

# SIBERIAN CROSSINGS

Bicycle touring heats up in the Cold Land

Part Two: by Mark Jenkins



**Editor's Note:** In part two of our "Siberian Crossings" series, we have excerpted two chapters from "Off the Map, Bicycling Across Siberia," published by William Morrow and Company, New York. Author Mark Jenkins was a member of the team that made the first bicycle crossing of the Soviet Union, as noted in the June 1992 BikeReport. The team consisted of three women and four men, three Americans — Jenkins, Tom Freisem, and Torie Scott — and four Soviets — Tanya Kirova, Natasha Traviynskay, and the brothers Pavel and Fyodor Konyukhov. The seven cyclists took five months to ride the 7,000 miles from Vladivostok on the Sea of Japan to St. Peterburg on the Baltic Sea. As

there is no road that crosses Russia, the team spent over a month slogging through an 800-mile swamp north of Manchuria. They were the first to sojourn in this region of Siberia since before the 1917 Revolution. Both of the chapters excerpted here take place in the swamp.

## PAVEL

I heard the axe wacking, echoing, and shimmied out of my bag. It was a cool morning, the kind that makes you feel lively and young inside no matter where you are. I walked through the dew to the campfire. It was out. Pavel was standing beside a pile of birch saplings. He was delimiting them, then chopping the poles into four-foot lengths. I didn't know what he was doing and he didn't tell me.

I worked on the fire. Pavel took a walk along the railroad tracks. He returned with a bundle of greasy wires. I gave him a cup of tea and a honey sandwich.

"Kleshi," said Pavel.

I went to my tent to get the pliers from the repair kit. When I got back Pavel was back on the railroad tracks. His bike was lying between the rails. He had three lengths of birch under his arm, the wires in one hand and the axe in the other. He called me up onto the tracks.

Although the sun was out now the air was still brisk. Steam was wafting off the tents. Standing between the rails, you could see down the tracks in both directions forever. It was a beautiful, pink

morning in the swamp. Only Pavel and I and the cuckoo birds were awake.

Pavel asked me to balance his bicycle on one rail. I lifted it up and steadied the wheels on the steel. Pavel took one of the four-foot staves and held it alongside the front wheel next to the fork. The stave extended from the handlebars, down along the fork, past the tire and touching the side of the rail. It was apparently too long. He hacked off a section and held it up again. It seemed to suit him so he cut a second stave the same length.

He took the wires and the pliers and tightly fastened a stave to both sides of the front wheel along the fork. It looked like a splint. He wired the top ends of both staves to the handlebars; the bottom ends stuck down past the front tire along either side of the rail, in effect, locking the front wheel onto the track. Pavel laid his head on the steel to check it.

Then he took the third stave and placed it along the top of the bicycle. It extended from under the saddle up to the middle of the handlebars. He wired it in this position so the handlebars could not turn.

"Otpushkai," Pavel said. Let go.

He took hold of the seat with just one hand and lightly pushed the bicycle forward. It balanced almost by itself and rolled quietly over the rail.

As everyone got up I sloshed into the birch and cut enough saplings for the rest of the staves. Pavel lopped them into the proper lengths and then shouted everybody onto the tracks to find their own wire.

After breakfast, under Pavel's supervision, we all fitted our bicycles with the sapling splints. We called it the "railroad rudder."

I don't know where the two boys were or their dogs or the man but we left without saying goodbye, in a long line on one rail, our bicycles newly retrofitted for the Trans-Siberian railroad.

The day before, slugging through the gumbo beyond the last village, we'd made 2.8 miles in three hours (we knew because of our maddeningly waterproof



odometers). Later, after abandoning the swamp to walk the rails—our bicycles bumping clumsily on the ties—we'd moved at about two miles an hour. Now, with the wheels in line rolling unimpaired on the rail, we were clipping along at a fantastic three miles per hour.

When I first met Pavel he said he had already bicycled across the Soviet Union. He said he was the first.

His brother Fyodor had said our bike ride was his 25th expedition. He said all of them had been complete successes.

Both Pavel and Fyodor are Soviets. They speak Soviet.

After a week Fyodor admitted that some of his expeditions had not been successes. They'd not always reached the summit or finished or done what they said they would do. Sometimes people had died.

In Blagoveshchensks, Tom and I had questioned Pavel about maps and routes and how we could best get through the imminent emptiness. Pavel hadn't answered. He wouldn't answer. We finally found out that Pavel Konyukhov, on his ride across the Soviet Union on a one-speed with a backpack, had taken the train through the swamp.

## DRAFT HORSE

We camped by the river. The smoke from our fire carried out over the black current and we slept without hope or dread. Still.

In the morning magenta fog caped the valley. We were out of food, but food had become like distance and time — we could get along without it. We found a sandy, trackless path beside the river and took it upstream. West.

Blue mountains rose out on both sides of the water as if we were in a fjord. We pedaled silently through inky fog up long narrow fields of grass. The grass was wet and high and the path went steady. Not fast or hurried, just asked us to come along and we came.



We passed into a bizarre forest — a forest of plants, marijuana plants. They were green and bushy and eight feet tall, trunks thick as a man's wrist, large, spiky leaves scenting the air.

"Damn ... Mark."

I couldn't see Tom. He was just ahead of me gliding through the fog.

"I know."

"Where are we?"

"I don't know."

Late in the day the river cleaved through a mountain creating a canyon. The walls of the canyon were sheer and intraversable. The path veered north, wandering up through a pine forest. Riding was easy. We rose above the fog and yellow light came streaming through the

branches. We might have spoken to each other but nothing needed saying. The path went up to a small pass and fell into a mountain valley.

It was a bluish green valley. A creek came out of the distant woods, pigtailed through the great meadow, then gurgled back into the forest. The air was light up here. Warm and light. Far away we could see a cabin. It took some time to ride to it.

It was a cabin built with care, everything true and square, the joints tight as knuckles. There were honey boxes in the grass on one side of the house and a corral with a big barn on the other.

Farther up the valley we could see a large horse and people working. We



bicycled through the high grass until we reached the patch they had cut. The father stepped determinedly off a large canvas blanket and walked toward us. He was a big man light on his feet. He wore leather boots that came up to his knees, baggy pants and a white shirt.

"Dobro prozhalovat."

He shook the hand of each of us firmly, as if we were relatives come thousands of miles. His face was tanned through to the bone. He had a remarkable black mustache that spilled down to his chest. He asked us to please sit down with him.

The canvas blanket was spread out beside a small fire. The mother, peering at us from inside a black scarf, sat on a stool boiling tea over the flames.

The father pulled from a cloth sack a round loaf of bread. The loaf was almost two feet across. He slipped a knife out from behind his back and began sawing the bread into chunks. The blade of the knife was so large it looked as if it had been made from a broken broad sword. He handed out the pieces of bread then passed around a metal cup of tea.

"Where are you coming from?"

Fyodor spoke for us at first, but his answers were one word answers. The man turned his eyes on Fyodor. We were travelers. He expected us to tell our story.

Tanya began explaining in detail and the conversation went well. She told him what we were doing and how we had gotten here and how long we had been at it and what places we had come through and he loved all of it.

I was listening, but mostly watching the horse.

It was a marble gray draft horse big as four horses. It was the biggest horse I had ever seen. Hooves huge as plates, legs like pillars, neck thicker than the trunk of a thick tree and a noble trim head.

The horse was near us in the field



with the father's two sons. One boy was scything the hay in rhythmic swings. Sun gleamed off the blade. The other son was on the horse; the loins of the horse were so vast his legs stuck straight out. A travois, lashed together from long young birch trees, was harnessed to the horse.

The horse and the two sons were working together, cutting hay and transporting it to a haystack. They were all sweating. It was a smooth operation. All three seemed to enjoy it.

"Mark!" Tanya was speaking to me. I spun my head.

"He wants me to ask you what you are thinking."

The father was looking at me. It was hard not to look at him when he did this. His mustache was luxurious, his eyes gay. He handed me another chunk of bread and the cup of tea.

"I think it is the greatest horse I have ever seen."

Tanya translated this, then laughed.

"He says 'yes it is the greatest horse you have ever seen.'"

"It is so heavy," I said.

Tanya repeated this and the father nodded his head.

He was sitting cross-legged and twirling the ends of his mustache. He was looking at me. The sun had somehow come down closer and it was warm. His wife was napping on her stool. The air was calm and the canvas broad and everyone but Tanya had fallen asleep.

He began speaking only to me. Tanya translated slowly.

"You have traveled much."

"Some," I said.

"Many countries, no?"

"Yes."

"But you have never seen a horse like this."

"No. Not like this."

He nodded as if this were something he already knew.

"It is my horse. Someday it will be

my sons' horse. This horse is called *Svobodny*."

"Where did it come from?"

He grinned. He waited for a moment and let me look out at the horse again. The horse stood waiting. Monolithic. It was hard to understand how big it was.

"It is a story ..." he paused, "It was during war. That is where all stories begin in this country."

I smiled but he did not.

"I was a boy. Almost a man but a boy still. My mother and father had died. My brothers had died. I set out to walk away. I had nothing. I walked."

He stopped. He was looking down at his hands.

"One day I came to a farm. The farm was empty. I could tell it had been empty for many days. That horse was in the barn." He pointed.

"I was small. I pulled myself up on him and rode away. I wanted to ride away from everything. I rode at night. Svobodny and I, we worked during the days and rode during the nights. Always east. I heard there was nothing there. That is what I wanted, nothing. So I rode. Rode and rode.

"I saw terrible things and kept riding. Many months I kept riding. Then I reached this valley and stopped."

I had said nothing.

"Do you understand this story?" His face had changed. He was smiling.

"I think so."

He stood up and beckoned his sons. They unfastened the travois, pulled up onto the horse together and thundered over to us.

The sons slid down and shook my hand. They shook Tanya's hand. The others had been awakened by the ground shaking so they shook their hands also. Then the boys stood by their father.

The horse waited. Still and magnificent and unbelievable. Colossal. I could see the veins thick as thick rope on its stomach. I could see its eyes calm and waiting and its huge nostrils expanding and its heavily muscled back dripping with sweat.

"*Yehzdityeh verkhom.*"

I looked at the father. He was looking at me.

I stepped forward, reached up, took hold of the mane with both hands, and leapt on. I came clear up, far above the earth.

I took the reins and we rode together. We rode across the mountain valley under the sky and I could feel his immense weight and the heat of his greatness and his giant heart thudding up through me. ○

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