

Traveller Jacek Palkiewicz, an Italian of Polish origin, needs no introduction: he has crossed an ocean in a boat alone, is familiar with the jungle and deserts, and has climbed the Himalayas. But, recalling his journey through Siberia, he says: 'That was the most trying expedition.'

## ITALIANS IN SIBERIA

by Leonid REPIN

Photos by Edward ZHIGALOV

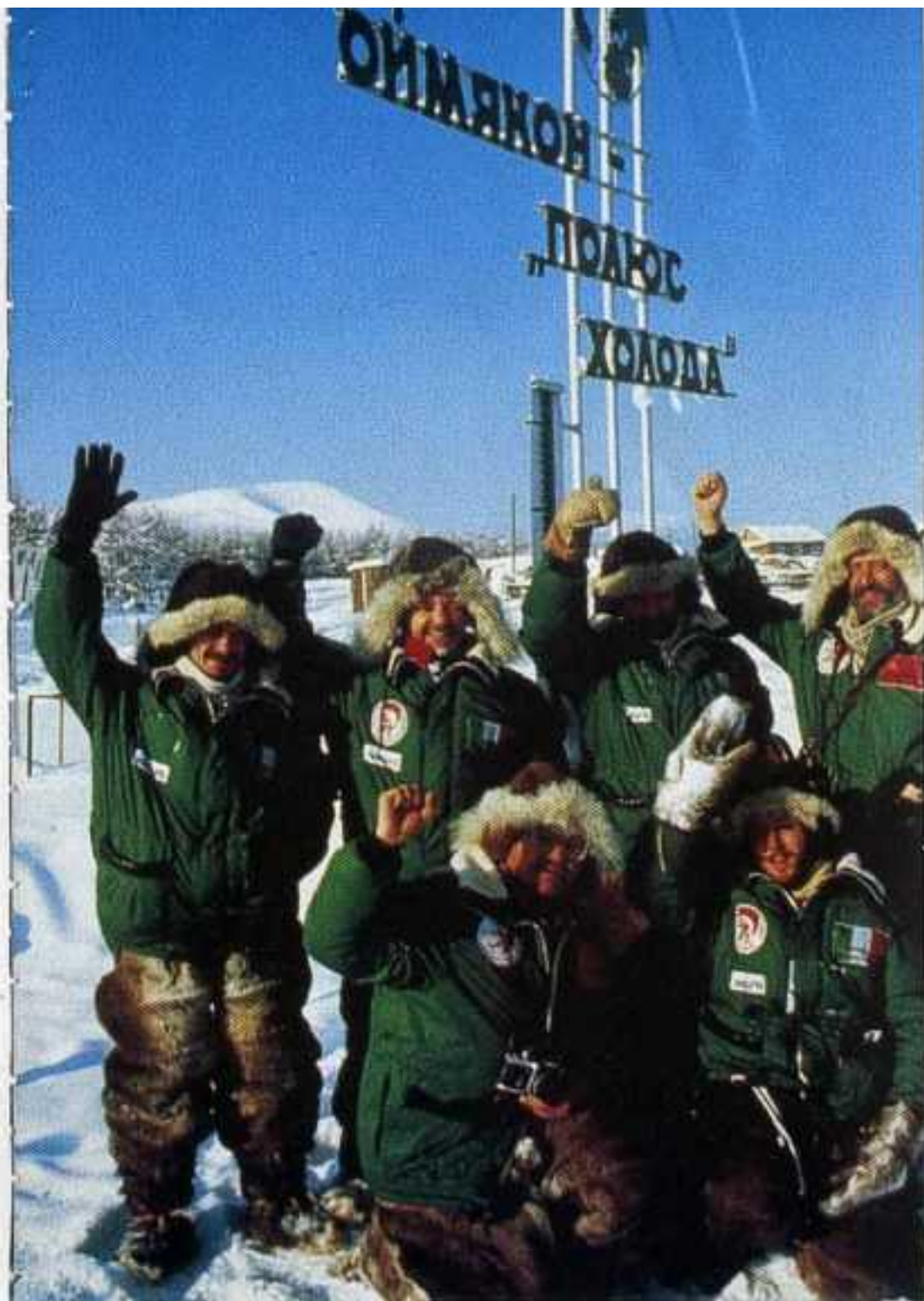


“Where better? Where there's none of us.” To these words by the Russian classic writer Alexander Griboyedov I will add that which is good is that which we don't have at the moment. Perhaps these two ideas make Jacek Palkiewicz rush about the world, each time leaving his wife and numerous children to grieve over his absence and possible troubles. When he called her from Yakutsk, a city in Siberia's interior, to say that instead of the coming Wednesday he would be back on the coming Friday, poor Linda burst into tears. She had done a whole month's patient waiting, but the idea of having to wait a further two days proved to be more than she could stand.

Jacek and his fellow-travellers began to make preparations for the journey at the beginning of the winter. They had warm clothes sewn for them, chose reindeer, and specified their route. On February 10, 1989 the expedition left Yakutsk, setting out for the settlement of Oymyakon, the coldest place in the Northern hemisphere. They expected to cross a distance of 1,200 kilometres in three weeks.

The four Italians and as many Soviet men got what they wanted. When the journey ended, Jacek said: “We've achieved what we wanted by 100 per cent, if not more.” Roberto Lorenzani, Graziano Piccinini, and Nicola Cerfoglio, who had not even the faint-

...They have reached the coldest place in the Northern Hemisphere.









est idea of what Siberia was like in winter, also were pleased, although their noses, fingers, and toes were frost-bitten. But they were full of impressions.

Fortunately, the lowest temperature they experienced was  $-53^{\circ}$  Celsius. The group moved, in the main, along frozen rivers. That was simpler. But they constantly had to take care to avoid the snow-sprinkled cracks in the ice. These warmth-loving southerners took snowbaths literally at every step of the way, invariably falling into water, waist- and even chest-deep. "None of my friends," later recalled Palkiewicz, "could imagine life at such a low temperature". At night everybody froze

... This is how they moved in good weather.

terribly: the temperature in the tent was a mere five degrees higher than outdoors. For the first time one of the local reindeer-driver's nose was frost-bitten.

The day's preoccupations took a lot of effort and strength. The choice of a camping ground, the collection of firewood and branches to spread under the tent, and camp-making usually took four hours. And just as much went into catching the grazing deer and harnessing them to sleds. They usually advanced at night, which left only six hours a day for sleep.

They ate local food — reindeer *stroganina* (thinly sliced scaled frozen fish or frozen meat — *Tr.*). This is regarded as delicacy, but not for the "uninitiated". The freezing cold turned bread into ice, which had to be sawn. The



only "civilized" products were tea and coffee, and the occasional pure alcohol, necessary in such conditions. It came in very handy when they celebrated three birthdays of Roberto, Graziano, and Igor Mikhalev, a Novosti photographer. A strict man, Jacek poured alcohol into everyone's plastic photo-cassette box. Presents were found nearby as the reindeer were shedding and renewing their antlers just then.

Did they come across wild animals in the taiga? There were footprints on their path, but they only saw elk and partridges and once the pawprints of a big wolf. Prowling around the camp at night, it howled long and nastily. Tarzan, one of the reindeer-driver Andrei Struchkov's dogs kept close to his master. The deer, which usually

strayed far away during the night, this time stayed close by.

During the crossing the group formed a caravan of fifteen sleds, each drawn by a pair of deer. Another ten reserve deer came in useful: one deer died a day before the men reached Kyubeme, the first population centre on their path. Another two had had to be left resting: they failed to get up. But the drivers said that in such cases the animals do not die; after resting they reunite with their herds.

The travellers reached Oymyakon on the evening of March 8. The temperature was  $-43^{\circ}$ . The exigencies of the expedition and a common aim brought the four Italians, two Russians, and two

... And in bad weather.





Evenks close together. (I must name television cameraman Vladislav Bochkovsky and reindeer-driver Dima Yefimov). During the trek they shared both bread and work equally.

Where do you think Jacek travelled next? In the selva? The jungle? The pampas? No. In Yakutia again, in summer. And quite recently, in 1990, he took a refreshing holiday in the Soviet Union — in the Kamchatka Peninsula.

I have mixed feelings about him: on the one hand, I feel like exclaiming: "Fine lad, Jacek!" On the other hand, I want to ask him in earnest: "Jacek, when will you stop tormenting your meek and mild Linda?"

*Abridged from the newspaper  
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