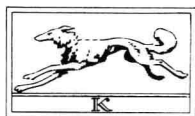


ECHOES OF A NATIVE LAND

Two Centuries of a Russian Village

Serge Schmemmann



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Echoes of a Native Land



*Peasant children selling mushrooms at the
Sergiyevskoye manor*

*To my wife and my mother,
and to the memory of my father*

И, пыль веков от хартий отряхнув,
Правдивые сказанья перепишет,
Да ведают потомки православных
Земли родной минувшую судьбу.

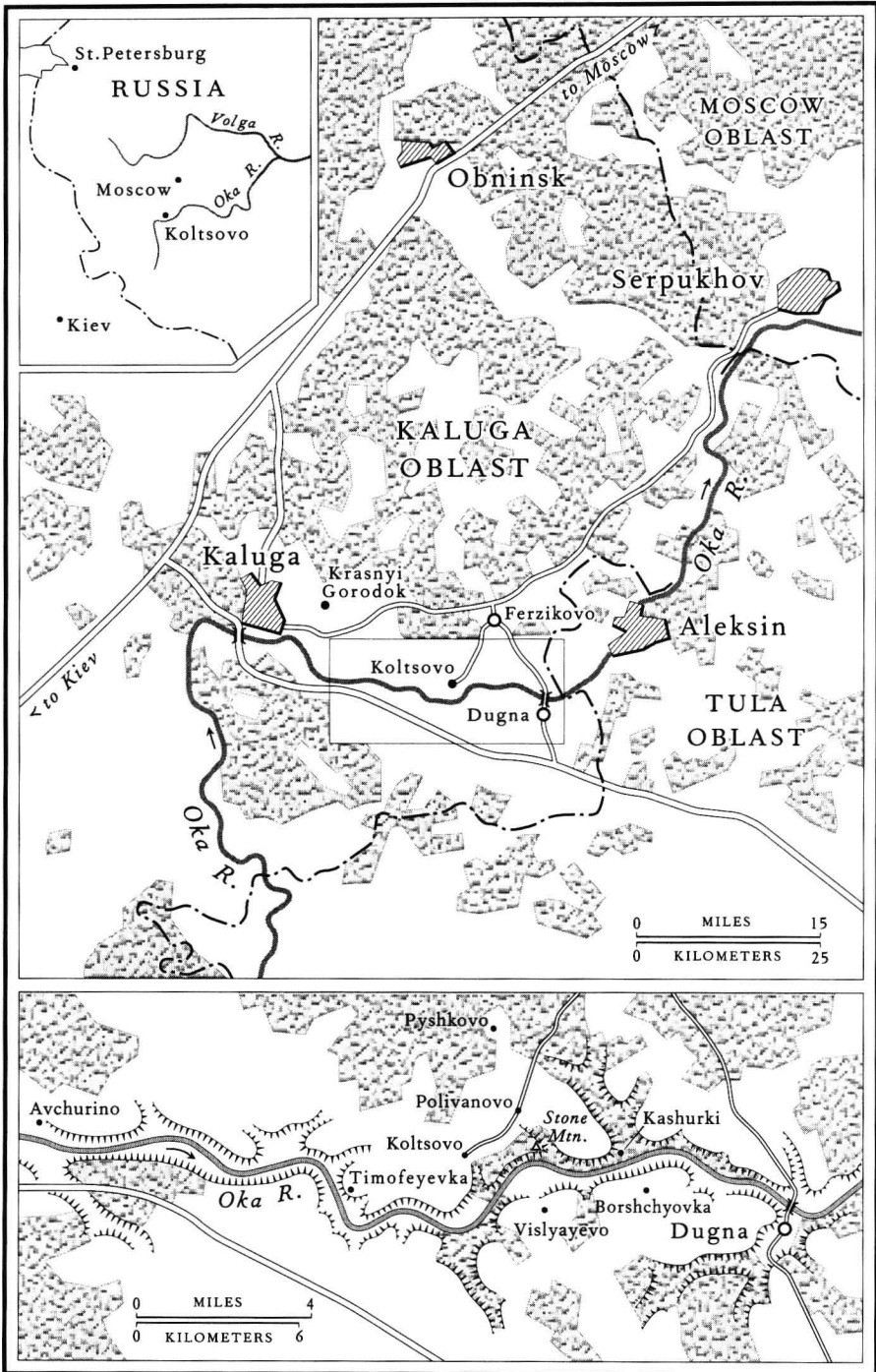
And, shaking from the scrolls the dust of ages,
He will transcribe these truthful sayings
So that descendants of Orthodox men will know
The bygone fortunes of their native land.

Pimen's monologue from *Boris Godunov*,
by Alexander Pushkin

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Echoes of a Native Land





I

A Corner of Russia

This is the story of a Russian village, known at different times over its three centuries of recorded history as Goryainovo, Karovo, Sergiyevskoye, and now Koltsovo. It lies by the Oka River in the ancient Russian heartland, 90 miles south of Moscow, near the city of Kaluga. It is a village to which I was originally drawn because before the Russian Revolution it had been part of an estate owned by my mother's family. But the Soviet government's long refusal to let me go there turned my curiosity into a mission. I finally reached Koltsovo only when Communist rule began to wane. I came to know the people; I immersed myself in the local lore; I even bought a log house there. Koltsovo became my little corner of Russia—my entry into the charm, beauty, and romance of that vast northern land, and also its backwardness, cruelty, and suffering.

I first arrived in Russia with my family in 1980, but ten years passed before I reached the village. By then the stern ideological taboos of the Soviet era were lifting, and people in the village were starting to lose their fear of talking to foreigners. Gradually, they opened up their memories and their history: how the women fooled the German occupiers who wanted to chop down the stately larches of the Alley of Love, how the old drunk Prokhor Fomichyov took the church apart after the war to trade bricks for vodka. Some went further back and remembered how in the thirties the Bolsheviks sent industrious peasants

into exile and herded the rest into collectives. A retired teacher even remembered how before the revolution the peasants would stop to listen to the great “silver bell” at the church, and how village girls would gape at the bows and smocks of the young mistresses on their way to Sunday worship. The people talked about the present, too—about how youths left the village as soon as they finished school, and only the old people and the drunks stayed on; how the love child of the albino accountant was beaten to death by his son in a drunken brawl; how nobody knew what to make of the new “democracy”; how the collective farm was selling off cattle to pay its mounting debts while the director built himself a big new house.

The first person I met in the village was Lev Vasilievich Savitsky, the retired head of an orphanage that had operated there after the war, and a staunch Communist. He told me how a KGB agent had come out there a few years earlier because some foreign correspondent was trying to visit Koltsovo, claiming that his ancestors came from there. Lev Vasilievich said the agent and the village leaders concluded that the place was too rundown to show a foreign reporter, that he would only write how things had gotten worse under the Communists. And so I learned at last the real reason I had been barred so long from Koltsovo. When I told Lev Vasilievich that I was that inquisitive reporter, he fell silent, and for a while he eyed me with suspicion and unease.

Lev Vasilievich told me that the manor house had burned down in 1923, and all that remained of the old estate was a gutted bell tower, a crumbling stable, and the former parish school. The school had been a teachers’ training institute after the revolution and an orphanage after the war; it was now a weekend “rest base” for workers from the giant turbine works in Kaluga, 25 miles to the west. The village and the lands were eventually formed into a *kolkhoz*, or Soviet collective farm, named Suvorov after the eighteenth-century Russian military commander. The *kolkhoz* produced milk and meat, though mostly it gobbled up government subsidies without ever turning a kopek of profit. After the Soviet Union collapsed and the collective farms were officially freed of tight government controls, the Suvorov Kolkhoz changed its name to the Koltsovo Agricultural Association and began gobbling up bank loans instead of government credits.

But on my first visit, that was not what I wanted to know. I wanted only to see beauty and romance, to walk where my ancestors had walked, to catch the echoes of a native land. It was the height of summer, I was in Russia on a brief visit, freedom was coming to the land, and the place was beautiful—a timeless Russian landscape of birches, winding rivers, log houses, and vast expanses. Lev



The gutted bell tower and the former parish school.

Vasilievich's grandson, Roma, his patched pants rolled up Tom Sawyer-style, led me to the places my own grandfather had so lovingly described: the old park planted two hundred years ago with ordered rows of linden trees; the lane of soaring larches known as the Alley of Love, which led past the Round Meadow, a low hill deliberately left wild for honeybees; the icy "Robbers' Spring," whose waters my grandfather had tapped for the house; the steep descent through the oaks and birches of the Zaraza forest, which abruptly opened onto a stunning vista of the Oka River winding through lush flood meadows, bluffs, and forests of birch.

In the evening, I sat under an apple tree outside Lev Vasilievich's house, blissfully drinking in the old stories and gossip with my hot tea. The laughter of

children playing in the unpaved street mingled with the summer din of frogs, crickets, and birds. I felt I had been here before, on a glorious day just like this one, a century earlier, which my grandfather Sergei Osorgin described in his memoirs:

In the summer, the windows all open, evening tea would be set on the terrace, and my sister Maria and I would sit on the steps, listening as Mama played my favorite nocturne of Chopin, and the evening bells would be ringing: It is already dark, only a pale-yellow streak remains in the western sky, the continuous thin trill of a small frog rises from the pond by the barn, and from the nearby village of Goryainovo wafts a peasant song, "Oh you day, this my day, finish quickly. . . ." I'm happy, totally happy, but I long for something even more wonderful . . . the sweet, romantic sadness of Chopin, what music! and how Mama plays! The watery trill sounds on, the stars of the Big Dipper grow brighter, the strong aroma of roses, sweet peas, and mignonettes, "Oh you day, this my day, finish quickly. . . ." My God, I thank You that all this was, and that it all still lives in my soul.

It was my grandfather's description of a youth spent here that first prompted me to search for this corner of Russia. When I finally gained access to it I learned that all the extraordinary resources of the world's first police state had failed to eradicate the past. It lived on behind the imposed ideological formulas and slogans, clandestine little truths cautiously stored in closed archives and in the deep recesses of people's memories.

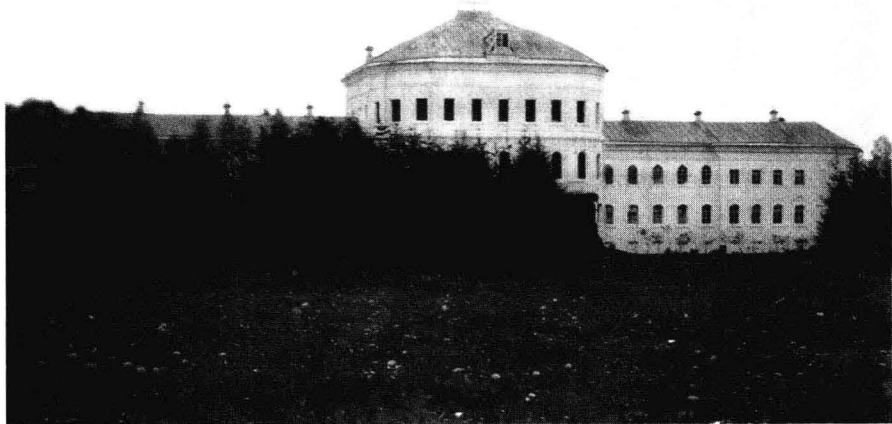
In Koltsovo, the premier repository was Alexandra Nikitichna Trunin. In her seventies when I met her, Alexandra Nikitichna had settled in Koltsovo after the war to work in the orphanage. Her background as a history teacher soon combined with her boundless curiosity to establish her as the unchallenged authority on local lore—what the Russians call a *krayeved*, literally "knower of the region." In the 1960s, Alexandra Nikitichna set up a one-room museum in what was then the orphanage, filling it with photos, poems, and letters from local people who had made a mark in Soviet society. An ardent and honest Communist for most of her life, she earnestly rejoiced in Soviet triumphs and achievements. But there were also things that Alexandra Nikitichna kept to herself—things that could not be put in her museum.

Also in the sixties, workers dismantling a chimney of the burned-down manor house found an urn full of letters and photos, presumably concealed there by the Osorgins, my mother's family, before they were expelled. There

were letters from “the boys at the front” and a postcard from one of the girls to her mother about a suitor she could not shake off. The letters circulated in the village and disappeared, Alexandra Nikitichna said. Only a few photos survived—cracked and faded snapshots of ladies in long gowns and children in a field. In the seventies, Alexandra Nikitichna’s brother was secretly scanning Western shortwave radio broadcasts (a risky but common enterprise in those days) and came upon an interview with an Osorgin in Paris, talking about Sergiyevskoye. He understood that the discussion was of the former estate in Koltsovo and told his sister. In the informal seminars she held on local lore, however, Alexandra Nikitichna toed the official line, that the former landowners had been rapacious feudal exploiters.

Not all prerevolutionary history was taboo, however. If little was said about the Osorgins, everybody knew about the man who had owned these lands before them, General Kar: a certified villain of Russian history. According to the prevailing legend, Kar was a cruel Englishman in the service of Empress Catherine the Great who was banished to this estate by her for abandoning his command and fleeing before the armies of the rebellious peasant Pugachev. Alexander Pushkin, Russia’s greatest poet, immortalized Kar’s infamy in his history of the rebellion, and centuries of local embellishments turned the general into a truly evil figure. Exiled to his estate here, it was said, Kar used a barrel of ill-gotten gold to build himself a grand mansion modeled on an English fort. Then he had his serfs burrow a tunnel to the Oka River so he could escape if any of his many enemies came after him. All the serfs who worked on the tunnel disappeared, it was said, and when some local boys found the tunnel in the 1920s, they claimed to have seen crucified skeletons inside. According to Pushkin, Kar met an appropriate end—he was torn apart by enraged serfs. Then his devout and long-suffering widow, a princess born, built a beautiful church on the estate to expiate his sins.

Local legend did not stop there. Kar’s estate was eventually inherited by his son Sergei, a sadistic wastrel who was supposed to have taken his pleasure with peasant girls and then killed them and dumped their bodies in the forest. This was why, Alexandra Nikitichna told me, the forest was called Zaraza—Contagion. Sergei went on to lose the estate in a game of cards to Mikhail Gerasimovich Osorgin, a military man who went mad on his very first visit to the property when he realized that Kar’s pious mother was buried in the estate church, and so Sergei Kar had in effect gambled away his own mother! A few years ago, Alexandra Nikitichna said, workers digging on the site of the old church came upon a skeleton draped in fine black cloth, with precious rings on



*The grand mansion at Sergiyevskoye, modeled on an
English fort.*

the bones of the fingers. The rings disappeared, and local kids were caught playing soccer with the skull.

Of course, there was a buried treasure. Sometime in the 1960s, Alexandra Nikitichna said, a man arrived with two beautiful daughters and settled in the abandoned stable, in the linden park. Every night he dug in the park; then one day they were gone, leaving behind an unfilled hole. Who he was, or what he found, nobody ever learned.

Alas, when I began to research the history of the place I often found that the facts did not measure up to the legend. It turned out that General Kar was of Scottish, not English, descent and he was probably less a coward than a victim of court intrigue. The forest was named Zaraza not because of decomposing maidens but after an archaic meaning of the word, "steep and uneven ground," which it certainly is. But what is truth? The facts of history? The version the Bolsheviks imposed? Or the legends that live among people? In the Soviet Union, "history" as science always bore the stigma of ideology, while the legends at least had the dignity of age.

What is true is that after Mikhail Gerasimovich Osorgin took over the estate, three generations of Osorgins were raised on it and formed an almost mystical bond with their Sergiyevskoye, the name by which they knew it. My grandfather Sergei Mikhailovich was the second son of the last owner of Sergiyevskoye. Born in 1888, he spent his childhood there. Many years and changes later, bent over with asthma but still full of humor and life, in a New York City apartment overlooking the George Washington Bridge, he took out his vintage Russian typewriter and began to write.

“My dear children and grandchildren, I would like to pass on to you the memories of my youth, those distant years of complete happiness.” He wrote of the passing seasons and the holidays, of the harmony of a patrimonial order and the beauties of his corner of Russia: “It is a known fact that the finest stretch of our beautiful Oka River is between Kaluga and Serpukhov, where the river flows east and both banks are high, and therefore especially lovely. We lived right at that part of the Oka.”

A romantic, witty, and deeply religious man, Sergei elevated the Sergiyevskoye of his childhood to a universal, spiritual home: “I believe everyone in a hidden corner of his soul has his Sergiyevskoye. For the Russians it does not have to be in Russia, or in France for the French: It is there where the soul first opened to receive God’s universe and its marvels. . . . Sergiyevskoye is that lost worldly paradise for which we all yearn, believing that if only we could return, we would be happy.”

I grew up with his stories. Before I was old enough to know there was a Soviet Union, I knew there was a Sergiyevskoye, where the forests were full of mushrooms, where my grandfather and his brother built a gravity pump to bring water from the Robbers’ Spring, where wolves roamed hungry in the winter, and where one autumn day my grandfather shot himself in the leg with a pistol and the local doctor tried (and failed) to dig the bullet out with sewing scissors.

Of course, it is to be expected that people who have had a happy childhood will describe in loving terms the place where they grew up. But Sergiyevskoye appeared to exercise a similar spell on many others. One worldly cousin of the Osorgins, Prince Grigory Nikolayevich Trubetskoi, Tsar Nicholas II’s ambassador to Serbia, came to Sergiyevskoye a few months after the 1917 revolution. The visit had a powerful emotional effect on him, perhaps because he had just completed a harrowing trip from southern Russia through areas ravaged by civil war, and found himself in an idyllic remnant of a world he knew was dying.