

A View From the East

by Lisa Van Buren

Exciting things are happening in Prague, Czechoslovakia. During the weekend of April 19-21st, the International Lesbian & Gay Association (ILGA) held its 5th Regional Conference for Eastern and Southeastern Europe. The theme was "Lesbian and Gay Media: Theory and Practice." The organizers hoped to bring more experienced "Westerners" together with Eastern Europeans to provide an exchange of information and ideas and to inspire new activities.

I left Vermont unaware that I would be living in Czechoslovakia when this conference took place. I feel fortunate to have had the opportunity to visit with gays and lesbians from around the world and to share with them what *Out in the Mountains* does.

The organization of gays and lesbians in Eastern Europe is in some ways 20 or more years behind the west. The freedom

to give shape and meaning to gay and lesbian lives is underdeveloped. Funding is also a basic issue. Citizens of the former GDR have an advantage now in that unification brought funds from the West. Even there, however, government social expenditures are specifically designated for women's groups or youth groups, and funds for gay and lesbian activities must be skimmed off. Unlike U.S. publications, which often rely on advertising, Europeans more often rely on subscription prices and other sources. Many fear that the high cost of the newly formed Czechoslovakian gay and lesbian magazine will be its downfall. The hope is that there are enough interested readers to continue its publication.

There were about 80 participants at the conference, most of whom came from Eastern Europe (though there were a good number of Western journalists and heads of organizations). Several countries were represented solely by men.

One of the most intriguing participants was a Russian woman (the only one) who managed to come from Leningrad on her way to the U.S. under dissident organization sponsorships. Olga Zhuk's story was one I had the opportunity to translate many times. I was both impressed by this woman and shocked at the current conditions in the Soviet Union. She was recently detained by the police on the illegal grounds of homosexuality since the Russian Statute 121 specifically outlaws male homosexuality. She is one of the key members of the Tchaikovsky Foundation in Leningrad, which is working to eliminate Statute 121. The current renewed clamp-down in the Soviet Union, however, has brought a new wave of harassment of lesbians and gays and made attempts at change even more difficult.

Participants from the West were eager to be of help but were asked to view the situation from an Eastern perspective. For example, using the word "emancipation" was described as a poor choice since it smacks of Soviet propaganda to many Eastern Europeans.

Particularly evident among the women was the frustration over the lack of any real women's movement in the East, making lesbians' situations there much worse. The issue of separate gay and lesbian publications was discussed with much emotion since many lesbians felt oppression came not only from straight men but also from gay men. One Czech woman showed an article she had written called "Woman to Woman"; beside it was a framed photo of a penis.

It was stressed that entertainment must be an integral part of a magazine to maintain circulation. Another point was that media focus should not further alienate those who already disagree; rather, it is more constructive to target people who are uninformed and have not yet formed strong negative attitudes toward gays and lesbians. The group underlined the importance of providing contacts for readers as well.

There remain many legal restrictions on lesbians and gays, and changing them seems to be the first priority in many Eastern countries. There was a member of the Czechoslovak parliament present at the opening ceremonies of the conference. Many changes are yet to come, however attitudes, particularly about women, slow to change. All were in agreement that effectiveness in the media is a very important step in the process of change. ▼

Fine Interior Finishing

- painting/staining
- plaster patching
- taping
- old/new construction
- exterior finishing

SANDRA ADAMS

1-802-482-3115

Mountain View

Animal Inn

Carol Skon

Claudia Cook

R.D.1 Box 1980 Fairfax, Vt. 05454 802-524-4574

BOARDING
GROOMING
TRAINING

Green Mountain Feminist Counseling Service

Carol E. Cohen M.S.W.

- Life and Career Crises
- Troubled Relationships
- Substance Abuse
- Lesbian and Gay Positive

• Sliding Fee

Individuals, Couples, Groups
Burlington, 864-5595