

Interview with Me
By Sonja Franeta
From My Pink Road to Russia (2015)

Ksiusha and Lena and I were on our way to Pobeda, a small village outside Moscow where people had dachas. We were going to visit our mutual friends Lena and Sveta, who had lived there as a couple for twenty years in Soviet Russia. We made a stop to buy cheese, chocolates, canned fish, and wine to contribute to dinner.

We got back on the Kiev Road toward Pobeda. It was a long drive with possible traffic jams ahead. I had the back seat to myself, Lena drove, while Ksiusha from the front seat said, "I'd like to interview Sonja for a change. She's always interviewing everybody. Why don't you tell us the story of how you came out?"

"Yes, Sonja!" said Lena with a smile, her eyes riveted to the road, her hands gripping the wheel of her red Lada.

I felt flattered. "You mean I never told you my coming-out story?"

"No, tell us," said Ksiusha, settling back in her seat. Lena turned off the radio.

"Well, it all started in Russia, you know. Here, in Moscow! I was on a trip in the summer of 1977 with some people from London, some young people, political people, and I met an American woman who would be my first woman lover. She was so beautiful in my eyes—tall with short dark hair, friendly, interested in people, broad shoulders and lovely full breasts. When I met her and she seemed to want to spend time with me, I remember thinking, 'She's so beautiful and confident, and I'm this boring married woman with glasses. Why would she want to speak with little old me?'

"At the time I was married to a physics professor who had a grant to do research in England, at the University of Birmingham. I had been dreaming about women for a couple of years on and off. I thought about how gentle and smooth women were, so soft, lovely long hair, the one in my dreams, with her full breasts against mine, the nest of her pubic hair against me, in my dreams.

"Anyway, that was what I wanted, but I had no idea how I could meet other women like me. I had been married for over six years and was living in a very tame community near Palo Alto, California, a suburb of a suburb. I was a writer and student, each evening waiting for my husband, a dedicated atomic physicist who sometimes spent the night with his experiments. I was going to U.C. Berkeley graduate school myself, but my life seemed to revolve around him nonetheless, and I didn't want it to."

"I didn't know you were married for six years!" Lena piped up from the driver's seat, looking at me in the rearview mirror.

"Yes, I was. But everything changed while we were in England. Birmingham was an industrial city north of London, but close to Shakespeare country and the Cotswolds. I loved the

English countryside, the lush rolling hills and the little steps that helped you cross fences designed for cattle. I would go to London often by train and roam around. I was doing a translation project for Leonid Rzhevsky, my Russian professor in the New York University Graduate program. For the most part, though, I felt bored and restless. Something was brewing inside. In England, not only did my dreams about women persist, but I was reading about the new women's movement and feeling dissatisfied with my marriage.

"Before leaving my graduate studies at Berkeley and while I was still married, I met a gorgeous long-haired Italian poet and had an affair with him. One day out of the blue, after we made love, he asked me if I ever felt sexually interested in women. I was shocked by the question and he didn't wait for my answer. He began to talk about his interest a guy we both knew. He did not seem surprised when, breathing deeply, I finally said, 'I'm attracted to women.' We kidded about setting each other up with same-sex partners."

"Was that the first time you said something to someone?" asked Ksiusha.

"No, actually my husband knew about my feelings before that. At about the same time as the Italian affair, I made friends with a gay man in the Russian Department who talked to me a lot about his lifestyle. I kept asking him questions about how he met men, trying to learn about my possibly fitting into this strange queer culture, but the image of being at a dance or a bar or an open meeting place scared me. I never said a word to my gay friend about my feelings toward women. Several years later, we happened to meet on the street in Berkeley and I revealed to him that I had come out; he told me he had never suspected a thing about me at the time.

"So when I met Gina in Russia, you can imagine how thrilled I was. She was the woman of my dreams." Both Ksiusha and Lena smiled and hollered, "Ura!" (Hurray!)

"I must have recognized something in her. I felt a spark, but I never dreamed anything would come to fruition. We were on a two-week tour through the Soviet Union—Moscow, Leningrad, and Tallinn, Estonia. One day Gina and I were walking alone on the riverbank in Narva, near Tallinn. While the river rushed by, there were some boys skimming rocks on the water. As we walked on the pebbly shore, she said to me, 'Have you ever thought about making love to a woman?'

"Was this really happening to me? I thought. I don't remember answering. She talked on. My mind was racing and tears worked their way to my eyes. As we walked up the hill to town, the setting sun was facing us. She said, 'I hope you didn't think I was coming on to you when we talked about being interested in women.' I was already feeling that irrepressible rush, and now my eyes were really filling with tears. 'What's the matter?' she asked. I said the sun was very bright and we walked on, with her doing most of the talking. We stopped at a little cafe before we returned to the dorm-like place we were staying in. The coffee was too sweet for me—they sold it presweetened. I didn't finish it."

"But when did IT happen?" Ksiusha asked with excitement, as Lena glanced at the rearview mirror.

"That night we were alone in our room. Our roommate was spending the night with her boyfriend. It must have been our time. Gina and I each lay in our own beds in the dark. We

chatted for a while, then fell silent. I didn't know how I was going to sleep that night; I was so wound up with excitement. I tossed and turned. I thought, 'If she says one more word, I'm going over to her bed.'

"And she did. 'You seem restless.'

"I literally flung the covers off me and ran to her bed. I bent over her and experienced an unforgettable wash of relief as I hugged and kissed her and she reciprocated. That's all that happened that night but two nights later we were in Moscow and decided not to go to the circus with the rest of the group. We made love in our hotel room overlooking the city. It was everything I had dreamed and more—warm and gentle and so full of knowing. There was no turning back. It opened my life."

Silence. A kind of reverence. I said, "The day before, we kissed for the first time while we were taking a walk in Lenin Hills, of all places."

"Vorobyovy Gory? [The old name in Russian]" repeated Ksiusha in surprise, and Lena chortled behind the wheel. The park was the highest point in Moscow, with a panoramic view of the river, the Kremlin, and the city. We talked of how momentous it must have been to kiss a woman in 1977, in the Soviet Union, right there in the open, where many lovers had come to profess their love. My friends knew how important Moscow and Russia was to me.

"Gina and I took a side trip by ourselves to Zagorsk, to the historic Trinity Lavra monastery-fortress a half hour from Moscow by train. Our Soviet tour guide was hesitant to let us go—after all, he was responsible for us. With my knowledge of Russian we would be okay, I said. We took off like two girlfriends getting permission from a parent or teacher to do something no one was allowed.

"Zagorsk was majestic and brilliant with its tiered gold cupolas and white stone walls. It was another world from the crowded streets of Moscow. It was a quiet, ancient, spiritual world, allowed to exist in a circumscribed way. I remember walking around inside the fortress seeing occasional dark-robed figures, older women in kerchiefs pensively on their way to pray. We saw two middle-aged women walking arm in arm and talking in an intimate way, so I took Gina's arm with a sudden burst of boldness. We bragged to each other about how free we felt in the Soviet Union.

"A man was working on an oil painting of the Cathedral of the Assumption, where Boris Godunov was buried. I asked the artist to take our picture with my camera. I still have the photo—our eyes glistening, our smiles ear to ear, his easel next to us. Arm in arm, we show each other off. I'll never forget how romantic it all felt—to be among those shiny cathedrals that had survived in the Soviet Union, to have my dreams come true, to be in love."

"And what happened with your husband?" asked Lena.

"Well, I told him as soon as I returned home." I grew sad remembering the difficulties. "He didn't take me seriously at first. Or maybe he couldn't. But I moved out and got my own apartment in San Francisco when we got back to California, and Gina and I continued our relationship for a couple of years. I explored the wonderful lesbian world in San Francisco, which I think was at its height then, in the late 1970s and I became a political activist. I was very

fortunate.

“I remembered how a poet helped me when I was having trouble leaving all that my husband and I had built together to start a new life. It was W.H. Auden. Do you know his name?”

“Ah yes,” said Ksiusha. “Wasn’t he gay?”

“I took his collected works from my shelf in my husband’s and my house and it just fell open to this page—a sign! I listened. His words gave me courage. I still can recite some of the lines:

Underneath an abject willow,
Lover, sulk no more:
Act from thought should quickly follow.
What is thinking for?
Your unique and moping station
Proves you cold;
Stand up and fold
Your map of desolation.

“How do you think coming out changed your life?” Ksiusha asked.

“A great question. You know, I tried to get an interview with a woman in Tomsk once, and she declined, saying the label lesbian was narrow—she said she was much more than a lesbian. I knew being open and true to myself felt like an opening, not at all a restricting. The woman had lost her job at the university because of her sexual orientation. I tried to explain that it was the university administration that was narrow-minded, not the label. Of course any kind of label is confining, but the best way to build a new life is to connect with others and widen your circle. What better way than to come out?

“To say you are a lesbian means you have left the traditional fold, you have moved out of the box society gives us and over to new possibilities. In turn, this new adventure can offer others a model for a more creative and independent life. Yes, it takes courage to come out, but it also means you want more out of life. You don’t want to settle for what is acceptable.

“When I was interviewed by gay.ru [the central popular website for Russian LGBTs], the journalist entitled the piece ‘Sonja Franeta Who Loves the Word Lesbian.’ Although I did say something like that in the interview, what I meant was that I embraced the word and didn’t reject it. We have plenty of labels in language and society. They are just a way of talking about something. Remember what Tsvetaeva said—everything is a translation! We translate our thoughts in order to speak about them. A label is a translation.

“I also strongly believe that coming out has put me on an amazing journey. I became an activist, not only for LGBTs but for all oppressed people, first and foremost for women and for working-class people, my people, advocating for those countries oppressed by the U.S. military and the CIA, for black civil rights and for the poor and for marginalized people. I became more keenly aware of what was going on in the world and the historical context. I became educated in class politics which changed my life.

“I saw history differently—the oppression of LGBTs (and women) was important to keep the family in place, the bulwark of capitalism. I still am close to Che Guevara’s famous quote: ‘At the

risk of seeming ridiculous, let me say that the true revolutionary is guided by a feeling of love.'

"After about twelve years of full-time activism, I followed my heart once again and emerged as a writer. It was poet Judy Grahn who was a mentor to me when I returned to the San Francisco Bay Area in 1987. She said the only way to be a writer is to 'take yourself seriously as a writer.' That's right. I am a writer and I have enjoyed writing and sharing my writing, my translations. At that time I met other writers and friends, political and not, who helped me feel confident in my transition to being a more dedicated writer.

"When I traveled to Russia to learn more in 1991 and connect with sexual minorities, it was with all of my Slavic background, my literary interests, my political activism, and my appreciation for queer lives that I approached my interviews and other work in Russia. 'A great feeling of love!' My mind was opened further—I learned that someone could be a transsexual or transgender and also be a lesbian. Was there any translation for this fluid identity I was hearing about? I learned that people who lived under an enormous stultifying blanket of silence could live their lives like flowers in a forgotten garden. They were becoming connected, internationalized, and I was part of it. This was all for the better, all human progress, even if it goes back a few steps for a while. We will emerge so much better for all this."

As we neared Lena and Sveta's dacha, Ksiusha said to Lena, "She has a Slavic soul, doesn't she?" I smiled and thought to myself: really I am a citizen of the world. The simple old wooden dachas with rundown yards surrounded us. Lena and Sveta would greet us warmly and we would soon have tea and other goodies.

I found myself thinking of a much-quoted phrase, perhaps from a civil rights chant, that June Jordan used as the last line of a 1978 poem about South African women standing up against apartheid: "We are the ones we have been waiting for!"