

This Month in Moravian History

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Dedication of Star Mountain in Ramallah, June 12, 1960

In 2006 we commemorated the 125th anniversary of Moravian work in the Middle East among the sufferers of Hansen's disease (formerly called leprosy) of Jerusalem. This month we celebrate the 50th anniversary of the continuation of that mission in Ramallah, Palestine.

Following the Second World War Moravian mission work in the Middle East faced a bleak future. What started in 1887 as a mission among a handful of patients of Hansen's disease in Jerusalem had by 1948 flourished into a well-respected hospital, "Jesushilfe" or "Jesus' Help," which served both Arabs and Jews. Although never a mission that boasted many converts, it shone as an ex-



ample of patient Christian love and service to the outcast. Moravian nurses reported that they gave "lepers the feeling that they are not forgotten or even disgraced by human society. Non-Christians do not visit or care for them... They live in the shadows. They are cut off from many things ... from home-life, from their relatives, and now they have to live together with other people, who may be sympathetic or the contrary, not to mention their pains and anxieties about their health."

The new State of Israel assumed control of the mission in 1948, precipitating the sale



of the hospital to the Jewish government in 1950. It was an unsettled time, full of political conflict and uncertainty for the future. Upon the disbandment of the mission, Sister Oggeline Norgaard prayed that "God may lead somebody to open a place for the patients on the Arabic side."

What followed is a classic tale of "where the Lord shuts a door, he opens a window." In 1953 two Moravian nurses, Johanna Larsen and Ida Ressel, led 15 patients to Silwan in Jordan (now the West Bank), where they re-established their work, albeit in cramped, unsatisfactory conditions. With the blessing of Unity Synod in 1957, a tract of land was purchased at Ramallah on Star Mountain (Sternberg). On June 12, 1960, the new home for patients of Hansen's disease was opened with a ceremony that included 600 guests and Jordanian dignitaries.

The mission seemed destined to close again as modern medicine conquered leprosy. A decision by Unity Synod in 1974 shifted the home's focus from serving patients of Hansen's disease to serving another

disadvantaged group: disabled children. Prior to this effort the disabled received very little help or attention in Palestine. By changing with the times the mission has evolved a third time and continues to flourish in the desert. Today more than 300 disabled children and adolescents are served, the majority of which come from poor, Muslim households. They are served by 40 trained teachers and aids of both Christian and Muslim backgrounds. The work at Star Mountain continues to be a symbol of peaceful cooperation and Christian love for one's neighbor. Quoting the report of the opening of Star Mountain in 1960, "The valley of Achor [trouble] is transformed into a Door of Hope" (Hosea 2:15).

Sources

Annual Reports of the Moravian Leper Home Jerusalem; Hartmut Beck, *Brüder in vielen Völkern: 250 Jahre Mission der Brüdergemeine*; Moravian Messenger; Periodical Accounts.