

Excerpt from the story

“Amazon Sisters on the Trans-Siberian Railroad”

in *My Pink Road to Russia* by Sonja Franeta

Interview with Lena

I asked each of them separately to tell me when they first felt they were lesbians. Lena was eager to begin, her gray eyes wide open, her hands gesturing with abandon. I turned on my tape recorder and began my first real interview in Russia.

“At college I became attracted to a girl named Olga. I had a serious crush on her. She wasn't the first girl I felt this way about. I would call her. She thought it was all some kind of joke. I started kissing her, hugging her. By the way, at that time I didn't really know that I was a lesbian. I had heard of such people, but I thought that very, very few of them existed, and that they were strange. Sometimes friends would say something bad about them. I would agree with these statements, but inside I wanted terribly to meet some of these lesbians. Where are they? How can I meet them?”

“One day a girlfriend of mine came up to me and said: ‘I was in the cafe today and there were some gay men there.’ I said, ‘Really? What were they doing?’ ‘They sat around a table calling each other Masha and Natasha and other girls’ names.’ ‘Oh how awful,’ I said. ‘How gross! Foo! Disgusting!’ At the same time I was thinking—how I'd love to see them myself! There was something about them that reflected me, my own outlook.”

Lena spoke about her attempts to be straight (*normal'na* in Russian) like the other girls. She thought of marrying Olga's brother to be closer to her. After school she worked as a nurse in Erfurt, East Germany, in an army hospital, but she continued to feel attracted to women. She met and fell in love with Tanya who was thirty-one, much older than she.

“Tanya was very good to me. She always invited me on walks; she liked to talk with me. I never was open with her about my attraction to her. I was afraid. We talked about men and other things. I also felt attracted to Lena, our supervisor, who was about twenty-nine; I was twenty-one. Tanya and Lena were very different. While Tanya was slender and sweet, Lena was a large woman but I really liked her.

“We lived in a collective. I generally liked to kiss and hug women in a friendly way. Once I stroked Lena's breast. She got upset with me for a long time. Then I thought: why did I ever do that? We would all get together, the men and the women, on October 3, to celebrate the reunification of Germany. We drank and partied. There was a woman who lived with us at the dormitory. I wasn't attracted to her but she had that quality, that lesbian look. After the party she was with me, she drew me toward her and began to kiss me. We fell on the bed and she continued to kiss me. I got so scared after awhile that I ran to my room. My mind was racing—what was all that about, how did it happen? And the next day I was so worried that she would tell someone. Well, she's from Belorussia, kind of naive, blabs about everything. Everyone was sitting around in the common room and I couldn't believe it! She suddenly blurts out, ‘Lenka, remember how we were kissing yesterday?’ I sat there stunned, thinking, Why is she saying this in front of everyone?”

When Lena began describing how wonderful it was to see her first lesbian erotic film, *Emanuelle*, my mind wandered to how I felt when I first saw the film. I was married to my husband at the time and I thought how amazing it was that Lena and I—of such different ages and times and countries—could have such similar feelings and experiences about coming out.

“When I saw that film, I began to understand that this was my sexuality, I needed to see this in the movies,” said Lena. “I was already twenty-two and I had been with a man and never experienced an orgasm. To be with a man was like drinking a glass of tea. Actually, drinking a cup of tea is actually more pleasurable.”

“What did you feel when you first met Asya?” I asked her when Asya had gone off to wash our “dinner dishes” in the bathroom.

“This was such an amazing day and this is true! The twenty-third of March was supposed to be my wedding day, but it was the date I first met Asya as well as Olga and the others [the other Siberians who went to the film festival]. It turned out to be such an incredibly happy day! The day my life changed. I postponed my wedding indefinitely.

“What did I feel that day? I was like a bird. I couldn’t believe what was happening yet I felt like I was doing something I’d wanted to do all my life. How could I go to bed with a woman? What would I do? How is this possible? For a long time I didn’t know anything about sex, making love. It was forbidden.

“I remember the first night with Asya, how scared I was. I even said to her: ‘I guess we need to make up another bed for you.’ ‘Of course not,’ she said. I was afraid of her. Then I realized she too was inexperienced. I realized I had been walking around all my life under a shell. This, my natural self, my intuition, my love had led me to this place.

“I have now been with Asya over a year. I love her, she loves me. I think our relationship will be long. What surprises me, at the same time that I love her immensely and deeply, is that it doesn’t stop me from being interested in, getting excited about, and even wanting other women. I don’t think there’s anything wrong with it. I think it even helps one in life.”

There was no law against lesbian sex in Soviet Russia, but it was forbidden, as Lena said. I felt I had to explain that there was also a lot of homophobia in the United States, too. In Russia I had heard stories of women being institutionalized in psychiatric hospitals and being urged by psychiatrists to either change their sex or to force themselves to date men. I told Asya and Lena that the U.S. was not the mythic land of freedom they thought it was. I had a friend who suffered electroshock treatments in her youth for her lesbian feelings. Gay bashing occurred even in the gay capital, San Francisco. They listened but didn’t seem to believe me.