

## A Good Man

- by Eric Schempp

While living in Lodeynoye Pole, Russia, I was working on a carpentry project for an orphanage located in a town nearby called Svir Stroi. And to no one's surprise, one of the biggest steps in developing a carpentry project is to hire a carpenter. So, for the time being, that was my mission. Everything was laid out, the project researched, and I just needed to find a carpenter.

The director of the orphanage insisted that I visit a friend of hers who she knew was a fairly good carpenter. He had done work for the orphanage before and she was happy with him. It didn't matter that last time the orphanage hired him he showed up to work infrequently, and when he did, he was usually stumbling around in a drunken stupor. It also didn't matter that he stumbled around the kids of the orphanage or that he worked with power tools. And it didn't matter that while he was drunk, he was teaching kids how to use power tools. And it certainly didn't matter that he worked without any protective gear while teaching those kids to use power tools. All that mattered was that he had done work in the orphanage before, and that he had, at one time, been a good man. And if I went and met him, I would agree that he was a good man. So, that became my new task. I had to meet a drunken carpenter and determine that he was good man. If he was a good man, then it was suitable to hire him.

I set up a time to meet him, and he insisted that I go to his house. I had no idea what I was hoping to get out of the meeting. I didn't know what I was going to ask and I didn't know what he was going to say. I didn't know much of anything. I didn't yet know much Russian, and I certainly didn't know such words as deceased, dead, and killed. It didn't occur to me that visiting a carpenter required such vocabulary. I was still in the "positive vocabulary" stage of my studies learning phrases such as "The weather is just delightful, is it not?" and "I am feeling myself excellent today!"

So, off I went with my positive vocabulary to meet the drunken carpenter and see if I felt that he was a good man. If he was, then I was to hire him. I walked all the way to the other side of town which really wasn't too far, maybe thirty minutes of so. Eventually, I crossed the train tracks that lead into the bad part of this tiny town and the

drunken carpenter's neighborhood. After getting lost, which for me was the norm, I pulled out my positive vocabulary and was able to charm some people into telling me which direction I wanted to be heading. Eventually, I found my destination and the home of the drunken carpenter.

He met me at the door and appeared fairly sober. He invited me in and as I looked around, I couldn't believe my eyes. There was junk everywhere. I stepped over some old shoes and a few piles of clothes and entered. As was Russian custom, he felt obligated to feed me. After apologizing that he was divorced and didn't have a wife to cook me a proper meal, he decided that he would try to whip something together.

The first task was to remove a pile of junk that was on the stovetop. He found a pan in the corner of the kitchen that conveniently had water already in it. He put it on the stove to boil so we could have some tea. He then fumbled around for a few minutes looking for matches and eventually found one and was able to light the gas stove. He went into a cluttered closet to see if he had some soup that he could cook. After brushing the dust off a few cans of homemade soup, presumably made by his ex-wife years earlier, he deemed that fish soup would be appropriate for the occasion. He threw it in a pan and started to cook that too. He went into the refrigerator (the only place where there wasn't junk) and pulled out a loaf of bread. He found a knife under some plates with the remains of what looked like a vegetable and a meat mixture, and started slicing the bread. He removed some junk from the chairs in the kitchen and I sat and waited for the tea to be prepared.

Ten minutes later food was on the table, vodka was poured, and we were engrossed in conversation. Thankfully, due to my positive vocabulary, I was able to compliment him on his splendid place and wonderful fish soup. I told him how nice it was to meet him and that we did indeed have delightful weather.

All was good. I was able to sip the fish soup while casually and discretely picking the bones out of my teeth. I was able to hold a conversation, which helped to let me express that although I loved his fish soup, I really, really loved the bread. And luckily my positive vocabulary didn't fail me when I noticed that the bread I was eating was encased in mold. I was able to mutter that the food was great and I am stuffed!

After a few more shots of vodka, which I gladly accepted to wash down the old fish soup and moldy bread, it was time to entertain me. He pulled out an Elvis Presley record and excitedly played his favorite song, "You Ain't Nothing But a Hound Dog!" on his scratchy little record player. He frantically ran around room while jamming to his beloved Elvis Presley music. He proudly declared that he had illegally kept the record in his apartment during the communist era and could have been thrown in jail for having it.

"That's great!" I said.

Next came the photo album and where my positive vocabulary failed me. He pointed to a bunch of people and repeatedly said the word "umare" (oo-mare). Not knowing that the word meant dead, I enthusiastically answered with such phrases as "How wonderful," "Excellent," and "Really? This is good!" He wasn't fazed by what I said. He continued to point to pictures of his friends and family saying "umare", and I kept on acknowledging the wonderful stories that he was saying with "great!" and "excellent!" This continued for more than twenty minutes.

Soon, it was time to go home. I thanked the drunken carpenter and went my merry way. It was dark out, I had vodka in my system, and again I got lost. After a few directions from some helpful passersby, I found my way home. Once safely inside, I looked up the word, "umare" and just about lost the fish soup and moldy bread concoction that was churning in my stomach. Luckily, the vodka helped me sleep that night.

A couple of days later, I went to see the director of the orphanage. She inquired about my meeting with the drunken carpenter and what I thought of him. I knew that I couldn't lie. Telling the truth, I said that it was a good meeting and, yes, he is a good man.

\* Due to many problems and much reluctance and hesitation from the director of the orphanage, the carpentry project never got underway. I never saw the "drunken carpenter" again.