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FATE OF THE FORT ROSS CEMETERY

by Alexei Istomin

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Author's Note: This text was translated by Oleg Terichow¹ It was one of his last works sent to me a few months before his death. I often recollect him and his wonderful human qualities—his kindness and modesty, generosity and tolerance. I met him and his wife Tamara at the cemetery excavations in July 1991 and spent several days at their hospitable home in San Rafael writing a part of my *Indians at the Ross Settlement*. A month later, visiting Moscow for the first time, Oleg and Tamara became the witnesses of the putsch of August 19. He was another Russian who finished his life in California.

I have made some corrections in the translated text, but as any translation, it can not serve as a full equivalent of the Russian original which is preferable for the Russian reader. I hesitated much before sending the translated text back to California. I did not wish to offend the archaeologists who made the excavations at the cemetery. They did their work very well according to professional standards. I hope they will understand me. Another doubt that prevented me from sending the text soon was how important is the idea of my article for an overpopulated world, full of forgotten or unknown burials and unburied pests? The problem, however, is not our symbolic, but real respect to the past and its people. For the historian who mainly deals with "those who are gone," it is not an unimportant question. In fact this is our respect to any other human being in the most general sense. Is the human being, even deceased, a goal or only a means for a professional career or religious-ethnic self-assertion? Our answer would reflect the real moral values of our civilization. Alexei Istomin, April 25, 1997, Moscow.

Recently I visited Fort Ross. I also visited the cemetery there, a place connected with many of my memories. There have been a lot of changes since the time of my previous visit. Instead of a dusty, gray area of excavations dotted with grave pits, there is now a green field covered with wild irises and recently erected crosses. The general appearance is that of order and care. However, my conscience is restless because of the realization of what had taken place at the cemetery during the previous few years.

I remember vividly the July days of 1991 when I participated in the cemetery excavations and where I was greeted by a hospitable group of archaeologists from the University of Wisconsin under the leadership of Dr. L. Goldstein. However, the word "participated" is not an exact word. Right in the beginning I prepared for Sannie Osborn, who was specifically studying the cemetery population, a list of people presumably buried there, compiled from the documents available to me at that time. During the next four weeks that I spent in California, I wrote a booklet, *The Indians at the Ross Settlement*, still available at the bookstore at Fort Ross. As far as the actual excavation is concerned, I was only an observer, a witness. Not

being an archaeologist, (I am a historian, concerned with documents on the history of Russian America) I was present only as a consultant on various aspects and as an observer of the process of excavation, preserving with photographs everything that captivated my attention.

The acidic soil had absorbed the buried bodies almost completely. They became earth, and when recovered by archaeologists it was as a dust in the air above the cemetery which settled on our clothes, skins and food; we inhaled that dust.

With the daily progress of excavation, a feeling of guilt and shame grew inside of me. The intrusion of scientists into the most intimate, the last resort of the human body, I perceived as a violation of the will of the deceased and of their relatives. When I shared my feelings with one of the students from Wisconsin who worked there, she confessed that she also had a similar feeling.

Such revelations will evoke only a smile from archaeologists (as well as from the majority of historians). The main source of archaeological study depends on the excavation of burials—from the Egyptian pharaohs to the innumerable burials of all nations and periods. Archaeology is intimately connected with this "violation of the sanctity" of the grave. I understand this perfectly; and I was also curious to find out what was hidden in the ground because we know so little about the population of Fort Ross. . . .

The reason for my feelings was probably not only in the fact of excavation of the graves, but also that almost nothing was preserved in the acidic soil. Found were some objects of ornament, crosses, buttons, nails, and rarely the remains of wooden coffins and fragments of clothing. There were almost no human remains; mainly teeth were recovered, but not even the teeth, only the enamel, light, almost weightless shells, the subject of study by anthropologists present. Only rarely did we encounter bones. The rest became the earth which was unloaded on the side of the excavated area, that at the end of the work was eventually simply spread over the graves and leveled off by a bulldozer.

My feeling of non-acceptance was reinforced on the day of the first reburial. (Even the definition of a "reburial" is incorrect, maybe even an improper word.) Small boxes were placed into two holes dug in the ground, the same cardboard boxes, marked with the letter "feature" and a number, in which the archaeologists had been collecting the items found during the excavations. It was the burial of artifacts rather than human beings. This feeling of formalism and profanation of ceremony was not overcome by the professionalism of Fr. Vladimir Deriugin, who, assisted by his family and another member of the clergy, performed the *panihida*, even when a wind gust overturned the icon. The Americans present were satisfied—the service was conducted in two languages, even applauded at the end of the service. At the departure from the cemetery, Fr. Deriugin told me with satisfaction, "We have done what they could have wished for themselves." When later in Moscow, I said these words to a well-known researcher of Russian

¹"Terichow" is a German transliteration of the Russian last name which sounds like "Terikhov". I must add that the article itself was published thanks to Oleg's help.

America, she answered thoughtfully, "Nobody could know what they wished for themselves." And indeed it is so.

Four years later the excavations had been successfully concluded. Regional Archaeologist Breck Parkman from the State Department of Parks and Recreation told me that all the remains were buried at the appropriate graves (however, of what kind of remains do we speak when often only the enamel shells of a few teeth were preserved?) In May of 1994 I learned by chance that there were plans to erect standard wooden crosses on the graves in the cemetery within only one day. I was categorically against such action, however my protest was too late to be considered and probably would have been ineffective considering the commotion that, as far as I can judge, was associated with this activity.

The crosses are now installed, standard in appearance, giving an impression of a barrack-type place. Except for military cemeteries, which require the uniform appearance, all others should not be uniformly faceless. For the historical reconstruction of a cemetery it was completely inappropriate. The crosses were assembled with modern type nails or even with screws. Two of them show damage and a few are tightly overlapping. It is important to check the number of crosses and the number of graves. Even a superficial look indicated discrepancies. But this is not the only problem. I respect greatly the patriotic enthusiasm of the young people, scouts, who quickly and energetically performed their assignment; but such a job cannot be done within one day. Usually it would be preceded by the lengthy preparations of historians, ethnographers and archaeologists in order to determine the scope of restorations and to prepare their project. The prompt and simultaneous erection of crosses contradicts the concept of individual burial place. A large memorial cross with an explanatory table would be sufficient.

It is necessary to ask a few principal questions about the excavation and restoration.

1. *Necessity and rightfulness of excavations.* This question in the most general aspect is connected with the controversy between scientific search and the right of a human to the inviolability of its remains. As we know, this question of "to dig or not to dig" is usually resolved in favor of science or forensic medicine, not to speak of grave robbers and repeated re-utilization of old burials. But in this particular case at Fort Ross, in addition to scientific curiosity, two other factors were determinant. First, only excavation could help to provide some individualization of each grave for proper restoration of the cemetery. Secondly, (and this became obvious during the time of the excavation) there was an urgency not to delay the works. As B. Parkman told me considering the soil acidity, "After another fifty years, even the teeth would not have survived." However, in my opinion, exactly this condition of the soil required a specific approach for the conduct of the excavation of this particular cemetery. Because of poor preservation of the remains, the concept of "remains" should have been extended and should have included the whole content of the graves. After the conclusion of opening a grave, it would have been preferable to return the whole excavated content (the earth) back into the same grave. It may sound uncommon or even absurd from an archaeologist's view, but it would require only plastic containers to collect and preserve each grave's earth. It may appear unusual for an archaeological tradition but in no way would have interfered with the process of excavation.

2. *Can we talk about the cemetery in a traditional way, i.e. as an assembly of individual graves, after the performed excavations?* My answer unequivocally is no. Under the condition of poor preservation of remains, the consequence of the excavations is that the cemetery has become a mass grave, destroyed in its original shape.

I admit that I accept partially my own responsibility for this, although I was not an active member of the excavations. As the sole Russian specialist there, and in general a sole representative of Russia-USSR at that time, I had symbolically sanctioned the event, unconsciously and implicitly; the meaning of which was not obvious to me at that time. The possibility of an active interference into a well organized process of excavation appears problematic to me even now.

3. *Identification of graves.* Do we know who was buried in these graves? Regretfully, no excavations and no archival search can give us a satisfactory answer to this question. The results of the excavations can give us in the best case only the general identity of the person—sex, approximate age, racial characteristics, maybe the ethnic origin. Even this is plenty. But the main thing, the name, remains unknown. As I mentioned before, I prepared for Sannie Osborn a list with the names of people that could have been buried there. The list was rather short. Later, in my letters to her I added more names. The total number was no more than a dozen. Now there are 22 names, including Kulikalov who apparently died at Ross. (See FRIA Newsletter January - February 1996.) And, of course, it is impossible to determine exactly in what graves these individuals are buried.

4. *Scientific restoration of the cemetery.* According to a memo from B. Parkman of April 20, 1990, the excavations were a part of the proposed restoration of the cemetery. The objective of the excavations were the localization and identification of individual graves for better preservation and restoration of the original appearance of the cemetery with the condition that the objects including bone remains found in the graves not be the subject of any archaeological collections. However, if the remains (or what are called as such) are reburied, the artifacts removed from the graves become archaeologists' finds. It appears that the interests of science and of morals are again in conflict.

Here we have to resort to common sense. Some items are destined to be destroyed by the acidity of the soil. They have to remain at scientists' disposal. Apparently, they include items of interest to grave-robbers because of their antiquarian value (jewelry etc.) These should be exhibited by the Museum of Fort Ross (and not stored in boxes) with an indication of the characteristics such as sex and age of their deceased owners.

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Let us consider that we have borrowed these items from the deceased in order to preserve the memory of them. Everything else should be returned to their proper graves: human remains and all other items in the same place from where they were removed. The artificial placement by means of plastic tubing, etc. appears to be inappropriate.

The erection of crosses performed on May 14, 1994 was not the restoration of the cemetery, and is at best a poor imitation of it. The questions of a truly scientific restoration are not resolved. Meanwhile, the materials for such restoration are available and have been collected by Ms. Maria Sakovich in

Berkeley. They are contained in American periodicals dated 1884, 1893, etc., in a detailed description in the *History of Sonoma County* (1880), as well as in an article by Bishop Nikolai (1897), that were published in the *Russian Life Daily* (San Francisco, 1982). A photograph of one of the monuments appeared in the notes of Fr. F. Pashkovsky in *American Orthodox Messenger* (1905). These descriptions allow a relatively complete reconstruction of the cemetery in its variable appearance: from simple wooden plates on the graves to some wooden monuments and even stone headstones.

What can be done at the present time?

1. Delineate the graves by means of rock borders or a modest fence (considering all the conventionality of such delineation because of the fact that the cemetery has become a mass burial.)

2. Check the accuracy of the cross locations and their correspondence with the number of graves.

3. Establish on the graves or on the crosses, if this is allowable by Church tradition, the information about the person—sex, age, ethnic or racial origin. This is the only

possible replacement for their names, which is impossible to determine for specific graves, even if we find their names in archives. This way each grave will be individually identified, at least to a certain degree.

4. Gradually, with the participation of specialists, replace the existing crosses with the historically identifiable monuments according to available descriptions. Erection of each monument should be a special act and could involve private donors who will be informed of their sponsored grave. It is possible to attract for this purpose organizations like Kodiak Area Native Association, the *Society of Russian America* in Moscow, as well as the cities and regions in Russia whose immigrants rest now at Fort Ross.

5. At the entrance to the cemetery a table should be placed with explanation about the history of this place and its real condition after the excavation. In a main place a monument or a cross/obelisk should be erected, made of rock, considering the humid climate. Near this obelisk a stone plate should be placed. The inscription on it should contain the known names and dates. There should be a blank space on this plate for names that may be found in the future as a result of archival search.

After those excavations I have a special feeling of responsibility and compassion for my long ago deceased compatriots whose bodies rest in California, on the edge of the world, far away from home, and in whose graves I had to look. A historian is an intermediate between past and the present, between the dead and the living. The dead ones are incapable to defend themselves against the wills of the living and deserve protection.