

# Leaving the 'blind spot'

**As we know, statistics have an answer to any question. However, there is often a lot of sadness in these answers. About one in ten orphanage graduates is destined to commit a suicide, one in five will become a criminal, and one in four will become homeless. And how many more children come from 'socially disadvantaged' background, living the lives of waifs with their parents alive? It is unlikely that their lives will develop smoothly. Chief of Family Commune Hope Evgeny Kliot says hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of children and adolescents today are in a sort of 'blind spot' that is virtually invisible to the public and the authorities. The main inhabitants of this 'blind spot' are individuals who, having graduated from a children's home or a boarding-school, found themselves incapable of living on their own.**

*- Do you think individuals who lose their family during childhood or adolescence automatically pass a point of no return beyond which they will never be able to become fully-fledged members of society?*

- Of course not. Based on my 45 years teaching experience, I indeed believe that no one can ever replace family, and those who have lost their family in childhood or adolescence lack entire blocks of social development. But this doesn't mean that these blocks are impossible to restore through artificially created models similar to the family model.

In fact, conventional orphanages, family-type orphanages, family communes, foster families, all these are various kinds of surrogate which more or less resemble real family, facilitating with varying success socialization of an individual.

Our family commune works mainly with orphanage graduates aged 18 to 29 years. I often compare them to aquarium fish. They had been cared for and fed for a while, but then suddenly released into great waters with no skills for finding food.

I remember the day when my first twelve foster children who were brought up in an orphanage have gathered around family dinner table for the first time in their lives. They were surprised that the tea in a teapot wasn't sweet. In the orphanage, tea used to be prepared for the whole group and therefore was always sugared. Even in the best orphanages, if children enjoy a living fully procured by others, are learned to do and say only what they are told, and are unfamiliar with warmth and attention (even best carers are not able to give them to every child), they enter adulthood being helpless, confused and aggressive.

Therefore, we have formulated the goals for our family commune. Legally speaking, our goal is to create the conditions necessary for an integrated social and psychophysical rehabilitation of socially deprived adolescents and young people on the basis of diagnosis, correction and solution of social problems that hinder full inclusion in labour activity, integration into society and social protection during the period of socio-economic transformations and reforms.

*- The title of your book is What is the Price of a Start in Life? Let's skip the question*

*of price. Rather, can you tell us how many people have already benefited from a new start in their lives?*

- Since 1993, over 800 people visited the Hope commune. Although life was not successful for all of them, our efforts nevertheless have not been without results. I say 'our' because our commune would hardly exist without help of particular individuals, enterprises and organisations that have provided us with both one-time and regular assistance. I would particularly like to mention the Ascent Russian Orphan Aid Foundation (AROAF). I would also like to mention my life's companion and guardian angel Liudmila Vasilyevna Berezhnaya for whom the Hope commune is the meaning of life.

*- What is the Hope Family Commune like today?*

- In St. Petersburg, we have premises in a house on 10 Dvinskaja Street, which is our permanent establishment and leisure centre. We also have our own farm in Tervu village, Karelia, where we are trying to create a sort of social rehabilitation centre and summer integration camp.

*- But how did all this begin? How did you actually become a pedagogue?*

- My mother was also a pedagogue; she ran an artistic circle in the House of Pioneers. So, I decided to follow her footsteps. I graduated from the State Russian Herzen Pedagogical University, graphic arts faculty. Then I worked in the House of Pioneers, schools, boarding schools, pioneer camps.

Later, I worked as a deputy director of educational work in Petrodvortsovy special orphanage № 55 for 'children with developmental problems'. It was then that the idea was born to create a school of agricultural production with subsequent graduates' placement in the Victory sovkhoz. Since it was happening during the late 1980s - early 1990s, the project was not completed due to well-known economic reasons.

During the period of market reforms I had to change my job, and in order to help at least someone from my students, I applied for guardianship of one of them. But his whole life was there, in the orphanage where he grew up and where his friends were. So, gradually all my 15 students moved to my house. That's how we formed our own community which, in fact, was the basis of the Hope family commune.

*- From a pedagogical point of view, what is the difference between the Hope family commune and other institutions that work with problem juveniles?*

- In our commune, we have subject-subject relations, rather than subject-object relations present in the majority of other educational institutions. Translated from the scientific pedagogical language, this means that the child is perceived not as an object of education or re-education, but as a person with whom one should build, first of all, human relationships.

We have pedagogy of cooperation and interaction. We don't force anybody to stay. Many leave, then they come back and we usually welcome them. But at the same time, we reserve the right to expel from Hope anyone who tries to use our organisation as a temporary shelter, or as a place where one can make good at our expense. Our main method of education is work. We will not

leave anyone who is willing to accept the rules of our family life; we will always hold out a helping hand to them. Everything has happened over these 17 years, though, like in any family.

- *You have a rather difficult contingent here. Is it possible to manage merely with consciousness, without a harsh discipline?*

- It is known that street children in general poorly adapt to various shelters and social centres exactly because they reject the barrack-like order which is typical to this kind of institutions.

But on the other hand, such an authority like Makarenko recognized the need for educational institutions of a rather closed type. I liked very much experience that I gained during my trip to Denmark which was a part of a programme developed by the public organisation called Civil Monitoring together with the Nordic Council of Ministers.

In Denmark, many offenders convicted for petty crimes live in conditions close to those found in a four star hotel. They feel quite free there. They go to work, manage their own spare time, and in return they must obey quite soft rules and pass alcohol and drug tests from time to time.

If no violations take place, they get, so to speak, an extra portion of freedom. Of course, you cannot mould a true personality without freedom, but restriction of freedom is often a necessary step in this process.

In Hope, we work with adult people who, in addition, are not criminals, so any restrictions in our commune are solely voluntary.

- *In one of the articles about the Hope commune it was mentioned that you didn't reinvent the wheel when you created your family commune.*

- In fact, I didn't pretend to it. Even if we do not make reference to Makarenko and look instead at the 18th century, we will see such examples as Pestalozzi and his Neuhoff village in Switzerland, Bassedou and his private orphanage in Dassau, orphanages of Ivan Betsky in Russia. All this is really a classic of pedagogical thought. However, our project is important not only from pedagogical point of view.

During my trip to Denmark, I was surprised when I learned that nearly a century and a half ago, after the Danish-Prussian War, a poet, priest and pedagogue Severin Gryuntdivig united orphaned children into five agricultural communes. And today, structures that emerged on the basis of these communes supply food virtually for the whole country.

- *Are you trying to create something similar in Tervu?*

- We have settled in an old Finnish house. We have repaired it and acquired livestock (we have five cows and ten pigs). At the moment, we are trying to combine farming and nature conservation. According to our plan, there is going to be a 200 m tourist zone around the Ihoyarvi Lake and the bay of the Lake Ladoga which is adjacent to our farm.

Also, 150 m from the lakeside, we are going to build an environmental education centre for local children and population.

We could provide all necessary services for tourists: field hotels-tents, rooms in coastal cottages, firewood, fresh vegetables from our fields, farm meat and milk, ready-made meals to order, fishing tackle, boats, guides for the most beautiful places of the Lake Ladoga (we have plenty of beautiful places here). Incidentally, when these territories belonged to Finland, the best southern resorts of the country were situated here. So why would not we return their bygone glory? If everything goes as planned, our commune will become much larger. Production from our fields and farms will meet a guaranteed sale. This will mean not just increased revenue, but also opportunities for growth, hiring highly skilled pedagogues, psychologists, social workers, providing children with new work places.

Undoubtedly, combination of agriculture and tourism appears much more promising than merely an agricultural commune. However, there is also a social aspect of the problem... Imagine if such an experiment was successful and could be continued! Then it really would be an example and a gleam of Hope for tens of thousands of teenagers and young people not only from Karelia, Leningrad Region and St. Petersburg, but from all over Russia! After all, there are so many perishing villages around and so many 'problem' teenagers that are similar to those in our commune! So why not try to solve two most difficult and painful problems at once?

*- Indeed, why not try? Is there anything to prevent you from doing this?*

- As always, everything is being held back by barriers typical to our country. Today the coast around Tervu is almost entirely occupied by residents of Moscow and St. Petersburg who have built their houses here. Local people, if they wish to access water for fishing or bathing in the sun, must go through this occupied territory. In fact, no one can guarantee that we will not lose our farm simply because the site attracts some moneybags.

So, we need to knock at the offices, persuade, argue, and look for money after all. Right now, in a house on Dvinskaya Street in St. Petersburg, with the help of charitable organisations we managed to install a new fire safety system - we would have been closed without it. However, we still need a new fire escape, and this is going to cost us about 150 thousand roubles - quite serious money for an institution like ours.

We face such challenges constantly. However, these are all routine problems. By and large, we need something more important. We want both society and the government to understand that Hope is not working with some anti-social elements. Rather, we solve problems of society itself by helping the INDIVIDUAL, helping the CITIZEN! And we are going to help in the same way as we have been doing for all these years!

***Interviewed by D. MITYURIN***

***Photo courtesy of family-type children's commune Hope***