



## YERMEK BALYKBEKOV— A KAZAKH REACHING HIS OWN PEOPLE WITH THE GOSPEL!



My wife, Kamazhai and I were born in 1975 in Central Kazakhstan. We were raised in two different cities just miles apart. We were married on July 6<sup>th</sup> 2002. Our two daughters are respectively 6 years and 18 months old.

As a young adult, while visiting South Africa, my parents were saved through our local Kazakh fellowship. My wife's parents shared *Isa Masih* (Jesus) with my parents, and since then, several of our relatives have come to faith.

Since childhood, I spent most of my time involved in sports. For about ten years, I did Japanese Martial Arts (Karate and some Judo). Since Martial Arts are connected with self-discipline, I always tried to better myself, so that I would not only be physically strong, but morally, as well. I was three times the National Karate Champion. In 1997, I attained a Black Belt Level 1.

As I grew into adulthood, I gradually changed for the worse and drifted into the lifestyle of a tough hooligan. I stopped competing, and began to practice self-defense, which is a form of street-fighting, thinking that was the way to make me a strong person. I was also earning a living coaching youth in my city, while sharing with them from my own experience how to fight in the streets. When I began drinking and messing with drugs, I was pulled into criminal activities. The longer I lived like that, the worse I became, and I caused myself many problems. My character was horrible and I often hated myself for the wrong things I was doing. Gradually, I became tired of my lifestyle and wanted to change, but I couldn't. Then I had an opportunity to go to Moscow, so I moved to Russia in 1998, hoping to better my life.

While in Moscow, I came in contact with a group of athletes who were Christians. I considered myself a traditional Muslim, although I was not practicing Islam, so when I learned about a personal relationship with God through Jesus Christ, I thought, "*I do not need Jesus, because I am Kazakh, which means I cannot be a Christian*".

In fact, after I began reading the New Testament that my friends had given me, I hated this book, especially where Jesus says "*without me you can do nothing*". I thought, getting very angry with Jesus, "*Who do you think you are?!*", even though I knew deep inside that what He said was true — I could not do anything to change myself.

Slowly, I got a deeper understanding of the fact that I was a sinner. I knew that if I were to stand before Allah, I would not be sure what would be awaiting me after death. Still, I was resisting in taking steps toward Jesus. The turn came when the Christian athletes invited me to a Christian sports conference. There I heard many testimonies on how God had changed people's lives. I finally understood that I needed God.

After the conference, in May of 1999, **I began to confess Jesus as my Lord and my Savior. I began praying to God in the name of Jesus, seeking Him,**



The Balykbekov Family in 2010.

reading the Holy Book and having fellowship with believers. God started to move in my life. He changed my character and freed me from the destructive habits which I had tried for many years to break. He gave me a tremendous peace in my heart and I knew I had received something that I never had possessed before in my life: faith! My life was filled with the joy of fellowship with God!

Having fellowship with the brothers in *Athletes in Action* and working with them a bit, I thought my calling was to serve in sports ministry in Central Asia. With that assurance, in 2002 I enrolled at Moscow Bible College and studied there for two years.

After graduating, I flew to Kazakhstan where my future wife was awaiting me. After our wedding, we stayed in **Karaganda** and began attending the local Kazakh fellowship there.

I could hardly speak Kazakh, because I grew up around Russian-speaking people. Actually, before I came to Jesus, I was full of hatred toward my people, my country, and my culture. When I visited our Kazakh fellowship, I saw my people preaching in our native tongue, praising God and leading the service. service in our cultural contexts.

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Yermek's first disciple group.

I began to cry because I did not understand a word in Kazakh and felt that I needed to know my own language well in order to reach my people.

Then our pastor invited me to teach Bible once a week because of lack of leaders, and I agreed to assisting him. **Suddenly, I realized that I have a gift of teaching and preaching which I never had before.** Nevertheless, I was still pursuing becoming a sports minister, so my wife and I moved to Almaty to join *Athletes in Action*.

Once there, we did not feel peace in having moved there, so I began crying out to God, asking what was wrong with my calling. When I finally gave it up, the Lord filled me with peace and joy, and assured me that **my call was to return to Karaganda, join the Kazakh fellowship, and serve my people.** When I returned in December 2002, I received the fire from the Lord to serve my own people though full time preaching and raising up disciples of Jesus.

Presently I teach in our *Kaum* (church), helping the believers become stronger in the Word of God. I am assisting our small group leader, and now, while learning my own language, I am working on a discipleship program for



Six new believers ready to be baptized.

new Kazakh believers to give them a foundation of faith. We have named it "God's Path". There are now fifty in our fellowship, half of whom are growing believers.

Our disciples are starting to raise up others. We prayed for our neighborhood for two months, and now we have sports activities there (volley ball), while building relationships with Kazaks,, Uzbeks, Tatars, and others. Last Sunday, the Mullah's helper in a mosque visited our fellowship — may the Spirit of God open his heart! The Lord is showing us how to stand in prayer for each other and the new believers. Many of them are experiencing difficulties from their relatives. Our cell groups are increasing. **Please pray for us!**

### RECENT UPDATE:

Almost a month ago, we had a great event in our fellowship. Six new converts were baptized in water. You can see the baptism pictures of some of them. **It's a great joy for us to see how Kazakhs put their faith in Christ!** There are a lot of challenges for them, both in their spiritual growth and pressure from their relatives — but that is the normal way of life for those who follow Him. Cont..



The joy of a transformed life in Christ!

Although my husband, Steve and I are staunch supporters of Israel and the Jewish people, that view does not at all collide with **our love for the Muslim-dominated nations of the world.** One example is our more than twenty year commitment to **Kazakhstan** and her peoples who are deeply imbedded in our hearts — **Yuri Shumayev** and all our wonderful friends at **Agape Evangelical Center**, **Sargon Daniali** and his network of relationships, both in Almaty, among many others.

**Yermek Balykbekov** a Kazakh from Central Kazakhstan, is also part of our Bridge network. We were introduced to Yermek by a good friend of his, **John Macintosh**, Canadian missionary to Russia and the Ukraine, who in 2003 visited us in Florida. John told us about this courageous young Kazakh he had met in Moscow who had forsaken a potentially lucrative future in Martial Arts (he was three times Kazakhstan's national champion) to follow God's call to return to his homeland and reach his Kazakh people for Jesus.

I find it timely to reprint Yermek's personal testimony (published in the Feb 2004 BR) and give you an update on his life and ministry. If you want to financially support the Gospel among the Kazakh people, please mark your donation: **8342 Kazakhstan Workers.** Thanks for prayers on their behalf!

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Recently we had a healing outreach under open air, which also went well. Although we were a small group of approximately fifty gathered, the Holy Spirit brought some of them to salvation. They were freed from bondages of sin and diseases. The reasons why we do healing outreaches are, first of all—we follow what Jesus did in His ministry; secondly — He promised in His word that signs, healing and miracles will confirm His word. As we work among Muslims we find that those are a powerful ways to bring their attention to the fact that **Isa (Jesus) is a Mighty God, not just a prophet! The Kazakh Muslims need to see and experience the power of the Living God! We will continue to go out among our people and share our faith, pray for the sick, and demonstrate that Jesus Christ is our risen Lord!** If God places a desire in your heart to pray for our fellowship, please pray for:

1. Our Bridge Ministries, such as our youth— and healing outreaches, one-on-one evangelism outreaches done through inter-personal relationships, radio ministry, and ministry to orphans in state-run orphanages.
2. In mid-September, **we are planning to have a big feast coinciding with the end of the month of Ramadan, to which we will invite our Muslim friends.** For those who are new believers, our discipleship program is adapted to our culture - a lot of food and fellowship before we share the Word and touch their hearts!



13762 State Road 84, Suite 423  
Fort Lauderdale, FL 33325  
USA

Ragnhild K. Ulrich ("R.K.")  
Executive Director

Tel 1.954.916.0521

Fax 1.954.916.8740

E-Mail:

[TheBridge@BridgeInternational.org](mailto:TheBridge@BridgeInternational.org)

Website:

[www.BridgeInternational.org](http://www.BridgeInternational.org)

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