

People of the Long Spring

By YURI RYTKHEU

Photographs by DEAN CONGER
NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC PHOTOGRAPHER

FOR each person the world begins where he himself first appeared, and the rest of mankind begins with him.

I was born on Cape Dezhnev, which some maps call East Cape and which lies at the extreme northeastern tip of the Soviet Arctic. In my childhood I heard another name for this rocky massif. It was called Pyeyek, meaning "big" in the language of my people, the Chukchis.

In good weather from the summit of Pyeyek I could see two islands: Ratmanov and Krusenstern—Big Diomede and Little Diomede. As a child I knew them in the Chukchi language as Imaklik and Inaklik.

In the dark blue haze beyond Imaklik and Inaklik rises a high cape that we called Kytmin. Maps designate it as Cape Prince of Wales—the beginning of the North American Continent.

My birthplace, the settlement of Uelen on the Chukchi Peninsula, is situated on a

narrow pebble spit. To the north lies the Arctic Ocean, which came up to our *yaranga*, or family dwelling. During autumn storms, waves often beat against the walrus-skin walls of the hut, while in winter masses of broken ice reached the hole where we kept our winter supplies of walrus meat. The south side of the spit is washed by a shallow lagoon fed by rivers of the vast tundra stretching south and west of my home.

Our whole life was bound up with the sea. Early on summer mornings the hunters set off from land in their *baydars*, or kayaks, paddling out into sparkling patches of sunlight among the drifting ice floes to chase the herds of walruses and whales. In winter the men hunted seals on foot, hiding in the light blue twilight among the masses of broken sea ice.

Our dwellings were built largely of walrus skins—roof, walls, and floor. Walrus skins covered the hunters' *baydars*, and sledge

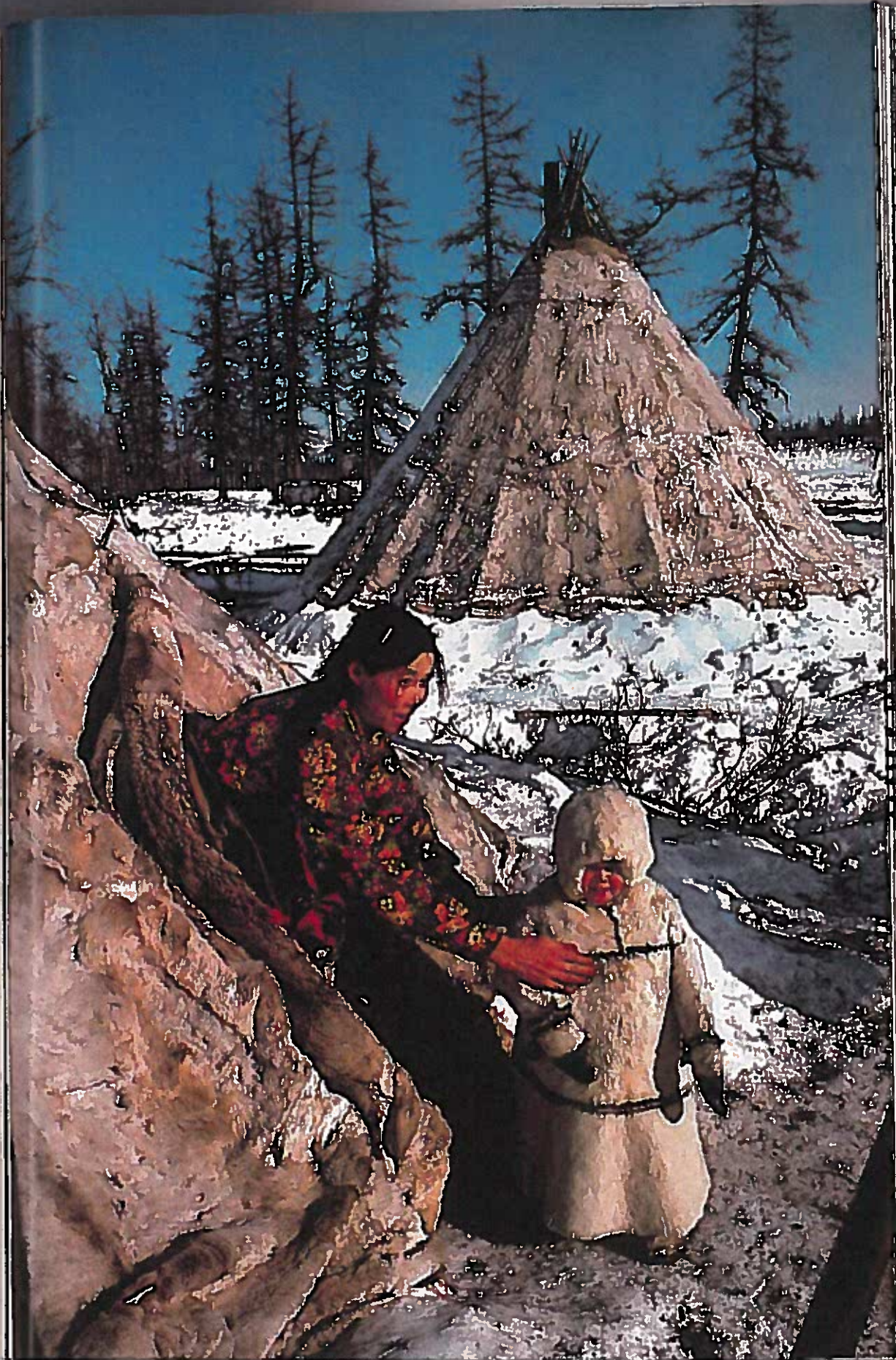
Warmed by fur and a mother's loving touch, a child ventures from her family's tent at a reindeer herders' camp near Salekhard in the Soviet Arctic. A two-million-square-mile expanse, underlain by permafrost, is cherished by the more than a dozen ethnic groups that call it home. Increasingly dominated by tsarist Russia from the late 1600s, these peoples subsequently felt the impact of post-revolutionary Soviet politics, education, and appropriation of the land's economic resources—with cost to their traditional ways, a familiar pattern across the Arctic.

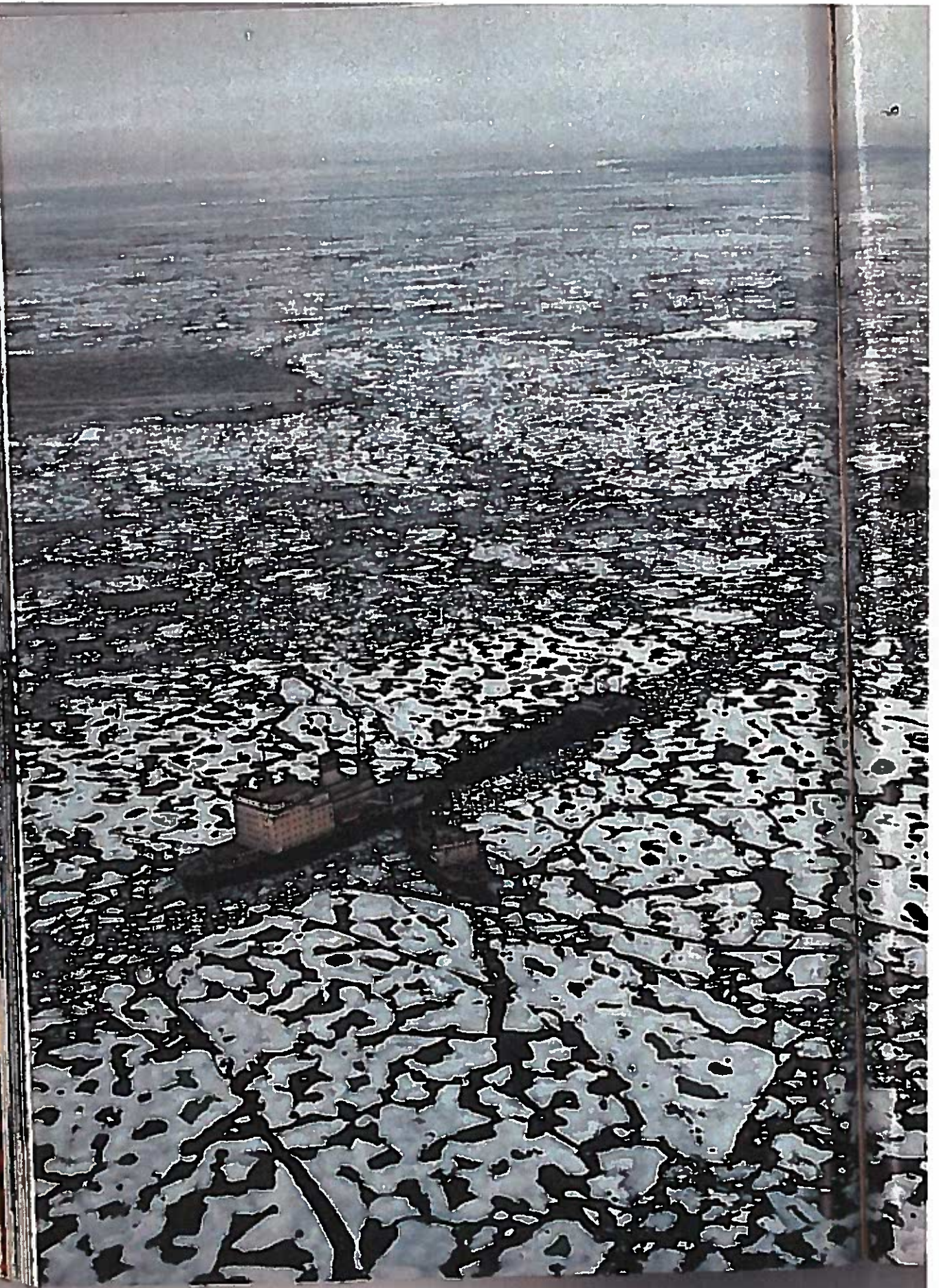
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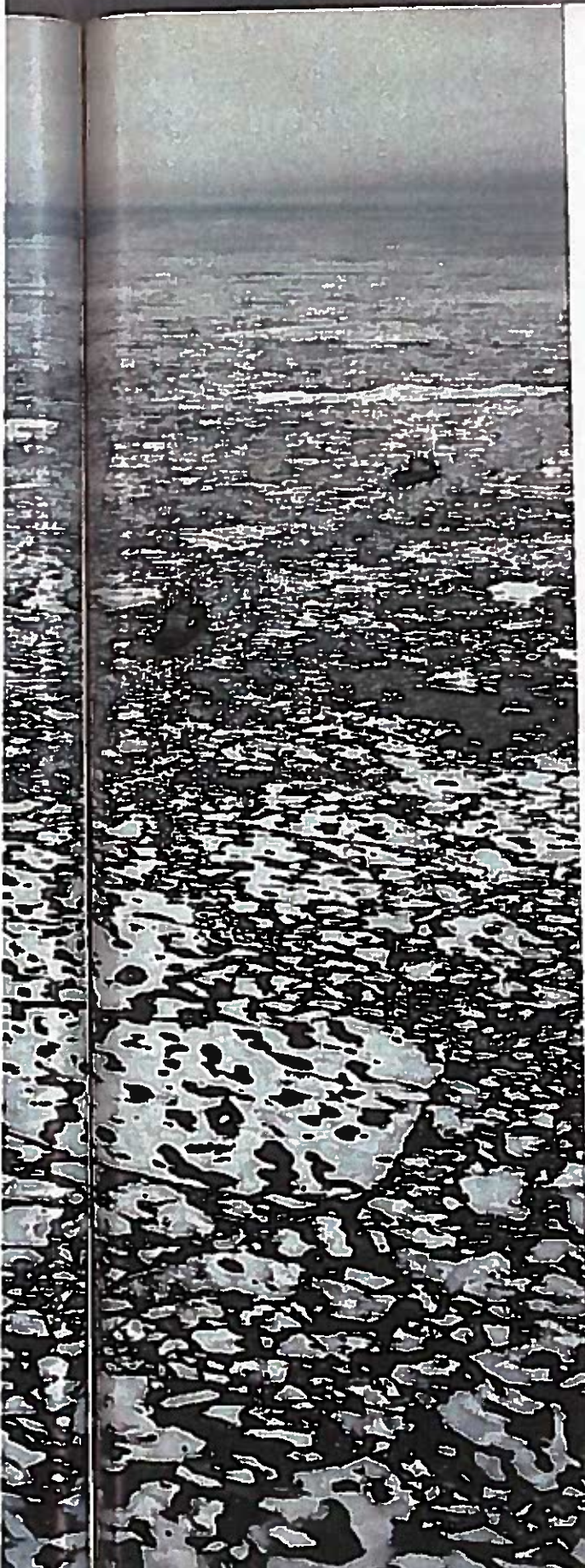
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Wedging through floes nearly five feet thick, Soviet icebreakers lead a freighter convoy along the northern sea route. Despite a Soviet fleet that includes three nuclear-powered icebreakers, ice shuts down shipping from November to March.

LENNART MERI

runners of walrus tusks slid easily over the ice. The tips of harpoons, handles of knives, and numerous other instruments were also fashioned from this strong ivory. Walrus and whale oil burned in stone lamps, warming and illuminating our homes. Our entire view of the world, our philosophy, fairy tales, legends, and songs were linked with the sea and its animals. Even our earthly origins were bound to the sea.

My grandmother, whom people called Givevneu, meaning the "knowledgeable one," taught me most of the legends and stories. She told me of the origin of our people, the seacoast dwellers.

One day many years ago I drove with her by dogsled from Uelen to Nauken, an old settlement that no longer exists, to visit relatives. In one of the hollows in a steep coastal cliff along the way we saw enormous whale bones, polished to a high gleam by blizzards and washed white by the cold autumn rains.

Grandmother Givevneu halted the dogs, took out crumbs of dried reindeer meat from a leather basket, and threw them toward the whale bones. Seeing my questioning glance, she explained: "Here, under the whale's bones, lies the spirit mother who gave life to all the people of the coast. She was impregnated by this very whale, who changed into a man for the purpose. . . ."

To this day I cannot dismiss this poetic legend about the origin of my people. It remains in the depths of my soul, filling me with a sense of mysterious community with nature, with ancient history.

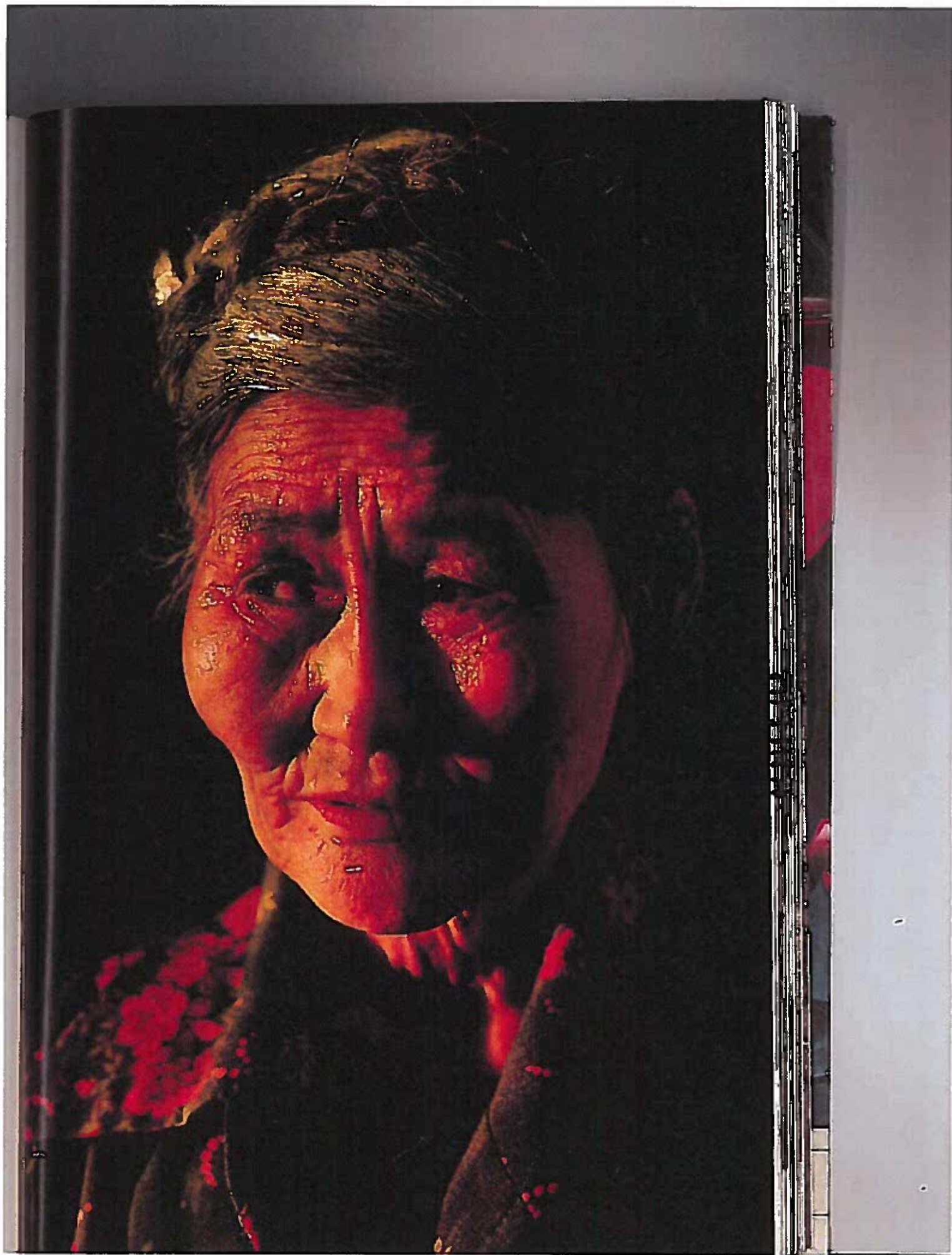
The Chukchi Peninsula, where I was born, is gripped by gale-force winds and severe cold. For all practical purposes there is no summer here, if one excludes the one and a half or two months of relatively warm weather when the temperature rises as high as 21°C (70°F). This is the time when the tundra vegetation blossoms and the midnight sun hardly disappears below the horizon.

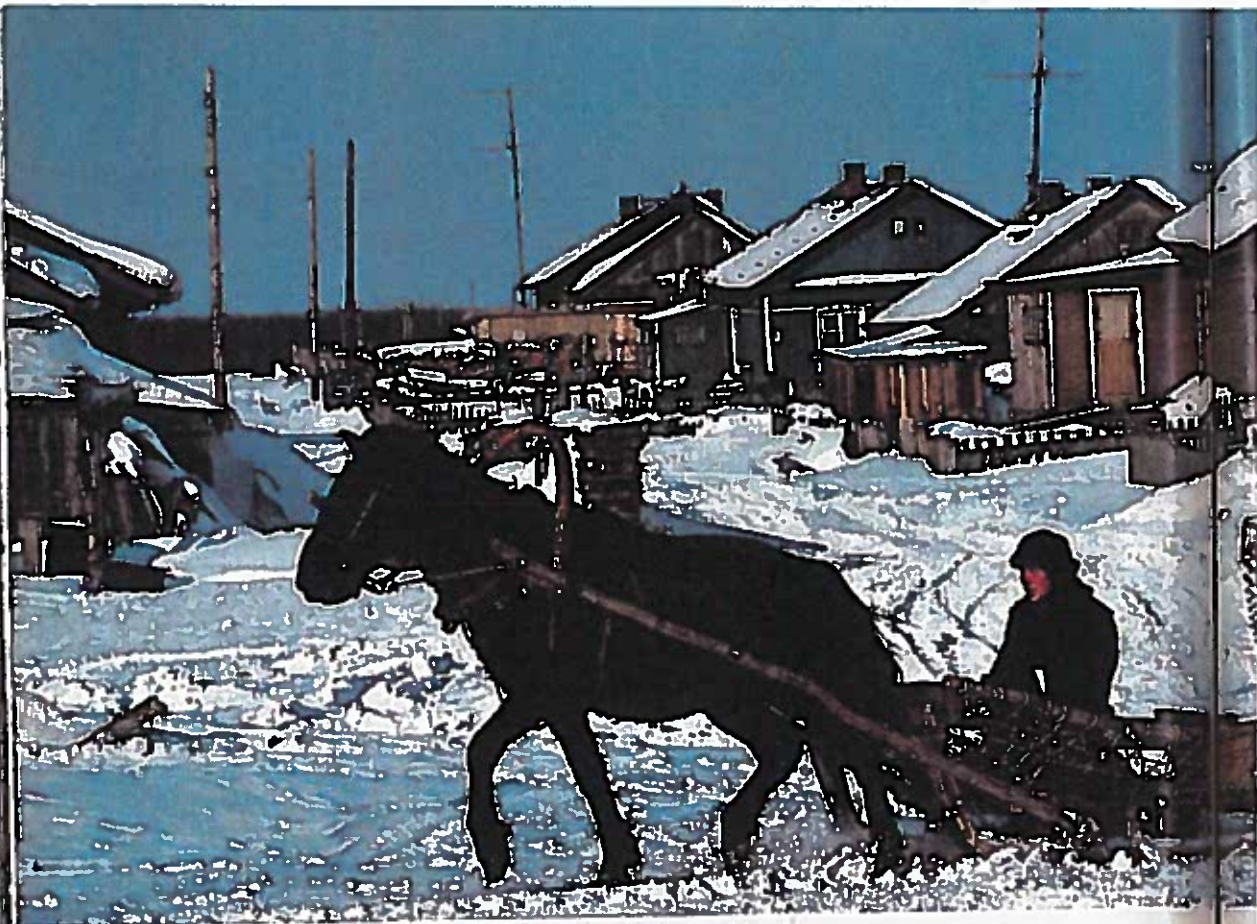
Like many arctic peoples the Chukchis

The incandescence of pride lights the face of Maria Malikov (right), a full-blooded Yukaghir. Her people, one of the smallest of the Soviet nationalities, total only about 800. Her three sons (bottom, left to right)—Vladimir, a pilot, Ivan, a policeman, and Nikolai, a telephone-company worker—were born of a Russian father. Such intermarriage has long been common. All live in Zyryanka, where the



communications center (top) provides a link to the outside world. The town of about 6,000 is on the Kolyma River, an area once infamous for Stalinist-era labor camps. Formerly occupying a vast territory, the Yukaghirs were decimated by invasions and epidemics, mainly in the 18th and 19th centuries. The remaining few now carefully collect and preserve their folklore and artifacts.





Old and new ways of getting around cross paths in a reindeer herders' village near Naryan Mar in a Nenets autonomous district. Some 30,000 Nenets,

consider that the year begins when the sun first appears after the polar night. This marks the beginning of spring—"the long day." Since we have almost no summer, spring for us is the longest season of the year.

I WAS BORN and grew up during a period when life beside the Bering Strait was changing rapidly. Literacy, books, electricity, and radio came to our yarangas from Soviet cities far to the west and south.

During this era of the 1930s and '40s the arctic peoples were being intensively studied by scientists from the outside. We cherished a joke in those days about the composition of the typical arctic family: father, mother, two children, and, over there in the corner of the hut, the researcher.

With the researchers, however, came teachers who opened up a new world to us. Even the nomadic people who travel most of the year with their reindeer often had

schools and teachers to accompany them.

Today, half a century later, many inhabitants of the Soviet Arctic have not only absorbed the ancient heritage that was passed on by their forefathers but have also adopted much of the contemporary outside world. They have shifted from yarangas to modern-style houses furnished with arrays of modern conveniences, including radio and television. Some have exchanged reindeer or dogsleds for snowmobiles or all-terrain vehicles, and they fly from village to nomad camp by helicopter.

But for all their ability to adapt, the native inhabitants of the Soviet Arctic remain inexorably bound to their homeland. They may change, but they will never leave their beloved seacoast or tundra; they will remain hunters and reindeer herders, dwellers amid lands covered for most of the year by ice and snow. These are the "people of the long spring," and I myself am one of them.



one of the largest groups of arctic peoples, live in ethnic territories where politics, legal business, and the press use both Russian and an indigenous language.

WELL I REMEMBER the sweet springtime, when early one morning, without any alarm clocks, all the inhabitants of my village of Uelen awoke simultaneously. Bearing wooden platters with sacrificial offerings of reindeer meat and fat for the spirits of marine creatures, the villagers would gather at a seashore still covered with ice. There they would place the offerings, which eventually would sink through the melting ice and be received by the spirits of the whales, walruses, and other sea creatures that my people hunted.

On that same day the villagers removed the walrus-skin baydars from their high storage racks. The baydars and the larger whaleboats were placed on sledges, and the long caravan moved along the edge of the ice toward the open leads where the marine animals were to be found.

As was the custom among my people, I

went on my first whale hunt at the age of 12. It was an exciting experience, for in those days we did not use rifles or outboard motors as some do now. We sailed or paddled quietly up to a whale, and the boat captain would strike with a hand-held harpoon. Floats made of inflated seal stomachs attached to the line acted as drags and caused the whale to exhaust itself. Finally it was towed ashore and divided up among all the villagers.

In recent years I have often accompanied Soviet Eskimos who continue to kill whales by the old hand-held harpoon method. I must say that nothing is more compelling or majestic than this combat between man and sea giant. That is why, when the hunt is successful—usually on that very day—the Eskimos hold a big ritual whale festival. It is a celebration of thanksgiving to the gods of the sea, with traditional dances and singing. In essence, too, the festival is a glorification of the strength and power of man.



SOME 1,500 ESKIMOS and 14,000 Chukchis represent only two of more than a dozen native ethnic groups that inhabit the Soviet Arctic. (See the supplement map, *Historical Peoples of the Arctic*, distributed with this issue.) The area is vast, stretching from the Chukchi Peninsula in the east to the Kola Peninsula in Europe on the west, some 4,000 miles. From arctic islands the area extends southward into the forested taiga, in places beyond the 60th parallel.

Numbering perhaps 300,000 people, these ethnic groups are scattered across an area far larger than Western Europe. Since time immemorial the majority of inhabitants have lived by hunting and herding reindeer, though a few like the Eskimos and coastal Chukchis hunt marine animals.

As a Chukchi, I have long been interested in the different cultures and customs of my fellow residents in the far north. Recently I visited several of these ethnic groups during

a six-week trip through the Soviet Arctic.

I began with Arakamchechen Island, located just to the east of the Chukchi Peninsula. Flying by helicopter from my village of Uelen, I paid a visit to the Chukchi reindeer herders at the state farm known in Russian as *Mayak Severa*, or "beacon of the north."

Arakamchechen is well suited for reindeer farming; in summer the winds blowing across the island sweep the swarms of mosquitoes out to sea, and the pastureland is rich. Until the 1920s the island and the walrus herds on its northern shore were controlled solely by a powerful shaman, or medicine man, named Akkr. When the new Communist government's socialist revolution reached the island, Akkr was dispossessed, and he hanged himself.

Vladimir Tukkay, leader of the state farm's brigade of reindeer workers, does not comprehend how one person could be the sole master of an island and its walrus herds.

"It is the same," he told me, "as saying,

In the snug haven of a hide-covered tent, the family of a Khanty reindeer herder warms by a stove. Education is required for these children of the Arctic, whose curriculum includes political ideology. Many will go to boarding school.

part of my very self. Here in the tundra, among the reindeer, although this is not the most comfortable and jovial existence, I feel the life I was created for."

Listening to Tuk kay, an educated man, I was struck by the northerners' tenacity and devotion to their native land. Despite predictions as early as two centuries ago that these people would vanish under the impact of a more aggressive culture from the outside, they continue to exist and in some cases to grow in number.

It would appear that even such small ethnic groups as the Yukaghirs, who number roughly 800 and who inhabit areas in the northeastern Soviet Arctic, are determined to preserve their cultural heritage. After my trip to Arakamchechen Island I flew to Zyr-yanka, a town on the Kolyma River in the northeast. There I spent several days as a guest among the Yukaghir people.

The Yukaghirs today are scrupulously collecting folklore and mementos of their cultural and spiritual past. They are now attempting to create a Yukaghir alphabet so as to publish books in their native tongue.

One old friend, the distinguished Yukaghir author Semen Kurilov, jokingly calls himself the only writer in the world who knows all his readers by sight. During my visit he showed me his latest book, whose first printing, in Russian, numbered 100,000. "You see," Semen said with a grin, "that means each of my countrymen can have 125 copies!"

THE YUKAGHIRS have a legend about their great numbers in olden days. There was a time when so many Yukaghir bonfires were burning that their smoke darkened the wings of birds trying to fly north in the spring. Moreover, the northern lights are nothing less than the reflection of numerous Yukaghir campfires left in the memory of the sky.

In fact, the Yukaghirs probably once

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"The sea is mine, the sky is mine, and those clouds over there, coming over the edge of the sky, are also mine."

Among arctic peoples the idea of owning land—in tundra or taiga—was traditionally a collective concept; they find the idea of private ownership of land alien.

Vladimir Tuk kay has his own reindeer, but this is quite another matter from having one's own pasture. His spacious yaranga is packed with recent newspapers and magazines. A powerful all-terrain vehicle with a transceiver stands by his home.

Surveying these comforts, I asked Tuk kay if he would live in any other place.

"Any other place?" he pondered. "Most likely not. I was born in the tundra, my parents and forefathers were always reindeer herders. I studied at school, lived in the dormitory, then served in the army. Sometimes the thought sprang up within me: Could I live in any other place but Arakamchechen? To do that, I would be deprived of a certain

numbered many thousands. Assimilation, epidemics, and a series of invasions eventually reduced the Yukaghirs to their present number.

Based on the percentage of people who have received higher education, the Yukaghirs are far ahead of many more numerous peoples. Even so, an overwhelming number of them prefer to continue their age-old occupations: reindeer hunting and herding.

People of the far north such as the Yukaghirs have survived over millennia in the harsh arctic wastes because they were not mere hunters, ignorant and unimaginative, but people who were curious, with keen, inventive, and artistic minds.

They understood and loved beauty, as is evident in the work of Ogdo Aksyonova, a talented poet of the Dolgan people. The Dolgans form a group of roughly 5,000 people on the southern fringe of the Taymyr Peninsula, which lies west of the Yukaghirs' homeland and thrusts into the Arctic Ocean.

The basic occupations of the Dolgans have been fishing, hunting, and reindeer herding. Their entire life cycle, as with all reindeer-farming peoples, is connected with breeding and pasturing reindeer. Theirs is a land of barren tundra and cruel climate, yet in her writing Ogdo Aksyonova reveals the warmth and gentleness of the Dolgan spirit. In her poem "A Custom of My Forefathers" she writes:

*We Dolgans live on our fair earth,
With love we warm the ground,
Never knew we any wars since birth. . . .
So plant this seed of peace and love
Throughout the whole wide world,
Then keep it warm with hope and trust
And flowers will unfurl.*

WITH THE ADVENT of warmer weather, the whole expanse of reindeer land, from the Chukchi and Taymyr Peninsulas to the



Memory stakes a trail in a roadless land as a Saami, or Lapp, herder heads for his reindeer herd 30 miles from Lovozero. Since the 1930s, reindeer raising, the

National Geographic, February 1983



primary occupation of many Soviet Arctic peoples, has been managed mostly by state and collective farms, but animals forage on the tundra, surviving largely on lichens and mosses. Besides 2.3 million reindeer, the far north holds huge oil and gas deposits, perhaps half the U.S.S.R.'s gold, and most of its diamonds.

People of the Long Spring

Kola Peninsula, experiences a great and recurring phenomenon—the birth of a new generation of reindeer. To the peoples of the Arctic it is like the gathering of a new harvest. Yet, despite the thawing of the frosts and the sun's warmth, this season is perfidious. An unexpected blizzard may blow up, and the defenseless reindeer calves can die from the frosts or succumb to the fierce winds. Centuries of raising reindeer have taught the nomadic herders to seek protected places and the best pastures.

And the sun climbs higher. Now, in the high latitudes near the Arctic Ocean, it barely sets. Truly, this is one of the quietest and loveliest times in the lives of those who live among the reindeer. The winter dwellings of reindeer skins are rolled up, and in their place rise light summer ones of fabric.

Along with the birds, children of the reindeer herders return to the tundra from boarding schools in the towns and cities. During this pleasant period, even the old people who have retired to settlements try to return to their native tundra. Here they walk across the live and resilient earth, sit on the shore of some quiet, clean lake, and hear the sound of water—not from a metal faucet, but rushing over stones covered with sparse moss.

Well-organized reindeer farming yields enormous income and is the most profitable livestock enterprise in the Soviet Arctic. This is due first of all to the biology of the reindeer themselves. They do not require expensive stabling and are self-sufficient in finding food all year. Their needs are amazingly simple: When mature, they can survive the cruelest frosts, rains, winds, and prolonged cold. They can graze the most meager pastures and, despite all this, they manage by the end of summer to build up enough of a layer of fat to survive the harsh winter. Even during the winter months they manage to scrape down through the snow and forage on the scant vegetation beneath.

IN THE CITY OF SALEKHARD on the Ob River in the western Soviet Arctic, I visited the Nenets people, one of the largest ethnic groups in the Arctic, with a population of 30,000. The Nenets, too, subsist largely by reindeer herding and are fiercely proud of their cultural heritage.

Salekhard stands directly on the Arctic Circle. It is in one of the fastest growing regions of the Soviet north, thanks to huge oil and natural-gas fields discovered during the past two decades.

Nenets art, literature, music, and dance are both colorful and distinctive. As with other arctic peoples many Nenets have had the opportunity of pursuing higher education in Moscow and Leningrad. There they have been exposed to outside literature and art, and this has given them new perspective on the beauty of their own ancestral culture.

In Salekhard I called on the famous Nenets poet Leonid Lapsuy and his wife, Yelena Susoy. Both are dedicated to the preservation and advancement of Nenets culture.

Yelena is a staff member at the Institute of Schools of the North, a department of the Soviet Ministry of Education. She supervises publication of school texts and books in the native Nenets language and helped establish a dictionary in Nenets.

Intermarriage between Russians and members of ethnic groups in the Arctic is a frequently discussed subject. Yelena obviously is in favor of it.

"Some say that if a Nenets man marries a Russian woman, then both the Russian and the Nenets lose something," she told me. "But why not look upon such a union in a different light? Isn't it true that both have become doubly rich, uniting two languages and two cultures?"

For his part, Leonid Lapsuy has contributed to an understanding of his people and to a wider appreciation of the challenge of arctic life. In his poem "The Hunter" he

describes a successful chase for arctic fox across the winter tundra:

*He's hiding over a ravine,
You dive beyond a snowy wall.
He makes a jump while you bend down,
You jump while he goes at a crawl.
You bend your back up like a stoat,
You crane your neck around a bush. . . .
There's his tail! You shoot quickly
And your bullet stops his flight.
Hunting's not an easy job,
That's clear to anyone who tries.
I can tell a proper hunter
Just by looking at his eyes.**

THROUGHOUT MY TRAVELS in the Soviet Arctic I have found differences among the various ethnic groups, but many similarities to my own life and experience as a Chukchi.

Several years ago, in order to write undisturbed, I went into seclusion in a small Chukchi village on Billings Cape beside the Arctic Ocean. Before I had a chance to get to my typewriter, I was invited to participate in a funeral ritual for a local woman.

I was curious to see what remained from ancient times and what new aspects had been assimilated into these rituals.

The latter were most clearly revealed by the objects that the deceased woman took with her into the Realm of the Polar Star, where, according to tradition, lie the camps of those who have departed this life. Since she was an excellent seamstress, on the little table that stood at the head of the coffin were laid out various needles, skeins of thread, a sharp knife to cut skins, an ink pen, thimbles, plus her porcelain cup covered with a network of crackles and dark blue drawings faded with time.

What struck me most was the electric sewing machine. Learning from a neighbor

*This verse and that on page 216 appear in *Soviet Literature*, 1980, No. 3 (384).

at the memorial altar that the machine was likewise destined for life in the Realm of the Polar Star, I pointed out that it would obviously be useless there, since in heaven there are no electric outlets.

Nevertheless, the machine was carried to the cemetery. I asked one old man why they decided to bury it also.

"Several years ago," he answered, "the husband of this old woman crossed over to that same place. In this life he was an active man and headed our community soviet. Thanks to his energy and industriousness, we obtained a power station and lights for our dwellings.

"I do not think," the old man added, "that all these years the husband has been in the Realm of the Polar Star, he has been sitting with folded hands, doing nothing. So do not be skeptical: The deceased will have somewhere to plug in her sewing machine."

In this quaint, mixed-up concept of death and the possibility of continuing life in the Realm of the Polar Star, there is a certain logic. When we observe, for example, that in the Soviet Arctic shamanism has vanished very quickly, we overlook the fact that it has simply taken on modern dimensions.

The shaman was the preserver of tradition and cultural experience. He was meteorologist, physician, philosopher, and ideologist—a one-man Academy of Sciences. His success depended upon his skill at prognosticating the presence of game, determining the route of the reindeer herds, and predicting the weather well in advance. In order to do all this, he must above all be an intelligent and knowledgeable man.

So now we see a modern breed of shaman, like the Chukchi physical therapist Olga Tymnebtuvie, the pediatrician Yelena Papo, and the Nenets surgeon Stanislav Sallinder. And we perceive that the replacement of shamanism with contemporary science does not contradict the basic views and principles of the arctic peoples.

MAN IN THE ARCTIC has always defended himself from the forces of nature, from the environment. At times he has had to protect himself from wild animals. Now, however, a new era has dawned, when nature in the Arctic must be preserved from man himself. The animals of the world, the cleanest lakes and rivers, and even the crystal air of the Arctic are threatened.

All of us throughout the Arctic have this problem. With the rapid development of polar regions for mining and other purposes, pollution and the destruction of wilderness lands are inevitable. But we cannot close the door on the Arctic, nor are most people who seek to develop it blind to the dangers. In all this there are hopeful signs, and I saw one recently near my home in Uelen on the Chukchi Peninsula.

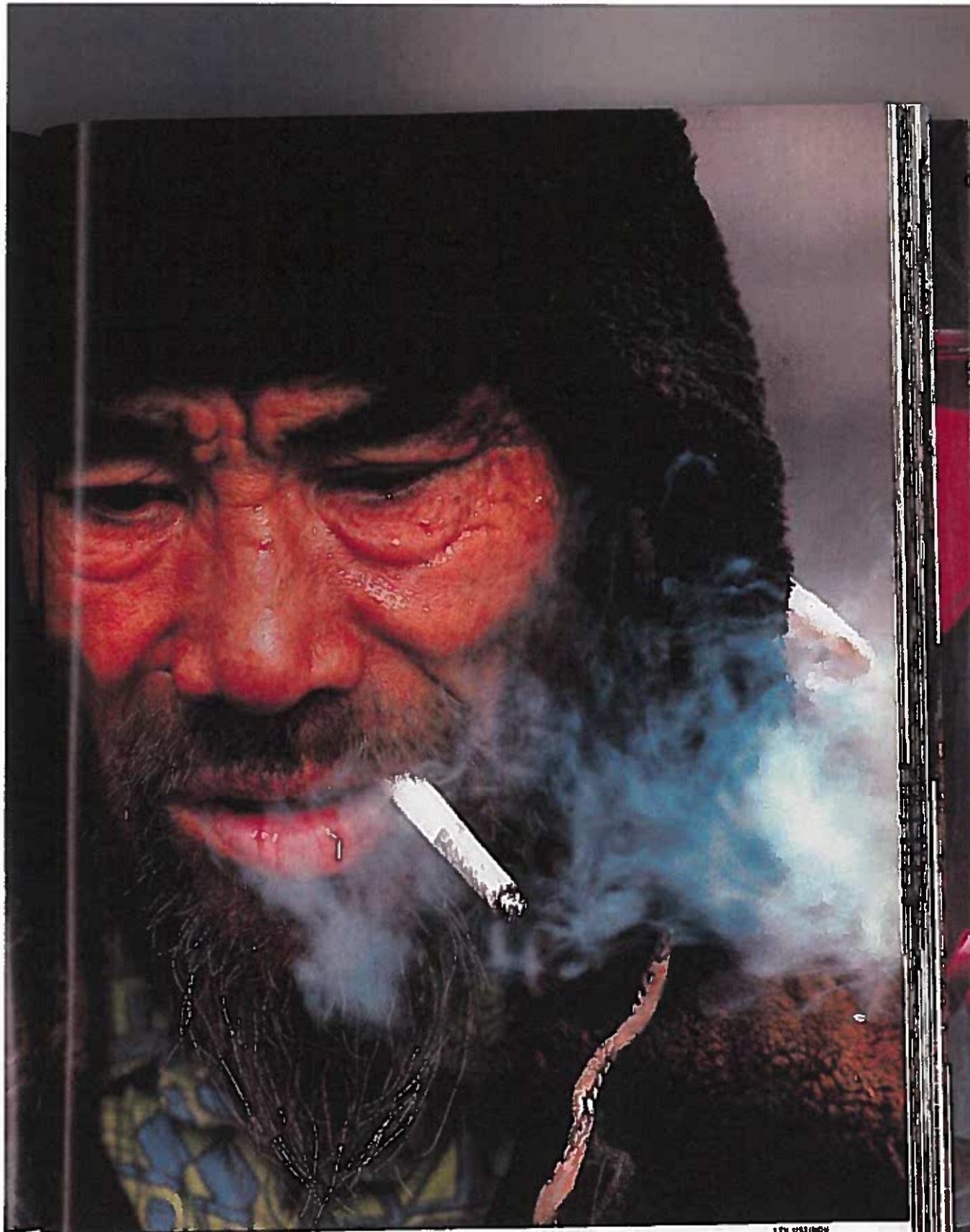
Here, on the shores of Providence Bay, the Chukchi people once hunted walrus. In modern times the herds have all but disappeared. One of those who has worked toward their restoration is an Eskimo, Vasily Nanok, chairman of the soviet of the neighboring village of Unazik. With the help of Vasily and others like him, laws have been passed forbidding commercial hunting of walrus and other animals on the Chukchi Peninsula. A new sense of conservation among the Chukchi people has resulted in improved conditions for all creatures in the wild.

Early one morning Vasily telephoned me at home and invited me to walk along the shore of Providence Bay. He led me to the noisiest and most crowded place, not far from Unazik's local store. What I saw surprised me: On the shore, usually noted for its piles of rubbish, lay several very live walrus.

"The walrus have returned to the shores of Providence Bay," Nanok announced triumphantly. "That means our work has not been in vain."



Weather hardened by a land of spring gales and summer frosts, a Chukchi hunter exemplifies arctic peoples, whom



LEV OSTINOV

explorer Roald Amundsen called "polar optimists who do not lose their smile . . . during the hungriest and darkest winter nights." The coastal Chukchis, hunters of marine animals, have now traded harpoon for rifle.



On the edge of yesterday, Soviet-owned Big Diomed Island, right, stares across the Bering Strait and date line at a previous day and different world—Little Diomed Island in the United States. Although Soviet authorities removed Big Diomed's Eskimos in the fifties, a surveillance post remains.

YES, THE WALRUSES are returning to their old grounds, and the polar bears have recovered in such numbers that they are beginning to bother seacoast settlements. All this makes the native inhabitants of the Arctic rejoice.

Long ago we said farewell to the numerous gods who had explained the tangled world and incomprehensible phenomena to us. However, the same gods also had revealed to us the authentic value of our

manner of living and our spiritual heritage.

Devotion to that heritage has been passed from generation to generation, and the young people of today are no exception. I remember talking with Vera Etyneku, a reindeer herder in her late teens at the Polyarnik collective along the Amguema River in the eastern Soviet Arctic.

"As a young girl," she told me, "I was sent away to boarding school in the south. It seemed so long a time to be away from my



YURI RYTKHEU

These remnants of a land bridge that once stapled Asia and America lie near the village of Uelen, birthplace of author Yuri Rytkheu. "Life in the tundra can be cruel," he says. "But today's inhabitants imbibe with their mother's milk a philosophy of joyful acceptance of life."

birthplace that I ran out of patience, but finally I was able to come back.

"The tundra is the very best place to be. Here one has the real sense of freedom, where there are no restrictions, such as where to cross the street—or the river.

"My people are of the tundra," she continued, "and I wish to be among them. I dream one day of meeting someone who will be my subject of love. The tundra is wide and one must look far, but in time I will find him."

Everywhere in the Soviet Arctic I met people for whom the north—with its snows, its cold, its vivid summer tundra and sweet cloudberry—constitutes their native land, the dearest place on earth.

And regardless of where fate might cast us up, for us the return to our native soil is always a return to that point from which we see the world. For me that point is Cape Dezhnev, where the globe first became—and always will be—reality. □