A Guide to Russian Adoption
Professional Counseling and Personal Insights

Alisa White Karwowski
For my husband Tim and for our children
John Sergei and Charles Vitalij—we
four are soulmates

With love and neverending gratitude to our family,
and to our friends, both at
home and in Russia

And especially for the hundreds of beautiful children awaiting families in the
many orphanages in Russia
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Photo essay follows chapter 5.
Preface

Hand the attendant your ticket. You have waited for what seems to be an eternity in the hot July sun to afford yourself the best seat. Strap yourself into the very first cart and outstretch your arms. You are about to embark on the most amazing rollercoaster ride you will ever experience, feeling each jerk and turn of the cart. *A Guide to Russian Adoption: Professional Counseling and Personal Insights* will thrill you; you will laugh, you will cry, you will want your next big adventure to be not at a theme park, but rather in one of the hundreds of orphanages in Russia.

You will live through each step of our two adoptions in St. Petersburg, Russia and beyond. You will learn, through the eyes of a soon-to-be mother, how successful international adoptions are completed. As you read, you will be given step-by-step instructions on how to complete a Russian adoption. I will break down the overwhelming process into manageable steps, and give you tips that I have learned throughout our two adoptions.

I will share with you two very different adoptions; two children coming from the same Baby House in St. Petersburg, Russia, to the same family in the United States. Our eldest son was fourteen months old when we adopted him and we adopted our younger son two weeks before his second birthday. Our experiences were very different from the start. I will explore the adoption of a younger baby as well as a toddler adoption, and address the many issues that are present with each.

Please know that there were 560 completely healthy orphans under the age of four available for adoption in the one city we visited during our time in Russia. The process of bringing one of these grand gifts into your family is very emotionally and financially difficult; a genuine *leap of faith* as many have said. As you read, please remember two things: First, our children are living proof that anyone really can make their dreams come true if they try hard enough and refuse to give up and, second, that those greatest risks in life will surely bring the greatest of all rewards.
Acknowledgments

This guide was written for prospective adoptive parents so that they can better navigate their way to their new child. If I am, even in a small way, responsible for helping a Russian orphan find a family, then all of the effort it took to create this book was worth it.

Please buy yourself a journal to record your thoughts in during your adoption. Writing your thoughts will be a useful way to keep track of important questions and feelings you have throughout your journey, and it will be another piece of the adoption process and your child’s beginning that you can share years later.

I wish to thank our family and friends for all of their love and support along the long road to our adoptions. I would like to especially thank Viktor, Arna, Alexsa, Natasha, Galina, Vika, and the New Hope Christian Services team for bringing our children to us.

To my copyeditor and now good friend, Janet Buell, this book would not be in my hands without your intelligent and creative mind. Thank you for believing in me and my purpose.

For my husband, Tim, who has been so supportive and is such a fun travel companion who always keeps the sense of adventure alive!

Most especially, to my sons, Jack and Charlie, may you both always hold the stories of your beginning contained in this book close to your hearts and may you find comfort in knowing how many people loved and cared for you while you were in Baby House #6.
CHAPTER 1

Making the Decision to Adopt

When a person or a couple is thinking about an adoption, there are usually many components that go into making such a big decision. One consideration is whether to adopt domestically or internationally. If the child is an international child, the adoptive parents have to grapple with the issues of race and ethnicity. How will they feel and how will the adoptee feel if they are of a different color or race? How will the child fit into the community?

If adopting internationally, adopting parents have to consider travel and expenses. They have to plan to be ready at any time to pay significant amounts of money with little notice. There is rarely more than one or two week’s notice before the prospective parents are expected to travel to Russia. What is the age and gender of the child you are hoping to adopt? Would you consider a sibling group?

I think it is important that the adopting couple not look at adoption as a last resort. Most adoptive parents have first tried to conceive a child biologically. There are those who have not, and have chosen to adopt one of the millions of children who are in need of a family. However, once a couple decides—for whatever reason—to adopt a child, they must be ready for the absolute adventure of their lives, one that will change their lives forever.

Adoption is most often a decision a person or a couple come to after they have go though some sort of infertility treatment(s). Most people who want children in their lives have a plan in life that does not include adoption. Even though adoption may be a “second choice” toward
parenthood, it can become your lifeline. For me, adoption was thought of after we went through only three infertility treatments. Although my doctor advised me to go to Boston for a more sophisticated approach to our infertility issues, we were more interested in considering an adoption.

When you begin considering if an adoption can work for you and your family, you will need to decide whether you would like to research a domestic or an international adoption. Domestic adoptions are generally less expensive and can provide you with an infant child. Many domestic adoptions can be either open or closed adoptions. Even though you may choose a closed adoption, there is a greater chance that the birth mother and/or biological family can locate their adopted family member.

Those who complete domestic adoptions do not have to deal with two countries, one being the United States and the other being the country in which the child is from. Many people are fearful of foreign travel and the expenses that accompany an international adoption. There was a definite sense of uncertainty that we felt especially when we were preparing for our first trip to Russia. The thought of cultural differences and a language barrier were intimidating.

We immediately decided we wanted to pursue an international adoption for few reasons. We feel that children without parents in this country are protected by what I believe as a whole is a fairly good foster care system. Children in other countries, such as in Russia, are living in orphanages with little access to appropriate healthcare and nutrition. Children residing in orphanages in Russia do not have the opportunity to be cared for and nurtured by a consistent caretaker.

We knew immediately that we wanted a closed adoption. We went to Russia to make our family; the fact that we are providing two children who lived in an orphanage a good life is a blessing. We have very little information to share with our children about their birth families. There are virtually no connections to their birth families. Russian adoptions are finalized in Russia. When you return home with your adopted child, he/she will fly on a Russian passport with their name that you have given them and the adoptive parents are listed as their parents. Once you enter the United States, the child will automatically receive their U.S. citizenship at the port of entry.

The paperwork chase and the length of time to complete your adoption are magnified when doing an international adoption. Much of the paperwork stage will depend on your own speed. If you are efficient with completing the home study and gathering the necessary paperwork, your adoption will likely move more quickly. The age and sex of the child you are seeking to adopt may also impact the timeline of your adoption.

Much of adoption is a leap of faith! If you can muster an open mind and a sense of adventure your journey toward your child will be much more relaxed and enjoyable and will provide you with happier memories
to share when your child is old enough to understand what you went through to bring them into your family.

I chose to begin this book with an interview I did with a student who was studying international adoption at Brown University. She recognized that there are many questions adoptive parents are faced with and there are many things other people wonder about when it comes to the issue of international adoption. Here are the interviewer’s questions followed by my responses:

1. **What were your reasons for considering adoption?**

   Infertility issues are present for both my husband and me. We both have low levels of those hormones most closely related to being able to conceive a child. After three months of artificial inseminations, there were no successful pregnancies. Feeling very frustrated and cheated, we took the advice of our physician and put further insemination on hold. I remember feeling so angry and wondering why two people who wanted nothing more than to be parents were having such a hard time conceiving. I then began thinking about adoption. I started feeling more and more like it was what we were supposed to do. I prepared myself to bridge the idea to my husband. Much to my delight, when I brought it up there was absolutely no hesitation on his part. He was thrilled with the idea and wanted to start looking into it right away. I think there was a sense of relief on his part. If we had a successful pregnancy it would have resulted in a baby that would have been created from a donor sperm, my egg, and carried in my womb. Through adoption it was in no way connected to one of us more than the other.

2. **Why did you ultimately choose to adopt from Russia?**

   First and foremost, we really feel as though those children in need of parents in this country are protected by our foster-care system. Children in other countries living in orphanages do not have the basic necessities for healthy living. Not only did we want one of these children, we wanted a child that looked like us. When we met our children, neither one of them had a diaper on. Their food was “milk-based product with oatmeal” in a bottle with a large hole in the tip of a makeshift nipple. The average life expectancy for a child living on the streets in a Russian city is thirty-two years.

   We do not think about adoption every day, just as I would imagine most mothers do not think about their pregnancies on a regular basis. Although we would love any child, I think having one who looks like he is your own is easier on the child. Recently, I was sitting at a table in the Olive Garden with my two boys; we were waiting for Tim to meet us. When Tim walked toward our table and was greeted by the boys, an elderly woman sitting next to us leaned in. She said, “My God, could I tell that was your husband. One child looks just like his mother and the other one looks just his father.” It felt good.

3. **In my research, I have uncovered various instances when families changed their child’s biological name to a more Americanized one. Was this something that you felt was important? Why or why not?**
My husband and I thought it was very important for our children to have the best of both worlds with regard to their names. We felt very strongly that the boys should keep their Russian given names. After all, they are Russian and we wanted to honor their birth names. We also wanted to give our children a family name especially since they are adopted. Jack’s given name was Sergei Sergeevich and we changed his name to John Sergei Karwowski. Charlie’s given name was Vitalij Sergeevich and we changed his name to Charles Vitalij Karwowski. Both John and Charles have a long family history on both my side and Tim’s side.

4. During the adoption process, was your child’s family history made available to you? If so, what has been your approach to educating your child about their heritage?

We have very little information on our boys’ biological families. We do know the name, age, medical history, passport number, and address in Russia of their birth mothers. We also have information on their place in the family with regard to birth order. Jack is the third and youngest child. His older brother (who is the second born) was adopted and lives here in New Hampshire. Charlie is an only child at this point. We have not yet, but certainly will tell Jack about his brother in the hopes that they can have a relationship later in life. If either birth mother has another child and decides to sign her rights away from the baby, we will be the first to be notified. As the parents of the older sibling to the baby we would then have to sign our rights away from the child before he or she would be eligible for adoption by another family.

5. How open are you with your child regarding their past?

Our children are still very young (five and six years old). They know their birth story and we learned through Jack recently telling us this story below how he understands it:

Once upon a time, there were two babies that were in Russia. One was me and the other one was you, Charlie. I was in a girl’s stomach, her name was Ludmila. Charlie you were in another girl’s stomach, Anna’s. Then we got born to the girls. The girls said, we can’t hold these babies; they belong to Tim and Alisa Karwowski. So they called and Mommy, you said, we’re on our way! And then you and Daddy flew in a big airplane over the oceans to come get us. And then, we all got to go on a big airplane to fly home.

6. Did you ever feel an obligation to educate yourself with regard to Russian culture and history? If so, at what point in this process did you feel the greatest urge to do this?

We absolutely feel it is our responsibility to learn more about Russian language and culture. We embraced the opportunity to explore the birth city of our children so that we could see it and learn about it. We traveled everywhere throughout St. Petersburg and took tons of pictures that we have shared with the boys. There is a lot of time (while there to adopt) spent in Russia when you are in the city without the child.
Learning more about their birthplaces was a very productive and rewarding way to pass the time while we had to be away from our child.

7. **Do you support the idea of your child revisiting Russia? Why or why not?**

   We all look forward to returning to Russia. Our plan is take the boys to St. Petersburg for their high school graduation gifts. We want them to be old enough to both feel comfortable and enjoy making the trip.

8. **If your child expressed the desire to find his or her biological parents, would you support him or her?**

   Unfortunately for our children, there would be virtually no way for them to find their birth parents. There is absolutely no information on their birth fathers. If there was a way for them in the future, we would support them in finding their birth family.

9. **Have there been any instances where you feel your child has benefited or been at a disadvantage from being from another country? To avoid confusion, I have read research that suggests that international adoption yields individuals with a greater sense of acceptance, understanding, and gratitude. Other research has suggested that they lack a sense of identity and belonging. What has been your personal experience with these kinds of issues?**

   Adoption isn’t all glamorous. There are hard times that all parents go through and some are more specific to adoption. We had issues surrounding attachment with our younger son. He was two weeks shy of his second birthday when we brought him home from Russia. Instead of feeling as though we were “saving” him from a life of destituteness, he made it clear to us that in his mind we were kidnapping him. He truly did grieve the loss of his caretakers, friends, language—his home. We worked for close to the first year he was home on forming healthy attachments to us.

   It is critical in the life of the adoptee as well as the lives of the family members that any and all emotional issues surrounding the adoption are dealt with as soon as they are identified. Once we were able to help him to form healthy attachments we no longer worried about that. Both of the boys have done amazingly well in school, with their sports, and with the development of age-appropriate behaviors.

   I have felt as though my children are at an advantage because of being adopted. I feel as though people by nature pay more attention to them and take exceptional pride in their growth and development. When they do something impressive with a sport someone in the crowd might say, “It’s that Russian blood.” Is it really, or is it that the boys are just very good at baseball?

   For me, personally, the journey began with feelings of why me? I was so angry and felt so cheated. All I wanted to do was to be a mother. Maybe it was that conviction that kept us pushing forward to our adoption days. Adoption has been our lifeline. We have been so blessed to have such amazing experiences with our children as well as with our friends in Russia. The question, “Why me?” still resonates within me. But now its meaning could not be further from what it was three and a half years ago. Now it is a curiosity of unexplained, undeniable privilege.
Recent statistics on children who were born outside of the United States and were adopted by an American couple are calculated by the number of immigrant visas issued to newly adopted children. You can find the most up-to-date information on those calculations in the table below.

Table 1.1
Immigrant Visas Issued to Orphans Coming to the U.S.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>IR3</th>
<th>IR4</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>China-mainland</td>
<td>4,981</td>
<td>472</td>
<td>5,453</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guatemala</td>
<td>2,812</td>
<td>1,916</td>
<td>4,728</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Russia</td>
<td>2,305</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2,310</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethiopia</td>
<td>119</td>
<td>1,136</td>
<td>1,255</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Korea</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>936</td>
<td>939</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vietnam</td>
<td>783</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>828</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ukraine</td>
<td>606</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>606</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kazakhstan</td>
<td>540</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>540</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>India</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>372</td>
<td>416</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liberia</td>
<td>117</td>
<td>197</td>
<td>314</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colombia</td>
<td>310</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>310</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Philippines</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>223</td>
<td>265</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Haiti</td>
<td>112</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>190</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taiwan</td>
<td>127</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>184</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mexico</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poland</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thailand</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kyrgyzstan</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brazil</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uganda</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Yahoo groups have been an amazing resource for me and for other adopting parents. You can literally ask anything you are curious about and you will get honest answers from those who have had the same questions you may have. You can invite other subscribers to contact you via a private e-mail if you have a personal question that may be sensitive for you or for someone else on the Listserv. You can certainly belong to one that is not in your home state. If your adoption agency is in another state you may consider becoming a member to the one in that area. This can prove most useful when you are in the beginning stages of your adoption and want feedback on an agency you are considering.

There are so many testimonials from so many different families, each with their own expectations in mind. This forum is probably the only objective way to read feedback on all adoption agencies. One
thing you **MUST** do is confirm that the agency you ultimately choose is accredited in Russia and that the accreditation will not be expiring within a year from when you begin the adoption process. It is not recommended to attempt an independent adoption, if there is even such a thing anymore. Multiple delays have occurred when families are not represented by an agency, which has led to people being mandated to stay in Russia for months attempting to finalize their adoption. The chances of adoption fraud increase as no one is ensuring the credibility of your referral. To find a group in your area visit www.yahoo.groups online.

I cannot possibly stress enough the importance of using an accredited agency when completing your Russian adoption. Below is a list of agencies in the United States working with Russia taken from U.S. Department of State Web (http://moscow.usembassy.gov/adoptions05.html).

**ADOPTION AGENCIES ACCREDITED WITH THE MINISTRY OF EDUCATION AND SCIENCE OF THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION AS OF APRIL 7, 2008:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1. ABC Adoption Services, Inc.</th>
<th>21. Frank Adoption Center</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3. Adoption Associates, Inc.</td>
<td>23. Gift of Life Adoption Services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Adoption Center of Washington</td>
<td>24. Gladney Center for Adoption</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Adoptions Together, Inc.</td>
<td>25. Global Adoption Services, Inc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Alaska International Adoption Agency</td>
<td>26. Hand in Hand</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Alliance for Children</td>
<td>27. Happy Families International Center</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Beacon House Adoption Services, Inc.</td>
<td>28. Homestudies and Adoption Placement Services, Inc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Buckner Adoption and Maternity Services, Inc.</td>
<td>29. International Assistance Group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Children’s Hope International</td>
<td>32. Maine Adoption Placement Services (MAPS)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17. Creative Adoptions, Inc.</td>
<td>37. World Association for Children and Parents (WACAP)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18. DOVE Adoptions International, Inc.</td>
<td>38. World Child International</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19. European Adoption Consultants</td>
<td>39. Wyoming Children’s Society</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20. Families Thru International Adoption</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
We used New Hope Christian Services to complete both of our adoptions and would use them again. They have been recently reaccredited in Russia. The brochure they use follows, and provides a brief overview of the adoption process.

NEW HOPE CHRISTIAN SERVICES

This is just a quick overview of the Russian adoption program. We are sure you have questions, and we invite you to contact us. E-mail is the most efficient means of communication (to avoid telephone tag), and we aim to answer all e-mails within 12–24 hours of receipt. You will find that we answer most e-mails within several hours at most.

Please contact us for more information on our program. We look forward to working with you on your Russian adoption.

The Process

Document Preparation

The document requirements for a Russian adoption can seem daunting to parents, but we walk you through the process. Your home study agency needs to follow a very precise format required by the court. We have copies of all documents and sample documents for your home study agency and for you. If you are not using NHCS as your home study agency, we strongly suggest that your home study agency contact us for the documents required from the agency; the sooner they have these requirements, the easier it will be for them to complete your home study.

The Referral

All referrals are given by the Committee on Employment and Social Security of the People according to the request of the parents. Often little or no information is given to parents before they travel to Russia. The purpose of the first trip to Russia is to receive the official referral from the committee, meet the child, review the child's medical and social file, obtain any information on the child’s history which is available, and to make a decision on accepting the child. All children can be seen by an independent pediatrician in Russia during your first trip. Parents receive a written medical report after the blood test results are available.

The Court

The second trip (usually follows within 4-8 weeks of the first; both parents are required to appear in court) is the court trip which finalizes the adoption. Parents appear before the judge who reviews the case and
approves the adoption. Russian law requires 10 days for any court decree to be finalized; judges can waive the 10 day waiting period. Upon completion of the adoption documents in the city of the adoption, parents travel to Moscow to the American Embassy to receive the child’s visa to the US.

Who Will Be with You in Russia

The Russian team will meet parents at the airport, transfer parents to their hotel, and they will take you through the entire adoption process. A translator will be with you at the Committee, at the orphanage, the court and at any official offices that are visited. The team ensures your transfer from your hotel to your travel to Moscow. You can have one member of the team guide you through the Moscow portion of the trip (visit to the medical clinic as required by the U.S. Embassy and to the Embassy for the interview and then the pick up of the visa.)

Be ready for a child with developmental, speech and other delays. Most of these are resolved with time, love, nutrition, good medical care and support services available in most communities. We can provide you with a list of parents who have volunteered to be references for our adoption program.

The Cost

Although adoption in Russia for Russian citizens is free, there are costs involved in international adoption, including, but not limited to, document preparation and submission costs, mailing costs, translation, notarization and legalization of all documents in Russia, administrative costs, on-site translation in Russia for adoption, driver and car in the city of adoption, salaries of team members in Russia, translation services, orphanage aid, aid to needy families, filing fees, court fees, legalization of child’s documents for the U.S. Embassy, etc.

We aim to keep the costs of the adoption process as accessible to as many parents as possible. Our fees (provided upon request) include all costs; there are no “hidden costs” along the way. Parents are responsible for their own document preparation costs (copies, notaries, apostilles, and the like in the U.S.), travel to Russia, travel to Moscow to the U.S. Embassy to obtain a visa for the child to enter the U.S., U.S. Embassy fees, driver/car in Moscow only. Fees are reduced for handicapped children, siblings and adoption of more than one child at the same time.

Requirements

We work with parents of all ages, single women and married couples, all religious persuasions. Russian adoption officials require that there be no
more than 47 years between the age of the youngest parent and the adopted child.

New Hope Christian Services
P. O. Box 310
Rumney, NH 03266
Russian Adoption Program

About Us

We have been working in Russian adoption for more than 13 years, and we have completed over 200 adoptions in Russia. New Hope Christian Services has been accredited in Russia, since the process of accreditation was instituted. We work as a team with your home study agency, your adoption agency (if these are different) and the NHCS team in Russia to help you navigate the road of your Russian adoption. We are all dedicated to adoption work and helping children find families and families find children. Our entire team consists of dedicated adoption professionals, all with advanced degrees beyond a bachelor’s, and our Russian Program Director has herself adopted two children from St. Petersburg. We all work with you from the beginning steps of document preparation, through support while you travel to Russia (2 trips) and through the court process and the start of your life with your child. Our goal is to give you personal attention and to keep you informed of any changes in the adoption process.

Our Programs

New Hope Christian Services works in 3 cities in Russia: St Petersburg, Orenburg, and Perm directly, and we have a cooperative agreement with another accredited agency for programs in Pskov, Smolensk, and Stavropol. Our main office in Russia is in St. Petersburg, and our team in that city has been working with us since the start in 1991. NHCS facilitators in other cities work closely with our Head Representative in St. Petersburg.

The Children

We place children ages 9 months and older; sibling groups are also available. Current waiting time varies depending on the sex, age and medical issues requested. (Waiting time for a young girl is significantly longer than for toddlers and boys.) We estimate that in most cases an adoption will be completed within one year (or less) of your completed document dossier being filed in Russia; many adoptions are completed within 6 months. Most parents want healthy children, and the children referred