

December 2010, was a white one in Wales and dear Val was snowed in at home in Cardiff, unable to make her flight to Belarus. I had travelled to the country in the previous summer and was now returning with my husband Stuart to provide presents for the Zhordina orphans as Leaves of Hope does annually.



We landed at Minsk airport, Luda's son Oleg and son in law, Vitalik collected us and drove us to town. With a controlled sliding technique we made it safely to the warm building and Val's flat. Met by Luda and Oleg, we settled in to our home for the week. Blonde/Little Luda, as I call her, one of the translators I'd met on the summer trip came over too. It was a real good welcome and although it felt

really weird being there without Val, it was so cosy and we had everything we needed for a comfortable stay.



The next day we got to see out to a genuine wonderland. The uniform tower



blocks lined up in the white, looked almost elegant. Suited up in fleecy layers we ventured outside, learning the slightly braced walking technique for walking on compacted snow and ice without falling. The dry powder sparkled like crystal sugar, only -6, degrees, possitivley balmy for Belarus. Many woman wore high heeled boots along with fur trimmed coats, the proper Belarussian look. We stuck out like sore thumbs in our down jackets, but we were really

warm.

We had the numbers of children to buy for and went with Oleg to an open air market to buy toys for all the kids. Lots of dolls and cars were inevitably purchased and we carried the bags back to the flat while trying not to fall on our backsides.



Then New Year happened and it was wonderful. At ten o'clock we sat down to a feast with Luda and her family. The table was full to the edges with plates of Russian delights, such lovely bites and salads.





I drank Belarussian ‘champagne’ and we shared our thanks for the year past and our hope for the one ahead. We toasted the new years of Russia, Belarus and the UK and spoke to Val on



Skype.



When all that was done Oleg took us out into the streets, where people danced around the entrance to a bar and we climbed a big hill with our plastic sledge. Down we went, trying to steer better each time but always veering off course, up and down till we couldn’t climb the hill again. Back to Luda’s for desert and icecream – happy new Year!

A couple of days later the mini bus from the orphanage came to pick us up, Luda, Oleg, Blonde Luda, Anita, Stuart & I made the hour long journey out into the



countryside to Zhordina.



It was so different from the boiling heat of the summer visit and at the site the children’s gardens were full of snow, the tables a foot high with white but there were tracks of small footprints down the paths, meaning they had been out there. The traditional wendy house looked more suited to the winter, they made sense.



Inside, the building was warm and we gathered in the staff room to meet the deputy director, have a cup of tea and Stu and I changed into our Grandfather Frost and Snow Maiden outfits. Anita made a great mini mouse.



A female doctor in a white coat came to ration out the juice, fruit and treats we'd brought along. One tray for each of the eight groups who live there.



The boxes of toys were put in the hall and 'Father Christmas' sat, as he should, in front of the Christmas tree. The first group of children came down the corridor, they were so tiny. A few I had seen in the summer but some were really baby and new, a bit apprehensive of the strangely dressed people.

They approached and were given presents, this broke the ice a bit and then we helped them get the packaging off. Before each group came we were told how many boys and girls and what age, so that with Oleg's help we could get the appropriate gifts standing by. Another group came, they were young ones too, some smiling others over coming apprehension of their first new year here at the orphanage.



Then the kids were coming thick and fast, rushing in, receiving gifts, feeling Santa's beard and ripping paper. They were running cars across the floor, librating dolls trapped by packing



ties, pushing plastic prams, bashing instruments and cuddling soft toys.



Luda told the story about how cold Grandfather Frost was, so they tentatively touched Stu's hand, then laughed, because it was very warm.

One little girl was overjoyed with her pair of fairy wings as we put them on her back. Some kids came for cuddles and I'd point ones out to Stu ones that I'd met before, that he'd seen in photos.



A boy called Dennis came in, he looked so smart in his shirt, he stood tall and seemed more confident than before. When he spotted me was looking shyly sideways and smiling, I asked Blonde Luda to ask him if he remember me, he said yes, I was like "come here then!" and gave him a big squeeze.

A group comes in, all in fancy dress, they look so cool and we do a dance around the big tree. Another group came in full of children I knew, including Dasha, a girl I'd spent a lot of time with, she didn't remember me, but she was her same bossy self, telling Stu off for not having his beard on properly. A few children sang songs they'd learned or recited poems.



It looked quite an uncomfortable task for some as they stood stiffly straight, while others glowed with it. More smiles and ripping of cardboard, further gifts unleashed and taken back to their rooms, along with a tray of snacks and drinks.

Everyone had been and gone again. And then from the other corridor the doctor came, with one child. It was Maxim!!! A dear boy I'd met in the summer. He was the first child I'd played with when we'd arrived the previous July and I was so glad to see him. Max is blind and has special needs so I was glad he's still with people he knew. All smiles and laughing with delight, he felt Stu's beard, shook his hand and took possession of a super soft teddy bear.



We then realised that we'd forgotten to give the biscuits out with the food, so we took them round to all the group rooms. That was lovely too, to see them a last time, all sat



round in little chairs, having snacks and watching tele. They seemed cosy and comfortable and we said our goodbyes. It was wonderful to come and be with the children, to share gifts and smiles and a moment of excitement. I felt so happy to have been able to be with those I'd seen or met before, just to know that they are doing okay. These kids, they're amazing and their resilliance is humbling. They are beautiful and it was my absolte privilage to meet them.

Amanda McGregor

*I would like to take this opportunity of thanking Amanda and Stu for ensuring that the children had a typical 'Leaves of Hope' Christmas – Val Cousins*