



MASSACHUSETTS CULTURAL COUNCIL  
FOLK & TRADITIONAL ARTS PROGRAM

## FIELDNOTES

Accession Numbers:

KN-02-1-FN

Fieldnotes

KN-02-1-C

Audio recordings

KN-02-1-CS1-28

Photographic documentation

bio forms

Additional materials

Date(s): 3/27/02

Related Accession Numbers: [also bio forms]

Individual/Group/Event: Alexander and Irene Belozersky

Fieldworker(s): Kathy Neustadt

Location of Interview: Belozerskys' home

Street Address:

City:

Zip:

Co:

Contact person (if different from above):

Title:

Sponsoring organization (for event or group):

Address (if different from above):

Phone: Daytime:

Evening:

E-mail:

Website:

Special Needs (including translation):

Traditions documented on visit (traditional art/skills, occupational experience, ethnic or religious community): Alex is a sculptor (more or less self-taught), although trained as a classical pianist in Russia. Irene is a social worker who deals with resettled Russian Jewish émigrés and has lots of contacts within the community.

Traditions noted for follow-up: Irene made several suggestions that I will want to pursue, including an a musical group from Petersburg that plays traditional Jewish music and a woman who runs the Jewish Heritage Theater, performing Jewish song and dance from Eastern European

Other Possible Contacts: Russian artists exhibiting at the Cambridge Multicultural Center currently (Konstantin Simun, sculptor; Katya Apekina, potter; Alexander Gassel, painter; Anatol Zukerman, architect/artist) and a woman who represents 22 Russian artists (Irina Gorbman, Fine Arts Vision, who has a website [www.fineartvision.com] with a virtual gallery

## Summary Description:

I initially learned of Alex Belozersky, Russian sculptor, from Dillon Bustin, who had featured Alex's work at the South Shore Art Center and had also met his wife, Irene, and knew that she was very informed about the Russian Jewish community in the Boston area. It seemed like a very promising way to begin learning about this community, and I believe it was.

The Belorzerskys are delightful people, just as I was told they would be. They have come from a very restrictive life in the USSR to the US, where—thanks in large part to Irene's abilities in English—they have largely landed on their feet and would appear to be well assimilated here. They were very comfortable and open with me—in large part, I am convinced, because of their very positive experience with Dillon—but there are telltale signs of their previous existence. For example, the extensive questioning about their family background on the Biographical Data form made them very uncomfortable ("It feels like we are back in Russia," bristled Irene. "Do we really have to answer these questions? Why do they need to know this information?" and you will see that I did not press them [I think it would be worth looking at the form, in any case, since I don't find it very helpful as currently constructed]).

I spent about an hour with Alex before Irene got home from work, looking at his many sculptural pieces throughout the house and following the development of his work. When Irene got home, she retreated to the kitchen as we continued to talk ("he needs to talk about his work by himself," she said. "He's too likely to turn the conversation over to me"). Unlike his wife, Alex has had to work at a number of menial labor jobs since coming to the US, including house painting and finishing floors—he is currently driving a van for seniors in the area—with his developing interest in making art being done on the side, since he needs to be making steady money.

At first blush, it would appear that leaving the USSR brought with it a kind of epiphany, which led him eventually to pursue art instead of music. In opposition to his conservatory training, Alex speaks of being artistically self-taught, by which I think he means that the content of the work, its structure, and *raison d'être* have come wholly from within. Nonetheless, from the time he discovered his first art class at the Radcliffe Pottery Studio, over 10 years ago, he has taken class after class (these days at the Mass College of Art), pursuing his developing interests, and he indicated that he intends to be a perpetual student. One reason for this, among others, may be that classes afford him easier access to materials and work space: when he first began exploring art, for example, he worked in the basement of his house, which he no longer uses and seems glad of it. Like all other area artists, workspace and gallery space—and opportunities, generally, for displaying work—are matters of concern, and certainly his connection with the South Shore Arts Center was important in this regard. I know that he also has some pieces in the upcoming 4/19 auction at the MCA.

Alex's work is very interesting, particularly to see it unfolding. It is largely representative, with many of the early pieces featuring Renaissance-type figures (early Renaissance, it turns out, is the period he enjoys), classical, and folktale-inspired figures (Alex talks of reading D'Aulaire and Dumas in his youth, and they clearly had an impact on his imagination). His recent work has become bit more abstract, and he is currently mounting his metal pieces on and with wood, which is a combination that works very well. The work is very structural, very solid in its formation, (even his first clay pieces displayed the texture and the look of metal), even when the content or depiction is more whimsical, and the connection of his hands with the various media is very central. It made perfect sense to me that he had been a pianist—depending on his hands for both statement and nuance—and when I mentioned this, he proceeded to give a fascinating description of the shapes and structures he would see when playing the piano (reminiscent of people who see colors when they listen to music).

Eventually Irene joined us, and as she told her version of immigrating, it was clear not only how different her experience had been but also why, as her English is excellent and she exudes confidence and competence at every turn. It is no surprise that she has risen so quickly and effectively to the head of the resettlement program at the Combined Jewish Philanthropies. She is smart, articulate, and has a good handle on American culture (including its bureaucracies). She knows the Russian Jewish scene inside and out (it is her job, after all), but she also was able to tell me about Russian Christians in the state, particularly the evangelical Russian Baptists (who knew?) who have recently settled outside of Springfield. [Irene confirmed the presence of a sizeable Russian community in Swampscott—she says North Shore generally (also Lynn and Salem) and cites good schools as a lure—which I have heard about through other sources. Both of these leads would be interesting to follow.]

Because of a major stroke of luck while still in the USSR, she had been hired to work as a translator for American scientists who would come to the country for conferences and the like—an unusually remunerative job and one that was not intended to be open to a Jew—which allowed them to travel around Russia more than would have been possible normally. In the course of their travels, they would see—and eventually began collecting—pieces of what they themselves call “folk art.” Irene took me in one of the back rooms to show me a wonderful array of these ceramic figures positioned throughout the room and prancing along every shelf. Coming from around the Soviet Republic, they show varying degrees of sophistication, glazing, color, symbolism and are completely delightful. We went from room to room to see this grouping and that (at one point, Irene put together 2 French figures, 2 Russian, and 2 Mexican that she felt were very much in the same): it became clear that every room is filled with beautiful objects, Alex's among them, all expressing feelings and a worldview.

CONSIDERATIONS: A lot of things became clear rather quickly: the first being that Alex's work in metal (and the clay and tar paper that preceded it) is not “traditional.” Trained as a classical

pianist at the Moscow Conservatory, any other artistic instincts had been thwarted in the USSR; it was the family's 3-month lay-over in Rome awaiting the paper work to allow them to proceed to the US that, according to Alex, served to inspire a desire to use his hands for other art forms. It is through a series of art courses (though he strongly declares himself "self-taught") that he has made his way into his current medium and style.

Similarly, there is resistance on his part to being called "Russian," a response that is both political and emotional. He is not proud of his country, he explains, which is one reason he doesn't feel Russian, and having been persecuted and "humiliated" his whole life because he was Jewish is another factor that mitigates against this national/ethnic identification. The exchange between husband and wife [see transcript, SIDE 2, 3-133] on this point is very interesting, citing a mixture of political and psychological influences. For these reasons (and others), it becomes difficult to make a big case for characterizing Alex as a traditional Russian artist.

However—and this is not just expedient—several valuable insights came out of the experience for me, and I offer them here for consideration. The first is that not all immigration is equal: refugees status, in particular, is likely to entail complex feelings about one's nation of origin, as well as to affect the process for assimilation and success in the new country. The plight of Cambodians in the Boston area comes readily to mind, as an example, but it is VERY different from the Belorzerskys' experience. For one thing, they have had the advantage of a sponsoring community with clout and large pockets (in Boston, for example, the Jewish community generally and the Combined Jewish Philanthropies, among others, specifically). In addition, because Irene had been an English teacher and translator, she did not experience a language barrier and was able to step into a professional job within weeks of arriving. Both Alex and Irene are well educated, which—according to them—in Russia means that they have been taught about and in the manner of European culture, which has made the transition to US culture *relatively* simple.

The very notion of being an artist—traditional or otherwise—is similarly refracted through the lens of ethnicity and immigration. In some cultures, "artist" is not a category or occupation (whereas craftsman or divinely-inspired/madman might be; in others, art is a political activity, controlled by the state. As Alex and Irene describe it, there were numerous constraints on their lives in Russia: travel outside of the USSR was forbidden; travel inside was difficult and often unaffordable; being Jewish was an additional cause for restrictions on educational opportunities, jobs, where they were allowed to live, etcetera. But studying music was apparently a traditional occupation open to and considered appropriate for Jews (Alex says that  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the world-famous violinists are Jewish and, I believe he was saying, Russian) although the fact that Alex reports having come to the point where music was a burden suggests that artistic freedom may have been a critically lacking element. Irene talked specifically of

how difficult it was for Alex, when they were still living in the USSR, to find the tools necessary to pursue some budding artistic interests since he wasn't an official member of the artists' guild.

So, on the one hand, being an artist was restricted by the State, while on the other, there was a European model (available, at least to the educated) of Art as an honorable and valuable pursuit. It would make sense to want to explore the possibilities if they have been previously closed off to you, just as it must feel luxurious to "say" with your art anything that you wish. His current ability to freely choose art forms and content is clearly very important to Alex, although he is sorely disappointed that the US does not support its artists as Europe does--and this is another interesting idea worthy of further exploration: the idea of the artist financially-supported "by the state that is still not owned" or dictated to by the patron/s.

All of this is interesting to me on its own merit, but it has implications about the kind of work that WE, the cultural surveyors, are engaged in. It was clear fairly quickly that the MCC is not going to readily embrace Alex Belozersky as an ethnic traditional artist—and I am not arguing that it should—but I cannot help but wonder what category he and his work do fit into: not academic, not traditional or folk, not outsider—what then? What grant would he be eligible for? I ask this philosophically as well as pragmatically.

This question is further compounded by other cultural specifics that apply to Alex and his cohort, which include class issues: e.g., Alex and his colleagues in the Boston Russian-Jewish community are well-educated, urbane, urbanites who see themselves as producing "fine arts" and, for the most part, do not aspire to folk art except as western "modern" artists do, as a source of inspiration. At the same time, their art bears the mark of their cultural-political experience and is different from American art ("out of step" would be one ethnocentric way of putting it—compare, by way of an example, with current Eastern European folkloristic theories). As a result, it tends to get relegated to the ethnic category of "Russian art," despite what Alex and co. may feel individually about their ethnic identities and despite the fact that it generally comes from out of an academic, fine arts tradition.

Resolution of these matters is unlikely and probably not desirable. I only raise these issues because the fieldwork does. The more official summary to these fieldnotes is that the information Irene gave me on the Russian Jewish community and some of its artists in Boston (or, more specifically, Brookline) is likely to prove very useful, and I will be following up on those leads. Russians in Swampscott should be investigated; I also think the Russian Christian community (evangelicals! I still can't quite picture it!) in Springfield would be a fascinating one to learn more about (although I'm not sure that is my "territory," and I would expect it, in any case, to be a longer-term project). Lots more to learn, plenty to ponder. Hallelujah.

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Some years ago, when doing fieldwork in Southeastern Massachusetts, I met a man who made wonderful, fanciful wooden birdhouses, many of which were displayed on his lawn with little “for sale” signs on them. I was delighted to have the chance to interview him, and he, in turn, was delighted to have the chance to talk about his creations, which represented to him, he said, his reward for years and years of wage earning and “business.” Had his father worked with wood? No, his father had been a doctor; his mother, though, she was creative; she could make anything beautiful. But no, no woodworking background, no tradition in his family or community of making birdhouses (I kept pressing)—he was just teaching himself and doing it on his own. No tradition, nothing being passed on.

At one point, when I was asking yet another leading “authenticity” question—and I had asked so many that I was almost not paying attention when he answered—he began to tell me about how he had come to this country from Germany after the War. He was a teenager, and he had come alone. The rest of his family had died in the concentration camps. He had worked hard and put the past out of his mind for years, but now that he was retired, he said quietly, he was finding that memories were starting to break through. It was at this time that he started making the birdhouses, and he said—more quietly still—that he felt his mother’s presence when he was working. Perhaps she was teaching him; perhaps he was making them for her. The question of artistic precedence and “tradition” has never struck me the same way since.