

Belov Family Icon

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Serge P. Belov, my grandfather, gave the Belov Family Icon to my mother a few months before she married my father in 1962. (See photo of Pete and Diane Belov taken in 1965 on page 2 of the Introduction to the Kent Book) My mother said she knew when grandfather handed her the canvas bag that it contained an icon, even before opening it. This seems strange as my mother is a fifth generation Mormon and had never actually seen a real Icon before. However, my mother is a political science major so perhaps it was a lucky guess. Grandfather died in 1977, so there is no way I can verify what follows. But my mother swears this is what he told her:



The Belov Family Icon was crafted before oil paints were developed. The wooden part was etched by a wood burning process. The metal casing was probably added a few centuries later. The Cyrillic letters that run behind the central figure and across the pages of the open book is very ancient Russian script.

Tradition has it that this icon was taken into battle in 1554 when my great ancestors defeated the Golden Horde. They hung it over the entrance to their tent and prayed for victory before it. (Professor McPhie’s note: “In looking at your Icon I can make out the last three words: ‘Image of Saint Nicolas, the Miracle Worker.’ But after much trying I cannot decipher the writings from the Bible.”)

My grandfather said his great aunt was the keeper of the family icons in her generation. After losing her fiancée in one of Russia’s many wars in the mid 1800s, she determined never to

marry and devoted her life to religious pursuits. She kept this icon along with many others of significance to the family. In her old age she gave this Icon to her nephew, Peter Matthew Belov, my great grandfather, who lived on the Volga River near Kazan. Many of the relatives grumbled at the time saying, "It should have gone to the older brother, Leonid." But time proved Auntie made the right decision. For Peter Matthew's and his family were the only ones to survive the Revolution. Peter Matthew and his two sons, Matthew and Zuka, were officers in the White Russian Army. They evacuated with wife and mother Catherine across Siberia with the White Russian Army in 1918. Grandfather said, "The winters were so cold that a sparrow, leaving it's nest, would fly into the sky, freeze to death and drop to the ground dead."

My great grandfather's family settled in Tsing Tao, China. But my grandfather Serge came to the United States to get an education. He worked hard, married and graduated from the University of California at Berkeley. As he graduated in the midst of the great depression and was unable to find work here in the United States, he returned to China with his wife and two-year old daughter Catherine. My father, Peter Serge Belov, was born in Tsing Tao five months after they arrived, in December of 1935. In May of 1949 Serge decided to evacuated his family to Brisbane Australia. while his parents remained in China. They believed that the icon and their Chinese citizenship would protect them from the new Communist regime of Mao Tse-tung. After grandmother Claudia's death in Brisbane Australia in 1951, my grandfather and Aunt Catherine returned to the United States. My dad, having Chinese citizenship, moved to Canada. Eventually he too settled in the United States.

The story of how the icon found it's way out of Communist China and to my grandfather in Gabbs, Nevada is nothing less than miraculous. Great-grandfather Matthew died in Tsing Tao in 1954. His wife died ten months later. Shortly before her death she called a trusted friend to her bedside and said "Try to get this icon to Serge. It is very important." After seeing her properly buried, the friend emigrated to Brazil taking the Belov Family Icon with her. She hoped someday to find a way to fulfill my great grandmother's request.

Five years later the woman made a trip to California but had no idea where Serge was living or how to contact him. While walking down a street in San Francisco she met Mrs. Swenson, who at one time, was engaged to Serge's older brother Matthew. She asked her if she knew where Serge was living. Mrs. Swenson replied that my grandfather lived and worked in Gabbs, Nevada, but was expect to arrive in San Francisco that very evening. So a special dinner was arranged and the icon presented to him. Three years later he gave it to my mother.

Both my father and grandfather believed that Russian icons have unusual power. Grandfather told us of an instance when Red soldiers invaded a private home in Samara Provence. They looted and destroyed the house and it's furnishings. But when they attempted to shoot point blank at one of the icons hanging on the wall, bullets struck all around it but could not hit not damage the relic. The soldiers became so frightened they ran from the house. Of course, there is no way to verify any of these stories but they are all very interesting. The age and unusual history of the Belov family icon seems to lend credence to the traditions. At the very least, they demonstrates the faith of the Russian people in their holy icons.