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129 Jay Street
Schenectady, NY 12305
518/346-7008
Fax 518/346-6617
Email: info@nyfolklore.org
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THE SASHA POLINOFF AFTER-STORY:

Old-time Balalaika Music Meets Old-time Americana Music

BY SARAH JANE NELSON

The following story is dedicated to the memory of autoharp player Drew Smith, who left this world on January 30, 2025.

This is the story of how seemingly disparate communities coalesced around a formerly prominent musician and sustained him in old age. As such, it takes place in comparatively humble or domestic settings and with a smaller audience. It is very much the story *after* the story. It begins in the closing decades of the 20th century, when Russians and all things Russian were no longer in vogue—particularly, in the wake of the McCarthy years. It begins when Lower Eastside nightclubs that once featured a variety of ethnic music, were losing patrons, in part, because their first-generation audiences had moved out of the City to the "burbs" and could no longer find a place to park.

To understand what all of this meant for balalaika player Sasha Polinoff, it is best to start with his own story. Like so many immigrants who were intent upon building their lives in the New World, Polinoff rarely spoke in earnest about his early life. He was more likely to say things like the following: "I was born in Harbin, China, so that I could be near my parents," an opening quip he often employed at the start of public appearances. Typically, the happiest person in the room, Polinoff shared his tragic early history but once with two friends, Michael Resnick and Susan Sterngold, both of whom are central to this story.

Portrait of the Poleschuk Family in Harbin, China. Sasha is on the hobby horse to the right. Photo courtesy of the author.

Sasha Polinoff, who identified as Russian throughout much of his performance life, was born Alexander Poleschuk in 1906, in a village adjacent to Pogranichnaya Station in Manchuria, China, to parents of Ukrainian heritage. According to an interview with author Mikhail Blyzniuk, Polinoff's father, Simon Poleschuk, was employed as a haberdasher before he became an officer of Tsar Nicholas II. Shortly thereafter, his father was murdered by Manchurian bandits. Even as an 85-year-old man, Polinoff vividly recalled the details of his father's death from gunshot wounds to the head. Six years old at the time, Polinoff remembered attending his father's burial service and nearly losing his mother to the

all-engulfing cemetery mud. Following the death of her husband, Marina Poleschuk followed the path of many displaced Russians and moved with her two daughters and one son (Sasha) to the Chinese Eastern Railway town of Harbin. Sometime after this relocation, Polinoff's eldest sister disappeared, the particulars of which are lost to the chaos of the Russian Civil War. In the summative words of Polinoff, "times were difficult" in Harbin.

In order to survive, Polinoff's mother took in washing, and the young Sasha found work as a delivery boy for a stationery store—a job that entailed walking almost six miles a day. Notably, if there was any music or dancing in this hardscrabble life, he never mentioned it. When Polinoff turned 16, his mother finally obtained the necessary papers for her son and sent him to live with an aunt in San Francisco. Having left his family behind, Polinoff sailed from Yokohama, Japan, to Seattle, Washington, in November 1923, carrying not much more than $50 and his aunt's street address. He arrived on the West Coast with barely enough money for a taxi and just a few months before the Johnson-Reed Act [Immigration Act of 1924], which introduced a quota system based on country of origin, effectively slamming the door shut for most immigrants from Asia and limited entry for those from countries of southern and eastern Europe.

I share some of the hardships of this early emigration story because Polinoff's life, like the Russian and Ukrainian folk tunes that he remembered, pivoted between extremes of sorrow and joy, unimaginable loss and resilience, not unlike the seasonal extremes of temperature, which he experienced as a boy in Harbin. The losses he experienced were wrought largely by historic events beyond his control, and his innate resilience was born of a gregarious, humor-inclined temperament that his friend and musical associate Charley Rappaport described as "almost childlike." Polinoff's extroversion, in combination with the joy he took in being in front of an audience, went a long way toward broadening his social connections well beyond that of the tightly knit émigré circle, coined by Professor Marc Raeff as "Russia Abroad." And these traits most certainly extended his life as a performer.

This late-life story begins well *after* Polinoff's immigration years as a vaudeville dancer; *after* he worked in Montreal for six years; *after* he met his future wife Edna Veralle—a Bronx-born prima ballerina; *after* he was liberated from kitchen duty in Abilene, Texas, to spend 1944–45 touring with an Army band; *after* he became known as the "Fastest Balalaika [player] in the West;" *after* Jac Holzman of Elektra recorded him with and without Theo Bikel (of "Fiddler on the Roof" fame); *after* appearances at Carnegie Hall; *after* his many decades of performing nightly at New York nightclubs; and *after* he was the first musician to be inducted into the Balalaika and Domra Association of America's Hall of Fame.

All of the above took place before the start of a 14-year musical friendship between a Russian musician for whom balalaika playing meant both joy and survival and a circle of leftist-leaning (mostly) Russian Jews from New York. Well into his seventies and eighties, Polinoff's circle of friends and occasional "gig" partners would expand to include a community of émigré and first-generation American musicians who coalesced around the revival of the Paramount Theater in Peekskill. Such friends included classical as well as folk musicians, and many individuals, such as accordion wizard Mario Tacca and his opera-singing wife Mary Mancini, straddled both genres.

Although it would be impossible to shine a light on all the individuals and cultural communities who sustained Polinoff late in his life, one group caught my attention early on. It consisted of musicians who were more

Polinoff and his mother Marina Poleschuk. Notice the cutout where presumably his father would have stood. Photo courtesy of the author.

Polinoff and his wife Edna Veralle dancing in Brooklyn. Photo courtesy of the author.

likely to be found at an open-air folk jam or a music festival, than in the subterranean, sophisticated spaces of the Russian-themed nightclubs, where Polinoff had spent most of his working days. At this group's core was the previously mentioned "Mike" Resnick, a bearded and slight-statured man whose soft-spoken, aging-hippie persona belies his erudition, and his banjo-playing wife Susan Sterngold. I first ran into Resnick and Sterngold at the annual Harry Smith Frolic and old-time music gathering in Greenfield, Massachusetts. Given that they were both in their seventies and eighties and lived just outside New York City, my researcher "intuition" told me they might have known the balalaika player. When I inquired in between fiddle tunes, they told me they were indeed "great friends" of Polinoff; in addition, they had loads of photos they could share. And so began my exploration of overlapping musical worlds and memory.

Familiar to folk festival attendees near and far, Resnick (an accomplished mandolin player) and Sterngold (who also plays guitar) rarely miss an old-time music event, be it in New England or down South. Their chosen means of travel is the gray cargo van, which they converted to a camper back in 2010, and they often have a canine companion in tow. Sterngold maintains a busy schedule as an all-weather hiker and therapist, while Resnick is a retired orthopedic surgeon who now devotes his life to family, friends, and his beloved music—all of which are inseparable.

Despite their advancing years, and in large part *because* of them, Resnick and Sterngold reside at the center of the deeply informed music community in which they enthusiastically take part. Forward facing, despite the inevitable losses and challenges posed by advancing years, they actively pass on their music to younger generations through jam sessions at their home in Rockland County, as well as during the various cultural gatherings that punctuate their social calendar. Their Facebook pages are filled with images of them jamming with younger players from as far away as West Virginia and North Carolina.

Born in 1935, Resnick was about 50 years old when he first met Polinoff, who was approaching 80. Despite this 30-year gap, both men seemed to share a musical DNA that erased cultural and generational differences. While the friendship between an émigré nightclub entertainer and a circle of potluck-loving, American folk musicians might seem far-fetched, the convergence of these musical lives had to do not only with a shared geography north of Manhattan, but an internal geography of experiences. Many of these experiences were rooted in nostalgia, which rendered Polinoff's tune repertoire both familiar and meaningful

to the younger man. When Resnick first met Polinoff, "Sasha" was a soon-to-be-widowed old man—too old to drive from the hamlet of Shrub Oak to nightclub gigs in midtown Manhattan, but not too old to perform for the Christmas Revels or for Mohegan Colony anniversaries.

One can best understand how this friendship came to be by tracing the steps in Resnick's own musical journey. To start with, he grew up in a family that had a built-in reverence for old tunes, regardless of whether the music came from Eastern Europe or American soil. Resnick's father Joseph was the earliest and most profound influence. Joseph Resnick grew up at the Brooklyn Hebrew Orphan Asylum, which was conveniently located adjacent to the Bedford Stuyvesant neighborhood of Weeksville, a locale known for its Black music. This proved to be of interest to Joseph who, in his teenage years, "… could walk over there and hear them [play]," recalled his son.

Later in life, Mike's Brooklyn-born father would also become enamored of cowboy music: "He wasn't a trained musician, but he was a great ear musician…. He had a tenor banjo and…he could play the piano, he could play the harmonica, he could play mandolin," recounted his son, a longtime member of the 101-year-old New York Mandolin Orchestra. Somewhat west of the orphanage was Crown Heights where Mike spent much of his own childhood. Home to the Brooklyn Botanic Garden and the Brooklyn Museum. "It was an incredible place to grow up," he commented.

Another major musical influence on young Mike was that of the leftist Mohegan Colony in Northern Westchester. His maternal grandfather, Max Molodovsky, was—as Resnick described him—a Russian-born "culturally conservative" plumber who built a little, unheated bungalow on Mohegan Lake; this is where the family spent their summers, some of which Resnick spent as a camp counselor. Much has been said and written about Mohegan, which celebrated its 100th anniversary in 2023; in fact, Rutgers University in New Brunswick, New Jersey, has an entire archive devoted to the colony's history. There are also very active Facebook pages, which keep past and present members in touch with one another.

Barely an hour north of Manhattan, Mohegan Lake, with its run-down boathouse and funky, spider-filled outbuildings, retains a peaceful otherworldliness where

The musical ensemble for Two Guitars Nightclub. *From left to right*: *(front)* Vladimir Lazarev, Sonya Chamina; *(back)* Constantin Poliansky, Alexis Hramoff, Leonid Kalbouss, Sasha Polinoff. Photo courtesy of Guy Fairstein.

one can spend hours simply watching the swallows and dragonflies playing over the surface of the water. Here is a glimpse of the colony's zeitgeist, as described in *The North County Views* during the community's 60th anniversary:

> There were needle workers, artists, writers, carpenters and electricians—men and women of many different walks of life. Most important, there were socialists, anarchists, communists, and a-politicals, not to mention the bourgeoisie. All were disparate and diverse yet held together by two common threads: a desire to seek a better life for themselves and their children in the country, and to set up a progressive school. (Beth Waterfall 1983, "The Mohegan Colony Then and Now," *North County Views*, August 31–September 6, V1–V2)

Similar reflections appeared in a 70th anniversary article in *The New York Times*, which quoted a Mrs. Gilman:

> "Mohegan Colony was my Shangri-La," she said. "Here were artists and trade unionists, anarchists and socialists, writers and factory workers—all idealists who wanted to create a better world. Yet there were things that pulled us together and pulled us apart. I vividly remember the heated social and political debates as well as the spirited dances and grand parties that were held at our lake." (Fay Ellis, 1993, "Mohegan Colony, 70, a Mine of Memory," September 5, Sec. 13WC, 17)

From its founding in 1923, Mohegan was a cultural magnet for left-leaning and politically outspoken musical artists, such as Woody Guthrie, Theo Bikel, and Pete Seeger, among many others. Most impactful for young Mike were the campfires every weekend led by his own father who played banjo and sang. Many of the colonists were émigrés, or the children of émigrés, so their campfire music was often a mix of American blues, Jewish, and Eastern European songs and tunes.

By the late 1950s, Resnick—now in his 20s—became one of many urban-dwelling folk music revivalists who followed the call of American old-time music to its rural points of origin: "The common knowledge was that in order to get the real flavor of the music you had to go down South to hear it." The music Resnick heard on the East Coast had "too much New York flavor to it," as he expressed it:

> So, in 1957, I…spent a month down there. I went to the festival run by Bascom Lamar Lunsford (Mountain Dance and Folk Festival) in North Carolina with a friend, who eventually became my brother-in-law. Then we hung around and met some very fascinating people—Marcus Martin and…Samantha Bumgarner and Clarence Greene (a late fiddler from the '20s). That was a wonderful trip. So, I came back and concentrated on learning medicine. I had to kind of give it [music] up, as many people did in the South! You know, they had families, and they had to give it up until they retired, or something.

Here, Resnick was referring to singer, guitar, and autoharp player Evelyn Farmer (1918–2010) who, according to a *Virginia Folklife* interview in 1991, said she'd waited 35 years to finally go and perform at the Old Fiddler's Convention in her home state of Virginia; this, after a life spent farming on the land that she and her husband had both cleared by hand and raising a family. (Similar stories abound in the old-time music world: Kentucky fiddler Art Stamper who spent 20 years as a hairdresser before returning to music full time, or West Virginia's Melvin Wine who supported his family by working in coal mines and farming).

Back home in New York, Resnick started attending jam sessions with John Cohen and Tom Paley, who had yet to become members of the popular folk revival band New Lost City Ramblers: "The two of them would appear as a duo in Greenwich Village in off-Broadway theaters. So, after the performance they would start a jam—say, at 11:30 p.m. or 12 [midnight]. Admission was $2.00. I loved their stuff." Whenever he was able, Resnick spent his Sundays observing hotshot players and jamming in Washington Square.

Eddie Mashberg and Polinoff jamming at Mashberg's 70th Birthday Celebration. Photo courtesy of Gregg Mashberg.

The practice of medicine being all-consuming, by the late 1960s and early 1970s, much of Resnick's music making was relegated to family vacations, many of which were spent at child-friendly folk music weekends at Camp Isabella Freedman in Falls Village, Connecticut—an event run by sea shanty enthusiast Bernie Klay. It was in the summer of 1977, that Resnick and his musical trail buddy Drew Smith decided to take a little time off from work to follow the music down South. (Smith had just made a conscious decision to replace the hobby of motorcycle racing with music making). This would be the first of many annual summer pilgrimages to Virgina, North Carolina, and West Virginia. And as Resnick's three children became more independent, he found more time to play.

By the mid-1980s, a number of musical house parties had sprung up in both Westchester and Rockland counties, and these are where Resnick and Smith would develop both their repertoire and their musical community. There were bi-weekly gatherings at the home of Lillian and Louis Appel in Valley Cottage, and this is where Resnick first met Sterngold, who would eventually become his second wife and musical partner. According to Smith (a world class autoharp player), "Lil was important to everyone."

As for Sterngold, she occasionally hosted her own gatherings in Chappaqua, New York, and a lyrical article by Lynne Ames for *The New York Times* brings these socially formative days vividly into focus:

> From a house in a hollow comes music of the hills. Follow the winding road, to the stand of big trees, to the wooden bungalow with its long front porch. A dull orange glow shines from one window onto the yard and is swallowed by the dark pines, the India ink, star-studded sky. Through this window also comes something stronger than lamplight: the whine of a fiddle, the beat of a banjo, the sound of a human voice. (Ames, May 18, 1986, Section 11WC, 2)

Similar musical evenings also took place in Tarrytown, and this is where Resnick and Smith first met Eddie Mashberg, an outstanding backup guitar player. Mashberg, the Jewish son of Ukrainian and Russian parents, had also spent much of his youth at the Mohegan Colony. Among his many accomplishments, Mashberg studied Flamenco guitar with the great Carlos Montoya, and the techniques he had learned carried over well in old-time musical settings. A quietly passionate and highly effective cultural mover and shaker, Mashberg was instrumental in bringing major talent to the Westchester area—Itzak Perlman and Woody Herman being among his many recruits.

Mashberg also succeeded in rescuing endangered organizations, such as the

Polinoff and Smith sharing tunes in Shrub Oak. Photo courtesy of Susan Sterngold.

Polinoff's handmade holiday card to Smith. Courtesy of Drew Smith.

Paramount Theater in Peekskill and the Copland House, which today serves as a musical retreat for contemporary composers. With shared Eastern European Jewish backgrounds, it soon became apparent that Mashberg, Sterngold, and Resnick had a fondness for Old World tunes, as well as old-time tunes. During the early 1980s, their paths crossed yet again near Mohegan Lake, where Resnick's mother and stepfather enjoyed hosting musical gatherings. On one of these occasions, Mashberg arrived in the company of Sasha Polinoff. A musical rapport developed quickly, and the four friends continued to meet at the lake house whenever they were able.

Drew Smith, who lived in Ho-Ho-Kus, New Jersey, had yet to meet Polinoff. His first opportunity arrived backstage at Symphony Space in 1985, when Resnick and Sterngold offered Polinoff a ride home after one of his nightly performances in Christmas Revels. Recalled Smith, "He had just had the neck of his balalaika repaired." Housebound at the age of 95, Smith became animated when speaking of his old friend: "Mike, Susan, and I were so lucky to have known Sasha and be influenced by him…. We would take Sasha out to Chinese dinners. We played with him at a 4-H Fair. We'd go with him to the home of Eddie Mashberg," he recalled.

Smith, born in 1928, reveled in his own musical eclecticism, which began with a Swedish mother, who happened to be Cole Porter's "social secretary." "She worked at the Waldorf Towers. He [Porter] had parquet wooden floors from English castles…. The doorways were painted to look like faux marble. I got to meet Porter at *Kiss Me Kate*!" Throughout his life, he particularly enjoyed playing Porter and Gershwin tunes on the autoharp—no small musical feat.

In addition to this early exposure to Broadway theater music and the folk doyens of the day, Smith was also drawn to bluegrass. At the height of his eclectic musical life, he performed with Roger Sprung at Lincoln Center. Eileen Roys of the *Autoharp Clearinghouse Newsletter* once explained that Smith "considers himself to be a string band musician," but given his choice of instrument, that musical identity would prove complicated.

Despite his many awards and accomplishments, one of Smith's most cherished memories was playing the national anthem on autoharp for the Old Fiddler's Convention in Galax, Virginia, a place where he did not always feel welcome. In old-time music, he once observed, "Fiddle is king. I could duplicate what the fiddle could do…but ultimately, I came to the realization that an autoharp could ruin the old-time sound."

By the late 1980s, Smith could also add Russian music to his repertoire. Here's what Smith once wrote about this addition to his repertoire:

> ...I was just bowled over when I was invited to jam with Sasha Polinoff, a real "world-class" balalaika player….after a somewhat perplexing first session with him (because I was not always sure what chords to use), I came away from the evening with a head full of exciting new melodies and chord changes. I also gained more feeling for the dynamics of playing by observing Sasha's playing, which typically begins slowly and softly, then becomes increasingly louder, faster, and more aggressive…. What beautiful music and what fun!

Although Polinoff's wife Nadia is noticeably absent from the narratives handed down to me, I'm told she often accompanied her husband on his musical outings. Her life is best understood through the medium of photographs, which highlight her prima ballerina years with Fokine, her dance partnership with her husband, and some late-life images of her and Polinoff in their garden or on the cruise ships where he performed. Biographically speaking, she faded from view, and the only way I could bring her back into focus was to locate her extended family of ballet students (many of whom were Sterngold's classmates from Chappaqua), who shared impassioned stories of "Ms. Veralle's" gifts as a dance instructor.

Polinoff lost his life's companion in 1991, and from that point on, his folk music friends moved their biweekly gatherings to his modest home in Shrub Oak. Polinoff loved hosting, and he would always treat his guests to borscht and black bread, in addition to balalaika tunes. Smith appreciated the time he spent with Polinoff, in part because his older friend's Russian tunes presented a technical challenge: "I'm not a normal autoharp player," explained Smith, whose stature in the specialized world of "autoharpery" rivals that of Polinoff among balalaika players: "I developed a thumb lead style to pick out melodies," a technique that allowed him to play melodically in both major and minor keys—a skill essential in Eastern European music. Interestingly, both Smith and Polinoff shared outlier approaches to playing otherwise traditional instruments. Early in his career, Polinoff broke from Russian tradition, which dictates the strumming of the balalaika with the forefinger, instead using a custom-made plectrum to render his music more audible in noisy restaurant settings.

Commented Smith, "I was amazed at what Sasha could do with three strings." (For readers unfamiliar with the balalaika, this fretted, triangular-shaped instrument, comes in many body sizes, but the solo instrument that Polinoff played was the prima balalaika, an instrument with three strings tuned—from low to high—EEA—the "A" is the singing string where much of the melody is played).

Polinoff and friends at the Helen Hayes Rehabilitation Hospital. Photo courtesy of Mike Resnick.

According to Resnick, the admiration between Smith and Polinoff traveled in both directions: "Sasha loved Drew because Drew was such an incredible musician. He had everything that Sasha wanted. Sasha had a great sense of humor, and he called Drew's autoharp his 'Stomach Steinway.'"

Polinoff once sent Smith a holiday card on which he commented, "Drew my Friend, I have only three strings to fool around with, but when I looked at you with that cut version of a grand piano on your chest, that is something to keep me thinking!!"

Playing music with the balalaika player was a particularly satisfying experience not only because it was novel, but because Polinoff took great pleasure in passing his repertoire on to his younger friends. If there was collaboration among them, it traveled in one direction, as there is no indication that Polinoff picked up any Appalachian tunes.

Smith wrote in the Autoharp Newsletter in 1991, "At least once a month, I… play music with my world-class balalaika-playing friend, Sasha Polinoff. Sasha has lovingly and patiently coached my musical buddies Mike Resnick, Susan Sterngold, and me with one exciting Russian folk tune after another." Gradually the three friends absorbed Polinoff's repertoire, "Korobushka," "Red Poppies," "Little Birch Tree," "Yes, My Darling Daughter," and a tango or two (among other tunes), occasionally jamming at the house of Eddie Mashberg, who also enjoyed playing this repertoire.

Recalls Resnick:

> We had been picking up tunes for years already by ear, and it was not hard for us to do it because, when you think of it, his tunes—these Russian and Ukrainian folk melodies—were kind of similar to old-time music. They had a brief statement. It would be repeated twice, and you would do a B part. It had more dynamics in it than we were accustomed to in old-time music. It gets loud and low and then loud, and you would have somebody hold off and then come in.

Soon, they would start gigging as "Ben Borscht and the Beats." One of their favorite venues—particularly, given Resnick's profession—was the Helen Hayes [Rehabilitation] Hospital, just 35 miles north of New York City. Said Resnick, "It's a wonderful place…. Patients were in wheelchairs, and so, we would be in the lobby in the big atrium. People would roll up, and we would start to play. Sasha would say, 'Well, nobody's gonna walk out on us today!'" Perhaps, their favorite gig of all was at Susan and Mike's own wedding in 1992. "Sasha was an honored guest… and we [Ben Borscht and the Beats] were part of the entertainment!" recalls Resnick. Thanks to this music community, Polinoff would also be invited to play for the 65th and 75th anniversaries at the Mohegan Colony, where his friend Eddie Mashberg backed him up on guitar.

In winter 1999, Polinoff was out in his driveway clearing snow off his car when he fell and broke his hip. Resnick, the orthopedic surgeon, gave me a detailed medical accounting of everything that went wrong for his friend, starting with the first hospital where they should have given him "…a 'hip nailing' to fix the fracture and get him out of bed within a day. They kept him at the VA hospital for four or five days. Then they transferred him to the Bronx VA, where Susan, Drew, and I visited him. The next day he died."

Drew Smith had a sunnier memory: "Sasha was such a delight. We visited him at the VA Hospital in the Bronx. We played music"—the tunes he had taught *them*. According to Smith, Polinoff, the ultimate host, said, 'There are three other men in this room. Don't just play Russian music!' And so it was, that on January 31, 1999, what might best be described as a *one*-way musical collaboration came to a close. More recently, Resnick and Sterngold have had to endure the loss of yet another member of this dwindling circle, Drew Smith. Upon the announcement of Smith's passing, a video appeared on Sterngold's Facebook page of the two men playing a Scandinavian polka in front of a roaring fire and making the kind of music that only a lifelong friendship could produce.

Polinoff has now been gone for over a quarter of a century, but for those of us who knew and loved his music, he is remarkably present. Resnick and Sterngold remember the man and his tunes as though it were yesterday. Last year, at this writer's request, they generously took the time to re-record the repertoire he taught them, only occasionally correcting one another as they went. At this writing, Resnick and Sterngold still spend time traveling innumerable miles to where the tunes are and, most importantly, to where their friends are—many of them younger.

Sarah Jane Nelson is the author of *Ballad Hunting with Max Hunter: Stories of an Ozark Folksong Collector,* which came out with the University of Illinois Press's Music in America series in 2023. Nelson's earliest soundscape consisted of Polinoff's recordings, many of which her father learned on the accordion. She was inspired to write about Polinoff's life when she discovered his autograph on an album addressed to her grandfather Semion (Kovner) Nelson. "Sam" Nelson settled in Hartford, Connecticut, in the 1890s, where he became a prominent pharmacist. Sarah Jane Nelson is currently at work on a community biography of balalaika music in America and encourages readers to contact her at *NelsonTrad315@gmail.com* with any memories they may have of Polinoff and his greater musical community. Photo courtesy of the author.

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