IN PROFILE

RACHEL DENBER

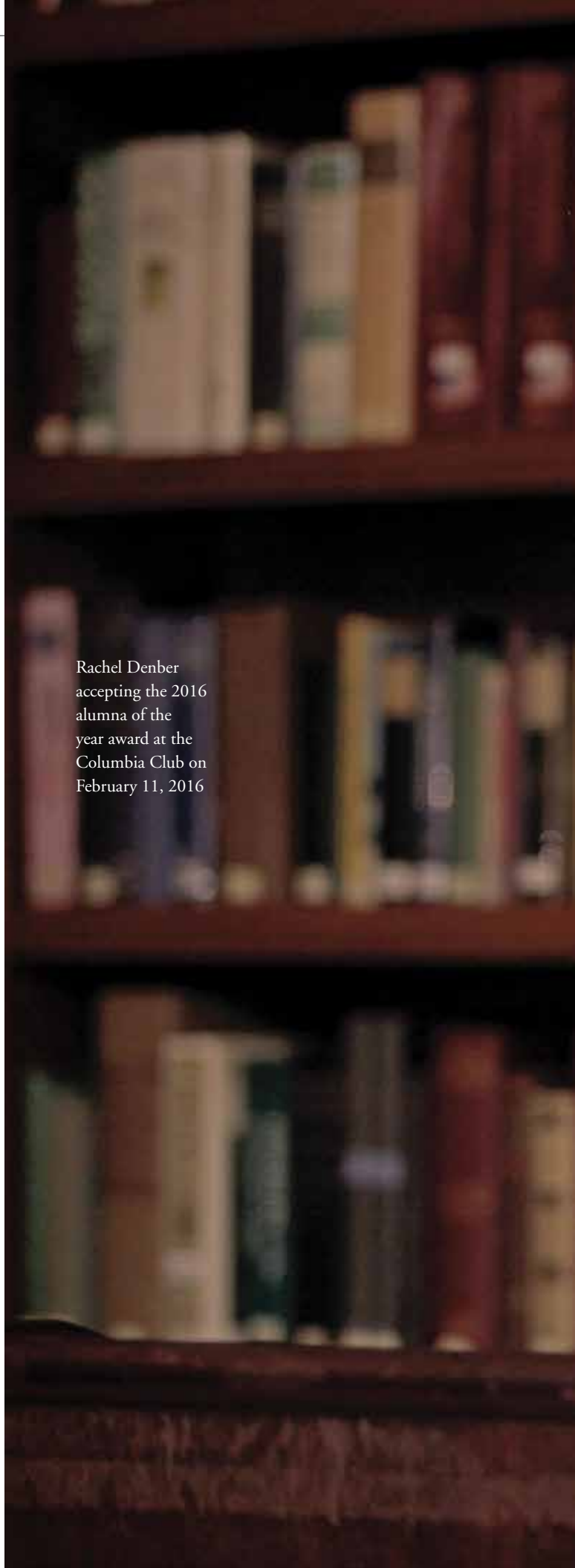
A DIFFERENT COUNTRY: PROMOTING HUMAN RIGHTS IN THE WAKE OF SOVIET COLLAPSE

BY MASHA UDENSIVA-BRENNER

In July 1991, a month before a group of hard-liners from the Communist Party of the Soviet Union attempted a coup to unseat its leader, Mikhail Gorbachev, Rachel Denber ('86) was hired as a research associate for the Helsinki Watch Division of Human Rights Watch (HRW). She would start that fall, and her job would be to investigate the human rights situation in various Soviet republics and to open the organization's Moscow office—the first in the Soviet Union.

It was an exciting and turbulent period. The Baltic republics had declared independence the previous year, and even the Kremlin's tanks were unable to stop them; nationalist unrest and calls for independence destabilized other republics; and, in June, Boris Yeltsin won a sweeping victory in the first open and democratic election to take place in Russia. When Gorbachev essentially dissolved the Communist Party in August, the world was poised for democracy to prevail in the Soviet Union. Denber watched the events unfold and wondered whether she would still have a job. "I was actually very worried they would tell me, 'We don't need a researcher on the Soviet Union anymore because everything is just fine,'" she says. But she started the position in September as planned (spending the first two months in the New York office and just missing, to her disappointment, the first international human rights conference to be hosted by the Soviet Union). "It only took five minutes to see how much work there was to be done"—the collapsing Communist system was devolving into a state of lawless chaos, and the Soviet republics were riddled with clashes and conflicts.

Denber, who is now deputy director of the Europe and Central Asia Division, will celebrate her twenty-fifth anniversary with HRW in September. We are in her office, located on the thirty-third floor of the Empire State Building. Dressed in jeans and an oversized maroon



Rachel Denber accepting the 2016 alumna of the year award at the Columbia Club on February 11, 2016

sweater, Denber is sipping Earl Grey tea from a mug adorned with a picture of Cheburashka, a popular Russian storybook and cartoon character. It is one of four mismatched mugs that she keeps on her desk near a half-empty jar of jam, an electric teakettle, and numerous, carelessly stacked tea boxes. "More *kipyatok*?" she offers, reaching for the hot water (she frequently inserts Russian words into English sentences). Six weeks after our meeting, the Harriman Institute will celebrate Denber as its alumna of the year. Humble and self-effacing, she is squeamish about the honor. "Why *me*?" she asks.

Growing up in Southern New Jersey during the 1970s, Denber was the only Jewish student in her school. Her parents, of Eastern European descent, supplemented her education with thrice-per-week Hebrew school ("You can imagine how much I *loved going*"). As a grade schooler, during lessons about the plight of Soviet Jewry, Denber learned of the Soviet Union for the first time. She wanted to know everything about the place, but her Hebrew school instructor would tell her nothing "beyond the fact that there were Jews there, and they lived badly."

Though the incident ignited an early, "deep-seated" interest in the Soviet Union, Denber, who completed her undergraduate degree at Rutgers, initially studied French. "I was enamored with French literature, French language, French this, French that," she says. In the summer of '82, after finishing her junior year abroad program in Paris, she took a bus tour from Finland to Leningrad. Brezhnev was still alive, and the group spent the days trailing

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Above: Denber *(second from left)* on the road from Tskhinvali to Vladikavkaz during her first human rights fact-finding mission, 1991

From left to right: Denber with colleague in Azerbaijan on the way to the conflict-torn Nagorno Karabakh region, 1992; Denber with the late Valery Abramkin, one of the first prisoners' rights activists in Russia, early 1990s; Denber on the way from Irkutsk to Bryansk, with Irkutsk human rights activist Aleksandr Lyuboslavski and friend, during a fact-finding mission investigating allegations of torture abuses by police, 1998

a "sweet" Soviet tour guide who stuck to a rigid script. "It was wild," says Denber, "because I was just some dumb kid."

Two years later, Denber enrolled in Columbia University's political science department to pursue a degree in the comparative politics division, where she immersed herself in the study of Soviet nationalities.[1] One of Denber's biggest regrets from that period (1984–91) is that she didn't go to the Soviet Union during graduate school. "*Of course* I should have done anything to get myself there," she says. "But I really lacked courage and initiative. You had to apply, be accepted; you had to put yourself on the line."

In those days, it was still fairly burdensome for political scientists to do research in the region. There were fewer grant-giving organizations, and research opportunities were limited to the archives—it was nearly impossible to conduct surveys and difficult to secure interviews, not only with elites but also with ordinary citizens. "As a foreigner, you were under suspicion and people were very guarded," Timothy Frye, a political science professor and former Harriman Institute director, whose graduate studies at Columbia overlapped with Denber's, told me.

Denber completed a master's degree and embarked on a doctorate. But her passion for academia soon waned, and she felt herself becoming "a terrible graduate student." She wanted to be on the ground relating to people but was in New York reading about other people's experiences instead. Then, in 1991, as the Soviet Union teetered on the brink of collapse—Gorbachev's glasnost policy brought openness, and thus discussion of the Communist system's failings—everything changed. "It was just this moment when there was huge demand from government, NGOs, and the private sector, and not that many people to fill it," said Frye.

It was during this period that Jeri Laber (Russian Institute, '54), founder and executive director of Helsinki Watch, decided to hire a Soviet Union researcher and open an office in Moscow. Denber, who had a long-standing interest in human rights, applied for the job; once hired, she did not think twice about leaving her doctoral studies behind.

On a cold, gray day in November 1991, Denber landed in Moscow's Sheremetyevo Airport for the first time. She was greeted at the crowded arrival gate, dim and hazy

with cigarette smoke, by an amicable retired couple related to the dissident and human rights activist Ludmilla Alexeyeva, now chair of the Moscow Helsinki Group and at the time a longtime consultant for Helsinki Watch. The couple drove Denber straight to a two-room apartment, secured by Laber with Alexeyeva's help, in a large residential building near Smolensk Square. The space had an official feel and a view of the Moscow River and the White House from the roof. Equipped with a laptop, fax machine, and laser printer, the apartment would serve as the inaugural Helsinki Watch office. It would also be Denber's temporary residence in Moscow, a city she fell in love with "at first sight."

It was an unprecedented time in history. A great ideological empire, closed to outside influence for seventy-four years, was opening and unraveling, and no one had any idea where it was headed. Just the year before, it would have been inconceivable to open a branch of a U.S.-based international human rights organization in the Soviet Union. But the opportunity was there, and it was up to Denber to figure out how to make it work. She started as soon as she landed in Moscow.

Denber had excellent command of Russian but no experience navigating the labyrinthine Soviet system. To help her, Laber and Alexeyeva recruited Alexander Petrov, a Muscovite computer programmer with a foot in the dissident movement, who showed up to meet Denber in the apartment's lobby on one of her first days in Moscow. "I remember thinking he was the calmest and most unshakable person I had ever met," she recalls.

The pair immediately set to work on registering the organization as a foreign representative office, first with the municipal government and then the foreign ministry. With the Soviet system eroding, the atmosphere was simultaneously chaotic—"you couldn't find things and you couldn't find people," says Denber—and extremely permissive. Seemingly simple tasks, such as finding a notary, could take all day, but a feeling of boundless freedom offset the frustration. "We could travel freely, talk to anyone we wanted," recalled Petrov, who spoke with me by phone.

The Internet had yet to take off, and each morning they combed five or six national papers for investigative articles about potential human rights abuses, which they translated into English and compiled into digests transmitted to HRW's headquarters. International calls, which Denber had to make almost daily in order to communicate with her colleagues in New York, were a complicated

From left to right: Alexander Petrov on the phone in HRW's first Moscow office, 1991; Denber and Petrov in the Moscow office, late 1990s; Denber in Moscow with the late Larisa Bogoraz, prominent Soviet dissident and human rights activist, shortly before the birth of Denber's son, 1994

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undertaking involving a switchboard operator and a lot of waiting.

As the public face of the organization in Moscow, Denber communicated with the media and found new contacts in the human rights community. She was an apt networker with sophisticated intuition and heightened emotional intelligence that allowed her to understand, and put at ease, whomever she was engaging. Petrov was amazed at how flawlessly she grasped the nuances of Soviet culture. "We thought of Americans as knowing nothing," he said, "but somehow, she knew everything."

During those years, Denber would take frequent trips to investigate and document human rights abuses in the former Soviet republics, which were plagued with nationalism, repression, social unrest, and armed conflicts. Her first trip, to Georgia and its autonomous regions North and South Ossetia, took place just two weeks after her initial arrival in Moscow, in December '91. At the time, Georgia was struggling to gain independence from the Soviet Union and fighting a separatist movement in South Ossetia, an autonomous region in northern Georgia. The result was a three-way skirmish between the Georgian, Soviet, and Ossetian military forces; a vicious anti-Ossetian campaign by Georgia's recently elected nationalist president Zviad Gamsakhurdia; and violence against ethnic Georgians in South Ossetia.

Denber would join the late Jemera Rone, HRW's pioneer expert on humanitarian law violations who had spent years investigating conflicts in Central America, on a fact-finding mission to document human rights violations committed against Georgian and Ossetian civilians by government and rebel forces from both sides of the conflict.

Denber on a fact-finding mission in the 1990s

Back then HRW did not offer the extensive research training it does now, and Denber trained by watching Rone, who conducted interviews through an interpreter.[2] During their two-week mission, the pair would interview seventy refugees, and about two dozen government officials, journalists, and hospital workers on both sides of the conflict.

Many of the refugees interviewed—Georgian and Ossetian shelling victims fleeing their villages in South Ossetia for Tbilisi, Gori, and North Ossetia—had been taken hostage for ransom. The practice (a major violation of humanitarian law) was a common means for both Georgian and Ossetian paramilitary forces to raise money; and the hostages were brutally mistreated by both sides—beaten, threatened, and sometimes even killed.

Denber will never forget the first interview she conducted on her own, with an ethnic Ossetian teenager who had been taken hostage by ethnic Georgians, then released. Denber was not only heartbroken on the boy's behalf, but she was also nervous that, in the process of taking his testimony in Russian and recording it by hand, she would misconstrue something he said. "I had this tremendous responsibility to get his story straight," she says. The day after they left Georgia, a violent coup erupted.

When Denber returned to Moscow, where she spent two days before heading to New York for three months, Gorbachev announced the disintegration of the Soviet Union. She flew out of the Russian Federation, a different country than the one she had flown into just weeks prior.

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In October of '92, Alexander Petrov accompanied Denber on a five-day, fact-finding mission to Yerevan, Armenia, to investigate the shelling of Armenian civilians and civilian structures by the Azerbaijani National Army and Air Force. The Azerbaijanis were fighting an Armenian insurgency in Azerbaijan's autonomous region, Nagorno-Karabakh, which had a predominately ethnic Armenian population at the time (the conflict continues to this day, and the mission was one component of the investigations into violations by all sides of the conflict). Denber and Petrov interviewed dozens of ethnic Armenian victims, refugees, doctors, and politicians, and, this time, Denber was responsible for the training. She listened intently while Petrov conducted his first interviews. Then, she pointed out his shortcomings. "Why didn't you ask this? Why didn't you ask that?" she would prod him. Initially Petrov was taken aback. "It was—how do you say in English—*annoying*," he told me. But he quickly understood the value of the details she wanted him to extract. When the time came for him to conduct an interview on his own, they were in an Armenian hospital. "It was evening, about five; the overhead light was on," he recalled. Denber pushed him into one of the hospital rooms, which contained about fifteen ethnic Armenian children injured by shelling attacks. "These children were maimed, missing limbs, and it was horrible. Rachel's method was to throw me straight into cold water and see whether I would sink or swim."

For the next five and a half years, Denber, who eventually became the Moscow office director, worked day and night alongside Petrov, both in Moscow and all over the former Soviet republics. The office was "a boiling kettle of activity," with "its own insane rhythm," recalled Erika Dailey (Harriman Institute, '92), who was based in HRW's New York office and often filled in for Denber in Moscow while she was in

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the field, taking over the office directorship while Denber was on maternity leave (Denber married a Muscovite in '93 and gave birth to a son in '94). People stayed on the couch, constantly coming and going—friends, friends of friends, and prominent human rights activists from the Soviet era, most of whom had spent years in internal exile or deprived conditions. "They smoked, they were exhausted, their nutrition was horrible," Dailey told me.

In the mid-1990s, organized crime peaked all over the region—people were shot on Moscow's streets in broad daylight, and violence intensified in the former republics, particularly in the Caucasus. In the midst of this chaos, Denber was instructed to lead a member of HRW's advisory committee on a trip through the South Caucasus, where they would be meeting with various officials. The era preceded cell phones, so meetings were hard to arrange, with Petrov fielding some of the logistics from Moscow while they were traveling. Because road banditry was so widespread, particularly carjacking and hostage taking, they traveled from Yerevan to Tbilisi by train. But, as they approached the Armenian-Georgian border, they stalled. After standing in the station for hours, the advisory committee member, feeling anxious, urged Denber to *do* something—if they waited any longer, they would miss their meetings with no way of alerting anyone. She ran out of the train looking for a driver and eventually found

someone to take them. But, there was a problem. The driver, a nice middle-aged man who accepted a hefty sum in return for the favor, only had one arm. And the car was a stick shift. Denber had no idea how they could possibly make it, but they went anyway. Thankfully, the car was retrofitted for the man's condition, and the driver knew exactly what he was doing. (When a group of suspicious men motioned for them to pull over, he kept going without hesitation.) Somehow, hours later, Denber and the advisory committee member got to their meetings in one piece.

Courage is a pivotal requirement for human rights researchers, and Jeri Laber instantly recognized Denber's ability to adjust to complicated and dangerous circumstances. "She had a strong spirit, a good sense of humor," Laber told me. "And she never complained about safety problems or poor working conditions."

In 1997, Denber was promoted to deputy director of the Europe and Central Asia Division. She was attached to Moscow, and ambivalent about leaving, but she packed up and moved her family to New York. In the ensuing two decades she supervised the researchers working in Europe, Russia, and Central Asia, and oversaw the opening of field offices in Tbilisi, Dushanbe, and Tashkent, among other cities. She also continued to go on fact-finding missions, though not as frequently, and spent a significant amount of time in Moscow, which remains her second home (during our interviews, which spanned the course of three months, Denber visited Moscow twice—for a week in February and a monthlong stay in March).

Throughout the 2000s, after the Color Revolutions, and then the Arab Spring, inspired the fear of similar movements overtaking Russia, Denber watched the human rights situation there deteriorate, with media freedom taking a plunge, and the killings of journalists and human rights

From top to bottom: Denber with Petrov in HRW's first Moscow office shortly after returning from her first fact-finding mission, 1991; Denber with Uzbek human rights activist Umida Niyazova *(center)* and Harriman Institute National Advisory Council member Colette Shulman at an HRW reception honoring Niyazova, 2008; Denber at a Moscow press conference presenting HRW's *World Report 2013*

Harriman director Alexander Cooley introducing panelists at the Harriman Institute's 2016 alumni reception; *opposite page:* Cooley presenting Denber with 2016 alumna of the year award

activists becoming commonplace. Media is an important tool for human rights workers. "We document abuses in order to affect change," says Denber. "And in order to do this, you need to make the abuses public—to bring them to the attention of governments, the international community, and the broader public." For that, you need free media. But it has become increasingly difficult to publicize human rights abuses in Russia.

In October 2006, the journalist Anna Politkovskaya, who had been investigating violations in Chechnya, was shot in broad daylight outside her apartment building in Moscow. Her death was never properly investigated. Then, in July 2009, Natalia Estemirova, a close friend of Politkovskaya's who directed the Grozny office for the Moscow-based human rights organization Memorial (one of Russia's most prominent human rights organizations currently fighting for its survival against threats from the Kremlin to close it), was kidnapped. Ambassador Sarah Mendelson, a friend of Denber's from graduate school and a longtime colleague, was awakened by a frantic call from Denber (who knew Estemirova) the day of Estemirova's disappearance. Denber wanted her to get in touch with Michael McFaul at the National Security Council to raise the alarm. Before Mendelson could make the call, Estemirova's body had been found. "We've had colleagues killed, we've had colleagues jailed, we've had a lot of scary times," Mendelson told me.

Watching her colleagues in Moscow "fight for their professional lives" has been disheartening, says Denber. But despite the dismal atmosphere, HRW has managed some victories in recent years. In the lead-up to the Sochi Olympics, for instance, HRW's Russia team spent two and a half years investigating the exploitation of migrant workers in the construction of the infrastructure. Abuses ranged from the confiscation of passports to the nonpayment of promised wages. After HRW, together with Memorial's Migration and Law project, leaned heavily on the International Olympic Committee, the IOC finally put pressure on the Russian government, which in turn investigated the situation. In February 2014, the government issued a pledge for wage arrears in the amount of $8.3 million. Another impact came in autumn 2014, after the organization released a report about the rights of children with disabilities living in orphanages, who are isolated, neglected, and subjected to abuse. In a surprise move, the Russian ministry of labor and social protections sent a letter to all the executive agencies in Russia responsible for children with disabilities living in institutions, summarizing the report's findings and instructing the officials to read the report and "take all measures" to address the issues presented. "It was a big high point with Russia in recent years," says Denber.

On February 11, 2016, Denber, fresh from a weeklong stay in Moscow, arrived at the Columbia Club for a panel (fittingly, on the topic of Russian media and propaganda) to be followed by a reception in her honor. She sat in the front row, avidly participating in the evening's question-and-answer discussion.

When it came time for her to receive the award, she shifted uncomfortably in her seat and, with a nervous smile, walked up to the podium.

"I'd like to think you're honoring me because you're honoring my organization and the movement," she said, recalling her days as a graduate student at the Harriman Institute. Then her face lit up, and her reticence subsided. "There is one thing the Harriman Institute did not teach me," she said, mischievously, and recounted an anecdote from her first fact-finding mission to Georgia and South Ossetia with Jemera Rone.

On their first stop, in the North Ossetian capital, Vladikavkaz, Denber realized that she had forgotten her toothbrush in Moscow. She naively scoured the "sweet provincial city" for a replacement. And, not finding one, tracked down a dentist's office. There were no toothbrushes there, either.

"But how can that *be*?" she asked an employee sitting at the reception area.

"*Devushka*" [young lady], the woman responded with a combination of weariness and contempt. "Don't you know where you've landed? You've landed in the *Soviet Union*." ■

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[1]While at Columbia, Denber regarded the Institute as a second home. She studied with Mark von Hagen, Seweryn Bialer, and Alexander Motyl, and wrote event summaries for the Harriman newsletter. In the late 1980s and early '90s, she took over editing *The Soviet Nationalities Reader: The Disintegration in Context*, a compilation of top academic papers on the Soviet nationalities question, published by Westview Press in collaboration with the Harriman's Nationalities and Siberian Studies Program in 1992. "It was the go-to source for trying to figure out which ethnic groups did what, to whom, and when," Timothy Frye told me.

[2]At the time, HRW was a relatively new organization, founded in 1978 by Jeri Laber and Robert Bernstein (president of Random House for twenty-five years) as Helsinki Watch, with funding from the Ford Foundation, to monitor the Soviet bloc's compliance with the human rights principles established by the 1975 Helsinki Accords. It was only in 1988, after expanding its activities to other parts of the globe, that Helsinki Watch evolved into HRW. The concept of a fact-finding mission was new, too—Laber established the practice by sneaking into Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Poland, Romania, and other former Soviet bloc countries as a tourist in the late '70s and early '80s to interview the dissidents there; and continued it through field work in Turkey in the early '80s, where she interviewed political prisoners and politicians, and in Afghanistan in the mid '80s, the first time the organization dealt with the investigation of war crimes.