

BULGARIAN ORPHANS FUND

One hundred per cent direct aid

REPORT OF VISIT TWENTY-SEVEN (1–8 MARCH 2011)

(THE TOTAL SPENT ON GOODS AND SERVICES FOR THE CHILDREN ON THIS TRIP WAS £13,378.44)

Already one of the poorest countries in Europe – not to mention one of the most corrupt – Bulgaria has been knocked by the recession. Prices have risen, jobs are scarce, pensions and state salaries are only irregularly paid, roads and pavements are left un-mended, building work has come to a standstill. In such a climate, in a country with such a dismal record of human rights, it would be surprising if the plight of institutionalized children were of any political concern. Yet the fact is that under pressure from the EU the Bulgarian Government is actively working towards the closure of most of its remaining children's homes within the next two or three years. Unfortunately it is less actively working towards any alternative that can be realistically called an improvement. In an ideal world the state would provide financial assistance for families who can't afford to bring up their children (or are unable to look after disabled children). Instead the likelihood is that Bulgaria will replace its big, old homes with small, new ones – staffed by the same untrained, uncommitted, ill-paid 'carers' – and that the tradition of abandoning unwanted, sick and disabled children to the state will continue, and perhaps, in hard times, increase.

Meanwhile the institutions totter on, overcrowded, unable to pay their fuel bills or buy clothes and bedding or to improve the diet, unprepared for the task of looking after damaged children, their staffs unwilling to commit to the children any more than the government commits to them in an average salary of £28 per week.



The St Marina Home (above) is typical. Like so many Bulgarian children's homes it's miles from anywhere: in the southern foothills of the Stara Planina mountain range, surrounded by an oak forest. And it accommodates 41 severely disabled children – more than its legal complement, because there are no spaces in the adult mental homes to which the 18-year-olds would normally graduate in a system which regards disability as an unchangeable given.

The director, Stoyan Genchev, has the harrassed look common to caring orphanage directors who have to keep the show on the road with insufficient funding. His home is luckier than some: a UK church group regularly visits with presents, which have included the new doors and windows you can see on the previous page.

The smaller children and the more able are relatively easy to manage. They're kept clean and warm and occupied, though scant attention is paid to helping them learn to live with, let alone surmount, their disabilities, and there is no interaction with parents whatsoever. But the bigger children, strong and frustrated, present a different problem. I asked if I could meet them. Mr Genchev was hesitant. 'It is dangerous', he said. I couldn't imagine why. 'Let's try', I suggested. We went upstairs, and through an open door I saw a room full of teenage girls, listless and quiet, except for one strapping girl who leapt on me, clinging to my neck and moaning. Through another door I saw not a den of lion's but a dozen pale youths, sitting on chairs around the walls, slowly rocking to and fro, their eyes black and staring, seeing, perhaps, only the darkness of their demons: a past that hadn't wanted them, a present that ignored them, a future that was unimaginable. The young man who had driven me to the home told me afterwards that one of the nurses had whispered to him, 'What about something for me? Where is my money?' The St Marina Home wasn't dangerous so much as sad.

We had brought with us in a lorry from the city of Sliven forty-one new metal bedsteads to replace the existing beds which had been broken or had rusted, together with new mattresses covered in a waterproof material. On the stairs as we entered we saw one of the old rubber mattresses and a soiled sheet (right), and later we were shown the antediluvian washing machine (below left). It was clear that our new beds and mattresses were badly



needed, but they seemed a poor substitute for the care and attention that these children really wanted. Before leaving I went back upstairs to check that the new metal beds had been properly assembled, ready for use – and not just stacked up and locked away, as often happens in Bulgarian children's homes. Most of



the broken wooden beds were still being dismantled, but in one small dormitory they had already been replaced by two of our new ones, and two excited boys climbed in to give them a try-out. I questioned the director about bedlinen, and he said he needed fitted sheets, pillow cases and zipped duvet covers (to protect the blankets). Back in Sliven the businessman whose company had constructed the beds and mattresses, Mr Stoil Dinev, said he himself would source the goods, send me a quote and arrange the transport (as he had for the beds). When I tried to pay for the transport costs (it was a national holiday and the lorry had come with three men) he waved my *leva* aside, saying that this was his contribution: it was his pleasure, and, he said, his duty, to help these unfortunate children. In eleven years of running BOF this has

happened only once before; I was not only touched but very greatly encouraged. But I wish we could provide Medven with trained carers of the quality that have made Varna's Karin Dom Home for Children with Cerebral Palsy so conspicuously effective and successful. Karin Dom, though, is a private initiative (run by a British charity), with the active involvement of the parents, while Medven is a state operation, where the unmotivated staff are only following the example of an unmotivated government, and the parents, ashamed of their failure, or accepting what they regard as the wrath of God, stay away. Mr Dinev has generously offered to mediate further, and I have a feeling we shall be seeing more of him.

The Peter Beron Home and School for Special Needs Children in Haskovo is run by highly-motivated staff who contribute more than teaching skills to the running of the place, despite the low salaries, and that's why I have felt secure about helping them over such a long period. This time, unable to meet their heating bills, which the government fails to pay on their behalf, they turned to us again. I regretted that we couldn't pay for the heating, which is specifically the government's legal responsibility, but I offered instead to buy more heater/air conditioners, to reduce their reliance on central heating. Finding a supplier prepared to give a discount on some good Japanese models, I ordered three. It's galling that the government boasts of this establishment as a model of what can be achieved with limited resources, when the resources are mostly ours.

The Karandila boy orchestra in Sliven continues to make its mark, not only in Bulgaria but in western Europe too, and, with the help of a generous benefactor in Warwickshire, we have been able to supply three part-time teachers for the modest little music school in the lean-to which is the orchestra's base in the rundown Roma suburb of Nadezhda. But I have warned the director that as their success grows so their reliance on us may have to change, in order that we can devote our funds to helping those with more urgent needs.

The Pleven Babies' Hospital is the most glaring case in point. Here nearly 200 babies and toddlers, abandoned at birth by their mothers, either because they were deformed or too sick or just unwanted, lie more or less neglected by 'nurses' who seem to see their role as nothing more than cleaners and feeders. And indeed, to be fair, they're paid accordingly. The forty or so chronically sick and deformed children in locked wards at the top of the hospital are given no medical attention at all. Their scalps are crusted because they haven't been washed in months, and they're fed lying down so they regurgitate anything that might be nourishing. Our British friends Eileen Regan and her young nursing volunteers on their (necessarily occasional) mercy missions from the Northumbrian University report that these babies 'are simply waiting to die a slow and painful death', while the hospital staff do nothing, and close ranks protectively if criticised. The Northumbrians and Kate Blewett and her Baba carers from the TBACT charity are doing all they can to provide the expert and loving care these children so urgently need, even though the Bulgarian nurses make no attempt to hide their resentment of what they see as foreign interference. When Eileen's nurses are working on site, as now, they are able to buy, on our behalf, feeding spoons, high chairs, fruit puree, nappies etc. We have also made significant donations to TBACT for more Baba carers, who come in from the villages to talk to, and play with, the children. And I'm glad to report that the sound system we installed in all the wards (with funds provided by a benefactor in Hampshire) is both in constant use and much appreciated by the children; an eclectic repertoire, chosen by the staff, offers such delights as *Riverdance* and *chalga* (Bulgarian cross-over), Dolly Parton and

Nutcracker. But sound systems, nappies and feeding spoons, whilst helpful, can do nothing to relieve the distress of those sick children on the top floor. What's needed there are urgent medical intervention, and kindly, qualified nursing. But these are unlikely to happen without a change of culture, not just at the hospital, but at the Ministry and in Bulgarian society as whole. The Bulgarian government has promised to replace these inhuman institutions with smaller sheltered homes, but such improvements will take time, and in the meantime children are dying.

One of the many problems facing those involved in Bulgarian child care is the fate of the young people ejected by the orphanages when they reach eighteen. And for these homeless teenagers some imaginative municipalities have established boarding hostels, with crisis centres for rescued street children. We are happy to be helping two such homes – both well-equipped and well-staffed, at state expense, and run by dedicated leaders: Mrs Stoyanova at the Olga Skobeleva Home in Plovdiv, and Mrs Georgieva at the Tsar Boris I Home in Sofia. For the former we supplied seventy pairs of new trainers, for the latter forty-eight pairs of the same. The children wear out these shoes in a matter of months, but love them, otherwise commonsense would have prevailed and we'd have supplied stout walking shoes instead. I'm delighted to record that the businessman who supplied the Sofia trainers, Mr Georgi Dorev, not only met the cost of the delivery, but came with me to help distribute them, and was so impressed by the spirit of the home that he offered to return with a vanload of footballs and tee-shirts.

At the Skobeleva Home I found two children I'd known at the Katya Vancheva Orphanage in Shiroka Laka, Aydoan and Julian, both tall young men now, fit and well-adjusted. Aydoan wants to be a policeman, and Julian a chef. The home will help set them up.

In the Sofia home I sought out Didi, a victim of the Mogilino home (which was the subject of Kate Blewett's harrowing film on the BBC). When I last I saw her, before Christmas, she had dyed her hair a dramatic platinum blonde; now it's back to Bulgarian raven. Didi is due to leave the home in June. She will always need supervision, and, with Kate, we are looking for a suitable adult hostel.

That there are such places in the bleak landscape of post-Communist Bulgaria is immensely encouraging; so is the growing number of concerned Bulgarians actively wanting to help their country's abandoned children. But all our efforts must now be focussed on saving the sick babies at Pleven.

Tony Scotland

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