

# 'Reconstruction' in Bratislava

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In early September 1993, a gathering of 'Reformers in Soviet Psychiatry' met for three days in Bratislava to discuss matters of common interest; in particular, how to improve their psychiatric services and training, and how to overcome or remove the many obstacles which still exist. There were psychiatrists from West and East Europe, the Baltic States, Russia (St Petersburg and Ussuriisk, near Vladivostok), Ukraine, Moldavia and Azerbaijan, and from Albania. There were people from USA and from the UK: Catherine Oppenheimer, Bill Fulford and Steve Corea (the only psychiatric nurse present), all from Oxford; and myself. No psychiatrists came from Moscow, but we were pleased to welcome a legal academic, Svetlana Publinskaya, who has been almost entirely responsible for the preparation and introduction of modern mental health legislation to Russia. The largest single group came from the Ukraine, where a reconstituted Psychiatric Association is emerging, helped by the 'Geneva Initiative'. This is the new title adopted by the International Association against the Political Abuse of Psychiatry, 'IAPUP', still based in Amsterdam. Its secretary, Robert Van Voren, after campaigning successfully for years against these abuses, has changed to supporting, with equal vigour, the training of psychiatrists, other professionals, patients and carers. Three recently formed carer groups sent representatives: from Kiev, St Petersburg and Bucharest.

The meeting was a heartwarming occasion. Here were people who had to struggle at great personal cost, and even risk, to maintain standards in a system which was degraded, where the needs of ordinary citizens were ignored, and which was seen, with some justice, as sinister and malignant. The formal meetings were all

plenary – because of the need for simultaneous translation. Bill Fulford gave the first presentation. Quite tough philosophy even in English, I thought, and not assisted by an obstructive overhead projector and a floundering translator. It was a resounding success. Drilled in the dogmatic Gradgrind of Soviet medical education (even worse than our own), the audience greeted Bill's shower of new ideas like parched travellers in the desert. Ellen Mercer's talk on tolerance, prejudice and trust struck an equally strong chord for those who had grown up in the cognitive dissonance between Soviet propaganda and Soviet reality. (Those of us force-fed on a diet of 'mission statements' issued by 'trusts' may soon be experiencing similar feelings.) Audience participation, and many informal gatherings, were at maximum level throughout. The meeting ended with a decision to reconvene in 1994 (in Holland) with the hope of its becoming an annual event.

Members of the College should know that the major demand is for education and training in psychiatry, both for professionals of all sorts and for concerned citizens. Just at present I would recommend making initial contacts through existing informal networks rather than through 'official channels', which are still liable to bureaucratic thrombosis. Twinning schemes, for instance with a district psychiatric service, might well be explored. There are opportunities for this in Ukraine. I would be happy to advise on these matters.

The College of Physicians has organised courses in French for many years. Perhaps our College should follow their example – but in Russian.

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