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Margarita Ivanovna Belichenko (Kevynjevyt), 1945–2021: Radio Journalist and Champion of Chukchi Language and Tradition

Margarita Belichenko, beloved radio journalist and dedicated promoter of Chukchi language and culture, passed away on October 9, 2020 in Anadyr, the regional center of Chukotka. Only eight months earlier, on her seventy-fifth birthday, she was awarded Chukotka’s highest distinction, the title of “Honorary Citizen of the Chukotka Autonomous Region,” which Governor Roman Kopin presented to her personally in the offices of the state radio station where she worked, before a gathering of colleagues who laughed and cheered in celebration of her achievements. Belichenko’s journalistic career spanned nearly half a century, and her voice was heard daily throughout Chukotka in her Chukchi language radio broadcasts, which always began with the words “Еттык, тумгытуры”/ *Ettyk, tumgytury* [Hello, friends].



Figure 1. Margarita Belichenko (photography by Patty A. Gray).

Belichenko was born on February 10, 1945 in the village of Enmelen on the Bering Sea coast, the second of five children (she had an older sister and three younger brothers). Her given name was КЭВЫН'ЭВЫТ/Кевуҕевыт, which means “Comfortable.” Her father’s clan was УЭЧГЫН/Uesgyn,¹ which she said was untranslatable, while her mother’s clan was К'ЭПЭР/К'ерер [Wolverine]. Her father, a sea mammal hunter, also hunted Arctic foxes to supply the WWII front, while her mother worked as a seamstress in the collective farm. Belichenko was born inside the family яранга/*iaranga* [reindeer skin tent] and lived there until the age of nine, when the family was moved into a wooden house built by the collective farm.

Belichenko spoke no Russian until she went to school at the age of seven; the schoolteacher spoke only Russian and forbade the children to speak in their native languages. Belichenko did not fully master the Russian language until about the age of nine, and often talked about how difficult it was to make sense of Russian grammar, which seemed to have nothing in common with Chukchi grammar. “It was dreadful,”² she said of the experience. But she considered herself lucky that her house was located in the village, so she could still live at home while going to school; she only had to stay in a boarding school (in Nunligran) during the fifth and sixth grades, until another school was built in Enmelen that taught through the eighth grade. “That’s why my siblings and I knew our own language so well,” she said; “it was because we lived at home.”

After eighth grade, at the age of sixteen, Belichenko went to study at the teacher training college in Anadyr. The seeds of her radio career were planted at the very beginning of her studies there, when she entered a translation contest organized by Chukchi and Yupik members of the regional Komsomol [Young Communist League]. The task was to translate summaries of popular movies that were to be shown to reindeer herders and sea mammal hunters in the “Red Tents”—local culture bases—as entertainment. Red Tent workers complained that it was difficult explaining to non-Russian speakers what the movies would be about. Belichenko won the contest with her translation into Chukchi language of a text summarizing the film “Divorce Italian Style.” The judges congratulated the top three translators in the regional media, and as a result, Belichenko was noticed by the state radio station and was invited to work part-time as a correspondent during her studies.

Belichenko graduated from the teacher training college in 1966, and was then obligated to work as a schoolteacher for at least two years. She

1. In some cases (as in this one) in Chukchi words, the letter ‘ч’ [ch] is pronounced as an ‘s’.

2. Direct quotes and many other details are taken from interviews with Belichenko conducted in 2008 by the author.

moved to Sireniki and taught a combined class of second and fourth graders for several years. There she met Ivan Bardashevich, with whom she had a daughter, Tatiana. After three years of active participation in the community, Belichenko was nominated to run for a seat on the village council, and was elected. She served for a year as Secretary, and was then promoted to the position of Chair for two years. As a deputy representing Sireniki, she often traveled to Anadyr for regional sessions and was frequently interviewed on regional radio for Chukchi language audiences; she therefore became well known in Anadyr and was admired by the radio staff for her articulateness.

Her full-time radio career did not start until 1973, when push and pull factors caused her to move to Anadyr. She wanted her daughter to attend the best schools possible, which were found in the regional center; but she was also being wooed by the Chukchi language radio staff. When she joined them as a correspondent, one of her first interviews was with the celebrated Chukchi author, Yurii Rytkeu. "I had the impression that he was interviewing me, and not the other way around," she said. She interviewed him many times after that in her career, and he remained a family friend until his death in 2008. In those early years, her job also included reading the news on television once a week in Chukchi language.

Almost immediately upon her arrival in Anadyr, Belichenko met her future husband, Vladimir Belichenko. They fell in love, and their daughter Natasha was born in December 1974. He affectionately called her "Ritunia." They remained happily married and deeply in love for twenty-eight years, until his death in 2002.

Belichenko was eventually promoted from correspondent to editor. She took a break from working at the radio station from 1979 to 1989, during which time she held a clerical job and also worked for the regional newspaper, *Krainii Sever* [Far North], as a translator and proofreader. But she missed the creativity of radio work, and so in 1989 she returned to work for the state radio station. Around 1992, she was promoted to head of the division of Indigenous-language programming. In her later career, she also appeared periodically on Chukotka's upstart FM radio station, Радио Пурга/ Radio Purga [Radio Blizzard], which was started with the support of Chukotka's former governor, the billionaire Roman Abramovich. She nevertheless remained a leading figure at the state radio station up until her passing.

"You know, I love my work," she would often say. "And you know why? Because somehow, I am free. In the past, every word spoken was controlled in some way, but now, when I greet my listeners...I can play around with it in different ways, create a mood for people.... To be a journalist in and of itself is to be an artist."

As a child, Belichenko was a member of the Soviet children's organization Young Pioneers, which was known for the red kerchiefs that

members wore around their necks. “I remember exactly, I wanted so much [to join] so everyone would see my red kerchief,” she recalled; “I was so proud.” Although she was also an active member of the Komsomol as a young adult and was socially and politically active, Belichenko never joined the Communist Party: “I saw too much injustice, too much darkness in what the Communists were up to.” But she said there was no animosity between Indigenous inhabitants of Chukotka over party membership, and Belichenko campaigned for Vladimir Etylin when he ran for governor, although he was a Communist Party member.

Belichenko’s strongest support was reserved for women activists—Chukotka has had no shortage of strong, active women in politics and society. As a radio journalist, she had a platform to air in-depth interviews with the women leaders of Chukotka she most admired, such as Maia Etyrintyna (a Chukchi), who served in the Council of the Federation, and Tatiana Nesterenko (a Russian), who was twice elected to the Federal Duma and was later tapped to serve in the federal Ministry of Finance in Moscow. Belichenko even served briefly as an assistant to Nesterenko until the latter’s promotion to the federal level.

Belichenko was active in the Indigenous community in Chukotka. She served five years as a member of the Council of Elders of the Association of Indigenous Less-Numerous Peoples of Chukotka. She was a founding member of Чычэткин Вэтгав/Sysetkin Vetgav [Our Own Language], which was started in 1994 with the active participation of the French linguist and translator Charles Weinstein. The group met regularly to converse in Chukchi language over tea as a means to preserve and promote the language; the organization has since grown in both size and scope. Belichenko was also a member of a Chukchi-language theater group called ЭНМЭН/Enmen [So They Say/So It Was] (the word *enmen* traditionally begins the telling of a story in Chukchi language). The group staged folkloric performances in Chukchi language, such as stories, songs, humorous tongue twisters, and throat singing; although it remained small in scale and no longer exists, Belichenko had a particularly loving relationship with the group. She was a charismatic performer and enjoyed storytelling before an audience, especially when children were present.

Belichenko received so many awards and honors in her lifetime that she joked she could wallpaper her apartment with all the certificates. She considered most of them mere formalities of Soviet times, but the one award she was most proud of was the title “Keeper of Tradition,” awarded to her in 2005 by then-governor Roman Abramovich. The first to receive this award was Yurii Rytkeu; Belichenko’s award was No. 2. “It means I have not lived my life in vain,” she said of her award. “It means I know something about my traditions and customs, and if I have preserved them, they will be passed on.” She added that her greatest reward of all was her two daughters,

Tatiana Ivanovna Bardashevich and Natalia Vladimirovna Belichenko. She often said that it was for them she was working so hard to preserve her family's and her people's cultural legacy. She is survived, remembered, and celebrated by these two loving daughters, as well as by their own children, Belichenko's dearly beloved grandchildren, Daniil (age 18), Ivan (age 10), and Maria (age 10).

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