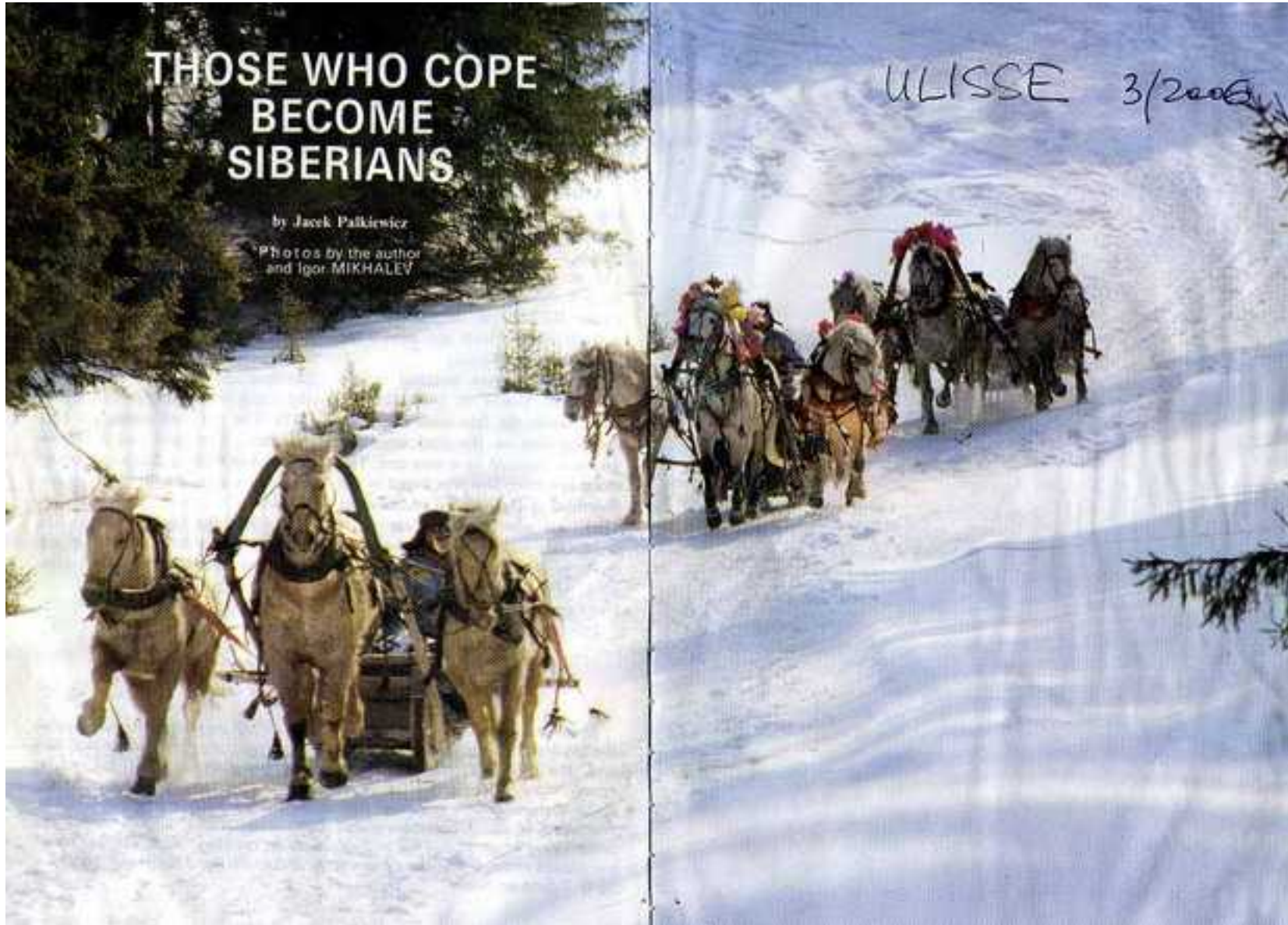


THOSE WHO COPE BECOME SIBERIANS

by Jack Palkiewicz

Photos by the author
and Igor MIKHALEV



Every morning the same procedure was repeated: a tarpaulin was spread over the bottom of the sleigh, hay was thrown over it, fur coats were heaped on the hay, and the bags with our things were laid over the coats. We, the participants in the Italian-Russian expedition across Siberia, squeezed in among our things. We were seeking what had been lost over time: old churches, forgotten rites, and dances and songs almost not to be heard or seen anywhere today.

The horses were adorned with ribbons and cloth flowers and their bells rang merrily. The silence was broken only by our three troikas.

And we didn't meet anyone today. Such solitude gives one a feeling of freedom, but at the same time, boredom can set in in the endless expanses of the Krasnoyarsk taiga.

Suddenly the trees parted and we came out on the bank of a river where we saw a dozen wood houses. That's probably the way ancient Rus was.

We had come upon the Old Believer's village of Ust-Kaitym, snuggled on the bank of the river by the same name. The family which joyfully greeted us was the very epitome of an honest and peaceful life. They were at peace

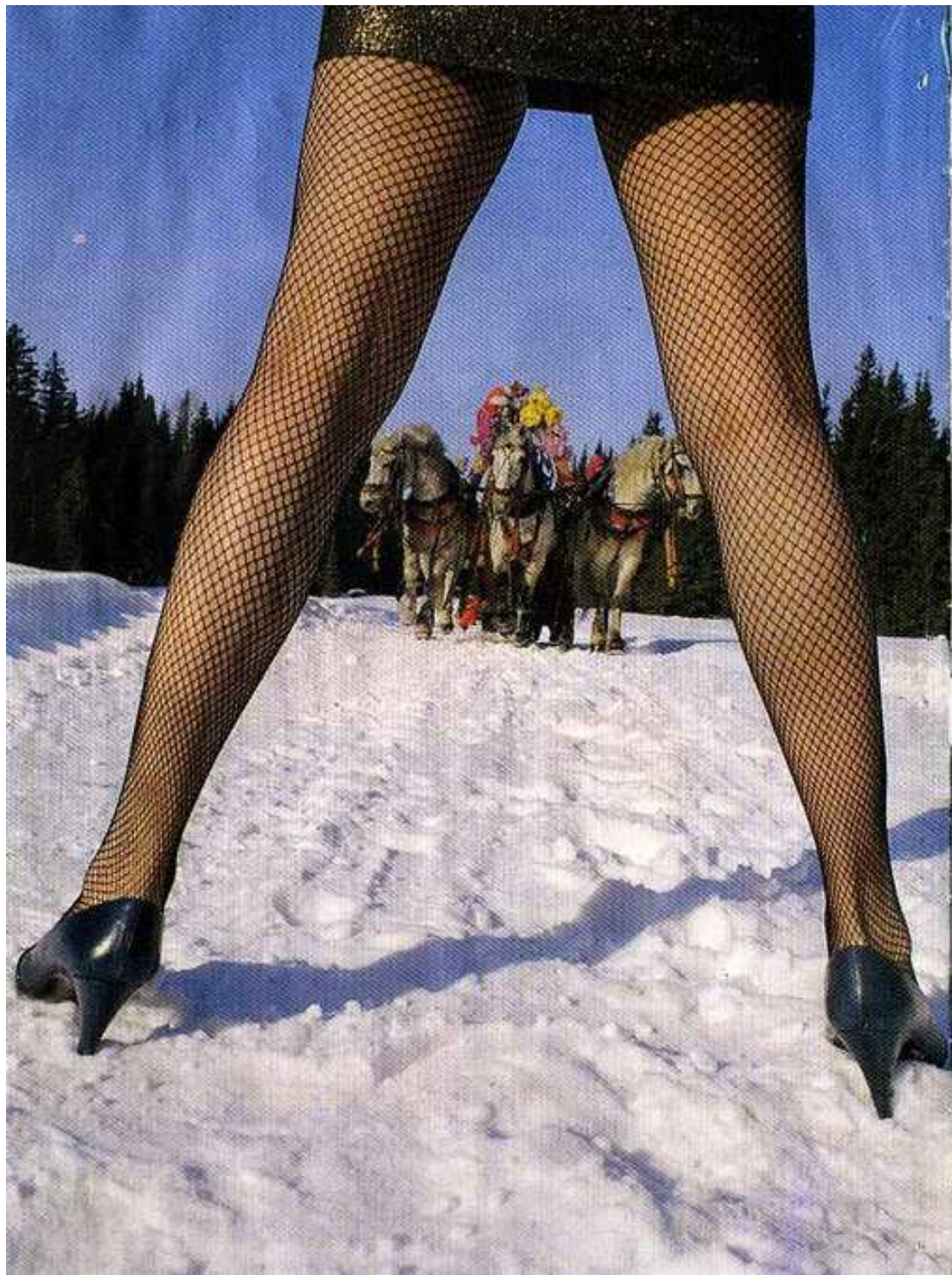
with themselves. All their faces were calm and smiling, and the baby didn't even cry once while we were there. The young recently married Nikifor told us about his life. Its rhythm coincides with the rhythm of nature. The taiga and the river provide work and food.

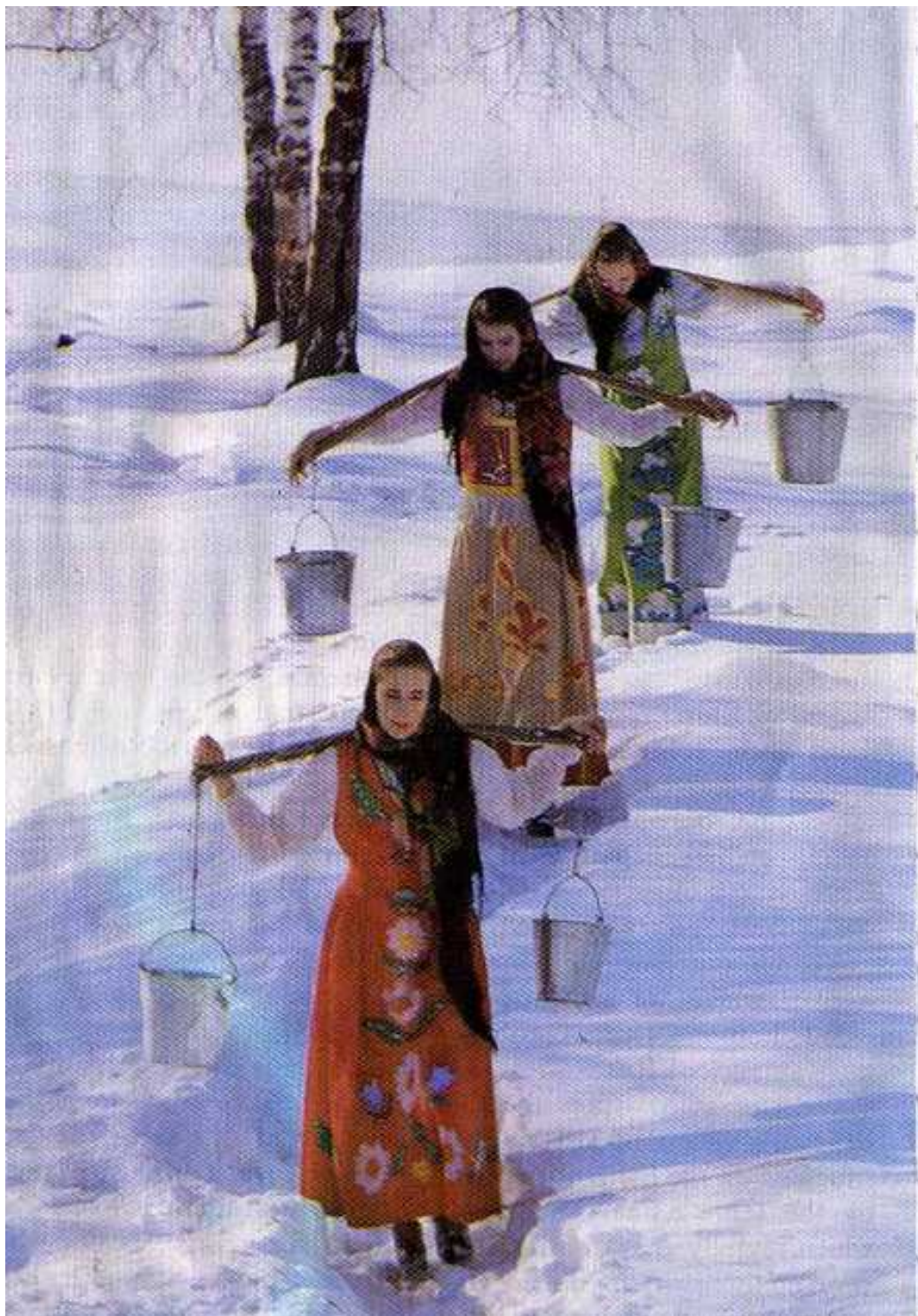
We set out in the morning. We had to cross the river and then a valley in the hills. Our guides carefully studied a map: in such a wilderness you can't count on being rescued.

The weather turned for the worse. The sky clouded over, snowflakes began to fall, and soon made a thick wall. It was a blizzard. We had been warned about that... We couldn't see ahead of the moving sleighs. Only the bells told us that we weren't alone in this world. But even the sound of the bells was drowned out. And suddenly the thought entered our heads: "What if we get lost?"

Fortunately, we made it to a hunter's cabin. First of all we had to take care of the horses: to put some hay down for them to lie on and dry them off so ice wouldn't form on them.

Just as a hundred to two hundred years ago, wood, salt, matches and some food had been laid up in the cabin for stranded





travellers. In the morning we replenished the supplies. But what we did first in the evening was to gather snow, fill the pots with it and boil it. No meals are eaten in Siberia without tea. For dinner we had "stroganina"—raw frozen fish cut into thin slices. The thinner, the tastier.

The cold woke us up in the morning. The fire in the stove had burned down and the morning frost had stolen in through the thick log walls. The windows were covered with fantastic designs. The sun here is deceiving—it doesn't warm you.

And again prickly bits of ice kicked up by the horses hooves fly up into our faces. Finally at dusk we are back in civilization. Taseyevo is a village with an airport, a post office, TV network and stores. This is the small jumping off point from which the wealth of the region is beginning to be assimilated.

When they say that there is everything in Siberia—they're telling the truth. Besides gold and oil, diamonds and timber, gas and furs, there are courageous people ready to fight the cold and snow, the dirt and mosquitoes, loneliness and human weakness, and the elements. Not all cope. But those who do become Siberians forever.