My Weekly Helping Hand

MAKE IT A MILLION!

More Than Words Can Say

Sending Christmas cards to family and friends shows they're in our thoughts. To children in Romania there's a much deeper significance . . . It means they still matter to someone, somewhere.

A CHRISTMAS card may not seem like a very exciting gift to most of us, but to the 100,000 children destined to spend Christmas in Romanian orphanages, it means more than words can say.

"It's so moving to see the children opening their cards and knowing that they're not forgotten by the outside world and that they'll have cards to show their friends at school," says Kate Pierce, campaign manager for The European Children's Trust.

"We're working to get the children out of the orphanages and into loving Romanian families. Yet in spite of our growing success thousands will spend yet another Christmas in an institution.

"A Christmas card may not seem much to us, but for children who have nothing of their own, it's a very special gift."

This Christmas, thousands of these children will not be forgotten thanks to the Trust's Christmas Card Appeal. Backed by the Royal Mail in Scotland, the Trust is encouraging people to send a card saying "Sarbatori Fericite" – Romanian for Happy Christmas – to the children via the appeal's HQ in London.

The European Children's Trust, formerly The Romanian Orphanage Trust, is the largest UK charity operating in Romania and the only one whose sole remit is the reform of the childcare system in Eastern Europe.

"We believe that the children have a future, but orphanages have none," says Kate. "As far as we're concerned, family based care is better than institutionalised care for children and the responsibility for the welfare of the children should be taken by national bodies using local resources.

"Around eight out of ten of these children aren't orphans at all. They have parents, but their parents are simply too poor to care for them."

The Romanian "orphans" certainly won't be sitting down to a turkey dinner as we will. Orphanage children rarely get meat more than once or twice a year, and for them, the biggest treat imaginable is to have an orange or apple to eat.

Nevertheless, Christmas is still an important time of year. One volunteer who visits an orphanage in Bucharest Christmas believes that the spirit of the season is far stronger in Romania than in Britain.

"The children go around the local village singing songs in the hope that someone will be kind enough to give them a piece of bread or maybe even a sweet," she says.

"They try to teach us carols in their native language, but we don't get the words wrong.

"Everyone tries very hard, but it can be an incredibly sad place. Last year, the temperature dropped to minus fifty and it's heartbreaking to watch the children shaking and crying with cold. Their clothes are simply inadequate, and there's very little food to eat and nothing warming.

"It's so icy-cold in the orphanage that even if someone had enough to get some hot food, it would gone cold by the time they get to their seat."

The Trust staff try hard to help the children enjoy themselves and always organise a party for them, but there's invariably someone who doesn't join in.

"It always chooses a child in a bedroom and there's always at least one child just sitting and staring, or maybe crying as they think back to Christmases with their family.

"It never fails to upset me," Kate says quietly.

"People may not think that sending a Christmas card to these children will make any difference, but it does. Their faces light up when they get the card, particularly one from another country.

"It means such a lot because it shows them that someone cares about them. For children who are starved of attention, it's vital."

Some children are better placed than others.

One mother lived in the same village as the orphanage which housed two of her sons and a daughter. The three children in all, but only the eldest lived with her. Her youngest, a baby girl, lived in a mother and baby unit many miles away – although, despite the name, there are no others in the unit, only children under three.

"The children had gone into the orphanage when their father died," explains Kate. "It must have been heartbreaking for the mother who clearly loved her children dearly.

"She lived in a tiny, single-storey house, but he still had a Christmas tree for her children then they visited, even though it took up half the house and left no room for her to sleep. On the day back to the orphanage, the children were singing carols to us, let their mother just stayed at home and cried," Kate confides.

Yet despite the poverty and hardship, the boredom and lack of stimulation, the Trust's staff are always struck by the generosity of these children.

"Give them five sweets and they'll always give you four back," says Kate. "If you don't accept them, they find ways of sneaking them into your pockets when you're not looking!

"I'd like to ask every *My Weekly* reader to take just a moment to think of these children at Christmas and send them a card. You can't possibly imagine how much it means to them."

MANY Trust staff treasure the letters and drawings they receive from children. The picture of the tree is by eight-year-old Tobias, who's lucky enough to have a Christmas tree in his orphanage, which the children decorate with pieces of paper and anything bright they can find.

The director of this orphanage cares deeply for the children and does everything she can to make Christmas special, but she has no money. Most children aren't as lucky as Tobias and can only look at other people's trees.

The letter from Lucian offers a glimpse of what life means to the children.

"I would really like to thank you for the little attention and also for your beautiful wishes.

"I wish you good health and everything good.

"With love, Lucian – your new friend."

By Gillian Thornton

Where It All Began

In early December, 1998, My Weekly published a feature about the work of The European Children's Trust, a charity who was asking readers to send a Christmas card for a child in Romania. These children all lived in orphanages and had nothing they could call their own – everything they wore and the few toys that were in the orphanage were owned communally.

A Christmas card would be special, something to treasure, something to let them know that somewhere, someone was thinking about them and caring about them. We even told them what to write – Sarbatori Fericite, which translates as Happy Christmas.

My Weekly readers responded generously and sent thousands of cards, but we also had several letters from readers telling us that they felt sending a card was simply inadequate. They saw the mountains of gifts their own grandchildren had been given and it broke their hearts to think of children with nothing. Surely, they told us, we could come up with a way to do something more.

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Doing The Right Thing

The Editor at the time, Harrison Watson, shared one of the letters with the readers and asked for suggestions. We were contacted by Sally Wood-Lamont, a librarian from Edinburgh who was living in Romania, setting up a medical library at the University of Cluj in Transylvania. Together, she and Harrison decided to ask the readers to send shoeboxes of gifts for the children, with a label on the outside to indicate the gender and age the contents were suitable for. Sally would organise the Romanian end of the operation, identifying institutions where the children were in need.

From your Editor

HOPE you like this week's feature on the Romanian orphans. We'd such an overwhelming response to our piece before Christmas that we knew you'd like to visit them again with us.

Here are some of the children with the Christmas cards you sent them. I don't know how it makes you feel, but there are tears in my eyes right now.

I got a letter after that feature that's been on my mind ever since. From Mrs B.J. Love of Bristol:

Dear Harrison, I've read your article on Christmas cards for Romania and yes, I will send some. There must be more we can do for these children, though. Most of your readers are mothers or grandmothers getting ready for Christmas, buying presents for bright-eyed kids who can hardly wait for Santa to come. Is there any way our favourite magazine can organise a collection of gifts to be sent to Romania? I'm sure most of the readers would be able to contribute in some way, however small.

Is it not possible to raise funds to put some heating in the place or at least provide some warm clothes? A lot of your readers must knit or crochet – how about squares for blankets, or warm jumpers?

Come on, Harrison, do something. Just imagine if your small grandson only received a Christmas card in a cold bare orphanage on Christmas morning. It would break your heart, wouldn't it?

YES, Mrs Love. It would break any of our hearts. And you're right, we should do something about it.

Something like adopting the Romanian orphans as a special Millennium Project, perhaps? Getting our readers involved in schemes and ideas to provide a bumper Christmas for those little kids?

And next Christmas would be a good target. It will be the tenth anniversary of Ceausescu's demise and the discovery of the terrible plight of the orphans. And our project could help make it the best Christmas ever for those youngsters.

It's up to you – our readers. What do you think? Shall we give it a go? Would you give us your help?

Why not write to me at *My Weekly*, 185 Fleet Street, London EC4 2HS. Tell us what you think. Give us your ideas on what we could do.

But don't send anything yet. Just let me know you're with us – and together we'll make it happen.

Take care,

Harrison

MY WEEKLY HELPING HAND APPEAL

Shoeboxes For Romania

The Muscular Dystrophy Unit

The School For The Blind

Suggestions for shoebox

From your Editor

Making It Happen...

And so the first Shoebox Appeal was launched. Sally had identified two causes that would really benefit from our help. The first was a school for around 250 blind and visually impaired children, the second a small hospital where 40 little babies with Muscular Dystrophy were cared for. What impressed us about both these places was that they were being run by dedicated, caring staff, who had to work within the constraints of tiny budgets and almost nothing but the bare neccessities.

The boxes were to be sent to the DCT depot in Glasgow who would put them on pallets to be collected by Hugh Ferguson, who organised charity transports to Eastern Europe. We printed labels for readers to cut out and stick to their boxes so we could identify who they would be suitable for. And we invited readers to donate to Medicaid, a charity hosting trips by medical professionals to improve their knowledge and skills.