

Eleanor L. Pray. *Letters from Vladivostok, 1894-1930*. Edited by Birgitta Ingemanson. Biographical Sketch by Patricia D. Silver. Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2013. xxxi, 270 pp. \$60.00 (cloth). ISBN: 978-0-29599-324-9.

Eleanor L. Pray, a middle-class American woman from Maine who lived in Vladivostok from 1894 to 1930, regularly wrote letters to family and friends that offer a picture of daily life in the Russian Far East during extraordinary times. Saved by her granddaughter, Patricia D. Silver, and collected and edited with commentary by Birgitta Ingemanson, the work provides a unique insight into the decline of the Romanov dynasty, the Russo-Japanese War, the 1905 Revolution, World War I, the 1917 revolutions, the Russian Civil War, foreign intervention in Siberia, and the first decade of Soviet power. Despite the clear dangers of staying in Vladivostok during such a tumultuous period, Eleanor refused to leave, citing a love for the city and its people. Her letters reveal that she saw her life in Russia as a great adventure - an unfolding story of which she could not bear to miss even a moment. Nevertheless, when work opportunities dried up and Joseph Stalin's xenophobic policies threatened the lives of foreigners, Pray had no choice but to leave the Soviet Union and her beloved Vladivostok forever.

Pray moved to Vladivostok in 1894 with her husband, Frederick Pray, who worked for his relatives' business that included international trade and a general store. Due to the upheavals of war and revolution, Frederick closed the business in 1918 and took a job at the American consulate, which he held until his death in 1923. For the first 15 years of their lives in the Russian Far East, Eleanor Pray lived the life of a bourgeois housewife who directed her household's servants and regularly entertained, attended parties, and participated in local events and ceremonies. When World War I started, she began to tirelessly volunteer for the Red Cross and the YMCA, continuing this work as much as possible until the Bolsheviks took the city at the end of 1922, marking the conclusion of the Russian Civil War. This work became extremely important to her and her letters demonstrate the emergence of great purpose in her life. In a letter to the Red Cross office in Washington D.C., she explained, "The spice of life is not lacking in our work and . . . a broad field of studies in human nature is thus opened up to us. . . ." (p. 187) The Bolshevik takeover of the city was followed shortly by her husband's death. Instead of leaving the country as some of her relatives suggested, she used her connections to the entrepreneurial elite of Vladivostok to land a job as a translator and bookkeeper at the Kunst and Albers Department Store, which was a type

of private business permitted to exist under the New Economic Policy. In 1930, the government ended toleration of such “capitalist” enterprises.

Sifting through the immense collection of Eleanor’s letters could not have been an easy task. Ingemanson’s introduction to the book explains how the letters were preserved after Eleanor Pray left Vladivostok, how they were safeguarded by Silver beginning in the 1970s, and how later Ingemanson had them transcribed and organized in a database. From this work, Ingemanson then effectively grouped relevant excerpts from the letters into three convenient parts: “The People,” “The City,” and “The History.” Within each section are several chapters where Ingemanson consistently provides context, historical background, and valuable insight. This contribution deftly guides the reader through the many letters and creates a logical and evolving narrative of Pray’s life. In addition, Ingemanson’s introduction and Silver’s brief biographical sketch of Pray offer useful information on the family tree and outline the main events in the book.

The first two sections of the work portray a story of Vladivostok that largely came to an end under Stalinism. It is here that the reader is introduced to the cosmopolitan nature of Vladivostok, as well as to its existence as an Asian city, and as an outpost for the Russian Empire’s imperial ambitions in the East. Founded in 1860 and located in and around the hills of the Bay of the Golden Horn, Amur Bay, and Ussuri Bay and only a short distance from China, Korea, and Japan, Vladivostok’s geography meant that it was destined to be an important trading city filled with residents and visitors from around the world. The Russian government also assigned it to be the last stop on the Trans-Siberian Railway, 4,000 miles from Moscow, making it an exotic destination for any adventurer. Eleanor’s letters detail the landscape, climate, working port, buildings, and homes, noting how they changed over time. While she does observe some of the negative aspects of the city, such as its high crime rate at one point, her letters generally express great affection for Vladivostok and its surrounding region.

Pray recounted almost everything and everyone that she saw in her letters, providing sketches of the city and the many people she met there. Vladivostok’s location meant that it had a large transitory population that included businessmen, statesmen, fur trappers, day laborers, navy sailors, and curious travelers. She explains her encounters with foreign businessmen and dignitaries, members of the imperial family, navy leaders, and the wealthy elite, including families such as the Bryners, who made their fortune in shipping (the famous actor Yul Brynner – he later added an extra “n” to the name – was born into this family in Vladivostok in 1920). In addition, she includes a portrait of the Korean, Japanese, and Chinese

residents of the city. While many were servants, hired hands, and small shopkeepers, she also met elites, especially diplomats and military leaders. At the same time, her letters illuminate the inner lives of her friends and family, describing such simple moments as conversations with her husband, reading books and newspapers in their veranda room, playing tennis with friends, and sharing meals with those closest to her.

Ingemanson explains that Pray's letters were subject to censorship from the Imperial government and later the Soviet state. It is in the third section, "The History," where this is most evident, as it is here that Ingemanson arranged the letters to describe the major political events that she lived through in Vladivostok. Knowing that she could not openly criticize the government (Imperial, occupational, or Soviet), many of her letters are rather matter-of-fact about the events she experienced. Occasionally, however, she wrote to her closest relatives in code, and sometimes she found foreign travelers to take letters with them to be mailed outside of Russia. The picture that emerges from these various letters is a mixture of support for Russia at times (for example, in World War I) and at other times backing for U.S. foreign policy (for example, in the Russo-Japanese War). In all cases, however, she expressed deep concern and sympathy for the people of Russia. As someone who abhorred violence, she sought through her work at the Red Cross and the YMCA to make life better for foreigners and Russian citizens alike. In the early Soviet years, her letters expressed sensitivity and understanding for the poor and working classes that helped bring the Bolsheviks to power. At the same time, she was critical of shortages, bureaucratic inefficiencies, arbitrary arrests, and heavy taxes. Her letters in the fall of 1930 described being hungry, but also appreciatively detailed how her friends found food in order to throw a wonderful going-away party for her.

The book ends with a letter from Eleanor, written on board a ship as she sailed away from Vladivostok. While the ending concludes her life in the Russian Far East, an interesting addition to this book would have been an epilogue about what Eleanor knew or what she felt about the changes that took place in Vladivostok under Stalin. Did she know about the purges and terror of the late 1930s? Did she know that Vtoraia Rechka, just north of Vladivostok on the Amur Bay, became an infamous Gulag transit camp where many died, including the famous poet Osip Mandel'shtam? Did she know that the Korean, Japanese, and Chinese populations were deported en masse from the Russian Far East in 1937? What happened to the many servants and friends that she left behind? Perhaps she could not have known about these drastic events. Indeed, after her stay, Vladivostok became a closed military city. Foreigners were banned and the deported Asian population was not permitted to return. The once bustling, worldly

city Eleanor knew had become a closed, ethnically Russian enclave until the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. Indeed, what is most valuable about her letters is the lost world of this most amazing city that she preserved through her writings.

I highly recommend this book for anyone seeking to know more about the Russian Far East and the life of foreigners in Russia. Suitable for general audiences, this work also serves as a valuable primary source for researchers and a useful tool for instructors desiring more exceptional reading materials to add to syllabuses.

Melissa Chakars

Saint Joseph's University