

Infinitely More

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Before I ever knew how to pray or to whom to pray, I begged for escape from my agony. I wanted, and plotted, simply for a way out. Yet, God in His mercy knew the plans He had for my life.



“Now all glory to God, who is able, through his mighty power at work within us, to accomplish infinitely more than we might ask or think.”

(EPHESIANS 3:20; NLT)



St. Petersburg, Russia, November 1997

Even in the summer months the average temperature in St. Petersburg rarely rises to 70° and in the winters it can be brutally cold. It had been some time since I had had a meal and even longer since I had had a job. Not knowing what to expect, I knocked hopefully at the door of Mark and Melinda Cathey, American missionaries in Russia.

Melinda answered the door. Hoping she would remember me from when we had met briefly a year earlier, I was disappointed when it became clear she did not know who I was. “What can I do for you?” she asked.

I admitted that I was looking for work, and I offered to cook for them.

“Sorry,” Melinda responded. “We don’t need a cook.”

Mark joined us and the three of us had a nice polite conversation, but I left dejected and discouraged. Before I left I gave them my phone number and uttered a final plea. “I can also be a tour guide, or clean your house, or baby-sit, or be a translator ...”

A few days later I was pleased when the Catheys followed up and invited me to their home for dinner. Apparently they had not been able to get their Russian visitor off of their minds.

When I arrived, Melinda asked, “Where’s your coat, Alex?” I explained to her that I had given it to an orphan.

Over dinner Mark asked, “When was the last time you had meat?” I admitted to him that I couldn’t remember. My diet was pretty much just cheap starchy foods like potatoes and noodles.

As we ate I shared with them some of my life story and talked about the work I was doing with Russian orphanages. Looking back, it is obvious that the Lord had planned this encounter. Little did we know that the friendship that began when two American missionaries opened their door to a nineteen-year-old hungry Russian stranger would end up impacting the lives of countless orphans in the former Soviet Union and lead to the starting of a ministry that would change all of our lives.

1

*“Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and
before you were born I consecrated you ...”*

—Jeremiah 1:5

St. Petersburg is on the Baltic Sea near the border of Russia and Finland. One of the most beautiful cities in the world, it is named for Peter the Great, the Russian Tsar who founded the city in 1703 and spared no expense in making it the showplace of his empire. For two centuries it was the spiritual and political capital of Russia. When the Communists came to power they changed the name to Leningrad and moved the capital to Moscow.

Because it is so far north there are only a few hours of daylight during the winter. On one of those winter days—December 6, 1977—a woman came to one of the state hospitals in Leningrad, no doubt afraid and almost certainly alone, and gave birth to a healthy baby boy with dark hair and brown eyes. That baby was me. I know from medical records that I weighed seven pounds and was twenty-two inches long. The records also indicate that for the first three days I was with my mother in the hospital. She was young, only eighteen or nineteen.

God only knows the weight of the decisions she pondered those three days as she held her newborn baby. And only God knows if her decision was selfish or selfless; if she was thinking of herself, or thinking of my best interests.



What we do know is that when she left the hospital she promptly discarded me in the closest dumpster.

I have often felt God's hand of mercy and blessing on me. Surely the first time it was evident was later that day when someone heard me crying and retrieved me from the trash heap. They returned me to the hospital, thanks to the identification tag still on my tiny wrist. The police and appropriate social agencies were notified but when they finally tracked down my mother, she refused to come for me. She was young and said she had no means to care for me. Her decision that cold and dark December day set the direction for my life.

She signed over all parental rights, and I became a ward of the Soviet State. I was sent to a "nourishment house" for infants, the first of several Russian orphanages that would become my homes.

It was in this "house," Orphanage Number 9, that I would live until April 1982 when, at the age of four, I was transferred to Orphanage Number 6. (Though the Russians have written some of the greatest works of literature and music, our creativity apparently does not extend to naming orphanages.) I have no memories of my first orphanage or my caretakers and surroundings, but I do have my medical records—the only tangible evidence of my early years.

Written on what Americans would call theme book paper, I have carried them with me wherever I have gone. Now a little yellowed and worn, they represent the sum total of what I know about my early life. When I show them to people they are surprised to see, tucked amongst the pages of the medical booklet, a birth certificate. Even though it is in Russian, it is obvious that in addition to my own name it lists names for both a father and mother. I



have to quickly point out that this particular birth certificate is marked a “duplicate.” Over the years, every time I was moved to a new orphanage I was given my records to take with me, and each time I received a new birth certificate and the parents’ names were different. I do not put much stock in the validity of those names, so I do not know who my parents were, or are, or anything about them.

Sadly, all of my other records have been lost.

Regardless of the inaccuracies of the document, it does provide official documentation of my birth: Alexander Victorovich Krutov, December 6, 1977. Since Russian children always bear our fathers’ names as our own middle names it is conceivable that my father’s name was Victor.

Reading through the medical records it is safe to say that they really tell the story of those early years. It seems that for my first four years I was in the hospital more than I was at the orphanage. I was first hospitalized when I was one month old. Noted in the records, I was treated for “psycho-neurological problems and second level maldystrophy (malnutrition).” I had chicken pox and pneumonia in both lungs in 1978 when I was only one year old.

The information found in my medical records marks milestones of my early life, in some ways the next best thing to a mother keeping a baby book. At ten months I was able to hold my head up on my own and able to roll over. At fifteen months I first began walking while holding on to things. I was twenty-one months before I was walking on my own. At fourteen months I got my first teeth and one month after my second birthday I spoke my first words. The records note that at twenty months I was independently dressing myself and that at three years I had fully-developed speech. There were several instances of major colds or flu with high fevers and hospitalizations.



Perhaps the saddest of the maladies is the note that in 1978, when less than a year old, I was treated for an “abscess on his buttocks.” Years later as I have visited orphanages the probable cause has become obvious: for the most part, in the crowded and understaffed Russian orphanages babies just lie in their cribs, all day, every day. As a baby I had bed sores on my bottom from lying in a crib with no one to pick me up or rock me to sleep.

It is not uncommon for adopted Russian orphans, no matter how loved and cuddled they may be by their new families, to still rock themselves back and forth in order to fall asleep. With no one to hold you and rock you to sleep, you learn how to do it yourself. It breaks my heart to think how many more little ones are still over there in orphanages where cribs line the walls, side by side, babies rocking themselves to sleep at night and suffering bed sores from laying in their cribs all day.



2

*He heals the brokenhearted and binds
their wounds.*

—*Psalm 147:3*

When I was four I was moved to Orphanage Number 6 in St. Petersburg; it is from there my earliest memories stem. I was only at this orphanage for a couple of years, and most of my memories there are good ones. We had food and clothing and caretakers to tend to us, doctors to care for us in sickness. Cooks prepared daily meals for us that kept us from going hungry. All the needs that we were aware of at that young age were met.

Orphanage Number 6 is where I met Edik (or Edward), whose parents had abandoned him. We became best friends. That's also where I met Misha. The three of us remain lifelong friends. Unlike my earliest years, I rarely got sick once I got to Orphanage 6. My medical records show that I was hospitalized only once during that time.

While I have rather fond memories of the place, the first thing that actually springs to mind when I think back on Orphanage 6 is the rats. We had lots of rats and we were all afraid of them. Misha, Ed, and I would often see them in the window-well of the dining room window.

And sadly this was also the place where I first experienced the death of one of my fellow orphans. One of the caretakers locked a little boy in the basement for punishment and

forgot that he was there. He died, all alone, locked in that basement room. When they eventually found him, the rats had been feeding on his body for days.

There were two hundred to three hundred orphans in Orphanage Number 6, which made it one of the smaller orphanages in Russia. Each summer we would be taken for three months to a *dacha*, as country homes are known in Russia. It was about two hours outside St. Petersburg and we stayed in cabins around the property.

While most of my recollections of the *dacha* are pleasant there is one horrific memory that stands out. This was the first time that we experienced a murder. The cabins had no running water, so we had to use outhouses. Most of us younger boys were afraid to go out at night so they set an aluminum bucket in the middle of the room for us to use at night if we didn't want to go to the outhouse. One of my classmates decided to demonstrate his bravery and ventured out in the night to use the outhouse. He was found the next morning, stabbed to death. A prisoner, who had escaped from a nearby prison, was later caught and charged with the murder.

I have been asked what kind of comfort we received from the caretakers after this traumatic event. My answer is a quick one: None. The whole thing was treated very matter-of-factly. We did head back to the orphanage earlier than planned. I remember how special we all felt to have our twenty or so buses escorted by police as we made our way back through the city and back "home" to Orphanage 6.

There was no formal school or classroom in the orphanage. I do remember a time in our living room when they were trying to teach all of us kids our colors, shapes, and alphabet—an informal preschool of sorts. But most of

this did not sink in for any of us. When we later went on to formal school, none of us knew our alphabet or colors or shapes.

Even at this young age there was no room for individuality. We were always treated as a big group. We all dressed similarly. When we went on any outings it was obvious that we were a group of orphans and it just fed the stigma that we were “nobodies.” The Soviet Union was socialist so the State provided for our needs, along with everyone else’s. We had new clothes, not hand-me-downs. But in true Soviet style, all of our clothes were the same and we received them just once a year: three sets of each article of clothing, including underwear. While we each might receive three new sweaters, they would be the same three sweaters everyone else got. “New Clothes Day” was the best day of the year since it was the only day I had something brand new that belonged only to me. But that would only last a few days because before long everyone’s shirts and pants and socks and underwear would get mixed up.

Misha, Ed, and I all cried when we were told we were being moved to Orphanage Number 51. We were frightened by the unknown. We were leaving the only place we had known as home. Our only consolation was that we were moving on together.



3

For I am the Lord, your God, who takes hold of your right hand and says to you, Do not fear; I will help you.

—Isaiah 41:13

Orphanage Number 51 was enormous. It housed between five hundred and six hundred orphans. On the first floor was the dining room, which was huge. But I soon found out that it still wasn't big enough to hold all of the kids that lived there. At meal time we all had to hold hands and file down quietly to line up for dinner. It usually took four shifts to get us all through a meal and we had to stand quietly in the line, waiting our turn to go in and sit down and eat.

I remember arriving at Orphanage 51 the first day. As we stood in the foyer I was awed at how big it was. I was staring up at the huge chandelier, amazed at the size of this thing, when suddenly one of the huge glass globes came crashing down and shattered in pieces right in front of me. Looking back now, that was probably pretty symbolic of what was going to happen to my life in Orphanage 51.

For the first time Misha, Ed, and I were in with boys up to the age of seventeen. From day one the older boys were extremely frightening to us—a fear that was well-founded. They incessantly bullied all of us younger boys. They were notorious for forcing the young boys to drink and smoke

and swear. If a boy refused, the older ones would beat him until he did. Ed and I refused. We were labeled “the Aristocrats” because the older boys felt like we thought we were too good for the rest of them. More than anyone else, Ed and I were beaten by the bullies.

All of us boys lived on the fourth floor, thirty or forty to a bedroom. The beds were so close you had to turn sideways to walk between them and there was no other furniture in the bedrooms.

We had free time every day from about 3:00 to 5:00 after school. While we were not supposed to leave the grounds, we all did. There was a bread factory right next door. Despite the concrete wall and the barbed wire fencing, kids would sneak into the factory and steal bread. They often gave it to the older boys to bribe them into not beating them.

While the government did not allow charity and deemed it unlawful to give handouts (the State, after all, took care of its own) a lot of the kids used their free time to beg for handouts. Occasionally they would get enough in handouts to go down the street and buy themselves ice cream. I never begged or stole, but I did use my free time to wander the streets, keeping my head down in hopes that I would find money people had dropped. Sometimes I found enough to reward myself with ice cream. Orphans could also go to the movie house for free (state-provided, of course) so I spent many afternoons watching movies, a seven-year-old, alone in the movie theater.

Orphanage 51 was attached to a Soviet boarding school for linguistics, specializing in teaching English. It was rather an elite school and the children attending the boarding school were not orphans. Their parents chose to send them there for their education. It would have been a great educational opportunity for us but six months after

I arrived the State shut down the boarding school. However, it did allow our already overcrowded orphanage to expand into the old school building. Fortunately for me, Ed, Misha, and all of our first grade classmates, we were able to escape to the “new” building. All fifty or sixty of our age group were moved into four rooms in the attached school building.

The building was actually an old palace and the rooms were large and beautiful. There were gorgeous marble fireplaces, ornate light fixtures, big mirrors, and fancy woodwork. We first graders had two rooms for bedrooms, one for a playroom, and one for a classroom, as well as our very own bathroom. I remember lots of locked doors throughout the place so that we could not roam. But even with parts of the building closed off to us we were thrilled to have a space of our own. We called it our “great escape.” While we still had to interact with the older bullies and other boys all during the day, at least at night we felt safe in our own space.

Nighttime was our time. All of the caregivers who worked there during the day left to go home around nine. There was only one night caretaker for the entire floor—about two hundred kids. Orphans or not, kids will be kids, and nighttime became our best playtime. We would take the covers off our beds and pull each other, slipping and sliding, all over the parquet floors. If we got caught I was always the one who got punished because I was always giggling the loudest. The caretaker hated all of us, but hated me most and thought I was a troublemaker. She took every chance she got to make me an example for the others.

We would hear her coming and rush back to our beds and throw ourselves under the covers. She would storm into the room and even though all forty of us were giggling under the covers she would head straight for my bed,

rip off the covers, and beat me in the face with her shoe.

Early in my years at Orphanage 51 I had to be taken to the hospital for some kind of treatment for one of my eyes; I don't remember what, exactly. One of the few male caretakers offered to escort me to the hospital. It promised to be a great adventure—my first “official” time out of the orphanage and into the city. Riding the Metro was certainly a new and thrilling experience.

On the way home from the hospital, the caretaker took me to his apartment to show me around. He then proceeded to beat me and attempted to molest me. I kicked, screamed, and pushed. He could have used force and as a little boy I could not have defended myself. Fortunately, though, my protests were enough for him and he gave up. He grabbed me by the arm and roughly escorted me back to the orphanage. As soon as I could I reported the incident to the orphanage director. I never saw the man working at the orphanage again (today they rarely allow male caregivers in the orphanages in Russia because of all the problems they had with molestation and abuse).

There were no showers in Orphanage 51 and no hot water. We would “bathe” each day by splashing ourselves with cold water at the sink. For six days we would wear the same clothes, including underwear. Once a week we got to wash our clothes. There was a large wooden bench in the bathroom where we would spread our clothes out and then rub them down with a big old bar of soap. Then we would take them to the sink and rinse them out in cold water. We strung rope from the pipes in the bathroom and hung our clothes to dry. You were never assured you were actually getting your own clothes back, and never assured that whatever clothes you did get would be dry or clean! Ed and I would often sneak into the bathroom to wash

our socks and underwear throughout the week. None of the other kids cared, but they stunk so bad and the two of us couldn't stand it.

Once a week we were taken to the public bathhouse. That was always a frightening experience for the young boys. We had soap but no shampoo and we didn't get showers—just a bucket of hot water with which to bathe. (This might explain why I enjoy taking incredibly long hot showers today!)

In my early years at Orphanage 51 I became sickly again. I had repeated bouts of pneumonia, a hernia, and chronic stomach problems. Four years in a row I was in the hospital for a month each year, with doctors trying to diagnose my stomach ailment. My medical records simply indicate “chronic gastroenteritis/ulcer” repeatedly. I was in almost constant pain for years and I lost a lot of weight. I was sick or hospitalized so much that I had to repeat the first grade because I had missed so much of the school year.

As I think back on my early years in the orphanage system, one of the things that strikes me again and again is the lack of individuality. We were dressed the same, fed the same, treated the same, and had the same schedule. Every morning we were gathered all together, lined up in the foyer, and made to recite stuff. We received pins as we progressed up the different levels of the Communist Party. I remember receiving a red star with a picture of Lenin on it. It was all so “Soviet”! It was easy to feel like a nobody. I was not an individual, just one of thousands upon thousands of Russian orphans. There was no room for privacy or dignity. And there was absolutely no individualized attention or affection.

Yet looking back over those years I can tell that God was marking me for His own, long before I knew Him. To

the caretakers I was known as “the troublemaker.” To the bullies I was known as one of “the Aristocrats.” Whether it was out of pride, stubbornness, or God’s hand of protection on me, I don’t know, but I refused to be bullied into drinking or smoking or swearing. I never followed the crowd over the barbed wire fence to steal bread. I refused to beg for money or food, and chose, rather, to wander the streets alone. And God was about to affirm His calling on my life with a very special blessing.

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