

# CHERNOBYL CHILDREN'S PROJECT (UK)

## ПОДДЕРЖКА ДЕТЯМ БЕЛАРУСИ

### Visit to Belarus November 2017

I flew from Manchester via Amsterdam which meant a 3.30am start to the day. The journey was fine, no luggage lost in Amsterdam and no questions at any of the airports, although I was carrying a Suction Pump, Stethoscopes and Gastrostomy sets.



The first visit was to **School No 5** where Oleg and his deputies had clearly spent many happy hours working out the best way to spend the **\$5,000** recently donated for them by Godel. They will spend some on keeping the minibus



on the road, and Natasha will supply this in cash to them.

They want to buy an interactive whiteboard, some audio equipment and items for a sensory room. Natasha will buy most of these items for them, probably in Russia, once they have decided on those most appropriate and best value.

The computers purchased with funds donated by Godel are much appreciated by staff and children.

They continue to improve their work with autistic children and they were glad to hear that we had a specialist in ADHD coming to visit and give training.

At **Gomel Baby Home** the Director told us that many children under one year old are now being adopted. This is excellent news as in the past it used to be common for children not to be adopted till they are around three years old and capable of dressing and feeding themselves. Some districts rarely send a child to the Baby Home now, others still make no attempt to find a foster family who may take them, and just automatically send all children under 3 into the Baby Home.

Palliative children can now be kept till 7 years, and in practice longer than this. Elena had recently been sent a letter to say that the Home should take palliative children from families for Respite Care, but had not yet been given any instructions as to how much the



families should pay for this, or how long they would be entitled to.

### **Our New Project on Teenage Mental Health**

With Tatiana, the new Chief Paediatrician, we visited the 'Youth Friendly Centre' in one of the Polyclinics in Gomel where our project is based. They already have many different medical specialists there who support teenagers, particularly those who want confidential help. For our project there are two psychologists, a special needs teacher and a psychiatrist all working part time to support teenagers with mental health issues, both individually and in groups.

This Polyclinic has three deputy chief doctors. One is Olga, who used to work as our Hospice doctor a number of years ago; one is Marina, the wonderful neurologist, who we employ for a few hours a week to assess children and young people at the Mayflower Centre; and the third is the ghastly Zimilikhin, who used to be chief doctor of Gomel Children's Hospital. We were supposed to be meeting Olga, but unfortunately she was not available when we first arrived and Zimilikhin joined us.

The Head of the Department told us about their work and then we explained to them the plans for the forthcoming visit of a Child Psychiatrist and a Clinical Nurse specialist. We started by talking about the training in Autism and ADHD which they would be delivering during the week, for a mixed group of psychiatrists, psychologists, neurologists, paediatricians, special needs teachers and speech therapists. Zimilikhin immediately said that it would be better to have separate trainings from each of the different groups of professionals – not just divide the medics from the educators, but separate psychiatrists, paediatricians, neurologists, etc.

We tried explaining to him nicely that the point was to get people working together, to set up multi-disciplinary teams, and to make sure that everyone understood the issues as comprehensively as possible. His colleagues tried too, but he does not listen to anyone and he continued to try to insist that this must happen.

In the end I had to tell him very firmly that the training would be joint for all relevant disciplines and it just was not going to happen any other way. We decided that it should take place at the polyclinic as they have a large room which is very suitable. But I am a little nervous about this as it would be very annoying if he comes to poke his nose in and interfere.

Once he had gone we had an excellent discussion with everyone else, about the training and about the project which is for ordinary children who have developed depression, anxiety or other mental health issues. Olga and Marina had joined us by this time, and with their support and that of the Chief Paediatrician I hope that the work will continue after the six month project has finished.

Then we went to the Psychiatric Hospital to talk to Natalia Begliuk, the Chief Regional Child Psychiatrist, who is working on the project. She said they had chosen about 20 children to take part. Some have been in the hospital. Others she has chosen because the parents came to her unofficially to ask for advice, saying they did not want their children to be admitted to the hospital because of the stigma which can follow them all their lives.

I asked if she had noticed any changes since the Chief Doctor's visit to the UK. I could not ask him as he was off sick. She said that she thought more people were being treated as day

patients instead of being admitted to the hospital. That is definitely the case in the Children's Department.

We asked about Zahar, an 11 year old boy who lives in Gomel Children's Home. I first met him two years ago in the Psychiatric Hospital, where he told us 'Nobody wants me'. His mother is dead and his father in prison.

Natasha and I then spoke to Zhanna about getting him



out of the hospital, where he had been for months, and she placed him in Gomel Children's Home.

I first saw him there a year ago and he was obviously very fond of the Director, who was coping quite well with him.

But last week the Acting Chief Doctor of the Children's Department in the Hospital said he thought that 'nothing could be done with Zahar' which is a startling and distressing thing to hear about an 11 year old boy (who looks more like 8).

He had just been in the hospital. When a young woman psychiatrist came to talk to him he greeted her with 'Oh, you are working with children, so I suppose you are too afraid to work with adults'. He is resistant to talking about why he gets so upset but when he does – as soon as something does not go the way he wants it to – he gets extremely violent and hurls large objects around.

When we went to **Gomel Children's Home** the Director was away at first so we talked to the Deputy Director and a psychologist about Zahar.

They said they were trying a new strategy of letting him wander about the school more, and they had moved him in with a group of older boys who he seems to get on with better than kids his own age.



He followed us about the school and appeared in lots of pictures as we were shown around. He is a beautiful little boy and looks as though butter wouldn't melt, but he must be in need of some serious psychiatric help which he is not getting. \$2,500 of Godel's recent donation will go to this orphanage.



At Zhuravichi Natasha was quite upset about a recent inspection. It had been her birthday just a couple of days earlier and she would have celebrated with a glass of champagne and a piece of cake with some of her staff. But she received a tip off that inspectors would come at lunch time. And sure enough a team of inspectors arrived and found her drinking tea with some of the staff.

If she had been drinking – even a small glass each for a birthday celebration - everyone in the room could have been sacked. They then went to the kitchen and asked the staff to fetch them a crate of champagne to inspect, to which the cooks said they did not have any champagne.

The inspectors had received an anonymous letter of complaint about Natalia. There is a horrible tradition in Belarus of taking notice of all letters of complaint, however vicious and unreasonable they might be, and even when they are anonymous. Natalia suspects that this will



have come from a sanitary nurse she had sacked because she just wasn't working.

There was a series of particularly nasty inspections going on and Natalia received news while we were there that the Director of an Institution at Halch had cut his wrists and left a suicide note to say it was the stress of the inspection he could not cope with. The poor guy did not die, and after a few days of patching him up he was sent to the Psychiatric Hospital.

Natalia is a good director and the young people are all very fond of her.

When we visited the department where we employ Inna to work with Petya, Pasha and around 15 other young people, I was surprised when many of them asked me about my mother as she knew I did not come in September because she was ill. They also



asked about Helena and the children, and of course whether they would be going to the sanatorium next summer.

Natalia is very happy about the volunteers who come to the institution in the summer and I told her Lynne will accompany me on my next trip in February, so she is looking forward to seeing her then.



The young people making crafts had made some delightful little dogs out of beads and have promised to make some for us to sell next year. I gave them \$60 to buy beads and they gave me some butterflies to sell now.



It was great to see that Anya, who had worked with the volunteers in the summer, had established a good relationship with many of the young people and some of the very disabled children responded well to her too.



Natalia told us that she is supposed to have 300 of these fire masks. I am modelling this one. They are said to last half an hour in a fire but they are very expensive, would be impossible to put on to many of the children and young people at Zhuravichi and it is surely better to focus on how to get everyone out quickly in the vent of fire.

At **Vikov** we met the new Director, Natalia.



She is a huge improvement on Ludmilla. She said she had been to Zhuravichi the day before and could feel that there was a warm atmosphere, and the staff were doing their best to look after the residents. She would like to try to create the same atmosphere at Vikov. When I asked if she would like some training for the sanitary staff she said that would be wonderful.

When we went to meet people in 'our corridor' she asked our Ludmilla to show us round as not only would she get lost, but 'people don't know me and might be frightened of me', which showed a sensitivity the last two directors never possessed.



She managed well for the obligatory picture with Loshe, and is clearly taking a lead from Ludmilla, who the previous Director ignored.

Anya had promised to write to this man after the summer. She had written him a letter but wondered if he had got it. She brought him a book to write in and asked if he had received her letter.



He looked doubtful at first but then put a finger up to indicate that he had received 1 letter and he clearly felt this was not enough! When she finishes working with the current trainers and then Geoff, I think Anya needs to write again!

Some of the more capable residents at Vikov do wonderful crafts. I gave the Director \$100 for craft materials, and Ludmilla \$50 for materials to work with the group in our corridor.

The previous Director had been sacked as the result of a ludicrous financial inspection. But we later learned that she had swapped jobs with Natalia on Rogachev Executive Committee.



At **Rechitsa Boarding School** we visited the computer class which was enabled by Godel's funding. Adam, who has no arms, is wonderful at drawing on the computer using his toes. He is also adept at using his chin and nose to operate a mobile phone.

Victor, the Director, was much more polite and pleasant than he used to be and when I asked if he would like training for his sanitary nurses he was really keen. He was also very positive about the volunteers who had been to them in the summer, saying all the kids, young people and staff liked them and hoped they would come again.

I had hoped that Lilia, Ira's sister (Ira of Rodni Kut and prosthetic legs) would be able to join us. She interpreted for the volunteers in the summer and it would be good for her to get to know the staff and young people better before next summer. She is at college just down the road, but her teachers would not let her miss a grammar lesson (which she really doesn't need) in order to work with an English visitor for a couple of hours. We will visit in the afternoon in February, and then she will be able to join us.

Victor did ask for money for various projects. One was to buy the polycarbon to complete their greenhouse. It would cost **\$1,000**. I said we would explore whether this might be possible. It would enable them to grow a lot more of their own food and would provide good work experience for some of the young adults in the institution, who may hopefully move on to supported living in the near future.



I have written to Godel to ask if some of the money they have given to support orphanages could go to Rechitsa for this purpose.



In Rechitsa we also visited the Social and Pedagogical Centre. Geoff had delivered some training there recently and was very impressed with the Director. He has been elected as Chairman of the Association of Directors of Social and Pedagogical Centres in Gomel Region

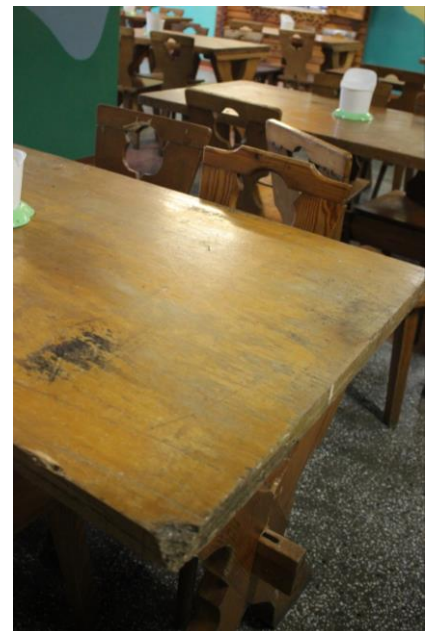
He showed us round the building and introduced us to the psychologists – one of whom we suggested should go to the training in Gomel this week – and to other staff. The whole place was warm and friendly and there was a children's shelter where we met these happy little girls.



They seem to have a good system for working with parents and children and he wants to set up a computer network so that they can have Skype consultations and trainings with some of the parents from villages, as Rechitsa is a very widespread district. We said we would ask whether the next Computer funding from Godel could be used for this purpose.



When we visited **Babitchi Orphanage** we told the Director that we could give him **\$1,500** thanks to Godel's generous support. He was delighted at this and said he would like to spend it replacing the old and broken furniture in their kitchen. He asked for a bank transfer for this, but he has a Euro account, so we can make the transfer from here.



They make lots of wonderful crafts at Babitchi and it would be

really nice to help them by selling something.



We couldn't manage the suits of armour, but I have asked them to make some cards for us for February. I have a couple of samples to show you.





At **Duyanovka**, Viger was very agitated. A young woman called Marina had been moved from Vasilovka to Duyanovka and is living at Klimovka. Marina became pregnant and insisted that she wanted to keep the baby. The Director at Vasilovka spoke to the Social Protection Department and they decided it would be good if she could be at Klimovka. They asked Natasha who asked me, and I said Yes.

So she was officially moved to Duyanovka, so she can live at Klimovka for the time being. But no-one asked Viger what he thought about this. He was in a panic because it is not allowed for a baby to be born and registered in an adult institution. We promised to look at ways to solve the problem and speak to Social Protection about it.

Yura, a young man with very profound physical disabilities, had recently died, when he caught pneumonia. We brought him an electric wheelchair a few years ago and Viger said this was now sitting unused in the store room. We would like to give this wheelchair to Liena, who used to live at Duyanovka, but now lives in an institution in Mogilev Region. She has written to some of the volunteers she used to know



and asked if they can get her an electric wheelchair. Some of them have donated for this on Just Giving, but I don't know how we are going to get it into the country as Medical Aid is now so difficult.

Viger cannot just give this one away as it is listed as humanitarian aid. But we have one in the store at Klimovka which doesn't work, so we hope we can effect a swap and take the better one to Liena.



Duyanovka is being re-designated as a Psycho-neurological institution. This means that the more intelligent residents will be moved, either to Vasilovka or to Kapatkevichi, near to Ptich sanatorium. But Sasha Baikesh, who is very good friends with Liena at Klimovka, and Maxim, will be able to stay. I hope they will both spend a lot of time at Klimovka.





When we visited **Klimovka**, Marina was settling in well. She is a little shy but Larissa says she is very helpful and keen to learn. She has always lived in an institution, growing up at Rechitsa, then being sent to Duyanovka and on to Vasilovka. Everyone at Klimovka is keen to support her, to help her have and keep her baby away from institutional care. Greesha and I had the same idea – that maybe she and the baby could be registered at Rodni Kut, and spend some time there living in the guest room and some of the time at Klimovka. Natasha said she would stay in Gomel if I was going to talk to Sergei about that!



Sasha was also visiting and seemed fairly happy and relaxed after a period of anxiety about his sister's death and his own health. He had voluntarily placed himself in the psychiatric hospital for a couple of weeks, and he said that had helped.

Liena's health is OK, although she still cannot be persuaded to sleep in a bed. No-one understands why she is so strange about this. She has been told many times that it is really bad for her health but once she makes up her mind about something she is very obstinate! Ira has some kidney problems and was due to have a spell in hospital.

We met **Baranov, the Director of Health**, with the Chief Paediatrician. We spoke to him about the forthcoming trainings on autism and ADJHD; about the mental health project with the Youth Friendly Centre; about plans to bring Hospice Nurses on an educational visit early next year; and also to bring people to look at pregnancy, childbirth and post-natal care (in the light of the recent publicity about our unacceptably high rate of stillbirths, I think this may be a genuine two way process) I said that we would like to bring the Chief Paediatrician and Baranov suggested that the Chief Gynaecologist for the region should go with her.

We also met the new **Director of Social Protection, Piotr Shutko**. He seems to be a really nice man, so much more intelligent, polite and co-operative than Savitsky. It seems that he does genuinely want to improve the lives of disabled people, and he knew all about Marina and how she had been moved to Klimovka. What he did not realise was that a baby could not be registered at Klimovka. He has promised to find a way to solve this and says she will keep her baby and they will find her a flat once she has learned to look after it. He also said that he might be able to let us have a flat in the future for an Independent Living Project!



Olga was very pleasant but her background is in management, not on social care. She has managed a wedding office and a theatre amongst other things. She seemed pleasant enough and hopefully will rely on her deputy to organise the social care they do from upstairs and leave Natasha to run Mayflower without interference.

When Natasha returned we spoke about the training in the Principles of Social Work which she will do with Geoff in Bobrusk next week. And I asked her if she would be willing to deliver some training at Vikov and Rechitsa for Sanitary nurses. She is quite keen to do this and will be ideal. She needs permission to take some time off work, and then she will go to talk to the Director of Vikov and work out the best way to do it.

I visited the **Diabetic Association** who are very anxious about Chinese insulin. Belarus has bought a large amount of insulin from China, and they say it is not used anywhere else except a small part of Africa, and very little in China itself. Strong campaigning has persuaded the government not to use it for children at the moment, but it is likely to be prescribed any time now for over 18s. They are still desperately hoping that we might start another group who decide to host diabetic children next summer.



Masha is so happy being a mum and Polina is delightful. It wasn't easy to get smiles as she was so fascinated by the camera!

At the Mayflower Centre, Natasha was away so we met Tanya, who is the nurse and Natasha's deputy.

Marina, who last year became Head of the Social Centre where Mayflower is based, had gone on Maternity leave (which was a surprise to everyone!) and has a temporary replacement who we went to meet.



It was lovely to visit Masha at home and meet her four month old daughter Polina.





On Saturday morning we went to Sveta's 'Give Them a Chance' Event.



It really was amazing! She is given a huge hall for free; 60 dogs and cats were on display with a volunteer each to look after them; lots of little kids performed to bring in crowds of parents; Sveta introduced everything and sang too; once people had chosen a pet they wanted, a volunteer would explain everything about the animal to them; and then they had to register at the desk so the animal could be checked on in the future. There were adverts on the walls for other dogs and cats and TV and local newspapers were there to spread the publicity further.

I could not be more proud of Sveta. She may have won herself a place on a Leadership Programme in the US. And apparently she has an American boyfriend!



On Saturday afternoon Natasha and I visited a couple of **Hospice Families** with Irina, and one of the nurses, Marina.

The first was a really tragic story. This little girl was a perfectly normal, happy six year old when she became ill. Her mother took her to hospital but the doctors said it was nothing significant and sent her home. She had to be rushed back in again with Encephalitis and she only just survived. She suffered severe brain damage and now can't move. But her mum, who is the most optimistic and



positive person you could meet, says she has made some improvements in recent weeks.

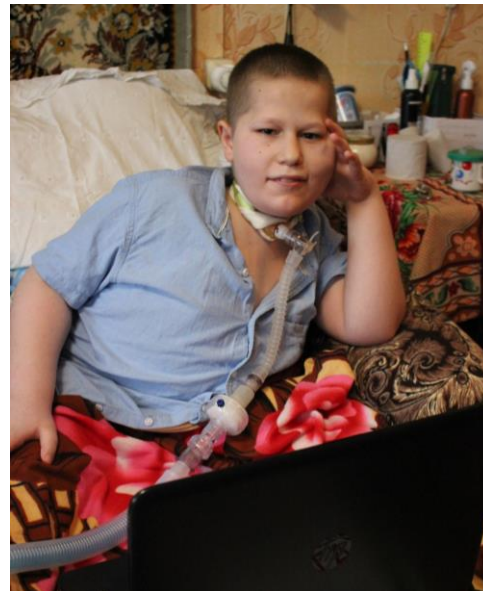
The little boy has mild cerebral palsy.

The second family lived in a small village just a few miles from the Ukrainian border.

This boy is 12 years old and has a rare form of muscular atrophy which means he needs help with breathing. He was on a breathing machine all the time, but recently has been breathing for two hours a day without its help.

He seems quite cheerful but does not have many friends locally. He likes to make friends online and the Hospice will make sure he gets to one of the parties around New Year and /or some clowns come to visit him. He needs some help to control his weight as he loves to eat and gets no exercise.

Irina says the Hospice Doctor paid for by the Health Department does most of the paperwork for the palliative families now, and visits families when Irina is not able to.



Zhanna, the Deputy Head of Education for the Region, took Natasha, me and Tatiana, the Chief Paediatrician out for a meal on Saturday night. Zhanna and Tatiana are already friends and work together whenever appropriate.

We talked about the Autism and ADHD training; the Mental Health project; and the Baby Home until the disco music came on and conversation became much more limited!



I had a short but lovely visit to the Search Club on Sunday morning with Dasha, who is known to many volunteers and lives next door to the Diabetic flat.

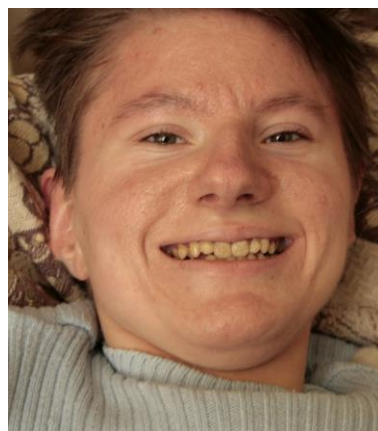


They had made a delightful short video of me with lots of jolly messages and photos of me with all of them at Mayflower and on various outings. Two young women had written a poem for me which they recited. Someone had made me a special cushion which Molly and Bessie will like and they also presented me with a Birthday Mug with a picture of me and all the Search Club members on it. Birthdays in Belarus are such a big deal compared to here, and so much fun! It is like being six again instead of 65!



We headed off to Rogachev and collected Sveta Chernenkova on the way, who does the Early Intervention work in the villages. First stop was Ira Rozhkova's house. She was very happy to see us and looking healthier and younger than ever. I actually forgot to take any pictures so this is an old one, but I asked her if she is ever ill and she said 'Never'. She and her mum had loved the sanatorium holiday where they had spent time with Sergei and Oxana and the Rodni Kut young people.

Her niece and nephew visit every day after school and the little girl sits on the front of Ira's wheelchair and teaches her what she has learned at school. Ira's eyes shone with happiness as she told us about it.



It will be Ira's 30<sup>th</sup> Birthday in February so when I come with Lynne, we will bring Ira to Rodni Kut and have a party there for her.





The first family Sveta took us to was desperately poor. The little girl was five years old and had learning disabilities. Sveta said the three year old boy had speech delay but that would hardly be surprising living in such miserable and unsupportive circumstances.



I had brought some food for Rodni Kut but I gave it to these kids instead as their need was far greater. I gave some to the dog tied up outside too as he did not look as though he had eaten a decent meal for a long time. This family needs social support and monitoring by the Education Department more than it needs Early Intervention.



This young woman is 19, her baby was born when she was 17. Her mum has been in and out of prison most of her life. Her grandmother became her guardian when she was nine and then when her grandma became ill, she was sent to live in three separate foster families where she was beaten in the first, neglected in the second and made to work on the land for long hours in the third.

She is now back in her grandma's flat and seems to be doing a good job of looking after her little girl, although Sveta is concerned about her delayed speech.

Her boyfriend visits when he is home from the army, and Natasha thought they might have got married. I left

some money with her as this was another family needing more social support.

The final child we saw was a tiny little mite, 13 months old, but looking like a little porcelain doll.

She had spent 11 months in three hospitals, mostly in intensive care and being fed intravenously.





She can now eat food but gets very little nutrition from it, and doesn't grow. When she was in hospital in Minsk she had some genetic tests which were sent off to Sweden six months ago. I promised to try to find out what had happened to these tests if I got the chance to go to the Health Ministry on Tuesday.

This was another child Sveta said had speech delay. Only 13 months old and most of her life in intensive care! She had said that it was difficult for her to find families for us to visit on the Tihinichi side of town, as she had far more in some of the other villages.

Sveta asked for \$300 to fix the old minibus so that she and Tanya can continue to use it. But Natasha has spoken to someone on Rogachev Education Committee who says that it would be possible now for staff at the Correctional Centre to support families in the villages if they could have a little help with fuel.

So I have given Sveta and Tanya the money to take them through to the end of the year, and the \$300 to Rogachev Association to help with keeping their better minibus on the road. From January 1<sup>st</sup> I have offered that we will give the Education Department \$100 a month to help with their transport to villages. We will see how it goes for a few months. We have been paying \$250 a month for Sveta and Tanya to visit families.

Valentina, the Head of Rogachev Families Association, and Zinaida, their accountant, came to see me at **Rodni Kut**. They are now due to lose the last room in the centre, and they were asking if they could have space for a desk and a computer at Rodni Kut. I said I thought this was sensible as the Guest room is little used and space could be made in there. They would like to do art classes twice a week in our large room, which would be good for everyone.

We just need to make sure that they cannot make more claim on Rodni Kut than we are happy with.

Nazar was very excited to have a new talking photo album of his holiday in June. Anya had been prepared by Joan's family not to expect to come back to the UK with me as she usually does. She will travel with Geoff in mid December.





On Monday Natasha and I travelled to Minsk with Ira Kamysh who needs new prosthetic legs.

The ones she had made in Minsk three years ago were uncomfortable and she had to walk on tiptoe. Plus she could not wear them under the jeans she lives in, so she has never worn them, and has stuck with the pair she had made in the UK five years ago.

When she came for a holiday this summer, one of the feet was badly broken so Barbara and Andy's son patched it together. They hoped to be able to raise funds to buy her some legs in the UK, but the cost of legs and travel back and forth to Sheffield would have been around £8.000, so they decided it would make more sense to have them done in Minsk.

At the Prosthetic Hospital we met Andre Fadeev, who came to Devon on an educational visit about 8 years ago. He was not particularly friendly but he seems to know what he is doing. He adjusted the feet on Ira's Belarusian legs and she walked better on them immediately. He said she was walking better than she does on the English ones.

He can make her new legs within four or five months of her presenting the right paperwork. She has to get another certificate in Gomel I think to show she is still disabled!

I asked what difference it makes when someone pays for the legs. He said it is no faster, and there would be no point in paying for the parts for the leg from Germany as the one from Russia would be just as effective.

But it might be worth paying for the feet. The ones in the German catalogue went from \$300 per foot, to \$2,000 per foot. The \$300 ones are no different to the Russian made feet and there is absolutely no need to pay \$2,000. If Barbara and Andy wanted to pay around \$1,000 each then the feet would be very good and she would walk better.

He told Ira that she has the right to come back every twelve months and order new legs. If she did this then she would have new legs every eighteen months. There would be no point buying expensive feet for these legs if they were going to be changed as often as that, unless the feet could be refitted to the new legs. But maybe the legs would last several years anyway.

I think Barbara and Andy need to send a message to Andre to say what kind of feet Ira has on her current legs and see whether it would be necessary to pay to get feet as good.

In the car afterwards, before we dropped Ira off at the station for her train back to Gomel she was the most chatty I have ever known her and she rang later to say thank you for the money I gave her for lunch, so she is getting more sociable and outgoing.

I tried to persuade her that she ought to try to switch to art college as she is really good at art and she struggles with maths, but she was adamant she doesn't want to do that.



We had lunch with **Galina Rudenkova**, who used to be the Head of Fostering in the Education Ministry. She is now a freelance consultant, working mostly with UNICEF. She has been doing lots of work of Developing Independence, Supported Living and giving greater support to foster families. She said that most foster families were not ready to do the job being asked of them and need more training. But they are having too much asked of them, like liaising with the birth family to see if they should take back the small child who has been taken away from them. This should be the job of another professional so the foster families can just focus on looking after the children.

We went to the **Social Protection Advanced Learning Institute** to talk to Yuri about Geoff's training in December. This will take place in Bobrusk, and for the first time the state is supposed to pay for the accommodation for Geoff, Natasha and Co-trainer and Anya, who will be interpreting. Yuri was worried about the accommodation being offered so he promised to go to see it before Geoff comes, so a hotel could be arranged if it was not suitable. It is not clear how much food will be provided for them, but there will be lunch in a canteen for all the participants of the training.

Yuri was very pleased that we can now start to do some training for sanitary staff as we have talked about this for some time. He said it would be better if Geoff could do this with Natasha as he has this idea that people don't respect training unless there is a foreigner there, but I think that is nonsense. And it would be a very poor use of Geoff's time. It is training which Natasha will be brilliantly.

Antonina Zmushko is now working in this institute, so we met her with Yuri. She was Head of Special Needs Education in the Ministry until a few weeks ago, when she was suddenly told that the post had been abolished. She is now trying to get her head round a very different job in a different sphere.

She was very friendly and pleased to see us, but when the subject of Zhuravichi came up she said that some of her colleagues had recently inspected Zhuravichi and were shocked that they had so many soft toys. Natasha and I thought this was rather weird. Not only are we unaware of there being many soft toys around at Zhuravichi, but it was the only criticism she came up with and she said it several times.

Then we went to the **British Embassy** to meet **Ambassador Fionna Gibb**. She is planning a large project on Juvenile Justice. She had just been to Baku to defend this project to Foreign Office colleagues and say why it should get funding (funds have since been confirmed!) A Human Rights Lawyer from London is already involved in the project, giving seminars to Judges and other lawyers. I told her again a little about Geoff's experience in Restorative Justice, in all the relevant projects we have carried out in Gomel and the tremendous work he has done for Unicef developing the Juvenile Justice system in other post Soviet countries. She seemed very keen to have him on board and asked if he could meet the relevant staff at the Embassy on his next visit. Geoff was due to arrive in Minsk on Friday 8<sup>th</sup> December but agreed to change his flight to Wednesday 6<sup>th</sup> so he can go to the Embassy on Thursday 7<sup>th</sup>. Fionna is pleased about this and a meeting is now being arranged.

She may have some small pots of money to give to other projects and we can talk about this on my next visit in February.

In the evening we went for a meal with Alina and Olga who recently came on a visit to look at Early Intervention, and Vera Khitruk, the Head of the Inclusive Education Department at the Pedagogical University. Vera is coming on an educational visit in March, with our Natasha. She said that Olga had told her that the visit was 'the best, the best, the best'. During the visit they were both quite reserved but now they seem to be full of enthusiasm for everything they saw and heard.

They had been on a visit to the US last year – and had I realised that I might not have invited them! – but they said the UK visit was much more informative and relevant. I knew that the UK visit involved a major cultural programme, and said that must have been a big difference as our budget does not stretch to a cultural programme. But Alina said that staying in people's homes, seeing the way they eat and live was an excellent cultural programme! So many thanks to Brian and Linda, Helena and Mike.

We talked about which aspects of their visit would be most useful to Vera and what else she would like to see and do.

Natasha and Sasha, who had driven us to Minsk, stayed with her oldest son on the outskirts of the city. I stayed at the Planeta Hotel as I have four suitcases weighing a total of about 80kgs, so could not manage the steps to Valentina's flat.

They collected me from the hotel in the morning to go to **UNICEF**. We first met Alexander Karankevich for a short chat. He is Head of Child Protection but has been ill for a while so did not meet Geoff on his last visit. He told us again, as he had said in May, that the British Embassy was not working with Unicef on the Juvenile Justice Project. I reported this to Fionna, who says he is obviously out of the loop as it is being discussed with some of his colleagues.

We had a long talk with Natalia Alexandrovich. She spoke about three projects. Firstly they are planning to assess all the institutions in Belarus and she said they would like me and Geoff to act as experts to help them with this work because of all our experience in this field.

The second project is to try bringing educational, social protection and other services together in support for families with disabled children. They want to do this in three districts in one Region and she asked us to suggest three districts in Gomel Region, so we went for Rechitsa, Rogachev and some part of Gomel city.

And they want to do a supported living project and she said they would probably do that at Zhuravichi because of our experience there. I am not at all sure what our role will be in any of these projects, but she certainly seemed very keen to work with us. And the fact that we had just met Galina Rudenkova, invited Olga from the Early Intervention Centre to the UK, and will now be inviting Vera Khitruk, all went down very well as they all work closely with Unicef.



I asked her to write to me about what they are planning and how she sees us fitting in to some of these projects. And now Geoff will meet her next Friday afternoon so hopefully can get more clarification.

Before we left we were snapped up by another member of staff, Victoria, I think, who is working on Mental Health and wanted to know all about our new project. She would love us to do more in this area and work with teenagers who are potentially suicidal.

Natasha headed back to Gomel and I went to **Children in Trouble** with Evgeny and Valentina.

I had a chat there with Nastya who wasn't able to come to the hospital because she had a heavy cold. She said they were working on a leaflet about CiT, but clearly they have already got the message that more families need to be encouraged to join. When I went to the **Cancer Hospital**



one of the pedagogues had a long list of families who had just applied, and I have never seen that before.

It was a fairly short visit to the hospital this time and I only met one family, a 16 year old boy who should be ready for a holiday next year.

Larissa, the psychologist I usually meet was on

holiday, but Olga came to talk to us. She works in the bone marrow transplant department. She told me about several children and teenagers who are nearing the end of their treatment and should be OK for a holiday next year and CiT have their details. One was a child who has had a holiday before but then had a relapse and a transplant. I assured her that we would be very happy to take such children for a holiday.

I asked her if mothers are now able to stay with children when they are in the transplant 'box'. Only children under 1 year old, or those with special needs. I was shocked that it is so restrictive. They say there is too high a risk of infection, but I know that in most countries the psychological importance, particularly for a young child, is believed to outweigh the risk.



We visited **Anna Gorchakova at the Hospice**. She had been able to arrange an appointment for me with Elena Bogdan, who now has a senior position in the Ministry of Health. One of the things I wanted to talk to her about was rectal diazepam, so Anna asked Ludmilla, the Director of the Palliative Care Centre, to join us. She said that Rectal Diazepam is at last on the list of medication provided by the Ministry of Health, which should be available to all children who need it. First it was on the palliative care list, and then the list for children under 3 and now for any child with major seizures. Which means it should soon be available.

Anna and Ludmilla obviously still have quite a good relationship. But Anna is keen to get started on a new project. She wants to set up a Centre for teenagers in the grounds of the Palliative Care Centre. I understood that this was for palliative teenagers, but Daryl of Friends of the Belarusian Children's Hospice, says it was planned to be for respite for teenagers with cancer. Whichever, I am sure it will be a very useful resource and as Anna says, it will only cost about 1 million dollars, so she is sure she will find a rich sponsor to get the ball rolling.

When Valentina and I arrived to see Elena Bogdan at the Ministry of Health, she had been called in to see the new Minister. But when she eventually emerged she was very friendly, but was keen to move things along as quickly as possible as it was coming to the end of her working day.

I asked her first about the little girl in Rogachev waiting for her tests. She said it was normal for genetic tests to take six months and she was sure that no results had come back from Sweden. She would ask Ludmilla Lioghaya to look into it and get back to the family as soon as she has any news.

Rectal Diazepam – she says that Council of Ministers have to approve the medication along with a list of others, some of which are quite expensive. Did that mean they might say no, I asked? RD is cheap, could they not be asked about it separately. No, it was impossible to ask about one drug at a time. This is a bit special though, I insisted, as it has been used in most countries for the last 30 years, and it will save the Ministry a lot of money. She said the Council of Ministers should pass the whole list, so I asked if the Ministry would then order the rectal Diazepam and would Shalkevich start teaching doctors about the need to prescribe it. She wanted to move on at this stage, so we will have to push for this in the New Year. I am sure the Hospice will be doing that too.

I reminded her that it was three years ago that she had told me Baby Homes would close and become palliative care and respite centres. She said that there were far fewer children in Baby Homes now and they all have Palliative Care units. I said that this was great but there is still some way to go before we stop all healthy children going into Baby Homes. She said this is happening in some areas and should be happening everywhere. She also said there is clear guidance about Respite Care in the Baby Homes, what should be paid by parents, who is eligible for respite. So we will have to try to find this!

The visit finished with a very nice evening with Elena Titova of Belapdi who are involved in lots of projects including supported work, about which she wanted me to make some more enquiries in the UK.



