

SUMMARY

Expansion of Foster Care Model in Bulgaria Project



I. The need

Data show that by December 2009 in **the country there are more than 7,500 children aged between 0 and 18 who are raised in specialized institutions** and another around 6,000 in special schools, putting Bulgaria among the top countries in terms of institutionalization rates in Europe. Adding the poor living conditions in many of the institutions and the lack of access to quality health, educational and social services this evolves as a serious problem that needs to be addressed without delay. Family substitute services have been initiated in mid 90-s, however they are still underdeveloped. Approximately 250 foster families with 220 children in foster care existed at the end of 2008. Slow speed of development (as identified by various studies supported by UNICEF) is caused by a number of reasons. Main of them include:



- low capacity of the child protection system for foster care provision;
- contradictory legislative framework;
- complicated application procedures;
- insufficient public awareness;
- poor capacity of local service providers.

The figures relating to the foster care, demonstrate that the working capacity of the CPDs is not sufficient to meet the existing needs – there are too many cases of children placed in institutions for the available social workers who, in turn, are burdened with too many other commitments besides the foster care. Providing foster care is a comprehensive process that requires competence and additional training in all the separate elements of the process – recruitment, training and counselling of foster parents, foster family selection, preparation of the child for placement, continued monitoring and counselling, provision of assistance after placement of a child, etc. Without differentiation of the service as a separate, self-funded service, one can not expect that it will be developed within the framework of the ordinary duties of the CPDs.

The population as a whole is poorly informed about foster care. They lack information on what is foster care (commonly confused with adoption), as well as what the benefits for the children are. The data show that the least knowledge of foster care and the poorest willingness to commit to foster care is in the capital of Bulgaria Sofia. Greater is the awareness in some municipalities where community-based services have been developed. At the same time, in the settlements outside the big cities the families have greater residential space available, life is calmer, the children more often leave the family to continue their education in the big city, and the crime is lower in comparison to the big city, which makes them more suitable for the provision of better-quality foster care.

Campaigns are rare and where existing, they are not done in a targeted manner in line with the important messages and interests of the various potential applicants and based on the analysis of the local community.

The lack of viable training programs for voluntary and professional foster parents, and for social workers who train foster parents also leads, in turn, to underdevelopment of the foster care. The country lacks a uniform program for training of

foster families and of foster family trainers. The practice in the various municipalities shows that the local teams themselves seek training programs or create themselves such programs, guided solely by the recommendations of the Ministry of Labor and Social Policy regarding the minimum required number of hours and mandatory topics to be covered during the training. The absence of training adequate to the needs creates a high risk of failure of the foster care, which, in turn has a negative effect on the child's development and wellbeing, and on the other hand it does not motivate the social workers from the CPD to engage with development of the foster care due to lack of confidence and competence.

II. The objective of the project

The project aims to establish a nation-wide regional approach to foster care development based on pilot experience.

The expected results from the project are:

- Reduced placements of children in specialized institutions in the pilot regions;
- Increased relative share of children from institutions placed with foster families in the pilot regions;
- Changed balance between institutionalization and placement of children in family care in the pilot regions.

III. Activities

The first stage of the implementation of the project involved the following activities:

1. Building partnerships for the project implementation

The project was implemented with a wide range of partners at national and local level. Partnerships aimed at developing a common approach to foster care provision, improving quality of foster care, building supportive network for foster parents and children in foster care, ensuring sustainability of project results.

The implementation of the project at regional level was performed by 3 NGOs (International Social Service Bulgaria and Institute for Social Activities and Practices). ISS covered the regions of Gabrovo, Smolyan, Targovishte and Veliko Tarnovo and SAPI the regions of Pernik, Shumen, Sofia town and Sofia region. Samaritans Foundation worked in Stara Zagora region. The NGOs signed partnership agreements with the Child Protection Departments in their respective regions.

The regional partners included also Regional Directorate for Social Assistance (RDSA), municipal authorities, other service providers and centers for social services, Labour Bureaus.

The nature of the local partnerships was dynamic and evolving along the project duration. At project beginning agreements had to be reached on the roles of the partners in the provision of foster care. Towards project completion topics narrowed down to discussing individual cases and details on the service elements.

Government partners, e.g. Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, State Agency for Child Protection and Agency for Social Assistance participated in project events and monitoring process. Conclusions drawn during project implementation were summarized by UNICEF and presented to Government partners. Major part of them are included in the draft Child Act and the amendments to the Social Assistance Act, i.e. the need to delegate provision of foster care service to service providers, specialization of foster parents, establishment a specialized foster care panel, coordination of foster care development at regional level.

2. Development of a common approach to foster care and exchange of experience

One of the main problems in foster care prior to project initiation was the lack of common procedures, methodology and approach to foster care. Despite the available normative documents, different service providers and Child Protection Departments applied them according to their own understanding.

The project managed to develop and apply common understanding and approaches in the pilot regions. The Regional Foster Care Centres, the Child Protection Departments, the Child Protection Commissions (which are responsible for approving foster parents), Regional Directorates of Social Assistance and other service providers in the regions agreed and gradually developed common understanding on the foster care principles, procedures, roles and responsibilities. Some differences still continued to exist, which are determined to a great extent to the specificities of the regions and the level of development of foster care.

The result was achieved by drafting a common methodology, signing partnership agreements, numerous meetings at regional level, exchange of experience between the team and all partners, contribution from international experts, dialogue with the Government partners. UNICEF monitoring process was helpful in identification of critical differences and initiation of actions between partners.

Unified training programmes for foster parents and foster care teams were developed and tested. The programmes are based on good international examples and are competence based. The foster care training programme was used by all RFCC and they trained 398 trainees. The training programme is complemented by a training video showing methods for assessments, interviewing and training. The printed copy of the programme and the video will be distributed to all new foster care teams, which will be established in 2012 under a national foster care project managed by the Agency for Social Assistance.

A National Resource Centre on Foster Care was established to support capacity building for foster care provision in the country. The Resource Center uses the training programme and a pool of trainers from the RFCC. The Centre started work in September 2010. The Resource Centre organized 8 training courses with more than 130 participants from the whole country. A discussion forum for professionals has been functioning since last year. An on-line foster care bulletin is issued quarterly.

A Foster Care Information Line 0700 12 170 and specialized web-site (priemime.bg) were established to disseminate information on foster care and help candidates and approved foster parents. The telephone line was promoted via TV, radio, online and printed media and outdoor campaigns. The highest number of calls was observed in 2010 and beginning of 2011 during the periods when UNICEF had national public awareness campaign in TVs. During the last quarter the telephone line had 37 calls. The web-site, however, marks a stable usage, which is explained with the up-load of new information and introduction of new topics and rubrics. During the last quarter the site had 3 473 unique visitors.

3. Provision of foster care services

9 Regional Foster Care Centres were established in the pilot regions. The preparation stage of the project implementation involved setting up offices, recruitment and training for the staff. The teams passed extensive social work and foster care training. On-going training and supervision was regularly provided to all team members during project duration by the project partners (ISS, SAPI and Samaritans).

The foster care teams in the pilot regions have worked on:

- Developing partnerships with local authorities, child protection departments, local service providers;

- Provision of training to local partners;
- Foster care promotion campaigns – information meetings and distribution of promotion materials;
- Assessment and training of foster parents;
- Support during the matching process and placement;
- Post-placement support.

The RFCC piloted a new role distribution between private service providers and Child Protection Departments. Prior to the project, private service providers were engaged mainly in training of foster parents and information campaigns. The RFCC got involved in the whole process of foster care. This approach was recognized as bringing higher quality and results by the state and will be multiplied next year in the whole country.



The main focus for all centres this year was development of foster care for newborn babies. Although placement of babies in foster care has been a priority for the Government, there were only a handful cases until 2011. The strategy included provision of more information, additional material support and training. A special leaflet for recruitment of specialized foster parents for babies was developed and distributed by all RFCC. The additional support aimed to cover the first expenses for placement of a baby as the Government support was found out to be insufficient in terms of size and coming too late (usually in the second month after the placement of the child). The efforts led to placement of babies (newborn and up to 6 months old) in the regions of Shumen, Targovishte, Smolyan, and Sofia.

All Centres were involved in provision of training and counseling to prospective adoptive families.

RFCC in Shumen has been involved in the process of closure of the Infant Home (for children 0-3 years) in the region. More than 40 babies and young children were placed in foster families in the region since October 2010 as a prevention or re-integration measure. The work of all centres leads to a decrease of the numbers of children 0-3 in residential care and thus support the Government plans for De-institutionalization.

4. National public awareness campaign

The preliminary analysis of the problem situation has revealed the need for a national public awareness campaign to promote foster care and increase interest to becoming foster parents.

A national foster care campaign '**Every Child Wants a Family**' was jointly launched with the Minister and Deputy Minister of Social Policy, the Executive Director of the Agency for Social Assistance, and the Chairperson of the State Agency for Child Protection. The campaign aimed at raising public awareness on foster care and motivating new candidates to become foster parents. It continued until September 2010.

The partnership with more than 30 media companies has ensured broad pro bono use of mass communication channels. This led to **a doubling of the total number of foster families** in the country (from around 250 to approximately 475 in one year).

Media	Media partners	Number	
Press	15	128	publications
Radio	14	6765	broadcasts
TV (nationals and regional)	12	3,598	broadcasts
Online	13	77,771,704	impressions
Outdoor	3	473	boards
Indoor advertising	1	380,328	broadcasts

LIFE AS IT IS – FOSTER PARENTS



As a continuation of the campaign, in December a 3 month documentary series **'Life as it is – Foster families'** was launched in partnership with bTV. The documentary was broadcasted between December 2010 and February 2011 once per week and showed real life stories of 11 foster families. The documentary has been following the families for more than 7 months. Foster care was further promoted during the TV advocacy and fundraising show 'The Magnificent Six 2'.

In the beginning of 2012 a new season of "Life As It Is" will be launched with a focus on parenting and early childhood development. The stories will make a link with the previous season, showing small children in foster families and further promoting foster care for babies.

IV. Beneficiaries of the project

The number of beneficiaries during project duration July 2009 – February 2012 was as follows:

Indicator	Value
Provision of initial information	More then 19 000 participants
Foster care applicants	384
Approved foster parents	277
Children placed in foster care	332

V. Sustainability

A national foster care project was launched in November 2011 by the Agency for Social Assistance with financing with EU structural funds (European Social Fund). The project will support establishment of foster care services in 82 municipalities in the country. Work methodology and training programmes for foster care teams and foster parents will

be based on the training packages developed and tested during the project. Municipalities from all pilot regions will participate in the project. In order to ensure smooth transition between the two projects UNICEF will keep some presence in pilot regions in 2012 as well.

VI. Partnerships

The project is being implemented with a wide range of Government and non-government partners. Government counterparts include the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, the State Agency for Child Protection, the Agency for Social Assistance, local authorities in pilot regions. Non-government partners are: ISS, SAPI, NGOs in pilot regions. A project advisory board functioned during project duration.

VII. Project timing

The most extensive period for the project was July 2009 – February 2012

*There are people who can do miracles.
These people wipe away tears and bring on shining smiles.
They transform sorrow into happiness. They replace greyness by hope and loneliness by family. If you think these people are strong beyond the need of help, you are wrong.
Adoptive parents do need our support!*

Human Interest Story 1: Twin girls find new aunt and uncle



The small village of Kaspichan welcomed us with sun, smell of fresh cut grass and the European flag. Right ahead of us is the local community centre. And right in front Nedjimia is waiting for us with her two little princesses, Ivayla and Ivelina. They were coming back from the library where they had borrowed some new books to read. Nedjimia is a middle-aged woman but tough and open. You can tell her life was not a bed of roses but a second look tells you all the hardships didn't break down her ability

to care and help. She married her husband 18 years ago but before that each had been married to someone else. They broke away from their partners and made a new family. Her husband Ramzy already had two girls, she had two children herself. They built their nest and taught the children to respect the others. They never treated them differently: what's there for one was there for the other. We are walking to their house close by the community centre and Nedjimia constantly turns around watching over the two little girls. She holds tight their tiny hands as if crossing a busy crossroad. In the meanwhile she is telling us that she has taught them to walk out of the house only after having been granted permission to do so. Indeed, the small meandering street welcomes all kinds of mischief and children games. Nedjimia tells us they got used quickly to the children at home. 'You can tell their lives have been hard so far', the 'auntie' goes on (the kids do not call her 'mom'), 'because they were mad about helping in the kitchen and the house'.



When we enter the house, the brand new granny and father Ramzy welcome us in. They are all expecting the guests: Ramzy is cleanly shaven, Nedjimia and the granny have baked a pumpkin pie and the girls have drawn a picture. Nedjimia and Ramzy decided to take in kids after her daughters left and his got married. They lost their self-esteem. They were alone. The house full of children suddenly was empty, with only the talks of days passed and new aches. Their love stayed the same but there was no one to look after, no one to

make you smile when life turns hard. Then the 'Six-size' charity show was on TV and a tiny thought crawled into Nedjimia's head, to take a child at home to look after. She thought about this every day, going through how the neighbours would take this, but one day she summoned her courage and told Ramzy. And Ramzy is mush inside. When he heard of Nedjimia's idea, he was ready to help the way he could. They underwent training how to look after somebody else's children. During the training they learned that

two twin girls were waiting for adoptive care. Ramzy made a joke that they were used to looking after twos, so why not take these twins too. Soon the joke became reality and two little girls walked in their home – Ivayla and Ivelina.



Love was strong between the girls' biological mother and father. Although sort of prohibited, it brought to the world two kids. Suddenly the father disappeared. The mother delivered them, the father formally acknowledged them. Their first years were spent in a home for abandoned babies, where they didn't feel well. The girls' parents' life was not easy either. They had to survive each and every day. Democracy brought along a devaluation of family relations and values that hit first smaller towns and

villages. Everyone was looking for his own freedom. Everyone had his own notion of freedom. The village slowly depopulated. Many left abroad. Many dropped their studies as consumerism took over traditional values. The girls' father grew bitter and bitter by the day. He saw no light in the tunnel. He started feeling sorry to be alive. And one day he hung himself in the barn. When she learnt of this, the girls' mother felt like the saddest person in the world. Pain gave way to an old psychiatric hereditary illness. One day the social workers came and took away the girls. They placed them in an orphanage but soon convinced Ramzy and Nedjimia to take them home. That's how the little ones met their new auntie and uncle. In the beginning the elders were stressed and scared. In vain. The little girls were looking forward to every meeting with them.

The first day at home was a holiday. Nedjimia even called her daughters in the Netherlands to show them the kids. And the girls were making acquaintance with the house, walking around, touching the oven, checking on the hens, picking a cucumber in the garden. Several months on they celebrated their birthdays. No one called to check if they were doing fine, Ramzy complains. And his heart bleeds that nobody rejoices in the sight of these wonderful children. The girls remember their mother. Nedjimia tells the story of the kids playing with an old telephone set. The elder girl often called her mother and led imaginary conversations with her. She would tell how much aunt Nedjimia and uncle Ramzy love them, how they look after the two sisters, but she would also invite her mother to come and see them and take them out for a walk. These imaginary conversations made Ramzy very sad. He wanted the mother to get better as soon as possible and come to take back her girls. Because there's nothing like home.

On our way out the girls show me the hens in the yard. They show me a hen hatching, waiting for the chickens to come out. Then they show me the kittens playing in the dust, under the reproachful gaze of their mother.

This is Ivayla's and Ivelina's childhood, in a village called Kaspichan, close by the city of the same name. They wake up in the mornings, have breakfast, draw pictures, run around and look impatiently forward to their uncle in the evening so that they can play with him. During the day they help their auntie with the cooking, washing and cleaning. They are very responsible young girls. The hard life in the home for children and the few memories of their mother have made them strong. And kind.

I leave them drinking cherry syrup and eating pumpkin pie. I know that as long as auntie and uncle are around, auntie and uncle whose eyes grow full of tears every time they talk about the girls, life's hardships will be away.

Human Interest Story 2: Two tiny birds to grow up and become eaglets

My name is Plamen. I am 44 years old. I grew up in the town of Shoumen, in its Gypsy neighborhood. My mother is very strict. She taught me to respect order, discipline and work. We never got anything for which had not worked to deserve it. It's different in our neighborhood. We struggle on our own which is not easy as some values of the past still hold true. My house has to be as good as that of the man next door. I can't afford to be rude as we know one another within the community and you never know when you may need someone to help you. I will always remember my child days which, though poor, were very genuine. Ours was a big family, yet my father and mother always found the way to cope. They never drew a dividing line between us and the other children. They wanted us to mend our ways. My mother was very keen on education. However, I was a very mischievous boy and after the eighth grade in school, I plunged into life. Frankly speaking, it's not easy to be self-made. We Roma are very united people, yet when it comes to setting up a household, parents don't help much. At least my parents didn't. My mother said that if I wanted to have a wife and children, I had to work and achieve and leave a trace.

I met my wife Galina in the center of the neighborhood. I was on my way to a friend's place to repair his car when I saw that beautiful girl. Her beauty and straight manners captivated me. Who could throw a stone at or speak ill of a girl who was her mother's pride? She was educated, hardworking and very reputable. Back home I told my mother and we got married before long. We loved each other somehow. You know the way of young flesh: the initial strong passion subsides by and by to give way to understanding and mutual support. We have three children. Today they are adults and have their children.

One day my mother who most people in the neighborhood call Granny Gyurga said she was sad as she watched TV where they featured distressing stories of parentless children. It was not the first time I heard about such children. To be honest, I disapproved of that and wondered what kind of women could abandon their own children. Moreover, they say most of these women are Roma. I am confused – I will never leave my child in institutional care. I will throw up the bread that I eat and the water that I drink; I will never fall asleep. Doing so will cause pain and suffering.

After one of our daughters married, Galina and I decided to take children in foster care. I was somewhat afraid. I wondered how the children would react; I had no idea what the children would be; I was not sure our home would not upset them. Granny Gyurga insisted: "Take a child. You are young, healthy and coping. Where there's space enough for three, it will be enough for four and five." This is how she persuaded us and at last we agreed. Meanwhile Annie was telling heartbreaking stories on the TV and my wife was very sad. When we saw the children from the Shoumen place, we felt pang in our hearts. We breed cows and I know that when I separate a calf from his mother, the calf is sad, refuses to eat, loses weight and the cow suffers tremendously.

We applied. The social workers came to inspect our home. The inspections seemed endless. The social workers could see for themselves that we have a house and space for many children; they were shown our cowshed; they bought yoghurt from our shop and were satisfied. Before long they called us to ask us to go to school. Frankly speaking, I thought the training would be waste of time but it wasn't. It appeared both Galya and I had been ignorant of the things that make up the life of children in orphanages. We even admitted between ourselves that we didn't know much about our own children. We were taught to give attention even to the tiniest things that concern the children who would

come to live with us as these things would have a formative effect on them. I realized there was a lot of truth in what they taught us. I remembered my child experience and memories sprang up to my mind.

Then THE DAY came. The social worker told us there were two suitable children in the Shoumen institution. My wife and I seemed to have grown wings on the way from the neighborhood to the institution. I don't remember how we got there. But I remember that we entered a room and the children were brought in. The elder boy's name is Ilian; the younger boy's name is Suleiman. As the children entered, they rushed to the biscuits. They completely ignored us. At our fourth encounter they relaxed and cried as we were about to go away. They wanted us to stay. We wanted to stay. We were sad to leave them. It was not that difficult for us with Galina to decide that we would take these children. The two brothers didn't know they were brothers. They were accommodated in different wings as their age necessitated.

They cried a lot during their first day in our home. I suppose it was then that they came to know they were brothers. We took them home a month before our feast day, the Day of St. George. Neighbors came one by one and brought sweets and toys as if we had a newborn baby and were delighted. In the evening we all celebrated the event of having children. Before long the children became the neighborhood's favorites. Wherever they moved, a man or a woman would speak to them, caress them or give them sweets. I loved Ilian, the elder boy, immediately. He is very close to my heart. My soul melts each time I see him rush. Galina loves very much Suleiman, the younger boy. He is like a motorbike: he is off before you could catch a glimpse of him. The two boys love to be fondled. As I come back from work in the evening they assault me and ask that I cuddle them and hold them in my arms. The force and power that they give me is indescribable. They are learning quickly and know a trick or two, to tell you honestly. They are very special to us and if they make a mischief or are running wild, I can't bring myself to scold them. They are children after all. May they grow up.

Before the social workers let us take the children home, we went to the court where we saw their mother. I felt pity for her. She had fallen in love with a man, a Roma, who deceived her when she had her first child and got a prison term when she had her second child. Her parents are elderly; perhaps they were not happy with this prospective son-in-law; all in all they rejected her. She abandoned first Ilian and then Suleiman to be placed in the institution. Honestly speaking, I can understand how this woman feels. We should not be severe in our judgment as we never know what situation we may find ourselves in and be helpless. It is important therefore that people like us be there to support parents in difficult circumstances. The institution may look like a kindergarten but the children who are placed there are different from ordinary children. Ilian, the elder boy, was very weak when we brought him home. The two boys looked like unfledged birds and their cheeks were sunken.

We've been together for three months now. We are very happy. They never leave us at peace but they make us happy. They are there when we get up in the morning. They are there when we go to bed in the evening. We hold them in our arms in turn. We care for them in the way we did for our own children. My wife and I don't do that for money: we have a shop and a cow farm for income. We do that because we feel we must give support, because we have a heart. We have brought up three children and we can afford to bring up another two. We do that because we want these children to make good. We hope kind people would come up to adopt them – the children are perfect. They are quite mischievous but that's the way with children. We must continue to tend them so that they leave off their previous habit of tottering. They find it difficult to get accustomed to the thought that we will not abandon them, that we will not forget them. We will cure their innocent souls.

We want these two tiny birds to grow up and become eaglets, to fly away from this nest and one day to love children as we love them.

Human Interest Story: Angelica – the daily trouble pill



I turned 22 years old. I can't really recognize myself. I so much want to be a child, to have mom make those butter buns for me which turned my Saturdays so delicious! I loved weekends because then mom would be up early to prepare the favourite family French toast. She would wake up my brothers who, much as the lazy-bones they were, had come early home from the Friday disco. Then – to the table, every one. My mother's excited loud voice and typical chaotic movements would soon bring to life the sleepy faces

together with a specific air of merriness. The smell of warm coffee, boiled milk and French toast would stir out of bed even dad, for whom Saturdays were like black Mondays. By all means he would end up as mom's interlocutor for local Shumen dramas while turning the house upside down, beating the rugs clean and cooking. Together. I loved to fiddle around, getting in their way, until mom would find a delicate way to send me outside playing with the kids.

We were a happy family where not a single bad word could be heard. I was the youngest in the family – the last kid of the happy family of Violetta and Zhoro. We were three brothers who, just like in the fairy tale, could discover and rediscover the world around us. With the help of our mother's love and dad's support. What for parents our parents were, I would always wonder: honest and open and loving. Paying so much attention to us. I knew the alphabet way before I started school. I learnt it at four while walking with dad to buy some tomatoes.

They brought us up to be honest, sincere and good friends. My mother's heart was open for other kids as well. Not a day would pass without a neighbour dropping her child at our place. I would ponder for a long time how mom could look after others' kids, cuddle them and caress them just the way she did my brother and me. When I grew up I just asked her one day, when I was sick of her loving others when she could only love us. And she told me that when she was a child, she didn't play with dolls like the other kids. She didn't like it talking like a lunatic to something cold and not breathing. That's why the kittens in the neighbourhood became her children. She diapered them, bathed them and fed them with milk stolen under my grandma's nose. She protected them. And she bathed in the warmth and devotion she saw in their eyes. These were her children. When she met our father Georgi, she warned him she would leave him if they didn't have a least three kids.

That's how my mother became my friend, a courageous comrade who taught me how to love and respect even strangers. And to help them. Maybe this is why I ended as a volunteer in the Red Cross in Shumen. I would never forget the visits to the orphanages – I had never seen so sorry places. That was strange – some of the places looked much better than our own place, but they were so full of solitude! My brother, probably led by our family upbringing, decided to enroll in social pedagogy. After he saw several orphanages, he gave it up. He told me that when they had visited a home for babies, his female colleagues were instantly surrounded by kids. Not a single one was left for him. Some time later one of the nurses brought into the room a boy, Niki. The same name as

my brother's. When the boy stretched out his arms and cuddled into my brother, he was almost brought to tears. He cried a lot afterwards and he never went back to that home. He was afraid there was nothing he could promise to little Niki. Because Niki craved only for love and someone to take him away from the home.

When my parents told us they would become adoptive parents I was not surprised. My brothers either. We had grown up and we could perfectly understand our parents' need to look after someone. We were genuinely surprised however when we found out we would be the first in Shumen to look after a new-born.

I still remember the phone call, 'Come to fetch the baby!'. My mother's eyes opened wide and her hands started shaking. 'How come! We haven't bought anything for the baby yet!' The other side of the line apparently realized the delicate situation my mother, the perfectionist, found herself in and suggested we went just to see it. 'Mitko, get the car keys, we're going to the maternity hospital', my mother ordered and started putting her clothes on. In the car she was shivering and nervously nagging, 'I can't buy a kilo of meat, let alone look after a baby...'

When we entered the hospital, I realized what the matter was. My parents had been training for almost half a year how to look after somebody else's children. Now was the moment of truth when all these efforts would be rewarded. The maternity ward's door was closed. My mother and I were standing in front. She was shaking and murmuring, 'I knew I should've taken a stress pill. No time, being constantly on the run... They told me to come and see the baby, maybe there's something wrong with it? What if they are preparing me for a bad news?', she would go on and on.

The door flew open and nurse Petrova brought out a white bundle. Sticking out of it was a lock of black hair. I caught my mother's look 'It's a baby negro!' When she took it, my mother gently said amidst the awkwardness, 'Hey, Angelica, your hair starts growing from your eyebrows!' The doctors all started talking that the baby had proper features which really took my mother off board. 'She's ours, we're going to raise her', my mother said diplomatically. And fell in love.

The doctors apparently thought that because the baby was a Roma, we would not have it. Nonsense. The very same day my mother took the whole family shopping for the baby. We walked round shops, our feet hurting, and mom, like a proud granny, would ask, 'The pink or the pink off colour, boys?' The three brothers and the father rejoiced with her enthusiasm but were begging for the shopping to end.

The discharge from the hospital was a three-ring circus. But I was scared. When mom passed me the baby, I froze. It was so tiny! And then I knew I would love this Roma kid. When you touch the hot-plate, you burn your fingers. When the wind blows, you get cold. Strong emotions come at once, without much thought. That's how it was with Angelica

We are inseparable, as my father Georgi would say. In the beginning I watched him carefully. He works in a workshop making pallets for fuel. He gets out early in the morning, comes back late in the evening, deadly tired, washes his hands and his first word is about Angelica. He cuddles her and talks to her. We cannot have enough of her. She is the lucky charm of the family. I was somewhat concerned in the beginning that people would take a wry view of us. But then I realized that under the dark skin the blood runs red just like mine, and the heart beats like the healthy heart of white children. As well as my mother's words that kids are like the dough, it's what you make out of them.

Finally Angelica was at home and one day the phone rang again.

'Come to fetch the second baby from the maternity hospital', someone said. That's how Marti came into our lives three months later. This time we were prepared. A procession – my mother, one of my brothers, the three-month old Angelica and I. The same nurse brought us the little boy. My mother even made a joke that she and the nurse took the same shifts – the one giving babies away, the other one taking them in. In the evening my father was surprised to find two babies where he had left only one. I never saw Marti

smile in his sleep or cry. And I was completely taken by surprise when he said his first 'Agouuu' greeting to us, the elder in the house – a gruffy and very masculine greeting.

Marti went back to his mother and father. One day we were told his parents could take him back and look after him. Something seemed to break in my mother. We were all sick with grief. In the evening, round the Marti-less table, we remembered through tears how we used to sing Russian war songs to bring peace on the baby room – Marti to stop whining and Angelica to be able to sleep. Time passed and my mother told us how surprised she was that the woman who gave birth to Marti failed to show any emotion in court when she was told she could take Marti back while the father was genuinely excited and couldn't stop thanking my mother for all the cares for his baby. He even gave a tea set for present standing right next to my parents' marriage gifts.

But we know where we belong.

The whole family knows we have not adopted the kids, we just take care for them while the best solution for them is found. We know it will be painful to see the children go to their relatives or new parents. But we also know that we have left pieces of ourselves in their souls. And my father, whenever word goes about the locals being afraid of becoming adoptive parents, usually quotes Paul the Apostle saying that there is no such thing as disbelief, there is only ignorance. Our job is also pioneering.

We are one happy family. We have prepared a special gift for Angelica's special moment when someone adopts her and she finds even kinder and truer parents. Mom already bought her a primer so she knows the Bulgarian alphabet no matter where she goes.

My guess is Angelica would go to Malibu and become an acrobat, knowing how strong she is.

But until that time she will still be our sweet pill to swallow down all daily troubles.

© UNICEF, 2011

Author: Alexander Milanov , Photographs by: Kate Holt