

# Sderot Kids Enjoy a New England Summer

**Yulia Zhorov**  
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After 12 long hours of flight, a group of 19 Russian children from Sderot, ages 9 to 13, finally landed at the JFK airport in New York to spend a month away from the Kassam rockets that caused them constant fear. Masha Rifkin, a Cornell University student, who spent three months in Sderot getting to know the kids, was behind the unprecedented fundraising that took place in Boston and the North Shore to bring these children to America. “The children were surrounded by people who came to meet us at the airport, and their first words were, ‘There are a lot of them, and they all love us already,’” said Natasha, a social worker from Sderot who accompanied the group as a chaperone.

The children were driven in buses, organized by the Free Wind Travel Agency of Lynn for a reduced fee, from New York to Boston. Ten kids then went to spend the month of July at the Shaloh House Jewish Day School Summer Camp in Brighton, and nine were transported to the Russian School of Mathematics Camp in New Hampshire.

The children were excited about all the new experiences awaiting them.

Michelle Kroitin, who is almost 11, was excited about swimming in a lake for the first time in her life. Nadya Babayan, who is almost 13, couldn't believe it when she saw real squirrels and rabbits in the forest, and she said she hoped to meet a bear. Larissa Abramov, 9, was excited about dance, tennis and piano lessons. Maria Shochot, 10, still can't believe her eyes about how many shades of green there are at her camp.

Daily activities at the camps include swimming, dance, music, art, math classes, tennis and archery. At night, the youths gather around campfires to sing American, Russian and Israeli songs.

“When they came, they were afraid of almost anything. These are the children who spent the last six years under the threat of Kassam rocket attacks. It has become the reality of their everyday lives, and they don't really understand that it's not the way it should be,” said Inna Rifkin, director of the Russian School of Mathematics of Newton, which is hosting the children free of charge.

“There were a few ‘laughs through tears moments,’ such as when one girl saw an industrial sized walk-in refrigerator in our kitchen. She called to the other children, saying, ‘you see, they also have a bomb shelter’. They also jump from loud noises or voices coming from my counselors’ walkie-talkie devices,” said



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**Nineteen Russian children from Sderot, Israel, are spending a month this summer in New England, away from the danger of rockets. Above, nine kids enjoy their afternoon at the Russian School of Mathematics camp in New Hampshire. Sitting on the right in front is Masha Rifkin, who helped bring them to America.**

Rifkin.

From a distance, the children look like any other children. But when they walk through the open soccer field, they subconsciously hold hands or cling to their counselors or any other adults. When they start talking, it becomes evident that they are more mature than their Russian-American counterparts. They have an adult-like seriousness in their eyes, and are constantly alert to potential danger.

“It has been a great experience for our children, too. It was very important to our American kids to learn about how other children live, and re-evaluate their own values,” added Rifkin.

“When they tell their stories, chilling accounts of what they lived through, everybody listens, because no child should be robbed of simple, childhood pleasures like playing worry-free in a back yard, or concentrating on learning at school instead of thinking, ‘Will I make it in 15 seconds (the time they have from the moment of the Red Alert until the rocket hits the target) to safety?’” said Masha Rifkin, who is spending the summer helping her mother, Inna, run the camp and attend to the children of Sderot.

Masha Rifkin wanted to bring children from Sderot to America to tell their stories to other children and adults.

“Noam Bedein, the CEO of the Sderot Informational Center for the Western Negev Ltd., and I wrote a play, taking different scenarios based on actual stories I was writing down while living in Sderot. Children will act them out. It puts human faces on all the dry information that is available now about Sderot. It is very important to the chil-



Courtesy photo

**Valera Chodush of Sderot was given a surprise 13th birthday party at the New Hampshire camp where he is spending a month this summer. His friends lifted him on a chair and carried him around to celebrate his coming of age.**

dren to know that people are listening, and they are not alone. After years of feeling abandoned by their own government, it's a wonderful feeling for them to be known and recognized,” said Masha Rifkin.

The play will contain simple stories — like one about a beautifully decorated room, filled with toys, nice furniture and paintings, that the parents prepared for their two young daughters, but the girls never spent a night in it because it's on the second floor, and it's too dangerous. Or the story about Michelle, who lives 15 minutes from school, but takes about an hour to walk home because she chooses a route between bomb shelters and other places she can hide in case of a rocket attack. One story will be dedicated to the memory of a 14-year-old girl who died while covering her younger brother with her own body.

Rabbi Dan Rodkin, co-director of the Shaloh House Jewish Day School which is also housing Sderot children, said, “the kids

are adjusting very well — they're so well-behaved and interaction between Americans and Israelis is not a problem.” He was surprised at how dedicated these children are to Judaism and Israel.

“I admire their physical and psychological resilience. I thought that they may need some therapy or counseling, but these children, despite what they went through, are so strong and just simply wonderful,” said the rabbi.

*“The Children of Sderot” play will be performed twice, on July 25 at Temple B'nai Moshe, 1845 Commonwealth Ave., Brighton, and on July 26 at Congregation Ahabat Sholom, 151 Ocean St., Lynn. The play will be performed in Russian, with simultaneous English translation. Tickets are \$10 for adults, and \$5 for children under 16 and seniors. For information, call Maria at 781-631-0331. All proceeds will benefit the Children of Sderot Fund.*

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