

Grozny's Vulnerable Thrown Together

Author: [Asya Ramazanova](#)

War damage has forced mentally ill, disabled and elderly residents of the capital to share a ramshackle care home.

A group of old ladies chats in the garden and near them an old man in an embroidered skull cap leans on a crutch, lost in thought. Someone goes by in a wheelchair; two other people limp past on crutches. A woman of about 40, with short hair, is mentally ill: she hasn't been able to talk since she was young, and behaves like a child.

These are residents of the only functioning home for the elderly and disabled in Chechnya.

"You can't imagine what I have been through," said 82-year-old Lilia Aksyonova in tears. "During the war my house caught fire twice, and both times the fires were put out. I spent the whole of the war in cellars. My possessions were thrown out of the house three times."

"I have been very lucky in life - I have known lots of good people.... I wasn't raped like the other old women who lived near my flat," she added, covering her face.

Aksyonova fled to Chechnya to escape the Azerbaijani-Armenian conflict. After living through the Chechen wars, she has for the last year been staying at the home. "I was a wreck when I came here - I had experienced terrible stress," said the short, hunched, thin old lady who has a dark complexion and a wrinkled face.

Disturbed by the way people of different ages and problems are thrown together in the home, Aksyonova says she has remained there "only thanks to Zina" (senior nurse Zainap Tavgireyeva who has worked there since the 1980s). "In the next door ward they use very bad swear words, they get their pensions and spend it on vodka. This is a truly hard, frightening place to be," she went on.

"Many of the people here don't like me, they are jealous of my gold teeth," she added in a whisper, before dissolving into laughter.

Surrounded by half-destroyed buildings, the Grozny old people's home, which is itself badly damaged, is located on the outskirts of the city close to the village of Katayama. It currently houses 79 residents, including elderly, mentally disabled and homeless people.

"They are all together, even though they shouldn't be," said Tavgireyeva, who hopes that some of the residents with mental problems will be transferred to a new home in the town of Shali, as soon as it is finished.

The Grozny home was opened in 1965 but the first Chechens began to live there only in the 1990s when conflict overwhelmed Chechnya.

Twelve-year-old Abubakar Abdullayev, one of the permanent residents, shares a room with three other

residents many years older than him. "My mother and I live here, she is seriously disabled," he said. "I go to the 4th class in School No. 61. I don't have a father. I am healthy but I have nowhere to go."

Abubakar loves to read the novels of Nabokov and dreams of owning a gambling club. He says his relatives tried to send him to a children's home but he refused, preferring life in the Grozny home. His best friend, he said, was a blind old lady who has now died.

Chechnya's ministry of labour has only just included five new homes for the elderly and disabled in its reconstruction plans, with a completion date of 2010 anticipated.

Many locals, however, are sceptical about the plans. "They will build this Shali home, they will finish building the home in Katayama and that will be it," said a former labour ministry employee.

Construction work on the destroyed part of the Katayama home has been going on since 2001.

"If they restored this part of the home, there would be room for 200 people, not just 79. The number of people wanting to come here is rising," said Tavgireyeva, who points out that the restoration work is going slowly.

The Katayama home was in the thick of the fighting in 1999 and the staff and residents hid in the basement of the building, in the vegetable storeroom. Abandoned by the authorities, many people died - and many of the rest eventually transferred to homes in Russia.

The home re-opened in June 2000 and people with nowhere to live gradually began to appear, giving the place its mixed population.

"The food is nice, I have clothes to wear, but there should be some kind of selection of people," said 84-year-old Vera Dracheva.

Aksyonova added, "Any normal person would go mad here. This is no life. This problem has somehow got to be solved as soon as possible. I have relatives in Moscow. Zina said, 'Come on, write a letter, if you want, and you can meet up.' But I don't want to..."

She looks out of the window and is silent for a long time. Then she gives a deep sigh and goes on, "I would be ashamed if they saw me. I don't want to upset them... I can't live like this any more."

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