

## STRICTLY A HAPPY NEW YEAR!

Lydia Project Update Jan.'09

This season reminds us that our faith is based on a vulnerable, unlikely child, born in an animal shelter, in a colonised country. This resonates with the deathly situations in which women of the Lydia network are running transformative projects. They care for people swept aside in East Europe by social collapse and brash new capitalism: the old, the vulnerable, frail children abandoned or orphaned, young people without training or a future, all people without social or family support.

The early 1990s found East Europeans living in crumbling structures. Failed soviet systems, which had been all-powerful, forbade social outreach by churches or independent initiatives. There were no charitable organisations for 40 to 70 years. New groups have been developing through the sheer force of the human spirit ever since.

“We want to reach people in need as you do”, said Irina of Belarus and Vera of the Czech Republic. “We need training to set up organisations to meet new social needs. We didn’t have unemployed people, street children or trafficked youth before –but now all is overturned.”

“We have teenagers living in the Vilnius railway station,” explained Brigita. “We have thousands of children living in Moscow streets, huddling in doorways, sewers and basements in sub-zero temperatures!” added Karima. “In my Albanian town there’s 90% unemployment, where a giant metallurgy factory collapsed,” told Roshi. “Young people are heading for petty crime in the streets so my organisation plans to train them in hairdressing, cooking, sewing and car mechanics.” In response to requests like these, Lydia Project programmes began to help women carry out their hopes for transforming their communities with greater know-how and confidence. One programme led to other invitations and now there are Lydia Project partners and contacts in 16 countries of East Europe.

“You can do it!” Lydia team facilitators insist during training. The women are extremely motivated, helping and empowering one another. Once they plan and carry out one programme, they gain enormous confidence and go on with many others.

Following the years of training and exchanges, the Guild has helped projects come to realisation. Whole regions have benefited from women determined to care for those in need. They plan new clubs and activities for older people who live isolated, without transport or social activities and the chance to meet others in the same position. Life can be humiliating for those who worked for years believing their pensions – with subsidised homes and food – would support them, after a life of work over which they often had little choice. But no! Costs have more than tripled, while pensions range from £3 to £20 pounds per month, (a few increased through new EU membership). Bringing them together to share experiences, to exercise or reminisce together, to enjoy life, has been the work of Lydia women in an international project called “Never Too Late to Learn!”, supported by the Guild. Following the pilot project in Romania in August '08, an Armenian programme is planned for 2009!

“We have no culture of volunteers,” said Eni and Gintare when Lydia Project women planned the Guild-supported years. “Soviet society didn’t have room for them. No charity was officially needed! But we need them now. We’d like helpers to train to set up and run projects.” Therefore, plans to train trainers for future Lydia-type

programmes around East Europe are in the pipeline and promise that the good work will continue even when Scottish support becomes a thing of the past.

The host in Lithuania for the first summer school for facilitators will be Ilona, who was a village seamstress and who built on Lydia Project training by launching new projects and involving interested helpers. Ilona has a strong team now and she herself has trained in community work. Peer learning is important in these programmes; new expertise is shared. The hands-on, bottom-up, interactive approach to training is appreciated as “creative learning” by participants. They are the experts in their local situations; we help to empower them to realise their plans in very concrete ways. Guild funds have made joint plans blossom in reality, at a time when there are still no local funds or trusts for such needs; their programmes are models for the future and offer hope to many excluded people.

Those who are fortunate to have paid employment have modest salaries (for example, 2-300 Euro a month in university jobs, £150-200 pounds). They have human resources in plenty, but - no government grants or charitable income until their governments climb out of bankruptcy and stop being suspicious of non-governmental organisations.

Volunteer work is added to regular work, helping those who might be forgotten otherwise. Young people who scabbled in hospital rubbish for food during the Latvian winter, unable to work or keep house, straight out of foster institutions, have a home in ‘Mercy House’, run by several Lydia partners; they learn to grow vegetables, milk a cow, and care for rabbits and hens. Young people in Romania, in Ukraine, in Georgia, and in Russia without social or family support have found people who care. Roma and village children go to the middle school. Moscow teachers, including Lydia participants, created an organisation that brings the education of young people dumped in huge institutions up to standard. Now they can train and become independent, some with the help of Guild funding. All of these “Children on the Edge” will not fall, unnoticed, into an abyss.

Out of the ashes of burnt-out systems have risen new co-operative and international ventures. Support has come from the Guild, Lloyds TSB Foundation for Scotland (plus Scottish and European churches and trusts over the years). Support makes all the difference to those who live modestly without spare money to travel or train until more social rebuilding takes place. The “Children not for Sale!” programme will begin this spring in Moldova, thanks to the Guild. Participants are coming from Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova, Romania and Armenia – all affected by this new danger. It will gather clergy, doctors, teachers, nurses and others to prevent the increased trafficking of younger and younger children and boys eastward to Moscow and Arab Emirates, for use in crime and sexual exploitation. Participants will learn from one another and organise measures to block such child exploitation. “The criminals are always several steps ahead of us.” Tamara told us recently. (You may remember Tamara’s visit last April.) Trafficking is now more profitable than drugs!

Over the three years of Guild support, these and other projects have been launched under the title, “Miriam – Changing the World Together”, a name chosen at the 1995 pilot project, when the group shared a biblical story. Miriam, the sister of Moses, in co-operation with her Hebrew slave mum and two spunky midwives, plus the royal daughter of the god/king Pharaoh - managed to save the Hebrew baby Moses from death. Without them – possibly no exodus from slavery, no liberation story! It’s a story of another vulnerable child of slaves in an oppressed situation! With Miriam, the women co-operated to change the world together. And so – with your wonderful support – do Lydia Project women.

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