

PORTRAITS OF COURAGE



STORIES OF
BAPTIST HEROES



Julie Whidden Long

THEO ANGELOV PERSECUTED BAPTIST



(Photo courtesy of United Bible Societies/Dag Smemo)

Who: Theo Angelov

Where: Bulgaria in Eastern Europe

When: 1940-present

What he did: Endured religious persecution to be a Baptist leader in Bulgaria

Baptist Theo Angelov remembers the earliest years of his life fondly. He was born into a Christian pastor's family in Bulgaria. Going to church, praying, and reading the Bible have been a part of his way of life since birth. Celebrating Christmas and Easter, being part of children's groups in the church, and traveling with his father who preached in nearby churches are some of Theo's brightest memories. As he says about his early childhood, "It was good to be a Christian."

Along with all of those fond memories, Theo experienced hard times as a child. The joy of Theo's

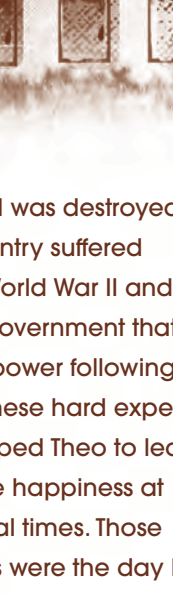


Communism is a system of government in which the state plans and controls the economy. Often a single political group holds power, claiming to make progress toward a higher goal in which all goods are equally shared by the people.

childhood was destroyed as his country suffered through World War II and the new government that came to power following the war. These hard experiences helped Theo to learn about true happiness at two special times. Those occasions were the day his

father came home from prison after eight years, and the day **Communism** fell.

After World War II, Bulgaria fell under control of a Communist government. The Communist leaders planned to create a society in which everyone was equal. The nation would own all property and possessions so that no person could be richer or poorer than others. While people being equal sounded like a good idea, Communism actually became a form of **oppression**. The Communist leaders



Oppression is a cruel or unjust use of power that is harmful to a person or group of people.

grew powerful and ruled very strictly. The people of Bulgaria had little power or influence.

Communists did not believe that religion had much value in society. They thought of religion as “old-fashioned.” They believed that

the nation should be a citizen's first loyalty. All of a sudden, being a Christian in Bulgaria became dangerous. The

church became a state enemy. Members of churches risked their jobs, positions in society, and possibilities for education.

The Communist time was difficult for Christians like Theo and his family. The government took over or destroyed some church buildings. Bibles and Christian literature were outlawed. The government allowed no schools or seminaries for the training of pastors. Church members were ridiculed at school, work, and even on the street for their beliefs.

Pastors like Theo's father particularly threatened the government because they had influence over church members. The government feared that pastors would speak out to their people about the injustice of the state leaders. Theo's father was concerned that the church would suffer under the government, but he carried on with his preaching. Then, on an August day in 1948, the Angelov family's lives changed.

Theo, age eight, was playing in the yard when two police officers came looking for his father. As the officers searched, Theo's father told Theo to run to the other pastor's home to warn him that the police had come. Theo was too late. Officers were already waiting to take that pastor away, too.

Theo and his family soon discovered that almost all



of the Baptist ministers had been arrested. No one knew where they had been taken. Finally, they learned that the pastors were imprisoned in the town of Sofia. On the night after the arrests, Theo's mother gathered her children. "Children," she said, "let's see if the Lord has something to say to us." She opened the Bible and read the verses where the page fell open, Isaiah 51:12-14:

I, I am he who comforts you; why then are you afraid of a mere mortal who must die, a human being who fades like grass? You have forgotten the LORD, your Maker, who stretched out the heavens and laid the foundations of the earth. You fear continually all day long because of the fury of the oppressor, who is bent on destruction. But where is the fury of the oppressor? The oppressed shall speedily be released; they shall not die and go down to the Pit, nor shall they lack bread.

These words from the Bible applied to the Angelovs' situation: Their father and husband was in prison, and they feared the oppression that they suffered. They felt like this Bible passage was God's encouragement to them during a challenging time.

The pastors in prison waited nine months for their trial. During that long and lonely stay, the pastors had no contact with each other. Communists interrogated the men and tortured them to try to force them to confess. The prisoners ate only scraps of bread with sips of water and were often forced to stand until they fainted.

When the trial began, the Communists accused Theo's father and the other pastors of being American spies and being disloyal to their government. He was sentenced to ten years in prison. Young Theo could not believe it. His father would have to stay in prison for more years than Theo had been alive.

Over the next years, Theo's family struggled. They missed his father deeply. His mother could not find work because her husband was in jail. His uncle, a farmer, helped them to survive those difficult years by offering food. For the span of eight years, Theo visited his father only once—for ten minutes.

Theo's father served his time and was freed from prison on December 20, 1956. He preached to his congregation the next day. Many of the Baptist preachers had now been released, and all of them had remained true to their faith.

During the time that his father was in prison, Theo decided to remain a faithful Christian. He and a friend whose pastor father was also imprisoned agreed that they would not hide their faith and remained active in a Baptist church. When Theo was fifteen, he made a personal decision to follow Christ no matter the cost, and he was baptized. He wrote to his father in prison to tell him, and the wonderful news encouraged his father.

Because his father had been in prison, Theo's academic achievements were not recognized at school. He could not be admitted to a university because the city hall would not give him the proper paperwork. He entered the army instead and was assigned to the building brigade,

a position to which Communists assigned those they did not trust. After the army, Theo took a chemistry course to get a job in a chemical firm. There he met his wife, Annie. He continued to study in the evenings to get his university degree, and he earned a job as a researcher.

Theo also followed in his father's footsteps as a preacher. Because most Baptist ministers had been arrested, deacons and church members took their places in the pulpit. He had begun leading the youth groups of the church as a teenager, and he had preached sermons since age seventeen. He did not have training to be a preacher, but he had listened to his father's sermons, read his books, and imitated his commitments. The good example of his father motivated him to do the work that needed to be done for the churches of Bulgaria.

Because of his involvement in the church and his father's imprisonment, the government watched Theo suspiciously. During his studies, he was regularly questioned by police. Christians were still being persecuted, and the officials wanted to know what was going on in his congregation.

Theo and Annie also became involved in secretly giving out Bibles and Christian literature. They received Bibles from other countries, and their house became a secret distribution center. This practice was dangerous. Their house was searched, and Theo had to explain to the police where the Bibles came from. Once he was arrested, but he was freed because they did not have enough evidence to convict him.

How did Theo and other Baptists in Bulgaria endure

Theo working with children
(Photo courtesy of Bulgarian Bible Society)

such persecution for so many years? Theo believes that they survived by standing together. Theo says, "It was only by the grace of God that believers continued to serve God in spite of persecutions. Moreover, because of the



prayerful support of believers around the world, Baptists in our region were able to stand strong for their Savior." In 1990, Theo became pastor of the church of Sofia. He tried to continue his work as a researcher, but eventually gave up his position to give full attention to his congregation.

The Communist government fell from power in 1991. Theo remembers, "The fall of the Communist regime was the most unexpected event. We did not believe that this . . . government would give up power voluntarily by itself. It was really a new time—new opportunities, new ways to live and serve. It was wonderful to breathe the air of freedom."

While a new and fair government did not appear immediately, the persecution of Christians disappeared. Churches began to overflow with visitors. New congregations and church buildings sprang up. Young people became believers. Missionaries from other countries arrived. Rebuilding the churches and buildings was not

easy with limited resources and few pastors. But they were free, and the people were filled with great enthusiasm.

With their new freedom, Baptists in Bulgaria elected new leaders for their union. Theo Angelov was elected as president of the Bulgarian Baptist Union. He became more involved with the Baptist World Alliance (BWA), a worldwide group of Baptists who work together for global issues. He served as the General Secretary of the European Baptist Federation of the BWA in 1998-2004.

Theo works for human rights and religious freedom in Eastern Europe and in other places around the world. Living fifty years of his life in a dictatorship where no religious freedom existed, Theo learned to value the Baptist idea of religious freedom. He now helps others understand the importance of the separation of church and state so that other believers will not be persecuted as Bulgarian Baptists have been. His passion for religious freedom for all people comes out of his own experiences. He also works for rights and better living conditions for orphans and other abandoned people who live in terrible situations.

Theo Angelov's portrait as a Baptist hero is painted with strokes of his faithfulness to Christ and to other Baptist Christians in a time and place of persecution. All that he has done has come out of his desire to live out his calling. His story is an inspiration to all Christians to stand firm and to hold on to the hope of Christ in times of despair and darkness.

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Written by Julie Whidden Long, this 128-page book, designed especially for younger youth and older children, presents the stories of Baptist heroes. These heroes lived in various countries and centuries and represent many phases of Baptist life. By highlighting the biographical dimension of the Baptist past, these inspiring stories help readers appreciate the personal contributions of heroic Baptist men and women.



Rev. Julie Whidden Long is the pastor of First Baptist Church of Christ in Macon, Georgia. She previously served as minister of children and families (2005–2013) and associate pastor (2013–2018) at FBCX Macon. Additionally, Rev. Long was the associate director of Baptist Women in Ministry (2018–2019) and launched a coaching and consulting practice in 2020. A native of Fitzgerald, Georgia, she is a two-time graduate of Mercer University, where she earned a Bachelor of Arts in Christianity and History from the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences in 2002 and a Master of Divinity from McAfee School of Theology in 2005. She is married to Jody Long, executive coordinator of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship of Georgia, and they have two children.