

Civic affairs matter, unlike under Soviets

Oregonian, The (Portland, OR) - Thursday, June 19, 2008

Author: Gosia Wozniacka, The Oregonian

Civic affairs matter, unlike under Soviets

There is a story Lyubov Tsinovkina has carried since childhood. It explains why so many metro-area Russian speakers --who number 100,000, according to community estimates --are isolated in their churches, seldom give their opinions in public, and are afraid to go to city hall or to vote.

In 1930, during Stalin's reign in the Soviet Union, Red Army soldiers arrived at the home of Tsinovkina's grandmother, then 17 years old. Her grandmother's father was a wealthy, independent landowner and an Orthodox priest who didn't agree with new Soviet laws. The soldiers executed him on the spot. His wife was deported to Siberia on a cattle train with other opponents of the government, and she died on the journey.

Their daughter, Tsinovkina's grandmother, survived only because she was not home when the soldiers came. For years, she lived in hiding. She passed on her colossal fear to Tsinovkina, who was not allowed to talk about the family's past wealth or the fact that they were Christians.

Theirs was a common story. Under Joseph Stalin, millions died of hunger, political opponents were murdered, religious leaders imprisoned, and ordinary people denounced, arrested and sent to labor camps. Even after Stalin, the Soviet state continued to be ruled by one party. Life was laden with censorship, propaganda and fear.

"Did we have civic engagement in the Soviet Union? No!" said Tsinovkina, who moved to Portland from Volgograd 14 years ago as a religious refugee. "Everything was decided by the Communist Party and its representatives. People would never dare say something because they knew they may go to jail."

Her new home is different, she said. Being part of Engage '08 and meeting local politicians made Tsinovkina feel safe. It convinced her civic involvement is not about pleasing the politicians.

"Here, we have discussion at a table; our ideas and opinions count," she said. "This has never happened in our lives before. Nobody in Soviet Union cared what we thought."

Tsinovkina plans to be more informed about her city. She has much to contribute: two college degrees (including one earned in the U.S.) and experience as a work force specialist at Human Solutions, where she works with the Russian-speaking community. A Slavic Coalition member, she sends e-mails to friends and church members, inviting them to learn and participate.

"We need to educate Russians. They think it is impossible that a city government can actually listen to them," Tsinovkina said. "My voice would like to be part of what is going on."

Gosia Wozniacka

ILLUSTRATION: Lyubov Tsinovkina Russia

Edition: Sunrise

Section: Metro East Neighbors

Page: 04

Record Number: MERLIN_12028372

Copyright (c) 2008 Oregonian Publishing Co.