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'If You Leave, You'll Die'

A young American girl thought she was visiting Russia, but was kidnapped by radical Christians, then held for 15 years against her will

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Reaching the monasteries is no easy task. You won't find them on the map. 300km from the nearest small town, you can only travel there during Spring and Autumn, when the waters of the Bolshoi Yenisey river, a major artery of the Siberian Taiga, become navigable.

Deep in the Russian hinterland, these wild, marshy, forest territories are home to Russia's Old Believers. Their impossible geography owes itself to persecution. Repressed by Communist authorities, who burned monasteries and sent priests to labor camps, some believers escaped abroad. But for those that remained, survival meant retreating further and further into the Taiga.

In 1954, after the death of Stalin, there was an amnesty, and Old Believers were allowed to return to their communities. Some of the exiled families living abroad also returned. The secretive communities swelled in numbers.

But not all of the new additions, it seems, arrived voluntarily. This is the story of Yelizaveta, a 15-year-old American girl from Oregon, who was tricked into visiting the monastery in 2000 and then kept for 15 years against her will. She asked for her surname to remain anonymous.

One-way ticket

Yelizaveta's grandparents were Old Believers who fled Russia during the 1930s. They initially escaped to China, before moving to South America, and then on to the United States. This was where Yelizaveta's mother and her two brothers were born.

After leaving home at 16, Yelizaveta's mother met Yelizaveta's father, an American non-believer. The partnership was not a successful one, and her mother's religion gave way to a life of alcohol and drugs, and even, for a short while, prison. The parents broke up when Yelizaveta was 5 years old and then she went to live with her relatives. She spent most of the time with her aunt, a strict Old Believer, and her 11 children.

When Yelizaveta was 13, her aunt sent three of her children back to a Siberian monastery. Little known to the young Yelizaveta, her aunt had plans for her too.

Yelizaveta first found out about a trip to Russia in 2000. At first, she couldn't believe it. "I looked at her and asked if she was crazy since I don't even know Russian," she says.

But suitcases were already packed, plane tickets bought, and a passport had somehow been issued without Yelizaveta even knowing. She was not told the tickets were one-way.

In Moscow, Yelizaveta was introduced to a family friend. He took her to Krasnoyarsk, Siberia's third largest city, and the nearest conurbation to the monastery. There, she met other Americans, and flew by helicopter to the isolated village of Sandakches. They reached the monastery by motorboat and hidden footpaths.

"The Americans told me that we'd be going back in two weeks, but they left without telling us," says Yelizaveta.

Once her passport was taken away and destroyed, she found herself trapped. "I was 15 and didn't know what to do," she says

In the wilderness

According to Yelizaveta, there are seven monasteries in the region. Some are a couple of miles apart, but others are set further into the Taiga. The monasteries are organized not by family but by gender, with male and female members living together. Yelizaveta says there were approximately 150 women in her group, and 700-800 people in total.

Living conditions range from difficult to severe. In summer, the sun barely breaks through the

horizon. In winter, temperatures reach minus 60, and dawn turns to dusk in a moment. There are only three months without snow, so preparations for winter take up much of the summer months — and well into the night. Armies of flies and mosquitoes add to the sense of discomfort.

"I wasn't used to this life," says Yelizaveta. "The first summer was really hot, but at night it was so cold that the potatoes all froze. We had almost no potatoes that winter"

The communities prepared and ate food communally, but the diet was limited, with no meat, and strict portions. Then there was the fasting. They fasted not only before Easter and Christmas but also every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday. Only the men were ever allowed to leave for the city to buy flour and sugar.

Yelizaveta says she often went hungry but was not allowed more food: "It was two times a day, no more." The people in the monastery were "good people," she says. "But they had this conviction that they should live in a way opposed to the outside world. They believed that if you left the community, you'd die."

Escape

The harsh conditions and diet soon played on Yelizaveta's health. By the fourth winter, she fell seriously ill. She had asthma and had developed all kinds of allergies — first to milk, then butter, then to sour and bitter foods. By the end, she was eating only porridge and jam.

All the time, the people around her told her she couldn't leave. If she did, she'd die, they would say. "Every day they repeated to me that I would soon die, that my life in the next world would be wonderful," she says. "I lived another 11 years on the edge of death, but I just couldn't die."

Yelizaveta understood that she needed to go to hospital. Under the cover of darkness, and while others were asleep, she left her monastery and headed for a neighboring monastery, where she knew things were not as strict. She got talking with a woman who promised to take her to the nearest village. There, she found out that there was an ill woman not so far away who planned to travel to Krasnoyarsk to get treatment.

"We asked to go with them. They were Old Believers and understood we were from the monastery and had no money. So they didn't even ask," says Yelizaveta.

It was August 2015 — a full fifteen years after the young girl passed through the big city on her way to Siberian isolation. When she arrived in Krasnoyarsk, she went straight to hospital and was treated for her asthma. After a few months recovering, she began to think about returning to the monastery. After all, she was told that if she were to leave the monastery permanently, woe would befall her, and she would die.

Yelizaveta made arrangements to return in October — just before the rivers froze over. Before leaving, she went back for medical checks. "The doctors wanted to find out what allergy I had, so they did all kinds of tests on my arm," she says. "It was then that they discovered I had an allergy to the cold."

As she was sitting in the doctors' office, Yelizaveta began to feel more and more unwell, and she began to have a fit. An ambulance was called and she was taken to hospital.

She was in hospital for over a week, by which time the rivers were already freezing and no boat could get through.

Getting back

The time in hospital gave Yelizaveta the chance to get to use the cheap smartphone she'd bought. Having lived in a monastery without electricity, the technology was a real revelation: Facebook, Twitter, even Gmail weren't around in 2000. She connected with friends and relatives back home. They offered to send money over and to help her get back to America.

"I thought about it for a long time, and in the end I decided I would go back," says Yelizaveta. "The doctors were all telling me that I couldn't live in Siberia: that I couldn't stay in the cold with my condition."

The few friends she had in Krasnoyarsk began to help. They told her to go to the police. But the police couldn't help, they said: she needed to go to the American consulate in Vladivostok or Moscow. The migration authorities offered another solution: pay a fine, spend a month in jail, and then be deported to America officially. After spending 15 years somewhere against her will, Yelizaveta was not inclined to agree. She continued to look for other ways out.

With no documents, it was impossible to do much — even to buy a train ticket to Moscow. She thought about traveling there by coach from town to town, but that plan was dismissed for being too expensive. Then, she says, she came across an advert on the internet from a driver who was traveling to Moscow, and looking for a fellow passenger.

"It was ideal, but it was the very next day and I didn't know who this guy was," says Yelizaveta. "But I didn't want to be deported, and I felt that he had a nice voice on the phone, so I risked it and started packing."

Once she reached Moscow, Yelizaveta had a replacement passport issued in 3 hours. But then she had the problem of an exit visa. She traipsed around Moscow — from migration office to migration office. In despair, she was told to speak to the head of the department. She waited for two hours. When the manager appeared, he offered simple advice: "go to the police, say you're American, you'd lived here for 15 years and want to be deported."

Yelizaveta followed the advice and went to the police, who laughed at her and told her to buy a ticket and board the next plane.

"And so I flew to Seattle, she says."

New life

Yelizaveta has been back in the United States for over a year. She has managed to catch up with old friends but does not include Old Believers in this list. Though the aunt who sent her to Russia is no longer alive, some of her relatives have made it clear that they don't agree with her decision to return.

Yelizaveta occasionally hears of news from the monastery via a friend in Krasnoyarsk.

“My friend sometimes comes across the monks who come to the city to buy flour and sugar every Spring, and that’s how she gets to know what is happening,” Yelizaveta says. “I found out that the main preacher there died recently — he spent 70 years in the monastery, from the 1940s.”

Contrary to the warnings, woe hasn’t befallen Yelizaveta in the outside world:

“They told me I’d never be happy and that I’d have no life, but I’ve never been happier,” she says. “I had no money, knew no one, but everything thankfully worked out.” MT

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