



Help Us Help the Children:

Drawing Ukraine's Attention to her Orphans

by Stephan Patten

As a cold and bitter storm raged at the summit of Ukraine's highest Carpathian peak, Mount Hoverla, a young girl tied a white ribbon and made a wish: "I wish that my children do not go through what my sister and I went through in our lives."

Lena Tymchuk and other children who endured that climb with her are all Ukrainian orphans who attended a 1996 two-week summer camp organized by "Help Us Help the Children" (HUHTC), a Toronto-based volunteer organization. Last July, teenagers from five orphanages across Ukraine, their care-givers and 14 HUHTC volunteers turned a former world-class ski jump facility in the little town of Vorokhta into a summer camp.

Ukrainian orphans have been lost during the shuffle of their countries' political and economic upheaval. Malnutrition, a lack of medical care and clothing were not uncommon when HUHTC began delivering aid in 1993. Volunteers often told tales of orphans walking barefoot in the snow. Orphanages are in shocking disrepair: just last May, a building housing an orphanage cracked in half and collapsed.

"You can't reach your potential under these kinds of conditions," said HUHTC founder Ruslana Wrzesnewskyj.

In 1992 she and husband Andy adopted a Ukrainian orphan, Olena. At ten months she was severely malnourished. She weighed no more than a new-born and spent a week on intravenous support at Toronto's Sick Children's Hospital. Today Olena is a healthy and happy four-year-old.

"I remember my husband saying to me, 'This child won the lottery, what about all the others,'" Ruslana recalls.

The others have received drugs, basic medical supplies, food, clothing, toys and hygiene products. Since 1993, HUHTC has brought over \$5.5 million of humanitarian aid to Ukraine's 30,000 orphans. The camp in Vorokhta was an attempt to give them more than material help. It was organized to help develop personal and life skills in the children in an interesting and fun way.

"This was the best camp I've ever been to in my life," said Lena, who has spent her entire youth in an orphanage. She particularly enjoyed it because for the first time she met other orphans like herself. Children came to Vorokhta from five orphanages across Ukraine: Ordzhonokidze, Rajizka, and Molochansk in the east, Kaniv in central Ukraine, and Chervonohrad in the west. Often the children are stigmatized for living in orphanages and labelled "incubators" - a cruel suggestion that they came to be without parents.

For the first time, the orphans rode bicycles, played floor hockey, took rides on a chair lift, or saw the majestic Carpathian mountains. They made and gave each other plastic 'gimp' bracelets.

But Vorokhta was about more than just fun and games. The 14 HUHTC volunteers planned activities that developed independence, self-esteem, time management and problem solving skills, teamwork, cooperation and improved their understanding of such things as nutrition, medical/dental needs and alcohol/drugs.

Developing life skills is necessary at this age because many of the orphans begin to fall through the cracks at about age 17. In Ukraine, orphanages and elementary and high schools are linked; often, orphans live in one building and

for all along.

However, the volunteer work of HUHTC is not over. In 1993 the three ministries responsible for orphans gave them a list of 37 orphanages. HUHTC now visits 150 regularly, some of which are in obscure places.

"We go to the far corners, where there are no main roads," recalled Marta Chyczij, a long-time volunteer. "Once we travelled 47 km through a cornfield - literally, through the field into the place. The kids were asking us, 'How did you find us?', 'How did you know we were here?'"

In spite of the plans for relinquishing control, the volunteers at HUHTC still do what they have done since their first days - the route. The "route" consists of one 40-foot transport truck, two cars, eight people and thousands of kilograms of aid that target about 20 orphanages in two weeks. A typical mission has four routes going at once. In total, they have gone on ten missions.

"You are never the same after you come back from a route," said Ruslana.



Ukrainian orphans at the Vorokhta summer camp in Ukraine's Carpathian mountains.



cross a small yard to get to their school. These enclosed compounds are called 'School-Orphanages'. But, because of this linkage, when grade 10 or 11 is over, so is their stay at the orphanage. Theoretically, a path is supposed to exist to keep them in the system.

"Practically, a lot them don't land where they're supposed to," said Ruslana. "A lot of these kids end up nowhere: on the street, in prisons, or as prostitutes."

One early Sunday, the children welcomed a visitor from Kyiv - Ukraine's top banker, Victor Yushchenko, Director of the National Bank of Ukraine. He was moved by what he saw at Vorokhta. "The style and method of working with the children is very, very good," he said during an interview. "The heart of the matter is that you have chosen a critical path to the child's soul."

Yushchenko's involvement has been a tremendous boon to the project's long term goals because he has been able to increase awareness at the highest levels of government and mobilize capital. Through joint efforts, a Ukrainian HUHTC foundation is now in place and starting to take an active role, which is what Canadians had hoped

One of her most memorable moments is arriving at the Molochansk orphanage on Graduation Day - May 28th - and seeing girls dressed in graduation gowns walking down the stairs together. "These were the dresses we had packed in Toronto, the same ones we had fitted for the girls in December, and here they were," she recalled emotionally.

Last year, 32 Canadians and 50 Ukrainians travelled 28,500 km. visiting 171 orphanages and 27,100 orphans, and delivering \$1.9 million of aid. That works out to about \$71 of aid per child - equivalent to about a months wages in Ukraine.

HUHTC's budget is based on donations, fundraisers, and grants. Over the last three years they have received about \$620,000 from CIDA. The Canadian Embassy in Ukraine donated \$10,000 for the camp at Vorokhta.

Each penny raised helps build the orphans' dreams. In Lena's case, the dream is for a better childhood for her own children.

Stephan Patten was one of the HUHTC volunteers who worked at Vorokhta this past summer. ●