

Chukchis Learn the Magic of Books

By YURI RYTKHEU

Editor's Note — Yuri Rytkheu is a Chukchi author, born in the village of Uelen at the easternmost tip of Siberia, the closest Siberian settlement to Alaska across the Bering Strait. Mr. Rytkheu is part Eskimo and shares common ancestry with some Alaska Natives of the Berings Straits region. This story is originally published by Unesco Press and la Baconniere, and translated from the Russian by A.B. Werth.

Time went by, and written literature came to occupy an ever larger place in our lives, it heroes replacing the valorous warriors, wise old ravens, bold adventurers and brigands of our folk tales. Out traditional heroes, as I said before, were anonymous, standardized, as it were; and so too, in the beginning, were the heroes of written literature, so long as they were arrayed in knightly armour or colourful mediaeval roves, or smeared with red clay like the figures of the Red Indian stories of American authors.

Then, all at once, there stepped forth from the pages of books curiously familiar faces, rather like those of your neighbours—as though yourself had been transported into a snow-powdered book, frozen brittle by the cold, whence you looked out at the damp, musty rooms of the workhouse described by Dickens in *Oliver Twist*, or at the life of the peasants peopling the tales of Turgenev Tolstoi, and Chekhov or the adventure of Gorki's barefooted ragamuffins... I sometimes had the impression that the world I lived in was an invention, while reality was to be found in the world of books. I cannot vouch for the exact words, but I well remember what Hemingway replied when I asked about the relation between fact and fiction in his books; he declared, serious as always, that for him, the real world was the world of his books.

I am amazed to this day to recall the atmosphere of my childhood days, wherein all epochs, beliefs, cultures and even literatures existed side by side. There were already, in our yaranga, numbers of objects testifying to the fact that its inhabitants lived in the twentieth century. The place of honour, just under the beam which held the fur partition, was occupied by a bright green gramophone with two records—the t Toreador's aria from Bizet's *Carmen* and a selection of songs by Soviet composers on the theme of the conquest of the Arctic; it stood next to an ancient wooden image shining like mahogany from years of polishing with the fat of animals captured from the sea; and on the wall was a grease-spattered but still colourful poster of Red Army soldier. And Books....



Yuri Rytkheu (right) visits Tundra Times Offices

Photograph By BRYANT TIKIK

How did books fit into the traditional setting of the yaranga, unchanged over the centuries? When I was a child, the Chukchi had already ceased to look on books as an unfathomable miracle; some would speak with a condescending smile of the time when these solid slabs of pages were mistaken for the well-tanned skins of some mysterious beast, and reading was likened to the familiar process of nosing out tracks, with the sole difference that in this case it was human speech that was being "nosed out".

But in my childhood books were already familiar objects; only their contents were regarded as miraculous.

On the first pages of the Chukchi ABC, published in 1934 we encountered, to our great astonishment, our fathers and our elder brothers (Fig. 2). The explanation for this was fairly simple: the authors of this first ABC, who were the first teachers of my school at Uelen, simply used the names of their former pupils, so that we found these people, now grown-up, playing ball and doing all the other things that we children were engaged in. Coming across people on the pages of a printed book (for a person's name, in our minds, was the same as the person himself) was every bit as astonishing as suddenly seeing our neighbours sitting on the moon! The people of my generation came gradually to understand that books constitute a new world hitherto unknown, a world in which you yourself may find a place.

In the beginning, books naturally ousted oral folk literature which, along with the yaranga, skin barks and fur thigh-boots, was re-

garded as a relic of the past, a sign of backwardness.

At the same time we could not discard it completely, any more than we could leave the yaranga and move out at once into a modern house; or go out hunting on the ice clad in rubber boots. Habit and tradition prevented us from sweeping our folklore aside overnight; it continued to exist side by side with books we read; and we boys living in the end room of the Uelen school hostel would often put aside a novel by Walter Scott or Turgenev to listen to our comrade Enmyynkan telling tales of the battles of yore fought between the people of Yanranay and the Eskimos of Saint Lawrence Island.

In my own experience, oral literature was a constant, familiar element in our lives, and one which we accepted as natural. Even at the time when I was studying at the university and helping to compile textbooks for Chukchi schools, anthologies and collections of fairy tales, I regarded folk traditions as something real, existing and developing independently.

One of the first books printed in the Chukchi language was a collection of fairy-tales entitled *Chavchyvalymnylce*, which means "Tales of the Reindeer Folk". It was by Fedor Tyntegin, one of the first students of the Institute of the Peoples of the North, who produced his own version of the animal tales current amongst the nomadic reindeer breeders, and his friend Vukvol the artist made some excellent illustrations. Chukchi literature probably dates from the publication of this book (Fig. 1).