

# Only Saami Native language writer dies

by Boris Popov  
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MURMANSK, USSR — The poetess Oktyabrina Voronova died last summer in the village of Lovozero in the Murmansk Region, where the Saami population numbers less than 2,000 people. She was the only Saami woman writing in her native tongue.

Voronova's verses in Saami can be found only in manuscripts; the printed versions have appeared in a Russian translation. It is only now that her book in Saami is being prepared for the press.

But the events connected with this publication would have certainly surprised the poetess.

The development of the native language, any culture's most important element, has not been encouraged among the Soviet Saami, unlike the related areas in Scandinavia, and it is still restricted to oral folklore.

In the USSR, written Saami is based on the Cyrillic alphabet. Certain differences with the Russian alphabet, the ensuing printing obstacles and bureaucrats' indifference toward the ethnic minorities' problems have for a long time undermined the issues of Saami books.

Today, the Saami people do not have a single edition for reading. They do not use the written language. As to those who speak Saami, they are gradually passing away.

There have been numerous attempts to introduce a live Saami language into the USSR. The '30s saw the appearance of the ABC book based on Latin print. But the Russified Saami failed to master it.

In 1979, Lovozero school teacher,

Alexandra Antonova, compiled a textbook on the basis of the Russian alphabet, and the Saami first-graders began to study their native tongue.

In 1988, the Murmansk Extreme North Uralian linguistic sector of the Institute of Linguistic Studies (Soviet Academy of Sciences) decided against using Antonova's textbook because it lacked several phonemes.

The group led by sector chief Rimma Kuruch perfected the alphabet and recommended it for use in schools. But the new textbook proved too complicated for Saami children for whom Russian was already a native tongue.

Saami language teachers split into two conflicting camps.

The desire to uphold its position forced the Kuruch group to write within 10 months a whole series of aids, including two manuals for first and second graders and several books for tutors.

They are based on the principles of teaching the Saami language as a foreign one. In their view, it is the only way to prevent the Saami language's

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full disappearance.

Since Sept. 1, Saami children have been studying with the new textbook. But new problems have appeared; some teachers do not recognize the altered alphabet.

The confrontation between the different linguistic concepts may now lead to unjustified losses. There is already strong evidence of this; advocates of the renewed alphabet have applied to the local legal authorities to prohibit the Murmansk Cultural Foun-

dation from publishing Voronova's poetry on the basis of the former alphabet.

The poetess is in no position to settle this conflict. To say nothing of the fact that, when composing her book of verse, "Life," she must have hoped to encourage national revival among Saami youth rather than instigating legal proceedings.

The Saami minority will have to live through another linguistic experiment. But will Saami culture stand it?