

Diary of Belarus visit 15-23 November 2018

After months of planning the day has finally arrived to start our November visit to Belarus. Going on this trip are Kenny Turnbull, coordinator on his 14th visit to Belarus along with Heather and Gavin Kyle, parents of Anya on their first visit and Fiona Wandless, mum of Ksusha on her 2nd visit. This is a particularly exciting visit for Heather and Gavin as they will get the opportunity to pick their new child who will come to them for the next five years.

Thursday 15 November

Well, after a very long day ☐, two flights ✈☐✈☐, going from 16 degrees in Amsterdam ☐ to - 3 in Belarus, ✨☐☐(many thanks to Kostya and Sergei for bringing us safely to our destination 😊), a very tasty spread provided by our beautiful friends here ☐🍷🍎, a few glasses of sparkly (professionally poured by Ed!) ☐ and party bags all made up 🎁🎁, it is time to rest our weary bodies ☐ In preparation for our first day tomorrow. As appointed photographer ☐, I will endeavour to capture as many photographs as I can of your little Belarusian babes for you to enjoy. Over and out! .

Friday 16th November

So, after a good night's sleep, we woke up to a fresh bright morning, with blue sunny skies, but very cold. Our first visit of the day was to the supermarket to pick up shopping for the families we were visiting. Our first stop was to Nikita and his brother, Artum. Nikita was his usual smiling self, until Kenny told him we were inviting his brother to Scotland. Nikita's face was a picture lol! Not sure if he thought we were inviting him in his place lol!! Then we visited Marina and her father. She was her usual coy self and presented Heather and I with little dolls, made by her own fair hands. Bless! Then we drove just around the corner to Maksim. His brother is just the cutest button and was very friendly and chatty and his dad was so lovely to us, showing us photos of Maksim from a young age. Maksim was his usual self lol! Very quiet and serious lol! Everywhere we went today, there seemed to be a family kitten 😊🐱, so you will see a few kitten photographs. Maksim was the first. From there, we moved on to Lera Grady's house where, again, we were met with the loveliest of welcomes from her babooshka and father. Lera also had a kitten! She was showing us her drawings which, I have to say, were very impressive! Watch this space! I think babooshka gave the most rousing line in our Christmas message lol! We then met with Sasha, my gorgeous girl's sister, who is equally as gorgeous, and she came with us to Ksusha's home where Galina, Ksusha's mum, provided a beautiful lunch for us. It was so good to see my girl and cannot wait to see her again at the party and then Tues/Wed, when I will stay overnight and spend time with the family, whom I love very much. I left a holdall with presents and told her she couldn't open them until I came to stay next week. I have put a padlock on the bag, just in case she peeks! 😊 After lunch, we went to visit Daryna and her family, not too far from Ksusha. It was lovely to see Daryna and her brothers. I understand her older brother, Nikita, has had 6 visits to Scotland. She also had a kitten, and a dog. It was now time to make the journey home, have a quiet hour, then head off to meet our interpreters, partners and, of course, not forgetting our gorgeous twins, Sergei and Kostya. A great night was had by all, albeit it took nearly four hours to serve dinner! However, as Luda said, it's not about the food but all about the company, which was excellent! Our chief, Kenny, even won a bottle of sparkling wine! And so to bed. Another long day ahead tomorrow. Enjoy the photos of your children ♥☐

Saturday 17th November

So, we woke up to another fresh, crisp morning with beautiful skies ☐ but still freezing cold temperatures and no sign of a thaw ❄️☐, which I think is just as well as Kenny has been showing us photos of the visit in March when, at some houses, they had to park at the end of the street and walk through the mud to get to the house! 😊. We started our day, as usual by being picked up by our driver, lovely Kostya, in his ☐. We drove to the supermarket to buy shopping for the children we would visit today - Heather and Gavin's Anya was first on our agenda. You can imagine how excited they were to be visiting Anya's home 🏠 and family for the first time, especially with this having been Anya's last year. Her mum was lovely and provided lunch ☐🍽️ for us, which was very nice, and a nice cup of tea with milk 🍵, which was very much appreciated, as a lot of the houses don't have fresh milk here. From there, we moved on to visit Ercamo, Zarina and mum. Zarina was telling us how well she had been doing at school and her reports and results were excellent, scoring 10 in many subjects. Clever girl! Ercamo, on the other hand, wasn't so keen to share lol! 😊 This was tinged with sadness due to the family's recent very sad loss of baby Sasha and there were images in the room to remind us of their beautiful baby brother. The girls showed us their bedroom and we brought them along with us in the minibus to our next stop, which was the gathering of our August group in Bykhov. It was lovely to see the children again and show them the video of their party in Scotland. Lunch was chicken gougons, pizza then ice cream. Absolutely delicious and hot! So much so that we were tempted to ask the chef if they wanted a job in the restaurant we were in last night lol!! 😊 After handing out party bags, we took to the road again and next stop was Sasha girl and her family. Oh, and another kitten!! 🐱 Sasha had family staying so they all joined in in the photographs! After leaving Sasha, we moved on to Sergei and Nastya's home, where we were greeted by her mum and two brothers, as Sergei and Nastya are at sanitorium. She was so pleased to see us and she is doing well, making improvements to their home. After leaving there, we went back to drop Zarina and Ercamo off, passing Nastya's house on the way. As we had time to spare before going to Luda and Ed's for dinner, we stopped off at 'the office', the beating heart of FOCC, where we met with Katia boss(which she hates being called! 😊) and some of the interpreters. Katia dropped us off at Luda's, where a beautiful spread was provided by our lovely hosts. We were introduced to gorgeous Jamie, their little westie (named after the dashing character from Outlander! 😊), who made himself quite at home on all our laps, before taking a liking to Kenny's toes! We enjoyed the evening very much and it was lovely to spend time with our beautiful Luda and husband Ed. Thank you so much for a delicious evening meal! So, taxi home, quick shower, update on Facebook and off to bed! Tomorrow is our ten-pin bowling and party for our June group. Goodnight all! ☐😊♥☐

Sunday 18th November

Good evening everyone! So, here we are on, officially, Day 3 of our visit, and what a day it has been! To start the day, we had another light snowfall, however, it didn't cause us too much trouble at all. We had no visit to the supermarket today! Today was the day we were going to visit three new children and pick two. As you know, this was Heather and Gavin's last year with Anya, so they are taking on a new child in June and also our new family, the Cooks, have agreed to have a child. The decision has been made but we have to let the new Belarusian children know first and that will take place on Tuesday. You will see only pictures of the outside of the houses. Oh! And a dinghy that we found on the way to the tenth floor!! Always handy! You can never be too sure!! Today was also the ten-pin bowling and party for our June group and how wonderful it was to see them all. We were also joined by many of the older children who visited in previous years and it was so good to see them all doing so well and no longer children, but young adults. Kenny has many photos of the older children. We even had an adult team play ten-pin and it was very close indeed, however, it humbles me to say..... I won!!! 😊 😊🏆 My score was 147 and I was very closely followed by Gavin Kyle with 145. It has to be said though, our lovely Kostya

tried to sabotage the game by throwing a bowl behind me, as my bowl was rolling down the lane!!! He did manage to knock my bowl off a couple of times, however, I still managed to keep him at bay lol!! 😊😊 Great fun! The kids had chicken, chips, pizza and ice cream. 🍷🍷🍷🍷 We had a little boogie and Marina and I took to the dance floor! I do believe there is a video flying about somewhere! 🕺🕺! After the bowling, the kids went safely off on the bus home with my gorgeous Sasha and myself, Kenny, Heather, Gavin and Katya (sorry if I keep spelling this incorrectly! Never remember which Katia is 'i' and which is 'y!') did a little sightseeing in the damp, foggy, 'dreich' weather! Katya learned a new word today! We had evening meal with beautiful Ira and her family tonight and it was such great fun as her mum, dad, sister, brother-in-law, nephew, niece and the dog were there. Her niece was dressed as Snow White (my kinda girl!) and I did ask if I could bring her back to Scotland! I was so disappointed I didn't pack my Elsa outfit from Frozen! I fell in love with her. She and her dad did a couple of fantastic dance routines and then we did a duet, Let It Go from Frozen, with her singing it in Russian and me in English. Just such a lovely family ♥️👍. Papa Sergei and Ira walked us all home and we had a little photo shoot around some of the popular sights here. All in all, a fantastic day! I truly love FOCC, all they do and the people who do it! As you can imagine, there are many photos today so there will be a few separate posts! Goodnight all! ♥️👍♥️👍♥️👍♥️👍

Monday 19th November

So, Day 4 saw our longest day travelling so far. A milder day, however, some snow still on the ground. Picked up from the hotel at our usual time of 9.00am and off we went. Blonde Katia was our interpreter for the day. We stopped off at the supermarket to buy shopping for the five children we would visit today, namely, Aliona Wood, Lera Craske, Yanna Wilson, Sasha Gebbie and Sveta Shiel. We have this shopping lark down to a fine art now and I feel like Dale Winton in Supermarket Sweep, watching the intrepeter and Sergei fly around with their shopping trollies lol! 🐶 Me, being me, and my love of dogs, befriended a little dog 🐶 we have seen at the garage the last few times we have stopped. I felt sorry for him and so gave him some of my lunch, a piece of my ham 🍖! We stopped along the way to remember the families who had to leave their village after it was 'closed down' due to radiation levels and the memorial stone that reminds us of the number of people there. The first child we visited was Aliona and it was great to see Mum and Dad doing well with the house, adding a new bathroom, complete with bath and new toilet (first picture!). Much to our surprise, Mama told us that Aliona is learning to play the accordion, so we asked her for a little rendition and she is amazing!!! 🎵 Her little sister is joining us in June with Aliona at Andrea's. She is such a little cutie, you will not fail to love her. We left her a present of a doll and set off on our way to the next house, Lera Craske. En route, a rather strange request came through asking me to take photos of toilets 🚻 as it was World Toilet Day today! 😊😊 Fortunately, I had already taken my first photo at Aliona's lol! 😊😊 When we got to Lera's, Mama was home with Lera and two brothers. Lera was very shy and didn't have too much to say. We asked how school was and she said it was fine. Next stop was Yanna's, where we were met by a very happy, smiling Yanna, which was so lovely to see and we had never seen Yanna say so much. On the way in, Kostya asked where the toilet was! Second picture! She was home with Mama, Papa, big brother and two young children. Mama asked if we could buy her nappies so we went back to the supermarket in the village and took some nappies and baby wipes back to them. She was very happy and appreciated them very much. We then moved on to Sasha's house. This lad deserves a medal for the road he has to walk from his house to the bus stop for the school bus and back every day. It is about 3km and, in the winter, when it is very dark, it must be a long long road home. It was great to see Sasha, who was home with Mama. He is very much looking forward to coming back to Scotland in June to spend time with his Scottish family, as are all the children. As we left, third picture! This proved more tricky as we had to skate down the back garden past a rather vicious sounding dog to get there! 😊😊 We took a photo of the road Sasha has to walk every day, past the village shop. Final stop was Sveta and

her smile lit up the whole place when she saw us. She was home with Mama and Papa, who was quite a character, and two little boys. Oh, and another little kitten! We have seen our fair share of kittens and dogs so far, as every family seems to have them! 🐱 After leaving Sveta's we started the drive back to Mogilev. It had been a long day and I happened to just doze off for a little while ☐☐ in the back of the minibus. Our lovely co-ordinator thought it would be hilarious to take a photo of me having a nap. Apparently, I was snoring and my mouth was 'slightly ajar' let's say!! No doubt, he will put up the photo, however, I will get him back because, I thought it was only our lovely Luda who vetted photos before they were put on to FB! Oh no! Kenny does too! Not anymore! 😊😊😊 We ended our day with a trip to the supermarket to find some Irn Bru as we had been reliably informed that Gavin could get his favourite tippie here! After searching, no Irn Bru could be found. Not mentioning anyone in particular but Mrs A Turnbull insists it was there when she was here in the summer! 😊 We had a beautiful dinner at Tania ('i' or 'y' again!) and Vova's with their two beautiful boys, Dima and Sasha. Dima eat Kenny at cards ♠☐♦☐♣☐♥☐. Poor Kostya came to pick us up, as if it hadn't been a long enough day already for him! So tomorrow, Heather and Gavin are spending time with Anya and going back to see their new child, along with the other child chosen for the Cook family. I am meeting Luda then Ksusha and her sister, Sasha, for a spot of shopping in Mogilev, then a bus journey to Ksusha's house to spend the night and try out the 'banya' 😊😊 This will be a whole new experience!!! Heather and Gavin will provide their own blog tomorrow and I mine. Hope you enjoy the photographs from today ♥☐♥☐

Tuesday 20th November

We started our day with the usual supermarket sweep, shopping for 4 families. 👤👤👤 Then it was off to visit our resident artist, Alexei, 🎨 and his parents. Lilya had a beautiful selection of cakes for us to try, and tea made using a traditional samovar. Alexei had some of his latest art work on display. A very talented young man! The family were very pleased to see the calendar and to hear that they were selling so well. Discussions already underway for a possible version 2! 😊 Our next visit was to a mum with 2 handicapped children that we have been giving some support to. They have recently moved into a flat of their own and mum is very grateful for our support. Next it was of to visit the 2 new girls who will be joining our June group next year. They were both happy to be invited and will be a great addition to our group. 😊 Kenny will post more details of them on our return home. Our next stop was at a lovely cafe for lunch ☺☐. The afternoon was spent exploring some of the sites in the city centre. We also spent some time in a local museum where Tania explained some of the history and traditions of Mogilev and Belarus. The day was rounded off with a lovely meal in a restaurant in the city centre. Our grateful thanks to our interpreters for today, Katia L and Tania, and our driver Kostya 🚗 for looking after us so well 🍷

Wednesday 21st November

Private days – Heather and Gavin - Today was our day with Anya. We explored some more of the city in the area where she lives. ☐ The temperature was only - 1 we were reliably informed! ☐☐. Glad I brought the thermals! Then we went to Anya's flat for lunch and a blether. A beautiful spread was put on for us! There was lots of chat and reminiscing as we looked at her photos over the course of her 5 visits. Some (happy) tears shed too by all the ladies! Her family are so appreciative of the love and support from their "Scottish family" 🍷. After lunch we visited a craft village and sampled their hand made vodka ☐. We finished off our day at Pasha's house, where again a veritable feast was laid out for us! Can't believe we only have one more day before we head home.

Kenny visited the school of Tania Simkina, Tania Grib and Lena Drinkova, all interpreters on our programme, to have fun chatting to two English classes. First up was a class of older children who interviewed Kenny. Some very interesting questions on all sorts of subjects, the funniest one being do you find Belarusian or Scottish women more attractive 😊😊 of course they are both beautiful. Then it was the turn of a younger class and they asked many questions while sharing juice and biscuits and learning a bit about each others country and schools. The morning was finished off by handing out some Scottish gifts and sweets to the children. Unfortunately Tania couldn't make it to the school as her son was unwell but her mum was an able deputy in escorting Kenny. After a lunch with mum, Tania, Dima and Tania's sister Olya, Kenny and Tania join Ira, Heather and Gavin for some sight-seeing before heading off to Kenny's boy Pashas house for dinner.

Fiona - Tues and Wed - Greetings to you all from Sakalovka! So, as already mentioned yesterday, we are blogging alone this evening! 😊 Today was very exciting for us all, for very different reasons. For Gavin and Heather, they were going back to tell their new child that they had been chosen to visit Scotland next June and also visit the new child for the Cook family to give them the same news and, for me, because I was going to spend the day and night with my little Belarusian beauty, Ksusha, and her family. I see Heather has already put on her post with great photos and lovely account of their day. Luda met me at the hotel at 9.30am and we headed to the bus station to meet Ksusha and Sasha. We did a spot of shopping, as all girls do and, after buying Ksusha some presents and Galina, her mama, a multi cooker which will, hopefully, help her, we headed for some breakfast. On the menu was ENGLISH breakfast so that sounded, almost, good enough for me. We did a spot of sightseeing around Mogilev where, you will see from the photos, we had to cover up. The girls still looked beautiful but I look like an old Belarusian babooshka!! 😊 Luda took us to a typical Belarusian village in the woods, where we had lunch. It was delicious! We caught a taxi to the bus station to catch the bus to Cherikov, where we were met by Sasha's friend, who drove us to Ksusha's house. I had already left a holdall full of presents, with a lock on it last Friday 😊😊so Ksusha was desperate to know what was in it. After opening their presents, it was time for the banya for us girls! I've heard so much about this and was a bit apprehensive, however, I loved it and feel so good, but shattered! Ksusha, Sasha, Luda and myself went in in swimsuits and bikinis (guess who wore the swimsuit and who wore the bikini?! 😊) and covered ourselves in honey. When it got a little too hot, they threw a bucket of cold water over me, which took my breath away lol! Luda and Sasha whacked me a few times with a bunch of branches, intentionally of course, then it was time to come back for dinner, feeling fully refreshed. After a lovely dinner provided by Galina, Ksusha's mama, it was time to decorate the Christmas tree! I had bought Ksusha some new baubles today so the Christmas tree went up. Luda and Galina were deep in conversation then suddenly we heard the voice of an angel 😊. I thought it was the laptop but it was Galina! What a beautiful voice! After a very long day, but just the best with my girl, we are off to bed, and guess who I'm cuddling up to tonight?!..... Goodnight all ♥️♥️ So, the last two days have simply been amazing. Left the hotel yesterday with Luda, my interpreter for two days, and met with Ksusha and her sister in Mogilev for some shopping and sightseeing. After lunch, we took the one and a half hour bus to Cherikov, where we were met by Sasha's friend, who drove us to Ksusha's village, Sakalovka. The welcome at Ksusha's house was wonderful. The balloons were up for our arrival and there were a lot of happy tears! Ksusha couldn't wait any longer to find out what was in the big holdall I left on Friday so I gave out my gifts and then we got into swimsuits for the banya!! This is our equivalent to a sauna, with a little difference! Fortunately, it was just across the road at Ksusha's relation's house! Once in the banya, we had to cover our bodies with honey then Sasha and Luda beat me with branches tied together! 😊👉. All part of the banya experience! Then they threw basins of cold water over me 🌊🌊, which sure is a shock to the system. Apparently, its very good for you! 😊😊. Then it was back home for a beautiful evening meal prepared by Galina, Ksusha's mama, a few glasses of champagne then a good 'blether', Luda's new word! 😊 The

plan was for me to sleep beside Luda but Ksusha was having none of it and insisted she sleep beside me ☐☐. I think she only punched me once during the night! ☐. I actually got a long lie this morning and didn't waken til 10.00am! We had a lovely breakfast then it was off for a wander round the village and a visit to the local village 'club' 🏠, where it all happens, and Ksusha's school. On the way, we met Galina's aunt so couldn't resist a photo of a traditional Belarusian lady. Also, it was very interesting to see some of the houses and how they vary in style! Sadly, there are very few pupils at Ksusha's school now and it will close down next year so she will have to travel to another village school. After a quick spot of lunch, it was time to leave and there were many many tears from us all 😊, except Vadzim, Ksusha's big brother! 😊 We drove back to Cherikov and, after a quick cup of tea ☕ at Sasha's house, we had to run like mad to catch the bus back to Mogilev!! I actually thought I was going to have a heart attack! It was so so cold! ❄️☐ ❄️☐. Once back in Mogilev, we met up with Heather, Gavin and Kenny and had a beautiful meal at Pasha's house, the boy Kenny and Alison had been hosts to. His dad Andre, aunt Ina, cousin Maksim, sister Aliona and her boyfriend, Nikita, were all there to join us for a delicious evening meal and gave us a lovely bag of gifts as we left. Shattered now! Quick shower, a video call to my beloved husband, a listen to my brother's radio show back home in Scotland, then bed! Another wonderful few days in freezing cold Belarus B☐♥☐

Thursday 22nd November

So, today was our last day and we cannot believe we have seen all the June group children and are packed and ready to fly home very early tomorrow morning! Sergei and Kostya are picking us up at 6.15am to take us to Minsk airport. Our final day started with Kostya picking us up from the hotel at 9.00 and taking us for our last supermarket sweep with Katia Winton! ☐😊 We were shopping for three families today, namely, Luba Smith, Vlad Henry and Matvey Hallesy. When we arrived at Luba's we couldn't believe how beautiful her home was. The family now have two apartments made into one. Mama has worked so so hard (over the last seven years, her daughters told us) to get it to the standard it is at. Mama must be very proud of her family as every daughter is beautiful, inside and out. We only met four girls today, including Luba. Her sister treated us to a song, accompanying herself on the piano. Absolutely beautiful. After Luba, we paid a visit to the children's floor of the hospital, where we have previously bought equipment for, and the lovely Natalia showed us round the wards where small children and babies were having physiotherapy and massage to help mobilise their limbs. This was a very moving experience and it was great to hear from one of the nurses how the equipment FOCC bought is making a huge difference to those children. We stopped for a cup of tea and beautiful hand made chocolate cake 🍰 (which I couldn't have, being coeliac! 😊) and left to go and visit Vlad. It was great to see Vlad and mama is looking so well and is really doing great. She said that Vlad could be doing better at school and is always getting into trouble lol! We were surprised to see a gun above Vlad's bed 😊 but then were informed he brought it back from Scotland and that someone had made it for him from wood for his role in one of the concert parties! 🎸😊. Mama made a cup of tea for us (and more cake, which I still couldn't have! 😊) and she showed us Vlad's school report books. Vlad wasn't impressed lol! Kenny gave him his Christmas card from his Scottish family and he couldn't wait to open it! 😊 After leaving Vlad's, we went to visit Luda at her school and took part in the lesson. Katya Boss (she hates that title! 😊) was taking the English lesson for the day and the topic was 'What's For Lunch?'. The children were given bread 🍞, peppers☐, cucumber ☐, tomatoes 🍅, ham🍖 and olives and told to create different things. Their ideas were brilliant! We sang a song with them and asked and answered some questions to and from the children then Luda showed us the school library, gym room and swimming pool🏊 then it was time to move on to Matvey. Matvey is doing well and he and his brother are living with their foster family, who are lovely. We met with his foster mum and her son, babooshka and we were even treated to a musical piece on the accordion and Matvey recited a poem about boys being boys, then it was more food..... And cake!! 🍰☐😊. After leaving Matvey, we came back to the hotel for a short while to start to pack and prepare for our last night at Katya Boss's house and were joined by many of the interpreters. Katia blonde will be one of the interpreters for our June group in

Scotland next year and Katya dark will be joining her. (Jean Turnbull.... Look out! She's a riot!! 😊). We were presented with a fantastic montage of photographs taken from FB, to remind us of our trip to Belarus and they also presented Kenny with a mug from Katya Boss, Sergei and Kostya (her left and right hand men! ☐). We taught blonde Katia a few Scottish words, in preparation of her visit..... 'dreich', 'blether' and 'slitter' ! 😊 And so, it is bedtime for us here. It has been an absolute blast! Seeing everything that goes on behind the scenes in the FOCC office, where the children meet to go to and come back from Scotland, meeting the children's families, visiting their homes and seeing their way of life has been very humbling, emotional and is an experience none of us will ever forget. It's nice to see where all the jigsaw puzzle pieces fit. We have cried 😊, laughed 😊 and been on a very emotional journey these last 8 days and, for those of you who have been before, you will know what I mean and, for those of you still to come, it is a fantastic opportunity to see first hand how these people work and live. From myself, Heather and Gavin, thank you, from the bottom of our hearts to the committee for choosing us to go, to the interpreters for taking care of us whilst we were here, to our wonderful driver, Kostya, who is just the loveliest guy with a heart of gold but, most of all, to the children who make our lives so much richer by knowing them, we love you so so much and can't wait to see you all in Scotland next year.....До свидания, и мы любим всех вас от всего сердца (Goodbye and we love you all with all our heart)