

Seminar – Access across the Generations – 31 May 2010
State Records & Royal Australian Historical Society

Peter Tatarinoff, President of the Russian Historical Society in Australia

Ladies and Gentlemen,

My thanks to Christine Yeats of State Records and to the Royal Australian Historical Society for inviting us to talk to you about how we Russians came to Australia and how we have settled here.

I shall preface my talk by speaking about the first encounter of the friendly kind between Russians and Australians. It happened 203 years ago in July 1807, when the sloop “Neva” sailed in to Port Jackson. They were very well received by Governor Bligh, restocked their supplies, repaired their ship and went on their way to Alaska. The Russian Historical Society marked the event by issuing a commemorative medal.

Other Russian ships continued to come to Sydney, a memorable one being the ship which brought the news of Napoleon’s defeat.

Then, in 1820, two ships the “Vostok” and the “Mirny” sailed into Port Jackson. I shall dwell a little on that event, as we consider it another cause for special celebration. The “Vostok” under the command of Captain Bellingshausen and the “Mirny” under the command of Lieutenant Lazarev left Russia in 1819 with instructions to discover whether there was indeed land at the south pole and to conduct exploratory and scientific research. Captain Cook had sailed around the Southern Ocean in 1777, but had been unable to come close to Antarctica because of fierce storms, fog and icebergs. He stated that no-one would be able to go any further south than he, Cook, had. Nearly forty years later, these Russian sloops sailed past South Georgia Island and sighted the continent on 28th January 1820. They approached the land on the eastern coast on two other occasions, and as summer was nearly over, they headed for Port Jackson.

Governor Macquarie also received the Russians very well.

Seeing that it was still too cold to go south, the ships left Sydney on an exploratory voyage in the South Pacific, discovered new islands, clarified the coordinates of others, travelled as far as Tahiti and returned to Sydney. By this time, the warmer weather allowed them to return to the south. They called in at Macquarie Island, charted its coasts and continued down along the west coast of the continent. They discovered more islands along the way. The voyage lasted 25 long months, during which they discovered Antarctica, circumnavigated the continent and accumulated a wealth of scientific, oceanographical,

meteorological and geographical information. And to commemorate this exploit, we have issued another medal.

And so, we come to the arrival and settlement of Russians in New South Wales. We cannot talk about the settlement of Russians, unless we explain how and why they came here.

We have identified six waves of immigration, the first happening soon after the aborted Revolution in Russia of 1905. Many of these revolutionaries came, fleeing justice and settled mainly in Brisbane, where they continued their work of agitation. They founded the Communist Party and fomented strikes and industrial unrest, until the government bundled the leaders off back to Russia. Sadly for them, their Communist brothers did not appreciate their efforts and shot most of them. However, their actions left a deep imprint on the Australian view of Russians, and when "White Russians" refugees, the second wave, victims of the 1917 Revolution wanted to come to Australia, there was a strong reluctance to let them in. We have copies of correspondence between the Australian Consul in China and the authorities here, expressing the fear that more communist agents could be among the refugees. It did not seem to occur to them that most of these refugees were fleeing the Soviet Union, and many had fought the Communists in the Civil War. Nearly all of them were strongly anti-communist and stayed so for many, many years. There were no government handouts in Australia in those days, every man fended for himself, many found work in the cane fields. Some prospered; one such was Michael Boukaseff, a Cossack who came via Persia with the left-over Cossack regiments in 1926. He started as a cane-cutter, worked on the building of the railway between Darwin and Alice Springs, then opened a business in Townsville, moved to Homebush, opened a furniture factory and a store in Ryde and became a leading member of the Russian community. He was very active in church affairs and was one of the founders of the Russian Orthodox Cathedral in Strathfield in 1949.

The third wave, 1947-1952, consisted of Displaced Persons, among them former prisoners of war, who had been forcibly recruited by the Germans from Soviet occupied territories for forced labour in Germany, the "Ostarbeiters". There were also those who fled the Soviet Union in the wake of the retreating German army. They refused to return to their homeland, knowing that certain death, gulags and slave labour in mines and forests awaited them. Following the Yalta conference, where Stalin, Churchill and Roosevelt chopped up post-war Europe, and the western leaders agreed to Stalin's demand that all former citizens of the USSR be returned home, thousands were betrayed by the Allies and often forcibly sent back. So, in order to avoid being repatriated, many of them passed themselves as Ukrainians, Belorussinas, Poles and others. I should like to

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mention that they came under these guises to Australia and therefore Australian statistics about migrants are seriously flawed, and a true picture of a Russian presence will never be known.

The fourth wave came from China via the Philippines in 1949. There was a large percentage of Russians in Shanghai who were strongly anti-communist, and they would have suffered a fate similar to tens of thousands of Russians in North China, where the Red Army arrested and repatriated them by force. After the war ended in 1945, China made it clear that they wanted all Europeans to leave China. Most Europeans had a country to go to, but the "White Russians", who were stateless, with no passport, had nowhere to go. The leaders of the Russian community began an intensive campaign to save their people by evacuation from China, and as a result, the International Refugee Organisation undertook to evacuate nearly 6,000 of them to the only country ready to accept them, the Philippines. They were dropped on an almost deserted island, Tubabao, a former US base. They received a leaky tent, a camp bed and a mosquito net, and were told to clear the jungle. The Russians showed their resilience and inventiveness once again, put up their tents, organised kitchens, schools for the children, churches, a hospital, a dental clinic, security patrols, scouts, concerts, theatrical performances, even an arbitration court and a little jail. They repaired an old generator and strung electrical wires between coconut trees, they cleared a few springs and set up pumps. There was one tap per section of 300 to 500 people. And all by their own hands.

The IRO did not supply any fresh food for four months, until there was a change in the directorship. It is a fairly horrible picture, and at the same time, one of strength of character, determination and complete self-reliance, of the will to survive and of faith in the future. Missions from various countries came to choose suitable people, Australia being the first, and about 1,500 were accepted to come to Australia at the end of 1949 and early 1950. A large group of about 3,500 waited for a special bill to be passed by Congress in the USA to allow them into the country.

Conditions in Australia then were not as they are now, and all able-bodied men had to sign a two-year contract to work wherever they would be sent. On arrival, all refugees were put into camps at Bathurst, then Scheyville, Parkes, Greta near Newcastle and others. The refugees were not allowed to leave the camp until they could find other accommodation for themselves. The housing situation was difficult and renting a room was the only option. Overseas degrees were not recognised and many professionals, some of them highly qualified ones, were set to digging ditches, working as cleaners and doing other menial jobs. Such a waste of talent was, in my view, to say the least, . . .wasteful. Despite earlier assurances to the contrary, all young people over 16 were also

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forced to sign contracts. Many families were broken up, fathers were sent to work in far away Sydney, parents were separated from their children, something that they had not endured even during their bleak years in post-war European camps. And again, they survived, found jobs, bought homes, raised families, built churches and resumed a fruitful life. After two years, when the contract expired, refugees received a certificate from the Government that they were now allowed to stay indefinitely in Australia and were not considered aliens any more. Citizenship was granted on application after five years' residence. People worked hard, skimped and saved in order to buy a house – a dream that was possible in Australia in those days. And in spite of all of these difficulties, they felt a great debt of gratitude towards the Philippines and towards Australia for allowing them to start a new, free life.

The fifth wave came from Manchuria and North China, from the mid-1950s to 1970s. In the mid 1950s, the Northern Chinese finally granted exit permits to those who did not want to return to the Soviet Union. As with the Shanghai exodus, few possessions were allowed to be taken out, most had to leave their houses and valuables behind without compensation. The World Council of Churches assisted with the passage, receiving a promise of future repayment of the advance, and there were no more contracts to be signed. Over 5,000 Russians made their home in Sydney and Brisbane

We have been told by a senior police officer that, up to 1990, the incidence of criminality among Russians was the lowest in the migrant population.

The sixth wave came from the former Soviet Union after the collapse of Communism in 1992– people who were looking for better living and better financial conditions. Many came on a points system, they are professionals who have also been active in settling in.

Because of all of these different waves, the Russian community in Australia is not a homogenous one. The first and the second waves were politically, socially and spiritually diametrically opposed. The wave from post-war Europe consisted of people who had a different background again. The wave from Shanghai consisted of people who had lived for over twenty years in an international city, had a different outlook from the people from Manchuria and Harbin, the main city, which, since the establishment of the Far Eastern Railway in 1898, had been a Russian centre, and the culture and way of life was very much an old-fashioned Russian one.

All of these waves have one thing in common. They were exiles, refugees, fleeing from a terrible regime. In order to survive, they had no choice, but to flee. In Australia, they found freedom, freedom to arrange their lives as they

liked, freedom to work where they could or pleased, freedom to travel around the country without showing their passport at every turn, freedom to raise their children, and freedom to practice their faith.

We are unlike the Italians, Greeks, Maltese or Lebanese who came in the old days in search of a better material and financial life.

The last wave, the post-communist migrants, have also lived in a communist environment, one which had changed since the death of Stalin, and had evolved into Perestroika and Glasnost which, in their turn, led to the collapse of Communism.

I have mentioned that churches appear wherever there are Russians. The Orthodox Faith is a strong part of our lives. And so, wherever they settle often even before they buy a house, they build a church. In 1949, it was decided to build a cathedral, named after the apostles Peter and Paul. Strathfield was chosen as a central location on the junction of railway lines as few people had cars in those days. The church was consecrated in 1953 by the recently arrived Archbishop Savva. The church has always acted as a focal point not only for spiritual but also for social activities. Many organisations were founded here – youth groups, Scouts, a library, a Saturday morning Russian school, a hall was built for church and social events and performances. I should mention that temporary churches were set up in refugee camps, be it in Germany, Austria, Tubabao, which I have mentioned, Bathurst, Bonegilla, Scheyville, Greña and others.

Churches have been opened in Cabramatta, Fairfield, Blacktown, Croydon, Carlton, Gosford, Wollongong and Canberra, mensateries in Kentlyn and Bombala and of course, in the other states.

“How are Russians settling in?” was one of the questions posed originally.

What is the measure of settlement? Demographically, we gravitate to the focal, spiritual and social point in our lives – the church, and you will find us around Strathfield, Cabramatta, Blacktown, Wollongong and the other suburbs where we have churches. Strathfield used to have a large Russian Population, but because of high real estate prices, the younger generations cannot afford to live there and move further out. However, Strathfield remains a centre of Russian activity – the Cathedral and the Russian Club, which moved there from the City in the mid-1950s, are where things happen. The last post-communist wave has settled mainly in the Eastern suburbs, where businesses and restaurants have been opened.

For years, Russians have lived quietly, working, studying, contributing to the community in all walks of life. We have endeavoured to bring up our children to

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be responsible citizens. For years, we have kept a low profile, knowing that many Australians still do not know the difference between a White Russian and a Red Russian, and many lump us all together.

How have we contributed? By being loyal and hard-working citizens. It has recently been publicised, that about a thousand young Russian-Australians ANZACS fought in the Australian Armed Forces during WWI. There are quite a few of us now in the Armed forces, the Navy, the Police force. Some of us have excelled in the sciences, in music, in the arts, in the law and in sport. The achievements of quite a few have been acknowledged and they have been awarded the Order of the British Empire and the Order of Australia.

We are nearly all Australian citizens, our children were born here, many of them do not speak Russian any more, but there is still that feeling of apartness, which it will take a generation or two to erase.

On our return from our first voyage to Russia in 1992, – we called it a pilgrimage to the land of our ancestors, our children were asked how they felt about it. They replied: Russia is our Motherland, but Australia is our home.