

SAKHA YAKUTIA

OUR TRAVEL JOURNAL

by **Sören Birke** and **Mareike Bader**







Background

In autumn 1999, a few mouth harp enthusiasts and I gathered in Mareike Bader's kitchen to establish the "Berlin Jew's Harp Friends' Circle". How did that happen? I, Sören Birke, can't quite recall when I first heard a jew's harp in my life. Simply put, for at least 30 years, the Jew's harp played no role in my life whatsoever. I'm a harmonica player. It wasn't until I started exploring the history of the harmonica that I stumbled across the jew's harp. Today, I understand the nearly 3,000-year history that led to the harmonica. **(1)** In the history of instruments with free-reed tongues, the jew's harp plays a central role. However, the historical connections between the jew's harp, sheng, organ, harmonium, harmonica, accordion, shruti box, and many others remain largely unexplored. This is an area ripe for pioneering musicological research. I had the good fortune to curate and organize two festivals on this topic in Berlin. The festival "ZUNGENSCHLAG" took place twice, in 1996 and 1999, which set everything in motion. It was through this that I met my friend and musical partner, Gerd Conradt. He is a filmmaker and a passionate khomus player. (Khomus is the yakutian name for jews harp) **(2)** Gerd spent some time teaching German in Yakutia and coordinated the concert tours of Spiridon Shishigin and Ivan Alekseyev in Germany, which led to the creation of CDs and films. Together, Gerd and I formed the duo "Prussian Blue," an improvisational performance act, also using jew's harps. We performed at the "6th International World Jew's Harp Festival and Congress" in Amsterdam in 2006 **(3)** and at the "7th International World Jew's Harp Festival and Congress" in Yakutia in 2011. **(4)** **(5)** This is where my connection with

Spiridon Shishigin became increasingly close and warm. We became friends, a long-distance friendship spanning over 10,000 kilometers. Spiridon regularly came to Berlin for concerts and workshops I organized.

In 2014, Spiridon encouraged me to organize the "9th International World Jew's Harp Festival and Congress" in Berlin in 2022. How was I supposed to do that? Without funds or a network? But I was determined to make it happen. Over eight years, I saved about 50,000 euros through my business and found perfect partners in Franz Kumpul and Aron Szilagyi from the "International Jew's Harp Society." Just months after the COVID lockdowns, this festival brought around 120 jew's harp players from all over the world to Berlin. **(6)** After this festival, Spiridon renewed his invitation for Mareike and me to come to Yakutia. Could a dream come true? We started planning a trip for March/April 2024. Spiridon's daughter, Maria "Masha" Shishigina-Palsson, lives with her family in Delitzsch near Leipzig, and she helped us prepare for the journey, acting as our guide. We were set on going in the winter. How do people live in temperatures as low as -50°C? Has playing the khomus become so significant because of this? Images danced through our minds: endless, inhospitable landscapes, ice, snow, cold, darkness outside. People sitting by a fire, listening to the delicate, otherworldly sounds of the khomus a peaceful moment. But the world rarely grants such peace. We had just emerged from the pandemic, and new crises were shaking this longing for peace. Since February 2022, there has been war. We wondered: can we travel to a country that is currently at war with the West? Does Russia's

(1) Link:



(2) Video:



(3) Video:



(4) Video:



(5) Video:



(6) Video:



invasion of Ukraine mean we shouldn't go? What has changed? Skepticism. We had looked forward to fulfilling this dream for so long. All those years of projects, exchanges, fascination with another culture, the love and friendship with Spiridon Shishigin. Should we let the resurgence of centuries old hostilities, disputes, and geopolitical power struggles stop us from taking this trip? We made our decision: we had to go, now more than ever. We are musicians and cultural managers. In times like these, we have a different mission. Who, if not us, can carry the hopeful spark of understanding through what we do? We get to know others, and they get to know us. For a brief moment, we do things together peacefully, listening. Music and the khomus are older than any war, and both will remain after the war. For us, that is the light in the darkness of this time. Music brings people together. We want to go to Yakutia, to Siberia, to the Yakuts, a Turkic people. How do people live there? Why is there such a strong khomus tradition there?

Part of our preparation includes needing a visa. The Yakutian government provided us with an invitation for a cultural project. Mareike works as a DJ professionally. As DJ Clarice (7) and Sören Birke Project (8), we are heading to Yakutia for a cultural exchange, exploration, and concert project. With this invitation, our passport, and a photo, we go to a Berlin-based visa agency. Everything goes smoothly. After nearly three weeks, we receive a visa, a humanitarian visa. It's different from tourist or business visas – a humanitarian visa, perfect for our trip.

We will meet many people and want to bring gifts. We're advised to bring chocolate, ham, and souvenirs. We

end up with a suitcase full: four kilos of Black Forest ham, vacuum-packed in small portions, Berlin souvenirs, bags with Berlin motifs, patches, pencils, Berlin teddy bears, Berlin T-shirts for Ivan and Spiridon, bottle opener magnets, and around 40 chocolate bars and CDs from me. It feels like we pack half a year in advance. What does one need for such a trip into the cold? No one can give us solid advice on what we'll actually need. On the hottest day of summer 2023, we go to an outdoor store to buy warm clothing rated for -30 degrees Celsius, long underwear, and really thick socks. The salespeople are overwhelmed by our questions, they know nothing about Siberia. Well, we don't know either; we'll have to find out. Are we packing too much or too little?

A few weeks before the trip, Masha tells us she'll be traveling to Yakutia earlier to accompany a team of photo-journalists from Iceland. Alright, so we'll be flying to Yakutsk on our own. A few days before departure, it's just another day in Berlin. It feels like Berlin doesn't want to let us go: work piles up, the Ukraine war fills the news with debates on sanctions and speeches about strengthening the military, fear of Russia stocked, and the German Foreign Ministry issues travel warnings. Friends shake their heads when we tell them about our plan. The propaganda machine is in full swing, and we're warned of the possibility of being detained upon arrival at the Moscow airport. But we're determined. March 14, 2024, 4:00 pm. We've made it! The last important phone call, the last email answered, farewells said to everyone, a bottle of vodka on the kitchen counter. We raise a glass. We snap a selfie and send it via WhatsApp to Spiridon: "We're coming to Yakutsk."

(7) Link:



(8) Link:







The Journey

Day 1: March 15, 2024

Short night's sleep. It's still dark in Berlin. We drive to the airport in a carshare. The streets are empty, so we arrive quickly. Unexpectedly, we run into friends from Thess-Berlin, the Berlin music network that Mareike and I co-founded years ago. They're flying to Thessaloniki, Greece, for another cultural exchange project. Once again, we're met with headshakes about our travel plans. We hear the phrase, part serious, part ironic "... you guys must have a death wish."

We check in: two very large suitcases, two smaller ones, and two backpacks.

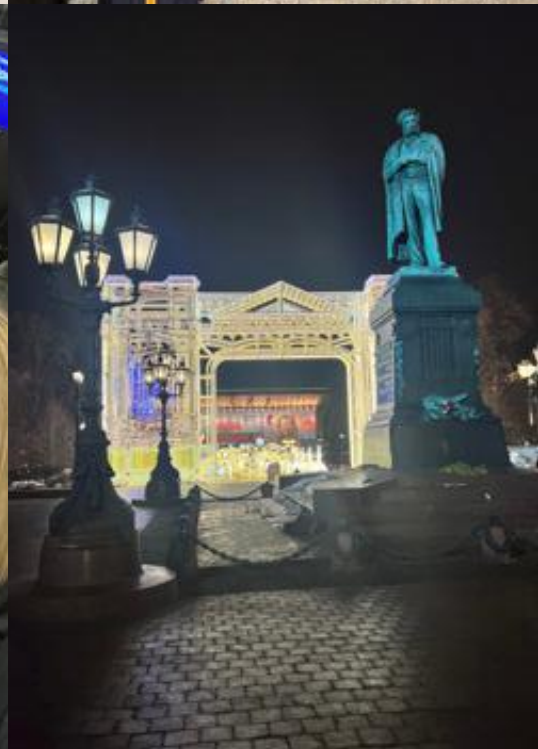
First stop: Istanbul. We spend a few hours at what will soon be the world's largest airport, an architectural marvel and a vibrant crossroads of countless cultural currents. Just sitting and watching the world pass by, time flies.

Late in the afternoon, we land in Moscow. From the gate, we head to the baggage carousel, where all our suitcases are already waiting. A short line at passport control. Someone advised us not to smile during the inspection. So, we don't smile. Neither does the young officer. He asks our reason for entry. We're issued a residency slip, which we must not lose, as it will be required for registration and departure. Everything is quick and straight-

forward. We have crossed the Russian border.

Past the automatic sliding door, we're welcomed. The international jew's harp network is in action. Irina Bogatyreva is there holding a handmade sign with a khomus drawing on it. We're thrilled. We don't know each other personally yet; Spiridon arranged everything. Irina takes the metro with us to our hotel. We check in and agree to meet at Irina's musical instrument shop the next day. Our hotel is near Pushkin Square, right in the center, not far from Red Square. It's winter. Piles of snow remnants and grit cover the streets. We go for a walk. The streets are full of people, usually in pairs, trios, or groups of four, chatting together. They're heading home or to theaters or cinemas, whose entrances are brightly lit. Giant light installations illuminate the squares everywhere. We get our first impression of the overwhelming size of this city. Everything is scaled up by a factor of five compared to what we're used to: buildings, streets, squares, the bustling traffic.

In our hotel's basement, there's a small, cozy restaurant. Quiet and friendly, the staff explain the kitchen's recommendations with subtle enthusiasm. Wow! First delights: borscht, bacon, steak, tea. We've arrived. Exhausted from the day, we sleep soundly.



Правительство Москвы
фестиваль
Масленица
11-17 марта
МОСКОВСКИЕ СЕЗОНЫ
#МОСКОВСКИЕСЕЗОНЫ MOS.RU

Day 2: March 16, 2024

The sun is shining in Moscow. After a hearty breakfast, we head into the city, making our way to Irina's instrument shop. Google Maps guides us on a 40-minute walk past churches, historic wide streets, a large government ministry, people going about their daily lives.

The shop is on the third floor of an old building with tenants offering various creative services, and there's even a psychotherapy practice. We step inside and are amazed. "Shelves filled to the ceiling" with wonderful musical instruments. Two shelves are packed with jaw harps. Irina introduces us to her husband, Sergei, who runs the shop. She herself is a children's author and a talented jew's harp player. (9)

A few minutes later, a friend joins us. Roman, a doctor who has been a passionate jew's harp player for several years, arrives. A first session begins, and it's magical. We are just getting to know each other, yet we listen attentively and leave space for each other's, playing a delicate, cautious, beautiful moment. We take a selfie and send it to Spiridon, who is pleased we've arrived safely in Moscow. I get to try various instruments and find a frame drum that really excites me. It has a deep, warm, penetrating sound, made with white-brown goat skin by a craftsman in the Urals. I imagine that this kind of drum might be played by

a shaman. I decide to buy it. But how will I bring it back to Berlin? Sergei promises to wrap it carefully for me, and I'm to pick it up on the return trip.

With a warm "Goodbye", we head out again. We plan to go to a café with Roman and Irina. On the way, we need to exchange some money. Due to sanctions, it wasn't possible to exchange rubles in Berlin, and credit cards don't work, as service has been suspended. We were allowed to bring euros in cash for the trip. At the bank, the staff handles the exchange very kindly and efficiently. Irina helps us with translation. She and Roman are wonderful, warm hosts. At the café, we learn about the current situation for jaw harp players in Moscow and Russia. The war has disrupted the scene. Some players have left Moscow to avoid being drafted, and there are fewer gatherings and concerts. People keep in touch over social media, but everything feels slow and uncertain. Irina is preparing an exhibition of historical jaw harps in Novgorod and hopes to reunite with many players there. Despite the current enormous challenges, the commitment to jaw harp music remains strong. We're encouraged by this, express our gratitude, and wish them strength and energy. We'll meet Irina and Roman again on our return. Little do I know that a surprise awaits me at that time.

(9) Video:





Day 3: March 17, 2024

The day has arrived. Today, we fly to Yakutsk. After a leisurely morning, we head to the airport around 3 p.m. The cheerful, young, and very friendly hotel team has called us a taxi and wished us well for our unusual journey. After nearly an hour's drive through Moscow, we arrive at Vnukovo Airport. At check-in, we find out that our flight has been delayed; instead of departing at 7:40 p.m., we'll leave at 1 a.m. We're given a voucher for food and drink. Even at the airport, the food is delicious, warm and freshly cooked. Five more hours of waiting. We have books with us. I'm reading "A Short History of Russia" by Mark Galeotti and learn that the Slavs called the raiding Scandinavians "Rus", likely derived

from "Ruotsi" the Finnish word for Sweden. Following trade and pillaging routes, they established the Kievan Rus, intermingled with the Slavs, and eventually became Russians. This is how Russia's multi-ethnic history began on the eastern edge of Europe more than 1,100 years ago.

The departure is delayed again by another hour. We remain patient and well-cared for. And then finally, we board a Boeing 737-800. It's packed, with every seat taken. With us are cheerful Yakuts. Families and people who work in Moscow. There's a bit of a struggle over the overhead compartments, but somehow, everything fits and comes along. It all feels like a bus ride. Moscow–Yakutsk, 6,000 km / 800 km/h / 6.5 hours of flight.



Day 4: March 18, 2024

In the airplane. Sleep. Eat. Sleep. Wait. The sun rises, and out of the airplane window, we see an unbelievable landscape: huge, meandering, frozen rivers. An endless wilderness map, a scene of nature with unknown actors.

We're flying toward Yakutsk. In this vastness, only a small dot of civilization, a pinch of salt made up of houses, roads, and power stations. People here are living in an ocean of forests, mountains, snow, and permafrost? Finally, we arrive in Yakutsk. We land. By now, due to the 6-hour time difference, it's already midday here. It's a small airport. No jet bridge. We step out of the plane. Blue sky, bright sun, biting cold – minus 24 degrees Celsius. What does it feel like? Wonderful. Clear air. The cold tingles on our hands and cheeks.

A small baggage hall ... and there, through the glass windows, we see Spiridon and Gera, his wife. Through the windows, there is already a lot of warmth and joy. Finally, we see Spiridon again! Our four suitcases are there. Fast. We go outside. Hugs, joy, flowers, our first selfie together. We're a bit tired, but full of energy and excitement for what's to come.

From the airport building, it's only a few steps to the car. Everything is white and ice-cold. Spiridon is driving a Toyota SUV. We set off for Pokrovsk, a place 80 km away from Yakutsk. Spiridon and Gera live there in a self-built wooden house on the banks of the Lena River, with the sunrise visible from the kitchen window. Arrival. Spiridon performs a Yakutian welcoming ritual with us in his self-built Yakut summer house. The stove is lit. Welcoming words and peace wishes are murmured, and some baked

goods and horse milk are thrown into the fire for the gods. He shows us typical Yakut items found in such a house: birch bark containers for milk and whey, or for gathering berries, furs, and animal trophies. Above the stove, there is a traditional Yakut clothes drying rack.

We will experience such a welcoming ceremony several more times. Even in closed homes and shops, a bowl is lit, symbolizing a stove, filled with a mix of herbs and juniper. Even if the dense smoke makes our eyes water and our clothes smell of juniper for hours, the warmth, attentiveness, and openness of the host are irresistible. When he waves a horsehair whisk with small bells over our heads and shoulders, a mysterious atmosphere sets in. The murmured wishes for happiness and health bring peace and a sense of togetherness. It's a beautiful, old ritual still practiced today.

Then, food. The table is full of homemade delights. Pirozhki, bread, meat, with cucumbers, tomatoes, salads, salamat, and a soup full of energy ... mmmhh, then tea, with bread and homemade jam. Spiridon's wooden house has its own magic. It exudes security, protection, and coziness; it creaks, it breathes, it's overheated. Outside it's -26°C, inside it's +26°C. We'll have to get used to this. Ahh, that's how it works ... this is how one lives here in constant frost. Inside, it's hot; outside, you wear warm clothes. So you don't actually freeze. But what do you wear? Our suitcases are full of warm clothes. Too warm for indoors? Not enough for outdoors? It's a constant experiment. The air is very dry. We have bloody noses. Our bodies will need to adjust to this. Will we experience -30 to -50 degrees?

We need to register. A shabby office with a friendly woman in uniform. A two-page A4 form with small-printed questions and little boxes one for each letter. I can't make sense of it, Mareike understands a little, and Spiridon finds it too complicated. We leave our passports and head to the school where Spiridon is the director. Three teachers are waiting to run a craft workshop for Mareike. We thank them for waiting; our flight was delayed. In the hallways, many children with open, curious eyes. A constant cheerful "Sdraswutje". A little boy asks me, "Are you Sören Birke? A khomusist?" "Yes" I say. We shake hands. Wow, they've been expecting us. Mareike tries a sewing machine for the first time, attempting to make a key pouch in the shape of a Yakut summer house. There's cheerful excitement among the four women. Spiridon waves me over, leading me from the school, across the snow-covered schoolyard, to another building, a workshop for practical training. A man shows me knee fiddles he's crafted, a traditional Yakut instrument. He explains that two horsehair strings are stretched over the soundboard and played with a bow, also made of horsehair. I get to try it. It sounds ... unusual.

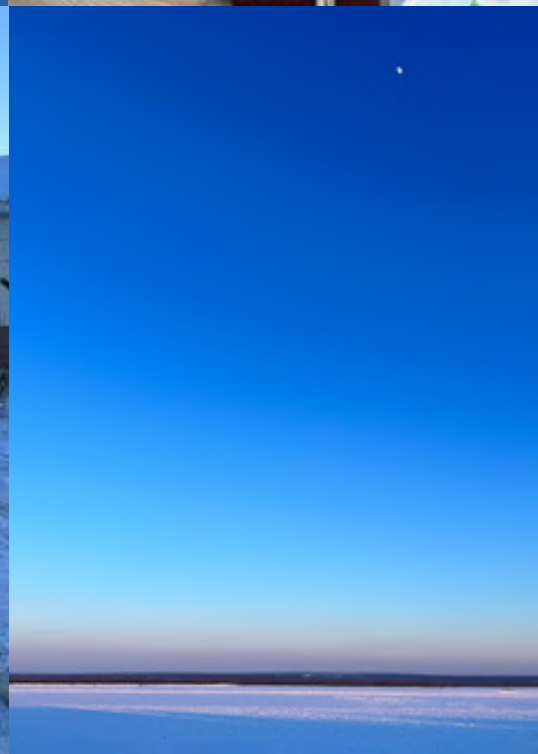
Spiridon takes a strand of horsehair and tries to break it. It holds strong. I hear for the first time: "Yakut horses are full of strength and energy." These horses are vital for the Yakuts. They drink mare's milk, eat the meat, and know its health benefits. These animals live outdoors year-round, even at -50 degrees. Their coats are thick and resilient. This breed is 40,000 years old and once roamed alongside mammoths.

We pick up our passports. The registration went through successfully; the woman in uniform knew her way around the forms.

The sun begins to set. The sky turns dark blue-violet. We head to a spot by the Lena River. The far shore is just a narrow black line. How wide can a river be? This feels like an inland sea over 10 kilometers wide, covered by a 2-meter-thick ice layer. You feel the urge to walk across it. We drive closer, spotting tiny black dots in the distance moving on the ice. What is that? Those are cars on an ice road. We get closer, drive onto the Lena, and can hardly grasp its scale. The car feels like an ant; just walking a few steps across the cleared section, you realize the vastness. Walking across isn't possible. Nearly chest-high ice slabs, stacked and frozen in place, form insurmountable waves in front of you. I take a few steps in this frozen surf, sinking into crusty snow. Yet, I raise my arms in excitement. We've arrived. Finally, in Siberia. A selfie with Spiridon.

The sun has already dipped below the glowing horizon. The deep blue sky fades into the black of night. We drive back to the house. Another spread on the table, with different, even more homemade delicacies. Then frozen fish, vodka, and a first khomus to try, gifted by a young blacksmith. Spiridon shows me his very first khomus made by the blacksmith Felix Komissarov. Afterward, we improvise a piece together. We fall into bed, exhausted. Jet lag. I wake up at 3 a.m., go to the bathroom, and look out the window. A clear, starry night, almost a full moon. I can't resist. I step outside briefly in my pajamas. Wow! Siberia at -28 degrees.













Day 5: March 19, 2024

Get up. Shower. Fried eggs. Cucumbers. Cucumbers in the winter? Juicy, full, round taste. How is that possible? With Japanese greenhouse technology, the Yakuts produce a welcome addition to the table. Amazing.

A sunny morning. Blue sky, -24°C. The plan for today: a trip to the Lena Rocks. From photos I've seen, they didn't seem so spectacular at first, but for the Yakuts, it's a pilgrimage site. Only when you stand before them do you understand why. Over 40 km long, a chain of uniquely shaped rock fingers stretches along the Lena River, about 80–120 meters high. The river has been working for millions of years, leaving traces that stir the imagination. A spiritual place for stories, images, shapes, gods, faces, people, and faith. The Lena Rocks are a UNESCO World Heritage site. Fairy-tale-like.

The first long drive through an endless snow landscape and along the Lena has been worth it. Alexander, Spiridon's brother-in-law, is our driver. Could I have driven? No, or maybe? It's definitely intense, every few meters the surface changes, sometimes a pothole-ridden concrete road, sometimes a normal road, then something hacked out of snow and ice on a frozen river. The average speed is 70 km/h. More isn't possible. The car has to endure a lot. We are jolted along the way. At each regional border, we stop. There's always something, sometimes something different each time. A marker for the specific place. Something tall, more or less shaped. Each region has its own significant marker. The place for a ritual. With pancakes and some vodka, they are called upon for a safe journey ahead. It still has a nostalgic feeling for me.

Only on our big journey to Oimyakon do we experience the deeper meaning and necessity of this possibly very old ritual. With the pancakes, you must form a small circle with 3, 5, or 9 pieces. If there aren't enough pancakes, you can split one. Then, horse milk or vodka is dripped over them, and you eat a small piece and take a drink. During this, you wish yourself and everyone else a safe journey.

A quick stop in a small village at a school. We need to use the restroom. Spiridon has been friends with the school's director for many years. Proudly, the director shows us his bright, warm school, full of cheerful and friendly children. After the tour, we all plan to take a photo together. It's a new building with classrooms for music, art, mathematics, natural sciences, languages, sports, and crafts. In several rooms, I see chess boards, both table and floor versions. I stop at a chalkboard and am startled. I had to ask for clarification and make sure. Yes, it's exactly what it looks like. 32 photos of young men in uniform, fallen in the last two years of the Russia-Ukraine war. Men who attended this school as children and probably ran joyfully through these school halls just like the children here today. The chalkboard is an informational board without pathos or decoration. Throughout the entire trip, I remained puzzled about how the Yakuts deal with this war. A brother war between Russians and Ukrainians, inflated into a global race for power, values, and influence. Perhaps because the Yakuts have had to survive in an uncontrollable nature for 1,000 years, they have a different relationship with death? They are hunters. In World War II, they were in high demand at the front lines as snipers against the Germans.

Yakuts – children, adults, and seniors alike – celebrate on the frozen Lena River, set against a stunning backdrop of cliffs. It's the opening ceremony of the "Children of Asia" mini-Olympics for young athletes from across Asia. Everyone is dressed either in sports attire, thick outdoor wear, or festively in traditional Yakut costumes, ready at any moment to take photos or be photographed. The Yakuts love capturing moments. Every encounter is a historic one worth recording, to immediately share on social media or update their WhatsApp statuses. This way, we sometimes arrived at places we'd never been before, but people already knew us. Yakuts are constantly seeking new experiences, always in touch with others, or in friendly competition, sharing their achievements on social media – whether it's sports, blacksmithing, darts, sewing, cooking, khomus playing, crafting, or photographing nature, flowers, animals, ice phenomena, and more. They are masters of capturing daily joys, warmly greeting each other and spreading laughter over the internet.

The Yakuts are also photo professionals. When someone says "photo", everyone knows how to pose, what posture to take, and what expression to make when the photographer calls out, "Raz, dva, tri!" And they hold the pose if multiple pictures are needed, each person's phone getting a turn. Afterward, photos are edited and shared immediately with those who couldn't be there. The speed and fun are contagious: "Photo!" – click – posing – click – adjusting clothes – click – setting faces – click – looking into the camera – click – "Raz, dva, tri!" – click – done. Naturally, we are popular subjects for photos and have to quickly learn the ropes to avoid looking overly out of place. Sel-

fies work too! Is this a new ritual, a way of confirming community connections?

The Yakuts don't formally say goodbye in such moments or in everyday interactions, whether in person or after a phone call – it would be like a kind of ending, a "death" of the connection for them. Everything stays open and in the flow.

After the Olympic flame was lit at the foot of the Lena cliffs to be carried by torch to participating countries like Mongolia and China, we were invited on a snowmobile ride. On the left was the frozen Lena, on the right the cliffs, with a brisk wind blowing – wonderful. We saw wolf tracks in the snow. My face was bright red from the cold, as I saw in the photos later.

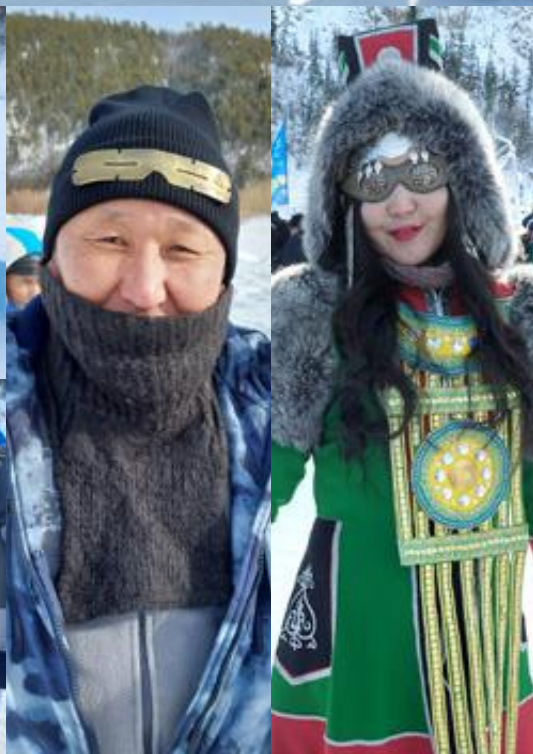
Back at Spiridon's house, Gera welcomed us with a delicious meal. We thanked Alexander for his skillful driving through ice, snow, oncoming traffic, and roads without clear beginnings, ends, or edges. There were no markings, often rough patches, and dips that tested the car's suspension. Alexander told us he was a professional driver for 40 years without a single accident or breakdown. After the meal, I played the duduk for him. **(10)** Then he set off on foot to walk about 50 minutes home in -26 degrees, excited for the exercise – his form of sport.

Spiridon brought out vodka, frozen fish, and his khomus, and we experimented with two or three pieces to improvise together. I played duduk or blues harmonica, paying attention to harmonizing our tones. It worked; it flowed and sounded good. We were ready for tomorrow's concert at Spiridon's school. Meanwhile, Gera shared her passion for darts with Mareike, teaching her some basics. Later, during our travels, Gera entered a darts competition and won.

(10) Video:







Day 6: March 20, 2024

I wake up early. Where am I? Pokrowsk is a small town, or rather, a rural village? Spiridon says that he prefers living here in the countryside over Yakutsk. Here, there's the beautiful wooden house with a vegetable garden, the Lena River, and it's not far to go fishing or hunt ducks. He does a lot of things himself, always busy with something – organizing heating, water supply, and food production. The evening before, he gave me his recipe for making bacon. I type it into my phone as a reminder:

“Spiridon’s Bacon Recipe”

500g pork back fat, cut into small pieces, rubbed with salt and garlic. Wrap in plastic wrap, then Refrigerate for 2 days, then eat or freeze.

The Yakuts love fat. Everything stays attached when cooking or frying. When you boil horse bones, you get a mineral-rich jelly. The horses are pure nature. They keep the Yakuts healthy and fit for the cold.

Pokrowsk has about 2,000 residents. Spiridon is a math teacher and the principal. About 300 children attend his school. When we arrive, there's an excited, lively atmosphere. The school hall is full. The students have prepared a program – dances, singing, a khomus ensemble, a recorder ensemble, and a master performing a traditional Yakut skill game with sticks, which is hard to explain or even replicate. Everyone is passionately involved. We are amazed. For me, it's especially wonderful to hear the khomus in the ensemble play. It has

a distinctive, buzzing charm, powerful and floating. Later, Spiridon tells us that each child is guided to the right course based on their preferences, allowing their talents or just a love of participation to unfold. No one is forced into anything. Role models inspire the desire to join in. The khomus, as the national instrument, is at the forefront of this.

We leave Pokrowsk and move. By noon, we're in an apartment in Yakutsk. Spiridon's sister, Agniya Spiridonova Zhirkova, greets us with a traditional welcoming ceremony. While herbal incense burns, she speaks words of blessing, purification, and well-wishes. She cleanses each guest's aura with a horsehair whisk. She is the mother of Tuyara Zhirkowa. Tuyara and I met in Berlin at the “9th Festival”. She and Erkin Alekseev performed a fantastic concert. Spiridon's sister is a teacher of the khomus. We have a quick meal and then need to go. We head to a huge cultural center. We stand in front of a 5x3-meter poster board. Spiridon shows us the announcement for our concert the next day.

This afternoon, a photo exhibition by Icelandic photographer Ragnar Axelsson is opening at the cultural center. **(11)** Striking black-and-white photographs depicting life in the cold – people in the struggle for survival. Masha has been overseeing the project and is planning to open the exhibition. We arrive just in time. I'm urged to hurry. On the way, I get my duduk ready to play. Coming from a dark hallway, we enter a brightly lit foyer with about 200 guests, and the event begins. We see Masha on stage. She

(11) Link:



waves from a distance. There is great joy that our shared journey is beginning. Masha speaks about how Europeans are discovering her country and culture and how important cultural exchange is to her. She is an ambassador for her culture, driving projects that promote exchange between Europe and Yakutia. Mareike and I are introduced and welcomed with warm applause. Spiridon and I begin our khomus-duduk piece. The guests are thrilled.

In the evening, another more elaborate “Blessing Ceremony” takes place. It is held at the entrance to two houses that are connected. These houses were built in traditional Yakut architectural style. One is a winter house and the other a summer house, linked together. The winter house is lower and more compact, where people huddle together in the self-generated warmth by the stove. The summer house is vaulted and high, like a large tent, offering cooling and shade for the hot summer months. Our hostess calls upon the spirits of the upper, middle, and lower worlds, whose connection is symbolized by a very large wooden pole called “Serge”, which stands in every village. The gods reside above, the animals and humans in the middle, and the “unbeings”, demons, and monsters below. The people are protected by a good mother goddess. The Yakuts have lived with nature religions and shamanism for centuries. Seventy years of communism, despite prohibitions, have not been able to drain this spiritual source. Later, I learn that powerful shamans were killed under

Stalin, and the bloodlines were interrupted as a result. Nevertheless, you can feel how deeply the Yakuts are connected to this spiritual tradition. Through this connection, they experience themselves as a strong community and remain open to the world and the universe. The wish for peace and happiness for all people is a living prayer.

Our hostess is very familiar with shamanic rituals and the necessary Yakut instruments, though we do not learn if she is a shaman herself. Being a shaman is a challenge. **(12)** As intermediaries between humans and spirits, shamans are mystics, doctors, counselors, and have a special relationship with nature and the universe. A shaman must be in good physical and mental health to fulfill the demands of their role in the community. A male Yakut shaman is called “Ojon”, and a female shaman is called “Udujan”. **(13) (14)**

The jew’s harp, the “khomus”, is the female counterpart to the male shaman drum. The sounds of both instruments lead into the spiritual world. Special words and songs manifest wishes for life. The rituals performed with them ward off misfortune, heal the sick, and invoke good fortune for hunters, travelers, workers, and lovers. During these rituals, kumys (mare’s milk), bread, or pancakes are offered, and horsehair and herbs are burned. The first sip and the first bite belong to the spirit of fire. The ritual we experience lasts nearly an hour. We are touched and impressed. Mareike is attributed special powers and abilities.

(12) Video:



(12) Video:



(13) Video:



(13) Video:



(13) Link:



(14) Link:







Day 7: March 21, 2024

We had a good night's sleep in our new apartment. It's a modern, spacious place on the eighth or ninth floor of a huge new building. From the windows, we see the sun rising over a vast snowy landscape. Below us stand the large, old houses of Yakutsk, some of which are no longer inhabited and are set to be partially restored. These are wooden houses made from dark, weathered timber, adorned with beautiful carvings and decorations in the old Russian architectural style. In the distance, there are more new buildings. They must be imagined, much like in Moscow, to be three to five times bigger than anything we're used to. It feels like an entire village could fit into one of these houses. They are completely functional with colorful facades and insulation that comfortably blocks minus 50-degree temperatures. Interestingly, the way you enter these houses is always the same. It's a principle we will encounter repeatedly. The entrances are small, designed as cold traps. The first door is set so tightly that it slams shut with a loud bang as soon as you step inside. A challenge when you're carrying bags or suitcases. The second door requires a code. Then, as soon as you step in, it's warm inside. The whole building is overheated. We quickly strip off our thick clothing. Looking out the windows in the other direction, we see a part of the city. Below us, a frozen river. On the other side, buildings from

the 1960s. Yakutsk was historically built by the Russians as a wooden fortress, and now it is laid out as a modern city according to Soviet urban planning. The streets are very wide, with large, representative squares, new residential areas, and very strikingly large theaters, cultural centers, and cinemas. Everything is set up for the functioning of daily life: housing, work, transportation, shopping, and social gatherings. Everywhere you look, huge pipes and cables for energy and water stretch through the air, giving the city a somewhat crowded appearance. The permafrost, which can be up to 1,500 meters deep, prevents the pipes from being laid underground. In summer, only about a meter thaws. This leaves behind mud and dust. The old wooden houses have bent in the middle from the shifting ground. The entire city is built on stilts. The infrastructure is constantly exposed to the extreme climatic conditions and the resulting wear and tear. Nine months of cold and three months of heat. This means both construction and decay are happening simultaneously. I'm struck by how people here manage to cope, with either pure nature or military-like construction sites – there's only one chance to do it right. There's endless space here. Walking around or going for a stroll feels like a hike.

It's 10 a.m. Afanasiy "Afonia" Lytkine, Masha's cousin, picks us up in his big SUV. Everyone here drives an SUV

or a large car. The car trade with Japan supplies the Yakuts with generous vehicles. The tires have thick spikes that crunch loudly as they drive over the harsh snow. The sound of this crunching, whether walking or driving, is a melody – a kind of poetry. Afanasiy works for an energy company and has taken a few hours off to show us around. Masha wants to show Mareike gold, jewelry, and gemstones. We head into town to the famous jewelry salon of Alexander Pawlow. Alexander is a large, strong man with friendly, warm eyes and a warm-hearted presence. He tells us how he built his business after the collapse of the Soviet Union. He takes us on a tour of the factory, showing us how the exceptional jewelry creations are made. Designers and artisans – both men and women – refine the immense natural wealth of Yakutia. Alexander has won many awards with his company and is well-known and connected worldwide. His photo gallery features a “Who’s Who” of Hollywood and the Arab world. Alexander has something of a shamanic presence. You can feel how deeply connected he is to his surroundings. The Khomus (jaw harp) is sacred to him. There are instruments adorned with precious stones. It’s clear that there’s competition for these valuable resources within the industry. There are jewelry shops all over the city, but everything seems very well-organized. What remains impressive is the aesthetic talent and

craftsmanship of the creative Yakutians. Somewhere, I read that it’s believed the tradition of forging the jaw harp may have emerged as a byproduct of sword and knife-making – a craft that has lasted for hundreds of years. The Khomus as a dowry, a gift in a warlike environment?

In the afternoon: The Mammoth Museum. **(15)** I’ve always wanted to visit a mammoth museum. Spiridon and Masha organized it for us. A young scientist guides us through the museum. We marvel at the giant skeletons and examine stuffed animal replicas of species that once lived in this region. Climate change is causing the permafrost to thaw. Mammoth carcasses are being exposed by the melting mud and are available for scientific study. Mammoth blood doesn’t freeze. In fact, 10,000-year-old blood has been found, still appearing as though it were freshly taken from the animal’s body. In 2028, scientists expect a breakthrough in their attempts to bring a mammoth back to life through cloning. The animals likely went extinct due to the retreat of the Ice Age and the resulting climate change. They couldn’t adapt to the warming environment, causing their blood to “boil.” We had a nice moment with the museum director and a group of students who were very curious about why we were in Yakutia. Spiridon and I performed a piece for them on the Khomus and harmonica. They were thrilled. As a souvenir,

(15) Video:



I take a small piece of mammoth tusk and tie it to the strap of my Khomus. 10,000 years of energy. We are hungry. Afanasiy takes us to his favorite restaurant that serves Mongolian cuisine. We replenish ourselves with hearty soups, dumplings filled with meat, and salads. Delicious and full of energy.

In the afternoon, we have an appointment at the Khomus Museum with its director Dmitriy Byastinov and his team. **(16)** The museum is a treasure trove of information, with hundreds of fantastic jaw harps. After an initial introduction, we are given an in-depth tour by Aisen Jollokhov, a young student and a very talented Khomus player. He shows us traditional instruments, Fred Crane's collection, and photographs of blacksmiths and players. This place is not only a museum for national heritage but also a research center dedicated to everything related to the jaw harp. The museum was founded and built in 1991 by Ivan Alekseejev, Spiridon, and his brother Nikolai Schischichigin, among others. What always impresses me about it is that not only is the Yakutian history of Khomus playing explored, but the global spread of this unassuming instrument has always been the main focus. Over the years, a vibrant global network of players, researchers, and blacksmiths has emerged, all constantly in contact and exchange. From this initiative, the International Jew's Harp Society was born. This association ensures that players meet regularly, eve-

ry few years, somewhere in the world. This intense intercultural work, often done with little funding but with much volunteer effort and passion, is something we cannot appreciate enough. As the organizer of the "9th International World Jew's Harp Festival and Congress", I hold a press conference. About 30 to 40 guests are present, and they are happy that the last big gathering was successfully organized in Berlin. For me, it feels like a circle has closed. I symbolically exchange our producer-festival badges with Dmitriy, thank all the collaborators, including Franz Kumpl, Aron Szilagyi, Gerd Conradt, Harm Linsen, Jeff Greene, my Berlin team, all the musicians, and present Spiridon with a T-shirt featuring a Berlin motif. Now he can say, "I am a Berliner". Spiridon Schischigin, Warawara Stepanowa, Alena Pinigina-Kun Chemchuynne, and I play a few pieces together. We all have a wonderful time, filled with laughter and warmth. In the evening, we dine with Dmitriy in a creative Yakutian restaurant. We get along well and agree to stay in touch for possible future projects. A young chef is experimenting with reinventing Yakutian ingredients. We enjoy delicious ice fish and unforgettable grilled reindeer meat with blueberry sauce. As a thank you, Spiridon and I play for the chef, his team, and the guests at the restaurant. It was a lovely day. Lighthearted, filled with small, delightful events and new discoveries.

(16) Link:



ЮВЕЛИРНЫЙ ДОМ
Киэргэ

льный
ртер
тэ

еральный
партнер
Киэргэ

генеральный
партнер
Киэргэ











Day 8: March 22, 2024

It's my 58th birthday. We get up at 5:30 a.m. and get ready for our interview on Yakutia's breakfast television show, "Good Morning, Yakutia". The streets are still empty. The sun has already risen and is drying the fog over the ground. It's a cheerful morning with fresh air. At 7 a.m., we are live on air. The curious, questioning eyes of the host duo. "What are you doing in Yakutia?" we are asked. We share our story and enthusiasm about the past few days. Masha translates from the background. She knows everyone here. Everyone knows her. Her generation. With a harmonica solo, we promote our concert in the evening at the "House for Friendship of Peoples." A successful start to the day. Everyone is in a good mood, and we're assured that the show was broadcast nationwide – a country eight times larger than Germany, but with only one million inhabitants, of which 350,000 live in Yakutsk. We have breakfast.

By 11 a.m., we are at the "Sakha" Theater, a place with a huge, bright lobby and a hall that can hold about 1,000 people. Today, a Khomus competition for children and teenagers is taking place here. A colorful hustle and bustle on the stairs. Nervous excitement. Many different school classes, ensembles, soloists, and soloists are preparing for their performances. Spiridon asks me

to play a Khomus solo at the opening, using a Khomus that the winner of the competition will receive. I'm happy to do it. Amidst joyful applause, I play and hand over the Khomus. Then the intense program begins. Every ten minutes, a new variation of how to play the Khomus is performed – solos, duos, trios, quartets, ensembles in various costumes and arrangements. Everyone is vying for the jury's favor. It's incredible what the children can already do. Spiridon introduces me to a Khomus teacher. I seize the opportunity to learn a special vibrato technique used in Khomus playing. It's called Javoronok Kjuregei, where sounds like "joijoi" are made in the throat with the tongue. Wonderful – once again, I've learned something new.

Around 1:30 p.m., we are at the "Maxtal" restaurant. The word "Maxtal" means "thank you" in Yakut. Masha invites us to celebrate my birthday with traditional Yakutian food. First, there is a cleansing ritual, followed by salads, reindeer meat, fish, curry, and horse milk. Many traditional items and oil paintings depicting the Yakut way of life decorate the restaurant. We are given a small tour and learn about the meaning of certain symbols on quilted horse blankets and how a Yakut rider in the 19th century managed to ride all the way to Moscow on a Yakut horse. I

receive a cap woven from horsehair – a Döbedöcke (is this the correct spelling? Please check and correct if necessary) – with an embedded Khomus symbol, just like the one Spiridon has. I'm not Yakut, but I'm proud to wear it. From here on, the day becomes emotionally turbulent. One unexpected event after another. I try to make sense of it all. Yes, Spiridon had wished to hold a concert. Of course, I agreed. Now, we are scheduled for a soundcheck at 5 p.m. Oh, this Haus der Völkerfreundschaft is huge, with a big stage! Just two days ago, there was a big poster, and now, a big show. The performers include: Spiridon Schischigin, Warawara Stepanowa Archuiuina, Alena Pinigina-Kun Chemchuyne, Tuiaara Tschirkowa, Artur Cemeonow, Masha Schischigina-Palsson, and the special guests from Germany, Mareike Bader (DJ Clarice) and Sören Birke.

When we all stand on stage and play together, I'm startled – it's a complete mess. Oh no, what is this going to be? Mareike is supposed to DJ, and the players are supposed to improvise. I am to play five pieces. There are supposed to be duets and a grand finale. As an organizer, I know what it means to put together a show. Weeks of planning, technical riders, sound checks, rehearsals, and a team that has gotten to know each other beforehand. And so-

meone coordinating everything. None of that is happening here – and the concert is supposed to start at 7:30 p.m. What now? Let go and experience it ... There! Someone is running around in a panic, holding a note and speaking to everyone. It's the director, Andrei Adamov. I do a soundcheck with a microphone, place my instruments on a chair in front of me, and think: It'll be fine. A few minutes later, my chair is moved, and I'm told that I'll be playing from a different position. Which one? I'm not told. What? Let go and experience it. Then, somehow, it all comes together. It sounds good with the others. Mareike finds a DJ set ready, just like in Berlin, with the best equipment. The production team has specially brought it in from a club. Backstage, the finest costumes are being put on.

At this moment, I don't yet know the tragic news that is hitting the Schischigin family. At 7:30 p.m., the house is packed. The show begins. Then, thunderous applause and cheering! The audience rushes the stage! We are celebrated! Photos. Selfies. Autographs. Open, warm, and smiling faces. Wow! A miracle has happened. How was this possible? Later, when I watch the footage on YouTube, I still can't believe it. **(17)** Not only was the music fantastic, but the show also had dramaturgy, a special lighting design, and an LED wall.

(17) Video:



I insist that we meet the director again. On our way back, we are able to speak with him for a few minutes. He studied directing in Moscow, and his team is made up of trained specialists. We learn that three to four events take place here every day, and this kind of show is routine. I can't believe my ears – this is unthinkable in Germany. This way of working impresses me. A venue that is always on and can adapt flexibly to any content. Every department is prepared – lighting, sound, stage design, etc. They improvise with what's available and, most importantly, know the sound of the Khomus. I've never heard the Khomus sound so good over a sound system. As we leave the venue, I see that our big poster has already been moved to make room for the next show the following day.

We drive home. A different mood fills the air. What just happened? We sit at the table: Spiridon, Afanasiy, Masha, Mareike, and I. Spiridon starts speaking quietly. He had just learned before the show that his older brother, Egor Schischigin, unexpectedly passed away. He was on a book tour, presenting his new book on local history, and had a heart attack. According to Yakutian tradition, the family must gather to bury the body within three days. We were supposed to start our journey through the country the next day, but Spiridon cannot

join us. The Schischigin family council decides that we will still go, and Masha should accompany us. Mareike and I are speechless. We offer to stay and not go, but the offer is declined. In that moment, I realize that just moments ago, I was standing on stage with Spiridon, and together we brought joy to the music and the people. Spiridon gives a heartfelt speech for his brother. We toast to him. Spiridon asks me to say something. Slowly, deeply, it wells up from within me: I speak about the crises of the last few years, the death of my father a few months ago, the death all around us, the power of music, and our mission to play, no matter what happens – like the band on the Titanic. I thank them, also on behalf of Mareike and my family, for allowing us to be in Yakutsk, to receive this incredible gift. We toast to life. Afanasiy presents me with a birthday gift – a Yakutian knife. Every Yakut son receives one from his father for hunting.

Later, as we are sleeping by 2 a.m., a terrorist attack happens six hours later, on the evening of March 22, 2024, around 8 p.m. in Krasnogorsk, a district of Moscow. During a rock concert by the band Piknik at the Crocus City Hall, 144 people are killed. Russia is in shock, with state mourning declared for a week. For us, the first news we hear the next morning.







СПИРИДОН ШИШИНГИН
Холбоотой-Борисуу гэрлэ
Специальные гости из Германии
SÖREN BIRKE
MAREIKE BADER-DJ CLARICE
ВАРВАРА СТЕПАНОВА-АРЧЫМНА
АЛЕНА ПИНИГИНА-КУН ЧӨМЧҮҮНЭ
ТУЙАДАРА ЖИРКОВА
АРТУР СЕМЕНОВ



Day 9: March 23, 2024

Terror attack, war, Spiridon not traveling with us. Clear air, blue sky, sun, and snow. Our journey through the country begins at last. We pack our bags. Masha introduces us to Pavel. He'll drive us the 1,000 kilometers to Oymyakon. In the summer, it would be 1,500 kilometers, because everything thaws, and you'd have to bypass the rivers. His minibus is a modern Toyota. We hug Spiridon. He has given me a task. I will keep asking the gods with pancakes and vodka for a safe journey. We start.

When you leave Yakutsk, you pass by new buildings, business facilities, shopping centers, and old wooden houses. From the comfortable Toyota travel seat, you look out at a sunlit backdrop full of changing impressions. It's not beautiful, it's not ugly. It's just everyday life. Things and situations lined up that will never make the news but are there every day. The car turns off the road onto a snow-packed track, and there is a wide intersection ahead, with a traffic light slightly elevated. We have a green light and drive down the rise on the other side – an incredible view. The Lena River. Frozen. An endless ice desert. We stop. For the first time, I ask the gods for blessings for our little travel group – Masha, Mareike, Pavel, and myself – and for all those who will be traveling this route with us. The first part of the journey is a wide, several-hundred-meter expanse of cleared and

leveled track over two meters of thick ice on the Lena River. Like the first day, everything works perfectly. There are a few bumps here and there, but the wheels roll smoothly. After about 20 kilometers, on the other shore, there is a sign standing lonely, reading: Magadan 1,840 km. The road to Magadan – there was something about that. I Google it. There's a documentary film called *Kolyma – The Road of Bones* **(18)**. In the 1930s, Stalin came up with the idea of forcing prisoners and forced laborers to build this road for mining and trade under inhuman conditions with the most basic equipment. 100,000 prisoners died during its construction. The dead were either buried in the road or, especially in winter, used as “boundary markers” at the side of the road. This horrific act marked the arrival of modernity in Yakutia. The road is now a vital lifeline for trade and exchange, a bridge to the world, and today it's officially called R504. **(19)**

The drive becomes a continuous effort. We shift into an endless straight-ahead mode, against or with the sun depending on the time of day or direction. We welcome impressions. There are small horses knee-deep in the snow “grazing”, rundown wooden sheds, a sign, thin tree trunks flickering by, a village in the distance, and ahead, the road turning into a line, stretching into the horizon. Every time we cross a district border, from one oblast to another.

(18) Video:



(19) Video:



her, we stop to perform our travel ritual. Pancakes, vodka, requests, and blessings. Pavel does it, Masha does it, I do it.

We need to refuel. I notice a group of funny, laughing boys getting into an overloaded, old, wobbly UAZ Buchanka. The UAZ is the classic Russian minibus, seemingly indestructible. It's short and stocky, perched on thin wheels. One after another, the nearly ten boys disappear into the bus. I'm amazed. Yes, they're not very tall, but still – how many can fit in there? With a tilt to the left, the bus starts rolling. We keep crossing paths with them, either stopping at rest stops or overtaking each other. We make good progress.

In the village of Tyungyulyu, in the Megino-Khangalaski District, we take a longer break at a famous trucker's stop. The Nal café is a large wooden rest stop with a hearty and flavorful kitchen and many people sitting at long tables. "Nal" means "pay in cash". The atmosphere is good. It feels nice to be here.

We enter a long, stretched-out village. Wooden houses and courtyards surrounded by high snowdrifts. No one is on the streets. But then ... I look out the window and spot a towering forged Khomus sculpture. In front of it stand two women in bright red traditional costumes. I turn to Mareike and say, "Look over there. What are they doing?" Masha turns from the front passenger seat and says with a smile, "They're waiting

for us!" "What??? Us?" That's how our journey is. We never know in advance what's coming next or what Masha has prepared. We're constantly surprised by one thing after another. We've arrived in the village of Kyyy in the Tattinsky District, where we're greeted by the local Khomus association. The two angelic women are Khomus players Alyona Sabaraikina and Elena Yankova. Their costumes are so beautiful and a highlight in the white expanse. Bread and salt are offered to us. We take a selfie together in front of the Khomus sculpture. We learn that many significant Yakut figures come from this district, including Alexei Golokowski, the founder of Yakutian literature. At a memorial site, we are shown the family tree of the Golokowski family, which holds deep meaning for the Yakut people. In the culture house, we visit a small local museum, where we learn about the remarkable Luka Nikolaiewitsch Turinn (1917–1989). He was a folk artist, singer, and Khomus player, and he developed his own playing style that became well-known in the late 1940s. Turinn played at the first All-Russian Festival of Talented Amateur Groups in Moscow in 1948 and made record albums. (20) He was Artur Cemeonow's grandfather, the same Artur who performed with Warwara just yesterday. The resemblance between the two, when their photos are placed side by side, is striking. Artur performed a unique piece with Warwara yesterday,

(20) Video:



(20) Video:



playing a very deep Khomus, which vibrated through the wooden stage and walls, creating an unforgettable experience.

Elena and Alyona invite us to sit at a table laid with small delicacies. Our small gifts – ham and chocolate – are well received. We exchange stories about Berlin and the Khomus festivals held in Kyy. They show us their colorful culture house, with a stage equipped with good technology and a welcoming audience space. We play a few more pieces together before continuing our journey.

About an hour further, at an open-air museum, we get a tour of a wooden Russian Orthodox church with a bell tower. The museum showcases old, original houses where exiles lived during the Tsarist era. For the first time, we enter historical wooden houses built in the Yakutian style. It's a completely different type of architecture. From the outside, one might think they've stepped into a Star Wars set. These wooden houses are flat and slant at the sides, resembling the lower part of a pyramid, with tiny windows. One can easily imagine how aerodynamically this form fits into the natural surroundings. Wind and rain sweep over them, but nothing is blown away. Snow gathers on the slanted sides, enveloping the house. The floor is frozen and covered in furs. There's an open clay

stove, a Kamaljuk, and a broad bench running along all sides of the room. People would sleep wrapped in furs on the bench. A table, simple crockery, and, under it, the distinctive milk vessel made from birch bark, in traditional Yakutian form. The Yakuts were a settled people who lived off their horses, hunting, fishing, and nourished by the healthy waters and fruits of nature. Super healthy. The encounter with the Russians from the West slowly began a transformation starting in the 18th century. Some exiles married Yakut women. They learned from each other. Someone wrote the first Yakut-Russian dictionary. The Orthodox Church had the Bible written in Yakut. The Yakuts were Christianized as Russian Orthodox starting in the 1820s. However, a wide range of shamanistic religious practices have remained to this day. Khomus playing, shaman drums, and spirit calling songs are part of it.

It has become dark. We continue our journey and arrive at the next place, Ytyk-Kujol, where we have an appointment with the Khomus blacksmith Eduard Tarabukin. He is a young, sought-after blacksmith who forges instruments of unique quality. Anyone who has ever played one of his instruments will immediately understand. Masha and he know each other well. Eduard is expecting us and takes us into his workshop. It's a cold, soot-filled room with

various machines. He shows us his latest creations. One piece stands out in particular. A finely carved wooden sculpture depicting a Yakut rider on a Yakut horse. The rider has a cheerful face and looks into the distance, shielding his eyes with his right hand. A truly beautiful work. Eduard presses an invisible button, and a compartment slides out of the sculpture. Inside, there's a large Khomus. Eduard calls it his masterpiece. Eduard is a trained goldsmith. After a sudden inspiration, he began forging Khomus. He tells us that he can only do this when he thinks of someone or something special. He can't, like a machine, just forge a Khomus. We are impressed. Eduard wants to learn how to play the harmonica. Curious, we exchange ideas. Together, we play an improvisation.

Not far from Eduard's house lives the family of Masha's chosen sister Marinika. We're invited to dinner there. We enter a yard and a wooden house. There is a great reunion between Masha and Marinika. They haven't seen each other for a long time, not since Masha married and moved to Iceland. Marinika is a psychologist in a city mental health facility and lives here with her daughter Ailana and her husband Zinovii. He is a hunter and made the delicacies on the table himself – fish, meat, and cheese. We drink horse milk and enjoy the encounter.

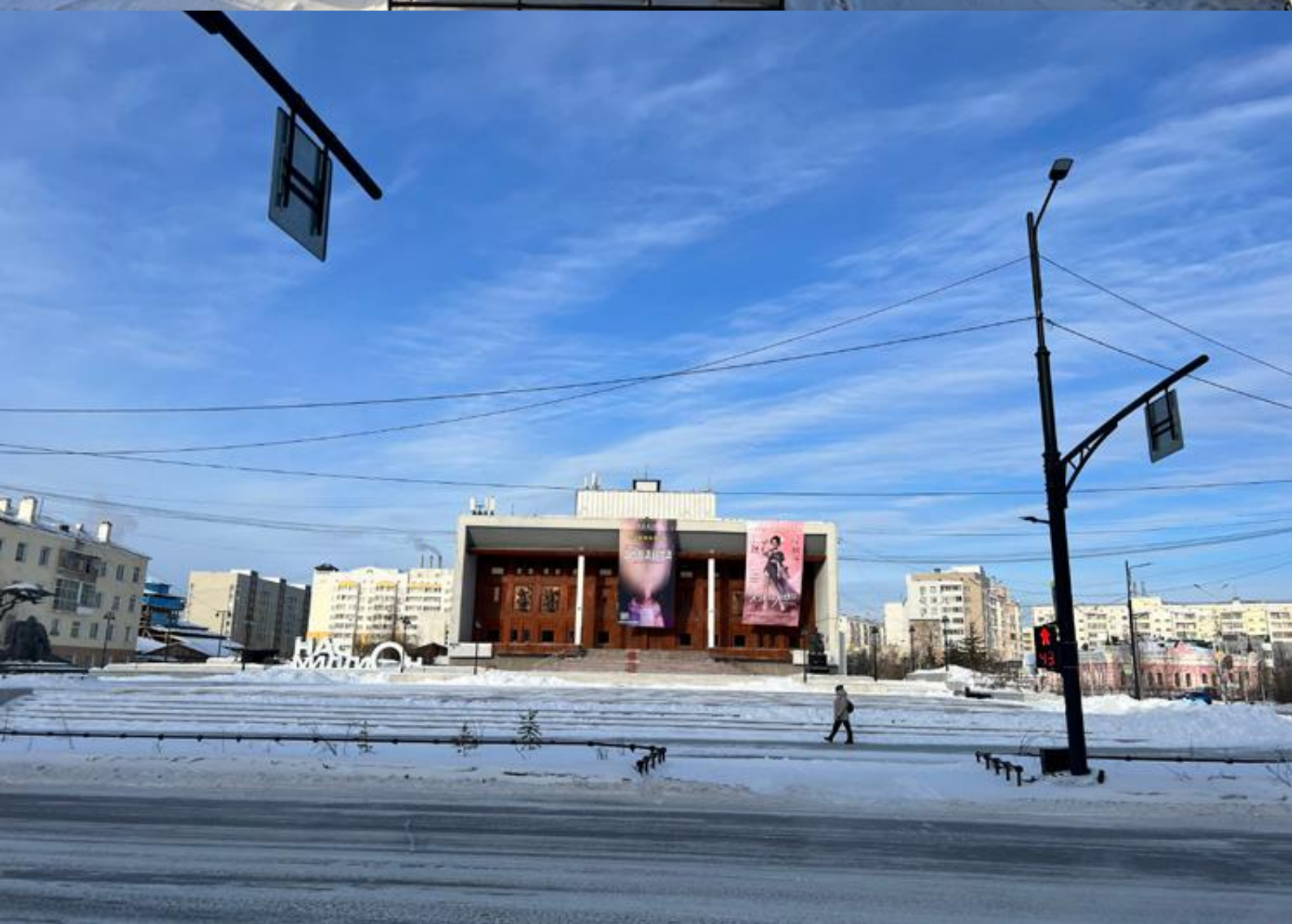
Late at night, we arrive at the Loft hotel, not far from Marinika's home. When I try to charge my phone, there's a power outage. We're told in the hallway that the problem will be fixed soon. I type my daily notes into my phone and turn them into a WhatsApp message for Spiridon. I let Google Translate translate my words into Russian. This way, Spiridon can still be a part of our journey. Every evening, I write to him until we meet again. He replies right away and is happy. The power is also back on.

Via WhatsApp:

"Dear Spiridon, we had a very beautiful day. The drive was very pleasant, with wonderful weather, a very good driver, Pavel, and a great car.

We met friendly, open people and made some music. Master Tarabukin showed us his workshop, and I was able to show him how to learn to play the harmonica. We visited the Khomus Museum and learned about Artur's grandfather. In a regional museum, we learned about the life stories of politically exiled people and their contributions to Yakut-Russian literature. Very interesting. It's so great to be here. I am beginning to understand more and more why the Khomus expresses the Yakut soul. We ate wonderfully and drank horse milk. We're now at the hotel and going to sleep. Tomorrow, we'll continue. I wish you and your family all the best and much strength. Thank you for everything. Your Sören"













Day 10: March 24, 2024

Despite the national mourning and the cancellation of all public events, we are expected at the cultural center in Ytyk-Kyuyol right after waking up. Kanaeva Vera Alexandrovna, the head of the local history museum, and khomus player Markova Raisa Semenovna want to show us the exhibition featuring oil paintings of notable Yakut figures. We are welcomed with the Yakut blessing and greeting ritual. The exhibition is incredibly interesting. Each portrait tells the story of Yakutia's modernization over the past 150 years – intellectuals, artists, writers, and statesmen who have worked to preserve the identity and well-being of the Yakut people amidst a changing world. Each, with their unique skills and talents, contributed to maintaining the traditions and characteristics of Yakut culture and identity in the face of strong Russian influences. There are too many names I've only heard once. Sometimes, I wonder if the history of modernity has been kinder to the Yakuts than to the indigenous peoples of North America. To find out, further study or travel would be necessary.

Markova Raisa Semenovna is amazing. At 84 years old, she plays the khomus wonderfully and masters the art of Olonkho performance. Later, I read more about it. It's a cycle, an epic, composed of various songs mixed with personal improvisations. An Olonkho performance can last for hours, depicting battles between three worlds. In the early 20th century, about 300 different versions existed in oral tradition,

of which 17 have been published so far. Markova sits in the foyer of the cultural center in front of a roughly 6 by 4-meter carved relief depicting the world tree as she begins her performance. We are captivated. Then she invites me to play the khomus with her. It flows between us. It plays itself. We embrace afterward and are happy.

After a long drive, our next stop is the town of Chandyga. On the way, we meet a hitchhiker from India by the roadside. We pick him up. He has hitchhiked all the way from Delhi to here, with the same destination as us: Oymyakon. He plans to continue from there to Africa, expecting to be on the road for several years. He runs a blog on YouTube and Instagram to share his experiences and has over a million followers. It's already late afternoon when we arrive in Chandyga, a larger urban-type settlement with about 6,600 inhabitants, founded in 1938 in connection with the construction of the Magadan Road. As we enter, one building stands out – a structure shaped like a flying saucer, a UFO on the parking deck. It's the local music school, built on the initiative of the current president of Yakutia, Aisen Nikolaev. We check into a beautiful wooden house, a guesthouse with spacious rooms. There's a large table for guests on the ground floor. It's warm. We rest a bit from the drive. From the window, we see a glowing blue-violet-red sunset. Masha announces guests – the Bebre Ensemble, a khomus ensemble led by Lydia Mikhailovna Borisova. The

khomus players are young people, music teachers, and doctors. They bring homemade cake, meat, fish, cheese, and pirozhki and are curious to meet us. They perform two exciting, well-arranged khomus compositions to welcome us. Mareike and I have prepared a duet piece for such a moment. We receive hearty applause. Lydia gathers us all for a group photo. Before the shutter clicks, she says: "Dear guests, you must know that this is a historic moment for the town of Chandyga. Today, we welcome the first foreigner who plays the khomus." Overwhelmed by this information, we spend a wonderful evening together. We eat and drink, perform pieces for each other, and improvise in various constellations. I get to know Lydia better. Masha introduces her to me as a legend. She founded the Bebre Ensemble, named after a specific style of khomus playing. She transcribed it from recordings of Luka Nikolaevich Turnin. The essence of this style lies in plucking the tongue during the forward and backward hand movements, creating a specific rhythm when playing Yakut folk songs. I ask her if there are other styles. Yes, she says. She had listened to my playing and says this style is called "Sija Tardy" (pronounced "Seje Tardöe"). At first, I'm surprised that a style can be recognized in my playing, as I mostly improvise. But then it becomes clear why. This is also the style played by Spiridon Shishigin. Spiridon is my teacher. I've listened to him for hours and continue to do so. His playing moves me,

full of the finest vibrations and exciting stories. Lydia explains this style to me. It's the freest way to play the khomus. The player develops a poetic meditation during the performance. It's more of a philosophical style, invented by women at home by the fire, allowing various emotions to be expressed directly. But there's another style called the Veluski style, originating from another region further west in the country. It's very virtuosic and includes imitating natural and animal sounds, such as horse hooves and screeching birds. In this context, I hear the name of the player Nikitina Antonina **(21)** for the first time. She is said to live very reclusively, rarely gives concerts, has researched the old playing styles of the Yakuts, and occasionally offers courses. Later, I remember that in 2011, we saw a little boy at the "7th Festival" whose performance was fascinating and whose playing sounded similar. I ask Spiridon via WhatsApp if he knows what became of him. Spiridon writes that he is a very talented khomus player and singer, gives many concerts, but no longer lives in Yakutia. His name is Volodya Dormidontov, now Vladimir. **(22)** He is a student of Nikitina Antonina. I find a short concert recording of him on the internet. Volodya has become a man. Time is running out again and won't be enough to study all this more deeply, but Lydia provides me with more differentiation. We arrange to meet the Bebre Ensemble on our way back from Oymyakon at the music school to learn more.

(21) Video:

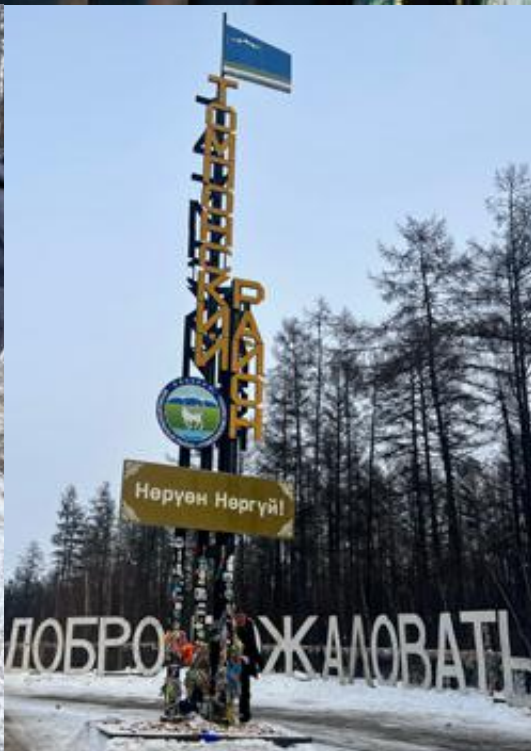


(21) Video:



(22) Video:







Day 11: March 25, 2024

Via WhatsApp to Spiridon:
“Dear Spiridon, what a day. A long drive, but it was worth it. We drove through a magical landscape under bright sunshine. Vastness, mountains, frozen rivers. Everything sparkled. Wonderful. At a ritual site with a hot spring, we refilled water. This time, I not only offered pancakes and vodka for good travel wishes but also tied fabric strips to a band. Blowing in the wind, they connect us with the gods. A few kilometers later, we took a long break at the ODO rest stop. Here, a mother lives with her sons and is building a tourist station amidst beautiful mountains and a river. We refresh ourselves with soup and freshly boiled eggs. We meet one of the sons, Dulustaan Tolstyakov, and his young, playful Laika dog. Dulustaan is 35 years old and full of talents. He shows me the boots he wears at minus 50 degrees. They are felt boots, a Russian classic, called valenki. These boots keep the cold out, and you can walk well

through the snow with them. As a hunter, he takes his rifle and invites us on a short hike. The sun is high, the air is clear and full of oxygen. The light glimmers in the snow and ice. We walk down a steep slope to the frozen river. The ice creaks and crunches. Total silence, then this self-generated sound. You experience yourself anew. Dulustaan says that nature in this region has particularly strong energies. In the past, shamans retreated here to gather strength. He shows us a natural curiosity – a mineral inclusion in a rock that has the shape of an eye. We go to a spot where the river isn’t frozen. The ice break points are full of various icicles. The most creative shapes, refracting the light. A natural spectacle. A special moment of being one with oneself. To be in this nature – what a gift! We can communicate well with Dulustaan. He speaks English, even a bit of German, as he likes listening to Rammstein. He quotes entire lines. In the end, it turns out that

he is also a khomus player and comes from the place of the Bebre Ensemble. He was a student of Lydia and learned the Bebre style from Luka Nikolaevich Turnin. Here, I realize the significance of Luka Turnin for Yakut khomus players. Pavel urges us to continue. It's still a long way to Tomtor, 600 kilometers. We have to go through the mountains. Dangers lurk. In the evening, at sunset, we take a break at the famous "Kuba" café, where all truckers stop to recharge. The café itself is a run-down wooden barrack with a small kitchen. The selection isn't abundant. We drink tea and meet the guys from the UAZ again. We start talking. They are wrestlers and were at a competition in Yakutsk, now on their way home to a village even further than Tomtor. The curious eyes and exuberant cheerfulness of the guys are contagious. We continue. We make good progress and admire a fairy-tale spectacle. The night is very dark, still without a moon. The light from our mini-

bus headlights reflects in the ice crystals of the frozen road. A thousandfold glittering array comes toward us. Tomtor welcomes us with this wonderful effect as we arrive there at 11:30 PM. It's the birthplace of our driver Pavel. His childhood friend Ivan welcomes us with food and vodka in his guesthouse. We move into a simple, beautiful room. In the uniquely elongated wooden house, there's a sauna and hot showers. After the long drive, we want to go out again. A midnight walk in Siberia. We can't believe we're here. Loud silence. The crunching under the shoes, a few dark silhouettes of houses, and the light of the street lamps give the illusion of a small, manageable world, but we know that with the blackness of the darkness begins the impassable infinity. We send warm greetings to Gera and you. We think of you.

Mareike & Sören. PS: Here's a musical greeting – I send a khomus improvisation of mine via WhatsApp."









Day 12: March 26, 2024

Today we were supposed to meet the local khomus players. I had really been looking forward to it. But it won't happen. Due to the national mourning, the meeting is canceled. Tomtor itself isn't large – just a village with about 1,200 inhabitants. We visit the local museum of Tomtor. **(23)** The exhibition tells the story of the region over the past 200 years. It's full of historical artifacts, photos, and information. You get a real sense of how the encounter between the Russians and the Yakuts might have unfolded. What must the Yakuts have thought when they first encountered Russian fur traders, hunters, and gold prospectors? The Russians later brought the Orthodox Church, many prisoners sent to the Gulags, land surveyors, mining specialists, new styles of architecture, unfamiliar foods, vodka, later machinery, communism, and the modern world of communication. When, I wonder, did the Yakuts first realize they were living in a land of immense wealth – at least from the Western perspective? Endless forests, animals with prized thick fur, enormous gold deposits, the largest diamond reserves in the world, oil, gas, and various ores. The exploitation and commercialization of their living environment began. David versus Goliath. The Yakuts had to adapt, to submit. What, in turn, did the Russians think when they encountered these resilient people – surviving the brutal

forces of nature, cold and heat alike, living off horse meat and milk, herbs, clean air, and water? They met people who lived long lives, whose hair still grew into old age. The museum's list of centenarians is long. Is Yakutia a "Blue Zone"?

From what I understand, there have been repeated phases of resistance and attempts at autonomy or independence from Russia, though these have never truly succeeded. Wise, shamanic Yakuts advised their people to adapt. Today, Russia is a multiethnic centralized state. Everything is decided and negotiated in Moscow. Still, I can't shake the thought that the fate of the Yakuts might not have been quite as harsh as that of the Inca, Maori, African slaves, or North America's indigenous peoples. The Yakuts are now an active part of Russia's economic and cultural life, with a strong, distinct identity that has survived. They've learned not to fall victim to vices like alcohol or gambling. They live wisely, speak multiple languages, and are open to the world.

The museum is connected to a very special place.

On the way there, we pass a snow-covered Yakut ritual site with a large world tree, wooden posts, and traditional summer houses. In the summer months, Yakut festivals are held here – often lasting for days. Guests come from all over the country, most of them

(23) Link:



naturally bringing their khomus. The place we're headed to is a former massive natural refrigerator carved into a hill, with year-round permafrost.

Before electric refrigeration was invented, food was kept fresh here throughout the summer. Today, this location has been transformed into an event venue.

Ice sculptures designed by artists tell the stories of Yakut mythology.

There's an ice bar counter, and you can lie on an ice bed covered with furs.

Sculpting with ice is a beloved artistic practice in the region. Everywhere we went – at events or in public squares in Yakutsk – we saw the most diverse ice creations: Figures from Yakut mythology, khomus players, characters from pop culture, or pure fantasy figures. Always impressive. And spectacularly lit at night. A multimedia presentation informs us about the many activities available in the region – sports, arts, and culture. We're especially amazed by the wild, oversized ice crystal blossoms hanging like frozen vines from the ceiling.

Afterward, we stop by a small local café built in the style of an old Yakut house. There, we meet four outgoing and curious girls between eight and ten years old. They are dancers and learning to play the khomus. They invite us to a music school concert at the cultural center the next morning.

In the afternoon, the time has come.

We drive to our destination: Oymyakon – the place where the coldest temperatures ever recorded in an inhabited location were measured. Officially: minus 67.8 In contrast, summer temperatures can exceed 30°C, making a temperature swing of more than 100 degrees within a single year possible. During the one-hour drive through an expansive snowy landscape with ridges on the horizon, Pavel tells us how he grew up here. Stretching out his arm, he points out where he used to play as a child and which path he took to get to the disco. As a teenager, Pavel used to listen to the world through the radio and loved rock music. He's fascinated by my harmonica and wants to learn to play. I had given him one just two days earlier in Chandyga. Upon arriving at a large square in the village, we are told to wait. We watch, amused, as free-roaming cows wander by, each with a large, warm, protective bag strapped around her udder. Then we hear a door open – and Chyskhaan approaches. The Lord of the Cold is a mythical Yakut figure. He wears a shimmering blue-and-white outfit, a tall cap, and a long white beard. According to Yakut legend, he is also the master of all Santa Clauses. Once a year, he gathers them to distribute cold across the world. Chyskhaan welcomes us and delivers a long speech about the importance of cold in the world and the responsibility people have to maintain

the balance between cold and warmth. He gives us a mission: to carry this message into the world. With official certificates, he confirms that we truly visited him in person. We take photos together before he disappears back into his house. A cheerful welcoming ritual. Shortly afterward, Semyon Sivtsev emerges from the same house. Semyon is from Oymyakon and created this welcoming ritual. He tells us that very few foreigners come here each year, and he's truly happy to bring Chyskhaan to life. He explains why it can get so unusually cold in Oymyakon: The village is surrounded by mountain ranges that block warm air currents. Instead, Arctic air masses – originating from the North Pole, about 2,900 kilometers away – create a cold-air trap. Semyon then takes us to his traditional Yakut house, built by his father, and shows us his self-shot photo gallery – bizarre natural moments with ice, fog, and horses. After playing khomus together, he tells us his family has lived in this place for over five generations, mostly as blacksmiths. He breeds horses and leads us to his paddock. Now we get to see, up close, this ancient horse breed that once roamed alongside mammoths. **(24)** Its thick, soft, multicolored coat radiates strength. Semyon even lets me drive his snowmobile – it's enormous fun. He's a creative, warm-hearted person and sends us off to visit his brother.

Pjotr Sivtsev is a blacksmith. He began making khomuses just a year ago.

We drive to his workshop, and he shows us how he crafts the instruments.

Masha buys one. He also had a sudden inspiration to try it. As a blacksmith, he does all kinds of work and had previously specialized in building snow sleds. He says making a good khomus is not easy – there's still so much he doesn't know, but he's eager to learn. His dream is to one day participate in a blacksmith competition. These competitions are held regularly, where smiths and players gather to select the most masterfully made khomus.

On the way back, we stop at an abandoned airfield. It was built during Stalin's time and served as the end point of a 10,000-kilometer air bridge between the United States and the Soviet Union. The Red Army urgently needed airplanes to defend against Hitler's Germany. Stalin had them built in the USA. Here in Tomtor, the deliveries reached their destination. History twists in unexpected ways. And now – at this very moment – the two nations are at war in Ukraine.

From one of the nearby hills, we enjoy a sweeping view of the Tomtor Valley one last time. Clouds fill the sky; the sun sets behind a dense veil. Ivan's wife has prepared a delicious dinner for us. It was a wonderful day. We go to bed early.

(24) Video:













Day 13: March 27, 2024

It's very early. The sun has already risen but still hangs low over the awakening village of Tomtor. The sky is a clear, deep blue. We slip into our warm clothes without bothering much with morning routines. Outside, Ivan is waiting with his UAZ. He drives us along a bumpy track. We arrive at a gently flowing body of water – not frozen. Surrounding us: reeds, silence, snow, and rising mist, all bathed in light. It's spectacular. We're going ice bathing. Ivan has prepared everything beautifully – even set up a small tent for changing. A small, wood-fired stove crackles away, offering a warm shelter in the midst of minus 25 degrees Celsius. The water is cold. Really cold. But the body goes along with it. What surprises me most: my feet immediately give up. It feels like a thousand needles stabbing into my soles. Quick dunk – then out again. Still, it's wonderful. The tingling in the feet lasts the whole day, even after a hot shower. It's also Masha's first time. She emerges from the water completely exhilarated.

We pack our things. It's the same route back to Yakutsk – 1,000 kilometers. But before leaving Tomtor, we've been invited to a music school concert.

Tomtor, too, has a splendid cultural center. The event also serves as a small

competition, with children's groups from Yakutsk attending as guests. Various groups perform dances, songs, heavy drumming, and khomus pieces. The quality is high across the board. The performances are well organized, with creative ideas and costumes. Masha had spoken with the organizers: we will perform a musical greeting together – she on the khomus, I on the duduk. Parents and children are visibly astonished. We receive generous applause. The four girls who invited us are overjoyed that we came. Backstage, we take a selfie with the children's groups. Pavel is waiting for us outside. He wants to introduce us to his mother.

We begin our journey back under radiant sunshine. From the car window, we enjoy the breathtaking panoramic view of the mountains – views we hadn't seen when we arrived because it was already dark. We stop to visit some reindeer herders. They are Evenki, a nomadic people who live with their animals.

The animals impress me: they are alert, attentive, shy, and clever. Their fur is very soft. This short encounter feels distinctly different from what we've experienced so far. The Evenki are very different – a completely different mentality. Getting to know them would probably require a whole new journey.

It's already dark again when we reach the ODO café. Suddenly, we're told: we can't continue. Heavy snowfall in the mountains has caused an avalanche that's now blocking the road. Stop! We're stuck. We sit in the ODO with others who also can't move on. The news we receive is conflicting—some say it will be cleared in two hours, others say it could take days. Worried phone calls with Yakutsk. Gera and Spiridon have heard the news and are concerned.

Will we sleep in one of the few bungalows at ODO? Or in the car out on the road? There's still time to decide. We sit with Dulustaan, chat, play khomus together, drink tea. Using a Google Translate app, we teach each other words in our respective languages. A calm, light-hearted atmosphere.

Eventually, that too fades – and nothing has changed in the avalanche situation.

Pavel waits with the car on the roadside, looking for updates.

Everyone wanders around – through deep snow to the car, back to the restaurant. It gets quieter and quieter. Less than two hours until midnight.

My time. I find a spot outside the restaurant, in front of a shed under a small awning, sitting on an old chair. A

soft, delicate, floating snowfall begins. I start playing the khomus. Dulustaan's dog, who must spend the night outside, sits in front of me, blinking its eyes. Snow gently collects on its fur.

And then something happens – something that still resonates with me today.

This unplanned time turns into a magical moment. I play and play – I don't stop.

My playing goes deeper and deeper. I feel myself dissolve into a thousand atoms, connecting with the 14 million galaxies out there. It doesn't stop. I let go and play. I play and let go. A full hour in a state of total unity. It's cold – but not too cold. Slowly I realize: I'm snowed in, in Siberia. But the khomus has set me free. I felt fully connected to the instrument and deeply understood why the khomus belongs here. This little instrument gave me the feeling – especially in this unexpected moment – that I was not lost.

That out there ... there is more than just black night. Wow. What a wonderful experience.

We spend the night in the car on the highway. The Toyota becomes a hotel room. The seats are reclined, a heater is on, everyone snuggles into their reclining seats, and we sleep.





Day 14: March 28, 2024

It's still lightly snowing when we wake up. Overnight, about 30 centimeters of fresh snow have fallen. The sky is overcast – no sign that we'll be able to continue our journey. I take off my clothes and rub snow on my upper body.

I'm wide awake. At the ODO café, there's tea and boiled eggs. Now what? Spiridon sends us a news report about the avalanche from the night.

There's a lot of snow on the road. Someone tells us the avalanche can't be cleared right now, as more snow has fallen, the temperature is rising, and there's a risk of additional avalanches. We prepare to stay a few more days.

We even consider flying back to Yakutsk – or maybe returning to Tomtor for a reindeer festival. But suddenly, cars begin arriving from the opposite direction.

They've managed to open the road overnight. We can continue! Pavel, a very skilled driver, navigates us safely along the snow-covered road. When we reach the avalanche site, we pass through a dug-out corridor, flanked by heavy machinery and snow walls at least six meters high. After that, progress is slow – we creep through the mountains in a convoy of large trucks, all moving at a snail's pace. Huge construction vehicles clear snow in front of us. Pavel points out a spot where a truck veered off the road and

fell so deep into a gorge that it still hasn't been recovered. But eventually, we make it out of the mountains safely.

Now we're back in Chandyga. We're scheduled to meet at the music school. Although we arrive a bit late, we're welcomed with open arms. All the students and teachers are waiting for us. At the entrance, we're greeted with a traditional Yakutian song. Everyone is dressed up. The director gives us a tour through the different classrooms. In each room, a teacher is waiting and explains what they do in that particular course. The focus is on foundational instruction across a wide range of music systems and instruments. They don't limit themselves to any one style – whether classical, traditional Yakut music, pop, or contemporary. The main goal is to inspire young people to make music. We hear again that the curriculum is adapted to match the students' individual interests. Just days earlier, we had seen the school's unique architecture from outside. Now we're inside the "flying saucer" – the UFO. The classrooms are arranged in a circular outer ring. Students move through a musical rotation. In the center of the UFO lies a large concert hall. Once a student completes their classroom cycle, they can step on stage – to perform for others or simply listen. A truly brilliant architectural invitation to participate. For our visit, a special program has been prepared. We hear

children sing and play khomus – some of them very talented.

The teachers perform classical pieces on the piano and accordion. Masha and I perform with khomus, duduk, and harmonica.

It's a cheerful hour of music across many styles. A curious, joyful exchange.

Of course, it all ends with a group photo. Even though there are more than 30 people, they get into position quickly. The Yakuts truly are masters of the memory photo. It's already late – everyone has to head home.

Before we leave, I get two mini masterclasses: One from Veronica Sakharova on khomus playing, and one from Alena Fedorova on Yakut singing.

Again, I'm able to learn and understand more. The director tells us she wants to build a collection of instruments from around the world. The first few pieces are already on display. Great idea. I'll donate a harmonica and a duduk to the school.

Our host, Lydia Mikhailovna Borisova, explains how important the school's work is for passing down traditional khomus techniques to future generations.

Lydia invites us to her house. She has prepared a table full of delicious food.

We eat and enjoy. Afterward, she takes us to her room to give Masha and me a quiet, focused explanation of the Bebre khomus style. She first shows us two books by Boris Neostroeov, a collector of Yakut culture from the 1960s.

The book contains images of everyday items and their colorful, aesthetic designs. Each region of Yakutia has its own unique characteristics and styles – no two are the same. Lydia explains that khomus playing is much the same way.

Each region developed its own specialty. The Yakuts are united by the khomus – but each region has its own signature style. Lydia and Spiridon come from east of Yakutsk. Ivan Alekseyev and Nikitina Antonina are from the west.

Each person sounds different – with distinct emphasis, techniques, and collaborations with other instruments and musicians. When you think about how many players there have been and still are, you realize: There is so much to discover. I ask her if this has ever been ethnomusicologically documented.

Has anyone – like Alan Lomax in North America in the 20th century – ever recorded field material of Yakut musicians? No, Lydia says. Not yet.

What an incredible project that would be! Lydia gives us a playing guide she wrote about her khomus style, along with a CD. Finally, she puts on the traditional costume of her region and plays a few pieces for us.

A moving moment. We part warmly and drive – thankful – to our guesthouse.

It's our last evening before returning to Yakutsk. I sit with Pavel and Masha, and we toast with a bit of vodka to our successful journey.





Day 15: March 29, 2024

Mareike has been feeling a bit under the weather since yesterday and needs to rest. She wants to save her energy for her performance tomorrow at the club. She skips breakfast. We're invited and are welcomed with a large pan filled with eggs, peppers, meat, and stuffed dumplings. A powerhouse breakfast that keeps us full until late afternoon. We thank the cook warmly and take a photo together.

On our return journey to Yakutsk, we briefly stop by Mariniki and her family. There is food and tea. This time, her father is also present, and he's happy to give us handmade gifts – a Yakut whisk for processing milk and cream. I play a duduk piece for him and a khomus duet with Mariniki before we bid them a heartfelt farewell. We continue on to the village of Churapcha. We have to leave the road and find a path across a snow-covered plain. Masha and Pavel are on the phone with our host, Gerassim Tarabukin, who guides them past snow-covered yards and houses.

Gerassim Tarabukin is a khomus blacksmith and the brother of Eduard Tarabukin. He invites us into his house – a very beautiful wooden home, self-built for his small family. Gerassim tells us how he came to khomus-making through his brother and shows us his workshop in the garage. Unlike his brother, he has specialized in forging khomuses in a particular way. He has found a method to consistently produce a certain quality. His khomuses are in demand all over the country. He makes many of them. He invites me to select from some of his newly crafted instruments – a rare opportunity to find a good khomus. “Good” meaning good for me. Finding the right khomus is an endless process. Each instrument has its own character. Sometimes it's not immediately apparent; sometimes you're overwhelmed by what it can express. Sometimes you're thrilled at first, and days later you wonder why. Some are hard, some soft, some sustain sound long, others briefly; some reso-

nate when you merely breathe through them. Choosing a khomus is complex. What do you want to play? What do you want to hear? How will it affect your loved one? One may offer good rhythm, another heavenly overtones, another might be said to have healing properties. Many feel numb to the touch – but another player might feel differently. It's all very individual. Out of about 20 I try, I find two I like. I buy them. Masha buys the rest to take back to Germany for other players. Gerassim's instruments are soft, full of velvety overtones. Later I'll discover that they're especially nice to play when you're low on energy, like in the evening after a long day. These instruments give you back your energy.

We sit at a set table. Everyone wants to hear the duduk. I play. Our small host gifts bring smiles to Gerassim and his wife. Then we eat zharkoye, another delicious dish made with a simple recipe:

Zharkoye soup
Butter, water, meat, oil, vegetables,

potatoes, and salt – cook for one hour, add potatoes for the last 20 minutes.
In a pressure cooker: For one hour in this order: Fry onions, then add carrots, peppers, meat, potatoes, salt and pepper, vegetable powder.

We can't stay as long as we'd like. It's still a long way to Yakutsk. The wide gravel road becomes paved again. We approach the Lena River. Pavel has some great music playing in the car – Yakut rock music by Alexei Mikhailov. We reach the Lena at sunset, glowing fiery red. Another 20 kilometers over the frozen Lena. Still a fascinating experience. Traffic gets denser – we're back in Yakutsk. We meet Gera and Spiridon. We're all overjoyed to see each other again. We embrace Pavel, who has driven us safely for over 2,000 kilometers. He knows his homeland like the back of his hand. Later I learn that Spiridon has never made that journey – he's never been to the places we've visited over the last days. I'm excited to tell him all about it.





Day 16: March 30, 2024

Our meeting with Ivan Alekseev (25) had actually been canceled, but he changed his plans just for us. We meet at the Khomus Museum. I haven't seen him since 2011. The joy of reuniting is immense. Ivan is bursting with energy and in great spirits. He's now 83 years old. Nadikan, a young singer and khomus player, translates for us. He's happy we made the journey to Yakutia. We talk about our impressions from the trip and the different khomus styles. He tells us that when we return, we'll go to his birthplace – the region where his and the Veluski style originated. You could say that Ivan was instrumental in reviving the khomus tradition at the end of the Soviet era. Spiridon had heard him on the radio or on a record and then got in touch with him. Since then, they've played together as a duo and given concerts all over the world. That's how I met them in 1999 in Berlin. Ivan is a linguist and a networker. He was already in September 1984 at the 1st World

Festival and Congress in Iowa City, USA – right in the middle of the Cold War. Fred Crane had invited him. Since then, a global, vibrant network of jaw harp players has existed. Ivan has written down his life as a khomus player, scholar, and connector in a 500-page book. He gives me a copy. He asks about Gerd Conradt and asks me to take a copy of the book back to Berlin for him. We take photos, embrace, and Ivan also receives a Berlin t-shirt. Not only because of that can Ivan and Spiridon now call themselves Berliners – they once played khomus together at the Love Parade, a performance captured in Gerd Conradt's "unpublished" film treasures. At the end of our meeting, Ivan makes one last request – or rather, shares an idea. He would love to come to Europe again. He feels it's time to revisit the German history of the jaw harp, and he would be delighted to inaugurate a pilgrimage site for jaw harpists in Heilbronn, birthplace of virtuoso Carl Eulenstein (1802–1890). (26)

(25) Video:



(25) Video:



(26) Link:



Mareike has been looking forward to her performance for days. Masha is excited too and manages all the preparations. Makeup and a white shapka (fur hat) are organized. DJ Clarice is playing at the “Krysha” club. What makes it special is that the event takes place on the club’s rooftop, offering a wide view over the city. It’s 3 p.m., minus 24 degrees, bright blue sky, dazzling sunlight, and the DJ booth is carved from ice. Guests are served vodka and Yakut BBQ. A laid-back party vibe spreads. Bundled up in thermal gear, people dance crunching through the snow. A microphone is added, and a few pieces are improvised live. Saina Ekaterina Savvinova sings. **(27)**

She is a pop star in Yakutia with Evenk roots. Masha and I join in on khomus. A lively and exuberant Saturday afternoon. We meet new people. There’s no barrier between pop and tradition – as long as it grooves. DJ Clarice and Saina are cheered.

Around 6 p.m., Spiridon drives us across the city to another huge cultural center – even larger than the one we performed in. It holds around 2,500 seats. Spiridon wants to show us a performance in which his Mongolian students are participating, and the khomus plays an important role in the composed soundtrack. The hall is filled with young people and families. It’s a multimedia show with dozens of dancers and singers. The musicians are on stage, just off to the side. The finale brings the house down – the audience celebrates the ensemble with enthusiasm. Spiridon rushes to the stage to get a photo with his students, who are excited to see him.

We head back to the club, which also has its own restaurant. We thank Ramir, the promoter of the event – he’s done a great job. As a thank-you for the DJ set and rooftop performance, club owner Artur Rudas generously invites us to dinner. He joins us himself and is curious about our stories. The sushi is delicious.

(27) Video:











Day 17: March 31, 2024

Our second-to-last day begins at Sacha Bult, a place for traditional clothing made from animal hides – hats, coats, shoes. I wanted to understand what people wear in this kind of cold. There are simple items, but also designer pieces. We try on a few things and take photos, but these clothes are really warm – too warm to wear in Europe. The Yakuts love craftsmanship and design. All traditional handicraft techniques have been documented and processed in such a way that anyone can learn them. We meet Anisia Fyudrova for a jewelry workshop. Mareike creates a Kosoplykyotka, a traditional hair ornament. I take some time to leaf through books describing the techniques and skills needed to create these magnificent costumes and pieces of jewelry. What Yakut designers are able to create from traditional inspiration is showcased in an exhibition at the cultural center where we had our concert. We thank the production team again, meet the director Andrei Adamov once more, and thank him with some small gifts. Director Antonida Koryakina tells us that the return to Yakut traditions gained immense importance after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Despite modern life, the Yakuts draw strength from these traditions. There are many festivals celebrating this. A large framed photo in her office shows thou-

sands of Yakuts dancing around a Serge, the sacred wooden hitching post. That event attracted tens of thousands of people. It reminds me of the “7th International Jew’s Harp Festival 2011.” At that time, the Yakuts invited representatives from the Guinness Book of Records to verify a world record. 1,200 jaw harp players from all over the world performed a piece together in a giant circus tent. **(28)** Back then, we played an Osuokhai. **(29)** An Osuokhai is a traditional Yakut ritual – it involves singing or playing while simultaneously dancing in a circle. There are lead singers, and the others respond in chorus. “Osuokhai” means “being together.” I will never forget the sound of 1,200 khomus voices blending into one – responding to Albina Degtyareva, Ivan Alekseev, and Spiridon Schishigin as they led the piece. A unique, shimmering sound from another world.

Masha hurries us along – she doesn’t want us to be late. We’re invited to a theater performance at yet another cultural center. Again, it’s an enormous multifunctional building – architecturally unremarkable, but still impressive due to its sheer size and functionality. Masha tells us that in the 1990s this building housed clubs and casinos. The Yakuts later concluded that these “new” forms of entertainment did not contribute to cultural identity. They

(28) Video:



(29) Video:



repurposed the building, filling it with several theaters, cinemas, exhibition halls, and restaurants. Masha introduces us to the theater musicians German and Klavdia Khatylaevssieh. These two artists have contributed greatly to the ethnomusicological documentation of Yakut music. In their book, they present the various traditional instruments and their uses in detail. During the play itself, they perform with many of these instruments. The piece is about the failed communist attempt to reshape Yakut society. Yakut music, sounds, and noises are set in contrast with Soviet workers' songs and revolutionary anthems. German and Klavdia invite us to several festivals in the summer.

Then comes something entirely different. Natalia Shishigina, the sister of Masha's cousin, is celebrating her 50th birthday. We're told we absolutely must come. And we're blown away. A room the size of a gymnasium, full of colorful lights and decorations. Dozens of tables set in a herringbone pattern with around 200 guests, all dressed to the nines. The tables are overflowing with food – salads, fish, meat, cheese, cakes, soups, water, tea, mare's milk, and things we don't even recognize. The party is in full swing. A host keeps the mood lively, presenting one performance or gift after another. Masha has announced me as a duduk player.

Despite the reverent moment, I receive great applause. Then everyone dances to Modern Talking's "Cheri Cheri Lady." The Yakuts love to celebrate. They won't let us leave until everyone has taken a photo with us.

After the party, we want to walk home. It's the first time during our stay that we're walking alone through the city – no program, no surprises, just walking. It's early evening, and the sunset light makes everything seem close and walkable. But that's deceptive. Everything is big here, and even though we can already see our building from afar, it takes longer than we thought to reach it. We're dressed warmly, but the cold still nips at us. It's a short walk, but intense – and we're the only ones out walking.

When we arrive back at the apartment, Spiridon is waiting for us. (30) I had asked him for one more khomus workshop. He shows me some special techniques he uses and talks about the meaning and uniqueness of the instrument. Later, he'll give me his khomus manual, translated into German. In it, I find interesting insights into the different styles played in Yakutia:

"There are three basic ways to play the khomus: traditional, imitative, and improvisational. The traditional moderate style is no longer widespread; in fact, one might say it's a lost style. In this style, the sound floats continuous-

(30) Video:



ly in the air, never vanishing for even a second. The soft, continuous song of the khomus intensifies with each stroke, increasingly enchanting both the player and the audience with its tender and blissful power. The simplest form of the moderate style is the reproduction of folk song melodies on the khomus. It must be played in such a way that the words of the song are audible. The tongue of the khomus is struck in rhythm, and the vocal organs are moved as if singing the words silently – so the music and the lyrics are both perceived. For this reason, the Yakut khomus is also called the “speaking khomus”. This style is great for beginners – it helps develop a sense of rhythm. The well-known melody “Bie-bie-bie” is the introduction to this style.

The imitative style is popular with listeners and players alike. The Yakut khomus has unlimited potential. When a true master of this style plays, one is transported – from the height of summer to a snowstorm in winter, and vice versa. In the past, our ancestors found joy in mimicking birdsong or the honking of geese on the khomus, envisioning the end of winter and the blooming rebirth of nature. This tradition lives on in the imitative style today. A khomus improviser can precisely depict spring’s dripping meltwater, the galloping of horses, the cuckoo’s

call that signals summer’s start, the tapping of a woodpecker on a quiet autumn morning, or the whistle of wind across the snowy tundra. Some players even mimic animal sounds vocally in addition to playing – wind, birds, wolves. While entertaining, this approach doesn’t fully utilize the khomus’s capabilities. Unlike the moderate style, improvisational playing has no lyrics and can vary in tempo. Unlike imitation, it’s driven by a theme or narrative. The player improvises on that theme – perhaps a melody – and uses whichever techniques fit. Every khomusist strives to master all three styles but won’t showcase everything in one performance – because it’s impossible and, musically, unnecessary. True mastery is about expressing a unified theme through the right combination of techniques. That’s when the khomus’s tender, quiet, magical voice truly touches the soul.”

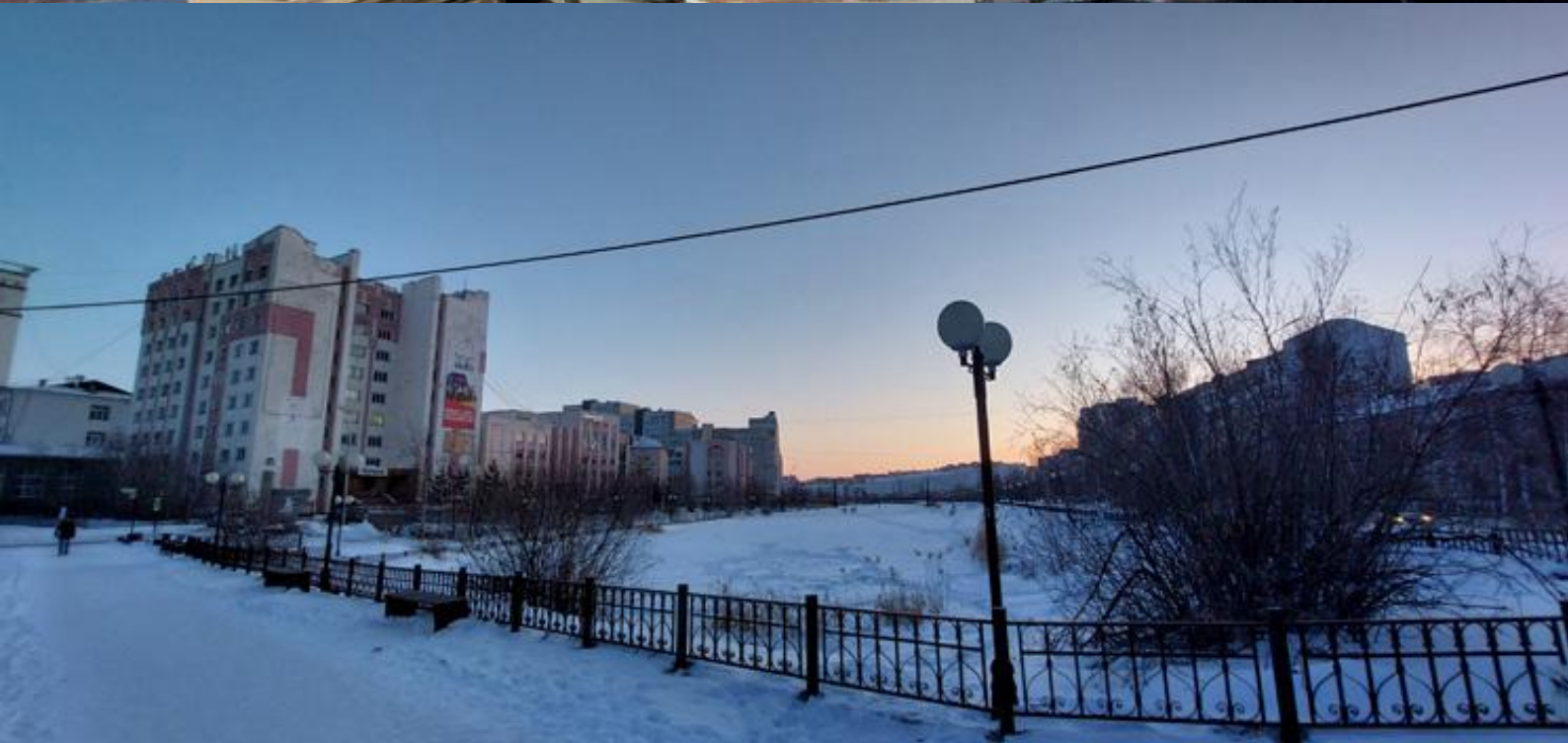
After this illuminating workshop, Spiridon prepares a Yakut delicacy. A whole frozen fish is sliced into thin strips using a special sharp knife. The rigid fish is placed upright in a groove on a wooden board. Held firmly with the left hand, the right hand slices the fish, laying the strips loosely on a plate. The strips can be dipped in salt, pepper, or lemon before eating. Best if the fish is slightly fatty and frozen fresh. Vodka is served alongside.











Day 18: April 1, 2024

Our last day in Yakutsk. In the morning, we have an appointment at the Sakha Museum. But instead of a guided tour, we're given a special task. We are welcomed by the head of the scientific department and the museum director. We take a group photo, and then comes their request. They tell us that for years they have been conducting an academic project on Yakut shamanic culture in cooperation with two German universities – one in Bremen and the other in Cologne. As part of this collaboration, several publications have been produced that are intended for delivery to Germany. But since the beginning of the war and the resulting sanctions, all communication with the universities has been severed. There are no longer any working email connections, nor postal services. They ask us to take the books with us on our flight the next day. It's two thick volumes, together weighing about eight kilograms. Of course, we agree, though we're already very aware of how much our luggage is going to be overweight. They also tell us that many old Yakut artifacts were taken to Germany by the adventurer and researcher Ivan Popov (1874–1945), and now rest in museum archives there – among them, objects once used by shamans. In the foyer, we're treated to a performance by a Yakut dance group consisting of young men and women. With powerful, intense movements, they hurl their choreography into the room under loud drumbeats – graceful, light, and full of energy. Everyone is impressed. We get a photo together afterward.

Then we head out to an industrial area. Spiridon wants to show us a place where khomus instruments are forged.

It's a creative industry and vocational training center for metalworking professions. The director guides us through the workshops and explains what the apprentices are currently working on. At the moment, they're forging traditional Yakut knives as souvenirs. He also shows us a khomus that recently won an award. In a nearby souvenir shop, we buy gifts for our family and friends – leather and horsehair pendants meant to protect the wearer. For lunch, we're invited to the home of Spiridon's friends, Larisa Osipova and Arkadii Osinov. After a traditional "Blessing Ceremony" at the front door, we play some music together. The meal includes more new Yakut specialties. Spiridon is given the honor of slicing a special sausage called Khaan – a blood sausage with milk. It's a very unusual and distinctive taste. It's a lively and cheerful gathering. In a designer shop afterward, Mareike finds a fantastic T-shirt, and we're gifted a small table stove in the traditional Yakut style – Kamaljok – along with some scented herbs to use back home in our Berlin apartment. Spiridon and I record a short khomus duet for the shop's Instagram channel. In the evening, we start packing our suitcases. They're definitely heavier than they were on the way here – books, CDs, gifts, a fur hat, vodka, the volumes from the research project, and many new khomus instruments.

We celebrate our final night at the "Krysha" club. This time not on the rooftop, but inside the club. DJ Clarice and Saina perform once more. Everyone is thrilled. But then the time comes – we must say goodbye. To Gera, to Tuyara, to Saina, and to people we only met this very evening.











Days 19 to 21: April 2–4, 2024

7:45 a.m.: Departure from Yakutsk, heading back to Moscow. Arrival in Moscow at 8:34 a.m. local time. We’ve “caught up” with the day and begin anew with a fresh morning. It’s warm. Spring has arrived. We’re back at the same hotel and are greeted cheerfully. We have two full days for walks and a guided tour of the city. Moscow is a giant. At first, I can’t quite grasp it – who is this city actually built for? The Kremlin, Lomonosov University, 400 churches, the “Ukrainskaya” hotel, business districts with dozens of skyscrapers, endlessly long and wide streets with dense, fast-moving traffic. Uniformed soldiers rush to the train, more police are on the streets than usual – likely due to the recent terrorist attack. Our guide is not a fan of Putin and curses the current politics. We lay flowers at the graves of Mikhail Sergeyevich Gorbachev and Vladimir Vladimirovich Mayakovsky. Everywhere: cinemas, theaters, cultural centers, parks with sculptures, and gigantic shopping centers. We take the metro – each station a miniature art gallery. We’re amazed at how thoroughly the city has already shaken off winter. The streets are spotless, everything has been swept clean – no more snow or gravel to be seen. The building façades are being power-washed, park benches and trash cans freshly painted. The spring cleaning of this enormous city is nearly complete. What power! Music flows from the cafés. People are embracing the arrival of warmer days,

and the youth are in full-on flirt mode.

We meet Irina and Roman once again and share stories from our journey, passing along greetings from Spiridon and Ivan. Roman surprises me with a wonderful gift – he’s forged his own khomus, right at home on his balcony. He explains how he found the material for the reed online: it’s a particularly strong yet flexible type of metal. I play it – and I’m thrilled. It has a warm, soft sound, rich in overtones – perfect for melodic playing. Roman is my hero.

Back in the hotel room, I finally have time to play all my new instruments. Over the past few weeks, Spiridon has regularly handed me khomuses from various blacksmiths to try out. Some have left a real impression on me – especially those made by Ivan Namitarov, Roman Ivanov, and Pyotr Kulishkin (his Yakut name is Biyaman Uus). I close the hotel curtains; the room is dim. And once again, I’m transported to that night of the avalanche – when I sat outside and played khomus for over an hour. I let go and played. Played and let go. A deep wave of gratitude rises in me. Playing the khomus is like a buoy in the chaotic ocean of this world. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you, Masha, for organizing this trip so beautifully. Thank you, Spiridon, for our friendship. Thank you, Mareike, for sharing all of this with me. And thank you to everyone who made sure we were always safe, well-fed, well-rested, and welcomed.







Day 22: April 5, 2024

“Dear Spiridon, yesterday we tried to visit Lenin’s Mausoleum, but it was closed to the public. Instead, the Eskimo ice cream at GUM was delicious. In some of the side streets, we discovered a more accessible, intimate Moscow. Many parks filled with sculptures of important artists. At the House of Composers, there’s an impressive statue of Aram Khachaturian, the composer from the homeland of the duduk – Armenia. Very beautiful. We spent our last rubles at Café Pushkin. Very aristocratic, but the chefs are true masters of culinary discovery. For me, it was a reconciliatory farewell to Moscow. Now we’re already on the plane to Istanbul. Moscow grows smaller in the window. We’re airborne again, and we wish we could be flying in your direction. Mareike and I are deeply fulfilled by this beautiful journey. Spending time with you and Gera, meeting all the warm-hearted people, the children in the schools, the music,

our concerts, tables full of delicious food, the workshops, the vast skies and land, the clarity of the cold – we’ll miss it all. Our hearts and our luggage are full of stories, emotions, experiences, recipes, books, gifts, and many wonderful new khomus instruments. I had plenty of time in the hotel in Moscow to try out all the new khomuses – wonderful. Now that I’ve met some of the blacksmiths, tried and purchased instruments directly in Yakutia – some even made especially for me – playing has taken on a new, deeper dimension. My senses are opening more and more to this world of sound. I will never forget that night we had to wait because of the avalanche. I sat outside and played khomus for over an hour. It played all by itself. In the frozen silence of the darkness, I discovered something in the act of playing. It’s still working on me. Maybe it will stay. Warmest regards, Your Sören.

P.S. We’ve landed safely in Berlin.”



In memory of **Andrei Adamow**,
who passed away from a heart
attack on September 13, 2024.

Footnotes

(1)

Book “Maulhobel, Zauberharfe, Schnutenorgel – Eine Kulturgeschichte der Mundharmonika”

<https://www.kulturkaufhaus.de/de/detail/ISBN-9783940863140/Birke-S%C3%B6ren/Maulhobel-Zauberharfe-Schnutenorgel>

(2)

Gerd Conradt, Maultrommel-Festival Berlin

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PbOi4yeVGdw>

(3)

Mundton, 25 Min. Ein poetischer Bericht vom 5. Internationalen Maultrommelfestival Amsterdam, 2006

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CqMGUTzC_yo

(4)

Thousands of Khomus (Jew’s harp) players at the Ysyakh festival – Yakutsk

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OxIXswOM1M8>

(5)

Band from Germany at 7th International Jew’s Harp Congress Festival 2011 Yakutsk

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_nzE4VTBaXs

(6)

9th International Maultrommel Jew’s Harp Festival & Congress Berlin | 27–30 July 2022 Festival Film

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jzddG95iUSY>

(7)

DJ Clarice

<https://www.djclarice.com>

(8)

Sören Birke Project

<https://www.soerenbirke.com>

(9)

Ирина Богатырёва и Володя Юрьев

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T5_8VYhvHtk

(10)

DUDUK

www.dudukfilm.com

(11)

Ragnar Axelsson

<https://rax.is/>

(12)

Фильм о современных якутских шаманах

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qmSwlF5Cl3s>

Шаман (Федоров)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kOrUu-QgoFU>

(13)

Albina Degtyareva

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=flDeBjacgtE>

Айархаан // Albina Degtyareva

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z0vLTEwVlg8>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2zQTMTOoi7I>

(14)

юлияна кривошапкина “Dance of the Hands”, Yuliyana Krivoshapkina

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p5rJrrxEQ-FU&list=RDkKYm0kxny8o&index=4>

(15)

The Mammoth Museum in the world’s coldest city -62°C | Yakutsk | Siberia

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=paAXT7oqYqM>

(16)

Музей и Центр хомуса народов мира

<http://rus.ilkhomus.com>

(17)

На волне чарующих звуков

<https://youtu.be/7SvxF238OkQ?si=XOS4nVXb4mwVKXLM>

(18)

KOLYMA – Road of Bones

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FEe7jLOc5Y0>

(19)

The coldest street in the world

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WmJ3xP7PjKk>

(20)

Лука Николаевич Турнин.Татыйык.

<https://youtu.be/xH2ZioP-H4w?si=lq0R88Zy443aDC22>

<https://youtu.be/d41cqRTlh5A?si=PtDOIHHqbQz9nxxwR>

(21)

Антонина Никитина

Хомус. Сыыйа тарды.

<https://youtu.be/zQOV9Ffp-tA?si=dWu1T4FoVpHIJYK>

Старинный стиль игры на якутском хомусе.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rqFxRZwRGUo&list=PL7bDUtH5SN1Cf1MOjy82eEmxk-irmGrdM&index=1>

(22)

Владимир Дормидонтов играет на хомусе

https://youtu.be/FFNOhVrSa_U?si=PDpm60JCpdFL03of

(23)

Museum Tomtor

https://vk.ru/club217382652?trackcode=b1ac0049h-PUrb7cBz8V6Q8Osas2xjQYpx1JX&ref=group_qr

(24)

Yakut horses

<https://www.youtube.com/shorts/5LlkeGgQ9fs>

(25)

Ivan Alekseev – Yakut Folk Melodies

(Jews Harp – Russia)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=txXlk32ccqc>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mlh4b1lnGvY>

(26)

Karl Eulenstein

https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Carl_Eulenstein

(27)

Saina Singer – Etnia Evenk Yakut – Russia

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=covJRGfhh4Q>

(28)

**Look how plays the greatest
vargan ensemble**

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l83p3hl3d_Y

(29)

**Osuokhai Melody to Set Guinness Record in
Yakutsk**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IVdDwEJbY0A>

(30)

Spiridon Schischigin –

Jew's harp virtuoso from Sakha-Yakutia

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z064YNiVI_k

Attachment

Mailing with Heilbronn - “Carl Eulenstein pilgrim stone” project

From: Soeren Birke <birke@kesselhaus-berlin.de>
Sent: Tuesday, 9 April 2024 15:10
To: 40-43-Stadtarchiv <Stadtarchiv@heilbronn.de>
Subject: Karl Eulenstein (1802–1890) – Heilbronn a place of pilgrimage for Jew’s harpists?

Dear Sir or Madam. Dear Mrs Schüssler, following our friendly and constructive telephone conversation yesterday, I would like to explain my request. My name is Sören Birke and I am a Jew’s harp player and concert organiser from Berlin. In 2022 I organised the 9th International Jew’s Harp Festival & Congress in Berlin. There is increasing interest in the history of Karl Eulenstein on the part of the player network.

Here are my questions:

1. is the birthplace of Karl Eulenstein known?
2. is there a memorial plaque, memorial site, monument or similar to Karl Eulenstein in Heilbronn?
3. if not, would the city be interested in setting one up?
4. is there a person or an association in Heilbronn that is explicitly concerned with the history of Karl Eulenstein or with Jew’s harps?
5. there is the idea of making Heilbronn a place of pilgrimage for Jew’s harp players. Who could I discuss this with?

Film 9th International Jew’s Harp Festival & Congress:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jzddG95iUSY>

Film Mundton:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CqMGUTzC_yo

Thank you for your commitment to this cause.

Best regards
Sören Birke

From: Schrenk, Christhard <Christhard.Schrenk@heilbronn.de>
Sent: Wednesday, 29 May 2024, 11:33
To: Soeren Birke <birke@kesselhaus-berlin.de>
Cc: Kümmel, Ute <Ute.Kuettel@heilbronn.de>
Subject: Karl Eulenstein (1802–1890) – Heilbronn a pilgrimage site for jaw harp players?

Prof. Dr Christhard Schrenk
City Archive Heilbronn

Dear Mr Birke,

Thank you very much for your enquiry and the telephone conversations you had with my colleague Ute Kümmel. We are pleased to answer your questions.

The jaw harp virtuoso Karl Heinrich Eulenstein (1802–1890) is well known in Heilbronn. As the City Archive of Heilbronn, we have carried out various research projects on his life over the years and also published our findings.

Here you can find two links to bibliographic entries of the most important works. The first article includes a digitised version of the entire volume, in which you will also find the relevant pages on Eulenstein:

<https://archivsuche.heilbronn.de/plink/e-162221>

Schwaben und Franken No. 3, pp. II–IV; No. 5, pp. III–IV; No. 6, pp. III–IV; No. 7, pp. III–IV

<https://archivsuche.heilbronn.de/plink/e-110234>

Now to your questions:

1. Is Karl Eulenstein's birthplace known?

Karl Eulenstein's father was the soap boiler Georg Heinrich Eulenstein (1776–1807). The family lived in Gerbergasse, in the centre of Heilbronn. The buildings on Gerbergasse were heavily damaged during the Second World War. No original buildings were reconstructed on the site. Today, there is a large car park there (Lothorstraße Car Park). You can view the area via the following link: <https://maps.app.goo.gl/EFa3U15s3q2PAW2u6>

After returning to Heilbronn in 1847 – the same year he acquired Heilbronn citizenship – Eulenstein built a house at Allee 58 in 1850. Further information on the house can be found here: <https://archivsuche.heilbronn.de/plink/e-14899>

Unfortunately, this house no longer exists. In autumn 1858, Eulenstein moved with his family to Stuttgart. In 1886, he renounced his municipal citizenship in Heilbronn. Entries for members of the Eulenstein family can still be found in the citizenship registers of the City of Heilbronn. Please find a scanned excerpt attached (StA Heilbronn A038-11).

2. Is there a memorial plaque, commemorative site, monument, or similar for Karl Eulenstein in Heilbronn?

In addition to the essays mentioned above and the information already known to you on our website <https://stadtarchiv.heilbronn.de/stadtgeschichte/geschichte-a-z/e/eulenstein-karl.html#:~:text=Karl%20Eulenstein%2C%20geboren%20am%2027,er%201826%E2%80%93931847%20zeitweise%20lebte> there was an event on 30 April 2016 titled: “Karl Eulenstein of Heilbronn (1802–1890) – laugh, if crying won't help” held at the City Archive of Heilbronn. You can find the Facebook description of the event here: https://www.facebook.com/events/haus-der-stadtgeschichte-heilbronn/karl-eulenstein-aus-heilbronn-1802-1890-lach-doch-wenn-es-zum-weinen-nicht-reich/231676893857115/?_rdr

Beyond this, there are no monuments or comparable commemorations.

3. If not, would the city be interested in establishing something of that nature?

Civic engagement — even from outside the city — is always welcome in Heilbronn. However, we at the City Archive cannot currently envision a traditional memorial or larger commemorative site for Karl Eulenstein in Heilbronn.

For many years now, the City Archive of Heilbronn has been working on expanding its „Gallery of City History“, which is installed as a series of large images on glass panels along the exterior wall of the archive. In the initial idea phase, the jaw harp player Eulenstein was identified as one of the personalities who could be featured in the planned extension of the gallery.

Unfortunately, we currently lack the resources and financial means to implement these ideas.

You can view the current panels of the “Gallery of City History” via the following link:
<https://stadtarchiv.heilbronn.de/stadtgeschichte/geschichte-a-z/g/galerie-der-stadtgeschichte.html>

4. Is there a person or organisation in Heilbronn who is explicitly concerned with the history of Karl Eulenstein or with jaw harps in general?

Unfortunately, we are not aware of any such individuals or associations in Heilbronn.

5. There is an idea to make Heilbronn a place of pilgrimage for jaw harp players. Who could I discuss this with?

Tourism-related services — for example, a special guided city tour on the topic — fall under the remit of Heilbronn Marketing GmbH. However, the establishment of a „pilgrimage site“ is not something we can envision for Heilbronn at this time.

Further information on Eulenstein can be found via the following links:

Contemporary history collection:

<https://archivsuche.heilbronn.de/plink/e-34726>

Music:

<https://archivsuche.heilbronn.de/plink/e-111974>

<https://archivsuche.heilbronn.de/plink/e-111975>

Letter from Carl Eulenstein to autograph collector Carl Künzel:

<https://archivsuche.heilbronn.de/plink/e-106610>

Lastly, I would like to draw your attention to the Weinsberg physician and poet Justinus Kerner. According to tradition, Eulenstein heard a jaw harp for the very first time at Kerner's. In Weinsberg, there is the Kernerhaus, which you can find here:

<https://www.heilbronnerland.de/poi/kernerhaus-weinsberg>

Kind regards,

Signed,

Prof. Dr Christhard Schrenk

Director

Karl Eulenstein
(1802–1890)



Karl Eulenstein, born on 27 December 1802 in Heilbronn, was considered one of the best jew's harp virtuosos of his time. He played several instruments with different tunings and made guest appearances in various German cities, in France and in England, where he lived from 1826 to 1847. After years of hardship in the early years, Eulenstein was celebrated ever-

ywhere and gradually lost his teeth as a result of playing the Jew's harp with his mouth; however, he also enjoyed success as a guitarist and worked as a teacher of guitar and German. In 1847, Eulenstein returned to Heilbronn as a wealthy man and privatised. He later lived in Stuttgart and in Cilli (Celje) in what is now Slovenia, where he died on 15 January 1890.

Link:



w w w . s o e r e n b i r k e . c o m

