

Yuri Vella's Fight for Survival in Western Siberia

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Oil, Reindeer and Gods

By

Eva Toulouze and Liivo Niglas

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PROLOGUE

It was September 14th in 2000. In the morning, we had loaded two *uazik* vans, one belonging to Yuri, the other to his son-in-law Edik. Both were full of people: Tayna, Yuri's and Lena's elder daughter, her husband Edik and their children, Zhenja the elder, Lena and baby Fyodor as well as their cousins Kolchu and Anton in one of them, Yuri, Lena, the two teachers, Kaur, an Estonian linguist, and Eva in the second. We had started early in the morning to cover the 140 km of taiga between the winter camp and Varyogan. Yuri's grandchildren attended school in the camp, where the grandfather had managed to obtain financing for a 'forest school', with teachers and computers. We were driving on a two-day trip to the village, for the ceremony of the beginning of the school year, because Yuri's school was linked to the village's, where the students had their exams every year.

We drove without any problem to the Khapleuta River, but already from far away we saw that there was clearly a bustle before the bridge.

Were they again doing something to the bridge? Yuri rejoiced, when he identified, among the machines that were at our end of the bridge, a wheeled digger. He was going to catch them red-handed! Several times the bridge had been damaged and even destroyed. Nobody knew for certain who the culprits were, although everyone suspected that the oil company was certainly connected with it. Now we would know.

We arrived at the end of the bridge and stopped the cars. Yuri jumped out. Beside the digger there was a truck and a helicopter surveiled the situation from above. No external signs of belonging. But for Yuri, none were necessary. He knew one of the men in the truck: it was a LUKoil worker. Suspicions became evidence.

He went to him and asked what they were doing. Although it was clear enough: on one side, the bridge was no more. "We are taking down the bridge", answered the other, quietly. Yuri demanded to see the order. There was no written order. "The instructions were given orally".

Yuri was losing his patience. "Stop it immediately, and call the police". The other laughed. We could not call the police ourselves, at the beginning of the 2000's there was no widespread network in the forest. None of our phones functioned. But LUKoil's functionaries had their own channels.

Yuri's patience was exhausted. Seeing that nothing would divert the oil workers from their order, he went back to the car. He did not speak to anybody. He just took an axe, and with cold, angry determination, went to the digger.



1. Yuri and the wheeled digger near the Khapleuta River. (Eva Toulouze 2000)

With the axe, he attacked the four tyres of the machine, and did not stop until they were thoroughly broken. The LUKoil men were frozen, their only sign of panic was that several of them called someone on the phone. Nobody attempted to interfere. Yuri had just finished his job, all the men climbed on

the truck and, without further communication, it drove away. Suddenly, the scene was silent, the big digger stood there, not moving, and there was Yuri with his axe.

Now the main thing was to solve the problem of how to repair the bridge in order to go to the village? Otherwise, we would have to make a 600 km detour and pass through LUKoil's checkpoints... There were no 'free roads' in the region, they had all been built by the oil drillers to answer their needs and to connect oilfields, workers' villages and centres of human habitation. Before the roads were built, starting from 1970, there were only winter paths for reindeer sledges and water connections for the taiga dwellers to use with dugout boats. And helicopters, generously provided by the state and the oil company in cases of urgent need. Since then snowmobiles had quickened transportation and the roads had favoured the use of the car, increasing the natives' dependence on infrastructure. So this bridge was vital. He had better come up with a solution... In the end we had to work five hours to make the bridge strong enough to carry our two vans.



2. The result of five hours work. (Eva Toulouze 2000)

This episode, in many details, is very characteristic of Yuri's world: driving a *uazik* (Chapter 6), bringing children from the school in his camp (Chapter 3), moving around (Chapters 4, 5, 6), solving unusual problems, and fighting with the oil company LUKoil (Chapters 3, 6, 7, 8, 9). It was the

climax of LUKoil's conflict with the indigenous population of this zone, which was becoming a kind of war, at least a war against the most annoying of the indigenous leaders, Yuri Vella. The decision had been made to isolate him and compel him – as well as the other families living in the taiga – to pass through the company check points. After this episode, LUKoil filed a complaint against Yuri, first a criminal one, then a civil one for damage on the digger's tyres. Yuri was condemned to a fine and had to give seven reindeer to cover it.

INTRODUCTION

As the prologue suggests, this book contains reflections about one person, one really exceptional personality: Siberian reindeer herder, poet and fighter for indigenous rights Yuri Vella. The short account of the event that constitutes the Prologue introduces the reader to several themes that will be touched upon throughout the book.

We had been observing Yuri Vella since we got acquainted with him in between 1998 and 2000. We are convinced of the relevance of anthropology based on the individual. Studying cultures as such has raised serious criticism from postmodernist authors, among others visual anthropologists, who emphasise the uniqueness of the individual's experience and worldview (cf. MacDougall 1998; 2005).

Although anthropology concerns itself with the social (i.e. the shared and general), it is also important to be open to those phenomena that are not shared but are particular or unique to individuals. As Heiss and Piette remind us: “Anthropology works with individuals, and in an attempt to generalize, it finds structures and patterns in society. However, when anthropology generalizes about society, it makes statements that do not correspond to the behaviour of every single individual. At times, individuals behave according to these general traits and are indeed their carriers. Yet it is never possible to deduce an individual’s living reality and his constituent traits from general knowledge of his society.” (Heiss & Piette 2015: 10)

The proponents of the anthropology of the individual maintain that doing anthropology means observing everything that happens to particular research subjects, who are real individuals with their various differences and singularities. The aim of this kind of anthropology is to understand what the research subject is like and what he or she feels. One reason behind the demand to devote attention to individual lives has been the need to resolve issues of representation in anthropology: “The individual would no longer be conscripted to serve as an archetype for the group but would instead be assigned to act as an equivocal guide to the vagaries of participation within it. [...] the particular would still be mustered to illustrate the more general

but to do so cumulatively rather than prototypically.” (Vered & Dyck 2006: 6)¹

We had these issues in mind when doing fieldwork with Yuri Vella. Thus, we feel we are justified in attempting to focus on one individual. While it cannot, by definition, give definite generalisable information about communities, it may reveal one of the possible ways the members of the community face their challenges. It allows anthropological study in depth, which is what we have endeavoured to do.

Moreover, we were encouraged in our attempt by Yuri’s repeatedly emphasised stress on the idea that “(his) life is a museum”. It was his way of fulfilling his responsibility towards his people for his individual approach was permanently turned towards his understanding of the common good. The two were linked with the latter giving meaning to the former. He desired no privacy: as he declared, his life was meant to be seen, it was open to any guest who wished to get better acquainted with it; he wanted it to be watched, recorded, shown and spread. People could visit his camp and spend some days there living their host’s life and being shown its different aspects and rules.² Thus, Yuri intended to promote among people – both natives living mainly in villages and people coming from the ‘other’ world, Russians and foreigners – a deeper understanding and respect of what a traditional way of life represents. It was, as we understand it and will endeavour to show, his mission. He lived not for the sake of instant life, but wishing to give this life further meaning, further impact, to be useful by merely living in front of other people, by preserving the traditional way of life for future generations. Therefore, he deliberately exposed himself to the gaze and the analysis of the outside world. This allows us to overcome

¹ The discomfort with cultural generalisation is clearly evident in the ideas of Abu-Lughod, who went as far as to demand that anthropologists write “against culture”. She argued instead for a focus on the lives of particular individuals: “By focusing closely on particular individuals and their changing relationships, one would necessarily subvert the most problematic connotations of culture: homogeneity, coherence and timelessness. Individuals are confronted with choices, struggle with others, make conflicting statements, argue about points of view on the same events, undergo ups and downs in various relationships and changes in their circumstances and desires, face new pressures, and fail to predict what will happen to them or those around them.” (Abu-Lughod 1991: 154)

² Reality could in some cases differ from declarations: he could in certain cases even refuse hospitality, if a guest would not agree to the rules. But the declaration was nevertheless meaningful.

ethical scruples about publicly detailing the way a single person perceives the surrounding world.

This book is the result of 15 years close contact and friendship between the authors and Yuri Vella – and our interest has not diminished since his death in 2013. Only there has been no new material to add to our reflections, which nevertheless have not ceased. We are convinced that Yuri's conceptual input and practical example have not lost their value. While at the moment there seems to be no one in Western Siberia able to take over his spiritual legacy, we find that those who knew Yuri best have a duty not to let his ideas disappear with him from the public space, to give them wider resonance, to keep them in the picture for the future. This is one of the aims of this book.

About the Authors

Some words now about the authors. Relations between the authors and the hero of this story are crucial to understand the storytelling. Moreover, the book has two authors, so this point of view is more plural, more complicated than is usual when there is a single author.

In the texts we shall refer to the authors by name, Eva and Liivo. Their experiences have not always been lived together, and we intend to refer to them extensively, for observation and sharing are among the main sources of our work. So we cannot always use 'we' and this mode of reference is less formal than use of name and surname. Each author takes responsibility for what is written about him or her. We are also both supporters of a reflexive anthropology, in which the point of view of the analysers is explicit and accepted. Thus none of what will follow is independent of who the observers are or of how they observe. It seems right to give the reader all possible data beforehand to understand both the subjectivity of our standpoints and the justification, the value, of them. This explains why this self-introduction comes as soon as it does in the introduction.

We are both anthropologists interested in Russia's indigenous peoples. Liivo, an Estonian anthropologist and documentary filmmaker, follows a tradition in Estonian ethnographic research that focuses on Finno-Ugric peoples, language kin with whom contact is well established: Estonians have been interested in such groups since the end of the 19th century, contact that became scientific relations at the beginning of the 20th century, and particularly during the pre-war Estonian Republic (1918-1940) (see, for example, the Finno-Ugric activities of the Estonian National Museum,

(Karm, Nõmmela & Koosa 2008)). Since then, training of ethnographers and to some extent also folklorists at the University of Tartu has concentrated not only on Estonian matters, but also on research about the Finno-Ugric peoples living in Russia. Eva joins this tradition while coming from far away: she is a French Finno-Ugrist, similarly interested in communities connected by language kinship. Eva joined Estonian scientific communities soon after the renewed independence of the country in 1991. Today, she is professionally based both at Tartu University and at INALCO, in Paris, where she teaches Finno-Ugric cultures and languages. In the Ethnology department of Tartu University, Eva and Liivo are colleagues and have been good friends for almost 25 years.³ However, apart from this common interest, their profiles are divergent. While Eva has focused on literature and orality, Liivo has concentrated on visual anthropology, which gives him wider possibilities of expressing the ideas, feelings and emotions he experiences during fieldwork. He is a trained filmmaker and has made several films on indigenous peoples all around the world, but the location he knows best is Russia.⁴

Eva has been interested in the peoples of the North in Russia since 1990, when she was invited to visit by Yeremei Aipin, a Khanty writer she had met in 1985 at the festivities for the 60th anniversary of the creation of the Khanty-Mansiysk Autonomous Okrug (Region). The political situation had changed in the Soviet Union (the collapse of which was then only some weeks ahead), and this allowed foreigners to be invited to regions where they were not welcome before. For the first time an international group, with Hungarian and Finnish scholars and politicians, Norway Saami, Estonians and Eva were officially invited to the regional capital Khanty-Mansiysk. The region was not officially closed for foreigners, unlike many Finno-Ugric areas. There had of course been foreign delegations dealing with economic matters, and foreign scholars conducting research, but it was the first time a whole delegation was gathered on cultural, ethnic matters. Of course they met the local intelligentsia and made friends, and this triggered further interest. The leaders of an association of the local indigenous

³ At the moment they are both working together on a project concerning another Finno-Ugric people in Russia, the Udmurt, both in Udmurtia and in Bachkortostan.

⁴ His first film *The Brigade* (2000) was about the brigade of Tundra Nenets reindeer herders with which he had conducted fieldwork for several years in the Yamal Peninsula. He also filmed two Itelmen hunters and their community in Kamtchatka and has made several ritual films about Udmurt ceremonies in Bashkortostan.

peoples, called Save Yugra,⁵ invited Eva to their congress in February 1991, where she was one of the very few foreigners – two Hungarian scholars and an Estonian filmmaker. The visitors and Save Yugra decided to organise a joint conference on indigenous rights in winter 1992. As responsible for the international dimension, Eva and Estonian filmmaker Mark Soosaar invited several international specialists on indigenous rights from around the world and the guests were invited to spend some days with local natives in their camps. The conference was organised far from the capital Khanty-Mansiysk, in the area inhabited by the Eastern Khanty and Forest Nenets. The proceedings of the conference itself were held in Lyantor, an oil town near to Surgut, which had the necessary infrastructure, and the participants were spread over camps in the forest or the forest tundra over a radius of 300 km.

This was Eva's first experience in the forest tundra. Because of her knowledge of English, she was assigned to assist a Saami lawyer working in Kautokeino, and they were sent by helicopter to a reindeer camp in the upper Tromyogan River, Nikita Napaseevich Ayvaseda's, guided by Khanty intellectual Agrafena Pesikova-Sopochina, nicknamed Grunya. Grunya was (and certainly still is) an extraordinary guide: she had been married for some years to a Latvian musician, had lived in Latvia, and was well aware of the cultural gap between her culture and the more Western urban cultures. She was thus very well armed to help Eva understand the new world she discovered. Eva learned much under her guidance, which later helped her to integrate herself into Yuri Vella's world. Yuri Vella was at that conference, although they did not meet. But Eva was well aware of his existence and in awe of his wisdom.

Eva's active contacts with the Northern world were revived when, in 1996, Yeremei Aipin attended the Pärnu festival of Visual anthropology in Estonia. Estonian Filmmaker Valentin Kuik had presented his film *Voices* (Kuik 1996), in which Aipin was the main hero and which followed the writer's campaign to be elected to the Khanty-Mansiysk regional parliament. He had been involved in politics in the previous years and was both a recognised writer and an activist who concentrated on creating laws that favoured indigenous peoples. He was also the head of an association of small indigenous peoples of the North, Siberia and the Far East (known now

⁵ The Association to Save Yugra (*Spaseniye Yugry* - Yugra is the historic name of the region) was founded in 1989 and is one of the oldest indigenous rights organisations in the Russian North.

as RAIPON). The friendship was renewed, and Yeremei Aipin invited Eva to the meeting of writers of the peoples of the North in Salekhard in December 1996, and, in spring 1997, to the RAIPON congress in Moscow.

Yuri Vella did not attend those meetings. But the knowledge gathered through these contacts gave Eva a preliminary, at least theoretical, expertise on Russia's Northern cultures.

The actual meeting with Yuri took place in 1998 and happened thanks to Yeremei Aipin, who was then the representative of Russia's president, Boris Yeltzin, in the Khanty-Mansiysk region. Yeremei Aipin and Yuri Vella were both born in the village of Varyogan in 1948. While Yuri's 50th birthday was celebrated at the local, district level, Aipin's was seen as an important at the regional level. He could invite whomever he wanted – both from Russia and abroad – and thus a group was formed, which was offered a one-week tour in Western Siberian locations relevant to Yeremei. Eva, who by then had become a good friend of the Aipin family, was among the guests invited. One of the places in their tour was Varyogan. There, Yuri joined the group. Eva learned that two years earlier Yuri had organised the purchase of 1000 reindeer from Yamal Nenets region a thousand kilometres to the north and their distribution among the local Khanty and Forest Nenets. This sparked Eva's awe, interest and curiosity. She dared to ask Yuri about the reindeer's welfare and their possible adaptation problems to an environment so different from their home.

Thinking of this in retrospect, these questions may indeed have triggered some interest from Yuri's side, whose life was centred on reindeer. From that day they spent their time on the tour together. Eva was indeed very responsive to Yuri's charm: he had a lively wit, he was a marvellous storyteller, and his conversation was never empty. When they separated, she attempted to discover the poet behind the man and during the following summer, translated some of his poems into French. This triggered her first publication about Yuri (Toulouze 1998).

A few months later, Yuri had been invited to attend a conference about indigenous rights in San Francisco, which stemmed from his acquaintance, at the same event where Eva met him for the first time, with Kiowa writer Scott Momaday. On his way back, Yuri made a short stop in Moscow and informed Eva of it. They met and after she read him one of her translations, he invited her to his camp, to work on more translations and publish a book together. This was too attractive a proposal to be ignored, and it was the beginning of Eva's deeper acquaintance with Yuri's life and worldview.

Since then, she has spent many months in Yuri's camp with his family: February 1999 to April 1999, October-December 1999; August-November 2000 with Estonian linguist Kaur Mägi; and then after a long pause in which there were several meetings elsewhere (2005; 2008), and phone contact on regular basis, July 2009 with Liivo Niglas. The last visit was two months before Yuri's demise, in July 2013.

Liivo's acquaintance with Yuri is very much connected to Eva's. Actually, after the 2000 fieldwork trip, Yuri, his wife Lena and Tatva Logany⁶ were invited to Tartu and spent two weeks there. They lived at Eva's place and thus became acquainted with Liivo, who showed Yuri his film about the Tundra Nenets (2000). After having watched it, Yuri did not comment, but asked Liivo whether he would be interested in making a film about the Forest Nenets – they both knew that this would mean a film about Yuri Vella. Thus, in winter 2000, Liivo spent a month at Yuri's winter camp and went back half a year later to his summer camp. This was the origin of the film *Yuri Vella's World* (2003) and the start of their friendship. It was a friendship in which Yuri did the talking, both to Liivo and to the camera. Liivo followed him wherever he went, which was not an easy task, for Yuri moved a lot and very swiftly. Liivo filmed him in bogs and forests, as well as while driving on the road and in towns. Yuri got accustomed to having a sympathetic ear around and even after Liivo discontinued his trips, he often called and they kept in touch.

After a long interruption, Liivo went again to Yuri's camp in July 2009. This time he came with Eva. Our idea was to film a series of biographical interviews in which Yuri would recall the main events of his life. We planned to use these episodes for research and for documentation. Eva's role was to engage Yuri in informal conversation while Liivo recorded it with a video camera. Our plan was to ask Yuri to take us to the places that had some sort of significance in his life history. We hoped that visiting these places would trigger a flow of information from Yuri and reveal his emotions in a way that could not have been achieved in a normal interview situation. Thus, while previously Eva and Liivo had worked independently, one doing fieldwork, the other making a film, this time we decided to join

⁶ Tatva (Russian equivalent Aleksander) Logany (distorsion of his clan name, Ngahany) is a Forest Nenets from the Num-To area. He lost his sight as an infant through disease and therefore he attended neither school nor the army but lived close to his grandmother in the forest acquiring comprehensive skills in Forest Nenets oral culture.

forces and use the video camera as a proper fieldwork tool producing materials for research.

This did not happen exactly as planned. First of all, because of Yuri's volition: he knew what he wanted the camera to do, and our agenda interfered with his own. As Yuri's aim was at that moment to protect his territory from trespassing oilworkers, Liivo understood that biographical interviews were not the priority. It was clear that for Yuri a proper documentary film rather than research footage would be more useful as a political weapon against the oil industry – this understanding resulted in Liivo's second feature length film on Yuri Vella *The Land of Love* (2016).

Actually, Liivo is seldom satisfied with mere documentation. Even when filming for research he tries to capture material that can be turned into a proper film by constructing meaning and interpretation in the editing process. He believes that, more often than not, an authored documentary film would serve an anthropological study better than mere film documentation that tries to minimise the influence of the filmmaker.

For Liivo, fieldwork is mainly a visual experience. Therefore, he usually uses a video camera as a means to pursue ethnographic enquiry, and an observational documentary film as a way to present research results (see Young 1975). Observational filmmaking as a research method is especially suited for the study of the individual. Filmmaking, much like classical ethnographic fieldwork, is always specific, rooted in a certain time and place, and based on collaboration with particular individuals. But unlike written ethnography, recorded images cannot themselves produce explicit statements about collective culture. Any generalisation that can be found in an observational film with no or very minimal commentary, as with Liivo's, is there implicitly, evoked by the images of specific individuals in a specific environment, and by way of presenting those images in a film narrative. Film's narrative structure helps the audience to follow and understand the protagonist's behaviour – his or her motives, emotions and relationship with the physical and social environment.

Liivo believes that filming helps to explore the specific environment in which the research subject acts and lives. The camera tells the audience what kind of sensory 'place' the protagonist is in and how he or she uses it. In other words, the camera provides the opportunity to understand and also to represent the subjects' embodied experience. The video shows the corporeal experience of the protagonist. It does so through images produced by a filmmaker who has shared the same physical and mental experience. During

the recording, the experience is filtered and manipulated by filmmakers according to what kind of sensory environment they feel themselves to be in and how they have felt in a similar environment before. Similarly, the audience's understanding of the protagonist's sensory experience is achieved by mirroring the audience's own bodily memories from the past in the shown image. (Pink 2006: 51) In both cases, the process of understanding is less intellectual than it is emotional and corporeal. The aim is to reach the kind of anthropological knowledge "in which meaning is not merely the outcome of reflection upon experience but necessarily *includes* the experience [...] the experience is the knowledge" (MacDougall 1998: 79, original emphasis). The video camera introduces a sort of reflexivity that can be explained by David MacDougall's conception of "corporeal images": "We see with our bodies, and any image we make carries the imprint of our bodies; that is to say, of our being as well as the meanings we intend to convey [...] Corporeal images are not just images of other bodies; they are also images of the body behind the camera and its relations with the world" (MacDougall 2005: 3).

Yuri's interest in relations with Eva and Liivo

We found, in interaction with Yuri Vella, deep human and professional satisfactions. We wrote about him and about the situation in Western Siberia and Liivo made films that have received festival awards in different parts of the world. What did Yuri get from his interaction with us?

Yuri was interested in translation. He was interested in translation *per se*: in the potentiality of the text, the semantic opening it implicitly contained, the dialogic dimension of this activity. When Eva read him her first translation of one of his poems into French, he was thrilled that he immediately recognised, behind the unknown language, his own. Then, when they worked on the bilingual collection of poems later published as *Triptikhi* (2001), and Eva suggested including some poems in Nenets, Yuri accepted, but without translation into French. So he was aware very early of the problematic of translatability, which he would explore later by proposing a raw translation of one of his Nenets poems for interested readers who wished to attempt a literary translation of it into whatever language they chose. Only later, in the series of books called *Talk to Me* (Vella 2004a; 2004b; 2007; 2008b; 2013), he systematically included translations into different languages – French, Estonian, English, different dialects of Khanty, Tundra Nenets, Turkic languages, etc. For him, it was a powerful means of opening up to the world, of entering into dialogue with the wider

horizon. Moreover, we suspect his interest was not merely literary. He continually felt that he was in mortal danger, and his wife reflected, more openly, this kind of permanent fear. Being known was part of his strategy to avert threats to his person. He was undoubtedly a disturbing neighbour for the oil industrialists. However, he could have been much more disturbing dead than alive, for any attempt on his life would be noticed at the international level. This was another reason to keep in touch with the world. It seems his tactic worked. It led to a wider experience with his later collections, to which we have already referred. Right from the beginning some of his books were published in bilingual editions (Vella 2008a; 2011a, 2011b) and after his death other translations followed (in German and in Finnish). He was not particularly interested in the intrinsic quality of the translations and was not eager to have a native speaker edit them. For example he asked his friend Aleksandr Vashchenko,⁷ and also a Russian student from Nizhnevartovsk, to translate some of his poems or some of his works into English. However good a translator may be when translating into a foreign tongue, it remains a non-native language and while Eva often proposed having a native speaker of English look over the translations, he was never really interested. The fact of the translation was thus more valuable than the text itself. We do not mean the number of languages into which he was translated. This was important as an illustration of the multiplicity of the bridges he built through translation towards the external world. The fact of the translation was in itself a statement of connection. They were conceived not so much for a hypothetical foreign reader, to whom the translations were but seldom available, rather for his image of himself, and also for his very real local enemies, who would be looking for signs of tiredness or isolation. We have the impression that by the end of his life, this tension and fear had relented, at least for Yuri, but probably not for his wife, and, as he expressed to Liivo in 2009, he did not think that oil workers would attempt to harm him physically, at least not while they were sober.

Yuri Vella was deeply interested in being the hero of a film, in being visible. Here also the same practical reasons existed. He wanted to have the support of the camera, and probably its protection too. The main characteristic of his relationship with Liivo was trust. Yuri knew he could rely on him whenever he needed the help of a professional filmmaker. For example, in autumn 2009 Liivo returned to Siberia at Yuri's request in order to help him

⁷ Aleksandr Vashchenko was a Russian academic and translator specialising in indigenous literature, who helped and supported Yuri Vella for many years (see also Wiget 2013).

challenge oilworkers who hunted on his territory and disrupted the rut period of the reindeer, thus endangering the future of the herd. Similarly, in September 2013, Yuri was about to have an important meeting with LUKoil that would have radically changed the pattern of their relations, and he asked Liivo to attend it with the camera. Liivo went immediately to Siberia but as Yuri was already fatally ill the only thing he could do was to assist him in the last days of his life.⁸

But Yuri was also genuinely personally interested in film, which is particularly well equipped to transmit the complexity of life's peculiarities. He understood the necessity of documenting very well, and some years he did this himself with a small video camera. He was sure of the value of documenting his life as an example of native life today. Everything he did, he did as a native. Thus every moment of his life – as of the lives of any other Nenets – represented, for him, the native's local culture. He often commented that even the way a Nenets makes love is an expression of his culture and as such has ethnographic value. Probably, this was connected with the experience of disdain by the bearers of the majority's culture, who dismissed native customs under the claim that it was primitive. Thus, in the example presented above, he turned to a very intimate and individual action to claim its cultural value *per se*. Even recording how Khantys and Nenets visit Helsinki was, for him, valuable because it reflected how Siberia's natives saw the foreign world, how they moved into it, how they behaved. What was informative in this case is first of all what is filmed, but also how it is filmed, because behind the camera there is also a native who saw the scene with eyes that are not equal to any other. These are comments that Yuri made himself to Eva in 1998, when together they watched the recordings of Yuri's video archive (which has disappeared since in a fire in 2008). It is probably also the reason why he did not mind us being there in his camp, observing his everyday life and asking questions. For our part we tried to cause as little disruption as possible to his and his family's life: we did not want to distract him and his wife from things they would do without our presence, or compel them to pay excessive attention to us. While it is impossible to avoid consequences on their life by us being there, we attempted to make these consequences as inconspicuous as possible.

⁸ Liivo was not the only filmmaker with whom Yuri worked: another long-term friend, Olga Kornienko, made several programmes on Yuri for regional television over the years, and other Russian and foreign documentary filmmakers and television crews filmed him (see Chapter 8).



3. Yuri filming one of the meetings in Helsinki. (Eva Toulouze 1999)

When staying in Yuri's home, our fieldwork method was mainly just living (Kerttula 2000: 3). We were there for different tasks, Eva translating Yuri's texts, Liivo shooting for documentaries. And we lived with the family. For Eva, probably more than for Liivo, at least at the beginning, participant observation and its results were a by-product of being a guest. As anthropologists we "simply" observed and/or participated in Yuri's everyday life. We played with Yuri's grandchildren and spent hours drinking tea and listening to Yuri's stories. Liivo accompanied Yuri when he looked for his reindeer and helped him in his household tasks. Eva carried water for home needs and for the sauna, and brought wood back to the hut. There was no specific research plan and no thematic interviews, for research

was not an issue at the very beginning. It became a goal later, when we came to recognise the value of the experience we had living with Yuri and his family. The position was somehow ambiguous: we were there as particular guests, with one task (Eva never stopped translating Yuri's texts and Liivo filming him), and at the same time we took advantage of this to observe and reflect. Of course, this process is not always so easy – we used the adverb 'simply', which does not mean easily. Liivo was used to life with reindeer herders because of his previous experience with the Tundra Nenets. The physical part of the enculturation was not particularly hard, because living conditions at Yuri's place were extremely comfortable; there were more difficulties with the psychological conditions, i.e. being able to fit in with the network of relations created by Yuri and his wife. There are specific reasons why we focused on participant observation in our fieldwork at Yuri's place.

Yuri was a very active and outspoken person. He was constantly on the move, always doing something, be it taking care of the reindeer, checking fish traps, building a sledge or driving a car to a nearby village or town. While one widespread method of doing field- and filmwork is to rely on interviews, for us this was excluded (even if we would have wished it) from the very beginning. It was impossible to pre-plan a longer interview session with Yuri because we would simply never know when and for how long we could do it. On the other hand, he was usually very talkative to the camera and liked to express his views on all kinds of matters. He enjoyed talking about himself, or, more precisely, on whatever topic he chose to tackle. The topic was decided randomly, but it was usually connected with his thoughts and concerns at the moment, with the environment in which he found himself at that moment. The taiga was a living milieu, with stories connected to every spot, and with experiences that he took lessons from and used to illustrate points he liked to make. He usually approached the chosen topic through his own person. As this book will show, the notion of personhood is clearly not a strictly individual one. Yuri's was deeply embedded in the landscape, in kinship, in a whole network and in a time connecting the past with the future. In other words, although it was complicated to conduct a proper interview with Yuri, it was relatively easy to gather information from him. As fieldworkers we just had to participate in his activities and try to keep pace with him while making our observations and collecting data.

This kind of participant observation seems to be for many researchers the most suitable method for studying an individual. "More than many other areas of research, the study of individuals hinges on close observation of the

field-subject. Many of the things that interest an ethnographer of individuals will not be accessible through an interview. Instead, the ethnographer of individuals uses all the ‘avenues’ that are open to him in participant observation. He observes, listens, asks for more information in the context of the action; he might perform the acts that the field-subject carries out; he spends a lot of time with the field subject so the field becomes accustomed to his presence, minimising his own impact on the situation; he engages in conversations and spends a lot of time with the field subjects in order to develop empathy towards them and understand how they perceive and interpret the situation they are in.” (Heiss & Piette 2015: 15) It is the kind of active participant observation, experience gained in a social situation involving different senses, that has been called “thick participation” (Spittler 2014).

This fieldwork methodology worked well with the kind of filmmaking Liivo had carried out at Yuri’s places since 2000. As a filmmaker, Liivo is reluctant to make interview-based films. Many documentaries use the interview – an informant or an expert, usually seated in a room, answering a set of questions posed by a researcher or filmmaker – as the main narrative device. In his film work, Liivo tries to harness the potential that is inherent in the real life behaviour of the film characters, including their spontaneous reactions to the presence of a camera. He employs observation as the main strategy in his filmmaking, but his camera is not limited to being merely ‘a fly on the wall’. His approach emphasises ‘being with’ rather than simply ‘looking at’ the film subject. Filming Yuri meant participating in his everyday activities with a video camera, which is not only a recording device but also a partner, whose presence enabled Yuri to comment on his action, to discuss various topics and to construct his identity. The object of the video observation was not just Yuri’s behaviour and insights, but also the role of the filmmaker in that observed reality. Therefore, although Liivo’s filmmaking is observational in form, it is participatory in essence: the filmmaker represents his subject’s socio-cultural reality by showing a series of contiguous events, thus encouraging the audience to learn by observing rather than just by listening; and in order to “enhance the value of his material as evidence”, he reveals his role as a filmmaker in the recorded events (MacDougall 1998: 134).

Using a video camera in ethnographic fieldwork is quite common these days. Some researchers see it merely as a ‘note-taking device’, others use it more systematically in the data collection, analysis and representation phases of the research in order to focus, for example, on aesthetic, corporeal or other sensory aspects of reality under study (Pink 2007; 2009). In the case

of Yuri, the video camera had for us an important methodological value. It provided us with the mechanism for studying his self-representation. The role of the camera in the construction and representation of personal identity is one of the methodological devices that film can offer to anthropology. For example, Jean Rouch put the idea of performance and role-playing at the centre of his filmmaking (2003). He has stated that the fact of being recorded gives people a public and provokes them to behave in extraordinary ways: "What has always seemed strange to me, is that, contrary to what one might think, when people are being recorded, the reactions that they have are always infinitely more sincere than those they have when they are not being recorded (Blue 2006: 268–269).

We believe that for Yuri Vella it was important to be observed, questioned and filmed. It provided him with the opportunity to present his understanding of the world, his joys and concerns to the wider audience, and through that reflect on his own personality and development as a human being.

The book

This book relies on texts the authors have published since 2000. We published them together or separately, but as during this period we worked together and continually discussed all the issues we faced, we are both quite comfortable in having even texts once published under one name presented here under joint responsibility. These texts were not conceived to be a whole, rather each represents a fragment of the wide reflection we have been pursuing throughout the years about Yuri Vella, his life and his thoughts.

No text is the same as when it was previously published. First of all, time has passed and with time new knowledge has appeared, which is precious for enriching our understanding and so these new elements have been integrated. We also felt the compulsion of proposing two particular chapters about context. Not only is it impossible to separate Yuri's deeds and thoughts from the context that triggered them, but he also viewed himself, his being, as integrated in it: he felt himself to be part of the nature around him, part of the historical and social context in which he lived, so some preliminary information about it is due. Moreover, this region has been affected in the last decades by fundamental changes, which forever transformed the aborigines' lives and therefore it is justified to give a general reflection on indigenous personhood as a result of this long

adaptation to new values and a new world. These issues deserve two separate chapters, presented as a contextual framework to our whole book.

In this book we focus on “personal culture” rather than on “collective culture” (see Valsiner 2007) because Yuri was a man whose idiosyncratic semiotic system of symbols, whose practices and personal objects differed from the experience of his community and although he shared many features of his community’s worldview and intended to promote them, he still had a personal way of living them, of formulating them and of relying on them. Yuri’s practice and ideas were not representative of those of the local Khanty and Nenets. This set him in some ways apart from the community he dedicated his life to. That’s why the remaining chapters of the book deal mainly with Yuri’s personal lifeworld.

We shall start with an introduction to Yuri’s personality seen through the authors’ eyes. It will be followed by the way, in his writings, in which he saw himself and spoke about himself. After this introduction it is time to get acquainted with his life in the forest, which is for the readers certainly the most exotic aspect of Yuri’s life. We’ll do it through the topic of penetration of modernity into the natives’ and Yuri’s world, which allows us to discover the syncretic dimension in Yuri’s thinking. One element will be separately discussed and developed: the use of the car in Yuri’s practice. This will also allow us to discover different aspects in Russian ‘automobility’. These points are all intricately connected to the presence of the oil industry on the lands in which Yuri lives. Relations with LUKoil happened to be at the centre of his life and thoughts in the forest, for they were the main obstacle in what for Yuri was the main value in his life: they affected the well-being of the reindeer and the integrity of the sacred places, and thus they will appear in the chapter that concentrates on relations between oil workers and natives. Then we will move on to more intimate issues: behaviour and worldview. How Yuri communicated, with words but also with silence, how he expressed his identity as a native, in what way he, as a Soviet educated indigenous intellectual, understood spirituality will be the issues dealt with in the final chapters of the book.