

# CONVOY

## Report



BULGARIA September 2009

# Changing Children's Lives and Making a Difference

They are almost without exception only found on a smaller scale and on the last page, of a road map of Europe. Vidin. Kula. Montana. Sofia. Kyustendil. Bulgaria is an overlooked country. Even our UK-bound sense of geography seems to bear it out.

The drivers of this September's convoy were in for a steep learning curve outstripping the hairpin bends of the Romanian hills. After four eventful, unforgettable days across the Danube, unfamiliar names of unknown places came alive forever with memories – memories overwhelmingly of children. The mention of Kula and Kyustendil especially will unfailingly bring to mind profoundly heart-warming and heart wrenching moments spent with just some of the real little faces behind the grim statistics of 'abandonment' and 'institutionalisation'. We sensed a country where pride and need, desperation and dignity, progress and prejudice, is all part of the struggle to define present and future identity.

This was a convoy of several 'firsts'. It was

simply the biggest CWUHA convoy ever to take to the road. Eleven vehicles, twenty two drivers, and further firsts in having our youngest ever driver and the four Irish boys. With broad accents from Dublin, Liverpool, Edinburgh and Newcastle, to name but a few, we couldn't begin to worry about understanding any Bulgarian!

The most significant 'first' for the team, however, was that instead of splitting up to deliver our aid to where our respective loads were destined, we all visited all of the projects being supported – the hospitals, orphanages and Roma schools. The upside of having many hands on deck for unloading hardly needs stated, but there was also a well-placed affirmation of each other's efforts as we all saw the sheer quality and quantity of what was being donated. And after each long and emotion-charged day, there was the solidarity of shared experience, talked through at length and sometimes with unembarrassed tears.



### The first stop

The hospital at Vidin, our first destination, was a gentle opener. Though 'it's all relative' was never more truly the case. We saw the good news first. Funds raised by team members had been sent ahead of our trip and spent well at local suppliers. Several of the children's wards were already boasting their brand new blue and orange beds, cots and bedside lockers. With incredible timing, while we were there, a further delivery arrived and brand new incubators came onto the premises, also the result of convoy fundraising. There was no taking away from the celebration of such tangible achievements. And there was equally no denying the shock of seeing those wards where old furnishings had not yet been replaced with new. In the midst of the gratitude expressed, we learned that this was the most generous charitable giving the hospital had ever received, and it was also the first time that aid had been targeted at helping the children's wards.



► There was similar joy to be had at Montana. It was not a place to retreat in horror at the prospect of being a patient there yourself, but compared with what we know at home, it was a huge step back, in time, in technology, in facilities. Montana was a tale of two hospitals – the rather dilapidated one in use, and the potentially upgraded version, in its towering naked brick semi-constructed state. The new build had been halted indefinitely. There was no more money.

Sofia's hospital was the one place we did not all venture, city centre trucking being, to borrow from another of the team's many tongues, 'pure mental'. Thankfully there were enough of us to handle the most challenging unloading, of a number of operating tables. How they made it to the theatres, we can only guess... just getting them off a truck nearly cost a finger.

**Keep on moving...**

And so to our other destinations – a different kind of place. For some of us, it was the first experience of being in an orphanage. But whether first or umpteenth, these are hard places to be. Kula is a community of cared-for young people with many kinds of disability, physical and psycho-neurological.

*"I played round and round the garden in one of her tiny palms. No reaction. Only a hollow unblinking stare, the saddest and most perturbing non-encounter with a child that I have ever had. It was hard to be there. And harder still to walk away"*



The Day Centre building was a promising facility, its airy activity rooms decorated with the children's artwork. The neighbouring residential building looked even brighter and more modern, until we stepped inside. Even looking later at a photograph of the abysmal toilets, my lip still curls involuntarily, recalling the near nausea felt at the time of taking the shot. The downstairs kitchen and laundry were pitiful sights. Appliances belonged to some bygone age and the long, cold basement corridor was reminiscent of some derelict warehouse. Back upstairs, one of the bedrooms seemed at first to be empty too, but peeking round the door, it transpired one

bed was occupied. A little girl of unidentifiable age was lying awkwardly, fully clothed and half covered with a patterned sheet. Her high, wide forehead and the strange angles of her limbs disclosed perhaps spina bifida. She was wide awake and taking in this stranger. I wished I knew her name. I wished I knew her language. I wondered what chances she had to be out of that bed and playing. I wished I had a cuddly toy to leave in her arms. But with what we had – time and touch and murmurings, smiles and coos and gazes – we communicated. First came clasping hands, then a huge

smile, a beautiful giggle, and a lively bouncing of those crooked legs. What was her story and how will life be for her in five, ten years?

We met others who had, strictly speaking, outgrown the age and stage of residential care. The staff at Kula had set up a 'Protected House' – a garden cottage for four older boys, who proudly showed us round their home, despite its walls surely bulging at finding capacity for 22 sudden guests! In such tiny corners, such small drops in the ocean, there was real hope, but precarious hope. Can these young men stay in this protected, marginally independent base indefinitely? Who will decide and what alternatives could they possibly thrive on?

**Hard facts of life**

Kyustendil too was filled with unanswered questions, though it's impossible to say which is worse – to be left wondering or to find out the facts. Bulgaria has 160 orphanages and, cultural norms as they are, it is rare for disability to be accepted and embraced within the family. But that was not the relevant issue at Kyustendil. Our first deliveries and visit were to the

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misnamed Mother and Baby Centre. The stark, spartan rooms of cots set side by side are an affront to our every idea of what childhood should be. Yet some were there because their families believed they would be better off in the care of the state than remaining with economically impoverished parents of the Roma underclass. While the wheels of change slowly turn, there were and are tangible transformations within our power to bring about.

There were two children who stood out to me in the toddlers' dorms. The first, because of his natural childlike inquisitiveness and trust. With curly hair, an angelic face and a bright red jumper, he stood alert and curious in his cot, as though not wanting to miss a move of this invasion of big people. He loved being tickled and squirmed happily in my arms, looking round in every direction from the higher than usual vantage point, then homing in with fascination on my camera case, fingering the straps and discovering the funny sound Velcro makes and how the zip zipped. It wasn't really me he didn't want to let go of, only the camera case!

A few cots away, a second curly haired, wide-awake child occupied her cot. She was lying on her back with motionless arms spread-eagled beside her head, palms up. Crouching down to appear less fearsome, I offered a hand through the wooden cot bars. No reaction. With one finger, I played round and round the garden in one of her tiny palms. No reaction. Only a hollow unblinking stare, the saddest and most perturbing non-encounter with a child that I have ever had.

It was hard to be there. And harder still to walk away.

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### Making real progress

The staff we met were no doubt doing their under-resourced and unapplauded best. Only later did we learn of the genuine incredulity at our presence and aid being a promise carried through. It seemed that grand intentions declared from other well-meaning quarters had led only to disappointment. The difference we had made was now stacked high in the corridors and ready for unpacking after our departure – new cots, mattresses, clothes, toys, all kinds of play equipment and much more. Wonderfully, within a fortnight of returning home, an email arrived with a batch of photographs showing off the newly kitted-out playroom at the Centre. Children we had met only in their cots were on bikes, trikes and seesaws, exploring playhouses and clutching balls and dolls. I clicked onto the next photo and suddenly there was the girl

who had barely blinked. She still looked aloof and unsmiling, but she was there, active and playing.

Ironically, the children growing up in the ghetto-like shanty town of the Roma village we visited were absolute livewires. But here we witnessed a moment that summed up all too well the dire circumstances of the families living there.

It all started in the dusty field between school and village that passed as their playground. The sight of ten lorries rolling in had brought all ages teeming from nearby houses and streets, with an enthusiasm probably not evident on school days! Among the multitude were as many adults as children – young mothers and wizened grandmothers, all vying for a share of our gifts, and smiling as they received toys and other goodies, to be given to the infant in





their arms or a toddling latecomer. Included in the offerings were knitted teddies by the boxful. No convoy is complete without them. One particular boxful was rapidly emptying into the eager hands of children and adults alike, creating a buzz of movement and voices.

One woman arrived late on the scene herself and approached the hub of activity, only to see that the last teddy had just gone. She pointed at the box, which was upturned and shaken as a gesture of explanation and apology. The woman pointed at the box again, speaking her own language, but having no common understanding except to keep pointing. "Does she want the box? Do you think she's asking for the box?" Hesitantly for fear of having picked her up wrongly, the box was gingerly offered. Big smiles, more chatter, and it was taken and paraded away. Did we really witness this? A woman made happy by the acquisition of a large cardboard box? But the story had not ended. A few minutes later

she returned, this time carrying a plastic bag half-filled with fruit and vegetables. These were handed to her astounded benefactor, to express profuse gratitude – for a cardboard box.

In the weeks following our arrival back home, we saw many of each other's photos; many of the same places and people show up, but each from a different angle; not quite the same perspective. And some are unique to one person; something noticed that no-one else took in. So too our stories and what stays with us long after the

ferry crossing and the long drive back to what we are unbelievably privileged to know as our normality. What we did counted. And it put places and people onto the map of our consciousness, into the path of our concern. Vidin. Kula. Montana. Sofia. Kyustendil.

COMMUNICATION WORKERS UNION  
HUMANITARIAN AID



## Special thanks to...

When embarking on this type of project you need the support of respected NGO's in-country and we are very lucky to work two 'One Life Charity' and 'Lora's Foundation'. Both these organisations help choose the orphanages, hospitals and schools we deliver to, they work closely with us in producing the wish lists, they organise translators, guides, secure parking, transport, hotels etc whilst were in Bulgaria. They also oversee the projects when we have returned home. Our thanks to all the volunteers of both organisations, and also to CWU Essex Amal Branch for sponsoring this report – **we couldn't do this without you all.**

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