

The Roads of Sweden, the Roads of Life

Anna Varfolomeeva

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Several years ago I was filling in a questionnaire about the concepts which had a special meaning in my life: “Scandinavia, travelling, bicycle, old books”. I remembered about the questionnaire one evening while cycling back home from the library in Uppsala. I finally combined everything. Maybe that is why I felt so happy and peaceful there.

I spent the time from September 2013 till March 2014 in three different locations in Sweden doing my research as a scholarship holder within Sverker Åström Foundation. I was studying current issues related to the Sami, the indigenous people of Sweden. The research concentrated on the analysis of Sami communities' complex relations to extractive industries in the North, primarily mining.

My interest in indigenous communities comes from my childhood, as I am from Karelia, where we still have two small Finno-Ugrian minorities – Karelians and Vepses. I was studying the Vepsian language at school and later, after a while, returned to the Finno-Ugrian topic while completing MA thesis. The research stay helped me to sort out my priorities and to realize which life road to take next. Now I am about to start my PhD, and it would hardly be possible without the months I spent in Sweden.



Uppsala and cycling between UCRS and our “villa”

My first stop in Sweden was in Uppsala, September – December 2013. Due to the kind support of Disa Håstad and Elena Namli it was agreed that I spend these months at Uppsala Centre for Russian and Eurasian Studies (UCRS) within Uppsala University. I also attended the seminars at the Department of Anthropology and discussed my research with Professor Hugh Beach. Besides, I tried to attend every academic event related to my interests.

Uppsala Centre for Russian and Eurasian Studies was inaugurated in 2010. Today there is a permanent staff of researchers, but many more are affiliated with the centre as guest researchers or visitors. I value the time spent at UCRS a lot, as it gave me the opportunity to learn from so many talented people at the weekly seminars and during everyday talks. Already in the first days of my stay, when I still had no idea what to focus on among so many Sami-related issues, Ingvar Svanberg brought me loads of books to help me to find the topic. Later I received a lot of support, advice, proofreading of my PhD proposals and suggestions on what to read from Vladislava Vladimirova, one of UCRS researchers.

No doubts, my research stay would be different without my Sverker Astrom scholarship colleague, Vika Vasilenko – it was always pleasant to have such an interesting, understanding, funny person sitting next to me in our “glass room” at UCRS.

While my mornings and afternoons were filled with studying at UCRS and lectures at the University, the evenings belonged to “villa” – we shared a large house with six other girls from different countries. I was nervous at first about sharing the household with so many people, but in reality it was the right thing to do. In the first weeks in Uppsala, when I did not know so many people, it would be tough to return to the empty flat and to spend evenings alone. And at “villa” one always had company – somebody to talk with, to cook with, to watch a movie with. And indeed, we watched a lot of movies during the rainy evenings, had several parties, an intercultural dinner and countless sweet or funny moments which come unnoticed, but you remember them with a nostalgic feeling later.



Another great part of my Uppsala stay was the opportunity to take part in a Swedish B1 course at Folkuniversitetet. I was studying Swedish before, but never really practised it and had the feeling that I forgot everything. Slowly the language was returning, and later in Jokkmokk I fully realized how important Swedish sources were for my research.

Jokkmokk or How to say productive when it is cold & dark

Everything comes to an end – or to a change. I had to switch from the well-established life in Uppsala to the unknown Northern world, beyond the Polar Circle. I agreed with Sami Educational Centre (Samernas Utbildningcentrum) in Jokkmokk (Norrbotten region, Swedish Lapland) to spend a month there while working at Ajtte museum library. Jokkmokk is one of recognized centers of Sami culture due to the activities of Samernas and Ajtte museum as well as the yearly Winter Market which takes part during the first week of February. I was in Jokkmokk between January 12 and February 12.



During my long trip to the North the temperature fell down from -7 in Uppsala to -25 in Jokkmokk. Later there came a week with -35 every day, while you could watch the sunset at 2 pm, and by 3 pm it became dark. I will probably never forget the afternoon when I was wandering around in the darkness and with -30 around, with the map I couldn't see, trying to find the swimming pool. However, the locals seem prepared to the harsh conditions: warm houses, bright colours, a lot of coffee, solid cars, free sauna for all the students of Samernas. I tried to observe the life of local population at every point: while walking, going to the only coffee place at the central street, visiting the Sami church and the Frikyrka, and, of course, in the Sami Educational Centre.

There were several milestones of my Jokkmokk stay: first, the journey to Tromsø, Norway to participate in the yearly international conference *Arctic Frontiers* – this trip was supported by Sverker Åström Foundation. On the way back I got stuck as the trains were cancelled due to extremely cold weather. Luckily, I got a chance to spend a day in Kiruna and had the opportunity to see the “city on the move”, one of the Swedish mining centers.

In the beginning of February I observed the famous Jokkmokk Winter Market and the massive Sami protests against mineral exploration in the region. The Market was filled with events; it helped me to meet the Sami activists, to listen to the talks, to see the real indigenous people with its worries and problems, different from the one depicted in tourist brochures.



I started getting used to Jokkmokk, to the quietness and the white colour dominating the landscape. However, the Winter Market ended, and it was the time to move again: now to Stockholm, where, thanks to the help of Disa, I had an amazing flat waiting for me.

Stockholm and the spring spirit from the 20th floor

After the north everything seemed different in Stockholm. Lots of people on the streets. The shops working every day (and not two days a week, as in Jokkmokk). There was no snow. I had a flat close to Medborgarsplatsen, at one of the students' residence centers, on the 20th floor, from where I could see half of the city.



While in Stockholm, I was travelling twice a week to Uppsala (it is only 40 minutes by train) to take part in UCRS' seminars. I also tried to attend the events organized by the Departments of Anthropology and Environmental Sciences of Stockholm University. One of the most thought-provoking events I went to was the discussion about the Age of Anthropocene at the Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences.

I strongly believe that the part of Stockholm I lived in was one of the best in the whole city. I enjoyed its busy youthful spirit: lots of coffee-places, bookstores and second-hand shops, the weekly Vintage markets where everybody could bring whatever (s)he doesn't need anymore and sell it for some symbolic amount of money. This spring time was also marked by the valuable memories we share now with other Sverker Åström scholarship holders: my meeting with Yulia Rudt while she was holding her own seminar in Uppsala, our visit to Opera, Museum day, the relaxation practices we have learned from Olga Kuvaldina. I could smell the sea everywhere I walked, the flowers were sold on the streets, I felt free and optimistic, even though knowing that the end of my stay in Sweden is approaching.



I know that these several months have changed me a lot, and I am grateful for this experience. I have already mentioned several people who helped me throughout all the way in Sweden, but I also have to thank Peder Roberts from KTH for believing in my research and providing me with unique opportunities. Olof Kleberg's advice and contacts helped me during the first weeks in Sweden, and the talk with Lars Norberg was extremely important while I was preparing for the trip to Jokkmokk – he helped me to see the history of Swedish Sami from a completely different angle. And whatever happened, we could always rely on the warm support and encouragement of Disa Håstad. It is inspiring to watch the constant development of the Foundation, and I wish best of luck to the future “stipendiater”: you will have a lifetime experience!

