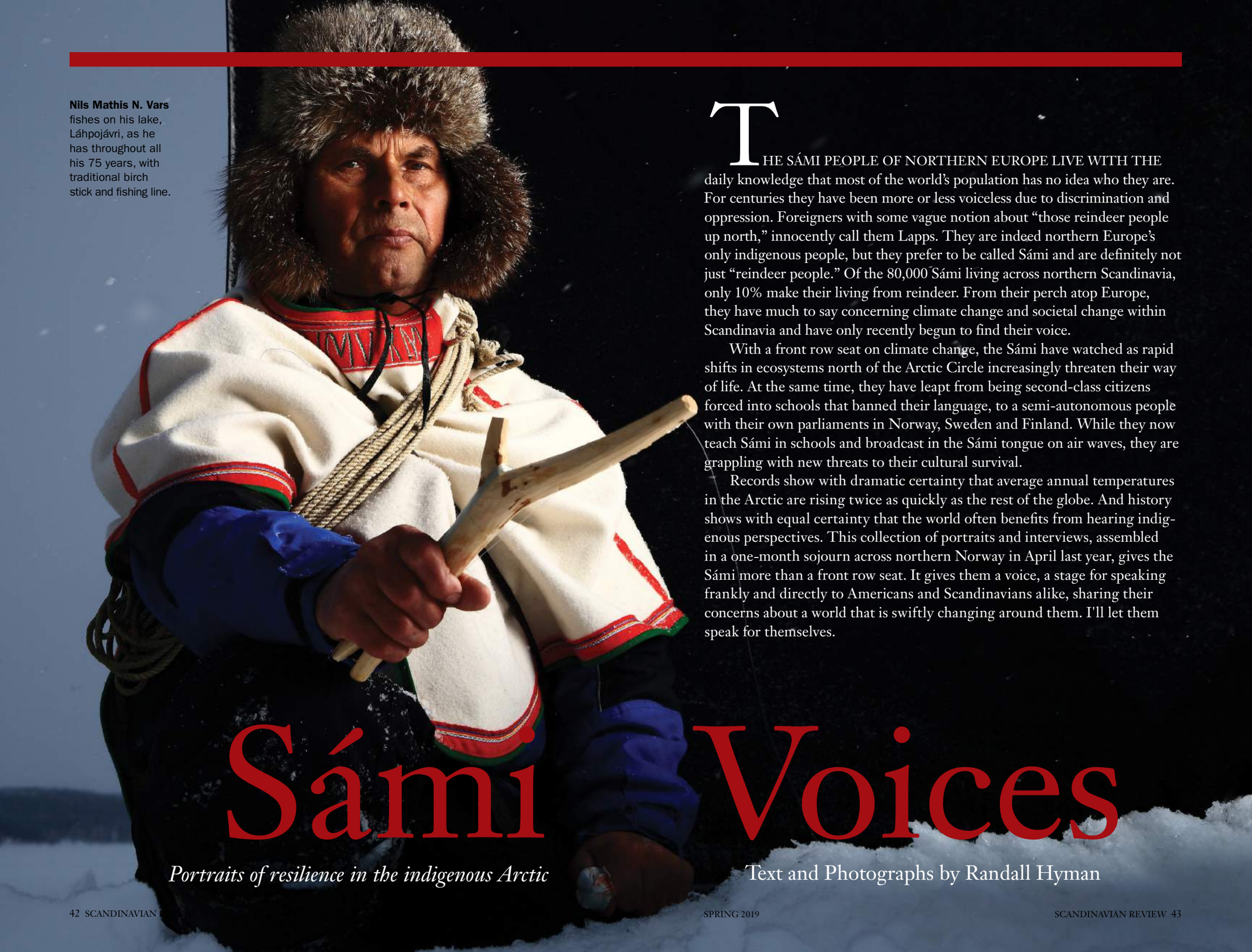


Nils Mathis N. Vars fishes on his lake, Láhpojávri, as he has throughout all his 75 years, with traditional birch stick and fishing line.

Sámi Voices

Portraits of resilience in the indigenous Arctic

Text and Photographs by Randall Hyman

THE SÁMI PEOPLE OF NORTHERN EUROPE LIVE WITH THE daily knowledge that most of the world's population has no idea who they are. For centuries they have been more or less voiceless due to discrimination and oppression. Foreigners with some vague notion about "those reindeer people up north," innocently call them Lapps. They are indeed northern Europe's only indigenous people, but they prefer to be called Sámi and are definitely not just "reindeer people." Of the 80,000 Sámi living across northern Scandinavia, only 10% make their living from reindeer. From their perch atop Europe, they have much to say concerning climate change and societal change within Scandinavia and have only recently begun to find their voice.

With a front row seat on climate change, the Sámi have watched as rapid shifts in ecosystems north of the Arctic Circle increasingly threaten their way of life. At the same time, they have leapt from being second-class citizens forced into schools that banned their language, to a semi-autonomous people with their own parliaments in Norway, Sweden and Finland. While they now teach Sámi in schools and broadcast in the Sámi tongue on air waves, they are grappling with new threats to their cultural survival.

Records show with dramatic certainty that average annual temperatures in the Arctic are rising twice as quickly as the rest of the globe. And history shows with equal certainty that the world often benefits from hearing indigenous perspectives. This collection of portraits and interviews, assembled in a one-month sojourn across northern Norway in April last year, gives the Sámi more than a front row seat. It gives them a voice, a stage for speaking frankly and directly to Americans and Scandinavians alike, sharing their concerns about a world that is swiftly changing around them. I'll let them speak for themselves.

Silje Karine Muotka

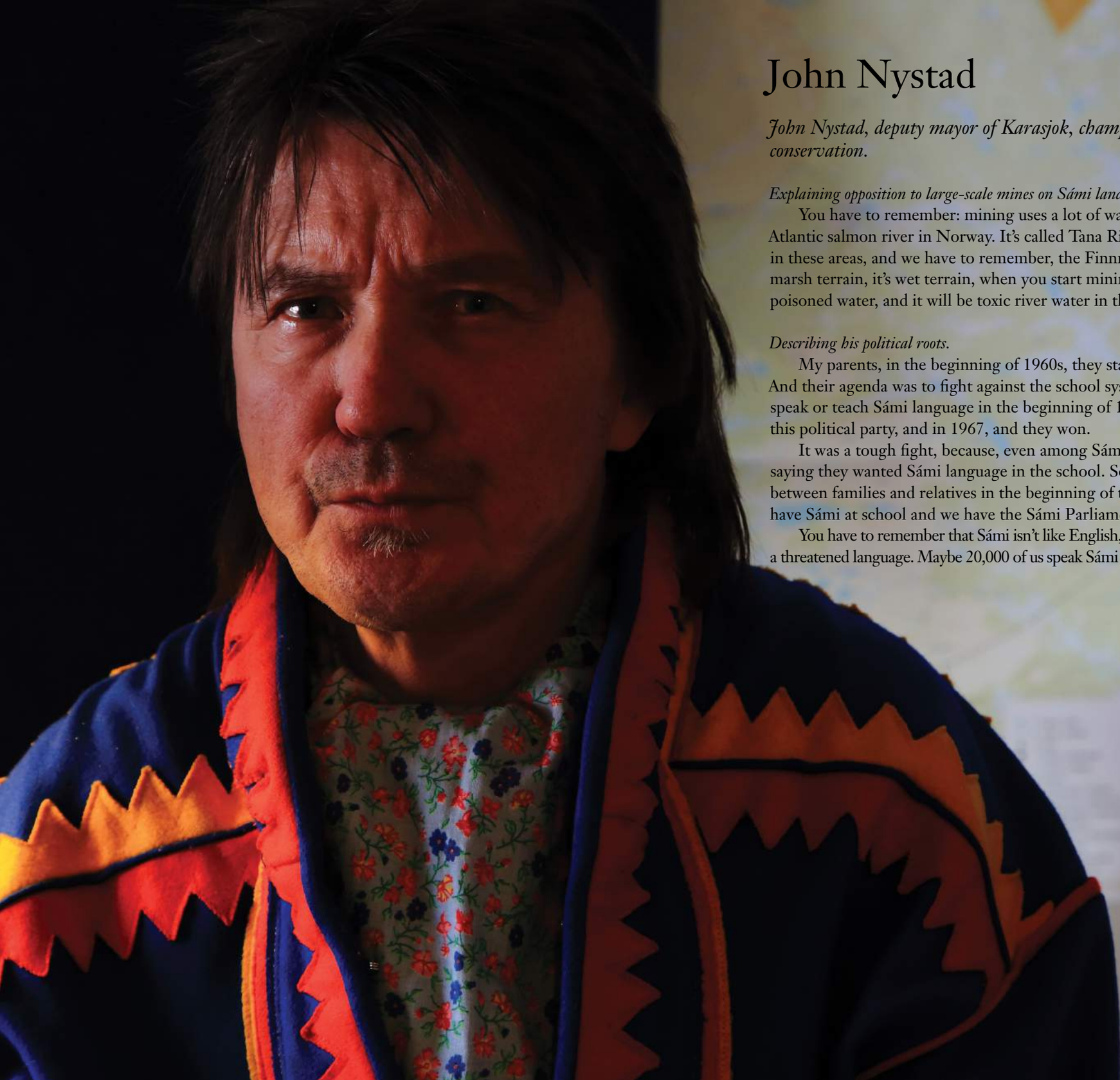
As a member of Sámi Parliament and a Sea Sámi with deep roots along the wild northern coast, Silje Karine Muotka makes her people's voices heard from Alta to Troms County concerning climate change, marine pollution and indigenous rights.

I am from a small municipality in eastern Finnmark called Nesseby. It's a Sea Sámi community close to the Finnish and Russian borders, so I have relatives from both sides. We bought our house where we can see the sea. Sea Sámi have always lived from a combination of fisheries and small-scale farming. Some of us also have reindeer and we move from summer to winter areas, but not as far as the reindeer-herding Sámis.

The Norwegianization process has been much more dramatic in the Sea Sámi areas, and especially here in the western part of Finnmark. It has almost eradicated the Sámi language here and also the use of our traditional regalia, the *gákti*. But now people are taking both the language and the *gákti* back.

The climate issue, I think, is the most important political issue that we are dealing with. And it's not just for the Sámis alone, it's for us all to care about. When you're living close to nature you are aware that changes are happening so rapidly that we cannot ignore it. And in the northern parts of Norway, here we can see the climate is changing from year to year, you can see it getting warmer. There are new species in our areas we haven't had before. When it comes to the Paris Agreement, we must ensure there is an indigenous platform. In Bonn, the environmental minister and I were at the table representing Norway at a high level. I was one of the very few indigenous people in the room.

The square bar codes on this and following pages are called QR codes. Open your cell phone camera and just aim—it will focus and notification will pop up. Tap on the notification to open the link to listen to the person in the photo speak directly to you. (Some phones require to load a QR app first).



John Nystad

John Nystad, deputy mayor of Karasjok, champions Sámi land rights and conservation.

Explaining opposition to large-scale mines on Sámi lands.

You have to remember: mining uses a lot of water. And we have the best North Atlantic salmon river in Norway. It's called Tana River. And if we start with mining in these areas, and we have to remember, the Finnmarksvidda plateau, you have marsh terrain, it's wet terrain, when you start mining there and it flows over with poisoned water, and it will be toxic river water in the Tana River system.

Describing his political roots.

My parents, in the beginning of 1960s, they started the Sámi People's Party. And their agenda was to fight against the school system because it wasn't allowed to speak or teach Sámi language in the beginning of 1960s, or until 1960. They started this political party, and in 1967, and they won.

It was a tough fight, because, even among Sámi people, some didn't like parents saying they wanted Sámi language in the school. So there were bitter battles between families and relatives in the beginning of the 1960s. But, nowadays, we have Sámi at school and we have the Sámi Parliament.

You have to remember that Sámi isn't like English, Finnish, Swedish or Norwegian. It's a threatened language. Maybe 20,000 of us speak Sámi daily. And that number is falling.

Edel Hætta Eriksen

Retired school principal Edel Hætta Eriksen, oldest resident of Kautokeino, born 1921, fought for speaking Sámi in public schools and was the first Sámi inducted into the Royal Norwegian Order of Saint Olav as a Knight, First Class—among Norway's highest civilian honors.

Remembering when she left home for middle school as a girl.

When I moved to Vadsø as a 15-year-old, I wasn't discriminated against because I lived with the director of all the schools in Finnmark. I was lucky. It took five days to get to Vadsø–first by boat down the river to Mázi, then walking 30 kilometers with the postman to the coast to get the coastal steamer, *Hurtigruten*. It was nothing. In wintertime it was easier. You could go by reindeer sledge.

Recounting her fight for the Sámi language in schools.

I always dreamt of being a teacher and went to teacher training school in Tromsø. The policy was not to allow Sámi language in school. That was my fight, that Sámi children had the right to speak Sámi and be taught in Sámi and to read and write in the Sámi language. Language scientists said if you learn two languages together, then you mix them and get no language at all. I got into a group forming curriculum for the Sámi children, and I fought for these rights. It's interesting that I was given the King Olaf award for that as a Sámi. I dined with the king here in Kautokeino and was invited to his castle to receive my medal and diploma.

Aina Emilia Siri Bals

Aina Emilia Siri Bals, 15 years old, daydreams in a lavvu *(teepee), during a middle school project demonstrating Sámi traditions for a group of visiting European education officials.*

Describing her portrait.

That was a *lavvu* (teepee) project. In my group we told about Sámi food, like the traditional bidos. Bidos is made of reindeer meat and potatoes and carrots. It's a soup. Sámi people eat bidos when we celebrate weddings, yes, big celebrations. I remember what I was thinking about . . . because it was the smoke and my eyes were, yes, my eyes had tears because the smoke had come into my eyes, and then I was thinking. I just saw there was so many people that had come to see the Sámi culture. I don't know how it is to come to Kautokeino and hear about our culture. I was so happy, that moment.

Recalling what it's like on the tundra with her family herding reindeer.

When you drive with the snowmobile after the reindeer, sometimes you can see the sun. It's yellow, red, orange. And it's so beautiful. Sometimes it's cold and then it's white around the sun like, snow and cold. You can see the reindeer running, and you just follow the reindeer.

I feel so alive when I'm with the reindeer. There are no trees there and all you can see is the reindeer and white snow and the sun and mountains. It's really beautiful.

Ingá Márjá Sarre

Ingá Márjá Sarre, nationally renowned Sámi actress who has studied with top method coaches in Los Angeles, relaxes after rehearsal at the Sámi National Theater in Kautokeino.

Explaining how she became an actress.

I started to act when I was around 14 years old in a TV series called *Skaide*, it was a Sámi TV series shot in Kautokeino, where I live, Guovdageaidnu. It's a Sámi community where 90 percent speak Sámi and maybe 10 percent speak Norwegian. When I was a child, I loved to listen to stories by my grandmother and grandfather, so I learned stories and I loved to tell stories also, so that's probably why I became an actress.

Recalling early experiences of feeling different as a Sámi.

When I was a child, I used to go every Sunday with my grandmother to church. And I remember, once, after church, another kid said to me, "Why did you wear a gákti and run around in the church?" And that was a very hurtful moment because it was very natural to me to wear a gákti. A gákti is the traditional Sámi dress, and I didn't think there was anything bad with that, but she probably grew up in a home where *fornorsking* (Norwegianization) was more. I didn't know it was like that in some homes. For me it was very natural to wear a gákti and to run around . . . Once I was in a camp for three weeks with other Norwegian young people and then they asked me the questions, "Do you live in a tent on the tundra?" And I was just laughing and playing with, "Yes, I live in a tent and I live in a *lavvu* (teepee) and we just joik (traditional chant) all day long and we ride on ice bears!" And they believed me, that it was true!

Kai Somby

Kai Somby, heavy metal rocker, brought Sámi roots into the contemporary music scene with "heavy joik."

Talking about his early years in music.

Our guitarist, Tor, got the idea that we take one of the very known joiks and make it hard rock, and we called the style, "heavy joik." It was quite okay here in the inlands in Finnmark, not by the coast, so we started playing for motorcycle gangs up here. They loved it. And then it kind of exploded after that. People started to get out with the Sámi costumes and say they were really proud of being Sámi. And people by the coast were joiking in the streets. They didn't do that before. In the 80s it was impossible, it couldn't happen. Once we had a gig and there was one Sámi guy in front with Sámi costumes on and some other guys from the coast. Everybody was digging the music, everybody was joiking. Afterwards, when the club closed, they went outside and they beat him up because they didn't like Sámi. But an hour earlier, they were joiking with us. Those were crazy times. Now it's almost opposite. This year, I saw in Kirkenes and Vadsø, on the Sámi national day, they were celebrating it.

Reflecting on vanishing Sámi heritage.

I'm a very nostalgic guy, but I look to the future. But we still have to grab some of our heritage and bring it with us because we are losing it. All those small signs about when the birds arrive, how the winds are going to be, when is the rain coming, how is the weather going to be–all those things are going away with the older generation, so we're losing that. And that's sad.

Heidi Sara

Heidi Sara, children's television host on state broadcasting's only Sámi station, cuddles with baby reindeer mascot.

Describing her baby reindeer puppet's cultural importance.

We are sitting here with our little reindeer. It's not a he and it's not a she. It's an it. And its name is Binnabánnaš. We do a show with it on the children's TV here in Norway, and it's in the Sámi language. And it's a very nice little it. Children are loving it. They see it on the TV, and nowadays, the children are telling me that, "I see Binnabánnaš on my iPad." When we are children, we have a special form of joik (traditional chant) that someone gives us, and when we grow up to adults then we have another one, which is more, like, more grown up. And Binnabánnaš, he's got one, a little joik.

Reflecting on how Sámi-language education has benefitted her children.

My children are growing up in a Sámi community. They have Sámi language at school as the first language, and then Norwegian as the second. These are opportunities I didn't have when I grew up, and I'm very grateful they have it. Sámi is kind of in a situation that we have to be aware that it could be gone one day. We are not so many, Sámi people. When my children are done with gymnasium here in Karasjok, they plan to move to other parts of Norway where there are not Sámi communities, but I believe they have it so strong in the blood that they will feel it, that they are still a part of the Sámi community.

Inga Ravna Eira

Inga Ravna Eira, poet and president of the Sámi Writers Association, writes of herding reindeer on the tundra as a child and of persecution in government boarding schools where the Sámi language was banned.

At *internatet* (boarding school), everything was in Norwegian and I understood nothing. It was very hard and I was very sad. Our parents were far away on the tundra, so we had to be in the village at internatet. I took care of my siblings because I was oldest, put grass in their Sámi reindeer shoes and dressed them. Sometimes I was late for meal times and had nothing to eat. And the food was quite different. Fish was good, but only porridge on Saturdays. And the dishes were always dirty. I thought, "This is not right, why are we being treated like this? At home it's not like this." It made me political very early.

They said reindeer-herding children have lice so we need to put DDT on them, in our hair, on our pillows, in our underwear. It was poison. How is it that we are not sick after nine years of it?

My family has very dark skin, especially my brother. He was very dark around the neck, and they said my mother was disgusting, not washing her children. So they scrubbed him until he started bleeding. And I would stand there and watch and cry and say, "Don't do that. He is not dirty. We live out in the sun." But they scrubbed him and said he was dirty.

Mathis Eira

Mathis Eira, 16 years old, butchers the meat from the family reindeer herd in his mother's kitchen. He is presently a full-time student at Reindeer School, a vocational high school focused on animal husbandry.

An important thing you can see in the portrait of me is that I am cutting reindeer meat into small pieces and putting it in a bowl to then grind it and make dried meat. What I would like Americans to know about the Sámi is that we are still here. We have our own language, we have our own flag, we have our own culture, and our land. What most Norwegians think or know about Sámis, when they ask me, "Are you Sámi?," I tell them, "Yes, I am," and then they ask, "Do you live in *lavvu*, do you have reindeer?" That's the only thing they ask me because that's the only thing they know about the Sámi people.

The biggest challenge of being Sámi is to be heard, to let people know that we are an indigenous people, that we have rights to our land where we have feeding grounds for the reindeer. The biggest blessing of being Sámi, it's to work with the reindeer, to talk a language I was born with. As a Sámi, I am most proud of my language, my culture and my reindeer herding. I dream of a future where I can work with reindeer freely and no one is bothering me and my herding.

Ana Maria Eira

Ten-year-old Ana Maria Eira, winner of the 2018 World Cup in junior class reindeer racing also owns Suiva, fastest animal in Norway in 2018 as the senior class winner.

Mun namma lea Ana Maria ja mun lean 10 jagi boaris.
My name is Ana Maria and I am 10 years old.

Mun riegádin Tromssas ja orun Guovdageainnu suohkanis.
I was born in Tromsø and I live in the municipality of a town called Kautokeino.

Mu bearaš bargá boazudoaluin ja mu eadni bargá maid oahpaheaddjin.
My family works with reindeer herding and my mom works as a teacher as well.

Mu boahtteáigg niehku lea beassat bargat boazudoalus, ahte mus leat olu bohccot ja beasan bargat herggiiguin.
My dream for the future is to work with reindeer herding, have a lot of reindeer and work with *heargi* (male reindeer, used in racing).

Govas oainnát mu iežan herggiin. Ja dat muitala mun lean heargeeaiggát ja heargevuoddji.
In my picture you see me together with my own *heargi*. It shows that I am a heargi owner and reindeer racer.

Mun hálidan amerihkalaččat galget diehtit ahte sápmelaš eallin lea somá.
I want Americans to know it is fun being a Sámi.

Mun lean eanemus rámis Sámivuođain lea go máhtán sámegiela ja go mus lea gákti.
I am proud of being Sámi, that I speak Sámi and that I own a *gákti*.

Randall Hyman is a writer and photographer who has specialized in Arctic topics for the past ten years as a Fulbright Scholar and Alicia Patterson Foundation Fellow. His interactive exhibit, "Sámi Dreams," appears at Norway House in Minneapolis through June 9th, 2019.