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I'll Never Give Up Fighting for Russia's Orphans

By Katrina Morriss

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The cries of children in orphanages are rarely answered, so they learn early to stop crying out loud. That is why orphanages are almost always eerily quiet. Yet, if you look closely into their eyes, you can hear their cries.

Sometimes I wish I could go back to a time when I didn't know what it was like for children to be orphans. Back to a time when I believed governments cared more about the welfare of their citizens than political games. Ever since Russia's 2012 Dima Yakovlev Law, which barred American citizens from adopting Russian orphans, the faces of the orphans I saw in Russia haunt my dreams.

I wonder what they believe has happened to us and guilt presses down on me each night as I fight to sleep. Promises to come back for them have been broken and I hear their cries, "Please don't let us be forgotten!"

Adopting from Russia was not always part of our plan, but after adopting a little girl

from foster care in the United States, my husband and I decided we still had enough love in our hearts and home for one more child.

That's when we became aware of the conditions of children with Down syndrome living in Russian orphanages. We found that because parents in Russia often have limited resources, some of them leave these children at the hospital because they are considered a burden on society.

Having worked with children that have Down syndrome, I knew they had much more potential than most people realize. So we began the adoption process with excitement, hoping we could help to improve a child's life.

We flew to St. Petersburg in July 2012 but our meeting at the orphanage was not what we had envisioned. They brought Natasha to us kicking and screaming because it was her group's turn to go outside. The fact that she had to stay inside to visit with us, in a small room, did not please her at all. Our attempts to engage her were useless, so finally we suggested we go outside to play.

Once outside we frantically tried to blow up a beach ball while chasing after Natasha. All the other little orphans kept blocking our way as they flocked around us, hugging us, wanting to know if we would be their mama and papa.

Finally we were able to lure Natasha over to us. The ball intrigued her and she became very amused by us. I taught her sign language and she became very animated as she could finally communicate with someone. With each visit, she became more and more attached to us.

On our third visit we tried to spy on her, wanting to see how she interacted with the other children, but Natasha quickly spotted us. She came rushing toward us, jumping into my arms and clinging tightly to me. Natasha's caregivers told her we had to go but would be coming back for her soon.

She looked devastated that we were leaving. If I had known then what I know now I never would have left. Her orphanage is better than most and the director is an amazing man, but even he said that the best orphanage is no replacement for a loving family.

The trip home was extremely emotional as we tried to stop our tears by reminding ourselves we would be back soon, but once home we seemed to hit every roadblock imaginable. We received the disheartening news from the St. Petersburg authorities that our paperwork had expired and we had to start the adoption process all over again.

We worked frantically to get this done in a timely manner, but upon completing everything it was then determined that the new requirements of 80 hours of adoption training instead of 10 hours would apply to us too. Once again we scrambled to fulfill the requirements to get a court date. With everything turned in by November, we finally thought we were in the clear.

We were in shock that morning in December, when we learned we were being banned from adopting the child we loved. At first we were told it was uncertain what the new law meant to those who had already met their prospective children so we remained hopeful and prayed there would be an exception for cases like ours.

In January 2013 we were informed that unless we had already passed court, there would be no exception to the law and that Russia was trying to find new families for the over 300 children who had already bonded with their American families.

Everyone was devastated by this news. We would never again hold the children we had grown to love. As grieving parents we had no idea what, if anything, the children would be told. Desperately we pleaded with our government to help us negotiate, but there was little they were willing to do as they placed the blame on the Russian government.

Some families suggested that new policies be implemented to carefully monitor all adopted children and stricter guidelines be put in place. We reasoned that surely this would help ease the Russian government's concerns about the safety of Russian children. Unfortunately, we were told that Russia did not wish to negotiate on behalf of the remaining orphans and that we should just move on and try to adopt from a different country.

Our government failed to realize that we didn't want to adopt just any child but were clinging to the hope that we would be allowed to keep the promises made to the children we already loved.

Out of sheer desperation, I flew back to Russia in January 2014 in the hope of negotiating with the Russian government to allow Natasha to come home with me. If that proved impossible, I wanted to help find her a Russian family by doing interviews and taking part in a Russian documentary. I had grown to love Natasha and knew she deserved to be part of a family, whether my family or a Russian family — it did not matter as long as she was loved.

My efforts in Russia failed and to this day there are many children, most with special needs, who remain in orphanages even though they have American families who still desperately want to adopt them.

Families continue to plead with our government on behalf of these remaining children. Recently we started a Facebook page called Parents United for Russian Orphans to keep people informed of our plight and several families have taken part in a new documentary called ''To the Moon and Back,'' which helps explain our story.

We are not asking for the impossible. We are asking that these two governments negotiate and come together to allow the children to have loving families. We are pleading for someone with the power to do something to hear our story, and care. If we stop fighting for these children no one will ever hear their silent cries.

Mr. Presidents, will you hear us?

Katrina Morriss is an American affected by Russia's 2012 Dima Yakovlev Law. She is the co-founder of Parents United for Russian Orphans and has featured in two documentaries about the ban — ''To the Moon and Back'' and ''Children of the State.''

The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.

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