

Kennys Belarus Diary 2014

Our journey for this visit begins a day earlier than normal. Our flight to Minsk checks in at 0820 on Friday morning. With no time for us to get to London in the morning, our journey begins at 5.25pm on Thursday 13th March in Broxburn. Weather is ok and Alison is taking us to Edinburgh airport. We pick up Ross, host Dad of Andrei. This is Ross's first visit to Belarus. Our bags are all packed to the max with things for the children and families. They are very heavy but it's certainly not our clothes. We only have about 2 changes for the week. This could get smelly ☺

We arrive at Edinburgh airport at 5.45 and meet our other 2 travelling companions. They are Adela, host Mum of Sergei, making her second visit to Belarus, and Bruce, Edinburgh group coordinator, host Dad to Angelina, making his first trip to Belarus. Check-in was uneventful apart from Adela having to redistribute some of the weight from her checked bag to her hand luggage and we then have time to relax and discuss our plans before our flight to London where we will spend the night.

Good flight to London on BA and we check-in to Premier Inn at Gatwick airport for the night. We have a quick beer and chat before we head to our rooms at 11 ready for a long day tomorrow.

Friday

Up at 6.45. Met Ross Adela and Bruce for a full breakfast at 7.15 mmmm)) got the little shuttle train just outside our hotel to go to the south terminal for check-in. Checked in at 8.20 with no real problems. Through security in very quick time and met our other companions for the trip. It's nice to see Norman again from Isle of Man, he has been on the last 2 spring trips with me. Also good to see Sue and John from West Leicester group. Sue was on the spring 2012 visit with me. Alex our GB chairman is there too and it's nice to see him and get to know him better in a more relaxed environment.

We had a big panic as we were sat waiting in the departure lounge, we kept checking the board and it kept saying please wait. Then it changed to boarding and gate closes in 6 minutes. We had to move sharply along with most of the people on the flight as the gate was a long long way away. We made it but there were lots of red faces and out of breath passengers)) and some almost missed the flight.

We are now on the flight and cruising above the clouds and it's sunny outside))) same plane as always, an Embraer for any who know anything about planes, with only 2 seats either side of the aisle. Only 2 hostesses, one male and one female. A nice old touch, as we are all given a sooky sweetie by the hostess before takeoff))

Nice in-flight meal of chicken with peach sauce and rice. Glad I chose the chicken as the beef and plum sauce didn't look as nice. Today's flight now going to be shorter than expected and despite taking off late we will arrive a little early where it will be 4.15 pm local time. They are 3 hours ahead of us at the moment.

That's our immigration card filled out and we are all ready for arrival.

Very bumpy landing)) but a gorgeous sunny day and 11 degrees. Quickly through passport control and bags were already waiting for us. Then through the security doors and we see Katia waiting for us with a nice friendly smile and hug. I was first to arrive at the minibus and recognise the driver from the last few times and strike up a conversation with him in Russian which was great when I was asking the questions but it stumbled a bit when he asked me a question)) I gave a random answer to what I thought he asked and it seemed to be ok)))

Now on the minibus at 1650 on the 3 hour journey to Mogilev. What a beautiful day. Surprisingly for the time of year there is no snow although forecast is to worsen with snow and highs of 3 for most of the week. The fields are still very brown as the country is still coming out of winter. The 12 visitors are talking excitedly about their visits of the past and their plan for this visit. It's great to hear that 2 of the groups are looking for more than 10 new children each so there will be a lot of happy children at the end of this visit, as they are told they will be going to the UK. Our children should be happy too. They will all get a visit from us, a meal/party, a letter from their family, pictures, and lots of supplies, medicines and lots of food. Can't wait to see them all and of course our interpreters who look after us so well.

The bus journey to Mogilev took about two and a half hours. We were met at the apartments, our base for the week, by Luda and Tania(our interpreters this year) and other interpreter friends. We quickly unpack and gathered all our supplies in Ross and Adela's apartment. Luda and Tania had prepared some lovely food to welcome us. Nice chicken with dipping sauce, nice salad, olives, carrots, Belarusian beetroot salad and finished off with some lovely cakes and tea and beer. Just what we needed)) It was good to chat with Luda and Tania and hear what is new in their life and hear of our plans for tomorrow and the rest of the week. Tomorrow is the most complicated day in trying to get all of the Edinburgh and West Lothian children to the village party. Think there will be three drivers and four interpreters involved :)

Luda and Tania say their goodbyes at 10 and Luda has a 15 minute walk home and Tania has a one hour bus journey.

We then sort out the 20 bags of supplies and 48 party bags ready to start our work tomorrow))

Go to bed at 2330 its been a tiring day but we are here and all set up and ready to go. Can't wait.

Saturday

Up at 7, breakfast at 8.15 in the cafe, we have tea and a bacon omelette each. Very nice and under £2 per person. Now off to hippo supermarket at 9 to change money and do a big shop for food for the 4 children's houses we will visit today. Shopping wasn't quick as we take time to get used to where everything is and whats on our shopping list. We are on the road at 10.15.

The families this year will get, tea, coffee, stock cubes, antiseptic cream, menthol crystals, lipsalve, elastoplasts, toothbrush, toothpaste, freezer bags, bread, 2 types of pasta, rice, buck wheat porridge, cooking oil, sweet milk, butter, ketchup, sweets, large packet of sausages, 2 large salamis, whole

chicken, tins of meat and fish, oranges, bananas, big box of biscuits, washing powder, washing up liquid. Hope I haven't forgotten anything.

We are with Luda and Tania today and our driver is Edward, Luda's husband. The van is older but it is getting us from A to B. The drive to Cherkov is a very long straight road like the A9 but with no dual carriageway, so lots of near misses (we close the curtains in the van so we don't see). Very flat countryside outside with birch and pine forests. Tania tells us that they drink the juice from the birch trees. But they only get it in spring and they will do it soon. It is good for your health. Luda tells us that she has an allotment 22km outside Mogilev where they have no radiation and she grows all her own fruit and vegetables. We are soon at Andreis and for Ross it is the first meeting with Andreis family. Ross hosted Andrei in 2013 and will host him again in 2014. Andrei is very quiet but it is nice to see him very happy and smiling and he had a tear in his eye, which shows the love he has for his Scottish family and friends. Andrei lives with his aunt and uncle following the death of his Mum and Dad in the last 4 years. He looks happy and settled and there is a lot of love for him and his sister in this family. Good reports on Andrei from his uncle. He says that he does well in all subjects and is the best pupil in the school. A very clever boy. His family are trying hard, they are in the middle of wallpapering the living room and it looks like Andrei and Vickas room has been done recently. They are also putting polystyrene tiles on the ceiling. They are making the most of the difficult circumstances that have been thrust upon them. We leave Tania and Ross to have lunch with Andreis family. Adela Luda and I then make the long journey to Klimovichi to see Sergei, Adela's child and take him to the party.

The party was really good. So good to see the West Lothian and Edinburgh children together. They had a lot to eat and got party bags at the end. It was so nice to chat with our older children and find out how they are all getting on. Small Sasha was the only absentee from the party as she is away on school camp. We pass on the news to Kostya and his younger brother Kiryl that they are coming on a private visit to Scotland in the summer and they are delighted. Kiryl will be making his first trip.

After the party we make the short journey to Dennis's house. The news from this family is that Dennis has a new younger brother who has been fostered by mum. He is 1 year nine months. He has had a very difficult life so far. At 5 months his mum left him with her brother. As the brother went to Minsk to work the boy was put in an orphanage. I think the mum and her mum are now in prison. Dennis's mum who has a family of her own (2 teenagers) and Dennis, has a huge heart. She is one of my favourite people in Belarus. I have so much respect for her and what she has done with Dennis and now with the new son (DOB 11.6.2012) We meet her husband too for the first time. He works in the prison. He is a nice guy and it's nice to see him play so well with the baby. Dennis is well and is doing well at school. He is quite creative and shows us some cards and designs he has been making at school. Mum is a lovely baker and we have a nice cup of tea and some lovely home made cakes, while we chat with them. Dennis is such a nice wee boy, so loving and it's great to see him doing so well after all the problems in his past life. He can't wait to come back to Scotland and see his hosts and we look forward to having fun with him again soon.

After the long drive back to Mogilev, Next up is an evening of unbelievably humbling hospitality at Pasha's house. Maybe one of the smallest houses of all the children in the group but a friendlier and

more welcoming house you will not find in the world. What a spread of food is laid before us every time. Everyone who visits is truly humbled by the kindness of a Dad (who has one day off a month) and his family. Pasha is well and is just the Pasha we know so well, sometimes shy sometimes mischievous)) Alena is very well and is now a lovely young woman who has been brought up so well by Dad with good principles. We all had such a lovely night and will all happily return to say goodbye on Thursday. I spend the night at Pashas, in his small wooden house. I sleep on the couch. It's great to be a part of this family, so loving and friendly.

Sunday

Up at 7.30 after a good sleep at Pashas house. Alena is making breakfast)) A teenager up at 7.30 on a Sunday)) you don't often see that. Pasha is reluctantly awake too, with only one room in the whole house when the light goes on everybody wakes up) Another busy day today with 3 home visits in Mogilev and the city party to host. I get picked up at 8.30 by Kostya and we are on our way.

Our day gets off to a very sad start when we get bad news about Zhenya. He has been diagnosed with epilepsy and the doctor wont sign his permission to travel this year. We tell his mum that we will do our best to support him for at least another 2 year's and if his health improves and the doctor can sign him as ok then he can come back. The doctors will give him medicine for the next year and they hope that he will improve enough to travel next year. They are upbeat and Zhenya is in good spirits probably the happiest and best behaved we have seen him. He was showing us all his craftwork from school. It was really great to see. For someone who struggles to write his name he has made some really nice things.

We probably stay too long at the next visit (Dimas), but despite it being the smallest flat of the children in flats, its such a happy place with a lovely mum. We were having so much fun we didn't even notice the time. Dima is in good health. His English is even better than before. Diana is good too and goes to extra English lessons and is very creative. Dima tells us he would like to be a diplomat or someone dealing with international relations. He likes to be with lots of people but be in charge)) We know)) Their Mum and the children made us very nice cakes and always make us so welcome. They have such a nice room in the hostel but this hostel is like others and is not so good with people hanging around in the stair wells and empty bottles of beer and cigarettes on the corridor floor. Not the kind of place you would associate with such a nice family but mum does such a great job with her children. We like her very much and the cakes were sooooo good, as always.

Next up was Dasha, who we met at grans. Dasha was good but had her leg broken at school recently by a boy. There is no plaster cast on it now but she is walking with a slight limp. Dasha was just her usual talkative self and was telling us that Mum and her are learning English together. Gran had made us nice food and tries very hard to help look after her 7 grandchildren, especially the children of her oldest daughter who passed away 4 years ago. Grannies are very important in Belarus and Dasha is watched by this gran at weekends when Mum and Dad are working. Dasha is doing ok at school.

Next was the city party in a pizza restaurant. It was nice to see the older children too who have finished on the programme. They are looking quite grown up now. They all had a pizza, coke and ice cream each and a party bag on the way out))

The snow came on really heavy just before the party and people were arriving looking very cold, wet and wintry. After the party we phone Steven and Louise, Zhenyas host parents, with the bad news that he cannot travel this year. He is so understanding and I get a nice text later from Steven saying they are very sad that Zhenya cannot travel but happy that he is getting medication. They would like to keep the door open for Zhenya to return and would like to host a child for one year. They will happily provide a suitcase of clothes for Zhenya and they say that they have the time set aside to host a child so they will happily take a replacement. They promise to be the best host parents they can be and promise to give the new child the best possible time they can in Scotland. They are great hosts. We have a child in mind and will make arrangements over the next few days

After a difficult day it was great to have such a nice meal and drink and chat at Olyas, our interpreter from 2012. Great food, great company and maybe too much to drink)) The evening ended up with a wee singsong and Ross gave a good rendition of Hearts, Hearts Glorious Hearts. Yes the Jambos made it into Europe after all))

Monday

Up at 7 and leave at 8.30 for a big day in the villages. Off to supermarket to change money again and get 7 \$50 dollar food parcels. So a big shop and lots of sorting into bags at the back of the car. We are now on the long road to the villages and it's very pretty today after the overnight snow. The roads are not too bad and we have Kostya driving us in his comfortable 9 seater Volkswagen.

Heartbreaking visit to Nikita who is in on his own with his gorgeous wee brother 3 and wee sister 4. In the past Nikita has had to take so much time off school to look after these wee ones. Dad who was drunk last time is away to the shop on his bike in the snow. We fear the worst that he is away to buy drink. The situation was not as bad as first appeared as dad came back sober and was away to the shop to get something for us for a cup of tea)) Nikita is well and in good spirits. We give the children sweets and chocolates and Adela wants to take them home they are so nice. We have lots of fun with the wee ones. They are sooo cute. I think dad is making a real effort. The house and children are cleaner than before. This was confirmed when we visited Sashas mum, in the same village, who says that he has been sober for a few months.

The snow in the villages is making driving very difficult and I thought we would have to push as we did a 3 point turn on Nikitas track, but well done to Kostya our driver and his winter tyres. We just made it.

Nice visit to Sashas. Lovely family. We get to meet her older sister this time, she is going to college to study trees and woodworking. Sasha has moved to a bigger school in another village with some other children from the group - Nikita, Olya and Kostya. Her smaller village school is now closed and as Mum worked there she is out of work. Mum always puts on lovely food for us and today is no exception. We enjoy a nice lunch with them. Potatoes, bread, salad, salamis, ham and cake and tea/coffee. Sasha would like to be a singer when she leaves school and sing on television. She is a great singer and we will hopefully hear her sing at our concert in June.

Vadzims visit was very interesting. Dad was there and looked ok in his own way. We find that he is working at night as a security guard at the farm, which is great. What a difference in the house, the living room has different, better furniture than before and has had new flowery wallpaper on the walls. There is a new rolled up carpet at the side of the room and it looks like at last they will have something to cover the floorboards after 2 years of us knowing them. Other rooms have been painted too and Vadzim has newer furniture in his bedroom, a desk and a wardrobe. I get a real sense of improvement in the living conditions for Vadzim but his mum and Dad are still the same, with obvious learning difficulties. This makes it difficult for documentation for the visit. Aunties help is much appreciated but even with that, the documents are wrong and need to go back to a lawyer again to get them corrected. We leave a small amount of money to help cover the extra cost of this. Vadzim is such a positive, happy wee boy and every time I see him in his house it re-affirms to me my belief that he looks after his parents probably more than they look after him.

Next it's off to Veranikas. She is a lovely wee girl and we are immediately drawn to her younger sister who is 3, what an infectious laugh she has. It was so nice to see her laughing and giggling as she played with Ross. Veranika does well at school despite being the only girl in her class. She has some health problems and will be going to Mogilev to see a doctor at some point, but mum doesn't elaborate on what it is at this point. If it is something we should know about it will be on our documentation from the doctor for the visit. Mum has not long returned to work after her 3 year maternity leave. She has a new job working in a shop that mends clothes and shoes and sells bedding, Dad is still in security at night at the school. Veranika is happy and positive as she recalls the good times in Scotland and is looking forward to coming again. This is a nice settled family who are doing well now.

We then make the short journey to Masha and Dasha and family who were all happy to see us and were waving excitedly from the house window as the car approached. It was good to see baby Sasha again. She is 15 months and looking well, and big !!. Ulianna is 4 and goes to kindergarten now. Dasha has been making embroidery/cross stitch for her host family and it was very impressive. She gives us two pieces to pass on to them. The girls really enjoyed their time in Scotland and Dasha was recalling all the various days they enjoyed. Masha was sitting quietly as always, with a nice smile on her face, as Dasha was talking about the good times they had in Scotland. 2 lovely sisters, quite different in character, but great members of our team and we look forward to welcoming them back again.

Long journey back to Mogilev, where we hit rush hour traffic. We squeeze in an extra visit when we get there to Maksim Malakhau who is 13 (260101) He will come to the group for one year instead of Zhenya. He likes gymnastics and at school maths and physics are his favourites. He was at a competition for history recently and got 75/80% He also does, breakdancing, swimming and skate-boarding. He likes to wear jeans, trainers, hoodies and t-shirts (tight not baggy) – he says to show off his muscles)) When he comes to Scotland he will dream of going to an aquapark(might have to be an indoor one in Scotland ☺) He likes chips, burgers, milk, yogurt, cheese, all meat, chicken, pork, fish(mum says fish Maksim not so sure ☺) pasta, rice, tomato sauce, carbonara. In fact most things as you can see. He lives in a large block of flats with Gran and Grandpa and Mum and is the cousin of Pasha. Grandpa doesn't keep in good health. Maksim shares a very small bedroom with mum. Maksim is a lovely boy, well behaved and will be a great addition to the group for this year.

We then enjoy a lovely evening with our interpreter Luda and her husband Edward and Caroline from Woking group at Ludas nice bed-sit flat. Such a nice spread of food, all traditional Belarusian dishes followed by ice cream and cakes. Not so much to drink tonight but a lovely evening of food and chat. We meet Ludas mum briefly too who pops in to see us and Caroline.

Tuesday

Up early again and away to the supermarket to buy food for today and tomorrows visits. What an operation it is buying maybe 6 of everything and sometimes more as the host family have maybe asked us to give an extra bag of shopping. We get some strange looks from the locals as we pile it all into 4 full trolleys. Then when we get back to the car we sort it all into Sainsbury bags for life with some supplies we have brought from Scotland.

We get on the long road to Cherikov again. First visit today is Vicka in Lobanovka. She is a very happy girl and was in good spirits. There have been a number of improvements, in her house since we first visited. The living room and Vickas bedroom have been decorated. Mum says that she hopes Vicka will not miss her so much this year in Scotland and phone less. Last year Vicka was great with us but did get a little bit homesick in quieter moments. It's normal for a first year child who is only 7 to be like that. I am sure she will be more settled this year. Mum says that she is in good health and has had no cold's during the winter. This is good to hear as our vitamins start to help. Adela decides to use the outside toilet which I think was her first experience of one))

Next visit was one of the highlights of our whole trip. When we first came across Palina just under a year ago, we met a girl who had said very few words in the previous 6 months and was a child who looked so frightened and shy at times having previously been in an orphanage. What a change in a girl. So happy and smiley now and Dad is very happy with what we have all done for the family and to help Palina to become more confident. Dad is looking after her well and she has put on a little bit of weight and her hair is longer, not the very short style we saw in Scotland. I can't believe the change in her since we first met her just under a year ago. So nice to see her so happy and almost outgoing)) Luda sits close to her and reads out the letter from her host family and Palina sits the whole time which such a nice smile on her face. After that we ask her some questions and she answers, with words ☺ not nods of the head. Its really great to see the progress she has made and reaffirms that we have a great team who can make such a difference to these childrens lives in many different ways. Well done to the Gardner family who must take a lot of the credit.

Next visit is Natasha. She is looking ok but always looks so much better and happier when she is in Scotland. We are told she does dancing and cross country skiing and shooting. She was in the newspaper for her cross country skiing recently. It was nice to see that her sisters were a bit more sociable this time. Yhuliya is studying to be a hairdresser but doesn't like it much. She was more talkative this time and happy to be with us and I warmed to her a lot more. Her other sister Olya is still at school in her last year and doesn't take much to do with us when we are in the house. She has a real scowl on her well made up face when we ask her to come into the room for a photo with the family and rushes out of the room immediately afterwards. Mum is now living a new life somewhere else and it's just gran ,grandpa

and the three girls. We see gran and grandpa but they are not in good health especially grandma, who has problems with her legs. Think grandpa has been drinking and maybe gran too((which is disappointing as she is the one we think normally provides some stability for Natasha. Yhuliya is the one who takes care of all the arrangements for Natasha now and is the main point of contact for the interpreters. She appears to have matured a bit in the last year and I hope that she will continue to step forward and have a positive influence on Natashas life. Natasha needs that and if Gran is drinking a bit now too then that is not good.

We had some bad news that Kristinas Mum was taken into hospital yesterday and they are not sure what's wrong(but probably drink related) She will be in for at least 10 days. Kristina is now living with her mum's sister in another village. We take a long time to find her aunts house in the nearby village. With often no street names and numbers in the villages, its normal when you enter the village to ask one of the locals to direct you to the family you are looking for. Normally they know exactly where people stay. We stop where 3 people are having a chat in the street. They cant agree on the directions and its so funny to see them get into a heated debate where they almost all came to blows)) We drive away none the wiser but find the house anyway. Gran and aunt who lived across the road from Kristina are now living further away in Cherikov and that's why she is staying with her other aunt which is closer to her school. Kristina was in good health and is always so happy to see us. She is looking forward to coming to Scotland and meeting her new host. Staying in this house is a good temporary solution. The house is nicer than her own and her Aunt looks after herself and her own family well. It's a difficult situation as you can never replace your mum but I am guessing home life is not too stable for Krystina as her mum is always drinking and she has nowhere nearby to go now, in times of need, as Gran has moved away. I think the trips to Scotland are so important to Krystina and we are looking forward to giving her a nice month which will hopefully take her mind off things.

We hurry back to Mogilev to have a nice meal with our interpreter Tania and her husband Vova and son Dima. The people in Belarus are so kind and Tania is such a good cook. We have great fun playing with Dima who is 3. He has not been in good health recently, including 3 weeks in hospital, so it was great to see him having fun with us and laughing while he played.

Wednesday

This is meant to be my day off but I will see 2 children today ☺ Ross and Adela are away for their day off to visit Sergei and Andrei their own children.

First visit for me today is to Tanya who lives in the north of the city of Mogilev. She is well and is always so happy and positive. Mum tells us her own health is not so good and she has anaemia. I think it would be nice if can we send iron tablets to mum to help her. Tanya enjoys school and in particular Russian and English. She loves crafts and has sewn an apron for herself to use in the kitchen. Brother Sasha trains every day for boxing and was first in boxing competition recently. Mum is doing a good job in bringing up the children on her own following the death of her husband. She has lovely food and cakes laid out on the table for us and make us a nice cup of tea. Tanya lives in one of the nicer properties and her and her brother go to the school where Tania our interpreter works.

Second visit of the day is to Kiryls family for an extended lunch. It was a pleasure to see the family again. All six of them live in grandmother and grandfather's wooden house, following the fire which devastated their own house. We are joined for lunch by Kiryls other grandmother and 2 aunts and cousin for a lovely spread of food, all sitting round the small dining table which takes up most of the kitchen. So nice to be all close together enjoying each other's company. We talk and eat for maybe 2 hours. Then Dad takes me to see the house he is rebuilding after the fire. He has made good progress with the outside walls, roof and windows but he still has a lot of work to do, which will maybe take years. Inside is still a shell with no floors and in some areas you are standing on a plank of wood with a 2 or 3 metre drop below you. Dad has recently started work again on the house after a cold winter. Kiryl is in good spirits as he tries on his new onesie, a gift sent by his host parents. He is also eager to get into the small box of lego sent. I am told he is not eating so good again. Last year we didn't have too many problems with eating and he promises to eat well again in Scotland.

I use the free time to catch up on my diary and some emails etc. I have a nice evening meal and finish off a more relaxed day with an early night trying to catch up on some sleep.

Thursday

After settling our accommodation and bus bills and making our final visit to the supermarket we head out of Mogilev on the Minsk road today to see Karyna in a village about 30 minutes away. This is the house of her gran. She moved here following the death of her mother last year, aged 28. She still sees her dad every weekend . Karyna likes her new school and it is only 5km away from the house. She has many friends at school and does well. She has 10 in her class 7 girls 3 boys and she is the leader)) She appears to have settled in well to Grans. Gran works on the farm milking cows. She works long hours and Karyna helps around the house. Karyna is a happy child despite all that she has been through. Gran has put on a huge spread of food and the only choice for drinking is champagne or vodka, not a normal choice for drink before lunchtime ☺ she doesn't normally have champagne but was given a bottle as a gift by Karynas dad on International womens day on 8th March. She said she was keeping it for a special occasion and deemed our visit special enough to open it. People are so generous. Afterwards Ross made his first visit to a village outside toilet and indeed it was an overflowing one so he got the full experience.

I am then called to a meeting with some of the charity officials who are on the visit and the result of the meeting is that one of our children will not be allowed to travel to the group again. This is a real shame as the child is a real character and will be missed. It's too late to find a replacement on this visit but Katia may still be able to find a new child over the next few weeks to bring our numbers up to 20 again. I will speak with the host family on my return to break the bad news.

Ross and Adela had been doing some sightseeing while I was in the meeting. We meet up and make our way to Pashas house to say our goodbyes to his very kind and friendly family. We have a nice cup of tea and some cake. They make us so welcome and it's great to spend time with them. Goodbyes are never easy but it's only 9 weeks until Pasha and the rest of the children are with us in Scotland.

Next up is a farewell dinner in the cafe at the apartments. It's great to see all the other visitors from UK and hear their stories of their week. It's also a great way of us saying thank you to our interpreters and

drivers for the week. They work so hard for us in arranging the visits and dealing with the parents for the various documents required for the visas, as well as being with us for long hours of the day when we are there.

Off to sleep at midnight and up at 3.30 (00.30 UK time) to start the journey home.

Friday

Up at 3.30 and meet at 4am outside in the street with our luggage. It's cold and dark, everyone is very tired and once we are on the bus most people start to nod off. The 3 hour journey passes quickly for me as I keep nodding off. Check-in goes well at the airport and the flight takes off on time. The flight arrives on time in London and we make the quick dash to the other terminal to make our connecting flight to Edinburgh with no problems.

Every visit to Belarus is different and this visit was no exception.

Here are some of the plus points:

- 1) Improvements to the living conditions of some of the children
- 2) Improvement in the confidence of the children especially Palina
- 3) Working with our 2 interpreters Tania and Luda who are a great team
- 4) Being able to bring 2 new children this year (Maksim and a child still to be decided)

Some of the minus points :

- 1) Losing Zhenya and another from the group
- 2) Krystina's mum being in hospital

Overall it has been a very positive visit, with good progress being made by a lot of the families. Yes we have had challenges during the visit but that is normal. It was great to see all of the children and pass on the letters, pictures and love from the families. This would not have been possible without the help and teamwork of Ross and Adela. We all had our own wee jobs/ responsibilities, we worked long and hard and got the job down without a cross word being said between us the whole week. We had a lot of fun too.

Thank you too to our travelling companions from other groups. It's so good to meet with other people who do the same work as we do with the children, in other parts of the UK and Isle of Man.

A huge thanks to everyone who helped our West Lothian group. Our drivers Edward and Kostya, our interpreters Tania and Luda, our dinner hosts, Andrei and family, Olya and family, Luda and Ed, Tania and Vova, our good friends Andrei K, Katia M, Oleg, Ira R, Lena and of course the boss and our special friend Katia K. Once more you have made this a special visit, looked after us so well and allowed us to see your beautiful country and help your country's children.

Thank you all. I am very tired, have given my all, but can't wait to do it all again next time.