



CAUGHT IN THE CROSSFIRE

The story of Janina Pladek

told by

MARY WEMYSS AITCHISON



CHRISTIAN FOCUS





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10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

ISBN 1-85792-149-6

First Published 1995,
reprinted 2005

by

Christian Focus Publications Ltd.
Geanies House, Fearn, Ross-shire,
IV20 1TW, Scotland, Great Britain.

www.christianfocus.com

Cover design by Alister MacInnes

Printed and bound by Norhaven

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This book is dedicated to all child victims of conflict. The countless children who have suffered, are suffering, and will suffer because of man's inhumanity, greed and aggression. As they pass unknown and forgotten they leave us with visions of a heroism which defies the definition of words.

'Ask not for whom the bell tolls, it tolls for thee', for we belong to the same family of God, graced with His love; and gifted with the power to love. So let it be! Let God's love rule our hearts and minds to make this world a heaven on earth for all children and mankind.





FOREWORD

All of us have to face suffering at some time during our lives. We do not live in a fair world and suffering is not distributed equally. Suffering, in particular the suffering of children and the innocent, disturbs us and it is right that we should be disturbed. It seems so unfair that innocent lives should be torn and twisted by events that lie outside the control of the victim.

Yet, there is another side to suffering. We are constantly amazed at the number of people who, having faced the most appalling circumstances have been able to rise above them. It's as though they have said to themselves, 'I will not be defeated. Suffering will not destroy me. I will make something creative come from it.' In fact, when we stop to think for a moment we realise that most, if not all, creative activity emerges from some suffering. Suffering has the power to destroy. It need not destroy.

This is the story of Janina Pladek. One, who as a schoolgirl witnessed the Nazi occupation of her country. It is a story of great and terrible suffering and yet, it is not that alone. Out of the turmoil and chaos of warfare grows a compassion that extends





way beyond Poland to embrace suffering people elsewhere. This is a story of courage and hope.

This story will bring hope to many and not only to those who read it. The author has donated half of all the Royalties to Y Care's work among Street Children. In ways that could never be known to her, Janina Pladek continues to bring a message of hope to thousands.

Terry Waite
Founder Chairman - Y Care International





PREFACE

When I dedicated the first edition of 'Caught In The Crossfire' to children who face suffering in their lives my personal experiences were limited to events I had witnessed as a journalist; a manager of Approved Schools (now named Community Homes); and governor of state schools and children's homes. Events which followed the publication led me into India, Thailand, China and Burma where I was brought face to face with the tragic consequences of dire poverty, homelessness, rejection and genocide. My heart cries out for the world to hear, to listen and not to forget; to look, to see and remember!

It is not possible for one to help financially the millions in need, but with a love that is free and boundless we can do so much to bring hope and comfort to the rejected. Being there, seeking them out, assures them that someone cares; that they are not alone or forgotten, or discarded like the garbage that they eagerly scavenge searching for food or anything useful.

The giving is not all one-sided. Be it the street children and slum dwellers of India; the orphans





and persecuted in China; refugees from the Burmese atrocities; child prostitutes in Thailand; orphans of the world; the homeless in Hong Kong, all have an inner spiritual beauty and a love to give which touched me deeply. Face to face with such suffering changed me irrevocably and so many faces are etched on my mind. Wherever we are; whoever we are; rich or poor; young or old; there may come a time in our lives when we need the assurance of God's presence, and long too, for human comfort.

Travelling alone I often found myself with such a need, and like many others I met, experienced the faithfulness and compassion of God. Inhumanity to man, tragically, still causes much suffering in our troubled world. Though my experiences are limited to the countries I have visited I am aware of the need to include others in my giving and prayers.

The oppressed people of Burma, however, constantly haunt me. The simple, peace loving ethnic minorities, in particular the Karens – a Christian race who fought bravely side by side with our troops to regain Burma from the Japanese; who suffered heavy casualties and the subsequent loss of their freedom – deserve more aid and support from us.

I witnessed the tragic and terrible sufferings of families who are constantly hunted by the Burmese junta and spend their lives hiding in the jungle or fleeing from their oppressors. Women, young and old are raped; children abducted or used for forced labour; men forced to work as porters for the army



or face death. Either choice ends the same, for they suffer much hardship and, deprived of food and water, they die. Those fleeing frequently suffer loss of limb or death by the many mines laid in their paths by the junta whose aim seems to annihilate the tribe.

Because journalists and writers are forbidden to enter Burma the outside world knows little of the atrocities. I had a compulsive urge to go, and, without passport or visa, I risked entering Burma by way of the borders of Thailand. I did meet danger, but returned unharmed. Indeed, I was the only one of my five companions who returned without malaria or injury.

The Karens are an inspiring example of Christian love and self sacrifice. Many refugees are teachers, pastors or medics who have chosen to leave a safe environment and live with their displaced people in the jungle in order to help. The Karens pray for freedom and with the hope that one day they will have their own state again, they educate and prepare the young generation to govern them.

It was an unforgettable experience staying with them in their jungle hideout. They are, intelligent, resourceful and their bible is their 'daily bread'. It is a treasured possession, well worn through use, read and quoted from dawn to dusk by the elder of the family.

It was expected that we would hold church services for them, teach in schools, and spend time in each dwelling. As dawn broke, the open wooden building they had erected and used for



community purposes and worship was packed and many crowded outside. If our sermons were less than two hours they were disappointed. We were surrounded by a deep faith, love and compassion found in those who experience cruelty, deprivation, poverty and utter inhumanity. Who so quickly respond to love, and are proof that you can torture, beat, starve a person; deprive them of home and possessions, but cannot take away their soul, learning or will. Where there is knowledge and faith, there is a power to overcome suffering. The Karen's faith has never wavered.

It was a privilege to be with them. There was no bitterness, no begging for money or goods, only that we should pray for them. (It goes without saying that we arrived with our truck laden with food, medicine etc.).

I shall always remember their sufferings; the heartbreak at leaving, the tears on departure; but also the tears of laughter and singing we shared in the darkness of the jungle.

Janina's story may, for some, be considered a 'historical episode' for it occurred sixty years ago when Europe was plunged into war and the countries have been at peace with each other since! Three generations have grown up since then, and we face the question 'Is the world a peaceful or safer place?'

It has been proved time and time again that Peace cannot be negotiated by military force. It creates rebellion, civil war, terrorism and untold suffering on the innocent men, women and



children. Particularly, the young; the hope for a nation senselessly destroyed both physically and mentally.

As the work of charities grows ever more demanding royalties from the sale of this book will continue to be devoted to children in need, particularly street children, wherever they are.

Mary Wemyss Aitchison







ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I acknowledge with deep gratitude the generous spirit of co-operation with which Janina (Pladek) Neale has contributed in making this book possible. She showed great confidence in me when at our first meeting in 1968 she asked me to write her story.

Janina at that time lived in Scotland and I lived in South Gloucestershire, therefore our communications depended on letters and telephone calls. Unfortunately, the project had to be abandoned when in 1970 my husband suffered a severe cerebral haemorrhage and became an invalid.

I became his carer and main source of income for the family. Twenty years were to elapse before I could resume writing.

Having lost contact with Janina and believing that her story had been written, I returned to journalism. The unfinished work troubled me, however, and I made several attempts to find her. Eventually in 1989 I traced her to South Africa. Learning that her story had not been told I restarted in 1990. When in 1993, Janina and her husband returned from South Africa, the book was completed. If I have been able to convey to readers the courage, love and deep





faith which Janina possesses, and the ever-loving faithfulness of God, then my prayers will have been answered.

Janina and I share the same deep concern for all children who innocently suffer, particularly the homeless and loveless. This concern has prompted the giving of royalties to the 'Y' Care Street Children Fund.

I acknowledge with heartfelt thanks the assistance given to me by my daughter, Ruth Larsen – the wife of a vicar, mother of a three year old and a busy vet. She has patiently edited my many manuscripts and encouraged me to 'get on with it'.

I express my appreciation and many thanks to my friend and neighbour in Burrelton, Moira Duthie, M.A., who so willingly undertook the laborious task of proofreading. Their tangible and moral support eased the isolation of the lone writer.





INTRODUCTION

Whither goes

I was wet, clumsy, shivering, teeth chattering. With icy hands I knocked at the main door. I waited, cowering from the biting wind and torrential rain. No reply. Frantically I knocked again and again. Still no reply. Groping in the pitch darkness I made my way round the house searching and searching for another door. I found one. I knocked and knocked until my fists ached. Eventually an angry voice shouted, 'What do you want? Get away! We want some sleep. You are waking up the entire house!'

What did I want? I was desperate, cold, wet through and starving. For weeks I had been fleeing from enemies – Germans and Russians. I had no food nor protection. I had been hiding in cellars, forests, sleeping in bomb craters, swimming rivers, and now having crossed another river in face of enemy fire from both sides of the river I had reached this house.

It was the early hours of the morning. The rain lashed down. The wind howled through the trees. I was hungry and exhausted. I continued knocking until a light came on. It revealed a room full of beds





– all occupied. The sight of beds filled me with a deep longing. I shouted that I would not stop knocking until I had shelter.

With shouts of swearing and cursing the front door opened and an old man told me to be quiet and not disturb his guests. Then he looked and taking pity on me said, 'Follow me. The place is full up with guests such as yourself. I could be in serious trouble for sheltering you. All I have left is a barn attic which is full up, too, but there is straw on the floor and it will get you out of the rain.' Warning me to crouch low close to the wall so that I should not be seen he took me to the barn. Placing a ladder against the wall he knocked on a small wooden hatch under the barn roof, 'Open up!' he shouted, 'I have a young girl. Move over and let her in!' There was the sound of shuffling from inside the attic, then the hatch opened and I climbed in on to a bare floor. The roof was low – too low to stand up. I crawled over legs and boots and huddled down. The opening closed. It was pitch black!

The silence was interrupted only by snoring and coughing – incessant coughing. I sensed that the occupants were men, but what did I care? What did anyone care? We might be inanimate objects.

I started shivering and could not stop. The floorboards seemed to be shaking with me. My heart beat loud and fast and I thought it would burst. A man's voice called out, 'Here girl! You can't sit up all night. Here is a little straw. Lie down on it.' Pushing his neighbour's legs over he pulled a little straw from under himself. I took it and crouched down.



As I lay in the dark I listened to the wind whistling against the roof. It reminded me of our barn in Poland and the times as children we played among the sweet smelling hay and straw. Would I ever see my home again?

Suddenly I longed for nothing else in the world than a bath, or just a wash or just some warm water and a towel ... and home! As I fell into a disturbed sleep my mind drifted back to home

