

Latvian Summer Camp 2008

We have been visiting Latvia since 1999, participated in two camps and saw how the dances in Latvia first went underground and then reappeared some years later with new dancers. Much of this owes to the energy Fatima put into reviving the dances in her home country.

After establishing a regular dance circle (still the only one in Latvia) and traveling to further away cities, she and her half sister Bashiran took the initiative to revive also the Dance Camp. The first one in 2006 was organized around them and Ralph, a German dance teacher living in England and married to Latvian Vitalija. For the 2007 Camp Silje (Estonia) was invited and the third Latvian Summer Camp took place from August 18 – 24, 2008.

After two smaller scale camps (of around 25 people), this was the first with a full staff, meant to kick start the Camp to a larger scale than the previous two. We are happy to say this worked well. All in all over 50 people visited the camp. As is usual in Eastern Europe, not everyone was there the whole time and we had new arrivals up to the very last dance session. Others left earlier due to work or other duties.

Staff and participants

The staff was very international with Shahodat (St. Petersburg), Karima (Moscow area), Bashiran and Fatima (Latvia) and us (Belgium) as originally planned. Like at the Czech Camp, earlier in August this year, we also invited our New Zealand friends and campers Sally and Prem in the staff, giving the camp an extra flavor.

The participants came from all three Baltic countries (Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania), with some extra guests from Holland and Findhorn (Latvian by birth). The camp really was a family camp with many young children and even a three generation family. Many promises for the future! One boy of 14 was hooked (rare for this age) and danced as much as he could, as did a young girl of four. Most other children (from 3 – 16 in age) sometimes danced and sometimes chose the excellent children program, led by Marguarita (22) and assisted by Russian Mila (the 14 year old daughter of Shahodat) and sometimes her friend Yelena (also 22). These young women came on a youth scholarship and are part of the new Latvian network (see below).

The camp lacked men. We had no more than 4 or 5 men in the circle, including staff members Prem and Wali.

Stumble Blocks

Three issues were always on the front and on the back of many of the participants.

I: Not far from the maddening crowd

The first issue was clear for all: noise. The site – used many years also for the Sufi Summer Camps of Dutch Sufi Movement teacher Wali van Lohuizen – was under reconstruction and we led our first morning meditation competing with the sound of trucks and bulldozers within 5 meters away from us. The staff arranged for them to stop in the morning, which helped a lot.

Then in the weekend soldiers came in (they own the site), as they do every weekend, camp or not. Friday night was party time and the drunken soldiers kept many awake. Saturday night was disco time and the heavy bass and drums accompanied us on our closing night.

During the week it also happened that wood needed to be cut, and in the end we almost got used to the sound of a chain saw.

II: Mother Nature

Unpredictable as ever, Mother Nature showered us with rain, so we had an overall wet camp. The second evening the rain came in so heavy that the tent flooded, so we had to rent an indoor hall. This proved to be a blessing with great acoustics and walls to keep the construction noise outside. The blessing ended when the soldiers came in on Friday, as they needed the room for themselves.

The batik work – planned outside – took shelter in a vacant dining room, which added a lot to the feeling of sangha, as many worked on their textiles in between sessions and meals.

These two stumble blocks, combined with the initial problems with setting up the tent (donated by Oneness and still in great condition. Great to see the tent again!) made one foreign visitor

remark that this was the worst organized camp he'd ever attended. Knowing this was Fatima's last camp (see below) we really felt sorry for her and did all we could behind the screens to bring the camp and its difficult logistics on track.

III: Power & Pride

The third stumble block is more difficult to describe, as the stories differ and it is hard to keep fiction and fact apart. Most likely, all involved will see their own fiction as fact.

Over the last year, a new organization arose, calling itself Latvian Network, although they know they do not meet the present official requirements, as Latvia doesn't have a residential mentor.

The driving force behind the Network is Vitalija, a Russian Latvian woman living in England with her partner Ralph, a German dance teacher. She had the vision to create a Network as this would help Latvia with momentum for the dances.

However, due to issues around the first camp in 2006, not all dance leaders are not part of the Network and clearly have spoken up that they also do not want to be. Even though everyone was invited for the different initial and founding meetings, these leaders now feel left out of the Network. This is an awkward situation, as some of them hold the dance circle in Riga and have the organizing expertise.

Next year, the Latvian network will take over the Camp. Present organizers Fatima and Bashiran in a moving giveaway ritual handed over the camp to the Latvian Network, thus creating space for the Latvian Camp 2009.

Both parties have asked us for advice during the year in our capacity as WW networkers and/or mentors and because we know most people involved.

Knowing beforehand about the situation and strengthened by our recent similar experience in the Netherlands, we underpinned the morning meditation with the healing wasifas and also programmed a Healing evening (the giveaway ritual took place the following morning). We kept heart and ears open for all parties, refusing to take sides. All talks were done at the request of the people themselves, we never once had to steer them in the direction of opening up. We are sorry to say that a talk between all parties wasn't (yet, we may hope) possible. Wounds are too deep and recent, people too bitter still. All involved however say that this is a matter of time, as time will heal the wounds.

We feel a lot of healing has been done and space is now clear for the new camp. We also feel that this may not be shared by all, as some still feel left out, even though they must understand it is self chosen.

To conclude:

Maybe because of these outer and inner issues, the camp was a very deep experience. Coming home, it felt like a very long time since we left. Much longer than any camp in the recent years, even though in fact the camp was only six days.

Again we experienced how good it is to keep contact and meet each other in the format of a Camp, where processes like forgiving and healing are so much easier with the hearts open and in the safe Baraka of the dances and Sufi work.

Wali & Ariëne vd Zwan
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Lessons learned

1. Eat, dance and pray together does work. (Not that we needed more proof of that!)
2. Power corrupts. For this too we didn't need proof, nor did we welcome it, but one of the issues in Latvia is clearly around power and whose voice is the most dominant one. This unfortunately seems to be a universal 'law' with the dances not as lucky exception.
3. Somehow pioneers often get the blows by the second generation. We have seen this internationally and in a variety of local networks. Sometimes there's a power game not unlike that between parents and adolescents, sometimes money is the issue, sometimes hurt pride of the feeling not to be recognized enough. More often than not, the second generation doesn't go to the middle, but seeks for an extreme on the other side, leaving

room for a next generation to respond to that and so forth. Against all present evidence, we may hope somehow our organization will develop in a direction towards a more healthy and less painful growth process (also internationally), and will be able to give guidance to pioneers if they go too far in reaching out their strong arms.

4. Time is relative: some weeks last much longer than others.

Feedback

Sally Plat & Premanand

We feel incredibly blessed to have been part of this Latvian Dance Camp, this being our first visit to Latvia. We very much enjoyed the huge heart of the Baltic people who have such similar energy to the Russians that I had danced with in the late 90's.

The site for the Dance Camp was environmentally beautiful, set on the edge of forest with a picturesque river nearby and potentially so peaceful. On arrival earthworks were going on at the site; noisy machines working around the dance marquee proved quite disruptive for morning pow wow and daylight dance sessions. Fortunately we moved into the wonderful inside space which served us very well for the next few days of heavy rain. Another surprise was the army arriving for the weekend and using parts of the same facility for their nightly recreational activities made this a less than desirable atmosphere for the dances.

On a positive note the food was better than anticipated. We were well catered for and very much appreciated a day of traditional Latvian food. It was surprising the food was so good after attending 2 Russian camps in the past.

The camp participants seemed to really enjoy the Camp with high participation in all of the sessions, dances and workshops. We were surprised at the very small number of men at the camp – at times just Wali, myself (Prem) and one other. Children and young people were well taken care of by a small team of young women which gave their mothers a welcome opportunity to dance uninterrupted.

It was neat to be on staff with such a variety of dance leaders from different countries – 2 Latvians, 2 Russians, 2 Dutch and 2 New Zealanders. We all complimented each other really well.

The program flowed well. The early morning practices were well attended and provided a beautiful start, attuning the group for the day. It was a good format having Wali and Arienne focusing the evening sessions and the rest of the team holding the energy of the circle for the morning sessions. We were a little surprised that we held the energy for the Saturday morning session on the last full day of camp, and we very much appreciated the opportunity.

Our Learning Curve

Both Sally and I (Prem) felt incredibly grateful to be included on the staff for this Camp. We thank Wali and Arienne for making the suggestion. We really enjoyed the opportunity to be part of the teaching of this camp and working with leaders from different countries.

There were lots of learnings for us, particularly leading when the primary language is not English, as that couldn't happen within our country where only English is spoken. We quickly realized that we had to adapt our style of leading to leading with as few words as possible and to lead with our bodies as much as possible. This was particularly needed with the assigned interpreter not being familiar with the Dances and the dance jargon. It was no surprise when she left the Camp half way through. She was fortunately able to be replaced by Vitalija and Anya, both well attuned dancers. One of our realizations was that in these situations only a few words are needed as the Dance quickly attunes itself and the dancers, once the basic movements are shown.

We particularly enjoyed the guitar instruction sessions with Wali – this being one of the cutting edges of our learning and leading at present.

High Points

Nasrudin stories skillfully told by Wali were a high point and concluded an efficiently yet sensitively-led pow wow. We also loved watching the participation in the Peace Through The Arts program led by Shahodat which created a lovely energy and was mixed with afternoon dance sessions.

One session that was particularly touching for us was the emerging dance leaders session of the Thursday afternoon. It was great the level of support for each of the leaders who came from Estonia, Lithuania, Russia and Latvia.

A handing over ritual initiated by Fatima to conclude her organization of Latvian Dance Camps was deeply moving and gave each person involved the opportunity to grieve the change and celebrate the new initiative of a Latvian Dance Network Camp in future. It was also very touching to witness the thanking and honoring of Fatima for her years of service to the Latvian Dance Camp and community.

We enjoyed that the Latvian Camp attracts people of all ages, particularly young adults as well as older age groups. We loved the Baltic and Russian presence and found it so touching to hear the likes of "May All Beings Be Well" being sung in Russian as well as English. We realize just how small our planet is and how amazing the Dances are in bringing us into unity even though we speak different languages. The Dances are the language of the heart and this language is universal – this was also reinforced for us in Germany and the Czech Republic. The longest, deepest hugs happen in this part of the world, crossing any and all barriers.

A personal highlight for us was leading our session with a New Zealand flavor and how well received it was. We left feeling part of a new dance family and feel so blessed to be part of this international dance family; Alhamdulillah to Murshid SAM for making this all possible.

We particularly enjoyed being part of this outreach work and this Camp gave us a good grounding to be more involved in this type of work in the future which we would very much love to do.

We left feeling huge gratitude to Wali and Arienne and the Latvian Dance Community for the opportunities to contribute and be part of this Camp.

Prem & Sally, Aotearoa, New Zealand

Dear Wali & Arienna,

I'd like to share some thoughts about the camp. Even though I've been there only 4 days- I felt that the energy of happiness was rising day by day. The culmination was at the pow-wow during the transmitting camp's traditions ritual. The atmosphere was very friendly and relaxing like at home. Different classes and other activities very an ideal addition to the dance program. I feel blessed by having high-level teachers in Latvian camp, so it made the camp a sacred process not only for experienced dancers and leaders. I don't know everyone opinion about the camp, but I saw deeply satisfied smiling faces and tears of joy & hapinness that describe all things better than words!

love&light, yelena

Blessed Be
