Conscientious objectors

Goodbye newspaper, welcome new website

FHM is continuing its support for Alternativshchik, the information service set up to support conscientious objectors throughout the Russian Federation. After many years as a printed newspaper, Alternativshchik has now opted for electronic format.

Alternativshchik first came to our attention in Kazan in 2006 when Gyerman Alyotkin made a funding application for his work providing information about the Alternative Government Service. Initially, he and his partner Nina Pisanova had been providing advice to 50 servicemen from all over Russia who were working in a gunpowder factory. When Gyerman noticed that they were answering the same questions many times over, they hit upon the idea of providing a regular bulletin.

The concept of alternative service had existed in the Soviet Union but was abolished in 1939. After it was reintroduced into the Russian constitution in 1993, it took until 2002 for the new law to be passed, which then became effective in 2004. Now there are more applications for alternative service than there are places, showing that the information about this possibility is spreading rapidly.

From the outset, the newspaper's basic topics were the history of pacifism, changes in legislation, relationships with employers, historic facts and news about alternative service in Russia and across the world. It didn’t come out on a strict schedule: over 12 years there were 56 issues in all. Mail delivery was free of cost in all regions of the Russian Federation thanks to the support of Friends House Moscow.

The paper wasn’t just read by alternative servicemen - it went to human rights workers, religious groups and to the bodies of authority. As it became more popular, so the size of each edition gradually increased. A wide range of organizations and individuals extended their help to the newspaper. Gyerman is still the editor; he, and all the readers, are deeply grateful to all the supporters who have kept the newspaper alive for more than a decade.

In 2019, the spread of the internet allowed this project to go digital. The website, http://www.альтернативщик.рф, contains an archive of all the print issues. It is full of articles and news about alternative service, with an easily accessed library of pacifist material. The site was built and is being maintained with financial and technical support of Friends House Moscow.
Visiting the Refugee Centre - where every day flies by

By Patricia Stewart

On one particular day this spring, child psychologists and teachers gathered six small children into a fast-flowing stream of activities. For refugee children, whose lives have been painfully disrupted, transitions can be difficult. Here, activities are designed to transition quickly, but also predictably and pleasurably; each one leads into another — just the way it did before.

After a period of open parallel play, the children carried chairs into a circle; each child announced his or her presence as part of a rhyming game. The entire group then chanted itself off on a journey, where, at each delightful new turn, it was necessary to shout out and mime motions — swimming, running, flying, hiding. They encountered a giant tortoise (a soft hand puppet) and each child was nipped or nuzzled by the tortoise on a particular part of the body. (Tortoises like to tickle tummies and nuzzle ears.)

Some of this, obviously, is language learning — these children come from Afghanistan, Cameroon, Congo, Uzbekistan... Russian is not their first language. However, they were five to eight years old, and small children learn quickly. One Congolese girl showed us a toy stove and explained that she likes best to cook broccoli — a commendably healthy choice.

The circle then broke apart. All chairs were neatly returned to their proper places and there came a period of joyous physical play. First was a sort of monster peek-a-boo. Everyone took turns either being the monster or running away and hiding, or confronting and unmasking the monster.

I hid under a play rug myself, but one of the Friends House Moscow team was the hit of the day when he left the room, knocked on the door, and made a dramatic entrance as an alpha gorilla, pounding his chest and bellowing from beneath a shawl — ecstatic screams and friendly pummeling of the Quaker monster.

Next a wild pillow fight — with small, soft pillows. Needing some rest, the children all lay down together on the play rug and sailed away on a lullaby ship. Then came some quiet and serious work at the art table, the proud showing of art works to patiently waiting mothers and fathers, some healthy snacks, and a long trip home.

These lessons teach more than language. In some respects, it’s standard pre-school and life learning — we all need to learn to take turns, we all need to learn to share — to move towards greater awareness of self and others, but these children have not had standard pre-school experiences. They come from war-torn and economically ravaged parts of Central Asia and Africa. Many have suffered traumatic experiences.

For these families, life in Russia is terribly insecure. Staff explained that the lives of the African families are particularly difficult. “Lawyers,” who are essentially human traffickers, purchase visas at Russian embassies in Africa and sell them to people who have no idea how different conditions in Russia

Continued on next page
are from those in western Europe. The visas are sometimes sold to single mothers, who may end up as sex workers in Moscow.

The parents have hopes for their children’s futures in Russia. One mother wants her daughter to get an education, so that she won’t also have to mop floors for a living. The children are obviously well cared for, carefully dressed and exquisitely clean. Their parents bring them to the Centre twice a week, traveling by irregular suburban bus routes and then in the crowded city subway, often for an hour — or even two —, and wait patiently through a four to five hour program.

By law, every child in Moscow is entitled to an education in the city schools. But, in practice, schools require proof of registration of residence, which can be difficult to obtain, even if you are not living on an expired visa, in your brother’s apartment, while being paid under the table for working a dangerous job. It is a bureaucratic nightmare, a maze with exit signs, but no exit.

The Centre and other organisations work to get children places; some of Moscow's pro bono lawyers help. The staff sadly estimate that, in the end, only ten percent of the children will find places in schools. They continue, however, to work faithfully and, furthermore, they work to support the parents. During the children’s workshops, a volunteer gives the parents Russian lessons. (The Centre serves nearly 100 families.) Tea is served. Information about programs for health care and legal aid is made available. The parents form tentative connections with each other. Education flows onwards, gently and irreversibly.

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**Children's tales**

*(The following is from our website – see link below for stories of other children. Names have been changed.)*

Mehrdad (15 years old) and Salar (8 years old) were born in Moscow, their parents having moved from Tajikistan just before Mehrdad was born. The children have been coming to the Centre for a year.

Before starting at the Centre, Mehrdad was a poor student – he didn’t like learning, was shy and withdrawn, and had problems with getting on with his class-mates. After only a year of coming to “Kids are Kids”, Mehrdad started to feel better about himself and this was reflected in his attitude and the quality of his work.

Thanks to his success at school, he is now thinking about his life-goals and a future profession. He works hard at maths, physics, Russian and English. He worked with a psychologist from the organisation who deals with bullying in schools, and this will help Mehrdad to begin to overcome the problems he has socialising at school. Mehrdad also loves football, so he was encouraged to attend football sessions. He never speaks about his feelings, which can make it difficult for him to interact with his peers. Now his goal is to be a programmer. He is attending training courses in a company which might be able to offer him an internship. He is satisfied, and trying hard.

Before Salar came to the Centre, he didn’t speak any Russian at all, and had problems with diction. With the support of the teaching staff and a speech therapist, he quickly began to learn and now speaks Russian accurately and enthusiastically.

He is easy-going, playful, and bright. He takes responsibility for his work, loves to help people, and enjoys going to football sessions. He has found a best friend, and they are both doing well.

Educating orphans

**Big Change is moving!**

Big Change has moved to new premises! This charitable organisation, which works with children from orphanages, has now been going for 17 years and has been supported by Friends House Moscow since the very beginning. Our current involvement is with a programme called the English Club.

The new contract with the Government of Moscow is for the ground floor and first floor, rent-free, for a minimum of ten years, which contributes to the stability of the work.

The activities at the English Club are many and varied. Small groups supported by teachers and volunteers discuss topics such as Ireland; Moscow without snow; news events, and many more. At each meeting the topic is discussed, new vocabulary is learnt, and lots of communication takes place. Each student also makes a presentation which they have prepared with the support of the volunteers.

All these activities help develop not only language skills but also analytical skills, memory and attention. And of course, being able to communicate and express yourself in another language gives an enormous boost to self-confidence!

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Publishing in the Russian language

**Fruits of Solitude, from 1790 to 2019**

Friends House Moscow is happy to announce its modern Russian translation of William Penn’s “Fruits of Solitude”.

The beloved collection of aphoristic short texts — gentle meditations and wise rules for living — had been translated into Russian before, but that was in 1790. Penn’s sometimes poetic musings are known to Russian readers (perhaps also to English-speaking ones) because J.K. Rowling quoted him in the superscription to “Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows”.

Our translation is available as an ebook from our Russian website, and also in paperback. We are accepting donations earmarked for printing more copies. If you donate at least £8 or $10, we can post you a copy as a thank you gift. Please email info@friendshousemoscow.org for details of how to get it.

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