

# Balakovo Wolga Weekend

*Because the trains only go ever so often, this trip was longer than planned, from Tuesday 16<sup>th</sup> to Wednesday 24<sup>th</sup> of October, so we were a full week away for one weekend. Almost every time at the beginning of a project like this we ask ourselves: "Why are we doing this?" And almost every time we answer ourselves at the end of a project like this: "Because the faces and eyes of the new dancers are so rewarding after the weekend, because the effect of the genius of the dances is so touchable and real."*

## Train lore

So again we went. For the fourth time in six or seven years to the Wolga, for the first time to Balakova. We flew to Moscow where we saw the first snow of the year (rare for Moscow too) and then 22 hours on the train South to Balakova. As before, our mentee Anya from Moscow accompanied us.

In Russia people travel a lot by train and it seems a certain 'train lore' is part of their culture. Special teabags with the logo, special sugar with the logo and also special customs. Anything overnight is a 'short trip', so with 22 hours for 1,000 km we didn't even travel that far for Russian standards. Part of the lore is that men are supposed to close their eyes when women change clothes or undress for the night. "Wali close your eyes, please" was new to us, first coming from a woman we didn't know but ended up in the same four person compartment with us and on the way back coming from friends we shared the sauna with less than a year ago, but that's the way it goes in Russia.

The train is filthy, noisy and overly hot, but fortunately the radio could be switched off. The view on the bright yellow birch trees was superb and we really enjoyed it, even though sleeping is more of a concept than a reality with benches measuring 190 by 55 cm and the overwhelming heat of the radiators.

Anyway, it was great to spend so much time with our mentee Anya, on the way back joined by Zhenya.

Our surprise came in Moscow in the train to the airport. What a lovely and modern train! Unlike our Balakova train, this is a train that foreigners and visitors will use, Anya Hakima explained to us. We felt initiated in the real train lore of Russia!

Anya Hakima? Yes, in the train we also gave an initiation: on the way back, somewhere between Balakova and Moscow, Anya became Anya Hakima. How dervish can a bayat be!

## Balakova



Compared to earlier visited Wolga cities Samara and Saratov, (1 million +) Balakova is relatively small with 300.000 – 500.000 inhabitants and one, like Saratov, a poor town. The first thing we noticed however were flowers everywhere, in pots, in parks in window sills. Unlike anything we've seen in Russia, also for our mentee and translator Zhenya. It made our Dutch heart beat faster!

The local people were proud of their city with its hydro energy plant and nuclear plant. We could even visit it. Much to their surprise and disappointment we turned the invitation down.

As we later found out, the energy here doesn't only come from the double source of water and uranium: we could do just about any dance and get the maximum out of it. These people really go all the way and seemed to have an inexhaustible source of energy, also inside. What a joy to work this way!

## The workshop

The actual weekend was a record for us. We know Russians like to make long hours, but one evening from 6 – pm till 9 pm, followed by two full days from 10 am till 8 pm we have never experienced! This was a real dance marathon. Of course we were asked to 'do something' the evening before and after, so all in all we were two full days and three evenings busy with the dance & Sufi work. As said above, as all participants went all the way and – most uncommon for Russian workshops – everyone stayed the whole time and didn't miss a minute, let alone a full day, we were very inspired to work with this group.

The room had a lovely view over the Wolga over the full length, with gym preps and machinery on the other side. It is one of the most beautiful rooms we've seen in Russia, although in the West you wouldn't accept a room with so many disturbing work-out equipment and even a large mirror.

Right at the beginning of the Saturday, someone one floor below started some repair work, happily hammering away. During workshops in Russia we've had a symphony orchestra, baseball game, disco, a live pop band during a wedding, but the hammering was new to us. No one seemed to care, so we just repeated some sentences that drowned in the hammering and started singing. Fortunately it stopped in the afternoon.



## Simaron



This was our first experience with a weekend fully organized by a Simaron group. The publicity made this clear: 'Simaron Club Balakova invite Wali & Ariënné'. The expected and prepared discussion \*excitement versus ecstasy\* for the Simaron people (see our application) stayed in the closet. We heard from several people that the Simaron code for a good zikr is to faint at the end. Except for the odd woman (who actually was from Samara) who wobbled on her toes after every dance, trying to get off balance, not much happened. The weekend was great and not that different from one, organized by a Russian DUP dancer. Maybe more

energy, but we'd see that as a plus!

## Feedback

The participants of the dance seminar were asked to fill in a questionnaire, that included such questions as "Did you have any dance experience before the seminar?", "What new things have you learnt about the dances, about their purpose and intention?", "Which dances did you like most?" People were also asked to describe their feelings during the seminar and whether they would like to have Dances of Universal Peace more often.

From 21 people who answered the questions 5 had no dance experience prior to the seminar. A number of people knew the Dances through the Simaron club and its leaders (Padre, Gayavata). Some people have been dancing for 4-5 years and mention such events as Inlakesh and the seminar of Wali and Arienne in Saratov, March 2005.

Among the new things they have learnt the participants mention the meaning of the mantras and movements in Dances, something about the life of Samuel Lewis, the vision of the Dances as of the "prayer in motion". They describe the purpose and intention of the Dances in the following words:

"Dances help to remember your purpose on Earth"

"An inner concentration, a harmony with music and within the soul"

"A unity of people through the Love to all beings"

"A harmony with Universe, God, your highest self, other people"

"A purpose is to feel, understand, see the Unity, hear it and head towards it, to know and to believe it exists".

Most people wrote that during the Dances they experienced great joy, the opening of the heart which lets you feel united with other people ("merging with other people") and kindness toward them. The inner feelings were that of deep peace, being thankful for your life to God and to your family, experiencing that God is within you and that you're being filled with Love and Energy, connected to something "highest, having no name".



One person observed: "I was concentrated on my feelings, awareness of the moment, what was born in the dance was softness, tenderness and at the same time power and passion".

Another person commented: "During the dances different feelings appear but you accept them all without fear, without refusing. You just let them be, you're open".

The majority of people wrote they can't choose a dance that they liked especially because every dance has something special in it. Often people mentioned dances from Sufi tradition, zikrs, a Healing dance and Lord's Prayer.

People who had no dance experience wrote they would like to have such dances more often (one woman wrote "I'll try to involve my family in the Dances as well"). Those who already knew about the Dances said they also want to have them more often, are interested to "discover other dances, breathing practices".

### **Lessons learned**

1. Only the feel is for real. We had many a negative report about the Simaron, but most likely the more extravagant warping of the dances happens when the leaders Papa and Beard are present and leading. In the end of course people are people.
2. Outreach can be very tiring and you almost need to be with two to cope with it and continue doing it for a longer time, especially in these far away regions. With so much waiting and traveling time it is good to have some company. It can also be very rewarding to see how the magic of the dances work with new people and to feel the dances really are getting rooted.
3. Persistent visiting of a region works. We know it won't always work, but in this case the dances are rooting quicker than we had hoped for.
4. The first will be last. Samara was the first Wolga town we visited, just after the turn of the century. Galia was our mentee and a mureed of James Burgess. She followed him on his path and actually stopped leading dances, as did her promising daughter (also a good musician and drummer). With now only 21 year old Zhenya to revive the dances, Samara has for the moment lost the benefit of its head start. Maybe with future plans (see below) we can keep serving Samara.
5. Trains are fun (even Russian ones to a certain level) & much more relaxed than airplanes!

*October 29, Heure*

*Ariënne and Wali*

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