

THE WOLFF AND THE “MOON”:
THE TESTIMONIES OF LILLI WOLFF AND PETER PLOTKIN

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A title like this could easily give rise to a very different expectation, but there will not be any werewolves or vampires in this presentation—only two Jewish believers from the past, both from distant countries and with very different stories. Both lived in Dallas at different times, but the connections are deeper still. Two artists, two different media—one Master Designer. So, please meet a brother and sister in the Lord—how they came to know Yeshua and how He used their lives. First, let me tell you about the “Wolff”—Lilli Wolff (1896–1983).¹ She was a German Jewish Holocaust survivor who eventually came to Dallas, then to her Messiah, and committed the remainder of her life to telling the local Jewish community about her Redeemer and urging Christians to cultivate a heart for Israel.

Cologne through 1938

Lilli Wolff was born into an Orthodox Jewish home in Cologne, Germany, in 1896.² She says, “It fills me with happiness to recall my family home. Five children joined with our parents in a truly orthodox Jewish life. The love of God was instilled in our hearts as the basic truth.”³ She went to class in a Hebrew school, where future teachers and cantors taught her to read and translate Hebrew prayers. “Joyfully,” she says, “I grew into my Jewish life, and gave my whole heart to it. Each Sabbath was a delight to me, and each one was eagerly anticipated.”⁴

She writes with genuine fondness about her home life, but she tells of a time when she violated the Sabbath by writing a note and ringing a bell, both of which were considered violations of the Sabbath. She says, “I could not get away from this feeling of sin; I could not handle this sense of guilt. I chose, rather, to slide into an emptiness where I could not violate any law.”⁵ Just then, a dark shadow was cast over her sense of guilt and alienation, for the savagery of war disrupted her idyllic existence. In spite of her orthodox childhood, when World War I took her two brothers into danger, the horror of it shook her faith in God and led her away from the religious security of her childhood. She says she became “a so-called ‘modern’ Jew.”⁶

¹Primary sources for this summary of her life are four published autobiographical essays: 1) *And Underneath are the Everlasting Arms, Deuteronomy 33:27* [AUEA]. 2) *Biblical Epochs Visualized* [BEV]. 3) *By His Hand, the Story of Lilli Wolff* [BHH]. 4) *Design: The Story of Jewish Refugee, Lilli Wolff, as told to Alma Elizabeth Morrow* [Design]. There is an extract from yet a fifth personal testimony (title and publication information is not known), which is published on the Yad Vashem website. For more resources, see the bibliography.

²“Lilli Wolff Papers,” Washington, D.C.: United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Archives, 1999.A.0041 [online]; accessed 01 February 2016; available from <http://collections.ushmm.org>.

³BHH, [1].

⁴AUEA, 3.

⁵Ibid., 5

⁶BHH, [1].

So it was that in 1921, at the age of 25, she had abandoned orthodoxy and had begun as an apprentice at “the finest [women’s clothing] store in all Germany with a reputation which drew princesses, duchesses and ladies of the German nobility as their customers.”⁷ Following her apprenticeship, she began her own design studio for the designing and making of fine clothes. A recent author says of that period, “Not only was fashion one of the country’s largest industries throughout the interwar period, but German women ranked among the most elegantly dressed in all of Europe.”⁸ Although Lilli believed in God as Creator and retained a strong moral code, she set religious observance aside. Even as she had given her whole heart to her Jewish life in the past, she now devoted herself to her dress design business and found its success extremely gratifying.

Her business enjoyed a tremendous reputation and eventually employed more than forty women.⁹ During these years, Lilli formed many friendships. In fact, it was Lilli’s close friendships that the Lord used in preserving her life in the midst of Nazi persecution. Her closest friendships were with her business partner, Meta Schmitt; her assistant, Mati Dreissen; and a young stage actress, Dorothy Neff. Having made several dresses and gowns for Dorothy, they formed the beginning of a close and life-long friendship.¹⁰ Here were four very gifted and intelligent young women, and the bonds that formed between them were to be tested beyond what they could have imagined. Years later, Lilli would write, “The friendship I had maintained with three wonderful friends proved to be superlative and unmatched. They took it upon their shoulders and in their hearts to protect me from all harm.”¹¹

The day came when Jewish businesses, including her own, were closed by the Nazis. This was shortly after Kristallnacht in 1938, and although her business was spared destruction, she was forced to leave everything she had worked so hard, for seventeen years, to build. For a brief time, she lived with one of her friends, and it was through this friend that she “was able to secure a job as costume designer in Berlin at the Jewish Theatre.”¹²

Berlin until August 1940

Shortly after her arrival, however, general employment for Jews became impossible.¹³ The tempo of persecution and desperation intensified almost daily. She says of these days: “The time came when I felt that I could no longer stand the pressure of this insane, cruel, and dangerous life. But the question was, ‘How to get out of this cage?’”¹⁴

⁷BEV, [8].

⁸Irene Guenther, *Nazi Chic? Fashioning Women in the Third Reich* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2004), from the cover.

⁹Ibid., [10].

¹⁰“Neff, Dorothea.”

¹¹BEV, [10].

¹²AUEA, 7. See also, Michael Brenner, *The Renaissance of Jewish Culture in Weimar Germany* (New Haven, CT: Princeton University Press, 1998), 193. He indicates this theater had been established in 1930.

¹³BHH, [2].

¹⁴Ibid., [2].

Meanwhile, back in Cologne, Dorothy “reached the apex of her career and was invited to act in Deutsches Volkstheater,”¹⁵ or the German Folk Theater, in Vienna. Lilli writes, “My chance to escape from Berlin came on August 1, 1940, when my friend, Dorothy, invited me to go with her to Vienna, Austria, where I could be hidden.”¹⁶ It was also true that, in Vienna, no one would know her.¹⁷

Vienna until 1947

Dorothy and Lilli arrived in Vienna in September 1940. Lilly says of Dorothy, “She played herself into the hearts of the people of Vienna, and was soon very well known and loved.”¹⁸ Lilli lived in hiding with Dorothy until circumstances dictated that she had no choice but to move to the ghetto. As you might imagine, life in the ghetto was very difficult. She says, “I was put into a house crammed and jammed with 140 Jews which rightly should have accommodated 50.”¹⁹

In October 1941, the Jews of Vienna received deportation orders. She writes, “Suddenly, there came the rumor that the people on our side of the street would be the next to be taken. The head of our household told me it was certain that none would escape this fate and urged me to go back into hiding. It was clear, now, that my staying in the [ghetto] would in no way keep this dreadful blow from falling on those poor innocent victims.”²⁰ “[We were] informed that every Jewish person must be ready to assemble for deportation. Size of valise was ordered, name was to be put on it in white paint. Dorothy helped me pack. It was one of the darkest hours in our life. We both felt something else was involved. Dorothy said, ‘Let’s stop...you are not going. I am going to hide you.’ At this time we decided that I should ‘disappear’—not to be seen by anybody from now on.”²¹ With this, Dorothy signed her own death warrant, should Lilli be discovered.

In Dorothy’s apartment, the women built a false back in a closet, and this became Lilli’s hiding place when visitors came. “They also had to eat their meals one at a time so only one plate would be on the table if someone came to the door.”²² Food was rationed, and the rations were meagre. They were trying to survive on Dorothy’s ration alone. When they became aware of the situation, “Meta and Mati came from Cologne whenever possible to bring food or clothing.”²³ Only true friends would make this trip of about 560 miles—at that time, a twelve-hour trip, each way.

¹⁵“Neff, Dorothea.”

¹⁶*BHH*, [4].

¹⁷*AUEA*, 7.

¹⁸“From the Testimony of Lilli Wolff,” Yad Vashem, The Holocaust Martyrs’ and Heroes’ Remembrance Authority, 2016.

¹⁹*Design*, 5.

²⁰*BHH*, [10].

²¹“From the Testimony of Lilli Wolff,” Yad Vashem, The Holocaust Martyrs’ and Heroes’ Remembrance Authority, 2016. See also, “Neff, Dorothea.”

²²Marissa Hall, “Friends are for Life,” http://www.theshorthorn.com/news/friends-are-for-life/article_064a6a11-bd86-52bb-b102-320dfb73dcd5.html

²³*BHH*, [5].

In Vienna, Dorothy's apartment had extra bedrooms that were unoccupied. About a year after their arrival in Vienna, an order came that there should not be any vacant rooms in houses or apartments. But they could not take in strangers, so "Meta and Mati left everything behind in Cologne and came quickly to live with [them]."²⁴ I wish there were time to tell more of the harrowing experiences during this period. These included having essential surgery by using one of her friend's identity papers. She also narrowly evaded arrest on more than one occasion. "The Nazis never imagined that Dorothy Neff, a celebrated stage actress, would be hiding a Jew."²⁵ Lilli was hidden in Vienna for four years.²⁶ She says, "We just had to fight for life itself, but," she would acknowledge, "my fate was golden in comparison with others who were killed in the ovens."²⁷

Finally, the war was over. She had no difficulty finding work, but Europe had changed. In her words: "It was a world of rubble, hunger, desolation, and ruin."²⁸ For the first year, she "designed costumes for ten plays in different Vienna theaters."²⁹ But the time had come for a fresh start in the New World.

The United States

Promising to prepare the way for her friends to follow later, she made the long voyage to New York. She went first to Rochester, where she found work as an alteration hand at 19 ½ cents per hour, sewing on labels. This only lasted two days.³⁰ She decided she must go to New York City to find work.³¹ Lilli commented dryly, "A newcomer in that great city who can hardly speak English and who has to find employment to make a living is exposed to much hardship."³² No doubt!

Nevertheless, in spite of the obstacles, her efforts were met with success. She tells about applying for a job making costumes for the opera. When "a woman asked me, 'Can you drape?' I had never heard the word: I just said 'yes' hoping to find out what she was expecting. They were so much in need of a draper that she told me to go right up and start working. I was handed a sketch, some muslin, and a dress form, and I surely proved that I knew what the word meant!"³³ Later, through a series of unusual circumstances, she was given the opportunity to make gowns for Miss America. In fact, she made three gowns for Miss America of 1952.³⁴ During this time of successful recovery and establishment in America, she was spiritually in a vacuum.³⁵

²⁴Ibid., [11]. See also, *AUEA*, 7.

²⁵"Neff, Dorothea."

²⁶*AUEA*, 10.

²⁷Ibid.

²⁸*BHH*, [15].

²⁹*BEV*, [10–11].

³⁰*BHH*, [17].

³¹Ibid.

³²*BEV*, [11].

³³*AUEA*, 15.

³⁴Ibid., 17.

³⁵Ibid., 15.

Although her studio in New York was enjoying very encouraging success, she accepted an offer to move to Dallas, Texas. This may not have been the best decision from a business perspective, but, she would later say, “I became convinced that this was God’s plan.”³⁶

Lilli’s home in Dallas was on Swiss Avenue. It is no longer in existence, but was located on what is now a parking lot on the campus of Dallas Theological Seminary.³⁷ One Sunday, she turned on the radio and heard a radio preacher. She was intrigued, so the next Sunday, she tuned in again. This made a dramatic impact on her. She says, “Jesus’ presence with me became almost real. I said aloud, ‘Jesus, can you help me?’ He heard my call.”³⁸ She sat down immediately and wrote a letter to her sister, telling her that she felt that some power was keeping her going, in spite of her lonely and depressing state of mind, and she told her of her new openness to Jesus.³⁹ There was a mailbox one block away, so she walked to the mailbox and mailed the letter. Let’s let Lilli tell the story.

“On that same day, I wrote a letter to my sister, and took it to the letterbox one block away. Turning to go home, I paused at my corner, and then, as if led by an unknown Hand (as indeed I was), I walked one block farther.”⁴⁰ “Some unknown power seemed to take hold of me and almost as though I were in a trance I began to walk and then to run swiftly.”⁴¹ “I did not know that I was stepping into a completely new life. I did not know any details about Jesus or the New Testament. Without any conscious intention to do so, there I stood in front of Gaston Avenue Baptist Church.⁴² This was the date, and this was the place where the Holy Spirit of God had chosen for me to meet Jesus. I could never have escaped His plan for my life.”⁴³

She says, “Once inside, I told someone that I would like to see a priest. This person led me to the office of Gale Dunn, Education Director and Minister of Music.”⁴⁴ It was now 4:00 on that fateful Sunday afternoon. She asked him, “Can you teach me about Jesus?” “He assured me that he would, and invited me to come to the evening service.”⁴⁵ Her resolve was growing, and finally she says, “There was no question in my mind whether I, a Jewish person, should do this.”⁴⁶ That evening, although it was the first time she had ever attended a Christian service,⁴⁷ she says, “I sang hymns together with the others, and knew there was no barrier between Jesus and me anymore. I spoke the Name of Jesus without hesitation, without any feeling of guilt. After the service was over, I went to the front to express my thanks, and suddenly several people were standing around me to pray. I was asked if I would accept Jesus as my Saviour, and I answered, ‘Yes; I believe.’ All this was suddenly in my soul. The Spirit of the Lord overcame me

³⁶BHH, [17].

³⁷Initially, she lived at 4014 Swiss Avenue. Later, she moved to 6002 Winton Street, also in Dallas.

³⁸BHH, [19]. See also, AUEA, 18.

³⁹Ibid., [19]. See also *Design*, 13.

⁴⁰AUEH, 18.

⁴¹*Design*, 13.

⁴²N.B.: This is now the site of Criswell College.

⁴³AUEA, 18.

⁴⁴BHH, [19].

⁴⁵AUEA, 19.

⁴⁶BHH, [19].

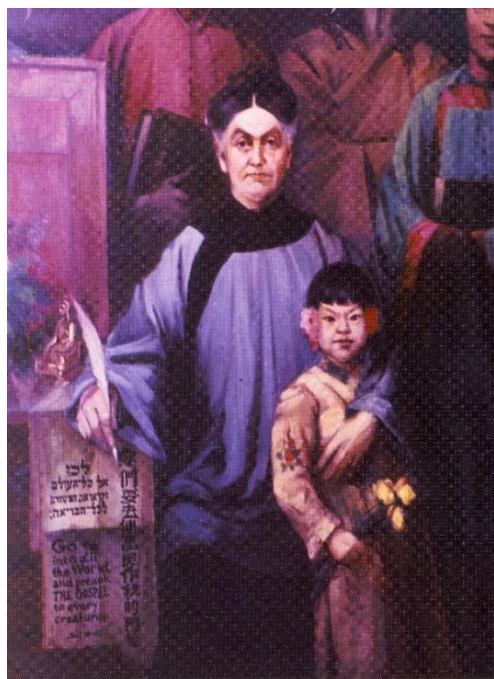
⁴⁷Ibid., [20].

with a flood of spiritual blessings. I found faith in Jesus, this glorious gift from heaven. I was unspeakably happy, and tears of joy and deep emotion ran down my face.”⁴⁸

Later, she would join First Baptist Church, under the direction of Dr. W. A. Criswell, and speak in more than 200 churches, on radio and television, and through her writings.⁴⁹ She continued to design and make elegant gowns and dresses. But Lilli never got over the way the Lord—her Designer—had directed her path. Years later, as she looked back over her life, she said, “His will was that I should first be saved physically and, later, spiritually.”⁵⁰

So, now you’ve met the Wolff—Lilli Wolff—and it’s time that I told you about the “Moon.” The Moon isn’t a heavenly body or a person, but a painting—a painting of Lottie Moon. I came upon it the first time I visited the campus of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky. The canvas is large, perhaps larger than life. Lottie Moon is honored by Southern Baptists as a pioneer missionary in China whose life of commitment has earned her a prominent place in the Baptist “Hall of Fame.” Some have affectionately referred to her as Baptists’ patron saint. As I stood before it, a detail that may have seemed insignificant to most people caught my attention.

With no training as an art critic, I was not drawn to technical aspects of the painting’s execution. If I had I been more acquainted with the history and culture of China, perhaps the



details of the painting would have been of greater interest. The painting conveys her resolve, her love, her cultural adaptation, and her burden for the lost. Yet, there was something else that caught my attention.

On the desk beside Miss Moon is a scroll, bearing the words of Mark 16:15 in three languages. It was not surprising to me that one of them was English – her native tongue and the language of most who would view this painting. Neither was it surprising that this verse was written in Chinese characters. But the third language puzzled me. Rather than Greek, it was written in Hebrew. Why would the artist have included Hebrew in a painting of a missionary to China?

My search for the answer yielded several possible explanations. As a young woman, Lottie Moon had been engaged to Crawford Toy, the well-known Old Testament and Hebrew professor who taught at Southern

⁴⁸AUEA, 19. Everything she has written is consistent with these events happening on a Sunday, except for one reference in *BEV*, [13], where she cites the date as “July 29, 1953.” The problem is that this would have been a Wednesday. It is likely a mistake. The most probable date is July 26, 1953.

⁴⁹She joined First Baptist on September 10, 1961. See also, Bill Kenyon, “She Visualizes the Bible,” *Dallas Morning News*, Saturday, September 18, 1976, 4D and W. A. Criswell, “Pastor’s Pen,” in *First Baptist Reminder*, 54:23 (June 8, 1979): 8.

⁵⁰BHH, [3]. She died on 21 January 1983 and is buried in Dallas, at Sparkman-Hillcrest Funeral Home, Mausoleum Garden, Lot 308, space 3.

Baptist Theological Seminary from 1869–79. Initially, it was suggested the inclusion of the Hebrew might have been related to this former attraction. But the engagement was broken off, and the exact nature of the relationship between Lottie Moon and Crawford Toy remains somewhat ambiguous. In any case, Crawford Toy had become ancient history by the time Lottie was immersed in her life's work. She was 72-years-old when she died in December of 1912, and the painting portrays her in her maturity. Pastor Li, who is shown in the painting, had not come to faith until 1890. So, the relationship with Crawford Toy completely fails to explain the Hebrew in the painting.

Someone else suggested that Lottie may have had a special love for the Hebrew language. As a student, Lottie was gifted in languages and, in addition to several European languages, studied both Hebrew and Greek at Albemarle Female Institute. Still, she apparently was more at home with Greek than Hebrew. This suggestion appears to be nothing more than an unsubstantiated conjecture.

Lottie Moon's uncle, James Barclay, was the first missionary to Jerusalem from the Disciples of Christ denomination. He developed an interest in archaeology and wrote a book about Jerusalem entitled, *The City of the Great King*.⁵¹ He identified some of the stones that make up the "Western Wall" of Herod's Temple as a portion of an ancient gate into the Temple complex, known to this day as "Barclay's Gate." It could be claimed that Lottie held a sentimental attachment to the Jewish people because of her uncle's work in Israel. Unfortunately, there is little or no evidence to support this claim, and, again, this seems an insufficient reason.

An elderly saint, who had been a close friend and prayer partner of a retired missionary to China claimed that it was because the Bible was translated into Chinese by a Jewish believer. As a matter of fact, Joseph Schereschewsky, a great missionary scholar and Jewish believer, had indeed translated the Bible into Chinese in 1873, the same year Lottie went to China. Though this claim was intriguing, it lacked sufficient justification as an explanation.

Catherine Allen, one of Lottie Moon's biographers, and Betsy Lowery, the archivist at the Women's Missionary Union in Birmingham, Alabama solved the mystery for me. They told me not about the man *in* the moon, but about the man *behind* the "Moon." The artist who painted the portrait was a man named Peter Plotkin, a Jewish man from Russia who had become a believer in Yeshua, and they reported that the painting was dedicated in 1930.

Plotkin had been born into a Jewish home in Petrograd, Russia in 1879. As a seven-year-old child, his parents, a sister, and all of his relatives were killed in 1886, in the anti-Semitic pogroms common to Russia at that time. He was adopted by an aristocratic Jewish family that had access to nobility and afforded him opportunities to study in the best schools. A close friend of his adoptive family was Leo Tolstoy, and young Peter's initial interest was in literature. Soon, however, he developed a love for painting for which he demonstrated a natural talent. In 1903, at the age of 24, he earned his Ph.D. in art at the University of Petrograd and taught in Russia and in Europe prior to the Russian revolution.

⁵¹James Barclay, *The City of the Great King; or Jerusalem As It Was, As It Is, and As It Is To Be* (Philadelphia, PA: C. Desilver, 1859).

With the Bolshevik Revolution that centered in Petrograd in March 1917, however, he fled to the United States, where he became a proud citizen in 1923. In New York City, he met a wealthy physician, who was building a large home in McKinney, Texas (near Dallas). This physician, impressed by the somewhat young, yet very distinguished artist, asked Plotkin to paint murals on the ceilings of his new home. Following his move to Dallas, Plotkin met and married Maria, a Russian Jewish woman. Peter and Masha, as she was called, had three sons.⁵² Shortly after their marriage, while still working on the doctor's ceilings, he traveled to Pittsburg to complete a less complex assignment for another client. While there, he was drawn to a storefront mission to the Jewish people and came to faith in Jesus as his Messiah and Savior.

In 1929, the family moved to Abilene, Texas, where Dr. Plotkin was to head the new art department at Simmons College (now Hardin-Simmons University). Rev. Albert T. Douglass, who lived across the street from Simmons College, commissioned this distinguished Messianic Jewish artist to paint a memorial portrait of Lottie Moon in such a way as to “challenge every Southern Baptist to renewed and more consistent consecration to Christ.”⁵³ Douglas invited Mrs. Jewell Herrin (later, Mrs. Jewell Daniel),⁵⁴ who had recently returned from missionary service to China, to work with the artist in the planning and research for the painting. During this time, work on the painting consumed the thoughts of all involved. There was, however, something of eternal consequence that transpired as work progressed, for Plotkin's wife accepted Yeshua as her Messiah and Redeemer at the urging of Rev. and Mrs. Douglass. Later, he would teach at the University of Texas, and he moved to Pasadena, California in 1932, when he was 52. He died on January 1, 1960, and his sons have established a gallery in Los Angeles for his art.⁵⁵

In light of this background, it has been suggested that the reason Hebrew was chosen over Greek was that Plotkin did not know Greek, though he knew Hebrew well. However, it should be pointed out that Plotkin did not know Chinese either! Furthermore, great effort was expended to insure accuracy in the details of the painting. Surely all involved knew that the original language of the New Testament was Greek. Still, I was left with my question.

The answer I sought came from Plotkin, himself. While working on the painting, Plotkin wrote, “When the picture is finished will you tell them that it was painted by an old Jew who went in the wrong road 46 years but found Jesus at last; and that He loves His people?”⁵⁶ It appears the artist was primarily motivated by a love for his Lord and for the Jewish people. Plotkin's own son revealed that Romans 1:16 was in fact one of his father's favorite verses. Based upon this verse, Plotkin realized that in the New Testament, there are only two kinds of missions—not home and foreign, but Jewish missions and gentile missions.

⁵²Based on a personal interview with his oldest son, Peter Plotkin, Jr., January 11, 1999.

⁵³Jewell Daniel, “Painting and Presentation of the Lottie Moon Memorial Picture,” the WMU archives

⁵⁴Jewell Daniel (1884–1991) graduated from Baylor University in 1907 and served as a missionary in Leiyang, Shantung Province, China from 1909 to 1926. See Craig Clarkson, “Multi-Faceted: Jewell Leggett Daniel's Formation for Mission at Baylor University” (paper presented at the conference, “Christian Life and Witness: From the Academy to the Church,” Georgetown College, Georgetown, KY, 24 January 2012).

⁵⁵See his entry in Edan Milton Hughes, *Artists in California, 1786–1940* (San Francisco, CA: Hughes Publishing Company, 1986). The Peter and Masha Plotkin Memorial Foundation supports the gallery. For more information on the gallery, located in Los Angeles, CA, see <http://www.peterplotkinartist.com/>.

⁵⁶Daniel, “Painting and Presentation,” 3.

The artist was not alone in his burden for Jewish evangelism. Jewell Daniel went to China at the invitation of Lottie Moon and counted herself a close friend. She had been forced from China by the Communist threat in 1926, but determined to continue with missionary work at home. She said, “The verse that says, ‘Tell it to the Jew first’ kept going through my mind. Then the Lord said that He wanted me to take up Jewish work.”⁵⁷ She devoted herself to Jewish ministry in Dallas from 1930 until near the end of her life in 1991, at the age of 106.

The likeliest basis for our answer seems to be Romans 1:16. The painting of Lottie Moon was intended to stir an interest in missions. The English and Chinese represent the gentile world, while the Hebrew reminds us of the concern every believer should have for the salvation of the Jewish people. Notice that the Hebrew in the scroll appears in the upper left-hand position, the primary position. Through his painting, Peter Plotkin is still proclaiming that the gospel should be carried to the ends of the earth, but to the Jew first.

Two Jewish believers—Lilli Wolff and Peter Plotkin—who never knew one another, serve as reminders to us of the importance of faithfulness. Lilli Wolff reminds us of God’s faithfulness to preserve a remnant of the Jewish people from those who try to destroy them, and among that remnant, to preserve a believing remnant. She bears testimony to God’s faithfulness. What of Peter Plotkin? Through his painting, he is still reminding believers today of our need to be faithful to take the Good News of salvation “to the Jew first” (Rom 1:16). So, remember “the Wolff and the ‘Moon’”!

⁵⁷Mary Calvert, “Days with Lottie Moon Still Vivid for Jewell Daniel, 100,” *Baptist Standard*, 22 August 1984, 12.

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Peter Plotkin

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