

Belarus Diary November 2017

Thursday 2 November 2017

On this trip are Kenny Turnbull (co-ordinator), Ross and Janice Macpherson (Ross is charity secretary and both are ex-hosts of Andrei and current hosts of Nikita) and Tracy Sinton (host mum of wee Sergei) Kenny and Ross have been before and Janice and Tracy are making their debut. It will be great to see them meet their host child's families for the first time.

We have been a great team so far starting our planning for the visit over 6 months ago and buying and sorting supplies for the visit since then, with Janice especially using her retirement time well to gather and sort supplies for our food bags and for the orphanage. Tracy has been taking care of sweets and gifts for our two children's parties.

On this visit we hope to visit each June group child in their house taking them food, other supplies and of course a letter and love from their host family. We will also get an update on how all children are doing for their hosts back in Scotland as well as updated heights and shoe sizes. We will host 2 parties. First party on Saturday at 10 pin bowling in Mogilev for all our current June group children and June group children who are finished on our programme. The children and adult helpers who will accompany some of them will all get a 3 course meal and drinks, during the meal we will watch the DVD of our June concert and maybe sing and dance along, then all play bowling before getting a party bag. It will be especially nice to see our older children, some may be as old as 16 now and its a great way of keeping in touch with them. Our party on the Sunday will be in Bykhov for our August group children, any brothers and sisters and an adult from each family. They will again enjoy a 3 course meal, drinks, watch the DVD of the August group concert and we will have a catch up with them all. We will also pass on the sad news that due to a change in hosts circumstances Timothy and Liosha wont be returning for a 4th visit, but they have had 3 good visits and we will keep in touch with them. We have 3 more important visits too. First is to meet Alexey, a 14 year old boy who we have been helping following a terrible accident 18 months ago. It will be great to meet him and assess if he is able to come to Scotland. Second we will make a visit to an orphanage taking clothes for the children. Third we hope to visit a rehabilitation centre for children in the hospital and see if we can help in any way. Our visit will be rounded off by inviting a new girl 7 years old to come to Scotland for the first time. Very exciting. Of course we will meet up with old friends and new for meals and get-togethers in the evening.

So its time to start our journey, bags laden, very early on Thursday 2 November at 4am in Edinburgh airport. All travel arrangements go well with no delays and after 2 plane journeys and a 2 hour car journey we are in our hotel in Mogilev at 7pm local time. Weather is not too bad 10 degrees but raining. We are met by our interpreters who have brought us lovely food. Its great to see them again and spend time with them. We unpack and sort all our supplies ready for a great week ahead.

Friday 3 November

Wake up to some dreich weather. Head off to the shops for our first food shop for todays children. 4 bags for everyone with the locally bought supplies being added to the supplies we brought with us.

After the long drive to Cherikov first visit is to **Maksim**. Mum, big sister and dad are also there. Small brother is at kindergarten. Mum tells us Maksim is good but not so good in school. English is his best

subject which is great to hear and we can vouch for that in Scotland. Mum says small brother sometimes fights with him but I think its normal for children. Big sister is ok and interacts well with us . Oldest brother works with dad. Biggest sister works in supermarket. Masha is in 10th class at school and would like to go to university but needs good marks. Mums leg is ok now. It was broken last time and is still sore sometimes. Mum works in the fields with potato and beetroot. They tell us one of their rabbits has had 15 babies ☺ another had 6. We go outside to see them ☺ they would like to skype regularly on Sundays at 9 Belarus time.

Next visit is **Marina**. Such a lovely happy girl and her brothers are still so small and slim. So emotional letter from hosts. They loved having Marina with them. Luda, our interpreter, has tears running down her cheeks reading it. Nothing has changed in the family. No news. Family like to go by the river and fish and go to forest and pick mushrooms. We also meet dads older daughter and her tiny new baby.

After lunch and paying for the bus for tomorrows party. We visit **Lera**. Mum is now back in this area but unfortunately doesnt visit. Lera does see her small sister more now and they are good friends. Lera does very well at school. Her marks are 8 for English 7 for all others. There are 150 children at her school. There is only one shift at school. She likes dolls but shares them well with her small sister. She got a parcel from Scotland today and was very happy. She wrote a letter to her hosts to thank them for it.

Last childrens visit of the day was **Nikita**. The host son of Janice and Ross. He is very happy to see his family and has waited all day. We are told brother Artum volunteers to help old people to cut wood today. Janice and Ross have lots of presents for the boys and mum. Nikita has good marks in English. Which is good to hear. He speaks well in Scotland. They will facetime from now.

We make the long journey back to Mogilev to the join our interpreter Tania and her family for a lovely meal in their house. Its so nice to see the boys and Vova again and spend time with them. Dima is always so excited to see us and play with us.

Saturday 4 November

This morning we visited **Alexey** a 14 year old boy who had a terrible accident at school 18 months ago. He was at an outdoor art class on the banks of the river Dnepr when an out of control lorry ran over him. He had many broken bones and even now 18 months later is only able to walk a few steps in the house and cant go to school. We have been assisting his family a little bit over the past 6 months but had never met them. Today we did. It was great to meet them and get to know them. We took some gifts of art materials to allow Alexey to continue with his art work. Since finding out about his friends in Scotland Alexey has been drawing pictures of Scotland and he has quite a talent. One of our friends Tatsiana from Moscow accompanies us. She runs Moscow Scottish Culture Community in Moscow and has arranged for 2 exhibitions of his paintings in Moscow which is great. Mum has put on a lovely cup of tea and cakes for us and our tea is poured from a Russian Samovar into the best China cups. We are honoured guests ☺ and time flies as we chat with Alexey and his family, look at his pictures and listen to him play on accordion. We surprise Alexey by inviting him on one of our visits to Scotland. He is very excited but there are many hurdles to get over to make it happen. We would need Doctors permission and also mum would need to be confident that we had everything in place to keep him safe. We will work on it over the coming months and we hope it can happen.

We go straight from Alexeys to our biggest childrens party ever with over 50 children attending. Its a huge operation getting the children from the villages some more than 2 hours away. Our interpreters work so hard for us to make our ambitious programme happen. On the day we get help from big Sergeis mum Sveta and Ksushas big sister Sasha who accompany many of the children on the bus. We arrived at the venue to a great welcome from the children surrounding us and giving us hugs. Its great to see so many of the older children who are finished on the programme still make the effort to come and see us. We all enjoy a 3 course meal of pizza, then chicken with cheese and chips, ice cream and all washed down with coca cola for a treat. It was lovely to see Tracy meet wee Sergeis mum and sister for the first time. They got on that well that no translator was required. During the meal we watched the DVD of the June group concert on the big screens much to the amusement of the children. The children were split into teams for 10 pin bowling with some of the older ones in teams of younger ones to help them. Much fun was had by all. The venue had made special cakes for us all which we enjoyed during the bowling. The 3 hours whizzed by and soon it was time to say our goodbyes and hand out party bags to all the children. Much excitement as they examined what was in them before we waved them off. We hope to see the older ones again in November next year.

After seeing the kids off we made the short walk to the office where we meet up with our friends from Helping Hands for a cup of tea and to pack some Christmas sweets and parcels for our children and random needy children they meet in the villages at Christmas time. Its great to catch up with everyone again.

Our day is finished off by us treating our interpreters to a night out at a restaurant.

Sunday 5 November

Up bright and early today and off to do more shopping for todays food parcels. After shopping we head off to Bykhov region.

First visit is to **Zarina** who gives us a lovely welcome. We are told her mark in English is 9. She is very good. Sister Ercamo is away at sanitorium (school camp) Her baby brother Sasha, 18 months, has had 5 operations now for cancer. He has burns from his latest radiotherapy. Its 4 hours to cancer hospital so quite a trek each time for mum but we provide some assistance. We also bring extra nappies and food for Sasha. After the first operation he was sore but now after 5 its normal for him. Such a happy wee boy and so brave.

Next visit is **Sasha girl**. The family are all pleased to see us. She does well at school and finds English easier now after all her practice in Scotland. She explained to mum about Chris's lessons and mum says big thanks to Chris 😊

It was a quick visit to Sasha as the August group children were starting to arrive for their party at the restaurant in Bykhov. Unfortunately some were away at sanatorium (school camp) so couldn't come. We invited brothers, sisters and one adult from the families and it was good to see them come in good numbers. We enjoyed a similar 3 course menu to yesterday with coca cola and also tea/coffee for the adults. We watch the August group concert dvd during the meal and exchange host family letters after. It was great to see everyone again and we look forward to seeing them in their houses in March.

After the party we make a short trip for a very excited Tracy to see the rest of **Sergeis** family and his house. It was a very emotional visit and the love and respect between the families was very plain to

see. Tracy had brought gifts for everyone and they were very excited to see what they had got and also very appreciative. Mum and dad had made some improvements to the outside of the house and with new cladding and also to the inside with new wallpaper in the living room.

Another exciting moment was inviting Sergeis sister Nastya on to the programme. She was very happy to be invited and read the letter from her own host family. She cant wait to meet them. Sergei knows them from his visits and was telling Nastya about them and of course all the nice things he has done in Scotland. We give her a doll as a gift. She is so excited and opens it, dresses it and combs its hair while we are gathering lots of information on Nastyas likes and dislikes for her new host family. Some of her dreams when she comes to Scotland – feed swans, visit seaside and try McDonalds 😊

Next is a longish drive back to Mogilev to spend the evening with Kenny's boy, Pasha's family. Dad Andrei is always so welcoming to his Scottish visitors and puts on a great spread of food for us. We are joined by Gran, Aunt Inna, cousin Maksim, Pashas sister Aliona and her boyfriend Nikita. It was nice to meet him for the first time. Inna is not so well just now and joined us from hospital. We hope she can get well soon. Exciting news from Aliona. She has qualified for the final of Miss Belarus. She is a naturally beautiful girl and we wish her well in the competition.

Monday 6 November

After food shopping we make our longest journey of the week. Over 2 hours to Klimovichy. We stop in the dead zone, which we have to pass through. Our first timers Janice and Tracy pay their solemn respects at a monument to a buried village.

From the monument we head into Klimovchy for lunch with Ekaterina who is head of childrens ideology for the whole of Mogilev region. We first met Ekaterina about 2 years ago and were very impressed with her then. A lovely lady. We wanted to say thanks to her for finding 2 of our new girls this year Yanna and Lena. We also discuss the possibility of educational/friendship links between our local area and Klimovichy area. Tracy will tentatively explore if anything is possible in that line. We present a book to Ekaterina from Head of Education in West Lothian. It was such a nice meeting and Ekaterina offered her help to us in finding children in future and also in providing real life stories of the affects of Chernobyl for the talks we do.

After lunch we visit **Yanna**. What a lovely welcome we get from her. Not shy at all which is nice to see. In summer she had her first visit to Scotland. She dreams of coming back to Scotland and misses her host brother Thomas very much. Thomas kissed her cheek to say goodbye and she remembers it 😊 So cute. She liked her own bike in Scotland, swimming and to go by train. Mum says she came home very happy and wanted to go back to Scotland. She wants to swim again. It was nice to see the new baby and also nice to see the improvements that mum and dad have made to the house with the help of a neighbour. They have moved the kitchen area to create more space for beds for their growing family and have also redecorated some areas.

We make the short journey to Timonovo to see **Lera**. There has not been much change to Leras situation. House is still the same. She also had her first visit to Scotland in summer. She listens very intently as Tania reads the latest letter from her host family 😊 Mum says Lera still has the previous letter from her hosts and reads it often. In Scotland she liked trampolines and our school. She likes English and explains English to her brothers. Told mum she was friends with Marina. Actually, they were inseparable in Scotland and it was great to see them reunited at the party on Saturday.

Next we make the short journey to the other end of Timonovo to see **Aliona**. The children have had some spells recently with a foster family but its great to see them back with mum and dad. We immediately see that Mum and Dad have been making improvements to the house, inside and out. It's a work in progress and will take time. Great to see new baby of 8 months Artum and the rest of the family. Wee sister Vasilisa is always so happy to see us and is a wee sweetie. Aliona is such a nice and happy girl. Her favourite things about Scotland were the fun park at M and Ds, spending time with host mum Andrea and being red riding hood in one of our concert items.

After the very long journey back to Mogilev we meet our interpreter Ira for a touristy walk in the city centre before joining her family for a lovely dinner. After dinner Ira and her dad walks us home to our hotel. A lovely walk over the new bridge and along the banks of the river Dnepr.

Tuesday 7 November

Before our usual start to the day, food shopping for todays 4 families, we take a quick touristy visit to the beautiful church we pass each day. Its huge and so nice. After some pics its shopping and coffee and croissant for breakfast for us ☺ Then we make the long journey to the Cherikof villages.

First up we head along a long bumpy dirt track road to **Daryna**. She is very happy to see us. Dad tells us when she came back from Scotland he asked her if she will go again and she said of course ☺. She said to us she will come right now. She has just missed school for a whole month due to being at sanatorium (School camp). They have lessons there as well as fun and health checks and treatments. Wee brother Danilla is at first class in school and enjoys it. They have many animals to look after at home. 18 rabbits and many chickens. Daryna is looking forward to coming to Scotland again and especially to visit the fun park at M and Ds and swimming. Dad has no job at the moment following the closure of the school in the village. They have lots of land at the house and grow all things themselves. In season the whole family also pick mushrooms in the forest and sell them.

We got a lovely welcome from **Ksusha's** family. They are always so pleased to see us and are so hospitable. Mum has made us a lovely lunch and cakes. Its great to see the progress mum has made in improving the house over the years. Its very stylish and I think Ksushas grown up sisters help with the styling. Mum has a new kitchen and water in the house now too. Mum has a new job working in the forest and cycles 5km there and back. Its not an easy job but it's a job and she is thankful. In common with other children in this village Ksusha gets German at school. She only learns English in Scotland. Ksusha gets homesick when she is in Scotland and misses her family terribly but mum says once she has been home for only a short time she is ready to go back to Scotland ☺

Next up is **Sasha boy**. Another long drive on a bumpy dirt road. Mum and Sasha come out to meet us. Inside the whole family is waiting for us, even dad. They have had another baby since our last visit. Mum tells us Sasha is not so well behaved at school. We tell mum his behaviour was not so good in Scotland too, but he is a boy. Mum says she will speak with him before the next visit and hopes his behaviour is better. Sasha plays chess and has won a competition recently. At school he gets German but his English is ok too. He tries hard to speak with us. In Scotland he likes most - slides at M and Ds, swimming, football, tennis and his bike. He had his batman t-shirt on again. Mum says he wears it all the time. I remember seeing a wee batman on a bike riding all over Broxburn in summer. The year before it was spiderman on a bike ☺

Last visit of the day to our children was **Sveta**. Another bumpy drive on a dirt track. Svetas family is growing quickly with a baby last year and another this year. Think that makes 7 children. Sveta and

her twin sisters are very alike. Little bundles of cheekiness and mischief but they are doing well ☺ Her twin sisters are also on the programme and go to Isle of Man. We take some pics for their host too. Mum is looking well after her recent pregnancy and dad says he is doing well too after having a lot of his stomach removed. He says he is learning to cope with it ok. It was a busy house as gran and uncle were there too.

We make the long drive back to the outskirts of Mogilev to meet up with Katia boss and Ira and then head east for about 40 miles to an orphanage/school in a village. When we arrive its just getting dark. The orphanage is on a huge piece of land, with large accommodation blocks spread out and linked by avenues of trees. It's deadly silent and a little bit eerie as we walk through the grounds. We have taken some cleaning and cooking supplies as often the budget for these items doesn't make it to the month end. We also take lots of new underwear, socks, tights, woollen hats, teddies and party bags for the children. In this orphanage the children all have special needs and 80% of them are social orphans, where mum and dad are no longer able to look after them. We learn that this is where Zhenyas brother Danilla is resident during term time and also that Zhenya now lives here too. We are shown down many dark corridors with no lights on and the lights are only on when we are with children. There weren't a lot of children as many, including Zhenya hadn't returned from their week long school holiday. The ones who were there were delighted to see us and were very excited to receive our gifts and interact with us. However it was quite an uncomfortable experience seeing these children in these circumstances and our heart goes out to them.

Our day was finished off back in Mogilev at the home of Luda our interpreter and husband Ed for a nice dinner. We also met their new puppy called Jamie ☺ He is adorable.

Wednesday 8 November

We have one day off during our visit to allow our visitors to spend time with their families. This is the day ☺ However we start with a quick visit to school number 18 and the class of our interpreter Luda. We usually visit her class, often taking them messages and sweets from the school in Broxburn, Scotland where they have a friendship link. We are well known to the children and they are excited to see us all. The school is looking great after some refurbishment over the last year. The kids are looking great too and they perform a song and dance routine for us. They are growing up quickly.

Then we go our separate ways. Kenny goes with Katia boss to visit the Rehabilitation Centre in the Mogilev Childrens Hospital. They have been waiting on a piece of equipment to help treat young children and babies with motor or muscle difficulties caused by conditions like cerebral palsy. We see some babies being massaged to try and help. Its very labour intensive work. Our piece of equipment should mean that more children will be helped and have a chance of having some improvement in their condition. Natasha who greets us says that we are their heroes in providing this equipment and we are presented with a certificate of thanks and a lovely book to commemorate 750 years of Mogilev. We hope to return in March to see our equipment in use. After hospital we head to the office to order some more things we will provide. One of which is a leg brace for Alexey to help him to walk. After a nice lunch its time to relax before catching up with our friends for dinner.

Tracy made the journey to Bykhov to spend time with Sergei and family. They had a walk around the village and went to Sergeis school and had a nice lunch in his house. In the afternoon Tracy took some of the family to Mogilev for a wee afternoon out and some shopping before catching up with Kenny for dinner.

Ross and Janice went to Cherkov to catch up with both of their families (Nikita and Andrei) for lunch, walk, visit to fire station and then dinner before heading back to Mogilev.

Once we were all back in the hotel we gathered in the café for a blether and to exchange stories of what we had been doing that day. Sounded like we all had interesting days.

Thursday 9 November

Our last day of visits started in the usual way with lots of food shopping for our children today.

As always we had an interesting visit to **Zhenya's** house. His circumstances have changed. The family now have social family status and they will be checked by the authorities weekly to make sure all is ok. Zhenya now lives in his school during the week. We had visited it on Tuesday. He will visit the doctor in some days for his 6 month check-up. We hope that he will be ok and will be able to return to Scotland for his 5th and final visit. He is such a lovely outgoing, sociable boy when he is in Scotland but we don't really get a chance to see him like this in Belarus. Gran says he does Ok at school. Gran has had some problems with mums behaviour over a long period of time and can no longer cope with the situation. Our meeting is a difficult and emotional one with both mum and gran present. Despite all that is going on around him Zhenya remains quiet and calm and focusses on the lego present that we brought for him. We all hope and pray that whatever the outcome is, that it is the best for Zhenya. He is a vulnerable boy. We all love him so much and only want the best for him.

Next was **Vlad**. We visited his school yesterday, school number 18. Vlad says he does well at school but mum doesn't agree 😊 He missed a lesson one day as he decided to play football instead. Mum is looking great. Its so nice to see. She now works in a factory producing waterproof material for jackets. She works nightshift from 10 til morning. Vlad stays alone but he is used to it. Vlads favourite things in Scotland were funpark at M and Ds and football training. Apart from missing one lesson he does have good behaviour at school. He finds English difficult at school and prefers English lessons with Chris in Scotland as they are lots of fun with games. We have a nice cup of tea and mum had made us some cakes.

Next we are off to **Matvey** and his wonderful foster mum Ludmila. Matvey hasn't seen his mum for about 2 years as she is in prison 😞 He was hoping to go with his brother this month to see her in prison but it wasn't allowed by the powers that be. Matvey had a great first visit to Scotland. He loved parks, mountains, bikes, to swim in the sea, lego and swimming pool. He goes to swimming in Mogilev too. He still looks through the book of all the activities we did in Scotland. He took it to school to show the pupils and teacher. He likes school.

Luba's family have done so well over the past 3 years. They lived in one bedroom flat, 9 of them, with no floor covering, no wallpaper, just mattresses piled on top of each other at the side of the room during the day. The flat has been transformed and now they also have the flat next door so they have more space. Mum and the older children have worked so hard to make this happen. Mum has 4 jobs. The children are so clever and talented. David sings us a song with his guitar. Big sister speaks perfect English to us. Luba loves her times in Scotland and is so looking forward to coming to Scotland again. The family have a tiny baby cat they found abandoned at their church. Its eyes are hardly even opened yet 😊 so cute.

Our last visit of this trip is to **Anya**. She had flu earlier in the week and couldn't make it to our party but has recovered now. According to mum she does well at school. The family would be very happy to see her hosts Heather and Gavin in Belarus. Before the first visit the family were frightened to let

Anya come to Scotland. Now they are so happy that she also has a lovely family in Scotland. Her next visit will be her 5th and final visit on the programme ☺ M and Ds is her favourite day out in Scotland but she likes swimming too. In fact she likes all days ☺. Anyas best subject at school is English. She gets 7,8,9 for English. She is on the 2nd shift at School which means she doesn't go to school until about 2 and finishes at 8. When she comes home she is very tired. Does some homework at night and some in morning before going back to school. We have some lovely food and cakes that mum and gran have prepared for us and it's a lovely way to finish our visits with a lovely family.

After Anya we go to Kennys boy Pashas house to have a cup of tea with them and say goodbye. Its always great to see them and spend time with them.

We spend the evening at Katia boss's place enjoying some food and drink with our friends from Helping Hands charity. We receive a certificate of thanks from Helping Hands for our interest in their work and for the kind donations that allow them to carry out small projects to help those in particular need. Honestly, it's a real pleasure to help this great team in whatever way we can. They do so much good work and its great to be a small part of that.

Friday 10 November

Its time to go home ☺ Kostya comes for us at 7.20am (4.20am Scotland time ☺) its just over 2 hours to the airport and we arrive in perfect time for check-in. All of the formalities go well and we are soon tucking in to a breakfast of Burger King and reflecting on a truly wonderful visit.

We had a great team as usual on the visit. Kenny, Ross, Janice and Tracy worked so closely and well throughout the week, all carrying out our duties individually and collectively like a well-oiled machine. Never a cross word between us for the whole week and so much fun. We were brilliantly aided by our drivers Kostya, Andrei and Katia, our interpreters Luda, Tania, Ira and Katia and our many, many friends. We worked long days, very hard. The best kind of work. Not for money but the most rewarding kind of work - for love and together we made a difference to so many people, showing them that someone loves and cares for them. And our work goes on through our helping hands team. When we are home we hear that we have helped another needy family with invalid children. The mum was in tears saying she prayed for help and her prayers were answered. The love goes on

K xxx