

## LETTER FROM KUBINKA BY JOCELYN COULON



**After bouncing for an hour over what seem like endless potholed roads, our delegation of journalists and military officers arrive at the air force base at Kubinka, a hundred kilometres from Moscow.**

Members of the base command, there to meet us, are impeccably turned out. On a warm, sunny day in April, the Canadian flag snaps in the wind.

This military base is one of the Soviet Union's most modern; it was the first to receive the formidable MiG-29 jet-fighter, now the star of every air show in the world. In fact, Kubinka is the pride and joy of the Soviet military-industrial complex – the Red Army shows it off to all foreign visitors, and it's here that our group starts a week at the heart of the Soviet army.

The officers are especially friendly, they really like Canadians. Our two countries have so much in common they remind us: the climate, the landscape, the great expanses of territory, and hockey – the sport which has really brought us closer together. There's one thing that really separates us, however, and that's raw military power. The Soviets have a hard time believing that the Canadian armed forces are so hard up, especially when they see the smart, well-cut uniform of one of our colonels.

After the ritual tour of the military museum with its displays of feats of arms and gifts from abroad, we settle down in the beautiful dining room. The Soviet officers open the conversation about disarmament, but they are cautious when discussing Mikhail Gorbachev's reforms. In Kantemirovka, also in the Moscow region, the officers of an armoured division were more direct with us and said that they didn't believe the economic reforms would succeed. Here in Kubinka they're more

restrained; it's all in the nuances, and we have to read between the lines.

"The population of this base has recently been reduced by a quarter," says the assistant base commander, Colonel Vladimir Basov – a young officer, fortyish, with fine features and elegant manners. "We're really at the limit now and only just able to get our

work done," he adds in the manner of all military people who must come to terms with budget cuts. When we ask for figures, so that we can make comparisons, he says there are no statistics available. The political commissar, who goes everywhere with us, is silently pleased.

The Soviet officers ask us how the Canadian forces operate. Just what is our country doing for disarmament at a time when the USSR is withdrawing from Europe and keeps making ever more attractive offers to the West? Kindly, a Canadian officer outlines the structure and the role of the armed forces in Canada and points out that even though we have only 88,000 people under arms, our government is thinking of making further cuts to the defence budget. At first the Soviets are taken aback, but then they burst out laughing; their sympathy for our officers is obvious.

After lunch we set out to visit the installations and see the equipment. In a large hangar, a MiG-29

and two combat helicopters are lined up, with an officer standing at attention in front of each one, ready to give a technical description of his aircraft. These three men are veterans of the war in Afghanistan. They invite us to climb aboard, and are very forthcoming with their explanations. Returning to the reception centre we drive along one of the runways where we see dozens of fighters and transport planes with pilots and technicians swarming over them. The aircraft are polished to within an inch of their lives.

The Soviet army is the most powerful in the world, and in a Soviet Union where the commu-

Army is well aware, furthermore, that its power to influence events has increased during these past few months as the Kremlin has asked it first, to crush the Azeri revolt in Bakou, then, to restore order in Georgia and finally, to impose a blockade on Lithuania.

The Army rejects the notion that it might become a volunteer force, because the present system of conscription assures cheap and obedient manpower. Our hosts proudly tell us that the integration of many ethnic groups is possible – even though ethnic violence was responsible for hundreds of deaths in the past year. Not a word is said about the number of deserters, nor about the draft resisters, nor about the growing gulf separating the officers of European origin from the draftees – forty percent of whom are from the Muslim and Asian republics. The Soviet military would be happy to transform their institution, but they want to do it their way and in their own good time. All evidence indicates that the Kremlin is listening carefully.

Leaving Kubinka I carry away a strange feeling of isolation. It wasn't easy at that base, or at others elsewhere for that matter, to break down the wall which separates journalists from soldiers. In fact, the Soviet officers were more at ease with the Canadian officers than with the representatives of the press. There was even one general who, near the end of our stay, lectured us for a whole hour about the role of journalists, recalling the good old days when journalists had to toe the party line. If *perestroika* still has a long way to go in the Red Army, at least *glasnost* allowed us to probe a little into the hearts and minds of those who make it work. □

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Translation by Eva Bild