

UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA at ASHEVILLE

ULAN BATOR TO VLADIVOSTOK ON THE TRANS-SIBERIAN RAILWAY

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by  
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## ***Introduction***

Travel is an innate part of the human experience. People yearn for discovery. "Being on the move" for many is enough, satisfaction at an irrational level. Travel enjoys kinship with religious experience. Be it the wandering of nomads; a child walking to school, leaving her neighborhood for the first time; or a globetrotter who has checked off the great tourist destinations, experiences like peering over the cliffs of Machu Picchu or crossing the Drake Strait from Cape Horn to Antarctica, travel educates. It matures us. It makes us more tolerant, yields new, deeper understanding of our own culture, and strengthens our curiosity. Travel enlightens.

In the world of railroading, the Trans-Siberian Express is number one, the granddaddy of them all. Yes, there are others. From its trademarked domed cars, the Trans-Canadian offers unparalleled views of the Rockies and the brilliant evergreen forests of British Columbia. The Blue Train slices through the veldt, the regal South African countryside, as it barrels down from Johannesburg to Cape Town. There is the run to Aguas Calientes, the railhead for Machu Picchu in Peru, the lost city of the Incas, 14,000 feet up, that Hiram Bingham of Yale "discovered" at the turn of the 20th century. A train of rarely more than five cars climbs out of Cuzco, following a zigzag pattern, to and fro, not unlike the slow pull of a roller coaster, traversing a 45° slope until it barges into the flat Valley of the Incas.

Also in Peru is the magnificent ride through the great alti-plano, the high plains plateau of South America, second only to the greater Tibetan Plateau in Central Asia, highest and largest on the planet. The alti-plano track runs north and south between Cuzco, the ancient Incan capital, and Puno, a university town on the shores of Lake Titicaca, self-

proclaimed for maximum appeal to visitors as the highest, biggest navigable lake in the world. On the eastern side of the tracks are the Andes, a pristine white blanket of snow one-half mile wide, outlining peak after jagged peak, a dazzling white complement to the pale blue, cloudless sky. The loose fit of each car's interlocking couple set in motion unpredictable jolts, clearing the table between seats, sending beverages, sandwiches and chips in aimless trajectories, charming for us city-slickers paying premium prices, all part of the "experience." The journey lasted 12 hours.

There is the Orient Express, originating at Victoria Station, London, traversing all of Europe to Istanbul, the ancient Byzantine capital of Constantinople. The trip takes three or four nights, depending on the exact itinerary. It is the height of luxury.

### ***The Trans-Siberian Railroad***

The Trans-Siberian Railroad (the TSRR) stands alone. It is the *sine qua non* of railroading, occupying the pinnacle of travel experiences, along with sightseeing in Antarctica. Spanning twice the width of the United States, the Trans-Sib covers seven time zones. Its rails cut through the world's largest forest, the Russian taigá, growing one-fifth of the planet's wood. Its route skirts Lake Baikal, the world's biggest, holding more fresh water than all five Great Lakes combined, as much as the Baltic Sea.<sup>1</sup> "One big train ride," said the travel writer, Eric Newby. "All the rest are peanuts."<sup>2</sup>

What does one do on the Trans-Sib? Eat, sleep, watch, walk to the dining car for a coffee, talk, and read. Get off along the way to sightsee. The majority are Russians on a mission, going from point A to point B in one fell swoop. Get back on. Repeat the cycle: eat,

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<sup>1</sup> Colin Thubron, *In Siberia* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers Inc., 1999), 157.

<sup>2</sup> Deborah Manley, ed., *The Trans-Siberian Railway: A Traveller's Anthology* (London: Century Hutchinson Ltd., 1988), 37.

sleep, watch, talk, read... A pedestrian experience, for sure, but one that bridges the gap between reality and expectation, in the simple act of just doing it.

People eat on the Trans-Sib not because they're hungry; rather, sharing food is the icebreaker that enables passengers to know one another, for in the end, talk dies out and there is no more, without eating. Passengers bring their favorite foods to enjoy and share. It is a repast without pretension, trappings of ceremony or ritual, let alone banquet. Russians seek a common denominator. They unwrap a link of 12 sausages, what we would call Polish kielbasas, from a swathe of clean and "perfumed" cheesecloth. They cut it up, put it on paper plates, lay out some tooth picks and declare, in typical, blunt Russian fashion, "Here. Eat." To me it was a command. To a Russian, it is a polite request, as if genteel southerner, extending plate in hand said, "Please, have one." The beverage of choice is tea. Every car on every train on the Trans-Sib has an attendant, a *provodniki*, ("pro-vahd-neekee") who performs many tasks, but has a duty to keep the samovar, also in every car, full of piping hot water. It is the one constant, the Holy of Holies, of the journey.

After tea comes beer, muscular Russian beer available at every stop of 15 minutes or more, invariably at larger stations where a supermarket conveniently sits across the street. There is vodka, of course. True to their stereotype, Russians take their vodka strong, straight and in one big gulp. Drunkenness, though, is bad form. Families, couples, children, *babushkas* (Russian grandmothers), Orthodox priests, anyone and everyone rides this train every day. Drinking yes, public intoxication no.

Guaranteed, in addition to tea, is another Russian staple, their wonderful dark bread with a brawny crust, thick robust flavor, and a fragrance of yeast and rising dough covered by a cotton dishcloth.

Siberia delivers its abundant supply of smoked fish, dark orange, succulent and savory, sold by vendors at each station, usually an older couple of Siberian peasant stock whose forebears were either exiled or left European Russia in the second half of the 19th century to escape serfdom, a.k.a. slavery, a condition never known in Russia's Wild East.



### ***Why Siberia?***

I have never questioned nor understood my insatiable need to plant myself far away, as if I was seeking a spot that anyone had yet to visit. The stranger, the more mysterious, the more remote the destination, the fewer visitors it received, made it more attractive.

India rushed my senses – sight, taste, smell, and hearing. Its crowded streets carried shouts of vendors and barking food hawkers and scents of diesel fuel, baked bread, ginger and garlic. Autos honked without provocation, all to a backdrop of the steady hum that accompanies thousands walking, some for no reason other than to wander, some going to their appointed spots. Children in filthy rags and dirty unkempt hair approached me with outstretched hands, palms up. Older kids in their mid-teens were maimed, missing a leg or an arm or hand or blind. The most skillful beggars were young women using infants as theatrical props, cradling them in their left arm, scrunching up the fingers of their right hands to form a semi-circle around the thumb and moving it in a wide arc, bending from the elbow, rotating the blunt point around their mouths, saying without talking, *I need food. Give me something so I can feed my baby.* And I did. In the countryside, ten or fifteen youngsters would surround me, all with the same outstretched hand, all murmuring the same mantra. I began each day by setting aside money. Usually I hired a car, making sure the driver knew that his duties included walking by my side to ward off the panhandlers.

After many trips, I accepted India's poverty, along with wonderful food and remarkable arts and crafts. I made acquaintances, began enduring friendships and took part in delightful conversations. Indians enjoy talking. They like banter; they like to chat; they like intellectual stimulation; they work to create friendship through conversing. I traveled regularly to India's three big cities, Delhi, Bombay and Calcutta, utterly different and the same, as New York, Chicago and LA.

I thought, okay, how about Kathmandu, capital of Nepal, surely that was off Philly's Mainline? And it was... and was not. It was a big crowded city, resting in the shadows of Annapurna, the world's tenth highest summit. One morning I hired a driver to take me out to see a Himalayan sunrise, a brilliant flash of burnt orange that blazed across 125 miles of snow-covered slopes. The massive ricochet lasted not a second; yet it was a moment that said God is alive, here and now. Nina Mazuchelli, an English woman who was the first European female to see Mt. Everest, said of her experience:

It was the dream of my childhood to see the nearest point of Heaven and Earth... As I stand in these vast solitudes, I do so with bent knee and bowed head, as becomes one who is in the felt presence of the Invisible.<sup>3</sup>

Suddenly a thin woman with stained buck teeth and droopy black eyes peering from a thin cotton scarf, a mandatory cover marking her requisite modesty, approached, hand extended toward my face, the familiar gesture for alms. Having come all this way for my epiphany, having seen the Face of Nature, one of power and harmony, one that confirmed my faith, having witnessed a picture now transformed into an indelible image, forever tattooed

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<sup>3</sup> Peter Bishop, *The Myth of Shangri-la :Tibet, Travel Writing, and the Western Creation of Sacred Landscape*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 97.

on my mind, I shooed the lady away. My meditation was self-centered, without compassion, too “meaningful,” forever a reminder of this *sightseeing excursion*, to pause for a few seconds to pull some loose change from my pocket. I had fallen into that crowd, a huge group, mostly first time visitors to the Sub-continent who receive beggars with resentment and hostility, as if their wretched poverty was contagious. I wish I could relive that moment. I returned several times to Kathmandu, always with money set aside for beggars. It was not far enough away, a view reinforced by the city's status as the last refuge for wandering, hopeless hippies of the 60s, of whom I saw plenty.

Burma, Kipling, Buddhism: it fits the bill; it satisfies my need to delve into the heart of Asia. Under U Ne Win, popularly known, though not at all popular, as Number One, the country sealed itself from the outside world, rarely granting entry visas. I was amongst the first wave of Western business people to visit, mostly bankers and travel agents. The regime turned inward, while its Southeast Asian neighbors did the opposite, benefitting from foreign investment, giving rise to unprecedented prosperity. Once through customs, difficult because most Burmese officials considered all foreigners wealthy and worthy candidates to shake down for an extra “entry fee,” I immediately felt at home. My host made me a member of his family and his circle of friends. I visited many times to negotiate loans and other credits with government officials who were terrified of making any decision, since the wrong one would easily land them in prison. We had lengthy conversations covering many topics, most having nothing to do with the transaction in question, all an attempt by my Burmese counterparts to delay, and to establish trust and friendship.

Toward the end of our first year of discussions, to call them “negotiations” elevated our conversation to the realm of comedy, I said, typically American, “Let's just do the deal.”

“I cannot. Look at my deputies. They will never decide anything. Nor will I. We are afraid of jail. All of us have barely escaped. It's a miracle,” said U Ko Ko Lay, head of the Burmese Central Bank, an accountant by training, a legend in the country for his ability to keep the regime afloat.

I said, “We can give credit to everyone who buys at your gem fair. We'll bring liquidity to your gem market, buckets of foreign exchange for your bank.”

“Okay. We will think about it,” which, in the Burmese way, meant yes, more or less. “We will refer the matter to the Cabinet. They will ask Number One to decide.”

Six months later, I got my contract. Burma became intimate. My friends lived there. I fell in love with the place.

It was the same for other destinations, all far enough away, as I saw them on the globe – Patagonia, the Skeleton Coast of Africa on the South Atlantic shore of Namibia, the great Savanna of East Africa, a reservoir of tourists during the wildebeest migration, the hills and tea plantations of Sri Lanka.

Siberia would be different. It was cold and alien. I knew they had summer, but knew it was fleeting. It was a land of endless tundra, no trees, only lichen sprouting up from defrosted Earth, frozen permanently from three feet down. I knew there were Gulags; but was equally sure I would never see them, having experienced nations' desire to hide their evil. I saw a wild place, peopled by indigenous tribes, cousins of the Sami of Arctic Scandinavia, living off reindeer herds, trotting nomadic paths. Toss in a few mines, some strange wildlife, towns and villages, one at each stop of the Trans-Sib, but nothing to write home about, and at last, I would be off the beaten path.

And Siberia is... far away. And it is... vast. Parts are as far off the beaten path as one can get and still be on earth. Parts are urban and refined and have the high culture of any world capital.

Siberia is big.

So the journey begins, the long-awaited Trans-Siberian Express, the greatest train ride in the world, one of global tourism's grand itineraries, a trip no traveler can miss and claim to be complete. I have been dreaming about this one since my early 20s (I am now 66), harboring doubts all the time that the Soviet Union would allow an independent traveler, one without special status to make the trip. The USSR failed. Russia established itself and I began dreaming in earnest!

I boarded the train today, May 31, 2013, at *Ulan Ude* (oo-lan oo-day), the Buddhist heart of Russia, heading west toward Moscow. A mute snuck on board. He dropped off a piece of chocolate tied to a printed note, in Russian, saying he was deaf and dumb. I ate the candy, remembering mutes working the subways when I first moved to New York in the late 60s. Amongst this man's chotskies, was a small golden turtle, the kind you see dangling from a keychain. This one looked like Testudo, the Diamondback terrapin cast in bronze in front of McKeldon Library on the campus of the University of Maryland, my alma mater. Perched on a plinth at the top of Maryland's mall, Testudo's raised head enjoyed the gentle rub of thousands of hands every school day, as passing students silently appealed for good luck. I bought the tiny rendition from the mute.

### ***Planning for the Trip***

Every year since 2005, I would declare to Joyce, my wife, "This is the year for the Trans-Siberian. This is the time," my voice rising in oratorical splendor. "We cannot wait

any longer." My declaration withered. Yet, I did want to make this trip without her: too far and too long to be away. We've shared more difficult itineraries – for example, driving on gravel roads of Patagonian Argentina (huge concentrations of marine life) and through the Namib Desert (the world's highest sand dunes) and Skeleton Coast (most dangerous for ships plying the African South Atlantic), both in Namibia, also on desolate gravel roads.

Every year I said, let's go; let's do the Trans-Sib. She said okay. Perhaps I should have booked the trip; but I always felt her reply was a matter of form, not substance, not sincere. It was not insincere. It was sincerely pro-forma.

## Ж

Heading west, well on my way to Irkutsk, I see wide turquoise blue lines running beneath the roofs and turquoise blue rectangles framing windows of traditional Siberian wooden houses. Small fishing villages dot the southern shore of Lake Baikal. They have cars, a sign of affluence. Judging Siberians' wealth by the appearance of their traditional, old, ramshackle wooden houses is a mistake. They do not put a lot of stock in gussying up their homes, paying no mind to the views of hundreds of thousands of riders. These folks have dough. They are slicing it high on the hog in an economy fueled by petrodollars.

Alex is sitting on the seat across from mine. He says people are still searching this part of Baikal for the Czar's gold. Legend has it that the general in charge surrendered trainloads of Imperial Gold to the Bolsheviks, some miles east of Lake Baikal. Alex said the general's side and the Bolsheviks, colluding, hid tons in the lake, yielding to the temptation to keep some for themselves. So, to this day people look for that gold, hoping to strike it rich, knowing – how could it be otherwise? – that the state owns all salvage rights; hoping, nonetheless, that they can discover history's biggest treasure.



I said to Joyce, "What I would like to do is go to Moscow to learn Russian. Spend a month or so there. Meet you. We take the train to Beijing."

"How long would that be?"

"About 19 days. We stop, you know; we stop for sightseeing along the way. The Golden Ring around Moscow, czarist era towns with beautiful monasteries and churches, supposed to be really worthwhile. We would spend maybe one night on the train. There is a long stretch in there. Okay perhaps two nights."

"Oh, really?"

"Yeah. Nobody takes the thing straight through. Even I don't want to do that!"



Lake Baikal reminds me of the Caribbean. Guidebooks say Baikal is so clear, what with visibility up to 40 meters, that swimmers get vertigo. They cannot can't tell up from down, diving, heading to the bottom when you think you're going to the top.

Baikal alternates between patches of flat glass and broad, course brush strokes from the breeze. It is cold. Though it is the last day of May, temperatures fall into the 40s, ideal for the Omul fish, a staple of the locals' diet, and an entrée in every restaurant. Women sell Omul smoked, hanging on a line by their tails, each longer than a foot.

Most everyone on the train wears a track suit or track pants and a T-shirt. Affordable, functional stuff, designed for comfort, a long ride, apparel with a sameness that reflects Russians' love of uniforms. One odd ball is in knee length cotton shorts, white ones decorated with green palm trees. He tops it off with a black, sleeveless undershirt, vaguely reminding me of the justice of the peace who answered our knock on the door the summer

my high school sweetheart and I graduated, an answer we hoped would end our search to get married on the right side of the law. This JP wore white shorts with palm trees and a ribbed white sleeveless T-shirt. Mr. Trans-Sib-Palm-Tree is young, mid-to-late 20s is my guess. Mr. JP Palm Tree had one foot in the grave, wispy white hair like Carl Sandberg, any other resemblance abruptly ending with the permanently stained crease that channeled years of seepage from tobacco juice dribbling out of the corner of his mouth. My fiancée and I left, convinced we could find a willing preacher that hot Saturday afternoon in August.

The fellow two compartments over wears black track pants and a dark purple cotton tee. He has a narrow face, wrinkled forehead, and an array of small warts running parallel to his long, bushy sideburns. A mysterious ring of black surrounds his dark brown pupils. His lips make a thin straight line that parallels his chin. His ears stand out 45° from his head. The guy's stomach is concave, his tee shirt draping in a straight line from his chest. His biceps rest by his side, elbows slightly cocked. I can't decide if the guy is Ichabod Crane or a hired assassin. If it's Crane, I expect all hell to break loose after dark. If it's the dirt bag whose role Ben Kingsley played in the movie, "*Transsiberian*", co-starring Woody Harrelson and Emily Mortimer, then all is toxic, paranoia prevails. My dream is over.

Lake Baikal rolls by. We've chugged along its south shore some 2 to 3 hours now. The mountains descend directly into the water, reminding me of the Western Cape of South Africa.

## Ж

"Or, we could meet up in Ulan Ude for the run to Beijing via Ulan Bator. Neither one of us has been to Mongolia." I was getting desperate.

"That's a possibility," she muttered.

“Yeah and why don't we spend the weekend in a yurt somewhere in the Gobi Desert, right? The railroad track runs right through the Gobi, doesn't it?” I was reading her thoughts. “I don't know. Maybe you could just meet me in Beijing I've got points on my AMEX Hilton card.” I waited.

That's it. Not this year. I am making the trip solo.

I called our Korean “daughter,” a beloved girl for whom we were host family when she attended the University of Georgia, where I taught Marketing. Anne Kim gave me the number of a Korean travel agent in Atlanta who buys tickets to Seoul from Delta in bulk and resells them on the cheap. I made my reservation for a May 25 departure.

### ***Seoul – the Trip's Beginning***

After spending two nights in the city, I took a taxi to Seoul Station to catch the train to Incheon International Airport, the world's best, named “Top Airport Service for Eight Consecutive Years” by the Airports Council International.<sup>4</sup>

My driver said he was a Vietnam vet. “Very bad.”

At Seoul Station, a porter asked to take my bag. I declined. We stared at each other. He was a short fellow in his 60s, with a kind face, barely five feet. He had fine black hair, remarkably free of any gray, except for a thin fringe circling the top of his head, highlighting his bald crown, a tonsure cut of a monk from the Middle Ages.

I said, “Heavy.”

He put the bag on a hand truck, black with two big tires on either side, making it float across the concrete. Taking separate paths to the station lobby, the porter and I rendezvoused

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<sup>4</sup> “Incheon Airport Named Top in Airport Service for Eight Consecutive Years,” (Incheon International Airport Corporation, Incheon, Korea), available from <http://www.airport.kr/eng/>, retrieved on October 4, 2013.

in the spotlessly clean cavern, as big as an airplane hangar, temporarily sedate, recovered from the morning rush hour's unbridled concentration of humanity.

"Coffee," I declared, resuming my stare.

Wearing white cloth gloves with rubber, sandpapered palms, he gently pushed my shoulder toward "Beans and Berries," an up-market player in the fight for customers, offering ambience, high-class baked goods, boxed sandwiches and various blends of joe. I was thinking Mickey Ds. Thirteen dollars later I left. *Ouch!* My friend walked me to my train; put me in my seat and brought me a cold bottle of water. The transition from taxi to RR took less than 20 minutes. I tipped him six bucks. The ride to Incheon passed miles of huge apartment blocks that make Coop City in Yonkers look like a country village.

That afternoon, I flew to Mongolia.

### ***Ulan Bator, Mongolia***

At Ulan Bator's Chinggis Khaan International Airport, one conveyor belt descended from a hole in the wall, spilling luggage like crushed ore on to a small carousel. I picked up my new piece, brand name "Elle," not a knock-off, the real deal bought from a legit Korean department store. I dumped my old duffel bag in Ulsan where I attended the wedding of our Korean "daughter." She married a Korean-American whose family immigrated to the States from Seoul. He is a senior at UGA's Veterinary School. My duffel was a two wheeler that felt like pulling a rickshaw with its brakes on. Because its contents *always* settled on the bottom, the duffle was nothing more than a heavy canvas sack holding a lead bowling ball, rolling on wheels permanently semi-locked. Instead of lifting the thing, something I could not do, I hoisted the beast, standing straight like a post supporting block and tackle rigging. I bought a green four wheeler on sale, after seeing them move in a smooth, quiet, continuous

motion across Seoul Station's gleaming marble floors, travelers gently plying their path, with one hand resting on the handle.

Outside of customs at Chengiss Khan, the driver I had arranged to greet me, held a "Tucker Cox" placard, making the rucksack on my shoulders feel lighter. He said his name was Ghan. He is a fireplug with a thick, round muscular body, bald head, and cat's whiskers sprouting above the corners of his mouth.

Our eyes met. I smiled and raised my chin.

"Good flight?"

"Thanks. Glad to be here," I said.

He drove a white Toyota Land Rover, almost big enough to pass for the tractor in a rig on one of our interstates. I sat in the front seat, as we traveled beneath a huge gateway, with "Welcome to Mongolia" across its semicircular top.

"Have you been to Ulan Bator before?"

"No. This is my first time."

"Three things: traffic, pickpockets, and drunks."

"Traffic? Pickpockets? Drunks?" I repeated, my voice rising higher with each word.

"Ten years ago, no one had a car," he said, "look at it now."

"So, what do I do?"

"Be careful. When a crowd gathers, thieves go to work. You'll be okay if you have zippered pockets."

I did not. Who does?

"Cross only at the light. Wait until others leave the curb first. You don't know."

"What about the drunks?"

“Ignore them if you can. Most are homeless. If it’s late at night, cross the street. Better, don’t go out by yourself.”

Ghan took me to the Mongolian Steppe Guesthouse, a hostel located in the center of town, light years from my room in Seoul with its electric commode whose motion sensor automatically raised the lid when I walked into the bathroom. Clever self-explanatory icons lit up its tool panel: “Heat the seat,” “Spray to clean,” “Bidet” and the critically important, “Stop.” The Guesthouse is a fifth floor walk-up, a converted apartment. Ghan carried my bag. Thanks, God. I tipped him five bucks. Reviews of the Guesthouse on TripAdvisor ranged from “book at your own risk!!!” to “great location and friendly staff.”

I stayed there because of “Eggy,” the hostel’s presumptive owner, something of a character described in posts to online forums by overland travelers making the trek from Moscow to Beijing via UB. Eggy had responded promptly to my emails, offering sightseeing suggestions. She arranged for Ghan to meet me. She did not ask for my card number in advance, something I was reluctant to give anyway. I met and paid her on the last day of my stay. Otherwise, there was no staff at the Guesthouse. Each resident had a key to the building and hostel door, on the back of which dangled a sign warning, “Do not let Mongolians in.” There were eight bunks in a narrow space, the apartment’s former living room, two small bedrooms, one of which I had, a bath and shower shared by all, the size of a postage stamp, toilet, even smaller, and a common kitchen with stove, hot water kettle and small table covered with a plastic cloth that shouted, Hello Kitty.

My solemn vow to climb the stairs no more than once a day was empty saber rattling. Invariably, I returned at cocktail hour to find a companion for dinner and continue working through the bottle of Johnnie Walker Double Black I bought duty free. I made small talk with

other travelers, two Germans; an Englishman who was a resident of UB, “temporarily” bedding down at the Guesthouse; a Frenchman on a tight budget, meaning he cooked and ate in; two members of the U.S. Peace Corps, male and female; and a taciturn, elderly Chinese man we believed was the janitor.



### *The Categorical Imperative*

Most pedestrians crossed the street at mid-block. On the main drag lights were spaced 1/2 mile or more apart. During heavy traffic, pedestrians cross this boulevard in stages, the first objective being to reach the double white line marking the middle of the four lane road. Cars whizzing by within inches, crossers stopped, mission accomplished. Standing straight as a plank, arms pressed against their sides, the faithful bide their time. Sensing an opening, they raise their right foot into a tiptoe in anticipation of the push-off to begin the dash across the second half of the road. With the occasional bogging down of traffic, pedestrians group up to boldly venture into the crawling column of vehicles, mounting a modest challenge. When the column gathers speed, the group disintegrates, individuals hunting and pecking their way toward sanctuary at the curb, some caught, as was I, between the two lanes, standing even straighter, hands and arms pressed even closer, old-age thickening now a liability, no longer the sign of a well-fed life.

The *categorical driving imperative* in UB is to "get ahead," to beat any other driver to the next open space, rarely more than one car length. The *imperative* mandates two, sometimes three turning lanes; right or left, it does not matter. On red's change to green, if a car turns right, the one behind punches the pedal, accelerating to the turning vehicle's inside, its right side, the space between the curb and the proper "turning lane." The third auto goes

wide on Number 1's outside, making the right turn in the center lane, the lane adjacent to the double white line marking the right and left sides of road. If numbers the next three vehicles are also turning right, everyone is slammed. For instance, if number 4 goes right first, numbers 5 and 6 repeat the first and second cars' maneuvers.

Vehicles crossing the intersection going in the opposite direction swear allegiance to the *categorical imperative*. Because there are no left arrow turning lights in UB, the normal, full-on green becomes a lift off signal at a National Hot Rod Association drag race. If the pilot of the lead car plans to turn left, be he starting from the left or right "lane" – lanes being an illusion under the *imperative* – Mr. Big-Shot-Puff-Chested-*Left-Turning* Mongol floors it for the next 10 meters to get to the opening first, ahead of Mr. B-S-P-C-*Right-Turning* Mongol, across the street.

As an aside, I did not see one woman driving in all of Mongolia. Not that the fairer sex is not competitive, they are. Not that they aren't capable, they are. While it's not PC to pigeonhole anyone nowadays, I concluded that Mongolian woman, nay any woman, on average, knows testosterone overload when she sees it. Not too long ago, these boys behind the wheel were in the saddle on the Gobi Dessert, herding, jousting, battling in Mongolian polo, celebrating unrestrained, wide open territory.

Cars going in opposite directions, turning left and right, all racing to occupy open space, all screeching to a halt, all tailgating between intersections, create a herky-jerky equilibrium. Flow, the sacred chalice in the communion of American drivers, comes if, and only if, there is lite traffic.

The Mongolian *categorical driving imperative* produces a battle of wits, competitors stopping and starting in fits, combining elements of surprise, intimidation and honking, a

mythic array of unmelodious noise. There is the “first-off-the-line” honk, a short burst, immaculately synchronized with the light’s change. “Coming through” is a long blast, that bears no relationship whatsoever to the probability of getting through. It is a cheap, bully’s gambit. “Don’t-tread-on-me” is “coming through’s” comrade in arms, sounding more like a bugler’s call to battle than a horn. Drag racers use it. The “frustration honk” dominates. It is one short and two long blares of surprising consistency, Morse Code that says “outta my way” and “c’mon, get a move!” But for its ubiquity, it would be ominous. Finally, there is the “I-don’t-know-why-I’m-honking” honk, heard upon engine start up; in flowing traffic or the middle of the night, a futile plea for its own futile, pointless sake, though one fellow traveler said it is reminiscent of a Buddhist chant.

Ulan Bator is on average the coldest big city on earth. UB's winter is October through April. Average low and high is 7°F and 24°F, respectively. Comparables for spring and summer (May through August) are 46° and 68°. <sup>5</sup> True to its claim, it snowed in UB on the 28<sup>th</sup> of May. Big jagged flakes splattered on the street, turning into a thick slush.

UB was exuberant. A boom town confidence characterized driving and walking and shopping. On the city’s Southside, out near the Zaisan Memorial to Soviet soldiers killed during WWII, luxury apartments, an enormous international school, shopping centers and office buildings are sparkling new. The Russians kicked off a free-for-all for Mongolia’s natural resources when they pulled out of the country in the 1990’s. Things have stabilized enough for international mining companies to invest and start extracting ore. Yet a few own the country’s wealth and relatively few enjoy its prosperity. The majority of the population outside of UB is still nomadic, living in round wool and felt tents with pointed conical tops

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<sup>5</sup> “Weather Averages: Ulan Bator, MNG” in “MSN Weather,” (Microsoft Corporation, Redmond, WA, 2013), available from [http://weather.sg.msn.com/monthly\\_averages.aspx?wealocations=wc:MGXX0003](http://weather.sg.msn.com/monthly_averages.aspx?wealocations=wc:MGXX0003), retrieved on 04 October 2013.

called gers (yurts in English). These conservative, traditional peoples can maintain their pastoral lifestyle for some years in the face of the rapidly modernizing Mongolia of UB. But, if their nomadic ranges hold mineral or precious metal wealth, they will lose them to corrupt leaders and global corporate interests. Unless checked, rampant corruption will stall the country's rush to modernize and cap rising standards of living.

The Mongols are proud. Some welcome their sprint into modernity, their introduction to consumerism and materialism and "prosperity," because they eat better, are warmer in winter and see a better future for their children. Corruption is the huge gotcha that threatens their social welfare. Westernization imperils their beloved pastoral traditions. I left UB with a modest tribute.

Arise ye descendants of the great Khan!

Rev your engines; join the race, another rat on the line.

Know that he – she who wins in the world of modernity  
remains the same rat, member of the same fraternity!

Like the mighty Chenggis, attain ephemeral prestige.

Pilot the Lexus, Beamer or Land Rover, rugged luxury, power in  
reserve,

a telling display of climbing modernity's learning curve,  
making you an obedient player, the vehicle now your liege.

Clog the streets! Choke the air! Daredevil drivers of serious intent  
sprint; jump off the light; play the game for keeps.

Throw away harmony, denying your Buddhist bent.

Stay in the race. Of the Great Khan your identity reeks.

A puffed up self-designated legend,  
greet your destiny, with your brethren!

I left UB on May 30, taking a bus north to Russia on a two-lane highway, a stripe of indelible black ink on the brown steppe, flat land that sweeps up to belts of snow ascending to the summits of the Hentei Mountains toward the east. A cloudless blue sky sharply contrasted with the mountain ridges, giving the feeling of sitting in the midst of an abstract painting. The two-lane blacktop follows the Tea Road, officially designated in 1689 under the Treaty of Nerchinsk between Russia and China as the principal trade route between the two countries.<sup>6</sup> China exported its tea, pounded and compressed into bricks, in return for Siberian sable. From UB, the road runs north to Ulan Ude in Russia's Buryat Republic, turning east to Irkutsk, my destination, and through Western Siberia, across the Urals, into Moscow.

A car overtook our bus every ten minutes or so. We passed a vehicle going south toward UB every four or five minutes. The last thing I expected in sparse traffic was the horrific accident we came upon. A large truck and passenger vehicle had collided head-on. The lorry lay on its side, its under carriage an ugly labyrinth. What was left of the sedan stood upright, a mangled gob of metal, its back crushed into the front seat. I tried not to think *bad omen*, as our bus driver turned off the road, making a wide arc on the hard packed earth. I could not imagine how this happened. *There was no traffic.*

### ***The Mongolian Sales Lady***

A Mongolian woman joined us an hour later. She carried an enormous sack on her back, held by a tapered, twisted cloth strapped over her shoulder. I thought of the classic

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<sup>6</sup> Martha Every, *The Great Tea Road: China and Russia Meet Across the Steppe* (Beijing: China International Press, 2003), 7.

statue of Atlas holding the world, a huge sculpture in the National Archeological Museum in Naples. I stumbled upon it while in the neighborhood, frightened by sinister faces and unrelenting rumors about Napolitano pickpockets. A large black purse hung from Ms. Mongolia's other shoulder. She plopped her earth ball in the narrow aisle, taking merchandise from it, scarves, socks, shawls, sweaters and blouses, each folded flat, each neatly wrapped in cheap clear plastic with "Mongolian Cashmere" in black letters, "Genuine and Authentic."

She started her sales pitch, presenting this scarf and that sweater, and this shawl, targeting ladies in the rows ahead. *This is going to be good*, I thought. *She's got a captive audience. Let's see what she can do. The driver's in on it, of course. He's going to get his measure. And why not? Like anyone else, she's got to pay rent. He's probably a relative.* The instant a prospect showed any interest, out came similar items in different colors and sizes. Inundating customers with choices, like we do in our super markets, is a common sales technique in Asia. I first ran into it buying rugs in India. I pointed toward one and barefoot sales assistants laid out 20 like it, making me feel guilty, not worthy of their efforts. I bought two that day.

Ms. Mongolia closed her first sale, a blouse. Holding a pair of socks in her hand, she extended her arm toward my seat. I politely waved her off, shaking my open palm to and fro, as if I was saying goodbye to a child, but a universal sign of "no" in Asia, a substitute for our sideways head-nodding.

Buddhist people are sensitive about their heads. It's bad luck to touch a baby's crown. You do not see a goodbye peck on the lips, let alone a smackeroo, unheard of, aghast! No

one greets another with a gentle cheek to cheek rub like the French. To an Asian male, the Spaniards' masculine *abrazo*, a wrap-around hug, is insect repellent.

*She's a selling fool. Does she have a shill on board?* She simply kept on displaying her wares and making change from a thick wad of bills she held between her thumb and index finger, the upper half flapping in the breeze as she rifled through them, counting like a machine. She closed two more deals.

*I better buy something. Why? Why am I doing this?* All of the passengers were staring at Ms. Mongolia, tracking her every move. I arched my eyebrows and imperceptibly stuck out my chin, signals Ms. Mongolia's radar picked up. Out came shawls and blouses.

“How much?” *You're cruise control!* I could use a couple of gifts, something for *Iraida* (“ear-rah-ee-da”), the International Coordinator at Irkutsk State linguistic Institute, where I would take my Russian lessons; and Tatiana, Sergei's wife and The Boss in my host family. Already I had bought her chocolate covered macadamia nuts from Hawaii. Though purchased duty-free at Incheon Airport in Seoul, I could add perceived value to them, a slick marketing concept. *Here Tatiana, these are from Hawaii. Joyce and I spent two weeks there this past February*, factually true, the kind of talk one hears from Washington. I bought a shawl for Tatiana to offset my guilt that would accompany the nuts.

“Thirty dollah,” said Ms. Mongolia.

“Shawl,” I said.

She pulled out three more, opening one fully, gently placing it on the shoulders of the lady sitting directly across from me. Like a maestro, Ms. Mongolia raised two forearms toward the ceiling, palms up. The lady stood, and turned slightly away from me, showing the shawl's short fringe as it sensuously touched the small of her back.

*Things are moving too fast.* Some staring, all modestly smiling, the front third of the bus watched, all women except for one grizzled goat-herder, still asleep. “Gimme two,” said I, making a V with the first and second fingers of my right hand. “I’ll take one blouse. Got any gloves?”

She placed three pairs on my lap.

She added up the price. I countered, knocking off 10% for the volume discount. I knew better than to ask if she took greenbacks or Korean Won, in addition to Tugriks, Mongolia's currency. Hoping I had enough to cover, I placed all three in her outstretched hand. She computed a fair exchange rate; gave me a few dollars change and trudged on toward the rear of the bus.

My mind returned to the accident. The lorry driver may be alive, I thought. No one else could possibly have survived. *What happened? Were they going for open space?*

### ***Images of Siberia***

As Galya Diment and Yuri Slezhene demonstrate in *Between Heaven and Hell: The Myth of Siberia in Russian Culture*, ample ignorance of the region prevails in Russia. Outside of the country, it is magnified. I pictured Siberia as immense white tundra, the sea surrounding Solzhenitsyn’s *Gulag Archipelago*. In addition to prisoners, guards and government officials, it is home to hunters and almond brown, tough-skinned nomads, reindeer herders. These Siberians wrap themselves head-to-toe in a quilt of considerable density, covered with motley animal hide, so enveloping that they can do nothing more than take clipped, stiff-legged steps or stand straight as a tree trunk on the back runners of their sleds. Eventually, I hear "Somewhere My Love," the theme song from Dr. Zhivago. I could

never get over how it was sooooo cold for Mrs. Zhivago, who saved wood to have a fire waiting for her husband, when he came home from work.

Capitalizing on my years as a marketing instructor at the University of Georgia, I decided to do what the pros call “walking-down-main-street” marketing research to see if friends and acquaintances shared my stereotypical picture of Siberia, the one I had before beginning this project. I sent approximately 70 emails to friends and acquaintances, with a request to respond to this question.

What do you know about Siberia? If you have stereotypical views, say so.

If you know a city or town, something about the weather, a famous site, a Siberian travel experience, actual or desired, let that be your answer. There is no right or wrong response. All replies are confidential. I will use some of them in my thesis; but will not attribute any reply to any individual.

Your answer may be one or two words, a sentence or more – any reply of any length is appreciated. The first thoughts that pop into your mind about Siberia are the best.

Recipients of my email are educated, well-traveled people, knowledgeable about national and international affairs. Their replies did not surprise me. Some were on the mark, some not. Collectively, the replies do not represent any population, except, perhaps, my network of help. However, my experience tells me that the proverbial man in the street *might* know that Siberia is in Russia, but little else. I have organized the replies under broad topics and edited them into a narrative, [with my comments between brackets].

*Area, climate and people*

Siberia is enormous, white and cold, VERY cold, frigid, desolate, barren, a snow-filled area in the eastern edge of Russia [it stretches across more than half of Russia, not always snow-filled], almost uninhabitable [22% of Russians live there<sup>7</sup>]. It has arctic winters, permafrost and glaciers. The coldest place on earth where people live is in Ural Mountains of Siberia [they are in European Russia, not Siberia and by far are not the coldest. The village of Oymyakon in northeastern Siberia is number one on the frigidity scale, temps hitting minus 97.8°F. “Breath freezes into crystals and falls to ground with a noise Siberians call the whispering of the stars.”<sup>8</sup>] Siberia is windy because there is nothing to block Arctic blasts. [Siberians have names for more than 30 different types of wind.<sup>9</sup>] Siberia has tundra and forests [and steppes]. Its permanently frozen soil contains flammable methane [true]. I used a global climate model and theoretically melted all the permafrost [not possible as it extends in places thousands of feet into the earth], releasing so much methane and other greenhouse gasses that the Earth warmed by 14 to 22 degrees Celsius. Wow! That's a lot of GHG!

Siberia is sparsely populated by European peoples [large indigenous populations also live in Siberia]. It is a huge territory where life is difficult. Basically, the architecture and life-style is Eastern European

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<sup>7</sup> Eva-Maria Stolberg, *The Siberian Saga: A history of Russia's Wild East*. (New York: P. Lang, 2005), 7.

<sup>8</sup> Thubron, *In Siberia*, 270.

<sup>9</sup> Sharon Hodges, *The Other Side of Russia: A Slice of Life in Siberia and the Russian Far East* (College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 2003), 119.

[Siberians have their own distinct architecture and life-style]. The most interesting animals are yaks [yaks are in Tibet]. I see pictures of wildlife and native peoples with hardened faces and determined natures and see Chenggis Khan galloping through the terrain. The people are warm and friendly [true, how true].

*Exile, deportation and prisons.*

In the not so distant past, a large number of prisoners were sent to the Gulags in Siberia [European Russia made expulsion legal in 1648<sup>10</sup>]. Some might consider it a land of exile, infamous for its prison camps in WWII for German POW's and members of the political opposition [Russians have exiled/imprisoned all nationalities for more than 350 years]. Siberia is a metaphor for banishment, desolation, isolation, remoteness [and much more].

*Natural resources*

Major area of oil production and logging. Used to be a major producer of pelts for fur coats [it still is]. Hordes of mosquitoes that hatch when the topsoil melts, so voracious that they can weaken a caribou to the point of death. With a growing season that is short, you can't grow any grains or vegetables [both thrive in abundance].

*Global warming*

I think of Siberia as the future home of millions of people on Earth. As the planet warms, it will be the bread basket of humanity.

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<sup>10</sup> George Kennan, *Siberia and the Exile System* (New York: Russell and Russell, 1891, 1970), 75.

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Siberia's geography makes it more frigid than lands at comparable latitudes. A combination of Arctic wind blowing freely across the wide flat tundra and layers of snow and frozen rivers that become major roadways in winter plunge the mercury to between minus 40 and minus 4 degrees Fahrenheit, on average, between November and March. Mountains protect Siberia's northeastern coast from the relatively warm air of the Pacific. They do the same in the South, preventing hot and humid breezes from the subtropical Indian Ocean. The North Atlantic is too far away for its moderating westerlies to have any impact. The result? "Twelve months of winter and the rest is summer."<sup>11</sup>

I studied Russian for two weeks in Irkutsk, the "Paris of Siberia." It is the historical jumping off point for Eastern Siberia. (The great Yenisei River traditionally marks the boundary between the west and east.) Locals say that summer in Irkutsk also has spring, autumn and winter in the same day. During the first half of June, mornings tended toward rainy and cold with temperatures in the high 40s. Spring sunshine came in mid-morning. Summer heat (mid-80s) greeted early evening, prompting women to go sleeveless, with college students stripping down to the bare essentials. Nights were delightful sweater weather, a light breeze in the low 60s.

Water characterizes Siberia as much, if not more than freezing temperatures. It is home to great rivers, massive swamps and the biggest patch of soaked sponge on the earth, the result of hundreds of thousands of square miles of permafrost melting in summer. When you talk about this land, it seems like every attribute ranks in the world's "Top 10." The Yenisei, Ob, Lena, Irtysh, Angará and Amur, Siberia's great rivers, rival the Amazon, Nile,

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<sup>11</sup>Golya Diment & Yuri Slezkine, eds., *Between Heaven and Hell: The Myth of Siberia in Russian Culture* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993), 73.

Mississippi and Danube. The Yenisei is the longest at 3,445 miles. The Gulf of Ob is the world's largest estuary, free of Arctic ice only a few months of the year.

### *A Land of Exiles*

By the end of the 17th century, the Czar (Caesar in Latin) viewed exile as a way to populate Siberia, first conquered and colonized in 1582, conferring world power status on Russia as the only nation that stretched from Europe to the Pacific coast of Asia. (To this day, Russians have not resolved the debate over their country's identity – European or Asian?) Demand for labor to exploit Siberia's mineral resources drove the exile system during the 18th century.<sup>12</sup> Russia abolished the death penalty in 1753, opting instead to exile criminals.<sup>13</sup> This was a time of deportation by *ukaze* (“oo-kah-zeh”), an edict of the Czar, absolute law.<sup>14</sup>

Nothing illustrates better Russia's long and lamentable tradition of abusing human rights than its 19th century policy of exile by “administrative process,” a procedure that authorized local authorities to arrest and detain and exile anyone whose presence was “prejudicial to public order or incompatible with public tranquility,”<sup>15</sup> a procedure barren of any due process, let alone presentation of even the flimsiest evidence. Authorities held anyone without trial, from two weeks to two years. Arrest warrant? Neither needed nor required.

Under the force of armed guards, exiles and their families walked to Siberia. Tens of thousands died along the way, neither accustomed to nor capable of the arduous effort

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<sup>12</sup> Valentin Rasputin, one of Russia's best-known writers, said of Siberia's 18th century colonization, “Siberia is our Mexico and Peru,” harkening to colonial masters’ ruthless exploitation of these countries for their silver and gold. Valentin Rasputin, *Siberia, Siberia*, trans. Margaret Winchell and Gerald Mikkelson (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1996), 20.

<sup>13</sup> Kennan, *Siberia and the Exile System*, 76.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*, 74.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*, 242.

characterizing a trek that lasted as long as two years. At best, survivors faced up to ten years of "police surveillance" or worse, as was the case for most, penal servitude in Siberian cold.

George Keenan, American author of *Siberia and the Exile System*, called administrative process "a system of official lawlessness," *próizvol* (pro-eez-vhal) in Russian.<sup>16</sup> Fluent in their tongue, Keenan, like every student of Russian, early on discovered native speakers' uncanny knack for boiling down the most complex situation to a single, untranslatable word. Victims' "crimes" were tragically absurd – "fortune-telling, prize fighting, snuff-taking [a European import]; driving a carriage with reins," another Western idea (Russian way: the driver rode a horse in the harness or ran beside it); "begging with the pretense of being in distress" or "bad conduct."<sup>17</sup> Authorities exiled people "guilty" of nothing more than mouthing a few words viewed as anti-Czar, for example, "I read about so-and-so's activities." Local police possessed unlimited power. Keenan said that exile by administrative process was "a chaos of disorder in which accident and caprice played almost equally important parts. Murderers were set free to colonize, peasants who lost their internal passports or incurred the resentment of hot tempered landowners exiled to a lifetime of hard labor."<sup>18</sup>

All to satisfy demand for workers to mine gold.

Unlike politicals, the system treated exiled felons as legally dead, stripping them of all civil rights, forfeiting their property to heirs, cutting all family ties, unless loved ones also chose exile. Wives left behind had a legal right to remarry. Heartless and tragic though the system was, no words capture the unbearable tearing asunder of Russians' special attachment to the land. This distinction lies in the realm of religious, mystical experience, a description

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid, 247.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, 74.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, 77.

of which always, by definition, arrives late, always after the experience is over. Russians cherish the land on which they live. Of the imaginary border between European Russia and Siberia, Kennan said, “No other boundary in the world has witnessed so much human suffering or been passed by such a multitude of heart broken people.”<sup>19</sup>

Escape? Impossible. Prisoners opted for warmth instead of mortal cold.

The Czar’s secret police arrested Dostoyevsky in 1849 for taking a political position against the regime – treason under Russian law. While he was standing blindfolded before a firing squad, the legal system reversed his execution at the last minute, ordering him to serve a four-year term at hard labor in Siberia. Said Dostoyevsky, “Here was the house of the living dead, a life like no other.”<sup>20</sup>

### ***Axis Mundi and the Sacred Sea***

One of my favorite journeys is making a pilgrimage, either actually or vicariously through the eyes of others, as is the case, for example, of the Hajj, the pilgrimage to Mecca, the one every faithful Muslim must make once during his or her lifetime. The first hajj was in 630.<sup>21</sup> Today it is the greatest annual movement of humanity in the name of religion on the planet.

For their college graduations I took my daughter and nephew on a pilgrimage to the Auschwitz, the death camp epitomizing the Nazi’s horror. We saw sights in Denmark, Germany and Poland along the way. We had moments of fun, of confusion, uncertainty and absurdity, as in Cracow where in lieu of being hauled off to the police station, I paid an on-the-spot traffic fine of all of twenty-five cents. The visit to Auschwitz and Birkenau erased

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid, 52.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, 243.

<sup>21</sup> *What Life Was Like in the Lands of the Prophet: Islamic World, AD 570-1405* (Alexandria, Va: Time-life Books, 1999), 31.

all levity, numbing us, our minds getting the monstrous damnation of it all, but not really, not for a lifetime. Pilgrimages do that.

I have visited many of Christendom's holy sites, the most sacred of which is the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, for Roman Catholics and Protestants. Orthodox Christians call it the Church of the Resurrection.

The first sacred site I visited was the ancient city of Varanasi, located in the state of Uttar Pradesh in northern India. This part of India belongs to the Hindi Heartland, the geographic anchor of the faith, finding its analogue in our Bible Belt, a wide cinch of territory running through all of Tennessee, across the Smokies and Blue Ridge mountains of Western North Carolina, curving south through upstate South Carolina, and into the red clay country of rural Georgia, and curving again, this time west, through the Deep South, Alabama, Mississippi and Louisiana. Varanasi is one of the oldest continuously inhabited cities on earth, already a seat of government by the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium BC.<sup>22</sup> Every morning Hindus walk through its narrow alleys lined by apartment buildings on either side. Their destination is the Ghats, wide steps that descend to the polluted waters of the Ganges, the faith's holiest of rivers.

Along the way, many stop at a temple – there are hundreds – for morning puja, a Hindu ritual of prayer and offering. Bathing in the Ganges cleanses devotees of their sins. Better yet dying in Varanasi, ideally the closer to the Ganges the better, gives the deceased some assurance of salvation, an escape from the endless cycle of reincarnation, traveling from one life to the next, the exact itinerary plotted by karmic force, an invisible Triple A trip-ticket, arising from the wayfarer's good or bad deeds in their prior lives. Death in

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<sup>22</sup> "Varanasi," in "Encyclopædia Britannica Online," (Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc. Chicago, 2013), available from <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/623248/Varanasi>, retrieved on 27 October 2013.

Varanasi, a final wash in the Ganges and cremation on one of the many pyres, huge piles of wood burning at river's edge, is an express ride to a blessed end, a journey to Unity.

My lasting memory of Varanasi is different. Walking through its narrow alleys, wearing a dark brown, deer-skin skull cap, my bobbing head became the prime target for an anonymous prankster, or someone with a grudge against Westerners, to patiently wait until he caught the brown skin in his cross-hairs, kicking off the release of a large chunk of coal, scoring a perfect hit, making a loud "pock" sound as the carbon broke into small bits of black perfidy. As others stared and my companions howled with laughter, I pressed both palms against the crown of my head and resolved to look forward, behind *and up*. I had forgotten about looking up, when walking in close quarters.

Every religion, culture and civilization acknowledge Divine Power capable of directing us to our final destination as spiritual beings, sacred places called *axes mundi* by the Latin Church, frequently holy mountains that are the center of earth, the point of its beginning, what the Greeks called its *omphalos*, its navel. Also known as the cosmic axis, world pillar, *columna cerului*, center of the world, world tree, an axis mundi is the point where God communicates with us and we with the Divine It.<sup>23</sup>

One of the most famous axis mundi was the tower of Babel, the man-made mythical structure extending to the Divine like another axis Mundi, no less important to the child hearing the fairy tale for the first time, Jack's Beanstalk. God viewed Babel as insufficiently sacred, lacking the requisite humility, arrogantly presuming we can build a track to God's Door. According to myth, we got our answer: tower destroyed, humankind thrown into a polyglot of languages.

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<sup>23</sup> Arthur Green, "The Zaddiq as Axis Mundi in Later Jerusalem" *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* v45, n3 (September 1977): 327-347.

*Lake Baikal and Olkhon Island*

Olkhon Island (“All-khan”) in Russia’s Lake Baikal is the spiritual center of the Buryat culture, the largest ethnic group in Siberia, descendants from the Mongol hordes of Chenggis Khan. The Buryat Republic is the Buddhist center of Russia. Buryats practice Tibetan Buddhism. They recognize the lama system that calls for a reincarnated holy person to fulfill his or her destiny as a revered leader of the sect, since, after all, they have played this part from the beginning. Buryats also believe in shamans, male and female spiritual leaders, diviners, fortune tellers, keepers and revealers of secrets, known stereotypically in African cultures, for instance, as witch doctors.

Like many Siberians and European Russians, the Buryats, and especially their shamans, consider Lake Baikal the Sacred Sea of Siberia. Stories of Baikal’s supernatural powers are legendary. Virtually every cove or inlet produces fierce winds, particularly in June, suddenly and without warning. The narrow *Maloe* (“Ma-lo-yeh”) Strait flows between Olkhon Island, Lake Baikal's largest, and the mountains ringing its western shore, creating a funnel that generates the *smarma*, a ferocious wind that roars from the West, ripping across the lake at hurricane force, gales and gusts approaching 100 mph, turning the lake into an angry ocean that mercilessly tosses ships to and fro. Locals have their favorite spot on Olkhon Island, usually a rock on a peninsula jutting into the inland sea, not a flat strip of land, but a dramatic peninsula rising high above the lake, majestically crowned by an enormous, monolithic stone. The rock atop the shamans’ axis mundi stands high above the lake, perhaps 1,000 feet. It is an ideal place for communing with Burkhan, the principal spirit of Baikal.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Valentin Gregorevich Rasputin, *Siberia, Siberia* (1996), trans. Margaret Winchell and Gerald Mikkelson (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1997), 120.

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I eagerly anticipated my visit to Olkhon. If ever there was a place to experience an epiphany, I thought, this was it. Even one iota of enlightenment, the rub-off of a microgram or two from exposure to Baikal's power, would yield new wisdom, a new spiritual dimension. If anywhere, I would find pay dirt in the good earth, or rocks from Olkhon Island.

From Irkutsk, blacktop, gravel, packed dirt to Baikal port,  
 we await the crossing to Olkhon Island. In changing light,  
 spring's cold bite defrosts the water's torque.  
 Baikal serenely hides its Divine Might.

Wrapping around us, a promise in its moisture  
 of birth to come, Baikal is Siberia's winter cloister.  
 Clearest water, deep and fecund, brings abrupt tranquility.  
 Mountain cliffs plunge into the lake, signaling their servility.

The pool's unprecedented depth,  
 womb to earth's next great ocean,  
 rending Asia in two, by-day, by month, by year, by eons of motion,  
 while humankind sleeps, unaware that we are kept

by Mighty Forces we pretend to understand,  
 divining ourselves masters, unknowing of a Hidden Hand.

My journey to Olkhon began at Irkutsk, the “Paris of Siberia,” one of its largest cities with a population of 600,000.<sup>25</sup> I stayed in the sixth-floor, walk-up apartment of my host family, Sergei and Tatiana Nikolaeva. He is a civil engineer. She is a designer of water conservation systems. They are parents of a love-child, eleven year-old Sonya who wore short-shorts pasted to her skin and grandparents of a one year old girl with pure blue eyes, the bluest, truest color, a light-emitting clarity that caused me to gasp and exclaim, “She is the most beautiful baby I have ever seen.” Two Americans, also studying Russian, had rooms. Miles was from Clemson and Mark a student at the University of South Florida in Tampa. A Dutch couple, Glenn and Patricia, occupied the last remaining bedroom. They were traveling west by rail to Amsterdam, having begun their trip in Beijing. In addition to a furnished room, Sergei prepared breakfast and Tatiana served dinner. Gathering us around the kitchen table, Tatiana said, “I am going to be Stalin when it comes to dinner: 7:30. Do not be late.” Everybody ignored her but me.

Early Saturday morning of my first weekend in Irkutsk, Sergei drove me to the local “bus station,” little more than a parking lot surrounding a convenience store. I was taking a *marshrutka*, Russian for mini-van, to Olkhon Island for the weekend, a seven hour, seven dollar ride.

She got in the van midway between Irkutsk and Olkhon Island. I hardly noticed her, a short lady, around 5 feet 2, with thick auburn hair, parted high with hints of black, waves falling over each side of her forehead. She had dark green eyes, fair skin, a round face, white, even teeth and sloping shoulders. Dimples bracketed her thin lips. With red hair, she was an adult Orphan Annie. She wore hiker’s pants with pockets on the thighs and zippers above the

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<sup>25</sup> “Irkutsk population,” in “Google search inquiry,” (Google Inc., Mountain View, CA), available from <https://www.google.com/#q=population+of+Irkutsk>, retrieved on 11 September 2013.

knees. A wedding band on her right hand, in the Orthodox Christian custom, said she was married.

We crawled out of the *marshrutka* on the mainland side of the ferry terminus to Olkhon, the tarred road abruptly ending at a “dock” – actually a fence of logs extending from the road’s edge – designed to snuggle the ferry’s bow, high enough to block the stiff breeze wrinkling the lake's surface.

The wind’s sharp moisture ignored fellow travelers’ high collared, Gore-Tex jackets, enveloping them instead, biting hands and faces, causing eyes to water, prompting a temporary fight for oxygen, though we were no more than 1,500 feet above sea level. The air carried a faint scent of pine and wet grass. The lake was demure. Puffs of clouds dotted the sky, coming and going with eerie frequency, constantly moving, directionless, like bumper cars at an amusement park. The cold reddened cheeks and burned hands, for this was winter’s last breath.

As the ferry pulled out, she asked, "Where are you from?" She held her hands, palm over fingers, resting against her tummy. She stared vacantly.

"United States," I said. "North Carolina."

"Ah, the Carolinas," she declared. "My English not so good."

*I would die to speak one-tenth as much Russian.*

"My sister lives – a city near Mee-ami. I visit. I forget."

"Near Mee-ami?" Saying "Mah-ami" southern style would stifle the shred of dialogue we were struggling to maintain.

“Ft. Lauderdale?” My voice rose on “dale,” the way Yanks ask a question. I hoped Russians finished their queries on a rising tone. It was a stab in the dark. Japanese frequently end theirs on a falling note.

“Fort Lauderdale, yes, Ft. Lauderdale. It is close to Mee-ami?” A rising tone.

“Yes, it is.”

“Why are you here?” she asked.

I didn't know what to say. The wind picked up. I pulled the sleeves of my jacket over my hands. “I'm here,” I paused. I wanted to say for tourism or sightseeing; but I was here to feel firsthand, if such a thing is possible, the spiritual qualities of Lake Baikal, particularly since Olkhon Island is the center of the lake's mysticism, according to Buryat shamanistic belief.

“I'm here to see Olkhon Island,” I said, like a politician from Washington, a lie in sentiment, a failure to disclose true feelings, what the Japanese, masters of the art, call *honne* (“hon-néh”), putting a good face on things. I could have explained why I was here in one word: “Faith.”

“Now, I come from Novosibirsk.”

“Science City, right?” I assumed the term was famous enough for her to recognize.

“What is Science City?”

The Soviets had invested millions to make Novosibirsk, on the western edge of Siberia, the nation's center of research, scientific study, and technological development. Since the USSR's break-up, Novosibirsk has tried to become Russia's Silicon Valley.

“It's okay,” I said. “Novosibirsk? You came from Novosibirsk?”

“Yes, do you know?”

“No I came from Irkutsk. First, I took the bus from Ulan Bator to Ulan Ude [capital of the Buryat Republic]. Then, the train to Irkutsk.”

“Ooooh, very far.” Her eyes widened.

“Two days.”

The wind picked up. I let my sleeves fall over my hands, fingers curled inward.

“What is your name?” I asked.

“Elena. Not really Elena.” She pronounced it, eh-lay-nah. “But call me Elena.”

I understood, having given up all hope of the Russians getting the “tuck” in Tucker right. Already I was introducing myself as “Tawker,” knowing that “Tacker” lay just around the corner.

Elena took a small pamphlet from her purse. The inside back cover had a picture of an older Russian couple, a stern, baldheaded man with unsmiling lips and his wife, equally serious, staring straight ahead, reminding me of the farmer and his spinster daughter in Grant Wood’s famous painting, “American Gothic.”

“They are good people,” she said. “They are teachers of Christianity. Please see them.” She handed me a card with the website address.

“Yes, of course.” I was quiet.

We stared at one another. She had the Slavs’ typical high cheekbones. She smiled easily, her lips partially covered with a film of pink pastel. A black and white mallard flew above, as our ferry, little more than a small barge with a conning tower, made its way to Olkhon. I was thinking of Poe’s Raven. The cold wind gusted, cutting into my exposed neck. I turned up my collar, now looking like a chubby Mandarin. I wished I had a scarf.

Elena placed my right hand on the pamphlet she held in the flat of her palm, as if she was about to administer an oath.

“I pray now,” she said. “Special place, time... Olkhon.”

The wind gusted. Rays from the sun struggled to pierce a dark purple bank of clouds, creating random patterns of light on the lake's surface. *You're in it now*, I said to myself.

*Geez, this is nuts. How could something like this happen? What is going on? Stay. Be still.*

*Who knows?*

Head bowed, eyes closed, Elena whispered. In her right hand, between her thumb and index finger, she twirled a small brown pebble, dangling from a gold key ring.

The sun disappeared, triggering a shot of cold. The wind stopped. It halted without any perceptible slowing down, just ceased. The ferry's engines sounded distant.

Elena continued praying and twirling the rock. She looked into my eyes.

*What is going on? This is crazy. It is not happening. Shut up. Take what you get. No one knows.*

“Something... something good, strong, important happens,” said Elena. “In future. October, yes, I think October.”

“Okay,” said I, not knowing anything else.

“We pray some more. Soon boat stops.” Elena bowed her head and swung the rock. It seemed bigger now. Elena swayed gently on the balls and heels of her feet, my palm still planted firmly on the Russian Gothic couple's picture. As we approached Olkhon, the wind abruptly returned, then ceased. Floes of ice clung to the lake's surface, remnants of winter's melt.

Across the strait, the sky was cloudless. Snowcapped mountains 5,000 to 9,000 feet high rimmed the shore. A kaleidoscope of light bounced off jagged peaks, pristine white, specs of orange and yellow, combining with gray rock, green trees and the lake's shades of blue – azure, turquoise, streaks of cobalt, and splotches of black glassy calms and wrinkled wavelets brushed by the wind.

*Everything has changed. It's a new place.*

Elena kept chanting.

## Ж

The wind's whispers camouflage its unbridled strength,  
 caress birds, rustle leaves, sweep the pines' pollen,  
 innocently stir wild flowers; it is the vital link  
 to new life, fertility's obligation, sacred and solemn.  
 Meadows, snow-capped ridges, cliffs cutting the lake's shore  
 bring spirits alive, stop thought, touch the core  
 of one's being; promote trivial talk, stifle search for meaning.  
 The cold wind bites, renouncing ego's proud preening.  
 There is the whoosh of wind, Divine Breath  
 linking life in one continuous mood,  
 thought now need no longer brood.  
 Sacred ground, sun, sky, earth merge, life and death.  
 And how ought I comprehend?  
 Alone, the cold moist chill makes all stand still, without end.

## Ж

Shamans are people with special training to access spirits, good or evil, and through them to divine a fortune, give advice, offer patients prescriptions to heal their maladies. While the Buryats are Buddhist, they have steadfastly held to their belief in shamans. They are a vital part of the Buryat culture, as is Lake Baikal. The Buryat shamans' favorite locale is Olkhon Island. Its peaks, capes, coves, beaches, cliffs, and hills give knowledge of Burkhan, the main spirit of Baikal.

The lake is 25 million years old, the most ancient on the planet.<sup>26</sup> It is geologically and biologically alive. Its bed rests on two tectonic plates moving apart from each other at two centimeters or three-quarters of an inch per year. Eventually, the lake will transform itself into the globe's fifth ocean, dividing continental Asia.<sup>27</sup> Baikal vibrates, experiencing some 2,000 tremors annually.<sup>28</sup> In the 19th century, a steppe measuring about 120 square miles – more than three times the size of Manhattan (33.8 square miles<sup>29</sup>) – vanished, swallowed by a Baikal-sized earthquake.<sup>30</sup>

Shaped roughly like a banana, Baikal stretches 400 miles on a Southwest to Northeast axis, covering a modest part of the Siberian taigá or forest. Baikal's length is the distance from Milan to Prague.<sup>31</sup> It is 40 miles at its widest. At more than 1 mile and increasing annually, Baikal is earth's deepest lake, more than twice that of North America's Tahoe at

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<sup>26</sup> Thubron, *In Siberia*, 157.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid*, 120.

<sup>28</sup> Hodges, *The Other Side of Russia*, 119.

<sup>29</sup> "Manhattan: New York City borough," in "Google search inquiry," (Google Inc., Mountain View, CA), available from [https://www.google.com/search?q=size+of+manhattan&rlz=1C1CHFX\\_en&oq=size+of+manhattan&aqs=crome..69i57j0l5.4127j0j8&sourceid=chrome&espv=210&es\\_sm=93&ie=UTF-8](https://www.google.com/search?q=size+of+manhattan&rlz=1C1CHFX_en&oq=size+of+manhattan&aqs=crome..69i57j0l5.4127j0j8&sourceid=chrome&espv=210&es_sm=93&ie=UTF-8), retrieved on 27 October 2013.

<sup>30</sup> Rasputin, *Siberia, Siberia*, 155.

<sup>31</sup> Thubron, *In Siberia*, 158.

1,650 feet and Superior's 1,300 feet. Baikal throbs with life. It is home to some 2,000 species of flora and fauna, of which about 1,100 are unique to the area.

Incomparable, astounding and humbling, the list of Baikal's attributes has few, if any, rivals in nature, except of course its Siberian homeland. Beyond any other quality, the lake's clarity touched me with a directness I could not and did not wish to understand. Divers are cautioned not to venture below a few meters. As they become accustomed to the play of light through the crystalline water, many experience giddiness and the yo-yoing stomach that comes from looking down from a great height: vertigo.

And Baikal is holy. Still beyond measure, its winds rise suddenly and cruelly. Its spacious silence made me feel like I was in a calm of Someone Else's choosing, one that would surely change on a whim, unpredictable and apparently random. No sense of ebb and flow.

If Baikal is a gem, which it is, its purest facet, cut with artistic precision to show its superior natural ardor, is Olkhon Island.



Elena prayed until the ferry backed into the familiar fence of shaped logs, a confusing maneuver that resulted in all the vehicles – trucks, *marshrutki*, SUVs and cars having no choice but leave the boat driving in reverse. Elena pulled my hand away from the pamphlet, putting both it and the rock into her purse, her green eyes clear and arresting. The passengers from our van gathered by an open shed on the side of the road, waiting as our driver inched his way down the gangplank. Elena got off at the first stop. She said a polite goodbye.

“North Carolina, Blue Ridge mountains, Fort Lauderdale, e-mail. Come, visit!” I blurted out, knowing full well the chances of our paths crossing again were nil.

**Ж**

Our sightseeing tour of Olkhon began in an old Russian military surplus van that took us from our hostel, “Nikita’s Homestead,” through a Siberian fishing village, past a pond, dung patties visible, cows having come to drink.

Roads are wretched, full of potholes, deep ruts, and roller coaster hills. In the van are travelers either going to or coming from Beijing, a Dutch couple, two Chinese Singaporeans who are undergrads, one at the University of Virginia the other at Penn, a Korean woman in her mid-30s, a Chilean lady, also in her 30s, three Aussies on their traditional walk-about, their overland trip to Europe, a long planned, eagerly anticipated rite of passage into the work-a-day life of adulthood, and a Russian mother and her 12 year old son, locals riding to the next village.

The van sways up, down and sideways all at the same time. Brakes squeal as the driver applies them going downhill, a screeching metal on metal sound. I wonder about the pads. How much of them remain? Will the brakes hold? Steep, precipitous, rugged peaks jut into the sky, a place for lovers, a lover's leap. Rocks, grass, cliffs, and drifts of melting snow frame blooming purple rhododendrons. Floes of ice desperately hug the shore. The air carries a smell of freshly ploughed earth.

Driving around racks my body. We motor across the island, rock and roll. We stop. “Out! Photos!” Our driver shouts. We laugh self-consciously at the incongruity of paying to see the sights, only to have the tour guide curtly boss us around. We take the treatment with good humor, knowing he’s just being Russian – blunt, direct.

The land stands still. And the land moves. It is cold. “A good two months of winter,” as Russians call their spring.<sup>32</sup>

It is easy to understand this land as special and sacred. Locals see mythic figures in rock formations, for instance, the face of a child on the side of a mountain – eyes, nose, and a smile.

Hot sun on the back of my neck makes me want to sleep. Geese and ducks are calling, as they fly overhead.

Having saved a few from my flight to Asia, I share a Delta dog biscuit, culled from my waist pack, with the Chilean woman.

“Gracias, muy bien.”

Thirty miles across the lake, dark clouds dump rain on mountain slopes. Squalls race toward us, some reaching our side, emptying their last bit of moisture. Others stop mid-way, while bolts of lightning angrily pierce the clouds. Squalls drive across the lake; stop; then, just as quickly, return to the opposite shore. Baikal spawns dozens of these storms, all moving simultaneously toward and away from us, some dropping rain, some stalling at mid-lake. It is a giant neon sign flashing gray, white and blue. I am dumbfounded. Cannot speak. Cannot marvel. Simply watch. The tempests last for about an hour. A giant rainbow arcs over the sky, fuzzy bands of red, purple, yellow, turquoise, green, orange, a slice of violet. A second one appears, higher and behind the first, the same colors, but not as vivid. I don't want to do anything. There is nothing to conclude.

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<sup>32</sup> Rasputin, *Siberia, Siberia*, 65.

## Ж

Modern society gives its allegiance to processes, machines, systems and equipment. We seek a technological, secular utopia, placing importance on external, material circumstances to help us “reconcile” our troubles. We seek happiness in “more and better” that advertisements promise, a promiscuous, indiscriminate promise to satisfy the need of the moment, a promise that specifically response to key words submitted to Google. “We've gotten used to thinking that everything on earth – its beauties and bounties, all the laws of nature – exists for us, that everything was created for us and intended for us, and we've begun to forget”<sup>33</sup> that we too belong to nature, we too are a mixture of squalls, blessed, if chance favors us, by a double rainbow.

### *The Gift I – Learning Russian*

My tutor is a Ph.D. in Teaching Russian as a Foreign Language and a member of the faculty of the Irkutsk State Linguistic University, where we met every day for two weeks, in 90-minute, one-on-one sessions. I first called him Professor, then Professor Alex, then simply Alex, until I learned his students addressed him as Alexander Alexiyevich (“Ah-lex-ee-yea-vich”). Every Russian has a middle name called a patronymic, the first name of their father. Alexander’s father was Alexi, the “-yevich” meaning “son of.” One of several “daughter of” endings is “-ovna,” as in Tatiana Ivanovna, Tatiana, daughter of Ivan. Russians address superiors, people they meet for the first time, in-laws and older people by their first name and patronymic.<sup>34</sup> The tradition enables parents to make their son’s name the middle name of his children, giving presumptive grandparents influence over continuity of the family line.

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid, 119.

<sup>34</sup> Mikhail Vadimovich Ivanov, “Nostalgic for Patronymics,” in “Russian Life, January/February 2007,” (Russian Life, Vermont, 2013) available from <http://www.russianlife.com>, retrieved on 09 October 2013..

American patronymics migrated to our surname, when used at all. For example, Dennis Nicholson originally meant Dennis, son of Nicholas. Ultimately, we dropped the “son,” leaving Dennis Nichols.

Alexander Alexiyevich was six feet tall with sandy blond hair, full and thick, parted on the right and combed back on both sides. He had a broad forehead and high cheekbones, characteristic of his Slavic genes. His deep blue eyes and thin lips framed a straight, narrow nose. His close-cropped, neatly trimmed white beard gave the appearance of scholarly authority. His stomach was flat, straight from the chest down, like a board. He wore plaid patterned, slim fitting shirts, tucked smoothly into his jeans, the kind you see on cowboys. A wide, black leather belt with a dull silver buckle, also reminiscent of Western USA wear, accented his trim, fit look. He was a handsome man in his early 50s.

Alexander Alexiyevich exhaled when he spoke, slowly drawing out the first word, a throw-away to kick-start his sentence. “So...”, he would begin, a “so” pushed out from his puckered lips, then a slight pause. “What are your objectives? What do you want to accomplish?”

*You speak Spanish. You can read French and Portuguese. What’s the big deal?* I said, “I want to get a basic vocabulary, enough to order a meal, buy tickets at the station, ask how much, say hello, goodbye, please and thank you. The basics.”

“Well...” He paused, cupping his chin between the thumb and index finger of his left hand. “You want the basics?”

“Yes. I’m taking the train to Vladivostok,” I barked!

“Okay... sit down. Let us have a practice lesson.”

We drilled. *Hello, how are you? How much? Good morning. Please. Thank you. What time is it?* Alexander Alexiyevich recited the phrase and I repeated, more or less, struggling to put together alien sounds, combinations of consonants I had never heard before, let alone pronounced. Words like “oom” (mind) and “toot” (room), stood a chance of being mimicked. Like two metals clanging together, amalgams of consonants stymied me as their clipped, sudden sounds butted into against each other. There was “KTO” (who), a soft “ka,” almost a “cha,” as in “chutzpah,” the “ka” made with a modest effort to block passage of breath that normally accompanies “kay” in English. The t was barely audible, since Russian do not aspirate their T’s, unlike the shot of air triggered by “talk” or “time.” The “o” sounded like a long “a” in “awe”: “kuhTe-awe,” pronounced quickly, as one unit. And that was an easy unit.

After fifteen minutes, I raised my hand. “Okay. Stop. I can’t do this. Let’s start at the beginning.”

“At the beginning?”

“At the beginning,” I repeated.

“Well... We will meet every day at 11:00, yes? Is that okay? We begin tomorrow, fine?”

“Yes, sir,” I said.

“Good. So... at the beginning, no?”

Slowly, methodically we drilled on vocabulary, working our way through the Russian alphabet, consonants, diphthongs, vowels and phonemes, linguistic elements that paint a portrait of a language. We touched upon grammar, a brief introduction to the masculine, feminine and neutral classes of adjectives and nouns. Though I speak Spanish and enjoy

language and words, though I read French and Portuguese and believe I have an affinity for foreign tongues, I found Russian difficult. Exactly how difficult is relative. For example, to “easily discuss a topic” in Russian and understand the language spoken “at a normal rate”<sup>35</sup> requires 1,100 hours of classroom instructions spread over 44 weeks, according to the U.S. State Department, putting Russian in category 3 on its scale of difficulty English speakers have learning another tongue. Category 1 (24 weeks, 600 hours) is the easiest – French, Spanish, Italian. Heavy lifting begins with cats 2 and 3 – Greek, Hebrew, Hindi. Full-on body building starts with cat 4 (88 weeks, 2,200 hours, year 2 in-country study) – Chinese, Japanese and Korean.<sup>36</sup> Hard numbers tell but part of the story. Language is messy. Language has too many moving parts to cubbyhole and neatly classify. Learning one language is only difficult relative to another. The National Security Agency of the U.S. Government are experts in foreign languages, for they are powerless to achieve their mission of decrypting information, without their linguistic skills. The Agency says Japanese is the most difficult to learn relative to any other language, followed by Korean, then Chinese, Arabic, Turkish, Hebrew and Russian. French, Italian and Spanish are the easiest, relatively speaking.<sup>37</sup>

My first task was to tackle the Cyrillic alphabet, derived from Latin, Greek, Hebrew and runic characters by St. Cyril (827-869) and his brother, St. Methodius (826-884), “Apostles to the Slavs” from Thessalonica, Greece. In 860 Byzantine Emperor Michael III

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<sup>35</sup> “ILR Scale” in “Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia,” (Wikimedia Foundation Inc., updated 20 May 2013), available from [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/ILR\\_scale](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/ILR_scale) Internet, retrieved on 10 October 2013. The level of proficiency described above is L-3, “professional proficiency,” according to the ILR scale. The *Interagency Language Roundtable* scale is a set of descriptions of abilities to communicate in a language... and is the standard grading scale for language proficiency in the Federal service.”

<sup>36</sup> Irene Thompson, “Language Learning Difficulty,” in “awl: about world languages” (The Technology Development Group, Leesburg, VA updated 27 October 2013), retrieved on 2 Nov 2013.

<sup>37</sup> “Foreign Language Learning: A Comparative Analysis of Relative Difficulty, ” [http://www.nsa.gov/public\\_info/\\_files/cryptologic\\_spectrum/foreign\\_language.pdf](http://www.nsa.gov/public_info/_files/cryptologic_spectrum/foreign_language.pdf), (National Security Agency of the United States of America, Ft. Meade, MD), retrieved on 10 October 10, 2013.

and Photius, the Patriarch of Constantinople, sent the brothers to Eastern Europe to preach the Gospel.<sup>38</sup> Russian Cyrillic has 33 letters, 10 of which are vowels, 21 consonants and 2 signals, letters that have no sound, but determine the sound of the consonant that comes immediately before. One signals a “hard” consonant, the other a “soft” one.<sup>39</sup>

Alexander Alexiyevich introduced this distinction to me, as my ear was incapable of discerning it. “Ahem... this signal means the consonant before it is hard,” he said. “The other character says its consonant is soft.”

Embarrassed by my ignorance, all of which was 100% justifiable, I said, “I see.” Suddenly, the answer came. “I pronounce the hard one louder than the soft one, right?” It’s hard, so I go for it; it’s soft, so I power down.

“Ah... well, no. Use the same tone.”

“I see,” which I did not.

Linguists call the hard-soft sound-making process palatalization. Speakers articulate a hard consonant by placing their tongue closer to the palate. They make a soft one with their tongue further away. In English, the t in pet is palatalized – it is a hard t as is the letter, “T,” standing alone. The t in patch is soft, with the tongue barely brushing against the roof of the mouth. Palatalization increases the sounds Russian consonants make to thirty-seven, effectively boosting their alphabet in terms of “letter-sounds” to 10 vowels and 37 consonants, a total of 47. *But*, there is an exception to every rule, Russian being no different. Three consonants are always hard, another three always soft. Keeping these six consonants in mind demands closer inspection of a word, be it written or spoken, adding an extra element

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<sup>38</sup> “Saints Cyril and Methodius” in “Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia,” (Wikimedia Foundation Inc., updated 04 November 2013), available from [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Saints\\_Cyril\\_and\\_Methodius](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Saints_Cyril_and_Methodius), retrieved on 14 November 2013.

<sup>39</sup> The English alphabet has 26 letters, 6 vowels and 20 consonants, producing 39 letter-sounds, ([www.pronunciationtips.com](http://www.pronunciationtips.com), retrieved on 26 September 2013).

of discipline, one more complication to learning the language. It is entirely reasonable to give each of these six consonants an additional value of 1 letter-sound, increasing the Russian alphabet, in terms of its value in letter sounds, to 43 consonants for a total of 53, including the ten vowels, a whopping increase of 60%!

A, B, E, H, K, M, O, P, C, T, Y, and X are 12 identical twins in the Russian and English alphabets. Make it fourteen, if one includes Ë and the reversed R, written as Я. I put them in the twins' column because, even though my eyes see Ë and Я as strange, by habit they are normal E's and R's, abnormally typed. Some look-alikes are also sound-alikes. A sounds like the *ah* in *father*, and o like the o in *rotten*, much of the time. My training automatically threw me into pronouncing the *American* sound for the Russian letter that has an identical twin in English in appearance, but not pronunciation. A few examples: E sounds like *yeh*; B like *vee*, H like *en*, P like *are*, but always trilled like the R in Spanish, Y like *oo* in *cartoon*, the reverse Я (okay, a half-twin) like *ya* in *yahoo*, X like the "akh" in *Bach*, the famous German composer and C, which is always pronounced as *ess* in *sassy*. Finally, there is the strange Ë. It sounds like the "yo!" one substitutes for "here," when responding to a roll call. I am happy with the sameness between the two alphabets. It makes Russian easier to write; but, unleashes verbal mayhem on what precious little accuracy I bring my recitation of Russian phrases. In my alphabet-math, B (vee), H (en), P (r), Я (ya), X (akh), C (ess) and Ë (yo) count as 14, instead of 7, putting the new, revised value for letter-sounds in Russia's Cyrillic alphabet to 60. I'm getting close to double what I signed up for.

And speaking of math, Cyrillic contains the most famous math symbol of all, pi, written as  $\pi$  in math and  $\pi$  in Cyrillic, pronounced like our p, but with less effort. The speaker's lips are hardly pressed together. Little or no air follows p's enunciation in Russian,

quite different than the shot of wind that comes after “puff.” Because math was not part of my bargain,  $\pi$  or  $\pi$  is worth at least two letters. I’ve stopped adding. I am now over 60.

Enough

Russian vowels can be stressed or unstressed; though, there are no rules to accent syllables in a word and accent marks are not used in sentences. Like all languages, pronouncing with the correct accent is basic. Two consecutive vowels in Russian do not form a diphthong as in English (ou as in *ouch*); but are separate syllables. No rules for accenting a word doubles the value of vowels, since they are the letter-sound that carries the accent mark. In spite of my desire to stop counting, I cannot help but to add another 10 to my letter-sound total, making the value at least 70, but more importantly doubling my work load.

Upon coming across a new word, Alexander Alexiyevich said, “Well... the consonant is voiceless.”

“Voiceless? You mean I don’t pronounce it?”

“Ooooh... no. No, you pronounce it. Of course... yes; it’s just voiceless.”

“What do I do, whisper?”

“Whisper? Ah... what means this, whisper?”

“Say it softly, like a secret.” I cupped both hands around my mouth and mingled the phrase with my breath, articulating the words precisely and muting them at the same time.

“Ah... yes, secret. No, not like a secret. Say it with the same force, just voiceless.”

“How do I tell voiced from voiceless?”

“Well... listen. Listen carefully.”

“But, how can I hear a noiseless sound?” Hard, soft, voiced, voiceless, it’s death by a thousand cuts.

Proud though I was about my knowledge of language, I had never heard of voiced and voiceless consonants. I thought the concept was unique to Russian; but every language has voiced and voiceless sounds. Speaker's vocal cords vibrate to produce voiced consonants and do not vibrate when articulating voiceless ones. For example, the "ess" sound in please is pronounced, please, voiced, since the z originates in vibrating vocal cords at the back of the throat. The "ess" sound in place is voiceless, originating exclusively in the front of the mouth, no vibrating cords. For both sounds, z in please and ess in place, the shape of the lips and location of the tongue are the same. One vibrates; the other does not. One is sexy, the other is stale.

Six sounds in Russian and English are always voiced. They are zh as in usual, z, l (long), g as in good, v (victory) and b as in brook. Six sounds are voiceless: p, f, k, t, and s as in same and "ts" as in its. In both languages, there are lots of rules surrounding voiced and unvoiced consonants. Alexander Alexiyevich was right. You have to listen.

I've always loved vowels. They are soft. They are the building blocks for all words. They are the first letters I learned. They carry words' accents. They are elites. But from here on, I hate A and O, thoroughly despise them. Stressed, Russians pronounce A as "ah" and O as "awe." Unstressed, as the first letter of a word, both are spoken as "ah." Unstressed in other positions, both sound like the a and along. There are no rules for stressing one syllable over another and no accent symbols. The uncertainty of not knowing when to say "ah," "awe" or "uh" put another log on this mule's back. Being popular vowels, building blocks, actually, a lot of words have an a or an o or both. Яelentless step by яelentless step, the weight of learning Russian overwhelms me.

Lest I forget too soon, a non-English speaker gets more than she bargained for:

I take it you already know of tough and bough and cough and dough?

Some may stumble, but not you, on hiccough, thorough, slough, and through?

So now, you are ready, perhaps, to learn of less familiar traps?

Beware of heard, a dreadful word, that looks like beard, but sounds like bird.

And dead, it's said like bed, not bead; for goodness' sake, don't call it deed!

Watch out for meat and great and threat. (They rhyme with suite and straight and debt.)

A moth is not a moth in mother, nor both in bother, nor broth in brother.

And here is not a match for there, nor dear and fear, for bear and pear.

And then there's dose and rose and lose – just look them up – and goose and choose

And cork and work and card and ward and font and front and word and sword

And do and go, then thwart and cart, come, come! I've hardly made a start.

A dreadful language? Why man alive! I learned to talk it when I was five.

And yet to write it, the more I tried, I hadn't learned it at fifty-five.

- Author Unknown

Alex – in the end I gave up and simply called him, Alex, with his permission – got me through the Russian alphabets, all 70 points of value. I could read street signs, learning quickly that every town in Russia has a Karl Marx Street and a Lenin Square, Plaza or Parkway. I could say hello, good bye, please, thank you, good morning and good night and precious few other phrases. For the great train ride ahead, I would have to rely on sign language, Russians' knowledge of English – every one I met knew at least two words, “Russia big” – and pointing.

To say thank you, I gave Alexander Alexiyevich a brass belt buckle, oval, with an embossed thunderbird, sacred god and protector of the indigenous peoples of the Pacific Northwest. When I bought it in Seattle, I thought it would be a good souvenir from America. It goes well with Alex’s plaid shirts and his habitual jeans.

### *The Gift Redux*

My stay in Irkutsk ended after my last Russian lesson on Friday, June 14, when I took train No. 2 to Vladivostok 2,500 miles east, 100 miles longer than the drive from New York to Phoenix. For most foreign travelers the trans-Siberian is either train No. 1 or 2. Both are called “The Rossiya.” Both are expresses, the fastest, making the fewest stops. Number 2 leaves Moscow for Vladivostok on even dates; number 1 leaves Vladivostok for Moscow on odd dates. Each travels 5,600 miles, equal to a flight between New York and Egypt. Leaving Moscow, beginning a 36 hour journey through what remains of continental Europe, crossing the Urals – the Rock as the Russians call them – Rossiya No. 2 enters Asia. Its initial stop in

Siberia is Tyumen, informal capital of Russia’s Oil Patch and the nation’s first Siberian settlement in 1686.<sup>40</sup> Rossiya No. 2 is the more luxurious with lux, kupé and third class service. No. 1 does not always



offer lux. It also takes an additional 20 hours, arriving in Moscow 7 days after departure from Vladivostok.

<sup>40</sup> “Tyumen” in “Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia,” (Wikimedia Foundation Inc., updated 14 September 2013), available from <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tyumen>, retrieved on 15 September 2013.

Both trains pass through 7 time zones, 12 regions and 87 cities.<sup>41</sup> Both are modern, thoroughly clean and crewed by the elite of RZD Russian Railways' attendants, called *provodniki*, two to a car, often husband and wife teams, with the wife traditionally in charge. Lux class sleeps two per compartment. Its day-time seats slide down flat, meeting at the cabin's center, forming a double bed. I traveled kupé or second class, four bunks, two down and two up, a window, a small table for food, reading lamp, space for stowing luggage and a sliding door for privacy. A wife-husband *provodniki* duo took charge of our car. They wore blue Eisenhower jackets, skirts and trousers and the kind of hat I saw on Russian military, police, fire and other security personnel, one with a big round blue top that looked like a shallow bowl with its sides pointing upward, casting a shadow on the wearer's epaulets. The men were tall and slim. The women were boxy and big bosomed, with blond hair and blue eyes, every one of them. Mother hens in charge of their brood, they rarely smiled, except to say goodbye (“dás-vee-dahn-ya”) to departing travelers.

Every new passenger got fresh linens, sheets, a pillow and case, a quilt and an ornate faux silver glass holder and glass, shaped like the old-timey ones made for a fountain Coca-Cola. Except, this one is for tea. In every car the fired-up samovar across from the *provodnikis'* cabin is *never, ever* without a steady-state supply of hot water. Both Rossiyas have a dining car, good for coffee, beer, vodka – many drink, but I saw no drunks – and a hot meal, mediocre.

At every stop, the *provodniki* guard the entrance to each car, checking passengers' tickets, directing them to their reserved compartment. *Provodniki* know who is traveling under their authority. They perform their chores methodically, rarely missing an opportunity

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<sup>41</sup> “Introduction to the Trans-Siberian Railway in “way to russia: The most popular travel guide to Russia since 2001,” (Way to Russia Guides, Berlin, Germany). available from <http://www.waytorussia.net/TransSiberian/Intro.html>, retrieved on 25 September 2013.

to peek into a compartment for a headcount, to make sure all is well or just to stay on top of things. Even a higher priority than hot water in the samovars, is an uneventful trip, no surprises, no disruptions. Vacuum, clean the toilets, turn the lights down at night, sell the odd candy bar out of their cabin, collect and punch tickets, the *provodniki* are comfortable in their routine. The rail car is their home. They want harmony, peace and quiet.

The Trans-Sib operates entirely on Moscow time. Clocks in stations and every car, and listings on all timetables – everything is Moscow time and has been Moscow time from the beginning. There is merit to this approach, especially when it comes to scheduling and calculating the time between stops. If a rider loses sight of Moscow time, as did I, then all kinds of consequences follow, the main one being you miss the train, miss connections, pay cancellation fees at reserved hotels, upset friends and, if you are a senior, as am I, get repeatedly confused about the time of day. My train left Irkutsk two hours late at 9:30 PM local, which was 4:30 Friday afternoon in Moscow. When planning my rides, I constantly jumped between the officially scheduled arrival and departure times and the corresponding local hour and minute, to make sure I had daylight passage through regions I especially wanted to see and that I reserved my hotel for arrival on the correct *local date and time*.

An elderly woman from Kazakhstan occupied the lower bunk opposite mine. The *provodniki* affectionately called her “Babushka,” Russian for grandmother. It is a term of respect, as is “uncle,” “auntie” or “little father” for older people, all fairly common in Russia. Her hair was dyed a dark burnt orange, tinged with red highlights. Deep semi-circular creases gave way to her lively brown eyes, almond shaped, peering from beneath black, scanty eyebrows. Her alluring smile turned slightly downward at the corners of her mouth. High cheekbones accented her narrow face. Tiny diamond studs pierced her ear lobes. Her pale

white skin needed color. Her hands were inordinately large, wrinkled and fleshy. She drank tea and slept through the first night. The two upper bunks were vacant, making the compartment seem bigger than it actually was, transforming the small room into a lonely monotonous space, empty, except for the clickity-clacks of the train's wheels, mocked by the occasional clang of couplings adjusting to a change in speed.

From Irkutsk we traveled through the night to Ulan Ude, 7 hours and 275 miles distant, stopping for 30 minutes to pick up and drop off passengers. On the trip into Russia from Ulan Bator, Mongolia, 18 days' earlier, I spent a day and night in UU. It is the capital city of the Republic of Buryatia, home of the Mongolian Buryats of the Tibetan Buddhist faith, those we associate with the Dalai Lama. Buryats are the largest indigenous group in Siberia (population 404,000<sup>4243</sup>). Ulan Ude enjoys fame for its preserved Buddhist temples and notoriety for its massive 42 ton bronze statue of Vladimir Lenin's head. It rests 25 feet high on a pedestal of polished granite. Erected on the occasion of the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his birth, the head is on Soviet Square in front of the House of Government.<sup>44</sup> No longer evoking revolutionary fervor, it is a central meeting spot and photo op for tourists and wedding parties.



Lenin is one of the most sculpted persons of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. His statue marked the entrance to stations large and small along the railway. In classic Italian contrapposto stance with most of his weight on one leg, he presents a relaxed, confident image. Staring straight ahead, his right arm extends outward with right hand held high,

<sup>42</sup> Anthony Haywood et al, *The Trans-Siberian, 4e* (Oakland: Lonely Planet, 2012), 206. Population is of Ulan Ude, not the Republic of Buryatia.

<sup>43</sup> Bryn Thomas, *Trans-Siberian Handbook, 7e* (Hindhead, Surrey, U.K.: Trailblazer Publications, 2007), 391. Thomas reports the Buryat population is about 350,000.

<sup>44</sup> "Statue of the Head of Lenin," in "Nile Guide for travelers by locals," (The Nile Project Inc., San Francisco, 2013) available from <http://www.nileguide.com/destination/ulan-ude-russia-178/things-to-do/statue-of-the-head-of-lenin/1189474>, retrieved on 14 September 2013.

fingers tightly together, forming a V with his thumb. He wears a jacket and vest, sometimes with and other times without his great coat. His left thumb curls beneath his garment's lapel, fingers grabbing its top. His is the orator's pose, frozen in time, smiling slyly like the Cheshire cat, pointing the way forward, confident of the Revolution's triumph, as if he knows something hidden and mysterious. He is the guarantor of victory. It is sad and inspiring. Russians and tourists alike, including me, mimic his pose while someone else snaps a photo. Yet, Lenin shaped 20<sup>th</sup> century history. He broke the Czar's tyranny, substituting his own, one less arbitrary, more egalitarian, lifting millions out of poverty, while maintaining the despotic "iron hand" so many Russians insist is the only way to govern their country.

"Clinton good. Gorbachev no good. Regan good. Bush bad. Yeltsin very bad. Obama good. Putin good," said Ivan, the young lieutenant in the Russian Army who joined us at Chita. A 17 hour trip from Irkutsk (600 miles), Rossiya No. 2 arrived at 2:30 Saturday afternoon, the 15<sup>th</sup>. Ivan and I shared the same destination, Khabarovsk, forty hours' and fourteen hundred miles east, at the meeting of the great Amur River, one of the world's ten longest, with the Ussuri.

The route took us through two of Siberia's three ecological zones, beginning with a gentle, 125 mile descent beside the Ingoda River, through the great steppes of Central Asia, grassy fertile and arable plains of rich black loamy soil that extend south into Mongolia and east, deep into European Russia. To the north and at times the south, the steppe gave way to the Siberian taigá, by far the world's largest forest, a one-thousand mile wide, north-south band of woodlands, growing almost 20% of earth's trees – cedar, pines, firs, birch, willows,

poplars, aspens, elms, larches, oaks and the tartar maple.<sup>45</sup> The taigá's "suffocating enclosure of trees" erases any sense of distance, eliminating the possibility of spatial perspective, literally driving people mad.<sup>46</sup> Hunters strictly observe the unwritten law of the taigá. They stock their shacks with matches, kindling, salt and food, "never knowing what straits people who come after them would be in."<sup>47</sup>

The tundra begins north of the taigá. It is a treeless, desolate steppe, carpeted with "brownish-gray arctic moss"<sup>48</sup> and a "silvery maze of lichen and fungi,"<sup>49</sup> life that grows only in summer, when continuous daylight melts the earth. All of the tundra and virtually all of the taigá of eastern Siberia and much of the steppe are a land of permafrost, earth frozen thousands of years, in many places more than a quarter –mile deep.<sup>50</sup> Long, hot summer days melt the seasonal ice cover and two to thirteen feet<sup>51</sup> of permafrost across the steppe, in the taigá, except for a relatively small area, always frozen, and throughout the tundra. The tundra becomes a vast, spongy, uninhabitable bog. The taigá and steppe are full of ponds, flowing rivers, streams, creeks, mud puddles and mud.

Then, the mosquitoes arrive, having bred in standing water. Lethal swarms attack and kill moose. People venture outside wearing beekeeping apparel, but with finer mesh knitting. Owners smear tar over their huskies' heads, paying particular attention to snouts, eyes and

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<sup>45</sup> Kennan, *Siberia and the Exile System*, 59 and Thomas, *Trans-Siberian Handbook*, 393, 397, 405.

<sup>46</sup> Colin Thubron, *In Siberia* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers Inc., 1999), 204.

<sup>47</sup> Valentin Rasputin, *Siberia, Siberia*, trans. Margaret Winchell and Gerald Mikkelson (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1996), 55.

<sup>48</sup> Kennan, *Siberia and the Exile System*, 56.

<sup>49</sup> Thubron, *In Siberia*, 35.

<sup>50</sup> Kennan, *Siberia and the Exile System*, 59.

<sup>51</sup> "What Is Permafrost?" in the "International Permafrost Association," (The International Permafrost Association, Potsdam, Germany, 2011) available from [Ipa.arcticportal.org/resources/what-is-permafrost](http://Ipa.arcticportal.org/resources/what-is-permafrost), retrieved on 01 Oct 2013.

ears. Said a visiting Italian, “If Dante had traveled in Siberia, he would have invented a new form of torture for criminals, using mosquitoes.”<sup>52</sup>

Ivan said he was in charge of the “motor pools” at military installations near Khabarovsk. He was returning from visiting his family in Chita. I laid out my sausages, a bottle of high-class vodka, three types of white cheese – Russians love dairy products and mayonnaise – and tough, thick-crust black bread that smelled like warm milk. Babushka had a bowl of instant noodles. We both asked Ivan to join. He did, after declining several times. He bought nothing to eat, a situation he more than made up for, with his purchases of snacks, beer, vodka and cakes at the inevitable supermarket in front of every station serving a city of any size. Ivan asked me where I had traveled before, stunned when I replied to 86 other countries. He wanted to know if I liked Russia.

“Yes, a lot.”

He said he likes the U.S.; but our media goes out of its way to paint a single, negative picture of Russia, a comment other Russians and foreigners had shared with me.

A small child of two or three years came into our compartment. He pushed himself between Babushka’s legs, draping his arms over her knees. His mother peeked in. “Give Babushka a hug,” she said. “Give her a kiss.” Babushka picked him up. He put his arms around her neck.

A few hours later when Babushka got off at her stop, her son and his wife were on the platform. A *provodnik* helped her negotiate the train’s high steps. Ivan and I carried her luggage. Her teenage granddaughter rushed into her arms, laughing and crying, pressing the side of her head into Babushka’s chest. She stood, waving goodbye, as Rossiya No. 2 pulled out of the station.

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<sup>52</sup> Rasputin, *Siberia, Siberia*, 52.

“You can call me Vanya,” said Ivan, referring to the diminutive used by his parents and friends. We talked about the break-up of the Soviet Union, which he thought was a terrible mistake, though he was but 9 or 10 at the time.

“Here, take a look at this,” I said, as I handed him a pocket knife I bought at the Central Market in Irkutsk. I have a collection. This one had finely carved wooden sides and a quality blade, skillfully engraved with an intricate, paisley pattern.

Vanya balanced it on his index finger. He opened and closed the blade several times. “Beautiful. Thank you. *Spah-cee-bah*. Thank you very much.”

*You just gave away your knife! You cannot find another one and you WILL NOT ask for this one back. Kiss it goodbye. Chalk it up to tuition paid, yet again, to learn customs and culture in a foreign land. You will always pay tuition, no matter how far and wide you travel.*

Rossiia No. 2 made a brief stop at Darasun, a town famous for its carbonated mineral water, especially popular in Korea and China.<sup>53</sup> Soon the Ingoda joined the Onon to form the Shilka River, which the train followed for 120 miles. We passed wide plains of wheat, barley, soya beans, sun flowers and melons. Molybdenum, a mineral used to harden steel, and gold mines were scattered along the way. Across the Shilka to the south I saw a large, deserted Orthodox church, white with blue horizontal trim just below its onion dome, a symbol of warmth and compassion in a harsh land where winter temps fall to minus 87°F. Seven-hundred kilometres to the north lay Olekminsk, a short distance, according to a favorite saying. “In Siberia a thousand kilometres is nothing to travel and a litre of vodka is nothing to drink.”<sup>54</sup> Olekminsk is home to yet another superlative, of which Siberia has so

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<sup>53</sup> Bryn Thomas, *Trans-Siberian Handbook*, 400.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid*, 403.

many, this one being the widest temperature swing on the planet, a variance ranging from - 87°F in winter to plus 113°F in summer.<sup>55</sup>

The next day, Sunday the 16<sup>th</sup>, Vanya reciprocated with a gift of his own, a paperback copy of Hamlet, a bilingual version, English on the left-hand page and Russian on the right. Its cover was creased, the edges of its pages worn, well-thumbed.

I tried to decipher the Russian that matched Hamlet's famous soliloquy. I knew the alphabet; but could identify no words other than Hamlet, transliterated into Cyrillic.

"Nice," I said. "Here." I gave the book to Vanya, thinking like an American, that he was showing it to me.

"No." He gently pushed my hand away.

"Thank you. Thank you very much. *Spah-cee-bah.*"



### ***Redemption***

Siberia, land of superlatives extreme,  
 overwhelming presence of nature, pedestrian, vast and profound,  
 shamelessly exploited for its wealth, without plan or scheme,  
 endures in calmness, serene, reposed on frozen ground.

Grain from its steppes, health from its waters nourish earth.

Its gold, rare minerals, oil, furs, wood and fish – incalculable worth –  
 are the planet's source of sustained survival.

Arrogance, greed, plunder, wanton neglect strive to rival

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid, 403.

Siberia's cruel innocence, its unlaboured exuberance.

But, a new day does not dawn

to obliterate results of slaughtered fawn,

'ere not long in nature's clock there is catastrophic confluence

of events, an ecological disaster.

Save us, Siberians, hearty, foolish and courageous, understanding of your master.

### *The Lost Notebook*

My return flight originated in Vladivostok, with a transfer and two day layover in Seoul. Somewhere between Incheon Airport and the Hamilton Hotel in Itaewon, the Greenwich Village of Seoul. Heartbroken, I lost my principal notebook. I paid the concierge \$20 to make inquiries at the Korea Rail Lost and Found. He visited their airport office at Incheon when he left for his vacation the next day, as did I, my departure being two days later.

I had some great stories in that notebook.

I felt numb, like my dear friend Reid felt when she lost her husband, Robert, an amicable curmudgeon who dropped dead while working out at the YMCA the first day it opened in the New Year, some time ago.

I had lost momentum, the wind gone from my sails. I got my wake up call, my epiphany, a moment of enlightenment coming from the empty Lost and Found Office of the Seoul Metro. I would rely on my recall of the trip. I had learned more than I thought possible about Russia and Russian culture, though, in truth, not much at all. I was ignorant of

Mongolia, aside from the odd, sterile article in *Foreign Affairs* magazine. My picture of Siberia changed for the better. I had experienced a jewel in Vladivostok, a warm, friendly, fun-loving city on the Pacific. I am not sure I was any more mature, having learned, yet again, that despite my considerable experience, as a traveler, I do not miss an opportunity to make a rookie move, in this case my “gift” to Ivan. I don’t know that I have any deeper understanding of my own American culture. Chance birthed me in this country, a stroke of luck for which I am grateful. Need I know more? I am as curious as ever about places I have yet to visit and what it means to be human. Around twelve more countries and I hit my lifetime goal of 100, plus a trip to Antarctica, the outstanding continent not yet on any of my itineraries.

I am doubtful anyone can measure their enlightenment, can declare they are more enlightened as a result of a trip. My experience of Lake Baikal strengthened my faith. Yes, the weather events I saw are scientifically explainable. Yes, meeting Elena, hearing her pray in Russian, not understanding a word, could have been coincidence and no more. Yes, Baikal’s double rainbow may not be a rarity. Some things one accepts. It is not that they are not worth thinking about; it’s that thinking about them leads to a rational conclusion, when the value of the experience is in its irrational significance. Anything can be explained. Some things are not, by choice, explainable. That makes them not less understandable.

### *Artist's Statement*

In the spring of my senior year at the University of Maryland, I pictured my ideal life revolving around reading, writing and studying. Though there is nothing of a material nature I would change in the years between my graduation and enrolling in the MLA Program, the picture I had in my mind that spring of 1969 has materialized beyond my most fanciful dream. I have spent the last two and one-half years studying, reading, researching, engaging in stimulating intellectual conversation, continuously learning, writing and traveling. The capstone experience for this period – and there are many – is the MLA Final Project, in my case an essay about travel an innate human activity, journey of self-discovery, one that educates, stimulates spiritual development, and increases tolerance and understanding, making the traveler a wiser, more enlightened person.

My essay is about traveling on the Trans-Siberian Railroad. Though it is an acclaimed journey that world travelers consider a must, the Trans-Sib, while a huge train ride, is a small story I will use to tell the big one: travel as a journey of personal discovery that produces insight into the nature of being human. Travel strengthens one's ability to think critically. It promotes curiosity, giving people joy from living in a state of wonder, open to accidental discoveries. Travel stimulates spiritual development and enlightenment, yielding understanding beyond rational thinking and scientific inquiry into who we are and why we are here. I dare not even think of success in attempting to write about such lofty concepts; but though my attempts to meet others and to experience their cultures, and tell the story as I saw it, I believed my narrative held an opportunity to reveal insight into these big ideas.

Colin Thubron, Bruce Chatwin and Eric Newby's works are models for my project, though I surveyed travel literature going back to the Classical Greek and early Chinese

writings on the subject. One of Britain's greatest living writers, Thubron's sharp eye and authenticity breathe life into a destination, making it central to the traveler's undiscovered awareness of self. Chatwin's spontaneous descriptions of nature and people keeps a story alive, as he did with the tale of Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid's flight to South America, weaving it through his classic, *In Patagonia*. Newby's conversational prose, powers of observation and sense of humor give his best-known work, *A Short Walk in the Hindu Kush*, a casual flow that grabs readers before they know it, swiftly carrying them to the narrative's end.

The travel bug bit during my first job, obtaining, compiling and publishing a set of tariffs for travel services at 420 destinations worldwide, used by agents to design customized foreign itineraries for their clients. I made trips to Africa, Europe, Asia, Canada, Mexico and the Caribbean, often squeezing in a half-day sightseeing tour of my destination, especially if it was my first visit. I worked and lived in Hong Kong, Singapore and Tokyo. Annual home leaves to the States, business and leisure travel took me all over Asia and, indeed, around the world more than a dozen times.

Being on a ship, boat, plane, train or car relaxes me, brings peace of mind. Meeting other people, eating local food and sightseeing are primary benefits of my travels. I cannot learn enough about the differences (culture, attitudes, values, behaviors) and the sameness (beliefs, attitudes, family) that make us human.

Travel by rail is a favorite. I've taken the Trans-Canadian from Toronto to Vancouver, a journey through a land of thousands of pristine lakes, unending prairie, mountain glaciers and virgin forests. Permanently snow-covered, mountain peaks, all at least 22,000 feet of altitude, mark the eastern side of the magnificent *altiplano*, the Andean

Plateau of South America. The rail track runs south and north some 400 kilometers between Cusco and the university town of Puno in Peru. Both the trans-Canadian and high-plains rides speak to the modest place we humans have in the scheme of things.

Travel educates. It provides knowledge about a destination, what critics of travel literature call *otherness*, meaning time, place, people, geography and culture different or “other” than our own. The best-known traveler of the Middle Ages was Marco Polo. His book opened a vast *other*, the Great Silk Road connecting Europe and Asia over land for the first time, stimulating valuable trade and expanding peoples’ knowledge of geography, culture, and new inventions (silk, paper money, gun powder). Also in the Middle Ages, Ibn Battutah was an indefatigable wayfarer from the Muslim World, the only traveler to visit every Islamic country of the time. He wrote about a 28 year journey that started from his home in Tangiers, taking him to the pilgrimage to Mecca and beyond, more than 75,000 miles.<sup>1</sup> Discoveries of the New World and Magellan’s global voyage revolutionized Europe’s understanding of earth. Of these illustrious explorers, the greatest by far, but ironically the least known, was Zheng He (1371 – 1435), the supreme Chinese navigator whose colossal voyages (Africa, Southeast Asia, and the Pacific) and maritime innovations dwarf Europe’s epic achievements. Under Zheng He’s command, the Chinese built ships four times the size of those in Columbus’ fleet. An armada of more than 300 vessels manned by almost 28,000 sailors made his first voyage of exploration to Southeast Asia in 1405.<sup>2</sup>

My essay fits into this broad tradition – travel as educational, spiritually stimulating and enlightening. My essay is part travelogue. It is a narrative of dialogs, observations, and conclusions from in the trip and a meditation about the journey itself.

I flew to Seoul to attend the wedding of our Korean “daughter,” an outstanding young woman for whom we were her host family while she attended the University of Georgia. From Seoul, I took a flight to the capital city of Mongolia, Ulan Bator. The rest of my journey was overland. A ten hour bus trip from UB north to Russia and train rides across Eastern Siberia. My journey ended in the Pacific port city of Vladivostok.

I write about the pedestrian pleasures of rail travel, urban life in Mongolia, shopping, learning Russian, mystical encounters, indelible experiences of nature, monotony, sightseeing and personal travel experiences from years before beginning this journey. Above all, I write about the people I observed and the people I met. The narrative illustrates the benefits of travel through encounters with others along the way. There was a prayer session with a fellow sightseer in Russia that was absolutely the last thing I expected. It gave me fresh, youthful, innocent eyes to behold with inexplicable wonder the constant movement of nature around Lake Baikal, the world’s largest body of fresh water. Russian lessons with my tutor and the friendships I formed with the staff at Irkutsk State Linguistic University made Russia warm, human, and familiar. I never thought I would stay with a host family at 66, as did Anne Kim, our Korean “daughter” with us. Living with Sergei and Tatiana Nikolaeva, eating home cooked meals, answering and asking questions, sitting around the kitchen table idly chatting taught me yet again, for the umpteenth time, that we have more in common than apart and, though customs are different, though priorities are not congruent, though wants and desires and ambitions vary, at a basic level, that of family and friendship, people are the same.

If the essay illustrates “good writing,” I credit all to my wife’s loving support, and UNCA’s instruction, especially the three classes I took with Tommy Hays and every other

course, for each one emphasized excellence in research and writing. If the essay succeeds in telling a story of travel as educational, as spiritually developing and finally, as increasing one's "wisdom," then I am humbly ever so grateful for the gifts those I met, both in research and in person, gave to me. For it is not mine, but their story I have tried to share.

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