

Helen Berhane, Eritrean gospel singer and torture survivor, tells story

by [Rosie Scammell](#) in the [February 17, 2016](#) issue

Gospel singer Helen Berhane found new life in Europe after fleeing Eritrea, where she was locked in a shipping container and tortured for her faith.

She spoke recently at a Rome conference on Christian persecution, Under Caesar's Sword, organized by the University of Notre Dame and Georgetown University.

Berhane, who was arrested for evangelizing and releasing religious music, spent 32 months in custody and was released in 2006 only after she became deathly ill.

"They don't want you to die in prison," she said. "So they send you home to die."

Berhane was targeted as a member of a church banned in Eritrea. The Eritrean government officially allows only the Roman Catholic Church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Eritrea, the Eritrean Orthodox Church, and Sunni Islam.

Berhane belongs to the Rhema Church, sometimes spelled Rema, a Pentecostal denomination that believes that the miracles in the New Testament continue to happen and that speaking in tongues is a manifestation of the Spirit.

Before her arrest, Berhane said, she traveled and preached. Her church had 4,000 members.

In 2004, the government began to crack down, said Fisseha M. Tekle, a researcher at Amnesty International's East Africa office.

"The majority of these pastors remain in arbitrary detention," Tekle said. "None have been charged with a crime or brought before a court."

While jailed, Berhane was pressured to reject her beliefs.

"They always ask you to deny your faith and to deny Jesus; I always refused," she said. "I am not ashamed of the gospel."

She passed the time praying, reading, and singing.

“For me, to sing is like when you go to war; it’s a kind of energy,” she said. “When I’m singing, sometimes I feel something release.”

After gaining her freedom, Berhane was unable to walk, had kidney problems, and had no access to medicine. Security forces continued to harass her. She left for neighboring Sudan with the help of sympathetic immigration officers.

Berhane and her daughter, Eva, applied for asylum in Denmark, which allowed them to move within a month. On arrival, Berhane received the medical care she needed.

Berhane said the situation in Eritrea is getting worse, and huge numbers of people continue to flee the country. While many are escaping religious persecution, others are fleeing military conscription and poverty. Eritreans were the fourth-largest group to reach Europe by sea in 2015, after Syrians, Afghans, and Iraqis.

Berhane called for a multifaith campaign to help Eritreans.

“We need many kinds of people,” she said. “It doesn’t matter what kind of religion they have or which doctrine. We must be united.” —Religion News Service

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