

1.2 From Russia with Love, Faith and Identity

Kamilla (interview), Russia

Nationality

I'm 41. I was born here in Russia, in Moscow, but it was the Soviet Union then. It was a very multinational and multi-ethnic country. And actually, I didn't know until I was six or seven that did not only have Russian blood in me. I have a father who would come and visit me – my parents were never married. And I thought, maybe it's just like this with fathers – they don't speak Russian well! That's what fathers do! But he was from Azerbaijan, one of the former Soviet republics. He's Muslim but he actually left Azerbaijan in the 50s. But I was born and raised here, in Russia. Russia is my country and I have never lived in any other country. But I wouldn't not always say I was Russian – it depends. It's important for me, actually, to mention that half my blood is Azerbaijani, because being Russian is a privilege in Russia, the same as being Anglo-Saxon is a privilege in the UK. And I think the voices of the underprivileged need to be heard. Sometimes when I know the person is a foreigner, they usually don't know what Azerbaijani is. But it's important. My girlfriend is English. I have a half-brother who is absolutely Azerbaijani. And he comes to fix her TV. And she once said to me: "A brown boy as your brother must feel unsafe on the streets..." And I was like, oh I never knew, we don't have this word in Russian. I never knew that, that Azerbaijani people are 'brown.' And then I started thinking, oh, we're brown. I'm also brown!

Sexual Orientation

I am bisexual, but almost all my life, I thought I was heterosexual. Now when I look back, like at my upbringing and just growing up, I realise I always had some crush on some actress, or a friend or a teacher. Teachers – they were a big thing. But in my lexicon, there were no words for describing this. I heard talk about lesbians, but lesbians... the perception of them was horrible. Women with very short haircuts! I knew that I was a bit on the autistic spectrum, not halfway, but still... and because of that, I felt that I was different. I've always felt that I'm different but I couldn't figure out where it came from. For pronouns, I use she, her and he, because I have never felt like a girl, but not a boy, either. So maybe I'm non-binary. I don't mind actually, how I'm called. It's more about my inner feelings.

Faith

I was born in an atheistic country, but it was the 80s. The historical events happened when I was two. I remember that my mum used to buy a kids' magazine for me and it had these bible stories. You had to make your own book out of it, just cutting the paper. And she used to make, I think, the whole Old Testament with pictures for kids and she used to tell me about God. She called him Bozhenka, which is like little cute God! So she basically told me this, I don't know, cuteish faith! This was during perestroika – it wasn't possible before perestroika. I was five, six or seven. Mum was a believer but she died when I was seven. Because of that, I was very angry – I was very angry with God, because of it. And I told him that if you do things like this, I'm not going to believe in you. And I began to be an atheist, a militant atheist.

My father was a Muslim, but in Azerbaijan, in the villages, in his remote village, they suffocated faith during Soviet times. His father died during World War II and their mother worked in a kolkhoz which is like a collective farm, where people share everything. So he was a Soviet. When

he was twenty something, he came here to Moscow and he lived there until he died – he lived all of his life here.

When I was an atheist, I used to read these books by communists from the Russian Revolution. They were very sophisticated, but with a great sense of humour. And not only was I an atheist myself, I would dissuade all my friends from believing. But when I was 14, I became a fan of a Russian rock group called Aquarium. Their leader was a kind of Russian Bob Dylan and actually wanted to look like him – he was a bit of a rip-off. He's quite famous. He's as brilliant as Bob Dylan in terms of his songs, but his voice is very, very special. But he was very interested in all forms and shapes of religion, but especially in Buddhism. And then when I was 14, I became interested in Buddhism, until I was 16.

When I was 16, I went to Vladimir, a small town in Moscow. I actually had a friend during this time and I was also asking her questions. She was an Orthodox believer, a Christian, and I would ask her some tricky questions, trying also to persuade her that Christianity and [Russian] Orthodox Christianity is a sham. Her priest even told her not to speak to this girl! When I went to this town, I had a friend there who wanted to play the *valtorna* (French horn). We saw that some American evangelicals, I think, were coming there to have some kind of event. And they had this French horn. We went there. And they had their usual... like first they play music, and then they ask the question, do you want to be prayed for? My friend, he raised his hand. They asked, do you want to be prayed for, do you have some questions. He raised his hand because he wanted to play French horn. So they came to him, and to me, because I was nearby, and they started praying. And at the same time, I felt that I needed to go to church and I needed to be baptised. At that time, I was thinking that it was because it was felt horrible, what they were actually doing. To this day, don't like this type of prayer where someone puts their hands on you and stuff. I think it was something during this event that got me pushing me back from then and it was what attracted me to the Russian Orthodox Church – I felt the urge to go to the Russian Orthodox Church itself, what was weird, because I had attended Catholic churches out of interest. I understood that the Catholic Church made more sense. But at that point, it was the Russian Orthodox Church, (that attracted me) and

now I understand that maybe it was like their prayers were heard and answered, because a non-Christian girl became Christian. God doesn't ask us about our preferences. And I went to Moscow and told my friend that I wanted to be baptised, and she didn't believe me! She thought I was pulling her leg! But that's how I came to be a member of the Russian Orthodox Church. I was 16 at the time.

I got baptised. My friend was from the traditional Russian Orthodox Church and there were different movements, ways, in the Russian Orthodox Church. But my friend went there, and I tried to be part of it. But it was very difficult. There were lots of traits in the church that appeared to be more from paganism. There was lots of praying to icons, celebrating days of saints, but not praying to God or to Christ. The name of Christ wasn't mentioned at all. But I still tried to put myself into this box, because my friend was there, but it was very hard. I was there for five or six years, but I just broke, because my understanding of the world and of God, of the logic of the world, just couldn't align with the mainstream orthodoxy. So I started to look for something else and I found more liberal orthodox churches.

The main thing that was tough was how the church treated human beings. They considered some people as non-important and you could treat them however you liked, demanding many things from them but giving nothing back. This was the main thing, but it was many other issues, too.

It was the senseless things, like in order to take communion in the Orthodox Church, you need to fast for four days during the week, not eating anything like animal products. You need to read, I think, 150 pages of prayers, not in the Russian language, but in a language more similar to the Bulgarian language or other southern Slavic language. You mustn't eat anything before communion. There are lots of these things that don't make much sense. So it was hard and I didn't hear anything about Christ. The further I have gone in my faith journey, the more I understand that he needs to be the centre – he needs to be. He isn't, not in the sermons, not anywhere.

So I started to look for something else and I found the church which Misza Czerniak attended all his life before leaving Russia. His father

used to do catechism classes there and the recordings were online and I realised this is the faith, this is the God that I believe in, the one he was talking about. Also this church did lots of charity work, and that was important to me, because the churches that I used to go to didn't do anything. But this church had a kitchen for homeless people a few times a day, where 400 people would come on a Wednesday and Friday. I wanted to be part of that. And so I started to go there and I met my future husband – my now ex-husband – at this kitchen. His twin brother was actually organising this soup kitchen.

I met him and we started dating. I met him when I was 26 and we got married when I was 28. I didn't date much before him, I think I only had one or two boyfriends. I think I'm demisexual. For me, to have any kind of romantic relationship is difficult, let alone a sexual one.

I was very jealous of him. At the time I thought it was because I was a jealous person, but now I think it was maybe because I didn't believe in our relationship, deep deep down. And he was stupid enough to tell me, when we started dating, that he used to like a girl in our church. He told me about her, and I'm very resourceful when I need to know something, so I figured out who this girl was. So it was difficult for me to attend church. Also, his brother and he were sort of famous people in the church, because they were twins, they were ginger, they were very smart and kind. He was 41 when we married and everyone was very surprised that one of the [gives surname] brothers got married. So everybody just treated me a little bit as [just] his wife. I also started to have some questions.

I work in a children's hospice. Once in a class at work we had a non-binary person who was talking about the sexuality of disabled kids and adults. Then we also started talking about gender theory and about sexuality and gender being on a spectrum. It opened a whole new world for me – though it was opening something that was inside of me already. I always felt that I was a kind of strange person until I knew that I was non-binary. I always felt that I didn't fit, among my friends, among girls. But then I didn't fit in around boys, either. It was only when I knew there was such a thing as being non-binary – *oh, that's about me!* – that I didn't feel like some kind of creep. It was, oh yeah!

At the same time, I knew that the Orthodox Church doesn't accept any type of queer identity. I think back then I already knew about Misza and about his struggles to find his place in the Orthodox Church in Russia, because we had many friends in common. Actually, there were many, many, many things that were difficult for me in all my time in the Orthodox Church. For example, this thing about saints. They celebrate saints almost every day. It was nonsense to me. There were many types of prayer – there's a prayer to a saint that lasts for 40 minutes. It tells the story of a saint in the form of a song. There are many, many things that Orthodox people love and they enjoy it. I think in a sense it's a way of controlling people, because it sometimes occupies the mind space of a person. If a person needs to sing this song five times a day and read a hundred pages of some prayers, it means that the person doesn't have any bandwidth for anything else.

But the main thing that I want to say about the Orthodox Church, and why I didn't leave until recently, is because the first thing that is said to a person who enters a traditional Orthodox Church, is that there's no worse crime than to go to any other Christian church, even just to enter the church, even just to be in the building. These buildings don't have any spirit or their spirit is evil. Even if you go there just to watch, it has already done something to you spiritually. It's been ingrained in people's minds, all over the Russian Orthodox Church. And that's why, although I was feeling very ill in the church for years, for dozens of years, I couldn't leave it, because it's what you're told.

I'm actually a historian by training – I'm a history major. When I studied the history of religions, I was thinking, oh the Anglican Church, it sounds so nice, they're not so crazy as Catholics, they're not so crazy as evangelicals. It sounds very nice. But I couldn't even think about trying [to go there]. The Lutherans also sounded quite good in comparison, but I never even thought about it. So I think about five years before the war, I just didn't attend any church, because there were too many things that would forbid me from going to the Orthodox Church, and this indoctrination didn't allow me to go to any other.

But in February 2024, the war started and our church, the Orthodox Church, behaved horribly, supporting all that was happening. For me, it

was like this allowed me to explore other options. I was very angry and I told them in my mind, *piss off, I will go, I will find some other church*. Because when your country starts the war, the most important thing that you actually need is faith. It was true for many Russians. But they did not go to the church, because the church was behaving horribly. And I decided that if my church behaves in this way, it allows me to go and find something else. It was obviously God showing me that I was allowed, finally, to find something else. People either stopped going to church totally, or stopped and started inventing some other forms of spirituality, either finding some rare churches with nice priests that were normal, that would hate the war and everything connected to it. But actually, many of these priests were then abolished from the priesthood. Some of them live now in Europe. The priest from my home church, he's Italian and an Orthodox priest. He's now a priest in Paris, I think.

I started investigating and researching churches, and I was more inclined to go to the Lutheran church, just because the Lutheran church is Russian speaking in Russia. But I saw some kind of... it wasn't like a verbal support of the war, but something like we don't approve of our bishop, who was Russian-German and left Russia just when the war started. And they said something bad about him, so I thought, no, it's not safe. I knew that the Anglican Church in Russia is like visiting the Russian Orthodox Church. It was one of the rules that the Anglican Church in Russia doesn't do any evangelism and they always pray in English in order not to attract Russians. I knew that this was a church of ex-pats, and surely ex-pats are not going to support the war. So I decided to go to the Anglican Church, but almost at the same time, I got a cancer diagnosis, so I didn't go to the church, until I had finished my first chemo. Then I could just breathe out and start attending the church.

Back then we had a very nice English priest with an amazing wife, who was also like a priest to us. They were both British. I'm still at this church. This priest had to leave though, because now with the sanctions people can't travel back from Moscow to London. They have to travel for two days through five countries. They have relatives, kids in England, so they had to move. We had a year of interregnum, and now we have a

priest from India. He came a month ago. But back then, Father Malcolm was very supportive.

Then I was arrested. When the war started, I was very, very angry and I wanted to do something, so I just made some kind of banner, like 'No War' and I put it on my backpack. I also had a badge with a blue sky and a yellow field, resembling the Ukraine flag. But a person took a photo and brought it to the police and the police found me through face recognition. I was arrested and tried and Father Malcolm told me that if I went to prison, he would visit me in prison. I was just fined. All my friend chipped in, and actually I was sent three times the amount of money I was fined! I've never felt this amount of support.

I'm thinking about putting another badge on my backpack, because there is this law that if you reoffend during the year, after your first offence, you can go to jail. The year has passed already. If it was just for me, I wouldn't do it, but when I was wearing these badges, many people would come and cry. For people, it's important to know, because we have many, many people, they're the only people in their family, or in their workplace who are against the war. Just to see someone who is also against it, for them it's very powerful. It's the same with rainbow flags, because rainbow flags are often considered a symbol of some very scary international ideology.

I'm now with a woman, but I'm still married [to a man] in my documents, because it's difficult to get a divorce but I haven't been living with my husband for a year and a half, almost two years. At the same time that I started going to the Anglican Church, I started researching LGBT Christians, because I realised that this is my type of people. This was the community that I needed to find, because we share so many things. It was before the horrible laws, so I managed to find people online and to get to know them. I met my girlfriend in the church. She's English; she doesn't speak much Russian. We were doing gardening together. She's British, from Coventry. I haven't been to England but I would like to, though somebody told me the only nice thing in Coventry is the cathedral!

Sexual Voyage of Discovery

I had crushes on [female] teachers, I think it was at the beginning of primary school. But I thought, maybe I'm looking for a mother figure. That's how I explained it to myself. At the same time, this compulsory heterosexuality always surrounded me. My father married a year after my mother died, a woman from Azerbaijan. Although not Muslim, Azerbaijani society is still very traditional. So I was surrounded by that. But actually, when I look back, I was always friends with people who as grown-ups, turned out to be either bisexual, or lesbian, or transgender. But I was just thinking, I'm just grieving, it means nothing. My first crush, where I realised that this was a romantic crush on a woman, was when I was already working, when I was married. I was working in a hospice and I had a colleague who was very nice and unusual. You could tell that she was a lesbian. Even when I first saw her in a photo, I could tell. It was a very, very strange feeling for me, because I knew I had never felt like this towards a man. I felt that I shouldn't feel these feelings, because I'm married. But it was freeing at the same time. I didn't know why. But I didn't act on it, just because it was purely platonic. At that point, I started thinking that maybe I was homoromantic – bisexual or biromantic. Now I think that this demisexuality of mine doesn't allow me to understand myself, to know myself.

In the Orthodox Church, they just went on and on about how you needed to find a husband or wife. I didn't feel any attraction to my husband anymore. I realised that he was psychologically abusive towards me, and I had suffered from the beginning. He would say negative stuff about me and my family and the things I love and cherish, he would despise me for not being a virgin when we met.

For the first years we were together, we lived with his mum. She used to bully me and he never defended me. He always spoke in a very derogatory way about things that were very dear to my heart. For example, I like languages; I like the English language. I went to the English church and he would always say, this is a horrible language. He didn't like anything that I loved – and he was very vocal about it. It wasn't very nice. When

I realised that I was bisexual, it helped me to open my eyes and see our relationship as it was, and not as I thought it was.

After the [cancer] operation, it was obvious [that I was bisexual]. I can't imagine myself being with a man now. But at the same time, I know that there was a period in my life when I really fell in love with men. I can't just cross it out.

Queer Life in Russia

My girlfriend is safe in Russia. Russia is safer than people on the other side of the border think. For example, many people believe that our Prime Minister is gay, although he's never spoken publicly about it. My girlfriend is from a very dysfunctional family. Her mum was, in her own words, doolally. She was taken from the family – they used to live with dogs, on a soiled floor. She spent six years in care in some Anglican monastery that no longer exists and was raised by nuns in her formative years, in Coventry. She's also on the spectrum, more so than me, as well. She was given back to her mother; she was really a very crazy and very strange woman. But she was able to go to university and get an education degree, and when she was 25, she was offered a job in some country that she had never heard of, called Russia. She came here when she was 25 or 26 and she worked in a Russian-English speaking school first as a teacher. Then she did a nursery school job and was able to gradually build up her own nursery. It's English speaking. She's the main teacher and the owner of this small nursery. She says that she could never run her own nursery like this in England, because you would need to have some kind of support from the beginning. Because she's a business owner, she has employment rights, she has a work visa to be here. Because she doesn't own any real estate in England, she doesn't have the right to vote. She doesn't go back to the UK often, though she does have a sister somewhere near Birmingham who's deaf who she supports because the sister is disabled – if something horrible happened, she would go back for that reason. So she's totally fine with staying in Russia until she dies, we just need to figure out how to legalise her.

I think I am also happy to stay here. I realise that some circumstances may come up that force me to leave Russia, but if not, I am a children's hospice nurse and my patients, they don't go anywhere. They can't leave Russia. It's difficult for them to go to the countryside in summer, let alone change countries. There are other people that can't go anywhere and I think as Christians, we need to be near them – because Jesus didn't live in a nice happy country as well.

Ideal Church

I wouldn't say that my church is the ideal church, although it's nice – it's the nicest I could find. I believe that churches need to be inclusive, not only of sexual or gender minorities, but also of ethnic minorities and maybe economic minorities. The Soviet Union was very egalitarian and you can feel it to this day. Russia is quite egalitarian, compared with Western societies. For example, in our church, we are egalitarian in terms of ethnicities, because we have people from all over the place – but you can feel how people with more money are treated differently. That was weird for me, because it isn't like this in Orthodox churches – just because we are Russian and we are here.

Who is Jesus to You?

I think for me, he's my best friend, maybe, and someone I can rely on endlessly. Someone who can be with me when no-one else can be in the situation and moment, when no-one else can be near. He can handle it and he can do something about it. He's the one in whom everything makes sense in church and behind the church walls. He is meaning in human body.

What's the Best Thing about Being Bi?

In my experience – I don't know how it is in England [sic] – it's maybe totally different because the Russian lesbian scene must be different. But I notice sometimes that in lesbian communities, there is this fear of men, of all men, that can exist – and fear even of other women that deal ok with men. I think we can act as kind of bridges, because we can't show – but at least tell – lesbian girls that there are men that are worth talking to. Because of this, I think the LGBT community in general is divided. There are gay men that have their own culture and there are lesbians. I think that bisexual people and gender non-conforming /transgender people can act as kind of bridges that can unite people together.

There's an online community called Cheers Queers. It's not an organisation, but they have many talks which might result in movements emerging. I think now that when many, many LGBT people are outside of Russia, they can freely discuss many things that were silenced before, and bisexual voices are starting to be heard. There are other bisexual Christians in the queer Christian group I go to – and that's important, because many bisexual people feel that they do not belong and that they need to be silent about part of their experience.

What are Your Hopes for the Future?

I hope that people will be wiser in the future and will realise that many things divide us, but we didn't choose them. Nobody chose them. It's part of our history and our conditioning. When you understand why people are the way they are, you can accept the person as they are and we become closer to each other.

This chapter reflects the personal experiences, memories and interpretations of the author. Names and identifying details have been changed or omitted for privacy.