

## **Sitt Elsie of Tiberias: a Bible-Woman Evangelist in the Land** **Kai Kjær-Hansen, International Coordinator of LCJE**

Tomorrow we shall be leaving High Leigh. We shall be going back to our respective tasks and duties. They are different but have the same heading: “Making the Messiah known”, the theme of this day. That task can be performed in many different ways and by people with very different talents and spiritual gifts.

The fact that there are many *different* tasks might lead to disputes over which task is *the* most important and which method is *the* best. I doubt that anything good may come of such dispute or discussion, for it is only together we can solve the *entire* task. We are dependent on each other – or we should be. This is the main point of this evening’s story.

It would not be difficult on this last evening to give a character sketch of a fourth woman who, in the middle of the 20th century, was in CMJ’s service and who also participated in a Summer School here at High Leigh. There are many interesting women to study. However, I have chosen to focus on a woman who never was at High Leigh, who was in Scottish service in Tiberias and who, I am convinced, Ursula Nehab/Jones, Ruth Clark and Hannah Hurnard knew, namely Elsie Nasrallah, better known to all friends and patients at the Tiberias Hospital as “Sitt Elsie.” She died in 1957 in Leeds, England, 56 years old.

I do not know much about her. Actually I do not have much to go on except an obituary. Historical research has taught me that there is more to say about a person than what is said in an obituary, but let us leave that alone for now. I am using her because she in her work as a Bible-woman evangelist was very much *dependent* on other people’s help to carry out her work.

Elsie Nasrallah was of Syrian nationality, went to the Tiberias Hospital in 1925 as a masseuse and Bible-woman evangelist – and then she was born blind. Can the blind lead the blind? I do not think I am on a collision course with the Scripture when I answer: Yes, a physically blind person can lead physically sighted persons who are spiritually blind. And a woman of Syrian nationality like Sitt Elsie could be a blessing for Jews in the Tiberias area, as we are going to see.

It was to be decisive for her life that she was admitted to a home for blind girls which Mary Jane Lovell had established in Jerusalem in the mid-1890’s.

### **Mary Jane Lovell – “Mother of the Blind”**

Also Mary Jane Lovell was a remarkable woman. In short: She was born in Stickney, Lincolnshire in 1848, was for a time a missionary in Africa but had to return to England for health reasons. She then became a teacher at the Kilburn School for Blind in London and soon learned the Braille alphabet – developed in 1824 by the Frenchman Louis Braille (1809-1854), who was blind himself. She later opened the first holiday home for the blind in St Leonards-on-Sea in East Sussex. A Lebanese blind traveller on a visit to the place aroused her interest in work among the blind in the Lebanon. She subsequently went there, learned Arabic and devised the first Arabic Braille code.

In 1895 she moved to Palestine and established Homes for Blind Girls in Jerusalem and Bethlehem. During the First World War she remains in Jerusalem unlike many other British missionaries who left the Land, among them Ruth Clark. John R. Ketteringham writes: “It was during the war that Mary began the tremendous task of transcribing the Bible into Arabic Braille, a work of thirty-one

volumes which she completed just before she died.” She was buried in the cemetery on Mount Zion in June 1932. Part of the inscription on the headstone reads: “In happy memory of Mary Jane Lovell ‘Mother of the Blind’”.

It was with this “Mother of the Blind” Elsie Nasrallah got her education.

### **Elsie Nasrallah according to Dr H.W. Torrance**

R. Clephane Macanna opens his beautiful obituary by quoting some words by Dr H.W. Torrance, who had become superintendent of the Tiberias Hospital in 1923. He tells how he came to meet and select Miss Nasrallah for work in his hospital.

I required a Masseuse and Bible-woman evangelist. I knew of a saintly English lady in Jerusalem – Miss Lovell – who had spent over 40 years in the Herculean task of translating the whole of the Bible, single-handed, into Arabic Braille. In a Christlike manner, she decided to choose 12 blind girls, and 12 only, and give them a thorough training. My journey to Miss Lovell’s home in Jerusalem, resulted in my choosing Elsie, while Dr. Orr Ewing picked another girl, Mathilde, for his hospital [in Jerusalem]. Sitt Elsie was given a course in massage at Jerusalem, and qualified.

I have never regretted my choice because one might almost say Elsie became the Helen Keller of Galilee. True, she had been blind from birth but, in another sense, she had the most seeing eyes of anybody I have met. Like the “electric eye doors” in modern hospitals which open of themselves as they are approached by a person or a wheeled trolley, Elsie’s anticipatory nerve of sensation tunnelled a way into her imprisoned spirit and made *her see everything*.

### **Sitt Elsie of Tiberias according to R. Clephane Macanna**

Let us now listen to what sort of person Sitt Elsie of Tiberias was and what task she performed. I will let R. Clephane Macanna speak, then a person well-known both in Scotland and internationally for his involvement in Jewish mission. In the obituary of Sitt Elsie he writes this, among other things.

Sitt Elsie’s work was summed up in “whatsoever thy hand findeth to do” – and she did it with all her might. She would do anything to help. When the Tiberias Hospital was closed down, as being in the fighting area, during the Arab-Israel war of 1948-49, her work as masseuse and Bible-Teacher seemed finished. Sitt Elsie and Miss Pearson (now Mrs Allanson) remained in Israel throughout the war and worked at Nazareth. In that period Sitt Elsie’s hand found much work waiting to be done. She visited refugees, cared for wounded soldiers, helped to trace relatives and, when Miss Pearson established a small hospital at Nazareth, Sitt Elsie took over the housekeeping side of the work.

When the Tiberias work was resumed after hostilities ceased, Sitt Elsie helped to organise the Kosher Kitchen and canteen, and with her knowledge of Hebrew was an invaluable liaison between the Home staff and the Jewish staff in the hospital. Later, when the Bible Shop was established and taken over by Miss Pearson and Sitt Elsie, she was tireless in the work undertaken. Whether talking to children, giving English lessons, discussing Christianity with enquirers, or preparing for the Hebrew services

(which she regarded as supremely important) Sitt Elsie gave all she had to the task in hand at the moment.

Her knowledge of the Bible was amazing and she could quote accurately from it in English, Arabic or Hebrew. During the period when there was no minister at Tiberias, it was Sitt Elsie who carried on the services – in English or in Hebrew – when no visiting clergyman was available. Without her initiative and work the Hebrew services at Tiberias could not have been maintained.

The work she loved best, however, was visiting. If domestic duties in the hospital had kept her too busy to go visiting during the day, she would go out in the evening so as to keep in touch. She was indefatigable. On these occasions, or at the Bible Shop, she favoured the story method – beloved in the near East – for giving information and instruction. Sitt Elsie was a born story-teller – like many Arabs – and young and old were eager to listen to her tales.

To the Bible Shop came many Jewish enquirers, and with them Sitt Elsie discussed and expounded the Christian Faith, for she had a great love for the Jewish people. From the Bible Shop, and accompanied by Miss Pearson, she went into Tiberias and the Jewish colonies around, to visit enquirers and former patients of the hospital, ever carrying with her the Gospel message, and allowing no opportunity to pass without commending Christ. Her witness was positive and fearless. She had a deep love of God, a zeal for His Word, and a simple faith in the power of prayer. One Jew – an avowed atheist who sought to discuss religion with her at the Bible Shop – said “She is quite right – she really believes what she says – she’s absolutely right.”

### **Sitt Elsie’s success and dependence on others**

Sitt Elsie’s physical handicap naturally made her dependent on other people’s help. R. Clephane Macanna comments on this:

Sitt Elsie’s success owed much – as she gladly admitted – to the unparalleled patience and help given by two former members of the Tiberias Hospital staff. Miss Isabella Dow, a former pharmacist, and Miss Edith Pearson (now Mrs Allanson) were devoted, unselfish guides and tutors to her and enabled her to enter spheres and to make contacts which would otherwise have been impossible.

In 1955 Sitt Elsie asked permission to retire. She was then 54 years of age, but her blindness did impose a strain and her health was failing in the trying climate of Tiberias. Miss Pearson was, moreover, resigning on [account of] her marriage and this would have raised a serious problem for Sitt Elsie and the Committee had she continued alone at Tiberias. In 1956 she was permitted by the British authorities to retire in Great Britain. Since October, 1956, she has been under the care of Mrs. Allanson (Miss E. Pearson) at Leeds. Steadily her health declined after lengthy treatment in and out of hospital, and after much pain, borne with fortitude and cheerfulness, she died at Mrs. Allanson’s house in Leeds. Miss Dow had gone from Glasgow to visit her a few days before her death.

### **Ordinary people in God’s extraordinary mission**

Elsie Nasrallah's life story is both fascinating and challenging. Physically blind she was dependent on other people. But we who are sighted also need others if our ministry is to succeed. May we who are involved in Jewish evangelism – also in the framework of LCJE – become more dependent on each other.

It makes an impression to learn that Miss Edith Pearson, who through her marriage became Mrs Allanson, makes room for Sitt Elsie in her new home in Leeds. New marital bliss can also accommodate the old love for Sitt Elsie. Love obliges.

It also makes an impression to learn that Miss Pearson and Miss Dow in Tiberias made themselves available and helped Sitt Elsie so that her talents and spiritual gifts could be used. This is to serve the Lord! She obviously had some gifts that they did not have.

Sitt Elsie was a born story-teller – like many Arabs. May God give us many “story-tellers” among Jesus-believing Jews – like Jesus.

It makes an impression that Sitt Elsie “of Syrian nationality” serves Jews in Tiberias and even conducts services in Hebrew when there was no man – clergyman – at their disposal. Today the challenge naturally also goes in the other direction, namely that Jesus-troende make themselves available for Arabs and Palestinians.

Elsie Nasrallah – “of Syrian nationality – made herself available in the service of reconciliation. May we also do that.

And may we remember when we write the history of Jewish evangelism not restrict ourselves to dealing exclusively with the “famous” or “eminent” *men*. Our history is also made up of less “famous” and less “eminent” *men and women*.

The majority of those who down through history have become involved in *Missio Dei*, in God's mission, can be classified as pretty ordinary people – *men and women*, the kind of people most of us can easily identify with and be inspired by when we continue our efforts to make the Messiah known. We are ordinary people who are involved in God's extraordinary mission. May each and every one of us be faithful to the calling we have received. And be dependent on God and, indeed, on each other.

### **Select bibliography**

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