

THREE WEEKS IN ISRAEL 15 YEARS AGO

Once in a while nostalgia overcomes me and I start going through the old files and closets in search of memories. This time I wanted to write about an old friend I first met about 25 years ago when a small group of us gathered in front of the Israeli consulate to protest yet another terrorist outrage that had happened that week in Israel. We weren't many – most of them familiar faces that I could always count on – and I am embarrassed to say that I no longer even have a recollection of what exactly it was that we were protesting; there were so many outrages over the decades. But I remember that a tall, handsome man took the mike and spoke passionately about his love for Jerusalem and the land that the Lord had bequeathed to the people of Israel. Someone told me he was a Christian pastor who published a pro-Israel newsletter and I introduced myself. His name was Frank Eiklor. In the years to come we became good friends. I spoke a few times on his radio and TV programs, had dinner at his home, was impressed by his love for Israel and the Jews, and appreciated that his seemed to be the only program that featured stories about Jonathan Pollard and the injustice that was done to him.

We didn't see each other all that often – he traveled all over the world speaking on Israel and Zionism to Christian audiences. He had gone to Africa, South America, all over Europe and, of course, Israel. Then he moved to another part of California, we lost track of one another, and finally met again just a few months ago when he was invited by the Israel Christian Nexus to speak at a Los Angeles temple, and explain to a Jewish audience what motivated Christian Zionists.

Frank hadn't changed much. He is still ramrod straight – just like he was decades ago when, as a young Marine, he fought in World War II, still the same twinkle in his eye, a few grey hairs in his moustache, but the same enthusiasm, same dedication to Israel.

As I listened to him I remembered an episode in my life. In 1993, I had spent two weeks in Israel, working as a volunteer in an army camp. On the day we were to fly home, the colonel commanding the base came to say good bye to the foreign volunteers and thank us for helping out. He asked if any of us were from California. A few hands went up. "Does anybody know a pastor from California, Frank Eiklor?" he said.

"I know Frank," I said. "He is a friend of mine."

A smile lit up the colonel's face. "You are a friend of Frank's? A great man, a good man. Tell him I said hello, will you?"

He told us that during the war, in 1982, when few tourists were coming to Israel, Frank had brought a planeload of Christian tourists to work on army bases while the soldiers were off fighting. Since then he came every year bringing dozens of people to help.

"A good man, a good man," he repeated. "I wish there were many Jews like him."

And now, 15 years later, thinking of Frank Eiklor I realized that I had written about my two weeks on an Israeli army base in 1993, but that it was way too long – I try to keep my columns at about 800 words or so; I was told by an expert that today's readers don't have the patience to read anything longer than that – so I put the project aside and never got to it.

I dug out my old photos and notes I had written so long ago – I didn't have a beard then, just a moustache that was long enough to twirl, I was about 20 lbs lighter and in much better shape, and in the camp I heard a rumor that some of the other volunteers thought that I had been a commando or in the special forces in the U.S. I ignored the rumor but I didn't deny it either – some of the cute Israeli girl soldiers appeared impressed by the mystery about me and the fact that I took a cold shower every morning. (I did, but there was no mystery about that: there was no hot water.)

Anyway, I rewrote what I hadn't written long ago and here it is. I enjoyed my two weeks in Israel for reasons that still aren't quite clear – the food was lousy, the conditions were primitive, the work was boring and depressing, and the best breakfast we had was when I managed to buy some instant oatmeal in a Tel Aviv market, used a *chainik* of hot water I sneaked from the kitchen and shared a hot breakfast with all the guys in my barrack. But I was never sorry and will share my memories with you in my next column.