

Chapter 38



Central Asia

Light in a Forgotten -stan

by Von Newcomb

The light bulb in our ten-by-fifteen-foot practice room at a national conservatory in north Central Asia had burned out a month earlier, and no one had yet cared enough to replace it.

Sunlight, too, died out dispiritingly early every winter day. The approaching darkness always made me all the more aware of the smell of dust- and mold-saturated curtains and chairs, which hadn't been cleaned in who knows how long. After practice, we left the gray concrete, post-Soviet school and make our way through a maze of other even-more-gloomy-in-the-dark concrete buildings to a bus stop. There we became lost in a sea of other nameless people crammed into buses going to unobserved places. All this was a daily, depressing reminder that, to me, the world had forgotten this "unknown" country whose name ends in "-stan."

But on this particular cheerless December day, as we came to the end of our folk group practice, darkness and anonymity were driven back. A beautiful beam of orange light streamed through the small window. And a profound truth was revealed in a new believer's song.

My family and I lived in this "unknown" country for two years, learning the language and studying folk music. One day, a local musician approached me about helping her and some of her believing friends start a folk instrument worship group. This was an exciting opportunity for all

of us, but the first time we met, we were also struck with the magnitude of the task. The first question I asked the group was, "So, what are we going to play?"

"We don't know," they replied, "there isn't any Christian folk music in our culture."

Seemingly not a problem for me, I quickly responded, "That's OK, you guys can write some."

"No we can't. In music school, we weren't composition majors."

"Well, I write music, and I didn't even go to music school! If we start praying and you start trying, God will give you the creativity to voice your praise to him."

Agreed, we began and ended our practices with times of prayer, asking God to give songs and melodies that would beautifully express heartfelt praise. We also started learning other folk songs that would help us jell as a musical group, expand our repertoire, and give us an immediate hearing by other locals.

Weeks of playing and praying passed, when one day, I got an unexpected email from my home office:

... I hope you all are doing well over there. By the way, you submitted a project proposal for a recording studio about a year ago. I have someone who would like to give you the full amount (\$20,000)!

I was stunned. At the prodding of my team leader, I had written the proposal for the purchase of some recording equipment and sent it to our organization's project proposal team. But since there was no music to record, I never mentioned it to anyone.

As it turned out, a member of our finance department sent both the proposal and our recent prayer letter about the newly formed folk-instrument worship group to someone interested in helping a project in our area of the world. After reading the two documents, the donor then wrote back and asked if they could help make the studio a reality.

So the home office asked, "Do you want the money?"

What a question! Of course, we wanted the money!

But at the time, there were less than one thousand believers in this people group, and our work with musicians was just beginning to take off. There were not yet any original indigenous worship songs to record. And I didn't want the opportunity of recording on fancy western recording equipment to become the believing musicians' motivation for writing music. Also, I wrote the proposal knowing that I had never actually put together a studio. If they did send the money, how would I even know the best way to use it?

So, God and I came to an agreement. I would say "yes" to the money when and if three things happened. First, I would be assured that there would be new worship songs to record; second, God would provide someone to help me spend the money wisely; and third, he would provide someone to train me in how to use the equipment to its full potential. If any one of those three didn't happen, then the equipment would be nothing more than a very expensive paper weight.

The next day around 10:00 AM, one of our believing musicians knocked on my door for a visit and some *chai* tea—nothing unusual about that. So we got out the tea and cookies and talked a while. And then a very surprising question slipped into the conversation.

"Would you like to hear the new song I just wrote?" she asked.

"What did you just say?" Remember, I was still in language learning and wasn't sure of what I just heard.

"I wrote a new worship song. Will you tell me if you think it is good?"

After lifting my jaw off the floor, Gulnara* played a lovely new song that called her people to praise God for the new life only he can bring. As excited as I was about the new song, I was also in turmoil because of my discussions with God the night before. Was *one* song enough for me to check off the first point in my agreement with God—that there would actually be some new worship songs to record?

After Gulnara left, there was a second knock at the door around 1:00 PM, another musician, and another "Would you like to hear a new song I just wrote?"

Hmm, God, are trying to tell me something?

It was also that same December day at about 4:30 PM when the clouds broke open and a beautiful shaft of orange light streamed into our cold practice room right before sundown. It was like a stage light from heaven shining down on Dilbar* who sheepishly introduced her gift.

"You know, I have been thinking about our discussions and prayers about writing new songs for God. And, well, I decided about a month ago I wanted to write a new song for Jesus—to remember his birth—and I finally finished it last night. Would you all like to hear it?"

She then pulled out her *komuz* (the national instrument of her people) and began to sing:

There is *sewyewnchew* in the city of Bethlehem!
Rejoice, my people, Jesus the Savior was born!
God, who is with us, may you be with us forever, Emmanuel.
Receive your Creator, who came to abide with you.

My God, filled with power, filled with grace,
His love, oh, how amazingly infinite it is!
You can hear his invitation always calling your name.
He has said, "I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life."

My Lord, I am grateful for your Gift.
God, who has been with us and will be with us forever, giving
eternal life,
Today, we celebrate your birthday with you!
And, we glorify and rejoice with you.

When she finished, there was not a dry eye in the room. She had announced the arrival of the Savior in a perfect way, unique to her people and customs. In this Central Asian culture, the word *sewyewnchew* introduces news that is extremely special and valuable, such as a

child's birth. In fact, when a person enters a room and announces "Sewyewnc Chew!" everyone stops what they're doing to hear what amazing news it might be. They are even required to give a gift or some money for the privilege of hearing such a treasured announcement.

There is sewyewnc Chew in the city of Bethlehem!
Rejoice, my people, Jesus the Savior was born!

As we sat rejoicing together in the dusty practice room, the golden orange light eventually faded to black. Lost for words, I was overwhelmed with the care and concern of our living, heavenly Father. As Dilbar was singing, it struck me again that these people were on Jesus' heart way back when he came to be the sewyewnc Chew for the world.

The three new songs arriving miraculously in one day were a clear and direct answer to both our group's prayers and my question—about whether or not a studio would be used in this place. I was sure then that God would bring individuals to help fulfill the second and third parts of our agreement.

Four days later, I met a man who introduced me to a friend who installs studios professionally and who also teaches recording technology at the university level. One year later the studio was up and running.

I still don't like the way darkness falls early in winter in Central Asia. But now, every time I see a sunset in December, I remember that in spite of the despair and hopelessness all around me, this "-stan" has never been forgotten by the only One who can bring to it light and hope.

Epilogue

The song "Sewyewnc Chew" was recorded in spring 2000, along with the other firstfruits of worship from these musicians, and was released in a collection called *Kudaidy Danktaibuz* ("We Glorify God"). A second recording of original spiritual songs and melodies entitled *Baysal* (the chosen name of the folk ensemble) was completed using the new recording equipment in 2003.

In 2005, at the time this article was written, the Baysal musicians were still playing together. A group of them are currently recording a

collection of original modern instrument worship songs they, and other musicians in their church's worship team, have written. This recording is being co-produced by the author of this article and the leader of Baysal who is learning how to run the studio.

*The name has been changed to protect the person's identity.