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Personal Reflections on the Matriculture of the Siberian Soviet Union: Transcript

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[*lightly edited; please cite using time signatures*]

[*Introduction in Russian*] So my name is Nadzheda Shalamova, that's my full name. I go by my short name, Nadya, and I was born in the Tomsk Oblast, Russia, well, Siberia, Russia.

My family history...! So my great-grandparents were exiled to Siberia in 1930, 1931, during the Stalinist repressions. But they were teenagers, I would say, at that time, along with my great-grandparents. My great-great-grandparents. And they originally came to that Altai region in the early 1900s. I don't know how many listeners are familiar with the Stolypin reforms; it was a series of agricultural reforms in Russia, like around 1905. The purpose of that reform was to modernize, you know, Russia. Like a lot of Siberian territory was not really heavily occupied at that time.

01:22

So they ended up in that, they were allowed to buy land, establish their own farms, and pretty much do whatever they... [*laughs*] It's like western, like Wild West here, during the different settlements in the United States. So, anyway, they came there; most of the people who ended up in that little settlement were of the Ukrainian origin. So there were a lot of Ukrainians. So, like, my great-grandparents are, have Ukrainian roots.

But when they were exiled from what was at that time their home, again 1930s, I think my granddad was 1930, and my grandma was a little bit later, a year later, 1931. So they were exiled; they were put on the barge. It was a lot, a lot of people, there is no roof, nothing, you're just basically in the open air. And they travelled several days to this very remote place in Siberia and basically left on the riverbank to either survive or to die.

02:40

Lots of people died on that barge while they were travelling; just many people were, of course, just kind of completely not used to the circumstances in which they found themselves. But my grandparents - their family survived and luckily, I suppose, at that time, considering the circumstances, they ended up being sort of, you know, left, they were left near the native or Indigenous, small Indigenous people settlement, to kind of a village, I suppose you could call them.

My granddad always attributed those Indigenous people to their survival, because he turned out to be really good at hunting and understanding of the forest and understanding that really new and foreign way of life. Essentially, they were farmers, so they didn't know anything about hunting or mushrooms, berry picking, stuff like that. But by the time I was born, so this settlement that was now, that was kind of established with the people who were exiled from different parts of Russia, okay, at that time it completely merged with the native or Indigenous people.

04:13

By the way, that group of people was called the Khanty. This is where I first encountered as a child, some of the native Siberian or native Indigenous people. I did not actually realize that until way, way later, because everyone... There were people from all parts of Russia at that time, you know, and of course, there were this native Indigenous population, but there were also lots of people from other parts of Russia. Including actually, when I grew up, when my parents, especially my mom grew up there, including people like German people who were sent there after World War Two, those who were captured.

So the settlement where we ended up in was called Megion. It's kind of a small, now became a small village in the Tomsk Oblast. It's the region actually known for very rich natural resources, very diverse landscapes; it's kind of the southern part of West Siberian Plain, this is where it's located. And as I said, both my parents ended up in that place. They were teenagers at that time, but this is where they met. Okay, this is where they, yeah, this is where they got married, this is where they established their family. And I lived there until I was seven or just shortly before seven. So we left that village, my parents and my brother and me, we left for the big city.

06:07

That's a city that's called Tomsk, okay, basically to go to school because my parents and my grandparents always wanted to provide good education and the school that existed in the village at that time, well, was not enough, was not enough. So that's how I ended up in a bigger city. But what I do remember about that village is... Some of the memories that kind of stuck with me is that before we left, I remember kind of a lot of explosions on the other side of the river. Yes, and it's like you might be wondering why, but like maybe a decade or a couple before that, they discovered big deposits of natural gas and oil near that village.

I remember that we had to leave our house and our house was really close to the river because they did a lot of, I suppose, tests at that time on the other side of the river. I just remember all people would leave their house and we have to walk pretty far just to be in a safe location. That village exists today, and it's basically one of the largest companies in Russia. It's kind of the world's, one of the world's biggest exporter of natural gas called Gazprom. It's still there. And so that's kind of stuck to me, those explosions. But to me, to me, that village was like, I did not like the place, to be honest with you.

07:57

My mom, of course, and her sister and her brothers, they remember that place with a lot of warmth, right? And love. This is where their childhood, this is where my grandparents, their parents were. But to me, it was a sad place, I have to say. Because even as a child, I clearly remember how lives were ruined by exile. People who came from different parts of Russia, who had never been in the taiga, for example, this thick forest, they were exiled from cities, they were scientists, they were teachers, they were doctors. Yeah, a lot of people sort of lost their sense of identity. People froze to death in the taiga or in the marshes, people killed by wild animals.

So I remember that we had to bolt all the doors in the house because a wild bear would be walking on the streets of the village. And you would wake up to a tragedy, because someone who maybe wasn't very careful, or maybe was under the influence, let's say, or did not maybe lock their doors, that someone would be killed. It wasn't really a good place. It wasn't a very good place to me, for me. I don't go back there with like my memories thinking about, oh, you know... I think I had a good childhood because I had a lot of love in the family, but I did not really like that place.

10:08

I had to go back there after we left for sort of summer holidays, because that was a thing to do. Those families who were lucky enough maybe to have their parents living somewhere in the country, often children would be shipped over there for just good air, organic food, and safe environment. But I remember I dreaded those trips to the village because you had to travel on a boat and then on an airplane that was, I swear, was manufactured before World

War II. So they were very small, they were very stinky, they were very uncomfortable, and they flew really, really low.

So I remember looking out of the window, and I'm also prone to motion sickness. To me, it would be an hour of puking, essentially. But I remember, I look out the window and all you see is this taiga and marshes, you know, taiga and marshes. Yes, I did learn some things valuable things from my childhood there. But it's not the place that I remember with love.

11:45

I was in Tomsk, so I got there before, before I went to, before you went to school. So I was about seven years old. And I ended up in this city, as I said, Tomsk. This city is actually known, at that time, was known for its rich cultural atmosphere; it was, and still is, a home to several universities, community colleges, theatres, art galleries. I remember that every weekend, we would go to either to the movies, or a theatre play, or some kind of a sport event, or some kind of performance. So, I remember we were always busy.

At that time, my parents owned sort of like a condominium, I suppose you can describe it, in a newly constructed building that also located in a recently developed neighbourhood. There were a lot of new people there, everything was new and clean. And I think this provided us with a comfortable place to live, and a sense of stability during my childhood. But I did walk to school, as everyone else did; there were no school buses. And again, luckily, I did not live that far away. But I remember, school was not cancelled in winter when it was cold. So, we all became very tough, because we had to wait. I just, I remember that school was cancelled only when it was like minus 38 centigrade. If it's 35, 36, you go to school, and it's cold, and by the time you get to the school, you know, to school or to the building, you know, your eyelashes are frozen, and your eyebrows are frozen. So, yeah, it was, I don't know, I think maybe it was, it just made me tougher. So I always make fun of the school cancellations here in Milwaukee.

14:07

Yeah, you walked to school, and you walk back. Parents worked, so you get home all by yourself, and you get into the apartment where you are by yourself. You warm up some food, you do the homework. We only have one television program at that time. So, I think a lot of us, well, I read pretty much. That was my main kind of entertainment at that time. So, again, I felt, I think that for many years, I kind of felt comfortable in there and liked my life.

But when I was 14, a tragedy struck our family: my father went on one of the hunting trips and never came back. As far as we know, he perished in the taiga. He was the main bread winner, essentially, in the family. So, after he never came back, my mom became a sole provider. Naturally, my grandparents helped. But I remember the life changed, and life changed drastically. And those years also sort of coincided with the beginning of the

collapse of the Soviet Union.

15:38

I just remember, there was a widespread lack of food. We stayed, we spent a lot of time in lines for a grocery store, for example, for sugar or just for a lot of things. Essentially for everything, for everything. I also remember there were several years where people, including my mom, simply were not paid. So, there was absolutely no money. And luckily, again, luckily for us, like we were not, we avoided starvation because my grandparents, again, lived in the village, and they were able to send us food on those big trucks that travel from that village to Tomsk during the winter months. And we also, again, luckily our apartment had a really big balcony and we used it as a refrigerator.

So, you go to the balcony, I remember just to get food, meat, and all kinds of canned foods. And my grandmother would send us even a loaf of bread and things like that. But I do remember that it was a very tough time for a lot of people and I know that many people just did not have enough to, you know, did not have enough to eat.

17:12

I would say that I grew up with a belief and kind of encouragement that education was vital, was key for both men and women. So, getting higher education, going to college, for example, getting postdoctoral degree, or doctoral or postdoctoral degree was just clearly considered to be a mark of status and respect in the community. For me, I don't know, I, many people I know of my generation or even my parents' generation who are still alive often look back at the Soviet Union with a sense of nostalgia. And I know that many people remember it very fondly because there was free health care, free education, free child care, free... Any sort of a post school programs for kids were free. And seemed to have kind of both equal opportunities for everyone, including men and women, if we're just talking about genders.

I think for a lot of people, and I'm talking about women as well, those social benefits were definitely an important part of this daily life. And they contributed, I think, for many people to the feelings of security and stability. But I also remember that life in the Soviet Union was just a bit restrictive; as many other kids, I suppose, or younger people, I was subjected to propaganda. But I was always kind of a curious person that questioned a lot of things around me and just had a really keen sense of kind of double standards of those, especially people in power.

19:31

But when it comes to women of my generation, either before or during the Soviet Union, again, women had equal rights; we had the right to vote. The woman had the right to

divorce. Abortion was legalized. Women were encouraged to pursue careers, but in certain fields, I have to say, like teaching, medicine, maybe journalism, science, but, God forbid, engineering, because girls don't have apparently brains, the brains for engineering, or maybe law. The environment that I grew up in was that everyone went to college, or the majority of people went to college, and there was no distinction whether you're a woman or you're a man.

I would say that was a kind of a progressive stance on women's rights. But I also have to acknowledge that women definitely faced this kind of ongoing challenge of balancing their careers with domestic responsibilities because there was this definite pressure from society that expected women to handle the majority of housework, cooking, and especially childcare. Kind of a double burden, I would say.

21:06

That double burden meant that women often endured kind of long hours at a very maybe demanding job only to come home to a second shift, let's say, and to do household chores, make dinner, make sure kids are okay, homework is done, and things like that. So this is what I remember about women.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, probably even actually later, when this is kind of a new Russia, I would say, at that time, that a lot of women got the opportunity to pursue their entrepreneurial interests and a lot of women became very successful because like I said, in general, women were encouraged and many pursued higher education, not just high school or even community college, but many went to what got their master's, it was kind of a standard, I would say. But after the collapse of the Soviet Union, yeah, lots of women opened their own businesses, became successful entrepreneurs, especially again, if their husbands had connections, let's say. But yeah, a lot of I think, for a lot of women, it was kind of a welcome change.

22:30

Men and women could occupy the same position, but of course, a man would be paid more. But in terms of, like I said, there were certain professions, maybe where women considered to be like outsiders, right? Like, again, engineering was not for women. But women also work in construction, you know, women work in transportation. So, I don't know, I grew up with the sense that, yeah, I could be, I could go anywhere if I had the brain for it. Lots of women, you know, lots of women had their own careers, it actually was looked down, or frowned upon, if you were sort of a homestay mom. So, that wasn't something that... definitely was not an aspirational path for a woman.

I went to school, to college and grad school in Tomsk, so the city that we moved in after we left the village. I got into a program in linguistics, and I worked in, ah, it's called Laboratory

of the Siberian Indigenous People. Okay, that laboratory still exists, they still conduct linguistic research and I worked primarily… I did several field trips for the course of three years, each field trip was about a month, and I worked with a community, the Indigenous community known as Khanty, as I mentioned. This is the population, this is the native Indigenous people that my great-grandparents and grandparents encountered when they first came to that part of Siberia.

24:30

My linguistic research was, I don't know if it's interesting, it would be interesting to your readers or listeners. It was focused on the category of aspect, it's a grammatical aspect, you know, in the Khanty language. But I think that what I need to say is that I studied not just language, I studied the specific dialect of that language, one of the archaic dialects of that language, that was going extinct at that time and it had a very interesting kind of a grammatical structure. Surprisingly, you know, the dialect was almost like an independent language, because there were some other dialects of that language that were spoken in other parts of Siberia. But this particular dialect was very close to the Hungarian language - surprise, surprise! - like somewhere in Europe, right? And as I said, you know, that was, it had only a few speakers left.

I studied that language because, again, I had lived in that village, so I kind of really had a pretty good idea about where to go, who to talk to. My relatives still lived in that area, and it wasn't the first time… When I went on a field trip, it wasn't the first time when I just encountered the Indigenous people, so I knew about their life. I would say that my observations throughout those years were that the Soviet Union definitely kind of brought some technical and scientific knowledge and literacy, because everyone had to go to school, every Indigenous child, including Indigenous children, you know, they had to go to school, everyone had to learn how to write. An expectation was that you graduated from school, you have to do at least ten grades, I think this is what we're required to do.

26:51

But to me, as a linguist and anthropologist of that time, I have to say that the sense of identity, you know, that was lost; the sense of identity, cultural identity, linguistic identity, because again, women married Russian or a Russian speaking man. Remember, we're talking about the place where people from all parts of the Soviet Union had been sent to, not only during the Stalin's repressions, but also after World War II. As I said, there were Germans, there were Ukrainians, there were Belarusians, there were people from the Baltic, what used to be like called Baltic Republic. I heard different languages, and I grew up in different cultures, which I did not realize until I got to the United States, pretty much, that I was very comfortable with the cultural and linguistic diversity.

But I also know that the native culture pretty much did not survive; as far as I know, pretty

much the dialect is gone. I'm very proud of the work that I did and that I was able to document that language, actually had a couple of grants. One was, well, we actually received two big grants from the Russian Science Foundation for that work. We also got a grant from Carnegie Foundation.

28:32

The majority of Khanty people live in the northern part of Siberia, it's called the Khanty-Mansi territory. They maintain their cultural identity in the language. But this dialect was an isolate, so they were like a very, very small community of people. Of course, everyone was interested, and still is, in how come it is so close to the Hungarian language and not that close to the other dialects of the same language. And it's like really fascinating research. But because the community was so small at that time, they basically kind of got diluted in this Russian-speaking population. I do not think that it is viable or feasible at this point to completely resurrect that dialect in that particular place.

For Indigenous women, I think that some of them definitely took sort of advantage of this new educational opportunities, right? But that was a big, was a really dramatic shift in their way of life. So, while they pursued their education and embraced their new cultural identity, of course, many of them lost their language and also lost their cultural identity. I know that some of them… In Russian passports at that time, you were required to declare your national identity, I suppose, so I know that some Indigenous people would want to be declared as Russians, not Khanty, for example.

30:41

There was also a lot of stigma around Indigenous people because, again, their way of life was just very different from the mainstream way of life that Russian-speaking population or other cultures that came in there. They were, I suppose, more Russian or more Westernized, maybe, but I think it was one of the main reasons I did not continue to pursue this work. It was happening in front of my eyes, how the culture was dying.

When I have conversations like that, it makes me appreciate things I did not maybe see before, didn’t realize or didn’t value before. I think that that life gave me really good sense… a skill I would call adaptability. Adaptability, being able to adapt sort of quickly, assess your surroundings, your circumstances, and think ‘well, how can I survive?’ That’s one, but then not only ‘how can I survive?’, but ‘how can I flourish?’ I just remember that this was kind of a mantra that we had in my family, and especially my grandad, you just never give up! You just never give up. You toughen up. You can’t, because in those circumstances you can’t, because you’d be dead in a few hours.

32:31
So, I think that maybe this adaptability, and becoming tough, I would say, maybe tougher

than other women who happened to be or happened to grow up in softer circumstances. So there was that. I remember when I came to the United States, I actually came to California for the first time, I felt really really comfortable. People were speaking different languages; I mean, I couldn't understand Spanish at that time, but I was just very comfortable with diversity, basically. That's one of the things: to me, it's cultural diversity, ethnic diversity, linguistic diversity… There is no one correct thing; there are always multiple perspectives, right? You somehow need to find out a way to live there, right, and live well. So I think this is kind of the main takeaway for me.

33:45