

# Eskimo life in the Soviet Union

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The first mention of Eskimos in Russia dates back to the middle of the 17th century. At that time, groups of travellers set out for the Far East of the country in search of new lands and new sources for replenishing the revenues of the state. In 1648, a group of cossacks headed by Semyon Dezhnev left the mouth of the Kolyma River on sailing ships and, going around the northeast extremity of Asia, came out into the Arctic Ocean into the Pacific. They made one of the greatest geographical discoveries ever — that America was not connected with Asia by land. One of the results of the expedition was the report about unknown tribes inhabiting the sea coast by "the Big Stone Nose." These people were Eskimos.

In the course of the next two and a half centuries, Eskimos and their activities merely served as a source of gain for government officials, and only in Soviet times have radical changes taken place in their lives.

At the end of the 1920's, and the beginning of the 1930's, the first schools and medical centers were built on the Chukotka peninsula. In 1933-1934, the education of Eskimos in their native language was started with the help of the first Eskimo language primer created in the USSR. This primer was written on the basis of the Latin alphabet, and for a long time, was also used in the schools of American Eskimos living on St. Lawrence Island.

## —The New and the Traditional—

Most Eskimos in the USSR (there are about 1,500 of them in the USSR altogether) live on Chukotka on the coast of the Bering Strait. In the modern Eskimo settlements of Novo-Chaplino, Sireniki, Lorino, Uelen and Providence, the huts covered with skins in which the Eskimos used to live have long disappeared and have been replaced by wooden houses. If you turn on the radio, you can listen to the latest news broadcast in the Eskimo language. The local radio and TV center in Anadyr broadcasts programs in three languages — Russian, Chukchi and Eskimo.

In the preschool, first and second grades, Eskimo children learn their native language from a new, colorful Eskimo primer written by Eskimo teachers Lyudmila Ainana and Vera Analkvask. There are many more Eskimos who can speak Russian than Russian-speaking Chukchi, who live close to them. Teachers

explain this by the Eskimos' greater receptivity to everything new.

Eskimos receive special training not only in big cities (a certain quota of places for enrollment without competition is maintained at institutes and universities for representatives of northern ethnic minorities), but also in their native Chukotka at the medical and teachers' training schools in Anadyr.

The citizens of the Soviet North, including Eskimos, are better off than average workers or office employees in the USSR. Due to the extra money added to the wages by the state's earning, they are about three times higher than the country's average. The system of long annual leave (up to 2 months), as well as fares to any part of the country, paid by the state once every three years, are privileges and allowances aimed at compensating for the severe climatic conditions in the North and securing permanent cadres in the rapidly developing regions there.

## —Life from the Sea—

The life of most Eskimos is traditionally connected with the sea. In summer, when the shores are free of ice, they hunt seals and white grampus, while in September, they switch to walrus in their nesting grounds. In winter, they hunt seals on the shore ice. Some Eskimos hunt furbearing animals — polar fox, fox and ermine.

In the hunting of sea animals, kayaks have been replaced by whaleboats and seiners. Though Eskimos go out to sea as sailors and riflemen the same as before, many of them are now mechanic-drivers, and some have become captains and captains' mates.

Eskimos also work at local industrial enterprises — animal-processing plants situated in the settlements of Providence and Lawrence. Some are radio operators, radio telegraphists and builders as well.

Articles produced by Eskimo and Chukchi bone carvers are on display at museums in Moscow, Leningrad and other cities of the Soviet Union. With great artistic skill the bone carvers depict

scenes from the life of their people or general themes from contemporary life. The bone-carving shop founded in the settlement of Uelen in 1931 is still the main center for walrus bone carving. A group of carvers from this shop won the Repin State Prize in 1976. The Ergyon (Dawn) Chukchi and Eskimo Dance Ensemble has had many successful tours both about the Soviet Union and abroad.

The poetry of Eskimo poet Zoya Nenlyumkina, a journalist in Anadyr, is published by the Soviet press and has appeared in the French magazine *Europe*.

## —Old and New—

Most Soviet Eskimo families are of one nationality, though about 20 percent of the marriages are mixed. It often happens that Russian men from other parts of the USSR marry Native women. Children of such mixed families choose their nationality when they reach the age of 16.

There are quite a number of families on Chukotka in which the children of hunters have chosen professions previously unknown in these parts. For instance, both daughters of Ukshima, a well-known craftsman, are university graduates. One is a doctor and the other a computer specialist.

Modern culture — television, domestic electric appliances and periodicals — has become an indispensable part of the life of many Eskimo families. Although outwardly the life of Eskimo families has changed beyond recognition, the ancient culture of the people is carefully preserved. Parents hand down to their children the art of national dance, walrus bone carving and Eskimo legends and tales. In the village of Novo-Chaplino, Marina Sigunilik, who teaches Eskimo at the local school and is also one of the authors of a textbook for the first grade written in the Eskimo language, has gathered a wonderful collection of tapes with recordings of Eskimo folklore. Many inhabitants of the village, particularly the grandmothers and grandfathers of her pupils, have helped Marina in her collecting.

NINA SIVIGUN, SOLO DANCER  
OF THE NORTHERN LIGHTS  
FOLK ENSEMBLE.  
(NOVOSTI Photo)

