

[Yoga, Soviet Style - An Eyewitness Report](#)

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## Yoga, Soviet Style - An Eyewitness Report

Ford-Kohne, Nancy

First International Meeting Creates Ties for Teaching Programs, Translations and Harmony

Even our two-day orientation in Ireland prior to going into the Soviet Union in early October could not really prepare our 33 delegates for this first Soviet-American yoga conference. Not until we experienced the need and intensity of our Soviet colleagues could we begin to understand the mission we had undertaken. "You are going to the Soviet Union at the most difficult time in its history," said Rama Vernon, founder and director of the Center for Soviet-American Dialogue and founder of Unity in Yoga (the two American sponsors of the conference). "This time is more difficult psychologically," she continued, "than the revolution or even World War II. The old order is crumbling and the new order is not yet in place."

Rama made her first trip to Moscow in May of 1984 and was asked at that time to organize a yoga conference. But it was not yet time! Yoga was illegal in practice, if not by law; books were very difficult to use or own, and in 1984 it was still illegal for foreigners to go into Soviet homes, or even to have much contact with Soviet citizens. Rama began to bring in large groups of citizen-diplomats from the United States. She wanted to create a "force field," and she did indeed find healers, yogis and mediators during her first trips into the USSR. Her 50 subsequent trips were always based on yogic principle of service, guidance through meditation and equanimity.

In 1990 the USSR was more than ready for yoga. Only when teaching in a medium-security prison have I felt such a hunger for something to ease the pangs

of everyday life. It was not easy to arrange the conference. After invitations had been issued to the ten honorary guests - Yogi Amrit Desai, Liliias Folan, Kathy Hunter, Pir Vilayat Kahn, Nancy Ford-Kohne, Judith Lasater, Eleanor Leatham, Swami Nischalananda, Ma Yoga Shakti and Ganga White - the original conference plan fell apart! Rama hurriedly flew to Moscow to pick up the pieces.

In a very short time Rama had representatives of several yoga groups meeting in Moscow in late-night sessions planning for this first Soviet American Yoga Congress. This in itself was a major step. A few years ago Soviet citizens could not and did not get together in groups to plan events. The groups that did gather did so despite bureaucracy, red tape and with very limited resources.

### Making Russian Friends

Within twelve hours of our arrival in Moscow, the American delegation, jet lag and all, were lunching with 30 Soviets at our hotel. I sat across from Evelina Jdanova, president of the healthy Family Club which was founded in 1983. Evelina has been teaching yoga since 1975, but is known in Moscow as a healer. She said that until recently she taught from books - her first yoga book was *Autobiography of a Yogi*. She told us that libraries had books on yoga and Indian philosophy, but "officially" private citizens were not allowed to possess such books. Over the next several days I was to learn how many rules were circumvented by veterans of yoga who kept a spirit alive despite the hardship.

Evelina's teacher, Dr. Greenblat, is probably the subject of the famous case we hear about of a person having been in jail for three years for teaching yoga. It may be more correct to say he was jailed for charging money for the classes and having large crowds at public places. There is also a story of a man being jailed in Leningrad for collecting a large library of yoga books. But we also heard many times of a few Soviets in someone's flat learning postures or pranayama and being left in peace.

Our first night in Moscow we gathered on the fourth floor of our hotel. Americans hauled food out of their rooms (and crystals, Ganeshas and mala beads). Soon the little stand in the lobby had become a puja table and someone lit incense. Ma Yoga Shakti led us in some kirtan and our Soviet guests joined in. Hinduism is very

individual in the USSR, and is based on an individual's contacts and experiences.

We met Olga and Lev Teternikov that night, and Olga gave me my first small lapel pin, a traditional Russian gift. I was very impressed with Olga and Lev, who later invited me for tea in their flat. They have almost single-handedly organized the first yoga association in the USSR. In the first year it has attracted several thousand members. Lev, a former analytical chemist who has left his job to do only yoga, has arranged yoga and other non-traditional classes at the Russian-American University for college credit. Lev said he began to read about yoga and Indian philosophy in 1970. He and other told me that Russians are very intellectual, and that educated people are introduced to eastern thought through philosophical books. Most of the Soviets we met were highly educated and were physicists, computer programmers, chemists, teachers and doctors.

Lev related that years ago, when he was in Mongolia to analyze water problems, he taught yoga. This raised a few eyebrows, but he never got in trouble for it. Now, he said, the Yoga Association of the USSR is free to do almost anything. Just lately the first articles on yoga appeared in an official journal. This year Lev and Olga are arranging special seminars for teachers so they can bring yoga to school-age children. It is a problem for some Soviet yoga groups to be able to stay "in business" with no official support and no funds. This is part of a changing socio-economic pattern.

We met Dr. Nikita Zuikhin on the stage of the conference hall when he gave a short speech. Nikita and his National Scientific Centre of Yoga represent yet another wing of Soviet yoga. The Soviet government is open supporting scientific research on yoga. Nikita works at a rehabilitation hospital. Through his auspices, Swami Nischalananda, a devotee of Swami Satchidananda, and I were able to talk to about 250 doctors, nurses and patients about yoga therapy. This was a military rehabilitation hospital with full army colonels as administrators. Many questions were asked, and at the end of our talk, Colonel Ladesov made a promise to set aside rooms for yoga to be a part of the hospital routine. In turn, I promised to have a book I had edited, *Yoga for Common Ailments*, translated into Russian.

Yoga Russian Style

I received many impressions of yoga in the USSR, some of it confusing. It became obvious to all of us that there is a strong occult and/or psychic component. This comes from a tradition which includes not only mystic Madame Blavatsky and her theosophical movement but the Russian Orthodox Church. Anna Tkatcheva, a young woman who has just received a Ph.D. in Comparative History of Religions, Institute of Oriental Studies, has written Russian Orthodox practices and yoga. "They even have chakras," Anna said.

After the conference, the Americans went off to Leningrad (to speak to thousands on yoga), to the Urals and to teach and share throughout Moscow. Because I chose to stay in Moscow, I was able to meet two interesting men who are very involved with yoga there. Sri Laksman Kumar teaches yoga at the Indian embassy. Though he teaches classes every night, he has a waiting list of 600. I think the most classical hatha yoga, mantra and meditation is taught at these embassy classes. Sri Laksman has been teaching for only a year and many of his students saw the announcement on Soviet television. Several of them acted as escorts and translators for Americans.

American teachers who stayed in Moscow met each morning for an asana and pranayama practice in the lobbies of the floors of the hotel. Somehow Muscovites heard of our informal sessions and attended. It was there I met Sergey Kostikov, of the Yoga Club of Moscow. Sergey speaks excellent English and went to Val Marin, Canada, to the Divine Life ranch of Swami Vishnudevananda. Sergey thinks that some American or European yoga is not good for the USSR if there is no discussion of nadis, chakras of astral body.

## History of Yoga in Russia

It is from conversations with Sergey that I got an overview of the history of yoga in the Soviet Union. Although no one could take me back further than about 100 years, it is my feeling that something yogic must have been exchanged with India through the trade routes and through travel to and from India through thousands of years. Several people told me that friendships, travel and communication with India has not been difficult in recent times. However, Sergey sees the beginning of yoga in the Soviet Union (then Russia) at the turn of the century through two lines. One was a husband and wife team of artists who went to India around 1900 and there developed "Agni Yoga." These Russian teachers received spontaneous information and had psychic intuition about their work, which they then brought back to Russia.

The other route was through Swami Ramacharaki, a Russian who translated the Science of Breathing and other books into Russian and English. He had travelled to ashrams in India where he was initiated and gathered information. The revolution in 1917 cut the culture of Russia, cut the life direction of many people. By 1927 yoga, along with many other arts and disciplines, had gone underground. To some extent, yoga was looked upon as a religion, and neither the Orthodox Church nor the government approved. In about 1960, two men brought yoga up from the underground. It came to the public as gymnastics, or later as health therapy. It was taught to large crowds in sports rooms, but the word "yoga" was not mentioned in public. By 1978 books were in libraries and some people were teaching illegally. Sergey reports that even at the beginning of Gorbachev's presidency, "books on yoga in private hands were arrested and fired" (i.e., confiscated and burned). Sergey's teacher spent 15 days at the police station answering questions. But the situation has shifted. This dramatic change is clearly high-lighted by our yoga conference and twelve days in the USSR.

## The Bright Future

Soviet citizens are now free to pursue their interest in yoga. "They are extremely open," said Yogi Amrit Desai, who while in Moscow with the conference did some taping for Soviet television. Several other Americans are being asked to do a TV series on yoga and the healing arts. Businessmen are arranging yoga classes in offices to lessen stress. Doctors are pursuing the therapeutic aspects of yoga and mediation, and the yoga association has teacher training seminars planned. As a result of our interaction, Americans have promised articles and translations to Soviet friends, and Soviets have promised to publish, translate and help get updated information to teachers and students of yoga.

We ended the conference with an ecumenical service, with candles held aloft by hundreds of people, the energy level high and pure throughout the hall. It was an amazing moment. It felt that we 33 had helped light the flame of yoga in the Soviet Union. After the closing ceremony, Victor, a yoga teacher who had been to one of my classes, approached me. He spoke very little English, but we could so easily understand his meaning, "Four days...it was 100 years. Evolution."

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