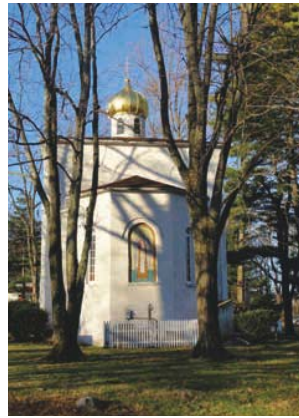




Tolstoy house in Radnor Township



Russian Orthodox Church

The COUNTESS NEWTOWN SQUARE



Sasha in 1953

By resident writer Doug Humes

In 1930 and 1931, the Countess, a “broad-beamed woman of middle age, with hazel eyes behind pince-nez glasses, and greying hair pulled back from her high forehead,” would be seen almost daily walking on Bryn Mawr Avenue from her home off of Malin Road just over the line in Radnor, crossing underneath the railroad bridge and continuing up to West Chester Pike. She then turned right and headed on to the post office, in the general store next to the old hotel at the main intersection. The postmaster, Charles Hanley, recalled that she would visit every day, looking for news from the old country. Clutching her mail, she would then turn around and walk back to the small ancient farmhouse where she was living, a round trip of about 3 1/2 miles. In an unheated ramshackle stone home with no running water, she would fetch water, chop her own wood, and tend to her crops, her pigs and a lone Jersey cow. The local children called her the Pig Lady. She bathed in the creek that runs through the property. At night, by candlelight, she worked on finishing her book about her parents’ stormy relationship. Newtown Square was a sleepy country village in those days, and so seeing the youngest daughter of the one of the greatest Russian

authors was a novelty. A Countess! In Newtown Square! Why was she here?

The Countess was Alexandra “Sasha” Tolstoy, youngest daughter of Leo Tolstoy, the author of *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina*, considered two of the greatest novels ever written. Until her father’s death in 1910, Sasha was his secretary and companion. He named her as executor for his literary works. And then came 1917. At that time Sasha was “a wealthy thirty-two year old Russian countess who lived on a three hundred and-thirty-acre country estate that included a model farm stocked with blooded cattle. But in 1917, Vladimir Lenin and the Bolsheviks seized power. When the blood had dried, the workers of the world had united – and were ready to throw off their chains. But if you were on the wrong side of that divide, a countess, life was going to change. Sasha was accused of anti-Soviet activities and imprisoned. When she was released, she threw herself into helping the Russian people, organizing schools, an orphanage and a hospital for the poor. Life was bad under Lenin, but much worse when Stalin succeeded him.



Farm House in New York

When given the opportunity to travel abroad, Sasha did so in 1929, at age 45, and though she lived another 50 years, she never returned to Russia.

Her stay in Radnor was brief – just a few years. She and a friend, Olga Masley, moved to the area in 1931 when Masley was offered a job as a domestic in Germantown. The owner of the vacant and dilapidated farmhouse in Radnor made it available to them rent free so they could do what they knew how to do – farm. In a 1952 *New Yorker* article, the writer reported, “They managed so competently that they got along without spending money on anything for their dining table but tea, coffee, salt, sugar and flour.” During that time, she finished her book, *The Tragedy of Tolstoy*, and the flyleaf is signed “Alexandra Tolstoy, Newtown Square, Pennsylvania, January 13, 1933.” She would also lecture in Philadelphia on the life and work of her father. In 1933, the landlord proposed to begin charging rent. Sasha and Masley searched for a better situation, and were offered a 7 acre farm in Haddam, Connecticut, and they left Radnor in the spring of 1933.

After 6 years in Haddam, Sasha moved again, and it was there that she began her true life’s work, at the Reed farm near the small town of Valley Cottage along the Hudson River north of Nyack. She had formed the Tolstoy Foundation to assist her displaced countrymen, the ones who were lucky enough to flee

the murderous Communist regime. The Foundation helped them immigrate, provided a temporary place to live, and offered language, education and training programs. Over the course of her life, Sasha and her foundation helped to re-settle over 100,000 refugees.

The old farmhouse still stands in Radnor. The owner reached out to me and I visited with him and toured the house and grounds, now beautifully renovated and maintained. The earliest portion pre-dates the American Revolution. That visit sent me searching for Sasha, and my journey ended on New Year’s Eve of 2011, when my wife and I stayed in her bedroom at the Reed farm – still owned by the Foundation, with B&B rooms rented out on occasion. Several Russian families were celebrating the holiday in the kitchen below us, and Russian conversation, music and laughter drifted up the steps to our room. We attended services that night at the beautiful Russian Orthodox Church on the grounds. We did not understand one word of what was said, but feasted our eyes on the glittering statues and paintings and icons that filled the space, and the pageantry of the service, a sight that Sasha must have enjoyed as well. While she died in 1979, at age 96, her work endures.

Doug Humes is a board member of the Newtown Square Historical Society. Visit our website at www.historicnewtown-square.org for more information.