

# PERM NEWS

The newsletter of the Perm Association

October 2006

## Street children in Perm

After graduating from the Russian department at the University of Leeds in 2005, I asked myself the same question as most graduates do: "What can I do with my degree?" As with most things related to Russia, I was ready to expect the unexpected. Last summer I met a young American who had spent almost ten years in Perm running Love's Bridge, a charity for street children and underprivileged teenagers. As luck would have it, he had decided to move on, and I wanted to move in. So, in the freezing November of 2005, I arrived in Perm, knowing very little, but eager to embrace the developing third sector in Russia, and share some of my experience of charity and social work from the UK.



*Dima, a former street child, helped us to make contact with children sleeping amongst these hot water pipes*

The collapse of the Soviet Union and the following economic and social upheavals have resulted in massive social problems in Russia, and one of these consequences is the appearance of street children in almost every Russian city. Unemployment, family breakup, crime, alcohol and drug abuse are all influencing factors in children ending up on the streets. Many of the children we have cared for have run away from orphanages. Russia has more orphans in its population than any other country in the world, although the vast majority are 'social orphans', which means that

there are parents, who are simply not capable of caring for their children adequately. As a rule these children come from underprivileged families that are affected by alcohol, unemployment and other problems associated with poverty. Orphanages still respond poorly towards children who display behavioural difficulties, which often results in children running away to the streets, and there getting into further problems and difficulties. Attitudes towards substance abusers are even worse. Substance abuse is still considered a psychiatric illness, and is treated as such. Many of the runaways we have cared for have been put in psychiatric hospitals up to ten times due to substance abuse, and, ironically, now suffer from mental illness, and the problems that come with it. Despite the harsh and often appalling living conditions, many children and teenagers actually prefer living in sewers, cellars and abandoned buildings, than being forced to stick to the strict rules of the orphanages or tolerating abuse at home. They often enjoy the freedom of life on the streets, and quickly become used to their new lifestyle. It comes as no surprise, then that abused and abandoned children, young offenders and substance abusers make up the vast majority of Perm's street youth today.

Love's Bridge has developed a comprehensive programme aimed at rehabilitating street children and providing them with the opportunities necessary to lead healthy, productive and independent lives. In 1998 the charity opened the first day shelter for street children, which remains the only place in the city where any child can come for a hot meal, wash their clothes, and receive impartial and non-judgmental help and support in making the steps towards a healthy independent life. Every day up to twenty children and teenagers pass through our doors. Although progress comes in very small stages, the fact that these youths have somewhere to turn in a crisis makes all the difference. For several years we also operated a 24/7 shelter for former street children aged 10-18. Forty-two children lived in the shelter over a period of six years, and the local government soon followed in our path, opening their own temporary shelters for street children and underprivileged youth in desperate circumstances.

The most recent stage of the Love's Bridge programme is an educational centre for older teenagers (16-21). The transition into a healthy and productive adult life is often the most difficult step for former street children. We have helped hundreds of teenagers finish their basic schooling, complete professional training, and learn how to find and keep a job. Once established, these teens can support both themselves and their families, break the poverty cycle, and bring hope to the next generation. We also provide recreational activities and skills workshops for our children and teenagers – for a year we have been teaching many how to sew traditional Russian dolls, and carve wooden artifacts at our joinery. The participants receive pocket money for good work, thus learning a useful skill whilst earning money honestly and positively. We are now expanding our services, and helping more children and teenagers living in desperate poverty at home - whilst the numbers of street children are falling, this category of children is unfortunately on the rise. We have developed an intervention programme for younger children who are at high risk of ending up on the streets. We are also opening a youth centre for all underprivileged children and teenagers, where we will provide recreation and workshops to those who would otherwise be at risk of a life on the streets; sniffing glue, stealing, working as a prostitute or a beggar.

Working with street children and underprivileged teens is no easy task. Breaking addictions and leaving the streets permanently often takes a great deal of time and energy. Many of the teens we care for are considered 'lost causes' by the state institutions, and come to us with very little faith in themselves, and even less in the society they live in. But to see one of our teenagers make progress gives us enormous pride - finishing school after losing half their childhood to the streets, exceeding all their own expectations by sticking to a job, or simply coming to our centres to spend a few hours learning a new skill – all these are vital steps in moving on to a healthy and productive life. It may take weeks, months or even years to help them get off the streets, back to school or into work. When it finally does happen, the effort put in really is worthwhile. Not only does it show that there is hope for Russia's street youth today, but for future generations too.

*Hannah-Louise Mobbs*

*Editor's note. The Perm Association committee has decided to offer financial support to "Love's Bridge". Readers wishing to know more about the work of this organisation can visit their highly informative website at [www.lbridge.org](http://www.lbridge.org) and anyone wishing to contact them to seek further information or offer support can do so at [info@lbridge.org](mailto:info@lbridge.org)*

## News in brief

### Perm Drama Festival

This year Perm was designated as a City of Culture and decided to organise an International Youth Drama Festival. The Carte Blanche student theatre from Oxford (whom you may have seen performing 'A Clockwork Orange' in February) went to Perm in June to take part in the Festival. The Perm Association and Oxford City each awarded them grants to enable them to participate. An account of the trip is on page 5.

### Dance visit

The Doyle Academy of Irish Dance visited Perm in July 2006. See article on page 6.

### University exchange

A group from Oxford visited Perm in September 2006, as part of the annual university exchange.

### Conference on English Literature

Oxford participants were among those from 47 universities who attended a conference on contemporary English Literature at Perm State University, organised by Karen Hewitt and paid for by the Oxford Russia Fund.

## Dates for your diary

### University exchange

A group of teachers from Perm State University will be in Oxford from Saturday 11 November to Friday 1 December. All Perm Association members are warmly invited to a party to welcome them at Rewley House on Wednesday 15 November at 7.30pm. If you are able to attend, it would be helpful if you can let Karen Hewitt know in advance, so that we know how much wine and other drinks to provide.

### Yarmarka

The Yarmarka folk music and dance group will be returning to Oxford from 24 November to 3 December 2006. They will perform in various locations, including the Christmas Fair (see below) and a major event at the Town Hall at 7.00pm on Saturday 2 December. Following the performance, there will be a reception for members of the Perm Association. Further details are on the enclosed flyer and tickets are available from May Wylie.

### Russian films

Russian film nights will be revived from January 2007, when the Magdalen College cinema becomes available again. Members are invited to request Russian films by contacting any member of the committee.

### Annual General Meeting

The AGM of the Perm Association will be held at 6.00pm on Wednesday 21 February 2007 at Wolfson College. The Chairman and Secretary have announced their intention to stand down from their posts. Nominations are invited for these and other offices. The business meeting will be followed by a talk by Peter Oppenheimer, a well-known expert on Russian affairs and Russian humour.

### School link

Cheney School plans to visit Perm in 2007.

## Oxford International Links

### Midsummer Madness

The event was judged to be a great success, and it raised £700.

### International Christmas Fair

On Saturday 25 November 2006 there will be a multinational Christmas Fair at the Castle area in addition to the International Market in Broad Street. The Castle area will have artificial snow and an ice rink to aid the festive spirit. Merchandise from all of Oxford's twin towns will be on sale. Performances by Yarmarka, the Doyle Academy of Irish Dance, the K & G band from Leiden and the Masons Aprons, will take place at the Castle area from 10am onwards. Members able to help out on the day, by setting up and/or manning a market stall, are asked to contact May Wylie as soon as possible.

### Carmina Burana

Planning is under way for a multi-national performance of Carmina Burana in Oxford in late August - early September 2007 and in Bonn in late October. This will involve singers, instrumentalists and dancers from Perm, Leiden, Oxford and Bonn.

## News of other links

### Bonn

A group from Bonn will visit Oxford from 27 April to 1 May 2007, to celebrate the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the link and attend the unveiling of a commemorative stained glass window.

Plans are being made for jubilee celebrations in Bonn in October 2007. Bonn also plans to host another girls' hockey festival in 2007, following the successful one in Oxford this year.

### Grenoble

The revived Oxford Grenoble Association held its inaugural meeting in March, and now has over 50 members, several of whom took part in East Oxford Community Choir's visit to Grenoble in April.

### Leiden

Anniversary celebrations were held in Leiden in July, coinciding with events to mark the 400th anniversary of the birth of Rembrandt in Leiden in 1606. A group from Leiden will visit Oxford for the annual Remembrance Day commemoration in November.

### Leon

In May the Leon Link celebrated its 20th anniversary with a reception in the Town Hall, at which a cheque for £5000 was presented, to fund projects for children and young people in Leon.

A sponsored swim in July raised over £1,000, which was donated to support a water conservation project in Leon.

The Leon link has also funded the production of leaflets as part of an alcohol awareness campaign in Leon.

### Perm Association contact details

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## Perm International Youth Drama Festival

When the Carte Blanche Theatre Company set off from Oxford to Perm we had no idea what to expect from the experience. Having briefly spoken to a friend who had danced at Perm previously I had gleaned only two pieces of information: first, the people are lovely, and second that we would be treated very well for the entirety of our stay in Russia.

My first encounter with a Perm citizen was in Moscow when I got onto the train to Perm. Sitting opposite me was a young man who introduced himself as Alexis, whom I instantly made friends with despite the fact that we couldn't speak each other's languages. Alexis made a huge effort to communicate with me, learn more about me, and to tell me things about Perm. After sharing our food and drink with each other he even helped me make my bed for the long train journey. Alexis was a perfect representative of all the people whom we were about to meet in Perm.

The people of Perm are very proud of where they come from and of the history of their region. It was wonderful to see them talk about Perm with such infectious enthusiasm, and it made learning about the region a lot of fun. On our first full day in Perm, we travelled out to see the collection of wooden structures that have been gathered together on the outskirts of Perm. It was from here that we first got a sense of how the region of Perm had developed; the history of Perm was told through the stories of the buildings and how they were built and used. The salt house, the church, and the windmill all had things to teach us about Perm. The buildings themselves are beautiful, rivalled only by the amazing valley that they have been erected in.

Our morning in the art gallery was also a great trip. It must be noted, however, that there is far too much to see there in just half a morning. That amount of time can be spent looking at the iconostasis and the carvings of Jesus alone.

My friend who had already been to Perm was certainly right when he said we would be treated well. We were fed morning, noon and night, and sometimes more in between. We were warmly invited into the university to learn about the similarities and differences between students in Perm and Oxford. We were delighted to have a reception with the mayor of Perm and to be able to hear how he and his team were working alongside young people to ensure that they provided the best opportunities to rising talent in Perm. And we were humbled when the children from a local school took time out to come and perform a concert for us, which was truly a beautiful moment.

It goes without saying that we couldn't have survived without our interpreters, but we felt particularly lucky that our interpreters were not only bilingual, but very good fun too. It must be quite a daunting task to be hosts to a group of young students from Britain, but they approached it with a good sense of humour and kept us smiling throughout the trip.

As well as learning about Perm, we also spent a lot of our time working on our show. Our main worry was to try to make the show accessible to an audience that is made up of people from all around the world. This required a very physical approach to character acting so that the story could be told visually rather than through the dialogue. After our first performance, Viktor Ilyev (the director of the Perm Youth Theatre's show) came backstage to speak to us. With the help of a translator he told us that despite not speaking a word of English he fully understood the show, much to our director's delight. The reason we were so worried about our performance was because the standard we had seen in Perm had been outstanding. After seeing the Perm youth group perform a play by Brecht, we all went straight back to our scripts and started to rehearse again. This is why it was particularly nice to hear kind words from the director of a show that we rated so highly.

The opening ceremony was fantastic to watch. There was so much variety and so much pure talent on that stage. In recent discussions we have decided that one of the particular highlights was the James Bond themed dance routine, which was incredibly innovative and unlike anything we were used to. In an email conversation after the trip, one of our group said that the entire opening ceremony exhibited "so much more energy than anything we would have in England".

The same applies to the closing ceremony, which included a selection of performances from the festival. It was great to see some of the friends that we had made over that week performing on stage in Perm for one last time. The plea to those in charge to make Perm Europe a yearly festival was met with a huge cheer, showing just how much the participants from all around the world had enjoyed the festival.

It was during the closing festival that we collected the award we won. Misha (one of our interpreters) told me that it was for professionalism and high standards of acting. Of course, we were very flattered to receive such an award, and we hope this means we are invited back to Perm in the foreseeable future. If we were to be invited back for the festival, I would plan things slightly differently and allow ourselves two weeks in Russia rather than one. Although the festival lasts just one week, there is so much to do in Perm that it is difficult to fit it into a week, and it would be nice to spend more time with the friends from around the world that we made during our time there.

Although this account may sound polite, I assure you this is an honest description of our thoughts on this trip. On the train journey back, we were sad to be leaving Perm and the people we had met there. In a brief conversation on the train one of us said that it had been probably the best experience of his life. I had to agree with him, adding only that I was sad to leave and that I hope to return to Perm sooner rather than later.

*Kerry Norman, co-director, Carte Blanche Theatre Company*

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## **Doyle Academy of Irish Dance**

On Friday 28<sup>th</sup> July 2006, 17 excited Doyle Academy Irish dancers and 15 accompanying parents and family arrived at a busy Heathrow Terminal One for the direct flight to Moscow. A few hours later we'd landed and once we'd collected all our suitcases, we were met by the 'ever smiling' Larissa and chaperoned to our coach for the transfer to the Gamma Delta Hotel for an overnight stay.

After we'd checked in, we arranged to practise in the Hotel lobby much to the delight of the other residents. Trying to find a smoke free area proved most difficult as it seems to be a very popular habit in Russia. A substantial meal followed before we gathered for a night-cap (or three) in one of the numerous hotel bars.

After breakfast we walked to the nearby Open Air market to stock up on the usual Russian souvenirs, and then took a train to the centre of Moscow to visit Red Square. I had pre-planned that we would perform an 'impromptu' dance and so had arranged for everyone to wear their pale blue tour t-shirt.

Much to our disappointment, when we arrived at Red Square it was fenced off. The police of course would not explain why, but after a few moments the barriers were removed. Suddenly there was a huge rush of dancers and parents to the centre of an empty Red Square and with our own military precision we had the music playing and began our 16 hand reel. Five minutes later as the dance finished, we had gathered quite an audience. A young blonde haired man was trying to converse with me, I presumed about the dance or our group, and I ushered him towards Larissa to translate. It transpired that he was from the militia and was reprimanding us for dancing in the Square – which is strictly forbidden without permission. After a bit of grovelling, he agreed that the audience had enjoyed the performance and we quickly dispersed to mingle with the tourists having photos taken outside Lenin's tomb and St. Basil's Cathedral. A lucky escape! We had lunch in Moscow and visited a supermarket to stock up on refreshments for the overnight train journey to Perm.

On the last visit to Perm, the Trans Siberian train journey was one of the highlights for me. I had remembered the bundle of bodies and cases previously, so meticulous planning as we boarded the train this time meant that we loaded the carriage in order, avoiding any hold ups. The number in

our party also meant that we had a complete carriage to ourselves. Then comes the 21 hour compulsory relaxation. The train chugs along at a very gentle 40 - 50 miles per hour, stopping at various villages along the route where locals take the opportunity to sell their home-made food and produce to the passengers.

Not having to meet any appointments, we awoke on Sunday at our leisure, except for Molly Bourke who was celebrating her 5<sup>th</sup> birthday. Her carriage had been decorated with balloons and banners and we managed to squeeze 20 of us into her carriage to sing Happy Birthday and share her birthday cake. The day rolled by until we arrived in Perm and met Tanya and some of her team. We boarded the coach and told Tanya about our close encounter in Red Square. Her words of wisdom which remain with us are that "sometimes it's easier to ask for forgiveness than to ask for permission." How true!

We drove through Perm and noticed how much building work was going on. There seemed to be far more cars on the road and many of them were people carrier style vehicles. No bicycles though. Soon we arrived at the University complex. Tanya had warned me that the accommodation was basic, and having previously visited Perm, I tried to explain to our group. Excited children who'd moments earlier had bounced up the stairs returned sheepishly to meet their parents who were pulling luggage up 3 flights of stairs. Having our own plumber with us meant that the puddles in the toilet block were quickly attended to. The mums prepared a shopping list for cleaning materials, and in no time at all we had settled in well. We visited a supermarket to stock up on essential supplies before a very welcome 3-course meal in a local school. When we returned to the University, the dancers and I practised while the parents arranged the furniture on our landing into a seating area. And so was launched The Vodka Club, where we shared stories and jokes into the early hours.

After breakfast the next day we travelled with a police escort to the Bourevestnik summer camp to dance for the children who were attending. At the camp we were met by the Director and a group of singers and then were offered the bread and salt. As we performed, what struck me most was how very well behaved the children all were. For 'The Walls of Limerick', (our dance where we invite the audience to participate) we danced it three times before the camp leaders decided we needed to conclude our routine! The last dance involved both dance groups after which, all of the Doyle ensemble (dancers and parents) were presented with certificates and framed needlework, beautifully crafted by the children. After the display, we split into three groups and visited the children in their dormitories. It was while we were walking to one of dorms that I was told that the children were from a mixture of backgrounds – some were children of athletes and medical staff while the others were from low income families and orphanages. It was quite emotional to hear this and was a reality check for many of our group.

When we had visited a Children's camp five years previously, the children eagerly asked for our autographs, but had very few pens between them. In readiness for this visit, we'd all brought small gifts and novelties to share among the children which we handed out. What surprised the five of us that were revisiting Perm on this occasion, was how many children were asking us for our email addresses! After a nutritious lunch we left the camp to take a boat trip along the Kama River. Normally this would have been idyllic, but the unusually cold, damp weather meant that we were confined to sit inside.

After a meal at Wok bar we returned to the University for an evening of unforgettable entertainment.

On Tuesday, we travelled by tram to the Catholic Church we'd visited in 2001. Also we took Lourdes water for the Priest which we presented to him at the end of Mass. But as I suggested that he may like to share it with some of the nuns in church, he clutched the gift even closer to his chest! We walked to Tanya's office for a meeting with the Deputy Lord Mayor and after several press interviews made our way to lunch. We then moved on to Gorky Park for complimentary rides before participating in an exciting display. The audience braved the wet, cold weather helped

along by the very energetic Russian dance troupe. Once again we concluded the performance with The Walls of Limerick which was easily mastered by our competent Russian friends.



On Wednesday morning we arrived at the Municipal Palace of Culture for our rehearsal with the Yunost dance troupe. After brief introductions we rehearsed our routines and soon established that we were required to learn a closing routine which involved both groups of dancers. Although the routine was quite different, our girls and boys plunged into the balletic style dance and thoroughly enjoyed themselves. A trip to an art gallery followed before lunch in the Irish Pub. It had been closed off for our exclusive use and when "Lord of the Dance" played on their sound system the Irish

dancers quickly arranged themselves for another impromptu display. At 6pm we visited a Russian circus which provoked mixed reactions throughout.

On Thursday we visited the open air museum of wooden architecture and enjoyed a very informative tour in a very picturesque setting. Back in Perm, we rushed lunch before the final rehearsals at the Municipal Palace of Culture. Again another highlight was the performance on stage and the finale routine, after which was the presentation of bouquets and brief speeches. As we'd all 'dolled-up' for the special event, we decided to finish off the night with a meal at a restaurant, which turned out to be a lengthy affair. Back at base we opened the Vodka Club before retiring for the night.

On Friday, most of the group went shopping, but Roisin, Sam, Georgia and myself had been invited to the presentation for the KAMVA festival. Again, more speeches, interviews and camera crews. We met up with the main group later before taking the coach to a health spa for dinner and a display. It was very well received and we all agreed that we would like to have stayed overnight. However, it was back on the bus to Perm to prepare for the next day.



On Saturday we were bussed to the stadium (near Gorky Park) for the First Kamva Festival. We were initially concerned that the rain may interrupt our participation, but the sun soon came out and shone for the rest of the day. The Irish dancers were a highlight of the day among a very varied line-up of artists. As the day drew to an end, we had photos taken with Tanya and her staff before giving them presents and cards. We stopped at a large supermarket where we had the option of dining in one of the fast food restaurants or taking food back to the University. Back at base we set up a buffet to soak up the flavoured vodkas which remained! We reminisced about the week's events and agreed that we had shared a unique experience with many memorable moments.

On Sunday 6<sup>th</sup> August we had an early start for our journey home, departing on a Permavia flight for Moscow at 0740. We had hired the coach in Moscow again so we could fill our day by revisiting the open air market and Red Square as we weren't departing the airport until 2115 local time. There were no delays and at 2210 we arrived tired but jubilant to be re-united with family back at Heathrow Airport.

*Anne-Marie Gallacher*