ARTICLES

The House of Stolypin Migrants to Eastern Siberia (From a Pit-house to an Estate)(1)

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Abstract

This article studies the development of house and homestead design in Siberia after the Stolypin reforms. It traces the history of the homesteading process, the architectural elements and designs and how they have changed over the years. It is based on fieldwork in the Irkutsk *oblast'* conducted by the author between 2003 and 2010 in Ukrainian, Belarusian, Chuvash and Russian villages. House design from various periods since the settlements began in the early 20th century reflects the socio-cultural patterns of the day. Oral narratives about the past and the experience of settlement serve as a window into an understanding of cultural attitudes.

It has been posited that the United States of America was created by people of a certain psychological bent: enterprising, infinitely loyal to the idea of personal freedom and the inviolability of personal property, firm in character, hard-working, desirous and capable of "living a new way of life," who were not willing to repeat the mistakes of the Old World in their socioeconomic structure. This idea has, in a certain sense, become a truism. However, in the history of Russia at the beginning of the twentieth century, a very similar process to the settling of the United States took place: the mass resettlement of aspiring, skilled individuals who did not want to reconcile themselves to a hopeless reality, and who believed in the capability to change one's own life and the life of one's family through personal, unimpeded labor. This event is referred to as the Stolypin agrarian reforms (1906-1914), which, in spite of their inconsistency and not achieving his original vision, had a colossal positive impact not only on Russia's economy, but also on the national consciousness of the citizens of the Russian Empire. Figuratively speaking, the settlement of Siberia, from 1906 to 1914, could be called the Russian "American" experience. As Mikhail Davydov argues,

> Considering the sense of personal property to be one of the most important natural qualities of man, Stolypin wanted a powerful stratum of peasant-landowners to emerge in Russia. Such a group would, in an agrarian country, become, on the one hand, the main source for the formation of the middle class and, on the other, a sturdy foundation for civil society and rule of law. (Davydov, 2010)

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The resettlement of the peasants in accordance with the Stolypin reforms was the largest mass migration in Russia of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Nonetheless, only a relatively brief amount of time separates us from this epochal process. We can still see with our own eyes the material results of these reforms today, namely villages and towns built deep in the taiga and steppe by early settlers various regions of the Russian Empire. We are able to interview their children and grandchildren, who still remember their grandfathers'

and grandmothers' stories about how they came "from Russia" to "this Siberia." In many respects, oral histories imbue dry statistics with flesh and blood and give life to the historical research on the Stolypin reforms. Thus, behind data on the growth of the number of agricultural communities, the acquisition of farming equipment, and Russia's export of grain stands the concrete fate of the people who decided to risk their current status for a worthwhile future.

Ultimately, within the foundation of every action lies emotion. We must ask what circumstances, then, engendered emotion of such strength that people left lands that had been obtained over centuries, severed ties with relatives, sold their last 'crumbs,' took out loans, and left with infant children in their arms for the far-off and unknown region of Siberia. The collection and analysis of oral history on the lives of the first Stolypin settlers and, even more so, the presence of descendants who have preserved family stories about the living conditions and photographs of everyday life during the first years on Siberian soil, have become an enormous resource for folkloristics and ethnography. This article summarizes the materials collected on six folklore expeditions carried out between 2003 and 2010. During this time, twenty villages in the south of Irkutsk *oblast'* were comprehensively studied. They include five Ukrainian, three Belarusian, two Chuvash, and ten Russian villages. All of the settlements are situated in the region to the west of Lake Baikal and were founded between 1907 and 1909. (2) At the time of the study, the population of each of the so-called Stolypin villages and towns ranged from 600 to 2000 persons.

Delimitation of one's space, as accomplished by four walls and an upper covering, is one of the fundamental conditions for human sustenance (on the same level as food, water, and warmth). Without a home, human life is next to impossible. A dwelling is not only an indicator of development within the society as a whole but also represents a psychological portrait of the individual living therein. We wonder, then, what the habitations of those Europeans that left their homes for the sake of a new life in such a distant and unfamiliar place as Siberia might have been like.

Despite the obvious necessity for shelter, construction of homes was not the highest priority for the settlers. Every newly arrived family was faced with the challenge of developing arable farmland, sowing the soil, gathering the harvest, and collecting seeds for the coming year. A newly plowed piece of land, reclaimed from the impassable taiga by uprooting larch trees three arm-spans in circumference, became the key to the prosperity of the settlers, and the embodiment of their dreams of a new, free, abundant life. All of the family's resources were thrown into cultivating the land, while construction of a dwelling was a lesser priority. Below is a description of one family's arrival in the village of Batama (Ziminskii District) on May 22nd, 1908, as recorded in the memoirs of Stepan Vasilievich Bondarenko (http://www.tetradimemory.narod.ru/Tetrad1_Batama.htm):

> Our carts were situated under enormous larch trees near a shelter made of birch branches left behind by the surveyors who had measured the land. That morning, when we were still on the road, the sun shone softly. By evening, however, after we had arrived at the shelter, as we looked through the tree branches at the patches of blue sky, it became overcast and began to rain heavily. Where were we to go? Piotr and I, along with the Bobokalo children, two boys and four daughters, tried to take cover in the shelter, but it leaked like a sieve! We ended up having to climb out of the shelter and under the carts loaded with all sorts of household goods. Father and his friend, having released the hobbled and hungry horses to graze, quickly sawed down a big larch and began to strip

> off the bark and with this bark covered the shelter and carts. By nightfall, we had somehow managed to shield ourselves from the rain. We all had to sleep in the shelter or beneath the carts, hunched together, bundled up in whatever we had. Scarcely had daybreak arrived when father and his friend took the axes and shovels and went to the right side of the little ravine to their neighboring pieces of land and started to build more substantial shelters, covered with larch shingles and turf. By midday, they had already cleared a road through the ravine and had crossed over to the right side of it with the carts and all of our household goods, toward the shelter, to their permanent dwelling place, where, as they had dreamed, their long-sought-after happiness awaited them.

Thus, that first summer, many newcomers contented themselves with simple huts, all the more so because the local climate offered limited time for building. Trains with settlers almost always arrived in the middle of spring (between the end of April and May), before Easter. In Western Siberia snow begins to fall in September and does not melt until the end of the following April. Thus, settlers had only three or four months for tilling, growing, harvesting, and preparing seeds and the harvest for winter storage, in addition to building their first home.

One must take into account three important factors in analyzing the everyday lives of these settlers during their first years in Siberia. Firstly, these people, having decided on such a step, were aware that they would be living in Siberia with all her frosts, snows, and long winters. They recognized the many possible risks. The success of the establishment of a new village depended directly on the role of the so-called *khodoki* [walkers]. The *khodoki* were people selected by the future migrants from among their circles; the villagers paid their way to travel to Siberia, supplied them with provisions, and sent them off on this distant journey with two goals: to select a good location for the future village and to find out precise details about the locale and living conditions there. As a whole, the *khodoki* performed their mission well; they chose the most beautiful and convenient places, taking into account the presence of rivers and other bodies of water; they examined the contents of the soil; and established good relationships with the local administration and the local xenoethnic population (predominantly the Buriats). In this way, early settlers arrived at a location ready to farm. Plots of land had been parceled off, future fields had been delimited, and sources of water were known. However, there were some instances when the early settlers arrived personally, in an effort to save money by not hiring *khodoki.* Such settlers ended up with the least fertile lands, usually in lowlands with long periods of snow-melt and water-logged soil.

Secondly, new Stolypin villages were founded primarily along railroads, far away from the long settled (*starozhilcheskie*) Siberian villages, so that there was no place to stay during the winter. However, this fact also had a positive side: settlers did not compete with long-time residents for natural resources such as water, fish, mushrooms, berries, game and trees.

Thirdly, Europeans came to lands which earlier had belonged to nomads, and in cases where good social ties were established with the Buriats, the latter became their main helpers and, in part, teachers in their new natural surroundings. One example is the village of Turgenevka, founded in 1909 by people from villages in Pruzhany County of the Grodno Province (in modern-day Belarus, Berioza District, Brest Province). The descendants of these settlers recounted that during the first winter they decided not to build, but instead accepted the invitation of the Buriats to spend the winter in their *yurts*. In many variants of family histories, the Buriats were characterized extremely positively:

> They had just arrived, with only what they could carry, but they needed a horse to plow, a cart, a cow: where should they get them? So, they hired themselves to the Buriats as workers. And my grandfather said, ‘A Buriat will never cheat you!’ So, we made an agreement that in spring, he would receive a horse for his work, that the Buriat would give him a horse, and a good one at that (Lidiia Ivanovna Loiko).

> They also said that there was one Belarusian who worked as a hired hand for the Buriats. The price should be a horse. So, in the spring, the Buriat master gave him a horse. The Belarusian brought the horse here, to the village of Tolstovka. But that night, the Buriat came galloping in, whistled, and the horse ran off at the sound of his whistle, well, and he drove that horse back to Baiandai. This worker glanced into the paddock that morning, but the horse was not there. He left and told the others. The Belarusians went to Baiandai and complained to their Buriat higher-up. And what do you think happened? They returned the horse, and also gave a pair of lambs, you know, as a fine (Nadezhda Petrovna Tumanova).

In some senses, the village of Turgenevka is an exception. It is located within the territory of the Ust-Ordynskii Buriat district, separated from sources of water, in a steppe zone where Belarusian settlers lived side by side with Buriats. This fact rather paradoxically influenced the building of dwelling places. According to the testimony of descendants, the first homes were raised up on a foundation having the form of a square. As L. I. Loiko reported, “Like the Buriats had, only their homes were round while our first homes were square. That’s so that the home would be warmer. That is what the Buriats said.” In actuality, the homes having a square as their foundation were not a rarity in the migrant villages. Certainly, they kept in the heat better, and the placement of the stove in the center of the home meant that it was equidistant from all of the walls, preventing the corners of the home from freezing. At the same time, this type of house had its prototype in Russia, namely the dugout house (*zemlianka*).

Not all of the settlements arose in areas of direct contact with native peoples. For example, the territories of the modern Tulunskii, Kuitunskii, Ziminskii, Balabanovskii, and Zalarinskii Districts of the Irkutsk *oblast’*. There, immigrants from Belarus, Ukraine, Chuvashia, and western Russia founded hundreds of villages, and the Buriats had stopped using these lands for pasturing their herds of horses a long time before the appearance of the Stolypin settlers. Accordingly, the first type of home built by the arriving settlers turned out to be the dugout as well. It was shaped from the trunks of newly-felled larches, in five to six rows. The thickness of the trees significantly increased the height of the dugout:. Tatyana Georgievna Simenei said that, “My grandmother said that in the dugout, you walk at your full height; it was warm, and five people usually lived in one.” Antonina Nikolaievna Zhuravlieva told of her grandmother’s experience,

> I also asked grandma what people's lives were like in a dugout. And she says to me that everyone lived like that the first winter. The dugouts were built along the Oka (3), but the door faced the forest, people were afraid that in the spring the river would spill over and flood them all out. They did not know how much it would flood. And it was true – in spring, it flooded them all out, but it had already become warm, and we awaited the spring in huts.

Only during the second year, and sometimes during the third, was the first permanent home built, using those same trees that the people had cut down when they cleared the land for plowing. In addition, over the winter the logs had "dried up" and were more useful for construction. Despite the vast abundance of available building materials, the first cottages were regarded as highly valuable. They could be sold at a high price, and in the case of a change of estate, they were always transported to the new location. To achieve this goal, the frame was taken apart log by log, each having been numbered by the builder, and at the new location they were put together once more. There are known instances where homes were transported 200 kilometers or more.

Currently, the Stolypin villages consist of than 50% (in some villages, up to 85%) of the homes built by settlers a hundred years ago. Two methods of preservation for such homes are known. In the first type of preservation, the new home (correspondingly wider and taller than its 'predecessor') was built around the original structure. The construction process began with the erection of canopies. Later the bedroom, guest room, and then a second bedroom were added on. As a result, the old home ended up being inside the new home. The roof was undoubtedly reconstructed, but the old walls remained. Today, under the many layers of plaster and wallpaper, one can still see (and in some homes even touch) the original, masterfully hewn logs. For the second method of preservation, the new home was built onto the old building. The inner yard was lined with boards, as Mariia Petrovna Bukharova recounted, "so that there would not be mud and so that it would not be hard to clean up the animal droppings left when you herded them to the barns." (4)

In this way, a distinctive architectural ensemble was formed; the original small home with its low ceiling was turned into a summer kitchen, while the new building became the primary home. This summer kitchen was closed up in the fall and opened only when warm weather returned. It essentially allowed people to conserve firewood and protect the main home against moisture, since, in the summer, people did not cook food in the main house or, rather, did not heat the stove. The combination of the main home and the summer kitchen into one structure is a typical aspect of building among long-time Siberians, who have preserved this tradition from the time of the first Cossack settlements of the area.

The large-scale expansion of the homes of settlers began in the middle of the 1920s and continued up until the beginning of collectivization (1928-30). Immediately before collectivization, communes began to be established in these villages. Youths set on revolution from the first generation born in the Siberian Stolypin villages began to leave their families for communes, taking with them provisions and small livestock. As a rule, the life of Siberian communes ended less than a year later. Zosiia Vladislavovna Ivankovich described the situation, "They ate all the provisions, slaughtered the pigs and ate those, too – and the commune ended, everyone went back to their homes."

At the beginning of the 1930s, the dispossession of the *kulaks* (5), along with the collectivization of settler villages, occurred. Only the Cossacks experienced the same degree of repression as the Siberian peasants during the years of collectivization. Spacious, new, bright homes (often with six windows) were confiscated, their owners were chased into the taiga just before autumn, and they were forbidden to take any building materials with them. Without axes and saws, the dispossessed *kulaks* froze to death by October in their tree-branch shelters. Exile to camps in the north of the Irkutsk region, prison, or execution were the fate of most of the owners of these spacious homes, as well as of carpenter-immigrants, whom the new authority considered too prosperous to retain their current lives. (6) Galina Petrovna Burak reported the following

story about her family history, “Our uncle, our father's youngest brother, left for Siberia. He came to visit us and said: “If I had known that they would give the land away to the peasants, I would not have ever left for any Siberia. As it is now, they gave me ten years of exile for that land.”

The second phase of home construction occurred in the middle of the 1960s. Lidiia Ivanovna Loiko remarked that “Earlier, people were afraid to expand their homes. Everyone remembered how the owners of big homes had all been evicted.” It was only in the 1960s that people commonly began replacing their primitive roofs with slate and began adding on verandas. Children and grandchildren of immigrant settlers built additions to their homes, significantly increased the height of the buildings and the size of the windows. A tall, spacious home with large windows became the distinctive standard of beauty in these villages. Nadezhda Petrovna Tumanova says of this period,

> We started to have money, and everyone began to rebuild. It was desirable for there to be a little more light in the home, so people started broadening their windows. And with our winters! We have three frames in our windows. Well, they began to redo the frames. Whoever had homes with big windows, they were considered a wealthy family.

During the same period, from the 1960s on, ornamental lintels began to appear on the windows. Windows are viewed as the “eyes” of the home. If the resources of the owner allowed him to step beyond the limits of purely pragmatic building decisions, then, without doubt, embellishment of the windows became the highest priority. The carving of lintels in Soviet times was partially an underground business, bringing no small income to carpenters. In addition, it was potentially a dangerous occupation, punishable with prison sentences “for unearned income.” As Ivan Ivanovich Pavlenko recounted, “Well, what sort of unearned income was it? I labored three days just to chase down the template, for each shutter they paid me three rubles. I would put it in my pocket and fear that I would be put in prison.”

Lintels were made according to patterns that in many ways replicated the shutters of older houses of Eastern Siberia. Every carpenter had an entire set of patterns that could number as many as 60. Accordingly, the owner of the home was presented with a wide choice, and, as a result, the form of lintels in such villages is distinguished by its variability and rarely repeats. As a rule, carpenters that made lintels were not local workmen. They went from village to village in brigades of two or three. They carved and hung the lintels, while the painting was left to the owner of the home. (7)

No matter the variant of the immigrant's farmstead, people put gardens in front yard. Often, during the marking of the first rows, directly in front of the future home, people planted “the family tree” in the garden. Most often this tree was a rowan or spruce, though a lilac bush or birch tree were possible as well. This tree symbolized the family spirits or, more accurately, the beginning of a new family. In actuality, the immigrant families had not only left their homeland but also forever “tore themselves” from their kin, leaving for such a distant, unknown land.

The departure of a father of a family with the older sons was typical, the younger sons and daughters remaining with their mothers in their home village. Often the members of the family never saw each other again. A new land, new people, a new home, and new prospects all took away not only physical effort, but also demanded the settler’s complete attention. They did not look toward the past but rather to an alluring future, although it was potentially full of danger and uncertainty. While planting the tree, they were thinking about how their family would live in

this new home. Even today, a hundred years later, in the front gardens tall spruces grow and rowans are still clustered in the yards.

The stove was always the center of the home in peasant homes. Characteristically, in Belarusian and Ukrainian settlements in the Irkutsk *oblast'*, larger stoves were built than in their native villages. Thus, two-chimney stoves were replaced by three-chimney versions. Villagers began to remove them from homes only in the middle of the 1980s. Stoves were assembled in various ways and according to the traditions that the immigrant settlers had brought from their native regions.

From the outside, the homes of the settlers from the various areas differed not so much in size as in the form of the logs. For example, the Belarusians never built homes from rounded logs, thinking that it was uncultured. Logs in the homes of Belarusian settlers were always hewn, on both the inner as well as the outer side. The corners of the homes are characteristic markers of the homes belonging to various ethnic groups. In the homes of Ukrainian and Belarusian settlers, the outer corners were covered by two vertical joined boards. This practice was explained not only by the pragmatics of construction but also by a definite aesthetic standard. As one local resident said, "We cover the corners so that no boards or tow stick out." (Natal'ia Dmitrievna Pukalo)

The placement of corners was the most critical part of a carpenter's work. Thus, if a corner began to freeze solid, rot, or become drafty, it was considered the most serious flaw in construction practices. In the consciousness of the inhabitants of the home, the corner of the home was associated with their homeland. Icons were hung there which had been brought over from one's birth village. Such family icons were an integral part of the baggage of immigrants. Under the icons was placed a table covered with an ornate tablecloth with the obligatory embroidery. The tablecloth was also usually brought from one's home. As Natal'ia Dmitrievna Pukalo told me,

> My grandmother told how her mother mourned for her native village. She would stand in the corner and cry aloud:
> Corners, you are my family,
> Corners, you are my warm ones,
> You were put together the right way,
> But you were placed in the wrong spot,
> You were put together in our way,
> But you do not stand in our land.

The entrance to a home always has a special symbolic meaning. It is not only a passage from the cold into the warmth, it is also a physical relocation of a person from the outer world, full of potential threats, to the inner space, which guarantees maximum safety and peace. In the homes of the long-time residents of Siberia, the threshold served as a special boundary between these two "worlds." It sometimes reached 40 centimeters in height. A low door and a raised threshold undoubtedly played an important role in preserving much valued heat. As a rule, the homes of immigrant settlers were not distinguished by large thresholds, but a typical detail of their construction was a porch. The threshold of the entrance of the home occupies a significant place in the general space of the home. In Ukrainian villages in Siberia, the tradition of building raised porches has been preserved; as one informant said, "You can hear what kind of person is coming into the home. If it is someone with bad thoughts, the porch will without fail creak

beneath him."

The porch led onto the veranda, yet another section of the path to the inner world of the home. Verandas began to be built in 1960s and were mainly used for storing foodstuffs. Zosiia Vladislavovna Ivankovich described this practice, "That which needs to be saved until spring goes into the cellar, but flour, sugar, grains, it goes on the veranda." It is noteworthy that, despite the fact that the veranda functioned as an addition to the living quarters, its floor and walls were painted with bright tones, such as yellow, light blue, light green, and even orange. The amiability of the home needed to be felt from the very first step that a person made onto the premises.

It is interesting that the increase in the number of porches and verandas was accompanied by an innovative building process that peaked in the 1980s: the decrease in the original size of the stove. In many villages, the Russian stove was supplanted by the so-called "Dutch stove." This process may be variously interpreted, but more than likely, only the more prosperous families decided to part with their stoves, once they felt more confident and safe with their status in society. Numerous *bylichki* [memorates] about the *domovoi* [house spirit] (known by the name "master") confirm that the stove is the safest place inside the house. In the stories of Russian, Ukrainian, and Belarusian immigrants, this mythological character always lives under the stove or, less frequently, behind the stove.

According to many of the accounts of the settlers' descendants, their parents and the generation of their grandparents recalled Siberia with great joy, despite the occasional onset of homesickness for their birth villages. When comparing life in Siberia to life to that in the homeland, the settlers and their children always emphasized how much more rich and happy their lives had become in Siberia. For example, Rozaliia Ignatiievna Petrushenko said that, "Well, mama took me to our homeland in Hmelnitsk *oblast'*, and what was it like? No firewood, no land, and a rainy winter. Mama was sick the whole time. We went back to Siberia and she immediately got better." Among the Stolypin settlers of the villages we studied, there were but a few instances when families returned once more to their homeland. A staggering majority remained to live in the new lands. Even today the houses in the immigrant villages are marked by their especially fine upkeep and condition, their multi-colored architectural elements, their original carvings, and a particular elegance of style. They stand as evidence of how an entire region was enhanced by people's individual desire to improve their lot in life.

Translated by Greg Bayles. Special thanks to Dr. Erin Collopy for reviewing the original English translation.

NOTES

1 The expeditions of 2009 and 2010 were carried out with the framework of the project "The Multimedia Textology of Folklore (An Experimental Publication of Monuments)," part of the Department of Historical-Philological Sciences of the Russian Academy of Sciences program "Text in Interaction with the Sociocultural Environ: the Level of Historical Literary and Linguistic Interpretation," a branch of the program "Folklore as a Form of Existence of a Text." The expeditions of 2008 and 2010 were carried out with a grant from the non-profit organization "American Friends of Russian Folklore" (USA, California) – http://www.russianfolklorefriends.org for the project "Dynamics of Folk Traditions" (2008, 2010). All collected materials are housed in the Folklore Archive of the A. M. Gorky Institute of World Literature's Folklore Department.

2 Accordingly, in 2007-2009, the villages celebrated the one-hundred-year anniversary of their founding widely.

3 The Oka is the leftmost tributary of the Angara river, which begins in the heights of the Saian Mountains and flows through the Ziminskii district of Irkutsk *oblast*'.

4 In all areas, cleanliness was one of the main characteristics in the homes of the immigrant settlers. The home and stove were whitewashed ("smeared") two times a year, before Easter and at the end of September.Literally meaning "fist" – a private farmer with at least one horse or one hired worker.

5 Victims of the political terror of the USSR (http://lists.memo.ru/index.htm)

6 A final building boom began in the villages established by the Stolypin immigrants in the middle of the 1990s. Homes once more began to be expanded and decorated with carvings carried out according to sketches from new journals.

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