

SERGEI SOOKOVICH SEROTETTO (1955–2021)

On 27 May 2021 Sergei Sookovich Serotetto died in the tundra of the Yamal Peninsula, West Siberia, at the age of 66. Sergei was well known, not only as an informal leader among the members of his nomadic Nenets reindeer herder community, but throughout the Soviet Union, Russia, and beyond, as a person highly esteemed for his work among reindeer herders and academics alike.

He was one of very few nomads invited to a Soviet Union-wide congress of the Communist Party, which happens only once in five years—and he declined! He told the party leadership that he was too busy herding reindeer and had no time for talking big politics. He was also among the first Russian Arctic nomads to receive international visitors when Smithsonian Institution field expeditions began in the 1990s. Through his involvement in these projects, he met with many well-known colleagues in the Smithsonian's Arctic Studies Center, including Bill Fitzhugh, Igor Krupnik, Andrei Golovnev, Sven Haakanson, Natalya Fedorova, Konstantin Ochepkov, and others. Outside the Soviet Union, Sergei also became well-known among a wider audience through numerous photos of him by Bryan Alexander (2021). He was a founding member of the World Reindeer Herders Association where, through his active participation, he travelled to most other reindeer herding countries of the Eurasian Arctic.

His reindeer herding skills, deep knowledge of the land, paired with oratory talents, and curiosity made him an ideal television personality. An award-winning Irish and National Geographic documentary production (*Turas I mbaol—an Tsibéir*, 2002) featured Sergei in a principal role. Three years later, I chose he and his family as the most reliable and impressive ambassadors of a passionate nomadic way of life for a BBC/Discovery series entitled “Tribe” (*Tribe Nenets*, 2007). According to the broadcaster, this programme was watched by 40 million people worldwide.

Academically, Sergei helped to shape the careers of and collaborated in research with many scholars on the Yamal Peninsula, thus becoming a significant influence on studies of nomadic pastoralism, Arctic Indigenous studies, and Arctic anthropology. Certainly dissertations by Andrei Golovnev (1995), Sven Haakanson (2000), myself (Stammler, 2005), Ellen Inga Turi (2016), Roza Laptander (2020), and others would not have been as rich without the input of Sergei and his family. He was a great supporter of our research, practically by hosting many of us in his nomadic camp, theoretically through rich and intense conversations, and by sharing his wisdom with us through his narratives that made Nenets culture more understandable for non-Nenets. Many of us in the scholarly world feel indebted to him.

Probably his principal motivation for this openness to incomers was his curiosity for the world in combination with his warm-hearted character and a never-ending hospitality. Secondly, he thought that positive publicity for their way of life would indirectly help make the



Under the midnight sun, Sergei Serotetto sits close to camp guarding his reindeer herd. The malitsa (reindeer fur coat) he is wearing was his last gift to Florian Stammler. Every time he wears it, the malitsa transfers memories of shared experiences (Photo: Florian Stammler).

empower Nenets reindeer nomadism during intensive industrial development. As a true professional however, Sergei maintained that everybody should do the job that they do best, so he did not want to become co-author on publications even when invited. He said, “You can do that writing best, and I am good at reindeer herding.”

Sergei lost his father early in life and was brought up in the tundra during difficult times in the 1950s by his single mother. He shared that it was thanks to his predecessor in the 8th Yar Sale brigade, Iri Khudi, that he learned both the skills and the enthusiasm for the nomadic way of life. Sergei was also grateful to Iri for pushing him to get a formal education, saying, “He just told me you have to go to town and study, and he set it all up and sent me away, and I did study.”

Nenets wisdom was not in contradiction with formal education for Sergei, nor was being a believer in animism and a good communist. After returning from Soviet army service, Sergei assumed the position of *brigadir* of the famous 8th brigade, which became for decades, the leading reindeer herding unit in the Soviet Union with a herd up to 8000 animals and faultless discipline. Sergei was convinced that this combination of tundra skills, acquired by lived experience jointly with Iri his elder-teacher, and formal education in town, was the right mix needed to lead a successful nomadic way of life. This is also the approach that Sergei and his brother Alexander continued in guiding their own children and grandchildren. In this large extended family, all children are well educated; Sergei's son Lev is a veterinarian who inherited the big reindeer herd and camp along with his daughters Valya, Olessia, and Neseine. His numerous grandchildren continue in this path.

Those who had the honour to be long-term guests of Sergei's in the tundra will confirm that, in this family, you never think that the nomadic life in the tundra will cease. Sergei has shown how to weather almost any

adverse conditions skilfully, including, iced pastures, industrialisation, political change, reindeer disease, or social pressure. One could say he was the epitome of the Nenets nomadic resilience that several of us have been writing about (Forbes et al., 2009; Golovnev, 2017; Stammler and Ivanova, 2020).

In this way we cannot overestimate Sergei's contribution to deconstructing the image of the marginalised vulnerable Indigenous victims of external pressures. Herding reindeer with him, joining him on the migration, and listening to his narrative made us not only understand, but also feel his story of passion, enthusiasm, stamina, and love for this way of life. It is based on the wisdom to distinguish the things that you can change and accept those that you cannot.

Sergei is buried in the Yamal tundra at their clan-cemetery, according to Nenets customs, surrounded by the graves of his ancestors and in the presence of his closest family. His departure is a big loss for Nenets reindeer nomadism, for the scholarly community interested in Yamal, and for numerous people whom he influenced deeply. Warmest condolences to his family; may Sergei's energy and spirit live on through them in continuing his legacy.

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