

HUMANISTIC PSYCHOLOGY

IN RUSSIA

A Personal Experience

by Margaret Novakovic

Margaret Novakovic visited the First Soviet American Seminar on Humanistic Psychology and Human Sciences arranged in Moscow by the USSR Academy of Human Sciences and the Saybrook Institute, San Francisco

Most of my life, Russia, and particularly the hammer and sickle symbol had instilled feelings of fear. I first saw the flag flying from the mast of a ship in Ostend, back in 1968, and gasped, shocked at my own reaction. Since then the world turned a few times, and now, as the red empire crumbles away, we can reach out at long last to each other, perhaps even become friends.

Sheremetyevo airport was small and dark, and we were welcomed with enormous warmth by Slava Tsapkin and his colleagues. We joined a coach with the delegates from Saybrook, and set off through lovely wooded country to a pleasant conference centre, about an hour away. It was surrounded by silver birch and fir trees. It was comfortable and welcoming. Next morning, before the week's programme began, we drove back to Moscow for some essential sight-seeing. The first glimpse of the great golden onion domes of the churches within the Kremlin was incredible. They shone so brightly even on that dark and drizzly morning. I thought I knew what to expect. I was wrong. The impact of their strangeness was oriental, more of the Muslim world than the West. For a moment I had the feeling that we were much further apart than I had realised before. And yet the beautiful yellow and white palaces had been designed by French architects, influenced by Versailles. Some bridges built, cultures shared, long before this.

We walked round a huge monastery being magnificently restored. The energy and wealth going into it all, rich and elaborate, in this country with its enormous economic problems and ill-fed people spoke of the power of the Church rising vigorously again in spite of the disintegration all around. I was to understand more about this rebirth as the days passed.

Of Science and Spirituality

That afternoon the conference was formally opened. Stan Krippner and Amadeo Giorgio from Saybrook spoke eloquently of the growth and development of the human potential movement in the US. Much of the contribution of the movement's pioneers has been well integrated in mainstream psychology and therapy, but they were unhappy with the lack of sound research in our culture where 'science determines reality'. The movement is in crisis now, because the founders are dead and there are no obvious heirs. Is the way forward continuing further integration and more research and respectability? If our contribution is to be effective we must have some power and influence. A Russian speaker responded, 'We would be glad to have your crisis'. The great disparities in the ages and stages, even meanings of the term 'Humanistic Psychology', in Russia and the US started to show. I felt some of the Americans, particularly those with a scientific background were indeed worried as to whether Humanistic Psychology has a viable future contribution to make.

Humanistic Consumerism?

A Dane, Steiner Kvale, spoke of the cultural contexts in which psychological understandings and emphases develop: of how Marxist thought and Behaviourism was functional to industry, and how Humanistic Psychology had developed in the context of consumerism, by and for the relatively affluent. He was optimistic about the contribution Humanistic Psychology can make in the field of business and the management of workers.

Several of the Americans spoke of the products of affluence, material needs satisfied, people now seek emotional and spiritual consumption. One said a 'Spiritual smorgasbord' has replaced the human potential movement in the US. The terms 'Transpersonal', and 'Spirituality' are becoming debased by a million pedlars of instant enlightenment, and abused by manipulative evangelists of the far right. I felt depressed by all this, then came to see it as an almost inevitable aspect of evolution. And here were people who could see and understand it, and yet be clear that there are other ways forward as well. That is hope.

No Passions Please

I waited impatiently to hear the Russians. Dr S. Horujy spoke on 'The Russian Quest for Truth'. Soon I began to understand that the long deep ascetic traditions of the Orthodox Church still held much power and influenced many people's deepest consciousness. A young priest, Father Boris was with us, the first ever to be allowed by the Church to attend such a gathering. He also had a degree in Psychology, and was very involved in the whole conference. He spoke of the simplicity of God, advising confession, prayer and good behaviour. He advised against passion and the development of ecstatic states, 'Do not imagine saints', he said. I could hear the voice of a Church long suppressed, which had continued to exist only by preaching conformity. Now it had suddenly been

set completely free, and there was much evidence to show that it had a vital role to play in this new, chaotic time, in a least two ways: by preaching ascetic simplicity rather than social action, and also by offering great comfort and welcome to those suffering terribly the experience the disintegration of all they had ever been taught to believe in by the state system. This disintegration was affecting many individuals at the conference very painfully. We were made vividly aware of this in a powerful psychodrama, brilliantly conducted by Tone Horwood. The protagonist was a popular author, feeling deeply suicidal. 'I want to want to live' he said. Many of the Soviet delegates were to share similar feelings with us.

Of Bad Buddhism and Jewish Roots

There was lively argument and division around what Father Boris had said. The Western view being that we do not seek to uproot the passions, but rather increase the intensity of the enjoyment of life and self-fulfilment.

I was glad to hear several presentations and discussions around the theme of our spiritual roots. Ilene Serlin and Don Rothberg were critical of the way that much Eastern philosophy, such as Buddhism, has been lifted out of context and offered as a path of perfection in other cultures. Using parts only of other cultures may serve for a while but are ultimately unsatisfying. Ilene spoke of her current return to her Jewish roots, and Don emphasised the difficulties of finding a true spiritual home and stressed the importance of a healthy balance of mind, body and spirit, warning against Transpersonal practices being used as a defence against being human.

Ruth Inge-Heinze, an anthropologist of long and rich experience said 'Watch how words have different meanings for us: are our deepest roots the same? There can be huge differences even between people who believe they are of the same tradition. Cults emerge, people move about to energise themselves'.

The Person as an Icon

The scientific and academic research-based position, together with the spiritual, was very pervasive in the conference. Somebody worried that there is no clear ideology behind what we call the Transpersonal. Tone Horwood suggested that 'We live without knowing'. I felt it was uncomfortably received. There seemed to be some shared struggle, East and West, to hypothesise, research and prove, or not. For the Russians, as it was and still is for us, it seemed part of the necessary journey to acceptance by a wider society. It was often very intense, serious stuff, little acknowledgement of the fun to be had along the way. Slava Tsapkin spoke of the depth of loving acceptance of others they hold as ideal, 'The person as icon being at the root of Russian feeling,' and it sounded to me like God being immanent in all things and everyone. At that point a Russian woman said, 'If people do not have something to fear they will destroy themselves'. Those chilling words have stayed with me ever since. They sound to me like a microcosm of Russian history, a belief shared by oppressors and op-

pressed equally which could and did support all tyranny. Planted in the soil of such belief how could the fine idealism of true socialism and communism have had a chance of lasting success? How can democracy? I hope she did not speak for the majority.

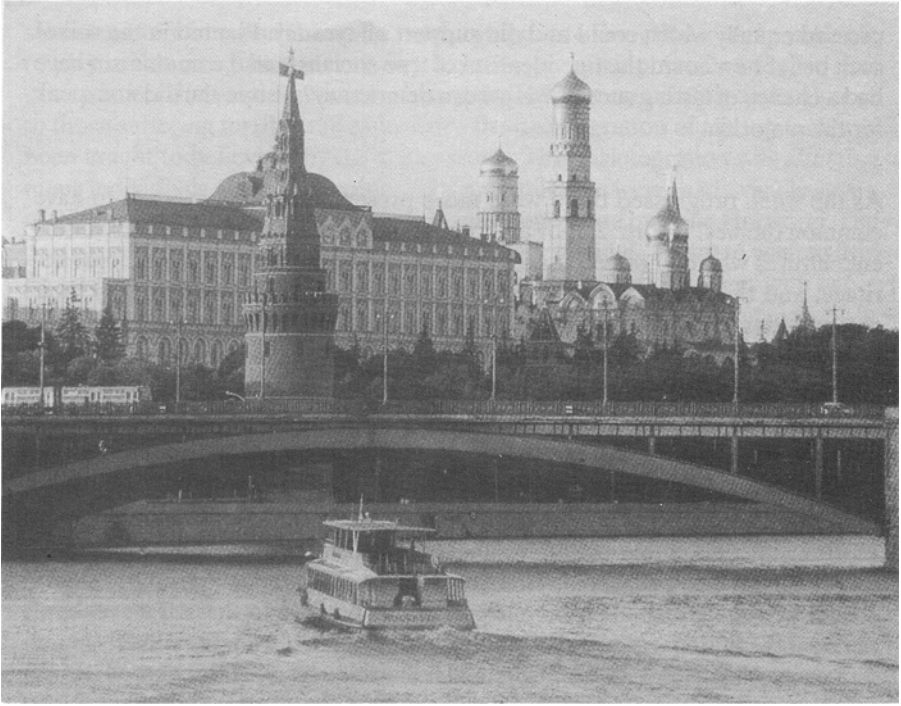
As the week progressed there were more presentations that seemed to have common themes. Andrei Zubov and others spoke of the co-existence of different cultures who do not necessarily have to mix, of the importance of local heritage, and the role of Shamans who are powerless unless validated by their communities. Were the anthropologists coming up with signposts to the future from the distant past, and other societies?

And now, as well as the shoppers in the spiritual supermarket and the scientifically orientated wanting ever more empirical knowledge, there was the view of the contemplatives, who see the world as the Shamans do, from both an intuitive stance and a concrete view, and have no need to distort, but can just be with what is.

As these themes developed, both formally and informally, communication, (never very difficult as so many spoke good English) deepened, and I felt the delight of discovering just how much we really did have to share. The sense of wonder that this conference was really happening, that we were actually being with each other at last, becoming friends, sharing our joy in this as well as our problems made me feel how special and new this experience and these people are, and how much I want our contact and communication to flourish.

Father Boris spoke about Russia now, of his fear that millions of disillusioned people may rise in anger if their new hopes are not realised. There are great tensions, he said, and the ordinary people are still forsaken. Capitalism is fine for the strong, but Soviets tend to have awful self-esteem, and are frightened by change and having to take responsibility for their lives. 'Power corrupts the powerless, also', he said.

Victor Maikov said that the current stress and uncertainty was affecting everyone, including psychologists and teachers. Unconfident people cannot influence those in power, or anyone else. They need to use the media much more, as well as informal opportunities. There is so much to be done. After the Armenian earthquake only sad music was played on the radio, it had a negative effect, and fantastic rumours abounded, and were widely believed. Some courageous psychologists without benefit of preparation or books on post traumatic stress, went to help and support people as best they could. Rape victims are commonly blamed, and there is much violence and suicide. New political groups spring up daily, often based in blaming and revenge. Anti-semitism is rife in some areas. There is clearly so much need for what humanistic psychology has to offer.



Bonds and Synthesis

Steiner Kvale gave a paper on post-modernism, concluding that now there is a new emphasis on 'the person in the context of nature', and this is the setting in which the ecology movement has developed, and also that 'there is no such thing as universal knowledge', for reality can never be exactly the same for us all.

Towards the end, the speakers tried to create some synthesis, several strands emerging, and always more questions, but a sense of excitement, too. 'Can psychotherapy use itself to heal itself? Can there be a true culture based on it? There is polyphony - how important is integration? Do we need to unite in a systematic way? and so on.

I felt most strongly that the conference had been about people with perhaps a more congruent view of the world than they knew. Here was a common base of love and concern for people, their intrinsic value, and a commitment to the value in promoting the development of human potential. Yet for both East and West there was struggle going on to define and redefine ourselves, our work, the contribution we can make. There was much drawn out of the roots of sociology, anthropology and religious teaching, there was naming and ordering.

It was a scholarly conference, more academic and 'heady' by far than those of AHP or AHPP. There were some dry soliloquies, many rich and warm interchanges, and everything in between. We began to look at the world through each others' eyes. It was a start, a good one, memorable and moving.