

## Belarus Visit Diary - March 2015

The many weeks and months of preparations are over. I feel a bit like Santa Claus. I've been making a list and checking it twice. Luckily we don't have to check who has been bad or good, naughty or nice. We don't go to Belarus to judge the children and their families. We accept them as we find them and go only to love them and help them.

On this visit are Kenny (6th visit) Adela (3rd visit) and Bob (2nd visit) so quite an experienced team who have been around the block a few times but it still doesn't harden you to some of the conditions and situations you come across.

Our journey starts at around 1030 on 19th March in Broxburn. The team are together, our luggage and pockets laden with supplies for the children and their families. We are all at least a few kilos overweight in our luggage but hope to work our magic with the check -in girl.

This is our first time as a group flying with Lufthansa, first to Frankfurt and then on to Minsk. I trialled this route in October and it worked very well and saves us a lot of money. Fingers crossed we make our connections as it's tight.

So we arrive at Edinburgh airport and check in. We are allowed 23kg and the heaviest was Adela !!, naughty, naughty, who had 27.7kg but we were Ok, we worked our magic, the girl was very kind to us and let our luggage go through for free. Glad they didn't weigh our hand luggage or coats with pockets full to bursting as we would have been embarrassingly over weight.

We joked at our final planning meeting a few weeks before that we can plan all we want but things always change to fit whatever circumstances we come across. This time our plans have to be changed for a nice reason, the lovely news that our interpreter Tania is pregnant and her and Vova are expecting their second child. A wee brother or sister for Dima, who our visitors have got to know well. Unfortunately Tania has not been keeping well and has had a long spell in hospital and won't be able to assist us during the visit but we will maybe still see her for some meals if she is able. Tania has still been working hard for us in the background despite her health problems and has translated our letters for our existing and past children, around 30 in total. This year in May Luda will have a new interpreter with her called Tania 2 :) not sure if that makes things easier or more confusing. So we look forward to meeting and working with new Tania.

Our flights were great with Lufthansa. We had an hour and a half to change flights in Frankfurt and we made it no problem despite a train journey, more security and a very long walk with our heavy hand luggage and heavy coats. Funny story - Luggage trolleys were very scarce and we are delighted to eventually find one to unload our things onto and then had to laugh when we got round the corner as we are only a few metres from the gate. We arrive in Belarus ahead of time and have no problems getting through security in the nice new modernised end of the airport. It was a very warm afternoon in Frankfurt when we left and it was -1 when we arrived in Minsk. Andrei was there to meet us in Katias Volkswagen polo !! How 4 of us fitted in that car with all our massive luggage was probably once a test

on the Krypton Factor but Andrei did it :) Now on the long drive to Mogilev. It's a crisp clear night with no snow on the ground and a feeling that spring is just round the corner.

It's not long before we are in Mogilev and into our apartment. We meet Katia. It's always great to see her. The apartment is a one bedroom apartment. I am sharing a twin room with Bob and Adela is on the bed settee in the living room. We unpack and sort all our supplies into the living room and have a wee cup of tea and a blether before heading to bed at 1am. Its great to finally be here, with everything all in place ready for a very busy but hopefully rewarding 10 days.

Friday 20th March

Wake at 7.30. Nice bright sunny morning. Up, showered and a quick breakfast of cereal bars, coffee, tea etc. with Bob and Adela. Do some packing of the supplies for today, sort the letters for today and we are ready and raring to go. We meet Katia(boss) who is our driver and interpreter for today.

First up is a trip to the supermarket to change money and buy shopping for today's children. The rate of exchange has moved substantially since our last visit in October. At that point it was about 10000 roubles to the dollar. Now it is almost 15000 !! which is great for us but not so good for the locals as prices will go up.

First visit of the day is to Dima and Dianna and lovely mum Svetlana. She is a great baker and has made a great fruitcake for us coming. Mum's baking is always a highlight of our visit. It's amazing what you can achieve from a shared kitchen in a hostel. What a lovely visit to start our day. Dima is great at English and will go to an English competition during the school holidays. Dianna is great at English too and tells us she wants to be an architect when she is older. They both need to work hard to get good marks to get free university as mum says she wouldn't be able to afford to pay. I hope they make it, they are two really great and helpful children. They are such a lovely family and mum is a great mum. It would be great to see them graduate coming from such a small, humble room. They have been 19 years in the hostel and it's very expensive. They are on the list for a flat but there's no movement. It would be great if they could get one. Dima and Dianna are getting so big and they really need to move. They have one small room where they live and sleep, all together. Dima tells us his favourite time in Scotland was at M and Ds ☺ Its always a very popular day with the children. We can't get them home that day.

Next up a visit to the office and Katia (boss) tells us our new interpreter/teacher for September is called Lena and our interpreter will be a new Katia, Katia number 3 for us. Its great to know we have interpreters sorted. We will arrange to meet them at some point during the visit and hopefully get to work with them for a day or so to get to know them and them us.

Next up is a visit to new boy Vlad. After the sad news of his dad's passing last year there is more bad news. Mum can't afford the rent on the wooden house they lived in, in the city of Mogilev where we met him for the first time in October so they have had to move to a flat but only have enough rent for one month. The flat is very bare with not a lot of furniture. They only have one bed and mum takes the mattress from it onto the floor to sleep on at night and Vlad sleeps on the base. We will try to do something to help. Vlad is doing well at school and is looking forward to coming to Scotland. The

grandfather who used to live with them now lives with Vlads auntie. Mum tells us that Vlad has been so excited for days, knowing that we were coming to visit him. He keeps talking away to me in Russian and following me. He is an active and very likeable boy and I am sure his host Ann will have great fun with him. Vlad will go to grans house in the country for his school holidays as he likes it there. Mum tells us he is very helpful and helps her in the house.

Next visit is Anya. Mum tells us she is getting on well at school and has no problems. The whole family liked the Christmas parcels sent from the hosts. They are a lovely family but there are so many of them living in the same flat. Anya really enjoyed her first visit to Scotland and can't wait to come again and see her family again. Anyas family are so kind. They make us a nice lunch of Draniki, bread with fish, meat and some nice cakes and a nice cup of tea. Very welcome in the middle of the day.

Then we are off to see Zhenya. His birthday was yesterday and he is now 10. They had a birthday cake and juice for his birthday at school and he received a book as a present. Gran tells us bad news about mum. Unfortunately mum has left the family and has gone to St Petersburg to live and get work packing either biscuits, ketchup or towels. So Gran is looking after the children again. There is no dad. Gran tells us Zhenya is ok at school. Brother Danila is in orphanage/school at the moment. We are told he had a nervous breakdown and he is not too good. He will go to psychology hospital soon for one month. So sad for someone who is only 11. I hope he can make a good recovery. Zhenya didn't come last year because of ill health. He is much better now and has grown a lot. Socially he appears more relaxed too in our company and I am sure Steven and Louise will have a great time with him again. They are so excited to be having him back again. Mum wanted to put Zhenya in an orphanage too when she left but Gran stopped her and will look after Zhenya now. What would we do without Grans. This granny has always been a great lady and I am sure Zhenya will benefit from the stability she brings.

Next we have some spare time so we arrange to go to meet our new interpreter /teacher for the September group. She is Lena Shepelivich and has a son Ilias who is 14. She will miss his 15<sup>th</sup> birthday on 2<sup>nd</sup> September as she will be with us ☹️. Ilias English is very good and he was really keen to help his mum answer our questions. Lena is a primary school teacher at school number 45 and has 26 children in her class. They are 6/7 yrs old. She has been to UK twice before with FOCC, once to Woking and once to Breckland. She is very pleasant and will get on great in our group and we look forward to working with her.

Time flies. It's dinner time already and time for our visit to Kiryl. It was great to see Kiryl and the family again. Kiryl read his letter from his host family in English. Very impressive. Mum tells us that he is going to sports club now at school and does football, swimming and cycling, which they will do in summer. His health has improved since being on programme and his mum Ira is very grateful for all that we do and gets quite emotional telling us this. His mum says he eats better in Scotland, which is great as we know eating is a problem when he is in Belarus. We all enjoy a really lovely meal with the family with lots of lovely traditional Belarussian food, eaten in their small kitchen. All of us very close together in a lovely family atmosphere. We spend a lot of time blethering during the meal and its lovely to spend time with this family. Grandma is a really great cook and the lovely meal is followed by tea/coffee and cakes. Kiryls family's house was unfortunately burned down in a fire two and a half years ago and they were very

lucky to survive as they were asleep when it happened and ended up in hospital. The whole family have been living with gran and grandpa since then, in their wooden, village type house. Dad has been slowly but surely rebuilding their own house over the past 2 years. They take us to see it. What a great job he is making of it and he expects them to be able to move back in within the next 2 months. The house is being completed to a great standard and he is keeping the cost down by doing nearly all of the work himself. He is a very talented man and a great guy.

Our first full day is almost over. Its back to the apartment now to catch up on some diary and sorting stuff and an early night. In bed at 10.30 and fall asleep very quickly. Tired already 😊

Saturday 21 March

Sleep well and get up at 7.30. It's a much duller and colder looking day outside. I just have a light breakfast as normal of cereal bar and glass of water. Bob and Adela have tea or coffee. After we are all showered and food bags etc sorted for today's visits we meet Katia and head off to meet the Forth Valley group who have just arrived. Sandy is already in the cafe and has had his bacon and eggs and cup of tea. Clare and Jaqs arrive soon after. We are joined by Luda and Edward who will be our interpreter and driver for today. We say our goodbyes to our Forth Valley friends and head off to Hippo supermarket to buy the remainder of our food shopping for the food parcels. The parcels include things we have brought tea, toothbrush, elastoplast, lipsalve, menthol chrystals, sudocrem, and a bag for life. Items bought locally include pasta, spaghetti, oil, flour, porridge, buck wheat porridge, oatmeal porridge, sweet porridge, mayo, ketchup, tins of meat, tins of fish, tins of sweet milk, rice, sugar, biscuits, sweets, washing powder, soap, whole chicken, large salami sausage, pack of thick hot dog type sausages, normal butter, chocolate butter and oranges. Its now all bought and sorted into bags. We are like a well-oiled machine all doing our bit quickly and efficiently. It was easy today with only 3 of everything to buy sometimes its a bit more difficult if we have up to 7 of everything to buy. That takes the full team with 4 trolleys :)

Now on the long road to Klimovichy (2 hours) to see Sergei (Adela's boy) and new Lena who will come to Adela's sister Andrea. We are in Edwards bus today which is always fun and interesting. Luda gives us all a rose each to welcome us to Belarus, which is very sweet.

We arrive at Sergei's at lunchtime to be met by his mum at the roadside. She is so happy to see Adela, Sergei's host mum and vice versa. They have a real bond, its plain to see. Sergei's is happy to see us too. We ask about his school marks and he is very shy about them :)but they are ok. Sergei's mum tells us that she has 3 brothers/sisters in Ukraine near the troubled area of Donetsk. So she now has skype to keep in touch with them as she worries about them. She will also keep in touch with Adela on skype too. Sergei was showing us the scooter he got from Adela on his private visit at Christmas. He loves it and won't share it with his friends. Adela gives some lovely gifts to the family and they are all delighted. Sergei goes to the same school as new Lena and is friends with her brother Oleg. He has been telling Lena all about Scotland and her new host family, which is nice. Sergei would like to learn to ride a horse as his grandfather had one, so Adela will try to teach him in Scotland on one of her 5 horses. We enjoy a nice cup of tea with Sergei's family. They don't have water in their house, but they do have an ingenious

sink for washing hands, which Bob demonstrates to us. Sergei and mum then show us their Banya, an outside wash room/sauna. I think it's the first time in a banya for Adela and Bob 😊 Too soon its time to go.

Next visit is to new Lena. What a lovely wee girl but so small. Mum tells us she does well at school. She is quiet but very happy to see us and get lots of lovely presents from Adela. Her big bother Oleg and wee sister Vasilisa are great too. Oleg has heart and kidney problems and the family are very poor and very deserving of our help. Once the children have opened all their presents they take us outside to see all their animals. Chickens, rabbits and goats. Not really pets as they are all used for food at some point. This was a lovely happy visit to a lovely family living in poor conditions.

Then its off to see Denis.(Bob and Lilians host child) Mum and Denis are out in the street waiting for us and give us a great welcome. We are taken into the house to wash our hands and then treated to a fantastic lunch of goluptsy, cheese, potatoes, salad and bread with ham. Mum is a great woman and a great cook. The food and company are great. Mum is also a great baker and has made us lovely cakes too. She tells us that they are not too far from the Russian border and they go to Russia once a month to buy food as it is cheaper to buy there. Mum says Denis' behaviour is much better now :) and he improves every year. We have seen that too. The small boy that they looked after at this time last year has gone to a permanent home so it's just mum, dad, Denis, Alina and Yuri again. Denis tells us he would like to be a fireman when he leaves school. This has been influenced by many visits to Ross's fire station in Scotland. Alina has been singing in many concerts recently. She is a beautiful singer and will maybe be famous one day. She has been invited by the president to a special camp in Sochi for people with special talent but have health issues from affected areas. She shows us a performance of her singing on dvd. Very impressive. Yuri is very clever at maths and computing. And has been taking part in maths Olympics (big competition) mum tells us Denis is the same at home and school as he is with us. Very sociable especially with adults always talking to them and looking up at them with his big blue eyes. Denis still has the teddy that every child was given at the concert last year. I spot it on the shelf. A young girl who visits uses it to get to sleep when she is with them. Its great it is being put to good use. They have tomato seeds growing on every window sill. They then plant them in their allotment along with many other fruits and veg. We go outside and they show us how to get special mineral water from silver birch trees. It's very good for your health so we try some. It tastes good. Luda tells us that they export it and its very expensive to buy in other countries. Bob says a very emotional goodbye to Denis's family, especially mum, maybe for the last time as this will be Denis's last year with us. It's plain to see there is a huge amount of love and respect between the two families. We all love Denis's mum. What a great woman with such a big heart, taking on and keeping wee Denis despite his many issues and she is now enjoying him behaving much better and being a great son.

Now on the long road back to Mogilev to go to our interpreter Tania's house for dinner. Tania is expecting her second child this year and hasn't been too well but is well enough to make us all dinner, which is great. We love going there, we are made so welcome by Tania and Vova, and Dima loves to play with us. Vova has been sorting his dad's coin collection and asked us to bring special perspex coin holders, which I was able to do and he was delighted with them. Tania is such a good cook and has

prepared a lovely meal for us. So tasty. The time passed so quickly as the conversation and wine was in full flow. Thank you so much Tania, Vova and Dima for your hospitality we all enjoyed it so much.

Sunday 22 March.

Woke up at 7.30. The weather had been very spring like and warm so far but the temperature was to be -10 overnight. It was a surprise to see snow on the ground this morning, but as the day goes on we get very bright sunshine and it becomes very warm and the snow just vanishes :)

Our new May/June group interpreter Tania<sup>2</sup> has come to work with us today along with Katia<sup>3</sup> who will come in September. It's great to see them and work with them. Kostya is our driver today and its great to see him again. Katia (Katerina Piatkova) is an English teacher, who lived in Canada for 5 years and speaks good English. She has a 3 year old daughter called Valeria.

We head off to find new children in the Bykhov area, which is a new area for the charity and we are the first group to go there. In the morning we visit children mainly living in apartments. At lunchtime we were in the flat of new child Valeriya and her gran had made us a beautiful lunch of chicken and potatoes followed by blinchiki (pancakes) It was so nice, perfect timing for us as we didn't know where we would have lunch. After that we visited mainly children in wooden village houses. Some really deserving children and families. One family we went to visit and only dad was at home. He tells us that mum and daughters have just been admitted to hospital. You could see the sadness in his eyes as he thought his daughter would miss out on a trip to Scotland. We get to have a look round the house and it becomes very plain to us that this is a family that we need to help. We say our goodbyes and in the car. Tania tells us that her dad is a doctor at Bykhov hospital and she could arrange for us to meet the girl. So she phones ahead and we go to the hospital. We met mum and 3 daughters and we will hopefully invite the child to Scotland.

At 2 in the afternoon Kenny does a live link up to the church in Broxburn by telephone and after giving a very long update of around 3 minutes which was broadcast live to the congregation he finished off by saying Kenny Turnbull, BBC news, Mogilev, much to the amusement of the congregation in the church and those with him in the car 😊

We visit more children in village houses including 2 boys where we had to drive 59km on dirt roads. Probably the remotest children we have ever visited and the village looked like a ghost town when we arrived. Very scary.

In total we visited 16 possible new children today which was a great effort by everyone, especially Kostya driving on those terrible dirt tracks.

We make the long drive back to Mogilev and go to Pashas house (Kenny's Belarussian boy he had staying for 5 visits) We meet up there with Clare, Sandy and Jaqs from Forth Valley/Moray group as Pashas dad's hospitality is legendary and all Scottish visitors love to go there. They are such a great family and so welcoming. It's amazing that we all fit in one of the smallest houses of all the children but the

closeness only adds to the warmth and feeling of love you get in their house. After much eating, blethering and even some drinking ;) we head our separate ways.

At 11 we get back to the apartment and start to match up new children's names with host families after having taken the opinion of the interpreters earlier in the day, on which ones should be invited. We all agree on the choices, which is great. Lights out at 12 after a long and tiring but great day.

Monday 23 March

Up at 7.30 and almost slept til my alarm for the first time this visit. Must be getting tired :) in the car on the way to the cafe it's -4 on the thermometer but it didn't feel that cold

We go to the cafe and meet with Norman from Isle of Man. Norman received the British Empire Medal just a few days ago for services to charity and is one of our most experienced coordinators. It's great to see him again and some of the other travellers. It's good to catch up and hear his stories, again 😊 You never tire of listening to Norman. He is an inspiration to us all.

I then head off to Mogilev regional children's hospital infectious diseases unit to meet Dr Nikolai. This is where all children from the villages come if they need hospital treatment for infectious diseases. So many of our children have been here in the past. On our last visit our group left a good donation for Dr Nikolai and the hospital so its great to meet him and see what our donation is helping with. Dr Nikolai tells us an interesting story. He was made aware of a machine being thrown out in Germany 20 yrs ago. Dr Nikolai told them not to throw it away as he would use it and he is still using it 20 yrs on. He takes us on a tour of the hospital. We meet Natasha, an FOCC interpreter who was in with her 6 year old twins. Dr Nikolai gave special permission for her husband to stay in the hospital too to help with both children. One day they had 25 nappies to change so it was a great help to have dad there. They had been in for 6 days and were going home that day. She can't speak highly enough of the Dr and the staff. They are so good and so dedicated to the children. Many children arrive unconscious and there is a special unit for orphans. They have no parents and no toys so our partner charity Helping Hands use some of the money given to them to buy toys so they have something to do all day. They also they provide clean nappies etc. We see one girl in the orphan wing. So sad. No one to visit her and she just sits and stares out of the window for hours on end.

The Dr remembers being on a conference and learning of swine flu. He came back and told people here about it. They thought it was fantasy and would never come to Belarus and one month later he was saving the lives of people who had swine flu. So the power of these conferences is immense. He will be at conference for 5 days in April with 20000 people from all over the world. It's the main event of the year for people in his specialism when they learn about new diseases and the best way to treat them. This is what our donation will help with.

We hear that Dr Nikolai saved the life of a very young boy, a baby. His Dad was a photographer and took a photo of Dr Nikolai's fingers and his child's fingers together and gave it to the Dr. It hangs in pride of place in his office. The father titled the picture "don't be afraid for I am with you" such a beautiful photo, maybe the nicest and most poignant I have ever seen and it is a great tribute to the man. Katia

(boss), says her daughter Lisa was also in this hospital for 3 weeks in intensive care last year and it wasn't machines that saved her life it was Dr Nikolai and his staff and the doctors knowledge he had picked up on conferences.

If anybody is reading this and can help Dr Nikolai in any way, with old machines or whatever, let me know. The machinery is very thin on the ground and old. If he is still using something that was being thrown out 20 years ago then we must have plenty scope for helping. The Dr remembers in the past they had so little supplies they used to wash bandages and other supplies that weren't meant to be used again. I have a tear in my eye as I write my account of the hospital visit and think of that poor we orphan girl and the lovely picture on the doctors wall.

I am alone today. Bob and Adela are away on their day off to see their children Sergei, Lena and big Vadzim. No rest for me unfortunately. Andrei is driving today and we have just picked up Tania2 and we are on our way to Bykhov area again to visit 3 more possible new children.

The meetings go fairly well except for one boy who is not in the house as he was in the kindergarten. So we speak to mum and agree to take her to the kindergarten so we can speak with the boy. So we have now seen all the children and need to decide who will come and who will stay with who. We take a drive into the centre of Bykhov and have a walk around to see what's there in the main town in the area. They say I am like a Japanese tourist as I am taking photos of everything in the town for the new September group hosts benefit so that they can see what its like. There are a few shops, a small hotel and one restaurant. Some small kiosks and a main square or meeting area called five corners as five roads join there. Towards the edge of town, amazingly, is a new cinema that is 3d. The town also has a small ruined castle. Not bad for a town probably smaller than Broxburn with a lot less shops.

We head back towards Mogilev and stop at a small café on the way for late lunch. Its very sunny so we take some nice pics of interpreter Tania 2 so we can show them to the folks back home. Tania 2 is actually Tatsiana Panchenko, she is married to Dima and has 2 daughters - Krystina 2 yrs 6 months old and Nastya 6 years old. Tania is an English teacher but is currently still on maternity leave. She is very pleasant and I am sure the folks back home will like her and get on well with her.

We then get on our way again and when we get to Mogilev we pop in to the office to do a favour for Katia. Sometimes family's complain that their children don't get seen or picked. So I am asked to go and do an official visit to a family to explain the process and how we select children and do an assessment of them. I am happy to help with this and I head off with Andrei and Yuliya. We meet the family and they are a nice family but I wouldn't invite them to my group for varying reasons so I report back to the office.

Then it's off to dinner for me at Tania, Vova and Dimas. Tania is a great cook and produces another lovely meal. I don't think I have had the same meal twice there. We have great chat as Tania translates for Vova what I have been doing so far on the trip. Me and Vova share our customary vodka and Vovas dad phones to thank me for bringing him the special capsules he wanted for his coin collection. They are the perfect size and just what he wanted and I agree to bring more next time. It's great to hear that he is

out of hospital and doing well, as he was very poorly the last time I visited. Early bed at 9 which is very welcome as I am tired.

Tuesday 24 March

Have a great sleep of over 9 hours but get up early and do some work adding the profiles of our chosen new children to my phone so that we can get a lot more info from the families for the new hosts.

First visit of the day is Tanya K. She is looking very well and has done her hair specially for us. Her marks at school in English are very good and she enjoys it. She is on holiday from school at the moment and is enjoying her time off. She recently took part in a concert at school with small plays and fairytales. She says it was a good programme with funny things and the audience enjoyed it. She enjoyed the theme park best in Scotland, another one pleased we are returning there in the summer ☺. She also enjoyed the swimming pool, which is a favourite of many too, and of course she enjoyed beating the boys at the go karting, where she won the final of the grand prix, much to Pasha and Maksims embarrassment. Mum is unfortunately going in to hospital in April. Her condition is getting worse again and would like more iron tablets, if we can possibly get them. I will let Kath, Tanyas host know, as she happily got some last time. Her brother Sasha is doing very well at boxing and muay tuay and Tanya shows us his medals. Tanya is looking forward very much to coming to Scotland again for what will be her last year. Mum is always very grateful for what we do and has made us a lovely cup of tea, with a beautiful cake. Its so nice and so humbling to get such good hospitality.

Next is a visit to new Luba in her one bedroom flat. Gran, from Russia, now lives with the family to help mum, so that is now nine of them living in a one bedroom flat. Five of the children are at home on holiday, one is at school and one at work. Mum is at work in one of her 4 jobs. We meet gran for the first time. She is a lovely lady. Luba is very excited to come to Scotland. Luba says she is a little bit afraid of flying but I am sure she will be Ok. She still goes to the special maths school and loves maths. She is looking forward to seeing the dog and maybe getting some toys. Luba is a lovely gentle wee girl and we look forward to her coming to Scotland too. Sister Anya tells us a sad story that one of their young friends in church has cancer and her and Angelina will visit him on Friday. They don't think he has long to live but he really enjoys their visits and really perks up when he sees them. So sad. He is 21 and has 3rd stage cancer.

Good news to finish on. Their flat which didn't have any front door for some time, now has a new front door. Bob and Adela come away with the same impression as me last time. What a really lovely, clever, talented family. You just want to hug them all and hope that they can make something of their lives with the great talents that they have and move to some bigger accommodation. We really feel for mum with 4 jobs to keep the family going.

Then we head off to Bykhov area again to give 4 children the good news that they are coming to Scotland. We check about the ages of some of the children on our list we will invite later in the week and find out at the last minute, that some are too young by around a month so can't be invited. Really disappointing news as we wanted all children to be 7 and the 4 who will miss out were really great children. Not to worry we will keep their details until next year when we are looking for more

children for May/June and will probably invite them then. So we revert to some other children, some of whom are 8, we have also visited and swap things around just a little bit for later in the week. So we still pass on the good news to 4 children today that they are coming to Scotland.

They are Ercamo who will become Ercamo Morrison, when she is in Scotland and Nastya who will become Nastya Spence. They both live in the same village and are good friends. Timothy also lives in this village and he will be invited later in the week. We then tell Lera who will become Lera Wright and Katia who will become Katia Whelan. We gather more information about them all and get lots of photos and a short video to pass on to the new host families.

We really feel for Katia Whelan. Probably one of the most difficult living conditions I have come across in all my visits to Belarus but I am sure that Ann and Mark, her Scottish host parents will give her lots of TLC and teach her lots of good domestic skills which she can use back home.

We come back to the apartment for some rest and I think a lot about wee Katia. We are heading out for a lovely meal and she probably doesn't know where her next meal is coming from. I shed a tear or two. Its difficult but we head out for a wonderful evening at a restaurant in the forest just outside Mogilev. There was a big fireplace with the heads of wild boar and elk above it and wolfskin and bearskin on the walls. We have a traditional Belarussian meal of salads, pork and vegetables in a clay pot and then we finish off with a not so Belarussian apple strudel and ice cream. We were there til throwing out time sharing drinks and chat with Luda, Ed, Tania and Dima, who we were meeting for the first time. His English is really good and we have a great chat. Really nice people and it was a nice break from some of the houses and things we had seen that day :(

We have a wee chat back at the apartment and head off to bed at 12.30

Wednesday 25 March

Up early and get sorted and get off to the supermarket for a big shopping today as we are heading to the Cherikof villages. After the long drive we arrive at Wee Maksims just before lunchtime. Katia (boss) is our driver/interpreter today.

Maksim is a lovely but quite shy wee boy. He tells us his favourite animal is a hare or rabbit and favourite food is pasta with cheese. They got a parcel at Christmas from their host family ☺. School is good he likes maths. The trousers he is wearing have big hole in them and dad is embarrassed by this. Mum is working and the wee one is at kindergarten. Big sister is on holiday from school and is there and is looking well. Bigger sister Nastya is now at college training to be an architect. Maksim is still very shy but shows us something he made in school for mothers day. Very nice. The family's health over winter has been ok, with only a slight cold. Maksim has cold at moment. Dads work on the farm is ok at the moment following the problems with the pig disease. They now raise cows instead. Dad is well educated and has his degree in farming and can work in any type of farm. Maksim would like to work on the farm too when he is older. He helps his dad on the farm and in the garden even in winter.

Visit to Masha and Dasha. They are always so pleased to see us and give us a great welcome. Dasha likes Russian language and literature at school. Masha likes mathematics. All are good and well. Nothing changes. They Skype sometimes but haven't been online for a while. I ask them if they can move their camera so that their hosts can see them better ☺ so they will. The children have made presents for their host families 4 small hats . Young sister Ulianna goes to school and enjoys it . Mathematics is her favourite subject. I saw her playing outside her school in October and she told her mum that she saw me ☺. Sasha doesn't go to kindergarten yet, too young. She is still at home with mum. Mum is good and dad too. Dad is at work on the tractor in the forest. The girls used to play outside all the time but don't play outside much at all now, just inside like teenagers. In Scotland Dasha liked go karts best and it was wall climbing for Masha. We enjoy a nice cup of tea and cakes with mum. mmmm

Next visit to wee Vadzim, he is hungry so we open the bag of food and give him some sausages to eat. Not much news – work at school and come home. He is doing well at school, especially reading but he doesn't write well. He works hard and tries hard. He is not a lazy boy. Vadzim has a big black eye from banging it against the door Katia jokes that he will have a black eye on the visa picture so they will need to give him another one before the visit so he gets in to the UK :) Later he tells us that he fell and got a black eye. When we meet Veranika she spills the beans – he was fighting with Artum ☺ We get a sense that things are improving a wee bit again in this household and I think they get some help from Galina, big Vadzims mum who lives nearby and keeps an eye on them. I think Galina had a big hand in the improvements made to the house in the last year or two.

Visit to Veranika. Nothing much new apart from dad doing lots of repair work on the house. Palina her wee sister is a real character and gives us a great and very cheerful welcome and is talking away to us. She is only 4 and goes to kindergarten. There are only 12 in the whole kindergarten. Veranika does well at school especially in mathematics. Marina her big sister has just received a flower from her boyfriend ☺ This year Marina will sit an exam to go to university to study psychology. Palina tells us she liked all the presents Veranika brought home. She is so cute and won't stop talking. Telling us lots of stories. She tells us she wants to wear high heels when she grows up. Veranika was taking part in a regional maths competition. She doesn't know the result but hopes she does well. She is now on holiday from school and plays with friends and helps mum about the house. Palina has a new toy, a wee soft dog and she has called him sweetheart. Adela can't wait for her to be age for the programme. She loves her. She is 5. She tells us a secret. Mum is making something special for you but don't say until you are called :) So sweet. We asked Veranika if it was her who gave Vadzim the black eye she laughs and blames it on Artum from Forth Valley group. Wow, mum has put on a lovely late lunch for us. Tea, draniki, bread, ham, cheese and home made cakes. So nice it gives us good energy for the rest of the day. Palina tastes one of Mum's cakes and tells us it tastes even better than ice cream ☺ . When we are measuring Veranika for height shoe size etc Palina tells us that her shoe size is 27 and then tells us a few minutes later “remember 27” so funny ,what a cutie.

Visit to old boy Big Vadzim who lives in the same village. It's great to see him again and mum and sister Ksusha They are all looking well. We just popped in for a cup of tea and for Bob to say goodbye to mum and the kids. He will see Vadzim again on Saturday at the party. Mum tells us that she keeps an eye on wee Vadzim and it was her who repainted and repaired their house for them. She is a great lady. It was

her who first told us about wee Vadzim and he has been one of our great success stories. Think Ksusha will come on the programme next year as she will be 7 and may even come to our group. We will see in time.

Now off for a quick visit to another old child Kostya to give him a letter from Shirley as he won't be at the party on Saturday as he is away at sanatorium (healthy school camp). There are a few other children who are going to the sanatorium too and we won't see them at the party so we give Kostyas mum the letters for Kostya to hand out. Kostya is a lovely boy, maybe one of the nicest and best behaved we have had.

Now off to meet interpreter Lena in Cherikof to pay for the bus for Saturday to get all the village children from Cherikof to Mogilev for the party at the 10 pin bowling. Lena will accompany all of the children on the bus, which is a great help to us and makes this possible.

We then make the long journey back to the apartment and get there about 4.30. It's great to have some time to rest before we go out as it's been a busy and tiring time so far. Andrei picks us up at 6.45 to take us to Katia and Olegs where we are joined by Olya Sapunova. We have a really great evening with our 2012 interpreter team Katia and Olya. Lovely food, great company, good laughs, a lovely setting and home made vodka, where any refusal was met with Olya saying "dae as yer telt " it's at this time we wish we hadn't taught her any Scottish phrases in 2012 :) it was a great night despite the vodka not lasting long. Thanks to Katia and Oleg for hosting.

Thursday 26 March

Up at 7.30 as usual and usual shower routine of Adela, Bob, then Kenny. Our final 5 food bags are looked out and packed with the supplies we brought from Scotland ready to be filled with food from the supermarket. This is our last day of visits to existing children. Quick breakfast and off to Hippo supermarket for 5 large bags of shopping for today. We also pick up some things for tonight's party for travellers and interpreters as most of the UK travellers go home tomorrow. We are here for a few days more. Today we are with Luda again and Ed is driving his van/bus.

After the long journey to Cherikof our first visit of the day is to new Nikita. Before we arrive Luda tells us the good news that dad has been released from prison yesterday. He was unfortunately in for stealing. Nikita is well but has a big sore on his face. He is very excited to open his small present from the family and listens very intently to his letter being read. He sends a big hello to his Scottish family. Dad tells us he was in France and Belgium on a programme before. His sister lives in Belgium now. School is good, he knows some words of English already. Dad is happy to be home. He is looking for work as a builder. He will try to improve the house. He worked 2 years ago in Sochi and has worked in Moscow in the past. He would like to work in Minsk. 2 weeks on and 2 weeks off. Grandmother is not doing so well and is in bed. Ed tells us when we were in the house the police came and asked why we were there as dad was just out of prison and they are keeping an eye on him, which is understandable.

Next we are popping in to see old girl Krystina as she will not be at the bowling. She is very happy to see us and is waiting in the street for us. She reads Helens letter and is very happy. Mum and dad are both in

prison ☹ and Krystina's house burned down last year. She now lives with aunt. Krystina will go to stay with mum in prison this weekend for 2 days so that they can spend time together. It's like a hostel within the prison and they need to pay for it. She will travel to prison with an aunt and the aunt will stay with her for the two days. She is doing well at school, is a great help for aunt in the house and likes to cook pancakes. She tells us she has no boyfriend. She has a new baby niece of 2 months who stays with her. It's emotional leaving Krystina, she feels like family to us all as we have known her for so long, she comes from maybe the worst background and despite it all she is such a lovely, happy and content, pleasant girl. She would be really deserving of a private visit to Scotland in future.

Next visit to Sasha who lives in a remote village with mum and 2 sisters and wee baby brother. He listens intently to Luda reading his letter and is happy to hear that Stuart his new brother loves football. He is very excited to be going to Scotland and is not afraid of flying or afraid of dogs. Dad is still in Moscow. Sashas teacher Katia is coming to Scotland(Forth Valley) at the same time and he will maybe see her during the visit or maybe she can come to his hosts for dinner one night and tell his hosts all about him. Mum says thank you so much to the family for the presents. She hopes that her son will enjoy Scotland and that the family will love him. We assure her that they certainly will. He is such a nice wee boy. Mum is soo happy that her son will have his chance. He is good at home and helps mum a lot. They have a computer with Internet but there is not often a good connection. Mum gives us the skype address to pass on. School is good but he doesn't learn English at school. Sister Lena is still eligible for the programme and may get taken by a group to England.

We then go to Cherikof for a late lunch in a nice cafe we know. We had 2 courses and a drink and the bill for 5 people was about £8 !! Very nice and sets us up for 3 afternoon visits in Lobanovka. The sun is out and it's very warm as we make the 15 minute journey.

First visit is Vicka. Her mum has done her hair especially for us coming. She looks really beautiful. She has made a small present for her family, really nice and I will be happy to pass it on to them. School is good. In September last year she had a beautiful school photo. Vicka knows that Sveta and Sasha will come and she is friendly with them at school. Vicka enjoyed best M and Ds last year. She is not so keen on flying but will be Ok again. She loves everything about Scotland. She is very excited to be coming to Scotland again and cant wait. They have Internet now and mum likes to look at Internet and find new hairstyles to try on Vika. They may have skype now so will hopefully bring the skype address to Scotland. I think dad or mum will maybe go on Facebook too so that they can see pics of the visit. We tell Vicka all about the programme for this years visit and Luda and Vicka are both excited to come to Scotland.

Next visit to Sveta. Sveta is very excited reading her letter. She can't wait to see the dog in Scotland. She has always wanted a dog. She is very excited to meet her family too. Mum is so grateful and emotional for all that we have done so far for them and Sveta. The whole family are very excited for Sveta to go to Scotland. She doesn't like meat, chicken or cooked onions she tells us now. She loves to draw and write she could do it all day. She likes to study at school reading, writing and drawing. Brother Zhenya was in the house too. He is 13. Sveta is very excitedly unpacking the food parcels we brought. She asks dad do you love tea ☺ He says of courses he likes tea so she gives him a big pack of tea bags. What a wee character. She dreams of a mobile phone she can play games on, but mum tells her she is too young.

She can't wait to come to Scotland. Zhenya has been to Germany on a programme about 3 years ago on a camp. Dad disappears for a few minutes and then as we are leaving he comes along the path on his bike with both wee sisters on the bike, who are so happy to see us. What lovely children. I think Sveta will be a wee star with us.

Next a visit to Palina. As we get near her house we see 2 men ploughing a field, a lone furrow with a horse. We stop to speak with the men and take photos. It's sad for the horse who is out of condition but it's interesting for us to see. The men ask if we do this in Scotland. We say about tractors and someone jokes you don't get good fertiliser from the back of a tractor ;) Palina's family see us and walk towards us to welcome us. Palina confirms that she got a parcel at Christmas and for her birthday. Palina is so happy to see us and spends most of the time on Adela's knee, very happy. We see a big difference in Palina again. Taller, filled out a little and very happy and chatty. Dad tells us she is good at school and enjoys it. She is in good health but not eating vitamins as they are finished. Maybe they are all using them. Gran would like more paracetamol if possible? Palina liked the swimming pool best in Scotland but can't swim. We tell her about the swimming lessons we will do as part of the programme this year. Things have really changed. Both sisters are very shy now and Palina is the sociable one now :) Who would have thought that 2 years ago? Lera is now showing us a medal and certificate for shooting. The best sniper in school. She doesn't shoot animals, only targets. Her sisters are going to England again this year. Dad is very grateful for the food parcels and every day Palina is talking about Scotland she is so excited to go. Lovely visit to Palina. We all remark on the difference in her since our first visit.

Now on the long road from Cherikof back to Mogilev for the last time on this trip. We have visited all of our May/June group children and we are very happy to have seen them all and provide them with food and pass on lots of love and best wishes from their Scottish families. In return we have been warmly welcomed and have been humbled by the kindness and gratitude shown to us by the children's families. Tomorrow we will make our way to Bykhov area again to tell the remaining 8 children the exciting news that they will come to Scotland in September

But first the goodbye party for the travellers and interpreters. The party took place in our flat. It was great to see them all and share stories of our experiences during our trip. There was an auction of some garments made by Ira at the party to raise some funds for Helping Hand and this went extremely well with a good donation being made. It was a late night and we got up at 3.45 to say goodbye to Adela who is leaving today. Adela has been a really great help and most of the measurements of the children have come from Adela (and Bob holding the tape) Adela is also great at interacting with the children and brothers and sisters while I am recording info and asking questions and Bob is taking photos. We are a good team and work well together. After saying our goodbyes we manage to get some more sleep before daylight wakes us.

Friday 27 March

Up at 7.30 to get organised for a big day telling 8 children they will come to Scotland in September. Today we will work with Luda. Ed will drive and we work for the first time with Lena our new teacher for September group.

After the long journey to Bykhov we visit

Timothy who will become Timothy Murphy in Scotland, Alina who will become Alina Fraser, Kira who will become Kira Mitchell, Liosha who will become Liosha Hutchinson to tell them they will be coming to Scotland. They are all very excited. We pass on gifts, letters, vitamins etc and tell them about the programme and their new families. They are very grateful. Then we have lunch of borsht, chicken etc at the Admiral Cafe in Bykhov. A three course lunch, with drinks cost us about £9 and that was for 6 of us. The portions in Belarus are not normally as big as you would get in a restaurant in UK but the cafes are nice and are great value.

Now off on the long road to visit Dima and Stas. When we visited them the first time we travelled over 50 km on mainly dirt roads. The lengths we go to, to make sure children get a chance with us. We go on a better road this time and we only do about 16km on dirt roads. So we pass on the good news and Dima will become Dima Grant and Stas will become Stas Gilchrist in Scotland. After that we come back to Bykhov and visit another Katia who will become Katia Wells and leaving probably the cheeriest boy in Belarus til last – Maksim who will become Maksim Johnston.

All the new boys got the gift of a football and pump, the girls got a doll with many costumes and accessories and both got enough vitamins to last until their visit to Scotland, as well as a letter from their new host family telling them all about the family, house, pets, nice things to do etc and lots of pictures so that its not so much of a journey into the unknown for the children and for their mum or dad.

They are all so excited to be coming and our group is now complete. We are really looking forward to working with these children over the next few years as we try to be a huge positive influence on their lives.

After a long drive back to Mogilev it's 7pm. We say our goodbyes to Lena until we see her in Scotland at the end of August. She is a very pleasant girl and I am sure she will be great for our group.

We go for a walk with Luda to a nice cafe and Ed eventually joins us. We have a nice meal to round off a great but busy day.

Saturday. 28 March

Up at 7.30 to start to get organised for packing and sort some gifts to give to our friends here. Most of the hard work has been done now and we can relax a bit. Luda meets us at 10 and we take a bus to the city centre. We have a nice walk and a visit to the museum. Bob and I can't help staring at a picture of a street scene in a village from about 200 years ago. Bob and me both say to each other that we could have taken that photo at any point in the last week with a black and white filter on the camera as not much has changed. We have a nice relaxing walk around the centre of Mogilev. It's really nice with lots of stylish people walking around. We go to the 10 pin bowling for 12

The Mogilev children are starting to arrive. Old children Masha B and Vlad are getting so big and grown up looking. It's great to see them and new Vlad who is so excited to see me and follows me around for

about 10 minutes talking away in Russian and every third word is Kenny. Great wee guy who will be good fun in Scotland. Zhenya and gran turn up with brother Danila who is out of the orphanage. Its the first time we have met Danila. I am surprised by how well he looks. Gran asks if he can stay for the party and I say of course he can, but when she asks Danila he says he just wants to go home. You can see the wee guy looks ok but you can tell he has a troubled mind and is not socially comfortable. Shame, it would have been good to get to know him too.

Lena Lisikova is bringing 16 children from the Cherikof villages on the bus. She is a great help and as a schoolteacher in the area knows most of them already. Without her help our huge party wouldn't be possible. The bus is a bit late but soon we are all together for the biggest party in the history of our group. 33 children in all come. They enjoy pizza and morse, a bit like diluting juice, coke, followed by chicken breast with cheese on top and chips. Then a game of 10 pin bowling for an hour and then pudding of apple pie and ice cream. It's was great to see all of the children have fun together. The older children who have finished are getting so grown up. Andrei is really filling out and getting muscley, Big Dzianis is really growing up, Big Vadzim so big now, Masha B looking quite the young lady, Vlad much taller and his speech is much better, Pasha still crazy, Alena nice young woman and Zhanna too. Its great to keep in touch with them in this way, despite them being finished on our programme. The new children meeting new friends for the first time was also great to see. New Maksim worried me a bit at the start of the meal, he didn't look comfortable and was starting to cry. Maybe too many people for him. However within a few minutes after a chat with Luda he was laughing his head off with new Sasha and they never stopped having fun the whole afternoon. Bowling was very new to the new kids but they really enjoyed it. Luda had split them up into age groups so most of the new kids were with Kiryl. He and new interpreter Tania were really great with the new ones and they had so much fun. I think our group will be a lot of fun this year as the new kids are great and get excited about even the simplest of things. New interpreter Katia also came along, as did Lenas sister Katia and Katia(Boss) (our 2010 and 2011 interpreter) and Olya(our 2012 interpreter) popped in to say hello too so it was a really fun afternoon.

After the party we get the bus to Pashas house to say goodbye. It's always great to spend time with Pashas family, who feel like my family as we had Pasha staying with us for 5 visits. It's nice just to sit and have a cup of tea, slice of cake and a good blether to catch up. Alena shows us some action pictures of her in high jump competition and it's nice to see her wearing the sports clothes we got her Last year. Time goes so quickly though and we soon have to say goodbye.

All of our work is now done and we head back to the apartment to pack and have a very early night as our journey home starts at 11pm UK time. We manage to get a few hours sleep before heading off to the airport. Andrei drives us there and we leave Belarus as we arrived, in the dark, but hopefully in our time there we have spread a little light and brought some happiness and love to our children and their families.

All of this is only possible through great teamwork both in the UK and in Belarus. I cant speak highly enough of the teams we have had on our trips. It can be difficult to work so closely with people, 24/7 for so long, sometimes in pressure situations but we have never had a cross word yet and it's great that we

can go about our business quietly and without fuss, everyone knowing what part they play in the team and just getting on with it, with love in their hearts.

A huge thank you to our travellers (Kenny) Bob and Adela. a great and hardworking and very supportive team

A huge thank you to all our interpreters. To old ones it was great to see you all again. To current ones it was great to work with you again, to our new interpreters it was great to work with you for the first time and start to get to know you.

To interpreters who we haven't worked with but know and who support us well in the office thank you for your hard work too.

To our drivers thank you for getting us to where we needed to be especially when that involved 50km drives on dirt roads (Kostya and Ed) and for asking random people for directions to new childrens houses as we arrived in new villages.

Thank you all for keeping us safe and well. Together you are a great team, led well by Katia, helping many children in your country not only on our programme but also in hospital. It's a pleasure being even a small part of this great team and I look forward to working with you all again soon as we continue to have a positive influence on children's lives in the affected areas.

K x