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Russian Bell Expert at Harvard

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College World
Lowell House at Harvard is being visited this month by Father Scovil Slobodsky of the Russian Orthodox monastery at Nyack, N.Y. It is hoped that he will settle the long-running dispute over whether or not Lowell House’s Russian Bells are in need of retuning. Father Slobodsky, said to be the West’s foremost expert on Russian bells, will also instruct the Lowell House Society of Bell Ringers in the playing of traditional liturgical music and may give a public concert.

The bells have a rather unusual history at Harvard, dating back to 1911. Their story is told in a Harvard Crimson article by Russell Roberts, of which the following is a part:

"The bells have long been one of the more curious elements in the Lowell House tradition. They first came to the University in 1911 after a wandering American Slavic scholar discovered them in a monastery near Moscow and brought them to the attention of Charles R. Crane, a leading manufacturer of toilet fixtures.

"Learning that they were about to be melted down for armaments, Crane purchased them to the attention of Charles R. Crane, a leading manufacturer of toilet fixtures.

"The bells were promptly accepted by A. Lawrence Lowell, then president of the University, and consigned to their present location.

"In an unusual display of generosity, the reason for which are still matters of historical mystery, the Soviets sent to Lowell House one of the most prominent of their bell-ringing professionals to direct the installation of the "zvon" of bells.

"The man's name was Saradjeff and his credentials were impeccable: his father and his maternal grandfather before him had been ringers, and one of the several thousand bells in Moscow and the Russo-Slavic scholar, was on the person who knew how many bells were in the original set, the wandering Slavic scholar, was on the first to be given the privilege of tuning the bells. He vigorously protested that some of the bells were missing and that without them the carillon would never be complete. President Lowell at last gave in and the matter was taken up with the Soviet government and offered them as a gift to Harvard.

"But the University had few Russian bell experts at its disposal in those days and the man's reputation could not be ignored. Saradjeff was placed in full charge of the tuning of the ron and the task was begun with no little restraint in revealing his displeasure.

"Almost at once, however, Saradjeff's hopes that the Lowell House bells could be made into the greatest set in existence began to diminish. Missing Bells

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He was eventually reached, however, and it was determined that some of the bells were missing, "Nonsense," Saradjeff allegedly told an interpreter, "we Russians invented bells and we know what we are talking about."

"Not long after this incident, President Lowell discovered Saradjeff in the Lowell House basement, chip-shouldering pieces from the top of the bell. Saradjeff later explained that this was the accepted technique for tuning bells but President Lowell believed he was damaging the ron and the Russian was finally dismissed. He sadly returned to Moscow where he was reportedly committed to a sanitarium.

"Bells Finally Installed

"Without further tuning, the bells were finally installed in the Lowell House tower and another bell, bigger than that from New York to play the first concert on Easter in 1912.

"It was apparent from the first playing that the bells were not what President Lowell had hoped they would be. Either the Russian music was unsuited for Western ears or the sound suffered from technical difficulties.

"Always eager to promote better two-way relations, the Boston press seized the opportunity: "TONS OF CHIMES AT HARVARD AND NOT A NOTE OF MUSIC," sneered the broadsheet. "COFFEE CHEMIST PROVE WHITE ELEPHANT!"

"The Crimson scoffed: "Charley Shall Not Ring Tonight," in which a beautiful modern record of "Hail, Columbia," rang the following (Please turn to page 5)

By Toby Zide '63

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