

This Month in Moravian History

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commemorating events from Moravian History

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Moravian Work in Jerusalem

The Moravians have been present in Israel/Palestine for many years, starting in Jerusalem in 1867 when a home for lepers was founded. Exactly 125 years ago the Moravian Church took over full responsibility of the home.

The initiative for a “leper home” in Jerusalem goes back to Baroness von Keffenbrinck-Ascheraden of Nehringen in Pomerania (Germany). In 1865 she visited the Holy Land together with her husband. Their compassion was inspired by the sight of the many lepers, who had been banished from society and were living in huts outside the gates of Jerusalem. Back in Germany the Baroness and her husband raised the funds to buy land outside the Jaffa Gate in Jerusalem where a leper asylum could be built. A committee was formed in Jerusalem under the chairmanship of Samuel Gobat (1799-1879), a Swiss missionary and Protestant bishop of Jerusalem, to oversee the work. Within two years a facility was constructed under the supervision of a local architect.

In order to find people willing to serve as house parents of the home, Baroness von Keffenbrinck contacted the Moravian Church in March of 1866. She knew about the Leper Hospital on Robben Island in South Africa the Moravians had successfully run for many years. The Unity Elders’ Conference called Friedrich and Magdalena Tappe, who had served as missionaries in Labrador, to do this work. On May 20, 1867, the Tappes arrived in Jerusalem and on May 30th, the Leper home was consecrated.

At first the Arab lepers approached the Christian home with suspicion. Of the 50 lepers who were invited to the dedication of the home only four showed up. The first patient finally arrived at the end of August. Tappe writes: “At the end of August [1867] the first leper came, a young man from Gaza, accompanied by his mother. They expressed doubts and scruples concerning the house, left and returned home.” Soon however, other patients arrived and by the end of the year there were five lepers. Already by 1872 the house was found to be too small and patients had to be turned away. The house was enlarged in 1875 and again in 1877.

From the beginning many Moravians and friends of the Moravians in England, Switzerland and Germany supported the Leper Home. In 1881 the worldwide Moravian Church took over official responsibility of the home. The local committee in Jerusalem continued to

oversee the home but was now accountable to the Unity Elders’ Conference in Berthelsdorf. The Unity Elders bore all the expenses and appointed the house parents. In 1884 the property passed into possession of the Unity.

The facility continued to prove too small and in 1885 the Moravian Church approved plans for a new home to be built at a nearby location. On April 24, 1887, this new home called “Jesushilfe” or “Jesus’ Help” was dedicated.



After World War II the Israeli government took over “Jesushilfe” as the Hansen Hospital for Skin Diseases. The Moravian Church moved their work to Silwan on the West Bank, until a new facility, “Sternberg” or Star Mountain, was completed in Ramallah in 1959. In 1979 the last leper left Star Mountain and the home was converted into a rehabilitation center for mentally handicapped girls.

Sources: Minutes of UEC. Annual Reports of the Leper Home. E. Rondthaler, A Visit to the Moravian Leper Home at Jerusalem, 1889. James La Trobe, Work among Lepers in Connection with the Church of the United Brethren.

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