

Diary of Belarus Visit Autumn 2015

Wednesday 28 October

Leave the house about 09.50. Travelling with us on this visit are

Kenny Turnbull, group co-ordinator, dad of Pasha, 7th visit

Clare Gardner, treasurer, mum of Palina , 1st visit

Steven Turnbull, Dad of big Maksim and Zhenya, 1st visit

Adela Keenan, mum of Sergei, 4th visit

Andrea Wood-Kidd, mum of Lena, 1st visit

We all congregate at Edinburgh airport around 10.30, excited and raring to go. All of our luggage bursting at the seams and overweight ☺ but we sweet talk the check-in girls and they let us through with no extra charge. Just as well, as we have the minimum of clothes required for a week and if we had to take anything out it would have to be clothes as we wouldn't dream of taking anything for the children out.

We are flying Lufthansa Edinburgh-Frankfurt-Minsk. We have a meal once we are through security as we probably won't have a meal for the rest of the day.

Flights and connections go very well and we touch down in Minsk at 2125 to a temperature of -2c ☺ Passport control takes a long time as usual with much checking of passports and visas with magnifying glasses ☺ then we all got pulled to the side with our luggage and got it scanned and money checked but all was OK, no problems. Its great to see the new fully modernised airport looking so well and shiny and new.

Kostya and Sergei meet us. It was so nice to see them. Then 7 of us and all of our huge cases and hand luggage fitted in to Kostyas great car which will be our chariot for most of the week. Only two and a bit hours in the car and we drop Andrea and Adela off at their hotel and we finally get to our apartment after midnight .We have a quick unpack of all our supplies and sort them ready for our busy first day.

Thursday 29 October

Wake before my alarm at 7.30 with the brightness shining in the window. It's a beautiful autumnal morning and there has been a heavy frost overnight. Steven, Clare and me are staying in an apartment still done out in the old Soviet style, but it's very comfortable for us and adds to our experience. After the procession of showers we sort out 5 bags of supplies for today's visit and 2 dolls to take as gifts for our 2 new girls who will be invited to Scotland today. Before we know it Katia is chapping the door and it's time to go. We pick up Adela and Andrea at the hotel and see Sheila and Mandie from mid Sussex group who are here just now. We make arrangements with Kostya to buy a bike for later in the visit for someone and the price is \$100-\$120 dollars. (For those who were thinking about it for future) then it

was off to the supermarket, change some money and shop, shop, shop. 5 of everything for our food parcels for today's visits. In the parcels are oil, pasta, rice, tinned meat, tinned fish, oatmeal porridge, buckwheat porridge, porridge, sweet milk, whole chicken, salami sausage, sausages, chocolate butter, normal butter, ketchup, mayonnaise, sugar, stock cubes, oranges, apples, biscuits, sweets, washing powder, soap, and we add to that things that we have brought- tea, coffee, elastoplast, lipsalve, sudocrem, freezer bags, toothpaste, toothbrushes, and 2 bags for life.

Back to Kostyas car and like a well-oiled machine the team puts one of every item into the 5 bags for life to be handed out to the children we visit.

All packed into the car and it's off on the 2 hour journey to Klimovichi to visit Sergei and Lena. On the way we see a beautiful St Andrews cross in the sky made by the trails from 2 aeroplanes. A huge welcoming message to say hello and thanks to our friends from Scotland 😊

This week there is a national clean-up day and everyone is out in the street cleaning up leaves and we hear that our friend and interpreter Lena Lisikova, who is a teacher, is working at the cemetery today cleaning it. They really look after their country and take a pride in it.

As it's the first time for Andrea, Clare and Steven we drive through the dead zone to get to Klimovichi. An area too contaminated to live in. We don't normally go that way, only for first timers. Lots of abandoned concrete flats and buried villages with only a monument left to tell you there was a village there. You can see where people's houses were by the garden. You can still see fruit trees in line, but nobody picks the fruit now. It's just a wilderness. Its so sad.

Visit to Sergei. Mum and Sergei are always so pleased to see Adela. They have a real bond made from Adela's 4 visits to Belarus. Sergei is doing well and is very happy to see Adela and get lots of presents. The shy boy we used to meet who would hide away when we arrived and be excited but almost embarrassed to see us, is growing up and he is very comfortable sitting chatting with us and having a cup of tea. We hear he doesn't like school and is happy to be on holiday from school this week. His marks are OK at 6 out of 10 but he was higher last year. After a nice long visit we head to Lena's house.

There is great excitement in the car as Andrea gets closer to seeing Lena's family for the first time. They are still with their foster mum and have been there since May. What a great welcome from so many people at the house. Mum Irina is foster mum to 7 children and they are all there as well as 2 ladies who head up Education/fostering/social work for the whole region. They would like to establish links with our charity and possibly tell us about children we could take to our group in future. It was lovely to meet them and if they can lead us to only really needy children, then of course we will speak with them. What an amazing spread of food Irina put on for us. So tasty. It's mind boggling to think how she can do this with 7 children to look after and so nice to see the Head of Education being so friendly and kind to the children, taking little Vasilisa on to her knee and feeding her lunch. She tells us that they work very hard to get families rehabilitated/reunited and check with the mum and dad every day to make sure they are well and not doing anything they shouldn't and work with them to make sure they get a job. They give us the news that the children will return to their natural parents on 1 November. The children are so happy and settled with Irina and I think they will have a mixture of emotions when they return to their own mum on Sunday for the first time in 6 months. Hopefully it works out for the best for the children, whatever happens, as it's important that they are in a settled family environment. They are such lovely children and really deserving of loving care.

Now off to Cherikof to meet Lera a new girl who will come in June 2016 to the Grady family. The visit goes very well and she is a lovely chatty happy girl who will be a great addition to the group. Full profile and pics will be given to the host family so that they can get to know her likes and dislikes and prepare for her coming. Favourite answer to my questions – are you afraid of anything – only vampires ☺ should be OK in Scotland I hope ☺ We take food, a gift of a new doll and also a letter/pics from the new host family introducing themselves so that the child can get used to them too and its not a journey into the unknown for Lera.

Now off to another new girl Ksusha who has been known to us for a long time. She is little sister of big Vadzim who was in our group from 2010 to 2012. It's great to see Vadzim again. What a fine big boy he is and is a great help to his mum around the house. His dad passed away 6 years ago ☹ Ksusha is a lovely girl with a great smile and is excited to be coming to stay with her big brothers host family in 2016. Mum was delighted to show us her plumbed in washing machine courtesy of the host family and sends lots of love to them. We enjoy a cup of tea with mum and the family to catch up on their news.

Next is a visit to small Vadzim, who lives in the same village. We hear the very sad news that mum had a breast- cancer operation 4 months ago and is in rehab at moment. She breaks down when she tells Luda our interpreter about it. Vadzim is in good health and is happy to see us. He has good marks at school especially for physical. We are told if he misbehaves father is strict with him ☺ Mum is in better spirits now despite her problems and is very chatty although she gets a bit upset again when talking with Luda later. We don't see dad on this visit as he is working. Vadzim is at school holiday camp each day at the moment as school is on holiday and he enjoys it. He is very much looking forward to coming back to Scotland for what will be his 5th visit.

Then we head back on the long journey to Mogilev. Its 8pm when we arrive (where does the time go) and we are a bit late for a meal with Tania Simkina's family at her kind-hearted mum's house. Tania is not able to come as she has just had a baby only 10 days ago (boy Alex) but we will see her and Vova and the boys on Saturday. Her mum is such a lovely woman and has invited us to her house for a meal with the family every time we have been in Mogilev and it feels like a home from home with lovely food and chat with around 15 of us around a long table. Luda tells that they only have a table like this on very special occasions like Christmas and weddings and we are very honoured and humbled by their generous hospitality. Steven is struggling with the cold and he is made various potions by mum to try and help. There were many good things in them like honey and tea made from parts of the raspberry bush which seemed to help and certainly tasted nicer than medicine.

What a great first day and already our first timers are getting an understanding of the warmth and hospitality of the Belarusian people and how appreciative they are of all that we do.

Thanks to Luda for great entertaining interpreting all day ☺ and Kostya for great driving and navigating on the long journeys and sharing his internet signal on his phone for us to use. We couldn't have asked for any more of our team today.

Friday 30 October

Steven slept well and long after his potions from Tania's mum ☺ Today we all go separate ways to spend some private time with our own children. Normally we wouldn't do this so early in the visit but today is the last day of the autumn school holiday so we take advantage of it.

Andrea and Adela visit Lena and Sergei via the market where they buy a bike for Sergei's birthday and deliver it. In Sergeis house water comes from a tap in the street. Inside they have an improvised sink which is a container of cold water about chest level, with a small tap which you use to wash your hands and the dirty water is collected in a basin on a chair below. Kostyas told us the day before where we can get a better system which looks like a proper sink, still with water stored above the sink ready to be used, but it has a water heater in it. Adela was very happy to buy one and Mum is so pleased when her "luxurious" new hot water sink is put together and is working and of course Sergei is delighted to get a bike for his birthday.

Clare is dropped in the village of Lobanovka where she will spend the day with her child Palina and her family. She is helped by Lena Lisikova who knows many of our children so well from working in schools in Lobanovka and Cherikof. Lena is also a great help to us with buses, especially to our party where she gathers all the children (almost 30 !) in Cherikof and brings them on the bus on the long journey to Mogilev (our parties wouldn't be possible without her) Clare and Lena spend some time in Palinas house with Palinas family and Clare hands over the many gifts of clothes she has brought for the family before Palina and Lena take them on a walk round the village. They visit Sveta from our group and see Palinas school but unfortunately they couldn't see inside. Later they take a drive to Cherikof for a walk round the centre of Cherikof, which is nice, and a look in the museum. Clare treats them all to a nice lunch in the café. After dropping the children back in Lobonavka Lena takes Clare to her house and Clare had a really nice time with Lena and her family. Lena used to be Palinas teacher and Lenas sister Katia is Palinas current teacher. Lena has been to Clare's house twice in Scotland to see Palina and as a result Clare and Lena have a nice friendship.

Me and Steven spend some time in the morning walking in the city centre, which is really lovely. We pass a wedding at the town hall. After a nice walk we go to the office of Focc/Helping hands in Mogilev. World headquarters ☺ is a very humble but special small office with lots of pictures of children on visits on the wall. So nice to see. Its hard to believe that on visa biometrics days there are 200 children per day, plucked from the villages and brought on the long journey to the office to have their finger prints and iris taken for their visa. That's after a huge amount of paperwork collected over months for each child and detailed visa applications completed online. A huge amount of work from a team of dedicated volunteer interpreters, all in that small 2 desk office. After the office we go to Materyk Bowling to make final arrangements and pay a deposit for tomorrows bowling party and food. We book for 39 children, wow, our group is growing and that doesn't include September children ! ☺ We then make our way to Zhenyas flat for Steven to meet gran and mum for the first time. This went well but was maybe a little awkward at the start as mum is quite shy and maybe a bit uncomfortable meeting new people but she soon relaxed and they all had a great time with much laughing and joking over lunch. In the end they were reluctant to let Steven go home and invited him back another time. It was great to see Zhenya eat so well at lunch and then play so well with Steven.

After escaping from the clutches of gran and mum ☺ we head off to see our September group interpreter Yuliyas flat and we enjoyed a nice cup of coffee and chat with her.

Next up was pashas house, my boy, and he was joined by Stevens other boy Maksim(Pashas cousin) and the rest of the family for one of Pashas dad's legendary barbecues. Its great to see them all again and be back in the house where I have slept over on a couple of occasions, to experience a day in Pashas life and spend more time with his family. It feels like home to me. The house is maybe one of the smallest of

the group, but the warmth, love and kindness we experience there is huge. Pasha's dad loves having his Scottish friends over and his hospitality is humbling. Although Pasha is finished on the programme I take him a large bag of shopping with many treats in it and hand over the gifts I have brought with me, which all go down well. We are joined later by Clare, Adela, Andrea and Luda back from their private days and we are one huge happy family together, eating, chatting and having fun.

Saturday 31 October

In the morning Kostya tells us it was -11 overnight and you could see the heavy frost on the ground. Our first visit today is to see our 2014 interpreter Tania Simkina and her family. Tania had a beautiful baby boy only 2 weeks ago. Adela stopped on the way to get flowers for Tania. We also took many gifts from the host families to help her, as she was well liked by them, especially her host mum Jean and hopefully she can return to our group in future. It was great to see them all again and play with my wee friend Dima, who had been so excited waiting for us to come. Tania had prepared a cup of tea and lovely breakfast for us. Amazing food, as always, with such a small baby to look after.

We went straight from there to the party at Materyk 10 Pin Bowling. All children come except Vadzim Calderwood and Nikita Mclean. I think Vadzim's family forgot and Nikita had to watch his wee brother and sister, while dad was working.

Lena Lisikova brought all the children from Cherikof on the bus. She knows them all so well and is a great help to us. We couldn't do this party day without her. We had 36 children who turned up. It was great to see so many of them together, old and new, sharing food and fun.

Children all had some pizza, chips with chicken and ketchup. Then apple pie and ice cream. They all had fizzy juice and fruit juice too. The room we ate in is also used as a night club with many big screen TVs everywhere so I took a dvd of the concert from June with me and it was good to see it played on all the screens with the music from it booming out while the children all ate. I think the children all enjoyed it very much in-between wee bouts of embarrassment at seeing themselves perform.

Some of the older children who are finished are so big and grown up now. It was so good to see them all. Here is an update from some of them.

Natasha Stenhouse/Batten is well and says nothing is new. Gran is OK and both sisters still at home. Says "big hello, I remember and miss you and love you"

Kristina is still living with aunt. She says to Scotland families " I love you "

Big Denis is so big and grown up and misses his family.

Olya is so big and grown up too. Our little princess has grown in a beautiful young lady.

Andrei is getting big too and has a new mobile number to pass on to his hosts, which I will do privately.

Big Sasha is very big now ☺ Nothing new for her except young brother Roma started school recently.

Masha Bishop is so tall and her dad has a new baby.

Wee Sashas family are good. All the family are well and in good health including Sasha. No more health problems.

Dasha Harper has very good English and has no news. She gives me a lovely drawing telling me how much she loves me and how kind and good I am. Its nice to be appreciated 😊

We also saw Olya Sapunova our 2012 interpreter and she was happy to see the children again and help us with some interpreting.

The children loved the bowling and had great fun together. An exciting day out for them coming all the way from their village to Mogilev , which is 2 hours away, for food and fun. It was sad to say goodbye especially for Adela and Andrea saying goodbye for the last time on this trip to Sergei and Lena, their children.

From the party we drop some things in to the office we have brought such as hats and scarfs and school stuff that will be used for Christmas parcels for our friends in helping hands to take to needy village children at Christmas.

From there we go to visit Dima and Dianna and their lovely mum Sveta it's always such a lovely positive visit and mum is such a beautiful baker. She has made a lovely cake and also beautiful triangular pastries with ham inside just for me 😊 and with ham and cheese for others. It's always amazing to think that this beautiful baking is produced in a kitchen shared with 8 families. We tell Dima that we would love him to return to our group as an interpreter when he is 18 if it is possible. He is hoping to study hard enough to go to the top university in the country and learn more languages so is not sure where he will be or if it will be possible to fit a visit in, but it would be great 😊

In the evening for our night off we enjoyed a meal out at a Bulgarian restaurant with Tania P and husband Dima and Luda and husband Ed. It was a very enjoyable evening with some halloween fun thrown in 😊

Sunday 1 November

We don't need to get shopping this morning as Kostya got it for us last night when we were out. He is a great driver and a great help too.

Today we head off to Bykhov area. First up we go the house of a new girl called Sasha to invite her to Scotland. I first met Sasha back in March when I was looking for new children for September group. Back then we had to see her in the hospital but I am happy to say that this time she was at home and in good health. She said her dream was to have a new doll and luckily that's exactly what we had for her to make her dream come true 😊 she is very happy to be coming to Scotland to the Currie family.

Next we visit Alina Wells. Alina was a late replacement for our September group this year so we hadn't met her family or been to her house. She lives in a hostel room with mum and dad. Dad gets the room through his job. Mum is very nice and they have the main room looking nice. It was a nice visit but a very quick one as we hear that Dima and Stas's planned mode of transport for their very long journey to the party will not happen. Kostya our driver will need to make the long journey on dirt roads to pick them up.

But first we need to go to Sergeis house another new child being invited to June group for next year. He is a happy wee boy living in an old village wooden house in Bykhov. A typical village house with water

and toilet outside. He is delighted with his gift of a football and can't wait to come to Scotland to the Sinton family.

Kostya drops us all at the venue for the September group get together and makes the long journey to pick up Dima and Stas. Katia boss and Yuliya go and pick up Katia Whelan and report that they see a nice improvement in her living conditions and they have some ideas about how we can help further. All of the children come and they were allowed to bring siblings and mum/dad. It was great to see them all and they were so appreciative of the afternoon out and what we did for their children in Scotland. They all enjoyed chicken and chips, pizza, ice cream and as much cola as they wanted. We played the dvd of the concert on the television and they all enjoyed it 😊 especially the parents who were seeing it for the first time. It was so nice to see all the children gathered together and having fun.

After all children had left we made our way to a hostel in the centre of Bykhov where we met our final child to be invited for 2016. His name is Maksim and as with Sergei and Sasha I had met him in March but he was too young to travel. He was quiet on that visit but is a bit more active on this visit and was very excited to see us. He loves to play football and his face lit up when we gave him a new ball. He has 3 brothers so there are 4 children and mum and dad living in a hostel. Their accommodation has a living room a bedroom very small kitchen and small toilet and bathroom. It's not so big for so many people but it is warm and they have water. So that's our June group complete again 😊

After a long day again we enjoy a barbecue in the forest with Luda, Ed, Tania, Katia, Yuliya, Olya, Andrei, Lisa and the five of us. It's at a restaurant we visited last time and they have barbecue huts you can rent for the evening with a big table, built in barbecue and chimney and sink. You bring all your own food and cook it yourself. It was a very enjoyable relaxed evening in good company. We say our goodbyes to Adela and Andrea as they will leave in the morning to start their journey home. Thanks ladies you have been a great help and great company to us all.

Monday 2 November

Today started with our biggest shopping trip of the week. We buy seven huge bags of shopping for our seven visits today. A huge sorting operation ensues in the Hippo car park, but we are soon on our way after working well together as a team.

First up is Maksim, very happy to see us after his first visit to Scotland. His favourite thing about Scotland was his family and playing with friends. He tells us he liked chicken, broccoli and chips. Some good news is that Dad lost his job so he is not in and is away to try and find a new one today. We meet mum for first time, which is nice. She is on holiday from work at the moment.

We hand out some presents and the boys are so excited about their gifts. Maksim is still telling mum each day different things about Scotland as they come into his head. He has so many good impressions. Mum tells us they may have to move soon as the house is linked to work, so they have been offered a flat in Cherikof with 3 bedrooms.

Next is Masha and Dasha. We are greeted by a new fence round their house, which is nice. Dasha liked M and Ds, sharks at Deep Sea World and swimming, but not with sharks 😊 She has no news. Likes English at school, but her English is good and maybe even better than the teachers she says 😊 Masha is quieter, as usual, and has no news. They are both growing up quickly and are lovely young ladies now.

Ulianna and Sasha are getting big too. Both girls say a big hello to their families and thank you for your support.

Next up is Nikita. He likes English lessons at school and tells us he is very good at it with marks of 9 out of 10, which is great for someone so young. He reads his letter from his host family and mum says he didn't get the card sent by post (mentioned in the letter) He liked everything in Scotland especially the soft play areas. He wishes his Scottish family to stay well and wait for him coming and wishes them all a happy birthday when it is time. He is so cute 😊 Dad is away to work in Russia. Gran is paralysed now 😞 and is lying next door. They have painted some things in the house but wait on dad coming home to do more. The presents that Nikita brought home were very useful. They are wearing new pyjamas already that hosts sent with me. Mum says a big hello to the family and wishes them merry Christmas. Maksim is his friend in the group.

We then make the drive to Sashas village, which is about 3 miles by dirt road off the main road. Sasha got a parcel for birthday from his hosts in the post. Thank you. Things he liked best about Scotland were his bike, scooter, zoo, crisps. Everything sent home was useful and very much appreciated by mum. He does craft club at school and enjoys it very much. We meet a man in the house this time for the first time and he is working in the local club. Mum is on maternity leave and the news is that she expects a new baby early in the new year, which will be child number 6. They don't know if it's boy or girl, but. Sasha would like another brother to try and even things up 😊.

Next we head to Lobanovka to see 3 children. There are many workmen in the village and we are told that they are getting gas put in to the village, which is exciting for them.

We meet Vicka to pass on the sad news that her host family wont be hosting in 2016. She has had 3 lovely years with them and we pass on a nice letter from them. Vickas hair is very well done and she is such a confident girl and takes the news in her stride. Her news for the family is that dad is now a driver and mum is looking after the pigs on the farm. Vicka is with gran today, who is mum of dad. Vicka says hello to everyone she knows in Scotland and wishes all the best to the host families.

Next we pop in to see Sveta. We are greeted very excitedly by mum and dad and then Sveta and big brother. Her two wee sisters are still at school. She tells us how much she enjoyed staying with her host family and playing with the big dog. Her hosts did a really great job with her but it wasn't easy and have decided to take a break. We then have to break the news to her that she will swap to a new host family next year. She takes it in her stride and listens very intently as Katia reads out all about the new family. She likes dogs and is very excited to be going to a family with a dog and I am sure she will see her old family too. She says she liked parks and swimming best in Scotland.

Last childrens visit of the day was to Palina. Its great to see the progress in Palina over the past 3 years from being very shy and introverted to being much happier and chatty. She meets us with lots of make-up on 😊 Dad has the table set for us with tea and biscuits on it. So nice. Dad tries so hard for his three girls and does his best to bring them up on his own. Palina and dad show us round the house and outbuildings including chicken shed and Banya (sauna/washing room)Dad tells us that in common with most of the village they are getting gas put in, which should make a difference to them. Its been great for Clare to see where Palina lives and to meet her family. She hands over a new coat to Palinas oldest sister, which fits perfectly before we say our goodbyes 😊

We make the long drive back to Mogilev and buy all our shopping for tomorrow as it will be a busy day. We then head to our September interpreter Lenas house for dinner along with our other September interpreter Yuliya. We are also joined by Lenas son Ilia. He is 15 and its nice to chat with him about his life and time at secondary school. Lena is a lovely cook and made us very nice food including a home-made apple pie. Mmmmm. A very nice evening of food and chat.

Tuesday 3 November

Up and away sharp for our final day of visits. We pop in to see Zhenya and gran for Steven to take some shopping and to say goodbye. Its great to see the progress in Zhenya over the past 3 years. He is such a happy wee boy and is looking forward to coming back to Scotland again as the doctor has passed him fit to travel, at the moment.

Next we make the short journey to Anyas flat. Anya is off school with a cold so she is at home. Mum tells us she still takes her vitamin tablet every day but has a cold despite that. Anya goes to secondary school next year. She is growing up quickly. She likes school and is very good at English. She does extra classes in English so she can understand more. They pay a small amount for this but are happy to do it. In Scotland she liked M and Ds funpark. She was upset before because she could only do the small rides but this time she could do all the big ones too. She also enjoyed swimming and bowling.

Then we visit Vlad. Last time we visited Vlad, him and mum had just moved into a flat and as a result there was very little furniture in it. This time its looking a little better with more furniture. Mum has had to move jobs as the previous firm closed down. She says she now has a mans job at a plant and puts screw threads on to metal bars for clamps for use in cars. She says it's a dirty job and at the end of her shift her hands and arms up to her elbows are black. But its work and she needs the money for rent and living. Vlad really enjoyed his first time in Scotland and liked everything especially his family and helping them with animals. He liked the rides at M and Ds, the sharks at deep sea world and discos. He shows us the candle he made in UK at the school. He is very proud of it. He spent the summer with gran at her house in the village. It was hot and he likes to help mum, gran and cousin around the house. His cousin gave him money for helping and he bought ice cream for the children with it. Nice kind hearted wee boy.

Next we make a visit to a school to establish a friendship link between its 6 year old classes and the equivalent classes in Broxburn Primary School in Scotland. It goes very well, the children were very excited to know they have friends in Scotland and even more excited when we hand over packets of sweets.

Next a visit to Lubas flat. A family friend gave them a fish tank recently so now 9 people live there and many fish in a one bedroom flat. David looks after the fish as Luba tries to put too much food in 😊 Mum can't take time off from her 4 jobs to see us. She needs to work hard to provide for her family. We saw her at the bowling when she dropped Luba off. She was looking well and was happy to see us again and very appreciative of what the Scottish family did for Luba and her. Luba is learning English at school now. Gran is very thankful for what was sent and says thank you to hosts and Luba is looking forward to coming back. She loved swimming . Luba says "I love you" and is so happy when she says this and invites her hosts to Mogilev and says hello to Eddie the dog. Gran tells us she has 9 great grandchildren in Siberia, where she spends the summer. Wow what a big family. Its so nice to see Lubas family again. Such a lovely family.

After Luba we pop in for a few minutes to a nearby stair to say goodbye to Tania Simkina our 2014 interpreter and her lovely mum who always looks after us so well. It's great to see Dima her son and new baby Alex. Dimas loves when we come to visit and loves to play with us and constantly hugs us. He is a great wee boy. Tania is starting to recover from the baby being born 2 weeks ago and its nice to see her again. She is well liked by the host families and her host Jean would love to see her again, if its possible sometime.

Next is a visit to Kiryl and its an exciting visit for us. They lost everything when their wooden house burned down in a fire which almost killed them three years ago. Dad has made such a good job of rebuilding the house and its great to have seen it progress over the last 3 years to a point where they can move in and live in it. The family are very hospitable and when they stayed with gran they always invited us for a meal on every trip and on this trip gran invited us and the family separate. We have got to know them so well over the years. So this is our first time in the completed house. The family are very appreciative of all that we and the hosts do and phone Luda a lot. Mum Ira has us all in tears including Luda our interpreter when she says that they are so lucky that we came into their lives at a time when they had nothing and helped them with clothes etc for Kiryl and it helped them so much and allowed them to do more in rebuilding the house. It was nice to have lunch with the family in their rebuilt house. During lunch Kiryl tells mum and dad that he won a hip hop dance competition at school that day and will go to a competition in Minsk in December. A nice surprise for them. Well done Kiryl. He was great at dancing in our concert.

Our final visit if thus trip is to say goodbye to my boy Pasha and to Maksim, Stevens boy, and for Steven to meet Maksims mum for the first time and see their flat. It's always lovely to spend time with this family. Again we have got to know them so well and they love having their Scottish visitors for dinner and cups of tea. We get to see grandad for the first time in a couple of years. He doesn't go out much and spends the summer at the dacha and winter in the house. He is a great old guy and always gets emotional when he says thank you and goodbye to us.

We head back to our apartment to pack up and get an early night as we will leave the house at 2.45 in the morning (11.45) UK time and travel through the night.

It has been a great trip again. It's great to see families make progress and be so grateful for what we do to help them. It was especially good to see the September group families and children be so excited to see us and appreciative. We can't wait to see them all again. Of course it was also great to meet our five new children who will come in June 2016 when we start to have a positive influence on their lives.

A huge thanks to all who helped on this visit. Travelling companions Adela, Andrea, Steven and Clare for all your help and support during the visit

To our drivers Kostya, Andrei, and Katia. To our interpreters Katia, Luda, Tania P, Yuliya, Lena S, Lena L, Tania S and Olya and other interpreter friends we met on the trip Sergei, Zhenya, and husbands of interpreters who spent time either us Ed, Dima and Vova. All of you have contributed to make our trip an enjoyable worthwhile and safe one and we can't thank you enough for all your hard work and organisation before and during our trip. In total we met 50 children who are currently in our groups, or have been in our groups or who will be in our groups in 2016. That's a huge effort from all in only 6 full days considering the huge amount of travelling involved to see them all.

Roll on our next visit 😊

K x