

Tracking the “Living Book”: Doukhor Song in Canada since 1899

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On January 27, 1899, the first Sunday after their arrival in Winnipeg, a group of newly arrived Doukhor immigrant settlers gathered to sing and pray. In his moving account of this event, Leopold A. Sulerzhitskii (1871-1916) concludes:

It is difficult to say how the Doukhor psalms were created. In their content they are entirely in agreement with the gospel, and much, especially the words of Jesus Christ, is quoted word for word. All the same, the majority of the Doukhobors are convinced, to this day, that their psalms represent something original, having nothing in common with printed gospel. It seems to them that the unperverted teaching of Jesus Christ can be learned only from their psalms. The Doukhobors call all the psalms “The Books of Life,” that is a live book—living, giving life. It “lives in the hearts,” as the Doukhobors say. The Doukhobors never wrote down these psalms. They are passed on orally from generation to generation and are preserved only in the memory. (1982, 98)

Sulerzhitskii’s report, written in Russian, appeared in 1905; it marks the first attempt to define the nature of Doukhor psalmody. Three years later, in 1908, a collection of documents on Doukhor history was published with an addendum featuring eleven “ancient” Doukhor psalm texts. These were meant to illustrate the inner sources of Doukhor strength and fortitude and featured the psalm that was reportedly sung when members of the sect were flogged for burning their firearms on June 30, 1895, an act of defiance against conscription as enforced by the tsarist authorities (Biriukov 1908, 231-32). Because this event precipitated the subsequent exodus of Doukhobors to Canada, the psalm’s text, with its message of utter resignation, follows (in my English translation):

For your sake, O Lord, have I accepted the doors to coercion;
For your sake, O Lord, have I abandoned father and mother;
For your sake, O Lord, have I abandoned brother and sister;
For your sake, O Lord, have I abandoned all kith and kin;
For your sake, O Lord, have I abandoned all worldly goods;
For your sake, O Lord, do I walk in the throng of the flogged;

For your sake, O Lord, do I suffer taunts and abuse;
For your sake, O Lord, do I wander in want and need;
For your sake, O Lord, do I live without any protection:
Glory be to our god!

The epic style and stichic format of Doukhobor psalmody, illustrated above, are the cornerstones that distinguish it from the stanzaic and lyric-narrative formulations that are currently more characteristic of both Russian folk music and other Euro-American song traditions.

The monumental task of documenting the entire Doukhobor canon was first attempted by the remarkable Vladimir D. Bonch-Bruevich (1873-1955) whose research (see Klymasz 1980) and published collection (in 1909) constitute true landmarks in the history of Canadian folklore studies. Musical notations were still wanting, but appeared shortly in works published by Anna K. Chertkova, 1859-1927 (1910) and Evgeniia E. Lineva (known in the West as Eugenie Lineff), 1854-1919 (1912). The wealth of material that confronted both women seemed almost to engulf and squelch their efforts. Chertkova, for instance, discovered that documenting Doukhobor choral singing presented enormous difficulties since almost every participant sang in an individual way while following the leading voice. Chertkova continues:

Not one singer can repeat his or her part in isolation from the choir; even the leading singer crumbles without the support of accompanying voices; this Doukhobor singing, it seems to me, more than anything else, characterizes the collective soul of the Russian people. And therefore the precise documentation of Doukhobor psalms, in my opinion, is possible only by means of a phonograph. (1910, 3)

Although, unlike Sulerzhitskii and Bonch-Bruevich, she never set foot in this country, Chertkova did manage to document the singing of a small group of six Doukhobors from Canada (two women and four men including the Doukhobor leader himself, P.V. Verigin, "the Lordly"). In 1906, en route to Russia, the Canadian group stopped by at the Chertkov household in England. Chertkova noted that their singing was particularly "beautiful and original" and their psalms "absolutely interesting, with a very complex melody and completely unique harmonization" (1910, 4). Chertkova's musical notations from this meeting were never published. One can only hope these remain intact in some dusty archive awaiting their discoverer. Interestingly, Bonch-Bruevich's notes for his fieldwork among the Doukhobors in western Canada have been located in Russia and efforts are underway to acquire a copy for the Canadian Museum of Civilization.

In her paper for the fourth congress of the International Music Society (London, England, May 29-June 3, 1911), Lineva echoed Chertkova's concern about the difficulty of documenting Doukhobor singing but announced that the revolutionary phonograph had lightened her work in collecting and recording the Doukhobor repertoire:

The number of the Doochobor [sic!] psalms is very great and reaches, so they say, up to several thousands. New psalms are still composed, as a reflection of various events of their life. This first attempt of recording their psalms by a phonograph must be considered as an introduction to a large work of collecting Doochobor psalms.

As just stated, the Doochobor psalms are exceedingly long, one verse alone taking not less than from two to three cylinders for recording. Consequently, an attempt to present a Doochobor psalm in a short paper like the present appears impracticable. (1912, 196)

Five decades separate such Russians as Bonch-Bruevich and Lineva from the pioneering work of Kenneth Peacock, who must be credited as the first non-Russian to penetrate the barriers of language, history and tradition that discouraged outsiders from delving into Doukhobor musical culture. The ruthless denigration of all religious manifestations in Russia during the Soviet era (1917 to 1991) heightened the critical role of Canada's Doukhobors as carriers of the tradition and increased the need to salvage the legacy of Doukhobor singing before it disappeared altogether. This was the larger backdrop against which Peacock's Doukhobor activities need to be evaluated (Peacock 1966 and 1970; see also "P.L." 1963, and Landry 1975, 81-82). The work of another non-Russian, Mealing (1972; 1989), dovetailed with that of Peacock and added to a growing awareness within the Doukhobor community of other, non-oral vehicles for the communication of their ideals.

A laborious project to canvas Canadian Doukhobors for song texts was undertaken. Sponsored by the leading Doukhobor organization, the Union of Spiritual Communities of Christ (U.S.C.C.) a large (752 pages) compilation of Doukhobor psalms, hymns and songs was published. Nonetheless, the co-editors, Anna P. Markova and Peter P. Lezhebokov, acknowledged their failure to capture the entire "living book," for texts kept coming in even as the first edition went to press (1978, 692).

With the growing acceptance of literacy and print, the role of the individual as carrier, verse-maker and generative component within the Doukhobor song tradition became obvious and allowed for the recognition of such "poets" as Ivan F. Sysoev, 1894-1967 (see Peacock 1970, 102-03; and Kolesnikoff and Kolesnikoff 1980; and Sysoev 1975) and stimulated the production of small-press, privately published collections like that of Nick N. Kalmakoff. Kalmakoff's work (1991) is especially noteworthy for its insights into the acculturative forces intruding on the Doukhobor song tradition in Canada. His annotated collection of 610 song texts documents the continuing influence not only of Russia's classical poets (for instance, Mikhail Lermontov, 1814-1841) but also of Canada's mainstream English-language hymnody. Kalmakoff provides examples of a Doukhobor predilection for translating into Russian such favourites of the western Canadian Bible belt as "Amazing Grace" and "Abide with Me" as well as popular Christmas carols (e.g., "Silent Night" and "Joy to the World"). "Sbornik"

(Russian for "Collection") is the title of a short film about Kalmakoff currently in the final stages of editing by film-maker, Larry Ewashen, in British Columbia.

Another new development was the production and circulation of sound-recordings. Recordings promoted values of fixity, ideal duration, and proper execution, and brought these norms to bear on the Doukhobor song tradition. Audio-collections at the Canadian Museum of Civilization document still another revolutionary leap: the introduction of musical instruments and solo-singing with a focus on individualistic performance, in contrast to the tradition of unaccompanied choral singing. A long-playing "album"-disc in the Museum's collection of Canadian Doukhobor sound recordings ("Troyka Album, Russian Folk Songs, Peter Gritchen Sings") names the following participants in its production: "vocalist" (one only), "lead guitar" (two of these), "banjo", "bass guitar" and "drums." This and other recordings in the collection signal the secularization of Doukhobor song in Canada, pointing as well to the emergence of a concomitant ethnicity factor reflected in a report in the Doukhobor press (Anon. 1958) citing the "touchy" nature of this issue ("Should [Russian] folk singing be permitted in the Doukhobor community home?").

Salvage operations linked to the needs of future generations are evidenced in the on-going work of Shirley M. Perry (nee Cheveldayoff) who earned a Doctorate in Music Education from the University of Arizona although she lives and teaches in British Columbia. The work of a native Doukhobor, Perry's dissertation (1992) complements significantly the work of her predecessors, Russians and non-Russians alike, whose investigations of Doukhobor song often had lacked the tools at the disposal of today's researchers.

Those who have yet to witness the power of Doukhobor congregational singing should plan to attend one of the annual "youth" festivals sponsored by the Union of Spiritual Communities of Christ. The 1993 festival was held over the long weekend in May at the Brilliant Cultural Centre in Brilliant/Castlegar, British Columbia. The closing hymn, "The Time Has Come to Part" (Probil uzhe razluchnyi chas), brought to an end one of the most impressive displays of music-making ever witnessed by this writer!

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Sommaire: Robert B. Klymasz retrace l'histoire de publications sur la chanson canadienne Doukhobor, depuis l'arrivée de ce groupe à la fin du XIXe siècle jusqu'à maintenant. Il met l'accent sur les caractères distinctifs du chant choral Doukhobor traditionnel de même que sur l'apparition d'événements nouveaux comme les enregistrements.