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An Unauthorized Biography of the World: Oral History on the Front Lines

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Excerpt from Chapter 1

Ts'eouli -- Floating Ashes

I made contact with Chief Ila Bussidor on a Sunday afternoon, at her compact wood-heated house on Tadoule Lake in northern Manitoba.

Tadoule (pronounced Ta-doo-lee) is derived from the Dene ts'eouli, which translates as floating ashes. Chief Bussidor lives with her husband Ernie and their two younger kids, Roseann and Dennis; the two older ones, Jason and Holly, live now on their own. I had called to make an appointment to talk with Chief Bussidor by satellite phone the following week. "Oh no," she said, "I probably won't have any time during the week. The days go by so fast, there always seems to be a million things I have to do." My heart sank. It had taken a long time to find her. Then she added, "Why don't we talk right now?"

Scrambling to set up recorder and phone mike, I asked how should I address her, Chief Bussidor? She laughed. "Oh no, just Ila." She'd been vacuuming when I called, the machine run by the community generator.

Tadoule Lake is the most northerly community in Manitoba, not far from the 60th parallel, the border with the Inuit territory, Nunavut. When we spoke in early March, the winter road was still open. Cut through the bush by Ernie Bussidor and his friend Tom in the winter of 1998, it connects Tadoule Lake and two other northern communities to Churchill, 400 kilometers to the east.

"That was quite a job," says Ila. "While they were cutting the road, they had to sleep outside at minus forty." In a month or so it would no longer be passable, and once again Tadoule Lake would be accessible only by air. The rush is on to get in as much fuel, building materials and other heavy freight as possible.

I asked Ila about the million things she has to do, what does a normal working day look like for her?

"Administration, paper work, that's a piece of cake," she replied. "It's dealing with people day to day that's the most difficult challenge. When you consider the history of what happened to our people in the last forty-eight years, it has left a tremendous scar on us. Being a leader in a community where people have a lot of problems that date back to that time, and most of the older people have died, now it's my generation that's responsible for taking care of the community. People are so wounded – let's say a family that lost a whole generation through all kinds of deaths in Churchill, freezing to death, house fires,

getting beaten to death – if people haven't really recovered from all of that, it means a lot of problems.

And our children, who are in their twenties now, they're also affected by what happened to us. I think we still haven't addressed healing in a proper way – I don't know if there is a proper way of doing – it's a huge job, maybe going to take another lifetime to do it. Maybe those little wee children growing up now, five years old, twelve years old, maybe they'll have a better life than I had when I was a child."

For more than a thousand years, the Sayisi Dene lived in the forests and on the open tundra of what is now northern Manitoba and Nunavut, moving with the seasons and the caribou. "I remember a time when there were no white men around us, and the people had to survive on the land. This was a very long time ago. The people were instinctive and strong like the caribou and the wolves in this harsh territory. Their sense of direction when they traveled was unfailing, as if the directions were imprinted on their minds. They didn't need a map. They just knew where to go. Survival was hard work. To eat, we had to hunt or fish. To stay warm, we had to make caribou-hide clothes. For shelter, we had to make our own teepees. There were no shortcuts. We did everything by hand. We went everywhere on foot. Never once did anyone complain about the hard work. No one ever got angry because there was so much work to do. We had to co-operate, there was no time to argue. It was just the way our life was."

Betsy Anderson, 100 years old, interviewed in her one-room cabin at Tadoule Lake by Ila Bussidor and Üstün Bilgen-Reinart, for *Night Spirits: The Story of the Relocation of the Sayisi Dene*, University of Manitoba Press, 1997. Betsy Anderson spoke in Dene, translated by Ila, her granddaughter.

In August 1956, the year after Ila was born, the government of Canada forcibly removed the Sayisi Dene from their traditional lands and livelihoods, and dumped them on the outskirts of Churchill, a military and trading town on Hudson Bay in northern Manitoba.

"The plane came with three white people plus the pilot. They said they came to move the people. The people never replied. We took whatever we could with us, we left behind our traps, our toboggans, our cabins, and we got into the plane. When we got out in Churchill, there were no trees. The wind was blowing sand on everything. We didn't know what to do next. We couldn't do anything there. We couldn't go trapping. We couldn't set a net. There was nothing to hunt. We were in a desperate state. We had nothing to live on."

John Solomon, Sayisi Dene elder, in *Night Spirits*. He was 30 in 1956. Over the next two decades, the Sayisi Dene disintegrated.

Ila documented 117 deaths between 1960 and 1977, more than a third of the population. Almost half of the deaths were by house fires, freezing, drowning, car accidents, or murder. Thirty-two children died from malnutrition or preventable illness. "The rest of us, the survivors," says Ila, "we carry the scars, and the memories."

In 1985, Ila met Üstün Bilgen-Reinart, a current-affairs reporter with CBC-TV in Winnipeg. (Üstün was born in Turkey, and has since returned there to live. For her story, see chapter 4). Ila was taking a Native communications course in Thompson, Manitoba, and Üstün wanted to talk with her for a documentary she was making on the community at Tadoule Lake.

"She interviewed me as one of the young people who had to leave the community to get skills I needed, which was not going to happen in Tadoule Lake."

Three years later, Ila became chief of the Sayisi Dene. "I asked Üstün to help me tell our story, the story of my people – by then we had picked up our friendship again. She said, 'Why not do it yourself,' but I didn't have the confidence for that. I needed somebody to help me, and I chose her. We did an outline of what needed to be done to put this story together, and we applied for funding. She and I went Churchill together, and she came up to Tadoule Lake, I don't know how many times, so we could do the interviews."

I asked Ila why she had felt so powerfully compelled to document the Sayisi Dene story.

"I wanted to be a voice for my father and my mom," she says, "and a lot of those other people whose lives were cut off, so they never had the chance to tell their own stories. Because of my own pain after I lost my parents in 1972, I remember when I left Churchill – I was living with a family and going to school in Guelph at the time, but I had come back home for Christmas – as the plane left Churchill, I could see the streetlights of Dene Village down there, and I said to myself if I ever come back here again, I will make something out of my life, I'll honor my mum and dad, so they will never be forgotten. I was seventeen years old. It was like a little seed, something I planted within myself....."

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