



Captured in Tajikistan 3

Only 3 editions in 13 months—what a shame! But better late than never, so please, have a look...

In May, I had the honour to welcome my first guests: My mother Susanne and Jacques. This was also the first time for me to travel elsewhere than between Dushanbe and Muminabad. That is... after failing in getting a visa for Uzbekistan—the two neighbouring countries maintain something like a cold war about water, energy and the two ancient Persian/Tajik cities Bukhara and Samarkand which were allocated to Uzbekistan by Stalin—we spent most time at home, in Muminabad but finally made it up the beautifully rocky Varzob valley for 2 days, at least.



Suzanne and Jacques connected more easily to the people than I did. Not only for their proven dancing skills (no complete program without a wedding) but much more for their knowledge of the Russian language. Even though you almost never hear Russian spoken in the villages (contrary to Dushanbe where you sometimes hardly hear Tajik), many people (and certainly all the elder) speak Russian fluently. So with some Russian, meeting the famous Tajik hospitality, you don't have to worry no more. The first day they came back from a stroll in the village: "We think we are not going to have dinner anymore... we were invited for tea." Tajik for beginners: An invitation for tea (that you get several times every day and sometimes makes field work difficult) doesn't mean tea but always the full culinary program, including a variety of fruits, nuts, a well nourishing soup, sweets and a second course like osh (a rice dish) or gusht biryon (big platters of boiled meat)...



Spring was green and beautiful and short. There was not much rain and soon the land was dry and dusty again. Back to work. Deforestation is a major problem in the hills of Muminabad and elsewhere in the country. Everyday you can see hundreds of donkeys bring down bigger and smaller trees from the mountains—meanwhile they have to trek for about four hours to find wood. By cutting the last trees and bushes in the watersheds surface water run-off and erosion are greatly enhanced. But the people direly need the fuel for cooking and heating in the cold winters. Trying to work on this issue, we are promoting more efficient stoves and heating ovens. It's the literary drop on a hot stone but maybe in the long run it will make a difference. The second big land use issue is overgrazing by livestock: Thousands of sheep, goats and cows—for many people the only option of investment/saving—eat every last bit of plant that dares to peep out of the barren soil...



Another field of activities of Caritas' natural disaster risk management is mitigation—mostly cleaning riverbeds in villages from steadily accumulating sediments from the mountains with the bulldozer. During Soviet rule this was done regularly and the risk of flooding was much smaller. Today, many riverbeds are at the same level as the streets left and right... Our partner organisation that is implementing these projects has a bulldozer. It dates back to 1952. And after each mission Boboi Nazar (left) repairs it for 1-2 weeks, taking apart the engine and everything. He is just one example for how times have changed: Today he makes about 100 USD a month; during the Soviet Union he had an average salary of 1700 USD... Here, for the people the expression the “good old days” is more true than anywhere else: In 13 months I have not met one person who wouldn't say the Soviet time was better than today.



The summer came and went by fast. And in the beginning of July I suddenly had this incredible headache that wouldn't go away and doctors were afraid it could be Meningitis. I found myself in the infectious department of a Russian military hospital where they almost wouldn't let me leave anymore. After all, it was not Meningitis but most likely just too much sun and not enough water—I was working a lot outside, constantly at temperatures between 40 and 45°C. Yes, that's hot but the thing is that, because of the extreme dryness, it doesn't feel that hot; it feels much less hot than say, 30°C in Dar Es Salaam and that's why you easily forget drinking. Anyhow, I took this breakdown as a welcome opportunity for a 2-week recreation break in Switzerland.



And that did me good. Staying at Sebastian's—sorry again for the undone dishes—with a wonderful view over the lake and enjoying the time with dear friends and family. Here, Stefan is posing the presidential Tajik way (after a steep bicycle uphill to the zoo).



Unfortunately I never took a picture of the real Tajik presidential way of posing in a wheat field—even though you meet him on over-life-sized posters throughout the country. On road signboards like this one, proudly standing in one of the many Tajik wheat fields. Well, sometimes I am actually not sure if he is really standing there. It might be photoshopped too. Anyhow, here is another very nice one hailing the Tajik harvest like in the old days, it says something like "efficient land use for availability of local products". In many places the harvests are shrinking from year to year because the soil is overexploited by permanent wheat growing and most farmers can't afford fertilizers. And here's another part of the vicious cycle: The only natural fertilizer that would be available—animal's dung—is being burnt in winter for heating. In many villages it's all they have. There are no trees left for the oven.



There are still many traces of the old days: Just at the district entry of Muminabad you are welcomed by the planned targets for agricultural and livestock production. Every year a little bit more. Especially the production of silk cocoons is increasing slowly but steadily...



These days, all kinds of agricultural products are transported from here to there. Melons and watermelons, cabbages, potatoes, apples, quinces, pears and grapes. In lories filled to the top or just like this.

And those fruits are delicious—never in my live I have eaten so many extremely tasty apples and grapes!



Just for the eyes: Beautifully piled up bales of straw after the (wheat) harvest.



And this is a communal administration office (in Sarmaidon 2). Here's the accountant. Unfortunately, on communal level there is even less budget to account for than on district level.

And yes, that's him in the frame: The master of the wheat field, His Excellency Emomali Rahmon.



And then, in the beginning of September, I had my third visitor: Sebastian. With him I finally made my first real trip through the country, up to the Pamirs. It was a great trip with a great friend. But to capture this I would need to make a whole separate special edition...

[6|11|2008]