

Memory of the Past

The Multi-disciplinary Study of the Traditional Culture of the Russian Old Believers of Lithuania

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In December 1999 a conference took place in Vilnius called "The Old Believers of Lithuania: Investigation into the History and Culture of an Ethno-Confessional Community." This conference has established a tradition of sorts as it was the fourth such summation of the preliminary results collected by expeditions outfitted annually by the members of the Interdisciplinary Group for the Study of the Old Believers of Lithuania. This group was established in 1996 and includes among its members representatives of several closely related scholarly disciplines, professors, teachers, doctoral students, and students of higher education institutes in Vilnius. The main sections of the group are: history, with Grigorii Potashenko as director, ethnography, headed by Vitis Chubrinskas, dialectology, with Valerii Chekmonas as head, folklore, headed by Juri Novikov, folk musical culture, headed by Zhanna Lebedeva, folk medicine, directed by Ramunas Trimakas, and early printed and manuscript books, headed by Nadezhda Morozova. The last of these sections has recently been joined by the Polish researcher Zoia Jaroshevicz-Pereslavcev.

The multidisciplinary character of the expeditions, their determination to thoroughly document the villages and farms with an Old Believer population, and the efficiency achieved through scholarly collaboration and sharing of collected materials have permitted the Interdisciplinary Group for the Study of the Old Believers of Lithuania to achieve significant results in a short period of time. Historians and ethnographers have interviewed long-time residents and recorded hundreds of stories about the history of the religious communities and about relations between Old Believers and representatives of other confessions. They have also discovered a number of abandoned cemeteries. The photographer Aloizas Petrashumas has created a rich portrait gallery of informants and preserved on film all the surviving Old Believer churches, the most interesting burials sites, representative religious objects, and samples from everyday material culture. He has prepared and displayed thematic photo exhibits at all four conferences held to date. Musicologists have recorded not only examples of folk melodies, but also church hymns that are typically performed during holiday and burial services. Dialectologists and folklorists have amassed an extremely valuable sound library containing more than two hundred and fifty hours of recordings.

A portion of the materials collected have already been published in Lithuanian and Russian periodicals and scholarly collections and have thus made available to the wider scholarly community. The most important papers and reports presented at the 1996 and 1997 conferences have appeared as a separate book. A reader entitled *Zhivoe slovo: Folklor russkikh starozhilov Litvy* [The living word: The

folklore of Russian long-time residents in Lithuania] has been made available to schools offering instruction in Russian. The overwhelming majority of the texts printed in this reader were recorded from Old Believers by the Interdisciplinary Group for the Study of the Old Believers of Lithuania and are appearing in print for the first time. Preparation for the printing of a three-volume collection entitled *Starobriadchestvo v Litve* [Old Believers in Lithuania] is being completed. Materials on history and ethnography comprise the first part of this edition; the second part deals with language and early printed books; the third presents folklore texts, beliefs, and church and everyday prohibitions reflecting the religious and mythological consciousness of the Old Believers of Lithuania.

The members of the folklore section have instituted a special program for their scholarly work and, for a number of reasons, have abandoned the previous method of recording of all folk poetic works. These reasons include the fact that the majority of the Old Believer settlements in Lithuania have been thoroughly investigated by student philologists from Vilnius University during yearly folklore practicums conducted in the 1960's to 1980's. Members of the folklore circle at Vilnius Pedagogical University have been equally thorough in collecting folklore texts. Thus, many genres are represented by a significant number of recordings: about 2,000 works of folk prose (basically tales of various genres), thousands of songs and ditties (*chastushki*), and hundreds of riddles. Also, the work conducted by the folklorists of Vilnius Pedagogical University over the span of a number of years, processing materials from the self-taught collector Elizaveta Kolesnitskaia from the Zaraisaiskii Region have produced rarely achieved results. Since 1946, this semiliterate woman has been recording all the folklore works which she can recall herself and which she has heard from her relatives and her fellow countrymen. Her emphasis has been on proverbs, sayings, and set expressions, all of which she has recorded in the local dialect. Her home archive comprises more than 45,000 items, about 3,000 of which have been published in the collection *Russkie poslovitsy Litvy* [Russian proverbs of Lithuania; Vilnius, 1992].

Thorough collection of materials since the postwar years makes it possible to observe the evolution of traditional folk culture. Of particular note are: the dying out of calendary ritual songs, the impoverishment of the wedding ritual, the narrowing of the tale repertory, and the ever-growing influence of printed literature on the oral poetry of the Old Believers. Under such conditions, it is practically impossible to hope to discover new trends in the existence of the so-called classical genres of folklore, the ones which have been the center of folklorists' attention for the last several decades. Thus, the members of the folklore section decided to concentrate their efforts on those genres which were unjustly overlooked during the Soviet period, or were under secret prohibition and thus have remained a blank spots on the folklore map of Lithuania. These are works connected with the religious views of the informants: Christian legends, religious customs, rituals, and prohibitions, religious verses [*dukhovnye stikhi*], songs with a religious content; beliefs, customs, and rituals, which reflect mythological concepts; incantations;

mythological legends about forest and house spirits, legends about sorcerers and the walking dead, about apparitions and werewolves, cursed treasures and snakes; stories about bewitchment [*porcha* or spoiling] and the evil eye [*sglazu*], and about folk medicine and cure involving incantations.

Insofar as materials of this kind are extremely poorly represented in older collections, we did not hope for a plentiful harvest. Reality exceeded our most optimistic expectations. It turned out that, for people of the oldest generation of Old Believers, all these genres still play an important role in spiritual life and that many of them continue to exist actively even today. Previous collectors had passed them by simply because they were not interested in folk beliefs and customs, considering them merely remnants of the past. Thus, while not a single story about the abduction of brides (which was practiced among Old Believers right up until the postwar years) was recorded by folklorists from Vilnius University for over a quarter century, we were able to add more than seventy such texts to our archive. This custom was particularly widespread in the north-eastern regions of Lithuania where it often acquired a unique ritual form. Girls were stolen (*krali*) at *kirmanas* (yearly rural fairs) during traditional riding on troikas; brothers and other relatives of the brides were obliged to beat off their abductors. In order to escape pursuit, they often used so called *podstavy* (spare horses which were waiting in an agreed upon place). The girls were abducted only with their consent because, in the eyes of the members of the village community, marriage by abduction (*svadba vkradu*) appeared to be a completely lawful and respectable matter. The parents of the bride would, in the end, be compelled to change their anger to mercy and to make peace with the daring son-in-law.

Another interesting custom that we discovered was the Old Believer practice of preparing in advance a traditional set of death clothing, coffins, and home-woven towels for lowering the coffin into the grave to be used at one's own funeral. Custom recommends doing everything with one's hands, avoiding purchased objects and materials, and doing without the help of people of a different faith. A pair of painted eggs, sanctified during vespers in church, lie under the icons from one Easter to the next in almost every village home. Informants are thoroughly convinced that, if the eggs are not touched, they will remain fresh the whole year and may be used for breaking fast the following Easter. According to another version, the eggs are "resurrected" when the words "Christ has arisen..." are sung in church. The year-old Easter eggs, and also the willows blessed on Palm Sunday and the salt from Holy Thursday, are ascribed special magical powers so that people bury the shell in the ground to increase the harvest and put it in fresh hay so that mice will not propagate there. If, during an approaching fire, one carries such an egg around the farmstead and then throws it in field or swamp, it will "lead the fire away" to a place where it can do no harm. Folk beliefs, both Christian and those essentially pagan in origin, are supported by mythological narratives which illustrate this or that custom and give concrete examples of the good or harm that can be caused by the observation or violation of religious and secular prohibitions and customs.

Some performers have astounded us not only with the extent of their knowledge about folk mythology and everyday magic, but also with their artistry and their excellent mastery of narrative style. From Dii Sivolov (Ionavskii region) we recorded several dozen mythological narratives about “whisperers” (medicine men or *znakhari*), “sorcerers,” (*volkhvity*), and people capable, either intentionally or unconsciously, of putting a hex (*sglazit*) on children, domestic animals and birds, and even garden plants. The repertoires of Anfisa Pavlova and Khavronia Portnova (Zarasaiskii region) are somewhat smaller. The best performer, however, was Glikeriia Kovalenkina (Kaunasskii region), from whom we recorded over fifty mythological narratives on a variety of topics. It is as if this old woman lived in an unreal microworld, literally strewn with objects having a mythological meaning. To her, devils abounded (*vodili besi*) in the forest near her home; on the road through a field and at the crossroads apparitions appeared many times; a woman neighbor had an evil eye (*s durnym glazom*); the evil one (*nechisty*) turned into a black tomcat in a nearby ditch; next to the well or in a clearing a treasure could appear to people as a red light; in the bath house, devils dragged an old woman behind the shelf because she had violated the prohibition against using the bathhouse on a church holiday and after the setting of the sun.

Even a genre as archaic as incantations continues to lead an active existence among Lithuanian Old Believers. People communicate incantation texts to collectors very unwillingly however, and, in the majority of the regions, sacral knowledge is zealously guarded from outsiders. Incantations are transmitted essentially within a family, directly to the oldest or youngest child. Many informants are convinced that once a whisperer (*sheptun*) initiates someone else into the secrets of the art of incantations, he or she will lose his or her own former magical powers. Such beliefs, of course, do not dispose performers to candor and complicate collectors' efforts. Nevertheless, the number of recordings has already exceeded one hundred variants. Stories about treating patients by reciting incantations and charms, about the art of folk medical practitioners, about intrigues and conflicts among sorcerers, and about miraculous cures can be found in the repertory of the majority of members of the older generation.

While the processing of field materials is only in its initial phase, it has already yielded a number of interesting and significant results. Our work with the field data has helped answer a number of important folklore questions and has helped us chart promising directions for further research. Our observations include:

1. Field recordings of the folklore and daily life of the Russian Old Believers of Lithuania attest and confirm in detail that both Christian and mythological ideas exist, that both types of conceptions are vigorous, and that they can coexist seamlessly, sometimes within one genre or even within a single text. These deeply religious people, who know Orthodox Christian literature well and who sing in church choirs, often turn out to be bearers of apocryphal legends and folklore saturated with pagan elements, including incantations, mythological narratives, and superstitions.

2. More and more facts are being accumulated that testify to the continuity between the folklore tradition of the local Old Believers and the folk tradition of Pskov, Russia, the area from which the Lithuanian community emigrated. Common elements can be found in the repertory of religious verses, the most ancient ballads, and incantations. There are similarities in a number of tale plots which are unique to the Old Believers of Lithuania and Pskov and in a number of items of children's folklore. Other similarities include the use of the folk term *volkhvity* (*volkhovity*) to indicate sorcerers; the term "little verses" (*stishki*) to designate incantations, along with other folk terms. These parallels are confirmed by the data of dialectologists who have found numerous similarities with the vocabulary and phonetics of Pskov folk dialects. The linguistic data is less able to confirm a widely accepted belief that Old Believers came to Lithuania from various parts of Russia and in several waves. Even if the Old Believers did come from several areas in Russia, the first Pskov "wave" has turned out to be the most powerful and viable; it has absorbed subsequent groups of emigrants and erased any regional differences in traditional folk culture.

3. The relative isolation of Lithuanian Old Believers from their historical homeland for three centuries and the existence of their folklore in a foreign language milieu has prompted them to preserve of many archaic elements. They have retained the cultural legacy of their ancestors while, in most regions of Russia, many archaic elements have been diluted or completely forgotten. Archaic elements which fall into this category are some plots of legends, religious verses, incantations and the most ancient ballads; the custom of abducting brides; conceptions about the world beyond the grave, and contacts of the living with the dead; stories about people who are ruled by snakes; proverbs and sayings in which realia of the Middle Ages are mentioned; unique riddles, and so on. Quite a few archaisms and historical references were also discovered in the language of the folklore collected.

4. The Old Believer communities of Lithuania preserved a comparatively high level of literacy in the years between the world wars. Many of our informants studied Slavonic reading and writing and church singing *po soliam* (that is, by hooks, the symbols of the Old Russian note system) in public schools. This produced favorable conditions for the production and preservation of folklore manuscripts. Old Believers copied works of those genres in which important meaning was attached to the stability of the verbal text: legends, religious verses (including also later Old Believer's works, composed by local writers), lives of saints, and incantations. The existence of manuscript collections of folk incantations has already been well attested. We were able to copy one such manuscript, a work containing eleven medicinal incantations, and while doing so, recorded an extensive real commentary by the woman performer to whom the manuscript belonged. The famous "Dream of the Mother of God" (*Son Bogoroditsy*) was copied on paper especially often. The text of this prayer or religious verse did not have to be said out loud to be effective and the manuscript itself was perceived as a reliable talisman, useful for

protection on distant trips. Setting out for war, the brother of one of the women performers wrote a fragment of this talisman on the stock of his combat rifle. She is firmly convinced that this saved him from death. Georgii Klychov from the Rokishskii region left his daughter two manuscript "Note books" (*Pamiatnye knizhki*), which he kept during the postwar years. The manuscript or "family chronicle" includes several superstitions and "recipes" for magically controlling the environment, alongside remarks about the most important events in the life of the village and records of unusual meteorological events. Works of other genres, including those that are of written origin, were sometimes circulated in manuscript form. All the tales with epic plots found in Lithuania, about half of the tales based on Pushkin plots, and also the texts of two incantations, which were probably derived from the classic collections of I. Sakharov and L. Maikov (middle of the nineteenth century) were all drawn from printed sources. In the Ionavskii region, collectors recorded magnificently well preserved funeral laments, sectarian religious verses, and everyday lyric songs, which were borrowed from P. Melnikov-Pecherskii's novels *In the Woods* (*V lesakh*) and *In the Mountains* (*Na gorakh*). The novels were likely selected because they are devoted to the life and life style of the Zavolzhie Old Believers. While based on written sources, the folk manuscripts, especially in the two last cases, were likely copied many times. Indications to this effect include the existence of variants, the fragmentary quality of the manuscripts, the tendency to replace archaisms with their more current and widely used analogues, slips of the pen, and insignificant distortions.

5. Interesting materials have been collected for studying the defusion of folklore genres in the twentieth century. These include: the influence of church prayers and incantations on each other. There is data on the evolution of several ballads, lyric songs, and even late urban romances which indicates that they were reinterpreted as religious verses. There is evidence that religious verses have penetrated into the church liturgy, as in the case of the song, "We entreat you, our mother...." Analogous processes have been noted in folk musical culture: as the ancient melodies of some religious verses are forgotten, the verses are then performed to the melodies of later folk lyrics, and even to the melodies of the so-called "cruel romances."

6. A rather fractious picture of interactions and interinfluences with the folklore traditions of neighboring peoples emerges. In those areas where Russian Old Believers live in close proximity to peoples of other nationalities, they learn the appropriate languages and many Old Believers have a good command of Lithuanian and Polish. Shared language facilities borrowing from neighbors and elements which are not characteristic of Russian folklore begin to emerge. The items most frequently borrowed are: subjects for etiological and mythological narratives, legends, magic and everyday tales, as well as folk anecdotes, proverbs, sayings, and riddles. Less often borrowed are: incantations, everyday lyric songs, and works of children's folklore. The characteristics of local daily life are often reflected in proverbs, ditties, anecdotes, and historical narratives and thus relations with people of a differing nationality and a

different religious views have become important topics. Interestingly, a number of genres have resisted external influences. These include: calendary and life cycle ritual poetry, legends, religious verses, the majority of religious and every day customs, rituals, and prohibitions.

7. The abundance of recordings of folk prose, including repeat recordings of the same item, compels questioning of the accepted opinion that folk prose texts are not stable. Instability may be characteristic of recordings from "amateur" narrators who are often being asked to perform a particular piece for the first time in their lives. Recognized masters and virtuosi, however, have variants which, through numerous repetitions, have acquired a relative stability and change only on the level of a natural "vibration of the text," to use K. Chistov's term. Key phrases and words (sometimes emotionally colored onomatopoeic exclamations) act as triggers which elicit "supporting constructions" and which ensure the structural stability of narratives, legends, and the tradition as a whole.

Every year, hundreds of texts are being added to the collection of folklore materials recorded from the Old Believers of Lithuania. Our greatest need at the moment is a better understanding of the characteristics of the folklore tradition of Old Believers in neighboring Belarus and Latgalia (the south-east of Latvia). The ancestors of our informants passed through these areas some 250 to 300 years ago and a better understanding of their folklore would enable a deeper scholarly interpretation of ours. We need to make recordings from these regions that follow the methodology used in our work. This would enable us to better answer questions of genesis, historical development, and the characteristics of the oral-poetic tradition of the old-time residents of Lithuania. Collecting trips to Latvia and northwestern Belarus are planned for the coming years.

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