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OLD BELIEVER ICON PAINTING IN LATVIA – FROM PERIOD OF POLISH LIVONIA TILL 20TH CENTURY

The formation of icon painting in Latvia that is specific heritage of Russian minority corresponds to the period of Polish Livonia in 17th and 18th centuries. The first permanent icon collections have been established here by Old Believers who entered the territory of modern Latgale after 1660 despite the Orthodox minority has been settling around Riga, Madona and Koknese also earlier. In a fact – Orthodox missionaries were the first Christians who managed to settle down in the territory of Latvia around contemporary Madona and Koknese at the end of the 11th century. They gave up their positions to Catholic crusaders who arrived here at the end of the 12th century. The Livonian chronicles are telling us of local tribes joining so called *Russian* Christianity, it is also mentioned that within the war trophies of Crusades Bishop Albert has received some icons and church equipment from Jersika. It was commercial roads that united Slavs from Smolensk, Pollock and Vitebsk with Latvian lands where they settled down. It was easy for Roman Catholic Church to fortify the positions of mental leadership in the region as Eastern Orthodox Church didn't know the Christianization with military force. Despite the little tolerance what avoided killing people towards the Eastern Church German crusaders didn't consider their presence an argument for not christening the lands¹.

Also medieval Riga had an Orthodox church what served to the spiritual needs for Russian inhabitants who were mainly merchants and who had their private property.

¹ Z. Balevics, *Pareizticīgo baznīca Latvijā*, Rīga, Avots, 1987, p. 1-12.



Fig. 1 Icon of St Nicholas, fragment. Egg tempera on wood, silver; 167x32 cm; School of Novgorod; turn of 15th/16th centuries. Photo: Ilze Jakuša-Kreituse (I. J.-K.)

(жидвствующии) denied hierarchy at the Church so they were forced to leave Russia. The further destiny of the people is not known but it is considered that the members gave basic implement for foundation of Jēkabpils (*Jakobstadt*). On the beginning of the 17th century when Polish Livonia has been established the serfdom in Russia became very strict and the émigré peasants settled around the city of Rezekne (*Резица, Rzeżyca, Rositten*) but the mass emigration started on 1653 and received its' peak after 1666 – the final reformation of Russian Orthodox church when the so called Old-Believers were facing the retaliation. The essence of the Reform was to equate the Church rites to Greek religious practise as within the time the rites had differed³. The first prayer house was founded in Liginišķi near modern Daugavpils (*Dünaburg; Dyneburg; Dzwinoń, Dźwińsk; Двинск, Борисоглебск*) in 1660. The migration developed and the refugees continued to flock in the territory mainly resting in cultural territory of Polish Livo-

Riga actually had its' Russian village it is known that this church has been working till 17th century when Riga became Sweden city. Periodically there have been Orthodox parishes also in Ilūkste and other places around river Daugava, also in territory of Polish Inflanty. The parishes were overviewed by archdiocese of Pollock and Vitebsk. But these facts don't allow us to speak on any tradition of Church art, icon painting etc. Certainly the cult relicts arrived from the archdiocese and their further destiny is uncertain. During the reign of Swedes the Church of St Nicholas in Riga together with the set was given to the usage of protestant church, it is also known that this church has been damaged a lot within different wars. Today we consider that some icons can be found in the University of Uppsala in Sweden².

From the 14th and 15th centuries different heretic movements who were pursued in Russia entered the territory. The movements of so called *strigoljniki* (*стрегольники*) and *zhidvstvujuschiki*

² P. Kampe, *Nikolaja Brinudaritāja baznīca Rīgā*, „Rīgas baznīcu būvēsture“, 8.sējums, Rīga 1937.

³ The Reformation pushed the country in deep interior crisis. Usually historians see the Treformation process as consolidation process for Russia that seekd to become the third Rome in order to unite all the Orthodox church in Moscow.

nia around Daugavpils, Rēzekne, Ludza (*Люцин, Ludsen*) and in the duchy of Kurzeme around Jēkabpils and Ilūkste. On the end of the 17th century the Old-Belief prayer houses were founded in the villages of Volodina, Voitišķi, Baltruķi etc. those were little wooden buildings filled with icons and church interior objects taken with the emigrants. The process continued all the 18th century so did the construction of sanctuaries and the implementation with icons from all over Russia. The Old-Believers had beneficial conditions for staying in Polish Livonia that had lost a lot of hands in the plague epidemic. The Polish king Jan III Sobieski legislated *On free living spaces to the secessionists in the Polish territories* that allowed the Old-Believers to settled down in those regions that had remained without inhabitants. Despite that Russia didn't reconcile oneself to emigration of peasants and even the formation of refugee chasing committee that had to send the escaped peasants back the government of Poland

didn't care on Russian invitations to cooperate. The richest collection from the Muscovian icons dating from 15th till second half of 17th century is located in Riga – Church of the Grebenschikov Community of Bezpopovian Old Believers. Here we find the oldest icon in Latvia – *St Nicholas* (Fig. 1) from Novgorod that today is covered with silver binding leaving only painting of the face and the hands uncovered. These details demonstrates virtuoso painting of the turn of the 15th/16th centuries with touches of white highlighting the wrinkles in forehead, top of the nose, bags under the eyes and the beard. Another icon of classical Muscovian painting in Riga is *St Varlaam of Hutina* (Fig. 2) dating to the 16th century – the saint is depicted with 12 scenes from his life and holding the stone model of the monastery of Transfiguration of Christ that was built by him cloth to Novgorod. Both icons show classical compositions of Muscovian icon painting and most probably have arrived here together with the first Old-Believe refugees. Unfortunately the Old-Believers do not have any tradition for noticing where and how is icon entering the temple so actually one may only guess the ways and conclude them from different circumstances.



Fig. 2 Icon of St Varlaam of Hutina. Egg tempera on wood; 102x98,5 cm; 16th century. Photo: (I. J.-K.)



Fig. 3 Stamp by Gavril Frolov. Photo: (I. J.-K.)

However the larger collection in Latvians churches can be found from the 17th century – mainly also in Old-Believe prayer house in Riga, some icons may be found also in the 1st Old-Believe Community prayer house in Daugavpils. Also when speaking on migration of icons it is important to mention that it is closely related to the history of the parishes themselves. The Old-Believer community is not centralized and the parishes have been migrating, changing their concepts, uniting and splitting as well as reconstructed the temples etc.

When describing the collections as such the main conclusion is that the collections mainly hold icons from the 19th and the beginning of the 20th centuries. The dates for Orthodox and Old-Believe icon collections are the same but the characteristics are completely different. Overall the researchers must face numerous problems examining the heritage – the lack of information, several layers of over paint, inaccessibility of the heritage, endless cases of thievery etc. The icons from 18th – 20th century in literature are called – the late icon painting. The term in art history is first used by Mikhail Krasilin who was the first of researchers who paid his attention to this phenomenon of icon painting and together with local specialists made inventory of temples in all USSR⁴. Within the late icon we speak on icons done in manner of baroque, classicism, even empire style and national romanticism that fusion with Russian silver age. Separately stands the icons from province and three villages in Middle Russia – Palekh, Mstjor and Holuj that developed as main icon painting centres for all the Russian Empire the principles of West European art ousted the Byzantine principles. With good reason some researchers consider also Old-Believe painting to be another separate direction in the late icon painting. As the Old-Belief is not centralized it is difficult to speak on any absolute characteristics but there are several common details that unite the painting all over the extension of Old-Believe movement that today merges even to South-America. In regional context we are even speaking on Baltic icon painting school that formed around the second half of the 19th century but the main conditions for the development of this tradition emerged within the Polish Livonia in 17th and 18th century. The incorporation of the territory within the Russian empire in 1772 was not beneficial to the development of the Old-Belief and its' material culture as

⁴ М. Красилин, *Обследование памятников изобразительного искусства на Латвийской ССР, „Художественное наследие“*, Москва 1985, р. 205–219.

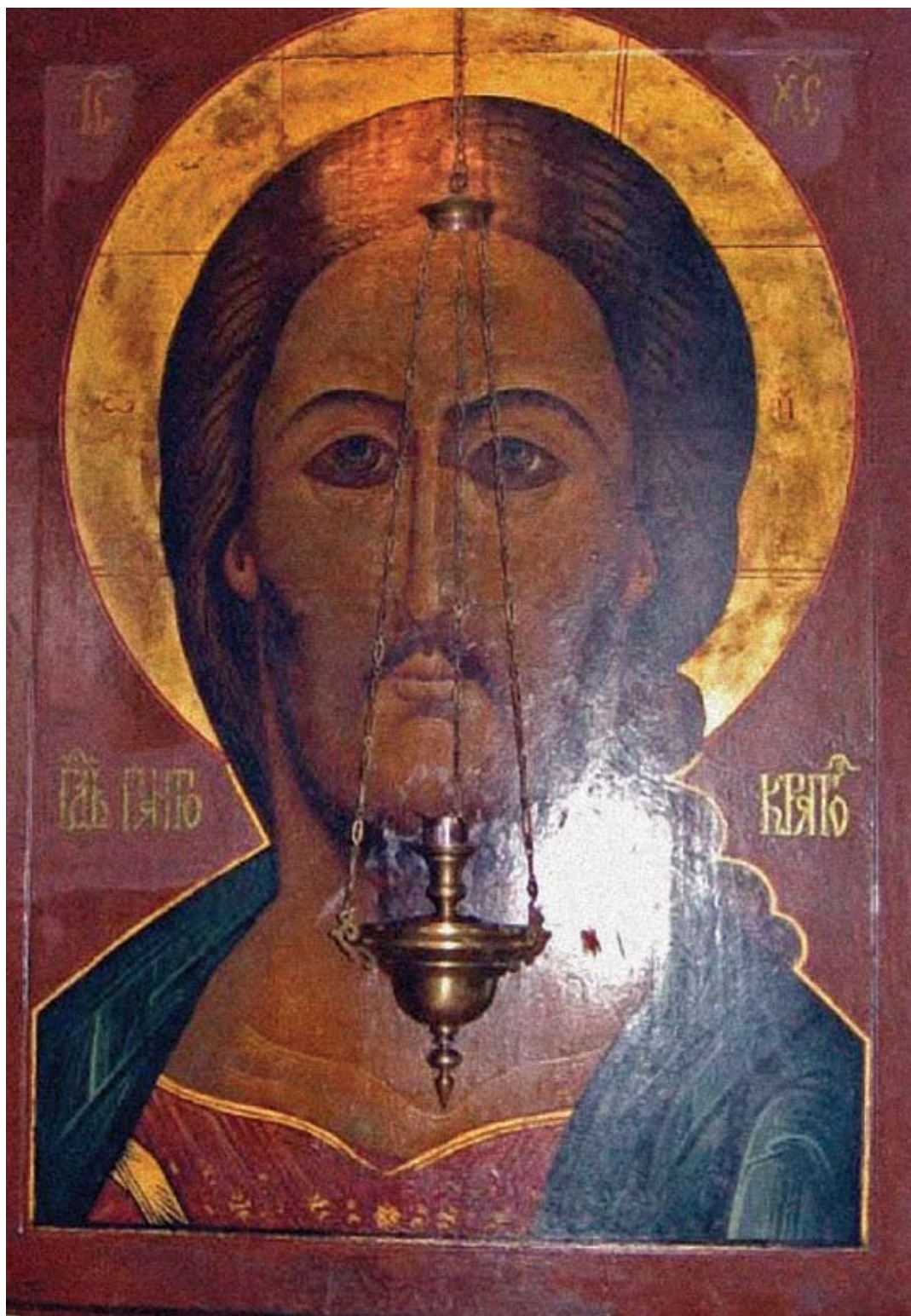


Fig. 4 Gavril Frolov. Icon of Saviour; 1927-1929. Egg tempera on wood. Photo: (I. J.-K.)



Fig. 5 Pimen Sofronov. Icon of Annunciation, 1927-1929. Egg tempera on wood. Photo: (I. J.-K.)

the retaliations were officially cancelled only on 1905 by Russian tsar Nicholas II. The Old-Believers were not allowed to build bell towers, to name their temples according to traditional church names – that is the reason why also today the main part of the prayer houses are named after cemeteries or important members of the parishes. They also faced severe social and economical politics. Nevertheless the protectionism of Polish reign allowed the Old-Believers to develop their culture in order that the incorporation did not stop the cultural development.

To characterise the Baltic icon painting school that emerged in former Polish Livonia – modern Latgale in Rēzekne in the context of the late icon painting it is obligatory to look back to the common processes of the Russian Orthodox Church. The second half of the 17th century in Russia is determined not only by the Reformation and the split of the Orthodox Church but also with the turning point of icon painting and the activity of Armoury Chamber icon painter Simons Ushakov. Usually these two reforms are seen together in reality they had nothing common except for the time – second half of the 17th century. Patriarch Nikon who was the leader of the Reformation process was strictly addressing the new tendencies of Western painting tradition applied by Ushakov and his confederates. The new principles of applying chiaroscuro, anatomy and foreshortening were standing against the ancient Church rules and concept of Orthodox theological aesthetics that fortifies the usage of abstract pure colours, vertical proportions, golden backgrounds and reversed perspective for depicting saint images as these means allows to see spirituality of the image and is worth of the holy name. The Russian Church was helpless to the arguments by Simon Ushakov saying that in the Holy Bible Christ is described with flesh and body that is the way how he depicts it. Meanwhile the Patriarch who was also facing great opposition to his reformation made manifestation where he pierced eyes of the new icons. For the Russian society it was shocking as the people were far apart from understanding the concept of religious arts and its' means. All they saw was profanation of the Holy image. The Patriarch Nikon had to resign from his post and the reformation was finished later with strong impact of tsar. The new concept of icon painting started to dominate while the ancient tenet moved towards province and started to disappear from the official art despite it was never denied by the Church. In this context it is also important to mention protopope Avakum – the spokesmen of opposition for the Reformation process. Also today he is considered to be among the most important ideological founders of Old-Believer movement. He also turned against the new painting principles pointing that it is a great disaster to paint holy images after foreign manner in Russian named *fijaz*. Old-Believers when arriving to the Polish Livonia took together with them ancient images, sayings of protopope Avakum and answers of Pomore prepared by brothers Denisovs on 1723. This document is of local meaning as in the Old-Believer community formed its' icon painting school that directly influenced the region of modern Latgale. Despite the lack of the ancient material today we can assert that right in the middle of Old-Believers in former Polish Livonia



Fig. 6 Pimen Sofronov. Icon of St Ilarion the Younger. 1930's. Egg tempera on wood. Photo: (I. J.-K.)

the Baltic icon painting school emerged and that its' formation has been closely related to Pomore school that perished at the beginning of the 19th century. Both – school of Baltics and Pomore has common characteristics of Old-Believe icon painting, that is – traditional iconography – 8 branch cross sign, three finger blessing sign, perspective of importance and successive story telling method and other characteristics of Muscovian icons. Meanwhile the Old-Believers preferred Strogonov icons – delicate miniature painting, rich ornamental decoration and bubble clouds that surround Holy scenes. These principles were adopted and lately developed by the Old-Believe icon painters. For Pomore it is also characteristic to use double line for outline the central image. As for traditional iconography Old-Believers stopped canonization of new saints after the 17th century also they strictly avoid such controversial compositions as Holy Trinity of the New Testament depict all three personifications. Also inscriptions on icons kept their ancient form that today allows easily differing pre-reformation icons. And what is of most importance that within the Old-Believers painters never refused the ancient technique – egg tempera on prepared wood. This feature was essential in rebirth of the icon tradition in Russian émigré but let us follow the story step by step.

Despite the retaliation Latvian Old-Believe community didn't broke its' links with Russia, in the prayer houses icons from Moscow, St. Petersburg, Palekh, Holuj, Mstjor, Ukraine etc. We find icons from Palekh, Holuj and Mstjor all around the temples in Latvia as the masters served both tastes – those of Orthodox and those of Old-Belief.

Today the biggest collection of Baltic icon school is found in the Old-Belive prayer house of cemetery in Rēzekne. There are several masters known whose works are relevant to the Baltic icon school – Gavril Frolov, Mihail Belogrudov, Semion Bikodorovs, Sergey Leonov, Ivan Mihailov, Constantin Pavlov, Pimen Sofronov and Marck Solncev. They all have been working around the modern Baltic States, Russia and Europe. After the Revolution in 1917 the territory of Latvia had the most important masters of the time. The characteristics of the icons are: traditional egg tempera painting on wood, lack of chiaroscuro, volume of figures, flat painting and lack of foreshortening, golden, ochre and olive backgrounds, double contour of red and green, extended figures painted in highly professional and elegant manner. They directly reflect the spirit of Muscovian icon painting including principles of Pomore and following the ancient techniques and recipes.

Gavril Frolov (1854-1930) is considered the founder of the Baltic icon painting school. He was born in Rēzekne in icon painting family. It is known that father Jefim Frolov also has been an icon painter; too bad nothing is known on his works. The family had its' workshop in the Central Rail station square in Rēzekne opened in 1869. After the fathers' death the sons Gavril and Tit went to Moscow after the invitations by the parish of Old-Believers of Cemetery of the Transfiguration of Christ. Both brothers set their workshop in Moscow and then worked also in Kazan and Samar. In 1887 they both went to Raja – important Old-Believe centre in Estonia where Gavril formed his

icon painting school teaching icon painting to his students. He also worked there as a painter and along with his students P. Sofronov and F. Miznikov painted more than 150 icons for the Old-Believe prayer house in Raja that was bombed during the Second World war. In 1889 Gavril returned to Rēzekne. Without his study and painting work Gavril Frolov were author of several publications concerning different aspects on religious life. The work with students as well as development of didactics are also an important part for traditional icon painter, also this tradition of Master and Student relations were forgotten within the official Orthodox church. He has been publishing also in magazine *Rodnaja Starina* published in Riga from 1927-1934 where he was criticizing the modern lifestyle of the Old-Believers. He has not published anything concerning his creative works or manners.

Works by Gavril Frolov can easily be recognized due to the stamp on the back of the icons (Fig. 3). The paintings today can be found in private collections in Russia, France and prayer houses in Latgale and Jelgava (*Mitau, Mitawa*) but the largest collection of 45 icons is in Rēzekne. A good example describing all the qualities of Frolovs' work is his icon of *Saviour* (Fig. 4) that follows all the principles of Old-Believe painting, despite the quality of the photo that is a common problem for all the icons that are serving their sacral function in temples, one may appreciate the smooth and delicate painting, the calm almond like eyes, severe face and lissom hair matches the dynamic and sharp painting of clothes that glisten in different tones of turquoise and red. The face shape with smooth skin curves on the neck points to parallels of Greek icon painting.

The most well-known student and later on a cloth friend to the Gavril Frolov was Pimen Sofronov (1898-1973). He was born in the village of Tihotka in modern Estonia and became a student of Frolov already in the age of 12. There are several notification on the time passed in the studio. Finnish art historian Kari Kotkavaara considers that Sofronov has been studying from 1909-1914 when he acquired the main principles of drawing and painting techniques and the cannons⁵. Pimen Sofronov was also serving Estonian army from 1919-1920 and returned into the studio only in 1926. In 1920's Sofronov turned also to secular painting but after 1930 he dedicated himself only to sacral art. In 1927 Frolov and Sofronov received an invitation from Cemetery parish in Rezekne to do restoration and creation of icons.

1928 Pimen received an invitation from Old-Belief enthusiast Ivan Zavoloko to go to Riga and establish icon painting school within the Circle of Admirers of Russian olden times. The classes took place in the temple of Grebenshchikovs in Riga and even students of the Art Academy of Latvia attended the courses.

In 1930's Sofronov was mainly working and living in West-Europe. He was working as a pedagogue, restorer and painter in Paris, Prague, former Yugoslavia and Belgium. In

⁵ K. Kotkavaara, *Progeny of the Icon*, Abo 1999, p. 257.



Fig. 7. General view of GCBOR praying hall, plafond painting Christ Pantocrator by Konstantin Pavlov. Photo: (I. J.-K.)

1931 he gave classes to the society by Russian émigré in Paris *Icon*. It makes him to be considered a founder of icon painting school in Paris. His arrival meant the rebirth of traditional egg tempera painting in wood in the émigré environment what was using oil technique or mixed media till 1930s⁶. The émigré mainly contented intelligentsia who were developing aesthetical principles in Russia till 1917 and these people had forgotten the traditional technique that has arrived from Byzantine as the oil paints in icon painting was used from the 17th century. Sofronov was a teacher for well known 20th century icon painters like father Georgy Krug and Julia Reitinge (sister Juliana).

From 1939 till 1947 Sofronov was working as restorer and painter in Rome and in 1939 he realized a five row iconostasis of 54 images ordered by Vatican for exposition in Eastern institute of Vatican. It was planned to exhibit the iconostasis in the *Worldwide*

⁶ К. Коткаваара, *О творчестве так называемых «Художников - иконописцев»: мастера русской эмиграции первого поколения Русская поздняя икона от 17 до начала 20 столетия*, Москва 1998, с. 291–300.



Fig. 8. Jevgenij Klimov mosaic St John of Baptist. 1930's. Cemetery of Pokrov in Riga. Photo: (I. J.-K.)

Exhibition of Christian art in 1941 in section of Orthodox. In published materials we find that people have compared these works to masterpieces by Giotto.

Sofronov has published also methodology named *Целебник* for traditional icon painting and with his research has participated also on International congress for isographs. In 1947 Sofronov received an invitation from archbishop of Orthodox Church in USA. He settled in Melville and today even a small museum and library. Till his death in 1973 he also managed to hold several solo-exhibitions in San-Francisco, New York, University of Fordham and Roerich museum and Los Angeles. His creativity has developed during his life but in Latvia we find only works from his early creativity in 1920's and 1930's and for the current state of the research the visual materials of further visual information is lacking.

A good example in order to characterise Sofronovs creativity is *Annunciation* (Fig. 5) from Rēzekne. The icon amazes by its' beautiful colours and graciousity of the figures. The successive story telling method as well as the inverted perspective and verticality of the composition and the figures sets no doubt about the following of traditions. Meanwhile we have one confusing detail above the icon – in the scene where Angel Gabriel receives the Good New from the God the God is depicted in type known as God the Caovat that treats the image of God as an aged man with eight corner nimbus – the

confusing part is that Old-Believers as well as Orthodox church thinkers denies any depiction of God except for the image of Christ that has been left on Earth by himself. There have been also great debates on depiction of Holy Trinity for the Old Testament by Andrey Rublov what has always been beloved icon. Despite the regrets people always have manage to avoid the Church rules in order to adore the Holy Trinity of New Testament etc. subjects. But it is not usual to see such icons in Old-Believe prayer houses as their concept is much more extreme.

In the Church of the Grebenshchikov Community of Bezpopovian Old Believers in Riga we find outstanding icon of *St Ilarion the Younger* (Fig. 6) from 1930's that is painted in traditional manner with two-finger blessing sign and a scroll in the right hand. The clothing is treated in graphical manner while the hair and the beard are elaborated in fine manner; the contour line is harmonized with painting of clothing and head. For elaboration of the face and the arms the touch of white is used linking the icon with tradition of Novgorod. The colours are beautiful with different variations of gold and blue that is being refreshed by accents of red in cross painting. Also this picture is surrounded by contour line around the deepening of the icon like it was used in Pomore. The images of St Trinity is in upper part of the icon contrasts the fine painting of the figure; most likely it is painted by an student of Sofronov Konstantin Pavlov (1907-1976) who took over the icon workshop after Sofronov left and were the main icon painter of the Grebenshchikov sanctuary. He renovated (that means repainted) several icons and according to the eschatological mood of the parish painted a lot of characters on margins of icons, the beloved images was of Guardian Angel. Among the most important works by Pavlov are the ceilings of the Church of the Grebenshchikov Community of Bezpopovian Old Believers in Riga⁷ that are treated in traditional manner but lacks the virtuosity (Fig. 7). Despite the students of Sofronov like Tatiana Kosinska, Valentina Zandere, Jevgenij Klimov (Fig. 8) and Pavlov were continuing to paint icons Sofronov himself considered that the tradition of icon painting in 1930's has subsided as the quality of work diminished. Meanwhile we find works by Tatiana Kosinska in Pokrov Orthodox church in Riga and Orthodox Church of St Peter and Paul in Daugavpils⁸ that are of high quality. Kosinska was also working in Paris, after the II World war she was working also in Jerusalem and immigrated to USA but no further information can be found⁹.

For the end of the Baltic icon school we can consider the Second World War and occupation of the territories by USSR still a painter from Lithuania Ivan Mihailov (1893-1993) was fruitfully working and have left a lot of his works in the 1st Old-Believe Community prayer house in Daugavpils that burned burnt out in 1941. From 1940's till

⁷ Л.С. Михайлов, *220 лет Рижской Гребеншичиковской старообрядческой общине// Старообрядческий календарь на 1980*, Рига 1979, с. 3-4.

⁸ Е. Данченко, М. Красинин, *Материалы к словарю иконописцев 17-20 веков*, Москва 1994, с. 15.

⁹ *Старшее поколение иконописцев и деятелей Общества*, Общества «Икона» в Париже, Москва 2002, с. 231.

1980's he painted the main icons for iconostasis that are also of very high quality and are following all the principles of Baltic icon painting school. Unfortunately no agreement with the parish can be made in order to make photos of the icons. Works by Mihailov can be also found in Vilnius and other temples in Lithuania and Latvia. Also other icon painters were working during the Soviet occupation but their work fusion with the concept of folk art loosing the canons and pureness of technique and drawing. The USSR legislation provided 10 year imprisonment for icon painting so the preconditions for the continuation of the tradition were destroyed. Also today we do not see the excellence of the past.

The icon painting in Latvia is an interesting phenomenon that actually developed within the Polish Livonia and continued during the Russian Empire and also after the gain of independence of the Republic of Latvia showing how rich and strong a tradition can be also when being attached to the minority of population and government. It is yet to examine the parallels between the processes in territory of modern Latvia and rest of the Orthodox influence are for cross border situations. The Old-Believe icon painting is just one aspect where we can confirm that actually a lot of common can be found also elsewhere.