



“Passage to St Petersburg”: the title of our cruise conjured up visions of opulent palaces, reached after gliding along Russian canals and rivers between banks of brilliant green birch forests, stopping off to visit ancient kremlins and monasteries en route. The vast amount of concrete used in the construction of the Stalin-era locks, triumphal arches and hydro-electricity stations came as quite a surprise; as did the lone bell tower of a church appearing out of the water of a reservoir, a poignant symbol and memorial to the 700 communities who had previously lived in the flooded area. The rural poverty we encountered in Goritsy was quite a shock, too. After seeing around a very ancient monastery in a stunningly beautiful setting a few kilometres away from our mooring village of Goritsy, we had free time to wander around the village. This consisted of a few wooden houses, most fairly decrepit although there was one new-build brick house. An old lady, bent double, hoed her small vegetable patch and we saw meticulously stacked wood piles with chickens running around them. What would young people do in a place like this? Were there any or did they all evacuate for education and then stay away, leaving the *babushki* to till the land for survival?

The daily stops on our cruise were interestingly varied: from the grandiose sights of Moscow via historical kremlins, sixteenth century merchants’ churches, mysterious wooden structures looming out of lakeland mist, a Russian theme park selling handicrafts to the baroque palaces, museums and pleasure gardens of St Petersburg. Many of the passengers had particular reasons for choosing this cruise: a connection with Russia through family, through work or through historical interests. I think several were shocked at the close conjunction of poverty and overwhelming riches – a theme as obvious in contemporary Russian society as in the Russia of Catherine the Great.

I live in Moscow and work for a British-based international charity, EveryChild, which seeks to redress the balance between poverty and riches, at least for children. Disabled or unwanted children (called “social orphans” although the vast majority have at least one parent) are not generally visible in Russian towns and villages because they live in huge government institutions, some from birth until the age of sixteen. About 716,000 children are institutionalised in Russia today¹. EveryChild Russia’s longterm aim is to reduce the number of children living in institutions. We work in communities, training government workers to support families at risk of disintegration. If families can be helped over a crisis, they can stay together and their children need not be placed in institutions. EveryChild also works with local and Federal governments, advocating family-based childcare as a far preferable (and cheaper for the government) alternative to institutionalisation for those children who have to be taken into government care. Research shows clearly that children thrive

¹ EveryChild’s research report: “Family Matters: a study of institutional childcare in Central and Eastern Europe and the Former Soviet Union” 2005 by Richard Carter

much more in a family setting, where they feel significant and individually cared for, than in an institutional setting. In the latter, emotional, educational, psychological, and physical damage can leave lifelong scars. Ninety percent of “graduates” from institutional “orphanages” fall into crime, substance abuse or prostitution and continue to be social liabilities.

For children living in institutions, the best option is to be reunited with their biological families. If this is not possible in the best interests of the child, then they can live with a family of relatives – an aunt and uncle, or grandmother. Failing this, EveryChild pilots foster care with our government and non-government partners in Ekaterinburg and St Petersburg. The story below illustrates our work.

A family in crisis

Anna, a girl of eight, lived with her mother, Natalya, in one room of a three-room apartment in Ekaterinburg, Russia. Soon after Anna’s father abandoned them, their landlord tried to evict them. A difficult homelife was made worse when Natalya became pregnant by her second husband and Anna became very disturbed and angry. Her mother felt she had no choice but to place her in a local authority shelter. At this point

EveryChild began working with the family.

With our intervention, and that of the district’s Centre for Social Assistance, Anna was returned home. As well as continued observation and support, the family were given practical help: some financial support, clothing and food, and Anna was given a medical check-up and counselling. After a short time, social workers were pleased to see her happy at home with her mother and new little brother.

Their problems returned, however, when Natalya’s second husband walked out, leaving the family with debts and the room in a state of disrepair. The family were in crisis again, but with the support and encouragement of social workers, Natalya was able to cope. She found a job as a school cleaner and managed to do some repairs on her room. Thanks to the lawyer of the Centre for Social Assistance, the ownership of her room was also finally settled in court, giving the family much needed security and peace of mind.

Anna started secondary school last year, and has been achieving good marks. In fact, she likes it so much that she now hopes to be a teacher when she grows up.

EveryChild Russia (2004)

EveryChild has been working in Russia since 1993. We have long, broad and deep experience of the problems faced by disadvantaged children and their families in Russia. Our work is always practical and we work through existing structures, training and sharing knowledge and experience. EveryChild works for long term solutions, implementing the right of all children to grow up in a safe, secure family environment and have the chance to develop their full potential.

If, after seeing something of Russia’s problems as well as of her glories on Noble Caledonian’s Russian cruises, you would be interested in helping Russia’s disadvantaged children, have a look at EveryChild’s website: www.everychild.org.uk and please contact:

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