



SHEILA'S VISIT TO BELARUS – AUGUST 2015

I travelled alone to Belarus to meet Sergey's pupils for a 5-day Summer School at School No 5 in Rogachev and finish projects outstanding from Rachel's visit in June. As usual I funded the cost of my visit and all resources for the Summer School but asked B2B to cover the cost of items bought for families supported by Galina Bordakova's charity 'Sails of Childhood', stationery for School No 5 and items for the old people's home.

Summer School at School No 5

Sergey had again made all the arrangements for me to meet his pupils (19 in all, 10 of whom I'd met previously) aged between 11 and 16 years from this very large school and I tried to ensure they had fun conversing and playing games towards the end of their long summer holidays. I offered 6 x one-hour classes to small groups each day with various games depending on the ability of the students and whether they'd attended before – although the students were happy to see some resources for a second time and it was interesting for me to hear what they'd remembered when these were shown to the new students.

I had the usual mix of more girls than boys and, as in previous years, things got off to a slow start until the students got used to my accent and gained in confidence. However, from the second day I was again amazed by their knowledge and enthusiasm to communicate.

I was initially disappointed that few students were able to tell me about events in Belarus since my last visit, but newspaper reports I'd collected of funny and/or interesting events in the UK soon got them talking. We played lots of games which have become favourites since I started this project in 2012 and daily brainstorming sessions covering a wide variety of subjects got everybody talking and laughing.

A new card game with general knowledge and/or thought-provoking questions (eg name 5 things not to do on a plane) was surprisingly popular and others in the style of the 'Family Fortunes' and 'Countdown' tv programmes worked well with older students who had a more extensive vocabulary.



Ilya and Nastya with scratch art designs inspired by our topic 'Where in the World?'

It was interesting to see how the group dynamics worked during games to match pictures to countries worldwide or products to advertising slogans, and a mini competition to use 100 letter tiles to form words in a crossword-style grid was tackled with great enthusiasm – helped in part I think by the fact that there were small prizes for the winning group!

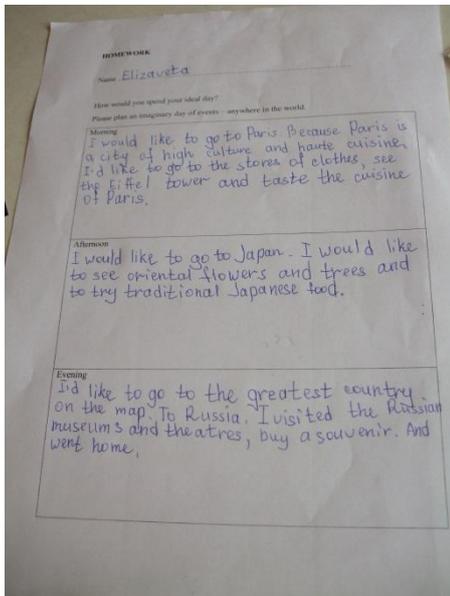


Left: Karina, Angelina, Ilya and Liza read news from the UK
Right: Alina, Vavara and Olga were the winners in the competition I organised

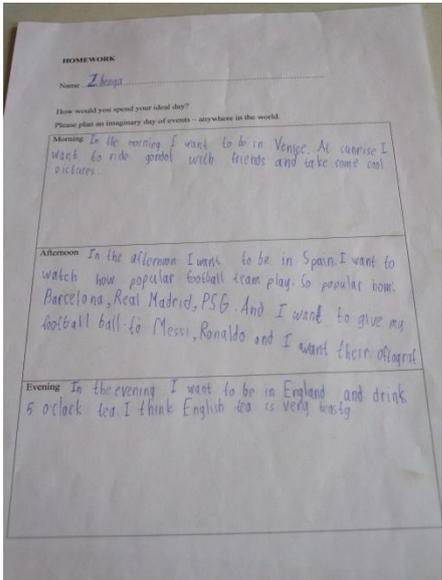
Once again my homework tasks were well-received. During the year I'd come across a large number of words in Russian which sound very similar to English words and have the same meaning but, despite having compiled an extensive list, the students were able to tell me more! I always work on the principle that I should know words in Russian if I expect students to know them in English so, in addition to the above list, I encouraged each of them to keep a list of new words learned during the week - which then provided lots of new words for me to learn!!

Other homework tasks throughout the week included

- I have 1/2/lots of . . . with some interesting comments!
 - The most memorable events in my life.
 - An imaginary day of activities anywhere in the world.
 - Tell me a story . . . after group brainstorming words on a subject chosen by each student
- and I also ensured I completed all of these tasks.



**Zhenya and
Elizaveta, each aged
just 12 years,
produced excellent
homework sheets
detailing an
imaginary day of
activities anywhere
in the world.**



I was disappointed not to have the opportunity to run classes for larger groups of more able students this year, but this is something I hope to be able to do in 2016 as I've already been invited to visit School No 5 for a week at the end of August. Three of this year's older students will be leaving school in June next year and, at their request, Sergey has already agreed that meetings in an informal setting with us and his daughter Lera (who is an undergraduate at Minsk) and some appropriate resources from the UK will give them a good start to their further education.

Natasha, the head teacher, was again very busy during my visit as she'd been told to expect a visit by school inspectors during the first term of the new academic year to assess both the buildings and work of the staff. She has overseen some amazing renovation and redecoration projects since my last visit and many of the stairs and walls of corridors have also been decorated with educational formulae and/or inspirational phrases. The school has grown from 1074 pupils last year to over 1300 registered to attend from September, though there are fewer teachers with the English Department alone having just 10 instead of the 13 employed previously.

Below: The writing on these stairs leading to my classroom was my daily inspiration.

Right: Headteacher Natasha with stationery from B2B which will be invaluable during the new academic year.



Rachel bought the school a number of items during her visit in June, so Natasha was especially delighted when I suggested buying a large quantity of stationery as a gift from B2B and requested printer paper, photo paper, pens, pencils and sharpeners. I was again recognised during my annual visit to the local family-run outlet (aptly named 'All at Once') so was given a generous discount and a gift of more pens.

Families

Vera, Sasha and their children Artom, Sonya and Kiril had received some help to decorate their new flat when Rachel visited in June but were struggling to provide bedroom furniture for their growing children. Galina had approved the purchase of bunk beds for the older children, a wardrobe, storage unit and desk and the family was extremely grateful.

Sergey and I were invited to meet this delightful family after we'd purchased the flat-pack furniture and again when it had been delivered ready to assemble – something I understand all the family were keen to be involved in! Despite problems with a congenital heart condition which Rachel mentioned in her last report, Kiril was sociable, active, in good health – and very determined to get involved!

One cause of great amusement was when I mispronounced my words asking if I could pay for this family's furniture with a credit card, so I actually asked if I could pay with a credit potato! I understand that thanks to the magic of facebook this has now gone viral and I've since been given the honorary name of Bolbashka (potato lady). Apparently this was an old term of endearment used to describe Belarusian women, so I'm very happy to accept this along with being an honorary grandmother to Galina's grandchildren.



**Vera and Sasha
(pictured left with
young son Kiril) were
delighted with
bedroom furniture
bought by B2B to help
their growing family**



Galina's family had expanded when Rachel visited in June with the birth of her eighth grandchild, Diana. I was again honoured to be invited to grandson Nikita's birthday party where I met Diana for the first time and caught up with news from the other grandchildren and female members of the family as all the menfolk are now living and working in Minsk or Moscow to support their families.

I usually stay with the **Kartuzovas**, the first family in Belarus Rachel and I were able to help about 12 years ago, but this year was invited to stay with Sergey and his family in their flat which is just a short walk from School No 5 so allowed me to be more independent. However, I was delighted to be able to visit my old friends, find them very happy, in good health and looking forward to the new academic year.

Old People's Home

I'd not expected to be invited to visit this place as Rachel had attended in June. However, Tamara, who is now in charge of this home as well as the centre for disabled people on the outskirts of Rogachev, had specifically asked Galina for help.

I understand that this home had been running for some time before Tamara took it over, but now the money paid by the residents for their care is taken by the local authority who then decide how much of it

to return to run the service. This means that, although income used to match expenditure, there is now a significant shortfall for basic items and other larger projects to repair the general fabric of the building for which Tamara is now trying to find private funding.

Tamara was extremely grateful for input from B2B in June but said many basic items would run out by September and there was still no sign of funding from the local authority. The list of items requested included washing powder, soap, toilet paper, piping to repair a toilet, bleach, general purpose cleaners, rubbish bags and disposable gloves so, at a cost to B2B of less than £300, I made the decision that these items should be purchased. It made me feel very humble that Tamara and her colleagues were so grateful for this additional help from B2B in their time of need.



Tamara and her colleague Volodya were clearly delighted and very relieved to receive this gift of basic aid from B2B for the old people's home.

Winter Food Parcels

These parcels of essential items continue to be much appreciated by the families helped by Galina's charity and this year each of the 36 parcels contained 2kg of flour, 3kg of sugar, 3 bottles of oil, 2kg of rice, 2 packs of pasta and 1 pack of buckwheat. I felt very honoured to meet many families I've known for a number of years, see how the children have grown and hear their news.



The contents of each winter food package and packages awaiting collection



Families waiting to collect winter food packages wanted to thank Bridges to Belarus for this invaluable support.

Plans for the Future

- I have already received an invitation from the headteacher, Natasha, so hope to visit Belarus again in August 2016 to provide another 5 days of Summer School at School No 5.
- I hope to be able to work with groups of 3 young students for hour-long sessions each morning and offer larger groups of older/more able students a long session during the afternoon so that Sergey, his daughter Lera and members of the teaching staff can also get involved - but realise the need to be flexible as this is during the school summer holiday.
- Since my visit in 2014 I've not been able to find regular and convenient times to Skype the teachers and students, but understand that other B2B supporters have forged links between School No 5 and schools in the UK which I believe will offer far better opportunities for everybody involved.
- I had planned to keep in touch with Sergey in the hope of linking more of the topics covered in the Summer School to the Belarusian curriculum but have found over the years that such matters are covered extremely well in class so, as in previous years, will update him on news from the UK and try to find other topics which the students may find interesting.

Conclusions

It was again a great pleasure to be entrusted to represent B2B and deliver the Summer School project to the hard-working and enthusiastic students of School No 5 in Rogachev.

I believe I have provided resources to engage and challenge most of the pupils most of the time and, with the exception of one pupil - who unexpectedly had to look after younger siblings whilst his parents worked - everybody attended promptly every day, took full advantage of opportunities offered by these classes and completed all the homework assignments with great enthusiasm.

I'm looking forward to keeping in contact with Sergey throughout the academic year, working to improve my Russian language skills and, building on the knowledge and skills I've acquired since 2012, delivering an even better Summer School in August 2016.

Sheila Furley