

St George's College evening 16 May 2019

On Thursday 16th May the College hosted its seventh annual Evensong and Fireside Chat Evening for the WA branch of the Council of Christians and Jews (CCJWA). This year's Fireside Chat guest was Helen Bryant, a life member and teacher at the progressive Temple David. Her life story gave the audience an insight into the 20th century Jewish experience post World War II.

Helen was born in London after her parents separately escaped from Bohemia, the westernmost province of Czechoslovakia, after the Nazis invaded in March 1939. Not all of her family escaped — three of her grandparents were murdered at Auschwitz and the fourth disappeared in the Nisko work camp. Her mother died giving birth to her. Then she was raised in London in line with the progressive Germanic Jewish traditions of her step mother and her father who was a supporter of the ideals of communism. Growing up she had a strong Jewish identity and, like many Jews in England at that time, was 'very Israel-focused' — keen to return to the homeland and build a state where the Jewish diaspora could be in control of their destinies, safe to practise and share their cultural heritage without persecution.

After university and three years teaching in Wolverhampton, she left England 'as a young Jewish idealist' to make Aliyah (immigrate) to Israel. Seeking to develop her Jewish identity with other like-minded young people, she studied a six-month graduate program of Hebrew and Jewish studies in the small Israeli desert town of Arad. This was a course offered by the World Union of Jewish Students to young Jewish graduates from around the world.

Upon completion of that course, she joined a kibbutz for six months. This agricultural community, where members lived and worked collectively, shared everything. Even their clothes were collectively owned and dispensed each week from the laundry, depending on job allocations. Everyone was rostered a weekly job: for women these tasks usually included looking after or teaching children and laundry and kitchen work. Helen also remembered getting up at 4am every day to clean out the cow sheds. Along with the clothing, the kibbutz also owned about five cars that could be booked to use as needed. At the time Helen lived there, no one had cooking facilities or access to food in their homes. There were communal kitchen facilities that members took turns working in. She said everyone had at least one kitchen shift a year. That meant that members of the kibbutz always prepared and ate food together as a community, thus everyone knew each other. Additionally, children, including babies, were raised collectively, not by their parents; first in the babies' house, then moving to the children's house and then separated into girls' and boys' houses at about ten years of age. She said that she had been appalled by this practice at first, but reflecting back on it now, she could see that it had some benefits. Each afternoon the children went to their parents' house to spend two to three quality hours with them before returning to their collective home. She doubts that, in this day and age, many children get that much uninterrupted quality time with their parents' full attention.

Traditional kibbutzim focused on developing agriculture and farming, though many modern kibbutzim have ventured into other areas of work. According to Helen, who regularly travels back to Israel, modern kibbutzim aren't quite as collective as they previously were. Now, they often have members who hold jobs outside the kibbutz and have introduced some private ownership such as private cooking facilities in homes, clothes, and cars. She told the audience that when she first moved to Israel it was real pioneer country, particularly where the kibbutzim were located — they were still taking stones out of fields to enable ploughing. Though much has changed, she still felt that living on a kibbutz was a good experience.

She said that despite loving the sense of community and equality in the kibbutz, it didn't have enough focus on Jewish traditions and identity for her. The kibbutz was left wing and non-religious, and while she liked aspects of this, there was no practice of Jewish religious and cultural traditions, and little sense of an overt Jewish identity, which was what she had been seeking. She noted that by contrast, nowadays some kibbutzim have quite right-wing politics and traditional orthodox religious and cultural practices. Coming from such a progressive background Helen also found the gendered nature of activities disappointing: women were allocated cooking, cleaning and childrearing work, while the men ploughed the fields and patrolled the farm's borders.

In the end she left the kibbutz and immigrated to Perth, just a few days before the start of the 1973 Yom Kippur War. She knew no one in Perth and she was reeling from the shock of the Egyptian-Syrian attack on Israel when she found Temple David, a progressive Jewish synagogue in Mount Lawley. Here she met kindred spirits who quickly became her family and she has been deeply engaged with the Temple and a tireless member of its community ever since.

She identifies as part of the progressive Jewish tradition, which is Temple David. She explained that progressive Jews 'see the beauty of the traditions but seek to place them in a modern context'. They take a realist or rational approach to their religion. While they value the traditions and practices of Judaism as a way to bring meaning, purpose and identity to their lives, they are open to fresh ideas and innovation in how these are practised. They focus on maintaining the spirit of the practices for the good of the ethical and spiritual development of individuals and the good of the wider community, rather than a strict adherence to traditions. For example, the men and women at Temple David all sit together — traditionally they are segregated — and women do all the same tasks as men. These too are highly segregated in traditional orthodox Judaism. Helen was one of the first women in our region to wear a Tallit (prayer shawl) and a kippah (skullcap traditionally worn by Jewish men during services and prayer). For the last 35 years she has thought of God in non-gendered terms. She believes that 'as soon as you give God a gender you limit God's power' by excluding identification and connection with half the population. In her words, 'there is the spark of the divine in everyone and it is up to us to decide how we'll behave' to either serve or turn away from that.

Progressive Judaism, as practised at Temple David, places an emphasis on the concepts of *tzedek* (justice and equity) and *tikkun olam* ('repairing the world'), which in a practical sense means trying to do things to make the world a better place. For Helen this involves trying to protect the environment, for the good of everyone, and her commitment to teaching and mentoring.

The College would like to thank Helen for sharing her fascinating story, and Brian Wills-Johnson for conducting the interview in the Warden's absence. Our thanks also to the Honorary Secretary of the CCJWA, Dr Mary Marshall, for her assistance with organising the event.

The College is very pleased to host the annual Evensong and Fireside Chat for the WA branch of the Council of Christians and Jews. It is a very special occasion and we look forward to next year's event.

St George's College
Perth, Western Australia