





# GENERAL COURTESY:

## A Five-Week Trip Down the Ob River Reveals The Secrets and Scars of Russia's Tragic Past

Continued From First Page

year and I for one day a year he's stroked, then he forgives everything else. We can only live in hope, waiting for something better."

**At the Source**

The expedition into Siberia begins in Chuvashka, a small town on the Tom River, which feeds the Ob 220 kilometers from the Mongolian border. In our group are five journalists from three countries and three ecologists studying the environmental toll of Soviet rule. Our leader, Vladimir Sukhatsky, a radio correspondent and entrepreneur, has chartered a 42-meter boat, but the river is so shallow here, so the first leg of our trip will be in the bright light of an early morning we gather to start north, following the current.

This is the land of the native Shorish people, who have lived around Chuvashka for more than 400 years. It was here that Russian explorers conquered their own Indians and then dug some of the richest coal mines in the world.

Our reception committee is a drunken fisherman, Viktor Sergeev, who waves uncertainly toward us in oversized green rubber boots. "You must finally be here with the gravel," he says, noting that the local road is impassable without it. His state breath: gravel of vodka, and the whites of his foggy eyes are blood-red.

"We ask for the gravel two years ago, so you are late, but we are still happy to have it," he says, not imagining anyone would come here for anything but official purposes.

Like other Shors, Mr. Sergeev, whose looks resemble both those of Native Americans, speaks a Turkic language left by one of many sets of invaders. When I say that I am American, he brightens and lets out a long whistle, exclaiming that the U.S. has more war graves than Moscow.

Before communism pushed aside Shorish beliefs and Stalin imprisoned the natives' leaders, the Shors worshipped nature so that the trees would bear fruit and the river fish. Every year, when the ice melted and fish were found still alive, they gave thanks for the miracle. For some time now, the Shors have worried that their people may one day die out. In 1980, the Shors and members of the 36 other Siberian native peoples numbered only about 500,000, a third of their population in 1930.

In 1930, a 46-year-old farmer who lives in one of a dozen log homes in the village, relates the Shors' situation to that of American Indians as portrayed by James Fenimore Cooper. "The Last of the Mohicans" influenced me greatly," he says. "Like the Mohicans, we too are on the border of extinction. It is almost too late already."

Encouraged by independence struggles elsewhere, the Shors and six tribal cousins are demanding the return of Shorish land. They say they will settle for a 5% share of the revenue from the region's mines, many of which are on their former territory.

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A cool wind carries the bitter, wet taste of coal dust up the blue shaft of the Ratspatskaya mine as the morning slugs through black puddles toward work. "We had a disaster in 1981," says the safety manager, a 40-year-old man with a mustache. "We killed 20 men. They put their coats over the gas-sensing gear so they wouldn't take to stop work and miss their bonuses for exceeding the plan."

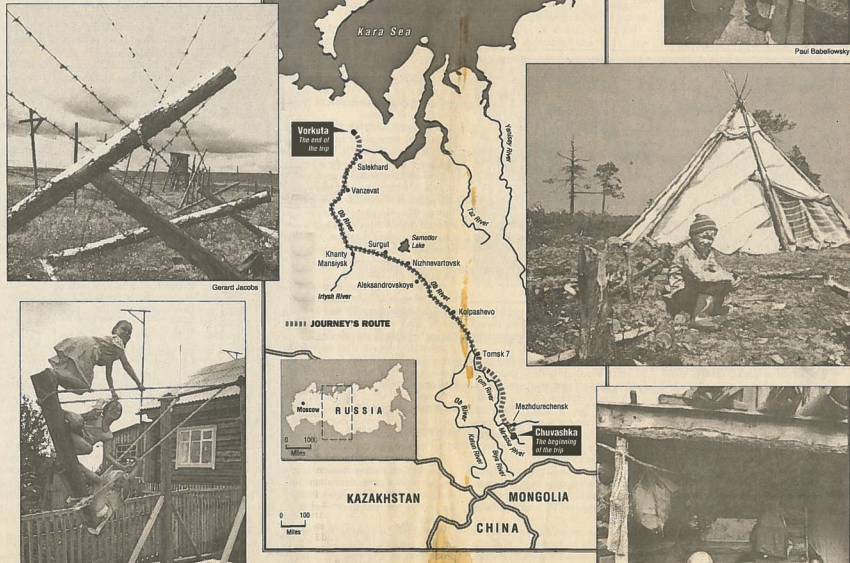
After a tour of the shaft, we come upon a section blocked by a collapsed roof. The only exit is a hole barely large enough to crawl through. On the other side, a miner pushing up a new support beam shrugs that he has no idea what life is like in the underground. "When miners are pensioned at age 50," he says, "they live just a few more days on a beach."

We ride out on the shaft on a conveyor belt with a load of coal, and Mr. Poleshchik invites his guest for tea in his office. Here, he sits at a table with a clock on the wall, a 30% share in the company if a Western partner agrees to buy some new equipment for an mine. The partner, he insists, will surely reap a 30% return on investment in the first year. He thumps the table with the flat of his hand. "Where else can you get such a return?"

A charcoal drawing of Lenin hangs on the wall, and Mr. Poleshchik's eyes are fixed on the drawing. "I am a Leninist," he says. "When we believe in God, we will hang him up in Lenin's place. But this is a time for hesitating in a case of beliefs."

**Spindling Isolation**

We board our boat about 640 kilometers from the Tom, roughly 80 kilometers before it flows into the Ob River. Here stands Tomsk, the old Soviet Union's key facility for the production of weapons-grade plutonium. But from the river bank, Tomsk 7 looks more like a concentration camp than a city. It is electronically monitored fences separate it from the outside world, and armed interior ministry soldiers march on



Clockwise from top right, Shor woman carrying water, Khanty boy and tepee, outside the shaman's home, Siberian sisters at play, and the ruins of Vorkuta's gulag

a no man's land between them.

The only foreign visitors to enter its gates before we were Frenchmen negotiating a deal to enrich fuel for use in French nuclear energy plants. With the nuclear weapons business in a downturn, Tomsk 7 is looking for new customers - and a new image. Hence the city's administrators have approved our visit to the city of 100,000.

Tomsk 7's nuclear facilities, which include five graphite reactors, a uranium enrichment plant and a plutonium extraction facility, are known euphemistically as the Siberian Chemical Factory. "We are entering a closed area," says Viktor Petrovich, the deputy director of the plant, as he directs our bus down Victory Street, onto Communist Prospekt and then along Lenin Street past three cinemas, two music schools, an artists' institute, two technical universities and numerous specialized libraries. The city is modern, its shops surprisingly well-stocked.

The reactors and enrichment plants remain off limits, but so do the people of Tomsk 7. Two young mothers are in line waiting for coffee and chocolates. They wear stylish pastel sundresses, copied from patterns in Western magazines. The size of Alphaville. Scientists know the place as the West Siberian geological plain. The city is modern, its shops surprisingly well-stocked.

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It, and then burned part of his face away," he says proudly. The others agree that the result is a convincing copy.

The engines of the boat are idling when I return to the harbor. The Russian organizer of the trip, Mr. Sukhatsky, is loading supplies - bread, meat, fish - for the next part of our expedition: into the vast, vast spaces of northwest Siberia.

The most important supplies go in the storage vault in the bottom of the boat: 160 bottles of vodka, the currency in the regions ahead where rubles are worthless.

**"He points to the fuel tank and says he will put a bullet into it, blowing up the whole boat if we don't give him our 'warm water.'"**

One bottle can buy seven kilos of fish. 160 can get us an engine for a canoe. The price for a day in a helicopter is 10 to 20 bottles. The land to the north is drunk, says Mr. Sukhatsky, smiling crookedly.

**God's Unfinished Work**

After a few days, our boat drops anchor in Aleksandrovskoye, 1,120 kilometers into our voyage. After some bartering, we rent a helicopter that takes us over the largest connected swamps in the world, stretching over an area three times the size of Alaska. Scientists know the place as the West Siberian geological plain. The locals, however, call it *Bozhia Nedodelka*, or "God's Unfinished Work," a place where God forgot to separate the land from the sea.

"I want to go to New York," shouts one. "There's a Big Ben there," squeals another.

"No, that's London," says a third. "New York has bandits. Doesn't it have bandits?"

The questions roll one over another. How big are the skyscrapers? How many can fit between the swamps and the confederate?

"Poko is in America," says one of the children. "No, Poko is in Japan," another corrects. "America is where the Ninjas Turtles live."

Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles penetrate the barriers of Tomsk 7 before the first American did. One of the boys describes how he converted a toy rubber soldier into the sort of Ninja Turtle character he had seen on television. "I took some black tape, covered him up with

nearly half of the region. But as the timber was harvested, and road construction backed up water, the swamps began to spread. By 1990, Western Siberia's oil fields were generating nearly 80% of the Soviet Union's hard-currency earnings. But the oil men had also left deep scars.

The helicopter crosses from the green swampland to the scorched earth of a recently burned forest. Discarded vodka bottles, which act as magnifying glasses for the sun's rays, are often blamed for fires here. The landscape looks devastated. Tree trunks are scattered about like blackened toothpicks.

Alexander Kalashnik, a local businessman who is our escort, orders the chopper to land in a clearing. "I want an American company to come and take this wood before it goes bad and is filled with insects," he says. He walks over to a stack of freshly cut tree trunks. They remained standing after the fire, but their roots were destroyed. He is being harvested. He sinks a hatchet into one to prove that the product is dry-char-broiled; the meat inside is yellow and healthy. "I've got 36 million cubic meters of very good timber," he says. "Be the first to come to Siberia and I'll treat you right."

Our dreamy flight over nature has become a fire.

**Building an Empire**

The next morning, after a 112-kilometer trip downstream, the boat docks in Nizhnevartovsk, a gray city of low-rise buildings in the center of West Siberian oil country. Nearby is Samotlor Lake, under which lies the largest single oil discovery in the world, and one of the largest in the world.

Among the oil pioneers here were Nikolai Ivanov and friend Evgeny Balashagin. They accepted modest salaries and long hours in the belief they were building socialism. Their crews often ignored leaks in pipes or repaired them haphazardly to keep production up and please the central planners. "Tons, tons, tons," says Mr. Balashagin. "We never counted money or nature. We only counted kilometers of pipeline and tons of oil."

Early on, the state decided to send oil, water and gas together in pipes to shipment points. Everywhere else in the world, these elements are shipped separately. Mr. Balashagin says the result was that Soviet Union was a highly sulfurous mixture that eroded pipes prematurely and spilled oil into the sea. In 1990 alone, pipes burst some 2,000 times.

The Siberian oil men at first suspected Western sabotage when the German-made pipes began to leak. They became clear that the fault was their own.

Today, Mr. Balashagin worries about what the oil workers have bequeathed nature. Huge lakes of excess oil spot the landscape, seeping into the ground and killing trees and fish. "Our ecology is destroyed," he says. "And 10 years won't

be enough to repair it. Even if we shut down every oil field, we never get nature back. We've spent a lot of labor in this region, and I suppose we don't have so much to show for it. We have lost our youth here."

The two oil men are seeking salvation through Western investment and know-how. They have started a joint venture with the French to build pipes that resist corrosion. They've hired an Italian company to help clean up the spills.

To escape the unhappy present, the two men talk of the early years, when only the oldest Russians came to the region. They built log roads to drilling sites and ate berries from the forests and fish from the clear streams. Mr. Balashagin remembers how the cold would often force them to close the school. "To know when to shut down, teachers hummed lullabies across the room, one in each floorboard. When the eighth nail into the room had frost on it, they would close the school for the day."

Mr. Ivanov laments about the time Mr. Balashagin was painting a large sign extolling Marxism-Leninism. Mr. Balashagin abandoned his work for lunch and returned to find what he thought was one of his workers, in a fur coat, asleep atop one of the freshly painted giant letters. When Mr. Balashagin drew closer to awaken the worker, he saw the fur coat was the real thing and the bear began to stir. Mr. Balashagin sprang back to the camp atop a pipeline, the only path over the swamp.

When he returned, a little later with Mr. Ivanov and a friend, the bear's footprints remained in the Communist red across the sign. "So we put it up that way," laughs Mr. Ivanov, slapping his friend on the back.

**Tepees in the Swamp**

Down river lies the modern oil city of Surgut, where we rent a helicopter and fly 160 kilometers to a native settlement seemingly lost in time. As our orange chopper slowly descends, reindeer scatter and the smoke from a nearby fire, built to keep the mosquitoes and deer flies at bay, swirls over the campground.

A dark-skinned woman in colorful native dress scoops up a little boy and girl and runs for the only cover available, one of two tepees huddled together on a small piece of moist, peaty turf between two lakes. The chopper hovers just above the swampy ground and drops us off, flying away to refuel while we investigate the life of the Khanty native people, the aborigines of Russia's richest oil region.

Like most Khanty women, Alexandra Davola lives far north of where the oil was born. She has moved repeatedly to stay a step ahead of the oil men. With

each move the climate has grown harsher and the animals and fish less plentiful. The oil geologists began exploring near here in February 1991. But an old hunter took eight of them hostage and escorted them overland back to Surgut. No more exploration should take place on Khanty lands, he told their company, without the approval of the native people's elected councils.

In the new age of democracy, local ecologists from the Surgut area joined forces with the natives for the first time. The regional council voted that exploration would be halted until the oil men could reach an agreement with the natives. News of the old man's courage spread quickly; the Khants considered it one of the few historical bright spots since their culture began its decline after Yermak the Conqueror led the first Russian Cossacks to the West Siberian plain in 1582.

"I don't know the man we're not here," says Mrs. Davola when our Khanty guide, a local historian, finally coaxes her out of her tepee. They are better talkers than I am. She studies nervously in Khanty, a Finno-Uralic language distant related to Hungarian, Estonian and Finnish. Her two eldest daughters, she says, have taken the two dugout canoes to visit the neighbors a half day's travel away.

She is one of only a few hundred left of the Khanty and Mansi peoples still living the life of their forebears. Their numbers have been shrinking, as alcoholism, disease and desperation take their toll.

"The Russians came like grasshoppers," says Mrs. Davola. "And like grasshoppers, they didn't do as much good as they did harm. They polluted the land and they shot game from their snowmobiles and helicopters, often leaving the carcasses behind because they were too much trouble to pick up. Reindeer, which the Khants raise for meat and skins, were left to rot. Mrs. Davola winces as she mimics the sound of the snowmobiles. "BRRRRR."

The arrival of outsiders has affected even the most secret corners of native life. At one stop on the trip, a man who says he is a Khanty shaman, or holy man, offers to show me his altar. "But we can't go anywhere," says Boris Rusmilenko, suggesting a bottle of vodka would be a good offering.

"Does God drink?" "God doesn't drink," he says. "We drink for God."

A short boat ride brings us to an embankment, which the shaman climbs unsteadily. Before us is his Holy Place: a birch tree with two empty vodka bottles hanging from its branches. Mr. Rusmilenko puts up coins for offerings at the tree's base and collects offerings at in cloth from his trunk. On the side of the tree are hatchet gashes. "A clean put means you will go on living and a bad one means you will die soon," he says, showing his own perfect mark and a flawed one left by a fisherman who shortly thereafter drowned in the Ob's cold spring waters.

The shaman sprinkles some vodka on the ground around the tree as a sort of title, then brings the rest to a nearby clearing. He instructs me to take a swig with him, then then around once more in the direction the sun turns. "On the road back, he takes a couple more swigs, without any effect."

**Dodge City**

We sail for two days down river to the small village of Vazvartov, where, just after dawn, Khanty natives attack our ship in their fishing boats. Leading the assault is a fisherman in a red and orange shirt, who has a gauge patch hanging precariously over his left eye. A leather bandolier is slung over his shoulder. "You are old rifle," he demands that we turn over our vodka - and any other alcoholic fluids, including meat - to him.

One of our organizers, Ivestia correspondent Viktor Kostoukousky, pulls out his flare gun and trains it on the fishing boat. "You are drunk and you don't know the law," he says. "But I can start you on fire with my gun and my aim is much better."

Two of our cowed native friends wrestle the rifle from his hands and persuade him to retreat. "We'll be back after sundown," says the pirate before he leaves. At the time then around noon, the Ob River, that gives us until about 3 a.m. He points to the fuel tank and says he will put a bullet into it, blowing up the whole boat if we don't give him our "warm water."

The deputy chief of the local state farm, who is also a local factor, tells us to leave. "We are not here to reassess," he says. "We are just testing you," says Alexei Sybin. They are just curious about your ship. One of our guides, when they back down - most of the time."

By 2 a.m., the pirates haven't attacked again. The much of our cargo, however, is running low on the currency, but we are also just 30 kilometers from our journey's end. A headless Ob River flows into the Kara Sea of the Arctic Ocean.

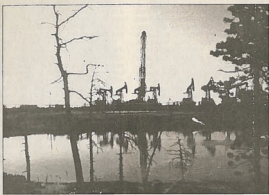
**Thinking of Jack London**

Two days later, we dock in Salekhard, the last major town on the Ob. Here I find Nikolai Ivanov, who sees the train that will carry me the final distance of the expedition to Vorkuta, the site of some of Stalin's cruelest prison camps, situated 160 kilometers north of the Arctic Circle.

High above the tracks in the engineer's control room, Ivanov sees the train and hits the brakes, slowing to a crawl. He swears at the uneven tracks, built four decades earlier by prisoners. "They are digging them up and start all over," says Mr. Choybaya, sticking his blackened fingers into a jar of pluck, which he swears and to stay a step ahead of the oil men. With

Continued on Next Page





Wytos van der Naalt, Groningen

## Oil slicks cover the swamp

*Continued From Preceding Page*

plopping a large one into his mouth. "But I wonder what they would find. They say there is a body buried underneath every tie."

At unmarked points along the route, the train stops to pick up old men with fishing poles and women with buckets of mushrooms. When I return to my seat, the carriage smells of campfire, fresh fish, vodka and cigarette smoke. The train is alive with conversation.

I sit beside Vladimir Antonovich Rodin, a man with a wild beard who smells of fish and sweat. He reaches into his pocket and pulls out a worn advertisement from the magazine *Ogonyok*. Canadian women are seeking husbands, and he has applied, he says. He wants my opinion. Could he make it in America at age 56?

Mr. Rodin says he is a carpenter who specializes in restoring 18th-century wooden churches. "To make a beautiful house of wood—well, that is part of the Russian soul." He considers himself similar to the Jack London character Martin Eden. Jack London's books are popular in Siberia, and Mr. Rodin believes Martin Eden was autobiographical. Both were simple men, he says, who were frustrated in their search for knowledge. And both committed suicide, a common death for capitalists—or so said Soviet scholarship.

"They said that's what happens to a good working-class man who tries to get up the ladder," says Mr. Rodin. "But Jack London wasn't so silly. I think he wrote a story about us all. Right now, you can grow tired of life the way Martin Eden did."

At the other end of the carriage, young men's voices sing melancholy songs to the strumming of two guitars. One of the men is Aleksandr Mostrov, 21.

"From age six to age 10 I was an *Oktoberist*," says Mr. Mostrov. "From age 11 to age 14 I was a Young Pioneer. And at age 14, I became a member of the *Komsomol* (Communist Youth League). I quit believing because of the Afghanistan war. Afghanistan was the breaking point for most young people."

His friend, Aleksei Deyukov, remembers how happy he had been as a child that he wasn't born an American. "I was sure I would be unemployed in America," he says. "I would be living in the dumpyard with nothing to eat but what I could dig up. We felt lucky to be Russian. I remember in our school class we gathered our pocket money to send to poor American children." They had all contributed, and they now

stretches from the wrist to the elbow. It shows hissing serpents wrapped around a saber. The gulag's guards forced this on her, she frowns. "My grandchildren ask me if the Germans did this. What should I tell them? How can I explain that we were doing this to our own?"

"Have you been to Rudnik?" Mrs. Kapnina asks, referring to the site of Vorkuta's cruelest forced-labor mine, and her home for five years. "The chief of Rudnik was an evil man named Kastikhin. One morning, during roll call, he made us count off by threes. He then shot every third person. I was lucky. I had drawn the number two."

"There was a trench that was dug by the convicts themselves. The bodies fell



Gerald Jacobs

Julia Kapnina

into the trench. We tried not to watch too closely. If you screamed or if your knees buckled, you could be his next victim."

Mrs. Kapnina sees her own survival as her single achievement in life. "The women did better in the camps than the men," she says. "Perhaps I survived because I cut my 50 grams of bread into three parts and ate it at different times during the day. A man would eat the bread all at once, and then he would starve."

Mrs. Kapnina's crime was that she was the 19-year-old daughter of an officer whom Stalin turned on and executed. For that, she was interrogated, tortured and then consigned to 10 years of hard labor followed by five years of exile. One of her few moments of relief in the camp came after she fell ill. After months of small rations and hard labor in the coal mine, she suddenly found herself bathed in the civility of the camp hospital. "There were doctors, professors and scientific workers, all prisoners themselves," she says. "In the cruelest of situations, the political criminals maintained a level of kindness that was astonishing."

Her worst memory is of the isolation cell where she was often sent because she spoke out. She remembers the cell as a small room with cement walls and an earthen floor. It wasn't large enough to lie down in, and in the spring, water came up through the ground. "I sat in water that was up to my neck," she says. Weary and emaciated, she would struggle to stay awake for fear that if she dozed she would drown.

She says she never stopped wondering if she might have avoided the camps if her mother hadn't abandoned her at birth, leaving only her father to rear her. Her mother never tried to gain her freedom. Yet in 1964, after Mrs. Kapnina was released from the camp, her mother appeared at her doorstep and asked her daughter to take her in.

"To this day, I can't forgive her," she says. "But I gave her the conditions where she could live, and she got along fine with my children. A person who had never gone through the hardships I endured, who has never been abused, might not have [let her in]. Do you think I did the right thing?"

Mrs. Kapnina looks weary. It is nearly midnight. She goes to her cabinet and takes out two large candles and five smaller ones. She wants me to light them and place them at the site of the trench in which her fellow prisoners fell.

"Orient yourself by the old school," she says, drawing a map on a piece of paper. "It is still there. In front of the school, there is a road passing by. It is of asphalt, but under it are bones. Human bones. To stand on that road is like standing on a graveyard."

So it is that the expedition ends the next morning on a patch of ground in front of the asphalt road that runs past the school. It is raining, so I put the candles under an overhanging rock, where the flames will not be doused. Mrs. Kapnina wanted me to light the candles for the dead, but as I fly away from Vorkuta, I am thinking about the survivors. About Mrs. Kapnina. She has survived a mother who abandoned her, an interrogator who tortured her and an executioner who killed so many others. She also has outlived the Soviet system, in whose infancy she was born. The system destroyed the country and itself, but not Mrs. Kapnina. In her spirit lies a glimmer of hope for Russia's future.

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laugh at the idea of their useless rubles being sent abroad.

"I believe in God now," says Mr. Mostrov, playing with a crucifix hanging from his neck. "That's not because I'm sure in this belief, but because there is nothing else to believe in. Lenin and Marx said there wasn't a God, so there was no God. I thought that can't be. It is too primitive to look at man as pieces of fat and molecules. A man can't live if he doesn't have a soul. And that soul doesn't come from Marx and Engels, but from God. Don't you agree?"

### The Survivors

The train rolls into Vorkuta at midnight, but the sun is still high in the sky, casting a silvery haze through a layer of clouds. Vorkuta is central planning gone mad. Geologists discovered coal here in the late 1920s. But no one would work in such cold isolation voluntarily, so Stalin sent tens of thousands of his prisoners to 63 labor camps arrayed around the city in the shape, by chance, of a human skull.

Here, on the advice of an acquaintance, I visit the modest apartment of one of the camps' survivors, Julia Kapnina, born in 1918, just months after the Soviet Union was formed.

As we sit in her small living room, beside the sofa bed on which she nurses her weak heart, Mrs. Kapnina hides her hands underneath the table. But I've already noticed the tattoos. What appears to be a man's name is etched in each hand on the skin between thumb and forefinger. Her left forearm has a larger tattoo that