

# It is God, It is God...

## by Yulia Brown

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Truly, the Lord has given me an absolutely amazing testimony! Whenever I shared it in the past, people would encourage me to write a book, which I am actually thinking about doing at some point, maybe when the children are older. ☺ My story is an incredible witness to the power, goodness, and love of God.

I was born in a town called Gorlovka. It is rather small and is known for its coal mining, steel industry, and a large chemical plant. It is located in the south-eastern part of Ukraine, right next to Donetsk, which is the center of the highly industrialized Donetsk region. In fact, this is the exact area that is currently plagued by war and political unrest. I would like to give you just a bit of historical background of this region since history played a significant role in my life.

Way back in history, this land used to be occupied by the Scythians, the nomad tribes living north-east of Europe and along the northern coast of the Black Sea. In medieval times, it was part of a powerful state known as Kievan Rus', which was a group of East Slavic tribes in Europe. It was during this period in history that Christianity was introduced to the area and then continued to remain its predominant religion throughout the centuries. Although once strong, in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, Kievan Rus' entered its period of disintegration, and by the middle of the 14<sup>th</sup> century, present Ukrainian territories were under the rule of other powerful forces. First, this region became a vassal of the Ottoman Empire, but by 1779 (which is exactly 200 years before I was born), it became a province of the enormous and then very powerful Russian Empire and remained as such until the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Probably, the most significant event of the 20<sup>th</sup> century which had a profound effect not only on history but also on the culture, education, economy, and pretty much every aspect of people's lives in that area, was the Russian Revolution of 1917 (also known as the October Revolution) when the Russian Tsar Nicholas II was overthrown, and shortly afterwards the Soviet government was formed. After the revolution, several very turbulent years came. The war broke out within the Russian Empire, and many supporters of the Tsar were forced to leave the country or were mercilessly slaughtered. This time is actually marked by a significant wave of Russian immigrants to America. In fact, my most favorite patriotic song "God Bless America" was written in 1918 by a Russian immigrant Irving Berlin whose family had immigrated a few decades earlier due to persecution of the Jews. During these turbulent times following the revolution in Russia, various treaties were signed in which territories were claimed, and different Soviet republics were formed. The territory of my birth was claimed as part of the Ukrainian Socialist Soviet Republic which in 1922 officially became part of the Soviet Union.

The Soviet Union existed for almost 70 years and collapsed in 1991. After the collapse, all 15 republics that formed the union became independent states, so the Ukrainian Socialist Soviet Republic became Ukraine. Now the latest development is that just a few years ago, in April 2014, war broke out in Ukraine, and the Donetsk region has been one of the major sites of fighting. It is currently a region that seeks independence from Ukraine and is known as the Donetsk People's Republic or DPR. So far it has not been recognized internationally and is still actively at war with Ukraine. Over the last several years, it has been disheartening to hear the terrible war news from my family back there which is now split. Some of the family members temporarily moved to a different area in southern Ukraine, and some now live in Russia. So much devastation and destruction is taking place there, and much blood is being shed.

But I will get back to my story now. On this timeline, I was born on November 24<sup>th</sup>, 1979, just several weeks before the '80s ushered in. The first 11 years of my life I lived under the Soviet regime. Both my parents had degrees in engineering, and my mom ended up working for the government as engineer and architect, overseeing various road construction and city building projects, until she retired just a few years ago. My dad did not end up working in his capacity as an engineer. He served as a police officer until I was about 8 or 9 years old, and then he worked as a manager of a movie rental place. In the Soviet society, my parents were considered the so-called working class, which, according to the Soviet propaganda, was supposedly the only class in society, with no rich or poor on either end of the spectrum, but everyone kind of the "same."

I grew up with one sister, two years younger than me, and in very closely knit relationships with my mom's side of the family which included my aunt (with her husband and son), my grandma, and especially my great-grandma who had a profound impact on my childhood years and whom I will be referring to as Granny. Sadly, I do not know much about my dad's family tree. The only piece of information I have is that my great-great-grandfather was a nobleman and owed a rather large estate in Russia, somewhere near Saint-Petersburg. My dad used to tease me as I was growing up. I loved literature, foreign languages, and fine arts so much that he used to say the Russian aristocratic roots must have dominated my genetic make-up. ☺ I sometimes wish I knew more about that part of my heritage, but I believe the main reason I do not is because during the Soviet era any connection or relation to the higher class of society was considered shameful, as the very purpose of the Russian Revolution of 1917 was to overthrow the Tsar and completely disown or eliminate the upper class (which, actually, happened to be the more educated part of the society, so Russia lost a lot of its driving intelligent force at that time.)

I do know much more about my great-great-grandfather on my mom's side of the family. His name was Phydor. He was my dear Granny's father, and according to her stories, a very godly man and a devout Christian, greatly loved and respected by many. He was a homestead farmer who had a large family and owned a substantial plot of land. It was located near Kharkiv, a city

rather close to where I was born, which also used to be part of the Russian Empire before the revolution. He owned all sorts of animals and produced almost everything on his farm, including grain and various vegetables, meats and dairy, clothing, and various household items. He also had a fruit orchard, a beehive, and even a great supply of fresh fish from the pond. However, when the Soviets came to power, all of that was taken away into the so-called collective farms that belonged to the government. There was a huge problem with that, of course, because people like my Granny's father did well because they worked hard, and the fruit of their labor was blessed by God. Once the collective farms came into place, it became the so-called "everybody's land" when, in reality, it was "nobody's land", because people were no longer motivated to work hard and care for the land since it did not really belong to them.

My ancestors on both sides of my family tree had wonderful beginnings. But, all that was crushed and ruined by the Soviet regime. Besides their collective farming policies, there was a push for major industrialization of the land, with various plants and factories built across the country. Whatever population was left after the massive upper-class massacre was roughly divided into two categories: farmers who lived in villages or factory workers who lived in small towns. The next generation which included both set of my grandparents fell under the category of factory workers. My dad's parents passed away when I was rather young, and he did not share many stories from his childhood experience, so I do not know much about them.

My mom's side of the family is a different story. As I mentioned earlier, I grew up very close to both my grandma and Granny, and I know much more about their lives. In fact, during my early childhood years, I spent most of my time with my dear Granny. My parents and grandma were working, and I was left under her tender and loving care. My parents, my sister, and I lived in a standard, Soviet-era type residential building, with about 30 small apartments in it, and we occupied one of them. Most people in the Soviet Union lived in such apartments which were located on the streets of the town. Some people were allowed to build very small houses with small plots of land they could use for gardening. These were located on the outskirts and still belonged to the government, as no one owned property in the Soviet Union. My grandma was one of those people. She and grandpa built a small brick house on the outskirts of my hometown in the early 50s. Soon afterwards Granny left her village and moved in to live with them. In that little house, my mom and aunt were born, and my parents lived for a few years after my birth, before they got a separate apartment. But even after we moved into the apartment, the majority of my time as a child was spent in that little house and garden.

As I mentioned earlier, both of my parents worked, so during all the years until I turned 7 and went to school, my parents would walk me and my sister to my grandma's place every morning and then head to work. It was a good 30-minute walk. (On a side note, when I came to the US, I was very surprised to find out that people here walked for exercise because back in Russia

walking was the most common means of transportation!) Later in the day, my parents would pick me up, and we would walk back to our apartment to spend the evening there. I remember those early childhood years as happy and carefree. Besides occasional times when my Granny had to get a switch from a nearby raspberry bush and discipline me for teasing my younger sister, my early childhood memories are sweet. We had decent homemade meals, our basic needs for clothing and warmth were met, and we enjoyed a few simple toys and books, but most importantly, we received a lot of care, nurture, and love. The house was small, but warm and cozy. In the summertime, we ate all the cherries and apples from the trees in the garden that we could want. My Granny would spread a blanket on the grassy yard by the house, and my sister and I played there. In winter, on the days she was off work, my grandma would wrap us up, pile us on a sled, and pull it to a small hill nearby where we would sled to our hearts' content. Then she would pull us on the sled back home where Granny had a fresh, steaming hot vegetable soup ready for us.

The majority of my time was spent watching my Granny cook and listen to her stories. All the traditional Russian cooking was from scratch and took hours to prepare. I clearly remember my Granny's rough, calloused hands (which I thought were most beautiful) working tirelessly, peeling all those potatoes, cutting up veggies, and doing a myriad other things in the kitchen. It was during those times of cooking and working in the garden that she shared stories from her life and her father's life. These stories greatly impacted me as a child and then later, as I got older, helped me shape my worldview and understanding of history.

Apart from some childhood illnesses and pretty bad viruses, one of which almost took my life when I was a toddler, my early childhood is filled with good memories. Except the one going back to April of 1986. That was when the Chernobyl nuclear power plant catastrophe happened. I vividly remember the tears and the expression of sheer terror on my mom's face as she frantically ran around the apartment, closing every window. By God's incredible grace, most of the radiation was carried by the winds towards the north-west. Since we lived in the south-east, we were largely spared. Overall though, the ecology of the area where I grew up was terrible. In fact, once my mom attended a conference for engineers, and according to the ecological map of the world, the Donetsk region was marked as the most polluted area in the world.

Then, in 1986, I went to school. From that point on, I pretty much spent my life in books for the next 15 years, 10 of which were school (actually two schools because along with the regular school in the morning, I attended the music school in the afternoon), and the other 5 college. Those were 15 years of rigorous, strict, intense, and often merciless schooling. My first-grade teacher was a very devout Communist, and she was very strict. Each morning she would walk

between the rows of desks and check everyone's hands. If they were not clean and the finger nails neatly trimmed, she would slap on them heartily with a wooden ruler.

From the first day of school, we were deeply indoctrinated in the Communist ideology. The Russian Revolution of 1917 was depicted as the greatest event in history, and its leader Lenin as the greatest hero of all times. His portraits adorned every classroom. The vast majority of all stories and poems in the textbooks were glorifying this great leader, his successor Stalin, and the largest, happiest, proudest country on Earth – the USSR. We were called “Lenin’s grandchildren” and were inspired to make good grades and be good boys and girls to make our long deceased leader proud. Every day we wore uniforms made of coarse brown wool fabric, and the girls wore black pinafores over their uniform dresses. However, there was one special day in April when we had to wear white pinafores and white bows in our hair, and if anyone failed to dress this way, they would be sent back home in shame. That special day was Lenin’s birthday and was celebrated all throughout the country. We sang songs of praise to the great leader Lenin, as well as the Soviet Union anthem, and recited special poems. Our greatest aspiration was this: to grow up worthy of being accepted into the glorious Communist party and participate in its greatest project of all time – the building of a completely Communist society. A society, we were told, where everyone is completely equal. A society that, as we all know very well, is a complete myth.

In such indoctrination were spent my elementary school years... until the middle school years arrived. It was precisely at the beginning of my middle school years when great change was about to take place. The 90s brought with them political unrest and a sudden collapse of the Soviet Union. At first, as an 11-year old, I did not understand much of what was happening, even though the truth is, many adults did not either. For the most part, the collapse was a shocking and horrifying experience to the population. Imagine the total moral devastation when everything people had been aspired to achieve and work for, all the lofty ideals of the Communist party, became nothing. During the Soviet era, everything was highly censored: books, periodicals, newspapers, and television. With no computers or Internet available yet, I remember there were two main TV channels: one was streaming directly from Moscow, and the other one from Kiev. The one-party, highly centralized government controlled every aspect of society, and the majority of people lived in a government created “bubble” for 70 years. They were told that the rest of the world lived either in great poverty (“like the third-world countries”) or in capitalist societies with great exploitation of the poor by the rich (“like Western European countries and the US”). The vast majority of the population could not even fathom to travel outside the Soviet Union.

Imagine the mere shock and devastation when this “bubble” suddenly burst! People began to realize how horribly deceived they had been for decades! Now they were faced not only with a

complete ideology collapse but also with a horrific economic disaster. The Russian rouble currency lost its value, and since there were no banks, whatever meager cash savings people may have had, became completely worthless. It was truly an economic catastrophe.

The new Ukrainian government was in the slow and difficult process of becoming an independent state. Gas pipelines, infrastructure, and all administrative affairs – everything was so closely dependent on Moscow that breaking away created a huge mess. I will try to paint just a brief picture to give you an idea of what most of my life in Ukraine was like. Extreme corruption, lawlessness, and moral degradation permeated the culture. Crime sky rocketed. Sometimes, right from our apartment, we could hear someone being robbed, beaten, or abused, but if we tried to call the police, we would get a response like this: “Sorry about that. We have several murders that were called in tonight also, but the gas tank in our car is empty and there is none at the gas station, so we can’t go anywhere.”

People’s living conditions were awful. All throughout my school years, we were consistently without power or central heating which meant freezing temperatures in the late fall, all winter, and early spring. Even when we did have the heating on, the radiators always felt barely lukewarm to the touch, so I remember always being wrapped up in heavy layers and even sleeping in woolen stockings, under heavy goose feather blankets. Walking to school in cold months was terrible. It took about an hour to get there in the freezing wind and on extremely slippery roads. Schools were even colder than home. Due to strict uniform policy, we were not allowed to wear sweaters or boots but had to shiver all day. I remember my seat was by the window, and the cracks in it were so big I could hear the wind howling. The running water supply was often shut off for days on end. And even when we did have water, the water pressure was so low we hardly had any warm water, and the cold splash-baths was our lot.

The buildings that had been constructed back in the late 40s began to deteriorate, but no repairs of any kind were done. We had a horrible garbage pick-up system, and I remember having to bring our garbage down three flights of stairs to the huge outside trash pile right next to the apartment building. Everyone just dumped their garbage there, and it was not picked up for weeks, and sometimes months on end. In the summer, you could often smell the stench as soon as you opened the window. The wages were not paid in months. The end of the year was the worst. My mom would not get paid in September and was promised that she would get paid in October. But she would not get paid in October either, or November, or December, and then in January, the officials would say, “Well, those were last year’s wages, sorry you didn’t get them. We will start fresh in the new year.”

There was a great shortage of food, and I remember having to wake up at 4 a.m. and rush with my mom or grandma to the small bakery a few blocks away. The bread line would already be forming there so that once the store opened, the people could have a chance to get a loaf of

bread. That meant standing outside in the freezing weather for hours, just waiting to get that bread. I remember counting over 200 people in it sometimes, and if those at the end of the line saw someone ahead of them buying more than one loaf, a vicious fight would break out in that bread line. I remember having a very meager food supply during those years, and many times we literally had no idea what we would eat the next day. Our meals mostly consisted of bread, potatoes or buckwheat porridge, and whatever my grandma could preserve or pickle from the garden in the summer. (In fact, when I came to the US, I was so sick of potatoes and pickles, I did not want to eat them for years!) Foods like chicken, fish, or even dairy were a luxury. From lack of protein, I often remember feeling hungry shortly after the meal, and experiencing low energy, sleepiness, and headaches.

Great corruption permeated healthcare system as well. Often doctors and pharmacists would give medication only to those who would pay a bribe for it. During those years, I suffered through several broken bones from falls, and it was pretty dramatic for me as a child because there were no pain killers. I also remember getting respiratory infections and viruses often, with one sinus infection so severe I had to stay in the children's hospital for several weeks. One of my yuckiest memories was of the times I ran a high fever, and since we had no fever reducing medications, my dad practiced this barbaric method which I hated. He would rub vodka all over me to try to bring the fever down. And in the Soviet society, that seemed to be the answer to every problem – vodka! It is the beast that took many men's lives in the former USSR, including my dad.

In a few bigger cities, there were at least theatres, concert halls, and stadiums for hockey or soccer games. But the rest of the country consisted of small towns and villages with practically nowhere to go and nothing to do. The Soviets pushed the “vodka entertainment” on people. They offered free drinks for lunch in factory cafeterias, and get-togethers with friends and family became “the thing to do.” Every holiday, every weekend, and often even in the middle of the week, my dad would bring unexpected guests to our apartment, and the party would begin. My sister and I would try to get some sleep before the next intense day at school, but that was almost impossible. All night long the party would go on with loud music, laughter, and singing, bad language, dancing, someone vomiting in the bathroom, and then more vodka, more music, and on and on it went until the morning. Sometimes dad would get me out of bed in the middle of the night to play the piano for the guests, and he made me learn this ridiculous song about the jolly Russian drunken man which was always a great hit among his friends.

The statistics show that 80% of male population at that time regularly consumed vodka, but in my experience, it was more like 95%. At first, people drank because it was a cultural tradition, then because it was an escape from the reality of the country's collapse, and then they drank because they were addicted to drinking. And that is what happened to my dad. After 40 years

of heavy drinking and smoking, he was diagnosed with stage 4 liver cancer and died at the age of 59. During my middle school and high school years, when I needed him the most, he was already addicted. He did not talk to me much or spend time with me, and he often did not even remember what grade I was in. The only other passion he had besides vodka was TV. Nonstop TV viewing was all I remember him do when he was home. As the years went on, the relationship between my mom and dad grew increasingly tense. I remember many of my mom's tears and a lot of middle-of-the-night fighting, screaming, and even horrific physical aggression as my dad lashed out on my mom in anger, the ugly details of which I will choose not to describe today. So many children of my generation grew up with alcoholic fathers, and a great too many of them also became addicted to alcohol or drugs themselves. I have witnessed a lot of my peers buying alcohol on which there were no age restrictions and throwing their lives away.

In addition to my dad's drinking, another sad event happened. My aunt's son had a birth trauma and was diagnosed with a form of cerebral palsy. There was a terrible stigma in the Soviet society against people with disabilities, so watching my aunt's suffering and my cousin grow up in pain was heartbreaking and impacted me greatly. That experience cultivated in me an enormous respect for people with permanent physical illnesses and disabilities as well as for those who care for their suffering loved ones.

As I was growing up in this atmosphere of total hopelessness, devastation, and despair, I often wondered, how could it get so bad? How could a country with such rich historical heritage as the mighty Russian Empire was, come to such utter ruin? As my heart searched for the answers to life during my young adolescent years, it became clearer and clearer: this is what happens to a nation that turns its back on God! Truly, without God, no nation will stand. If God is disregarded in any culture, it is doomed to failure. As I pondered these things while growing up, all of my Granny's stories began to make so much sense. She was born just a year before that horrible Russian Revolution that brought about the Soviet regime, and her entire life was a witness to its atrocities. She told me that, shortly before the Tsar was overthrown, many believers had visions and dreams. One orthodox priest had a dream in which a woman all dressed in red was dancing on the altar of the church, waving a red flag in her hand, and all the walls of the church were sprinkled with blood. As a child, Granny witnessed Soviet men come and literally knock down churches. (One story was of a man who was struck dead when he tried to knock off the cross from the roof of the church.) She survived the horrible manmade famine of the mid 20s when the wheat was taken from people by force and sold to Western European countries and even witnessed cases of cannibalism in her own village. In the 30s, she survived Stalin's "purgings" when hundreds of thousands of believers who stood up for their faith were sent to Siberia, murdered, or simply "disappeared". She lost her baby to typhus, and experienced great horrors of World War 2. Her village was right in the area where many battles

were fought, and I will never forget her stories of being forced to give all their food to German soldiers, of having to evacuate and barely escaping being sent to a concentration camp, of how her house was set on fire by the Germans and burned to the ground, and of losing her dearest husband who died in the battlefield. Then after the war came another severe famine, and as a widow, she barely managed to keep her two children from starvation. (Later in life, my poor Granny lost her son to cancer.)

As I listened to her stories, I realized that so much suffering in her life she endured as a result of the oppressive government and a society that rejected God. So, by now, I am sure you are wondering how on earth I came to know Jesus? Well, now I am getting to the best part of the story! As I look back at my life, I am totally amazed and convinced that the Lord chose me and called me from before I was even born. He must have looked down on me and declared, "This child is mine!" By the time I was born, 3 generations lived without knowing God, so no one taught me about Him at all. There was no church to go to, no Bible to read, and no believers to fellowship with. If God's name was ever mentioned in history or science class, it was always mocked, and later I learned that the Soviets even took any mention of God or faith out of classical literature. But just like the Pharisees could not keep Jesus "dead" and stop the spreading of Christianity, so the Soviets failed to keep Jesus from working in my heart!

From my earliest years, I remember having powerful encounters with nature in which, even though I could not explain it as a child, in my spirit I perceived the power and greatness that filled my heart with awe. One such vivid memory goes back to the time when I was about 3 years old. I was sleeping in my grandma's house when a huge thunderstorm came in the middle of the night. I remember getting out of bed and tiptoeing to the window, in complete awe and wonder at the enormous power behind the storm. My grandma found me there and said, "Honey, what are you doing up here?" to which I answered, "Oh, Grandma, how awesome is this storm! I am sure someone very great must have created it!"

Yet the most incredible thing happened to me when I was about 7 or 8 years old. I wish I knew the exact year, but it was somewhere around the time leading up to the collapse of the Soviet Union. There was a TV program called Children's hour, and how in the world the Soviets allowed the airing of this is a mystery to me, but one section of the children's hour was an American evangelical cartoon series called Super Book. It was a story of a boy, a girl, and a little robot who found a wonderful Book in the attic. Whenever the children opened it, they were supernaturally transported to whatever time in history the Bible story took place. I was absolutely fascinated by all those stories. The cartoon series went through the entire life of Jesus, and at the very end, we were explained that Jesus is still alive and wants to be the King of our lives. I prayed the prayer to accept Jesus into my heart, and I clearly remember this unbelievable sense of peace and wonder that came over me which was very powerful. Of

course, at that time I did not understand and couldn't put it into words, but now I know that it was the Holy Spirit moving in my heart. I also remember how at that moment I felt such assurance and conviction that I encountered the truth, (not just a truth, but The Truth) that I felt totally and completely satisfied, and in my heart I knew beyond the shadow of a doubt that I would never need to search again. I discovered the Treasure. I encountered Jesus, the only Way, the Truth, and the Life.

I vaguely remember sharing my experience with my family, but they completely missed the significance of what was happening. I think my mom must have said something like, "Oh, that is a really nice story, honey, I am glad you liked it!" Since they did not take me seriously, I kept my newly found faith deep inside my heart pretty much until I was ready to graduate from college. The program that aired the cartoon included the address somewhere in Russia where I could send a request for a booklet to be sent to me for free. I wrote there and received that booklet in the mail. It was small, but it covered the very basics of Christian faith in words that a child would comprehend, and that little booklet was my only source of knowledge about Jesus for the next ten years. It is amazing how the Lord sustained my simple, childlike faith during those long, hard years. My relationship with Him grew as each night I prayed for whatever I needed help with at school, and I really learned to view Him as my Father and my protector, especially when my earthly father was not available to me. Somewhere around the age of 16, I got hold of the Bible. It was written in the archaic Russian language which was often used in liturgies in the Orthodox Church, and it was hard to understand. There was no one who could interpret it for me, so I kept praying for God to help me understand His Word.

Now, God works in mysterious ways, and He is often weaving different aspects of our lives together like a tapestry. The Lord has blessed me with many talents and abilities and gave me a great love of learning, so during my school years I was an "all As" type of student. My teachers suggested that I should pursue study in various fields. Some urged me to major in Russian language and writing, some in piano, and others in ballet, but although I greatly enjoyed all of those, English was my favorite subject by far. Since I took my very first lesson at the age of 6, I immediately knew that it was exactly what I wanted to major in. I told my parents that day that I wanted to be an interpreter, and I never changed my mind! Unlike most colleges in the US that offer degrees in various areas of study, in Russia, most colleges specialized in a particular field of study, so because not many families could afford to send their children to a different city away from home, many young people were forced to choose among whatever few colleges they had in their area (even if they didn't particularly care for that field of study.) There were only 2 colleges of foreign languages in all of Ukraine, and by God's great providence, one of them was located in my home town, within only 15 minutes of walking distance from our apartment building!

I often like to say that although I have Russian genetics, God surely gave me an American heart! During my years of study, I not only took great interest in the English language, but also fell in love with the American history. In the post-Soviet society, America was seen by many as the magic land where all dreams come true. TV channels introduced commercials advertising various brands of toothpaste, shampoo, and such which people considered very trendy. And children were convinced that bubble gum, Snickers bars, and Coke were the greatest inventions. ☺ Soap operas such as Dynasty began airing, and the Russian people were sure everyone in America must be a billionaire. However, my greatest fascination with the American culture came from very brief encounters with a few Americans who came to visit our college every now and then. I remember one lady in particular who invited me to spend a lunch hour with her during which she asked if I would be interested to practice my English by reading the Bible out loud to her. You can be sure I said yes! And from that brief encounter, I got a little glimpse of what Christian fellowship might look like. I remember praying that night and wondering if I would ever get an opportunity to worship Jesus together with other believers...

Well, our Great and Awesome God answered that prayer! It was during my third year in college that a group of Americans came and spoke to us about the Undergraduate Exchange Program we could apply for. There were many steps to take if we wanted to participate. We were to submit our grades, academic evaluations and character recommendations, travel to Kiev to take comprehensive English tests, and then later travel to Kiev again for an in-person interview with one of the Americans who acted as a program supervisor. At the end, out of 1, 500 qualified applicants, 60 would be chosen as finalists and would spend a year studying in one of the US colleges... I was ecstatic! When I got home that day and told my parents how excited I was to participate in the program, my dad was very skeptical and discouraged me from even trying. He said everything in the country was so corrupted that even though I had good grades I had no chance of winning because he believed only the children of corrupted officials would get through. But I turned to prayer. I remember fervently praying with that crazy, logic defying, childlike faith. "If it is Your will, Lord, if You, the King of the Universe, desire for me to meet the likeminded believers, then even if my chance of winning is one in a million, I believe it will happen, Lord. So, let Your will be done!"

Well, guess what? It WAS God's will, and He answered my supplication! I will never forget the day my professor told me I was chosen as a finalist in the program! When I walked home, I actually thought I grew wings, and I remember I just couldn't hide this huge grin on my face, so whoever saw me that day probably thought I was crazy (especially in Russia where people usually do not smile at strangers.) I remember coming home, falling on my knees, and thanking Him, thanking Him, thanking Him... My dad was speechless. One year of studying in the US, and everything was paid for by the American government: passports, visas, room and board on college campus, and even textbooks. And so it happened that 60 students from the former

Soviet Union flew to Washington, DC. After a few days in the city, we went to Philadelphia for a 2-week pre-academic orientation, and then were sent out to various colleges across the US. Mine was called Shorter College in Rome, GA, about an hour away from Atlanta. It was a private Baptist college, and I thought it was the most amazing school ever.

One particularly vivid memory I have is when I walked into the cafeteria on the first day, and the students motioned for me to join them in praying over their meal. I barely believed my eyes and could hardly hold back tears! I had the fellowship with other Christians at last! The entire year was all like the most wonderful dream. The loving welcome, generosity, and warm hospitality I received overwhelmed me. Every weekend I was invited to someone's home and would join that family for church on Sunday, and one time I even participated in an amazing Christian event for college students. It was held in Tennessee and called Passion. The entire weekend was filled with worship, prayer, fasting, and teaching from God's Word. My heart soared like never before. My commitment to God strengthened and faith in Him greatly deepened. Just like the French diplomat Alexis de Tocqueville who, back in the 1800s, set out to travel across America and find out what made it great and then came to a conclusion that it was God who was alive in American churches, I remember calling my mom and saying, "Mom, I discovered what makes America great! It is God, mom, it is God..." (On a side note, through my life story and testimony, my mom eventually became a believer.)

I remember how happy I was when my college friends took me to a Christian store and let me pick out a Bible. I chose the Bible with lots of footnotes and explaining, and I would saturate myself in it for hours. As an exchange student, I was allowed to take a maximum of 12 academic hours a week, so compared to 70 (yes, you heard that right!) hours a week in Ukraine, I ended up having a lot of time on my hands, and most of it I spent in God's Word or in prayer. I was like a starving child, and I just couldn't get enough of God! To add to my amazing year, I was blessed to be part of the wonderful college choir. I remember feeling God's presence so strongly while we sang, I thought we were all glowing, wrapped in His light. And this time I was worshiping the true King of Kings, and not the idol Soviet leader...

At the end of that incredible year, my heart was on fire. I no longer was content to keep my faith a private matter but wanted to shout from the rooftops how great and awesome God is! The program ended, and I went back to Ukraine with great determination to set the whole country on fire for God. Well, the reality I faced did not turn out as I had expected. Upon returning, I had one more year of study to finish before I could graduate. During that year, I faced terrible rejection and ridicule. My teachers, peers at school, and even my own family thought I went crazy and accused me of becoming a "religious fanatic." Without a doubt, it was the loneliest time in my life. No one seemed to share my passion for God, and the worst was the conflict with my dad. The more I tried to share Jesus with him, the more aggressive and

hostile he became. During one particular conversation, things got really heated up. Dad would bombard me with all the questions about God and Christian faith, probably looking for a place for me to stumble, but the Lord was graciously giving me answers to all his questions until finally it seemed as if he couldn't come up with any. I still remember how he got so angry and said, "A little egg should not teach a grown chicken. What do you know about life anyway? You spent all of yours with your nose in books and dictionaries. You don't know a thing!" I remember saying to him, "Daddy, I may not know as much about life as you do, but I simply discovered the truth, and I want you to discover it, too..."

During that difficult year, the Lord taught me the great importance of being in fellowship with other believers. He gave me the image of coals burning in the fire. If left to burn separately, they will quickly stop glowing, but kept together, they will burn brightly for Jesus... Needless to say, I spent a great amount of time praying, fasting, and seeking the Lord for direction. The school year ended, and I graduated, but still I had no idea what the Lord wanted me to do. I felt like my heart was left back in America, with my fellow Christian friends, but I had absolutely no financial means to travel, so I waited and prayed. I declined the job offer to teach at the university I had just graduated from because of the immense corruption that permeated that place where, instead of studying, students were paying money to teachers to get certain good grades. Therefore, I decided to busy myself with giving private English lessons to children while continuing to wait on the Lord.

Well, I didn't have to wait long! The Lord's hand was upon my life, and another miracle awaited me! Only 6 months after I graduated, one of my dear friends from Shorter College back in the US contacted me. She was getting married and wanted me to be a bridesmaid in her wedding. She was incredibly generous to offer to pay for my trip, so all I had to do was to apply for a tourist visa. That is when yet another miracle happened. To obtain a visa at that time was incredibly difficult. Many people tried to come to the US to seek better lives, but few managed to do so. I remember standing in a long line in the consular office in Kiev and praying for God's will to be done in my life all over again. People in front of me were turned down one by one. One man was a scientist who had a wife and children in Ukraine and who simply wanted to attend a conference in the US, but he was denied for no apparent reason. And here I was, just out of college, unmarried, fluent in English – a potential immigrant. My situation seemed impossible, but in my heart I prayed to my God with Whom I knew all things were possible. And I still remember as if it were yesterday when the officer looked me straight in the eye for what seemed like forever and said, "I issue you a visa. Enjoy your friend's wedding!" Now that was a miracle!

And so, it was March of 2002, and I was on my way to Atlanta! During that long flight, I kept praying for my future. I knew that the final decision on how long I was allowed to stay rested

upon the officer at the port of entry, so I continued to pray. When I arrived, another miracle awaited me. The officer put a stamp in my passport that was far more than I expected: 6 months! I was allowed to stay in the country for six months! It was then that I knew the Lord had a plan for me, and I just needed to discover what it was! For the next month I was busy helping my friend with wedding preparations and settling in her soon-to-be new home. After her wedding in April, I visited many of my friends from Shorter College, and they were all encouraging me to look for a job. One of those friends whose family I had previously gotten to know very well, offered me to stay with them while I was looking for a job. I was grateful to accept the offer, and the next several months were spent in resume writing, sending out job applications, and much prayer.

When I sent my academic credentials to be evaluated and “translated” in the American educational standard, the Lord had another surprise waiting for me. As it turned out, the Bachelor’s Degree I received in Ukraine was an equivalent to a Master’s Degree in the United States! Needless to say, I was overjoyed to get my Master’s overnight! ☺ I ended up sending out about 40 applications, but it was a very difficult time to get a job. I mostly sought a teaching position but also applied with Delta airlines, hoping for a flight attendant position. However, it was not too long since 9/11 happened, and Delta was actually downsizing, not hiring at that time, as many other places were as well.

Time went on, and no job offers followed. Then suddenly came an offer to teach at the Kennesaw State University in GA. I was super excited! I would be teaching English as a foreign language to undergraduate students from other countries! How awesome would that be, I thought! So I busied myself with creating a syllabus when the phone rang. It was the administrator from the University apologizing greatly that he looked further into my case and realized I needed a petition to be submitted to Immigration services by my employer in order to switch my status in the country from a “tourist” to a “worker”, and that with all the fees involved, the University was not willing to go through with the process. I remember it was raining hard that day, and I went to my room, fell on my knees, and poured out my heart to the Lord, once again seeking His precious will for my life. With only a few weeks left before my visa ran out and I would have to go back to Ukraine, I wanted to submit myself to His sovereign reign in my life, even when it seemed hard to understand.

However, as I heard it said before, God is seldom early, but He is never late. Just as I thought I had nothing else waiting for me and that the Lord must want me to go back, the friend who had invited me to come to her wedding called. She said her brother attended a church which had a private school affiliated with it, and the principle of that school was looking for an English teacher. She said he would be interested in interviewing me for the position. I clearly remember when I arrived for my interview, and the principal’s assistant looked at me, smiled

broadly and, winking at her friend nearby said, “Brad Brown!” They both giggled excitedly, and I did not quite know what to make of such odd greeting! Well, little did I know that Brad was accepted to teach at that school a year before I arrived there, so the biggest surprise of my life was waiting for me!

Needless to say, the interview went amazingly well. The principal was from Puerto Rico himself, and he was willing to work with me in the filing process to obtain a legal permit to work in the country. I was elated! God did have a plan for me!!! Only I did not realize at the time just what a grand plan that would be because, as I learned later, the moment the interview ended, the principal called Brad and said, “Guess what? I just hired your future wife!” And I’ve got to tell you this because it is very special. The very first time I saw Brad, I heard a very clear voice in my spirit saying, “This is your future husband.” I was totally taken by surprise! I never heard a voice speaking like this to me before! And the words came so unexpectedly! I had actually never dated anyone and literally spent all of my life in books and dictionaries, was just offered a new job, so the thought of marriage was not exactly in the forefront of my mind at the time, but the Lord’s plan was the best! I was teaching middle school English, and Brad taught science and the chapels for students. It was during those chapel times, when I saw Brad’s heart for the Lord, that God really started knitting my heart with his. And, as they say, the rest is history! Six months later, Brad proposed, and three months after that we got married. My family back in Ukraine thought mine was very much of a Cinderella story!

After the wedding, we filed with Immigration services, and I was granted a Permanent Resident status. We taught together in the school for two more years, and it was during the second year that the Lord began stirring Brad’s heart to want to do ministry full time. He completed his Master’s Degree through Regent University, and the Lord was calling him to a role of youth pastor. The Lord was also stirring a desire in us for a family. After much prayer, in February of 2005, we made a decision not to sign a contract for the following school year. We were stepping out in crazy faith! Just a few weeks later we discovered that we were expecting our first baby, so we knew the Lord was leading us onward.

Brad applied all over the United States, and the church in San Mateo, CA, was very interested. They flew us in for an interview, and shortly afterwards, Brad was offered the position of full time youth director. We sold our house in GA and went on an exciting 10-day drive across the country to get from GA to CA. Just a few months after we arrived and he started his job, Anastasia was born, and my heart was sold out! I often remember that before I met Brad I had such high career aspirations. I saw myself as an interpreter in the United Nations or maybe even right next to the President. But once I became a wife and a mommy, I knew exactly what the Lord created me for! The next ten years were devoted to that noble calling, as our family

grew and the Lord blessed us with Elizabeth, Hosanna, and Josiah. Now, describing these last ten years would not fit even in a book, so I am not going to attempt to do that today. 😊

Somewhere during these years, as Brad continued his studies, he earned his Doctorate degree through Fuller, and a few years ago the Lord began to stir our hearts toward pastoring a church. It was in the beginning of November last year that we visited our precious Heritage Village Church, which was “love at first sight”, and now here we are, immensely grateful and excited to be here and serve in this new and wonderful calling the Lord has given us. And I just want to take a moment to tell you all how much each of you is appreciated and loved by our family. The Lord Jesus has given us deep love for this congregation, and the desire to shepherd, nurture, and care for each one of you, and we are praying and excited to see what the Lord will do in this body of Christ for His glory!

But as I get near the end of my story I wanted to share about one more event that is very significant in my life. On September 9th, 2009, I was granted Citizenship of the United States of America, so I have been an American citizen for 7 years now. I really did not have to become one. The process was long and expensive, and it involved studying, test taking, medical exams, finger printing appointments, interviews, fees, and the long paperwork trail. I could have just continued as a Permanent resident, but I chose to go through this process because I really, really wanted American citizenship. I mentioned earlier that God gave me an American heart, and it is true. I have such deep love and devotion to this country, and I believe that this nation is unlike any other on the face of this earth.

When I first came to this country, in my eyes, the contrast between post-Soviet Russia and the America was so stark, I thought that America was as close to heaven as you can get. The main reason I thought that was because I encountered great faith in God actually lived out by people in their everyday lives. I saw faith that permeated every aspect of my friends’ lives. I saw people whose hearts were so devoted to Jesus, in whose hearts He was rightly on the throne, worshiped as the King of Kings and Lord of Lords. However, as the time went on and this country became my home, the Lord began to show me little by little that alongside all that virtue and beauty, something awful was brewing. I began to see the terrible direction our country was heading in.

I learned about the separation of church and state, and it greatly troubled me because in my life I experienced firsthand what happens when the government takes God out of the equation! (As Isaiah 1:2-3 says, “I have nourished and brought up children, and they have rebelled against me. The ox knows its owner, and the donkey its master’s crib; but Israel does not know; my people do not consider.” In this passage God is amazed at the utter foolishness of Israel which did not have the intelligence even of an ox or a donkey as it denied God, its Master and Sustainer.) I discovered that prayer had been taken out of schools, and it sent shivers up my

spine because I witnessed the moral decay of a generation that was not taught the ways of God. (And Psalm 78:5-6 says, “For He established a testimony in Jacob, and appointed a law in Israel, which He commanded our fathers, that they should make them known to their children; that the generation to come might know them, the children who would be born, that they may arise and declare them to their children, that they may set their hope in God, and not forget the works of God but keep His commandments, and may not be like their fathers, a stubborn and rebellious generation, a generation that did not set its heart aright, and whose spirit was not faithful to God.”) And when I learned about redefining marriage while calling it “choice”, and legalizing murder while calling it a “woman’s right”, my heart broke...

Each year I discovered more and more of the horrible things taking place, and each year it looked like the poison of liberal progressivism was permeating our culture more and more. In recent years, the moral fabric of this country seems to be disintegrating at lightning speed, and my heart is bleeding. What frightens me the most is that many things that are happening here today remind me more and more of the frightening Socialist regime I was born under! The scary regime I talked about today! Only under such rule would people lose their business or get in trouble with the law because they refuse to sell products or render services based on their religious beliefs! And this is especially true when it comes to media. It is devastating to me when I observe the media in this country push political propaganda and the same mind-controlling tactics as did the Soviets in the Former Soviet Union! When the conflict in Ukraine broke out a few years ago, the news commentaries on what was happening in the region were completely the opposite to my family’s reports! I could plainly see that the media, for whatever political reasons, clearly took sides with the Ukrainian government which referred to the people in the area of my birth who desired to join Russia (and that would include my family) as separatists and even terrorists.

I do not think it coincidental that the Lord arranged for me to share my life story with you today, at such a time as this. A really turbulent time for our country.... I had people tell me that I have greater love for America than some who were born here. I believe there is truth to that. As an immigrant, I have been “on the other side”, and I know what it’s like. I know what it is like to live under the highly centralized government that controls everything, from education to healthcare, the government that turns its back on God. It is devastating. It is horrible beyond description. Recently I read this quote by an author and commentator Eric Metaxas, and here is what he said, “American freedoms can never flourish in a secular environment because virtue and freedom are connected. The kinds of freedoms we have in this country simply cannot exist without virtue. Without God, we are lost. He is the one who inspires us to virtue, and He is the only One who can help our country rediscover its virtue. It’s at the heart of who we have been as a nation, and it’s unavoidable. It cannot work any other way.”

Doesn't it just echo my own proclamation to my mom years ago, "I know what makes America great! It's God, mom, it's God..."?

I know the hot topic of politics and upcoming elections has been sickening to many people. I remember talking to a friend back in GA shortly before the elections in 2008 who told me, "You know, I am just sick of it all. I think they are all corrupt out there in Washington. I don't think either candidate deserves my vote." And part of me understood what he meant. But as bad and messy as the whole process has gotten, the reality remains, we have to cast our vote! A vote that, in my opinion, is not based on the moral character of the candidates, but rather on the overall direction our country will take under their leadership. I just read the staggering statistics that 24 million Christians did not vote in 2008 election. This figure shocked and horrified me. One of the reasons I wanted to become a US citizen was so that I would be granted the right to vote! What an awesome right and responsibility it is for the people to participate in their own government, the government "of the people, by the people, and for the people?"

But I noticed that people are busy. People want to get on with their lives. Maybe they are not interested, or maybe discouraged, or confused. But our God is not a god of confusion. His righteous standards of right and wrong are clearly spelled out in His Word. Here is what we find in Isaiah 1:16-20, "Wash yourselves, make yourselves clean; Put away the evil of your doings from before my eyes. Cease to do evil, Learn to do good; Seek justice, Rebuke the oppressor; Defend the fatherless, Plead for the widow. 'Come now, and let us reason together,' says the Lord. 'Though your sins are scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall be white as wool. If you are willing and obedient, you shall eat the good of the land; but if you refuse and rebel, you shall be devoured by the sword'; For the mouth of the Lord has spoken." God's Word is as clear as day! The good deeds in this passage are defined as social justice, particularly resisting oppressors and promoting the interests of the vulnerable. Such as an innocent unborn babies... (The context of this passage is Isaiah's warning to the nation of Judah who was under the rule of wicked king Ahaz at the time. Ahaz ordered children to be thrown into the fire as a sacrifice to his idol god, and I believe that millions of unborn babies in this age are being sacrificed to the idols of selfishness and rebellion against God.)

Thus, I have a deep passion, and my prayer and my heart's desire is that the Christians across this nation will be united in this passion. The passion to cry out to God for His mercy on this nation. The passion to seek Him with fervent prayer, fasting, and studying His Word. The passion to seek justice for the oppressed, to defend the rights of unborn children, to stand up for religious freedom. The passion to protect the very ideas and principles that this country was founded on for the glory of God...The passion to preserve the blessings God bestowed on this nation for the sake of our children and grandchildren...

I believe it is a critical time for our nation like no other. What vision will the newly elected leadership team act upon? Will it appoint judges to our Supreme Court who will defend our Constitution and fight for our religious freedom and those Christian values we hold so dear or who will wrongly assume their law making role and impose on this nation the liberal political agenda that directly opposes God and would instead set the trajectory for sin for decades to come? Will the new leaders do everything in their power to protect the lives of the unborn? Will they defend our nation against our enemies? Will they uphold the Biblical sanctity of marriage as between one man and one woman?

It is my heartfelt prayer that God will protect us from all evil, that the powers of darkness will not deceive God's children, that lies will be uncovered and corruption will not prevail, that Christians across this nation will be very discerning as to what media sources they allow to shape their views, that they will study the current issues and both candidates' views on those issues, and that they will exercise their God-given right and will vote, and as they do so, that the Holy Spirit will reveal to people which of the two candidates, along with their team of advisors and administrators, sets forth a vision which, at the very least, offers hope that our country may get back on the right track. So, may God bless America, land that I love! For it is only God who makes her great. It is God!

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