Andrei Lankov

FORGOTTEN PEOPLE: THE KOREANS OF THE SAKHALIN ISLAND IN 1945-1991

In early spring 1946, hundreds of Korean miners and fishers came to a small port city of Korsakov, located in the sounthernmost part of the Sakhalin island. Southern Sakhalin just changed ownership: after 40 years of the Japanese rule, its territory was retaken by the Russians, so local Japanese were moving back to their native islands. Koreans came to Korsakov because rumors which insisted: ships would soon arrive to take all Koreans from Sakhalin back home, to southern provinces of newly independent Korea. Those who came to Korsakov wanted to be first to board these ships. However, ships never came.

This was, in a sense, a sign of things to come. The Sakhalin Koreans found themselves locked at the island in 1945 (much against their will) and for long time they hoped for some miracle which will let them return to their homes. This miracle did happen eventually, but only when it was too late for most of them, and when their children and grandchildren had completely different ideas about how life should be lived.

The present article is largely based on the material which were collected during the author's trip to Sakhalin in 2009. In recent years the local historians have produced a number of high-quality studies of the Sakhalin Koran community and its history. Unfortunately, these through and interesting studies are not well-known even in Russia outside the island, let alone overseas. The present article is based on the notes and materials provided by the Sakhalin historians and activists, as well as on some publications. Of special significance there were my talks with Natalia Liede (chairwoman of the Korean Cultural Association), Viktoria Bia (editor of the local Korean newspaper), Mikhail Vysokov (professor of the Sakhalin State University) and Anatoly Kuzin.[1] I am much indebted to these people.

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In 1905, after Russia's defeat in the Russo-Japanese War, the large (nearly one thousand kilometers long) island of Sakhalin, previously under the Russian jurisdiction, was divided between Russia and Japan. The victorious Japanese took the southern half. The island had large coal deposits and abundant fisheries as well as large forests, so it was of considerable value for the resource-poor Japanese empire. However, developmental projects needed cheap labor, and this labour was found in Korea, then a Japanese colony.

[1] Works of Professor Anatoly Kuzin are of exceptional importance for the history of the Sakhalin Koreans. Once a high-level official in the Soviet times, he became a prominent historian, a true master of the document-based research. Most of the statistics in the following article is taken from a collection of historical documents he recently published (A.T.Kuzin. Sahalinskiie koreitsy: istoriia i sovremennost (Sakhalin Koreans: past and present). Yuzhnosahalinsk, Yuzhnosahalinskoe izdatelstvo, 2006).

First Koreans appeared at the island around 1900, but it was from the 1930s when the Koreans began to arrive to the island in growing numbers. At first, it was a voluntary migration, since Korans were attracted by high wages there. Indeed, around 1940 a Sakhalin coal miner could make 80-100 yen a month – a fortune for a Korean countryside lad who would be happy to get 15-20 yen a month back home. Initially these high salaries were indeed paid, but when the military situation began to deteriorate, the obligatory "savings" were introduced – so up to the present day descendants of those miners are engaged in a legal battle with the Japanese companies and banks, trying to recover this money.

In the early 1940s more Korean laborers began to arrive to the island, this time as mobilized workforce. Usually, they were also put to the mines, where they had to work under increasingly dangerous conditions, producing the coal for the empire.

So, by 1945, there were some 23,500 Koreans on the island. The population of Japanese Sakhalin was 380,000, so Koreans constituted some 6-7% of the total.[2] A vast majority of these people came from what was to become South Korea, and few of them intended to stay on the island for more than few years.

At those days, many Japanese looked at Koreans with racist disdain and a great deal of suspicion. It was widely believed that Koreans tended to have communist sympathies and might be even secretly siding with the Russians. It was a sad irony of history that in the Soviet Russia at the same time Koreans were also seen with suspicions as potential Japanese sympathizers (the forced relocation of all ethnic Koreans from Far East in 1937 was largely caused by the Soviet authorities' worries about their loyalties in a likely case of a war with Japan).

When the USSR finally joined the war in August 1945, these suspicions led to an outpour of violence. In mid-August 1945, the local Koreans were attacked by the members of Japanese ultra-nationalist militias. The zealots believed that the local Koreans were ready to serve the advancing Russian forces as guides and were secretly providing intelligence to the Soviet command.

The worst happened in a small Korean village of Mizuho. The population of the entire village, 27 people, including many children, were slaughtered with utmost cruelty by their Japanese neighbors (most of whom were youngsters intoxicated with the nationalist propaganda). There were other outbreaks of violence across the island.[3]

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[2] Istoria Sahalina i Kurliskih ostrovov (The History of Sakhalin and Kuril Islands). Yuzhnosahalinsk, Yuzhnosahalinskoe izdatelstvo, 2006, p.459.

[3] The Mizuho massacre is not widely known outside the island. A detailed study of the tragic affair can be found at: Konstantin Gaponnko. Tragediia derevni Midzuho (The tragedy of the Mizuho village). Yuzhnosahalinsk, Rif, 1993.

The Russians military took control over the area in less than two weeks and immediately made clear that a large population transfer was going to happen – much in line with the established practice of the post- WWII era when changes of borders usually meant forced relocation of the population. Whether Japanese wanted it or not, they would be required to leave the island within the next few years. So, throughout 1946-1948, some 357,000 Japanese passed through large camps in southern part of Sakhalin and then boarded ships for Japan.[4]

However, local Koreans learned that, unlike the Japanese, they would not be allowed to leave the island. It is not clear why the Soviet authorities initially decided not let Sakhalin Koreans out. It is often argued that the major reason was the political impossibility of allowing these people to go to the US-controlled Korea, but the decision about the fate of the Sakhalin Koreans seems to be made in early 1946 when the future of Korea was by no means clear.

In spite of the efforts of the Sakhalin historians, no document which would explain the rationale behind this decisions has not been found so far. Nonetheless, it appears plausible that the initial motive was economical, not political: like their Japanese predecessors, the new masters of the island needed labor. In spite of the government propaganda and rather generous incentives, few Russians were willing to move to Sakhalin, and many of these arrivals could not adjust to its natural conditions. So, the local Koreans who – unlike Japanese – were not perceived as an incurably hostile group, were seen as an ideal source of labor. The industry of Sakhalin was then based on coal mining, fishing and logging, with timber being used for paper production. In all those industries, a large part of unskilled and semi-skilled labor was provided by the Koreans who knew the local climate and conditions.

Soon afterwards, a change in the political situation made repatriation to the southern part of Korean peninsula politically impossible: Korea was divided, and under no conditions the Soviet authorities would tolerate a large transfer of population to the “capitalist hell” of the South.

When in the late 1940s the Japanese boarded the ships, some Koreans tried to pass as Japanese, but it seems that almost nobody succeeded. The Soviet officials in charge of the repatriating Japanese were reminded by their superiors that they should be on guard against the Koreans’ attempts to sneak at the ships.[5] Some elder Koreans told the present author that a small number of the Koreans managed to leave for Japan (and then, presumably, to South Korea) using the havoc and anarchy of September-October 1945 when some adventurous skippers were ready to cross the narrow strait at night and take fee-paying passengers to Japan without asking any questions. Nonetheless, it seems that the Soviet authorities generally succeeded in separating the Japanese from the Koreans and preventing Koreans from leaving the island.

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[4] Istoria Sakhalina i Kurliskih ostrovov (The History of Sakhalin and Kuril Islands). Yuzhnosahalinsk, Yuzhnosahalinskoe izdatelstvo, 2006, p.460.

[5] A.T.Kuzin. Sahalinskiie koreitsy: istoriia i sovremennost (Sakhalin Koreans: past and present). Yuzhnosahalinsk, Yuzhnosahalinskoe izdatelstvo, 2006, pp.122-123.

In rare cases of mixed families, a Japanese spouse was allowed to leave if it was his/her wish, but all Korean family members would have to stay in the USSR, so a Japanese spouse would have to abandon them and go alone. However, unlike all other ethnic Japanese, the Japanese spouses of Koreans were also given a right to stay at the island with their Korean family members if such was their choice. Nearly all Japanese who were allowed to stay at Sakhalin after 1950 (there were some 700-800 of them) were spouses of the Koreans or children from mixed marriages.

Facing grave labor shortages, the Soviet government decided to recruit more Korean workers in North Korea, then still technically under a Soviet military administration. In the late 1940s, few ten thousands North Koreans signed up to work at the Soviet Far East, and in some points in the late 1940s and early 1950s their numbers in Sakhalin alone exceeded 10,000 (about a third of the entire Korean community). It was assumed that those workers, usually employed by the fisheries, would go back home once their contract period – typically, between one and three years – would expire. Some of them were indeed sent back home by 1950, but then the Korean War prevented them from returning. According to a 1952 document, at the time 9,500 North Korean workers and their family members lived at the island.[6]

The natives of southern Korean provinces, who formed a majority among the Sakhalin Koreans, look at these new arrivals from the North with some suspicion, but most suspicion was reserved for another, much smaller group – the so-called 'continental Koreans' who also arrived to the island from Central Asia in the late 1940s.

From the very beginning, the Soviet authorities felt insecure about the presence of numerous Koreans, none of whom spoke Russian, and none of whom had been indoctrinated in the ways of the Soviet society. To control the community, but also to facilitate interaction between Korean workers and Russian managers and provide Korean population with basic services, they needed bilingual translators, educators, journalists.

Logically enough, those people were found in Central Asia, where there was a large Korean community, then numbering some 200,000. Those people were descendants of the farmers who escaped from northern parts of Korea before 1917. They initially settled near Vladivostok, but in 1937 the entire Korean population was moved to Central Asia. In spite of the cruelty of this measure, and subsequent period of discrimination, the 'continental Koreans' were remarkably loyal to the Communist system (and those who did not, still knew how to keep their mouth shut). Needless to say, they were thoroughly Soviet in their education and worldview, and usually spoke fluent Russian.

Hence, the government selected some 2,000 politically reliable Koreans in Central Asia and sent them to work at Sakhalin as teachers, journalists, translators and clerks. They had to reeducate the local community in the true Soviet spirit. They became school teachers and administrators,

[6] A.T.Kuzin. Sahalinskiie koreitsy: istoriia i sovremennost (Sakhalin Koreans: past and present). Yuzhnosahalinsk, Yuzhnosahalinskoe izdatelstvo, 2006, p.150.

police and KGB officers, editors of the local Korean language newspaper, officials of the bodies which dealt with the Koreans.

Not unsurprisingly, many members of the island community were not particularly eager to be re-educated. The 'continentals' met with disdain and hostility which remained palpable until the 1980s. They were seen as agents of authority about which a majority of Sakhalin Koreans were not very happy. Actually, if one takes into account not only serious tensions between two Korean communities, but significant cultural and linguistic differences which separated them, it becomes difficult to talk about one Soviet Korean community. Actually, there were two such communities: one which included the Koreans of Central Asia and another, much smaller, which included Koreans of Sakhalin island.

In April 1952, after the San Francisco Treaty was signed, the Japanese government formally stripped all Koreans and Taiwanese off the Japanese citizenship. This decision which had a major impact on the Korean community in Japan, also influenced the Sakhalin Koreans: they officially became stateless.[7] Having lost their Japanese citizenship, they acquired neither citizenship of the USSR nor of any Korean state.

This legal situation meant considerable legal difficulties, since it was not easy to live in the USSR as a stateless person. Every three months such person would have to go to a police station to get an extension of residence permit. Any trip outside one's native town or district required a special police permit, and application for such permit should be lodged at least three days before the intended trip. Until 1956 it was impossible for 'stateless' Sakhalin Koreans to enter a college, and since 1956 they were only allowed to enter a local pedagogical college, and no managerial job could be taken by them. For few years in the late 1940s even their marriages with the Soviet citizens were not allowed: for a while in the late 1940s and early 1950s the Soviet law forbade marriages with foreign citizens, and Sakhalin Koreans had been officially considered 'foreigners'. In some cases, the Koreans as 'aliens' were forcefully relocated from the vicinity of the important military installations. Last but not least, it made them ineligible for nearly all managerial jobs, and precluded them from joining the Communist party (a prerequisite for any successful administrative career until 1991). Finally, the stateless people could not go overseas, since nobody would issue them a passport, and even travel outside the island needed permits which were remarkably difficult to arrange.

In 1953 the Soviet authorities finally decreed that Koreans would be allowed to take up Soviet citizenship if they wish to do so. Nonetheless, this offer initially had few takers: the Sakhalin Koreans were remarkably reluctant to naturalize. Most of them still wanted to go to their home towns in South Korea, but by the 1950s they had learned enough about the Soviet system to understand: once they take Soviet citizenship, they will probably lose all chances to leave the

[7]On the 'citizenship circular' and its impact on the legal standing of the Korean communities, see David Chapman. Zainichi Korean: identity and ethnicity. London; New York : Routledge, 2008, p.69-70.

country. Until the late 1960s the Soviet government never allowed its citizens to go overseas for permanent settlement, and an attempt to do so was treated as a serious crime.

At the same time, the legal inconveniencies of their statelessness did not worry them that much. Most of the first generation Koreans were unskilled laborers who seldom needed to leave their towns and villages and would not be eligible for any managerial job anyway.

Thus, according to a 1958 Soviet internal document, of some 32,000 Koreans who then lived at the island, 6,891 had North Korean citizenship (they were workers recruited by the Soviet military administration of North Korea in the late 1940s, and their children) while some 3,000 were holders of the Soviet passports (those were overwhelmingly 'continental Koreans', officials and educators, sent to the island from Central Asia). All others – 22,184 – were stateless. [8]They believed that this was a way to return home eventually.

The Korean Armistice of 1953, the normalization of the relations between Soviet Union and Japan in 1956 and some other international events heightened expectations about repatriation.

A small number of Koreans indeed managed to leave in the late 1950s. As we have mentioned above, during the mass expulsion of the Japanese population in the late 1940s, some Japanese spouses of local Koreans were allowed to stay with their families (no Korean was allowed to accompany his or her Japanese spouse during the first population transfer of the late 1940s). In 1956 the Soviet government agreed to let Koreans follow their Japanese family members if the latter choose to go to Japan. Few hundred people left then, including 294 'stateless' Koreans. Among those people there was Pak No-hak who later became an unofficial representative of the Sakhalin Koreans in Japan (he was married to a Japanese woman).

Meanwhile, the economics of the community began to change. Most Koreans still worked in mining and logging, but in the late 1950s many discovered a new, profitable activity which required a lot of hard labor and persistence, but neither citizenship nor education - small-scale vegetable farming.

The Sakhalin food situation in the 1950s was remarkably bad. A professor of the Sakhalin University, whose childhood was spent at the island in the 1950s, told me recently: "Without Koreans we would not starve, perhaps, but we would have to sustain on the almost uneatable stuff they used to ship here from the continent. You cannot imagine the disgusting taste of dried potatoes and dried onions which used to be our staple food before the Korean farms flourished". Indeed, Russian farmers, unused to the peculiarities local climate and soil, could not produce fresh food in sufficient quantities – especially under the notoriously inefficient system of the "collective farms".

Large private farms were not legally possible in those days, but Koreans managed to get exceptional harvests from those small plots which could be owned privately. By the 1960s, a

[8] A.T.Kuzin. Sahalinskiie koreitsy: istoriia i sovremennost (Sakhalin Koreans: past and present). Yuzhnosahalinsk, Yuzhnosahalinskoe izdatelstvo, 2006, p.196-197.

majority of the Korean women (and many men) spent their days working at these tiny but efficient farms. Thus, they earned much respect from the locals – and also money which were soon invested into the education of their children, the Sakhaliin Koreans of the next generation.

Meanwhile, the first generation of the southerners, then still in their 40s and 50s, badly wanted to return to their native lands in the southern parts of Korean Peninsula. The Soviet authorities would not allow such a large-scale resettlement to South Korea, but had a different attitude to those Koreans who had arrived to Sakhalin from North Korea in the late 1940s. Authorities wanted them to leave, and from 1954 the instructions were frequently sent to the local police to persuade the former North Korean contract workers that it was a good idea to go home.

These attempts at persuasion found much support from Pyongyang. Around the same time, officials the North Korean consulate, located in the port city of Nakhodka (near Vladivostok – the latter, being a naval base, was off limits for foreign diplomats in those times), became remarkably active in the island. Obviously, North Korean diplomats and spies were encouraged by their recent political success in Japan. Japan had a large Korean population, whose members (much like Sakhalin Koreans) were recent migrants from South Korea. The North Korean agencies succeeded in persuading them to choose North Korean citizenship and for two or three decades the Japanese-Korean community remained surprisingly loyal to Kim Il Sung's regime. Their association, Soren (or Ch'ongruyon) became a powerful state-within-state which often broke Japanese laws with impunity and provided North Korean regime with considerable funds and valuable intelligence. In the late 1950s and early 1960s Pyongyang also succeeded in luring some 95,000 ethnic Koreans from Japan to North Korea.

Nowadays it is difficult to believe that North Korea, a brutal impoverished dictatorship, once enjoyed a great popularity among the Asian countries and also in Korean communities overseas. Nonetheless, around 1960 North Korea – due partially to its actual achievements, but also to remarkable skills of its propaganda mongers – was seen as a beacon of progress in many Asian countries. The Sakhalin Korean community did not avoid this temptation, and for a brief while it appeared that Sakhalin Koreans were also eager to side with Pyongyang and perceive North Korea as their 'true motherland'.

The North Korean diplomats and intelligence agents worked hard to persuade 'stateless' Koreans to choose North Korean citizenship. They insisted that, after all, "Korea is one", and it would not matter in which province of the native country a person would live for a while (of course, not for long: unification was just beyond the corner, they assured).

Indeed, in the late 1950s Sakhalin Koreans came to prefer North Korean, not Soviet, citizenship. For example, in 1958 the Sakhalin police office surveyed the local 'stateless' Korean population (that is, Koreans who originally came from the South). According to the survey, 9,836 said that, given the choice, they would rather remain persons without citizenship, 6,346 opted for the North Korean passports, while merely 1,008 expressed their wish to become Soviet citizens.[9]

[9] A.T.Kuzin. Sahalinskiie koreitsy: istoriia i sovremennost (Sakhalin Koreans: past and present). Yuzhnosahalinsk, Yuzhnosahalinskoe izdatelstvo, 2006, p.193-194.

Between 1956 and 1962 some four thousand Sakhalin Koreans moved to Kim Il Sung's 'paradise on earth'. This number included few formerly stateless Koreans who had taken the DPRK citizenship.

At the same time, the North Korean agents began to create a semi-clandestine network which, they hoped, would allow to remove the local Koreans from the Soviet influence and redeem them into the 'loyal soldiers of the Dear Leader'. The 'study groups' (haksŭpcho) looked innocuous at first: they taught Korean language, history and culture (heavily mixed with North Korean propaganda, of course). However, soon the groups began to change. The pro-Soviet Koreans who were present there were pushed aside and sometimes subjected to violent attacks. A clandestine pro-Pyongyang network began to emerge.

However, it did not last. First, the Soviet Union was no Japan, and the KGB would not tolerate a Ch'ongruyon-type organization on the Soviet soil. After all, in spite of official rhetoric, relations between Moscow and Pyongyang in the 1960s were tense, even hostile. Second, Sakhalin Koreans themselves were soon disappointed about North Korea.

Stories about the life in North Korea began to filter out in the late 1950s, and in no time the idea of repatriation to North Korea lost its appeal. The last group, some 500 people, left the island for North Korea in 1962. Since then, nobody wanted to go. By the mid-1960s few had doubts that the life in the USSR, however poor and restricted it might have been, was still free and affluent if compared to Kim Il Song's alleged 'paradise on earth".

Three former Sakhalin Koreans who made a mistake of going North, staged a bold escape back across the Soviet border. They were allowed to regain their Soviet citizenship (one of them eventually became a journalist in Moscow radio). Some others could not escape but smuggled letters which left no doubt about how North Koreans really lived.

So, North Korea became decisively unpopular at the community. An elder Korean intellectual told me: "Frankly, we were not proud of being Korean until the late 1980s. Everybody then thought of North Korea as a sole Korea, and people here, in Sakhalin, knew very well what an awful place it is". North Korean mirage, briefly attractive in the late 1950s, collapsed. However, it had an unintended consequence later, in the 1970s when this short-lived infatuation with Kim Il Sung's regime was used by the authorities as a tool to silence the emerging opposition on the island.

In 1974 a sudden change in the domestic and international situation led to a revival of hope for repatriation which by that time were almost dead. By that time, the USSR was far more liberal (and, for that matter, affluent) place than at any point of its history. In the 1970s, the Soviet government began to allow Jews to leave the country. It signaled a change in the Soviet approach to emigration which used to be uncompromisingly negative.

In 1974, Japanese government stated that it would accept those Sakhalin Koreans who would be allowed to go by the Soviet authorities. Surprisingly, the Japanese offer was taken by Moscow.

Initially it was assumed that numbers of the potential emigrants would be small (dozens, perhaps) – after all, the younger generations of Koreans were well adapted to the new life and were doing well. But things took another turn: to the embarrassment of Moscow, hundreds, and then thousands, of the Sakhalin Koreans were willing to apply. In some cases, it seems, it was the Confucian family ethics at work: while younger generations did not really want to go, they were ready to obediently follow their parents for whom the return to the native lands was a long-cherished dream. At any rate, this was a potential humiliation. The North Koreans also put great pressure on Moscow, demanding to stop the process. To complicate things further, the relations with Japan deteriorate when in 1976 a Soviet air force pilot defected to Japan with his new fighter jet. So in late 1976, the earlier decision was reversed: Soviet authorities declared that no repatriation would take place.

This came as a shock to many older Koreans whose cherished dream suddenly collapsed after being so closed to realization. Sakhalin, like most Soviet countryside, was habitually docile in matters of politics, but this time a spontaneous 'repatriation movement' began to unroll. In late 1976, the family of To Man-sang who lived in the small town of Korsakov, on the southern coast of the island, undertook a desperate measure: they staged a demonstration in front of the local Party office. They hold placards which expressed their demand: "let us go!"

Soviet Union of the late 1970s was a relatively liberal place if compared to Stalin's era, but still less liberal than, say, South Korea under the "iron fisted rule" of General Pak. The Korsakov demonstration constituted a dangerous and unprecedented challenge, and Soviet authorities reacted swiftly.

Unfortunately, To Man-sang and his family members hold North Korean citizenship, although they initially came to the island from the South. Available documents do not clarify when and how they acquired it. It seems that they were among those Sakhalin Koreans who in the late 1950s took the North Korean citizenship, being driven by the nationalist feelings. This decision backfired.

In early 1977, To Man-sang and his family were extradited to North Korea as 'undesirable aliens'. Soon, they were followed by three other families of prominent repatriation activists. Throughout 1977, 40 Sakhalin Koreans were sent (essentially, as prisoners, under armed guard) to the border railway station of Khasan where they were transferred to the North Korean authorities.[10]

The Soviet government saved itself from an embarrassment of putting to prison people whose only crime was desire to go back to their native lands. At the same time, everybody understood: have the activists been tried in the USSR, they would get a few years of imprisonment at worst, while sending these people to North Korea likely meant a death sentence –and not only for them, but for their families, too. Indeed, in 1977 North Korea was an exceptionally brutal dictatorship. The North Korean authorities would not treat nicely people

[10] A.T.Kuzin. Sahalinskiie koreitsy: istoriia i sovremennost (Sakhalin Koreans: past and present). Yuzhnosahalinsk, Yuzhnosahalinskoe izdatelstvo, 2006, p.268-272.

who technically were North Korean citizens, but openly expressed their wish to go to South Korea – more so since they initiated a movement which nearly led to a serious loss of face by Pyongyang regime. At best, those 'traitors' would be sent to prison camps, but it seems probable that they all were put to death almost immediately.

After 1990, the families and NGOs, as well as official Soviet agencies made inquiries about the fate of those people. Needless to say, Pyongyang remained silent.

The story terrified the community whose members by that time had no illusions about North Korea. The repatriation movement was instantly dead. An activist's son explained me the position of his father: "My father once told me: 'Perhaps, I would not be that afraid of a prison. But they could send me to North Korea, together with all of you. And this is much, much worse than going to prison. North Korea is a hell'. So my father dropped out".

Meanwhile, the community at large was changing. Once the hopes of repatriation diminished and Pyongyang mirage collapsed, the Sakhalin Koreans began to take Soviet citizenship. It liberated their children from manifold restrictions: being Soviet citizens they could enter best schools and occupy almost any jobs. Some discrimination persisted: it was an open secret that only people born Soviet citizens would be normally eligible for the most prestigious and/or sensitive jobs. Nonetheless, compared to the position of a stateless person, this change of standing meant a dramatic increase of the available career prospects – and most good jobs were not seen as security-sensitive anyway.

Those who had acquired North Korean citizenship during the short period of pro-Pyongyang illusions or had it from the beginning, as former recruited workers, faced a major obstacle. In order to apply for Soviet citizenship, they had to formally renounce their North Koran citizenship and produce a proper certificate from North Korean consulate. Such certificate was never issued, so Soviet officials devised a clever way to get around this uncompromising stance of the North Korean officialdom. They advised the applicants to send their North Korean passport to the consulate by registered mail (in such case, the postal receipt had to contain a brief description of the envelope content – that is, in this case, a valid North Korean passport). After no reply from the consulate was received for six months, the proper paperwork could begin. By the early 1980s, a majority of Sakhalin Koreans were neither stateless persons nor overseas citizens of the DPRK. They were Soviet citizens, albeit their loyalty, to be frank, was not always perfect.

From the 1960s the signs of assimilation were increasingly visible at the island community. In 1945 few if any Korean could utter a word of Russian. Those who came to the island from North Korea in 1946-1949 to work at fishing and timber industry hardly had better command of the language. Thus, for a decade or two the Sakhalin Korean community could function in Korean only.

In the 1950s, most Korean kids attended Korean language schools. In the post-war Soviet Union, still a very poor place, it took major efforts to provide these schools with textbooks (they had to be either translated from Russian or written specially and then printed) and teaching material,

but it was done. A junior college was maintained at the island in order to rain teachers for the Korean language schools. Until the early 1960s, Korean Culture House operated in the island's administrative center. For a while, even a small Korean language theater existed in the island. The North Korean films were widely screened, and in some cases Korean subtitles were prepared for the Russian language films.

From 1951 a Korean language newspaper (called 'Lenin-ui kil-lo' or 'Followig Lenin's path') began to be published at the island. It was generously subsidized by the administration, so from 1952 it was published five times a week, with circulation of 10-12,000 copies. Sakhalin radio stations made regular Korean language broadcast.

However, in 1963-64 a major change too place: all Korean schools were closed down, with its teachers and students being transferred to Russian schools. This step is often described as an attempt at forced Russification, but talks to the elder Koreans make the present author skeptical about this explanation. The witnesses insist that the major force behind the switch to the Russian-language education were Koreans themselves.

By the mid-1960s the Korean community changed much. Elders still hoped to go home, but the younger generation had different ideas: it was Russian Sakhalin which was their home, not some province of Korea's South. In many cases, their parents also changed their mind: like Koreans worldwide, they highly valued education and jobs which were associated with education. From 1956 even stateless Koreans could be accepted at a local college, and very soon they came to be overrepresented among the most successful students.

However, a Russian-language education was necessary to increase chances to succeed in a Russian-speaking environment. Graduates of Korean middle schools had problems with advanced education. Had their parents wanted their kids to become fishermen or miners or vegetable farmers, they would not probably mind. But they had far more ambitious plans in mind – and did their best to teach their kids in Russian, so they could easily become engineers, doctors, professors. For an aspiring engineer or lawyer, learning Korean was, essentially, an unproductive waste of time, so only few undertook such an endeavor.

However, even after the switch to the Russian language education, the Korean culture sphere survived in the island – largely thanks to generous government subsidies. It was an interesting peculiarity of the Soviet policy. On one hand, the state did encourage Russification, but at the same time it spent huge sums of money on supporting minorities' languages and cultures, even when the minorities in question did not show much interest about their supposed 'heritage'.

Nonetheless, by the end of the Soviet period the younger generations were increasingly assimilated into Russian culture. According to 1970 census, 28,000 of some 35,000 Sakhalin Koreans listed Korean as their primary native language. In 1989, there were only 13,000 such people. In other words, by 1990 some two thirds of the Sakhalin Koreans had limited or no knowledge of their ancestors' language.

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And what has happened to the Korean community after the end of the Soviet Union, in a new Russia?

For Sakhalin, the disintegration of the Soviet system in 1991 was a mixed blessing. Initially, the island experienced a wave of enthusiasm for democracy and market economy. However, the events of the early 1990s dealt a heavy blow to the region which heavily depended on the government subsidies. Unemployment became the norm, and incomes shrank.

So, it comes as no surprise that nowadays many locals long about the lost stability of the Soviet days. That large statue of Lenin still dominates the main square of Yuzhnosakhalinsk (and incidentally, the above mentioned Korean candidate ran on the ticket of the Communist party). Only in the early 2000s the economic situation began to improve, largely thanks to an oil boom: rich oil and natural gas deposits were discovered in the seas around the island.

However, for the Korean community the perestroika meant the "opening" of South Korea, land of their ancestors. Since the late 1980s the stories about material prosperity and technological success of South Korea were widely reported in the press – and enthusiastically retold by Koreans. Visits to Seoul soon became a commonplace, and nowadays Aseana operates daily flights to the island.

These contacts brought new employment opportunities, but also a new self-perception. For decades, the Koreans saw North Korea as "their country" – and everybody knew that it was a destitute dictatorship. The "discovery" of South Korea in the late 1980s, after the 1988 Olympics, changed perception of Koreans. The cultural associations, language classes, circles of national dance and other similar organizations flourished in the new environment. For a while people say that the general revival of Korean culture and language was just behind the corner.

Finally, in the late 1990s, persistent efforts of the Korean activists and their friends in Japan, South Korean and other countries helped to solve the oldest problem of the community. Japan and Korea jointly funded the construction of a special apartment complex near Incheon. This complex houses those elder Koreans who wish to come back to Korea. One has to be born before 1945 to be eligible for this program. The returnees are entitled to normal South Korean social benefits and old age pension. As of January 2009, there were 2,300 elder Sakhalin Koreans who resided in this apartment complex. Finally, they realized the dream which once was so important for the Sakhalin Koreans.

Meanwhile their children and grandchildren are remarkably good in adjusting to the new life of the island. Koreans are overrepresented among the elite professionals of Sakhalin nowadays. If judged by the education level and income, the Sakhalin Koreans were very successful in the last days of the USSR, and they became even more successful after the demise of the Soviet Union. The post-Soviet social transformation meant that old restrictions became irrelevant. The quite discrimination disappeared as well.

However, contrary to earlier expectations, this success did not translate into the revival of Korean culture. In the early 1990s many young Koreans began to study their ancestors' language, but nearly all of them eventually gave up. For native speakers of Russian, Korean is exceedingly difficult, but fluency in Korean does not help the average inhabitant of Sakhalin that much. So, younger Koreans tend to make a rational choice: if they take up language studies, they prefer to study English or, if they want a challenge, Japanese (Japanese business is much present at the island). It is telling that in the last years the Korean language department of the Yuzhnosakhalinsk State University struggles to find enough applicants to fill the quota of fully subsidized students – that is, students who study for free. However, most of the Koreans are now becoming Russians – albeit a particular kind of Russians, with intense sympathies towards South Korea, strong anti-Pyongyang feelings and also with a love for seafood generously spiced with chili pepper.