

# Preface

## The Sleeping Land

### Where Eagles Soar

It seems an eternity now, although it has been only a little more than eight years since my first passage through that vast land called Siberia. My memories of that first summer are a kaleidoscope of images, odors, sounds, and periods of profound stillness—not so much a quality of the environment as a response to it. Lying on my back in a hot field with my head cradled in my hands, I watched the flight of seven eagles soaring lightly as they rode first one thermal and then, losing it, plunged briefly to another and again rose carelessly skyward, all as effortlessly as the flow of a river. The rhythm of the rise and fall of each bird brought to mind the cadence of the lines from Arnold's "Dover Beach":

*Come to the window, sweet is the night air!  
Only, from the long line of spray  
Where the sea meets the moon-blanch'd land,  
Listen! You hear the grating roar  
Of pebbles which the waves draw back, and fling,  
At their return, up the high strand,  
Begin, and cease, and then again begin,*

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*With tremulous cadence slow, and bring  
The eternal note of sadness in. . . .*

That summer was one without care. Soon after the last day of classes at my university I flew to that faraway land. The very sound of the word—*Siberia*—evoked mystery, adventure, and a history shrouded in intrigue. According to the Russian author Valentin Rasputin, “The word *Siberia*—and not so much the word as the concept itself—has long sounded as a warning bell announcing something vaguely powerful and imminent.”

For more than 400 years, since Russia began to occupy the untamable Siberian wilderness, the gigantic region has remained remote, but it is less so now than it was in the days when it took months to cross its broad expanse by horse and boat. The Russians’ conquering hero of Siberia was Yermak Timofeevich, leader of a band of warriors called Cossacks. The name comes from a Tartar word meaning “daredevil,” one who has shunned all ties with his social class and becomes a free spirit as ready to fight as gulp down a measure of vodka. The Cossacks came into their own in the 1500s when they avoided the Tartar yoke of feudalism and serfdom by fleeing to the “Wild Field” where, according to Rasputin, “They founded their own settlements, elected chieftains called atamans, established laws, and began a free, new life that was not subordinate to any khanate or czardom.” Nevertheless, to survive they eventually came to serve the czar and tirelessly vented their patriotic fervor by defending Russia against her perceived enemies, be they Turks or Tartars. Their stronghold was the land forming the lower reaches of the Don and Volga rivers. It was the Cossacks, under the leadership of Yermak, who played an almost supernatural role in opening up Siberia. They were a proud and

ruthless lot of adventurers who let nothing stand in the way of their pursuit of wealth. But there were others before them.

Who were the first Siberians, the mystery people who inhabited the forests and plains east of the great Rock, or Ural Mountains? Foreigners in ancient and medieval times reading Herodotus's *History* were told that "at the foot of some high mountains dwell people who are bald from birth and have flat noses and oblong chins [and who] have goats' feet; and others living beyond them sleep six months out of the year." As late as the 1500s, one Russian written source related old tales describing the Siberians as a people who ostensibly die to pass the harsh winter months and do not reawaken until spring.

Siberia, from a Tartar word meaning "sleeping land," is a giant only slightly smaller than the United States. It extends eastward across northern Asia from the Ural Mountains to the Pacific Ocean. From west to east in the north it borders first the Barents, then the Kara, then the Laptev, and finally the East Siberian seas across the Arctic. It sprawls southward, first across the tundra, then through the great north coniferous forest biome called the taiga, and finally over the steppes of Central Asia to its southern borders with Kazakhstan, Mongolia, and China.

In my opinion, there is no better way to savor that capacious estate than to cross its breadth by the Trans-Siberian Railroad, and to plumb its depth from north to south by river. The Trans-Siberian Railroad was completed in 1905, the year the Russians suffered humiliating defeat in the Russo-Japanese War and three years before a cosmic visitor ripped apart the sky and exploded over Tunguska. To this day, transportation in the region remains poor, however. Most villages are accessible only by dirt roads either alternately choked in swirling clouds of dust or churned to mud by heavy rain,

which means that at times they are not accessible at all. In Russia, according to one saying, there are no roads, only directions, which was literally true for some of my expeditions. For instance, you get to Vanavara, the stepping-off point of my expedition to the Tunguska site, by foot, river, or air. North-south traffic in Russia is served by the Lena, Ob, and Yenisei rivers and their thousands of tributaries of central Siberia, and by the Amur River, which flows along Russia's border with Manchuria in the Russian Far East. The Amur eventually empties into the Pacific Ocean near the island, and former penal colony, of Sakhalin.

Dissidents, political prisoners, rapists, murderers, and thieves of every description traditionally have been carted off to Siberian penal colonies—most recently Stalin's notorious gulags—or exiled to remote villages. In 1897 Lenin was exiled for three years to the small and remote Siberian village of Shushenskoe. His exile, however, was something of a lark since he had a comfortable little house, was well fed, and had an ample supply of books and periodicals. In fact, his banishment to Shushenskoe marked one of his most productive periods in churning out Bolshevik literature. He was even married there, to his long-time fellow revolutionary Nadezhda Krupskaya.

Trotsky also ended up as a Siberian exile, and so did Stalin, and most likely at the very time of the catastrophic Tunguska explosion. Most of the political prisoners, dissidents, and their descendants were simply dumped in that vast empty land. Since there were no easy or reliable means of escape, they had no choice but to stay and follow the wish of the government to settle and help tame the inhospitable wilderness and exploit its seemingly inexhaustible natural wealth.

Three-quarters of Siberia is a land of eternal frost, or permafrost, a crust of ice, bog, and soil frozen to a depth of some

300 meters on the average. In places, the frost penetrates to a depth of 1500 meters! Despite the heat welling up from Earth's interior and bearing down from the summer Sun, the permafrost temperature remains a constant  $-4^{\circ}\text{C}$ . Only during a few weeks of summer does the permafrost melt to a depth of a few meters.

I saw a graphic example of the delicacy of the permafrost layer and what happens as a result of human intervention when I explored the ruins of one of Stalin's notorious gulag prisons a few days downriver from Krasnoyarsk on the Yenisei River. The camp marked one location along an ill-fated railway line, constructed by forced labor, across the tundra from Salekhard, on the Arctic Circle, eastward to Igarka. The railroad, destined never to be completed and never intended to be, was a pet project of Stalin's to help settle Siberia and to condemn untold thousands of "enemies of the state." When Stalin died in 1953, the project instantly came to a halt, testifying to its utter folly. Today, survivors of that grim time and that fateful project describe the railroad undertaking as the Soviet equivalent of Auschwitz and Dachau.

When I picked my way among the ruins of the gulag, the fragility of the tundra was driven home to me. The centerpiece was a derelict railroad engine rusted nearly to dust. Tilted and resting on equally rusted rails, the engine had sunk several feet into the permafrost. This particular section of the rail line was built in 1947. There are numerous other reminders of the fragility of the tundra. Bulldozers and other tracked vehicles used by oil exploration crews break through the thin insulating layer of mosses and lichens and leave vast, heaving ditches that will remain for centuries. Like the railroad engine, structures such as heavy buildings create just enough heat by their weight pressing into the ground to melt the frozen ground below and create swamps, into which the

buildings eventually sink, totter, and collapse. Roads are destined to meet the same fate.

My decision to brave the Trans-Siberian Railroad for the 4000 kilometers from Moscow eastward to Krasnoyarsk on the first leg of my journey to the Tunguska site was the right one, although I don't know if I would do it again. In part, it was the realization of a longing I had had since my teens inspired by my reading the works of Tolstoy and Chekhov. Anton Chekhov's moving and graphic descriptions of his three-month crossing of Siberia in 1890, first by horse and carriage and then by steamer, had made me long to see Siberia from the ground rather than from the indifferent perspective at an altitude of 10,000 meters. I wanted to experience the texture of the land from within its fabric, not above it, to sense its aromas, and to mix unobtrusively among its peoples to hear them speak and hawk their wares. Oh, how I came to yearn to speak their language and be one with them.

What is this seemingly endless land like? It is like no place else. Comparisons, which we habitually make when describing a visit to foreign lands, are useless. Siberia is a world unto itself, another planet marvelously varied and self-sufficient in every way. Its environmental, cultural, and spiritual diversity makes Siberia singular, unique, extraordinary, incomparable. The experience of it is unforgettable and unduplicatable.

### **Cloud Merchants and Wet Fences**

On April 29, 1890, while sailing on the river Kama, Chekhov wrote to his family that, "The banks are bare, the trees bare, the earth a mat-brown, patches of snow stretch ahead and the wind is such that even the devil himself couldn't blow as sharply or unpleasantly. When the cold wind blows and rip-

ples the water, which after the spring's flooding has taken on the color of coffee slops, everything turns cold and lonely and wretched; the accordion sounds on the shore seem mournful and the figures in torn sheepskin coats standing motionless on the barges we encounter appear permanently stiff with sorrow. The cities of the Kama are gray; it looks as though their inhabitants occupied themselves exclusively in the manufacture of lowering clouds, boredom, wet fences and street filth."

To this day, on making your way along the dirt, dung-strewn main streets of remote Siberian villages—remote in time as well as place—you can encounter the same types of people described by Chekhov. From the town of Ekaterinburg he wrote: "The people here inspire the newcomer with something like horror; they are high-cheekboned, with jutting foreheads, broad-shouldered, have little eyes and enormously big fists."

On arriving at Krasnoyarsk, Chekhov referred to the world's most voluminous river, the Yenisei, as "that fierce and mighty warrior." During the weeks ahead after my adventure by train, I was to spend eleven days on that fierce and mighty warrior aboard the ship *Anton Chekhov* as it carried me north into the Kara Sea of the southern Arctic Ocean and the outpost of Dickson at 73°N. That is north of Norway, north of Alaska, halfway up Greenland. Even in August you can expect to encounter ice floes when the wind is right. We were lucky. The wind wasn't right, but even at the height of summer we could feel the bite of the cold and heavy glaciated air. What a contrast from the oppressively dry and hot air of the steppe land where eagles soar. Actually, I welcomed the brief chill of Dickson. It meant no mosquitoes.

The train continued to speed me on that three-day hot July journey across some of the most beautiful country I

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have even seen—across the Ural Mountains; through forests of pine, cedar, birch, spruce, and larch; across expanses of broad and flat fields of wild grasses adorned with little islands of silver birches that glowed pink in the early morning sun, gleamed titanium white by day, and then dissolved to a ghostly gray by moonlight. On and on the train groaned and creaked, sometimes with a rapid clacking of the wheels as they raced along, striking the expansion joints of the rails; other times slowing to a staccato click-clack, click-clack; and sometimes stopping altogether as we were shunted onto a siding to wait for one or more trains to pass from the opposite direction. We traveled at an average speed of 58 kilometers an hour. The hypnotizing effect of this unending Sonata for Iron Wheels often kept me in a state of half asleep, half awake, being neither fully conscious nor deeply asleep.

On crossing the steppes of central Asia and trying to still the shimmering of the ground caused by thermals rising off the hot fields, I almost expected to see a herd of giraffes or a pride of lions in the distance, so similar is this land in summer to the African savanna. It seemed interminable. As we approached villages, the wild grassland abruptly gave way to continuous patches of incredibly lush vegetable gardens, some towering with swaying sunflower plants that would serve as cattle fodder or whose seeds would be lightly fried, salted, and sold at bus and trolley stops everywhere. Husky, hooded female peasants, shawled and heavily clothed, worked plots of potatoes. Seldom did these *bábushkas* look up from their chopping hoes. “Get yourself a nice *bábushka* who will bring you tea and vodka and mend your socks,” I was once jokingly advised. On and on, click-clack, click-clack.

The gardens stopped as suddenly as they had appeared and were interrupted by squalid wooden buildings unpainted except for pale blue peeling shutters. At one time, who knows

when, the late communist government must have decided to make an ocean of paint—all blue. Throughout Russia, house shutters are to this day almost always that same hue. I doubt Russians will ever run out of blue paint.

No matter what time of day or night the train stopped at a town to take on or discharge passengers, the railroad tracks were instantly lined with dozens of shawled and jacketed *bábushkas*. They stood by makeshift tables or tended baby carriages brimming with cabbage pies and boiled potatoes, collectively wrapped in blankets to keep them warm, and with radishes, raspberries, wild strawberries, blueberries, endless jars of succulent preserves and honey, little cakes, and homemade vodka. At Mareensk we were met by regiments of more peasant food merchants, kerchiefs knotted tightly under their creased and wrinkled chins, their faces browned by the sun and lined by age. Their hands, extended with their offerings, were also brown and calloused and often deformed by arthritis or years of hard use. Children were vendors as well. “My God! How rich Russia is in good people!” Chekhov wrote his family. “If it were not for the cold [and] the officials who corrupt the peasants and exiles, Siberia would be the very richest and happiest of territories.” These were Chekhov’s “good people,” unchanged over a century, survivors of the wretchedness and brutality of Stalin’s reign of terror, enduring as tenaciously as the hardy weeds and flowers of Darwin’s “tangled bank.”

From time to time the train, for no apparent reason, slowed to a crawl—click . . . clack . . . click . . . clack—as we passed a tiny wooden hut with a man or woman standing just outside its cuckoo-clock entrance and holding up a pole with either a plain yellow or red disk attached to the end. These were signals to the engineer announcing whether the tracks

ahead were clear (yellow) or not (red). An electronically operated signal system for the railroad had yet to come to Siberia, and still has yet to come eight years later.

I had reserved and held tickets for all four bunks in the first-class sleeping car compartment that I shared with my attractive traveling companion Ekaterina Rossovszkaya. It was Katya who was responsible for my embarking on this odyssey, which was to extend unexpectedly into several adventurous years. Since she played, and continues to play, such an important role in my Siberian travels, I should explain the circumstances of our meeting.

It was during the summer of 1991. I was enjoying the seasonal break from my university and writing a book deep in the Maine woods on the mountain lake where I live. I was carefree, single, and in a frame of mind to consider just about any opportunity that suggested adventure. At the time, I was a member of the advisory board of the Center for the Study of the First Americans, located at Oregon State University, from which I had recently returned from a meeting. My involvement in astronomy prompted the director's wife, a recent Russian transplant, to bring up the subject of the Tunguska Event of 1908. Yes, of course, I knew about it, and, in fact, had long had more than a passing interest in the cause of the event.

A week or so after my return home I received a call from Oregon. It was Mila, the director's wife, saying that a Russian friend of hers, who was an authority on the Tunguska Event and who had visited the explosion site, was temporarily on assignment by the Russian government and doing work as an interpreter in San Francisco. Would I like to talk with her? Her name is Ekaterina Rossovszkaya, but just call her Katya.

Over the next week or more Katya and I talked for several hours, mostly about Tunguska, but gradually we became acquainted. She struck me as being very bright with a strong

and winning personality. She was single and in her mid-thirties. Mila had told her about the astronomy books I had written, which prompted Katya to ask me why I didn't write a book about the great Tunguska explosion. She could even arrange for me to go to the site since she knew, among several other investigators, the principal scientific investigator.

I said I'd jump at the chance if she really thought she could arrange things. She assured me that she could and that she was free for the next two months to begin making arrangements. I suggested that she come to Maine and work from there since she would need a number of documents from me. "Send me a ticket and meet me at the airport. You'll recognize me because I'm Russian and have long red hair." So began our relationship and the years of adventure to follow.

Katya had advised my buying out the sleeping car compartment, saying that it would be unwise to risk unnecessarily displaying my two Nikon cameras, camcorder, and tape recorder, not to mention our bottles of Russian champagne (which is excellent and cheap, by the way) and tins of caviar. Our choice for "climate control" was to suffer the heat inside the compartment or pull down our top window, which provided a flow of hot air filled with soot from the engine. The windows were so crusted with grime that we had to lean out and clean them with tiny pieces of paper napkin soaked with tea. To get as much mileage as possible out of a paper napkin, the Russians to this day unfold the napkin and then cut it into four patches along the folds. It is called a *salfetka* and, as a napkin, is about as useful as a postage stamp.

Each first-class carriage had ten compartments accommodating four passengers each, a narrow corridor running the length of the car, and a toilet at each end. Passengers were supposed to have use of both toilets, but the two *prahvad-neetsahs*, or attendants who collect the tickets, sell you bed-

ding, serve you tea, and also act as guards, almost always kept one toilet locked for their private use and for use by important officials. Bureaucrats in Russia are everywhere. The other toilet was nearly always filthy and barely usable. You never sit on the seat of a Russian train's toilet. You adjust yourself above it, brace yourself as well as you can, and take your chances with the swaying and abrupt jolts of the train. Both toilets were kept locked when the train passed through a village or town, and sometimes remained locked out of neglect or forgetfulness of the *prahvadneetsabs*

Each car also had a hot water urn for tea. Previously, tea was 3 kopecks a glass without sugar, or 6 kopecks with sugar (a penny or two). Prices had gone up to 6 rubles (about 25 cents at the time of my trip). Bedding, which consisted of a mattress cover, two sheets, one blanket, and one towel, came to 25 rubles per person (just under a dollar). Previously, the price was 1 ruble. I asked Katya if I might offer our *prahvadneetsab* a couple of my Earl Grey tea bags. She frowned and said no, "because she would think that you were trying to tell her how awful her Russian tea is." A tip would also have offended her and would have been refused because, as Katya explained, "people are expected to take pride in their work and without extra compensation."

"What about bribes?" I asked. "Oh, that's different," she smiled. "How do you think those people standing up night and day in the corridor outside our compartment got permission to do that? They didn't have tickets." One time our *prahvadneetsab* tried to persuade us to let two young men share our compartment. After several determined "*niets*" (noes) from Katya, the matter was settled in our favor. I wondered how much the *prahvadneetsab* was planning to get for selling a place in our compartment.

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I once told Katya that I wanted to do some video recording in the second- and third-class cars. "Absolutely not," she admonished. "When they see your camcorder, someone is likely to follow you out of the car and mug you, or worse." In 1992 a camcorder was regarded as an extremely expensive item, approaching the price of a car.

In the third-class cars a ticket does not ensure you a seat. There are no bunks, and seats are on a first-come, first-served basis. These carriages usually are so crowded that there is no room to lie down. Bodies occupy the floor wherever there is space; standing room also is at a premium. Even the uppermost luggage compartments have someone lying curled up in them. A car designed for 100 people commonly is occupied by half again that many. People are everywhere, sitting on their luggage, standing in the vestibules between cars and inhaling soot, and in the toilets inhaling odors better avoided. Most Russian males smoke, so the air throughout the train is about as bad as air can get, even without the summer enrichment of strong body odors.

The importance of the Trans-Siberian Railroad as the principal means of east-west travel and the distribution of goods was driven home to me by the frequency with which trains passed us going in the opposite direction. Before arriving at Novosibirsk, from which you would drop straight into Mongolia if you slid due south down the map, we were delayed for an hour by the wave of a cuckoo-clock attendant holding her red disk pole. You learn not to ask why there is a delay; no one seems ever to know or care. If you are in a station and ask a question at the information counter, you have to pay 2 rubles for a simple question and 4 rubles for a complex question. Rarely do you get a reliable answer and never a return of your rubles.

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During our hour of delay I counted eighteen trains passing us westbound. They carried people, logs, hogs, milled boards, tanks of natural gas, tanks with guns, tractors, trucks, more tractors, marble chips, tires, drilling equipment, military vehicles of all sizes and sorts, dark containers tightly closed, banded, and locked, and endless cars of coal, coal, and more coal. The variety of the Siberian landscape matches the richness of its natural resources—vast quantities of oil, natural gas, coal, iron ore, gold, platinum, nickel, timber, and gemstones galore, some so rare that they are known to occur only at a single site in Siberia.

We were five hours late when we arrived at the Novosibirsk station at 4:00 A.M., but the station clock showed only 11:00 P.M. That was because railroad stations, air terminals, and certain other public buildings throughout Russia display Moscow time, a reminder of who is in charge. I wished I had been traveling with Chekhov, without need of a temporal Big Brother.

Our last stop was Krasnoyarsk, although the train was to continue on for several more days to its final destination, China's capital of Beijing. The engineer had neither gained nor lost a minute over the 880 kilometers from Novosibirsk. At Krasnoyarsk we were still exactly five hours late.

## Welcome to Siberia

Northward for some 600 or more kilometers from the Trans-Siberian rail line is the densest region of the taiga and tundra biomes, with swamps and bogs in every direction. Even as late as mid-June the tundra remains frozen at 2 or so meters beneath the downy surface. One Russian writer, Yuri Semyonov, has described the region as a “sinister” land where “the weak and imprudent often perish . . . where everything below

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is decayed and rotten, and everything above withered, where only the corpses of the huge trunks slowly molder away in the brackish water.” Mosquitoes here are reputed to be the fiercest, largest, and most numerous of any place in the world. The only protection against them is heavy clothing, gloves, and a “helmet” of netting to protect your face and head. Chemical repellents are nearly useless. The mosquitoes just laugh. One Japanese expedition member to Tunguska called Siberian mosquitoes “flying alligators.”

So this was the Siberia I had traveled so far to see, and it was to be my summer home for several years to come as I visited remote meteorite impact sites across the breadth and depth of the land—from the Arctic to Mongolia and from the Ural Mountains eastward to the active volcanoes of Kamchatka in the Russian Far East.

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