

THE MUSLIM COMMUNITY OF PITTSBURGH

by Laurence Glasco

IT WAS A sunny Friday morning when I asked myself, why not include the Muslims of Pittsburgh in this special issue? After all, one of their mosques, the Islamic Center of Pittsburgh, is located on Bigelow Boulevard just down the street from my house. I had never been inside, but I had seen worshippers coming to Friday prayers and had noticed the variety of “colors” among them — white, brown and black. So, at noon I sauntered down and, somewhat apprehensively, entered by the back door.

My apprehension stemmed from a worry that non-believers might not be welcome, or that I might unknowingly make some faux pas like not removing my shoes. Moreover, I probably shared subconsciously the impression that Muslims are not particularly friendly toward Westerners. Such concerns, fed largely by the media, were quickly dispelled. No one was around, so I went downstairs, where I explained my mission to a black woman tending children. With a welcoming smile, she took me upstairs to meet her husband, Abdul Rabb. Abdul is a stocky African-American with a beard, a twinkle in his eye and a quick, earnest wit. He welcomed me and made me feel comfortable, just as he greeted others who entered — of all colors and nationalities — with “*As-Salaam Alaikum* (Peace Be Upon You), brother.”

A handsome Egyptian lad named Ali quietly took me under his wing. We removed our shoes and entered the large open place of worship. Before we sat to talk, Ali explained that he first must pray, and went down on his knees and touched his head to the carpeted floor. Ali, whose parents were physicians at Allegheny Hospital, spoke good English, although he was only 16 years old and had been in the United States for only a few months. Ali quietly asked me if I wanted to become a Muslim. When I demurred, he explained I needed to think about the future, about eternity, about hell and paradise. He explained, but did not press the point, that Islam is a universal religion, and Muslims should try to convert others, not through force but through friendliness, a smile, and quiet explanation.

Ali said that if I wanted to worship with them, I would be welcome. He showed me how to prepare for worship by performing “Wudu” — an ablution involving a thorough washing (three times) of hands, arms, face, feet, hair, and even mouths. Afterwards I certainly felt clean! The “khutbah,” or sermon, was given by Imam Hamud A. al-Silwi, director of the center. It reminded me of sermons I had heard in my own church. A short, very pleasant Ph.D. from Yemen, Dr. al-Silwi focused on Judgment Day, on the need to lead a holy life, to treat others with care and

respect, to be kind and loving, to persevere despite persecution — as is happening in Bosnia and Chechnya. We sat on the floor, perhaps 200 of us, all men. Noticing the number of beepers on peoples’ hips, I figured a lot were physicians; indeed, occasionally a beeper would go off during the lecture. I was told that women stayed in the back or in the basement with the children, and that this did not signify disrespect for women, but that it was customary for men and women to worship separately at mosques. After the service, a student from Carnegie Mellon University came up to say how much he appreciated someone coming to learn about Islam first-hand in order to do a fair article about Muslims.

With its wide range of colors, races and nationalities, the



The interracial and international aspect of Islam attracts Abdul Rabb to his faith, along with its emphasis on family values and cleanliness of mind, body, and spirit.

to Christianity and Judaism, religions of “The People of the Book.”

I did some library research and learned that Islam first appeared in Pittsburgh in the 1930s, affiliated originally with African-Americans and the Moorish Science Temple. In the mid-1930s an Indian Muslim, Dr. Yusef Kahn, came to Pittsburgh and introduced more traditional Muslim rituals into the services. This

Islamic Center seems like an adjunct to the United Nations. Abdul Mawjoud, president of the Pittsburgh Islamic Information Center, explained that Muslims here indeed represent a model community of diversity. Islam, he said, stresses tolerance of other people and religions. The basis for this is the concept of “Oneness.” The principal Oneness is that of God, from which flow other kinds of Oneness. These include the Oneness of Humanity, which means that all persons are worthy and equal children of God, and Oneness of Message, which means that the teachings of Christianity and Judaism, as well as other faiths, are worthy of respect. Indeed, Muslims are to give special respect

led to a split in 1935, and the establishment in that year of the first mosque. Mission work among African-Americans in Homestead, Braddock, Swissvale, Duquesne, and East Pittsburgh increased the Muslim membership, and in 1945 the mosque, located on Wylie Avenue in the Hill, received a charter, making it the first in the U.S. to be chartered by indigenous Americans. [See Jameela A. Hakim, "History of the First Muslim Mosque of Pittsburgh, Pa.," in Michael A. Koszegi and J. Gordon Melton, eds., *Islam in North America: A Source Book* (New York: Garland Publishers, 1992)]

Today there are eight Muslim mosques in Pittsburgh servicing between 5,000 and 8,000 adherents. Four are located in predominantly African-American neighborhoods, and draw their congregations from that community — the first mosque in the Hill District, plus two mosques in Homewood, and one in Wilksburg. Similarly, a mosque in Monroeville has a predominantly East Asian membership, principally Indians and Pakistanis who live and work in that suburban area.

The mosque in Oakland, known as the Pittsburgh Islamic Center, has the most varied membership. In two brief visits I met members from Bosnia, Turkey, Egypt, Yemen, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, India, Malaysia, and Indonesia. In addition I saw, but happened not to interview, several worshippers who appeared to be from sub-Saharan Africa. Abdul said the Oakland mosque tries to be a place where non-Muslims can come to learn about Islam. This is important, he stated, because there are many misconceptions about Muslims — that they are mainly or exclusively Arabs, fundamentalists, and sponsors of terrorism, for instance. Abdul explained that the Islamic Center had its origins in the mid-1970s when students and professionals in Pittsburgh sought a place where they could meet and worship. Many were members of the Islamic Movement at a time when a number of Arab governments were, ironically, repressing Islamic religious expression in their own countries. The Muslim Student Association became one of the principal off-shoots of the movement, and is today known as the Islamic Society of North America, an umbrella organization of several student and professional Muslim organizations. Muslim students here first met in the Student Union at the University of Pittsburgh and in various classrooms at the university. Next they rented an apartment on Atwood Street, and in 1979 purchased a house on Forbes Avenue in Oakland. As the community grew, it felt the need for larger quarters. In the mid-1980s Muslims living in Monroeville sought a more convenient place to worship and built the Muslim Community Center of Greater Pittsburgh. Then in 1992, the Islamic Center (called "Masjid Darussalam" or "House of Peace") bought a building on Bigelow Boulevard formerly owned by the Jehovah Witnesses. In this building they have ample space for religious services, as well as for the performance of marriage ceremonies, an elementary school, and other religious and community activities.

RELIGIOUS AND COMMUNITY ACCEPTANCE BY PITTSBURGHERS

Somewhat to my surprise, the people I spoke with all said they had found Americans, and the Pittsburgh community, accepting and understanding of them and their religion. Ali

(the young Egyptian) said an American physician at Allegheny Hospital told him it might be good if more Americans were Muslim, because then the women would be more modest and the men would not drink. Two students from Pitt said one example of religious understanding and tolerance was the existence of a small prayer niche in one of the libraries at the university. A young Indian Muslim who grew up in Mt. Lebanon reported he had suffered no discrimination in high school, except briefly during the Gulf War. A student at Carnegie Mellon reported that, as a Muslim he cannot drink nor attend functions where drinking takes place, but the students are understanding, and even respectful of his decision. Another, Erma, finds Pittsburghers very understanding of her religion and tolerant of her taboos against eating pork and drinking alcohol. Basically she finds young Americans not particularly concerned about one's religion; so long as you don't infringe on their own beliefs or practices they are very tolerant, sometimes indifferent. She has never experienced discrimination on account of being Muslim, but thinks this is partly because she is not Arabic, and that Americans often confuse being a "genuine" Muslim with being an Arab.

However, I suspect the Muslims do feel some lack of confidence here in Pittsburgh. A student from Carnegie Mellon, born of American and English parents who converted to Islam while living in Saudi Arabia, requested that his name not be used in this essay. I saw an old friend at Friday service — an African-American employee at the University of Pittsburgh — who seemed nervous when I approached him and who declined to be interviewed. This is why Abdul Mawjoud expressed great satisfaction that Muslims were being included in this issue of *Pittsburgh History* because Muslims here very much want to become an active part of the city's ethnic mosaic.

VOICES OF MUSLIMS

Abdul Mawjoud is a lecturer in English Literature at Assiut University in Egypt and is President of the Pittsburgh Islamic Information Center. The Information Center is dedicated to promoting tolerance and understanding between Pittsburgh Muslims and the larger Pittsburgh community. Abdul is married and the father of four children. He stresses the community aspects of Islam: "Islam is not just a religion, but a way of life. When you become a Muslim you become a member of a community. Islam is not private; you have responsibilities to the community, and the community has responsibilities to you." I asked him about racial feelings and racial identity among Muslims. He said he did not think such matters were as important as he has discovered them to be in America. For example, when he taught English literature in Egypt, he had the class analyze Shakespeare's *Othello*, but never thought to mention the main character's color or race. When he came to the University of Pittsburgh and took a course on Shakespeare, the instructor's first question to the class was about *Othello*'s race. Abdul thinks the experience symbolizes the different approaches to race and color in the Islamic world and the West, particularly in the United States. Abdul says he has become much more race and color conscious because they are such issues in America. But he feels this is not proper: Muslims are instructed

to look at people of all races and colors as equal, and that their worth depends on their behavior.

Abdul Rabb is a steam-fitter from McKeesport and, along with his wife and two sons, a dedicated Muslim. Abdul came to “mainstream,” or Sunni, Islam via the Nation of Islam, popularly known as the Black Muslims. Abdul remembers when the Nation of Islam was led by Elijah Muhammad and its most acclaimed spokesman, Malcolm X, preached a strong message condemning “white devils.” In 1975, Elijah Muhammad’s son took over the organization and led it into the path of mainstream Islam and away from racialism. It is precisely this interracial and international aspect of Islam that attracts Abdul. He talks enthusiastically of the opportunity to meet and worship with people of different races, nationalities, colors, and walks of life. “You see and feel the warmth here,” he says. Abdul himself radiates warmth, humor and joviality. He says the *Koran* explains that God made us into tribes and nations not to despise each other but to come to know and respect each other. This, plus the conservative morality of Islam — its emphasis on family values, on correct behavior, on cleanliness of mind and body and spirit — also make Islam

attractive to Abdul.

Ermawati Erman is a senior in biology at Chatham College. She is known as “Erma” among her friends. Erma lived in the U.S. between the ages of 7 and 14, when her father was a student, and then she returned to attend college. Erma agrees that Islam has created a community in Pittsburgh, and that being a Muslim makes her automatically a part of it. One example is that here she is called “sister” by other Muslims, something which is not done in her native Indonesia. Most of her friends here are what she calls “internationals” — foreign students and Americans who have traveled abroad. Erma mentioned that she had attended services at the Islamic Center only once or twice, and this triggered me to ask about why I saw so few women at the center. She explained that Muslims are expected to pray five times daily. Men are expected to perform their Friday prayers at the mosque, but there is no such expectation for women, although they may do so if they wish. Erma makes it a point to attend public prayers following the fasting season known as Ramadan, when special foods are prepared and families and friends gather to socialize. Typically she attends those which are organized by the Indonesian Association of Pittsburgh. ❁

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Bouquet Street. As an engineer, I somewhat doubt that the ball could have landed there. It would have had to have been wickedly sliced down the right field line and ricocheted off an obstruction on the roof of the stadium to have been deflected toward the house. It is possible, but unlikely. No accounts of the game refer to the drive being sliced down the line.

I, too, have heard that some youths retrieved the ball. One of them is said to have given it to the Major League Baseball Hall of Fame. A friend of mine contacted the Hall of Fame and was told that someone from Pittsburgh had donated the ball. I do not know the year.

I know you don’t get many letters, but I am sure there are many like me who enjoy each issue of *Pittsburgh History* immensely. ❁

Dan Bonk
Coraopolis, Pa.

[Mr. Bonk, who wrote “Baseball Figures: The Story of Forbes Field” (Summer 1993), has written an historical introduction for a do-it-yourself paper model of the park by Len Martin, called *Forbes Field, Build-It-Yourself*. It is available nationally in bookstores.]

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