

Helping Bulgaria's Orphans Integrate Into Society

FROM THE PRESIDENT'S DESK...



Ellie Tashev

In the turmoil following the collapse of communism in Bulgaria, the institutions for the poor and downtrodden were the first to fall into disarray. When Integra Bulgaria noticed this decline, they developed a program to help orphans. Ellie Tashev directs this extraordinary "Youth at Risk" program, which provides orphans with the support and life skills needed for entry into the adult world. She and her husband Peter (*Integra Bulgaria executive director* – see "Board Close-Up," page 2) recently adopted an orphan girl themselves. Ellie has a heart dedicated to helping these needy children, too often forgotten by society. Here is Ellie's story of the incredible work going on among the orphans of Bulgaria.

Bob Kuhlman
President

How could such beautiful children be left alone? How do they live without love and care?

We first met Siika while visiting an orphanage in Sofia as part of a church outreach. She was seven years old, incredibly skinny, weak, and pale. Yet, she and her brother Vasko were cheerful and bright, asking questions, and pulling us aside to play. Like the other children, they were starved for attention. It made our hearts ache. They had food and shelter, but no supervision, care, education, or love. How could such beautiful children be left alone? How do they live without love and care? We longed to do more for them, but lacked the means at that time.

We continued visiting the orphanage, and observed that they had no plan for

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Integra Bulgaria is bringing hope to orphans like Siika.





Peter Tashev, Integra USA board member and Executive Director, Integra Bulgaria

BOARD CLOSE-UP

Peter Tashev

Since inception, Integra has sought to work through godly national Christians. Rather than arriving on the scene to tell local believers how to do ministry,

Integra sought qualified individuals with whom they could work. Not surprisingly, God had prepared people perfectly for this kind of role!

In Bulgaria, Peter Tashev was God's man. Working in Canada as the communist government fell, Peter saw an opportunity to implement market economy principles in Bulgaria and returned home. In 2000 he met Integra staff and embraced the vision to communicate the Gospel through business. The concept of marketplace ministry as a tool to reach people and communities for Christ was inspiring for Peter. He eagerly applied his entrepreneurial skills to facilitate Integra's vision.

Since 2001, Peter and his wife Ellie have seen Integra in Bulgaria grow. (Note Ellie's leadership of the Youth at Risk program featured throughout this newsletter.) To date, more than 2,000 people have attended 74 training seminars. Both small businesses (loans of \$5000 and up) and micro-businesses (loans below \$5000) have been launched.

Recognizing Peter's leadership, last fall the U.S. board invited him to join in overseeing the stateside arm of Integra. Tasked with raising resources and awareness in the U.S., the perspective of one of Integra's overseas leaders is invaluable as we grow our funding for business-as-mission.

"I have been blessed by Integra's work in Bulgaria," said Tashev. "I am happy to help the U.S. leadership understand Eastern Europe after communism, and how we can work together to share Christ through business."

U.S. president Bob Kuhlman agrees. "Peter Tashev brings a unique perspective to our meetings. He understands the culture of Eastern Europe and has helped our board, composed mostly of U.S. business people, understand the challenges we face in the wake of communism." Because Tashev has run successful businesses in Bulgaria, the board respects his voice. "We're often reminded that accomplishing our goals isn't as easy as we'd like," continued Kuhlman, "but at the same time Peter's can-do attitude is inspiring."

Beyond his leadership, Peter and his wife Ellie are flesh-and-blood reminders of what Integra is all about. Several years ago, they got involved in ministry to orphans living in the state-run foster care system. Eventually, they adopted a child themselves. The orphan ministry has become a wonderful illustration of business development changing communities. Melding the two, Integra-sponsored businesses hire orphans, who have few prospects and no support as they enter the adult world. This successful strategy is a model for other Eastern European nations struggling to integrate abandoned children into society.

Integra USA greatly benefits from a high quality board with people like Peter. For more information on Integra's dynamic and innovative leadership committed to sharing Christ through business, visit our website at www.IntegraUSA.org.

Once Troubled Teen Dreams of Being an Instrument for Change

Asen Rusev is 19 years old now, but just seven short years ago his life was very different. His father died when Asen was only 12, and after this Asen found himself in trouble with the law for theft. He was placed in an orphanage for children with deviant behavior, located in the Bulgarian village of Pelatikovo. The emotional trauma and stress of losing a parent, combined with the frightening ordeal with the police, left Asen uncertain and fearful of where his life was headed.

Recalling those early days at the orphanage, Asen says, "At that time I knew nothing about life. I had a tough go of things there initially. I was afraid and unsure of myself, but I still had hopes and dreams of what I might do in life."

For orphans like Asen, those hopes and dreams are largely dependent on the type of care and education they receive from the institutions they are placed in. In the Integra orphan programs, kids like this are surrounded by staff members who are on a mission to see that every child has the best opportunity to succeed. From mentoring to educating to sharing the Gospel, their focus is improving the seemingly dim circumstances and plight of the children in their care.

Asen experienced all these things and more during his six years in Pelatikovo. He even got the rare opportunity to travel abroad, touring France as a reward for his improved behavior. When he returned home, he moved to another

"I was afraid and unsure of myself, but I still had hopes and dreams of what I might do in life."

orphanage in Sofia, Bulgaria. Here he continued his education at a vocational high school, obtaining exceptional grades in a program designed to train young men in construction and the building trades. His dream, however, is to eventually study law at Sofia University.

Why law? "Because I think that in this way I would be most helpful to my community and country, especially to people who go through hard times and do not know the law or how to defend themselves," Asen explains. "More specifically, I would like to become a judge and to make sure that the law is fairly applied. I think that Law is the foundation of each country. Eventually I would perhaps like to be a politician because they are the ones capable of making significant changes for the people of Bulgaria."

As a personal endnote to his inspiring story, Asen adds, "I hope someday soon to have a family of my own. I wish to give to my children everything that I was not able to have. I want to see them achieve great things with the hard work and discipline that



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Partnering to Serve Bulgaria's Orphans

Integra has been blessed since 2001 to partner with the non-profit organization Agapedia in its work with the orphaned children of Bulgaria. Founded in 1995 by German soccer star Jürgen Klinsmann, Agapedia sets up projects to aid needy children. They consult, plan, organize, and implement humanitarian projects that help children directly, as well as support societal advancement through sustainable projects. Agapedia has focused on Eastern Europe, where the number of abandoned infants and children is exponentially higher, due to weak economies and the high rate of unemployment. So far, Agapedia has been active in four countries as a registered non-governmental organization (NGO) with their own local staff. Their administrative costs are covered by Agapedia's founding members as well as by proceeds of Jürgen Klinsmann's foundation monies. Agapedia Children's Home offers children aged 6 to 18 sensible spare-time activities. Supervised homework, sports, games, creative work, and instructive interaction with the team help the children develop independence and skills such as a willingness to cooperate, decision-making abilities, and creativity. Integra values this joint venture with Agapedia and looks forward to many years of fruitful and faithful service together among the orphaned children of Bulgaria.

Love Triumphs Over Emotional Scars

Valya Angelova is a young woman who spent five years in the Integra orphans' program. She had spent her entire life in orphanages. She came to Integra at a very young age, and the emotional trauma she had experienced left her extremely fearful, shy, and difficult to communicate with. She did not allow people to stand too close to her, and was arrogant, aggressive, and violent. Valya was convinced she would never amount to anything. But that didn't deter the Integra staff. They mentored and trained her with lots of love and care. With time she became more relaxed and open, and she acquired skills that built her character and helped her graduate and start a job. She did not have the opportunity to live in a transition home, but has kept her job for three years and is able to support herself. She often visits the Integra office and the staff maintains a wonderful relationship with her. They are thankful for the way God has turned her life around.

Orphan Works to Overcome Identity Mix-Up

Gencho Atanasov, aged 19, has lived in an Integra transition home for two years. He is learning to be independent and to view himself as a valuable member of society—big steps for someone who has spent much of his life in an orphanage. At 18 he learned he had two different birth certificates, two surnames, and two birthdates. "I had a hard time explaining to the police that I had nothing to do with that," Gencho shares. "My friends from Agapedia wrote many letters to help me get a single, officially recognized birth certificate." Gencho has made progress on his legal status, but still cannot get an ID card because of the mix-up. Without an ID, he cannot travel, rent his own apartment, or find employment. Yet he maintains a positive attitude and strong work ethic. He is doing well in school, pursuing a career as a chef. At the orphans' training center he is learning computer skills and English, and is working there part time. Gencho also has good friends at church, where he attends the youth services and helps out at nearby orphanages. He is hopeful for his future, knowing that he can shape it as he does his best at school, works hard, and trusts God.

Orphans' Project

A Few Facts About the Orphans Project

Number of Orphaned Teens in Program



Number of Orphans Who Have Completed the Program

(Living Independently, with Full-Time Jobs)

As of May 2007 **35-40**

Number of Orphans Who Have Lived in Transition Homes

Since 2001 **30**

Number of Orphans Currently Living in Transition Homes

As of Jan 2008 **10**



Orphan Achieves Independence Despite Disabilities

Georgie Yankov spent about four years in a transition home. Because of a learning disability, he was behind most of the other children his age academically and socially. But due to an ambitious drive to better himself, and with the help of an Integra social worker, Georgie faced the challenges and has overcome them. The time he spent at the transition home helped him mature, complete high school, and acquire life skills necessary for survival in the world. Integra staff eventually helped him rent his own apartment and find a job

to support himself. For a person with such a big burden—being raised in an orphanage, having been abused, and being slow in his development—this was no small achievement. Recognizing Georgie's great need for support, a local pastor took him under his wing and gave him a job in the church office. Georgie has been supporting himself for more than a year. He is an active member of Blaga Vest church, and is deeply involved in the orphans' ministry. Integra is very proud of his achievements.

operating within the new, post-communist, system. The children were being raised in poverty and misery, a most depressing environment to grow up in.

A Desperate Need for Change

Over time, the light in Siika and Vasko's eyes began to fade. Siika became aggressive, while Vasko looked fragile and sensitive. One day Vasko seemed afraid to come near us. I touched his face and asked what was wrong. He jumped back, burst into tears, and ran away. Another child told me he had been abused. Sadly, physical and sexual abuse are common in orphanages.

Before long, we no longer saw Siika and Vasko during our visits. We were told they had been "reintegrated" into their family. To reduce the number of orphanages, the government was sending children to relatives. We later learned that Siika's mother lived with a few different men, all alcoholics. She had no place of her own. How

the children "reintegrated," we could only imagine.

A few years passed, and our work had developed from a church ministry to a full-fledged program under the umbrella of Integra Bulgaria.

Witnessing the plight of children like Siika and Vasko had prompted us to develop a comprehensive means of helping them integrate into society. In 2001 we opened a center to train orphans in life skills, work habits, responsibility, and relating to others. We also encourage them to develop their talents, thus building confidence and self-esteem. We now work with about 40 orphans and disadvantaged young people between the ages of 13 and 19.

The kids are involved at the training center for one to five years. As of May 2007, 35 teenagers had completed the program, and 90% of them are now living independently, with full-time jobs. The students have responded

"Transition homes" help orphans ease into society with a much greater chance for success.



beautifully to the training, and we are excited to see where God will lead.

Life After the Orphanage

As desperate as life in state-run homes is, when orphans turn 18 a bad situation gets worse. They must leave the orphanage, with no skills to support themselves. One day, they have a small measure of comfort, the next day they're on the street! Some barely get by at low-wage, dead-end jobs. Others turn to drugs or prostitution.

Integra's alternative? "Transition homes." Instead of jumping immediately to independence, young people can now share apartments under the supervision of Integra personnel.

These 18- to 20-year-olds receive a rent subsidy, mentoring, and spiritual counsel. They learn how to buy and prepare food, manage a bank account, pay bills, and keep their home clean. This support radically increases their success rate. Most important, we have a chance to share the Gospel with them. After all, our key goal is to reach these orphans for Christ.

What about Siika? Now 16, she is back in an orphanage. Her story continues with a series of misfortunes, but at least she is able to be with us and receive help. Like every other child she still has one major need: someone to care about her personally. And now, through Integra, she and others like her finally have hope for the future.

If you're interested in supporting Integra's work with orphans financially, we have established a Bulgarian Youth at Risk fund. Simply indicate on your check that you'd like your gift directed to the support of this significant and effective program.



**ONCE TROUBLED TEEN
DREAMS OF BEING AN INSTRUMENT FOR CHANGE ■
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I learned from my time in Pelatikovo. I want to teach my children to have a significant, fulfilled life, and to teach them to respect others, defend the weak, and accept and love all people as they are."

What a turnaround for a young man who just seven years ago appeared headed down a path that leads many to prison, addiction, or death! Please pray for Asen as he pursues his dream of someday being an instrument of change in his country.



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