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Yuri Rytkeu, Russian Native author

Jeff Kennedy, moderator

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Series: Potlatch series

Jeff Kennedy said the University of Alaska had an unusual and distinguished visitor in late January, Yuri Rytkeu. Rytkeu is a native of one of the easternmost points in the world, the village of Uelen on the eastern tip of the Chukchi Peninsula. Rytkeu is a Chukchi which is an ethnic group in the eastern Soviet Union. The number of aboriginal peoples in the Soviet Union is very small.

Rytkeu said the Eskimo population is very small. There are 1200 Eskimo people who can speak their Native language. There are about 13,000 Chukchi people. In their village they have a prominent writer in the Soviet Union, Semen Kurilov. He has published many books.

Rytkeu said he has dreamed about coming to Alaska. They had close relations before 1946. They had a cultural exchange of Natives. They danced and sang together and remembered their old tales and stories. Sometimes they exchanged by hunting. His main purpose for coming to Alaska is to remind them about their friendships and close relationships and to re-establish contact. He said Arctic people have a common sense of one history. He would like to reopen the gate between their two countries on the Bering Strait. He said he is not political – he is a fiction writer. He is optimistic about them building a closer relationship. He said there is already a good relationship in the science area and the industrial area. For him it is important to have a cultural exchange.

Song by Gordon Lightfoot

Jeff Kennedy asked Yuri Rytkeu what his Native language is. Rytkeu said it is the Chukchi language. He speaks in Chukchi. He explained that he was talking about the Chukchi language and the feelings between their two countries. Kennedy said that Rytkeu compares the culture of the Russian Natives and the Alaskan Natives. Rytkeu said there are many cultural similarities. They have the same folklore, songs, dances, food, clothing and the style of their old life. They can understand each other easily.

Kennedy said at a press conference in the KUAC studios on January 25, 1973 one reporter asked if Russian Natives have similar problems as Alaskan Natives. Rytkeu said they need to exchange more culture. He said culture can develop by more exchange and comparing one another. Another problem is the influence of mass media on the culture. He talked about cultural traditions keeping people rooted to the earth.

Unidentified song.

Jeff Kennedy said Yuri Rytkeu now lives in a big city far from his native village, but still goes back to his subsistence lifestyle. Rytkeu said he likes fishing. His parents were good hunters. His Uncle Kamal was a famous polar bear hunter.

Rytkeu was asked by a reporter if people still survive by subsistence hunting in the Soviet Union. Rytkeu said he avoids such political questions but he talked about protecting Native style and to have possibilities of developing ones style of life. They have many hunters and they fish on collective farms. He said there are those that are educated, but they prefer to hunt. In the Soviet Union they have a new proposed law to protect fishing laws and arctic nature from spoiling by industrial interests.

Kennedy said he asked Rytkeu if hunters in his country are finding game animals scarcer than before. Rytkeu said they have the same problem and have very strict laws for subsistence hunting. Natives can hunt for subsistence and not for selling outside of the community.

Kennedy said Rytkeu said Russian hunters are enjoying an abundant harvest of walrus. The Soviet Union enforces laws for poaching. Kennedy asked if Native hunters have priority in times of scarcity. Rytkeu said they have. As an example he lives in Lenin, but he can go fishing in Chukotka. He has a special permit for fishing for his family. A friend of his can't fish because he is Russian and not Native. This protects the Native life.

Kennedy said Rytkeu explained an unusual addition to technology that assists subsistence hunters in remote areas - helicopters. Rytkeu said they use helicopters in the reindeer industry because of the long distances. Kennedy said the use of helicopters prevents damage to the fragile tundra in the Soviet Union and the government has a special fund to deliver medicine to far off rural villages. Rytkeu said they have money to use helicopter travel on the tundra. They don't have to use them for medical reasons very much because the tundra people are very strong and are usually healthy. Rytkeu said he has used the medicine helicopter for travel through the country.

Unidentified song

Rytkeu was asked if young Natives in the Soviet Union can speak their own language. Rytkeu said very few of them who live in the big cities have the possibility to speak Native. In the villages maybe all of the children can speak Native. They teach Native language in primary school, they have a special room in the school for Native culture. Kennedy said he asked Rytkeu if they can go to schools in their own villages or if they have to be flown to villages far away. Rytkeu said each village has its own primary school. Many of the people do not like to live separately from their children. He discussed the law that requires each village to have a school, store, medical facilities, etc. They all need to be paid. The Natives don't want to leave their places for education. There are special colleges for training. They are not just for Natives. He had heard about the Land Claims movement.

Kennedy said it is possible that the Soviet Union will send Natives to meetings such as the Inuit Circumpolar Conference. Rytkeu was asked if the Soviet Union is concerned about environmental issues. Rytkeu said yes very much. They have a lot of societies to protect nature and wildlife. They have many strict laws to protect nature.