

## NEW ZOO BOOKS IN RUSSIAN: A CONTRIBUTION TO THE HOLISTIC HISTORY OF ZOOLOGICAL GARDENS

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Reading some of the recent books and articles which, as a whole or in part, deal with zoo history, one could gain the erroneous impression that the history of zoological gardens, or more generally of wild animals in human care, is restricted only to the 'Western world'. To disregard the achievements of the zoos of the 'Eastern world' is irritating, but it could be easily explained by the lack of knowledge on the subject in question. But to criticize something, about which one hasn't the faintest idea, is quite a different matter, really difficult to explain. The most disgraceful example of this latter approach can be found in the 'paradoxical vision of the zoo world' expressed by David Hancocks in his recent book (2001).

The concepts of 'Western' and 'Eastern' worlds are not, and have never been, unanimously defined. Their connotations have changed several times during the centuries. Since 1945 they have had a very strong political connotation, with all the countries under Soviet influence regarded as 'Eastern'. And recently they have been changing again before our own eyes. After the changes of the years 1989 to 1992, East Germany returned to the Western world, and so did the other countries of central Europe (Poland, Hungary etc.). But there is one big country which always was and still is regarded as the 'Eastern world' – Russia, which always was, and – despite the collapse of the Soviet Union – still is, an enormous country, with a great variety of flora and fauna, and many citizens who really do appreciate these treasures of nature. Gerald Durrell (1986), in the book compiled to accompany his popular TV series *Durrell in Russia*, wrote: 'What I wanted to show was the Soviet people's love of animal life... I wanted to show the people's great love of their zoo.' And I do not think that anything has changed in this matter since the Durrells' visit to the Soviet Union.

The reasons why the contribution of Russian zoological gardens (including, of course, during the Soviet period) to the history of the world's zoos is very often omitted or disregarded, are twofold: political and linguistic. The political 'iron curtain' (1917–1992) effectively separated Soviet zoos from the outside world. This worked in both directions; however, it was relatively easier for Westerners to go to the USSR and visit some zoos than for Soviet zoo staff to go abroad, even to other socialist countries, not to mention to so-called Western countries. But more important, in my opinion, is the linguistic barrier. Among zoo historians (in the West, of course!) it is hard to find anyone who can read the Russian language. And it is worth mentioning that for someone who can read Russian, it is also possible to read Ukrainian, Bulgarian and even Serbian written in Cyrillic. For the person who cannot read Cyrillic letters, in most instances,

these languages are not distinguishable. On many occasions I have been asked to identify this or that 'Russian' book or guide which turned out to be, e.g., a Sofia Zoo book or Belgrade Zoo guide. As a result the huge literary output of Russian zoos (at least two dozen popular and historical books and hundreds of scientific articles) is not widely known.

In the Russia of the Tsarist period (up to the 1917 October Revolution), there were six zoos established: Moscow (1864), St Petersburg (1865), Askanya Nova (1892), Kharkov (1895), Nikolaev (1901) and Kiev (1908). In the Soviet Union, during the years 1918–1961, another 19 zoos were opened, and seven more by 1987 (Sosnovski, 1961, 1989). Today, in all the former countries of the USSR there are 85 zoos, aquaria and exotariums, most of which are members of EARAZA (the Euro-Asian Regional Association of Zoos and Aquaria). Out of this number 50 are in Russia and another 15 in Ukraine (EARAZA office, Moscow Zoo, pers. comm., February 2004).

In the Soviet Union many zoos produced their own books: Alma-Ata, Askanya Nova (at least four books), Grodno, Kharkov, Kiev, Moscow (at least four books), Novosibirsk, Rostov-on-Don (three books) – to name only a few. Most of these books consisted mainly of collections of different animal stories. If there were any historical chapters at all, these were relatively short and very strongly influenced by socialist propaganda.

The first zoo book edited after 1992 (the year which is officially regarded as marking the end of the USSR) was about Kaliningrad Zoo (Danilova, 1996). But unfortunately this still had all the shortcomings of the books of Soviet times and from a zoo-historical point of view is hardly worth mentioning here.

More recently three other books have been published about the zoos in Nikolaev and Ekaterinburg (both in 2001) and St Petersburg (2003). Reviews of these books are presented below.

**VOKRUG SVETA ZA POLDNYA. PUTISHESTVYE PO NIKOLAEV-SKOMU ZOOPARKU** ('Around the world in half a day: a trip to Nikolaev Zoopark') by Vladimir Nikolaeievich Topchii. MP Vosmozhnosti Kimmerii, Nikolaev, 2001. Softbound, 109 pp., 70 black-and-white photos. Edition – 1,000 copies\*, in Russian language. ISBN 966-7676-12-9.

[\*Note: In all the countries of the Eastern block it was obligatory to give the data about the number of copies printed in the editor's footnote. In Russia and other post-Soviet countries this – in my opinion – good tradition is still continued.]

This small book was published in the year in which Nikolaev Zoo celebrated its 100th anniversary. However, as we will see later, the age of this particular zoo is not so clear, and could easily be called in question. The author, V.N. Topchii, is a veterinary surgeon, who started his zoo career in 1978 as a docent guide. Currently he is the director of Nikolaev Zoo. (Nikolaev is a city in southern Ukraine, with a present population of 600,000.)

The book has two distinct parts. The first, on pages 5 to 22, illustrated with 15 black-and-white photos, is devoted to the zoo's history. It is not as long a chapter as one could expect from an anniversary book, but nonetheless contains many historical facts, most of which are published here for the first time.

The establishment now called Nikolaev Zoo was started as the private aquarium of N.P. Leontovich, who was the mayor of the town. On 26 April 1901 he opened this aquarium, which was located in his own house, to visitors. Topchii has discovered several old publications about this aquarium, so we

value is to the first zoo guide book (1951), and it is really a great pity that no other sources of historical data are given. Unfortunately the book was not edited with great care. The photos are of quite good quality, but the text – for no obvious reason – is printed not in traditional black but in grey or greyish, making it really hard to read in a poor light.

**OT ZVERINTSEV K ZOOPARKU – ISTORIJA LENINGRADSKOGO ZOOPARKA** ('From menagerie to zoopark – a history of Leningrad Zoopark') by Elena Evgenievna Denisenko. Isskustvo-SPB, St Petersburg, 2003. Hardbound, 377 pp., 160 black-and-white illustrations. Edition – 3,000 copies, in Russian language. ISBN 5-210-01579-3. Price in Russia, 308 Roubles (US\$11.00); also obtainable on line from East View Information Service ([www.eastview.com/search\\_book.asp](http://www.eastview.com/search_book.asp)), but for US\$28.95.

This book by E.E. Denisenko is quite different from the two reviewed above, and is no doubt the first book of its kind published in Russian. It is really, as its subtitle indicates, a book about the history of Leningrad Zoo. Mrs Denisenko was born in 1952 in Leningrad and in 1974 graduated as a zoologist at Leningrad University. The same year she started her job at Leningrad Zoo as a docent-guide, but soon became the head of the educational department. In recent years she has served as scientific assistant. She left the zoo in June 2002 for personal reasons and now works as a freelance writer and journalist. She has written many articles for the local press, as well as a children's guide book to Leningrad Zoo. She is now working on a book which will be entirely devoted to the history of Leningrad Zoo during the war (1941–45).

The present book is divided into 16 chapters: 1. Menageries of old St Petersburg; 2. First years of St Petersburg Zoo; 3. New era; 4. Zoological annals; 5. Rebirth; 6. Bureaucratic tortures; 7. Socialist zoo; 8. The war; 9. The peace; 10. Elephants; 11. Giraffes – the record holders; 12. Chimps and people; 13. New projects . . . and their effects; 14. Orang-utans; 15. Polar bears – our logo animals; 16. Taking the pictures.

The first chapter, dedicated to the history of old menageries in St Petersburg, could not be as long as in other Russian towns simply because the city's history started only in 1703 when Peter the Great gave the order to build an entirely new town on the marshes around the Neva River delta. Only nine years later, in 1712, St Petersburg became the capital of Russia, despite the fact that packs of wolves still attacked the soldiers and their horses in the centre of the town. But very soon there were a lot of different menageries maintained by nobles, especially for hunting and entertainment purposes, of course with native animals only. There is evidence that the first exotic animals arrived in St Petersburg some time between 1711 and 1714, all of them being, of course, special gifts for the Tsar, among them lions, ostriches and very likely the first elephant. Later, specially designed barns for elephants were erected, which even had special heating systems for harsh winters. At the end of the 18th century no fewer than 15 Indian elephants were kept for the Tsar's amusement.

The first true zoo in St Petersburg was opened to the public on 1 August 1865 and was the private enterprise of a Dutch lady, Sophia Gebhardt, and her husband Jules. The first times of prosperity for the zoo came under the directorship of E.A. Rost (1873–1897), who was also the second husband of Sophia Gebhardt. Unfortunately, as Denisenko discovered, Rost left Russia

and went back to his native Germany because of some health problem. She also found many materials and documents about the difficult years of St Petersburg Zoo between 1897 and 1911. For a short time the zoo was closed to visitors, and some animals were even moved to Moscow Zoo. For a few months there was another, private menagerie alongside the zoo grounds. Later, from November 1910, under the direction of S.N. Novikov, the zoo regained its good reputation. And again Denisenko gives us many well-documented stories explaining how and why this happened. This second period of prosperity ended in October 1917 during the days of the socialist revolution; and in April 1918 the zoo, until then privately owned, was nationalized.

In Denisenko's book one can also read – for the first time, I believe – some critical comments about the work of zoos in the Soviet Union, when the communist ideology was dominant. One good example she gives is that of the central allocation of funds for zoos. The money were granted on a yearly basis depending on the number of species and specimens exhibited, regardless of their size and needs. So in theory a zoo with many small animal exhibits (e.g. aquarium with fishes, small mammals, passerine birds etc.) could have been in a higher category than another one with elephants, rhinos and any other large animals. There were a lot of such controversies during Soviet times, but nonetheless the visitors kept coming. The record-breaking year for Leningrad Zoo was 1934, when over two million people visited the zoo!

But fortunately Denisenko in her expressed opinions is far from uncritical condemnation of everything that happened during Soviet times. She sees also some positive aspects, one of which surely is zoo education. I was really very happy to read the story about education in Soviet zoos in general and Leningrad Zoo in particular. For here was the proof that education done on the basis of a zoo's animal collection and on the zoo premises (today we would say zoo education *'in situ'*) wasn't started at the Bronx Zoo, nor at London Zoo, nor at Keeling's Pan's Garden, but in the zoos of the Soviet Union. The first Zoo Club for Young Biologists was started as early as September 1924 in Moscow Zoo. Five years later, in 1929, a similar club was established in Leningrad Zoo. No doubt educational work with children and teenagers in zoos was part of the populist philosophy of the Soviet Communist Party, as is clearly stated by Denisenko. It was really very easy to indoctrinate young people using their love of animals and nature. But this ideological basis of zoo education in the Soviet Union is no excuse for denigrating its achievements. The members of the club used to help in cleaning the cages and feeding the animals, and along with scientific assistants they made daily notes about animal behaviour and, of course, learned about biology and zoology in special 'classrooms'. A few of them later became well-known scientists, others came back to the zoo as keepers or assistants, but surely for all of them working with live animals at the zoo was a great experience and a pleasant adventure.

The most tragic period in the zoo's history came with the war, which began with the German attack on the Soviet Union on 22 June 1941. And again Denisenko was lucky to discover some new documents about this difficult time. The decision was made to destroy the dangerous species and to evacuate the most precious ones, though it is not clear on what basis such selection was done. The lions, bears and wolves were shot. Among the evacuated species were polar bear, tiger, tapir, black rhino, zebra, ostrich, cassowary, and big macaws – altogether no more than 60 animals. As the destination site, the zoo-botanical garden in Kazan (Tatar Republic, c. 700 km east of Moscow, which stayed free

from German occupation) was chosen. All the animals arrived in Kazan safely on 7 July 1941, but not too much is known about what happened to them later. The truth is that not a single animal came back to Leningrad after the war. Thanks to Denisenko's efforts, the present director of Kazan Zoo recently discovered the skeleton of a black rhino in the museum of the Veterinary University in Kazan, and this is surely the specimen from Leningrad Zoo.

The German army surrounded Leningrad by September 1941 and the total blockade of the city lasted until January 1944, nearly 900 days in all. During the siege nearly a million people died (most of them from starvation). The city had no electricity, the water supply was cut, the sewage system was broken. And each day thousands of aerial bombs and artillery missiles were falling on the city. So it is no surprise to learn from Denisenko that some people even today (she gives the example of Americans visiting the zoo) cannot understand why in such circumstances the zoo was kept open and how it happened that some animals survived. She discovered a very precious and important document, namely some notes written by N.L. Sokolov under the significant title 'The observation of animals in Leningrad Zoo during the blockade'. Before the war Sokolov was the head of the bird department, but during the war he served as director of the whole zoo. Denisenko quotes the whole article without any omissions. One of Sokolov's most interesting observations is on the animals' reaction to bombs. He noticed that mammals' fear and panic was mainly due to the noise of exploding bombs. The birds did not show any reaction even to the loudest noise, but got into a terrible panic when they saw the flames, flares and flashes. Surprisingly, quite a large number of animals, mainly of the native fauna, survived until the end of the blockade. Among the largest and most exotic survivors were a female hippo named Krasavitsa ('Beauty') who died in 1951 at 43 years of age, a male nilgai and a female black vulture. Another survivor was a brown bear who was brought to the zoo as a cub just a few weeks before the outbreak of war, and who lived there until 1970.

Of course Denisenko also gives us some animal stories. But the species concerned have been very carefully and appropriately chosen by the author. There is a chapter on polar bears, which first bred in Leningrad in 1932 and were later chosen as the zoo's logo. One learns a very unusual detail of polar bear husbandry at the zoo, namely that these animals were fed with seal meat! Then comes a chapter about giraffes, which have bred regularly since 1956, and equally interesting ones about elephants, chimps and orang-utans. Reading about the successes and losses in the breeding of these animals, one should bear in mind that Leningrad is one of the northernmost zoos in the world. The geographical latitude is almost the same as for Alaska Zoo in Anchorage and Helsinki Zoo in Finland. The winters are very long and hard, with temperatures as low as minus 40°C, and the summers are hot, sometimes rising to 35°C. Winter days are very short, while during the summer there are the so-called 'white nights'. All this must surely influence the animals' physiology, so that what is common and easy in other zoos is not necessarily the same in St Petersburg.

In the very interesting chapter 'New projects . . . and their effects' the author describes several schemes to build a new zoo in Leningrad. It is worth mentioning that the very first idea for a new zoo came as early as 1904. Since then several more or less realistic projects have been put forward. In the early 1960s a new zoo project was elaborated to be ready for the zoo's 100th anniversary in 1965. It is enough to say that this 'zoo-paradise' was designed

to exhibit 3,000 species (!) of animal. Later, in 1986, the general reconstruction of the old grounds was planned, with the assumption that the zoo would close down for five years. Then in early 1990 came the idea of building a huge 'eco-park' with several interactive themes in a vast total area of 2,640 ha, in which the true zoological park would have no less than 315 ha. And most recently, in 1996, some members of the scientific staff of Leningrad University, the Zoological Institute of the Russian Academy of Science and the Primatological Centre established a 'Zoo Fund' with the main aim of collecting money for a new zoo and promoting the idea of two zoos in St Petersburg: the old one (after reconstruction and modernization, of course) and a new one, yet to be built. At the end of this chapter Denisenko writes: '*We want to believe that here in Russia, too, the time will come when we will be proud of our zoos. And especially of the zoo in St Petersburg. And we wish this may happen very soon.*'

Each chapter has its numbered reference list at the end of the book. This bibliography shows what a painstaking job the author did: it was not simply a matter of going to see the Leningrad Zoo archive and library, as these – at least until very recently – were really very poor. The author must have spent many, many hours in municipal archives and libraries searching for every piece of information about the zoo. And, surprisingly, she found many different materials, so each historical fact given in the book is very well documented. Additionally it is illustrated with 160 black-and-white photos, most of which are very rare and unusual – and mostly, I believe, published here for the first time.

Minor inconveniences of this book are the lack of an index and the fact that the photos are not numbered and have no references in the text. Perhaps it would also have been interesting to see some summarized historical data (e.g. attendance, species and individual animals) in the form of tables and/or graphs. But the biggest 'disadvantage' of the book is that it is written exclusively in Russian. I realise, of course, that it was written by a Russian author and is devoted to a Russian zoo. But bearing in mind that St Petersburg/Leningrad Zoo will be 140 years old next year, and as such should surely have an important place in the history of the world's zoos, such a book should have at least short chapter summaries and picture captions also in English (or in German, or in French?). I am lucky enough to know the Russian language, but very few zoo people, especially those who are interested in zoo history, are in such a privileged position. So I dedicate this review to the special attention of Messrs D. Hancocks and C.H. Keeling, and all their younger uncritical disciples who are wrongly convinced that all the 'firsts' in zoo history happened in the West and that everything 'good' in the zoo world is still only in the West.

While presenting this review of a book on Leningrad Zoo's history, it may be useful to give a short note about the present situation at the zoo, which is unfortunately still far from stability. In 1990 I.V. Korneev was elected (*sic!*) by the zoo staff as the new director. He was only 29 years old and as such was the youngest director in all the history of Russian (including the Soviet period) zoos. What is more, he did not initially have any university background, receiving his B.Sc. only in 2000; but soon after (in December 2001) he was fired. During the next two years Leningrad Zoo was run by four other directors! At present it is probably the only zoo in the world with three independent internet sites. The first is the zoo's official site ([www.lenzoopark.spb.ru](http://www.lenzoopark.spb.ru)), the second is maintained independently by the former director, Mr Korneev ([www.lenzoo.ru](http://www.lenzoo.ru)), while the third one, under the name 'New Zoo', is supervised by the scientific members of Zoo Fund ([www.newzoo.narod.ru](http://www.newzoo.narod.ru)). On