

2007 Lithuania/Latvia Study Tour Heifer Study Tour Visits Baltic Region for the First Time



The first Heifer Baltic Study Tour, with 15 participants, has wrapped up in Vilnius, Lithuania. The group of participants from across the United States enjoyed visits to both Lithuania and Latvia on the July 8-21, 2007, trip.

After gathering in Vilnius, the group began its trip by visiting historically and politically significant sites around the city. This allowed them to both begin to understand the impact of old and recent history on the people of Lithuania and also to recover somewhat from jet lag. The first project visit then took them to the Elektrenai region to visit the village of Beizioniai. This project includes a children's home and 13 other families, and includes sheep, cows, chickens and one horse (for the children's home). The children of the home, while not orphans, come from home situations where they weren't able to remain due to a variety of reasons. However, at the Beizionys Home, they create their own family where they share in chores, learn skills, attend the local school and prepare to be self-sufficient. Although this home is one of hundreds in Lithuania, not all offer the training and preparation this one can now offer its occupants. The local families also participating in the project support the home (and each other) by cooperating in the use of the wool for handicrafts. This project was opened recently, during the 15th anniversary celebration for Heifer's Central/Eastern Europe Programs area; and the Study Tour group was honored to plant a tree in the local "Forest of Hope," joining trees planted by Heifer dignitaries, including Jo Luck.



In addition to visiting a new project, the group also visited the oldest project in Lithuania in the village of Šilute. This cattle project began eight years ago, and the community is continuing to pass on the gift. The study tour visited the home of Ramuti, an unemployed mother of four whose husband is a day laborer. They have recently been severely impacted by the floods that have killed off most of their potato crop; but she is very proud of her Holstein heifer and the calf that will be ready to pass on next year. She told the group how the daily milk helps provide for her family, leaving the little money they have free for items such as clothing and shoes for her growing boys. Her neat, clean homestead reflected

the pride and hope of this family, with a diversity of foodstuffs growing all around the house: a small greenhouse with tomatoes, a neat garden and cherry trees protected by nets from birds, and three mother ducks leading half-grown ducklings across the backyard. This project also included a visit with Janina, a widowed grandmother raising two grandchildren orphaned by a house fire. She had been unable to take the children for two years, since she could not prove that she could provide for them. However, with her Heifer cow (a third pass-on) and the home she rebuilt from an empty shell, she now has her family together again.

Other highlights included the Zaube, Latvia cattle project and the beekeeping project in Tarosai, Lithuania. In Zaube, the local organization – the Zaube Collective – and Heifer International work side by side. The collective also gives cattle to recipients and requires a pass-on commitment. This builds on and complements the work done through Heifer's donations to 15 families in the community. The community greeted the study tour with food, including a specially decorated Heifer cake, and shared many of their experiences with the tour participants.



Their children were everywhere, and very eager to be in pictures or try out a bit of English. One project participant, Sanita, moved everyone. Although she is in a wheelchair, she has made her small farm into a successful commercial venture, raising dairy and meat cattle, rabbits, pigs, geese, chickens and at least one duck. She has two daughters born to her and a son she adopted from a local children's home, and she and her husband, Gint, will be ready to pass on gifts this winter around Christmas. In Tarosai, tour participants and project participants alike were moved to tears at the home of Vaclovas Šniukšta. Vaclovas, nearly 70 years old, was sent to Siberia for 10 years as a young man for singing Lithuanian songs. He worked in metal and coal mines while there, and ended up staying 14 years to remain with his family. When he returned to Lithuania, it was to find his home destroyed. He rebuilt it himself, completing it in 1979. He received seven hives from Heifer and now has 12. He centrifuged fresh honey by hand for the study tour group; and he kept thanking his visitors for this source of income and vocation for himself. This sweet man, living by himself at the end of a long country road, had a beautiful homestead proudly flying the Lithuanian flag. The excellent condition of his hives, yard and garden left no doubt he was not just putting on a show. Through his very hard work, he has made himself and his community very proud. There were many moist eyes upon the group's departure from the home of Vaclovas.

All in all, the study tour visited eight wonderful projects and dozens of inspiring participants. Some were already able to show success from their living loans; others still had more dreams than current progress. But each participant finished the trip with a greater understanding of the impact Heifer International makes on lives every day. And just as important, they came to know just a little bit better the gracious and amazing Baltic peoples who have had long histories of success and oppression. As these new nations begin again, the hope for the future is rising throughout the populations. Heifer should be honored to be part of this.

Projects Visited, in order:

The Rural Community of Beizioniai, Elektrenai, Lithuania

NGO Teviskes Pastoge, Sudeikiai, Utena, Lithuania

Familiar Farmers' Group, Bilška, Latvia

Zaube Cooperative, Zaube, Latvia

NGO Teviske, Babrungas, Plunges, Lithuania
NGO Gardia, Zemaičiu Kalvarija, Plunges, Lithuania
Šilute Cattle Project, Lithuania
Tarosai Community, Tarosai, Kaunas, Lithuania

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