

Sounds of loud shouting, heavy jackboots thumping along the corridor—CRASH! CRASH! as big fists hit our compartment door, a voice screams out in Russian. From behind, I fumble to open the closed door. More shouting! At last I open the door. My gaze falls on three huge Russian military men in olive tan great coats, fully armed, demanding, as far as I can make out, our passports. I hesitate a moment—big mistake. The front giant shouts at me and extends his gloved hand in my direction. Welcome to Belarus, where the Soviet Empire still lives. Traveling with Poep Sa Nim sure has its moments!



ON THE ROAD WITH HEILA DOWNEY JDPSN

by Rodney Downey, The Dharma Centre

It all started at the end of February, when I flew from sunny hot South Africa to join Downey PSN in cold, cold Poland for the last few days of Kyol Che there. Then we were to travel by train to Lithuania where Poep Sa Nim would lead a three day retreat. Then to St. Petersburg, Russia for another three day retreat, after which, still by train, we would travel back to Warsaw for a day, then fly home.

It was wonderful to be able to join in the last three days of Kyol Che and experience the much talked about “Polish try try mind.” About thirty people from all over Europe attended the last week. So many voices for the circle talk in two languages that it took over two hours to complete! Then we had a special last lunch with lots of goodies and of course present-giving to Downey PSN. She is much loved by the Polish sangha and this is echoed by the Czech, German and Slovak sanghas.

That evening about ten of us who were still at the center sat around a bonfire drinking hot beer and herbs, talking and, for me, getting to know some of the sangha. It was really funny sitting next to the fire as the temperature was below 0°C, so the front half of your body roasted and the back half froze!

The next few days were spent exploring Warsaw and getting to know Aleksandra Porter PSN, her husband John, and a few of the sangha. Then, we “hit the road” in a manner of speaking. We in fact caught an ex-Warsaw Pact train for Vilnius.

Vilnius, the old capital of Lithuania, is one of those rare and beautiful cities that you suddenly find when you least expect it. We were met by Hubertas and Agne, who lead the Kwan Um School in Zen in Lithuania, together with Rita

and many of the sangha. We left the station and drove into the old city to our luxury apartment. Bedroom, sitting room and bathroom in an old building that is being renovated and turned into a small hotel, then to our first meal and Zeppelins! Traditional food of the region. Later that afternoon we drove to Kaunas, about 150 km away, to give our first talk. Downey PSN so inspired a man who attended the talk that the following month he gave a double-decker bus to the sangha, free of charge, in order that they could drive to Poland to be at the twentieth anniversary.

The following day we explored Vilnius and that evening gave another talk, and at 5:00 a.m. the next day started Yong Maeng Jong Jin. The Zen Center building is deep inside a pine forest, no running water, and half the building without heat (which at -5°C is cold!) The loo was a real “dry shit on a stick” type, a hundred meters from the building and by the end of the first day under thick snow! But as Zen Master Seung Sahn always says, “Difficult situation, good practice; easy situation, poor practice.” How true. Here practice is strong and the students all eager, not only in their sitting but according to Downey PSN, “they all have very strong try minds” in the interview room. By the end of the retreat it was obvious that the Lithuanian sangha and Downey PSN had “hit it off.” The Kwan Um School of Zen started in Lithuania the same year as in South Africa, 1991—but under much more difficult circumstances. However, the Lithuanians are a proud and many-talented people who care a great deal and I have a feeling that the sangha will grow and grow. We left late one night bound for St. Petersburg—ten hours away—but far far away from what were used to!

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Russia! One pictures a land as seen through the eyes of history—Ivan the Terrible, Catherine the Great, Napoleon's great retreat from Moscow, Stalin's purges, "Barbarossa" (Hitler invasion 1942), May Day parades in Red Square and Lenin's tomb. It's all that and more! We arrived at about midday in thick snow at Warsaw station in St. Petersburg, and were met by Boris and Olga, who are leading the group in St. Petersburg, and five other members. We all jumped into taxis and drove across the city to Olga's flat in Sleep City.

Sleep City is a dorm of St. Petersburg—about three million people live in this space in vast impersonal high rise apartments with not a tree, park bench or kiddies playground in sight, and until Russia opened up a few years ago, there were no shops, restaurants or anything. Russian life is difficult, hard and crowded. But the people are warm, hospitable and eager to learn about everything. At the flat we got to know each other over tea and cookies. That evening we left the flat, walked through the thick snow to the main road to try to stop a car to take us to the Center where we were going to give the talk—yes, just stop any car on the road and ask, for a fee, if he/she will drive you where you want to go!

Sounds crazy but it works. We traveled to and from the Center for three days this way. The Kwan Um School of Zen sits in the only Buddhist temple in St. Petersburg, a Tibetan temple built in 1916 and taken over by the Soviets in 1924, who used the building as a laboratory. It was returned to the Tibetans only three years ago and now houses twenty monks and two lamas. Our school is very welcome and practices there twice a week.

The retreat started the morning after the talk. Poep Sa Nim and I stayed the night in Olga's flat, getting up at 4:15 a.m. and after dressing in what seemed like a hundred layers of clothes, left the apartment and walked through snow about forty centimeters deep to the roadside to "pick up a car." Arriving at the Center, we were amazed to find forty-five retreatants waiting for bows! For interviews, Poep Sa Nim had a very different room to what we normally call the interview room—four meters by three meters, but over fifteen meters high, and very cold. The cold we could fix a little with the aid of a heater—but the shape of the room! What made it more interesting was the live electric wires hanging down one wall; if you got close you could have electrocuted yourself. Still, for Poep Sa Nim this was home for most of the next three days as, with so many people needing to speak through an interpreter, most of the day was taken up with interviews. Out of the forty-five who attended the retreat, thirty-eight had never done a retreat before, and those who had, had only sat one or at the most two retreats.

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Nobody was familiar with the form, so I was asked to be head dharma teacher, which was a tougher job than I expected as, when I walked with the encouragement stick, everyone asked for it! By the time I returned to my seat I was covered in sweat despite the coolness of the room.

The abbot of the temple (a wonderful man) had given permission for one of the monks to attend the retreat. He participated in everything, *including the interviews*, bowing, sitting, chanting, walking and eating—but you could see by day two, his legs were suffering which I thought was strange, until I found out that the monks there can only start meditation after eight years and this was his first retreat. Something really special must have happened to him on the last day, as coming out of the interview he did three full prostrations towards the room before returning to his seat.

Three days passed in a flash. My admiration for the Russians grew and grew. Such strong practice. Many of the retreatants had to sit on bits of carpet, rolled up sweaters, or sleeping bags as the sangha had no zafus. To sit like this on your first retreat takes some guts! At the last meal at the end of the retreat we were joined by the abbot and Tantra Master who had kept a quiet eye on this retreat. The abbot said to Downey PSN that this was the most powerful retreat that had been held at the temple and invited her back, also inviting her to teach at their new temple being built in Butan when it is finished.

That evening we held a party at Olga's flat—eleven people packed into her tiny kitchen (six square meters) plus the stove, sink, table and cupboard. Great fun, eating and drinking Russian tea. The next few days we spent exploring St. Petersburg—vast churches, museums and stately palaces. The first day the sangha drove us around to show us the layout. The next day Sasha, the abbot of the Russian sangha, took us to "the Hermitage" and other great buildings. The following day we went exploring on our own via the great metro system which is the deepest metro I have ever been on. It takes ten minutes by escalator from top to the bottom. Each station is a work of art—clean and not a sign of graffiti.

We left Russia by train late at night. In fact the train left Warsaw station at 11:00 p.m. Notwithstanding the lateness of the hour, eighteen sangha members turned up to wish Poep Sa Nim and me farewell and express love from Russia. "Please come back to Russia for another retreat," were their parting words. The train rushed off into the night. As we turned into our bunks the only sound was the "clackety-clack" as the wheels hit the rails.

What an adventure, what an experience; so many new friends...what a wonderful thing is the dharma!