The Homeless Jew

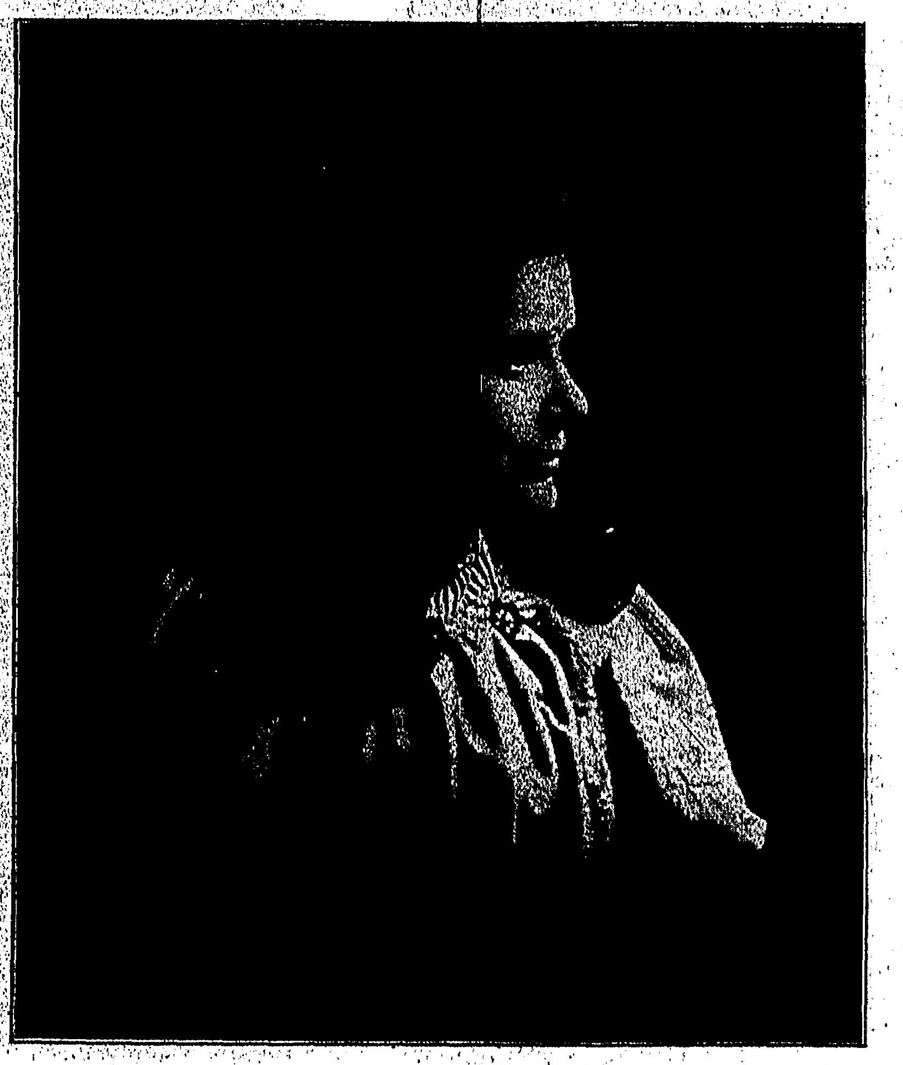
By MRS. H. B. FERGUSON
Secretary Pittsburg House of Shelter

The question of what Pittsburg has done and is doing for the Homeless Jew, on which topic you assigned me to write, has been one of gradual evolution, commencing with hospitality extended the stranger in private homes by the residents of our community, and gradually leading to the formation of an institution which deals with this phase of charitable endeavor.

Among the Jewish people, from time immemorial, the matter of extending hospitality to the stranger has been a custom handed down to us by tradition, and its functions have been carried on to the present day. About twenty years ago, when it first became necessary in Pittsburg to deal with this question, every family residing on the Hill who had any self-pride and wanted to be considered a "respectable" element of the community, had to volunteer his own home for that purpose. All applicants naturally drifted to the Orthodox congregation, and we were sent in regular routine to the homes of the respective volunteers to take out their three days which were assigned them. The applicant was not handed his meals by the servant in the kitchen, but sat with the family at their own table, and the same spirit of hospitality was extended whether the transient was to the personal liking of the family or not. His personality made no difference whatever; it was due him and it was a debt that had to be paid.

Gradually as the city developed and grew, rooms were rented where the strangers could sleep and the people were assigned out only for their meals. This custom existed for years in the community. Then numerous ineffectual attempts were made to rent a house, install a janitor, and run an institution, but the efforts were not crowned with success, for the reason that there was not enough money and organization to hire a suitable janitor and run an institution. Finally, about seven years ago, this perplexing problem was turned over to the women of the Hill district for solution. It was deemed in the sphere of woman's work—particularly since they had demonstrated their success in running another charitable organization—and finally they decided to see what could be done in the way of housing and feeding the stranger in a Home conducted for that purpose.

When I recall the first few months I marvel at the patience and endurance exhibited by us, and we really had to argue with our friends to attempt to convince them that we were perfectly sane and mentally well balanced for dreaming of putting into execution an idea so visionary. But we dreamed dreams and saw visions, and went ahead and worked. When the people realized that we were serious in our aims, and that the movement would "hold together," they ceased laughing and commenced to have a little confidence, which they demonstrated in a very practical way. We then took a few rooms on Our alley, that were connected with a "chedar" conducted in the same house, and a private residence, for which we had to pay the exhorbitant price of $20 a month rent. We managed to get enough money together to pay the rent, and felt we were accomplishing a great deal. From there we moved to Chestnut street, where we rented a five-room frame house, located on a high elevation, which seemed admirably adapted for our purpose. There we installed a janitor and his wife, and commenced to serve meals to our inmates, paying the couple for each meal provided. Soon this became impracticable, owing to the labor and annoyance of distributing the meal tickets, etc., etc., and we abandoned this plan, and commenced to set up housekeeping on our own account. From there we moved to Stevenson street, where we rented another small house, paying $25.00 a month rent, and by that time the movement was fairly well established. In October, 1906, the present quarters of the Home, located at 1625 Locust street, were purchased. The Institution was dedicated with the proper ceremonies—every one gave liberally and cheerfully to the cause—and its gates were opened wide to welcome the stranger.



MRS. H. B. FERGUSON

The Home is equipped with a nice kitchen, dining-room and reading-room, 14 beds for the use of the inmates, and a bathroom and laundry. We have spent considerable money to improve the sanitary conditions of the place and make it more suitable for our work. The building is modest and unpretentious, but within its humble walls many hungry and weary travelers found a refuge that welcomed them and made them feel that they were not altogether outcasts, but were still regarded as human beings, whose miseries had to be allayed.

In speaking of the calibre of the people that apply to us, we might sub-divide them into six distinct classes, and I will endeavor to explain the various types so that the community generally will understand concerning them. To the average person who is not actively identified with charitable work so that he comes in personal contact with the recipients of relief, it is hardly conceivable to him how a person can be so bereft of earthly possessions as not to have a roof over his head. And yet this class forms a separate and distinct element in itself.

First is the case of the very worthy individual who comes to Pittsburg in the hopes of securing work. He is attracted to this city by the numerous mills and factories located in this district, and by the newspaper reports of our prosperity. Frequently his very last dollar is spent in transportation, and he imagines that as soon as he arrives here a position will be awaiting him. He is very soon disillusioned, and he finds himself penniless and stranded, and is soon compelled to seek admission to the House of Shelter. It is very hard indeed for this class of unfortunates to have to apply, and frequently he goes around for days fighting against it, but fate compells him to swallow his pride, and when he does apply, he is actually starved, and to watch his ravenous appetite upon eating his first meal is indeed a tragedy. Strange to relate, the man who is really and earnestly looking for work, and is not choicy about what he will do to earn a livelihood, usually succeeds in finding it. He is enabled to do this very frequently by reading over the advertisements in the daily papers that are delivered to the Home, as a courtesy shown our institution by every newspaper in the City of Pittsburg. As it is sometimes a matter of from one to three weeks until he gets his first pay, the real charity comes in tiding him over during this period, and we invariably have him stay with us until that time. Indeed, very frequently our janitress gets up at 5 o'clock in the morning to provide him with breakfast before he goes to work, and a lunch is given along. There are many in this city today who are fairly comfortably situated who owe their first start to the help received from our institution. On Sundays they frequently make us a visit, and there remains with them a feeling of tenderness towards the Home that befriended them in their greatest need.

The second class is the sick and disabled, who are indeed to be pitied, for sickness is a dire calamity when there is plenty of money with which to combat it, so picture to yourself the friendless and penniless who are physically unable to work. We at all times provide them with medical attention, having a score of willing physicians who have offered us their professional services; in a few instances we have had to extend hospital treatment to some. The saddest of all, however, is the transient consumptive, and there is scarcely a week when we do not have him in our midst. We are powerless to do anything very tangible for him, as we have no local Jewish hospital where he can be treated, and owing to his being a transient, he is not eligible to the Tuberculosis Camp at Marshalsea or to Mt. Alto, the Sanitarium conducted by the State. Very frequently, even though these places would stretch a point in his behalf, we would not want to avail ourselves of them, for many of this class of unfortunates are in this country less than two years, which would make them a case for deportation if they became a public charge. Usually they are en route to Denver, where they feel the cure awaits them, and no amount of pleading or reasoning with them will dissuade them from attempting to get to Denver. "Hope springs eternal in the human breast." Many times we have known of people to use up their very last dollar for transportation—against the advice of the local charity, where they came from—and in that way they travel from city to city, stopping at every House of Shelter en route, until their destination is reached. Sad indeed is their lot!

The third class is that of the families, consisting of men, women and children, who have a particular destination in view and come here stranded. Scarcely a month elapses when we do not have a few of such families. These cases are very trying, and it is usually up to us to get them financial assistance before they can be induced to leave the institution.

The fourth class we are obliged to shelter is that of the deserted woman, who comes to Pittsburg in the hopes of locating her missing husband. She usually gets here handicapped with a few small children, and pitiful indeed is her situation. If we had a uniform law in this country making wife desertion a penal offense so that the man could be extradited to his home city, much misery could be obviated on the part of the wife. Of course, in such cases it is a moral obligation on our part to see that financial relief is given her so that she might return to her home city—of course unsuccessful in her efforts and broken in spirit.

The fifth class is that of the pious Jew, who makes a living by selling wares of a religious nature, such as prayer books, Tallis, Holy pictures, or occasionally preaches a sermon in an Orthodox congregation. Of course, this "sermon" is only a guise for begging practically, but it is a more dignified way of putting it.

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They are usually rather elderly men, apparently well educated and exceedingly pious—to such an extent that they cannot eat when everyone else is eating, feel themselves above sleeping in a room with anyone else, and have an air of superiority, which is not in keeping with their being public charges. Are they not the chosen people of Israel, and should it not be an "honor" to the House of Shelter to have within its walls such as they? Are we not being given an opportunity to enter the Kingdom of Heaven through administering to their wants? Such a thing as impressing upon them that an institution must have its rules strikes them with disdain, and they actually refuse to abide by any such restrictions, and of course they have no trouble in getting a sympathetic hearing from someone as to the terrible "abuses" to which they are subjected.

The sixth class is that of the professional tramp, who takes the stand that the world owes him a living with the least possible exertion on his part. They travel from city to city, stopping at each House of Shelter en route. They are very resourceful, and have their own mode of traveling where they get special rates on their own recognizance without any outside assistance (freight trains). This is the class that gives us the heartaches and makes us feel at times that our efforts are useless. Unfortunately, most people know only of this type of applicants, and not of the others that I have mentioned, again it is the usual case of the other side not being properly presented to the general public, and people get the perverted idea that all applicants are of that type. I want to resent that most emphatically, for we have the respectable and worthy applicant, which forms a large percentage of our recipients.

Every institution must have some rules to go by. With us it seems we can make rules only to break them, for each person must be treated individually, and no two phases are alike. There is only one rule, however, which is an inflexible one with us, and that is, that every applicant is admitted without any red tape or investigation. We feel that if we must err (and it is human to do so), we want to err on the side of admitting the unworthy rather than refusing the needy applicant. We feel that when a person is hungry and worn out physically and mentally through being stranded in a strange city, that then is no time for academic discussions. We first relieve the hunger, give a night's rest, and then we commence to ask questions. We find that in an institution of this kind we cannot make iron-clad rules, and have long ceased attempting to do so. However, in another respect we have a set rule, and that is, in not extending more than three days to the professional tramp. We feel we have done more than our duty to give him this much. In all other cases our laws are very elastic—sufficiently so as to admit of any change that circumstances may warrant. The spirit of true charity prevails in the Home; the people are made to feel comfortable and not as aliens; the meals are plain but substantial; the beds are of good quality and well kept, and the whole atmosphere is one of hospitality. We require each inmate to take a bath on his arrival, and when we have a change of garments to give him, we do so. We never have enough to go around, and this is one of the things we have not yet solved satisfactorily, for that is one of the things we have for that is as necessary as the food that we furnish. Whenever our place gets crowded, which it very frequently does, having at times to shelter as many as 20 people, we send some to a hotel nearby to sleep—especially in the case of the consumptive, our society paying at the rate of 25c a night for doing so.

As I have consumed so much space in telling of the things that we do, I also want to speak of the things that WE DO NOT DO, and should. I want to bring our shortcomings before the public just as forcibly as our accomplishments, and hide nothing, telling the facts as they exist, without any coloring.

We should have enough beds to give each inmate a separate one to sleep in. We should have a bath room on each sleeping floor, as well as more extensive quarters for our janitors. They are entirely too crowded, and while we are very fortunate at this writing to have such competent people, they are really inspired by love for the work as much as the compensation, for they are sadly underpaid. Our third floor is entirely inadequate. It is a large and airy room with sloping roof, which should not be the case. An attic room should not be used for sleeping apartments. We should have enough space around the house so that our inmates could sit out in the summer without being a burden to the neighborhood, as is the case at the present time. It is too hot in the summer to compel people to stay indoors, and we should not have to be regarded as a nuisance in the neighborhood in which we live. We should also have a well-equipped fumigating apparatus in the institution, compelling each and every inmate to have his clothes fumigated during the night. This is absolutely necessary to protect the public health. It is simply miraculous that we have escaped having any sickness break out without having this equipment. We should have certain work at our disposal to offer as a "work test" for each able-bodied applicant that applies for admission, and if he refuses to take the work, he should not be extended any help and arrested for vagrancy if he continues to beg. If he accepts the work I would be in favor of keeping each inmate as long as two weeks without any charge so as to enable him to get a fair start. Of course, it is understood that in the case of sick people, or women and children, we must admit them and give them medical attention and other help. This we do now at all times.

It may interest our readers to know that in the year 1905 we sheltered 593 people, in 1906, 352; in 1907, 387; in 1908, 1023; in 1909, 868 inmates. So you see we are confronted with a condition and not a theory as to the Homeless Jew of the City of Pittsburg. Also that just two weeks ago we completed the final payment on our mortgage, and we now own the house unincumbered. As stated before, it is entirely inadequate for our requirements. We have a membership of 225, which is hardly sufficient to pay our running expenses. We have been in receipt of five legacies, which shows that our institution is recognized as one who does good work. Our voluntary contributions in the way of cash and groceries have been a splendid help to us. Lately they have fallen off considerably, for people have gotten the impression that we are prosperous and do not need it, which is a mistake, for now that we have paid off our mortgage we are really poor—with a building inadequate for our requirements, and our treasury so low that within a month we will face a deficit. And a long winter is before us!

We know that our institution has been a beacon of light to many a weary wayfarer, who was inspired with new hope and courage and made to feel that he still fills a place in this world and life yet holds out to him some possibilities. We feel that these unfortunates have probably been as tenderly reared by their parents and as much love lavished on them, as we ourselves have had, and that we are indeed our Brother's Keeper, and should extend a helping hand to those who are less fortunate than ourselves. After all, they are the victims of circumstances and sad surroundings, and even the professional tramp is sometimes made to mend his way. We hope that our Home will continue to increase in its field for usefulness, and do more and better work as time progresses, and that we may carry out to the letter our Motto, "Let all who are hungry enter and eat thereof."

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