

# REPORT FROM MARIUPOL, UKRAINE

January 2005

Dear Brethren,

Winter is finally upon us. Although it has been cold enough to require regular coat wearing, it has not been unbearably frigid. Snow is frequent but usually does not stay on the ground more than a few days at a time and has not yet been a hindrance of any kind. More troublesome are the layers of ice that often form over the dirt paths and sidewalks I must negotiate regularly as I go about my business.

The first occasion I had to walk down the ice covered paths went rather badly because I failed to realize how difficult it would be to cross uneven terrain in these conditions. Okay, I wasn't paying attention like I should have been. At any rate, my nonchalant stroll came to an abrupt end when I suddenly found myself staring at the sky with the disconcerting feeling that my feet were where my head was supposed to be. A moment later my suspicion was confirmed when I hit the frozen ground with an impressive thud. As I got to my feet and collected the scattered grocery bags I had been carrying I promised myself that I certainly would not take this route anymore when there was snow on the ground.

The next day, I had invited everyone in the congregation over to my apartment to celebrate Thanksgiving (they never had before, but were eager to). This of course required a great deal of cooking on my part - which is something I had never done on such a scale before. To be honest, cooking was the facet of living on my own I was least prepared for. Thus, I have spent the last several months subsisting on ham, eggs, and fried chicken not typical Thanksgiving fare to be sure. Thankfully, I found out that 1) mixes sent from home are extremely helpful, 2) following a recipe isn't too terribly difficult, and 3) there is a booth not far from my house that sells whole grilled chickens. I know that you are really supposed to have turkey on Thanksgiving but they don't. I decided that what they don't know won't hurt them and having to eat a turkey that I attempted to cook probably would.

Although I prepared as much of the meal as possible the night before, it was still necessary for me to get up and start cooking at 4:30 am for their 2:00 pm arrival. By noon I had accomplished most of what I had hoped to and decided I had better go and get the chickens so that I could get back in time to finish everything else.

The political crisis going on at the time greatly hindered my ability to draw money from the local banks. Thus, it had taken me upwards of six hours on the previous day to find a bank that was able to give dollars. By the time I completed the task of replenishing my severely depleted money supply it was too late for me to exchange the dollars into the local currency. Thus, it was now necessary for me to make my way to an exchange booth, go to the store and pick up a few remaining ingredients and items for the meal, and to pick up two freshly cooked chickens on my way home. No small feat in less than two hours time. However, the mission went like clockwork even in spite of my realization on my way to the chicken stand that I didn't actually know how to ask for a whole chicken in Russian and would have to resort to pointing and hoping for the best. I would not really care to know the young lady's assessment of my relative intelligence after our encounter but at least I got the chickens and was on my way home with an hour to spare.

Because it had snowed again the night before and continued intermittently since, the slick layer of ice had greatly intensified its potency since my encounter with it on the previous afternoon. Of course, this should not have been a problem given my vow to take a different path in the future. Unfortunately, old habits are hard to break.

As I picked myself up and tried to gather the bags of groceries I had thrown a good distance by flailing wildly in a vain attempt to recover my balance, I couldn't help feeling more than a little foolish. I should have known exactly what would happen if I walked the same way under the same conditions but I had done it anyway. Fortunately, nothing I had been carrying had been severely damaged and I was able to collect my scattered assortment of products from the frozen ground and limp home with my bruised hip, misshapen chickens, and the few remaining shreds of dignity I could muster.

The meal went surprisingly well even though the light in the living room stopped working and we had to eat in the dark. The brethren were very impressed by the amount of food I had prepared and ate heartily. Valentin repeatedly remarked that now he had been to America. Tonia brought her husband with her who was quite well pleased with the meal and was eager to talk and visit. Before he left, he expressed his appreciation for what I was doing and his hope that soon we would be able to talk to one another without an interpreter. Although he has not yet attended any services with his wife, I view these as very encouraging signs.

The only downside that I have experienced from our meal together is that it shattered the long standing illusion on the part of the ladies here that I was a poor bachelor who did not know how to cook anything (I have never done anything to encourage this perception. They merely refused to believe otherwise). Thus, their offerings of food have dropped off dramatically. However, I am not terribly upset by this given the financial difficulties and other hardships most of them experience. I am glad they no longer feel an obligation to keep me from starving if it shortens their list of worries.

The holidays are always a dangerous time of year for Christians here. Many gather with friends and relatives they don't see at any other time. Invariably, alcohol is a part of these celebrations and the pressure to drink to the health and happiness of those they are closest to is very strong. I have spent the last several weeks attempting to combat this by bringing up the sinful nature of alcohol use at every opportunity during Bible classes and sermons (no small feat considering I am in the middle of a series on the nature and work of the church and we have been in Kings and Chronicles in our Bible classes). Unfortunately, old habits are hard to break.

I first became aware that Teresa had suffered a relapse in November when she missed several classes during Jim Mickells and Charles Gant's visit. She finally showed up the following Sunday morning after worship in her bathrobe and house shoes (she lives just upstairs from Valentin and Galina's where we meet) and asked us to forgive her but she had just come from work. It was rather obvious from her smell and appearance that the only work she had been doing for the last several days had been bending her elbow.

As it turned out, she had come from work two days previously where she had been prevailed upon by partiers in the restaurant she was employed to sweep the floors in. It seems the revelers took the attitude that their joy could not be complete unless everyone around them was as intoxicated as they were. After some initial resistance (I don't know exactly how much), Teresa gave in to their request. This opened the floodgates, so to speak, and she remained in a drunken state for the next three days before making her way downstairs disheveled and depressed to ask our forgiveness.

Sadly, her sister Elnora, who shares the same apartment, was taken in by Teresa's example and relapsed herself. Despite my best efforts and those of the other Christians to teach and encourage them after this incident, both sisters spent New Year's weekend drinking with their family and friends. I do not

regard these actions as high handed rebellion against the truth or as a rejection of the principles they have been learning. The problem is merely that old habits are hard to break. Even so, they can be broken.

I was invited to celebrate the new year with my landlord and landlady with whom I have had fairly regular contact since our studies in November and who both still seem interested in talking about spiritual things. Because of this, I was very happy to accept their invitation which they offered a week in advance.

I was well aware that their celebration would almost certainly include the use of alcohol. However, they both are well aware that I do not drink myself and invited me anyway. Considering this, I did not suffer from any great apprehension as to how the evening might go since only the three of us would be present.

Predictably, as we were getting ready to eat, Sasha brought out the bottle of champagne he had been cooling in the refrigerator and announced that we would begin the celebration by drinking vodka. I reminded that I didn't drink and he shrugged and left the room. Once we began eating he asked if we were ready to drink the champagne. I reminded him again that I didn't drink at which his wife also refused to drink. He thought for a moment, eased back into his chair, and said "Well, I'm not going to drink by myself."

When midnight finally rolled around he brought me a glass of clear carbonated liquid and said "Here, in the place of champagne." Still wary, I had to ask what it was. It was carbonated water a drink I usually hate. It has never tasted better. Old habits are hard to break, but they can be broken. I pray that this will be the case with the Christians here eventually.

I know that a number of you have been concerned about the political situation here over the past several weeks. However, other than the banks making it more than a little difficult to withdraw dollars, I was not hindered in any way. I had suspected that after the initial turmoil overturned the previous election, the rerun would be anticlimactic. This has turned out to be the case. It has been somewhat comical to watch the news here in recent weeks as more and more members of the old government distanced themselves from the "winner" who had cheated his way to victory in the last round. Even the current president who had personally selected Yanukovich as his heir withdrew his support. I cannot help but be encouraged by these developments. I am hopeful that Yushenko, the new president whose wife is an American citizen and was an aide to our president Reagan, will pursue a course of greater integration with the west and more openness and freedom in society. If his rhetoric to date is any indication, it is very likely that this will prove to be the case which bodes well for my long term ability to stay and teach the Word perhaps with even fewer restrictions than I have now.

Finally, please remember Wiley Deason in your prayers as he makes plans to join me here at the end of this month. The brethren are very excited about the prospect of a second person working with them for an extended period. I'm sure he will do good work and it will certainly be nice to have more than myself to talk to all day. I have had a problem receiving e-mail over the past several months. If you have e-mailed and not received a reply this is probably way. Thus, effective immediately, my Mariupol.net e-mail address is no longer valid. I have changed providers and will now be using mattmanua@mac.com exclusively. Please update your address books and resend any unanswered mail you might be expecting a reply to. I hope this change will resolve the situation permanently.

Thanks to all who have called, sent cards, packages, and e-mails during the holiday season. I had underestimated how difficult it would be to be away from friends and family during this time of the year. You certainly helped to lighten the load. To all - best wishes and the Lord's richest blessings in His service for the coming year.

In Him,  
Matt Duggin

e-mail: mattmanua@mac.com  
phone: 011 38 0629 52 40 80  
mobile: 011 38 0509 19 83 99  
address: Ul. Baxmutskaya  
House 120 Flat 123  
Mariupol 87554  
Ukraine



