

Out of a Russian Orphanage

How three orphans found their forever family

Six-year-old Tatiana lived simply in the Tyumen, Siberia orphanage in Russia. She had clothes to wear, food to eat, and caregivers who shared as much affection as they could in an orphanage filled with children.

Tatiana also had a burning hope inside her heart and a small picturebook, tattered from repeated use. The book held photos of a faraway couple, Ruth and Allen, their grownup sons, and their Michigan dairy farm. She had hope that before too long she would be adopted into a family.

And finally, Tatiana had Dima. An orphan two years younger than she, Dima had become a playmate and friend. Tatiana's excess energy could easily have been labeled attention deficit disorder—she channeled part of that energy into mothering four-year-old Dima. One of the caregivers even overheard Tatiana call him “my brother.”

As dairy farmers Allen and Ruth prepared their hearts and their home to adopt Tatiana, and another child, Olga, from the same orphanage, their anticipation soared: they knew they were ready to welcome their new daughters into the family.

Before they had even “met” the two girls through referral pictures, Allen had listened to a couple who adopted from Russia on a Focus on the Family radio broadcast. They mentioned that as soon as they started the process, they started praying for the children. Allen and Ruth began to pray daily that Tatiana and Olga would arrive safely home, and that they would adjust well to having four men in the family, since the caretakers at the orphanage are females.

As they traveled to pick up the girls and transport them back to Michigan, an emotional drama began to unfold that no one had prepared for. Says Allen, “I noticed in the orphanage that Tatiana and her friend Dima played a lot. As we got in the car and were waving goodbye, I looked out the back window. Dima was standing there, and it was like his best friend in the world was driving out of his life, tears coming down his face.” Allen's heart lurched, and he was immediately moved to tears himself. It was only later that he would share the scene with Ruth.

Adjusting to a new culture, home, and grownup brothers came easy for the girls, and life settled into a happy routine, complete with life on the farm and homeschooling for Tatiana and Olga. As soon as Tatiana was able to grasp some English, she said, “We should go back and get Dima.” Before long, her baby doll's name became Dima, as well as her favorite kitten. Although thousands of miles away, her friend still remained in her heart.

“We had a picture of Dima and Tatiana,” says Ruth, “And we just could not get Dima out of our minds.” However, when the family asked Russia Director Alla Goncharova about Dima, she discovered that he was not available for adoption. Three long years passed as the girls grew and flourished in their new family.

Finally, in Spring 2003 Goncharova delivered some big news: Dima was now available for adoption. At nine years old, it was unlikely he would be adopted by another family because of his age. Says Ruth, “We were thinking, should we add this new dynamic to our family?”

Complicating their decision was the decrease in milk prices and difficult finances on their farm. Says Allen, “It was like, ‘OK, God, why now?’” The couple prayed for months on end until Ruth knew she must end the emotional turmoil and approached Allen in October. “I told him that 10 years down the road, if I had not tried to get Dima, I am really going to feel regret,” Ruth says. “If we try and God closed the door I could accept that. But we have enough money to start the process. God will just have to do the rest.”

After they used up their funds and were wondering where the next adoption payment would come from, Ruth came across an article about CAFA, Christian Advocates for Adoption, in the AAI newsletter. The organization works with Christian adoptive families to help them request funding for up to half of their adoption expenses. “We were one of the first few people to work with CAFA, and they were receptive and wonderful,” Ruth says. We sent out two mailings, and in the end, our family and friends contributed \$10,500. We couldn't have done it without them.”

When Ruth and Allen made their initial visit to see Dima, they wondered what they would encounter. What if he just really doesn't want to come home with us? Ruth thought. Allen wondered if Dima would bond and share affection with them as the two girls did. Allen remembers when his fears were allayed: “On the second day we were there, he sat on my lap and was cuddly and huggy. It was amazing.” Soon after, Dima also bonded with Ruth.

As they left, Allen handed Dima a gift that would reassure him he was part of their family. “We handed him a ball with a globe printed on it, marked Michigan on there, and drew an arrow from Dima to us, reminding him we were coming back.”

Four long years had passed since Tatiana and Olga had left the Tyumen orphanage, but Tatiana’s dream was finally coming true. The girls and their parents all traveled on the second trip to Russia, where they would make Dima’s adoption official. As they arrived in Russia and were greeted by AAI staff, they were presented with a surprise invitation. Although it was an unusual gesture, the orphanage caretakers invited them to stay on at the orphanage for three days until Dima’s court date. They accepted, and experienced the same routine Tatiana, Olga, and Dima had known for years. They ate borscht, fish soup, cabbage and carrots, and something that looked like bologna. Although they couldn’t speak Russian, they observed the rhythm of orphanage life. Says Ruth, “To me, it looked like they were doing a remarkable, outstanding job.”

Although some of the kids needed clothing, the resourcefulness of their caretakers provided them with a computer room, a library, a music room with a karaoke machine, a TV and VCR, and a sewing room where the girls were making clothes for the children. One evening the older children kept the family up as they entertained the whole orphanage performing skits with music, and acting out songs, complete with costumes. “It was after 11 when we got to bed,” says Ruth. “It felt almost like camp.”

As they traveled back to Michigan, their hearts were full, and the long journey to bringing Tatiana’s “Dima” home was complete. Today, although their biological sons are all grown up, their home is once again buzzing with activity. Ruth continues to homeschool the children, and each child helps out with chores around the farm. You’ll find Olga meticulously cleaning the milk bottles, Tatiana putting out water and grain for the calves, and Dima observing as one of Allen and Ruth’s older sons milks the cows.

Allen remembers back to that vivid day when they drove off with the girls, leaving Dima standing on the orphanage’s front porch. “The picture of him standing there is still frozen in my memory. It wasn’t until we found out he was available and that we could get him that I began to get some closure.”

Dima is now beginning to understand English, and Ruth asks him if he remembers being sad when the family left with Tatiana and Olga. He nods. She also asks if he thought he would ever see them again. He quickly shakes his head no. A happy smile now replaces the tears shed four years ago.

Allen and Ruth shine as they talk about their decision to have a “second family.” Referring to their adoption journey, Ruth says, “I don’t think I can describe the blessing these kids have been to us. It gives me goosebumps.”

