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Document: An Account of an American Commune in the Soviet Union during the 1920s

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“all these colonies are, little islands of American influence in Russia, although the individuals who compose them are, for the most part, regarded as ‘undesireable’ at home.”

Hamilton College’s special collections has recently acquired this remarkable letter from American journalist Arthur Brown Ruhl (1876-1935) to his mother Nellie Brown Ruhl (1856-1932). The letter is densely written across eight pages and describes a heretofore unknown group of Americans living in an intentional community in the newly formed Soviet Union. Ruhl (1876-1935) was born in Rockford, Illinois, and graduated from Harvard University in 1899. He served as an inspector for the American Relief Administration (ARA) in Russia from 1921 to 1923. On April 29, 1923, the *New York Times Magazine* published Ruhl’s “Back to Old Russia as Pioneers: The Return of the Native, Who Has Been Made Over in America” about an “American” colony north of Odessa.

Tambov is a city and administrative center approximately 260 miles southeast of Moscow. In 1920-1921, it was the site of the Tambov Rebellion, one of the largest and best organized peasant rebellions against the Bolshevik regime. Kirsanov is approximately fifty-five miles east of Tambov. In late 1920 and early 1921, around 16,000 Americans entered Russia through Baltic ports, motivated by combinations of economic opportunity and communist ideology. Soviet sympathizers in the United States and Canada created the Society for Technical Aid to Soviet Russia (STASR) to coordinate immigration by skilled workers. In April 1921, Soviet officials created a more complicated entry process for individuals, which slowed immigration substantially.

Text:

Sunday Morning—August 5 '23

Dear Mother—

I have just returned from one of the most interesting things I have seen this summer—an “American” colony in the neighborhood of Tambov similar to the one I saw last year in Odessa and wrote about in the “Times.” Only this one—as I looked forward to doing in New York—I have seen rather thoroughly. After messing up two days with misunderstandings over tickets and missing trains, we finally got away on the third day—Third class—and bunked on the bare boards for the 18 hours from Moscow to the village of Kirsanov in the Tambov government and from there drove the 15 versts (about 10 miles) in a Ford to the farm. It is part of a huge estate formerly owned by a Princess Obolensky. It was taken over at the time of the revolution. Prince Obolensky himself was killed (not on the estate but in a nearby village) and the manor house burned. The land was divided up among the neighboring peasants, but there was enough left over beyond their needs to make this big farm of 3,000 acres which the Government assigned to the American colony. There are now about 150 people on the estate—all more or less Americanized & speaking English, although born in Russia. They have brought in machinery, tractors, reapers, a big Peerless truck, a fully equipped machine shop, with all sorts of milling machinery so that they are ready to make almost anything from tin pails to new motor bearings—in all they have invested about \$100,000 made up of what they had saved in America. The place has been running since April, 1922, and seems to be a success. It is a hard job—everything, from roofs to cover their heads, had to be made from the beginning; it is a lonely neighborhood, the standard of living necessarily enforced on the colonists was very much lower than they had been used to in America (even now their diet consists almost entirely of soup, bread and kasha (porridge) without sugar) but they are going ahead with great courage and fortitude and hope in another five years, to have a model modern farm. The place is run as a literal commune—everything they make is put back into the farm (future surpluses are to be devoted to helping the other peasant communities of the region) and no individual makes anything at all above his board and keep. (There is no reason, in theory, why they should not, in the end, but this is the plan on which they have started at any rate).

Considering that most of them have had to suffer for their opinions in America and have sacrificed everything to make this experiment a success, their loyalty to American ways of doings is impressive. They are, as a matter of fact, and all these colonies are, little islands of American influence in Russia, although the individuals who compose them are, for the most part, regarded as “undesireables” at home.—It is still raining nearly all the time and apparently northern Russia is to have no real summer at all. I was shocked to hear of Harding’s death on arriving in Moscow last evening. We know nothing but the fact, itself,—no details. Another quite different piece of news was that Kenneth Roberts, the “jazz” foreign correspondent of the Saturday Evening Post, was at the frontier waiting to get in. It will be interesting to see what he will write about, if he does come. I hope that all is going well with you and that some mail will come through soon. I haven’t had a line since the ARA left. Love to Pop.

Arthur

My address can still be care the A.R.A., or care the American Section, European Students’ Relief, Malaya Bronnaya 4, Apt. 21, Moscow. I shall have moved from the Spiridonoska by the time you receive this.—A. R.