

5 days in the Russian Nash Dom Winter camp 2014 *) **An impression by Theo Cappon, member of the Dutch Korczak Association**

A short introduction

The Russian Korczak Association has already a long tradition organizing the Nash Dom integration summer camps for disabled and non-disabled children. Julia Tchikhatcheva and Anna Smolina started this initiative in 1993, together with Irina D. Demakova, professor at the Pedagogical Institute in Moscow. The first camp was in Taganrog (near Rostov on Don) and it proved to be a big success and the Nash Dom camps continued year after year. Since 1994 also Korczak friends from the Netherlands took part in the camp and from 1996 even blind and non-blind children from Holland went to the Nash Dom camps, together with some Dutch group leaders.

Since 1999 a new initiative started, because many children asked for a short camp during the Christmas Holidays.

This idea was a great success and these short camps, only 5 days, followed the same principles of the summer camps.

(These principles are based on the Pedagogical Ideas of Janusz Korczak)

- * The right of the child to respect
- * Children and adults are equivalent
- * The right of the child to be as he/she is
- * Children take responsibility for each other
and for the whole community of the camp
- * Children take care of each other
- * Children have the right to make mistakes and adults too.

So, each year 50 - 60 children in the age of 6-17 gather near Moscow in a 5 days-camp.

They live in so-called 'families' with a 'papa' and a 'mama'; two group leaders who take care of the children.

Two head leaders are coordinating all the activities in the camp. But there is also a person who is responsible for materials and he or she makes it for all the group leaders comfortable during team-meetings and short breaks during the day (food, drinks, little snacks)

Some impressions of the Nash Dom Winter camp. (3- 8 Jan. 2014)

I was happy to be invited to take part in this camp, in a little village not far from Moscow.

The Korczak friends rented a building in this big complex for 57 children and 15 adults. I myself was no 16.

We gathered early in the morning on the 3rd of January at the famous square in Moscow called 'Clean Ponds' (tsjisticie prудie).

Parents brought the children in the dark and everybody waited in a light powder snow till boarding time for the 2 touring cars. For 10 children it was their first camp and they looked curiously around, for safety cared by the 'papa' and 'mama' of their 'family'.

It took us 1,5 hours to reach the camp and in no-time everybody found her / his place in one of the 16 rooms. And from that moment on an amazing and joyful time started.

I will not write a chronological report of this camp but offer you the most typical and interesting events.

The most eye-catching impression is the special atmosphere of the camp, but very difficult to describe. One girl told me that her experiences in the regular Russian camps differ very much from the Nash Dom camps. I asked: 'Why'? She answered: *'Adults in the Nash Dom camps give you the feeling that you are fully accepted, regardless your background. They listen to you as a person that matters. In the other camps the program is more important than the child. It is like a barrack (KAZERNE) with a rather strict regime.'*

Groups of children have no own chosen 'family'-name but only 'detachment no 3 or 4'. (a military term). Adults are always screaming to children,'

'Very special in our camp, she said, 'are the candle-light moments every evening in your own family. The papa and the mama talk with us in an very open and informal way. You can express your feelings and do suggestions for the coming day(s)....'

NB. During these 5 days I saw the relation between adults and children in the other Russian camps on the same territory (We had meals together in a big canteen). To be honest, there was a good atmosphere and informal companionship between the adults and children)

But her description is unfortunately true for many regular camps.

There is another quality of the camp I want to stress. The Nash Dom camps are so-called Integration camps. What does it mean?

As I wrote before, one of the main principles of the camp is the **Right of the Child to be as It is**. Korczak wrote: *Each child is a unique human being.*

Whatever he is: born in very poor conditions, mental or physical disabled, black

or white, believer or non-believer, having a non-standard sexual orientation, etc, he or she is an equivalent and a person of full value. Korczak hated discrimination and appreciated the individual competences of each child.

This is exactly the attitude in the Nah Dom Camp. I was touched how children and adults went about with the blind boys (17 and 18 years old) and with the mental disabled children. They were not only accepted but fully part of all activities. And if they were not in the mood to participate and liked to withdraw, it was also OK. The blind boys told me that they like the camp just for this reason.

Sacha, the oldest one, came all the way from the Oertmoertia district, 18 hrs by train, to join the peers in the camp.

It is a real integration camp in the spirit of Janusz Korczak.

The Nash Dom camp has several characteristic traditions. One of them is the daily 'Sbor' (meeting with all children and group leaders standing in a big circle). We start with the well known Russian songs. All children know them by heart and cannot stop. They like to sing one song after another. Then the two head leaders (in this camp Alina and Aliona) stay in the middle of the circle and ask some general questions about the day. What they like the most or in what activities they participated. Then follows a very special moment.

The staff gives everybody the opportunity to say 'thank you' to somebody in the circle who was important for her or him that day.

Some examples:

'I want to say thank you to Igor, because he played table-tennis with me'

'I want to say thank you to Mascha, because she presented a wonderful workshop'

'I want to say thank you to Sacha, because he repaired my backpack'

In my opinion this 'Thank you' is a very important pedagogical moment.

Children and adult realise that they belong to a living community where everybody take responsibility and care for each other.

And children learn empathy.

It is the beginning of citizenship.

But there are more traditions that impressed me. Each day after lunch workshops are presented. Everybody can offer a workshop but should give a short orientation of his or her workshop one day before or in the morning. So, children have an idea what kind of workshop they can expect.

Important is also the fact that children can organize a workshop as well.

What kind of workshops are to be chosen? Some examples:

- Playing guitar
- Making a Newsletter for the camp with interviews, short texts, photo's etc
- Hairdressing (special for girls)
- Judo
- Theatre
- Photo-studio
- Design of modern art
- etc., etc.

It is great to see how fanatically everybody take part in these workshops and the results are amazing.

I'm always astonished how children in Russia act and perform. There is a strong tradition in the camp to prepare short performances.

For example: Render a fairy-tale with simple objects and materials. In no-time they learn texts by heart, but moreover, even the youngest, they are real acting. I noticed this also during the traditional evening of Poems and Songs. Children of 6 or 7 years old recite long texts.

The cultural education in Russia (music, theatre, dance, reading etc) is of a high quality.

What to tell more? Some little but essential traditions:

Everyday one of the families has the flag (green with a golden four-leaved clover) and is responsible for some duties.

- Awake everybody in the morning; by preference in a funny way
- Standing at the entrance of the canteen, giving each family a task that permits them to enter the canteen
- They make each day a room-control. Rooms that are well-ordered receive sweets.

On the last day of the camp the mama's and the papa's prepare little presents for the children and so do the children for the 'parents'. It is combined with a 'concert' in the last afternoon. Children make a presentation characterizing the group leaders and the papa's and the mama's do the same for their children.

In conclusion: it was an amazing time for me and I like to congratulate the Staff and all the group leaders of this great Korczak Nash Dom Winter camp 2014.

Theo Cappon

Amsterdam, January 2014

*) Nash Dom = Our Home; named after 2nd orphanage of Janusz Korczak in Warsaw.