



Ten-year-olds-
Maxim and Katya
are new family to
one another

He built a
fairytale village
where some of
Russia's most damaged
children find healing
and a bright new
future

BY KENNETH MILLER

Dmitry's Dream

T

HE MINIVAN ROLLS through the frozen Russian countryside, carrying six children home after an outing. There's little to look at but snow-covered forest, and the kids distract themselves with books and plastic toys. They snap to attention, however, when the man in charge leans toward them. "Look what I found rolling around," he exclaims, holding up a water bottle as if it were a rare fossil. "Does



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—Dmitry Morozov

anyone want a drink?” The kids shake their heads, and the man arches an eyebrow quizzically. In a sonorous voice he asks, “Why should we never drink from a bottle that’s fallen on the floor?”

“Microbes!” shouts a dark-haired 10-year-old named Maxim. He beams as the man says, “Good answer!” and gives him a high-five.

Maxim is small for his age, with an air of jaunty toughness that belies his painful past. His mother and father

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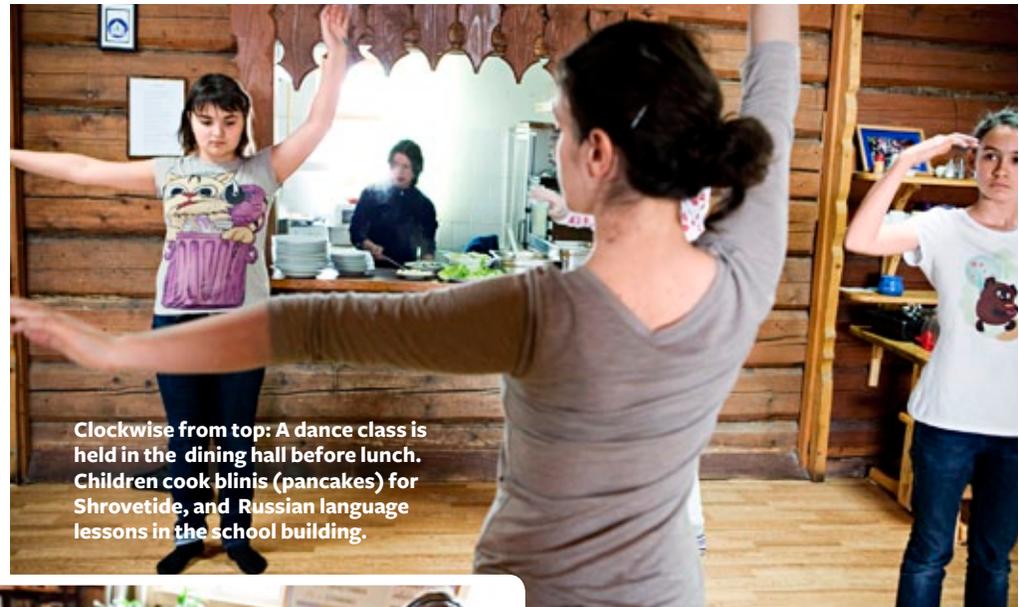
were severe alcoholics who often left him to forage for food on the street. When he was four social workers removed him from his home; he spent two years in a children’s shelter, where he was beaten by bigger kids and largely ignored by the staff. And were it not for the bearded man on the bus—Dmitry Morozov, 52 (dob: 16.06.1959)—Maxim’s life might have gone downhill from there.

Maxim is one of a lucky number of children who have come to live at Kitezh, a children’s community that Morozov founded 19 years ago. The community comes into view as the bus rounds a corner: 18 houses, a school

and church as well as a farm. Most of the buildings are made of roughhewn planks and bedecked with steeples, murals, cupolas and crenellations. The place looks like something out of a Russian fairytale, but its fanciful appearance serves a practical purpose. “It’s in the world of fable that miracles and metamorphoses happen,” Morozov says. “Everything about Kitezh tells children that they can transform themselves.”

When the bus stops, the kids make a beeline for the dining hall. Maxim

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Clockwise from top: A dance class is held in the dining hall before lunch. Children cook blinis (pancakes) for Shrovetide, and Russian language lessons in the school building.



grabs a bowl of borscht and sits down at a long pine table next to a girl his age.

“The grownups say my mother is dead,” he says, a flicker of sorrow crossing his face, “and I don’t know where my father is. But I have a new mother.” He points toward the serving area, where a plump middle-aged woman is wielding the ladle. “And this

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is my new sister.”

The girl beside him—compact and cheerful, with straight brown bangs—introduces herself as Katya. Her background is similar to Maxim’s. “I went to a party yesterday,” Katya declares, displaying a photo of herself in a fairy costume.

Maxim smiles and slurps a spoonful

[[2R]]



Sandra Diagileva lives with Aleksandr and Irina, and their family

of soup. “We’re Kitezhan now,” he says.

To be a Kitezhan is to belong to a unique community devoted to turning deeply damaged children into educated and productive members of society. Everyone is equal here. But the first among equals, as any resident will tell you, is founder Dmitry Morozov.

Morozov grew up a member of the Soviet elite, the son of a military officer and a medical professor. His parents were hard workers and independent thinkers, and they nurtured those qualities in their only child. Still, he believed that Communist culture was the pinnacle of civilization. As a young man, he traveled to India while pursuing a PhD in Asian Studies. There, he was stunned to discover that the world he came from was not the only one in which people could feel happy and

fulfilled. While studying yoga and Hindu mythology, Morozov met Svyatoslav Rerikh, a prominent expatriate Russian artist and philosopher, who encouraged him to follow his own calling – however unconventional. “Gradually,” he says, “I came up with the idea of making a world of my own.”

But what kind of world? Morozov spent a decade searching for the answer. Returning to Moscow in 1982, at age 23, he became a well-known international correspondent for state-owned Radio Mayak; summers, he worked at Young Pioneer camps, where he discovered a gift for mentoring troubled children. Yet it wasn’t until the Soviet Union began to crumble in the early 1990s that he found a way to create something new.

As Russians began to jettison Communist ideals and social controls,

countless families splintered. Alcoholism and drug addiction soared, and the population of displaced children reached levels unseen since World War II. Russia classifies more than 665,000 boys and girls as being without parental care. Some are orphans but at least 80 percent are kids taken by the authorities from negligent or abusive parents. A great many of these children are adopted but more than 100,00 are left in orphanages. The future for these children is grim.

Moved by their plight, Morozov found his life’s work. In 1992 he announced his plan to establish a community devoted to the humane care of

early adolescence. There was much trial and error at first, but by the early 2000s, Kitezh was flourishing.

Today the village is home to 33 children, living in seven households. The parents, who double as schoolteachers and counselors, are specially trained to handle the needs of traumatized kids. The children can be maddeningly uncooperative, but each child can rely on a web of relationships that goes well beyond a single family. If a child doesn’t get along with his foster family, he can move in with another; if he wants to study chess, or Japanese, he’s encouraged to find a teacher.

Along with a high-quality education, the children receive intensive psychological treatment—play therapy, art therapy, drama therapy. Their progress toward be-

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havioral and psychological goals is tracked by peers and counselors. They begin as “pups,” – which in Russian means a young, inexperienced person -- with no responsibilities; as they reach individual benchmarks, they’re promoted to the status of “students,” responsible for themselves and “mentors,” responsible for other children. Each stage is marked by a ceremony.

Morozov himself has raised three foster children. (He and his first wife, who still lives in the community, also have a biological son; both have since remarried.) What he asks of adult Kitezhan is no more than he demands of himself: a willingness to provide

The kids began arriving in 1995. Most come from Kaluga’s orphanages, and are usually from ages five and to

their charges with love, empathy and discipline, and to sacrifice conventional comforts for a cause. Most respond magnificently. Tamara Pichugina, 60 (**dob: 18.08.1951**), the soft-spoken, kind-faced foster mother of Maxim and Katya and—over the years— nine others, says simply, “I came here because I wanted to dedicate myself to something serious and great.”

The kids must hold up their end of the bargain, too. “We can’t make them obedient,” says Morozov. “We can’t make them clever. All we can do is persuade them to take responsibility for themselves, to read more and to improve themselves.”

On a blustery Tuesday morning, a

“I’m thinking of a disco party, with lights and decorations, where kids will learn to dance in pairs.”

“I vote for Sandra!” cries little Katya.

Sandra unleashes a radiant grin. The daughter of an Ethiopian father who deserted her Russian mother, she came to Kitezh from an orphanage where she was ostracized by children who’d never seen a black person before. When she first arrived, at age six, she told everyone she was ugly and stupid. She now lives in the community with a couple in their 30s. A budding linguist, she recently won a regional English competition and got to try out her skills on a school trip to Scotland.

More than half of Kitezh’s 70-odd graduates have gone on to higher education; like Valentina Kanukhina, who was brought to the village from a desperate background when she

was 12. Today, at 23 (**18.06.1988**), she’s graduated from the Russian State University for the Humanities and now works at Yandex, a Russian Internet search portal, like Google. Says Valentina, “I can go anywhere. Kitezh gave me the tools to deal with the world.”

Most of the remaining graduates have found legitimate employment. “Not one in 15 years has become a drunkard or a prostitute or a bandit,” says Morozov. “Not one has committed suicide. These are fantastic results, even for kids from ordinary families.”

Russian officials agree. The federal



Dmitry (top centre) with children, Kitezh in the background

“Things can be done—and done successfully—in an absolutely different way”

group of kids shovel snow off a pond to make a skating rink. In a pine-paneled classroom, six high school students listen raptly as their teacher, Maria Schurova recites passages from Tolstoy. At lunchtime, children help prepare the lentil stew and clean up after the meal. In the evening, a crowd gathers in the schoolhouse to hear speeches by candidates for youth council.

“I’d like to diversify our extracurricular activities,” says one campaigner, a slender, brown-skinned 17-year-old named Sandra Diagileva.

government now pays the salaries of Kitezh’s teachers, and provides stipends to each foster family. In Morozov’s modest living room a display case holds the presidential Order of Honour that Vladimir Putin awarded him in 2007. Five years ago, he was appointed to advise a parliamentary committee on children’s issues.

Thanks partly to Morozov’s efforts, the Russian government now encourages private foster care, and Kitezh is offering courses to would-be caregivers. Morozov travels around the country sharing his wisdom with orphanage administrators and social workers.

Morozov and his followers hope to go on building more communities. Orion, 200 kilometres from Kitezh, has been operating since 2004.

“This life is not for everyone,” Morozov acknowledges. “It’s difficult.

The important thing is to show that things can be done—and done successfully—in an absolutely different way.”