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From Russia to Annisquam Woman's journey out of fighting wasn't easy

By Gail McCarthy

When the Annisquam Village Players decided to stage "Fiddler on the Roof," several residents thought about a beloved neighbor, Kira Robinson, who grew up in Russia. The play takes place in Russia in 1905, four years before Robinson was born

The first scene of the show has almost the entire cast on stage, including the village elder.

When directors Terry Sands and Mary Curtis wanted to cast Annisquam's own village elder, they thought of Robinson, who turned 97 in May.

Rough times

Even though Robinson was unsure about taking the stage, she did share some stories from her childhood when she fled Russia as a girl.

Born Kira Volkoff in 1909 in Saint Petersburg, she was an only child.

"Can you image? I lived almost a century," she said during a recent interview in the serene village of Annisquam.

But her early years were anything but serene.

Speaking through clear, brown eyes, she remembers Russian restrictions on where Jews lived. She was raised Russian Orthodox by her mother and grandmother. Both her parents descended from nobility. Hence, she was raised speaking Russian, as well as French, the language of the upper classes.

But she was born during a time of political turmoil. She remembers looters throwing pianos from wealthy homes because they didn't know what they were.

Starting in 1905, strikes and violent anti-government protests began against Tsar Nicholas II, the last emperor of Russia, who was forced to abdicate in 1917. The Russian Civil War followed for the next five years. The main fighting took place between the Communist troops called the Red Army and the anti-Communist White Army.

After the Communists won in 1922, the Soviet Union formed. Although not in the middle of the fighting, Robinson could not escape the politics of the time.

She said in the early days of the revolution, her father just disappeared. He was a lawyer who prosecuted the

revolutionaries.

"He just vanished," said Robinson, who would not see her father again until she married in 1930.

She recalled attending an all-girl school when a Red Army commissar patted her on the shoulder and asked what were the students doing. The young Kira replied that they were taking a French class.

He replied to her: "What's that?"

Getting out

She and her mother, Natalia Michailovna, and grandmother went to live in a cottage, located in a Ukrainian village.

Even there, times were tense. She attended a birthday party, and going home she and her mother had to cross a field.

"We saw two opposing armies on either side," she recalled. "My mother said, 'We have to go through the middle, and nothing will happen.'"

Lucky for them, her mother was correct.

When the girl was ready to start a new school with a new uniform, her mother decided it was time to leave. She was about 11 years old around 1920.

The three generations of women fled together.

"My mother got us out of the country very neatly," she said, talking in the library area of her home. "Mother was always packed and ready to leave. I was supposed to stand at the dock and see if a boat came that could take us out."

One day, she saw a small French naval vessel come in, and she spoke French to the officer, a Capt. Muselier.

"I told him we wanted to leave, but he said the boat was leaving in a few hours. But my mother was ready, and we left with them," she said.

The French vessel took the women to Turkey, where they resided in Istanbul for two years.

"It was so exciting because all these armies were there," she said. "There were Scotties in their kilts. The Turks still wore their fezzes, and the women still wore veils."

She remembered having good times playing in the Golden Horn, an area of water near the bay of Istanbul.

Bound for New York

From Turkey, the women traveled to Schenectady, N.Y., where one of her mother's best friends lived, married to a man who worked for General Electric.

"I arrived on a Saturday and started school on Monday," she said. "Two days later I was promoted because I could out-spell the other children."

The family settled in the city, where she attended school and met the boy she would one day marry.

One of her high school teachers talked to her about attending a teachers college, though she was less than enthused. But the teacher later told her about an exam that would earn her a full scholarship to Cornell University in New York if she scored well.

"She told me this on a Thursday, and the test was on Saturday," she recalled, thinking it would have been nice to have had time to study and prepare. But she scored high and earned that college degree in liberal arts with a major in French.

She and Howard Robinson were wed; the marriage would last 63 years. He was from an Andover family, descended from old Boston blood.

Her husband was a physicist in the field of atomic energy. They lived on Long Island, as well as in Sweden and Paris, while he worked for the State Department.

Once her children were grown, she was approached to teach Russian language and literature at Adelphi University on Long Island.

But when the couple decided to retire, they found a nearly 300-year-old cottage in Annisquam, which looked much like the cottage of her childhood in the Ukraine, a white, clapboard house with green shutters and an apple tree in the yard. They had become familiar with the area when their son married a girl from Folly Cove.

Robinson, who speaks and reads three languages - English, Russian and French, spends a great deal of time reading all sorts of books. She is currently reading "Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon." Although raised Russian Orthodox, she calls herself "irreligious."

But she enjoys pursuit of the intellect and the study of languages. She holds weekly French Club meetings at her home, where the participants speak French.

"Kira is just a joy and much admired in the community," said Jaye Whittier of Annisquam.

While some people half her age are intimidated by rapidly changing technology, Robinson is a modern woman with her office equipped with a computer she uses regularly.

Though she has no siblings, Robinson's family boasts many generations, with three children, several grandchildren and now a great-grandson.