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'I Don't Want to Die': Harrowing Tales From Russia's Summer Camp

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Children returning to the Syamozero Park Hotel summer camp in Russia's Karelia. Fourteen children died after a storm capsized two canoes on a lake on June 19.

Of the 47 children and four young instructors that went boating on June 18, only 37 came back alive. Several miles offshore in the freezing waters of a lake in Karelia, northern Russia, two canoes were caught in a storm and capsized. Fourteen children died, having drowned or frozen to death.

The boat trip had been organized by Syamozero Park Hotel, a summer camp, which, among others, hosted orphans and children from troubled families. Government social service bodies were among those who had paid for the children's stay; those that died during the storm were Muscovites, sponsored by the Moscow City Hall's Department for Labor and Social Security.

Unsurprisingly, attention soon turned to the management of the summer camp. Syamozero, was, it turns out, not the most reputable. Some parents had described it as "hell" and a

"concentration camp." The camp didn't have a license to organize boat or hiking trips, and was buried under dozens of lawsuits. In 2012, one of its deputy directors was convicted to 12 years in prison for involuntary manslaughter, after he had beaten a staff member to death while drunk.

Despite this, Moscow City Hall did not withhold funding. Indeed, since 2014, City Hall had signed off on several contracts with the summer camp, paying a total of 108.7 million rubles ($1.7 million).

The tragedy sparked outcry at the very top: Both President Vladimir Putin and Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev called for a thorough investigation into the incident. Punishment for those in charge of the camp and officials involved in shadowy procurement procedures will no doubt be stiff and demonstrative. The camp's owner, deputy director and the three surviving instructors have been detained. The Department for Labor and Social Security was searched by law enforcement on June 20.

Early Warnings

Syamozero did have its supporters. Natalya Smirnova, a mother of three, says her daughter liked it there. "The food was good, and living conditions were fine," Smirnova told The Moscow Times. "My husband and I went there on a weekend and inspected everything. The only thing that kids weren't lucky with was the weather." Smirnova's daughter didn't participate in the deadly boat trip because of health issues — she was taken home the day after the tragedy.

Other parents told a different story. Kristina Nevzorova, whose two sons were attending the camp, was "shocked" by the camp conditions. "My younger son got terribly ill, and I had to take him home two weeks ago. And my elder son returned home thin, exhausted and grim. The day after the tragedy he called me and cried into the phone. 'Get me out of there,' he said, 'I don't want to die,'" Nevzorova said.

According to Nevzorova, the children were left to their own devices. No one paid attention to what they were doing, she said. When they went on hiking trips, the young, untrained instructors "barely fed them."

Another parent, who asked to remain anonymous, said that on the day of the tragedy he received a text message with a storm alert. "I called the camp specifically to check with them on whether they had received the alert. They assured me they had and promised not to sail any time soon," he told The Moscow Times.

Local official Andrei Orekhanov, who says he has been "fighting" with the Syamozero administration for years over poor living conditions, claims the situation at the camp was dangerous. He told the Novaya Gazeta newspaper that when visiting the camp last year he found broken tents, wet linen, and a lack of pillows and mattresses.

"The children cried and asked me to take them home," Orekhanov said. "They told me they were hungry, wet and frozen. Many of them were clearly affected by the cold."

40 Lawsuits

Syamozero Park Hotel has quite a rap sheet. According to due diligence database SPARK, between 2013 and 2016 the company was involved in 40 lawsuits. It also underwent 19 inspections by different state watchdogs. The latest one, by a branch of consumer rights watchdog Rospotrebnadzor, took place in June 2016. According to the RBC news agency, which cited unidentified government sources, this report revealed organizers didn't have the proper licenses to take boat or hiking trips.

None of this has stopped Syamozero from winning tenders from Moscow City Hall. In 2014-2015, its only competitor was listed as a company called "Karelia Open." A company with this name is owned by Yelena Reshetova, the owner of Syamozero Park Hotel. "Karelia Open" was most likely a shell company created for the illusion of competition, but offered pricier services and allowed Syamozero to secure the contract.

It wouldn't have been hard for Moscow City officials to find all of this out, noted Ilya Shumanov, deputy director of Transparency International Russia, writing on Facebook. It appears that officials did everything they could to back Syamozero. A company with such a bad reputation couldn't have won the bid on its own, Shumanov wrote.

It remains unclear what ties Moscow government officials have to the owner of the camp, if indeed any. "There aren't any obvious links," says Yelena Panfilova, head of Transparency International Russia. "But you never know who is whose friend, college alumny, ex-colleague, relative or grandchild."

"Situations like this — when there's no obvious affiliation — are widespread in state procurement, and they are the scourge of the system," Panfilova told The Moscow Times.

The head of Moscow City Hall's Department for Labor and Social Security, Vladimir Petrosyan, has insisted that the tender was fair. "All their documentation was in order," he said. But a cloud of suspicion remains. The Russian Anti-Monopoly Service has promised to investigate the tender, and has told RBC that the competition looked like a cartel agreement.

Patchy Regulation

It remains unclear whether any discovery of corruption will lead to systemic changes, or follow the usual Russian pattern of finding scapegoats and parking the problem. According to Panfilova, the tragedy will only bring about change if there is common political will once the scandal has died down.

In the meantime, children's summer camps will remain a gray and under-regulated area. According to Irina Volynets, expert and chair of the National Parents Committee, there are currently no protocols outlining who can be an instructor, or who can run a children's camp.

For Volynets, vulnerabilities are built into the state procurement system, which only looks at the cost when purchasing for summer camp services. "According to existing laws, authorities are obligated to choose the cheapest option, which shouldn't be the case when we're talking about children's lives."

On the heels of the tragedy, the government has announced a blanket inspection of all the summer camps across the country. This is unlikely to be sufficient, says Volynets, and focuses on consequence, not cause. "What we really need is a return to uniform safety standards: They may well inspect and shut down some camps, but it won't solve the underlying problem."

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