

## Our History

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### **Apathy, Agony and Triumph on the Streets of Odessa, Ukraine**

Not long after I moved to Odessa in 2006 and first began the work of This Child Here, one question disturbed me, **"Why don't kids leave the streets?"** I met non profit workers in Kiev who simply would not give any food or clothing to kids on the streets unless they came to live at their shelter. To me this was heartless. Though I still would not take this approach, I understand better why they do. To help kids, kids have to help themselves.



In Odessa, I never saw youth or children starving. There was always a way to get food, by begging for it or for change to buy it. More often they made money by petty theft. Most youth and children lived in groups; in their own way, they took care of each other. I have heard of only one child who froze to death. I suspect hard drugs were a factor in that tragedy. They make a drug called Baltushka which means "to shake". It's cold medicine containing ephedrine mixed with vinegar and potassium permanganate, shaken, boiled and injected into a vein. The cost is minimal, maybe \$5-\$10 for a batch, but the effects are brutal: neuropathy, loss of motor skills and speech. A youth or child high on this does not care about life or death.

The basics of food, clothes and a place to sleep are most often met, even in the crawl spaces below

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apartments and in the servicing bunkers of the hot water, steam and sewer systems. Some kids I met who were youth in their mid teens back in 2006, are now young adults in their mid to early twenties and still on the streets. They no longer live in groups, but in pairs or alone. They have become young homeless adults. They make money with odd jobs, selling wares on wooden tables on the streets or by carrying bags or in construction. If they use Baltushka, they can die at an early age. The number of homeless youth and children since 2005 has decreased, but the number of homeless adults, young and old, I believe, is increasing, and due in large part because of Ukraine's financial crisis.

Though the focus of my work would later move toward keeping youth and children from going down that path, it was, at first about trying to get kids off the streets. This was not easy. The reasons are many, but **the primary reason they choose not to leave the streets is because they do not want to. Freedom, some say, is the first addiction.** On the streets, even given the discomfort, life is carefree. There are no rules; there is no school; there is no responsibility; there are no adults to obey.

Street kids also lack the imagination of a life that is better; they see kids their own age well dressed and



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going to school, but never believe they can have such a life. They lack the resilience necessary to forge such a life, and the belief in themselves needed to succeed in life. Self-characteristics defined by Erik Erickson such as initiative and industry are minimal. Perhaps, more importantly, they consider the group of kids they live with to be family... *more* family than what they have for a biological family. This is the issue of trust. At the core of that issue is a history of abuse. Almost every street kid has been abused: physical abuse, emotional abuse, sexual abuse by a parent, adult friend or relative are the primary forms. A child can be happy even in poverty if he or she is properly loved at home. But an abused child, even in a financially stable home, will run away or be given away by the family of abuse.

I am not saying anything here that has not been written or spoken before. I will say, though, that thousands of hours on the streets, under buildings and down in the sewers of Odessa with these kids in the first years of my life in Ukraine affirmed it for me personally. I had the crushing disappointments over and over again of leading kids to the doors of a shelter, into the office and rooms that could be there's, only to have them flee at night back to the streets. I traveled to cities all night by train to find them and bring them home to the shelter they came from, only to see them leave again.

In one memorable conversation with Alla Soroka, a psychologist, over hot tea on a cold afternoon in some dive near the market, I was ranting on about the pointlessness of what we were doing. "We give them food and they won't come to the shelter; we give them clothes; we take them to the clinic when they are sick and they won't come to the shelter to stay. What's the point of all this? What can we do?" To which she replied,

"Robert, we can be near."

Now and then I succeeded, but after a time, I realized it was just as important if not more so to focus on the ones who were always within reach and those who lived in shelters and who were "at risk" to go to the streets. The first of these facilities I turned to was the private non-profit shelter called The Way Home, the agency I met when I first arrived in Odessa. They embraced me and my work, gave me a desk in the office and more importantly, the space to imagine ways to help. If I could not bring kids in from the streets, "**Then what could I do?**"

By the end of 2008, I was paying Alla Soroka to talk one on one and in groups with kids who lived at The Way Home. Not long after this I began paying two other psychologists to work with "at risk" kids in groups in public school--a program I used to participate in while serving as a pastor in New Mexico.

By this time, I was paying for clothes for all 25 kids at the beginning of summer and winter. I paid for medicine, for piano and dance lessons, math and English tutoring. I paid for kids to ride horses as a form of horse-therapy, for kids on sailboats in the summer. I bought tents, food, fishing poles for summer camp. Later I would ship 84 bicycles collected in the states, to Ukraine.

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I paid for tutoring lessons in Math and English. I bought books for Andre because he was obsessed with reading. These were not comic books; this was Jack London, Jules Verne, Mark Twain. I pegged him as our first college student. But there were setbacks to all this. Some kids would not follow through with tutoring lessons. One night Andre and another boy broke into my office, stole a digital camera and ran to the streets. Two weeks later, Andre was pulling a wire out of the ground to sell the copper, but the wire was carrying several thousand volts; he was electrocuted. Though eventually he recovered, his head is scarred from the burns.

Once I brought fifteen used digital cameras from the states and had a photo class for our kids and an exhibition of their photography downtown in Odessa. I did all these things and more in an attempt to boost self esteem, to inspire and motivate these kids. Eventually, running low on American ideas, I turned to my Ukrainian counterparts. **"What can they do?"**

By the beginning of the fourth year, I was leaning more and more on the wisdom of Alla Soroka. I decided



to use what she does well and invest in it. Alla takes a personal interest in these children. It's not just a job. What she does professionally is help kids with issues of trust, accountability and responsibility. She gives time to meeting with kids individually and she works with them in groups. These "trainings" as she calls them, are really a full day of interactive and non-competitive games sandwiched between conversations about what kids just did and felt in the activities. It's intense, well planned and yet flexible enough to focus on a youth or child who needs it. What happens in the room with these youth and children is really quite remarkable. Most of these kids have never had such an experience of interaction and conversation. They don't get this kind of learning experience in the standard orphanage.

Alla was trained by the Quakers; she went to South Africa with the program called Alternatives to Violence and she has modified it to work with kids in Ukraine. She has experience with kids in prison, with college students and many, many hours with me on the streets. I started with Alla's work at The Way Home and with street kids. Then, we began to visit orphanages in the Odessa Oblast (or state of Odessa). When I moved back to the states in 2010 for my own financial stability,

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Alla became my project manager. Soon she had three or four others working with her; now we have fifteen to twenty people available to do this work. The latest addition was our own Mariam who we funded through university. Most of these people have other jobs for income and work weekends, late afternoons or evenings.

By 2012, I realized I had to find ways to support these people working for us. To me, that meant not only paying them for the hours they put in, but meeting with them each time I came to Odessa for dinner and conversation, affirming the work they do. Some of my energy was shifting then to people helping youth and children. Some of the money you gave us paid for a portion of the orthodontist's bill of one of those staff people named Alyona. In the future, I would like to help our best workers finish degrees in child psychology, or graduate in a field that enables them to earn a living wage so they can continue work with us. One of our best staff people is a woman who is also a lawyer. She does mostly documentation but makes a living wage which allows her to do what she really loves: work with children. I can educate someone in most any field in university including law school for about \$1200 a year. Medical school would not be much more. I am also eager, of course, to pay for education for children who live at The Way Home. If a child shows promise, college usually means technical school; university means an academic degree. See below Mariam, our university student in psychology, addressing the Association of Psychologists and Psychotherapists of Odessa. This is a young lady who, as a child, sold plastic bags to people at the open market.

Rumor is, Ukraine will close all orphanages by 2017 and move to foster care. Recently, in the past year, we



began to recruit and train foster families. Dozens of families have been through our orientation. Some pursue it further; some decline when they see what the responsibilities really are. As in America, foster families in Ukraine receive money from the state. We work to discourage those in it for the money. Alla has gained some respect from the local government or social services office. Now they use us to work with prospective families. The Way Home has written for a grant that will allow them to do this work. This Child Here will train their trainers and provide the content to

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prepare those foster families.

The final area that is new to us is peacemaking. The conflict continues in eastern Ukraine between separatists and pro-Russians on the one hand and those loyal to the sovereignty and independence of Ukraine on the other. There are degrees of attitude one way and the other. Though everyone I know in Odessa (and certainly all street kids and kids in orphanages) speaks Russian, it's a small minority people in Odessa who would want Russia to annex Odessa. Nevertheless, many people feel an emotional tie to Russia and not just because of language. Some families are spread across the borders. Now that they have experienced war and continued conflict, healing will take years. This year and in the years to come, we will do our part to in working toward peace.

Robert Gamble, D.Min.

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