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The Children's Ark  
by  
Vladimir Lipovetsky  
  
Drama  
Based on a true story and documents

# content

## A) logline, short synopsis, heroes, locations

### logline

The true story of 800 RUSSIAN children sent away from war-torn St. Petersburg in 1918 because of food shortages. They return THREE years later after an odyssey around the world, rescued with the help of a courageous AMERICAN Red Cross volunteer.

### short synopsis

This is a true and unknown story of how in the summer of 1918 a group of 800 children was sent to the Urals because of food shortages in war-torn St. Petersburg (formerly known as Petrograd). It was meant to be a three-months sojourn, but as the Russian Civil War raged on, it became impossible for the children to return.

At the same time on the other side of the world, Riley H. Allen, a journalist in Hawaii left for Vladivostok to report on the Russian Civil War. When he arrived, he learned of the dire situation of the children and decided to volunteer at the Red Cross. His mission was to bring back the children to their parents. Little did he know that the fate of those 800 children would lay exclusively in his hands and that for the next three years he would be travelling with them around the world.

Riley managed to get the children under the protection of the Red Cross and because of complications, it took an entire year before they could leave. In the meantime Russian propaganda had it that Americans had kidnapped the children. The children's letters to their parents never arrived.

Riley paid 5,000 \$ a day for a cargo boat to take to the most incredible journey in the history of the Red Cross. A three year odyssey started around the globe with stops in San Francisco, the Panama Canal, New York, Brest and Helsinki. During this time, Riley and a Russian nurse fell in love. Some children tried to escape and some even died during the voyage, but 780 returned home safely returning to Petrograd the long way around the world via the Russian Far East, Asia, the USA and Europe.

Upon arrival in 1921, the children and their parents had trouble recognizing each other.

The existence of the journey was kept hidden to the Soviet public because the children were rescued by officers from the American Red Cross. The children kept their secret almost all their lives.

### heroes

- 1) Riley H. Allen, a Honolulu resident, who was American Red Cross Siberian Commissioner at that time, and, until his death, editor of the „Honolulu Star-Bulletin“.
- 2) Burle Bramhall, his colleague, American Red Cross
- 3) Mariya Leonova, Russian nurse, in love with Riley Allen
- 4) the children

In special focus: Evgeniya, Zoya, Vitaly, Valentina, Petr, Georgy, Irina - their remembrances, letters are the documentary basis of the story and there is this Fyodor Kuzovkov who ran away in San Francisco and joins the group in New York not having found his father in America, his story is told also. Among the kids is a later famous dancer and a scientist.

### locations

Petrograd (St. Petersburg), Ural, Sibiria, Vladivostok, China, Japan, San Francisco, Havanna, New York, Brest (F), Kiel (D), Helsinki (SF)

# in brief

**B) Long synopsis**

**long synopsis** Petrograd, in the spring of 1918. Hunger was prevalent in the capital of Bolshevik Russia. Only recently having come to power, Lenin and his People's Commissars were no longer able to supply the population with food and the system of school meals for children had also collapsed. The schools commission implemented an emergency assistance plan in March: accompanied by their teachers, school children were to be sent off as soon as possible to the Ural countryside for a few months where the supply situation was better. Parents had until April to enter their children on the name lists.

On the 8 and 25 May Petrograd's Finland Station was the scene of moving farewells with the youngest of the children being only seven years old. Yet, for the parents, the hope that their little ones would fare better there than in hunger-ridden and revolution-torn Petrograd was greater than their anxiety. Divided among several trains around 800 children set off on a journey from which they were to return back home to their parents only three years later. But at the start no one had any idea of the odyssey awaiting them.

The children already start sending letters home during the journey, telling of the adventures en route as well of their hopes for better conditions in the summer camp. The camp really was only intended as a holiday camp with the plan being for the children to stay for 3 months. After a strenuous journey by train, cart or on foot, in some cases lasting weeks, they were all happy to be able to settle into reasonably fixed accommodation with more or less normal beds at last. However, the groups then had to be split into two children's camps, hundreds of kilometres apart and with no means of contact between them. The one was in Mias in the Governorate of Orenburg (South Ural), the other in Kuri the Governorate Perm (North Ural).

In this remote part of the former Tsardom the political situation was nowhere near as stable as in Petrograd which was firmly in the hands of the Bolsheviks. During their journey the children had encountered mounted gangs of marauding soldiers, some of whom were on the side of the White Army, while others were fighting for the Red Army. During the course of the summer the front between the two sides in the civil war fluctuated and the children's camps were caught between the two. With a great deal of effort the camp supervisors were able to protect the children during attacks or from soldiers on the march. The civil war was now in full swing and delayed the children's return to Petrograd.

On 18 November 1918 Alexander Kolchak, General of the White Army, declared himself Supreme Commander of all of Russia. His troops blocked all train connections in the direction of Siberia. The children were left completely cut off; a return journey by any other means was impossible and far too dangerous. The summer camps were not equipped for the winter and the children were faced with the prospect of a hard winter full of deprivation.

# long synopsis

## B) long synopsis

At the same time, on the 18 November 1918 in Hawaii, the steamship „Yomei Maru“ was ready to cast off. On board was a journalist from the „Honolulu Star Bulletin“, Riley H. Allen. Riley Allen had embarked for Vladivostok to report on the Russian civil war, planning to be back in his newspaper office in Honolulu within three months at the latest. When Riley Allen arrived in Vladivostok the local Red Cross headquarters had just received notification from the YMCA headquarters in Samara of a camp in the Ural in which children from Petrograd were being housed in inadequate conditions and of the fact that the children were not able to return to Petrograd. Rudolf Bolling Toisler, representative of the Siberian Committee of the American Red Cross in Vladivostok, told the US reporter about the camp. Riley Allen did not hesitate for long; he did not just want to report, he wanted to help. Voluntary Red Cross helpers from America as well as other countries had been active in Russia during WWI, particularly in the care of wounded soldiers in field hospitals. Following the end of the war and with the start of the civil war they increasingly extended their efforts to alleviate the suffering of the civil population. Riley Allen became one of them and decided to make sure that these 800 children separated from their parents would be able to return home. Riley Allen was a small man, his round, somewhat childlike face made him seem to many like a gentle cherubim who hardly seemed up to the harsh conditions of the Siberian winter. Yet this „cherubim“ proved to have a will of iron, boundless energy and the tenacity of a bull dog when the situation and the good cause required it. At the start he had no inkling that the fate of 800 Russian children would soon rest entirely in his hands; not only would it shape his life for the next two years but would take him half way round the world.

In March 1919 the children’s camps learned that they were now under the protection of the American Red Cross. That is how long it took for the Red Cross to be able to negotiate with both sides in the civil war in order to obtain more or less official authorisation to take care of the children. It also took a long time before the Red Cross was able to get precise details of how many children were involved and where they were.

The children had to be brought in groups eastwards, further and further away from their home city and over different, ever more adventurous routes through Siberian Russia torn by civil war. In March they travelled first by horse sled, then by rowing boat along the ice-free Tura, Tobol, Jenisei, Ob and Tom to Tomsk. Only once they reached the collection point near Ilmensk on Lake Turgoyak was the Red Cross able to guarantee their safety for a while. The scattered groups first had to be gathered together, which Riley Allen managed to do during the early summer, still in the hope of being able to get the children back to Petrograd in time for the start of the next school year in the autumn. However, the trains which they were finally able to board at the end of August did not head westwards. At the end of September 1919 the last train with the children arrived in Vladivostok, almost at the most eastern point in Russia. Riley Allen had set up a reception camp with good conditions for the children on the small island of Russky. It was only in an official announcement by the People’s Commissar Lunacharsky in the Izvestia newspaper on 3 April 1920 that the anxious and desperate parents learned that their children had not been abducted by the Americans, as had previously been claimed in propaganda sources, but that they were still on Russian soil and that they were being taken care of by the American Red Cross. The children’s letters stopped reaching their parents. Lunacharsky announced that the children would be returned to Petrograd as soon as possible, either by train or by ship, accompanied by doctors and supervisors.

# long synopsis

**B) long synopsis**

It was to take almost a whole year before the children were finally able to leave the island of Russky. But it was not by train heading westwards to Petrograd and not by ship either. The steamship which cast off from Vladivostok on 13 July 1920 with the children on board took a different course. The steamship was the „Yomei Maru“. Riley Allen had chartered her for \$5.000 per day for one of the most unbelievable missions in the history of the Red Cross.

After a short stopover in Muroran on Hokkaido the captain set course for San Francisco via the northern sea route, following instructions from the local Red Cross headquarters in Washington. The „Yomei Maru“ took 19 days to make the 4 495 mile crossing over the Pacific. The children were welcomed by the Mayor of San Francisco, Rolf, and by representatives of the Red Cross and taken to a military base staffed by women soldiers from the Salvation Army. The military General Gunter Sigget, the Information Ministry, the Greek Orthodox Church, the Boy Scouts and thousands of civilians rivalled each other in their hospitality, having been touched by the fate of the children separated from their parents. The excursions, ice creams, sweets, tropical fruit and theatre visits went on for three days. One boy did not board the „Yomei Maru“ again, running away before the ship cast off headed for the Panama Canal on 5 August 1920.

Riley Allen and Maria Leonova, one of the children’s supervisors, were no longer on board either. They had been instructed to take the quicker route overland to Washington in order to make all of the necessary arrangement prior to the ship’s arrival in New York. Riley had received a telegram from local headquarters in Washington telling him that, due to the political situation in Europe, the children were not to be brought directly by ship from New York to Petrograd but that they should be taken to Bordeaux from where they would have to return home by land. For Riley and Maria this was to be more than a business trip. When they stood on the Manhattan landing on 28 August 1920 where the ship tied up in the early morning hours after a three week journey, the children saw not only their American saviour and hero standing next to their Russian supervisor, but also a happy couple.

While Maria Leonova was to meet her immigrant sister in New York, the runaway Fedja Kuzovkov experienced his own adventure in America in search of his long lost father. His search took him from San Francisco via Chicago to New York but, despite the help of many people and although his story even reached the American President, has was to have no luck. Perhaps he was lucky, though, to be able to rejoin the other children again in New York.

The Mayor of New York, Haylen, set up a triumphant arrival for the children in New York. Accompanied by police escort the children were taken by bus from one landmark to the next. Not just for three days but for a whole two weeks the children were treated as honorary guests in the Big Apple. In the meantime Riley Allen was received by President Wilson in Washington where he made it clear at the highest level that it had been his personal promise to bring the children back to their parents and not to leave them to an uncertain fate in a French harbour. And he got his way: the „Yomei Maru“ was to sail via Brest and then via Kiel and Helsinki to bring the children back to Petrograd.

On 11 September 1920 the „Yomei Maru“ set sail again. Many of the passengers became ill during the crossing. On 15 September Maria Leonova died from the consequences of an untreated ear infection. Riley Allen had to bury the woman he loved at sea.

# long synopsis

**B) long synopsis**

On 25 September 1920 the ship docked in Brest. The French government would not allow passengers without a passport and a visa to leave the harbour. At the beginning of October they reached Cuxhaven, where merchants and journalists as well as a navigator for the journey through the North Baltic Channel came on board. On 6 October the „Yomei Maru“ docked in Helsingfors, having reached her end destination, unlike the Russian children who are not at all welcome in Finland as the government feared a diplomatic dispute with Russia if the children were allowed to disembark from a ship flying under two flags, the American and the Japanese, Russia's relationship with Japan being at its worst ever. The „Yomei Maru“ had to spend three days at the quay in Koivisto before the children were brought from the ship to a sanatorium.

It was another month later, on 10 November 1920, before the first group of the now only 780 children (a number of the children had also died) stood at the Finnish-Russian border, each carrying a bag of provisions. In strictly alphabetical order Petja Aleksandrov was the first to cross the bridge over the Sestra River which formed the border. The last group of thirteen children left Finnish Khalila in February 1921, accompanied by Riley Allen and Burle Bramhall. Riley hugged every child and kissed each of them goodbye on the forehead.

There were two people who stood at Riley Allen's side right up to the end: Hanna Campbell and Burle Bramhall. Burle Bramhall celebrated his 27th birthday on board the „Yomei Maru“ during the Pacific crossing and was the youngest of the three. Riley Allen was 34 years old. It was only in Finland, shortly before the children returned to Russian soil, that the three Americans went separate ways. Without them Riley, the unsung hero of the story, would not have been able to complete his heroic undertaking.

# long synopsis

B) photos



The children on their way to the Ural camps



Through Siberia

photos

B) photos



The children on bord the ship



American Red Cross volounteers Barm Bramhall (left), Riley Allen (right)

photos

B) quotes from the book

„If you blindfolded me and spun me around, I would turn my face in the direction of Petrograd every time.“

„They did not see us as a big group of children, they looked into the eyes and the soul of each child.“

„The Baltic Sea belonged to them all. It united all its peoples and reminded them that their world was one, that the sea belongs to all nations.“

the departure  
of the kids,  
Finland station,  
Petrograd 1918

At that time Finland Station was different from the present. The small wooden building had insufficient space for hundreds of children. But no one was interested in going indoors. The day was sunny, and everyone was in a mood for chatting and joking. The young people happily rushed around the station, disappeared somewhere, then reappeared leading a friend by the hand. It seemed as if a Sunday picnic awaited them, not a thousand-mile three-month journey.

the children on  
their way to  
the Ural camps

Out of the blue the steward began to hum a sad soldier's song, and everyone fell silent. Uncle Grisha waved his hand, and turning to Lësha Karpei, he said, "Well that's enough sadness. Let's go get some tea. They only had the one bucket, and the tea tasted vaguely like cabbage. But nobody cared. There was plenty of sugar. It had been a long time since the kids had had such a tasty and ample meal.

„They looked in amazement at the unusual procession. "Orphans" pronounced an old woman and made the sign of a cross.“

civil war  
arrives at the  
Ural camps

In the pre-dawn hours a person often sleeps so soundly that even a gunshot might not awaken him. So it happened that first morning in Miass. A few of the boys, including Petya, did awaken, though, and pressed their faces to the window glass. Georgi Ivanovich rushed into the room from below and ordered them back to bed. He issued strict orders not to turn on the lights. As soon as he left the room, the curious boys again ran to the windows. Fascinated, they watched as riders appeared in the moonlight. Rifle shots were fired; horses neighed and reared. It was the advance patrol of the White Army.

arrival of the  
ship at  
New York

The Yomei Maru entered Henry Hudson's harbor late in the evening on August 27, 1920, and docked the following morning. Coulter assured the girls, who had come out on deck again, that half the city would show up to meet the ship. Their arrival had been announced in all the papers. New Yorkers were a curious lot.

quotes

B) quotes from the book

Riley Allen  
meets Presi-  
dent Wilson

"I feel sorry for these children," said President Wilson. "Their parents are awaiting them. But so is famine. They are returning to the very same circumstances which caused them to flee in the first place."  
Then Wilson said words which Riley Allen would remember for the rest of his life: "Don't forget that the first request in the Lord's Prayer is for daily bread. It is hard to praise the Lord and love your neighbor on an empty stomach."

Riley Allen  
looses his love  
Mariya on bord  
the ship

After a considerable amount of time, everybody moved away from the bed, and he could see Mariya. She was sleeping peacefully. One hand lay on top of the blanket, and the other hung down over the side of the bed. She was better! Thank God!  
"Is the crisis over?" he asked, breathing a sigh of relief.  
"Yes, the crisis is over," murmured Coulter.  
"She's asleep, no?" he asked, still not grasping the situation.  
"She has passed away," said Devison.  
Miss Farmer stepped over to Allen and put her hand on his shoulder.  
"Dear Mr. Allen, I am so sorry."

the children  
at the Finnish-  
Russian border

A Finnish officer signaled to the men on the other side of the river with signal flags. On the Soviet side a man appeared in a black leather double-breasted coat. This was the head of the border guard. On his command signal flags were raised on the Russian bank of the river. Riley Allen and Burle Bramhall descended to the bridge and proceeded to the center of the stream. From the other side representatives of the Petrograd Soviet did the same.  
Riley Allen gave the officials a list of the children, and the men returned to their bank. Examination of the list did not take very long  
"Yep, all ours," said one of the men.

## C) A story of humanity suppressed by the Cold War

political  
background

The children tried to keep in touch after having returned to Petrograd in 1921 but it did not last for long; everybody was having to focus on their own survival during those hard times. The major obstacle, however, was FEAR. Having spent time abroad or even having relatives outside the country could result in serious setbacks like losing your job and/or not being allowed to attend university. Several of the children were later arrested and subsequently vanished.

They did not even tell their future wives and children what they had been through. The dancer Leonid Jakobson, performing with ballerina Maja Plisetskaya during a tour at the Met in NY, was not able to share his excitement with her that this was not his first time in the Big Apple! Obviously he had kept this episode in his biography hidden from the Soviet officials.

The Odyssey was mentioned briefly in some children's magazines in the 1930s, but then only in the „correct“ ideological wording. Later on, during Stalin's terror regime, not a single reference appeared anywhere up until the 1970s. Dmitry Erokin, descendant of an old aristocratic family, was 10 years old when he was taken to the Ural camps. He became a high ranking astrophysicist and worked with world famous colleagues such as Tsiolkovsky, the “father” of the Soviet Space Programme. He was arrested in 1936 and subsequently shot in 1938. The KGB had discovered his personal archive with photos and material about the children's ark which was one of the main reasons for sentencing him to death. He was rehabilitated in 1955.

Riley Allen never returned to Russia. Only Burle Bramhall did - as an old man. His first trip to Moscow took place in 1972 when the officials of the Russian Red Cross did not believe his reports because the story was completely forgotten. Only a year later, after an article in a Seattle newspaper, did former colonists manage to have him invited by the Russian Red Cross again in 1973, this time to Leningrad where he met with survivors. Among them was Jakobson, who no longer made any attempt to hide his past. The other “colonist” children could talk to Bramhall personally only with the special permission of the KGB. It would have appeared as pro-American propaganda to have an American being publicly honoured for the rescue of Russian children whom Russia had not been in a position to rescue herself. Only the Russian Red Cross dared to award Bramhall the Medal of Honour.

30 years later the Russian Red Cross awarded Vladimir Lipovetsky the same Medal of Honour.

# background

## C) A story of humanity - A Russian sailor's quest for the truth

## origins

It was by chance that Lipovetsky, a sailor and journalist born in 1936, found out about the children's amazing story while chatting with some of them in Leningrad in 1978. It turned out that there were astounding parallels in both of their biographies: Not only had he been evacuated to Siberia himself at the beginning of World War II, he also travelled the world by ship as a sailor and had seen some of the same ports as the colonist children.

As a human being and Russian citizen he had been deeply touched by the fate of his compatriots. As a journalist he had discovered the story of his life. His research would preoccupy him for decades, leading him to all kinds of private and state archives worldwide collecting memorabilia, photographs and documents from Leningrad, Moscow, Omsk, the Stanford University Hoover-Institute „War and Peace“, New York, Honolulu, Kobe (JP), Belgium etc.

Meanwhile the colonists themselves started to write their memories down and submitted them to Soviet publishers, all of whom rejected them. Even the famous Soviet Russian writer Daniil Granin had been approached. He refused for the same reason: this was too great a risk even for an established Russian writer. It was simply not politically correct to have an American saving Russian children.

Lipovetsky kept trying until the 1990s – without success. When Viktor Dotsenko, a known film director, started to work on a script and was still inhibited by officials Lipovetsky realized that he had to move elsewhere to see the story published. He immigrated to Israel in 1996 and wrote the book himself. It came out in 2004. One year later the St. Petersburg publisher AZBOOKA finally published the book in Russia.

Ironically, this situation was quite similar to that on the other side of the (free) world: North American newspapers of the day did carry reports of a group of Russian children on board a Red Cross steamship which docked in San Francisco and New York. There was even a book which was brought out. Yet, similarly to the Russian attitude, the focus automatically shifted to the cruelty of the Bolsheviks who left their own children to their fate - cold as they were. And the harsh conditions in the Siberian camps also provided another perfect opportunity to attack Communist Russia. The cold war was cold and nothing would change this, not even an American hero.

During the current film festival in Berlin Lipovetsky is being honoured with a major award by the Russian Association of Journalists for his life's work.

And the journey is not yet over: during the past two years he has held more meetings with people connected with the story of the Russian children, the children's Ark.

# a russian sailor

D) Message

This is the story of a man saving hundreds of children - the enemy's children.

The true story of an American hero in Russia 100 years ago.

This time Schindler's list consists of 800 Russian children during the Russian Revolution.

One person makes a difference.

Always has, always will.

Because an American journalist takes his heart to Siberia as a volunteer for the Red Cross a miracle happens.

A mind-blowing, forgotten page in the history of North America and Russia, of two nations that could be any two nations in a global world with conflicting ideologies.

Every child is innocent and makes us realize that we are all equal and that we shall recognize the need to support each other.

message

## G) Blurbs

„It is a practically unknown story of human solidarity. By bringing the real details to light the author has proven himself to be a journalist, archive researcher and world traveller of boundless energy. It is written with enthusiasm and is as enthralling as a real psycho-thriller, but one without any traces of fiction or false pathos. This is one of those rare books able to influence our world view.“

Albert Plutnik, Editor in Chief of the „Red Cross“ newspaper in Moscow

„I think Lipovetsky’s work on the book „Unbelievable Odyssey“ is an act of civil heroism“

Georgy Arbatov, Honorary Director of the US-Canadian Institute RAN

„... if in the future mankind were to set up a museum and fill the rooms with the most important souvenirs as testimony to the fact that, despite all of the outrages of evil and hostility, in all of the world’s dark nights, mankind was able to keep the flame of good burning, of brotherhood and of creative energy. This book would be found in the book section next to the Diary of Anne Frank ... .“

Aleksei Simonov, director and screenwriter, President of the Glasnost Defence Foundation

# blurbs