

**Molokans Petition against
"American, Catholic and Subbotniki bootleggers"
in Los Angeles' Flats during Prohibition**

Excerpt from

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA

**ASSIMILATION PROBLEMS OF RUSSIAN MOLOKANS
IN LOSANGELES**

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CHAPTER XIV – STRUGGLE TO PERPTUATE MOLOKANISM

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Appeal to American Social Agencies: The Molokans realize that their children are often the prey to undesirable city influences over which the Colony has no control. They, therefore, attempt to secure the cooperation of various urban social organizations which they hope might help them in eliminating the disorganizing forces to which immigrant neighborhoods are generally subjected. American, Italian, and Subbotniki bootleggers have a strong hold in the Flats. The Molokans have appealed to the district attorney's office to help them stamp out liquor from their Colony:

To OUR DISTRICT ATTORNEYS
and WHOM IT MAY CONCERN

September 27, 1924.

We the undersigned Russian residents of Los Angeles, members of the denomination of Spiritual Christians, respectfully represent as follows:

Under the principles of our religion the use of intoxicating liquors in any form is

strictly forbidden. Since the adoption of general prohibition in the United States the Russian Colony in Los Angeles has witnessed in many homes of their settlement a constant increase in the secret manufacture of harmful and dangerous intoxicants, most conspicuous among such manufacturers are holders of permits from the Government to produce liquors for their own use and certain Sabbatarians, members of a Russian denomination of the Jewish religion which tolerates the use of liquors. Under the cloak of such manufacture for home use unlimited quantities of intoxicating liquors are now sold in our midst, and members of our settlement, particularly those of weak character, are falling into the net of disaster and spending all their hard earnings for intoxicating liquors, while their wives and children go hungry and naked, suffer great privations and face physical and social ruin. In the spiritual as well as in the secular sphere are observed all the demoralizing and destructive effects of intemperance. The families of the "victims of intemperance threaten to become public charges, while the victims themselves become unfit for any work, for their bodies are poisoned and destroyed by the liquors they absorb.

We earnestly seek the help of the Government and the state and all trends of the race to inquire into the truth of our statements herein and put a complete stop to the illicit and illegal manufacture of liquors, and thus to restore the rule of temperance desired by all good men and women, restore it particularly in our settlement where the enemy rages and threatens irreparable damage and material ruin. We pray that, for effective eradication of the evil, no more permits for the manufacture of beverages be granted in our neighborhood.

This petition to all appearances failed of its purpose and the Molokans appealed to the International Institute asking their cooperation in wiping out liquor traffic. The Institute called a meeting of representatives of urban agencies at which four Molokan elders presented their problems through the use of Russian interpreter. The following is an excerpt from the minutes of the conference.¹

The Molokans told the Americans that they came to this country because they believed they could enjoy religious freedom and freedom from military service and bring their children up in a fine moral atmosphere. They have enjoyed religious freedom ... but their children were causing them much concern and anxiety. They asked the help of the Americans in solving some of their problems which, unfortunately, many American parents have been unable to solve. ... Several Americans emphasized the necessity of making their homes as attractive as possible and of having the parents learn English so they could better understand their children.

As a result of the meeting, four of the elders of the Molokan Church met at the office of the Anti-Saloon League and asked for the help of the League in stamping out bootlegging in the Colony. A deputy sheriff spoke to Russian children at the Utah Street School and told them they must obey the curfew law and be off the street at 9:00 P.M., and he also went to motion picture houses and told the managers that they must enforce the law prohibiting minors to attend picture shows unaccompanied by adults, after 9:00 P.M.

February 15th. 1923. Names and addresses of bootlegging establishments were given federal prohibition officers. The City Fire and Housing Departments are preparing to show motion pictures to explain the need and the methods of preventing fires and making their homes comply with city regulations.

The Russians have done what they could to secure the cooperation of the Americans and now it is for us to help in every way can.

Little or practical consequence has resulted from the various petitions sent by Molokans to urban social organizations. These petitions have little effect since they come from a group of non-voters, aliens, "those Russians." The district remains poorly serviced, and signs of social disorganization are becoming more and more evident. Bootlegging has as strong a hold in The Flats as formerly. The older Molokans find it more and more difficult to try to maintain their spiritual brotherhood unimpaired as they are no longer able to withstand the influences or a deteriorating district.

¹ From the annual report of the International Institute on file with the Los Angeles Social Services Commission

The above was scanned and transcribed by Bill Aldacushion – October 2011

Editor's Note: International Institute of Los Angeles: In 1914 The International Institute of Los Angeles was established by the YWCA to serve women and girls coming from Europe and the Orient and to assist the foreign communities in their adjustment to live in this country. See <http://www.iilosangeles.org/>

Editor's Note: During Prohibition, there was an exemption granted in the Volstead Act providing for the manufacture and consumption of so-called "ritual wine" used in Jewish and Catholic religious observances (sacrament, weddings, funerals, Seder/Passover dinners, circumcisions, etc.). It was inevitable that some of this product made its way into the broader market for general consumption. See this article posted to the American Jewish Archives for a more in-depth discussion of this topic: "Let Them Drink and Forget Our Poverty": Orthodox Rabbis React to Prohibition "by **Hannah Sprecher** (http://americanjewisharchives.org/journal/PDF/1991_43_02_00_sprecher.pdf)

Here is an excerpt from this article:

The Eighteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution, which forbade "the manufacture, sale or transportation of intoxicating liquors," went into effect on January 16, 1920. Its enforcement was provided by the National Prohibition Act, popularly known as the Volstead Act, whose thirty-nine sections created the mechanisms for translating the amendment into functioning law. Among other things, it set up an enforcement unit, subsidiary to the Bureau of Internal Revenue, for the purpose of apprehending the law's transgressors as well as regulating the allowed use of alcohol in industry, medicine, and the sacrament.

The allowances for the sacramental use of alcohol were the result of a compromise the prohibitionists were compelled to make to ensure passage of the Volstead Act. Since both Christians and Jews required the use of alcoholic beverages (specifically wine) in their age-old rituals and customs, the drafters of the act had been forced to recognize that the First Amendment right of freedom of religion was in some measure in conflict with Prohibition. In order to prevent opposition from religionists, the drafters of the

Volstead Act permitted the use of wine for "sacramental purposes," specifying in Section 6 that:

Nothing in this title shall be held to apply to the manufacture, sale, transportation, importation, possession, or distribution of wine for sacramental purposes, or like religious rites, except Section 6 (save as the same requires a permit to purchase) and Section **10** hereof, and the provisions of this act prescribing penalties for the violation of said sections. No person to whom a permit may be issued to manufacture, transport, import, or sell wines for sacramental purposes or like religious rites shall sell, barter, exchange, or furnish any such to any person not a rabbi, minister of the gospel, priest, or an officer duly authorized for the purpose by any church or congregation, nor to any such except upon an application duly subscribed by him, which application, authenticated as regulations may prescribe, shall be filed and pre-served by the seller. The head of any conference or diocese or other ecclesiastical jurisdiction may designate any rabbi, minister, or priest to supervise the manufacture of wine to be used for the purposes and rites in this section mentioned, and the person so designated may, in the discretion of the Commissioner, be granted a permit to supervise such manufacture.