

## **FAMILY PORTRAIT IN BLACK & WHITE**

Olga has 27 children. Four of them, now adults, are her biological children; for the other 23 she has been an adoptive or foster mother for as long as they can remember. Of those twenty three, sixteen are bi-racial. She calls them “my chocolates”, and raises them to be patriotic Ukrainians. Some residents of Sumy, Ukraine, consider Olga a saint - but many believe she is just crazy. Inherited from the Soviet era, there is a stigma in the country against interracial relationships, and against children born as “consequences” of such romantic encounters between Ukrainian girls and students from Africa, who come to Ukraine to study. The destiny of hundreds of bi-racial children is tragic - unwanted and doomed to grow up as orphans. Hence, for over a decade, Olga has been literally picking up the black babies left in Ukrainian orphanages. This was Olga’s idea – to raise many mixed-race children together so that they could support and protect one another.

The lesson the kids learn very early is “life is not fair”. Is Olga always fair to them? By no means! Olga is not Mother Teresa; she bears much more resemblance to a wartime commander or a platoon leader. She loves most of her children but can barely stand a few. By now, most of Olga’s children are teenagers, with different personalities, interests and strengths. Some kids have learned to manipulate her, some obey, and only one constantly battles with her. Kiril, a 16-year-old boy nicknamed “Obama” for his intelligence, work ethic, and effortless aristocracy, is the one who dares to openly argue with Olga. Roman never argues, but stubbornly breaks the rules, if anything stands in the way of his true passion – soccer. Sashka, one of Olga’s favorites, is a charming candidate for a school drop out and the leader of local rebels. Andrey is a quick-tempered boy who has been sent by the authorities to a boarding school for troubled children. Sylvia is a beautiful, shy, obedient girl, who plays violin and whose parents were both students from Egypt. Sylvia is lucky to have at least some information about her parents – most of Olga’s children, who were left at the orphanages at birth, don’t even know the first name of their birth mother or father.

It’s hard to imagine what it is like to be a visible minority in Ukrainian society. We interviewed African students at local medical school who gave us first hand accounts of racism they have to deal with. Being spat at on the street or called names is a daily occurrence which you learn to ignore. Physical abuse is much harder to disregard. The interviews with Neo Nazis in Ukraine reveal the real dangers for a dark skin individual in the street. These white supremacist youth joke about their evening raids and how police seemingly lets them do it, unless they actually murder someone and then the criminal proceedings begin. But the prosecutors are not very determined to give strict sentences to racially motivated crimes and you can get away with probation for beating someone nearly to death.

The modern world is interconnected: not only did the British Charity buy the house for the family, but these kids from this tiny place in Ukraine have been spending summers with host families in France and Italy year after year. Many European families choose to help Ukrainian and Belarusian disadvantaged kids since the time of Chernobyl disaster by inviting them to stay during their summers and Christmas. Olga’s kids speak different languages and older girls chat in fluent Italian with each other even while cooking a vat of borscht.

What is also interesting is whether these host families ever wanted to adopt Olga's foster children but faced Olga's resentment. Though Olga has arranged the summer stays for her kids in Europe, she doesn't believe in international adoption and have refused to sign the adoption consent papers. Like many Ukrainians, she believes the Westerners might adopt children just to use them for their organs.

On the other hand, Olga is literally sacrificing her life to raise her children. Olga has no social worker who would take over for even one hour per week, no psychologist to deal with the issues many of her children have and no tutor to help them with homework. Ukrainian authorities provide Olga with a tiny fraction of what the government gives to orphanages per child. In fact, because the house was bought for Olga by a British charity "Hope and Homes for Children", local authorities refuse to spend a penny on fixing the heating system, or building an in-house toilet, or bringing hot water into the house. Instead, they send Child Welfare Inspectors. The inspectors walk through the house with boredom written all over their faces and demand better conditions to be provided to the foster children by Olga. It's an Orwellian picture - an absurd injustice where bureaucrats don't help the family and blame Olga for all shortcomings. The local authorities threaten to "downsize" her family - to send half of the children who have been with her for 10-14 years to orphanages. If that ever happens, no one will consult with the children - orphans have no say in any decision that permanently affects their lives. The chilling consequences of a pending separation from Olga and each other become clear, when Olga travels far to visit her troubled foster child Andrey, placed at a boarding school for special-needs children. We've filmed it all: from Andrey's immense joy at his mother's arrival to this perfect prison - to their tragic separation. We hope none of Olga's children will ever be taken away.

"At least when the kids grow up, they'll have a mother to blame for all the failures that will happen in their lives". In many ways, Olga's words sum up the immense value of living with a Mother (ideal or not, biological or adoptive) versus being raised in the best of orphanages; there, a child calls every caregiver "a mom", and might have twenty moms without knowing what a real MOTHER is.