

## “You’ll Always Have a Friend in Georgia”

The story of Marie’s Baptism

By Jollee Baker

In 1999 we were blessed to adopt our son, James, from Russia at eight months of age. The orphanage Director told us he had been baptized in the Russian Orthodox Church during his stay at the baby home. The cross from his baptism, given to us as a necklace on common string, is the only tangible memento we have of his life in Russia.

In 2002 we were again blessed to adopt our daughter, Marie, from The Republic of Georgia. When we received Marie’s referral we asked if she had been baptized in her birth country, hoping our children could share this common heritage. We learned that she hadn’t been baptized and more amazingly that we could have her baptized in the Georgian Orthodox Church and be part of the ceremony during our trip. As fortune would have it, our time in Tbilisi would overlap briefly with that of our dear friend Robin Sizemore. Accordingly, we requested the ceremony to be scheduled on a day when we were both in Tbilisi, to share such an awesome and traditional “Georgian” event with Robin, truly a “living saint” to the Georgian people.

We were urged not to pack a christening gown and instead purchase one in country. During our trip we learned that out of necessity a “nice” dress or outfit is the common attire for such occasions. Fortunately, Marie’s new grandmother gave us an adorable summer dress, albeit a pink cotton knit, that became her christening gown.

Our Georgian adoption team handled the arrangements and the ceremony took place at a small and very traditional church set in a field of wild flowers, scrub brush, and a few goats. While taking photos in the church is strictly forbidden, we were allowed to video tape the entire ceremony! Chants, candles, and prayers for the future filled the hour on that hot summer day. Marie was an angel through the entire ceremony, even when a goat unexpectedly wandered in!

To celebrate Marie’s baptism and to show our appreciation of our Georgian friends and Robin, we were honored to host a lunch at a magnificent restaurant on the river just outside of Mtskheta. We enjoyed many traditional Georgian dishes and even tried Terragon, a soda pop type drink that tastes much like the herb. At the table next to ours was a party of about

a dozen young men enjoying a meal together. A few different times on that afternoon several of these men spontaneously broke into song at the table, while others kept eating and one even took a call on a cell phone. Their voices formed perfect and multiple harmonies that seemed to drift along the river. WOW, so cool and so Georgian!! I had goose bumps and was clearly taken by the experience. I asked our Georgian friends if they were a professional group. They just said, “No”, as if to say, “this is no big deal, really”.

I asked where they learned to sing, “Everyone learns to sing in church” was the reply. Sensing that my awe and amazement were only growing, one Georgian in our party said, “It’s just friends singing at a meal, all Georgians can sing”.

“Do women sing in public too?” I asked.

“No, of course not, women only sing in church”, was the answer. After taping the entire baptism just hours earlier, we had only enough battery reserve to inconspicuously capture about a minute of their casual performance.

After Turkish coffee and ice cream we left the restaurant and gave the Godparents a ride home. At the end of the road there were hugs and tears, as we said, “Nakhvamdis” to Marie’s Godparents, two people who care deeply for Marie and the welfare of Georgia’s children. In broken English the Godfather turned to us and with the sincerest smile said, “You always have friend in Georgia”.

Since our trip to Tbilisi we have enjoyed phone calls and e-mails from Marie’s Godparents.

Addendum:

In the spring after our trip, we were honored to have Marie’s Godmother visit us for a week. In true Georgian style she brought wonderful Georgian gifts for each member of our family. We had the best time showing her our city and she embraced both of our children as her own. I told her that I heard that all Georgians could sing and asked her if she could sing for us. Laughing and blushing she declined. Toward the end of the week, as she became more comfortable, she cradled Marie in her arms and sang her a traditional Georgian lullaby. Once again I had goose bumps.