



PERM NEWS

Оксфорд и Пермь — города-побратимы

O P A

Oxford Perm Association

Newsletter June 2021

“Perm Gods”

Sandra Hurst

If you persevere and climb to the top floor of the Perm State Art Gallery, there's a treat in store for you. Here you will find the collection of Komi-Permian wooden sculptures, gathered by Nikolay Nikolaevich Serebrennikov, Ural art historian, collector and researcher, over many years and over a total of 5083 miles from old villages in the region. These sculptures would no doubt have perished during the years after the Revolution had it not been for Serebrennikov.

Despite the religious powers banning wooden sculptures, these “wooden gods” continued to be created for several centuries in the Ural Churches in Komi-Permian areas. These Komi-Permians treated their sculptures with love and awe, dressing the wooden gods as living beings in clothes and wooden shoes and bringing them treats and gifts. They believed that the wooden gods came to life at night and went to the temple, so they regularly changed the shoes of their gods.

Local priests, afraid of losing their congregations, did not burn the wooden images made by skilled craftsmen as they were instructed.

While travelling around the Perm region, Serebrennikov discovered the first of these unique sculptures in 1922 and began collecting them, displaying them for the first time in 1924. For forty years he was the director of the Art Gallery and as the collection grew, so did the exhibition. He said of his first discovery: “the figure of Christ with the face of a Tartar especially struck me ...”

He went on to unearth and rescue 195 wooden sculptures. As a result, the Perm State Art Gallery has a fine collection of wooden sculptures of XVII – XIX centuries, today numbering 370, though sculptures from the XVII century are rare. Serebrennikov found these sculptures throughout the Perm region – in towns and villages and in empty churches.

The most striking aspect of these sculptures is the fact that they resemble the people of the Perm region and are portrayed wearing local costumes with distinctly local facial features. Often with amusing expressions on their faces, they are quite unlike any other religious sculptures, such as the XVIII century carving of the Saviour sitting in prison, with Jesus dressed in Permian national blue clothes, resembling a man from Perm, or Saint Nicholas of Mozhaïsk – one of the most popular characters in Permian sculpture and probably the most famous.

These Perm sculptures are a combination of sculpture and painting. The painting adds something extra, particularly in facial expression, to the plain wooden shapes, making it well worth the climb upstairs to see them.

Perm News on-line readers can explore many views of the Wooden Sculptures with detailed descriptions at the [Perm State Art Gallery](#) .

The following relate particularly to the comments in this article

[Angels](#) [St Nicolas](#) [Seated Christ figure](#)

BOOK REVIEWS

Pushkin's Button (Fourth Estate, 2000) by Serena Vitale

Jonathan Saunders

Most of us who have a passing acquaintance with Alexander Pushkin (1799-1837), the father of Russian literature, know that he was killed in a duel. What fewer of us know is why this duel took place. Serena Vitale, Italian academic and Russian translator, published her *tour de force* on the subject in 1995. She benefited from Russia's opening up of state archives to foreigners post-1990 as well as from her access to the previously unseen family archive of the descendants of Pushkin's killer, the Frenchman, Baron Georges D'Anthès. As she also drew on the expertise of the Polizia Scientifica of Milan, we can believe that she was in a good position finally to unlock the mysteries surrounding Pushkin's death. That said and in deference to our Russian readers, a 20-year study of Pushkin's duel by Stella Abramovich (published in St Petersburg, 1994) should not be overlooked. Unfortunately as I cannot read Russian and the book has not been published in other languages, I cannot make any judgement regarding its merits.

The overthrow of Charles X, last 'legitimate' king of France, in July 1830 had a decisive impact on the fortunes of young Georges D'Anthès, Pushkin's future adversary, and at that time enrolled at Saint-Cyr (the French Sandhurst). Together with other loyalists, he had demonstrated against the new king, Louis Philippe. For his efforts he was kicked out of Saint-Cyr. Thwarted in France, D'Anthès looked abroad to advance his military career. In Berlin he was only offered a post in the ranks. However, in St Petersburg he was luckier and was accepted into the Guards. As his fellow officers all spoke French, language was no barrier. In time he would learn enough Russian to give commands to his troops.

Apart from Pushkin and D'Anthès, there is a third major player in the drama about to unfold – a Dutchman, Baron Jacob van Heeckeren. This career diplomat, Dutch ambassador to the imperial court in St Petersburg, who had converted to Catholicism in his youth and fallen out with his family in the process, was a bachelor without binding relationships who met D'Anthès socially in St Petersburg soon after he arrived and quickly formed strong bonds. The immediate advantage to D'Anthès was pecuniary – Heeckeren was happy to contribute towards Georges's extravagant expenses as a Guardsman. Soon the Dutchman wanted to go further: he would adopt Georges who would become his son and heir.

It was around this point that D'Anthès became infatuated with Pushkin's wife, Natalya. Considered the most beautiful woman in St Petersburg and being 13 years younger than Pushkin, it appears that she was flattered by the attentions of handsome young Georges at the balls that both regularly attended. For months Pushkin remained aloof and unconcerned by these advances, even if he found the Frenchman an uncultured reactionary, his manner irritating and lacking in respect for people in general.

All this changed when anonymous letters were circulated around St Petersburg suggesting that Pushkin had been elected Grand Master of the Order of Cuckolds. As many Petersburgers, particularly court officials, had been the butt of Pushkin's wit and epigrams for years, there were many suspects. In the more than 150 years since Pushkin died, there have been endless theories about who the guilty letter writers were and Vitale gives the reader a résumé of the 'best' of them. She does not have all the answers herself but she is very clear on one point: Pushkin might have ended up duelling with D'Anthès but the object of his hatred and contempt was his patron, Heeckeren. Vitale remains unconvinced that Heeckeren deserved this.

Pushkin never doubted that his wife had remained faithful to him. It is tragic that this troubled genius died young, leaving behind a young widow and four small children. It is doubly poignant that the real villains were, according to Vitale, never unmasked.

**Leningrad: Tragedy of a City Under Siege 1941-44, by Anna Reid.
Bloomsbury 2011**

Marianne Talbot

Imagine being delighted to discover that tooth powder, cough medicine and cold cream contain calories, or that joiner's glue, boiled with bay leaves, can be forced down with the help of vinegar or oil of cloves. It was to this that 2.5 million people, including 400,000 children, were reduced during the Siege of Leningrad in 1941-44.

Stalin's refusal to believe intelligence reports that an attack on the Soviet Union was planned by Nazi German left the Red Army hopelessly unprepared. One of the three targets of Operation Barbarossa was the capture of Leningrad, home of the Baltic Fleet, and the 600 factories that made Leningrad second only to Moscow in industrial output. Hitler's army took twelve weeks to cut Leningrad off. They first took Mga, severing the last rail link, then Shlisselburg, the last road. Thus the siege ring closed.

At first, told that the Germans were being routed and that food was plentiful, many decided to stay. During the 872 days of the blockade 75,000 bombs were dropped on Leningrad, many of them incendiaries. The winter temperature fell to -30 degrees.

Fear of extreme cold and sudden death from above must have been bad enough. But the threat of starvation was possibly worse. The first thing extreme hunger does is leave its victims unable to think of anything but food. People 'imagined themselves nibbling an endless supply of buttered rolls' (p.235/6), children sucked stones pretending they were sugar, and strange rituals grew up around every aspect of food. But by October, only one month after Leningrad was cut off, corpses started appearing on the street. The death rate, peaked at 100,000 a month in January and February.

The elderly and very young died first. Teenagers and men were next. Mothers, left with young children, had to decide whether to give food to the child most likely to survive or the one who needed it most. Corpses in the street – animal and human - would be stripped of flesh. One mother fed the remains of her three year old to her 12 year old in the hope that at least the latter would live.

Bodies were taken on sleds to be buried in mass graves. Or they were kept in wardrobes and bedrooms so ration cards could be used. People were murdered for ration cards despite the ration's totalling a meagre 460 calories a day. A distinction was made between 'corpse-eating' and 'people-eating' – only the latter involved murder.

At first people received news through 1500 loudspeakers attached to the city's lampposts. Soon all that was left was the ticking of a metronome. This ticking is now a heart-breaking symbol of the siege.

Springtime brought a supply of food trickling into the city across Lake Ladoga's 'ice road'. This, together with the growth of edible weeds and the fact there were so many fewer mouths to feed, brought the death toll down quite sharply.

Hitler underestimated Russian willingness to fight for the motherland. In January 1944 Leningrad was liberated, and the German army scattered. But then too the official denial started. It wasn't until the Brezhnev era that, as one historian put it, 'the syrup could be wiped off' the story of the siege.

It is clear from the diaries grounding Reid's book that there were many acts of heroism and charity, and that many citizens showed extreme resilience. It is also clear that there were acts of which, under normal conditions, their perpetrators would be ashamed. But one should condemn only if one is certain one would not do likewise given the same conditions.

Anna Reid's book is, in my opinion, a masterpiece. Reading it takes a strong stomach. But it felt to me like a duty. That such a tragedy could happen – in living memory - in a modern European city is something that should not be forgotten.

Past and Future Events

Past Events

Karen Hewitt

The AGM took place on zoom on 24th February. After the official business, Mark Davies, an Oxford local historian gave a talk, 'Lewis Carroll in Volgaland' about Carroll's trip to Russia in the mid nineteenth century, together with a friend who hoped to convert the Russian Orthodox faithful to Anglicanism!

Also on 24th February, an online conference on the Diabetic Foot Screening Project with reports from the Perm Medical Academy revealed impressive progress so far. Two NHS specialists who have already been twice to Perm discussed developments with their Perm colleagues while several members of the Association were able to listen in.

On 7th May Karen Hewitt gave a talk about the situation in the Donbas region of eastern Ukraine, a situation which had threatened escalating violence three weeks earlier. She began by illustrating the history of Ukraine, a patchwork country of different cultures and languages, with maps. She described the events of 2014 when the President was overthrown in a coup and the subsequent violence from the point of view of the Kiev government, the people of eastern Ukraine, the Russians, and, especially, those who chose to remain in what became the Donetsk People's Republic. She quoted from the individual perspectives of friends in Ukraine, in Russia and in Donetsk.

Future Events

Karen Hewitt

Members put forward many suggestions for future events. Although the 400 anniversary celebrations of the Oxford Botanic Gardens had to be postponed, we hope to have a talk from Sergey Shumikhin, Director of the Perm Botanical Gardens, either when he eventually gets to Oxford, or online.

Perm is organising another Virtual Photographic Exhibition, this year on Water and My City. Oxford is not lacking in water, so we are asking members to volunteer to search for evocative and authentic photos from the various archives.

We plan to hold more talks from Perm on Climate Change, and on the experience of the pandemic in Russia. Weather and Covid permitting, we can also hold a Garden Party this year.

STOP PRESS Svetlana Zhdanova, Professor of Psychology at PSU, will give a talk at 5 p.m. on Friday, 25th June on '**Covid in Perm - and Russia**'. Andrei Shikhov, meteorologist at PSU will talk at 5 pm. on Tuesday, 29th June about about **changing weather patterns, and what they mean for Perm and for Russia**. Both talks will be on Zoom. Please let Karen know if you would like to be sent a link.

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Newsletter

David Roulston

We are very grateful to our members who continue to submit interesting articles for Perm News. Please note that articles, including book reviews, etc. are always welcome. The submission deadline for the autumn issue of Perm News is **15th September** but it is helpful if you let the editor (contact details above) know sooner if you plan to submit an item. Articles should be sent as email attachments preferably in docx format and not exceed about 650 words plus two jpg images (also as attachments), or approximately 850 words with no images. Shorter articles are always welcome. Note that individual permission for publication is required for any photos which include recognisable people. Readers can browse past newsletters on the website www.oxfordperm.org. The editor is grateful to Jessica Vlasova for her invaluable help in proofreading this issue of Perm News.

We have received suggestions that Perm News could publish articles from our members describing their reasons for initially taking an interest in Russia - the country and/or the language. These could be professional or voluntary activities, exchanges, or maybe just interests in Russian literature, or short items on novel/useful ways of learning the language. Please contact the editor if you would like to discuss a topic, or submit an article.

Website

Jessica Vlasova

The new dance videos have been added to the website www.oxfordperm.org

Please send any photos of visits to Perm or Perm Association events for the website photo gallery to Jessica at jessica.vlasova@gmail.com or to her WhatsApp on 07766 025313. Note that under GDPR rules, individual permission is required for any photos which include recognisable people.

Summary of articles from Perm twin cities newsletter *Jessica Vlasova*

Информационный вестник' is the Perm twin cities newsletter. Below is a short summary of the articles in the November 2020 edition of Информационный вестник' - the Perm Twin Cities newsletter. The newsletter in pdf format can be read on our website [here](#).

Perm and Oxford: 25 years

The twin cities celebrate 25 years of friendship. A description of the relationship from 1985 including events, exchanges and projects that have taken place with the benefits they bring and the twinning agreement in 1995. Comments from Karen Hewitt, Tatiana Grigorieva, International Officer for Perm City Administration and Dmitry Samoylov, the mayor of Perm.

Handmade presents

In 2020 embroidered quilts were exchanged between Perm and Oxford to celebrate 25 years of twinning. The quilt from Perm sewn in a textile workshop shows an Ox, the symbol of Oxford, and a bear, the symbol of Perm. The idea goes back to 1943 when women in Coventry, wanting to support the citizens of Stalingrad, embroidered a tablecloth with 830 names sewn in which they presented to the city after the war. They later became twin cities. The quilts sewn in Oxford and Perm can be seen on our website [here](#)

'Perm - Oxford: friends for a quarter century'

This project set up in Perm included several events aimed at educating young people about the history, traditions and benefits gained from twinning. One event was an essay competition in English 'One day in Oxford'. A selection of the best essays were sent to Oxford to be marked by members of the OPA. Another event, in October, was an online conference in both Russian and English on cooperation between the two cities. Over 100 people took part, including members of the OPA. Talks on culture, education, medicine and information exchange.

Publication of an illustrated book 'Perm - Oxford: friends for a quarter century'

The book includes information about key moments, projects and friendships between the two cities. Sections are devoted to Karen Hewitt, the setting up of a hospice in Perm, medical projects, information exchange between journalists, cultural exchanges and the Oxford Perm and the Perm Oxford Associations.

A virtual celebration: new ways of interaction

The pandemic forced Perm and Oxford to move the 25 years celebration online. Events included a dance exchange 'Ethno England 2020'; a journalism conference; the 'Women and Photography 2020' exhibition in Oxford and 'Me and My Perm' and 'Me and My Oxford' video exchanges.

A twin cities cookbook

An important part of understanding other cultures is trying their food. People from Perm and its twin cities swapped recipes and tried them out to understand more about each other's cooking. These have been published in an online cookbook.

Twin cities of the future from the point of view of young people in Russia and Germany

A three day online forum, held in November, was an opportunity for young people from Perm and Duisburg to discuss themes such as the environment, digitalisation of urban spaces, development of public transport, recycling, improvement for pedestrians and cyclists and regeneration of abandoned industrial areas. The final day was devoted to the discussion of 'The City of 2025' and what that would look like.

Coronavirus in Perm - A Personal Drama

Submitted by Marcus Ferrar

Perm journalist Vadim Skovorodin is known to many of us in the Oxford Perm Association. Early in 2020 he and his son Artem spoke here at one of our meetings. Vadim has become a good friend of mine (writes Marcus Ferrar), and I asked him to keep me up to date on the coronavirus in his home city. Here is his report:

“Since the beginning of October 2020, it was obvious that the coronavirus was regaining momentum in Perm. Official statistics showed small numbers, but every day we heard about new cases among friends and acquaintances. Then my children began to cough and complain of sore throat. After a couple of days, my wife also started coughing and I felt the same symptoms.

“Social networks filled with complaints by people that they had symptoms of coronavirus, but neither ambulances nor doctors would come, or did so only a few days after the call. There was a lot of panic. Instead of calling the hospital or asking a doctor, I called a private clinic to have CT lung scans for me and my wife. I tried four clinics: two did not answer, and two offered appointments only in the second half of November. All of them warned that the price of an examination had increased by 30% due to high demand.

“On social media, some people offered up their places in queues for CT scans. A few asked for money in return, but many offered for free. For example: ‘I signed up for a CT scan, but I don't need it now, I can give you my place.’ Another wrote: ‘I finished the course of treatment and I still have antibiotics, so if someone can't buy this at the pharmacy, I can give it for free.’ Many people volunteered to buy groceries for the elderly or bring purchases from a store to their apartments. A local businessman joined with friends to organise free delivery of hot meals to doctors at coronavirus hospitals. In the end I could find personal acquaintances to do the CT scans for me and my wife.

“However in the middle of November, disaster struck. One Friday, my mother-in-law, aged 73, began to complain of difficulty in breathing, and my wife went to her. The next day an ambulance took her to hospital, where doctors determined she was in a grave condition and put her in intensive care. It was a difficult two days, but then the mother felt better and was transferred to a regular hospital unit.

“For the next two weeks we believed mother was gradually recovering. However, then she complained of pain in her heart, and her condition worsened very quickly. Doctors took her back into intensive care, but she died that same night. We don't know how she was treated, or if this treatment was adequate.

“Most of our office employees have been working remotely. High school students for a time had to study from home, and were forbidden to go to shopping centres without their parents. All extramural activities after school were cancelled. My kids stopped going to basketball training and drawing classes. In our free time, we went for walks with my wife (who is taking the loss of her mother very hard), we play football, and go to the dacha at weekends. Restaurants are open, but we eat at home, because we're afraid of getting infected in restaurants. I continue to use a mask in shops. I avoid public transport.”

By the end of 2020, the panic had eased, but if Vadim thought he was out of the woods, that was not so. On 27th January 2021, he sent a terse message: “I'm sick and it's COVID. Please give me a couple of days to understand my state of health.” A week later: “I'm still sick, it's fever and weakness. I mostly lie in bed and go to the medical centre for medical procedures once a day. My dad is also in the hospital.” On 8th February: “I feel a little better, I've not had a fever for three days. But I still have a very big weakness. Unfortunately, my dad is in the intensive care unit.” A week later: “My dad is still in a very serious condition. He's been unconscious for a week now. Unfortunately, doctors have no good news yet.” Then: “I should

write to you about very sad news. My dad died on Monday. He was in the hospital for over two weeks, but the doctors were unable to save him. We all grieve.”

By March 2021 50,000 Moscow inhabitants had been vaccinated with the Russian Sputnik vaccine and it was even being given free to foreigners, with only a few minutes waiting time. But in Perm, two months later the toll in Vadim’s family was two dead, one still being treated for lung lesions and only his wife vaccinated.

“Vaccinations are not progressing quickly. At first, the government did not send many vaccines to the regions. Now there are enough, but many people do not want to receive them or are in no hurry to do so. One person does not trust the vaccine (or any vaccine), another thinks that if he has already been ill, he will not get sick again, and another simply puts it off. We have a Russian proverb – Until thunder breaks out, a man does not cross himself. Many Russians no longer fear coronavirus because politicians state that Russia is dealing with it better than the rest of the world.”

If you would like to cheer Vadim up, email skovorodin2012@gmail.com .

The sky *Joanna Tulloch, April 2021*

There’s a spaciousness I feel
when I’m in Russia –
not just the vast ironed landscape
stretching away to thousands of horizons,
but that bright bluff of sky,
as high as the psalmist’s firmament,
as wide and empty as the steppes beneath.

Something in me expands
as a freedom to be anyone fills me
and the sky, the land, the vastness
become the pool of possibility.
I speak, and another language
feels the air, my voice disappearing
into that huge heaven.

Learning Russian

Fiona Gow

I first learnt Russian at adult evening classes in Liverpool in the 80s, when the USSR was the enemy on the other side of the Iron Curtain. I went with my friend, Barbara, who was going to Moscow with a group called Mothers For Peace which tried to build bridges by arranging exchange visits for women. One member of the class was more fluent than the rest of us – he had learnt Russian on national service in the 1950s, and wanted to revive his skills.

We followed the GCSE course and learnt some grammar, but the emphasis was on basic

conversation (fun, but not always totally relevant for adults - “My favourite subject is,”). I supplemented the classes with the Linguaphone tapes (still worth using, now CDs) and the BBC programmes which some of you may remember: Russian Language and People, and the excellent Ochen Priyatno, 20 episodes of the travels of Arkhady and Svetlana.

Galina, our teacher, did a good job, and we all passed the exam. Barbara went to the USSR, where her hosts were delighted she knew some Russian, but I put my carefully learnt Russian phrases (“I have a headache and a sore throat”) on the back burner.

Fast forward thirty plus years, and as a newish member of the Oxford Perm Association, I received an email from Karen asking if anyone would be interested in Russian lessons. She organised two groups, meeting alternate weeks, and put me in the lower group. I thought a bit of revision was required and dug out my old text books. This proved helpful, but the frequent references to Leningrad, CCCP and comrades reminded me how much things have changed since the 1980s

So during lockdown earlier this year the magic of Zoom enabled me to sit at home and have Russian lessons from Cyprus, where Alexandra, our teacher had recently moved. She based the lessons on an interesting course, and gave us useful grammar notes of her own, which helped fill the gaps in my GCSE course. We covered a major grammar point each week (eg noun endings, perfective and imperfective) and learnt about Russian life in the reading passages. Some aspects, like painted Easter eggs, were familiar, others were new to us, most notably Cheburashka, an iconic cartoon character, now also a much sought after cuddly toy.

Alexandra is an excellent teacher coping with our varying abilities, and tailoring the questions accordingly. She was very encouraging however stumbling our responses (her trickiest question was “What news?” as very little was happening in our lockdown lives).

After the initial six lessons, sadly Alexandra had health problems requiring treatment. We wish her all the best, and hope that the lessons may yet resume. And if they do, I would recommend them to anyone wanting to revive rusty Russian.

Meanwhile you might like to follow some of the links Alexandra provided for us – it was quite an eye-opener to discover how many resources are available these days thanks to the internet of which here are two examples:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QSCYRLkjUA0&t=3s> Five minutes of Russian news each week in relatively simple Russian with Russian subtitles

<https://russianfilmhub.com> Lots of Russian films, mainly free, with English subtitles.

A Russian dacha

Jessica Vlasova

Many foreigners, as well as knowing the Russian words ‘vodka’ and ‘babushka’ are also familiar with the word ‘dacha’. They might have romantic ideas from Chekhov of summer days spent sitting on the veranda sipping tea next to a samovar but what is a modern day dacha like and how do people spend their time there?

As many OPA members who have visited Perm will know, a dacha is a second home in the country usually visited in the summer months only. Unlike in many other countries where owning a second home is only possible for the wealthy, Russian families with modest incomes can own a simple dacha with a plot of land.

Dachas had been around for the wealthy and middle classes since the 18th century but only became accessible to the majority of Russians during the 20th century. After the second world war the government started to distribute small plots of land easily accessible from the

cities where people could build small wooden houses and use the land to grow vegetables. Most dachas are still in these dacha colonies of 600 square metre plots.

However, many traditional village houses are now also being used as dachas. Some of these are acquired by those who moved away from their village and then later inherited from their parents the house where they grew up. Others buy a village house, of which there are many available as more people move to towns and cities. The advantages of living in a village house compared to a dacha in a dacha colony is that the costs are usually lower, the house comes with more land, there are larger distances between houses so more privacy and they are usually in better locations slightly further away from the cities and often nearer woods, rivers and lakes.

How do people spend their time at the dacha? Traditionally dacha plots were used for growing vegetables to feed the family. Although vegetable growing might not be such a necessity for everyone now, many people still spend a lot of time planting and harvesting vegetables often conserving produce for the winter. Many prefer to eat vegetables grown at the dacha than eat shop bought ones. Cooking outside especially shashlik (kebabs) is also popular as is having a banya if dacha owners are lucky enough to own one. If the dacha is near a forest then gathering mushrooms and berry picking are popular activities.

The realities of having a dacha can sometimes be hard. Many summer weekends are taken up with gardening and carrying out dacha repairs, not to mention sitting in traffic jams on Friday and Sunday evenings with all the other 'dachniki'. Not everyone has running water which means getting water from a well or bringing large bottles of water from the city, washing facilities can be basic and the toilet is often a wooden outhouse.

However, in spite of the hard work and sometimes basic amenities, many people, particularly city dwellers who live in blocks of flats, relish the chance to be closer to nature and enjoy the cleaner air. And at the end of a hard day tending the vegetable plot what is nicer than sitting in your garden with family and friends enjoying shashlik cooked on the barbecue!



A village house used as a dacha



A traditional dacha