

Fieldwork in MOLDOVA

Homemade heroin and courageous mothers

‘Only losers buy heroin when you can harvest it yourself.’ Opium poppies grow wild in the north of Moldova. From the end of June until halfway through August, drug users leave the city and head into the countryside to pick poppies. But what do they use outside of harvest time?



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family.’ Tatiana has been using since she was nineteen. A fieldworker found her in a hangout for drug users, in 2001. ‘At that time I was five months pregnant and in a really bad state,’ Tatiana recalls. ‘Maria (Ivanovna, the fieldworker – ed.) got me out of there, found my parents and helped me to keep my child. A brilliant woman.’

Courageous mother

When she found Tatiana, 62-year-old Maria Ivanovna Stupalova had just started as a fieldworker. She originally came into contact with YRL when she was seeking help for her son who was hooked on opium and heroin. Now she has over four hundred ‘children’ that use drugs. ‘You know,’ she says, ‘They really need my help. That’s why I will continue with this work as long as I can.’

Maria Ivanovna works from the heart, she has had no formal training as a social worker. She helps ‘her’ drug users where she can, brings clean syringes, condoms and iodine. She gives advice about HIV, hepatitis, tuberculosis and methadone. She goes along with people to see a doctor and even supports their family members. If necessary, Maria Ivanovna even goes to the police to expose corruption. ‘A lower-ranked Justice official asked for money to dismiss a case against a drug user. I reported that and he’s been fired.’ ■

‘Real Russian roulette,’ says 42-year-old Oleg Saharov about the poppy picking. ‘We usually end up in a village where everyone knows everyone else. We have to avoid not only the police, but also the villagers.’ That’s why they look for a hidden spot to extract the sap from the poppy heads without being seen. They dry the sap on a cloth above a fire. Oleg: ‘We looked all day for the right field where we could harvest at night. It was tough, physically and mentally; we felt like guerrillas. But only losers buy *shirca* (homemade heroin) when you can harvest it yourself!’

Methadone myth

The Republic of Moldova has 4 million inhabitants. Bli is its second largest city, with 150,000 inhabitants, of whom an estimated 1,500 injecting drug users harvest poppies themselves. Outside the harvest season, they buy medicines (often ephedrine) at the pharmacy, smoke marijuana or drink alcohol. No one is choosy, everyone uses whatever is at hand. In the last few years, this includes methadone. But what is methadone? In the Moldovan scene, there were a lot of negative stories surrounding this substance. Therefore the

local organization Youth for the Right to Live, Bli branch (YRL) started a project to inform drug users, doctors, nurses and social workers about the advantages of the methadone programme. One of the biggest advantages is that methadone is taken orally and programme participants have to stop injecting in order to participate, which drastically reduces the risk of spreading infectious diseases. With success. Tatiana Ov, a 35-year-old mom in the methadone programme: ‘I can function again and stay healthy, for me and my