

MAKING A DIFFERENCE

SHIRLEY H. THOMAS



I joined IVS in 1968...

and was sent to Berlin where staying in The Pestalozzi-Froebel Nahctbarschaftsheim. We set out each day to decorate for the elderly.

These were similar to projects I later did with Peterborough IVS except I silvered a Kachlenoffen ,an awful job!

For another lady I painted a kitchen Waldgrun so that her pet pigeon would be happy. From her window you could see the roof of Schoneburg Town Hall. At a reception there for the volunteers after waltzing with the Mayor we went on the balcony and declared, "Ich bin ein Berliner!" The Berlin workcamp is a tale in itself and made a difference to how my life and ideas were shaped and changed. To write all the experience of some 30 projects and local group work is an immense task so I have decided to be selective giving examples of how a change or a difference was achieved.

Returning to my home town Peterborough I joined the local group. Mrs Green had polio as a child and wore huge black calipered boots. When going out she used a wheelchair. IVS helped her decorate her bungalow. She came on various outings and fund raised for us on Flag Days. However, the monument to Mrs G is the pedestrian flyover at the roundabout on Lincoln Road, Peterborough. We had set out on a shopping trip to buy new frocks. Our 18 month old daughter was firmly strapped to Mrs G as I pushed her chair towards town.



With a 15 stone load plus baby I puffed to the top of the steep flyover ramp. I realised that I could not get my load safely down without mishap. Workmen came to our assistance and helped us on the return trip.

Mrs. Green soon started a campaign in the local press. I was called to witness the dangerous gradient of the ramp. It was redesigned at great expense, circular and safe and still in place 47 years on.

Mrs. Green's brother, Mr. Harbour, had only one lung and that one was in poor condition. He was a stubborn old chap, grumpy and angry about being old, ill and feeling useless. The OAP's outing was to Sandringham. Mr H was struggling up the garden path. He had refused a wheelchair. "Get in this chair" I yelled, "If you snuff it on this trip you will never forgive yourself". He laughed so much he got into the wheelchair and later was whisked away by the Queen's Chauffeur for a tour of the house. It was not open to the public then. The wheelchair was a passport to new experiences. Mr H was elected as chairman of the local Evergreen club. Inspired by IVS members he enjoyed more years of life and made a difference in his community.

A plan drafted on the back of an envelope at a pub in St. Helens, Lancs whilst drinking Guinness with the Belfast group led to the Irish Holiday Scheme.

These newspaper headlines dramatise the holidays. 48 youngsters in two groups, a week each, came from the Falls and Shanklin Roads and the Divis Flats in Belfast. The volunteers were overwhelmed by their tasks so the local group members went to help. Audrey Bartron and I became resident cooks. I also did drama workshops and Audrey read bedtime stories. One evening someone dropped a metal tray on the dining room floor of the Field Centre. Every child dived under the tables. They thought it was a bomb. There was an eerie experience of dreadful quiet until they were coaxed out to eat bread and butter pudding. Our youngest visitors were two girls aged 5 and 6 years, too young to be sent on holiday without their Mammies. "We got doillie morney", they said solemnly, "to buy doillies", they explained. Sometimes the Irish accent was difficult to understand. Eventually we realised they had been given money to buy a doll each. I took them to Peterborough to Shelton's department store. It was impossible to shop in Belfast in 1970 --far too dangerous for small children.

I cannot remember how much was paid but two magnificent dolls were bought. Just as we were leaving old Mr Shelton appeared."These dollies will need outfits",he said. The girls chose clothes and Mr.Shelton paid on his account. The status of IVS and this venture had a long lasting effect in Peterborough. I was astonished at Audrey's funeral (she died in her late 90's) that she had written letters to these girls as they grew up, married and had children. This loving concern had lasted over 35 years. She had kept faith with those who lived through the Troubles. It is these small acts, if we all do something to help, that make a big difference.

"25 years, 25 years",we cried as I hugged my friend Dana on Martin railway station in Slovakia in 1995. We had met in 1970 at Borocourt Hospital, Reading where IVS ran a special needs children's summer school. We had corresponded ever since. Our daughter had visited and their son came to us in 1994.



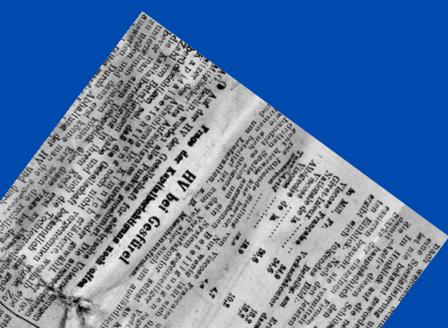
*"Dear Shirley,
This summer I
send you my
son"*

Dana was confident that this would be ok. She knew that if ever they had to leave Slovakia they had us in the UK.

In the 1960's if you applied to go outside the UK you did not choose the country nor the theme of the project. You offered your services, your talents and said how much you could afford to spend on travel. My best spoken foreign language was German,my French not so good (later I became proficient in British Sign Language) hence my posting to Berlin and then to Prague to work in a Care Home where some of the residents did speak German. My Mum was horrified----Czechoslovakia only one year after Prague Spring! Again there is a full story here.

I was arrested for photographing "secret military" equipment, a steam train! I was rescued by two German boys who were United Nations volunteers and fortunately heavy smokers who provided Marlboroughs to gain my release

It was these first projects behind the Iron Curtain which gave me a special interest in supporting the volunteers from Poland, Russia, Czechoslovakia & Ukraine etcetera.





Returning to my making a difference theme I now tell of Martin* who had joined the Special Needs Teenage Programme run by Julie Harvey from the Leeds IVS office. This scheme was supported by a DfeS grant which supported youth work. Martin had passed his GCSE 's mainly at grade 5 with a C for Drama. He was upset but I consoled him. He had done very well as he had not learned to read until he was 12 years old.

He attended several work projects with IVS going three times to Chepstow Castle Re-enactment drama summer events. He had a dodgy time at a Bradford Play scheme project where he could not cope with the volunteers spending all their housekeeping money on take away food. We went to trouble-shoot the money shortage, give helpful hints on cooking and tackled their discrimination in dismissing Martin's advice.

These experiences and references from IVS led to Martin gaining employment as a Yellow Coat at a Holiday Camp in Wales. Similarly after supporting a Learning into Employment Initiative George* came with us to Botton in Danby Dale. IVS has and continues a long association with Camphill Trusts.

George rose at 4-30am each day to milk cows making early morning tea when he came back which was much appreciated by me, the breakfast cook. George studied with me as he did a literacy project for his course. On returning home he had an interview at Morrison's Supermarket. They asked him about punctuality and he talked about milking the cows. This chap is now in charge of the fish counter. IVS made a difference to his life chances. Perhaps my star work project was at Bialystok, Poland in 2003. Here SCI provided a summer school for refugees from Chechen and Belarus.

We stayed in cramped up conditions in the old Caretaker's flat at a Refugee Hostel called the "Worker's Hotel". The Caretaker himself lived in a modern caravan in the courtyard. The Hostel was given over to the refugees. We were nine volunteers from the Czech Republic, Poland, Finland, Belgium, Holland, Japan and England. We ran a Summer School for both adults and children and between us we taught English, Polish, Czech; also Maths in Polish and Russian and Football Coaching. There was also Art Therapy and children's games and much more.

One day Anton from Holland (the art therapist) and I were unable to use the classroom for our art session as it was required for Muslim prayers. We took our group out into the local park and adjacent woods with clipboards to be artists and draw trees. The little girls, aged 6 and 8 years old from Belarus, were well educated. With their parents, grandma and little brother they had escaped after church in their best frocks which were all they had to wear.

Mama spoke 3 languages including French in which we communicated with her, the little girls and Grandma. Their mother was a highly qualified language teacher.

The girls drew their trees carefully, with flowery branches and leaves with the occasional bird. Well, naturally the 2 to 4 year olds drew lollipop style trees. Ishmael also drew lollipop trees but he was 13 years old! He then saw the work of the little girls and came to me sobbing. His English was quite good. He was very bright. When we had set up a mathematical squares game he solved it very quickly but he was stick thin and ate very little. His Uncle Aslam, his only adult relative in the hostel, was very worried about him.

"Panjee", (Mrs.) he cried "I make baby tree but I do big man's gun"

Indeed sadly that was so. He could draw a Kalashnikov to an almost technical specification but his trees came out as lollipops!

He knew this was wrong and his skills were all messed up.

Through our leader, who interpreted, Aslam spoke to a group of us. After some trouble in the city Aslam had been concerned about the family who farmed in the countryside. When he arrived at the farmhouse he found 9 people dead, grandparents, the housekeeper, a grandson and his wife and new baby, two farm workers, and a neighbour but no sign of his niece and nephew. Aslam knew that Ishmael and his sister Miriam were missing. There was evidence that someone had raided the cupboards for food.

Brother and sister were out in the woods when the soldiers came and they hid. Fearful of what she might see Ishmael had tied his sister to a tree so she would not wander and gone to the house. Days later his Uncle had found them in the woods and smuggled them with his wife and son into Poland. There was no news of their parents.

Tuuli, the volunteer from Finland took on the care of Miriam who pinched her black and blue, bit and scratched. Tuuli held fast and gave her love and support. Miriam started to play again.

This story is heart breaking and in a situation such as this it is best to count the success of a project in the small achievements. Nico and Grzegorz did football training very early each morning. We had leaflets to give out about the refugee situation. The footballers went outside the stadium leafleting the crowd. After some chat up they eventually arranged football fixtures for the Chechen team. Paradoxically our reception outside the Catholic church did not go so well.

The leaflet said "Jesus Christ was once a refugee". A Polish man was very angry about this but perplexed when I told him I was English and spoke only a few words in Polish.

One afternoon I was due to teach to an older group of boys. I could not use the classroom as it was required for Muslim congregation. Hussain and friends had scarpered, no doubt to collect bottles on which to get money back at the supermarket. What to do? I went back to the flat and took a photo album with some pictures of our younger daughter's wedding and sat on a bench in the hostel garden. Then ladies, Babushkas, came and went back to their rooms bringing wedding photos. We had little words to communicate but total understanding. Some one made chai and brought biscuits. Later we were assured by email that the footballers were still playing matches, the Babushkas' tea was a weekly event. Our intervention had encouraged the adults to play and educate their traumatised children.



But my days of sleeping on camp beds unless in my own tent are numbered!

To sum up does IVS make a difference?
I think of family and friends and the paths and choices we have made in our careers and lives. Various jobs come to mind, Special Needs Teaching and youth work, Probation officers, Social workers, Adoption services, Speech therapy, Independent living projects, Inclusive Dance schemes, Roundabout Projects for the homeless, Occupational Therapy, Food Bank volunteers. The list is endless. So many have been inspired by IVS.

- Shirley H.Thomas

