

Life on a Soviet fish processing freighter. **BY KEVIN LEDUC**

**S**kimming into the fog in a Zodiac two miles off the coast of Rockland, I see an ominous black silhouette slowly beginning to take shape, like a magic mountain. Speeding closer, details rush toward me with a shock as the rusty fishing vessel looms over us, growing in apparent height. “Is that the ship?” I ask.

Looking amidship, I see her smokestack statuesquely reaching into the sky. Firmly imprinted on her stack, in deep rich colors of red and yellow, shimmers the hammer and sickle.





# DIPLOMACY

The Soviet freighter *Riga*'s journey has been as long as mine has been short. Her name is derived from the city of Riga, capital of Latvia.

Her home port is Murmansk, population 380,000, in the Soviet Republic. Owned by Northern Cold Storage Fishing Fleet of Murmansk, the *Riga* has a crew of 108 men and eight women from the country villages and cities throughout the Republic. Men from

Kiev, Riga, Minsk, Bryansk, and Estonia flock to Murmansk to work on fishing vessels that fish the world's oceans.

But here, off the coast of Maine? My eyes involuntarily widen. Then I burst out laughing. To the rear of the vessel, a local fishing boat is unloading a Plymouth Horizon onto the Soviet ship. Dangling precariously between the two pitching decks, it seems almost too symbolic an expres-

sion of the transfer of western theory and culture to the Soviets as Perestroika jumps into reality. I look at the car and oddly hope it has an automatic transmission.

**7:37 a.m.** In a joint venture with Resource Trading Co. of Portland, the *Riga* is here to purchase pogies from American fishermen, then process the fish into fish meal and fish oil. The ship is automated and is





## LET'S JUST CALL FOR A PIZZA

News item: "For years, they'd thought of Maine as lonely duty—a dark continent inaccessible to Soviets (and possibly hostile) as they floated outside the 3-mile limit [aboard] their fishing freighter *Riga*. A few lonely streetlights connecting Maine towns in the distance, glares from U.S. fishermen en route to fishing grounds... Then *Glasnost*, and suddenly the **Rockland Domino's** is starting pizza deliveries...



"Something with vodka on it!" "Double anchovies!" Speculation grew rampant, says Bob Mitch, who coordinated the delivery of 60 hot pizzas and several cases of Coca-Cola. But the final tally is 20 pepperoni ("everybody likes pepperoni"), 10 cheese, 10 hamburger, and 20 assorted. At sea, the Soviet cable lowers nets to the deck of the *Domino Effect* delivery boat, where cold-numbered fingers slip and lose fully half the cargo into the mountainous green swells. A Soviet crewman strips off his wristwatch in trade for an American model, sends it down, but it too falls into the slapping waves. Still, everyone's all smiles as the historic transfer begins something new for all of us, a spirited attempt at fruitful communication, trade, and cooperation.

—Susan Gillmor







capable of processing 20 to 30 tons of fish an hour.

Like U.S. fishing ships, she's a highly efficient killing machine poised far from home. To the *Riga's* crew, Maine is the far-flung end of the world.

Throughout the autumn days and nights, American fishing vessels have come to the *Riga* to unload their catch. Twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week.

No leaves, no holidays; the crew has not been to shore in six months.

How ironic—as I write, some men play a game of Chinese billiards on the deck as if they're not in sight of land and fewer than three miles away lies solid ground. *Amerika*. After a game of billiards, I ask one of the players what he thinks of the North Atlantic Coast. He says he doesn't know, he's never been here. "Are there beautiful mountains and trees there?" he asks. The conversation struggles on in broken sentences and hand gestures. He likes European football, which he plays daily on an enclosed deck. Baseball? "Nyet!" He knows nothing about baseball.

**8:11 a.m.** Left alone, I'm free to wander about the ship. My passage leads me to the captain's quarters.

The door opens; I peer in. *Hello?* No re-

sponse. Entering, I notice a photograph of Mikhail Gorbachev on the wall. I tiptoe over for a look. The photograph is almost surrealistic, but there's something odd about it. I peer even closer. Then it dawns on me. No discolored birth mark!

**8:17 a.m.** Voices come from behind. Surprising me as they enter are the captain and Steve, the only American who lives on



board. Steve is a marine biologist whose job is to sample the fish for disease and general health, as well as monitor the catch. The captain, shaking my hand firmly, says, "Hello, I am Vadim Khrulev, captain of the *Riga*."



The *Riga's* trilingual Captain Khrulev has "fished the sea for 16 years and traveled in 29 countries."



## GLASNOST

"Hello, I am Kevin, the first mate."

I'm dumbfounded when both the captain and Steve roar a laugh. "OK, first mate," Captain Khrulev says. "Have a seat, let's talk!"

I ask Steve what's so amusing. Steve explains that unlike American ships, the first mate aboard Soviet vessels is the political officer. His duty is to be the voice of Moscow to all foreign companies and governments. We settle in and talk some more.

**11 :41 a.m.** Up on deck, Capt. Khrulev explains the *Riga* to me. Built in 1958, *Riga* can hold 750 metric tons of fish oil; she produces 90 metric tons of oil in one day. In two-and-a-half months she's spent off Rockland, *Riga* has produced more than 350,000 metric tons of fish oil. "What is the meal and fish oil for?" I ask.

"Pogies are quite rich in protein, which makes an excellent nutritional additive for animals, particularly chicken and cattle." When refined, the fish oil makes a high grade oil for use in fine machinery. Khrulev explains the Soviet Union exports much of the oil from Murmansk to Norway and other European countries. There, the fish oil is used as a food additive in margarine, as an ingredient in the production of cosmetics such as lipstick, and also as a vitamin supplement.

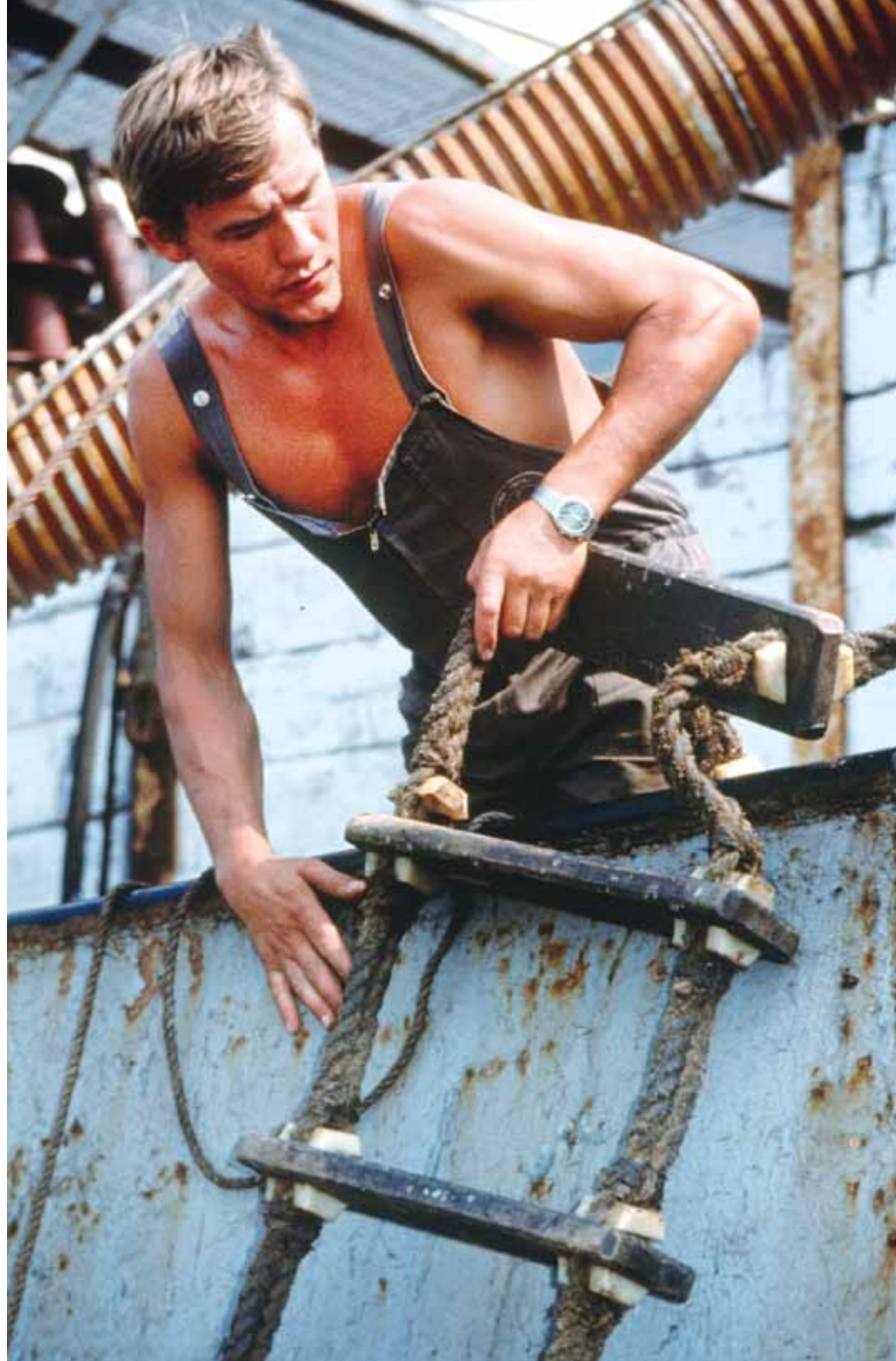
This is Khrulev's first year as commander of the *Riga*. The trip has been "refreshing." Ordinarily, his assignment brings him off the Spanish Sahara Coast in Africa, fishing for sardines. "Not a pleasant time," he says. "Fishing is often difficult."

"Is it hot?"

"Yes, the civil war there is hot. The sun is, too."

Back in his office, Khrulev reveals he speaks both English and German; he considers German the easier of the two. "My daughter, she is 12; she has learned English in school, too. She is talented in music and art. I have many hopes for her. My son is seven. He will learn English this year in the first grade."

Khrulev stops our conversation, turns to open the top drawer of his desk, and takes out a photograph of himself with his wife and children poised behind a small, cartoon-like statue. "The picture was taken on Constitution Day." In the background of the photo lies the greenery of a



small park. In the distance stands a plain concrete and stucco apartment building. Khrulev tells me they once celebrated this holiday in October, but because this version of the constitution only lasted for one year, this place is now nothing.

"What was your first impression of Americans?" I ask.

"Normal. I have fished the sea for 16 years and traveled in 29 countries. Americans here are the same as Americans overseas. Friendly, normal, behave like they

should, civilized."

"Have you ever visited America?"

"Yes, one time we visited Portland."

"How were you greeted?"

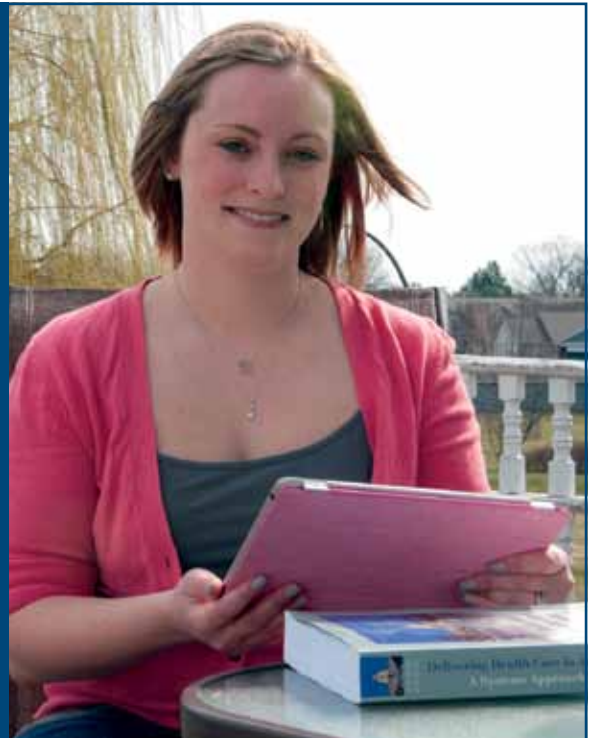
"Normal. I was not spooked by the Americans, and they were not spooked by me. I liked the visit to Portland's City Council meeting most. I like the way I was received and how friendly the people were to each other. I like the rituals that were involved with the meeting. The people were

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### Pizza Diplomacy (continued from page 30)

very serious, honor their flag, and have allegiance to the government. The meeting is designed to make you feel the decisions that are made are right and just. The people don't look as if they are tired or bored of the process. Nothing like this happens in my homeland. In Russia, I have never been to a political meeting. In Russia, people do not feel this way..." Khrulev then becomes guarded and seems somewhat reluctant to discuss his thoughts openly...

**1:51 p.m.** As if to bail out his captain, a sailor calls out in Russian, "Has the Geiger counter arrived?"



"Ya," replies the Captain, "and it has been calibrated, too."

"Why the Geiger counter?" I ask.

"The captain of the transport ship from Russia is concerned that their meat is radioactive because the beef came from an area near Chernobyl."

**2:24 p.m.** The people on the ship are in exceptional physical condition. Their physique is attributed to the hard labor and diet. Their menu is high in starch, carbohydrates, and protein. Yogurt, meat, and tons of potatoes are the basic staples of their meals. Round this out with oxtail soup, bread, and tea. Evidence of their yogurt intake is everywhere—empty containers are used as drinking glasses, pencil holders, and storage containers.

**4:49 p.m.** When they aren't wearing their universal fish-processing coveralls, they dress quite differently. Mikal, the deck officer, is dressed in American clothing—a Polo shirt, khaki trousers, Dockside shoes, and Ray-Ban sunglasses. If it weren't for his Russian accent, Mikal would easily be mistaken for an American preppy. In contrast, Shalkav is all 1960s—black jacket, cigarette,

Euro-beat *Unbearable Lightness of Being*. With Russian music serenading us in the background, we talk and exchange trinkets. I end up with Soviet cigarettes—a curious red and white package with, yes, a Soviet Surgeon General's warning on the side. Seems they're all trying to quit, too. Mikal can watch both American and Russian television. Back home, he listens to the BBC and Radio Free Europe. Before Perestroika, he says, Moscow radio didn't tell the news the same as the BBC, but now "There is no difference."

"What do you have to look forward to when you get home?" I ask him.

"Nothing," he replies. "Very bad, no money. *Chut, chut*, a little bit I have," he says. He pulls out a paper ruble. "Here," he says, "a gift for you." With reluctance, I accept. He explains that a ruble's worth depends on who you trade with. One U.S. dollar can buy from 60 to 2,000 rubles.

"Do you practice religion?"

"No, Communist," Mikal says. "No problem." Then he reaches under his shirt and shows me a silver cross. It is the Eucharist cross, the symbol of Orthodox Catholicism.

"You are Christian," I say.



"No, Communist."

Just then a slender, somewhat meek man approaches and begins speaking to Shalkav, who tells me, "This is Dr. Ke-memovov Dmitmi, the ship's dentist. Come, he welcomes you to his cabin for a visit."

**5:42 p.m.** Dr. Dmitmi was educated as a dentist in Leningrad, where he now lives with his wife Natili. As the ship's dentist, he's equipped to perform minor surgery, but he finds himself generally involved with cleaning and filling cavities. Many of the Russian men have gold teeth. Why? Dr. Dmitmi explains that filling teeth with gold is no longer done, but some men do have their teeth capped with the gold from their wedding bands, though the practice is fading. Today, men who cap their teeth in gold are considered behind the times, bumpkins.

**6:15 p.m.** Standing on deck, looking out, I hear a hello from behind me. Peering out a cabin window is a bearded man smiling broadly, his gold tooth glimmering in the sunlight. "Hello, my name is Alexander. You are a journalist..."

**6:21 p.m.** Alexander is a machinist from a village on the Ukrainian/Russian border. "Come, come see my shop." We rush through narrow corridors and down a steep stairwell into the belly of the ship. He opens a heavy steel door into a dark enclo-

Alexander, the engineer, coaxes soulful music from his accordion; spontaneous dancing results.




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## GLASNOST

sure and slaps the tops of giant metal objects. "I fix them," he indicates with no lack of gesturing. "Russian computers!" he says, and then laughs at his joke. "Let's go and dance," he says to my surprise.

Back in his cabin, he picks up an accordion and creates a sound I've never heard

from an accordion before. U.S. players are jerky, showy. This is a cooing sound, wonderfully charming and understated, with a distinct cultural flavor. I stare at the invisible music coming from his arms. He is playing from the heart.

### Fun Fact:

While we were preparing this story for publication in 1990, we received a call from Nobel laureate Czesław Miłosz, who was interested in this most unusual situation and our coverage of it, along with other stories we were doing on Polish echoes and the Lithuanian Friars at the Franciscan Monastery in Kennebunk. We believe he heard about our Ethnicities Issue from Tomislav Longinovic of the Iowa Writers' Workshop, who has twice written for *Portland Magazine*.



**6:29 p.m.** Then he stops. "My harmonica!" he proclaims. People surround and start to cheer. One by one, each man takes center stage to dance, amid more cheers. One dancer challenges another and another. Everyone is dancing. The small stateroom is getting hotter and hotter and the laughter more robust in the cold Soviet freighter that has inspired so much fear along the Maine coast for so many years. ■



# Party Like It's 1989

(Yes, Devonsquare *did* play aboard the *Riga*)

"It's been so long! A riot? My God, yes," laughs Alana MacDonald, a founding member of the band Devonsquare, who performed aboard the Russian fish processing ship off Rockland in 1990. "Our friend Nina Carter's brother Spencer Fuller booked us aboard the *Riga*—he had something to do with the marine industry. It was so primitive! We went out there on a little launch, and they had this sort of pontoon bobber—it was like an egg. We had to jump from the launch into it without falling in the water and drowning. Then they hauled up our equipment. They all looked at us so silently in this strange way. They were paranoid! That's the way they lived. They brought us into this little theater, we performed, and they loved it, it was a big thing.

"Afterward, we were invited to the captain's quarters for a drink. It was a Flash Gordon time warp! The captain's quarters were so bare and out of date. He had vodka. There was a knock at the door. The cook reached in and handed the captain something. I thought, oh no, it's a gun!

"It was a lemon, *one* lemon. You'd have thought it was the golden egg, it was such a big deal! We'd drink a shot of vodka, sprinkle sugar on a thin slice of lemon, and suck the lemon.

"We made good friends with Victor Sobor-

nov, the second mate, and kept in touch. Two years later, the *Riga* was in Boston when we were there. The Russians could go ashore by then. We all had dinner at Maison Robert and drank champagne. Then we put him up where we were staying, at the Parker House. Wonderful guy. His father was murdered by the KGB."



Devonsquare's performance aboard the *Riga* (Alana MacDonald is at the microphone) leads to shipboard partying and friendship with second mate Victor Sobornov (left).



## RIGA RECALLED

Twenty-four years after writing and photographing this story, Kevin LeDuc still feels its power. "Everyone was acting like the *Riga* was a spy boat. Whatever it was, it was also a pogie processor. Remember back then, when Maine had a huge pogie problem and they were just washing up on the beaches? Russia was falling apart economically, and they needed food. They showed us their refrigerator for the galley. 'Chernobyl steaks,' they said of the discounted beef they used. 'Pre-microwaved.' A lot of the crew came from Revenek on the North Sea."

LeDuc's visit was all on the quiet, of course. You just didn't walk onto the "pizza boat" on the Maine coast and demand a passage to the *Riga*. It took nerve and friendliness, and LeDuc has both.

"I had to go out there three times beyond the six-mile limit to international waters, where the *Riga* was, to earn their trust. I rode in an American fishing boat, then transferred to a Zodiac. The first two times, I didn't bring a camera."

Pizza was just the tip of the iceberg in private trading during this sensitive period of Détente, when U.S. and Soviet relations were warming up. "I saw an entire new Volkswagen bug being transferred from an American trawler to the *Riga*, lifted high in the air by cranes. Miles of new blue jeans. The Maine coastal fishermen weren't happy about my being on hand, watching this. They were very protective, like wolves. Their social network is who they trust: family members. People whose families they've known for three or four generations.

"One American fishermen was giving me the eye, like I was going to swipe his wallet, disturb his private world. It was easy to read his mind: It's taken time to make these Russian guys my buddies—I've been working with them, fishing with them (several U.S. boats were nested up against the *Riga*), trading with them all summer long, and here's this guy—me—crashing in, maybe ruining everything. He's looking at me and thinking, people get what they earn, and you haven't earned anything. I was in a situation that could have developed very poorly very quickly.

"On the last day I got to go on the *Riga*, there was a show. The ship's bleak auditorium had banners and paintings from the Soviet Union era, plenty of deep reds, and the lights went out. It was Devon-square on the stage. I was astonished. Who possibly could have booked them here? How did they get here? For a moment, I was in Oz—if *The Wizard of Oz* had been shot inside the ribs of a tanker. What a culture dash, with dangling speakers on the ribs!

"Finally, I was asked to two parties. What did crew party about? Hey, we're here for a year, processing pogies! I went into the captain's cabin, and Sasha's cabin. It seemed in that cell there were five or six Russian crewmen, two other fishermen, myself, and my interpreter. Everyone was pretty trashed, like 2 a.m. in a bar in the Old Port, waiting for last call, even though it was 2 p.m. I met two [of the eight] women who worked on the boat. They did manual labor, laundry, cleaning. They were in their late thirties. The blonde was very friendly, very open, a very sexy tone to her voice. A person who once might have turned heads on the street. The brunette was more reserved but friendly, too. As the night wore on, there were more Americans coming out of the dark and up the side, all fisherfolk, joining the party. After a while, it was hard to tell who was who.

"Sometime before dawn, I was given a pack of Russian cigarettes. I still have it! The cigarettes aren't there any more." Like the past, "They've been smoked."

➤ For more, visit [portlandmonthly.com/portmag/2014/02/pizza-diplomacy-extras](http://portlandmonthly.com/portmag/2014/02/pizza-diplomacy-extras)



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