

Gays, lesbians join Soviet/American Peace Walk

Besides the three gay men and two lesbians, the Peace Walk included young and old, single and married, and a few entire families. The makeup of the Soviet walkers was similar, except there were no avowed lesbians or gays.

BY BILLY RUSSO

Among the 220 Americans who joined an equal number of Soviet citizens on the recent, well-publicized, Peace Walk from Leningrad to Moscow was a Roseburg native. He was also one of the five American walkers who openly identified himself as being gay.

During August, Roland Shanklin visited his

Shanklin was concerned that neither the coordinator, nor the other Americans, who were directly involved with the Russian officials, were willing to address this blatant act of homophobia. Other American Peace Walkers, who were not involved with the officials, learned about the incident, and they were more supportive.

About ten days into the adventure, a man quietly joined the group. He quickly won the hearts of the American walkers, and, over the objections of the Russian officials, he was allowed to join the Peace Walk. He had recently been released from a Russian prison where he had served time for opposing the war in Afghanistan. He spoke fluent English, and like most Russians, he didn't know any homosexuals personally.

The dissident said that there were homosexuals in the prison. He didn't know if they were there because they were homosexuals or for other reasons. He told the Americans that the homosexuals were tortured, as were other types of prisoners.

During the trip our friends learned that there was a cruisy park in Moscow near the Bolshoi Ballet Building. Shanklin didn't go there himself, but his traveling companion did.

One evening he met a man in the park, a performer with the Ballet. The Russian didn't want to discuss homosexuality or talk about himself. He was only interested in sex (does this sound familiar?).

On another occasion in the park he met two teenagers who were far more open. They were so open that the American thought that this might be entrapment KGB-style. As they chatted the American became more comfortable and, eventually, accepted their invitation to have dinner at their home.

They lived about 45 minutes from Moscow by subway in one of the many tenement-like housing projects where most urban Russians dwell. It was a nice, clean, little studio. They were joined by a third man who was the lover of one of the teenagers.

This group talked about a small gay community that they were a part of: a discreet network of friends. As far as they knew, no one in their circle has ever come out to a non-gay person. It wasn't done that way. They distanced themselves from their oppression by totally hiding their gay identity: no one oppresses them for being gay because no one knows.

AIDS awareness is in its very early stages in the Soviet Union. While visiting a clinic in Moscow the Peace Walkers were told that only three cases have been reported, and only one of them was a Soviet citizen. The youth in the park did not feel particularly vulnerable, Shanklin said. They were not affected personally.



The Roseburg Report

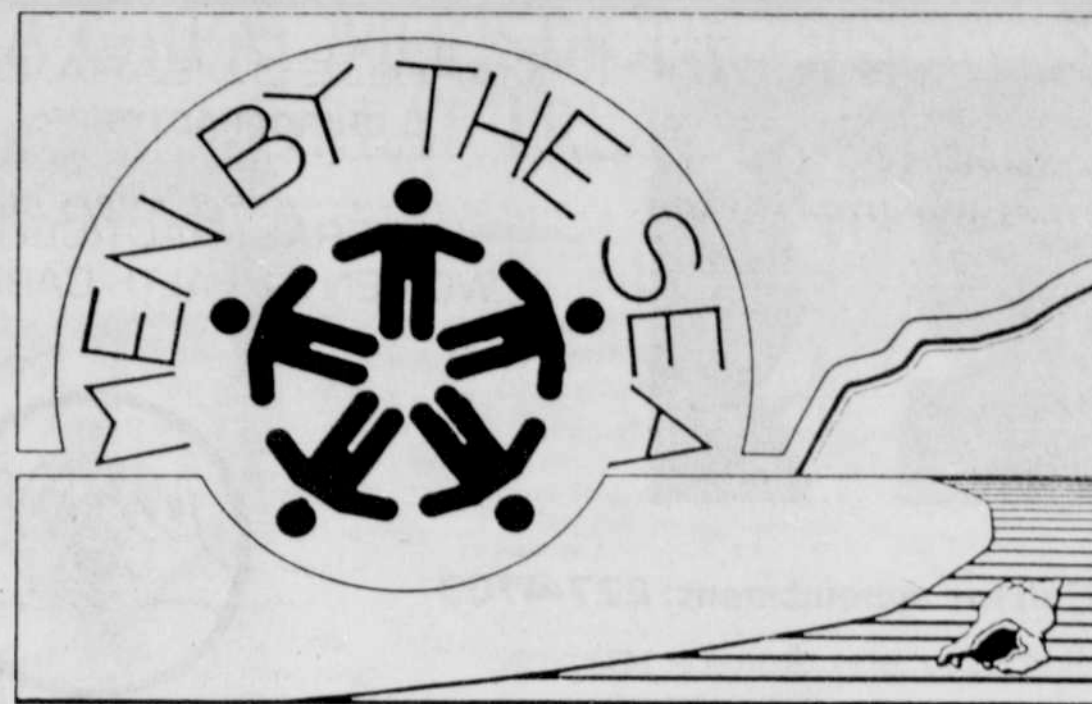
hometown and shared an evening of pictures and stories about the month-long Soviet/American peace trek. It was one of the largest turnouts at our Tuesday Rap Group.

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At the weekly rap group we wanted to know about the gay life in the Soviet Union. Shanklin explained that he traveled through Russia with a close friend — one of the other gay men. They were assigned to one of 12 groups of 40 walkers, half American and half Soviet. Each group had two coordinators, an American and a Soviet.

"Most Russians thought that there were no gays and lesbians in Russia," Shanklin said. When asked if homosexuals would be imprisoned there, "no," most responded, "they would be put in hospitals." In Russia, they put dissidents in "hospitals," mental institutions.

Many local youth greeted and dialogued with the Peace Walkers as they passed through small towns and villages. They were interested in rock 'n' roll, American literature, history and culture. Early in the Peace Walk the American coordinator for Shanklin's group told our gay friends that the Russian officials were concerned that exposure to homosexuals would corrupt Russia's youth.



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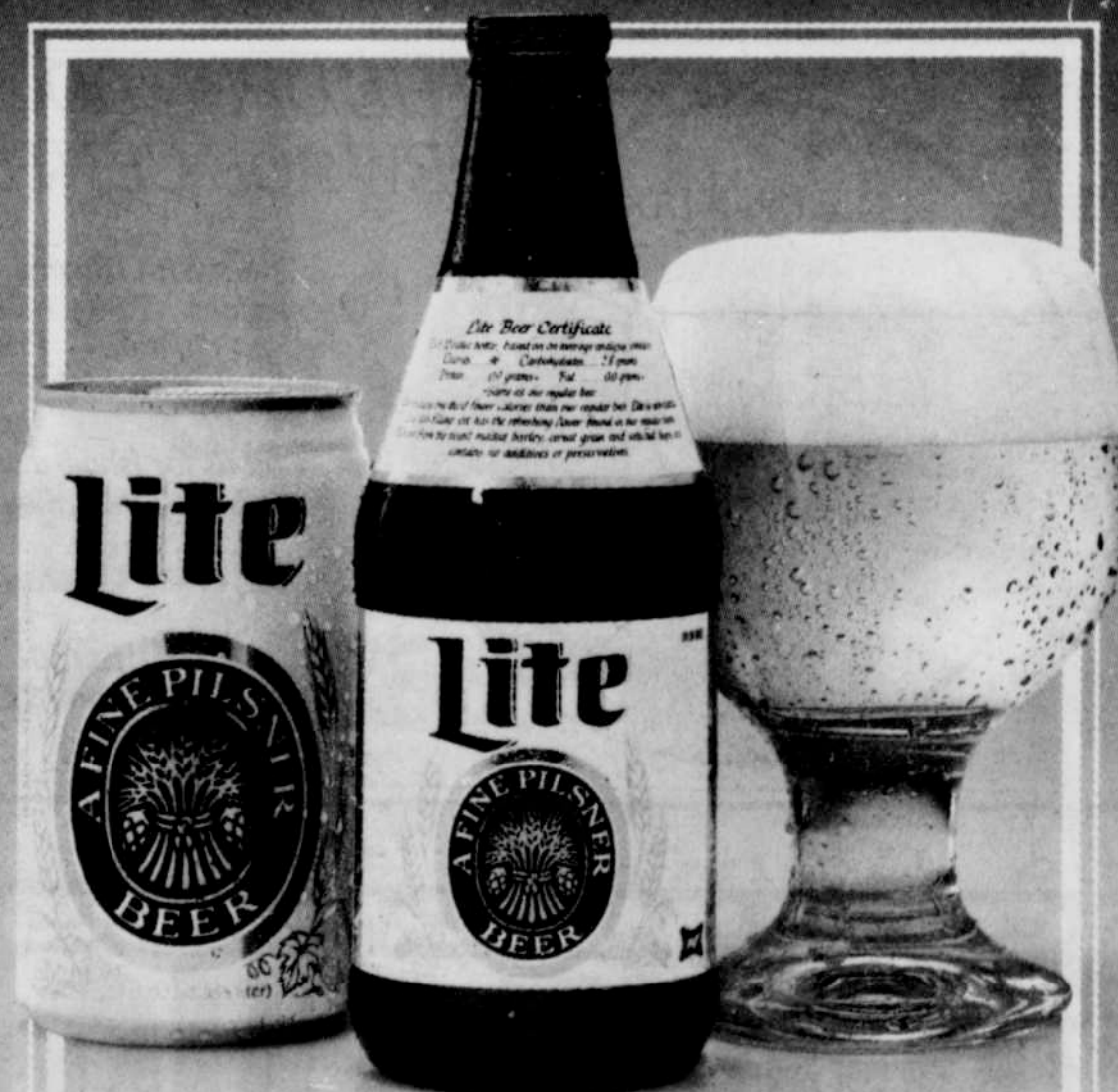
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