

# CHERNOBYL CHILDREN'S PROJECT (UK)

## ПОДДЕРЖКА ДЕТЯМ БЕЛАРУСИ

### Supporting the Residents of Institutions

Zhuravichi is home to over 200 children and young adults with disabilities, ranging from Downs Syndrome or fairly mild learning difficulties to profound physical and mental disabilities.

The home is hidden deep in the countryside and, even today, the majority of people in Belarus are not aware of the existence of such institutions. It took Chernobyl Children's Project (UK) several months to discover where the most disabled children were sent when they left the Abandoned Babies Home.

When the charity first visited Zhuravichi it was very bleak with few toys, no wheelchairs or other aids for physically disabled children, many children spending their whole lives in a cot and the majority receiving no education.



CCP began to take humanitarian aid – educational toys, nappies, clothes and wheelchairs. Then volunteers started to work with the staff, encouraging them to get children out of bed and to give them more care and attention.

For the last fifteen years the charity has organised a holiday at a holiday camp or sanatorium in a clean part of Belarus. Volunteers from Britain fly out to organise arts and crafts and sports activities for the children and make sure they have a holiday to remember. Staff who accompany the children are amazed to see how much they are able to do when given the chance to develop.

In 2001, CCP sent many special chairs and walking frames to Zhuravichi, and a physiotherapist and occupational therapist fitted appropriate children to the aids and showed the staff how to use them. Then Luba, the physiotherapist from the home, was brought to Britain to develop her skills. Then four young children – Anya, Anton, Stas and Nazar – came to spend time with families in the UK where they made dramatic improvements, both physically and emotionally. The charity decided to create a small family home for these children called Rodni Kut.



Many of the children living at Zhuravichi now receive some education. This started largely due to pressure from CCP (UK) on the Social Protection and Education Departments in Gomel. It has since become policy of the Belarusian Education Ministry that all children should be educated, which is a tremendous step forwards.

In 2004 we managed to get some of the children at Zhuravichi reassessed and moved to Ulookavye Orphanage or Rechitsa Boarding Home for children with cerebral palsy where they now receive more education and have the chance of a happier childhood. In 2012 other children were moved to a new 'Children's Village' in Gomel which was set up by Caritas. Zhuravichi has greatly improved in the last few years, but institutional care is never an ideal option for any child particularly in a place as isolated as Zhuravichi.

It is impossible to say how many of the children at Zhuravichi have been disabled due to Chernobyl. There have certainly been many more children born with disabilities since the accident in 1986. And there are some conditions, such as the children who fail to grow and still look like toddlers in their teens, which ought to be investigated for a connection with radiation damage.



Since 2006 we have been sponsoring a teacher to work with some of the most learning disabled young people, who have never had any education. We have also funded extra carers to help with the children who spend most of their time in cots.

In 2010 we brought the Director of Zhuravichi on an educational visit to the UK, which involved time visiting special schools to learn about our education for children with disabilities here.



Over the years of CCP's involvement, the children have grown into young adults and by 2018 there were only around 30 or so under 18s remaining. Recently, the authorities have taken the decision to move all of these remaining children to other institutes and to accept no further children. This means that Zhuravichi Boarding Home has become an adult institution.

Vikov, located deep in the forest near Rogachev, is also an adult institution for people with learning and physical disabilities. Many of the children from Zhuravichi institution used to be sent there at 18. When we first visited, it's resources were even more limited than those of Zhuravichi.

Over ten years ago we began to take humanitarian aid there, and since 2004 we have funded two teachers to work with some of the most profoundly disabled young adults. These are people for whom institutional care is all they have ever known, and all they are ever likely to know. They grew up without an education and with very little input into their development and well-being.

Our teachers, Ludmilla and Sveta, have made a huge difference to the lives of many. They work from a small classroom where they hold lessons and arts and craft activities. They have become mentors to the young people as well as teachers, and brighten up their lives on a daily basis.



We converted a large and bleak room into a communal space where everyone can meet, the walls were painted, new floor put in and a TV/DVD player installed. Of course, much more is needed to change the lives of these young adults. For the last few years we have taken volunteers there during the summer to work with them (see below), and we take several young adults on Sanatorium holidays when we can.

We have also carried out training sessions at Vikov with staff, focusing on areas such as disability awareness and managing challenging behaviour. There is still a lot to be done in order to improve the lives of residents at Vikov and we have recently

employed a psychologist to assess the individual needs of the residents to see if there are ways these can be better met.

Staffing levels in all of the institutions, by western standards, are very low. While the basic living needs of the residents are met, aside from one or two arts and craft teachers to provide activities for the most able residents, there is little or no activity or engagement provided to the majority of the residents who are typically left to their own devices all day long in large groups in lounges. So, every summer for the last ten years we have sent out teams of volunteers to provide attention, stimulation and entertainment to the residents of Zhuravichi and Vikov. The volunteers who go here are usually older and more experienced and they try to give as much one-to-one attention to the residents as is possible. Although they take plenty of indoor and outdoor games and activities, often all the residents want is a hug and some individual attention to make them feel valued.

