

“BE FAITHFUL”

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Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Beware, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison so that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have affliction. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life. (Rev. 2:10)

For many Christians today, these words from Revelation refer to the persecution of the Church during the first centuries, to the time of the first martyrs and their fascinating testimony about the truth of the Gospel. For many people it is difficult to imagine what it is like to be declared an outlaw and chased because of your faith. How far away from many of us is the idea of defending the Christian faith even at the cost of our life! Today we have to be grateful for living in a time when we can profess our faith relatively freely. However, we do not have to forget the blood of the martyrs, shed not only during the first centuries but during the whole of Church history, which is a real evidence of God's grace that can make the weak human being capable of great feats.

For Bulgarian Methodists, the passage from Revelation is not only the source for another meditation on the early history of the Church. For many of the current members of our congregations it was only twenty years ago that a period of Bulgarian history ended during which Christians had to pay a great price to be faithful to their calling. While the persecution they faced did not always cost Bulgarian Christians their lives, many Christians died for their faith. Many times Christians were sent to prison, interned by force, disfranchised; they were continually tormented by the state security forces. Christians had problems finding jobs and had limited possibilities for study. Because the Communist regime regarded religion as “the opiate of the people,” the government made every effort to crush those who spread it or to motivate them to stop their anti-national work. Of course, the most smashing blows were applied to ministers. Most of the Protestant pastors were imprisoned or sent to detention camps as “American spies” and their families were treated very humiliatingly as “national enemies.” Some of them died because of the hard regimen, but the rest of the prisoners still remember their courage and strong Christian faith.

Today I would like to tell you a personal story, which is a real illustration of the challenges that Bulgarian Methodists faced. The hero of this story authorized me to tell you the story and said: “For all this I give glory to the Lord. Without him I would not be alive!”

This is the story of a young German girl, who connected her life with Bulgaria early, when she was sixteen. In February, we celebrated her 91st birthday. This is the story of Martha, who was born in 1919 in an ordinary

family in eastern Germany. When she was fifteen she met the Bulgarian man Iliya Iliev, who had graduated in Frankfurt with a degree in theology and was preparing to return to Bulgaria as a Methodist minister. Iliev was in Martha's hometown with some friends to hold evangelical services.

When Martha was attending secondary school, she was forced to drop out of school because she was not a member of the Hitler Youth. When Iliev, having returned to Bulgaria, heard from Martha about her circumstances he suggested a solution to her problem—Martha could continue her education in the German school in Ruse and at the same time she could work for the family of a Bulgarian doctor and his German wife. At that time there were thirty or forty Germans living in Ruse. In those days it was unusual for a young girl to leave her country and to go abroad without any local sponsorship and protection. Iliya Iliev had a solution for this problem as well, proposing engagement to Martha. At first, her parents agreed and permitted Martha to go to Bulgaria. "That's why I came here," she said. "It was not a grand passion."

In 1935, Iliya Iliev was a pastor in the small village of Hotanza, near Ruse. Martha knew that if she married Iliev she would have to share all the challenges of rural life. At last she accepted the proposal and the marriage ceremony was prepared in the small church. The young couple was dressed in formal clothes, the pastor was there, the bell was ringing and, at the last moment, the bride's father suddenly arrived from Germany, entered the sanctuary and began dissuading his daughter from getting married. It was not too late and she could refuse the marriage. However, Martha remained firm and said, "My intended husband is a pastor here and I do not have the right to discredit him."

The young family was accommodated in a modest house on the outskirts of the village. The conditions were very hard for a young German lady and Martha admits, "I would not bear all this, if I was not a Christian!" Soon after the marriage, Martha's mother came to see the young family and was horrified by what she saw. For eight months she tried to persuade the young family to move to Germany. However, that was not possible, not only because Rev. Iliev could not leave his congregation, but for many other reasons as well. For example, he would not be well accepted in Germany with a name which consisted of three Jewish names, Elijah Jacob Elijah. Even during his studying in Germany he introduced himself not with his real name, but with a similar one. In this way he could avoid at least one of the two Jewish names. So the young family stayed in Bulgaria.

Martha set to work as a faithful helper of her husband. Her first challenge was to learn Bulgarian. She progressed fast and a year and a half later she translated a children's Christmas song from German into Bulgarian. On her initiative a Christmas tree was displayed in the church for the first time. Soon a choir was formed—in four parts under her conductorship. She actively worked with the women and the children in the church. To this day her graduates remember everything they learned from her and they are very grateful to her. The church in Hotanza is still called "the singing church."

In the beginning of World War II (1940), the son of Iliya and Martha was born in Hotanza; his name is Bogomir ("in peace with God"). In 1944, Martha faced very serious danger. As a German woman, she had to be deported to Siberia, which meant certain death. However, some local Communists who over the years had risen to places of influence in the hierarchy successfully intervened and prevented her deportation. A year later Rev. Iliev received his new appointment to the town of Lovech where the American High School for Girls was located. For the twenty-six year old Martha, who had then been living in Hotanza for ten years, the move was a breath of fresh air as she now had the opportunity to communicate with the American women missionaries as well as with the intellectuals in the town of Lovech. During the first years of the new Communist regime the missionaries and the American ambassador were able to protect her family. Unfortunately, it was not long before the missionaries were forced to leave the country and the school building was taken over by the government. The last words the missionary women said to Martha were, "May God help you all!" Soon the new regime took action against the Church.

In 1948, Rev. Iliev was sent to prison in Sofia, accused of being an American spy. He was imprisoned there for three years. Martha stayed alone with her son, without any support on the part of Iliya's parents who were strict Orthodox believers. The most painful years of her life were beginning. As a German and wife of a pastor she was not allowed to receive coupons for food (war coupons were required to obtain food). Martha did not have any financial support except from the Church which had experienced a steep decline in attendance because many of the Church members were too frightened to go to church. Sometimes the Metropolitan bishop of Lovech, who was a Greek, helped her. It was not unusual for Martha to go days without food. Her weight during that period declined to about 40 kilograms (which is about 80 pounds). "I never complained," said Martha, "I never begged and God did not let me starve." Obviously, our sister Martha has learned the same truth as Apostle Paul, "I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need" (Philippians 4:12).

At that time, her son Bogomir was diagnosed with a disease which called for special care in a sanatorium. The government did not give their permission, but the doctors sent him to a sanatorium on their own responsibility.

Despite of her own hardships, Martha opened the door of her home (the local parsonage) for many exiles and their children, whom the new government had expelled from Sofia while confiscating their houses and the rest of their property. In addition to her own needs she endeavored to send money to her husband in prison and willingly accepted every kind of job to earn money. During that period she worked very hard in the forestry industry and for a canning factory. For five years she had to make buttons from mussels.

While Rev. Iliev was in prison, Martha preached in the church. They did not stop their services even when very few people attended church. When

Rev. Iliev was set at liberty, the government took the keys of the church and forbade the conducting of services. The challenges were not over. Pastor Iliev was disfranchised for five years. He was not allowed to work at his job or to do a higher-skilled job commiserate to his education. He was only allowed to do hard manual labor. He was forced to go to Ruse where he worked for fifteen years on the city's project to install new drains. Martha remained in Lovech for a few more years until she was invited to join her husband in Ruse.

When she arrived in Ruse she was once again aided by some influential Communists from Hotanza who helped her and she began working as a dressmaker. Rev. Iliev worked and preached, but often accosted by the police who imposed all sorts of conditions for him to continue his ministry. During that period the Pentecostal and the Baptist churches did not have their own buildings and they asked Rev. Iliev if they could have their services in the Methodist church building. He accepted but the police would not allow this to happen. However, Rev. Iliev firmly declared, "They are my brothers and I cannot send them away." To this day the Protestant churches in Ruse acknowledge how important that decision of Rev. Iliev was for their survival.

At one point the regime gave up of the straightforward struggle against the churches. Then many agents and collaborators of the government were recruited and they received a very important task—to destroy the congregations from the inside, making as many obstacles as they could or even selling the buildings. The Bulgarian Methodist Church did not have the opportunity to be in touch with Methodists in Western Europe and the USA. The bishop, who lived in Switzerland, was not allowed to visit Bulgaria. The Communists then succeeded in installing a Bulgarian bishop who was faithful to the regime.

Despite all the efforts of the Communists to destroy the church, it survived. When the democratic changes came to Bulgaria in 1989, there were only three active Methodist churches—in Ruse, Hotanza and Shumen. By that time Rev. Iliev was retired with the small pension of a laborer. What about Martha? It was the same, she was a retired dressmaker.

However, as they witnessed the new beginning of the Methodist church in Bulgaria, Martha and the other Methodists found new courage and were able to find their joy renewed despite the memories of sorrow and pain.

Rev. Iliev died in 1996. If he was alive today he would be one hundred years old. As I told you, this year Martha turns ninety. She continues to attend church and constantly offers words of comfort and encouragement for the young people. Often when I see her I am reminded of the words of the Apostle Paul, "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. From now on there is reserved for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will give me on that day, and not only to me but also to all who have longed for his appearing" (2 Timothy 4:7-8).

This was the story of Martha and her family. It is similar to the stories of

many Bulgarian Protestant families, who were forced to confess their faith in the face of many challenges. From them, as well as from the example of the first martyrs, we, the Bulgarian Methodists today, can learn a great lesson—to be faithful. At the end of this sermon, my message to you is: live your life in a way that you can say at the end the words Martha said me at the end of our conversation, “I trust God, I’m convinced of his power!”