PROJECT MUSE®

From the Crooked Timber

Okla Elliott

Red Cedar Review, Volume 43, 2008, pp. 5-13 (Article)

Published by Michigan State University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/rcr.0.0015>

➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/240175>

From the Crooked Timber

Okla Elliott

Before the conductors checked our tickets and passports, I knew our train had crossed the border into the Kaliningrad *oblast*. It might have been all the minor shifts in landscape seeping into my unconscious—the ratty lean-tos I could barely see in the distance, the potholed service road running parallel to the train tracks, the leanness of livestock in the fields—but that’s not how it felt; I just knew we were in a sadder place than we had been moments ago. I turned to Natalie and saw that she felt it too; the knowledge of it hung on her normally bright face. The Kaliningrad *oblast* is a place forever separated from itself—a part of Russia (*oblast* is Russian for enclave or province), though separated from the motherland by Lithuania and Latvia, or Lithuania and Belarus, depending on which route you take. And years of neglect after the collapse of the Soviet Union have only served to deepen its native sadness. Natalie and I were headed toward the heart of the Kaliningrad *oblast*, to the city of Kaliningrad, drawn by the thrill of such an unlikely destination.

She squeezed my hand, and I smiled, glad to be having this adventure with her. We’d dated the previous year when she had studied in America. Due to my having earlier studied in Germany, we communicated in an amalgam of English and German, making us at once foreign and familiar to each other, both exciting and comforting. Now that I was at the University of Wrocław, in Poland, and she was back in Germany, she had come to visit. I was supposed to be her tour guide for Eastern Europe. Coming from Western Europe, she saw the East Bloc as exotic, romantic in its downtroddenness. And I’d chosen the Kaliningrad *oblast* as the subject for my semester project—a paper on the effects of poverty in post-Soviet society ranging from poor medical facilities to increases in drug addiction and STD rates.

Kaliningrad was founded as Königsberg in 1255 by the Teutonic Knights. It has an enviable ice-free port on the Baltic Sea, making it strategically

useful for both military and commercial purposes. That's why, after WWI, Königsberg and East Prussia were separated from Germany by a redrawing of Poland's borders, the reunification of which Hitler gave as his primary reason for invading Poland. And that's why, after WWII, Russia annexed it. Russia turned Kaliningrad into a military outpost, housing thousands of soldiers and the massive Soviet Baltic Fleet. The Russification process required the mass deportation of the German-descended residents and changing the Germanic city names to Slavic ones (Tilsit to Sovetsk and Rauschen to Svetlogorsk). Kaliningrad got its name from Mikhail Kalinin, the titular head of the Soviet state from 1919 to 1938, who distinguished himself by signing the order for the infamous Katyń Massacre, in which an estimated 21,000 prisoners of war were summarily liquidated.

Talking to a German about WWII is difficult, no matter how well-acquainted you are with her. I wanted to ask Natalie how she felt about being on land that had been, in living memory, German territory, where tens of thousands of Germans died fighting Russians (who lost many more), but I knew it would only make her uncomfortable and force her to search for something appropriate to be feeling. I'd heard that one of the beaches in the Kaliningrad *oblast* held thousands of human skeletons just beneath its sands, and that you could dig up a human femur or jawbone as a souvenir. Though the thought of taking home the knucklebone of some long dead soldier appalled me, I was sickly attracted to the idea of seeing the beach and uncovering the bones. I almost suggested to Natalie that we go there, but thought better of it.

We hadn't seen each other in months. And during those months, I hadn't realized how much I'd missed her—her calm and matter-of-fact personality, the way everything in the world dropped away when we were together, the rawness of our attraction. The previous night in my apartment in Wrocław, we'd barely slept at all, and now, whenever the old Russian man who shared our car went to the train's small, smelly toilet, I ran my hand up Natalie's dress, and she smacked my arm, pretending to be offended.

That's the way she and I were, always stealing a few days, maybe a week, together whenever we were on the same continent, and it seemed that no rules applied to us. A few years later, long after our trip to Kaliningrad was over, she would be teaching German at Dillard University, in New Orleans, and I would tell my girlfriend—with whom I'd been living for nearly three

years—that I was going to visit an old high school buddy, and fly down from North Carolina to visit her. (I did see my friend briefly, so my deception was not an outright lie, though even then I knew that excuse was pure bullshit.) My flight, which I'd booked months in advance, was scheduled for four days after 9/11, and my girlfriend suggested that I postpone my trip, considering the circumstances. But I got on the plane and made the risky flight to New Orleans for the tryst with Natalie, faithful as ever to our strange marriage. One of the nights I was there, another lecturer, whom she'd been dating, came to Natalie's door. He asked who I was and what I was doing in her apartment. "It is none of your concern," Natalie told him, her accent making the statement seem all the more cruel.

We got a thousand-ruble room at the Kaliningrad Hotel on Leninskiy Prospekt, a street busy with cars ranging from small Fiats to BMWs and buses spitting black smoke. The woman at the counter spoke only a smattering of English and no German, so I used my broken Russian, stuffing Polish words in the cracks of sentences, hoping that the similarities between the languages would carry my meaning. Just as we were about to finish, another man came up, presumably the manager, who spoke flawless English. I was disappointed to get off so easily, robbed of the excitement of navigating choppy foreign waters. I was like that back then—any adventure or challenge arousing my interest.

In our hotel room we pulled at each other's clothes and kissed. Unbuttoning her dress, I realized that I hadn't brought condoms. By this point Natalie had undone my pants and was squeezing my stiffening penis. "Ich hab' keinen Präser," I said. "It's okay without one," she said and pulled her panties down, revealing her carefully trimmed pubic hair. I was shocked by her willingness—no, eagerness—to take the dual risk of unprotected sex. She was normally the more vigilant one, which I forced myself to be happy about. A part of me saw the use of condoms as mercenary, a way to make an intimate activity into a sterile business transaction in which lovers become safe arbiters of a mutual pleasure. But I had been raised in the '80s and '90s, the age of AIDS, and so had as hefty a paranoia about contracting the disease as anyone else. I've convinced myself several times that I had it, only to be tested and find myself clean, another get-out-jail-free card offered to an undeserving criminal. So I hesitated, stood there with a silly erection pointing nowhere, until she pulled me to her and toppled us onto the bed.

That first afternoon in Kaliningrad Hotel, while taking a shower, we discussed what we wanted to do that evening. Natalie washed her hair as I suggested a visit to the Immanuel Kant Museum. I was double-majoring in German and philosophy, so seeing Kant's manuscripts and personal belongings was akin to a teenager in a rock band going to Père Lachaise Cemetery to graffiti Jim Morrison's grave.

Immanuel Kant lived in Königsberg his whole life, leaving only once in order to attend his father's funeral. Somehow this grand Germanic figure survived the Soviet ideological cleansing, and in recent decades, Kant has come to be a major point of pride for the people of Kaliningrad. Kaliningrad University has been renamed Kant State University, and the cathedral that houses the museum dedicated to his life and works is perhaps the best-kept building in the entire *oblast*.

Kaliningrad is not like the famous Eastern European cities. It lacks the regal lion-headed façades and beautifully crafted bridges of Prague; can't boast the bohemian charms of Krakow's street musicians and gypsy palm readers—no Danube Promenade of Budapest. I don't mean to suggest that the city is entirely without charm. Kaliningrad has its share of verdigris statues and cobblestone pathways, but it truly distinguishes itself from its neighbors in unexpected and unenviable ways.

Firstly, the Kaliningrad *oblast* is the world's largest producer of amber. In shops everywhere you can find amber necklaces, brooches studded with amber, rings sporting oversized chunks of the yellowy-brown stuff. (I confess to buying a silver chain necklace with one delicately cut piece of amber for Natalie, a memento of our time together.) The amber mines, along with the export of the substance, account for much of the employment in this depressed region. To this day, when I see a piece of amber at a jewelry shop I nearly buy it, hoping in the pitying way of the privileged that some portion of my money will make it back to Kaliningrad and improve the lives of the people there.

The Kaliningrad *oblast* also boasts the fastest growing rate of AIDS in Europe. It is hard for Americans to understand the ignorance many Eastern Europeans show on the subject. This is because, as usual, we are taking for granted the privilege—both in terms of economic and informational wealth—in which we live. When, during the '80s and '90s, the American Congress okayed billions of dollars in AIDS awareness and

prevention programs, when our celebrity actors, authors, and musicians were doing benefits to raise national understanding of the disease, the Soviet Union fought to cover up the existence of the disease, worried that it would cause too much unrest in an already failing state. And since the fall of the Soviet empire, with the attendant economic collapse, there has been little improvement in the situation.

But walking in the Kant Museum, you can almost pretend that the dirtier outside world isn't there. The spotless, white walls and the intricately carved bust of Kant stand in belligerent relief against the backdrop of Kaliningrad. Natalie and I walked around the museum, pausing to take in a painting of Kant or a glass-covered manuscript of his. Natalie walked beside me, holding my hand. Seeing the sway of her dress made me wonder whether there was a secluded bathroom somewhere in the museum—but I squelched the thought, the way a devout Christian might refuse to have sex in a cathedral.

Kant made many contributions to the world of philosophy, but perhaps his most famous was the ethical proposition known as the categorical imperative, which states, roughly, that one ought to act in any given situation only in such a way that one would be willing to see that way of acting become universal law. It invites the question of whether it would be permissible for everyone to act in such a way. It seems clear that, according to Kant's ethics, engaging in unprotected sex (except in purely monogamous relationships) is unethical. If 100 percent of people practiced unsafe sex 100 percent of the time, the social and personal repercussions would be catastrophic. And so, thus does the patron philosopher of Kaliningrad condemn us from the grave.

How many times have I had unprotected sex? It's an uncomfortable question. Especially if you were raised hearing Magic Johnson warn that it only takes once to get AIDS and that you're sleeping with everyone your partner has ever slept with (which always brought forth orgiastic images for me I'm sure he did not intend). Engaging in unprotected sex is an act akin to drunk driving, sharing needles, playing Russian roulette—we all agree that it's dangerous and, if we take the Kantian view, unethical as well. But, just like drunk driving (if not sharing needles and playing Russian roulette), far too many of us do it.

According to the Santa Cruz-based public health research organization ETR, 48 percent of sexually active teens do not use condoms; that's here

in America, the country where billions are spent in awareness and prevention, the nation of Magic Johnson and AIDS awareness concerts. And the BBC in 2001 reported that 43 percent of Britons used no form of protection, a percentage not much different than most Western European countries. Just try to imagine how such statistics would read (if reliable ones were to exist) on the citizens of Russia—where the very existence of AIDS was covered up and, later, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, there was little money for awareness programs. There are cases of HIV-positive Russians continuing to have unprotected sex because they believed that needles were the only way to contract the disease; or just the opposite, continuing to share needles thinking that it was entirely safe, but rigorously wearing condoms to protect uninfected partners.

To properly illustrate the rampant lack of public information on the subject of AIDS in Russia, all we have to do is look at the Clinical Hospital for Infectious Diseases at Ust-Izhora, just outside of St. Petersburg. There were numerous articles published in St. Petersburg newspapers in the early '90s demanding that the hospital be relocated to distant Siberia. Claims that everyone in nearby neighborhoods of St. Petersburg would be infected were rampant and led to the temporary closure of the hospital.

And one more case, an unimaginably sad one: In the Kaliningrad General Hospital, in 1998, an entire infant ward was infected with HIV because the nurses reused the same needle to administer basic vaccinations. The lack of resources the medical professionals were (and still are) forced to endure, along with a general cultural failure to recognize the dangers of HIV/AIDS led to this dark chapter in Kaliningrad's history.

Natalie and I were having a merry time of it. We dined on *pashtet* (liver paté) and *osetrina po-russki* (sturgeon in tomato and mushroom sauce), along with other delicacies at what seemed to us humorously low prices. We drank brandy and lemon-infused vodka. We also, in order to have an authentic regional experience, smoked Russian cigarettes that tasted like burnt cardboard mixed with dirt and drank cheap vodka that tasted like distilled boot polish, both purchased at a kiosk replete with newspapers, pornographic magazines, and half-rotten fruit.

Our three days in Kaliningrad were much the same. After a night of dinner and drinks, followed by dancing at a club where kids bought and sold black opium in the bathrooms, we'd end up back in our hotel room

drunk, sloppily taking each other's clothes off and engaging in an act that we were educated enough to know the dangers of. But each time I entered her and felt her warm pressure against me, whatever worries I had were perfectly absent.

We didn't discuss what we were doing. Maybe we were . . . who knows? I almost wrote that we were trying to be closer, maybe even trying to get pregnant in order to have an excuse to end up together—which I suspect we both secretly wanted—but that would be projecting a present-day explanation on the inexplicable past. I won't pretend to know what was happening unconsciously.

We can almost absolve Russians of their careless behavior due to their lack of information on the subject of STDs (though I would point out that Soviet propaganda never tried to convince them that unprotected sex didn't lead to unwanted pregnancies). We westerners, however, with our awareness programs and comparatively free media have no excuse. So why do roughly 50 percent of sexually active westerners use no form of protection (and I imagine that much of the other 50 percent surely slips up from time to time)? At first glance, there seem to be two main reasons—the conscious seeking of a more pleasurable experience and the delusional belief that *it* won't happen to *us*. But that can't be all there is to it. Do we humans, no matter our social or political situation, love transgression to the point that we'll risk our lives for its sake? Is it that without risk, there can't be any meaning in an action? But all that strikes me as too blithe to be fully true. There has to be more, doesn't there?

I'm reminded again of Kant, of perhaps his most famous quote: *From the crooked timber of humanity no straight thing has ever been made*. That's as close as we'll get to an explanation.

The train ride back to Wrocław was relaxing. Natalie fell asleep against my shoulder as I stared out the window, thinking of nothing in particular, but mulling over all we'd seen and done in the past few days. I touched the cool glass of the window and tingling gooseflesh raised up on my arms. I felt close to Natalie and—as was my wont at that time in my life, a time filled with travel and adventure-seeking—let myself become self-absorbed, solemn, and pensive. Here I was in a train coming back from a part of Russia none of my American friends had even heard of,

with a German girl with whom I might be in love leaning her body against mine. I looked out the window as we careened past dusk-hued buildings and calligraphic trees, and savored the press of Natalie's breasts against my side.

Back in Wrocław, we fell directly asleep, exhausted from the travel, but in the morning, I woke to Natalie kissing my face. As we kissed—our hair tangled and our breath thick with sleep—I felt like a primitive man, in the cave of my room, and I'd found my mate and the outside world didn't mean a thing. But as I rolled on top of her, I remembered the condoms in my desk drawer. I didn't want to wear one, but I knew they were within reach; and out of respect for Natalie, or some unproud sense of chivalry, I grabbed one. She didn't stop me from putting it on, but the eagerness left her face as I tore open the wrapper. The latex was a separating barrier as I slid inside her. When we were done, I threw the filled condom in the trash, where it lay like the carcass of some alien or undersea creature, or the discarded skin of a reptile.

I cooked breakfast, which we ate at the kitchen table, wearing only t-shirts and underwear. As I placed the food on the table, I looked at Natalie's bare legs, sloppy shirt, mussed hair, and I was able to recapture some of the joy I felt while we were in Kaliningrad. We ate fried eggs and *kielbasa* cooked in onions and cabbage and washed it all down with large glasses of milk. It wasn't the rich cuisine we'd stuffed ourselves on in Kaliningrad, but it was hearty and comforting, a more practical continuation of our gluttony.

Her train left that afternoon, and we felt the weight of her departure already; everything we said and did suffered under its inevitability. We went into town and looked in shop windows, stopped for coffee two or three times just for something to do. I told her I had a break coming up and even though I didn't really have the money, I'd try to make it to Stuttgart to visit her. We reminisced about how we'd met in Greensboro, North Carolina, of all places, and how we used to dance to bad hip-hop music at a local bar. "I was surprised," she said. "You didn't look like the kind of person who would dance." Talking about how we met, years earlier, reminded me that we likely wouldn't see each other again for years.

We didn't talk about the possible consequences of our time in Kaliningrad, didn't discuss what we would do if she was pregnant, didn't question our assumption that neither of us was diseased. (Luck would

privilege us, and there would be no pregnancy and no diseases, but luck is no absolution.)

When it was finally time for her to leave, I walked her to the train. We hugged goodbye. Her train pulled slowly out of the station with a creak of cold metal. I walked the two miles back to my apartment instead of taking the tram. I tried to think of my semester project, but every thought of Kaliningrad led to thoughts of Natalie. I wish I could report that I was thinking about how stupid we'd been, or that I felt guilty for our carelessness, but all I could think was how empty my apartment was going to be without her, and that I regretted that morning, regretted ending our reckless honeymoon.