

**Eija Parkkinen**

## **Looking for a long lost relative in Kaliningrad - Who is Sidir?**

Two weeks before the journey to Russia I got a message that I was supposed to have a relative in Kaliningrad. In my dreams I am used to walk in strange cities and talk with unknown people. When I arrived, I got the telephone number to this strange lady I had never seen before. It made the spring days in Kaliningrad just as a dream with short flashes of lights and shadows. As in my dreams the doors were anonymous, but the rooms inside were filled with fantasy and bright artistic ideas.

Even more strange was to get a possibility to take contact with this person who in some way was connected to my family. Who was that person and in which way we were related to each other? Should I recognize her from the similarity of hair hanging up and down just like mine does.

There were only two short spring days for me to stay in Kaliningrad. The third day should have been nice, but impossible, because the flight had to leave earlier. The airport was announced to be under reparation and closed just after our last possible flight to St. Petersburg.

A long-lost relative? Which language could we speak together? Was she a very old lady? Who was she? Why did I feel myself as a secret agent, but not knowing for whom I worked for. I asked a travelling companion, Ms Ilze Vitola, if she could help me to translate from Russian to English. She is a brave art teacher, and she said: "yes!" I picked up the phone and a woman's clear voice answered me. I gave the phone to Ilze. She managed to speak Russian with my contact. Soon there was an appointment planned for next afternoon. As Ilze told me, the relative was happy to hear about me. The lady had not sounded surprised. I thought that maybe somebody had already written to her that I was coming.

The next day I don't know how I came to the hotel where I was meant to meet this foreign lady. In a way she could not be foreign, if she was related to me. I was foreign in Russia, in Kaliningrad, but what was her identity? Was she

Finnish? My identity, for me it was a mosaic picture with different pieces on each other like in a mirror frame seen in a window of an old shop. The windows were showing shapes of my passing figure. But in my room in hotel Moscow in Kaliningrad I saw myself in the bathroom mirror without knowing, whom the relative thought she would meet. Maybe I would make her disappointed. Was I a relative at all? Maybe I was just a shadow, a book with no writing in it.

In the hall of hotel Moscow, where we stayed, there was a woman sitting in the sofa. She was middle aged, with short haircut and a dress. I went against her and said "Anja?" She came to me with bright eyes. She said to me in Finnish: "Hyvää päivää!" (Hello, good day!) We shook hands and embraced each other. Do you speak Finnish? I asked her. "No, only those words", she answered in English. For the moment Ilze had not yet arrived. We were there with no translator. All the missing words came up as in pictures. "Mama", I started and pointed at her, "maja radietelji dom". "Your mother, I have met your mother in my parents' house." She understood. We sat and she showed me some photos. There was her old mother with her cousin. I knew I had met her too. She is living in Finland. Anja, this lady I had sitting next to me in hotel Moscow, she said, that her mother was dead. She had died two years ago. I saw the pictures of old ladies, old sisters sitting somewhere by Carelian coast.

At that moment Ilze showed up. She came to translate my meeting. We went to coffee bar Soljanka on the opposite side of the street. Drinking coffee and eating nice blinis we spent a long time talking. The missing words we completed with names and numbers in my sketchbook.

Anja's story: My parents were living there up in the north in St.Petersburg's region. My grandmother, Anna, you know, with your surname, her parents' had this bread shop. At the wartime people who had Finnish surnames had to leave to Siberia. It was year 1942. My mother and her sisters were sent too, the whole family. Except their grandmother, she was too old to leave, so she continued to bake bread in the bread shop.

The first winter in Siberia was very cold. My mother's father and mother got very sick. They died one after each other. When the spring came, only the children were still alive. The oldest of them was fourteen years old. She had to take care of the others. They lived and worked in the children's home. That was how they survived. That orphanage was a good place, not one of those where they sexually abuse children. No, this was a good one.

Later on the sisters came back from Siberia. My mother got married. I was born in Estonia. I never heard her saying a word about my roots and relatives in

Finland. We had very strict rules. I was very Russian. My mother wanted to protect us. She had already had so much sorrow.

But for two years ago my mother came to visit me. Suddenly she became very ill. Then she started to tell me all the stories about relatives and houses, places, travelling. I have difficult to understand all the connections, all these young men, who went abroad during the war and disappeared. I have forgotten the names. It was too much in a short time, all these stories. Then my mother died. I think her heart was broken, because of all that sorrow in her life.

Now my life is this: I work, my husband is working, I have a beautiful daughter who is studying in the university. I have a son, who is sailing abroad. I go swimming in the sea.

“How do you feel, Anja, do you like the idea that you have relatives, such as me, in Finland?” I asked her. “Yes, it is nice”, she said. I saw the tears in her eyes. “Did you receive a letter from Aunt Helmi, did she write that I was coming here to Kaliningrad?” Anja looked at me with her nice, round eyes. “No, Helmi’s letter has not arrived. Nobody told me you are coming”. I knew that Anja had met Aunt Helmi a long time ago in Estonia, when Anja was a child. It must have been after Helmi came home from America. To which home? How was she located? Does not she still have U.S. passport?

I told Anja my childhood story about my Grandmother baking bread. In my family there had also been a mysterious young man, who disappeared by wartime. It was a great uncle, who spoke Russian. He was in the wartime in a castle by the sea. He was very sick, but when Grandmother had baked him a big rye bread and put medicine in it, he became well again. Then he left the castle and came home. As a child I never understood that some castles are prisons and some people do escape from them. “My Grandmother told this story, when I was a child and Sidir...” I said. I was so confused that I was speaking Swedish to Ilze and Finnish to Anja. We started to be quite tired. Ilze had after three hours translation started to speak Russian to me. In this mixture of languages Ilze and Anja asked me at the same time: “Who is Sidir?” I tried to explain what I was telling about. All these Annas and Marias started to get mixed up. Anja had also mentioned the person she did not have a regent photo about. It was her cousin, Lily. “Her name is Lily Sini (Sini means the blue colour in Finnish), because she was born with bright blue eyes. This name “Sini” is the only Finnish name left in our family”, Anja told. She had met Lily for many years ago. Lily is now probably living in Moscow.

When Ilze left us standing in the street I felt a great sorrow for leaving Anja there under the blooming trees in Kaliningrad. I knew I had to go, but suddenly I understood that it was not so sure I would soon meet her again. We were holding each others hands, two women, almost at the same age, who had been unknown for each other until the day before. Just one telephone number and one call, and of course, miss Ilze Vitolas language skills, had connected us. Just at the moment we were saying goodbye in different broken languages, Anja shouted: “Your present!” Then she opened her bag and put something in my hand. I looked at the present, which was red stone pearls. “These are the greetings from Siberia”, Anja said to me with tears in her eyes. I saw her walking away with the small present I gave to her. Then I returned to the hotel holding her red pearls tight in my hand.



Eija Parkkinen 2005, *Woman with an Unknown Mountain*, acrylic