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## *Cold War Lingers At Russian Church In New Jersey*

### *Orthodox Dissidents Defy New Union With Moscow, Fearing Putin's Spies*

BY SUZANNE SATALINE

BUENA, N.J. -- An unlikely combatant in an international legal battle over Russian power and religion, Adelaida Nekludoff, age 83, chants "Lord have mercy," amid flickering candles and the whiff of incense. The only other worshipper at the Sviato-Pokrovskiy Russian Orthodox Church is her daughter.

Mrs. Nekludoff has led prayer services at the onion-domed church since 2004, when her husband, its only priest, died. When he wasn't replaced, members opted to attend Orthodox churches nearby rather than hear Mrs. Nekludoff read. She stayed on, and continued her husband's opposition to the Russian Orthodox Church in Moscow and its prelate, a man she calls "KGB."

Her defiance has landed her in court. A Russian Orthodox diocese in the U.S. has sued to evict Mrs. Nekludoff and take control of the Sviato-Pokrovskiy property. The case, scheduled to go to trial next month in Atlantic City, is being watched by a number of Orthodox dissidents who are defying new orders to submit to the Moscow patriarch because, they say, he aided Soviet Communists who tried to destroy their faith.

Mrs. Nekludoff argues that she cannot obey an institution that colluded with atheists. "Where there are lies, there is no God," she says.

Russian Orthodoxy has long been divided, with rivalries over prayers, personalities and even which fingers to use when blessing oneself. The largest rift of the modern era occurred in the aftermath of the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution. Bishops who fled, horrified by squads that shot priests and jailed believers, formed the Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia, which eventually chose New York as its base.

Also known as the Church Abroad, it vowed to "maintain no relations whatever with the Russian ecclesiastical

authorities" while the country was "subject to Communist rule." For decades, leaders of the Church Abroad denounced the Moscow leadership.

When Communism crumbled, efforts to heal the rift began, culminating this year in May in a Moscow ceremony attended by President Vladimir Putin. There, the two sides signed the Act of Canonical Communion, joining members of the Church Abroad with more than 140 million Russian Orthodox world-wide.

But dissidents believe the Moscow church hasn't adequately repented for its sins and is still too close to the Kremlin. About 100 of the 340 Church Abroad clergy around the world have broken away in the past four years, particularly in recent months. At least 10 of the Church Abroad's estimated 145 U.S. parishes have asked other Russian or Greek Orthodox bishops to lead them instead, while many parishioners have joined Greek, Serbian or Russian Orthodox churches unaffiliated with the Church Abroad.

Several Church Abroad priests who opposed the canonical union have been ordered out of rectories and stripped of their parish posts. Seven clerics quit the Protection of the Mother of God Church in Rochester, N.Y., splintering the worshipers. In some locales, family members are attending separate churches.

Mr. Putin helped broker the Canonical Communion and met with U.S. Orthodox bishops in 2003. The agreement has mutual benefits. The Moscow-based church gains influence in the U.S., Western Europe and South America, where it had little presence. The Church Abroad becomes part of a major world faith.

Mr. Putin also gains. The union blunts what has been one of his largest group of critics -- Church Abroad clerics who regularly attacked his policies and

human-rights record. Mr. Putin has used his own Orthodox faith to soften his autocratic image, vowing to rebuild churches destroyed by the Soviets, while asking the church to bolster the country's moral fiber and unite the Russian diaspora.

The dissidents decry the relationship between the president and church leaders, maintaining that his support came even as he clamped down on the press and government critics. They also say the Moscow church has done too little to address corruption and poverty in Russia.

The Church Abroad has taken steps to rein in the critics. The church is suing for the property of a California parish that joined a Greek Orthodox church. Internationally, three priests and a bishop have been told they can no longer administer sacraments.

The dissidents -- including World War II refugees, U.S.-born converts and some Russian monarchist descendants -- say they will continue the Church Abroad as they believe it should be run. A particular sore point with them is the Russian church's links to the KGB.

Archivists who have plumbed Soviet-era records say KGB informers infiltrated churches for decades, reporting on clergy and parishioners, at home and abroad. Indrek Jurjo, chief of the publications division of the State Archives of Estonia, says that one of those agents was Patriarch Alexy II, the current leader of the Moscow church. Mr. Jurjo says that biographical details of an agent named Drozdov, found in a 1958 KGB annual report, match the cleric's Estonian background, year of birth, education and career path. Oleg Kalugin, a former KGB general now living in Maryland, says Patriarch Alexy told him at a 1991 dinner party that "I had to collaborate. That is the price of survival."

Some dissident priests fear for American security, saying Mr. Putin will use the union to send over government agents disguised in cassocks. The Rev. Victor Dobroff of New York City, who broke with the church, says that "in a very short time," Russia's current FSB security agency will have hundreds of "new spy nests all over the world, absolutely untouchable, working under the cover of the church."

Alexander Abramov, secretary for external affairs in the U.S. for Alexy's church, says that no one has ever proved the patriarch spied. Father Abramov says the Estonian document doesn't directly link the patriarch to the KGB. He recalled that Alexy said in a speech years ago that bishops who were in contact with Soviet authorities "did not betray the people."

Alexei Timofeev, press secretary for the Russian Embassy in Washington, says concerns about spying priests are "old stereotypes of the Cold War" no longer applicable.

Sviato-Pokrovskiy, or Holy Protection Church, was built by Cossacks who had fought the Bolsheviks. They settled in New Jersey's Atlantic County in the 1950s, and church membership eventually grew to 150. Every Easter season, the Rev. Nikolai Nekludoff held a service honoring the dead in the church cemetery, followed by herring and vodka served at tables set by tombstones.

In May 2005, as the union with Moscow looked imminent, his widow, Mrs. Nekludoff and three members of her family voted to leave the Church Abroad. Father Nikolai had been devoutly anti-Soviet; the Bolsheviks had killed seven of his relatives one night, his daughter says. The family drew up new corporation papers stating the parish beliefs were "pre-Revolutionary Russian Orthodoxy." They joined a break-away church formed by a retired Church Abroad leader who had spurned Moscow.

A few months later, Gabriel Chemodakov, Bishop of Manhattan, told the Nekludoffs in a letter that the diocese wanted to have the Buena property cared for by a "brotherhood," which the family assumed would turn it into a monastery. Mrs. Nekludoff's daughter, Maria, a church trustee, replied, saying the parish declined the "offer" and was an independent entity "founded on Russian Orthodox anticommunist traditions which clearly and categorically reject any conciliation with the Moscow Patriarchate." Association "with your Diocese

or Synod is not compatible with our religious convictions," she wrote.

The diocese asked a Superior Court judge in February 2006 to declare that the parish was holding the property in trust for the Church Abroad, a ruling that would place Sviato-Pokrovskiy under the hierarchy's control. The church's lawyer, Richard Mongelli, wouldn't comment on the case. Nicholas Ohotin, a church spokesman, would only say that no parish may take its property to a new church.