

Dear Friends and Colleagues,
I send you a short impression of my fieldwork in the tundra of the Republic of Sakha, Northeast Siberia.

Yakútsk

The low sun that shines shortly but frequently softens contours, the clean snow muffles the noise in the town. Through the broad streets, women move soundlessly with quick steps in their long, wide fur coats sweeping around them. Beautiful fur hats, sometimes making heads almost top-heavy, form the topline on the pavements. Small buses come and go on the hardly cleaned asphalt, cars drive without problems over the slippery roads. Between the many modern buildings some wooden houses can still be found. Shops that cannot be recognized as such have limited choice, though western chains of shops found their way here too. The outside temperature fluctuates between minus 20 and 30, inside radiators are working hard.

In the Arctic Institute I am well looked after and my license to do fieldwork in the military zone of Chérsky and Andryúshkino is arranged. The aim of my



fieldwork is the documentation on audio and video of stories, songs and some separate recordings for my phonetic research on Túndra Yukagír (TY), an isolated, almost extinct Paleo-Asian language.

Anya from Andryúshkino, who works as an assistant at the Institute for Problems of Minority Peoples of the North and who had a TY mother, will join me on fieldwork. Gavril Kurílov, full TY working at the same institute, supplies us with a list of good TY speakers. After seven hours waiting in uncertainty (the airstrip in Chérsky is not cleaned, there is no kerosene to fly back, two drunken, but influential passengers do some successful

calling), we, Anya with heavy bags full of things for her relatives and myself in a long fur coat from a colleague and armed with equipment, go on board of a propeller aircraft, loading our own luggage. I obtained the tickets from the director of the airline who would shift our connecting flight from Chérsky to Andryúshkino, that we would just miss, to the next day. In four and a half hours we are shaking, huddled in our coats, high over the snowy mountains to the northeast to Chérsky where it is two hours later.

Chérsky and Andryúshkino

Still on the plane the military police picked me out: passport and license, please. In a jeep we drive to their office, with somebody opposite us in a cell, and I am registered. Fortunately, they do not notice that the numbers of my passport and on my license do not correspond. A friendly soldier drives me to my “hotel”, a cold floor in a high building where I will sleep under all available blankets and my fur coat. But before that we slither with Aunt Nástya through the quiet streets of Chérsky with its 3000 inhabitants (Anya is shocked that almost all wooden houses disappeared during the last three years: optimalization, they call it) to Aunt Lídiya who serves us macaroni with reindeer meat. I do not pay much attention to the small town: above my head a fascinating show takes place of most white but also rainbow-coloured northern lights. Spears, stripes, squares, circles, moving horizontally or fanning out, then suddenly in a wide circle around us, the sky is full of it, whatever direction you look. Like a child I am jumping, and I scream pointing in the air: look, look!

The next morning at nine o'clock we are supposed to drink vodka to celebrate the Day of the Militia: one of the guests in the hotel, proudly dressed in uniform, is sitting upright, receiving congratulations and we only take a sip symbolically, the car to the airstrip is already waiting for us. The flight to Andryúshkino has indeed

been shifted to today. It takes hours to negotiate about luggage to take along, and Anya arranges that a man will put her heavy bags around the office in the plane so that she does not have to pay for it. The small plane is loaded and with ten passengers on small tip-up seats along both sides of the plane (“don’t stand up during the flight” is the only instruction we receive from the pilot) with between us the luggage we carried ourselves, the plane with one propeller and double wings climbs into the air and we tremble in hundred minutes over countless rivers and lakes to the west to Andryúshkino. Upon



arrival people storm the aircraft and outside sleds with snowcats or dogs are waiting while at the horizon the sun sets in loud red. It is three o’clock. Anya’s brother Fyódor takes us to her empty



house (her aunt is not there, her parents passed away a long time ago, people die early here) where cousin Nastya waits for us with macaroni and reindeer meat. It is touching how Fyódor says goodbye to Anya, till the New Year he will go fishing in the north with a mate (no, polar bears are still 100 km further north). All houses in which live some 800 people are made of wood and have two stories. There is a small hospital, a district office, a kindergarten and a primary and secondary school, a museum, a bakery and some small shops in private houses which sell almost nothing for stiff prices: everything is three to five times more expensive than

in Yakutsk. The only sounds come from the many dogs who live outside and from the snowcats. Everywhere there are boats covered with snow. Around us the beginning tundra stretches out, there still



are some trees frozen with a layer of snow, a beautiful scenery in the orange-pink sunshine that rises and

sets within the frame of our kitchen window, always together with half rainbows at both sides. Fyódor leaves huge



frozen fishes behind and Vóvka brings us a frozen reindeer leg that he cuts into pieces in

the kitchen. With large bags of macaroni this is our three times daily meal for the next ten days, solid or as soup. From frozen fish thin slices are cut off that roll up and are directly eaten, dipped in salt and pepper: stroganína. Likewise liver, heart and kidneys of reindeer are eaten, frozen and raw. Tea, the whole day tea. Food and drinks are always on the table for everyone who drops in. No greeting, you start talking, you eat and drink, and leave again.

Anya, with whom I get along so well, shows me around and makes appointments to record TY speakers and visit TY lessons



at school. TY children have a fairly good passive knowledge of their mother tongue (as far as you may call it so, there is so much mixed blood with the other minority peoples Evèn, Chukchee and with Yakut, that “pure”

TY hardly exists anymore), but translating from Russian into TY is hard. I am deeply touched by the youngest kids who in national costumes with bead decorations in their hair read aloud their TY lessons.

There is no TY courseware, there is also no money, teachers make everything themselves. Their devotion and enthusiasm



commands deep respect. At home TY is not spoken, even if the parents are rather “pure” TY. We are guilty ourselves, tells the headmaster of the secondary school during an evening with TY women at her home, we should have understood that TY is doomed to disappear if we do not work



hard for its revitalization. I ask them to sing each a TY song for me, they feel embarrassed. Then I sing a Dutch song, they cannot refuse anymore and their sadness is gone. At home with the elder women or in Anya’s house I record materials, folk songs and sung improvisations. Sometimes I have to take away their fear for my equipment, have a lot of patience, try to reach them from different point of views,

and even if they say that they don’t remember anything, finally they turn up with something, sometimes a lot. With young people I record spontaneous speech and songs, they don’t know any legends, because their parents did not tell them when they were younger. Fortunately, before me many others registered a lot of materials for which I would now have been too late.



It takes one hour to Bábushka Anna Yegórovná in very warm clothes on a sled behind a snowcat. It is already dark and

the low bushes lighted by the lamp of the snowcat look like white dusted reindeer antlers. Anna lives with some relatives in a tiny wooden house at the borders of a small lake, warmly heated by an iron stove on which the



reindeer soup bubbles. Her short, sung memories about her late husband or sister all end in sniffing. Later that evening she is very jolly and she sings one song after another. Before we leave, I am sitting on the sled, she pulls down my shawl covering my face and putting her lips she kisses me on my mouth.

On Sunday with beautiful clear sunny weather, a ritual is held on the cemetery to accompany the spirits of a father who died in July and of his son who shortly after that drowned during fishing. At a turn we



feed them by throwing bread, fish, meat, tea and vodka into the fire that we also use to warm ourselves. A miniature sled on which the spirits are supposed to leave is tightened to two reindeer that are slaughtered. Then we beat them with a stick on their stomach and if they move it is a good sign, the spirits can leave.



Intestines and bones are left behind in a box on a wooden construction, the meat is divided. In the meantime we are busy eating and drinking. In a separate fire belongings of the two men disappear. After hours, when we return at a beautiful sunset, we may not look back.

Herd number two is only one and a half hours away from the village. Lying on the couch like a doll two women dress me. Over my normal clothes (long thermo underwear, 3 fleece sweaters, long trousers) they put on trousers lined with dog wool, over those wide trousers made of reindeer skin, reindeer boots, wool sweater, a quilted coat, a windproof cape with hood, a huge fur hat and wool and reindeer mittens. They put me upright and ask me to walk but I can only lumber. They help Anya in TY clothes and she looks beautiful in her waisted, wide flaring white coat with decorations and an apron with little bells underneath. With full speed we drive into the real tundra, Khristofór makes sure that I won't fall off the sled. Gentle hills and endless white, bare plains in the pale sun. Suddenly black spots: the reindeer. We search and find the big octagonal tent of the nomads who



move on every two weeks. Near the wood-burning stove all news is exchanged and we get to eat raw reindeer heart, liver, soup, fish, macaroni, tea and pure alcohol



diluted with water in teacups. Four children clap hands, two women take care of the fire, food and clothes, five men are resting. Then two shepherds leave to rush the reindeer with dogs toward the tent. In a while the more than thousand reindeer

appear over the hill against the pink horizon, the leader with great dignity in front with a bell around its neck. The children chase them and with a muffled, dark



buzzing they run around us. Breathless I watch and listen to this spectacle, am I really standing here right in the middle? With a lasso a brown and a white reindeer are caught and tied to a sled on which I sit down and with a little lash in my hand I guide them across the tundra for a while. But we cannot stay outside very long, a sharp wind gets up. The reindeer have sat down near the tent. The red sun disappears with its rainbows behind the hill, it is time to go back.

After ten days in Andryushkino, not yet having finished my work, out of fear to get stuck we decide to go back with an unscheduled flight. We are not allowed to stand, the tip-up seats cannot be reached, we must find ourselves a place to sit between big chunks of deep frozen meat and fish, the heating is not put on, and a little later we are frozen chunks ourselves. The "hotel" in Chersky is now heated even worse, I am invited to stay with a Chukchee and a Tundra Yukagir woman who both have been nomads for a long time. I find some other good TY speakers and get an expert excursion in the ethnographic museum.

Back in Yakutsk (-40) I am warmly welcomed by Yuri Sheikin, ethnomusicologist and my host, who congratulates me with my fieldwork, he knows what it means, and I admit, it simply was altogether very heavy. After a little media circus I still will have some sessions with linguists, some culture, some pleasant evenings. At St Nicolas I will be back home. Stay healthy and happy!

© Cecilia Odé, Yakutsk, 28 November 2004