

My Journey with Jehovah – Umida’s Story

As told to Kathleen Hughes by Umida Mardanova

I was born in the country of Uzbekistan on December 19, 2001. Our family later moved to Russia and we are now living in San Bernardino, CA in the United States of America. Why, when and how did my journey begin?

I am 18 years old and I live with my mother, my father, and two older brothers. I lived in Uzbekistan, located in Central Asia, until I was seven years old and then we moved to Russia. Why did I leave my homeland? Our family are Jehovah’s Witnesses and we are part of a multi-racial international family of loving believers, but we are persecuted in many parts of the world. Life in Uzbekistan became very difficult for several reasons. We lived close to a military warehouse, and in the middle of the night, we would hear explosions. It was very upsetting for us emotionally and damaging to us physically. Adding to that, as Jehovah’s Witnesses, we were being religiously persecuted although there was not an official ban against our religious activities at that time. Unfortunately, there were several times that my parents were taken to court and had to pay a fine for practicing their religion. We were very scared and my parents knew that we had to make a change so we decided to move to Russia. Shortly after the move, the police showed up at our Kingdom Hall looking for my Father who was the Coordinator of the Body of Elders. Not being able to arrest him, they were also unable to get information about us because no one knew where we were. After moving to Russia, I was unable to attend school there until I learned the Russian language. Because members of our congregation in Russia helped me learn the language, I was able to attend school the next year. Another highlight in my life was my baptism as one of Jehovah’s Witnesses on July 19, 2014. At the time of my baptism, I had no idea of the trials and tribulations that would befall me, my family, and fellow worshippers in Russia. Within four months after my baptism, however, my faith was tested. Every year, it is required that each person in Russia share in the celebration of Victory Day from World War II. Because Jehovah’s Witnesses are politically neutral, I would not participate and received a lot of persecution from the school I attended. In 2017, the organization of Jehovah’s Witnesses in Russia was labeled as “extremists” and serving our God Jehovah became very dangerous. Public testimony, meetings at our Kingdom Halls, and all of our activities were now under ban. Every Kingdom Hall in Russia and the Branch Office Facilities were confiscated by the government. My older brother lived in a different city in Russia and attended a different congregation. He was conducting a Bible Study with a man, and unknown to my brother, he worked for the police. This was a dangerous situation for him so my mother firmly felt that he should return to our home and he did. Since we were not able to meet in our Kingdom Halls we met in houses and did so in very small groups of ten. Most of the homes in this area were in tall apartment buildings and the neighbors quickly noticed any activity and we were constantly being watched. They were quick to ask why Jehovah’s Witnesses were coming to our home since they were forbidden and they hinted that they could call the police at any time. It became even more difficult, in 2017 and 2018, when my older brother called and talked to a sister from his former city of Saratov. She said that a man, with whom he had studied the Bible, was an imposter. She said that he was responsible for the arrest of twelve of our spiritual brothers, and that the police were looking for him. Also, during this time, my brother received letters and phone calls stating that he needed to join the army or he may be incarcerated. Since that ban started, Jehovah’s Witnesses in Russia have had no alternative choices to comply for military service.

I was 16 years old, in 2017, when my Uncle came and told our family about the persecution taking place in the country. We were worried that if my family were arrested, I would be separated and placed in an orphanage. After this conversation, we decided that both families would flee and try to find asylum in the United States. Our plan was for my Uncle, his wife, and two children to accompany us, but unfortunately, we could not get

Visas to the United States. Therefore, after many prayers to Jehovah, we decided to try to enter the United States through Mexico and apply for a two-week visa. We could not tell our community about our travel plans due to security issues. However, we felt that we should tell several close friends, and a week later, in August 2018, we left Russia. From Moscow we flew to Cancun, Mexico, and then another flight to Tijuana, Mexico. Before we left Russia, my Father contacted the Branch Offices of Jehovah's Witnesses in the United States and Mexico explaining our situation. As both branches were alerted to our travel plans, our brothers and sisters welcomed us when we arrived in Tijuana. Along with two couples, a Russian speaking brother from San Diego, were waiting for us. However, the joy of that moment was short lived. While the others waited for us, the police took me, my parents and one of my brothers to question us. I was scared and started crying as my Father explained to the officers why we had made the journey from Russia to Mexico. He explained that we were there to visit friends, and the only thing that kept us from being forced to return to Russia that day was the return tickets we had purchased. Looking at the ticket, the police reminded my Father to be on the plane back to Russia in one week. We were relieved to finally be able to fly to Rosarita, Mexico after a short layover in Tijuana. Our spiritual family was very generous in providing what we needed during our short time with them, and for their gift of five Bibles in the Russian language. We shed tears and hugged them as we got on our flight to Rosarita. A family in San Diego had a mobile home there so it became our residence for about the next two months. While living there we able to buy our own food but we needed transportation. One brother generously gave us a car that allowed us to carry out assignments, attend meetings, and participate in the field service. Our new friends called each day to check on our welfare and to satisfy any of our needs. Their love and support were invaluable.

Our preaching activity was so restricted in Russia that we were thrilled to participate in the ministry with the local congregation and did this often. We were very surprised to see that our friends openly carried and distributed Bibles and Bible literature in the ministry. This was something we were never allowed to do in Russia. We spent about two months in Rosarita and were busy filling out documents for the Immigration Service. We realized that there were long lines at their office in Rosarita, so we moved to San Luis, Mexico, near the Arizona border. We were told the lines there were shorter and it seemed that it might be an easier way to speed up the asylum process. We had two rooms in, what we thought, was an expensive hotel. Initially, the men in our group were the only ones that stood in the lines. They would do so by twos and as they got closer to the front of the line, other family members would also take turns. We spent about five days standing there from 6:00 a.m. to 10:00 p.m. A local family offered a room in their house for the women in our group and we took the opportunity to stay there while we were taking our turns waiting in line. My Uncle and his family were the first to be allowed entry into the United States, and now it was our turn to cross the border. Each day the officials would ask if there are families with young children as they would be given priority. I will always have a heartwarming memory of our friends that stood and stayed with us during the long days, in those long lines. Some of them would not leave our side even though my family encouraged them to go home and return to work. After many days of waiting, we made it into the United States where we were moved to a detainment center in Arizona. We spent 1 1/2 days there and all five of us were in one room until my brothers were moved to separate rooms. My parents and brothers were interviewed for two to three hours.

After gaining entrance into Arizona, my family was then separated and taken away in two trucks. While traveling I would look back to make sure that the truck that held my brothers was still behind us. About an hour into our drive, I could no longer see their truck and didn't know what happened to them. We were very frightened to have our family separated in this new country.

We continued traveling and all I can remember seeing was desert. I had no idea where we were as we eventually pulled up in front of a very tall building. It was here that my parents each received an ankle bracelet to track

their locations and where we spent over three hours in a waiting room. We were then taken to a church and six hours later we were picked up by some of our friends from the Riverside Russian Group of Jehovah's Witnesses. There were two times, since we started this journey, that I especially felt scared and concerned for my mother. The first time was our twelve-hour flight from Moscow to Mexico. She suffers from claustrophobia and she was very scared on this flight. She tried not to show it because she was worried that she would be separated from us. The second time was when my parents received their ankle bracelets and we spent three hours in a small room. She was overwhelmed by fear and anxieties and we prayed and begged for Jehovah's holy spirit to help her. How grateful we were, that in both instances, he supplied us with the strength we needed to get us through those difficult times. We also felt very grateful, and unworthy, for the hospitality and care shown by our spiritual brothers and sisters during our two months in Mexico.

After gaining entrance into the United States, we originally planned to live in Portland, Oregon because one of Jehovah's Witnesses there was going to act as our sponsor. But because we were assigned, by the United States Branch Office, to serve in the Russian Group we were able to get a sponsor from Riverside. My parents and I were still very worried about my brothers as we had not heard from them in over three days and had no idea of their whereabouts. Fortunately, our sponsor tracked them down and discovered they were in jail in Arizona. I was allowed to stay with my parents because I was under 18 years of age. My older brothers were incarcerated while they attended hearings for the asylum process. While we were in Mexico our family learned Spanish, so my brothers talked to everyone they could while they were imprisoned. Many of the prisoners were Spanish speaking, and they conducted eight Bible studies with interested ones and had a lot of return visits. They related that there was a brother who would come to the prison to conduct meetings and many of the inmates chose to attend this meeting. Another interesting experience occurred when the Catholic priest asked my brother to help him baptize his parishioner. This man thought my brother was also a priest because of his knowledge of the Bible, but my brother kindly turned down his offer to assist with the baptism.

And finally, both of my brothers were granted asylum into the United States. They said that the guards at the jail applauded and hugged them once they received the good news. When were we finally united as a family again? My parents and I had lived in Riverside for about four months when we were reunited. A brother from Arizona brought them to our home and there was a gathering for them accompanied by lots of food, hugs, and tears of joy. Because of Jehovah's blessings, our family was finally together again.

We are getting settled into our new life serving the Russian Group in Riverside, but at times, it hasn't been easy. Even after gaining approval to live here, we were still unsettled and on the move. On first arriving in Riverside, we lived in three homes. After several months of living between two residences, we moved to Highland, CA to live with another family. After all of the constant moving, we were happy, in September 2019 to move into our own home in San Bernardino, CA.

Since our first language is Persian, we visited a Persian Group in Rancho Cucamonga, CA and met the most wonderful couple. They became instant friends with our family and would visit us at our house, take us in the ministry, and take our family out for meals. My brothers both serve as Ministerial Servants and my Father is an Elder in our congregation. I increased my share in the ministry and began regular pioneering in September 2019. I feel that our family has blossomed spiritually since coming to the United States now that we have the freedom to serve Jehovah.

We have a very large preaching territory and we soon realized that we would not be able walk everywhere in our ministry. My brothers both have a driver's license now, but not when we first arrived. We had no transportation and were too shy to ask for help. However, without ever asking, our spiritual family in the

English, Spanish and Russian Congregations volunteered to assist us. We never had to ask for, and we were never without, transportation when it was needed.

One of the original songs that has been produced by Jehovah's organization is entitled Brotherly Love and it is especially meaningful to me. I first heard it at a family's home in Rosarita and it moves me very much. Why do I feel this way? Because it perfectly explains my journey with Jehovah, and his love and support of me and my loved ones through my international family of fellow believers. My purpose in telling this story, and sharing our challenges, is to give Jehovah all the glory and praise he deserves. We directly felt the loving hands of Jehovah carrying us during our journey from Russia to America. From this successful journey, we realized how important it is to keep the Kingdom of God first place in our lives despite obstacles and difficulties. While we were still in Russia, the news reported that there were thousands of letters being sent to Russia from Jehovah's Witnesses around the world. They were sent to the government protesting the ban put on our religious activities. Little did I know, at that time, that I would have the chance to really see this love and support in action.

I want the story of my journey to help others build faith in Jehovah. I want to show them how he can and will help us in ways we didn't think were possible. Because of Jehovah's loving care, I have the opportunity to write this story. I will be eternally grateful to him.

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