

When I looked into Her Eyes
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When I looked into her eyes, she reminded me of my husband's bubbe (grandmother) whom I had grown to love at the age of 15. Even though there was a language barrier, our eyes met and it was an instant connection. Her name was Clara and she was in her 80's. Through an interpreter I learnt that she had come to the Jewish Autonomous Region with her parents as a little girl in 1938. This was the "homeland" that Stalin had promised the Jewish people so they could start a new life for themselves. Little did they realize that it was a mosquito invested swampland, Stalin's version of Zion, his solution to the "Jewish Problem." The Jewish Autonomous Region was established in April 1928, twenty years before the existence of the modern State of Israel.

Being as productive as the Jewish people are, they built a wonderful shtetl for themselves in the main town called Birobidzhan. Jewish life was thriving with Yiddish schools, newspapers and street names. Clara recalls the wonderful singing and dancing in the streets as a child. She is the 1st of 4 generations of her family living in Birobidzhan.

Surely the connection we felt to each other was nothing other than Yeshua because this dear lady is one of the new believers in Messiah who have come to know Him through the work that we had started a couple of years earlier. I met many other elderly folk with similar stories to Clara and am still amazed at how the Lord opened the door for us to minister in the Far East of Russia and Siberia.

It all started in 2004 when our team embarked on a journey that would increase our sphere of ministry in a way we could never have imagined. When we heard that there were Jewish people still living in the Far East of Russia we just had to go and see for ourselves. Birobidzhan is situated just North of the Chinese border, further East than Siberia and Mongolia with the river Bira running through the town.

Since the fall of communism in the early 1990s many Jewish people began to leave Birobidzhan and make "aliyah" and return to Israel. Yet there is still a large number of Jewish people living in Birobidzhan and other scattered towns and cities around the region like Khabarovsk and the port city of Vladivostok. It is to this remnant that we felt the call of God tug at our hearts.

Travelling to the Far East of Russia from Australia is quite an arduous trip although closer than the Western side of Russia. Flying from Melbourne to Hong Kong then onto Korea and Vladivostok, and then by train to Birobidzhan. When one arrives at the station you are greeted by the name of the town in Russia and in Yiddish and many of the streets signs are in Yiddish and Russian. The town square has a massive Menorah in the centre of a fountain and a statue of Tevya from Fiddler on the Roof fame. It is surely a surreal feeling and one wonders if you are in Russia or perhaps Israel.

During one of our visits we had the opportunity to speak to a large group of people, both Jews and Gentiles. We really wanted to share with them deeply about God's love in Yeshua the Messiah. We needed a way to relate to their suffering and hardships

living in such a harsh place. God put on my heart to share our testimony about our severely disabled child Sarah who was only meant to live 3 days and who is now 20 years old. I shared our journey and how God has used Sarah to change us and to touch the lives of many others. Little did I realize that our daughter's life would speak so clearly across cultural and language barriers. Amazing since Sarah has never spoken a word herself yet God had used her in a very special way. Her story touched their hearts and when I had finished there wasn't a dry eye in the meeting. Immediately after speaking, I was surrounded by so many women hugging me and wanting to share their stories. One woman told me that because of the love that we have shown our daughter, she was going to have more love in her heart from then on. What a privilege it was to share the Message of the Messiah with them.

Our workers in Birobidzhan, Valeria and Andre, typify the story of God's saving power in Russia. Andre born into a Jewish family in Birobidzhan, his stepfather used to beat him up so at the age of 15 he chose a life on the streets. Soon he was involved in petty crime and then found himself spending the next 27 years of his life in a Soviet prison. It was in prison that Andre came to faith in Yeshua as the Messiah through reading a book called "Son of Man" by Alexandra Men. While reading the book he had a vision of the Lord who showed him his black heart. He started praying the Lord's prayer and the more he prayed the more he saw his heart being healed and change colour to a healthy red heart. He recalls he prayed that prayer about 40 times in anguish and tears before finally accepting forgiveness and surrendering his life to Yeshua.

Later he met Valeria who was working for an organisation helping Russian Jews return to Israel. They married and began working with us in reaching the Jews of Birobidzhan. In a most astounding turn of events, even though they are well known in town as messianic Jewish believers, Andre is now serving in a prominent role in a small orthodox synagogue in Birobidzhan. They have become known for their commitment to the Jews of Birobidzhan through their love and benevolent care.

To end off I want to share one more incredible story: We were in the town of Magadan in the far north of Far East Russia. This town is infamous for Stalin's gulags in the region. While we were there we contacted the local Jewish community and offered to bring them food and share a Shabbat dinner with them. We introduced ourselves to them and shared our faith in Messiah. Surprisingly they were very open. After our Shabbat dinner, one lady came up to talk to me and I told her the story of the Good Shepherd who had left the 99 sheep to find the one lost sheep of the house of Israel. She looked at me with tears flowing from her eyes and said, "I am that lost sheep and I need the Messiah." We held hands and we prayed together.

Luke 15:4-7 (NIV)

⁴ "Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Does he not leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it? ⁵ And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders ⁶ and goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbors together and says, 'Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep.' ⁷ I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent.

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