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## The summer camp at Munozero

*This article is written by Victor Troitsky, teacher in St Petersburg and volunteer at the Kondopoga parish summer camp. His description of camp life shows in what detail the activities are thought out, each intended to develop the children's sense of responsibility, imagination and creativity. If you wish to volunteer, please read this article, so that you understand more about what your role will be. Volunteers must be happy to play a part in the children's development, must be willing to lead a "club" session and to throw themselves into every aspect of camp life. This is an intense type of volunteer work, but one with immense rewards for those who enjoy working with children and watching them flourish.*

During the second half of July 2009 I spent two weeks in the summer camp for children at Munozero/Karelia. Julia Bolshakova was responsible for this particular session and had asked me if I would spend some time working with children. To work—but in what capacity? The uniqueness of this camp starts with this question.

At camp one doesn't work, doesn't relax, doesn't teach and one doesn't learn in the usual sense of the word, since at camp all the above are inseparable. Because there you live, live a very intense life, you develop and fulfil yourself and your talents. Incidentally, this isn't just true of the children and teenagers, but also of the adults.

Initially I knew nothing of the camp's concept or its existence. I got to know its traditions and the experience gained over the previous years through taking part in its day-to-day life. In these notes I will attempt to briefly describe my personal impressions.

In fact, the word "camp" is not entirely applicable here. Officially, no such thing as a camp exists. This is a privately-owned country house, where several dozen children, teenagers and adults spend 2-3 weeks after having been invited there by the home owners themselves.

Of course, the most essential jobs are differentiated: cook, doctor, activity leader. But these job descriptions are fluid: the cook becomes an activity leader, a teenage leader joins in an activity, the doctor becomes a night guard and driver, and the activity leader watches over the children while they are swimming in the lake and reads fairy tales to the smaller children at night.

There are also no divisions along age lines, as there were in the Pioneer camps, where life for the different groups ran in parallel but shut off from each other. In these camps the older kids had no outlet for their energy, their urge to develop and affirm themselves, to become adults, and so it expressed itself in distorted ways and was a constant source of headaches for the leaders.

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At Munozero the children, boys and girls, of all ages and the youth leaders are divided not into age groups, but into “tribes” choosing the name of real Slavic tribes: the “Slavenes”, “Polyans”, “Vyatichi” and “Drevlyanes”. The kids think up a symbol for themselves and during the whole camp they study the history, the way of life and the values of “their” tribe, take part in competitions, games and races between the “tribes”. Within these “tribes”, the older kids and the leaders naturally care for the younger ones; they take initiative, demonstrate responsibility and independence. This is a natural way for them to fulfil their need to affirm themselves. It is very important that the youth leaders (who are in the top class at school, are school leavers or 1st year students) are given a lot of responsibility by those in charge. For example, they go ahead of the group to prepare the island and spend a night there in preparation for the “Robinson” - treasure hunt. Or they choose and prepare the stop-over for the two-day boat excursion. They are allowed to go fishing on dinghies in the morning and at night, and not only by themselves, but also taking the younger children along. When necessary, they are also given permission to leave the camp and go to the neighbouring villages or to Kondopoga. There has not been a single incident where they abused the leaders' trust. It is very important that many of them took part in similar camps when they were children and learned to accept “the rules of the game” back then, so that they are now able to continue a tradition of many years.

The programme for each day, prepared in advance and in detail, is very full but there is no feeling of lack of freedom since the children’s needs and interests are taken into account. There exists, of course, a daily routine: the morning wake-up call and bedtime, fixed meal times and a prayer before eating, but this routine can be altered when necessary. Quiet time is a time for relaxation, and every individual can spend it as they wish, but without disturbing the others.

After breakfast the children tidy their rooms and bring their personal belongings in order. This has been established with two aims in mind: maintaining cleanliness and hygiene, as there are no paid cleaners in the camp, and, most importantly, teaching the children to take care of themselves, develop the habit and ability to also take care of their belongings and keep up a certain level of cleanliness. A special inspectorial commission consisting of adults and leaders goes around all the rooms, makes comments where necessary and assesses the quality of the tidy-up. The results of the inspection are immediately reported to everyone in the camp and best and worst rooms are named. The order and cleanliness in the rooms is checked by the same adults and leaders that read books for the children at bedtime.

The children in each room take it in turn to be on duty to lay the table, tidy up, wash the dishes and clean the toilets. Self-service has been consciously established by the camp's leaders; it is an organic part of the way of life there.

The first half of the day is taken up by a work programme which always contains an educational element and is in fact systematic community service. The older kids and the leaders stay at the camp and undertake the construction and improvement of facilities on the camp grounds under the supervision of one or two adults, in particular the camp's superintendent. The work is varied, the kids for example cut the grass, carry out the rubbish, create vegetable beds or areas for games, build changing facilities for swimming, facilities for drying laundry or wooden boardwalks for those areas where water can accumulate. There is always plenty of essential work like this in the camp, and what's most important, the kids can see that the fruits of their labour are immediately put to use by the camp's residents and make life at camp more attractive and comfortable for everyone.

The younger children walk or go out by boat to collect mushrooms or berries. On these excursions they get to know the local nature, can gather flowers and plants for herbaries and create flower arrangements. The

gathered mushrooms and berries are given to the kitchen, and these trophies may be served up at dinner that very evening fried, pickled or pureed.

Each time before leaving the camp, the children's and adults' clothes, shoes and head garments have to undergo careful treatment against ticks, which unfortunately abound in the surrounding forests. This measure is also both necessary and educational. The children, although under supervision from adults, treat themselves and each other without assistance from others, which eventually helps them to develop the ability to take responsibility for oneself and others.

After quiet time begins the time of the "City of Artisans", where the activities are organised into a variety of clubs. Anyone who wants to share their knowledge or skills can lead a club and has to announce this in advance in a special notice. Each club's programme is prepared for about 5 days, after which it can change together with the club's members. There are many of these clubs: drawing, photography, folk music, English, flower arranging, poetry, needlework, mathematics and wood carving to name just a few.

Another aspect of the work of the "City of Artisans" is the design of photo diaries, which is a highly original chronicle of the camp's life during the summer.

After these club-based activities, the most important even of the day is a big, themed competition. As a matter of fact, almost every day in the camp is based on a theme, which is usually organised based on the work of one of the clubs. The theme of the day can be literature, history, mathematics, theatre, the circus etc. The "homework" is announced in advance and the "tribes" will have prepared in advance for this and might recite a poem, fairy tale or legend they have written, solve puzzles or brainteasers, or look for suitable information in the camp's well-staffed library. A jury judges these competitions and everyone gets special prizes, and at the end of a session all competitions undergo a final review.

At the end of the day there are sports competitions, dancing and games (headed by the leaders). A lot of attention in the camp is also paid to sports. Apart from the games in the evening, such as football, volleyball and other physical education games in which the "tribes" participate, there are also regular organised sports competitions and celebrations, such as the "Robinson Treasure Hunt", "The Feast of Neptune", an archery contest or

"The Tribes go on a wild animal hunt".

The "Robinson Treasure Hunt" is an adventure game between the "tribes" on a small island. It is prepared in advance by the leaders and involves some orienteering, looking for "booty" and other challenges testing the participants skill, savvy, endurance and courage.

"The Feast of Neptune" is a water-based contest and involves swimming, diving and boat races. It takes place on the lake or the river in good weather.

The archery contests are especially popular. They start by making bows and arrows under the supervision of an adult. Instruction in archery is then given and finally, there is the competition which tests range and aptitude. Girls and boys of all ages as well as leaders participate in the competitions. The participants learn how to use a feather knife, hack-saw and axe, how to pare down the prepared pieces of wood for bows and arrows and how to make the arrow head and fletchings. Naturally they also learn to use the bow safely which teaches them about responsibility.

The "Hunt" is organised by the leaders and involves some orienteering, throwing spears or archery using home-made bows and arrows.

For the duration of the stay, all children learn at least the basics of rowing. The boats are constantly in use: for excursions to gather mushrooms and berries, field trips, fishing or just for exploring the lake. There is one mandatory element in every case: every person on a boat has to wear a life jacket (there is a sufficient number of life jackets of different sizes in the camp). Using the life jackets becomes a habit for the kids; they take them and put them on before getting into a boat. This also serves as a lesson in being responsible and safe.

If the weather allows for it, the children swim in the lake throughout the day (of course under the supervision of elders). There are no specific rules relating to this, and often the children themselves ask to go swimming. Every second day they can use the steam bath and sauna.

At the end of each stay a big costume ball takes place for which both children and adults prepare in advance.

There are two more wonderful traditions which create the special atmosphere of the camp, an atmosphere of trust, kindness and comfort. Approximately once a week in the evening after dinner the so-called "Candle" takes place. Everyone, the children, leaders and adults, sit in a circle and whoever's turn it is to hold the candle tells the circle what he or she liked most and least in the camp over the last few days and talks about the happiest and most difficult emotions he or she experienced while being there.

The second tradition is called "Secret Friend". At first (this takes place 3 times during each stay), everyone writes their name on a piece of paper and drop this piece into a box. Then everyone pulls out a piece of paper with the name of the person who will become the "Secret Friend". The secret friend writes letters (there is a post office), makes presents and prepares all kinds of pleasant surprises of his or her "chosen one". At the end of a cycle everyone once more gets together. Every "Secret Friend" describes his or her "chosen one" in a way that helps the others guess who he or she is talking about. After this, the "Secret Friend" gives his final present.

Both these traditions are very popular in the camp.

Nature, the clean lakes with its picturesque shores and colourful sunsets harmonise with the natural way of life of the camp at Munozero. Even the strong thunderstorm, which raged during the "Robinson Treasure Hunt" and which forced us to quickly evacuate (the competition took place on an island), brought out the best qualities in everyone who participated: endurance, responsibility and selflessness. It also highlighted the warmth, cosiness and comfort of the main house.

Many of these activities would be difficult to carry out, especially in bad weather, without this beautiful and convenient house right by the lake. The huge veranda and spacious open terrace are particularly good for camp life. Some lack of comfort is of course noticeable, for example, the lack of indoor toilets and showers and the small kitchen. In fact it seems that the house's size does not correspond anymore to the ever-growing number of those wishing to stay there in one capacity or another.

However, the house itself and the additional facilities have become an organic and picturesque part of the surroundings, which is also a great achievement of the camp and its organisers. The immediate surroundings provide many possibilities for creative imagination and practical activity.

This camp and the experience it provides, as well as the enthusiasm of its organisers, are unique and deserve as much support as possible. The children, many of them from dysfunctional families and unable to spend their holidays in a normal fashion, find comfort, understanding and a new outlook on life. Apart from the permanent leaders and pedagogues in the camp, each year also brings new people coming to work there from Moscow and Saint Petersburg, as well as volunteers from abroad. The interaction with these people provides a form of cultural injection for the children, many of whom have never travelled further than Kondopoga or Petrozavodsk. The new individuals from cultural centres help to widen the children's horizon and make them look at familiar things and situations with fresh eyes.

In the camp at Munozero, the children are given the opportunity to live peacefully, eat well, develop their intellectual and creative abilities and take the initiative, show responsibility and improve their health. All of this takes place in the most beautiful natural surrounds, in beautiful and well-thought through conditions, amongst kind and intelligent adults, who are also given a chance to discover their own best qualities.

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