

Interview with Elizabeth Ton

This is a personal testimony of someone who has experienced significant suffering for the sake of her love for Christ. She is the wife of theologian Josef Ton, a renowned Romanian Christian leader and theological educator. The editors met her on the occasion of the Bad Urach Consultation on “Developing an evangelical theology of suffering, persecution and martyrdom,” held on 16-18 September 2009 in Germany. They were impressed by her deep spirituality and felt it would not be adequately captured by the consultation statement. Mirjam Scarborough conducted and edited the interview.

Q Where and when were you born?

ET I was born in Romania in the town of Aiud in 1933 into a Christian family, where I learned what it means to be a Christian.

Q Was it usual in your environment to be born into a Christian family?

ET No, my father was a pioneer in his time. He came to know the Lord by himself, by asking the question, ‘if there are laws made by man, where are the laws made by God for man?’ One day somebody gave him a Bible and there he found the answer. He found Jesus. He became an evangelist and also a pastor. He was under some form of persecution almost all the time, because at that time the Orthodox Church persecuted the non-Orthodox believers. They locked our churches even before the communists did. When the communists took over they opened the churches and it was as if freedom had arrived, but that was only for a while, because after a very short time, they started their own persecution and slowly the persecution got worse. The communists gave us the freedom to gather, to have our churches, but at the same time they limited our activities very much, and that was the hardest thing. But, we rejoiced being together, as long as they let us be in a church. And there were somehow meetings we could hold without being discovered.

Q You faced a lot of opposition from early childhood. How did your faith continue to develop under these adverse circumstances?

ET For one it helped growing up in a family where the parents were strong Christians. My father was a fighter, a defender of the faith. He was beaten and he experienced a lot of problems, because he was so strong in his faith. I learned from that. Because God was present in our family, we didn’t feel the hardness of the situation.

We just rejoiced in the Lord and we knew that we were different and we were persecuted, because Jesus was persecuted.

(A further important milestone in my early faith development) was my baptism when I was 14 years old. I remember that on that day heaven was open. (Reflecting on the presence I felt), one day in my devotion I read that God assisted Jesus at his baptism and said, 'You are my beloved Son in which I find all my pleasure.' I said, 'I know God is my father too. I am his child too, I am his daughter.' I believe strongly what I felt was His presence. He comes alongside us as we follow him through the (baptismal) water, which represents our death and our resurrection.

(School was one place where I experienced this presence of Jesus.) Although I always felt rejected at school, I was never upset. I simply accepted it. I didn't miss the friendship of my fellow pupils, because I was a Christian. If you are rejected that means that you don't belong to the world, and I was not ashamed of that. My father always said, 'Dare to be different!'

Q How did you eventually meet a husband who shared your faith?

ET He was my neighbour, we knew each other from childhood. God prepared us, both of us, I am convinced that he is the one whom God had chosen for me.

Q How did you see your role as a wife?

ET My husband was involved in lots of tasks, and wearing many hats. What did I do for him? In short, I made him happy. To make him happy meant to be behind him in everything. That means you have to know everything that he is doing. He shared absolutely everything with me especially when we faced serious problems.

Q What were some of the problems you faced together, and how did you deal with them?

ET First of all he wrote a paper fighting for the rights of the church. During that time he tried to teach me that as a result I would maybe have to give him up and give him to the Lord, because he might be killed. I told him, 'I don't feel it's time for that.' (After his first paper) one of our pastor friends actually collected 50 [supporting] signatures and humanly speaking this saved his life. We knew this was a victory. But after the second paper, the Christian Manifesto, we faced a lot of hardship. But by that time we had already walked a long way with the Lord in difficult

situations, and we were ready. As a result of the paper they searched our house and put us under house arrest, and they were interrogating us a lot. They were always threatening us with hard prison. They even threatened to kill us. This time round I really felt that they would do it. I learned one important lesson from this experience: In order to stand firm during that time I had to understand, what it is to love God and to love Jesus. It was a choice, to be with Jesus or to depart from Jesus. But when you know Jesus the beauty of his love, his goodness, his mercy, his forgiveness, how can you not stay with him? He had also shown us how much he's with us. I knew he will be there with us even unto death and suffer with us.

Another special lesson I learnt during that time is that you have to be totally free to have perfect communication with God. Don't do anything of which you are not sure that it is right. For example, we had to make sure my husband's papers would get out of the country. One day I was staying with some friends in Bucharest, when an English diplomat came to visit. My host said, 'Elizabeth, you have to sign this paper away, because we won't have another chance to give it to a diplomat,' and so I signed it away. However, I wasn't sure that I had done the right thing. After I arrived back home, I took the Bible, opened it and the word was, 'because you weren't afraid, my gift for you is your life.' You cannot mistake it when God is talking to you, because when he talks he gives you the message you need. And that message works in you what you need. He gives you something which you did not have before, and removes any doubt and fear.

I also realized one has to be very careful in everything one says during interrogations, and not have any doubts afterwards. You have to trust the Holy Spirit. He enlightens your mind. It is almost as if you read what you have to say.

Once, however, I was much afraid, because the authorities had said, 'we will come on Monday (that was on a Friday), on Monday we will see what we choose to do to you.' I somehow was not prepared this time round. I asked my husband to tell me why we had to die. What he said stayed in my mind: 'As my father sent me so I send you.' In such a situation, you read that verse in a totally different way. You feel how Jesus was sent to be crucified and you see the *via dolorosa*, but you feel God in you.

So I just prayed, ‘Lord, I want to honour your name, give me the power to stand and not bring shame on you.’ And during that prayer I felt my backbone strengthen and keep me upright.

One afternoon I prayed near our little baby's bed and I said, ‘Lord: to whom can I entrust my daughter?’ Then I heard a voice saying, ‘Who can take care for her better than me?’ When I heard that I said, ‘Oh please, be the father and the mother of my child.’ And I really felt that I was detached physically, emotionally from her in every way. Now I think that was a gift which was given in that time for my daughter, because God really cared for her. Afterwards I went into the kitchen. It was three o'clock in the afternoon, and I looked through the window, and I saw something like a white cloud coming very close, and I said to my husband, ‘If I take one step, I feel I will step right into eternity. It's so close, its right here.’

Q It seems that although you had to give up a lot because of your faith you have also gained much?

ET When you receive Jesus and give up other things, you get everything with him. I have to be free in my heart, and love. I began to realize what it means to love Jesus more than anything. It is one of Jesus' commands to love him more than anybody and anything, so that he comes first in my life. I realized the love for him helps me in times of persecution. It gives me power to stand. That love keeps me inside of him, and he stands up with me, in me and me in him. And that's the whole power which gives me the joy, the freedom, the peace, the rest – it's wonderful. His love is everything, it was his love that put him on the cross. I started from the point that everything he asks me to do is good for me. I gained from that. For me, his love is a strength.

Q If you had to give one piece of advice to a young woman who is facing persecution, what would you say to her?

ET If she is ready to die, she will go and face persecution. If she is not ready to die for Jesus, she doesn't have to go and face it. You cannot stand the fear, it would kill you. But if you gave your life to Jesus you will gain it, you will gain what you never ever dreamed of: joy, beauty, fullness, everything. You see the world through his eyes. You think through his mind, you love through his love. You do everything through him. It's so much more precious than my life. For me his will is my life, is my home, it is

my rest. If God wants her to do a ministry in a hostile environment, she will be protected. Those three young men in the Book of Daniel were brought out of the furnace without any harm. Daniel was brought out. And what was the gain? God was glorified. And all those pagan people recognize there is no other God. What you can do: through your life or through your death you can honour God. And if God is choosing you to die for him, he will help you to die in such a way that they will see God in you. That's for sure.

Q After the antagonism and persecution you faced, what has changed in your life?

ET Well what I am trying to live for now: to teach my sisters, and to tell them that it's worth to live a real Christian life. If you love God, then you show your love for God through living your life for those around you. The love of God is something which opens your eyes for the needs around you. And it's so wonderful in the evening when you go to sleep and you can see that yesterday was a day when God blessed me.

Thank you very much for sharing your experiences with our readers.