



## Women behind the Wire

by Sarah Daniels

Alexandrine and Virginia are both young mothers who share an apartment. Unlike other mothers, they cannot meet up at the park or take a stroll with their babies in the pram, as both of them are locked up inside Villawood Detention Centre, without their sons.

Alexandrine, 29, fled Russia fearing for her life. Describing frightening and terrible events in Vladivostok where she was living, she claims to have witnessed a murder in a nightclub there, and subsequently was raped on a number of occasions by the security guards and the local police. She left Russia on a false passport, arriving in Australia in 1997.

Her appeal for political asylum has been refused and in May 2002, while in her local RTA office to pay a parking fine, she was taken away in handcuffs by two Immigration Officers, while her five-month-old son Andrew sat screaming as he watched his mother being dragged off.

“I was standing in a queue. They told me to sit down... I waited five minutes and then two men come and handcuffed me, they grabbed my son from me. They ring the father and take him from me. At that time I was still breast-feeding my son.”

Though Alexandrine had not seen the father for over twelve months and there was no con-

tact with the baby, he has been granted full custodial rights. “His father, Sam was not there for my son, I am the only one who wanted my baby from the beginning.”

Alexandrine has been detained at Villawood, since 24 May 2002, and access to her son depends solely on her ex-partner. “Sometimes he comes, sometimes he doesn’t. I wasn’t seeing Andrew for three weeks, he (the father) was doing it to hurt me”.

The NSW Family Court order has ruled that she can see her son three days a week within the confines of Villawood visiting area. Her requests for overnight access with her son have been refused.

Mark is dropped at the palisade fence while a security guard unlocks the gate, and is handed the baby. The guard carries the baby through the metal cages, and to his mother waiting at the other side. The sight is both pitiful and heartbreaking.

Since her detention, baby Mark has developed acute eczema. He has a very low resistance to allergies and is prone to infections. She believes that his condition has deteriorated both mentally and physically since their separation.

“All throughout the time Mark came to me for visits I have seen his eczema become worse. I kept telling his father to take my son to the doctor, but he just ignores me always. That’s very frustrating for me because by the law, I cannot show my baby to the doctor here in Villawood because

he is not a detainee and the doctors here refuse to examine my son”.

Dr Sandy Whitehouse, a paediatric specialist has expressed concerns regarding the responsibility of care of the child. “Alexandrine requested that I examine Mark as he had a rash and it was getting worse”. She had discovered the rash was the herpes simplex virus, diagnosed at Westmead Children’s Hospital and the cream she was given to use, a steroid cream. “Mark has eczema and a steroid cream is suitable for eczema but is absolutely contraindicated in a herpetic condition.” Consequently, his body was covered in painful red sores.

Dr Whitehouse pursued the issue to get appropriate care for the baby, but was shocked to find that Alexandrine has no access to medical care for her son and no access to an advocate for him.

During the handover process when the father arrives to pick him up there is no discussion regarding daily management, his development, diet or health care needs, and no social worker or advocate has been elected for either Mark or Alexandrine.

On 10 October 2002 Justice Chisholm ruled that no order should be made” that would lead the child returning to Russia with the mother. The mother’s evidence about the reasons that she fears for her life in Russia makes this an obvious conclusion”. In other words, Russia is deemed too dangerous for her son to return there with her, but not dangerous enough for Alexandrine to be granted



temporary protection status here in Australia.

Alexandrine's time is running out. Her appeal to the Minister for Immigration, Philip Ruddock, has been denied. She has been contacted by Immigration who told her that she would be deported. Meanwhile, she has not seen Mark for over a week. His father has broken the agreement with both her and the courts to bring Andrew to the detention centre three days a week. She stands at the fence each day unsure of whether or not she will see her son again.

Virginia, 28, has not seen her four-year-old son for over two years; like Mark, he is also an Australian citizen. She was arrested while leaving Australia with false papers, two months pregnant. Her son lives with her ex-husband and he has refused Virginia any contact. Both Alexandrine and Virginia have no legal rights to their sons and contact remains limited if at all. There is no social worker or advocate for either of these women or their children.

Like all pregnant women that are detained in Villawood, Virginia was driven to a nearby hospital giving birth to her baby daughter Naomi, alone, with only two ACM guards beside her.

"My life in here is hard, really hard, I did not plan it this way at all, I was leaving Australia to start a new life again, I wanted to get my son back and be as far away as I can from my ex husband."

Both of these women's situations are desperate and the conditions under which they are living can only be described as horrendous.

Juni Ong the initial founder of Children Out Of Detention

(ChilOut) has commented on the situation: "I am aghast at the hypocrisy of our leaders. Australia, over many years, has often preached to the third world and developing nations about their human rights record, but I had never looked at human rights in terms of Australia. I had a very rude awakening when I realised that mandatory detention was a human rights issue, and more importantly, it is a children's human rights issue, which is even worse in my opinion".

"To me it is like a creeping cancer where human rights are concerned. It is the final domain; it is the last frontier of an evolving society that then has earned the right to call itself progressive and civilised. Human rights are hard fought for and hard won, and it can be lost in the blink of an eye. Which I believe is where we have arrived. Everything else comes to nought if we turn our back on human rights, especially children's human rights."

Both the United Nations Human Rights Committee and the Australian Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, have condemned Australia's detention centres, likening them to overnight police lock-ups rather than places suitable for the lengthy detention of people who have committed no crime.

As the University of New South Wales Centre for Refugee Research and the Australian National Committee on Refugee Women stated, "Effective parenting cannot occur in an environment where family and parent-child routines such as setting bedtime, normal family mealtimes, and family outings are

not possible, and where parents' ability to provide a safe and supportive environment critical to children's development is removed".

"Parents report feeling a lack of control over everyday situations. Even the child's food is prepared by strangers: this erodes family structure when traditional patterns of food preparation, eating and parental role modelling are replaced by the life of the institution."

Australia contravenes almost every article of the UN conventions on children and both Alexandrine and Virginia are the human face of this harsh policy, with their children 'forcibly removed' and neither one sure of when they will next see their sons. Alexandrine's words are full of emotion as she describes her situation; "I feel like I am dead. It is like I am killed but I am alive somehow. I just hope one day that I can hold my son again and be with him.

I love my son and want to hold him so much".

Virginia told me;" It is very hard to explain to you how I feel. Which way can I tell you how I feel - he is alive my son, and I cannot see him. Only I can see the life ahead for me without him, hard, very hard. I am angry and tired, this feeling really makes me hate myself".

As Julian Burnside QC has commented, "In twenty years' time our children or grandchildren will ask, what did you do to try and change this? Those without an answer will show themselves to be complicit in the great crime of Australia in the twenty-first century". ■