

The Moshi Spirit

SOWING IN TEARS

“DADDY, LISTEN!” CALLED MY daughter, Damali, suddenly interrupting the casual conversation around the lunch table. “Amin is on the run! The Tanzanian army has attacked Uganda!” Our eyes turned quickly to the news broadcast coming from the nearby television. Suddenly my body became numb and my mouth became as dry as that of a man facing a roaring lion.

Just the mention of the name *Idi Amin* stirred emotions in me that are inexplicable in any language. Amin was the tyrant responsible for thousands of deaths of friends and fellow Ugandans, the brutal slaughter of innocent citizens, and the senseless genocide of precious souls. As the president of Uganda and a truly demonic individual, Amin had led a rampage, killing anyone whom he suspected of opposing him or anyone who could possibly have ever considered opposing him. Although I had seemingly been immune to his wrath for years, suddenly and without cause I had become his number-one target. Perhaps his wrath was directed at me because so many were coming to Christ through the ministry of the church I pastored, the Redeemed Church; but for whatever reason, he had forced me into fleeing the country, separating me from my relatives, friends, and church.

My exile began in 1973. My family and I had just spent four months in Amsterdam. I had been working on my doctorate at the Free University, and we were developing a lasting and deep relationship with one of my professors, Dr. Rookmaaker, and his wife Anky. The Rookmaakers were deeply committed Christians who took me in as their son and greatly influenced my life for Christ. Those were wonderful days of learning

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and growing, but by the end of the summer, we were eager to return to Uganda, to our friends and family, and to our work there with the Redeemed Church and the Kijomanyi Children's Home. Despite several vague telegrams from home warning us to stay in Amsterdam, we were determined to return. But before we left, our friends gave us a warm farewell party, and at the end of the evening, Mrs. Rookmaaker handed us two "safety" airplane tickets from Uganda to Amsterdam, just in case we needed them. We were sure we wouldn't, but tucked them away hoping to use them to send two Ugandan young people to the university in Amsterdam to study.

Arriving at the Entebbe airport in Uganda, we were shocked to be met by one of Amin's former assassins. This Nubian (member of a tribe of warriors who were known for raiding and killing) had come to our church on the previous Easter Sunday with four of his fellow assassins to kill me. With their guns pointed at my head, they had given me one last opportunity to speak before I died. Not realizing that it was I who was speaking, I heard the words of surrender to God's will coming from my mouth. I told them that I would pray that after my death God would have mercy on them and spare them from eternal destruction. To my surprise, one of them asked that I pray for them. I did, and they suddenly lowered their guns and left. Amazingly, in subsequent days each one of them came to a commitment to Jesus Christ.

Now, my wife, Penina, and I, along with our baby daughter, Damali, were being whisked through the airport by this formidable man. Should we trust him? I wondered. Had he truly been converted, or had his decision to trust Christ been a trick? He shoved us into an unfamiliar car driven by another man in disguise. Questions flooded my mind. Was I leading my family to our death by trusting these men?

Our driver turned out to be a trusted friend. He drove us to a safe house where we were able to visit with friends, relatives, and elders of the Redeemed Church throughout the night and finally to get some rest and food. We were informed that my name was at the top of Amin's list of wanted men and that just days before, he had arrested and tortured many of our church elders in hopes of obtaining information of my whereabouts. This home was to be a temporary safe house until they could locate a more permanent hiding place for us. However, soon after we awoke the following day, we learned that Amin had been informed of our location, and that we had just minutes to escape. We gathered one

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suitcase of belongings and were driven several miles to a bus park where we boarded a worker bus bound for Nairobi.

Crossing the border from Uganda to Kenya was a terrifying experience. Five hundred of our six hundred shillings were confiscated, and our lives were threatened. When we finally arrived in Nairobi, we spent the day walking the streets searching for friends we knew. Unable to locate even one acquaintance, we were forced to spend ninety shillings on a room and breakfast.

The following morning as we were eating, Penina noticed a Nubian at the motel desk, and as we listened, we realized he was looking for me. We quickly grabbed our suitcase and the baby, hurried out the back door, and began running. We both realized that if the State Research Bureau were still looking for us, even in Nairobi, it would not be long until they found us. We were not safe there and needed to return to Amsterdam immediately.

We found a stranger on the street, who was willing to drive us to the airport, and who refused to take any money for the trip. His wife even gave us ten shillings to tip the porter! Fortunately the porter refused the tip, and our last twenty shillings were used to pay the airline clearance tax.

Soon we were safely in the air but without money, home, country, possessions, a job, visas, or entrance papers. Our dreams were destroyed, our friends were still in danger, and we were overwhelmed with grief. But the last words of my dear friend Dr. Kibaya to me that night in the “safe house” were ringing in my ears: “The whole world might turn against you,” he had reminded me. “But Jesus Christ stands with you.” Jesus Christ was standing with us. We could so clearly see how he had directed our footsteps and brought us through the hurricane. He had provided escape for us not just once, but three times. He had provided money and airline tickets when we had needed them. If he had not let us down so far, why should we worry now? Surely he would see us through whatever storms remained. Certainly his grace was sufficient, and his strength would be made perfect in our weakness!

The next storm came when we landed at Schiphol International Airport just outside of Amsterdam. The customs officers had no compassion on any traveler without documents. We told our story repeatedly but to no avail. They refused to believe such a wild tale and treated us as if we were criminals. We begged them to call the Free University to verify our story, but our pleas were ignored. Their only option, they said, was to

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put us on a plane back to Uganda. It seemed as if our world were crashing in around us, and we were helpless. Returning to Uganda meant certain death. Had they no compassion for our situation?

Finally a government investigator entered the room and, after a thorough inquiry into our situation, agreed to contact the university. An hour later Dr. Rookmaaker and Dr. Van Noord, a high-ranking official from the university, arrived on the scene and were able to convince the authorities to extend sanctuary to us and protect us from “Uganda’s Hitler.” Six hours after our landing, we were given temporary identification papers and released.

Although we were out of Uganda, we were not necessarily safe. We began to hear reports of the assassination and terrorizing of Ugandans in exile in France and England. One evening while shopping, Penina was severely frightened by a dark muscular man with Nubian tribal scars, staring at her as if he were stalking her. Reports began to come to us from friends left in Uganda indicating the worsening situation there. My friend Ali wrote that just thirty minutes after we had crossed the border into Kenya, the borders had been closed in an effort to trap us. Amin’s agents had traced us to Nairobi and then to the airport, but only after we had been airborne for thirty minutes. The Redeemed Church had been closed, and members of the congregation were meeting in private homes for worship. Our house had been completely plundered, and our car was being driven by a well-known army captain. Two men who were in charge of the Kijomanyi Children’s Home had had to flee for their lives, the orphanage had been closed, and the children had been turned out onto the streets.

The hardest blow came with the news of the capture and torturous death of my dear brother in Christ, Kiwanuka. Amin himself had beaten him to death with a sledgehammer, had performed blood rituals over his remains, and then cut off his head and stored it in his freezer. Kiwanuka had died a martyr’s death, praying for the forgiveness of his murderer’s sins and calling on the name of Jesus as he died at Amin’s feet.

My grief over Kiwanuka’s passing was overwhelming. I lost all hope for the future of Uganda and the ministries there. All we had prayed and worked for was now gone. I cried out, “Oh, God, where are you?”

His answer came quickly as he brought to my mind the words of an elderly woman just after the death of another dear friend: “You know,” she had said to me, “through many losses of family and friends and through

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much sorrow, the Lord has taught me one thing. Jesus Christ did not come to take away our pain and suffering, but to share in it.”

Almost a year later, the gentle words of the woman took on new meaning. God was not mourning over his people from a distance. His own Son had suffered the defeat of physical pain and death and still suffered with his suffering children. We did not weep alone; Jesus Christ wept with us. But our sadness was only for a season: “He that goeth forth and weepeth, bearing precious seed, shall doubtless come again with rejoicing, bringing his sheaves with him” (Ps 126:6). What Kiwanuka and thousands of other martyrs had sown in tears, they and the church with them would reap in joy.

In February of 1974, Penina, Damali, and I said goodbye to our friends in Holland and boarded a plane for the United States. We flew to Philadelphia where I began a three-year program of theological studies at Westminster Seminary and later began the Africa Foundation. Through the foundation we were able to give aid to Ugandan refugees who were suffering in Kenya, unable to work or go to school, and who were living in desperate conditions due to strict Kenyan laws forbidding refugees from holding jobs. As we reached out to the suffering refugees, we realized that the story did not end with Amin. We came to understand that what Amin had meant for evil, God had meant for good. For every story of atrocities and death, there was another story that went unreported and unnoticed. It was the story of those who, by faith, had “escaped the edge of the sword” (Heb 11:34), and of those who, by faith, “were slain with the sword” (Heb 11:37). It was the story of how God’s people in the midst of great suffering had come to understand the depths of love. And it was the story of how God, in his providence, had led his children into the wilderness to prepare a table for them.

THE MOSHI CONFERENCE

For six years we labored in America, waiting with hope for the day that Amin would be defeated and expelled from power. And now it looked as if that day had come. I was hypnotized by that small flash of news, and in my daze I envisioned myself landing at the Entebbe airport with a big welcome of hallelujahs from our friends and church members. My heart beat wildly at the thought of my beloved country’s being freed from

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tyranny and of my family and me, along with thousands of other refugees, returning to the life we had once known.

“Daddy, we will get a full picture at the prime news,” insisted Damali, and we anxiously began the wait for more information as questions whirled in our minds. However, before the news broadcast came, there was a telephone call from New York. It was from Namakajo, calling on behalf of the organizing chairman of our pressure group, Godfrey Binaisa Lukongwa. A conference was to be held in Moshi, a small town in northern Tanzania, and the Africa Foundation had been invited to send three delegates. The purpose of the conference was twofold: to elect a government in exile and to present the appearance that it was the disgruntled Ugandans fighting to live in their own country who were attempting to overthrow Amin rather than the Tanzanian government. The foundation had to immediately provide three travel tickets for Binaisa, Luyimbazi Zake, and me. It was wise, of course, at this point to leave my family in the security of America, awaiting either my return or my call to them to join me when it was safe for them to reenter Uganda.

When we arrived in Moshi, we found that Namakajo had gone ahead of us and was among the American journalists, so we hired a taxi from the airport. This particular taxi, with a roof patched with metal pieces, was a sign of poverty in the region. But that did not shock anyone, as it was better than even the affluence of the exiles' lives. Traveling to the location of the conference was further complicated by the notorious checkpoints along the way, which were manned by soldiers and militia.

The conference was an exciting time as we laid the foundation for the new day that was dawning in Uganda. A democratic spirit was born in those days in March of 1979. Before any names were considered for nomination to leadership, Dr. Aliko had proposed that only men of substance be considered. Yusufu Lule was unanimously elected as a man of substance to serve as the new president. In addition, we adopted four cardinal principles that we vowed to implement: unity, democracy, national independence, and social progress. We established our imminent government objectives to be political acceptability, accommodation, and reconciliation; and with these ideas, we planned to forge a coherent national unity and to live in harmony with one another. With our new government officials elected and foundational principles established, we eagerly awaited the final deposition of Idi Amin in order to return home and begin restoration.

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By May of 1979, Amin had been removed, the Liberation War was over, and it was safe for us to return to Uganda. The executive members who had been chosen in Moshi formed the cabinet and in June 1979, president Lule led the first National Consultative Council (NCC) meeting in the Nile Conference Center in Kampala. After only sixty days in office, Lule was removed and replaced by Godfrey Binaisa. At the same time, I was appointed deputy minister in charge of rehabilitation. What a perfect position for me to be able to serve my fellow countrymen and to open doors of ministry to spread the gospel! How marvelous is the hand of God!

At first only we *returnees*, as we who had left were called, were permitted to hold government positions, but in October changes were made that allowed the *stayees* to be included. A committee was formed to interview people from all around the country who had applied to join the NCC. When I was elected chairman of that committee, I made certain that the *stayees* were also granted opportunity to serve in government positions.

My mind was not prepared to accept the devastation I would find when I returned to my country. I soon discovered what a tremendous job was before us to rebuild a destroyed country and to bring healing to shattered lives. I felt as Nehemiah must have felt when he returned to Jerusalem to rebuild the crumbled walls. The shame of the city's lying in waste spurred him into action, and as he surveyed the ruins by night, he determined to be a catalyst among the people to accomplish the work and will of God. As he challenged the people, he reminded them that the hand of God was upon him, and it would be through God's strength and power that the task would be accomplished. Even in the face of resistance in the form of laughter and scorn, Nehemiah trusted in God's strength. He proclaimed, "The God of heaven, he will prosper us; therefore we his servants will arise and build" (Neh 2:20b).