

## The Other Side of the Arctic

In 1993 I was a 20-year-old studying Russian at the University of Birmingham in England. A group of kids from St. Petersburg came on an exchange visit to my old school in Berkshire, and somehow the leader of the group, Elena Andreeva, got in touch with me and we met at my parents' house. Elena suggested that I could come to St. Petersburg that summer and teach English to the polar explorers she worked with at a company called INTAARI, based at the Arctic & Antarctic Institute. INTAARI organized expeditions to the Arctic and Antarctic for international teams of scientists on the icebreaker Akademik Fyodorov.

My college friend Amy and I both went to St. Petersburg and had very modest success teaching the polar explorers how to say "I am wearing a multicolored shirt" and translating texts for INTAARI about obscure forms of aquatic life in the Arctic. Without online translating tools, this was challenging. Nevertheless, we both acquired a fascination for Russia and for the Arctic. The charismatic head of the company, Alexander Chernyshov, described airlifts of supplies of vodka and tomato juice to the polar explorers who were sent to float around the North Pole for a year, and how one unlucky woman was eaten by a polar bear.

Alexander's second-in-command was his equally powerfully-built and humorous friend Alexei Turchin. Perhaps when you have spent long periods in remote places you acquire the belief that you can do anything and withstand anything. Amy and I hadn't met people like these before. There were several other scientists at INTAARI who made our trip memorable, as well as the other lively Russian characters we encountered at random social occasions. When we got back to England, we wrote a play about the experience. As soon as I graduated in 1995 I wanted to go to St. Petersburg again. I moved there without any plan. I worked for one very small English-language newspaper, but soon afterwards was hired by the main one, the St. Petersburg Press. I spent almost a year writing about everything that was happening in those unbelievably chaotic times in the Yeltsin era. Then I returned to England again, wrote a book about my times in Russia and started working as a freelance journalist in London. In 1999 I got a job with BBC Monitoring in Azerbaijan, in 2000 I edited an English-language in Beijing, and in 2001 I met my future husband on the internet and moved to Alaska to live with him. I had lost touch with Elena Andreeva, but in 2003 I became the international programs coordinator at UAA's American-Russian Center, which sadly lost all its funding subsequently and no longer exists. My colleague in the room next to me was Olga Catalana, who was from St. Petersburg. I mentioned that I knew someone called Elena in St. Petersburg. Of course it was a big joke, because Elena is an extremely common name in Russia. "She worked at the Arctic & Antarctic Institute, her last name was Andreeva," I said. "Oh, that's my best friend from school!" Olga said. It was an incredible coincidence. I got back in touch with Elena and we started writing to each other two or three times a year.

Occasionally Elena would ask me when I was coming to visit St. Petersburg, and I always said it was very expensive and I wouldn't be able to, as I usually had to spend all

my travel money going back to England, and it became even more impractical after I had a baby in 2008. But in 2012 I remembered that I was on the list of ARCUS visiting speakers and realized that Elena could invite me to give talks about the Arctic, which would be ideal in 2013, the 20th anniversary of my original visit.

At the last minute I almost canceled the trip because I was afraid that I wouldn't be able to get a Russian visa in time. In order to apply for a visa I needed an official invitation, which Elena was going to provide, but it was taking a long time to prepare. Then I found out that the Russian Consulate in Seattle didn't accept applications in the mail, only in person. I didn't have time and couldn't afford to go to Seattle. Fortunately another visiting speaker, Henry Huntington, was going to Sakha just before me, and he recommended a travel agent in Seattle who specialized in expediting the complicated application process and would go to the consulate for me.

The travel agent really turned out to be essential, because she noticed some small errors on my lengthy application form, which would have resulted in the consulate rejecting the application if they hadn't been changed before she submitted it. Once everything was fixed the process was relatively smooth and the visa arrived well before my departure date. The only other bureaucratic hurdle was that all Russian visas have to be registered, otherwise you can't leave the country! So I had to make two trips to another travel agency in a residential building in a St. Petersburg suburb to request that they register the visa and then pick up the registration document.

It was impressive that Elena had continued working for INTAARI over all those years, but no one else I had known was still there. Alexander Chernyshov had emigrated to Canada in 1996. Alexei Turchin had died suddenly in 2012. He had been a phenomenal force, organizing regular expeditions to the Antarctic from a base in Cape Town. That had turned out to be easier than getting Russian government permission to make expeditions to the Russian Arctic. The Russian Arctic is considered a closed border zone, so travel there is restricted. When I arrived in St. Petersburg, INTAARI was still undergoing major changes, trying to reorient itself and possibly start up new Arctic projects with a new boss. INTAARI employees were very interested in hearing about the Arctic in Alaska and potential for Russia-Alaska Arctic projects.

Everywhere I found people eager to hear about Alaska and the Arctic. I had read so much about the Russian government's hostility towards foreigners (the law requiring all international organizations to register as "foreign agents" and the law banning adoptions of Russian children by Americans, for example), that I was quite nervous before I arrived. But on a personal level most of the Russians I met were enthusiastic about the U.S. and very friendly. At the Arctic & Antarctic Institute I gave a talk for young scientists, showing them the range of Arctic research institutions with which they could collaborate in Alaska. They were quite surprised to hear that it was OK just to send an email to an American scientist and suggest exchanging information - they thought that they needed a formal introduction. Everywhere I went, I told people about the PFD, and their eyes lit up. It is sad to think that a very simple policy could transform people's lives and give them all the benefit of Russia's vast oil wealth, but something like that is unlikely to ever be implemented.

Giving talks at schools was very rewarding. I talked to a class of 8-year-olds, a class of 16-year-olds, and then at a huge hall full of 16-year-olds. They bombarded me with questions about Alaska. I had to remember that in Russian the Alaska Purchase is known as the Alaska Sale. The older students spoke excellent English. I am always somewhat unnerved when I meet young Russians whose spoken and written English is actually better than that of their American counterparts. The education system in Russia is quite thorough and rigorous, although I still get the impression that it emphasizes rote learning more than creative thinking.

I gave two talks at St. Petersburg State University, at the Journalism Faculty and at the Geography & Tourism Faculty. The one surprise was that the geography students hardly asked any questions. I don't know why not - perhaps older students are anxious to leave, while younger students have to be in class anyway, so they might as well participate? The most prestigious venue I spoke at was the Russian Geographical Society, with stained-glass windows and portraits of famous explorers above the staircase. A diverse group of members of the public attended, including the kind of old eccentric guy that you often get in Alaska - I wasn't quite sure what he was asking about, but I think he was referring to the HAARP project!

I also spoke at the American Councils for International Education and the American Corner in St. Petersburg. Both are venues for educating young Russians about life in the U.S. Again, the Arctic in Alaska was an unusual topic for them and they were fascinated. Everyone I met was interested in Alaska Native traditions. Many didn't know that Alaska Natives hunt whales, or even that indigenous people in Chukotka hunt whales. They didn't know about Alaska Native corporations. When I told some of the 8-year-old school kids that in the past Alaska Natives had been forbidden to speak their languages, one stood up and said, "But Native people need to know about their culture!"

One of the highlights of my talks was showing people letters that had been written by 7th-grade students from Point Hope about their life. Some of the children wrote them letters back in English, and hopefully this will be the beginning of an ongoing correspondence. Another amazing coincidence was that the first school I visited had just had an exchange visit to Anchorage with the Russian immersion schools here, Turnagain, Romig and West. I had no idea about that in advance, I went to the school because it was the one that Elena's granddaughter goes to. Other than that, I didn't hear of too many contacts between St. Petersburg and Alaska, and I hope that they will be expanded in future, because St. Petersburg is an important hub for Arctic research.

I also had some great individual meetings with polar explorers and employees at the Siberia Department of the Peter the Great Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography (Kunstkamera). Prof. Marvin Falk from UAF, who edits a series of books about Russian America, had asked me to meet the head of the Siberia Department, a young guy called Vladimir Davydov. I trekked over to the Kunstkamera one day in sub-freezing weather, crossing two bridges and then realizing I'd gone too far and had to go back over one of them, but by the time I got there it had just closed. Fortunately, without knowing I was

looking for him, Vladimir came to my talk at the Russian Geographical Society and introduced himself! He invited me to come to the Kunstkamera to listen to a seminar about adoption among the indigenous people of Buryatia. I mentioned inter-racial adoption in Alaska, and the anthropologists were quite surprised that it is OK here for non-Natives to adopt Native children.

Elena invited a polar explorer called Victor Serov to her apartment for lunch. He also leads adventure tours up Mt. McKinley and Kilimanjaro, among other destinations, but one of his biggest jobs is leading an annual one-week ski expedition to the South Pole for tourists who pay \$60,000 for the privilege, plus \$10,000 to fly first class from Moscow to Chile. He showed us a DVD about one of the expeditions. I had no idea that the U.S. has a huge building at the South Pole, with a post office so you can get letters mailed with a South Pole postmark. I thought the South Pole was more desolate than that! There's a sign that says, "Visitor Center and South Pole". Victor is also interested in bringing Russian tourists to Alaska. It's a hard sell, because if you live in Russia you often want to go on vacation to somewhere slightly warmer...

We also visited the Museum of the Arctic & Antarctic and its director, Victor Boyarsky. He is another strapping, tough, funny polar explorer. In fact he was just about to leave on his latest expedition to the North Pole. He gave me a copy of his book about Canada's Northwest Territories. He said that when he was there some girls came up to him and asked him if he knew what NWT stood for. He said, "Northwest Territories." They told him, "No, it's No Women Tonight!" Boyarsky's Antarctic suit was an exhibit in the museum, alongside a photograph of a surgeon operating on himself for appendicitis. The final person we met was yet another larger-than-life character, even if he was somewhat slight in physical height. Elena took me to the village of Solnechnoye on the Gulf of Finland, about an hour's drive from St. Petersburg. We went to the home of Vladimir Baranov, who in his youth had led numerous Soviet expeditions to the Arctic, heading teams of about 30 men. He greeted us by singing a children's song in Chinese. Then he led us on a 90-minute tour of his property, most of which he had built and decorated himself. An upstairs guest room had a parachute for a ceiling. A tall wigwam behind the house had a fire pit and Vladimir demonstrated how he played the drum at a New Year's Eve party. In his workshop he made beautiful wrought-iron railings. Only one room was heated, the last one, which was stuffed full of Arctic memorabilia. He had a cabinet full of videotapes from his expeditions and diaries with handwritten entries for every day in the Arctic, plus postcards and birthday cards from home, and photographs. An incredible archive that would take years to go through if anyone wants to write the history of Soviet Arctic exploration. Before we left, Vladimir sang us some folk songs and accompanied himself on the accordion.

I would like to thank ARCUS for giving me this fantastic opportunity and Elena Andreeva for being the perfect host, and I hope that the tour has achieved some lasting results. We may not know now, but one of those children young people may have been inspired by hearing about Alaska's Arctic and will do great things. We do know that we have made some friends.

Sarah Hurst