

Conflicted Faith – by Lorelei Pepe

I graduated from the Fashion Institute of Technology when I was only 19. At that time, it was a 2 year college in New York City. I had worked very hard taking over 18 credits a semester and attending summer school to get my degree and a much wanted career in fashion. I sacrificed a lot, but knew I wanted to design clothes since I was 8 years old.

But it was not long after pounding the pavement of NYC that I became discouraged looking for my “dream” job. I thought I had a great portfolio which I had to turn over to prospective employers when applying for a position and then being turned down. Soon after I realized not to let it out of my sight as it was common in the industry to “knock off” designs from one another. These businessmen were all pretty much a bunch of “sharks” and since it was male-dominated, they easily took advantage of young female designers. One of them told me I would have to grow a “thick skin” to survive in the business. Being raised with morals and ethics, this was a conflict of interest for me. I bounced around in the business losing many jobs and even did textile design but was not happy internally. I felt like I was in competition all the time and had to do things against my faith.

I remember going to church on Sunday and worshipping God and then on Monday back to this crazy world. I felt so compromised and that I was betraying who I really was. I felt like I was a failure.

Then one Sunday at church our pastor announced a speaker, a woman called “Hansi” was going to speak in a Presbyterian Church in Manhattan. She was visiting from another country and had a limited engagement in this church for one night only. My mom and her friends decided to attend and I knew immediately in my heart I needed to go. So, I made up an excuse at work to leave early and caught the bus to go downtown. I met up with my mom there and ran into the church “breathless”, hoping I was in time for the lecture. As my mom and I were hanging up our winter coats we passed by a small room with an open door. Sitting in a chair was a woman with her head bowed down and she looked like she was praying. Suddenly she picked up her head and smiled at me. She had a serene, peaceful glow about her that was unexplainable. I was drawn to her like a magnet and started walking towards her. She actually motioned with her hand to come in. I said are you “Hansi?” and she smiled and said “yes” and extended her hand to mine. When she touched mine, I could feel the electricity and sense of peace flowing through her body. I apologized for disturbing her, but she said she was finished praying before the lecture. So, I quickly thanked her, and mom and I went to find seats.

I was mesmerized by her and hung on to every word of her lecture. She explained about her childhood in Czechoslovakia where she grew up and became a follower of Hitler and was brainwashed in the Nazi Ideology as she had won a scholarship to a Nazi school and thought it was a great honor. Her mother, a Christian, was torn about letting her go but knew she would have wonderful benefits and advantages to get ahead. Her mother did tell her never to forget Jesus, as she tearfully said good-bye to her.

But in 1940, young innocent Hansi began a journey where she turned her back on God and Hitler became her mentor and she was devoted to him. In her book, “The Girl who Loved the Swastika” – Maria Anne Hirschmann, known as Hansi, describes her awakening and realization how wrong she was after Hitler committed suicide. Then she started to explore and think for herself. She told many fascinating stories of betrayal and romance and also how her fear of Americans went away after being educated. She grew to love them and felt led to go to America where she could be “free” and worship whom she pleased. She felt convicted to serve Jesus Christ and teach the gospel. In 1974 she founded a Christian ministry which continues today.

After the lecture, I was filled with such emotion I could not speak. Going home with my mom I was silent in the car. When we got home I went into my room and just cried and cried. Hansi touched my soul and spirit that night as I felt different. It was then clear what I had to do about my job. I knew my life had to change!

I called in sick to work the next day and went to see my pastor. I explained my crisis I was going through at my job. I also said that Hansi touched my soul and felt like the Holy Spirit was talking to me. He listened silently, nodded his head and then just said one word to me – “pray” for guidance. I went home and did and I knew what I had to do.

The next day I quit my job against my parents’ wishes. I spent time alone soul searching and taking walks and talking to God. I needed Him back in my life full time and had to restore my relationship with Him. I did do a lot of praying, meditating, writing and spending time alone.

Well, I finally got another job in the industry which was alot less stressful and I went into textile design. I was happier and knew I could be “me” during the week and on Sunday too! I truly believe God spoke to me that night through Hansi. He touched me so deeply I had to listen. I learned my lesson that night to listen and trust Him and not myself and not to compromise my values.

And whenever a difficult situation arises, I think back to that night how He rescued me. And He keeps doing it. It is a good reminder. He is always there for ME!

“I call on you, my God, for you will answer me; turn your ear to me and hear my prayer”. – Psalm 17:6