

Remembering Eli A. Popoff (1921-2014)

By Koozma J. Tarasoff, July 5, 2014. — Link to this page: <http://goo.gl/6PAVgV>

At age 93, the highly respected Doukhobor teacher, folk historian, author and translator died on the morning of July 4, 2014. A two-day funeral service will be officiated by Paul J. Seminoff at the [USCC Community Centre in Grand Forks](#). — [USCC Funeral Notices - 2014](#).

- July 9, 2014, Wednesday 7 PM, evening service with family, friends and singing.
- July 10, 2014, Thursday 10 AM to 1 PM, Doukhobor service (cremation later).



Also see my Blog: [Tribute to Eli A. Popoff \(1921-2014\)](#).

A Family of Writers and Cultural Contributors

— From: Tarasoff, K. J. [Spirit-Wrestlers: Doukhobor Pioneers' Strategies for Living](#), 2002, pages 120-126.

Eli A Popoff and his wife Dorothy, now retired and living in Grand Forks British Columbia belong to a wider family of writers and community activists with extended community, zealot and independent affiliations. Their son Jim excelled as editor of the community journal *Iskra*; their two daughters are teachers and social workers, one of them being a poet, while their grandchildren are occupied in various studies, trades and professions.

Eli was the youngest in the family, also born on the homestead. His father Alexey Ivanovich Popov was one of the veterans of the Doukhobor struggle against militarism, which took place in Tsarist Russia during the last few years of the 19th Century. During his Siberian exile he had met and married his wife Katerina, whose family were [Yehowists](#), a millenarian religious movement in Russia.

It may have been Alexey Popov's interesting reminiscences of his experiences that triggered the growth of a lifelong interest in the Doukhobor movement in his youngest son. As Eli grew up, he enjoyed listening to his parents' and other elders' stories of the past, and it became a hobby to

write them down. Reminiscing in an interview, Eli expressed the source of his interest, which began early in his life:

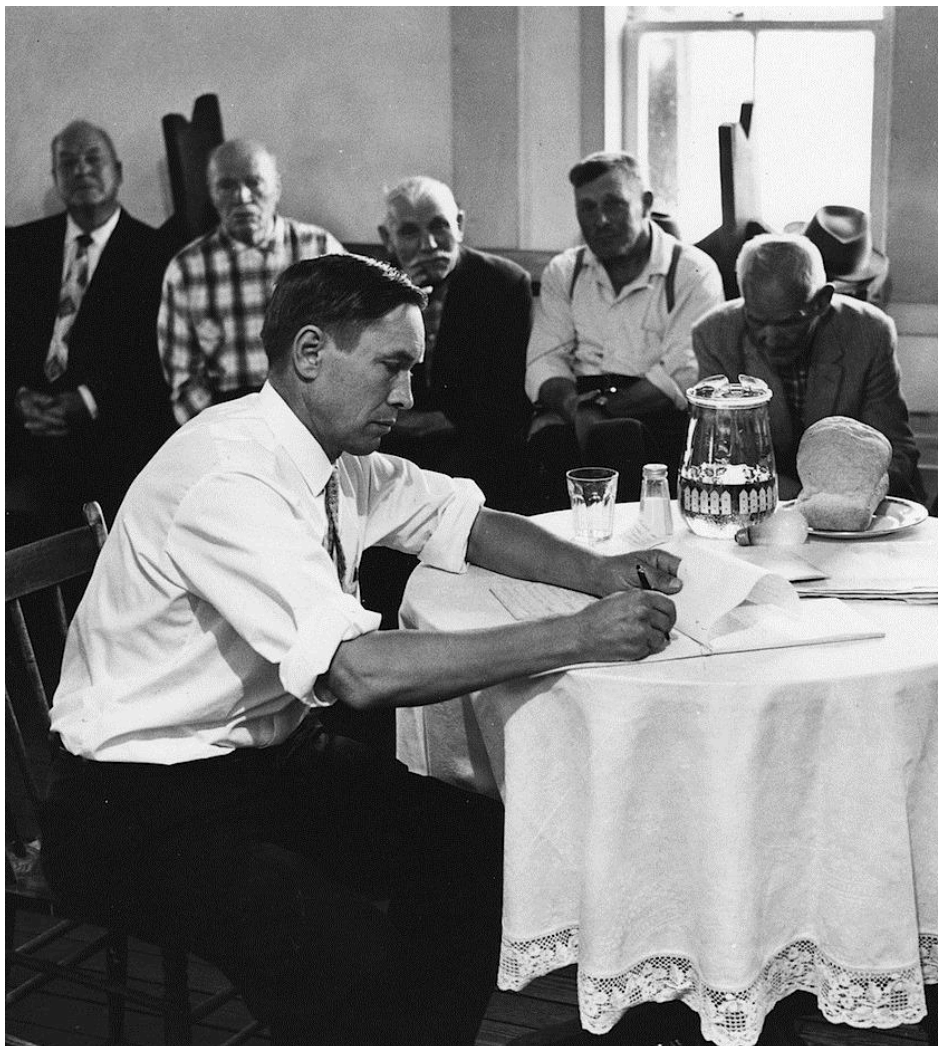
'...My father was a great story-teller and in my opinion he had a very colorful life to draw from, having been born and growing up to manhood in the southern part of Russia and then, in the prime of his life, being exiled five or six thousand miles away to Siberia. Seven years of his life were spent there, and then, along with the other Doukhobor exiles, he made the trip across most of Asia, crossing Europe, the Atlantic Ocean and most of Canada, finally settling on the prairies. Here he experienced the pioneer life, first living for a time in the community, which was later to become the Christian Community of Universal Brotherhood, and then moving unto his own farm....Many of our neighbours were of Anglo-Saxon, French, Ukrainian, or [Metis](#) background, and from my earliest years, I remember my father having to explain his conception of Doukhobor philosophy and telling stories from his own xperiences....My earliest recollections are of sitting in a corner of the room when we'd have visitors, and listening to my father recount stories about his birthplace, his exile and life in Siberia, and the long journey to Canada. This started my interest from away back then, for I remember clearly from about four years of age...' (*Mir*, January 1975: 3).



1952 : Dmitri, Eli, Elaine, and Dorothy at Christina Lake, B.C.

With only grade school education, Eli felt himself hindered in pursuing a writing career. Nevertheless, he continued to collect stories on pieces of paper and filed them away in boxes. In his quest to move closer to his zealot grandparents, as well as to a larger concentration of Doukhobor young people, in his early twenties Eli moved to Grand Forks, BC, where he has resided ever since. He married Dorothy Rilkoff in 1945, and they raised three children, Dmitri (Jim), Elaine, and Natasha. It was here that he became actively involved in the affairs of the Orthodox Doukhobor community. This involvement gave Eli the motivation to draw upon his vast accumulation of Doukhobor historical lore, and his literary talents. He served two years as editor of the Russian language Doukhobor weekly periodical [*Iskra*](#) (The 'Spark'). His work with the Sunday School and Youth programs necessitated the preparation of historical material, which resulted in a collection of over fifty anecdotes based on events and personalities from Doukhobor history. A mimeographed printing of this in the Russian language proved very popular and sold several thousand copies.

For the May 1954 *Inquirer*, he wrote: "[Time's bugle calls](#)". In 1957 he was the first Doukhobor to hold public office in BC, as School Trustee; and he participated in the [Building bridges of understanding meeting](#) (5th from right), Grand Forks, B.C.



1963 : Working on Russian texts in Brilliant, B.C.

In the early 1960s the [National Museum of Man](#) in Ottawa initiated a research and recording project on musical lore of Canadian ethnic minorities, the Doukhobors were one of the groups approached. Contractor from the Museum Kenneth Peacock spent two summers with the Doukhobors and Eli Popoff was the principal assistant in providing translations, annotations, and historical background. Out of this effort, a historical monograph was prepared by Eli titled *Historical Exposition on Doukhobor Beliefs*, available [at libraries](#) and [sold online](#). The decade-long project resulted in [5 cataloged items](#):

- *Stories from Doukhobor Tradition* collected and compiled from old texts and from oral tradition in Saskatchewan, Alberta and British Columbia. The collection covers Doukhobor history from its early origin to the first years in Canada. In Russian, mimeographed booklet, 1956, 80 pages. Call No: 93-14
- *An Historical Exposition on the Origin and Evolvment of the Basic Tenets of the Doukhobor Life-Conception* (part 1; Origin and Formation; part 2: Evolvment in the Caucasus; part 3: Development in Canada; appendix 1-3: historical exposition on Doukhobors (songs, psalms, hymns, rules of life, philosophical concepts) [1964-1965], 74 pages. Call No: POE-A-1

Published under the title: *Historical Exposition on Doukhobor Beliefs* related to religious beliefs, religious practices, sects, intolerance, songs, psalms, hymns, correspondence, peacemaking. Mimeographed booklet published by Iskra Publication, British Columbia, 1966, 58 pages. Call No: POE-C-1

- *The Soul Expressive Heritage of the Doukhobors – Russian Group Singing* (song text, sacred music, sect, song composer, choir, singing, psalm and hymn, prayer text). 1968, 13 pages. This text was joined to the transcriptions and translations of Peacock's Doukhobor songs. (Originals in Peacock collection). Call No: POE-A-2
- Administrative correspondence, including some drafts of contracts, related to a Doukhobor exhibition, the publication of his contract report and the recording of Doukhobor choirs. 1963-1971, 1 cm. Call No: POE-B-1.1

Popoff's *Historical Exposition on Doukhobor Beliefs* (1964) is cited 23 times in Makortoff, Stacey. "Why the Path to Peace is Often Paved in Conflict: A Historical Examination of the Doukhobors of British Columbia," MA thesis, European University Center for Peace Studies, May, 2006.

In all of his literary efforts, Eli dedicated his works to the young people, always trying to help motivate them to inquire about life around them, to delve into its deeper inner meanings, and to find genuine progress along the pathway of ever higher spiritual evolvment'. From this 'Doukhobor Life-Concept', Eli contends that we can begin to define the answers to the purpose of life itself beginning with me, myself, my own individual, personal being (Popoff in *Iskra*, 16th December 1987: 59).

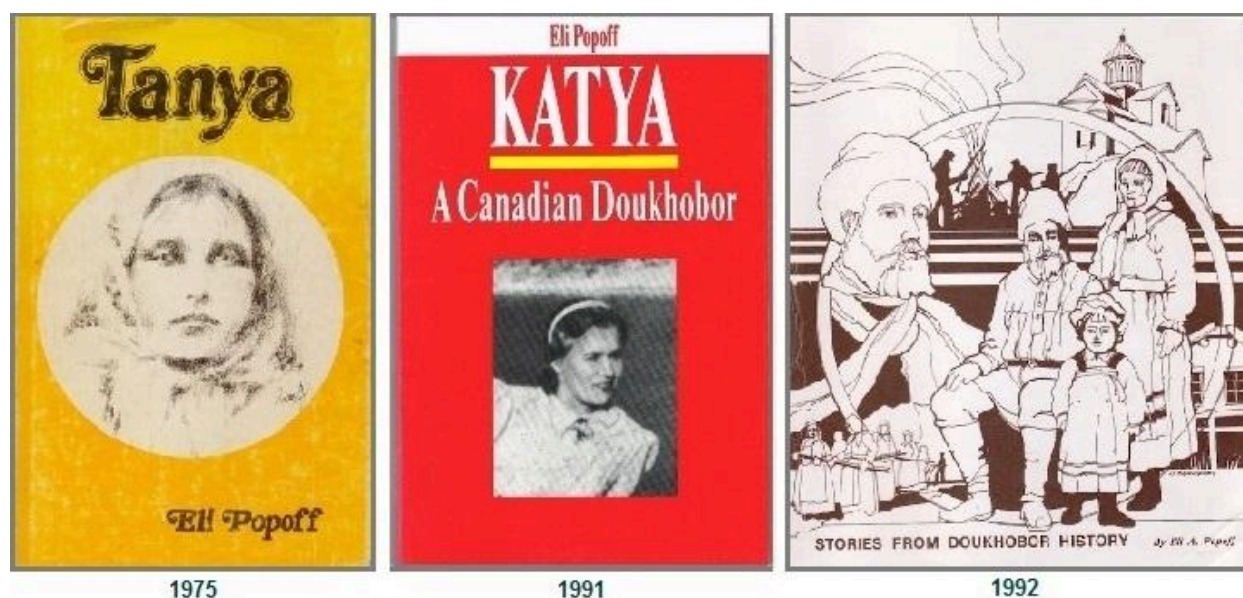


1981 : Reading to grandchildren Manya and Matthew, Grand Forks, B.C.

As one of the first Doukhobors to take up public office in BC, Eli served on the Board of Trustees of the local School District in Grand Forks from 1957 to 1967. He declined to swear an Oath of Allegiance in the hiring process and set a precedent whereby affirming the truth was acceptable in the future.

In 1968 Eli Popoff made his first trip to the Soviet Union and used this opportunity to visit the Doukhobor settlements and do some homework for his first novel. That same year he became secretary of the Association of Canadians of Russian Descent which the following year organized the 70th Anniversary of Doukhobors and Russians in Canada. Over the years, Eli was employed as a farmer, carpenter, and bookkeeper.

Beginning in the 1960s he conducted lectures and discussions at the USCC on Doukhobor history, but few attended. In the 1970s Selkirk College invited him to conduct a four-month course on the origin and meaning of Doukhobor life-concepts. When people realized they had to pay for the same lectures which they could have heard for free, interest, attendance and respect for his work significantly increased.



To interest young people he created a composite character based on many historic facts and in 1975 published: *Tanya*, his first book in English. This was followed in 1991 with *Katya - A Canadian Doukhobor*. *Tanya* focused on Orthodox Community Doukhobor history, and *Katya* attempted to clarify the zealot and Independent points of view.

In his 1972 Ph.D. thesis Mark Mealing extensively uses Popoff's translations, and wrote:

In 1964, Eli Popoff of the U.S.C.C. published an English survey of Doukhobor history. Its three parts deal, respectively, with an account of the early history of Doukhobors until about 1845; development in the Caucasus region and the Burning of Arms, till about 1899; and the period of Canadian settlement. Each section is accompanied by a lengthy appendix for illustrative purposes, including psalms and songs in translation. Community documents, and addresses. In 1966, Popoff published a slightly revised new edition of his *Rasskaz*, first produced in 1956. The *Rasskaz* complements Sukhorev's work, consisting of an opening collection of legends; and six sections of historical and doctrinal discussion. Apparently the *Rasskaz*, is the basis for much of the English *Historical Exposition*. The legendary section illustrates Popoff's effort to add to the existing traditional genre of Suffering legends a genre of Social Achievement. (Mealing, Mark. "[Our people's way : a study in Doukhobor hymnody and folklife](#)," doctoral dissertation in Folklore and Folklife, University of Pennsylvania, 1972, page 364.)

For 8 years from 1974 to 1982, a series of symposia about Doukhobor identity and history issues were hosted by the [USCC](#) Joint Doukhobor Research Committee. Many Independent and unaffiliated (named) Doukhobors and some Freedomites attended. Extensive summaries and transcriptions were titled: 'Report of the United Doukhobor Research Committee in the Matter of Clarification of the Motivating Life-Concepts and the History of the Doukhobors in Canada.' For a decade the proceedings were edited and translated by Eli Popoff and published by Selkirk College in 1997 as a 698-page book: [Joint Doukhobor Research Committee Symposium Meetings, 1974-1982](#).

In 1992 he published *Stories From Doukhobor History* (139 pages), an English translation of his 1956 Russian language book. During the past 2 years *Stories* has been serially published bilingually in [Iskra](#) — Part 24 appears in the current July issue.

In 1998 and 1999, John "Vanya" Woodsworth, Russian instructor and translator, University of Ottawa, met Eli 3 times. These are his diary notes: [Personal recollections of Ilya Alekseevich Popov](#), by John Woodsworth, Literary Translator, Ottawa, June 7, 2014.

In 1999, Eli was invited to give a keynote address at the University of Ottawa's Conference on the Doukhobor Centenary, where the University also presented him with the Institute of Canadian Studies Award for Outstanding Achievement in Canadian Studies.

In late 2001, Eli visited the newest Doukhobor settlement in [Mirnoye](#), Bryansk, Russia, where he purchased an apartment for his family to use during visits. This replanting action signals his loyalty to his Russian roots and a dedication to being a 'citizen of the world' and to being tolerant, respectful, and becoming a bridge-builder for other ideas and traditions.

Comments

From Nick Troubetzkoy, St. Lucia.

A Sorrow and a Memory.

My family visited Eli and his family in Grand Forks a few years ago. Here is one of our photos together.



L to R: Dmitri (Jim) E. Popoff, Nikolai Troubetskoy Jr., Eli A. Popoff, Nick Troubetzkoy with daughter Nikolijne and son Yasha. 2006.

Leave comments at my Blog: [Tribute to Eli A. Popoff \(1921-2014\)](#).

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Spirit-Wrestlers.com