

FRONTLINE
FEMINISMS
WOMEN, WAR, AND
RESISTANCE

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CHAPTER 17

The Kitchen Cabinet

JULIE MERTUS

Everyone loves a scandal. Few people understand how the global women's movement works. That's why you never heard about our remarkable dinners at The Restaurant in Huairou.

News from the women's conference was dominated by matters of a more sensational sort: Would Hillary speak? Do the Chinese know how to run a world conference? Will women attending the meeting be harassed?

Was there more? You had better believe it. These were, after all, 30,000 women activists from around the world. They were accustomed to difficult travel, getting wet in the rain, getting things done against obstacles. And they had plenty of experience creating unusual alliances in unexpected places.

In many parts of the world, being a women's rights activist means having your phone tapped, your mail read, your meetings infiltrated, and your children harassed. In countries without freedom of speech, it means holding meetings in dark flats, passing out photocopied brochures that will later be confiscated by police, being called into the police station and lectured after attending foreign or even local conferences. In countries at war, it means teaching girls how to read in bomb shelters, hiding your sons from the army, waving antiwar placards in the town square, and passing out humanitarian aid with refugee groups. In countries in poverty, it means lading out milk in the mornings, learning new farming techniques in the afternoon, teaching women how to operate small businesses in the evening, and fighting environmental degradation and structural-adjustment policies on the weekend. In countries riddled with

fundamentalism and national chauvinism, it means finding a way to join forces with every oppressed minority group in the struggle to survive.

The women's gathering in China was not what Western human rights groups expected. Representatives of such organizations, new to women's rights, stumbled about uncomfortably, uncertain where and when "real work" would begin. Amnesty International, for instance, had lagged ten to twenty years behind women's groups in Latin America and elsewhere. Unless women conferees attacked the repressive policies of China, the amnesty types presumed, we were either ill-informed or just plain stupid.

But most of us had not come to turn the World Conference on Women into a World Conference on China. We had come to unite for women's human rights. I had come to the NGO Forum from my Belgrade post to search out "unusual alliances." In Hanoi, many unusual groupings of women had come together pragmatically to get work done: lesbian-rights activists and Tibetans, Sudanese, Rwandans, Bosnians, and proponents of reparations for "comfort women," Islamic reformists, pro-choice advocates, and opponents of female genital mutilation. These seemingly unlikely combinations might have looked odd to an outside observer. To women working side-by-side for human rights, however, it was all in a day's work.

Or an evening's repast.

The Restaurant is a privately-owned Chinese restaurant that I chanced upon with a small group of women from "the former Yugoslavia" the day before the NGO Forum started. Seated in tiny rooms, secreted away in all corners of a haphazard collection of buildings, we were served cheap, delicious food by a friendly family staff. We never asked how much anything cost—no matter how much we ordered, the price was always the same. We couldn't find anything half as good, so we kept coming back, bringing in more and more friends. Soon the place was overflowing with regulars, all of whom were "related" to us in one way or another: the Russians in one room, Ukrainians in another, lesbian-rights activists next door, French musicians in a corner room, human rights activists in the karaoke bar, human rights educators in the long room at the back with the lizards on the ceiling, Spanish-speaking delegates in a room near the patio, and of course, always, a large group of "former Yugoslavs."

"I am really surprised that the women from the former Yugoslavia haven't had more of a presence at this conference," more than one journalist remarked to me over the course of the conference.

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"Oh?" I would reply, "Have you been to 'The Restaurant'?"

No one ever planned anything, but night, after night women dropped in for dinner from Croatia, Bosnia, Serbia proper, Kosovo, Macedonia, and, by the end, Slovenia. These women cared deeply about what was happening in their countries—but while the rest of the world debated peace in the Balkans, they joined in singing early pioneer songs over sweet-and-sour fish, teasing one another about which songs are now too "nationalistic." A Bosnian woman, perhaps too sad to add her own voice, usually listened somberly while the other women sang one song after another—Bosnian, Croatian, Serbian, Albanian, Macedonian, and, yes, even Yugoslav songs.

The owner of The Restaurant beamed, watching the scene from the doorway of the evening's "former Yugoslavia" room. "I am going to rename my restaurant 'Yugoslavia!'" he exclaimed. No one barked at his geopolitical incorrectness. Instead, a young woman from Belgrade borrowed a pen from an Albanian woman and scrawled a sign, "Former Yugoslavia: Caucasus." A Slovenian woman tapped it to the door. Women passing by from other rooms looked in with curiosity.

I already knew that such informal get-togethers of women from all parts of the former Yugoslavia were far from unusual. Over the past three years, I had watched these women meet with other women whenever they could. With telephone lines cut and roads blocked and transportation within ex-Yugoslavia unsafe, that chance was often provided by outsiders who paid for their trip to a neutral third country. But on those occasions, participants were obliged to do what their hosts wanted. At The Restaurant, where every woman paid her own tab from her own separately-obtained grant, no one was obligated to do anything. As a result, The Restaurant meetings ended with perhaps the most concrete, self-initiated proposal ever to arise from such an encounter: the beginnings of a joint declaration and a December or January follow-up meeting in Vienna or Budapest to plot future cooperation, "To Christmas together!" the women toasted. No one thought twice about whose Christmas—Catholic or Orthodox.

Next time women of the world unite, we should not settle for so repressive a host country . . . but we should definitely pick as good a restaurant.