

## Origin and Probable Extinction of the Russian Surname Ponafidine (ПОНАФИДИН)

In 1453, the Turkish army stormed into Constantinople and Constantine XIII, the last emperor of the Byzantine Empire, perished fighting its advance. However, shortly before the city fell, the emperor's brother, Thomas (Foma) Paleologue and his family escaped and made their way to Rome where they were received by the Pope as refugees.

In 1472, through the good offices of the Pope, Sophia (Zoe) Paleologue, the emperor's niece, married Ivan III, the widowed Prince of Moscow. In turn, she became the mother of Basil III and the grandmother of Ivan IV, better known as 'the terrible.' After her marriage, the double eagle of Byzantium became the symbol of the ruling Russian royal family and replaced that of St. George—a change which later led to the claim of the Russian Empire that it was the legitimate successor to that of the Byzantine.

Sophia Paleologue was a highly cultured woman, having been educated in the traditions of the Byzantine Empire and schooled in the court etiquette of the Pope at Rome, so when she and her retinue removed to Moscow, she took an extensive library and many cultural artifacts with her and in so doing reinforced the Byzantine traditions of the Russian court.

A male retainer who accompanied her to Moscow had a crest on which appeared the motto: *BONA IN FIDEM*. This retainer secured favor at court and his motto became the basis of the Russian surname of Ponafidine. Large estates in the province of Tver were assigned to the Ponafidines, and by the early years of the 17th century, the family seat (manor) had been firmly established at Bortniki by Lake Seliguer near the present town of Ostashkov. The Ponafidine Family believed that their nameless ancestor who accompanied Sophia Paleologue to Moscow was a Byzantine Greek. This view is supported by the fact that the family religion was always devoutly Greek Orthodox, and that the names George and Peter within the family recurred generation after generation—the oldest son of one generation was always named George and his oldest son was always named Peter.

The males of the Ponafidine Family usually served as officers in either the Russian Imperial Army or Navy, and in 1820, a Russian naval expedition honored the family by naming one of the uninhabited Bonin Islands: Ponafidine Island; however, after World War I, the name no longer appeared on maps.

Pierre Ponafidine (1849-1919), the father, brother, uncle and grandfather of the last Ponafidines, was born at Bortniki as the oldest of eight children—six boys and two girls. One of his grandmothers was the sister of the Russian partisan Seslavin whose guerillas wrought such havoc upon Napoleon's Grand Army during the French invasion of 1812.

He became a diplomat in the service of the Tsar, and eventually became the Imperial Russian Consul General in Constantinople after occupying similar positions in various parts of Persia and the Ottoman Empire. His diplomatic career began in the late 1870's and ended with his retirement to Bortniki in 1912.

In the late 1880's, while serving as the acting Russian Consul General in Tabriz, Persia, he met and married Emma Cochran (1863-1956), the daughter of an American Protestant missionary serving at Urumiah near Lake Urmia in northern Persia. Their marriage produced three sons: George (1892-1920), Alexander (1893-1978) and Joseph (1898-1971).

After the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917, the Ponafidine Estate was confiscated by the new Soviet state, but Pierre and his family remained on it in reduced circumstances until his death in 1919, after which, his immediate family (Emma, Alexander and Joseph) was ordered to settle in Ostashkov. After their departure from Bortniki, the only Ponafidines remaining there were Pierre's brother and his two children—a boy and

a girl; thus if the surname of Ponafidine has survived in the Soviet Union, it can be traced to Pierre's last known nephew.

In 1920, Emma and her two sons moved to Petrograd in hopes of leaving Russia, and in 1922 managed to escape to Finland after which they emigrated to the United States where they settled in East Aurora, New York.

George Ponafidine served as an officer in the Imperial Russian Army. In 1915, he married Vera Semkovsky and had one daughter, Vera Ponafidine ANDERSON (1917-1973), who was born in Kiev. After the Bolshevik Revolution, he joined the White Army<sup>1</sup> and served under Denikin and Wrangel. In October 1920, he was killed in the Crimea fighting the advance of the Red Army on the village of Kurman Kermenchi.

On December 21, 1981, the last known Ponafidine in the United States and perhaps the world died. Her name was Elisabeth Gregorevna Yatzevich Ponafidine of East Aurora, New York, the 86 year old widow of Alexander Ponafidine.

Robert J. Throckmorton

#### Bibliography

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<sup>1</sup>These governments represented a genuine people's movement. All favored the convening of the Constituent Assembly, a democratically elected congress which the Bolsheviks had dismissed on the day it was convened in January, 1918. These governments were known as "White Governments," a term applied to all Russians of whatever sentiments who opposed the soviet in Moscow. The disorder and disarrangement which befell Russia after the February and October Revolutions nourished the mythic hope that a White general would save the Russian people as General Skobelev saved them in 1877 when he defeated the Turks at Plevna, leading a charge "clad in white, decked with orders, scented and curled, like a bridegroom to a wedding." This was the ideal. Goldhurst, Richard. *The Midnight War*. New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1978. p. 52.