

## "LOST IN TRANSLATION"

or

"Breakfast in Vitebsk"

Secretary General's Speech to the General Assembly of YMCA Europe 2008

Litomysl, May 1<sup>st</sup> 2008

It was an early morning in Vitebsk, Belarus, the hometown of Olga Lukina, our Executive Committee member and one of my absolute favourite painters, Marc Chagall. He is unfortunately dead, but Olga is fortunately very much alive. I was travelling together with Sasha Artuschenko and Michal Szymanczak. This sunny morning in Vitebsk I was hungry and wanted breakfast and my two companions, although very much alive, were sleeping, and therefore of no much use for me as translators. I went down to the restaurant where everybody did their best to ignore me, or rather to pretend that I did not exist. It is interesting in how many ways you can ignore someone. They knew that I was a foreigner and did not want the complications of even trying to communicate with me. They were not unfriendly, rather a bit uncomfortable. We had no languages in common.

An hour later my companions came down and stared at me with open mouths. There I was, happily smiling surrounded by the chef and two very friendly waiters, enjoying a superb breakfast including orange juice, fried eggs with delicious bacon, beans, tomatoes, fresh coffee, toast, jam, honey. They just stared at me and asked how I had managed? I just showed them my serviette where I had made a beautiful naive painting of my breakfast and even added a flying goat in the style of Chagall. Both I and the staff of the restaurant were hilarious about skipping language and having much more fun.

Some years ago I told the story about my bus ride from Budapest to Kaloz at the Lake Balaton where I was to meet with the local YMCA leader, a priest. The bus came twenty minutes early, and the bus driver did not have the courage to approach me, so together with his mother in law and wife I ended up at their farmhouse deep in a Hungarian forest with the big bus. It was ice cold and I wanted to survive, so I did everything possible with body language to explain where I should go. They laughed and did not understand until I was kneeling around their courtyard and they understood POP! Priest! For me that has become the kneeling language - you signalise that you need help, and that is one of the best ways to communicate in a new situation where credit cards and mobile phones will not help you.

Sometimes the two words "thank you" is lost in translation. Let that not happen today. I want to sing a love song to you; I want to share my happiness with you and my gratefulness over all the gifts, support and resources we were given last year and the years before. I am doing something very dangerous, and I know it is dangerous. I want to mention a few of you, and I will forget at least one important donor and afterwards I shall be severely punished. It is almost as dangerous as to hold Holy Communion in an ecumenical family as ourselves. I miss that. And sometimes I miss mentioning by name all those who carries this important work, and today I want to do that, and please forgive me when I forget you.

Westpfälische Landeskirche is very difficult to write in reports, but they are famous with us, because over many years they have given us may be two to three hundred thousand Euros for development of new YMCAs in the East. Horyzon from Switzerland is keeping us going in Balkan, Y Care gave us 120 000 Euros a few years ago for Balkan. Swedish SIDA and Children of the World organised by Swedish Y have both helped us enormously in Russia and Ukraine and Belarus and other places. Global from Norway has organised huge help for Russia and paid three years salary in Litomysl and took the responsibility for the finances of the Festival 2003. ICCO is a Church Agency from the Netherlands and facilitated by Dutch YMCA they have paid for Armenia and Georgia and now also for Nagorno Karabach. Vardan Hambardzumyan has done a lot of great fundraising and basically due to him we secured half a million euros for three years from ICCO, EED in Germany and HEKS in Switzerland, all church organisations. YMCA of the USA World Service has by far been our biggest and most generous contributor since 1991 when they started by giving us 1,5 million dollars, and since then several million dollars have been coming in to fund YMCA Europe Field work and fund the National YMCAs. YMCA of Canada has started to send resources our way, both to the MD work and to the Training Centre. Local Canadian YMCAs are engaging more and more. Weltdienst Germany - a solid contributor over many years, since the very beginning of the Eastern European developments you have stood by us. Gerhard Gruhler and his friends collected more than a quarter of a million Euros for our work for many years and continue to support Georgia and other situations. Last year the Scandinavian movements helped us together with Switzerland to solve our cash flow situation before the Festival, and YMCA England Movement Trust fund invested 14 000 Euros in the

fund raising for the Training Centre. Isn't this great? And I could continue. German YMCA offered 45 000 Euros as guarantees for the Festival. Many of you have bought rooms or beds or chairs in this Training Centre and helped us to end up with more than 70 000 Euros in a successful Fund raising last year. And please read the Working Documents and see the YMCAs which are filling the Field and Partner Groups with solidarity.

Did I forget Y'sMen Denmark and Y'sMen International? No, not at all! Especially here in the YMCA Europe Training Centre we experience the great contributions, especially from Denmark, but also Y'sMen International.

In addition to this we have been strongly supported by European Union and Council of Europe and indirectly by governmental funds channelled through your YMCAs to us. Or rather to the work we do out there. We should also not forget to underline the generous support from the Czech Government, the city of Prague and the city of Litomyšl. They have received us with vast generosity, and that is why we have a home away from home looking so tremendously beautiful, and why we can organise one festival after the other in the city of Prague.

This means a big thank you to you for all your generous sharing of responsibility. You have done well, the staff and volunteers of YE have done well. There is a lot to be happy for.

Between us there is nothing much lost in translation. All the people and institutions, which I mentioned in my love song, we understand one another and we believe in what we are doing together. We know the story and we believe in it. That is why we do not hesitate to invest time and money in it.

It is important for me to start here and remind ourselves how strong we are in these structures, churches, European Institutions, some Governments and the whole family of YMCA, even far away from us. I am so much looking forward to celebrate all of this at the Festival this summer. 6000 participants already registered and paid for, more than 400 from US and Canada, almost 200 from Latin America, with more than 100 from Mexico alone. 50 countries represented so far. Enormous! But please - we need your help to mobilise at least 2000 more participants. Can you do that?

All the money you have shared with us has been transformed into wonderful stories of young people having life changing experiences in the YMCA.

Then we pulled all these stories together and made the YMCA EUROPE Festival 2003 in Prague and had some magical moments together in the Letna Park, a great manifestation of YMCAs from around this continent. Thousands of new YMCA people got to know the story.

In the process of planning for the second big YMCA youth festival in Prague in 2008, we decided to take our story to the big companies around Europe and ask them to support this great endeavour. We hired a professional consultant with a very good track record from media and the world of sports and culture. He had mobilized millions in sponsorship agreements. He was very motivated to work with YMCA as he saw this as an honourable course. As we took him to different parts of the YMCA family, to Chicago and Albania, to Russia and to the world Council in Durban, the eyes of this man became bigger and bigger and he was just taken by surprise - he had no ideas that the YMCA was so big, so good and so full of amazing stories that he had never heard told.

With very professional presentations he then took our story to petrol companies like Statoil, to Nokia and T-mobile, to Sony Ericsson and Telenor and Airline companies, food makers, paint makers, and he got meetings with high ranking professionals in all those companies. They had very limited knowledge about the YMCA, and their message to us was that they cannot start a sponsorship partnership with an organisation they have to explain to their employees first.

It was pretty much like my breakfast in Vitebsk. We tried to paint a picture for these business leaders, but it did not give us the breakfast.

We were closest to get a deal with Nokia, helped by Finnish YMCA and most far away from one of the telephone providers which found us not cool enough and too religious. Because they were operating in Muslim countries, they could not be seen to support a Christian movement.

For all of us it was a really eye opening experience. We had an engaged discussion together all the National Secretaries from Europe last year and yesterday again. The Global Staff team reacted by inviting our consultant, Harald Hjort, to come to Geneva two times to explain the experience in Europe, and in fact this triggered a deep going process of self reflection and analysis in all the areas of the world.

Something has been lost in translation!

We are doing great things and creating fantastic stories about people having their lives saved and changed. And those stories are not told to the outside world. Harald calls the YMCA the biggest secret in this world and talks about a sleeping giant who needs to be woken up. He sees a huge potential for this movement, but also tells us that we need to start almost from scratch to build up the image of YMCA, the brand of YMCA, the strategic position of YMCA, outside of the family, so to say. Because remember: Inside the NGO sector we have a good strategic position. But not within the outside world.

We need a position there, my friends, because some other NGOs are there and they are getting strong support from Corporate Social Responsibility driven companies and institutions. We need to reach them with our story, which is probably the best story in the world, untold.

From Harald's report referring to meetings with an international telephone provider:

"Ms Ditlefsen asked why there is one logo for YMCA in Norway and another one for YMCA Europe. She thought it would be very complicated for a sponsor to relate to several logos, and she therefore predicted challenges recruiting international sponsors."

This SWOT analysis of YMCA from Harald's report I shall only comment very quickly and you can study it later:

### *Strengths & Weaknesses - Opportunities and Threats of YMCA Europe*

*Based on my experiences working with YMCA Europe and representing the movement towards a number of companies, I have made the following analysis:*

SWOT analysis of YMCA

#### *Movement Strengths*

- *Long impressive history*
- *Some very resourceful regions*
- *Millions of volunteers/members - Commercial Potential*
- *14.000 YMCA local committees create stories daily*
- *Triangle logo already in place*
- *Conglomerate of aid programs*
- *Flexibility and Relevance*
- *Youth Organisation*
- *Christian value based organization*

#### *Movement Weaknesses*

- *Uncertainty on our Mission*
- *Complex Graphic Image (logo program)*
- *Relatively low media presence -> low visibility*
- *Lack of branding focus*
- *Lack of priority on positioning YMCA*
- *Lack of fundraising experience*
- *Desentralised Management Structure*
- *Difficulty in selection of focus areas*

#### *Market Opportunities*

- *Economy is good in many markets*
- *Corporate willingness to support the "right" projects*
- *Increased focus on CSR in the business world*
- *Large "internal" marketing army*
- *YMCA network of well connected people*
- *Branding/PR skills can be purchased from outside*

### *Threats from the market environment*

- *Other NGO's will further refine their position*
- *Intra-organisational competition*
- *YMCA vs. national*
- *National vs. local, etc.*
- *Internal resistance against commercialisation*
- *Ethical objections (with whom can YMCA be associated)*
- *Increased competition in the sponsor market (Norway)*
- *Removal of established income sources (lotto) (Norway)*

What are we as an organisation? What is binding us together? What is the DNA of the YMCA? Let us try to analyse whom we think we are and see if we agree!

One of our weaknesses is: Uncertainty on our Mission.

\* **We are a Christian movement.**

But we are very different Christians, because we are ecumenical and therefore belong to very different churches and traditions and cultures. Traditionally we are Christian in different ways as well; some traditions put more of an emphasis on practicing Christian values, doing good without preaching too much. Other traditions would preach a lot, and see the mission of the YMCA as being very close to the church. Most traditions see the YMCA as a very open organisation where everybody are welcome, but where there are Christians in the leadership. This is not true for all parts of the world, in some YMCAs they have opened up for multi religious leadership of the organisation, meaning that people of other faiths can sit on the board of management. When I read the mission statement of the Festival at an international conference and it goes like this:

**REAL LIFE HAS NO BORDERS**

**THEREFORE WE COME FROM**

**ALL OVER THE WORLD**

**WITH A DEEP WISH TO**

**LEARN AND RESPECT**

**TO LOVE AND UNDERSTAND**

**SO THAT WE ALL MAY BE ONE**

**IN THE LIGHT OF JESUS CHRIST**

A lady got up immediately and asked how we could focus only on Jesus Christ and not the other religions? This means that in some YMCAs the Christian dimension is toned down in order not to discriminate towards people of other faiths. Even if most of the leaders of these YMCAs are as committed Christians and churchgoers as you and I, for them YMCA has become a tool for community development and important social and humanitarian services to all people without focusing on any particular religion. The spiritual dimension is then left to the churches or mosques.

\* **We are a youth movement.**

I think that as we all agree that we are a Christian movement; we are also a youth movement. Even so we work with families and adults and even elderly people in many parts of the YMCA. But around the world we look upon ourselves as a youth movement.

\* **We are an international movement.**

Nobody will be in doubt about this. YMCA is almost everywhere. The question is how much this international dimension impacts on our daily lives as YMCA leaders and members? In USA only a minority of the local YMCAs participate in any international activity. Still that is a big number, because they are so many. And in Europe I would say that the majority of local YMCAs have low international activities and the knowledge of international YMCA activities is not high. I do not believe that to be international is the highest priority in the YMCA; first of all we need to deliver our mission in the local environment. But more and more the relevant question is about survival for the future, a future where we will have to compete with very competent NGOs about interest, media coverage, funding from private and public sponsors and volunteers. Can we survive alone or do we need to unite more to become stronger. YMCA is a fleet of ships, but if this fleet is spread all over the oceans, people will always meet only one and one ship. If they carry very different flags, nobody will notice that this is a fleet of ships. So - can we sail closer together and can we fly approximately the same flag? To put it in consultant language: Do we need to strategically reposition ourselves?

\* **We are a Social movement.**

Worldwide the YMCA has always cared for people in a holistic way and tried to meet their needs in spirit mind and body. I shall not spend time giving you examples, but we have great social programmes around Europe, but even more so in other parts of the world. One of my passions has been to try to inspire movements with great social programmes to share them with other movements, inspire other movements to go in the same direction. It does not work very well. I do not understand why the YMCA Europe Social Inclusion group from time to time almost collapses under lack of leadership and energy. It is for me a question if we as a European movement should not sail closer together in dealing with migration, trafficking of women and children and general violence against these groups of people. We have a lot of expertise already in certain parts of the European YMCAs. In North America they have great social programmes to serve huge groups of people. This has at the same time grown those YMCAs very rich and resourceful. They build skyscrapers and employ hundreds of professionals and the turnover of all US YMCA activities annually is on the level of 5 billion dollars. The size is unbelievable, and they are far bigger than Red Cross., for example.

This leads me to the next issue, which is a question more than a statement of what we are:

\* **Are we a movement or an institution?**

I think we are either movements or institutions in the worldwide YMCA family. In Europe, as well as in Africa and Latin America we are predominately a movement, not many buildings, schools or sports halls or business centres. The richness is more the number of young people participating in group activities, the number of volunteers - people in short. The lack of buildings does not make us rich, but it gives us the opportunity to be flexible, to adjust to new challenges, we are mobile and easy to move around - the light troops. We have the old, good energy from group dynamism, which always was typical for the YMCA. It also helps us to keep a rich spiritual dimension in our YMCAs. The question is if we use the opportunity to be flexible and to pioneer with new programmes and to take up new and relevant challenges. The YMCA is for me at the worst when we complain about programmes no longer drawing the interest of people - why are people leaving us, why do we loose members and support?

YMCA to me is at the very best when we have the courage to leave the comfort zones and plunge into the challenges of tomorrow and pioneer new programmes and take up new responsibilities. I am convinced that the West has a lot to gain from studying the experiences in the East of Europe just now.

In North America and partly in Asia YMCA is an institution more than a movement. If you can offer childcare to half the city, you will need a big building and it will make you rich and resourceful. To improve the health of people you need swimming pools and fitness centres. I really wish that I could work out in a YMCA facility instead of paying to a private company. But we do not have them. A lot of the resources coming in are spent on social programmes. But the massive amount of buildings is a challenge as it is for all institutions, and lack of flexibility and adaptability is very dangerous. The YMCA fights with the tax authorities to demonstrate what is the difference between YMCA and other providers of fitness and health services? Why should you not pay tax? Youth work, group dynamism, volunteer activities, leadership training for youth, camps. Those are the answers to that question. As a movement we miss the strength of an institution. As an institution we miss the dynamism of groups of volunteers and youth. You see already that we are filling in for one another and we should sail closer together to become stronger.

**Are we able to agree on the DNA of the YMCA and express it in just a few words?**

Then the next steps for us will be to present the fleet under a flag which recognises us as one fleet. That is probably not possible - what do you think?

Our friends in LACA and in Africa Alliance are trying to do exactly that. And they invite us to cooperate. The invitation to you is together to break the language barrier to the socially responsible Business world and in stead of serving Breakfast at Tiffany's we shall serve Breakfast in Vitebsk with flying goats!

This is not about strengthening the brand of YMCA Europe, but the brand of YMCA in all National Movements, in Europe and in the world. It is a great potential for us, but we do not have the resources to invest in a good job!

Let me make a few things utterly, crystal clear:

*I do not invite us to try to change a movement of youth into an institution.*

*I do not invite us to destroy the diversity and do the same things all around.*

*I do not invite us to compromise with our Christian identity and values.*

I invite us to tell the story better to the outside world so that all of us can get more resources to do more good to more people in need.

Let me conclude with one example, which shows part of the potential not used in the outside world:

Let us invest in professional journalistic assistance to get the story about the Festival in Prague 2008 through to media internationally.

The story will consist of 8 pictures:

- 1 Thousands of Ten Singers will come to the festival and tell the story what this youth programme is doing to them to give self esteem, values and direction for life, sometimes even job opportunities.
- 2 Young kids from the football team of YMCA Kosovo, football teams with so many languages and ethnical backgrounds that the only word binding them together is peace.
- 3 A few Roma kids from the school in Skodra, Albania, telling the story of how it is possible to leave poverty and discrimination in Europe.
- 4 Teenagers from Belarus who have met YMCA through peer education about HIV/AIDS in the schools.
- 5 Teenagers from the streets of London who have been given new life opportunities in the hostels of the YMCA.
- 6 Teenagers from Georgia, Armenia, Nagorno Karabach and Azerbaijan who met the YMCA in the fantastic YMCA Roots for Reconciliation project .
- 7 Young immigrants to Spain being integrated in society through YMCA programmes.

Do you remember Beslan? The tragedy in the south of Russia where over 400 children were held by terrorists in a school for several days and many were killed in the shoot out? To the festival comes one of those kids who were kidnapped together with his mother and teacher. Several of the surviving kids have been to YMCA camps to try to deal with the pain and hurts from Beslan. Now they come to share their story with the rest of us.

Friends – do we have a story to tell?