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May Days

The irises are standing at attention and the peonies are in full bloom. Odd little snowdrifts of seed fluff from the poplar trees fill the gutters and every now and then I catch a sweet whiff of white acacia flowers. There's a cuckoo whose territory includes the trees behind the academic building at Odessa Seminary and from time to time he reminds us of the fact with his monotonous call—like a broken clock! It must be May...

It's certainly been a month for short working weeks! 1 May was on a Saturday, so we took the following Monday off. Some of you surely remember watching news footage of May Day parades on Red Square years ago. Although there are still political demonstrations, nothing very extravagant takes place any more; but 1 May is still a holiday, often celebrated with the first outing of the picnic season. A week later comes Victory Day on 9 May. The end of World War II (or the Great War of the Fatherland as it is known here) is solemnly commemorated with ceremonies at war memorials and other special events. Again—since it fell on Sunday, Monday was a holiday. And this week the second day of Pentecost was also celebrated as a national holiday as well.

History for the visually impaired

By far the most interesting experience of the last couple of months was working with a group of visually impaired students at Donetsk Christian University, a school I've been associated with for many years. During the past year DCU has offered its campus and teachers to a national mission organization that serves the blind. This mission assembled a group of fairly new Christians from all over Ukraine for several sessions of theological training to help improve their outreach to other visually impaired people. At their April meeting I was invited to give some lectures on the history of the evangelical movement in Russia.

It took time for me to realize how sharp and receptive the students were because their faces register very little. It turned out that they were full of questions and eager

for discussion. During breaks they sang vigorously and well. Those with better vision carefully looked after those with poorer.

Of course, I couldn't use the blackboard or show them any pictures—all I could do was talk. The lectures were recorded and distributed to the students on CDs, but I decided that if I'm ever asked to do anything like this again, I'll have to try to change my lecturing habits. Another time I would tell more stories and try to think of ways to arrange the material so it's easier to remember without visual prompts. The ideal would be to have something the students could hold in their hands, but I'm not sure how that would work. Do any of you have ideas or suggestions?

Getting to know the neighbors

I love teaching at theological schools, but there's a drawback: I could go for weeks without talking to people outside our little Christian circle. So I've been praying about ways to meet some of the people in my neighborhood. I haven't been too systematic about it, but I believe God has given me a modest start.

For example, at Easter I decorated eggs and made a basket with candy and a greeting card for the elderly man next door. I'm naturally pretty shy, so I had to work up a little nerve to knock on the door. My idea was to just say a quick hello, drop off my gift, and duck out, but I was surprised all over again by Ukrainian hospitality. Anatoly took me firmly by the elbow and escorted me into the living room where his brother and sister and their spouses were enjoying their holiday dinner. They not only filled up a plate for me but also a shot glass of cranberry-flavored vodka! They clinked glasses all around and solemnly repeated, "Christ is risen!"

I'd never heard the ancient Christian greeting used as a toast before, but this wasn't the moment for a temperance lecture! Instead I concentrated on learning their names and enjoying their company. I don't run into Anatoly very often, but at least now the ice is broken and we can chat when we meet.

Rescue operation

Then I glanced out my back window a couple of days ago and observed two stuffed animals—a dog and a cow—that had crashed on the flat corrugated roof of the downstairs neighbors' shed. They had obviously suffered a terrible descent from some apartment up above. So I went and fetched a handy article of furniture we call a *taburetka*. It can either be sat on like a stool or used as a low table. That was to get me up to a height where I could more or less easily sling my leg over the balcony sill. First I opened the window and pried up the thumb tacks that hold down the netting used in place of a screen. Then I looked down on the corrugated roof and just in time it occurred to me to wonder how I expected to climb back into my apartment once I was out there! So I fetched another *taburetka* and eased it out the window onto the roof to serve as a step on the other side. Then I slowly got my leg over the windowsill and

managed to climb out onto the roof to retrieve the animals. They were dirty and soaked with rain, but dried out overnight.

Then I went in search of their owners, inquiring at all the apartments directly above me. (Do you see how the Lord got me to talk to strangers?) About halfway up I reached an elderly woman who informed me that the only children young enough to enjoy throwing toys off the balcony were on the ninth floor. “Take the elevator!” she advised. Fortunately, it was working that day, so I went up to the ninth floor and knocked on the door that corresponded to my apartment. Bingo! The young mother was really surprised and pleased. She said, “We could see the toys down there, but we had no idea how we were going to get them back.” So I went downstairs feeling rather heroic—and with a better idea of who lives in the same building with me.

Prayer requests

I sincerely thank all of you who pray for me; some of you have written to tell me so. Please join with me in praying for more contacts with the people around me so that friendships can develop.

Four new students from Russia and Ukraine will be joining the Odessa/Prague Master’s program this fall. They will need visas to travel to the Czech Republic for orientation and you may remember from last year that it’s no easy process—please pray with us that their documents will be completed in a timely way. Each student will also need to come up with US \$200. Pray that the necessary finances will be found.

Summer is the time for camps, day camps, and Vacation Bible School all across the former Soviet Union. Every group needs staff, adequate supplies, and protection from danger. Please pray for God’s blessing on all these valuable ministries.

With peace,

Mary Raber