

So what *really* needs correcting here?



by Nigel Roberts

In hidden europe 25 (March 2009), we published an account of everyday life in the town of Vetka in south-east Belarus. Nigel Roberts, who wrote that article, is a regular visitor to this remote community, which was terribly afflicted by radiation after the 1986 disaster at the Chernobyl nuclear power plant. During two extended visits to Vetka this year, Nigel engaged with another side of Vetka life – one that is rarely seen by the outside world. He was accompanied by David Tee. Together, Nigel and David are trustees of a UK charity that supports community initiatives in Vetka (see www.wova.org.uk).

Each time I return to Belarus, the country that is an enigma in the heart of Europe, and see the ranks of dull apartment blocks in every town, the same depressing reality strikes me. These concrete blocks of flats are archetypically Soviet and almost always crumbling. The condensation on the windows is impenetrable, there's usually an overweight topless bloke leaning over a balcony smoking a cigarette, and the common areas are unremittingly grim. And as David and I mount the stairs to the top floor of this particular block on Sverdlova Street in the town of

ABOVE: Zhenya sitting at the table in one of the rooms of the Correction Centre in Vetka (photo by David Tee)

Vetka (Ветка), deep in the heart of the Chernobyl radiation zone, I feel nervous. Elena had forewarned us. “Think very carefully before you agree to meet Ivan. His mother cries a lot. You might be upset, or offended,” she said.

We reach the top floor and knock on the last door. We are welcomed inside and we enter a world of calm and peaceful order. The weather is really hot this week and inside the flat it seems rather airless and oppressive — or is that just our nervousness? I feel clumsy as introductions are made, and in my haste to remove my shoes I tread on the phone and send it flying. But Ivan’s mother Natalya greets us warmly. She is pleased that we would like to meet her son.

Ivan lies on a rubber sheet on a short bed in a small room, where Belarusian folk music gently plays on a small music system. Ivan likes music, you see, and he especially likes Belarusian folk. The first thing I notice is the size of his head. His face is turned in our direction and his eyes are open, but I know at once that he doesn’t see us. Those sightless, unfocused eyes roll in their sockets as we gather round him. His breathing is steady. A blanket covers him from the neck down, for it is the mosquito season, but we can tell at once that his tiny body is motionless. Ivan has no

Carers Anna and Natasha at the Correction Centre in Vetka
(photo by David Tee)



motor function of any sort, and so day after day he lies in the foetal position, regularly turned by parent or carer, around the clock. Bed sores are a really big problem for him.

It is time to let him rest, and Natalya ushers us into the living room. She wants to tell us all about her beloved son. She says she’s lucky that Ivan’s father, Kolya, is so utterly devoted to him. Every day, Kolya carries Ivan to the bath, climbs in first with the boy in his arms, and sits down beneath him as he lowers him slowly into the water, a feat of formidable endurance and strength.

We would not meet Kolya until our next visit several months later, when we would sit with him as he softly sang his son to sleep, great tears streaming down his cheeks. We’ve met the family several times now. The dignity and self-respect and strength and love and endurance of these devoted parents leave both of us in awe.

Natalya turns to the sideboard, rummages in a box of papers, and pulls out two documents. Ivan has not only a civilian passport issued by the government, just like everybody else, but he also has an army one. We hear of Natalya’s pride, and also of her anguish, the day the military came to tell the family they wanted Ivan to play his part in the defence of the Motherland. He would never be able to, of course, but the bestowing of such revered status was nonetheless a source of great honour. This boy has the authority of the State and of the military to go anywhere in the world, but his condition is so severe that he cannot leave his home; his world is his bedroom, the bathroom and the living room of this top floor flat.

Natalya is grateful that we have come, and that we have listened. Visitors from somewhere else in western Europe came last year, she tells us; they took photographs and had tea; they smiled, they laughed, then left. She hasn’t seen them since.

During that same visit to Vetka, David and I spend a day at the Children’s Correction Centre. Ivan is denied the opportunity of attending because of the severity of his condition.

The Director shows us into a small room, where soothing music is softly playing. It has simple, basic furniture and ordinary decor. At a table in the middle of the room sits Zhenya. He is 14 years old. As he rocks slowly backwards and forwards, his head on his chest, the face of teacher Galina glows with pride as she tells of the great progress that Zhenya is now making, and how it is a wonderful achievement for him to be able to sit unaided. From time to time he lifts his head, mutters indistinct sounds and smiles. Zhenya is doubly incontinent, and sometimes his family has no diapers for him. Today he has a cold. He sneezes and snuffles, and sits and rocks.

In a corner of the same room, held on a rudimentary couch of cushions by a single harness attached by velcro, lies Nina, who is also 14 years old. Her mother sits quietly in another corner, hands in lap. Nina has profound and very significant needs, the most pressing of which are caused by acute hydrocephalus. Mum says that inside Nina's head, which teacher Tatyana gently strokes, there is a lot of water that causes great pressure on the girl's brain. In the UK, the condition can be treated by the application of a routine procedure to drain the fluid. Here in Belarus, it seems that no such procedure is available.

Nina can see and hear and she smiles a great deal, especially when she is spoken to and when you hold her hand. She has the most beautifully radiant smile, which lights up the room and makes everyone's heart sing. She adores music and she loves to be touched and stroked. She has little or no motor function. But when you hold her hand, she hangs on for dear life. For many moments, this girl is the centre of the universe for us all.

Mum tells us that she is able to sound out simple words — 'mum', 'dad', 'give' — and that she has very discerning taste. For every meal, Mum chews her food for her and then places it in her mouth, and if she doesn't like it, she spits it out. We hear that she particularly likes chocolate. Not for the first time today, I think of my own kids.

Later, as we emerge into the sunshine for a walk, we ask if Elena and Oxana will do us the honour of allowing us to buy them lunch. Our offer is politely declined. Then with the trace of a mischievous smile, first Elena tells us that she



The author (Nigel Roberts), Nina's mother Anna, some diapers and a blender (photo by David Tee)

likes red roses, then Oxana tells us her preference is for black. Later, as we walk back through town, Elena announces that she has changed her mind. It would please her greatly if we could buy diapers. Zhenya and Nina and Ivan have no need for red roses.

The next day, David and I go to the market. We buy diapers, washing powder and food for Nina, Zhenya, the others and their families. We spend less than 20 pounds. A measly twenty quid. A fast food meal for four at home. A third of a tank of fuel for a family car. Three packets of cigarettes.

We're struggling to work out what it is that really needs correcting here. ■

Nigel Roberts is the author of the [Bradt Guide to Belarus](#). The first edition of the book, published in 2008, was reviewed in [hidden europe 22](#). Nigel has just completed updating the guide and a much revised second edition will be published in February 2011.