

## BULGARIAN ORPHANS FUND

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*One hundred per cent direct aid*

**WHAT IT IS.** The Bulgarian Orphans Fund is a small, independent, highly personalized, direct-aid charity started and operated by writer and broadcaster Tony Scotland, with financial contributions from his friends and their friends. He himself covers all the overheads, so every penny given goes directly to the children. Established in December 1999, the Fund provides relief for abandoned, handicapped and orphaned children and babies at half a dozen state institutions. With cash donations, Tony buys staples (food, clothes, bedding), medicines, white goods (washing machines, heaters and computers), teaching materials (pens, paper, textbooks, computers), double-glazed window units and roof insulation, and comforts (chocolate, soap, footballs, holidays); the Fund also supports art, carpentry, music and cookery workshops, an orphan-run smallholding, and a Baba Project which pays bored grannies to spend four hours a day, five days a week, with babies and toddlers at a large and soulless baby hospital in Pleven. At his own expense, Tony Scotland visits the homes two or three times a year, assesses their needs, buys locally the goods required, and personally delivers them. He never gives cash ó to prevent misuse of funds by ill-paid staff in a state system still riddled with corruption.

**WHY IT'S NEEDED.** Many of the children in orphanages aren't orphans at all but children who have been abandoned to the care of the state because they are physically or mentally handicapped or because their parents are too poor to look after them. And many of the children in mental homes aren't mentally ill, but have been neglected for so long that they now seem so. Most of the children in all the homes are *Pomaks* (Muslim Bulgarians), ethnic Turks or *Tsigani* (Roma), racial groups which are subject to persecution throughout the Balkans. In many institutions the children are cold, unwashed and underfed. Nearly all the homes are bleak and squalid, with broken showers, blocked lavatories (of the hole in the ground variety), plaster falling from the ceilings, paint peeling off the walls, beds so soaked with urine that the mattresses are rotting. There's a pervading stench of drains and sewage and boiled cabbage. Not surprisingly diarrhoea, fleas and skin rashes are prevalent. And since the homes have few if any medicines, illnesses remain untreated. In many homes (though not at the well-run orphanages in *Tróka Láka* and Haskovo) there is nothing for the children to do ó no school, no books, no paper, pens or crayons, no games, no footballs, no skipping ropes, no television. Just a numbing purposelessness.

In general, the babies are adequately cared for, but the system falls down when a child reaches three. From then till the age of 18, when the state washes its hands of responsibility for unwanted children, the daily subsistence allowance for food and clothes is the equivalent of 16p, and even this often goes unpaid. On such a budget, meals rarely rise above the level of pepper stew followed by semolina made with water ó supplemented by whatever gifts may be offered by visitors. But since so many of the homes are tucked away in deliberately remote locations the prospects of attracting passing charity are small.

If the conditions of some of the homes are a shock, the passive acceptance of these conditions by officials at all levels of government is no less of a shock - but 50 years of Communism (preceded by 500 years of Turkish domination) have sapped Bulgaria of any sense of individual responsibility, or any experience of exercising it. Bulgarians are no less kind than anyone else, but they don't realize that they themselves have it in their power to change bad systems to better ones. Despite the privations, the general torpor of life in the homes, and a certain simmering prejudice against them locally, the children seem remarkably fit and well-adjusted, even if many of them have no idea of who they are, where they come from and when their birthdays are.

Their resilience and cheerfulness are shored up by the inexhaustible hope that one day a mother will suddenly appear to fetch them home.

Little attempt is made by the state to prepare these children for the realities of life afterwards, or to monitor their progress once they have left the social care homes. The sad truth is that in the unhappy circumstances of post-Communist Bulgaria ó riven by institutionalized corruption, inefficiency and mass unemployment - many will end up on the streets of Sofia, Plovdiv and Varna as beggars, thieves, drug addicts and prostitutes.

In July 2006 Bulgaria closed some of its children's institutions, including three which the Bulgarian Orphans Fund had been trying to help: ill-run homes for mentally-ill children in the remote villages of Slavyanovo near Haskovo and Chokmanovo near Smolyan, and for orphans in Orehovo, and a well-run home for toddlers in the mountain village of Stoikite near <sup>TM</sup>roka Lâka. The 250 children in these four homes were re-housed in other orphanages, though not always with the greatest sensitivity: for example, brothers and sisters were sometimes split up, and special needs children were forcibly integrated in the state school system. The Government's objective is to close all but twenty of the remaining 120 state-run institutions which presently house more than 10,000 children in this country of barely eight million people. Most of the displaced children will be adopted, fostered or returned to whatever family they have, whilst the twenty reprieved homes will be re-designed as small sheltered homes, each unit comprising about eight children under the care of a house mother. That is the intention, but the reality is that a huge cultural change must take place first ó a change more likely to take a generation than three years.

**WHAT IT'S DONE.** Since its inception eleven years ago, the Bulgarian Orphans Fund has raised, from a small circle of generous friends, a total of £82,897.37, with which Tony Scotland has bought relief supplies in Bulgaria (and personally distributed them to the homes) on a total of 25 trips.

The main purpose of the Fund remains the provision of those essentials which the state fails to cover adequately: food, clothing, medicines ó together with upkeep (plumbing, re-painting walls, replacing windows and doors, beds and mattresses), recreational and educational games and treats (summer seaside holidays, chocolates). But the Fund would like to build on some of the longer-term aid projects it has started, and, in particular, educational projects which can prepare the children for life after the orphanage ó for example courses in basic computing, carpentry, cookery etc, a music school for Roma boys in a ghetto in Sliven, a craft workshop run with and for orphans in Sofia, and a kitchen garden at the <sup>TM</sup>roka Lâka Orphanage (on land provided by the Mayor), which usefully occupies the children, whilst supplementing the Orphanage kitchens and providing a possible source of future employment. If work can be found for these deprived young people, more of them will be saved from relapse into the fringes of society, fewer will want to join the rush for migration to western Europe, and a core of young talent will remain to build Bulgaria's future.

**BANKING DETAILS.** The Fund banks with Royal Bank of Scotland, 20 Market Place, Newbury, Berkshire RG14 5BD (Account 10070097, branch sort code: 16-26-18). NB: For the purposes of practical effectiveness on site, the Fund is not a registered charity, so donations are neither tax-deductible nor eligible for Gift-Aid.

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