

Bearing the Scars of Persecuted Christians

No one did more to raise awareness about the persecuted church than Richard and Sabina Wurmbrand, who suffered for years in Romania's communist prisons.

Years of physical mistreatment and neglect failed to dampen Richard Wurmbrand's zeal for God and His people. So at an age when most men would be considering retirement, he began a new ministry that would make him, other than Brother Andrew, probably the Christian leader most recognized internationally for championing the plight of the persecuted church.

He began in his typically passionate style. On his first visit to the United States after he and his family were ransomed out of Romania after years of persecution by the communist authorities, Wurmbrand witnessed a large anti-Vietnam War rally in Philadelphia.

Incensed by the pro-communism message of the speaker, the then-57-year-old challenged him to a debate. Wurmbrand said that he was an expert on communism and stripped off his shirt to show his "doctorate"—the scars he had received during 14 years of imprisonment. Wurmbrand's arrest by police for disrupting the meeting was captured by a photographer and splashed across the next day's newspapers—sparking the birth of what would become Voice of the Martyrs (VOM).

"My father was incredible when it came to debate," said Michael Wurmbrand, speaking shortly after his father's death in February at the age of 91. "He was a trailblazer. He

single-handedly opened up the United States to his message. He really considered the world was his parish.”

Richard Wurmbrand’s best-selling *Tortured for Christ*, a chilling account of his years of persecution in Romanian prisons, revealed to the West for the first time the extent to which Christians were suffering for their faith under communist regimes. He testified before governments to speak out on behalf of those who suffered for Jesus, and he traveled ceaselessly until the ill health of his last five years of life.

Although Wurmbrand and his wife, Sabina, who died last August, did not become known in the West until their freedom in the mid-1960s, they had been famous among Christians in their homeland for years. Both from Jewish families, they became Christians shortly after their marriage in 1936 and became leaders of the underground church during World War II.

Their son Michael suffered for his faith, too. He was left to fend for himself as an 11-year-old boy when his mother was arrested and followed his father into prison for three years.

“I didn’t have time to start crying for myself,” he recalled. “There were thousands of kids on the streets.”

He was cared for by a family who had been touched by his parents’ ministry, and he later was reunited with his mother. Now 62 and the director of a correspondence school in California, Michael Wurmbrand recalls weeping when he was taken to Disneyland shortly after his arrival in the United States.

"Everybody thought it was because I was so impressed," he remembers. But there was a different reason for his tears.

"Growing up in a communist country, people always said to me, commiserating, that one day the Americans would come and free us and help us, take us out of all this craziness. And that day in Disneyland, I understood that nobody would. They had no idea, no imagination of what communism means. The Western world is also in an insane asylum."

A member of Mount Olive Lutheran Church in Rancho Palo Verdes, California, Michael Wurmbrand has returned to the land of his birth since the fall of communism. He was saddened when he found "some mixture of communism and capitalism done with no true spiritual conversion of the people."

"Unless they do that as a nation, nothing will happen," he says.

But his hope is in what he said is the true legacy of his parents—even beyond the challenge they brought the Western church to respond to the cries of suffering believers in other parts of the world.

"They loved their enemies," he says, simply.

That love led to his father's miraculous release from prison, he says, explaining that one secret police officer sent to interrogate Richard Wurmbrand ended up coming to Christ through the imprisoned pastor's life and witness. The officer later arranged for Wurmbrand's release papers to be included among hundreds of others.

Says Michael: "Nobody understood how [his release] happened."

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