

By Sheila McMillan
Staff Writer

FARMINGTON - You didn't need to understand the Russian language to know that the little boy, plucked from brutal beginnings in a Moscow orphanage, is now happy. Serioja Trunov, 10, was the center of attention in a room full of adults who had come to meet the boy at the North Dining Hall at the University of Maine at Farmington this week. Born with a cerebral circulation impairment, misshapen, or so-called club feet, that make walking on his own impossible and a squint in one eye, Serioja was abandoned at birth. Like all disabled children without parents or relatives willing to take him in, Serioja ended up in an orphanage. Labeled an ³imbecile,² Serioja was not entitled to an education, or medical treatment as has been the case of all disabled children in Russian orphanages.

In Russia, the former Soviet government refused to publicly acknowledge the ³less than perfect² children by hiding them away from society at birth and warehousing them in grim institutions. Up until now, Serioja has spent his life hidden away in an orphanage but, watching him on Sunday scoot on his knees around the floor at UMF chirping away in Russian and going person to person, he charmed everyone in his path. Serioja was saved from a lonely, hopeless existence in the orphanage by people living thousands of miles away who cared about him.

Coming to America

His trip from Moscow to Farmington, Maine for surgery to repair his club feet has been three years in the making. It began with Danny Gazette and Jarad Platt, both of Farmington, and their friendship with the founders of the charitable organization, Diema's Dream Foundation. It is the reason Serioja has landed here in western Maine where doctors, nurses and therapists at Franklin Memorial Hospital will enable him to walk for the first time on his own. Mary Dudley of Cobham, Surrey, England, the founder of Diema's Dream Foundation and her sister, Debra Cockrell of Vienna, Virginia are close, longtime friends of Gazette and Platt, who both wanted to help out when they heard Serioja's story. Dudley, an advocate of orphanage reform now taking place in Russia, founded the organization whose mission is to provide financial, medical and educational support for both physically and mentally disabled Russian children living in orphanages.

It was through one of the reform programs that Serioja was recognized, in 2001, as ³educable² and his diagnosis of ³imbecility² was rescinded. In 2002, doctors at Serioja's orphanage made an attempt to place him on a list for surgery, but their request was denied on the grounds of ³the boy's physical and mental retardation.² Since then, Serioja's diagnosis was changed when it was found his intellect to be that of a normal, healthy boy. Serioja has walked on his knees until recently, when with some rehabilitation sessions, he learned he can walk on the outside sides of his feet with his feet facing inwards.

Why not bring him here?

Platt said the idea of Serioja coming to Farmington for the surgery began when he was discussing Serioja with some physician friends at a party and one of them said, ³Why not bring the boy here to do the surgery?² After a long, complicated process of obtaining the Russian government's permission, Serioja finally left Moscow and arrived in Farmington last Thursday, Dec. 4.³He's a very bright, adaptable, charming and lovely child,² Platt said. ³Right now he is going through the diagnostic stage and it might be determined that he will need specialists. Franklin Memorial Hospital will provide all the diagnostic work, the planning, the rehab and the location of the surgery will be decided by need. Dr. Iris Silverstein and her staff at Pine Tree Pediatrics have agreed to provide primary care during the pre- and post-operative period. Dr. Gregory Leather, an orthopedic specialist, formerly of Farmington now of Rockport, will perform the surgery to correct Serioja's club feet. Gazette and Platt are providing a home for Serioja and his legal guardian, Ludmilla Gudtz for the six months that they are expected to be in Farmington.

His first birthday party

On Friday evening they celebrated Serioja's tenth birthday with a party. It was his first party. Platt said he was most impressed with the clothes given to him for his birthday. He's never had any clothes to call his own before. When they went to Howard's Rexall on Friday to buy Serioja a wheelchair, the store's owners, Jim and Rob Witt wouldn't take any money for it. ³I'm feeling so honored to be a part of this community right now,² Platt said. ³On top of the hospital and the physicians donating their time and skills, we are really seeing an outpouring of concern. People who speak Russian are coming out of the woodwork to translate for us, all of the local clubs and people in the workplace are becoming wonderful new friends.² Marilyn Hylan, a MSAD 9 co-worker of Gazette's, was there to meet Serioja on Sunday. ³He's a very special boy. Amazing, really,² she said. ³It would be wonderful if he could stay here and didn't have to go back.² Those wishing to help Serioja can contact Jarad or Danny at 778-0609 or 506 New Vineyard Road, Farmington, ME 04938.