

SON OF THE UNDERGROUND

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THE STORY OF ISAAC LIU,
SON OF "THE HEAVENLY MAN"

Albrecht Kaul

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Tel: +44 (0)1865 302750 Fax: +44 (0)1865 302757

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1

Son of an enemy of the state

From the very beginning, the Chinese state was suspicious of our family. Even as a young man my father had talked about Jesus in many places in China. Countless people had become Christians because of this, and Jesus had changed their lives fundamentally. My father had founded numerous new congregations so that they would keep growing in the faith.

But working as an evangelist was forbidden in China. As I shall explain, preaching was allowed only in the official church, the Three-Self Patriotic Church, which was controlled by the Communist state. Setting up new congregations was illegal. For this reason my father was viewed as an “enemy of the state”, and thus his life was often at great risk.

Yet in many areas the people of China had had enough of Communism. They felt empty, and were looking for meaning in their lives. That’s why they were so open to faith in Jesus. Whenever my father preached the gospel, things happened.

Life with an “enemy of the state” was dangerous for the whole family. Even before my parents got married, my mum had begun to sense this. She was seventeen and

stood with my father in the town hall, waiting to have the marriage registered. He was twenty-one. Their application to marry had been approved, but even so my father was arrested on the spot and driven into town – something apparently needed to be cleared up. He was already well known as an evangelist in the local area, and that alone was enough to brand him a criminal in the eyes of the state police. They didn't want to ban prayer meetings in the villages, but travelling preachers who spread these “mind-numbing superstitions” were too dangerous to the state.

After several months of questioning, beatings, and insults, they let him go again. So my parents' marriage didn't actually take place until almost a year later. But my father didn't stop travelling around secretly and preaching about Jesus. The head of the Public Security Bureau spied on him constantly after his release and arrested him whenever he could find him.

My mother had said yes to marrying my father of her own free will, even though the marriage had originally been arranged by their mothers. She was proud to be marrying a preacher of the gospel, because she too had given her life to God.

When she became pregnant with me, life became very difficult. Her hard work in the fields, poor nutrition during the pregnancy, my father being in prison again, and on top of that the mockery and contempt of the people in our village all made it very hard for her to cope.

For a long time she managed to keep her pregnancy a secret. She suspected that if she didn't, people would treat her as they treated other wives of “enemies of the state”

and forced to have an abortion. But from seven months it couldn't be concealed any longer. She couldn't hide herself away either, as other pregnant women did, because she had to go to the fields and take part in village life. So one evening two policemen came round and ordered her to abort the child of an illegal preacher. She was to report to the hospital in the chief town of the district within three days, or else she would be forcibly collected and taken there.

Mum knew what that would mean, having heard the secret reports that were in circulation: a lorry would draw up and the woman would be thrown onto the load area. She would be kept there by means of kicks and blows. Then the lorry would drive over the rough roads with no use of brakes until it reached the town. Most women gave birth to their babies while on this rolling and bouncing instrument of torture. Stillborn – and quite often premature – babies were thrown from the lorry into a grave or hurled over a bridge into a river, and when the mothers finally got to hospital, they were treated like lepers. Many didn't survive this awful torture; some sprang from the lorry to their death. Anyone who hadn't yet lost her baby was subjected to a painful abortion without anaesthetic in the hospital.

In her anxiety my mother took refuge in prayer. Only God could help her now. She had to do without any help my father might have given her, as he didn't even know what a frightful situation she was in because he was unable to have any contact with her from prison. She couldn't "disappear", as all her relatives lived in the same village or else the next one. They would soon find her there. Neither

could she go to ground further away, as she didn't know where to go – and, besides, a pregnant woman alone and far from home was always suspicious.

“God, you have given me this child, even though its father is in jail,” she prayed. “Preserve this child for me, and it shall live only for you.”

On the evening before my mother was due to go to the hospital, I came early into this world. There were no sterilized towels, no instruments, and no medication at hand. A bowl of warm water and a clean hand towel were all that my grandmother was able to lay out in readiness. She was the only help available in this difficult hour.

Happy, even though at the limits of her strength, my mother held me in her arms. Now I was protected by the law and could no longer be killed. God had saved me at almost the last minute.

The fact that I survived those first weeks without an incubator and with no medical assistance was another miracle from God. I am said to have been tiny, wrinkled and pale. Yet, when I see myself in the mirror now – and when I think about how girls look at me – I have to admit that God actually made me quite good-looking!

News of his son's birth was smuggled to my father in prison. He secretly wrote me a letter – my first, though of course I couldn't understand it until much later. In this letter he specified my name – Isaac. The name should signify, he wrote to me: “offered up to God and thus wonderfully used to carry forth the blessing of God”. The story of Abraham and his son Isaac always inspired me later on in life. In total obedience to God, Abraham

was prepared even to sacrifice his son in accordance with the practices of the people of the surrounding area. But God does not want such cruel sacrifices, and with Isaac he set the scene for the marvellous history of salvation. The implications of my name make me very proud!

Further on in the letter it said: "Isaac, before you were born your father went into prison, even though he had done nothing wrong. All he had done was to spread the gospel. I have only one wish for your life: that you should follow Jesus, as your name says. You shall become a man full of faith and obedience, just like Isaac." At the end he wrote: "My son, we'll see each other in heaven. Your loving Father."

Today I know that at that awful time of torment and anguish he had given up all hope of life. He did not think that he would ever go free. Every day he lived in fear of execution or feared that he wouldn't be able to endure the torture and agony any longer. It seemed clear to him at that time that this would be the first and the last letter he would be able to write to his son.

But one day, when I was four years old, my father arrived home! The political climate had become a little more relaxed, and he was released from prison. My mother could scarcely contain her joy. Incapable of doing any normal work, she ran around the house with a flushed face.

My grandmother travelled into town to discover the precise terms of his release from the Public Security Bureau, but no one took any notice of her and they gave her no information.

But I felt uneasy. What would it be like having a man in our house? Was he perhaps a bad man after all, as the people in the village thought? Because they thought that if someone is in jail, then there's a reason for it. He must surely be a criminal.

And then my father arrived alone, walking into the village that he hadn't seen for four years. Friends had bought him a bus ticket, but he had been released so late in the day that he only just managed to catch the last bus, which stopped ten kilometres from the village. It was bitterly cold. My father could no longer remember how blissfully warm a heated house could be or how it would be to hold his wife to his chest. He longed to take his son in his arms. My father was about to see me for the very first time.

The front door is locked and I have already fallen asleep on my mat. As my mother later told me, Mum and my father greet each other like strangers, and then suddenly like lovers. Eventually my mother wakes me up and says: "Your father has come home."

I hold her hand and move awkwardly to the door to peer distrustfully at this stranger. He crouches down and stretches his arms out to me – but I hide behind my mother. This strange man seems quite sinister to me. What does he have to do with me? Is he bad after all?

Then I see my father go down on his knees. He prays loudly and passionately; he praises God for my life; he extols God's goodness and his will. Then he blesses me.

These tones are familiar to me. While he is praying, I

go to him and fling my arms around his neck. Now we are all kneeling on the stamped-down clay, thanking God for his goodness and his help.

2

A nervous robber

Because my father was constantly on the move and not able to spend much time at home, my grandmother became an important person for me and for the Christian groups in the surrounding villages.

She was a small, self-assured woman. Working in the fields had made her bent, but her feet still faithfully carried her over many kilometres, and she went out most days. I loved her because she made time for me and had filled my heart with the love of God. I went out with her almost every day. Her name was Yun Qing Wu but I called her Nai Nai, which is what paternal grandmothers are called in our area.

She took me with her to secret meetings with other Christians. What with singing, praying, and intensive Bible study, we often wouldn't stop before twilight to return to our village. Then we had to walk through dark, spine-chilling woods, over wide, storm-wracked fields, or along the river with its secretive bends and its eerie gurgling.

I imagined an evil spirit might emerge at any moment from behind that gnarled old tree, from out of those swampy ditches between the rice fields, or from behind

a ruined box grave! In the river's mutterings I heard threatening messages. You need to know that our village was characterized by a fear of evil spirits and doom-laden figures. No one would go past the cemetery at night, and even during the day there was always an undefined air of anxiety in the village. The whole of nature was filled with spirits, and not just benevolent ones, or so we believed. So it might well be true that the hollow trees were the dwelling-places of terrible beings that ate up children and cut the hearts out of their living bodies.

The Christians knew full well that this was all just superstition, but the dread of demons and evil gods ran deep in all the inhabitants of our village – and it was nourished by many mysterious incidents and accidents. When I clasped Nai Nai's hand more firmly, she could feel my anxiety. Then she would tell me of God's protection and his faithfulness, that Jesus was bigger than all evil powers, and that we were surrounded by him as if by a protective wall. Her trust in the God of heaven was infectious – until I started once again in fear at the sound of a cracking branch.

On one occasion a robber lay in wait for us on a path through the woods, threatening to stab us to death unless we gave him money. But his voice sounded somewhat nervous, and he brandished his rice sickle rather clumsily.

Nai Nai was much calmer than he was!

“Get out of the way! You won't get anything from us; we are poor people, and anyway we stand under the protection of our Grand Master, Jesus Christ.”

The robber seemed frightened. He looked around

anxiously. Maybe he didn't know anything about Jesus Christ, or perhaps the words "Grand Master" reminded him of an expert in Chinese martial arts. At any event, he sprang sideways into the bushes, tripped over a root, and fell flat in the mud.

Though she had successfully chased off the robber, my grandmother ran home more quickly than usual. I could sense her relief as we reached the first houses of the village. For me it was clear from that evening on that the name of Jesus had special power.