Field Trip

The Tolstoy Foundation—
a bit of old Russia in Valley Cottage
by Shel & Jan Haber

Just up the road from the river villages you will find 45 acres of old Russia— home to the internationally known Tolstoy Foundation.

It was founded in 1939 by Alexandra Tolstoy. She named it in honor of her father, Leo Tolstoy, the great Russian writer/philosopher and prolific author [1828—1910] whose works include War and Peace and Anna Karenina.

Today as at its beginning, the foundation is dedicated to humanitarian works and preservation of Russian cultural heritage.

After five arrests and a prison sentence for supporting free speech, Alexandra Tolstoy was allowed to leave the Soviet Union in 1929. She settled in the U.S. and continued her advocacy for human rights. For her, freedom was not only a political right, but a divine right and efforts to help individuals attain liberty a moral duty.

World War 2 created huge numbers of refugees—people whose homelands were destroyed in the war, people kidnapped by the Nazis and forced into slave labor. At war’s end, tens of thousands of displaced persons were scattered across war-torn Europe.

Determined to rescue some of these displaced persons, Alexandra Tolstoy pressed to modify U.S. immigration policy and was instrumental in the passage of new, more humane regulations. The Tolstoy Foundation was then able to help thousands of the homeless and persecuted to enter the U.S. In time they became citizens.

In mid-August, when we visited the Tolstoy Foundation, we were guided around the grounds by Victoria Wohlson, Director of the Tolstoy Foundation and Victor Schmidt, its Controller. Both are American-born children of displaced persons rescued following WWII.

Leo Tolstoy with small child

"... If I were told that what I shall write will be read in twenty years by the children of today and that they will weep and smile over it and will fall in love with life, I would devote all my life and all my strengths to it."

—Leo Tolstoy

Everywhere on the green and tree-shaded grounds of the Tolstoy Foundation are cottages which serve as retirement homes for former refugees. A handsome, expansive Victorian houses the 50,000 books of the Tolstoy library and...
in a low, whitewashed building the
toation stores its archives—hundreds
of thousands of papers, pictures and
films documenting the Russian émigré
experience.

Among its many programs that help
people all over the world, the foun-
dation currently works to aid some of the
thousands of children in Russian orphan-
ages. The victims of changing economic
conditions, many of these children are
ill-equipped to find employment when
they leave the orphanage. Many end up
on the streets.

In a startup program, 72 children aged
10 to 16 from all parts of the former
Soviet Union have been brought to
Valley Cottage to experience a 3-month
program studying the English language
and computer science, all valuable in
gaining good employment in Russia.
As all its good works are privately fund-
ed, the Tolstoy Foundation needs finan-
cial contributions to expand its work
with the children, to maintain its unique
library and preserve its priceless archives.

The exterior of St.
Sergius, the Russian
Orthodox Church at
Tolstoy Center [photo
at left], is a relatively
small, simple white
stucco structure with
a golden onion dome.

In no way does it
prepare you for the magnificent interior,
a serene place of sparkling light and fra-
grant incense. Its walls are covered
from floor to ceiling with fresco paint-
ings of iconic saints in jewel-toned robes.
Spectacular gold leaf icons are every-
where. Each is a distinctive work of art.
Many are antiques, bequeathed by the
faithful to the parish.

We were introduced to Father Gregory

Kotliaroff, Rector of St. Sergius, who
told us that many couples, not only
those of the Russian Orthodox com-
munion, choose to be married here
because of the great beauty of church
and choir. Rev. Kotliaroff led us outside
to see the traditional set of bronze bells.
As we left he wished us a safe journey
and, tugging the cords, let sound the
resonant voices of the bells.

Tour groups & visitors are welcome; call
(845) 268-6722 for reservations.
The Tolstoy Foundation, 104 Lake Road
Valley Cottage NY (north on 9W to Valley
Cottage and west on Lake Road)