

Three Russian Kindergartens

— Mary Lee Plumb-Mentjes

The kindergartens our small group of four from ISIS Cultural Outreach International visited in central Russia this past summer started around 1989, when glasnost had opened Russia's doors to the world in the midst of the chaos ensuing from perestroika.

At our first stop in Irkutsk in Siberia, near Lake Baikal and the border of Russia and Mongolia, German and Scandinavian Waldorf educators came and worked first with mothers of children with special needs and then with those wanting a Waldorf school. The kindergarten is in an old section of town with great charm but also many challenges, including drafty buildings, and until recently a dependence on a well on the street from which water had to be hauled to the kindergarten on a sled, even in bitter winter weather. The Anchorage Waldorf School will continue to help raise money to winterize another set of windows to hold the heat from the large, centrally located masonry stove in the nap room with its bunks for the children who stay all day.

When our group visited, a room full of earnest women of varied ages gathered around the kindergarten's low tea table to discuss issues and needs and to enjoy the beautifully prepared, nourishing snacks. We felt very much at home in the carefully crafted spaces of their kindergarten. We heard much that was positive for the future: parents have been helping to beautifully renovate an upper story so that the kindergarten program can expand. But then we learned that they will only be renting the new space, not buying it, as hoped, along with an expanded wild play area. They had raised the money to buy, but by the time the "proper paperwork" was presented to the government, the opportunity to buy had passed. This story of forever seeming to file the "wrong paperwork" was repeated over and over at the different centers. We were impressed how this evolving group of women managed to keep going.

Our second stop was in Yekaterinburg, the third largest city in Russia. There we saw photos of the lovely Waldorf festivals that had been celebrated in

the past at a school no longer in existence. The photos brought back memories of festivals we'd each participated in back home. That school and others did not survive the challenge of the Russian Orthodox church taking over the buildings, and outright opposition to the development of Waldorf schools. We heard a fierce, lone woman tell us about how she continues a small, unlicensed kindergarten in her small apartment, carrying the thread forward, longing for a place in the country where the children could play in nature, a situation not easily found in such a large city.

Kirov was the third stop of our ISIS journey. This time, Nina, a short, robust woman last visited by ISIS about ten years ago, directs a State "Waldorf" kindergarten, bearing the numbered sign of the many State kindergartens on its exterior. Inside, 67 children spend their long days in three beautiful classrooms. Nina, an anthroposophist, describes that the essence of a Waldorf kindergarten is in "how" things are done and how the children are kept active.

A harvest festival had just been celebrated before our visit, and vegetables were still laid out on beautifully draped tables. Elsewhere pink dominated; the filmy, transparent materials used might be synthetic, but the effect was still there. On the shelves were row on row of handmade animals, perhaps dating back to visits by Monica Gold and the early impulse of ISIS to bring toys and dolls made with love, building peace heart to heart.

The eurythmist among us adapted her offering to better meet those unfamiliar with the art, and the kindergarten provided knit balls for the development of a social exercise. The design of the balls was familiar, but the balls were made of synthetic material and of harsher colors, and stuffed with plastic. It is hard for even a kindergarten that is not struggling to find natural materials to replace toys.

We were immersed in warmth by the teachers at this kindergarten and at the struggling Waldorf school. We may have been somewhat repelled by the institutional kitchen and an approach to nutrition dat-

ing back decades, but the singing and line dancing that arose spontaneously to involve us all after our anthroposophic workshops provided a once-in-a-lifetime experience. Unlike in Irkutsk where a diverse group of individuals each seemed deeply involved in decision making, here it was Nina whose strong will forms the school, who trains the teachers and helpers, and probably faces off any challenges from authorities on what she regards as essential.

We felt the contrast between her kindergarten, where the teachers were paid, and the situation of the Waldorf school teachers in Kirov, who spent their tuition money to make their building habitable after it had been turned over to them in a trashed condition, minus doors, radiators, and toilets. Those teachers spent their summer making it beautiful, only to be told they had filed the “wrong paperwork” and could not hold classes there until this was fixed. Thus, they must pay rent for both their own building and for use of space at the State school until the problem is rectified. Gathered around the kindergarten tea table, we could feel the weary, but brave unity of purpose, in a group that has faced repeated challenges.

Later, still in Kirov, we visited a private Waldorf kindergarten with twelve children, where the lead teacher had left the State “Waldorf” kindergarten on friendly terms five years ago, and converted an apartment in an old, disreputable-looking building into a place of peace and beauty. I was glad that we had gone to the State kindergarten first because the contrasts would have made what was missing at the State school stick out. Here was the quiet enclosure, the safe place for early childhood to slowly unfold. This was not part of an institution. Here, the aesthetic thoughtfulness in each element of our shared meal was experienced.

Around glasnost Russia had many visitors, who brought funds and training to start Waldorf-based initiatives. Now there is the tendency to think that the great need has ceased. At least in Kirov, which comparatively speaking is close to western Europe, just thirteen hours by train from Moscow, there still seems to be a need for experienced Waldorf kindergarten teachers to model the quiet, subtle background fundamentals that underlie festivals and puppet plays, as well as a love of natural materials, and use of fresh produce. The further challenge is that natural materials and fresh produce are difficult to obtain and, where available, they are not cheap given the low incomes of most Russians. ♦

Future Travel and Support

If you or your kindergarten are interested in becoming a sister kindergarten with one in central Russia or would like to hear more about ISIS travel plans to return to Russia in July 2013, contact Mary Lee Plumb-Mentjes by e-mail at maryplumbmentjes@yahoo.com.

Support is also needed for the Moscow kindergarten training center and to help Russian kindergarten teachers attend a conference next fall—a train ticket to Moscow can cost a month’s wages. You can read about the training course on the IASWECE website under Country Projects at www.iaswece.org/country_projects/around_the_world/former_soviet_union.aspx.

If you are interested, you can send a check made payable to WECAN marked “Russia” to WECAN, 285 Hungry Hollow Road, Spring Valley, New York 10977. For further information, contact Susan Howard at s.howard@iaswece.org.



Photo courtesy of Mary Lee Plumb-Mentjes