

Trip Report Slatina, Romania: CAST: 11th – 21st October 2008
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Before my trip to Romania I was a little anxious as although I had met Sarah Parry twice, I was essentially unfamiliar with the organisation and had already booked my flight and hotel at Luton. However, close to the time I was sent lots of useful information, both from Hanna Lythgoe and from Charlie Hillary, the team leader so that by the time I set off I knew who the other 9 team members were to be and where they were staying close to Luton. Hanna also had details of whom to contact in case of emergency and a copy of my passport, so I felt quite reassured.

The group met up at the airport and we had an uneventful flight. At Bucharest we were met by Mr Matei; although he spoke no English he smiled a lot and drove us to Slatina, where we were introduced to Norica Popa, our translator and helper for the duration. Our accommodation was very cramped but central, next to a grocery shop and close to a huge vegetable market.

As we had arrived on a Saturday we had the following day to wander around and gel as a group, which we did very quickly. Although I was over 40 years older than any of the other members, I was incorporated just as much as I wanted to be into the group, who were without exception friendly and cheerful throughout the stay. And when I preferred to read rather than play cards or watch a DVD I was not treated as an outsider at all.

Charlie, with her 2 helpers Amy McCulloch and Claire Dunne, all of whom had been to Slatina before, sorted us into 3 teams. Each morning (Monday to Friday) I went to a) what we termed the More Able Downtown Home and b) the Less Able Downtown Home with Amy and Amy Johnson, accompanied by Norica. The more able home was somewhat chaotic; we did what we could, indoors and sometimes out of doors. We played with the youngsters, cuddled them a lot, danced with them and generally conveyed our respect and love for them. Most of the carers were apparently kind and fairly helpful to the residents. I was able to work best in the less able home where I cared mainly for one of the young girls. Although she was 9 years old she was about the size of a normal 1 year old. Because she has not received appropriate therapy her legs do not straighten and her muscles have not developed. I massaged her and moved her legs a little more each day. I believe that with regular movement therapy and physical/mental stimulation she could develop more than will probably happen as she appears to lie on a sofa most of the time when no volunteer is present. The same is also true of one of the other boys and another girl, the other residents in that home – both responded more and more each day to our presence.

On Saturday morning I went to 2 other homes, which were better decorated and with apparently more caring 'house mothers'. The youngsters there all went to therapy or schools during the week, and the higher standard of their behaviour /ability is obvious.

On 3 days of the week, during the afternoons, we went to a More Able Adults Home. There we drew pictures with the residents, spoke to them as best we could, cuddled them etc. Many of them appear to be simply incarcerated there because there is nowhere else to put them; in the distance we could see others who appeared to have no relationship with the outer world any longer. We did not contact these people. The carers were there the 1st time we visited, but went after our arrival on subsequent visits, locking the toilet block so that the residents had to relieve themselves on the grass round the corner from where we sat.

On 2 days of the week, during the afternoons, we went to a Less Able Adults Home. This place was perhaps the most heartbreaking place we visited. Few of the residents could speak, although one young man claimed to have been left at an orphanage by his mother because he was HIV positive, and now had nowhere to live. It was at this home that we could use Intensive Interaction most usefully; simply sitting swaying back and forth with someone eventually produced first a glimmer of recognition, and later a real response. At both the adults homes there was a total lack of colour, although here there were a few pictures stuck high up on the walls. But

the building and surrounds were so very sad. The carers sometimes shouted at one or other of the residents. We witnessed several incidents while we were present. Although we could not speak to the carers about this and other instances, I am sure there is less cruelty due to regular visits by CAST (and perhaps other organisations) than there would otherwise be.

Some points of view:

I am more impressed by what CAST is doing than I have been by other voluntary organisations I have worked with. The leaders are so dedicated, and not financially motivated at all. I was extremely impressed by Charlie's leadership: she remained even handed and calm at all times, and never allowed the group to split into factions, which so often happens in circumstances where a group is living in close quarters.

If it is possible to take a sound system to the adult homes that could be used with people's iPods I believe the residents would greatly benefit from the stimulation of music. These are now quite small, so not difficult to transport.

I think the MOST useful thing we took was the large pump action pot of E45 body cream. So many of the residents, particularly the adults, had feet, and hands, which were in very poor condition, and we were able to massage them. It was also interesting to note that they liked to smell the scent of the cream – perhaps taking some not too expensive eau de toilet would be pleasant for them, as they never normally smell anything nice at all.

I cant stress enough how much I personally have gained from being with the CAST group and visiting the Romanian residents. I am also glad that Sarah had told me the groups of volunteers were young; I found the accommodation difficult but no worse than I had expected.

In an ideal world back to back visits throughout the year would help the residents so much. But I am not sure whether there is a sufficient number of people who could fill spaces in term times.

I have told Charlie that I am happy to speak to local 6th form colleges about CAST with the aim of attracting volunteers.