

ROOF-tops



Newsletter of the Russian Orphan Opportunity Fund

Issue 5, May 1999

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ROOF Contact Information

If you would like to speak personally with ROOF staff, or to suggest articles for the next Newsletter, please use our e-mail address or our Moscow number to telephone or send a fax. For more information about ROOF, see our web site at: <http://www.glasnet.ru/~roof>

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Libraries for Pereslavl Orphanages

In April ROOF was chosen as one of the charities to be supported by the International Women's Club (Moscow Chapter) 1999 Winter Bazaar. Last year, each charity awarded this funding was given over \$15,000.

Our aim is to build modern, multimedia school libraries for the orphanages in Pereslavl-Zaleski in the Yaroslavskaya Oblast, a small town about 150km from Moscow. In partnership with Project Harmony and the Logos Fund, ROOF may be able to expand the power of the IWC funding, more than doubling the value of the project. Project Harmony will provide state of the art computer hardware and Internet connections and the Logos Fund will provide many

Free the computers!

Cars, computers, telephones, faxes and Xerox machines — all brought into the Russian Federation under Section 67 of the current Customs Code (1993). Between 1993 and the beginning of 1999, any company with partial foreign ownership was allowed to import equipment for office use *duty free* if it signed a promise to return the equipment abroad at the end of an appointed (but extendable) period of time.

This law has created a ridiculous situation in which a very large stockpile of depreciated equipment has built up in warehouses and cannot, under Russian law, be donated to charity. Owners have a choice:

either they can ship the depreciated equipment abroad or they can pay customs duties of up to 300% based on the original cost of the equipment. Shipping the equipment back to where it came from is expensive and some companies are left hiding vast quantities of equipment from customs officials and even paying rent for the warehouse space in which to hide the equipment!

ROOF and the office of V.M. Platonov (Chairman of the Moscow City Duma and Vice Chairman of the Federation Council) are leading a lobby group to draft suggested replacement legislation. Platonov's office holds that politicians are losing a chance to attract voters in the upcoming elections by not being able to have the old equipment donated directly to government-run schools and orphanages in their own districts.

In a recent American Chamber of Commerce survey, 70% of the equipment owners said that they will ship their old equipment abroad to be discarded rather than paying customs duties. The lobby group will suggest that amnesty from customs duties be granted to companies that donate the equipment directly to government budget organisations such as schools and orphanages.

If the project is successful, it will result the donation of thousands of computers and other types of equipment to orphanages not only in Moscow, but also throughout the country.

educational children's books free of cost. This means we may be able to build two libraries which could serve all three orphanages in the town – reaching about 250 children.

Our goal is to provide pleasant, light, colourful libraries, aimed at children between the ages of 5 and 17. Both ROOF and the orphanage directors envisage these libraries as reading rooms open to the children at all times so that they may rest, read and learn at their leisure. The libraries would also be reference centres for formal educational programmes; computer learning centres; a resource for educational games and developmental toys (e.g. Lego); and a source of reference material for teach-



Oksana using some donated computer equipment

ers and orphanage staff.

ROOF will endeavour to obtain every item or service required free of charge or at a discount. This may enable ROOF to stretch this project to cover all three orphanages without compromising *in the least* on quality. ROOF's philosophy of implementation will be never to compromise on quality in order to cut cost.

Our library project promises to have lasting effects. Both the knowledge that these children gain from the libraries themselves and the motivation from learning that comes from having a comfortable and encouraging learning environment will fundamentally affect these children's lives.

Russian Orphanages *by Georgia Jansson Williams*

For a couple of months I have wanted to write a broad overview of conditions in Russian orphanages for our readers. I am sure this cannot be accomplished in a single issue of ROOF-tops, so what you have here is only the beginning...

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Orphanages Visited by ROOF during April

Moscow Temporary Isolation Centre for Minors

Uchebnii-Vospitatelnii Kompleks (Educational Complex) No1862 (Moscow, Varshavskaya)

Priyut (Tomilino, just outside Moscow)

Detskii Dom (Bykovo, just outside Moscow)

Detskii Dom No96 (Pereslavl-Zaleskii, 150km from Moscow)

Detskii Dom / Sanatorium (Pereslavl-Zaleskii)

Correctional Home for Slow Children (Pereslavl-Zaleskii)

More information about the different types of orphanages in the next issue of ROOF-tops...

Addresses for donations

Cheques posted to Russia via our Post International addresses may be destroyed by customs. Therefore, please use those addresses only for correspondence, and use the following addresses for donations:

In the USA:

Russian Orphan Opportunity Fund (ROOF),
Box 2279,
Peter Stuyvesant Station,
432 East 14 St.,
New York, NY 10009

In Europe:

Russian Orphan Opportunity Fund (ROOF),
P.O. Box 1648,
Cannock,
Staffs, UK
WS11 1YB

In part, this article is a response to a lot of bad press in the west that occurred after the Human Rights Watch report about orphanage conditions in Russia. Although I don't doubt that the odd sadistic director does exist, I think our readers should know that there are also vast numbers of dedicated staff who love the children in orphanages as their own. My personal impression is that these far outnumber the sadists.

I want to give you an impression of orphanage personnel by writing about three real people we have met, each of whom represents a stereotype. Yes, I am giving you nearly the whole spectrum of stereotypes... except the 'super-welcome,' which, thankfully, we also come across.

Tatyana – she looks to be in her early thirties, quiet and academic, slight of build and hidden behind enormous glasses. For the better part of the last five years she has been working on her dissertation *in the orphanage* as well as teaching classes. Her dissertation is a new methodology for teaching children with learning difficulties. On her own, paid only about \$30 a month, she has scraped together the money needed to painstakingly produce individual textbooks for each of the children she works with. She wants desperately to get her textbooks published so that they can be used by others in similar institutions, but there is no money in the project for publishing companies. ROOF is trying to help her to find some new contacts or support for publication. The original research involved in her project is extensive; her work is beautifully exact.

Olga – heavysset and getting on for fifty, when we sat down to talk with her about ROOF I made the nearly fatal mistake of mentioning that ROOF is an American organisation. She screamed at us and asked why it was that the Americans think they knew how to help Russians (not neglecting to mention the trouble in Yugoslavia, of course). I immediately rushed to ensure her that all our teachers are Russian and that we were only there to listen to her and find out if there is anything we might do to help. So she said she understood – we must be some religious organisation. Well she doesn't want her children to be forced to sing American hymns in order to receive aid! Again, I assured her that although I do happen to be a Christian, our organisation does not have any formal link to any religious group. Slowly, over the course of an hour, we gained her trust in conversation (which was interrupted twice by telephone calls by the local police about some of the children in her care who had been involved in a robbery in one of the central Moscow markets). For the final half an hour of our meeting she poured her heart out to us about her situation – the fact that 4 women over the age of 70 were expected to care for over 50 orphans between the ages of 14 and 16. Olga admitted that although the UVK has very good teachers, the orphaned children make little use of the educational facilities even though the school is a special language school and attracts students from all regions of Moscow. At the end of the meeting Olga took our application form and said that she very much wants ROOF staff to help, especially in the areas of psychological counselling and extracurricular activities.

Yuri – dressed in his military style Interior Ministry uniform, he rattled off some statistics about the Centre. He was most concerned to give us a very precise picture of the problems with which his institution deals. My first impression was that he was a lot nicer than I expected a guy from the feared MVD (Interior Ministry) to be. 6000 children come to the centre each year. 60% are not from Russia at all, but come to Moscow from other NIS countries looking for a way to feed themselves. Only about 5% of the children come from Moscow. Most children that the Centre sees end up coming to the Centre 3 or 4 times; they run away repeatedly from parents or orphanages far from Moscow. Some come directly to the Centre when they come to Moscow; the police pick others up from the streets. Children cannot, by law, stay at the Centre for more than 30 days although some would prefer to stay longer. Yuri was very honest with us about the sort of help that ROOF might be able to provide for the Centre. He told us that our proposed library project would be better used elsewhere – they have a good library; but that their single psychologist could really use more help. He did use his dry sense of humour to make me feel less than happy about being American — but hey, what can you expect these days? He was happy that I am interested in the Russian Orthodox Church and told me a great deal about the Centre's Christian training programmes.



Georgia working in ROOF's office