THEY LIVED TO TELL THE TALE

True Stories of Modern Adventure from the Legendary Explorers Club

Edited and with an Introduction by Jan Jarboe Russell

Chapter 20

Siberian Expedition

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"Mike!" Johan whispered anxiously, "Look out!"

As I turned around I saw a big brown bear standing on the beach only twenty meters away, between us and our canoe, intensely sniffing and staring at us. It was one of the most beautiful bears I'd ever seen. Its fur was radiant in the sun, its front arms were gray from age, and it seemed startled by our presence. At that moment I had no idea whether it was the same bear I had shot at from the canoe ten minutes earlier or whether it was another one. The first bear had fallen over, having been hit at least three times in the area below its left shoulder, and before I had time to reload, the wounded bear slowly crawled into the thick taiga. This one, however, took a step forward, stopped again, and stood up on its hind legs, sniffing even more eagerly.

I took a quick look at my young partner, Johan, only twenty-one years old and on his first expedition, and I suddenly realized that he was unarmed. The Russian authorities had allowed us to bring only one rifle, and at that moment I remembered the words of my wife, Titti, before setting out on the expedition. "Don't ever forget that you have the same responsibility as any parent regarding Johan," she warned. "It is better you die if things come to that."

I handed Johan the rifle and took a step down from the steep bank and out of the thick forest. "Maybe you should have a go," I said calmly. My appearance startled the bear initially, but suddenly the giant charged up the steep slope, turned around, and came at us with determination.

"Whatever you do, don't miss," I told Johan quietly as he raised the rifle.

The bear suddenly stopped ten meters away from us and stood up on its hind legs again. Johan shot the bear in the stomach; the giant fell backward and rolled down the bank, straight into the fast current of the river. Stunned, we watched the bear being swept away. We had killed for nothing and I felt both miserable and painfully hungry. Our expedition down the Kolyma River, located in the far northeastern part of Siberia, was only one month old; it was the end of August and we were already on the verge of starvation.

"We better stay sharp and focused," I told Johan as he reloaded, "we still don't know if it's the same bear, or if there's another one out there. If it's the same one, it's dangerous."

It was useless advice. Johan was full of adrenaline. He trembled from excitement, concentration, and nervous tension. I grabbed an ax from the canoe, hoping to use it as some kind of a weapon if needed, and together we went cautiously into the dense taiga. We spent an hour doing a thorough examination of the area and concluded that it was the same bear and that its odd behavior had to do with it being badly injured from my shooting it from the canoe. (A Swedish authority on bears, after having heard measurements of its paws, estimated that it was a male bear weighing around four hundred to four hundred fifty kilograms.)

"No meat, no fur, and no food," Johan said downheartedly when we returned to the canoe, ready to continue down the river. "And we don't seem to catch enough fish. Maybe we're not good enough trappers?"

"Don't worry," I answered reassuringly, "if we keep working hard, sooner or later things will change."

But in reality I knew if we didn't get the local hunting and fishing gods on our side within a week, we would never make it to our final goal in Ambarchik Bay, ten months and thirty-five hundred kilometers of traveling farther north.

We had many aims for the Siberian expedition. One of the less important was to investigate whether our ability to hunt and fish would be sufficient enough to survive the wild Siberian taiga and tundra along the Kolyma

River. More important was to make a full record of this unknown part of our world. This was a vital task, since in the course of our extensive research we realized that not even the Russians or the Siberians themselves had a comprehensive picture of the area along the Kolyma River. The obstacles were the cold, the distance, the size, and the isolation. The area was untouched, remote, and unknown.

The main aim was to build a bridge between our cultures and widen the Western world's knowledge about Russian and Siberian ways. We wanted to study the Russian and Siberian temperament. We believed this could provide a perspective on the way of life of these people in the future. In particular, we wanted to ascertain how the area had been affected by the enormous changes in society that resulted from the collapse of the Soviet Union. And we knew 3.5 million people had lost their lives in Stalin's concentration camps—gulags—along the river. The documentation of the native peoples was another important issue: the Yakut, the Even, the Chukchi, and especially the Yukaghir, of whom only four hundred individuals had survived the Soviet era, despite living in one of the coldest areas on Earth.

We wanted to know if the native peoples along the Kolyma were genetically different from Western Europeans when it came to their ability to cope with this extreme cold. And, during our research, we became conscious that polar travel throughout its short history—a record full of frostbite and death—had been dominated by people who were being brought up and living in cities. We believed that people like ourselves, born, bred, and still living in the north Scandinavian outback, were more physically tolerant when it came to handling the cold and hardships of the polar areas.

To prepare, Johan and I used the old lumberjack tradition of putting on enormous amounts of extra weight in the shape of fat, before the arrival of winter. By the beginning of August when we first put the canoe down the river, we had put on twenty extra kilos each. However, it was all gone by the time we had the hunting incident with the bear, only after a month of paddling, because of the fact that we had been pushed to our limits physically and mentally since the first day we put the canoe down into the river.

from the damage it was taking. Suddenly, just as I was sure we had had it, we were on the other side.

"I have never been as scared as that in my twenty years of extreme exploration," I told Johan in relief.

"I love it!" Johan yelled happily, "I want more of this!"

If my rifle had been next to me at that moment, I would have shot him. Luckily, he didn't say anything more for the next two hours. We went through one series of rapids after another, and after five hours of avoiding turning over, we were too knackered to continue. We stopped at the first high ground we could find. It was a muddy opening in the taiga covered with clouds of mosquitoes. It took us two hours to carry our equipment a few hundred meters inland to avoid getting flooded.

Once we started pitching the tepee, we realized we wouldn't get any sleep that night. The level of the river was quickly rising. At 7:00 p.m., it got dark and we set our alarm clock for every fifteen minutes to remind us to check the level of the river. At 11:00 p.m. we knew that we would get flooded during the night, and we were well aware that paddling in the dark would kill us instantly. We just had to hang on somehow until dawn. Working in the dark, we packed the canoe, attacked by uncountable amounts of mosquitoes, gnats, and flies, and stood by the boat until water reached above our knees at 3:00 a.m. in the morning. Then we took our seats in the canoe, tied it to a sturdy tree, and waited. It was an uncomfortable wait because we were freezing cold from being constantly wet and soaked to the bone. As soon as dawn arrived, we took a deep breath, untied the rope and set off for another day of uncertainty.

We didn't get any sleep for ten days, and the lack of rest made it difficult to stay focused. We had many near accidents every day. Most difficult of all, however, was the lack of food. Even though we carried three hundred and fifty kilograms of equipment, only a small percentage was provisions, such as rice, pasta, cooking oil, wheat flower, salt, and sugar, thirty portions of dried frozen food, coffee, teabags, stock cubes, and oats. Our original plan was to fish and hunt not only to survive, but to collect enough

meat and fish to dry for the upcoming winter. The flooding, of course, made this impossible.

By the time we encountered the brown bear, after four weeks of troublesome and demanding paddling, it was pure survival instinct that made us shoot. We shot the bear in order to eat it. One of the aims of the expedition was to hunt and fish like the local people in order to understand their reality.We had pretty much run out of all supplies, except salt and pasta. The loss of the bear sharpened our instincts dramatically and made us more concentrated on the need to be better hunters in order to survive. This was indeed the reality of daily life.

A couple of days after losing the bear, nature finally sided with us. The flooding stopped and we caught fifteen kilograms of trout and indigenous fish in our net, and shot two massive hares and a pheasant. During the upcoming two months, September and October, we caught over one hundred and fifty kilograms of fish, and very few of them were caught with Western lures or flies. Every day, a couple of hours before darkness, we took turns pretending to be hunting dogs forcing giant Siberian hares out of their hiding. We established the area where they hid, and one of us took the role of a barking dog and went off into the dense taiga. The one with the rifle took position waiting eagerly for the dog to do its work. It was some of the most interesting hunting I've ever done. When the human dog barked once it meant a hare had been spotted. Two barks meant that it was coming straight for the spot, and three barks in a row meant that the hare should be in front of the shooter. We managed to hunt enough game and catch an adequate amount of fish not only to survive but also to put on additional body weight to face one of the coldest climates on Earth—the Kolyma winter.

"That's frostbite," Johan said, pointing to one of his fingers through his face mask in despair. "That means I've got it on every finger."

He was having another bout of diarrhea. It was the third time in an hour he had to squat down and pull his trousers off. And his third set of gloves. On every occasion he had experienced that burning feeling followed by numbness in one of his fingers, which marked the first stage of frostbite. I

could barely make him out in the eternal darkness of midwinter, and I shivered violently. The same way I had every day since we left the settlement of Zyryanka four weeks earlier, in the middle of November.

"I think we better move on," I whispered.

Then I exhaled, coughed, and heard that familiar tinkling sound that occurs when someone's breath turns into a shower of ice crystals, locally referred to as "the whispers of the stars." It was minus seventy degrees Fahrenheit and it was impossible to form a decent thought or even to daydream. Or feel any worries. By pure survival instinct, we knew we had to keep moving and never stop. Therefore, we continued with great effort in the darkness, pulling our three hundred thirty pounds each behind us.

Even though the river was covered with only a couple of inches of snow, it still felt like pulling the sledges over sand. It didn't help that we both were walking, not skiing, since our ski bindings had broken, as with most of the metal parts of our equipment, when the temperature dropped below minus fifty-eight degrees Fahrenheit. The heavy load made us sweat profusely the whole time, but we just couldn't stop and take a break. Every time we did, we seemed to pick up more frostbite on our fingers or cheeks. Consequently we kept moving in complete darkness. Hour after hour, we steadily put one foot in front of the other. The darkness didn't matter since our eyebrows were always iced up, making it hard to see anything. But, as long as we kept moving, at least it made us aware that we were still alive—until that dreadful moment it was time to get inside the tent.

After sixteen hours of skiing it only took us a few minutes to pitch the tent, but it took at least an hour to get the stove going. Some nights it didn't work at all. Poor-quality Russian petrol was the problem. It froze solid. As a result, we carried the petrol bottle under our armpit the last hour of the day to keep it warm. We always knew when it was usable, since the bottle would then leak. It still took an hour to get the stove going, as it was completely frozen and we had to pour petrol in a cup and light it to defrost the stove. We both had to keep busy during these attempts in order to keep dangerous apathy at bay. The cold still made us tremble, sometimes almost hysterically.

When the stove finally worked, we could momentarily form a thought, but unfortunately this relief just made us more aware of how cold it was.

Once inside the sleeping bag, we knew we had to cope with at least six hours of unrelenting pain. It took at least three hours to gain control over our bodies. During this time, we lay on our backs, bodies arched, trying to keep the worst shivering away, and rest as much as possible. We hardly slept at all. Sharing the sleeping bag with the face mask, satellite phone, torch, spare batteries, boots, stove, and gloves didn't help. It was absolutely silent outside. Sometimes we heard a lone howling wolf in the distance or the odd explosion when a tree detonated from the cold. We didn't thaw up completely this night either.

"It is time to get up," I said through my breathing hole in the sleeping bag. "Four days to go before we reach Srednekolymsk."

"What time is it?" Johan groaned.

My answer was simple: "I don't know. Does it matter? It's dark all the time anyway."

As quickly as I moved, cold snow fell into my face. It was pitch-black and it always took some time to find the torch. I'd slept on it most of the night. When I switched it on, still inside the sleeping bag, I noticed as usual that our breath had formed giant stalactites of snow hanging down from the tent roof. And when I heard Johan moving, I realized I had to try to get out of the sleeping bag. It felt almost impossible. My body was still stiff. Every muscle ached; my cheeks, nose, and hands burned. I felt no energy at all.

Johan was first out of the bag and immediately put his down jacket on, followed by his face mask, and then started the struggle to get his boots on. He was very weak after days of diarrhea, but still worked heroically hard and did everything purely by instinct. He handed me the stove. To work it I had to remove a layer of gloves and I had problems getting the lighter to work, even though I'd kept it in my underpants all night. My hands were too stiff. And the stove was frozen solid. Johan gave it a try with no luck.

"I think we have to give breakfast a miss today," I told Johan. "We forgot to take the petrol bottle and stove into the sleeping bag last night."

Immediately a violent current of the river capsized the canoe. "Johan!" I shouted in panic, "I am stuck under the canoe!"

Johan, with all his strength, managed to pull the canoe away from me. I went under the rapids and was quickly pulled away by the strong current. It tossed me around like a piece of paper. I would have drowned if I hadn't been lucky enough to end up on the sandbank, which we had tried to avoid.

"Are you OK?" Johan asked exhaustedly.

"Yes," I answered terrified, "but I am scared stiff every second we spend in the canoe. If the canoe turns over, we're dead."

"We better not turn over then," Johan said quietly, which made us laugh and relax for a moment.

We pulled the overloaded canoe up on the bank and took a short break to give us some time to sharpen our concentration. Enormous masses of water passed us on both sides. Rain was pouring down, it was the third day on our expedition, and our lives had immediately turned into a constant struggle for survival. A nasty typhoon had hit this unpopulated, untouched, and very wild mountainous area, and this reality made the water level of the river rise seven meters in a couple of days. We had expected a fairly calm river, with relatively easy paddling, since it was the beginning of autumn. Instead the typhoon turned it into a torrent of fast-moving logs, violent rapids, and unpredictable sandbanks that were hard to spot while we steered through high waves.

"Time to concentrate fully again," I told Johan as we pushed out the canoe from the sandbank straight into another rapid.

I was terrified every single second as I was sitting in the front of the canoe. Our survival depended a lot on the knowledge of my young comrade and his ability to steer through the rapids, avoiding getting run over by fast-moving logs or getting stuck on a log that had come to a halt. We didn't talk at all. That would have meant a dangerous loss of concentration. I just sat in the front and waited for Johan's screaming instructions when we hit a stretch of high waves: "Paddle harder!"

At that moment I paddled for my life. After a couple of hours of paddling we saw a cloud of water spray and heard a thunderous noise ahead of us and we realized that something even worse awaited us. Amazingly enough we spotted a stretch of calm water to our left and I yelled in a slight, panicky voice: "We have to get out of the canoe and check that stretch out now!"

"Look out!" Johan yelled back. "I will turn the canoe around and when I scream 'Paddle,' we need all your strength to make it!"

To my amazement he managed to turn the canoe in a nasty rapid and we ended up front to front with the current. We crossed the river, paddling like mad for what seemed like ages. Eventually we made it over to the other side of the river. We hadn't come across such calm water since we began paddling. For a short moment it felt as if we had entered a sanctuary of peace.

Then clouds of mosquitoes arrived and caused havoc. We tied the canoe to a tree and entered the taiga. It was our first contact with the wild Siberian taiga and it was a nasty surprise. We were true forest people, but we were used to the easy, cultivated Scandinavian taiga, where one can travel easily. Now we couldn't even move forward one single step.

"It'll get better once we've made it inside the forest," I told Johan reassuringly, "the same way it is in all jungles all over the world."

It didn't. The forest was almost impenetrable and it took us one hour to advance only one hundred meters. And it took the same time to return to the canoe. We never got to see what waited ahead of us. "We just have to give it a try and hope for the best," I said, "And if we keep our concentration, we'll get through."

We tried to traverse the river once again, since we figured we had a better choice of routes from that side. But once we made it to the middle, the current and the rapids were too strong. Whether we liked it or not, we ended up in the worst possible route through the rapids. Before I had a chance to yell out my feelings of terror, we went into a series of high waves. The waves just tossed us around, uncontrollably, and the canoe moaned

The only positive aspect about not being able to cook was that we didn't have to suffer condensation, which iced everything up badly. It took us just a few minutes to get all the equipment out of the tent, disassemble it, and pack everything together in the dark. Then came one of the coldest moments of the day, when it was time to take our down jackets off and start moving. It took at least three hours to feel relatively warm. During this time our face, nostrils, and eyes were covered by ice again, breathing was difficult, and we coughed continuously. To save batteries we traveled all day in the darkness. Three days later we reached the Yakut settlement of Srednekolymsk.

We spent January thawing out in Srednekolymsk among some of the nicest, most generous people on Earth. Temperatures were constantly below minus sixty degrees Fahrenheit. We put on a lot of weight needed for the remaining fifteen hundred kilometers to reach Ambarchik Bay before the end of April. We sampled the local delicacies like *stroganina*, frozen raw fish eaten like ice cream; *maxa*, frozen raw liver eaten the same way; cooked moose nostrils, stewed moose heart, fried liver from wild caribou, cooked moose muzzle with pasta, raw frozen horse testicles, and much more.

The local people gave us a healthy perspective on the extreme cold. Some of them had amputated fingers, arms, and legs. Almost all had scarred cheeks and had lost the tip of their nose. And, as they told us, it could have been worse. We could have been unfortunate prisoners in one of Stalin's gulags whose remains dotted the Kolyma. Many of the prisoners froze to death within two weeks.

Even though we encountered temperatures below minus fifty-five degrees Fahrenheit most of February, traveling during the end of the worst winter period turned out to be a holiday in comparison with the dark mid-winter travel. The darkness was an extreme challenge. We froze badly throughout the month, but at noon every day the temperatures rose to minus thirty degrees Fahrenheit and that was enough to thaw. We even stopped for short breaks without getting frostbite. We pulled the sledges from early morning until a couple of hours before darkness and then we pitched our tent and spent a couple of hours trying to get the stove working. Eventually

it did. Equipment continued to break in the cold, but we came across trappers almost every three or four days, and their log cabins gave us enough warmth to do decent repairs.

In March we had plenty of daylight, and temperatures rose to minus forty degrees Fahrenheit even in the night, and we experienced day temperatures up to zero degrees Fahrenheit, which seemed like heaven. We reached the tundra in April and traveled quickly over the sastrugi and made it to our goal in Ambarchik Bay at the end of April 2005.

Half a year has passed since we returned home to Sweden. It hasn't been easy returning. I miss Kolyma every day. Naturally, I don't miss the hardships, the suffering, or the extreme cold, but I continue to think about the people. In twenty-five years of exploration, the people of Kolyma were among the best I've ever encountered—generous, funny, intelligent, knowledgeable, open-minded, and as warm as their environment is cold.

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