

The other Bethlehems

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The other Bethlehems

Bethlehem is also the name of a Tauranga suburb. Originally a small independent town, it has now been absorbed by Tauranga.

Switzerland has its own Bethlehem; it is a part of Bümpliz-Oberbottigen, Bern. It has a population of 30% foreigners, many of them Muslims - not Arabs, but Muslims from the Balkan.

The Netherlands has a little hamlet named Bethlehem, and there are various Bethlehems in the United States.

But there is also a second Bethlehem in northern Israel.

Bethlehem of Galilee was inhabited by Jews until some time after the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 AD. During the Crusades, it was a small Christian town, later abandoned.

Due to its proximity to Nazareth, some historians believe that this is the Bethlehem where Jesus was born. Until the late 19th century, ruins of a church and a synagogue could be seen there, and archeological findings show it was a prosperous city.

In 1906, when the area was still part of the Ottoman Empire, Templers from the German Colony in Haifa established a colony in the Galilee, naming it for the ancient city. After World War I the region became a British protectorate, with the name Palestine.

In 1932 the German National Socialist Party (NSDAP) won the first two members in Palestine from the Templer colony in Haifa. In the course of the 1930s many Templers in Bethlehem of Galilee also joined the NSDAP. After the Nazi takeover in Germany Hitler's government streamlined the foreign policy according to Nazi ideals, using especially financial pressure. The teachers in the German schools in Bethlehem were financed by the Third Reich and had to be in the NSDAP. A Palestinian branch of the Hitler Youth was financed by the Third Reich. On August 20, 1939 the German government

called up the Gentile German men living in Palestine to the Wehrmacht. 350 followed the call.

After Germany had started the Second World War all Germans in Palestine became enemy aliens. The British authorities decided to intern most of the enemy aliens. For this purpose four German gentile settlements were converted into internment camps. Most enemy aliens living elsewhere in Palestine were also interned in one of these settlements. In summer 1941, 665 German internees, almost all young families with children, were released to Australia, where they could settle again. Many of the remaining Germans were either too old or too sick to leave for Australia, while a second group did not want to leave. In December 1941 and in the course of 1942 400 German internees, mostly wives and children of men who served in the Wehrmacht, were released - via Turkey - to Germany.

In 1945 the Italian and Hungarian internees were released from Bethlehem and the other camps. But Great Britain refused to repatriate the remaining German internees to the British zone in Germany, because the British zone was flooded with war refugees from Eastern Europe. Many did not want to go to Germany anyway, as there was no vacant land in Germany where they could have settled as farmers. In 1947 the British authorities and Australia agreed to allow the remaining German internees to emigrate to Australia. On 17 April 1948, the Haganah captured the village, and it was resettled by Jewish farmers. Much of the original Templer architecture survives, and is similar in style to the homes built by the Templers in other parts of the country.

In recent years, tourism has replaced agriculture as the main source of income.

Bringing medical aid to Bethlehem's babies

Every year since 1963 the Catholic churches in Switzerland have donated the offerings taken at Midnight Mass to support the Caritas Baby Hospital in Bethlehem.

The Christmas givings are vital, covering around one-third of the hospital's budget. It costs around SFr15 million annually to run the facility, which last year treated more than 4,000 children as inpatients and around 30,000 as outpatients.

Patients come from all over the West Bank, where the hospital has built up a reputation for excellent care. The fact that the treatment is available at low, or even no cost, means anyone in need can access its services. Social background and religion are not taken into account.

The story dates back to Christmas Eve 1952 when Swiss priest Ernst Schnydrig, on his way to the Church of the Nativity, then still part of Jordan, witnessed a distraught father burying his child near a Palestinian refugee camp. He resolved that never again should a child be deprived of medical care in the birthplace of Christ. He rented a house, filled it with 14 beds, and the Caritas Baby Hospital was born.

Work to extend the original building and construct a new wing, which began in 2008 and is expected to be completed by 2011, is budgeted to cost around SFr4.5 million.

The Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation has contributed SFr1 million to cover the costs of the new outpatients clinic. International lift company Schindler, which is based in Lucerne, has donated a new elevator.

Although the hospital treats children of all ages, most of the patients are aged under three. Most problems occur in the first year of life, and newborn mortality is high - four times higher than in Switzerland. *swissinfo*