His last translator

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Georgy Permyakov is 83 years old and so fit he will spring to his feet and pound his stomach to prove he retains some of the strength of his youth as a boxer. He never drinks or smokes, speaks six languages, and sleeps on his balcony in Khabarovsk most nights, even in Russia's winter. He chatters in Japanese and Putonghua and is a little gleeful when visitors stare blankly back.

But just when you think he is through pulling tricks from his hat, he shuffles about in his study and pulls out a tattered schoolboy's notebook. There are essays written in Chinese, interspersed with pages of strange figures made out of the characters: a dancing man, a teapot, an umbrella. You know who drew these? Mr Permyakov says in a rough but fearless English.

Henry Pu Yi. Poo-yee, you Americans called him, but that is wrong. You know Henry Pu Yi? Last emperor of China. I was his interpreter and teacher of Russian history and history of the Communist Party.

Pu Yi was the last of the Qing dynasty, Manchus who conquered China in 1644 and ruled until 1912. He ascended the throne in 1909 when he was three-years-old, and later ruled as a puppet under the Japanese in the vassal state of Manchuko. And Mr Permyakov, it turns out, was the former emperor's translator during the five years he lived in the Soviet Union between 1945 and 1950. The former emperor was a prisoner during that time, but that could hardly have been new for Pu Yi. He had been a prisoner every day of his life.

Pu Yi - who became well-known in the West after the 1987 Bernardo Bertolucci film The Last Emperor - spent a cloistered childhood in Beijing's Forbidden City. Removed from his mother when he became emperor, he didn't see another child until he was seven, when he met his brother and sister for the first time. But he wasn't allowed to leave the city, even when he was deposed in 1912. After a warlord expelled him from the Forbidden City in 1924, he sought help from the Japanese. They later made him head of occupied Manchuria and eventually, in 1934, its emperor. During this time he lived in the northeastern city of Changchun, Jilin province, but was captured by Soviet troops in 1945 and taken to Khabarovsk in the Russian far east.

Mr Permyakov, too, grew up in China after his father, a soap manufacturer, fled the Bolshevik advance in the Russian far east. He is so fluent in Chinese that on his return to the Soviet Union after the war, he was a logical choice to work with this strange prisoner.

Pu Yi spent his life shaping himself to the demands of his captors - he married at 16 when advisers in the Forbidden City told him to, publicly followed the Japanese religion Shintoism when this was demanded and also chose a new wife at the behest of the Japanese. Later in life he even killed mice, when ordered to do so at the request of Chinese communist brainwashers (he was a secret Buddhist and considered killing a sin).

So perhaps it is no surprise that he sought to please his Soviet captors. Or perhaps he feared being returned to China. Mr Permyakov said Pu Yi sent to Stalin: 'Request: Let me become Soviet citizen . . . work for communism'. But the Ministry of Interior Affairs said, 'You cannot be member of Communist Party because we fight against monarchy.' So Pu Yi said, 'I will be first communist emperor in Russia.'

Pu Yi recalls the requests in his autobiography, The First Half of My Life. The book may have been ghost-written and is shaped in order to glorify the party and reduce what little attraction the fallen Manchu monarch may have had among the Chinese people, but there is much that matches Mr Permyakov's recollections. At first, the former emperor tried to get to England or America, thinking such a request might be honoured as they were wartime allies of the Soviet Union.

Eventually, he simply wanted to stay in Khabarovsk. During the five years of my stay in the Soviet Union, besides oral requests, I appealed three times to the authorities with letters seeking permission to remain here for good, he writes.

There was another reason for his desire to stay in the Soviet Union, and her name was Maria Tishchenko, Mr Permyakov says. She was a graduate of the Post Office college and a war widow with two children. She worked as a cook at Special Object No. 45, the facility where Pu Yi was held. (Pu Yi writes nothing of Tishchenko, and she has since died).

Pu Yi lived a strange life in Khabarovsk, showing little inclination to give up his imperial behaviour and make the transformation that would mark his later life in China as a symbol of communist equality. During my five years in the Soviet Union, I failed to give up my former habits. When they transferred us to a camp not far from Khabarovsk where they had no servants, somebody still took care of me. My household didn't dare call me emperor, so they just said, 'the highest'. Every day, they entered my room and bowed at my feet, showing their respect.

Soviet officials seemed to tolerate this situation for a time. But they did try to give labour to the former emperor and his retinue. My family and I, having received a small plot of land, planted green peppers, tomatoes, eggplants, beans, etc, he writes. It was curious to watch the sprouts growing every day. I watered them from a watering can with great pleasure. All this was new to me. But although I like tomatoes and green peppers, I constantly thought it would be more convenient to buy them in a vegetable store.

Pu Yi's record for bringing wealth into the Russian far east has perhaps yet to be beaten by post-Soviet era money-laundering officials or the Christian missionary who showed up with millions of dollars worth of church-planting money in a suitcase. He brought his imperial seal, a suitcase full of jewellery, and a state emblem made of diamonds, rubies, emeralds, and platinum birds. There was a cigarette holder made of elephant ivory, and rare gems from the Qing dynasty. Mr Permyakov negotiated the return of the gems, and Pu Yi tried to give his translator a diamond that he says was worth millions. Mr Permyakov declined.

Pu Yi donated large amounts of his jewellery to the Soviet Union on the pretext of helping the war economy, he writes. But he seems to have been in two minds about giving away his wealth. He hid as much as he could stuff into the false bottom of his suitcase, and he had his family and servants hide gems and even burn his pearls. Once, Pu Yi writes, an officer and a translator came to see him (it is unclear if this is Mr Permyakov and, because he has no phone, it was impossible for a reporter to verify with him). Holding something sparkling in his hand, the officer appealed to the prisoners. Whose is this? he demanded. Who put it in the broken car radiator sitting in the yard?

Everyone surrounded the officer, and one prisoner even noticed there was the seal of a Beijing jewellery store on one gem. Pu Yi recognised the gems as ones his nephews, now transferred to a different camp, had thrown away at his request. To protect them, he feigned ignorance. The officer gave up and left.

Until 1949, Kuomintang leader Chiang Kai-shek repeatedly demanded Pu Yi's return, but the Soviets refused to hand him over. After the communist victory, however, the picture changed, and Stalin agreed to surrender Pu Yi in 1950.

Before he left, Pu Yi gave his translator his watch, a Japanese fan on which he had painted characters, and the notebook describing life, love, upbringing and husband-wife relations in China. He spent nine years in prison, and upon his release he was assigned to work as a gardener in Beijing's Academy of Sciences' Institute of Botany.

But as he left Khabarovsk in 1950, he had no idea what lay ahead of him - perhaps even execution as a traitor. On July 31, he was sent on a train to Pogranichny on the Sino-Soviet border.

In Khabarovsk, when loaded on the train, I was separated from my family and put into a train car with Soviet officers, Pu Yi would write. I lay on the berth with open eyes, staring at one point; but the fear of death didn't let me sleep.

Pu Yi died in 1967 during the Cultural Revolution.

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