

Summer Camp – Half a World Away

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Tanya, 12, and, her 8-year-old sister, Tonya, thrilled to their first bubble baths. Vitaliy, 8, was amazed to see his very first ice cube melt in a soft drink.

These and a dozen other Russian children were enjoying their first trip away from their orphanage in Biro Bijian -- and their first American camp experience, part of which was spent at the Lattof YMCA in Des Plaines.

"It is amazing! They just seem to adjust. It was their first plane ride, and Tanya and Tonya seemed to love flying. No crying. No fighting. They are not awestruck, but there is no apprehension. They just go with the flow," said Debra Lorig, who with her husband David, welcomed the sisters to their home in Chicago's Sauganash neighborhood.

"My husband and I considered adopting an older child and heard about this program. We thought hosting the sisters for the camp would be a great way to try it out," she added.

The sisters are away from everyone they know, in a different country, exposed to different customs, and don't speak English, although help is available from translators, Debra said.

But they make their bed and brush their teeth without even being told. And now immersed in a culture very different than their own, they are confronting things we take for granted -- like automatically opening doors at grocery stores and sampling all kinds of food they have never tasted.

They love tea, yogurt, pancakes, cucumbers, carrots, corn, mashed potatoes, turkey bacon and salami, although not other meats they have tried or lasagna, Debra said.

However, when the Lorigs took them shopping for clothes, it was the light-up gym shoes that made the biggest hit with both.

"It's fun to watch them do things for the first time that we take for granted -- like using a straw to sip a drink and a squeeze bottle to get condiments... Last night, they took their first bubble baths. Tanya stayed in hers for half an hour," she added.

And David, owner of a road construction business -- who has a 12-year-old son from a former marriage -- is delighted that the girls seem to be adjusting so well, said Debra, a full-time homemaker.

Maureen and Wayne Lau of Batavia are having a similar experience hosting Vitaliy, an 8-year-old orphan who would never even have dreamed of the summertime fun he could have before arriving here.

The Laus, who married in their 40s about a year ago, also have been thinking about adopting an older child. Wayne, who is in marketing, and Maureen, a social worker who works in a local middle school, were researching the possibilities when they discovered information about international adoption.

"I heard that many older children in this country were available to foster families interested in adopting them, but many times their biological families get them back even after they have been in a foster home for years," Maureen said.

"I didn't want to go through that. When I found out the children from other countries were all from orphanages, I became interested," she added.

Although the Laus don't speak Russian and Vitaliy doesn't speak English, they have the help of a family friend who was born in Russia and a website that helps them translate. They pantomime a lot.

"Vitaliy has never seen a playground like we have here and he loves the equipment. But he is even more excited about the little things that we've given him, like a small flashlight," Maureen said.

"He is very adaptable. He has such a social and outgoing personality, that the experience has been excellent. This has been a wonderful visit, smoother than we ever anticipated. There has been no acting out, but we were well-prepared for behavior adjustment problems by the staff at **St. Mary's** and the Bridge of Hope," she added.

All three children are participating in the five-week Bridge of Hope camp program facilitated by **St. Mary's Services**, an adoption agency in Arlington Heights.

The program offers the youngsters, all of whom are available for adoption, an opportunity to see how children in America spend their summers. The program sponsors weekend cookouts, pool parties and other events to enable the children to stay in touch with friends from their orphanage and give host families the opportunity to share experiences.

The Bridge of Hope, created by the Cradle of Hope Adoption Center in Silver Spring, Maryland, is the only program like it in the Midwest, said Michaelyn Sloan, **St. Mary's Services'** director of international adoption.

Before the orphans arrived, adoption counselors at **St. Mary's Services** determined which families were suitable to host the children, then introduced the families to translators, she added.

During the visit, the counselors also help families understand some of the unique behaviors that Russian children might exhibit and answer questions that might arise, she added.

Because most of the children have never experienced anything but institutional life in an orphanage, unusual situations could occur.

"I received a frantic call about one little boy who was poking holes in his host family's porch screens. Once we got a translator, we found out he wasn't doing it to be mean. He had never seen screens before and didn't know what they were for, so he was poking them. It was curiosity. There are no screens in Russia," Sloan said.

Misunderstandings such as this could have led to 14 Russian children being killed by their American parents since the 1990s, including a 6-year-old boy in Schaumburg.

That is why Russia stopped renewing the licenses of about 50 U.S. adoption agencies until the process could be reviewed. The slowdown caused adoption numbers to drop to 3,706 Russian adoptions last year from the peak number of 5,865 in 2004, Sloan said.

But the license of the Cradle of Hope, which has placed more than 450 children since 1997, was among seven agencies that was recently renewed.

Another get-together of Russian children participating in the American camp experience will be held July 28 in Frankfort, Ill. For more information, call (847) 870-8181.