

This Child Here

BY ROBERT GAMBLE

Street children of Ukraine and a Presbyterian minister from Daytona Beach

YANA IS DEAD. One boy has been on the streets since age five; his father is in jail for killing his mother. Vika and Denis are still at the shelter managed by a non-governmental organization called, The Way Home. Maggie also is there and Jena; I know they will not go back to the streets. I cannot find the boy with blue eyes who lived at the Ptomkin steps. Misha who walked with Nancy, (holding her arm across the snow and patches of ice), stole something from a worker at the shelter then ran away. I do not see him this morning, but I see where he lives—a place for storage under stairs in an abandoned building. I open the small door and look into a space with room for only two to lay down; I see soiled clothes, crushed paper cups, newspapers, and the glue.

Peter and his two friends, have moved; I don't know where. Now, no one lives in the dirt below the concrete of that reconstruction site. I am glad about this as I wore a mask for TB when I went down before. Polina and those who had the second floor of an abandoned house—a place with four windows, a they bragged about—are all gone, routed, I suppose by the police.

It is like the voyeurism of "Survivor" to wonder who is still on the street; who moved to the shelter; who is placed in a home or an orphanage or jail; who is dead. But in the heart of anyone helping any child anywhere—India, Sudan or Ukraine—there is a face.

I AM A PRESBYTERIAN MINISTER. This is the fourth time I have come to Ukraine in one year. I am here because there is a large population of orphans and children who live on the streets, and because I want some sense of renewal and that usually requires that I do a thing that is new, risky and meaningful.

On these trips, I meet more people than I can remember. I have e-mail addresses and phone numbers of , Eastern Europeans, of aid workers from



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non-governmental organizations (NGO's), of travel agents, rental agencies and pastors taken so quickly in a cab or on the street, that I look in my notebook and say, "Now who is that?" I meet the desperate and the rich, the crazy and the beautiful. I see scenes that awe me and conditions too shocking for tears.

I spend much of my time with one NGO called The Way Home. They have a Day Center for street children and teenagers and a dormitory for those who live in as residents. Children get first aid, clean clothes and hot meals; they play together, draw, or watch TV. Nearly twenty children and youth, from age eight

to eighteen live at or visit the Center every day. Some go to school; others are tutored. I found this organization, like I find many things, by chance. It happened like this: I was checking in at the front desk of a blue-collar workers hotel. Unknown to me, a small group of representatives from several NGO's were meeting to discuss the issues of street children. One participant stepped out of the conference and into the lobby. She overheard my English. Her name was Epp; she is from Estonia. Red haired, sassy and very smart, she came to Odessa funded by a program for university graduates who want field experience in social issues.

"SOCIAL PATROL," EPP ANNOUNCES, pointing to her watch, "is at nine." Street kids have a schedule; they stay out late, sleep late in the day, scatter out to find food and beg for change in afternoon and early evening, and return to their locations at night. It is past nine-thirty when the staff of The Way Home has the van loaded. Alex is wearing headphones with a disc player in his pocket; Ivan, who is thirteen, is sitting next to him. Sveta, who manages the shelter, is up front with Nadia the nurse. We have boxes of clean needles, condoms, a deep pot full of hot noodles and water to drink.

The traffic is easy. I sit on the bench seat in the swaying van, holding my camera case in my lap. "You, me, later drink," says Alex, pointing first to me and then to his chest and lifting an imaginary bottle to his mouth. I nod. He puts his headphones back into his ears.

We pull over to the curb, ironically, next to the playground at MacDonald's. Between our van and the playground, children stand on a raised platform of concrete block. On top of this are two round steel-rimmed holes with ladders beneath—man holes—large enough to climb into.

I count eight kids; they jump off the concrete block and back up again, running and pushing each other. When they see us, they run to the van. Alex opens the door and speaks rapidly to them in Russian. I climb out and see Yula. "Photographer, photographer!" she says immediately, motioning with her hand for me to follow. She wears a t-shirt and jeans that are gathered by a belt at her waist. Even in the dark, I can see her dirty hands, the black beneath her fingernails, dark smudges across her face. Up close, her breath reeks of glue.

With the camera bag on my shoulder, I hoist myself onto the platform. Yula has already descended down the manhole. I sit first on top—hot air carrying the stench of garbage

and urine rushing up from below—then descend the steel ladder. The floor I stand on is a mixture of clothes, rags, and flattened cardboard boxes. Someone sleeps on this, I say to myself. In front of me are several massive steel sewage pipes too large to put my arms around; they heat this space beneath the concrete. Other smaller pipes run parallel and up with valve handles the size of steering wheels. Yula stands in the corner of concrete blocks, her hand on her hip as I raise my camera toward her. I don't smile; neither does she. There is a boy there too, with a black dog sitting on the pipes. He wants his picture taken with the dog.

Darkness is the backdrop to these photographs; added to it are two streetlights, the lights from MacDonald's and a nearby gas station. I shoot with a heavy digital camera, using interchangeable Nikon lenses and a low flash. I shoot rapidly, glancing always at the screen on the back of my camera to see the images I have made. In thirty minutes, I make two hundred images: faces of children from age eight or nine to fifteen, hugging each other or climbing on top of each other to get in front of the camera. Faces with arms hugging the yellow dog that sleeps on top of the platform; faces pressed against cats that live with the children beneath it. Faces of children climbing the circular orange slide at MacDonald's, swinging from the bar at the top, sliding down the pole beside it. Faces solemn, smiling, wide-mouthed, closed, intimate, distant; faces with eyes that stare into and past me.

Yula's face becomes central in these photographic essay. The images I took in February showed her clean cheeks, piercing blue eyes and shy smile. Under a wool cap covering her blond hair; at 13, she had the face of a model. This is May and they tell me, she has become a prostitute. I photograph her sunken cheeks, her shrunken frame; her eyes dimmed by life on the street.

THE BEST ESTIMATES SAY THERE ARE 140,000 CHILDREN living on the streets of Ukraine. In a country with a population of fifty million, it may seem a small percentage, but the number is still staggering. Street children survive by living in groups with their own laws. They wash cars, carry things, beg, steal, and become prostitutes. They don't go to school; they have no time, no friends and no documentation. When they are not begging or making money or sleeping, they inject themselves with drug store chemicals or squirt glue into a plastic bag and inhale.

Ukraine was once part of the Soviet Union. Under Communism, Ukrainians lacked personal liberty and lived in fear of the Russians, but most people had a job and food on the table. Almost every child went to school. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, many stopped getting a paycheck. Teachers, doctors, nurses, shipyard workers, factory workers, and accountants were suddenly unemployed. Much of what the government funded, ended. In the scramble that followed, a few individuals made loads of money but most were immediately poor. University professors began driving taxis and nurses took seats behind cash registers in convenience stores. Families broke up; alcohol took over. Abused children left home for the streets. You don't have foster families in Ukraine. No one can afford another child. "You have three children," a taxi driver said to me, "you must be a rich man."

While I am here there are times I drink too much but most times too little. I spend like a poor man but live a life that is rich. I listen to idiots, skeptics, learned people and fools, I learn from the suffering of children. I doubt and trust, give away and receive. I get robbed and restored, applauded and shunned.

I see churches void of life and attended worship with more life than my comfort zones can handle. I gave one sermon; it wasn't in a pulpit, and I didn't wear a robe. I stood on a rented stage in an old movie auditorium and it hardly lasted seven minutes, but I felt alive and honored as every word I spoke was repeated in Russian.

I never get bored, except on a thirty-two hour train ride from Kiev to Vienna. Each day, I stand on the street, stick out my money and ride in the cars of strangers. I spend as little as \$1.75 in a restaurant. I eat on street corners, in nice places and (not of my own choosing) at McDonald's. I feel the tingle of risk, the stab of danger, the warmth of doing a good thing and the presence of God in both good times and bad. I learn how much I can do, how much I can feel, how to let go of stuff I have lost and mistakes I made, how to ignore stupid people and keep hope stubbornly alive. I know I cannot help every child, but I can help this child right here.

IT IS LATE MORNING AND WE ARRIVE AT A NEW LOCATION, a large abandoned building. From the outside, it looks to be a school or office building. People are walking past on the sidewalk, but no one knows the boys are inside. Alex pulls back the sheet of metal covering a window, just enough to let me slide through with my camera and bag. Then he climbs in himself. We cross a room with crumbling concrete and brick walls; floor boards are missing, revealing sand, dirt floor joists below. There is a hall and a door. "Here," Alex says. He opens the door, and I step down bare wooden stairs. Below, filling a room that is only six foot by ten, are seven boys, lying side by side, like fish in a square can. A single light bulb hung from a cord is strung across the ceiling. At one end of the room is a small TV, a few empty cans on shelves, assorted tools and boxes left by those who once occupied the place. As I began to photograph them, one boy opens his eyes and smiles, the others lay sweating and sleeping in the warm damp air. ■



Above: Two boys from a group of six who live near the historic Ptomkin Steps. Fifteen yards away, tourists are snapping photos and a wedding is being performed. September 2005

Bottom: In winter, I find children below the streets where massive sewage pipes keep concrete tunnels warm. Looking down is Epp, a graduate student from Estonia, working for The Way Home. February 2006

