

'Shifting Sands': Stories of life in Palestine and Israel

By Kay Campbell, The Huntsville Times

March 19, 2010, 5:46AM

*"Those who would silence doubt are filled with fear.
The house of their spirit is built on shifting sands."*

-Â From "Cherish your doubts," in "Gates of Prayer," used in Jewish services.



Glenn Baeske / The Huntsville Times Jewish women speak out about conditions for Palestinians in a book edited by Osie Adelfang, center. Two of her children Anna, age 10, right, and Ellie, age 6, left, look over her shoulder.

Distracted as an adult by her own life, including the death of her second child shortly after birth, Adelfang was startled in the spring of 2002 to receive a request from Weiss to help translate a letter. Haim had joined other IDF soldiers in publishing "The Combatants' Letter," which told why they refused to serve in the occupied territories.

The "Combatants' Letter" outlines the reasons why these Israeli patriots were refusing to serve beyond the borders established by the 1967 war. It details how they see the actions of the IDF in the occupied Palestinian territories as antithetical to their personal beliefs and values as Jews and Israelis. Haim asked Adelfang to translate a letter to his commanding officer about that letter to be published in *The Guardian* of London.

Although Adelfang, a writer with a master's in creative writing, is fluent in Hebrew, she struggled with the translation. She lived with the words for weeks as she made sure she could capture both tone and temper of the carefully worded manifesto.

The letter and long conversations with her cousin opened her eyes to what she realized she had spent her life ignoring: The desperate reality of Palestinians who live in and around the country she loves, and the way the occupation is making Israeli soldiers into monsters.

Haim's heroism called Adelfang out of her own grief. Her cousin had put his career and reputation on the line to write the letter and join the organization **Courage to Refuse** with those other army veterans. What was she going to do?

Finding a dream

Adelfang read about the situation. She raised money for Palestinian relief causes. She talked to friends.

Meanwhile, she was able to have a third baby, who lived. She and her husband adopted a son from Russia. She began homeschooling their children.

Then, in 2008, at a homeschooling conference, she wandered into a seminar on helping children realize their dreams.

"I'll never forget it," Adelfang said. "The presenter, Daniel Armstrong, said, 'The way to show your kids how to dream is by making your dreams come true.'"

Later, Adelfang took a long walk, considering which of her own dreams she had shelved because it was too impractical or too big or too impossible. She'd always wanted to write a book. Should she do a book? Perhaps something about navigating an international adoption?

"But then I heard my Dad's voice - we used to walk together when he was alive - I heard his voice clearly in my head: 'The adoption book can wait. You have to write about peace in the Middle East.'"

Adelfang's eyes, a startling desert-green, get wide as she describes that moment of comprehension when her own happy childhood in Jerusalem and her recent realization of the cost of the occupation came home to her.

"I realized, finally, this is something I can do."

Forsaking 'God of Force'

Adelfang put her experience as a magazine editor to work. She called for submissions and beginning to consider what sort of book could help make peace in a vexed land.

Facts, she realized, won't do it. There are too many facts - and deliberate miss-facts - flying around as it is. No, the only thing that will work, she decided, are stories. Simple stories, little pieces of the larger truth with human faces on them, little windows into the lives of people caught up in the interlocked fates of Israel and Palestine.

Submissions came in from nationally and internationally recognized activists, including Anna Baltzer, a former Fulbright Scholar who has lectured in Huntsville; filmmaker Jen Marlowe, who filmed "Darfur Diaries;" and Alice Rothchild, co-founder of American Jews for a Just Peace. The stories, like a collage of lives, began to take shape: Stories of painting a barrier wall in West Bank as a way to turn apartheid into art. Stories of great kindness; of Hedy Epstein, 85, a Holocaust survivor, active in Women in Black and with Free Gaza Movement; of a Jewish woman's search for the childhood home of her New York friend, a home from which his Palestinian family had been forced after the 1967 war. Adelfang's own essay tells of her summers in Israel and how she came to see her cousin's heroism in refusing to serve in the IDF any longer.

American peace activist Cindy Sheehan wrote the introduction. Respected Israeli journalist Amira Hass agreed to do the forward.

The book also contains two poems, including "Good Germans" by Emma Rosenthal. A line in the poem quotes an Israeli settler, "Killing them is killing me" - an apt summary of how the occupation drains both wealth and morality from the modern state of Israel.

At the end, none of the essayists come to any five-point action plans or manifestos. The goal of the book, Adelfang said, is to start a conversation about the people behind the wall and to consider what's going on. To, as the prayer from which she took the book's title suggests, realize that "doubt is the handmaiden of truth."

At the very least, Adelfang hopes, the essays will get people to realize the current policies are not working. Peace activist Starhawk notes her essay, "The God of Force is failing, but there are others to call upon."

"Tragedy is tragedy," Adelfang said. "We need to consider each other as human beings, not as enemies. I think most people in the world want peace. I guess that's the hope, the faith, that drives this book."

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