

R E P O R T S F R O M C O N F E R E N C E S
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Panel Report: AAASS 2001

Issues in the Collection of Folklore in the Former Soviet Union

During the Soviet era, foreign scholars were restricted to working in cities. Approved cities were listed on the visa and any travel beyond authorized limits was difficult indeed. Folklore fieldwork in the Soviet Union, therefore, was out of the question and most American folklorists and anthropologists who were able to do real collecting in East Europe and Eurasia, conducted their work in the Balkans or other states outside the Soviet Union proper. With the collapse of Soviet rule, fieldwork has become a real option and members of SEEFA have been engaged in such work. At the annual meeting of the American Association of the Advancement of Slavic Studies, SEEFA sponsored a roundtable on fieldwork entitled “Issues in the Collection of Folklore in the Former Soviet Union” so that members could share their experiences. The session was chaired by Jason Merrill; the participants were Sibelan Forrester (Swarthmore College), Natalie Kononenko (University of Virginia), Laura Olson (University of Colorado), and Jeanmarie Rouhier-Willoughby (University of Kentucky). Issues raised ranged from the practical, to dealing with Russian and Ukrainian colleagues, to abstract issues such as defining the field of folklore.

All participants stressed that working conditions are difficult and that, when it comes to the equipment needed for fieldwork, it is best to bring it from the United States. Electricity can be unreliable and batteries are a must. Forrester suggested using rechargeables. She noted that, while batteries can be purchased in most cities, having ones own rechargeable batteries is an extra bit of insurance that guarantees power when needed. Furthermore, she added, rechargeable batteries make wonderful gifts for Russian colleagues upon departure. A drawback to rechargeable batteries is that they to behave differently from regular batteries, she cautioned. They run out with a sudden thunk, rather

than losing power slowly. Still, a thunk on the tape may be better than a longer period of slow decay of sound quality, she observed.

All participants agreed that it is important to reduce the weight of the equipment carried as much as possible since transportation can be as unreliable as the electricity and the researcher may well need to carry all equipment over substantial distances.

Kononenko, who has begun using digital equipment extensively, suggested a Digital Wallet. This is much smaller and lighter in weight than a laptop computer and can be used to store space-consuming files, such as digital photographs, while in the field. Files stored on a Digital Wallet are then easily uploaded to a computer.

The clothing worn by the researcher and the gifts that she gives her informants are issues that lie somewhere between the practical and the cultural. As Forrester noted, markedly foreign clothes can attract undesirable attention. She suggested that, if financially possible, the scholar should underpack and buy things like a simple winter coat in the market. If you end up with clothes you would never wear at home, she said, you can give them to someone when you leave. Earrings make great gifts, she stated, because they can be small and as inexpensive as you wish. Furthermore, it is not hard to find kinds that you know no one there will have, and they are easy to carry around in the field. A great gift for a lot of men, especially a driver or colleague who is a specialist in solving technical and logistical problems, she continued, is a folding tool with various parts and blades. In Forrester's village experience, the most popular gifts were fluffy knitting yarn (angora) and a pair of very warm gloves that she had brought from the US for herself.

Kononenko noted that she had difficulty getting informants to accept financial compensation for their time. She said that, in her experience, doing farm labor for the informant was most appreciated. She has also after her return to the United States had success sending money to people in villages at whose homes she stayed via an American company called Meest. When staying at a home, she observed, one should be aware of the very limited resources of the host. Thus, it is a good idea to bring food to share, especially food that might be difficult to get in a village. Washing bed linens may very well be difficult for a village host and so bringing one's own sheets and towels and even

pillows and comforters is advisable. These can be purchased in cities or borrowed from urban friends.

The logistics of securing visas were also a topic of discussion. While visas are no longer necessary for work in Ukraine, Kononenko suggested that they nevertheless be obtained because changes in regulations may not be known in villages and extra documentation, such as formal letters of invitation or research permission can always be useful. Rouhier-Willoughby agreed that, while it is no longer true that every city visited need be on the visa itself, it is best to cover one's bases by listing every possible city where you might work on the visa application. In addition, she said, a cover letter from your department chair or yourself stating the nature of your work improves the chances your visa will be processed smoothly. Allow at least a month for processing if at all possible, she urged, but pay the extra fee for a two-week turnaround. That way, if the visa has an error or gets lost in the mail, you have time to get another. Keep copies of all invitation letters, application forms, cover letters, and so on to ensure that you can get another visa quickly, she concluded. Rouhier-Willoughby noted that she usually includes an overnight postage-paid envelope to get the visa back quickly with a guarantee of tracking. Depending on the length of the trip, she said, you may want to consider a multiple entry visa. These are more expensive, but they have the advantage of being valid for longer than three months, and having a multiple-entry visa can save the hassle and potential complications of renewing a visa in-country. Be sure to keep xerox copies of your visa and passport with you at all times and separate from your originals, she said, and leave copies in the United States as well with someone you can reach in case documentation is lost and you need confirmation of its existence.

All participants agreed that working with Russian and Ukrainian colleagues can be both a great benefit and a burden. Forrester suggested that, if time and resources allow, one should consider adjusting or building research plans upon arrival, because piggybacking on local expeditions or networks can be to everyone's benefit. The money from American grants, she said, can pay for a great deal, while local specialists' knowledge of the seasonal rhythms in the area being studied can be invaluable. By the same token, she noted, one should beware of local partners who may try to overmanage

you and your project, either by “helping” informants stay “on topic” or by not allowing you to fully participate in the expedition. Despite assurances from some that Americans would never be able to speak openly with village informants, Forrester found that there are ways of taking advantage of being a foreigner. If modulated by proper respect and cultural awareness, the traditional American informality (*panibratstvo*) and general lack of pretension attached to things like being a university professor can make an American scholar more accessible and less off-putting to a village granny than a chicly dressed and somewhat condescending urban Russian academic or researcher might be. In general, foreigners visiting Russia are shown great hospitality, and being foreign allows the researcher to ask seemingly naive questions such as, “So why did the young people on the kolkhoz stop following traditional wedding practices in the 1930's?” This can help uncover unexpected or divergent “received” opinions from different informants, or classes of informants.

Rouhier-Willoughby talked extensively about the challenges that interviews present. Most people reject interviews outright, typically because they feel they have nothing of interest to impart. At the second or third request, informants usually agree to an interview. Sometimes they want to talk right then and there. If a person begins to tell you about his/her experience and you are not ready to record an interview, Rouhier-Willoughby said, you should make notes about the impromptu conversation as soon as possible. When you are able to conduct a recorded interview, you can use these notes to elicit additional specific information; this is important because interesting material is often left out of the recorded interview precisely because the informant believes he/she has already said it and it need not be repeated.

Many people are nervous about the idea of being taped, Rouhier-Willoughby added. Because of issues of modesty and memory, the most difficult group of people to interview is often older women, in particular when discussing birth. Modesty can be dealt with not only by reassurances of anonymity, but also by proper use of euphemisms to describe the process, particularly of birth, Rouhier-Willoughby's research topic. If you are not sure whether you have the proper vocabulary, she said, you should meet with a native speaker beforehand to review the questions you will use. When asking questions, it

is often a good idea to have a preamble such as, “Other Russians have told me X, Y, or Z” or “In our country, this is how we perform this ritual; how do you do it?” A bare-bones question often results in a bare-bones answer of little interest, she added. It is important to allow a great deal of time for the interview to proceed at a leisurely pace and in a quiet place, Rouhier-Willoughby continued. Once the tape recorder is shut off, people often remember an interesting detail or two and she suggested keeping a note pad handy to jot down final statements. Another possibility is using digital tapes. These can run for a much longer period of time and allow the collector to keep a recorder on even when there is no interview in progress. For turning the field recordings into useable data, Rouhier-Willoughby recommended finding a native speaker to transcribe interview tapes.

All participants agreed that definitions of folklore in the countries of the former Soviet Union differ greatly from ours. Rouhier-Willoughby reported that, despite some changes in folklore collecting since the breakup of the Soviet Union, several long-standing traditions of the discipline still affect collection. First is the perception that folklore does not exist outside of the village. Anyone studying any kind of lore in an urban setting faces a great deal of resistance from both informants and from many other folklorists. Rouhier-Willoughby has worked around this problem by informing people that she is an ethnologist, rather than a folklorist. Second, even in village work, one encounters the opinion that the study of ritual is not folklore. Rouhier-Willoughby’s current research is primarily on birth and, for her, the easiest way to deal with objections that medical practitioners are not representatives of folkways is to state that she is comparing the traditional folkways of the midwife to modern practices. Her medical informants often feel they are just typical Russians who do not possess any lore of interest. Thus, she tells them that she is interested in how the system has changed over the centuries and that she needs modern informants to compare with older documents or with village life. If collaborating folklorists are resistant to collecting folklore in an urban setting or recording contemporary practices, it is easier either to make contacts through non-folklorists or to adapt terminology so that it is more in line with local expectations, she concluded.

Kononenko noted that her Ukrainian colleagues were dismissive of contemporary practices, even in the rural setting. Thus, they thought she should not observe contemporary rituals, but only interview the elderly about practices of the past. Furthermore, they were dismissive of any practices with Soviet elements. While such an attitude is understandable in this era of rejecting the recent Soviet past, especially in non-Russian areas such as Ukraine, documenting the mix of Soviet and indigenous elements can be of great interest to American researchers, as Kononenko noted.

Kononenko also discussed sharing information with colleagues in the post-Soviet states upon completion of field research. She has been developing a database which can be viewed at <http://nmc2.itc.virginia.edu/SourceCatSLFK/index.html> (please type <guest> into both slots to view). A web-based platform can provide Russian and Ukrainian scholars with an opportunity to publish their work at a time when paper publication can be difficult. Furthermore, digital exchange of information can allow collaborative work and the development of new ideas. A web site demonstrating a prototype model of a Ukrainian Village Farm can be viewed at Kononenko's home page (<http://faculty.virginia.edu/kononenko>). Kononenko demonstrated her database with the help of Anne Ingram, a member of the University of Virginia Instructional Technologies Group. She also announced that she is seeking grant support for her own work and for the work of her Ukrainian and Russian partners.

Jason Merrill (Drew University) and **Natalie Kononenko** (University of Virginia)