GENEVIÈVE PIRON

"Come See Us at Kolyma!"

Translated from French by Jay Milton

REINDEER MEAT AND MARE´S MILK

YAKUTSK. The city's very location on the map is so extreme that I lose my balance just looking at it. Asia—that massive continent to our east, the house of the rising sun—has snuck off and somehow slipped in behind me. Seen from eastern Siberia, China and even Japan are in the South. Emerging just a bit farther to the east, instead of Asia, is the westernmost point of the West, Alaska. Some sort of internal compass is desperately trying to repolarize the needle of my entire mental cartography.

Maps rarely represent Siberia clearly: either its area extends off the page or its space is deformed by infinite horizontal expansion. This vast reservoir of natural areas seems too far north to merit attention. On the edge of the Eurasian continent, the Yakutia Territory borders the Arctic Ocean and continues up to Chukotka, which extends to the Bering Strait.

"Here," as an ironic proverb puts it, "winter lasts twelve months a year. The rest of the time, it's summer." In fact summer lasts a good two months, and it tends to be dry, frequently scalding, as we realize from the hot wind that greets us at the airport in Yakutsk. In the entire world, this is the place where temperatures vary the most: up to 40 degrees Celsius in the summer, down to –75 degrees Celsius in winter. We're in the capital of the Republic of Sakha: five times as big as the French Republic, but with a population of less than a million.

Yakutsk is a lively city, with contrasts as great as the range of its temperatures. Old high-rises built out of Soviet concrete, their cracks covered by reddish insulation, contrast with elegant modern apartments. There are no neighborhoods, just a city languidly spreading itself out according to no particular plan, like its river, the Lena. The historic district is an unlikely reconstruction of wooden buildings: a Cossack fort, some *izbas* where wolf skins and Tissot watches are sold, a brick building with its entryway reconstructed as a yurt. Behind this historic city façade, a new Orthodox church, and a monument to the colonizers, the Cossacks. In

the city center, buildings have raised foundations so they never touch the permanently frozen soil. Down the dusty backstreets, edged with stunted vegetation, one finds restaurants with impeccable service: a pseudo-Italian café tucked into overly air-conditioned hotel, a hipster bar in a gaudy, gilded rotunda, a restaurant serving superrefined fare: chilled fish, meat from foals and reindeer, Arctic tea, and frothy cream with wild northern berries.

During the celebration of the solstice, an enormous affair that attracts tens of thousands of people, you feel most deeply the definition of this area by extremes. On this thinly populated territory, countless ethnicities are mixed together. For example, we came across Russians originally from Nizhny-Novgorod. Located on the edge of the Arctic Ocean since the sixteenth or seventeenth century (legend has it that they fled there following persecution by Ivan the Terrible), they've kept their characteristic Northern Slavic culture and speak the Russian of that period. Their main occupation is fishing, especially sea mammals, and they showed me with pride the silverware they'd kept carefully over the years, unaffected by the revolutions, wars, and repression of the twentieth century. Neighbors to the indigenous peoples of the Siberian North, such as the Evens, the Chukchis, the Nenets, and other peoples who have lived there from prehistorical times, they've borrowed hunting and fishing practices from them.

Traditionally, most of the peoples in the Russian Far East lived by herding reindeer. From the seventeenth century on, Russian colonization principally developed the fur trade. Backed by the Russians, the Yakuts—a Turkic equestrian people that fled the Mongol invasions by migrating north—slowly pushed these small populations to the borders of the territory. In the borderlands, their way of life continued, hardly touched by the modern civilization until the second half of the twentieth century. There, even the most progressive consider modernity problematic. In effect, as we were told by Dima—an ethnographer, but really the voice of living history—a team of reindeer, even though they are being replaced more and more often by motorized transport, are still the safest means of transport in such extreme conditions. In our times, numerous accidents have happened; a snowmobile that won't start is a traveler's death notice, and even the best anorak never protects one from the murderous cold nearly as well as clothing made from reindeer skin and fur.

Our guide during the solstice celebration, Dima gave us a very special visit to this borderland world. He brought us to the encampment behind a small lake, where the Northern peoples were staying, just outside the

immense fairgrounds where this great three or four-day event takes place. The celebration is one of a kind; it was revived during the early 1990s as part of the wave of de-Sovietization, breaking the taboos imposed in the name of international communism. In point of fact, for seventy years local customs had been repressed as a sign of "nationalism." The rebirth of traditions, newly authorized by the autonomy acquired in 1990, above all expressed a quest for spiritual renewal. The peoples of Yakutia rediscovered their national traditions, their dances, and their music. During the solstice (or midsummer) festival, Ysyakh, the locals bless and celebrate prosperity according to long-forbidden rituals that only the distant location of their villages kept them from forgetting.

During Ysyakh, they welcome you with an offering of fermented mare's milk, and the fire is blessed by feeding it cream and meat while lengthy ritual incantations are recited. At the Northern peoples' camp, you're received with equal hospitality, although instead they offer a broth made from reindeer tripe, warmed on the fire inside a wooden tepee. On the grassy esplanade, a young boy performs with a Jew's harp, accompanied by throat singing, imitating the cries of animals. Suddenly cutting through the guttural sounds of the instrument, we hear wolf calls and the hooting of birds from the taiga, bringing us shivers. At night, though closer to dawn, a shaman will come to recite his incantations before the countless people assembled there: hundreds have come to represent their villages and regions and present their arts, crafts, and traditions. A great number of families arrived the evening before and are now camping out without any fuss, their children in the small lake, swimming in their underwear and cooling off in the dry air, where there happens to be a bit of breeze.

The wind causes the small yellow and white flags, draped in Tibetan Buddhist style across the entrance to the fairgrounds, to flutter gracefully. A traditional wooden portal allows men and women to enter separately. Farther on are the *sergués*, ritual posts to which horses are tied. On the horizon, there are great conical or octagonal huts made of narrow wooden lathing, traditional summer dwellings for the nomadic Yakuts. Elsewhere there are tents made of birch, covered with branches, more typical of the smaller, reindeer-herding peoples. On a hill there's a line of people waiting to make vows before a stylized wooden construction resembling a tree, a representation of the Tree of Life, alluding to the Three Worlds cosmogony common to all these different shamanistic peoples. At the entryway, there are bleachers and a section for government officials.

FREED BY SPACE

I HAD GOOD REASON for my suspicions. I'd already noted that the horses tied up at the entrance weren't the small Yakut ponies (whose extraordinary capacity for survival had made it possible for this people to adapt to the conditions of the North), but I didn't know what mix of counterfeit they were. Already, in looking over the program for the Ysyakh festival, I'd detected something of a trade-show component, a post-Soviet variant on the Friendship of the Peoples festivals, where the goal was to subordinate the regions to the center and organize a subtle hierarchy for the ethnicities, according to a hidden code. And indeed, when we sat down on the bleachers, the giant screen on our left was transmitting an address (from, I believe, the president of the Sakha Republic) about the indissoluble union of the peoples, all given perfect equality and each part of "our great multinational homeland." The Russian Minister of Agriculture, sent on special mission from Moscow, would next offer a few words. Obviously "nationalism" is uncalled for today, just as it was during the Soviet era. Obviously Moscow won't want to loosen the reins on this diamond-rich republic, where a decade of economic near autonomy has resulted in a certain level of prosperity. It shouldn't be forgotten that Russia itself has returned to an era of hardship, where economic sanctions and devaluations of the ruble have come together, in lockstep, with crackdowns on civil society and the hardening of the hierarchy of power. A single accusation of corruption suffices to begin another round of musical chairs, as just happened in the Komi Republic, where the political elite were arrested, imprisoned, and then replaced with fresh apprentices from Moscow, functionaries even more corrupt and less open to attack. Obvious the level of kitsch in this spiritual renewal for the masses—for this nomadic people who settled long ago in remote, isolated villages, where the crazies and drunks have never seen, at any distance, even the shadow of a shaman.

Yet when we get up and go to join the immense procession, with its circle beginning to spiral, and we walk together holding hands, one step behind, one to the side, the good-natured ambiance wins me over. After all, it's the way a ritual is experienced that gives it meaning and depth. Here, from the Soviet era, they've inherited both an inattention to official discourse and a tradition of joyful celebrations, for their own sake and for their clan. But there's something else as well. Such luminous costumes, with their dresses of yellow and white tulle, their silver jewelry for

the betrothed, such elegant gestures, such pleasant smiles—filled with spirit, light, and full of life. Yes, the people here are proud, yet the "nationalism" they've reclaimed here protects them. It isn't bellicose or hostile, isn't in opposition; instead it is open, it lingers throughout this immense territory. For how could these people, whatever sort of political pressures they suffer, ever truly not feel a sense of autonomy, given how far from the metropole they live and given how successfully they've adapted their lives, at the expense of a constant struggle against the climate, the open air, the elements? Given how they've been able to measure, not so long ago, their economic power in ore and in diamonds? Yakutia, "that prison without bars," is the refrain that people from here often quote, not without irritation, in referring to the exiles sent since the time of the tsars to those regions where the most fail-safe of guardians were the isolation and merciless cold. Now that a certain degree of comfort has been achieved, now that Japanese cars, with their steering wheels on the right, fill the streets, and now that trade with Asia protects them from the sanctions, it could be that here, before anything else, they feel an absence of barriers.

EXILES AT THE ENDS OF THE EARTH

The small plane from the Siberian airline Polar flies low enough that we can observe every change of the terrain below. Only a month ago, snow still covered this entire countryside, up until June. Only since then have the rivers begun to thaw. The Lena River and its tributaries widen their serpentine ways around Yakutsk. The hardy green grass is stippled with small, round ponds, released from a spring in the upper layer of permafrost. After an hour or two in the air, this flat terrain blemished by watery planes suddenly gives way to mountainous folds. A strange landscape: arid mountaintops, then the gleam of snow. The lunar brown of the grass and stones where shining surfaces of water glisten, much like mercury. The folds of the mountains appear black, and all this barren and desolate, magnificently carved terrain is wondrously strange. Suddenly a lyric from a song of the camps comes to mind: "May you be damned Kolyma! / You who are called the marvelous planet."[1]

We fly over Far Eastern Siberia in order to arrive at Srednekolymsk, on the Kolyma River. From Moscow to Yakutsk, it's a flying time of nearly seven hours. Now, it will take another three to get to our destination. Here the roads are too few to appear on Google maps. I'm reminded of other songs from the gulag: "Cars don't travel these roads,"

"The axles have gone silent: there are no rails left." Now that I see that the words are literal, these lines make my heart ache.

The lack of roads is made up for by rivers; it's water that serves as the means of connection. The principal rivers, such as the Lena, flow from south to north; farther to the east, the Inguirka, and farther east still, the Kolyma, which finds its source in the nearby mountains of China. Each of them flows into the Siberian Sea, and then the Arctic Ocean. When they're frozen in winter, these rivers offer flat paths for travelers. That's why, paradoxically, you get around more easily in winter; otherwise, helicopters are the preferred means of travel.

The town consists of a few wooden houses painted in lively colors, scattered near the streams. We land under a low line of clouds, and I understand now why we had to wait for hours this morning before the flight was confirmed: the landing strip isn't paved and it runs along the Kolyma, which regularly overflows its banks and seems notably swollen and astonishingly wide.

The airport consists of a single small building, painted blue, with an elevated section that looks like a wooden cabin. The hold of the airplane is opened for us; we take the suitcases ourselves, pulling them along a dirt road, where clouds of mosquitos are waiting to welcome us. "These mosquitos aren't bad," Slava tells us. "When it's really bad, the cloud is so thick that you only see a person's silhouette, moving in the middle of the cloud." Laughter.

In the airport's minuscule hallway/waiting room, a child holding his father by the legs sports a new black cap with white lettering, "Crimea." Details like this—along with the patriotic World War II posters—remind you that you're really still in Russia . . . and in today's Russia. Otherwise it would be difficult to distinguish what period we're in: having gone such a distance, we're a bit outside of time as well. The roads aren't paved, and under the low-hung clouds, bent pipes for gas and water hang halfway up or just above our heads (with a small, scaldingly hot tube next to the main pipe to combat the cold in winter). Hardy vegetation sprouts up lazily between houses that are quite distant from each other, the exception being the area along the river, where an older section can be seen; there it looks like a fishermen's village. In the center, which has no real indication marking it, is the museum, and below it, some houses arranged in perpendicular order, painted light blue or white. The administrative building looks like a general store in a Hollywood Western: it's covered in faded posters and the slogan "The Year of Ecology" is etched in white letters

above the door. Along the road, parabolic antennas and crooked wooden shacks and, from time to time, a child on a bike, zigzagging between the puddles that reflect the sky above.

In the regional museum: Slava, fifty-something, slanted eyes in a round face, imperturbable and personable, exudes a certain aura of mystery. Born in the capital, why has he come to live here, in this village of three thousand at the end of the world? His laconic response is the lyric from a song where the hero laments having followed a Northern girl and then become a prisoner of her land. Slava is a researcher, self-taught. Employed as a technician at the local radio station, one of the oldest in Siberia, he has done research on the causes and the history of the Japanese intervention on the radio line here during the First World War. Obstinate in his efforts, he has found several answers, but mainly he's been bitten by the bug; since then, he has enlarged his horizons through work on local history, cleaning out the archives and regularly publishing one small volume after another.

His museum, the Regional Museum of Srednekolymsk, has a display on the customs and lifestyle of the Northern peoples, a defense of the mammoth, some documentation about the post-Revolution exiles, and a mannequin of a Soviet-era student with her red scarf and schoolgirl uniform. A dull odor of badly tanned leather exudes from a tent set up in the first room. Exhibited for our appreciation is also a calendar made of wood; the days and months are marked by a small stick inserted into the holes. "An Evens calendar," he specifies, in reference to one of the indigenous Siberian peoples, "like my grandmother's."

We choose to stay in the staff office at the museum in order to talk further. Slava displays his wealth of discoveries, spicing up his subject with anecdotes and personal reflections. He is a true child of Soviet culture: his is the art of not telling all, a delectable mix of apparent impassivity and internalized emotion. His way of laughing is absolutely unique: suppressed, oblique, tempered by fatalism and black humor.

Thanks to him, the history of Srednekolymsk becomes visible to us by degrees. In fact, this obsessive collector has assembled every available photo of the village since the invention of photography and then retaken the same shots, so that the different aspects of these places can be measured. When we learn, that even to bring the metal necessary to make a single tool, the wait here was a year or two, we better comprehend the challenge involved in taking a photo. Not to mention what it took to find the rare examples of extant photos. What images can't show gets told to us by Slava.

And so, the first fort erected by the Cossacks opens up before our eyes—originally it was no doubt farther down on the river, where these first colonizers were harried for years by the Yukaghirs, a small, autocthonous people, renowned hunters. Then, the village was colonized by a succession of exiles: by court favorites fallen into disgrace, by criminals, and then other waves, by religious exiles such as the flagellants, who tried to bring agriculture here beginning in the nineteenth century, or another schismatic religious movement, the Old Believers, an artisanal people, and, finally, from the end of the nineteenth century, by revolutionaries, intellectuals who were for the most part Jewish, and who immediately announced a "Commune" and established a library in this polar region. At the time, around 1886, the village numbered roughly three hundred inhabitants, with a fifth of them from this group of intellectuals—greatly feared, according to Slava, by the police entrusted with their surveillance. These political prisoners, he comments, were armed, and their radical convictions had been forged during the trials they shared with the comrades, the enfants terribles of the era.

Despite the still Soviet-vintage idealism for the intellectuals (defenders of the Enlightenment) in this exposition, Slava clearly doesn't carry these Fathers of the Revolution in his bosom. He evidently considers them to be bourgeois. Moreover, after barely ten years, they were allowed to leave, unlike the countless number of miserable exiles condemned to remain until their deaths on this land that is impossible to farm. And yet, when we see the photo of the village, its lovely wooden church hanging over a few houses withering beneath the snow like numb sparrows (they would cover them with ice and snow as insulation from the cold), when we realize that it would take two weeks by sled to arrive at Yakutsk, and then another 40 to 115 before reaching Irkutsk, itself still 5,000 kilometers from the capital, and when even a single letter would take months to arrive, we admitted that iron will would be needed to live and to study here.

"Slava, how did these exiles manage to meet the small populations of autochthonous peoples and thus provide the foundation for Russian ethnography?"

"Quite simply: the Chukchis went with their reindeer and started trading a bit farther south. So contact was frequent, even required."

One of these exiles, Vladimir Jochelson, had lived for several months with a reindeer-breeding people; he established, between 1898 and 1902, a rich ethnographic collection now housed at the Museum of Natural History in New York. Still today, an elderly local woman, an art historian,

travels regularly from Yakutsk to New York City to take inventory, to publish these materials, and to make available this ethnographic collection, with its incredible photos that exists nowhere else in the world. Just think, the intention was to isolate these people.

″NO MATTER HOW I HOWL″

THE KOLYMA IS A LARGE RIVER, with an ample flow. In every weather it seemed blue to me, the delicate blue of a springtime sky. It reflected every shift of the clouds, but chose its own lazy, insistent course through this landscape, where nature dispensed its favors in abundance. In the north, nature possesses the marvelous gift of appearing to have just been born each time it's touched, then embraced, by the sun.

Gliding through this green land, the Kolyma is nature made bare, open, and free. What a contrast with the gloomy reputation it carries! "May you be damned, Kolyma / You who are called the black planet" (another variant of the song). The vast region to which the river has given its name is steeped in the worst sort of memories.

Here close to a million detainees in Stalin's gulag struggled, suffered, or died. Those who didn't die of hunger, exhaustion, or cold were attacked by scurvy, dysentery, and pellagra that made their skin peel off as if it were useless crust. The *Kolyma Tales* of Varlam Shalamov have fixed forever this state of limbo, beyond humanity, in its crystal of cruelty. Because even beyond its natural conditions—nine months of winter, the land perpetually frozen—and the nature of the work—with pick and shovel, no mechanized equipment, never enough food—there was the system of the gulag. Prison guards, with a rifle always ready? A minor problem compared to the inmates they shared the huts with, criminals and gangs allowed to take charge in the camps.

In Kolyma the land is filled with bones. Excavating in order to build, you find mass graves. Stalin's comrades-in-arms wrote to him, complaining that they needed power shovels and picks to bury the dead in frozen soil: "They're dying in mass and the cadavers are piling up, stiff like logs." To this, the "Little Father of the Peoples" responded with a little laugh: the more that the enemies of the people stack up like logs, the better we're doing.

The problem, though, was that the enemies of the people were the people themselves. The ranks of the convicts were multiplied by members of the military and political elite in disgrace, yes, in great numbers, but the overwhelming majority were simply peasants and innocent workers.

Whether due to distance in time and space or to the political changes of recent years is difficult to know, but here the monstrous history haunting this region is simply passed over in silence. I knew very well, of course, that Stalinism has been increasingly exculpated in official historical accounts, which remove the "negative" in order to speak only of the "positive"—the Great Patriotic War and the victory over the Nazis. Just the same, though, to hear the director of the Museum of Exile in Yakutsk tell me that, in her museum, this particular page of history hasn't yet been covered, because "the archives aren't available," made my eyes widen in astonishment.

She saw my reaction and it bothered her. And so she told the story of her own family, of her grandparents who'd met on the Arctic shore. "They were originally from central Yakutia, where the entire population was deported to the north during the war. There they met Finns, and Balts, and other peoples exiled by Stalin—entire families with no provisions, dying like flies and condemned to survival in unheard-of conditions, fishing in the frozen sea." As for the camps, she told me that former detainees, and deportees, had come and brought her various items, evidence. She'd planned to open an entire floor on the history of the gulags, but the response from above was beyond appeal: "It's too soon."

In fact, it's too late. By the time the museum reopened in 2012, after years of restoration, the wave of memories freed up during the 1990s, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, had subsided. Their waters had again begun to nourish the stretches of subterranean knowledge, occasionally authorized and more often maintained in silence. "What good is there in remembering such sad things?" Slava would say, fatalistically backing the official position with an ambiguity very typical of his people.

When we were walking through the streets of Yakutsk, Dima pointed out to us the series of hummocks popping up like miniature volcanos, pushing through and breaking up the paving of the sidewalk. An effect of permafrost: wherever there's an object in the soil and the ground thaws, it pushes up to the surface. "You should dig it up, take it out, and repave," Dima said with a laugh, "but instead they put asphalt in, pack it down, so when the next time it thaws, the hummock forms again." That reminded me of one of Shalamov's *Kolyma Tales*, where he describes how cadavers in the camps, buried just below the surface, are spit out by the earth in springtime, forcing the camp administration to inter them again. Joseph Brodsky recalls how, when working in the Russian Far East during the 1950s, he had to shoot at half-crazed bears come out of hiberation; they

had become accustomed to feeding on cadavers from labor camp graves and no longer knew how to hunt for food.[2]

Russian memory, the victim of an immense and powerful force of collective repression, repeatedly buries its cadavers so that it will no longer see what surges up, what cries out nakedly, demanding a tomb. Each time it gains back its strength, the angry earth throws truth back to the surface, forcing these millions, the children of victims and killers, again to close their eyes.

The only thing that has kept memory alive may be the detainees' songs; their endless sadness echoes around in my head like a kaddish:

> Here the winds are harsh and the woods are dense
> No matter how I howl—blues around!
> Behind me there are seven thousand kilometers
> And seven blue years are ahead of me.[3]
>
> Five hundred kilometers of taiga
> Without home or village
> No cars on the road
> Here only reindeer
> Stumble by
>
> I know you do not wait for me
> That you never read my letters
> That you will not come to meet me
> And if you did, you would not recognize me[4]

THROWN OUT BY PERMAFROST

WHAT THE MOVEMENT of permafrost tells us is that memory is a physical phenomenon. Here the history of the Soviet camps can't be seen in the museums, not even on a simple commemorative plaque, yet it shows through, it returns to the surface. It is inscribed in the details of every single thing made, inscribed in the brick and the wood of walls, in metal, in asphalt.

As he shows us the small town of Srednekolymsk, Slava informs us that this house, or that one, was built by detainees. How can he spot them? By the quality of the building. Hundreds of thousands of Germans from the Volga region—master craftsmen in the art of construction—were deported here. During the course of our conversation, we learn that practically the entire city has been built by convicts on temporary leave from one or another of the neighboring camps. We find a natural freezer con-

structed thirty yards belowground; you reach it by going down a staircase that surrounds a freight elevator. "Could anyone other than detainees have built that?" says our guide, with evident irony. "You had to fight through meters of frozen earth with picks and shovels; no human effort, under humane conditions, would have achieved this." "And agriculture?" "The religious groups who arrived here in the nineteenth century never succeeded in in establishing farms here, due to the climate, but the camp detainees managed it." And thus, after initially depending on the small communities of reindeer breeders, hunters, and fishermen to feed them, the camps accomplished their feat, becoming self-sufficient.

On the site where the museum is located today, right in the city center, used to be the main offices of Dalstoï, the company in charge of mines and mineral extraction in the Far East. Under the direct control of Moscow, its branch here was extremely active and presided over the development of a dense web of labor camps from 1938 until 1953, when Stalin died. Whereas farther south, city-sized camps with hundreds of thousands of detainees were constructed on the Sea of Okhotsk, near Magadan and its gold mines, the entire region lent itself to such development principally due to the fluvial traffic of the Kolyma, which served for the transportation of wood, ore, and coal.

"A lot of bad things are said here about Dalstoï," says Slava, with a slow, imperturbale tone, "but, well, it must also be said that they didn't just do evil, they also did some good."

In an article written in 1973, Joseph Brodsky meditated on the phenomenon of Stalinism. "And all the time that [Stalin] was murdering, he was building. Labor camps, hospitals, hydroelectric stations, giant metallurgical complexes, canals, cities, etc., including monuments to himself. And gradually everything got confused in that vast country. One could not comprehend who was murdering and who was building. One could not comprehend whom to love and whom to fear, who was doing evil and who good."[5]

It's clear: viewed purely in terms of their economic force, the camps were an extraordinary development. Superhuman in a literal sense, beyond the capacity of human beings, the camps managed to carve roads, build cities, and run mines under conditions where no human could survive. They organized death into a grand repressive project useful for industry. Stalin made concentration camps as ordinary as factories and made it impossible to differentiate one from the other. Slava worked for a radio station in Lobuya, fifteen kilometers from Srednekolymsk, on the

other side of the river. There too, we learn, was a camp. This camp was too small even to figure on the map of camps recorded by the group Memorial, a human rights organization now persecuted by the government. Here there was logging, brick manufacture, and barges were built for river transport. Slava knows of 1,300 detainees who were given their freedom in 1953. Half of his co-workers were convicts. Now I understand what he means when he says, "What good is there in remembering such sad things?" His expression is a lament: that there may really be nothing able to make us forget.

Today in Lobuya, where only a single person remains, a cross has been left by the children of prisoners. The remains of machinery from the camps are still there, a winch, some half-ruined barges, and—a zany find—a number of iron toilets, the ingenious invention of detainees. "In all the Soviet gulags, these are the only ones," Slava adds, sporting a comic expression of pride. The vigorous vegetation sprouting up in this abandoned camp gives a new relevance to the poet Brodsky's anguish during the 1970s, his fear that burying this tragedy would produce irreparable harm in the souls of the living.

REBIRTH AND TWILIGHT

When I returned to Yakutsk, I asked Dima, "How did such engineered industrial development, based on the camps, mix with the lives of the local peoples?"

"The nomads avoided any encounter with the camps. Those in charge demanded that they report any escapees. When there was the mass liberation of detainees after the death of Stalin, the majority returned to their families, but those who had no one left sometimes stayed here." Dima once lived in a village in the Northeast where one of these former detainees still lives, a Ukrainian who has made his home among the breeders of reindeer.

Stories emerge. An uncle, during those days, bragged about bringing back the severed hand of an escapee that he'd killed, then giving his fingerprints to the administration in order to receive a bonus. (His wife commented furiously, from the kitchen, "Shame on you forever for this!") Another relative who, as a child, crawled through the snow with a group of other boys in order to knock on a barrack at the labor camp nearby, where they knew one of their people was detained, and then, on his way back, died from a wound inflicted by a guard who fired after hearing a noise in the dark. "By tradition, the reindeer breeders were

good hosts. But the civil war, along with the punishments given to those who had welcomed soldiers from both sides, had weakened such relations and taught the local peoples to live withdrawn among their own."

Paradoxically, the crimes of Stalin didn't greatly affect life among these populations. Isolated reindeer breeders were not really affected by collectivization; there was too great a need for them, for the products of the hunting, fishing, and herding that they practiced, and for the means of transport that the reindeer offered. And so the nomadic peoples weren't forced to settle until very late, during the sixties.

As these conversations continue, I begin to understand better why the solstice festival didn't carry the musty odor one generally finds in folklore extolling the "Friendship of the Peoples." Here, in fact, the ancestral traditions are still very close. In Dima's village the last ritual initiation of a shaman was during the fifties. His grandmothers still speak the traditional dialects. In 1960, an elderly man who had been offered a state apartment continued to live in his tent, in the courtyard, explaining that he couldn't adapt to central heating.

In villages, on the mountain pastures, they still know how to make traditional instruments and clothing from animal skins. Every woman raised here possesses an ability to sew, fostering a marked creativity and art in fashioning clothing and sometimes also a personal style that makes its beauty even more striking. Of course the teenager that accompanied us during one of the village tours, one of Dima's nephews, played with a spinner just as trendy as the one my son has, and he was equally worried about his appearance, which seemed to depend on the cleanliness of his black sneakers. Today's young author-composers, trained according to their own traditions, prefer to immerse themselves in syrupy pop music and pass themselves off as TV celebrities. Yet they continue, as in the Soviet era, to work at excelling in art, and they value education. Most visible is that the struggle for the rights of indigenous peoples has become a vigorous form of activism in civil society today.

Reindeer require vast territories for grazing. Legislation passed during the Yeltsin years gave priority to raising of reindeer herds over every other economic activity in these regions. But changes are in the wind. The government, with its turn toward Eurasia, looks increasingly toward the Northeast and its natural resources in order to satisfy the appetites of the mining, gas, and oil industries. The laws are now being questioned. The government in Yakutia supports the autochthonous peoples, but together they are now confronting a weighty machine.

The introduction of *sovkhozy*, collective farms, was a major blow to traditional way of life in this region. Yet although they weakened familiar ties with reindeer, they also permitted reindeer herding to continue, by reinforcing values deeply written into the nomadic lifestyle, such as contempt for property rights and the importance of collective labor. The collapse of the USSR caused everything to fall apart, since a liberalized economy in the Russian style meant stripping resources, with no patience for demanding tasks. Yet the rebirth of a national spirit has also awakened the energy and pride of the native peoples of Yakutia—they are shaken, but too educated to allow such tendencies to run rampant.

Mina is a journalist representing one of the indigenous minorities of the North. She speaks five languages: Russian, Yakut, Yukaghir, Chukchi, and Even. Member of an impressive family from the intelligentsia of the Yukaghirs, a people who live in the taiga and tundra in upper and lower Kolyma, she has lived and worked in Moscow, but she has also lived here, brought back by the renewal her family has participated in. She tells us of the role literature has played in this renaissance, which dates back to the 1970s. It was intellectuals from the autochthonous peoples who began writing in their own languages and thus spurred recognition worldwide, thanks to translations. Then their language began to be offered as an option in schools. Carried forward under perestroika, this movement was ready when the USSR fell, and the intellectuals, supported by local authorities, created new scholarly programs and started new radio stations, newspapers, and television programs in autochthonous languages, reaching reindeer herders and isolated hunters, and achieving great popular success.

Dima, like a number of other enthusiasts, went to teach in a village, applying a radically new pedagogy based on the learning of their ancestors, on the observation of nature and practical knowledge. The young were taught how to set traps, how to observe migratory birds, how to calculate by beginning with concrete problems. In other words, Tolstoyan pedagogy. Once they'd been so well instructed, they left for cities, to enroll in upper-level education.

Today, such engaged intellectuals comprise a new sort of dissidence. Having formed an important association, they struggle for their rights. The powers that be have recognized them: after a session defending the rights of autochthonous peoples at the United Nations in New York, several delegates found the doors to their apartments blocked, the tires of their cars punctured, their passports ruined to keep them from leaving—established practice in the history of repression. The president of

the association learned that his son would be sent into combat in Chechnya if he didn't offer his resignation "voluntarily, for personal reasons," and a patsy from Moscow was put in his place. The struggle has gotten tougher, but it continues with the support of international organizations, benefitting from the vagaries of power. It seems like a battle between grass and asphalt. And yet, though I don't know why, here you can feel the force of the grass. We've seen so many places where grass manages to sprout up, even splitting rocks with its vigor and vitality.

Gricha, who raises reindeer, Svetlana; a singer who still has a troupe of her own; our friends Dima and Mina, engaged intellectuals—they all speak of the burning challenges that burden their people. There are only a few people left who speak their language. Climate change is turning their region upside down. Floods are more frequent; in some villages the water has reached the rooflines. Birds have moved closer to the sea, so you no longer hear their song in the taiga.

No less worrying are the societal changes: young people no longer want to follow the reindeer into their pasture, because there's no Internet connection. But reindeer demand constant care: you constantly have to follow them from place to place, take care of them, protect them from wolves and bears, live with them like a member of the family.

And so, the splendid costumes we saw at the solstice festival and the rugs made of reindeer hide aren't folklore, they're what's left of a way of living. The renewal of the 1990s was fostered by traditional knowledge that still lived even as it disappeared, and it fanned the coals. The freshness of this culture still comes from connections to subterranean waters, however scarce they've become. At present, the whole of it wavers in the halftones of twilight. And we don't know which way this world will tip.

NOTES

[1] "Vanynski Port," *Songs from Gulag*, trans. Dina Vierny; see also https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vaninsky_port.

[2] Joseph Brodsky, "Reflections on a spawn of hell," *New York Times*, March 4, 1973.

[3] "Bogaybo," *Songs from the gulag,* trans. Nathan Mer, 1991, http://www.wysotsky.com/1033.htm?1405.

[4] Ibid., "Vanyinski Port."

[5] Brodsky, "Reflections on a spawn of hell"