

O C R E E C A S

N e w s

Number 2
Spring 1999

The Oberlin Center for
Russian, East European,
& Central Asian Studies

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OCREECAS FUNDS FIRST INTERNSHIPS TO RUSSIA



Clockwise, from left: Amy Paris, Elena Vlasova, James Morgan, Olga Teben'kova, Wesley Steele, and Andrea Boehland.

This past January, OCREECAS and the Winter Term Committee funded a unique new project. Visiting Assistant Professor of Russian James Morgan and three Oberlin College students traveled to Russia to volunteer at the Tuzha Internat, an orphanage for Russian youth. Seniors Andrea Boehland, Amy Paris, and Wesley Steele spent three weeks living and working at the orphanage.

James Morgan first visited the Internat in 1993; this January was his sixth trip to Tuzha. He has taken people with him several times, including his parents, but he had never taken a group of students before this year. Morgan wanted "to give people a chance to forge a relationship with this place, and to foster interest in Tuzha in younger people while immersing them in the Russian language."

Tuzha, a small settlement with a population of only 5,000, is located approximately 800 miles from Moscow, in the Kirov region of Russia. Most of its residents are farmers, although many commute to nearby cities to work.

The Tuzha Internat was founded in 1960, and serves as a combined foster home and school for approximately 130 children, aged 7 to 17. Although it is described as an orphanage, in reality very few of its residents are orphans; the vast majority do have at least one living parent or relative. Their families, however, are not capable of taking care of them. "Some are in jail, some are alcoholic, some are in hospital, some have been judged unfit to parent," says Morgan. They are often brought to the Internat by the police, the court system, or by hospitals.



The children of the Tuzha Internat.

The older children share rooms with two or three roommates, and the younger children are housed in large groups. During the day, they attend classes such as math, science, civic law, and even first aid and survival skills. "The Russian curriculum is very different from ours; it's very structured and content-based, with much less of an emphasis on creativity," says Morgan. After nine years of general education, students have the option of taking two years of vocational training classes such as cooking, auto repair, carpentry, or sewing. This helps prepare them for trade school, where many of them go after they graduate from the Internat.

During the summers, the Internat doesn't hold classes; instead, the children work in the fields, tending crops and preparing for winter. In exchange for their work, they receive wages, much like an allowance. Former Internat residents often return to the orphanage to work during the summer in exchange for room, board, and a little money.

There are about 40 staff members at the Internat. These include teachers, kitchen staff, overnight helpers, the director and administration, and a nurse. The director, Nikolai Ivanovich Labor, attended the Internat as a child, as did several other staff members.

The Oberlin group arrived at the Tuzha Internat on January 12, after two days in Moscow and a 12-hour train journey. They were housed in the old nurses' quarters inside the orphanage, which had been converted into a small apartment. Normally, the apartment is used as part of a program designed to wean students off the structured schedule of the Internat in preparation for the real world. Two or three of the older students are allowed to live there for a weeklong period, are given an allowance for food and supplies, and are responsible for being independent for the week. Since no one lives there regularly, Amy Paris said, "We didn't feel like we were displacing anyone." The entire group found the conditions quite pleasant; the apartment was "small, but clean," said Amy. Although the apartment did not have hot water, the group had almost unlimited access to the school's banya, or Russian bath house, located just a short walk from the main building. At mealtimes, the Oberlin group ate in the cafeteria with the students. They were very satisfied with the food, although Wesley Steele confessed that "while we usually ate what the kids ate, sometimes we were given fancier forms, or larger portions... we were definitely given preferential treatment." He added, however, that the children reassured him that the food was generally good and always plentiful.

"A lot of people probably pity these kids, but it's the parents I feel sorry for. They're missing out on all these great moments in their kids' lives."

The Oberlin students' daily responsibilities consisted of spending time with the children and simply getting to know them. Every few days, they would sit in on classes, although Amy confessed that at times "We could be a bit of a distraction for the students." More time was spent with the children during their free time, participating in sports such as volleyball, basketball, and

frisbee, as well as outdoor activities. The Americans often walked around the town of Tuzha with the older students, and on several occasions went for walks in the forest with large groups of the children. “They knew the woods so well!” said Andrea Boehland. “They would just stop in a clearing and build a fire. They were great tour guides.”

In addition to spending time with the children, each of the American students was responsible for an individual Winter Term project. Andrea researched Russia’s healthcare system, which involved an extended tour of Tuzha’s hospital. “I was really impressed with the hospital facilities. I saw the hospital’s operating rooms, and they were well-equipped and very clean,” said Andrea. She added, “There was a real sense that people were there to get BETTER, not just stay there, and that was a great feeling.” Amy researched the history of Tuzha, visiting the local museums and interviewing various people around the town.

Last year, Human Rights Watch, a U.S.-based international human rights monitoring organization, published a report on the deplorable conditions of orphanages in Russia. The report stated that “from the moment the state assumes their care, orphans in Russia- of whom 95% still have a living parent- are exposed to shocking levels of cruelty and neglect.” Although the conditions at the Tuzha Internat are not representative of Russian orphanages in general, this particular facility certainly did not fit into that category. “There was no shortage of love in that place,” said Andrea. The children were healthy, happy, and well-fed, and many thought that the Internat was the best possible place they could be, according to Amy and Andrea. Wesley commented that “A lot of people probably pity these kids, but really it’s the parents that I feel sorry for. They’re missing out on all these great moments in their kids’ lives.”

All the members of the group were extremely impressed with the Internat and the children. Everyone was surprised by how open and honest all the children were about their backgrounds. James Morgan offered some insight into this: “There’s a stereotype of Internat kids as wild, or ‘scarred’, although people in Tuzha seem a lot more tolerant than they used to be. Once the children see that you’re on their side and really want to be with them, they open up quickly.” He commented that “the

kids seem to get along really well with the adults.” Andrea thought that part of the reason the school ran so smoothly was that the adults really trusted the children. She commented on the system of small privileges and freedoms that were given to the residents as they got older, and how it was balanced out by increasing responsibilities. “The older kids had some serious homework!” she said. Wesley got the impression from the children that the reason they related so well to the adults at the orphanage was that many members of the staff, including the director, had attended the Internat themselves..

The Oberlin students were also struck by the extremely close relationships among all the children. “They were so supportive of each other,” said Amy. “There was a definite hierarchy; the older children took care of the younger ones.” Andrea also said, “I was amazed by how well everyone played together. When we went for walks, the older kids were always taking head counts and looking out for the younger ones, and everyone was having fun.” Although the students at the Internat “ran and laughed and played, just like any kids” according to Wesley, they all seemed to the Oberlin group to be more mature and thicker-skinned than American children of the same age.

Should the money that was spent on the Oberlin group’s tickets and travel expenses have been given to the orphanage instead?

In addition to time spent at the Internat, the Oberlin group also donated clothes, money, and medicine to the orphanage. Before they left, both Wesley and Amy collected contributions of clothing and money from churches near their homes, and all the members of the group received donations from friends and family members. Originally, the group planned to use the money they collected to buy clothes and large amounts of medicine to give to the Internat. Unfortunately, customs regulations made it impossible to take large quantities of medicine into Russia. They brought some aspirin and bandages, along with four large bags of clothes, but decided to wait to purchase medicine until they were in Moscow. Once they arrived, however, they changed their minds again. “When we

were presented with all this medicine, there was the problem of what kind they needed, and how much of it to buy,” said Amy. “We didn’t know if there was one thing they needed more urgently than another.” They ultimately decided to simply give the money to the Internat and let them decide how to use it. “They have this council made up of staff and students, and they all decided how to spend the money... it was really great,” said Andrea.

“Perhaps this one visit won’t have a huge impact on the rest of their lives, but part of this trip was also about making connections that might help them in the future.”

One question that understandably arose about the project was whether or not the Internat would have benefitted more from direct aid than from the Oberlin group’s visit. Russia’s economy is far from stable, and state organizations like Russian orphanages have suffered as a result. Should the money that was spent on the Oberlin group’s tickets and travel expenses have been given to the orphanage instead? When confronted with this question before leaving, there were mixed reactions from the group members. Although most anticipated that their trip would be worthwhile, Amy acknowledged that “It’s always a question of whether money should be spent in giving direct short-term aid, or whether you can take the money and try and do more.” In retrospect, however, all four members agreed that their time spent at the Internat had been extremely valuable, both for the children and for the Oberlin group itself. “If it were a terrible place, maybe just money would have been better,” said Andrea. “But since this orphanage was obviously beyond basic needs, I think what we did was very valuable.” Wesley added that “Although we didn’t spend that much time with the kids, the time we spent was quality time. Perhaps this one visit won’t have a huge impact on the rest of their lives, but part of this trip was also about spreading the word about this place and making connections that might help them in the future.” Amy also added, “A lot of these kids really need

attention, not because of the quality of the staff at the Internat, but because there is only so much they can do. It was good to be able to provide that for a while.”

The only thing the Oberlin students would have changed about the trip was the time frame; everyone wished it had been longer. “We felt like guests a lot of the time,” said Andrea. “It was only in the last week that we really started to feel comfortable with the kids.” Wesley added, “It was a shame that there were some kids there that we never really got to know.” All, however, said that they would love to do it again, and hope to go back to the Internat in the future.

James Morgan was extremely pleased at the success of the trip. “The group was ideal,” he said. “They never complained, even though life in Russia isn’t easy, and they all really liked the kids. Even though it was often intimidating being there, our students were all fearless.” The students also commented on how well the group got along. “We worked really well together,” said Andrea. “At first, it seemed like we were all very different people, but we found out we were really similar after all. I think it was a really quality group of people with good reasons for wanting to go.” Hopefully there will be more groups like it in future years.



Relaxing by the fire in the Tuzha forest.

From Alumni

Susan Davies, '62, taught at Stanford for 3 years after receiving her masters degree. She is now pursuing a career in psychology.

Rob Brown, '67, a law partner in a Rochester, NY firm, represents a U.S. client with operations in Novgorod, as well as a Russian client with business in Rochester.

Alice Kurtz, '69, worked for the Current Digest of the Soviet Press in Columbus, Ohio after graduating from Oberlin.

As the director of corporate communications at the Hershey Foods Corporation, **John Long, '75**, maintains business contacts in Moscow, and spent a week there in 1996 interviewing public relations agencies.

Ruth Cherson, '81, works as a Program Manager at the United States Energy Association in Washington, DC. She works with the electric power sector in Central and Eastern Europe, through a program which provides training funded by the U.S. Agency for International Development, with contributions from both U. S. and C.E.E. companies.

A PhD candidate in Russian/Soviet history at U.C. Berkeley, **Adrienne Edgar, '82**, spent all of 1997 doing research for her dissertation. Before entering the PhD. Program, she worked as an editor of the World Policy Journal in New York, where she was responsible for coverage of the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. She also worked as a consultant on human rights in the former Soviet Union for the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service, and as an editor for the Center for East-West Security Studies in New York.

Adreon Hubbard, '85, taught Russian for six years at a Baltimore high school. She also used her Russian while teaching English as a Second Language to Russian emigres at a community college. She now teaches ESL to elementary school students in Baltimore.

Karen Davis Evans-Romaine, '86, is an Assistant Professor of Russian at Ohio University. She was also a Fulbright Representative for the Russian Federation, based in Moscow, from 1993 to 1996. She went back to Russia with a group of OU students in the spring quarter of 1998.

Donald Bostwick, '87, has worked since graduation as a technical information analyst for the American Chemical Society in Columbus, Ohio, translating, analyzing, and encoding information in chemical patents and patent applications from Russia and other Eastern European countries. In June of 1994, as part of a master's program in labor and human resources at Ohio State University, Donald worked as an intern for two companies in Kazan, in the Tatarstan Republic. After returning home, he used his experience in Kazan, as well as his study of Russian employment practices and labor laws, to publish a report of his observations and recommendations. Since then, he has written and published a white paper providing advice about employment matters to companies with little experience in Russia. Donald is now deciding whether to continue his research on employment practices, to become a travel consultant for people going to Russia on business, or to pursue a Ph.D. in management and human resources.

Peter Riggs, '88, works for the Rockefeller Brothers Fund, which has a grantmaking program on wild salmon preservation and environmental protection in the Russian Far East.

Laura Thompson, '88, an international tax attorney, occasionally has clients with operations in Russia. Her husband's business is based in Massachusetts and Moscow.

Greg Rigdon, '90, got his MA in Russian Studies at Princeton after graduating from Oberlin. He also worked for KMPG's Merchant Banking Group doing privatization advisory work in the Baltics, Russia, Central Asia, and Hungary.

Susanna Porte, '93, works part-time as a Russian tutor and translator. She makes regular trips to Russia to visit friends.

Sarah Henderson, '93, is writing her doctoral dissertation on the women's movement in Russia. For the past year she has been predominantly in Moscow, interviewing the heads of women's organizations. She traveled to Murmansk, Rostov na Donu, Irkutsk, Petrozavodsk, St. Petersburg, and Tatarstan for field work. Sarah was also a consultant for the Ford Foundation and the Eurasia Foundation while in Russia.

Susan Bleyle, '93, is an instructor in English as a Second Language at the International

Rescue Committee and the Latin American Association. She has worked with Bosnian refugees since 1995, teaching them English, learning Bosnian, and acting as a translator and interpreter.

A doctoral candidate in Russian history at the University of Illinois at Champaign- Urbana, **Greg Stroud, '94**, is particularly interested in cultural historical approaches to memory in early Soviet Russia.

Since graduating from Oberlin, **Robbyn Kistler, '95**, has been working as Program Manager of the Foundation for Russian American Economic Cooperation in Seattle, one of the most established US organizations dedicated to trade with Russia. The Foundation fosters economic development in Russia and the US through a variety of programs that promote business and educational connections. In particular, Robbyn is responsible for a professional exchange program which brings business and government representatives to the US to learn from their American counterparts. Through her work, Robbyn has developed extensive contacts in the Russian Far East and has led several delegations to the region.

Roza Kryzhanovska, '95, was a featured artist in the Fourth Annual Women's Show hosted by the CASE (Committee for the Absorption of Soviet Emigres) Museum of Contemporary Russian Art, located in Jersey City, New Jersey. The museum's focus is to publicize the work of talented unknown artists with origins in the former Soviet Union. Roza's works in mixed media were chosen for display after a competitive submission to the museum's board.

Lydia Bryans, '96, is currently enrolled in the Translation and Interpretation MA Program at the Monterey Institute in California. She also works at the Center for Nonproliferation Studies, translating and abstracting articles for nuclear power databases.

E v e n t s

Russian pianist **Dmitry Bashkirov** gave a free performance in Oberlin on February 21, 1999, featuring works by Mozart, Prokofiev, Scriabin, Rachmaninov, and Schubert. Bashkirov, a professor at the Isaac Albeniz foundation in Madrid, is a Danenberg Artist-in-Residence at Oberlin this semester, and has given a series of

master classes at the Conservatory.

Bashkirov's distinguished career has included performances with orchestras throughout the world, in addition to performing in several of Russia's leading chamber ensembles. His career was interrupted in 1980 when Soviet authorities refused to provide permission for him to leave the USSR. He remained there for eight years until, under Gorbachev's new policy, he was allowed to travel to the West again. Since then, he has performed acclaimed concerts throughout Europe and the U.S.

Faculty-in-Residence and Lecturer in Russian Elena Monastireva-Andsell has organized an **Eastern European Film Festival** in Oberlin this semester. She feels the festival will provide "the perfect opportunity to discover each individual culture" of Eastern European countries which fall outside the traditional program house focus. The festival includes films from the Czech Republic, Poland, Yugoslavia, and Hungary, and includes work from directors such as Emir Kusturica, Milos Forman, and Krzysztof Kieslowski. The films were chosen by Monastirova-Andsell and Dan Goulding, head of the Film Studies department. They obtained many of the films from the libraries at Indiana State and Ohio State universities, although several came from Monastirova-Andsell's personal collection. Screenings are free of charge, and occur every Thursday night in Mudd Library.

This year's annual speaker in the Clowes Lecture Series was **Eric Naiman**, Associate Professor of Russian at the University of California at Berkeley. On April 19, 1999, he gave a talk entitled "Reading Nabokov Perversely: A Filthy Look at Shakespeare's 'Lolita.'" Naiman is the author of *Sex in Public: The Incarnation of Early Soviet Ideology* (Princeton University Press, 1997), in which he uses various government and media resources from the Soviet Union of the 1920s to explain the period's preoccupation with crime, disease, and sex.

On May 7, 1999, **Veljko Vujacic**, Assistant Professor of Sociology, gave a talk at the City Club of Cleveland. In his speech, entitled "Serbia, Kosovo, and the West: Western Mistakes, Balkan Misperceptions, and Their International Consequences," Vujacic discussed the effects of Western involvement in the Balkans on the former Yugoslavia. His focuses were on the Western mistakes made during the course of the Yugoslav disintegration, and the perceptions of the West's involvement in the Balkans.

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