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The Old Believers

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Authors

Loughlin, Ryan
Jonassen, Wendi

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Wendi and Ryan
The Old Believers
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Women bowing, inside church, candles being lit, icon outside of church, ES of church, carrying alter, (Church Bells)

VO, Vasily: What I fear. What I fear most is spiritual deadness, more than anything, people are going to lose faith in god.

Food being served at feast, CUs of people at feast, father standing to give speech

VO, Kollmann: The goal of the Old Believer is salvation. They feel that change represents a threat to the ways that god has taught them to live.

(music), aerials of Alaska, village, church, women bowing in front of church, down road in Nikolaevsk, little boy with an ice pick, snowmobile going down the hill

Vasily: All I know is that Dad was born in China, Mom was born in Brazil. They lived in Oregon for a bit and then they wanted to preserve the culture, the Russian culture, a lot better, so they moved here to Alaska.

ES of Yakunin house, CU of cross, painting on wall

Vasily on laptop, father on cellphone

Vasily with prayer book

Vasily: This is our six day book. It's pretty cool. The services are all the same. Every weekend but each tone changes how you are seeing something. And therefore expresses different emotions in your heart. (Vasily sings.) I am not very good at singing.

Painting of 17th century Russia, (Moscow 1666 lower third)

VO, Kollmann: It was in the air that the end of the world was coming and the antichrist would come first. And so when their faith got tampered with by the official church changes, many of them concluded that the antichrist had arrived.

Title card: In 1666, the Russian government imposed reforms on the official orthodox church.

Title card: A group known as the Old Believers rejected the reforms and split from the church.

Kollmann: The reforms were how many fingers you make when making the sign of the cross, how many times you sing hallelujah during the service, how to spell the name of jesus.

Archival images of Patriarch Nikon, church council

Father: The main church adopted this type of finger position when they crossed themselves. My forefathers kept to this.

Archive of finger position, pull back to Jesus

Kollmann: If my father and grandfather crossed themselves by raising two fingers and making the sign of the cross, and as far as I know they went to heaven after they died then I'm not going to change anything.

Father: It might not seem like a big issue, but to them it was.

Father: People were forced to accept it, if anybody brought up a question, he was beat. His fingers were cut off or something like that. Tongues cut out.

Archival of OBs being burned at the stake

Kollmann: Several prominent resisters were imprisoned, killed, burned at the stake, died under torture.

Archival of OB being taken away from several shots.

Kollmann: One of the most famous Old Believers is Feodosia Morozova. She resisted publicly the church reforms. The state decided to imprison her, torture her, and she died in prison.

Archival of Old Believers going to Siberia – painting.

Kollmann: Old Believers tended to leave Moscow as far behind as possible. Many wound up in Siberia.

Archival of Old Believers in Siberia – stills.

Kollmann: They escaped authority and fled to the forests of Siberia.

Kollmann: The Old Believers throughout the rest of imperial Russia were illegal. Although they practiced their faith sort of underground.

Kollmann: The Old Believers have always been challenged to find an isolated enough community where they can practice their own way of life.

ES of Nikolavsk down the road, outside post office, sign outside of post office

Sewing lady: Now this is for like a ten-year-old little girl. She came and picked out the fabric and asked me to sew it with red lace on it.

Lady holding with satin green fabric, CU of face sewing, CU of hands sewing

Sewing lady: This village used to be so much more private. There used to be a private gate in the beginning of the village where if you don't make it in time, that gate is closed up.

ES of Nikolaevsk from above

Father: 1968 was the first group that came up here. There was, uh, what was it, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, about 5 families moved up here in the beginning.

Eli: It's a small community. You can't marry your relatives. So you definitely can't always find someone in the communities.

Vasily: My wife, we met at parties in Oregon. A lot of us younger men that are single we like to go to Oregon to look for a bride. So we had a lot easier or a, more of a chance to find a woman, a bride in Oregon.

Archival photos of them in Oregon partying, fishing, and their wedding photos.

Frosi: In the beginning when we got married, I wanted to live at home, because in Oregon where I'm from, the city is right there, like 2 minutes away. But got married, kind of got the hang of it, so I don't mind it. You have less temptations of always wanting to go out to eat, go see the movies. We are trying to live a spiritual life, a Christian life. So that helps a lot, living in the village.

ES of Nikolaevsk, church

(sounds of cheering), Old Believers ladies clapping in stands

Coach: When I first came here in 1990, I coached junior high girls basketball and at that time, the girls were required to wear skirts.

Archival of the girls wearing the skirts.

VO, Coach: And they were homemade by the parents because there was a strong cultural belief that the girls would wear dresses at all times.

BBall game, shots of Old Believers in the stands

Coach: A lot of the girls were getting married at young ages, 14, 15, 16. And because of that, they would leave school and dropout, get married, and start their families. And that was part of their culture.

Shots of basketball game, fans

Coach: And that has changed. The parents no longer deny their girls to go to higher education. But the problem is we are sending the children out to get educated and they go off and sometimes they go come back to build their homes here.

Buzzer, slapping hands, end of game

Eli: Right now I am living in Anchorage, going to college.

Shots of Eli putting on make-up, drinking a beer.

Eli: I was raised Russian Orthodox, in Nikolaevsk. My parents, they felt as a younger person, I would be really easily influenced or all the temptations of the outside world would just be overwhelming.

Shots of Eli chilling with her friend on couch, holding iphone and kitty.

Eli: And I would not want to keep my faith and I think the older people are definitely really nervous of that. They have been through a lot. They definitely I think they deserve to keep the traditions that they want to.

Eli leaving with football on tv.

Archival footage of onion dome falling in Moscow 1920s

Kollmann: During Soviet times in particular, under Stalin when anti fervor got going in the 1930's is when most people fled out of Russia, from places like Siberia to China.

Map showing, Siberia to China.

Father: There was orders for my grandfathers arrest. Then they had to decide really quick.

Aerial from helicopter at night.

Father: They traveled at night. I don't know how long they traveled, just walking. And it was apparently in the winter because they just crossed the river into Manchuria on ice.

Archivals of OBS in China, family, little girls, baby in basket.

Father: I don't know if I am from China or not, but I was born in China.

Father: Mostly the men were hunters.

Father holding up photo of elk, tiger.

Father: They were hired also to take tigers that were man eaters out of the system.

Father holding up photo, goes to digital.

Father: My father said, in his lifetime in China, he has shot, uh, 36 tigers. He had to shoot that many. Laughs.

Shot of bald eagle. Shot of beach, Shot of flags.

Kollmann: They become fisherman. They become miners, They become loggers. They are known to be very adaptable wherever they go.

Vasily: My Dad and my Uncle Victor. They came to Alaska to start fishing and they didn't know a thing about it.

Shots of boats in AK. Shot of the Yakunin's boat.

Eli: For me fishing is just kind of the family business. My Dad has always done it.

Old family photos of her and her Dad fishing.

Eli: He had a boat that I was going to buy from him and do salmon fishing for the rest to my life. Probably going to fish this summer for sure, and maybe next summer. But after that, I am hoping to do internships. Fishing will probably be a thing of the past for me.

Landscape of the beach.

Archival of men holding flag, tank coming in, prison camp, labor camp photos

Father: In 1945, the red army came into Manchuria. Groups of men were arrested out of the communities. And they were treated as deserters.

Kolmann: Anybody who resisted was subject to arrest and being put into the labor camps, in a system that we refer to as the gulag.

Father: Millions of people were sent there. No, they were just arresting everybody. And if you had an icon in your icon corner, like we have, you get to go to the gulag for 5 – 10 years.

Archival of gulag.

Archival of People's Liberation Army

Kollmann: Come the communist revolution in China, the Old Believers discovered that China like Russia under the soviets was not a friendly environment.

Archival of Chinese uprising, people in the streets

Father: Their new government decided that all the foreigners had to leave.

Archival people getting on train.

Father: Our folks knew they weren't going back to Russia. They knew what was waiting for them there.

Kollmann: Old Believers whether they were escaping communist Russia or Communist China went many places in the world wherever they could find land to farm. Brazil was one of those places.

Map of journey to Brazil

Father: Part of my childhood was in Brazil.

Archival of Old Believers in Brazil.

Father: When we were there, everybody was trying to grow rice, not really a good living. But it was a struggle.

Shot of pastoral Brazil

Kollmann: To find a place where they make a viable living, they sought elsewhere.

Archival of Old Believers traveling

Kollmann: Many Old Believers in the second half of the 20th century wound up in places in the United States, including Oregon.

Map Brazil to Oregon

Archival of Russian children, OB on Oregon farm, OB in front of American flag

Father: The first day in Oregon, Dada went to work and they got paid, that same day. And Dad said, yep, we can make live here. We can make a living here.

Archival of three old OBs in Oregon.

Father: In Oregon we lived until 1970. There was concerns that we are assimilating too rapidly, becoming too Americanized.

Father: They could have found places in Oregon or the states too, but Alaska was something that was enticing to them.

Vasily: Our Russian is so mixed up with so many different cultures. Because we have been to Brazil, China. In Russian beans in frazol, but we say fijon, but that is the Portuguese word for bean. So casha fijon, we're speaking a half Russian and half Portuguese.

Frosi: I used to speak Russian fluently when I lived in South America. But came back to the United States, forgot most of it.

Shots of Frosi and Vasily hanging out, reading.

Vasily: I bought my wife and myself a Rosetta Stone, so that we can learn proper Russian.

ES of outside of school, (school children singing), interior shot of children singing

Teacher: I started as interrupter for the kids come in as Russian, Russian don't know English, so I started as interpreter.

Shots of little blonde girl flipping through book,

And then, now it's kind of I have to teach Russian to them instead of English, so it's turned around. After 27 years, that is how it is.

Little blonde girl reading from book, reciting Russian, teacher walking up aisle way

VO: How do you go about it? How do you try to make it important for them?

Anchorage street shot. Eli goes to McDs, rolls window down and orders a fish fillet.

Looking out of a car window down road. Eli's face driving

Eli I am driving home for St. Nicholas holiday. Our church is named St. Nicholas so we usually have a big feast after the church service.

CU of hands on steering wheel, shots of Alaska from road, outside car window

Eli: Nikolaevsk is very very small. There is just a post office. There is no stores.

More shots of wilderness passing by out the window

Eli: A lot of my friends have already gotten married, have kids. So I am, of my age group, one of the only ones that moved to Anchorage.

Kollman: Living in the modern world, it's very hard to tell the younger generation, you can't watch television, you can't have a mobile phone.

ES of movie theater with Russian writing

OBs getting popcorn, soda machine, OB boy ordering, walking into movie theater until cell phone sign pops up.

VO, Kollmann: For the Old Believers it's a challenge to live in the modern world wherever they are on the globe.

Teenagers walk into the theatre, turn off your cellphone ad shows up on big screen.

ES of a cabin, man chopping wood

Akati: A Russian Old Loser lives here.

Akati: I'm from everywhere, grown up in Mongolia, Manchuria China. China to Brazil, Brazil to United States.

Akati: Life in Alaska! (Akati talking to his chickens)

Kollmann: The Old Believers in Nikolaevsk have in a sense come full circle around the globe, getting close to Siberia again by being in Alaska.

Kollmann: If you set your mind back to the 1660's, and if you reject the official church, you cannot accept newly ordained priests because the only people who can ordain them are bishops of the church. And no bishops in the 17th century went over to the Old Belief.

Archivals of 17th century Moscow

Kollmann: The basic question is, then, do we accept priests from somebody or do we go without priests? And the question is still very much alive for Old Believers.

Archival of old newspapers

Father: So when we settle here, we see all the freedom we have. We can travel. We can travel. We have enough money to see the world.

Archival of old newspapers.

Father: So when this question arose in the minds of our elders, they said, well let's go and take a look.

Kollmann: In the 1980s one of them went to Romania, which is a center of priestly Old Believers from Russia.

Archival of old Russian priests.

Kollmann: And got a bishop to ordain him. Some of the Old Believers in Nikolaevsk were willing to accept this person who had been ordained in Romania and some not.

Archival of Nikolaevsk's first priest. Titlecard: Father Nikolai became the 2nd priest in Nikolaevsk.

Father: The reaction was pretty nasty. There was a lot of animosity.

Title card: In July 1984, the priestly Old Believers finished building a second church in Nikolaevsk.

Title card: A few days later the original priestless church burned to the ground.

Akati: Oh god, it was terrible.

Archival of old days Nikolaevsk.

Akati: There was a new church and right across there was an old church. Our church, the priestless church went up in flames.

Archival of burnt church

Akati: They burned that down. And then I talked to fire department here in Anchor Point. They said well fire start from attic, from electrical whatever.

Archival of burnt church

Akati: Guess what? They don't have any electrical in the church. How does electrical start fire in there? That's the question mark. Who started the fire?

Father: It created huge controversy. People started moving out of this community because of it. Another split.

Title Card: The cause of the fire remains unknown, but with tensions high, several families left to form priestless communities.

Map of the Kenai

Kollmann: If controversies arise in Old Believer community, like Nikolaevsk, between priestly and priestless, some are going to split off and form new communities to practice the faith and the way of life they think is correct.

ES of Akati through Diner window

Reindeer again, reindeer sausage, inside diner, ordering food.

Akati: My kids, they used to live up there in Nikolaevsk, they all moved out.

CU of sausage

Akati: Well they got the new believers up there, the new priest. So they start scattering all over the place.

Aerial of switchback, road to priestless village

VO, Akati: Well it used to be they coming in by the boat or helicopter when they start out this village here. My brother lives down here my kids live down here.

Akati driving down switchback, beach

Aerial of beach, through front windshield

VO, Akati: They said get out.

Shots of No trespassing signs

VO, Akati: Eh, right there. It said no trespassing, private property.

Shots of town through windshield

Lower third: Kachemak Selo, Priestless Village

Akati: Ok this is it, dead-end over there and dead-end over here.

Shots of buildings in town, empty streets

VO, Akati: People hiding in there, from everybody.

Crow overhead. ES of welding shop

CU of welder, mask, WS of shop

Ivan Kalugin talking to his son in a mix of Russian and English

Ivan: We had one religion and then some of the Russian folks, they discovered another religion. And our folks did not want to associate with that religion so they left.

Ivan prepping tools, welding

Ivan: The guys that I grew up with, I still see them and talk to them once in awhile, but we don't associate. If you don't associate with bad people you're not going to be bad, right?

ES of church, red truck drives past

Women washing a ton of potatoes, salmon cutting, mashing potatoes.

VO, cooking lady: We have a big holiday tomorrow. It's St. Nicholas Day. Our church is named St. Nicholas. So we traditionally, every year, have an annual feast. The whole community is invited tomorrow morning after church services.

Dusting pastries with flour

Cooking lady: And right now we are making a Russian food, called Shanushki.

Shots of them making potato dumplings

Cooking lady: We prepared something not so traditional. We wanted to go a little bit different way this year. We made fish burgers and halibut chowder, which is also not a very traditional Russian food, but, you know, it's 2012, we want to do something different... laughter.

Pulling tablecloth on table

Eli family photo, follow Eli into bedroom

Eli: Usually there are no bumps allowed so you have to braid your hair.

Eli: When I first moved to Anchorage, I had a lot of doubts, a lot of questions whether I was going to stay in the faith or not.

Eli putting scarf on in mirror

Eli: But at this point, I am starting to lean toward it. I think there are some beautiful traditions. Ta-da, now I am ready for church.

Outside early morning (bells), church service, timelapse of clouds over church, (chanting comes in)

Inside feast, priest leading prayer, men praying and crossing themselves

Kollmann: I think the dispersal of Old Believers is an ongoing phenomenon that will never end. Because they'll always be attempting escape the pressures of the modern world.

Old Believers, eating, laughing, celebrating

Vasily: If God has a plan for me to go somewhere else that's where I need to be you know.

Father: Where else is there to go to? Maybe the moon.

Women crossing themselves and walking back into church.

(Credits)

Sources

Interviews:

Father Nikolai Yakunin, priest of Nikolaevsk

Akati Kalugin, Priestless Old Believer living in Alaska

Vasily Yakunin, son of the priest, soon-to-be priest of Nikolaevsk

Eli Yakunin, the niece of the the priest in Nikolaevsk

Ivan Kalugin, Akati's son, priestless Old Believer living in Alaska

Bea Klaich, Nikolaevsk high school basketball coach

Luba Dorvall, Russian teacher at Nikolaevsk School

Dr. Alexander Dolitsky, Russian religion expert at University of Alaska in Juneau

Dr. Robert Crummey, Russian historian at UC Davis

Dr. Jack Kollman, Russian historian at Stanford

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