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INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

'Missing' Brazilian Found Copying Holy Texts in Siberia

By Alexandra Odynova

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Five years ago, Brazilian citizen Ustina Chernishoff made her home in the Siberian taiga, doing random chores and copying by hand the holy texts of a local Old Believers community.

That is, until the police came knocking on her door.

Chernishoff, 23, was put on an Interpol missing list after she stopped writing to her mother back in Brazil. Now her mother will have a chance to see her again, because Chernishoff is facing deportation from Russia.

An ethnic Russian, Chernishoff was born in a Brazilian community of Old Believers — a catch-all phrase for hundreds of Orthodox Christian sects originating in Russia that have fled persecution for centuries and now span the globe in a network of communities.

"Her ancestors ... had to move from Russia at the time of the October Revolution [in 1917]

and settled in South America," Vladimir Yurchenko, spokesman for the Krasnoyarsk police department, said by telephone.

Her father, Mark Yakov Chernishoff, divorced her mother and decided to move with their children back to Russia, Yurchenko said Tuesday.

In 2006, Chernishoff brought his son and daughter to a remote Old Believers settlement by the Yenisei River, one of the three great Siberian rivers, along with the Ob and the Lena.

Local police did not release the name of the settlement, saying only that it is located in the Krasnoyarsk region's Turukhansky district, more than 1,000 kilometers north of the city of Krasnoyarsk.

The elder Chernishoff soon had enough of the harsh Siberian environment and traded it, interestingly, for Canada, leaving Russia in 2008, Yurchenko said. Chernishoff's son went with him, but his daughter stayed.

Ustina Chernishoff has kept in touch with her mother, Vera, but stopped writing earlier this year, prompting the worried woman to report her as missing to Interpol, which, in turn, contacted the Krasnoyarsk police.

Regional police promptly located Ustina, who, they said in a statement, had spent the years doing community chores, including "copying by hand the holy books of the Kerzhaks," an ethnic group of Old Believers.

A video made by the police showed Chernishoff wearing a long dress covering her toe to neck, her hair carefully braided. She looked shy and modest, fidgeting nervously and occasionally flashing a smile at the police officials who were talking to her.

She speaks good Russian, but uses a lot of outmoded words and expressions that are no longer in common use, Yurchenko said.

The police video, published on their web site, also shows her visa, which was issued in August 2006 for one month.

Chernishoff was sent to Moscow on a plane Tuesday, Yurchenko said. "She didn't want to leave and said that she would like to return to Russia," he added.

A spokeswoman for the Brazilian Embassy in Moscow, which is assisting in her deportation, was unavailable for comment Tuesday, the eve of Brazil's Independence Day.

The Old Believers separated from the official Orthodox Church in the mid-17th century after a state-backed reform aimed to bridge the Russian and Greek churches. The reform, although limited to changes in rituals and minor edits of religious texts, resulted in a full-scale schism and public upheavals, complete with a crackdown on schismatics, some of whose unrelenting leaders were burned alive.

Most of the population eventually accepted the reform, but a significant portion held to the old ways despite state persecution. Many started to trickle from Russia's European mainland, either to remote regions of Siberia or abroad. The exodus received a particularly strong boost

following the 1917 Revolution.

Many Old Believers observe the old ways in both rituals and their everyday lives, making a living by gathering, hunting and agriculture. Some do not cut their hair or shave, and refuse to hold passports.

Old Believers are hard to count due to their isolated lifestyle, but their number in Russia is estimated upward of 2 million people.

Several million more are scattered around the world, including in the United States, Canada, Australia and New Zealand, as well as South American countries, especially in Brazil, Argentina, Uruguay and Bolivia.

Some Old Believers have returned to Russia under a Kremlin repatriation program for ethnic Russians, initiated in 2007. But the program, which aims to improve the country's increasingly dismal demographics and winds up next year, has not managed to lure back many people.

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