

June 29, 2009

It was a frosty evening in late February, when my brother and I arrived at Chisinau the only airport in Moldova. Mission staff met us at the airport and drove us two hours to the country's second largest city, Balti, where we spent the night as the only guests of a small hotel outside the city. The next day the local co-ordinator and a translator took us to a boarding school in the city to see 11-year-old Roma, one of the children our family sponsors.

The boarding school is clean and warm and the children's physical needs are well looked after. Another school we visited was an auxiliary school in a small village near the town of Ungheni. There were noticeable improvements at this boarding school since we had seen it two years earlier. Like many of the schools in the villages, this one was older and more run-down than the schools in the towns and cities. Broken windows, leaking roofs, and faulty heating systems are common; but due to the help of volunteers and supporters, many of the schools have improved.

Roma and Arteom spend the school term at the school. During the holidays, their grandfather takes one or the other of the boys to his home in a small village about an hour's drive from Balti. His home is a typical village home, with a bit of land and some poultry and goats. Most of the villagers earn their living a little here and a little there, doing contract work on the farms, or doing odd jobs wherever they can get them. Alcoholism is a big problem in these villages. Most of the young to middle-age people have left the country to live and work abroad, leaving the elderly and their children behind. Many never return. Lionela and Tatiana, twelve and fourteen-year-old sisters, were very excited and a little nervous when we met them on the school grounds with presents. We spent the day with them in town, shopping, visiting a museum, eating out at a restaurant; but in all the excitement of this rare outing, there was one thing they were never distracted from. Everywhere we went they would be holding our hands, putting their arms around us, smiling and looking into our eyes to show the happiness and love they couldn't put into words because of the language barrier. It wasn't just the things we bought them that was putting that happiness in their eyes. The girls insisted on sharing all their sweets with us in spite of our protests. It was a little taste of love and belonging in a cold world that doesn't want them, that was a little taste of paradise to them.

Lionela showed us pictures of their relatives. When they go home on the holidays, it is to take care of a sick grandmother and great grandmother and work. With a hint of pride she showed us the picture of their mother. She left them to live and work in Moscow.

"We see her once or twice a year," she told us with sadness in her voice.

And yet, some parents do return to their children. It is only poverty that forces them to leave their children periodically to earn money abroad. We took tiny Sveta to her home in another village. After carefully and slowly driving along the dirt roads in the village, avoiding huge potholes, we arrived at her house. Her mother, a tiny, shy woman, met us and invited us in. She kept apologizing for having nothing ready, and the house supposedly not cleaned, but we were impressed with how clean it was. The place was very tidy, the bedrooms cozy and warm. Sveta and her eight-year-old brother Nicolae have a good, hardworking mother. Sveta said she likes it better at home than at school. Like her daughter, the mother is not very healthy, and she had been to the doctor that day. Still, periodically her husband and she are forced by their poverty to go to Turkey and work there for a while to make money to take home. She worries about the children back at home with the grandparents while they are gone.

We went to see Vasile in one of the auxiliary schools for mentally or emotionally effected children. He is a very good student in seventh grade, but has been diagnosed with some neurological or psychological problem. We could notice nothing at all different about him from any quiet, shy 14-year-old in the school, but it is also not necessarily true that he has any problem at all.

We were told of cases where doctors diagnosed children with so many different kinds of sicknesses and diseases after merely looking at them, that when a skilled doctor later looked over the child's health report he declared that the child would have to be dead if he had all that! They told us doctors in Moldova are very unskilled and untrustworthy. Money gets a person anywhere in this country. A doctor's degree can be obtained by bribes. To get treatment, a bribe is usually necessary, although officially the country's medical plan covers all costs. Doctors simply write anything they wish in a child's health report, regardless of how their diagnosis might affect the child's entire life.

Cristina and Aliona, twelve- and fourteen-year-old sisters, and the two Ana's were sweet and affectionate and all smiles as they showed us around their dorms and classrooms. All of them have families nearby who take them home on the holidays. As usual, the families are very poor and

the girls need special education. All of them have other siblings who live at home with their parents. We had lunch at a restaurant and walked in the park in the nearby town of Ungheni. They were very quiet and had difficulty answering questions about choice and preference. This was one thing noticeable on most of the boarding school children we spent time with. Choosing is not a part of their life. They have to accept whatever comes their way, and complaints are useless. This attitude has become so much part of them that even making a simple choice such as what to order at a restaurant is too much. But there's one thing nothing will ever take away from them – hearts longing for love and full of love. Again and again, holding our hands, they would look up into our faces for another smile. They quickly learned the one English phrase, "I love you," to repeat it again and again with lingering hugs and kisses before we could say goodbye.

We left Dumitru behind at the school for the day trip with the girls. He is a tiny eight-year-old with a severe communication handicap. The only hope for him is a LOT of love and attention. He kept his head down and his eyes on the ground when he met us, and barely answered the questions asked him. But as soon as they told him we were his sponsors come to see him, he latched onto my brother's hand and clung to it.

"I have a brother in seventh grade," he told the co-coordinator. But this "brother" turned out to be a boy who had befriended him. So great is the longing to belong in this suffering little boy's heart. I took him in my arms and tried to show him the pictures and videos of the girls on my camera. For a moment he forgot his shyness in the excitement of pointing out his favourite Aliona and the coordinator Sergei in the pictures. When it was time to say goodbye, he would hardly let go. With his face against mine, he clung desperately. As we hugged the girls goodbye beside the car, he went and stood a little distance away, leaning against the school wall, crying silently. As the car slowly drove through the gate, he suddenly he ran after us, and the last we saw of him was the tiny figure standing on the road watching us drive away. A home and love is all Dumitru needs, but it is the one thing he is least likely to ever get.

After another day out with Sasha, Corina and Iulia, children from different homes around Orhei, we came back to the school to find that Iulia's mother had been there to take her home while we were away. She would come back the next day to take her. The sweet little face that had been so happy and full of life all day now became very sad. She didn't want to go. Most of the time, she spends holidays with her great-aunt and cousins, which she enjoys very much. But she never

talked about her mother and home. Our translator pressed her to tell why she didn't want to go home with her mother, and finally the answer came reluctantly.

"Because my stepfather beats my mother." It was the same old story, so common there in the villages, where alcoholism abounds, but it struck home deeply when we saw the tears in the eyes of a sensitive little girl who has to see things that no child should ever see. She cried in my arms when we said goodbye.

On the brighter side, there were Nicolae, Gheorghe, and Cristina. The three thirteen-year-olds are in grade five together and are best friends. Gheorghe is friendly, relaxed and cheerful and Nicolae and Cristina both say he is their best friend. The boys are praised as hard-working by their teacher, and they have good families with whom they stay during holidays. The only reason they don't live at home is because their parents are very poor. Nicolae has a funny sense of humour and it was a pleasure to see their happy, confident faces, after all the hurt and sadness we had seen in the days before.

But Cristina was very quiet and shy. She can stay with her father on the holidays, but he drinks a lot and they are very poor. She has siblings in the village, too, but most are older. She often goes home with one of her teachers because the home situation is not very good. But, as usual, she didn't talk about it, and when we left her at her father's home in the village at the end of the day, she didn't look happy. I asked her if she was happy to be home, and she only looked down and shrugged her shoulders. She didn't turn to wave goodbye as she walked down the dusty dirt road to the only place she calls home.

The trip to Ukraine, after spending nine days in Moldova, was more than sixteen hours by bus overnight and into the next morning. Occasionally, the driver would stop at a bus stop so we could all get out for a bit. The road was extremely bad, so the bus drove quite slowly, gearing down completely at times to get through the biggest potholes, and sleep was impossible. It took an hour to get through customs at the Ukrainian border, but we were given the best treatment as soon as they discovered that we were from the West and traveling for mission purposes!

Finally, around 10:30 the next morning we arrived in Lvov, where staff from the Ukrainian mission met us with the two orphan boys, Pasha and Dima. The eleven- and thirteen-year-old brothers live at the boarding school in Rivne. Occasionally they get to see their siblings who live with their uncle and aunt. They have no parents. Dima was very outgoing, and both boys seemed happy and friendly. We took the boys to our hotel room and unpacked the presents there. Again,

the lingering goodbye with arms around us, showed the hunger for love in the hearts of these orphan boys. It's not things that they need. And yet, love and home are things no amount of money can buy them.