

MOSAIC OF REFLECTIONS AND IDEAS

Seminar for Women from Central and Eastern Europe, April 1995

by **Nadeje Mandysová**

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The following summary of reflections and ideas came into being during eight days in April when an EUNIKA seminar was held in Prague for women from Central and Eastern Europe with guests from Western Europe and USA. This summary does not constitute a finished product but is only a colorful mosaic of various opinions or suggestions whether in groups or during personal contacts. They can have a subjective or an objective character. All of them bear out the reality that the overall theme of the seminar "Do you understand?" was and is useful, inspiring, and inexhaustible.

How do we mutually understand and know each other? Women from Western Europe and the USA saw the Eastern women as follows: at the beginning all of the women were seen as a one monolithic whole. Only the personal contact with women from Eastern Europe really showed the variety. They are not "the women from the East," but every woman is an individual person. The people living inside the eastern block were allegedly friendly. Now we reveal that a real friendship between these people has been absent. People in Eastern Europe have a strong awareness of their history. Women from this area know a lot about their country's past, and they are talking about this item. It is a great challenge for the West, where people tend to show a minimal interest in the past, and consequently their historical knowledge is often poor.

Women from Eastern Europe are well known by their warmth and hospitality; they are ready to spend time with preparatory work connected with the hosting of guests. Everything is prepared by their own hands. A woman and a fireside form a complimentary unit; a woman is the creator of a home's warmth. Let the Eastern European women preserve this quality.

Solidarity between women, solidarity with men and with the church is strongly expressed in Eastern Europe. Sometimes women from the west see traditional solidarity between a woman and a man only in terms of the women being exploited. Women from the East are comfortable within these relationships in the family and in the church. They welcome having more time for their task as mother, whilst the Western women tend to concentrate more time on their career developments--and the household responsibilities are considered as a restriction. The women from the East are energetically engaged in fighting against the phenomenon which result from the Western lifestyle, e.g. drugs, prostitution, unemployment. These women are often "swimming against the stream," and may become isolated. Let us support them.

The relative poverty of Eastern Europe is very characteristic in comparison with Western Europe. Yet it also has its positive side--it is not necessary to long for material things or to possess the best or the most perfect of modern articles. This freedom within poverty has great worth. Being able to hold a conference or a seminar in our own region creates more equality for us from a financial point of view. This is something that the West could benefit from if they understood it.

Women from Eastern and Central Europe are more committed to their faith. There is a strong interest in theological questions and in Bible studies. Western European women do not tend to have these commitments in the same way.

To people from overseas, from the USA, Europe seems to be a monolith to those who lived in the East and vice versa. But this is not true. Only through common contact can we experience the variety of the world. Many Americans have an idea that they do not need anybody; they have everything and they do not need the rest of the world. What a fallacy!

How do women from Eastern Europe see their Western European colleagues? During the period of totalitarianism, there were few possibilities to be in a mutual contact with and to learn about people abroad.

In those cases where contact was allowed to several "Chosen" individuals (with the blessing of the ruling Communist power), it was to the detriment of objectivity and a real friendship. All contacts were influenced by fear and formality. In spite of this, feminism was exported from Western Europe to the East. We had objections against it; it seemed to be a left-wing ideology, ruining, destroying, and agitating. Yet this was the accompanying feature of so-called militant feminism. There were other women who in the frame of their feminist struggles took an interest in helping women in addressing their real needs, and now they focus especially on the situation in the Third World.

Let us distinguish between the various feminist movements. Feminism in the West is a struggle for human rights, and it needs to be understood in this way. There was an endeavor to bring these ideas over to those lands where human rights discussions were not common yet. In post-Communist countries, this idea about emancipation of women can sometimes break the political and social system. Therefore, women in Eastern Europe cannot follow this way--they could lose the possibility to survive. It is necessary to become fully-respected human beings first and only then to become fully-respected women. For reflecting on the Bible, women from the East will always have the time.

The testimony of women from both parts of the unified Germany became an opening into this area. The question of reconciliation was more intensive than at other times, as the seminar took place during the build-up of preparations for the fiftieth anniversary of the end of World War II. The German women take seriously the consequences of the war, and they expressed their awareness of it. Yet they cannot live with the feeling of guilt all the time; they cannot ask people for forgiveness all the time. Let us meet and speak about the regrettable past, but pain must not overwhelm. In Berlin East and West meet in one church administration. The relationship between state and church are a source of discussion. The Western part of the church is very careful in relation to the state--there are the questions of the church tax, religious lessons at school, cultural policy, and the pastoral care of soldiers. The Eastern part says: "We must carefully think through everything;" while the West is asking: "Why are you so suspicious to our state? It is a democratic state caring about our rights". The East answers: "We worry how blindly you believe the state. The democratic order does signify that everything is going well, but we are afraid of the influence of money."

It is impossible to erase the German past. To German history belongs Hitler as well as the time of the former GDR. One German participant stated: "I am listening to you and I don't know where my place is . . . where is my place now, in Germany; what does my bridge look like; where does it go? We need a bridge to both sides, to the East as well to the West."

There are questions concerning patriarchy and paternalism. State paternalism is the Eastern European experience. The West has experienced more patriarchy. Patriarchy is a relation between a man and a woman--the man is ruling the family and the society, with all the consequences concerning property and power. Man is the crucial economic force. State paternalism minimized the difference between a man and a woman. Both of them were viewed as the state's employees, economically not so dependent on each other. A man in Eastern Europe did not have the same position as a man in the West. Therefore, there is probably a smaller difference between man and woman (with consequent animosity) in Eastern Europe than in Western Europe.

What are we anticipating from the future? We are Christians; we live in a freedom, and we are women. These are the three pillars that unity can be built upon. We ought to reflect on our post-Communist identity. The question of identity is never a simple one. An international network of organizations, including Christian ones, should be developed, which would try to deal with our experience from the Communist era. It would be good to make a comparative study from each country--including statistics, dates, characterization of women's position in various countries, historical memories, and extracts from literature. It would enable a better dialogue between West and East; it would enable a better contact with our own daughters because they do not know socialism from their own experience. Christian women should not be absent in this effort. Some people think they do not need such information. Yet we must communicate because we live in a century of information. Sometimes we are afraid of the truth. There are still some topics which are not discussed because we are trying to be discreet. There are still certain areas of our life which are taboo. These taboos are different from one country to another, which generally means the further east one lived the more taboo existed.

A private separate future does not exist. If we do not have a common future, we have no future at

all. We are involved in many activities. It is important to know why we are doing what we are doing. Is it really to help other people or is our helping a way for us to liberate ourselves from our own stress? Will we help others or try to get our own way?

It is necessary to support the Ecumenical European Forum of Christian Women (EEFCW) in its serving function. The situation in Europe has changed rapidly since the Forum was created. Have these changes been addressed by the Forum? Should the Forum not begin to rethink its new position in the contemporary Europe? Would it not be better to make a general transformation of this organization, rather than attach further partners from the East to EEFCW?

In plenary, there were heard the feelings that this seminar was very joyful. "We are speaking about a hope and joy, which has never disappeared from your country. We are feeling it together with you and we are happy." The voice of one West European woman echoed: "I am happy to find there is something done and created in Central and Eastern Europe (by Central and Eastern European women). I hope the project EUNIKA will be able to be developed further and that we'll have the possibility to co-operate with you and to open the windows wide for you."

From many biblical wishes, conveyed from one woman to another was a quotation from Jeremiah 29: 11-13: "I alone know the plans I have for you, plans to bring you prosperity and not disaster, plans to bring about the future you hope for. Then you will call me. You will come and pray to me, and I will answer you. You will seek me and you will find me because you will seek me with all your heart."

And one voice rose in conclusion: "What shall we do with all that we have learned during this seminar? We must share our learning with other people. Otherwise, it will be a flower which is left to whither."

Therefore we are writing this to you all. Let our seminar be of benefit to many people.

Documentation

REPORT AND MESSAGE FOR THE SEMINAR FOR WOMEN FROM CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE, HELD IN PRAGUE ON 19-26 APRIL 1995.

The seminar was prepared by women from various churches in the Czech Republic, who came together in the women's commission of the Czech Ecumenical Council of Churches.

The aim of the seminar was clear: after many years during which Europe had been divided into East and West, after years of imposed isolation of both individuals and of whole communities and nations within one political bloc, women now need to express their position, discover their own identity, and understand one another. There was no question of any new division of Europe, for invitations to the seminar were sent out to and accepted by women from Western Europe and the USA as well. Our limited resources meant that women were only invited from seven countries of Central and Eastern Europe--the former East Germany, Austria, Poland, Slovakia, Hungary, Romania, and the Czech Republic--and from churches of three denominations--Reformed, Lutheran, United [the combination of Lutheran and Reformed], and the Roman Catholic Church.

The overall theme of the seminar was the question "Do you understand?" Basing ourselves on the biblical passage Acts 8:26-40, we tried to find among our ranks a Philip who would open the Scriptures to us and thus the minds and hearts of others. We were glad to be able to discover during the course of the seminar that openness is both necessary and possible. Friendly discussions, sharing of information, comments, questions, and critical remarks were to be heard throughout the course of the seminar.

In the first part of the seminar, the theme "Do you understand?" was discussed from two viewpoints: how Western European women understand and know women from the East and the other way round. It was very useful to be able to hear from both sides what women value in their sisters from the other part of Europe, where they see differences, and what they see as tasks to be shared.

After the weekend spent with congregations and families in and around Prague, we continued with the theme "How shall we carry on? How can we make use of new possibilities in the future?" It is hoped

that an answer to these questions will be provided by the "Eunika" project, which organized this seminar as its first activity. The "Eunika" project arose out of the need for a special approach to the women of Central and Eastern Europe. Women from this area have long been aware that they are slightly different from Western European women--they have a different status, usually being more strongly tied to the family setting; they are not so emancipated; in the churches they are more closely involved in their local congregations; they have a different approach to feminist theology, and ecological issues do not yet command their full attention. According to Western European women, women from our part of Europe are more unassuming and more deeply religious.

The "Eunika" project aims to discern, study, and support the different gifts with which women are endowed. It aims to react to specific tasks and situations in specific countries. It is necessary to find women who want to be involved in this work in all countries, churches, and Christian communities.

The words of the message which we want to be heard everywhere both in our countries and elsewhere are as follows:

- both now and in the future, Christian women in Central and Eastern Europe want to express openly their views on the problems which surround them and to play an active role in resolving them;

- we wish to express and share with others our visions for the future and our experiences on our own, without having them mediated by others. We defend the idea that those best placed to understand specific situations and needs are those who come from that setting and who have the necessary overview and knowledge;

- we do not want to accept the view that the period of repression we have lived through together has only left a negative impression on us. In spite of all the difficulties, which in many cases still persist or are re-emerging, we want to profess with gratitude that our Lord led us in troublesome times and that he gives us hope in all circumstances;

- let us pray that we shall be able to remain steadfast, patient, unassuming, and courageous. The Church and society urgently need us to give this kind of witness.

The participants in the seminar of women from Central and Eastern Europe
Prague, 25 April 1995

On behalf of the organizing committee: Helena Brabencová, Vera Lukášová, Daniela Brodská,
and Nadeje Mandysová.