

Return to Kazakhstan -- Roger Torstenson

My daughter, Deanna, was adopted from Pavlodar, Kazakhstan at two years of age in April 1997. As soon as she began talking in full sentences, after only five months, she expressed interest in the adoption process and where she came from. We had heard about a Pavlodar internet forum and I believe it was through this that we learned about the possibility of searching for the birthfamily.

We started our search in 2003 through Anna James (anna@internationaladoptionsearch.com), a California parent, who also had adopted, and her Ukraine associate, Ruslan, who did the actual searching. Ruslan suspected from the documentation that we provided that the birthfamily was actually from Karaganda, about six hours drive from Pavlodar. His initial search was unsuccessful in the city of Karaganda, but told us that he would try again in Fall 2004. In February 2005, we were notified in a lengthy letter from Ruslan that his second search was successful. He had arrived at a small railroad village about 25 miles north of Karaganda shortly before Christmas 2004 and did find Deanna's birthfamily.

Ruslan explained all the details that led to his success, as it was only by chance that he found the street that he had been looking for in this village. Deanna's sisters answered the door at their home and it was through them that Ruslan traveled to another railway station to meet the birthmother at her job. Many photos were provided by Ruslan in the course of the letter to us; all the family members and their birthdates and a little something about each of their personalities and their occupation or interests. He found an intact family unit with mother, father, six (now seven) brothers and two sisters, as well as information on aunts, uncles, cousins, etc. The children now range in age from 30 to 5.

The events leading from Deanna's premature birth in Pavlodar to the orphanage are still foggy, and all I can do is believe the birthmother's story which sounds authentic but also leads one to question the ethics of certain medical authorities. In any event, we have been corresponding with the birthfamily over a 6-7 year period, only recently facilitated by an aunt's new computer and the use of Skype, as letters and translating (by Ruslan) can take quite a while in each direction.

Since 2005 Deanna has impatiently awaited the trip to see her birthfamily; I had promised her six years ago to take her to Kazakhstan after her sophomore year in high school. Finally, the time arrived, between her sophomore and junior years, and we traveled this August for the long trip back to Kazakhstan; they are 10 hours ahead of us timewise and 11 hours ahead with standard time.

This past Spring we went through a visa service for the necessary applications to visit Kazakhstan. While my visa, as her father, was accepted and processed quickly, there were more stringent requirements regarding her. I had to make copies and have them notarized (with a seal) of all adoption papers that I possessed. The Kazakhstan embassy also required her original USSR passport issued in 1997 (we still had to go through the Russian embassy in '97); by the

way, I asked for this passport to be returned but they did not do that. Deanna also had to write a short note *renouncing her Kazakhstan citizenship* even though she had a naturalized U.S. birth certificate of which a copy had been sent. After a couple weeks Deanna received her visa. The embassy never mentioned anything about needing a Kazakhstan passport.

Ruslan was not able to travel with us as an interpreter/guide; however, he did contact a friend of his who teaches English at a university in Simferopol, Ukraine. Olesya was most anxious to accompany us on our trek. We arranged a cost per day for her services, plus her airfare from Simferopol to Astana. We kept in touch with her via Skype in the months and weeks leading up to the trip. She suggested that we get an apartment for our 10-day stay and that worked out very well. Olesya was much more than just an interpreter. She served as our daily tour guide as to who was available and when we would see them. She was our friend, told us when we needed to go grocery shopping and ideas as to what to get, was an excellent cook, served as a confidant for Deanna, and had many helpful suggestions throughout the trip.

We traveled Turkish Airlines, as this was by far the cheapest and also most direct way for us to get from Washington, DC (Dulles) airport to Astana, Kazakhstan. We flew nonstop to Istanbul, Turkey and then nonstop to Astana. Deanna and I met another woman and her adoptive daughter, from Manhattan, at the gate going from Istanbul to Astana and we found out during our discussion that they probably connected on their search the same month as Deanna's – December 2004. She offered to take video of Deanna meeting her birthmother, which she did when we arrived in Astana. It is pretty amazing; I wonder how many people have gone back to connect with birth families or just to travel the country? Probably not many have gone back to Kazakhstan and it was a real gift meeting them.

We were met at Astana International Airport at 3:15 am local time, by the tearful birthmother, a translator the family knew, and our driver who I had contracted for. Our translator arrived the following day due to a change in our air schedule. Karaganda, our destination, is about a 3-hour drive from Astana.

Once in Karaganda we went to our two-bedroom apartment, which was newly renovated with air conditioning, full kitchen, internet connection, and a washing machine; at \$70 per day the price was comparable to an average hotel room. Deanna's aunts gave us a rousing welcome. They had been there most of the night, fixing all sorts of food for us. The food lasted throughout the day and then some, even though we had about 15 visitors during the course of that sleep-deprived, but exciting, first day. There were flowers for Deanna and lots of hugs, kisses, and laughter.

Deanna connected with all her birth relatives, and that is saying quite a lot since there are at least 35, including the maternal grandmother, nephews and a niece. We had 10 full days there and did something with family each and every day. We went shopping, swimming in city parks, bowling, enjoyed the zoo and an arboretum. We were invited into five different homes for dinner. Everything was delicious. We had been told that Kazakhstan does not have a lot of vegetables and fruits but we found out differently. They do countless toasts (saluting their guests) and were very generous with what they had to offer. We actually came back with more

gifts than we had brought! Deanna's sister insisted on taking her on a full afternoon shopping excursion; she badly wanted to get gifts for her, but Deanna was thrilled just to have the siblings as company. I've never seen a happier child than Deanna was during the time we spent in Karaganda and the village of Solonichka. We visited Solonichka (45 minutes by rail), home of the birthfamily, twice; all the other days they came to us when they did not have to work.

Karaganda is a very walkable city with plenty of fruit and vegetable stands. Watermelon stands were everywhere including trucks just parked along the main highways. There are pedestrian malls lined with trees and gardens of flowers. Underground tunnels, themselves with merchandise stands, are used by pedestrians to cross the busiest of streets. Even so, there are not a lot of motor vehicles in Karaganda, so traffic is only a problem in a few areas. While the main roads are paved and good, many of the secondary streets keep the auto repair shops in business.

I told Deanna to keep a diary, so I hope she did that as my recollection of the days tends to run together. Fortunately, we have hundreds of photos which are indexed by date so we can look at them and remember our daily activities. The last full day in Karaganda we hosted a party at an upscale Chucky Cheese-type place, called Begopark, for about 25 relatives. We had a separate dining room and excellent service. There were several children present who had never or rarely had a chance to ride on carousels, bumper cars, etc, or play arcade games. They were enthralled by this place; it was both very fulfilling, but also sad that they don't have chances to enjoy more childhood things. Saturday we spent the afternoon in Astana, an amazingly beautiful capital with a modern international airport; Kazakhstan is very mineral-rich compared to many of the former republics of the old USSR.

Solonichka made us very appreciative of where we live. We actually drove there both times as the road from Karaganda was passable (it is only passable in July and August). Living conditions are harsh. They currently only have running water about two hours a day, but there is a 2-story schoolhouse and they have an English teacher now; it is very difficult to see a bright future for those that grow up in such conditions. It has a population of maybe 600; somehow they make do with minus 40 degree temps in the winter, while in the summer highs regularly hit 90 degrees. Central Kazakhstan has a steppe-type of climate (clear, hot, dry, and windy in the summer), and the environs reminded me of west Texas, though snow fences along the main highways will tell you differently. There were several days when not a cloud was to be seen, but it was always windy.

There is a river near Solonichka, the Pura which runs all the way to Astana, where Deanna went swimming with all the brothers one day. On two other occasions she went swimming in the City Park, with two brothers and a cousin, in Karaganda to the chagrin of the birthmother who worried about her swimming ability and whether she would catch cold. I assured her that Deanna would be fine.

This was a very fulfilling trip, both for Deanna and myself. I was particularly pleased at the welcome we received by all members of the family. Everyone she met really loved her and wished she could come back every year. The day we left, about a dozen family members were

there to see us depart Karaganda. We had planned to have our taxi driver take us to Astana, but Deanna's brother-in-law insisted on taking us, despite the six-hour roundtrip, to the airport. Once there, since he was not familiar with Astana, he waited in the car with our belongings while we took a 2-hour taxi tour of Astana, and wanted to stay with us until our plane left at 4 am the next morning, but there was no need of that. This was a young father holding two jobs! Any apprehensions we may have had about this journey proved unfounded. With language and 10,000 miles separating us, we learned that family is forever; Deanna has two extended families who love her!

Note: Deanna had wanted to visit her orphanage in Pavlodar, where she was brought as an infant in March 1995, but time made that impossible. We had no way of knowing what to really expect during our stay in Kazakhstan beyond the first day, but the family kept us busy the entire time. We did have the address and phone numbers for the orphanage, which is in the same location as it was in 1997.

Customs Notes: Once in Kazakhstan (we arrived in Astana), the only quirk with Kazakhstan customs was that you have to register with the local police within five days of entering the country. A family member took our visas (we did not even have to be present), including a small piece of paper (filled out upon entry to the country) stating the purpose of the trip, to the local authorities and all was well. This small piece of paper must be retained because customs wants it upon your departure at the airport. I had brought copies of all the papers relating to Deanna's adoption but Customs never asked for them.

Deanna knew enough Russian to answer basic questions both arriving and departing Kazakhstan, as Customs did not speak English. Turkish airline officials spoke excellent English and Russian at Astana Int'l Airport.

As an aside, Deanna had visited Russia in 2009 as part of a school group and she only had to provide her 2007-issued U.S. passport in order to receive a visa to travel there. There were no questions regarding her passport place of birth being Kazakhstan.

In Deanna's Words -- Deanna Torstenson

Finally, the day I'd been dreaming about for years was here. I'd imagined that day over and over in my head, coming up with almost every possible outcome of what would happen the day I'd visit my birth-family for the first time.

Finally after countless airports and countless hours of plane rides I was finally there; Astana, Kazakhstan. I could feel my heart pounding in my chest, adrenalin pumping through my veins. I was actually there in Kazakhstan.

It had been almost fifteen years since I'd left, when I was adopted by my parents. So many years of dreaming and wondering what my long lost family was like was finally coming to an end. I almost couldn't believe it when I saw my birthmother waiting for me outside the gate. Just looking at her, I could see so many similarities and differences between us. Our body structures were almost identical, but our cultures, languages and ways of life were so different. On the first day of my arrival I met many relatives. When I arrived at my apartment I saw my aunt and older second cousin. To say the least it was very overwhelming! They had provided for me a great feast of a meal. We talked and expressed our happiness for being able to make the trip, to finally visit.

It was a warm windy day. I remember the feel of the silky, rocky, bottom floor of the Pura River. The water had a green tint to it and there were lots of high weeds growing from the bottom of the river floor. Not too far away I could make out the railroad bridge that passed through part of the river. Anything having to do with water seemed to totally captivate my younger brothers. Boys will be boys I suppose, in any country. My younger brothers and I raced one another to see who was the fastest swimmer; I won! Soon after the mud and water fight began. It was younger siblings (including me that made five of us) against our three older brothers, we won! By the banks of the river my Dad and birthfather were chatting up a storm, drinking beer and talking of worldly affairs. Everything felt so peaceful at that moment. I remember feeling happy being with all of my siblings, smiling, laughing, playing and making some lasting memories.

Words can't really express the feelings that were running through my mind at the time. I literally fell in love with these people, my second family. Their lives were so different from mine yet we were so similar. We had the same facial expressions and similar likes and dislikes. It was a shock to me. I'd always felt like an alien, like there wasn't anyone who shared such similar characteristics to me, let alone DNA! In my eyes all of my siblings were the most beautiful things I'd ever seen, blameless and spotless. Just thinking about leaving them made me sick, whenever I'd start thinking about how little of an amount of time I had left I would start bawling. I asked myself, "Why do I have so much and they have so little?" What did I do to deserve such an amazing life?" I wished I could have eased their pains. I wished I could have taken them all from their poverty-stricken lives. I wanted them to experience all of the joys that I had in life, show them all of the beautiful things I had seen. I wanted to give my siblings a second chance at life, like I had gotten. Knowing that there was nothing I could do for them severely depressed me. I then vowed I would make something out of my life, I would somehow make everything better for them.

I made some pretty amazing memories on this trip, like going to the theme park with my younger brothers, going swimming in the river with all 7 of my brothers, going shopping with my sister, playing on the playground with my little brothers and nephew, going to church with my aunt, holding my little niece and more. Throughout my visit I kept asking myself, "Why did this happen to me? Was it fate or a mistake? What would I have been like if I had grown up with these people?" All questions I'll never know. I got a firsthand look of what poverty really was and what it looked like. For me, it was much different from what I saw and read about in textbooks. I had a real and firsthand experience of what poverty was really like. You feel

helpless because there is nothing you can do, there is no way out of this giant black hole. The hole just gets bigger and bigger until it swallows you.

This trip was an amazing experience for many reasons. I got to see my birth family and really connect with them. I also learned many life lessons. I learned that you have to appreciate all of the good things in life, small or big and not take them for granted. I also learned (though this might sound a bit cliched) that family really is the most important thing in life. When you have nothing, family is everything. Even when things get really difficult, you know that you'll get through it because you have each other. I hope to make both of my families proud, adopted and birth. I hope to make a difference in society and help those in need. I hope to give back to the world, to give others the second chance at life that I got.