

# A Dance Therapist Travels in Russia

Ilene Serlin

*I will go to Russia . . . The Russians have been misrepresented. They may not have enough to eat there, but they are determined that art, education and music must be free to all. I am eager to see if there is one country in the world that does not worship commercialism more than the mental and physical education of its children.*

Isadora Duncan

The following was written upon my return from the first Soviet-American exchange on humanistic psychology and human sciences, to which I had a chance to bring movement. Following the dizzying events of the last few months, it is even more interesting to note the climate just before the coup, and reflect on what will happen to the hopes of professional cooperation and exchange born during this visit.

From July 8 to July 13, 1991, the first Soviet-American Seminar on Humanistic Psychology and Human Sciences convened in Galicino, USSR. This historic conference was co-sponsored by Saybrook Institute Graduate School and Research Center in San Francisco, the Center of Psychology and Psychotherapy in Moscow, the Association of Humanistic Psychology (USSR), and the National Center for Human Studies of the USSR Academy of Sciences.

Approximately 15 Saybrook participants and 5 members of the English Association of Humanistic Psychology were joined by 80 Soviets, including delegations from Lithuania, Georgia, and the Ukraine.

Plenary addresses by Stanley Krippner of Saybrook Institute and Vladimir Zinchenko of the National Center for Human Studies were followed by opening talks by Fyodor Vasilyuk and Slava Tsapkin of the Center of Psychology and Psychotherapy and Arne Collen of Saybrook Institute. Presentations by Stanley Krippner and Amadeo Giorgi on humanistic psychology and human sciences summarized the history of humanistic psychology and research methodologies in the human sciences. The second day began with a plenary session on "Humanistic Psychology in the Context of Cultural Traditions," followed by Stanley Krippner discussing the psychology of shamanism and S.S. Horujy on the "Russian Quest for Truth."

The third day's plenary session focused on the theme of psychology and spirituality, and the fourth was on psychotherapy and religion.

On that day, I chaired a panel on Embodied Meaning, with presentations on "Human Body and Human Existence: Philosophical Analysis" by V.N. Podoroga, "Hermeneutics of Movement" by this author, and "Death in the Cinema" by M.B. Jampolsky. Both Podoroga and Jampolsky's talks focused on the image of the body in culture, and both are associated with the Institute of Postmodern Studies in Moscow. The afternoon featured a discussion group on cure, personal growth and salvation, "Personal Mythology and Dreams" workshop by Stanley Krippner, and my experiential workshop called "Kinaesthetic Imagining in Psychotherapy."

As a participant, I felt very moved by the sight of the Soviet and American flags crossed over the dais. The spirit of the conference reflected an enthusiasm for exchange, demonstrated by much good spirit, toasting, and stories. Soviet hospitality lived up to its reputation, and we were showered with gifts and attention. Soviet participation on humanistic psychology and human science was very interesting, with both similarities and differences with the American version. Slava Tsapkin pointed out, for example, that the Soviet humanistic psychology movement did not begin in opposition to Freudian and behavioral psychology, so it had a different development than the American model. The Soviet model, in addition, seemed to include more spiritual and religious dimensions. Father Boris, a Russian Orthodox priest, spoke of the unity of spirit, body and mind within the Orthodox tradition, and emphasized the importance of tradition in a psychospiritual search. Planned excursions to Orthodox monasteries attested to the deeply-rooted relevance of religion to Soviet humanistic psychology. The Soviets did not yet seem to have the problem of the American eclectic or consumer approach to spirituality, and remained rooted in their ancient traditions. The Soviet sense of time and space seemed more Eastern than Western, and in contrast to our sense of precision, clear boundaries, and personal space. In my workshop, where we worked with themes of saying yes and no, the participants had a difficult time saying no, separating from the group, or

going their own way. Soviet culture still seemed more person-centered than thing or technology centered. On the other hand, there was a pervasive sense of depression, markedly different than the typically American optimistic psychology. Presenters, citing the works of Dostoevsky and Gogol, acknowledged the presence of tragedy and despair in the human condition. The fact that conditions were so difficult, buildings so shabby, and the economy so bleak made idealism and sometimes pessimism more prevalent than optimism. People did not know whether to hope or to be cynical, and the recurring cycles of hope and despair produced a kind of confusion and paralysis. In a psychodrama workshop, at least 3 participants admitted suicidal thoughts or ideation, and said that suicide was for them a reasonable alternative. In my workshop, images which emerged were stark, like "we are the last inhabitants on this planet," and "there are only a few days left."

Most of the presentations were notably academic. There was, however, a hunger for experiential work, and a real feeling of soul. During the serious panel, Vladimir Zinchenko of the USSR Academy of Sciences would rush up to the microphone, toast me and the "Russian dancing soul," and quote poetry. Soviet participants did not seem to share our inclination for order and boundaries! On Monday night, I was asked to start a spontaneous dance session in the dining room, and the participants joined in exuberantly, wrapping my scarves around them and expressing themselves vividly. The movement workshop was crowded, and all shared freely from a great depth of feeling. Based on this work, they asked me to return to Moscow after my visit to Kiev, and do a workshop for the Society of Practical Psychologists, the first group focusing on clinical rather than academic issues. I left Moscow with many warm feelings and new friends, impressed by their accessibility and soulfulness.

After Moscow, I did a one-day workshop at the Institute of Psychology in Kiev. It was inspiring to know that Carl Rogers had been there before, and to be part of a humanistic-art tradition. About 25 students in psychology were intrigued by the language of movement, and I taught some simple Labanotation and role-playing skills.

However, like some of the other participants, I came to this conference with a personal as well as a professional quest. My grandparents came from the Soviet Union, and I was determined to find their village and my roots. I have felt that my work with dance and movement was somehow inherited, and traced its roots back to my great-grandfather, who was the Chassidic chazzan (cantor) in a small Ukrainian village named Kamenets-Podolsky. Friends from Kiev bought me a black market ticket for the all-night train, and were shocked at the idea of a woman traveling alone. Despite the ruggedness of the trip, however, I appreciated the fact that the government had just lifted travel restrictions, and that I

could even make the trip. No one in my family had ever been back. I found this village, which was in a beautiful wild and wooded section of the Western Ukraine, about 35 km. from Rumania. This entire village had been declared a historic and architectural preserve by the Ukrainian government, and it was still an ancient castle with cobblestone streets. The synagogue had been destroyed and almost no Jews were left, but friends pointed me to the old Jewish cemetery. I hoped to find my grandfather's grave, but discovered that this cemetery had been closed in 1848. It was located in the next town, which may have been the birthplace of the Baal Shem Tov, founder of Chassidism. As I stood among the ancient, beautiful carved Yiddish gravestones, I could imagine feeling the soul of the Baal Shem Tov still hovering over the area. I chanted the Sh'ma, awed at how strong the sense of soul was there, and at connecting back to my Russian soul and dancing roots.

When I returned to Moscow, the group asked me to teach them Chasidic dancing. I taught them one which has movements that my great-aunt describes as "pulling God by the feet." Although I had gone to Odessa after Kamenets-Podolsky and met with a family of refusniks, and although my own family was wiped out in the pogroms, and although descriptions of revived anti-Semitism were on the rise, I nevertheless did not feel anti-Semitism from my friends there. They were eager to share and to help, and did so generously.

The task of integrating these impressions and emotions upon returning home was very difficult. On the one hand, it would be easy to simply hold that the Soviet Union is in a great deal of distress, and that conditions make travel impossible. On the other hand, it would be easy to sentimentalize the soul and magnetism of this exotic motherland, and try to live there literally. I found the change from a culture where shopkeepers still used an abacus, where storytelling and a Dionysian, non-rational mentality, mixed with still strong traditions and family ties, to a post-modern, fast, jaded American efficiency unnerving. Václav Havel notes that in Czechoslovakia were awakened certain potentials in people that would not be expressed to the same extent in a normally functioning democracy, and that they "... have not succumbed to the crisis phenomena that comes from a state of general prosperity." The crisis to which he refers is "... the loss of the sense of the meaning of life" (in an interview in the *New York Review of Books*, summer issue, 1991, pp. 6-8). One wonders if they suffer from the same symptoms of alienation and narcissistic individualism as we, or if their pathologies are different. Further, one worries what will be the outcome of their exposure to us, thinking of their most famous poet, Pushkin, now staring at McDonald's in Moscow. The Polish poet Adam Zagajewski posed this question when he wondered: "What would happen if one day—one beautiful day—Poland regained the freedom of a political life? Would this splendid spiritual tautness—which

surely characterizes the entire nation of at least its altogether numerous and quite democratic elite—survive? Would the churches be deserted? Would poetry become—as it does in untroubled countries—food for a bored handful of experts, and become one branch of commercialized entertainment?” (from *Solidarity, Solitude*, by Adam Zagajewski, reviewed in *The New York Times Review of Books*, Summer, 1991).

While worrying about these issues, and already missing the intensity of Soviet life, I am yet wary of the tricks played by desire, nostalgia, and memory. Aware that my grandparents left their country, that this has become our new home, and that in fact even they are not looking back. Why this longing for roots in the following generation? Between the extreme of finding the Soviet Union difficult and the extreme of excessive sentimentality lies a very interesting path of memory and integration. Describing her village to my great-aunt who now has memory loss, weaving stories of the village into collective memories of relatives, sponsoring a visit of Soviets who want to come over, considering another trip to travel wider and deeper, and planning other kinds of exchanges are all ways to bring the past into the present. Maybe we have come to the end of our road with materialism and the Soviets have come to the end of their road with Communism, and maybe we can all admit the limitations of our ways of knowing and the possibility of exchange. Instead of either country dominating, maybe now is the time for a genuine exchange of therapeutic knowledge between the United States and Russia. We may have theory and techniques to bring them, but they certainly have soul and the sense of art which Isadora Duncan sought, to share with us. At this time when everything is beginning to open, the possibility of this exchange is exciting.



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Marian Chace at St. Elizabeth's Hospital