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# ROAD TO EMMAUS

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# PETERSBURG STREET KIDS FIND A HOME

## The Psalm 23 Orthodox Boys' Shelter

In 1991 Natalia Ustinova, a St. Petersburg math teacher, took a dozen homeless boys off the street and started one of the first private children's homes in post-glasnost Russia. Her boys are all grown now and on their own, but Natasha's work continues. Ten years later, we asked her to tell us her story, and found it as direct, warm and inspiring as Natasha herself.

ROAD TO EMMAUS: Natasha, can you tell us about your background?

NATASHA: I was born in St. Petersburg, which, of course, was called Leningrad at the time, and I graduated from the Institute of Mechanical Engineering and Optics as a research engineer. After my daughter Masha was born, I got a job teaching mathematics in the St. Petersburg public schools. My husband's name is Alexander and our daughter is now seventeen and a student at the Institute of Finance and Economics here in St. Petersburg.

RTE: When and how did you become Orthodox?

NATASHA: I was baptized Orthodox when I was just a few months old. My father was an atheist, but my mother was a believer and would go to church frequently. There was no church instruction in those days, so attending services was all she knew. In fact, I remember her saying that fasting was the hardest thing for her, so it was never a practice in our household. Although I was baptized as an infant, I really came to the faith during the perestroika years when people were allowed to attend church freely again.

*Opposite: Natalia Ustinova.*

RTE: Can you tell us about the general state of homeless children in Russia today? How many are there? Have both parents usually died, or is the children's homelessness due to chronic poverty?

NATASHA: It's difficult to say exactly how many homeless children there are in Russia today. The government puts the number at about one million, but I believe it is far greater. Although some of these children are indeed orphans, calling them all "homeless" is not totally accurate. Most of these street kids are not orphans at all. They usually end up on the street because their parents have sold their flats, are in prison, or are alcoholics or drug abusers. Whatever the exact number, you can be sure that it is great. As a rule, children whose parents have died go straight to a state-sponsored children's home. That means they don't end up on the streets like these kids. You have kids chronically on the streets when their parents are heavy drinkers or don't have any work or income.

Despite the fact that orphanages and children's homes do exist, the current state of homeless children in Russia today is really terrible. It's horrible to watch what is happening on the streets because of the rising number of refugees: constant begging, extortion, a huge number of drug addicts, alcoholic children, and kids who ask for money to buy cigarettes, vodka, and drugs. It's rare when they actually spend their money on food. Often they hand the money they collect over to those who force them to beg for it. When they ask me for money, I don't usually give them money. I say something like, "Come on, let me buy you something to eat..." or "How about if I drive you over to our children's home?" That's when they usually run straight away. But there have been times when children have agreed and either I drove them somewhere to get a bite to eat, or to the children's home.

These are the children who really do need help. There are said to be somewhere around 30,000 homeless children in St. Petersburg alone. Many of these children live in sewers. It's absolutely unfathomable.

RTE: We have heard stories in the West of the state-sponsored children's homes in Russia. Can you tell us a little about how they are run and their conditions? What happens if a child falls into the hands of the State?

NATASHA: There are about 2,000 state orphanages in Russia today that house over 200,000 children. Children's homes in Russia could really be so



much better, but are not, for the simple reason that they receive such poor financing. State-run orphanages have deteriorated terribly because with the fall of the Soviet system and the extreme change to a market economy, the government has no money to support them properly. This means that their staff members are poorly paid, there's no money for good medical care, clothing, or proper nutrition for the children. It's hard to say exactly what goes on in most children's shelters, but personally I am not an advocate of sending children to these homes.

The institutionalization leaves the kids helpless and unable to fend for themselves in their own private lives. Of course, they are taught things there. That goes without saying. They receive an education. But every child I have ever seen who has gone through that system has a chip on his shoulder and feels that everyone owes him something... the State owes him, the teachers owe him, and the children's home owes him. The result is that they are not well adjusted to begin an adult life. Everything is already decided for them: what to say, how to think, where to go, what to do...but they are not taught to think for themselves, they are not self-sufficient.

I am for private children's homes that are run in a more normal fashion, where the children do everything for themselves – I mean like the cleaning, the laundry, the ironing... and where they are trained in some manual labor if they are not capable of working with their minds. But such children's



homes are few and far between. I feel so sorry for all these kids. Perhaps there are good children's homes but, as a rule, in order to be good such homes would have to receive financial subsidies of some kind.

RTE: When did you first think about starting the shelter? Did the first children come to you, or did you find them on the street?

NATASHA: After seeing the homeless children on the streets here in St. Petersburg. I felt so bad for these young kids that when the possibility presented itself, or rather, when a person appeared who was ready to give some money to help support some of them, I agreed at once to start our home. I started the shelter in 1991 and it lasted for seven years – as long as it took for all the boys to grow up and find work to support themselves. Three years ago, after our main benefactor fell ill and had to stop sponsoring the shelter, I decided that it was too risky to start with a whole new group of boys under such uncertain circumstances. That's when we decided to close.

RTE: Can you tell us about the first boy who came to you?

NATASHA: The first boy who came to us... well, actually it was a group of boys, not just one boy. They were living in a public bathroom and the workers who kept the bathroom clean were kind enough (more or less) to provide these kids with a little food every day. But in order to be able to sleep there

the kids had to bring the workers money. At the time, they had to bring five rubles, which was a good sum in those days. Yes, five rubles every night. They couldn't just sleep there for free. So how did they come up with the money? Well, each child would sit in the metro and beg. Each one had his own spot. Then in the evening they would all gather together in the bathroom among all those filthy toilets, and one of the workers would prepare a big bowl of macaroni or noodles. The children had to pay money for it, too. If the kids wanted to sniff glue, they had to pay fifteen rubles to the bathroom workers. On the other hand, the kids were satisfied with this arrangement because they had a roof over their heads and could stay warm at least. In the summer, they slept under a bush in the park, or even in the entrance way to an apartment building, but in the winter, well... winters here can be extremely cold.

RTE: How many boys did you have at your shelter, and what ages were they?

NATASHA: The sixteen boys at my shelter were different ages. The youngest was seven and the oldest was thirteen. Here's how my shelter actually began: I gathered a group of these young boys from the public bathroom. I had to take the bathroom employees too, because they had already spent so much time together that they and the boys were quite attached to each other. Of course, over a period of six months I gradually replaced the bathroom workers, because I wanted to introduce other people who could really teach the boys something. Gradually, the boys themselves developed other priorities, so it wasn't hard for them to say goodbye to the workers.

I'm a great believer in having children of different ages at the children's home, because they can teach and help one another. The older kids learn how to take care of the younger ones. The young ones see the support they get from the older ones. This is very important for their development. As a result, they became like brothers and really looked out for each other. I suppose it's because they knew what it meant not to have a family. The sense of brotherhood among them was what amazed me the most.

Nevertheless, all of them loved their parents very much. One boy said: "Yes, everyone here is kind of like a family to me. But somewhere out there is my mother [who abandoned him when he was three years old] and nobody had better say anything bad about her." He would talk about how much he loved his mother and how one day she would give up drinking and come back for him. They always believed that their parents had just "just

by chance” forgotten about them and that it was “just by chance” that their parents got drunk.

RTE: Why did you choose to have boys rather than girls, or a mixed group?

NATASHA: I tried to take on one girl – the sister of one of the boys. But because these boys were street kids, they had too hard of a battle with their sexual instincts. As far as girls are concerned, there are far less girls on the street than boys. As a rule, if a girl ends up on the streets she will unfortunately almost always get caught up in prostitution, but she will have a roof over her head. That means that she is already taken care of as far as the bare necessities are concerned. Also, girls run away from home far less than boys.

RTE: Is anyone trying to do anything for these young girl prostitutes?

NATASHA: Yes, there are shelters like “Young Mothers” and other such organizations. They are government-sponsored, not private shelters, but they do exist and they try to do something to help them.

RTE: What kind of living conditions did you have for the boys?

NATASHA: Our children’s home consisted of eight rooms. There were two boys per room. We also had a sports room, a hall where they could play games and have a bit of entertainment. The most important thing was that each of the boys had his own writing table, his own little corner, where he could do what he wanted. If a boy didn’t want to participate in one of the general activities, he had the right to go to his own little space. It was very important for these kids to have a place of their own.

We started off with nothing. I brought every extra pair of shoes I had from home. Some of these boys had large feet, and in the autumn and winter it gets pretty cold, so we used newspapers to wrap their feet in. Over the newspaper we put a plastic bag and then they wore regular summer shoes. And that’s how they walked around. I went to the school where I had just stopped teaching mathematics because I wanted to devote myself entirely to my work at the shelter. There was a class there where the kids really acted up and caused trouble, so I went to them and said: “Hey guys! We’re opening a shelter. Why don’t you help these kids out!” Do you know who brought clothes and shoes? These very same little hooligans! The ones from the unhappiest families. And children whose parents were better off didn’t





*Ruslan at bedtime.*

offer a thing. Some of these kids who were thirteen or fourteen years old came by the shelter afterwards to play games with our boys.

## Supporting Talents

RTE: How were the boys educated? What kinds of classes did you provide for them? Where did the teachers come from?

NATASHA: Educating the boys was not easy. Imagine thirteen year-olds who had never studied a day in their life. They couldn't read or write – it was really a nightmare. Their parents simply “forgot” to send them to school. It never seemed to have occurred to them that a boy might need to learn to write his own name. Of course, for these boys we had to hire professional teachers. They were constantly busy studying.

One of our teachers was also a trained psychologist, and this helped us avoid instilling a distaste for studies in these young boys. And the boys really tried; they wanted to. That's why everything succeeded. Of course, we had a very specific selection process for our staff members. I myself picked the staff, and followed up on how they taught their lessons and what kinds of games they taught the kids.



*Boys celebrating birthday.*

We gave the boys some psychological tests to help us understand what they were going through inside, and the results were very interesting. We would ask them what seemed to be rather simple questions. For example: “What is a dog?” or “What do you think about when you see a dog?” Things that would be simple for most people to answer. You’d expect to hear something like, “A dog is something you can pet.” But you start to understand what these kids are feeling inside when they answer, “A dog is something you can skin, make a hat of, and then sell.” That was the answer of an eleven year-old boy. That was the first test. We tested each of the children when they first came to the shelter. We asked other questions, such as: “What do you think about when you see a knife?” “A knife is something you can pick up and cut Mama with.” Obviously, his father had waved a knife around at his mother. These things are just awful.

The more time we spent with these kids, the more we saw how they started to open up and be transformed, and then they began to draw other pictures. At first everything they drew reflected such bitterness, then you began to discover what their pictures meant: bitterness, resentment, alienation; they hated everyone. But after a while a certain warmth appeared, a tenderness, and other needs. You could see the child growing and opening up, and you could see how our work in the shelter really obtained results. It is

just as easy to take a children's home, place some kids in it, and obtain no results whatsoever.

RTE: If a child showed an obvious talent for, say, drawing or music, were you able to provide him with special lessons or individual training?

NATASHA: When any of the children displayed any special talent or were gifted in music or art, we were able to support this – thanks to the fact that we received financial support from the West. We hired people to teach music and art. We even bought a piano for the children's home. It was really wonderful. We offered music lessons to all the children, and the boys sang wonderfully. They really did! We used to put on shows, particularly on holidays. We even put on public concerts and enacted various children's stories with masks and costumes. They really loved this. We also offered special courses, such as photography. If a child was particularly talented, we made an exhibition of his drawings and put them all on display.

Once a child had received a bit of training, we allowed him to go out with normal friends who were not attached to our shelter. And the most important thing was that the boys weren't embarrassed because they were from a children's home.

RTE: Did the children receive any Orthodox instruction?

NATASHA: We didn't have a Sunday school in the strict sense of the word. Twice a week, however, a priest named Fr. Theodore came from our local church to instruct the boys. He also took them for walks to talk to them individually. Fr. Theodore blessed our children's home with holy water when we first opened our doors. He baptized all of our boys, and they were so proud of the crosses that they wore around their necks. We really celebrated that day.

Two of the boys, who were brothers, traveled to Moscow on several occasions to help out at the Valaam Society of America's Russian Mission. They helped carry books around to different bookstores and tidy up around the mission itself. Several of the older boys also went to Moscow to help build a Christian shelter for young girls. They worked on the project with enthusiasm.

## Creating a Home

RTE: Did you try to create a home-like environment?

NATASHA: Yes, I feel that a home-like environment is absolutely essential for such boys. If I had to say how our shelter differed from others, I would say it was that we lived like one big family. They were like twelve brothers, each with their own interests, but even so, when they were on the street together, they watched out for each other. They were real brothers. And our shelter had such a warm feeling to it, even the furniture was just right. I didn't want to make things too conventional and trite – you know, those horrible screechy spring beds. No. Each bed had a bedspread, and each of the boys had a different bedspread. We painted each of the rooms together and placed the furniture where they wanted it. So they created their own rooms. They hung up various pictures and paintings themselves. They enjoyed it so much.

RTE: How did you celebrate holidays?

NATASHA: We arranged all types of things, as I mentioned before. Perhaps the most memorable one for me was then the boys prepared to celebrate a birthday. They always celebrated everyone's birthday. It was as if it *was* everyone's birthday. They dressed up in their best clothes, like real gentlemen, and they would sing, dance, and have a wonderful time. It was really great to watch them! Moreover, I invited several of the parents to one of these celebrations. We had a young boy named Igor, whose father had a horrible drinking problem, but he really did love his son. So, even he showed up. It was so special.

## Conflict and Response

RTE: How did you go about disciplining the boys?

NATASHA: If someone really did something bad, then, of course, we would have to punish him in some way. But we never inflicted any physical punishment on the boys. Although, I personally feel that in extreme cases, if something criminal or extremely serious has happened, then I don't see anything



*Boys with Yasha Domich, their wood shop instructor.*

wrong in a light whipping. Nothing heavy, of course. But this is my personal opinion. I never had to resort to this though, because they obeyed me in everything. All I had to do was to look right at them. That was enough.

A few small conflicts arose on occasion with some of the staff members. When this happened the boys used to get angry and say that they wouldn't sweep the floors or wash the dishes, because they didn't feel like it. If a boy got angry, we would leave him alone for about five minutes, so he could sit and think a bit. Then one of the other boys would approach him from the other side and say: "Come on, friend, you know we have to get the dishes washed." But in general, we tried not to punish the boys.

RTE: Boys being boys, did you have a lot of problems with fighting?

NATASHA: As you say, boys will be boys, and we did have some fights, but they were nothing unusual. We never had any serious fights. Only small arguments and verbal squabbles about common daily things. Nothing out of the ordinary.

RTE: Although they were young, did you have any problems with smoking or alcohol or drugs?



NATASHA: In the very beginning we had problems with some of the boys running away, sniffing glue, and smoking marijuana – we had to deal with all of this. By the way, Russian doctors say that two years of sniffing glue is more than enough to cause a colossal loss of brain cells.

We experienced one wonderful, golden year, when none of the kids in the shelter smoked. It was absolutely wonderful. Here is how we achieved this. The boys could choose what they wanted: either chewing gum and candy – or cigarettes. To keep them from stealing, we had to buy them packs of cigarettes. We gave them only a small amount of cigarettes a day, two or three, so that they wouldn't go away or try to find cigarette butts to smoke. They had to know that if they really needed a cigarette, we would give it to them. All of them smoked at that time. Then little by little we proposed the following: "O.K. What'll it be – a cigarette, chewing gum, or candy? Go ahead and choose!" A small miracle happened. The entire shelter stopped smoking for an entire year! But then things began to change. One of the older boys left and I accepted a new one. He was a difficult thirteen year-old who was a drug addict, a toxic addict. He sniffed glue and drank and smoked a lot. The older boys in the shelter began smoking again, but the younger ones didn't.

## The Staff at Psalm 23

RTE: Who worked with the boys on a daily basis?

NATASHA: I had an absolutely wonderful staff at the shelter, and that meant so much. Zhenya, Vlad, Seryozha, Yasha, Inna – our main cook. Each one was different, yet they each gave so much, and the boys could choose who they wanted to work with. Vlad was involved in setting up different shows and performances. Zhenya was a master at fixing appliances. The kids had a fantastic time taking things apart, fixing them, and putting them back together again... hairdryers, radios, TVs. And groups started forming around each of the staff members depending on the interests of the kids themselves. Some chose Zhenya. Some chose Vlad. Others chose Yasha, who was in charge of our wood shop. Seryozha was our geographer and could tell the most incredible stories of various countries around the world.

Each boy had his own male figure who was an important authority figure for him. Each one was very different. This is also very important. You should never employ teachers who are all alike. Each child needs something different. Whenever we had a holiday, all the staff members showed up, whether they were on duty or not, and in this way they showed a real interest in the kids. All my staff members came down with lice and scabies – every one of them.

Each staff member worked a twenty-four hour shift and would then be replaced by one of the others. We also had one staff member who only worked days. So, for instance, if one of the children didn't feel well or didn't want to go walking with the others, he could stay at home. Then the day-time staff member would work with him and help him with his studies. As a result of this, all the boys eventually began going to a regular school, just like other kids their age. It was hard for them at first, but they managed.

We had a woman who came every day to help cook for the boys. In fact, the boys themselves helped her. It was so great when they baked things on the weekend. Each one could make their own cookies or buns in any shape they wanted. The boys were proud of their achievements and would call to me, "Natasha! Natasha! Come try it! Come try it!" And when each of them came up to me with their little pretzels that they had baked – well, it was so wonderful. The boys cleaned up too. No one had to do this for them.

The staff members made sure that the boys cleaned up after themselves, learned to wash their own clothes, and always washed up before going to bed at night.

Once, some clowns from America came by our shelter. Real clowns! They were actually performing somewhere in St. Petersburg at the time. And Vlad, one of our staff members, was at one of their shows and went to them afterwards and said: “We have a boys’ shelter. Why don’t you come see us!” And they came and gave a free performance at our shelter. They were just great! Although our shelter was way on the outskirts of St. Petersburg, they came out to see us. And in full costume too! The boys were so thrilled.

RTE: Children need to feel loved and cared for as individuals, not just as part of a group, and you and your staff took the place of their parents. Did you feel that you were able to provide this kind of family love and warmth?

NATASHA: Of course, this is difficult, but I believe that the people we got to work in our shelter were really extraordinary, and they were able to create an atmosphere of love and family warmth for the boys. Take, for example, Ludmilla, who used to come and help cook. She would spend entire days at the shelter. I would look at her and say: “Ludmilla, you need to have some time for your private life too.” But for her, these kids were just like her own kids. Staff members would drop by, even when they were off duty, to ask: “How are the kids doing today?” Sometimes they would invite some of the boys to their homes.

I invited the boys to my home to celebrate my daughter Masha’s birthday. I wanted to show them that they could have a good time without wine, without alcohol – something they had never really experienced. This was during the first year of our shelter’s existence and they ripped off quite a few things... some of Masha’s inexpensive jewelry, and things like that. Well, it wasn’t so important. They ended up giving everything back to Masha because deep down inside they were really good boys. We showed them what a real birthday party could be like. They played games, told stories, had lots to eat, and had such a wonderful time. All things considered, I think that they’ll remember that day their entire life. So to answer your question: yes, we tried our best to show them family warmth and love.

RTE: Your daughter sounds like a rare girl. How did she feel about the shelter and the boys you were spending so much time with?





*Cooking with Ludmilla.*

NATASHA: Why don't you ask her yourself? (*Natasha calls Masha*)

RTE: Masha, could you tell us how you felt about your mother's work at the shelter? You would have been eight years old when she began, and fifteen when she closed it.

Masha: I loved the kids very much. Although I could have been resentful that they were getting so much of my her attention, I never felt any jealousy. I knew how much my mom loved me, and I felt so bad for these boys who didn't have parents who could show them the same kind of love. I particularly loved the little ones. And you know, it was at one of the holiday celebrations that I danced for the first time with a boy. Even today if my mother sees one of the boys who used to live at the shelter, they always ask: "And how's Masha?" We were like a big family. I have nothing but good memories of the shelter and my mother's work there.

RTE: Your own generosity and your love of the boys was probably crucial in your mother's being able to do this. Natasha, how did you work with a boy when he first came to you? I imagine they are often afraid or angry. How did you make him feel like a part of your home?



*Natasha and her boys.*

## New Boys

NATASHA: When the boys first came to the shelter, of course, they needed to spend most of their time there with the other boys. That meant we put them to work. They had to get used to the idea that they were not alone, that there were other boys around whom they also had to learn to respect. That's because each new boy who came to live at the shelter, especially if he was a bit older, began by insisting on his rights: "Hey, I'm cool and I'm gonna do what I want." I wasted no time putting them in their place. If the boy was a drug addict, I kept him in a sort of quarantine from the other boys for at least a week. He wasn't allowed to go out for walks with the others and could not leave the shelter. I received a lot of help with this from the other boys who were already living at the shelter. They would go out and keep an eye on him. If anything happened they would come to me right away and say: "Natasha! Stas is trying to bum some cigarettes and is asking people to get him some alcohol to drink." Those boys were just great. They helped me so much with this. And little by little we succeeded in helping the boy see that he needed to have other priorities in life besides getting drunk, taking drugs, getting in trouble, and begging. There had to be something else in life that he could be interested in and love. We had dogs and cats in our shelter.

Someone always looked after them. All the boys loved these animals, but we always made sure that someone in particular was in charge of caring for them. We also had lots of flowers everywhere, and several of the boys were in charge of keeping them watered and cared for.

The first time a new boy came to the shelter, he would often be afraid and resentful, and his behavior would show it; he would try to provoke the other boys to fight. So, all the boys were on their guard for this. For about a month and a half, they would keep a special watch on him. Then they themselves would decide to show him a little trust by giving him money and saying that he should go get some bread, since we had just run out of it at the shelter. Well, anything could happen. Sometimes the money would be spent on other things and the boy would never reappear. Then we would have to go looking for him half the night. (All the places where these boys hang out are very well known.) When we found him he would say: "I bought myself some cigarettes or a can of beer with the money, so how can I return it?" Sometimes, though, they would come back to the shelter very proud of themselves for having accomplished their mission and would hand back all the change to the last cent, as if to say: "You see, I'm honest. You can trust me!" This is a very important moment. And this happened with each of the boys.

RTE: Did you see a quick improvement in the children that came to you, or did it take a while?

NATASHA: Of course, there was a desire in each of these boys to improve. Just going to school instilled it in them. They wanted to learn. And they wanted to start dressing better too. One of the older boys, Andrei, would always say, "I want to be a gentleman," and he would always try to dress like one. His clothes were always so neat and clean. Heaven help him if he found any mud on his shoes. He was growing into a real young man.

RTE: Of course, it's a tremendous blow to any child to be parted from his family. How did your boys cope with that? Do you think they were really happy?

NATASHA: Do I think that my boys were happy? Well, I think the boys should be the ones to answer that question. Any child who goes through what these boys had to go through can never be called completely happy. But, yes, of course they were happy that they had a place to live and had a roof over

their heads. Each boy, as he grew older, was given the opportunity to learn a specialty and to finish school. They learned how to work with their hands. We gave them the opportunity to learn a trade: welding, plumbing, painting houses, etc. They always knew that there was something else ahead for them when they finally left the shelter. We did everything we could to ensure that their flats were not sold out from under them by alcoholic parents who wanted the money. We had run into such situations before.

We always asked ourselves, will each boy be able to stand the test? He has two paths in front of him: either he can go back and become like his parents, or he can try to change it all. Each has his own special destiny and when he grows up and leaves the shelter, he has to make up his own mind as to what he is going to make of his life; whether he will be happy or unhappy. Even those who left the shelter came back regularly to visit us. They missed us and it was wonderful to see that they didn't forget about the shelter right away.

RTE: Did parents or relatives ever come to reclaim their children?

NATASHA: Parents and relatives came to visit the boys, but no one ever tried to take them back. There was one absolutely awful mother. She had two sons at our shelter. These were wonderful, smart, capable boys and their mother told them: "I'll come to see you next weekend." But she didn't turn up for two months. And these boys would sit by the door waiting for her every Friday and Saturday. One of the boys didn't take it too hard at first, but after being stood up for such a long time he began to urinate from all the stress. The other brother simply cried every night. It was just horrible.

RTE: How old were these boys?

NATASHA: They were very young, seven and eight years old. And it continued the whole time they were at the shelter. It was really terrible. Then their mother went away somewhere for half a year. We searched for her, to get her to come visit the boys, but each time something unimaginable happened. After each disappointment the boys would say: "Mama loves us, she is wonderful. She's a good woman." Incredible!



*Ruslan and Vitaly at camp.*

## Runaways

RTE: Did any of your boys run away?

NATASHA: For the first three months, constantly. One boy ran away and I went to where he hung out. He was sitting there with his jacket turned inside out, spotted with mud, and his face all greasy. I went up to him and said: “Anton, dear, why are you hungry? You can get fed at the shelter.” “Oh, Natasha, you’re right.” He turned as red as a beet. “Let’s go to the shelter,” I said. “O.K. Let’s go!” he replied. That’s force of habit: their former life still had a hold on them and little by little they needed to disassociate themselves from it. But this is normal. It means that you have to do something so he won’t feel alienated.

If you see that a child needs the shelter, then you certainly want to return him there. But there are kids who don’t want such help and there’s no point in forcing them. I had one such boy who simply didn’t want to be there. When a child says: “No matter what, I’m out of here. I’m leaving this place,” you have to let him do as he likes. I don’t believe you should force someone to stay. He really liked the dirty, vagabond type of life. Children run away all the time from children’s homes.



*Dressing up for a skit.*

Take Andrei, for example [the boy who wanted to be a gentleman]... he lived in another children's home, along with his two brothers. Andrei was five years old when his mother took off. She left her husband with three children, one younger than Andrei and one older. She simply disappeared. Their father drank himself drunk every night and their mother got involved in prostitution. When Andrei came to us he was closed, very quiet, withdrawn, but after being with us he began smiling and laughing – such a wonderful boy. I saw him not too long ago. He lives here in St. Petersburg and dresses so well. He didn't give up. He simply didn't give up! I'm so happy for him. He's already growing into a wonderful young man.

RTE: Did you take mentally or physically handicapped children?

NATASHA: No, I was not able to take in seriously mentally or physically handicapped children, because they have so many other needs, including lots of medical problems. But I think our shelter wouldn't have been easy for that type of child either. You see, street kids can be cruel. If I were to take on a physically handicapped child, they might mock or tease him. If a child had a light handicap, of course, we would take him. When you come to think of it, every child that came my way was handicapped in some way; they were

all are suffering from slow development, and to a small degree from oligophrenia [feeble-mindedness], which is understandable with such parents.

## Raising Funds

RTE: How much funding did you need to do all this?

NATASHA: It cost us approximately \$3,500 a month to keep the shelter running for our last twelve boys. But that was three years ago. Today, due to high rent costs, expenses would run around \$5,000 a month. This included food and living expenses, rent, salaries for staff members, medical expenses, travel expenses, camp expenses, etc. It came to about \$60,000 a year to run the shelter with twelve boys – or \$5,000 a year for each boy. I don't think this is very much when you consider that we put it in a common pool and used it equally among all the boys.

RTE: And how did you raise this?

NATASHA: Completely through charitable donations. We had our main sponsor in Russia and some humanitarian aid from abroad. Other people would bring clothes to the shelter, pots and pans, furniture, and many one-time small donations.

RTE: Where were your sponsors from?

NATASHA: One permanent sponsor from Germany and several donations from America. One day a Russian lawyer dropped by our shelter and gave me some money for the boys. Just like that. It didn't happen very often, but sometimes people would simply offer a donation, and then it was like a holiday inside the shelter. That meant we could buy the boys some new clothes, or have a nice meal and buy a big cake – there were never huge sums of money.

RTE: But enough?

NATASHA: Not always. As I said, one of our main sponsors fell ill with heart problems so he had to stop helping us, but we even received help from cadets at the Military Institute. They simply gave up some of their rations to

help my boys! I transported the food to the shelter. It was wonderful! That's how our shelter was able to exist. There were actually many good people who made it possible to keep going, but, believe me, it was hard at times – because the government can't yet subsidize or give low-rent assistance to charitable organizations, although as in Soviet times, they still give an apartment to orphans that have been in state institutions when they reach maturity. We had to rent all of our space. There were all sorts of problems.

RTE: Did local and regional administrators help with your work?

NATASHA: Oh, the government.... What difficulty we had in just trying to get them to let our boys go to a government-sponsored camp for half-price in the summer! That was really all the help they gave us. Generally speaking, with this huge change in society after perestroika, bureaucracy is a nightmare. There are not yet real laws or programs to encourage private children's shelters to exist. Often, any attempt to do something positive is stifled by bureaucrats. However, I can't say that they really put many obstacles in our way, because I didn't let government officials or bureaucrats get involved. I figured, it's a private shelter and should stay that way. They could have come and taken a look and we would have been happy to show them around, but no one ever came or showed any particular interest.

RTE: Where was the summer camp you spoke of?

NATASHA: About ninety kilometers from St. Petersburg in a place called Anosino. The boys ended up spending about two months there each summer. But you know, they were really hurt once when someone stole a watch and then accused the boys from my shelter of stealing it. They came back all upset: "We didn't steal that watch! Why is it that if you're from a shelter everyone automatically thinks you steal things?" It really made them mad. Later, the watch was found and it turned out that none of my kids was involved at all.

RTE: I understand you also spent time in the United States. Would you tell us a little about your experiences there?

NATASHA: I traveled to the United States for the first time as Teacher of the Year in 1990. I had been chosen as the best teacher in St. Petersburg, and the trip gave me the opportunity to get acquainted with America. I met





*Vasya.*

many wonderful people there. That trip actually inspired me to work on the idea for my shelter.

When I returned to St. Petersburg, I became acquainted with the Center for Citizen Initiatives-USA, a California-based nonprofit organization, which sponsored me to spend a month in San Francisco in 1992 to participate in their training program for Russian nonprofit managers and interns. That's how I came into contact with Raphael House, a nonprofit organization that helps families at risk achieve stable housing and financial independence, while strengthening family bonds. What an incredible experience that was for me. Among other things, they taught me how to find sponsors for my shelter, and this helped me a great deal when I returned to Russia.

I was received so warmly there and people showed me such support. Raphael House amazed me from the very start. My knowledge of English wasn't all that great – actually I spoke it rather poorly. Sometimes it was difficult for me to communicate with people as much as I would have liked to. But they were all so kind and hospitable towards me. Kate McCaffery, Fr. David Lowell and his family – such remarkable people, simply wonderful. I liked them all so very much.

I remember traveling to a monastery near the Russian River in Forestville, California, where I met Fr. Herman Podmoshensky, who greeted me so



*Vitaly.*

warmly with the words: “I knew we were somehow going to meet!” and blessed all of my activities. Such a unique man, life just poured out of him. I was very happy to have the opportunity to visit the monastery.

And then there was Olga Shkuro, a woman who lives and works at Raphael House. She helped me a great deal as she is also Russian and could give me helpful advice. I found so many wonderful people in America who were willing to help support my children’s home, and I’m thankful to each and every one of them.

Later I came into contact with everyone at the Valaam Society of America Russian Mission in Moscow who put me in contact with such wonderful people as Kay Vallone who lives in Chicago and is involved in Orthodox charitable work. Through the generous help of her Phos Mission, we were able to feed our boys for an entire year.

Of course, back home I had to travel all over St. Petersburg, talking to people and trying to enlist their help. People helped as they could.

RTE: Did you have any kind of volunteer program, where ordinary people could help out for a few hours a week, or a few weeks a year?

NATASHA: Yes. There were people who came and simply said that they wanted to help in some way. Some of them took the children out for walks;

others taught them how to do mending and sewing; others taught them how to work with wood. We never refused anyone who wanted to help. It was wonderful seeing their response. People would come by and say: “I learned that you have a shelter here. Well, I have some clothes that I’d like to give you. Take a look. Perhaps you could use them?” Or: “I draw very well. Perhaps I could teach your kids how to draw?” So once a week this man came and taught the boys how to draw. It was wonderful!

RTE: What were some of the greatest problems you faced in keeping the home going? Have you had any personal disappointments?

NATASHA: The biggest problem was trying to get a stable financial base for the shelter, so we wouldn’t have to think: “Will there be enough money for next month? Will I be able to feed these boys? Will I be able to pay for their instruction?” For me, this was the hardest part. It literally gave me the jitters. I am the kind of person who looks towards the future, so when I feel that something isn’t going right, I always think: “What will tomorrow bring? Will I be able to make it or not?” It’s a big job trying to find money, food, clothes... it really is. It forced me to rely on God for everything. The only reason the shelter worked was because of God’s help.

## Sasha and His Brothers

As far as a personal disappointment, well, I would have to say that it is over a young man (now grown) named Sasha. Things have turned out bad for him so far. When I first got him I had high hopes. I had to document the fact that the kids were at my shelter so I went to his home to obtain his parents’ written permission. When I arrived, his completely drunk mother opened the door. I said, “You know, your Sasha is staying at my shelter and I need you to sign a declaration.” She responded, “No problem!” So she signed the declaration. I left her our shelter’s phone number. Then suddenly I saw two other boys sitting there in the room, and asked who they were. The mother replied, “Two other kids of mine.” So, I said, “Can I take them too?” And the mother said, “Go on, take them!” It was Vitaly and Dima. I brought them to our shelter, and these brothers turned out to be great!

But Sasha is twenty-two years old now and sitting in prison because he and some friends got drunk and raped a young woman... But you cannot

imagine how smart this boy was. To tell you the truth, he was at least three times as smart as my own daughter, Masha. He was totally ignorant when he came to our shelter, but he caught on to mathematics very quickly. I taught him myself. He received straight “5’s” [the Russian equivalent of an “A”] in all of his subjects. He skipped two or three years because of his high grades, and even so, he received top honors at school. And we were all sure he would go on to study at an institute. The Institute authorities even agreed to accept him without any entrance examinations because of his excellent grades. But you know, from his early years his parents had sent him out to shoplift. At first he would steal some bread, just to be able to eat. Then he would steal tomatoes and cucumbers from different dachas, again to feed himself. He and his friends would also steal things from stores – they were foolish young boys and would steal chocolate and other candy. They were finally caught and had to go to court, but they weren’t sent to prison. The second time they were caught, they received a conditional sentence and didn’t have to do any prison time, but then he left the shelter and he and some friends got drunk. That’s what led to their latest crime for which they received a long prison sentence. Sasha writes us letters from prison. Life is a struggle.

RTE: Have you ever wanted to throw up your hands and quit?

NATASHA: Throw up my hands and quit? No, I never felt that way. I suppose it’s because I always feel so responsible for whatever I do. I could never just give up and quit.

RTE: And what would you count as success?

NATASHA: I think the biggest success is when the boys finish school, receive an education, leave, and then come back for a visit and tell me that they are happy and that everything is O.K. That is the biggest success.

## Foreign Adoptions

RTE: Many foreigners have come to Russia to adopt children. How do you feel about this? Did you hope to have any of your boys adopted?

NATASHA: One of our boys was adopted by an American family. His mother

had disappeared without a trace. She had been to our shelter only once before she disappeared, and we spent the next three days disinfecting the place. You see, she was all covered with horrible ulcers and was in an absolutely dreadful state. After that, no one saw her again. She had three children, one of whom had already run away from a children's home. I found him on the street. His name was Sasha [another Sasha]. He had a great need for a family. He wanted a mother and father all to himself. Some of the boys were like that. Others were content just knowing that I, Ludmilla the cook, or one of the other staff members was there for them. But Sasha needed someone just for himself. A certain jealousy can creep in.

One day a family came from America. They didn't have any children of their own, and they immediately started legal steps to adopt Sasha's sister, who was in a home for babies. Then they learned that she had another brother who was a little older. The baby girl was only a year old, and her little brother was three. Just as they were getting ready to leave, they learned that there was still another brother – my Sasha. So they phoned me about adopting Sasha and ended up adopting all three children. Sasha phoned us from America and told us that everything was fine and that he was very happy.

So that's how all three children were reunited. Isn't that wonderful! It's simply amazing! Such wonderful people! Taking on three children they didn't even know. What a difficult thing; especially because Sasha wasn't a young kid any more and didn't have the easiest character in the world. He was always running around the streets and getting into things. He phoned us for the first three years, but then children start to forget. He already has a totally different life now. They have a good family.

RTE: Do you know where they live?

NATASHA: No. It's a secret. No one will tell us. I would phone them myself if I could, but I don't have their phone number. Sasha himself can phone us, but I cannot phone him. The rule exists to avoid conflicts should the mother return. But I never insisted, because God forbid that their mother should have come back on the scene. (The poor woman was later found dead in a St. Petersburg basement.) They were never happy with her, and now they're with a good family. Thank God! I wish it were so for each of the children.

That's the most important thing, not who gave you birth, but who raised you, and wherever you go in life, to remember that it is God who gave you life!

## Private Children's Homes and Russian Generosity

RTE: Russians are often very generous by nature, but after the fall of the Soviet regime most people are struggling to make ends meet; also, they live in small apartments that would make it a huge challenge to adopt a troubled child. How much are people able to help?

NATASHA: There are those who are willing to help and those who aren't. But if given the chance, most people would try to help in some way. You know, when we attended parent-teachers' meetings at public schools, the children would come too, and they would usually separate the kids from shelters from the regular kids. But with our kids there was no such separation. The other parents didn't have any problem with this, and they helped set their own kids straight about it. Most people are really good, kind people. Of course, there are those who say, "Why do we have to deal with this problem? Let the government take care of these kids!" They don't stop to think that we all live by God's will – whether we know it or not – and things can happen to anyone. One day I'm here, and the next I'm not. And my child would be left alone and could end up in the very same children's home. I wish people would think about this more often.

RTE: There is a wonderful boys' home just outside Moscow at the Golitvin Women's Convent in Kolomna, under Matushka Xenia. The children live on a farm and have both nuns and young men in their twenties and thirties taking care of them. Do you know of other monastic or private endeavors like yours to help homeless children?

NATASHA: It's very interesting that you should mention this. Although I'm not familiar with the boys' home in Kolomna, I had the very same idea of starting such a home attached to a women's convent here in St. Petersburg. I know the abbess there very well and have already spoken with her about it. She is very enthusiastic about the idea. You know, young boys need a woman's presence in their lives – I think even more than a man's. Of course, ideally, it should be both. A man, of course, can teach a boy certain things, but these young boys need tenderness and maternal love. Only women are really capable of providing this – and within the atmosphere of a monastery, where they could have an even deeper spiritual life, I think is a fantastic

idea! I am now the director of a travel agency with offices in St. Petersburg and Moscow, and as soon as my business starts making some more money, this is what I plan to do.

RTE: You were a pioneer in founding private children's shelters. Have other people been inspired by what you've done?

NATASHA: In the field of private children's homes, I was one of the first – at least in St. Petersburg. After seeing the success of my shelter, my sponsor decided to open a branch of our shelter in another location in St. Petersburg. After that, more and more shelters began opening.

RTE: Do you think there is more that the Russian Orthodox Church could do to help?

NATASHA: I love the idea of monasteries running children's shelters. When a child grows up in such an environment, he'll find love, warmth, and affection. As his faith grows it will help keep him away from bad thoughts and giving in to temptation. Religion plays a tremendous role in all of this. That's why we took the children to church services and had them all baptized. We didn't force baptism on them, we only had them baptized if they wanted it themselves. And they all wanted to be baptized – every one of them! So, all my kids were baptized according to their own wish. You know, I really do believe the Church should do all it can to help these children, because the closer they come to the Church, the less you have to worry about them.

## Personal Sacrifices

RTE: If you don't mind my asking, what did you have to sacrifice in your personal life to work with these boys?

NATASHA: Spiritually speaking, God has blessed me so much. My spiritual life was going well, but it was my family life that suffered. The shelter required so much time, so much energy, that my marriage suffered under the strain of it all. Sometimes you just have to give all you can because you feel so bad for these kids. On one New Year's Eve, for example, I had to go to the shelter quickly at 3:00 am. One of the staff members phoned me and said: "Natasha, some people here are causing trouble," so I took off for the

shelter and chased away several drunks who had come by and were causing problems. My husband couldn't understand it; he said it wasn't normal.

I took my daughter Masha to the shelter with me quite often, but my husband just couldn't take the pace of my work, as I usually returned home rather late in the evening. Well, what man is happy when he comes home from work and finds his dinner isn't ready? I doubt if anyone likes it! So, he found a woman who would cook for him. Things went downhill and we eventually separated and divorced. It was very sad.

Perhaps I just gave too much of my energy to helping the boys at the shelter, but, I think if you're not willing to give your all, it's better not to start such a thing. However, to live on two fronts is also difficult. If you botch things up, the kids will not forgive you. I know this all too well. Perhaps they turned out good because they saw how much everyone on the staff gave of themselves to help. Our staff members were all fantastic. They showed the kids so much warmth and really felt for them. I see this as a success.

I am one who believes that everything works out for the best. I have remarried, and my husband, Alexander, is a wonderful man who supports me in this work with the kids. I see God's Providence in everything connected with this shelter.

RTE: What do you feel you've gained from all of this?

NATASHA: I feel inside myself that at least I've tried to do something in life, and that means that my life is not without purpose. So even if it were to end tomorrow, I would at least feel that I have done something good.

RTE: Do you have one or two of the boys who you would particularly like to tell us about?

NATASHA: Each of my boys was special and worthy of attention; each one had his own story, but Vasya's story is particularly special. He was from a family of gypsies and used to go out on the street begging for money. His parents would take all the money he collected, use it to get drunk, and Vasya would sit there hungry. But when Vasya turned eleven years old, he suddenly understood that he could keep the money and buy some bread himself.

Vasya was one of the very first boys who came to the shelter. He was one of the ones I picked up from the public bathroom. He spoke Russian poorly, so we started teaching him how to write. What a victory it was for him



the first time he spelled his own name! We taught him to count. When he became older, he left the shelter. The gypsies brought him lots of children, and he sat with these children during the day and taught them himself. What a fantastic kid! Simply the best! And in the evening when his parents returned, he would go to his night job handling freight. And that's how his life continues to this very day. Everything is right with him, just right. He has a job and earns his own money. Although he can't work at a profession because he doesn't read or write well enough, in our shelter he took wood shop, metal shop, and learned how to use a kiln and to solder. I keep thinking of him sitting there and teaching those children. What a miracle!

RTE: Is there anything else you would like to say, about anything?

NATASHA: Yes. Although I wasn't there myself, I saw a report on TV not long ago about how Russian soldiers in Kronstadt, a port town next to St. Petersburg, have taken some young boys under their wing. One of the officers felt so sorry for them that he decided to do all he could to help. The soldiers gathered up some street kids and started a small shelter attached to their military headquarters.

All of the boys live on daily military rations. When they turn eighteen, they will go into the army and receive general training. They will learn how to be disciplined. Even now, the soldiers teach the boys in different ways. They talk to them, read and write with them, and try to impart some knowledge to them. The boys were literally transformed. I think this is simply fantastic! And it is men who are doing this. How much this officer must love kids in order to care for so many of them! He gives himself totally. So you see, there really are people who care.

All of my boys are now young men. If I could have just one more wish, it would be that each one of them will eventually fall in love with a really nice girl, because they are really good boys. That would be such a support for them and would help them in so many ways. A good woman can do wonders for a man, you know!

And I would hope that God's mercy might be with each of them every day of their life. For some reason God has chosen to give each of them a chance. I hope and pray they'll find good people along the way, who will be kind and help them to find their place in life. ✦