

## *JOURNEY TO RUSSIA*

*Sara Trevelyan - May 2007*

*I have always wanted to get up early on May Day morning, and this year I had my long awaited opportunity. My journey to Russia began with leaving the house at 4.30am - the taxi driver asked me if I had managed to get my face washed in the dew - of course I hadn't but I otherwise felt fresh, alert and ready for the coming adventure.*

*My purpose in going was to visit a very unique project called Kitezh, a therapeutic community of foster parents and children, located about 300 Km south of Moscow. Dimitri Morozov, the founder of this community, had given a talk at Findhorn a few weeks previously and had offered to do a training in working with energy. The prospect of combining this with an opportunity to visit this community was enticing.*



*My early start was not rewarded with a breathtaking sunrise as it was a misty Scottish morning. I met up with Liza Hollingshead for the flight to Moscow. I have known Liza for a number of years - she is one of my Findhorn family of friends. She said that this particular date, May 1st, marked the 19th anniversary of her first visit to Russia. She has visited every year since this time, through the years of Perestroika and the dissolution of the former soviet state. Relatively early on she met Dimitri Morozov in a Moscow flat and felt an instant rapport with him which was to result in her visiting Kitezh in the early days...when there was only one house and a small, but committed group of people. Over the years she has helped the community in a number of ways - raising funding support from the West and identifying sources of expertise and training, as well as creating exchange visits for adults and children from Kitezh to visit Findhorn. Some years ago Liza showed me a video of children and adults working*

together to create this unique vision of hope in a country overwhelmed by the problems of its turbulent history - which to this day includes vast numbers of children raised in the depressing surroundings of state orphanages. I was instantly hooked!

This was how I found myself in the air, on my way to Moscow - finally coming to visit and make a personal connection with this community. Beneath us as we flew east, Europe looked spectacularly beautiful. It was only a 3 hour flight but I experienced familiar landmarks changing. Beneath us as we flew in were an expanse of forests and lots of small wooden buildings - Dachas - the Summer and weekend houses where Moscow citizens retreat to get respite from the city. When we arrived there was a flood of first impressions - from the large peaked caps of the uniformed Russian officials to the indecipherable language...in cyrillic script. As I see the world in symbolic terms this represents for me something of the challenge in confronting this culture which has different roots from the rest of Europe. When a C=S, P=R, H=N and a lot of unfamiliar symbols are added to form the alphabet, I expect to have a few problems understanding and relating to the way things work here!

We were fortunate as Liza's friend Nikita met us. We piled our luggage gratefully into the back of his dusty landrover and he drove us into the city. Along a motorway, all in a straight line, but his driving style was different...looser as he wove in and out of the lanes at high speed...a little unnerving as several other drivers were doing the same...until further on down the road the traffic ground to a standstill, all four lanes solid with cars. Nikita said that this was caused by Moscovites returning from their weekend visiting their Dachas, but in actual fact the congestion was caused by an accident. Further on we passed a car upended with its roof crumpled...unlikely that those inside could have escaped serious injury and indeed we'd heard several sirens blaring as ambulances made their way through the traffic to reach the victims. On our way in we passed several huge soviet style apartment blocks...depressing in the extreme but with some signs of modernised buildings and shopping complexes.

We were driven into the city centre where Liza had booked a hostel for our overnight accommodation. We hauled our cases through an open gate into a back courtyard area. This at least gave some respite from the relentless roar of the traffic outside. Gaining access through a shabby steel door, then an old wood door, we made our way into a

narrow stair well. All four of us managed somehow to squeeze into the old fashioned lift. We then ascended 7 floors to where we were staying, an apartment appropriately called 'Top Floor'.

Inside it were bunk beds in a small sized room and access was through another room where two other male travellers were staying! A rather off putting start, but it was clean and tidy with Ikea style furniture and we were all too tired to go through the exhausting process of looking for something else. We were hungry and after we'd said goodbye and thanks to Nikita, we made our way downstairs where we discovered a Pizza restaurant. We were grateful for good food and service from the Russian waitresses and I spoke my first word of Russian "Spaseeba" which means thank you. While we were eating we were joined by Francesca a young university graduate who was employed as the fundraiser and contact person for Kitezhi in Moscow. Francesca and her boyfriend Tim changed money for us and we bought a few items from a local shop. I was feeling disorientated and helpless in relation to these quite basic things.

At this point, in my small notebook I've written: Moscow - city of 11 million people, which is more than the population of Scotland (5 1/2 million) and more than the whole population of Greece. These figures give a measure of how enormous this city is. We were fortunate to be staying so centrally (this compensated a little for the droning noise of all the traffic on the ring road below) as the following morning we were able to walk to Red Square. Again my senses were wide open and taking in all the new impressions. We passed a huge, larger than life size statue of a soviet hero...designed to feel imposing. The street we walked down felt vaguely familiar from the short visit I made 10+ years ago. What has changed is the influx of smart new shops selling luxury goods and designer clothes - capitalism has arrived! The most extraordinary example of this that we spotted was a pair of gleaming silver men's shoes with pointed toes...now who would wear these and to what occasion?? The contrast to this was a shabbily dressed man I saw on the metro with an artificial foot attached to the bottom of his leg, begging for money with a small boy playing a toy instrument. This city is full of extremes.

A military event was taking place in the area around the square where the eternal flame burns - commemorating the 27 million Russians who lost their lives in the Second World War. I found this figure impossible to take in - death on such a scale -

how appalling. The slow goose stepping of the soldiers to the accompanying music of the military band was quite mesmerising to watch. We happened to arrive just at the climax of the ceremony when a wreath was being placed in front of the memorial - I have never seen a wreath positioned with such astonishingly choreographed precision. From here we walked a short distance to enter Red Square - this all looked familiar with the onion domed turrets and spires of St Basil's Cathedral rising to greet us. At Liza's suggestion we went into a small traditional church where we lit candles and enjoyed the painted icons. Churches, such as this one, were apparently rebuilt under Yeltsin and people may now find solace in religion if they choose to.

Our whistle stop tour then took us on to GUM the upmarket shopping complex... lots of designer shops, but not hoards of customers. On to the Kremlin to see the spectacular churches in this extraordinary complex of state and religious buildings. The ones we visited were full of painted icons - not a mm of the wall or ceiling was left unpainted - and enormous gold chandeliers. The atmosphere was heavy with the sweet scent of candles burning. In St Michael's chapel a group of monks started to sing just as we were leaving - this drew us back - the exquisite sounds of their voices evoked something ancient and extraordinary. I had hoped to have an experience which touched on the soul of the Russian people and felt that this brought me close to it.

Finally, we headed back to 'TopFloor' and had our second meal at the Pizza restaurant, our last taste of city comforts for a while. Liza told us that the drive to Kitezh would take about 6 hours. Vlad, the Kitezh driver of the minibus arrived just after 3 and we were off. The first part of the journey involved crossing Moscow, stopping to collect Francesca on the way. Also with us were Andrew, a former member of the Findhorn Community who is a talented carpenter and who is volunteering his skills to assist Kitezh with current building projects, and Andrew's daughter, Kelda, who is a photographer.

On the way out we stopped at Orion, the new satellite village about an hour outside of Moscow. This is still in the process of being built but three houses and an impressive almost complete educational centre formed the complex at that moment. As with all building sites, the ground outside was muddy, but the house that we went into was warm, cosy and clean. Children and adults greeted us - among them was Ben, a

volunteer from the UK and friend of my friend, Susan Richards. It was good to be able to say hello to him and see him in his small classroom teaching three of the children - Vera, Nastia and Ruslan. Our stay here was short as we had a long drive ahead.

The countryside was flat...we passed by forests and lots of uncultivated land...I noticed settlements of dilapidated and deserted buildings. These I learned were the remnants of the collective farms from the Soviet era. With Perestroika the whole system collapsed and people left in droves as there was no more state funding. It was a shock to see so much emptiness in the countryside...it looked bleak and depressing. Where were the fields of crops, where were the animals? I had expected some perhaps medium sized towns but the ones we passed were small and unimpressive. There were quite a few old wooden houses by the roadside but many of these looked well worn and in need of repair. The other surprise was that it was much colder than I had expected. On the way we passed through patches of snow and the temperature felt more like Winter than early Summer.

Finally we reached Baryatino, the closest town to Kitezhi...not much to write about here...a few rather drab looking streets. We bumped a few more Km along a local road which was built for when a Government official took part in a formal opening ceremony. As it happened this official ended up arriving in a helicopter but at least this road was built as far as the Kitezhi settlement - beyond this the road is gravel. Suddenly we arrived and had our first view of the collection of wooden houses. It was a relief to finally climb out of the minibus.

It was late so there was no food when we arrived but some tea and biscuits were provided. We were shown to our accommodation. I was allocated a room in Kolya's house...Kolya is now about 25 and he and his brother were the first children taken into the community about 12 years previously. They came from Baryatino and were in constant trouble, their parents had disappeared and they were roaming the streets. As a last resort they were to be sent to an orphanage in Kaluga (the regional town). The mayor of Baryatino had met Dimitri and asked if he would take them. Rather nervously Dimitri said yes. It was not a picnic at the beginning for him or for these boys, but they agreed to go with him and settled into the life in Kitezhi. The biggest

crisis happened a few years ago when one night the two of them got drunk on vodka and headed into Baryatino in the new minibus...on the way they lost control and veered off the road into a tree. The vehicle caught fire and was completely destroyed. Fortunately they survived. This was a big test for the community. Liza said that she thought that they would be told to leave, but they were instead invited to stay and work to earn the funds to pay off the damage which they had caused. They are still living in the community. Ideally they should be moving out into the outside world, but their former life has left them lacking in confidence and self belief. The community continues to provide a safe haven for them.

I didn't know any of this on the first night. Kolya politely showed me to my room and immediately retreated. There was a duvet cover and pillowcase on a desk but no quilt or pillow. I had to ask him in sign language for these and he produced them then disappeared again. I got the message, that the way to survive here is to take responsibility and look after oneself. I slept well despite the hardness of the bed. It was my first night in a log cabin - it was warm and I liked the atmosphere created by the walls of natural wooden beams. Outside Kitezhi looked like a magical place in the moonlight...with the silhouettes of the fairytale styled houses and surrounding trees outlined against the luminous night sky.

I'm going to include here a description of Kitezhi which came from Dimitri's notes:

"If you were to find yourself in Kitezhi right now, you would see log cabins, some with turrets, pine, carved porches and ornamental carved window decorations. You would also see delicate little wooden bridges. It is just as if a picture by the Russian artist Vasnetsov had come to life. We are proud of our 'fairy tale' architecture, we believe that it plays a vital role in enabling children to be receptive to fairy tales. Why this interest in fairy tales? Simply, its only in the world of fable that metamorphoses, miracles and transformations are possible. The name is taken from folk lore...Kitezhi is a mythical invisible town which was transformed by the will of God into a vessel for spiritual energy."

The following morning was overcast - a pattern which continued for most of my stay. The day at Kitezhi starts at 8.15 with early morning exercises. The first day I didn't

make it but once I caught up on sleep I did try to join in with these. It was the one time of the day when I could participate in an activity which included the children. Apparently it is not always easy to get them out of bed, and these energetic early morning sessions are not for the fainthearted. It was led by Dimitri most mornings and was always good humoured with plenty of encouragement to get into the spirit and strength of the movements - which were a combination of Kung Fu and Chi Gung.

Breakfast took place afterwards in the dining hall...as you go in outside coats are taken off and you search for a pair of slippers which look roughly your size. Porridge or some equivalent is served from a hatch which leads through to the kitchen; on another table there is always a pot of black tea. The diet at Kitezhi takes a bit of adjusting to...the cook does very well with limited choice...grains, some meat, chicken occasionally, fish once, potatoes, rice, beetroot, cabbage, coleslaw...these are the kind of dishes that I can remember. The children tended to eat together as did the adults, sitting around three large tables. There was quite a large group of volunteers (6-7) during my stay and they tended to sit together. The Russian Kitezhians were not immediately outgoing. It was a serious disadvantage not being able to speak the language and although quite a few of them knew enough English, there was an overall reluctance to speak it.

My main contacts were Liza who was constantly available for support and who gave me all the information I needed about the community, and the regular daily spiritual development sessions which she and I had with Dimitri.

As the days unfolded I met Tamara and Marina, two of the house mothers, Misha a young man from Moldova who spoke quite fluent English and who helped to organise the volunteers, and later Masha another foster parent and Elena a young woman who had come from an area to the far north near the Bering Sea to live and work in the community. Elena told me about the traditions and customs of her people and proudly showed me her pair of reindeer skin boots - they looked fantastic and apparently could keep her feet warm in sub zero temperatures.

I enjoyed watching and getting to know the children...a lot of names to learn at first but gradually I became familiar with them and although I couldn't talk with them, I could watch their interactions and expressions. Some like Svyetoslav, a lively 6 year old

who loved his bicycle, were the natural children of the foster parents...others like the Sinkos, 7 children from one family who were being looked after by Tamara, were from the orphanages. With time I learned that the parents of some of them were still alive, but because of alcoholism or drug addiction they were incapable of looking after them. In this instance they are called social orphans. With the Sinko children, the older ones had come first and had said that they would only stay if the younger children were allowed to come as well. The youngest two, Marina and Ksyusha, sang us a song one night...a song about a little green frog that one of the volunteers must have taught them. The combination of their sweet smiles, funny gestures and beautiful accents was quite heart warming. Another little boy who I liked a lot was Masha's foster son Sasha - he had a lively impish expression and always returned my smiles!

During the day the children would attend classes. The English classes before breakfast would always be taught by the volunteers (they thought that this was a ploy to get them out of bed!) and later on they would be taught other classes such as history, geography and maths by other members of the community. They seemed to work hard and classes were held 6 days a week. They were also rehearsing a play in English for the Orion Open Day which took place at the end of my visit. In between times they would play games and do the kinds of things which children everywhere like to do.

What was very noticeable was the absence of rows, tantrums, whinges or fights. Occasionally I could see a child looking perhaps a bit low, but usually another one would come up and put their arm around them or take their hand. There was a lot of physical contact between the children and the adults. The only public argument which I saw took place between two of the adults!

Once during the week there was a meeting which involved the whole community... everyone spoke at this including the children...who were putting forward the suggestion that they should have a day of teaching the adults, reversing their normal roles! The younger ones were very enthusiastic about this, the older ones who would have to prepare and supervise it were less keen! Another item on the agenda was reminding everyone to replace their tools...it was interesting to see how everyone is encouraged to participate actively in the life of the community and to take responsibility for the health and wellbeing of the whole group. What a learning experience for the children

and what was noticeable was the confidence with which they spoke - there was laughter and humour particularly at the contributions of some of the younger ones. Svyetoslav wanted Summer to come QUICKLY!!!

The day after I arrived I was able to join a group going to Baryatino for the weekly market. The market was a series of open stalls selling quite basic items...clothes, shoes, vegetables, teas, sweets, and I saw a whole lot of young piglets in the back of a station wagon! The ground was muddy and planks had been placed across patches which had the biggest puddles. There was a feeling of poverty and hardship all around - in the faces and postures of the people, old and young...things don't seem to have changed much here since Soviet days...although Dimitri told us later that Baryatino only used to have 1 shop, now it has 5! I found it all quite depressing but it was good to experience it and to get more insight into the conditions that many of the Kitezh children have come from.

May 9th was Victory Day, a national day to remember the 27 million who died in the Second World War. A small ceremony took place at the local war memorial across the road from the Kitezh front gate. A local dignitary arrived with his wife and made a short speech, as did Dimitri. Dimitri apparently told the children about the importance of creating a different kind of world where wars didn't need to be fought. Afterwards, I joined a number of the adults and children climbing into the two minibuses. We were driven to where the dirt road finally joins a tarmac road which had great significance during the war as it was the main road leading to Moscow. Outside a small war museum a large group of people were gathered for a ceremony. There were a couple of tanks on display that the children could climb up on, a band was playing and people carried wreaths. Afterwards we were driven a short distance to a site remembered because of a significant victory. The fascists (Germans) apparently took this local hill...it was then retaken by the Russians, then taken again by the Germans...eventually the small group of Russians who were hopelessly outnumbered, secretly dug a tunnel underneath the hill, packed it with explosives and blew the whole hillside up. This victory is remembered and celebrated each year. We were shown the huge crater and saw round about it in the woods the remaining detritus of the war...remnants of trenches, and 65 years later there are still shells lying on the ground. I spotted a couple of rusty helmets and even more incredibly we spotted two almost intact gas masks...this

was quite an eerie discovery. Although this day was celebrating with a great deal of national pride Russia's 'victory' in the second world war, the losses were catastrophic and are remembered with an intensity of feeling here which makes it feel as though it all happened only a short time ago.

Some of the other highlights through the week were my two visits to the 'Banya... the communal sauna. The children usually went before dinner, the women's session was next and the men went later on in the evening. Next to the sauna was a room where there were basins which could be filled with hot or cold water. To get the best out of the experience it is good to go for the extremes...getting really hot in the sauna first, then getting someone to pour freezing cold water over you. Liza did this for me and I screamed...but that is regarded as the natural thing to do!! It was a great release and a lot of fun. The other part of the ritual was to be thrashed with birch branches which apparently softens the skin... finally next door was another room where Galina had provided a pot of herb tea and part of the time was spent relaxing and chatting which was very pleasant.

There was also a disco on the Saturday evening to celebrate the birthdays of the two eldest Sinko boys. I gave them 2 football strips that belonged to my son Kydd ... they certainly appreciated them and put them on straight away!! When we came in the older boys were practising break dancing...some of them had been taking part in a local competition. We were also invited to Mashia's house where she was having a music evening...this was most enjoyable, finally a way of communicating which didn't depend on speech. I was touched by how this simple environment encourages the emergence of everyone's talents and gifts.

It is difficult to sum up this time at Kitezhi, because the longer I stayed the more I discovered about its history and the more my enthusiasm grew. I look forward very much to Dimitri's story of the community being published soon. I had hoped for a beautiful sunny day before we left so that I could take lots of photographs, but that moment never came...on the morning we left it was raining. Transport had been arranged to take Liza and I, along with Dimitri, to Orion. In contrast to the rather well worn minibus we had arrived in, we travelled back in a spacious and comfortable land rover. This transport had been provided by a Russian company which is

supporting Kitezĥ with occasional help of this kind. We drove back through the uncultivated countryside...I again spotted very few animals, some thin looking cows, a small herd of sheep. In the car Dimitri and Liza discussed the meeting she had had the night before with the English volunteers. I had sat in on this, interested to learn more about their individual experiences in the community. I was impressed with the level of their commitment - it did feel to me that overall the community wasn't appreciating their contribution as much as I thought that they might...but this could have been because culturally appreciation is expressed in different ways. I keep an open mind on this. However it became clear to me that because of the enormous difference between the backgrounds of the Russian Kitezĥans and the students, tensions can arise. It requires effort on both sides. I think that part of Dimitri's approach is that he likes to test people out. This I would see as part of the challenge, the risk and the opportunity for those drawn to come here.

We were warmly welcomed back to Orion. Everyone there was busy making preparations for the opening gathering the following day. The weather yet again proved uncooperative, but this did nothing to dampen the spirits of the adults and children. The minibus from Kitezĥ arrived late morning bringing the children who were going to perform in the play. This was followed by a couple of cars and a large bus arriving from Moscow...bringing people from the expat community who have shown an interest in supporting Kitezĥ and Orion. This was Francesca's flagship day. She had brought together an interesting group of people who seemed to enjoy their visit.

The presentations took place in Russian and English and the play was fantastic. The young man who played the leading role had been speaking English for less than a year! In amongst all the activity of the day I spoke a bit with Masha Pichugina, one of the foster mothers here - she is Tamara's daughter, aged 22 and is in charge of the house we were staying in and fostering 3 young children! When she told me her age I realised that she is a year younger than my daughter Suzi!! She told me that originally she and her Mother lived in a small house where there was scarcely enough money for food. She didn't like Kitezĥ at first because it was in the middle of nowhere and you had to get up early to do the early morning exercises. However, living in Kitezĥ has without doubt transformed her life into one of possibility and opportunity in a way which could never have happened otherwise. In many ways she embodied and expressed for me the

*dynamic and extraordinary achievements of this small group of ordinary, and yet extraordinary people. I gave as many of the children as I could the extremely small gifts I'd brought with me...some decorative butterflies for the girls and pens for the boys...what touched me were the warm smiles and thank yous... these are stored in my heart.*

*Although we'd hoped to stay a second night in Orion, our plans changed because of the difficulty of trying to get public transport back into Moscow with our heavy cases, so we decided to get on the bus with the other visitors. It was hard to say goodbye...I felt so full of all the memories, all the moments of feeling touched...when I feel a physical pain in saying goodbye, then I know that I've really been touched deeply in ways which will remain with me long after the physical goodbyes have been said.*

*Returning to "Top Floor" felt completely different from when we first arrived here. This time the surroundings felt familiar - even the drab outside door, and the ancient lift felt less off putting. This time we had the whole upstairs apartment to ourselves which almost made it feel luxurious. I had my first experience on the world famous Moscow Metro - which is extraordinary. According to Liza it was built as a 'palace' for the people - it is extraordinarily grand, immaculately clean, each station has a different design and there are numerous features of artistic interest. The art work is designed to inspire the masses with the Soviet ideal - the statues of revolutionary comrades with earnest faces, the ordinary person portrayed as hero and heroine working tirelessly and selflessly for the good of the state - a social dream that didn't take account that life's deepest wellsprings of meaning die when individuals are unable to express their uniqueness.*

*Our final experience in Moscow was attending a wonderful and very colourful Ukrainian restaurant - the food was delicious. The next day, Liza took us to a market and in the evening we met up with Oleg, an artist friend of Liza's who I met when I visited Moscow with my husband Jimmy 10 years before. We spent the evening in his partner's studio apartment where the walls were covered with her beautiful silk paintings and every shelf and corner was a feast for the eyes.*

*On the final morning, finally the sun shone ! We went for a short walk to look for the sculpture which Jimmy installed in the mid nineties. The shop had closed down and moved and the sculpture had gone. This was a reminder of change which has happened in such tumultuous ways over this stretch of time.*

*On the plane home I read Anna Politkovskaya's Russian Diary. This I found completed the picture for me. Before she was tragically murdered a short while ago, this courageous woman journalist bore fearless witness to the continuing brutalities of this vast nation - the legacies of the past which live on, the resistance and fear of democracy, the appalling human rights record. I found it gripping and depressing reading, but those of us who care must be willing not to turn our eyes away from these uncomfortable truths.*

*Sara Trevelyan - May 2007*