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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 kidnaped 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.



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

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.



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 foundation 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 foundation currently works to aid some of the thousands of children in Russian orphanages. 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 funded, the Tolstoy Foundation needs financial 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 fragrant incense. Its walls are covered from floor to ceiling with fresco paintings of iconic saints in jewel-toned robes.

Spectacular gold leaf icons are everywhere. Each is a distinctive work of art. Many are antiques, bequeathed by the faithful to the parish.

We were introduced to Father Gregory



Victoria Wohlson, Rev. Gregory Kotliaroff and Victor Schmidt inside St. Sergius

Kotliaroff, Rector of St. Sergius, who told us that many couples, not only those of the Russian Orthodox communion, 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) ✧