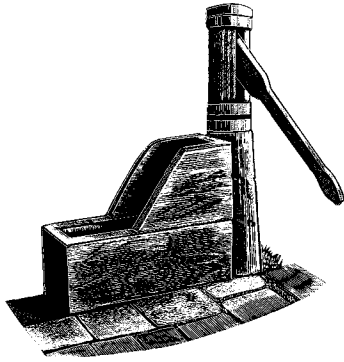


Bell Swap



“Your wooden arm you hold outstretched to shake with passers-by.”

FROM THE MOMENT they first spoke in Cambridge, in February 1931, the 17 Russian bells in the Lowell House belfry have elicited a mixed response from students. Some have thrilled to the exotic tintinnabulation. Yet articles in the *Crimson*, with such titles as “Hell’s Bells” (1934), “Gung-Ho Din” (1956), and “Stop Those @!&# Bells” (1992), have lamented “the clangs and bangs of inharmonious bells, polluting the air from the River to the Yard.” One cannot play “Fair Harvard” on these bells, it’s true, because they do not sound a chromatic scale. Instead, the “Mother Earth Bell” (a big mama at nearly 13 tons), “Sacred Oil,” “Pestilence, Famine, and Despair,” and their smaller siblings reverberate—joyfully, mournfully, mysteriously—every Sunday at 1 P.M. and on special occasions with an odd beauty all their own.

In Russia these are Heaven’s Bells unequivocally, revered as “singing icons” leading the faithful to God, their voices the trumpet call of the Archangel Michael. The monks of the Danilov Monastery, the seat of the Moscow patriarchate, where Harvard’s bells once hung, badly want them back (see “Zvon Song?” March–April 2003, page 84). They’ll get them.

Stalin seized the bells in the late 1920s, but plumbing magnate Charles R. Crane, LL.D. ’22, bought them—and another now suspended at the Business School—as a

gift to Harvard “to save from the anti-religious zeal and melting-pots of the Soviet at least one of the characteristic Russian peals or *zvons*,” wrote the late professor Mason Hammond ’25, G ’32, LL.D. ’94.

In an agreement made public in September, which followed a feasibility study paid for by Harvard, workers will partly disassemble the Lowell House tower, remove the bells and ship them to Moscow, install replacement bells cast in Russia to Harvard’s specifications, and rebuild the tower, all at Russian expense. The bell swap, according to project manager Peter Riley of Harvard Real Estate Services, might occur as early as next summer.

Oil tycoon Viktor Vekselberg will pick up the tab. (In 2004 he paid \$90 million to the Forbes publishing family for nine Fabergé eggs he then returned to Russia.)

“The will, commitment, and funding are all in place,” says Diana Eck, Wertham professor of law and psychiatry in society, a scholar of comparative religion and master of Lowell House, “but this is a complex project.” For instance, the larger bells bear icons of Christ, saints, and Mary, and inscriptions in Old Church Slavonic. Will the new bells be exact replications? Eck and Riley went with others to Russia in August to finalize the agreement and check out foundries. “We



Father Roman, head ringer at Danilov Monastery, shows their inferior perestroika-era bells. He wants back the bells that Gogol heard.

have thought of duplicating the iconography of the larger bells,” she says. “All this, however, is theoretical until the foundry is chosen and their bell masters have a close look at our bells.”

You may ring the bells yourself at their informative website, <http://lowell.harvard.edu/Bells/index.html>. You may hear them rung by Harvard students and visiting Russians in recordings on the Danilov Monastery’s website, www.saintdaniel.ru.



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“He that hath ears to hear, let him hear” (Matthew 11:15). ~PRIMUS V