

MT Classic: Soviet Sturgeon Nikita Loses Life in Norway

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In another ominous sign of the souring relationship between Russia and NATO, a prized sturgeon given to Norway by Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev has died in a tragic accident.

The fish, nicknamed Nikita, died after her tank in the Bergen Aquarium was accidentally filled with salt water, aquarium director Stig Sægrov said Friday.

Nikita, a female estimated to be at least 40 years old, lived with two other sturgeons who

arrived from the United States. Her companions, however, lived through the environmental disaster.

"The Americans were a slightly different species. This is probably why they survived," Sægrov said.

Nikita, who came from the Don River delta where the sturgeon are hunted for their tasty white meat and even higher prized black caviar, died March 29.

Management at the aquarium in Bergen, in western Norway, kept the loss of the fish quiet, but the story appeared in one of the local newspapers Friday morning.

"It is not very good for our marketing, but they seemed to have been tipped by someone," Sægrov said.

The fish was given to the Bergen Aquarium in 1964 during Khrushchev's state visit to the kingdom. She arrived as a youngster of less than 50 centimeters and was 1.5 meters long when she died.

She was popular with visitors, who could read her story and see pictures of Khrushchev by her tank.

Sægrov said that the aquarium is preparing a new exhibition dedicated to the sturgeon family. "Part of it will be dedicated to Nikita," he said.

The exhibit will feature Nikita's stuffed body accompanied by the full story of her life as well as pictures of the Soviet fish and of her famous donator.

The sturgeon's life was generally peaceful until last year, when a letter arrived supposedly from the Russian government requesting Nikita's return to her motherland. The letter caused a certain amount of panic at the aquarium, where no one seemed to want to see the fish leave.

"In the end it turned out to be a practical joke played by some people I know," Sægrov said. "But it was done really well."

Nobody was punished for Nikita's sudden death. "We all make mistakes," Sægrov sighed.

Bergen Aquarium keeps around 300 species of fish accommodated in 75 tanks, and is outfitted with a network of pipes containing fresh and salted water. "By mistake a wrong tap was opened," Sægrov said.

While saying the management regretted the loss of Nikita, Sægrov also hinted that he would love Russia to offer a replacement.

"We need another Russian [sturgeon] to control the Americans," he said, referring to the American sturgeons who survived.

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