

Rabbi Remembers the Retarded

By PHYLLIS POSY Special to the Jewish Chronicle

All Jewish kids are smart. Right? No, sadly wrong.

There are 174 Jews, most of them children, within just an hour's drive, who are mentally retarded, institutionalized, deserted, and forgotten by relatives and community alike. Few besides the overworked and often harsh personnel at the institution where they live care for them.

Many Jewish mothers can't cope with a retarded child. They feel ashamed; they are afraid of violence -- social stigma, maybe -- of frustration. So they put the child away and they conveniently forget.

Recently media and lawmakers have been focusing community attention on the deplorable conditions at some of the private homes for the mentally retarded: suspicious deaths; inadequate, unsafe facilities; and harsh or minimal treatment. But the Jewish community has yet to discover the poor Jewish children in the state hospitals in this area, languishing for love and Jewishness.

Rabbi Leib Heber gives them both, and sandwiches besides. Last fall, Rabbi Heber left his part time pulpit in Elwood City and came to Pittsburgh to be the full time chaplain for Jewish patients in seven state institutions for the mentally retarded.

He serves 17 in Ebensburg, (700 patients total); nine in Cresson, (of 600); 97 in Polk, (of 1,900); 11 in Torrance, (of 1,700); 13 in Warren, (of 2,800); 12 in Dixmont, (of 500); and 21 in Western State School and Hospital, (of 900).

Rabbi Heber takes bread, condiments and salami and wraps as many sandwiches as patients he'll counsel the next day.

"All human beings need reinforcement and rewards," Rabbi Heber says, explaining his sandwich strategy. "Most people consider their own particular brand of heaven their reward, or resulting good their reinforcement.

"But these kids and adults can't understand that. They need a reward now -- a tangible reinforcement just to go on living. So I bring them sandwiches. I sit and eat with them. It's their reward for letting me try to get through to them."

Rabbi Heber says the sandwiches work. "I always tease the priest," he confided jokingly. "He brings a Bible or a rosary, and I bring my bag of sandwiches. We'll see who gets more souls."

The institutions' administrators welcome Rabbi Heber, who has done wonders with the patients. At Western State, he's teaching several to read Hebrew. At Polk, all 52 mobile patients attend religious services regularly.

But sometimes he's resented by ward orderlies, whose prejudices, Rabbi Heber says, eventually show through. "Patients call me one of six things," he explains. "Rabbi, Clergy, Chaplain, sandwich man, Jew or dirty Jew. It mirrors what they hear



SEDER with mentally retarded is the main event of the year.

from the staff...and all too often it reflects how they are treated as well."

Mrs. Heber used to be in charge of the sandwich detail, as well as baking, cooking and arranging for the major event -- a seder -- each year. No shortcuts -- the works, from marror to charoses, gefilte fish to kanaydilach, chicken to tzimis, and on and on.

The hospital administration would contribute everything it could to the seder -- white tablecloths bedecked with flowers, fresh salads, trays of hard-boiled eggs and saltwater. But Mrs. Heber would do the rest of the preparations (as well as pack packages for each patient so each had three pesach meals a day).

The Hebers financed the seders and food distribution partly through the congregation sisterhood. The remainder came from the Heber pocket.

This year it will be much harder to give every patient a seder and supply each with food for Pesach, Rabbi Heber admits. His wife broke her hip last fall, so he doesn't know who will cook now that she is bedridden.

He doesn't know who will finance the seders -- now that there are 174 patients to look after. (He only had two hospitals last year compared to seven now). And he no longer has a congregation to turn to for help.

"I'm not the sort of guy who can go be a shnorrer," Rabbi Heber says. "O.K., if no one volunteers to help, I'll get it done some way. So I make a little less money. It's a mitzvah I can't pass up."

Rabbi Heber will welcome adult and young volunteers to cook, arrange and help give the Jewish retarded in the area a meaningful Pesah. Call him at 421-1757.)

Slain Merchant

No Israeli Agent

JERUSALEM, (JTA)--A Foreign Ministry official said that Simha Glitzer, the Israeli leather merchant murdered in Cyprus by a Jordanian student, was a private businessman and was not connected with the Israeli intelligence service or with any other government department.

The statement was made in response to questions following a claim by the Black September terrorist organization that it was responsible for Glitzer's murder because he was an Israeli agent

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