

The TOS in Sweden recently chose the setting of a weekend seminar on the theme “Seeing with the Eyes of Spirit on the Path of Service” to celebrate the exceptional work over a long period of their National TOS Coordinator, Birgitta Stålhammar. A gift was presented to Birgitta in recognition of her 20 years of dedicated service to disadvantaged children in neighbouring Latvia, a country with close historic ties to Sweden.



Birgitta’s gift was chosen to symbolise her brightness of spirit and openhearted nature.

When Latvia gained its independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, the situation of neglected and abandoned children was catastrophic, especially the orphaned children of the greatly resented former occupiers. Over the years, Birgitta and her principal helper Kickan Håkanson (in charge of sister organisation Letthjälpen) spearheaded the collection and transport of literally tons of reconstruction material, furniture, household and hygienic supplies, clothing, toys and sports gear to various institutions for children all around the country, fully half of the children Russian.



Birgitta and Kickan driving to Latvia



Birgitta’s husband Jan preparing another load



Over two decades, countless trips were made to Latvia until the government could afford to improve its social services.



In some of the institutions visited, boys were found sitting around with absolutely nothing to do. No wonder they had behavioural problems!



The TOS and its sister organisation Letthjälpen provided equipment for indoor activities and outdoor sport. Swedish companies were found to donate the material.



For Birgitta's 75th birthday, she requested friends and relatives not to give her presents but to support the TOS work in Latvia. Everyone responded so amazingly generously that it was possible to pay for a greenhouse at a Care Centre for teenagers in order for them to learn care for vegetables. It was even possible to pay for the materials for another greenhouse at a home for boys with serious behavioural problems (including alcoholism at a very young age). The lads took pleasure in constructing the greenhouse themselves.

Even 20 years ago the government had a policy of giving flats to orphans leaving their institutions to embark on adult lives, but these flats were often bare of all furniture and household goods and sometimes even had no glass in the windows! The young people were totally unprepared for their independence so in addition to material help Birgitta's team supported them in acquiring domestic and social skills and helped in their search for further education and vocational opportunities. Swedish families were found to 'adopt' them, give them moral support, bring them to Sweden for holidays, etc. The commitment had to be a long term one to ensure the successful integration of all these young people into society.

All through the years, Birgitta and the team have had the joy of collaborating with a splendid Latvian charitable organisation called Kopa ar Mums, meaning 'Together With Us'. Kopa ar Mums works with street children in the capital city of Riga and offers services for needy children in the countryside too.





Upon the death of Birgitta's husband and TOS volunteer, Jan, to honour him, instead of giving flowers, friends and relatives contributed very generously to the purchase of a little boat (with life vests, oars and even a small outboard motor) for the pleasure of the boarding school of boys living close to a lake. Money was even left over for additional purchases.



The launching of the boat named JAN was a formal affair with social welfare officials coming from the country's capital of Riga and even a local Catholic priest to bless the boat with holy water and prayers.

Birgitta can look back on many years of joy in working with the children of Latvia.





Now that the situation in Latvia has improved significantly, the Swedish TOS is winding down its work there and has chosen to turn its attention toward the educational work of the UK registered charity, Mango Tree Goa, in the slums of Goa, India. The TOS has been renamed by an eager student☺!