

The Subbotniki

A report by

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INTRODUCTION

This is a report on the background of the Subbotniki compiled from available research material and personal recollections. My mother's family was Molokan¹. My father's great-grandparents were of Molokan origin and who became Subbotniki while living in the Transcaucasus region of the Russian Empire during the second half of the 19th century. There is not a central source of information on the Subbotniki nor has much been written recently about them. Since the Subbotniki have essentially died out as an organized religion, I feel it is important to document what I have found though searching used-book stores, the Internet and other sources.

This report focuses on Subbotniki of Molokan origin from the Trancaucacus region that migrated with the Molokans to Los Angeles in the first decade of the 20th century. I have also included general background on *Judaized Russians* from other backgrounds, time periods and regions in order to place my ancestors into a greater historical context.

This project continues to be helpful to me in gaining a better understanding of my ancestral roots. I hope it will also be of interest to other readers. More importantly, I hope this report will stimulate others to share information they may have concerning the Subbotniki so *we* can continue to expand and complete their story.

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¹ The Molokans are a non-Orthodox Russian Christian religious sect that embraces many Old Testaments tenets and is often compared with the Quakers. There is a great deal of published information on the Molokans including several Internet sites such as <http://Molokane.org>

WHO ARE THE SUBBOTNIKI?

In the books and articles I have used as references to write this report, I noticed that the Subbotniki (soob-**boht**-ni-key) have been referred to by several other names including *Subbotnichestvo*, *Subbotniks*, *Jew-Subbotniks*, *Judaizers* and *Sabbatarians*. Most of these names were derived from the Russian word for Subbota (soob-**boh**-tah) meaning Saturday, the day on which Subbotniki observe the Sabbath. I believe historians have used descriptive terms that they felt best described this unique religious group.

In modern times, governments of cities in the Soviet Union used the word *subbotnik* (soob-**boht**-nick) as a patriotic call for a “voluntary” community-service day, usually on Saturdays. On these declared workdays, citizens were asked to clear trash from vacant lots, sweep sidewalks, plant trees, etc. There is an existing Jewish family name Subotnick (sue-**baht**-nick), but I do not know of any connection of this name to the Subbotniki. One Jewish friend had mistakenly confused the Subbotniki with Sabbatian Movement or the followers of Zevi Sabbatai, a Jewish mystic and pseudo-Messiah who lived between 1626 and 1676. Although they adopted many beliefs and practices from the Jewish faith, the Subbotniki people were predominantly ethnic Russians, not Jews. Louis Adamic in his 1944 book, *A Nation of Nations*,¹ supports the fact that they were a distinct group. He described the composition of the immigrant population of the *Russian-town* (or *Flats* as it was also known) neighborhood of East Los Angeles near Boyle Heights where many Molokans originally settled in the first decade of this century:

... With them {the Molokans} in Russian-town live all kinds of people: Mexicans, Italians, Armenians, Jews and Russians belonging to other sects - such as the Jew-Subbotniks who are Slavic converts to a mixture of Judaism and Molokanism, and who, arriving here just before World War I, are to be found in several other parts of the United States.

I find the last line of this excerpt intriguing, as I am not aware of Subbotniki living anywhere else in this country other than Los Angeles. Perhaps, I have some long-lost American-Subbotniki cousins that I have never met. What was the origin of the Subbotniki religion? Who were its members? How do they really relate to the Molokans? I will try to answer these questions in the remainder of this report.

EARLY JUDAIZING MOVEMENTS IN RUSSIA

There are several historical accounts of the conversion of groups of non-Jewish people living in Russia, both pagans and Christians, to Judaism ever since the downfall of Judea in around 100 AD. There are documented records of the migration of the Jews into the northern shore of the Black Sea (the Crimea) as well as other parts of the known world at that time.

The Kingdom of the Khazars in the First Millennium

The Khazars were a conglomerate of Finno-Turkish tribes living in the area roughly encompassing the Crimea, the Caucasus, South–Central Russia and the area north of the Caspian Sea at the mouth of the Volga River. They emerged as a pagan nation during the 8th century AD. Because of their geographic position at the crossroads of the famed “Silk Road,” the Khazars were exposed to Byzantine (Greek Orthodox) Christianity, Islam and Judaism. Each of these religions was bent on converting the Khazars either for purely religious reason or to create a new ally of similar beliefs.

*The Jews in Russia and Poland*ⁱⁱ, written by S. M. Dubnow as translated by I. Friedlaender in 1916, contains these accounts from Jews and medieval Arabic travelers:

The King, or Khagan, of the Khazars, by the name of Bulan, had resolved to abandon paganism, but was undecided as to the religion he should adopt instead. Messengers sent by the Caliph persuaded him to accept Islam, envoys from Byzantium endeavored to win him over to Christianity, and representatives of Judaism championed their own faith.

As a result, Bulan arranged a disputation² between the advocates of the three religions to be held in his presence, but he failed to carry away any definite conviction from their arguments and mutual refutations.

Thereupon the king invited first the Christian and then the Mohammedan, and questioned them separately. On asking the former {the Christian} which religion he thought was better of the two, Judaism or Mohammedanism, he received this reply: “Judaism, since it is the older of the two, and the basis of all religions. On asking the Mohammedan, which religion he preferred, Judaism or Christianity, he received the same answer in favor of Judaism, with the same motivation.

² debate

“If that be the case,” Bulan argued in consequence, “if both the Mohammedan and the Christian acknowledge the superiority of Judaism to the religion of their antagonist, I too prefer to adopt the Jewish religion.” Bulan accordingly embraced Judaism and many of the Khazars followed his example.

The conversion of Khazars to Judaism took place in about 740 AD which is about two hundred years before the Russian state in Moscow adopted Orthodox Christianity after a similar search and evaluation. In contrast but through a similar process, the Russian ruler Vladimir adopted Christianity in 988 AD. He created his own variation of the Byzantine (or Greek) Orthodox Church as the state religion. Vladimir set forth to impose this imported religion upon the predominately pagan population Vladimir sent out ten "good and wise men" to investigate the world's religions before making his choice. *The Cultural Atlas of the Soviet Union*ⁱⁱⁱ written by Robin Milner-Gull and with Nikolai Dejevsky gives this account of the investigators' report: "The Islamic version of paradise sounds good, but the prohibition of alcohol is too much, ... the Germans are drab. The Jews are losers without a homeland. ... But inside the Greek churches {referring to the elaborate ornamentation, vestments and ceremonies}, we did not know whether we were in Heaven or on Earth."

The Kingdom of Khazaria came under increasing military pressure from the Byzantines and the Russians until it finally fell in 1016 when its leaders fled. However, one can assume that some of the covered Khazars remained in the area and merged with the local Jewish population. There are also reports of Jews migrating from Khazaria to the Ukraine and other parts of Russia stating from the ninth century.

To learn more about the Khazars, I recommend reading *The Jews of Khazaria*^{iv}, written by Kevin Alan Brook in 1999 and visiting his web site <http://www.khazaria.com/>

The Judaizing Heresy of 1480

As is well known, the Jewish population grew and continued to spread across many European countries including Russia. The leaders in Moscow employed Jews as assistants and agents in order to communicate with the Jewish world during the 14th and 15th centuries.

Dubnow's history includes accounts of a secret movement in Novogorod in 1480 later referred to as the *Judaizing heresy* led by a Jew from Kiev named Zechariah. There was a great deal of religious turbulence in Novogorod at that time and the organizers took advantage of it. They formed a new sect called itself the *Strigolniki* after its local founder Karp Strigolnik. This movement soon spread to Moscow where a number of Orthodox Christians were converted including the daughter-in-law of Tsar Ivan III.

The tenets of this sect included

- Abrogation of the Orthodox Church rites and ceremonies
- Denial of the divinity of Jesus Christ
- Submitting to the rite of circumcision

When the movement became known the Archbishop Gennadi of Novogorod and other Orthodox zealots mounted a vigorous yet difficult campaign to abolish it. Finally in 1504 with the support of Ivan II and the Church Council, the Strigolniki leaders were captured and exiled, imprisoned in monasteries or burned at the stake. This episode instilled a superstition about Jews among the people living in Moscow that carried with it the stigma that the Jews were a threat to “Holy Russia” and that they must be watched carefully in the future.

The “Jewish Seduction” of 1738

Another incident involving covert Judaizing activity that is included in Dubnow’s history occurred in the town of Dubrovna near Smolensk in 1738. Borukh Leibov, a Jewish farmer, made friends with a retired Russian Navy captain named Alexander Voznitzin. As the two studied the Bible together, it became apparent to Voznitzin that the dogmas of the Orthodox Church were inconsistent with the teachings of the Bible. Accordingly, Voznitzin converted to Judaism and underwent the ceremony of circumcision.

When the authorities learned of this, they rounded up Leibov and Voznitzin and sent them to face the consequences before the Chancellery of Secret Inquisitional Affairs in St. Petersburg. After enduring sessions of torture on the rack, Voznitzin admitted to blasphemy and Leibov confessed that he

... together with other Jews, predisposed the common people of Smolensk in favor of the Jewish religion, and insulted the Russian Pope Abramius, in connection with the establishment of a Jewish synagogue in the village of Zverovich.

The Inquisition Court convicted Leibov and Voznitzin under the statute of Tsar Alexis and sentenced

.... both of them to be executed and burned, in order that other ignorant and godless people witnessing this, shall not turn away from the Christian law, and such seducers as the above-mentioned Jew Borukh shall not dare to lead them astray from the Christian law and convert them to their own laws.

The sentence was carried out in a public square in St. Petersburg in front of a large crowd on July 15, 1738.

ORIGINS OF THE SUBBOTNIKI SECT

Many people in the Molokan/Subbotniki communities living in Los Angeles that I have talked to believe that the Subbotniki religion is just a variation of the Molokan faith. Pauline Young in her 1932 book, *The Pilgrims of Russian-Town*^v, based in large part on her interviews with Molokan elders living in *Flats*, reports that the Subbotniks who settled in Los Angeles share a common heritage with the Molokans:

The Molokan sect. ... divided further; and its most important offshoots are Subbotniki, or Sabbatarians, or Judaized Russians, who modified Molokan doctrines under the supposed influence of Jewish scholars of the nineteenth century....

However, other sources claim that the Subbotniki had a separate beginning. *The Icon and the Axe*^{vi}, published in 1966, has been used for years as an authoritative source in Russian history courses in universities across the county. Its author, James H. Billington, writes that the Subbotniki sect had its own unique origin as part of the sectarian movement during the reign of Tsar Alexander I in the 1820's.

The idea of a church unifying Christians and Jews was gaining grass roots support in the Orel-Voronezh region with the sudden appearance of the sabbatarian (Subbotniki) sect. They added to the usual rejection of {Russian} Orthodox forms of worship to the doctrine of the trinity, celebration of Saturday as the Sabbath, and the rite of circumcision. ... It taught that all men could be rabbis and the coming of the Messiah would be an occult philosopher who would unlock the secrets of the universe.

Voronezh Oblast³ is located next to Tambov Province where many sectarian groups including the Molokans originated. Voronezh was once called Woronetz as on the map below which was published in 1898. Also note that this rare map shows the Russian Empire with its Transcaucasia borders extending into eastern Turkey including the Mt. Ararat and the region surrounding the city of Kars. Many Molokans and Subbotniki settled in the Kars area after the Tsar's army conquered it in 1878. In 1921 the Treaty of Moscow returned this land to Turkey.

³ district



Map of Russia circa 1898 showing borders of Trans-Caucasia extending west beyond Kars, Turkey

Dubnow claims that the Sabbatarian sect first gained the notice of Russian officials in 1817 when they discovered “the ominous spectacle of huge numbers of Christian embracing a doctrine closely akin to Judaism” in the districts of Voronezh, Saratov and Tula” - all of which were not known to have any indigenous Jewish inhabitants. The Orthodox Archbishop of Voronezh reported the following:

The sect came into existence about 1796⁴ through natural Jews. It afterward spread to several settlements in the districts of Bobrov and Pavlosk. The essence of the sect, without being directly an Old

⁴ In a footnote, Dubnow cites subsequent accounts giving the originating year to be 1806.

Testament form of Jewish worship, consists of a few Jewish ceremonies, such as Sabbath observance and circumcision, the arbitrary manner of contracting and dissolving marriages, the way of burying the dead, and prayer assemblies. The number of avowed sectarians amounts to 1,000 souls of both sexes, but the secret ones are in all likelihood more numerous.

The Archbishop instituted various measures to deal with the situation including the deportation of a soldier named Anton Rogov who was found to be a “propagandist of the heresy.” Still the movement spread to farmers and merchants in surrounding areas. When confronted, the Sabbatarians responded that they desired to return to the Old Testament and “maintain the faith of their fathers, the Judeans.”

According to Dubnow, the Committee of Ministers approved the following “draconian project:”

The chiefs and teachers of the Judaizing sects are to be impressed into military service, and those unfit to serve deported to Siberia. All Jews are to be expelled from the districts in which the sect of Sabbatarians or “Judeans” has made its appearance. Intercourse {commercial} between the Orthodox inhabitants and the sectarians is to be thwarted in every possible manner. Every outward display of the sect, such as holding of prayer meetings and the observance of ceremonies which bear no resemblance to those of Christians, is to be forbidden. Finally, to make the sectarians an object of contempt, instructions are to be given to designate the Sabbatarians as Zhydovskaya⁵ and to publish far and wide that they are in reality Zhyds, inasmuch as their present designation as Sabbatarians, or adherents of the Mosaic law, does not give the people a proper idea concerning this sect, and does not excite in them that feeling of disgust which must be produced by the realization that what is actually aimed at is to turn them into Zhyds.

Dubnow says that these and other policies were sanctioned by Tsar Alexander I in 1825 and that as a result,

Entire settlements were laid waste, thousands of sectarians were banished to Siberia and the Caucasus. Many of them, unable to endure the persecution, returned to the Orthodox faith, but in many cases they did so outwardly, continuing in secret to cling to their sectarian tenets.

From the content of Raphael and Jennifer Patai’s discussion of the Subbotniki in their book *The Myth of the Jewish Race*^{vii} must have used Dubnow’s book as a source. However they expand on the cruelty afforded the Subbotniki:

⁵ An adjective meaning “a Jewish sect” that is derived from Zhyd, the Slavic form of the Latin Judaeus, which has a derogatory connotation in the Russian language.

In 1823 the Russian government took strong measures against the Subbotniki, whose numbers it estimated at 20,000. Their leaders were conscripted into the army; those unfit for army service were exiled to Siberia; the Jews who lived in the districts infected by the heresy were deported; and all sectarian activities, gatherings, customs, and so on were strictly forbidden. The sect was called “Jew sect,” so as to make it clear to all and sundry that its members were actually converts to Judaism. As a result of these measures whole villages were ruined, thousands of sectarians banished to Siberia and the Caucasus, and small children taken away from their parents to be brought up in Christianity.

The last sentence the above citation is interesting in that the Molokans suffered a similar fate. It may be that the authors are jumping to a more generalized statement about all sectarians at that time.

Further accounts of the emergence and persecution of the Subbotniki are contained in a recent book by Masha Greenbaum titled *The Jews of Lithuania*:^{viii}

.... The emergence of a religious movement of peasants in Central Russia who called themselves Subbotniki (Sabbath observers), and were perceived to have converted to Judaism. An indignant Tsar Alexander I subjected the Subbotniki to terrible abuse, including deportation to Siberia. Although no Jewish connections or influence was involved – no Jewish communities existed in provinces where the Subbotniki flourished – officials held the Jews collectively responsible for Subbotniki religious ideas.

Ms. Greenbaum goes on to report that officials used the Subbotniki phenomena to renege on promises to improve the conditions of Jews living in Russia. The Patais confirm that the Subbotniki experience had an impact on the greater Jewish community in Russia:

The fear of proselytizing by the Jews, which produced the reaction to the Subbotniki, also led to restrictive laws (1820) prohibiting Jews from having Christian servants. In 1821 the Jews were expelled from the villages of White Russia. By 1827 some 20,000 Jews had been thrust out; many of these died of hunger, the cold and diseases.

The Soviet historian A. I. Klibanov in his book *History of Religious Sectarianism*^{ix}, translated into English by Ethel Dunn in 1982, also writes of the Subbotniks as a unique sect and confirms the harsh measures employed against them. He reports that there were between 15,000 to 20,000 Subbotniki living in 28 regions of Russia at the beginning of the nineteenth century:

The participants in these communities engaged in petty crafts and trades and the wealthier of them in money lending (for example in the Trans-Caucasus).

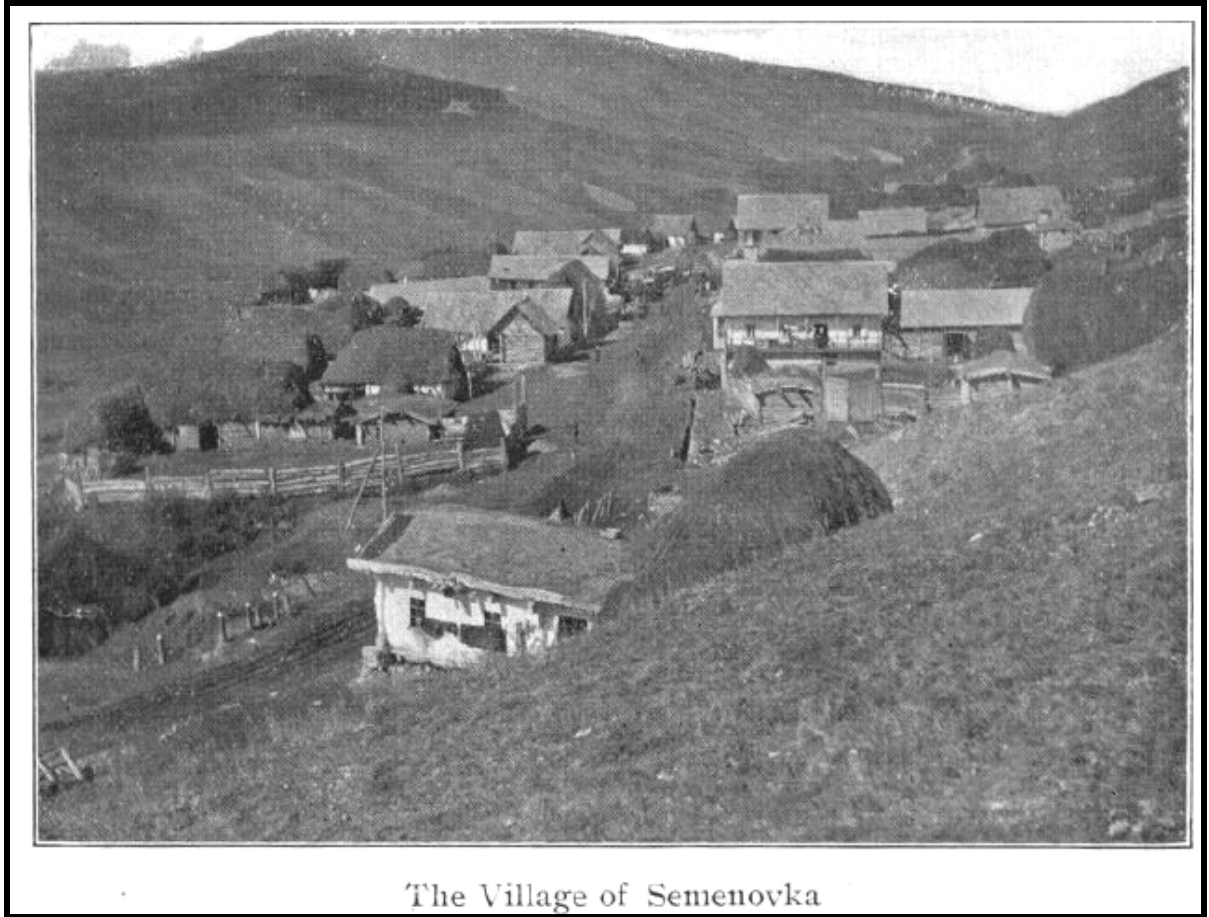
In 1825 {the government} adopted a special resolution directed toward cutting off the spread of the Subbotnik movement with extremely harsh repressive measures, which, it should be noted had no success. The Subbotnik religious tendency ... appeared as a peculiar form of social protest of the peasants directed against the ruling {Orthodox} church.

This situation continued until the reign of Tsar Alexander II. In 1887 the government allowed the Subbotniki to again publicly conduct their own brand of marriage and burial services. A *ukase*⁶ issued in 1905 seemed to reverse the plight of the Subbotniki entirely as it abolished discrimination against the sect and directed that they no more be considered as Jews. This ukase and the distinction it made may have saved some Subbotniki living from the Nazi Holocaust – see the section about Subbotniki living in France later in this report.

Are the two versions of the origin of the Subbotniki discussed in the previous paragraphs in this section (Molokan spin-off or unique beginning) contradictory? Not necessarily. Klibanov states that the Tsar's government was concerned about the spread of the faith. This indicates that there was some degree of proselytizing by early followers of the Subbotniki doctrine. His book also indicates that the sect spread within the Tambov region and eventually expanded to Transcaucasia.

Many Molokans were sent in forced exile to Armenia and Georgia in Transcaucasia during the mid-19th century and later into the Kars region of Russian conquered eastern Turkey. Some Molokan family histories include accounts of Subbotnik evangelists visiting them in the Armenian mountain village of Semenovka in the 1870's. These evangelists persuaded some family members to adopt the Saturday Sabbath and other Subbotniki practices.

⁶ Government manifesto or decree

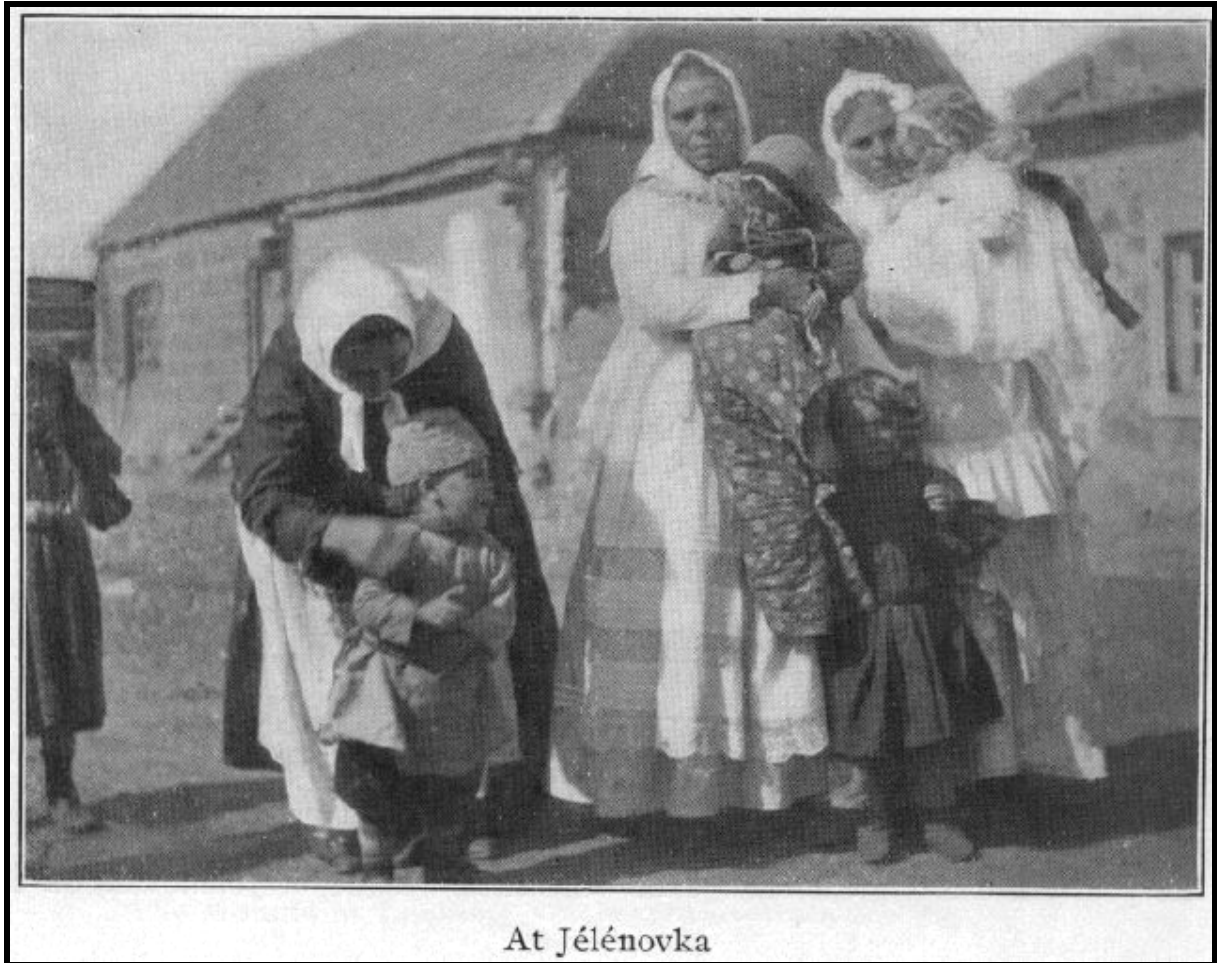


The Village of Semenovka

The above picture was taken in 1895; courtesy of National Geographic Magazine – Vol. XII No. 8 August, 1901

This activity led to conflict and turmoil among the villagers. Many households became divided along religious lines. Sons who did not follow in the ways of their father who had converted to the Subbotnik religion were sometimes cut off from the rest of the family and did not receive an inheritance. Some of the family names of those that experienced this schism are Androff, Bogdanoff, Moiseev, Patapoff, Pivovaroff, Saltikov, Samarin, Shubin, Slivkoff, Tolmasoff and Urkoff⁷.

⁷ Author's Note: The name Aldacushion {Aldakushin} is not listed here, as I have no evidence of the family being Molokan. My grandfather Osip Yegorich Aldakushin married Esther Vassilyvna Pivovaroff, the daughter of Vassily Makarich Pivovaroff and Mary Samarin. The name Aldakushin can be found in Russia as late as 1984 when Evgenii Andreivich Aldakushin co-authored a book in Minsk about the Russian resistance during WW II.



The above picture was taken in 1895; courtesy of National Geographic Magazine – Vol. XII No. 8 August, 1901

Some of these split families co-existed in the same village while other Subbotnik families chose to resettle and congregate in villages with others of similar beliefs. Yelenovka (or Jelenovka), which is called Sevan in today's Armenia, was one such village that became Subbotnik. Yelenovka is on the shore of Lake Sevan, at the base of the mountain road leading to Semenovka. Some tombstones can still be found today in Semenovka with the dates numbered by the Mosaic calendar.

Although living separate religious lives, the two groups shared many of the same hardships and persecution that Russian sectarians experienced during this period. They needed to interact with each other through commerce and service trades in order to survive. Younger family members maintained contacts and intermingled with their former neighbors, cousins and friends. So, it was not unusual that the Transcaucasian Subbotniki left Russia during the same period as the Molokans: 1905-10. However, by the time of the mass migration to America in the first decade of this century, the Subbotniki converts assumed their own identity.

SUBBOTNIKI RELIGIOUS DOCTRINE

Some of the authors I have cited refer to the Subbotniki as secretive in the practice of their religion. One explanation for this behavior was avoidance of persecution by the Tsarist authorities. Therefore, little has been written about the content of Subbotniki doctrine, and details about their religious services are hard to find.

One source I have found that sheds some light on Subbotniki beliefs is a section of a book published in London in 1894 by Stepaniak entitled *The Russian Peasantry*^x provided to me by Anne Zolnekoff of the United Molokan Christian Association (UMCA) Library. In Chapter III of this book, the author describes the Molokans as being "... divided into Sabbatarian and non-Sabbatarian Molokane." The book also contains a summary of interviews conducted by a Russian historian named N. Kostomarov with a Sabbatarian (Subbotniki) teacher (rabbi) in the city of Saratov. From these interviews, the following insight is gained about Subbotniki doctrine:

- The Subbotniki teachers were well versed in both the Old and New Testaments.
- Subbotniki believe the New Testament is divinely inspired but caution that nothing in it overrides the laws in the Old Testament including the Mosaic dietary laws.
- They see no proof of the Trinity in either the Old or New Testaments.
- They recognize Jesus Christ as a great prophet and as a man who performed miracles.
- They believe in the resurrection of Jesus but reject his divinity.
- Like the Molokans, they reject any physical representation of divinity, such as Orthodox Church icons and frescos, which they view as offensive to God.

At that time Subbotniki in Saratov believed that they should offer sacrifices⁸. Kostomarov quotes the rabbi as contrasting the Subbotniki with the Jews by saying, "The modern Jews do not offer sacrifices because they are in exile, but we, who are the *New Israel* — we ought to offer sacrifices." The book also contains a description of Subbotniki services from which the following is taken:

The rites and worship of the Sabbatarians of Russia proper contain nothing Jewish. On Saturdays they assemble in their houses of prayer,

⁸ It is not known what was sacrificed or how the rite was performed.

where their elders or teachers deliver a sermon, which is interrupted from time to time by the sacred songs of the congregation.”

As to the service, it was very unlike that of the Russian Jews. The small congregation was seated in rows on wooden benches on one side of the room. Opposite there was an open space, on which stood the preacher ... with an open Bible before him....”⁹

However, the author reports that some Subbotniki living in the Transcaucasus seemed to have evolved into a form closer to that of modern Jews:

The Sabbatarian colony in the Caucasus ... has developed into a sect much more nearly allied to Judaism... They accept the Talmud, and they expect the Messiah in the guise of a king and conqueror, who is to appear at the close of the seven thousandth year, dating from the creation of the world (Mosaic style). They follow the Jewish ritual in the marriage ceremony and the burial service, and permit divorce; and they use the Jewish prayers in a Russian translation.

Albert Parry’s 1927 article in the *Jewish Tribune*^{xi} provides more insight to their Molokan origins and those who became Subbotniki while living in the Yerevan region in Armenia.

Czar Nicholas I began persecution of the "Molokani" sect. He eventually banished them to the wilds of the Caucasus and Trans-Caucasia, and some to the district of Erivan. Contact with Jews in their new home resulted in many embracing the form of Judaism locally known as Subbotniki. They observed Jewish law and custom faithfully, called upon the rabbi for all religious ministrations, but did not learn to speak Hebrew or Yiddish. The Russian government only persecuted them the more bitterly, so some fled to America, with many Molokani.

The Patai’s write that the Subbotniki adopted the Jewish customs of circumcision, voluntary marriage and divorce, the manner of burial and the form of prayer meetings.

In correspondence with Michelle Vincow, who is assisting her Subbotnik great-uncle with his memoirs, I learned the following:

He {Michelle’s great-uncle} describes my family’s background as Subbotniks who became gerim¹⁰ after contacts with a rabbi.

Initially, as Subbotniks, they celebrated biblical holidays, did not accept the New Testament, prayed in Russian, and lived separate from the Jews. They had Slavic features and Russian names.

⁹ There are many similarities with Molokan services in this account.

¹⁰ Non-Jews who have converted to Judaism.

After they met a rabbi, my great-uncle's "congregation" of several families in Tsaritsin (Volgograd) was convinced that it would be best to more fully adopt Jewish practices. They were given Jewish names, remarried under a chuppah¹¹ (even grandparents were remarried), and several of them learned to pray in Hebrew.

At that time they began to be referred to by other Subbotniks as gerim. This change "visibly distanced" them from other Subbotniks.

I have not found any documentation that describes how these beliefs and practices were carried forth by the Subbotniki who came to America.

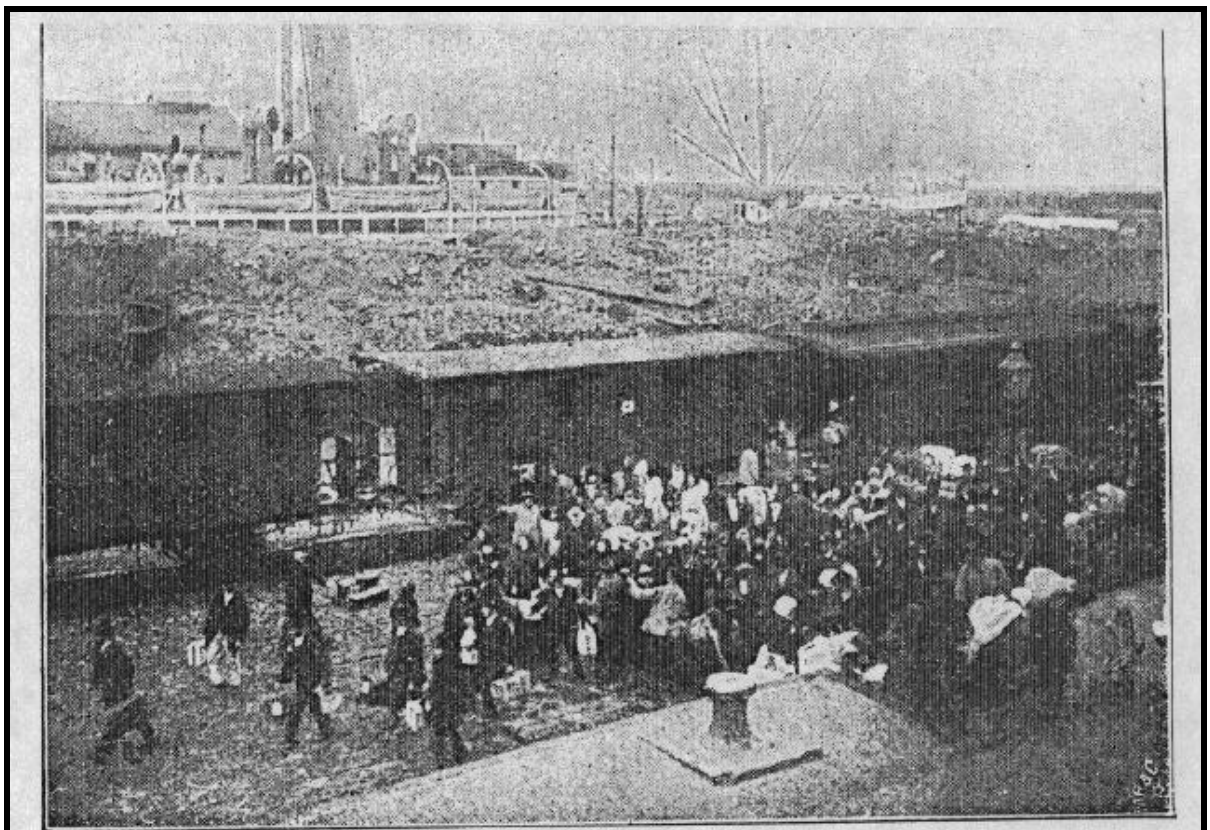
Both the Molokans and Subbotniki followed the Mosaic (kosher) dietary laws, but they differed in other practices. In addition to the day chosen to observe the Sabbath, another difference that led to conflict was the inclusion of wine in Subbotniki services - similar to Judaism. The Molokan faith professed abstinence from all alcoholic beverages. Subbotniki tended to rely more on the Old Testament as the source of names for their children, such as Abram, David, Esther, Moses (Morris), Osip (Joseph), Radila (Ruth), Samuel, Sarah and Yacov (Jacob).

¹¹ Hebrew wedding canopy

SUBBOTNIKI EMIGRATE TO AMERICA

Much of Russia was in turmoil in the years leading up to and after the 1905 revolution. Life in Georgia (the home of Joseph Stalin) where many Subbotniki were living was especially chaotic. Many Molokans who were also in the area were departing for a new home in America following a prophecy. They were escaping the military draft that was in full force to support the Russo-Japanese War. It is not surprising that the Subbotniki followed the Molokans to Los Angeles during this dangerous time.

The Subbotniki followed many of the same migration routes as the Molokans. Some entered the United States at Ellis Island via Antwerp, Belgium, assisted at times by Jewish relief agencies. Others traveled via Bremen, Germany to Galveston, Texas on the North-Lloyd German steamship line.



Arrival of Steerage Passengers at Bremerhaven.

**Photo copied from North-Lloyd German Steamship Line brochure.
Courtesy of Steamship Historical Society of America Library, Baltimore**

One such Subbotniki family leaving Russia during this period was that of my great grandfather Vassily Makarich Pivovarovoff and his wife Maria Samarin. Vasily's

family, eighteen in number, traveled with a larger Subbotnik group of about thirty people. First they traveled to Bremerhaven (Bremen), Germany by train. There they boarded the *SS Frankfurt* operated by the North German-Lloyd Shipping Company.

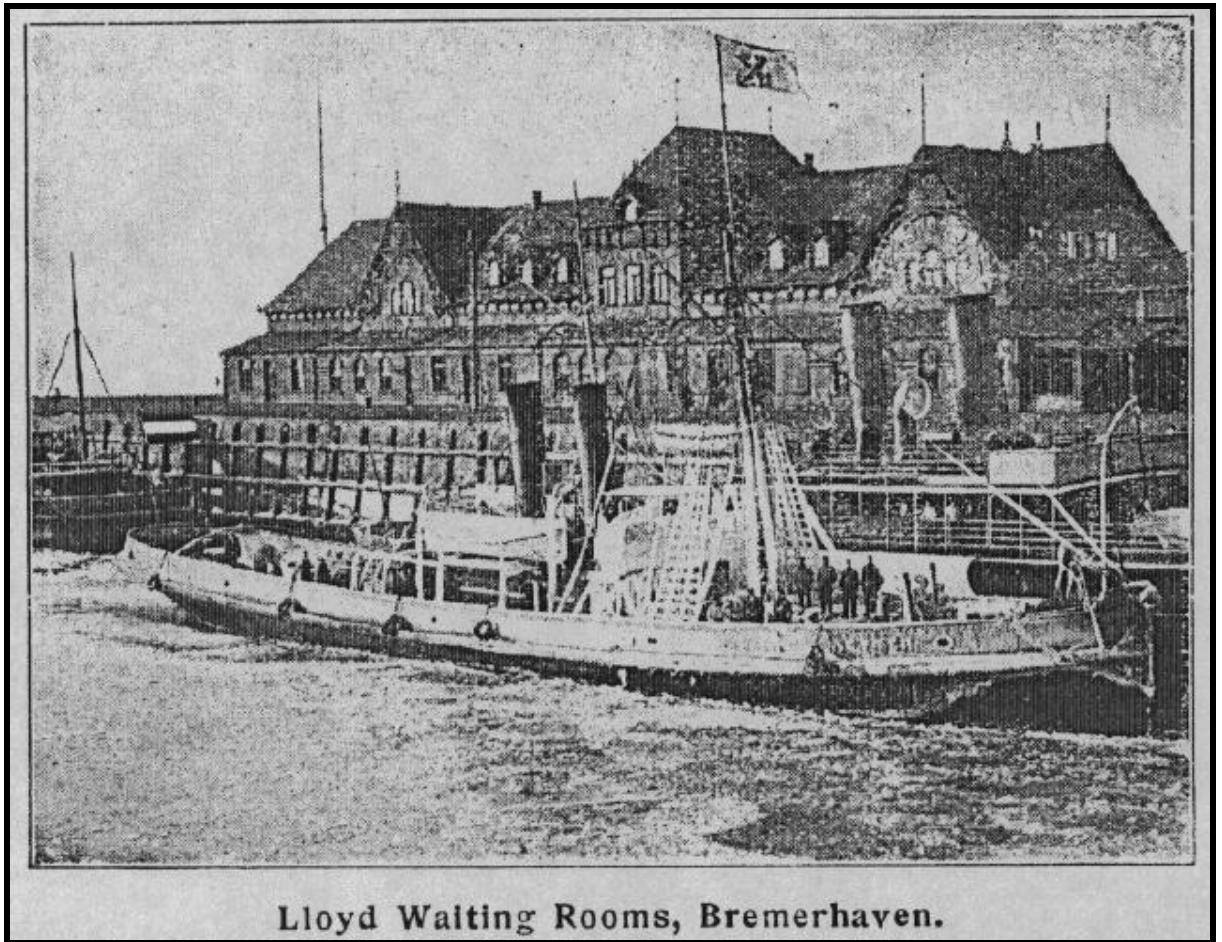


Photo copied from North-Lloyd German Steamship Line brochure. Courtesy of Steamship Historical Society of America Library, Baltimore.

New York City was becoming overcrowded with immigrants from many countries. An American-Jewish agency initiated a program to disperse immigrants to cities other than New York. Under this program, ships of the North German-Lloyd line were chartered to transport Russian Jews to the port of Galveston, Texas instead of Ellis Island. After the first few trips, the organizers received many complaints about poor living conditions aboard the ships. Jewish passengers found that the German crew members were rude to emigrants in general, and to their group in particular.

Investigators inspected the *Frankfurt* in Bremerhaven on August 22, 1907 just before its sailing with Vassily Pivovarov's group. The *Frankfurt* sailed from Bremerhaven on August 24, 1907 with 1,400 passengers. The Pivovarovs traveled in *steerage* class - so called because, in those days, the accommodations for the lowest

paying passengers were located below deck at the level housing the ship's *steering* mechanism. These were the poorest accommodations on board.



Photo copied from North-Lloyd German Steamship Line brochure.
Courtesy of Steamship Historical Society of America Library,
Baltimore.

On this sailing with the Pivovaroffs, the *Frankfurt* arrived in Galveston, Texas on September 14, 1907.

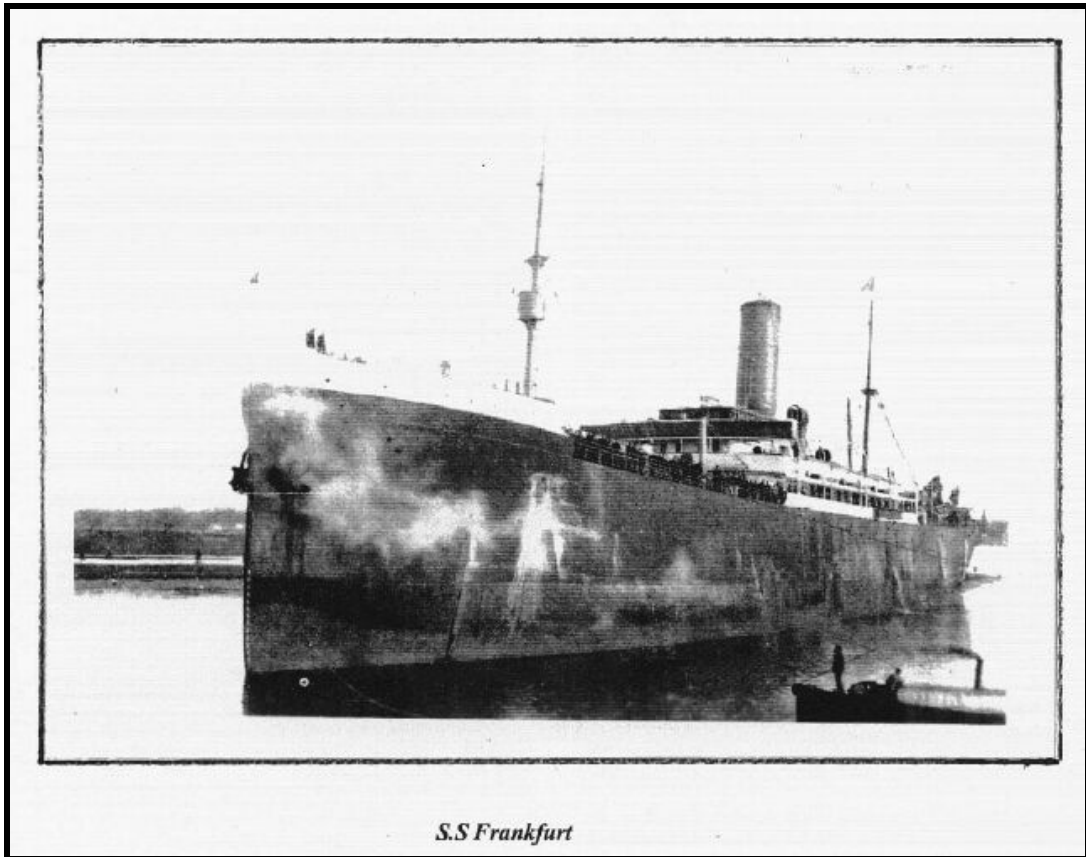


Photo courtesy of Steamship Historical Society of America Library, Baltimore,
MD

An American doctor was aboard the next Westbound sailing of the *Frankfurt* on October 24. His reports were summarized in the book, *Galveston: Ellis Island of the West*^{xii}, written by Bernard Marinbach in 1983:

The first sight of the cramped steerage quarters was enough to depress anyone who saw it. ... Some 180 persons ... [would] have to lie close to and over one another in a single cubicle for three weeks. Many passengers have the feeling of being fed almost like cattle.... The present arrangements (and the steerage as a whole) are unworthy of human beings.

Except for beer, no refreshments were sold in the steerage compartment, ostensibly to prevent members of the crew from embezzling food products and selling them to the passengers. Thus, the steerage passengers were totally dependent on the meals which they received in the dining hall.

There were no kosher cooking facilities on board until a few years later. Until then, the only kosher meat available came packaged in tin cans.

The passage to Galveston has indeed the drawback of being longer than the passage to New York.

The straw bags that serve as mattresses are put in white cases at the beginning of the journey, but are removed a few days before reaching {the interim port of } Baltimore, so that the passengers to Galveston have to sleep during ten or twelve days on uncovered straw bags. In consequence, I would hear the people complain: 'We are treated like cattle!' After their having been used to cover bedding, the removal of the cases makes a still worse impression.

From Galveston, Vassily Pivovarovoff and his family were transported to nearby Houston. From there, they continued on to California by train. Upon reaching Los Angeles, they settled among their Molokan cousins and friends in the *Flats* district, just east of downtown near the river and railroad yards. Some of the Subbotnik children of Vassily's brother, Traphim Makarich Pivovarovoff, also came to America and lived nearby.

THE SUBBOTNIKI IN LOS ANGELES

With their common heritage, it was to be expected that the Subbotniki would settle among the Molokans in *Russian-town*. One Subbotnik man opened a store there that, because of a common kosher practice, served both communities. However, with their basic religious differences, it is not surprising that some of the conflicts between the two sects that were evident in Russia, such as the consumption of wine, continued in America. The Subbotniks were also more prone to more quickly abandon the ways of the “old country” and assimilate with Americans. This was counter to the goals of the Molokans who were determined to preserve traditional values in their community. Many Molokans felt that the presence of the Subbotniki in their neighborhood was a bad influence on their young people with whom they were struggling to maintain the Molokan way of life in *Flats*.

A Subbotnik church was established in the *Flats* district of Los Angeles near the corner of First and Gless Streets. The church was a small building, but it could accommodate the two to three hundred person congregation. Kitchen facilities were located in the rear. In back of the church, there was a large fenced yard where *samovars* could be lit to provide hot water for *chai* (tea). Later on, the Subbotniks held their meetings at 611 Breed Street in Los Angeles. This is near the historic Talmud Torah Temple that is also known as the Breed Street Shul.

The Subbotniks associated to some degree with the Jews living nearby but maintained a separate identity. Some of the common elements were the burning of candles and consumption of *matzos* on certain religious holy days. Jewish calendars could also be found in some of the homes. The Subbotniki enjoyed convenient access to the Jewish shopping area in Boyle Heights. There they could purchase kosher foods and other items necessary to practice their religion. This included baked goods such as fresh rye bread from the original Cantor Brothers Bakery and Restaurant on Brooklyn Avenue.¹²

Albert Parry commented on what he observed about the relationship between the Jews and the Subbotniki living in Los Angeles in the *Jewish Tribune* article previously cited:

In Los Angeles they find themselves viewed with suspicion by the great body of the Jews there, because they cannot read Hebrew prayers, bibles, and so on. They read and pray in Russian, they can only look at the Hebrew text. The other Jews look down on them, fear to give their daughters in marriage to them, doubt their Judaism, say they are half-goyim¹³, as Edomite converts in Josephus' account were half-goyim to many Jews of the time. Since they are generally poor, the wealthier

¹² Renamed Caesar Chavez Avenue in the 1980's.

¹³ "Goyim" is the plural of the Yiddish word *Goy* meaning a non-Jew or a gentile and was often used contemptuously.

Jews also fear that their daughter may fall into the sweatshop or factory, should they marry into Subbotniki families. So Subbotniki sons are marrying equally Americanized Molokani girls, or Armenians, or Mexicans. The result will be the complete Americanization of the new generation.

The Molokans also did not look favorably about intermarriages. Molokan and Subbotniki youth growing up in *Russian-town* during the “Roaring Twenties” were greatly influenced by the “open” urban environment of Los Angeles. The two groups intermingled in the public schools, organized sports teams at Pecan Park and at other programs sponsored by local social services organizations. The “mixed” marriages” that were inevitable were not condoned by the parents on either side. As a consequence, the couples had to elope to places like Yuma, Arizona where civil ceremonies were easily available. Occasionally Subbotniki services and receptions at the homes of relatives followed these weddings. The newlyweds usually lived with the Subbotniki parents until they could afford a place of their own. It could take years for the Molokan parents to fully accept the marriage, but differences were usually put aside when the grandchildren arrived. In later years, some of these offspring themselves married back into the Molokan Church and are active members today.

Members of the Subbotniki church were never numerous in Russia or in Los Angeles. With the isolation pressures from both the Molokans and the Jewish communities, the church was not successful in sustaining itself within the pressures of the growing city. In the 1950’s, as part of an urban redevelopment project, the City of Los Angeles condemned the original church property in order to build a community swimming pool — part of the expansion of the Pecan Park playground. About the same time, the homes of many of the sect’s members living nearby were cleared by the city to build a low-income housing project. This resulted in the dispersion of the Subbotniki to other parts of Los Angeles County. Some of the older Subbotnik families moved to houses in East Los Angeles near the Molokan “Big Church” on Lorena Street. Later on, Subbotnik widows found some comfort in their later years by living among their friends and relatives from the old country.

The loss of its original meeting house, the dispersion of the members of the congregation and the death of key church elders led to the demise of the Subbotniki Church in Los Angeles. The Subbotniki congregation held its last meeting on March 12, 1971 and was officially dissolved by its trustees two days later. As a symbol of unity, love and friendship with the Molokan community, the trustees visited the Board of Directors Meeting of the United Molokan Christian Association (UMCA) on March 8 to announce their intentions. They also presented the UMCA with the funds remaining in the Subbotniki treasury.



Left to right: Morris Haproff, Harry J. Shubin, Paul Zolnekoff, Alex Tolmas, Morris Shiskoff, Esai Andrews, William J. Tholmas, Mike Urkoff, Andy Valov.

In order to follow the prescribed ways of disposing of their dead, Subbotniki burials took place at the Home of Peace Memorial Park¹⁴ on Whittier Boulevard adjacent to the Long Beach Freeway. Plots for many of the original Subbotniki immigrants can be found in the grassy area along the fence east of the chapel and opposite the ramp to the Long Beach Freeway. Many of the Subbotniki headstones are adorned with the Star of David or with a menorah. Some contain Hebrew writings. Once the original Subbotniki section was filled, a newer Subbotniki section was selected at the southwest corner of the main road next to the Sephardic section. Since this site is in what is considered an Orthodox Jewish section of the cemetery, the occupied graves have raised cement covers.

¹⁴ The Southern California Genealogical Society has compiled a CD with an index of all those buried at Home of Peace with grave-site location including the Subbotniki. For more information visit <http://www.scgsgenealogy.com/>



Photo of original Subbotniki burial area in the Home of Peace cemetery.

After the closing of the Subbotniki church in Los Angeles, funerals for some of its former members continued to be arranged through the Malinow and Silverman mortuary located at 818 West Venice Boulevard just north of the University of Southern California. Over the years, this mortuary provided thoughtful assistance to the families of deceased Subbotniki even though not all were familiar with the Jewish burial traditions of their loved ones.



Close-up of tombstones of Esther Vassilyvna (Pivovaroff) and her husband Joseph Yegorovich Aldacushion with that of Stephan Ivanovich Moiseiev in the background.

Final services were conducted in the chapel at the Home of Peace Memorial Park with internment in family plots purchased long ago. Jewish rabbis were asked to officiate since Subbotniki elders were no longer available. The mortuary has now relocated to West Los Angeles, closer to the main Jewish community while the remnants of the Subbotniki moved to the eastern suburbs.

THOSE WHO STAYED BEHIND

Not all Subbotniki came to America prior to World War I. Some chose to remain in Russia or to emigrate to other countries during the last century. The major focus of this report are the Subbotniki who were originally Molokans. However the Subbotniki movement extended to many more Russians that were not necessarily of Molokan origin. So the stories presented here may or may not refer to the Molokan-Subbotniks that are my main interest. In addition to the United States, it appears that many Subbotniki eventually emigrated to France, Israel and South America

Subbotniki in the Soviet Union

Klibanov reports that he encountered a group of Subbotniki in 1959 near Tambov. An excerpt from the 1969 *Evolution of Old Russian Sectarianism*^{xiii} published in Moscow by L. A. Tul'tseva and translated by Ethel Dunn contains statistics and Soviet accounts of Subbotniks from the Russian Revolution through modern times. The author states:

Today several groups of Molokans and Subbotniks remain in Veronezh Oblast: ... Subbotniks in Il'inka and Vysokii settlements of Talovsk Raion {formed after} the migration of the Subbotniks in 1920 and 1921 to former landed estates. ... of 1,200 inhabitants of Vysokii there are about 20 to 25 convinced {Subbotniki} believers who assemble more or less regularly for prayers. ... in the village of Il'inka ... of 611 inhabitants there are 400 Subbotniks.

The Subbotniki of Voronezh had rabbis from the Pale of Settlement during the Tsarist era, but had no other contact with Russian Jews until the November Revolution. Thereafter, the Jews of Russia became racist, and did not consider these people, who are true converts, to be Jewish and referred to them as *Iudeistvuyushchie*: "Those who practice Judaism." There was very little contact between the Jews and the Voronezh Subbotniki community. Since 1989 most of them have come to live in Israel.

In a November, 1992 *Washington Post* article entitled "Few Russian Jews Left in Stalin's 'Homeland,'" Margaret Shapiro writes that while visiting a Siberian territory set aside for the Jews by Stalin, she found "... a few ethnic Jews who now follow a Christian sect called Subbotniki." This seems to further substantiate earlier reports mentioned in this paper that some Subbotniki sects had their roots in Christianity.

Subbotniki in France

An interesting reference to those who stayed behind is found in *Vichy Law and the Holocaust in France*^{xiv} written by Richard H. Weisberg in 1996. Vichy refers to the puppet government that administered the parts for France that were not formally occupied by Nazi Germany during World War II. The Vichy government attempted to follow some form of constitutional law when it came to determining who was to be considered Jewish for purposes of exclusion and eventual deportation.

Four Subbotniki were living in France at the time war broke out. The Vichy Council General on the Question of Jews (CGQJ) first had considered them to be Jews. A CGQJ official named Ditte maintained that

...These little 'Mosaic' groups could not be distinguished one from the other, at least not in a manner convincing to his agency.

A lawyer listed as LaPaille represented the Subbotniki in an appeal to keep the Subbotniki from being considered Jews although they practiced the Jewish religion. In making his case, Lawyer LaPaille cited the precedent of Russian law that had exempted Subbotniki from Soviet anti-Semitic measures although acknowledging that the group had "Judaizing tendencies." His argument stressed the religious distinctions between Subbotniki and Jews. LaPaille professed:

*The best proof that **Subbotniki** are in no way a Mosaic sect is that they accept the New Testament, which is totally rejected by the Jewish religion.*

Subbotniki in Israel

It is only logical to expect that some of the Subbotniki living in the Soviet Union would have taken advantage of the resettlement programs offered to Jews wishing to emigrate to Israel. After all, since they were identified with the Jews because of their religious beliefs and practices, the Subbotniki probably suffered similar patterns of discrimination and persecution from the Communist and post-Communist governments.

The most recent Russian reference to Subbotniki I have found appeared in 1997 in an article in the newspaper *Moskovskie Novosti* entitled "An Ancient Sect Leaves Russia" by correspondent Oxana Antic. She reported on a group of Subbotniki who live in the village of Ilyinka on the border of Vorenezh Oblast with Ukraine.

The sect originated at the end of the 17th century in Russia. The persecution of Subbotniki, which began in Tsarist Russia, continued under the Soviet regime. Now the last members of the sect have decided to leave for Israel. Moskovskie Novosti's correspondent who

visited Ilyinka regrets this decision as a loss for the spiritual climate of the country.

There is settlement of Subbotniki 13 families, altogether 130 people, in the upper Jordan valley. However, it does not appear that they found total peace and acceptance in the "Promised Land." On April 24, 1997 an article appeared on the first page of the Israel newspaper of record *Ha-aretz*. The headline read: "Interior Department works to cancel the Israeli citizenship of all the families in Yitav in the Jordan Valley." There is a church in Yitav where all the inhabitants get together on Saturdays. The article said these people were given papers in the former Soviet Union saying they were Jewish. The documents were obtained from a government official in 1990 or 1991 after an old Subbotniki woman told him that she and the entire group "*felt themselves to be Jewish.*"

The contribution of Subbotniki to the building of the Jewish presence in Palestine was significant. However, as noted previously explained, they were all converts to Judaism. One example is Eitan (Ethan) Raphael who was a member of the 1988 Israeli Knesset,¹⁵ Minister of Agriculture & Environment and Deputy Prime Minister. He is reportedly from a Subbotnik family. He has born in Israel in 1929 and apparently has returned to the racist definitions of what it is to be Jewish. He is a supporter of legislation that would deny the legitimacy of Reform and Conservative conversions to Judaism. However, when recently asked if *he* was Jewish, Eitan answered, "I will not answer that question."

¹⁵ The legislature of Israel

CONCLUSION

The sun has set on the Subbotniki. They exist no more as an organized religion in any part of the world as far as I can tell.¹⁶ However, the fact that they did exist is important to note and document. This is especially important to those, like me, who are descendants of Subbotniki.

These people followed a faith that was in-between the worlds of their Molokan heritage and that of the ethnic Jews that they chose to emulate. In adopting more fundamental, Old Testament practices such as the laws laid down by Moses and the Saturday Sabbath, they felt they were getting closer to God. However, they ended up being ostracized by their neighbors from both sides. In addition to enduring the persecution of *non-believers* by the Russian Orthodox Church and the Tsarist government, they were isolated from others, including Molokans and Russian Jews, who were enduring the same fate. Still, they pursued their beliefs for a long time. However, lacking sufficient critical mass, the Subbotniki were not able to sustain their identity and religion after leaving the Motherland. Upon reaching new shores, both America and Israel, they soon blended into the mainstream society in their new homelands.

Are there descendants of Subbotniki immigrants who settled in other parts of the United States? If so, who are they? I hope to find the answer to this question someday. I would appreciate hearing from any reader who has corrections or additional information about the Subbotniki past and present.

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¹⁶ Author's Note – April 2005: I reached this conclusion while writing this paper in 2000. As indicated in Additional Sources in the Bibliography and in other citations listed on the new Subbotniki.org web site, other researchers have discovered and documented their visits to small Subbotniki villages in the Azerbaijan and Armenia in the early part of the 21st Century.

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