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SPOTLIGHT

ENTERPRISE

## From Russia to Calvert, chapel's history lives on

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Above, Christ at the Sea chapel has been restored and is part of the historic village at Herrington Harbor North. Below, Natl Scheffer painted icons on all sides of the six-sided chapel, including saints that shared names with her loved ones.

STAFF PHOTOS BY SARAH FALLIN

Across the street from Herrington Harbor North in Tracys Landing sits a little-known piece of Calvert County history, where the stories of the marina's owner, a prominent Maryland builder and a Russian immigrant converge after almost 70 years of history.

In Calvert County, where the religious landscape is dominated by Catholic, Baptist, Episcopalian, Methodist and Lutheran congregations, it may be surprising to know a small Russian Orthodox chapel was built in Cove Point in 1940.

Its builder was Nathalie Scheffer, who came to the United States in 1930 with her first husband, Prince Nicholas S. Wolkonsky, according to her obituary. She detailed her experiences during the Russian Revolution in a memoir under a pseudonym called "Twice Born in Russia." In 1935, Scheffer purchased a lot in Cove Point and later bought five more lots and built a small cottage and pavilion to house visitors.

"I named this place 'Tryn Trava,'" Scheffer writes in a document in the Calvert County Historical Society's files. "According to a Russian legend, it means a flower which in the legend blooms only once in a lifetime and then only on a special night. In the Russian language and songs, Tryn Trava assumed the meaning of 'don't worry.' Both the legend and the meaning of the word were most befitting the origin and purpose of the place."

Scheffer noted that during times of financial hardship, money was spent on this place of solace for people to escape. Free days to spend at Tryn Trava were weekends and holidays, so she could not attend her regular Russian Orthodox church services in Washington, D.C. So in 1940, she decided to build a chapel. Around that time, Scheffer worked at Dumbarton Oaks in Washington, specializing in the study of Byzantine art. Throughout the years, several priests lived at Tryn Trava to hold services. The doors of the chapel were always open.

Scheffer studied Byzantine art and taught herself to paint icons. The icons in the small six-sided chapel are ones she painted, picturing saints who share names of important people and events in her life.

In 1960, Scheffer said she “became an invalid” and could no longer travel to Tryn Trava.

“Many of the original visitors had moved away, aged, and died. Tryn Trava was sold and with it the chapel, with the understanding that the chapel would not be destroyed or desecrated. The legend of Tryn Trava came true. Tryn Trava bloomed only once in our lifetime, and while it bloomed we all forgot our worries,” Scheffer wrote.

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While Scheffer only knows of her beloved Tryn Trava blooming once in her lifetime, the chapel, which was named Christ at the Sea (in memory of an ancient small wooden chapel called Spas na Boru, or Christ in the Woods, which was destroyed during the Russian Revolution), bloomed twice more in two other locations in its history. Scheffer died in 1981.

In the late 1970s, Christ at Sea was given to the Calvert Historical Society by its new owners. Builder Perry Van Vleck was given authorization to move the chapel to his property in Dunkirk. Van Vleck paid the society \$50 for the “privilege of removing the building,” according to society meeting notes from January 1977.

Van Vleck was owner of the Red Hall historic property in Dunkirk. He was a well-known Silver Spring homebuilder and is responsible for moving old homes to Lower Marlboro. The Van Vlecks restored the historic Red Hall home, which had been unoccupied for decades, according to a May 1960 edition of the Baltimore Sun. One home he relocated to Lower Marlboro was once located on Virginia’s eastern shore, according to a 1973 article in The Washington Post.

“I had restored several old houses,” Van Vleck told the Post in 1973. “But I really got involved in restoration when I bought Red Hall in 1954 as our country place. The property had been patented in 1667 to [Vivian Beall] and John Bogue as payment for their services as indentured servants by

Lord Baltimore. Both became well-known Indian fighters and sold their grant to William Lyle, who built the house in 1680.”

Van Vleck didn't just move houses. He also moved some other historic buildings to Red Hall. According to Maryland Historical Trust documents, Van Vleck also moved to the property the vestibule of a local 19th-century Methodist church and log cabin built in 1851 in Takoma Park in addition to Scheffer's little chapel.

Jacon McCallum, now of Sunderland, remembers the owners of Red Hall in the 1980s became friends with his father through his father's heating oil business. In addition to swimming on the property, McCallum remembers seeing the chapel and going inside it.

“I remember that thing being there and him saying it was from Russia,” McCallum said.

Then, about nine years ago, Steuart Chaney, owner of Herrington Harbor, caught wind of Christ at the Sea. Like Van Vleck, Chaney has an affinity for preserving and moving old buildings. He collects 19th-century structures that aren't ones typically saved or preserved. More than 30 years ago, he started a historic village at Herrington Harbor North in Tracys Landing where he moved a schoolhouse, meeting house, a home and more.

“I've always had an appreciation for old buildings. I've lived in them. I grew up on a farm in Anne Arundel County,” Chaney said.

When he learned about the Russian Orthodox chapel and the state it was in, he moved it and the chapel was restored. He knew the chapel had been moved once before by Van Vleck.

“If it was worth it to him, it was worth it to me,” Chaney said.

It took some work to restore the chapel back to some of its former glory. There were squirrels living in it.

“It was in really, really bad shape,” said Hamilton Chaney, Steuart Chaney's son, who shares his father's affinity for historic buildings. The siding had to be replaced and more. However, the cross on top of the domed roof is still the original.

With its new life, Christ at the Sea, a bit of Scheffer's Tryn Trava, blooms again. The Deale Area Historical Society operates the historic village at Herrington Harbor North, which is open to the public from 1 to 4 p.m. Sundays from May to October. Call 410-867-4911 for an appointment.

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