

Kazakhstan Goat Borsch

by Ed Landry

A trip to Eastern Russia is not an easy trip even when things go well. I have been on three pastoral training trips to what was the former Soviet Union. This event happened on my first venture into the land of Lenin.

After an all nighter on what is one of the worst airlines on the planet, Aeroflop, we arrived in Almaty, Kazakhstan at six in the morning. And we only bounced three times when we came in. We were met and quickly shuttled to our seminar location in what was at that time the only kind of car in the country, a Lada. The Lada was a Russian-made car patterned after a Fiat made in the early 50s. Why they picked that car I will never know. But I can assure you that five large people, full luggage and medical supplies aren't even close to fitting in one. We fit in one. Good thing the ride was only two hours and we only hit 2000 pot holes.

We arrived at a sanatorium in the mountains which had been used to treat TB patients for decades. After the customary kissing the ground and having a worship service on the street to thank God for sparing our lives we went into the dining hall just in time for breakfast. They served us goat borsch. It wasn't just any goat borsch mind you but they had to search far and wide for this goat. He must have died from arthritis. And it was a Billy. For those of you who eat normal foods you have never had the privilege of eating wild game, especially the male of a species. I don't understand the biological issues but males have a special gland of some kind that secretes a strong odor that makes girl goats roll their eyes and drool. Well it certainly did that to us. The stench of that goat filled the entire cafeteria. When you mix rancid stinky goat with beets you have goat borsch.

When the kitchen staff came out with the rancid goat soup my first impression was that this was going to be a good week to start my diet. The staff were all Babushkas, or simple pudgy-faced-grandma-type farmer ladies with hands like a colonial blacksmith. When they milked their

cows the critters limped for a week. The Babushkas brought out the food and just sort of plopped it down in front of us. It reminded me of the trucker who stopped in a greasy spoon diner and the tired, overworked waitress snapped, "What do you want?" He answered that the only thing he wanted was a cup of coffee and a kind word. When the waitress returned and pushed the coffee in front of him, He asked, "So, what is the kind word?" She said, "Don't drink the coffee." One look at the faces of those women told me not to eat that soup. The smell confirmed the look. But I was hungry and resisting all my involuntary vomit muscles I prayed the usual missionary prayer, "Lord I will get it down, you keep it down."

While eating the putrid gruel, a man rushed over to our table with a disturbing story. It seems that one of the kitchen staff was having a serious problem of some kind and wanted one of the foreigners to help her. Now how would you feel at that moment? You have a mouthful of stinky goat goo in your mouth and while struggling to chew the soup and you hear that one of the kitchen crew that made it is having a major mental problem and needs help or wants to confess to something. I instantly made the decision to be the one to go back and help the lady. The main reason I went was to learn more about what was in my mouth that was making me want to give up food the rest of my life.

I hurried back to the kitchen with an interpreter and a Russian speaking missionary who for some reason was also not very hungry. We saw a woman cowering in the corner of the room, in absolute terror. She would not make eye contact with anyone and was shaking. I guessed that she had been eating the goat meat. It turns out that she had come to work that morning experiencing uncontrollable fear. So with the help of the interpreter I tried to talk to her. The entire kitchen staff gathered around us. Everything stopped in the large kitchen. We became center stage. It was obvious that something spiritual was going on. We prayed that God would calm the situation and give wisdom. We began to gently explain to her about the gospel of Jesus Christ. Soon the kitchen staff all starting asking questions so we divided our group up. I took the kitchen staff and the interpreter. The missionary took the fearful woman to the other side of the

room to be with her privately. After about twenty minutes of answering the ladies' questions about God and eternal life I noticed the missionary returning with the fearful lady but something was very different. She was radiant, smiling from ear to ear. The place became silent as we all stared at them approaching us. I knew she was born again. The other kitchen staff who knew this woman had no idea what had taken place but they know something amazing had happened. It was a hushed, holy moment. There we were in a kitchen in Kazakhstan and God had touched a lowly kitchen helper and light was shining in the darkness. Everyone was silent, shocked and staring in wonder. We then heard the announcement that the first session was beginning so we disbanded our kitchen meeting. I was rejoicing that this woman had just become a Christian and also that I didn't have to finish that horrible goat soup.

I asked the kitchen help if they would like to have a Bible study. They all said "yes" without hesitation. We set up a study time two days later during their one hour break time. I wasn't teaching the pastors at that hour and all the ladies would be available. When I got back to our team and told them what had happened in the kitchen and about the upcoming Babushka Bible study I was met with some unusual resistance. The leader of the of our missionary team reminded me we were there to teach Russian pastors and not to be sidetracked with doing Bible studies with peasant women. I don't know what ticked the guy off but I decided to be understanding a bit since he is a great leader and had just traveled all night on Aeroflop and had eaten soup made with Methuselah the goat. I promised the guy, who we will call Ron for this story, that the Bible study would not detract from my teaching. Besides when we ate lunch that day we could all eat something besides that goat and we would be in a better mood.

This was my baptism into Russia. Russia is poor, like really poor. That goat was about all they had. We ended up eating rancid goat borsch every meal the entire week. Not just any goat, either, it was Methuselah himself all week. Each time we went to the cafeteria you could smell him all the way down the hall. I could actually smell him when we drove up in the morning

and we hadn't even gotten out of our leaky, crowded Lada. I suspect you could smell him in Romania.

The day for the Bible study time arrived. When I went to the agreed upon spot the Babushkas were all nervously sitting there. The formerly fearful but now radiant Maria was also there. She was still the center of attention. She was a totally different person from when we first saw her slithering in the corner like Tolkhemim's Golem. Now, she was alive and joyful. I wasn't sure where to begin with them so I stated to talk about the existence of God and before long I was interrupted by one of the ladies who politely told me that they know God existed. I said, "OK," and I started to talk about the reality of sin. They interrupted again and said they knew they were sinners. I then said, "Well what do you want to know?" They said they all believed that there was a God and that they were separated from him but they just wanted to know how they could get right with him. They wanted what happened to Maria. I told them very simply how God had sent his son, Jesus Christ, to die for their sins and if they prayed and asked him to forgive them and come into their lives he would do that and give them eternal life. I had barely finished that sentence when the lady on my far left stood up and started crying out to God for mercy. As the interpreter relayed her passionate words to me I had tears in my eyes just watching the miracle happen. When she finished her prayer of repentance the next lady to her side stood and prayed a similar prayer. The third lady said she was not ready to make such a commitment. The next lady said she was and proceeded to do so. All this time I just sat there watching in wonder as the Spirit of God brought six ladies into his Kingdom. I vividly remember the last lady was shaking like a leaf in a storm. When the wind of God got to her side of the room I asked her if she was alright. She said yes, her voice quivering. She said she just could not wait to ask Jesus into her heart.

I went back to the pastors' sessions in the other room and felt like was walking on clouds. When I shared the incredible story the team was amazed, except grumpy Ron. He just remarked

that I needed to focus on my task and not get involved with these women. I figured it was some kind of long-term, adverse goat reaction for Ron. He was not normally like this.

At the end of the week we had our last supper. I never looked forward so much to eating a last meal. I never wanted to smell that horrid stuff again. Even after one week you couldn't get used to it. They probably had to burn the tables after the final meal. The tables were then served but for some reason I was left out. Grumpy Ron was sitting to my left and made some comment about God punishing me for getting sidetracked with Bible studies during the week. Prayer was said and everyone began forcing their meal down. Except me. Dave, one of the other missionaries offered me some of his but I kindly told him to go ahead and eat it. I was actually relieved. Then something happened that will be one of those special memories that will stay with me forever.

The doors to the kitchen opened and a procession came out. All the ladies who had gotten saved that week pushed a cart over to my table and presented me with a special chicken dinner they purchased themselves and had cooked just for me. They gathered around me smiling. The entire place was still and had stopped breathing as the ladies thanked me for bringing them the message of life. They then served me this incredible meal while the goat eaters just watched. I was afraid to even look at Grumpy Ron. They even had even baked a cake with a candle on it. This was a Mary anointing the feet of Jesus type of moment. It was a gift of great love and sacrifice for these new sisters. I don't think anyone could smell the goat anymore; it had been replaced with a new fragrance, love. I leaned over to Ron and said, "I sure hope God keeps on punishing me."