

Belarus Diary 12 – 19 April 2013.

Its Friday 12th April 5.30am and I am awake, showered, bags packed and ready to begin another exciting trip to see the children in Belarus. I hear a car outside and its my 2 companions from West Lothian Bob and Adela who are very excited to be making their first trip. Gary, Adelas husband takes us to the airport and we say our goodbyes.

At Edinburgh airport we meet up with Pippa and Ali who will be coming with us. They are going to see the current Edinburgh children. We are also joined by David and Sandra who are going to be visiting some past Edinburgh children and interpreters. Our party is complete. Hurray.

Flight to London Gatwick departs at 7.25am arrives about 9am.

Meet Norman and Sandra from Isle of Man. Nice to see Norman again and meet Sandra, whos husband Alan was with us last year in Mogilev.

Flight to Minsk departs at 2.10pm .

Both flights on time and really impressed with the new Belavia Aeroplane. Nice meal on the plane too. Arrived at Minsk at 7.10 and were through customs etc surprisingly quickly by 7.30. Its a bit unnerving when they check everyones passport with a magnifying glass but also quite amusing.

Walk out of the airport expecting to meet Katia but after a short wait Olya comes instead. Looking well and gives us a great warm welcome. The weather was not so warm at 6C and raining. Still lots of snow on the ground. Its been a hard winter and the snow is very late in going away this year.

Minibus ride to Mogilev takes just over 2 hours. Snow on the ground at Minsk but by the time we got to Mogilev the snow had pretty much gone. Its funny how our driver seems to drive at a nice average pace on the straight quiet motorway and the turns into David Coulthard in the city chicaning paste potholes and cars like we were last on the grid in the Mogilev Grand Prix. We were definitely in the lead when we arrived at the apartments :)

At the apartments we were met by Katia M, Katia K and Andrei who checked us in and took our bags up the stairs. We unpacked and sorted our stuff and met in one of the apartments for sandwiches which were provided by our friends who met us. After confirming our plans for tomorrow we headed to our own apartments to sort our stuff. My apartment is nice. Kitchen, dining area with TV, bedroom with TV and a large shower room. Off to bed now at 12.35 Its been a long day but sets us up nicely for the week. So hot in the room – cant get to sleep.

Saturday

Wake up at 6.30 with the brightness streaming through my lovely pink curtains. Thats pink curtains two years in a row !

Normally we would go for breakfast to the cafe next door at 8am but we dont have any local currency yet so we had decided to have breakfast in our own apartments and congregate in the cafe at 8.45 ready to meet Katia. Long time to wait but have a shower etc and relax and sort some more stuff.

Cup of tea in the cafe with all of us and interpreters including Tania who has arrived. Nice to see her and she tells me that her little boy Dima was up early as he was very excited that Kenny was coming for dinner tonight.

We gather our things and go to the supermarket to buy food for the two children we will see in their houses today. We are with Olya today and Sasha is our driver.

On the way to the supermarket we see lots of people picking up litter from the paths and grass and people shovelling up salt from the road. We are told that today is national cleaning day. If you work you go to your work on this extra day and clean around your outside work area. The car parks, gardens etc. A great idea! No waiting on West Lothian Council to come and do it for you! And it helps to make the place look very clean and nice.

Shopping all bought in Mogilevs only large supermarket. Olya tells me there are now plans to build more.

So we are on our way on the long journey to Lera and Angelina's house. Past Cherkov and then through the dead zone to Klimovichi. Still some snow remaining in the fields even on the 13th of April. Its about 6C today and a little bit of rain in the air. Still cant get over how flat this place is, flat fields as far as the eye can see, with birch and pine forests every so often.

Visit Lera 2013 will be her 2nd visit to Scotland

School is good. Enjoyed Scotland very much. Enjoyed everything. Likes the shoes and clothes and a sparkly dress that was sent home with her. Likes the swimming pool. Both Angelina and Lera are looking well but we found them in the house with no adults and when we took them to the party they left 3 younger siblings on their own. Was very sad to waive them goodbye, so young so small to be on their own. Oldest one maybe 5. But thats normal. We are told its ok and a neighbor will pop in sometime ! but when?

Adela also met her new host son Sergei. A nice boy but quite a character, which I am sure we will see unfold as the initial shyness quickly wears off. We leave the shopping with the children and some sweets. Now on the long journey through the dead zone to the party. Lera and Angelina are well dressed Angelina especially with eye shadow on :)

So good to see all of the children and parents waiting outside for us. The party went well. All had a good time with lots to eat. Children loved the hair bands and toys handed out at the end. Great to see our children who are older and now finished our programme. All looking well and grown up

It was great to see Bob meet Vadzim and his mum and sisters for the first time. They are a lovely family with huge respect and love for Bob and Lilian and the emotion of that first visit was nice to see and be a part of.

Also got Sergeis details but Adela will visit him again later in the week. Sergei Height 123cm Shoe 32 but is quite big

Visit Dennis 2013 will be his 2nd visit to Scotland

Really lovely visit to Denis's house. What a great adopted mum he has and she has a lovely family. Its great to be able to help someone who is making a real difference to this great wee guy. We had a lovely cup of tea and cake with mum and the family where she was relaxed and told us more about his past. She first visited Dennis in hospital when he was one and a half and had been beaten by his drunken parents. She lost contact with him for a few years and by chance went with a friend to an orphanage about an hour away in Mogilev as her friend was going to

adopt a child from it. When mum was there this little boy ran up to her and said “are you my mummy, have you come to get me” and she said “no I’m sorry I’m not”. But she thought to herself - I know that face, how could I forget it. She checked the records and indeed it was Dennis and she went on to adopt him. A lovely story. She has not had an easy time with him, as we know too, however she has stuck by him and now he really does appear to have turned the corner. He is doing well at school and recites poems. One of the hardest things I have had to do was tell this great mum that he could not come last year. You have to be cruel to be kind but I am really happy that things have worked out well for Dennis and we have stuck by him and supported the family well, He will be coming to stay with Bob and Lilian and it will be a home from home for him in that he will be very much loved. It was great to spend time with Adela and Bob and the family as Bob got to know them better. I am buzzing - what a lovely visit.

Long drive back to Mogilev then its off to Tania the Edinburgh group interpreter for dinner. Met her son Dima and husband Vova. Dima,2, is a very active boy and it was good to play with him with the cars I had taken him. We had a nice dinner starting with a chicken salad with tasty sauce and croutons both of which Tania had made herself from scratch. Very nice. Then Salmon with vegetables and special mashed potatoes followed by ice cream. All accompanied by a glass of wine and finished off with a cup of tea. Well done to Tania for cooking and hosting such a nice evening after a busy day interpreting, with very little time to cook. Now 1230 again. Where does the time go. Now to sleep. Busy day ahead tomorrow.

Sunday

Woke at 5am and didnt sleep much after that. Too warm in the apartment :) Up at 7.15am. Weather still dull outside but is due to start getting warmer today. Early start to the day today. Off to see Dasha Harper leaving at 9 after picking up her shopping bag etc.

Visit Dasha Harper 2013 will be her 3rd visit to Scotland

Dasha was living in Mogilev with Gran, 2 brothers and Girl cousin. Mum and dad still live and work in the village where salaries are low and they have to work at the weekends too to make ends meet. At the weekend all of the children stay with gran. Dasha likes everything about Scotland. Gran says that Dasha is not so good at school. She eats not so well at home. She likes pasta with ham or sausage with tomato sauce. Likes pancakes, meat rapped in flower, eggs and milk, likes cabbage. Likes to play on computer - building a farm but plays it only at grannies. She has a cold and has a temperature at moment but has been good since returning from Scotland. Grandmother says a very big thank you from the family. What we do is very important to them. Dasha is looking forward to seeing Jennifer again and the rest of the family. Her brothers are ok.

After Dasha we go to visit the office where it all happens. It has enough room for 2 desks and maybe not much more. It just shows us how good Katia and here team are that they have had 500 children in there over 2 days to get all of the visas done. Most of these children live about 90 minutes away and have to be collected from their house. What a great team effort. It was a real privilege to see how humble but functional our office is. So funny to see the security guard who is actually an old lady who lives there and drinks ☺

Then off to church to sit in quiet and reflect on what we have seen so far. Its great to have this quiet time in our busy schedule. The church is very modern and I am happy to see so many children and young families.. A few people came up to us at the end of the service and spoke to us in English, which was very nice.

Then it was off to the city party. New venue this year in the Pizza Restaurant above the Hippo supermarket. It was good to see all of the children. Vlad was looking very well. Masha Bishop wasnt there as she was at school camp. Dasha wasn't there as she was not feeling well enough. It was great to meet Kiryl for the first time. He is a nice calm boy and was very well behaved. It was also great to meet Zhenya too. He is a lovely wee boy and was full of energy!!!after a bit of a tearful start. I think he was just a bit overawed by the children and adults there and he didnt know any of them. He soon came round though and I made a point of sitting beside him and getting to know him and having a laugh and a play with him and I built his model aeroplane for him. He is now looking forward to me going to his house on Tuesday to play with him.

After the city party we went to Pashas for a barbeque. It was great to see everyone again. It was just like being back home again. Pasha lives in the smallest house but maybe has the family with the biggest heart. They are so kind. What a fantastic spread of local food they put on for us. Barbequed pork, chicken and sausages. Draniki (fried potato pancakes). Lots of different kinds of salads, Marinaded carrot wrapped in cabbage, various salamis, boiled almost mashed potatoes, salmon. Far too much food for all of us. They shouldnt do it. We tell them not to do it but they are so appreciative of what we do for the children. It was great just to spend the late afternoon and early evening chatting and eating and drinking in great company with a family that everyone from FOCC who has met them has great affection and love for.

Back in the apartment now ready for a much needed earlier night and looking out the gifts and the letters for the six families we will visit tomorrow in the Cherikof villages including a visit to wee Vadim and his legend of a father - Macho.

Monday

Wake at 6.30 this morning after a better sleep. Looking forward today to going to the villages to see all the children but especially Masha, Dasha, Vadim and Veronika who are the 4 children I chose last year to come on their first visit to Scotland. It will be great to hear what they thought of their first experience in Scotland and hear from mum and dad on any improvements we have made to their health and life.

Had breakfast in the cafe today. Tea and fried pancakes with Adela and Bob. Very nice and only £2 for all three of us. Meet the other ladies from Cambridge, Woking and Easingwold who had just arrived last night. Nice to see them.

Been shopping for 6 food bags for us and 6 food bags for Edinburgh group and now going our separate ways to the Cherikof villages.

Visit to Vicka 2013 will be her first visit to Scotland

Nice mum, needy house. Likes all food but not carrots . Likes drawing, painting, reading, dolls, dog and riding bicycle - she has her own. There is a playground near the house and she likes to play there. She would like to wear jeans, trousers, stylish dresses and shorts with coloured tights. Her dream would be not to go to school ! Very excited to be coming to Scotland for the first time. Vickas house is on the main road in the village and is next to the playpark and near to the school. The house is a wooden house but it has had a brick skin added to the outside. It has a big garden at the front and the garden is well defined with a nice plastic fence. The back is more of a

yard for animals. We only saw 2 dogs but I presume there are more animals in the small outhouse buildings. Mum is a nice lady and you can see that Vicka takes her nice nature from her mother. Vicka is a very pleasant and smiley girl. We give her a present of a doll from the charity and she is very happy with it. When we do a short video message to send back to her new host family she mentions that she is very thank ful for the present. Vicka then shows us round the house. Her bedroom and the house in general is clean and you can see that mum and maybe Gran too and trying hard to do their best. There is not much in the house and some of the wallpaper is coming off the walls but that is quite normal. A lovely visit to start the day.

Visit to Palina 2013 will be her first visit to Scotland

Palina and sisters Lisa, Lira and dad live in the house. Gran and dads brother live in another nearby. Palina is very quiet. She likes to eat chicken, sweets, most things. Not allowed to eat too much chocolate. Theres nothing she doesnt like. She likes drawing and painting. Likes to wear jeans, trousers, trainers, some dresses but not so many. Pink is favourite colour. Her dream is just to visit Scotland. Dad has custody of the children again after finding them in the orphanage. He is controlling his drinking well and is trying very hard. I like dad, he is a nice guy. It is not often that Dads take responsibility for their children in this way. With the help of Gran they provide us with a cup of tea and some sliced fruit and biscuits. We all sit round the table in this very basic wooden house. A typical wooden village house with outside water and outside toilet. House is quite dark, a little damp smelling and with floor boards that bounce, are very uneven and I wouldn't risk 2 people standing on any one board at a time! The house is quite remote and hard to get to by car as the melted snow has made the dirt track road so wet and muddy its almost impassable. The house is in the same village as Vickas but its much more remote. Dad met us on the main road and suggested that we walk to the house but Andrei gave it a go on the track and we made it. Palina is so like her sisters all with short hair. Easier to keep hair that way in the villages, especially for a dad. Palina has said very few words since coming out of the orphanage and indeed says very few words to us too. I know that Scotland and her new host family will help Palina to come out of her shell a little and I cant wait to hear the first few quiet words that come out of her mouth in Scotland. That would make me so happy and give us something to build on as we try to help her start to realize some of her potential..

Visit to wee Sasha 2013 – 3rd visit to Scotland

Sasha is looking forward so much to coming back to Scotland. She liked everything about Scotland. Her health is good again after the scares at the start of last year. She likes to wear skirts. The clothes sent home are very useful for Sasha but also for Lisa who is two and a half now. She is big for two and a half but is lovely . Dad is unfortunately not working now so the help we give the family is even more appreciated now. Apartment has a bedroom and livingroom and kitchen. Sasha goes to musical school now and plays piano and sings in a choir.

Visit to Masha and Dasha 2013 will be their 2nd visit to Scotland

Baby called Sasha and will be 4 months soon. We took some presents for the baby from the hosts and the charity which were well received. Uliana is well too. They really enjoyed Scotland. They loved the park and slide. Masha enjoyed her English lessons. The things the girls brought home that were most useful were the vitamins, but everything was very useful. Big thank you for all the help. They need our help more now with 4 girls. Dad works 8 til 5 and gets 2 days off. Drives a tractor in the forest and mum is on maternity leave. When mum works she

cleans the cows and prepares the slurry for spreading on the fields. Its not hard to see why she doesn't want to go back and hopes to get a new job. Little sister Uliana is lovely but very lively, what a character. Maybe even a bigger character than Dasha if thats possible ! Masha was listening very intently to Katia reading the letter telling her all about her new host family. She was smiling and kept looking over the letter and pictures again. Masha is a lovely girl with a really nice nature and I think she will take the change of hosts in her stride. I am sure the new host family will make this very easy for her too. They are a great family.

After the visit Andrei got the van stuck in mud. He ran halfway around the village to find a lorry to pull him out. The lorry arrived got the tow rope connected and then the driver couldnt start the lorry. So funny. We thought we were going to have to push the lorry to get it started to pull us out.

Visit to Veranika 2013 will be her 2nd visit to Scotland

Everyone is ok but Veronika now has problems with her legs. Bad aches in her knee. Been to doctor and no results yet. Was there 1 week ago but next appointment will not be until July. She is good at school. Likes handicrafts best at school. She is the only girl in her class. She loved playing in the playgrounds with Lucy and the children. Shoes, clothes, seeds were all very useful. They showed us the seeds which were growing on the window sills. Likes to eat everything and theres nothing she doesn't like.

Visit to Vadim C 2013 – Will be 2nd visit to Scotland

After being to Scotland did they notice any difference in Vadim. They did – he was speaking English, was very happy and was talking only about Scotland and the great time he had with John and Lynda. Mum says thank you for clothes and photos and everything. They are very happy with everything. He loves sausages. Andrei took the food bag into the kitchen and looked in the fridge. It was empty. So we took some of the sausages out of the bag and Vadim sat and ate 3 of them very quickly. You could tell from the way he was eating them that he was very hungry. What a great wee guy he is. Hard to believe a boy so nice and vibrant can come out of a house like that. Saw more of mum this time. She tries but I dont think she is very capable of much and Vadim probably looks after her rather than the other way round. Still wears his football strip with Vadim on the back of it. He likes to wear it. Loves playing football. Loves his training shoes and jeans. Really excited to go to Scotland again and asked if he is going tomorrow. Never saw dad – Macho - Vadim says he is hiding! Took more pics of the house this time and they speak for themselves. But they do have a guest room and John and Lynda are most welcome anytime they say !!

Went for a quick visit to Angelina Cotton. And her granny. It was great to see them and granny was giving us huge hugs and many kisses. It was really nice to see them and granny really likes us. Apparently she kept asking “when is handsome Kenny coming to see me” Oh well its nice to make someones day ! I think I racked up over 10 kisses from her – that's above and beyond the call of duty ☺

Next was the long drive back to Mogilev for Dinner at Olyas mums house. Olya is so like her mum. Also there were Olyas dad, Katia Markava and her husband Oleg and Bob and Adela. We had nice traditional Belarussian food and lots of it and lots to drink and lots of chatting. It was a

very nice evening. One really funny moment was when Bob was trying to refuse more drink and Olya, who likes Scottish phrases said. "Bob Dae as yir telt" in a perfect Scottish accent. So funny. We couldn't stop laughing and Bob – well, he didn't refuse any more drink ☺

Tuesday

Up at 6.30

Breakfast 8.30, shopping then Mogilev visits today.

Visit to Zhenya 2013 – 1st visit to Scotland

Likes to do puzzles and watch cartoons. He helps mum around the house to clean and yesterday he used the vacuum to clean the house for me. He was very happy to read the letter from his new host family and find out that his new host dad works with a professional football team. He is in the first form and does well at school. Likes mathematics. Best friend at school is Andrei and they like to play together at football. There are 6 children in his class. School number 37 is his school and it only takes 5 minutes to walk to it. Foodwise he likes pasta with meat and ketchup. Doesn't like Onion. Likes amusement parks. When he leaves school he would like to be a policeman. He doesn't have any dreams.

Likes T-shirts, Tracksuits etc not so much jeans. Lovely boy but appears to get his own way all the time and when he doesn't he cries and shouts. We have the opportunity to make a big difference to Zhenya and I think he will return to Belarus a much better boy

Visit to Kiryl 2013 – 1st visit to Scotland

Life was turned upside down for the family last year when their house burned down and the family were in hospital for a time. With no insurance they have no money to build another one. So mum, dad, sister and Kiryl are now living with Gran and Granda in a small wooden house in the city. They take me to see the remains of the previous house and it is very sad to see the remains of what was a lovely house. We will do our best to help them to rebuild their lives if not their house.

Kiryl is quite a fussy eater. He likes pasta with no sauce, potatoes, ice cream, juice, lemonade, chips, crisps, soup. Likes to play football, but now doesn't play so much. Likes playing computer games. Likes to ride a bike but doesn't have one now as it burned in the fire. Would like to be in the army. His dream would be to have a good house/home that won't burn down. His favourite subject is drawing but doesn't like school much. He has no marks at school yet as it's his first year but does well. The family were very happy to read the letter from the new host family and see who Kiryl will be staying with. Mum feels more relaxed about him coming to Scotland knowing that he is going to a nice house and family.

We then get a trolley bus into the city centre. It was an experience. The bus was packed and still the conductor came round to take the fares. Yes they still have bus conductors!!

Had a good walk round the city centre and it was a nice sunny day. Went to a café for a cup of tea and walked more before sitting on a bench in the square in the sun. Very nice day.

Then off the Pashas grans flat where we had a nice walk to the lake before having dinner. It was the first time I had been to their flat and it was nice to see them growing the tomato seeds I had sent them.

I head back to my apartment early with Andrei and go to bed early. Very tired.

Wednesday

Up at 7.30 10 hours sleep and feel much better, ready to see out the rest of the week. Really needed that. Have breakfast in the cafe, nice pancakes and a cup of tea.

Another big day today 6 visits to the villages, Luba is in one of the furthest away villages and we have to be back in Mogilev by 4.30 for Andrei to pick up his daughter from Kindergarten. So at the moment we are heading to the villages and we have just overtaken Lewis Hamilton in his F1 car and playing chicken with the oncoming traffic :)

Visit to Luba - 2nd visit to Scotland

Its our first time in Krasnapolie area. Luba lives in a small village outside Krasnapolie in a dirt track street near "the" shop. Its great to see her and mum tells us that Luba was very ill during the winter time. She was in hospital 3 times and had an operation on her appendics and when she got out she had an infection and was back in twice. She missed a lot of school and now she has extra classes to try and catch up. Lubas bed was an upside down fruit crate with a straw paliasse mattress on top. Sandy and Louise her host parents have arranged for a new bed, mattress and bedding to be delivered. It will arrive next Monday and they are very excited about getting a delivery like this.

Visit to big Sasha 2013 – 4th visit to Scotland

Sasha is in good health. She does well at school and is a lovely girl. The oldest in our group and likes to try and speak English with us. Her village school will close next year as there are not enough pupils now. So Sasha will then go to school in another village. It shouldn't be a problem as there is a school bus. The days she liked best in Scotland were Airport control tower, soft play, decorating cakes. Everything sent home is very useful. They hope David is in good health and everyone else. We arranged for a bike to be delivered from her host family and Bob and Andrei assembled it. It looked very good. Little brother Roma was not be outdone so he got his wee bike out too for one of the photos. Sashas mum helps us to keep an eye on Nikitas family and we thank her again for this, as Nikitas family is going through a tough time. We have a nice cup of tea with mum and Sasha with some lovely baking. mmmm

Visit to Nikita 2013 – 4th visit to Scotland

The news is not so good from this family. Nikitas mum doesnt have custody of the children again. Only dad. Mum is drinking heavily again and is not with the family at the moment. We are told that Nikitas health is ok but I got quite a shock when I saw him. Nikita is normally quite a chunky boy but now he looks so thin with quite pronounced features on his face. We are told that school is ok but I know from others that Nikita misses a lot of school to look after the children when his parents are drunk, which is often. The youngsters were at grans house when we visited. Dad is not a nice man when he is drunk, which is often. He often phones Katia late at night and shouts abuse. When we visited he was drunk and got very aggressive and was shouting and swearing at Katia, who was shaking. Andrei took him outside, locked the door and they

exchanged pleasantries, which left us in peace but we didn't stay long, wondering what was going on outside. When we got outside all was calm and we said our goodbyes. I really feel for Nikita. He is a nice, clever boy and at 10 years old he has already been through a lot and had to put up with a lot. He is not getting the chance to make something of his life as he is having to look after 2 parents and the younger children. Sashas mum will continue to keep an eye on them at the school, where she works.

Visit to Andrei . 2013 – 4th visit to Scotland

Andrei likes most food and his favourites are lard and pork but not chicken or beef. He also likes salad! Not fish. Likes to wear anything except a skirt !

Grandma says hello to everyone. She is a big character. It was nice to see Andrei in a relaxed talkative mood. He is normally quite a quiet boy. It was so nice to watch him listen to Katias every word as he took in all the information about his new host parents. I think he will be quite relaxed about the change and he was happy to show Vicka and gran the pictures he had received. I was impressed when he did his video message and used the names of his new mum, dad and two Scottish brothers. They are quick learners. Andrei has had a lot of turmoil in his life in the last few years with Dad being killed, then last year mum passing away so suddenly. Andrei and Vicka seem settled with Gran and aunt and I was worried that the change of host might be difficult for him but so far so good. Sister Vicka comes to our Maghull group and this year our group and the Maghull group are arriving on the same flight so that is nice. We will do our best with the help of the new hosts to give Andrei a good visit among the friends he has made over the past few years. I am so grateful to his new hosts for coming forward at the 11th hour, in his time of need, so that he can continue his journey with us.

Visit to Natasha 2013 – 4th visit to Scotland

When we arrive we see a look of panic in Grans face as she tends the vegetable garden. She had forgotten we were coming and Natasha was at an after school class. Granny is forgiven for lapses like that. She is a great lady and if it were not for her then I have no doubt this family would fall apart. Natashas mum and granda are both alcoholics. Gran has problems with her legs and blood pressure, which is sometimes high and sometimes low. That is understandable, but in general she says she is ok and just gets on with it. She has to. It is her 61st birthday tomorrow. Wow she has had a hard life. Natasha was at school but is in now, her sister ran to school to tell her to come home. Its great to see Natasha. Wearing a nice skirt and blouse and a denim jacket. Very stylish. We are told Natasha is good and in good health. Natasha sometimes has problems with little skin infections and I notice that she has some problems on her lips but didn't say anything. If it is the same when she is in Scotland we will get her looked at and hopefully help her. Granny tells us that Natashas is going to watch the circus on Saturday and she helps her granny a lot in the house and outside. Katia reads her letter from her new hosts parents and tells her about the drawings and she is excited to be coming back to Scotland. She shows us round her house, which we didn't get to see last year, and Gran shows us round the yard outside including their large log store and their rabbits, which I am not sure if they are pets or future dinners. I suspect a bit of both. As we walk out to our car I am reminded of the outside toilet which is part of the entrance gate to the yard. What I see and hear of this family reaffirms our decision to continue to support Natasha for a further two years. It is great that Natashas new host family and her old one are

good friends and once she is settled with us again I am sure she will meet her old hosts at some point for a catch up.

Krystina. 2013 – 4th visit to Scotland

Had to abandon the car about half a mile from the house as the dirt track road was so muddy and wet. We couldn't risk getting stuck. So we bailed out and decided to walk. The weather was lovely. Beautiful sunshine but we were walking on a very wet muddy road between two very flat fields. The road stretching almost to the horizon and then sweeping left to a very small village with only a few houses, maybe 6. We had phoned Krystina to say that we couldn't get the car in and soon after we saw a little dot appear on the horizon and run all the way along the horizon and then turn and run towards us down the muddy road. So nice to see it was like something out of a lovely film. You can see why she is so excited to see us. There is nothing much in the village to get excited about.

All is well with Krystina and she is good and very happy to see us. She is good at school and her favourite subject is music. School is very far away and she has to get a bus. However when the road is bad with either snow or mud she has to walk a long way to get the bus. When in Scotland she tells us that she likes swimming and likes going to the different schools and colleges. She is looking forward to seeing Jess again, so much. It is understandable. I think there are long periods of time when she doesn't get any attention from mum as she is a heavy drinker. As we walk along the road back to the car we see many empty Vodka bottles littering the edge of the fields. The road is also the way to the shop in the next village and I am guessing the bottles don't even make it back to the house with mum. Krystina's aunt has just had another baby and we have some spare baby things in the car so Krystina comes all the way back to the car with us to collect the baby things. It's not nice saying goodbye on a remote road but Krystina is used to walking the road to the shop and school bus.

Now on the long road back to Mogilev for a quick change out of our very dirty clothes and boots into something nicer for dinner at Katia and Andrei's house. Looking forward to meeting Sasha for the first time. We have a lovely meal with Katia and Andrei. Liza is so sweet and entertaining. It was nice to meet their son Sasha for the first time and see his medals and cups he has won in the triathlon. He is now in the Belarus national team and is very busy training and competing in different countries. Maybe we will see him at the Olympics in Rio if he qualifies. We also meet Katia's friend Ira who is a lovely girl and helps Katia sometimes with Liza and also in the charity.

Off to bed now for a good sleep hopefully

Thursday

Up at 7am and start to get organized for the final day.

Meet Bob and Adela in the Café for breakfast of pancakes and tea. We are getting good at the Russian now and we have mastered ordering the pancakes, tea and even just hot water for me to add my own teabag.

Just like every day we start our work with a visit to the supermarket to get all of the food we need to deliver on our visits today then it's off to the visits.

Visit to Dima 2013 – 3rd visit to Scotland

Dima lives in a hostel in Mogilev with his mum and sister Diana. Diana is not at home when we visit as she is already in Scotland at our Forth Valley group in Linlithgow. The hostel room is very small. Smaller than most peoples living room and that is the whole size of their house. They share a kitchen and a bathroom. We had thought that they shared these with 25 other families but we are informed that they only share with 8 other families. Mum still has to get up early in the morning and queue to use the shared facilities. She has put on a lovely spread of food for us. Pastries with ham and cheese inside and a lovely cake with apple inside. It is quite humbling that someone with so little and with shared facilities can make such beautiful food. Dima and Diana have a great mum who looks after them so well. I ask her how long she has lived in the hostel, thinking it was more of a temporary solution for her and I am shocked when she tells me she has been there for 10 years. I understand why it is so difficult for her to have any relationship with a man and I don't think her situation will change any time soon. But she is devoted to Dima and Diana and that is plain to see.

Dima does well at school. Likes English and Maths. He is missing Diana already. I say is he missing someone to argue with but he says no, they are really good friends, which is great as they spend so much time together in a very confined space. They have a TV and computer and you can see that mum really does her best for them in their small place. They have skyped Diana already in Scotland. Dima had good health in the winter. He doesnt get out much after school so plays computer and watches TV. On Sunday he has extra activities at school - swimming, English and judo. He is looking forward to meeting his new host family and liked reading their letter and seeing their pictures. He likes everything about Scotland. He doesnt like chicken or fish with bones. Likes everything else. Prefers to wear jeans rather than sporty clothes, but both are ok. Dima is always very talkative his mum says but is shy when we are there. Really nice visit.

Tania 2013 – 4th visit to Scotland

Tania lives with mum and 2 children in a two bedroom apartment in Mogilev. The apartment is very clean and is fitted out well with nice furniture. You can tell that mum and the family take good care of it. Mum is a cleaner, working at school, after the school. The children are left at home with older daughter and boy 13. Dad died a few years ago so the family has suffered tragedy in the recent past. The Scottish hosts are keen to have skype or email contact with the family as this is sometimes possible in the city but they have no internet in the house so don't have skype or an email address. Tania is a lovely girl and goes swimming after school. Her favourite subject is Russian literature ! and she is very good at it and mathematics. She has English lessons at school 3 times a week. This was my first visit to this family as Tania is transferring to us from the Edinburgh group. It was a nice visit and the family appear to have recovered from the death of dad and are getting on better now.

From Tania we go to visit the school where our current interpreter Katia M works and also our previous interpreters Katia K and Luda. Also Ira who we met last night works there too. We are given a tour by the headmasters assistant. Primary school is on one side of the building and secondary school is on the other side. This is a sports school so there is a swimming pool and large games hall. Only 2 of 45 schools in Mogilev have swimming pools. We are taken into an English lesson in the secondary school and I am surprised by how well dressed and well mannered the pupils are. They rise to greet us into their classroom and are happy to try and speak English with some real English speakers.

We then go to the school dinner hall and then café and get something to eat in the café. School dinners are set up, served and cleared up by the children. Very impressive and it's a 3 course meal. After lunch we go to a primary school mathematics class and have some fun and a laugh with the children and their jovial teacher who are all delighted to see us. They were all well impressed when I solved the mathematical problem the teacher had written on the blackboard. After school we went into the centre of Mogilev for some shopping for souvenirs. It was a lovely day. 18C and walking about in our t-shirts and feeling the heat of the sun. Our trip was almost over and it was time to say our thank yous. We arranged for all the interpreters who had helped us during the week to join us for a meal in the café at our hotel. It would also be our first meeting with Ira Lemeshkova our second interpreter for the West Lothian group who will be returning with Katia Markava who was with us last year. Ira is very nice and we get on well. She was once a child on the FOCC programme and it was her dream that one day she would be able to return to the UK as an interpreter. She has been to 2 groups before us and she is just perfect for us. I am sure all the hosts will really like her. We do a short video message with her to say hello to the hosts. Our meal was lovely, with beer and wine and very reasonably priced too. It was a lovely way to say thank you to the people who had made our trip so special.

Friday

Up at 5.15 and we catch the bus to the airport at 6.30. On the bus are the 18 from the UK Katia and friend Ira and also around 6 children. These were the last of the children to get their visas and they will go the embassy in Minsk with Katia once we are dropped at the airport.

We had a good trip home with only an hour delay from Gatwick to Edinburgh.

That is my second trip to Belarus over. I have enjoyed this one just as much as the last one and worked just as hard for our children and hosts putting in long hours. I was very ably assisted by Bob and Adela from West Lothian and also Pippa and Ali from Edinburgh. Without their help, hard work and support we could not have done all that we did for the children, their families and the host families back home. They were great companions and I know that they were truly humbled by the kindness, generosity and spirit of our children and their families. They maybe have nothing but they are very happy to share that with us and they are all so very grateful for all the we/you do for them and their children.

Thank you so much to our many interpreters and drivers and to Katia and Andrei for keeping us safe and organizing everything for us. You have shown us round your beautiful country and taken us to see our children and we are so grateful to you for all that you do for us and them. We are so lucky to have such good and nice people looking after us. Thank you so much. We look forward to repaying your kindness when you return to Scotland.

My last thought is for the children and their families. The reason we do all of this. Most are so appreciative of all that we/you do. Do not be disheartened that some of the families troubled by alcoholism do not appear to be so appreciative. It is in these families that the children need our help more than ever and remember our charity is called Friends of Chernobyl's Children. Children are not always good at being appreciative but I can see it in the eyes and faces of these children in particular, as they look at me, that they are so appreciative of what we do, and that is more

than enough for me. We don't set out to be appreciated, only to help and love the children unconditionally.