

## **Diary of Belarus Visit 16-23 March 2017**

Our lengthy planning and preparations are all complete and the day has come to start our journey.

On this trip are Kenny Turnbull, host dad of Pasha and interpreters on his 10<sup>th</sup> visit. Adela Keenan host mum of Sergei and Zarina on her 7<sup>th</sup> visit. Lesley Murphy host mum of Timothy on her 1<sup>st</sup> visit and also making her 1<sup>st</sup> visit at the age of 74 is Jean Turnbull who has hosted interpreters on 7 visits. A great team and it should be a great visit. Our journey starts at 03.45 and we all meet at the airport at 4am. What an early start. We are all tired but excited for what lies ahead of us.

We have an extra bag of supplies on this visit. As well as meeting all our August group and new June group children in their homes and taking them food, we will gather all our current children (33) for a meal and party at 10 pin bowling. We will also visit two orphanages. In one we will take the children there, aged 3-10, lots of new pants, socks, vests and tights and in the other which is for children with special needs our friends at Helping Hands have helped us to buy some much needed learning games.

All the travel arrangements go well with everything on time. Huge thanks to the check-in girls in Edinburgh who were great about our overweight luggage and the customs lady in Belarus who let us straight through when we said it was charity.

Jean has had us in stitches already with her stories. She told us about a previous flight (her first) when she was in the plane toilet and had just stood up when the captain announced to return to your seat so she didn't know whether to sit back down or return to her seat in the plane 😊 She also asked how long does it take to get to Magaluf 😊 instead of Mogilev and thought our driver was called Costco instead of Kostya 😊

The weather is bright on our arrival but it has been raining. No snow on the ground and there is a spring like feeling which is great.

Sergei and Kostya meet us and are good company on the 2 hour journey to Mogilev. We are met at the hotel by our interpreters Luda, Tania, Ira, Katia boss and Ludas husband Ed. We have some food and drink with them which they had made for us. A great welcome . Its good to catch up with them all and finalise our plans for the week.

After our interpreters leave us we sort out our huge amount of supplies ready and organised for the week ahead.

Early night after a long day.

### **Friday 17 March**

A good nights sleep - over 8 hours. Wake to a lovely sunny but frosty morning. We head on our way at 9am to the supermarket and change money. The rate is a little bit down from last time but is ok. At the first bank we emptied their roubles and had to go to another bank 😊 5 lots of shopping today for 5 children. Kostya is an expert shopper and a great help.

Then we make the long journey to Cherikof. Jean is on camera duty this week and we use the time in the car to get her acquainted with the camera. This could take some time as she asks what hole she looks through to take the pictures 😊 Even when we point out that you look at the screen she insists

on closing one eye when taking the pics 😊 We could have some strange pics on this trip. First up is a visit to new girl Daryna, who we have seen grow up from a very small girl. She is the little sister of Nikita from our first group who was with us for 5 visits. She lives in an old part of a very spread out village.

She has lost 2 teeth so is shy when smiling 😊 She is excited to come to Scotland and meet her new family. Nikita is at school camp for 4 weeks. She will come to the party tomorrow but its a long journey. Bus to Cherikof and bus to Mogilev. On the way home 2 buses and then dad needs to cycle some miles to meet the bus. It will be worth it though for a nice day out.

Marina has a cold and sore throat and is off school. She is not her usual upbeat self but is ok. Tomorrow she will be ok for the party. In Scotland she would love to go to the park. Loves slides 😊 Its nice to see her two wee brothers and the family appears to have settled a bit following the death of mum late last year.

Next we go to Cherikof to pay for the bus for the party. It takes about 1 hour as the lady who writes the receipts is on holiday and they phone her to come in from her holidays to write the receipt. We are happy she wasnt in Spain 😊

Now off to Klimovichi driving through the dead zone. So peaceful and there are not a lot of cars just us daft tourists. We stop at a monument to a flattened village and take some pics for our first timers.

First stop is at Sergeis where Adela gets a chance to see her boy and his family. We have a quick lunch of borsht beetroot soup. A very welcome lunch.

Next up is Lera. She is well. Her small brothers were in hospital with skin problems recently but are out now. The big lump on her brothers eye has gone but still some marks remain. Dad is working away in Russia at the moment. We go into to house but cant see anything. Too dark as electric is not working so we go back outside. Gran is there too. They are a needy family and definitely need our help.

Adela had brought new coats and shoes for all the children in Yannas family. The family is about to get bigger. Her mum is expecting a baby girl in August. They are all well and this is another family who will definitely benefit from our help.

Final child visit is to Denis. I think everyone who has met Denis or heard his story has a soft spot for him and Jean had asked to visit him and his lovely mum. He is getting much taller but he is just the same Denis always in mischief 😊 So his mum tells us 😊 It was nice to see mum again. She has such a big heart and she has another small child adopted. Big Denis the biggest boy from our first group popped in to see us. He was playing football nearby and is such a big guy now.

After the long journey back to Mogilev our day was rounded off with a lovely meal at the home of Luda and Ed. Mmmm very nice 😊

### **Saturday 18 March**

A dull and wet start to the morning but our day is soon brightened with a lovely visit to Dima, Dianna and mum Sveta. Its a lovely tradition that we visit this family on most visits. The house may be the smallest but we love going there. Such a lovely family and mum is such a lovely baker. We enjoy bacon pastries, pancakes, lovely cake and nice chat which sets us up for the day. No interpreter is with us as Dima and Dianna speak such good English and interpret for mum.

Next we go to visit the orphanage. We have brought lots of pants, socks, vests, tights for every age from 3-10, boys and girls. Also lots of shoes, toys and sweets. We get a tour of the building and meet the children. They come here for up to 6 months to be assessed and put with foster parents so its a place of transition and uncertainty. So the situation for these children is not so good but they are well looked after by the staff. The building may be old but it's in better condition than many of the houses we have seen so we are encouraged by that. Things like clothes and toys and some furniture are only provided by charities so our donations are very well received. The children were so nice and happy and so excited to get even a balloon. The saddest thing for everyone was seeing all the small beds in one room.

After the orphanage we go to our party for our children. Both groups come on buses we organised from Bykhov and Cherikof areas. A huge operation for our interpreters to organise but we are ably assisted by some mums and grown up sisters who accompany the children. We arrive to massive group hugs from them all. They are so happy to see us all. They enjoy a meal of chicken and chips, some pizza and ice cream. Its all washed down with fruit juice and a rare treat of cola. Its great to see our 5 new children for the first time joining the group and making new friends as they played bowling. Most of the adults join the bowling too but the children are the best with many winners in the 6 lanes. Its good to see some of our older children there too. The afternoon was rounded off with party bags being handed out and children excitedly looking to see what they had been given.

After saying goodbye to the children we go to the bakehouse cafe for a wee gathering of all the interpreters who have stayed with Jean, and others she has met on a few visits. We enjoy coffee and cake and a blether with Ira Lemeshkova (2013) Tania Simkina (2014) Tania Panchenko (2015 and 2016) Ira Rozhina 2016 and also others who were on visits Katia Kozlovskaya 2010 and 2011, Katia Markova 2012 and 2013 and Lena Lisikova who was in Linlithgow group when Jean hosted Olga Sapunova in that group for one year.

The day is finished off with a night out at the restaurant with our interpreters.

### **Sunday 19 March**

We wake up to a small dusting of overnight snow. Then it's off to the supermarket for shopping for today's 3 visits. With all food shopping on board we make the 45 minute journey to Bykhov area and the village of Godilova.

First up is Nastya. She shows us her English books. She has good marks of 8 and 9. She is very good at school. She reads an English poem well and they have great fun as I try to read Russian. I am like a child in the first year at school. Sister Lisa speaks to us well in English. The family pass on huge thanks to the family for inviting Nastya and the group too. No problems with health apart from cold.

Next is a nice first meeting for Lesley and Timothys family. Lots of children. 6 of them at the moment. Lesley makes arrangements for her private day on Tuesday. Sounds exciting. A walk round the village then visit school then a trip to soft play in Mogilev for Timothy and one brother. The baby is getting big now and has lovely light hair. School is ok. His marks are good. 8 for English.

Next is Ercamo and Zarina. Ercamo liked her letter and was interested to hear the news. She doesnt mind what room she will sleep in. Its nice to see Adela reunited with Zarina and we have some food prepared for us. Its a sombre occasion as once we are finished we will take mum and baby Sasha on part of their journey to hospital. Sasha gets his operation tomorrow to remove his tumour and soon after will start his chemotherapy. So sad for a baby who is only 9 months old ☹ Its not easy for mum. We will support them in whatever way we can. We give her and Sasha a lift to Mogilev to get the bus

to the cancer hospital. We stop on the way to buy nappies and other things for Sasha to take to hospital. Its an emotional goodbye for us all. We hear later in the week that Sasha had his tumour removed and has started his chemotherapy.

After our sad goodbye, maybe its bad timing, but its time for a small celebration. Its the 10<sup>th</sup> visit to Belarus for me (Kenny) Our interpreters Luda, Tania and Ira have arranged a small celebration at a Banya for us and we have invited other interpreters that we have met over the 10 visits. When we arrive Luda and Tania greet us in national costume. These have been borrowed and are only used when the president visits Mogilev so we are honoured. We are given a special gift of Karavay (square sweetbread/cake) specially made by Tanias sister Olya. Everyone breaks a piece and dips in salt and eats for friendship. Again this is traditionally done for the president. Luda, Ira and Tania do a special dance and sing a song they wrote about our friends at helping hands working together with us to bring joy to the children and all our visitors are mentioned in the song. I am invited to join in the special dance. We then sat down and watched a beautiful slideshow of pictures from the 10 visits with children and families, sadly some of the people in the pictures have passed away. The pictures were beautifully put together by Ira(and dad) to the music "that's what friends are for" and many of us, and definitely me, were in tears at the end of it. We have a lovely spread of food and drink. The banya was in a lovely location on the outskirts of Mogilev with a pond. Next it was time for banya and me and my banya partner Ed make the short walk to the outside banya, to cheers and laughter and banter from everyone gathered. The banya is like a wooden hut sauna in the garden. It has two rooms one for changing and the other the sauna. After getting changed into almost nothing ☺ we go in the banya. Its very hot and Ed is in control of throwing on the water to increase the heat. We sit high up and my head is touching the roof. We are soon sweating. Next Ed gets me to lie down and he dips softened birch branches in hot water and first wafts them above me to shower me in the very hot water. Then he gently beats me from head to toe with the branches. Very nice. Then we go to second room for a cup of tea made from "herbs" gathered outside. Its very nice. Once we cool down just a little its time to jump in the pond ☺ Ed goes first and I don't go second ☺ chicken ☺ then back in banya for more of the same. You do this 3 times then wash all over and get dried and dressed. It was a good experience and you feel very good afterwards. The girls then go in and do the same while me and Ed and others have some food and drink. When the girls are finished we all gather together for cup of tea and our special "friends" cake made by Ludas sister. We are also given a special presentation by the owner of the banya as we are the first visitors from UK to their property.

It was a really nice way to celebrate the 10 visits and the party was all the more special because of many of our friends sharing it with us. I would recommend a banya and will have another one hopefully another time. Huge thanks to everyone who organised it.

The day is finished off with a nice meal at the house of Tania Panchenko, our 2015 and 2016 interpreter.

### **Monday 20 March**

The day starts with a visit to a 2<sup>nd</sup> orphanage. This one is for children with special needs. Our friends at Helping Hands have sourced learning games for us to take. They are very well received and the children love playing with them. We have also helped with a table for sand and water play which they will get soon.

We the head off to the supermarket for food shopping for 5 children. Then we make the journey to Bykhov.

First up is Alina S visit. We are treated to a small concert. Alina recites a poem in Russian. Alina and cousin do a dance and sing a Belarussian song. Alina does a boogie woogie dance. Her small sister recites a poem. And then Alina does a lovely poem in English – My heart is in the highlands. She is not fazed by going to a new family in Scotland and is looking forward to her trip to Scotland and would like to see her old family sometimes too. ☺ If we are sending anything for her small sister then age 4 is best as she is a big girl. Gran baked lovely baking for us and we have a cup of tea. Lovely family.

Next up us Alina W. Mum says everything is the same. No news. Next year we she will start to study in a special class for flute. Mum enjoyed watching the concert video where Alina sung a solo. She had a special competition for singing in a choir and they came first and got a diploma. She may learn new song or piano music for our concert. Dad is ok and mum is still working. She is looking forward to see her host again. They were very grateful for the gift from the hosts and bought a bed.

Leras visit was well timed. Gran had made a lovely lunch for us with chicken and potatoes. Lera says nothing much is new. Goes to school, does homework and plays outside. She has very good marks at school – 7, 8 and 9 . English mark is 9 which is very good. One more week and children will be on holiday. During the holidays Lera will stay with mum in the village . She normally stays in Bykhov with gran. Brother Maksim is getting big now - 13 months and is walking. Gran says older sister will finish school soon and will go to medical school and study medical diagnostics in a laboratory.

Kira and Liosha are ok. Mums says they are friendly with each other sometimes, also sometimes not but regardless they are always together. Both are excited to go to Scotland in summer. Kira broke her wrist one month ago but its better now. She had a cast on but its off now. Liosha does ok at school. He shows us his books . Mum will start to work soon in a chicken factory feeding and cleaning them. The factory is for eggs. Both children have good marks in English but Kira is best. In April they will go to school camp for few weeks. Dad was back with the family for a few months but sadly is away again.

We then make the journey back to Mogilev to visit new boy Matvey. Foster mum tells us he likes most things to eat but doesn't like egg. He likes lego, football, trampoline and figures from Egypt like heros, which are popular in Belarus. He is looking forward to going to swimming pool, zoo and castle in Scotland. He is also looking forward to playing lego with his new Scottish brother.

The day is finished off with a touristy walk in the city centre then dinner at the house of our interpreter Ira. We also have a lovely walk home over the bridge from the city centre to our hotel.

### **Tuesday 21 March**

This is our day off. We all visit Ludas school and class for a short time, hand over some things from the school in Broxburn and then go on our separate ways.

Lesley goes to visit her boy Timothy and spend the day with him in Bykhov (school and walk round village)and Mogilev (soft play, roller blading, pizza etc)

Adela goes to visit her boy Sergei and others she knows in the village (Alionas family and foster family)

Kenny and Jean visit the school of Tania and spend some time in the English class and also meet 2 former children of the charity Angelina and Tanya. After lunch at Tanias we visit Zhenya who stays with Jeans son and daughter in law. We then have dinner with Pashas family (Kennys family)

We are back at the hotel for a much needed early night.

### **Wednesday 22 March**

Our final day starts as usual with food shopping and then off on the road to our most remote children in Bykhov.

A visit to Maksim is first. Luda passed on the hug in Sonia's letter. His health has been good this winter, better than last year. The clothes and shoes sent all fitted well. He is good at school but maybe marks are not so good. Luda asked if they needed anything, as per letter, but Mum says they are ok and don't need much, maybe warm coat for winter. In response to another question they confirmed that they don't have a computer but have tablet without internet, so communication with the host family is not easy.

Next up is a visit to Katya. Mum gets home in May but she will probably live with relatives and not with Katya who is living with Dad at the moment. Dad says winter was very hard especially in January when it got to -36 !! wow that is cold Katya is looking forward to swimming in Scotland and going on a scooter. She enjoyed her visit to Scotland at Christmas and received lots of presents. School is ok. She has 2 new kittens and they are only 3 days old and they are now called Mark and Kenny ☺ We meet Katyas grandad(dads dad) for the first time, who is sitting outside the house.

Then we make our longest and toughest journey of the week. 25km on mostly dirt roads to the house of Dima and Stas. A very bumpy journey. All children and mum were in the house, dad was working away. Baby Artum is getting big now. The documents to allow the boys to come to Scotland are in progress and on track but they are not yet completed. Luda will offer assistance if need be to ensure the boys can come. Dima is very good at school and his picture will be on the special wall at school at school soon to celebrate the best pupils. Stas marks at school are ok about 5 out of 10. They received a parcel for Dimas birthday and pass on their thanks. While we are in the house we are distracted by Kostya getting the car stuck in the mud, while he was trying to turn it. So we all go out to help and dig and push it and eventually we managed to get it out. However one of the tyres was damaged and we had to stop at a remote bus stop and change it half way home. Just as well we got it changed as there are only 2 buses per day ☺

Thats all the visits done and we make the long journey back along 25km of dirt roads to Bykhov and then Mogilev.

After a quick visit to say goodbye to Pashas family,we finish off the day with dinner at the house of our interpreter Tania Simkina and all our interpreters are there, Luda and Ira too. Katia boss comes to join us later and say goodbye.

We have an early night as we leave early in the morning.

### **Thursday 23 March**

We are up at 5.20 (2.20 UK time) and leave the hotel at 6 to make the long journey home. All arrangements go well and we even make our very tight connection in Amsterdam that we missed last time. The only casualty was Adelas luggage which didn't make the connection.

A huge thanks to the Scottish and Belarussian teams for a wonderful visit. Together we make a great team and bring a little hope, love and happiness to the children and families we meet.

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