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Of Evenks, Reindeer and Bureaucrats

All in all, Swiss filmmakers have tended to concentrate on their homeland. Lately, though, a few makers of documentaries, such as Hans- Ulrich Schlupf, Franz Reichle, and Mike Wildbolz have gone far afield, to Antarctica, Siberia, and Sumatra, reaching out for remote subjects not only for their exotic quality, but as metaphors for serious, global ecological concerns – dangers to the environment, the imminent disappearance of threatened life forms, both animal and (“primitive”) human. The following paragraphs, penned by an NZZ movie critic who accompanied Reichle’s camera crew to a remote corner of Siberia, describes the strangeness and frustration involved in an attempt to shoot segments of a documentary film under circumstances which required the cooperation of Soviet bureaucrats. The film, “Traumzeit” (Dreamtime), was ultimately completed, however. Its world premiere was at this year’s Solothurn Film Festival and it subsequently ran at Zurich’s Filmpodium during the month of April.

Where are we? Close to 1,900 meters (roughly 6,200 ft.) above sea level, just about exactly between the 54th and 55th parallels north and between 111 and 112 degrees longitude east. IN other words, about 150 kilometres as the crow flies from the northern shore of Lake Baikal, in the Ikatsky Mountains, at a spot with the local name of Karatal. How did we get there? By helicopter, which picked us up in the village of Rossoshino, about 200 kilometres farther to the east, and after an interim landing in Bagdarin, the main town of the district, set us down here. Bagdarin is around 500 kilometres north of Ulan- Ude , capital of the former Buryat Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic, in turn 5,650 rail kilometres from Moscow. And how do we get out of here again? Possibly not at all. At least, that’s our impression now that the flight scheduled for Saturday is already three days overdue, and on this Tuesday morning, through the window of the tiny hut in which the three of us are cooped up with our film equipment, we see the snow coming down so hard that I crawl back into my sleeping bag. No helicopter is going to get through this storm. At which point we hear the sound of an engine.

That is, our cameraman Peter Liechti claims to hear it. As for myself, with my head closer to the sizzling little stove whose heating efficiency is ridiculous measured against the Siberian cold outside (and it’s only November), I mutter something about hallucinations and wishful thinking. But there it is again. And Franz Reichle comes storming into the hut, shouting that “The whirlybird has landed!” Now we have to hurry, because the pilot is afraid his rotors will freeze up if he shuts them down. So all the odds and ends that gradually emerged from our carefully tied bundles during the last three days have to be quickly packed together and loaded. With unseemly haste we say farewell to our hosts, and soon we are seated in the craft’s huge cargo bay, with Peter filming the splendid, lonely landscape for all he’s worth.

We've experienced a good deal up here in the wide, silent mountains. We have made the acquaintance of a shy, charming people, listened to the melodic murmuring of their language, seen large herds of reindeer. Franz and Peter agree that this has been the most intense phase of the shooting for Dreamtime.

Perhaps the most impressive part of the experience, especially for us punctuality-crazed Swiss, has been the waiting. A sterile waiting, glossed over with moody banter for a while, then changing its character from hour to hour. Until the moment in late afternoon when the light disappeared irrevocably behind the mountain ridges surrounding our high valley, the level of hope had steadily declined, only to rise swiftly again next morning with the sun. Then, from the second day on, we felt the paralyzing effect of the situation.

Naturally, everything possible was done to establish contact with the outside world. Initially, our only possibility was the radio telephone with which Lyuda Dogontchina, who was running the reindeer ranch skilfully and energetically while her husband lay in hospital back in Bagdarin, tried to reach the office of Gospromkhoz, the kolkhoz (collective farm) administration. Its telephone switchboard, which is responsible for communications spanning an enormous area, is manned for only half an hour on weekday mornings, from 8:30 to 9 AM – a piece of arbitrary chicanery typical of the Soviet (now Russian) bureaucracy. Obviously, a large number of favourable factors have to come together fortuitously if contact is to be made. Yet, wonder of wonders, telephone contact is sharp and clear as soon as Gospromkhoz wants something, reindeer meat or hides or what have you.

But since nothing could be accomplished by telephone over the weekend anyway, we had to work out a strategy for Monday morning. First, Franz wrote out three telegrams to inform the outside world of our whereabouts: one to his wife in Ulan-Udé; one to Boris and Doris Prokofiev at Izvestia in Moscow, without whose help our Swiss-Soviet cooperation not only would never have materialized, but would have fallen apart several times during the shooting; and finally, to Franziska Reck in Zurich, who as our executive producer was often the only one in possession of functioning means of communication and thus able to maintain some sort of overview. In the event that Lyuda would be unsuccessful in her Monday morning effort with the radio telephone, an Evenk reindeer herdsman and hunter, Mikhail Karpushkin – who, in the film, tells the impressive tale of his encounter with a mother bear and her two cubs – would saddle his reindeer and bring the telegrams to a weather station a few hours away, far in the mountains. Needless to say, Mikhail had to make the trip.

Without this final scene, I might have returned home with a more idyllic image of life and working conditions in the erstwhile Soviet Union. As it was, my overall picture was illuminated by the experience of the paralysis induced by this indefinite waiting, which becomes one's major occupation and makes even moderately long-range planning impossible. Granted, Franz and Peter exposed a lot of film during those three days, but always with the feeling that we had to be ready to depart at any moment. Gradually, we came to imagine what everyday life must be like for the average Soviet citizen: without any possibility of obtaining reliable information, nourished by a spark of hope glimmering on the horizon, waiting for something the advent of which will be coupled with a breath of unearned grace.

We tasted the flavor of Soviet reality – arbitrariness, harassment, the arrogant disregard of prior agreements – as soon as we landed in Bagdarin, where the local official kept fobbing us off with transparently inadequate excuses for delay. And instead of providing us with the aircraft which we had chartered for the flight to Ulan-Udé 500 kilometres away – at a price of two thousand rubles, and only after presenting an “official” document, which we fabricated from a blank letterhead of the production company that I fortunately found among my papers. Also part of officialdom’s sense of propriety was the need to have us drag all our luggage – half a ton of stuff in countless boxes, cases and bags – into the small kitchen of an adjacent building to be weighed, even though the plan imposed upon us was far larger than we could possibly need. As to the two thousand rubles, we were able to raise the sum only because three Party functionaries, who unexpectedly hitched a free ride to Ulan-Udé airport with that amount of cash in hand. Which meant a telephone call. And since her parents, who live in that city, have been waiting for 15 years for a phone, we had to try to reach the film group’s interpreter, Ida Ilyina, at the school where she teaches, so that she could get the message to Franz’s wife. And what if getting the phone connection would take us hours, or even days, with no guarantee that Ida would even be reachable at the school?

For Franz Reichle, this nerve-racking combination of violated agreements, endless waiting, and infuriating encounters with a bureaucracy whose arrogance is exceeded only by its indifference, was merely a repetition of an experience which was to characterize the entire film project more than any other. In early summer of 1990, when shooting was supposed to begin after the authorities had even given permission to hunt elk, bear, wolf and lynx, it suddenly looked as though the whole thing might collapse after five years of tireless, laborious preparation. It had been Franz Reichle’s idea to go and live in a nomad camp in the taiga with members of the Orochon tribe, as the Evenk call themselves in the Buryat region. The purpose of that radical move was to cinematically document old traditions and thus perhaps stimulate memories of the state of shamanistic ecstasy known as “dreamtime.” The local head of production, himself an Orochon, was enthusiastic about the project, and Franz Reichle never did find out why the man failed to even notify his fellow tribesmen about the plan.

One of the consequences of that lapse was that the Siberian cameraman and his sound-engineer wife had to be fired. Everything had to be shifted around. Franz Reichle tried to save what he could from the disaster, knowing full well that it would not be much. The Evenk today are an uprooted people, largely alienate from their millennia-old traditions, helpless victims of “civilization” and, even more, of vodka. And in those few places where at least rudiments of the traditional lifestyle might still be possible, as among the reindeer herders in the mountains of Karatal, kolkhoz administrators saw to it that these phenomenal hunter are equipped with only small-calibre rifles and almost no ammunition.

The film *Traumzeit* (Dreamtime) documents Franz Reichle’s gentle yet insistent attempt to evoke memories of Evenk life as it once was.

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