

## Winter Bible School January 2010

### The following report is from Brother Charles Abel [Horley, UK Ecclesia]

I was privileged to speak at the Poltava Bible School in Eastern Europe last week. It was a return trip to the city in eastern Ukraine I visited last May. Back then the sun was out and the chestnut trees were in full blossom, in the warm early summer sun. This time the snow was piled beside the road, every street in the city was a skating rink of ice-packed snow and the minus 17 air froze the orange I was eating as I walked down the street! But the hearts of our East European brothers and sisters are warm. They travelled up to four days from the far north of Russia, Siberia, Moldova, Kazakhstan, Belorussia and Ukraine to share 5 days studying the Lord's Word. One 83 year-old brother, Pavel, travelled four days from Siberia, including a day on the platforms of Moscow stations awaiting a connection to Poltava. Anatoly and Nina from Kazakhstan crossed four difficult borders to get to the school.

For many of those attending the friends they meet at the Bible School are the only Christadelphian contacts they have from one year to the next. But their zeal for the word of God was almost inexhaustible! Daily Bible readings took at least 2 hours, with plenty of enthusiastic debate. Bible talks dominated the rest of each day, preferably lasting one and a half hours each. There was no dozing off. Brothers and Sisters were captivated, making notes and checking references in well-leafed Bibles. Comments were always made, with plenty of debate around the topics, which included personal development, Noah, humility, ashes on the altar (forgiveness/sacrifice), repentance, parallels in the Bible and our identity in Christ (Ephesians). Group work was engaged in enthusiastically.

*The spirit of the School is very much of elderly brothers and sisters with poor eyesight and general health, "the poor of this world rich in faith", earnestly studying the Bible together with an obvious spirit of love for God's word. Sisters Nina and Raisa only get to meet at Bible School; they are sisters in the flesh, but Nina lives in Kazakhstan and Raisa in Russia:*



*Here's 83 year old brother Pavel acting in the play put together so well by sister Larisa Atkin; and brother Valerij, who travelled a few days from the very far north of Russia with little else apart from a flask, his Bible and his new walking stick, always keen to make a point during the daily Bible readings. Valerij has nobody much to talk to about the Bible and yet he is just full of thoughts about his daily Bible readings over the last 12 months. And he likes singing too:*



*Brother Alexei and Sister Vera overcome many health issues to sing their favourite hymns to us; brother Maxim travelled all day straight after a night shift to get to Bible School, and stayed as long as possible before leaving late at night- "I have been counting down the days to Bible*

School, crossing them off on the calendar". He had many comments on the daily Bible readings:



Failing eyesight is obviously a problem for many, and spectacles and support of cataract operations are always a welcome donation:



It is easy to overlook the turbulent history of countries in the region. The few years since Ukraine broke free from the Soviet Union, through its Orange Revolution, are the longest spell of true independence the country has known. Ukraine's last significant period of independence was short lived in the late 17th century, before the army of Russia's Peter the Great defeated the Swedish army outside the city of Poltava and annexed Ukraine. Whilst the Bible School was running Ukrainians voted a pro-Russian government in with a large majority. But it is not only Western Europe's relative political stability that seems alien. So is our wealth, our easy lives and our large, strong ecclesias. Most East European brethren live in isolation. Their incomes come from selling books in the street, a small pet shop, a night shift, working in a kindergarten, meager pensions. One Russian-Ukrainian has his own business and another is the deputy head of a school. But most have very little materially. But they are rich in God's Word. Most read from it every day and study it intently. They have a good knowledge of the Word and its application to their lives. Indeed, many commit their lives to the Lord in ways we only aspire to. They preach in the street and discuss God's word with friends and family with real commitment.

*The Breaking Of Bread meeting was a very intense but joyful occasion :*



*It was good to see some local converts giving talks; brother Andrej gave some lectures about how to let the Bible interpret itself; and sisters Ludmila and Cindy spoke to the sisters about "How to hold on to your health" and "The song of Solomon".*



You can download a complete set of recordings of the talks as MP3 files at <http://hristadelfiane.org/av.htm> ; brother Duncan's series of talks about Noah were also produced in English and they're downloadable here:

[Noah 1 \(Genesis 5:30 - 6:6\)](#) [] [Noah 2 \(Genesis 6:6-7:1\)](#) [] [Noah 3 \(Genesis 7\)](#) [] [Noah 4 \(Genesis 8\)](#) [] [Noah 5 \(Genesis 9\)](#)

Their dedication to God's way emerged in group sessions. Many issues were common to us all: they wanted to pray more, sing praises more, do more to help the poor (those poorer than themselves), to study more. They delighted in drawing messages from the Old Testament to support Jesus' teaching. Anybody interested in helping out at the next Bible School is guaranteed an uplifting experience. There was much to inspire. Not the food, admittedly. Sausage of unknown origin with porridge or boiled Bulgar wheat for breakfast, meat-like pattie with mashed potato and chopped cabbage salad for lunch, and meat balls in soup with sour cream for dinner, with a cup of sweet black tea at every meal.

The language is a pain too. I now have an extensive vocabulary of 31 Russian words, 10 from the Bible and 21 others. It makes for limited conversations. But hand actions and drawings help. Indeed the whole Bible School runs in Russian, so presentations need to be done through a translator. And don't think you can use Google Translate to compile PowerPoint slides. I tried and it produces complete rubbish! So, stick to short simple sentences, even if ideas are complex. That way the translator's job is a little bit easier. And give the translator an idea of the subject before you start.

So, in conclusion, will I go back? I'd love to, if the Lord remains away. I got so much from being there. I think the Brothers and Sisters got something from my talks too. So, I'd recommend it, or something similar, to anyone. A new projector - or at least a bulb- is needed to help future Bible Schools. Donations to Carelinks please.

## **VERONIKA**

The highlight of the Bible School was the baptism of Veronika, from the coal mining town of Shakhty, in the Rostov region of Russia beside the Sea of Azov at the top of the Black Sea. She speaks reasonable English, learned in class at school, but had never spoken to an English person. She is 15. Her father, Bro Andrey, works with electrical equipment and edits a Russian language Christadelphian magazine. Her mother, Sis Tatyana, works in a kindergarten, despite holding several degrees. Veronika admitted she had not decided to be baptized before she arrived at the school. She has a very clear understanding of the Christian faith, having read and discussed the Bible with her parents every day for eight years. She explained her beliefs very clearly. But she says it is hard believing in Jesus, because her friends at school do not.

Veronika was very interested in pictures of English Youth Weekends and CYC evenings on my laptop computer. She has started to e-mail a young sister in New Zealand. She likes Christian music and looks forward to being part of a global community, even if she only meets anybody from outside her region at the Poltava Bible School once a year. She regularly completes the young people's pages in the "Good Company" magazine, and was happy to have her name mentioned in it recently.

*Photos: Veronika after her baptism with her delighted parents; Cindy congratulating her afterwards. Her baptism as a second generation convert marks the 'coming of age' of the community here; we've found a photo from our archives of Veronika as a young child at one of the early Bible Schools. These Schools are really a wonderful and vital element of ecclesial life in this part of the world. We really do appreciate all the donations which make them possible.*



Her baptism was in a disused apartment in a high-rise accommodation block adjacent to the Bible School hotel in the outskirts of Poltava. It was dusk as we headed across from the hotel, the temperature well below -15C. Fortunately hot water was in plentiful supply. Returning to the hotel in the dark her parents were keen to ensure her hair was dry and tucked into the furry hood of her coat – to prevent it freezing to her face presumably. After a special breaking of bread to welcome her into our worldwide community, a special bring-and-share tea party was held, with tea served from a vast cauldron of boiling water brought up from the hotel kitchens. The evening also included some great sketches portraying Christ's purification and introduction to Simeon and Anna in the temple; Onesimus and Philemon etc.