



Out of Africa ... **into Malta**

a journey of faith

Kingsley Meekness



The Church of Scotland
World Mission Council



OUT OF AFRICA
INTO MALTA



Foreword

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Kingsley Meekness is a happy guy. As I write this, he's just become a father, when Joy gave birth to their first child – Ivan. When you meet him at our church in Malta, his first reaction is always to smile – he's really happy to make new friends. He's literally *"just happy to be here."*

And when you read his story, you'll understand why. It's a miracle he's here at all. It's an even greater miracle he's here with Joy. So many of the people he knew and encountered on his journey from Nigeria are no longer with us – lost in the sands of the Sahara, the war in Libya, the people trafficking and slavery operations of the North African coast, the unforgiving waters of the Mediterranean.



On World Refugee Day – 20th June 2012 – we held a waterfront service of remembrance for all those lost on their journey out of Africa into Europe. According to UNHCR, at least 1,500 people in 2011 alone – the same number who died on the Titanic 100 years ago. But, unlike the Titanic, this story really does still go on. The boats are still coming. As I drove into Valletta to lead our morning service one Sunday this summer, I saw an Armed Forces Malta patrol vessel speeding into port with yet another load of refugees rescued from the waters south of Malta. It was mid-June; and in addition to the Somalians, and Eritreans, and Nigerians, this group contained Syrians – fleeing yet another war, and risking everything through desert and sea, for the chance of a new and free life in Europe.

Malta's a small island – about 20 miles by 9 – and, according to *Terre Des Hommes*, now has the biggest refugee problem in the world, in relation to its population and economy. There's only so much we can do. But, thanks to growing support for our mission project *OUT OF AFRICA... INTO MALTA*, it's a lot more than we thought we could. We've seen astonishing answers to prayer – you'll read of several in Kingsley's story. And so we're still praying for miracles.

Kingsley is living proof that these prayers are answered. This story will make you angry in places. It should. It'll make you cry. If it doesn't, read it again – by the seaside. It'll make you question how any human being could behave in the ways you'll read about here. But it'll also make you happy to celebrate with Kingsley – and Joy – and give thanks to God for a 21st century story which brings alive once again these words of Jesus *"I was a stranger and you received me into your home; naked and you clothed me; I was sick and you took care of me; in prison and you visited me."*

When the story has come alive in you, share it with someone else. This story needs to be told, and told again.

Malta, September 2012

Introduction

Sunday, beautiful Sunday...

It is a beautiful Sunday morning. I'm in church, in Malta, with Joy. She's holding our baby. We're surrounded by friends, some who have shared our journey out of Africa, and many more who are new friends for us here. We are thanking God that we are safe, and that he has blessed us.

This church is called St. Andrew's Scots Church, and it is very different from our churches at home in Nigeria. But some of these churches no longer exist, because they have been bombed or burned. Our life now is here. Around us are people from all over the world, and together we are praying, and offering thanks to God for what he has done in our lives.

And I am thinking of another Sunday, at my mother's home in Agbor Ika in the Delta of Nigeria. That is when my journey really began.

I had always dreamed of travelling abroad one day, after I had become financially balanced and secure. First, I would have to go to university in Lagos, and then build my career. But not yet, because although I had many sisters, I was the only man left in the family after my brother died. My father was no longer with us, and I must look after the needs of my younger sisters. There would be time. But life was about to teach me a different lesson. Because on that beautiful Sunday morning my mother died.

She got up very early so that she could tidy everything as usual, and then we would all go to church together. But at 6.00 am on this day, she came to me where I was still sleeping. She said *"I don't have strength"*. I gave her a little blue glucose tablet, but this time it made no difference. I shouted for the others. We took her to hospital. I carried her on a motorbike. I think she must have died on that journey.

And my journey was just beginning. It was not a journey I had planned or wanted to make. It started just after we had buried my lovely mother. I was 26.

Chapter 1

"Tough times never last – tough people do."

The year my mother died, I had come back home to Agbor Ika from Lagos. I had to. The family needed me. My own future was put on hold. But we had planned for me to go to university, and the day after my mother died I was due to go back to school. I had to quit.

I needed to find a way of supporting my younger sisters. I went back to Lagos. I had an elder sister whose husband worked in the oil industry in Nigeria, for Chevron. I met him and asked if he could get me a job to support my younger sisters. He made promises. But nothing happened.

More promises. More nothing.

I was becoming desperate. In Nigeria, the way things are, everybody looks out for themselves. There is no money or time for others. Even family. Then I read this book, *'Think and Grow Rich'*, by Napoleon Hill. It changed my life. Maybe I really could do this on my own. Anyway, I now knew I would have to.

Over the next year my life in Lagos was like hell on earth. I had to live in squats. I had no regular job and no regular income. With no address and no financial status, it is impossible to get proper work. And without proper work it is impossible to get a home and an address. And still I am scraping money together for my sisters so that they can keep going to school. I dread to think what will happen to them if I cannot do this. Sometimes there is no food. Sometimes no way of cooking what I have managed to get. Often no money. And when I have money I am a target for others. But I am determined to *"think and grow rich..."*

With my friend Melvin I kept looking for work. After a year of all this, I was finally able to get my own apartment to rent, and I had an address. So now I could enrol at the University of Lagos and study computer engineering. And I managed to see myself through the whole course, studying and working and supporting my sisters. And dreaming of the day I could finally be proud of my life and career.

But even with all my certificates I still could not get a job in my own country. It got to the stage where I could no longer afford even to pay for my rent. I was

exhausted. I did not know where to turn. I prayed, but I did not think my prayers were being answered. I was very confused.

At one point I tried to set up a laundry shop. There was so much dirt around, I thought this must be a good thing to do. I even employed someone for a short time. But it didn't work. I had spent my money on this business, and so again there was nothing.

I met another friend, whose name was Prince Adodo. He was a graduate, and we shared an apartment for about 3 months. He came with another book. This one was by Dr. Robert Schuller, and it said *"Tough Times Never Last – Tough People do!"*.

I was determined to be tough. But then Prince got a job, with Schlumberger. After that, he stayed just 5 more days, then he left. I was in tears.

He said *"Don't worry"*. He was going to travel to Europe in three weeks, to France. He even said I could do the same – *"Everything is possible when you believe in God"* he said. I believed this too – but I didn't know where the money for such a trip could ever come from.

But an idea was taking root in my heart. If I could get to Europe, then maybe at last I could work with my computer skills, and be paid proper wages, and be able to support my sisters. For me it would be a new start. At this point in my life I believed that there was no future for me any more in my own country, and this made me very sad indeed. Nigeria is a country where people who have money do not want to help those who have none. And every week we could read in the news how others were suffering even more. In the north and the centre, Christian churches were being bombed. So I could not go there.

In my own town of Agbor Ika, nothing works. The roads are terrible. There is no public water supply in the pipes; only privately-owned boreholes. There is no public health care, only private clinics for those with money. So I could not support my family by going home.

The future of my family depended on me finding my own future a very long way from home, and from where I grew up.

Then I met Solomon. He had been repatriated to Nigeria from Libya. And he told me so many pleasant stories about life there. He also said that it was the best

way to get to Europe. He said he was planning to go back as soon as he could.

I thought this could be the answer to my prayer. Solomon told me that I could use my computer skills there. He said that I could earn good money, especially on the coast in the cities. So I said I was very interested in coming with him. I had just been disappointed again when I applied to work for PZ Cussons in Nigeria. I sent my CV, and I got an interview. But no job. Their website said *"We firmly believe that our people are our greatest asset."* But I was not one of the chosen ones.

Solomon said that it would cost around \$1,300 to fly from Niger to Libya. And first we would have to get from Nigeria to Niger. But without a real job, I could not raise this kind of money.

We asked around. And in time we heard of people who said they could get us all the way to Tripoli in Libya for around \$700. But it would be a long, hard journey through Niger and the Sahara. We would have to pay the money up front. We would have to be ready to go in the middle of the night if necessary. It would take many weeks. By now, I believed I was ready for anything.

How wrong I was.

Chapter 2

“You either go on, or stay and die!”

I raised nearly \$500 by selling nearly everything I owned. I kept my phone. I knew I could be in serious trouble if I was unable to contact anyone on my journey. My girlfriend Praise Okonta helped me by giving me the rest. It was the last time I would see her.

At the start, there were three of us. Solomon and I were joined by another friend, Kelvin. We handed over our money, and at 5.00pm we boarded a bus to take us to Kano, Nigeria's second biggest city. It is in the north, and is Muslim. Here there is Sharia law. And in the months before our journey, there were riots and bombings, especially of Christian communities in Sabon Gari, the “*foreign quarter*.” So we stayed under cover in a migration connecting house until the next morning, when we headed north across the border into Niger in a minibus.

We travelled all the way to the city of Agadez, in the southern Sahara, in that minibus. The journey was OK, and our spirits were quite high. It was an adventure.

We spent two weeks at Agadez before we could set out on our main crossing of the Sahara. We had to be careful not to be seen by the wrong people in the city. There had been much violence in the years 2007-2009 there, and the city was still under curfew. The roads into the city had been mined, and the government had banned all tourists and even aid agencies from coming there. While we waited there with our guides, we were very careful. We became aware that there were thousands of refugees in the city, from many places. We prayed we would not be noticed. These prayers were answered.

Then we headed into the desert.

There were eight big trucks, made for carrying bricks. Each one could take almost 200 people packed tightly and roped together. There were over 1,000 of us on that journey. They had arrived in Agadez from many places; from Somalia, and Sudan, and Eritrea, and Chad, and Ethiopia in the east. From Guinea, and Ivory Coast, and Ghana, and Togo in the west. And of course there were many from Nigeria. And none of us will ever forget it until the day we die. For some, that day would come on the journey.

We were given snacks and five litres of water each. But we would be five days on

this journey! Before it was over I would see some people even urinating on their friends to help keep them cool. But at night it would be freezing. There was no room for blankets or warm clothing.

We were not told where we were going. But our driver did tell us what we needed to hear. He said “*Be careful how you sit on the truck. If you fall off, I will not stop to pick you up. The desert rule is simple. You either go on, or stay and die!*”

We saw how this had happened many times already. We were shown many graves beside the desert road. And piles of bodies left unburied where they had died when their truck broke down. The truck was valuable – it was towed away to be repaired and used again. Only the bodies were left.

Our driver said to us on the first night “*Listen! Don't give anyone else your water. There isn't any more.*”

The first people to die on our journey were killed on the fourth night. Their truck hit a mine. 6 people were killed. Others were injured, and of course the truck couldn't go on. But we could, and so we left them there. I do not know what happened to them after that.

But I still see in my mind the bodies we saw so many times beside that road.

On the fifth day we came to a place in the desert called Idrukwo or Douruku. Here we would stay for some days. There were huts made of mud and palm fronds. We were all now very hungry and thirsty. The people in charge of our convoy said “*The next stage will be worse. You must eat now. Whatever you think you need – double it.*” We had to wait until our transport arrived from an earlier convoy.

This place had thousands of refugees. It is a huge trafficking operation. Hundreds were from Nigeria. Those who had no money left were sometimes just abandoned here. Every day, people died.

While we waited, some people came back from trying to get into Libya on an earlier convoy. They had an accident. They were shocked. They told us 10 people in their truck had died when it rolled over. They knew they were lucky to be alive. We looked north over the desert and we wondered what our journey would be like.

Some of us prayed again, very hard.

Chapter 3

“Some died on their knees at prayer.”

We all lost weight at Idrukwu. And I think we were all very frightened. But we could only go forward. We would do this now in open, long-wheelbase Jeeps. We discovered that, by carefully packing people in, you can get up to 40 people on each truck. Once again, the drivers told us *“Fall off, and you’re gone. We don’t stop for anything.”* We decided that we would keep the women and girls safe by placing them in the middle of the truck, with the men on the outside, helping each other to stay awake, and so to stay on board. Joy also made this journey, although we had not yet met each other.

This stage of our journey would take us into Libya; the promised land, for which we had paid so much! But we would pay even more.

At a place with a big rock (I do not know the name of this place) Niger militia robbed us at gunpoint and knifepoint. We discovered the hard way that nobody fights for you. Certainly not the people who have already taken most of your money for the journey.

It was on this journey that I had my worst experience. We came across a Cruiser that had broken down. There had been 38 people on board. 37 of them were dead. We counted them. Some were partly buried in the sand. Their friends had done this to try to save their lives when the sun was at its highest.

Some had died on their knees at prayer. I do not know if their final prayers were answered. But I know one man whose prayers were not. He was the only one still alive. As we came past, he was crying, and pleading with us to be taken on board.

Our driver did not stop.

There were four days of this. Here the desert is patrolled even at night. We would stay absolutely still. But one patrol caught us. They hit the driver. But we were then allowed to go on. More money had changed hands, and so we were still on our journey.

We came to Zanzu Protection Camp. Soon we understood just how this “protection” worked. We each had to pay 10 dinars to be recognised as slaves.

This was our protection. Then one day, at 5.30 in the morning, we were left in the desert with nothing when our cruiser had a punctured tyre. It was taken with all our belongings in it.

Again, some of us prayed. Hard.

We were lucky. We survived. All three of us were still together when we entered Libya. The first place we came to was Gatron. I still had about \$100, and so did Kelvin. Solomon had no money left at all. But we continued to pay protection for him, because he spoke Arabic.

We were left in a hut at Gatron. It was very cold at night, and we froze. Also they now took our phones. The organiser said *“So – you are now in Libya. You will not need them. Your journey is nearly over.”* We could not object. We would lose our protection. We heard many stories of those who had lost the protection of the traffickers. People were beaten. People were left in the desert. Some were killed.

Note: Another Nigerian from the Delta who made this journey, Osita Osemene, has told his story on www.vanguardngr.com. His facilitators made him believe he and his seven companions would be in Europe in 5 days. His journey lasted 91 days, and nothing has been heard of the fate of the other seven to date. Osita said, from the Kano connecting house, they travelled all through the deserts of Zindern, Agadez, Douruku in Niger and Tegery to Gatron and finally to Tehrinmata in Libya. Throughout the journey, he said, scores of people were dropping dead from the ramshackle truck in which they were travelling. When they eventually ran out of water, they were forced to beg for urine from women they met and that of camel for survival.

“Once you get to Kano, you are stripped of all your money. I am alive today, because I refused to give them all my money. Once they collect your money, you may end up stranded in the desert of Niger without food or water. It was there I got the clue that it was pure business. There is no job anywhere.”

Osita said many Nigerians whom he spoke to told him they were stranded as their link-men abandoned them. *“We spent seven days in Agadez and many Nigerians stranded there had lost hopes of returning home. Many were dying on a daily basis due to attacks by rebels. I was supposed to go to Morocco but we were told that rebels were killing a lot of people along the route; so we diverted to Libya.”*

On how he was able to keep his money, he said: *“It was an experience I can never forget. I inserted my money into my anus and passed it out through faeces anytime I needed it.”* He said the worst happened when the truck conveying them from Douruku to Libya got spoilt in the desert. According to him, they trekked day and night for four days before they got to a place called Tegery where he said 250 Nigerians had died due to lack of water. *“While on our way from Tegery to Gatron, we were attacked. We finally made it to Tripoli but I could not muster the courage to travel through the Mediterranean Sea in a ramshackle boat to Europe. At this point, I spoke to four other Nigerians that we should return home and they agreed. I was able to pay their way to Kano where they put a call to their families.”*

Kingsley saw much of this on his own journey. This may even have been the group that he saw returning from the desert after their truck accident. He takes up his own story again:

We left Gatron at 7.00 pm in an open truck. This trip cost us another 40 dinars and it was to Sabha.* It was the last of our money. So when we entered the compound there and we were asked to pay another 100 dinars each, nobody had it. We were held as hostages. They gave us phones and said *“OK, call home and get them to pay a ransom for you. No money – no travel. You stay here.”* While some of us were on the phones, we were beaten so our families would hear. And this was done to us by black Africans.

Chapter 4

“In Libya, you don’t make friends – they can talk about you.”

The Sabha compound was a bad place, and we were hostages. It was so bad that when we met a man called Okro, who we knew was a people trafficker, we begged him to take us.

He did.

He put us in a 3-bedroom flat in Jedith Street in Sabha. It means “**New**” Street. But if we thought it was a new beginning, we were wrong. We were kept there under guard. Still hostages. We had no money. Kelvin managed to call his sister in Spain and she sent enough money for him to return to Nigeria.

I had nobody to call. And no money.

I was a hostage in Libya. And now Solomon, whose stories had encouraged me to come, told me the real story of his first journey, before he was returned to Nigeria. He came on the same journey we had just made through Kano and Idrukwa. There were two of them. But he told me his friend died as he watched. It was after Idrukwa, and the sun was very high and hot. There was no water. Many just gave up the ghost on that journey. Solomon told me he had pissed on his friend to try to keep him alive, but it was not to be.

I desperately needed to get money. And that meant finding work. One of the guards liked me. We spoke often. He said I should escape, and he could help to make it possible. Maybe my prayers were being answered in this way. I have read in the Bible of how Peter and Paul both escaped from prison.

So I got out, and at first worked with another Nigerian man at a carwash in Sabha. It was hard work, and after eight days I had sore hands and 82 dinars – about \$60. I asked if there was anywhere I could earn money from my computer

* Libya’s largest desert city, located in the clan territory of Col. Ghaddafi. Sabha also had large Libyan Army and air bases (later targeted by NATO aircraft on long-range missions, putting the migrants in the compound under even more danger during the Libyan war). All the activities described above took place within a stone’s throw of the Libyan authorities, who did not get involved officially.

skills. Everyone laughed at me. I was ashamed to go each day looking for work at pick-up centres. Sometimes you could work a whole day and then get nothing. Some employers would take your work, and then inform the authorities that there were illegals at their site, so they could be arrested before they were paid.

Then, in the middle of 2010, things began to go better for me. I found a man who would pay me good money for welding. At first 150 dinars, then 500 a month when he found I could do this well. After six months, I stopped. I was thinking I could set up my own welding business. My boss then offered me 1,000 dinars per month! So I knew I could make a business myself. So I set up my own shop early in 2011. I spent a lot on good equipment.

But things were about to get very difficult, for many reasons. In February, the fighting started. Many people left Sabha to go north to support Ghaddafi. These included many black Africans. This left armed young gangs in the city. And we also thought that the war could come to us. There are large army and air bases close to the city. I sold my business as soon as I could.

I was once again in danger. I had money now. Libyan gangs follow you if you have money or good clothes. And you can easily be set up with drugs – grass or weed – so that you will be arrested, and your money taken.

In Libya, you don't make friends – they can talk about you.

Now I was determined to go home to Nigeria to help my family with my money. My plan was to get to Tripoli, and then try to get to Tunisia, and then fly to Nigeria. But now the country was at war. I couldn't get to any of these places. In the desert and along the coast road and around all the oases, there was fighting. To be a black African in Libya in 2011 was the worst thing. Ghaddafi had hired black mercenaries from Mali and other places to fight for him. He had given jobs to people from Sudan and Chad and they were loyal to him. So we were daily under threat from both sides as the war got bigger.

But of course there were still men who would offer to help us escape for money. And I now had money.

Although I could not get to Tripoli, because there was heavy fighting around it, I was able to get to Zwara*. This is about 70 miles west of Tripoli, on the coast, and only about 30 miles from the border with Tunisia. When our guides brought us there, in early 2011, it was under the control of the rebels.

There I met a Libyan man, Ahaji, who said he could get people to Italy for 600 dinars each (about \$450). We could not go into Tunisia because the border was too dangerous. And we would have to wait until the right boat became available in the right place. It would not be from Zwara, because most of the boats had already gone from there, and Ghaddafi's forces were killing people who tried to leave the harbour anyway. I used my money to pay for several of my friends to make this journey with me.

We waited. We hid. And while we waited, there was a battle for Zwara. Ghaddafi's forces captured the town on 15 March.

Still we waited. Still we hid.

I had a new strength in me. I believed God was with me. And so, now, was Joy.

Chapter 5

“Joy was now in my heart...”

Joy had made the same journey as me. When the trucks crossed the Sahara, she was protected with the other women by being in the centre of her truck. Like many of her friends, she was trying to get to a better life. The people who took her money said *“We have jobs for you. Good jobs. You will become hairdressers.”* As the journey progressed, it became clear that this was not true.

At each stop, the people traffickers would look at the women and girls, and some would be selected. But not as hairdressers.

They could not go back home. Because the price for women to return was twice as much.

So Joy and I shared a destiny, although we did not know it at first. I knew about her, because I used to know her elder sister Mercy. Mercy had managed to get to Italy, and we were in contact sometimes while I was on my journey. So I knew that Joy was close to where I was, and I knew she could be in trouble very easily, and I knew that Mercy wanted me to find her and help her and keep her safe. Mercy told me once that she had been sending money to Joy, but her protectors had been taking it. After 3 days, I found her. Mercy was very happy. So was I.

Wherever we went, I tried to make sure that I knew where she was, and that she was safe. It wasn't always possible, because the men often took the women and girls to different places.

But she was becoming part of my life. She was now in my heart. I promised her I would protect her properly. I prayed I would be able to. Once I had bought her back from her protectors.

* After the outbreak of Libya's rebellion on 15 February 2011, Zwara rapidly came under the control of the rebel anti-Ghaddafi forces, but within two weeks was regarded as their solitary remaining town west of Tripoli. While Kingsley was there, it was very much in the front line, with skirmishes on the streets, increasingly violent demonstrations, and with pro-Ghaddafi forces massing to the east and south, prior to retaking the city on 15 March. After this, numbers of black Africans were shot on sight in the streets of Zwara. If Kingsley and his friends had arrived even a couple of weeks earlier, their escape across the Tunisian border would have been assured. Instead, they lived through this.

When we were in Sabha, Joy was in prison for two months. And she was also in prison in Tripoli for two weeks, while the bombing and fighting went on all around. But still maybe she was safer there than she might have been on the streets of the city, or with the traffickers.

I travelled to Zwara alone at first. But when I got there and discovered that my money could buy us a journey to Italy, I arranged for my friend to bring Joy to me in Zwara, after one month. I had a hope that I would be able to take her to Italy, and find her sister Mercy. When she arrived safe at Zwara, I was happy in my heart. I knew that she was now a very important part of my life.

The time for our sea journey was getting near. More money would change hands, and many more prayers would be said. But with Joy beside me now, I believed that my destiny was to survive, and to reach Europe. I said to Joy *“We must stay together now. My destiny is not to die in the sea.”*

Chapter 6

“My destiny is not to die in the sea.”

Our journey to Europe was now close. But so was the war. We were told to be ready to leave at a moment's notice. We would be taken to Tripoli when a boat was available and the weather was right. We would travel only through territory officially occupied by Ghaddafi's forces, but our guides said *“We cannot always be sure. So do exactly as we say, and do not hesitate.”*

We got to Tripoli. We stayed one night in a huge camp. There were thousands, and most were Somalians. Then at 4 am, we were called.

At the docks, the ship was already loading. This boat was about 70 feet long, with two decks. There was a long queue to get on board, and the traffickers were urging us to hurry. They were hitting people who did not move fast enough. I think there were almost 1,200 people on this small boat, and I could see it was very badly overloaded. But still people were desperate to get on.

Some pushed into the queue between Joy and me, and so when I reached the gangway to the boat, I hesitated. They hit me hard. I turned back to be with Joy. She was easy to see in the dark, because I had bought her a lifejacket, and also one for her friend.

We could see that people were now paying even more money, bribing the traffickers to get on this boat. I did not have enough money left to buy us entrance to the boat. I was very angry at this. My friend Mike was already on board.

The boat sailed without us. We watched it slowly move towards the open sea. And then we saw it reach the bigger waves beyond the outer harbour. And we watched as it rolled right over. It was so close that we could hear the cries of the people. There were many children deep inside that boat.

We kept watching. There was no rescue. No lifeboat. The traffickers just walked away from the dock. They had their money. We heard later that 630 people had died on this boat.

There was a riot on the dock! Cars were burnt, people were crying, fights were starting. I was so angry and frustrated. But Joy persuaded me to calm down, and

that we must leave before others came. She had an aunt who was staying in Tripoli, and so we went there.

I was satisfied that Joy would be safe hiding with her aunt. So I went all the way back to Zwara to find the man who had taken our money for this trip. I was sick. I did not find him. Maybe that's a good thing!

But I had to pay all over again for another trip for Joy and me. I called my sister for help, and this time she did. All this time the war was going on around us, but we only now had thoughts of getting out and beginning a new life in Europe.

Our chance finally came in May. This boat was really small. It was about 20 feet long, an old fishing boat made of wood. The engine did not sound good, but it worked. There were over 300 people on this boat. I was below deck. Joy was on top, wearing her precious lifejacket.

At first we were really nervous as we sailed away from Tripoli. Sometimes there were jets overhead. And we had heard stories about boats which had been intercepted and stopped, with people being returned to Libya. But as the first day passed into night, we felt safer.

Many people were sick on this voyage. The smell was really bad. And on the second day and night we were alone on the sea. It was a very long day.

3 days out of Libya, we saw a grey patrol boat, and it saw us. There were two white guys on our boat, a Libyan and an Egyptian, and they knew what to do. The captain destroyed part of our engine, so we began drifting helplessly. That meant the patrol boat would have to rescue us.*

When they came alongside us, we saw a red and white flag, and we thought maybe it was the Red Cross. We were towed many miles across the sea, until we came to land, and we said *“Is this Italy?”* *“Yes!”* they said, and laughed out loud.

We were taken ashore by soldiers and armed policemen, and put in trucks. Then we arrived at a large police station. It was only when we were all being processed there that we discovered we were in Malta!

The island which had saved St Paul on his way to Italy had now saved us. We thanked God.

Chapter 7

“This was our home. Now it’s yours.”

We were safe. We were in Europe. In Malta. But we were in jail. At least that’s what it felt like. We hadn’t done anything wrong. But after having all our details taken, we were put behind bars. This was at a place called Lyster Detention Centre, and we slowly came to understand that everyone who arrives on Malta from Africa like we had is locked behind bars. The only ones who are freed quickly are those with children, or couples where the woman is pregnant.

Some people spend up to 18 months locked in detention. After this, they can be sent to an open refugee centre, or they might be deported back to where they came from.

We were lucky. Joy was pregnant, and so we only spent 3 months in detention. While we were there, we met Walter and Lillian Donmilic. They had arrived on a boat a month before us, and Lillian and I were from the same place and spoke the same language. We became like a family together in a place where many people get really lonely and depressed.

Walter told us the story of his journey. He had been halfway round the world trying to build a new life away from persecution as a Christian in Nigeria. He used to own a boutique in Jos*, and he used the last of his money to travel with 17 others to Malaysia, via Dubai. But they all got robbed of everything in Malaysia in 2008, and were deported back to Nigeria. A friend told him to do what we had done, and go to Europe through Libya. So he raised money by working at a carwash, just like me, and they worked their way to Tripoli. They were there when the war started, and one of the very first bombs hit their house.

Their boat journey lasted 11 days. They drifted for a long time without an engine and without fresh water. One woman who was pregnant died on their boat. They arrived in Malta as we had done, and together we thanked God for our survival.

* There were 347 people on board the fishing boat when it was intercepted. The patrol vessel was P-61 of Armed Forces Malta, and they reported the interception as being some 20 miles south of Malta, on a direct line between Delimara Point (Malta) and Tripoli – the old fishing boat’s navigation had been excellent! The date was 19th May 2011.

When Joy and I were released, we were first given a place in a tent at Hal Far Tent Village. This was in an old army tent set on a concrete base, and it was a bad place. It was summer, and the heat was terrible. There were flies and mosquitoes, and rats at night. There were twelve of us in this tent, six men and six women. We had police identity numbers, and a small amount of money each week, but not enough to properly live on. Joy miscarried her baby.

But we were still lucky. We did not have to go back into Detention. We prayed for Walter and Lillian, and God answered this prayer. They were released after six months in Detention. Lillian also was now pregnant. Now were able to move into a cabin at Tent Village with Walter and Lillian.

When we were in Hal Far refugee centre, we met other Christians from Nigeria in the tents and cabins*. They told us about St. Andrew’s Scots Church. They worshipped there, and people from the church came to Tent Village to help the Africans there.

So we went to this church, and people were very happy to welcome us. For the first time we felt we were part of a family again. We knew God was with us.

Sunday 20th November was a special day for our new family. Walter and Lillian were to be baptised and confirmed that day. Lillian was in hospital that weekend, because of concern about her pregnancy. But she was determined to be in church for her baptism. Rev. Doug, our minister, went with Walter to the hospital early on Sunday morning, and he said he would be happy to baptise Lillian there, or to wait for another day in church. But Lillian was determined and brave. The doctor said she could come to church for her baptism so long as she was very careful, and was driven there, and afterwards driven all the way to Hal Far Tent Village.

So she was baptised in church that day, and we were very happy and proud.

Next Sunday was an important day for the church, because the President of Malta came to our church for the very first time. But it was even more special for Joy and me, and Walter and Lillian. Because that was the day when our new friend Jenny Psaila came to us and said *“When I saw how Lillian was last week, I knew I wanted to do this. So my husband and I have decided to move out of our home, and live in our son’s house. I want you and your children to have our home.”*

We could not believe it! But she meant it. Jenny is a very special kind lady. Like a grandmother to us all. So we now live in Jenny's house on Birkirkara Hill in Malta. It is our home. When we moved in, she said *"This was our home. Now it's yours."*

And now it is a real family home. Walter and Lillian's baby was born, and he is called Wisdom Ikechukwu, which means **"Power of God"**. He was baptised in June in our church.

Our joy is now complete. Joy became pregnant again, and Ivan, our firstborn, arrived in August. I have a good job at the Hilton Hotel, and I am a father. Here in Malta, at last, we are blessed. Ivan was baptised on 30th September. His full name is Ivan Tochukwu. It means **"Gift of God"** and **"Praise God"**, and this is truly how we feel. I am so happy to see the way Joy now smiles all the time.

I thank God for all the people who have helped to make it possible, even as I remember all the others who I see no more. For now, our journey out of Africa into Malta is complete. And a new journey as a family is just beginning. It is the best journey I could ever make.

Kingsley Meekness
September 2012

* A city of almost 1 million people, in central Nigeria, popularly called "J-town" or "Jesus our Saviour" by the residents. But since 2001 it has been the scene of major Muslim-Christian clashes. Thousands have died over the years; Christian churches have been firebombed and fleeing worshippers massacred. These clashes are still going on – just at the time Walter left, some 400 Christians died in a single incident.

Afterword

Rev Doug McRoberts

Kingsley's story is remarkable. But it's not unique. In our church we know many other stories like this. One young mother from Somalia, for example, told us how their boat drifted out of control for two weeks in the torrid heat and the swell of the sea, and all she had to feed her little boys was toothpaste and seawater. They were very ill when rescue finally came – within hours, possibly, of death.

Lucky Osas, another of our Nigerians, was one of 17 survivors in a boat of 31. 14 were killed when an Italian patrol boat swept up to them, swamped and sank their little dinghy. Among the dead was an entire family – except for one. Lucky, who can't swim, told me how he went into the water. He said "I just remember it getting darker and darker. Then it started to get light, and I wondered if I was reaching heaven. But I was going up. I saw a baby going down past me, and I reached across and grabbed her. Then we were picked up." The baby has been named Blessings, and she's been adopted by a Maltese family.

Abdul from Eritrea told us how, as he ran for his life from paramilitaries attacking his family farm, he heard the shots that killed his father and his uncle. He also never saw his brother again. His legs were cut to ribbons as he ran through the sawgrass to escape. He left his wife behind. There were tears in his eyes when, after years of living alone as a refugee in Malta, he told us that he had been granted permission to make a new life in America. And he would be reunited there with his wife! The final irony was that he was delayed on his journey by an Icelandic volcano...

The stories differ in the details – but they are all about courage, heartache, fear, loss, faith, and the best and worst of humanity.

Stories like these leave scars. So our *OUT OF AFRICA... INTO MALTA* mission and ministry is about so much more than providing blankets, or fridges, or teaching

* Our new home was really an old shipping container with holes cut for windows and doors. Each one was home to two or three families. We used cardboard and blankets for privacy. But God was looking after us. He found us a church. And then he found us a real home.

English to reluctant new Europeans, or even the sanctuary of a church. It's about healing, and hope, and rebuilding broken lives in the way of Jesus.

It's also, to our surprise and delight, about astonishing answers to prayer... like Jenny giving her house and the ways in which, whenever we have faced a challenge, we seem to find God providing the answer.

Many of the Africans are still very troubled people. When the physical scars have healed, and the immediate ache of loss has eased, and the barred cells of detention are a memory, there are still deeper troubles. Why did this happen to me? To my family? How can other human beings have done this to me? Why do some people here still avoid looking me in the eye? Faith can provide an answer for some – but not everyone has this faith. And so there is a longer-term need for a ministry and mission that offers counselling, and structured, microfinance-based assistance to develop skills, and confidence, and the kind of personal financial security that will really help families to stand once again for themselves.



In Malta today there are thousands of Africans with similar stories – as there are throughout Europe. But there's a difference between our Africans, and those who have reached mainland Europe. It's simple. Officially, when you arrive on this island as a refugee, you're here to stay. You get your police ID, you're in the system – and travel off the island is not permitted. Some go, of course – but when they're picked up in mainland Europe, they're not sent home. They're sent back here. So the impact on this little island is huge. And the effect this has on the Africans is multiplied. They know they're resented in many quarters – and there's very little they can do about it. But there's another side to this...

"I was a stranger and you received me into your home; naked and you clothed me; I was sick and you took care of me; in prison and you visited me."

These words of Jesus make it clear that, in encountering and helping others, we meet Jesus himself; such a meeting is also a truly enriching experience. And the arrival of our Africans has, for us, been exactly that. We meet in them a faith which is simple, straightforward, and eye-opening. God answered their prayers.

Every week at our church, before the service, you will hear our Africans lifting their voices in praise and shared prayer. They start 90 minutes before our service. As we gather for worship, you will see Africans silently at prayer, offering thanks. Once, we had a group of black Africans singing while our communion elements were shared. People wept openly as we heard voices lifted in praise: *“Lord you were with us in prison... Lord, you were with us in the desert... Lord, you were with us on the sea... Lord, you are with us here!”*

To be a minister here is a rare, rewarding and humbling experience. To be part of *OUT OF AFRICA... INTO MALTA* is enriching and life-affirming.

Thank you for reading this story. You're now part of it. If you're moved to support this work, we thank you from our hearts. If you're moved to pray, then know that you're in a prayer group which now numbers in the thousands, and stretches across the world.

And if you ever decide to come to Malta, Kingsley and Joy would love to meet you. Just come to our church, and look for those smiles...

Malta, September 2012



The Church of Scotland



OUT OF AFRICA
INTO MALTA

