



The Russian Revolution forever changed the lives of many in Russia, not least those who had been in the service of the Imperial forces.

This book traces the life of a young naval officer from his graduation in 1918 in St Petersburg through the ensuing Civil War, to Shanghai in the 1930's, Indonesia in the 1940's and 1950's and finally Australia. The fifty year span of this odyssey takes place during some of the most momentous historical events of the 20th Century, such as the Russian Revolution, World War II and the subsequent painful decolonization of Asia.

Igor Labzin has written this factual account as a tribute to the adaptability and inventiveness of his parents as well as to the many other Russian émigrés from the Revolution that made a life for themselves in difficult and ever changing circumstances.

Available at
amazon

RUSSIA & REVOLUTION: MY FATHER, THE OFFICER, THE MAN

IGOR LABZIN

IGOR LABZIN

RUSSIA & REVOLUTION: MY FATHER, THE OFFICER, THE MAN

CHAPTER 1

“Copyright ©2015 Igor Borisovich Labzin

All rights preserved worldwide.

No part of this publication may be produced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the Author.”

As my fathers' son, I was privy to a lot of his stories, often related to me in unguarded moments by him. It is these stories together with what I saw and learned of him that to a large extent underpin my knowledge of him and his personality. Despite knowing so much about him, there were parts of his life about which I knew very little. My curiosity lingered and in later life engendered in me a desire to find the more detailed information about those events. It was this desire for the real knowledge of my father that propelled me to seek information from the Naval Academy in St Petersburg and other sources. In the end they substantiated these so called "tales" that my father had told me.

The story of my father, Boris Martemianovich Labzin, is intertwined throughout this book with my own memories and impressions of him. I hope that they will add a greater sense of understanding of this man and his tribulations in what was undoubtedly one of mankind's most fluid and challenging times of the twentieth century.

Since its founding in 1703 St Petersburg was the capital of Russia until 1918, except for a fifteen year interlude. During that period not only was it the seat of the imperial government but it was also the centre of the country's intellectual and defence establishments. In this milieu many families rose to positions of power and prestige. Some of these families did this through sheer talent, determination and outstanding service to their country. In time some of these families were ennobled by the Tsar and hence joined the ranks of the privileged nobility.

Boris Martemianovich Labzin was a descendant of two such families, the Labzins and the Bodiscos. As was the norm at the time, both these families had a number of branches each of which had many children. As well as distinguishing themselves by their abilities and service to their country both families also exhibited traits of independent thinking, often contrary to that of the Establishment, which brought some of the family members into conflict with the Tsarist authorities. Embedded in Boris were these traits that had contributed to the success of these two families which then shaped his own life and enabled him to navigate through the challenging times that lay ahead.

It is with this man, with his impeccable St Petersburg credentials, that the saga of this journey from St Petersburg commences.

The Labzin Family

The Labzin family, with its numerous branches, was located mainly in the western part of Russia near St Petersburg and the adjacent lands, including Byelorussia, as well as in Moscow. One thread of commonality throughout the many parts of the family was their status as gentry or, as it is sometimes described, the lesser nobility. Commensurate with this status, they were mostly in the service of either the Royal Court, the armed forces, the civil service, diplomatic corps or one of the educational institutions.

One of Boris's forbearers was Alexander Fyodorovich Labzin (1766-1825), a graduate of Moscow University. He found favour with Emperor Paul I after preparing an historical account of the Order of Malta, one of the oldest military and chivalrous orders of Christianity that had been founded in Jerusalem in 1050. Following this, he was appointed to a number of high-level government posts, including the Chief of the Navy Department and Vice President of the Academy of Arts, by Emperor Paul I and later by his son, Emperor Alexander I.

Whilst at university, Alexander Labzin had met a number of leading Freemasons, and was influenced by them to the extent that he later became heavily involved in Freemasonry. At the time Freemasonry was undergoing a revival in Russia, where it was part of a quest for new avenues of spiritual fulfilment on the part of Russians of many classes, who were dissatisfied with the intensely conservative formalism of the Russian Orthodox Church.

He was also a member of the intellectual circle known as the Friendly Learned Society (*Druzheskoe uchenoe obshchestvo*) and the founder (in 1800) of one of the most important and influential Russian Masonic lodges, the Dying Sphinx. Established on the eve of the reign of Alexander I, the Dying Sphinx quickly prospered in the favourable conditions of a religious revival, which then prevailed in St Petersburg. In the atmosphere of heightened religious interest, Labzin also played an active role in the dissemination of mystical ideas, personally translating numerous works of foreign mystics such as the German Christian mystic and theologian Jacob Bohme and eventually launching his own journal, *The Messenger of Zion* (*Sionskii Vestnik*) in 1806 with the help of his wife Anna.

Labzin's works in the journal included radical articles on mysticism as well as the publication of an article by the German mystic, Jung-Stilling, which prophesied that a new Lord would soon appear to capture the allegiance of mankind. This article in particular was seen as inferring that Russian Orthodoxy would be supplanted by the new Lord and made Labzin look dangerous in the eyes of the Clergy and many lay supporters. Prince A.N. Golitsyn, procurator of the Holy Synod opposed Labzin in his ideas on mysticism and aided by the censors in the Ministry of Education ordered Labzin to change the "nonsense" being published in his journal. Rather than submit to this, Labzin in his typical uncompromising behaviour and strongly independent views chose not to comply and instead closed his journal later that year (Labzina, 1974, p. iii).

In the years following the defeat of Napoleon, Prince Golitsyn became chief censor. It was during these years that there was a constant struggle between the Church, which sought exclusive rights to control all writings dealing with sacred matters, and the more spiritualistic approach of Prince Golitsyn. Labzin, still a spokesman for the mystical wing of Russian pietism, recommenced publishing his journal in 1817. By 1818 his religious views had changed to extolling the virtues of the inner feelings as man's best approach to God rather than his previous enthusiasm for the scriptures and the church. Once again Golitsyn was forced to act and ordered that the Holy Synod was to supervise what was to be printed in the journal. Once again, Labzin chose to close the journal rather than submit to censorship. He and Golitsyn however remained on good terms.

Amongst his many literary works he also translated the works of the French playwright Pierre Beaumarchais, whose plays included *The Marriage of Figaro* and the *Barber of Seville*. Not only was his work in translations prolific, so too was his poetry for which he was recognised as an Imperial Russian poet.

One of his young protégés and also a member of the Dying Sphinx was Alexander Vitberg, an architect who was commissioned to design the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour in Moscow by Emperor Alexander I. The design of the cathedral was in the neoclassical style, heavy with Freemasonic symbolism. Construction of the cathedral on Sparrow Hills, the highest hills in Moscow, started but work soon came to a standstill due to the unfavourable ground conditions. In

the meantime Emperor Alexander I had been succeeded by Emperor Nicholas I who, being profoundly Orthodox, and not approving of the Freemasonic influences ordered that a new architect be appointed and that the cathedral be designed in the Russian Revival style of the time. The cathedral was then modelled on the style of the Hagia Sofia in Constantinople and built on the banks of the Moscow River. It was later demolished in 1931 on the orders of Joseph Stalin but was rebuilt between 1990 and 2000.

Undeterred by the politics surrounding *The Messenger of Zion*, Alexander Labzin continued on as an active member of the St Petersburg society. He was named Vice President of the Imperial Academy of Arts in 1818. His independent and determined spirit, so evident in his desire to challenge the Orthodox hierarchy, led to an incident that occurred in 1822, which marked the end of his government service and indeed his social and literary activity as well.

At an election of honorary members to the Academy, Labzin objected to the nomination of certain high-ranking government officials (Counts Arakcheev, Gur'ev and Kochubei) to the board of the Academy. When reminded of their "closeness" to Alexander I, Labzin sarcastically retorted that if proximity to the Tsar qualified a man for election as an honorary member of the Academy it would be most appropriate to nominate Ilya Baikov, the Tsar's coachman!

As a result of this impertinent and imprudent conduct, Labzin was dismissed from government service and exiled from the capital, first to Sengilei, then to Simbirsk (present day name of Ulyanovsk) about nine hundred kilometres east of Moscow. His wife Anna accompanied him into exile. She remained there until her husband's death in 1825. Anna went on to become a famous memoirist in her own right before her death in Moscow in 1828, at the age of seventy (Labzina 1810, Zacek 1973, p.iv).

Anna Evdokimovna Labzin (nee Yakovlevna) (1758-1828) was a woman of extraordinary drive and religious devotion. Her book, *Recollections of Anna Evdokimovna Labzina* which she wrote whilst married to Alexander Labzin who was her second husband, dealt with topics that were rarely discussed in public and was emblematic of the world seen and experienced by a woman of her time. She was daring in her account of the tribulations of her first marriage and courageous in talking about the burdensome life of women, even of those in the aristocratic circles, in a male dominated society.



*Alexander Fyodorovich Labzin (1766 – 1825)
(1805 painting by Vladimir Borovikovsky)
(<http://www.rulex.ru/rpg/portraits/27/27537.htm>)*

She is considered to be a significant female writer of her era and is described by Judith Cohen Zacek in the foreword to the reprint of Labzina's book, as follows:

“Although her memoirs are often cited with those of Princess Dashkova or even Catherine the Great as a source of information on the life of the Russian upper classes in this period, the fact is that Labzina was a quite different sort of person. Not only were her origins more humble, but also her outlook was far more serious and pious. As a result, while Dashkova emerges from her own memoirs as a rather frivolous and pretentious dilettante, Labzina stands out as a woman of deep personal faith and strong convictions. Her counterparts are to be found, instead, among the other female mystics and philanthropists of the early nineteenth century, such as the Baroness von Krudener, Princess Sophia Meshcherskaya, or even the Dowager Empress Maria Fedorovna, women in whom were combined personal piety, spiritual sensitivity, and a certain crusading spirit” (Labzina, 1974, p. v).

In her book, Anna describes her early childhood in a noble family. Her father's early passing left her growing up under the influence of her mother's deeply religious beliefs, which were coupled with a strong sense of humanitarian values. The descriptions of her mother's visits to the local jail to provide food and clothing for the prisoners were certain to raise the eyebrows of her readers at that time who, belonging to the upper classes, were more interested in the latest waltzes from Vienna and the latest fashions from Paris and the good life in general. They would have found such beliefs, actions and values quite quixotic and more than a little puzzling.

Anna's early betrothal to Alexander Karamyshev, fifteen years her senior, at her mother's insistence and soon after her father's death, was an unhappy one. Karamyshev was a gambler and womaniser whose debauched morals and atheism were totally at odds with that of the religious Anna. Her description of their unhappy marriage and his unabashed womanising and most of all his advice to his wife Anna to go and get herself a lover, whilst most likely striking a chord in many of the wives of the upper class couples, would have been most likely the first time that they had read of these matters and seen them laid out so clearly.

A few years after Karamyshev's death in 1791, Anna married Alexander Labzin. This marriage proved to be a very happy one as both were deeply religious and enjoyed moving in the intellectual circles of the time. Their combined energy ensured that *The Messenger of Zion* and the *Dying Sphinx* were a success. Her description of their exile in Simbirsk would also have been avidly read by many of those whose inner feelings mirrored those of Alexander and Anna that had led to their exile.

The story of Alexander and Anna Labzina still lives on today. In the Russian Museum in St Petersburg, their majestic bronze busts, sculpted by Ivan Prokofiev (1758-1828), have pride of place in one of the museum's display halls; Alexander's portrait is also displayed in the hallowed halls of the renowned Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow.

Mystery surrounds some of the other Labzins in St Petersburg at the turn of the twentieth century and the Labzin family treasure. Although the treasure and its precious contents was accidentally discovered in a secret room during major renovations of an old building in St Petersburg in April 1985, intrigue still lingers about the owners of the treasure, Vladimir and Nikolai, and whatever happened



Anna Labzina with ward Sofia
(Painting by Vladimir Borovikovsky)
(<http://creativecommons.org>)

to them after the Revolution. The hurried way in which the items of the treasure were assembled, without even washing out the silver wine goblets, suggests that the time for departure had arrived quite suddenly, perhaps through a tip-off that the Revolution was about to happen. They would have decided to leave almost straight away as their plan to travel to the border with a neighbouring country such as Finland or one of the Baltic States would only succeed if they managed to get there before all the transit points and roads were blocked by the new Revolutionary powers. It could very well have been the case that they had entrusted their loyal servants to put the designated items into the room and have it sealed off and camouflaged. Having made these arrangements they would have then set off leaving the servants to do it.

The find made headlines throughout the world. It was described in great detail, including colour photographs, in the April 1985 edition of the Soviet weekly magazine “Ogonek”, the Soviet newspaper “Trud”, the London “Sunday Times” and “The Australian”.

This well-preserved treasure, having survived the Revolution and the siege of Leningrad (St Petersburg in the Soviet era) in World

War II, was handed over by the workmen that found it to the State Museum of History of St Petersburg for safekeeping and academic study. It was considered to be an invaluable snapshot of the lifestyle of the gentry in the early part of the twentieth century. Investigations of the paperwork found with the treasure by the research staff at the Museum, determined that it belonged to Boris's two uncles and their wives: Vladimir Nikolaevich Labzin and his wife Sofia Anisimovna, and Nikolai Nikolaevich Labzin and his wife Olga Vladimirovna. Prior to their departure in August 1917, the two families had lived in the five-storey residence in St Petersburg where the treasure was found at No.16, 2nd Krasnoarmeiskaya Street. Their large building extended across to the next street (Petrichenko, 1985).

The area where the residence was located can best be described as "inner city residential". It is about two and a half kilometres from the Winter Palace and only a few blocks from the Fontanka River that runs through St Petersburg. Most of the street, despite the many trials and tribulations that had befallen the city since those days, appears to be essentially the same now as it was the day that the Labzins left there, never to return.

Its five storeys with the grand entry gate and internal courtyard, carved cantilevering beams, bay windows and wrought iron handrails on the courtyard balconies, was in many ways similar to the grand residences of that era in Paris and London. Looking at the building it seemed that the walls breathed and felt alive as if waiting for their masters to return. For me, a distant relative, to see and touch it was a way to catch a mere glimpse of Vladimir and Nikolai's past lives and of the times when an extremely comfortable lifestyle was enjoyed within those walls. It is easy to visualise those long gone days: the comings and goings of the carriages, bearing dinner guests through the entry gate on their way to enjoy sumptuous meals, fine wines and port.

Vladimir and Nikolai were the sons of Nikolai Filipovich Labzin, who was born in 1837 and had graduated from the St Petersburg Technical Institute. Nikolai Filipovich was a man of great scientific talent who was subsequently appointed by Tsar Alexander III to be the professor of metallurgy at the Institute. At one stage in his illustrious career, he was entrusted with the teaching of mechanics to Grand Dukes Alexander and Vladimir Nikolaevich. In 1893 he was the deputy leader of the Russian delegation sent to Berlin for the negotiation of a trade agreement with Germany.



*Former residence of Vladimir and Nikolai Labzin
and their families, St Petersburg, Russia
(Photographed in 2011)
(Labzin family album)*

Vladimir Labzin, a graduate of the prestigious Nikolayevsk Cadet Corps, was in 1914 a government official. Rather cryptically his role in the public service was described as one who handled special assignments for the Ministry of the Interior.

Following the abdication of Tsar Nicholas II in March 1917 and the subsequent progressively strident militancy of the Communist movement, it was becoming obvious to Vladimir and Nikolai Labzin that a Communist led revolution was an increasingly probable event. By August 1917, just two months before the October Bolshevik Revolution, Vladimir and Nikolai fearing for their safety should the Bolsheviks gain power, decided to flee St Petersburg with their families. Despite the unfolding of these events they felt that the Bolshevik Revolution would be short-lived and that life would soon return to the affluent, privileged ways of pre-revolutionary Russia. To that end, they stockpiled some of their most precious valuables including a Stradivarius

violin, a Penny Black stamp, a Faberge desk weight, silver and crystal-ware, fine linen and their best clothes. These valuable items were placed in a secret storeroom located on the mezzanine floor level of their residence. The room was then sealed and camouflaged to disguise its presence and was accessible only through a hatch in the floor of the room.

So sure were they that the Bolshevik revolution would be soon over, that they stored personal paperwork, calling cards with the name of “Vladimir de Labzin”, and his chequebook. There were blocks of their favourite chocolate, bottles of champagne and a few bags of ground coffee. It would appear that their intention was to wash down the chocolate with the champagne upon their return home.



*Entry gate to the Peter and Paul Fortress and
the State Museum of History of St Petersburg
(Labzin family album)*



Larisa, Amelia and museum staff member with one of the shoes that belonged to one of the Labzin ladies (Labzin family album)



Sofia Labzin's nightgown with monogram (Letters S and L intertwined) (Labzin family album)



*Museum staffer showing a winter coat that belonged to Vladimir Labzin
(Labzin family album)*



*Packet of "Bavarian" brand of barley coffee
found amongst the treasure
(Labzin family album)*



*Some of the Labzin silverware- a wine tray
(Labzin family album)*

Ninety-four years after the treasure was first sealed off from the outside world and twenty-six years after its discovery, it was a strange and awe-inspiring feeling to be led by Marina Vershevskaya of the Museum through the rambling corridors of the heavily secured studio workshops of the Peter and Paul Fortress for a private viewing of the Labzin treasure. To touch the silverware, examine closely the dried-out wine stains at the bottom of the crystal carafes, to handle the bars of the best chocolate of the day and read the labels of the Parisian tailors on the clothes, gave a feeling of reaching out across decades to relatives that had lived in a world that was no longer there. In a way, that has been as close as I have ever felt to my relations of that era.

The Bodisco Family

The Bodiscos were an old European family that can be traced back to the 12th century, when they arrived in Italy from one of the lands in the eastern Mediterranean that was under Turkish rule. By the mid-16th century the Bodisco family, led by Peter Bodisco, had moved north from Venice to the city of Bruges in the Flemish part of Belgium and subsequently onto Amsterdam. In Holland, the Bodiscos were

involved in the fields of medicine and commerce and were elected to positions in the city administration. One of Peter Bodisco's sons was listed in the Amsterdam city records in 1611 as a councillor.

A century later, the Bodiscos were on the move again. Following Tsar Peter the Great's travels through Western Europe, including his stay in Holland in 1697, he invited Dutch professionals to come to Russia as part of his scheme to westernise it. The Bodiscos took up his offer.

One member of the fifth generation of the Bodiscos in Holland, Heinrich (russified to Andrei) (1660-1741) with his son Jacob (Yakov) (1689-1731), arrived in Archangel in northern Russia, in 1698, where they set up as arms traders. Another son, Jan and a daughter Maria with her husband Franz von Dort, who was a friend of Heinrich, joined them there. It was Heinrich who is considered to be the founder of the Russian branch of the family (Bodisco, n.d.).

In time the Bodiscos moved from Archangel down to St Petersburg and continued to progress professionally. Heinrich's grandson, Andrei Heinrich, was born in St Petersburg in 1722 where he later practised as an architect and had three sons and four daughters.

One of those sons was Boris's great grandfather: Major-General Yakov Andreievich Bodisco. He was a State Counsellor, who worked in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and was Chairman of the Orel Civil Court and a leading noble in Orel province (Mintslov, 2013).

Yakov Andreievich Bodisco had large land holdings in the Bolhovskii region of Orlov province (as this area was known in Tsarist times). These estates were about 350 kilometres south of Moscow, and included holdings near the villages of Shemyakino, Lunevo, Lokna and several others (Mintslov, 2013, p. 10). All these properties were near the town of Mtsensk, which is about 50 kilometres north of the larger city of Orel in that area.

The many branches of the Bodisco family each had large families. Whilst Yakov Andreievich had a modest six children, his brother Andrei Andreievich had twenty-two children and his other brother Nikolai Andreievich had ten.

On the 5th February 1803, Tsar Alexander I granted these three great-grandsons of Andrei Heinrich a coat of arms. This coat of arms remained in use by the many ensuing members of the Bodisco family and eventually even found its way to far away America.

It was not until 1976, when I visited San Francisco that I came across the name Bodisco. Ever since the first of my many travels to



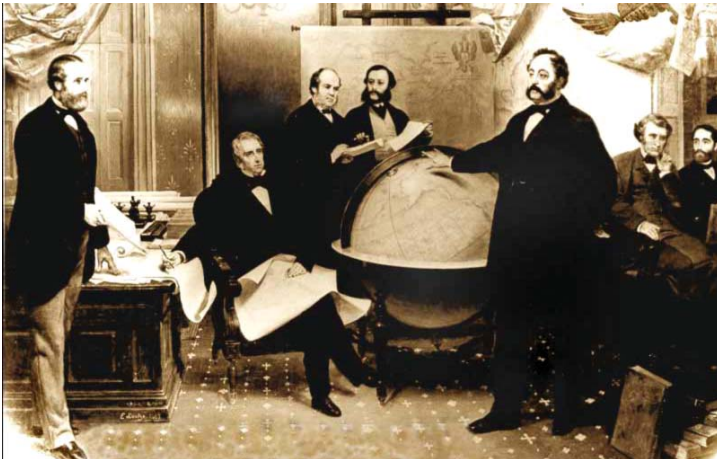
The Bodisco Coat of Arms
(<http://gerbovnik.ru/arms/3481.html>)

various parts of the world, I always had a desire to see whether there were other Labzins or Bodiscos living in the places through which I was passing and, if there were, then to meet them and learn more details of my family's history. This desire, to meet some long-lost and forgotten family member, perhaps first heard of during a dinner conversation at home, added a kind of a spiritual dimension to those travels. For most of the time, from the 1970's to the early 1990's, a quick way to do this was to search in the phone books of all the cities that I visited. It was thus that I managed to spot a Bodisco in the San Francisco phone book in 1976. This was Michael Bodisco. We met for lunch in the city centre and had a long discussion, over a few glasses of wine and fine food, about our families and how we had ended up in different parts of the world. Michael had brought along with him a ring, with an engraving of the Bodisco family crest on it that had been in his family for generations.

A number of the Bodisco family members, who were descendants of Heinrich's great-grandsons achieved fame in different areas of endeavour. My mother used to recall that in their early years together in China, Boris had told her stories about some members of his maternal family, who had been prominent in their different fields.

One such prominent family member was Vladimir Andreievich Bodisco, the Russian diplomat with the mutton-chop side-burns, who in the late 1800's had been involved in the negotiations of the sale of Alaska by Russia to the United States. Correspondence in the United States House of Representatives records describes the preparation for the sale whereby Bodisco dutifully presented the Russian papers, signed by the Tsar, to the meeting with the US Secretary of State, William Seward and his colleagues. Following the countersigning of the Russian papers by the US officials in March 1867 a cheque for US\$ 7.2 million was presented to Vladimir Bodisco who then travelled post haste to St Petersburg to present it to Tsar Alexander II. Once the formalities were complete, Alaska became part of the US. Bodisco was subsequently appointed Russian ambassador to the US in 1868 where he remained in that post for a year.

Boris told many stories about his family and relatives including his great uncle, Vasili Konstantinovich Bodisco, who was governor of the Yakutsk province from 23rd November 1868 until 24th December 1869, and his second cousin, Sergei Rudolfovich Mintslov. Sergei, the son of Anna Nikolaevna Bodisco was the cousin of Boris's mother



*Ceremony of the Transfer of Alaska from Russia to US,
Sitka 18th October 1867*

*L to R, Robert S. Chew, Secretary of State (USA) William H. Seward,
William Hunter, Mr Bodisco, Russian Ambassador Baron de Stoeckl,
Charles Sumner, Frederick W. Seward
(Alaska Library Collection)*

Ekaterina Bodisco. Mintslov was a prolific author in pre-revolutionary Russia and subsequently outside of it after the 1917 Revolution. Amongst the many books that he wrote was one called “*Faraway Days*”, an autobiography that described his adventures growing up with the Bodiscos on their country estates in the province of Orlov. In the book he describes in considerable detail the characters and personalities of the other Bodisco family members.

Boris used to recall with pleasure that his and his sisters’ early years, especially on the same family estates, were very similar to those described by Mintslov and on numerous occasions he encouraged me to read the book as an insight into these delightful years of his youth. It was my luck to obtain a copy of the book in the early 1990’s and a privilege to translate it into English and publish it in 2013.

Mintslov fled Russia sometime around 1918 and took up safe residence in several countries, including Serbia and finally Latvia, where he continued to write. His books were published in Riga, Latvia from 1927 to 1931 and also in Bulgaria. He died in Riga on the 18th December 1933.

The other colourful family member that Boris enjoyed talking about was his uncle, Dimitry Nikolaevich Bodisco, his mother’s brother. Following the St Petersburg riots of 1905, Dimitry foresaw with great prescience the chance of further serious instability in the times ahead. Known in the family as “Mad Uncle Dimitry”, he sold up all his possessions soon after and with the proceeds bought diamonds. He also resigned from his government posts and departed Russia carrying all those diamonds in a bag. He first went to live in Japan and subsequently moved to Harbin in Northern China (Manchuria) where he opened a library. The not so mad Dimitry settled down had a son, Sergei, who in turn also had a son called Sergei.

The love of the sea and through it, the Navy, was a distinguishing trait in the Bodiscos, starting with Nikolai Andreievich Bodisco (1756 – 1815) who rose to the rank of Vice-Admiral following his victories in several naval battles against the Swedes. He was highly regarded by Empress Catherine the Great who in 1793 entrusted him with the delicate and dangerous task of accompanying Count Artois, the future king of France, from Russia to England. From that time onwards there were virtually always one or more Bodiscos either at the St Petersburg Naval Academy or aboard one of the Navy’s ships.

There was also a streak of independent thinking throughout the family. Michail Andreievich Bodisco (1803 – 1867), a graduate of

the St Petersburg Naval Academy partook in the Decembrist Revolt in Senate Square in St Petersburg in 1825. One of the aims of the Decembrist movement had been the abolition of serfdom in Russia. After his arrest he was imprisoned in the fort of Bobruisk for five years after which he was banished to the south of Russia where he was ordered to serve in the 49th Chasseurs infantry regiment. He retired from there in 1838 and although free to leave the south, he was forbidden to live in either Moscow or St Petersburg. His advocacy for the abolition of serfdom was rewarded in 1861 when he was nominated as “Main mediator between the landowners and the serfs”.

St Petersburg

All of St Petersburg with its buildings, canals and bridges, has that intangible air of the former greatness of the mighty Russian Empire. It brings out a sense of awe that this was the hometown of the Labzins and Bodiscos. The knowledge that they were influential families in this imperial city and that they walked the same streets, crossed the same bridges, attended the same churches and cathedrals, smelt the cold Nordic air and watched the Neva river flow under those very same bridges, completes this sense of belonging to this city. This was their home!

To the descendants of those long gone times the city does impart a certain sense of belonging. The sound of Russian being spoken, the Cyrillic writing, the food, all these things evoke in those sons and daughters of the old Peterburgtsy a sense of coming home, a sense of belonging, as well as a sense of pride!

It is at the least expected moments that the city makes you feel special. A taxi ride from the city centre to St Petersburg’s Pulkovo airport leads to the usual customary small talk, until the driver is told that his passenger is a descendant of one of those graduates of the Naval Academy who went on to fight for the White Cause during the Civil War and ended up living in exile for the remainder of their lives.

The taxi driver’s reaction, which appears to be almost universal, is one of unabashed admiration for these long lost sons of the city. A few will add a phrase such as “during the Revolution and afterwards we killed our best people and now we are the poorer for it”. Once again there is that feeling, so rarely experienced by the sons and daughters of émigrés living in some faraway place, of being part of something, part of some place!