

# Mother Russia's children return

Adoptees visit birthplace with U.S. parents

BY KATHY LALLY  
IN MOSCOW

**D**asha left as a 6-month-old Russian orphan, hospitalized since birth, beset by a variety of ailments. This summer she returned for a visit, a spunky sports-playing 10-year-old now named Emily, as American as can be, down to the pink polish on her toenails.

Nicholi, now 12, went to his U.S. family as a sickly baby who weighed only 12 pounds by the time he was 10 months old. He returned as a lively seventh-grader with top marks back home in Norman, Okla.

The two youngsters and their mothers traveled to Russia in July as part of a group of 15 families who wanted their adopted children to see and feel the country where they were born, a place they had been told about all their lives but didn't really know and couldn't quite imagine. They wanted them to know who they are.

The parents were mindful of how much had changed here since their original visits, when Americans were adopting in large numbers. Russia has turned increasingly cantankerous toward the United States, accusing Americans of abusing their children. On Jan. 1, Russia forbade further adoptions by Americans.

If the families feared any stand-offishness, they needn't have worried. The Kremlin line may be peevish, but ordinary people, doctors, nurses and baby-home directors met them with curiosity and kindness. Nicholi — known as Nicky — even found three surprised brothers and a loving grandmother.

"It was terrific," said Harper Liles, Emily's mom, after visiting Tomsk, the 400-year-old Siberian city where her daughter was born. "The cornerstone of the whole trip was returning to where we became families. It's the thing you invested the most hope in and had the most worry about. And it was lovely."

The trip was arranged by the Ties Program, part of a Wisconsin

company that organizes homeland journeys for adoptive families. They spent three days in Moscow, a few days in the regions where their children were born and then a few days in St. Petersburg.

Odessa Bacher took Nicky and his adopted sister, Victoria, now 13, back to southern Russia, where they were born. Although they are from the same region, they are not related by birth.

"They were delighted to see us at the baby home," said Bacher, a retired special education preschool teacher. One of the caregivers remembered them, and Victoria gave her flowers.

Before they left Oklahoma, Bacher had hired a researcher to trace her children's relatives. The search produced Nicky's grandmother, a 22-year-old half brother and two teenage brothers.

Nicky and the 22-year-old, a university graduate with a degree in counseling and psychology, quickly bonded. "They have the same dark hair," Bacher said. "It was like seeing Nicky 10 years in the future."

He played video games and chess with his brothers. The grandmother greeted him with a kiss. "That made the whole trip worth it," Bacher said.

Bacher had known little about Nicky's birth family and thought he was a first child. Now he and the eldest brother are keeping in touch by e-mail and Facebook.

"I think it gave him some orientation for that part of him that was missing," she said. "They were such nice people."

Liles and her daughter live in Frisco, Tex., near Dallas, where Liles works for Dell in service and sales. "I was single and in my 30s," she said. Emily, sitting with her mom in a Moscow hotel lobby, gave her a big hug. "She still is single," Emily said with a smile, "which I don't like so much."

"I wanted to be a mom," Liles said. "I felt so fortunate: I had the opportunity to adopt this wonderful little girl!"

They spent the first day of their return to Tomsk exploring the city. "The next day was the source of all the buildup," Liles said. "We went



The adopted children and their parents pose for a photo during a visit to Peterhof Palace while touring St. Petersburg, Russia.

PHOTOS BY OLGA MALTSOVA FOR THE WASHINGTON POST



Harper Liles and her adopted daughter, Emily, 10, left their home in Frisco, Tex., to return to "where we became families."

to the hospital where Emily was being cared for when I adopted her."

The doctors and nurses offered tea on nice china along with the best Tomsk chocolates and were as full of welcome as they were of questions. A crew from the local television station followed Emily around.

"They were delighted to see Emily," Liles said. "Emily said she was a bit overwhelmed by the end, with all the hugs and kisses. They embraced her figuratively and physically."

The staff wanted to know if the U.S. government had sent them. They wanted to know about Emily's health, about her school, her activities. The doctor was surprised that Emily had always known she was adopted — Russian children were not told, he said.

Russians, he said, were concerned about the fate of their adopted children.

"I acknowledged the concern," Liles said. "Clearly they were surprised that I knew about it."

The doctor was surprised again



Before they left Oklahoma, Odessa Bacher, center, hired a researcher to trace relatives of Nicholi, left, and Victoria, far right.

when told that deaths and abuse of some Russian adoptees in the United States had been reported in newspapers and on television. "He probably asked me several times in different ways if I got the full story," she said.

"They seemed to be genuinely interested and very curious about this 10-year-old girl who had returned," Liles said. "It was what I hoped for — for my daughter to be embraced by the people who cared for her long ago."

Emily had her picture taken at the maternity hospital — in front

of a statue of a baby emerging from a cabbage. They visited the courthouse where Emily likes to say Liles had pledged to be her mother forever.

When Nicky left his brothers, the eldest one took an Orthodox cross from around his neck and put it on Nicky. Back home in Oklahoma, he is wearing it still.

"I want the people of Russia to know we've taken good care of their children," Bacher said. "They've been a gift to us — such good children."

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