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Corrie ten Boom

Her Life
— Her Faith

A Biography by
Carole C. Carlson
With a special tribute
by Billy Graham

Fleming H. Revell Company
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From the Smell of Death to a Taste of Freedom

As Corrie pushed one swollen leg ahead of the other on the snow-covered ground between Ravensbruck and the train station in Fürstenberg, the vision of Betsie and her prophetic words rang in her ears. "A home, Corrie, for the broken ones . . . and our message about God's love in this darkness."

How could God use her, a weak, undernourished Dutch woman? As she shuffled along the country road, she passed a labor camp of prisoners. If they lived through the day, they would have to return to the dreaded Ravensbruck barracks that night. Corrie looked at them and felt guilty about her freedom.

She had her gold ring and watch returned and a small sum of money; at least, she thought, she wouldn't go hungry. However, she hadn't realized the importance of food coupons; released prisoners were not issued any, and food could not be purchased without them.

For three days she traveled by boxcar through Germany; the train seemed to creep across the countryside. Once she had to wait hours before transferring to another train. At one stop she saw a piece of white bread on a restaurant table. Starving as she was, she started to take it when a waitress saw her, asked for food coupons, and then ordered her out.

As Corrie continued on her journey, she talked with God: "Lord, I have received my life back from You. Thank You. Will You tell me how to use it? Give me understanding. Yes, Lord, You are right. My work must be to save souls for eternity, to tell about You."

Corrie looked through the window and saw Bremen. Heaps of rubble lay where once there had been comfortable, clean homes. Where was security in this ruined world? She thought of a vision George Fox, the founder of the Quakers, had described: "I saw an ocean of darkness and sin. . . ." Corrie looked at the ruined cities, the concentration camps, the battlefields of war. ". . . But then I saw an ocean of light and love covering that ocean of sin. That was the moment Jesus died on the Cross."

Hungry for food, longing for human love and kindness, Corrie rode her freedom train back to Holland with a promise to her Lord that she would take the message of His love wherever He wanted her to go. Betsie's visions would go with her.

At last she reached Groningen, in the midst of the starvation winter of 1944. The south of Holland was free, under the Dutch military command of Prince Bernhard, but the north and the urban west were in desperate circumstances. There were no Dutch trains running, and the Germans were not about to use their trains to transport food for the Dutch from the rural regions to the city areas.

In Groningen Corrie went to a Christian hospital called the Deaconess Home. For the first time in months she received kindness from people in charge, instead of hatred. Her first food was tea and dry rusk: It tasted like manna from heaven. As she looked at the neat beds in the ward, the clean sheets, the spotless floor, it seemed like a dream. She noticed, however, that the nurses and patients were staring at her and realized that she was an ugly contrast, with her dirty, unkempt, smelly clothes and body. Kindness was such an alien quality that Corrie submitted meekly to every direction.

Her first surprise was in the person of a young nurse who took her to the dining room for her first meal. "Where is your home?" she asked.

"Haarlem," Corrie replied.

"Do you know Corrie ten Boom?"

The nurse was Truus Benes, one of Corrie's YWCA leaders. She didn't recognize this thin, hollow-eyed, dirty woman as the robust, cheerful leader of the Christian Girl Guide movement in Holland.

"I am Corrie ten Boom."

From then on Corrie was treated lovingly, tenderly, by people who cared. The food was plain: brussels sprouts, potatoes, gravy, pudding, an apple, but it was a banquet. She was given a bath, clean clothes, and a bedroom with color. On the shelf were books, and she was provided with a radio. A record of Günther Ramin, playing in a Bach trio, was being broadcast. The memory of that day was so keen that when Corrie wrote her book *A Prisoner and Yet*, she recalled every detail.

After she had been there for ten days, some men from Haarlem came to get some food from the farmers in Groningen. These kind men were generous with their produce and loaded the truck with potatoes, corn, wheat, and meat, to be sent to the West Netherlands, where people were eating sugar beets and tulip bulbs. When it was dark, Corrie left the Deaconess Home, wedged in the cab between two drivers, on a wild ride through Holland. They drove without lights, through the pitch dark, hiding from Allied airplanes and the German Gestapo alike. Their friends bombed every truck, and their enemies confiscated all food. At times the airplanes were so close that they ran from the truck and hid in the shadows along the dikes.

Corrie arrived, shaken but safe, at her brother Willem's in Hilversum. From there she was taken back to Haarlem and the Beje.

Many things had been stolen: some Oriental rugs, her typewriter, the watches and clocks that had been left for repair; but Father's portrait remained, presiding over the dark rooms like an Old Testament prophet. Corrie leaned against Father's bed, thinking about the happiness that he and Betsie were enjoying in heaven. In a deeper sense, they were more at home than she was.

Corrie was changed. She loved all the things she had missed, like her books, music, creature comforts, but she knew that every human worldly security was no security at all. The only security is in the Bible and in the love of Jesus. In Ravensbruck, Corrie could not give in to drowsiness or indifference, because she knew there were people who needed the Lord, people who might die soon. Her constant prayer was, "Speak to me, Lord, give me a message."

Betsie would say to her, "Corrie, you never have spoken more clearly and better than here." Now she was free, and by giving herself she had saved her mind. Her body was weak, and she couldn't walk straight, but her thinking was sharp, and she wanted to share the experiences and the truths the Lord had taught her.

The doors were opened for Corrie's story, but it was a very

cautious opening. It was forbidden by the Germans to tell what had happened in prison, so the meetings were secretive. Many churches had prayed for the ten Boom family, so now Corrie offered to tell them how God had answered their prayers.

As she stood before a church or a small group of believers Corrie had a written speech about the care of feeble-minded people in front of her. If the door opened and someone she did not know entered, she would start to speak about the psychology of teaching a child with a low IQ.

The legends of Corrie ten Boom have been built by her admirers, who see her as a fearless, indomitable woman, receiving infallible messages from God for her every act. This picture does injustice to the power of God working with the weakness of man. One headstrong reaction to an experience soon after her return to freedom could have resulted in imprisonment again.

One day Corrie opened the door of the Beje, just as she had hundreds of times before the fateful February raid, and a man made a familiar request.

"Miss ten Boom, I have a friend in prison. You know the director of the prison; he is a good Dutchman and on our side. Will you go with me, introduce me to the director, and ask him to set my friend free?"

Corrie agreed to go, and they climbed onto their bicycles without tires and went to the prison. When Corrie saw the director, she knew she had never met him before. Had she been led into another trap, just as she had with the quisling who had asked for money for his wife? She stumbled through her request for the prisoner and almost panicked when he said, "Wait a moment, I'll phone the Gestapo to see if this request can be approved."

She smelled the prison odor she knew so well and heard a delirious man banging on the door of his cell. A terrible fear gripped her, worse than any she had felt in Ravensbruck.

The prison director took them into his office and closed the door. Then he gave her the harshest—and happiest—scolding she ever received.

"Are you an underground worker? What stupid work you do. You put us all in danger. If I should do what you ask I'd have to hide myself and my helpers immediately. I'll give you advice on how to get this young man out, but don't come here again."

When Corrie was safely home, the man who had requested her

to come with him said, "You looked as pale as death. They told me that Corrie ten Boom was never afraid."

Corrie knew that she was the same woman who climbed out the window in the concentration camp and spoke to her friends who were leaving, the same woman who risked her life with her Bible studies, but she also knew that God had called her to minister in the concentration camp. He was her strength. But this trip was her own desire for adventure, and she plunged ahead without seeking His direction.

From then on her friends forbade her to do any underground work. What about the prison director? Corrie recorded that on the last day of the war he liberated eighteen prisoners who were supposed to be shot and then escaped himself, just in time.

How did Corrie know the leading of the Lord? When she was old, Corrie wrote some books of daily devotions. In one she answered the question about God's will by saying:

Another way in which God makes us know His will is by closing the doors if our decision is not the right one, or by allowing us to make a mistake, in order that we may see for ourselves that we took the wrong turn when we did not listen to Him. His word tells us that we can hear His voice: "And your ears shall hear a word behind you, saying, 'This is the way, walk in it . . .'" (Isaiah 30:21 RSV).

God clearly led Corrie to speak about her experiences in Ravensbrück and to tell of God's power and strength in times of life's severest hardships. The requests began to come from friends in Haarlem. When she spoke, she told about Betsie's visions. First, for a home, a beautiful place with polished wood banisters, a flower garden, a home for people who had suffered during the war. The most important part of Corrie's task, however, was to tell everyone who would listen that Jesus is the only answer to the problems that are disturbing the hearts of men and nations.

A letter from a prominent Hollander gives us a glimpse into the beginning of that journey through the decades, which was to take Corrie to sixty-four different countries and to speak before millions of people. Jan van der Hoeven, who described himself as "barrister at the Court of Haarlem," a member of the aristocracy, told how Corrie came to their house in March of 1945 for a small gathering of people to tell of her experiences. He wrote:

There was Corrie, who only a short time ago returned from this unbelievable horror—from a hell from which no return seemed possible—speaking about these experiences and at the same time about the love and nearness of the Lord. She was already speaking about a dream her sister Betsie and she had for a home where victims of this terror could be rehabilitated.

When she spoke in the home of that important personage, a five-year-old boy sat and listened. He was Jan Willem van der Hoeven, a little war baby who remembers listening to Tante Corrie in a room with closed curtains, so the Germans wouldn't know there was a meeting inside.

Jan Willem remembered that occasion, and when he was thirteen years old began to read Corrie's letters, which she wrote in a Dutch Christian magazine called *Kracht van Omhoog* (Power From on High). Even as a child, he began to pray for Tante Corrie. This young man was later to have a worldwide ministry himself and become the keeper of the Garden Tomb in Jerusalem, where thousands of Christian travelers visit each year.

As a pebble is dropped in a pool of water and the ripples spread to endless concentric circles, Corrie's worldwide ministry began to take place. The little Dutch boy who first lingered at that adult meeting in Haarlem loved Tante Corrie, as all children did, and emulated the love and concern for the Jewish people that the ten Booms showed. Jan Willem opened the International Christian Embassy in Jerusalem in 1980, which had as one of its primary goals to show concern for the Jewish people and the State of Israel, according to the biblical command in Isaiah 40:1 (RSV): "Comfort, comfort my people, says your God."

After the war there was a housing shortage in every European country, but this was only one of the challenges Corrie faced in her quest to see the fulfillment of the first part of Betsie's vision. With the help of some friends, she found a home, *Schapenduinen*, in the middle of parklike grounds in Bloemendaal, that could be rented for her refugee work. It was the home of the vision: beautiful polished wood, a garden, and quiet rooms for those broken and disturbed lives that God would lead to its doors.

As Corrie plunged into this new project, forming committees to persuade people to give furniture and clothing, she began to receive many invitations from all over Holland to give lectures and tell her

experiences of the reality of Jesus Christ in a concentration camp. She always told about Betsie's vision of the home for displaced people and ex-prisoners from the camps. The collection plate was passed, and she urged people to give generously.

In later years Corrie was convicted that she should never ask for money, but during this period she said, "The Lord had not yet told me this."

Mies Poley, the wife of Hans, who had been the first *onderduiker* at the Beje during the war, visited Corrie in the Beje during this time and said that she seemed so lost there. She had taken in a retarded child, who followed Corrie like a shadow. But the house with the crooked stairs seemed hollow. Schapenduinen received most of her furniture. Soon she sold her watchmaker's business, rented the Beje, and used the rehabilitation house as home base.

Corrie had some able assistants in her work. She seemed to be able to attract and inspire people with many talents: Henk van de Bunt had helped find the house; Aad Geels, an able home and camp director, led the work of general administration; a psychiatrist offered his time and help without charge. A man who owned a rare item in Holland at that time—an automobile—came to Corrie with an unusual request. He said, "Will you please take my car? May I be your chauffeur? I will pay for the gasoline. All I will need is for my wife and me to use it occasionally."

So her ministry began to grow. First Schapenduinen, where her personal direction exasperated the volunteer psychiatrist. He asked her one day about a deeply disturbed ex-prisoner, and Corrie replied, "Oh, he's getting on fine. Last night he saw the moon shining and climbed out of the window and took a long walk through the dunes. He didn't get back until five in the morning! I said to him, 'Wasn't it a joy, Jan, to be out of prison and go wherever you like, even during the night?'"

"But, Miss ten Boom, how could you? Your patients must be helped to lead a regular, disciplined life. How can you direct such a house when you allow such irregularities?"

The psychiatrist had never been in prison! Corrie had. When she ran the phases of the underground work, she was disciplined and forceful, but after Ravensbruck, she could not exert disciplinary methods upon the ex-prisoners.

On May 5, 1945 all of the Netherlands was free. Dutch flags flew again, the national anthem was heard, and people wept. In the evening, lights were seen from the houses, and people walked in the

streets. The royal family returned from exile, and "Long live Wilhelmina," echoed through the country.

Queen Wilhelmina, who was influential in strengthening her subjects, wrote: "I knew myself to be at one with all at home in the invisible and occasionally unrecognizable Guidance whose hand controls the destiny of nations, out of the reach of even the most unscrupulous conqueror."²³

But in any war there are those who never return. More than 140,000 Dutch died in the resistance, in German reprisal killings, concentration camps, air raids, or from hunger.²⁴

Victory was no sooner proclaimed than the treatment of traitors was considered. Some were tried before special courts and sentenced to prison. Some were shot for high treason. Much of the conversation among the Dutch populace concerned the attitude toward their fellow citizens who had betrayed them.

A few weeks after the victory celebration, Corrie was told the name of the man who turned her family over to the Gestapo. How should she react? The copy of a letter she wrote on June 19, 1945, conveys the attitude she had, which God used to share His love and forgiveness around the world.

She wrote:

Dear Sir:

Today I heard that most probably you were the one who betrayed me. I went through ten months of concentration camp. My father died after ten days, my sister after ten months of imprisonment.

What you meant to be harmful, God used for my good. I have become closer to Him. A severe punishment is awaiting you. I have prayed for you that the Lord will accept you if you will turn to Him. Think about the fact that the Lord Jesus also carried your sins on the cross. If you accept that and will be His child, you will be saved forever.

I have forgiven you everything; God will forgive you everything also, if you ask Him. He loves you, and He, Himself, has sent His son to earth to forgive you your sins, that is, to bear the punishment for you and me. From your side an answer must be given. When He says: "Come to me, give your heart," then your answer must be: "Yes, Lord, I will. Make me your child."

If you have difficulty praying, ask then if God will give

you His Spirit; He works the faith in your heart. Never doubt the love of the Lord Jesus. He stands with His arms wide open to receive you.

I hope that the hard road that you now have to go will bring you to your eternal Savior.

Before she wrote that letter, Corrie confessed she felt an initial surge of hatred and bitterness come into her heart. Then she remembered the words of Jesus: "For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins" (Matthew 6:14, 15 NIV).

God had established the music for Corrie's symphony. She began to put together the components of her orchestra as one person after another was led to join. For fourteen years Schapenduinen served as the location for mending lives and teaching the Word of God.

Reverend Spencer De Jong, minister at Melodyland Christian Center, in California, recalled how the Youth for Christ team arrived in Holland in 1946, reaching out to minister in a country devastated by massive bombings and the aftereffects of Nazi occupation. Soon after their arrival, the name of Corrie ten Boom was mentioned as one who would help them. The team was short of personal workers to help with new converts. The Reverend De Jong said that in Rotterdam alone almost one thousand people came forward to commit their lives to Jesus Christ.

Corrie's big home in Schapenduinen became a weekend-conference center to train the Youth for Christ workers. Corrie would tell her story, so fresh with its poignancy, and the young people would sit on the floor in the large living room of the house and listen.

De Jong preached in twenty-nine cities in the Netherlands and said: "Even though Corrie could not always be present, we could depend on her for moral and prayer support. She has always been an inspiration to me. She didn't seek for greatness. Her humility was her greatness. The crowds that came to hear her speak sensed her humility, as well as appreciating her humor. Her messages were always forthright, because Jesus was speaking through her."

In 1947, a young Dutch woman, Lotte Reimeringer, came to work for Corrie. She remembers the Bible-study weekends where young people who had accepted Jesus in one of the Youth for Christ rallies came to the large house to learn from this lovable Dutch lady.

Corrie's experience with Girl Guides and clubs, before the war, was valuable.

The needs in Europe were so great. The American war effort had swung the tide of the war, and now Europe looked to America to help design the structure for a new beginning.

After the work began to run smoothly in Bloemendaal, Corrie knew that she was almost ready to obey the second part of Betsie's vision and God's command to tell the world about His love and forgiveness. Where should she go first? God clearly told her: America.

People have said, "That's nonsense. There's no such thing as direct guidance from God. You have to use common sense." When Corrie confronted this type of skepticism, she would remember a verse her parents were given when they were married: "I will instruct thee and teach thee in the way which thou shalt go: I will guide thee with mine eye" (Psalms 32:8 KJV).

A year after her release from prison, God's merry saint, as Billy Graham called her in later years, left Holland on a freighter, with fifty dollars in her pocket, to be a personal missionary to that vast area of the world called America.

Watch out. Here comes Corrie with a story to tell. An American visiting in Haarlem told her, "It's not easy to make one's way in America."

"I believe you," Corrie answered, "but God has directed me, and I must obey."