

Confessions of a Volunteer: The Task of Special Importance – “Back to the Knacker’s Yard” – Given to Tamashevky by Reentovich Completed!

This is a story telling why we (i.e. volunteers taking care of dogs) decided to leave... Or, to be more exact, how we were made to leave. Little by little, bit by bit...

It should be mentioned straight away that we did realize what our municipal temporary shelter for animals was like. We were fully aware of the fact it was not an ASYLUM. The irony is that it is they (not us) who advertised the temporary shelter as an asylum – both in printed media and on TV. It is they (not us) who claimed that only sick animals were euthanized, not animals exceeding the period fixed for keeping them at the shelter. It is they (not us) who told everyone that the cats and dogs were well cared for. We did realize that animal catchers were the main figures there, we were ready to follow the rules set at the temporary shelter (both internal laws of labor conduct and rules of communicating with the world outside), we did realize we would have to put up with our charges’ being euthanized, we were ready to “wash dirty linen at home” (anything might happen, and we were not going to disclose any conflicts to the public), we were ready to peacefully negotiate and resolve any problems and disputes arising, and so on, and so forth...

What we did not expect was that not a single arrangement would work out, that rules of our stay there would change literally several times a day, that volunteers would be taken off the list (either by mistake or just for nothing) without any warning, that our suggestions and requests would be complied with “the other way round”, that we would find ourselves in a dirty, damp, unlit basement, flooded regularly, where things rot away even in summer, that volunteers would not be allowed to sterilize the animals at their own expense, that candidates for euthanasia would not be named to us, that the prices would go THAT high after June 1, that visitors would simply not be able to buy the animals out, and finally, that the lawyers employed by the organization would work out a set of rules for volunteers taking care of dogs, where one can read in black and white that a volunteer CANNOT open the cages and take care of the dogs in the absence of the temporary shelter’s employees (how could one speak of adapting animals under such conditions???), that the time for walking the dogs is limited to one hour and a half, and this time is scheduled to the minute, that one cannot feed the dogs (you cannot even give clear meat soup to the dogs that have undergone surgery), that one cannot provide the dogs with anthelmintic treatment, even vitamins... However endless this list of limitations may seem, it ended up with the following phrase – in case of violating the above mentioned rules a volunteer will be taken off the list without the right of restoration (it seemed that if you made one false step, they would shoot on sight!!!).

Here is the whole story, all events in succession.

A.V. Tamashevsky, who was appointed as Director of the temporary shelter, had no idea what living beings are like. He was employed to launch the infamous “capture – disposal” system. When the sterilization room was shown to him he was indignant – “What? Maybe they should also do the dogs’ nails here? I’ll sort things out.” Well, he just seemed to have no idea what sterilization meant, neither did he know that the housing authorities had publicly announced a sterilization programme that they were so proud of.

He limited the number of volunteers taking care of the dogs to just 19. The renowned dog specialist Stepanova was not included. Not once did we ask him to add her to the list, as she is an expert in potentially dangerous breeds. We were not allowed to. His argument was as follows – she was once bitten by a dog.

And so it all started – first they allowed us to walk the dogs, then they prohibited it; one day we were allowed to walk only sterilized dogs, then, another day, we were also allowed to walk the dogs handed over to the shelter by citizens, yet on the next day we were allowed to walk all the dogs, afterwards, only the dogs caged in the same row. Apart from this, the instructions could change several times a day. On your way to the temporary shelter you could never guess what the future had in store for you. We went to see the Director every day. Irina Prykhodko and me submitted a letter explaining why walking the dogs was absolutely necessary, why it was necessary for the volunteers to adapt and rehabilitate the dogs after they had been trapped by the catchers. In no more than an hour we were taken off the list. Only after we had reclaimed the letter were our names restored on the list. Later, when a Deputy Director responsible for animal protection (!!!) was appointed, the time for walking the dogs was limited (to 1,5 hours) and a strict time-frame was worked out. Firstly, this period of time is too small even for walking the dogs, to say nothing about trying to adapt them (beyond these time limits all contacts with the dogs were prohibited), secondly, the time-frame did not always suit us, as all of us work and have families. Following a series of requests about changing the time-frame for walking each dog etc. the period for walking the dogs was increased by half an hour. Not for a long time though. One of us made another mistake, as they thought, and the time-frame was again set to 1,5 hours. Needless to say, without warning us.

In general, rules changed without any notification. For example, a “cleaning day” was introduced. On the door there was a note saying that no visitors or volunteers were allowed that day. The volunteers came, but they were not let inside. We begged them to let us in, asking them to let at least two volunteers go inside to take care of the sterilized dogs. The Director allowed us to do so. On a “cleaning day” in August two volunteers, including me, came to attend to the dogs. We came in, changed our clothes and went out to walk the dogs. Suddenly, we saw the Administrator running towards us and shouting that we were to leave the temporary shelter immediately – Animal Protection Deputy Director **I.V. Kupich** was in a rage. On seeing him I observed that there had been an agreement, to which he responded – “It’s none of my business. Can’t you read what is written there?” At a loss, we went to see Director **A.V. Tamashevsky**. The latter admitted that, indeed, there had been an agreement with him personally, but now the Deputy Director was administering things, thus it was up to him to decide. I enquired why they had not warned us. To take care of the dogs, we had to ask for a couple of hours off work. The Deputy Director’s indignation knew no bounds – how dare we try to contradict!!! It took us a lot of time and effort to beg him to let us stay at the shelter for some time.

The same obstacles were met when it came to sterilization – one day it was allowed, and requisite papers were signed, the next day it was prohibited again, with changes taking place within one day. Such was a typical situation – we got a permission to sterilize a dog, made an appointment with the vet, hired a car, found an accompanying person, and just as we came to fetch the dog – here we go again. NOT ALLOWED. Over and over again, we had to beg, explain, find reasons – to finally rush the dogs to the vet. One day they allowed us to pin special notes – “Preparing for sterilization”, the next day we would come to the temporary shelter to find our notes thrown away, and heaven knows when those dogs had received

anthelmintic treatment, when they had had an injection of “Giskan” serum... After June 1 sterilization at the volunteers’ expense was banned altogether. It was announced that sterilization and treatment would be carried out at the organization’s expense. Mirabel and Karina are the two examples illustrating what consequences such sterilization could have, and, most important of all, what consequences post-operational treatment delivered by the organization’s “renowned” vet could lead to.

We were transferred to the worst imaginable, dirty, unbearably wet basement, practically never lit (the electric bulb burnt out regularly, we had to replace it by ourselves). Nevertheless, we were reprimanded for the mess. In response to my observation that it was not possible to clear up the mess due to the absence of light they said they would fix it. Of course, they never did. After the flooding, when water filled the basement for three days, all the things we kept there, including vitamins, dog-leashes etc. became useless.

We were constantly on tenterhooks, followed by an unfaltering gaze every minute. A good volunteer was shouted at by Animal Care (!!!) Supervisor **Natalia Malashkevich** just because one dog could not wait till the scheduled “walking hours” and had to “go to the bathroom” inside. At that time, we still had to drag the dogs through the porch. Not once did we ask to open the side door which was closer to the fenced area for walking. The volunteer was told in a fit of anger that the Director was right, and as long as the volunteers were at the temporary shelter there would always be a mess (!!).

Then Director **A.V. Tamashevsky** said that he was sick and tired, people coming to see him were a nuisance. **Natalia Plotnikova** came on stage and said she was ready to negotiate. We were glad there would be a person speaking on our behalf. She declared (both – personally to us and publicly on her site) that they would treat animals at the temporary shelter “Fauna”. We should simply pin notes saying that a dog was being patronized and this dog would not be taken to the animal quarters for experimenting. We did so, and a couple of days later all the dogs with such notes were taken away to participate in experiments. They ignored the fact that we had vaccinated the dogs, provided them with anthelmintic and flea treatment, had given them vitamins. As regards the promise that the organization would treat the animals itself, M.S. Palchikova (the vet) asserted that this would never happen and there had been no agreement of the kind. We did not hope to get any assistance from Plotnikova anymore.

Not once did we come to the shelter to find the registration cards thrown away, with new ones containing no information inserted – no names, no sterilization date, no vaccination date. They said we were NOT ALLOWED to write anything. And they themselves did not keep any record. Again, we asked for a permission at least to put marks on the cards of those animals that had been sterilized. They did allow us to. We managed to restore the lost information, more or less so. Then it repeated all over again. Not once, not twice... They aspired to depersonalize things. And ignore us completely.

It had been agreed that they would tell us the candidates for euthanasia. They did so for some time. But one day we came to the shelter to find four dogs euthanized. They had done it without warning us. Worst of all, one of the dogs was about to be rescued from the shelter by our volunteer. The latter wanted to keep the dog as her own pet. We received no explanation. We were not treated like people there!!! After the incident, however, they did continue to inform us about the candidates for some time. Then they stopped again. The reason was that we posted on the site the list of 16 candidates for euthanasia, appealing to

the visitors to pay attention to the animals that were destined to die. Actually, it was a usual thing, we had been practicing it for quite a time and it had always been of great help (many animals had been rescued – taken for good, or at least temporarily, in order to find a new owner later). As Animal Care Supervisor **Natalia Malashkevich** and **Maria Palchikova** (the vet) explained to me indignantly, such practice was not allowed and from now on they would not tell us the candidates for euthanasia, or tell us the names at short notice, just one hour before the mentioned event. Our reasoning that it had been common practice, that it had helped greatly, that 14 animals out of 16 had been rescued, and that warning just one volunteer at short notice would not be of any use (little could be done within one hour) did not bring us anywhere. On that day, we were not informed about the candidates for euthanasia. One of the dogs, Tuzik, was cruelly killed on a Friday, before the weekend, despite the fact we had asked them to keep that very dog alive. I stood before **Maria Palchikova** (the vet) for 5 minutes, begging her to tell me the names, and (as I had a suspicion that Tuzik was among the candidates) I offered her to exchange Tuzik for another dog, sick and untamed, to which I got the following answer – “I won’t tell you anything. Get out of my room and don’t interfere with my work”. Later they started to tell us the names again. On September 4 it was announced that they would not do it anymore, and this time it was definitive.

Expelling volunteers. First they expelled Pisanets who dared to write a letter of complaint about a dog that had been killed despite the fact that new owners had been found for it. She also mentioned, that at the weekend the medical assistant had no T-61 at hand and thus there was no opportunity to put a suffering animal to sleep for two days. After an unpleasant talk she was kindly allowed (!!) to visit the shelter. But then, six more volunteers were expelled. It all happened like that, by the way. No warnings as regards when and why. You just came, and they took you off the list. No explanations were offered, as if we were not human beings. One volunteer was expelled for (presumably) having posted something on the site; another volunteer was expelled for (presumably) giving advice to the visitors, one of whom wrote a letter complaining about the lack of volunteers; a third volunteer was expelled for (presumably) participating in a TV interview (no one cared that the episode was filmed near “Fauna” at the time when the girl was far away from Minsk, at her own wedding); two volunteers (Sakerina and Palash) were expelled for having written a question in the “Recommendations and Concerns” book – How did they calculate the prices that appeared after June 1?; another one, Zhavrid, was expelled for having told a journalist that there were sick puppies at “Fauna”. After numerous visits and long conversations three volunteers were put on the list again (one of the volunteers burst into tears during one of such visits). Sakerina, Palash and Zhavrid were never allowed to return, though.

And now some words about the infamous vet **Palchikova!!**

The “young ones” could not stand it anymore. Gradually, they started opting out. Some of them had left once and for all. For two months (maybe even two months and a half) I paid regular visits to the Director, Supervisor **Natalia Malashkevich**, Deputy Director **I.V. Kupich**, asking them to replace those volunteers that had quit with new ones. I paid them visits every Wednesday, sometimes I even paid two visits a week. They either sent me off or fixed an appointment on another day, later the same week or the next week. Then, what did I see on the organization’s official site? A complete list of volunteers, including the three former volunteers that had left for good. I wrote an official enquiry (a registered one) asking them to sort things out. What did I get as a reply? These three names will be taken off the list, no new names will be added.

In view of the new rules of animal care, bearing in mind the fact that we will not be informed about the candidates for euthanasia, and taking into account the consequences of sterilization in case it is carried out by the organization itself, one may arrive at a logical conclusion that our presence at the temporary shelter has become useless. Let alone our working environment.

As I see it, this is what will happen to the dogs in the absence of volunteers. NO ONE will tame and adapt the dogs, no one will walk the dogs, and they will not even have dog-leashes (it is us who used to buy the leashes for our charges), and a third of all the dogs will not even have their sex identified correctly (Well, to tell the truth, this has always been the case. The volunteers simply used to correct the wrong information...). There will be no photos taken, no ads placed. It is us who used to take pictures of the dogs and advertize them. There will be no information about the dogs' age and peculiarities of the character. The snippets posted on the organization's site cannot count as sufficient information, e.g. "colour – white, age – two-eight years, peculiarities – trapped by catchers service"!!! **A.V. Tamashevsky's** cherished dream – "capture and disposal" of animals – will come true. They will continue to kill animals, first diagnosing an illness anyway, in order to be able to say that they euthanize only sick animals and their killing healthy animals is just our fancy.

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