

## **SQUAW VALLEY - THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS**

*To the memory of Alexander Cushing*

*It was a miracle: 40 years later I happened to be, like Alice, behind the looking glass of my youth, and I met again with events and people I had seen on the screen in another part of the world.*

*The magic history of the Squaw Valley captivated my thoughts, and I dedicate this article to the memory of Alexander Cushing, the architect of those long-ago 16<sup>th</sup> Olympic games in California.*

...One hot summer day when we were on vacations at Lake Tahoe, I was lazily browsing the map of the lake with all the surroundings.

Suddenly my eyes fell upon two words: "Squaw Valley". "Squaw Valley?" I muttered thoughtfully, "Sounds somewhat familiar. Something was there. Long ago... Very long ago... Some kind of competition, may be?"

"Oh, come on!" - My husband, Dima, who caught my quandary, responded, "Don't you remember? It was the Winter Olympic Games! In 1960!"

A long-ago memory, deep in my conscious started to form, and the pictures of the past re-appeared alive in my mind: a black-and-white television screen with all the competitions, radio broadcasting, newspapers, pictures, names, and names, and more names...

So, it was here! And we can visit the place as easily as any of the Moscow suburbs of my childhood some 40 years ago!

"Let's go then!" I exclaimed, and without delay we drove to the Squaw Valley. It wasn't far - about 40 minutes drive from South Tahoe, all the while enhancing my excitement level.

Suddenly, there it was! Picturesque Squaw Valley! The Valley rested peacefully in front of us - calm and solemn as this warm summer evening. We drove to the center of the Village, which was quiet and deserted at that time, and took a gondola to the top of the hill along with a few more visitors. The view was gorgeous, and we made a promise to each other to return to this wonderland.

We kept our promise, a year and a half later, and decided to travel by car. A long way awaited us - about 490 miles to the North from our home in Southern California. The drive was filled with expectations, and the anticipation of seeing Squaw Valley again.

The picturesque Valley has a fascinating history. Of course, we were completely unaware of it at the time in Russia, while sitting in the front of the TV, watching the competitions and vigorously supporting our teams.

Once upon a frosty December morning of 1954 he was sitting in the chair sipping coffee and looking through the newspaper. "He" - I mean Alexander Cushing, the owner of Squaw Valley, and "the newspaper" was the "San Francisco Chronicle". The article he was reading was about the future 16<sup>th</sup> Winter Olympic Games. Anchorage, Alaska, and Reno Nevada submitted bids to hold the Olympics of 1960.

Cushing peered out his window. "Why not Squaw Valley?!" - he thought. The idea was born in that moment! At the time Squaw Valley was a tiny remote ski resort with only one chairlift, two rope tows and a fifty-room lodge. In essence, it had little to offer, but - from another point of view - the Valley had everything! It had: mountain slopes and a huge valley below; there was enough spread for ski tracks, for skating rink, for hotels and buildings, and for the meeting square. Cushing had a very clear image in his mind - the Olympic torch lowering from the mountain, and Olympic fire burning. His vision followed with applauses of thousands of sportsmen and guests.

Yes, of course, this Valley had everything, and Cushing was not only it's inspiration owner, but also it's architect. He was the one who could see the future; this dreamer had an iron will and a vivid imagination. After a few articles published in major newspapers, the idea caught on, and Americans were mesmerized by his magnificent vision. "Olympic games... In the California mountains... with the annual snowfall of 450 inches..." - it sounded so beautiful, that it began to appear that there could not be any other venue. Squaw Valley indeed was the perfect choice.

Yes, the United States chose Squaw Valley. But the voting had to go through the International Olympic Committee. The competitors were very serious - Innsbruck, St. Moritz, Garmisch Partenkirchen. But... - "The Games belong to the

whole world, not only to Europe!", - that was Cushing's motto.. He made Squaw Valley model and performed the show; he convinced, he requested, he insisted. He gained supporters from the Western hemisphere countries, especially from South America. He appeared to be inexhaustible in his efforts to reach his goal. And it all was not in vain: after the first voting St. Moritz and Garmish Partenkirshen had gone, and after the second... The Committee voted 32 to 30 for Squaw Valley!

..We are standing now in the front of Tower of Nations, on the crossing with Highway 89. I can't believe that looking glass has broken, and we are at the other side of it, in the magic fairy world.

Passing the vast field where Olympic ski track was, we entered the Village. Almost all the buildings are the newer ones, built onto the site of the 1950's Architecture that still stand. Two are still here, reminders of the past, visible from far away - Far East Center and Members' locker building.

I am thrust back in time to that long-ago era when the beauty of Squaw Valley made such a lasting impression on a small child in Moscow.

Since I don't do mountain skiing, I walk for miles, breathing the clean mountain air and waxing nostalgic.

I recapture my youth, when I had wooden mountain skis with iron edges. I remember the first slopes where I used to go with my family. It was about 50 km from Moscow, and we traveled by car. There was no chairlift at that time, and no rope tows; and after the hauling down we walked upward, to the top - step-by-step, step-by-step, like on a ladder.

... The skating-rink on the top of the mountain is a copy of the former skating rink on the foothill. All the hockey battles were held here, and we feel like participants in those events feeling deeply that invisible string connecting us with the past.

And the most astonishing thing here, on the top of the mountain, is the Olympic museum, right near the skating-rink! We see the history of the Valley, the whole chronicle of the Games here, and whatever I saw and knew

about the Games back in 1960 in Moscow, I now see from the other side of the glass.

Any visitor here knew that America's hockey team won the Olympics. "Russians lost" - they told us with sympathy. Yes, we know it as well, though our team was one of the main contenders for the golden medal - they were the first in the previous Olympics, in Cortina d'Ampezzo.

We saw pictures of Belousova and Protopopov (figure skating) while they are doing their famous todes - one of the figures on ice. The caption was: "Russian style figure skating". Despite taking the 9<sup>th</sup> place they were still noticed: in the next games, in Innsbruck, they came in the first place, 4 years later, in Grenoble, likewise they came in the 1<sup>st</sup> place, as well as numerous victories on the European and World championships.

All 3 winners - Russian names: Maria Guskova, Lubov Baranova, Radja Eroshina. Cross-country skiing, 10 km distance. The article said: "Russian women took all the medals".

Another familiar name: Lidya Skoblikova, golden medallist for 1500 and 3000 meters in speed skating. Four years later, in Innsbruck, she won gold medals for all tournaments for women. I remember her photo very well - with the medals she pressed to her face. But she was famous in Russia not only because of her prizes. After winning ceremony, directly from the podium she approached the head of the State, Nikita Khrushchev, and asked him for admission to the Communist Party. It was decided to admit her though usually admission took a long time. I don't remember, though, where she got her Party membership card - perhaps even in the Kremlin. And Khrushchev had left less than a year before he was replaced in October 1964 by inter-party coup d'etat with Brezhnev.

The days are passing by in Squaw Valley. Slopes, lifts, skating rink, and so many vacationers. Lessons - for the kids and for parents, whomever wants. Don't laugh - but I'm thinking about taking lessons for myself...

But meantime I found a cross-country skis renting place - (so far from the slopes, that you can hardly find it!) and went along the ski track, the same, Olympic one, where our women won all the medals. I cannot recognize the skis -

they are plastic, short, and only a little bit higher than me - at the time of the Olympics, the risen hand measured ski length. "New style" - they said. The shoes are different as well, and are fixed to the skies by one single movement.

And again - I am drifting with my thoughts to the past, to my youth, when I did my cross-country skiing. I remember icy-cold sheds for renting skies, wet gloves, frozen fingers... And the attempts to warm in the metro, where one couldn't be warmed at all. And later - big marches for 35-40 km through the forests and fields, passing tiny villages, through springs and ravines.

... I am returning from dreams to reality, the past is drifting away, vanishing into the thin air like the smile of the Cheshire cat, leaving behind the unforgettable aura of peace and happiness. The sun is shining, the thin snow is melted here and there, and brown grass is seen in the gaps. I watch my grandson, Danny, who is going up on the chairlift and soon will be skiing down the hill, like those unknown champions more than 40 years ago.

When we were leaving to return to Los Angeles on early Sunday morning, the town was quietly awaiting a snowstorm, and heavy gray clouds were hanging over the lake. We knew that we'd remember this wonderful week forever, spent in the looking glass world, with special memory of heart, which brought new depth and new dimension to the wonderful picture of life.