M E M O I R

Recollections of Peasant Life in Kizhi District (1)

Regina Kalashnikova, The Kizhi Museum, Petrozavodsk

Aleksandra Vasil'evna Andreeva-Riabinina, née Rigachina, was born in the village of Garnitsy in 1907 and died in Petrozavodsk in 1992. She was the wife of Petr Ivanovich Andreev-Riabinin (1905-1953), the well-known singer of *byliny* and a member of the Soviet Writers' Union. These excerpts from her memoirs offer glimpses into the life and background of the Riabinin family.

Translator's note

The Riabinin family occupies a unique place in the history and study of the Russian oral epic, because members of four different generations were performers. The first, T. G. Riabinin (1801-1885), is considered one of the finest Russian epic singers. His epics were recorded by P. N. Rybnikov in 1860 and by A. F. Gil'ferding in 1871. The second, I. T. Riabinin (1844-1908), gave invited public performances in various Russian and foreign cities. The third, I. G. Riabinin-Andreev (1873-1926), and the fourth, P. I. Andreev-Riabinin, continued this family tradition into Soviet times. They all came from Zaonezh'e in north-western Russia, located north and west of Lake Onega, and now part of Karelia. Members of the family lived on the island of Kizhi on Lake Onega and in the nearby village of Garnitsy. Karelia with its main city, Petrozavodsk, has a mixed population comprising primarily Russians and Karelians, a Finnish group. During World War II Karelia witnessed prolonged fighting between Finnish and Soviet forces.

Regina Kalashnikova is a folklorist on the staff of the Kizhi Museum near Petrozavodsk. For ten years she has been collecting materials from the descendants of several epic performers for a book to be entitled "Peasant Recollections." (James Bailey)

How I got to know P. I. Andreev-Riabinin

Well, how shall I put it? I was walking out with this fellow for two years and the whole time, he - he was a neighbor of ours - he'd keep staring at me. Whenever he passed by (my house was right on the edge of the village), he'd be singing away, always with a song on his lips. And I'd be thinking, "Why aren't I in love with Petr? Look what a great singer he is! Oh Lord, it can't be right to torment that lad like this." (She laughs.) And he says to me: "I woke you. I woke you up so as you'd hear my voice." That's how much in love he was. But as far as that other fellow was concerned, he was for ever saying: "You're not going to marry Pavlukha; oh, no, it won't happen!" Then Petr's sister Olia came over to fix up a match between us: "Well, go on, you know it's you he likes the best in this village; you're a girl who knows about work!" There was a holiday coming up: St Elijah's Day (*Il'in den'*, August 2nd in the Orthodox calendar), and she just went on and on at me: "Shura, do let's come to an agreement. Drop your sweetheart and marry my brother." Petr came over for the holiday and we went to his sister's place in Sennaia Guba. There we were in Sennaia Guba. We spent some time there together, and then of course we went to Garnitsy. After that he wasn't going to give me up. That's how things happened. The wedding was set for August the tenth.(2) It took place during the working season. That was some wedding. People came from Petrozavodsk and there was a big crowd. Ours was the last wedding crown.(3) I asked, "Are we really going to get married in church?", and he said: "Come on, let's do it, they're still conducting church weddings!" After us no one got married in church. I had this dress; it was made of silk, raspberry colored. Such a beautiful color, it was. It shone, first bright, then dull, now one color, then another. So interesting. No one else had a dress like that. On my head I wore a pearl net and beads and in my ears earrings. My mother did some buying and selling. She lived in Leningrad, buying and selling things, and bought these beads and rings. Peter had on a grey suit, his jacket was grey, and his pants were black. He didn't own a suit, but he did have a good jacket. That's how we got married. My mother gave me a cow for my dowry, and a sheep too. And so everyone in the village carried my possessions from my house to his; five trunkloads of belongings I had. So, so many things my

mother had woven for me! Ours was the last church wedding. We were the last ones to get married in church.

The Andreev-Riabinin Family

We set out with my father-in-law; the nets had been laid in Lake Onega. There were ever so many nets there. And so he says, "Looks like the weather's calm. Let's go out on the lake. You, Shura, sit down, take the bow oars and Peter the ones behind. And I'll sit on the stern." And so off we went. We caught so many fish, we happened upon so many that the boat was full. There was no room for more. But what were we to do with the fish, with the weather so warm? Where should we take it? "Let's go to town," he said.(4) The weather was calm, and we started rowing. There were two of us rowing; me at the front and Petr at the back, while he, that's my father-in-law, sat on the stern of the boat. It was getting on for evening when we got there; it was calm, and the weather was fine. We moored the boat. And didn't people come running up to get some fish! My father-in-law had so much he put an extra kilo in for free for every two of white fish, perch, and pike they bought - just to get rid of it all. The townsfolk sure got a good deal there!

Fine fishermen they were! This was before the war. Goodness me, such a lot of fish there were then! Once he came home and I was horrified; what could we do with a fish that big? It was a pike. Petr was a tall man, but the fish's head was up to his shoulder and the tail down by his legs, that's what he'd caught. He finished it off with a harpoon. Can you imagine catching such a big fish as that! When he stepped through the door, I said to him, "Have you gone out of your mind?" He dragged that big fish along by himself – I don't know how much it weighed!

We had a large two-storey house.(5) We certainly worked hard, we really drove ourselves. We kept two horses, and three cows as well. In the yard there were sheep, twelve of them. Then I brought another cow from my mother's. Chickens, we had so many of them. It was a lot to cope with, but we managed! In the morning we'd get up at five and go off mowing! We'd walk together to the grain field. Our fields all had

stone walls round them, not wooden fences, or stakes, but stone. Our parents, those old folks really knew the meaning of work!

The performance of byliny

I heard byliny, lots of times. My father-in-law used tossing as he sat weaving his nets. Then Petr took up singing. He was five when he started. His father didn't teach him specially, he just had a talent for it somehow. So he began singing and people started sending for him to come to Leningrad. He brought us a radio to listen to.(6) There he was singing in Moscow and there we were at home listening to him. It was a round black thing and we'd sit and listen to it. It was so clear! He went on singing for three hours at a time. He didn't pause; he just kept on and on singing. He had his concerts there, and then he'd bring home gifts for us. He was given a gramophone – I kept it safe all through the war. He was presented with an engraved watch. All kinds of gifts he'd bring home. When you couldn't get cheese in the village, he brought back a square lump of cheese and we invited the neighbors over for a meal. The singer Korguev came to see us in Garnitsy and Konashkov often visited Garnitsy too.(7) But they didn't sing like our folk. Our people, that is, Petr, and his father, Ivan Gerasimovich, they somehow sang more interestingly. I remember Ivan Gerasimovich well. He was a good man; he really was! He lived in Petersburg, and worked there, as far as I remember, in Kolpino, but I don't remember what his job was. My own father was a cabinet maker in Kolpino, too. Now, when was it that Ivan Gerasimovich died?(8) He and Petr went to the collection point for logs, the winter was really, really hard, and they slept in some dugouts. He probably got chilled there - in the dugouts. They came home and he got sick. Pneumonia it was. He kept pleading with me: "Shura, don't forget your old father-in-law." He was a good person. He was sick, so sick, but somehow they couldn't cure his pneumonia. He was at home, not in the hospital. They buried him in Sennaia Guba next to the church. He was a good man, Ivan Gerasimovich, a very good man.

P. I. Andreev-Riabinin's favorite activities

It was going out in his boat. Then we were still lighting beacons. We worked, lighting the beacons; opposite our village, where Lelikovo is, the steamer used to go by. There was another beacon opposite Longasy. We rowed, first lighting the lamp on one and then on the other beacon. When the weather was calm, he went alone. But when it was windy, we had to go and light the lanterns together. Sometimes we even spent the night there. A little house had been built where the lanterns were – the two of them. How he loved going out in his boat! When he was out in the boat, you could hear songs echoing all over the lake. Such a strong voice he had, a good voice. People loved singing then! I loved it too, but when my son was killed and my husband died, I gave it all up. My son died in 1944; he wasn't quite eighteen. Before it happened I had a dream; the roof was torn off, but the walls were left standing.(9)

The Black Horse

In the morning we used to get up at five and start mowing because we had two horses and three cows to feed. We kept two working horses and bred a horse for riding, a big black steed he turned into. My, what a splendid animal he was. He could carry me for ever. I remember riding him. Once my mother-in-law was cooking, some big fish, ruff they were; she steamed them in the stove, big ones with their roes. Then she said to me: "Take them to the fields to Petr." I said: "Fine, off I go." I set out with a basket on my arm, and mounted the horse. Suddenly he saw something lying in the field, a wooden sled with a bale of hay on it. He shied at it, and carried me off like the devil. I barely managed to cling on – I lost all the fish, the basket fell off and the horse's legs got tangled up in the straps, so he stopped, and we rode back home. I told her – my mother-in-law, that is: "You know, mama, you may not like it, but all the fish have flown away into the clearings in the woods, the pot with the ruff in, those big fish!" "Well, so be it," she said, "we'll do another pot." Such an easily spooked, mad horse! Once Petr and I were going to Petrozavodsk, so hold on tight! We were riding to Petrozavodsk on the horse, but just then Petr was ordered to go to Leningrad. It was winter. We arrived at the Abramov bridge. The horse was racing along like a mad

thing, huge, strong and well-fed. There was a priest walking across the Abramov bridge, somehow he got caught up - we were driving a sled. The priest got caught up and dragged off. The horse must have dragged him about two meters and the priest fell over right there on the bridge, the Abramov bridge. The horse went crazy; we put a bag over his eyes and tightened it so that he couldn't see and wouldn't scare anyone. How could I ride home on a horse like that? Petr said: "Fine, some of our neighbors are staying there. You take the neighbors' horse and give this one to Egor Buev." Egor lived next door to us in the village. Petr left, I saw him off, then ran to see Egor and he agreed. "Okay, fine, you cross the lake and then, perhaps, he'll be a bit quieter." We set out and the horse galloped off like one possessed. Egor was riding ahead, and I was behind, and he managed to grab hold of my horse. "Enough, you take my horse." When Petr came back from the city I told him: "I'm not going to ride with you any more, definitely not! You can go and ride the horse yourself, or else go to Leningrad on the train. I've had enough of that horse!"Despite that, I did like horse riding, even when it was that horse. Later we gave him up to the collective farm. A pretty pass things had come to! We cried and cried. Peter and I just cried and cried!

War. Evacuation from Garnitsy

My brother-in-law, Stepan Ivanovich, said: "Shura, don't even think of staying here. Petrukha is a communist, you mustn't stay," he said. "Otherwise they may do something terrible to the kids and to you. Just don't stay!" I remembered his words all my life; I must not remain under Finnish occupation. Peter was on the front line in the trenches the whole time. He was blown out of the trenches and afterwards wasn't quite right in the head. He came home shell-shocked, and didn't live long after that. He just curled up and died. Just jumped straight into his coffin.

We were evacuated. We had got as far as Kizhi, when opposite Zubovye a plane attacked and began bombing us and our barge. Then the steamer went and untied the ropes joining it to the barge, abandoned it and sailed off. The barge was rocking and drifting in the open water between the two villages. So, there I was with six children and not enough rope. Everyone else had tied their kids to themselves because we were

being bombed. Perhaps the barge would be holed and we'd all drown. I didn't have enough rope, six kids and me the seventh. Then Volodia, the oldest, grabbed hold of me and said: "Mama, if someone doesn't come to rescue us, and we're going to drown, then let's all of us go down together, in a group." The plane dropped its bombs first on one side of the barge and then on the other, but didn't manage to hit it. The barge wasn't holed. And then when perhaps a couple of hours had gone by the steamer came and took us under tow. That's how we were rescued, but we sure were terrified, every one of us. My, oh my!

Aleksei Mikhailov Riabinin (born March 30, 1921 in the village of Potanevshchina). A direct descendant, the great-great-grandson, of the world-famous bylina singer, Trofim Grigor'evich Riabinin (1801-1885). Stalin comes to Kizhi.

This is what I remember. Goodness, for sure it was summer, 1933 or thereabouts, probably when they opened the White Sea Canal . . . . Bright white nights - in town you don't notice them so much... and Leshka Rusinov and I were outdoors. He isn't alive any more; he died. We looked up and saw a steamer coming... it was the "Anokhin." No hooters or anything, it approached so quietly. It was, I should think, about midnight; we didn't have watches. There wasn't a living soul about apart from us two; everyone else was asleep. Rusinov owned a small boat and we were busy getting the boat ready for the next day. We ran to the wharf. Should we grab hold of the hawsers? We did and the gangplank too. People started coming down the gangplank… They emerged... Three of them, there were... Who came out first? Probably the bodyguards, in civilian clothes. Just like nowadays, they had bodyguards. About ten people disembarked. None of the steamship's crew left the boat. The captain was on the bridge and just went on standing there. That was all. And then three more people appeared. Later we found out they were Stalin, Voroshilov and Kirov. Really! They were all quite short and had the same air about them. We, as they say, were craning our necks to see, though we didn't know… If we'd known it was them, we might have remembered a bit better what they looked like, of course. But we didn't know. "How do we get to the church?" they asked. Services were still being held in

the church because we still had a priest. There was a watchman attached to the church. He was fond of swearing, really bad. Egor was his name, but we always called him Uzhotkin, though his surname was really Serov. In the watchman's hut there was a sort of entrance room for people to wait in for passenger steamers to arrive. He had a little cubbyhole of his own there, and apart from being the watchman he was also the bell ringer.

"Who has the key?" they asked.

"Uncle Egor, I expect."

Egor? Mm, yes, Egor. We knocked at his door. Before this happened we used to have fun at the old man's expense. We would run up to his window and make a scratching noise as though the dead were trying to scare him. That's what we did now. Out he came… swearing away: "What the..." Immediately we said, "Pop, take it easy!" He glanced round and shut up instantly. He said, "I don't have the keys. The priest, Father Aleksei has them." He says to us: "Lioshka, go on then, you nip off and get the keys, get the priest to come!" So off we ran to Navoloko where the priest lived. It really wasn't that far. And when we turned up, the priest's wife began trembling; as soon as she had opened the door to us, she was shaking. You know how in those days everyone shook with fear. So the priest came. And we were told to shut up and told "Where do you think you're going?" and they wouldn't let us near there again. How long they spent there I don't know; we didn't count the time. They only went into the big church, of Our Savior. They didn't go in the Church of the Intercession. The Church of the Intercession apparently didn't interest them. Perhaps they were in the church about twenty minutes, perhaps a half hour. Not long, not long. Then they came out and went back to the steamer, which left without sounding its hooter or anything. And it went off in the direction of Velikaia, where there was a channel, through Krasnoe Field, and on to Povenets. That's all we saw. So I saw them.(10)

Trofim Grigor'evich's Grandchildren

My grandfather Kirik Gavrilovich used to sing byliny and tell lots of folktales. In those days we lived in Potanevshchina. Scholars would come from the city and

record him, on something, I don't know what its proper name is now, but then it was called "a round cylinder," I do remember that… I remember my grandfather… Well, my grandfather looked very much like Trofim Grig'orevich; the same beard, grey, and the same face… Grandfather worked right up to the day he died… He and I had brought some hay, we'd gone to get some hay in winter, so as to trample the hay down in the sled. He climbed onto the stove and there he died, just lay down and that was that. An easy death it was. When grandfather died, my father took down all the icons. He took down every last icon. Kirik Gavrilovich is buried, like all the Riabinins, by the walls of the Church of the Intercession.

Our house was big, beautiful, and had two stories. We lived downstairs, upstairs was a clean apartment for guests. There was a third room leading off from the barn – that's where our Petersburg grandmother lived. Agropena Gavrilovna was the sister of grandfather Kirik. She had helped build this house when she lived in Petersburg. She gave money. She spent her whole life in Petersburg. How do people end up there? Egor Uzhotkin - he also spent his whole life in Petersburg. He was a cabinetmaker. They sent people who came from big families there to be apprentices. And that's how she got to live there. She stayed and learned to cook. Then she started working as a servant for various good families, wealthy ones. Her room in the barn had two windows. Everything in her room was in the Petersburg manner. Everything was white, the bed was white, everything was covered in white. She didn't have benches round the walls but had chairs instead. My mother brought her her coffee; she did love her coffee, but it had to have cream in. She dressed in city style too. For a long time she had been a cook for Count Tatishchev, for the Gagarin family;(11) she cooked for important people, even the tsar, according to the stories … The tsar, I think, was **a** guest at Gagarin's house. She served him food, cooked it all herself. It was delicious, all splendid stuff. Then the tsar even asked her to cook in the palace. When the revolution came, she was well rewarded. They gave her a lot of gold, some money and other such things … Apparently, it was too heavy for her to carry, and at the train station two men said to her: "We'll carry your things, and put them in the car for you." They started settling her in the car, but they went in one door and exited out the other,

and that was that. She was left with nothing, just paper bills, paper money. Later we papered the sitting room with it.

Mikhail Riabinin - The Wedding Druzhka

My father was well known in Zaonezh'e as a *druzhka.*(12) He often went to weddings and took my mother with him. He would be dressed like everyone else. The only difference was that he had a towel slung over one shoulder. It was a towel with decorations on it. He had a whip with a small handle. When he was about to go into someone's house, he'd open the door, tap the shelf-pole (*polka-voronets)* under the ceiling with the whip and keep mumbling: "Girls, young married women, the skirts are short" (*devki, molodki, iubki korotki*), I've already forgotten the rest… It was funny, you know, sounded good, and rhymed sort of like it was verse. Properly speaking, it was verse. Here is one story he ;iked to recall. If someone wanted to put the evil eye on a wedding (it was called *portezh*), he could figure this out. How could a wedding be "spoiled"? In winter a piece of bear fat would be put on the road and the horses would balk. When people were on their way to the wedding ceremony in the church, the bear fat would be shoved under the snow. There was someone who was thought to be a sorcerer of sorts: Ivan Petrovich Pershin, who lived in Seredka, a village nearby. Everyone said he was a sorcerer, there's the sorcerer. He would stick something under the snow… (He knew something.) But my father could figure it out. He'd ride in front on his horse, in Zaonezh'ie this person is called the chief matchmaker (*vershnik*). He would dismount and lead his horse by the bridle. The horse would approach that spot and rear, that is, stand on its hind hooves. Then my father would clear away the snow - it meant there was something there, he'd pull it out and throw it away. Then the whole wedding party would ride on.

A Tale of Sorcery

If you walk from Seredka to Vorob'i you come across an inlet and quiet backwater. You can see Vorob'i from Kizhi, it's not far at all. Near Seredka there was a glade in the wood that had been trampled flat, sort of like a bald spot. It was there

that the young folks used to gather to enjoy themselves. They had fun. They'd (pair up and) break off from the dancing and... Then a devil turned up in that backwater.(13) He was scaring people. The water was constantly moving, though he didn't appear in person. Everyone was terrified of walking round there. So some of the young fellows went off to see Pershin, "Ivan Petrovich, the devil has appeared in our backwater." "Don't worry, I'll get that devil for you!" Fine. And off he went with a harpoon and speared a pike. It was that that had been frightening everybody. Now attached to the pike was a hawk. Its wings were outspread; it apparently had tried to take some prey that was too big for it and couldn't carry it off. Its claws had dug into the pike, which had then dived and the hawk drowned. And so there it stayed, rigid and stuck to the pike. Meantime the fish was still alive, and as it swum around, it stirred up all the water. And so they thought: "It's a devil." That's how the devil appeared in that place. Of course, it was terrifying. And the pike was a good size. Perhaps some people wouldn't believe that was true, but there's no denying facts.

NOTES

1 First published in Zhivaia starina, no. 1, 2001, pp. 26-29. (Trans.)

2 1925. They were married in the Church of St Nikola in Sennaia Guba.

3 During the wedding ceremony in a Russian Orthodox church crowns are held about the heads of the bride and groom. (Trans.)

4 In Petrozavodsk (about 60 kilometers from Garnitsy).

5 Our grandfather Ivan Trofimovich Riabinin built the house in 1894 on money from performances singing byliny.

6 A *reproduktor* was a radio receiver that received only one station. In some instances it was also impossible to adjust the volume. (Trans.)

7 M. M. Korguev and F. A. Konashkov were also epic singers from whom songs were collected. (Trans.)

8 Ivan Gerasimovich Andreev-Riabinin died in February 1926. He caught cold at the collection point for logs; they were preparing logs in the forest.

9 Dreaming of a ruined house indicates the death of a relative according to folk dream beliefs of the area. (Trans.)

10 Avgusta Alekseevna Akkuratova (1921-1999), the daughter of the priest in Kizhi, Aleksei Stepanovich Petukhov (shot 1937), confirmed this story during a conversation with staff from the Kizhi Museum.

11 The Tatishchevs and Gagarins were noble families well-known in St. Petersburg. (Trans.)

12 "Misha Kirikovich was a fast talker," according to M. M. Rusanova from Pogost village (born 1911), in a recording made 3rd August and held in the author's personal archive.

13 The *druzhka* acted as master-of-ceremonies at weddings. He not only protected the young couple from the evil eye, but during the day he often entertained the guests with his delivery of traditional wise-cracks (*pribautki*). The most feared of the mythological spirits was the *vodianoi*, who dwelt in quiet but deep pools. He might pull the unwary into the water and drown them. During the course of the nineteenth century he was increasingly confused with the devil. (Trans.)

Translated by James Bailey and Faith Wigzell