

## 32 ❀ Caught on the wrong side

By the end of January 1964 the Jeunesse rebellion had overrun a tremendous swath of the territory to the west of the Loange River. Barefoot, bare-chested young men in their teens and twenties armed with bush knives and bows and arrows had cut a destructive and brutal swath north and south through Mennonite territory. They believed that if they removed all white-skinned people from among them and wiped the landscape clean of any vestiges of their presence (homes, schools, chapels, bookstores, hospitals) they would, in return, receive an outpouring of aid from the Russians to rebuild their newly independent country to the benefit of neglected rural people such as themselves.

The Africa Inter-Mennonite Mission mission post of Kandala lay directly in their destructive path. The locus of medical work, a large primary school, plus a Bible institute and a few missionaries, it was also the location of a growing church. Two local pastors, Pierre Khelendende<sup>1</sup> and Jacques Kindumba, provided leadership.

For many months before violence exploded, a few clever leaders had been quietly at work in the villages of the area, organizing and indoctrinating young village recruits who would constitute their attack teams. In the process they also solicited the support of various Christian leaders. They portrayed their movement as a legitimate and desperately needed political protest against a corrupt, in-

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<sup>1</sup> See “A well-ordered pastor” (chapter 10), and “All I have to give is a daughter” (chapter 75).

ept government in distant Kinshasa and said they needed educated people to support their cause. Once they were in power, such people would be given leadership in the new government.

Jacques Kindumba listened attentively and finally committed himself to their cause, in secret. But after an initial period of sweeping rebel success, by 1966 the tide had turned and Congolese troops were slowly but surely repulsing them, forcing them farther and farther into the recesses of the wooded stretches of the west bank of the Loange River. Pastor Jacques and his family fled with the rebels.

Via the African bush grapevine, word of the whereabouts and plight of Pastor Jacques and his family eventually reached Nyanga station on the east side of the river, an area where the rebels had never gained a foothold. When Pastor David Ngongo,<sup>2</sup> the lead pastor at the Nyanga church, heard this news, he immediately swung into action. He sent a message to Pastor Jacques naming a day and a spot on the rebels' side of the river where he would meet him. "I want to see you again. I want to talk with you."

On the appointed day Pastor Ngongo crossed the Loange in a dugout canoe and, at considerable personal risk, stepped into rebel-held territory, seated himself under a bush, and waited. Had Pastor Jacques received his message? Would he come? Finally, a gaunt figure slowly appeared out of the forest shadows. Pastor Jacques was dressed in the tattered remains of a khaki shirt and trousers. His ribs could easily be seen through the shredded shirt. Severe malnutrition was taking its toll. After a long embrace, they sat down and, in a low, flat voice, Pastor Jacques poured out his story, a litany of spirit-crushing tragedy.

He had believed, in the beginning, that the rebel leaders were telling the truth. The idea of a legitimate political protest against the distant, hated government made good sense, and he wanted to be part of it. But after the rebels took control, it changed swiftly. The pastor's beloved mission station had been put to flames and the missionaries had been forced to flee. At that point he already bitterly regretted that he had allied himself with them, but it was too late to extricate himself. He would have been considered a deserter and put to death, along with his family.

The rebel leadership became even more brutal as they began to experience defeat, he reported. By then a chicken was worth

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<sup>2</sup> See "David Ngongo: From houseboy to great leader" (chapter 35).

more than a human life. Moreover, there was nothing left for Pastor Jacques to return to. The Kandala mission post lay in ruins. A roofless chapel and school buildings stood empty. The once neat station was now overgrown with wild grass and weeds. Except for a few who were with him in the forest, the Kandala Christians were scattered far and wide.

When Pastor Jacques at last fell silent, Pastor Ngongo quickly responded. He reminded his friend that no matter what he'd done, God was ready to respond in forgiveness to a prayer of penitence. God's grace was more than sufficient to restore peace to his tormented spirit. Pastor Ngongo urged him to set a time for a second rendezvous and to bring his wife and surviving children with him so they could be helped to escape across the river. Christians at Nyanga station would welcome them with open arms and feed, clothe, and care for them. The family would receive help to find their way back to peace of mind and heart.

Pastor Jacques's eyes were deep pools of longing and suffering as he considered this offer. Finally he replied, "Thank you, my brother, for your love and the love of the Nyanga Christians, but I can't. I just can't."

They embraced a second time. Then Pastor Jacques turned and made his way back into the shadows of the riverside forest, while Pastor Ngongo, with an aching heart, stepped into the dugout that would take him back to the safety of the other shore before sundown.

What caused Pastor Jacques to reject the offer of escape? Was it shame? Remorse? Despair? Fear of retaliation against members of his extended clan who were still with him in the forest? We will never know. Today Pastor Jacques, his wife, and several of his children lie buried in unmarked graves somewhere in the forested stretches of the west bank of the Loange River.

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