

Memories about the beginning of SEEFA

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Perhaps I should begin by mentioning how I became interested in Russian folklore. When I was working for an MA in Slavic Studies at Indiana University 1957 to 1958 I took a course on Russian Folklore in translation from Felix Oinas. We kept in contact for many years. During the following year on the first graduate student exchange with MGU in Moscow and then four years in graduate studies at Harvard from 1959 to 1963 I kept a modest interest in Russian folklore. The fact that I bought hundreds of books, including those on Russian folklore, demonstrates how deeply I had been infected by a Russian scholars' disease — to buy books on every subject that you have even a vague interest in. Once I settled at the University of Wisconsin in Madison in 1967 I decided to offer a course on Russian folklore which had to be taught in the original since otherwise it would not have qualified as a course in the Slavic Department. Sometime around 1992 four of us from African, Scandinavian, South Asian, and Slavic met many times during the summer to talk about starting a program in Folklore at the UW. We eventually wrote a proposal which the dean for Letters and Science at the time approved but would not let us cross-list courses “because this would enlarge the time table too much.” (Sometimes you just hate deans, right?) The succeeding dean finally agreed so I started giving my course on Russian folklore in translation. In order to include a variety of genres I translated many things myself.

The following remarks are based mainly on files about SEEFA that I saved on my computer or that appeared in the “President’s Message” in early newsletters. Thanks to the customary nature of memoirs and a “folk mentality” there probably will be some “lapses of memory.” I will try to trace the gradual establishment of SEEFA to about 1999.

During the spring in 1994 an international conference on epics was held in Madison at the UW. During the conference several of us in Slavic languages talked about the need to establish a national group for people with an interest in Slavic folklore. We decided to invite several people to meet during the AAASS conference in Philadelphia in November, 1994. Since we were not affiliated with AAASS we had to meet in my room, a viable tradition which we observed for several years. Some ten people managed to cram together in my room. We discussed which national organization we should try to be associated with and thought that

AAASS would be best because it involves a variety of fields which in different ways concern folklore of the Slavic peoples. We decided that the name would be “Slavic and East European Folklore Association” (SEEFA). We selected a steering committee: Ronnelle Alexander, James Bailey (chair), Jan Perkowski, and Snejana Tempest. Election of officers should take place at the October 1995 meeting of AAASS in Washington D. C. Jan Perkowski and Natalie Kononenko agreed to write the by-laws required by AAASS. Patricia Arant and Natalie Kononenko said they would organize panels. Another problem concerned how we would inform everyone having an interest in folklore about our new organization. And of course we succumbed to the inevitable notion of compiling and mailing a newsletter. Natalie Kononenko had several graduate students who were active and helpful during the first years of SEEFA.

Becoming affiliated with AAASS is a complicated process. You have to submit laws and bylaws, names of officers, a list of all members and their addresses, and become a non-profit organization. You obviously need to establish a bank account but to do this you have to become incorporated in one state. Only then can you apply to the IRS for non-profit status. Many people helped to resolve this hassle which lasted several years but we are most indebted to Jeanmarie Rouhier-Willoughby for her patience and persistence. We sent a plea for people to donate \$45 to pay lawyer fees for incorporation. We had a warm response from the “founding contributors.” (I’m not sure whether SEEFA has ever published lawyer jokes.) Even after you have become affiliated with AAASS every year you have to update everything. One thing which apparently has now been cancelled is that each such organization was entitled to a meeting room. I don’t know whether our tradition of meeting in someone’s room has been resurrected.

In order to deal with the problem of notifying people about our new group, I (or maybe a graduate student working for me) went through two AAASS directories picking out all those who had noted an interest in folklore. Some 150 names turned up. Email wasn’t common then so I used some research funds to mail a letter to all possible future members. I bought an old DOS program to print address labels and printed them out several years for SEEFA. Some sixty odd people responded to the letter. In a sense this reflects the strong interest that SEEFA aroused, but it also shows how many people contributed to the future organization.

The next meeting was held at the AAASS convention in Washington, D. C. in October, 1995. For the first time we had two

sessions of our own. We again met in my room where we continued talking about the problems involved in becoming affiliated with AAASS. We had a productive meeting which some twenty people attended. Jan Perkowski presented a draft of bylaws which we accepted. Ronelle Alexander nominated people for several positions and we held elections: President — James Bailey, Vice-President — Jan Perkowski, Member at Large — Ronelle Alexander, and Secretary-Treasurer — Jeanmarie Rouhier-Willoughby. Bruce McClelland, then a graduate student at the University of Virginia, agreed to edit the newsletter and to set up a web page. All these items show how many people took part in organizing SEEFA and realizing the complicated connections with AAASS. The most difficult remaining problem was the preparation and publication of a newsletter. That is a complicated activity which has been carried out by several people over the years. The first two newsletters appeared in 1996.

Thanks to Margaret Beissinger and Tom Butler during the AAASS convention in November 1996 in Boston arrangements were made to visit the Parry Lord collection in Widener Library at Harvard University. Mrs. Lord not only attended the session “Homage to Lord” at the conference, but she also spoke to the gathering at the Parry Lord collection. Tom Butler also spoke about the collection which he evidently did much to preserve. For folklorists nothing could have been more pleasant and memorable. We had three panels at the Boston convention. At our meeting we talked about expanding the newsletter and including other Slavic and East European traditions besides Russian. Jeanmarie opened a bank account, finished incorporation in Kentucky, and applied for non-profit status. So we were able to ask \$15 a year for dues, deposit them, and pay for printing and mailing the newsletter. In September 1996 I sent a letter to AAASS requesting affiliation which was eventually approved. This meant that beginning in 1997 we would have one “free” panel and a meeting room. Bruce MacClelland resigned from editing the newsletter and handling the web page. Jonathan Perkins, a graduate student at the University of Kansas, agreed to assume the editorship and establish a new web page.

One of the things I may have started was to invite Russian folklorists to contribute to our newsletter. This of course brought up several problems. Should their works be published in Russian or translated? We decided that they should be translated which meant a lot of work for someone each time — I don’t know how many I translated. Unfortunately the names of the translators have not always been included in the newsletters. A few items were eventually published in Cyrillic

along with an English translation. And another problem concerned which transliteration system we should use in the newsletter. To simplify matters we stuck with the trusted Library of Congress system. We agreed that any foreign scholar who contributed to an issue of the newsletter should receive a copy of that issue. For several years I paid the annual dues for four Russian folklorists so that a larger group of people would learn about SEEFA, would present a talk at an AAASS convention and would contribute to our newsletter.

At the AAASS convention in Seattle in November 1997 we had six panels or round tables, a high for our early years. Since according to our AAASS inspired by-laws we had to hold elections of officers every two years, we held an election. The following people were chosen: President — James Bailey, Vice-President — Snejana Tempest, Member at Large — Patricia Arant, and Secretary-Treasurer — Jeanmarie Rouhier-Willoughby. Jonathan Perkins resigned as editor and Sibelan Forrester at Swarthmore College agreed to become editor and to manage the web page. Our newsletter began to include works by foreign folklorists including several from Eastern Europe.

The 1998 convention of AAASS took place in Boca Raton, Florida where we had five sessions. I had never heard of the place with such a strange name but even so made my second trip to the seemingly attractive place called Florida. I probably was prejudiced since I had grown up in sunny California. A Russian friend of mine, Zhenja Kostyukhin, an expert on the tale at Pushkin House in St. Petersburg and now deceased, agreed to contribute with a talk he gave in Russian. The translated title was “Magic Tales that End Badly.” I gave him the wrong date about the conference so that he came a day early. At the airport in Fort Lauderdale who should he run into but one of the economic bigwigs of the Yeltsin era! He was waiting for a limousine. Since Zhenja and I were sharing a room I made up for my mistake by paying everything for him. At our annual meeting we decided to establish an editorial board to evaluate contributions and to turn the “newsletter” into a refereed journal. Sibelan Forrester asked for assistance in editing the journal and was happy that Anne Ingram agreed to assist her.

The 1999 AAASS convention occurred in St. Louis where we had five sessions again. One was entitled “Russian Confessional Groups in America: Linguistic Problems.” Leonid and Rozaliia Kasatkin as well as S. E. Nikitina took part. At one time the Kasatkins evidently visited the Old Believer community in Oregon. As dialectologists they were especially interested in the language of this distinguished group in

Russian history. At our meeting we held the third election of officers: President — Natalie Kononenko, Vice-President — Snejana Tempest, Member at Large — James Bailey, Secretary-Treasurer — Jeanmarie Rouhier-Willoughby, and Editor — Anne Ingram. AAASS informed us that we would no longer have a “free” session.

Without too many “folkloric repetitions” I have tried to present a survey of events during the early years of SEEFA. I once again will say that it was a great joy to have worked with so many energetic people who were deeply interested in the folklore of various peoples and languages in Eastern Europe. During these early years of SEEFA I was especially indebted to Tatiana Ivanova at Pushkin House for her numerous contributions to the newsletter most of which I translated. I stayed at her apartment in St. Petersburg several times. Once she gave me the keys to the two doors but I never figured out how to open “Russian locks.” In 1999 we published our translation “An Anthology of Russian Folk Epics” which gives us royalties to this day from M. E. Sharpe. Boris Putilov, a connoisseur of Slavic epics, read the introduction and commentaries in manuscript while lying on his deathbed in a hospital in St. Petersburg. I have been retired some sixteen years now so I gave up going to AAASS conventions some time ago. From talking to various people SEEFA seems to be prospering. This is evident from the beautifully formed journal now called “Folklorica” which Natalie Kononenko and her husband, Peter Holloway, have edited and posted on a revised web page. I give my thanks and appreciation to the many people who helped create and continue SEEFA over the years. Please forgive me for my numerous “epic digressions.”