

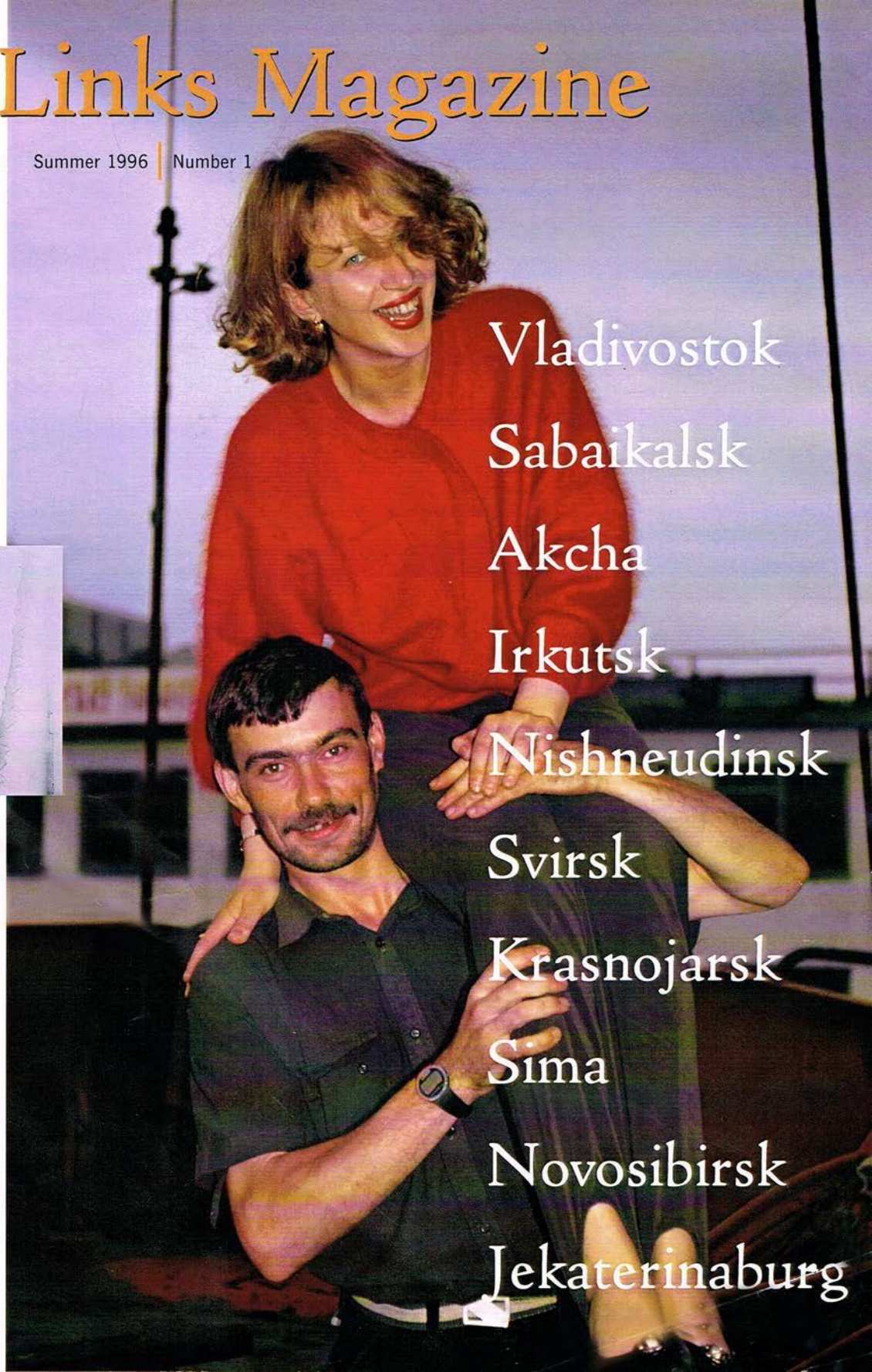
The Links Magazine

Summer 1996 | Number 1

Siberia



The fabulous
journey of
René Seghers is
coming to a
spectacular end



Vladivostok

Sabaikalsk

Akcha

Irkutsk

Nishneudinsk

Svirsk

Krasnojarsk

Sima

Novosibirsk

Jekaterinaburg

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Cover

Colorphoto Pavel and Helena Cherechnev (Vladivostok) by René Seghers

B/W photo of René Seghers by Murielle Lucie Clément

THE LINKS MAGAZINE

A border is a place which one may cross. Publication of this magazine is based on the conviction that current art can and must go further than the social margin it is in now. This conviction led to the founding of the Links foundation in 1989. One of the objectives of art and culture is that each successive generation gives form to its own time. Cultural and social changes are born from that space. This social involvement is reflected in the Links project.

THE LINKS PROJECT

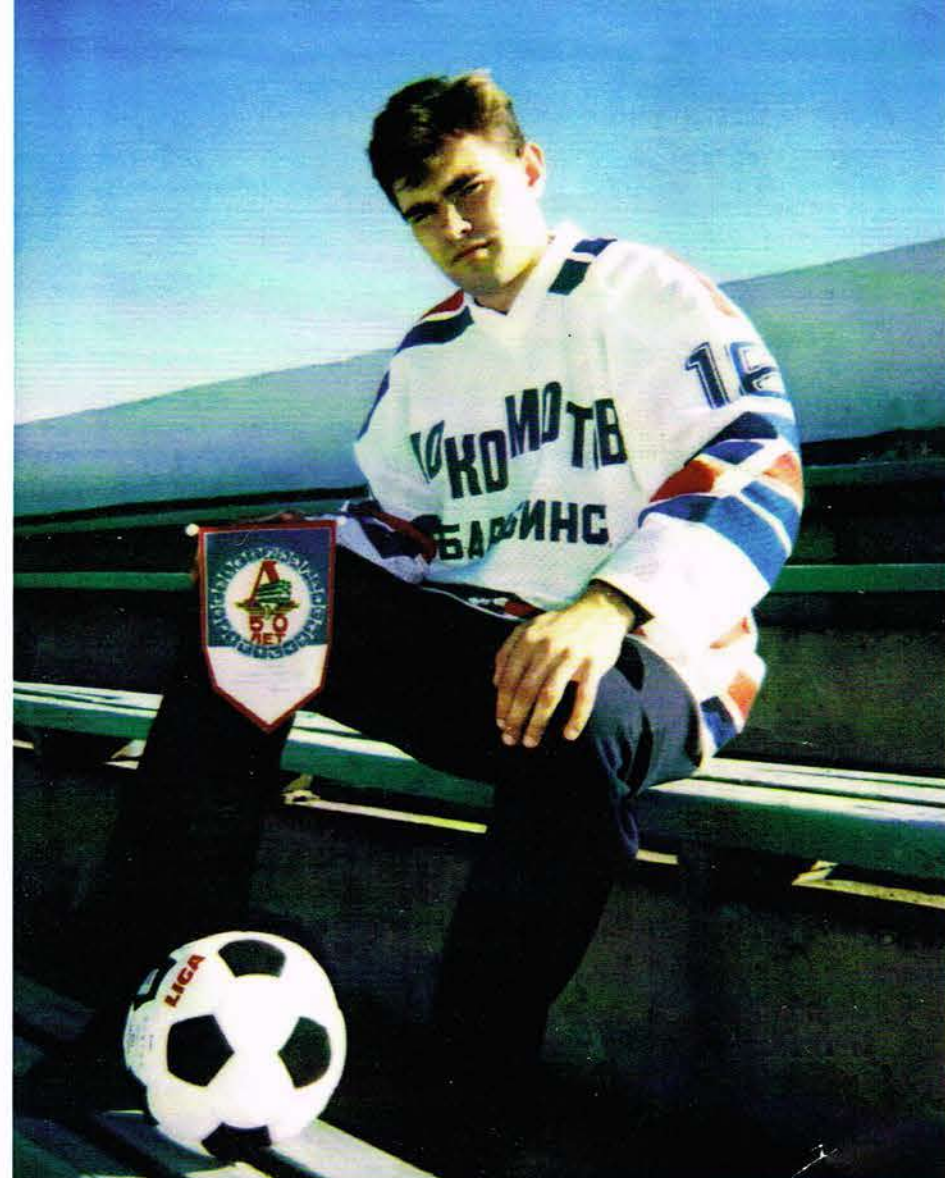
What?
 There are 508 towns and villages on the route from Clifden in Ireland to Tokyo in Japan. The Links Foundation has a particular inhabitant recite the poem 'Undestined' in the local dialect of each one of these villages. Video and photocomeras record this, which results in a unique collage of different people from all over the world who, at one moment in time, focus on one and the same object.

Why?
 The poem 'Undestined' is (in form and content) a lament against all religious and political movements in the world. They make many promises which, in the end, are never fulfilled; they are tempting the void. The symbolism in the poem can be discovered quite easily: the words form the 'yin and yang symbol' and the Cross is encompassed as well as the Olympic colours. On paper though, the poem contains the very same empty words as the movements it opposes. This is why the action has been suited to the world, and so the 'true' poem is formed by the recitations of 508 people throughout the world.

Who?
 The poem and the idea of the project are the creation of artist/poet/philosopher René Seghers.

When?
 The idea arose in 1989. Since 1992, René Seghers has been on the road in stages in order to collect images of the aforementioned speakers. In 1996 the journey will be completed, after which the gathered material will be prepared for display (in all countries along the route), photographic records and diaries, videotapes, TV programs, interactive applications for computer and Internet.

Where?
 Initially, Ireland and England were carried out, subsequently Japan (1993) and part of China. Then, Holland and Germany, and last year the remaining part of China and Siberia in its entirety. In 1996 the poetry-journey will be continued with European Russia, Bellorussia and Poland.



Siberia: beforehand

Contact, a term which best summarizes the reactions of the people we meet. Everyone knows precisely what the West can offer him or her. Consequently, the best soccer team of Barabinsk – a club that plays in the Russian major league and the forward of which recites the poem while holding up a ball – would like to play a friendly game against Ajax, even if it were merely against the reserve team. The trainer is considering an apprenticeship and in terms of the organization the director wholeheartedly supports him. In short, one unsolicited application after another presents itself. Every journalist wants an apprenticeship with a Dutch newspaper, every municipal administrator is interested in the Dutch infrastructure, every entrepreneur is interested in capital and/or a joint venture. The craziest thing about it is that they sometimes have much more to offer than they realize. From the milk fac-

tory to the sausage factory and from the fish auction to the coal mine, from chemistry to agriculture and livestock breeding and from local government right on through to the soccer club.

I am repeatedly asked how people react to the project. With respect to Siberia there are two answers. The first is given by the veterans of Anshero-Sudshensk, who said in farewell: 'It would be good if we were to visit each other more often, then we would see that we are all part of humanity'. I add to this that I would be the last person to claim that the project improves the world, but one thing is certain: when people are confronted with what we do we leave them in a state of bewilderment which gradually becomes a realization that if 'Links' is achievable it must at least be possible for them to do something about their own situation.

Barely a soul in sight on the streets of Sabaikalsk, let alone a man descended from anything resembling the original native population. The Russians answer our questions with the familiar song: 'Sabaikalsk? Nobody was here! Dauria? That was only created in 1948! Tanga? That was founded by Georgian missionaries.' ...

'But look at the map: Ulan-Ude, Dauria, Chilok, Onochoi, Darassun, those are not Russian names, after all', I cry out desperately while Murielle asserts that I am hunting for something which does not exist.



At the shift of time

Sabaikalsk, July 12th, 1995

After hours of searching we discover an Asian-looking girl named Tyana. She brings us to her mother Ludmilla who is in turn a guest of the Georgian couple Pavel and Tatiana. Chance delivers us into the arms of an artistically and literarily inclined family, who hold, aside from the art of cooking, the art of painting in especially high regard. This is not such a coincidence since the communists stimulated culture from day one. No village is too small for both an art and music school. Art enjoys prestige here. It is in short a paradise for a soprano and an artist travelling through, with the people we encounter helping in whatever way they can. Pavel insists that we spend the night at his house and arranges for a struggling odd-jobber with car (!), who will bring us to Dauria and Borsja tomorrow, after which we will again be left to our lot. In the meantime he takes us around Sabaikalsk, a depressing collection of ghetto architecture with the inevitable climax: the monument dedicated to the memory of the World War II dead. Pavel and Tatiana came to Sabaikalsk in response to the rumor that Sabaikalsk would become one of the first free economic zones of the disintegrating Soviet Union, and

considering their shrinking pension they therefore took the gamble. Sabaikalsk, the only border town in thousands of kilometers where foreigners can cross the border into China, has in the meantime become one of the last areas to fall under the old rules and Pavel feels himself, as a supposedly free person, trebly deceived by each successive government. First the communists plundered their lives, claiming that they, the Russians, were much better off than all the other people in the world. Because they believed, they participated obediently in this monstrous illusion the communists dangled before them like a sausage. Then came the moment when Gorbachov made it clear to the Russians that they had been deceived throughout their entire lives, that they, in fact, owned less than people in Africa. This is perhaps the real reason for Gorbachov's impopularity; in essence, he deprived the people even of their imagined sausage. Then came the market economy, the inflation and the financial purges which ate up people's savings and pensions. Russians do not see perestroika as a political story, since from a political point of view the bulk of former communists are, generally speaking, still at their old

jobs. The perestroika is primarily a radical economic story, having drastically redistributed the monetary streams which by means of mass unemployment has led to an earth-shaking upheaval in the population. Simultaneously, Russian companies and government agencies recruit foreign employees en masse because they are cheaper, just as we do. It is a schizophrenic situation: whereas the communists, in line with their intellectual inheritance (Tolstoy, Dostoyevski), traditionally abhorred money and strove for a moneyless society, everyone now, albeit with misgivings, mostly have an excess of dollar signs in their eyes. The real question for them is how to get a piece of the pie. Every Russian knows that politics cannot, has no desire to or will not change the situation. Changes in Russia are realized by revolutions. That is why most people remain indifferent to who is president. Yeltzin, Zjuganov, the Tsar, it is merely a different hat for the same state. The only certainty in Russia is that the next leader will be bald, because the only discernible pattern in Russian history is: bald, hair, bald, hair, bald, hair, bald, hair...



Jekaterinaburg, October 25th, 1995

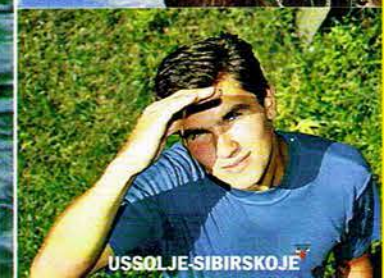
A sense of history



We have reached our goal, contrary to all expectations. Snow has been falling for three days – we could not have come at a better time. The snow and the fact that the next town is solidly located in Europe are but two of the city's special features: here, in 1917, the Bolsheviks murdered – together with his entire family – Czar Nikolai Romanov II. The remains were recently recovered and identified by an American research team which utilized a tissue sample from Prince Charles, whose genetic code is related to that of the Romanovs. Anastasia has been legitimately and definitively buried. Murielle senses a mythical atmosphere in the city, something in the air that you also have in Dallas. Collective guilt complex or collective repression, the fact is that everyone walks around with the Czar on their minds. One night in 1977 already the Communists tore down the house where it happened because it was threatening to become a pilgrimage site. Now a cross is left behind on a bare spot filled with snow on which the red sun well-nigh brings the blood to life. In the

background are three willow trees who witnessed the drama – they form a more penetrating monument of despair and loneliness. We encounter a heavyset man armed for the winter with a healthy gut. He walks around with only a sweater on, to say nothing of his nineteenth-century beard. He turns out to be Sergei Sokolov, a well-known Pole explorer. When he discovers that we have been walking through Siberia for the past five months he invites us to join his next expedition, but first he recites the poem at the base of the cross marking the spot where the royal drama took place.

At times the circumstances and time spans necessary for the project seemed to conspire against us, but paradoxically it was often the time that brought things within reach that would not have been possible at an earlier stage. When the project began Erich Honecker was frankly and freely at his post in an airtight GDR. Now the trip through Siberia ends at this until recently forbidden spot, where the fates of millions of people were sealed with one salvo.



The Akcha phenomenon

July 1995: Away from the transsib and that is noticeable: the hotel owner refuses to register us until the militie come to tell her that everything is okay. Still she thinks we'd better go somewhere else, as the hotel is nothing like Santa Barbara.

The militie, in contrast, are wildly enthusiastic: two correspondents come to rescue Akcha from oblivion? We end up on a merry-go-round culminating in a welcome at the palace of culture. In answer to my query of whether the some one hundred citizens present have come to see the folkloristic performance being given in our honor, Salomon, the mayor of Akcha, says that the people are welcoming us... That evening we attempt to explain to Salomon that Akcha is in many ways a better place to spend one's time than Western Europe. Here you are free, truly free. For us freedom has become a theory, but here there is space, nature heals, you can live off the fat of the land. A different understanding of time applies. What, in the end, is a color television? A French perfume or whatever? And the Netherlands also suffers unemployment, I assure him. But Russians are confused and desperately seeking the secret of the Western model. Since almost nobody can go to the West, the only model left is that offered by television. That model is Santa Barbara, the most popular soap opera from Smolensk all the way to Vladivostok. The population is hardly able to see through all that glitter and glamour. The West is a worker's paradise, the tv proves it and in addition everyone

has heard the story of the odd emigrant who reached Germany and now owns a Mercedes. People want to be fooled: apart from the fact that, of all people, the Russians should know how deceiving television can be, their soap-episodes are moreover ten years old. In the course of the evening banquet, which more and more begins to resemble a feasting orgy, I call out: 'My house is smaller than yours and I don't have a car either, that has nothing to do with happiness. I would be able to write here perfectly. Just give me a cow!' At which point Salomon promises to build a house for us. If we return, the residents of Akcha will present us with two cows as starting capital and we drink to it with the entire city council.

The next day we rest up on the banks of the nearby Silver Lake. According to legend Genghis Khan is buried in the adjacent Buryat reserve together with the gold he amassed on his plunderings. The most wonderful smells rise up from the field, the flora is abundantly rich and the hills around the lake are covered with edelweiss! On the other side of the lake a colony of Buryaters have set up camp. We row to the other side and document a number of recitations. On the way back we are taken surprise by a

sudden downpour, coming from the mountains. The reflection of the light on the drops hitting the water makes it seem as though we are gliding across a magical field of liquid mercury. A silver mist envelops us, the banks disappear from sight and a different sort of world reveals itself, a world in which we are alone with ourselves and the light on the raindrops. A curious natural phenomenon that ceases only when we reach a shore and the rain vanishes as suddenly as it came. Europe is forgotten. I am here, Murielle too, we fight against time, against the elements, against money and against each other. We go to places where the chances of finding a place to sleep are uncertain and where we never know whether we shall meet friends or foes, but here, at the shores of the Silver Lake we soak up the strength to press on.

When we finally depart from Akcha Salomon entrusts us with a few letters for his colleagues in the adjoining villages. The text reads 'These are my guests', and thus begins a relay through Siberia in which we are passed from the care of one municipality to the care of the next. A unique experience during which time the heart and soul of present, past and future Siberia sporadically reveal themselves.



(the president speaks) speaks)

My Turkish neighbour was shaking out a rug on the street recently. Another neighbour came up to him and asked "Won't it start?".

A wonderfully articulated multicultural joke which made both neighbours laugh heartily. This again shows how our mutual prejudices can also be the source of much pleasure. It underscores the inaccuracy of the persistent fallacy that everyone is supposedly equal. Luckily not, that would make life much more boring and the Links project impossible. Pleasure in the diversity of all people in the world is what makes Links so unique.

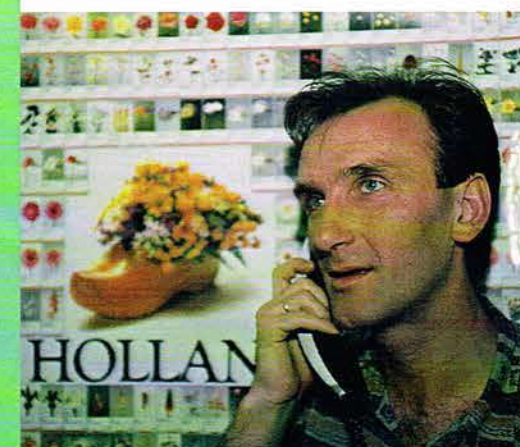
One moment we are driving into a small dusty village where it seems as though everyone has hidden themselves away. For the lonely soul who dares to appear on the street the word "art" is like something from a different planet. We are in the former GDR where people have been made timid by the peddlers who palmed insurance off on them as soon as the Wall had fallen. With much insistence we finally persuade a farmer to get down from his tractor and recite the poem. It is a treat to see how much he ultimately enjoys reciting a poem for the first time in his life.

At another moment we are driving through Berlin and share with each other the thought that a transvestite would be a good representative of this cosmopolitan city. The next day we find ourselves with a squirt of a deaf-dumb transvestite who performs the poem animatedly, in sign language. I had never viewed the poem that way.

It is of course the president's job to praise his own foundation's activities to the heavens. Since you already understand this I will forego the pleasure. Postbank 272610.

Joël van der Meer

(the president speaks) silent) silent) silent)



Flowers from Holland Irkutsk, August 1995

Here we sojourn in the world of the nouveau riche. Evgeni and Helena threw themselves into the flower business after a visit to Holland and now operate a flourishing boutique on the prestigious Karl Marx Avenue: 'Flowers from Holland'. They work from early morning until late at night, come home to the tube (tv in every room), eat a hodgepodge improvised from left and right and yesterday's food, check the clock and dash to the car to race off, full power, to the first of the evening's three social obligations. We cannot even keep up, their mobility almost exceeds that of last year's ruble rate. 'We started during the Russian subsidy era, shortly after the perestroika, otherwise we would never have made it', says Evgeni between zaps. He goes on: 'Nowadays everything is

falling apart, many factories have closed because there is no money to reopen them. The money is with you but many entrepreneurs have been scared off by the politics, the turbid situation and the negative stories. But there are plenty of possibilities. For example the wood-processing plant is now standing still but could open tomorrow while in Japan, meanwhile, our wood is made into chairs and tables which we then import for ten to twenty times the price we originally got for the wood. If one were to adapt the factory tomorrow to the demands of today the difference in transportation costs would already be seventy percent, I can't think of a simpler success formula! And even for that I cannot find investors'. 'Okay, you want capital, but for us there isn't a bean to be bought, no house, no land, nothing. And who knows how those joint ventures are going to work out judicially. If your partner is reliable and has access to the right contacts you might be in a good position, but how can you be sure?' I ask. Evgeni sighs, 'You also have crooks. Enterprise is investment and the one investment is better than the other, but if I had the money I would know what to do. And then again it's not that difficult: we import from The Netherlands on a daily basis. That is ultimately only eight hours from here. Someone picks up the stuff from the airport and that's it. Admit it: in Moscow you entrusted \$1400 to the care of a pilot. Did it disappear? It didn't, did it? Without risks nothing further than your front door happens and according to the statistics that is precisely where most accidents occur. The bottom line is that there is a lot of money to

be made here. When you come from the West you see an obvious hole in the market on every street corner. Those holes are waiting for people with guts. It's not for nothing that the multinationals have been here in force for a while now!'

Whatever people may say about Siberia, Irkutsk is above all a magnificent city with a rich czaristic architecture, a couple of beautiful cathedrals and no less than three female television presenters who jointly recite the poem on the shore of the Angara. Once Siberia loomed as a gigantic problem, but problems are defined by how one deals with them. We cross the Angara via the crumbling bridge; centimeters of play are caused by the passing streetcars. What should have been pavement for the sidewalk is completely ruined. Gaping holes offer a royal view of the wildly raging water, though this morning it is cautiously calm. What could be lovelier than a stroll in the early morning light! It is as though cooler blood flows through your veins then, blood like a lazy brook, a brook wherein life still sleeps. There is nothing more gorgeous than late Fall on a sunny day, a day when light falls as it does in the Spring. In this light one can measure oneself with the Gods. A marvelous walk over a bridge on the verge of collapse, a walk that becomes even more light-footed after peeing into a bush on the side of the path that leads under the bridge. There are times when the light on the city falls as it does in Naples. During this walk I could swear that I had arrived in a new city, while in reality we are to depart today at the end of a long stay.

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Murielle Lucie Clément

The multitasking Murielle Lucie Clément, French by origin, living in the Netherlands the past twenty years, Soprano and life artist collaborated on the organisation and execution of the Siberian lap of the Links project in 1995. Aside from other initiatives concerning financing she also sold her household effects for this purpose.

What fascinated you to make you go so far?

'Russia fascinates me, I worked there almost two-and-a-half years and discovered that Russia has culture. It is not the state's, it resides within the people and that is very unusual. Russia straddles the borders of two worlds and in the best people that is sublimated. This works in two directions. It is a land of extremes. You see that mirrored in the history and you see it on the street. A Russian views life as a chess game. He nurtures problems because he knows like no other people that very little can be solved. Siberia has always exerted a magical attraction on me. I met René on a Friday afternoon in an Amsterdam copyrette and was fascinated by his project. When it turned out that I spoke Russian he invited me to go to Siberia with him. I immediately

said 'yes', we began working together and in May 1995 we travelled to Siberia. Siberia was fabulous. The vast space alone and then with such a bizarre project doing something impossible. I did it because nobody else could do it. And the fact that it succeeded almost makes it as beautiful as an opera...'

It seems like an unexpected combination, since you are actually an opera singer?

'I am myself: Murielle. I serve my dreams. As a girl of fifteen I already knew that I would write when I was about fifty. At thirty I decided to live in such a way as to give me something to write about. Siberia fits into that. But music runs like a red thread through everything else. That fascination with music is in my family. My grandma was a singer, my grandpa a conductor and the famous French tenor Edmond Clément was my great uncle. One day I discovered that I too had a voice. I explored it. But I have never forgotten my other talents and especially in opera a melting pot of artistic and organizational facets play a role. I sing, give singing lessons, direct, compose and write, but I also

organize concerts and productions. In 1987, I established Operalab, because until then The Netherlands had no stage for young singers to familiarize themselves with roles.'

What productions have you done with Operalab?

'A great variety, from Bizets' Carmen to Lully's Armide, from Verdi's Traviata through Menotti's Consul. I have also done children's operas and organized concerts with Russian and Polish singers, with whom I performed portions of Tchaikovsky's Pique Dame at 'De Duij' in Amsterdam. But the high point was my production of Carmen in Moscow, where the work was performed in the French language for the first time. I also recorded my first CD in Moscow. I wanted to document my voice, since it is the only voice I have and is very dear to me.'

What are you working on currently?

'I give concerts of French, Italian and Russian arias and songs. I am also writing my Siberia book and composing an opera, 'la Folle Baisure'. I would like to sing in the theater again, in secondary parts.'

Murielle can be booked for concerts. You may also order her CD (at f45,-). INFO/ORDERS: Murielle Lucie Clément Stichting, P.O. box 95256, 1090 HG Amsterdam, The Netherlands. Tel. +31 20 6928246, fax +31 20 6635040. COMP. Sketches of Chess (Libretto Ljubovjevit & Kaspárov); SONGS: 'Brummen', 'Les Soleils immobiles'; BOOKS: 'Carmen je t'aime', 'Les Heroïnes d'Opera'; CD: Murielle Lucie Clément; ROLES: a.o. Violetta, Carmen, Suor Angelica, Tosca. PROD. a.o. Traviata, Tosca, Carmen, Armide, Dido & Aeneas, Suor Angelica, The Telephone, Savitry, Pique Dame.






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