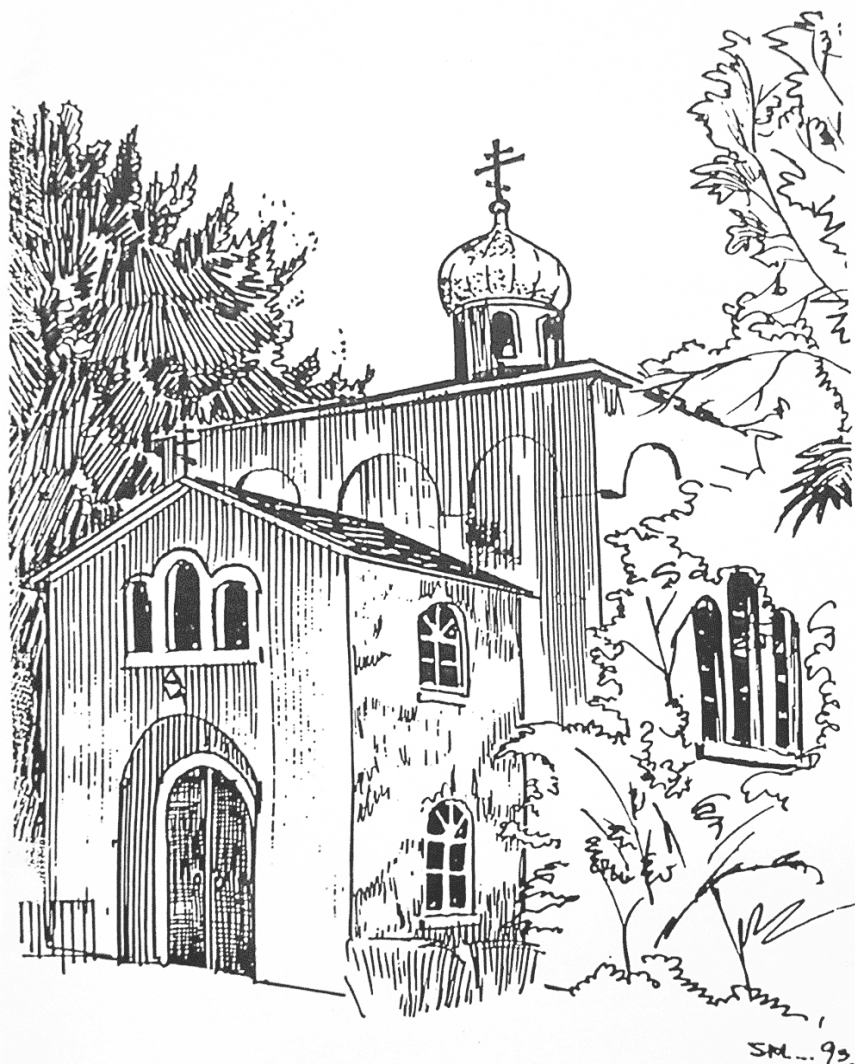


† Saint Sergius of Radonezh Church †



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St. Sergius Russian Orthodox Church at the Tolstoy Foundation Center had its beginning as a tiny house-church on the main floor of the "Big House." Consecrated in 1940 by Metropolitan Theophil, it was the loving handiwork of the refugees living at the Center (then known as Reed Farm). A handsome plywood iconostas was built by Leonid Kazantsev. Cherished family icons were donated by many refugees to decorate the walls. Vestments were hand sewn and church books gathered from here and there.

By 1949, the Tolstoy Foundation Center was already a thriving Russian community. Daily arrivals from war-torn Europe filled the Farm to overflowing.

A large new building presently (OPH2) was built to house the arriving refugees. The Church was an important spiritual center to the people whose first action in any temporary refugee situation had always been to set up a church: in tents, barracks and basement rooms.

Bishop Sava of Poland had been the first pastor of the tiny parish. He was much loved by the children of the summer camp with whom he had terrific rapport, giving religious instruction, even as he shared their love of sports and games. The Rt. Reverend Michael Jelenevsky succeeded Bishop Sava in 1947. Father Michael remained the pastor of the growing parish for over 20 years and it was his hard work and loving dedication that ultimately built and decorated the present building. Father Michael was succeeded by Archimandrite Victorin Liabach in 1970. Today, the pastor of the church is Rev. Gregory Kotlaroff. Born in China of Russian émigré parents, he lived in Australia for many years before arriving in the U.S. in 1979.

In spring of 1950, during Great Lent, a fire destroyed a good part of the church interior. Although the walls and main house suffered only scorching and smoke damage, vestments, many icons and even the sacramental vessels were destroyed. (Interestingly enough, a small paper icon of the Tikhvin Theotokos remained unscathed in the midst of the worst conflagration.) Consequently, just before Easter of that year the church was moved to the basement of the new building (presently OPH 2). The work of raising a new church out of the ashes of the old began. Whatever could be salvaged from the fire was restored and re-used; whatever could not was done anew. The iconostasis was restored, although it had to be cut down to accommodate the heating ducts at the ceiling of the basement room. The dirt floor was covered by rush mats, new icons were found, church books and music recovered, vestments sewn. By Easter, a new church was created. Although there was another temporary move that summer (the church moved outside for two weeks, into a garage, to accommodate the pouring of a cement floor), the basement housed St. Sergius Church for seven years.

By 1952, a construction committee was convened to authorize the design and construction of a permanent Church. A building fund was established using the insurance money from the church fire; appeals went out, and slowly donations trickled in.



By 1954, enough money was scraped together to begin construction and a festive ground breaking took place that spring with Metropolitan Leonty officiating at the "Molieben." It took three more years for the building to be completed. Finally, the consecration of the new church was joyously celebrated in the summer of 1957, and the final gold cross on the small cupola above the entry was set into place.

The present building was designed by Vladimir A. Busch with features taken from the ancient Novgorod style of Russian church architecture.

St. Sergius is in the basic shape of a ship (which like Noah's Arc carries its occupants to safe harbor across life's turbulent waters) and is surmounted by the golden onion-shaped dome, symbolizing the gathering prayers of the worshippers, which rise like a flame towards heaven.

Inside the Church, Gleb A. Greitz, a dedicated parishioner and talented wood carver was commissioned to carve new decorations for the iconostas, the candle stands, the icon kiosks, chandelier and generally all the necessary carving and woodwork of the interior. The small offertory table where candles are set in the memory of departed souls, was lovingly created by him and donated to the church in memory of his wife.

The iconostas, a screen of icons separating the nave from the altar, is typical in design to all Orthodox Churches. It has two tiers of icons; some iconostases have more, some less. The very top tier represents the patron saints of the many parishioners who donated them; below that are icons of the 12 major feast days, commemorating the life of Jesus and the Mother of God.



The altar can be entered by three doors penetrating the iconostas. In the center are the Royal Doors through which only the priest or deacon may enter. As the church is characteristically oriented with the Altar to the East, the side doors are the North portal and the south portal, through which lay servers may enter. The royal Doors are decorated with the images of the four evangelists, above them is a representation of the Annunciation, and above that a double representation of the Last Supper in the center of which is inset an antique Russian Icon of the Holy Trinity. On the North and South Portals are Archangels Michael and Gabriel and on either side of the royal doors are The Holy Mother of God and Jesus. On the north side are icons of St. George and the dragon and St. Nicholas, whereas on the south side are icons of St. Sergius of Radonezh and the image of the Holy Trinity, a copy of the famous 13th Century icon by Andrei Rublev.

Most of the icons on the iconostas were commissioned from the icon-painter Mr. Morozov of Paris. However, he was unable to complete all of the icons and so Mr. N. A. Papkov of Nyack, NY painted the remaining ones. Mr. Papkov also was commissioned to complete the decoration of the walls in the nave of the church when Mr. A. Bicenکو, who had decorated and ceiling of the altar and the dome, was unable to continue.

Although all of the icons decorating the walls of the church cannot be mentioned within the confines of this short leaflet, it should be noted that the bottom level of paintings, starting from the north wall and proceeding around the church, are illustrations of major events in the life of St. Sergius, the patron saint of this Church, a great mystic of 13th Century Russia, and most beloved within the Russian Orthodox community to this day.

Another interesting and personal feature of the decoration is the five icon medallions on the church vestibule walls. They commemorate the patron saints of the co-founders of the Tolstoy Foundation: Alexandra Tolstoy and Tatiana Schaufuss; the two rectors of the parish who served during the church's construction and development: the Rt. Rev. Michael Jelenevsky, and the Archimandrite Victorin Liabach, and finally Xenia Rodzianko, an administrator and nurse at the Center in the early years, whose dedication to the work of the church and the Tolstoy foundation is legendary.

Outside the church, one finally needs to mention the bells, the sound of which is as memorable of the old Russian scene as birches and churches with onion domes. The first set of bells was donated by a parishioner who worked for the railroads. All three of the smaller bells were taken from antique steam engines when they were being replaced by diesels. The large bell below them, however, was once a fog bell on one of the wharves in New York City.



A set of 10 bells were donated by parishioners, Mr. & Mrs. Peter Tomkevich in 1997 (shown left). A collection has been started to build a bell tower which would house these beautiful bells. If you would like to specifically contribute to this worthy cause, just note "Bell Tower" with your contribution.

It is important to note that the construction and beautification of the St. Sergius Church was accomplished over many years, by the dedicated sacrifice of many people who gave of their time, talents, and hard-earned money. Today, it is the spiritual center of the Tolstoy Foundation Center, serving the needs of the retirees and local community. It stands as a memorial to those who came before and a beacon for the future.

If you would like to make a donation to St. Sergius, please mail to:

St. Sergius Church • 104 Lake Road • Valley Cottage, NY. 10989

To truly appreciate the artistry and spiritual beauty of this church it should be seen in person. Inside tours of the St. Sergius and exterior tours of our grounds are available upon request.

For more information, call 845.268.6722
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