

VOVA'S STORY

Vova is now 7 years old. He was born very prematurely, with a serious digestive problem and his mother abandoned him at the maternity hospital.



I first met Vova in 2004 at the abandoned babies' ward in Borovliani Hospital. I was particularly drawn to Vova because, unlike all the other babies on the ward who were clamouring for the attention of visitors, he was quiet and expressionless in his cot and ignored all the noise around him. He looked so isolated and sad and seemed to have given

up on life.

I picked him up and started playing tickling games with him and there was a miraculous transformation. He became animated, giggly and responsive. It was as though he had been 'switched on'.



Spending 24 hours a day in a cot, enclosed by bars like a cage, with little stimulation, cuddles or physical contact was slowly killing Vova emotionally. I felt I had to keep in touch with him, wherever he went, just to show that someone cared about him. So, over the last 5 years I have done just that.

He has moved to two different orphanages, and several times to different groups within those orphanages, which must have added to his insecurity and confusion and affected his development. He is undersized for his age, has a sight defect and no speech.

He also has quite immature mobility and the result was he was often left behind in the orphanage when the other children went out for a walk because he fell over and slowed up the group. We had seen his distress at being left behind on one occasion and so the charity provided a buggy so that he could share in the outings and benefit from the fresh air and stimulation. You can see how chuffed he is with his new buggy!



We have always maintained that he is deaf, but this has mostly been denied by the orphanage and no particular help has therefore been given to him. He has simply been sidelined as 'a cabbage' and for this reason the orphanage staff have expressed surprise that I want to bother to visit him when they have 'many more beautiful, appealing and capable children'!



I beg to differ. I see him as a very curious child who soon works out the mechanics of any toy I bring him without any help.



Vova becomes very involved in his play...



.... responds to any stimulation and new experiences with joy and enthusiasm....



...and loves the visits of the young people on the convoys.



And we have heard from our friends in Belarus that on a recent stay in hospital he dismantled all the furniture in his ward – without instructions or screwdriver. That takes some ingenuity and a considerable concentration span and I consider that to indicate not a cabbage but a child with potential!

Vova is also a very affectionate child who has so much to give.





We have a wonderful team in Belarus who persuaded the orphanage director to allow them to have Vova medically examined to check out his hearing. It was confirmed that he does indeed have a hearing loss. The team described the change in Vova, when wearing hearing aids, as 'shocking' He started looking in the eyes of the speaker, reacting to speech and listening to what was being said. With the right help Vova could start to make some real progress and the team are hoping to make arrangements for him to be fitted with a hearing prosthesis and have some specialist help with developing his speech. However, this year Vova could be transferred to Novinki orphanage

for disabled children. This is very depressing and distressing place to visit and where we are convinced Vova's particular needs will not be met and where he will probably be destined to spend the rest of his life in an institution.

So, a big priority is to find him some foster carers who will give him the individual attention he needs to catch up and to have some hope of achieving his full potential.



At the moment I find it very emotional saying goodbye to Vova, particularly as I am never sure when I will be back in Belarus, where he will be when I do return and whether I will be allowed to see him as so many orphanages are now 'closed' to outside visitors.

In a foster home I could be sure of maintaining my contact and having some quality time with him.

It's been a long road to even get Vova's special needs acknowledged but I now feel more confident that, with the invaluable help of our wonderful friends in Belarus and the support of Leaves of Hope, his future looks so much brighter.

Barbara Messenger

