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View across Matochkin Shar (photograph by H. Lund, from Grønlie 1924). *Anyone who has sailed through Matochkin Shar will probably never forget the remarkable beauty of the wild and magnificent panorama which constantly unfolds. What charm and variety in the combination of green sea waves with the bare, multi-colored rock, with the snow and the glaciers!* (Rusanov, 1907).



Crew of R/V Willem Barents, going ashore in Matochkin Shar with sloop *Lucie*. (Photo William Grant 1884).

PREFACE

Life is a journey and we move through its stages like a traveler through a landscape. This is all a book about the amazement of Westerners who traveled the world behind the former Iron Curtain, looking for traces of a small historical event against the backdrop of the ending of the Soviet Union. This is a book about the 'nineties.' Over one decade, we watched modern Russia take shape. We had exclusive access to an area that is tightly regulated, because of a common interest. The Russian Arctic has been the scene of some of the most inspiring explorations. One of these, the nine-month wintering of Willem Barents and his men on the Arctic island Novaya Zemlya, although a historical footnote, takes on new meaning in the 21st century.

For anyone growing up during the Cold War, Novaya Zemlya might as well have been on another planet. Trapped in the pack ice of the Arctic and then hidden in a hostile (or so imagined) nation the island has been inaccessible for generations. But the world changed, and Russians and Dutchmen searched together for the ship and grave of Willem Barents. Today, hostilities are back as if they were never gone.

A war is dividing our continent again. The attack on Ukraine came a week after the presentation of the Russian edition of this book, organized by the Moscow Library for Foreign Literature, to an online audience of 125,000 Russian viewers. The invasion, carefully prepared in plain view, for everyone to

see, was the culmination of a series of events set in motion with the ending of the Soviet Union. Many of these events were witnessed by those who visited the Russian Federation in the 1990s: the August 1991 Coup, economic anarchy, wars in Bosnia and Chechnya, the crash of the ruble in 1998 and sinking of submarine *Kursk*. Also, the fatalism, the occultism and the obsession with Nazis, a scorn for ‘foreigners’: Russian sentiments over the past thirty years were clear and unmistakable.

Editor Denis Khotimsky wrote in his introduction: “Well-known events, famous places, names that have long been heard are viewed by the author from an unusual angle. He visited our country several times: Novaya Zemlya, Vorkuta, Labytnangi, Dikson, Khatanga and October Revolution Island – are for most of our compatriots more remote than the furthest foreign countries. The action unfolds in two historical parallels: on the one hand, these are events from the recent past: the Novaya Zemlya expeditions of 1991, 1993, 1995, 1998, and 2000, whose participants and witnesses are still our contemporaries, living in Russia and the Netherlands. On the other hand, events that took place more than four centuries ago and mark the beginning of the facts, stories, documents and persons that closely link our two nations.”

With the melting of snow and ice, much of the mystery that has shrouded the Arctic for centuries disappears forever. We’ve captured a vanishing landscape, traveling past the remains of polar stations, so bravely maintained by their crews for much of the 20th century, and quickly repossessed by the elements. Willem Barents appears here and there in the background, reflected between ice floes and in the rotten beams of the wintering hut.

Between 1594 and 1598, navigator and cartographer Willem Barents, and his crew, showed that there is an open ocean at the

top of the world. These early explorers entered a world unseen – long before the Arctic quest turned into a confrontation with nature. They were not unprepared: their story is that of the first successful wintering of Europeans in the high Arctic. The Arctic through their eyes is as alien as the ‘Lost World’ fantasies that they inspired much later. The original journals, excerpts of which are included here, have lost little of their imaginative power. This book reconstructs that Willem Barents ran into a lively network of fishermen, trappers and nomads around the White Sea, an important connection with the open ocean for what was then Muscovy. Novaya Zemlya, the ‘New Land’ wasn’t exactly *New*, it was always there and known to the however few inhabitants, but it was new in the emerging context to chart, understand and control the planet we inhabit.

In our century, the effects of accelerated climate change and an ice-free polar ocean are felt across the globe. Mother Nature has been conquered and subdued – Joost van den Vondel in his poem from 1613, reproduced here, observed with remarkable foresight that this would be the ultimate price of the Dutch ‘invasion’ of the Arctic. Valerian Albanov’s life-or-death struggle in 1914 over ice floes and treacherous straits, with Fridtjof Nansen’s book in hand, would qualify as extreme sports today. This is also a book about the Arctic and what it was like up there. We didn’t just follow Barents’ steps, but wanted to relive these classic journeys, and fill in all the mighty details that everyone has wondered about for centuries.

Nijmegen, January 2023



Team Kravchenko after raising their monument at the site of the wintering (1979); and their camp site just north of the 'Saved House' wintering location. Photo's by Yuozas Kaziauskas.



(Above) Eugène Lepoittevin (1839), *Wintering of a Team of Dutch Sailors on the Eastern Coast of Novaya Zemlya*. Oil on canvas, Beauvais, France. (Below) J.H. Isings (1951) *Overwintering in het Behouden Huys*, print for schools.

“A sad message from Siberia, unfortunately, leaves little hope that the indefatigable New Siberia explorer Baron Toll has succeeded in evading demise,” wrote Hugo Wichmann on 28 January 1904. “Lieutenant Kolchak on 4/17 August 1903 on Bennett Island found a message from which it appears that Toll and Seeberg [plus two men from Yakutsk] were on Bennett Island between 21 July and 26 October 1902. It is highly probable that Baron Toll and his comrades met their death on the way to New Siberia. What happened – hunger or an accident in the water – will probably never be known” [PGM, Band 50, Heft I, 28 Jan 1904, p. 34]. Closing nearly two decades of covering Von Toll’s quest for Sannikov Land, Wichmann concluded on 28 March 1905: “The exploration of Bennett Island has cost too dearly with the demise of this brave explorer and his companion, the astronomer Seeberg.”

“From first to last the history of polar exploration is a single mighty manifestation of the power of the unknown over the mind of man,” wrote Fridtjof Nansen [1911]. “Nowhere else have we won our way more slowly, nowhere else has every new step cost so much trouble, so many privations and sufferings, and certainly nowhere have the resulting discoveries promised fewer material advantages.”

I got up from my small desk and looked through the water-splattered porthole across the southern Barents Sea. Now getting used to the vessel’s moving and with a slightly calmer sea, I ventured back on deck. The ship moved forward with a steady, regular swing, together creating a spiraling motion. From the aft deck I watched our wake form and then dissipate in the distance. It was chilly out there, still +7°C with light rain and wind everywhere. We were leaving the summer behind us. On land, it would take us a day at least to get used to the thin winds: the same winds that drive us back to our warm bunks

after a few minutes on deck. Through the fog we could glimpse the outline of Kolguev Island, ~30 m high and totally flat. In the gangway, I found Jerzy and Dima smoking cigarettes. We chatted until Anton told me to step aside so that Henri could film Jerzy as he leaned over the railing. Dmitri asked me to demonstrate our GPS system on the bridge. The Captain wants to compare GPS-based headings with those from the *Kiriev*'s instruments, which include a LORAN radio navigation system and the Russian *Glonass* satellite navigation. On a small outside section of the swaying bridge, shaking with nausea, I explained the workings of our small gadget. Drops of saltwater splashing from underneath the bow wetted my face and mixed with the rain. Endless wave trains were marching down the lead-black sea and passing unhindered below our vessel. I showed how to establish a 'way point' and how to enter the coordinates of a certain destination. I would have liked to stay around for a while, but suddenly I felt overwhelmed by seasickness. I did, however, find out that our course had changed. The continuing storminess of the Barents Sea has forced us to abandon the original route along the west coast of Novaya Zemlya. Now *Kiriev* is heading for the Kara Gates to arrive at the island's leeward side.

CHAPTER FIVE

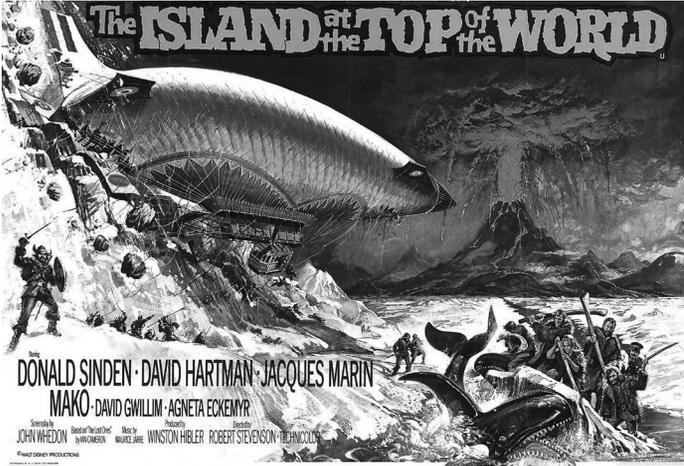
REPULSED BY THE STORM

*M*onday, 21 August 1995 – By the end of the morning of the third day at sea, *Kiriev* is cruising off the south coast of Novaya Zemlya. The heading is northeast, waves come in from a westerly direction and the wind is straight out of the north. Last night, there was a gale, with wind speeds of 18 m/s (36 knots; 8 Beaufort). The sea is rolling with streaks and great white patches of foam. The ship's meteorologist confirms that a cyclone presently is passing over north Novaya Zemlya. Water flies all around as waves break over the bow. There isn't a single moment of stability. I bolster myself in my bunk by squeezing a pillow between the headboard and my head. I tumble backwards, drop a good distance, then tumble forward again, so that I eventually stand vertically and drop straight about one meter. The ship is going through a series of rapid vibrations. Rising, heeling, falling, vibrating, rolling, sliding. With every falling wave, *Kiriev* veers into the deep until buoyancy compensates. In the downward motion, you feel your stomach acid burn. In the upward motion, it becomes harder to breathe. Eyes closed, it is easy to imagine the ship's spiraling through the waves. One moment I can see the grey skies with sometimes a seagull or a fulmar, next the foaming sea, before the porthole goes underwater. After the White Sea, which was coffee-colored from humic acids transported by the Dvina River, the water in the Barents Sea is a deep, transparent blue. Alex the mate came by the cabin and told us not to go outside again. It

is too dangerous on deck; going overboard would be a death sentence. Don't worry pal, I'm not going anywhere! Often the ship will remain heeling, only to return most unexpectedly to its old position. The resulting bedlam is unimaginable. Everything shakes and clatters, closets burst open, and kitchen utensils splatter all over the galley floor. I feel unstable and can't wait to set foot on firm ground.

This morning after breakfast, we were given our landing instructions. I'm assigned to the first group as Number Five. Jerzy is trying to maintain the morale now, because we must face that the Great Russian-Dutch Novaya Zemlya Expedition of 1995 will spend much less time on land than the three weeks originally planned. The Arctic weather remains a most unpredictable factor and now it forces us to readjust our schedule. "Get every bit of sleep you can," our commander told us. "When it's time for action, things will happen fast." Our way east is blocked by an exercise of the Russian Northern Fleet. At 9:00 our location was $46^{\circ}15'$ E; still north of Kolguev Island. The landing craft remains tied down on the foredeck, covered up until we're ready to lower it.

Most of the time I have stayed in my bunk, reading or sleeping. The very moment the seasickness ceases, the body relaxes. I intended to do a lot of reading, but the wretched stay aboard this stuffy vessel has prevented me from ordering my thoughts. I can't read, think, or write. Lie down and sleep: that works. My brain returns time and again to the same question: how to escape from this situation? At mid-morning, instructions from the bridge echoed throughout the vessel: in five minutes we'll be changing course. The Captain was executing a series of tactical maneuvers off the Kara Gates to pass east through the Russian fleet, but, eventually, around noon, he decided to drop anchor in a relatively protected bay of southern Novaya Zemlya. The barren coast is close by: black capes and rock faces thirty meters



The Island at the Top of the World, movie poster from 1974.

Of overdringhe van drie dierren die ontrove het schip quam / daer van de eenen achter een schot op bleef legghet / ende d'ander twee naet schip quam / d'eenen nam een stuec vlees upt de zolde daer in te verberseken / stont ende wort in d'lerenot gheschoten dat sy meer floste / d'ander niet wende de kwaer sijn macher overghetcomen want stont langhe stil ende kroech hem aen / ende liep ten lesten werf. Daer nae quam sy weder teghen ons holtz aen / ende teghte sich op sijn achterste pooten / om op ons aen te walfen / maer wort in d'lerenot doode gheschoten / ende wy reysen hem op sijn poeten / ende bruen hem algaes behagelijc.



This spectacular rendition of an encounter with a polar bear is illustrating events described by Gerrit de Veer on 15 September 1596: two men are keeping the bear at bay while the third reloads the gun. The wintering journal was a modern 'Lost World'-style pictorial.

to return to Moscow, back to the same misery as always. And while nostalgically wallowing in the smoke, we cut up the last pieces of old cheese and Spanish sausage, which tasted excellent. Russian songs echoed across the frozen plains.

Our watch ended at 4:00 a.m. It seemed a good idea to me to visit Cape Petrovsky once more before Kiriev comes. We probably missed that section where the 'BAR' pole could be when that bear blocked us a few days ago. According to Kravchenko's report, the pole is some 400 m southwest of the cape. We got ready to leave in the direction of Cape Petrovsky. While we were busy checking our rifles, I spotted a polar bear leisurely sniffing the large flag of Amsterdam. Panic immediately erupted in the camp. Vitali, dozing by the fire, jumped almost a meter into the air. I ran inside to grab my camera and flare gun. The animal, spooked by the sudden commotion, made an abrupt about-face and quickly trotted off. This was very encouraging: the polar bear that annoyed us for days apparently appreciated our presence even less than we did his. We immediately set off



View across Cape Varnek's storm ridges (Photo's JJ Zeeberg 1998). A Nazi sea mine marks the spot of Willem Barents' probable burial site.

and heroically followed him, shooting flares. We chased that bear for ten minutes or so until he disappeared into the interior. The Russians stayed behind, deathly afraid of the monster, and we left them very much on the alert.

After a good hour and a half, we reached the spot described by Kravchenko in his 1983 report. The location, to my surprise, was close to the remains of the surveyors' camp. I looked around and (I'll be damned!) spotted a well dug-in pole, some 45 meters away from the camp. The pole, 25 cm in diameter, stood about 100 meters from the current shore. The top was cone-shaped, and a thick but modern wire nail had been driven into its tip. On a flattened side of the pole was carved: 'BpR 1955 r', or BpK, in Cyrillic with a damaged K. The r is clearly Cyrillic, the Russian abbreviation for 'roΔ' (year) after 55. On the north side, a crude face had been carved. The surveyors had used this pole to calibrate their work.

There is no burial or anything in the immediate surroundings. How Kravchenko could ever not have understood this as a calibration pole is a puzzle to me. For sure he must have seen the camp and been able to draw his conclusions. I put George next to the pole and took a few photographs to prove Kravchenko wrong. Around 7:45 a.m., a bit disappointed, we got back to the cabin.

Our colleagues were intently waiting for radio contact with *Kiriev*. At 8:30 a.m. we got the news that the ship was underway and would be sailing into the bay within fifteen minutes! Now we immediately had to prepare our departure. We dragged all the packed items to the tide line. In the distance we suddenly saw the ship. The landing craft was already at sea and approaching. They sure weren't wasting any time now! Once they were offshore, it soon became clear that they didn't dare sail the craft through the breakers. The boatswain clumsily maneuvered the *plashkot* back and forth behind them. They were so close we

Henri, were sitting in front of their tent in a bleak light. The sun was just below the horizon.

“He suddenly jumped up and was gone,” said René. “He must have thought of something.” I stood and observed while Henri and René continued their discussion.

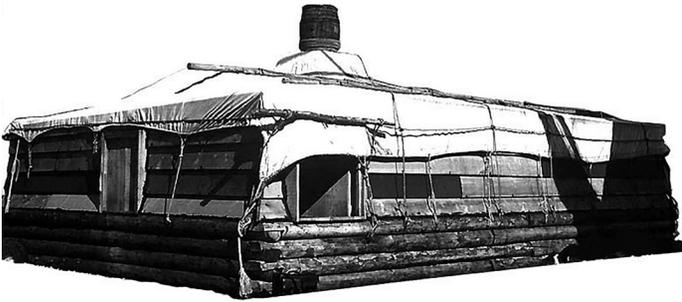
“So as I drive home, I say to myself, I’m late, I’m late, I’m late. She’s not going to like it,” said René. “And when I get home, what do you think is the first thing she says?”

“You’re late!”

“That’s right. And all of a sudden, I just don’t feel like apologizing. Do you know what I mean?” We all laugh.

Meanwhile Jerzy had produced a tape measure and anchored it with a rock, quickly but carefully stepping over the rotted beams that remain of the Saved House. That night we witnessed the original and elusive process of inspiration. At last, he carried the freeze-dried roof beam into the new layout of the House and lit a cigarette. Then he walked back, deep in thought. When he had paced off the 150 meters, he said belatedly: “That south beam of 6.24 m has an intact corner joint. That indicates the maximum external width of the House. Five beams have been found, including the one 6.2 m long that was found two years ago [30 August 1993], which I believe is the roof beam. I’ve looked at all possibilities.” He sat down with us, trying to ignore our teasing.

“No no, look here,” he said, irritated by our incomprehension. He pulled out his knife and traced the layout of the Saved House in the trampled ground. “In the last century an Amsterdam ell measure, 68.8 centimeters long, was found at this spot. That’s the unit they used to lay out the House.” He pointed his knife across his shoulder towards the digs. “What we have outlined over there measures six meters and twenty centimeters, which is 9 ells, by ten meters and thirty centimeters, which is exactly



Remaining beams of the wintering cabin, the 'Saved House' and excavation of the cabin's surroundings. In 1997 a life-size reconstruction was built in Amsterdam. Note log-cabin construction closed with ship deck planks, covered with sails (Photo's JJZ).

De hope van gewin zoo wijd de saeke brocht,
The hope for lavish profit set expectations wide
Dat tot twee malen toe dees streke werd bezocht,
So twice in just two years they northern route tried
Wijd onder t' Beersche licht: maar laas! met weinig bate,
Ways under Ursal glare: but alas! The bleak fate
Niet wijders opgedaan als der Nassouwen strate.
Had gained them nothing wider than the Nassau Strait

Maar Willem Barentszoon, als voogd en principaal,
But Willem Barentszoon, as guardian and leader
Den Noordpool, met nog een, gaat voor de derde maal
The Northpole plus one, for the third time either
Bestoken, op vier min als vier-maal twintig trappen,
Will assault, at 4 minus 4 times twenty steps
En daalt ter Hellen waart, daar nergends menschen stappen,
And descends into Hell, where no humans tread

Daar hem Corneliszoon, in nood en lijfsgevaar,
For [Jan] Corneliszoon [Rijp], in distress and mortal danger
Om al des werelds schat geenszins wil volgen naar;
For all the world's treasures did not want to follow him
Dan Barentszoon (die niet vindt raadzaam zich te wenden)
Then Barentszoon (who did not find it advisable to bend)
Tot Nova-Zembla toe, verzeilt aan 's Weerelds ended.
At until Novaya Zemlya, reached at last the World's end

Natuere word beroert, sal ick dan gantsch verkracht
Nature is touched, will I indeed be totally raped
(Seght sy) ten lesten zijn van 't menschelijck geslacht?
(She says) at last by Humankind
Zal dan een sterflijck dier de palen overspringen,
Will then a mortal animal jump the poles,

Die eenmael heeft ghestelt de Moeder aller dingen?
That were once set by the Mother of all things?
 Zal dan geen plaetse zijn op 's Werelds aengezicht
Will there be no place on the face of the Planet
 Daer desen woesten hoop zijn zoolen niet en licht
Where this savage bunch does not place its feet
 Natuere sal vele eer, vele eer als dit ghedoogen
Nature will sooner, much sooner than tolerate
 Geheel ontwapent zijn van alle haer vermogen
Be stripped entirely and subjugate



Detail of *'Lans Welvaeren, 'the Country's Prosperity'* (1613) commissioned by publisher Abraham de Koninck, showing Amsterdam's cityscape and the only confirmed portrait of Willem Barents (3 cm-tall).

CHAPTER TWELVE

SUMMER ON VAYGACH Y2K

Moscow It is a fine summer evening and there is quite a bit of wind, so I open the double windows, obviously designed to keep the cold out, for a breeze, and hear the bustle outside: barking dogs, accelerating trucks, claxoning, multi-toned car alarms, chants. Between all that buzz, there are shreds of popmusic and a Russian house beat. We are back at the Heritage Institute, our host of three expeditions to Novaya Zemlya: in 1993, 1995, and 1998. This year, we are set to return to the southern end of the archipelago, to Vaygach Island. The institute is in a guesthouse opposite of the 'All-Russia Exhibition Center' or the Park of the People; opposite also of the towering Cosmos Hotel, which has bright, pulsating strips of white light running up and down on it. On the square in front are kiosks and pavilions with improvised terraces. Young people stroll around and buy bottles of beer. A gigantic overpass is being constructed straight through the neighbourhood, obstructing the park's gold-gilded gates. Sparks from welding are flying. The sleek obelisk 'for the Conquerors of Space', a beautiful 107-m tall titanium monument representing the stylised plume of a spacerocket, is right around the corner. In the exhibition center, however, the dusty spacecraft, *Sojuz*, *Salyut*, and landers for Venus and Mars, have been shoved aside to make room for an imposing German car display. Mercedes, Porsche, BMW. Black and shiny, each more than the other: a glimpse into Russia's desired future. It is August 2, year 2000. Y2K.