

One Child at a Time

She was standing on the corner wearing a bright purple blouse and black slacks, a thin, diminutive woman with hair darker than I recalled from the sole photograph I had previously seen. She waived us onto the short access road that led to parking lot in front of the concrete gray, dilapidated, Soviet-era apartment block where she lived. My family began sponsoring Anna and her daughter Natasha in January 2010, when Natasha was only 9 months old, through Project Guardian Angel**. Now here we were, meeting face-to-face in September 2011, me, “her benefactor” as she called me in letters, together with two American priests. Father Myron was present in his pastoral capacity as head of the deanery. Father James West, a fellow mission visitor from Little Rock, Arkansas, was along for the adventure.

Natasha’s mother, Anna, became pregnant in 2008 at the age of 34. She refused to have the abortion demanded by “the father,” who abandoned Anna during her pregnancy. Instead of having the support of a loving spouse, Anna endured a difficult and lonely child birth; one that caused both her and Natasha a prolonged stay in an intensive care unit. By the grace of God both mother and daughter survived the ordeal.



We knew little of Anna and Natasha’s story when we became sponsors, only what little information the two-page flyer contained. Anna was from Sakhalin Island, she had come to Primorye Krai in 2006 looking for work, and she had no relatives. There was an itemized list of income and expenses which indicated that she was living on \$240 per month and coming up regularly short. The file picture was only of Natasha, whose face wore a surprised and troubled look for the camera.

We exchanged several letters and photos over the course of 2010 with Anna and Natasha. One letter arrived in August, at a particularly trying time for us, and I distinctly remember feeling much better knowing that we were doing something worthwhile for someone in need. Letters and prayers are a very important feature of Project Guardian Angel. While we contribute financially, and we pray for the sponsored individuals, it is really humbling to know that they are also praying for us and our intentions.

The beginning of 2011 brought an additional grace tangentially related Anna and Natasha. A friend introduced me to Father Jim Kelleher, a priest from the Society of Our Lady of the Holy Trinity in Corpus Christi, Texas. Anyone who has ever met Father Jim knows of his devotion to Our Lady, and has undoubtedly received, at a minimum, a pair of Miraculous Medals from him. He carries several hundred medals with him at all times in his backpack – it is a wonder they let him through airport security. For my Vladivostok trip, Father Jim made sure I was equipped to be one of his “distributors”, providing me with several hundred dime-size silver Miraculous Medals to take on the trip.

Like most visitors to Vladivostok’s Most Holy Mother of God parish who come from f the U.S., I was asked to bring certain items with me, as commercial delivery services are expensive and unreliable. I was given a monstrance, knit caps for young children, wool socks, and some arts and craft supplies from Mission Society

supporters from around the country. Other visitors brought clothes and food items, including a special Arkansas BBQ sauce. Inquiring as to what I might purchase myself and bring as a gift for Natasha, Father Myron's very brief email reply was "winter clothes." Luckily, our local Target in Virginia was just starting to bring out children's winter coats, so I was able to get a nice purple ski jacket in 4T size. Figuring all little girls need a doll; I purchased a small, girl rag doll with blonde pig tails. Since I didn't know where in Primorye Anna and Natasha lived, my plan was to leave the coat and doll at the parish for someone to deliver.

Father Myron picked me up at Vladivostok airport on Saturday morning, after a brief two hour flight north from Seoul, South Korea. We got stuck in traffic for a couple of hours due to construction, so we had plenty of time to talk. Father Myron surprised me by asking if I was interested in meeting Anna and Natasha. Naturally, I was very interested, but I did not know where they lived, so I left the final decision up to him and his schedule. Imagine my surprise the following Monday when Father Myron offered to make a four hour drive north to the town of Arsenyev, just so we could visit our Project Guardian Angel family. I jumped at the chance. We planned the trip for Wednesday, with the intention of making a roundtrip in the parish's well-worn Toyota Corolla.

When Wednesday arrived, we rolled out after morning Mass and breakfast, accompanied by Father West. Thankfully, Father West rode shotgun in the front, left-hand passenger seat. Russians drive on the right-hand side of the road, but the steering wheels of their cars are also the right-hand side. The cars are made for driving in Japan but exported to Russia; they are used cars in most cases. Passing slow moving traffic on a narrow two-lane road is quite an adventure when the steering wheel is on the wrong side. Father Myron does it really well, but it did require Father West to blindly face oncoming traffic when there were big trucks to pass. This made for a few white-knuckle moments.

Primorye, north of the town of Ussuriysk, about two hours out of Vladivostok, is beautiful country. It is somewhat flat and open grass land with some cultivated fields. To the east were some low, tree covered foothills that reminded me of Virginia's Blue Ridge Mountains. As we traveled north on the Federal Highway, we came to a fork in the road. The Federal Highway continued to the left to Lesozavodsk and Khabarovsk, and to the right it veered into the foothills leading to Arsenyev. Arsenyev is a town of approximately 80,000 people. The main industry is manufacturing military helicopters. In Soviet times it was a closed and restricted city like Vladivostok. Now it is open, but many of the jobs are still related to military contracts. There were several small towns and villages along our route. The villages consisted primarily of dirt roads and the ubiquitous, small, dark brown, Russian log cabins called "dachas." The day was clear, blue and dry, so all of the farm families were out digging potatoes, storing their harvest for winter.

After waiving us onto the access road, Anna met us in the parking lot of her apartment building. Typical of what I had already seen in Russia, the apartment building was very run down, with no color anywhere, not outside, or in the stairwell or hallway, just gray concrete. There were two young women, a blonde and a brunette, smoking and talking in the first floor landing. They were probably acquaintances of Anna's, and they were surprised to see three men enter with her, two in priestly garb. Anna mentioned to Father Myron in Russian that the cigarette smoke in the stairwell always caused Natasha breathing difficulties. The little girl apparently has a sensitive respiratory condition, something I was learning for the first time.

We walked up three flights of stairs to the third floor landing and Anna unlocked the big, thick steel door to her apartment. Everyone living in a Russian apartment lives behind steel doors. They make the apartment complex feel like a jail when you are in the hallway, but they also provide a sense of security once you are safely on the inside. We took off our shoes at the door, as is the custom in Russia. We were in the one main room of the apartment and Natasha was asleep in her wooden crib, so we remained quiet. She was such a pretty little blonde thing! Her crib was old and sturdy, and of a design that would have been banned in the United States for child safety reasons long ago. I wondered to myself when she might get a "big girl bed"? These cribs must have been mass produced throughout the Soviet Union, as Natasha's crib was identical to the ones I had seen in Children's Hospital #3 in Vladivostok. There was a small, narrow bed placed perpendicular to the crib where Anna slept. There was also a bright yellow tricycle-stroller next to the crib. The only other furniture in the 9' x 12' space

was a single wooden chair for the 2 year old Natasha and a small TV and stand. We did notice a framed picture of our family on a little shelf, together with a few other pictures. It was nice to know they were thinking of us back in America.

Since Natasha was asleep, we passed into the kitchen through a short hallway. Anna pointed out two small closets, one with a toilet and one with a shower. She told Father Myron that the toilet worked, but the shower did not. The kitchen was tiny and it was all we could do to squeeze the four of us into it. We three men sat on stools around a small table that was placed under a window sill. The window was open with a nice breeze coming in. The day was still bright and blue, which made the facing apartment building, the uncut grass, and the rusting playground seem not too bad. Anna leaned against the counter and made tea and offered us snacks of chocolate wafer sticks and shortbread cookies. It was obvious these were not items she normally had around, and that she had purchased these luxuries on our behalf. Her hospitality was impeccable, and we made small talk through our interpreter, Father Myron.

A seemingly quiet, private woman, Anna shared a little more about her life in Sakhalin and about how much she liked the relative peace and quiet of Arsenyev. I told her about the years I had spent as a soldier for the US Army, and that I am glad that America and Russia were friends now. In response to questions about work and how she was getting along, we were all surprised to learn that she was living solely on the Project Guardian Angel money and whatever she could make doing odd jobs. The money she received from the state for being a mother ran out in the spring when Natasha turned two, and her unemployment money had also run out. If she still is without permanent work after a six month period, she could reapply for unemployment benefits, which she intends to do this winter. Her vocational training was in dairy technology, a skill not in demand in Arsenyev. When asked about the winter, Anna replied with a Russian expression literally translated as “we will live through it.” Father Myron carefully explained to Father West and I that this phrase contained both a sense of anxiety and uncertainty, and also a providential trust. Natasha woke briefly while we were having tea, came in to the kitchen to say hello, got scared of the strange men and went back to her crib and finished her nap. Father Myron did ask Anna if Natasha had been baptized. Anna was baptized herself, probably in a Russian Orthodox Church, but Natasha had not been baptized.

We finished our tea and returned to the main room for pictures and good-byes. After finishing several group photographs, I did manage to take one of Father Jim’s silver Miraculous Medals from my pocket to give to Anna. She was unsure what it was, and Father Myron informed her with one word that it was “Bogoroditse” – the woman who gave birth to God. We shook hands at that point, then I gave Anna a gentle hug and we left the apartment. She walked us down to the car and waived us good-bye.

Two days later Father Myron received a call from Anna telling him she wanted to have Natasha baptized on the coming Sunday, and she wanted to know if I would be the godfather. This call was a great grace and I readily agreed. The woman in charge of the Women’s Support Center in Arsenyev was to be the godmother. As of this writing, I do not know what has been accomplished, as I was not able to travel back to Arsenyev for the ceremony and the godmother was likewise unavailable on such short notice. An American Franciscan priest, Father John Gibbons, is involved now, as he is the pastor for the parish in Arsenyev. These souls are in his and Our Lady’s hands.

Please pray for the conversion of Russia, one child at a time.

Her Immaculate Heart will triumph!

**Father Myron established Project Guardian Angel to encourage pregnant Russia women in the Far East to have their babies by providing financial and spiritual support. To find out more about Project Guardian Angel, or to become a sponsor, go to www.vladmission.org.

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