

A Tale of Christmas Past

by attorney Sorin Leahu

With Christmas approaching, the thoughts of many are consumed with last minute shopping, holiday events, family gatherings, and perhaps even the birth of Messiah. Yet, for many Eastern Europeans, this time of the year is significant for still another reason. December 16, 2014, marks the 25th anniversary of the Romanian Revolution. The Revolution, which was concluded eleven days after it began, ended 42 years of Communist rule in the country by Dictator Nicolae Ceausescu. Although Communist rule persisted stubbornly for over four decades, it was a pastor's fight against a zoning law that ultimately changed the course of history.

Laszlo Tokes, a Romanian born pastor of a Hungarian Reformed church, committed the crime of speaking out against the Communist Systemization policy. That policy was an urban planning program which sought to bring about the development of a Socialist society. Naturally, places of worship were less than welcomed and the destruction of churches and monasteries was well under way. When the Communists attempted to evict Pastor Tokes from his church in Timisoara, the Hungarian minority in the city rioted. Many others would join the Revolution and over the course of the following days the protesters overwhelmed the Communist forces. Ceausescu and his wife Elena were caught trying to escape and following a two-hour trial on Christmas Day, both were publically executed.

Lack of due process aside, the end of Ceausescu and Communist rule was a major victory for religious freedom. The fact that freedom came on Christmas Day (a day outlawed by the Communists) did not escape some. The horrors of persecution during Communist Romania continue to shock the conscience. Many have read the account of Richard Wurmbrand, a Jewish believer in

Christ and pastor who was imprisoned for 14 years because of his beliefs. His bestselling book, "Tortured for Christ" is a must read for any believer. Pastor Wurmbrand later founded The Voice of the Martyrs, an international organization that works on behalf of persecuted Christians around the world.

I was two years old, living in Romania when Communism fell. I count myself privileged to now work with a talented group of attorneys fighting for religious liberty, and incidentally, against discriminatory zoning laws. As we celebrate the birth of Messiah who brought us freedom, let us not forget those who continue to seek freedom from oppression. Whether in the prisons of Iran or the courtrooms of America, religious freedom must be protected. It was the abolitionist Wendell Phillips who stated that "[e]ternal vigilance is the price of liberty." Ronald Reagan echoed that sentiment when he famously remarked that "[f]reedom is never more than one generation away from extinction. We didn't pass it to our children in the bloodstream. It must be fought for, protected, and handed on for them to do the same"

This Christmas Season, let us celebrate that Christ came to set us free from the bondage of sin, but let us not forget those who continue to be in physical bondage. Let us also remember the difference even one pastor can make. A modern day Pastor Tokes is Pastor Saeed Abedini who is imprisoned in Iran. Pastor Abedini recently released a Christmas message in which he stated something worth reflecting upon, "It may be that we will be called fools and traitors and face many difficulties, but we should crucify our will and wishes even more until the world hears and tastes the true meaning of Christmas." ■