

Warrior now battles for souls

By **Nancy Gier**
Daily Herald Staff Writer

Posted Wednesday, January 17, 2007

The fierce civil strife between Muslims and Christians in Lebanon in the 1970s robbed him of his youth, his innocence, and ultimately his beloved brother.

Hicham Chehab was 13 in 1973, two years before the full-blown outbreak of a bloody conflict that took thousands of lives, when he was given political literature and recruited by Muslim extremists. They told him their duty was to "conquer the infidels."

His brother's death in 1980, his desire to relinquish his hate and forgive, and his subsequent study of the Bible led him to embrace Christianity.

An unusual spiritual journey and unlikely career path has brought him to Trinity Lutheran Church in Roselle, where he works for People of the Book Lutheran Outreach as a missionary to Muslims, and to promote understanding between Christians and Muslims.

He will speak on "Islam and Christianity" at 9:30 a.m. Jan. 28 at St. Mark Lutheran Church in St. Charles.

Long journey

Chehab has experienced the best and worst of Christian-Muslim relations. He and his brother were teenagers when they learned to use rocket launchers, mortars and rifles. In the late 1970s, Chehab was given a long-range rifle and worked as a sniper in the Christian part of Beirut.

As he matured, he began to doubt that his mission was a holy one, or that the fighting was justified. One incident in particular made him reflect on his military role.

"One day as I looked through the scope of my rifle, I could see an old woman running with two children," he said when interviewed at the small space he occupies in Trinity

Lutheran Church. With a slight accent, he speaks calmly about horrors most Americans know only through the media. "I could see the wrinkles on her face. She reminded me of my grandmother. I decided not to follow orders. I didn't shoot."

Chehab went to Muslim leaders with his doubts but was told the violence was justified. Christians and Muslims continued to fight in the streets. He studied the Koran more intently in preparation for a leadership role of his own. He was scheduled to preach at a Friday prayer



Former Muslim Hicham Chehav is now a Christian missionary to the Muslim community, working out of Trinity Lutheran Church in Roselle. He will speak at St. Mark Lutheran Church in St. Charles at the end of January. (Marcelle Bright/Daily Herald)

service when he was severely injured in a car crash that was not related to the war.

Both legs were broken. During his long convalescence, he began learning English through reading comic books and novels by the late Western author Louis L'Amour.

Eventually he was admitted to the American University in Beirut, where instruction is in English.

Seeking revenge, finding forgiveness

He was excited to begin his studies, but during his first semester, his brother was killed by Christian militia while attempting to negotiate a truce.

"I wanted revenge," he recalled. "My brother was only a year-and-a-half older than me. We did everything together."

He displays a photo of himself with his brother, taken in the 1970s, two young men sitting outside, each petting a dog.

"See, if he had a dog, I had to have one. After he was killed, I bought a gun with a silencer and two pistols. I took classes in the daytime. At night I stalked people, hoping to find those responsible for his death," Chehab said.

His thirst for vengeance did not bring him peace or relief from sorrow. But his studies at the university eventually led him to a path of forgiveness. He had a course in comparative religions, and he began reading the Bible as voraciously as he once read the Koran.

"When I was full of hate, I read the Sermon on the Mount," he said. "Christ said to love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you. I felt as though I was hearing the voice of God. I began to think there was another way, that of forgiveness. I stopped stalking people at night."

He began sneaking into Protestant churches in Lebanon, unable to reveal his secret to his family, who claims to be directly descended from the prophet Mohammed.

By 1990, the international community had imposed a cease fire in Lebanon, and Chehab vowed to work for reconciliation. His association with a Western Christian organization brought him to a prayer service in Washington, D.C., in 1999 and he met other leaders.

Ministering to Muslims

When he was offered a job with POBLO, Chehab obtained a work permit and moved to the United States with his wife and four children in 2004.

POBLO is a mission society of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod. "People of the book" is a name Muslims still use in referring to Jews and Christians, referring to Hebrew and Christian Scriptures. The mission of POBLO is to evangelize Muslims and other groups in North America and establish Christian communities within them.

Proselytizing is a touchy subject. Chehab speaks to mixed groups and works with Muslims through faith-based organizations, but he does not speak to Muslim groups.

"We minister to people through a one-on-one basis," he explained, "and I do talk to families."

Chehab says he does not want to force the Gospel onto Muslims, and calls himself a follower of Jesus, rather than a Christian, because of the cultural implications of the word and his memories of bitter fighting.

The Rev. Randall Duncan, pastor of a Lutheran church in Michigan and founder of POBLO,

calls Chehab a “cross-cultural bridge-builder.”

“In our post-9/11 world we need clear communication,” Duncan said. “Hicham understands Islam very well and he also has a heart for people, he loves people. Your anthropology has to be as good as your theology. Our only agenda is to bring the love of Jesus and healing to others. He understands both sides, and he brings a message of reconciliation.”

Others may see it differently.

“He can do what he likes, but there is no compulsion in Islam,” said Abdul Dogar of the Islamic Foundation in Villa Park, when asked to comment on Chehab’s work. “Islam appeals to common sense. There are no dreams or visions. When I explain Islam to someone I ask them if they are satisfied. If they are not fully satisfied, they can go somewhere else. It’s a free society.”

Mazher Ahmed of the Batavia Islamic Center said she could not comment on Chehab’s work and said his beliefs are “between him and God.” Jesus is referred to in the Koran.

“For me, Jesus is the most innocent prophet of God,” she said. “My love for him is always there.”

Present studies

Working with POBLO has given Chehab the opportunity to pursue his dream of becoming a Lutheran pastor. He is taking courses at Concordia University in Fort Wayne, Ind.

There is nothing in his demeanor that indicates he once armed himself for his religion. But making peace with the past remains difficult. He is not certain if he will stay in the U.S., but if he returns to Lebanon, he faces death threats. His wife’s family wants her to divorce him and return to Lebanon.

When asked if he himself was responsible for any deaths as a member of the Muslim militia, Chehab demurs.

“I don’t answer that question,” he said. “I can’t give accurate information. When you’re a sniper, sometimes you know and sometimes you don’t whether you have killed someone.

“Christians can live their values if they can live in peace. Humility and love are very important in achieving peace.”