

Spiritual Experiences in Europe

28 January 2009

CCJWA's annual meeting for 2008 was held at 7:30pm on Wednesday 28 January at the Mary Lockett Hall in Claremont. Following the business meeting, attendees were given a visual presentation by CCJWA's Honorary Treasurer, Ann Smith, who spoke about her experiences while visiting some very diverse places of worship in Europe.

The Council's Chairperson, the Revd Assoc. Prof. Rowan Strong introduced Ms Smith as a teacher of Philosophy and Religious Studies at Presbyterian Ladies' College, informing us of her interesting — and surprising — background. Ann Smith was born in Papua New Guinea to parents who were ministering there pastorally, and also spent some years in Penang as a young adult. She majored in Anthropology and Asian studies, and has taught at PLC for 27 years.

Following on from Dr Strong's introduction, Ms Smith shared further about her origins and inspiration, how she felt deeply influenced by her father, the Revd John Wardman, who had travelled to Israel twice, and by Adam Levine, her Jewish Studies teacher. Her presentation, she explained, was a collection of reflections; each reflection surrounded a number of photographs grouped together. The photographs, the product of planned visits resulting from Ms Smith's own intrepid research, constructed a very unique spiritual 'tour'.

The tour began in Spain with a Roman Catholic cathedral and a procession. Ms Smith was captured by the procession's full and colourful vestment, its vibrancy and movement steeped in tradition, yet also present in enthusiasm. Still in Spain, two quite different and evocative images were shown, a statue of the learned Maimonides, and an ancient, simple, carving of a Menora.

From there we were taken to Sweden to contemplate the historic Uppsala Cathedral and, within it, a poignant portrayal of Mary the mother of Jesus as returning to the cathedral. After this architectural grandeur, we were introduced to a very different inspiration of awe, the Church of the Rock in Helsinki. Hewn from granite and hidden from outside, this circular church with its unusual ceiling made from glass and copper wire, provided a sacred space for meditative prayer. Ms Smith experienced great stillness in the silence of those praying here. Moving ever deeper into the heart of suffering in European history, we were brought into the Latvian forest to contemplate a Holocaust memorial. Ms Smith's sharing about the planning of this and her feelings walking unaccompanied into the forest toward the memorial helped us experience the isolation of this place.

We then were taken by Ms Smith to Lithuania where she had been confronted by an intimidating tall granite memorial commemorating the murder of five thousand Kaunas Jews. Another Lithuanian memorial, confronting in a different way, was the Hill of crosses. In spite of the ban on religion, over time a hill has been vigorously implanted with crosses by the local people. In among these, amazingly, was set a Star of David which Ms Smith experienced as a defiant yet peaceful statement about affirming hope.

In Poland we visited the Warsaw ghetto, to contemplate on the tragic loss of life, here. A stark memorial of seventy chairs on the sidewalk in Krakow represented the furniture discarded when seventy thousand people were 'removed'. The unattractiveness of this memorial Ms Smith felt well imaged an unattractive past.

Finally, to a synagogue in Hungary. Built in the architectural style of the cathedral, this dignified and ornate synagogue was designed to blend in with the local Christian Churches. It represented, for Ms Smith, hope, a successful regrouping and redefinition of a faith and its culture which has deeply suffered in history.

Together, the evocative images and reflections by Ms Smith gave us something to ponder about. In many ways sacred places, and those who enter them, represent a culture's profoundest expression of hope.

Judith Schneider
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