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Source: *Pacific Journal* 4 (2009): 25-29.

Publisher: Fresno Pacific University.

Stable URL: <http://hdl.handle.net/11418/437>

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One Voice

SUZANNE D. KOBZEFF

Dzetha, my grandfather, was a singer in our church. He was a very talented man from what I hear, since he died before my parents were married. My Pop says that my brother, sister, and I would have made him happy. We love to sing. My father is a shy singer; he knows a lot of songs but won't admit it. I often watch him open his mouth wide and sing with deep breaths of air—his voice blends in and gives strength to the congregation in singing. We have all sung since a young age. As a Russian Molokan, singing is a way of life that unites the community. This is what I love about being Molokan. I have had many friends leave the religion, its conservativeness, its limitations. These are still present in the church today and to some extent, I admire much of this. The Molokan heritage and history are a part of me and to ignore them would be to ignore a part of myself. But what is more important to me is the community. Despite what I have to face in the “outside world,” I know I can always return to a group of welcoming people who are not only united in traditions and beliefs, but more importantly, they are united in their singing.

The Molokan sect began in Russia in the 1600s. They were a Protestant group that disagreed with many Orthodox Church practices, including the prevalence of icons in the church, the emphasis on the clergy, and the various fasting days. For instance, all Russian citizens were to abstain from drinking milk during Lent. A small religious faction rebelled, and thus received the name the Molokans, or milk drinkers. As this sect grew, and their way of worship developed, they consciously tried to be as different from the Orthodox Church as possible. They no longer used the word *tserkva*, or “church,” to refer to their religious meeting place, but rather they used the term *sabrania*, or “gathering” in order to put an emphasis on the people and not on the building. No icons were allowed in the church, the buildings were made without steeples or stained glass windows, and the various positions in the congregation, such as that of the minister, were all done without pay. Additionally, the Molokans left behind the hymns of the Orthodox Church and wrote new songs put to peasant tunes from the villages.

As the religion spread, so did the songs, and when many Molokans moved to America at the beginning of the twentieth century seeking religious freedom, the music moved with them. Only the words of these songs, not the notes, are written; the tunes have to be passed on orally from one generation to the next. Today, we still sing many of those same songs from Russia. They are sung in Russian, a cappella, using only the voice, the purest instrument to share the feelings of our hearts and spirits. The music has a driving beat; I imagine that my ancestors in Russia often sang these songs to help them get through the laborious work on their farms. This tradition also carried over to America. My Baboonya Mendrin (paternal grandmother) told me that her family sang the Molokan song “In the House of King David...” when they worked on their farm. When my brother, sister, and I worked in our family vineyards during the summer time, we also sang this same song to help us finish our tedious work in the sweltering Central Valley Heat.

Unlike some churches, there isn't a “church choir,” but rather, the entire congregation takes part in the singing. The congregation is split into specific groups that stand around the *prestol*, a rectangular table that has an open Bible on it. There is the minister, the *presvistid*, and his assistant, the *pamoshnik*, who stand at the head of the table. The *besedniks* stand on another side of the table and read out loud from the Bible during services. The *skazali* stand across from the *besedniks* and they announce words of songs that are not written in our *pesnik*, or songbook, as the congregation sings them.

The official singers, the *pivsti*, stand next to the *besedniks*. They call upon each other and other church members to start songs in church. They are also expected to be familiar with most of the 780 songs in our church songbook, if not have many of them memorized, so they can always help carry the tune if someone forgets. The women are directly across from the minister and assist in a variety of church procedures. There are also women *pivsti* who stand in the front row of the women's section. During a church service, the minister, with a nod of his head, tells the *oopravitsil*, the head singer of the church, to select someone to start a song. The entire congregation is silent, waiting to hear the Russian name of the person selected. Once the name is announced, the individual has a few moments

to select a song from memory. They start it and after the first line, the rest of the congregation slowly joins them for the remainder of the song, united together to become a part of one voice.

*Arise O soul, arise. Cast off your wearisome yoke.
 Depart from the field of battle, appear in your Eden.
 Crowns are prepared in faith.
 Behold your voice is heard.
 There shall you behold the perfect world which is now in peace with you.
 Arise O soul, arise. The Lord calls you to Himself.
 Awake from your sleep, He who created you.
 Come, come unto the judgment
 There you shall see the light of justice.
 As you lived here, to God shall you answer.
 You, a holy soul, thee you shall dance.
 Fly in heaven, reign for the age of the ages.
 O powerful Savior, flaming towards you with love.
 You are the redeemer of us all. Cleanse us with your blood. Amen*

Song 14 is one of my favorite songs, but is only to be sung after the burial is completed at a funeral or at a *pomniki*, or church remembrance service for the deceased. Many Molokan songs have been written to be sung at specific occasions and specific times within those occasions including weddings, funerals, baby christenings, and church holidays. Still, other songs are more general and can be sung for any occasion. Thus, it is important to know the translation of these Russian songs so that if are called upon to start one, you will chose appropriately.

All church members are expected to know how to sing, or to at least try. When I was five, my mother began a children's *spevka*, or a singing class where we learned many of these traditional songs and sometimes even had Russian language classes, since that is still the primary language used in our church services. My mother focused on songs with simpler tunes like Song 120 ½, "We love God, Our Creator..." and Song 1, "Behold this, you warriors of Christ..." the first Molokan hymn to be written and published. *Spevka* was also a time to become acquainted

with the children in our Molokan community since most Molokan parents prefer their children to socialize with other Molokan children and not those that are “ne-nash” (“not ours”). We still sing many of those same songs from children’s *spevka* today at church and other events. Graduations, anniversaries, and birthdays are often celebrated with food, cake, and singing. Every thanksgiving, my family has turkey, pumpkin pie, and Molokan singing. Everybody gets to choose a song to sing out of the *pesnik*. Nobody argues about which part to sing, you just try to blend, to come together and become a part of one voice.

Alas, we may not always sound like one voice. One of the church elders frequently said that “God doesn’t care how you sound...as long as you try to sing.” Often, in the congregation, there are those individuals who are tone deaf and others who don’t know the songs but instead close their eyes and sing with all their might lyrics that they create as they go along. And this passion is what is important, since singing is a feeling and we are lead by the Spirit, not our minds. The words are not necessarily the most important part of the song, but rather the experience is important...since through this music we become a part of a community able to feel and express God’s presence.

Still, singing does take practice. Next to our families and our jobs, church is an essential part of the life of a Molokan. Church events can take up as many as three or four nights a week, not including Sunday services. The *spevki* singing classes occur on at least one of those nights. During these classes you learn the melodies of songs and once the melodies are learned, you try to develop an ear for picking out harmonies like *saredniya*, or first soprano, or *pahalos*, first tenor. Of course there are individuals who have been born with an ear for music. They can sing any part without much effort, as if they have had years of practice. That is what people have said about my grandfather. That he could fill in the part that was missing to complete the fullness of the community voice.

Sometimes when you are at a Molokan church and a part of the congregation, you do not fully hear the voice and appreciate it unless you step away and listen. Once, I had to go outside of the church during of the *abets*, or community meals. The air was very still outside and dark. I listened patiently...intently...then I heard it, not just a sound, but the event of a people. A river of words traveling

up to heaven in powerful unison. At that moment, I realized that every soul in that building forgot about their jobs, homes, families, friends, and themselves, and released their spirits to join a larger consciousness...and I thought about my family inside, experiencing membership in this universal community. And I thought about my Dzetha, and how his voice echoed in that singing, for once a voice is spoken it is never lost. And I thought about him now being a part of a heavenly chorus and smiling because for a few moments, among the turmoil of our world, this group of people, his people and his family, was able to come together with love and unity and sing as one voice.