By Juliet Tan

Reindeer Herding in Siberia

"Well, getting to Uro will not be easy," my course director, Alla, said to me. We were in St. Petersburg at that point in time, discussing logistics of the fieldwork I would be conducting as part of my anthropology course. "It takes awhile to get there."

"That's okay," I said enthusiastically, thinking about all the long haul flights and connections I had dealt with every year to get myself from Singapore to Amherst, Massachusetts, where I attended undergraduate college. I was soon to discover that the 19-hour direct SQ flight and efficient Amtrak train connection that I had gotten used to over the years paled in comparison to the journey I was about to embark on.

"Well, first you have to take an overnight train from St. Petersburg to Moscow."

"Okay."

"From Moscow, you'll take a flight to Irkutsk, that shouldn't be more than a 6-hour flight."

"Great."

"From Irkutsk you will have to take an *electrichka* (electric train) to Siudyanka, which will end you up around Lake Baikal."

"Okay."

"And from Siudyanka you will take a local bus to Mondi, which is located in Buryatia itself."

"Mmhmm."

"And from Mondi, you will try to hitch a ride from someone to Orlik. Orlik is the regional capital of the Oka mountains. Once you reach Orlik it will be easy to get to Uro where the Soyot people live; you can get there by horse or van or tractor. Any local will direct you there."

"Hitch a ride? Do you mean hitchhike?" I asked incredulously.

"Yes, hitchhike, that is what I mean," Alla said.

"Isn't Orlik something like half a day's journey over land from Mondi?"

"Yes, it will probably take you 11 hours or so. It really depends on the condition of the roads; once it took me 22 hours because the roads were so frozen over."

"Alla, who's going to agree to give me a ride for 11 hours? What if they want to stop before Orlik?" I asked distractedly, as I pondered whether getting rides from Russian strangers in the middle of winter would be going against my mother's instructional pleas for me to not "do anything stupid or dangerous" while I was in Russia.

"Oh, don't worry, by the time you get to Mondi, you will be so far out from the city that anyone passing by will definitely be on his way to Orlik. Not to worry. Besides, worrying will do us no good, since there is no other way to get there."

Whenever people hear that I've spent some time in Siberia, they often joke that people get exiled to Siberia, not volunteer to get sent there. I am constantly asked: "Why Russia? How did you end up there?"

To be honest, I never imagined myself ever visiting Russia, much less living, breathing, and speaking Russian. As a highly passionate anthropology major in university, however, I developed an irrepressible interest in nomadic

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Sunrise in winter, Lake Baikal frozen over.

Walking to the main grocery store in Port Baikal to buy some chocolate right after a snowstorm.

cultures and Arctic studies. As I read more about nomadic pastoralism and the Polar Regions, I soon wanted nothing more than to spend my junior year abroad learning more about reindeer-herding tribes. I applied to a number of anthropology-based study abroad programme, and a series of unexpected and highly fortunate events (perhaps the most important of which was the fact that I had studied Russian as part of my coursework in university) led me to the Oka region of Buryatia, home of the Soyot people of Southern Siberia.

Historically, ancestors of the Soyot people arrived in the Okinsky region at the end of the third millennium BC from Eastern Siberia. The Soyots were proto-Samoyedic hunter-gatherers, living off foods and animals of the land. Favorable soil and land conditions in the Eastern Sayani mountains (located in the Okinsky region) were conducive to animal breeding; as a result, the Soyots began to domesticate reindeer while simultaneously involving themselves in cattle-breeding. Due to their domestication of reindeer, they were also seasonally nomadic, and traditionally lived in 8-sided yurts. In present day Oka, Soyot reindeer-herding families are still nomadic, migrating three times a year. During the summer and autumn, the Soyot pastoralists live in small huts, and in winter, the men are fully nomadic with the reindeer herds.

As described above, the journey to Oka was long and rather tedious. The harsh and unforgiving weather of Siberia made the journey even more taxing; I arrived at Orlik, the capital of Oka, at midnight on a harsh, snowy night. There were no streetlights in the settlement, and I marveled at how I was completely unable to see my hands as I waved them vigorously in front of my own face. It was incredible how brightly the stars shone from lack of stray settlement light. Because it was so dark, I was unable to find the outhouse my first night, and I remember sheepishly relieving myself by a big prickly tree, thinking: this is the most ridiculous thing ever – me peeing in the wilderness in the middle of Siberia with a snowstorm billowing around and snow collecting in my pants. It was an amazing feeling.

During my time in Oka, I lived with a reindeer-herding family in the settlement of Uro, located in the Hoito-Uro mountain range. My host father was a tall, thin, hardworking man with a kind sense of humour, and my host mother a thoughtful, reserved lady, only six years older than myself. My four host siblings, ranging from four months to ten years of age, ensured that there was never a dull moment at any time of the day. Though my host family was reserved in the beginning, we soon warmed up to each other and got used to long conversations about our differing countries and cultures. They were curious about Singapore and delighted in the photos I had brought along with me, especially enjoying photos of my family, home, the Botanical Gardens, Orchard Road and Marina Bay. I recall how they stared at disbelief as I showed them the skyline of Singapore and pointed out the 63-storey OUB building at which my dad used to work. Previously, the highest buildings most people in Oka had seen were 10-storey buildings in the regional capital, Irkutsk.

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Although there is a clear division of labour within Soyot culture, my host father was kind enough to take me under his wing and teach me intricate details of reindeer husbandry, which would eventually become the focus of my senior honors thesis in anthropology. I soon became accustomed to following the men out into the tundra to herd the reindeer and collect reindeer feed, as well as round up the sheep and yak. During those sojourns into the mountains, what made an impression on me more than the herders' gentle and efficient care of their animals was their overwhelming love of Oka land. I had brought a camera along with me, and the herders all proudly asked me to take photos of their families, reindeer herds, and homes. Above all, they insisted I take pictures of the Oka landscape to show my friends and family at home.

I grew incredibly close to my host family and was touched by their hospitality and concern for my well-being. One morning as my host mother and I were folding *pelmini* (little meat dumplings, the Russian version of *xiao long bao*), I casually mentioned that I missed a dish from home – Singaporean fried rice, which I described as rice with chicken, eggs, cabbage, carrots, garlic, onions, salt, pepper, and assorted spices. Imagine my amazement when my host father left for the day and returned in the evening with a bag of rice, carrots, some garlic, onions, salt, pepper, and a pre-mixed packet of Mexican spices that he had taken the trouble to find in a grocery store three hours away in Orlik. I was so touched I almost cried on the spot, if not for the distracting realisation that I had no idea how to cook rice without an electric rice-cooker, and would have to cook fried rice for my entire family on top of a wood-fed stove (don't worry, I discovered that there is a God somewhere; he knows how to make fried rice over a wood fire, and he responds to highly desperate pleas).

I also spent many marvelous hours with my host siblings, who taught me that kids, whether Siberian or Singaporean, enjoy playing the same kinds of make believe games, such as role-playing doctors and patients, students and teachers, policemen and robbers. We spent a lot of time walking around the Hoito-Uro range, where they taught me how to identify native flowers and trees. They laughed at my inability to distinguish sheep poop from reindeer poop, showed me their Buryat word books, and marveled at the origami boxes and birds that I taught them to make. Equally popular as my amateur origami skills were the clapping games and local songs that I learnt in primary school – now, my 6 and 10-year old host sisters are probably the only two people in Buryatia who know how to play "Hamburger" and sing "Dayong Sampan."

Since Russian was the second language of most Soyot people there (after Buryat, the regional language of Oka) and only my third, there were times both my host relatives and me had difficulty describing a particular concept, or simply lacked

Taking a break from collecting reindeer-feed (note the white sacks in the background).

The village of Sorok (nearest settlement to Uro) at dusk. Most children of reindeer-herders stay in Sorok with distant relatives during the week in order to attend school; they return to their families over the weekend.

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the necessary vocabulary to convey our respective thoughts. I remember having particular difficulty relating how Singapore was indeed thousands of kilometres away from Buryatia yet was still in the same time zone, not knowing the Russian words for "latitude" and "longitude" ("Julietta, how is that possible? Chita is only a few hundred kilometers away and already the time there is different… and Singapore is very very far away!").

Another embarrassing situation I dug myself into was when I was observing castration of the reindeer, slightly tipsy from all the vodka that had been circulating around. As an older stag was getting castrated in front of me, one of the herders asked if I had witnessed anything like this before. "Oh yes," I said confidently, confusing castration with circumcision, "they do this all the time in America to young babies, especially the Jewish and Muslim boys!" After I realised my mistake, it took me the rest of the day and a lot of awkward sign language to undo my horrific mis-education, and explain to them what exactly I had meant by circumcision.

Small events like these make me look back fondly on my time in Siberia, marveling at the depth of relationships I maintained with the people of Uro. There was a significant amount that I learnt simply from conducting interviews with the Soyot reindeer herders, but the true bulk, value and authenticity of my education in Russia came from my actual interactions with individuals there.

Many people are thrown aback when they hear that I am currently studying medicine, after four years of studying anthropology and mathematics. The broad liberal arts curriculum seems almost incompatible with the study of medicine, known for its intensity, rigor and scientific depth. Yet, I can think of few other academic fields which draw attention to the power of human interaction to such an extensive degree, much like the kind commonly observed in the patient-doctor relationship. As an anthropologist, it is essential for me to synthesise emotions and relationships with facts and data, and accurately represent the thoughts and practices of the people I work with. This is not terribly different from medicine, which fuses together the precision of science and the art of communicating effectively with patients. If anything, I believe that my training as an anthropologist will serve me well in the years to come as I pursue the study of both scientific and compassionate medicine. ■