

Hidden Culture in Tomsk

By [John Freedman](#)

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One of the homes, this one at 12 Ulitsa Krasnogo Pozharnika, in which poet Nikolai Klyuev lived during his exile in Tomsk before he was executed.

In my long love affair with Russian art and culture, the city of Tomsk plays a special role. The main reason for that is the research I have done on the Soviet playwright Nikolai Erdman, who spent about a year in exile in Tomsk in the mid-1930s. But I am not going into any of that today. Been there, done that.

In fact there are many things I've done every time I have been in Tomsk. And one of them invariably is to meet with Pavel Rachkovsky. Educated as an architect, since 1999 he has worked for an organization that has gone under various names but is now known as the Tomsk Oblast Department of Culture and Tourism. He is the head of the department of cultural heritage and ethnocultural policy. He is a member of the Union of Architects of Russia and a member of the Russian Photography Union. He is a scholar whose research and photos are often dedicated to the extraordinary and extraordinarily unique wooden architecture of Tomsk.

See the photo gallery: [Hidden Culture in Tomsk](#)

All of that is impressive, indeed, although it only scratches the surface of Rachkovsky's contributions to his city's well-being. And none of it comes close to saying anything about this unique and invaluable individual. Tomsk is one of the few cities in Russia that has, to one extent or another, worked to preserve its amazing wooden architecture. Rachkovsky is one of the quiet warriors, battling fiercely to see that developers don't pull down architectural monuments overnight, and that people trying to rezone historical quarters for personal gain don't get their way.

Rachkovsky has taken me on some walking tours of Tomsk that I will never forget. You see, he not only loves his city, he knows virtually every centimeter from east to west and north to south, and, what is most astonishing, he knows everything there is to know about every notable building you may encounter or every interesting person who may have inhabited a specific building. At least so it seems to me.

Consider the walk we took on Saturday. I decided it was time to begin making a few dents in my ignorance about this city I have come to love, and I put together a list of addresses that are connected with important writers, painters and musicians. I asked Rachkovsky if he would walk me around them so that I could get a feel for their place in Tomsk, physically and figuratively speaking.

Being the person that he is, Rachkovsky turned half of his Saturday over to me to oblige my request. As I have come to expect, he gave me much more than I had bargained for.

As we fought a swirling, icy wind, trudging from building to building associated with the populist writer Gleb Uspensky, the ethnographic and travel writer Vyacheslav Shishkov, the novelist Ilya Erenburg, the publisher and bibliophile Pyotr Makushin, the painter Vadim Mirzoyev and more, I began hearing entire histories of people and places I wasn't prepared to hear.

Take Lidia Delektorskaya, for example, the Russian-born secretary, muse and model for the great Matisse. Rachkovsky has been trying to interest people in turning the house where she grew up into a museum, so far without success. I wouldn't bet against him in the long run, however.

But for now no one but Rachkovsky and his personal guests would ever know that the beautiful yellow, wooden building standing on the corner of Ulitsa Kuznetsova and Ulitsa Kartashova is the location where Delektorskaya grew up as a child, one block away from a house inhabited by a certain Denisov family. That second building, a relatively simple, but gorgeously restored two-story abode, was home to several families of note, although the most famous one today is that of composer Edison Denisov. It, indeed, is marked with a memorial plaque claiming that he, one of the great composers of the 20th century, lived there from his birth in 1929 until 1951.

Earlier, even before we arrived at the former Delektorskaya home, Rachkovsky stopped as we passed a relatively unprepossessing park, the east side of which borders on Krasnoarmeiskaya Ulitsa. Waving his hand at the trees and lawn, he said, "This is Buff-Garden and one time the poet Igor Severyanin came here to recite his poetry." I stood and snapped a photograph,

thinking about the tall, impressive poet unleashing his expressive poetry into the Tomsk night, or day, air.

One of the most-used books in my library is Victor Terras's "Handbook of Russian Literature." In it Aleksis Rannit writes that Severyanin, "early in his career recited his poems by half-singing with his masculine-lyrical baritone voice of beautiful timbre and perfect vocal technique, and later, after the Revolution, in a simple, slightly incantational manner. His tumultuous successes before large, hysterical crowds were similar to those of Elvis Presley." Imagine that in the Buff-Garden in Tomsk.

Surprises and detours aside, in about three hours Rachkovsky and I made it through about one-third of the addresses I had prepared in my little list. Because Tomsk was one of Siberia's most important cities, it was often a place where political prisoners came to rest awhile, or passed through on their way further into the depths of Siberia. Briefly, here are a few of the locations that we paused to consider.

As we walked up the aged, cobblestone street now named after the revolutionary Mikhail Bakunin, Rachkovsky pointed out a bright green roof in the distance. That, he said, is a home that sheltered Alexander Radishchev, the famous author of "A Journey from St. Petersburg to Moscow," for a few nights in Tomsk before he was convoyed further into Siberia in the 1790s. Beautifully renovated, the building was altered after Radischev stayed there, but, according to Rachkovsky, the first floor of the building remains essentially the same.

Rachkovsky and I walked all around a blue wooden building that now bears the markings of No. 21 Ulitsa Pushkina. In 1864, however, it was known as the beginning of the Irkutsk Highway, and this structure sheltered the revolutionary writer and critic Nikolai Chernyshevsky for no more than 90 minutes as he was being moved from Moscow to eastern Siberia.

Ninety minutes. Hardly enough to catch your breath or have a meal. But there it is — the home still stands and forever its walls are associated with the name of one of Russia's most famous and influential revolutionaries.

One building that, for reasons I am not entirely able to discern, was more moving than most. This was a small wooden hut that I had failed to put into my list, but which Rachkovsky took me to anyway. Two plaques identify the modest structure as one of several locations where the mystical, peasant poet Nikolai Klyuev spent three years in exile in Tomsk between 1934 and 1937. As was often done with exiles in the 1930s, Klyuev was ordered to share quarters with the matron of the house, a certain Anna Kuznetsova.

As Rachkovsky explained, it was not from this building that Klyuev was later rearrested and taken to be shot. That building was torn down in the 1990s, although the memorial plaque that once hung on its walls and proclaimed, "In this house the poet Nikolai Klyuev lived on the eve of being shot," is now held in the House of Arts dedicated to the memory of Vyacheslav Shishkov.

The last surprise Rachkovsky had in store for me occurred after I thought our walk had ended and we were on our way home. But no, Tomsk never ends when it concerns Rachkovsky.

As we strolled north on Prospekt Lenina, my guide pointed in front of us and dropped this little pearl: "Oh, by the way, this is the hotel where Vladimir Vysotsky stayed on his first trip to Tomsk. He wasn't even Vladimir Vysotsky yet, and he did not come to perform his own songs, but rather to recite the poetry of Vladimir Mayakovsky. He stayed right here on the second floor of the Sibir-Forum Hotel."

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