

Kennys Mogilev Diary

I decided to write a diary of the trip to Belarus. Most of these comments were written in the car between visits or just before bed so the writing may not be a literary masterpiece but hopefully it will give an incite into what we got up to. There is not a lot of detail about the children as you will get that in your personal update on your child, however there are some details. I have concentrated more on the country and surroundings etc to help give people a bigger picture about where the children live. All of the families are very very grateful for everything we do and you do even if it is not specifically mentioned here. If it was I would still be writing !

Friday 9th

Picked up at 500

Edinburgh Gatwick flight leaves at 620

In Gatwick met up with Norman and Alan from Isle of Man group and Sue from West Leicester group. The rest are flying out on Sunday.

Check in at the Belavia desk was interesting. The nice Russian speaking lady looked and sounded like she could have been in a James Bond movie “ Ah your luggage is too heavy Mr Bond” as she clicks her feet together and the flick knife springs from her toes ☺ Only joking we got away with it.

Gatwick Minsk flight leaves at 1130 and it is a small plane. Only 2 seats either side of the aisle. Very cosy.

Arrive Minsk 1730 local time

Through customs without too much bother surprisingly. They asked if Shirley and I were together as they looked at our luggage on the one trolley and we both said at the same time “yes” and walked on. We weren’t going to get into any deep explanations.

Met Katia and got Minibus to Mogilev. It was great to see Katia again and hear all her news and plans for us. She was looking well.

Lovely sunny evening but chilly with snow on ground. Minibus is warm though.

Journey to Mogilev mainly straight motorways, dual carriageways and pretty quiet but bumpy roads. The roads cut through beautiful snow covered fields and forests. Very picturesque.

Arrive in the city of Mogilev where we will be based at 2100

Apartment block looked ok from outside 1960s/70s. We are on 4th floor and no lift so have to get heavy cases up the stairs!. Apartment surprisingly nice inside. Decor bright and colourful but a bit 1970s garish. Strange entrance to your apartment. You unlocked the door only to be met with another door 6 inches behind the first one! Nice big bedrooms with very extravagant colourful net curtains and bedspread. I had the pink room! A small kitchen with a strange mix of some modernish units and a stand alone gas stove and table and chairs. Living room with TV. I am sharing an apartment with Ian and we have a bedroom each. Bathroom is basic and resembles a 1970s caravan. Very jealous of Shirley's bathroom which has had a makeover and has a huge corner bath/shower unit with jets coming from every angle. However theres no instructions and a degree in modern showers is required to work it. At least I can turn on my one tap that serves the

sink, small bath and shower head you just pull the arm of the tap to wherever you need it. Who needs jets of water everywhere! Apartment very warm.

Go to cafe for some supper but there is a wedding on in it so we go to local shop to buy bread, cheese, water etc for supper.

Empty all our bags and gather all paracetamol etc in Shirleys room and start to make up the bags for delivery the next day.

Decide to leave the rest til morning and head our separate ways at 2345 to sort our own things and go to bed. As well as doing that I tie up the host letters with the translated versions from Katia and go to bed at 1am. Tired. Long day but set up nicely for the week now.

First impressions apartment nicer and warmer than expected, if a little bit old fashioned. Shop also nice - just like a spar. Prices not bad for us but numbers are huge 12000 roubles = £1. Think locals would struggle to afford much as their salaries are very low.



The Village Party

Saturday 10th

Wake up at 7 with the brightness and then sun shining through my lovely net curtains with 4 shades of pink. Large almost dreary apartment block opposite us only about 40 yards away but with lots of bright washing hung out on every veranda and it must be -5 outside. Very crisp looking morning. Dont think they will dry somehow.

Shower was an experience and you would get done under trade descriptions act for calling it a shower by our standards. More of a trickle. However it was hot and wet so I

wont complain. Also had a shave and feel better now ready for what the day brings.
Looking forward to it

Andrei and Katia had bought all of the non perishable food for us so it was off to the supermarket for fresh things like chicken, sausages, fruit and salami to complete the food bags. Very modern supermarket with very stylish people shopping in it. It is an ill divided place when you think how poor our children are.

First impressions of Mogilev very beautiful city in its own way. Very flat, lots of open space with lots of trees planted but also lots of blocks of flats as far as the eye can see. Lots of snow on the ground but not on the trees. Trams or maybe trolley buses- theres a novelty for us Scots.

Changing money was a lot easier than I thought. 2 bureaus in the supermarket. Became an instant millionaire! Huge deli counter in supermarket much bigger than ours. They love their sausage and salami. Never seen so many different kinds.

1130 now on our way to see Angelina Roberts on the way to the village party at 1400 Which is a 90 minute drive from Mogilev. Snow covered Countryside on way to dead zone and Angelinas is outstandingly beautiful. Very like Scotland lots of little pine and birch forests and open spaces, little villages but no hills

Driving through the dead zone we saw empty villages, ghost villages, closed farms where the people had to evacuate in 1986. One house remained and the occupants did not move and the old person is still alive to this day !! Must be a tough old soul. Some villages had to be buried and we saw the monuments to each of the 5 buried villages. Dead zone is 30 kilometres and only reopened a few years ago. The snow is a good insulator to the radiation we are told which gives us comfort. Also the radiation is less on the road and only increases once you are off the road.

After driving through the dead zone we saw some small villages where the local transport was a horse and sleigh, just like santas on the snow. Very beautiful

Lovely visit to Angelinas house. She was looking so well and grown up with her hair a little longer and make up on – ready for the party! We give her a lift to the party as it is a very long way maybe 45 mins?

1500 Cherkov - Village party was great. Lots of food and lots of people there. It was a little bit quiet to start with as we were late, and the parents were maybe a bit apprehensive about us. Its not easy to speak with them but nods, smiles, handshakes and hugs were the order of the day. Everyone ate well and took all the leftovers home in plastic bags. Kids had a ball and eventually were running about daft. It was great to see them all. I said a few words to thank them all for coming and told them that we really enjoyed looking after their children for 1 month and we cant wait to have more fun with them in June. We would of course have more deeper conversations with them in there own homes in the coming week.

1700 Then it was off to see Denis Rodger. Short drive. Denis lives in a village only reopened 2 years ago. Lovely visit. Very loving and caring mum who has been through a difficult time with her relationship and looks after Denis very well. Nicely kept house – flat with maybe 6 or 8 in a block.

Short walk to visit Denis Anderson. He was looking well and was his usual self at the party – always at your side and wanting cuddles – which he got. However the update on Denis is not good. We had been informed by the guardian that he has been removed from his school and put into a special school where he should be able to get more care.

However his behaviour is getting a lot worse and he has been smoking and stealing from the guardian. He was also away on school camp recently and when they returned the teachers were so exasperated with him they were delighted to pass him back to the guardian. Much as we love wee Denis, as a charity we are not really set up to deal with behaviour like this and the language barrier makes it almost impossible for us to control him. The situation has been discussed with Tom and Katie. Last year was a difficult one for them (and us !) with Denis because of his behaviour and if it has got worse then it is not fair on them or the group that Denis returns. This is not a decision that was taken lightly and we will continue to support Denis and his guardian with food, vitamins and love as if he was on the programme and we are happy to provide extra support for any social work or professional help they can get. We feel that this will be more helpful in the long run to Denis than coming to Scotland. We pass on the news that he will not be invited this year but we will continue to support. The guardian was expecting the news but is very grateful for our continued support. He has a lovely guardian who has had him for 3 yrs when other guardians only lasted a few days. I have huge admiration for her and I told her that and said that she had my word that I would visit her and Denis every year and we would not forget him. I also told her if his behaviour improves then I would not rule out a return to Scotland. During all of this wee Denis sat as if butter wouldn't melt in his mouth, as you would expect ;-)

This was probably the toughest meeting of the whole week. It was very emotional for me but I manage to keep my emotions in check – but only just. Andrei is not there to meet us as we leave so we start to walk along the road. The nice cool wind that blows across the snow covered fields is welcome to cool me down after an emotional meeting. Tom and Katie are now looking for a new quiet girl to host this year. So the search begins.

Andrei who had been dropping off Angelina after the party picks us up after a few minutes. Andrei tells us that when he dropped Angelina off there were no adults in the house only Angelina and all the little ones. Re-affirming that this family really needs our support. Short drive to Natashas where her gate is attached to her outside toilet! Poor but warm living conditions and a home situation which is not great where mum and grandfather were drunk and asleep. Gran tries very hard and holds the whole family together. She is really grateful for the help from us and the hosts. Natasha was quite shy in front of her 2 older sisters. This is a family who need our help more than ever. We hand over the very large and heavy bag of shopping etc and decide we will pop back later in the week with extra food to help gran.

Now 1915 and on the road back to Mogilev for dinner at Pashas and an emotional first meeting with his family.

2030 Met Pashas dad, sister Alena and Pasha. Was very hungry and saving myself for dinner and turned up to a cup of tea and slice of cake :-)

Pashas house is a very small wooden house at the edge of a group of wooden houses in the city. It is dwarfed by a big block of flats only a few metres away. The dad is very hardworking and only has 2 days holiday every month. Katia sees a difference in the inside of the house and he is really trying hard for his 2 children. Katia is always joking with him that he is single and he says nobody would want a man with 2 children and only 2 days off a month. But he is a great dad and I told him that. He says that any dad would only want the best possible for his children and he tries very hard and is helped by his family. I was only there for an hour as we were very late in arriving and also Pasha was very shy. Tomorrow evening

will be a different story as Dad is having a barbeque in the snow in my honour with all of the extended family.

Came home and chatted through the day with the others and I'm now writing this at 0130. Long day, busy day, great day and a great sense that we have already been a huge help to some of the families who are now getting on well with their lives but also a great sense that some of our families need so much more help from us now and in the years to come



Local transport horse and sleigh

Sunday 11th

Up at 700 again. Wakened by a team of about 6 older ladies with snow shovels outside the apartment block clearing the whole road of the overnight snow. Not sure if it was the clanging and scraping of the metal snow shovels or the constant chatter that woke me ! Who needs the council gritters. No moaning here they just get on with clearing the whole road. They are also paid a small amount for it to supplement their pension!

0900 off to see Dasha Harper. Lovely drive out of Mogilev into the country to our only child slightly north of Mogilev. Overnight snow on top of the compacted snow and ice from months of cold weather makes the drive more challenging for Katia but the winter tyres help a lot. Beautiful flat snow cover fields as far as the eye can see and a nice wee track in the snow for us to follow. Dashas village has a large farm with a huge chemical type plant that makes plastic. The village is built around this and is mainly for the workers.

Dashas family are a lovely family. Mum and dad graduated as teachers but stopped teaching as it didnt pay enough. They now work on the farm/plant and between them earn 150 dollars per month. The mums sister died of pneumonia in 2008 and gran now looks

after her daughter. Dashas family also lived with gran but they have recently moved out to their own house which is provided by their work. The previous occupants had done a lot of work to it and they are benefitting from it. They are a lovely family who have suffered tragedy through death and also one of their sons has problems with his hips and spends a lot of time in hospital. They are very poor but very hardworking and it is great to see them in a nicer house. The mum dreamed as a child of being on a programme like ours and couldnt believe it when we phoned to say that her child would be on our programme. Dashas loves her hosts very much and the mum and dad are so grateful for everything. A real happy visit to start the day.

Rush back to Mogilev for the 1100 church service in the Mogilev Baptist Church and Shirley and me sneek in 5 minutes late. We didnt understand a word of the service but we recognised most of the tunes of the modern hymns. We definitely recognised the love that was in that place and it was an oasis of calm in a very busy schedule that let us take stock of what we had achieved so far, the difficult situations that we are trying our best to help with and also the families who are trying very hard with our help and it was great to give thanks for the work we are able to do, for keeping us safe and for the work or labour of love we still want to do on the visit and beyond.

After church it was great to share fellowship with some of the locals (surprisingly in perfect English) over a cup of tea.

We went straight from church to the city party to be greeted by our city children and past city children from the Edinburgh group. There must have been 60 people there. Of particular significance to me was a chance to see my city children again Vlad (with mum and brother), Masha(with grandmother), and Pasha(with aunt and sister Alena). Dasha (with Mum and 2 brothers) was also at the city party as her village is closer to the city than Cheriokof.

I think I made Mashas grandmothers day when I after I hugged Masha I said to the lady Masha Mama and she replied with a big smile. Nyet Masha Baboushka. It was her grandmother ! An instant rapport that was to be repaid on the visit to Mashas ! It also gave me a chance to meet Dima again from the Edinburgh group that I had met last summer who is coming to my group. Also his sister Diana who will come to our group at the same time to stay with new hosts due to Anne and David being unable to host her in Edinburgh in September due to Davids health. Mama is delighted that we will be able to have both at the same time next year but we will meet them again on Thursday for our proper visit. Party food was lots of salad, pizza, juice and then chicken, chips and vegetables. Lots of clean plates.

The city party finished at 3 and Claire, Olya (our new interpreter) me and Pasha, Alena and Aunt Inna were driven by Andrei to Pashas house for a barbeque in the snow: It was a really nice afternoon and we were joined by Shirley after she had completed some other visits. Pashas house is wooden,very quaint and very small. Outside it was typical pasha. He had built like a snow fort at either side of the garden with scary icicles on top and spy holes so that he could see what Alena was doing in the other snow fort when he was throwing snowballs at her. This was all watched by their outside dog. Basha the other dog was tucked up inside Pashas tiny house with a cat and two hamsters. The house has a small entrance hall which is also the kitchen. Sectioned off from that is a small toilet which Papa has built. A small sink with only cold water. There is one other room which is living room, Dining room and Papa and Pashas bedroom all in one. Now that

Alena is 14 papa has built a very small bedroom which is 3 feet by 12 feet. Yes that narrow. It has a loft bed at head height and a desk etc under. Very small but great that Alena has a private place. The whole extended family were there. Gran granpa aunt and cousin and what a spread they put on for us. All traditional Belarussian and it was lovely. Grans are the same the world over. Just when you thought you were going to burst she brought more food for another force feeding session! . Spent about 5 hours there talking and talking. I couldnt have hoped for a better family for my host child. Pasha is so like his dad in looks and especially mannerisms. Everybody had a great time, great laughs, great fellowship and real sense of love in a family where the dad only has two days off per month to provide for his 2 children who he brings up admirably on his own with the occasional help of his extended family who live a 30 minute bus ride away in another part of the city.

Thanks to Shirley, Clare and Olya for sharing those special moments with me. I think they enjoyed being part of a lovely hard working family. Pasha was the real Pasha today. Lively, very lively, very excited but also very loving to all spending quiet times just cuddling in to Clare and Shirley and me for long periods of time. Alena is great too and is so good with Pasha. You can see she has been 'mum' for most of his life.

Now back sitting in my room alone, tired, needing sleep, full of Pasha Dads beer which we happily shared together and now shedding tears of happiness for a great day and trip in so many ways. Thank you to all in our group for letting me lead you and serve you as your co-ordinator.



Shirley Clare and me with Pashas family in their tiny house. Alena (pronounced Alyona)

Is in the centre front and will join us for a one off visit this year.

Monday

Up at 7.30 not a great sleep. Was awake for long periods during the night. Too much on my mind and surprisingly too warm.

0800 Went to the cafe for breakfast for the first time with Clare Jayne and Shirley. We were first in. No English menu and nobody speaking English. After 5 minutes of hand gestures and drawing trying to get pancakes Shirley had inspiration and pulled out the phrasebook. As she ran down the list of P's the closest to pancakes was panty liners!! Not helpful but funny. After another 5 mins the message was received. We think. We'll see. Great pancakes arrived !

Shopping now for more fresh food to add to the non perishable we have then off on the long drive to the Cherikov villages with Katia Andrei and Clare.

1130 visited Vadim. Nice village, well spread out with water wells in the street peeking their heads through the snow. Passed the letter to mum to read and she was very emotional when she was reading it. You could feel the love coming from the page and I'm sure the tears running down her face were tears of appreciation for everything that Bob and Lilian do for Vadim to support her following her husbands death. Lovely visit lovely family. Its was Vadims sisters 21st birthday today and his youngest sister is a real cutie. Vadim was quite quiet but said he is looking forward to coming to Scotland and promised to mum he would behave well. I am sure he will.

1230 off on the short drive to Angelinas house. A lovely visit especially for Clare her host mum. After handing out some gifts which were just perfect for all the children we enjoyed a nice lunch. The grand unveiling of grannies bra was a highlight. You may be aware that Clare had a special request from Granny to bring her a bra. When asked what size we were told that each cup should fit on Angelinas head. She wasnt kidding, by the way. Andrei and me thought we were going to have to lift one each into their first ever cups :-). Clare had got 3 bras on the internet, the biggest available and discreetly handed over the package without comment. Granny who had sat motionless for the whole visit up to that point, sensed what was in the packet. She was out of the seat like a shot and away behind the curtain. She re-emerged a few moments later looking very perky. Parading about prodding them and cupping them like the Les Dawson character. The trip hazard had certainly been removed !! And she now had a waist. She was delighted it fitted. Probably her first one in all her years !

We were shown the new outside toilet - very nice and also the bathhouse banya which is traditional where they heat the water by burning wood under a tank and they also use the heat to create steam. They then use softened birch branches and leaves to rub and hit themselves with which is very good for your skin. In the city they have public banyas where people go at the same time every week and it is very sociable and you meet the same people.

Angelina was very excited to see Clare and is very caring towards her younger siblings. She is looking very well and in common with most of the children they have not had any colds this winter as the vitamins really start to help them.

We also had a chat with Angelinas cousin Misha who is eligible for the programme.

Lovely wee boy who had just come in from school with a tiny blazer on. A lovely wee

boy from a loving family but I think maybe he was too shy and not emotionally ready to travel. I will make up my mind when I see others.

0230 off to see Olya including driving along her walk to school. It is unbelievably long and the thick snow covered road goes through the forest for about 3 miles of it. Village is also mainly surrounded by the forest. We were greeted by mum and dad and the chickens and dog and Olya. We also had a lesson in how to use the well outside in the street from Andrei. Olya is well and her English lessons are going well. Mum had made us nice food including a dish a bit like stovies and some home made wine. Very nice

They live in an old wooden house with quite run down areas and dad is gradually upgrading it. He has fitted some nice new kitchen units next to the old stove and outside he has made a great job of renewing some of the wooden walls to the house. They are very grateful for all that we do and they are a lovely family.

Longish drive back to Cherikof to see Sasha Sterrick. They have just recently moved from a wooden village house to a block of flats in Cherikof so that mum is nearer to her work as a cleaner in the hospital. The flat is nice but cost of living is more than in the village and she still really needs our help.

They were looking well but the news on Sashas health was not good and we may try and get her looked at when she is here. However she was in good spirits and is a lovely girl. Then we are off to see some possible new children - sisters Dasha and Masha who live on the edge of Cherikof. One real character and the other a little bit shy and with some of her toes stuck together. Really liked them both and their home situation was needy.

Then off to see a possible new boy in Angelina and Vadims village. Wow what a home situation to live in. Bullet hole in the front window. Virtually no furniture Vadim barely clothed and with mums boyfriend. (who looks to be a drinker, was very small and slim a bit strange looking and was talking to himself) A more needy case I dont think I will see ever and such a lovely boy who says that he works hard at school. His dream is to have a football. I may be wrong but I am not sure if our help would be fully appreciated by the parents but regardless we could help make something of this lovely little boys life. Since found out from another of our childs parents that the small skinny strange guy in wee vadims house is the local stud who spends a few months living with each lady in the village before moving on to another one. He is apparently very popular with the ladies!! Cant believe that. He is a real macho man when he is drunk. So we refer to him as macho for the rest of the trip :-) looking forward to meeting wee vadims mum in the future but I'm guessing she is not much of a looker judging by her taste in men :-)

Then off for the last visit of the day to see a new girl Veronica (pronounced Veroneeeka). Our trip was halted as Andrei our driver(Katias husband) got us stuck in the snow and we had to get out and push. Andrei is a great driver the car is big and heavy (8 seats) has winter tyres and it just shows that the conditions in these villages are very harsh.

Anyway back to Veronicas. Nicer house, nicer family than Vadim but still very needy. Veronica is a beautiful wee girl who had her hair done in bunches and her mum had made a real effort to make her look nice in a nice dress. These children were all in Angelina and Vadims village and may know them through the school.

1830 Now back on the long drive to Mogilev where we are meeting up with Ian Jayne Shirley and some of the interpreters and past families at 1930 before Clare and Jayne say their goodbyes. Will we make it? I think we might. The wheels are hardly touching the ground we are going that fast now that we are back on snow free main roads.

Very busy day again today but I wouldn't have it any other way. We have to pass on the messages and love from the hosts to the children and get info and photos to pass back to the hosts as well as meeting and finding new children to complete our group. I will do whatever I have to to ensure all of this happens. I am here to serve others and do so willingly and without complaint.

We make it for 7.30 just - without changing or washing which is not great given the long and sometimes dirty day we had but made good use of the wipes.

3 course dinner for 15 came to £110. We had tuna salad starter choice of chicken and chips or salmon and chips followed by ice cream.

2200 We met up with some of the other co-ordinators for a bottle of beer and to discuss new children we had seen that day with a view to siblings going to each others group. Still more new children to see on Tues and Wed before making those life changing decisions and which ones are most appropriate for each host parent. Any not chosen will hopefully get picked by another group or may have to wait for next year. Heartbreaking but there is a limit to what we can do.

Said goodbye to Jayne and Clare as they will be leaving at 0445 to go to the airport and I'm not getting up then!

Now 1230 and off to bed with wee Vadim featuring heavily in my thoughts and prayers. Wee soul. Such a lovely wee boy with huge potential that just needs unlocked. I can see beyond the terrible conditions and situation he lives in. We could have a huge positive impact on him and change his life.



Beautiful Country with mainly silver birch and pine trees

Tuesday

Up at 0730. Good sleep last night. Sun shining in the window, blue sky, lovely.

Breakfast at 0830 with Shirley and Ian. We all had pancakes and tea or coffee. Total of £2.50. The same waitress as yesterday is speaking a little bit of English today and is trying hard. No struggle today to order and we get exactly what we wanted. We leave her a nice tip, just like yesterday.

Now preparing the bags of food before going shopping to add fresh chicken, sausage, salami, sweet milk, apples, oranges, biscuits, sweets and also soap and washing powder. Items already in the bags are 2 of everything butter, oil, tinned beef, tinned tuna, tinned sardines, rice, buckwheat porridge, normal porridge, pasta, rice. Also stock cubes, tea bags, paracetamol, ibuprofen, calpol, abidec, plasters, chocolate, toothbrushes, toothpaste. Vitamins for new children. They normally get more in the bags but they still have some left from last time so they were also given approx 40 dollars of cash (where appropriate) or more food. Quite a sorting operation with Shirleys apartment being the hub.

After shopping its off to see Masha. Masha lives in a hostel in the city of Mogilev. There are about 25 rooms off a long dark concrete corridor and it looks a bit like a prison corridor. All 25 families share one kitchen and one toilet. It was Mashas mums birthday so we took her a nice box of chocolates. She was all dressed up for her birthday (or me !) who knows but she looked lovely. Grandma and Grandpa were there too. Grandpa was telling us that he was involved in some of the clean up operations after Chernobyl. He was driving the vehicles that evacuated people from 5km to 30km. He now has difficult health problems but he is lucky as all of his colleagues are dead. He is the last one in his division. They were told they were going on a training exercise but they were actually going to the disaster area and didnt know anything about it. Sad story but he is one of the lucky ones. Great old guy. Masha is doing well at school and loves dancing. We certainly know that from the concert. Mum gets great support from grandma and grandpa and she has her little place looking really nice despite the difficult area and circumstances. They are very grateful for our support and the support from Sharon and Joe. Lovely family who put on lovely birthday food for us and they made a big effort. I hug and kiss all of the female adults on the cheek on all of our visits and hug and shake hands with the men to show the respect and love we have for them. As I went to hug and kiss Mashas gran, I am guessing following my comment to her and rapport built up at the party, she grabbed both of my cheeks and planted a smacker on my lips. There was no way I was getting out of that one and thought enjoy? the moment Kenny. The things I do for Belarussian Scottish relations !!

1215 now off to Vlad

What a great visit. Vlags mum was brought up in an orphanage and has had nothing all of her life. When the children came along she was a single mum and lived in a hostel. Then FOCC came along. What a difference she has seen in Vlad over the last 2 years. He has grown up a lot and is now more confident. Mum has now found a new husband and her life is now turning around. They have moved out of the hostel and into a nice apartment in a newer area of Mogilev. It is great to see one of our families getting on well thanks initially to our support. The mum is very grateful and was quite emotional talking about it and her past.

Now off to the market with Andrei and Katia to buy a bike for Shirley to give privately to Kostya. This should be fun! And it was. After buying the bike Andrei rode it out of the market and up a steep hill to the van. So funny ! A bike is a great present and we pick one that will be adjustable for the whole family to use and also it folds it half to help with storage. A lovely shiny blue one. Someone is going to be very happy tomorrow.

Now back at the apartment for a quick cup of tea before sort of having the afternoon off sightseeing with Pashas family and getting to know Olya better who will interpret on the sightseeing and our trip in June

1430 meet with Olya. Who says to me “Kenny you are hot Scottish Man” I said “thank you very much ☺” until I realized she was talking about the fact I wasn’t wearing a coat or hat when it was cold. I explained to her that hot has two meanings in Scotland and she saw the funny side of it. Andrei takes us to pick up Pasha, Alena and Dad. We then head into the city centre where Andrei drops us at the Spartak football stadium. We have a really nice walk around the city centre and see some of the lovely buildings and sites including 2 churches, the government building, astronomers square and the eternal flame and war memorial in the huge square near the Mogilev city hall. The snow and ice is starting to melt a little and the pavements were very icy, wet and slippery. We were joined by Pashas aunt Inna and her son Maxim before we finished our long walk. We went to a beautiful cafe restaurant where we had a nicely decorated small private room for 8 of us as Andrei joined us too. Lovely 3 course meal and drinks before dropping everyone off and making arrangements to see them to say goodbye on Thursday night.

I have now spent two afternoon/early evenings with Olya. She is a really nice girl and her English is good. I am sure she will do a great job with our group.

Now 2200 and back in the apartment to gather my thoughts before a long day tomorrow visiting the last of our village children and seeing some more new children before we decide on what 4 we will bring to our group.



Typical road to the villages

Wednesday

up at 0730. Breakfast at 0800 on the road at 0930 with Katia after making arrangements with Andrei and Shirley to go and get shopping. Big day today. See some more new children to visit, visit the remaining village children and take some extra food to others. Off to see a new girl in the gypsy area just outside Mogilev.

Dont know what I expected of the gypsy village but its was just like a normal village. No caravans no big fat gypsy bling just normal ramshackle houses. However Katia says it is not a safe place. Lots of stealing and drinking and drugs but not everybody does that. We met mum outside the gypsy village and she guided us in. Main difference was unmade roads. Nice girl called Pollina. Single mum. Outside toilet, outside Banya for warm winter washing and outside shower for summer which looked like a hut with a water drum on top of it. House quite run down. Nice needy girl. Not sure she would fit with our available hosts but will keep an open mind.

1045 off to catch up with Shirley and Andrei to finish the shopping. Got extra for Natashas gran and also Nikita.

1130 Kenny Shirley and Katia off on the long drive to Cherikof. Following discussion and heart rending we have sent Andrei on a special mission today when we are away. He is to get 5 duvets for a needy family that Ian met and also to buy some clothes for wee Vadim. Regardless of whether he is coming on the programme or not we will drop them off to him. Hope Macho man doesnt wear them as they may fit him too !

Lovely visit to Kostyas house where we spent extra time for Shirley to get to spend time with the family. Nice house. You tend to find the houses provided by the farm are better

but the downside is they are in a more contaminated area. Kostya is very well and looked great. Mum and dad are really nice. We had a nice lunch of Stovies type potatoes again which are very popular, salad and wine. It was also great to see Kostya get his new bike. He was so excited. No colds again in the winter so the vitamins are helping to build the children up.

1415 now off on the shortish drive to Nikita and Big Sasha

Lovely visit to Sasha. Mum is really nice a helpful in looking after Nikitas family too when the parents are drunk and I thanked her for that.

Sashas English is getting better and it was great to hear her speaking English in her video message to the Evans family without any prompting from us..

During the whole meeting little Roma was sat on my knee. He had been so excited all day that I was coming then was so shy when I arrived. So I took him in my arms and he gave me a big cuddle. He was holding on so tight. It was lovely. He was happy to just sit there on my knee when I was typing away the interview answers on my phone. Lovely wee boy. We leave extra food from Gillan and the extra charity money with Sashas mum to look after Nikitas family when things get tough.

1500 now off to Nikita

Although Nikita lives in the same village as Sasha it was a good 3 mile or so drive to his house along really thick Ice and snow with some of it like a really thick skating rink..

Katia has done a great job today on the driving in her wee polo. I thought we were stuck a few times but no and she did an amazing 3 point turn outside Nikitas on sheer ice and snow on the narrowest track of snow road you will see. I thought I was in for a ladylike 15 point turn and with at least 3 pushes. Big respect to Katia :-) Well impressed. (did I get away with that ladies?)

Short visit to Nikitas as the whole family only got out of hospital yesterday. They were in with an infection. Very old wooden house. Feel sorry for Nikita. He is a great guy very clever but he lives in some of the worst conditions with a mum and dad who drink. Its places like this that you really know how much our assistance is appreciated by the child, never mind the parents, and that is the most important thing to me. Not the appreciation just the fact the child really needs our help. So grateful to Sashas mum for helping them. Almost had a tear in my eye when we asked what he liked most about anything he brought back from Scotland. He said it was the things he brought for the young ones as he likes to look after them and make them happy. Emotional even writing this.

Now to Kristinas who really lives in middle of nowhere. The village isnt even on the map as it was closed after Chernobyl and not really officially recognised now even after sort of opening.

We pulled up at her house which is opposite her grans house and were greeted by a sheep in the road. The first farm animal I have seen on the trip other than chickens. Nice visit.

Kristina was a little shy to start as we expected but soon warmed to us. She was looking well. It was lovely to see her smile and her hair was a bit longer than we saw in Scotland. It is great that Kristina has a few older adults around to give her some stability in her life when mum disappears. Gran, grans brother, uncle and aunt were there at the meeting too. Kristina was very shy doing her video message to Jess and could only manage one or two words but she told us she loves Jess and the dog and the family very much. The mum looked ok and had made an effort to be with us and is really grateful for all the support. It

was great to see how close grans house was and know that Kristinas has someone nearby to go to in troubled times..

Now off to Natashas house again to drop in more shopping to her gran to help her out. Very emotional short visit. Gran also asked for money but we cant give her any as the drinkers just take it off her. Gave her a big bag of shopping and she was happy and emotional. Nice to help her out.

1730 now heading back on the long drive to Mogilev and our thoughts turn to our new children. I think I am going to go with Dasha Masha Veronica and Vadim. Little Diana, Dimas sister will also be hosted.

Shirley is just reminding me from the back of the car of some of the prices of food here. Pasta £1 ketchup £3 chicken £4 rice and buckwheat nearer £1.50 sweet milk £1 hot dog sausages £2 salami £6.50 porridge £1.50 oil £1 soap 50p toothpaste £1.25 toothbrush £3 tins of meat £1.5 sardines £1. Hope I got all them right . A normal wage here for someone in the village would be 70 to 100 dollars per month. £50 to £75 per month so you can imagine how little food that can buy and how much our food parcels and help is appreciated

1930 been back at apartment for a wee while. Ian now away to orphanage with Katia to see an ex child. Me and Shirley are now going with Andrei to Katias mums to meet her mum and dad and her wee daughter Liza

Katias mums pancakes are world famous and it was great to meet her and taste her pancakes. Definitely a recipe we need to get for the FOCC recipe book.

Katias mum is looking well following her surgery and troubles and dad is looking ok too following his stroke but his mobility is now limited. It was great to meet them. Liza who was 3 recently is a beautiful wee girl, full of energy and loves bouncing around. Now sitting watching Dora the explorer and “reading” an English book. Shirley is saying duck or whatever in English and Liza is then pointing to the correct picture. Very clever. Lovely spread of food from Katias mum. Beautiful smoked ham, salami, bread, pancakes, tomato, cucumber, cheese and lovely cake. Not bad for just a cup of tea. As I said before baboushkas are the same the world over. The Belarussians are very friendly like the Scots. Great to be here.

2130 Heading back to the apartment for a meetng with a possible new interpreter for us called Katia as Luda will not be joining us this year now. Meeting goes well and new Katia is very happy to be coming to Scotland in June.

2230 make up our minds on the final line up for this year and agree with Andrei and Katia how we will visit the 15 new children between the twogroups tomorrow. Julie and Alison from Maghull group join us for coffee and chat after. Its good to know what other groups are up to both here and at home. They seem very nice and we have got together a few times now

0030 the 3 of us start to make up the bags of food, vitamins and painkillers tailored exactly to the family situations of our new children.

0130 almost out on my feet. Away to bed. More on the new children tomorrow.

Shirley tells me she continued until 0245 !!



Beautiful Mogilev

Thursday

0730 Up for the last day and ready to complete our mission. Blue sky and brightness streaming in the window. Can't wait to tell our new children they are coming and start to change their lives for the better. That is why we are here and they are the most important things.

0930 Me Katia and Ian go to visit Dima and Diana. Brother and sister who are coming to our group this year from the Edinburgh group after their first visit last year. Dima is hosted by Ruth and Dougie from Kirkliston. Diana was hosted by Anne and David Evans from Balerno but due to David's health they will be giving up hosting after Sasha this year. They have been a great host family and are very much in my thoughts at the moment. Dima and Diana have a great mum but live in one of the poorer hostels in Mogilev. They have one small room in which every spare inch is used in a very thoughtful and useful way to create a great but small home for this family. Very clean and mum is great. They share a small kitchen and toilet/shower with around 25 other families. Mum says if she wants to cook anything in the morning she has to get up at 5 and queue to use the cooker. Same with shower etc. Diana is 8, has a great smile, is a lovely wee girl and will now be living with Martin and Dianne Stein in Linlithgow. They have 2 sons and a dog. Diana's mum says she would play more with boys than girls and she loves dogs and loves to play with them. A great visit and great to see a family doing so well in very difficult circumstances.

Back to the apartment to meet Shirley and Andrei who had been doing the last of the fresh shopping. Sort out all the bags and Ian heads off with Katia to visit the 11 new children in his group with the good news that they are coming.

1130 and Shirley me Andrei and Olya our new interpreter head off to Cherikof area to break the news to our 4 new children that they will be coming too. Food bags and vitamins at the ready and also some new clothes and a coat for wee Vadim

First visit to Masha and Dasha - two sisters who will be coming to our group. Dasha is a very bubbly girl with enthusiasm oozing out of her and it was great to see her again.

Masha is a slightly quieter girl but they are both lovely girls. Dasha will be going to stay With Kev and Sonia and family in Livingston and I am sure she will be great with them.

Tom and Katie and family from Torphichen will have Masha and I know that she will be great with them. I promised them a nice quiet girl (after Denis) and Masha certainly fits the bill. What a great visit both girls were absolutely delighted to be coming and really enjoyed reading the letters from the new host families and showing them to mum. I think mum was a bit shellshocked by it all. Lovely to be able to pass on such good news. We also explained about all of the vitamins etc in the bag

I have also asked all the new parents not to send gifts with their child. Just a letter from mum. Some families would find it harder than others to send gifts both in terms of money and logistics so I think it is better this way and fairer.

Off to see Veronica (pronounced veroneeeka) she is a lovely blonde girl who had bunches in her hair. She is a girly girl and loves wearing dresses and her favourite colour is pink. Veronica will be staying with Kel and Lucy and family in Livingston and will fit in great with their family. I am sure of that. She was quite quiet and took the news in her stride.

We saved the best(or worst) til last.

Wee Vadim and macho man. As we pulled up outside the house we were greeted by what I thought was a crazy child running down the street. It was actually mum! Coming to meet us from the farm. She is very small too. Also his aunt came along (machos sister). The situation is a little bit complicated and not as we first thought. Macho man is actually his dad and has full parental rights. 'Mum' is not really mum we don't think and has no rights. Both Macho and mum are well suited in a nice but also sad way. Without being judgemental only descriptive I would say they were a little bit simple. Machos sister was there and appears to be a sensible normal lady. Before I revisited Vadim I was hoping that there would be someone in his life that could be relied upon and give him some sense of normality and I am so so happy that he has this aunt. His living conditions are desperate, his parents will try hard I am sure but they are not really 100% capable in my opinion. Vadim is such a nice wee boy and I am so happy that he is going to get a real break in his desperate life and I am so happy that he is going to John and Lynda Calderwood in Broxburn as I know he will be well looked after and made to feel so special.

He was just in from school and had the same dirty shirt he had on when we first saw him on Monday. We had taken clothes and a coat and trainers for Vadim as well as all the shopping. He was so excited to get new clothes probably for the first time that he took his trousers down in front of us and started to put the new clothes on. So lovely to see him with clean new clothes on. He looked a different boy. We gave him some bouncy balls

as well as sweets. He says his dream one day is to have his own football. I am sure he will have more football stuff than that from John and Lynda. I am so happy that I chose Vadim. I know it will probably have its challenges maybe more on the paperwork side of things but the aunt is taking full care of all the paperwork and is the point of contact for the family. There is great potential for us to make a huge difference here and that is what I love about wee Vadim. I am up for a challenge where others would maybe walk away and I would love to be a part of the difference we can make here.

I feel quite bad about having joked a bit about Macho. He has the rights to Vadim and has stuck by him despite whatever personal issues he has with his mind or life and I really admire him for that. I give Macho a big handshake and warm embrace and the same for "mum" with our promise that we will look after Vadim well in Scotland and he will have a great time.

Before the visit I was looking for some comfort that there was an adult in Vadim's life and I am actually surprised that I now see that comfort maybe comes from dad under the watchful eye of his aunt. I feel bad that I may have misjudged dad (and it was very easy to do so) but I am happy in my mind that Vadim does have someone who loves and cares for him in his Dad.

Get back in the car and Shirley shares with us that Macho jumped up kissed her full on the lips. Shirley you've pulled and Macho's reputation lives on !!

1515 we are now in the car heading back on the long drive to Mogilev. Our work here is almost done. I am so happy with all of our new children and know that we can have a big impact on their lives. I have concentrated more on Vadim's story in this diary but all the new children are very needy in their own way. We will make a huge difference to them all and I am also sure that everyone in the group will love them.

1630 say my goodbyes to Olya. That is the 3rd day I have spent with her. Her English is very good, as you would expect being an English teacher. She has a very nice manner is very organised and very professional. I know she will be good with our group and look forward to seeing her again in Scotland.

1700 back in the apartment after doing another food shop on the way back for a remote child whose bag will be delivered after we are gone.

Packing up my stuff now as I am going to say my goodbyes to Pasha's family at 1800 and then Ian Shirley me and some of the interpreters are having dinner in the cafe at the apartments at 1930 ish

1700 one of the funniest small world moments I have ever witnessed. Shirley was meeting Alex one of the interpreters who visited Edinburgh a few years ago and who no longer has a connection with FOCC. As Katia wasn't back and Olya had to go with Norman her other co-ordinator Shirley had asked a favour of Alex that we all go to Pasha's house on the other side of the city. Alex can take us and translate. Alex's wife had to come too but she doesn't really speak English. In a huge city like Mogilev what are the chances of Yadya - Alex's wife going into Pasha's house and shouting Pasha! She is his schoolteacher and didn't know who she was going to see and I never knew she was a teacher. It was so funny and all of us couldn't believe it and were laughing for ages. Pasha found it hugely embarrassing and spent most of the time hiding.

It was sad to say our goodbyes after building up a great rapport with Pasha, Dad, Alena, cousin Maxim, Aunt Inna and of course gran and granpa over the 4 short times I spent time with them. They are a really beautiful, kind, hard working family and I can't wait to

see them again. What an amount of gifts they gave me for all of the family back home. I had not spent much money in Mogilev so I left most of what I had left with them. At least I didn't feel so bad about the gifts, food and beer they had so generously given during my time with them.

We were dropped at Shirley's Zhannas flat to say a quick goodbye to them and then we walked about 15 minutes past all the blocks of flats on the thick and very slippery ice. Maybe not the most sensible thing to do walking ourselves at 2030 at night but we made it.

We met Katia and Ian and some of the other co-ordinators for a quick meal. Saw Luda for the first time on the trip and said hello, but we knew by then she would not be coming to Scotland again.

1030 heading off to bed as we are leaving at 0500 to go to Minsk.

Our New Children



Dima & Diana



Masha



Dasha



Veronica



And of course Vadim, “mum” and Macho - all 4 foot something of him

Friday

Alarm goes off at 0415 (0115 UK time) get up with the intention of having a shower but there is no hot water so decide to miss out.

0500 on the coach going to Mogilev

This has been a great trip. One of the best things I have done in my life. I have given my all both for the children here and for the host families in Scotland. I have had great assistance from Shirley and Clare and cant thank them enough for the organisation of all the supplies and money before the trip and especially on it. Also for being very caring loving mums to all your children on the visits. Their assistance has let me record all this information for you about the visit.

To Jayne Ian Shirley and Clare thank you for being great companions and for all your support and friendship. It is not easy living with others for a week and while we had brief exasperations with each other, they were only brief and I think we managed well.

I feel content that we are helping all our children and their families to make the most of the life they are used to. Some are doing better than others and some still need our help more than others. Our work must continue and I know from meeting all the families that everything we do is very much appreciated.

To our interpreters and drivers. Katia, Andrei Olya and others - a huge thank you for organising our visits, taking us around your beautiful country and keeping us safe. Your

patience, dedication and friendship is hugely appreciated by us all. It would just not be possible without you. You are very special people and it is great to know you and count you as friends. Thank you.

If anyone would like to go on the trip next year then please have a chat with me. If you think it would just be a holiday with your child then its not for you. If you are prepared to work hard on the trip, muck in and also spend some time with your child and family then it will be the best and most rewarding holiday of your life.

Kenny