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HEIRS OF ST. SERAPHIM'S WONDERFUL REVELATION

The Moscow Descendants of Nikolai Motovilov

In a poignant interview with descendants of Nikolai Alexandrovich Motovilov, the beloved disciple of St. Seraphim of Sarov, *Road to Emmaus* captures the reflections of today's Motovilovs on their unique spiritual legacy. The Moscow family includes the Russian artist Olga Igorievna Motovilova-Komova, her sister Anastasia Igorievna Motovilova, their mother Natalia Georgievna Motovilova, and Olga Igorievna's daughter, Maria Ilyinichna Komova. It was a privilege to be invited to the studio where Olga and Anastasia's grandfather, Georgy Ivanovich Motovilov, worked as a sculptor, and where both family history and the spiritual bond between the saint and his disciple are enshrined in art and memory.

The Motovilov Family Roots

RTE: Among Orthodox in the West, the name Motovilov is synonymous with St. Seraphim of Sarov. Almost all Orthodox Christians recognize him immediately as the author of *A Wonderful Revelation to the World: A Conversation of St. Seraphim of Sarov with N.A. Motovilov*. Olga, can you describe how you are related to Nikolai Motovilov, and what you know about the Motovilov family roots?

Opposite: Olga Igorievna Motovilova-Komova.

OLGA IGORIEVNA: Nikolai Alexandrovich Motovilov, the friend and spiritual son of St. Seraphim, was married to Yelena Ivanovna Meliukova. They had six children, but all of their direct descendants died before or during the Russian Revolution. Our connection, as Nikolai Motovilov's last living relatives, is through his cousin, Andrei Yegorovich Motovilov, our great-great-grandfather. Andrei's son was Ivan Andreivich, a famous Moscow surgeon and father of Georgy Ivanovich, our grandfather.

RTE: What do you know of the Motovilov family roots?

OLGA IGORIEVNA: There are two versions of the origin of the family. The first, from early Russian chronicles, has a 14th-century pre-Romanov connection, claiming that the Motovilovs are descendants of Feodor Ivanovich Shevelyaga, the brother of Andrei Ivanovich (Kobyła), an ancestor of the Romanov and Sheremetyev families. Feodor Ivanovich's son, Timofei Motovilov, was the first of the Motovilov family.

The second version has the family originating from a Lithuanian prince named Montvil-Montvid (Russified as Montovilov, and later Motovilov) who fought with Dmitry Donskoy against the Tartars. I will mention more about this connection later. Through archival documents, we can trace the Simbirsk line of Motovilovs from the early 1500's during the reign of Vasily III. As for modern connections, the poet Anna Akhmatova is the grandmother of our second cousin.

Nikolai Alexandrovich Motovilov

RTE: We know little of Motovilov except as a faithful disciple of St. Seraphim, and the benefactor and guardian of the Holy Trinity-Diveyevo Women's Monastery, founded by the saint. What can you tell us about him?

OLGA IGORIEVNA: When Nikolai Alexandrovich's father, Alexander Motovilov, was a young man, he hoped to marry a girl named Durasova and remain in the country to pray and live simply, but Durasova wanted the bright society life of the capital. When she refused his offer and left for St. Petersburg, Alexander went to Sarov Monastery as a lay worker in the prosphora bakery. There he had a dream that St. Nicholas came to him and told him that he was not going to become a monk, but would marry Durasova after all, and that

Opposite: Pilgrims approaching the Diveyevo Women's Monastery, which was largely supported through the benefactions of N.A. Motovilov. Late 19th century.





they would have a son named Nikolai who would serve God and his country. Durasova returned, they did in fact marry, and the couple always considered St. Nicholas to be their family protector.

In 1809, Nikolai Alexandrovich was born, but six years later his father died. Before his death, among other things, he told the young boy that, for the salvation of Russia, he should never have anything to do with Masons. This was the 19th century, when Masonic rites and practices had spread through much of the upper class. Nikolai's father was a faithful believer, and after his death, Nikolai had a dream in which he said that his father had shown him the place he was living and the different levels of heaven and hell. His mother was also very faithful, and took her son on pilgrimage to both St. Seraphim of Sarov and St. Mitrophan of Voronezh.

After his father's death, Nikolai developed problems with his legs and could hardly walk. This was the first time his mother took him to St. Seraphim and the saint healed him during this meeting. When Nikolai began to run about from sheer joy, his mother ordered him to stop, but St. Seraphim replied, "Don't stop him, he's playing with angels."

As a university student in Kazan, Nikolai rented a room from a German merchant family while attending classes. One day, a scandal arose after he touched the hand of a girl he liked, and Nikolai was so upset that his mother would be shamed that he went to Chyornoe [Black] Lake to drown himself. On the way, an icon of the Mother of God of Kazan appeared in the air in front of him. The Mother of God looked at him sternly, and understanding the gravity of what he was about to do, he turned and went home. Once his German landlord understood the situation, he straightened out the scandal so that there were no consequences.

After graduating from the university, Nikolai returned to Simbirsk and later to Moscow. Because of his family connections, he anticipated a good position in either government service or private business, but on his arrival in Moscow he was pressured (as were all young men of upper-class and merchant families at this time) to become a member of the Masons. He was told that if he did not join, there would be no career opportunities for him. When he refused, he found himself barred from any suitable position in Moscow, St. Petersburg, and even in his native Simbirsk, and was treated with disdain by neighbors, including a local girl named Yazikova whom he had hoped to marry. His nervous anxiety over the loss of his prospects left him partially paralyzed.

Opposite: Nun near abbess's residence, Diveyevo. Late 19th century.

Nikolai went to St. Seraphim now for the second time, and was again healed. He told St. Seraphim that he wanted to marry Yazikova, but the saint replied that she would not become his wife, that his wife was not yet old enough to marry. He would marry a girl he would meet on pilgrimage to a monastery, and he would know that this was his wife because there would be false gossip that Nikolai had insulted her. Although healed, Nikolai did not listen to the saint, but returned home and pleaded with Yazikova again to marry him. She refused for the second time and soon married a poet.

A Third Healing and a Wedding

Nikolai's anxiety-related paralysis returned, and his friends brought him to St. Seraphim for the third time. This time he had to be held up by the friends who accompanied him, and St. Seraphim asked if he believed in God, in Jesus Christ, His Mother, and their prayers. Motovilov replied, "I do." The saint then asked if he believed that he could be healed by a single word. The young man assented and St. Seraphim said, "If you believe, then you are already healed." Motovilov said, "What do you mean? They are still holding me up, I can't move." The saint told his companions to let him go, and Motovilov found that he could move on his own.

Saint Seraphim died in 1833 and Nikolai Alexandrovich spent much of the rest of his life writing about the saint and promoting his cause as a holy man. Seven years after the saint's repose, on a pilgrimage to Diveyevo, Motovilov was accused of insulting Elena Ivanovna Meliukova, the niece of the Diveyevo's abbess, who was living at the women's monastery with her aunt. Remembering the elder's prophecy, Motovilov married her.

Elena Ivanovna's family were serfs, and because such a socially unequal marriage was unusual for wealthy upper-class families, Nikolai's choice was criticized by his relatives. However, the practical and business-minded Elena proved to be a very good wife for him, managing their houses and properties in Yaroslavl and Simbirsk, as well as the family and servants. Nikolai Alexandrovich spent most of his time on pilgrimage to holy places around Russia, and was considered an eccentric outsider by the society to which his family belonged.

Before his repose, St. Seraphim had warned Nikolai that, with his firm principles, life was not going to be easy. Like Nikolai's father, he urged him

Opposite: Pilgrim to Sarov. Note staff, bark shoes and water can.





to serve Russia as much as he was able. At one point in their conversations, St. Seraphim foretold the Crimean War of 1853-1856 and, once the conflict broke out, Motovilov sent an icon of the Mother of God to the Russian fort in Sebastopol. The fort was later destroyed, and the only wall left standing was the one on which the icon hung.

The *intelligentsia* were quite indifferent to religion by now, but the young man continued to write and later tried to use his family influence to encourage economic and agricultural reform. As an unofficial guardian of the Diveyevo convent, he bought much land in the area and donated it to the sisterhood.



Georgy and Maria Motovilov, 1927.

During Motovilov's life, the entire family of several generations lived together in a huge ancestral home in Linitsovo near Simbirsk. During the Soviet times the estate turned into a collective farm. Ironically, Lenin and his wife Nadezhda Krupskaya also met in this neighborhood.

Soviet Era Trials

RTE: What happened to the family after the Revolution?

OLGA IGORIEVNA: As far as we know, Motovilov's direct descendants died around the time of the Revolution, but one of their cousins was our grandfather, Georgy Ivanovich Motovilov, who was born in 1894 and died in 1963. He was a student of the famous Russian sculptor Vkhutein, who wanted Georgy to go to Italy to study, but Georgy's father, Ivan Andreivich Motovilov, a well-known Moscow surgeon, had high expectations for his children and would not let him study art. Although he supported his children being musical and artistic, he did not consider these to be proper aims of life. He wanted them to serve God, and believed that while being a doctor was a respectable helping profession, being an artist was not. All of his sons went on to study medicine.

After the Revolution, Georgy Ivanovich lived with his wife, Maria Georgievna, and six children (including our mother, Natalia) in a single room in a small communal apartment in Moscow. They never talked about their families, because neighbors in the apartment could easily overhear any con-

Opposite: Georgy Ivanovich Motoviilov, 1938.

versation. Although religious, they could not appear to be so openly. Maria Georgievna was well-educated, having attended a very good girls' school in Moscow, and spoke and read English. She was also a believer. She prayed secretly but was only able to teach her children the "Our Father" and "Theotokos and Virgin Rejoice" for danger of them revealing the family's faith. While it was too dangerous for Georgy Ivanovich to attend church openly, Maria Georgievna was a parishioner of the famous Moscow pastor, St. Alexei Mechev (and later his son, Fr. Sergei) at their Church of St. Nicholas on Maroseyka Street. Later she attended the Church of St. Ilya at Kropotkinskaya. We were amazed to learn from her diaries that she was still attending church as late as 1937, the hardest years for believers before the Second World War. There was certainly heavenly protection.

After the revolution, Georgy and his older brother Andrei were arrested on trumped-up charges. Realizing that they would both be imprisoned, Andrei took full blame for the false charges in order to free Georgy, and served a ten-year sentence. Afterwards he was prohibited from coming within 100 kilometers of Moscow, and was thus exiled for life from his native city. Because of the extremely dangerous times, the Motovilovs could not tell the children of their ancestry, and after the death of his father, Georgy Ivanovich burnt all of his personal documents as well as everything related to his family history. When he had them replaced, he added ten years to his age so as not to be conscripted as a surgeon into the Red Army.

Georgy Ivanovich the Artist

After his father's passing, Georgy gave up medicine for art and at first supported himself by using his anatomical knowledge to sculpt plaster models of parts of the body for study in Moscow hospitals. He knew many Moscow sculptors including Sergei Konenkov, the "Russian Rodin," who later emigrated to the United States.

At various times, the Soviet government ordered Georgy Ivanovich to make memorial pieces, as well as monumental statues for the Moscow metro, but he managed never to become a member of the Communist Party. When he was once asked why he didn't belong to the Party, he answered, "Everything is decided by the voices of the many, and the many are fools." That he stayed alive was a miracle, and I believe that the family was certainly under God's

Opposite: Georgy Motovilov sculpting statue of Anton Chekhov, 1946.





protection. Intelligent and accomplished – he spoke English, French, German, and, of course, knew Latin and Greek – Georgy Ivanovich was eventually appointed to the Chair of Classical Art at the Strogonov Institute, the most famous art academy in Moscow.

At the Strogonov, he gathered some experienced sculptors to create a new department of sculpture, but they never quite understood or appreciated him, although the students adored him and his classes. Many books and libraries had been destroyed or sold off after the Revolution, but Motovilov had a wonderful memory and while his students sculpted, he would recite long poems and pieces from Chekhov, Tolstoy, and from Greek and Latin literature by heart to create an atmosphere in which they could work with inspiration.

During the Soviet times it was unusual for students to have such a teacher: everything was prohibited, so he was like a fairy tale for them. One of our elderly neighbors was his student, and he told us that each lesson was like a holiday. Every sculpture they did was evaluated and they were warmly congratulated on each successful piece. Much of the information we have about him is from these elderly people who were his students.

Interestingly, twenty-five years ago, in the 1990's, I first noticed a sculpted bust of a woman in my grandfather's studio where I work now. I asked who it was, but my mother only knew that it was the daughter of a school friend of her mother, Georgy's wife. I was so fascinated with the piece that later, when I met my husband, I asked him to write an article about it. Many years later my own daughter Maria made friends with a little girl in kindergarten, and when she once came to stay overnight with us, her great-grandmother called me to ask, "Who is Oleg Konstantinovich Komov? I recognize the name." I said, "My father-in-law. He was a well-known sculptor." She said, "Oh yes, of course. I once posed for a very famous sculptor, but you wouldn't know him, you are too young. His name was Georgy Ivanovich Motovilov." When we met, we understood that this woman was our mysterious model. She recalled that she sat for him in the winter and although it was very cold in the studio, he had made her take off the scarf she wore around her neck. While she was posing, he recited poems to entertain her. It is very interesting for me that the great-grandmothers of my Maria and her young friend were also school friends.

Opposite: Olga in her grandfather's Moscow studio.

An Icon of St. Nicholas

In 1986, two priests came to us searching for a small historical icon of St. Nicholas that could be worn on a chain around the neck, which they rightly understood belongs to our family. This was the Gorbachev era, and it was the first time we had ever seen priests. We were so surprised, and for us, seeing these bearded men in cassocks was like a scene out of Tarkovsky's film *Andrei Rublev*. Earlier, I mentioned that one of the versions of the founding of the Motovilov family was that we are descended from a Lithuanian duke originally named Montvil-Montvid. According to history, he wore this St. Nicholas icon around his neck when he fought with the Muscovite Prince Dmitry Donskoy at the 1380 Battle of Kulikovo on the Don against the Tartars. Just as Dmitry Donskoy was about to be pierced by a Tartar sword, the duke raised his arm to protect him and deflected the blow. The sword hit the icon on his own chest, saving them both.

This icon was passed from one generation to another and Nikolai Alexandrovich Motovilov very much wanted to have this icon, which at that time belonged to his uncle. But for some reason, this icon has always belonged to those members of the family who are not very religious and haven't had a strong belief in God. Nevertheless, they've prized the icon, and I wonder if perhaps it wasn't given to them for protection because they weren't believers. Through many generations, it finally came to Georgy Ivanovich, who gave it to his wife Maria because she was the one who prayed at home. Maria died in the home of her daughter, my aunt Olga, who in turn received the icon after her death. So, when these priests came, hoping to preserve this historical icon, they called Aunt Olga who said, "Oh, yes, we had this crazy relative, Nikolai Alexandrovich Motovilov; all of our relatives were crazy. And I do have this icon, but I'm not going to give it to anyone." This side of the family considers us a little crazy as well because we go to church, but they still safeguard the icon.

Family Connections

RTE: How wonderful to have a material relic from the founder of your family line. Going back to Nikolai Motovilov, when you read the account of his conversations with St. Seraphim, do you feel close to him?

OLGA IGORIEVNA: I always feel this connection with Nikolai Alexandrovich and his father, and when I'm in church I write their names and that of their wives for liturgies and memorial services. I feel their support and their help, and when I ask for something, I always feel a response. It is a great gift from God that I can pray for my ancestors back to the fourteenth century.

RTE: Converts in the West are very indebted to Motovilov's preserving St. Seraphim's teaching on the acquisition of the Holy Spirit. I would say that along with Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*, this account by Motovilov is the one piece of literature that we most often hear has introduced a reader to Orthodox tradition. It touches people deeply, and provides an easy entrance for newcomers to the Orthodox mind and spirituality.



Left to right: Maria Iliyevna Komova, Anastasia Igorievna Motovilova, and Olga Igorievna Motovilova-Komova.

OLGA IGORIEVNA: Interestingly, I've found that the *Conversation with St. Seraphim* is much more popular in France and in the West than in Russia, perhaps because we have such an abundance of good Orthodox literature here.

RTE: Is there anything you would like to say to our readers, many of whom feel a deep debt of gratitude to Nikolai Motovilov for preserving the memory of St. Seraphim? His writings were undoubtedly the single greatest influence in the saint's canonization.

OLGA IGORIEVNA: It was predicted to Alexander Motovilov that his son Nikolai would serve God and Russia. Despite the fact that Nikolai was not respected during his lifetime, that he was denied a responsible position, and that all of these troubles undermined his health to the point of paralysis, we should still remember that God does not leave his people.

We can remain faithful to the principles and foundation of our faith. Know that if you are faithful to God, you will never be left without His protection. Don't live by your own will, but by God's will. Let yourself be led by what God gives you. ✱

With great thanks to Alla Manukova for her introduction to the Motovilov family, and for interpreting during this interview.