

Troubled Children, Troubled Times

By Julie Poucher
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In a corner where the sunlight reaches into an otherwise dark first grade classroom, a brown haired seven year old boy with lively eyes sits on a wooden chair drawing Russian tanks in battle. This is nothing unusual. Little boys are known to be caught up with the excitement of war, but this boy whose name is Dima often draws violent scenes and evil faces. He paints in sad colours.

Dima doesn't live at home. He lives at Internat No. 58, which is a boarding school for children whose families cannot afford to keep them at home because they either do not have the money or the time to properly care for them. The school is open five days and four nights a week and the children are boarded there during the week for as long as their parents decide. Dima's mother sent him and his sister here a few years ago when their father went to prison.

Although Dima's father went to prison for killing someone in a drunken brawl, Dima believes his father is, generally speaking, a good person. His art and English teacher, Natalya Yuryevna Lomonosova, says that when she asked him how he felt about his father, Dima replied, "Yes. He is good. He brought me to the circus and bought me candy. He writes us regularly."

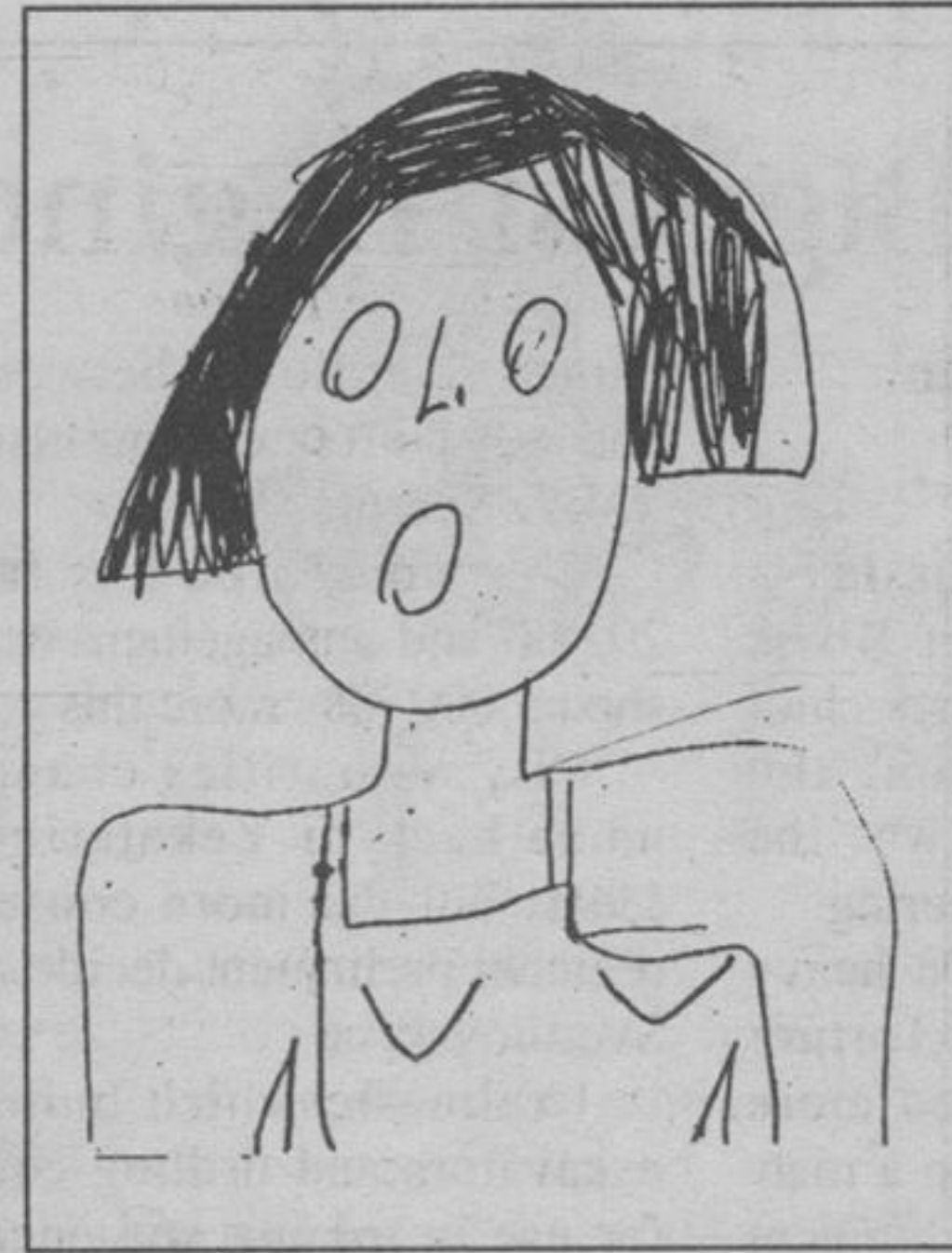
When Dima's eleven year old sister, Natasha, stopped coming to school two weeks ago the teachers were worried. Dima tells me that she

ran away and now lives at a friend's house. But he said their mother is not worried. "Mama does not try to find her. She said Natasha will come back herself."

There are restless young students aimlessly running about in the hall, yelling and fighting and laughing. It is no doubt break time. But Dima is still quietly drawing.

Natalya says that Dima often paints with sad blues and browns which indicate to her a depressed mental and physical state. In this internat which boards and schools students from first to eleventh grade, she teaches art and English to the lower grades. She wrote her thesis at the Pedagogical Anastasia on "psychological rehabilitation with creativity in the internat." Natalya is also a strong advocate of the ability of art and music to soothe a child's frustrations and inner struggles and to serve as a tool for psychological evaluation. It is especially important to Natalya that the school have access to plenty of easels, pastels and bright paints, but at the school they are seriously lacking. She said that the music programme, fortunately, is endowed with a great music teacher who instructs the pupils about folk songs and dancing and has access to some great costumes to act out the folk tales.

Natalya laments that there is no school psychologist to give and evaluate tests which would help her to better serve these kids who are literally emotional orphans. Most of them come from dysfunctional families. The typical family profile that she out-



Drawing by Dima, 7, who often creates violent scenes in sad colours. Internat No. 58 works to help children like Dima realise a better future.

lines includes single parent households, alcoholic parents, displaced parents, or families whose combined income was between 1000 and 2000 roubles a month and often had to stretch over several children. "Only about 30% of my students on any given day ever paint happy faces and the rest paint sad and evil faces," Natalya said. She adds that because of their low morale from home neglect and abuse, the first and second classes don't have grading systems, she said, so they will not think of themselves in terms of an "A" or "F" student. Natalya says that sometimes even if a child receives an "A", "they throw it

in the garbage, saying who would want it anyway."

I hear more screaming in the hall and two first graders peek in the door asking if their teacher is finished yet. I ask if these children have succeeded in creating a healthy social structure here, but Natalya tells me that "they don't know how to become friends. They fight a lot. They do not know how to get along without extremes. Someone is good or bad. If they are bad, you beat them up." She tells me of an incident on the playground where a boy and girl were playing soccer and the boy accidentally knocked into the girl and the girl began to relentlessly beat the boy and tell him he was bad. "If they do not learn how to relate to each other at home, then how can they make and keep friends here?" she asks.

She pulls out some portfolios and I find that it is easy to be shocked by the unveiling of young minds. There are war pictures strewn with dead bodies. There are large military machines and cars drawn in sophisticated detail and featureless stick figure people. There are robots with happy faces. There are some animals and up-side-down skies and fewer flowers than Russian stars. There are dead German fascists. There are witches that some children have labeled "mama" and an entire family of scissor people.

These pictures are key to psychological evaluation, Natalya said. Some pictures show people's subordination to technology (witness a large detailed machine next to a

small stick figure) and the constant rehashing of World War II, a reminder to children that so many Russians were wronged by the fascists. The anger of 40 years ago lives on it seems. "Not as many young boys want to be soldiers anymore, though," Natalya points out. "They want to be business men."

It is odd, that at a time when Russia seeks to embrace capitalism and children dream of wanting to be businessmen, they are still drawing pictures about World War II. A primary reason is because history books at many school have yet to be updated.

However, social and financial ills created by present day economics continue to generate the need for these schools that take on some of the family's responsibilities and supply outdated teaching materials. Natalya says teacher turnover is high due to the stress of having work with these unstable youngsters.

Recently Internat No. 58 received 50,000 roubles from the winner of the the Seventh International Ice Sculpture contest that was held in Moscow on February 10. The Singapore ice sculpture team chose this school as the recipient of their prize money so that they could buy better art supplies and teaching materials. The school is searching for more money so they can eventually employ a school psychologist and more teachers for its 2500 students.

Dima is finished with his pictures. He tells me he wants to be an artist. Natalya smiles. She says that there is some hope for the future of "her children."