

APPENDIX Z

TRIP REPORT FROM THE ILGA CONFERENCE AND TRANSGENDER PRIDE CONFERENCE: HELSINKI, DEC 94

TRIP REPORT

European Regional Conference of ILGA
and
Transgender Pride Conference
Helsinki, Finland
December 27-31, 1994

SUMMARY

Not so long ago, I hardly felt myself fit to carry Phyllis Frye's bags, much less fill her shoes. The first part turned out to be easy enough, because the clothes in the bags were my own. But filling her shoes (a pair of boots, actually) proved more difficult. It took three pairs of socks.

Why all of this? Because ICTLEP's global mission requires contact with people from outside North America, and demands that we build bridges to the lesbian and gay movements, many of whose members feel little common concern with the mushrooming gender liberation movement. ILGA, the International Lesbian and Gay Association, is a world-wide coalition of organizations working for lesbian and gay rights. The organization started in Europe, and their European Regional Conference is a major annual event. ICTLEP needed to be there, and we found a contributor to underwrite most of the costs.

Was the trip a success? Absolutely. Was I greeted as a visiting dignitary, invited to address the Conference, and granted honors due a Board member of a prestigious international organization? Well, no, not really. To a limited extent, yes, at the Transgender Pride Conference; they had at least heard of us.

The real value lay in the networking. In much of Europe, particularly in the smaller countries, transgendered people have no support organizations. They rely on gay and lesbian groups for information, emotional support, and assistance in dealing with unsympathetic

bureaucracies. And even when the gays show compassion and concern, they have little information to offer.

For example, I was approached by an official with the Ministry of Health in Croatia. His job is to disseminate information on AIDS, but he is also trying to help three or four TS's get the counseling and medical treatment they need. Services formerly provided by the government in Yugoslavia are unavailable since the break-up, and nobody even knows where to start. I gave him the email address of another TS in Houston, a neighbor, and when he has a chance to ask more specific questions, I hope to be able to refer him to people with answers.

Besides the networking, there was great value in simply being there and being visible. ILGA tends to ignore gender issues, and my presence may have jolted the awareness of some delegates.

One specific item of ICTLEP interest. On Thursday, there were four workshops related to gender issues. One of these submitted a resolution calling for ILGA to adopt the International Bill of Gender Rights, and to recommend that its member organizations do so, as well. (No, I didn't do that; the Finns had planned it from the start.) When the resolution reached the Friday morning plenary session, the reaction was swift and negative. *Too significant a step to take without serious study. • *My organization did not give me authority to vote on such an issue. • Most revealing, *ILGA has been working on a similar statement for several years, and we need to coordinate with that effort. • I had been prepared to defend the Bill and the resolution, but this clearly was a lost cause. Besides, Euro-ILGA didn't need some American telling them what to do. Instead, I had lunch with the gentleman who had raised the last objection. I pointed out the fine print at the end of the Bill, saying that it was a living document, and inviting anyone with suggestions to contact Sharon Ann Stuart in Cooperstown. He agreed to forward the Bill to the ILGA person presently working on their document, a Doug Sanders in Canada.

The Transgender Pride Conference was organized by the Helsinki Trans Support Center as an adjunct to the ILGA conference. It included the four joint workshops on Thursday, as well as two more days of separate sessions on Friday and Saturday. Attendance was much smaller, and mostly local; the only non-Finns were myself, an electrologist from San Jose, a recently-transitioned lady from England, and Jenny Sand, a prominent European TG activist. I wound up chairing the final two sessions, one dealing with health-law issues, and one on global goals of the TG liberation movement. Thank goodness for ICTLEP Proceedings.

DETAILS

Tuesday, Dec. 27

Registration opened at 11 am, and a workshop introducing first-timers to the workings of ILGA ran from 1:30 to 3:00. Nothing spectacular, but a useful grounding. Otherwise, the afternoon provided an opportunity for special-interest caucuses to get together. The registration was well organized and ran smoothly, with few apparent glitches. I was impressed.

The welcoming party at a downtown gay disco had good beer, a light supper, and too much amplification to allow much conversation. Bah, humbug.

Wednesday, Dec. 28

Opening plenary - welcoming speeches and housekeeping details. What fire there may have been got lost in the translation. Then most of the attendees walked about a mile to City Hall for a demonstration. The mayor usually hosts a reception for international conferences, but not this one. The protest made the evening news, and the mayor's comments (as translated) made him sound like your typical redneck bigot.

The afternoon workshops were disappointing, at least the two I chose. The one on ILGA action didn't discuss what ILGA was doing anywhere; it just framed a couple of letters of support to organizations in Turkey and Albania. And the one on religious institutions in Eastern Europe, which might have had interesting parallels to our situation with the Self-Righteous Right, was cancelled for lack of attendance.

Dinner was the most expensive Big Mac I've ever had.

Thursday, Dec. 29

A good day. Four workshops in conjunction with the Transgender Pride Conference, sponsored by Helsinki's Transgender Support Center. The first session was an introduction to transgender issues and a comparison to gay and lesbian issues. Pretty basic stuff, but there were some interested non-transgendered people there, and it was a good chance to get acquainted.

I missed the second workshop, dealing with the *scoring* problems of F-M's, because of a concurrent workshop on the Internet and its capabilities for world-wide communication. The Finnish gay and lesbian organization, SETA, has a major network for their own internal communication, and they are connected to the Internet. Perhaps the gender community can set up a gender net some day, but it won't be cheap.

The third workshop was the real highlight of the conference. When I walked in, I was handed a copy of the International Bill of Gender Rights, which I immediately recognized. The Finns leading the workshop were already excited about the document, and they were delighted that someone from ICTLEP was there. I ended up speaking for several minutes about the history of the Bill and ICTLEP's role in disseminating it. As mentioned at the start of this report, a resolution urging adoption of the Bill was already prepared, and the workshop approved it unanimously. The text of the resolution follows:

Although there are differences between transgender, gay, lesbian and bisexual communities, the participants of the workshop agree that we must work together. Homophobia, gender based discrimination and other forms of biases against the members of our communities share a common cause: we challenge the social and sexual roles the heterosexual world usually assigns to us.

To promote cooperation and acceptance, we must work together and respect the differences of individuals and fight the prejudices within our communities.

To further these goals, we **recommend** that:

1. the EURO ILGA recommends that its European member organizations adopt the International Bill of Gender Rights;

and that

2. they work towards having a similar document affirming the gender rights passed by the world-wide organization.

Also as mentioned earlier, the reaction of the plenary session was swift and negative. The amendment offered follows:

EURO ILGA shall set up a Working Party to examine whether it is appropriate for it to:

1. adopt the International Bill of Gender Rights;

2. work towards having a similar document affirming gender rights passed by the worldwide organization.

This Working Party shall take account both of the transgender community's arguments in favour of adoption and of reasoned objections thereto, in particular those put forward by some sections of the feminist movement.

The Working Party shall report back to the 1997 European Regional Conference.

Action on the amendment was deferred until Saturday morning, when all the transgendered participants would be away at their own conference. I have no idea what happened.

Back to Thursday afternoon. The final joint workshop, on cooperation between the communities, was anti-climactic, because the good stuff had already been said. We ended up listing reasons for cooperation, and ways to achieve it.

Friday, Dec. 30

I spent the morning in the ILGA plenary, missing the Trans Conference sessions. Fortunately, they looked only interesting, rather than vital. I caught up with the Trans Conference in mid-afternoon, in time for a discussion of what cross-dressers face in Finland. It sounded familiar - dress and behave appropriately for the situation, and even if you're read, you probably won't be hassled.

The plenary session was valuable, not just for the Bill of Gender Rights issue, but for the insight it gave into ILGA's character. The conference consisted of over 100 delegates from more than 30 countries. There seemed to be more power games than searches for agreement, less inspiration and more competition. For example, the workshop on women's issues submitted a resolution calling for ILGA to adhere more closely to its own rules for

gender parity. The opposition (all male) claimed, *We hear this same resolution every year. Why can't you drop it?• The obvious reply was, *Because you still aren't listening!• I don't even remember how that one came out.

After the session, I spoke with the Secretary-General of ILGA, Hans Hjerpekjon, of Norway. He and his female counterpart, Rebeca Sevilla, from Peru, share leadership duties for the entire organization. He agreed with my impression that ILGA is not very receptive to transgender issues at this time. There used to be more transgender participation, but it has faded away. I said that ICTLEP might find that indifference an excellent reason to join, and he smiled.

Saturday, Dec. 31

ILGA was folding its tents, but the Trans Conference had another full day of workshops. A great presentation on electrolysis by Susan Laird of San Jose, CA. Susan is a TS who had to give up an engineering career (sound familiar?), so she brought a technical background to the business. She's the first one I've heard who really understands what happens; her big recommendation was to use as little thermolysis as possible on the upper lip, to prevent pitting.

Jenny Sand, a Swede living in Norway, presented a report on transgender rights in Europe. Very interesting, very thorough; she's done her homework.

After lunch, we discussed health-law issues. The scheduled workshop leader was unable to attend, so I filled in. The issues vary considerably from country to country; most European governments subsidize health care, and they all have different attitudes toward gender issues. In Finland, the *gatekeepers• haven't read anything published in the last twenty years, so their attitudes are a bit archaic. But free SRS is available for those who qualify. In many countries, the establishment relies on the DSM characterization of transsexualism as a mental disorder to justify treatment. In the US, with unregulated health care, we tend to lose sight of this point.

The final workshop addressed the global goals of the transgender movement. No leader had been found prior to the conference, so I stepped in again. The consensus was that while our goals are well stated in the International Bill of Gender Rights, actual implementation has to occur on a country-by-country basis, with detailed goals and strategies tailored to the local culture.

Should ICTLEP join ILGA? I am enthusiastically undecided. As an activist organization, ILGA falls far short of effectiveness. It's too big, too wide-spread, and too cumbersome to be responsive. It will take them at least three years to adopt the International Bill of Gender Rights, and that's if they really want to. BUT activism is best when it's localized and focused. ILGA's role is coordination and interchange of ideas. Despite its internal politicization, it's well-suited to that role.

As a think-tank organization collecting and reporting legal information from around the world, ICTLEP could be quite effective within ILGA. The world-wide contacts and communications

would be invaluable in achieving our long-range goals. Our formulating strategies for constructive change• purpose would not be furthered very much, however.

ILGA membership would not be cheap. Annual dues are only \$165, but to be effective, we would have to participate in conferences. At a minimum, we should attend the annual North American and European Regional Conferences, and the biennial World Conference. That's at least \$3500 average annual travel costs, and probably more like \$5000, depending on where the conferences are.

One potential problem -- ILGA's Constitution specifies only lesbian and gay organizations. Getting them to include transgender organizations could be a lengthy process, and we would have to depend on present members to press our case. With any opposition at all, we wouldn't stand a chance.