Letter from a Russian Village

The village puts food on the Russian table and serves as a personal safety net for city-dwelling relatives. In return for their pains the farmers get a fragile form of independence, but at a great price.

by Margaret Paxson

It starts with the hands. Hands that have grown numb over time, wooden. She has to strike those hands against a chair or a leg or another hand just to beat some feeling into them.

Yulia* has been beating her hands this way in the eight years that I have known her. Her small hands with their smooth, thick fingers have been her livelihood, wielding scythes and shovels and plows and rakes, pulling roots and carrying pails of water and rinsing clothes in the icy waters of Lake Tikhonskoe. But last year, something changed. "It's no use," Yulia told me last summer. "I can't milk the cow anymore. We'll slaughter Lushka once there is a solid frost."

Yulia, who turned 62 last year, has been living in the tiny village of Solov'ovo, about 300 miles north of Moscow, for 40 years. Born in another northern village in 1939, abandoned to an orphanage by age six, working in the industrial city of Cherepovets by her late teens, Yulia had a chance to leave rural life behind her. In the Soviet Union, village life was not only very hard and poorly paid but—for all the slavish work villagers did so their countrymen could eat—demeaned and derided by city dwellers.

*I have changed the names of the village and its people.

In 1955 Nikita Khrushchev, in a quixotic flourish, ordered that corn be planted all over the Soviet Union as a part of his new, post-Stalin, postfamine agricultural policy. Young Yulia joined a work brigade from her factory and found herself on the shores of a lake on the edge of a pine-and-birch forest, where she caught the eye of a gentle man who quickly fell in love with her soft beauty. Her girlfriends in the factory thought she was crazy to accept a marriage proposal that would take her back to the countryside. But she did. Telling anyone who asked that she wasn't afraid of hard work, she moved into a one-room cabin with her new husband's parents and brothers and sisters. The village was beautiful then, as it is today: hills rolling softly down to the shores of a lake, nearby fields full of spring and summer wildflowers, horses roaming freely in the swampy lands beyond.

Now, 40 years after making her choice, this is the life that fills the hours of her days. There is planting and haying and harvesting to be done, animals to be tended, and a cow to be milked three times each day. Meals must be cooked, the house cleaned, firewood cut and hauled. There is no running water. There are almost no machines to help with the farm work. For most of Yulia's life, the work for the collective farm had to be done first; the work that

In wintertime Solov'ovo, the days are short and often overcast, bathed in a blue-grey light.

kept the family alive was done at dusk or pushed to the end of summer. Always there was the race to finish before the autumn rains rotted the potatoes or spoiled the hay. This is the life that numbed her hands, twisted her back forever, and brought her groaning to her bed at the end of a long day. It was hard and sometimes brutal. There was war and famine and family violence. But most of all, there was work. In 40 years, Yulia and her husband took only one vacation together, to distant Leningrad for 10 days. That was it. How could they leave their farm? How could they leave their cow that had to be milked three times a day?

The cow. Farm life centers on the cow. It gives milk, and the milk is turned into cheese and butter and sour cream. Every spring it gives birth to a calf, which can be slaughtered, in turn, a half-year later to provide meat for the long winter. In the symbolic lexicon of the village, a cow means wealth. (Indeed, after the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917, two cows were enough for a villager to be considered rich, and therefore suspect.) Most heavy farm labor is done to keep the cow fed and giving milk and reproducing. For the cow the hay is harvested. All that time spent stooped over the soil in the summer sun, brushing away the swarms of flies and avoiding the bees, all the sweat of the day, is for the cow, as well as the many mornings and evenings looking up at the clouds for signs of rain. The discussions Yulia has with her husband, the worries about a single teat that is having trouble, or about why the cow won't drink water or eat enough, or the risks of her being spoiled by the evil eye, or the nights of pacing before her calving—all for the cow. Lushka. Lushenka. So that day, in the summer of 2001, when Yulia looked at her hands numb as wood and finally said that the cow would have to go—*that* was a big day.

In 1991, the Soviet Union collapsed and Russia began its transition from socialism to protocapitalism. In the cities, old women stood in rows at the metro, selling anything from cigarettes and underpants to plastic bags and family heirlooms. Gangsters acquired

money, roaming the cities in fancy cars and Armani suits and indulging their taste for kitsch. New images and voices appeared in the media, luxurious new buildings sprang up in Moscow, and homelessness emerged as a social problem. A new instability shook what was once a complacent Soviet version of the middle class.

But what of the countryside?

In the Soviet village, socialism was embodied in the institution of the collective farm, or kolkhoz. In spite of petitions and protests, Solov'ovo had its turn at collectivization in 1933, and villagers there spent the next 60 years working not for their extended families but primarily for the extended arm of the state. In the period during and after World War II, stealing a turnip was enough to send a person to prison. Solov'ovo's land (like most of the land of the Russian north) was best suited to dairy production. There were milking quotas to meet, five-year plans to fulfill.

And so the kolkhoz workers spent their days laboring together in brigades, doing all the heavy work required to keep a few hundred cows alive.

In 1992, just as Moscow was beginning its wild ride toward capitalism, Solov'ovo's collective farm had a decision to make: What to do with its 85 head of cattle, now that subsidies from the state could no longer be counted on?

The answer: Slaughter them. Sell the meat. Leave that enterprise behind and concentrate on selling off the wood of the rich forests of the region.

The result: In Solov'ovo, as in countless small villages dotting the vast Russian countryside, the primary economy is now based on subsistence farming. The collective farm has not yet been privatized, although the villagers are beginning to use some of its land. Farmers in Solov'ovo are still making do with the potato plots assigned to their families in earlier decades and with the tangled gardens around their homes. They hunt in the forest and fish in the nearby lake. They keep bees for honey.

For Russia as a whole, this subsistence life of the village has had several consequences. First in importance, villagers are relatively safe from the economic upheavals shaking Russia because they live mostly outside the money economy. One way or another, they produce most of what they need to survive. Conditions in rural Russia, which is home to about 27 percent of the population, are certainly harsh. Roads, telephones, telegraph, the postal system, and medical care have all deteriorated since the end of the Soviet Union. Salaries and pensions are tiny: between $20 and $50 a month. Still, this is money over and above a villager's basic needs for food and shelter. In cities, the same income barely manages to buy anything more than bread, *kasha* (grain), and tea for a month. Villagers remain insulated from the mixed blessings of a capricious money economy. When the skies do basically what they should, and health and strength remain, they need very little else.

Village life provides an independence that is bad news for political economists who see the expansion of markets as the sine qua non of democracy and civil society. It gives a dismaying answer to those who ask, "Who is feeding Russia?" But as villagers make do with what their hands produce, as they feed their children and their aunts and uncles and cousins in distant cities (who fill up their villages in the summer and share in the work), they are providing a social safety net, perhaps the only one with any real meaning in post-Soviet Russia.

Dependence on the hands, then, is a form of independence. Until the hands fail.

The first time I saw Yulia, it was a sunny day in the summer of 1994. The moment was very still and, for me, utterly captivating. She was returning from the fields with a small group of farmers all in white kerchiefs and caps, all carrying rough-hewn scythes and rakes. Yulia is darker than some, quieter than most. She likes to sing Soviet hymns and old Russian folk songs; she can dance a rather complicated jig. She

>Margaret Paxson, *an anthropologist and former research scholar at the Wilson Center's Kennan Institute for Advanced Russian Studies, is currently writing a book on social memory in rural Russia.* *Copyright © 2002 by Margaret Paxson.*

A Solov'ovo family puts away hay for the winter on a plot of land a half hour's walk from the village.

has a soft laugh. As fate would have it, I lived with her and her husband for a year and a half in their one-room house while doing research on social memory in rural Russia. They told me matter-of-factly one day not long after we met that they would be taking me in "as a daughter." *Kak dochka.*

What I saw in Solov'ovo was a world of great symbolic and ideological complexity. While growing up as modern Soviets, learning to believe in the "radiant future" of communism, and weeping desperately when their "father" Stalin died, the villagers maintained their own sense of how the world works, how problems are solved, how power worldly and otherworldly can be invoked. So although they grew up celebrating the Christian holiday of *Troitsa* (Pentecost) as a secularized "Day of the Birch Tree" in their local clubhouse, every year they would steal away, family by family, to the graveyard, bringing offerings to their ancestors, talking with them, invoking their aid in the harvest, getting steadily more drunk and effervescent and connected with one another and with the dead.

Year in and year out, even when it was dangerous because of the eyes of informers, they would seek out local sorcerers and healers and women who could find animals lost deep in the woods because they knew how to talk to the "host of the forest," known simply as "grandfather." And always they feared the evil eye, effusive praise, or anything that pointed to personal wealth or distinction. They protected their animals and the newly born from the glances of strangers, covering their baskets of berries or mushrooms, hiding signs of wealth, never looking the stranger too long in the eye.

In this world that is very much its own, I have seen how farmers grapple individually and collectively with where they—as families, as villagers, as Russians—are going next. In Yulia's family, a son recently moved from his village to the ancient, once-bustling port city of Belozersk with his wife and two children. The farm work was too hard; the rewards were too few. Now he finds himself in a small urban apartment with no running water or central heating, hoping that he'll find some work, but if he doesn't, that his wife's salary as a teacher will sustain them for a while. Yulia's daughter lives with her husband and three children in a village 25 miles away and struggles endlessly with a full-time job at the local library, housework, the cow and calf and chickens she keeps, and a chronically sick son. For her family, there is never enough money and barely enough resources. Rural life is unforgiving in its demands. Leaving it can bring relief, but it can also bring uncertainty as the

social safety net it provides becomes weaker or vanishes.

All over the world, societies find themselves in similar periods of transition. All over the world, people carry with them a deeply cultural sense of who they are. And everywhere they ask themselves, "What next?"

Since the fall of the Soviet Union, there have been two important ways of treating this very large question. The first way assumes that the "invisible hand" of the market will reach down and quickly turn Russia into something familiar to Westerners. As markets develop and grow, as competition expands, as corporate practices become transparent and "rational," Russia will become democratic. The rule of law will rein in the excesses of renegade moneymakers and politicians. Civil society will flourish. Russia will differ from America only in its preference for borsch and caviar over hot dogs and French fries. A little ballet, a little Cossack dancing, a couple of onion domes. Russia will become a rational capitalist society with a slight regional accent.

The second typical way of thinking about the Russian future has been to fall back on what anthropologists scorn as an "essentialist" concept of culture. The idea of culture has a long and controversial history among scholars, and one reason is that wielding the term carelessly can cause one to view the "other" as utterly different, a separate, impenetrable gestalt. The Russian "other" has been seen, for example, as slavishly loyal to despots, as a collectivist with no ability to act individually, as incapable of enterprise. Russian villagers carry the extra burden of how their own country's elite has seen them: conservative, irrational, mulish, and brutish (and, at the same time, the repository of the national "soul"). Russia through this lens, and especially the Russian countryside, is eternally separate and different.

This view would hold that where Russia is going is nowhere. Ever.

This, of course, cannot be true, just as it cannot be true that there is a monolithic capitalist society out there that Russia is destined to merge with. It is true that Russia is changing. Even the Russian countryside—as rich and, in certain ways, as independent as its cultural traditions are—is changing. But how?

One day I asked Mikhail Alekseevich, Yulia's husband, how he knew when it was time to plant the potatoes. "Go out onto the fields barefoot," he said. "When you feel the warmth start to rise from the earth, it is time to plow and to plant."

From earth to foot, from eye to sky, this decision is made some time in the month of May. June, July, and August pass in fields and gardens, plowing and planting and weeding and hauling hay and water, water and hay. The growing season is only about four months in Solov'ovo; then the cold winds come and soon enough there is a frost and the leaves turn brown and there is darkness, cold, and rain. Once winter arrives, people settle into quiet rhythms; animals are penned up and closed in. As the winter stretches on, the vegetables gathered and preserved in the fall run out jar by jar; some of the meat slaughtered in the fall begins to rot; rats can be heard gnawing on the carrots in the cellar at night.

The growing season in Russia ranges from two months in northern Siberia to six in the south. Throughout Russian history, that time has had to provide enough not only to feed the village family but to support the feudal landlord and the hungry empire. Though the Russian imperial court was as lavish as Versailles, the north of Russia is certainly not the center of France; because of their differences in land and climate, the force required to pull a Versailles out of the Russian population was exponentially greater. The tsars who led Russia from the 16th to the 20th centuries had little compunction about exploiting the serfs to increase their own wealth. In 1581, during the reign of Ivan IV (known as the "Terrible" and the first to assume the title of tsar), the serfs became indentured and were officially "tied to the land," having no freedom to move without the permission of their lord. Escaping serfs were retrieved as any runaway slave would be. Taxes, which were paid collectively through village communes, were exorbitant. Battery and sexual license were common. Neither the emancipation of the serfs in 1861 nor the series of reforms during the first part of the 20th century did much to ease the burdens of the peasant class. The Revolution of 1917, though one of its stated intentions was to bring justice to the countryside, brought only more suffering and terror.

Yulia heads toward Lake Tikhonskoe for a few hours of ice fishing. The lake provides the villagers with a treasured source of fresh food, especially when fruits and vegetables are scarce.

The months are short to grow potatoes, to grow grain, to grow hay for fodder, to feed the family in the village, to feed the animals, to feed those who have moved away . . . to feed the country itself.

In the seven years that I have observed the Russian countryside, I have seen the steady (but not final) disintegration of the kolkhoz. I have watched villagers inch their way onto kolkhoz lands for their own haying, which a law fresh on the books gives them the right to do. I have seen people retire. I have watched a post office close, a *medpunkt* (a tiny, seldom-used medical station) close, a local store close. I have seen people leave for the cities, with no intention of returning; I have seen others move into the village for good. There have been deaths from illness and suicide and violence. I have been to the graveyard for ancestor rites; I have watched scores of people visit a local sorcerer in search of healing for the sick or the lifting of curses from the accursed. I have heard tales of strange and wondrous beings that live in the forests where the mushrooms and berries grow. I have heard, in the winter, a quiet so quiet that one can hear the footsteps of a cat walking on the snow.

But mostly I have seen mornings when a man and a woman sit at a table and look out at the sky and decide what needs to be done that day. I have seen them working. I have sat around a table with them as they ate and drank tea and rested from the labors of the day.

And now what do I see? A pair of hands, a worried look, a decision being made.

When the cow is slaughtered (when Lushka is slaughtered), there will be no more milk, and no more butter or sour cream or cheese. After the first frost of the year, there will be no more calves for the slaughter. And so there will be no more meat.

No cutting hay in the summer. No bees and biting black flies, no more sweating and burning under the sun. No looking to the sky for rain nearly every hour of every day.

The village of Solov'ovo, the home of the hands with no more feeling left in them, will have, this winter, one more family who looks at the sky in a new and different way. This family will no longer be a family of farmers. It will be a family of pensioners. Dependent. Changed.

Yulia wrote me not long ago. "New Year's we will be home," she said. "Sasha and Zina will come. Lena's daughter Olya is growing up. . . . Now we have no more animals, only our cats Kissa and Kotya. Our little cow Lushka is already gone. . . . There it is, some news." ❑