

NOTHING

a

CAN

monologue,

BEAT

work-in-progress



I'd like to be globalized. No age. No nationality. No native land. No... It'd be true...

A dormant or suppressed identity was awoken and a sense of place that had been denied for many years reappeared and made it possible for me to share my identity experience. It's not always easy to get a hold of one's material and metaphysical identities. But art might actually help. Only in adulthood, when relatives preserving traditions had already passed away, I could begin to articulate my sense of identity and belonging to other native cultures.

Look how much we have in common...

If you were me, would you lose your identities all the time, too?

Would your face always be in the shadow of a crisis? I can only talk you through...

We were all Soviet people ...

Soviet culture, Soviet life, Soviet history, Soviet power, Soviet press, Soviet professions, Soviet names...

When did they appear? The Soviet people were well developed intellectually, read a lot, went to the theater (not me), watched movies, took an active part in the national economy, worked hard, and were interested in power and the life of the state. A Soviet human being believed in the authorities and was ready to work for the state, develop itself physically and mentally, but it wasn't unique. The Soviet people didn't stand out of the masses and saw their strength in it. They came from the people, and they themselves were those people. And only sometimes the Soviet people felt something strange, something disturbing: emptiness, lack of resources, alienation from the world, dullness, scarcity, lack of abundance, and freedom.

If you were me, would you lose your identities all the time, too?

Would your face always be in the shadow of a crisis?

My mother was fond of writing letters to newspapers and magazines. Sometimes they would be published. In the nineties, refugees from Tajikistan arrived at our barrack, where we lived after leaving Ukraine. After my mother had heard enough of their stories about the war, she wrote a letter about the friendship of peoples. Mom wrote that she was very worried about military conflicts breaking out here and there on the territory of the former USSR, forcing people to drop everything and run for their lives. Mom wrote that the friendship of peoples was a condition for victory over fascism, that it rallied society and opened up the prospects for global peace and a more humane policy. Mom wrote that all the efforts of our new state should be aimed at preserving what the USSR was so proud of, preserving the friendship of peoples. "The Soviet Union was founded on the solidarity between workers and the friendship of peoples," she reminded them. Mom wrote that she had made her own contribution: regular dinners to which she invited people of different nationalities. "The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat, the calf and the lion and the yearling together; and a little child will lead them," she quoted. At my mother's dinners, an Armenian sat with an Azerbaijani, a Tajik with a Kyrgyz, a Dagestani with a Chechen, a Ukrainian with a Russian, and she, a Chuvash, hosted everyone. Mom suggested no one should hold grudges, but instead be grateful that we exist and that we can sit together at the same table like this. The letter was published in a newspaper. Mom solemnly read it to me. "But that's not true," I replied. There was not a single dinner, there was no Armenian sitting next to an Azerbaijani, or a Tajik with a Kyrgyz, a Dagestani with a Chechen, a Ukrainian with a Russian. My classmate called me Chukchi at school, and a woman once called me a black-ass at a bus stop. "But they printed it!" Mom objected. It was our common utopia. The dream was that it's possible to create a new social international community of people – the Soviet people – speaking the same language, Russian, having the same culture, Soviet.

If you were me, would you lose your identities all the time, too? Would your face always be in the shadow of a crisis? How did I first find out about you? From fairy tales? Dreams? Films? Poems? This definitely happened in a world where I'd wish to live, when everything was falling apart around me. In a world where every character got what he or she wanted after passing the tests, where the good was rewarded, and the evil was defeated. On my way, I met you.

I'd tell you, oh woman in the North...

I'd tell you...

I'm six years old. We're playing catch-up, when one boy's running away from me and hiding behind his Mom. This woman's yelling at me, "Leave him alone, you black ass!" Suddenly everyone stops and falls silent. "Am I not a Soviet citizen?" I ask myself. And I hear the answer: "You're someone else. You'll be searching for the answer for the rest of your life." The children look at me, and together we realize that something irreparable has happened. I've learned that I'm not like them, and they've learned that I'm not like them. And we're not all Soviet, we're all different. I'm someone who can be rejected just because I look different. I don't have a name they're used to, we come from a different country, we're refugees, we're poor — we're not only different. We're Others.

If I could be you, oh woman in the North ...

Woman in the North prepares her skins before making something survivalist

Something traditional

She salts and dries the reindeer head and leg skins

She must then scrape and tan the skins

She uses an iron tool to soften and smooth them

She finally rubs fat as a preservative into the skins

She decorates everything with yarn and pewter thread

She knows the language of this abstract geometric patterns

She wears the horned headdress as a visible presence
like a proud reindeer with its head high

She's seated closest to the "kitchen," the matron's place

She rules and commands everything at home,
including the past and the future

She's surrounded by other women who carry strength and power

She knows what she's doing

She's learned it since she was a child and has chosen
the good part which won't be taken away from her

If I were you, I'd always put my bed under the night sky. But sorry...
The only way for me to look at the night sky was while sitting on the village
toilet with an open door and dreaming about what I'd do if I were you...
Would I be like you, a goddess? A witch? A huldra? A nymph? An enchantress?
A vittra? A fairy? A dryad? A siren? A fata? A Freja? Just a troll girl?
Who from time to time appeared among the naked tree branches and noticed
that birch branches and reindeer antlers are mysteriously alike? Would I travel
with a caravan of reindeers all over the North or, if I could be you,
would I visit the underworld every week, on Sundays? Would I have to endure
the whole week in the living world just dreaming about heaven?

I'd tell you, oh woman in the North...
I'd tell you...

If you were me, you would never see the landscape in which you grew up and lived. You would never feel the precise place. You would hang in space, not knowing what and whom to cling to, without imagining that you can hang without a care. If you were me, you would live in the underworld and heaven, know only black and white, and never combine them.

What do we have in common?

What is it that we share?

Would I be indigenous or not? Or would I just move away from a gray city into a three-dimensional winter landscape to taste the particular flavor of the subarctic winter? Just to have an opportunity to feel the smell, the texture, and the sound of snow whenever I want?

Would I have been born to a family of reindeer herders? Wear traditional tunics, leggings, and trousers made of reindeer fur? Use shoe grass to keep my feet warm in boots made of skin? Would I have learned how to wrap long shoe bands around my leg? Wear the Skolt Sámi hat or just two long braids? Make my way through deep, bitingly cold snow? Throw a lasso and brand a calf's ear with a knife?

I am not someone who wears what my great-grandmother used to wear.

Only once did I dare to try on Tuhya and Hushpu.

Those were female headdresses of the Chuvash, my mother's ancestors.

Tuhya and Hushpu were as heavy as their fate.

They adorned them with Tsarist and then Soviet coins

Because they never had their own.

They reminded them that a woman is a warrior.

They hid women's greasy, tired hair.

They reflected the sun and looked good in black and white photos.

Much better than women's tired, flat faces.

Their thin lips tightly compressed.

Switch up with me, oh woman in the North. Let's switch up...

I know you're generous, although there's only whiteness around you...

I believe you're some kind of a goddess... A witch? A huldra? A nymph?

An enchantress? A vittra? A fairy? A dryad? A siren? A fata?

A Freja? Just a troll girl?

Or, if I were you, would I have been born to a family of wonderful parents
(or at least have cool grandparents) who would set me adrift to sail
my own boat? Who would teach me how to pick mushrooms, to jump correctly,
to feel safe enough both in the forest and in the sea? Maybe they would also
be creative and loving? And there wouldn't be a single little girl around?
Oh, that would be great! I could climb the pine trees myself, look down,
and not see a single little girl! My Mom wouldn't be afraid of snowstorms,
and Dad would make bouquets of mushrooms and fish for us!

Our parents were always busy.

They had young lives of their own.

They left us easily without question,

Wherever it was allowed.

Lucky if you had grannies.

Even luckier if they were better than the parents.

What would you choose at six if parents gave you a choice?
(The option of staying with them has been eliminated).

1. Loneliness
2. Kindergarten
3. Grannies
4. Forest
5. Boarding school
6. Death

You're seven years old and you live in a boarding school. Your father's in jail. Your mother has two more children. And in the boarding school you can live, study, and eat well. But you can't. You can't digest dairy products, though no one seems to care. You're constantly sent to the dysentery ward. You get infected and you feel worse. Being 150 centimeters tall, you weigh only 27 kilos. They still make you drink milk and kefir. You have no one to complain to about it, you just discreetly pour out anything that's killing you. It saves your life. You can even fight. Your classmates don't like that you, Sámi children, speak Sámi among yourselves, and they don't understand you. You fight till it bleeds. And you run away from the boarding school. Like many Sámi children. But not back home. There's endless drinking. And at home they refer to you as a "boarding school girl." You wear a uniform, you're bald because you have lice, you're standing in a lineup with other children, all crying out: "Hands off Vietnam!" Or something about a nuclear war. Every night, everyone sings the "Internationale" and the words "Arise ye workers from your slumbers, Arise ye prisoners of want..." And you remember all the tales about rauks. They're the living dead that scared us. And in response to these words, you imagine terrible rauks rattling with chains, and you don't breathe. Rauk is looking for those who breathe. You're pulling the blanket over your legs and head, as if you were in a coffin, evenly. It's very scary. But you believe that you're living well. The power of suggestion is strong. Sometimes you kiss the foot of the Lenin monument.

Switch up with me, oh woman in the North. Let's switch up...

I know you're generous although there is only whiteness around you...

I believe you're some kind of a goddess... A witch? A hulder? A nymph?

An enchantress? A vittra? A fairy? A dryad? A siren? A fata? A Freja?

Just a troll girl?

If you could be me, woman in the North, you would fight to the death with children for speaking your native language. As a girl, you would have to learn to sew aprons and use a lathe. You would go bald because you would have lice all the time. You would wash dishes for everyone, darn smelly socks for boys. Because if you could be me, you would live in a boarding school, and only there. Any Soviet Sámi girl would tell you that.

But I'm no slouch either, oh woman in the North. I'm strong, too. I was able to survive even when they left me in the forest when I was just eleven. I learned to shoot there and eat only salted fish. I learned not to be afraid of the song "Arise ye workers from your slumbers...", I learned to kiss the foot of the Lenin monument. After all, he's just one of our gods. We have a lot of them. Here, in the USSR. Here, in the North. Please come, take any of them.

I learned how to scrape leather, embroider shamshura, and dye skin with moss, wear the hair of older women with special strings, and sing in a certain state of mind. I fulfilled all the commandments: one must work, one must live decently, one must not be slovenly, dating is very bad. I was able to do that.

I'd tell you, oh woman in the North... I'd tell you...
If you were me, you would kiss Lenin's pedestal for
he was one of the gods that surrounded us in the forest
and the sea. If I were you, I would write a letter to the King,
asking him to build a bridge to my island.

I'm nine years old. My childhood house is on a little island in the middle
of the lake. When you're a girl, you have to go to school. And off I went...
by boat. Because we don't have any bridges. Neither does Öresund,
nor Ölandsbron, nor Högakustenbron, nor Östra Bron, nor even Hallarnas
Stenvalvsbro Över Suseán... I couldn't see any bridges around there.
All right, I'm good with boats. But then, in autumn, everything
became covered in ice. Then it was different. Many times I went
through the ice to get to school. And I was nine years old when
I realized that I needed to write to the Swedish crown prince.
So, I penned him a letter:

"Hello. I'm a Sámi girl. I'm nine years old. And I live on an island
and have to go to school. I have a problem. I really need a bridge."

And they built a bridge for me.

Switch up with me, woman in the North. Let's switch up...
You have the drum to guide you. You have someone who can build you
a bridge over ashes. I only have lines on my hand which confuse me
all the time. These lines say to me, "You're tired of the traumas.
You have as many as three."

First, I don't have a language

What I remember in Chuvash :

MOM
COME HERE
EAT SOUP
I LOVE YOU
GRANDMOTHER
NO
SONGS
WELL
BIG
PIG
SMALL
PIGLET
FOOL
CAT
CUNT
BLOODY CAT!
SHUT UP!
GOD

ANNE
KIL' KUNDAN
SCHI YASHKA
EPSANA YURADAP
KUKAMAJ
SCHUK
YURRISEM
LAJAH
PIZIKE
SISNA
PICHIKE
SISNA ZURI
UHMAKH
KUZHAK
KAPSHA
KAPSHA KUZHAKI!
SHEPERT HA!
TURA

ONE.

NO LANGUAGE, NO SONG

My grandmother and her sister, having traveled around Moscow for the first time and marveled at its glow, its lights, the electricity scattered here and there, said they now understood what their pensions were spent on. For Moscow to be beautiful.

They sang their last song in Chuvash, and I didn't understand a word. At the end they cried.

"Why are they crying?" I asked nonchalantly.

"Don't you understand?" Mom wondered. "Don't you understand that they're saying goodbye?"

Now I understand that they also cried about the fact that there was no one to pick up their song. There is no grandson or granddaughter who can remember their song and pass it on. As a testament, as a blessing, as something to help you survive and even live well in this country that is too big, in this place where millions of people disappear underground without a trace, where you are forced to watch indifferently as your whole life is thrown into the furnace of ideas. Sometimes beautiful ideas, sometimes ugly ones. They sang the last song, the very last of the last. It's now buried with them in the Chuvash cemetery. Soon their names will be erased from the crosses and slabs. And someone kind, some village weirdo, will sign with a marker: "Alexandra, servant of God," "Taisia, servant of God." They knew this would happen. They forgave us beforehand. They gave their lives away so that we could live better than they did, so that we would forget them, and not remember them. So that I would speak to you in this comfortable place and you would listen. So that we would have time to take our minds off the burdens of life. They knew this would happen and they let us go. So we could be happy. Without them.

TWO.

NO LANGUAGE, NO LAND

That's the way it's always been that the land shaped the language. And by knowing the language, we get to know the land better. Another language describes the land differently, and you lose the ability to label the snow and ice in more than a hundred words as it's in the Sámi language. There're about fifty synonyms for the word "beautiful" in the Chuvash language. If you don't know them, you can't fully describe the beauty of this land. I don't know them.

My grandmother's house is empty now. The fence around it, the barns, the well, they're all sagging and blackened as if by grief. The house's still standing. There's a spindle lying around somewhere, and a fly-infested reproduction of a classic image of Christ hangs in the corner. The only closet still holds her dresses and aprons. She sewed them along the lines of her ancestors' costumes, but with Soviet fabrics, with giraffes from the Karakum Desert of Turkmenistan. There were also chocolates called "Karakum," but my grandmother didn't eat such things. She had been starving as a child after the dekulakization and collectivization, so she liked very simple food. Where is Chuvashia and where are the Karakums? And here they turned out to be connected. With my grandmother's dress. We tried to connect the unconnected, to tie all the lines into one, and we broke down. I can go there and document the disappearance, understand, and capture what this disappearance means. It means...

What disappears when the place disappears? If there's no land, there's no important part of you. No rootedness, no sense of ground beneath your feet, no stability. You're like a tumbleweed in the Karakum Desert on my grandmother's dress trying to cling to something, but the wind of history carries you on and on.

THREE.

NO LANGUAGE, NO ME

Switch up with me, woman in the North. Let's switch up... You have the drum to guide you; I only have lines on my hand which confuse me all the time. These lines say to me, "You're tired of the traumas. You have as many as three." Third, I find myself neither on earth nor in heaven, east, west, or south, but now somehow I have one foot here, in the North, and the other one somewhere in the world where the women of my kind knew who they were, who they came from, and who they were going to become.

I'd like to start talking about hope.

I'm writing and speaking in a language that's not my mother tongue, a language that's not your mother tongue either. I believe that there are other languages that you and I will understand and will share. My grandmother didn't know Russian because she couldn't go to school. Out of two children, a brother and a sister, they were only able to educate one. I didn't know her language, but we had our own, which you, woman in the North, will understand. The language of piercing rain and cold sun, the language of sweet meat and slightly rotting dung, the language of berries exploding in our mouths and hot scalding fat, the language of blistered fingers, and the language of the oppressed land... And if not, we'll understand each other's dumbness. We'll understand without words why we have no language, no songs, no land, why there's none of us as heiresses of our ancestors.

What do we have in common?

What is it that we share?

Maybe we both exist side by side with the spiritual and the physical?
The physical, you're just a human being of flesh and blood,
freezing, suffering, smearing grease on your chapped hands,
you're with a red nose and watery eyes.

I heard you talking to a moose...

It was like I talked to my cow.

You acted like a young female for him...

I just whispered my secrets to her. Her name was Majka.

And he believed and didn't believe...

And I believed she answered me.

He looked incredulous because it was the beginning of winter,

and the female moose's not so stupid

as to stand in the middle of a crowd of people

and call him in the thick of it...

But cows become stupid in spring. Throwing their hooves up in the air, they run along the asphalt road towards an adventure. They stop responding to their nicknames because they have heard the call of the groom. God calls them. "Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away; for now, the winter is past, the rain is over and gone. The flowers appear on the earth; the time of singing has come," and they run, leaving the owners behind. Nothing can beat spring.

What do we have in common?

What is it that we share?

Memories, smells, sounds, touches, tastes, contact with living beings, their death, their taste, their bodies, our bodies. I never knew what a moose smelled like. But I remember how my cow smelled. She emitted the delicate scent of lush grass and fragrant hay, hot milk and fresh manure. Her eyes were large, the color of purple wine. She had small horns and funny bangs. I never knew what a moose smelled like. I've only tasted his meat. It smelled of something subtly sweet. And it tasted like something I can't describe because it had never been part of my memory. But I remember the taste of my cow. It contained my tears and despair about not being able to save my beloved being. Don't we all have similar stories? Doesn't grief unite us?

What do we have in common?

What is it that we share?

If I were you, would I visit the underworld every week, on Sundays? Would I have met my mother, grandmother, great-grandmother, great-great-grandmother, and so on down to the very first woman from whom I was descended? All of them lived to be me, all of them passed their knowledge down the chain so that the connection would not be lost, so that every little girl would be safe, so that she would know who she was, where she came from, and where she was going to.

How I wish I could say to them, "Here I am. I am your daughters' daughter. I'm okay. I have food. I'm not cold, I'm warm. And I haven't even heard the word "war." I'm safe. No one will come to my house to kill me."

I know, woman in the North, you're generous although there's only whiteness around you. You led me through, you brought me to my women; they're alive as long as I live. Now I know them, and they know me.

I'm here to live through ...

You tell me, "There's nothing wrong with you. Just breathe. Breathe while there's a war going on around you. Breathe when it's over. Breathe even if it's endless. We're out there waiting for you. We're like goddesses, witches, huldras, nymphs, enchantresses, vittras, fairies, dryads, sirens, fatas, Frejas, just troll girls. Look, how much we have in common... Nothing can beat spring."

DIALOGUE BETWEEN ILMIRA AND OLGA

*Comments for a performance,
lecture, play, screenplay*



OLGA: Ilmira, you've crafted the text "Nothing can beat" as part of the "Women in the North" project, inspired by the archive of Evgenia Yakovlevna Patsia, a researcher of the North, and trips to the Kola Peninsula and northern Sweden...

ILMIRA: My first time in the North was in Tromsø, Norway, in 2015.
This was when I got charmed by its unique nature and culture.

OLGA: Your text accompanies my archival installation devoted to Patsia's archive at "The Observatory: Art and Life in Critical Zones" in Södertälje Konsthall exhibition, and I want this interview to clarify our motivations.

Why have we, an artist and a curator, become interested in Eugenia Yakovlevna Patsia's archive, part of which is dedicated to her Sámi friends and the Kola North in general?
Why have we taken on this task: to talk about their experience?

ILMIRA: It's always interesting to give an honest answer to myself and others about motivation. For me, a personal story played an important role, of course. I'm a daughter of people with different ethnicities, my parents belonged to two nations within the USSR. My stepfather's Ukrainian, so I spent the first six years of my life there, in Ukraine, which was also a part of the USSR. I know nothing at all about my birth father's people, but Chuvashia, my mother's homeland, has always held a place in my history. Not as my homeland, although I was born there, but as a source of unclear identity. I don't speak the language and know almost no culture, but I did know the people, my grandparents, other relatives, other Chuvashians, who seemed to have always been ashamed of belonging to their people. And this trauma of theirs took me a long time to comprehend.

As far as I know, this situation concerned not only the Chuvash, but any peoples, large and small alike, living on the territory of the USSR. Russian was the official language of the USSR and functioned as a means of interethnic communication. While there was no prohibition on the use of national languages by law, in practice, only knowing Russian could get you an education and a job. And when we were traveling in northern Sweden, I found many similar narratives in the stories of the Sámi and representatives of other indigenous peoples (we met another family of Shorians in Giron Sámi Teáhter, we were introduced by its head and director Ása Simma), including the Chuvash. For example, there's the narrative of not knowing one's native language and what it leads to; the narrative of parents' prohibition to learn and use the language; the narrative of being embarrassed by one's language or accent; the narrative of denying one's nationality. These are not ubiquitous, but still recurrent stories in seemingly different cultures. There's also the narrative of state authorities banning the use of one's language or manifestations of one's own culture. There's the narrative of oppression and displacement of indigenous people from their land. There's the narrative of returning to one's native language and culture as an adult and the narrative of fighting for the rights of one's people.

I was surprised by this similarity, and I think it allowed me to connect my non-ethnic experience, the experience of a Soviet child, and further, of someone who grew up in Russian culture, the former Soviet Union, disconnected from their native ethnicities, to the experiences of Sámi colleagues and acquaintances. I don't have any extensive experience of living in either Chuvash or Sámi cultures, how could I? So I envisioned a child traveling between different images and memories.

OLGA: And importantly, why did you need to do this?

ILMIRA: Maybe to transform the traumatic experience of grappling with national identity into an integrated experience, connecting not only my different identities, but also interactions with people from different nations. In the realm of contemporary art, we've long engaged in discussions about developing a global, universal language of art that could be understood anywhere in the world. In the pursuit of developing this language, we lost a lot of personal, unique stories.

OLGA: The archive holds a wide range of texts, journalism, research, and fairy tales, but what unites them is the desire to preserve vanishing histories, often referred to as oral history. Personally, I like that women unite to keep these texts alive.

When we traveled to the Kola North and Sweden, we talked a lot about post-Soviet childhood. In the text you're working on right now, drawing inspiration from the archive materials, you bring out a little girl as the protagonist. I also refer to my childhood memories as the Kola North being my homeland. Why does the figure of a child emerge?

ILMIRA: A child has an opportunity to fantasize and freely imagine herself in someone's place. In my text, the girl links together seemingly completely unrelated stories: the Chuvash territory and its Soviet Chuvash citizens, the Kola Peninsula and the Soviet Sámi, the north of Sweden and the Sámi living there. There're literary reminiscences, imitations of school tests, and what I dare to call poetry. I hope I've managed to capture something elusive: the experience of coming to terms with one's identity as a representative of culture different from the one your parents or the state authorities wanted you to belong to; the experience of a child growing up very close to nature and its inhabitants, naturally embracing traditions or their remnants. The child's gaze is one of the few ways to connect the unconnected. It's unusual, naive, it gives distance and allows us to look at the history of indigenous peoples in different parts of the Earth with fresh, reconciling eyes.

Why is reconciliation important to me? Because for me, the issue of national identity is way too subtle, too complex, too fragile, too traumatic. I know how to talk about it as an activist, but I also want to learn how to speak softly, figuratively. Can this experience also be comprehended as a shared experience?

That's when the kaleidoscope image comes into play. A child gazes into it and sees a beautiful pattern, an ornament. The child doesn't know that if she breaks the toy, she'll be left with a bunch of ugly glass bits. The text is a kind of a kaleidoscope, too. A rhythmic pattern of fragments and impressions, also inspired by the archive of Evgenia Yakovlevna Patsia and Sámi tales.

My favorite toy, a kaleidoscope, was broken,

and inside

I found a few ugly pebbles and a mirror.

Only...

They no longer create mesmerizing designs.

No ornaments. Nothing glossy.

We're these pebbles that have fallen out

of the pattern of tightly woven destinies.

No matter who broke us and sowed us,

We don't know why he decided to do this.

We fell upon a rock and among thorns

and never on good ground.

Our essence is inexpensive plastic.

And once we were a part of the endless lace.

We can't bear fruit because we're

in a disaster.

OLGA: It's interesting that we approach the figure of this girl from different angles. I read your texts as a longing, an attraction to an impossible commonality. This girl's deprived of biography, she's not a solidly made character, she's deprived of corporeality. She's a hologram, appearing here and there. In fact, it's not even a child in the sense that we all know, that in different conceptions of childhood we have different images of children. Here, I felt an attempt to enchant this figure and pass it all the qualities that give it the ease to tell all these unrelated stories.

ILMIRA: I remember that your childhood experience also played a role in addressing this archive and your northern experience in general.



OLGA:

In my case, on the contrary, it was an attempt to unravel this figure and this experience because my childhood in the North had already turned into some kind of storytelling and I wanted to reassemble it, to understand what really happened there. When I started to delve into other stories to refer to my own, I realized that, unquestionably, this story is about the militarization of the North, its colonization, at least of the Kola Peninsula, and my specific position. After all, I'm a child of the colonists. I have nowhere to return to. I wish I could imagine such a thing, but I have no language except my own. This inability to return forces you to look for some common grounds beyond language. Being a stranger everywhere, you can look for what makes people close. And that's something that we share. I think; we both have this need.

For me such a figure, a guide, became not a girl but one might say, a grandmother, *babushka*, Yevgenia Yakovlevna. In her, I saw a person who was able to blend in a completely alien environment. Fairy tales became conduits for this interaction. If you could connect to the fairy tale and see the values it conveyed, you could share them and become a part of that community. The text seemed to be gathering people.



The North is a perfect location for...

(Please complete this sentence)

...for territory expansion

...for colonialism

...for totalitarian occupation

...for brutal slaughter

...for nation-building

...for expansion of hydroelectric power plants

...for mining

...for mining of digital cryptocurrency

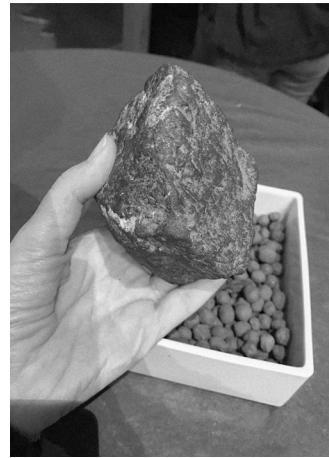
...for cheap renewable electric power

...for aggressive commercial logging

...for military buildings

...for new trade routes

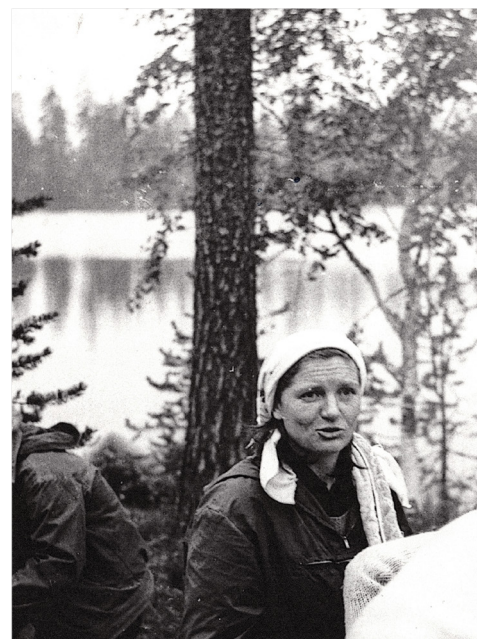
...for a new Silk Road



ILMIRA: Eugenia Yakovlevna dedicated her life to the North, although she was a newcomer with a different ethnicity. If she, not being originally from there, fell in love with the North, and became, one could say, its ambassador and researcher, does it mean that by getting acquainted with the stories she collected, her archive, we'll come closer to the understanding of the place that she assembled?

OLGA: Are we discussing the role of the researcher and how we can work with her materials? This question, for me, is twofold. There's a certain community, and whether you belong to it or not, we can't tap into that. But there's another level, generational. I really liked what Anna Afanasyeva from Norway, a Kola Sámi, wrote about the resettlement of this group. That yes, she has the right to talk about it all because she knows the language and is within the community, but at the same time she can't fully connect to it because it's not her time, she hasn't personally experienced it. We're talking about a very specific time, too, the tipping point of the late 1980s and early 1990s, when we were still young and couldn't actively participate in society. And the women Patsia collected an archive about, including herself, could. And they, too, shaped the atmosphere, the country, the territory in that we later lived. We owe them for the work they carried out. At first, I thought I was driven by a simple interest in the archive, "What was it like?" But now I realize that this interest is also practical, "How did they do it?" Especially now, as we witness the transformation of Russian society. In the 1990s, new values were taking shape, and it seems like now they are being completely abandoned. Both times are difficult.

At the same time, the collapse of the Soviet Union and the first time after it was the time of closest contact. Cross-border contact. So this moment in history is important for us as it marked the time when numerous connections were formed, when people started to travel more and compare their experiences. Something that's being taken away from us now. And our journey through the Kola North and northern Sweden in 2022, in that sense, is a rare privilege nowadays. We could afford it, we had an opportunity to connect with different people. It's a luxury.



ILMIRA: You were friends with Yevgeniya Yakovlevna, weren't you? And in turn, she was friends with all her informants ("informants" is not the right word, nevertheless, they helped her to collect materials).

OLGA: Of course, friendship here is important as a work method. As a part of everyday life. All the possibilities and tools that Eugenia Yakovlevna used were simple, clear, yet at that time, they hadn't been conceptualized. Now we're conceptualizing the practice of hospitality as significant for contemporary art. Eugenia Yakovlevna had practiced it before it became trendy. She had organized performative dinners and meetings, for example. She and I talked a lot about our professional overlaps. I was talking about the field of contemporary art, while Evgenia Yakovlevna was talking about her thirty years of work in the museum. I playfully remarked to her once, "You're essentially a curator!" She laughed because all her life she didn't know what to call herself. She used the words "journalist," "researcher," "museum worker." But she didn't have one word that could summarize all her work. I remember telling her that she had been a curator before the word became commonplace in Russia. Eugenia Yakovlevna maintained prolonged contact with her informants. All those people became her co-authors. As a professional journalist, she helped them to write. In fact, a network of authors formed around her, to collect information, describe it and comment on it. That's also a great way to connect: not only can you collect and share information yourself, but you can also stimulate its production. Eugenia Yakovlevna encouraged everyone to work independently, to collaborate. She realized that her resource to be visible was greater, and she was aware of the responsibility it entailed. Throughout her interactions with the informants, she found out about their strengths and interests, and everyone did what resonated with their values. Ludmila Vatonena recalls that Eugenia Yakovlevna encouraged her to write, but Vatonena lacked confidence in her Russian language skills and refused to contribute stories. Instead, she excelled in writing articles based on statistics and engaging in journalistic investigations.

What did immersing myself in Evgeniya Yakovlevna's method give me? It allowed me to articulate my role without trying to appropriate anything. I just realized that I had the right to be with those people and their stories because I was now a part of the network that she had created. I'm also connected to it, and it's been very empowering. Moreover, this network's intergenerational because the archive unites everyone: both the living and the departed.

Eugenia Yakovlevna shared with me that she had a lot of stories that she simply didn't have time to develop. Besides, her eyesight was deteriorating rapidly. She didn't need helpers or assistants but rather companions and associates who could pick up on what she was doing and see it through to completion. She realized she might not be able to keep up with that. So we started reviewing her materials on topics that she found particularly interesting, and that's how she introduced me to her Sámi friends, those who were still alive. We didn't initiate meetings with new people, we tried to finalize and clarify those points that remained unexpressed in the old interviews that Evgeniya Yakovlevna had conducted back in the 1990s and 2000s. Her friends were passing away too quickly...

ILMIRA: Now we can return to the interest and attention we direct towards this passing generation. My deceased Chuvash grandmother didn't know Russian, only a few words. She simply had nothing to go to school in as it was several kilometers away, and my grandmother's family was considered kulaks and beggars. They decided to send her brother to school. And I, in turn, didn't know Chuvash because my family didn't see the value in preserving their native language. As a result, my grandmother couldn't tell me her stories. We communicated with gestures and a mixture of words from our two languages. And now in every "grandmother" I see such a greeting from mine: perhaps their stories are similar in some way.



OLGA: Of course! This is a very important moment. Asking those women questions as you can't ask your own women anymore. It's an entrance into some kind of a collective network that stores information about everyone. A lot of that information will reach your grandmother or my grandmother through some next iteration. We can learn a lot about the women of our own kind through other women. It's not always possible to keep it on an individual level. My grandmother died very young. I've questioned her about many things, but I've got a similar feeling that we didn't agree. All of these are of course "fragile histories," oral histories, microhistories; working with elusive histories, often unrecorded, as if they weren't valuable.

ILMIRA: But how much they can give! I crafted my text as a fairy tale where a confused (literally lost) female protagonist encounters a magical helper. However, in reality, there's an entire chorus of voices. They're the guides from the past and the present, supporting and blessing. And as long as their voices are alive, we know where to go.

I'm a black polar fox trapped in a post-Soviet animal house,
knowing for sure that sooner or later she'll be skinned.
And that's why I'm so interested in
foreign journalists, insistently passing through the ranks of our cells.
They're the ones documenting our last days.
It's in their videos my muzzle will be seen somewhere —
even if it's no different from the others.
But I know that I won't just lay as a collar on someone's white coat.
I know that somewhere on the screen I'm still funny, cute, and even alive.
Even though I'm in a cage.

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