

Testament to new and old

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HAIM SHAPIRO, THE JERUSALEM POST

Jun. 28, 2005

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Petra Heldt still remembers the exact time, almost eight years ago, when a terrorist bomb seemed to shatter her life.

"It was July 30, 1997, at 1:13 p.m.," she recalls with a sad smile.

The diminutive German Lutheran minister, who had already lived in Israel for almost 20 years, had gone to Jerusalem's Mahane Yehuda market to buy tomatoes. Instead, she woke up in the Hadassah Hospital special intensive care unit for burns victims. It is a facility that has had considerable experience as a result of the many terrorist suicide bombers who have attacked men, women and children – of every race and creed – indiscriminately in Israel's capital.

After five weeks in the intensive care unit, two years of outpatient rehabilitation, and several years of recuperation, the scars that once marked her face and hands have all but disappeared, but the scars on her soul still remain.

"I still don't like to go to the market," she admits. The others who won't forget the incident are the members of the staff at the burns unit. It is a department where visitors are strictly limited for fear of contamination, but there was a steady stream of visitors clamoring to see Petra. One day the crowd at the door included a dozen teenaged girls from an Orthodox Jewish school, led by their bearded teacher.

"Who is this Petra?" the head nurse asked in exasperation.

"She's wonderful," answered one of the girls, explaining that Petra had given a lecture to them at their school. They had been amazed that a Christian minister had such vast knowledge of Judaism and that she had shown such sympathy for Israel and the Jewish people. Although they did not say so, what also drew them close to her was her dry sense of humor and her refusal to take herself too seriously. For her, to be religious is never to be pompous.

Heldt's links with Israel began in 1979 when she came as a student. In a recent interview she recalled that although she was fascinated by the language of the Bible, she was also interested in the Hebrew signs she saw in the streets. Her professor told her not to pay any attention to such things because learning modern Hebrew would only spoil the purity of her knowledge of biblical Hebrew, but this only made her persist in learning the language of modern-day Israel.

This knowledge was a tool which she needed later when she set out to get a PhD from the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, Israel's oldest and most prestigious academic institution. Her thesis was on the writings of second and third century interpretations of the New Testament by a group of Jewish Christians in Alexandria.

"They are really beautiful. The interpretations are so incisive that they have been repeated over and

over," she says with enthusiasm. Much of the writings of the third century Church father, Origen, are based upon these earlier commentaries, she adds.

Today much of her time is spent teaching a variety of students: Americans at the Jerusalem University College on Mt. Zion, Germans at the Dormition Abbey, a Dominican Monastery, nearby, and Israelis at the Hebrew University. She tells them that at the time of Jesus there were two main outlooks in Judaism, one which developed into rabbinic Judaism, the source of Judaism as it is practiced by Jews today, and the other into Christianity. It is not, she notes, a view which all Christians are ready to accept. Meanwhile, she met and eventually married Malcolm Lowe, a British New Testament scholar who had also made Jerusalem his home.

WHEN ASKED what it is like to be a Christian in Israel and if there is discrimination against Christians in Israel, she pauses a moment. She is determined to be truthful, and at the same time does not want to be overly critical. Finally she replies that Israel is a society that is building itself up, that there are pressures for people to conform. If, for example, you want to get a job, it helps to have a powerful group behind you. At the same time, she adds, in some areas there are Christians who are very powerful in terms of money and position, and thus form a lobby group helping those they favor to advance.

"Israeli society is not necessarily equal towards all, but I wouldn't call it anti-Christian," she says.

However, she adds, the real question should be what it is like to be a Protestant woman in Israel. The Protestants, she said, are at a disadvantage because Israelis love the Catholics. The late pope John Paul II was, in the best sense of the word, an actor, who was able to present Christianity to even non-Christians in an era of television dramatic moments, she noted.

"The personal symbolic gestures of the late pope John Paul II talked to the hearts of the Israeli people. He enchanted all of Israel," she says.

The Protestants, on the other hand, do a lot of good work in Israel, but they are divided. On the one hand, she says, the evangelicals are biblically motivated to love and support Israel. Mainstream Protestants, on the other hand, are pro-Palestinian out of human rights motivations and because of their historic ties with the Arabs. There are others, she adds, who are biblically motivated to do good in the world and she sees herself in that group. She also feels that it is wrong to create such divisions, that they should be one group in which there are different emphases, and that they should help one another.

At the same time, she adds, it is not always easy being a woman in Christian theological circles. As a religious person, she is accepted by other religious people, but at the same time, in Christian leadership roles, the men tend to push the women aside.

"When they talk about theology, they accept women, but when it comes to power plays, they try to freeze the women out," she says.

Meanwhile, Heldt is at the helm of one of the few groups which seems to be able to create and promote Christian unity in the Holy Land, the Ecumenical Theological Research Fraternity, which encompasses not only all the different factions of Protestants, but the Catholics and Orthodox Christians as well.

"We come together to recognize the richness of Christianity's many different facets," she says. The Fraternity was organized in 1960. Heldt has been a member since 1979 and she has been its director since 1987. It is a unique organization, she says, a positive result of the fact that in Israel Christians

constitute an insignificant minority in numerical terms. Where Christians are the majority, she observes, each Christian group tends to remain isolated. They have no need to reach out to other Christians, to study their liturgy and philosophy. In a sense, she says, the Fraternity is the non-denominational counterpart to Israel and the Jewish people in the Holy Land. It is a group that is concerned with mutual study and mutual recognition, but it steers away from politics.

However, it is not just as a Christian that she has a special role in Israel. As a German, she cannot ignore the tragic history of Jews and Germans and the emotional baggage it brings with it.

Although born after the war, she is still painfully regularly reminded of the fact that six million Jews were murdered by the Nazis. At the same time, she notes that her parents were teenagers when the war ended and thus not only escaped conscription, but the stigma that their elders carried with them.

Although she describes her upbringing as secular, she did go to church as a child and it was then that she decided that she wanted to study theology. Even in high school she studied Latin and Greek and continued to study these languages at the university. Even at that point, she adds, she was already interested in the interim period, between the closing of the canon of the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament. Her master's thesis, which she completed in Berlin, was on the Qumran community.

Today, she says, there appears to be more interest than ever before in this period of early Christianity. She feels that the Hebrew University research on the Qumran Scrolls has been of particular importance. However, not only has the discovery and publication of the Dead Sea Scrolls been significant, but other documents have also been discovered. One such find was the Nag Hamadi texts, which were found in Upper Egypt in 1945. These include many works which were thought to have been destroyed because they were considered heretical, but which cast light upon the thought of the time.

There are many groups related to the New Testament who would like to know more about the writings of the early Church. At the same time, scholars are no longer bound by creedal limitations.

"We don't have to read within the boundaries of the Church councils," she says.

Instead, she adds, she and other scholars read the early Christian or Jewish-Christian texts in order to understand the development of the Church and the interpretations of the Hebrew Bible which these early groups had in mind. What they produce, she says, is a historical view of the early Church that brings it alive.

That period, she says, was one of great messianic expectation and today too the Apocalypse and the element of salvation play important roles. "They mesh with the modern mind and the modern mind finds a place in ancient Christianity," she says.