

SEPTEMBER 2002

Dear sponsors, members and other animal-lovers,

This autumn report will mainly inform about what is happening in S:t Petersburg, since so much has happened there since last time you heard from us. At the animal shelter in Riga the work proceeds as usual, thanks to the monthly financial support from you, meaning literally life or death for the shelter's existence. As you already know there is a huge difference between working in Russia and in Latvia. For our Russian colleagues it is so much more difficult to bring about changes and sometimes it can even be dangerous! Read more about that later in this report.

RIGA:

Astrida Karklina and her Animal Protection Group continues to run the animal shelter in Riga which we support with 300 Lat per month. The money goes to rent, electrical power, telephone bills, veterinary costs and symbolic salaries. Different companies provide the food for the animals. So far, the group has managed to find homes for 350 dogs. This is an extremely good result and they have also really made an effort to find the right home for the dogs and even follow up afterwards by telephone calls or visits.

There is place for 30 dogs in the present animal shelter. The number of kennels is only 14 but in many of them two dogs can be placed. Also, in order to make room for more needy dogs the personnel very often make room for them in their own quarters. Naturally, cats are also taken care of but they are much harder to find homes to. Still, four to five cats get a home every month.

Most important for Astrida and her colleagues right now is trying to get enough funds to build a larger and more modern shelter. Recently they sent over 100 letters to some of the largest companies in Latvia asking for some sponsor help in building the new shelter. They hope it will be large enough to place 40 dogs and 30 cats, a small kitchen, a veterinary clinic, a room for visitors and a room for the personnel (preferably only for humans this time?). They have already been promised to rent a suitable lot from the town at a modest price and for as long time as they wish. We hope that they will receive positive response from at least some companies so that they may reach their goal.

“I could never work with anything but this”, says Astrida, who does not take out any salary for her work. “To work with animal protection is a low status work but I don't care. I meet so many interesting people every day, actors, journalists and businessmen that come to take a dog into their homes. They listen to me and trust my long experience. The only negative thing is that I so often see animals being victims of cruelty at the hands of people that are supposed to care for them. I don't like at all to have to fight as much like this but when I witness animal abuse I simply must interfere and help.”

S:T PETERSBURG:

Life in Russia can often seem unreal to us in our own secure homes. Sometimes it is very hard to understand that what Elena Bobrova reports from Saint Petersburg is really true. Here is such an report. We begin with some incredibly cruel things but please read on because it will get better in the end.

Since in February Elena has worked with a campaign against the experiment on animals at the medical university in Saint Petersburg. Karin Gabrielsson and I was there for almost ten years ago and we were shocked when we saw all these poor dogs in small compartments, some alone and some in groups. In one compartment there could have been as many as 25 dogs!

It was obvious that these animals were somebody's pets and they were of course very scared, hungry and dirty. The house was very cold and they only received pieces of stale bread in water. We managed to buy some of the dogs, two pups and one older white mix that sat in a corner, shivering with fear. He got the name "Roffe" (the name of my boyfriend) and lived the rest of his life with Elena. After some time Roffe felt safe and secure and became a good watchdog for Elena.

Unfortunately, the situation is still just as bad at the institution today. Dogs are caught and sold to be used for experiments. Most of them are used in old fashion laboratories by medical students who practice performing operations on them. This type of training used to be carried out the world over but has stopped in most countries as regarded to be of no educational value. Still, in Russia one continues to use dogs like this, probably because they are so cheap. Either is replacing the dogs with modern educational methods too expensive or it just continues as a matter of routine.

Perhaps we can make an effort to have these cruel experiments replaced with modern alternatives in the future, if we can get the people in charge interested. We have provided Elena with literature and video-films (translated to Russian!) and we are prepared to go there together with international experts the day the representatives for the university are ready to discuss the issue.

Meanwhile, Elena does her best to watch and influence what happens at the institution. Last spring she received a tip that 100 dogs were taken to the university and that most of them were stolen in Vsevolozhsk, near Saint Petersburg. Elena and her friends managed to get in to the dogs and to take pictures of what they saw. They also took nine dogs with them, of which several later showed to be very sick.

Elena succeeded in getting a television-channel interested and a team managed to get in to the institution twice and take films. At the second time the television-team were hit by one of the researchers, which also was filmed. The films showed fatigued, frightened dogs sitting in their own excrements. Once each day they are let out in the hall, while their cages were flushed "clean" with hot water. Afterwards the hot water was instead directed on the dogs in order to force them back in again.

Elena spread information and pictures to all newspapers in Saint Petersburg and Vsevolozhsk. Three weeks after the visit at the university the television sent the story about the dogs. Several owners who desperately had looked for their dogs now saw them in the program. An older woman, Ludmila, called Elena and told her that she had seen her collie there. She and other witnesses had seen her dog being stolen but were not able to stop them. The dogcatchers had used a female dog in heat to catch dogs easier. Elena followed Ludmila to the university.

There they talked to the director of studies in charge but even though Ludmila cried and begged on her knees to get her dog back they would not give it to her.

Ludmila and Elena then asked for help from a human rights commission at S:t Petersburg parliament but not even this helped. Nor did the police and the prosecutor that they contacted as they said that to receive stolen property a decision has to be carried out by a judge and that usually takes several weeks. Every day for 16 days Ludmila came to the university and begged and prayed for her dogs life. The personnel at the institution pretended to be helpful but said things like they did not have the keys and that they could not find the person in charge etc. etc. After 16 days they let her in, than the dog was not there and no one knew what had happened to him. He was most certainly dead.

Elena has, together with some of the owners, made as many police reports as they have been able to, for stealing the dogs, bad hygiene in the stables and animal abuse. These reports lead to inspections by the authorities (who found nothing to object to!) and by the prosecutors. When the prosecutors came to inspect the institution had killed the 60 dogs that were placed in the worst place. Unfortunately, it's doubtful whether the institution, or the people that brought them in, can be punished for their crimes. There is no functioning animal rights law and it seems like not even the theft of the dogs can be prosecuted. Elena is struggling on to improve the law. She has good contacts with the parliament in S:t Petersburg and they will now look into the local legislation and even write to president Putin and require that a national legislation is initiated.

Now to another horrible occurrence! In the end of June Elena heard of a place where a large number of dogs were kept in a shed without food or water. She was told that dogs were kept there the whole year in spite of the heat in the summer and the cold in the winter. This was in Vsevolozhsk, the same place where all the dogs at the university had been stolen from.

The shed was by a tumbledown house, which the owners had left, two alcoholics lived there now. They might have been supposed to care for the dogs but they never feed them. Some people in the village tried to protest to the animal abuse through a report to the police, on which 17 families had signed, but nothing happened. The neighbours could not stand to hear the poor dogs whimpering and tried to talk to the owners but to no use. Finally, some of the neighbours broke in and took out some of the dogs. Five dogs were rescued, all micro-chipped(!) and pedigree dogs but in such a bad shape that they could not even stand on their legs. The rescuers filmed the place and the dogs and sent the material to Elena and asked for help.

Elena has a theory that the dogs were to be sold to China, where just now pedigree dogs are in big demand. But how did they plan to make money on dogs that are so badly treated that they obviously never could survive the transport?

To visit and inspect a place like this can be dangerous and this particular day Elena only managed to gather a small group. She invited a journalist from the national television channel but unfortunately he did not show up on time. When the group arrived at the place there were no pedigree dogs to be found and a neighbour said they had been transported away the same morning. There were other dogs there, all in a terrible condition. Elena and her friends wanted to take the dogs with her but the men who lived in the house stopped them. One of them attacked Elena and tried to hit her in the head and a woman, staying at the premises, poured dirty water over her. A neighbouring woman saved Elena from the assault, she managed to get

away only with some injuries made to her hand from one of the men hitting her with a iron-pipe! In some miraculous way the group still managed to rescue eight pups and one dog and a bird in a cage(!) and hurried away with them which made the angry men attack their cars. They were lucky enough to escape with the few animals and with only some minor injuries.

When they drove away from the place the journalist from the television called and told them he was in a village nearby. They drove there and he filmed the animals and was told the whole story. As the animals did not look well a decision was made to have them examined by a vet in order to have their poor condition and the neglect confirmed.

The closest clinic was one that is run by the city of St Petersburg, the Main City Vet Centre. We visited this clinic many times some years ago. Elena told an unbelievable story about this clinic. The former head of the centre and chief veterinarian had a driver, in some mysterious way this same driver became the head of this centre! He has of course no veterinary or medical knowledge whatsoever! In spite of this, he is in charge of all the state owned clinics. It's also to this centre all registration fees for dogs are paid! Elena had long suspected this man of being corrupt and was now proven right.

When Elena came with the animals he refused to have them examined "for no reason" and Elena was referred to other people at the centre who also said that it was very difficult to examine them. They behaved very strangely and seemed to try to keep Elena there as long as possible. After half an hour Elena could leave the clinic. When they came out the whole street was full of cars with fierce looking men. Their cars were blocked by the other cars and one of the men was recognised as the owner of the place from where the animals were saved. On their way to the cars Elena and her group were attacked again by the men who tried to hit them with their fists. Elena told two of the younger women to try to run away while she and her friends Olga and Irina should keep the animals in their cars. More and more cars with threatening men came. Elena recognised some of them from the markets where it is well known that stolen animals are sold. Elena decided to call the police and went back to the veterinary station but they refused to give her any help. Elena understood that the personnel at the centre had called for these men that were now threatening her.

After a while one of the "mafiosos" called the police and claimed that Elena and the others had robbed their house, taken money and mistreated their children! Thus, after two hours, everybody moved to the nearest police station where they had to wait for the police from Vsevolozhsk. Elena, Irina and Olga waited in their cars. It was very hot and the pups suffered but the women did not dare to leave the cars afraid that then the animals surely would have been taken. They did not even dare to open the windows as they were surrounded by the furious men. Inside the cars they wrote reports to the police about the threats but the police refused to accept it, claiming that it should be handled by the police from Vsevolozhsk.

During these conditions they waited FOUR hours and when the police finally came it was decided that everybody should go to Vsevolozhsk! It was a long procession, first a police car, then Elena, Olga and Irina in two cars and then ten cars with mafiosos. When they arrived there the police asked them about all the animals and said that Elena and her friends could leave as soon as they had been interrogated. For Elena however, it was obvious that this should not be possible as Elena could count to 17 cars with mafiosos gathering outside, waiting for them.

Olga had a mobile phone and tried to call for help. She agreed to being interrogated but Elena refused unless she had a lawyer present. She was put into a dark hallway to wait and when a well dressed man later showed up and asked her if she was Elena she was first scared to admit she was. Luckily, he turned out to be her lawyer, contacted by a friend of Elena's. Eventually they were released but the lawyer had to call for some huge, strong men in order for Elena, her friends and the animals to get home. Olga managed to get away in her car but Elena had to ride with the lawyer. Some of the mafiosos followed them and some of the lawyer's men drove Elena's car. When they had got rid of the pursuers they all met at an industrial area and Elena received her car back.

"I was so afraid that any of the pups should have been hurt or caused an accident as they were laying on the floor close to the pedals but all went well. And – the men did not say one word about the stench in the car!" said Elena to us afterwards. At 5 o'clock in the morning she was finally home and fell in sleep with her clothes on. And - it was June 28, Elena's birthday!

Naturally, Elena has reported the events to the police and used every connection in order to put a stop to the dealing with stolen dogs. Thanks to Elena's and her friends presence of mind, they had all the registration numbers of the mafiosos cars, thus making an identification much easier. Elena is convinced that a huge organisation is stealing dogs, selling them to laboratories or at markets or perhaps even for export. The expenses are kept very low and the profit is high, even though many dogs die during the horrible process.

Unfortunately, the owner of the place in Vsevolozhsk still states that Elena assaulted a child when they rescued the dogs and the report is dealt with by the police. It means that Elena must be able to pay for a lawyer to defend her.

Since this happened, Elena has been subjected to a lot of threats against herself and her dogs. At present she has 19 dogs at home, two of her own and 17 saved dogs to be re-homed. One person called Elena and told her that her activities had caused them a lot of financial loss and if she did not stop interfering they would kill her. In order to protect herself and her dogs from attacks from the mafiosos Elena will stay at her place in the country for a while, hoping that she and the dogs will be harder to find there.

"Aren't you afraid?", we asked last time we talked to her. "Yes, of course I am but I must show them that it's not possible to stop me", she replied. "I don't think they'd dare to kill me, it would cause too much attention now. However, my greatest fear is that they are going to hurt my dogs".

Now to the good news!!

Thanks to some support from the parliament of S:t Petersburg, Elena has finally a small premise to be used for castration and sterilisation of dogs and cats. The premise is in connection with a veterinary clinic and will have a few stalls for observation of the animals after the operations. She has also permission to build some additional stalls or kennels outside. At the moment a fence is being built around the area and water is being installed. The payment of the room and the dog-stalls is made but the cost for running the place as well as for personnel, equipment, medicines and other material for operations will have to be paid for by Elena. The contribution from Sweden is the largest source of income for her.

Elena Bobrova and her Russian colleagues keep working as usual and in order to manage the daily work she receives from us 5.250 Swedish crowns each month. It is equivalent to a little more than 550 US dollars. This is supposed to cover payments for animal food, veterinary costs, medicines and petrol for the car and other expenses. As you all understand, this is barely enough for her, but as of today we cannot afford to give her more and she really succeeds in doing a lot for such a small sum of money.

Do you wish to give an extra contribution to help Elena pay her lawyer or to the new castration-clinic? Please send this to postal giro no: 10 04 56-3 (Djurskydd i Östeuropa). We will see to it that she receives the money as an separate payment. Also, please state on your giro form if you want your extra gift to the lawyer or the clinic.

OTHER:

Our annual meeting was held at the end of May. In order to save money we are not sending the annual report to all members and sponsors. Those who wish to receive it, please contact us and we will send it to you.

The next report will come in January. Then we hope to be able to show you some photos from Latvia as well as from Russia.

Do you know that many Internet-banks will help you if you wish to become a sponsor and send a specific amount every month to our postal giro? Please hear with your bank how you can have this done very easily.

We are still in need for people helping us in our non-profit organisation. If you feel that you want to do something meaningful in your spare time, please let us know. You will be greatly welcomed into our little active group.

Please do not hesitate to contact us if you have any questions or if you would like to help us in any way. We are very pleased to come in contact with all animal lovers that are interested in what we are doing.

Once again, thank you so much for your support. Without you much of what is being done for the animals would not be possible. You will hear from us again soon.

Sincerely yours

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