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An American Crusader Bent on Healing a European Scar

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Jet lag does not seem to exist for Dr. Mira P. Brichto. At home in Cincinnati one recent morning, even before preparing treats for her five grandchildren, Dr. Brichto was making phone calls about two shipments of donated medical supplies destined for Eastern Europe.

Twenty-four hours earlier she had been in Poland, visiting archives where centuries-old Jewish documents gathered dust and enthusiastically joining in a public ritual that she had arranged to return a Torah scroll to its original home in a Cracow synagogue.

For Dr. Brichto, 68, these are all parts of a single vision. She is founder and president of the R'fa-aye-nu Society, an organization in Cincinnati trying to repair some of the ravages of recent history in Poland, Ukraine and other Central and Eastern European nations -- and also to heal some of the scars that history has left on the souls of American Jews.

Born in McKeesport, Pa., where her father was the rabbi for a community of Hungarian Jewish immigrants, Dr. Brichto grew up in an Orthodox Jewish environment in Brooklyn and has lived for many years in Cincinnati, where her late husband was an innovative Reform Jewish Biblical scholar.

But for over a decade now much of her life has been centered in Poland and the neighboring lands where European Jewry was long rooted. An educator who wrote her doctoral dissertation on Shakespeare and the 19th-century novel, she explains her concern in typical fashion by quoting a line from the closing scene of ''Hamlet'': ''I have some rights of memory in that kingdom.''

Nothing demonstrates the dynamic the society is trying to set into motion better than what happened a week ago in Cracow. Jews and Polish Catholics held aloft a wedding canopy and stepped down a street that was once the heart of the city's medieval Jewish quarter of Kazimierz. Beneath the canopy was not a young couple but a Torah scroll. A Polish foundation had given it to the R'fa-aye-nu Society in gratitude for arranging the donation of equipment from a surplus United States Army field hospital to clinics and medical centers in Cracow and nearby cities.

The society, in turn, was responsible for the July 30 ritual in which the Torah was solemnly but joyously borne to the door of the ReMa Synagogue, named for one of Judaism's great sages, Rabbi Moses Isserles, who taught there in the 16th century.

There the scroll, the handwritten parchment that contains the first five books of the Bible and the most sacred of Jewish ritual objects, was welcomed back to the synagogue to which it had been given in 1904.

The procession was a ritual -- Hachnasath Sefer Torah, or Welcoming the Torah Scroll -- that Cracow had not seen since the Nazis devastated the Jewish population of Poland more than half a century ago. Roman Catholic participants joined visiting Hasidim and young people from the Jewish summer camp in Zywiec sponsored by the Ronald S. Lauder Foundation, which supports efforts to renew Jewish life in Eastern Europe, singing and dancing on ancient cobblestones that long ago had witnessed similar scenes as well as many less joyful ones.

Founded three years ago, the R'fa-aye-nu Society has also steered mammography equipment from an American medical manufacturer to Poland and transferred other medical supplies no longer needed by the Department of Defense and American hospitals to Ukraine.

The organization's Hebrew name comes from a prayer of the prophet Jeremiah: ''Heal me, O Lord, and I will be healed.'' Dr. Brichto translates it into English as ''Heal us.''

The healing is meant to be spiritual as well as physical. The society has won agreements from church and civic authorities in Poland and Ukraine to open major archives containing rare Jewish books and manuscripts, correspondence and legal opinions by rabbis on questions of religious conduct as well as modern newspapers and private letters.

Many of these records of a Jewish secular and religious life that flourished for centuries before the Holocaust are literally moldering away in buildings without fireproofing or air-conditioning. Dr. Brichto has ambitious plans to provide the equipment and expertise needed to conserve and catalogue this material and to make microfilm and computerized copies available to scholars.

Dr. Brichto spins out ideas and allusions, bits of theology and lines of poetry in the way that Olympic gymnasts do back flips. Conversation moves from the great Rabbi Akiva's view of the Song of Songs to wry comments on the convergence of ''lyric poetry and hormonic development'' in adolescent girls.

At O'Hare International Airport, on her way to Poland, she spotted a sculpture representing Jacob's ladder and recalled a rabbinic gloss on the Biblical text. A minute later she was talking about her grandchildren. Then something set her musing about the fact that the Hebrew of the

Bible and of the Talmudic sages had no word for religion in the abstract.

Dr. Brichto also appears to have the skills of a natural-born religious diplomat. Her contacts with churchmen and Catholic intellectuals in Poland are extensive. The Cardinal of Cracow sent a representative to the Torah ceremony. The Mayor joined the participants afterwards. It was not surprising that she obtained a message from Pope John Paul II, a former Cracow Archbishop, saluting the return of the ReMa Torah and commending the society's efforts.

"I suppose I have a sense of ease about being religious and that there are lots of ways to be it," she said.

Although her parents were "immersed in their religion," she said, they did not let that -- or the persecution that her grandparents experienced in Austria-Hungary -- diminish their appreciation for the culture of others. Her Hungarian-speaking family honored such a range of poetry that not until high school, she said, did she realize "that Wordsworth wasn't a Hungarian poet."

What animates Dr. Brichto more than anything else is her conviction that those efforts hold a promise of healing for Jews in the United States no less than for the inhabitants of Eastern Europe.

Too many American Jews, she believes, look on those territories as nothing more than a graveyard and treat the centuries of interactions between Christians and Jews there only as a prelude to the Holocaust.

The recovery of neglected historical materials may restore a more positive, or at least more complex, side to that history, she suspects, although she is ready to recognize that in some cases the truth about Christian treatment of Jews could turn out to be worse than thought.

She is hoping to send three mobile units around Eastern Europe, an undertaking that would include experts who would advise local librarians on fireproofing and air-conditioning and who could train local people to scan and duplicate documents. A division of I.B.M. is considering the plan, and the Catholic University of America in Washington, Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion in Cincinnati and the Oxford Center for Hebrew and Jewish Studies in England have agreed to lend expertise and house the microfilm and computerized copies.

"I feel as though I'm standing and watching the great library of Alexandria going up in flames and not doing anything," she said, referring to the final destruction in the fourth century of what had been a storehouse of the literature of classical antiquity.

"There is a hole in our understanding about the past due to that loss," she said, "and yet we are watching the same thing happen."

She says her interest is in making copies available to others, not removing material from those who have preserved it, often for centuries.

At moments Dr. Brichto cannot hide her frustration that her mission of healing and preservation sometimes seems to compete with the emotions and resources Jews pour into memorializing the Holocaust.

But sometimes the two concerns intersect. On the day the Torah returned to the ReMa synagogue, Dr. Brichto said, a woman mentioned that the ritual had delayed her trip to Auschwitz. Dr. Brichto asked her why she was going to Auschwitz.

"The woman lifted her sleeve," Dr. Brichto said, "and replied, 'You see why I'm going to Auschwitz. But I'm glad I came here first. I go to Auschwitz with a different feeling now.'"