

August 2014

I was delighted to return to Belarus for a second time, having not been since August 2012, when I was part of the first English language Summer School project. It was a real pleasure to share the experience with Sheila Furley. Sheila, once again, devoted her time to leading the Summer School (this time in a new school – the 5th School); whilst I continued the work of the charity in visiting and helping some of the needier families of Rogachev, as guided by our partner organisation 'Sails Of Childhood'. As per normal, Sheila and I were happy to cover our own travel costs to ensure the charity's money went to the best possible use.



The Kartuzovi Family

Once again, Sheila and I stayed in the home of the Kartuzovi family. All five children are doing well in education: the oldest two are approaching completing their college courses. The parents, Sasha and Lena, are in good health, though working hard. They told us how all the children, in their own ways, are helping to run the house and tend to the family's plot.

A new addition to the Kartuzovi family. One of two pet lizards clammers through Alesya's hair ... needless to say I was less keen to allow it to do the same!



Vitalii, Katya and Family

Rachel and Sarah first met this family in May, when they helped them by purchasing a fridge and cooker. Rachel was keen for us to see how the family were getting on as they are living in poor conditions – with all five members of the family (parents plus three small children – Irina, Nikita and Ilya) sharing one living room for a bedroom. Galina Bordukova, director of 'Sails Of Childhood' said that the family's washing machine had since broken. She requested, and we agreed, to purchase a new one. The family were extremely pleased and Katya and I were especially careful to pick a machine with a greater capacity – with three small children, it's easy to imagine that a lot of washing gets done!

Katya, Vitalii and Irina with new machine, just visible

Irina, Andrei and (Delightful) Children

Andrei, Irina and their four children (Yulya, Darina, Timofei and Evelina) continue to do well. Irina is actually pregnant with number five, who is due towards the end of this year. The older daughters are already learning English and have a few words under their belts. The family have worked extremely hard in building their home and showed me some of the pictures of its construction. With the girls growing up fast (the three all sharing one room), their current sleeping arrangements are certainly not going to be sufficient going forward and so we contributed to purchasing a new set of (very stylish, I was quite jealous) bunk beds, complete with ample storage facilities and a table for them to study at. This will certainly help the family as it continues to grow. I discovered that the day on which Andrei and I went to pay for thee beds was actually the couple's 10th wedding anniversary – a practical gift for them then!



Ellie, Sheila and Galina with (from left to right) Evelina, Yulya and Darina then Irina, Andrei and Timofei

Natasha, Misha and Family

Nasha and Misha's was one of the first families which Bridges To Belarus helped and they continue to do well. They have five children of their own, four adopted children and one granddaughter – Milana. When I visited I was delighted to be invited by the girls (Katya and Karina) to play with them and their friends on the street: we played 'hot potato', hide and seek, catch and then went to a local playground to swing on the monkey bars. I was particularly touched that the family had remembered me from my previous visit and (even!) that when I was last there I had been bitten by a local dog. They were quick to tell me that the dog had since gone.



Natasha (with granddaughter Milana), the girls Karina (in yellow) and Katya (in pink) with some of their friends and Ellie in front of their brightly-coloured garden



Moreover, Natasha and Misha invited me to return to

visit on my final day in Belarus to wash in their banya (a traditional steam room, heated by a wood oven) and share shashliki (kebabs, cooked over coals). It was wonderful to feel so included in the family and at this farewell party I also saw Volodya and Anna who I met in 2012. It was lovely to catch up with them and their children and a pleasure to see how neighbours share good times together.

Karina on the monkey bars. Not only is she fearless, but her mother tells me she is also doing well at music school and plays the piano. As is visible, we were blessed with some glorious weather at the time of our visit

Tonya, Kolya and Family

Tonya and Kolya's family have also known Bridges To Belarus for some time. Their six children are wonderfully behaved and extremely bright: Alvin and Ilya were attending the Summer School, where Sheila found them to be very able. Maksim, their adopted son, gave an excellent rendition of 'Mama Mia' on the saxophone when I visited.

Liza and Liubasha, are also doing very well and drew some great pictures for me to share on the Bridges To Belarus blog and website. The latest arrival in the family, a girl, was born in July and is healthy.



The five children with the new beds purchased by Sarah and Rachel in May



Alla and Sons

Alla and her husband now have five sons! The new arrival was born in July and is called Filipp. The older boys are extremely helpful to their mother, helping to keep the younger ones in check and playing with them carefully. Whilst I was there Roman (in yellow) played to me on his violin. Roman is only 7 years old and thus only just one year into his schooling, I was most impressed to hear him playing so well already.

Alla with Ellie and the five boys. Visible are the beds which Rachel and Sarah bought during their visit in May

Alicia and Family

Alicia is a single Mum, living in one of the more isolated villages with her mother and her four children (three girls, one boy). The family struggle financially and over the years Bridges To Belarus has helped significantly with paying for medical treatment for the children as well as household necessities. All are doing well at the moment and the children help their mother and grandmother care for the family's vegetable plot as well as their animals (cows, pigs, chickens and ducks), who are crucial to the family's well-being. Whilst I was there the oldest daughter, Alina, introduced me to the animals and showed me around their village. From speaking to her I got the impression that it is a close-knit community, with relatives of theirs nearby, and all try their best to help each other.

Liuda , Daughters and New Arrival

Liuda and her family are old friends of Bridges To Belarus. Liuda has three daughters of her own and one adopted daughter, Vera, who is now 16. They live in a dacha (summer house with plot) outside of Rogachev. When Rachel and Sarah visited in May Alesya (the oldest of Liuda's own daughters) had been unwell with kidney problems. Whilst

her mother mentioned that she was thus having some problems with her back and could not carry anything too heavy, her health is otherwise stable. What came as a surprise surprising was that on the very day that I visited, accompanied by Galina, Liuda arrived back at the house with a new adopted son. Egor is one year old. He is the son of a prostitute and the grandson of an alcoholic grandmother, thus had been admitted into hospital (this is what normally happens to children who are taken away from their parents). He is healthy, although it was discovered that he has had teeth removed in hospital. Liuda requires a pram for Egor, which they intend to get from the rehabilitation centre. I was a little surprised that Liuda had taken on this new challenge. Galina explained to me that Liuda is paid to foster children and now that Vera is 16, that income will no longer be available. Despite this motivation, Liuda and the four girls are evidently overjoyed with their new arrival and will no doubt care for him as their own.



The Liseichikovs

Sergei, Angela and Lera were, as ever, very welcoming and it was wonderful to be invited to their home for dinner one evening. Sergei is returning to work as a teacher (at the 5th School) after his year as a chauffeur. The pay he will receive at his new school is far less than he had received as a chauffeur. Lera is continuing to study languages / interpretation at the University in Minsk, as well as spending much of her time taking part in English-speaking debates. This has allowed her to travel quite a lot and she seems to be really enjoying it. Her knowledge of English and ability to translate both into and from the language never fails to astonish me. Whilst we were there she spoke to me about the possibility of completing a Master's Degree in the UK. I did inform her that this could be extremely expensive, but she thinks that she may have found some UK Universities that will offer scholarships. This was the first time that I met Angela and found her an absolutely lovely and bubbly lady. She was pleased to have the chance to natter in Russian with me, which I enjoyed immensely as well.

Galina Bordukova's Family

Galina's family continue to do well. Our first full day in Belarus coincided with the first birthday of Rachel's younger godchild – Nikita. Nikita is an extremely busy one-year-old:



Playing in the garden at the birthday party

always running somewhere and with a tendency to bite! The family is, however, concerned that he has gained little or no weight since his birth. Sheila and I were honoured to be allowed to share the birthday celebrations with the whole family: Galina plus divorced husband; all six of Galina's children plus respective partners; eight grandchildren and Nikita's other set of grandparents. It was a wonderful, lively occasion and full of fun. Nikita's sister, Sophia, who is Rachel's older godchild, now attends kindergarten and is turning into a very pretty little girl. Sasha, who is the father of Nikita and Sophia, has done an amazing job of building all sorts of play equipment in the family's garden (including a substantial tree house, which Sheila and I were quite jealous of!). This is enjoyed by all of the grandchildren as well as neighbours.

Sadly, the evening of the birthday party, the father of Sasha (Nikita's father) had to be admitted to hospital with chest pains. Apparently he has previously suffered from a heart attack. When Sheila and I left he was in hospital in a stable condition, with suspected issues also of the liver.

During my visit I spent most time with Galina's 19 year-old daughter Lena, who drove me around to visit the different families and to purchase what was needed. Lena is starting to study in Gomel' in September and intends to work in hospitality.

The Rehabilitation Centre

It was a real treat to visit the centre, which I did not have the opportunity to see when I was in Rogachev in 2012. Whilst I was there I was given a tour of the grounds: the centre's users help the staff to grow vegetables on the plot at the back of the centre; they also have a lovely garden for users to relax in. I saw the arts and crafts which had been produced by the users, as well as some truly stunning paintings. The rehabilitation centre also houses a 'Community Laundry' where local people who do not have a washing machine can come to launder their clothes. This is an excellent project and is also helping the centre's users to develop everyday, practical skills. The staff of the centre also help them to learn to cook.



Ellie with two of the centre's users. Olya dances and sings beautifully. Previously, she could not speak at all. Apparently her mother cried for joy when she saw her dance. Artem is an extremely gentle and accommodating dance partner

I had heard that the centre's users were remarkably talented and so was hoping to be shown an example of their performance. I was not disappointed! They put on a show, singing and dancing to music provided by the new music centre which Rachel and Sarah bought on their last visit. I even joined in myself with the dancing! The centre's staff told me that in June their users had won first place in a festival which took place in nearby town Zhlobin, in which handicapped individuals from across Belarus had taken part (singing, dancing and acting). They had also won first place for their floral displays. I got to watch videos from the performance and see photos of the flowers on the new large screen

(again, purchased by Rachel and Sarah during their last visit).



Pots, pans and cups

On this occasion the centre asked us to provide them with a fridge (their old one was too small to accommodate the lunches of the fourteen regular users of the centre and the freezer was useless), as well as a selection of pots, pans and cups. The centre was also the beneficiary of some of the medicines which Rachel sent with me (explaining what they were and how they were used provided a real challenge for my Russian!).

Moreover, I also purchased a laminator and binding machine for the administrative offices of the social services. I learnt that the Rehabilitation Centre is just one of the multiple projects of the organisation, whose director is our contact Tamara Feodorovna. The organisation also cares for the large families, pensioners, war veterans and other needy groups of Rogachev and receives minimal government funding.



Meeting other members of the social services and their new laminator

Sails Of Childhood

As in previous August trips, Galina asked that we buy winter food parcels for the 49 families which come under her organisation. Each family received: flour, sugar, sunflower oil, pasta, grechka (a type of grain used to make porridge) and rice. Prices have gone up massively over recent months (we were told that a loaf of bread now costs as much as one dollar, and considering the average monthly salary is only \$400, you get an idea of how difficult it can be for some families to make ends meet). These purchases will really help the families over the hard winter months. We also distributed medicines which Rachel had sent with me to the families as they collected their food parcels. Moreover, we learnt that around half of the children belonging to Sails Of Childhood families attend the 5th School, where Sheila held the English Summer School. We were thus pleased that this project could contribute to the overall work of the charity.



Food for 50 families

Galina Bordukova continues to do great work as the director of the organisation, a role which, she laments, no one is willing to relieve her of. I learnt that Bridges To Belarus is now the sole (international) organisation helping her in her efforts. On this trip, Galina asked that I did not leave money hidden in envelopes at the homes of all the families which we visited. She wishes to avoid the situation where some families receive an awful lot and others much less. In accordance to her wishes, I did not leave money with those families for whom we had bought things or who Rachel and Sarah helped a great deal in May. Galina asked that we only buy what we could provide to all the families, so that everyone received the same. For example, we asked about helping with school equipment and uniforms for the coming term, but with uniforms coming in at \$60 (!) a shot, we could not afford to furnish every family with the same so did not do this. Galina also worries about some families demanding too much help. Galina continues to be an excellent liaison for Bridges To Belarus to work with: eyes and ears on the ground who can ensure that families who need help receive it and that no-one receives too much at another's expense.

Thank you to all the supporters of Bridges To Belarus who make the work of the charity possible.

Ellie Bates