

Peace Train Works for a More Peaceful World

by *Bruna Nota and Ian Russell*

Les auteures décrivent comment elles ont vécu l'expérience de 22 jours à bord

Our 1995 crossing of borders to meet with peace and human rights activist groups involved seven stop-overs in Eastern Europe and Asia, involved women from 42 different countries, in areas of the world where wars are being waged or where peace is at best fragile.

du Train de la paix (Peace Train) qui a voyagé d'Helsinki en Finlande jusqu'à Beijing en Chine. Ce groupe de militantes se prononçaient pour la paix et le désarmement.

At 6:30 a.m. on August 7, 1995, we were among 233 excited "Peace Train" participants, over 90 per cent of whom were women. Starting from Helsinki, Finland, we were beginning a 22-day, 14,000 kilometre "trip of a lifetime." Our adventure would end at Beijing, with many of us going on to participate in the Peace Tent at the NGO Forum, the parallel conference to the Fourth United Nations World Conference on Women.

In 1915, over 1,000 women travelled across the borders of their warring countries to meet with their "enemy sisters" in the Hague and work for peace. The Peace Train was organized by the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF) to commemorate the 80th anniversary of that event. Our 1995 crossing of borders to meet with peace and human rights activist groups involved seven stop-overs in Eastern Europe and Asia, involved women from 42 different countries, in areas of the world where wars are being waged or where peace is at best fragile.

In St. Petersburg we were welcomed by a coalition of local women's groups. In the workshops the Russian women pointed out strongly the importance of disarmament and the abolishment of nuclear weapons. We joined with them in strong protest against the French government's decision to continue nuclear testing in the Pacific, in a call for a Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty to come into effect, and a boycott of French goods.

We listened to women from Chechnya and the Soldiers' Mothers of St. Petersburg. They recounted experiences of human rights violations within the Russian army itself and against the Chechnyan people. They solicited our support in asking for a halt to the military activities, and the serious continuation of peace talks. We also became aware of the severe economic difficulties being faced by the Russian people as their country struggles with the transition to a market economy, the resulting increase in crime and violence, and the difficulty in building a peaceful society when basic justice is absent. Seniors and others on fixed incomes are suffering badly from rampant inflation—the image of a string of elderly women begging on the street in St. Petersburg is stuck in our minds.

Our next stop-over was Kiev. We met with senior officials such as the Ministers of Health, of Environment, and representatives of the Ukrainian government. They discussed issues related to democracy, environment, and nuclear disarmament. The catastrophic effect of the Chernobyl nuclear disaster on the environment, on people's health and their reproductive capabilities, highlighted the urgent need for alternative safe and

clean ways of producing energy. Commemoration of the August 9, 1945 dropping of the bomb in Nagasaki brought into sharp focus the presence of large nuclear armaments still in the Ukraine and the continuous deadly threat of destructive military use of nuclear weapons. General Palamarchuk of the Ukraine army, emphasized the importance and urgency of receiving international help to proceed with nuclear conversion.

Our next stops were in Bucharest, Romania, and Sofia, Bulgaria. Many of the issues that we discussed in workshops were similar to those in our first two stops, the main one being the devastating economic effect of the transition to a market economy. In addition, it was here that the realities of the war in the former Yugoslavia hit home. Dr. Stana Buzata, one of our hosts in Bucharest told us "Due to the embargo [imposed on the former Yugoslavia] the whole navigation of the Danube River, an economic asset for Romania, was stopped ... an extreme loss for Romania which the big powers never consider..." The human loss for Romania also threatens to be great. Four million minority Romanians live in the former Yugoslavia and are feared to become a target for stepped-up ethnic cleansing.

In Sofia, two women from the neighbouring war regions described the human damage inflicted in the fighting itself, the impact from economic deprivation, the internal refugee problems, and the increase of domestic violence. Looking back at the roots of the war, a Ukrainian woman emphasized the need to stop the growth of nationalism at its earliest stages and to combat extreme nationalist affirmations of superiority. The all-pervasive arms trade was also blamed and deplored. We were asked to put pressure on exporting countries to stop this trade.

Our meeting in Istanbul included

discussions on the struggles of the Kurdish people to achieve their inherent rights as a minority. The role of western military sales to Turkey in the suppression of Kirdish rights was made clear and Canadian Peace Train participants were reminded of Canada's very significant sales of weapons to this country.

Our stop in Odessa allowed us to meet with the Chief of the Odessa District Council, who spoke of the difficulty of maintaining equity in social services to the 120 different ethnic groups in his region in this time of severe economic pressures. We also exchanged views on how to move from a culture of war to a culture of peace, agreeing that a culture based on militaristic views, a militaristic economy, and military production is not sustainable. Working towards a more just society, eliminating all violence, including economic and social discrimination, choosing negotiated, win-win solutions to all conflicts, personal or societal, were starting points we all agreed with and felt we could make progress on.

The next leg of our journey took us to Almaty, Kazakhstan where we learned of the problems left over from the time when Kazakhstan was one of the republics of the former USSR. This country will suffer for a long time from the genetic consequences and environmental destruction of over 200 nuclear tests carried out by the Soviet military. Needless to say, the people of Kazakhstan are very concerned about the resumption of Chinese testing; the Lop Nor test site borders on Kazakhstan.¹ We learned also of the struggles similar to those in Eastern Europe, with the transition to a market economy, of increased drug abuse, and the rise of crime. We learned of the difficulties in re-establishing the Kazak culture, suppressed for many years by a large ethnic Russian minority.

After Almaty we transferred from the Russian train to the Chinese one for the last three days of our trip to Beijing. In Beijing, one of the most important conclusions of the Fourth

World Conference on Women, from a peace perspective is the following paragraph of the final Beijing declaration:

Take positive steps to ensure peace for the advancement of women and, recognize the leading role that women have played in the peace movement, work actively towards general and complete disarmament under strict and effective international control, and support negotiations on the conclusion without delay, of a nuclear-test ban treaty which contributes to nuclear disarmament and the prevention of the proliferation of nuclear weapons in all its aspects. (Article 28)

We must continue to work assiduously to achieve the world acceptance that war, in all its forms, is illegal and

that parties that engage in conflicts or wars are to be penalized by the world community.

Bruna Nota has a private consulting practice in organization development and structure. She is involved, almost full-time, as an activist in the field of disarmament, international development, and social housing.

After a career culminating in a senior management position in business, Ian Russell is now a full-time volunteer and activist involved in areas including men's violence against women and substance abuse.

¹Lop Nor is in the western-most corner of China, bordering on Kazakhstan, where the Chinese have been testing above-ground nuclear weapons. The Chinese government resumed testing in September 1995.

JENNIFER FEBBRARO

Pattern #53

I glue sequens to my cheeks and smile like a charm.
I don't make the rules, you said, and you shouldn't need
my approval anyways. Closed the door.
The clock got fat and I climbed round its womb
to twelve. Built a board for diving there
and named it love.

Quicker than a gun
I flew ten stories down
humming our song. While you beat the computer at chess,
I spelled escape with my body,
I wore the costume of a clown
and let my words like balloons at a carnival fly.

When I reached the gound
my face got up on its hind legs and begged.
I crawled out of my skin to start again
in search of what I owned that wouldn't die.

Jennifer Febraro was born and raised in Sault Ste. Marie and has an MA in Philosophy. This is her first published poem.