

# Potatoes and Soap

## A Russian Camp Director's Dilemma



August 19, 1991, is a date marked by Russians as the *putch*, the line of demarcation between “the previous times” and the new stage of *glasnost* and *perestroika*, first introduced by Gorbachev in 1985. The tanks that rolled into Moscow that August heralded the fall of the Soviet Union in December 1991 and subsequent division into fifteen separate states. This was to begin a decade of optimism followed by pessimism, a time of uncertainty, a time of upheaval, but, most of all, a time of transformation. For camps and other youth programs, the changes were perhaps more profound than in any other institution — forcing administrators to cope with the essentials of providing food and shelter with the few available rubles. One Russian director, hearing of American directors’ current concerns of hiring qualified staff, government regulations, insurance costs, and marketing and camper recruitment, responded, “They think they have problems. I can’t find potatoes or soap for my camp.”

## Profiles of Russian Camps

### Yunga (Cabin Boy)

Children dressed in nautical uniforms and blue caps march in formation at the formal opening ceremony of *Yunga* Camp near Anapa on the Black Sea. During each session, the 400 campers, ages six to sixteen, participate in themed programs such as "The School of the Old Boatswain" where they learn navigation, sea sign language, Morse code, and study the flora and fauna of the Black Sea. Director, Svetlana Negulitsa, holds an advanced degree in tourism and recreational services and has administered the program for the past six years. Counselors and instructors are selected from the leading students of the Taganrog Teachers' Training College and receive additional training in sea skills. In recent years, counselors from Australia, Great Britain, and the United States have also participated.

For twenty-five years, the Novorossiysk Steamship Line has subsidized the camp sessions for the children of employees, although other children may attend at the full tuition. *Yunga* is also licensed to provide health services and treatment for children with lung and breathing problems. Operating mainly during the summer, there are also special sessions for families and orphanages in other seasons.

### Rebyachaya Respublika (Children's Republic)

Located on a lake in the midst of a Siberian pine forest, *Rebyachaya Respublika* is owned and operated year-round by the Youth Affairs Committee of the Tyumen Administration. The buildings give the appearance of a small college campus, with dormitories housing 350 children and over 100 staff. After fourteen years, the camp continues to develop new programs and facilities. As the CCUSA headquarters for interviews of applicants from the Urals, Siberia, and the Far East, many American directors have visited the camp.

Larisa Shilova is a hands-on director, active in all facets of the daily life of the camp and communicating with counselors, instructors, and campers. The camp program is organized by development centers — music, arts and crafts, video studio, computer clubs, rock climbing, ropes course, and many others. The talented staff is composed of students or graduates of Tyumen State University and Tobolsk State Teachers' Training College, as well as international counselors from many countries. Children attend *Rebyachaya Respublika* by selection of the Youth Affairs Committee or through exchange programs with cities in the Ural area, Siberia, and the Kazakhstan Republic. Camp fees are on a sliding scale, based on the parents' income, with social funds covering 50-100 percent of the tuition.

### Uralskaya Beriozka (Birch Trees of the Urals)

In stark contrast to the nearby industrial city of Chelyabinsk, Camp *Uralskaya Beriozka* stands in a pristine birch forest. For twenty years, the Chelyabinsk Metallurgical Plant, owned by the federal government, has provided camp sessions for the children of employees who pay only 10 to 50 percent of the cost. Some children from low-income families are fully subsidized by government funds. Highlights of the camp include a press center, children's television studio, adventure survival programs in the taiga wilderness, and river rafting. The camp also operates during the fall, winter, and spring holidays, with special sessions for older youth and families.

Anton Denisov, who holds a degree in higher pedagogical education, is a creative director who is implementing contemporary ways of working with children and new ideas for programming. He has previously attended the International Camping Congress in Australia and the 2004 ACA National Conference in San Francisco and enjoys hosting international counselors in his camp each year. Special courses at the Chelyabinsk Teachers' Training University prepare counselors, and additional workshops are conducted by trade unions, social security funds, and the city administration. A core support and administrative staff are permanent and live locally.



### History of the Russian Camp Movement

The history of Russian children's camps spans more than a century, with an extensive network of camps overseen by the Central Committee of the Young Pioneer Organization. At the time of the fall of the Soviet Union, it is estimated that there were 123,000 camps in the U.S.S.R. Camp activities were highly structured for the children who proudly wore the red scarves of the Young Pioneers and absorbed the tenets of Communism. The largest camps in the world were located on the Black Sea: *Artek*, now in Ukraine, with 5,000 campers and *Orlyonok* with 3,000 campers. Attendance at those camps was a privilege reserved for Young Pioneers who displayed the strongest leadership traits or excelled in athletic and cultural competitions. Camps, often located on the Black Sea or in other resort areas, were also a respite from the unhealthy conditions of the crowded cities. They provided clean, modern facilities and the most appealing and nutritious foods. Financing came mostly from industry trade unions or state funds. Nearly every child between the ages of seven and sixteen had the opportunity to attend camp at a minimal cost.

### Transition to a Market Economy

The move to a market economy has resulted in significant changes in the social policies of the Russian Federation. Olga Torgovkina, who directed a Russian camp for nineteen years and was also an intern at Seacamp

in Florida, now oversees the operation of all camps in the republic of Mari-El. She explains that camps had previously been financed almost entirely through federal funds and now receive a much smaller portion of their income from the government. On the positive side, camps are now authorized to recruit campers in addition to those sent by the unions and industries and to charge fees for the spaces in their camps. Major differences exist between Russian and American camps in systems of accounting and taxation, employment practices, government regulations, and staff training.

### Russian Counselors Enrich American Camps

Because attending camp has been such an integral part of Russian childhood, there are many talented young adults anxious to experience American camps. Each year several thousand Russian counselors serve in American summer camps as cultural exchange visitors through the services of international placement services. Although the number of participants was significantly reduced during the summer of 2003 with new Homeland Security policies and staff changes in the American Embassy in Moscow, the number of counselors in 2004 increased. Valery Kostin, Russian director for Camp Counselors U.S.A. (CCUSA) for the past fifteen years, coordinated the placement of 1,761 Russian counselors and support staff in American camps. Another thirty-one counselors from Australia, Finland, Great Britain, the Netherlands, New

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Zealand, Japan, and the U.S. were placed in Russian camps. Kostin attended camps in the U.S.S.R. for nine years as a child and was a counselor and camp director at *Artek* for ten years. He is passionate about the value of the camp experience in both countries and works tirelessly for camps in Russia and the U.S.

CCUSA Counselor Marina Lukanina from Moscow calls the summers of 1999-2002, which she spent at Camp Med-o-Lark in Maine, the best summers of her life. She feels that her life was enriched by the director, Jay Stager, who provided an example of a successful businessman with a special talent for working with children. As a result of her years in Maine, her goal is to establish and run her own camp in the future.

Sasha Burkovsky, age twenty-six, is a native of Tomsk and has worked at two well-known camps in Russia, *Orlyonok* on the Black Sea and *Rebyachaya Respublika* in the Tyumen Region. Through CCUSA, he came to Camp Friendship in 1999 as a counselor and is now a year-round program director at the private camp in Virginia. With experience in both Russian and American camps, Sasha has a unique perspective for comparison.

He acknowledges that, when he first came to the U.S., the differences seemed profound to him, but those lines blurred as he worked with American children. “American camps

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have such a variety of activities. It seems that the objective is to keep the campers' hands busy, while Russian camps' activities are focused on a theme, and staff endeavor to keep the children's minds busy. American camps seem more skills-based, while Russian programs are more creative and fanciful," he says. Russian camps, by contrast, have had more emphasis on inter-camp competitions, cultural and athletic, and concerts and performances with all children and staff involved in some way.

Sasha comments that Russian children are more active and easier to supervise, and they are not accustomed to as many choices of foods in camp as Americans. He is amazed at the problem of obese children which he has never seen in Russia. He is also impressed with the ability of American camps to accommodate children with special needs. In Russia, those children tend to be more isolated.

#### The Future of Russian Camps

Russian camps, originally created as recreation and health development institutions, are now offering more educational programs, with greater attention to character development. Both Russian and American camps place the individual child at the core of their philosophies. The programs of Russian camps once emphasized large group activities such as dramatic and musical productions, rather than activities that developed individual skills such as tennis, archery, and horseback riding found in American camps.

Torgovkina says that another similarity is "the special atmosphere found only in camps which is created by dedicated professionals who work with children to recognize their value, build their character, and develop their abilities." She feels that it is important for Russian camps to set up nongovernmental organizations and to strengthen camping associations for educational programs and legislative oversight.

Russian camp professionals have

**FACTS**

**About Russian Camps**

- Russia has the largest number of camps of any country in the world: In 2003, over 6 million children attended 51,760 camps.
- Camps are operated by the federal or regional governments, trade unions, companies, sports clubs. About 1.2 percent of the camps are privately owned.
- Approximately 30,000 day camps exist, based at schools, recreational centers, and sports club sites.
- Camps are regulated by the Ministry of Labor and Social Development and the Ministry of Education.
- The Russian Camping Association is a volunteer organization that develops and organizes educational events. The elected president, Galina Kupriyanova, is the director of Youth Policy of the Ministry of Education.
- Most camps have direct agreements with universities and colleges to prepare educators and specialists. Four universities are engaged in research and have prepared more than 100 dissertation theses investigating child development and the camp environment.

shown amazing resiliency and perseverance during the past thirteen years as they have rebuilt the camp industry under new conditions. The fall of communism dictated the need to redefine their missions, goals, and programs to meet the needs of future generations. Russian directors and administrators have systematically studied camps around the world and have recreated their camps to reflect the best of all. The Russian economy has shown continuous growth each year since 1999, and all indications point to a positive future for the children of Russia and the camps they love. ■

Photos: Courtesy of Camp Med-o-Lark, Washington, Maine.

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