

Belarus Diary March 2016

Travelling on this trip are Kenny Turnbull, coordinator and host dad of Pasha, on his 8th visit to Belarus. Sonia Johnston, provisions coordinator, host of Dasha and Maksim on her 1st visit to Belarus. Mark Whelan host dad of Katia on his 1st visit to Belarus. (Adela Keenan provisions coordinator and host mum to Sergei on her 5th visit to Belarus and Andrea Wood-Kidd host mum to Lena on her 2nd visit to Belarus)

We travelled on Lufthansa from Edinburgh to Minsk and all arrangements went well. Special mention to the check in girls at Edinburgh who were great and very understanding as all our bags were overweight with our supplies for the children and we didn't get charged. Also special mention to Kostya and Sergei who picked us up from Minsk airport and gave all the ladies a nice flower. Lovely guys.

The weather is dry and not so cold but the forecast is for snow from tomorrow so we will see what the week brings.

After our 2 hour journey from the airport we arrive at the hotel around midnight to be greeted by our very excited interpreters for the week, Luda Hurkova (with husband and our good friend Ed) and Tania Panchenko both of whom will come to Scotland in June and Ira Rozhina who will come with Luda in September. They brought us lovely food which was very welcome after our long journey. They didn't stay for too long as it was late. We make our arrangements for tomorrow and say our goodbyes. We all go off to our rooms to unpack and sort our supplies for the morning. The hotel is OK and comfortable enough for us. Finally get to bed at 2am. Only get about 3 hours sleep due to noisy neighbours and then thinking about all we will do this week.

Friday 18 March

Up and ready and take all our supplies to Sonias room to sort them further then off to the cafe in the hotel for a quick breakfast. Our interpreter for today is Tania and driver is Andrei.

On all our home visits the children get a large bag of food from Belarus and some supplies from Scotland.

First visit is new Lera and grandmother. Lera is very happy and we couldn't stop her dancing around the room and playing with her cat. She is so looking forward to Scotland but doesn't know much about it. She knows Nikita and Maksim from the group and will ask them to tell her about it.

We enjoyed a visit to Veranikas for Sonia to meet with her as they were so close when Veranika was in Scotland. We hear she has good marks at school, 8 and 9 and is very clever. Mum works in Cherikof now fixing and selling clothes. It's been great watching little sister Palina grow up over the years and it's hard to believe she is 5 now. The family are all doing well.

We had a nice visit to New Ksusha, who's birthday is next week when she will be 8. She is excited to be coming to Scotland. Mum was working so aunt was with her and Vadzim. Mum had made a lovely cake for us to have with a cup of tea. We will see mum at the party tomorrow. Vadzim is getting so big and his English is good.

We were joined on these 3 visits by a lady called Olga from the Department of Education (I think). She was a nice enough lady and we got on well with her but it is strange and off-putting having someone

observe all that you do and it doesn't help us to relax with the families and have a nice visit. Its also not so nice for the families to have so many people going in to their house at the one time. If people want to check up on what we do with the children and families (because of the actions of other charities !) then they should really read our diaries of all our trips and look at the photos of every trip (all available on our website), maybe speak with some families on our programme and maybe observe some family visits and our party if they wish, maybe speak with us about what checks are done on us and our hosts back home, but If this is going to be a regular thing for Cherkov from now on, someone observing every contact with children and families, then maybe we wont take any more new children from this area.

Before heading back to Mogilev we drop in to let Sonia meet the family of her child Dasha. They are very excited to meet her and her them. Masha and Dasha are getting so grown up and of course this will be their last year of coming to Scotland. We leave Sonia to get acquainted with the family and spend the night with them and we hear that they had a really lovely evening. They are a lovely family and Sonia has got to know them so well over the years on skype and of course from hosting Dasha for 4 years.

We make the long journey back to mogilev to finalise the arrangements for our bowling party tomorrow ☺

To finish off today me and Mark make our way to the home of our 2014 interpreter Tania Simkina and enjoy dinner with her and Vova , Dima, and of course new addition Sasha who is getting big already. Dima is always so happy to see us and play with us and it's good to see him in good health again. Lovely food as always and it's great catching up with everyone.

Saturday 19 March

Visit to Vlad. Mum was just off the night shift and has a new job. Her and Vlad are looking well. We tell Vlad the news that his host has had a new knee recently and will be unable to host him this year but he has a new host. He is so looking forward to coming to Scotland and can't wait to meet his new host and see his old one.

What a lovely visit we then had to Dima/Dianna and their lovely mum Sveta. She has made us lovely sandwiches and a beautiful cake with coconut. Dima is going to school during the holidays to work on his English which is great. He will compete in the English Olympics and will also sit a special English exam in Minsk later this year too.

Then we had a party at 10 pin bowling for all our current children in both groups and also this year's private visit children (around 37 children). This time they were accompanied by some parent helpers due to new rules. They enjoyed chicken and chips, pizza and apple pie and ice cream as well as lots of coca cola and fruit juice. Then they had an hour long game of bowling. For some it was there first ever game of bowling and the first time in the city. Our new children were put in teams with children who will live nearby them in Scotland and we made sure that all the new children settled and had a friend. It went very well and the feedback from the children and mums later in the week was great. It was a special day out for them and they were so glad we took them. It was also great to see some other interpreters who came to see us and the children at the party. Our 2013 team of Katia Markova and Ira Lemeshkova were there as was Ira Zuzina from Edinburgh group as well as Kostya, Sergei, Katia boss and our interpreters for this year Luda, Tania and Ira. A great afternoon and 3 hours go by in a flash.

This was followed by a visit to our humble office, world headquarters of Focc and our sister charity Helping Hands. It's always busy with interpreters gathering documents for children's visits to UK and processing their visa applications online. The walls in the office are a sea of photos from children's visits over the years and our travellers spotted the ones from our group.

Then we had a walk round the city centre in the snow sheltering occasionally in shops which was great and interesting too as we don't normally have time to look in shops. Our day was finished off by a nice meal in a restaurant.

Sunday 20 March

Kostya had very kindly been to the supermarket and bought all our shopping for today's visits. So we had a longer lie then enjoyed a breakfast with Isle of Man group at Katia boss's house

It was so nice to see her mum again, the first time in a few years and she is looking well.

Tania is our interpreter and driver today and it has been snowing overnight but Tania is a good driver and we have no problems as we head off for our first trip of this visit to Bykhov, Tania's home town.

Maksim in September group is our first visit. It's great for Sonia to visit Maksim, his house and his mum. They get on very well and Maksim and Mum are very bubbly and happy characters.

Next was a visit to Katia. The first time Mark had been to her house. Mum had made some lovely food and a cup of tea for us. Dad was there too. Katia has a new goat only two weeks old and shows it off to us. It's nice to see the kitchen that was refurbished thanks to help from the host and us and nice to see that mum is looking after it well. We spend some time chatting with the family outside as it is a lovely sunny day and the snow is melting.

Next we are off to new Maksim. He and his big family has moved from their hostel room to a new council flat. It was only a shell when they got it and still it doesn't have too much in it but it is a big flat in a nice area and they have done very well to fit out what they have so far. The hosts wanted us to ask some questions - Anything special he would like to do in Scotland - bowling, football, roller blades (hasn't tried but would like) What does he like to eat - Hamburger, chips, sausage (if he has ice cream he gets a sore throat) Is there a toy he likes to play with that we could give as a welcome present - Tanks or lego. Would you like to play basketball? Yes he would like to play. He is counting the days before he comes. Very excited and he loved the bowling, where new Sergei was his friend.

New Sergei - mum is having a baby when Sergei is in Scotland in June. He had a great time at the bowling. Got their present in post from hosts. Thank you very much. Mum likes to knit and has made socks for the children. Sergeis wee sister is a lovely wee girl and as they are a very needy family we will consider bringing her in future. He made friends with Maksim at the party.

New Sasha, nice visit to her house. Mum is a nice lady. Dad is good too and is older. Sasha is becoming less shy with us and was laughing and relaxing. At the party Anya was her friend as they will live close in Scotland and they got on well. Anya is a lovely and kind girl and enjoyed getting to know Sasha i think. Some questions - do you wish for a toy and what would it be and maybe we can have it waiting for you

when you arrive in Scotland - Toy dog ! She liked the bowling very much and received a parcel at Christmas which they were very grateful for. Loves to dance and sing and draw.

Monday 21 March

After our normal shopping trip, helped by Kostya, We go to visit Lera. She was unwell on Saturday and couldn't come to the party. She is living at mums for the holidays and also lives there at the weekends. The other times she lives with gran. Mum lives in a remote village with boyfriend and baby. We visit Lera there this time. The house is in a village 7 km on a dirt road in same direction as Dima and Stas house. Lera tells us she loved Scotland, her family, Naomi and Alina as she goes to school with Alina and also went to kindergarten together. She is taking her vitamins every day. Everything sent home was useful. She is generally in good health but is unwell at moment with a cold. We have a lovely lunch and cake and some samagon 😊 (home made vodka which takes Sonias breath away 😊) Lera is very good at serving and clearing up. House is very quiet as it's a small village with dirt road and no cars. House is number 1 in the village. There is a hunting house nearby and they had Italian and German visitors there recently, hunting wild boar and foxes in the forest. We take a pic of the bus timetables at bus stop 0832 and 1722 only 2 buses per day. Questions from host - Lera has she been practising her ball skills 😊 and yes she is better with a ball 😊 Would you like to try some different food in Scotland this year. If so what would you like. Pizza and ice cream 😊 Maybe not the answer the hosts wanted. What did you like to do most with your family in Scotland – volleyball, mini golf . Have you been learning English. Yes 😊 Is there an item of clothing gran mum or Natasha would like - please email and give the size and family will try to get it as a gift. Ok gran will be in touch.

Next we go to the village of Godilova for our next 3 visits. First up is Timothy and its so nice to see his new brother Vlad and all the rest of the family, 6 children in total now. Questions - Timothy How are you and all the family, good. Is baby brother getting big and what is his name. Yes Vlad and he is now 7 months. Are you doing well at school and concentrating? Mum says he tries hard at school but is not so successful. What would you like to do and see in Scotland. Anything, all is interesting. Would you like to go to watch or play football. Yes, he would like. Mum is so grateful for all the clothes as work in the village is not so good at the moment.

Next up was Nastya who was in with mum and sister Lisa. We have a nice cup of tea. Questions - Nastya what foods do you like so that family can get them in for you? Mum will make a list of food and send with Nastya 😊 Did you get the parcel that was sent? Parcel arrived thank you very much. In Scotland Nastya liked Zoo, Almond Valley Park, café and Edinburgh Castle best. Nastya is learning English and tells me the English alphabet. Well done 😊 Mum was asking about her behaviour during the visit. It was very good. She was no trouble at all, just needs to eat more 😊

Last one of the day is Ercamo and her lovely sister Zarina who is a favourite with many of the Scottish visitors. Such a nice and happy girl and just a pity she is too old for the programme. They tell us they received a parcel from Scotland and are very thankful 😊 Questions - In Scotland would you prefer to have same bedroom or share a bedroom with Iona . Same bedroom as last time as she likes it very much. Does mum have Facebook or email as family would like to keep in touch. Not at moment but they are hoping to get it from next month. If so send list of clothes and things that would be needed and family will try to give what is needed. They will. Big news - mum is having a baby boy in May 😊 Last year

Ercamo had not long moved into her house but now it's looking more comfortable for them and they are settled. Best thing about Scotland was her family. Loved M and D's, liked musical instruments and playing them. Likes bollywood films and acting them out 😊 Ercamo had made a lovely cake for us and we had a nice cup of tea.

The day was finished off with a lovely meal at the home of Luda our interpreter and husband Ed, along with Ira and Tania our interpreters and the 5 travellers from West Lothian. We say goodbye to Adela and Andrea who fly home during the night. Safe flight ladies and thank you for all your help, support and company.

Tuesday 22 March (Day off)

Today Mark and Sonia are away for a private day together with their families. They bring them to Mogilev for a day out and after some time at Belarus village sightseeing and looking at interesting things in the small shops they spend most of the day at the indoor soft play area. This was a great idea as it was cold and snowing outside. I am not sure who had the most fun the children or Mark 😊 who had to go back to the hotel afterwards to get changed as he was soaking with sweat. A great day out.

When all this was happening Kostya went and bought a bike for our visits tomorrow.

Kenny spent some time walking around the city centre with his interpreter Luda in the snow, visited a café, went to Tania Simkinas mums/ Kyrils grans for a big lunch and blether with all the family. Such a nice family and always so welcoming. Then off to bowling to meet Pasha, Alena, Maksim and the five of them had a good game of bowling with Maks winning with the final shot. We had a meal for the youngsters and then took them shopping. They all got a fixed sum each and could decide if they bought mainly sweets or food for the house or a mixture. Everyone was different but very happy with their purchases. We said goodbye and Luda took Kenny to visit a monastery near the river Dnepr. It was very beautiful with lots of gold on the inside and some beautiful singing by the nuns inside who were having a short service. Then it was a quick walk to the restaurant to meet the others for dinner.

We went to 101 a fireman themed restaurant where the waiters wore firemen outfits and the bar was made out of an old fire truck. Very nice evening and we were joined by our interpreters, Katia boss, Irina, Julie and Danii from Maghull group and Clare and Jaqs from Moray group.

Wednesday 23 March

We make the longest journey of the week to Dima and Stas remote village which includes maybe 20km on dirt roads. On the way we pop in to Leras house with some baby clothes for her mums new baby.

Dima and Stas were so happy to receive their new bike courtesy of their host family. Stepdad has a job working in the forest cutting trees and making logs for firewood. Village children like Dima, Stas and sister Krystina love to play outside and make things with wood and also snow in winter. They take vitamins every day and have been in good health this year. Like many families they are growing tomatoes from the seeds from Scotland on their window sill. Stas has his medal from Scotland above his bed. Mum is very happy with clothes and presents sent home. Dad says they have everything they need

- a fridge and TV. Dads sister goes to Ukraine and buys things cheap from Ukraine. Dima loves football and plays with Stas and Krystina. Its 16km to school. Leave at 6.30 in morning and there are only 23 children in the whole school. Dima has 3 in his class and Stas is the only one in his class. Don't get English. Stas and Dima both get German. Their natural father lives a 15 minute walk away but don't see each other often. Sometimes they see grandmother. They have Internet in the area but its not good connection. They don't have computer but think dad may get a tablet at some point . Krystina may have Internet and email on her phone.

Questions - Dima what is new at school. Nothing just the same ☺ What did Bill say to you at the airport. Secret is to do well at school ☺ What would you like to see or do in Scotland. Wants to see football in a proper game.

Stas what did you like best about Scotland or staying with your family. Zoo, M and Ds, swimming pool. Says he can swim. Have you been learning any English. No - just German.

We then make the long journey back to Bykhov to see Kira and Liosha. Questions - Liosha how have you been. All ok. Hope school is good and English too. Yes very good at English. Are you looking forward to coming back. Yes of course, very excited to come again. Anything you would like to do this time. Go to see friend Brandon who lives close. Anything you didn't like. No. Talks about Alan all the time, both children say this. Liked to walk in Edinburgh and climb Hill. Big brother wasn't in he was at music school playing guitar.

Kira would love to go the zoo and swimming pool again. School is good. Very good marks 9 or 10. Looking forward to see her family again. Mum has made us a lovely cup of tea and cake. Baby Sasha has her ears pierced so does Kira but Kira doesn't often wear earrings. They take vitamins every day. Liosha wears glasses every day but might need new ones as one pair broken. He needs bigger glasses or more room for his eyelashes as they are very long. Mum is a great woman. Very selfless. 4 children she looks after and now looking after her mum who has a broken leg. Liosha goes to hospital every year to get his eyes tested and get treatment as his eyesight is getting worse every year. Mum says the doctors say he shouldn't watch a lot of TV or computer.

Alina W was away in mogilev on a school trip. So we go to her school and meet mum and await the bus which arrives in only a few minutes.

She goes to special drawing class 3 times a week and music school for piano. Takes her vitamins every day. Has a chocolate allergy so cant eat a lot of it. Bananas too. Questions - What did you like best about Scotland. Everything. What outings were best. M and Ds. Outings you didn't like none but don't like pizza or onions or boiled carrots but loves sweetcorn and peas. What would you like to do again. Golf For mum what items sent were best. Very happy with everything. Thank you. Any items not so useful. No. Anything not sent that would be useful this year. Would like winter hat and shoes and warm winter tights grey, black and red for school. Any update on heart ultrasound. Has some problem but not serious Nothing more needs to be done. When she was younger had problem with cardiogram with irregular heart beat and gets checked once every year to make sure it's OK. Mum was a good help at the party on Saturday as our parent helper. Favourite subjects at school - physical. Says hello to host family and look forward to seeing them in future in Scotland and also Belarus ☺ you are invited ☺

Alina F is well and both grannies welcome us and have baked for us. Very nice. We asked what Alina likes to eat as her eating was not so good in Scotland. Likes to eat pizza, meatballs, fruits, sweet apples, bananas, fish, chips, likes sweet things, noodles, rice, pasta. Doesn't like meat very much. She loved Scotland. She loved Edinburgh Castle. Loves history. She liked the dentist - wow 😊 liked everything she would like to be a singer and a designer when she is older. She goes to a special dance school 5 times a week for 2 hours. Alina showed us a beautiful Belarussian dance. Wow her confidence is growing from the very shy girl we met just over a year ago. Great to see.

On the way back to Mogilev Luda phones Andrei Macpherson to read him his letter from his family as he wasn't able to come to the party on Saturday to meet us. Andrei is getting on well and is very happy to go to Scotland. They received a parcel. No new news.

On our return we go straight to meet Pashas extended family to say goodbye to them. They are always a big part of our visits and are so welcoming, friendly and excited to see Scottish visitors. We have a cup of tea with them at a restaurant before leaving them with another visitor Clare who has got to know them so well and she is treating them to dinner 😊 We go back to our hotel for a quick dinner, pack up and bed as we are leaving at 0230 in the morning to make the long journey home.

Thursday 24 March

Kostya and Sergei come for us at 0230 and we make our way to the airport getting there in time for our 0500 check-in. The airport has changed over the years and is now bigger, brighter, more modern and welcoming. Belarus is trying hard to welcome tourism and they should be congratulated for that as Belarus is a beautiful place. Hopefully in time to come they will make it easier for visitors to come and do away with visas as I am sure that would help a lot.

Our journey home went without incident except in Frankfurt where Sonias handbag tested positive for explosives !! and given the recent problems in Brussels she attracted some nice policemen with a selection of guns. However after a further 3 tests her handbag was given the all clear. We are not sure what it was but could have been the hand gel we had been using all week rubbing off on her bag.

So we returned home safe, tired but happy that we had accomplished what we had set out to do on our trip. This was only possible through the help of our drivers interpreters and friends. Drivers Andrei, Kostya, Katia, Tania P and Valera. Interpreters Tania P, Luda, Ira R, Tania S. Interpreter friends Katia M, Ira L, Ira Z, Olya, Yuliya, Sergei and our fellow travellers from West Leicester, Maghull and Ormskirk, Isle of Man and Moray. To our friends that we didn't meet on this trip, sorry we missed you and we hope its not too long before we see you again. Thanks to our 5 West Lothian travellers you did a fantastic job

Together we are a great team and it's a pleasure to be able to bring our Scottish and Belarussian families closer together through these trips and see the difference we can make in restoring hope to the children and families on our programme.