

Searching for sisters in the USSR

In Leningrad I was on the streets every day, filling up my eyes, searching for anything and everything. Would I know a lesbian if I saw her?

BY KELLY MASEK

In Leningrad, where the light never ceased and I felt continually dizzy and off-balance (a reaction to jet-lag I was told), we only murmured about the possibility of lesbians. Had anyone heard anything from anyone else who had been here before? Did someone know someone who knew?

The information that finally filtered through was in the form of a coming-out story. It seemed last time Janet was in Leningrad she decided to come out to a Soviet friend. Things went smoothly and the two women remained friends. When Janet returned to Leningrad for another visit, accompanied by her lover this time, she wanted her Soviet friend and her lover to meet. They met and all was well until it was time to say good-bye and the friend was "stiff as a board and barely touched me" came the report to us from Janet's lover.

The story takes on considerably more weight in the Soviet Union where the people are not squeamish huggers, kissers, hand-holders, or arm-in-arm strollers; man to man, woman to woman and otherwise. When meeting or departing, especially departing, there are great displays of affection, even if you've just met.

It was the first piece of the puzzle laying lonely on the board. Just a bit of homophobia, but it spurred us on. What further information would we uncover? Would we see a gay couple or even a single? Would someone come out to us? It was the beginning of our journey and we were buoyant with hopes.

There were twenty-seven women in our traveling group; each of us in search of a special dream, several of us looking for clues to Soviet gay and lesbian culture. The common ties binding the group were citizen diplomacy, peace, and the empowerment of women. This trip, which brought us together, was the third annual Women's Journey for Peace to the Soviet Union sponsored by the Earthstewards Network.

In Leningrad I was on the streets every day, filling up my eyes, searching for anything and everything. I was there at six in the morning watching parents walk their children to day-care. I was there during rush hour, carried by crowds toward the Metro. One night I was at the circus, surrounded by laughing children and adults. Would I know a lesbian if I saw her? Sitting next to me were two women whispering to one another, their arms linked together. Who could tell? We were gleeful at the complete acceptance of public affection. How freeing this seemed. No stigma and yet in the end I had difficulty adopting this custom. It felt awkward. I needed practice.

When we left Leningrad the white nights lighted our way to Vilnius, the capital of Lithuania. Birch forests and dachas and smooth green fields floated by our train windows. It was difficult to sleep with these scenes beckoning and difficult to stay awake aboard the lulling train. Our time in Vilnius was brief and filled with visits to a daycare, a factory, an island castle. We did not pick up any more clues on the lesbian trail. After three days in Vilnius we traveled to Minsk and an adventure with Ylena.

It began with an address given to a member of our group who is a world traveller and co-ordinator of world travel for persons with disabilities. Susan wanted to visit the woman whose address she had, but whom she did not know. Did anyone want to go with her? Several of us did and at 10:00 on a Sunday morning we set out to find Ylena. It took us several tries to procure a taxi, no one wanted to take Susan's wheelchair. We finally hid the chair until the last moment, and then piled into the taxi before the driver could say "nyet!"

We were taken to a block containing several sandy-colored low-rise apartment buildings.

When Ylena answered my knock she was faced with a nervous American pointing to her address and saying "hello" and "peace and friendship" in poorly-accented Russian. Somehow she understood and invited us in, served us tea and sweets, and spent the rest of the day with us. We communicated with the help of two dictionaries and one useless phrase book (which Ylena finally threw against the wall in frustration). Later in the day we were able to bring Carol, a member of our group who spoke Russian, together with Ylena. In the more fluid discussions which followed, someone asked, "did Ylena know about women who loved women, men who loved men?" "As friends," she said. "No, as married, as husband and wife," was the best translation. "Nyet," she said with finality. "These people are ill. They are institutionalized and cured."

Ylena's answer reminded me of the information we'd received about AIDS. We were told there are people in the Soviet Union who have AIDS, but there are only 40 of them and they are all foreigners. Following this line of reasoning, there are gay people in the Soviet Union, but they're "cured" and because they're cured, there really aren't any Soviet gays (just like there aren't any Soviets with AIDS). It's a difficult argument to accept.

I asked if Ylena was married. No, she was a single woman, a psychologist by profession, who loved her work. Marriage would be bad for her nerves, she said. Did she feel pressure, social pressure to marry? "Only pressure from my mother," she replied.

We left Minsk on a midnight train bound for Moscow, the fourth and final city on our itinerary. Our finale in Moscow was almost too good to be true. It included a chance to participate in the third World Women's Congress, a chance to roam the streets of Moscow, to stand in Red Square, to explore this complex layered heart of old Russia and the new Soviet Union. In Moscow the days lengthened beyond recall. Each day might have been a year or more. I cannot describe the stretching of my emotions, my thoughts, even my physical being felt stretched living in Moscow. Keeping my journal became a difficult task. I would forget at the end of the day, or be too tired, lying in bed repeating to myself what I must write the next day, what I must not forget.

I wrote nothing about Svetlana in my journal. Her address is scribbled across the back of a Moscow postcard with arrows and instructions to turn the whole thing upside down (the city goes on the top line, Svetlana's name on the bottom line).

Will my letters reach you. I had asked, having learned in two short weeks to take nothing for granted in the Soviet Union. "Oh, yes, perhaps they will." She had paused thoughtfully. "You must give them to someone, a friend who will come to Moscow to deliver them to me or who will mail the letters from somewhere within the country. Then I will receive your letters."

Svetlana was the closest I came to finding a connection to lesbian and gay culture in the Soviet Union. She was not a lesbian nor did she know women who were, but she knew about lesbians and gay men and there was a sophistication to her knowledge. She had read Rita Mae Brown's *Rubyfruit Jungle* (which was listed in the card catalogue of the foreign language library where she worked) and she had seen the film *La Cage Aux Folles*. She had asked a French interpreter at the United Nations (where she had worked for three years in the early 1970s) if all the men in France were gay. He had told her only those in the south of France. Svetlana asked me many questions about being lesbian. Some were typical dregs (Do they hate men?), others were not (do they choose to have



children and how is this done?). Svetlana's willingness to talk helped dispel the murky fog of homophobia created by Ylena's words in Minsk. But she asked more than she answered and perhaps kept me from probing too much. Re-living that discussion I understood how small are the increments of knowledge to be gained by the visitor in the Soviet Union. If I could go back and talk with Svetlana again, what more would I learn?

Svetlana was one of two gifts that came to me on my last day in the Soviet Union. She was a gift of openness, but Grete, a Netherlands

delegate to the Women's Congress, a grandmother, and a gay rights activist, was the balm to soothe my soul. Grete joined me and my lover on a bench in Gorky Park, assumed we were partners, and told us about her work as a gay rights activist. "I am not gay," she said, "but everyone must work for gay rights because everyone must have the right to choose." I hope her words linger in that place a long while.

Kelly Masek lives in Portland. She participated in the World Women's Congress in Moscow last June.

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