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Tragedy Spotlights Reckless Driving

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By Carl Schreck / The Moscow Times

Saturday would have been the first day off from school for 8-year-old Nastya Pak and her 5-year-old brother, Pyotr, since classes resumed after the extended New Year's holiday.

Instead, the two children were driven out of the city in oak caskets to be buried in a Korean cemetery Saturday morning, two days after they were mowed down by a car while walking on a crosswalk on their way to school.

The tragic accident is focusing the spotlight once again on the blatant disregard that many Moscow drivers show toward pedestrians and traffic rules.

As with many city crosswalks, the one near Internat No. 17 on Ulitsa Profsoyuznaya in southwest Moscow is not equipped with a traffic light. Without a traffic light, crosswalks are supposed to give pedestrians the right of way.

While drivers regularly ignore the pedestrian right of way, in a rare sign of acquiescence, traffic in two lanes stopped at the crosswalk near the internat, or boarding school, to allow Nastya and Pyotr to cross together with their mother, Lidiya Khan, at around 8 a.m. Thursday.

When the three reached the middle of the crosswalk, Nastya and Pyotr somehow shot out ahead of their mother. At the same time, Pavel Volynchikov, 22, was driving 60 kilometers per hour in the far left lane in his blue Izh-Oda car and either did not see or opted to ignore the crosswalk, police said.

Volynchikov's car struck Nastya and Pyotr and tossed their bodies seven meters forward, said Marina Ushakova, a traffic police spokeswoman. They died from their injuries almost immediately.

Volynchikov's car careened across the median and slammed into a minibus carrying several passengers, two of whom were hospitalized with minor injuries. Volynchikov was not hurt in the crash, although his 50-year-old female passenger suffered cuts and bruises.

Volynchikov has been arrested and charged with vehicular manslaughter and could face up to seven



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A sign for the siblings, killed in a car crash, reads: "We are grieving with you!"

years in prison if convicted. A judge Friday declined his request to be released during the investigation and trial.

In comments shown on Russia television, Volynchikov said he was sorry for "the tragic mistake that took people's lives."

"But nonetheless, I would ask the court not to take my freedom away," he said from his courtroom cage in a preliminary hearing.

Perhaps nothing encompasses the savage pace of life in Moscow like the widespread driver disregard for pedestrians trying to cross the street. Anybody who has ever tried to cross the street in Moscow, whether at a crosswalk or traffic light, knows how perilous this mission can be. Drivers not only rarely stop for pedestrians, they often speed up to make sure the would-be crossers stay put.



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Lidiya Khan, center, weeping over the caskets of her children on Saturday.

Ushakova, the traffic police spokeswoman, attributed this practice to twisted driver logic on protecting pedestrians. "Many drivers say that if they stop at a crosswalk, the driver in the next lane over won't and the pedestrian won't see the oncoming car," she said.

Larisa Melnikova, who has advised the State Duma on road safety, said because of poor driver's education, many drivers do not know that they are required by law to stop for pedestrians at crosswalks. "Often they don't even suspect they are breaking the law," she said.

She added that aggressive driving had become increasingly problematic in recent years.

The number of accidents in Russia has grown steadily. About 29,300 people died in the more than 207,000 traffic accidents from January through November last year, according to Interior Ministry statistics. More than 6,000 pedestrians were killed after being struck by cars in that same period, including 488 children.

Around 100 mourners came to Nastya and Pyotr's wake outside the entrance of their 15-story panel apartment building on Ulitsa Profsoyuznaya on Saturday morning. Many said the crosswalk where the children were killed was particularly dangerous. "I live right near the crosswalk, and when I come home from work, I have to walk ahead 200 meters just so I can cross," said Alexei Ilyov, whose son, Mikhail, was in the same class as Nastya at Middle School No. 121 nearby. "It's dangerous even for adults to cross there."

Lidiya Khan was preparing a birthday celebration Thursday for her husband and the children's father, Klimenty Pak, friends and relatives said. She had asked Nastya to stay home with her to get ready for the party, but she was excited to get back to school after the long holiday. "She said she missed the girls at school and told her mom she didn't want to miss the first day back," said Tamara Volchkova, director of Middle School No. 121. "She was a wonderful student and girl. She had a beaming smile. It

was impossible to walk past her and not notice her."

The caskets of Nastya and Pyotr were opened and placed on two benches outside the apartment building. Relatives brought out all of their clothes and toys wrapped in bed sheets and placed them near a wreath that Pyotr's kindergarten had bought for the wake.

Relatives' grieving had an almost accusatory tone. "How could you leave your mama and papa like this after everything they did for you?" a female relative wept while standing between the two caskets. "Nastya, why didn't you listen to your mother?"

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