

TEMA

ON THE THEME

Talking With The Editor of The Soviet Union's First Gay and Lesbian Newspaper

Dimitri R. is the editor of The Theme, a newly formed unofficial gay newspaper in Moscow. Julie Dorf, who has been involved with Soviet unofficial movements for the last four years, met with Dimitri in Moscow last November. This is the first interview with him ever published.*

Julie: Why is the name of your newspaper *The Theme*?

Dimitri: In Soviet gay slang the word for "theme" [*tema*] means gay. To be "on the theme" or "thematic"—both mean to be gay. Say you see somebody in a train and you know they are gay—you can tell your friend, "Look, he's thematic." Just so the people around you don't understand. It's like a code word that all the gay people know. Recently a new movie came out in Moscow, and it surely had nothing to do with being gay, but it was just funny—all over the city you could see posters with the word "THEME" in bold letters. Our people were just crazy!

Julie: Why did you decide to start the newspaper?

Dimitri: Well, to publish a newspaper is not the goal in itself. I would even say that to establish some kind of organization of gays and lesbians in the Soviet Union is not the goal in itself. The goal is to help to create an environment

* a pseudonym

where gays and lesbians will be able to express themselves and not feel lonely, to help stop the fear of dealing with people, to feel free. We want to give information, and want the naturals [*Russian version of "straights"*] to realize that there's nothing horrible about homosexuality.

The premier issue includes an article entitled "Perestroika and Homosexuality," which basically says that the Communist Party, as it works to consolidate all power and obtain total control of the country, had to repress every kind of alternative. It looked for any kind of personal information about anyone to make it possible to blackmail them.

I think that is why the infamous Article 121 came into being. The communists realized very well that as gays find themselves in the position of being outcasts in society, they may develop a more objective and balanced view of that society. Since the time when Andropov was the chief of the KGB, the police and KGB have avoided using the terms "homosexual" or "homosexuality" but rather call us "sexual dissidents."

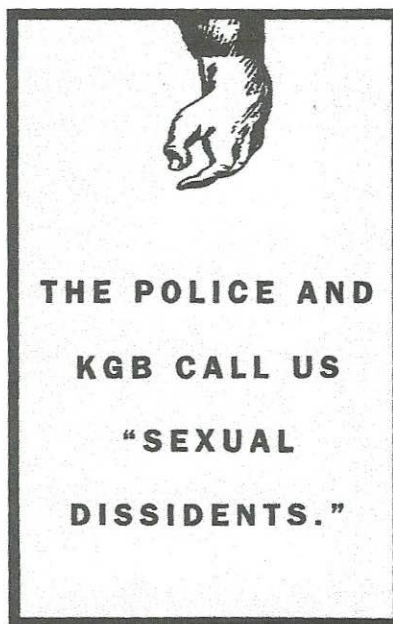
There are certain things about Article 121 that every one of our people should know and make use of. For example, it's very difficult to prove anything if the examination is not done immediately after the act is committed, and because of this it should be hard to convict someone even if there are witnesses, unless he admits it himself.

The fact is that if two male lovers are in bed—only male, because lesbian sex is not criminalized—even if they are in love and everything is consensual, they can still be prosecuted. Someone can inform on you, and then the officials follow you. They can break down the door and examine you—I mean examine the microtraumas in a passive partner's anus—parti-

cles of excrement on an active partner's penis. And depending on the results of this examination, regardless of consent, you can be sentenced to up to eight years in a labor camp. And these camps differ substantially from American jails.

Julie: Can you explain?

Dimitri: Soviet labor camps now do not differ much from those of the time of the GULAG [*a term used for Stalinist labor camps*]. Very



little food, very hard labor, psychological abuse, and you also find yourself among hardcore criminals there. A person who was convicted under Article 121 becomes an "untouchable"—he constantly gets raped and abused by his cellmates. It's very unlikely that anybody could serve a full term and remain physically or mentally healthy.

Julie: When do they use anti-gay articles like 121?

Dimitri: It's most likely to be used against somebody they need to eliminate by some means. Or to blackmail people to work as informers. Usually, investigations against people suspected of homo-

sexuality are performed not by the Lubyanka [KGB] but by the Petrovka [*criminal police*]. The KGB has a file for each Soviet citizen, and there's certainly information about homosexuality there too.

Julie: Have any of your friends served the penalty for being gay?

Dimitri: Thank God, no. I think our jails differ from American ones in the sense that when people get out they're completely broken and very rarely dare to confront the system again. Someone who has experienced a camp would most likely rather look for an opportunity to eat, sleep, and hide from people's sight, at least for a long time, and not take part in our activities.

Julie: Do gay people here usually talk to their friends and parents about their sexuality?

Dimitri: Everybody tries not to, but still sometimes they do. I told my friends and parents that I am gay because I don't like to lie. I got tired of changing pronouns—saying "she" instead of "he." I got tired of caring what people would think of me. If people are stupid enough to change their opinion of you after they find out that you're gay—well, probably it's only to your benefit that they're not your friend.

Julie: How did you get information for the articles you are planning to publish concerning AIDS and safe sex?

Dimitri: Well, not so long ago some Danish people came to visit here as a part of a "next step" initiative. They were with representatives from all the northern European countries, and somehow we managed to meet them and one of them gave me this poster about safe sex. I gave it to a friend to translate, and now we'll have it published in Russian. We had to edit it, though, because some

things were inappropriate here. For example, it says that all condoms that you can buy in the store are absolutely safe—this sounds like black humor in a Russian publication, because condoms are simply unavailable in the Soviet Union, and if you somehow manage to find some, the quality differs substantially from Danish condoms.

Julie: What do people know about AIDS?

Dimitri: It seems that the gay community, the same as in the States, is becoming the first group of the population to be seriously concerned about AIDS and safe sex. Our people are already used to feeling danger in their lives—certainly, they are reluctant to have the freedom of [unprotected] sex taken away too.

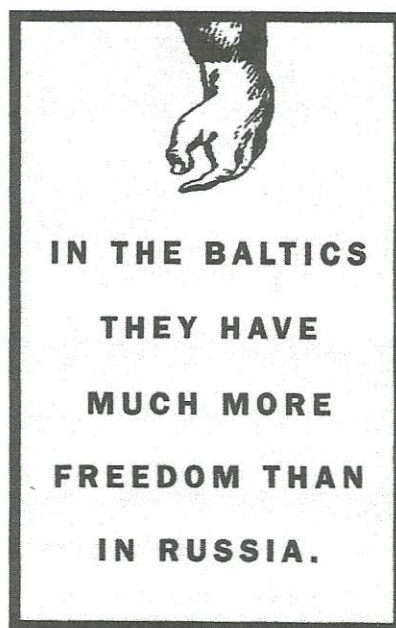
Julie: Do gay men practice safe sex?

Dimitri: I hope that our publication will help to promote safe sex. Basically, we face two problems. First, there is a very short supply of condoms. Second, and no less important, to use condoms one has got to live a certain type of sexual life. More organized, I would say. I mean, to use a condom you have to have one with you. And if you leave home in the morning not knowing if you are going to screw with somebody tonight, you probably won't take one.

Julie: Where do gay people usually meet here in Moscow?

Dimitri: Formerly, the usual places were the square in front of the Bolshoi Theater, "Sadko" Café, "Artists" Café, and also the part of Gorky Street opposite the INTURIST Hotel. But now the only place left—the slang for this kind of place is "blaze"—is Gorky Street, and only certain people would go there. I won't.

Several years ago the police let our people know that, instead of arresting us, they would rather "eliminate" us by closing their eyes to the actions of violent groups called the "fixers." "Fixers" is the slang for youth mobs, which are prospering thanks to us. They know very well that if an attractive guy is on the blaze, it's likely that he would be picked up by some respectable man, who is likely to invite him home with him. The fix-



ers follow them, rip up the apartment, et cetera . . . They know that the victim won't file a police report, given the circumstances of the encounter. That is why we don't really have any safe places to meet now.

Sometimes people meet in public bathhouses, sometimes at the public swimming pool. The only relief is going to the beach in summer. This beach is very far away, and all our people gather there. It is separated by high grass and bushes, and you can find a quiet spot. You can have a good time and relax a little. The only place I know of where lesbians meet is the square in front of City Hall. But not many people go there. In gen-

eral lately, no such places exist.

Julie: So then people usually spend time together at each other's homes?

Dimitri: Yes, at home. But you know, in my opinion a gay relationship is not only about sex, but it also is a very special state of one's soul, and very often you just need to feel your loved one close to you, need to talk to him—this is very difficult to arrange. Usually you have only two options: either you can talk or you can make love.

Julie: Is it possible for couples to live together?

Dimitri: Well, they can if they want to, but for that you have to rent an apartment, which is incredibly difficult to find. If you are lucky enough to have a place of your own, you can both live there. Just to let you know how hard it is to rent a place: The average salary of a worker in the USSR is 200 rubles a month. A young person can hardly make more than 150 a month. And you can't find a studio for less than 150 a month.

But money is not the worst of the problem. For example, my lover—the man I really love and would give anything to live with—has a very good income, and we can afford to rent if we could only find an apartment. There is a huge shortage of apartments to rent. I've asked all my friends to let me know if they hear about one, but still nothing. [*Soviet citizens are registered in communal or individual apartments, usually with their families. To change one's place of registration is a very involved bureaucratic procedure. Dimitri is referring to a space in addition to where one is officially registered.*]

Julie: Are there differences between the situation for gay people in the various republics of the USSR?

Dimitri: In the Baltics they have much more freedom than in Russia. But the attitude of Central Asians, Georgians, and other Caucasian people about homosexuality is very hostile. It is true that you can be killed for being homosexual in both Georgia and in Central Asia. Not even "can be killed," but rather, if they find out they *will* kill you. Here in Moscow I can come to class, take a seat, and, among my classmates who are aware of my homosexuality, say loudly, "I wish there was a good man here," and they will tolerate it.

Julie: What about gays in mental institutions—what is the situation there?

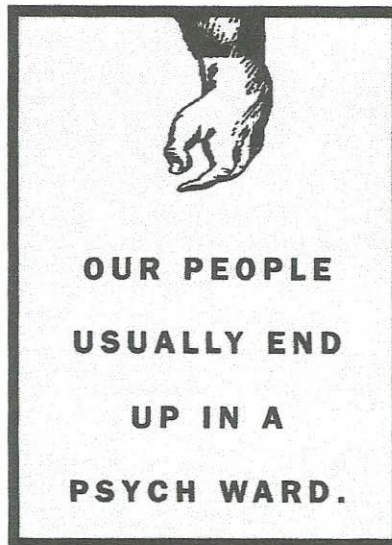
Dimitri: Well, things seem to be changing now. But still, there was a famous psychiatrist, Snezhnevskiy, who was the author of the "sluggish form of schizophrenia" theory. This diagnosis was widely used to institutionalize dissidents. There were legitimate medical terms, such as "hippie schizophrenia," "pacifist schizophrenia," "punk schizophrenia," and so on.

Homosexuality was also considered a type of schizophrenia. And very often, if they could not come up with any better diagnosis, they diagnosed "psychosis." So if somebody was known to the authorities as a homosexual but for some reason they didn't want to imprison him, he was institutionalized.

Our mental hospitals are still in the Stone Age. I spent some time in one of the better mental hospitals where the doctors are among the best. This is how it looks: A very long corridor, no windows at all. If you're lucky, your room has no doors. If you're not lucky, there are at least eighteen people in your room, where there is a door which is kept locked—except for the few times a day when patients are allowed to use the toilet. The air in such a room stinks horribly. People

mostly sleep all day because they are constantly numbed by heavy drugs or what they call "medicines."

Those who fail to behave "properly" are forcibly given shots of sulphazyn—usually four shots—which causes an immediate fever of up to 40° C, which lasts for several days. During these days a person is hardly alive, he can't do or think anything, and is completely helpless. They call this "cleaning



the body of harmful substances." Another means of disciplinary punishment is insulin shock. That means an injection of a crazy amount of insulin, which also leaves the person in a half-alive/half-dead condition for several days. And this is only what they call the "medical treatment," to say nothing of the beatings and the other means of terrorizing patients by the paramedical personnel. Any nurse can beat you up at any moment.

It isn't rare for people to never come out of psych wards. In the hospital I saw people who had been there for twenty to thirty years. Their whole life consists of getting up in the morning, taking a short walk down the corridor, then a meal, and back to sleep.

You are completely subjected to your doctors' authority. There is no term for you to serve, there's only your doctors, and they can keep you there as long as they want, and while you are still there they have the full power to do whatever they want to you. Anything they want—any drugs, any kind of regime for you, any violence. You don't know when or if they're going to let you out of there.

There's a rule that a person who has spent more than half a year in a psych ward can be released only by the authority of a special medical commission, which meets only twice a year. And if you dare to protest about the conditions of your detention, your chances of getting out are zero. You'll be kept there until they crush you completely with drugs, because no doctor will let you out before being sure that you won't complain about them. So you find yourself in a situation even worse than prison, since you don't know when you are going to be let out.

Our people usually end up in a psych ward either when they are forced by the system to admit their homosexuality or when they try to avoid army service. Our army is another story. The fact is that some time ago homosexuals didn't have to do army service, because they were considered mentally ill. That would mean that the person would be stigmatized for the rest of his life, would never be allowed to travel abroad, would never be allowed to occupy any decent position. But still, if one chose to, he just had to declare that he was gay and they would put him in a mental hospital for an examination. In a month or two he would obtain the "treasured" diagnosis of psychosis and would be free of army duty for the rest of his life.

Julie: How will *The Theme* be distributed?

Dimitri: The first issues will be sold openly on the streets by our own independent sellers, who will stand holding up one copy. Hopefully, people will walk down the street and see a new, attractive-looking magazine on sale and buy it. But in the long run I hope our magazine will become popular mostly among our people. We'll have subscriptions too, if we can figure out whose address we can use. *[Prior to this year, unofficial or underground literature was distributed privately, hand to hand, often wrapped in brown paper or newspaper. Only recently have unofficial organizations begun to sell their literature on the streets; state-owned kiosks do not sell independent publications—yet.]*

Julie: How much will it cost?

Dimitri: One ruble to buy and about sixty kopeks to publish one copy. *[One hundred kopeks equals one ruble, and one ruble is approximately equal to twenty-five cents.]*

Julie: How is the paper being financed?

Dimitri: With all my own money. It costs a lot to produce an independent paper in the Soviet Union. If our circulation is going to be 1,000 copies, that is 500 rubles, which is really a lot for a young person.

Julie: Maybe you will explain a little about the publishing process.

Dimitri: Because we can't have access to a printing plant, the newspaper will be mimeographed, or maybe we will be able to find a photocopier. First we'll try to find a computer to typeset. Then we'll print it out, paste up every page onto cardboard, and take it to the people who are willing to copy it for me in the Baltics—even though it is illegal—and then I will bring all the copies back to Moscow and distribute them.

Julie: And whose computer are you using?

Dimitri: Mostly, we find opportunities to illegally use office or laboratory computers after work hours—an hour here, an hour there. It's not so hard to find somebody who will let you get your stuff printed out. But if he sees what kind of material it is, he will never talk to you again!

Julie: Ideally, how often do you



want to publish and how many copies?

Dimitri: The best we can expect is to make the paper a four-page weekly.

Julie: Do the authors sign what they write?

Dimitri: Because we live in a society where it is still dangerous to be known this way, they all use pseudonyms.

Julie: What kind of help do you want to receive from the gay community in the West?

Dimitri: Well, we need your support by sending us information. The majority of our material is still translated and reprinted from foreign gay publications. We also

need the support of your community organizations. No one is sure what's going to happen here tomorrow—it's entirely possible that tomorrow they will start moving us all into camps. We need your support, so that if tomorrow we are arrested, there will be voices in support of us in the West. In the Soviet Union one of the few things that both the democratic movement and the gay movement can rely on for security is public support from the West. Our government now tries not to do anything that would disturb outside public opinion.

We are also looking for contacts, simple human contacts. Most Soviet gays are completely isolated, even from one another. The higher the position a person occupies in the social pyramid, the riskier it is for him or her to establish contact with others. Only those at the very bottom have contacts. So people are isolated from other gays and from any information about what happens in the West with people like us. It could be great if we could establish personal ties between gays and lesbians here and abroad and build a stronger international community. ▼

Julie Dorf is currently working on several projects with Soviet lesbian and gay communities including interviews with Russian lesbians and a documentary video. She coordinates a vocational training program for Soviet Jewish refugees in San Francisco.

Lyonya Merzon assisted with the translation of this interview.

The first issue of The Theme came out in January. The front page had an article by a lesbian entitled "Come Out from Underground," along with an editorial column announcing the formation of the Gay and Lesbian Union of Sexual Minorities and "the beginning of the gay-rights movement."

Anyone interested in sending material to the editors can send it to:

121457 Moscow, USSR
Do Vostrebouvanya
R. D. Smirnova

If interested in supporting this organization in other ways please contact Julie Dorf in care of OUT/LOOK.