

Visit to Belarus March 2018

Wednesday 7th March 2018

The wait is over, the day has come when we start to see the fruits of all our labour in preparation for the visit.

Its a very early start. We meet at 4am at Edinburgh airport. On this visit are Kenny Turnbull (12th visit) Adela Keenan, mum of Zarina and Sergei (this is a special visit – her 10th) Dave and Clare Wells , host parents of Alina and they are on their first visit.

Our bags are laden with supplies for our children and also for one of the children finished on the programme who is being treated for a sarcoma, bone cancer on her leg– Tanya Karotkina (Eadie)

All our travel arrangements go well and after 2 flights and a two hour car journey we arrived at our hotel in the city of Mogilev in Belarus at 7.15 in the evening. We are greeted by our interpreters who check us into the hotel and provide some food for us. Its great to see them and spend time with them catching up on their news and discussing our plans for the week. Soon they leave us to unpack and sort all our supplies for the week.

Its been a long and tiring travel day but we are here and set up and ready for a good week hopefully.

Thursday 8 March

Today is international women's day. Its widely celebrated in Belarus and there is a national holiday here today and for 4 days.

Our day is started with some food shopping then a visit to a great example of a woman -Sveta the mum of Dima and Diana. Her 2 children are a credit to her. We pass on some women's day gifts and Sveta has made us lovely baking. Its hard to imagine how difficult it is to make such nice things in the shared kitchen of the hostel. Her baking is so nice. Dima and Diana are great children and speak to us in perfect English without the need for translation. Its great to hear that they will move to a flat this summer after 21 years in their hostel room.

After this lovely visit its off to Materyk in the city centre for our children's party. Unfortunately some children cant come due to being in Sanitorium (health school camp) and some are ill after the very cold weather last week where it got to -22. But its great to see the ones who do come. They are so happy to see us. We have invited some siblings and mums and dads to fill the gaps. Its also a first meeting for Dave and Clare with Alinas mum and dad. So nice to see them meet.

We all enjoy pizza, chicken and chips, dessert and lots of juice. Instead of bowling today we decide to go with a children's entertainer. Its a welcome change and they have so much fun doing all the various activities including cool experiments. It was great to see Alexei there and walking all by himself.

After the party we went for a walk in the city centre. It was beautiful, with all the snow. We had an interesting coffee stop at 101 restaurant which is at the fire station museum and is all fireman themed. We are served by one of Iras ex-pupils. At the end we ask him for some secrets about Ira but he was very kind and said she was a beautiful teacher

The day was finished off with a lovely meal at the house of Katia Markova and husband Oleg. Olya is there too completing our 2012 interpreter team of Katia and Olya.

Friday 9 March

Up to another fresh snowfall and -4 temperature.

Food shopping again today for 4 children. Great team. We have the shopping done and sorted into 8 bags in no time. Then we make the journey to Bykhov area.

First up was Kira and Liosha's house but Kira is unwell in hospital. We will visit her after. They have a new dog. It's a sad story. It was a homeless puppy and they rescued it from the snow. It is called Dana. At school Liosha learns English. All children in his class are not so well behaved. He liked the entertainer at the party but prefers bowling.

We then go to visit Kira in hospital. She has been in for 2 days having a gastric tube operation and will get the results in a few days. She might be in hospital just 1 more day. It's her first time in hospital. She is lonely and upset that she missed the party. We take her some books and comics. They have a new flat and will move to it as soon as they get the inside built enough. There is lots of work to do but they hope they will move in 2 months. It will have 3 rooms. 2 bedrooms and one living room/bedroom. But most important it will be their own home. Kira will change school to a closer school when they move. She will now go to Alina Yurchanka (Wells) school. She really loved her new host family. She looks forward to coming again to Scotland. She liked everything. Especially horse riding and swimming. Mum asks if possible to send more warm things this year and less t-shirts and dresses. Winter clothes are very important but expensive.

Next we visit new Nastya and brother Sergei. Sergei counts the days until he comes to Scotland again. He is excited. Nastya is looking forward to Scotland and playing with the family, swimming. She has never been to a swimming pool. She dreams of it. She likes butterflies ☺ We ask -would you like to see Sergei at the weekend in Scotland. Nastya laughs and says no. Nastya says school is ok. She is getting English at school now and likes it. She likes Russian language at school. She says she is very good at skiing cross country and downhill but I don't think there are many hills. Sergei would like to go to M and Ds, swimming but can't swim, English with Chris. Everything sent home was useful, but warm clothes are most useful. They are expensive in Belarus. Snow boots are great.

We pop in to see Sasha girl from June group. She was unwell and couldn't come to the party. She was happy to see us and tells us she is learning English at school. She is looking forward to coming to Scotland again.

After a late lunch we head to Nastya, who has chicken pox. It's funny to see all the green marks on her face compared to our way of treating chickenpox, but hopefully it's effective. Nastya is also learning English at school. She is getting tall and grown up looking. There are massive icicles dangling from the roof of her flat. Very dangerous.

Final visit of the day is to Timothy. His behaviour at school has not been so good recently, mum tells us. Unfortunately he won't return to Scotland this year due to a change in circumstances with his host. We confirm to mum that we will still visit up to 5 years like the other children and support them when we can. The family appear to be doing ok apart from one of the smaller ones also having chickenpox.

Our day is finished off with a meal in a restaurant with our interpreter team.

Saturday 10 March

Fresh snow again today. Usual shopping for food, then off to see Ercamo. She speaks good English. We are impressed. Like all children they are on a 4 day holiday. Says school is ok. Some of her marks - Russian 10 wow, maths 6, English 9. She liked M and Ds best. At weekend she liked best swimming, football, basketball, bike. Sasha will have another operation on 14th March. A biopsy to check for more cancer and possibly another operation if needed ☹️ Ercamo will finish primary school in May and have a big party 😊

Alina Smith gave us a hand made gift for new married Scottish sister. She got on great with her new family. She was worried that she wouldn't be invited but she is so happy to read in the letter that she will be going to Scotland again. If its possible to help with school uniform this year it would be a great help. Mum and sister were unwell high temperature.

Then we headed to Alina Wells house for Dave and Clares first visit. It was great to see them being shown round by Alina and getting to see her drawings, hamster and all sorts. The whole family had made a lovely cake with fruit and sponge and cream, topped off with raspberries. Very tasty.

We had a nice evening at Yuliyas house with the wider group of interpreters to celebrate Adelas 10th visit. We meet up with many of our present and past interpreters.

Sunday 11 March

Everyone had a private day today

Adela headed off to Klimovichi to visit children there from her and Andreas family.

Dave and Clare brought Alina and family to Mogilev for the day and to get some things for the forthcoming baby. Alina also joined Lisa for some play and lunch.

Kenny visited Tanya Karotkina, a child who was on our programme for 5 years and now sadly has bone cancer. Her Scottish family have been very supportive and have sent many things for her to help her.

It was so nice to see Tanya and hand over the gifts of medical and other equipment from the family. She is on an intensive course of chemotherapy until summer and will probably have radiotherapy for the rest of the year. She gets school lessons when she is in hospital and now will also start lessons in the house when she is at home. In hospital mum sleeps near her. Tania gets food provided but mum has to cook her own in a kitchen nearby and sometimes will also cook for Tania if she doesn't like the food provided but she is not eating much at all. She is not feeling like eating. Tania and mum are so appreciative of everything the family and charity have done.

Kenny also catches up with some families he knows well including dinner with his own boy Pasha and family. It was great to catch up with them all and hear their news.

Monday 12 March

We have a second private day today.

Dave and Clare spend time in Bykhov visiting Alina's school and music school.

Adela spends the day in Minsk with Luda and has dinner with Luda's daughter and her future husband Vlad.

Kenny also spends the day in Minsk, a lovely city, with Katia boss, building relationships further for the charity with key people. The meetings were very positive and will hopefully help to smooth any issues which arise from time to time, including one issue we were advised of regarding dates of our children's visits. Very lucky that we had this meeting rather than finding out at the last minute ! Kenny returns to Mogilev to join Dave and Clare at the home of our interpreter Tania and her family for a lovely meal.

Tuesday 13 March

A rainy morning. Very messy now with a huge amount of melting snow.

Usual start of food shopping for the children we will visit today.

Then we are off on the long journey to Maksim. He was very happy to see us. He does German at school. We phoned Sonia on viber. They were so happy to see each other. He has lots of his artwork on the walls and his medals. He is very proud of them. In Scotland he liked to go swimming, M and Ds, bike and scooter. He liked everything but it's difficult for him to get up in the morning. Maybe he needs to go to bed earlier as he says he is always very tired in Scotland. At school there are only 6 in his class 2 girls and 4 boys. The family say - Thank you very much for everything. Winter clothes and boots are the most useful and also the rucksack.

Next visit is to Katya. She is ok, is happy to see us and has grown a lot. She enjoyed the party but likes bowling too. She doesn't get English at school. Will get it next year. She likes Chris's lessons. Likes M and Ds, swimming, playing with Max. Everything sent home is important and useful. Liked seeds, got a good crop. Tomato, cucumber and carrot. Got chickens. Likes McDonalds in Scotland. Mum and dad are not working at the moment but Grandpa keeps them afloat, just, with his small pension.

We met Lera at grans with cousin Lisa and wee brother Maxim. Despite thick snow they never miss school in the village. Bus takes about 20 minutes. Lera understands lots of English and is much more confident. Lisa goes on Wednesday and Friday to art. Lera is in same school as Alina and Dave and Clare tell her they were at her school. Clare reads Lera's English book with her. She is very good. Lera not Clare ☺ The most useful things sent home are clothes for colder weather. Gran asks us to try and invite Lisa. She was 7 in Sept past. She has had 2 operations on her mouth and tongue for cleft palate, so doesn't speak well but can read and write. We will think about it.

Dima and Stas. We make the very long and bumpy road, 25 km on dirt and snow roads and have to stop a few hundred metres from their house due to mud. We grab all the shopping and make our way through the mud and snow. We don't see Dima as he is in school doing a big test today. Mum tells us the snow suits are great but too big. They won't fit for probably 2 years or more. Need much smaller size. Boots are still a good size so won't need new ones til next year. Both Dima and Stas are at new school. The old one closed. It's now the same one as Alina and Lera. It's a much longer journey on the bus. 25km on dirt road. He likes the new school. He speaks English a little now. Bus takes an hour to school. Looking forward to Scotland and likes golf, cycling, going on the boat and fishing. Stas really enjoyed fishing in Scotland. He fishes often in the village for river fish. Dad is a woodcutter and

would like a Scottish woodcutter uniform 😊 Everything sent home is very important and useful. Dima is sitting a maths test. He loves school especially maths and also plays football and tennis. Stas is not so good at school. He has 4 out of 10 in most of his marks 😊 Dad waited in all day as he thought Sonia was coming. He likes Sonia 😊 probably because she shared a drink with him last time 😊

We finish off the day with a lovely dinner at the house of our interpreter Luda, husband Ed and dog Jamie.

Wednesday 14 March

Our day starts as usual with food shopping for today's visits.

First up is Alexei. We had a lovely cup of tea, from Russian samovar, cakes and discussed many practical points for his visit due to his disabilities. They asked about toiletries and towels – no need to bring as hosts will provide. Alexei will bring some clothes but maybe hosts can buy some too. He is a big boy 180cm, 76kg, shoe size 42/43 but better to try in UK. He is usually man's size M, but sometimes now size L. Mum will bring more clothes but maybe hosts can buy some too. At the airports we have arranged special assistance for Alexei and he has asked if we can bring his walker only, to the airport, for the walk to the car park, as he wants to walk whenever he can. He likes chess and lego. Next time we see Alexei and mum will be in UK and they are very excited about the trip.

Next was a visit to Mogilev Regional Hospital where we provided a piece of equipment in November to help children with motor difficulties, especially in the legs, problems with cerebral palsy. It was great to see our equipment being used and helping children. We have a small tour of the wards and meet a baby 5 months old, who has been refused by her parents, because of her minor difficulties. She is currently being cared for by the nurses. We also meet a 2 month old baby who has allegedly been the subject of abuse with a broken arm and bite marks on her face. So small. Very emotional.

We meet the doctor in charge of the whole hospital. He is very appreciative of our help and tells us more about the hospital. It was built 40 years ago. It's the only central hospital covering the whole region. There are 200,000 children in its area, they have 25,000 stays in a year and the polyclinic has a further 130,000 consultations in a year. They also do urgent surgeries, rehabilitation, cancer treatment, intensive care and accident and emergency in the community. There are not many deaths. Trauma is main reason for death. The rehabilitation wards are the ones we have assisted but half of the rooms are not used and are being rebuilt for more children to be treated. Currently they treat from birth to 1 year olds but want to expand to cover up to 3 year olds. They are very grateful for our help. The equipment help lots of children. A German charity built a room called oasis, for mums to have a break and share experiences when their children are sleeping. Sometimes if a child comes, mum can't stay as she has others to look after, so it puts more pressure on the staff. There is not a lot of staff but they are all very good. The ministry of health say that rehabilitation for children is very important. Unicef have a campaign at the moment on how to avoid children's trauma. Mums are trained to help at home with massage etc of children. We say that we won't be able to help with the redevelopment of the rooms etc but we would be happy to consider further help with equipment.

Leading on from this we visit a family in their home, who have severely handicapped children, Dima and Vicka who attend the hospital. We have helped this family last year but it's our first time actually meeting them. We take them some food shopping. It was a pleasure to meet such a devoted mum and gran, who spend all of their time caring for the children, who unfortunately can't really do

anything for themselves. We will definitely visit them again and maybe offer some more practical help.

We then visit the office, picking up some wraps on the way, to have lunch and check all of the information/documentation for our childrens visit to UK. There is a slight issue that the ministry of education have just recommended that children are not allowed to travel before 1st June. Our group comes on 26 May (and 2 others are affected too). As its too late to change our dates this year a letter is put together by Katia asking that they allow our visits this year. This will be hand delivered tomorrow along with our official list of children, to an official that we met and got on well with on Monday in Minsk, so fingers crossed for a positive outcome. (We hear the next day that our list and dates has been accepted and will hopefully be signed off by 1st April)

We then make our way to the family of Kenny's boy, Pasha, for a cup of tea, chat and to say goodbye to them until we visit again. They are always so welcoming and so happy to see us.

Our visit is finished off with dinner at the home of our interpreter Ira. Its always so nice to see her lovely family and also to meet her sister and nephew for the first time. All of our interpreter team and Katia boss join us later to say goodbye.

Thursday 15 March

We are up at 6am, (3am UK time) to start our journey home. After a 2 hour car journey and 2 flights we arrive in Edinburgh at 4pm UK time. Tired but satisfied that we have done what we set out to do, and more.

Huge thanks to the Belarus team who looked after us so well and organised things so well – Katia boss, Administrator Sergei ☺, drivers Kostya and Andrei, Interpreters Ira, Tania, Luda, Katia M and Yuliya, transport helpers Sasha Makushkina and Anna Yurchanka, families of our interpreters, many more interpreters beyond who supported us at social events and meetings and most importantly to our children and their families for being so welcoming to us.

Huge thanks to the UK team of Clare, Dave and Adela who were absolutely fantastic for buying in fully to all the organisation and preparation in the months leading up to the visit and then carrying out every item in the visit with precision and humanity.

At these difficult times when we read the news of problems between East and West, its very heartening to see a fantastic team of people from both East and West, combine to achieve much more than anyone could ever dream of and to do it all in such a positive, respectful and friendly manner. Why? Because we all have a huge amount of love in our hearts and share the common goal of helping the most important people in our charity – the children. Nothing else matters ☺

K xxx