

Series Number Twenty-One

Provideniya, Russia - Siberia

Photographs 1994 - Essay 2025

Thirty-Three Photographs

Michael Nye

Provideniya, Russia - Siberia 1994



On a map, Russia, Siberia and the Far North of Alaska look like two fingers almost touching. I found a bush plane and pilot that agreed to fly me over the frozen Bering Strait in the Arctic from Alaska to Russia in the middle of winter. On the other side was a small village named Provideniya.

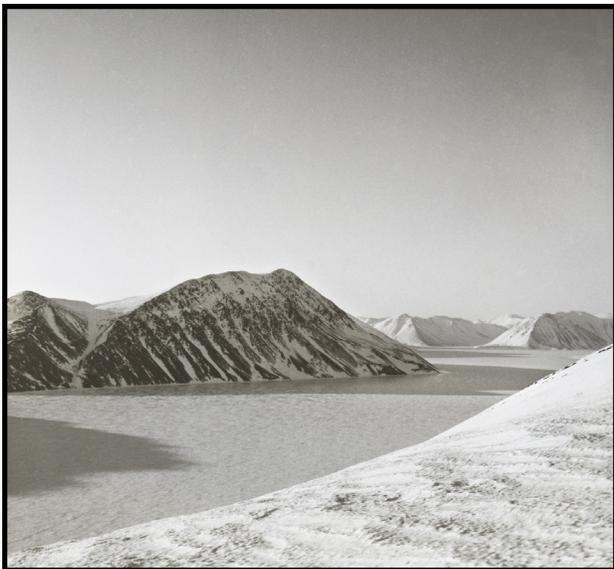
We landed on a strip of ice on the edge of a frozen lake. I met a tall, serious Russian soldier who said to me in broken English, "If you spit it will freeze before it hits the ground". He was being kind, telling me to be careful.

Two weeks before I landed in Siberia, and on my flight from Seattle to Fairbanks Alaska, I was sitting next to a young man wearing a white T-shirt, sleeves rolled up to his shoulders. He had several tattoos of faces on each arm. Outside the temperature was below zero. He was silent except he was drinking too many beers. Finally, the stewardess said, "I'm sorry I cannot serve you any more beers". We started talking. I asked him, "Where are you going?" He said, "I'm going to the top of the world. Point Barrow Alaska." He had been an automobile mechanic and lived in San Diego with his mother and had never traveled outside California. Last week he won Lotto, four million dollars. He told me, "The first thing I wanted to do was to stand in snow on top of the world to see what it looked like. What would it feel like? I wanted something that nobody could take away from me. An experience."

Flying over the Bering Strait into Siberia in winter, my imagination was a heavy unmovable object. Where would I stay? Would it be safe to work here? The small plane landed on snow and ice. When white is everywhere, your eyes adjust to white's elegance and sophistication. The frozen bays and lakes take on a bluish white while the distant Chukotka mountains are a warmer, softer golden white. I did not have a passport or visa with me (and the bush pilot would not return to pick me up for three weeks), so a Russian soldier in uniform requested that I give him my gold wedding ring as security.

Walking across the frozen lake toward the village of Providyenia, with 80 pounds of equipment, I worried about whether the ice would hold my weight. Appearing out of nothingness and fog was a 60-ton military tank stumbling slowly across the same frozen lake toward the village settlement. The tank appeared to be a still black and white photograph.

Siberia has been a part of modern Russia since the 17th century. It stretches from the Arctic Ocean to the borders of Mongolia and China with an area of 5.1 million square miles. Siberia is known for its long, difficult winters, as well as a history for cruel Russian prisons and labor camps. Provideniya is a former small Soviet refueling military port situated on a fjord sheltered from the Bering Sea. The settlement consisted of Siberian indigenous Yupiks, Inuit Chukchi peoples and Russian soldiers and their families. There was no internet, no social media at that time. Communication was limited. The population and economy of this small village was in decline.



East of Provideniya

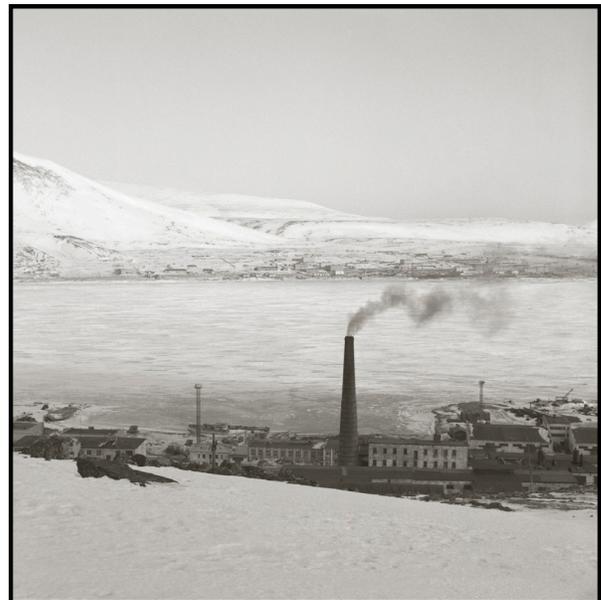
I stayed in a four-story concrete structure. The higher the floor the warmer the space. I had a small simple room on the third floor. Through the walls I heard a couple laughing. First a man and then a woman. It was comforting.

At dinner one night I took only one bite from my thick slice of brown bread. The next morning at breakfast, I found that same slice of bread, missing one bite on my plate.

It was so cold outside. Every day it was between 15 to 35 degrees below zero, (fahrenheit). No one talked or complained about the icy earth and sky. Frozen air was welcome here on the top of the earth.



Provideniya, Russia



Provideniya, Russia

I wanted to make a series of portraits of those I met. A portrait is inherently participatory. It is about time but not one moment in time. It is not kindness but it is akin to kindness in some way. Seeing a face tells little about a hidden heartbreak or hopefulness or jubilation. But still, ----Imbedded in each portrait is an inventory of extended conversations. Each person in front of the view camera is holding a private thought. Light breaths and waits. There is calmness and quietness that occurs just before the shutter is released. Who speaks first afterwards? .

Nadia, the wife of a Russian soldier and Tanya a former ballet dancer, helped me work. They wanted to practice their English. Over dinner one night with her family, Tanya told me she was a ballet dancer for many years in Khabarovsk. *“Now, I still dance but only at night when my eyes are closed.”*

We found an abandoned room on a second floor of an old concrete building as a temporary photography studio. There was no heat inside. Plaster and paint found their slow drip, drip to the cement floor. The only light arrived from small windows facing the mountains to the northeast. Nadia and Tanya suggested that we walk around the cold icy pathways and into various buildings and invite individuals into the temporary studio. We walked into a bakery. The smell was of warmth and safety. Nadia talked to several women, bakers, dressed in all white. Nadia told them in Russian, *“This man is a famous photographer from Chicago”*. I told Nadia that I was not famous and not from Chicago. She said, *“No one has heard of Texas, but some have heard of Chicago.”* With no expression on their faces the woman agreed to meet us in the studio. (Siberia # 5)



Siberia # 5

I brought with me an 8 x 10 large view camera and sheet film. I taped a dark backdrop to the cement wall. It was so cold that my light meter would not operate. As a result of the low sunlight, I constructed a small soft brace that would fit behind a person's head to reduce movement. The camera's shutter exposures were between 1 to 15 seconds.

The impulse to photograph does not come from the eyes but from a desire to connect with others. Every portrait begins with words, and then attention moves toward the delicacy of light. During the first week a family carried their very ill mother up the stairs to have her last portrait taken. From the windows in the studio, I spotted a Russian soldier getting out of his tank. He had just returned from a 17-hour trip across the icy tundra. In front of the camera he said, *"I am hungry and tired and cold."* (Siberia # 24)

During the second and third week, soldiers, an Inuit hunter, a teacher, students, children, an army mechanic, families of Russian soldiers, bakers, medical doctors found their way to the temporary studio on their own. Some of the women wore makeup and beautiful fur coats. They looked like they had stepped out of a movie set in the 1940s or 1950s. Everyone asked me questions through a translator. "Why are you here? Is your home attached to other homes? Are there green plants or trees near your home? Why can't you speak Russian?"

There was a small orphanage on the edge of town near the cemetery. The caretaker told us that they wrapped the baby's heads in white linen cloth. They were required to take three or four naps each day to stay warm. I photographed three older boys who were living in the orphanage. (Siberia – Orphanage # 19)

The cemetery leaning on the side of a mountain was a birthday cake with white frosting. The gravestones poking up through the snow were candles. The faces on the stones never grew older.



Cemetery



Cemetery Stone

Village: Novoye Chaplino

I was offered a ride on a military transport truck over the tundra to Novoye Chaplino on the coast of the Tkachen Bay near the Bering Sea. This small indigenous village was founded in 1958 as a result of merging ancient coastal villages into one. (Several of the villages merged were a thousand years old.) Most of the villagers were Siberian Yupik peoples. I visited a school and the children sang songs and danced. They laughed at my clumsy feet and voice. Their song was a story about longing, and a cry from one distant place to another. They warned me not to hike out into the frozen tundra alone because of the polar bears. At recess the children slid down icy hills in their school shoes, crouching low for more speed.



Village: Novoye Chaplino

Several days before I returned to Nome, Alaska, I met Nicolai who owned a snowmobile. After dinner, the last light from the sky was melting. Nicolai said, "We go anywhere you point." The snowmobile took us over frozen lakes and rivers and along the edges of mountains. Even at night, even without the help of the moon, the mountains and lakes took on a careful golden glow. The earth appeared more moonlike than earthlike.

I can't ever remember feeling so cold. It is possible to experience both biting pain, and awe at the same moment. We finally stopped in the middle of a frozen lake and looked back toward the village of Provideniya and all of its shimmering and twinkling lights. The smoke from the coal burning chimney pipes

was a straight line vanishing into black. Nicolai brought out some vodka and we drank from the bottle. He told me stories about the Siberian prison camps. Nicolai quoted a famous Russian poet, Yevgeny Yevtushenko, "*When truth is replaced by silence, the silence is a lie.*" Never before and never again will I experience such an intensely wild and mysteriously majestic place. Appearances have no borders here. My feet and hands and eyes were numb. I pointed with my arm to Provideniya and said, "Let's go back."

Essay - January, 2025

LAST NOTES:

The bush pilot from Nome, Alaska made periodic deliveries to Provideniya. I had an agreement with the pilot that I would send him copies of all the photographic portraits (over 120 portraits) and he would deliver them to the two women that helped me work while I was in Provideniya. Nadia and Tanya. I received word that they were all received and distributed. Every person and every place is a map to somewhere else.



Siberia # 11



Siberia # 12



Siberia # 13



Siberia # 14



Siberia # 15



Siberia # 16



Siberia # 17



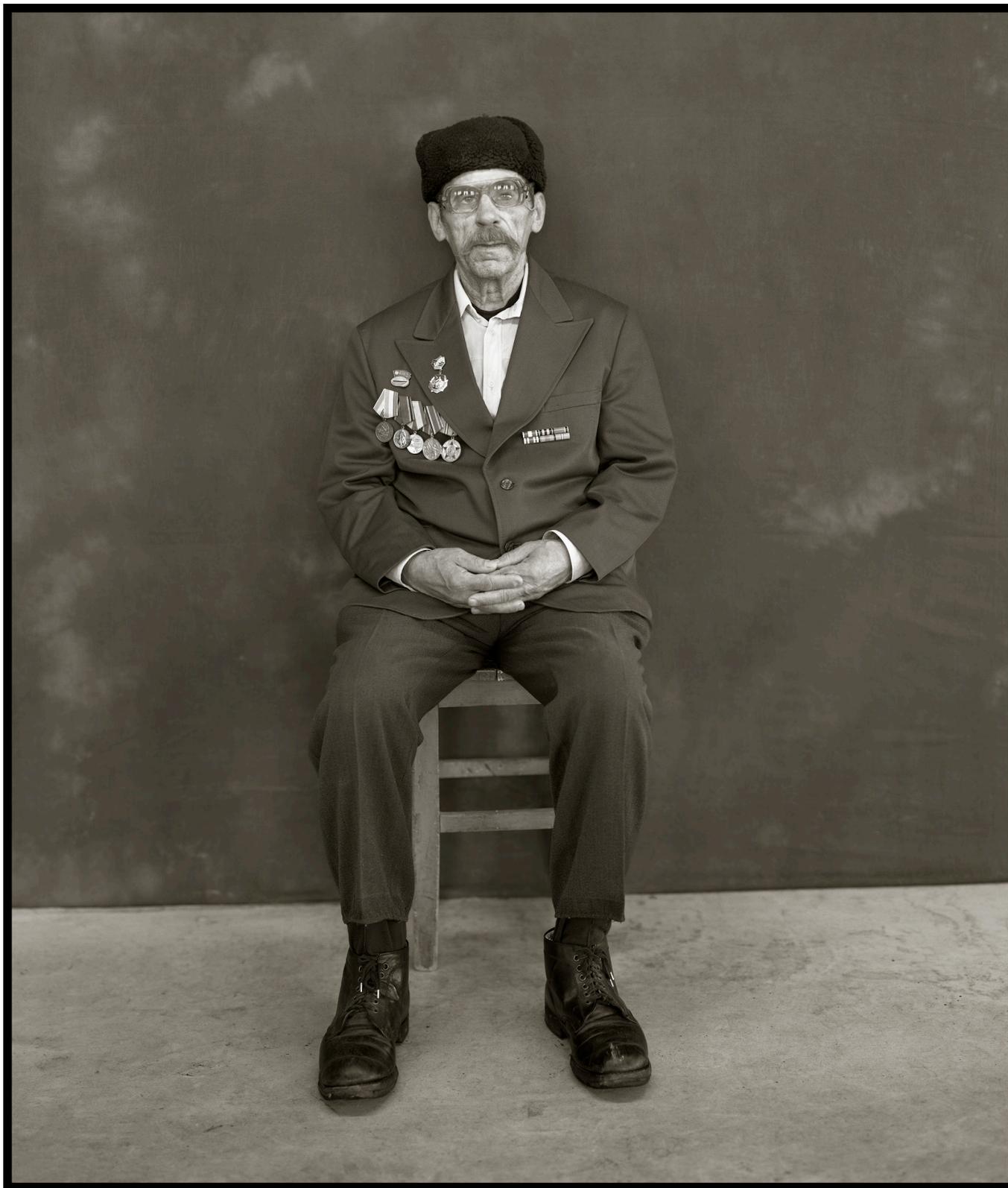
Siberia # 18



Siberia # 19



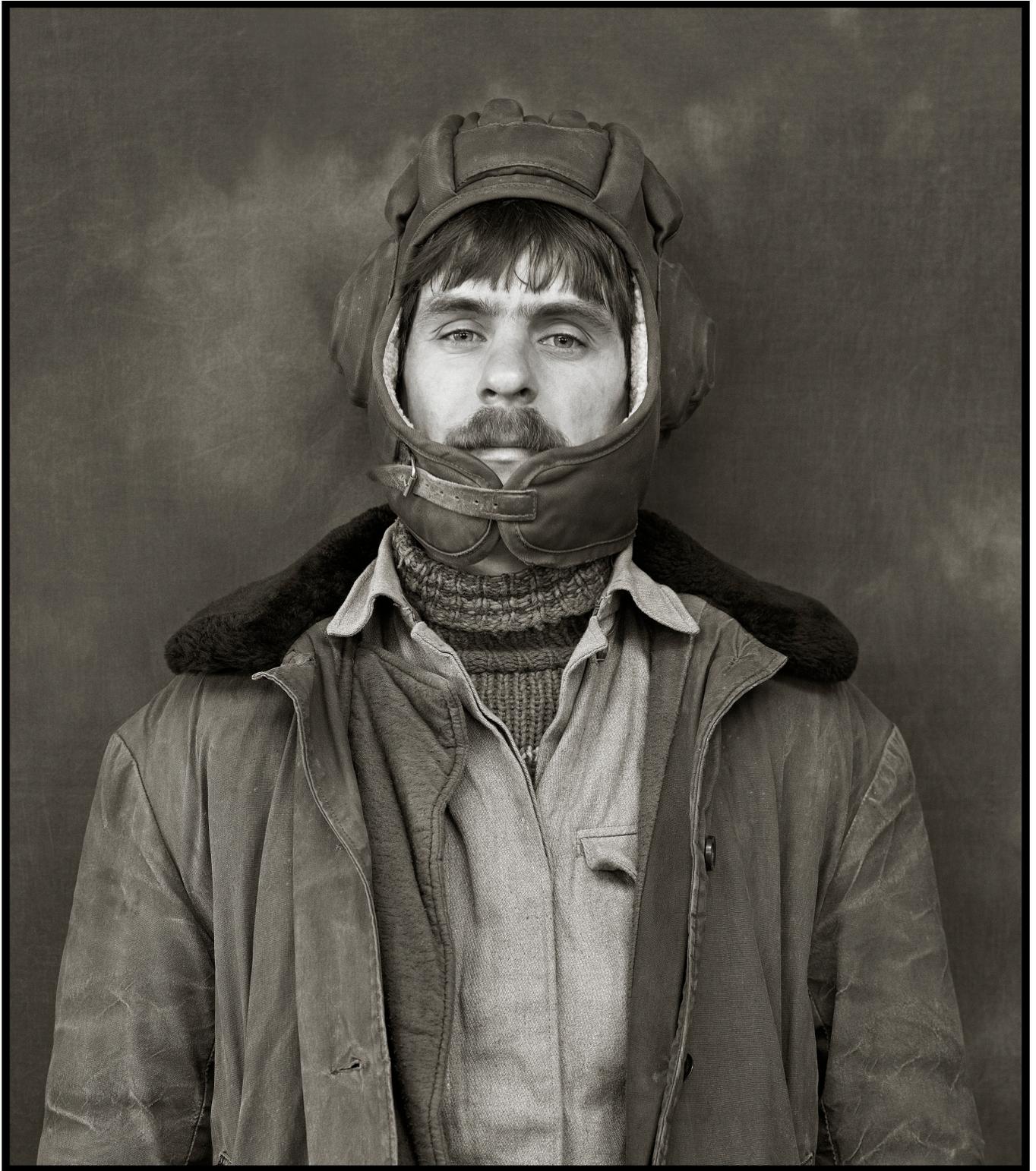
Siberia # 20



Siberia # 21



Siberia # 22



Siberia # 23



Siberia # 24



Siberia # 25



Siberia # 26



Siberia # 27



Siberia # 28



Siberia # 29



Siberia # 30



Siberia # 31



Siberia # 32



Siberia # 33