**2021 Экскурсия в Звиззчи, Калужская область**

**2021 Excursion and cultural field trip to Zvizzchi, Kaluga Oblast, with Pushkino, Tver Oblast**

**Concept:** Wapke Feenstra (Myvillages)

**Organisation:** Anastasia Kamienska, curator and interpreter from Tver

**Participants from Pushkino:** 7 (1 was unwell), 4 males, aged 16, 20, 36 and 41, and 3 females, aged 35, 54 and 62

**Friday, 17 September**

We leave at 14.00 and stop off en route at a panoramic lake to chill out. At the request of the younger members of the group we pull up at a KFC for a bite to eat. Our vehicle hits an owl, so we stop – it’s still alive, so we take it with us. It dies on Anastasia’s lap.

At 20.30 we reach the Kartoshkino, our accommodation in Zvizzchi, where supper awaits us in the restaurant. Immediately we engage in a discussion about the self-made architecture of the owner Sergei Serov and the culinary skills of Nathalia Serova.

I have been a guest here seven times, either for a month or six weeks, so while we eat we catch up, with the aid of our interpreter, on what has happened in the meantime: about Covid in the village. We hear that both Sergei and Nathalia had Covid last year. Natalia’s mother, who lives with them, did not catch the virus, but has still needed a lot of care in the past year. We reflect on the – still ongoing – project that I set up in Zvizzchi in 2012 and the participants from Pushkino tell them about Pushkino\_Style that we started in 2020 and assure me that Sergei’s home-made liquor is excellent. I decide to have an early night because I’ve caught a cold and want to be fit in the morning.

**Saturday, 18 September**

We arrange to meet up with the villagers of Zvizzchi by telephone – because we can’t just turn up with all these dogs. Then we take a walk through the village and go to the River Ugra. We view the new sculpture and we bury the owl on the way to another sculpture that I first saw in 2015 (when it was new).

We want to go horse-riding and inquire about the prices. 1200 roubles an hour seems pretty cheap by our standards, but that’s what it costs. If the rain holds off tomorrow, the excursion can go ahead.

Walking along the street, I run into Maria, who used to manage the supermarket. She greets me like a long-lost friend and wants to take us, right now, to the workplace of Nikolay Polissky, where she works occasionally – but we’ve already arranged to meet the others for lunch, so we make a date for Sunday afternoon. That fits in better with our plans.

After lunch, a guide takes us to the Nikola Lenivetz park. It’s a four-hour trip and everyone is tired, but content when we get back to the Kartoschkino.

After dinner I visit Maria who used to be head teacher at the village school and now rents out horses, milks 15 goats and makes goat’s cheese. With her eldest son, Nikita, she has been an active partner in “Made in Zvizzchi” since 2012. We drink tea and eat a cake she has baked. She speaks some English, so we catch up on the latest news. We have brought a Dutch bicycle bell for her son Igor (6) and he wants it attached to his bike straight away.

(TIP: a much appreciated gift for young children in Russian villages is a multi-coloured HEMA bicycle bell. Once again, it proves a great success.)

**Sunday, 19 September**

The skies have opened and the rain is pelting down. Today, we are taking things easy. At 11.30 the entire team pays Maria a visit to look at her goats. The horses are in the stable; no riding today. Not in this downpour. We hear how the goat’s cheese is made. Ira from Pushkino also has a goat at home and makes fresh cheese. Maria hand-milks 15 mother goats twice a day and has one Jersey cow that provides fresh milk for a few families in the village. The cheese is produced only with milk from the goats. We talk about milking techniques and Ira wants lessons from Maria on how to make what I call ‘the Gouda version’. Maria and Ira share information and Maria promises to join us this evening in the Kartoshkino with a cheese-tasting platter.

Then we have lunch and talk to Sergei about how tourism is developing in Ugra Park. I know the story so I tell my interpreter to take a break.

Afterwards, we go to the old Kolchoz which, since 2015, has served as the workplace of Nikolay Polissky (the artist who created the large sculptures in the photo – except for the red one, which is the work of an architect). In one of the halls we run into Victor, who lives opposite the Kartoshkino and has been working with the Pollissky for 20 years. As the gusli maker Kolia also works with wood, we hear a lot about the purchase, prices and processing of wood. We go to three different halls which smell of smoke and paint. Ira, who is also a manager at Mir Gusley, is interested in the business approach. But it’s a bit haphazard with workers being employed on a project basis when needed. The people from Pushkino and Mir Gusley would not be happy with such an arrangement. Victor says he is used to it and that it leaves him free to do other things in the meantime. He invites us to his home later in the afternoon and offers to show us his wood carvings.

That evening we meet some of the locals first. A few had to cancel because of the wind and rain. Also, elections are being held and some have to count the votes that evening. We enjoy the food and drinks that everyone has contributed and, of course, the cheese-tasting platter. Last but not least, the women from Made in Zvizzchi who have joined us this evening are presented with three guslis made in the Mir Gusley factory in Pushkino, which we have brought along as an appropriate gift to mark the association between the two villages.

They try out the guslis and exchange QR codes that contain films with more information.

Later, the Pushkino people head across the street to where Victor lives to look at his wood carvings and sample his samagon. I help to clear up the Kartoshkino so that we can make the most of our last evening. Anastasia returns, proudly displaying a wooden owl that Victor gave her. It looks like the one we hit on the road.

**Monday, 20 September**

Cases packed, time to leave. After breakfast, we drop by the church at Nikola Lenivetz and the home of Nikolai Pollissky.

Then we hit the road. Halfway, we stop because the men want to see the memorials marking the Russian victory over Napoleon. After one memorial I’ve seen enough. I’m not the only one. So the men stay another few hours and we head for Pushkino, for there is more work to be done.

22 September 2021

Wapke Feenstra - Myvillages