

# A random encounter

*I met a veteran of the Afghanistan war on the train platform in Zima, Siberia. It was a most remarkable stop on the Trans-Siberian Railway.*

## US Partner Jim Couch on how a chance encounter got him thinking

Well, remarkable for me. Lois, Becca and I were taking the long way around back to the US from Asia this past July. The journey is six days by rail from Beijing to Moscow and our overland travel adventure required that I take the twenty minutes stops at major stations, usually around five hours apart, to find food.

Zima represented a particular challenge for me. First of all, I saw a most interesting building beside the tracks as we pulled into the station. I had to have a photo of it. We were

also low on our food stocks. Our diet consisted of sausages and bread with the rare cucumber or piece of fruit thrown in. However, I was low on rubles and few people out in Siberia are willing to change dollars for you. But I had read that there are ATMs in the Russian train stations. So I set my goals for the next twenty minutes: dash over to the building and snap a shot, race into the station and see if the rumour of the ATMs was true, and, if so, then capture a meal for our family from the stalls lining the platform. But, I think that God had other plans for me that day. ➤



You can see here the photo of the building that caught my interest. And yes, there is an ATM at the Zima, Siberia station and it does dispense rubles using my bankcard. I was two for two with ten minutes left. Now, over to the kiosks for provisions. "Two sausages," I said in English pointing to the treasured sustenance with one hand while holding up two fingers with the other. Back in our train cabin I spread our meal out before the adoring faces of my loved ones.

"I did it," I said to myself walking back into the train corridor to look out upon Zima. But as I gazed upon the field of battle on which I had been so victorious, my eyes fell down upon a bedraggled man in his mid-thirties and what I took to be his young son beside him. The boy's hands were full. He was clutching two halves of a watermelon. His father was gazing up at me with a beseeching look, that universal expression of piteous appeal beggars use was etched across his face. As he began his spiel I was astounded. I understood him. He was speaking Persian.

It never ceases to amaze me that when I meet people in these exotic places and we begin to speak in a minority language like Persian, they fail to think it strange that a foreigner can speak, with limited capacity in my case, their native tongue. He was a Persian speaking Tajik, a veteran of the Soviet Union's Afghanistan war, from whence the deployable condition of his life ensued. Did I not have a few rubles to spare? Well, I did. In fact, my pockets were literally brimming with rubles.

I could be magnanimous. Had I not

just accomplished a most remarkable feat: providing fine fare for my family for the next five hours? I stepped back into our cabin and picked up one of the sausages. "There's a Tajik out here begging who fought in the Afghan war," I announced. I reached down with my offering. He reached up with his outstretched hand. A Siberian sausage passed between us.

That should have been it. In fact, if I were writing the story, that is how it would have ended. I wanted the train to move. "Certainly it's been twenty minutes by now," I thought. The man tucked the sausage into his coat pocket with thanks and continued beseeching for more, more food, and maybe some rubles too. "Why couldn't he be happy with my sausage?" I thought. "It's like the Afghans say, 'there are two things that are never full – the beggar's bowl and the mullah's stomach.'"

I met myself on the train platform in Zima, Siberia. I wanted my giving to be easy. Out of my abundance had I not been so generous? I wanted him to be satisfied – satisfied with my small talk in Persian, satisfied with my compliments about his son, satisfied with the gift from my table. And still the train did not move. But I did. I came back into our cabin and sulked, turning over the uncomfortable occurrence in my mind. "Why can I not feel satisfied through this giving?" I mused.

The train jerked and began to move forward. I looked past our cabin door into the corridor and saw the veteran from the Afghanistan war jumping up to catch a final look at me through the window. His face



The train winds its ways across Russia

was smiling. The begging was over. I ran to the window to bid him and his son farewell. Looking back at them on the Zima platform I waved as I watched them diminish in size while the Trans-Siberian Railway took us onward to another adventure.

Back in the States in the Interserve office, Lois and I met with our finance director. "You'll need to raise more support to meet your budget," he said. Lois' modest salary from the school in Thailand was finished and we now need to make up the shortfall. With eighteen months before us in both the States and New Zealand, we face the unenviable task of finding funds from donors who support our ministry.

At the same time, these donors are not some random travellers passing through our lives. They are partners with us in our work, some of them showing interest in us for over fifteen years. I've been pleased to find how many folk back home really have been keeping up with us, reading our newsletters, praying for us, and supporting our ministry.

Yet even with all that, despite the "noble cause", I often feel like a beggar at a train station. I guess that's my challenge during this season of life: how to give and how to receive. And it all rose to the surface when I met myself on the train platform in Zima, Siberia. ■