

REPORT FROM MARIUPOL, UKRAINE

March 2006

Dear Brethren,

Greetings from windy Mariupol. Spring is finally starting to break Winter's grip. The snows of January have finally melted away making walking outside much easier and more pleasant. This has, of course, come at the cost of the high winds (20-30 mph with gusts over 50) of March. The locals tell me that we can expect two weeks of perfect weather in May followed by an unbearably hot summer. However, as cold as it has been this winter, I have a feeling I'll be able to bear the heat quite well.

A few days after writing my last report, I made my way to Kiev to meet the Gillespies. Because the flight to Mariupol was full, it was necessary for us to fly to Donetsk (the nearest city to the north) instead. Having found this out a week beforehand, I planned carefully to ensure that we would all make it back to Mariupol that evening. Thus, I hoped we would make it from the airport, across town to the bus station before the final bus of the evening left for Mariupol.

Sometimes I am surprised at just how well my plans work. This was not one of those times.

We made it from the airport to the bus station easily enough (except the three of us were crammed in the back seat with some of our luggage). – but the last bus had already left. During the ride from the airport, the driver and his friend had insisted that the bus would already be gone and that it would be better if they just drove us to Mariupol. Because the price they offered to do it for was cheaper than a hotel would be for the three of us, I finally consented for them to take us. Although I am sure that Shane and Mary Frances were less than thrilled at the prospect of two more hours in that tiny back seat, much to their credit, they offered no complaint.

Our driver attacked the icy road to Mariupol with more zeal than I would have preferred but the majority of the trip passed without incident (a few close calls due to his exuberant style of driving, but we escaped unscathed). Then, suddenly, he pulled over for no apparent reason, and without a word to anyone, got out and approached to the passenger side of the car. I assumed that he must have needed to make a little rest stop for personal reasons. However, instead of trudging off into the darkness, he briefly examined right front tire, returned to his seat and restarted the engine. As he put the car into gear and attempted to merge back onto the highway, it began to lurch and make an ominous grinding sound. He killed the engine a second time and announced that it had overheated but that we shouldn't worry because in a few minutes it would cool down and we would be on our way. However, when he tried again after a few minutes, the lurching and grinding grew even worse and were this time followed by the discouraging stink of burning oil.

A smoking automobile usually indicates that the remainder of your journey will not be a pleasant one. This reality was not lost on our driver and his friend who now exited the car and began a rather animated discussion of just what they ought to do now. After some anxious pacing about and a bit of hand-waving, the driver stuck his head in the door, switched on the hazard lights, and announced, "Don't worry, we'll get you home!"

He returned to his post outside and frantically began dialing numbers on his cell phone. His friend pitched in by running in front of every vehicle that came by and asking if they would mind taking the three of us the rest of the way in to Mariupol. After several minutes of nearly being run over, he convinced a passing bus driver to carry the three of us the rest of the way into town. Thus, we arrived back at my apartment a bit later than I had hoped but more or less unharmed. For some reason, this incident caused the Gillespies to form a very low opinion of taxis which they retained for the remainder of the trip. Thus, I felt the need to apologize any time it was necessary for us to take one. I suppose this is the price one pays for adventure.

Even with that rocky start, the rest of their visit went extremely well. The living conditions were somewhat Spartan by American standards, and the weather for most of the trip was as generally unpleasant as one would expect to find in Ukraine in the middle of February. Even so, as with our wild taxi ride, I didn't hear the first complaint out of either of them and was mightily impressed.

Shane did a great job presenting much-needed lessons for the group here. The brethren were greatly uplifted by their presence and seemed to develop a rapport with them almost instantly. The weeping on both sides at their departure is evidence enough of the untold good they did for the church here – merely by choosing to spend their vacation with us.

During the time I have spent in Mariupol, I have enjoyed rather good health and have rarely had to miss worship or Bible classes due to illness. I have also been helped in this by being fortunate enough to get sick on days when we had no meetings. Recently, however, I became violently ill after eating in a local restaurant on a Friday evening. Judging from my condition on Saturday, I did not expect to recover in time to preach the next day and had Vera deliver an outline to Valentin that afternoon so that he could make use of it during worship.

On Monday, I received a call from Vera who informed me that the brethren had requested that we meet for Bible study on Thursday instead of Wednesday because Wednesday was a holiday (International Women's Day) and they would all be celebrating with their families. Furthermore, if I didn't want to meet on Thursday, that was fine, I could just not bother showing up at all! Because I had not been there to discuss this with them on Sunday, there was nothing I could do except to show up on Thursday and try to prevent them from making such requests in the future.

When Thursday came, I conducted class as I normally do and made no mention of the holiday or our altered schedule. As classes go, it went rather well. All were present having read the chapters and filled out their lessons. Class participation was high and a couple of them even asked questions related to the text. As I noticed how well it was going, I wondered whether I ought to "rock the boat," so to speak. After all, it was not as if their first choice had been to cancel class entirely.

However, before we said our customary prayer to end the meeting, I asked everyone how their holiday had been. All replied spiritedly that their celebrations had been most satisfying. I then asked, "holidays are pretty important aren't they?" Beginning to realize that something wasn't quite right, they replied cautiously that they weren't extremely important, but were just an enjoyable custom." More important than, say, studying the Bible?" I asked. Realizing now why I had broached the subject, all adopted the look of a scolded puppy and declared, "We won't do it again!" I then had to take a little time to reassure them that I wasn't offended or angry with them (although I hadn't stopped smiling throughout our entire discussion). I had strongly suspected from the beginning that their request had not been out of a desire to do anything wrong but rather a failure to consider what such a request said about their priorities. As our discussion showed, their hearts are in the right place.

I discovered later, that although my illness and absence had led to a problem that needed to be corrected, it also made me aware of something rather good that I had been unaware of previously. Although I had sent the lesson to Valentin, he had to work the next morning. This left the group wondering what exactly to do since Monsour would be there, but suffers from cerebral palsy and has the mind of a child in many ways though he is 24. However, he entered that morning and announced to everyone that he was a man and that the ladies had better keep silent! He then proceeded to conduct the entire service himself even though he had never led a single prayer or song the entire time I have been here.

The following Sunday, at the end of services, I turned to Monsour (who didn't know I knew what he had done) and asked if he would like to pray like he had the previous week. He agreed and prayed as follows:

Heavenly Father

Thank you for your Son

And thank you for your Church

Help us to be good Christians

And give us good lives.

Amen

Had I not been sick, I wouldn't have known he could do it. I would say it was worth it.

As much as I hate to sound like a broken record, I am still in need of \$500-\$700 per month increase in order to cope with the additional expenses marriage will shortly be bringing with it. If you are interested in helping with this need, please contact me as soon as possible.

Thank you all once again for your support as I work here. Your prayers, cards, letters, and e-mails mean a great deal and are a great encouragement to me.

In Him,
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