

off our backs

a women's newsjournal

in search of yugoslav lesbians

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in search of yugoslav lesbians

We are reprinting this article from Out and About: the Seattle Lesbian Feminist Newsletter. It is the first article we have seen about lesbians in Yugoslavia--or any East European country.

A year ago i went back to Yugoslavia with a specific goal of finding out about lesbian lives there. It was not an easy task despite the fact that i grew up there and speak both official serbo-croatian and slovenian languages.

I do not have any memories about lesbians from my childhood; actually i don't remember hearing the word lesbian in the 19 years that i spent in Yugoslavia; perhaps a word homosexual a couple of times but not a "lesbijika." I realized what a taboo the subject was and still is in the country where i grew up.

Personally, i came out in the women and lesbian movements in America. It was here that an american lesbian gave me names and addresses of two slovenian lesbians who were together during international ice-skating olympics in Ljubljana in 1971. But they have not been corresponding with american lesbians for several years. During my very brief visit in Yugoslavia in 1978 i found out that one was living with her husband on the coast and the other was married to her ex-lover's brother. (A couple of years later when i had the opportunity to talk to them in person they did not only deny their lesbianism but also any knowledge of other lesbians in Yugoslavia.) This was very sad and disappointing news, especially since these women were my only potential contacts to find other Yugoslavian lesbians at that time; but i was not giving up so easily.

In 1980, when i bicycled through Europe for six months, i met a Yugoslavian lesbian, Betka (fictitious name) who had been living in Hamburg for over a decade. Initially i was very excited about meeting Betka, hoping to get to know her better and possibly even get some contacts/support in my search for Yugoslavian lesbians. Betka left Yugoslavia after her lover realized that their affair meant that they were lesbians, so she quickly got married.

According to Betka, who has been going back to Yugoslavia for yearly vacations, most of the lesbians are married in Yugoslavia, hiding the fact that they have relationships with women. Betka's life in Hamburg outside of a straight job evolved around her lover, a few artists and a lesbian bar. She did not feel any need to get to know lesbians in Yugoslavia or to help them deal with isolation and homophobia, as i have ever since i became involved in the lesbian movement. I did not get any contacts from Betka either.

double day

A few months later i came across an issue of "Questions Feministes" (a radical feminist magazine from Paris) where Christine Delphy wrote about a women's conference in Yugoslavia. That was news to me! The conference took place at the University of Belgrade in 1978. Because Yugoslavia is a socialist country, the law states that women are equal to men. This law came into effect after the revolution during World War II during which Yugoslavian women were fighting with men on front lines for liberation. In the most developed republics (sections of the country) by 1980 women comprise 43.6% of the work force in Slovenia and 38.5% in Croatia but in Yugoslavia as a whole only 34.5%. Yugoslavian women make up 47.6% of the students in elementary schools, 45.7% in high schools and 39.4% at the universities. Despite these economic and educational changes for women their lives have not improved substantially. Similar to Russian women, Yugoslavian women are coping with double burdens--working in a factory or office during morning and afterwards they are doing their regular household chores while their husbands go to political meetings or take the children out for a walk.

There have been a few improvements in women's lives in Yugoslavia. For example a year paid of maternity leave or either parent can take time off from work when a child is ill and receive 80% of their pay. But when I questioned my liberal friends about why it's still mostly women who stay home (they are both economists), the husband responded that because he makes more money than his wife, it's better for the family finances. This subtle reinforcement of male dominance is widely spread in other areas as well. Childcare is available in Yugoslavia

but is very expensive; a woman working in a factory spends most of her pay on childcare, so with a double burden she gains very little of economic independence for herself. According to the law a woman can give her birth name to children but this rarely happens because of traditional thinking/attitudes. Likewise a family law was changed just recently, so it no longer protects just a married couple but states that any single men or women living with anyone else have the same rights as married partners.

The conference in Belgrade was organized by a small group of academic women who, after the International Women's Year conference in Mexico City in 1976, have started to discuss some of these inequalities between the sexes in Yugoslavia but didn't know exactly to tackle them in the socialist country. (You must keep in mind that according to Marxist-Leninist thinking a feminist is a remnant of the bourgeoisie, therefore no Yugoslavian woman dares to publicly identify as a feminist.)

They knew that they could not have a women's conference only, so they titled the conference the "Women's Question" and invited known feminists from several of the west European countries. The conference was a hot debate, heavily attended by men who were furious at international feminists who dare to confront them on their domination of the country--politics, economy, army, most of decision making positions, with an exception of a few token women. The conference was broadcast on TV and organizers of the conference publicly defended the men but later ended up forming their own base groups.

According to Delphy, who was a French participant, the word lesbian was not uttered during the whole conference except when at a meal a young lesbian approached her and explained that lesbians had no place to get together except at a gay bar in Belgrade. Unfortunately, Delphy no longer had this lesbian's address to give me.

It was in Paris that i received a letter from my sister in Yugoslavia that i should not visit them because they put lesbians in mental hospitals. It was not clear from the letter whether that was a threat or just an alert, so i was really worried about going to Yugoslavia even with an american passport.

finding a lesbian

After i attended the first international lesbian conference in Amsterdam, the last week of December 1980, i started to feel the urge to visit Yugoslavia at whatever risks involved. My first stop was Ljubljana, the capital of Slovenia, which has the highest standard of living and is therefore the most liberal. For 10 days i continually made personal contacts with women whom i was told were lesbians or were working on women's issues. I was being open about being a lesbian and a feminist.

They all denied their lesbianism, some because of fear of losing their careers or having their husbands/relatives find out about their lifestyle and a few mentioned that they were feminists but did not know any lesbians. I was pretty discouraged.

Finally, i decided to contact a women's magazine and with some hesitation they agreed to print an interview with me about my background, feminism, lesbianism and my picture. The first draft of the interview sounded like the interviewer was making fun of american feminists and lesbians. With lots of research and effort we agreed on a compromise draft where they would also announce the second international lesbian conference which was taking place in neighboring Italy the next month. When i saw the printed

When i saw the printed interview i realized they cut out most of the radical statements; the lesbian conference was announced but not the address (which meant that lesbians would have to write to the magazine and identify themselves in order to get the address). I was upset with these changes but was finally told by the woman editor that the magazine is controlled by the major daily newspaper and the male editor made final changes in the interview.

During those days i was feeling lonely even though my heterosexual friends with whom i was staying were being supportive. I longed for a lesbian to talk to. My fear was growing, especially now that the interview and my picture were on newsstands all over the country. I chose not to contact my family as they requested and had very mixed feelings around that decision also.



Marija Bogovic

from Out & About

At long last, out of this interview i got a contact for an open lesbian in Zagreb who had just written a public coming-out letter to the major newspaper in Belgrade. It was pretty amazing that at the time i was working on this interview, she was writing a coming-out letter, and we had never met!

When i met Marija in Zagreb, we did not stop talking for seven hours; that's how validating our thinking/actions were for us. For the next 10 days, we met every day and i developed lots of respect for her.

Marija is a working class lesbian who has three grown up children, is 41 years old and has recently been divorced from her husband. She decided that she was tired of hiding and lies, so Marija chose to come out at her work and publicly. For 20 years she has been working as a typist for a major daily newspaper and participated in international typists contests.

Just a month before i met Marija she went for the first time to a public forum that feminists were organizing at the university. This time the topic was "Orgasm, Yes or No?" so there were about 500 people attending. After the speakers finished, Marija got on her feet and told the audience why she is a lesbian and about male dominance. Marija is very intelligent and speaks loudly and clearly. The response that she received encouraged her to write a coming out letter to the newspaper, letting other lesbians know who she is and where they can get hold of her. This was a tremendously courageous action and i have a lot of admiration for Marija.

The problem for Marija was that she did not know any other lesbians who were willing or able to come out; she was feeling lonely and a lot of class differences with middle-class lesbians who were willing to meet at expensive night clubs or restaurants but not to discuss their lesbianism.

A couple of days after Marija and i met, we got several other lesbians to join us for an afternoon discussion about ourselves and our lesbianism. There was interest expressed for an ongoing support group so i volunteered to translate an article on lesbianism written by socialist-feminist-lesbians from London (i chose that article hoping they would be more open to socialist perspective than to anything coming from America which to them equals capitalism.)

Marija and i worked very hard for a full week to get the article translated, typed and distributed before the next meeting. However by that time a few lesbians were overwhelmed with the fear of consequences of coming out or even affiliating with open lesbians so we realized paradoxically that the support group was not to happen yet. It was a very painful realization for both of us.

class difference

In meeting Marija and other working class lesbians i became painfully aware of existing class differences in Yugoslavia. All the feminists that i met in Yugoslavia were affiliated with universities and spoke at least one foreign language; via that knowledge, they had the access to west European and American feminist movements: literature/thinking/actions. Marija had no opportunity to learn another language and yet has developed alone her own thinking on male dominance, based on her experiences. Feminists working at universities have two or three times higher salaries than a lesbian working (and putting in the same hours) on folding

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Dutch protest in the Hague about Eliane Morrisens' dismissal

from Gay Community News

florida court keeps gays in schools

TALLAHASSEE--On February 4, the Florida Supreme Court struck down the Bush-Trask Amendment, attached to a Florida appropriations bill passed by the Florida state legislature in 1981 to cut off funds to any university, public or private, that recognized, gave assistance or provided meeting facilities to any group that "recommends or advocates sexual relations between persons not married to one another." Lesbian and gay student organizations were the main target.

The Court ruled that the bill violated the First Amendment right to free speech, overruling a lower court which had found no First Amendment violation.

--info from gay community news

austin, wisconsin pass gay rights

AUSTIN--On February 18, five of seven members of Austin's city council voted to approve an amendment to the city charter including lesbians and gays among the groups against which housing discrimination is prohibited. On January 16, 63% of those voting at the polls rejected an initiative that specifically would have permitted housing discrimination against lesbians and gays. Anti-gay groups organized the initiative because they knew that the city council would debate the issue.

The new amendment was passed as an emergency measure and cannot be repealed by referendum. The Austin Citizens for Decency, the group which sponsored the anti-gay initiative, reportedly plans not to try to repeal the new law but to concentrate on the next city council elections.

MADISON--The Wisconsin state legislature has passed and Republican Gov. Lee Dreyfus has signed the first state lesbian and gay rights law, protecting the rights of lesbians and gays in employment, housing, public accommodations and the state National Guard. Dreyfus said he signed the bill to protect the right to privacy.

Any firm (located anywhere) involved in a contract with the state of Wisconsin must obey the law. Private landlords, employers and others who violate the law face fines of up to \$1,000 for the first offense and up to \$10,000 for the second offense within five years. Lesbians and gays who are discriminated against by an agency of government can bring complaints to the State Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. However, Dreyfus has said that he and the legislature do not intend to interpret the measure as requiring affirmative action or quotas for lesbians or gays.

--info from Gay Community News, Wisconsin State Journal

news compiled by cad

belgian lesbian job loss

BRUSSELS--Beginning on January 18, Belgian lesbian schoolteacher Eliane Morrisens staged a 38-day hunger strike to protest her dismissal from her job. Morrisens, a chemistry teacher for 23 years, was fired from her job on October 30, 1980, two days after appearing on a national television program about lesbians. On the show, she gave neither her name nor the name of her school; she discussed her lesbianism and her problems as a woman working under male administrators. On November 6, 1980, the Hainaute Deputation Permanente, a provincial government body whose six members are all Socialists, voted to confirm her dismissal.

Morrisens is a member of both the Flemish Socialist Party and the Radical Party. The Socialist Party has refused to support her; so has her trade union.

Four days after Morrisens began her hunger strike, an appeal of her case was denied, but provincial officials changed the grounds of her dismissal from lesbianism to criticizing the school administration.

Belgian public and private schools both are funded by the government, but the government operates only the public schools. Morrisens was fired from a private school. One of the demands of Morrisens' hunger strike was that the government adopt non-discriminatory statutes for private schools, (some of which are operated by churches), that are identical to those for public schools. She also demanded reinstatement to her job and Belgium's adoption of the recent Council of Europe's resolution calling for an end to discrimination against lesbians and gays.

Lesbians and gays have held protests in support of Morrisens in Amsterdam, the Hague, London, Stockholm, Helsinki, Paris, Bonn and San Francisco. Several demonstrations have been held in Brussels and another will be held there on March 27.

For support and information, contact Comité de Soutien, 25 rue de la Madeleine, 1000 Brussels, Belgium. Protests can be sent to the Socialist Party President, Guy Spitaels, Parti Socialiste, 13 Boulevard de L'Empereur, 1000 Brussels, Belgium.

--info from gay community news

yugoslavia

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sheets and ironing in a hospital or working in a day care center. A woman who moved from a southern part of Yugoslavia to the north, was not only discriminated against because of her sex but also because of her darker skin, making a minimum wage.

These were some pretty hard realities for me to accept about the socialist country where women fought together with men for the liberation--30 years later women's lives have not been improved substantially, nor are lesbians free to be who we are. As Marija has written to me: "We are a socialist country and that's fine. But this primitive society in which I live, has forgotten that I too, as well as other lesbians, build this socialism!" Marija has been physically attacked twice when her picture was published last fall and I have not heard from her since then.

by olga

poland

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saw, particularly, Marzena Gorsczyk-Kecik, who was a major power behind the initiative and subsequently was charged with organizing the meetings of the university. Rural Solidarity, built on these foundations, has never lost its relation to the workers, so that after the declaration of martial law, they brought food to the workers in occupied factories. That aid to the resistance was given despite the church's repeated calls for "calm."

But then, some opposition to the church has always existed in the workers' and particularly women's activity. In October 1981, the women textile workers in Zyrardow refused to follow the church's advice to postpone their demands and end their strike. They struck because there was no food--a strike the government declared "political" and therefore illegal. The women refused to recognize any distinctions between political and economic despite threats from the government and the church's appeal that they go back to work. They even defied their own leadership, which, fearful of the consequences, had advised them to stop their strike.

the church & abortion

With the tremendous activity of women there also had arisen the beginnings of a Women's Movement. Sigma was the first of Poland's feminist groups, organized in November 1980. They intended to publish their own newspaper, telling the history of women and their ideas. Their demands included equal pay, development of social programs for women and increase in men's responsibility for their children. As for abortion, Krystyna Kowalewska, one of the founders of Sigma, puts it clearly: "Many of our demands conflict with the position of the Church. For example, abortion. The Church has clearly spoken against it. We can't accept that."

Abortion has been used as a political weapon between the church and the state with complete disregard for women's freedom. The Church opposes abortion, while the state does not allow any other forms of birth control, forcing women to go through an endless series of abortions. The Russian feminists' description of abortion clinics as "mince-meat machines" is also true in Poland. The feminists made the question revolutionary by making it a question of human choice, opposed to both church and state manipulations.

...The truth is that women in Poland have been both revolutionary Force and Reason throughout their whole history. That is seen not only in the fact that the 1863 war against Russia was known as the "Women's War," but in the life and work of such magnificent Polish women as Rosa Luxemburg--one of the greatest of all revolutionary internationalists...

...(there are) those those who do not see what women's participation in today's Polish fight for freedom means. We have to confront what it means that the 18-man Presidium of Solidarity was just that--all men.

In an interview last July, Alina Pienkowska said:

"In August, 1980, the women in Gdansk were very active in building Solidarnosc...At that time they paid no attention to the the special problems of women, instead they fought for the rights of all human beings...But we have not been able to win our concrete demands that are important to women...we must struggle more for the women's cause. The life of women in Poland is still very hard, they must work and perform housework and social labor. Anna (Walentynowicz) and I were able to do much for Solidarnosc only because we are widows, otherwise our housework would have suffered..."

Alina Pienkowska is now underground.

--from an article by terry moon in News & Letters

Some women in Eastern Europe have asked us for radical feminist books. We would appreciate contributions to help us buy and send some. Please send to International Books, c/o off our backs, 1841 Columbia Rd. NW, Wash., DC 20009, room 212A.