

St. Petersburg in April 2010

A report by Steph Roberts of Network Russia

We flew in to St. Petersburg on 15th April using Lufthansa via Munich. I had emailed all my contacts in St. Petersburg that we would be staying at the Dostoevsky Hotel and we would be willing to meet if they arranged a time to visit.

On Saturday we met Natasha Skorokhodova on the steps of the Findlaskaya (See Freddy's previous Report) to visit an ex-pioneer campsite in Lembolovo. Natasha had expected the path to be slushy but the snow had not melted and the path was narrow if you came off it and became thigh deep in snow. It really wasn't a good idea of Kevin's to wear out his holey shoes on the trip before ditching them! Catching up with Natasha after so many years was fun. My first memories of Edward and Natasha were from the first Russian Jamboree 17 years previously. We chatted about Scouting in St. Petersburg. Natasha runs a cub section in her school (The Happy School) where Edward and herself run a group in town called the Owl Troop. Olga and Nicolai run a Group called White Fang across town by the ice cream church off Moskova Street, and Katier and Edward run another Group called the Beavers . These groups all work in a formal regular meeting more like our own expectations of Scouting. Natasha has difficulties in the time that she can give Scouting along with full time teaching and commuting to and from the school in the school bus, but does devote many hours of her time.

On Sunday morning, Natasha Moroz and Annya Gregoria came to the hotel for a coffee. Natasha was on the campsite programme 10 years ago and worked with Kevin and I at Watcombe Campsite in Torbay. Annya is one of the leaders in the old All Russia Scout National Organisation (A.R.N.S.O.) It was so lovely to see her as she is now only helping Annya in a distant way due to work and having a 3 year old daughter. She told us about the differences coming to England had made to her life. She thanked Kevin and I for the time given for visits we had taken her on during her stay with us and how now she looks back knowing that Russia is not the centre of the universe and that we are not all enemies.

We then went on a city tour and somebody made the comment that it is possible to get " cultural indigestion" very quickly if you let it. Kevin loved it this being his first visit.

In the evening we met Demitri Usanov a police Captain and secretary for the International Police Association. Our aim was to set up a Safety badge with themselves and St. Petersburg Scouts along the lines of stranger danger and personnel safety Road safety , however he advised us that the police are not yet "User friendly" and it would be a very long term aspiration for the police but



they would like to keep in touch with the programme and ideas around the concept. He then said he would set up a meeting with Gerandi later in our visit.

On Sunday afternoon we met Olga Maitlin in a metro station, and after an ice cream and drink we walked to White Fangs Scout meeting place in a block of flats. Nice airy couple of rooms if a tad small but functional. We were met by fifteen smiling happy Scouts who had trekked across the city to meet us. We sat and

introduced ourselves in a circle and talked about their wishes for Scouting which mainly were chances to travel and camp with scouts from over the world and especially English Scouts. They take their promise very seriously and it is not made until a full commitment to Scouting can be proved this can take up to 6 months!! We then played games and sang songs. At the end of this part of the programme Freddy presented Olga with a medal and certificate for service recognition to Chalfont and Ambassadors' for Russian Scouting. The first presented in Russia. Of course the easter eggs that we had overloaded on coming into Russia we now gladly presented to the Scouts!!



Monday afternoon we taxied to the Happy School. After some guided tour of the school we were shown into Natasha Skorokhodova's class room where she was running her cub pack. Ten cubs were on a timed run around the school playground. The school being on the outskirts of St. Petersburg on the river Neva and in the industrial part of town meant that Freddy and I sat on a bench waiting for them with our eyes shut to avoid the dust whirls. The cubs were planning to go on a training camp in the summer holidays that would be four weeks long. Their aim was to teach camping and cooking skills for the cubs. We presented Natasha with a glass pair of hands shaking, and then told the cubs the significance of this as a sign of friendship. We then gave the cubs badges and more eggs.

We were then invited along to school assembly as they were launching English week which started off with six Burns Scottish poems together with a PowerPoint presentation of Scottish castles and then some English pictures.

We went home in a school minibus with Natasha where the school children wanted to practice their English but it was very difficult with the radio blaring, a hot sticky confined space, and Russian road conditions. Freddy was just glad when it was over.

Now to an evening of what I think Network Russia is about. Natasha, Katier and Annya came to an evening meal with us to discuss a safety badge. Annya being in a different organisation and working with older Scouts has different sets of problems in Scouting from Natasha. Natasha is working with both Cubs and Scouts. So now we decided that Freddy, Kevin and I would sponsor a safety badge that would be obtainable at two levels, one for Cub ages the other for older Scouts. The badge would be the same design and usable in both Russian organisations. We would produce the badge and distribute to both Annya and Natasha. Annya and Natasha were given a six week cub programme for ideas to make up their criteria for the badge at cub level. The Scout level would involve learning of skills in a much more in depth way over a much longer time span. Elements of British Canoe Union (BCU) rescue skills, Fire safety and first aid would be part of the older version criteria. We are now waiting for them to give us their criteria in full.

During another part of the evening Annya said she had lots of older Scouts who would make suitable leaders and was willing to work with Natasha to see if they could help each other. We gave Natasha a pack of 140 tee shirt transfers and suggested that they might like to camp together and have a common tee shirt. There were lots of possibilities. After five years of not communicating they exchanged mobile numbers. Many other ideas were made and the evening was very positive. Just as it was slowing down, Timmy and Dimmy arrived and presented Freddy with a cheeky photo of their last expedition into the mountains in winter.

The following afternoon we met up with Gerandi, President of the International Police Association in St. Petersburg. He reported 200 members in St. Petersburg. There would be a delegation to

Hertfordshire in two weeks to see how policing in England is done. Exchange of good practice and ideas etc.. . They know the police have a bad reputation in the city and are overwhelmed with ways to change this after years of a military style policing. As we sat down in the cafe to chat, the ladies behind us heard the word police and moved away. Demitri laughed and agreed that police have been corrupt and they expect it will be a slow progress to eliminate these problems and even longer to erase the perception too. He told us of the School liaison officers who visited schools to give talks on road safety etc. but also said it was more propaganda. They are the good guys trying to clean up. Gerandie passed on email and telephone for the director of the Police Academy that may be a useful contact in the future.

Annya picked up Freddy and I up early in the morning to get to school on time to sit in on her first two classes. We introduced ourselves and talked a little of Scouting and then got into a discussion on the Royal Family. In the 2nd class we asked if we could talk about the police and the second teacher asked us to stop. We suggested that things would not improve if you did not even talk about the problems. One girl raised her arm and said the police were corrupt. Freddy said he was a friendly policeman and that it was not uncommon to give talks and demonstrations in schools and Scouts in the UK. Then another teacher said that they have liaison officers who visit school but it was compulsory. Another thing he did was run a training camp of survival for the older pupils using the fire brigade to teach some skills. They also learnt some rope work which we translated as mountain rescue techniques. Anyna's Scouting is done with the old ARNSO of whom a few remain despite lack of funding and support. Anyna runs a camp and has use of an ex-pioneers campsite but it has no storage or buildings on it. She also runs Scouts through the school but with the older pupils 17-18 year olds. The 3rd lesson was a trip to the school museum, we then had lunch and walked out of school into Nevsky Prospect which was 200 yards down the road.

That evening, another surprise. Alex and Natasha came to the Hotel again. Alex was the other Scout we hosted in Torbay. Alex also told us how his life had changed because of his visit to the UK. He is now involved with a youth exchange programme with an eco organisation in Manchester . He sends 10 students to Manchester yearly to work on a bird sanctuary because he saw the value of such exchanges from his experience. I was quite choked at the influence we had had on both Natasha and Alex all those years ago. He had also worked at the campsite in Losevo and had worked with Tim Axe, but was surprised there was not more Scouting involved as this to him seemed to be wasted of opportunity. Overall, he was glad we had opened his eyes to another side of the world and to more possibilities than he had ever dreamed of.

Dimmy, or was it Timmy, picked us up from the Hotel to take us to the Owls Headquarters (yet another block of flats, but good and clean and proudly meeting European standards!!) The Cubs and Scouts were a delight, beaming from ear to ear. They sang songs and proudly showed us their home-made badges earned under the old cub programme. The leaders talked more of the safety badge and scribbled ideas down. I gave them printed material related to safety and games that I have played with bronze medallion courses for lifesaving. We gave them copies of our ten days photos for their records, emptied the easter eggs boxes, and gave out the remaining badges we had brought with us.

Edward told us of a gathering the weekend after we had left in Pavalosk Park of Navigator Scouts to which they and Anyna had been invited. Navigator membership to WOSM has been paid for the next ten years so the rumour goes!! by an oil company . They have twenty permanent members who are 'Leaders'. They gather kids from schools and then run a camp and take photos of the numbers for publicity. I asked both Anyna and Edward for photos and a brief report of the event. (I am still waiting). Pavalosk Park is where the first camp was held and then with

the rebirth of Scouting the first Scouts were invested under an oak tree. We parted with great sadness but a lot of work to do in the future.

In between the Scouting, we had a super visit but it was more productive that we ever thought possible and it was also hard work mentally and physically, Kevin has now DONE Russia and will continue his support from his arm chair!

Both Schools that we visited have invited Explorer Scouts to visit and teach safety for an Explorer Belt award and we have gathered information on hostels and related information for a ten day expedition and set of challenges in the future. There are endless possibilities for the future. Watch this space.

