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The Cavendish Archipelago

Solzhenitsyn Believed Building a Fenced Retreat in Vermont

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CAVENDISH, Vt.—In a part of New England where reticence is normally appreciated, exiled Soviet author Alexander Solzhenitsyn is building a mountain retreat so secretly that even the local folks are wondering what he has to hide.

Bulldozers have been pushing dirt around a secluded 50-acre tract a few miles outside this sleepy south central Vermont town, and a constant stream of carpenters passing through the gates of a barbed wire-topped fence gives evidence that something big is going on inside.

But whenever the Cavendish townspeople's latent curiosity gets the better of them and they inquire about the celebrated family rumored to be a Yankee brushoff from a bearded, Russian-speaking architect named Alexis Vinogradov.

Vinogradov, who is listed on town records as "trustee" of the property, came to the locked gate of the heavily wooded estate last week and blandly denied that Solzhenitsyn planned to move to Cavendish, even though the Nobel Prize winner had listed the town as his intended residence on a visa application.

"It's just all a lot of speculation. I don't know what his plans are, because I haven't talked with him lately," said Vinogradov.

Vinogradov, who said he befriended Solzhenitsyn after meeting him through friends in the Russian emigre community in Montreal, claimed to have last seen him last spring when the author was in California doing research at Stanford University's Hoover Institution on War, Revolution and Peace. Solzhenitsyn left the university in June.

The 58-year-old author won the Nobel Prize for literature in 1970 during a storm of controversy over his criticism of the Soviet system. After much publicity and pressure from the West, he was deported to West Germany in February, 1974, and later moved to Zurich, Switzerland.

At the time, he said he expected to spend a long while in Switzerland and eventually return to the Soviet Union.

However, he reportedly left Zurich last month, complaining to friends that he had been harassed and constantly followed by Soviet secret police. His whereabouts and his plans for relocating his family since then have been shrouded in mystery.

There's no mystery, however, to Quentin Phelan, the blunt-speaking town manager of Cavendish (pop. 1,264).

"We're no damn fools. We know who's moving up there, no matter what the Vinogradov fella says."

Phelan said Vinogradov purchased the property, without a mortgage, for \$150,000 last October, and later filed building permits for \$250,000 worth of renovation to the 20-year-old frame house.

"You wouldn't recognize the place, with all that they've done to it," said Phelan. He said a half-dozen bedrooms were added, a tennis court built, a two-story studio erected, a small pond enlarged and a pondhouse renovated.

The eight-foot wire fence, topped with a strand of barbed wire, went up about two months ago, causing something of a flap in Cavendish.

"It's the only fence around here like that," said Myrtle Cady, whose family once owned the property. "Some folks think there's no need for fences, that all you have to do is post your property (with signs) and people will stay out."

The house is so remote, in fact, that visitors have to summon Vinogradov to the locked gate by honking the car horn, then wait for him to drive to the locked gate beside the dirt road.

The bulldozers have pushed up hillocks in one part of the security perimeter, completely obscuring the view of the house, which one workman described as California contemporary design.

Lloyd Stillwell, chief of Cavendish's three-man police force, said he has seen the house and "heard plenty of talk" and was convinced the \$250,000 remodeling estimate is understated.

"From what I've heard on the grapevine, I don't think you could finish that place for less than \$2 million," said Stillwell. His conjecture about the lavishness of the mysterious house was more generous than anybody else's.

Vinogradov, however, isn't impressed with all the talk around town, nor by the parade of reporters honking their horns at his gate and asking questions about Solzhenitsyn.

"I've already said it a thousand times, and I'll say it again. I'm building this place for me," Vinogradov said, with more than just a trace of annoyance in his voice.

When pressed about his rumored plans to turn the house over to Solzhenitsyn when the work is finished, Vinogradov said, "I have no plans to do that, but if I did I would give you the same answer."

Vinogradov said he built the fence for privacy and to keep snowmobilers

out, and insisted that the peace and quiet he was seeking was for himself and not Solzhenitsyn.

"If he does contact me, I will encourage him to make a public statement about what his plans are," added Vinogradov, who said he had been running back and forth between the house and the gate so much he isn't getting anything done.

"If he does make a statement, maybe all of you will go away," he said.

Most Cavendish residents interviewed seemed blasé about the prospect of Solzhenitsyn moving into town, noting that he appeared here one weekend last April without causing even a stir.

Tony Janowski, owner of the town's general store, recalled that the Russian author and two other Russian-speaking men came in for groceries, and that his wife, Emily, recognized the author from magazine pictures. At the time, Solzhenitsyn was visiting Vinogradov. He also lectured briefly at Norwich University, 60 miles north of here.

But William Smith, a local contractor, said, "Who is this guy, anyway? I never heard of him." When informed that Solzhenitsyn was a world-famous Russian dissident who had written a half-dozen best-selling books based on the Stalin regime's oppressiveness, Smith said, "Well, if it's quiet he wants, he'll find it here."

As the only black woman living in Cavendish or miles around, Mignon Prescott allowed as how she could relate to the feeling of oddity the Solzhenitsyns might experience if they move here.

"All I can say, this is a marvelous place and everyone is very friendly. We feel right at home, and I know they will, too," said Mrs. Prescott, a New York City resident who has had a summer home here for nine years.

Phelan predicted that local residents would take Solzhenitsyn's residence in stride and pay little more attention to him than they have to another well-known resident of 30 years, Ethel Derby, President Theodore Roosevelt's daughter and sister of Alice Roosevelt Longworth. Mrs. Derby, whose winter home is in Oyster Bay, L. I., spends summers in a house 1½ miles north of the Vinogradov property.

As for the fence around the secretive Vinogradov property, local Vermonters have adapted to it in their characteristic way.

"If I see a buck deer in there, that little fence isn't going to stop me from going in there and getting it," Smith said.