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Seeking Lost Treasure After 94 Years

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Rudolf Kavchik showing some old coins that he dug up while treasure-hunting with his Australian-made metal detector. By law, three-fourths of his findings belong to the Russian government.

It's been nearly 100 years since a jewel case containing family and imperial jewelry crashed through the ice to the bottom of Lake Baikal. The last hands it touched before disappearing into the watery depths were those of a Russian woman who was fleeing the country to save her life.

The year was 1917. The Bolsheviks had seized power, and White Russians were forced to move out of their homes or face execution.

Vadim and Zinaida Smit had no hope of staying in the country. Vadim was railway minister for the east-west Siberian route and a personal friend of Tsar Nicholas II, and Zinaida was the godchild of the queen mother.

With little time to think, they packed up whatever they could and fled St. Petersburg to China, from which they would catch a boat to Europe. They traveled by any means and walked when

no transportation was available. They trudged through the Siberian snow and ice, losing their belongings in their haste to get to safety.

Just when they were crossing the frozen Lake Baikal, they heard the crack.

The ice had shattered beneath them, and the case that Zinaida was carrying slipped from her grip and plummeted to the bottom of the lake. It contained jewels that her husband and the imperial family had given to her. The Smits couldn't afford to stop to search for it. They continued on, paying bribes at border checkpoints until they finally arrived at their destination in Belgrade, Yugoslavia.

The story of the jewel case was passed down through generations of the Smit family until it reached Helen Cleary, Vadim and Zinaida Smit's great-granddaughter. Cleary, who lives in Melbourne, Australia, was in her 40s when she first heard the story from her mother.

Cleary's grandmother and father, direct descendants of the Smits, have already died, but her 81-year-old mother still hopes to find out what happened to the sunken treasure.

"It would be amazing for it to be found," Cleary said by telephone. "It's astonishing that it all happened."

The family has waited 94 years to solve the mystery of the lost treasure chest. Now some people in Russia could be getting close to the answer.

Giving Treasure Hunters a Hand

Rudolf Kavchik found his first antique coins 15 years ago when he was scouring the beach with a metal detector owned for his work at a biology institute. But once he dug up the coins, Kavchik got hooked on treasure hunting.

Kavchik is now one of the most experienced treasure hunters in the Irkutsk region and a countrywide distributor of Australian metal detectors. Kavchik said there are up to 300 other treasure hunters in the region who are on the lookout for lost valuables. And their searching brings results.

A group of treasure hunters, including Kavchik, conducted a series of dives into Lake Baikal at the beginning of September. The dives produced a handful of old coins and a heavy case, which Kavchik believes was used for carrying weapons. Last year, another group found a female prosthetic hand made out of silver in the lake. The hand was discovered at a 50-meter depth, and treasure hunters are still scratching their heads over how it got there, Kavchik said.

Such large finds are rare, though. It is more common to find coins and other small trinkets.

"People didn't use to have pockets," Kavchik said. "They dropped coins, and [the coins] always have value."

Kavchik said 90 percent of the 300,000 treasure hunters across Russia go searching for valuables as a hobby. Professional hunters also exist but, even as a hobby, treasure hunting can be profitable. A silver ruble dating to the times of Peter the Great or Catherine the Great

will fetch upward of $3,000 on the market. A rare test coin recently found near Yekaterinburg was valued at a price equal to that of an apartment in the city.

Irkutsk enthusiasts plan to open the world's first and only museum of treasure hunting in their city in January to showcase their finds and change the negative perceptions some people have of their pastime.

"Many people have a bad outlook on the hobby," Kavchik said. "They have little interest in it. That is unfortunate."

But people are hearing the call, and many of them are heading out on the hunt.

Russia's Treasure Maps

It doesn't take a master sleuth to go online and find information to get started as a treasure hunter. There are numerous forums with advice for beginners. Some even provide treasure maps of various Russian regions. The odds of finding treasure are very good, according to the treasure hunters.

"There are more chances of finding treasure than winning a lottery," Kavchik said. "People lived everywhere, which means they always lost something, hid something."

The Moscow region is particularly abundant with treasure. Moscow-based hunter Roman Katko has found coins, crosses, icons and jewelry in the region.

"There is always a possibility of finding treasure," he said.

Treasure hunting has become more popular in Russia recently, Katko said. Each year he sees more people with metal detectors around old village sites when he goes on his own weekend explorations. Sometimes he even stumbles on places that have already been searched. But even in these places he can always find something, Katko said.

The key is to know where to look.

Katko uses archived maps to find where old villages were located. Kavchik studies the history and legends of the region where he is going. One out of 10 legends turns out to be true, he said.

The locals of one village told Kavchik the story of a rich man who had buried treasure beneath an oak tree in his garden. Kavchik and his fellow treasure hunters went to the spot with their metal detectors and quickly retrieved an old chest filled with paper money and coins. Kavchik said he was amazed that everybody in the village knew the legend, yet nobody bothered to see for themselves whether it was true.

"What stops the Russians from taking out a shovel and digging up treasure?" he said.

Lost History

But not everybody wants Russians to take out their shovels and go on treasure hunts. Archeologists warn that treasure hunters devalue artifacts when they take them out of their cultural context. The archeologists are then not able to piece together the story of the object.

“There is somebody’s life behind every treasure,” said Alexei Alexeyev, senior associate at the archeology department at the Pushkin Historical-Literary Museum in Bolshiye Vyazyomy, outside Moscow. “For us it is a historical reference.”

Another risk is that artifacts will be lost if they end up in the hands of people who don’t realize their full value, Alexeyev said. Experienced treasure hunters agree that this lack of knowledge is a problem.

An elderly woman once approached Kavchik to show him a gold coin that she had found. The coin was cut in half because she molded a part of it into a tooth. Kavchik determined that the coin was from the times of Catherine the Great and would have brought the woman $20,000 if it had been undamaged.

“For this amount of money she could have put in three layers of teeth,” Kavchik said.

Archeologists are so overwhelmed in number by treasure hunters that it makes monitoring such cases difficult. There are 20 archeologists working on digs in the Moscow region, Alexeyev said. In comparison, the region has an estimated 20,000 treasure hunters.

By law, people who find treasure are required to give three-quarters of it to the government. In reality, the rules are rarely enforced. Kavchik said the government doesn’t have the structures to take in treasure, so treasure hunters simply don’t declare their findings.

“We are losing our history,” Alexeyev said. “In five to 10 years if this continues we will lose all artifacts in the Moscow region, and future archeologists will be left with a desert of looted archeological sites.”

So far no one has announced that they have found a chest with jewels in Lake Baikal. Kavchik said the Smits’ treasure would be hard to find since the lake is very deep. Divers can go down 50 to 60 meters, and 100 meters if they have special equipment, but the chest could be even further down.

In Australia, Helen Cleary wears the wedding ring she inherited from her grandmother. The ring bears the inscription “1917” — the year of her grandmother’s wedding and the year when the jewels fell into the lake. Clearly said she is not giving up hope that her family’s heirloom will be found.

“It sort of like a fairy tale. It just doesn’t happen to normal people,” she said. “To be a part of it, it’s just amazing.”

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