

Saratov, 2005

Saratov is home city of our student Katya, located deep South in Russia on the Volga river. It is a poor city: Doctors and teachers earn some \$60 per month, a good job earns to \$150, \$300 is considered an excellent pay. Renting a house is up to \$150 (plus \$50 for gas, electricity and phone). No wonder everyone lives together. Katya also still lives with her mother. She studied to be a GP and finished University but was unemployed for a long time. Now she works in the computer business, translating English manuals into Russian. She learned her English for the Dances, using text books from her stepsister. Katya runs a group there, but until now, no Western teacher has visited the city. You may remember her name from her feedback of the European SRI Camp and other Dance trainings. At the EU SRI Camp she invited us to come to Saratov to help her spread the Dances and deepen her insight.

In Saratov we did a full weekend for a large circle of some 50 – 55 people, followed by a spontaneous organised Sufi evening and a farewell evening after the sauna, reviving the hippy times of Murshid SAM with songs & stories and of course large amounts of food, sweets and fruit, ending with zikr.

One of those evenings that are magic, and impossible to organise. They just happen!

As we lived in the house with Katya, we spend much time with her talking, sharing and notating Dances and doing all things that dance teachers do when together. At the two evening sessions in the house, her mother and stepfather (Katya lives at home) joined. They support Katya throughout, but never experienced her work. The singing and stories moved them deeply and in future will enable them to understand on a deeper level what moves Katya in the dances and her spiritual path. This was a very welcome, but unexpected extra outcome of our stay.

The workshop itself was very successful, both by numbers and by content. A group of some ten dancers came from Samara (which we had visited the year before) and also from Nizky Novgorod (never visited by a Western teacher and holding a large Dance community). To our surprise, our mentee Olga from St-Petersburg undertook the three days journey to dance with us in the town of her birth. Many of the dancers had their first dance experience and most were keen to join Katya for her regular sessions. So we may hope her circle will grow.

With Galina from Samara (our organiser for last year) and Katya we organised a meeting, trying to work towards collaboration and (eventually) creating a Volga area within the larger Russian Network. The problem in working together is money: Samara is rich (though not quite like Moscow), Saratov is very poor, and Samara entrance fees are beyond anything Saratov people can pay for. In spite of this, the idea emerged to organise a longer retreat for the whole area at some point.

We presented the Dances in several clusters of Dances, sitting in between (We cannot dance for four hours on a row...), using time for sharing, questions and giving dharma talks for the next concentration. One concentration was on different aspects of the Prophet Muhammad, trying to create more understanding between Islam and Chistianity (Saratov deep in the South is close to the Caspian Sea and to the Islamic part of the old USSR empire). One was on the Buddha and one on the Aramaic Jesus. With a Dharma session, we ended up with a nice focus on the Prophets. On Sunday morning, we shared a series of Dances in the order and inspired by the Universal Worship. On request we also presented the Fatiha.

Already the first evening the group was a 'group', with the singing and Dancing more superb every hour. Highly inspiring! The local drummer Arkadi was a treat to work with and proved to be a real master.

The depth and intensity of the questions asked surprised us. They brought us deep into the core of the philosophy and spirituality under the Dances. Obviously, Katya has been doing good work in her hometown.

It is very inspiring for both us and the local people to have this kind of events happen and visit towns or cities further off the beaten track. We also see it as a kind of respect to the local communities and the local teachers who have to do so much travel to get their Dance food.

We feel Katya has been given a boost in her Dances and confidence as local teacher (she is only 25, so can use some support).

It would be usefull to deepen the contact with this area after two trips (Samara and Saratov). Is is highly uncertain that a longer retreat/training (Estonian style) indeed will happen, due to the costs. Strange enough even in the for us 'cheap' parts of Russia, renting venues is highly expensive and in no relation to what you can ask for a retreat.

Another idea that we are toying with ís being *teacher in residence*, staying for a longer period in a fruitful area and offering a weekend workshop to start with and consequent classes for teachers on weekly evenings for a period of more weeks, using the consequent weekends to deepen and experience it all with the students in Dance and Walk. This would allow us also to spend more time teaching the Walks and go deeper into the background of teh Dances and Murshid SAM.

To be continued, we hope
Wali & Ariënne