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The Life and Legacy of Pastor Richard Wurmbrand

Due to the general affluence of Western society and the remarkable religious freedoms enjoyed there, few Christians in the West truly know what it means to suffer for their faith. In the restricted nations of the world, however, this is not the case. Believers are forced into hiding by atheist regimes and, if captured, are tortured until they succumb to the demands of their oppressors. Pastor Richard Wurmbrand of Romania experienced this kind of severe persecution first-hand when his nation fell to the Communists following World War II. Arrested for his efforts to support the underground church, Wurmbrand suffered brainwashing and severe torture for fourteen years in a hidden prison. Upon his release in 1964, however, the story of Christian persecution in Eastern Europe was all but unknown beyond the confines of the Iron Curtain.ⁱ In response, he passionately dedicated the rest of his life to serving as the spokesperson for his brothers and sisters still suffering for their faith back at home. Through his involvement in the founding of the non-profit organization Voice of the Martyrs, he expanded his ministry to the global level, calling attention to the persecution of Christians throughout the world. His life of courageous faith and dedication to the spread of the gospel, even under the most dangerous of circumstances, serves as a witness to the power of the gospel message and challenges Christians everywhere to take up their own crosses and follow Christ wherever he would lead them.

Early Life and Conversion

Richard Wurmbrand was born in Bucharest, Romania on March 24, 1909.ⁱⁱ Even from a young age, he came to know the struggles of poverty and privation. Orphaned early on in life, he soon learned to fend for his own survival, a difficult task, given the hardships that his nation was facing at the time as a result of World War I.ⁱⁱⁱ However, when reflecting on his childhood in his autobiography, *Tortured for Christ*, Wurmbrand mourns the spiritual poverty of his youth far more than the difficult physical conditions that he grew up in. Although his family was ethnically Jewish, Wurmbrand recognizes in his book that his early years were marked by a staunch atheism, surprising though that may seem to those familiar with his later pursuits and dedication to the Christian faith.^{iv} In fact, it was not until 1938, two years after his marriage to his wife Sabina, that the two of them both came to know Christ.^v Wurmbrand first came to faith when he stumbled upon an elderly carpenter who had been praying for years that God would send him a Jew to convert. In the opening pages of his autobiography, Wurmbrand narrates his encounter with this man:

Seeing I was a Jew, the carpenter courted me as never a beautiful girl had been courted. He saw in me the answer to his prayer and gave me a Bible to read. I had read the Bible out of cultural interest many times before. But the Bible he gave me was another kind of Bible. As he told me sometime later, he and his wife prayed for hours for my conversion and that of my wife. The Bible he gave me was not so much written in words, but in flames of love fired by his prayers. I could barely read it. I could only weep over it, comparing my bad life with the life of Jesus; my impurity with his righteousness; my hatred with his love – and He accepted me as one of his own.^{vi}

From this point on, Wurmbrand's life took on a whole new trajectory. Formerly a successful self-made businessman, he now became a Lutheran minister and began working to expand the

church in Romania.^{vii} From the start of his ministry, he faced severe opposition, for the Nazi regime in his country had aligned itself with an extreme branch of Orthodoxy and sought to stamp out Protestantism.^{viii} The persecution that Wurmbrand received from the fascists, however, actually served him well later on in his work with the underground church under Communism. He learned how to carry out his evangelism in secret and how to persevere even in times of great suffering and physical torture.

Communism and the Underground Church

When Romania fell into the hands of the Russians in 1945, Wurmbrand found his work made more dangerous than it had ever been during World War II. The Communists believed Christianity to be completely incompatible with Marxism, and so they used every method at their disposal to cleanse the country of true believers. First, they sought to force pastors to swear their allegiance to the state, promising them the freedom to keep their churches open as long as they preached in support of Communism. Early on in the regime, the government summoned a gathering of all the Christian leaders in Romania, and called upon each of them one by one to affirm their loyalty to Communism. As Wurmbrand listened uneasily to the confessions of his fellow ministers, Sabina turned to him and asked, “Will you not wash this shame from the face of Christ?” When he responded that she would lose her husband if he chose to speak out, she boldly replied, “I don’t need a coward for a husband.”^{ix} Convicted by her words, he then gave a rousing speech in which he wholeheartedly rejected Marxist doctrine and affirmed Christ Jesus as the sole head of the church.^x Although applauded by the other pastors for his bravery in reminding them of where their true allegiance ought to lie, Wurmbrand would later face the severe consequences of his actions, which had labeled him undeniably as an enemy of the state.

This speech in front of the congress, while bold, was only the first of many greater risks he would be called upon to take in maintaining his loyalty to Christ.

Because it was no longer safe for him to operate in public, Wurmbrand increased his efforts within the underground church. While his congregation operated primarily in secret to avoid being caught, it also rose above the surface at times in order to minister to the Russian soldiers themselves. One tactic the church used was to publish Christian pamphlets in disguise as Communist propaganda. They would cover their booklets with pictures of Marx in order to get them approved for distribution, and then proceed to pass them out to unassuming Communists.^{xi} Some Christians were even so bold as to sneak into army barracks to preach to the soldiers.^{xii} In all these actions, they looked to Wurmbrand as their leader. Although he fully understood the danger he placed himself in by continuing to preach and evangelize, he willingly put his own life in jeopardy for the sake of winning new souls to the gospel. He recognized that the eternal reward of bringing people to Christ far exceeded any worldly suffering that he would have to endure as a result of his actions.

Imprisonment and Torture

On February 29, 1948, Wurmbrand finally faced the penalty for his boldness in standing up to the Communist regime. He was abducted by the secret police on his way to work and was taken to an underground Russian prison.^{xiii} There, he encountered all manner of brutal torture as his imprisoners sought to force him to deny his faith and denounce his fellow believers.

Although he endured nights of nearly freezing to death in an ice box and of standing in a tiny closet lined with spikes on the inside, he admits that other prisoners faced far worse. One pastor was forced to watch his own son be beaten to death in front of him, tormented all the while by the promise that the beating would stop as soon as he renounced Christ.^{xiv} Beyond the physical

torture, Wurmbrand and the other prisoners also faced the psychological torture of listening to a recording day and night that said, “Communism is good. Christianity is finished. God is dead.”^{xv} In the darkness of solitary confinement, the constant pressure of these words had the power to take a heavy toll on the faith of the prisoners. So intense was his suffering in prison that Wurmbrand later remarked, “There were times when I looked at the cup of water which I had in my cell to convince myself that I was not yet in hell. I knew that in hell there was no water.”^{xvi}

Despite the unspeakable pain and oppression that the prisoners had to bear on a daily basis, however, many of them continued to preach the gospel even from within the confines of their cells. When held in a room together, the Christians seized the opportunity to proclaim the faith to the atheists who were also facing punishment as prisoners of the state. These preachers knew well the price they would pay should they be caught teaching about God, but even when they were dragged away for a beating in the middle of a sermon, they would simply pick up where they left off the minute they came back.^{xvii} Even when sentenced to solitary confinement, the believers would continue to communicate with each other and seek to convert others through using Morse code on the walls between their cells.^{xviii} Their dedication to the spread of the gospel empowered them to overcome even the most brutal tortures and gave them the hope they needed to persevere steadfastly in genuine faith.

Release and Mission to the West

In 1964, Wurmbrand gained his freedom at last, and was ransomed to the West by money raised by a Scandinavian church.^{xix} Although he would have preferred a peaceful retirement in a comfortable home with his wife, he instead dedicated the rest of his life to acting as a mouthpiece for persecuted Christians worldwide.^{xx} He traveled tirelessly, giving speeches and preaching sermons that called the Western church to wake up from its slumber and take action on

behalf of its brothers and sisters in Communist nations. Through his bold words, he indicted Western Christians for their lukewarm attitudes and apathy toward the menace of corrupt foreign regimes. He left no room for empty words of indignation in place of tangible action, and challenged his audiences to assume responsibility for their own role in allowing injustice to persist. In his autobiography, he makes a plea for aid from Christians in the West, writing “Don’t just say this is ugly and immoral—of course it is—*but ask yourself if it is not also your sin that such tragedies occur*, that such Christian families are left alone, and are not helped by you who are free.”^{xxi} In his eyes, no true follower of Christ could possibly remain silent in the knowledge of the brutality being practiced against Christians in other nations. He strove in everything he did to impress this duty to take action upon his listeners and to call them back into a life of true and obedient discipleship.

In 1967, Wurmbrand’s desire to spread awareness and create avenues for Western Christians to provide aid to the persecuted church gave birth to the organization Jesus for the Communist World, which would later expand to become Voice of the Martyrs.^{xxii} This organization provides frequent updates on the suffering of Christians worldwide and encourages believers living in safety to pray fervently for their persecuted brothers and sisters. It also prompts people to donate money for Bibles and other highly valued resources that can then be smuggled into the hands of members of the underground church. Now, regardless of their circumstances, Christians everywhere can stand in solidarity with the rest of the body of Christ and can participate in the ministry of the gospel in even the most restricted nations of the world.

Wurmbrand died in August of 2001,^{xxiii} but his legacy lives on as a reminder to Christians around the world to remember their fellow believers in chains and to do all they can to support these soldiers of the faith in their efforts to loyally serve the Lord even under severe persecution.

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- ⁱ “Wurmbrand Still Active,” *Charisma and Christian Life* (1996), 16.
- ⁱⁱ “About Our Founders,” *The Voice of the Martyrs*, 2016, <http://www.persecution.com/public/ourfounders.aspx?clickfrom=%3d6d61696e5f6d656e75>.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Charles Foley, “The Case of Pastor Richard Wurmbrand: 14 Years of Communist Brainwashing,” *Moody Monthly* (1968), 23.
- ^{iv} Richard Wurmbrand, *Tortured for Christ*, (Bartlesville, OK: Living Sacrifice Book Company, 1967), 11.
- ^v “About Our Founders,” *The Voice of the Martyrs*.
- ^{vi} Richard Wurmbrand, *Tortured for Christ*, 13.
- ^{vii} Foley, “The Case of Pastor Richard Wurmbrand,” 23.
- ^{viii} Richard Wurmbrand, *Tortured for Christ*, 13.
- ^{ix} Sabina Wurmbrand, *The Pastor’s Wife* (Bartlesville, OK: Living Sacrifice Book Company, 1970), 22.
- ^x Richard Wurmbrand, *Tortured for Christ*, 16.
- ^{xi} *Ibid*, 30.
- ^{xii} *Ibid*, 21.
- ^{xiii} *Ibid*, 33.
- ^{xiv} *Ibid*, 34.
- ^{xv} Foley, “The Case of Pastor Richard Wurmbrand,” 22.
- ^{xvi} Richard Wurmbrand, *Sermons in Solitary Confinement*, (London: Hodder and Stoughton Limited, 1969), 188.
- ^{xvii} Richard Wurmbrand, *Tortured for Christ*, 41.
- ^{xviii} James and Marti Hefley, *By their Blood: Christian Martyrs of the 20th Century*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1979), 306.
- ^{xix} “Wurmbrand Still Active,” 16.
- ^{xx} Andy Butcher, “Bearing the Scars of Persecuted Christians,” *Charisma and Christian Life* (2001), 60.
- ^{xxi} Richard Wurmbrand, *Tortured for Christ*, 47.
- ^{xxii} “About Our Founders,” *The Voice of the Martyrs*.
- ^{xxiii} Butcher, “Bearing the Scars of Persecuted Christians,” 60.