

Visit Report 20 – 23rd March 2008

Four children's homes visited - Doganovo, Vratsa, Razliv and Pleven

Plus:

a visit to a sewing workshop in Rebarkovo.

Report made by Agnes van Uchelen and Anouk Vaarkamp

Members of the delegation:

Board members:

Agnes van Uchelen : Chairman

Anouk Vaarkamp : Board member

Additionally:

Jonathan Morris : General Manager JustDesign B.V. and photographer

JustDesign is sponsoring our new website (ready summer 2008)

Patrick Halters : Board member Bulgarian Food Assistance Foundation, Made (Brabant)

Suzanne Kagie : Teacher at Mgr. Zwijsen School, Kerkdriel (Brabant)

Heino Vos, Anton and Sabine de Kok, and Tanja Haverkamp, Wijk & Aalburg (Brabant)



Petty cash taken along euros 2.500,-

1. euros 600,= for purchase of a machine for the sewing workshop in Rebarokovo (photo)
2. euros 500,= for purchase of five new beds plus mattresses for the boys' rooms in Vratza
3. euros 1.400,= for computer lessons for Razliv from 1st April – 31st December 2008, four hours a week for roughly 30 children.

Day 1, Thursday 20th March: Doganovo

Urgent repair needed for the bedrooms for the 7 – 12 year olds.

- 1 bedroom for 2 persons
- 2 bedrooms for 6 persons - currently one large room
- 3 bedrooms for 4 persons - currently one large room
- recreation room and hallway

Costs euros 40.000 excluding furniture etc. The Doganovo council has donated Funds of euros 13.500,- (we need to find sponsors)

Project 'Be a smile' ("Wees een Lach") summer 2008, Dognaovo

The project 'Be a smile' is being organized this summer by Anouk Vaarkamp, Board member. This will be the second time she has taken on such a project but the first time that this is being done through the SKB. Anouk will be in charge of eight participants and will be accompanied by a translator and a photographer. The group will be participating in the yearly holiday in the Rila mountain area. The project will last two weeks, and 33 children between the ages of 7– 12 will be involved.



Board member Anouk and principal of the Doganovo orphanage Emil Dunchev discussing their project.

13th – 15th June 2008

Director Emil Dunchev will be coming to Holland to attend the photographic exhibition 'Be a smile'. His travel costs will be covered by the sponsored amount that the participants of this project have gathered together, and will be able to meet the people involved in the 'Be a smile' campaign.

The photographic event will be held on Sunday 15th June in Amsterdam, and all interested parties are most welcome. The photos have been taken by the people involved in the project and also by the Bulgarian children themselves. There will be a film shown, and the project members will be sharing their experiences. We are hoping that there may be more special Bulgarian guests, for instance Stoyan (16) and

Sevda (18), who have been raised in an orphanage and who – apart from forming a budding romance – team up to make a wonderfully passionate dance duo. In order to say thank you to the many sponsors and benefactors of the SKB who have been of such tremendous help to them and their fellow orphans, they will be performing a dance created completely under their own choreographic skills. However, the Bulgarian laws relating to travel are very tricky and Anouk is still doing her best to try and make this happen.

The SKB will be issuing invitations to all their sponsors and benefactors for this very special event.

Education project by the SKB: Sponsor – Turing Foundation euros 15.000,= per year

- Sports lessons. Several groups, in the winter 2 hours per day, in the summer 3 hours per day until the end of 2008.
- English lessons: Two kinds of lesson ; theory & in combination with computer lessons
- Computer lessons: exams being held beginning of April

Urgently required – 10 new computers euros 500,- each (we need sponsors)

Baba's

Urgently needed - 5 Baba's to assist the smaller children to go to school, to be present when they return and to put them to bed in the evening. Most importantly to provide the tender love and care that they would otherwise receive from a grandmother/relative.

Salary level – euros 60,= per month/5 days a week/4 hours a day. (we need sponsors)

Conclusion:

1. Renovation project, possible co-operation with the Wilde Ganzen foundation. This has still to be worked out and finalised.
2. Continuance of Education project. Sponsoring guaranteed until 2009 by the Turing Foundation, after which new sponsors need to be found.
3. The SKB has promised 2 Baba's from 1st April 2008, salary of 60,= per month each.
4. The SKB will try each year to purchase 3 new computers euros 500,= (we need sponsors)

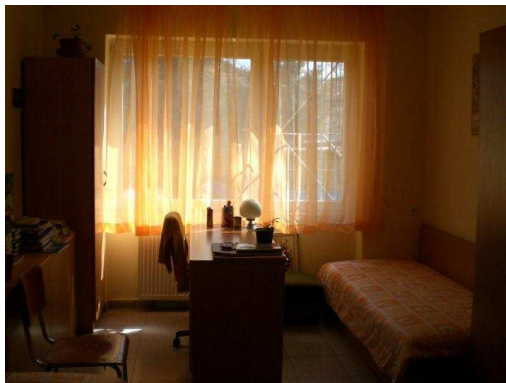


Day 2, Friday 21st March 2008 : Vratza

75 children between the ages of 7 – 19

We were able to make the acquaintance of the new lady Director.

We checked the newly acquired furniture, curtains, bedlinens and bedcovers on the ground floor. There had been no resources for these items before the renovation of this floor in the summer of 2007. A large part of the funds – euros 2.000,- used were the outcome of the takings on a classical concert held on 7th September 2007 in Abcoude. Total costs were euros 2.665,=.



The refurbished rooms, with new furniture, curtains, bedlinens and bedcovers.

Unfortunately there were not enough funds for one of the boys' rooms, which still has five old beds and mattresses. During our visit we decided to donate the sum of euros 500,= to the NGO towards the replacement of these items.

Summer 2008: Renovation of a children's ward including furniture – costs euros 56.000,= commitments from Wilde Ganzen for euros 14.000,= and NCDO for euros 20.000,=. The SKB has to generate a sum of euros 22.000,= before 1st June next, and are doing our utmost to achieve this.

It has taken three years, since the very start-up of the SKB foundation, to complete the renovation and refurbishment of all three floors plus the large entrance hall.

Protected space within the orphanage – 15 – 18 year olds.

This is a new ruling put into place by the Bulgarian government in compliance with their new regulations applicable to orphanages.

This is an separate area in the home specifically for the older children – 15 – 18 year olds – to achieve some sense of independence before they leave the orphanage. There is a separate kitchen, wash/utility area and bedrooms. These renovations have been made possible through sponsors (though not through our foundation). There are currently six boys here being supervised and assisted, two of whom will be taking their final exams this year.

Protected Homes

These also fall under the new regulations made by the government. Children who are required to leave the orphanage without job prospects, education or housing will be taken into one of these protected homes for 1 – 1 ½ years max. by the council. They are given 60 leva (euros 30,=) per month and are assisted by a social worker in the accounting for and spending of these monies.

The social worker will be able to offer help in the transition from child to adult. This assisted transition period is of enormous importance for the children leaving the orphanage, as they have up to then

never had to fend for themselves. This enormous change in their lives is too much for them to cope with on their own.

The council will be mediating on their behalf with a job agency specifically suited to their needs and abilities. One of the possibilities would be further relevant education, and the social worker will be involved in such choices. It is not an easy task for these youngsters to find a job, but once found they have a good chance of holding on to it. This new assistance has been set in place in order to avoid the very real dangers of the youngsters resorting to crime and prostitution.

Conclusion:

The renovation of the children's quarters has to be made this summer. The foundation has already supplied the funds needed to purchase 5 new beds and mattresses for the boy's ward i.e. euros 500,=.

N.B. ~ This orphanage in Vratza is in dire need of mattress protectors/rubber sheets. Many of the children are unfortunately currently still soiling their beds, this due to traumatic past experiences. The mattresses will last longer if we can find some rubber/plastic protection sheets or fitted sheets to this purpose.

Day 2, Friday 21st March: Razliv

54 children 7 – 18 years

These premises are very old (1918). The bedrooms and reception/living rooms are in a very poor state of repair. Fourteen children have to share a bedroom.



Girls' bedroom in Razliv



Boys' bedroom in Razliv

Family type house – a dream almost come true

This is another product of the new regulations for children's homes set up by the government. On a new plot of land opposite the existing home, there will be three new units built to house 30 children.

-1st unit: 15 – 18 years (we need sponsors)

-2nd unit: 10 – 15 years (we need sponsors)

-3rd unit: 7 - 10 years (we need sponsors)

This plot of land is owned by the council and will therefore be relatively inexpensive, and the new owner will be the NGO. Each unit, including furnishings, will cost around euros 100.000,-. This amount is the current cost, but will of course increase quite rapidly. It is therefore of the utmost importance that the units are built as soon as possible. Estimated building costs euros 650/750 per square metre.

After completion the government pays the following costs: salaries for the personnel, electricity bills, heating, food and the cleaning bills. However maintenance costs will have to be covered by the sponsors.

Each of these housing units will hold 8 – 10 children. They will live as a family – hence the name 'Family type house'. The inhabitants are responsible for keeping house i.e. cooking, washing, cleaning, sharing facilities etc. but will be helped and supervised by social workers. Such household responsibilities will of course be delegated according to the age of the children. From these experiences the children will learn to live in a small safe social environment, to accept their own responsibilities and to prepare themselves for adulthood and life beyond the orphanage. This project is a very worthy financial investment - the word investment is used here due to the fact that NGO Tabitha Bulgaria will actually own these buildings. The care involved here can be brought up to normal standards, so that the children can structually benefit from these improvements.

Day Care Centre:

For all ages, also for children from poor and anti-social families in the neighbourhood.

This ruling is again the product of the new government regulations concerning the orphanages. The present children's home in Razliv will be partially demolished and rebuilt as a Day Care Centre. This centre will offer pre- and after- school care, social assistance and homework supervision. Additionally it will provide hot meals for the children

Under the new system, children with no parents or relatives to take care of them will be able to live here, in the Family type house. Children who do currently have contact with their parents (i.e. for holidays, or occasional visits) will under the new system be going back to their families. This would apply to children whose parents live in the surrounding neighbourhoods but both groups would be able to use the Day Care Centre during the day. As well as taking care of the existing inhabitants of the

current orphanage, the Day Care Centre will offer their facilities and care to children from poor or broken families within the surrounding areas. Social workers will be given the task of looking after and supervising these children and their parents. If problems do surface, then they will be there to give guidance and help, or in the worst case take the children back into the protected environment of the orphanage/family type house.

Advantages of this project:

Children who still have contact with their parents or relatives living in the neighbourhood, will have much more opportunity to stimulate and increase this. As the children will be able to partake of meals, education and proper care at the centre, these costs indeed being borne by the Day Care Centre, the responsibilities of these parents will be minimal. The children will not just be sent back home without proper supervision, but will be closely monitored by the orphanage. They will however return home in the evening to spend the night there. Should this prove too much responsibility for the family, then the child will be placed back into the Family Type House. There is a definite emphasis on re-stimulating the contact between parents/family and child, which will be beneficial to the children's future development (if all goes well). Parents who show willing to take their children back will be given a small one-off financial incentive.

This project is also of the utmost importance for children living under distressing family circumstances. These children will also be welcome in the Day Care Centre, but will not fall under the aforesaid supervision. The reason for this is to provide enough daily assistance in order to avoid having to permanently place a child in the orphanage. The centre takes over the welfare of the child, in so much that they are provided with a meal, helped with their homework, have access to a social worker etc. Any problems can be identified and help/prevention measures provided.

The above structure is of vital importance to Razliv and its neighbouring areas. The Family type houses and the Day Care Centre will offer employment with good working conditions. All this will make the village a more attractive place to settle down (permanently), the quality of education in the local school can benefit/improve and (foreign) property investors will all make sure that Razliv stays on the map.

In order to achieve this important structural and multi-faceted project, we need to find sponsors.

One other such similar project currently exists in Bulgaria, this being in Gorski Senovets, and which has proved very successful. Our NGO (and also the SKB) has donated a large sum towards this in the past. The Day Care Centre in Gorski Senovets deals solely with mentally or physically handicapped children, but the structure is same as that of the proposed Razliv plan.

Education: Computer lessons and classrooms.

During our conversation with the Razliv orphanage's director, and in addition to the above-mentioned important project, we were made aware of the fact that there is a great need for computer lessons. The existing computers are very old and the classroom is in dire need of repair. The foundation is willing to finance the computer lessons, and that will be a twice weekly session comprising of two hours, during 26 weeks, for two groups of children (total of 8 hours per week). A teacher will cost 12 leva (6 euros) per hour, thus total costs for this project of euros 1,280.-. This will then guarantee lessons during the period April – December 2008. There will be one group for beginners, and one for advanced pupils.

The computer classroom was severely flooded two years ago. This room needs major renovation, costs: euros 2.000,-/euros 3.000,-. This could be a really good summer vacation project for some (Dutch) students.

Conclusion: Computer lessons are being paid by the Foundation, through the NGO. We are awaiting an estimation for the renovation for the computer classroom. (we need sponsors).



Old computer classroom in Razliv.



Education Centre

Day 2, Friday 21st March: Rebarkovo

10 girls – educational project – from Vratza and Roman

Education:

The girls from Vratza and Roman are following a sewing course in Rebarkovo, the costs of which have been covered by the foundation (Sponsor Turing Foundation).

The course entails several hours a week. Unfortunately the girls were not present on the day of our visit, but we were able to visit their workshop premises. Co-incidentally at that very moment a new (locking) machine was actually being installed and instructions for its use were being given to the staff.

Conclusion:

These lessons need to be continued for the girls – the new edging machine costing euros 600,- was paid for by the foundation.



Sewing workshop in Rebarkovo

Day 3, Saturday 22nd March: Pleven

250-270 children between 0 – 3 years

This was the second visit to this home by the foundation, the first having taken place in October 2007. At that time we reported the terrible conditions in which the children were having to exist. The building is 30 years old, and the facilities and available materials extremely basic.

This building is in urgent need of repair. We would like to draw your attention to our website where photos and more information are to be found. The renovation costs will be in the region of euros 9.000,- per unit (four rooms). There are 16 units in all.

In order to be able to provide the maximum care to this very vulnerable group of children, the total sum of euros 144.000,- is needed. (we need sponsors).

Every year another 200 new children arrive at this home. Children from 3 and over should then be transferred to orphanages dealing with 3 – 7 year olds. Officially children older than 7 should no longer be occupying this orphanage, but there are currently 69 children who are older than that (up to around 10 years old). These older children – older than 3 – have either a mental and/or physical handicap or even both. There are just no other homes who can take them in. It is especially these handicapped children for whom it is impossible to find any other placing due to the terrible shortage of the specialized expertise that these children need. The director is at her wit's end, she is obliged to keep these children in Pleven as there is just no alternative. This of course means that this whole system just stagnates and there is just no place for the babies and toddlers who also desperately need a home.



Photographer Jonathan Morris in Pleven

Incubator Department

The orphanage in Pleven also functions as a hospital. As well as sick children, also premature babies are taken in here. The department offers care to abandoned children but also to children/premature babies who are in need of aftercare. There are enough incubators available.

Adoption

In the past orphanage children could only be put up for adoption if the parents officially abandoned them. This was a long drawn out procedure which was emotionally very stressful, especially to the older children. They had to go through a procedure, under the auspices of a solicitor or judge, whereby their parents had to officially give them up. In order to ease and quicken this whole procedure, a new law has been instigated.

This states that the children may be put up for adoption after six months of their placement in the orphanage and if, during such time, the parents have had no contact at all with the child. In itself this ruling seems more advantageous, and it has now become much easier to put a baby up for adoption. Most prospective parents would rather adopt a baby than a toddler or slightly older child.

However, it appears that currently fewer children are being adopted than before due to the fact that other parts of the regulations have actually become much stricter. This is due to the exposure of some corrupt government officials, and there were even some dismissals reaching right up to ministerial level. The director informed us that prior to June 2007 an average of 100 children per year – from this orphanage – were being adopted within Bulgaria, and another 50 children were being adopted by foreigners abroad. Last year only 40 children were adopted within Bulgaria, and 1 abroad. This concerns Bulgarian couples who adopt within their own country. The adoption procedures have become very bureaucratic. Potential adoptive parents have first to undergo a screening, and then their application has to be legalized. Following this they are allocated three children from which to choose, this being done by a special council. They make their choice and are then allowed to visit the child for one month, as frequently as wished. After this first month they are then allowed to take the child home for a two week period. If they decide within this period that they do not wish to adopt this child then they may return him/her to the orphanage. The whole procedure then starts all over again. Naturally this procedure can prove extremely distressing to the child themselves. If a child is rejected three times then it may be put up for international adoption. This is a very lengthy procedure. By the time that the child can be given in adoption, it is usually in the toddler/kindergarten age (or even older) and adoption is very nearly not possible anymore.

The above-mentioned procedure is officially applicable to both children from a Roma (gypsy) background and Bulgarian children. In practice it doesn't work that way.

70% of children in the Bulgarian orphanages is from Roma descent but nearly all prospective parents demand a Bulgarian child. Roma children are therefore often rejected.

Physiotherapy

There is actually only one physiotherapist present for around 75 children suffering from a physical and/or mental handicap. The home holds 250-270 children, so this situation has to change rapidly. The medical staff are consulted as to which children undergo which therapy. There is a three-monthly evaluation and decisions made as how to improve the care given. The physiotherapist works 40 hours a week and starts off with the most serious cases. The development of each child is closely monitored and reported.

Fitted sheets and Duvet covers.

Since our last visit when these bedlinens were ordered, these have now been delivered to the sewing workshop. Agnes has checked this all and made photos.



New fitted sheets and Duvet covers in bright colours

Conclusion: The foundation will finance a second physiotherapist as from 1st April 2008, euros 265,- per month.

We hope that it will be possible in the future to afford more physiotherapists (we need sponsors)

Desperately needed: Pampers (we need sponsors)

There has been no visual improvement here since our last visit.

The visiting group was clearly disturbed by the living conditions being experienced by these poor little mites. (see our website for more information)



Beautiful photos by Jonathan Morris. Nurse and child in Pleven.