

LETTER FROM MOSCOW

# Amid civil war, a Red Cross rescue of Russian children

BY KATHY LALLY

World War I was drawing to a close in 1918 when American Red Cross volunteers in Russia's Far East heard rumors about abandoned children, dressed in rags and foraging for food in Siberian forests. They set off on a rescue that would turn into an extraordinary around-the-world journey little known today.

All these years later, two Russians have been trying to get the story told because, they say, it shows the United States and its institutions, such as Washington's American Red Cross, in a warmer light than their country's leaders traditionally present them.

The improbable tale began in the spring nearly 94 years ago, when the hungry city of Petograd — now St. Petersburg — put thousands of its children and chaperoning teachers on trains headed a thousand miles southeast to the Ural Mountains, where they would spend the summer eating nourishing food in fresh air, far from the city where the deprivations of World War I were still being felt.

Most of the children returned to Petograd uneventfully at the end of the summer, but nearly 800 who had been sent east of the Urals found themselves trapped because of the civil war that had begun that year. During skirmishes between the Reds and the Whites, the train line to the west was cut. Sent from home in summer clothes, the children — ages 5 to 16 — were growing cold and hungry as fall approached.

When the Red Cross volunteers learned that they put them on trains eastward to Vladivostok, a Pacific port city full of refugees of various nationalities from Siberia,

that would take the children, their teachers and Red Cross protectors around the world and finally home.

"It is a wonderful story," said Susan Robbins Watson, archivist at the American Red Cross in Washington.

Oлга Molkina, a St. Petersburg teacher, and Vladimir Lipovetsky, a former fisheries-vessel researcher from the Russian Far East, both have written books about the Petograd children and want to make what happened more widely known. Most of the children never spoke of their adventure even after growing up — contact with foreigners was dangerous business in the Soviet Union.

Molkina knew because her grandparents and great-aunt were among those rescued. Lipovetsky's ship had put into Seattle in 1978 when he heard about the death of an elderly man who had saved Russian children. He has been captivated by the story ever since.

### Keeping the story alive

Molkina knew she had to write a book after her aunt died in 2000 at the age of 99. "She was one of the last survivors," Molkina said, "and I realized that with her passing away this story would be lost for my family. I decided to preserve it."

That took her as far as Washington and Maryland for research at the Library of Congress and the National Archives, and she eventually wrote "Under the Sign of the Red Cross" in Russian.

"The Americans who worked in the American Red Cross were simple people, and those lost children were someone else's," Molkina said in an interview. "They didn't have to do anything, but they did."

In Vladivostok, the Red Cross put the children in a former



Riley Allen, the editor of the Honolulu Star-Bulletin, is shown with one of the hundreds of children he helped rescue after they were cut off from their families by the Russian Civil War. Allen planned to report on chaos in the Far East but became an American Red Cross volunteer.



Vladimir Lipovetsky wrote a book about the children in Petograd, now St. Petersburg, and wants to bring more attention to their story.

development for the Asian-Pacific Economic Cooperation summit in September. Watson found a 1928 Red

foot, sharp stinging blasts of wind whistling about the corners of the buildings."

The children remained on Russky Island until summer 1920, when the American Expeditionary Force, a contingent of U.S. Army troops, left. The troops had been deployed to protect American equipment loaned to Russia for World War I and to prevent the Japanese from exploiting the Civil War.

"They could have left the children behind, saying they had done all they could," Molkina said, "but they did not. They saved my grandparents, and if it weren't for them, I wouldn't be here talking to you today."

### A long voyage

Lipovetsky — originally named Kuperman; he regularly uses his pen name — describes how Riley Allen, the editor of the Honolulu Star-Bulletin from 1912 to 1940, arrived to report on the chaos in the Far East but became

He refitted a Japanese cargo ship called the Yumai Maru and took 780 children, 50 teachers and 20 Americans on the voyage.

By August 1920, the steamship was in California, and the San Francisco Chronicle published a front-page story Aug. 5 headlined "Russian Child Falls Into Bay," describing a 14-year-old girl tumbling from the pier. Someone threw her a life preserver, which hit her on the head and knocked her unconscious, but a police officer dived in and rescued her. She was fine when the ship steamed off to the Panama Canal, New York and Finland the next day.

On Feb. 6, 1921, the New York Times published a two-paragraph article at the top of its front page, reporting that finally the last of the "little Russian waifs" had crossed the Finnish border and returned home.

"And everything was done by the Americans for absolutely someone else's children," Molkina said. "Wasn't that a

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