

[COMMONPLACE LECTURES]

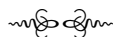
Far from Home

Slavic Refugees and the Changing Face of Oregon



A LECTURE BY
Susan W. Hardwick

commonplace lectures : connecting ideas and communities



commonplace (*L. locus communis*) : a general theme
or argument applicable to many particular cases;
a common or ordinary topic.

MATTHEW STADLER

At Liberty: A Town's History and a Theater's Story,
Astoria, the Liberty Theater, February 24, 2006

DONALD SNOW

'Round the Next Bend: Pendleton, Walla Walla, and the
Transformation of the Rural West,
Pendleton, Hamley's Western Store, May 19, 2006

MOTT GREENE

The Lab and the Flag:
Science, Democracy, and a New Worldview
Portland, Jean Vollum Natural Capital Center, October 20, 2006

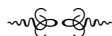
RANDY GRAGG

Against Nostalgia: The Roots of a New Direction for
Architecture and Planning in Oregon
Portland, Temple Beth Israel, February 24, 2007

SUSAN W. HARDWICK

Far from Home: Slavic Refugees and the Changing Face of Oregon
Salem, Willamette University, May 19, 2007

*Far from Home: Slavic Refugees and the Changing Face
of Oregon by Susan W. Hardwick. A lecture given at
Hudson Hall on the campus of Willamette University in
Salem, Oregon, on May 19, 2007.*



EARLIER THIS MONTH, a pro-immigration rally in Salem crowded the front steps of the Capitol and spilled across the street onto the Capitol Mall. Almost everyone in the crowd of about three thousand mostly Latin American immigrants and other supporters were wearing red, white, and blue shirts and waving Mexican and American flags. Scenes like this, along with daily news stories, political debates, and dinner table conversations are reminders that immigration has become one of the hot-button topics of our times.

Latino immigration issues have dominated recent news headlines, but tonight I want to share a few stories of some lesser known, and less noticeable, newcomers to Marion County and our state. Because these residents are white and predominantly Christian, their racial characteristics and belief systems make them invisible to most of us in a part of the country where white residents form the majority. Most came here as religious and political refugees from the former Soviet Union and they're making a home in the Willamette Valley very much like earlier groups of immigrants in previous decades. Let me begin by telling you one of their stories.

Six years ago, Galena finally got the call she had been waiting for from the State Department saying her refugee status had been approved by the U.S. government. This meant she was free to make the big move she felt she had been planning all her life.

After waiting more than a year for her immigration paperwork to clear, Galena would never forget the morning her family boarded the train

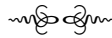
and then the bus for the long trip to the airport. Holding tightly to the hands of her three young children, and with her Pentecostal scarf tied over her hair, Galena and her husband were finally off to find a new life in a new place. She felt like she already knew this new place because of all the letters and e-mail messages her sister had sent. But nothing could have prepared her for the overwhelming feelings of fear, excitement, and anticipation at what they would face in Salem when they arrived.

After three years living in Oregon, her older sister, Irina, looked younger and more sophisticated than Galena remembered. The confident woman hugging her was Irina but something about her seemed different. On their drive south to see her new apartment in Salem for the first time, everything looked new, scrubbed, and vibrant. And yet, in many ways, the view from the car window also looked strangely familiar—the rain on the highway, the traffic. And then suddenly it hit her. This one long day was the end of her old life and all she had known. It was also the beginning of her new life in a strange and sometimes lonely place.

Galena's story is typical of the more than one hundred thousand people from the former Soviet Union who now call the Willamette Valley home. Seeking to better their own lives and the lives of their families, and to find the religious freedom their parents talked about, this group faces many challenges as they adjust to life in Oregon. Like Galena, these new Oregonians lived their entire life in the former Soviet Union before leaving home to start this new and very different life. Most were desperate to find a place that felt more open, safe, and economically secure. Many also left their homeland with fears about the uncertain futures they would face and the unknown experiences that lay ahead.

These new Russian-speaking residents of the Willamette Valley are arriving amidst a sea of changes in our communities, the state, and the nation. They have quickly become a part of a place experiencing its own sets of new challenges and opportunities. Building on the post-1970s-era of political, environmental, and economic changes, Oregon has been

caught up in a new era of possibilities (and also of problems), during the past fifteen years or so. The rise and fall of high tech industries, the increasing popularity of often invasive tourism on our coasts and in our deserts and mountains, and the major, ongoing demographic shifts that are now occurring across the state—all offer opportunities, as well as concerns for the future. How are these interrelated demographic, environmental, and economic issues reshaping our state, and what role do recent Slavic migrants play in these changes?



THIS DECISION ABOUT where Russian, Ukrainian, and other refugees first settle upon arrival in the United States is initially determined by refugee sponsors. State and local resettlement agencies are critical in determining where refugees settle and how their adjustment process unfolds once they arrive. In Oregon, as in many other places in the United States, a spate of voluntary agencies, or *Volags*, such as Lutheran Social Services and Sponsors Organized to Assist Refugees (SOAR), work closely with the Oregon state refugee coordinator and other state-based social service programs and nonprofit Mutual Assistance Programs, along with other networks of support that operate at the local level. The largest and most successful of these resettlement nonprofits in Oregon is the Immigrant and Refugee Community Organization (IRCO) with headquarters in a refugee-rich neighborhood in northeast Portland. In a model much like Jane Addams's historic Chicago Hull House, this visionary resettlement agency employs more than 150 multilingual social workers, counselors, linguistic assistants, and educational and employment training experts to help provide support for newcomers struggling to adjust to their lives in Oregon. IRCO and other social and economic support organizations are required by federal policy to help resettle new refugees within one hundred miles of their Volag for those who are being

reunified with family or friends, or fifty miles for refugees who arrive with no prior network of contacts in the United States. Marion County cities of Salem and Woodburn, and other smaller towns in between, are located within this approved radius and thus are prime refugee resettlement sites. The ultimate goal of these overlapping networks of support is to help increase refugees' language and employment skills, and assist them in adjusting to their new environment. In Oregon, refugees receive cash and medical assistance during their first eight months as long as they regularly attend English language classes and work skills sessions at IRCO or another accredited refugee support agency.

The advantages of this early economic and linguistic support make the refugee experience, especially during the first year of settlement in Oregon, quite different than that of those who come as immigrants. Findings from our interview data, however, indicate that the initial advantages offered by the extra support refugees are provided may be counterbalanced by the challenges of dealing with the label "refugee," as well as the trauma resulting from the extreme conditions of their past lives. While immigrants, such as Mexicans, come to this country with their own funding and only the support of family and friends who may already be living here, refugees are admitted to the United States under very different rules and regulations. Prior to arrival, each potential refugee must meet a rigorous set of criteria defined by the U.S. Refugee Act of 1980 and upheld by the Department of Homeland Security via a screening process that occurs prior to their approval for admission into the country. Refugees must document that they are escaping political, religious, or racial persecution by the government of their home country. Economic deprivation is not considered a justifiable basis for granting refugee status. A person can be admitted as a refugee, however, if persecution has been experienced in the past, if there is a threat of it becoming an issue in the future, and if they have a sponsor in the United States.

Another category of émigrés is *asylees*. People in this category do not need American sponsors for their resettlement here, but they cannot qualify for asylee status until they actually reach the United States. There are no quotas for asylee admissions but they must also be able to prove that they are victims of a fear of religious, political, or racial persecution in their homeland. If a person is already living in the United States, they also have the right to seek political asylum if these criteria are met.

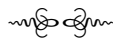
Here's where things get complicated regarding migrants from the former USSR. Coincidentally, at the same time as the United States was engaged in restructuring its immigration and refugee policies, Mikhail Gorbachev, the first and last president of the former USSR, was considering major changes to his country's restrictive emigration policies. Soon thereafter in 1988, Gorbachev's surprising announcement that victims of religious persecution were free to leave their homeland for the first time since the Russian Revolution shocked the world—and opened the door for certain religious groups to apply for U.S. refugee status. Chief among the groups favored in this policy were those who had been most severely penalized for practicing their religion in the Soviet Union: Jews, Pentecostals, Baptists, and Seventh Day Adventists. Jewish refugees went to Israel, Germany, and traditional gateway cities of immigration in the United States and Canada, such as New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, and Toronto, where there were more employment opportunities for highly educated migrants. Protestant fundamentalists, most of whom had high school diplomas and job experience in blue-collar jobs, relocated to smaller cities such as Sacramento and Portland. Since only a few Jewish refugees relocated to Oregon from the former Soviet Union (about eighty people to the Portland area and only two here in Salem), my talk tonight focuses only on the non-Jewish groups.

Incoming refugees from the former Soviet Union long have had the negative and fearful label of "Communist" attached to their identities.

The challenges brought on by their often-desperate departures from home and labeling by others who do not understand the system can offset the best intentions and hard work of refugee providers in Portland and elsewhere in the nation.

Oregon and Washington added more new migrants born in Russia and Ukraine than any other part of the country between 1990 and 2005. Attracted by sponsors affiliated with Christian fundamentalist church congregations, a network of well-organized social service and refugee resettlement agencies, and a physical environment that resembles their homeland, Russian and Ukrainian Baptists, Pentecostals, and Seventh Day Adventists combined are now by far the largest refugee group in Oregon.

As mentioned earlier, the exodus from the former USSR to the United States began with changes in both Soviet emigration policies and American refugee policies. The religious groups that were able to prove to the United States government that they were “refugees” under this legislation included Jews and evangelical Christian migrants who were persecuted for their religious beliefs under the Soviet system. The American evangelical lobby and the religious right in the United States have been influential factors in securing and holding onto the selective refugee status for these Protestant groups, even though their persecution virtually disappeared with the collapse of the Communist regime in the early 1990s. In addition to large numbers of well-established congregations arranging for sponsors for newcomers, those who were already resettled in other states heard about the West Coast meccas and migrated to Portland, Seattle, and Sacramento, and the smaller towns and cities located in between along the I-5 and Highway 99 corridors.



BEFORE CONTINUING, I'd like to say a few words about my perspective on all this. I'm a cultural geographer, so these changing human and environmental dynamics fascinate me. I see patterns everywhere I look. And the social, cultural, economic, and political processes shaping these patterns are even more interesting to try to document and analyze. Like most other geographers, I create and analyze maps to answer questions about people and places. I also depend on what can be learned from people's personal migration stories. Their experiences breathe life into my maps and draw out deeper meanings about the patterns they show.

Some of you may remember the study of geography from Miss Grundy's fourth grade class where you were asked to memorize the names of all of the states and their capitals. Or perhaps the word geography brings to mind even more boring memories of being asked to locate some obscure place in the middle of an ocean using only its latitude and longitude. I, too, am a survivor of those years of recitations of capitals. But as a lifelong geographer, it's been exciting watching the field grow and change since I took my first geography class in the mid-1960s.

In fact, the study of geography has changed almost as much as Oregon has during the past decade or so. We are still fascinated by the study of people and places. But the use of today's computer-generated maps and other spatial analysis systems, and the more "up close and personal" meth-

The American evangelical lobby and the religious right in the United States have been influential factors in securing and holding onto the selective refugee status for these Protestant groups, even though their persecution virtually disappeared with the collapse of the Communist regime in the early 1990s.

ods some geographers use to gather and analyze information about people, places, and cultures, have made the field come alive in new ways. As a result, the study of geography is finally, literally, on the map. Thanks to the generous support of the National Geographic Society, there are now Geographic Alliances in every state as well as Canada and Puerto Rico.

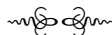
I appreciate having this chance to talk about my favorite subject tonight—Slavic refugees and immigrants—and to demonstrate what geographers can do and how we do it. I'll depend on what I learned from some of the stories I collected from Willamette Valley refugees from the former Soviet Union.

A small group of Russians first settled in Marion County as early as the 1960s, and the story of these remarkable Old Believers, the early Pentecostals, and others who came a decade later will be part of our discussion tonight. Many more have come since the early 1990s when the Soviet Union collapsed. And they continue to arrive, making Oregon home to the second largest number of post-Soviet Russian and Ukrainian fundamentalists in the nation.

My comments are drawn from an ongoing study of refugees in Oregon in collaboration with IRCO in Portland, and the high tech InfoGraphics Lab in the geography department at the University of Oregon. With their help, and the invaluable assistance of geography students in our department in Eugene, I've been able to analyze information from archival records, census data, survey questionnaires, and interviews with refugees, immigrants, and resettlement agencies and social service providers. We also completed an intensive spatial/cartographic analysis of the residential, religious, and economic patterns of the largest groups of refugees in Portland. Information provided by IRCO, along with data from the U.S. census for the years 1990 and 2000, made possible a comprehensive mapped analysis of refugee patterns in our area and state. Subsequently, using information from interviews and responses to survey questionnaires, I was able to expand upon and deepen my

understanding of the overlapping political, socioeconomic, and cultural processes and networks that helped shape these mapped patterns.

Using these nuanced layers of information, I'd like to talk briefly about the earliest immigrant imprint in the Willamette Valley, and then analyze the settlement patterns of newcomers from the former USSR. The key to making sense of these patterns is sharing what I've learned from some of these recent refugees about their migration and adjustment experiences. I especially want to talk about the ways they are dealing with the challenges many face in their new lives and conversely, also about the ways that places like Salem, Woodburn, and beyond are dealing with the challenges this group of new Oregonians bring with them as they change the face of our state.



OREGON IS A SPECIAL PLACE. For most of its history, according to environmental historian William Robbins and the *Oregonian's* Brian Meehan, Oregon represented an idea—"a place where people prospected not for gold but for a better life." Beginning with the Oregon Trail in the 1840s, up through New Deal-inspired efforts, such as the Bonneville Dam during the Depression, to the bucolic search of 1960s-era dreamers who came seeking a way to live off the land, the Oregon dream keeps reinventing itself.

During the past five years, I've been collecting migration stories from Oregon refugees who came here from many parts of the world. Many of these stories are filled with the pain of remembering a past they'd rather forget. Other stories remain untold, such as those of the Somali Bantus who came to the area three years ago.

These stories are increasingly being played out in our local landscape, as well as in my field notes and on our maps. We counted more than thirty-five Latino food stores, restaurants, and bakeries in Salem

alone in 2007. Driving past these businesses on our way to work is a daily reminder of Oregon's changing demographics as well as the diversity of its economic development. Equally large numbers of Latino businesses line the downtown and suburban streets of nearby Woodburn, a rapidly growing town with a population that now is almost half Spanish-speaking.

Similarly, in nearby Portland, streetscapes are changing as well. Along Martin Luther King Boulevard in the city's Albina District for example, former African-American-dominated scenes are being replaced by African refugee businesses and social gathering places. Likewise, almost all of Sandy Boulevard's 1950s-era biscuit-and-gravy coffee shops have been converted to Vietnamese-owned restaurants, clubs, and jewelry stores. Here, and in Portland's suburban communities including Beaverton and Hillsboro in the hills to the west and Happy Valley and Gresham in the flats to the east, the lives and landscapes of new residents from outside the United States have begun to take root and grow.

A few years ago, journalist David Kaplan characterized the Pacific Northwest in the *Atlantic Monthly* as "the last Caucasian Bastion in the United States."

A few years ago, journalist David Kaplan characterized the Pacific Northwest in the *Atlantic Monthly* as "the last Caucasian Bastion in the United States." The dominant whiteness of our region speaks to the lingering impact of the region's early immigration history, when streams of Germans, Scandinavians, Anglo-Canadians, and migrants from the British Isles moved to the area in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. They found a place shaped by earlier arrivals from England and Scotland, along with a group of French Canadians, recent retirees from the Hudson's Bay Company. The cadence of the lilting vowel sounds of these earliest post-indigenous settlers, their civic values,

the Euro-American gridded street system and town plans they imposed on their settlements, and their evenly dispersed rural homesteads remain today as enduring reminders of their legacy in the region.

These immigrants were joined by a much smaller number of Chinese who came to Oregon in the 1860s and '70s in search of gold and work on the railroads. In the late 1880s, tight government restrictions were placed on Chinese settlement in the United States. Thereafter, the need for farm laborers and railroad workers drew Japanese men and other foreign-born workers into the state. By 1920, there were ninety Japanese hotels in Portland and numerous grocery stores and restaurants owned by this immigrant group. Twenty years later, the Japanese had become the state's largest non-white group with about 350 Japanese farmers living just outside of Salem, where they grew celery, onions, and other truck crops on the fertile peat soils of the Lake Labish district. This was all soon to change, however, during World War II, when nearly the entire population was removed from the region and sent to relocation camps.

To help fill the wartime gap in farm laborers, the U.S. government passed the Bracero policy in 1942. This legislation opened the door to admitting more farm laborers from Mexico and other parts of Latin America than in the past and provided critically important support for Willamette Valley farms. Although the Bracero program was eliminated in the early 1950s, effectively barring the large-scale admission of additional farm workers from Mexico, the doors were opened again in 1965 when major amendments to the Immigration and Nationality Act were passed by Congress. The new immigration law removed country-based quotas, placing all parts of the world on an equal footing in terms of how many new immigrants were allowed to enter the United States.

Soon thereafter, new refugee policies were put into place that allowed people who were persecuted in their own countries admission as well. These changes resulted in Mexicans, Filipinos, and Vietnamese becom-

ing the largest groups in the state by 1970. Latin American immigration to Oregon increased from 26 percent in the 1950s to 40 percent just ten years later. Even more astounding, between 1990 and 2000, the number of immigrants from Latin America increased 144 percent (as compared to a 20 percent growth rate for the state as whole).

But these demographic changes pale in comparison to what happened next. Beginning in the early 1990s up to the present day, Oregon has emerged as eleventh in the country in the number of new refugee arrivals. With the support of federal and state refugee policies and an active set of local and regional players such as IRCO, desperate refugees from camps in Somalia, Ethiopia, and Eritrea in Africa came, as did Vietnamese, Cambodian, and Laotian survivors of post-Vietnam war trauma in refugee camps in Thailand. These groups were soon joined by larger numbers of new refugees and other immigrants from the former Soviet Union, who came to the area after political changes at home in the late 1980s opened the door to their emigration.

There's actually a much longer back story to the Slavic experience in Oregon that began a century before the most recent post-Soviet-era. A Russian Orthodox church was started in north Portland by an Alaskan of mixed Russian-Native American heritage as early as 1890. The membership list of this first Russian Orthodox church in the Pacific Northwest mentions only two Russians, six Arabs, and four Serbs. Ten years later, a Seattle visitor to Portland noted that there were about fifty believers in Portland at the time, even though their chapel was in disrepair and ethnic factions regularly disrupted services. This historic Orthodox chapel was abandoned in 1910 and remained closed until a new wave of Russian Orthodox immigrants settled in Portland after the Russian Revolution ended in 1922.

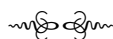
Other early and mid-twentieth century immigrant groups from Russia settled in the Willamette Valley town of Woodburn. Molokans, members of a Protestant sect that left Russia between 1901 and 1911,

Molokans first settled in east Los Angeles, San Francisco, California's Central Valley, and Glendale, Arizona. In search of a more rural environment, a small group of California Molokania visited Woodburn in the early 1950s and since then, hundreds more have come north to stay. I had the chance to interview four Molokan women who lived in Gervais in 1988, right after I completed my PhD dissertation on Russians in California. Caterina's story remains in my mind to this day.

I know I don't look like a Russian except on Sunday mornings when I wear my traditional Molokan clothes. But I *am* Russian and I always will be, even though I was born in Los Angeles after my parents first came to the U.S. I originally came to Woodburn to visit my brother when he moved here from San Francisco. I remember how far the drive up to Oregon seemed from my home in Fresno then, and how surprised I was by this little town in the middle of nowhere having signs in both English and Russian in the grocery stores. We didn't even have that in California.

I fell in love with tiny Woodburn on that trip and decided I had to convince my husband and four kids to leave California. But coming here the next year wasn't as easy as I had expected. My oldest son soon became involved with the wrong crowd who he met at the city park and with drugs.

It was a terrible time for us. Both my husband and I wanted the family to become Russian Molokans again, you know? We had lost so much while we were living in California. But the kids just didn't see it that way.



THE EARLY NODE OF Slavic identity in Woodburn, where Caterina and about 250 other Molokans still live, set the stage for the arrival of another group of ethno-religious migrants from Russia and the Soviet Union who arrived mid-century: Russian Old Believers. Old Believers are the most distinctive of all Slavic residents of the Willamette Valley because of their unique style of clothing and their propensity for constructing ornate Russian Orthodox chapels reminiscent of those built many centuries ago in Russia.

Old Believers are a sectarian group who separated from the Orthodox church in 1666 after a series of reforms were enacted by the ruling czar and Orthodox patriarch. Refusing to go along with these changes (such as the number of fingers used to cross oneself and the spelling of the word “Jesus”), thousands of what came to be known as *Starovery* (or Old Believers as they are called in English), burned themselves to death in mass suicides, or left Moscow and St. Petersburg to move east to hide out in remote Siberian villages. Others fled west to rural areas in Romania, Bulgaria, Poland, Turkey, or Iran, seeking a safe place to practice their traditional Orthodox religious rituals.

In the early 1920s, after the Russian Revolution, many of these Old Believers were forced to move yet again when anti-religious Socialist forces swept through their Siberian villages. To escape Communist control of their lands and lives, most fled across the Chinese border to the city of Harbin in Manchuria. Others moved into the Sinkiang Province in central China. There they lived their lives in relative peace and safety until 1949, when the Communist takeover of China resulted in the forced collectivization of thousands of Old Believers into isolated villages. Their plight drew the support of the Council of World Churches who secured visas and funds to help them emigrate to a safer haven. Thereafter, these two groups of Old Believers—one group from Manchuria and the other from central China—gathered together in Hong Kong in the early 1960s to prepare to once again start new lives in

Australia, New Zealand, Brazil, Argentina, or Uruguay. Some arrived in wagon trains that had made the long trip all the way from central China to the coast. Stories abound among old timers in Woodburn who still remember the trauma of this trip. One recalls frantically losing a toddler along the way, and then rushing back to find her on the side of the muddy trail. Eventually the group decided to go to Brazil, where they had been offered free land and safe haven.

When these Old Believers stopped in Los Angeles to have their ship refueled after the long trans-Pacific crossing from Hong Kong, a group of Russian Molokans from East Los Angeles rushed down to greet them. “Welcome, welcome—but where are you going?” they called out in Russian to the passengers on deck. “We’re going to Brazil” a few of the Old Believers called back. Hearing this plan, several of the leaders of the Southern California Russian community reacted negatively, asking how Russian foods could be grown in such a tropical climate and if they were aware that neighboring Chile seemed to be moving toward a communist government. When questioned about where they should go instead, many replied that they should “go to Oregon, to beautiful green Woodburn, a place where some people from our community already live and where Russian is spoken on city streets.” As their ship pulled out of the harbor, many of the South America-bound Old Believers had already begun planning for yet another move to the United States to find the town of Woodburn.

Two long years later, because of problems finding funding for their trip to the United States, most still lived in Brazil on land donated by the government. Life proved to be extremely challenging in this unfamiliar climate. One elderly man that I interviewed—who was among the original Brazilian migrants—in the Old Believer village of Nikolaevsk, Alaska, remembered, “These were very hard years and it was very hot in Brazil. We could not grow potatoes or beets, and so we had no borscht. So what is life without borscht? It just could never feel like home there, you know?”

Finally, in 1964, funding was secured from the Tolstoy Foundation in New York City for the trip to Oregon. With the sponsorship of a few Russian Molokans in Woodburn, almost all of the Brazilian Old Believers migrated to the rich farmland of the Willamette Valley. Less than one year later, another group of Russian Old Believers from New Jersey, who had come to the United States from Turkey where they had been living since their escape from Russia in the late seventeenth century, arrived in nearby Gervais. There are now about two thousand Old Believers living in the Woodburn area. Their ornate churches are located outside of town in the midst of a small residential area. Old Believer houses can often be distinguished by the solid fencing around their yards, backed by either tall rows of sunflowers or Cyprus trees. While many of these houses appear to be standard 1960s-era tract homes on the outside, brightly colored paint distinguishes the interiors. As one Molokan woman who rented a house to newly arriving Old Believers put it:

It was so irritating to us really. When they first arrived here, we rented them the house next door to us. I painted and cleaned everything before they came from Brazil. The first thing they did was to paint all my nice white walls in bright colors. Of course, their religion demands that they make everything pure and clean. After other people have lived in a house, I understand that.

Just as Russian Molokans helped sponsor Old Believers who came to Oregon, Woodburn's Slavic Pentecostal community played a major role in attracting the most recent wave of migrants from the former USSR. In a story that is legendary among local Russian-speaking residents, the minister of the tiny Russian Pentecostal church in Woodburn (the only one of its kind in Oregon at the time), asked his congregation to sponsor refugees from the Soviet Union when he heard about Gorbachev's new and more open emigration policies in 1988. Several years later, Pastor Ben

Shevchenko's church finally received word that one of the families it hoped to sponsor had been approved, and the family was now on their way to Woodburn. This started a chain migration that exploded after the Soviet Union dissolved and that continues to this day. Overwhelmed by the numbers of new arrivals in the early 1990s, the church in Woodburn asked the largest refugee resettlement agency in Portland for help. Since then, that agency morphed into IRCO and Pastor Shevchenko sits on the board.

Since family reunification is a top priority of U.S. immigration policy, the numbers of new arrivals have continued to intensify with the arrival of the parents, children, and other family members of these post-Soviet-era refugees. According to Victoria Libov, a Russian social worker who lives in Beaverton and is a program administrator at IRCO, "In a short time, you've almost moved an entire village here."

An estimated 90 percent of these Slavic refugees remain in the area after their initial settlement in the region because of the support provided by refugee resettlement agencies, church networks, and family and friends from home. According to one interviewee, a thirty-four-year-old married woman from Kiev, Ukraine, who relocated to the Willamette Valley in 1997, "My sister gave me the idea really. She said we should go to Oregon to be with the others who already left our city. Then the minister here sent us a letter urging us all to come to his church. He assured us that my mother and father could come too."

Slavic refugees and their children have opened three stores here in the Salem area and more than four hundred other businesses that cater to the Russian-speaking market in the Portland metropolitan area. Many of these are centered in the building industry, real estate, and banking. One of the characteristics of residents of the area who came from the former USSR, in fact, is their strong desire for home ownership, which was spawned in a homeland that long eschewed private property. Data from interviews and survey questionnaires indicate that the majority transition from being renters to homeowners within the

first three years of arrival in Oregon. This consumer niche in the regional economy has resulted in Russian-speaking families owning the majority of homes in selected new suburban subdivisions such as Wood Village in eastern Multnomah County. Families like the Paskalovs—who arrived in Oregon ten years ago from an industrial city in Ukraine with six hundred dollars, their suitcases, and a new baby in tow—were able to purchase their first home in an affordable neighborhood within the first year of settlement in the United States with the help of family members and their dual incomes as a cabinet maker and house cleaner.

According to Mariya, “Here it’s a good investment when you buy a house. Maybe we don’t understand it the first time we buy a house. But when we sell it, we understand.”

Slavic refugee leaders also are beginning to play a role in reshaping the politics of our region. The Slavic Coalition, for example, provides a voice for the Russian-speaking community to ensure maximum opportunities for gain-

ing county and city funding and political power in the urban region. The coalition was founded three years ago to advocate for youth success, family stabilization, and elderly support for the area’s Russian-speaking community. Membership grew and galvanized around the issue of local American teachers sending notes home to Russian-speaking fundamentalist parents warning them not to use spanking to discipline their children, advice those parents strongly disagreed with.

More recently, the political efforts of the Slavic Coalition resulted in being added as a voting member of the Community of Color

One of the characteristics of residents of the area who came from the former USSR, in fact, is their strong desire for home ownership, which was spawned in a homeland that long eschewed private property.

Coalition in Multnomah County, an organization established for African, African-American, Asian and Pacific Islander, and Latin Americans. Despite the whiteness of all of the members of the Slavic Coalition, Slavic members now serve on advisory committees and participate in funding decision-making bodies for this mixed-race, multicultural group. Two leaders of the Slavic Coalition were recently appointed to serve on the Portland mayor's new advisory board in support of immigrant and refugee issues in the metropolitan area. Another Ukrainian-born leader in the Salem community, Anya Sekino, currently serves as the cultural competency coordinator of one of Oregon's major state agencies headquartered here in Salem.



I BEGAN MY TALK tonight with a few comments about the pro-immigration rally held on the capitol steps in Salem just a few weeks ago. About a week before that, a smaller but equally engaged group of Slavic Christian fundamentalists and other supporters gathered on those same steps with a protest of their own against proposed legislation in support of gay rights. This less-publicized event not only provides evidence of the increasing numbers of Russian-speaking residents here, but also signals their increasing involvement in American politics and culture. Much like immigrant groups who arrived in the early twentieth century, newcomers from the former Soviet Union are not only finding ways to adjust to their new lives in the United States, they are also becoming active players in reshaping the landscape of the place they now call home. Because of their relatively large numbers and well-organized networks, and the availability of instant communication systems and high-tech media exposure, Slavic refugees and their families have the potential to make their mark on local landscapes more rapidly than did earlier groups.

As we have seen, these new Russian-speaking Oregonians came to the Willamette Valley primarily because of religious networks. Other magnets for their in-migration include economic and political challenges in their homeland, family reunification, the availability of social services and support, and a climate that reminds many of home. Most initially arrived as religious refugees, although today's newest arrivals come primarily because of the family reunification policies of our government or as new immigrants. About 40 percent of the more than 100,000 who live in our region are from Ukraine. Others were born in Russia, Belarus, or other republics that formerly made up the Soviet Union. While the vast majority live in the Portland-metro area, about three thousand currently reside in Salem, with significant numbers also living in Woodburn and smaller towns such as Lebanon and Albany.

Historian David Peterson del Mar recently observed that longer-term residents of the state have tended to be “more alarmed than delighted” by Oregon’s transformation by new immigrants and refugees. And these feelings of discomfort, and even alarm, are often translated to our foreign-born neighbors. Despite his white skin and mainstream religious beliefs, a young man who first came to Marion County from Belarus with his family at the age of seventeen told me just last week that he still feels strange and different here: “Everyone always knows I wasn’t born in the United States by the way I talk and something about the way I look. I can just *feel* it, even if they don’t say anything.”

The impacts of this “othering” process is much like it must have felt to speak with a Norwegian or German or Italian accent in the Willamette Valley at the turn of the last century. As our Slavic neighbors adjust to being outsiders, it’s worth considering what long-term impact their relatively large numbers will have on the economic, cultural, educational, and political landscape of our state.

Because most have limited English proficiency and work experience in the U.S., they are limited mostly to working minimum-wage jobs.

This, and the large size of many of their extended families, makes finding affordable housing and making ends meet very difficult. In addition, an overall lack of understanding of American society, laws, health care, and educational systems make life feel confusing on a daily basis. The adjustment process is especially difficult for those over fifty years old, many of whom have health issues and are unable to find employment. The retirement age in the former Soviet Union is lower than in the United States because of lower life expectancy, so most are unprepared for what they face economically and socially when they arrive.

There can be no doubt that the experience of leaving home and adjusting to an entirely new place can be overwhelming. Struggling to understand and communicate in a foreign language, locating and bartering for an apartment or house to rent, and responding to questions from any kind of official is frightening and confusing. More subtle cultural differences also pose problems. According to Alexander, a new Portlander from St. Petersburg, "Everyone seems to be in such a hurry here. The way they keep smiling all the time and express their feelings in public doesn't seem real to me. It makes me feel really uncomfortable to be so unsure about what people are feeling and saying and what their smiles really mean."

To many newcomers like Alexander, life in North America often feels superficial. New friends come and go quickly and never seem to follow up on their hasty "let's do lunch" invitations. Friendships in the former Soviet Union were the lifeblood of survival when times were difficult and lonely. Family and close friends stayed together no matter what happened, sharing problems at a deep level that made existence in a difficult place bearable. In contrast, American friendships often feel fleeting and cold by comparison.

Slavic religious support systems often assist newly arriving families with their adjustment experiences. Numerous interviewees report that few outsiders are available to help because of language barriers and a

lack of understanding about issues faced by Russian-speaking communities. At school, ESL (English as a Second Language) classes are dominated by other groups such as Spanish and Asian-language speakers, with scant attention paid to Russians who have little or no English language skills upon arrival. In addition, the pedagogies used to teach K–12 students are dramatically different in the former USSR as compared to the United States, where group discussions and collaborative activities are more common than formal lecture methods. After-school activities also are often problematic for new refugees, since older children are needed at home to help care for younger siblings and assist with chores.

Likewise, the approaches used in the American healthcare systems are challenging for Slavic newcomers. Doctors seem disinterested and spend little time with patients. Many would-be patients only seek professional health care in an emergency. The concepts of insurance, referrals, co-payments, and other approaches to maintaining good health that are common in the United States are completely unknown to the newcomers.

At the same time, healthcare and educational systems in Oregon are facing challenges of their own as newcomers create new demands in classrooms, doctors' offices, and hospitals. Perhaps most serious of all are differences in the way mental illness is handled here as compared to in their homeland. In the former USSR, individuals diagnosed as mentally ill were considered incurable. Many were hospitalized for the rest of

As this large and diverse group continues to galvanize around their strong and often quite vocal support of conservative issues such as anti-gay and anti-abortion rights, the politics and culture of this least conservative region of the state has slowly begun to change.

their lives. Mental illness was traditionally blamed on bad blood, failure, sin, or demonic possession. Since immigration- and acculturation-related stress may contribute to mental disorders for some, clinical depression and sometimes even suicide may result from lack of treatment.

Many issues and questions remain. As did many other immigrant groups before them, migrants from the former USSR are changing the face of Oregon in visible ways. Other changes are fast becoming part of our region as well, including a renewal of the religious landscape, as fundamentalist churches play stronger roles in the politics and values of the local and statewide scene. One example of this is the work of the Slavic Christian Church in Salem, an activist group of more than five hundred who have organized satellite congregations in Albany and Lebanon, and provide headphones that translate services into English for non-Slavic members. Like some of the largest churches in Sacramento, the Slavic Christian Church sends missionaries to Russia, Ukraine, and other former Soviet republics to launch and organize new church congregations that are supported by weekly radio programming broadcast from a studio located inside their church on the outskirts of Salem. This large congregation is one example among more than forty new Russian-language churches in our region that provide evidence of the increasingly important role of Slavic values and beliefs in our area.

As this large and diverse group continues to galvanize around their strong and often quite vocal support of conservative issues such as anti-gay and anti-abortion rights, the politics and culture of this least conservative region of the state has slowly begun to change. Will Salem become the next Sacramento, home to the largest Slavic fundamentalist community in the United States, where anti-gay activists organized by Slavic church congregations picket gay pride events, jam legislative hearings, and demonstrate at school board meetings? Only time will tell.

I was reminded late one afternoon last fall just how much things have changed since I first began my interviews with refugees from what

was then called the Soviet Union. A freshman student wearing a University of Oregon sweatshirt, jeans, and flip-flops knocked on my office door to ask if we could set up a time to meet. Suddenly she burst out with her news. Nadya was enrolled in my large introductory geography class, and I had presented the first lecture just that morning. During my comments in front of the more than 190 new University of Oregon students in our large lecture hall, I mentioned something in passing about Russians in Woodburn and showed them a quick image of one of the Old Believer churches in the area to help illustrate the diversity of our local landscapes here in the Willamette Valley. Nadya could hardly contain herself with excitement, but felt too shy to speak up during class. "I think you came to our house in Woodburn and interviewed my Grandmother Babushka a long long time ago when I was a little girl," she suddenly blurted out. At that moment, I realized that Nadya was only a second-generation Russian Old Believer, but she was already so acculturated that she was completely invisible within the mainstream of students enrolled in my classes.

The life of this young woman was not the only thing that had changed dramatically during the fifteen years or so since we first met: As political groups headed by new refugees such as Portland's Slavic Coalition influence educational policies, and religious groups such as Salem's well-organized Slavic Christian Church disseminate religious values and teachings, the Slavic community is emerging as an important new player in the politics of place here in the Willamette Valley.

SUSAN W. HARDWICK

Susan W. Hardwick is a professor of geography at the University of Oregon and the author of several books about the diverse populations of western North America and the former Soviet Union, including Russian Refuge and Mythic Galveston. She has received grants to fund her work from the National Science Foundation, the National Endowment for the Humanities, and the U.S. Department of Education, and has spent the past five years documenting the migration experiences, settlement patterns, and shifting identities of immigrants in the Pacific Northwest. In 2005, she was awarded one of the Association of American Geographers' highest honors, the Gilbert Grosvenor Honors in Geographic Education Award in 2005.





THE OREGON COUNCIL FOR THE HUMANITIES believes that knowledge and ideas are fundamental to the health of our communities. OCH programs encourage Oregonians to learn about and discuss social, cultural, and public issues. The Council's programs include a statewide speakers bureau, summer institutes for high school teachers, grants to young people, a course in the classics for individuals living in poverty, the magazine Oregon Humanities, and community reading and discussion groups. Our programs help Oregonians connect with one another and think about the places and times in which we all live. OCH is a nonprofit, independent affiliate of the National Endowment for the Humanities. OCH programs are funded by the NEH and by contributions from individuals, foundations, community organizations, and corporations. For more information about OCH, please contact us at:

Oregon Council for the Humanities
812 SW Washington Street, Suite 225
Portland, OR 97205
(503) 241-0543 or (800) 735-0543
Fax (503) 241-0024
och@oregonhum.org
www.oregonhum.org



OREGON COUNCIL FOR THE HUMANITIES

812 SW Washington Street, Suite 225

Portland, Oregon 97205

(503) 241-0543 or (800) 735-0543

Fax (503) 241-0024

och@oregonhum.org

www.oregonhum.org