

# MY AFTERNOON AT *Maria's* A STORY OF FRIENDSHIP



Maria and Shirley

SHIRLEY GUSTAFSON

**M**aria came right over and sat by me. She smiled and hugged me and we bonded right then and there. She did not speak English and I knew only a few phrases in Russian, but we felt our oneness in Christ.

It was my third day in Kalinovka, a town in the Ukraine. It was the fall of 2000 and I was there with a group from First Covenant Church in Rockford, Illinois. That night the women were meeting to pray and sing in the home of Anatoly and Nina. I had been asked to give my testimony. All through the evening, Maria and I nodded and smiled at one another. Then I took my scarf and tied it around my hair like hers and someone took our picture.

Maria had this glowing smile that

set her apart from so many of the Ukrainian women I saw who looked burdened and sad. Through an interpreter, I asked Pastor Igor about her and he told me that she was the first new Christian in Kalinovka and had been praying for a church. Now our church in Rockford had adopted this group of believers as our sister church, and we were helping them erect a building. (We had been put in touch with them through the Slavic Gospel Association, which has offices near Rockford.)

We invited all the ladies to a “tea” at Nina’s one night. When they had enjoyed the tea, hot chocolate, and treats, they asked us questions. When they asked my age, I discovered that I

was one year older than Maria and that was one more bond for us. When the day came for us to leave, we lugged our suitcases to the meeting place at Nina’s. We were surprised to see a group gathered to send us off, and of course, Maria was among them. She had baked some loaves of decorated bread for us to bring back to our church.

On my next trip to the Ukraine, in November 2001, I looked forward eagerly to seeing Maria again. The believers there seem to take quite literally Paul’s admonition to “greet one another with a holy kiss,” and when I met Maria she kissed me loudly many times. The sanctuary had been finished so we met in the church. Maria and I sat next to each other, and I wished I could talk

Gathered around Maria's table are, from left, Maria, Shirley, her neighbors Valodia, Olga, and Luba, and her daughter Luda.



to her. She brought me a scarf that had been beautifully embroidered by her daughter. I realized there was so little I knew about her.

When we prepared for our third trip in October 2002, I decided this time I would find an interpreter and spend some time with Maria. I had a whole list of questions for her. When I inquired if we could spend an afternoon together, Maria invited me to her house and a young woman named Roma went along as my interpreter.

Although it was a cold October day, she was standing out on the walkway to welcome us. We walked through a heavy door in a high wall into her yard, where a little dog barked his welcome. Maria's house was very small—one room with a curtained alcove for her bed. At one end of the room was a small counter/cabinet where several women were preparing food. In the wall was her stove and storage area. A table at the other end of the room reached almost wall to wall, with just enough room for us to sit on both sides.

tiful, but it tasted delicious!

As Roma helped us converse around the table, I began to ask my questions. "Maria," I said, "when did you become a believer?"

"My grandparents and parents were believers and they taught me about Jesus," she told me, "but I didn't repent and believe until 1981. We lived in the northern region of the Ukraine, part of the USSR then. My parents and I had to work very hard and often we were not paid. It was hard but we had gardens and grew our own food. We made our own clothes too, out of scraps of cloth and fur. I had an uncle who was taken to prison because he was a believer and he died there."

Maria's husband was an officer in the Soviet army. She showed me his picture—a very austere-look-

ing man dressed in his uniform, heavy with medals. He was killed in 1980. When I asked if he was a believer, Maria sadly shook her head.

When Maria lived under Communism, she sometimes had to work more than one job. It was very hard for her. When her children were little, she had to tie them in bed when she went to work since there was no one to care for them. She has four daughters, one son, ten grandchildren, and five great-grandchildren. Her daughter and the neighbors told me that they were believers, but none of them went to church regularly. Luda comes occasionally to the church in Kalinovka. I know Maria prays for them and now so do I.

Maria's house is in the middle of town, right across from the school. She gets a small pension of 68 *grevnas* (about \$12 a month). She has a garden behind her house and grows most of the things she eats. She also has nine hens, a rooster, and two pigs. Although she has little in material goods, she gave me gifts—a small bank and some candy. When we prepared to leave last October, Maria brought me bags of walnuts and pumpkin seeds.

The greatest gifts she gave me, though, were her smile and friendship. She is an inspiration to the pastor there in Kalinovka and to all who know her, and I feel so blessed to be her friend.

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A group of Christian women the author met in Kolozensy, Ukraine

Maria had invited her daughter, Luda, and her neighbors, Olga, Luba, and Valodia to share in our feast. The table was crowded with dishes of cheese, sausage, potatoes, pickles, jams, fruit compote, wafers, and cake. Maria used a long pole to remove a pot of potatoes from the oven. Then she took from the oven a warm loaf of her decorated bread. It not only looked beau-



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Shirley Gustafson is a member of First Covenant Church in Rockford, Illinois.