

Psychoanalysis in Kazakhstan: A Division 39 Colloquy Reported by Albert Brok, PhD

The International Committee of Section I presented an exciting colloquy at the Division 39 Meetings in New York in April 2014 on *International Analytical Work: Conflicts and Surprises Crossing the Border*. The participants were Anna Kudiyarova, PhD, Director of the Psychoanalytic Institute for Central Asia; Charles Bonerbo, MSW, who taught in Almaty, Kazakhstan; and your reporter.

Our participating audience included Alan Roland, who has worked in and written about India and Japan; Laurie Wagner, a former Division 39 President, who lived in Spain; Ellen Gussaroff, PhD, a new Section I member with a lot of international experience, and many others, including PhD students from Eastern Europe and South America.

What follows is my synopsis of the colloquy in substantially the presenters' own words. We covered many topics significant to our increasingly interconnected psychoanalytic world. We shall begin with Anna Kudiyarova, who shared her experiences of both learning about and developing psychoanalysis in Kazakhstan, then follow with my own observations and surprises in teaching via Skype, and conclude with Charles Bonerbo's impressions of teaching psychoanalysis in Kazakhstan.

Anna Kudiyarova candidly shared her journey from being a teacher and college president in Kazakhstan to having an enthusiastic interest in and being an advocate for psychoanalysis, and along the way becoming a Fulbright scholar in the United States. In her words:

"When I learned of psychoanalysis in 2001, it was so exciting. But in my country there was no analyst, no institution for study. So I found a Russian-speaking American psychoanalyst in Boston. I came to the United States with many assumptions about American culture. For example, I prepared myself very thoroughly, starting with my clothes. I went to a market to buy cheap coats for my child and me. Why? I was going to an enemy country. I naively supposed that if someone would learn that I was a wealthy woman, I could be attacked and my daughter could be kidnapped. It was a big surprise to me that Americans are very open and kind people. [She spoke of her idealization of the United States as having a homogeneous psychoanalytic culture.] While touring, I was surprised that students at some colleges in West Virginia hadn't heard of psychoanalysis. I joked with them: 'A Kazakh woman brought psychoanalysis to West Virginia.'"

Anna went on to poignantly note: "My host mother in Newton, Massachusetts, became closer to me than my own mother. My host mother knew the difference between *psychiatrist*, *psychotherapist*, *psychologist*, and *psychoanalyst*. In my country, people hardly differentiated these notions. It is enough to pronounce *psych* to frighten almost everybody."

As part of her presentation, Dr. Kudiyarova provided a synopsis of the historically uphill battle for psychoanalytically oriented therapy in Central Asia. She said:

“In 1934, under the control of the Soviet Union, psychoanalysis was banned, including the Institute in Moscow. As a tragic consequence, psychoanalysis in Kazakhstan, a post-Soviet country, has become nonexistent as a method of treatment for mental disturbance. The population of the former Soviet Republics is not familiar with psychoanalysis. This [eliminated] the rich conception of human experience that psychoanalysis provides. Now, since the independence of Kazakhstan, there is huge gap in access to analytic theory to overcome. In the Soviet era, mental conflicts were treated as a ‘deviation from majority of the people’ or a lack of chemical balance. A personal perspective was treated as a ‘bourgeois tendency,’ rather than an expression of genuine identity. Now psychoanalysis is presenting the opposite: the individual versus the social perspective; the personal point of view versus social laws.”

Dr. Kudiyarova also shared information perhaps not well known in the United States:

“The incidence of depression and anxiety within the population of the Central Asian region including Kazakhstan has increased significantly over the past number of years as a result of the inability of the population to adapt to the radical changes to their lifestyles after the dissolving of the USSR. This often results in people feeling isolated, helpless, alienated, depressed, and suicidal. According to World Health Organization data for 2010, Kazakhstan has the third highest rate of suicide in the world. Moreover, Kazakhstan wins first place among twenty-four countries in the European region for suicide rates in girls of fifteen to nineteen years.”

She went on to suggest that:

“Kazakh people seem to keep their problems internalized, because they feel the need to be in complete control of their own lives, which ironically, depending on the severity of their illness, they are certainly not. This ideology and culture is strongly embedded in the people of Kazakhstan, and forestalls the progress of psychoanalytic understanding.”

Speaking of culture and understanding, I (Albert Brok) had the following surprise during my teaching Kazakh students via Skype. The class of 20 was highly motivated, did the readings, and asked creative, incisive questions. I taught in English, and there was an adept interpreter. As we proceeded, I noticed that she was translating my lecture into Russian. Naïvely, I asked, “Why aren’t you speaking Kazakh? After all, you are now an independent nation.” There was a buzz among the students. The translator, after a brief befuddlement, advised they had never thought about why they communicated in Russian. It seemed that unconsciously they remained ensconced within the language of the dominant Soviet culture, while suppressing the value of their mother tongue. This led to an extended discussion of “language imperialism” and identity, where a second language is used as a defense. Interestingly, when I asked which language they dreamed in, some indeed said Kazakh.

This opened up a lively discussion about how a second language can serve as a defense against the affect that is encoded in the mother tongue (Greenson, 1950; Pearson-Brok, 1987).

Being bilingual myself (English-Spanish), I shared some personal experiences as well as some of the research on this topic. We discussed the importance of noting which language is preferred by bilingual patients, as well as analysts. Thus quite serendipitously we discovered a fascinating topic concerning cultural and genetic/developmental dynamics as related to language, in vivo in our teaching moment. At this point in the colloquy, many in our audience, especially Laurie Wagner, Alan Roland, and some of the foreign students now studying in the United States, contributed their own thoughts and experiences on the issue of learning in a second language.

Charles Bonerbo then shared the following reflections:

“I first met Anna K. at a couples psychoanalytic conference in New York City in the winter of 2010. Throughout her stay through April, I had multiple opportunities to meet with Anna. She shared her thoughts about the widening and deepening interest in and growth of the study and practice of psychoanalysis in her native country of Kazakhstan. I learned that she was the director of a fledgling but very active psychoanalytic institute and training program in Almaty.

“Not very long after Anna returned to Kazakhstan, I was invited to lecture about some topics on psychoanalysis to her students at her local analytic training institute in Almaty. I accepted the opportunity to present three live lectures, through Skype video, with the assistance of a well-versed translator, on three of Freud’s seminal papers, ‘Mourning and Melancholia,’ ‘On Narcissism,’ and ‘Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego,’ to fifteen eager, Russian-speaking, Central Asian students from her country.

“I found my experience very rewarding, as the twelve people on my computer screen, who were sitting in a classroom-style arrangement, appeared open, warm, and enthusiastic. Moreover, I found more than a few participants to be analytically keen and astute. Some of them, I was informed, had had some previous psychoanalytic training in various parts of the world and were eager to expand their knowledge base of psychoanalytic theory.

“Soon thereafter, Anna invited me to Kazakhstan to lecture and supervise for the annual Central Asian Psychoanalytic Summer Conference in Almaty, August 2011. I was told that I would be speaking to participants from Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, China, and Russia, all assembled to learn and listen about theories and techniques of psychoanalysis.

“With no hesitation I accepted her gracious invitation, but without a clue of what to expect.

“Kazakhstan! I had to have someone point it out on a world globe! As I got closer to making this journey, needless to say, my anxieties began to stimulate numerous playful adolescent explorer fantasies. They ran the gamut of seeing me as a Marco Polo, traveling by horseback or camel, through the last of the winding Silk Road, giving lectures in a yurt, surrounded by richly colored and textured carpets, speaking with nomadic women and men, not knowing what to expect.

“Although I knew my fantasies were exaggerated, before I had crossed the border of what I believed was a far-off ‘exotic’ place, I continued to imagine that the nomadic

culture that I was unfairly stereotyping and was about to enter would be far from the comfortable contemporary society by which I am thoroughly indulged. Moreover, as far as the world of psychoanalysis was concerned, I imagined that those whom I would lecture would have at best a rudimentary understanding of the theories and concepts of psychoanalysis.

“My fantasies were quickly corrected on both counts.

“After a grueling sixteen-hour flight, I stepped tiredly onto the tarmac and saw before me a thoroughly contemporary international airport, with spacious areas hosting jets from Eastern Europe, Russia, and numerous European countries. Soon thereafter, I was picked up by two young Asian gentlemen (one was Anna’s son), dressed in designer jeans and buttoned-down collars, and I was driven in a brand-new American jeep from the rural outskirts toward the downtown area of Almaty. As we drove down the two-lane highway, my initial fantasies of a more rural, agrarian society, resembling that of a dusty Midwest American landscape, started becoming fulfilled. At one point, our car had to stop to allow a herd of goats to pass. My young drivers shouted something in Russian to the herder, who shouted something back to them. The young men laughed, and we waited patiently as the goats passed. At this point, I wondered if this was a preview of what to expect.

“However, as we traveled closer to our destination, the dusty two-lane highway suddenly opened up into a four-lane superhighway with numerous trucks and cars of all types, new and old, speeding purposefully toward their destinations. For a brief, disappointing moment, I felt that I was back on the Long Island Expressway with the other commuters. I momentarily wished to be back with the goat herders. As my young drivers, who were now listening to contemporary rock and roll on their radio, sped along the highway toward downtown Almaty, the landscape became increasingly urban, with high-rise apartment and office buildings densely filling in what was previously a rural stretch.

“As we crossed into the city of Almaty, formerly the capital of Kazakhstan, we passed by an enormous, contemporary, sculptured arched gate, with an array of fountains and lights, welcoming us in Russian to Almaty. As we drove through the streets of this compact but bustling metropolis, it became quickly obvious to me that I had landed in a very contemporary, developing modern urban place, with streets lined with restaurants, bars, and coffee shops. It was clear to me now that I would not be trekking down the Silk Road on horseback. In fact, Almaty possessed all the amenities that, for better or worse, we have grown to expect in the West. Indeed, at one point I had imagined that I was back in one of the outer boroughs of New York City amongst the Russian-speaking population.

“Nevertheless, in the city of Almaty I found a rich mix of old and new, traditional and contemporary, often adjacent. There are ancient mosques and Russian Christian Orthodox churches with distinct architecture, as well as modern office buildings, hotels, high-end restaurants, and clubs. Moreover, I was struck by the ethnic diversity. There were native Kazaks along with Mongolians, Eastern Europeans, Koreans, Chinese, Russians, and Orthodox Jews.

“My anxieties were allayed a bit after experiencing the warmth and openness of my host family in their contemporary, ranch-style home. But as I got closer to the time that I

would be meeting the participants of the conference, my anxieties again quickly rose again, contributing to a defensive, skeptical anticipation regarding those whom I would be teaching about aspects of psychoanalysis. I was still unsure what to expect.

“The next day, my fears were dissipated as I was introduced to my translator, who had a copy of Winnicott’s *Home Is Where We Start* on the back seat of her open-air Jeep Cherokee. I reached over for the book and asked, ‘Is this yours?’ She replied, ‘Oh, yes, do you know it?’

“The next four days of teaching, supervising, and consulting at this conference were pure joy. I had the opportunity to experience fifty-eight intellectually hungry students who were astute and possessed a depth and breadth of the understanding of the concepts of psychoanalysis, from Freud to Klein, Winnicott, Kohut, and contemporary psychoanalysts. Moreover, their enthusiasm to learn more was energizing. My students’ questions and discussions were nothing less than what I would experience in a typical class of candidates in a psychoanalytic training institute in the United States. Their questions, asked both in Russian through an interpreter and in English were sophisticated and astute, ranging from technical questions of working with countertransference to how to differentiate from Oedipal and Pre-Oedipal defensive organizations.

“Overall, I experienced a warmth and enthusiasm in my host country of Kazakhstan that widened my perceptions and understandings of Central Asia and what as psychoanalytic educators and psychoanalysts we can offer this region to assist them in their quest for deeper knowledge of p

The colloquy ended with a pleasant surprise. Anna gave all the panelists gifts of traditional Kazakh garb, which we can be seen wearing in the photo above.

References

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