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Michael Wurmbrand, President

Tel. (310) 544-0814, Fax: (310) 377-0511.

P.O. Box 5161, Torrance, Ca. 90510, USA.

Email: helpforrefugees@verizon.net ; Website: <http://helpforrefugees.com>



Late Reverend Richard Wurmbrand with wife, Sabina

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”Then shall the righteous answer him, saying, Lord, when saw we thee an'hungered, and fed thee? or thirsty, and gave thee drink? When saw we thee a stranger, and took thee in? or naked, and clothed thee? Or when saw we thee sick, or in prison, and came unto thee?” (St. Matthew 25:37-39)

Richard Wurmbrand Obtains Clothing for His Freezing Fellow Inmates in a Communist Prison

Excerpt from "Our Daily Prison", an article written by a former inmate of Romania's communist prison system. It appeared a few years ago in a Romanian historical magazine. (Translated into English at the Richard Wurmbrand College in Iasi, Romania)

“We were in the transit room waiting for our departure to the Pitesti [communist prison] ...I went on to introduce myself to those whom I had not met yet when I got to the second prisoner who, ... had caught my attention as soon as he had been introduced in the room. [This prisoner] continued to be one of the most controversial persons I had ever met during my detention. I am talking about Pastor Richard Wurmbrand. He was an unusual man not only in terms of his looks, but also in terms of his behavior, a man who could not pass as unnoticeable. Tall and well-built among the other prisoners, at first sight it seemed that the dungeon had not managed to alter his body. Appearances were, however, deceitful. ... We stayed together from the moment I met him on the first day until the following day when the [communist] Security [police] set on different destinations. The curiosity he had awakened in me at first turned into an ever growing interest which was also determined by the quaint attraction he had on those listening to him. He was endowed with the gift of speaking and seemed to be a natural born preacher. He was simple, but always logical in arguments and he was always ready to tackle the most arid theological problems, thus charming his audience. He spoke with conviction and he was persuasive.

...The Pastor had made it his mission to share the Gospel with unbelievers, being passionate about bringing Jews to Christianity. Thus, he started his activity right in the ghetto of the [capital] city [Bucharest.] ... Despite the opposition of fanatic Jews who were restless because of this intruder, Wurmbrand was not affected by the rumor he was causing and went on spreading Christ's Word with tireless passion and perseverance. His church was ever growing and his sermons were ever more listened to which made the animosities grow even stronger inside the Jewish community. ...

When the war began, ...[a number of Jews] ...were sent to concentration camps. A lot of Jews told me about countless such cases for which Wurmbrand fought and managed to get permission from the authorities to let them stay home. This fact has been confirmed by Roman Catholic priests among whom Bishop Schubert [who was imprisoned as well, NT.] More often

than not, in such cases when Wurmbrand could not fulfill his goals through his relationships, he would ask for help from the Catholic organizations or even higher Catholic prelates to intervene with the authorities or use their personal influence with different personalities of the regime. I was told that he had similar relationships with the Patriarchate as well, in order to obtain their support in his tireless work of helping the persecuted. ... At the end of the war, the Soviet invasion completely changed the country. ... The most representative public figures, political and cultural personalities, as well as traditional national institutions became the target of these stumblebums, who were willing to play the game of the invader which meant the collapse of the Romanian society. The church was a primary objective on this list of mass destruction. All the denominations suffered from all kinds of pressures...

Pastor Richard Wurmbrand went on taking care of his parish and helping the persecuted, as he had done before the Russians came. The cataclysm that turned the world upside down around him did not manage to change the course of his life. He dedicated himself with the same passion and energy to his activity. Now only the names of the victims, whose suffering he kept trying to alleviate, changed. Bishop Schubert told me about the relationships that the Catholic Church had with Wurmbrand during those times and how fruitful their collaboration with him was in helping people who were suffering or were in danger. Wurmbrand... did not hesitate even once in saving countless Saxons of Transylvania and Schwabs people doomed to deportation in USSR... Abuses were piling up as sick, old and young people were taken out of their houses as well as women with infants ... Wurmbrand ... made use of his Jewish relationships, which were very precious during those times when many key positions were in the hands of the Jews. Another advantage was that he could speak Russian, which allowed him to go up to the Soviet administration and army offices where he was tireless in getting favor for his causes. Bishop Schubert had only words of praise for Wurmbrand's support towards the church's efforts to save a lot of German families from Romania from deportation.

The most spectacular action Wurmbrand set in motion, recounted by many priests with whom I shared the prison cell, took place in 1945. During that year the regime summoned a "Congress of all Denominations" held inside the parliament building. Several thousand representatives of the clergy of all denominations came from all over the country. The Patriarch blessed the gathering and Petru Groza, the Prime Minister, had the opening speech. Burducea, the Minister of Religious Affairs, whom they said was a former priest, was seated next to him. What followed was a parody of a congress, that only communists could orchestrate. Groza spoke about the role of the church in the new organization of the state and then the speakers from the clerical spoke. All their speeches followed the same pattern, each and every one of them affirming their wish to collaborate with the government. ... The outbreak of terror had the regime's desired outcome: public declarations of allegiance and collaboration.... under Stalin's parenting eye that was watching from the painting that dominated the audience. There had been a number of speakers when Pastor Wurmbrand signed up to say something as the representative of "Swedish Missionary Church" and of "The Ecumenical Council of Churches." The first few phrases did not give way to a different speech than those before his. While tackling the subject deeper, the audience started paying more attention.

When Wurmbrand finally pointed in his conclusion the incompatibility of the church of Christ to collaborate with the Marxist-atheistic regime, the whole room became chaotic. The applause of those who thought alike but did not have the courage to voice their opinions mingled with the rebukes of those who did not agree with him or who just wanted to be seen protesting. Pastor Wurmbrand was the only participant at the congress who had the courage to defy the regime at the peak of the meeting, thus openly rejecting any kind of collaboration. The reply came a few months later. Wurmbrand was arrested. ...

A few years later, while still in prison, I found out about another episode from

Wurmbrand's life, this time from his detention period. ...Wurmbrand was sent to the Tirgu Ocna prison.... Tirgu Ocna meant the last step of their detention. It was here that a large number of young students arrested after August 23, found their death tortured while investigated, submitted to the torture of "reeducation" or to the extreme labor at the Canal, starved to death in the first awful years of the communist regime. Those who did not have the chance to die in other prisons, found their death at Tirgu Ocna.

For the world's sake, the penitentiary was called "The Tuberculosis Hospital," when in fact it was a regular prison, with a medical room with no medicine just as the other ones were. Medical treatment was nonexistent. Among these prisoners, whose lives were slowly perishing, those who entered the final stage of the disease were moved in the adjoining room for the last days of their life. Circulation between rooms was free so the dying ones were taken care of by the still somewhat healthy ones who could be of a last use: to help them turn in their beds, to give them something to drink or to bring them a word of comfort. I was told that Wurmbrand, even though he himself was extremely sick and weakened, stayed day and night at the beds of those from "the chamber of death" as the room was called. I talked to some legionaries [members of a famous anti-Jewish political movement, NT] who managed to get out of there alive and who were with Wurmbrand at Tirgu Ocna. "If all our priests behaved themselves in prison as Wurmbrand did, our church would be the way we wanted it!" – one of them told me.

Then, he told me what he meant. Due to Western intervention and pressure, Wurmbrand's church from Norway had managed to get the authorization from the Ministry of Internal Affairs to send him a parcel with clothes and medicines. This was unheard of in those times – a political prisoner getting a parcel from outside the country. It was the first time a foreign medicine for the treatment of tuberculosis entered the prison at Tirgu Ocna. There were a few streptomycin boxes in Wurmbrand's parcel. For his stage of the disease's progression, streptomycin was a life savior. When the prison doctor came to give Wurmbrand the streptomycin shots, he asked that the treatment be given to a young man in the "chamber of death" who was in far worse a stage than his. Only after the security officer gave his permission, was the young man given the medicine that Wurmbrand renounced. His deed left a profound impression upon the other prisoners at Tirgu Ocna. For them, Wurmbrand made the supreme sacrifice: he offered his own life for the sake of another suffering brother. Their gratitude was even greater as the young man to whom Wurmbrand had given his streptomycin was one of the most valuable youth in the Brothers of the Cross organization. Through his moral character traits and his exemplary life (most of which he spent in prison) he was considered a role model for his comrades and he enjoyed everyone's admiration and respect. I cannot tell for sure the identity of that young man, but I think his name was Gafencu. Wurmbrand's sacrifice, however, came too late to save the young man's life. Destiny had decided a different turn. A few days later the young man went into a coma and then died, while Wurmbrand, whose ending was supposed to be the same, miraculously survived.

I shared with you some episodes of Wurmbrand's life which I had been told while in prison. ...

Time went by pretty quickly in the cell we were isolated and waiting to leave. As usual in this type of situations we were excited about the change that was about to occur in our lives. The new acquaintances, the information exchange and our opinions about what was to come made us forget the cold in the cell, the hunger and the passing of time. We also missed our daily benchmark: the meal time. As we were about to be transferred, we were not included in the food ration of the Jilava [communist prison] kitchen. We were "taken out of the ration" as they used to say, and were supposed to get cold food on our way. The guards showed up in the afternoon. Those of us who had been sentenced to more than fifteen years [Richard Wurmbrand included] were taken out in the lobby, where chains were fastened on our feet. As I was sitting on the cold

cement, I put my feet on the anvil, holding the chains tight in my hands while a guard was beating the rivets. This way I was guarding myself from a blow to my shins. Next in line was ... Wurmbrand and others. ... Now we were ready to go. We were lined two by two, those in chains at the front, since we were walking slower. In the clanking of the chains, the crowd started moving while the echo in the underground corridor announced the remaining ones that a bunch of inmates was leaving Jilava by police van. At the entrance of the first inner court of the fort, we were almost swept away by the cutting squall that was blowing through the ditches of Jilava.The setting for a shooting a black and white, horror movie from the 30's would not have been complete without our convoy, slowly dragging along, in the noise of the chains that we were clattering.

Besides the terrible frost outside, nothing out of the ordinary in the program: lining up and counting at the gate of Jilava, getting in into the two police vans and riding on a bumpy road to Bucharest. Then a stop and a waiting that to me seemed endless.

(Some of us) did not have winter clothes so the others embraced us to keep us warm. I was still shivering without being able to contain my chattering. My feet were frozen and I had a burning sensation when the chains were touching my ankles. We all had the permanent need to urinate. Being forced to hold it, I had acute pain in my bladder. ... Finally, the door of the van opened and, frozen to the bones, we were hurried by the armed guards towards the prison-rail car, pulled over at 20 meters in front of us. ... With the chains on our feet and paralyzed by cold, getting up on the high platform of the carriage that had no steps was a hassle even though we were helping one other. The prisoners that had got on before us were locked in the small cells on the two sides of the middle hallway. When we arrived, all the cells had already been occupied, so we were sent towards the end of the hallway and put in the room at the end of the carriage. ... At least we were protected from the wind. We spent several hours in this glacial atmosphere. It was only when our carriage was attached to the train the heating system starting working and we warmed up. Each one of us dealt with the frost in his own way. Those without chains were pacing from one corner to another; those cuffed were squatting or were stretching as much as the chains allowed them to. Among the 10-15 men that were together, there (was also) pastor Wurmbrand. Seeing that the stationing of our carriage was taking too long and we were freezing, Wurmbrand told us that he was going to get a warmer pullover from the backpack stacked on the hallway together with all our of luggage. We were sure he was not going to make the guards give him his backpack. The guards on this train with prisoners were renowned for their inflexibility and their meanness. They never did the least humane gesture. For example, during the scorching summer, in the overcrowded carriages, when the prisoners who were suffocating because lack of air and fainting from heat asked for water there would have been hours until one of the guards would bring them some water. However, our skepticism did not discourage Wurmbrand in his attempt to get his backpack. We witnessed this attempt over an hour. The first part went as we had predicted, seeming to confirm the failure theory: Wurmbrand knocked on the door. He did not get any answer although we heard the guards chatting. Wurmbrand knocked one more time. The hallway was silent. Only after he knocked for the third or the fourth time, he heard the usual answer: "Stop knocking!"

Wurmbrand kept on knocking on the door, as calmly as before, without knocking harder or increasing the rhythm. From now on, the knocking alternated with the replies from the hallway and everything turned in a kind of dialog. However, while on this side of the door Wurmbrand them kept the tone of his knocking at the same level, on the other side the guard starting losing his temper and became angry, using the well-known foul language of his order. The replies of the guard were becoming more and more threatening: "Stop knocking!" "Stop knocking, you, bandit!" "Don't you hear, bandit! If you keep knocking, I'll report you!"

Wurmbrand, after every threat of the guard, calmly knocked on the door again.

Finally, we heard not only the guard's curses but also the steps of the boots that were approaching us. The small window in the door of the cell opened and the furious, bloodshot face of the guardian showed up. Shouting at Wurmbrand, he asked him why he was knocking on the door. With a gentle voice, Wurmbrand apologized for his insistence and gave the guardian the reason

"It can't be done!" was the answer and the small window in the door was closed back.

The guardian had not even taken a few steps when Wurmbrand knocked on the door again. This time, with a crazy roar, the guardian opened the small window and lavished upon him with insults and threats. Having the same calmness and serenity, Wurmbrand asked again for his backpack, appealing to the guard's human side, which could not allow him to remain insensitive to the sufferings of his fellow man. The fact that Wurmbrand did not react to his threats or his insults, speaking with a soft voice, had the desired effect.

Disarmed by the way Wurmbrand formulated his plea, the guardian, with his simple mind, reasoned the only possible conclusion concerning his opponent:

"What were you as a civilian? A lawyer?"

"No, sergeant!"

"You looked as a lawyer, pleading with the judge to let the bandit on trial go free!"

"I plea only in front of one judge, sergeant. And I pray for all people, even for you, sir."

The intrigued guardian started talking to Wurmbrand. We could admire how Wurmbrand with his mastery of language lured him to Wurmbrand's discussion "home court," how he retained his attention and interest, with a skill of an oriental merchant who did not let his client go away until he bought his merchandise. I do not know the extent to which this disguised sermon had a profound effect upon the guardian. What we all attested to was that Wurmbrand earned his regard. At one point, the guardian abruptly ended the conversation, slammed the small window and walked away, mumbling something about the priests "all of them being thieves." A few minutes later, when the latches of our cell were raised, we realized that the words he had uttered were said for his comrade's ears.

The guardian had actually gone to get the backpack for Wurmbrand. He pushed with his foot through the crack of the door, that he immediately closed back, and through the small window told Wurmbrand to take his pullover. However, he warned him to take only one pullover, as the rules stipulated, still standing at the window to watch him. A useless guarding watch, since Wurmbrand opened the backpack right behind the door, without being seen by the guardian.

With incredible handiness, he started taking out four or five warm pieces of clothing and threw them, one after another, under the benches in the cell. Then, holding the last one in his hand, a pullover, stood up and showed it to the guardian, thanking him at the same time for his compassion that he showed towards his sufferings. Guardian opened the door halfway and Wurmbrand gave him back his backpack. The man took it without saying anything about the fact that now it was almost empty compared to how it was when he had brought it into the cell."



As soon as communism fell in Romania, several believers inspired through the Christian witness of late Reverend Richard Wurmbrand started an evangelical high school bearing his name. While under communism they were able to read books like Tortured For Christ circulated, secretly among underground worshipping local churches. Though in cramped facilities and behind in paying its teachers salaries, a team of dedicated Christian teachers are able to educate over 300 kids. Left, students shown in volunteer construction work. The Richard Wurmbrand College is a fully government-accredited high school (1st -12th grade) in Iasi, Romania.

STEPANESCU MARIA, an 84 year old widow.



Widow of STEPANESCU ILIE who passed through 4 years of Communist prison. She writes: " My late husband was sentenced in 1959 to 9 years of jail just for being a member of the Army of the Lord (a Christian evangelical revival movement inside the Greek-Orthodox Church of Romania.) At midnight 4 secret policemen entered our home with drawn handguns, asking us to keep our hands up, checking if we did not have weapons and they took also any religious books we had. I remained alone to raise 3 children without any support. The Communists also took away our home, while the children could not continue in school since their parents were regarded as enemies of the government. My husband executed 4 difficult years of communist imprisonment and afterwards could find a place of work only with much difficulty. Now I live with my daughter, and am thankful to God for His help in passing through all these difficulties."

Richard Wurmbrand High School Kids



Maria S above right, with friends

Maria was born in a gipsy family from Harlau, Romania. Because she was born with a cleft palate, she was brought to the children's hospital "St. Mary" in Iasi. There she was abandoned by her parents and she ended up in an orphanage where she lived until she was 5. Now a teenager, she lives with other orphans in an apartment with two other Christian ladies. Maria is a Christian and is a role model for the entire Richard Wurmbrand school. When she grows up, Maria would like to become a missionary. Maria attends the local "Jesus the Savior" church. Her favorite Bible words are from Isaiah, Chapter 43: "Fear not: for I am with thee".

Help For Refugees, Inc., PO Box 5161, Torrance, Ca. 90510, USA, is a tax-exempt, 501(c) non-profit corporation, trying to be of help to refugees from present and former communist countries. It also helps in dire situations left, as a sequel of communism, for instance formerly persecuted Christians in Eastern Europe, Christians who passed through 6-10 years of communist prison because of their Christian witness or orphanages in Eastern Europe, Asia, Latin America.