

THE BUSHNEFF SAGA: *First Molokan Families Arrive on Potrero Hill In August, 1906*

*By George Bushneff
and Vas Arnautoff*

One can only guess at the emotions that swept over the small group of Russian refugees who were unceremoniously dropped by a surly drayman at the foot of Potrero Hill 90 years ago, on August 7, 1906.

On the one hand there was the everlasting hope that perhaps their 27-month trek from their Russian village near the Turkish border, through Europe, North America and Hawaii was finally over.

But on the other hand, they were homeless, with only the pitifully meager belongings they could carry, strangers in a strange land — and in a city that lay in ruins.

Those who knew English were, at best, uncomfortable with it. What little solace they could muster in their situation lay in the realization that a large part of the population amidst whom they found themselves were also refugees, driven from their homes by the great quake and fire that had devastated San Francisco just four months before.

As George Bushneff, the grandson of one of the members of that original group, puts it: "The disaster of 1906 had unexpectedly provided the immigrants with a semblance of social equality. After all, when one lived in a tent or shed, it didn't seem important to cultivate elitist class attitudes."

They were Molokans, this sturdy band of 40 men, women and children, members of a religious sect who fled the oppression of Tsarist Russia to seek a freedom they had not known in their land. Their arrival was duly noted on page 12 of the August 8, 1906 issue of the **San Francisco Call**: "S.S. Alameda arrived from Honolulu. Among the steerage passengers were 40 Molokans, the Russian peasants who were expected to solve the labor problems on the sugar plantations. The Molokans, however, are said to have failed to make good. They lack ambition." This gratuitous allegation was soon to be proved inaccurate.

The Molokan trek began in the spring of 1904 when, after five futile years attempting to obtain exit-visas from local Russian officials in their village of Selim, they packed only what they could carry and quietly turned their backs on their old lives. They abandoned their property, for to sell it would have alerted the authorities.

Particularly vulnerable to authoritarian structures at that time were men of military age who were being called up for service in the impending Russo-Japanese War of 1904-5. While conscription terms had been reduced from the 25-year service required in the 19th century, to 15 years, agrarian families in particular were devastated by the loss of men for so long a time. Indeed, married women said prayers for the dead when their husbands were conscripted, believing they would never return.

Another major obstacle for those who wished to travel was the internal - passport system in effect since Peter the Great established it in 1722. By the terms of that law, arbitrarily enforced even through the Soviet era, visitors and travelers were required to present a valid internal-passport to the magistrate of every hamlet, village and city that they entered. Non compliance was punished by fines or imprisonment or both.

These conditions and their adherence to an unsanctioned religious creed (Molokans (literally "milk drinkers") defied the official Russian Orthodox fast days by partaking of dairy foods.) convinced them that emigration offered the only hope for a better life.

So it was that in 1904 the 45-year-old Fedor Ivanovich Buchneff, his wife Alena and six children left the village of Selim near the Turkish border and headed out into the unknown. It was the beginning of an odyssey that was to last more than two years and one fraught with hardship and danger. There were the authorities to avoid and food to find. At one point Fedor Ivanovich was arrested by the Russian authorities on a passport matter, but luckily he was able to rejoin his family on their trek after a week in jail.

Subsisting mainly on bread dried in ovens at low temperatures, which was nourishing and filling and remained edible for long periods of time, the group eventually arrived, travelling on railroad freight cars, at the port city of Bremen in Germany. There, in shelters provided by German agencies, which provided temporary lodging for a steady stream of Molokans, the refugees awaited medical clearance for embarkation.

The Buchneffs booked passage on a steamer bound for Quebec, Canada, but the illness of the youngest child, Lena, age 2, forced a change of plan. The mother, Alena with the aid of her oldest daughter, Dunya, would have to remain to care for the youngster until she was healthy enough to make the voyage. Fedor Ivanovich, sons Michael, Jack and Fedor Jr., and daughter Stella set sail for Quebec.

It was three months before Alena and her daughters were granted health clearance to board a ship which was to unite the family in Quebec. But what would in the normal course of events have been a joyous reunion in Canada was tempered by sadness. Baby Lena had not survived the ocean passage and was interred somewhere in the North Atlantic.

From Quebec the band of Molokans sailed to Galveston, Texas, which was becoming a major port of entry for the religious refugees. There Fedor Ivanovich and other adults found work as day laborers and by saving their money and borrowing were able to make the next leg of their trek, to Los Angeles, a rendezvous point for the thousands of Molokans arriving in America. There was plenty of room for the newcomers there; the entire Los Angeles Basin population was only 200,000 then, and they knew they could practice their religion without interference.

The sectarians settled in East Los Angeles in a neighborhood known as "The Flats" and their section soon came to be called "Russian Town." They worked at whatever jobs were available to them, but some longed for a pastoral life similar to that they had left behind, so when agents of Hawaiian sugar plantations regaled them with stories of the tropical paradise in the Pacific, they found receptive ears. The Molokans were offered land and \$20 per month per family for work in the fields.

In February, 1906 30 families including the Buchneffs accepted the offer, were bundled onto a train for San Francisco, from where they sailed to Honolulu. There a steam launch ferried them an additional 120 miles



Clockwise from top left: Fedor "Fred" Bushneff Jr., age 38, sunbathing at 24th and Arkansas Streets in 1938. Also in 1938, Emma Bushneff and George Bushneff, the family chronicler, at age 2. The tract of land on which they sit, bordered by Connecticut, Wisconsin, 23rd and 24th Streets, had only six houses on it in the 1930s. In the bottom picture are newlyweds Fedor "Fred" Bushneff, 20, and wife Emma (nee Loskutoff), 17, returning from church. Fred is wearing the traditional Molokan shirt for church services (roobashka) and Emma wears the kasinka, the traditional shawl head covering.

Molokan Community

Molokans are members of an ascetic religious sect founded in the 18th century by former Doukhobars, another Russian dissenting group. It opposes sacraments and ritual and stresses the authority of the Bible. The sectarians were so named because they ate dairy products ("moloko" is Russian for "milk") on fast days, contrary to Orthodox observance.

The differences between Molokan and Orthodox practices are visually most striking in their houses of worship. In contrast to the elaborate trappings and ritual of the latter, the Molokans meet in simple surroundings devoid of icons and pomp.

The First Russian Christian Molokan Church on Potrero Hill's Carolina Street is a simple rectangular hall with large windows that admit a bright light softened by white diaphanous curtains. Simple benches serve the worshippers and pastors conduct services from a table on which sit open Bibles. The parishoners provide the music, singing a capella. — V.A.

to a sugar plantation near Kapaa, Kauai.

But disillusionment quickly set in. The hard work, meager wages and swarms of mosquitoes made it apparent to the workers that their conditions were worse than those they had fled in Russia. Worst of all, their bosses reneged on their promise of land.

Thoroughly disheartened, unable to save enough money to leave, fearful of becoming stranded, the refugees turned to their co-religionists in Los Angeles who sent them enough funds to book passage back to the mainland. Fedor Ivanovich paid \$157 for seven one-way steerage fares to San Francisco, a total equal to the salary for eight months' work in the islands.

Upon their arrival in San Francisco after a six-day voyage, they discussed their limited options. Despite their meager financial resources and the language barrier, they opted not to continue on to Los Angeles where the comfort of familiar surroundings in "Russian Town" would have made life easier. Why they chose to remain in San Francisco is unclear, but buoyed by faith in their religion and the balmy 64-degree weather they were ready to make a start on their own.

While they discussed their options one decision was quickly made for them. A drayman on a flat bed wagon pulled by four horses approached and peremptorily ordered the families to put their belongings on the wagon and to follow him. To their indignant demands for an explanation the drayman replied that a policeman had told him to remove the refugees as loitering was forbidden in the area. Apprehensively the Molokans loaded the wagon and trudged after it.

Vassili S. Fetesoff, his wife and child were in that group. In his account, which was later printed in the **Molokan Review**, he wrote: "Our group was stunned at the devastation caused by the Great Earthquake of 1906. Most buildings along Market Street had collapsed, yet many of them had twisted walls still standing. The debris, which was mostly brick, had been cleared from the streetcar tracks and piled to the side for as far as the eye could see."

The column of Russian immigrants plodded after the wagon through the ruins and south on Third St. At 20th and Illinois Streets, near the Union Iron Works, at a site that the group thought was the city dump, the driver of their wagon stopped and demanded that they off-load their belongings. When they protested vehemently the drayman angrily threw their luggage to the ground and drove away.

Fetesoff recalled that other people were in the area who reminded the newcomers that thousands of San Franciscans had been rendered homeless by the quake and that they would simply have to adjust to the circumstances.

In the aftermath of the great calamity, the efforts to clean up and rebuild the City provided opportunities to able-bodied men and women who were willing to work. First there was the monumental task of removing the rubble; then of transporting the enormous quantities of building materials for reconstruction.

Russian males over the age of 12 found jobs as stevedores, day laborers, ship builders and construction workers. Any woman not needed at domestic chores went to work in laundries and rag recycling plants. An unskilled laborer in San Francisco then could make as much as \$1.50 per day, which compared favorably with what New York City lawyers were getting. A large immigrant family could easily earn \$200 to \$300 per month, a sum 10 times that offered by the sugar barons of Hawaii.

So, the Molokans settled in, making the most of the circumstances in which they found themselves. With the younger members of the families chipping in, the patriarchs were able to save enough money to buy pre-owned homes, or government-built "earthquake shacks" or empty lots. Most open space on Potrero Hill then was around the summit and that's where the Russians moved, the more desirable and expensive property being in the flatlands where it was more convenient for citizens to get to work, to stores or school. By 1907 a Russian settlement began to emerge on the crest of the Hill.

Fedor Ivanovich Buchneff bought a lot at 950 DeHaro St. and with the help of friends and relatives built a house which still stands, as do most of the surrounding houses built by Russians. The Buchneff house was the first built by a Molokan on Potrero Hill. Most of the dwellings have undergone interior updating but the facades remain basically unchanged.

It was in the Buchneff house that Molokan religious services were first held, conducted by Fedor Ivanovich. Later two churches were built by the sect (the one remaining, built in 1930, is on Carolina St. just north of Southern Heights), but Russians of other denominations found their way to Potrero Hill too, Pentecostals and Baptists, and they built their own houses of worship. Services in all, of course, were conducted in Russian on what the old-timers referred to as "Holy Hill."

So, the odyssey for Potrero Hill's Molokans was over. Like the city which they chose to call home, they worked their way out of a difficult situation, and through perseverance fueled by an abiding faith in their religion and by their hardy nature, strengthened by the ordeal of their trek they prospered.

And though in 90 years their numbers on the Hill have decreased, the Molokan parishioners still come here from all parts of the City on the sabbath to worship, to marry and to honor their dead just as their parents, grandparents and greatgrandparents did on "Holly Hill."