

## STRUGGLES IN A WAR-TORN WORLD

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raped. Most of the women who ended up in Belgrade were from Serb nationalists, and they were raped by Muslim or Croat soldiers.

"Any soldiers would come back and rape their own women. Husbands do that anyway. In war they resolve conflict with violence, so when they come back home they just go on with that."

Lepa said she is doing this work because she is a woman who loves women.

"Nobody wants to identify as lesbians, so we have lesbians as part of the Arkadia group. It is difficult, but it has not yet been dangerous for me to be a lesbian. When I came out there were books and some people in other countries coming out, so it helped to know. Coming out has different stages. There are other lesbians who are out in the women's group. But they are not out in the family or anywhere else, because they are scared for their job or family.

"I have been to the U.S. before, too. I saw the way things are here. It helps a lot. I would just support everybody to come out wherever they are, in whichever country they are. I think that is an important thing for all of us. We should really support each other in coming out. People are so scared because hatred is so awful, and they really don't want to go through that.

"I think that those small consciousness-raising groups in America that happened 10 or 20 years ago were very important, and is how women become feminist."

I asked Lepa if the war is ending.

"We hope it is calming down now, a little bit at least. The nationalist people cannot be tired of the hatred because the media and the dominant politics just feed you on that hatred all the time, so that can go on as long as the dominant policy is hatred.

"Women have more dilemma, between being mothers and having their sons in a situation to die in the war, and so some of them have this contradiction between faith to the nation and love to their children."

I asked why the government created this hatred and this war. Was it for money?

"It's not money, it's power."

"Power—over people?"

Lepa sighed and said wearily, "Power. I will never understand it, but I don't think it's money. Everybody is 10 times poorer now. It doesn't seem that we will be richer in the next 20 years, so it's some strange thing about having more territory. I don't understand that, but there's been war for 2,000 years all around that. It's nothing new. The territory, the vengeance, the pride system which operates the production of hate, and so power—it is nothing new. We all come from the same soil which is heterosexual and nationalist and patriarchal.

"Communist ideology suppressed religion. My generation did not care about religion at all. It is not a religious war. Yugoslavia under Tito had 22 different nationalities, ethnic origins, so it was clear the only way the country would survive is to have this policy of brotherhood and unity. Then all of a sudden, in a couple of days, it became against the policy."

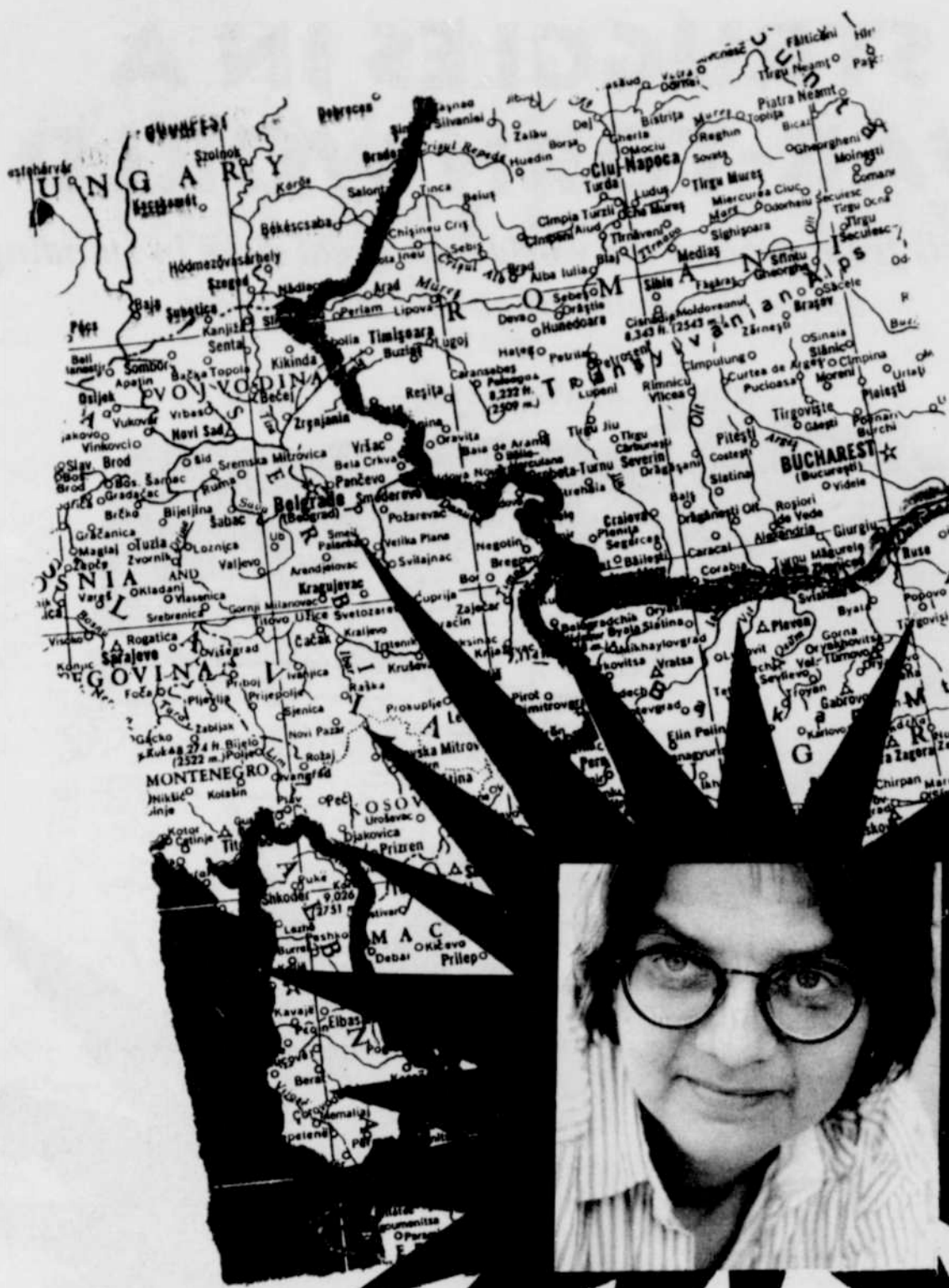
"Is there anything people can do here to help the situation of gay men and lesbians in your country?" I asked.

"Instead of supporting us, it is better to support themselves—especially lesbians."

Lepa is planning to write a book about Yugoslavian lesbians. The following is a translated excerpt from her work:

*In front of refugee women I become the witness of their tragedy. I listen to their stories of lost children and lost lives...*

*But I am not a war survivor, I am not a refugee, I am not a Serbian mother. The city I live in was not ruined. I am not identified with the regime, nor with the nation I come from. When the regime's*



Lepa Mladjenovic

*paper names me "a traitor of the Serbian nation" it hits the hidden smile in me.*

*Where I come from is not the nation I was born in, but the lost lesbian country I never had and somehow still manage to create. So, if they cannot insult me on the national basis, they certainly can insult me as a woman and lesbian. And they do...*

*But lesbians will remember, and I know there were lesbians living in the wartime before me. Most of them did not leave me their guidelines. Women who loved women in my town a long time ago did not save any traces of their voices. So, sometimes, in the moments of weakness, I read Audre Lorde in her "Litany for Survival," or I remind myself that "There must be those among whom we can sit down and weep and still be counted as warriors," (Adrienne Rich). Many lesbians, feminists and pacifists from this country and other countries have supported us, sent letters, books and journals and words of love. Then, when it all arrives, we sit in my kitchen, which we call Free Lesbian Republic, we look in awe at the beautiful books and papers, we eat macaroni, and some of us dance. And we still dream how to announce the codes of the Kitchen Republic into the streets.*

**A**BIGALE, the Association of Bisexuals, Gays and Lesbians, is a primarily black working-class organization, formed in 1992 in Capetown, South Africa. Its strategy is direct action. Its work is prolific. It organized the first gay and lesbian pride march in Capetown in December 1993. It recently sponsored the first lesbian, gay and bisexual film festival in South Africa, held in June and July of 1994. It worked successfully in coalition with the Organization of Lesbian and Gay Activists to include a ban on discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation in the Bill of Rights of the new South African Constitution, written by

the African National Congress. It is the first constitution in the world to specifically ban anti-queer discrimination.

Current projects include pursuing an HIV education project in the townships, seeking funding for literacy education, producing video documentaries about transvestites and sexual minorities in South Africa, and providing support and a safe haven for lesbians and gay men.

Right wing Christians and Muslims and the African Christian Party (believed to be sponsored by far right organizations in the United States) are fighting to remove the sexual orientation clause from the Bill of Rights.

Drag queen Bassie Nelson, Theresa Raizenberg, and two other members of ABIGALE live together in the house that functions as ABIGALE's center. I heard the homey whistle of the tea kettle and a

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clatter of cups as they gathered around the table during my telephone conversation with Bassie and Theresa. There was casual conversation in the mother tongue, Afrikaans.

Bassie told me that Capetown is a queer city. Gay men are accepted in the townships (poor communities), so it is relatively easy for them to come out. ABIGALE's active participants consist of 270 men and 35 women. There are 500 members including closeted queers. Theresa talked with me about the situation for lesbians.

"It is very difficult for women to come out as lesbians. We had two cases in ABIGALE. They told one woman she was a witch, and they wanted to burn her. The community found out she was living with another woman, and they wanted to crucify her. This guy in the township, that helped us to get people in to do workshops around gays and lesbians, rescued her and took her to a safe place.

"The people in the township found out that two

women are lesbians and said they must move out of the township.

"I knew I was a lesbian at a very early age, but, because of my mom and family, I only came out about three years ago when I started working in ABIGALE. My mom brought the police for me. I told her, 'This is not going to change me. I am not scared of the police.' My lover is from the Muslim community. Her family cut her off. They don't accept her, and they don't want her to be part of the family.

"Gay men who come out will probably start dragging—wearing women's clothes—because the community accepts it. The women are not out, so we have so few of them in ABIGALE.

"One colored [mixed racial ancestry] lady was married, then she found out she is a lesbian. She is living with a woman now for 17 years. If I go and visit there, then I can't hug and kiss my lover. I might make a mistake and then it's going to cause a whole drama, and I don't want that to interfere with their lives. I told them if you want to visit then you come visit me here, because we're more open here.

"At the film festival I saw a lot of lesbians. One show was about 500 lesbians. But they're very closeted. Lesbians do clash—they don't see the same point of view, or they don't want to mix with this group or that group. I will go into that this year and see what do they really want.

"We did try to start a lesbian caucus separate from the men, because I felt that some women don't want to interact with men or they feel they are dominated by men and they don't want to open their mouth. What can I offer them? I don't know what they want. I know what I want.

"The gay men from the townships come to us and say, 'I've got this plan. Can your committees work on it and help us?' and then we do. But, for example in the health forum, there is nothing for lesbians.

"Lesbians are a bit distant. I think it's because of society, because as soon as people they work with find out they are lesbian then they withdraw from them, and then they feel like an outcast, you see. An example was my lover who worked in an office. Then she changed her job. Now she is working for a health clinic, and there she is more accepted. The people like her there, so she is happier because she can be herself.

"I was teaching children Sunday School and first aid to the street kids within the church. I couldn't come out then because I wouldn't be allowed to teach the children.

"My mother doesn't accept it. I need to work on that, because I feel like everything I do or say or involve in my life—I want her to know about it. I'm still working on that. It's going to go slowly, but I will get there.

"At the film festival, the Muslims and Christians were picketing. The police escorted the gay marchers at our march to make sure we followed all rules to the letter. If you have a permit from 12 to 2 o'clock, there are three police cars there at 2 o'clock to make sure you leave.

"Lesbians are afraid to come out because of the police and their families, their jobs, and many would fear for their lives because of people wanting to burn them or kill them or crucify them.

I asked Theresa, "Would people really do that?"

"Yeah, they will. But the information gets to ABIGALE, and if we approach it with our organization, we don't go one by one. Then we have the support of some straight people within the community, so we have workshops with the ANC, and it makes our position stronger to deal with these situations."

"Why is it that gay men are accepted but not lesbians?"

"I think it's more for the fun. The colored drag queens, in Capetown, you will enjoy yourself with them. It's more entertaining because someone will chat up with you, they do something with style, and then we have this gay language, the 'gayla' language. If there are two drag queens together they will 'gayle,' and then the straight people don't