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Soviet Children's Fear of Being Left Alone

By Marilyn Murray

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One of the issues that has troubled me most since I began teaching in Russia did not surface in my classes until more than a year had passed. When students discussed feelings they experienced as children, the words "fear" and "loneliness" were mentioned consistently. During one session, I asked a psychologist whether she could remember when she first felt fear. She responded by saying, "I think it was probably when I was left alone for 12 hours when I was 10 months old."

I knew her parents were alcoholics, and I assumed she meant they had gone out one day, became intoxicated and didn't come home for a long time. But I was shocked when I learned that it was not a one-time event, but rather, it happened every weekday because her mother was required to work by the government, and the infant had to be left alone.

Turning to the rest of the class, I asked whether this had ever happened to any of them. Over one-third of my class raised their hands, and several women tearfully admitted they also had

to resort to this option with their own children during Soviet times. They told me women were only allowed to stay with their babies for 56 days or less and then were required to return to work even if they, or their newborn, were sick. It was expected that the baby would be cared for by an elderly family member, and it was also not uncommon that the child was sent to live with someone far away from the parents.

Several of my colleagues told of being taken as infants to grandparents who lived in Siberia or other distant areas during a time when travel was very difficult and communication was limited. They grew up calling their grandparents "Mama" and "Papa" and knew no other home but the small village of their ancestors. A few said one or both parents may have visited once or twice but that memory was very faint. But the most painful remembrances went something like this: "One day when I was about 6, two strangers appeared who said they were my real Mama and Papa and had come to take me home. I was terrified. They took me off screaming and crying from my grandparents, the only Mama and Papa I had ever known. I don't know if I ever forgave my mother and father for that."

If a family member was not available, which was frequently the case since they were also required to work, the child was placed in a government child-care facility, where the infants were kept clean and fed, but the attendants rarely had time to pick up and nurture the babies.

If this type of facility was not readily accessible, then the child was left alone. In the wintertime, the heat was sometimes turned off in apartments so toddlers would not burn themselves. The children would be bundled up, given some food, and left alone for 10 or 12 hours. I cannot begin to fathom what it would be like to be those little ones or their parents.

Over the years, I have continued to ask this question in my classes and consistently find that one-third to one-half experienced this bleak trauma sometime in their childhood. Many stories have been told in our classes regarding this issue. I especially remember one man who choked on his tears as he shared about being 3 years old and spending many long hours curled up in a ball with his 1-year-old brother, trying to keep warm, as they scrunched up against the front door of their tiny apartment waiting for their mother to come home. He said they would sob until they ran out of tears, and eventually they learned that crying was useless. He never cried again until that day when he shared his story with us for the first time.

One woman showed the class a large drawing of a small, thin little girl who had placed a stack of books on a chair and had dragged the chair up to the front door of their apartment. The tiny child was balancing on tiptoe on the books, while she strained to look through the peek hole in the door.

"I literally would stand there for hours waiting for my mother to come home," she said. "It makes me really sad when I look at this drawing of myself and see how terribly lonely that little girl is. It feels like she lived her childhood stretched out above that chair and her only experience of the world was the empty space beyond the hole in the door."

Whenever I discuss being left alone in our classes, it inevitably causes many tears, even in the most hardened participants. But one time, a beautiful woman smiled and said: "I am proud of the fact that my parents trusted me enough to leave me alone. They always praised me for that." I asked her how old she was and she replied, "I was 2 when my parents were transferred to Magadan to work. There were no child-care facilities built then, so for a couple

of years I was left alone for about 10 hours a day."

I asked her whether she would draw what that child felt and she agreed. The next day she brought a picture so startling the entire class gasped. The drawing was of room with a blond-haired, tearful toddler crawling toward a glass of spilled milk on the floor. Sitting next to the glass and plugged into the wall was a searing, red-hot electric hotplate. My student said she was crying because she knew she would have no milk for the whole day and that her parents would punish her for spilling it. She also stated that it was her job to heat her own food on the electric plate.

When asked whether she would allow her own small children to be alone for days with a burning, electric hotplate, she said, "Of course not!" and burst into tears with the realization that she was not only left alone but was appallingly unprotected in an extremely dangerous situation.

Almost all of these people saw the issue of being left alone as a small child to be such a common occurrence that they hadn't even mentioned it before to me or to others. I began to understand why, as adults, they are so enmeshed with their parents and their adult children. It seems as if everyone is trying to make up for what they lost as children and as parents.

These parents were not bad people. They were simply characters in a drama staged by the Soviet system and had no choice in the roles they were assigned to play. Today, many young parents are writing a different script.

Marilyn Murray is an educator specializing in the treatment of trauma, abuse and deprivation, with more than 2,000 people attending her classes in Russia and other countries from the Commonwealth of Independent States over the past 10 years. Her second book, "The Murray Method," will be released in English and Russian this summer. You can read her interview with The Moscow Times here.

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