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Q&A: Maria Yeliseyeva's Children Don't Feel Like Orphans

By Howard Amos

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Maria first visited an orphanage in 1991, along with doctor Patch Adams.

Maria Yeliseyeva has always been surrounded by children. In addition to the five she gave birth to, she has fostered another five from Russian orphanages.

That is, as she puts it, the "official" total. But there are dozens of other orphanage children who have passed through her home and whom she counts as part of her extended family.

Maria's Children, her aptly named charity, is one of the oldest such organizations in the country.

Maria Yeliseyeva

Education

1980-1984— Theatrical Artistic-Technical

College, Leningrad, major in puppetry
1986-1992— Leningrad Artistic Academy

Work experience

1992-1997— Various art teaching jobs in Moscow and Moscow region children's institutions
1997- present — Director of the Maria's Children orphan charity

Favorite book: "The Master and Margarita" (1967) by Mikhail Bulgakov; "The Catcher in the Rye" (1951) by J.D. Salinger; "Islands in the Stream" (1970) by Ernst Hemingway
Reading now: "Darkness Covers All the Stairs" (2012) by Alexander Chudakov
Movie pick: "Prayer" (1967) directed by Tenghiz Abuladze; "Breakfast at Tiffany's" (1961) directed by Blake Edwards
Favorite Moscow restaurant: American Bar Grill (2 1st Tverskaya-Yamskaya, Bldg. 1)
Weekend getaway destination: Sorochany, Moscow region

The name "Maria's Children" was thought up by Yeliseyeva's husband and co-founder of search engine Yandex, Ilya Segalovich, during a trip on a commuter train outside Moscow with a group of children. Yeliseyeva said she did have second thoughts because of the religious connotations, but the children on the train liked the name.

"It meant they were not from an orphanage, but were Maria's children," she recalled.

A small, slight woman with pale hair, Yeliseyeva, 48, studied to be an artist in St. Petersburg, but soon began to use her skills as a way of engaging marginalized young people.

With a studio in central Moscow, the main idea of Maria's Children has always been to use art as a means of self expression and a vehicle for self-discovery for those warehoused in Russia's orphanage system.

There are nine categories of orphanages in Russia. To which one children are sent depends on the extent of their mental disability, physical disability or behavioral disorder.

The children who live in "ordinary" orphanages have many more opportunities, Yeliseyeva said, and can attend local schools and clubs. Maria's Children, therefore, works primarily with

remedial orphanages, a middle bracket containing children with minor physical disabilities and mild intellectual development issues.

Among experts, it is a truism that all orphanages contribute to the estrangement of their residents from society, and that this phenomenon becomes exponentially worse at orphanages for the disabled.

Maria's Children is not narrowly focused and has longstanding links with the United States, epitomized by the clown Patch Adams, who tours Russia every year and was the person to first introduce Yeliseyeva to orphanages in the early 1990s.

While the charity's activities inside Russia are financed by fundraising, all of its foreign work, including trips abroad and temporary placements for orphans in Europe, are all covered by Segalovich.

In a recent interview with The Moscow Times, Yeliseyeva was deeply critical of the ban imposed on American adoptions. "It seems like some sort of bad dream," she said.

With decades of experience of the benefits of foreign adoptions and the dysfunctionality of Russia's sprawling institutional system, Yeliseyeva also believes that anyone can find their niche in the work of supporting orphans.

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

Q: When was the first time you went to an orphanage?

A: The first time I was in an orphanage was with the clown, Patch Adams. It was in 1991, I got to know Patch and he invited me to go with him to St. Petersburg. We went around different hospitals and orphanages. There were little children and many touching moments. There was one child who climbed into my arms and didn't want to get down. It was emotionally very difficult and I cried a lot afterward.

Q: What were conditions like in orphanages in the 1990s?

A: When I went with Patch in 1991, it was a bit different because the trip was organized by Intourist [the Soviet tour agency that regulated the access of foreigners], and they couldn't take us to bad orphanages — they took us to showcase orphanages in St. Petersburg. All the children were in their best clothes, with bows in their hair. It's impossible to say what it was really like.

But later on, in 1993, I went to an orphanage: Friends of mine, Italian students studying Russian in Moscow, wanted to give some candy to the orphans. But it wasn't easy!

The first time we arrived at this Moscow orphanage in the Baumansky district, they didn't let us in. They said that it was closed — and that was that. Then I phoned the Education Department. And we came with the candy and said the Education Department had given us permission: They let us cross the threshold, and then asked us for the candy, expecting us to leave straightaway! But I said my Italian friends wanted to see the children.

I was surprised when they eventually let us in. There was no light in the corridors, and they opened a door with a key — I remember very well that it was locked — and there were the children watching television. Some sort of garbage. There was a teacher who was also watching television. The children were told to stand up and sing a song for us. They sang something awful about the fatherland. It was a very sad spectacle. I had my daughter with me, and I realized that they had never seen young children before.

When Patch was due to visit the next time, I wrote to him to ask whether he would like to come to this orphanage and get to know the children. And we went together. And then, after that, I got permission to come and draw with the children. Many of these children are still with me: They are now my volunteers or work with me.

Q: When did you first encounter orphanage children?

A: I was already acquainted with orphanage children because, six years before I met Patch, I had founded my own art studio in the Moscow region. As well as other local "at risk" children, orphanage kids used to come to the studio.

Q: Did you create the studio?

A: No, I actually went there as a little girl to work with an artist. But then the artist left, and the studio closed. But, many years later, I was involved in a local exhibition and participants told me about the studio, which was still closed. They suggested I go and work there. It was the lowest salary I have ever had! They couldn't find anyone to work in the studio because the salary was so small.

I worked with the children who lived in those houses. At first they simply broke the windows, climbed in, and painted all over the plaster models that were kept there. But then we became friends and they started to come regularly, though, it's true, they weren't very interested in drawing.

Q: What did you do with the children?

My first degree was in puppetry, and these children loved to make puppets with me. The type of puppet that has eyes, which opens its mouth, and whose hands are controlled by thread. And we put on shows in the street in this very run-down area. A street theater. We put on fairy tales that they hadn't even heard of because they hadn't been to school.

Q: How does today's orphanage system differ from the system in the 1990s? Are there any orphanages in a poor material state today?

In Moscow there definitely are not. But I can't say about other towns — I fear that everywhere there are material problems. There might be a beautiful main hall, with carpets, but the daily facilities for the children, including plumbing, can be old and in terrible condition. Like our provincial hospitals.

Q: What is the biggest problem with the system of orphanages?

A: The most terrible problem is the lack of individual attention — one [orphanage carer] cannot divide herself into 20 parts. This hasn't changed, and won't change while the system

exists. I am the mother of five children, and it's very difficult for me to give the right amount of attention to all of them. I can't imagine what it would be like with 20. It's unnatural.

There are wonderful carers [working in orphanages], but even with just 12 or 14 children in a group, it's still impossible. The system is nightmarish and it demands reform as soon as possible.

Q: What happens to children who grow up and leave orphanages?

A: Before, there was practically no monitoring. Now there is some sort of system, but it depends on the will and inclination of the people involved. There are a lot of grown up children who either live, or lived, with me. I know their lives very well. Some of them have people to whom they can turn, but there are only a few like this. The system as a whole does not work.

Q: How did you react to the ban on adoptions by Americans?

A: To the very last moment I couldn't believe that it was happening. I simply didn't believe it. I thought it was some sort of mistake. I was sure that it would not be passed. And I can't believe it even today. It seems like some sort of bad dream.

I know so many children who are simply happy in American families. I have a large number of American friends, thanks to Patch Adams. Friendships that have lasted for 20 years.

There was one woman who adopted three children from different orphanages in Russia. It's a sort of catharsis when you see these children now. It's obvious that they are the children of alcoholics, but otherwise you would never know which are her children and which are not. She is occupied all day with the children. It's just like a fairy tale. It's not a unique case. I know families that took very ill children and organized operations for them. Not rich American families, but middle-class families.

I know a huge number of American families that have taken Russian children. There is a whole community of these people, and they strive so that the children don't forget their Russian. They support Russian culture, they strive to preserve in their children a love for Russia. They bring them to Russia.

But, while I have been working in this field for 20 years, I could count on my fingers the number of Russian families that would take children from orphanages. And I am not even talking about seriously ill children.

Q: What can volunteers do to help?

A: English is needed by everyone. But it helps when a person really wants to do something specific with children. Not just "being" with a child. That can be important, but it's better to have an idea of what you will do with them. I drew with the children — not because that's what they wanted to do, but because that's what I could do. And you have to inspire them with what you are doing. A volunteer is a good volunteer when he can lead children like this. A charismatic person. Or you can always come to our studio and help wash up, or bake an apple pie. If a person is purposeful and ready to help he might feel a bit lost the first few times, but he will quickly understand where his hands are needed.

Q: How can you ensure that an orphan's sense of abandonment is not exacerbated by volunteers?

A: These sorts of children are so eager for someone to visit, someone who will pay them some attention. This person might fill the role of an older friend, or someone to whom they can write on Facebook or go swimming with on Sunday. Of course, there are a lot of hopes. The children dream about parents and being taken by a family. Often there is a disappointment. So you have to correctly assess what sort of internal resources you have. We try and give volunteers different opportunities if they are not sure what they can commit.

Q: What role does your husband have in your work?

A: From the very beginning he has supported me. He has always given us money. I have never had a salary and do not have one now. But at first, when there was no Yandex, he did lots of work too! He even drew a bit, although he's no artist. He taught himself to juggle and, at our camps and events, taught children how to juggle. He has twice been to a clown shop in London's Camden Market to buy juggling balls that he then gives away to children.

Q: Do you think that all the talk about the problem of orphans in Russia at the moment will help improve the situation?

A: I hope so. I am an optimist. If you think nothing can ever help, that's sad. If you think and act with faith, things are bound to work out.

Contact the author at h.amos@imedia.ru

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