

Yakutsk a city of diamonds and squishy permafrost

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The permafrost that the stilts were intended to protect is now polluted with salts and other corrosive elements, he says. So it begins to thaw, the stilts begin to corrode, and the buildings begin to topple.

The result is what Mr. Klimovsky calls "drunken buildings" all over the city. Some just crack; some, such as Secondary School No. 3, crack so badly that a whole wing collapses; some, such as the apartment block on Ordzhonikidze Square, cannot be saved at all.

In the depths of winter, on most days in December and January, the temperature hovers between -50 and -60 and the city is covered by a white haze that the people call a milky fog. Sometimes you cannot see beyond a couple of metres.

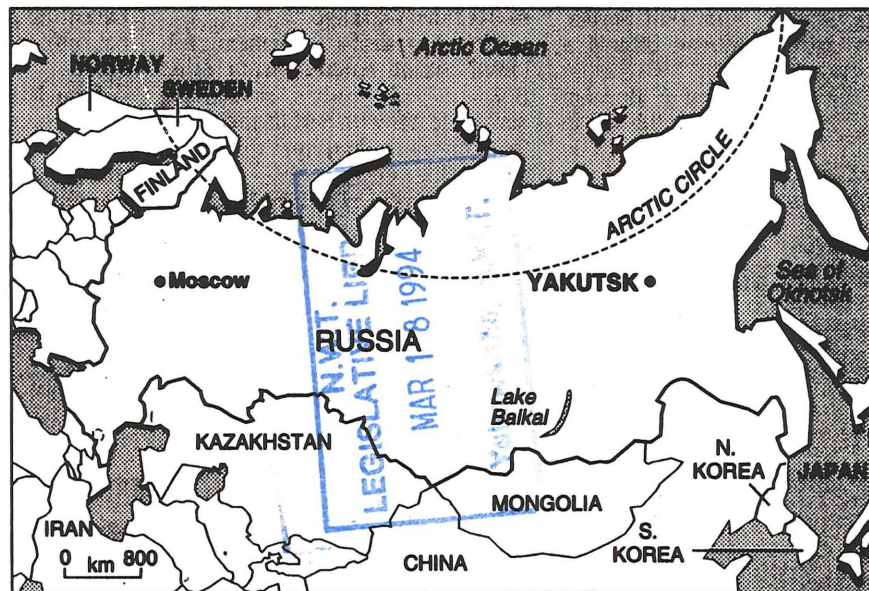
The Lena River, which winds its way lazily past the city and north to the Arctic Ocean, freezes every winter to a depth of five metres.

The city is a spaghetti-platter of huge insulated water pipes supported on trestles, comparable to the utilidors in Canada's northern communities. If the pipes were underground, any leakage of heat would further damage the permafrost. Besides, if underground pipes needed repairs, it would be virtually impossible to dig through the frozen ground to get to them. Every autumn at the cemetery, workers guess how many people are going to die during the winter and they dig the graves in advance.

Yakutia, or Sakha as it is now called, is of a scale to match the extremes of its climate. The largest of the Russian republics is three million square kilometres — larger than India.

When Russia's Cossack warriors arrived in 1632, their goal was conquest, and the extraction of tribute from the native people and from the Yakuts who had arrived from the south during the Middle Ages. Only later did they discover Yakutia's mineral wealth.

Until the discovery of gold and then di-



amonds, the Yakuts were a majority. To outsiders, they look Mongolian or Inuit; they are a Turkic people and still speak a language akin to Turkish. Mineral wealth has made them a minority; they are a third of Yakutia's one million citizens.

Yegor Shishigin of Yakutia University first talks of Yakutia becoming part of Russia, then he talks of Yakutia joining Russia. Shifting ground, he speaks of "the enlargement of Russia's borders."

Mr. Shishigin is the voice of the Soviet past, when it was Communist Party orthodoxy that the people within Soviet empire happily joined one another. Nobody conquered anyone; conquering was what the West did.

After a little prodding, Mr. Shishigin concedes uneasily that party orthodoxy was not strictly accurate. "To be completely objective, it was conquest."

The Yakuts at first resisted the juggernaut from the west, but then they ended their resistance. The Russian Cossacks had firearms, he explained, and the Yakuts had only bows and arrows.

Mr. Shishigin's wistful nostalgia for

what he calls "we peoples of the Soviet Union" also colours his view of how his own people have fared after more than three centuries of Russian conquest.

More than 80 per cent of the Yakut people still know their own language and they are educated in that language, he says. His own children speak and read both Yakut and Russian.

Mr. Shishigin's Soviet loyalties are shaken. He acknowledges that during the 1970s the number of Yakut schools in the whole republic was reduced to two. The rest taught Yakut only as a subject. There are no Yakut kindergartens.

All public services, whether governmental or commercial, are in Russian. Still, he says, only recently the government created a commission to translate the contemporary vocabulary into Yakut.

Gavriil Struchkov, the young editor of the Yakut newspaper Sakhada, does not share Mr. Shishigin's rosy view of the Yakut peoples' fate, saying the figures are reversed: Rather than 80 per cent of Yakuts speaking their own language, 80 per cent of the people no longer do so.

Everything was fine until Moscow discovered the incredible mineral wealth of Yakutia, he says. Yakuts were educated in their own language and even the minority, of Russians here studied Yakut.

Until the 1950s, Yakutia was just Siberia; then it became a place where Russians arrived to dig for gold and diamonds. The Yakuts began to lose their schools, and their lives became Russian.

As well as losing their language, the Yakuts seemed to have lost most of the benefit of their incredible mineral wealth. After long, hard bargaining with Moscow, they won the right to 20 per cent of the revenue from diamond sales, but the money has so far made little impact.

Diamonds earn Russia more than \$1-billion in hard currency a year — more than every export except oil — but Yakutia remains a ramshackle town with an economy rooted in the Soviet era.

The changes in Moscow have not really filtered down to Yakutsk. There is little sign of the market economy. The government is made up mainly of old Communist *apparatchiks*, the street names are still those of Bolshevik heroes, and Lenin's statue dominates the city.

Alexander Kougayevsky, the youthful chairman of Yakutia's committee on foreign trade, wants to begin manufacturing in Yakutia. Grimly, he gestures around his spacious office; nothing in the office was made here.

Some of Russia's other local leaders are more radical, but Mr. Kougayevsky, who is also the republic's deputy foreign minister, insists that Yakutia does not want to separate from Russia.

The Yakuts would like a little more independence, a little more processing of their own resources. He dreams of the day when the railway line from the south will push the final 400 kilometres northward to Yakutsk.

But it costs a lot of money to build a railway line on permafrost, and there is permafrost across 85 per cent of Yakutia. Even in the land of diamonds, they don't yet have that kind of money.

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