

Diary of Belarus Visit November 2016

Our journey starts very early on the morning of Thursday 10th November 2016. We arrive at the airport at 4am ☺ to check in for our flight which leaves at 0550. On this trip are Kenny Turnbull, Adela Keenan and Donna Hendrie. Our flights take us from Edinburgh to Amsterdam and then on to Minsk. Our luggage is full to the brim of things for children especially for Christmas presents to be handed out nearer the time by our friends in Helping Hands charity. We were all worryingly over weight. The check-in girl was very kind to us and didnt charge us for being overweight when we told her why ☺. Despite it being early in the morning we are all in good spirits and excited for our journey and work which lies ahead. The weather forecast for the week is very cold with the warmest temperature forecast at -2 and snow showers some days. A coffee ensures we are wide awake.

All the travel arrangements went perfectly and we arrived in Minsk at 1630 and got through immigration and customs without any hitches. Katia boss was there to meet us. Its always great to see her face after a long journey and we can relax with someone great to look after us. After a long drive passing snow covered fields we arrive at our hotel in Mogilev at 1950 (the time not the year ☺) to be greeted by a delegation of interpreters Luda, Ira, Tania S and Luda's husband Ed. We check in and head to our rooms. Our interpreters had prepared lovely food for us and something to drink. So nice. Katia's husband Andrei pops in with some more of our supplies and Katia Whelan who had been for her biometrics for her Christmas visa. Andrei was going to take her home. Busy, busy place with people doing so much for the children.

We have a lovely time chatting, planning and laughing with our interpreters. All excited for the week ahead. Time passes so quickly. After we say our goodbyes to everybody we sort out all of our supplies for the whole visit and then head to bed about 2300. We are all set for a great but busy week.

Friday 11 November

Its a cold and frosty morning ☺ Up at 0730 to a room full of supplies and aroma of garlic from leftover food from last night. Today is remembrance day and aptly we will be remembering 3 of our original families from our first year by visiting them today, Nikita, big Sasha and big Vadzim. Two of the families we will be looking at younger siblings as possible new children and the third, big Vadzims family because wee sister Ksusha joined our programme this year.

We have a quick breakfast and catch up before grabbing 5 bags of supplies and heading off sharp to the supermarket. We will buy lots of food to completely fill the huge bags we have brought from home – B and M Homestores big bag of bargains, the biggest and strongest bags we have found.

Today our interpreter is Luda and driver Kostya who is a great guy and a huge help with the shopping. He is like a clockwork machine. Just wind him up and off he goes. 5 of everything ☺

Kostya and Luda were bang on time and we changed money and did all the shopping in less than one hour. Like a well oiled machine. The long road to Cherikof is very picturesque today with snow covered fields. Temperature is -3 and we definitely felt it when we were outside sorting the shopping, nippy ears and fingers.

First visit today is to the very small village of Tourie to see sasha boy (Gebbie) He has had 2 visits to Scotland and his sister goes to one of our groups in England. Sasha is doing well. He has a new brother who is almost one. He also has some new kittens. School is ok. He is in Palinas class and

Sveta goes to the same school too. In Scotland he loved M and Ds the park and owl park and loved to play football with Stuart his host brother. Mum is at home with the children all the time and dad is working away in Moscow. He has a new teacher in school and she is nice and kind. Mum is very happy that he will come to Scotland again next year.

Next up is a visit to two possible new children who have been known to us for many years through their siblings. The children are Roma and Daryna. Visits go well but we have many more children to see before deciding who will come.

Next visit is Ksusha. Such a beautiful girl and she is well. She loved Scotland and her first visit and is looking forward to seeing her host family again. She enjoyed M and Ds too and making candle holders, the seaside and swimming pool. All the family were there and it was great to see them all. Ksusha said to her mum after she came home from Scotland that Kenny is the kindest man in the world 😊 haha she is a wee star and can come back again 😊 Vadzim her brother was there with his new coat on, thanks to the host family.

Then on to another possible new child Yanna. We keep an open mind on her too

Then Maksim. One of 5 children. Dad is working again as tractor driver. Mum has broken her leg and is hobbling about. She was in Mogilev hospital. Maksim had an operation for appendicitis but is well again. He is growing up and was very brave during his operation. He was playing outside in snow when we arrived. Sends hello for host family. Liked swimming, zoo, liked everything really. School is good. He is in Leras class. He gets bus to school. Artum his wee brother has not so good behaviour and often fights with Maksim but they play well with lego together. The older children in family will move to a new flat soon in Cherikof and mum and dad and younger children will stay in existing house.

Next is Lera. She was a bit shy so we put on the dvd of the concert and show gran her performing. She likes to draw now more than dancing. She was singing in English to gran when she came home. She went to meet with mum and small sister on holiday recently. She likes maths, Russian literature, started to learn English and sings us the alphabet. Loved swimming pool the best in Scotland. Kept telling gran nice stories about Scotland.

Next is Nikita. His gran died recently 😞 Nikita does well in school. Artum not so well. Artum is now in high school. Nikita is friends with Maksim at school. Dad works in Moscow and is home one week in the month. He is an official builder in Moscow. Nikita gets English at school and he is good at it. It was a nice visit to Nikita's. Mum is doing well and it's nice to see the improvements they have made to the house.

Our day is finished off with a lovely meal at the house of Tania Simkina and family, our

June group interpreter. Such a great cook and a lovely family who are growing so quickly.

Saturday 12 November

Today we stay in Mogilev.

First visit is Vlad. He is in a different house (the 3rd since he came on our programme) and goes to school in Ludas school now. Mum still works at same plant. She works 3 different shifts and Vlad is on his own when she works. House is better than before which is great. He was telling his classmates all about Scotland. He was full of positive emotions and liked his new hosts and playing in the

football team. He sees Luda at school. E is good at drawing and writing but maths and Belarussian language is very difficult. Brought back so many gifts and mum is so grateful. Mum looked great and appears to be doing well which is so nice to see.

Next is Luba. Its great to see some more of her house decorated and looking much better. She is in the 4th class at school now and is learning English. Luba enjoyed Scotland. She opens pics of Scotland on computer and tells her sister I have been there. Mum wasn't in the house when we visit. She was busy working on her many jobs to keep the family of 7 going, but Luba is well looked after by her lovely older sisters.

Then we had a huge party for June group children past and present. Many children came on the long bus journey from Cherikof villages, some children from Bykhov and some from Mogilev. 40 children in all. We gathered at 10 pin bowling and had a 3 course lunch with pizza starter, main of chicken with cheese on top, chips and ketchup. Finished off with lovely ice cream and they had lots of fruit juice and coca cola. With bellies full it was time to burn off some energy. And they did. We played bowling for one hour all split into different teams. They had great fun with great excitement At strikes and spares. It was so good to see them all especially the older ones who are getting so grown up. Three hours pass so quickly and its time to say goodbye. Huge thanks to the 3 adults(mums/big sister) who helped accompany the children from Cherikof and Bykhov (Dasha/Mashas mum, Ksushas big sister and Sasha girls mum. A bigger thanks to Tania S and Luda for organising the party and transport. Its a massive operation to bring so many children from so far and wide and it all worked perfectly. End result children had a great time and i think accompanying adults too. We did ☺ One of the highlights was seeing Donna meets Sashas mum for the first time and they got on so well. Mum had Sasha looking beautiful with her hair all pleated. Its sad saying goodbye to so many children all at the one time ☹

After the party we walk to Focc world headquarters to meet with our friends in Helping Hands team. Its great to see them all. Then we split up and Kenny and Adela go to meet with Katia Markova, our 2012 interpreter who had a baby called Timur recently. Its great to see her. She was looking great and Timur is so cute. Katia was helped by Olya Sapunova who was also our 2012 interpreter. Great to see them reunited. Donna went for a walk round the city centre with Luda and Sashas family.

We finish the day off with a dinner in a nice restaurant with our 2017 interpreters and Ludas husband Ed.

Sunday 13 November

Today we go to Bykhov area which is about a 40 minute drive

We pop in to see Zarina and Ercamo as Zarina was Adelas child in September group. They are looking well and speaking good English. Mum is looking well after having a new baby in the summer.

Next is wee Sergei. Got parcel thank you very much. Everything sent was great. Sergei looking well and happy to see us. Doing very well at school. Looking forward to Scotland again. Luda gave hugs and kisses from letter. Mum is in hospital with baby as baby has a cold. Such a lovely family and good to meet dad for the first time.

Now off to centre of Bykhov for September group party. So nice to see all the children again and mums, grans, brothers and sisters who came to the restaurant. We enjoyed a 3 course lunch with juice and tea and coffee. We played the DVD of the concert and it was great to hear the children sing along to the songs even the English ones. Then they got up and did the actions to one too, egged on of course by Luda ☺ We had a little dancing to pop music and some photos before the kids all got

their party bags. It was a lovely way to get together for 2 hours. Huge thanks to Ira Rozhina and to Alina Yurchankas mum who organised it all for us.

Then we popped in to see Alina Fadyevas family as she was away in the sanitorium and we needed to tell her about her new host family. They were happy to hear that she will not stop coming and have a new family. Gran was very appreciative of all that we do for Alina and for finding her a new family. She looks forward to welcoming us to her house again in March and we can see the whole family.

Next was Donnas first emotional visit to Sashas house. So nice to see. Mums says Sasha shows her pics of Scotland to every guest and everyone in the village and they all say she has a young and beautiful host family. Mum says when she came back from Scotland she was like a different child, much more confident and full of positive emotions. She asked is it my Sasha 😊 her favourite days in Scotland were the ones at swimming pool, seaside, M and Ds. Mum was crying when Sasha was telling her all the nice things she did in Scotland, when she came back, as she was so happy for her.

After Sasha's it was time to make the journey back to Mogilev to go to Pashas for an evening at the home of Kenny's Belarussian family. As always they were very welcoming and it was a truly humbling experience to receive such great hospitality from this wonderful family.

Monday 14 November

First visit today was to a possible new child in Mogilev called Matvey. He has a heartbraking story and is a lovely wee boy. We are fairly certain we will take him but will wait until the end of week to tell him.

Next up was Zhenya. He is doing well at handicrafts at school. 5 or 6 marks. He was at school camp in the holidays and had disco, museum and cinema. Zhenya enjoyed ice cream in Scotland, M and Ds loved all parks and candy land. His brother Danilla was in the house this time. He is still at special boarding school but stayed off longer from the holidays to see us. Mum didnt work for 1 year and will now study to be a builder and painter. No news from Gran other than she is busy looking after children and mum.

Next up was Anya. No special news. Aunts child is now 3 so is at kindergarten and mum(aunt) is at work again. Anya is always smiling. She is in the 5th form (secondary school) now and has many new teachers. No favourite subject. New teachers and subjects are difficult for her as she is slow to adjust but she goes to extra lessons to help and has good marks. We have a very nice lunch, as always, in Anyas.

We then had a short visit to the office to collect some details of new children to visit and then we head off to Cherikof and visit the new children. We visit Marina in such tragic circumstances with her mum only passing away 2 days before our visit. She is a lovely girl and we are fairly certain we will invite her but will wait until later in the week to decide. We also visit a girl called Zhenya and go to visit a third girl who was not at home but we spoke with a lady who is an aunt.

We then make the long journey back to Mogilev to go to our interpreter Iras house for dinner. Lovely dinner and lovely family. Then a very nice walk back to our hotel over the new bridge opened by the president that day

Tuesday 15 November

This is our day off. Donna is going for the day with Tania P to meet with Sasha's family, have a walk round the village to see school etc. Then go to Mogilev with Sasha and mum to do some sightseeing.

Adela is going to make the very long journey to Klimovichi to see her Sergei and also Aliona and maybe some new children called Yanna and Lera . Kenny is going to school .

Kenny visits school number 18 to pass on letters and sweets from Broxburn Primary School as they have a friendship link. Its great to see the children again. They are all growing up and are always happy to see us. After that have lunch with Katia boss, Tania S and her mother in law. In the afternoon Alona who can now drive takes us to the Belarussian equivalent of Go Ape. Pasha, Alona, and Maksim (Kenny's family) all have 2 goes. Very enjoyable but very cold.

In the evening we all get together for a catch up over dinner and discuss the new children and hear of the difficult situations they live in. We make some decisions on who we will help.

Wednesday 16 November

Busy day ahead. 4 lots of shopping then on the road to Lobanovka.

First up is Palina. Health is good. School is ok she is starting to read. Great progress 😊 better in school now. She couldnt take her reading book home last year but this year she can, which helps her to practice. Liked parks in Scotland and M and Ds, swimming pool . Palina would like to live in Scotland with her Scottish family but with her Belarussian family there too 😊

Next up is Sveta. She is doing ok in school. Good to see whole family. All looking well but sad to hear that dad had stomach cancer and had operation recently. Now has no stomach and needs to eat only liquid food. Test after the operation was good as it hasn't spread but he has lost a lot of weight, 10kg. He is emotional but in good spirits. Takes tablets to try and gain wait as very slim. Sveta liked her new host family. We take lots of pictures to also pass on to her twins sisters host family in Isle of Man.

Then after a quick lunch in Cherikof, we make the long journey through the dead zone to Klimovichi, stopping for some pics of the way.

First up is Aliona. Mum is having another baby. Mixed opinions in the children if they would like a boy or girl. Little sister Vasilisa is always so cute and this time is no different 😊 Oleg had anoperation for his kidneys in Minsk and is doing well.

We see Sergei at Alionas and take him along to his house but mum is not at home so we have to leave him alone.

We then visit Yanna a new child and give her the good news that she will come to stay with the Wilson family. She is very excited. We took them lots of small gifts as well as sweets and shopping and they were excitedly opening things. They dont have much so its easy to see why they are excited. Welcome to the group Yanna Wilson.

Next is another new child Lera, who will come to the Craske family. There are many children and mum dad and gran all living in a small house. Lera is very excited and says her dream is to see mountains and have her own talking doll. Welcome to the group Lera Craske.

We make our way back to Sergeis house to see Sergei and mum but mum cant get away from work to see us. When we get to house we find it open with nobody home so put all the shopping away that we have brought. We find Sergei who was walking from the shop and take him home for Adela to say her goodbyes.

Then its the long 2 hour drive back to Mogilev. We get to our destination at 7.30 and spend 3 nice hours with the family of Tania Simkinas mum including Kiryls family. Tania doesnt join us as its too late and will come to our last evening tomorrow. Its always so nice and hospitable with this family and time passes so quickly.

Thursday 17 November

Our last day already ☹️ so quickly.

Today we visit 3 new children to tell them they are coming, take them gifts and shopping. A very happy day.

We make the short journey to another area of Mogilev to invite Matvey. Such a lovely boy and Donna and Adela would love to have him but he will go to the Hallesy family. Welcome Matvey Hallesy.

We then hit the road again. This time to the village of Lobcha near Cherikof over an hour away. We invite Daryna who has been known to us for some time as the little sister of Nikita(5 years with us) and unwittingly Daryna is known to many others as the little girl on the front of our leaflet. Daryna will go to our Neilly family. Welcome to the group Daryna Neilly

Then we go to Cherikof for some lunch before going to invite Marina. Saving maybe the saddest story until last. When we visited her on Monday her mum had just passed away two days before from cancer and she hadnt been told at that point. She is a lovely happy chatty girl who will get on great I am sure with the Keenans. We feel so sorry for dad who is left with 3 children aged 7 and under and look forward to helping them. Welcome to the group Marina Keenan.

We then make the long journey back to Mogilev, to pack up our things and then quickly go to Pashas for a cup of tea and to say goodbye to him and his family.

Next up is a visit to Katia boss's flat for a wee get together with the Helping Hands team. Its always so great to see them all. Such a great team of volunteers who work so hard for all of us and also the children in arranging our visits to Belarus, the childrens visits to the UK and much, much more.

We then head back to the hotel for an early bed as we have an early rise in the morning.

Friday 18 November

Up and away early at 6am (3am UK time) There has been a fresh fall of snow overnight and we leave as we started with the temperature below zero, where it has been for the whole visit. Andrei takes us on the long journey of over 2 hours to the airport. Flight leaves just a few minutes late and arrives even later in Amsterdam, where we have quite a tight connection of 1 hour 20 minutes. After disembarking via a bus, which took us to the far end of the airport, which meant we had to go through security again, we had only about 2 minutes to get our flight. After running the length of the airport we arrive at the gate 1 minute too late, with the plane still there but they wont let us on. Out of breath, sweating, we decide we are all too old for this shenanigans 😊 We were rebooked within a matter of seconds, with only 3 hours to wait for the next flight and no cost, so fair play to KLM for that. We arrived in Edinburgh without further incident and our luggage was all there.

Just want to say a huge thanks to Donna and Adela for being such great companions. We have laughed and cried together, worked very hard throughout the week to achieve everything we set out to do and once the work was done we had fun on our evenings out with our friends. Never a cross word between the three of us which is great when you are working so closely for so long, probably

because we are all focussed on the most important thing in our charity which is our children and their best interests is in all of our hearts.

Finally to all the great Helping Hands team and especially to our interpreters and drivers for the week Katia boss, Luda, Tania S, Ira R, Tania P, Kostya, Ed, Andrei and Andrei for the massive amount of organisation in contacting over **50** families to be in the right places at the right times and for getting us to those places, far and wide, at the right times. For organising both of our parties, food etc with a total of around 60 people attending from all over the area. For allowing us to meet all our June group children in their own homes, past and present June group children at a party, September group children and brothers/sisters/mums/dads at a September group party, for your help in buying 20 large food parcels, 2 bikes and for arranging for us to visit many new families so that we were able to find our 5 new children for June next year. All of this in one week, while having great fun, lots of laughter, some tears and most importantly keeping us safe. Your country should be proud of the way you treat your foreign visitors and proud of the way you go the extra mile to look after your neediest children. We are certainly proud to call you our friends.

Until next time Большое спасибо (thank you very much)

K xxx