

Real Life Stories
February 29, 1948 - Prisoner Number One

One beautiful Sunday morning—it was on this date, February 29, 1948—Pastor Richard Wurmbrand of Rumania set out on foot for church. He never arrived. For eight and one half years his wife and son did not know where he was or even whether he was alive or dead. "Ex-prisoners" assured Sabrina Wurmbrand they had witnessed her husband's funeral in a Communist prison. Sabrina was heartbroken and yet she had her doubts. The men might be government stooges.

Richard Wurmbrand whose sufferings for Christ led him to found the Voice of the Martyrs.

Wurmbrand's disappearance was expected. Anyone who acted contrary to the regime could expect imprisonment or death. At a "Congress of Cults" held by the Communist government, he had asked for it. Religious leaders stepped forward to swear loyalty to the new regime. Sabrina asked Richard to "wipe the shame from the face of Jesus." Richard replied that if he stepped forward, she would no longer have a husband. "I don't need a coward for a husband," she answered. And so Richard stepped forward and told the 4,000 delegates that their duty as Christians was to glorify God and Christ alone.

He returned home to pastor an underground church and promote the gospel among Rumania's Russian invaders. He smuggled Bibles into Russia, disguised as Communist propaganda. And then he disappeared.

What had actually happened? As Richard walked to Church, a van full of secret police stopped in front of him. Four men jumped out and hustled him inside. He was taken to their headquarters and later locked in a solitary cell where he was designated Prisoner Number 1.

His years of imprisonment consisted of a ceaseless round of torture and brainwashing. For seventeen hours a day, repetitious phrases were dinned into his ears: Communism is good. Christianity is stupid! Give up. Give up! Over the years, he was carved in a dozen places and burned. "I prefer not to speak about those [tortures] through which I have passed. When I do, I cannot sleep at night. It is too painful." His jailers also broke many of his bones, including four vertebrae. Miraculously, he survived. Other martyrs did not.

Eight and one half years later, in 1956, Wurmbrand was released. Sabrina herself was brutalized for three years in prison. The Wurmbrand's nine year old son Mihai was orphaned during this time. Released, the Wurmbrands immediately recommenced underground work. Wurmbrand was returned to prison, not released again until 1964.

In 1965, Western churches ransomed Wurmbrand from Rumania for \$10,000. Richard and Sabrina immediately spoke out for those still suffering in Communist hands. Wurmbrand was asked to testify before the US Senate. He displayed the eighteen holes cut in his body. Afterward, he was invited to speak before hundreds of groups. By 1967, "Prisoner Number 1" had incorporated the mission organization that is now known as Voice of the Martyrs, dedicated to assisting those who suffer for Christ throughout the world.

Richard and Sabina were able to survive their ordeal through the power of love. "If the heart is cleansed by the love of Jesus Christ," wrote Wurmbrand, "and if the heart loves him, you can resist all tortures. What would a loving bride not do for a loving bridegroom? What would a loving mother not do for her child? If you love Christ as Mary did, who had Christ as a baby in her arms, if you love Jesus as a bride loves her bridegroom, then you can resist such tortures. God will judge us not according to how much we endured, but how much we could love. I am a witness for the Christians in communist prisons that they could love. They could love God and men."

.....Richard Wurmbrand