

How I Spent My Summer Vacation (1999)

by Luba Petrusha

Summer, for many children, is time to go away to camp, make new friends, and develop their independence. I spent two weeks this summer at camp, but this was no ordinary summer camp; it was a camp for the children of the internaty, the orphanage-schools, of Ukraine. There are more than a hundred such schools in Ukraine, and many thousands of children in them. Some are orphans due to the death of their parents; many more have ended up there either abandoned or taken away from their parent (due to abuse, alcoholism or drug use on the part of the parents). Help Us Help the Children holds a camp annually; this was our fourth year, my second, and the largest camp ever—350 children (aged 12 to 17) on three campuses.

The children who participate in our camp are all residents of the many internaty that dot the countryside of Ukraine. Most of the children have only been in the institutions some five years or less, although I did meet a few who had been abandoned at birth and had spent their entire lives there. Most of the children also don't fit our traditional notion of orphans: poor children whose parents have died and are alone in the world. Rather, they ended up here when their parents had their parental rights terminated by the government, usually because of neglect or abuse due to alcoholism and drug abuse. Some of children may still have one or both parents, but they are so poor that they can't support them, and have given up custody (the unemployment rate in Ukraine is said to be somewhere between 20 and 50 percent). And some, indeed, have lost their parents; the life expectancy in Ukraine, which has always been low, has fallen in recent years due to the effects of Chernobyl (cancers and other disease), AIDS (which is growing rapidly in Ukraine), widespread environmental pollution, and a faltering economy (unemployment causing poverty and depression, and exacerbating alcoholism).

The internaty can (but don't have to) be pretty grim places. Some are quite well run and the children seem reasonably happy; others seem like pages out of *Oliver Twist*. Much comes down to the directors of the institutions; some really care about the kids, while others don't and take every opportunity to line their own pockets at the kids' expense. HUHTC, through its contacts in the government, has managed to get several of the latter sort fired, and we have a few more on our hit list. Unfortunately, there is a LOT of work left to do.

Help Us Help the Children has as its mission helping improve the lives of the children in these orphanages. Twice a year teams from Canada and the US go to Ukraine and personally distribute supplies (clothing, toys and medications) to the orphanages; on subsequent trips, they check to see if the items have been appropriately used and have stayed distributed (there is a huge problem with theft and graft in all the foreign aid programs in Ukraine, a holdover of the old Communist mentality; we do our best to police and thus limit it). Most of the clothing and toys we send have been donated, as have a large portion of the medications.

This year the Canadian branch has begun sponsoring ten competitive academic scholarships per year for kids from the internaty to the Kievo-Mohilanska Academy, the Harvard of Ukraine. The children chosen for these scholarships are past camp participants, where their potential was often first noted. They are encouraged to return to camp as counsellors. One of the aims of HUHTC is to promote to promote education and training among the children, so they don't end up, on reaching eighteen, out on the streets with no skills and no future (except crime, drugs alcohol and prostitution, as there are few other opportunities for kids in a stagnant economy with no family support system).

Our big project each year, the jewel in our crown, is the annual summer camp in the Carpathian Mountains. This is our fourth year, and a record year it was—350 kids at 3 bases. The first year, there only some fifty kids at one camp, and last year—250 at two bases. We keep growing, because there are so many needy kids who could benefit from the experience. The kids in our camp came from all over the country; for many of them it was the first chance they'd had to meet people from elsewhere, and lots of friendships were formed. This year we also had disabled kids for the first time, including deaf kids, visually impaired kids, and some with physical deformities (cerebral palsy and birth defects). They were mainstreamed, and quite exceeded our expectations, participating in all the activities of camp, including treks up the mountains. They had a wonderful time; I think they really enjoyed just being a part of the crowd for a change.

The camps are organized and funded largely by the Canadian branch, who put in a lot of time shipping supplies over, setting up a curriculum, arranging transport for all the participants, a recruiting volunteers from North America. We in the States, being a younger and smaller organization so far, mostly contribute to the supplies (this year toiletries for all the kids, some clothing and shoes, and twelve donated bicycles) and several counsellors.

The camp is held in and around the town of Vorohtha, in the Carpathian Mountains, some 240 kilometers (or six hours by bus) from Lviv. It is a beautiful setting, and the highest mountain in Ukraine, Hoverla, is nearby, as is the resort town of Yaremche. There were three camps, or bases. First there was Basa Avanthard, which is a youth hostel type

building two kilometers from the town, but near the natural spring (good, cold mountain water that is safe to drink). It is the home base of the Ukrainian National Ski Jump team; they practice here every day, on the summer ski jump they call a "trampoline". There is a ski lift which goes up the hill. Closer to town is Basa Ukraina, a set of buildings closer to town, convenient for shopping and church, but with little open area for the children to run around. Third, and new this year, was Mahora, a barracks up on the mountain, serviced by a ski lift which broke down just before camp started. This was meant to be more of a rough, survival camp for the older kids; half way through camp they were evacuated out, due to lack of running water and other amenities, to a nearby sanitorium.

In past years our staff consisted almost entirely of North American volunteers, people from all walks of life, who would come to Ukraine and use their talents and skills to help organize and run the camp. This year it was decided to integrate Ukrainians more fully into the camp structure. Individuals who had been participants (as vyhovateli, or guardians from the internaty themselves) in past years, and students from Kievo-Mohilanska Akademia, were recruited as staff and brought to Vorohta the week before camp for intensive training sessions. As a result, this year a majority of the vyhovnyky (group counselors) and even some of the instructors of the maysterny (educational sessions) were Ukrainians. There were only thirty-one participants from North America this year.

The camp is meant to be educational as well as recreational. Camps in Ukraine are generally "resting camps"--the benefits of fresh air and indolence are highly touted there. In contrast, ours is a highly organized and quite active camp, whose goals are to expose children to Western ideas and values while encouraging them to value their Ukrainian heritage and traditions.

We had several themes this year. Our camp theme was Kozaks of the 21st Century; the kids studied the Kozak era of Ukrainian history, and applied its lessons to modern times. They learned the Kozak version of judo/self-defense, saw Kozak horsemanship, and even got to participate in a Kozak wedding. Our second theme was Easter; many of the kids have never had the opportunity to celebrate any of the traditional Ukrainian holidays. Last year we had a proper Christmas Eve supper; this year we celebrated Easter. Our third theme was the wedding, which is one of the folklorically richest traditions. We taught them the traditions and the songs, and they learned to make vinky (flower garlands) and prepare a wedding feast.

There were also had maysterni (sessions) on sports, psychology, spirituality, media, and health (including a good bit of time spent discussing AIDS, which is growing more rapidly in Ukraine than in any other part of Europe). There were two hikes up the mountain, a Terenova Hra (running up and down the local mountain, searching for clues and solving puzzles), and building human pyramids. Evening activities included numerous discos, several campfires, a candidate's night, and several shows put on by the kids, in which they sang, danced and otherwise amused us.

On our first day, our doctors did physicals on all 350 kids, and found them to be generally fairly healthy. Then they went to the Sports Hall at Basa Avanthard, where they were given supplies: clothing, shoes, toiletries. Most of the children own only the clothes on their backs, and just one pair of shoes (in some of the southern internaty, several children might share a single pair).

The first week was spent preparing for Easter. I taught the children the fine art of Ukrainian easter egg making. Amazingly, very few of them had ever made them before, whereas almost all Ukrainian-Americans have. Real eggs, white, are used. Designs are drawn on with hot beeswax, using a special instrument/stylus called a "pysaltse", and the eggs are put through a series of successively darker dyebaths. It is a form of batik; whatever color an area was when the wax was applied, it will remain that color. In the end, the wax is removed by holding the egg next to a candle flame, and allowing the wax to melt.

It was much more difficult than we could have ever imagined to make pysanky in Ukraine. Our first problem was eggs. There were virtually no white eggs in Vorohta, as all the chickens there seemed to lay only very dark brown eggs. Ruslana, the head of the camp and HUHTC of Canada spent a good part of the first week going door-to-door looking for white eggs, and offering premium prices. Our second problem was candles; the ones sent from Canada quickly got burned up, and a scramble was on to find more. In the end Ruslana bought out the supply at all the local churches and markets.

I was amazed at how much the kids enjoyed making the eggs. I've taught groups of kids in the States, but none seemed as enthralled as these kids, even the ones who didn't participate in much of anything else. One guy, who seemed to have little interest in anything but the band Prodigy, came several times after hours (and skipped other scheduled activities) to make extra eggs (including, I must add a PRODIGY egg). Others would come when they were free and help me out, teaching other kids, minding the dyes, even sharpening pencils.

The children also spent time with Vertep, a folkloric group from Ternopil, learning all about Ukrainian Easter traditions, and learning to sing haivky. They learned how to weave baskets (and a few even completed them, although many were left with what can charitably only be referred to as coasters). They baked Easter breads. We had

an outdoor Good Friday evening service (involving lots of candles), and then the kids took turns in shifts guarding the plashchnytsa (shroud of Christ, an old Ukrainian tradition) around the clock. On Saturday we fasted all day, and on Sunday we had a full church service and blessing of the baskets.

The kitchen had prepared traditional non-Lenten Easter foods--sausage, hard-boiled eggs, beets, butter, cheese, other meats--and the kids put these in their baskets along with their pysanky and bread. We all walked some three (or more) kilometers to the church, where the village priest (along with two of ours) help a regular Easter service. The parishioners involved in our service. They sang the Easter service, then marched around the church singing, as the priests blessed the baskets. (It was an odd sight to see in August, although I must say the weather was much more amenable to an outside service than April, when it often snows or rains.) After, there was a big party at Basa Ukraina, where the kids ate the food from their baskets, sang songs, played games, and hung out on a pleasant afternoon.

There were also lots of non-Easter-related activities. Our kids hiked up the mountains (twice), often in fairly horrible rain, had several discos, a masquerade ball, the official blessing of camp, and several vetry (campfires). They put on shows for us, and quite a few of them were good singers and dancers, as well a couple of comedians. (There were also kids from one internat who had some really interesting skills--juggling, acrobatics, and laying on broken glass.) We had one huge fire, and smaller, individual ones, where we roasted marshmallows and sang songs. A bandurist from Sumy joined us, to the delight of the children, and they sang along with him.

Because of the upcoming national elections this fall in Ukraine, it was decided to teach the kids about the electoral process. We had a camp election for hetman. The children went through the entire electoral process: nomination of candidates, debates, campaigning, and the secret ballot. They made campaign posters, handed out buttons and stickers, got celebrity endorsements, talked to the voters and even made all sorts of promises. In the end, Yura from Lubtyn won, and became commander of the camp for a day.

The second week we prepared for the Kozak Wedding. Vertep taught the kids how to sing all sorts of wedding songs, and taught them about the various wedding traditions. Ukraine is a very musical nation; it is often said that when God was handing out gifts to the nations of the earth, Ukraine was given the gift of song. All Ukrainians sing, whether they can or not, and know lots and lots of folk songs. Any holiday has its associated songs (many of them pagan ones being adapted to Christian holidays), as does any ceremony. Weddings are no exception; there are songs to accompany every stage of the process. The teaching of the songs was quite pleasant. We would take the kids, in groups, on the chair lifts up the mountain, and then settle in a shady spot with them and sing. It was quiet up there, away from the hubbub of all the other activities, and far from the baseballs that had kept hitting us way down below.

It had been decided that the bride would come from our camp, and the groom from Basa Ukraina. We carried out the many stages of the wedding. First there was the **Svatanya**, when the young man would come to girl's house with two friends, and discuss the possibility of marriage with her parents. The girl had the final say, though; if she didn't wish to marry him, she would give him a pumpkin, symbolizing her rejection. It took a brave girl, though, to do this, especially if it meant going against the wishes of her parents. Rejected suitors were known to vandalize homes and spread rumors about girls.

Then there was the **Vinkopletanya** (Wreath-Making); the girl and her friends would get together to make her wedding wreath (for her head) for the wedding, accompanied, of course, by song. This was usually combined with the **Divychny Vechir** (Maiden's Night), the last night she would spend with her single friends. Once a girl married, she would have to wear a scarf, and only associate with other married women. In our case, the event was almost rained out, although some floral work did get done in the sports hall.

Lastly there was the wedding itself. Our bride had been chosen from among the candidates (one selected from each of the twelve groups), who met the following criteria:

- long hair
- Ukrainian-speaking (many of the children were fluent only in Russian)
- looks old enough to be a bride

The girls pulled straws at morning zbirka one morning, and Olya won. She was dressed up in wedding finery, and the others became her bridesmaids. The groom came to her gate (which had been erected the day before to lots of singing), while her brothers tried to extort money from him for her. A deal was struck, and then a fake bride (Mark, our head cook, in drag) was brought out. More arguing ensued, another deal was struck, and the real bride was produced. There was more singing. They then rode off on horses to the chapel; once they came back, they went to her house, where the parents greeted them with bread and salt (the traditional Ukrainian welcome). A wedding tree had been erected (branches covered with ribbons and other gifts) and carried in a procession. The bride and groom then drank together, to singing, but not before tossing the contents of the first two glasses they were offered (right onto me, I might add). This, I learned later, was the Ukrainian equivalent of throwing the bouquet...I am now meant to be married soon!

Then the party began--food, drink, and lots of music. The children, in their groups, had prepared the cold course--canapes, devilled eggs and salads. Our cooks provided the hot--potatoes and lots of meats, including eleven roasted pigs (the twelfth one had escaped from the car coming back from the market; I like to think it is still wandering, free, up in the mountains). There was a traditional band, and a display of horsemanship by the expert horsemen and their horses, who had come in from Kiev.

And then it was all over. We spent the rest of the evening packing and saying our goodbyes. The kids all told me they didn't want to leave, they wanted to stay another month or even longer. For many of them, this camp was the best thing that had ever happened to them, something they would look back upon for years to come. Some might return the following year, but most wouldn't. The train took them all away much later that night. We all cried together; and, tired though I was, I didn't want to leave either. I loved my kids and, the next morning, in the quiet halls and the almost empty building I really missed them. When the train had left the night before, it had taken my heart with it.