lifeway, could take root and survive. The journey into this society also had to go through stages of difficulty in order to be able, somehow, to cleanse oneself of the outer world and to emerge in this inner world with its own pattern of engagement with life and communication with the spiritual life beyond. A separation from the outside world had to be constructed - and maintained - and therefore the actual, physical journey into further reaches of the continent was an absolutely essential component of creation and survival of the Old Believer life.

A well-known example, albeit extreme, was the situation of the family Lykov, an Old Believer family of father, mother, two sons and two daughters who, originally from the village of Tishi on the Abakan in Khakassia, Siberia, moved further and further into the wilderness. They first settled, in 1929, higher up the Abakan at the mouth of the Kair River with four other families but then when the Altai Preserve was created in 1931 and hunting and farming was prohibited, the Lykovs moved further into the wilderness "with the firm conviction that they were supposed to hide from the world," that only in this way could they find salvation (Peskov 1994:43).

The discovery of these isolated Old Believers became known to the general public in the USSR when the *Pravda* journalist, Vasily Peskov, wrote an account of his visit to them in 1982 in his newspaper. Even Agafiya, the youngest daughter, although she made the huge step to fly out to visit her relatives in the outside world, in the Old Believer village of Kilinsk, found herself unable to live away from her isolated homestead on the Abakan river. She said "It is not allowed for us to live with the world" (Peskov 1994: 232), for if she had given into the impulse to go live with her relatives after her father's death, all the thousands of hours of prayers, deprivations, fasts, keeping of exact ritual, would have somehow been negated and her place in the spiritual afterlife would have been less secure.

My path almost crossed with Agafiya. When I asked, people in the village of Erdjei told me they knew Agafiya because a few years before she had visited a small convent (*skit*) of seven women several days journey further down the river, and although she became attached to one of the nuns, she was unable to stay at the convent and returned to her own home. Not only were her own potatoes more tasty, but she said about the nuns: "They tend to their mortal body. They do not think of their soul" (Peskov 1994: 222).

Peskov notes that around the turn of the 20th century there were a number of Old Believers who lived in remote, inaccessible corners along the rivers and streams of the Altai, Gorkhaya Shoria and Sayan Mountains. As descendants of schismatics sensitive to even the most minor intrusion from the real world, when the slightest event occurred, they would respond by setting out immediately even further from the "world" (Peskov 1994: 231). This fear of the world dates back to the original schism - or *raskol* - of the Russian Orthodox Church in the seventeenth century. At that time, there was not only debate about the validity of standardization of liturgical traditions, but also Russia, under Tsar Aleksei Mikhailovich and his son, Peter the Great, was searching for a new identity, one more linked to the West and to western cultural and philosophical ideas. Essentially, these pro-western sentiments and attractions brought about the fear that Muscovy would become "Latinized."

In response, in the 1630s, a group of clerics called the Zealots of Piety formed a revitalization movement which would renew traditional Russian Orthodoxy and restore its purity. One of these Zealots, Archimandrite Nikon, rose to the Metropolitan seat of Novgorod from which he attracted the attention of Tsar Aleksei, and in 1652 he was appointed Patriarch of Russia. He turned to the Greek mother church in order to determine authentic true Orthodoxy tradition, and by doing so, he angered and alienated most of the Russian people, assaulting some of the most cherished traditions of the Russian Orthodox Church. In fact, the Greek Orthodox Church of the 17th century was no longer the same as that church which had originally sparked the impetus of Russian Orthodoxy in the 10th century. In the meantime, Latinization and westernization had become syncretized to some extent within the Greek Church tradition (Scheffel 1991: 24-29).

Therefore, the true Zealots, such as Archpriest Avvakum, understood these changes in ritual as a betrayal. They responded as follows: "We met together and took counsel. It was as if winter was of a mind to come; our hearts froze, our limbs shook. Neronov entrusted his church to me and shut himself up in the Miracle Monastery, and he spent a week praying in a cell, and one day a voice came from the icon of the Savior: "The hour of tribulation has come; it behooves you to suffer and be strong"(Avvakum 1974:407).

The changes in ritual which Nikon proposed might seem to be minor, but represented to the Old Believers deep-seated heresies leading to the Anti-Christ. One of the most important examples of contention was the signing of the cross. The correct signing of the cross, according to the Old Believers, is to join the thumb, fourth and fifth fingers of the right hand. This denotes the Trinity. The second and third finger are held erect together, with the middle finger slightly bent, which configuration symbolizes the double nature of Christ and His descent from heaven to earth (Scheffel 1991: 140-1141). In a well-known painting by Vasily Surikov (painted 1887, Tretyakov Gallery) of the

Boyarynia Morozova, an early supporter of the Old Believers or *Raskolniki*, she is shown being taken into exile on a sledge, her right hand raised defiantly, two fingers pointing at the sky, one slightly bent. The three-fingered sign introduced by Nikon, however, in which the fourth and fifth finger are concealed inside the palm, is interpreted by the Old Believers as associated with Nikon's alleged pact with Satan. They see this three-finger configuration as an attempt to deny the divinity of Christ and to substitute instead an unholy trinity of apocalyptic beast, snake, and antichrist (Scheffel 1991: 141).

The world, according to the Old Believers, is divided into sacred and profane. One of the most important obligations for the Old Believers is to maintain ritual purity, not only of all sacramental articles such as icons and holy books which cannot deviate even slightly from the original prototypes which are attributed to God, but also of non-sacramental life. The daily life of the Old Believer is filled with strict regulations concerning water, plants and plant products, classification of animals and birds, distinctions between edible and inedible substances, feast and fast cycles, and appearance of men and women, including head covering and hair length. These concepts of purity and pollution permeate every aspect of an Old Believer's life. Only a life lived in ritual and daily purity can lead to salvation. It is for this reason that a separation from the world had to occur, so that the harmony of religious life and daily life could be maintained. As the outside world persecuted the Old Believers, they retreated further into the forest wilderness, the taiga, establishing their own communities where life could be lived in harmony with their religious beliefs.

It can also be understood, as in examples of other small religious groups, that this erection of boundaries based on a dichotomy of pure and impure is more likely to occur in minority groups who feel themselves threatened by external forces pressuring them to conform to outside norms. Hence, historically, religious groups based on concepts of Puritanism were able to preserve their traditions through movement to the furthest reaches of an empire by colonization of new lands and dispersal into small island communities where their own traditions could be safely kept. Moreover, in the actual performance of sacred practices, all prayers and other actions are made communally, voices of the believers rise together in prayer, melding all into a unified voice greater than any one individual chant. The experience and practice of the liturgy therefore also strengthens and is supported by the underlying communal social organization preferred by the Old Believers (Robson 1995:52). During the historical development of the Old Believer spiritual practices, the symbols of Orthodox rite had taken on a much stronger communitarian aspect, and thus sustained the Old Believers in communities seamless in their secular and sacred practices.

However, in the villages where I went, there was a noticeable range of traditional and more modern, or even worldly adaptation. The schoolteacher, Sergei Kirilovich, lived in a modern wooden house near a stream. He was in the process of improving the interior and installing a bathroom (not to be found in other houses). He had a piano, out of tune because there was no one to tune it, a fine collection of old chants on CDs, and a group of cherished icons which he had inherited from his family. He was born in a village of Old Believers in the Urals; both his paternal grandmother and grandfather were Old Believers. In a photograph from 1892 his grandmother is wearing a big black scarf over her black dress and his grandfather has a long beard and a hat, looking like a Russian character out of Tolstoi. His parents were atheists. During the Soviet Period they didn't

say they were Old Believers; they were *skrivali*, hidden, but they prayed. One of the results of the repression during the Soviet period, as he sees it, is that the faith among young people is not very deep. Young people don't know much about the religion, because also the parents don't know, and when he asks the old men "why don't you teach?" they answer "No time." Since the young people in the village don't know their religion, he wants to develop a program in the school for the revival of Old Believers and their culture.

At the time of the Schism, two major forms of Old Believers developed. One, more prevalent form, particularly in Siberia, was *Bezpopovski* (priestless) which held its religious authority in Elders who maintained the religious structure and conducted prayer meetings in homes. This was the type that was practiced in Erdjei and Sizim. When Sergei, who was born in 1936, grew up in the Urals, he recalled that in his home there was a big room filled with many icons and his family gathered there and prayed. In the village was a small church and there they prayed with a priest (the other form of Old Believers). After 1930, this *chasovnya* (church) became a school where he eventually taught and then a shop, its present usage. This was a village population of about 4000-5000 people, of whom 2000 were Old Believers prior to 1930. At present, when he visited his village in 1995, there were 10 Old Believers left. Whereas in the taiga, believers were living in a small village, far from Soviet influence, and this preserved the religion. He pointed out that Old Believers were always persecuted by the official church, so that essentially the situation before the Revolution and during the Soviet Period was not very different. The real problems in terms of preservation of religion are beginning to occur now with the influences of modern life.

We went to visit Tania, the sister-in-law of my hostess, Luba. In a small, crowded house with her children perched on top of the stove, and leaning down from a stepladder with curiosity to see the phenomenon of an American, we chatted and she demonstrated to me how she spun angora goat fleece from her carved distaff onto her spindle. Typical of Old Believers, this beautiful woodcarving was characteristic of the great care which people employed in making and embellishing useful objects. She had inherited the distaff from her grandmother. As one of the Old Believers, Nadja, from whom I bought a *polovnik*, a rag rug, said: "we are living in the Stone Age." We make everything ourselves - we can buy flour but there is no bread to buy so we make our own bread. Tania said that the community gathers at various houses to pray every Saturday evening at 5 o'clock for several hours and then again at 2 a.m. for an all-night session, called Middle of the Night, which ends Sunday morning at 5 or 6 a.m. The day after tomorrow was going to be a big holiday for the Mother of Christ celebrating her birthday and since it was an important holiday, there would be prayers starting on Friday evening. If I wanted to go, I would have to go and ask permission of the Elder.

Sergei and I walked through the woods to the home of the Elder, Sisoï Filimpovich Dolgov and his wife Anna. They were an older couple sitting in their kitchen. He had a long beard and she was wearing the *sarafan* dress and an apron. Her hair was pinned up and covered with a scarf worn with a fold at the top and tied at the back of her head, so that none of her hair showed. They had just finished eating their evening meal, parts of which were still visible in the kitchen, but did not offer us anything to eat or drink in the two hours we were there. Actually, this was in keeping with the Old Believer taboos on eating with outsiders or using any dish or utensil which

an impure, non-Old Believer has used. At the time, however, it did not make me feel very welcome, nor did the barrage of questions, religious and personal, to which I was subjected. It was clear that it was very difficult for this Elder to decide whether or not it would be possible for me to be present at the early evening prayer meeting the following evening. He hemmed and hawed. Sergei tried to be very diplomatic and persuasive. Anna gave me a birch basket filled with cedar nuts as a parting present but her husband was less taken by the novelty of an American woman.

For two hours he debated the history of the Old Believers, the story of Father Paladi, a famous monk persecuted and imprisoned in the 1920s and 1930s, and the problems currently facing the Old Believer community. Now Sisoï stated the main problem is that people have the knowledge, but the youth doesn't want to know. Sergei agreed that their knowledge is shallow and that the children in his class at school, 7th graders, don't even have knowledge of the religion. From the point of view of a deeply devout Old Believer, this lack of desire to follow the religious tenets was profoundly disturbing. Although I promised neither to photograph nor to take notes of any sort during the prayer meeting, Sisoï still could not decide whether I could come and watch on Friday night or not. Sergei told me afterwards that he had to consult with the other Elders and could not take this decision by himself.

The following morning I went to school with Sergei. We crossed the river, together with a flock of school children, on a *parom*, a ferryboat to the other village Sizim, about a 2 km. uphill walk into the woods on the further bank of the Yenisei. The school is a very attractive building, 20 years old, with a newer addition built 10 years ago. There are approximately 96 students from both villages in grades from kindergarten to grade 11. Erdjei village only had school for children through grade 4, so both villages combined grades 5 through 11 in this school. Sizim seemed to be a slightly larger village. If we extrapolate the total inhabitants for these two villages from the number of school children, one can approximate a population of perhaps no more than 300 people in all.

I spent several hours in Sergei's classroom during his English language class for 7th graders, telling them about myself and where I came from in the United States, explaining our school system and subjects taught in our 7th grade classes. The classrooms in Sergei's school were bright and cheerful, and appropriately decorated for each grade level. I looked in on a 9th grade class discussing literature, and visited a first grade class. There were eight first graders, probably all from Sizim, sitting in a semicircle with the teacher bending attentively over them. The room was sunny with green plants, attractive wall posters and colorful pictures on the walls. Later in the day I returned to the school after classes were over, and talked with 10th grade girls who were doing crochet sampler pieces. In the rear of this activity room was a small museum, collected by Nikolai Genadevich, a history teacher who came to this village from Briansk.

During lunchtime, Sergei took me to visit a friend of his in Sizim, a woman named Claudia Ivanova. Her home and her presence as a person probably are most representative of a typical traditional Old Believer. Small, elderly, about 70 years old, dressed in a red dress with a gray overblouse and a red kerchief over her hair, she was welcoming and kind. We spoke together for a while in her one-room wooden house - kitchen, dining room, bedroom, and prayer alcove all in one space. She said that during the Soviet Period it was not possible to pray, to teach the children, to cross oneself or to

wear a cross. Nevertheless, the religion was preserved by old men and women. On the calendar, she said, it is written that women preserved the religion more than men, and children were taught at home. Men, she said, have more work and not as much time to pray, whereas “old women love to pray.” She invited me to join with her and a group of women in evening prayers at a home that evening in Sizim. When we told her of our difficult negotiations with Sisoï the previous evening, she dismissed this as a problem, implying that women were not so rigid as men concerning the inclusion of outsiders.

Claudia's daughter, a young blond-haired woman in blue jeans, came down the hill from the school where she was the kindergarten teacher in order to give her mother a hand with the digging and gathering of potatoes. This was the height of the potato harvest for everyone in Tuva, shaman, lama, lay person, or Old Believer. Claudia set a fine table for me, offering me a large bowl of stew with potatoes, meat and other vegetables.

The whole room gave an impression of neatness, serenity and order and, in fact, seemed, in its coverings and colors, like another version of Claudia herself. This harmony between the person and the surroundings, whether religious or secular, is evident among Old Believers not only in the intellectual connections between religious dogma and prohibitions or strictures of daily living, but also in the physical working-out of these beliefs. Outside Claudia's home one could see a neatly tended vegetable garden with a variety of plants, ingenious latches for gates leading to animal enclosures, large stacks of neatly piled wood for the winter, a dog house and a number of chickens. Metal pails were placed on a tree to scare the birds away from the vegetables. In the field beyond her garden, sheep belonging to neighbors were grazing. Here was self-sufficiency, an easy connection between belief system, daily life and the natural surroundings as these were transformed and wrested out from the taiga.

Later that day, having crossed the river back to Erdjei and back again to Sizim, now properly attired in Sarafan dress, I hiked two km. into Sizim and met one of the teachers, Nadejda Petrovna there. She walked with me to a home in the village, down a muddy hill past huge grunting pigs. We came to a house with a collection of shoes outside, so we knew we were in the right place. When we walked into a small entry room there were six women sitting there who eagerly asked me questions about Old Believers in the U.S.

A white-bearded Elder in long black clothes arrived and we followed him through another room into the Big Room which was customarily used for services. The floor of the room was covered with narrow striped woven rag rugs, laid next to each other. A new, overly bright rug was laid diagonally across the room over these rugs to the icon area. The room was surprisingly large for what looked like a normal-sized Siberian wooden house. In the rear of the room where we entered were a number of long benches. I sat nearest the door. On my right sat a young woman in her 30s, then a young woman who may have been the mother of a boy about 13 years old seated next to her and at the end another young woman. In front of me, standing and seated on the left side of the room facing the altar area in the front were several women of varying ages, not very young, and Nadejda Petrovna in a skirt and blouse and a small kerchief on her head. Along the right wall was a bed on which Claudia Ivanova sat. A young woman stood near her. In front of the bed was a table with bibles and between this table and a type of

lectern stood the Elder. At the very front, right hand corner of the room was a shelf with gilt-edged icons, and next to this a table with bibles on it.

The Elder lit the candles in front of the icons. He and the women crossed themselves three times (head, chest, right, left) with two fingers extended. Then all prostrated themselves, their knees and head to the ground three times, crossing themselves and prostrating to the icons. They prayed and chanted together, one woman moving over to the window and reading or chanting prayers from a book. An easel was brought in and the Bible placed on it. A group of three or four women stood in front and read appropriate sections from it, singing. Claudia Ivanova seemed to be the leader, chanting the loudest and directing the reading, occasionally saying they needed to go back to a passage or go forward, or it was sufficient and they will continue elsewhere in the text. The Elder took a light from one of the candles in front of the icons and held it for them, a candle on an extended wooden rod, moving it back and forth across the page. The scene was impressive in its simplicity: the darkening room, the four women singing grouped around the bible, the rest, all wearing sarafans, blouses, and long head scarves, standing quietly - religion stripped down to its essence of piety and purity.

The end of the prayer session brought forth these elements in reverse - joint prayers, reading from the book on the table, everyone crossing themselves three times and prostrating to the icons. Then the Elder extinguished the candles and it was over. Walking back in my long sarafan over the wet, muddy roadway, negotiating past hungry threatening massive pigs who wanted to be let into their farmstead to eat, I fell into conversation with the schoolteacher Nadejda concerning the present-day problems this community of Old Believers is confronting. One of the major problems is the future of the young people. Sergei had said children don't read, don't watch television, and speak Russian (their only language) badly. In English class they may make 3-4 mistakes in their tests but in Russian class they will make 18-20 mistakes. There is no encouragement at home to read or to learn. Some children want to go on to higher education after high school, but parents don't want them to do this. Once a girl has finished 11th grade, her only option is to get married and continue the arduous life her mother led - bearing children, managing the household and the garden and livestock. During the Soviet period, there was a small woodworking factory which employed a number of people, but this has closed down in post-Soviet times. For young men, the only possibilities are hunting or working as drivers. There are not many other choices.

Unfortunately, as Sergei also said, the lack of money is a factor as well as other parental anxieties about letting their youths further their education in Kizil. They are concerned about their children mingling with non-believers, whose lifeways, even if they are ethnic Russians, are totally different. The rising crime rate in the city, the lack of jobs and the impossibility of pursuing a profession in the taiga once educated, also are factors in parental disapproval. Ultimately, moving outside these villages - and these boundaries - would mean a permanent loss to the community

Friday night, returning through the woods, I saw a silent moving image arise before me like a mirage in the misty forest. Moonlight shone down upon a pack train of two riders and five horses going off to hunt. Like a scene from another era, a constancy in a changing world, the horses and riders moved out of sight, bent on their ancient quest. The earth had trembled while I sat at Claudia Ivanova's kitchen table, an earthquake so

minor it was felt only in Sizim, not in Erdjei, but Claudia and her daughter continued to harvest potatoes, caught up in the eternal present.

References

- Avvakum. 1974. Life of Archpriest Avvakum by Himself. In S. Zenkovsky, ed.,
Medieval Russia's Epics, Chronicles, and Tales. New York: E.P. Dutton & Co.
- Peskov, Vasily. 1994. *Lost in the Taiga*. New York: Doubleday.
- Robson, Roy R. 1995. *Old Believers in Modern Russia*. DeKalb, Illinois: Northern Illinois University Press.
- Scheffel, David. 1991. *In the shadow of Antichrist*. Peterborough, Ontario, Canada: Broadview Press.